

James Philip Bible Readings

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James Philip Bible Readings
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THE BOOK of AMOS

Our original Notes on the book of the prophet Amos were first issued in July/August 1964, and reprinted without alteration in September/October 1976. Since then we have made an extensive study of the book in our Sunday evening services with, we trust, new and fresh insights into its teaching, and the Notes that follow represent the fruit of that study.

1) 1:1

Of the Minor Prophets nine – from Hosea to Zephaniah (in the AV order) - belong to the period before the Exile, with three Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi - belonging to the post-Exilic period. They are called 'Minor' not because they are of lesser importance or significance than the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but simply because their writings are considerably smaller by comparison with the 'Major' prophets.

There are two main introductory issues to deal with in a study of this nature: one is the historical context and background of the prophet's ministry; and the other, how to apply an Old Testament prophetic message in a way that makes it relevant for today. Let us look at the second of these first of all, the making of the prophet's message relevant today. One of the problems here is whether we are to consider that message as applying to the nation or to the Church. For, of course, Church and State were not separated in Amos's day in the way that they are in ours. Israel was a theocratic state in the way that modern states certainly are not. This is why the message that the prophets proclaim often sounds as if it applied both to Church and State at the same time and applicable to both alike. But the message today to the nation may be different from that to the Church, and we must distinguish them: But the message to individuals can be drawn from both, and this is certainly a legitimate application for us.

2) 1:1

To continue the thought in the previous Note we may say that the message of the prophet can be taken as a word to different kinds of people - to the nation, yes; to the church, yes; but also to Christians, those who name the Name of Christ; and also to luke-warm complacent believers (cf 6:1); and to nominal Church folk who may be void of any genuine spiritual experience; and also - and not least - to those who are unchurched, the careless and the indifferent, who are without any real faith or commitment. It will be clear then, that what we are dealing with in these studies is no dead volcano, but something very live and rumbling, and with great potential for disturbance. It will be seen, for example, from the outline of the Kings of Israel and Judah (on opposite page) that Amos ministered in the time of Uzziah, king of Judah and Jeroboam II, king of Israel and that Uzziah's father, Amaziah's reign was dated 797-768 BC, but that Uzziah came to the throne in 791 BC and reigned for over fifty years. Amaziah was therefore 'set aside', so to speak, by the hand of God, with his son taking his place. But Amos lived in that time and would have been aware of Amaziah as being essentially, as the record shows, a 'middle of the road' man, who was neither the one thing nor the other - and much trouble and distress it brought him! He is the classic illustration of the 'double-minded man, unstable in all his ways' that the Apostle James speaks of in the first chapter of his epistle. This is a hopeless, as well as a tragic, attitude to take. Do we see ourselves in this picture? Is this God's Word for someone at the outset of our study?

3) 1:1

A still more important consideration, however, is the historical background and context of Amos's prophecy. First of all, it is worth noting that the period of history in which the majority of the prophets wrote is a comparatively brief one in relation to the whole sweep of the Old Testament, less than four hundred years in all from the death of Solomon in 931 BC to the Captivity in 586 BC - but it is one in which the Divine Word came to the people in great power and urgency. The note of warning in face of impending doom sounds throughout all the books alike. Amos's ministry took place, as can be seen from the outline, some sixty years before the captivity of the northern kingdom, Israel. The division of the kingdom had taken place following the death of Solomon. Judah and Benjamin forming the southern kingdom, Judah, and the remaining ten tribes forming the northern, Israel. It is a striking fact that although there were several good kings in the south, all the kings without exception in the north were evil. God never recognised the validity of the northern kingdom, which was thus doomed to disaster from its very formation and the Assyrians laid it waste in 722 BC.

Elijah had begun to prophesy in the north in the reign of Ahab (874-852 BC), followed by Elisha, and together they created a conscience, so to speak, in the nation to which all the succeeding prophets were able to appeal. On the repudiation of the prophetic message, wars followed with Syria, ravaging the land in the reigns of Ahab's successors (852-785 BC). Then, suddenly, the tide turned, and under Joash, and particularly Jeroboam II, Israel became a prosperous, wealthy and powerful nation, extending her borders as far as Solomon's empire. This, then, is the setting of Amos's prophecy. Into a prosperous and wealthy land, cursed, as George Adam Smith puts it, with the terrible combination of moral corruption and great wealth and luxury, God sent the herdsman of Tekoa with his unpalatable and disturbing message of impending doom.

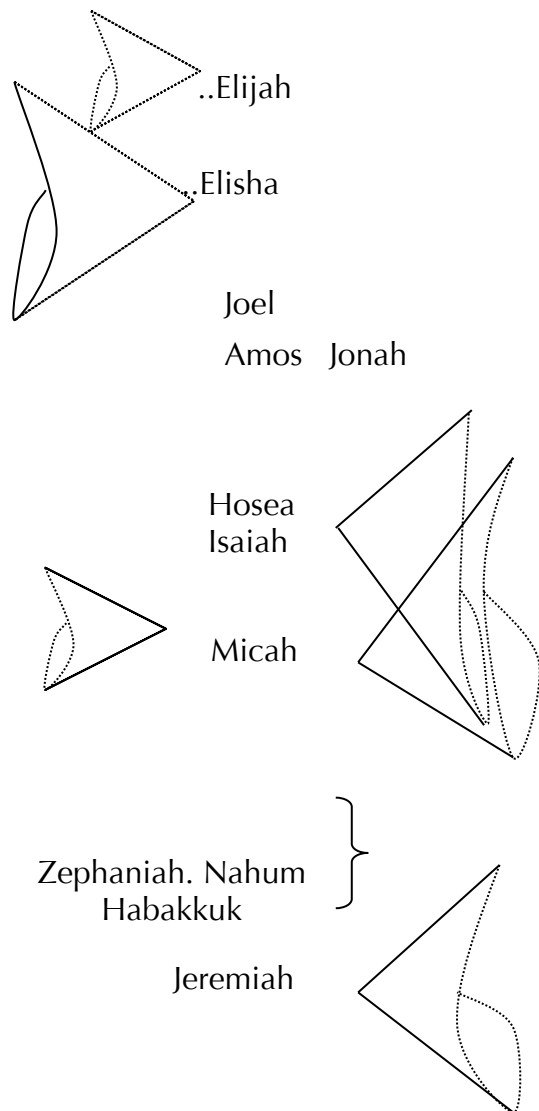
4) **Chronology****THE KINGS OF THE DIVIDED KINGDOM**

(After the death of Solomon)

ISRAEL

931-910	Jeroboam
910-909	Nadab
909-886	Baasha
886-885	Elah
7 Days	Zimri
885-874	Omri
874-852	Ahab
852-850	Ahaziah
850-842	Jehoram
842-814	Jehu
817-800	Jehoahaz
800-785	Joash
785-745	Jeroboam II

6 Months	Zechariah
1 Month	Shallum
744-735	Menaham
735-734	Pekahiah
734-730	Pekah
730-722	Hoshea
Captivity to Assyria	

THE PROPHETS**JUDAH**

Rehoboam	931-915
Abijam	915-912
Asa	912-871
Jehoshaphat	875-850
Jehoram	850-843
Ahaziah	843-842
Q. Athaliah	842-836
Jehoash	836-797
Amaziah	797-768
Azariah	791-740
(Uzziah)	
Jotham	751-736
Ahaz	736-721
Hezekiah	727-693
Mannasseh	693-639
Amon	639-638
Josiah	638-608
Jehoahaz	3 Months
Jehoiakim	608-597
Jehoiachin	3 Months
Zedekiah	597-586
Captivity to Babylon	

5) 1:1

Two further points need to be noted before we proceed. The first is that Amos, though prophesying to the northern kingdom came from the south. Tekoa was situated a little south of Bethlehem. He was therefore a foreign missionary. Yet, the 'foreign' land to which he was sent, Israel in the north, was not a strange place for him. He was not a citizen of the northern kingdom, as some scholars have supposed, but as a wool-grower he would necessarily have had yearly contact with the markets of that land; and to such contact, as George Adam Smith observes, 'were probably due his opportunities of familiarity with Northern Israel, the originals of his vivid pictures of her town-life, her commerce and the worship at her sanctuaries'; thus he would have become familiar with its sights and sounds, and been enabled to develop a 'feel' for its social and economic injustices which he later was so vividly to portray, in descriptions which must surely have come from an eye witness. As Adam Smith comments, 'it was because he went up and down in it, using those eyes which the desert air had sharpened, that he so thoroughly learned the wickedness of its people'.

The other point is this: in the previous Note we indicated that in the reign of Jeroboam II Israel's material fortunes turned, and she became a prosperous and wealthy nation. In the now famous words of a modern politician, she 'had never had it so good'. It is against this glowing picture that the words 'two years before the earthquake' stand out in startling relief. An actual earthquake was soon indeed to shake and shatter the land, but Amos's words are also symbolic of the impending doom that in a matter of years was to overtake this sinning nation, and this gives us a salutary reminder not only that the prophets have a topical and relevant message for our own time, but also that material prosperity in national life may serve but to conceal the moral and spiritual bankruptcy which invites the wrath of God.

6) 1:1

J.B. Phillips published in 1963 a modern translation of 'the Four Prophets', Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-39 and Micah. It is a fine piece of work and we recommend it to readers of these Notes. It includes an essay by Edwin H. Robertson on the historical background of these prophecies in which he maintains that the era of the Minor Prophets was one of the times in human history when all the world seems astir, with a wind blowing through human affairs, and the Spirit of God stirring the spirit of man, and that these prophets spoke in the name of the living God, conscious of why they spoke. They were not political commentators, but saw world events as evidence of God's power in the world. They also believed that the whole of history was to serve His purpose in preparing His people. They urged them to obey His laws, and promised great things if they did; they warned them of the consequences of disobeying or living lives unworthy of the people of God. The great historical event that gave colour to the prophetic warning of this period was the fall of Samaria (the northern kingdom) in 732 BC. Amos warned of this, and it came to pass. The general line taken by the prophets was trust in God and keep out of foreign alliances. By listening to this counsel, Judah, the southern kingdom, survived this dangerous century. Later, she interpreted her good fortune as a security guaranteed by the presence of the Temple in Jerusalem. As soon as magical confidence took the place of true religion, the seeds of destruction began to germinate. Eventually, even Jerusalem fell. But the prophet has seen beyond this and taught a survival of God's people beyond disaster.

