

❧

## 117. Amos: "You Alone Have I Singled Out of All the Families of the Earth—That Is Why I Will Call You to Account for All Your Iniquities"

3:2

### Amos and the Meaning of Jewish Chosenness

Although it is not intended to do so, the doctrine of chosenness can lead some people to believe that they are superior to others and/or more beloved by God. Amos apparently feared that many of his Israelite contemporaries so regarded themselves; thus, he felt the need to explain the true implications of chosenness. The fact that "you alone have I [God] singled out of all the families of the earth" endows Israel not with a superior status, but with a greater responsibility: "That is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities."

In similar manner, parents might love children equally but not treat them equally. For example, they might punish a fifteen-year-old child for an offense for which the child's younger sibling will go unpunished. Why? The older child is held to a higher standard, more has been explained to him or her, and therefore that child should know better. So, too, because of the divine revelation God has granted Israel, He holds them accountable to a higher standard of moral behavior.

Unfortunately, throughout history, the temptation to view chosenness as a dispensation, rather than as a summons to a higher standard of behavior, has been pronounced. As noted later (see entry 119), Martin Luther asserted that those who believe Jesus to be God will go to heaven, even if they have committed murders, while those who do not affirm Jesus' divinity will spend eternity in hell, even if they are righteous people, indeed, even if they are the victims of

those murderers who are believers. In his view, apparently, Amos should be rewritten to read: "You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth—that is why I will *not* call you to account for all your iniquities."

A similar conviction that chosenness allows the chosen to practice an inferior morality seems to have been held by Arnauad-Amalric, legate of Pope Innocent III and commander of the Crusader army in 1209 C.E. that murdered 15,000 Frenchmen in Béziers in pursuit of some 220 supposed heretics in the city. Legend has it that when the Crusaders asked his advice as to whom they should kill (since they could not distinguish the good from the wicked), Arnaud-Amalric responded: "Kill them all! God will recognize his own" (in other words, the concept of being chosen did not obligate the Crusaders to refrain from murdering innocent people; see Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World*, pages 76–78).

In recent times, those Jews who hailed Baruch Goldstein's February 1994 murder of twenty-nine Arabs praying at a Hebron mosque likewise seem to believe that the prophet Amos spoke falsely, as do Muslim religious leaders who have supported Ayatollah Khomeini, Hamas, and other proponents of Islamic terrorism.

Amos also argues that chosenness does not mean that God loves Israel more than He loves other people:

To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians, declares the Lord (9:7).

God loves all His children, not only Israel, but also the Ethiopians. Nor do I believe that it was by chance that Amos compared Israel to Ethiopia. Given that racism probably has existed throughout history, one can imagine the multitude at the Israelite temple in Bethel murmuring, "Imagine comparing us to a group of Ethiopians—saying that God loves them as much as He loves us."

That of course is precisely what Amos is saying: that God loves all human beings equally, since they are all created "in His image."

Joseph Telushkin:  
Biblical Literacy, HarperCollins,  
Oct. 1997