

Historical Overview of the Prophets: The Book of Amos

Amos 1–9

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The World of the Prophets

To understand the books we call “the Prophets,” it helps to get your bearings in history. The kingdom of Israel reaches its peak under David and Solomon around 1000 BC, and by 930 BC it has fractured. What had been one nation is now two: Israel in the north, Judah in the south. But here is the thing — despite the civil war, despite the split, both kingdoms remain under the Mosaic covenant with God. That covenant has not changed. God has not changed. The obligations have not changed.

One of those obligations was bringing offerings and sacrifices to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. The first king of the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I, had a problem with that. He did not want his people making pilgrimages south to Jerusalem, so he built two alternative temples — one at Dan, the northern capital, and one at Bethel, near the southern border. In effect, he created a religion for nationalistic purposes. The worship was designed to serve the state, not to serve God.

This is the world into which the prophets are sent.

Who Are the Prophets?

God has been sending prophets since the early pages of Scripture. Noah is called a prophet. So is Abraham. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are all referred to as prophets. Deborah and Gideon and Samuel are prophets. Saul is a prophet. David is a prophet, and so is Nathan. And then come the towering figures of Elijah and Elisha.

But around 760 BC, something new appears. A new kind of prophet emerges — different from everything that came before. These prophets do not perform miracles the way Elijah and Elisha did. They are not kings like David and Saul, nor warriors like Gideon and Deborah. This new kind of prophet can be anyone: educated or uneducated, rich or poor, from the city or from the countryside. What defines them is not their background. What defines them is their purpose.

The seventeen prophetic books in your Bible cover a span of roughly three hundred years, from 760 to 460 BC. To put that in perspective: this period of prophecy begins about forty years before the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, and it comes to a close about sixty years after the temple is rebuilt. At the front end of those three hundred years, the people are known as Israelites in the north and Judeans in the south. At the back end, they are all known as Jews. At the front end, worship is confined to designated locations — Jerusalem in the south, Dan and Bethel in the north. At the back end, people worship in synagogues in towns across the known world. At the front end, both kingdoms are focused on expanding their own power and territory. At the back end, the people are looking forward to a Messiah.

A great deal happened in those three hundred years. And the prophets were the guides — the shepherds — who led the people through those times of upheaval and change. Nearly all of them filled four distinct roles.

First, and most importantly, they were messengers from God. Sometimes those messages came as direct dictation: “*Thus says the LORD: ‘What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?’*” (Jeremiah 2:5). Sometimes the messages came through visions, like one we will look at today: “*This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb line.’*” (Amos 7:7–8). Sometimes the messages came through visible demonstrations — the kind of thing that made the prophet himself uncomfortable. Ezekiel was commanded to bake bread over human dung (Ezekiel 4:12–13). When Ezekiel objected, God allowed him to use cow manure instead. The messages also came as sermons, as poetry, as letters. The medium varied enormously. But in every case, God was using these people to speak to Israel, to Judah, and through them, to the world.

Second, the prophets served as God’s prosecuting attorneys. They were sent to bring charges — to confront the people with their sin and make the case against them before God. We see this with unmistakable clarity in Amos 2. Third, most of the prophets were, in a sense, funeral directors. They did not merely expose sin; they also announced God’s judgment upon it — a judgment that meant an end, a death, to the old way of things. The prophets were not executioners; God never uses them to carry out his wrath. But he does use them to lead the people through it. Fourth, and finally, the prophets served as midwives. Beyond judgment, God is always doing something new, and he uses the prophets to announce it. Just as they pronounce the curses and the woes, they also pronounce the blessings — the new thing God is bringing into the world. God is moving all of history — not just Israel and Judah, but the entire world — from an old reality to a new creation. The prophets lead the people through the death of the old and into the birth of the new.

The World of Jeroboam II

When Amos steps onto the stage, the king of the northern kingdom is Jeroboam II, from the dynasty of Jehu. The generations before Jeroboam II had faced constant pressure — threats from Aram and Syria, and the rising menace of Assyria to the northeast. But by the time Jeroboam II came to power, Assyria had overextended itself. It had crushed Syria. It had destroyed Aram. But its momentum had exhausted itself before it reached Israel. Jeroboam II stepped onto the world stage at a moment when there were no external threats pressing upon him.

