

AMOS

Prophet of Social Justice

Introduction. With Amos, we are introduced to the first of the “*writings prophets*.” They did not only preach but also wrote down their sermons. Preaching prophets like Elijah and Elisha did not write down their sermons. In some books of the Bible, Amos and his contemporaries (Hosea, Isaiah, etc.), are sometimes called the “Latter Prophets” to distinguish them from the “Former Prophets” (Joshua, Samuel, Nathan, etc.).

Historical Context. One of the problems we encounter when dealing with the so-called “Latter Prophets” is the lack of historical context for their ministry. Since little or nothing is written in the historical books about any of the prophets, with the exception of Isaiah, scholars have depended on the text of each prophetic book to ascertain the historical background of each of the prophets. Some of the books provide very little historical information while others give no clues at all.

From the book that bears his name, we do know that Amos is a shepherd from Tekoa, a small town south of Bethlehem. He is from the southern kingdom, but he preaches in the northern kingdom at the Shrine of Bethel during the reign of King Jeroboam (786-746BC). It is a period of great prosperity in the northern kingdom when Amos arrives in Samaria, the capital. Amos is shocked and outraged on what he sees: the rich living in luxury and becoming richer on the backs of the poor. Amos’ ministry involves railing against the great injustices he witnesses in the northern kingdom. Hence, he is often called the prophet of social justice or the prophet of divine judgment.

The social evils in Israel are compounded by the hypocritical veneer of religion with which the perpetrators of social injustice seek to veil their actions. Thus we find in the Book of Amos not only a critique of social injustice, but also a scathing assault on formal religion that has lost its heart and become little more than a shell of hypocrisy.

Amidst widespread social injustice and shallow worship, Amos becomes a prophet of divine judgment on the nation of Israel and on her neighbors as well. His message is often seen as one of gloom and doom. But the real gloom lies *not* in the

proclamation of Amos’ judgment, but rather in the social evils that demand such judgment.

Style. Amos’ preaching style is blunt, confrontational and insulting. He calls the rich ladies at the local country club in Samaria “cows of Basham” (4:1). With an agricultural background, he uses symbols he has experienced on the land: laden wagons, roaring lions, flocks plundered by wild beasts.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

PART ONE is a collection of oracles against surrounding pagan nations. These oracles imply that God’s moral law applies not only to his chosen ones but to all nations. In this series of condemnations, Judah and Israel are not excluded (chs 1-2).

PART TWO is a collection of words and woes against the people of Israel. In each instance, Amos points out the multiple ways by which Israel has violated God’s laws (chs 3-6).

PART THREE deals with five symbolic visions pertaining to threats and promises (chs 7:1-9:8).

EPILOGUE contains words of hope and promise of restoration (9:9-15).

COMMENTARY

PART ONE: ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS (Chapters 1-2)

CHAPTERS 1-2: The Lord roars

“The Lord will roar from Zion, and from Jerusalem raise his voice....”(v.2)

The first two verses are like the title page and preface in a modern book. We are told about the key figure in the book—Amos—where he came from and the historical context in which he served during the prosperous reign of King Uzziah in Judah and during the reign of Jeroboam in Israel. Amos will speak the words he has received from the Lord in a vision.

“The Lord roars from Zion” tells us that the one speaking does not sound like a gentle shepherd but

like a lion roaring in the desert. Amos' audience has been alerted that the message spoken will not be an easy one to hear. It will ring with terror.

Beginning with an oracle against Damascus (Syria) in verses 3-5, Amos roars with God's displeasure against Philistia, Phoenicia (Tyre), Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, culminating in a devastating indictment of Israel (2:6-16). In each oracle, a set formula is followed:

- a) *Culpability*: "For the three transgressions...."
- b) *Threat*: "I will not turn it [threat of destruction] back...."
- c) *Specific sin*: "Because they have threshed Gilead...." Their crimes are often against humanity, e.g., using excessive force in war, sending captive soldiers into slavery. "*For three crimes and for four*" is a reference to multiple crimes.
- d) *Punishment*: "I will send a fire [destruction]...."

In his book *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Peter Ellis, CS.S.R, lists three things to be noted with regard to the oracles against the nations:

- Amos' primary purpose for the oracles is to show that God is ruler of all men and all nations and that he punishes those who rebel against God's law wherever he finds it.
- In castigating the nations, Amos' secondary purpose is to highlight the even greater sins of God's chosen ones who, despite their abundant gifts and their revealed knowledge of God's will, are no better at times than the ignorant and underprivileged pagans.
- Beginning with Amos, and for the same reasons, the oracles against the nations become a typical stock-in-trade type of sermon for subsequent prophets (Is. 13-23; Jer. 46-51; Ex. 24-32; Nah. 1-3; Zeph. 2; Hab.).(p. 219)

Judah is condemned for breaking God's laws (2:4-5). Whenever Amos roars about the sins of the nations, his audience cheers loudly, but when the prophet blasts Israel for its offenses, there is a stunned silence. Now the Israelites are called to see and acknowledge their own sins.