Such is a summary of Robertson's essay, and it gives a remarkably authentic picture of the 8th century prophetic background.

7) 1:1

We also are living today in such a dramatic period of change, as described in the previous Note. And if there is any real word from the Lord, it surely has to be a word which will interpret the dramatic changes we have witnessed in terms of the sovereign purposes of God for the world, and indeed in terms of moral and spiritual principles, and the perils of flouting or ignoring them, or sitting lightly to them.

In the light of what has been said we can hardly be surprised that Amos's prophecy begins with the words 'two years before the earthquake'. Indeed the time was a time of earthquake, and the prophet swiftly (in the next verse) changes the metaphor to the roar of a lion. The earthquake, then, was interpreted as the voice of God, and this is confirmed in what seems a clear reference to the earthquake in 8:8 ff and 9:5. The reference, much later, in Zechariah 14:5 makes it clear that it was a very major disaster, causing widespread devastation. There are some grounds also for associating Isaiah 6:4 with this earthquake, 'and the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke'. And could the shockwaves have reached as far north as Carmel (2)? Well might Amos say in 9:5 'The Lord God of hosts is He that toucheth the land'. The historical event was surely an eloquent descriptor of the underlying sense of instability of the land at the time Amos spoke, calling into serious question the 'never-had-it-so-good' syndrome that characterised the affluence of the northern kingdom in the reign of king Jeroboam.

8) 1:1-15

It will be useful to go through the whole of the first chapter at one reading to see something of the sweep of Amos's purpose. The indictment he brings from the Lord is upon all the surrounding nations, and one by one he pronounces their doom. Message of doom it is, and this austere note pervades the whole prophecy. But we must not adopt a wrong attitude to the prophet's message. The recurring phrase 'For three transgressions...and for four...' (Not a literal term, but one meaning, as J.B. Phillips puts it, 'Because of outrage after outrage') is meant to indicate, if anything, the long patience and forbearance of God with the evildoers. It is after many and repeated transgressions, and when patience and longsuffering have proved unavailing, that God acts in judgment. This in fact is one of the distinctive insights of the Old Testament, and we should wonder, not that God sends judgment on men and nations, but that He should be so slow and reluctant to do so.

It is significant to note that the Lord 'roars from Zion' and utters His voice 'from Jerusalem' not from Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, Israel, to which this prophecy is directed. The Rev William Still suggests that this more than hints to backsliding Israel that Jerusalem is still the seat of religion and government - as if to accentuate the fact that God had never recognised the validity of the northern kingdom's constitution as a separate people. His warning voice from Jerusalem reaches to Carmel in the north and the pasture lands in the south. It covers the whole land, from north to south. It is a word, not to individuals, but to the nation. Thus wide is the conception Amos had of his ministry.

9) 1:1-15

The usefulness of reading through the whole chapter to get the flavour of what Amos is saying, but it would indeed help us a great deal to read through the entire prophecy, to help in our ongoing study. We should note in passing that Amos is described as a 'herdsman from Tekoa', a village south of Jerusalem. We need not, however, necessarily suppose that he was of peasant stock; some commentators suggest he may have been a prosperous sheep farmer - and that may well be - an owner of flocks and herds and of plantations of sycamores on his estate. The significance of the description given of him is not to establish his social grouping, but to underline that he was a layman, not a prophet or a prophet's son. But it will be noticed that he was very knowledgeable about the nations and peoples surrounding Israel, and was well-versed in their history, layman though he was. And one is bound to say that this is something much to be desired today: Yet, we have met students who say they never read newspapers, or listen to news broadcasts, and who are often woefully ignorant of current affairs. It seems to us that it is incumbent upon thinking people, especially Christians, to keep abreast of contemporary opinion in the world scene: If Amos were among us today we are quite sure he divine purpose in the broad sweep of them.

10) 1:1-15

When we bear in mind, as has already been pointed out in an earlier Note that the reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom, was a very prosperous one (this was true of Uzziah's reign in the south also), with days of calm, peace and prosperity, and affluence the order of the day, it is hardly surprising that Amos's message was greeted with a mixture of contempt, scorn and resentment (as 7:10 ff makes plain) a message of this nature does not go down well with a people who are at ease in Zion (6:1) and trust in the mountain of Samaria. As one commentator puts it, 'The placing of the statement about the terrifying roaring of the Lord's voice at the beginning of the book indicates that all the sayings of Amos could be heard against the background of that roaring'. And he continues, 'In the preaching and teaching of the Church today, most of us tend to favour those biblical pictures of God that are comforting and secure: the caring shepherd (Psalm 23), the nursing mother (Psalm 131), and the waiting father (Luke 15). In contrast we open the Book of Amos and discover on the first page that encountering the Lord is like meeting a lion. We find that the first announced acts of this God are the sending of fires and an earthquake. This picture of God as a roaring lion conveys the ferocity and the wrath of a God whom we have tried to domesticate and tame.' But - and this is a significant factor today - the concept of judgment is outmoded in our generation. It is very 'non-U' to speak of it in any way, and those who do are speedily dubbed as the fundamentalist/lunatic fringe of the Church. The whole climate of theological, and especially ecclesiastical, opinion is set against the very idea. This is another reason why the ministry of Amos was not acceptable to the religious establishment of his day and what he said to the high priest when thus challenged and dismissed was very significant, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

11) 1:1-15

In 7:14 he tells us he was neither prophet nor prophet's son, but a herdsman, that is to say, he was not an official ecclesiastic, but one whom God had called, outwith the establishment, to speak His Word to the nation. This has been known to happen again and again down the history of the Church. When the Church fails and loses its testimony, and no mouthpiece is found for the Word of the Lord, He goes outside, sometimes in the most dramatic ways, to find someone who will do His bidding. This is why very often God's message in time of crisis is in the nature of a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice out of tune with the recognised pattern and 'party-line'. The Word of the Lord is more likely to be with those who are despised and belittled and miscalled by their fellows than in conventional religious circles, and this is where it needs to be looked for.

This is why there is a growing awareness in non-ecclesiastical circles that the Church is failing in its calling. In a newspaper article, a prominent churchman, in describing the democratic, bureaucratic, collectivist and secular characteristics of the modern state which are moulding the identity and describing the practice of the churches makes the comment 'the end result is a tendency for the churches to act more as moral agencies and propagandists for social reform than as authentic vehicles of spiritual mysteries. This may also be a key to their continued decline. Many people simply do not find churches religious enough'.

12) 1:1-15

One readily thinks also, in this connection of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's forthright and indeed prophetic words in an article written by him after he was exiled to the West, entitled, 'Godlessness, the first step to the Gulag' in which he recalled hearing as a child a number of older people offering the following explanation to the great disasters that had befallen the Russian people: 'Men have forgotten God: that is why all this has happened'. This is the point that Amos makes in his prophecy. We shall have more to say about this later in our study.

In the meantime, we continue with the text of this chapter and note that there is a swift transition in 3 from the chosen people to the nations surrounding them. This serves to remind them - and us - that these nations have their own particular significance in the sovereign purposes of God in relation to His people. What we mean is this: God punished His chosen people again and again by raising up foreign powers against them as instruments of His displeasure and as the rod of His anger. But not only did these nations habitually go to excess in their barbarities against Israel; they were also, paradoxically, tools of the devil, and willing tools at that. So that, while God used the excesses as a chastisement of His people, He punished them for the atrocities they committed. It is one of the great and thrilling mysteries in the divine economy that God can use evil for His own sovereign purposes, yet punish it in righteousness, for even when He uses it He has no kind of complicity with it.

13) 1:1-15

The principle underlined in the previous Note goes a long way to explain the really agonising questions that we ask in our own day. 'Why doesn't God deal with - the world threat that may vex us at any particular point - and give us peace in our time?', we ask. And God says, 'Ah, this is too easy a solution, to come to me after generations of iniquity and ask me to deal with your enemies and give you peace. Peace? What do you want peace for? Peace to go on sinning, to go on forgetting me? What kind of God do you take me for? I will not give you peace: I will keep you on tenterhooks; there will be no kind of rest from this interminable cold war or from the threat of nuclear war, until you learn to repent. The dictators and oppressors of this world are my instruments to chastise and discomfit you. Oh yes, they are evil, and their cup of wrath is slowly and steadily filling up; their time will surely come. And if, after I finally deal with them, you are still unrepentant, I will raise up others, still more terrible, to molest you;' This in fact is what He did in Amos's time. Damascus Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab came to grief; but still a more terrible foe was, even as Amos spoke, looming on the northern horizons of Israel - the Assyrian empire, which brought final and irrevocable ruin upon the sinning and unrepentant people. Rightly understood, the destruction of Damascus and the others was little consolation to Israel, if they only made way for even greater dangers.

14) 1:1-15

The record of the sins of Israel's neighbours and enemies makes grim and horrible reading indeed. It is the unspeakable barbarity of what they did in their terrible attacks on Israel that finally provoked the judgment of God. There are two things to be said about this. The first is that although the catalogue of crimes given here is gruesome, it is more than matched by those of a generation that has produced the horror of Hiroshima and the grim bestialities of Belsen, not to speak of the nameless oppression of Communist power behind the iron and bamboo curtains. We are living in a world in which there are so many atrocities that we have got used to the word, and it is as well to be reminded that God never gets used to it, and will not hold them guiltless who perpetrate them. This is the second point: God does visit the guilty in judgment, and does so, however secure in their power and might these nations may think themselves to be. In His time He brings them crashing down. No one sins against Him with impunity. In our own day, the German Reich proved this to its bitter cost; and more recently we have seen Communist might, which for a great part of the twentieth century, straddled the world like a colossus, and seemed impregnable beyond all hope for redress for its victims, being reduced to dust almost overnight. This will be the fate of all lawless might in its attempts at world domination.

