

# 01. 8th century Israel





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**Creation**

**Education**

**Fundamentalism**

**God**

**Islam**

**Liturgy**

**Mission**

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**New Testament**

**Old Testament**

**Pope Francis**

**Prayer**

**Priesthood**

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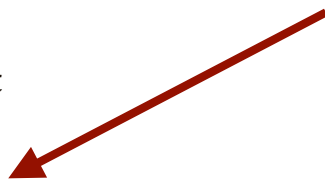
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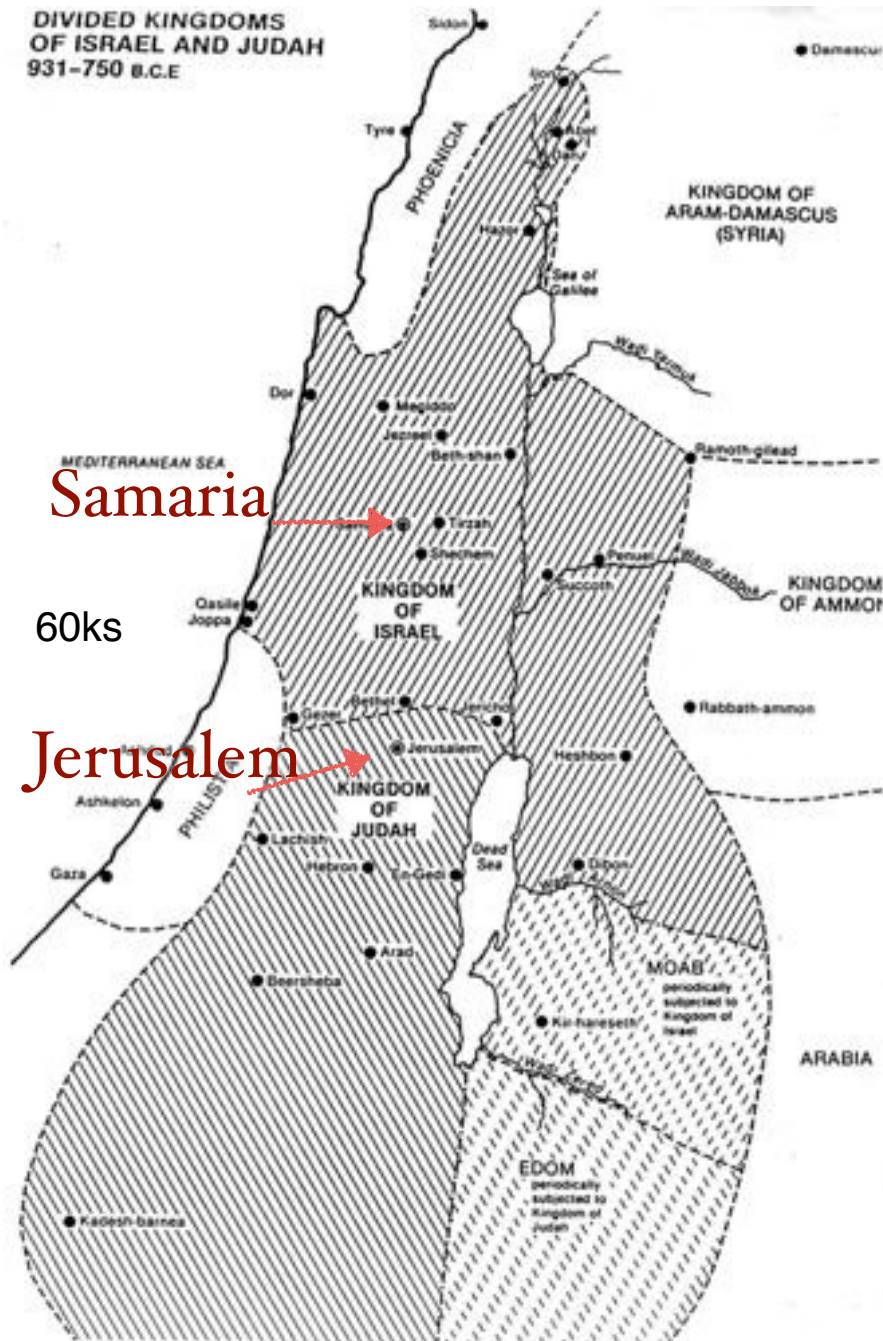
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**Index of Topics**

**click on “The Old Testament” (left menu)  
then scroll down to “Prophets”  
then down to “7. Eighth Century Prophets”.**



# The earliest Biblical Scrolls



It is probable that the political, economic and social environment that is necessary to provide the environment for the emergence of substantial written material first emerged in the northern kingdom (Israel) in Samaria in the 8th century.