The sins of Israel (2:6-16). In his indictment against Israel, Amos almost exclusively singles out crimes of

social injustice: enslaving the poor (2:6), oppressing the weak (2:7); ignoring covenant laws written to protect the underprivileged (2:8; see also Ex. 22:20-25, Deut 24:12-13).

2:13-16. This is Amos' first prediction concerning the downfall of the northern kingdom—a threat and prediction that will be repeated many times by his successor Hosea.

PART TWO: WOES/SERMONS AGAINST ISRAEL (Chapters 3-6)

This section of the book contains a series of woes or sermons.

CHAPTER 3: First woe/sermon—Amos defends his mission

"...storing up in their castles what they have extorted and robbed.... An enemy shall surround the land, and strip you of your strength, and pillage your castles." (vv 10-11)

"The lion roars, who will not be afraid? The Lord speaks, who will not prophesy?" (v.8)

In verses 3-8, Amos, a Judean, defends his mission as prophet to the northern kingdom (vv 3-8) with a series of rhetorical questions setting up an affirmative answer to all including the last: "*When the Lord God speaks, who will not prophesy?*"(v.8). He then goes on to predict the certain destruction of Israel (vv 9-15).

CHAPTER 4: Second woe/sermon—Condemnation of the wealthy ladies of Samaria

"Hear this word, women of the mountain of Samaria, you cows of Bashan, you who oppress the weak and abuse the needy...!"(v.1)

"...Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (v.12)

Amos attacks the wealthy, luxury-loving women of Samaria, calling them "cows of Bashan" and predicts their deportation to Assyria (vv 2-3). Then the prophet unmasks the empty and hypocritical religion of the northerners (vv 4-5) and points out their stubborn refusal to heed God's medicinal punishment (vv 6-11). For such crimes and stubbornness, they are told: "*Prepare to meet your God, O Israel*" (vv 11-13).

CHAPTERS 5-6: Third woe/sermon

“She is fallen, to rise no more, the virgin Israel....” (v.2)

“...Seek me that you may live, but do not seek Bethel....” (vv 4-5)

“Woe to those...who cast justice to the ground.” (v.7)

This is the final sermon in the second section of this book. It is a combination of a funeral lament over dead Israel and an exhortation to “seek the Lord” while there is still time (v.6). This chapter also contains a strong condemnation of Israel’s liturgies (vv 21-25).

A lament is normally delivered *after* a death. However, in verses 2 and 3, Amos speaks to his *live* audience as if they were already dead. In verses 4-7, Amos invites his listeners to “seek the Lord and *live*” even though the very form of his address implies that they are *dead*. The people must seek the Lord, but they will find him in the places (Bethel and Gilgal) where they are seeking.

The rest of chapter 5 (vv 7-27) and chapter 6 deal with three woes.

First woe (vv 7-17). Social injustice is strongly condemned. *“Woe to those...who have cast justice to the ground...have trampled upon the weak...accepting bribes, repelling the needy at the gate”*(vv 7-12). A society is in trouble when those who try to do what is right are hated for their commitment to justice.

Second woe (vv 18-27). The “Day of the Lord,” which should be a happy day, will be a day of “darkness and not light.” We also find a harsh condemnation of Israel’s liturgical services: *“I hate, I spurn your feasts. I take no pleasure in your solemnities”* (v.21). Amos is not opposed to liturgy in itself, but he is deadly opposed to liturgy that is divorced from justice.

Third woe (6:1-14). In chapter 4, Amos condemns the rich women of Samaria calling them “cows of Bashan.” Now the prophet’s attention is turned to the rich and powerful men of Samaria. Like their female counterparts, they will be condemned for their pride, their easy living and heavy drinking at the expense of the nation. *“Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched out comfortably on their couches, they eat lambs taken from the stall...(v.4)and are not made ill by the*

collapse of Joseph”(v.6). Like Joseph of old, sold into slavery by his brothers, “Joseph” collapses again every time we permit another person to go in want while we enjoy more than we need. Amos warns that the tide will turn, and those who have more than enough now will lose everything, including their freedom. They who sell the poor into slavery will themselves be taken into slavery.