15) 1:1-15

Two things stand out from this record of Israel's enemies and their sins. The first is that their sins go back a long, long way. The Philistines were not new enemies of God's people; right back to David's time, and even further, to Samson's, they had harried and discomfited Israel, and this is just as true of the Ammonites and the Moabites and the Edomites. This speaks grimly of Israel's continued impenitence (why otherwise would God continue to use them as a goad for His people, and as the rod of His anger?), and this heightens the sense of impending doom that runs through not only Amos's prophecy but also his contemporaries, and those who followed them. It also speaks, however, of the longsuffering of God with such intractable evil, and His inevitable righteousness in finally bringing doom upon them: It is as if God waited until sin, having been given its head, had demonstrated beyond all doubt the enormity of its guilt and the crying need for its punishment. The second thing is that the origin of at least some of these nations in highly significant episodes in the early history of the patriarchal times bears witness to the awful entail of sin in human experience. What we mean is this: Edom descended from Esau, and the Scriptures mean to teach us that the sins of Jacob (from whom Israel descended) against his brother were destined to have far-reaching and long-lasting repercussions. Ammon and Moab were the incestuous sons of Lot, and from the evil brood of that unhallowed and wasted life there arose peoples who harried and distressed Israel in her later history. It is the terrifying dimensions in which sin issues and to which it finally develops that should impress our hearts and consciences and fill us with solemn fear. The devil blinds us so that we see only the beginning of sin when we commit it, in all its attractive and beguiling charm; but the Scriptures remind us grimly how and where it ends.

16) 2:1-5

As Amos hurled his tremendous condemnation against the surrounding nations, the men of Israel were no doubt expressing their agreement with his words. It is very probable that as yet it had not dawned on them that God was preparing to speak a word of ominous warning to His own people. This is so true to human nature; polite interest, agreement, even applause, will be given as long as someone else is the target of the attack; but let it come home to the hearer's own heart and conscience, and all hell may be let loose. This, in fact, is what happened with Amos (see 8:10ff): It is true that Judah and Israel had not indulged in the kind of atrocities of which their neighbours were guilty - although in fact they finally descended to an abandonment of idolatry that narrowed the gap considerably between them and the heathen - but their sins were no less abhorrent to God, and no more excusable. Their sins were the sins of civilisation, not atrocities as such, but social injustice: This in fact was the burden of many of the prophets, and particularly Amos's. Here, in the catalogue of Judah's sins, the prophet puts his finger on the heart and core of all the trouble - they had despised the law of the Lord, and had not kept His commandments. It is one basic and fundamental biblical principle that religion and morality are inextricably linked together, and the implication is clear and plain: because they despised the law of God, the moral fibre of the people of God rotted, and moral declension became inevitable. This is something relentless, inexorable, and inevitable, and it has startling relevance when we seek to apply the message of these prophetic Scriptures in our own age.

17) 2:1-5

The sin of Judah that of despising the law of the Lord is the sin of so-called Christian countries today, and this provides us with the real spiritual explanation of the international tensions of our post-war civilisation. Men sometimes ask: 'Why can't we be content to live quiet, decent lives without bothering one another? Why doesn't God give us peace when we want it so much?' But that is the point. We have lived such lives, quiet and decent to a degree, and we have lived them without God. That is God's quarrel with our generation, and with the Christian West, for we have received the revelation of His will in the gospel, and have despised it and neglected it. We have sown the wind of criminal neglect and now we are reaping the whirlwind. And what adds to the tragedy of such a situation is the melancholy realisation that even yet there are very few willing or apparently capable of recognising this as the grim fact that it is. Having dismissed the notion of judgment from its theology, the Christian West cannot get used to the fact that the hand of God is heavy upon her because of her sins. But this is something that the theology of the West will need to relearn, and if the signs of the time are any indication, she may yet have to learn it by a practical demonstration of its reality in grim and continuing international tension, if not something worse, unless she is prepared to heed the warning voices of the religious or secular prophets who are interpreting the situation in these terms today.

18) 2:6-16

We come in these verses to what Amos says about the sins of Israel, the northern kingdom. We see in his indictment of Israel the grim pattern of cause and effect unfolded by unrighteousness and the collapse of conventional moralities - honesty, purity, charity - and the lowering of standards that inevitably comes in the wake of an abandonment of the religious basis of life. In this respect Israel, the northern kingdom, was always a step ahead of Judah, and the moral declension that was even then evident in Israel's national life was only at a later stage seen in its sinister, all-pervasive implications in the southern kingdom. It is as if Amos, in exposing Israel's parlous condition, were warning Judah of the inevitable consequences of her own neglect of the Word of the Lord. Alex Motyer, in his commentary, 'The Day of the Lion', points out that the person-to-person aspect of the sin is underlined in 6, 7a, exposing the general trends of life as it was then lived in Israel, and adds, 'Three principles were held and acted upon: the primary importance of seeking material possessions (the sin of covetousness), the irrelevance of the rights of other people (the sin of indifference and oppression) and the unrestricted promotion of self-advantage (the sin of self-importance).' The impressive and indeed frightening thing about such a catalogue is that these were the same sins for which the heathen nations around Israel were condemned and judged by God. How therefore could Israel hope to be treated differently by a holy God, when her sins were the same as theirs?

19) 2:6-16

Social injustice mingles with moral turpitude in the horrible picture of the sin of Israel given in these verses - 7a should read, with J.A.B. Phillips, 'they grind the faces of the poor into the dust' - and this is a grim reminder that one form of evil usually generates others (so also in 8). But worse than all else is the fact that such evil is committed and continued in the face of the divine mercy to His people, and His long forbearance. This is the force of the 'Yet' in 9. This is the sin of ingratitude with a vengeance, and one which doubles their guilt in the sight of God. To have been a people so favoured, and to have made so light of these favours, and despised them - it was this that finally brought judgment upon them. 13 should read, with the RSV, 'Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down'. The prophet sees in the situation a picture of harvest - grim and terrible after the sowing they had indulged in. There is more than a hint in 14 of the nature of the judgment that was to come upon them - panic-stricken flight from the advancing enemy, an unlikely enough contingency in the minds of those then listening to Amos, but one which was fulfilled with dread literalness a generation or two later. God is not mocked; whatsoever a man - or a nation - sows, that shall he also reap. The sad - and frightening - thing in all this, however, is the lack of concern and the complacency of Israel and their crass blindness to the realities of their situation. They were simply unaware of the inevitable consequences of the way they were living.

20) 2:6-16

One further point of great significance must be noted before we leave this passage. The evidence that Israel's departure from the Word of the Lord was not an accidental, fortuitous matter having little positive significance is seen in their treatment of those whom the Lord raised up to lead them by precept (the prophets) and by example (the Nazarites). What 11 and 12 speak of is the corrupting power of the people, pulling down eager young prophets from the high places of inspiration and authority to the commonplace and the humdrum, quenching their enthusiasm and corrupting their simplicity. This is a word that has its relevance today. Sometimes great bitterness is expressed about ministers who fail to be faithful to the highest they know and do not preach a true gospel, and doubtless there are those to whom this judgment will apply; but what are we to say of congregations who are responsible for pulling down godly men and discouraging them in the work of the Kingdom? Of how many men is it true to say that they have entered the ministry with high hopes and in a spirit of great dedication, only to have their spirit broken by a worldly or divided congregation, or by one that has not been prepared to receive the word of life from them. Sad indeed it is when a man in his first charge has left it broken and disillusioned and sadder still when the congregation succeeds only too well in infecting him with their own spirit and turning his ministry into a pale, lifeless travesty of what, but for them, it might have been. It is sometimes said that a congregation can make a preacher; from Amos's words we see that it can also unmake him, and it is a solemn, nay grim, responsibility upon those to whom God sends His Word.

21) 3:1-8

The inevitability of judgment upon the people of God, inferred and implicit in earlier Notes, now becomes quite explicit in these verses, particularly in 2, where the word 'therefore' rings out like a death knell upon the hapless people of God. 'Known' in 2a refers to Israel's election of God. To whom, as Paul puts it in Romans 9:4, 'pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises:' -they were surely a uniquely privileged people, but what they had failed to grasp was that privilege laid upon them solemn responsibility; and it was this tragic failure that spelt their doom. As Motyer points out so trenchantly, 'Sin is desperately serious among the people of God: The heathen come under condemnation for violating conscience; the people of God must therefore be trebly under condemnation for they violate conscience, revelation and the love which has made them what they are. And yet nothing is easier: for His love is so great, does His holiness after all matter? Since He chose, will He not keep, come what may? So it goes on, the voice of complacency eroding spiritual reality: But love has brought us near to the Holy One; the blood of the Lamb has redeemed us for obedience. 'To be chosen is to be put under judgment'. 'The nearer God places anyone to His own light, the more malignant is the choice of darkness'.

'Special privileges, special obligations; special grace, special holiness; special revelation, special scrutiny; special love, special responsiveness...the church of God cannot ever escape the perils of its uniqueness'.

22) 3:1-8

It is inevitable, and indeed necessary, that we should seek to draw parallels between the situation in Israel and our own day, and they stand out very clearly, for those who have eyes to see. The lowering of moral standards in Britain today with the blurring of distinctions between good and evil - one recalls Isaiah's frightening words (5:20), 'woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness' - can be seen most clearly when we think back over two or three decades: the acquiescence of society in evils that even thirty years ago would have led to resignation and dismissal from public life can only be regarded as a disquieting and ominous sign of the times. This is 'the other side of the coin' vis-a-vis the euphoria that followed the collapse of communism in Europe. What we need to ask ourselves is; does the demise and discrediting of communism let the West 'off the hook'? Not so; not any more than God's people of old were let off the hook, and allowed to continue in their complacent, Godless ways, for as soon as one threat was past, another appeared. And what of other threats in our day? It does not need much discernment or insight to recognise the looming menace of Islam in the world. Well might we remember Paul's words, 'When they shall say, peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape'. If one message comes through very clearly for our own day from these chapters, it is that the apparent prosperity and affluence of the West is really an irrelevance, as it was in Jeroboam II's time. It could all change so rapidly. Modern civilisation tolerates, and lives by, the existence of vices which ruined the ancient empires. Why do we not more readily do what Amos did, and put two and two together, and see that cause and effect work just as inevitably in the modern world as in his day?

