The Movement of the Book of Amos

A book like Amos operates at several levels. It shifts from image to image, idea to idea, emotion to emotion. These movements interact with each other. Thus, although we may outline the book, we should not think of it as having a static structure that we can pry apart. Rather, it shows a carefully orchestration of images, ideas, and emotions that, together, create an effect.

If this claim is true, then it should be possible to chart the shifting of images and emotions, as well as ideas or literary genres. As you will see, such a charting is possible.

The Structure of the Book

A. Superscription and motto (1:1-2)
B. Oracles against the nations, including Israel (1:3-2:16)
C. The Divine Witness Against Israel (3:1-6:14)
   1. Judgment on Samaria (3:1-15)
   2. Judgment on Elites (4:1-3)
   3. Judgment on Idolatry (4:4-13)
   4. A Funeral Dirge (5:1-17)
   5. A Response to the Dirge, re the “Day of the Lord” (5:18-20)
   7. Judgment on Samaria (6:8-14)
D. Amos’s Visions and Pleas for Israel (7:1-9)
E. Israel’s Refusal to Repent (Played by Amaziah) (7:10-17)
F. The Doom of Israel (8:1-9:10)
G. A Promise of Restoration (9:11-15)

Cutting across this dramatic structure are a series of five visions in chapters 8-9. Note that part C takes the form of a semi-broken, or rather sophisticated, chiasmus, with 1 = 7 and 2 = 6. Parts 3-5 interrogate the nature of Israelite religion.

The Characters

Amos forms a sort of drama in which three major characters speak: God, Israel, and Amos. The foreign nations constitute a fourth character, and the implied (postexilic) reader a fifth. Each of them stays in character, with Israel the rebellious one, Amos the pleading intermediary, and God the outraged judge. Even the final scene, a promise of renewed hope, does not break the characters, though the effort at making God’s actions internally consistent creates a theological problem. This problem, however, leads to the profoundest insights of the book, as we will see.

Emotional Movement

On a first reading, Amos seems emotionally limited, if intense. Outrage is the dominant emotion. Yet, on a closer reading, things become more complex. The book
begins with a motto: “Yhwh has roared from Zion, given his voice from Jerusalem.” At first, this seems to be a statement of national particularity, with Yhwh taking the side of Judah against Israel. But the next few verses quickly dissuade us from this view, as it becomes clear that God has judged all the nations for their iniquity, with the Israelite kingdoms coming in for the severest condemnation. By the end of the oracles against the nations, any sense of comfort has gone.

The next few chapters passionately dissect the anatomy of oppression in Israel. The prophet reasons with his hearers, mocks them, cajoles them, threatens them, and even (in chapter 5) offers a ray of hope. Rhetorically sophisticated, these chapters try to construct an argument from pathos for the audience so that they will feel, as well as think, their way into repentance.

Chapter 7 plays up the role of the prophet as mediator, allowing us to hear the pain in Amos as he watches his nation destroy itself. Here we see the preacher as mediator, as the one begging God to relent. We also see his indignation at other religious leaders who have sold themselves to obtain comfort and status.

Chapters 8 and 9 offers the wildest mood swing of all. Chapter 8 opens with a final vision of divine outrage, final this time. The words of chapter 9 seem like a description of hell itself. They are designed to hurt, and they do. Then, at last, when we least expect it, comes the word of hope and reconciliation. Faintly at first and then resoundingly, the prophet
For Further Reading


How to Read a Prophetic Book

Reading the biblical prophetic books requires both discipline and imagination, because, unlike other works, they are not intended to be read in a linear-sequential fashion. The prophets are poets, whose words must be felt as well as understood rationally. Their books explore a metaphor or idea in a brief speech, and then proceed to another speech on a similar (or perhaps opposite) theme, and on and on through the work. A prophetic book is like a string of beads: each is different, but each is related to the next. Patterns emerge over time.

To read a section of a prophetic text, first identify where the unit starts and stops. This may be marked by a change of mood or idea, or more helpfully by some formula such as “thus says the Lord.” Next identify the main point of the unit, and then try to see how it connects to those sections before and after it. Then push further into the section at hand, trying to see how it is organized, what its subunits are. Next, move further into each sentence, weighing carefully how each is put together, paying attention to word plays and surprising connections (a favorite attention-getting tool of the prophets). Finally start the process over and repeat all the steps so as to see more than before.

