

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE XIII.

CRITICAL NOTE.

WHY DID AMOS PREDICT THE CAPTIVITY?

THE conception of God which it was the special mission of Amos to emphasize was his justice. The reign of Jeroboam II., during which this prophet lived, was characterized by great prosperity in Israel. It was no less conspicuous for its immorality. The evils that frequently accompany circumstances of wealth—luxury, injustice, oppression, etc.,—were particularly prevalent. A sense of security and ease prevailed in the nation, however, for were they not Jehovah's own people, and would not he protect them from any evil that might threaten them? With this thought uppermost, the people did not consider it anything inconsistent to keep sinning and at the same time observing their religious ceremonies. Indeed, they seemed to be unusually diligent in their attention to these ceremonies, apparently with the idea that this would offset any displeasure to Jehovah that might be occasioned by their sins. Amos sees the hollowness of all this. Jehovah is a God of justice, and can be pleased only with righteous conduct. Hence, as the people refuse to abandon their sins, Jehovah's wrath must be visited upon them. In what form shall this come? Famine, drought, pestilence—but all these are insufficient to bring about any such reformation as is needed. Hence, as a final resort, as the climax of the disasters which he predicts, the mind of Amos turns once and again to one remedy which, he recognizes in view of all the circumstances, will alone be sufficient. It is a very bitter medicine, but the conditions demand nothing less. It is no other than the captivity of the whole nation.

But what was there in this particular form of visitation constituting an appropriate application to the case in hand? How was Amos led to make his declaration in this particular direction? The reply to this question which has been largely accepted by recent writers is in the direction of that given by Professor George Adam Smith. Professor Smith, in his "Book of the Twelve Prophets," after strongly emphasizing the importance of the eighth century B. C. in Israel, and laying great stress on the influence of Assyria upon prophecy, applies these thoughts to Amos, especially in connection with his exposition of chapter iii. 3-8. He says:—

"The prophet then is made sure of his message by the agreement between the inward convictions of his soul and the outward events of the day. When these walk together, it proves that they have come of a

common purpose. He who causes the events—it is Jehovah himself, *for shall there be evil in a city and Jehovah not have done it?*—must be author also of the inner voice or conviction which agrees with them. Who then *can but prophesy?* Observe, again, that no support is here derived from miracle; nor is any claim made for the prophet on the ground of his ability to foretell the event. It is the agreement of the idea with the fact, their evident common origin in the purpose of Jehovah, which makes a man sure that he has in him the word of God."

"The greatest of the events with which Amos and his contemporaries dealt was the Assyrian invasion. . . . The prophets observed the rise of that empire and felt its fatality for Israel. Turning then to inquire the Divine reasons for such a destruction, they found these in Israel's sinfulness, to the full extent of which their hearts were at last awakened."

In short, Israel is sinful and must be punished. Assyria is displaying a warlike activity. This plainly suggests the form of punishment God will use. Assyria will come over and carry Israel away captive.

After such a clear statement by Professor Smith, one wonders whether there is not a slight inconsistency shown by some remarks which follow. He has later sentences like these: "To begin with, we are not certain that the terror of the opening verses is the Assyrian terror." "The rest of the chapters contain visions and oracles which obviously date from a time when Amos was not yet startled by Assyria." "Nay, it was not even these earlier judgments, preceding the Assyrian, which stirred the word of God in the prophet. . . . He treats them only as the consequences of certain facts, the conclusion of certain premises. These facts and premises are moral—they are exclusively moral."

But whatever bearing such remarks may have upon Professor Smith's own theory, Professor Cornill's criticism seems certainly in point. Referring to the Assyrians, Cornill says:—

"This lowering thundercloud had repeatedly flashed its lightnings over Israel's horizon, first in the year 876, and in the succeeding century ten times at least. At last, in 767, the Assyrian hosts had penetrated as far as Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea, spreading terror and devastation everywhere. But at the time in question the danger was not very imminent. The Assyrian empire was then in a state of the uttermost confusion and impotence. Amos's conviction, accordingly, was no political forecast. Moreover, the most important and most unintelligible point remains unexplained on such an assumption. Why was this condemnation an absolute necessity, willed and enforced by God himself? This the prophet foresaw from his mere sense of justice."

This view rightly pushes back the explanation of Amos's declaration to the prophet's fundamental doctrine. But while it shows the weakness of the preceding theory, it leaves nothing in the place of it to explain the reason for the particular prediction of the captivity.