What followed was forty-one years of peace, expansion, and prosperity unlike anything the northern kingdom had ever seen. His borders extended beyond even those of Solomon in the north. Combined with the southern kingdom of Judah, the Israelites controlled more land than at any other time in their history. And with that territory came control of the ancient world's major trade routes, and with that control came wealth — fabulous, staggering wealth. The book of Amos gives us a picture of what that looked like from the inside: plenty and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, might in the palaces. The rich had their summer houses and their winter houses, adorned with costly ivory. They reclined on gorgeous couches with fine cushions at lavish feasts. They planted vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils, and drank wine from bowls.

We have archaeological confirmation of this picture. Ivory artifacts have been discovered at Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. There are no elephants in ancient Israel. Ivory means luxury goods imported from Africa — a marker of serious wealth. Amos also mentions the eating of veal. If you can afford to slaughter your cattle while they are still young and tender, it means you are wealthy enough that you do not need them as work animals for the full span of their lives. The poor ate the tough, stringy meat of old oxen. The wealthy ate veal. Archaeology has also confirmed the earthquake Amos references in his opening verse — a seismic event significant enough that it was remembered in Israel for generations.

If you could travel back in time and walk through Samaria during the reign of Jeroboam II, you would think you were looking at a kingdom built to last. It was beautiful. It was strong. The people radiated confidence and optimism. And yet, beneath that healthy appearance, the kingdom was in an advanced state of decay — socially, morally, religiously, and politically.

It was into this world that God sent three prophets: Amos, Hosea, and Jonah.

Amos

“The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.” — Amos 1:1

The opening verse of Amos tells us several things worth noticing. First, Amos was not from the northern kingdom. He was from Tekoa, in Judah, a few miles south of Bethlehem. Second, if your translation says “shepherd,” it is not quite capturing the original. The word used for Amos describes an owner of flocks, not a hired hand who takes the animals to pasture. Amos is a landowner — not a country bumpkin, but a man of some means. The book will tell us later that he also worked as a dresser of sycamore fig trees, and since sycamores did not grow in the region around Tekoa, he evidently owned land at some distance from his home. Amos is a prosperous farmer and businessman from the south.

As a farmer, he had to sell his crops, and the market was in the north. So Amos traveled north, and while he was at Bethel — one of the primary religious centers of the northern kingdom — he began to preach. And his opening sermon was, I suspect, the kind of sermon that drew enthusiastic agreement from his audience.

He begins by announcing God’s judgment on Damascus — condemned for the brutal violence it had committed against Gilead. The crowd surely nodded. Then he moves to Gaza — condemned for selling an entire people into slavery. More nodding. Then Tyre. Then Edom. Then the Ammonites. Then Moab. And then even Judah, Amos’s own people, condemned for rejecting the law of the LORD. Notice how the charge against Judah differs from those against the surrounding nations: the other nations are condemned for acts of violence and cruelty, but Judah is condemned for covenant unfaithfulness. That distinction matters.

And the crowd at Bethel would have been delighted. Preach it, brother. Condemn all those evil, sinful people. But if you trace Amos’s movement on a map, you realize what he is doing. He is drawing a circle — nation by nation, oracle by oracle — around Israel. And once the circle is complete, he turns to its center.

“Thus says the LORD: ‘For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.’” — Amos 2:6–8

Amos charges Israel with selling the righteous for silver, selling the needy for a pair of sandals, trampling the poor into the dust, perverting justice, exploiting vulnerable women, taking the poor man's cloak as collateral on a debt, and then using the proceeds of all that injustice in their religious worship. Their wealth has come at the expense of their neighbors. And then God adds what makes this even more devastating:

“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath. Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? declares the LORD. But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, ‘You shall not prophesy.’” — Amos 2:9–12

I have been faithful to you. I delivered you from Egypt. I brought you through the wilderness. I gave you the land. I gave you prophets. I have been faithful to you — and you have been unfaithful to me.

Four Falsehoods of Israel

As Amos works through chapters 2 through 6, four fundamental problems emerge in the life of the northern kingdom. Each one is a kind of falsehood — a distortion of something that was supposed to be true.