23) 3:3-8

This is a notable passage whose meaning requires careful pondering. Of the various interpretations given it, that of George Adam Smith seems more cogent and helpful. The picture is from the desert. Amos was a herdsman, and trained by long experience to watch for every tell-tale movement in the vast expanse of the wilderness. No movement would escape him, because no movement would he without significance; the slightest disturbance among the herds would cause him to be on guard. This is the point of the reference in 3. In the desert it would scarcely be possible for two people to be walking together simply by chance -they must have agreed to meet; something must have drawn them together. So also, when in the forest he heard the roar of a lion, he would surely come to the conclusion that it had jumped upon its victim. It does not roar when stalking its prey; when the roar is heard, the victim's doom is already sealed. Similarly, if a bird is captured and brought down, it must be that a snare has taken it, and when a warning trumpet is blown in the city, the people know it is not for nothing, but that there is an alarm of war. And if there be evil in the city, will the Lord not be behind it? Such is Amos's argument; and we can imagine his hearers following his thought and agreement that this was so. 'We are with you, Amos, and see the force of what you are saying. What then? What is the point of your argument? What are you getting at?' This is the important question, and we turn to its answer in the next Note.

24) 3:3-8

Amos proceeds to say - and this is the force of his dramatic, if allegorical, language - that the lion has roared, and God has spoken. And if He has spoken, as He was at that moment through Amos, then the ominous judgment was indeed about to fall. Just as all these aforementioned phenomena have their cause, so Amos's appearance with his message of doom has its cause also. And thus when Israel hears God's voice through Amos she should shudder as the shepherd does in the desert when he hears the lion's roar, knowing that it has pounced on some hapless victim. Translating this harmony between event and inner conviction into a working principle, Amos then states in 7, 'The Lord will do nothing but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets' - that is, 'the revelation first comes to the prophet's heart; then he sees and recognises the event, and is confident to give his message about it' (G A Smith). Just as, in the desert when he hears the roar of the lion, he puts two and two together and concludes that the lion has jumped on his prey, so in looking at the corruption of Israel, its wealth and idolatry on the one hand, and realising that God the Lion of Israel is roaring and calling him to prophesy, he also puts two and two together, and realises that he is called to prophesy coming doom upon Israel because of the idolatry and sin and evil of the nation. The sin will be the cause of the judgment, just as the taking of the victim is the cause of the roaring of the lion. Thus, the two things that are agreed (3) are a) the sin and declension of the nation, and b) his own call to prophesy. This cannot be coincidence, thinks Amos. And, just as the roaring of the lion never happens without some ominous deed happening along with it, so prophecy (God's roaring) will never come without some deed of destruction and judgment also, ominous sounds in nature are accompanied by fatal deeds, and in the moral realm, when God's men speak forth, their words will be confirmed by the action of the Lord. Amos's inward convictions harmonised with the outward events in the history of his day.

25) 3:9-15

Here, then, is the roaring of the lion! The Lord calls on Ashdod and Egypt to behold the moral and spiritual disorder in Israel, as if to be witnesses of His righteousness in sending judgment on her. Not only are they evil, but they have become so debased that the power to do right has long since departed, and with it the ability even to distinguish between good and evil. This was the culmination of Israel's sin; they had gone too far, and disaster and ruin were inevitable. This is the meaning of 11 and 12; the disaster was to be complete and irremediable. The history of subsequent events proves how literally these grim words were fulfilled in the experience of God's people, for Assyria came upon them from the East, sacked Samaria, and transported almost the entire nation into captivity, re-peopling the land with heathens from Babylon and elsewhere (see 2 Kings 17:5ff). Israel was never again known as a nation, in the way that the southern kingdom preserved its identity (in its later captivity in Babylon) and was able to return to the land under Ezra and Nehemiah. Israel, in fact, was destroyed forever as a national entity, and what Amos predicted in 12 was a frighteningly realistic and exact figure of what eventually took place. There was as little left of Israel after Assyria had done with her as a lion leaves of the victim it has slain. It is important that we should realise, about predictive prophecy in the Scriptures, that it is not so much a probable forecast of what might conceivably happen, made by men of more than ordinary discernment, as a clear warning as to what will assuredly happen since God Himself has ordained it. The prophets deal with certainties, not probabilities.

26) 3:9-15

A further comment on 10. What Amos may mean by these words is that the hearts of the people had been so seared by continual sin that they were no longer conscious of right or wrong; the absolute distinction between the two had become blurred and all but obliterated. This is one of the disturbing and disquieting features of modern society today. Much is said and written in our time about the decline in moral standards that could, we suppose, be legitimately described as somewhat doleful exaggerations - there will always be those who complain that 'things are not like what they used to be' - and a good enough case could be made out for the thesis that every age has had its moral delinquents, and that ours is not so very much worse than former times. But what is different is this: in former times there may have been as much immorality as there is today (yet what of the medical statistics for venereal disease and AIDS among youth?), but at least they knew they were doing wrong, and recognised that they were transgressing accepted moral standards, whereas today, it is the moral standards themselves that are being questioned and assailed. The question 'Why should adultery or promiscuity be considered wrong?' is essentially a modern question. This is the really serious and indeed sinister difference between former days and now, the abandonment of absolute moral standards, and the rejection of an absolute moral law, and it is this that invites the 'adversary' (11) as the rod of God's anger.

27) 3:9-15

The last two verses of the chapter speak of divine judgment on Church and nation alike. The point about the visitation of the altars of Bethel and the cutting off of the horns of the altar seems to be the destruction of false religion that sought to exist outside the will of God (see 1 Kings 12:26 ff). The persistence of worship at Bethel only served to kindle God's wrath against the people because, wrong in essence, it multiplied wrong-doing (see 4:4). Religious observances are no substitute for obedience to the will of God, as Israel found to her cost. Something of the luxury of Amos's day may be seen in the picture given in 15 - 'winter house, summer house', 'houses of ivory'. They had 'never had it so good' in Israel! Not that material affluence as such is wrong; the fact is, however, that it is so often gotten, as it was in Israel's day, at the expense of the poor, and furthermore it tends almost inevitably towards forgetfulness of God. The sorry history of our own affluent society affords a grim parallel to that of Israel in this respect. The material benefits of the Welfare State, agitated for and obtained through forces that owed their original inspiration to the Christian faith and Christian ideals, have only too successfully obscured from modern man the truth that he cannot live by bread alone.

28) 4:1-3

We have quoted once or twice in previous Notes from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and what has struck us very forcibly in what he says, and what is so impressive - and those who have read his writing will recognize this - is the unmistakable authority with which he speaks and writes. There is something compelling about him that makes one listen. And what is it? He is certainly a prophetic voice; and he speaks (naught for our comfort); his is a given message, indeed. But it is not the 'doom and gloom' utterance of a frenzied, unbalanced fanatic, but a reasoned statement that he makes, a reasoned argument that carries one's mind with him. He puts two and two together in such a way that we are obliged to see the logic of what he says. And this is how it was with Amos also. As Motyer says:

'But, as ever, the Bible has no appetite for mere denunciation, bare announcement of imminent, inescapable doom. The section is a reasoned argument why these things must be so: it therefore exposes the sins of the people of God, the areas of life in which evidence will show itself that they are not living in harmony with their God, the things which (however unimportant they may be to the unaided human gaze) make Him mourn, the reasons why the church is powerless in the face of the world. It is along these lines that what would otherwise have been the tale of a by-gone tragedy remains the voice of the living God speaking to us and to His whole people today:'

This is what we see in Amos at this point in the book. And what is more, dark and grim as his message is, it is interlaced with tender appeals to the people, as we shall see later in chapter 5 (cf 5:4, 6, 8, 14). God does not find pleasure in the doom and loss of His people; He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should turn to Him and live. But before we come to that tender appeal, we need to look at the 'case' that Amos makes against the northern kingdom: This we proceed to do in tomorrow's Note and those that follow.

29) 4:1-3

The 'kine of Bashan' are, it would seem, the women of Samaria, and Amos is inveighing against a vicious social evil in which the wealthy women are held to be responsible for the crushing oppression of the poor by the demands they lay upon their husbands for all manner of delicacies ('masters' in 1 should read 'husbands'). This might surprise us, if we did not remember that in our own society one of the more harrowing features is the considerable misery caused by social climbers who will go to any lengths to 'keep up with the Joneses' and drive their husbands in the process into the merciless industrial 'rat-race' in order to promote social standing and advancement. None are so unscrupulous as those who are determined to 'get on' socially, and none so heartless in their exploitation of situations and people to gain their ends. This is probably more true in the large cities of our land than elsewhere. Middle-class snobbery is a particularly squalid kind of vulgarity, but it can also be, and alas often is, merciless in its expression and in its efforts to preserve its existence: It is one of several marks of an effete society which invite the judgment of God, for He hears the cries of the oppressed, and will not hold them guiltless who bring them into such misery. How topical is all this! For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, Amos has much to say to our time. As someone has put it, modern civilisation tolerates, and partly lives by, the existence of vices which ruined the ancient empires. How, then, should we suppose that we should escape the nemesis that came upon them, when we do the same things?

30) 4:4-13

George Adam Smith has entitled this passage 'The false peace of ritual', and speaks of two contrasting pictures it presents, firstly, man's treatment of God, and secondly God's treatment of man. Amos's indictment of Israel's religion was that it was empty of meaning and divorced from reality. The startling thing is that there was no lack of religion in Israel; Bethel (4) was a national shrine, where religious observances were multiplied with great pomp and ceremony. What is so frightening is that such ecclesiastical practice went hand in hand with the sins of chapters 2 and 3, the oppression of the poor, social injustice, and carelessness of their needs. It was a religion without morals, and this is what called forth the most scathing of denunciations from the prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries against God's people, and underlined all the more forcibly the divine requirement as being 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly' with God. The supreme tragedy in religion is when outward observance becomes a substitute for inward reality. Nothing can be more heartless or inhuman, nothing more offensive or more calculated to arouse bitterness in men or indignation in God; A belief that does not behave is an abomination as well as being a contradiction in terms, and faith without works, being dead, produces death wherever it is found, in the sense that it kills all the finer human qualities that can grace and bless the life of man.

