Minor Prophets in the Bible: Amos
Reading the Book of Amos in context
John Ahn

Readers of the Hebrew Bible may be familiar with stories about Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, and even major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, but what about minor prophets, including Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Zephaniah? It’s not surprising that people are less familiar with these Biblical figures, due in part to limited exposure to them in church, synagogue, or religious circles, but more centrally, due to less comprehension of the major topics in the minor prophets.

In this article, I will provide a general guideline for how to read the Book of Amos in context. At the outset, it should be said that the designation of a prophet as either “major” or “minor” is not a reflection of the prophet’s significance or importance, but refers to how many columns of texts in the scroll the prophet receives.

When reading the prophets at large, there are three or four components that are seminal in helping readers better understand the text: (1) the historical and social situations surrounding the text(s), that is, the context; (2) the message of the prophet, which at times is entangled with (3) the prophet’s own reflections and the audience to whom the message is addressed; and (4) the redactions, added words, phrases, or quotations or echoes from other Biblical texts by the canonical editor for the purpose of creating a holistic or unified section of the text in the Hebrew Bible.

1. The Historical and Social Context
The prophet Amos is historically and socially situated in the eighth century B.C.E. Leading up to this setting, Israel and Judah were two separate kingdoms. Beginning in the ninth century B.C.E., the northern kingdom of Israel was politically, economically, and socially wealthier and more stable than their southern counterpart, the kingdom of Judah. Israel was recognized by neighboring nations and associated with Omri, the founder of the monarchy ruling in Israel during this period; the Moabites described Omri as the “King of Israel” (Mesha Inscription), and the Assyrians designated Israel “the land or house of Omri.” Readers may be familiar with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, made infamous during the time of Elijah. King Ahab was the beneficiary of his father, Omri, who had built up Samaria and created the rare four-fold generation of succession in the north: Omri, Ahab, Ahaziah, Joram, and Queen Athaliah.

During the affluent period of the eighth century B.C.E., the rich were getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Income inequality was high. Social and political justice and regard for the poor, the widow, and foreigners were non-existent. If there were any form of legal representation for the poor, it was fully exploited by those in power for their own gain. Two major institutions of power turned a blind eye on the needy: the priests were satiating the needs of the crown with lapses in moral consciousness, and the monarchy completely aligned itself with the wealthy. The priests and kings had little or no regard for society’s underclass.

During this time, Judah had one ruler: King Uzziah. The prophet Isaiah laments and worries that “the
king” has died and that Judah will now experience uncertainty (Isaiah 6–9). It was in this context that Isaiah sees Yahweh, the king, seated on the throne. Isaiah is reminded who the real king is. What is fascinating is that the prophets Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah were all contemporaries. In other words, they prophesied and ministered about the same time. Yet not one of them ever mentions another. But the fact of the matter was, the southern kingdom of Judah feared a major invasion from stronger nations like Aram (Syria), Israel, and Assyria. Judah looked to Egypt for the protection of its sovereignty. The superpower of the time was the powerful Neo-Assyrians. They modernized military propaganda, psychological warfare, and the total destruction of conquered persons, leading to not only an acquisition of material goods and expanded territories, but also the systematic deportation or forced migration of the conquered peoples for absolute control and domination.

2. The Message of Amos the Prophet
In the midst of national and international affairs, Amos, a local rancher (Amos 1:1) and/or farmer (7:14) from Tekoa in Judah is commissioned to the influential north, Israel. Amos 1:1 describes Amos as one who deals with sheep. Although Amos’s occupation is simply translated as a “shepherd,” the preferred technical translation is “one who owns or tends sheep or cattle.” In other words, Amos could be a simple shepherd or, conversely, a wealthy rancher owning or tending a plethora of sheep or cattle. In Amos 7:14, a qualification is added: Amos is also “one who gathers or tends figs or sycamore-figs,” a day laborer working the fields like a migrant worker or the owner of a large plantation or orchards of sycamore-fig trees. The way in which an interpreter reads Amos’s occupation as either a poor shepherd/day laborer or a very wealthy influential trader of sheep and/or figs—the two major sectors of Judah’s economy—has diverging implications, but the message that Amos preaches does not change. Amos’s commission to go to the powerful northern kingdom of Israel to speak inflammatory words against the elites is bold prophetic activism.

The fact that Amos is from Tekoa is meaningful. Tekoa, a region outside Bethlehem, was known for its desirable olive oil production. But textually speaking, Tekoa is known as a place of “wisdom.” In 2 Samuel 12:1–33, David’s beloved son Absalom who was in exile returns because of the action of the “wise woman of Tekoa.” She brilliantly plays the role of a mourning widow to convince David to bring back his son. At the very outset of the text, this simple reference to Tekoa suggests and frames Amos’s message in the broad framework of “exile and return” in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., when the book or scroll of Amos was re-worked and (re)edited.

