Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah

# Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, Amos and Social Justice

In #353 I have implied that the idea of social justice is a vague one. Here are some definitions (from http://www.reachandteach.com/content/article.php?story=20040812190148765).

1. Social justice means moving towards a society where all hungry are fed, all sick are cared for, the environment is treasured, and we treat each other with love and compassion. Not an easy goal, for sure, but certainly one worth giving our lives for! - *Medea Benjamin.*
2. By social justice I mean the creation of a society which treats human beings as embodiments of the sacred, supports them to realize their fullest human potential, and promotes and rewards people to the extent that they are loving and caring, kind and generous, open-hearted and playful, ethically and ecologically sensitive, and tend to respond to the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation. *- Rabbi Michael Lerner.*
3. A long and mysterious historical process in which those who are excluded and exploited by social forces of privilege and power attempt to consociate into movements that struggle for: a more equitable distribution of social and economic goods; for greater personal and political dignity; and for a deeper moral vision of their society. Social justice is a goal toward which we move, always imperfectly, and persons and groups are motivated to realize it by their deepest spiritual and political traditions. Justice is only meaningful when it is historically specific and embodied (as opposed to theoretical or abstract).
4. The degree to which social justice is achieved in a given time and place should be measured by two (seemingly contradictory) notions: 1) the greatest good for the greatest number, and 2) how the least powerful and the smallest minorities in a society are faring. The vision of social justice is best articulated through stories that have the marginalized as their subject and that present hard questions to those at the center of power — stories like the ones Jesus told. - *Ched Myers.*
5. "Social Justice Work"' is work that we do in the interest of securing human rights, an equitable distribution of resources, a healthy planet, democracy, and a space for the human spirit to thrive (read: arts/culture/entertainment). We do the work to achieve these goals on both a local and a global scale. - *Innosanto Nagara*.
6. Social Justice isn't something I expect we'll attain in my lifetime. Fortunately, nothing could be more fulfilling than working to make it happen. - *Rick Ufford-Chase.*

What does that look like in light of the Prophets and the rest of Scripture?

1. Few of the concerns expressed in those definitions appear in the Prophets (or Jesus). This doesn’t make them wrong. It does mean we’d be unwise to buy into them without asking what is the Prophets’ perspective. Otherwise we are just using scripture to support convictions we have reached on other grounds, and at best we will end up with half-truths.
2. Scripture gives no basis for the hopes expressed in the statements, and history fits that. Two thousand years after Jesus’ coming, the vision he shares with the Prophets is no nearer realization in the world.
3. The Bible has no ideal of equality. It recognizes and rejoices in the fact that some people have more than others (as God gives different people more strength or brain power). The challenge then is for them to use what they have for the benefit of others (e.g., Ps 112.)
4. The Bible does not advocate or point towards democracy, at least in the form that we know it with its stress on electing representatives.
5. The Bible says nothing about conservation (though it includes material that can be used to support conservation).
6. The Bible does not expect or advocate the abolition of war, though it does expect God eventually to bring it about; it does seek to constrain its immorality.

# Hosea: Responses to Questions

Is it the same woman in chapter 3?

\*\*Presumably, otherwise the theology wouldn’t work!

In human relationships, persevering in love doesn’t always lead to restoration. Why does God persist? Does he have no other choice but to love the woman he courted?

\*\*Yes, I think that’s the right answer. It’s the nature of hesed that you keep being faithful and committed even though the commitment is not returned. It’s by choice, in the sense that God chooses to be himself in the way he acts. It’s the way he acts in relation to the church and the world, and I wonder if that is why the Second Coming hasn’t happened yet, because that terminates the time when the church and the world can return the commitment.

Does Hosea really love her or is just following instructions?

\*\*In the Bible love is an action not merely a feeling, so by marrying her and staying faithful to her he is loving her. But then in traditional societies the assumption is that if you commit yourself to someone in that way, what we call love can grow.

Doesn’t Hosea get a raw deal? Surely God didn’t have to work this way?

\*\*Yes, Hosea gets a raw deal, like lots of people in Scripture and in life—people who have to take up their cross when it wasn’t really necessary….

Are we supposed to learn something from the book about male-female relationships? Does the book rule out divorce?

It’s more the opposite—what we know about male-female relationships is supposed to help us learn from the book, though we need to allow for cultural differences, and the opposite gender relationship (a woman loving a man) could work just as well; Hosea needs especially to reach the men, who have the power, so he pictures them as a woman. By illustrating God’s faithfulness, it does set a challenge before people who might be inclined to give up on their marriage because of their partner’s unfaithfulness, but the Bible isn’t legalistic about that kind of question; it implies that if you can’t manage that standard, God doesn’t give up on you.