The prophets’ words hurt, but they also heal. These spokespersons for God want their audiences to experience the pain of injustice, as both God and their neighbors feel it. They want us also to feel the possibilities of joy that comes from true religion and generous life as community. They ask us to imagine the world that the sovereign Lord seeks to create and to join in that creation.
How to Read Amos in Particular

Historical Settings

Setting 1: The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BCE (mid-700s), a time when Israel reached a zenith of prosperity and political independence, and then quickly fell to the advancing Assyrian empire. Chapter 7 dates his work to the reign of Jeroboam II (r. 786-746 BCE), but we cannot be sure of the dates of any given oracle. Amos foresaw the collapse of northern Israel.

Setting 2: Some students of his at an unknown date arranged his oracles into a book. The last unit (9:7-15) presumes a hopefulness that may point to a time during the return from Exile, hence after 539 BCE. But we cannot be sure of this. Amos himself or his immediate disciples may have organized much of the book as we have it.

Setting 3: At some point this book became part of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, a collection that could only have been finished during the Persian period (539-334 BCE) or perhaps even later. In this setting, the book of Amos sits alongside Obadiah’s oracle against the nation of Edom and Jonah’s response, as well the messages of doom in Hosea and Joel.

Preaching Like Amos

To preach Amos could mean several things: to be an expositor of various units in the book; to imitate the rich interplay of images and symbols working in the book’s language; to engage the theology and ethics of the book; or to use the book as a resource for inviting our audience to imagine the better world Amos and his disciples, under God’s instruction, imagined. Contemporary preaching must do all these things.

What precisely is our goal in preaching Amos? Surely it is to draw our audience into communion with the just and life-giving God to whom Amos bears witness. The goal of prophetic preaching is thus to help the church become a prophetic church. To make this happen, we must help our hearers cultivate a theological imagination.

This imagination has several elements to which Amos can contribute.

• First, Amos reclaims the language of the holy. By critiquing Israel’s misuse of the language of worship, and even of its own core story, Amos reclaims that language for its intended purpose.

• Second, Amos sketches a vision of community. Israel is to be a people in which relationships of reciprocity work. Power must be used with care. All must receive enough material and social goods to belong to the society.

• Third, Amos draws his hearers into communion with God by portraying God’s pathos or emotional involvement with Israel. Amos, like all prophets, acts as a mediator between God and human beings, empathizing with both sides of the relationship and thus asking us to do the same.

• Fourth, Amos calls his hearers to personal integrity and equity. The focus is upon their use of resources of all sorts.

Prophetic preaching means, then, drawing our hearers into dialogue about their
own relationships and use of economic and social resources. This is true at every level, whether in the life of an individual, a family, or a church. Preachers as practical theologians need to ask questions about the goals of human life in this world and lead their congregations in the building of practices that make the realization of those goals possible. For Christians, the present age is to become in some measure, however imperfect, a parallel of the coming Kingdom of God. This means that we must identify those practices, values, and beliefs that undermine the transformation of ourselves and modify them.

Preaching the Old Testament as a Christian Book
“That he was raised again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” – by including this phrase in the early creed in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul bears witness to the early Christian understanding of what we call the Old Testament. This collection of books, already centuries old, did not bear testimony merely to a past set of actions of God’s grace, but rather voiced the ongoing activity of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul elsewhere refers to “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith….” (Romans 16:25-26) Paul believes that God acts consistently through the ages and continuously reveals the work of redemption through the Old Testament scriptures. Underlying the words on the page is an eternal movement of God toward his creation, now fully revealed in the person and work of Jesus. The Old Testament is a fit vehicle for divine revelation.

Without unpacking every aspect of this view, which appears elsewhere in the New Testament, we should note that the older canon did not seem to early Christians to be merely a book of moral instruction or clever stories. Rather, it contained the story, the narrative of God’s saving work in Christ. We might perhaps wonder about the specific strategies of reading that allowed this conviction – typological exegesis seems problematic to many people today – but the basic idea remains true that Israel’s story is our story too because their God is the true and living God. Christian theological reflection on the Old Testament starts with this fact.

Preaching also begins here. As preachers, we attend to the literary shape of the Old Testament so that we can understand its theological contribution, again, not as a dead letter, but as a living oracle. To do this, we read this text also as Jesus’ text. This occurs through three lenses:

• As Matthew and Luke in particular argue, Jesus’ story continues and epitomizes Israel’s story. Note the first chapters of Matthew, which portray Jesus acting out in his own life Israel’s story, making it accessible in a new way to Israel itself and to the rest of the world.

