

The Prophets, Book 8

Amos

The Book of Amos, the 8th book of the Prophets, is built around five visions concerning the final judgment soon to come on the Kingdom of Israel, the Kingdom of Judah, and the pagan nations in the region.

Amos the Man. Amos was what today would be called a "layman." He was not a priest, nor a Levite, nor a product of a school of prophets; rather, he was a shepherd, a gatherer of wild fruit and, perhaps, an orchard-keeper. God called him with a direct visitation, as he was in the field, caring for his flock. His home town, Tekoah, was 10 miles south of Jerusalem, and five miles southeast of Bethlehem. Although Amos was a native of the Southern Kingdom, his message was delivered to the Northern Kingdom, probably in Bethel, where Jeroboam had established one of his two pagan worship centers.

After prophesying to the Northern Kingdom, Amos probably returned to his home and continued what he had been doing before he was called; the place and time of his death are unknown.

Amos and David. Like David, Amos was an obscure shepherd; in fact, the fields where Amos kept his sheep were only a few miles from those where David had kept his, 200 years earlier. Like David, he was what most would have called a poor choice for such a calling. And, like David, once called out by the Lord, he didn't hesitate; he rose to the occasion, believing that God would make him able to do what he was called to do.

The Setting. The Northern Kingdom was at the height of its prosperity, in the reign of Jeroboam II, but it was rushing toward its ignominious ending in defeat and captivity. God had sent Elijah, Elisha and Jonah, some of His mightiest prophets, to warn them, but to no avail; Israel, "hardened in its idolatry and wickedness, was speeding on to its ruin¹."

Amos may have known Jonah, and heard the story of his unusual trip to Ninevah; he may also have known Elisha. He was contemporary with Hosea and, together, they gave the wicked kingdom its final call to repent; but the message of all these prophets would be rejected. Within 30 years the Northern Kingdom would cease to exist, never to rise again, and its people would be led off into cruel captivity in Assyria. God had given them His very best, they would reject them all, and they would perish. Amos wrote his prophecies in vivid poetic language.

A. Author. The author of the book which bears his name is Amos, the humble "herdsman of Tekoah," who became a prophet of God. Little is known about Amos beyond what is recorded in his book.

B. Place and Date. The prophecies of Amos were probably written in Israel at the time in which they were spoken, in the reign of Judah's King Uzziah, about 800-750 BC. He began his ministry as a prophet "two years before the earthquake."

NOTE: This earthquake must have been a landmark event, for Amos wrote with the assumption that the readers were familiar with it (identified simply as "the earthquake"). According to Josephus, this earthquake occurred as King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy; we might think of it as "God's exclamation point²."

¹ Halley, Henry H.: Halley's Bible Handbook, Amos, p 358.

² II Chronicles 26:16-23; Josephus, Antiquities, 9.10.4.

Amos

C. Theme. The theme of Amos, like that of Hosea, is God's final call to the Northern Kingdom, to repent and avoid destruction.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Amos include the following:

1. Amos Introduces Himself. (1:1-2)

At the beginning of his book, Amos introduces himself with humility as one called from tending sheep. He states that his ministry took place during the reign of Judah's King Uzziah; and he date-stamps his prophecies as visions he saw "two years before the earthquake." Because he doesn't identify this earthquake, it must have needed no identification; it was so severe that it was still spoken of, more than 200 years later, by the prophet Zechariah³. His introductory statement may suggest that his prophetic messages will shake the Northern Kingdom like the great earthquake to come.

2. Doom for the Nations of the Region. (1:3-2:16)

Amos proceeds immediately to indict Israel, Judah, Syria, and all the pagan nations in the region; and, in each case, the reason for their coming destruction is for four transgressions ("for three transgression, and for four"). These four transgressions are not listed (at least, not as such); but Edom is charged with breaking "the brotherly covenant" (i.e. the old covenant between Esau and Jacob); and Ammon is specifically charged with ongoing cruelty to the children of Israel. Judah is charged with rejecting the Law of Moses, and Israel is condemned for oppression of the poor and general wickedness. A part of the punishment of all will be captivity; and, for those carried away by the Assyrians, it will be an extremely cruel captivity. This passage is almost exhausting to read because of its unbroken litany of doom.