31) 4:4-13

It would be an interesting study to examine the relationship between the corrupt religion of Romanist and orthodox countries, where ritual has displaced reality, and the rise of bitter, atheistic Communism. This is as good a parallel as any we could find to the situation in Amos's day, but we would be unwise to be blind to the fact that there are other areas of unreality in religion, the Roman incense and rosaries and Greek and Russian ikons. The Apostle Paul speaks of the 'form of godliness that denies the power thereof', and of those who 'profess that they know God, but in works they deny Him' (Titus 1:16). This is something that is relevant for Christian testimony today, and raises the whole question of what it is that counts in bearing effectual witness to Christ. There are believers who are so self-consciously obtrusive, not to say embarrassing, in the way in which they employ 'religious' language in their contacts with others that they tend to harm rather than help the cause of the kingdom of God. To 'speak a word in season' does not necessarily mean to lard our conversation with religious jargon, especially jargon of a bygone day, as if there were any particular sanctity or supernatural power in seventeenth century English. It is possible to put a false trust in an outward facade of religious terminology and attitudes and thought-forms in such a way as to deceive ourselves into believing that acquiring a facility and familiarity with them makes us effective witnesses. But a man with reality in his heart will do more in five minutes for Christ's cause and kingdom, even if he breaks all the 'rules' of orthodox evangelical practice, than the most impressive accumulation of religious clichés and evangelistic expertise. There are some people so 'holy' in this sense that they are dull and a weariness to the spirit!

32) 4:4-13

The other side of the picture is of the living God in action (6ff), - famine, drought, blasting and mildew, pestilence and war, earthquake. Amos does not merely mean that God allowed these misfortunes to come upon His people - He sent them. This is the grim reality with which Amos shocked and angered his contemporaries, and this is the message that we find it so difficult to receive today. In this connection there are two things that should be pointed out: the first is that the books of the prophets are being studied more carefully in our day than they have been for many generations, because men are seeming to discover an authentic word from the Lord in them; and the second is that it is still generally speaking true to say that the man who dares to speak from a pulpit to our generation as Amos did to his is likely to be branded as fanatical and verging on lunacy. The angry God, it is said, is an anachronism not to be revived in a modern, enlightened age. We are too civilised to think in such terms any more - this, be it noted, from the generation that has produced the gas chamber, bacteriological warfare and the hydrogen bomb! It is this awful blindness to the realities of the situation that constitutes the gravest and most ominous sign of our time, just as it was in Amos's. It was because Israel was not prepared to heed the warning voice of God in the calamities that over-took her, nor Amos's interpretation of them, that the word came, 'Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel'. It is in the light of this grim summons, with its terrifying possibility of meaning for us, that it may be more realistic for the faithful in the Church to think less in terms of preparation for revival (what if it is too late now to hope for this?) and more in terms of preparation for some equivalent of the captivity that overtook Israel for her sins. This is something so strange to the thought of today that we must spend some time on it again tomorrow.

33) 4:4-13

The possibility of the Church being prepared, not for revival, but for survival, is one that has more scriptural warrant than we might at first think. We have only to recall the teaching of the Book of Revelation to be reminded that in the last days persecution and sustained onslaught on the very existence of organised witness as such are much more likely to be experienced than spiritual awakening, and that even if a revival on a national scale is still a possibility it may come only after a fiery purging of national life comparable in its disastrous dimensions to that which overtook the people of God in these ancient times. In this respect, we should remember that Old Testament history has a 'typical' significance, that is to say, it foreshadows the possibilities for good and evil in the history of the Church, and if this is so, then books like Ezekiel and Daniel paint a relevant picture of possible future conditions, with witness-bearing in captivity, fiery furnaces and dens of lions typifying the kind of crucible in which faith will once again have to be purified before the rebuilding of the temple and the city of God is possible. Even in the Acts of the Apostles, later revival issued out of persecution (Acts 8:3 ff), and it may be that we shall have to suffer much and long before the kind of awakening that will purify our land can come. At all events, what we have in the book of Daniel is the story of the recovery and reforming of a pure and purified faith and witness in the furnace of affliction, and we may yet have to learn from its pages how to sing the Lord's song 'in a strange land.'

34) 5:1-9

In face of the awesome summons in 4:12, 'prepare to meet thy God, O Israel', there comes another note, one of tender appeal, with the clear implication that there is still time to repent. The repeated emphasis on 'seeking the Lord' (4, 6, 8, 14) is deeply impressive, and it is all the more remarkable to find this tender entreaty in a book so dark and heavy with the thunders of doom. One thinks of Boner's words,

Space to repent, and turn from sin,
the everlasting crown to win.

This is the gospel, and we best understand its appeal against such a background as this. The first three verses of the chapter bewail the nation as already fallen, and the manner of her fall is indicated as terrible disaster in war. This dirge reminds us of the visionary prophecy about the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18, and partakes of the same prophetic spirit. Amos could see this impending doom so clearly, and it is this that gives his subsequent and repeated appeals their great and tender urgency of tone. To the end, the prophet proclaims that there is time for a nation to turn. But it must be a-turning from the false ritual which had bedevilled Israel's national life, to God Himself: This is the force of the reference in 5 to Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba. Bethel was particularly associated with Jacob and the appearing of the angels of God and the ladder to heaven; it signified the experience of God in renewing, transforming power; they were clinging to the name not the reality. Gilgal was associated with Israel's establishment in the land at the beginning of their history, and was the base of their forward march. Beersheba was associated with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with the assurance that 'God is with you in all you do': But the name without the reality was empty and vain. This was Amos's concern with his people.

35) 5:1-9

We should note the force of the contrast between the picture in 2, 3, and what Amos says in 8. We think it may indicate that however near may be the impending doom, and however fatal the gathering of the enemy forces around, God is still able to transform the situation well-nigh instantaneously, for He can turn 'the shadow of death into the morning'. Even the doom of judgment can be turned into grace, even when the shadow of death is upon a people for very nearness, true repentance can banish it from their sight. It is certainly true that Israel had herself proved this in her own history, as witness the great and miraculous deliverances recorded in the Book of Judges, when God set at nought those who were beleaguering His people. It is this that should encourage us, while fearing the worst, to believe to the end that better days may yet come, if repentance be in time. We may recall that national renewal came under Samuel, when, symbolically, the lamp was flickering in the temple, and about to go out, when there was no open vision in the land, and the Word of the Lord was precious (i.e. a scarce commodity). What God did once, He can do again, in a similar situation: It is this hope that underlies Amos's moving phrase in 8.

36) 5.10-15

It is worth noting at this point' in our study that in the moving appeal Amos makes to seek the Lord and live, the prophet shares common ground with other Old Testament prophets, as we see for example in Isaiah 45:19, 22, 23; 55:6 ff. It is also worth noting, however, that Amos strikes the same warning note in 15 - 'it may be that the Lord.... will be gracious' - as Isaiah does in 55:6 - 'while He may be found'. There is nothing too hard for the Lord -about this neither Amos nor Isaiah would be in doubt; but it is not so much whether He is able to retrieve a seemingly impossible situation, but whether He would always be prepared to do so. This bears witness to the solemn truth that it is possible for a people (or individuals) to go beyond the bounds of divine grace - not that He cannot reach them beyond that place, but that He does not do so. In this respect, it is important for us to compare the note that Amos strikes here with the note struck later in relation to the sins of Manasseh which provoked the anger of the Lord beyond any possibility of mercy when not even subsequent repentance in Josiah's time availed to stay the avenging rod (see 2 Kings 23:26). It was this awesome possibility that Amos, even this early, was able to discern; it is always possible to overstep the limits of divine patience. We may not presume upon God's grace. It is His to bestow and to withhold: In our sinnerhood we never can be said to have a proprietary right to it, not even when we are His chosen, covenant people: This was the tragedy in Amos's day, that the people sat light to the appeal of the divine mercy, despising it indeed and repudiating the prophet's ministry, dismissing him and bidding him return home to Tekoa (7: 12). It was this that drove them beyond the point of no return, for within two decades they were taken into captivity, and destroyed beyond any hope of restoration. See Proverbs 29:1.

37) 5:16-27

Amos thunders a further attack on the false complacency of the people in 18. 'Woe unto you', he cries, 'that desire the day of the Lord'. Nothing could underline the crass complacency and blindness of Israel than the thought that underlies the prophet's words. They were, they argued, God's people, and therefore nothing could happen to them; the day of the Lord would be, they thought, their vindication. And with blunt, unassailable logic Amos declared that, since they had by their sins denied their election, it would be their doom. This is a word that has perennial relevance; it applies wherever and whenever orthodox belief fails to produce that watchful vigilance and holiness of living that the Scriptures always say that the doctrine of the Day of the Lord should. It is an easy step from this attitude (and many have taken it!) to that which makes orthodoxy of doctrine the test of consecration. It is as absurd as it is tragic and hurtful to make what a man believes about the Second Coming of Christ (particularly the details of prophetic schemes and theories about which there always has been such divergence of view) the test and criterion of his loyalty and love for the Saviour. Those who arrogantly 'unchurch' people who do not subscribe to their own particular shibboleths (prophetic or otherwise) would be well advised to examine the grounds of their own confidence and assurance. It is Jesus Who says, to those who confidently claim to have prophesied in His Name, 'I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity'. The Day of the Lord will be darkness, not light, to those who say to Him, 'Lord, Lord' but do not do the will of His Father in heaven.

