

Amos 8:11-12 and the LDS Doctrines of Apostasy and Restoration

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*“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God,
that I will send a famine in the land,
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord:
And they shall wander from sea to sea,
and from the north even to the east,
they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord,
and shall not find it.”*

Amos 8:11-12 KJV

The Usual LDS Understanding of Amos 8:11-12

The LDS Church publishes a “Topical Guide” that list scriptures from all of its Standard Works of relevance to numerous doctrinal issues. This Topical Guide is part of its official published version of the Standard Works (the “quad,” containing the Bible, the Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price under one cover). It is also available on the LDS Church’s official website. Under the heading “Apostasy of the Early Christian Church,” the Topical Guide lists Amos 8:11, quoted above.¹

Mormons have long held that Amos 8:11-12 specifically predicted the “Great Apostasy” that the LDS Church teaches stretched from about AD 100 (when the New Testament apostles passed from the scene) to 1830 (when Joseph Smith founded the LDS Church). For example, over a hundred years ago the highly respected and influential Mormon theologian James Talmage stated, “Another prediction applicable to the period when there should be no Church of Christ to be found, and when, in consequence there should be lamentation and suffering, is that of Amos.”² Richard R. Lyman (ironically, the last LDS apostle ever to be excommunicated) cited Amos 8:11-12 at a General Conference in April 1924 and commented. “Thus there is predicted a time when the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be found anywhere.” According to Sterling W. Sill, speaking at the General Conference in April 1956, “Joseph Smith was sent before the face of the spiritual famine spoken of by Amos, for exactly the same purpose, to unlock the granaries of spiritual truth, to dispel the darkness that covered the earth, and make possible that every living soul might have ‘life everlasting.’” Similarly, Spencer W. Kimball, who was later to become the President of the LDS Church, also made this same claim at a General Conference (April 1964):

¹See the listing in the online “[Topical Guide](#).”

²James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (orig. 1909; Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1968, 2008 reprints), 26.

After centuries of spiritual darkness described by Amos and Jeremiah, we solemnly announce to all the world that the spiritual famine is ended, the spiritual drought is spent, the word of the Lord in its purity and totalness is available to all men. One needs not wander from sea to sea nor from the north to the east, seeking the true gospel as Amos predicted, for the everlasting truth is available.

This understanding of Amos 8:11-12 as a prediction of the so-called Great Apostasy is still common among Mormons. Richard I. Winwood's book *Take Heed That Ye Be Not Deceived*, published on the website of FAIR (a leading pro-Mormon apologetics organization), describes various developments in fourth-century Christianity and comments, "The famine of 'hearing the words of the Lord' spoken of in Amos 8:11-12 was in full swing. The lights of revelation were out."³ Winwood refers to the period that followed as the Dark Ages. Jeff Lindsay, who has a very popular website defending Mormonism, likewise applies the passage to the so-called Dark Ages: "However, there are times when the truth is not found on earth—or when authorized prophets and apostles are absent. Such a time was predicted in Amos 8:11,12, referring to a coming age in which there will be a famine of truth. Fits the dark age of the Apostasy very well!"⁴

Amos 8:11-12 in Its Biblical Context

Amos was a prophet during the period of the divided kingdom, in the days of Uzziah and Jeroboam II, around 760 BC. If we look at Amos 8:11-12 in context, we find that it simply has nothing to do with the Christian church during or after the New Testament era. There is no connection between what Amos said and anything that happened following the passing of the New Testament apostles more than 800 years after the time of Amos. Of course, Old Testament prophets could prophesy about events millennia later if God revealed such events to them, but in this instance that is definitely not the case.

After telling the northern kingdom of Israel that God was going to bring judgments on the neighboring nations (1:3-2:5), Amos told Israel that God was going to bring judgment on them as well (2:6-16). The rest of the book elaborates on the reasons for this judgment, what it will be like, and the results of the judgment. When we come to chapter 8, we can see this same theme continuing: "The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more" (8:2). God will judge Israel because its people mistreated the poor (8:4-6). Because of these sins, God will bring mourning in the land (8:7-10). It is in this context that God tells Israel that he will send "a famine in the land...of hearing the words of the LORD" (v. 11). The people of the northern kingdom will look for God's word but will not be able to find it (v. 12). Those who worship the false gods of Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba "shall fall, and never rise up again" (v. 14). All of this took place when, some forty years later, God allowed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC).

³Richard I. Winwood, [*Take Heed That Ye Be Not Deceived*](#), 2006.

⁴Jeff Lindsay, "[Mormon Answers](#): Questions about the Restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ (Apostasy, Authority, Restoration)."