Pause: What are forms of social injustice in our country today?

PART THREE: VISIONS OF DESTRUCTION (7:1-9:8)

CHAPTER 7: Three visions; Amos’ encounter with Amaziah

“Amaziah, priest of Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam, King of Israel: ‘Amos has conspired against you here within Israel; the country cannot endure all his words. For this is what Amos says: Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be exiled from its land.’” (vv 10-11)

In a summary statement of chapters 7-9, Peter Ellis writes:

Beginning with two visions of destruction (vv. 1-3, a locust plague; and vv. 4-6, a drought) decreed by God but averted by the prayers of the prophet, the sermon relates three more visions of destruction (7:7-9, God with the plumb line of destruction; 8:1-14, the basket of ripe fruit; 9:1-8, God presiding over the destruction of the temple at Bethel). The point of the build-up (visions of destruction averted, followed by visions of destruction that will not be averted) is to show that when God’s medicinal punishments are scorned (7:1-6, the locust plague and the drought), there is nothing left for God to do but proceed to total destruction (the visions of God with the plumb line, the basket of ripe fruit, and God presiding over the destruction of the temple at Bethel). (The Men and Message of the Old Testament, p.223)

Vision of locust (vv 1-3). A locust plague threatens to destroy Israel’s crops. Amos does not believe that such plague is a fluke of nature but a divine judgment on Israel for her sins. And so he prays: “Forgive.” In response to the prophet’s plea, God changes his mind and cancels the locust plague.

Vision of the fire (vv 4-6). Amos' vision of fire threatens to consume the land. The prophet once again petitions God to stop the fire, and just like the first woe, God responds to his prayer.

Vision of the plummet (vv 7-9). In this vision, Amos sees God standing against a wall with a plummet, an instrument used to check if a wall is straight. Israel was constructed straight, but now she is crooked—she has lost her alignment. Just as a dangerously leaning wall must be brought down for safety, so too must Israel be destroyed because of its crooked alignment. In this vision, Amos does *not* ask the Lord for mercy. Previous judgments have been averted, but Israel has not changed its evil ways. Just as some buildings are beyond repair, so is Israel beyond redemption. In John 3:19 Jesus says: *“The judgment is this, that the light comes into the world, but people preferred darkness to the light, because their works were evil.”*

Amos encounters Amaziah (vv 10-17). Amos' visions are interrupted by a scene describing a confrontation between him and Amaziah. This is probably the best known story in the book. Amaziah is the senior cleric at Bethel, the main shrine in the northern kingdom. He has a prestigious position and probably enjoys a nice lifestyle. He represents the king in matters of worship. Now he has to deal with a missionary upstart from the south who is upsetting his congregation with his gloom-and-doom sermons. Fearing that his continued dipping into the collection to maintain his lavish lifestyle may bring him down, he sets out to dismiss Amos: *“Off with you, visionary, flee to the land of Judah! There earn your bread by prophesying, but never again prophesy in Bethel; for it is the king's sanctuary and a royal temple”* (vv 12-13).

Amaziah is suggesting that Amos is only in the prophecy business for the money. At that time, there are indeed professional prophets who make a living by their services. When Amaziah says: *“Eat your bread there”* (in Judah), he means “make your living in Judah, not here.”

Amos responds to Amaziah's personal attack:

“I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, ‘Go prophesy to my people Israel!’”

“Now hear the word of the Lord! ‘You say: Prophecy not against Israel, preach not against the house of Isaac.’”

“Now thus says the Lord: ‘Your wife shall be made a harlot in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword; your land shall be divided by measuring line, and you yourself shall die in an unclean land; Israel shall be exiled far from its land.’” (vv 14-17)

Amos says: “I am not one of those professional prophets. I was making a living in Tekoa when the Lord called me to go prophesy to the people of Israel.” As Amos leaves town, he issues a stinging prophecy against Amaziah and his family: his wife will become a prostitute, his children will be slain, and he will be taken into exile.

Pause: How real is the danger for clergy to only preach what the people want to hear? How do you feel when clergy address the hot bottom issues?

CHAPTER 8: Fourth vision and a prophecy against greed

“Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land.” (v.4)

“...I will send famine upon the land: not a famine of bread, or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord.” (v.11)

Fourth vision: Basket of ripe fruit. The fourth vision begins with a description of something that Amos sees. Then there follows a dialog between Amos and God which leads to a statement of divine judgment. Amos sees a basket of summer fruits. Just as it is time to pluck the fruit, so too is the time ripe for God to judge Israel. The happy songs traditionally associated with harvest festivals will be replaced by wailings. Dead bodies will be seen everywhere.

