

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AMOS

(Tremper Longman III)

In many ways the eighth century BC was unique in the history of Judah and Israel. It witnessed the toppling of the northern kingdom from the glory of economic prosperity and international influence to virtual subjugation by a foreign power (722 BC). It also witnessed the near collapse of Judah, averted only by the steadying hand of King Hezekiah, who could do no more than slow Judah's progress toward certain ruin. At the same time, however, the eighth century witnessed the rise of one of the most potent moral forces the world has ever known—the writing prophets (besides Amos, there are Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah). These men, from widely separated backgrounds, shared an overwhelming conviction that God had called them.

They had various styles of writing, but all wrote with the authority of the Almighty. They denounced the sins of their contemporaries and also looked far into the future as they spoke of deliverance for both Israelites and Gentiles.

The dawn of the eighth century brought new hope to Israel and Judah. Israel's subjugation to Damascus ended abruptly when the Assyrians under Adad-nirari III crushed Damascus in 802 BC. The internal difficulties that had plagued Judah also ended with Uzziah's accession to the throne (792-740 BC). He built up a powerful army and increased Judah's mercantile activities.

In the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I (793-753 BC) came to the throne roughly at the same time as Uzziah. Jeroboam restored much of the territory that had fallen to Damascus (2Ki 14:28).

The conquest of Damascus and the attendant quiescence of Assyria, coupled with the brilliant leadership of Uzziah and Jeroboam, brought Judah and Israel to heights of prominence second only to Solomon's golden age. The kingdoms prospered financially and at the same time expanded their borders. But as their economic well-being and national strength continued to foster their security, an internal decay was eating at their vitals. This decay was primarily moral, for it involved a basic violation of the covenant established by God at Mount Sinai. The covenantal stipulations required loyalty to God and love toward humanity. Yet the idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors had infiltrated the two kingdoms, thereby producing a strange syncretistic worship. While pagan high places dotted the countryside and idols stood within the cities, the people continued to trust in such Yahwistic concepts as the "day of the LORD" (5:18) and aspects of Levitical worship (4:4-5).

Not only did the people disobey by worshiping idols, but they also violated the social legislation of the covenant. Amos is particularly vehement in denouncing the lack of social concern in his time. Archaeology has illuminated this period through a number of discoveries. Excavations at Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, have yielded hundreds of ivory inlays attesting the luxury enjoyed by these people as described by Amos (6:4).

The nature of Canaanite Baal worship, which so damaged the social structure of Israel and Judah, is now



well known from the Ugaritic epic material. The cult of Baal was primarily a fertility cult, which likely involved sexual rituals. Violence also played a part in this religion. Anat, one of the most prominent goddesses of the Canaanite pantheon, is pictured in the Ugaritic epic material as a brutal warrior. In one passage she wades in blood, and beneath her roll the heads of her victims (*UT, 'nt, 2:5-31*). The intrusion of similar observances into Israel and Judah could lead only to a rending of the social fabric. The ethical concerns of the law were no longer necessary in a cult that required only external ritual.

The erosion of Israel's social structure showed itself primarily in a cleavage between the rich and the poor. The improved economic situation in Israel led to an increase of the wealthy, who not only neglected the poor but also used them to increase their own wealth. The social concern inherent in the very structure of the law was forgotten. God's will, as it applied to the nation of Israel, was ignored; and this spurred the eighth-century prophets to action. Though their protest was largely ignored (2 Ki 17:13-14), it contributed to the establishment of a believing remnant. The prophets preserved faith by assuring the people that God had not forsaken his promise. They saw emerging from their fallen society a kingdom different from any other, an ideal kingdom headed by the messianic King, whose rule would be completely just.