38) 5:16-27

The last verses of the chapter turn once more to God's abhorrence of the multitude of meaningless sacrifices offered on the altars of Israel (see Isaiah 1). The question put in 25 really expects and demands a negative answer. Scholars think this means that the prophet is denying that God ever required sacrifice of His people at all, and that the whole, elaborate system of the cultus was not of God and never had been. But this, we think, is to miss Amos's point, which is that, the experience of past days in Israel's history showed a very different spirit and a far greater purity of worship than that which characterised the days in which he then lived. He is in fact appealing to the experience of their earlier days, when a desert faith and a pilgrim spirit kept them, comparatively speaking, close to God, and moral integrity characterised their national life (see particularly the book of Joshua). This is something that is of continuing relevance. We find an echo of it much later in the history of God's people from the lips of Jeremiah (6:16), 'Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls'. It is all very well to insist that the Church must move with the times, but what if the times are moving away from God? The truth is that, in spite of all our experiments in worship and our majoring in modern techniques, we have not wrought deliverance in the land. It could just be that we have something to learn from the much-despised old days, old-fashioned as they are held to be, if they were able, as we apparently are not, not only to hold children and young people but also train them and fashion their lives in practical godliness, without special techniques or modern educational methods. Could we have missed something, in our moving with the times - something vital?

39) 6:1-6

These verses set in relief the undoubted economic prosperity that the reign of Jeroboam II had brought to the nation of Israel, and with it the complacent assumption of well-being which obstinately refused to face the fact of moral and spiritual declension. It is a telling picture of the luxurious, debauched living in the northern kingdom among the 'yuppies' of Amos's day and of the affluence of a day of which it was said 'you've never had it so good'. It is not the material wealth as such, but the almost inevitable dangers it brings, that constitutes Amos's burden in these verses. History certainly teaches us that the combination of material prosperity and moral laxity invariably bring disaster and ruin to nations and empires, and Israel was to be no exception. This is the force of the reference to Calneh, Hamath and Gath. Amos means that Israel had little prospect of escaping what had come on other nations, when she herself was guilty of what they had done. The sentiment expressed in 3 is a very human one, and bears witness to the almost incredible aptitude we have for closing our eyes to the obvious when we do not wish to see it, and refusing to read the signs of the times. The pleasure and ease-loving attitudes of the rich are scathingly exposed in 4-6, in words that have been just as true of other empires, which suffered the same kind of fate as later overtook Israel for her sins. This is what makes the book of Amos so disturbingly relevant for our own day and generation.

40) 6:1-6

The phrase 'the affliction of Joseph' (6) can be interpreted in two ways. Some think it should be taken literally, and refer it to the poverty of the common people side by side with the opulence and luxury of the idle-rich and this makes good sense in the context, for one of the tragic features in Amos's day - and in many another - was the fact that the rich had amassed their wealth at the expense of the poor. Others, however, think that what it refers to is the moral ruin of the nation. Material affluence has blinded them to the moral declension all around them, or at least made them careless and indifferent towards it. If this is the correct understanding of these words, two things may be said about them. The first is that when material prosperity becomes the be-all and end-all of our thinking, to the exclusion of moral values, judgment becomes inevitable, for God has ordained that man shall not live by bread alone. The 'therefore' of judgment in 7 follows immediately and inevitably on the sinful complacency of the previous verses. The second thing is this, when the complete preoccupation of any government is the establishment and maintenance of economic and industrial prosperity, to the exclusion of any truly moral emphasis, then such a government falls under the indictment Amos brings upon his own in these verses. It is high time some voices were raised in the House of Commons expressing disquiet and anxiety about the moral state of our land, high time too that someone in high places acknowledged that the issues facing us in the West are moral and spiritual before they are economic and political. But there are none so blind as those who will not see.

41) 6:7-14

There are two pictures in these verses - one of plague (8-10), the other of invasion from the North (14). With regard to the first, we are reminded in grim fashion of Amos's earlier words in 3:6, 'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?' Having by her sins withdrawn herself from the mercy and protection of God, Israel was delivered up to the pestilence. Nor is this to be regarded as some relic from a barbarous and superstitious age which later teaching would discountenance, for the principle involved in it is expressed clearly in Romans 1:18 ff, where Paul explicitly teaches that God does on occasion judicially give men over to evil because of their sin. God requires on pain of punishment that we take His grace and His covenant seriously. The picture of the result of the pestilence is fearsome indeed, with whole households wiped out and relatives assuming the responsibility of funeral arrangements. (The burning of bodies was regarded as sacrilege, and practised - pestilence apart - only on great criminals (see Leviticus 20:14; 21:9; Joshua 7:25). The sense of fear and dread is even more graphically conveyed in 10, if G.A. Smith's interpretation is right. He suggests that the fear of mentioning the Lord's name is that uttering it aloud might bring down further wrath upon an already devastated city, in the same way as a raised voice (to follow Smith's analogy) can sometimes start an avalanche of snow in divine wrath kindled against a sinning people!

42) 6:7-14

The second picture in these verses is that of invasion. There is an alternative translation of 13, followed by many scholars, which lends force and points to what the prophet says. The phrase 'a thing of naught' translates the Hebrew 'Lo-Debar', and 'horns' translates 'Karnaim'. Now, both these words, as well as bearing the meaning the AV gives them, are also place-names, and were fortresses which Israel had lately captured from Aram: The point therefore of what Amos is saying is that Israel was boasting that by her own strength she had taken these places, whereas it was only because Aram herself was preoccupied with the approaching Assyrian hosts from the north, and had little opportunity to defend herself against Israel. Furthermore, apart from Aram's preoccupation with Assyria, Amos's point is that even although Israel may be exulting in a sense of power and even invincibility, nemesis would come swiftly upon her through the power that God was even then raising up against her. It is this that lends force to the prophet's predictions; it was immaterial to him that Israel should seem so secure, as she did at the time he prophesied against her. He did not need to have an enemy clamouring at her borders before he could venture to prophesy the coming doom of the nation. It was when the sun was shining, and prosperity was waxing great, that he uttered his grim warnings. This is important; and we shall continue to think about this in the next Note.

43) 7:1-9

After the grim utterances given us in chapter 6, these verses stand in marked contrast, in the picture they give of the pleading prophet, at prayer for the people he loved. There is a certain incongruity, so to speak, between such a picture, with Amos wrestling against an impending doom that seemed imminent, and that of the prosperity, affluence and luxury that he saw all around him. But there is always that kind of incongruity: it was so, and it is so now. And we have to say that the prophet's view gives the reality of the situation. This is how it really was, in spite of the affluence and prosperity, and the security of the time. Doubtless, if Israel had been able to 'look in' on Amos's vision recorded in these verses, it would simply have brought a momentary unease to them, as one sometimes gets with a bad dream, which would have been shrugged off quickly enough as an evidence of morbid thinking. Men have a great capacity for 'shutting off' when unpleasant realities look like breaking in to their consciousness, and for reassuring themselves about a security they thought they had, but was in fact an illusion. We should bear this in mind today. Here is a passage from earlier Notes on Amos written in 1964; we may judge its insight in the light of what we have seen in our time: 'It is quite possible for East-West relations to improve, and the tensions of the cold war lessen considerably, but, apart from national repentance, how should this be any indication that divine judgment was any less imminent? We are warned in the New Testament that it is 'when they shall say, Peace and safety' that 'sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape'.'

44) 7:1-9

Here, then, is Amos standing in the breach, and exercising an intercessory ministry of dramatic power and effectiveness, and moving the hand of God on behalf of the people. He was a prophet of judgment, and is given a dark and forbidding message to proclaim, but he did not delight in preaching hard things (this is a greater temptation and snare than is sometimes realised by some preachers). Rather, he shrank from the possibilities it involved, and the remarkable picture we have here is of the prophet pleading in love for his people before the face of God, and prevailing not once but once and again, eliciting from the Lord the assurance, 'This shall not be'. It is at least worthy of notice that there is no evidence in his prophecy that what he said to the people had any effect, but his secret ministry of prayer before God wrought mightily as a restraint to the judgment that would otherwise have fallen. This should give the lie to the cheap sneer that is sometimes made against the Old Testament prophets that their whole concern was the uttering of blood-curdling threats against the nation, and that they were harsh and unfeeling in their denunciations of national sins. What the world does not see - and it is often because it does not want to see - is the deep tenderness of heart and the great yearning and agonising of spirit that lie behind the most forthright and uncompromising preaching of the day, and that it is the one that gives force and authority to the other, and is its justification. Hearts that feel deeply for the sins and woes of men have a right to speak bluntly, as the prophets did.

45) 7:1-9

The implications of these verses for the Church today are quite incalculable and this is why they are so important for us. They speak of visions, yes, but through their message it could just be that we will also catch another vision - the vision of what prayer can do in a national, and even international, situation. On the surface, indeed, it might seem that this is the ultimate incongruity, that any national situation could be changed by the prayers of a handful of insignificant individuals. But it would not be too much to say that this is far and away the greatest need of the church in our time, a recovery of the vision of what prayer can do to change things in society, and in the nation, and in international affairs. Prayer, we are taught in Scripture, can lay restraints on men and nations in the interests of the kingdom of God and the furtherance of the gospel. If this is so, why should it be thought unlikely that prayer should turn away the anger of God from a nation? Amos believed in the possibility; and we may read into the visions in these verses that his prayers stayed the great avenging God for a time upon the people and gave them space to repent. If it were true today that judgment from God was threatening our nation, our way of life; if it were the case that prayer could give them breathing time, and space to repent and turn from sin; if this were so, should it not stir us, move us, touch our hearts with compassion, to cry to God for a generation in grave danger of slipping down into eternal loss? If all these things are true - and surely they are only too true - could we, believing this, withhold ourselves from the task, the discipline, and the stewardship of intercession? Long ago, one of our forebears was heard to pray, 'Lord, give me Scotland, or I die.' O for such a vision today in young and old alike, to see that this is the greatest thing we can ever do for the kingdom of God!

46) 7:1-9

The vision of the plumb-line indicates that there comes a time when even intercession is of no avail, and beyond which no appeal can be made to the mercy of God. Again and again God can be entreated and moved by prevailing prayer, but if men persist in their sin, the plumb-line of His holy law is laid against them, and He says, 'I will not again pass by them any more'. Israel is measured, found wanting and doomed. In interpretation of this vision G.A. Smith says, 'To set a measuring line or a line with weights attached to any building means to devote it to destruction; but here it is uncertain whether the plummet threatens destruction, or means that God will at last clearly prove to the prophet the insufferable obliquity of the fabric of the nation's life, originally set straight by Himself - originally a wall of a plummet. For God's judgments are never arbitrary; by a standard we men can read He shows us their necessity. Conscience itself is no mere voice of authority; it is a convincing plummet, and plainly lets us see why we should be punished'. Israel had come to this point in her long resistance to the will of God, and now, having received ample opportunity to repent and mend her ways, to no effect, He decrees that the blow must fall, and not even the cries of faithful Amos will suffice to make Him relent or turn from His purpose. Israel is to be invaded and the house of Jeroboam overthrown.