For Israel, the message of this vision is clear: “You are beyond redemption. Your future has been determined by a long history of sin and your refusal to repent.” It is not that God stops being merciful, but there may come a time when a heart becomes so hardened that it can no longer hear God's word and respond to it.

Delivering harsh judgments could not have been easy for Amos. But as a physician must find it hard to divulge to a patient that he/she is terminally ill and

has only a few months to live, so it must have been equally hard for Amos to deliver Israel's death sentence.

Four oracles

Ruin (vv 4-14). These verses contain four oracles in which the prophet employs some phenomenon from the natural world as a description of the end.

Earthquake (vv 4-8). This act of judgment is tied to Israel's sins against justice. The poor are trampled down and exploited. The rich cannot wait for the Sabbath to be over so that they can return to cheating and exploiting the poor.

Eclipse (vv 9-10). On festival days, light is celebrated, the light of God's creation. But Israel's life of sin and rebellion has made a mockery of the true meaning of the festivals. And so the time of light will become a time of darkness, the eclipsed sun symbolizing the extinguishment of the light of God's countenance from Israel. One cannot celebrate light and live in darkness.

Famine of God's word (vv 11-12). Amos may have anticipated a real famine, but then goes on to speak about a much worse famine, a "famine of the word of God." One of the ancient fundamentals of Israel's faith is that "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deut 8:3). "*The coming famine of God's word would culminate in the starvation of the spirit, not the body, but when the spirit dies within a person, the carcass is of little value*" (Peter Craigie).

Drought (vv 13-14). Those who worship at the nation's shrines will "faint for thirst."

CHAPTER 9: Vision of the altar

"The eyes of the Lord God are on this sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth...." (v.8)

The fifth and final vision affirms Israel's total collapse. The setting for the vision is a sanctuary, presumably Bethel, which has figured prominently in Amos' ministry. Amos sees the Lord standing beside the altar and listens as he pronounces judgment.

The Lord declares destruction, first of the sanctuary itself, and then spreading out to include all the

people. Neither the world beneath nor the heavens above, neither mountain nor ocean would allow a way to escape, for the Lord has set his eyes upon Israel "for evil and not for good" (v.4). Then follows a poetic passage extolling God's power over all the forces of nature (vv 5-6).

Then, as if someone had raised a question about Israel's special status, Amos states that in God's eyes, Israel is no different than all the other nations. He is the God of all nations and all will be judged by him (vv 7-8).

Postscript: Hope for the future (vv 8b-15)

"...But I will not destroy the house of Jacob completely, says the Lord." (v.8b)

"On that day I will raise up the fallen hut of David; I will wall up its breaches, raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old." (v.11)

As indicated in verse 8b, God will not annihilate Israel.

The change in tone in these final verses of the book is so remarkable that many scholars believe that the verses are a postscript from a later period, perhaps from a Judean exile of the sixth century B.C. These final words of hope would be helpful to later generations who read the prophet's dark threat of judgment. The final verses contain a very important message: even after the darkest message of judgment, and indeed even after its fulfillment, there remains a word of hope. Beyond all the disaster of judgment, a day of rebuilding is anticipated. The broken world of the chosen people would be restored, the crops and harvests of the land would be plentiful once again and new cities would rise again from the ruins of the past. This bright final perspective must be added to those darker ones that precede it.

A final word

We can summarize the main teaching of Amos as judgment against all who do not practice their religious beliefs by leading an ethical way of life. In his commentary on Amos, Peter Craigie offers these concluding remarks:

"We take leave of the Book of Amos with the sense of having encountered one of God's most remarkable servants. A citizen of Judah, his agricultural business

interest took him north to the nation of Israel. But Amos was a man of faith, not merely a businessman. The faith was not left in Tekoa when he took off on business; wherever he went, he saw the world and human society from the perspective of his faith in God. And being a sensitive man, he heard the divine vocation. For a short period of his life, this remarkable layman served as a prophet, declaring a particularly unpleasant and unpopular message in a land where he was a foreigner. Amos is extraordinary for his obedience and his courage; no less significant are the clarity and immediacy with which he proclaimed the prophetic word.”(The Daily Study Bible Series – Twelve Prophets, Vol.1, p.193)

Pause: Amos was a prophet of social justice, of a religion that leads to a faith that does justice. What in your opinion are some ways that the government and you can and should help the poor?

RESOURCES

- The Daily Study Bible Series – Twelve Prophets, Volume 1. This commentary was most helpful.
- The Collegeville Bible Commentary – Old Testament
- The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition