74. What was the fourth?

When the Hebrews came out of the desert the spirit of individualism was strong among them. The humblest and poorest had rights which the richest and strongest were bound to protect. Men were not judged by the class to which they belonged, nor were they granted privileges on any such basis. A Hebrew was a Hebrew because of the blood that ran in his veins. But with the development of the new civilization, and with the coming of the new money economy, men came to be judged by what they owned rather than by what they were. Society began splitting up into classes, the denominator being economic, and against all this Amos cried out with all his might.

75. Were matters worse in Israel than in Judah?

In some respects. In the first place, more than a score of old Canaanite cities had survived the Hebrew invasion of the Land of Promise. Although they were situated along the borders of ancient Israel, their influence spread across the land, and the rich landowners who made their homes therein became very powerful as a result of the new prosperity. This constituted a social and economic force of very great importance.

In the second place, Israel was a nation that bestrode the great trade routes and was more deeply involved in the commercialism of the times. Jerusalem was a country capital somewhat removed from the main current of affairs, while Samaria was a busy metropolis in the very center of the scene. Though the same social forces were at work in both kingdoms, the effects were more noticeable in Israel. But to understand the book of Amos we must look at Israel through the shepherd's eyes.

76. How was life different for Amos?

He was a countryman to whom every living thing was infinitely precious. When he saw the rich grandees of Bethel eating little day-old lambs and wobbly calves (6:4) in their extravagance, it seemed to him utterly sinful, callous, and reprobate. In the desert where he tended sheep everyone was poor; and the luxurious houses and expensive furnishings of the cities outraged his sense of justice, especially when he knew the processes by which they were obtained. He was indignant when the rich were complacent in the midst of the sufferings of the poor. There was a certain rough-and-ready justice in the desert, but in the cities he found the courts corrupt and judges accepting bribes openly (5:12). In the desert men defended one another, but in the cities they preyed upon one another.

Amos was a poor man, but his poverty was the product of narrow valleys, sterile soil, and a hard country in which to make a living. The poverty of Israel was the result of oppression, exploitation, injustice, and corruption. All Israel might have lived in reasonable plenty if the land had been justly ruled and well administered. It was against the injustices which caused the poverty that Amos inveighed.

77. Did not the government protect the people?

The rich, the powerful, and the nobility—these were the government, with the judges of the courts a part of the vicious system (5:7-11), all protected by laws dictated by the money lords. This was what aroused Amos' ire. No one had the moral judgment to see, or the courage to protest against, the social injustices that were making life hideous for the masses of the people. Short weights, faulty balances (8:5), and kindred evils went unrebuked. So anxious were the big businessmen to make money that they chafed under the small restraints imposed by the feast days, restless for the dawn of a business day when they could plunge again into the mad melee of money-making (8:4-6).

78. Did not the priests protest?

Organized religion had no social conscience. Its sole concern was ritual and ceremony. Priests felt no more responsible for social wrongs than modern preachers feel for technical errors of engineers. Such matters were esteemed to be entirely outside the realm of religious thought.

79. Was the nation irreligious?

Not at all. In fact, it was very religious. Its shrines were crowded, its services elaborate, its sacrifices expensive, its devotions meticulous, the sabbaths properly observed, and the feasts numerous (5:21-23). *But it was a religion that did not care about the poor.*

80. What did Amos call sinful?

In contrast to the priests who said that failure to sacrifice rams and bullocks was a sin, Amos demanded just dealings and fair treatment of one's fellows. No priest ever considered the possibility of shutting a man away from the privileges of the shrines because he heaped injustices upon the weak or robbed the poor. An Israelite at Bethel might have done these things and suffer no rebuke or embarrassment.

Not so with Amos. The sins he condemned were not ceremonial failures nor were they ritualistic oversights. They were acts and attitudes which are considered sins today by all right-minded persons, but which in Amos' day no one considered sinful. That is an indication of the distance the race has traveled since the eighth century B.C. Graft, bribery, prostitution, cruelty, drunkenness, embezzlement, corruption of courts, the defeat of justice—none of these terrible evils were associated with religion in any way in the thinking of the priests or the people.

81. Where did Amos preach his sermon?

At a city called Bethel, near to the southern border of Israel. Here was the favorite shrine of the reigning monarch, Jeroboam II; and anyone speaking there was speaking to the government (7:12).