Doesn’t using poetry make it more difficult to understand if you’re trying to get people to change their ways?

\*\*Getting people to change their ways isn’t just a matter of understanding. The problem isn’t that the Ephraimites don’t realize they are doing the wrong thing. The hope is that poetry with its use of imagery and so on may get through to people in a way that ordinary speech doesn’t. (Of course elsewhere the OT uses ordinary speech, so God is trying various ways.)

Is Hosea’s view of injustice different from Amos’s?

\*\*Yes, in the sense that Hosea is much more concerned about the people’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh in seeking the help of other gods, whereas Amos focuses on the wrongdoing of the powerful towards the powerless.

Why does God seem to get angry and jealous (almost childlike in Hosea 5:15) and then a moment later be forgiving and showing compassion (14:4-9)? God seems to have multiple personalities.

\*\*Because God is like a father or mother, or a husband or a wife. Sometimes it’s appropriate for fathers and mothers or husbands and wives to be angry and jealous, sometimes to be forgiving and compassionate.

What are raisin cakes and are they any good?

\*\*It means blocks of dried grapes. To judge from Song of Songs 2:4-5, they were really good. We don’t know how they featured in worship.

Why does Hosea keep moving between destruction and mercy, e.g., chapters 10—11—12? Is this Ephraim’s last chance? Is Ephraim now cast off forever?

\*\*He keeps alternating, because the people need to realize that both are possibilities. They deserve judgment and they can’t assume mercy on the basis of God’s love if they don’t come back to him, but neither do they have to be hopeless. Of course actually it was their last chance. But it’s never over until it’s over. Cf. Jonah.

Why the periodic references to Judah (1:7; 4:15; 12:2)?

\*\*Because Hosea’s messages were in due course relayed to Judah and they are therefore applied to Judah.

“I hated them” (9:15). Surely hate is outside God’s character?

\*\*There are a number of references to God’s hating people and things in Scripture (in the NT, cf. Rom 9:13). Like love, hatred is an attitude and a practice not merely a feeling.

# Amos: Responses to Questions

1:1: Is Amos Isaiah’s father?

No, that’s Amoz.

1:1: Does Israel mean Ephraim or Israel in the broader sense?

\*\*The context here suggests Ephraim and that works all the way through, really, except 9:14. But when the prophecies were read in Judah, there are many places where the broader meaning would be helpful.

1:1: Why send a Judahite prophet to Ephraim? Why not send him to Judah? Would he have been treated better there?

\*\*Maybe a foreigner sometimes sees thing clearer? Or because a foreigner finds it easier to be tough? But 1:2 implies that it’s because Yahweh roars from Zion—that is where Yahweh lives, contrary to Ephraim’s assumptions. God sent other Judahite prophets to Judah (Isaiah and Micah). They weren’t treated better there….

1—2: Is there a significance in the repetition of “For three sins of \_\_\_\_ even for four, I will not turn back my wrath”? What is the importance of saying three or four sins?

\*\*It’s a form of emphasis: they did it as many as three times, in fact as many as four.

3:3-8: Is God seeking repentance or proclaiming a coming devastation? Does he still do nothing without revealing his intention to prophets?

\*\*He’s doing both—the audience chooses between them. There were lots of occasions in the OT when God acted without revealing his intention to prophets, so the statement is one about Amos’s time and times when there are prophets. (The same applies to the comment on disaster coming to a city—one could not infer that Yahweh directly causes all disasters.)

4:10: I don’t remember ever seeing an example in the Bible similar to this statement that the Lord brought drought and famine to cause the people to suffer and realize that they needed Him. Are there other verses in Scripture that speak of God causing suffering in order to inspire people to return to Him?

\*\*I would have thought it is the assumption that most of the prophets are making most of the time. It’s also common in Proverbs and in Elihu’s speeches in Job. And cf. Hebrews 12.

5:14-15: Global warming, the war on terror, the economic crisis, intractable poverty in our cities, and failed states, all these challenges seem very similar to the challenges of Amos’ day. Are Amos words of warning the same for us today? How can we apply Amos’s prophesy today? What does it mean as individuals, communities, and nations to seek good and hate evil? What does it mean when much in our world today is grey?

\*\*I don’t think I as a professor have anything distinctive to say about those questions. It takes a prophet to give the answer, and you are as likely to be a prophet. But what I’d say is stop shopping and start sharing. Stop borrowing and start lending. Don’t hanker after big solutions and do what you can do in your community. (The world doesn’t look very grey to me.)

5:15: God suggests that if Israel hates evil, loves good and maintains justice then “perhaps” God will have mercy on the remnant. I am still puzzling over the collective nature of God’s commands to his people as a nation rather than a collection of individuals. How much of Israel need to hate evil for God’s mercy? The nature of this “perhaps” is that is not quite a promise, and yet we do see that God is merciful to the remnant, so should we see this as evidence that sufficient numbers repented?

\*\*I don’t think the prophets deal with the “how much” question, though Genesis 18 deals with it. I don’t think you can infer that enough people repented from the fact that God did have mercy. God often has mercy anyway!

7:1-6: So prophets can pray and God may relent? Is God mainly sending prophets so people will respond and God will relent? Is “Unless you repent” always implicit in prophecies of judgment? How do we know?

\*\*God sends prophets with the hope that they will provoke repentance and make it unnecessary to fulfill their prophecies, but simultaneously as a means of fulfilling them if people do not repent. We know that the “unless” is implicit from Jer 18.

7:15: Why Amos? On what basis does God choose people? And who wrote this down? A shepherd?

\*\*I don’t think we can usually discern that. God chooses people who are good leaders and bad leaders, obedient, and disobedient. Amos the shepherd is clearly good with words and I don’t see any reason why a shepherd shouldn’t also be able to write his messages down (my father was a printing machine minder, but I learned to write). Yet maybe prophets didn’t usually write their own messages down (see Jer 36).

8:11: Isn’t that self-defeating?

\*\*It will be an act of judgment because they haven’t been listening all this time

9:7 seems to say that as Yahweh brought Israel up from Egypt so he did with the Philistines from Kaphtor and the Arameans from Qir. Are we to believe that Yahweh was working amongst those two nations as he was in Israel? Or is this merely an expression to the people of Israel to understand it was Yahweh who delivered them from Egypt and even amongst the other nations it is his hand of deliverance rather than the nations’ own ability to do anything great?

\*\*It doesn’t mean Yahweh was working to the same end with those other people; Yahweh was doing something of distinctive significance for the world’s salvation through Israel. But Yahweh was sovereign in their lives, working out a purpose with them. I think the argument wouldn’t work if Amos didn’t mean what he said! Note also the assumption in chapter 1—2 that the nations know God’s expectations of them and can be confronted accordingly.

9:11-15: What is this about? Was it fulfilled?

\*\*It would be odd for a prophetic book to end with no note of hope—it would give the impression that judgment was God’s last word. Verses 11-12 look like the kind of application of the message to Judah that you also get in Hosea—in this case, it looks like an adaptation from the exile or after, when there is no Davidic king and the Edomites are occupying Judahite land (cf. Obadiah). The Jews did regain the land (they have it in the NT) but God did not restore the Davidic kings. Verses 13-15 are a more general promise that disaster will not be the end. Yahweh’s positive purpose for human life in Israel will be fulfilled.

Amos is full of “do nots” and criticisms. What is Yahweh positively looking for?

\*\*That’s a good comment. The prophets aren’t usually very expansive on that question. I think they assume people know the answer at one level—they know the kind of thing Yahweh looks for, partly because the Torah tells them. It is the Torah that tells people what to do.

What was wrong with worshiping idols?

\*\*If they were images of other gods, then it meant treating the real God as if he were not the real God. If they were images of Yahweh, then they were bound to give a misleading impression of the kind of person Yahweh is (one who is alive, who acts and speaks).

We do not live in a theocracy, but it seems to me the prophets can inform our civic behavior. I would be interested for you to comment on your views of what shape this takes.

\*\*I assume that prophets’ job is to speak to the people of God and challenge us to be more of a godly community. If we were, it might speak to the world. If we aren’t, our words won’t make much difference. I don’t mean we shouldn’t argue for prophetic truths (e.g., that people shouldn’t be able to make money by lending). But I don’t see that we should argue in a secular context on a “Thus says the Lord” basis.

Why is it now in particular that God is threatening to act in this catastrophic way? Why not before?

\*\*I don’t think we can ever know why God acts at particular times. But I think there is an interaction between two considerations. One is that God is always having to decide whether to continue being merciful or whether to say “That’s it,” and act. The other is that God acts in relation to historical and social contexts. At one level, the reason why judgment is coming now is the fact that the Assyrians have decided to extend their empire.

# Obadiah: Responses to Questions

Obadiah is a message of judgment against Israel’s enemy. Even though it is addressed to Edom, it is delivered to Israel. What was the desired response from the audience? Was it that Israel perseveres in their situation? Was it to encourage Israel to organize resistance against Edom? It seems a bit unfair to pick on Esau as Edom. Even though he sold his birthright, he was still deceived out of Isaac’s blessing. If Esau’s descendants did settle in the area designated as Edom, is it assumed its relationship to Israel was always antagonistic? After all, the brothers “made up”, didn't they? In short, I'm still not grasping why this nation is picked on more than say, Egypt.