There we find the initial scribal work that would issue in the Book of Deuteronomy, and also the first of the prophets whose oracles are recorded in a scroll under their name (Amos and Hosea).

## The Northern Kingdom (Israel)

Thriving trade and commerce created a small, wealthy upper class in the capital, Samaria. In the main northern shrines the cult was lavish, but little regard was given to justice. Bribery, extortion, the corruption of the judiciary and exploitation of the poor undermined the moral foundations of the state.

### The prophet Amos (c. 762-750BC)

This was the period of the ministry of the prophet Amos, the first of the prophets to have his words preserved in a scroll named after him. Amos exercised his ministry as a prophet prior to the military expansion of Assyria, which began with the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III in 745.

## I. Amos

The first prophet to have a scroll named after him



## Amos 1:1

The words of Amos, who was a herdsman from Tekoa [8ks south of Bethlehem], who had visions [ḥāzâ] concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah [783-736] and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel [790-746], two years before the earthquake [760BC].

↓  
Zechariah (520-518) 14:4-5

Tekoa is eight kilometres south of Bethlehem on the edge of the 'wilderness of Tekoa' (2Chronicles 20:20) in Judah.

## Amos 1:2

He proclaimed: YHWH roars from Zion,  
and thunders from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds are in mourning,  
and the summit of Carmel withers.

The period during which Amos was prophesying was one of relative peace and considerable prosperity. The problem that confronted and shocked him was that the prosperity favoured a small upper class who were living in luxury (see Amos 3:15; 5:11; 6:4-6), while the vast bulk of the population was being exploited. This cuts at the very heart of the covenant with YHWH that gives Israel its identity. The administration of justice was corrupted by bribery and extortion, and paid no regard to the rights of the poor. The wealth flowing from commerce and trade enabled the main northern shrines to have lavish cult and elaborate rites (see Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-23), but Amos judged this style of religion to be a travesty. It lacked justice, integrity, honesty, and fidelity to the covenant with YHWH, which made it abhorrent to God. God would have to put an end to their prosperity. There would have to come what Amos calls 'the Day of YHWH' (see 5:18-20).