The precise wording of verse 12 describing the inability of the people to find a word from God makes it clear that Amos is referring specifically to the northern kingdom of Israel. He says that they will unsuccessfully seek divine revelation “from sea to sea, and **from the north even to the east.**” The wording “from the north even to the east” is surprising; one would normally have expected the expression “from north to *south*.” Scholars have offered a variety of explanations, but they generally agree that this wording reflects the local geography of the northern kingdom or of the Holy Land as a whole.⁵ The best explanation remains the view that the one direction the idolatrous Israelites in the northern kingdom would *not* look for God’s word was south—to the southern kingdom of Judah and its religious center in Jerusalem. Shalom M. Paul, in his scholarly commentary on Amos, explains: “This frustrating ranging and racing to and fro will drive them eventually from one end to another of the northern kingdom.... The description of ‘from sea to sea,’ that is, from west to east (or vice versa) will lead them from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea (or vice versa).” Amos then says “from north to east” instead of “from north to south” because the one place Israel would not look for the word of the Lord was to the south. “The south is precisely where Judah is located, and this southern prophet [Amos] most surely believes that there in Judah, at least, one can surely ‘find’ the words of the Lord.”⁶

That Amos is referring to the kingdom of Israel is confirmed in verse 14, where he speaks of Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba as places of idolatry:

“They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, Thy god, O Dan, liveth; and, The manner of Beersheba liveth; even they shall fall, and never rise up again” (Amos 8:14).

Samaria, Dan, and Beersheba were all cities prominently associated with Israelite idolatry. Samaria was a centrally located, major religious and political city in the northern kingdom. Dan

⁵In addition to the view favored here, scholars have suggested the following explanations. (1) The directions *north* and *east* refer to the directions that the Assyrians dispersed the Israelite exiles. Jorg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 151. This explanation does not fit well with the use of “from sea to sea.” (2) The second *sea* in “from sea to sea” refers to a south sea (the Red Sea? the Dead Sea?), so that Amos 8:12 includes all four points of the compass. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 386; Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 703, 825. There is some biblical support for treating the Red Sea as the southern border with the Mediterranean as the northern sea border (Ex. 23:31), but the expression more likely contrasts the Mediterranean to the west with the Dead Sea to the east (Joel 2:20; Zech. 14:8; cf. Zech. 9:10; Ps. 72:8). (3) “From sea to sea,” drawing a line from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, “defines the southern latitudinal border of the northern kingdom.” The expression “from north to east” may then refer to Israelites searching in “the Galilee region to the north, heading for places like Samaria and Dan, and to the east, whether Beth Shan or the Transjordan territory of Gilead.” John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 774. This view also has difficulty with the phrase “from sea to sea.” Still, all of these explanations understand Amos 8:12 to be using directional indicators pertinent to the geography of the Holy Land.

⁶Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 266. Similarly, James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 149; J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 187.

was a town at the northern end of Israel, while Beersheba was one of a group of towns located within Judah's territory, well to the south of Jerusalem, that were originally allotted to the tribe of Simeon. The people of Simeon apparently scattered, many of them settling in the north, and as a whole the tribe aligned itself with the northern kingdom.⁷ Thus, although Beersheba was geographically separate from the northern territories, its association with Simeon made the Israelites favor Beersheba over Jerusalem as a southern center of worship. Philip King is therefore probably correct when he states that Amos 8:14 is "alluding to the idolatrous worship offered from Dan to Beer-sheba, the northern and southern extremities of the Northern Kingdom."⁸ Commentators that interpret Amos 8:12 as referring to the entirety of the Holy Land (which would include Judah) appear not to have taken verse 14 into proper consideration. However, even their explanations, which are strained, agree that Amos is referring to the people of Israel in Amos's immediate future, not to people worldwide living centuries later.⁹

When we consider the focus of Amos as a whole, and Amos 8 in particular, on the northern kingdom of Israel, and the specific geographical language of verses 12 and 14, it becomes clear that Amos is referring to a spiritual "famine" for that northern kingdom. There simply is no basis in the text for referring or applying the warning in Amos 8:11-12 to the supposed Great Apostasy of Christianity that Mormons think took place over eight centuries later.

At least one LDS writer has recognized this fact and sought to address it. Duane Crowther argues that although the passage did not, in its original context, refer to the Great Apostasy, it describes a similar apostasy in the Old Testament period. He concludes that one may cite Amos 8:11-12 as a point of comparison, not as a prophetic prediction, of the Great Apostasy:

While it is a very suitable description of the lack of revelation which occurred during that period, there is little basis for the assertion that Amos was intentionally speaking of that era, rather than of the time of the fall of Israel, in his prophecy. It is suggested that the prophecy be cited only when comparing the apostate condition of Israel following Amos' day with the apostasy which followed the New Testament period.¹⁰

Crowther rightly sees that since the immediately preceding and following verses have to do with the judgment that came on Israel eight centuries before the coming of Christ, it will not make much sense to claim that the two verses of Amos 8:11-12 concern an apostasy that would not begin until sometime after Christ's coming:

⁷See Leon J. Wood, "Simeon, the Tenth Tribe of Israel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 14 (1971): 221-25.

⁸Philip J. King, *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 100.

⁹See, for example, Anderson and Freedman, *Amos*, 830-31.

¹⁰Duane S. Crowther, *Prophets and Prophecies of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1993), 261 n. 2.

A sudden change to a period 850 years in advance for two verses, then an immediate return to his original subject is definitely not typical of the style of careful transitions and full exposition of the theme characteristic of the book of Amos.¹¹

Crowther, as a believing Mormon, is anxious to emphasize that he is not questioning the LDS doctrine of the Great Apostasy, but merely the claim that Amos 8:11-12 predicts the Great Apostasy:

The author merely questions the wisdom of some L.D.S. expositors of the scriptures who have, in his view, forced the interpretation of this passage with gross disregard for context and the true intention of the prophet Amos.¹²

No critic of the conventional LDS use of Amos 8:11-12 could ask for a more stinging assessment. I will respond at the end of this paper to Crowther's suggestion that Mormons may still cite the passage as describing a condition of apostasy similar to that of Israel.

An Alternative Explanation

I have found one other attempt by a Mormon author to deal with the problem of the context of Amos 8:11-12. Ellis T. Rasmussen, in his commentary on the Old Testament, offers this explanation:

The prophet then foresaw a long-range spiritual famine of 'the word of the Lord.' That famine continued from the last of the Old Testament prophets on, except for the period of the Savior's ministry, until the latter-day restoration.¹³

In other words, according to Rasmussen, the "famine" of God's word predicted by Amos began around 400 BC, the approximate end of the Old Testament era. It then ran continuously (except for the period of Christ's coming in the first century AD) for over two thousand years until the 1820s, when God began issuing new revelations through Joseph Smith. Rasmussen's explanation shows that he realizes that Amos's prophecy had something to do with Israel in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, his view has two serious flaws.

First, the "spiritual famine" predicted by Amos happened to the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC, some *four centuries before the last of the Old Testament prophets*. Rasmussen ignores the fact that Amos is speaking specifically about a judgment that was to come on Israel hundreds of years before the end of the Old Testament era.

¹¹Ibid., 261-62 n. 2.

¹²Ibid., 262 n. 2.

¹³Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1993), 649.

Second, to treat “the period of the Savior’s ministry” as a mere exception, a momentary blip of divine revelation that briefly interrupted the prophesied “famine,” is simply unsatisfactory. The revelation of “the word of the Lord” actually reached its zenith in the coming of the Lord Jesus, who is the living Word of God incarnate. Christ’s coming was followed by a flurry of revelation, which guided the followers of Jesus to become the Christian church and which produced the 27 books of the New Testament.

For these two reasons, Rasmussen’s explanation of Amos 8:11-12 cannot salvage this passage as a proof text for the doctrine that Christianity entered a Great Apostasy following the death of the apostles.

The “Famine” of Amos and the Condition of the Post-Apostolic Church

We have established that the prophecy of Amos 8:11-12 in its own literary and historical context refers to a judgment that came on the northern kingdom of Israel. It simply does not and cannot refer to a period of apostasy that would come on the largely Gentile Christian church almost a millennium later. But could Amos’s description be illustrative of that apostasy, as Crowther suggests? Not in the slightest. The experience of the post-apostolic church (that is, the church of the second and third centuries, which Mormons claim slid into apostasy) simply does not fit Amos’s description. Two points stand out here.

(1) The sins for which the people were judged with a famine of hearing from God, according to Amos, were sins of mistreating the poor (Amos 8:4-6)—sins of which the church after the passing of the apostles was not guilty. In fact, the church in the second and third centuries was renowned for its charity.¹⁴

(2) The withdrawal of hearing words from God was a judgment on Israel for its gross disobedience to God. Amos warns that the people would not only suffer, they would be in a state of *mourning and bitter grief* (Amos 8:7-10). In this context, the “famine” was the lack of any comforting word from God, any hope of God lifting the judgment. The church after the passing of the apostles experienced suffering in the form of persecution but *rejoiced* in it, confident that God was with them and blessing them despite their suffering. The church’s experience during the second and third centuries was *not* an experience of judgment.

We conclude that it is simply wrong to apply Amos 8:11-12 to the post-apostolic church. Not only does the passage not refer, in its original context, to Christianity; it does not even work as an illustration of or analogy to what happened in Christianity after the passing of the apostles.

Query: Can a religious group that so badly mishandles biblical texts like this one really be a divinely authorized and uniquely inspired restoration of the truth?

¹⁴See, for example, Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).