NOTE: Here, in v 13, "Jacob" is used to mean the Northern Kingdom. Amos uses "Jacob" six times in this way. He also uses "Isaac" in the same way twice (in Chapt 7).

3. Vivid Imagery of Unavoidable Judgment, and a Remnant to Be Saved. (Chapter 3)

Amos explains, in vivid, powerful, poetic language, God's reason for the coming judgment: that the Lord had chosen Israel, out of all the nations of the Earth, to bless and protect; yet, because of the nation's relentless and determined rejection of the Lord, the relationship cannot survive ("Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"). The situation, and the coming end of Israel, is a simple, unavoidable, matter of cause and effect. In the course of his message, Amos reveals a fundamental principle underlying God's relationship with His rebellious people: before bringing judgment upon His people, the Lord will always give warning through His prophets. And, in the earthy language of a shepherd, Amos prophesies the preservation of a remnant of God's people for the future restoration--but only a small remnant⁴. He speaks of what little might be salvaged from a sheep eaten by a lion: "two legs, or a piece of an ear." This is the kind of language that the people, from peasant to king, cannot fail to understand.

4. The Infinite Love and Grace of God. (5:1-6)

In the midst of the prophet's declaration of the coming final judgment on Israel, there is, even here, an appeal to the wicked people to turn back to the Lord and be spared the judgment! What a powerful revelation of the basic nature of our God! Even here He declares that it isn't too late: "Seek ye me and ye shall live"! As Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, will similarly

³ Zechariah 14:5.

⁴ This small remnant that is left by the lion may also (or instead) refer to those few who escape the slaughter by the Assyrians, hide, and avoid capture. If any thus escape the coming judgment, they will be very few.

Amos

proclaim 200 years later, in the midst of the final destruction of Jerusalem, truly the Lord's unfailing mercies "are new every morning⁵."

5. And, Yet, the Inescapable Judgment. (5:16-19)

Our God is infinitely loving and gracious--in fact this is His basic nature ("He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love" [I Jn 4:8]). And yet, He is also infinitely just; therefore, for those who steadfastly refuse to turn from their wicked ways, His judgment is certain and inescapable. Here again the prophet expresses this fact of life in earthy, evocative terms that cannot be misunderstood. He speaks of a man who runs for his life to escape a pursuing lion, only to be met by a bear. And he describes one who runs into his house to escape the peril, leans exhausted on the wall, and there is waiting a poisonous snake, hiding there, to bite him. No one in Israel could fail to understand the prophet's meaning.

NOTE: In verse 16, in one sentence (in fact, in one clause), the Lord identifies Himself by all three of His basic names: YHWH; Elohim; and Adonai. He seems here to make it clear that the declarations of Amos are "official" and not to be taken lightly; it also makes it clear that what will happen is in perfect keeping with the significance and meaning of all three names. This occurs again in 6:8. For a refresher on the meaning and significance of these names, see "Notes on the Names of God" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

6. Living at Ease Now, Burning the Dead Later. (Chapter 6)

Chapter 6 is a rebuke of both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (verse 1), but is directed primarily against the Northern Kingdom and its capital city of Samaria. It is a rebuke for thinking that their present wealth and prosperity would last, as they live in ease and luxury, while they ignore the Lord and practice their paganism. Amos speaks of Calneh, an ancient city built by Nimrod on the Tigris River, and Hameth, a prosperous, pagan, city state, and capital of upper Syria, mentioned many times in the books of history and the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 10:9)⁶. The people are befriending them, and even befriending the Philistines. Their prosperity is described in terms of their beds of ivory, enjoying music and eating and drinking the very best meat and wine, while giving no thought to "the affliction of Joseph⁷." For this reason, utter calamity will befall them, calamity which they will have brought upon themselves.

Cremation is a common practice in most pagan cultures. For the people of God, however, there is neither scriptural basis nor historical precedent. Although some Christian people today practice cremation, the practice cannot be supported by scripture. The burning of dead bodies by Israelites is mentioned only in two places in the Bible: here, in Chapter 6; and in I Samuel 31:12, both in exceptional, calamitous situations. In the I Samuel passage, the Israelites had suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Philistines, and Saul and Jonathan had been killed. At least one of the bodies (Saul's) had been mutilated, and it is probable that all his sons were also mutilated; and the bodies of all of them had been hung up by the Philistines, in ignominious display, on the wall at Bethshan. The men of Jabesh-gilead bravely recovered the bodies, and burned them to prevent further desecration.

⁵ Lamentations 3:23.

⁶ Calneh appears in Isaiah 10:9 as "Calno," and in Ezekiel 27:23 as "Cannah."

⁷ The beds and houses of the wealthy were decorated with expensive ivory--not made of solid ivory; and in v 6 "Joseph" is used to apply to all 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom.

Amos

In this passage, the prophecy of Amos, of coming calamity, includes a reference to disposing of corpses, indicating that normal funereal practices will not be possible. The elders in households will be required to carry out the dead (presumably because there will be no servants or young men to do it). Bodies will be burned, and no mention will be made of the Lord, for the entire situation will be contaminated and ceremonially unclean by contact with the numerous dead.

NOTES:

a. There is a clear revelation in v 7 that the people of God will be going into captivity, and that the Northern Kingdom will go first.

b. In verse 12, in illustrating the impossibility of escaping the judgment of God, Amos asks if horses can run on smooth, exposed rock, or if a wooden plow can break up such bedrock. The answer, of course, is an emphatic "No!" Today, with proper shoes, a horse can run on a rock surface; but shoeing horses with iron shoes was unknown in the ancient world. Such shoeing of horses is not known to have been done until about 600 AD.

7. Three Visions of Coming Judgment. (7:1-9)

Amos is given three visions of coming judgment, and he pleads for the people. The first is one of the creation of locusts or grasshoppers, which will eat up the late pastures, "after the king's mowings," and cause famine⁸. Amos pleads with the Lord not to do this, and the Lord relents. The second vision is of fire, which would consume "the great deep" and "eat up a part." This may have meant a disastrous drought, or it may have referred to fire from Heaven, which would literally consume their water supplies and part of the land. Again, Amos pleads with the Lord not to do it and, again, He relents. In the third vision, he sees the Lord, standing on a straight wall, with a plumb line in His hand. The Lord declares that He will set a plumb line in the midst of His people, and will not pass by them anymore. This time, Amos does not plead for mercy on the people. This vision seems to mean that the Lord has established the line between sin and righteousness, as clearly and simply as a plumb line tells a builder what is vertical, like a straight wall, and what leans, so as to eventually fall. This standard is His Word, literally written on scrolls; and, figuratively, it is His Word in the form of His prophets, who have declared His Word. The wicked people, from king to slave, have consistently ignored God's standard, and judgment must come upon "the house of Jeroboam" (the Northern Kingdom).

8. A Hard Word for a Pagan Priest. (7:10-17)

Amaziah, the pagan priest of Bethel, reports to the king that Amos is making trouble, and that he has even prophesied that the king will die by the sword and the people will be led away as captives. Amaziah then confronts Amos and tells him that he should go back to Judah where he belongs. In a famous declaration, Amos tells Amaziah that he was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but a herdsman and gatherer of wild fruit; but the LORD had called him as he followed the flock and told him to "go prophesy unto my people Israel." Amos then declares a personal prophecy to the pagan priest (note the use of "thou" in v 16); and it is a very hard word. Amos tells Amaziah that, because he has resisted the prophecies of God rather than repenting

⁸ "The king's mowings" probably refers to the right of the king (Jeroboam II) to the early pasture (or hay from it); or it may refer to a tax from this early pasture. In either case, it means that the late pasture was what the peasants depended on to feed their livestock. The destruction of the latter growth would cause a famine in the land.