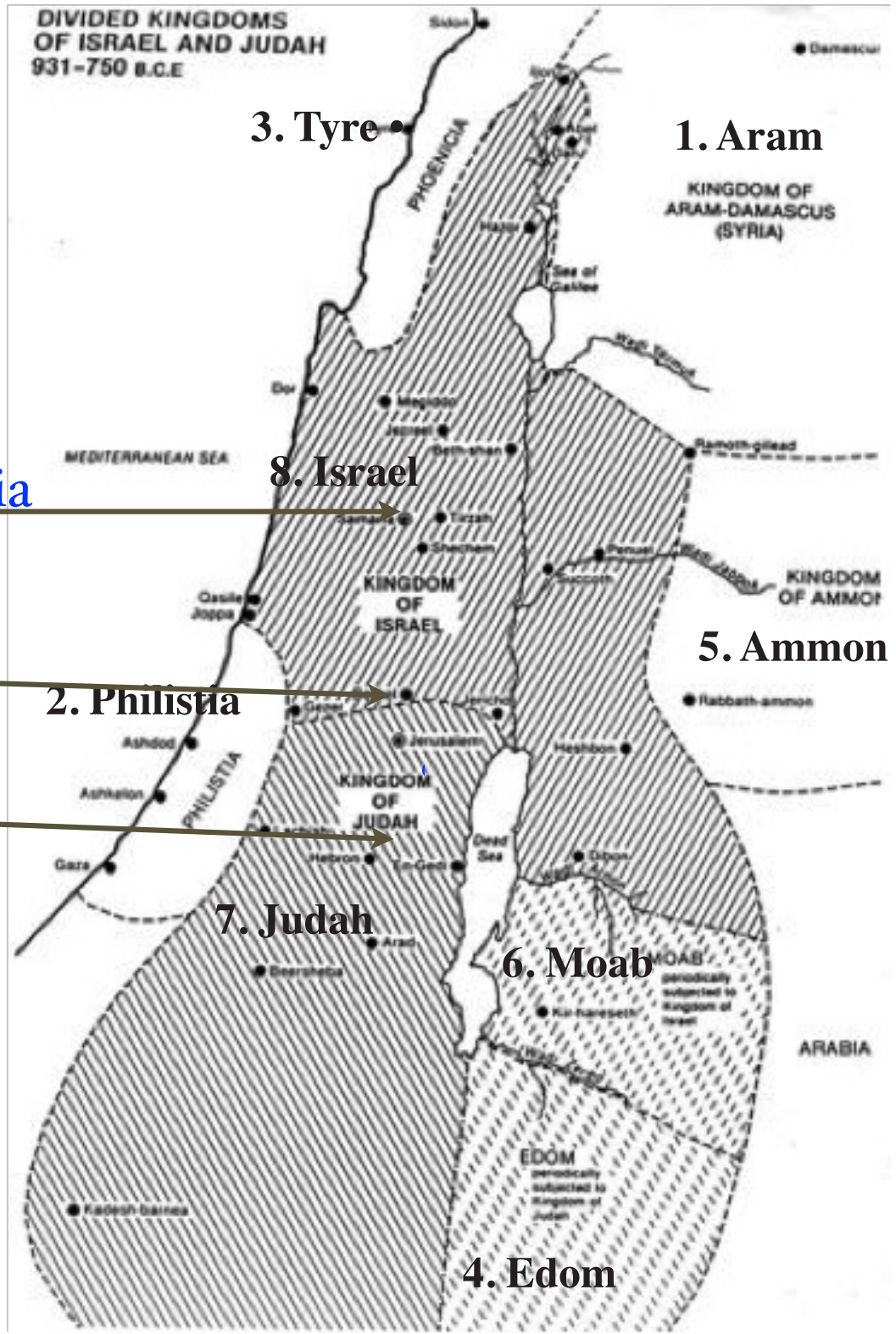
As one would expect from words that were born from a profound communion with God, Amos's key focus throughout is on YHWH, the God who hears the cry of the poor. Amos is faithful to the traditional faith that gives Israel its identity. YHWH is the God who heard the cry of the slaves in Egypt and sent Moses to rescue them from the tyranny of the Egyptian pharaoh. Amos saw that the tyranny that was enslaving God's people was now coming from within the political, judicial and religious institutions of Israel. The abhorrence he experienced was, as he interpreted it, a sharing in the abhorrence felt by YHWH, and in YHWH's name he denounced the injustice he encountered. In the scroll we will find words that challenge the rich and powerful to change their ways in the hope that YHWH would not have to punish them. Amos prays for this. However, the main thrust of his words indicates that his appeal failed. He declares in no uncertain terms that the nation of Israel cannot survive.



However, this cannot be Amos's final word, for, as a true prophet, he is speaking about YHWH. The scroll ends with words of hope – based not on human behaviour (he found no signs of repentance) but on the fidelity of YHWH (see 9:13-15). The nation of Israel would be destroyed, but Israel was still YHWH's own people, and YHWH would be faithful to his commitment. A remnant would listen and a true Israel would emerge from the coming catastrophe.

Amos is a 'seer', graced to look beyond the horizon of human decision and indecision. The scroll records a number of 'visions' that he was given. It is perhaps these 'visions' (7:1 – 9:6) that gave energy and direction to his speaking. Finally, Amos sums up the thrust of his prophecies, concluding, as we should expect, with a statement on the fidelity of YHWH that carries with it an assurance of restoration and renewal.

**DIVIDED KINGDOMS  
OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH  
931-750 B.C.E**



**3. Tyre**

**1. Aram**

KINGDOM OF  
ARAM-DAMASCUS  
(SYRIA)