• Jesus also appears as the worshiper, the one who keeps Sabbath and sanctifies the Temple so that it can be a house of prayer. In preaching and prayer he draws people into the redeemed life that began in creation itself.

• Jesus also calls people to holy living, giving his law and fostering wisdom. As prophet, he invites us into a world in which we have daily bread and God’s will is done on earth as in heaven.
the Bible and the ongoing life of the Church led by the Spirit bear witness. As David Buttrick puts it, “We preach the future of God so people can change” (Preaching the Then and the Now, p. 18). Preaching is rooted in the daring prayer that God’s kingdom should come, and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Preaching is prophetic and eschatological in orientation.

Preaching Old Testament Prophecy
The prophets of Israel did not primarily engage in prediction of the long distant future. Rather, they spoke to their own era about its shortcomings and invite people to remember the majesty of their divine calling. The prophets were reformers and political thinkers (in the broad sense that they wanted to help people learn to live together in harmony and peace).

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To read any prophetic book, recognize that it consists of a series of short oracles woven together like a patchwork quilt. Each oracle is self-contained message, but it gains further meaning by its proximity to other oracles. Also, recognize that most oracles are poems, meaning that the suggestions for reading poetry still apply. In addition, in examining these oracles, you might try the following questions:

1. What view of God is in play here? What are the limits of such a view, and what are its strengths?
2. What elements of the oracle are rhetorically loaded? For example, the prophet, like any preacher, may resort to word play or understatement or exaggeration to make a serious point.
3. What view of human community lies beneath the oracle? What assumptions about the world of the audience is the prophet making?
4. Does the personal experience of the prophet bleed through? Does the absence of obvious personal experience have significance?
5. How do the oracles adjoining the one you are examining impinge on its meaning? Since the prophetic books are fairly carefully constructed, we should pay attention to how a particular oracle fits into the whole book.

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The prophets assume a basic social ethic in which humans respect each other, do not hoard their resources, and pay attention to the needs of the vulnerable. They recognize the ability of the powerful to take over religious language for their own ends, and they call upon the people of God to speak truth to power. Prophetic preaching inevitably calls us to protest the injustices of the world and to work to make them right. The prophets identify otherworldliness as complicity with evil. And they invite us to a deeper vision of God and thus of ourselves. Prophetic preaching thus becomes more than preaching about the prophets; it is about being prophets to a world in desperate need of healing.

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Dangers confront the preacher of biblical narrative, mostly arising from our desire to rub off the rough edges of the text. We live in a sitcom world, in which all problems must be neatly solved in 30 minutes. The sitcom mentality has infected preaching. The major dangers are:

- **Moralizing.** Although the biblical texts raise profound moral issues, they are never moralizing. They never offer pat answers. They never paint in black and white, but in myriad shades of gray. In that sense, they resemble life itself.
- **Over-theologizing.** Some biblical narratives are conspicuous for their apparent absence of God. We should not pretend this absence away, but should note in our preaching that God often seems absent.
• **Under-theologizing.** Preaching is a theological act. We draw hearers back into the confession of the church. Sermons must do this. But they must do this in different ways.

• **Jumping too soon to Jesus.** “Jesus is the answer” is true, of course, but often it comes too soon in our sermons, so that it is not an answer, but a way of sweeping the problem under the rug. Timing is everything. We need to recognize that human life did not suddenly become less messy on the Sunday morning of the Resurrection.

• **Failing to appreciate the ruggedness of human life.** The biblical stories unflinchingly look at human life. Sermons, by contrast, often fail to acknowledge the real suffering of people and therefore the real triumphs of people. We need a grittier preaching.

Sample Sermon: “The Flabbergasting Words of God”

Amos 9:5-15
27 April 2008

Some words are very surprising. Some are surprising because they seem unnecessary, like the pizza box that says, “do not eat before cooking.” I think I knew that. Some are surprising because they come from a source you didn’t expect to say that, as when I was giving some lectures at a Catholic college in California, and one of the professors, a man quieter than a whole herd of church mice, informed me, not unkindly, that he was praying for the pope to die. I’ve never even prayed that someone would catch a cold. Very surprising. Some words are surprising because they seem to challenge our view of reality, our most cherished assumptions about ourselves, as when your husband comes home one day and says, “Honey, I’ve decided to give up my lucrative career in banking and become a folk singer. You know that zither in the attic? That’s our ticket from now on!” Very, very surprising.