Amos

because of them, his wife will be driven to prostitution, his children will fall by the sword, his nation will be divided up by a conqueror, and that he "will die in a polluted land." The future of a man and his family doesn't get much worse than that! And, Amos adds, what he has been saying about the nation is true--the survivors of Israel will definitely be carried as slaves into a "polluted" (foreign, pagan) land.

9. A Vision of a Basket of Fruit. (8:1-10)

In yet another vision the Lord shows Amos a basket of Summer fruit, and asks him what he sees. The fruit represents the people of Israel, ripe for the eating; Summer fruits do not keep well--they must be eaten when ripe or they will spoil. The meaning is clear: Israel is ripe for the picking and the prophesied judgment will come soon (the Assyrians will conquer Israel in about 30 years). Instead of songs of joy there will be the wailing of the tormented and hopeless, "the sun will go down at noon" and there will be supernatural darkness on a clear day⁹. Again, the principal sins of the wicked kingdom are related, with emphasis on the oppression and victimizing of the poor, something that God especially hates¹⁰.

10. A Coming Spiritual Famine. (8:11-14)

Amos delivers a prophecy of a coming famine in the land--not a lack of water or food, but a time when there will be no teaching or prophesying of the Word of God. This would seem not to be a threatening thought to the people of the Northern Kingdom at that time, for they had rejected such truth, and embraced paganism, for a very long time. And here lies something of a mystery: does this prophecy apply to the people of Israel during the soon-coming, long and terrible captivity? Or, could it apply to a different time or situation in the future? It probably applies to both. During the captivity of the Southern Kingdom in Babylon, the people had prophets such as Daniel and Ezekiel to bring them the Word of God in preaching and prophesying; but there is no record of prophets among the people of Israel during the Assyrian captivity. Thus, it clearly applies to the soon-to-come captivity in Assyria; but it may also apply to the long period following the dispersion of the Jews in 71 AD. Likewise, it could be applied to the situation in Christendom today, when seminary professors, denominations, and the preachers they produce have rejected the primacy of the Word of God, and have replaced it with humanistic presumption, sociological and psychological theories and, in some places, paganism. It seems to me that Amos speaks here of all three situations.

11. "Radiant Days Beyond the Gloom." (Chapter 9)

Amos ends his prophecy by looking into the distant future and declaring that, ultimately, there is Good News. First, however, there will come the judgment, and it will be inescapable. In powerful poetic imagery, he says that no matter where they might try to hide, if they dig a hiding place all the way to Hell, or find a way to climb up to Heaven, or if they go to the bottom of the sea, they will be found and punished. And yet, describing in equally vivid terms what Dr. Henry Halley calls "radiant days beyond the gloom," Amos promises that there will be a restoration "in that day" and the people of God will be permanently restored to the Promised

⁹ Verse 9, in addition to being part of the coming destruction of wicked Israel, may be a prophecy of the crucifixion of Jesus, when supernatural darkness descended at mid-day. For a refresher concerning the basic nature of OT prophecy, see "The Writing Style of the Prophets: a Note of Caution," in the introduction to *The Prophets*.

¹⁰ See also 2:6 and 4:1.

Land in peace and prosperity¹¹. At least, if they remember God's words to them, spoken by Amos, they will go off into a terrible captivity, but with a hope to which they can cling¹².

¹¹ "In that day" (v 11) may refer to the time of the return from Assyrian captivity, 100 years into the future; and it may refer to the permanent restoration following the Second Advent of Christ, which is still at an unknown distance into our future. Perhaps it refers to both.

¹² See in this regard Luke's quoting of this passage in Acts 15:16-17.