**Samaria**

**Bethel to Samaria 40ks**

**8. Israel**

KINGDOM OF  
ISRAEL

**Bethel**

**Tekoa to Bethel 35ks**

**2. Philistia**

**5. Ammon**

**40ks**

**Tekoa**

**Douglas Park to Liverpool**

KINGDOM OF  
JUDAH

**7. Judah**

**6. Moab**

MOAB  
periodically  
subjected to  
kingdom of  
Israel

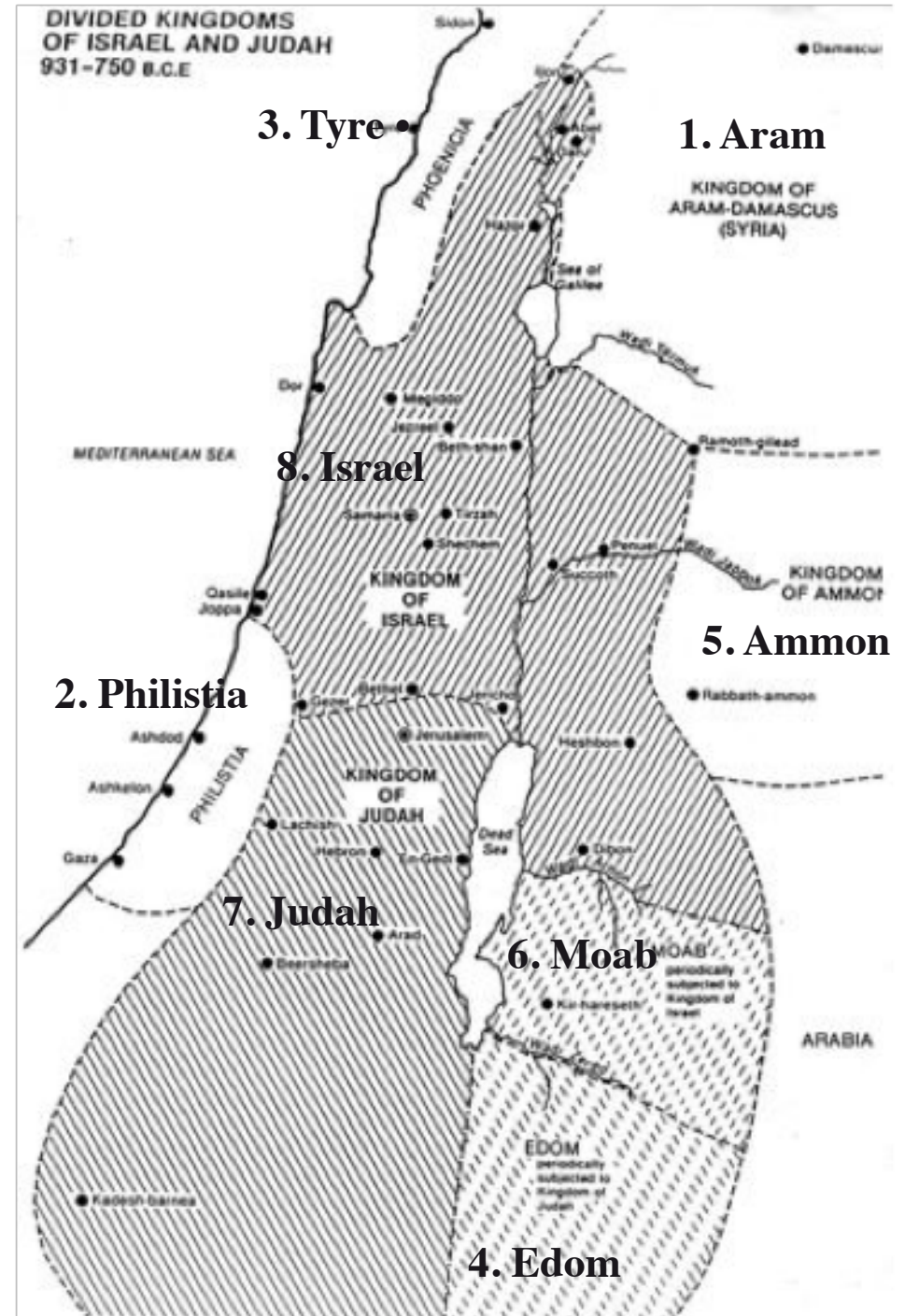
**4. Edom**

EDOM  
periodically  
subjected to  
kingdom of  
Judah

ARABIA

Amos's concern was with the small nations surrounding Israel (see Amos 1:3 – 2:3)

1. Aram
2. Philistia
3. Tyre
4. Edom
5. Ammon
6. Moab
7. Judah





## I. Oracle against **Damascus** (Aram) (1:3-5) - atrocities against Gilead

Amos 1:3

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Damascus,  
and for four, I will not revoke it;  
because they have threshed Gilead  
with threshing sledges of iron.

Gilead is the area to the east of the Jordan, just south of Aram. The military incursions from Aram were particularly severe in the mid-ninth century (see 2Kings 10:23; 12:18-19). Even though Gilead was in relative peace during the reign of Jeroboam, who occupied Damascus and Hamath (see 2Kings 14:25-28), the memory of earlier atrocities was still acute.

## Amos 1:4-5

So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.  
I will break the gate bars of Damascus, west  
and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, east  
and the one who holds the sceptre from Beth-eden;  
and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Qir, says YHWH.