The text places Amos during the reign Uzziah, King of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, King of Israel, two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1). A parallel reference to an earthquake (during the reign of Uzziah) is also found in Zechariah 14:5. But unlike the family of four minor prophets (Amos, Hosea, Joel, Zephaniah) that opens the book with “The word of Yahweh,” Amos’s text begins with the phrase, “The words of Amos.”

The words, matters, or affairs in the Book of Amos are: economic disparity (3:15; 6:4), where a very wealthy group of women are called “you cows of Bashan” (4:1) who sleep on “imported ivory beds” (6:4) and eat luxurious lamb and veal while the poor go hungry. There is complete exploitation of the poor (2:4, 6; 4:1; 5:11), moral bankruptcy (5:14; 6:12), and sexual misconduct: “a man and his father go into the same woman” (2:7). Such words may refer to either temple or non-temple prostitution. With added environmental and natural agricultural disasters (4:7–9), they all culminate into inevitable doom and collapse of the nation, resulting in forced migration or exile as punishment on the peoples. There is lament, and a later editor even describes Yahweh repenting (7:3) for the aftermath that is about to happen.

Abuse by the priests and prophets are pronounced. The Nazarites are forced to break their vows (2:12), and Levitical musicians (6:5) use their gifts for entertainment, not liturgical purposes. Worship has become a variety show with various deities on high places on non-approved sanctuaries (7:9). A
celebratory vineyard harvesting imagery, called the “day of the Lord,” is turned inside out and completely reframed as a day of vengeance, wrath, and judgment. All of the religious high holy days are rejected. According to Amos, the Lord says, “I hate, I despise your festivals” (5:21).

Interspersed with judgment are occasional oracles of salvation: “A segment of the population will remain and reside in the land” (3:12), “Seek me and live” (5:4), “Seek good and not evil” (5:14), and the words made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr., “But let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (5:24). These and other echoes of “keeping the Sabbath and Torah” are all forms of restoration, best read as post-exilic redactions bearing witness to a community that has endured and overcome.

3. Amos’s Audience
As noted above, in the family of four minor prophets (Amos, Hosea, Joel, and Zephaniah), the books of Hosea, Joel, and Zephaniah open: “The word of the Lord that came to (Hosea, Joel, Zephaniah).” There is an emphasis on the one-ness, the singularity of the texts as one. Amos’s words, however, are in the plural. According to scholars, Amos’s judgment was principally set against Israel, but at some point in time, after Judah’s expulsion from the land at the hand of the Neo-Babylonians, judgment on Judah was added. There is recent debate among scholars as to whether the reverse is the case. Judah’s own forced migration gave rise to the north’s collapse.

There are “sign acts” in Amos. The Lord asks Amos what he sees. In 7:4, Amos sees a great fire, in 7:7 a plumb line, and in 8:1 a basket of summer fruit. All the images are used as final judgments of destruction. There is a slight nuisance when Amos says, “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar” (9:1), or the “Lord showed me a swarm of locusts” (7:1). All these images reveal inevitable destruction. These visual images are contrasted to uttered or spoken words, “Hear” in 3:1 and 4:1–2, where Israel will be lead away on fish hooks.

The most famous encounter of Amos is found in 7:10–17. Amos goes to Israel to confront Amaziah, the (high) priest of Bethel, and King Jeroboam of Israel. Amos prophesied that Jeroboam will die by the sword and the nation collapse and then go into exile. In that exchange, Amaziah calls Amos a seer and tells him to go back to Judah and prophesy there, make your living there. Amos says, “I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet” (7:14). He says, “The Lord took me and sent me to go and prophesy to my people Israel” (7:15).

4. Redactions in the Book of Amos
The redactions or continued growth of the Book of Amos has a richer complex literary history that extends into the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. In chapters 1 and 2 of Amos, there is a unique phrase, “for three transgressions of [X] and for four” set against the nations (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). This literary phrase denotes the threefold exile or forced migration of the southern kingdom of Judah in 597, 587, and 582 B.C.E. to Babylonia and the fourfold return migrations in 538, 520, 458, and 445–30 B.C.E.

The Relevance of the Prophet Amos Today
In closing, the Book of Amos continues to be relevant concerning social and economic (in)justice. Especially pertinent in today’s central issues of human trafficking, DACA, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the divide between Wall Street and Main Street, the words of Amos continue to echo and remind readers to be engaged and outraged, and the Lord roars from Zion (1:2) from history and the text to those who see, hear, and care enough to protect the vulnerable by offering human dignity. As for those in the pulpit or parishes who abuse and exploit their sheep without producing fruit, judgment has been rendered.
Dr. John Ahn, Ph.D. (Yale), is Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible at Howard University School of Divinity (Washington, D.C.). He is the author/co-editor of *Exile as Forced Migrations* (2011), *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon* (2012), *The Prophets Speak on Forced Migration* (2015), and *Thus Says the Lord* (2009).

Bibliography:


