

Study 7: The Prophet – A People’s Conscience

Introduction. *Note: Several hundred years passed from the time of King David to the days of Amos the prophet. The history of this period is recorded in 1 and 2 Kings.*

The struggle for control between David and Saul ultimately resulted in secession of the ten northern tribes after the reign of David’s son, Solomon. The northern tribes, who were always favorable to Saul, revolted and succeeded in establishing a separate kingdom called Israel. The tiny remnant of David’s kingdom was called Judah. Amos’ prophecy took place in approximately 750 B.C.

Although the People of God were increasingly unfaithful to God’s Covenant, God didn’t abandon them. Throughout the period of the monarchy and even during the later exile, God made known His will to His people through the men we call the prophets.

As an illustrative example of a prophet, we will first look at Amos, the “prophet of doom” and a man best known for his opposition to the wealthy of his day and their treatment of the poor. It’s important, however, to realize that this opposition wasn’t based solely upon their oppression of the poor, which was merely a symptom of the root problem. The real cause of Amos’ harsh words was the corrosive pride of the wealthy; for it was this that led to the final destruction of both Israel and Judah. In studying this wonderful book, our task is to examine this pride closely as it is exposed by the words of the prophet.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Amos 3-6; 7:10-9:15

[Amos is not a long book, so you can certainly read it all. I’ve omitted the first two chapters from our study as they have many allusions to the history of Israel that were familiar to the people of Amos’ day but now largely obscured by the passage of time. These two chapters are, however, a magnificent example of prophetic oratory, and so you might want to read them anyway.]

Background. Some historical background is necessary to understand better the setting in which Amos acted as God’s prophet.

- † **Jeroboam II** (783-743 B.C.), a capable king, took advantage of Assyria’s internal problems and expanded Israel’s territory. He took control of the main trade route linking Egypt to the eastern and northern nations so Israel flourished as a center of commerce. Israel became prosperous and the wealthy built mansions and summer homes. Peace was at hand, business was good, and the opportunities for increased wealth seemed endless. Into this world of sophisticated extravagance walked Amos, the herdsman and fig-dresser from the hills of Judah.
- † **The Assyrians.** A new enemy had arisen to threaten the now divided kingdom. The Assyrians were the totalitarians of their day, not unlike the Nazis or Communists that threatened the world in our own times. The Assyrians were in the midst of a rapid conquest of the entire Middle East, using the ancient equivalent of *blitzkrieg*. The terror they spread in advance of their conquests was their greatest ally, and the kingdom of Israel, its head buried in the sand, was about to become Assyria’s latest victim.
- † **Religion in the North.** To preserve their political independence, the kings of the new state of Israel severed all religious ties with the kingdom of Judah. People were not permitted to make pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, and so they established northern shrines to Yahweh at Bethel and Dan. Over time the northern brand of Yahwehism grew increasingly idolatrous, and adopted many of the licentious customs and practices of the old Canaanite fertility cults. Bethel was where Amos prophesied.
- † **Northern Society and Culture.** Because of its location, Samaria was much more accessible to the great centers of commerce and culture than small, mountainous Judah. And so, during the years of

separation, the northern kingdom grew wealthy. But as the rich grew richer, the poor grew poorer. Ultimately, the poor were reduced to virtual slavery.

- † **Amos, the Man.** Amos' name means "burden" or "burden-bearer" and, given the times in which he lived, a prophet like Amos carried a heavy burden indeed. All we know about Amos is what he tells us about himself. In Amos' words, "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." [Amos 7:14-15]

Amos tells us that he was from Tekoa [Amos 1:1], a town of Judah not far from Bethlehem and close to the border between the two kingdoms. He was quite likely a poor, working man, a herdsman and not the owner of sheep, and a migratory worker who was hired to slice the fig-like fruit of the sycamore trees to aid in their ripening. A humble man and probably uneducated, Amos was well acquainted with nature, and spoke his mind in plain language.

Although a stranger in the north, and no doubt dismissed by the wealthy and powerful of Samaria, Amos carried out his prophetic mission with force. The grace of God, combined with his naturally forceful character, made Amos a man to be reckoned with in the ivory palaces of Israel.

Key Passages. Highlight these key passages in your Bible by writing key words in the margins.

- † **Amos 1-2.** *Prologue.*
- † **Amos 3-6.** *Oracles against Israel.*
- † **Amos 7-9:10.** *Five visions.*
- † **Amos 9:11-15.** *Epilogue*

Some Highpoints.

- † **The Word of God [Amos 1:2; 3:4, 8].** From Amos we hear not only God's words, but also the sound of His voice. Yahweh roars like a lion! By rejecting Amos and silencing other prophets, Israel shows its unwillingness to hear the Lord; and so this prosperous land will experience a deep, pervasive famine – a famine of hearing God's word. Her refusal to listen to God, then, will mean the Lord will refuse to speak to her for a period of time.
- † **The Chosen People [Amos 3:1-2].** The term "chosen people" was in Amos' day a source of pride and complacency for the Israelites. Because God had chosen them through Abraham, they felt He had to make good on His promises regardless of their conduct. The prophet, however, offers a very different meaning of "chosen."
- † **The Remnant [Amos 3:12].** Here Amos touches on an important theme in the prophetic writings: the *remnant*. Although God's people had been false to His Covenant, and would be severely punished, a few would be spared and be the beneficiaries of the promises.
- † **Social Justice [Amos 3:13-4:5].** In this passage Amos begins his condemnation of the rich, their callousness and their false piety. No social reformer ever spoke with greater indignation than Amos. He exposed the hypocrisy of elaborate rites devoid of social consciousness, and condemned the fascination with ritual divorced from a concern for one's neighbor as an offense against God [Amos 5:21-24].
- † **The Choice [Amos 4:6-11].** Even though his words were harsh, Amos wasn't at all vindictive. Through Amos, God is the rejected lover who sees His people abandoning Him for a path that leads only to death and destruction. Despite His pleading, "they will not return."
- † **Day of the Lord [Amos 5:8-27].** This passage describes the grandeur of God and His infinite power and majesty, and is contrasted with the smallness of man and the consequent Day of Judgment. This "day of the Lord" was a popular idea among the Israelites and was to be the day of their triumph over

the nations. Amos, however, paints a very different picture of this day. He also includes an eloquent plea for the importance of interior change and religion.

Old and New Testaments.

- † **Romans 11.** In Amos 3:12 we are told of a remnant of Israel which will be restored. St. Paul takes up the same theme in Romans 11. God will not completely abandon His people; for, although man is faithless, God is always faithful. The prophets, therefore, held out a hope of restoration. This hope was fulfilled when a small band of exiles returned under the Persian Empire at the close of the 6th Century B.C. They were a foreshadowing of the even smaller remnant of God's chosen people who would one day greet the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ.
- † **Acts 7:42-43.** In St. Stephen's speech in Acts, where he summarizes the history of God's relationship with Israel, he applies Amos' critique of the arid ritualism to the idolatry of the ancient Israelites in the wilderness (Amos 5:25-27). Stephen, "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit," spoke as a new prophet. He was the Amos of his day insofar as he exposed the falsity of ritualized Temple worship. (See Acts 6:13; 7:35-50)
- † **Acts 15:16-17.** In his speech advocating the admission of the Gentiles into the Christian Church on equal terms with the Jews, James, the kinsman of the Lord and elder of the Jerusalem community, quotes the vision of restoration that concludes the Book of Amos (Amos 9:11-12). Amos would have agreed with his words, since Amos asserted in his own time that the Lord cared for the Cushites, the Philistines, and Aramaeans as well as for the children of Israel (Amos 9:7).

Amos also reminds us forcefully of the necessary link between the liturgy and the social mission of the Church. As Christians, we must be alert to the danger of hypocrisy in our religious life. God doesn't ask us for prayers alone; He asks for an entire life devoted to loving Him and His people – a life lived in the awareness that we are His children and that all men and women are brothers and sisters. If we fail to follow this command of God, then we, too, will be fitting targets for Amos' biting denunciation of the religious life of Bethel.

Questions. Amos, counted among the "minor" prophets, gave the people of Israel (and us) some major-league prophecy, and the application of his words to contemporary society in our country and elsewhere in the world is terrifyingly appropriate. Here are a few discussion questions that should help us take Amos' words to heart.

1. What are the nature of the transgressions of which Amos accuses Israel?
2. What light does Amos throw on the nature of true religion? [Amos 5:18-24]
3. What can we learn from the Book of Amos concerning the purpose and mission of the prophet?
4. God appears to threaten the Jews with national ruin because they have been unfaithful. Does this mean we should interpret national and personal calamities as a consequence of man's sinfulness?
5. Consider St. Paul's words in Romans 11. What do they possibly tell us about the condition of the Jews in Christian times?
6. How has your study of the Book of Amos affected you personally? Has it led you to view anything differently? What?
7. Describe the "Day of Yahweh."