\*\*The negative things the OT says about Edom relate to its role when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. In addition, Edom later took over much Judahite land. Actually Obadiah doesn’t talk much Edom’s attacks on Judah but about its being Yahweh’s enemy. So in a way what it does is promise a resolution of the question why doesn’t God do anything about evil in the world. There’s no suggestion that Judah is supposed to make war against Edom. The promises about God’s action point in the opposite direction (“Vengeance is mine”).

What’s relationship between Esau-Jacob and Edom-Israel?

\*\*Israel traces its ancestry to Jacob and traces Edom’s to Esau. So the two peoples are related—as they are to Ammon, Amalek, and the Arab peoples (but not the Philistines or the Egyptians).

Was Edom completely destroyed, or was this an exaggerated claim in order to make a point? And, how do you know when the authors are exaggerating and when they are writing straight facts?

\*\*I don’t think we know that Edom was ever completely destroyed. We do know it got converted – that is, by Jesus’ day, the area that Edom had taken over had become Jewish. I’m not sure what you mean by an exaggerated claim, as there is no claim here. It is more a promise. But often God fulfills promises in a different way from what you might have expected. You don’t know that till it happens!

Why the reference to wisdom (v. 8)?

\*\*Edom had a reputation for wisdom—Eliphaz in Job was from there.

Why is the book so short?

\*\*And why is Jeremiah so long? I imagine Obadiah issued other (true) prophecies) but it seems that there was this one came home to the people as one that it was really important to keep hold of—maybe because its promise was so important when Edom was occupying Judah’s land….

Obadiah overlaps a lot with Jer 49. Who copied from whom?

\*\*Some people think Ob copied from jer, some that jer copied from Ob, some that both copied from somewhere else!

Doesn’t Edom get chance to repent?

Everyone gets chance to repent, whether or not it’s stated—as the Book of Jonah makes clear. And see the response above about how the Edomites (Idumeans) actually get converted.

# Jonah: Responses to Questions

*Why Nineveh?*

\*\*Because it’s the capital of the Assyrian Empire—it’s like saying Washington. So Nineveh is the great brutal oppressor of its world.

*Casting lots? Did it work? Is it okay?*

\*\*There are many positive references to casting lots in Scripture, including the appointment of Matthias in Acts. It’s a way God can guide people. Urim and Thummim was a way of casting lots.

*Why is Jonah 2 in the past tense? What is the role of the prayer?*

\*\*Because the fish was Jonah’s means of deliverance from the storm. So he is safe now he is in the fish! The prayer is thus an act of praise, quite like a thanksgiving psalm. It gives the impression that Jonah is learning, an impression that continues in chapter 3, but not in chapter 4.

*What does “Salvation belongs to the Lord” mean?*

\*\*The idea of being saved that he has in mind is the one in Matt 8:25; 14:30. Only Yahweh can save you like that!

*Why did God insist on using Jonah? Why not find someone more cooperative?*

\*\*Someone really committed to Israel is the sort of person through whom to make the point that God wants to make!

*How can God have a change of mind (chapter 3)? Is this open theism?*

\*\*There’s more to open theism than that, but the idea that God can have a change of mind comes a lot in the Bible. It’s a piece of really good news. If you repent, God doesn’t implement his plan to destroy you! In the Bible, changing your mind doesn’t mean imperfection. It nearly always means mercy.

*If Jonah knew that God is more forgiving than punishing, why wouldn’t he want to tell people?*

\*\*Don’t you know people who would be sorry if (say) Osama bin Laden had repented and been forgiven?

*Does God’s rebuke in chapter 4 show that God loved the nations even before Jesus came? So what was the difference in Israel’s position?*

*How can one explain the universalist view in Jonah?*

\*\*I presume by “universalist” you mean that God cares about all nations; and that is the view that runs through the OT, though the OT also assumes that God made a particular commitment to Israel (which is what the OT talks about more often). But God made that commitment to Israel as a way of reaching the nations 9see e.g., Gen 12).

*Why is there no conclusion?*

\*\*Because that means the readers have to provide it.

*It’s surprising after all the rhetoric about Assyria that God would now protect them. What was the book’s message in its day?*

\*\*Yes! So part of its message is that Israelites mustn’t give in to negative attitudes to the superpower, even while they are to expect that God will put the superpower down if it doesn’t repent.

*How does Jewish faith read this story? They won’t be hearing a message about outreach.*

\*\*I’m not sure why you say that. In the centuries after Jonah was written, they translated the OT into Greek, partly so that other nations could read it, and as a result welcomes countless thousands of proselytes into Judaism. Jewish theologian Jonathan Magonet in his book *The Subversive Bible* quotes the Midrash on Jonah (as collected in a compilation of Jewish interpretations of the OT called Yalkut Shimoni) as saying that the sailors promptly went to Jerusalem and converted to Judaism.