The proper explanation of this, I believe, is to be discovered by refer-

ence to a very common belief of the times. No idea is more repulsive to the mind of Amos than the notion that Jehovah can be appeased by zeal at the altar, without a turning away from the immorality which prevails. But so deep-seated are the ideas of the people that unrighteousness will not incur Jehovah's disfavor so long as they scrupulously observe their rites and ceremonies, that no ordinary discipline can uproot these notions. Even the severities of the famine and the pestilence will not do it. The prophet sees that only one course remains. *They must be taken where they cannot sacrifice to Jehovah at all.* This they could not do, according to their belief, in a foreign land, under the sway of another god. They will then be placed where they will be compelled to obtain a more spiritual conception of their relationship to Jehovah. In other words, the prediction of the captivity was the logical result of applying the conception of the prophet regarding Jehovah and his relation to Israel to the general condition and need of the time.

Among the considerations supporting this position are the following:—

1. What is perhaps the clearest and most vigorous assertion of the captivity, viz. chapter v. 27, "Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity," etc., follows immediately the prophet's severest arraignment of the ritual in v. 21-23, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies." These two thoughts, then, seem to be related as cause and effect. Since full dependence is placed in the feasts, while there is a continuance of transgression, therefore Jehovah has come to hate these feasts; and, since the people can rise to no higher conception, so long as they have access to the altars, they must be banished to some foreign land where they will be beyond all reach of these altars.

It is also to be noted that the series of severe chastisements in iv. 6-11 with the frequently recurring refrain, "Yet have ye not returned unto me, saith Jehovah," closely follows the bitter sarcastic tirade against the sacrifices in iv. 4, 5, "Come to Bethel and transgress," etc. It seems as though it were the one important thing to become rid of these sacrifices; and the conclusion finally is that there is only one effectual way of doing this.

2. The conspicuous position which the mention of the captivity always occupies, points in the same direction. Each time this seems to represent the climax of the author's thought, as in v. 27; vi. 14; vii. 17; ix. 4. As various other calamities are considered in their possible adaptation to the case of Israel, each time the prophet realizes that they will not suffice, and each time he is obliged to have recourse to the captivity as the only remedy that will avail.

3. This view will explain Amos's conception of Jehovah's intense dislike of the feasts. His language is so strong in v. 21-23, his reference to the ritual so sarcastic in iv. 4, 5, that it seems almost to imply a hatred of these things on their own account. And indeed it is nearly this or has

become so. The ritual and the iniquities have become very closely associated, owing to the prevailing habits of thought. Therefore, to hate the sins became practically the same thing as to hate the ritual. Hence the one thing to be aimed at was to remove this false prop on which the people leaned, i. e., Jehovah must have them taken away to a "land that is unclean" (vii. 17).

4. All this accords better with the function of a prophet, and makes appropriate the occasional glance of Amos in the direction of better things, as in v. 4, 6, 14, 15,—if not the closing paragraph of the book, which is rejected by most critics. It makes Amos a teacher and disciplinarian and not simply a predictor and stern denouncer. If he were simply the latter, he would be without a parallel among the prophets. Shall Amos alone occupy the role of one who is satisfied with simply declaring doom? Has he no thought of Jehovah's love for his people which compels him to punish, but only with a view to discipline? Has he not in mind some better future, or is he satisfied with complete extermination? If we make his declaration simply a political forecast, only to this lower position could Amos have attained. It is not surprising that the references to better things are not more numerous. It accords neither with the constitution of this particular prophet, nor with the need of the times, to lay much stress in this direction. The people are contented, proud, and self-satisfied. The prophet is somewhat stern in his demeanor. It must be left for a later prophet of a different temperament, and with a different conception of the people's need, to place strong emphasis upon a gentler aspect of Jehovah's character.

5. The view presented will also account more satisfactorily for the new era now at hand—the beginning of written prophecy. To conceive Jehovah as a God of justice, to recognize and to denounce the iniquities of the people, to threaten disaster—all this was nothing new. Elijah, for example, could aspire to this. But to arise to a much higher position—to see that Jehovah's sovereignty was not limited to Israel; to trace the method by which he would lead his people to a clearer conception of himself; to open the way for the people gradually to obtain the thought that Jehovah must be satisfied in some other way than by ritual observances, these being, from the very nature of the case, in the "unclean" land, impossible; to foresee that an exile was necessary, in order to give the people this higher conception, and to bring them gradually to the fact that Jehovah was exercising his sway in this far-off land as well as at home; to be, in short, the forerunner of a completed doctrine of monotheism—all this was quite sufficient to justify a new order of things, and it naturally burned in the prophet's heart that he had been given a new conception, one that was not to be confined to his own country and generation, but to be written down and permanently preserved.