Much of the Bible falls into this last category. The words of prophets and sages, of storytellers and priests point us to a world far beyond our ordinary experience. They challenge our easy assumptions about our own virtue or our own vice. They call sin what it is, and they offer hope where none seems possible. The more you read the Bible, the more strange you realize it is. Very surprising.

One of the most surprising voices is that of Amos

If you’ve been reading the book of Amos lately, you know how it goes.
1. Chapters 1-2 trace out the atrocities of various nations, culminating in Israel. While the other nations are guilty of crimes against humanity, Israel’s sins are less extreme, but more directly a violation of the covenant with God.
2. Then we move through a serious indictment of the people of God who have
   a. Forgotten their story
   b. Used wealth and power for self-aggrandizement
   c. Allowed the relationships of people to deteriorate
   d. Used religion as a cover for their misdeeds
3. Along the way Amos pleads with God for mercy
4. But his pleas are drowned out by the nation’s stubborn refusal to repent, and so ultimately God declines to relent
5. Work out all this

At the end of this, we feel like W. C. Fields, who on his deathbed was caught reading a Bible. “What are you looking for, Mr. Fields.” “Loopholes, loopholes.”

Are there any loopholes, is there a future?

Recovering the Meaning of our Story
It is possible for people to go through the motions of knowing a story and reciting its words and even feeling warm and spiritual about it without understanding it. So it’s not just a question of knowing what happened before us, but of understanding that in a particular way.
The Fallen Booth of David means that there is a connection to the past. But it is not about the powers, successes, achievements of that past. We do not ignore the failures of those who went before us, because that is part of the story too. For instance in our own past, we remember some of our predecessors as people who were quite convinced that they were the only ones who were right and who looked down their noses at everyone else. They were deeply sectarian and attached to some of the wrong ideas. But on the other hand, they taught us to seek truth, to be brave even when we were in a minority if we were right, and to seek out community with like-minded people. Good and bad tangled up together. We stand on the shoulders, not always of giants, but we do stand on others’ shoulders.

What do we remember about David? Not his conquests, but his repentance. About Moses? Not his parting the Red Sea, but his pleas to God not to destroy the rescued people after the Golden Calf. What do we remember about the Lord Jesus? A great many things, but not so much the spectacles, but the human lives he reached. We celebrate the boy whose lunch fed a crowd, the woman who heard, “your faith has made you whole.”

David Prital tells the story of the Baptist Ukrainians who rescued him, a Jew from the Nazis. The poor farmer brought him into their hut and said to his wife, “God brought an important guest to our house,” he said to his wife. “We should thank God for this blessing.” They kneeled down and I heard a wonderful prayer coming out of their pure and simple hearts, not written in a single prayer book. I heard a song addressed to God, thanking God for the opportunity to meet a son of Israel in these crazy days….”

We remember stories of aggressive kindness, of mending the fallen hut.

**We also see a future in the abundance of resources**

Notice the imagery of sufficiency. This addresses people who wonder if their God can provide. It appeals to people whose stomachs growl day are day until they shrink enough not to growl anymore. The prophet has said to those who were complacent, “God will settle the score,” but this means that, to those who lack, “God will settle the score!”

What constitutes enough resources?
What are our resources?
Notice that we count attendance and budget in the church bulletin, and that’s fine. Wouldn’t it be great if we could use the count in the church bulletin in a different way. Whenever I give a meal to someone who needs it, that’s a bonus point. If I encourage someone who is brokenhearted, that’s a bonus point. If I take on the ministry that my grandmother did late in life of thwarting grouchy people, that’s a bonus point. What if we could make the number on that reckoning rise?

Resources are our lives.
Explore this idea.
And so, God calls us to seek a vision of the Kingdom.

This reflection leads us to the final meditation – this one on vision for the kingdom.

We can ask questions about how we appeal to this group or that group, how we raise more money, or how we lower the age of our group, or so on. And those are legitimate questions. But there is a deeper question that puts those in a different context.

Who do we become fitter instruments for the Kingdom of God? Just as Amos posed an alternative to the people of Israel in his day, so must we face the same choice today. What sort of people do we want to be? What kind of church shall we be?