47) 7:10-17

We come in these verses to the account of the confrontation between Amos and the priest of Bethel. Alex Motyer has a helpful and graphic statement at the outset of his exposition of this passage. He says, 'This little piece of personal narrative about Amos reveals him at his courageous best, but, more than that, provides us with deep instruction about the nature and function of the man of God, the experiences he may expect to encounter, the resources on which he can draw, and the persevering fortitude which is to mark his career.' That is a very worthy way of looking at the passage. There can be no question about his courage as he ministered at Bethel, and said all he did. He must have known the hazard of so doing! But he did, nevertheless. We should note the sly cunning of this smooth ecclesiastic in giving to Amos's words the subtle twists that made them into a personal attack against the king himself (10, 11), and this reminds us that the word of God can be manipulated to suit scheming minds, and that His servants can be misrepresented and out manoeuvred even in their burning testimony to His truth. We do well to remember that this is a danger ever present to established religion, when the official masters displace the spiritual, and the ringing voice of truth - often, alas, a voice in the wilderness - is silenced, or worse still, ridiculed by considerations of expediency or ecclesiastical rigidity. Amos is dismissed with contempt by Amaziah, and forbidden to preach again in Bethel - silencing the Word of God, as G. Adam Smith puts it, in the name of the king. It is to this then, that barren ecclesiasticism finally comes. The system strangles the spirit, and the resultant corpse is the ultimate blasphemy against life and the purpose of God.

48) 7.10-17

Sadly, such a tragedy is by no means uncommon, indeed in times of approaching judgment it has often happened. One recalls Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4:3 'The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.' But we have to add this: we sometimes lay the responsibility of deadness in spiritual things upon faithless men in the pulpit; but one wonders whether there is not something beyond that, namely, faithless congregations who refuse the challenge of the living word in their lives. It is all very well to look at this place or that which used to have spiritual life, and mourn that now there is a lifeless ministry. But who is at fault? Was there a time when that congregation refused the Word of the Lord? It was so in Amos's time, and it has been so many times in Scotland in our days. Many a good and godly minister has had his heart broken by the opposition to his ministry by a godless and rebellious congregation and its office bearers. The apostle's words, 'See that ye refuse not him that speaketh ' (Hebrews 12:25) should often be in the minds of such people. But the Word of God is not any less the Word of God though the establishment sets it at a discount, and two decisive results followed Amaziah's arrogant and contemptuous dismissal of Amos from Bethel. The first was the sentence of doom pronounced upon the professional priest and his family. Those that have the effrontery to oppose the living Word of God and do despite to His prophets must learn that he pays special attention to their personal downfall. He who says, 'No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn' (Isaiah 54:17) must be understood to mean what He says, as many who have dared to oppose Him, whether in ancient or modern times, have learned to their cost. The second result of Amaziah's dismissal of Amos will be the theme of tomorrow's Note.

49) 7:10-17

The second result of Amaziah's action against Amos can best be expressed in George Adam Smith's words: 'Amaziah little knew what power he had given to prophecy the day he forbade it to speak. The gagged prophet began to write; and those accents which, humanly speaking, might have died out with the songs of the temple of Bethel were clothed upon with the immortality of literature. Amos silenced wrote a book - the first of the prophets to do so - and this is the book we now have to study'. Thus easily does the sovereign Lord over-rule the machinations of evil men for the furtherance of His will and purpose, and make the wrath of man to praise Him. Nothing is allowed to interfere with or hinder His work, and even the evil that men do is pressed into service for His glory. This is seen just as much in what Amos says of his own call to God's service, which will be the subject of the next Note.

50) 7:10-17

Amos's personal testimony as to his call makes moving reading like Paul he is in effect saying, 'Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not.' It is as if he were saying to Amaziah, 'I am not prophesying because this is my job, nor because it is hereditary, with my father a prophet. It is God Who has called me to this work, and said to me, ' Go, prophesy unto my people Israel.' Amos's words are full of significance for they tell us that God has gone beyond the usual channels of ordained religion in order to find Himself a mouthpiece for His Word to the nation. This is not, of course, meant to be taken to mean that He dispenses with the normal need for qualifications and training in His service. Amos had a vigorous training in the deserts in lonely vigil and communion with God, as the fishermen apostles likewise had in their three years with Christ. But it does mean that no humble occupation need be thought a barrier to Christian service. There are many fine, useful, consecrated missionaries on the field today who, like Amos, never had the advantages of higher education, yet God called them and equipped them. There are no barriers that are unsurmountable when God calls a man. And if the official church fails to speak forth the Word of the Lord, God goes outside officialdom and calls men to do His will and makes them the instrument of His grace and power. The tragedy is that this has had to happen so often down the ages. It should not be forgotten that, in some of the greatest revivals that have blessed and re-invigorated the life of the church and the nation since the Reformation, the instruments God has used have not been men in the ordained ministry, but laymen of dedicated, consecrated spirit, whom He has raised up to preach a message that the church has so often failed to proclaim.

51) 8:1-3

There is a certain dramatic intensity in the positioning of it - it is a vision of judgment - since on the one hand it belongs in 'genre' to those in 7:1-9, and is therefore the fourth in the series, and on the other, it is interrupted in its proper placement as the fourth vision in the series by the fateful confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. And it is as if the Holy Spirit were underlining the prophet's message of judgment as a matter of cause and effect. Amaziah, as the representative of the religious establishment of his day - and therefore speaking for the nation - had said a resounding No to the Word of the Lord; and now, this vision shows the implications and consequences of that refusal: 'The end is come upon My people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more'. This reinforces the message of the earlier vision of the plumb line, and confirms it. To reject the Word is to reject God, and to reject God is to be rejected by Him: The picture in the vision is one of harvest. The summer fruit is the produce of the harvest, and it is being presented in the Temple as part of the celebration of the autumn feast of Booths (or Tabernacles). Harvest, then, is the picture: Israel was basking in the sunshine of economic prosperity and harvesting the fruits of Jeroboam's remarkable commercial boom, but a very different harvest was about to be reaped, as the next Note will make clear.

52) 8:1-3

There is a grim irony in these solemn words, for in the eyes of God and to the spiritual insight of the prophet the harvest of Jeroboam's prosperous years represented something very different. A great change was coming, one which would mean the end for Israel. One recalls our Lord's solemn words in the parable of the wheat and the tares: 'The harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 13:39-42). The description in 3 matches these words in the parable: The modern versions read more graphically than the AV: RSV has 'In every place they shall be cast out in silence'; J.B. Phillips has 'As everywhere corpse is thrown upon corpse in deathly silence'; while the NIV (and NEB) have 'many, many bodies - flung everywhere! Silence.' George Adam Smith points out that in the reference to 'Silence' there is an echo of the sentence that Amaziah the high priest imposed upon Amos, for the prophet was cast out and silenced. If this be so, it bears out with awful literalness the idea of harvest that constitutes the vision, in terms of Paul's words in Galatians 6:7: 'God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap'.

53) 8:4-10

These verses contain a series of prophetic utterances in which the sins of society are exposed and condemned. We need to consider a significant association of ideas here, and examine them with care, for it is deeply relevant for our day - the association in these verses and the next (11-14) between the Lord's Day (the Sabbath) and the Lord's Word. We shall say more about this presently, but first of all we must note the significant way in which Amos links the interests with the Sabbath with the interests of the poor. This is a highly topical subject for us, and it is remarkable to realise how the trends and tendencies that some of us view with great dismay and misgiving in our time were in evidence also in Amos's day, and were interpreted by him as signs of the coming judgment. What is indicated is this: the religious institutions and opportunities of the people (as George Adam Smith puts it) were being threatened by worldliness and greed, and this is still the basic reason why modern, secular man objects to the idea of Sunday observance. Commercial exploitation today is filching from the people the hard-won and time-honoured sanctity of the Lord's Day. It is true that in Amos's time there was still Sabbath observance, and Temple worship was still fulfilled; but it was a formal, lifeless thing, as we may see from what is said in these verses, as they longed for the end of the Sabbath so that they could get on with their business and trading; that is where their hearts were; the Sabbath was simply an inconvenience. This is what appeared so ominous and disquieting to Amos, and indicative of impending doom.

54) 8:4-10

It is only at a later stage in the process of Sabbath neglect that open violation comes - as it has come in our time. And if the attitude of Israel was so doom-laden, how should we suppose that the later stages, as we see today, could be anything different? It is perfectly clear, not only here in Amos but throughout the prophetic literature, that immense emphasis is laid on the dangers of Sabbath desecration, and on the cardinal and central importance of the Sabbath in the mind of God. It is not difficult to see why this should be so: the Sabbath law is important because its essence and the principle which it enshrines is that it is a symbol and a token that all our days belong to God, just as tithing one's income is a symbol and a token that all we have is His, and an acknowledgment that it is His by right. To violate or neglect this is an indication that we are neglecting God and His rightful claims upon our lives. That is its importance. And when a people, a nation, a government, sits light to Sunday, and desecrates it by secularising it, it is an evidence that they are sitting light to God, and ignoring and slighting Him. Lord Home, in his autobiography, 'The Way the Wind Blows', records that he asked Harold Macmillan if he could put his finger on the point when the slide in values in Britain began to set in. His answer came without hesitation: 'The day when people stopped going to Church regularly on a Sunday morning.' Home adds, 'It was an arresting reply, and I believe that it was not far from the mark'.