6. The fact that Amos never mentions the name of Israel's captors is very significant. He does not fail to be specific in the case of the other

nations, e.g., in the case of Damascus (i. 3). Perhaps, after all, he was not so sure that Assyria would be the nation Jehovah would use, especially owing to the state of confusion and impotence within the empire at that time, to which Cornill's remarks quoted above, call attention. Now it was not till the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III., in 745, that Assyria's real period of conquest in this century began. This was just before the beginning of Isaiah's career and too late for Amos to observe. Yet Professor G. A. Smith himself says that even "Isaiah had perhaps at first been uncertain whether the required punishment of Israel would proceed from Assyria or from Egypt."¹ If Isaiah in his day were not certain about such a matter, we need not be surprised if there were uncertainty still greater in the mind of Amos. The important thing in reference to Amos is to grasp his great principle, that the logic of events demanded an exile. The force of this would have been very greatly weakened if it had degenerated into a mere political forecast—the people of Israel to be made captive at a particular time and by a particular nation.

7. This reason for the prediction of captivity, as has already been partly suggested, fills out the defects that have been noted in the theories mentioned above. Cornill's criticism of the "political forecast" view is correct as far as it goes, yet does not really touch the question under consideration. Smith himself points out that the sense of justice is at the root of all, but does not show how this explains the announcement of a captivity. This seems best explained by distinguishing Amos's conception of religion from that of the people of his time: to them it is zeal at the altar; to him it is spiritual communion on the basis of righteousness. No ordinary visitation has been sufficient to show them the folly of their position. Evidently what alone will suffice is to change their conditions and surroundings in such a way that no other relation to Jehovah except such as is spiritual, will be possible to them.

8. This view harmonizes well with certain passages in the book of Amos; such as, ii. 10, and especially v. 25-27. Using Schmidt's translation of the latter as given in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1894 (though it is immaterial whether we adopt his reading of the puzzling twenty-sixth verse or not), the passage reads:—

"Did ye bring me sacrifices and meal-offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? Did ye then carry about the tabernacle of your king, the image of your god, which ye have made for yourselves? Nay, I must send you in exile beyond Damascus, saith Yahwe, God of hosts is his name."

That is, in your past history, when in the wilderness, you never thought of these formalities as being necessary to please Jehovah. Now you regard these as everything, while in reality they do not touch the essence of the matter. Hence he must return you to what will be—from the point of view of possibility of ritual worship—your former position.

¹ Art. "Isaiah" in Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible.

The position here taken might be made much clearer by reviewing the course of the prophet's argument contained in his book. The unity of the book and the strength and beauty of the author's conception from this standpoint may thus be conspicuously illustrated. But that will not now be attempted.

It may be objected, that if this were the thought of the writer, it would have been more clearly stated. But the obscurity that appears to attach to the thought is because our conception of one God who is the sovereign of the whole world is fundamentally different from the prevalent notion of that time. To a people steeped in the idea that the worship of a deity was dependent upon residence in the land where he exercised sway, no clearer statement would be needed. The first thing that occurred to David as he faced the possibility of being driven from his own land was, that this would mean "serving other gods" (1 Sam. xxvi. 19). When Naaman desired to worship Jehovah in Syria, the first preparation he made for that was to take "two mules' burden of earth" from Israel, Jehovah's land, that such an act might be possible (2 Kings v.). So, in this case, the thought that would first naturally present itself would be just in this direction.

Hence the important message of Amos came in connection with this very lofty conception of himself which God had given to this prophet. It is usually said that the people in general did not grasp the idea of monotheism until the later exile in Babylon. This at least cannot be said of Amos. As the book now stands, the passages iv. 13; v. 8, 9; ix. 5, 6, are sufficient to prove this. But, as these passages are claimed by many to be later insertions, there is enough in the book without them to establish this doctrine. Considering the power that is ascribed to God in various lands such as Syria and Philistia (i. 3ff.; i. 6ff.; ix. 7) in connection with such a thought as that in iii. 6, "Shall evil befall a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" our conclusion is that the logical result, at least, of Amos's view is Omnipotence. Similarly we obtain the idea of God's omnipresence by comparing ix. 2, 3 with God's presence in the various nations. But, admitting this, it is scarcely possible to stop short of monotheism.

Amos, then, could prophesy as he did, simply because God spoke to him in that far-distant day so plainly, and gave to his prophet such a wondrously clear conception of himself, towering far above all others of his time, and scarcely surpassed by all the succeeding line of prophets until the Prophet of the Perfect Vision came to clear away many mysteries that necessarily remained, in spite of the fact that these great men of the olden time came into such close contact with God, and delivered so faithfully the important messages they received from him.

OSERLIN, OHIO.

EDWARD E. BRAITHWAITE.