

The God of Amos

Amos 1:1-5

Let's admit it right up front: the God who discloses himself in Amos may not be the sort of God that we are comfortable with.

In fact, he may not even be the sort of God that we prefer to have, were the choice up to us.

At least, not at first thought.

We are not unique in this: he was clearly not the sort of God that Amos' original readers were used to, either, or the sort of God they preferred.

It should give us pause that at some level we are inclined to agree with those whom Amos rebukes, whom God rebukes.

Ideas matter, especially ideas about God. Theology (literally, 'the study of God') is not – at least, not when properly practiced – some abstract, arcane discipline with no bearing on life. How people conceive of God is intensely practical: it controls both how they worship and how they live.

Ancient Canaanite tended to be polytheists and idolaters, and ancient Israel often succumbed to the influence of such cultural ideas, and construed God similarly.

A similar process happens today. In a well-known book, sociologist Robert Bellah notes the contemporary trend to pick and choose one's own gods from a wide range of contemporary claimants to deity. More than that, he observes a tendency today to construct one's own customized god, assembling the whole haphazardly from a miscellaneous assortment of sometimes incongruous parts derived from culture rather than from Scripture. One informant, and a lapsed evangelical, even famously named her religion after herself: "Sheila-ism." Creating our own god is just what Scripture has in mind when it prohibits idolatry.

Of course, few of us are so creative, or so impertinent. Nonetheless, though the process may be neither conscious nor intentional, as with ancient Israel, inevitably both our culture and our own fallen human nature influence how we think about God, in turn, distorting how we live before him. For example, how often have you heard someone say – or how often have you yourself said – "I prefer to think of God as ...", without any reference to how the Bible actually portrays him?

So we begin our reflection on the book of Amos by drawing to the surface the attributes of God which inform the prophet's message to his contemporaries, and indirectly, to us as his readers today.

Attributes of God

Amos 1:1-5

God's attributes are typically beneficial or appealing to us in some respect, though they may also be threatening or unappealing to us in other respects. In other words, those attributes or characteristics of God which we find threatening or off-putting are typically the "down-side" of attributes which we depend on in other ways.

Each day this week, focus on worshipping God, and making peace with his harder attributes. As you spend time with God:

- (a) first, reflect on one of his attributes that is evidenced in Amos 1:1-5 (to stimulate this reflection, I suggest contrasts with other concepts of god that lack that attribute);
- (b) then, worship him for the advantage that attribute brings you; and,
- (c) finally, reflect on any areas where that attribute is disadvantageous to you, identifying why it is problematic, and what you need to do in order to resolve the problem.

Day One: God as a personal being.

In contrast to the teaching of Buddhism and pantheism, God is not impersonal absolute reality or a pervasive life force, but an individual, distinct being.

How is God's individuality and personality presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God as a living, personal being?

What risk does it pose for us that God is a living, personal being?

Day Two: God as actively engaged with the world.

18th- and 19th-century deism (e.g., Thomas Jefferson) affirmed that God first created the world and then withdrew from it.

How is God's active engagement with the world presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being engaged with the world?

What risk does it pose for us that God is engaged with the world?

Day Three: God as omnipotent.

In contrast to polytheism and animism, which tend to affirm gods as limited in power, Amos affirms God's power over all forces, heaven and earth.

How is God's omnipotence presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being omnipotent?

What risk does it pose for us that God is omnipotent?

Day Four: God as sovereign over the entire world.

Tribalism, nationalism, and animism tend to treat gods as circumscribed in either influence or interest to a subset of the world, whether tribe, nation, or ethnicity.

How is God's universal sovereignty presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being universally sovereign?

What risk does it pose for us that God is universally sovereign?

Day Five: God as an emotional being.

Buddhism promotes emotional detachment.(impassibility) as a virtue, and is offended by the notion of divine emotion (passibility).

How are God's emotions evidenced in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being emotionally engaged with his world?

What risk does it pose for us that God is emotionally engaged with his world?

Day Six: God as a moral being.

Animism, polytheism, and moral relativism generally deny the existence of divine moral absolutes. Animistic and polytheistic deities tend to be capricious, beyond obligation to morality; relativism denies that moral absolutes exist.

How is God's moral nature presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being moral?

What risk does it pose for us that God is moral?

Day Seven: God as retributive.

Animism and polytheism generally portray spirits and gods as capricious; liberalism, and Buddhism and Hinduism (karma) remove retribution as an act of God and ascribe it to an impersonal process of cause and effect.

How is God's retributive character presupposed in 1:2-5?

How do we benefit from God being retributive?

What risk does it pose for us that God is retributive?