55) 8:4-10

The trembling of the land and the darkening of the sun in 8, 9 may refer to earthquake (see 1:1) and eclipse, but on the other hand there may be an apocalyptic reference similar in intent to that in Joel 2:30, 31 and in our Lord's own words in Luke 21:25. The association of disturbance and convulsion in the physical universe with the sin of men is too frequent and unmistakable in Scripture to be ignored, and bears witness to organic unity between man and the rest of creation. It is generally in relation to the high pitch of men's sins and their effrontery in the sight of God that cosmic disorder is mentioned, and it is perhaps much less fantastic and far-fetched in this day of inter-planetary and cosmic probes to think in these terms than it would have been a hundred years ago. Christ warns us about being able to read the signs of the times. Perhaps this is one of them, for those who have eyes to see. The 'greenhouse' effect on world atmosphere has suddenly become very real and very menacing in our time, has it not? To offset this grim and foreboding picture we should turn to the Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 8:19-22, where he not only recognises the link between the sin of man and the bondage and corruption of creation, but also proclaims the ultimate liberation of the whole created order as a direct consequence of man's redemption. As the sin of man involved the created order, so also man's ultimate salvation will deliver creation from the bondage of corruption.

56) 8:11-14

The significance of these solemn words in 11, 12 is directly related to the encounter Amos had with Amaziah the priest. There came this critical point in the history of Israel when the people of God refused His Word, and this was the direct result - God sent a famine of His Word: they rejected the Word, and He withdrew it. This process has happened often in the history of the Church, often enough indeed to convince all but the very blind of the terrible dangers inherent in any revolt against the Word of God. Seen in perspective, one explanation of the years of spiritual barrenness through which most of those of our generation have lived lies in the great apostasy which took place among the theologians and biblical scholars of the nineteenth century, originating in Germany, and spreading later to this country, in which the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures was impugned and undermined, and what came to be known as 'higher criticism' finally held the field, until the whole foundation of the Christian message was called in question, and the gospel obscured and all but lost to the whole western world. With regard to German 'enlightenment' and infidelity, it would alas be true to say that the same melancholy pattern has tended to repeat itself in the post-war years, prompting the question, will they never learn?

57) 8:11-14

The parallels today with Amos's time are too striking to ignore. Then, it was neglect and refusal of God's Word that led to a 'famine of hearing the words of the Lord,' and a neglect and despising of God's Day. And it was this twofold issue that brought the nemesis of the captivity upon Israel and these are the ingredients that make for nemesis today also, in our time. This is not something that belongs to the eccentricities of some odd society dedicated to the preservation of the Lord's Day, but something central and integral to the nation's life and well-being, and indeed to the message of the gospel. And when the nation - and, God help us, the Church also - departs from these - it is the 'in' thing now to have Sunday School picnics on a Sunday, and birthday parties (even in evangelical families), - then all the signs are ominous and disquieting for us as a people. 'God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' Was it this kind of situation, in the Israel of our Lord's day, which prompted him, at another Feast of Tabernacles celebration, when the people around him, religious to a degree, were nevertheless empty and barren of any reality, to cry - in a context in which He was soon to speak with tears of their house being left desolate, because they would not come to Him - 'If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He that believeth on me, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water': This is what Amos in effect was doing: 'Seek the Lord, and live: Seek Him while He may be found: call upon Him while He is near: Soon it may be too late'.

58) 9:1-10

The final chapter of Amos's prophecy clearly divides into two distinct parts, 1-10, and 11-15, the first part very dark and grim, and the second bright with hope. The first ten verses themselves readily divide into two, 1-6 and 7-10, and we shall look at these in turn. The chapter begins with a vision. Amos sees the Lord having taken His stand by the altar. There is an important association of ideas in this statement. We should bear in mind who the king at this time was, Jeroboam II, who had been one of the most influential and astute monarchs in the northern kingdom. There is but brief mention of his reign in 2 Kings 14:23 ff, but what is said is eloquent and, indeed, from the point of view of our study, very fateful. We are told that 'he did evil in the sight of the Lord: he departed not from all the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin'. This is the characteristic description of Jeroboam I, and we see from 1 Kings 12:25-13:1 how he came by this fateful description. We see from these verses that Jeroboam's was a renegade religion and ritual, with priests that were not of the tribe of Levi, on days that were not the days appointed by the Lord, and by one usurping the place of the priest in arrogant sacrilege. This was the sin referred to in the phrase 'made Israel to sin'. And Jeroboam II continued in all the evil practices of his forebear and namesake! The calf-worship at Bethel had become established practice; and it is very likely that the king followed his forebear's now established practice, and stood by the altar to offer sacrifice and burn incense. This is the significance of what Amos saw - he saw another King, God the Lord, the Sovereign Lord of Hosts, standing by the altar. And He stood there for judgment and destruction. It is a grim picture indeed, and we shall make some proper comments on it in the next Note.

59) 9:1-10

The first thing to note about the vision is the imagery in 2 ff, which is strongly reminiscent of the words of Psalm 139:7-12, and as one commentator suggests may very probably have been in the prophet's mind as he wrote these words. But there, in the Psalm, they are a source of assurance and comfort, hope and peace, as the believer realises that whatever his circumstances God is there to help and uphold; whereas here, the words are a source of terror, fear and panic, as the hapless people under judgment realise that, turn as they will, there is no escape from the God of vengeance and judgment. Prof Emil Brunner, in his great book, 'The Mediator' underlines this twofold insight. Speaking of the inviolable holiness of God, and commenting on Paul's words in Galatians 6:7, 'God is not mocked: but whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap', he says, 'The constancy, the self-consistency of God, which is primarily one of the comforting and glorious things about Him, is a terrible thing in this connection. God does not forget; the injury to the divine order does not heal; this wound remains open eternally. Just as previously it was comforting to know that we could reckon on God, so now it strikes terror to the heart of man to know that we must reckon with Him.'

60) 9:1-10

For another thing, lest we fall into the too easy error of denouncing this judgment scene as evidence that the Old Testament God is a harsh, forbidding Deity, far removed from the New Testament God of love revealed by Christ, let us remember this: the Old Testament testimony to this God is that He is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy' (Psalm 103:8 ff). But let us remember just how long a time had elapsed for Israel between the reigns of Jeroboam I and Jeroboam II - about 180 years. What is evidence in this history is the patience and long-suffering of God for so many long years: Slow to anger, indeed! In fact, it was precisely that longsuffering patience and forbearance that had led Israel to assume that as we are told in 9, 10 (as J.B. Phillips renders it), 'Disaster will never touch us and can never threaten our security'. God's patience had been so unaccountably toward them that they mistook it for indifference to their sin. That was a very fateful and perilous misunderstanding on Israel's part.

61) 9:1-10

There is surely an application of all this to our own modern day and age. If a nation has sown the wind for so long and in so many ways, theologically, spiritually, morally, would it be surprising if we did not come to a time when we reap the whirlwind? When clever renegades in the theological world have undermined, by their radical and often ill-thought-out views, the faith of countless thousands, and often made shipwreck of faith themselves, is it credible to suppose that the God of the Scriptures, will wink at this indefinitely, and not rather bring a day of reckoning upon them? Do we suppose that the God Who judged the apostate people of old, who descended in their sin lower than their heathen neighbours, and made their children pass through the fire, will not also judge a generation who in the past two decades has burned a million or two unborn fetuses in hospital incinerators. Do we suppose that the God Who has put down and overthrown godless communism so dramatically in our day, will hesitate to put down other godless systems when they continue to forget Him and His laws? We have already seen in earlier chapters how there was in Israel a supreme but fatal trust in their election by God as His special, chosen people, and that they laboured under the highly mistaken conviction that, whatever they did, they would still have favoured treatment. But when the chosen people sin, as Israel had done, they deny their election - not that God revokes it, but rather that they reduce themselves to the level of other nations, and therefore open themselves to the same kind of discipline and judgment that fell upon other nations. It is God's rejection of His people that is announced here: Yet they remained God's rejected people, and it is this that explains the remaining verses of the chapter, which speak of restoration.

62) 9:9-15

The change of atmosphere in the last verses of the chapter are so startling, so complete, that scholars tend to suggest that it was penned by another hand than Amos's, and appended at a later date to his prophecy, which is one of unrelieved gloom and doom. But it is open to question whether this possible explanation does justice to what is undoubtedly one of the fundamentally important considerations in the biblical scheme of redemption, namely the need for Israel's continued existence as a people as a signpost to God's sovereign purposes in the world. What we mean is this: God chose Israel to be an instrument of His revelation to the world, and even when they refused their calling, and were rejected in so doing, God did not let them go, but insisted, as it were, in using them, in spite of themselves and in their rejection of Him and in His rejection of them. Down their long history, even to the present day, their sufferings and travail and their amazing mysterious preservation have been used of God for His sovereign purposes of redemption, in ways beyond our full understanding. Their 'casting away', as Paul teaches in Romans 11:15, is 'the reconciliation of the world'. Israel must therefore remain in existence, the synagogue 'shadowing' the Church, until the fulness of the divine purposes is completed. For this reason, God does not 'utterly destroy the house of Jacob', and Amos bears witness to this fact in the final movement of his prophecy.

63) 9:9-15

Amos makes very clear that his words about restoration offer no grounds for complacency to the sinning people (9,10): There is something in the human heart that is incorrigibly optimistic in a shallow, superficial way, determined to believe the best, and set in the conviction that 'everything will work out all right in the end', and that 'it can't happen to us'. But Amos will have none of it. Any restoration of which he can speak as the mouthpiece of the Lord can come only after judgment has fallen and been visited upon the nation for its sin. There is no hope, he says, that the evil will not overtake them (10): That is fixed, and unalterable: It is on the other side of doom, when grief and contrition have done their cleansing and purifying work in the soul of the nation, that new hope is born, and this is Amos's emphasis in these verses. The true recipients of this word would be men like Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, and we can imagine with what consolation and comfort they would turn to a passage such as this, after the dread catastrophe of the Captivity (see Daniel 9:2). Nor is its force exhausted in the message it must have borne to them; it has relevance for us also, who dwell under the shadow of divine judgment for our sins, and points to the truth that before better days come upon earth there may have to be fiery crucibles in which to be re-moulded and re-fashioned, and dread sufferings and agonies with which to be purged and cleansed from the enormities of twentieth century sin.