In the late ninth century it was Hazael who seized Gilead (see 2Kings 10:32-33; 13:7). His son Ben-Hadad (see 2Kings 13:25) continued his father's aggressive policies. The 'Valley of Aven' probably refers to the fertile valley between the Lebanon and anti-Lebanon mountains. 'Beth-Eden' was a city-state on the banks of the Euphrates. 'Qir' would appear to be in the vicinity of Elam (see Isaiah 22:6), just north of the Persian Gulf. They will be forcibly taken back to their original homeland (see Amos 9:7). The gains they made in the past through expansion will be completely erased.

2. Oracle against **Philistia** city-states (1:6-8) - involvement in slave-trade

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of **Gaza**,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they carried into exile entire communities,  
to hand them over to Edom.

It is likely that Edom would have used the slaves in its copper mines,  
as well as selling them on at a profit to Africa or Arabia.

So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza,  
fire that shall devour its strongholds.  
I will cut off the inhabitants from **Ashdod**,  
and the one who holds the scepter from **Ashkelon**;  
I will turn my hand against **Ekron**,  
and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, says the Lord YHW



### 3. Oracle against Tyre (Phoenicia) (1:9-10) - supplying slaves

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Tyre,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they delivered entire communities over to Edom,  
and did not remember the covenant of kinship.  
So I will send a fire on the wall of Tyre,  
fire that shall devour its strongholds.

Tyre dominated all trade with the area that depended on shipping in the Mediterranean. Tyre provided some of the slaves mentioned in the indictment of Gaza.

There was a long history of covenants between Tyre and Israel going back to the period of David and Solomon.

#### 4. Oracle against Edom (1:11-12) - military atrocities

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Edom,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because he pursued his brother with the sword  
and cast off all pity;  
he maintained his anger perpetually,  
and kept his wrath forever.

So I will send a fire on Teman, (= Edom)  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah (main city)

Edom had traditional kinship ties with Israel: Esau is presented as the brother of Jacob (see Genesis 25:19ff). A century prior to the time of Amos, Edom attained independence from Judah (2Kings 8:20-22). This had been lost by Amos's time (see 2Kings 14:1-10), but the atrocities condemned here could have occurred at any time between these two antagonistic 'brothers' (Genesis 27:40).

## 5. Oracle against Ammon (1:13-15) - atrocities in territorial expansion

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of the Ammonites,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead  
in order to enlarge their territory.

So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah (= Amman, capital),  
fire that shall devour its strongholds,  
with shouting on the day of battle,  
with a storm on the day of the whirlwind;  
then their king (Milcom, the national god) shall go into exile,  
he and his officials together, says YHWH.



## 6. Oracle against **Moab** (2:1-3) - military atrocities

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Moab,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because he burned to lime  
the bones of the king of Edom.

So I will send a fire on Moab,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth,

Kerioth is the city of Chemosh, the chief god of Moab

and Moab shall die amid uproar,  
amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet;  
I will cut off the ruler from its midst,  
and will kill all its officials with him, says YHWH.

7. Oracle against Judah (2:4-5) - rejected the Torah

Amos 2:4

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Judah,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;

To this point Amos has been circling. He is about to strike at his main target, Israel. Before doing so he turns his attention to his own home country, Judah.

## Amos 2:4-5

because they have rejected the law of YHWH,  
and have not kept his statutes,  
but they have been led astray by the same lies  
after which their ancestors walked.

So I will send a fire on Judah,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.

The countries chastised to this point have rebelled against the will of YHWH by the atrocities they have committed. Judah, however, is in a special position, for it is in a special covenant relationship with YHWH. This makes its behaviour all the worse, for it has 'rejected the Torah'. It has failed to keep its side of the covenant (compare Isaiah 30:9-11). Instead of keeping faith with YHWH, Judah has gone after 'lies': false gods and false prophecies. Like its neighbours, it must face judgment.



## Oracle against Israel (2:6-8) - Injustice

Thus says YHWH:

For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment

Having completed his indictment of the behaviour of Israel's neighbours, Amos now comes to the central issue of his prophetic critique, and it is directed against the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos goes on to denounce crimes against YHWH, crimes which cut at the heart of the special covenant relationship which Israel has with YHWH, who hears the cry of the poor, who frees from slavery, and who abhors injustice. Amos is particularly concerned with injustices that are hidden behind the mask of apparent religious duty and political and social responsibility. The impartiality required by law is being used to grind the poor into the ground. The powerful appear to be obeying divine law, but they are doing so against YHWH's intention.

