

## Introduction

While being relatively short, the book of Amos, like many other prophetic writings from the Old Testament offers strong judgements against specific groups of people and situations. The issue is however that while these judgements can give some indications of the behaviours and situations being condemned. They do not always offer a great deal of information for a reader who is not familiar with the context that the work was written against. The result of this is that certain emphases that were intended by the author may be missed. For this assignment our task is then to explore the question: "What insights into the message of the book of Amos does an awareness of the economics of the eighth century Israel contribute?" In order to do this we shall examine some of the specific economic issues relevant to this period and how they relate to the text.

## Findings

One of major economic factors that must first be mentioned is the change in the predominant domain system found in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Between 1000 and 600 BCE the type of domain found in Israel changed from a predominantly patrimonial system to mostly prebendal.<sup>2</sup> Some suggest that this change was necessary for the survival of the nation but,<sup>3</sup> it was still a significant change for those peasants who had previously been mostly subsistent. This change was not in itself the issue on its own but the result was that much of the control that the peasants had

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> William Doorly, "A Sociological Detour," in *Prophet of Justice: Understanding the Book of Amos* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 5.

previously had over their land was lost and significantly more power was given to higher classes of society. Those in this elite group then introduced more systems of tax and rent whereby they could extract the maximum amount of wealth from the peasants within their domain, as well as effectively force any remaining peasants from patrimonial domain onto prebendal.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this the region was also enjoying a period of peace. Stable long term kings in both the Northern and Southern kingdoms, as well as both kingdoms reclaiming much of the land they had previously lost, meant that several major trade routes were once again accessible.<sup>5</sup>

These factors all contributed to creating the environment that allowed the peasants to be exploited and oppressed by the elite. In addition to this the elite viewed their material success as an indication of their own righteousness and blessings from God. The opposite was then typically assumed for those in poverty, the peasants.<sup>6</sup> The Amos criticised the elite for their treatment of the peasants in the following passage: "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6). Firstly we can see that way that the peasants were viewed by the elite as being on par with material assets. This was likely due to the domain and rent systems being used to

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<sup>4</sup> Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Berthoud, "The Covenant and the Social Message of Amos," *European Journal of Theology* 14, no. 2 (2005): 103.

<sup>6</sup> Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*, 7.

force them into debt, keep them there and force many into slavery.<sup>7</sup> Secondly a point to note here is that Amos refers to these peasants as righteous, a notion that may not at first seem significant to the contemporary reader. Considering the difference in wealth between the peasants and the ruling elite, the notion that those in poverty were righteous before God would have been a very challenging statement for those in the elite class. One that would challenge their understanding of the status of those in poverty before God.<sup>8</sup>

As well as a period of peace and prosperity, the vast majority of the wealth and control was now in the hands of an elite few, generally located around Samaria and Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> This helps to explain why Amos makes frequent mentions of Samaria, as this is where most of the ruling class would have resided. With this more centralised power and wealth, as well as re-established trade routes, it was now possible to focus on large scale production of cash crops for export.<sup>10</sup> The result of this was that peasants were forced, not only to now buy what they needed to survive but also pay increased prices for what was often for inferior product.<sup>11</sup> These factors also meant that the elite were also in a position where they could freely manipulate the market prices for their maximum personal benefit.<sup>12</sup> Amos addresses this manipulation in the following passage: "saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so

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<sup>7</sup> Bernhard Lang, "The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard Lang (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Doorly, "A Sociological Detour," 5.

<sup>10</sup> "Commentary on Amos," in *The Ivp Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. Victor H. Matthews John H. Walton, Mark W. Chavalas (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> "Commentary on Amos."

<sup>12</sup> Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology*, 11.

that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." (Amos 8:5-6). It is suggested that this passage is directly about dishonest merchants manipulating the market.<sup>13</sup> In this case, Amos clearly knew about this market manipulation but at the same time this helps us to understand why it was that Amos was giving this message to those in the elite class. More than just offering a judgement to his hearers, he knew that they were in a position to make significant changes and work towards justice for the peasants if they so desired.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that there are many economic circumstances present within eighth century Israel which are not explicitly mentioned within the book of Amos. Once these are understood the reader then in a much better position to gain a fuller understanding some of the emphases found within Amos. Ultimately there were a number of economic factors, as well as social factors that came together to create a system where the rich in society had all of the power and control. They exploited and manipulated a system and mistreated the peasant class, ensuring that their poverty continued. With an understanding of these factors, the reader can gain a much clearer picture of the situations that Amos is addressing in the judgements that are being delivered ruling class in Israel. Given this the informed reader is better equipped to relate the message of Amos to broader social and economic situations, to contemporary life and also oppressive regimes today.

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<sup>13</sup> Lang, "The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel," 3.



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