## Amos 2:6-7

because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way

In his first accusation Amos seems to be speaking of a situation in which money is lent and the borrower – a person who is ‘just’, that is to say who is living in accordance with God’s will – defaults on repayment. The law protects the lender and allows him to take the borrower’s property if necessary. This could reduce the borrower to slavery. Amos is objecting to the use of this law in circumstances that have made it impossible for the debt to be repaid as promised, or when the legal action is disproportionate to the fault. The lender might be acting legally, and so ‘in God’s name’. He is, however, acting unjustly.

It is interesting here to speculate on the purpose of the sandals (also 8:6). If they are purchased to go on a pilgrimage, the hypocrisy of the total disregard for the needy ('ebyôn) is powerfully underlined. The 'ebyôn covers all the following: the beggar, powerless, needy, hungry, thirsty, paralysed, blind, deaf, lonely, last-in-the-line, without-a-voice, redundant.

The small upper class who are profiting from the wealth pouring in through commerce are walking all over the rest of the population, the powerless (dallîm). They are bullying the oppressed and marginalised ('anāwîm; compare Isaiah 3:15). The 'anāwîm covers all the following: stooped, oppressed, trodden down, deserted, deprived, outcast, despised, cast-aside, humiliated, roughly-treated, burdened, yoked, trapped, caught, crushed by the blows of chronic misery.

## Amos 2:7-8

father and son go in to the same girl (Asherah - consort of Baal),  
so that my holy name is profaned;  
they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge;  
and in the house of their God they drink  
wine bought with fines they imposed.

People are carrying out their religious observances, but the cloak they prostrate themselves on is one they have taken from the poor who are unable to repay a debt. The Law required that the cloak (used as a blanket at night) had to be returned to the poor before nightfall (see Exodus 22:25-26).

Likewise the wine they drink at communion banquets has been purchased from exorbitant fines imposed on the poor. Their religious cult is founded on rapacious injustice to the poor.

The Torah (Exodus 22:21-26) forbids reducing people to destitution

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down.’



## Amos 2:9-10

Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,  
whose height was like the height of cedars,  
and who was as strong as oaks.

I destroyed his boughs above,  
and his roots below.

Speaking for YHWH, Amos reminds Israel of the special providence that YHWH has exercised in their regard, in stark contrast to the way the privileged are treating the poor. As is clear especially from the Book of Joshua, the emergence of Israel in Canaan was attributed to YHWH, pictured as a warrior god conquering the local inhabitants (the 'Amorites'), making space for his chosen people to prosper. Another tradition emphasised the gigantic stature and prowess of the inhabitants of Canaan (Numbers 13:32) – a way of underlining the fact that Israel could never have conquered on its own. Only the power of YHWH could have won the Promised Land for them.

## Amos 2:10

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,  
and led you forty years in the wilderness,  
to possess the land of the Amorite.

This is echoed in the following complaint:

‘They did not say, “Where is YHWH who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness’ (Jeremiah 2:6).

## Amos 2:11

I raised up some of your children to be prophets  
and some of your youths to be Nazirites.

Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? says YHWH.

This is the only text in the Bible where YHWH's raising up of Nazirites is presented as a sign of his providence for Israel. Samson, a hero raised up to achieve deliverance for the people, is described as a Nazirite in Judges 13. In the Septuagint Samuel is described by the same title (see 1 Samuel 1:11). Legislation covering their consecration and vows is found only in Numbers 6:1-21. They were committed to total abstinence from wine and any other intoxicating drink (see Numbers 6:3-4).

Amos 2:12

But you made the Nazirites drink wine,  
and commanded the prophets,  
saying, “You shall not prophesy.”

Isaiah 30:10

You say to the seers, “Do not see”; and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions”.

Jeremiah 11:21

You shall not prophesy in the name of YHWH, or you will die by our hand’.

## Amos 2:13-16

So, I will press you down in your place,  
just as a cart presses down  
when it is full of sheaves.

Flight shall perish from the swift,  
and the strong shall not retain their strength,  
nor shall the mighty save their lives;  
those who handle the bow shall not stand,  
and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves,  
nor shall those who ride horses save their lives;  
and those who are stout of heart among the mighty  
shall flee away naked in that day, says YHWH.



The powerful are weighed down under the luxury in which they are living. They will know the weight of defeat when YHWH raises up an unnamed enemy to crush them. There will be no escape from the punishment that YHWH will inflict upon them because of their determination to continue the life of luxury and ignore the needs of the disadvantaged and oppressed, who have no control over the institutions set up by the powerful for their own selfish advantage. Their obstinate refusal to change their ways cannot but lead to annihilation.