False Justice

“Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins — you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.” — Amos 5:11–12

The gate of an ancient city was where justice was administered. It was the courthouse, the place where disputes were settled and the vulnerable were supposed to find protection. God's law was designed to establish justice and protect the poor. But in Israel, the gate had become a place where money talked. Those with wealth could manipulate the system. The law that was supposed to protect the vulnerable had been turned into a tool for exploiting them.

False Righteousness

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’” — Amos 4:1

“Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?’” — Amos 8:4–6

The problem went deeper than the courtroom. Israel’s relationships with one another had become corrupted at every level. Merchants sit through the Sabbath, impatient for worship to end so they can get back to making money. And when they do get back to business, they use dishonest scales — making the measuring container smaller and the price higher, selling the chaff mixed in with the grain, exploiting anyone who cannot protect themselves. God’s people were supposed to live in right relationship with God and with one another. Instead, they had distorted those relationships for personal gain.

False Security

“Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” — Amos 6:4–6

Israel’s prosperity had convinced them that they were safe. They had everything — the furniture, the food, the music, the wine, the luxury. Everything except grief. They “are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” Their wealth had insulated them from the suffering around them, and it had also convinced them that nothing bad could happen to them. They had confused prosperity with God’s approval and wealth with security. They believed their standard of living was a sign of God’s blessing — when in fact it was a sign of their injustice.

False Religion

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.” — Amos 5:21–22

Perhaps most shocking of all: these people are still worshiping. They hold festivals. They gather for solemn assemblies. They bring offerings. They sing songs. They are, by any external measure, a religious people. And God says he hates it. He despises their feasts. He will not accept their offerings. He will not listen to the noise of their songs.

Those words are shocking because God had commanded Israel to worship. The problem is not worship itself. The problem is that their worship has become completely disconnected from the way they live. Their religion has become a means of honoring and justifying themselves, rather than honoring and obeying God.

So what does God actually want?

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” — Amos 5:24

God wants a people whose worship of him transforms the way they treat one another.

Amos Exposes the Lie

This is really what the entire book is doing. Israel believes a set of lies about itself. We are prosperous, therefore we are blessed. We are religious, therefore we are righteous. We are powerful, therefore we are secure. We are God’s people, therefore judgment cannot reach us. And God sends Amos — a farmer from the wrong side of the border — to expose every one of those lies.

Your justice is false. Your righteousness is false. Your security is false. Your religion is false.

And because they will not repent, judgment is coming.

“The Lord GOD has sworn by himself, declares the LORD, the God of hosts: ‘I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.’” — Amos 6:8

Five Visions

Beginning in chapter 7, the book shifts. Amos receives five visions that carry the message toward its conclusion.

The first vision is a swarm of locusts, consuming the crops after the king's share has already been harvested. The economic devastation would have been total. Amos intercedes: *"O Lord GOD, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"* And God relents.

The second vision is fire — a judgment by fire that devours the deep and begins to consume the land. Again Amos intercedes: *"O Lord GOD, please cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"* Again God relents.

Then comes the third vision, and this one is different.

"This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb line.'" — Amos 7:7–8

God stands beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand. The image is one of measurement. Israel has been measuring itself by prosperity and wealth, by religious activity and national success. Look at how great we are. But God measures differently. His standard is justice and righteousness and the genuine seeking of his face — and by that standard, Israel does not measure up. The wall is out of plumb. And this time, Amos does not intercede. This time, God does not relent.

Israel's response to this vision is telling. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel — the official religious authority of the northern kingdom — confronts Amos and tells him to go home. In effect, Israel puts Amos on trial. They don't want the message, so they attack the messenger.

The final two visions therefore announce the certainty of what is coming. The fourth vision is a basket of ripe summer fruit. The fruit is ready. Israel is ready. The end has come. And in the fifth vision, Amos sees the Lord himself standing beside the altar — and the sanctuary comes down. The very religious structures in which Israel had placed its confidence cannot save them. Judgment is certain.

But Judgment Is Not the End

Even so, Amos does not end with destruction.

Earlier in the book, Amos had described the Day of the LORD in terms that must have shocked his audience. Israel expected the Day of the LORD to be a day of triumph — God's

judgment falling on their enemies, vindication for his people. Amos told them they had it exactly backwards. The Day of the LORD would bring darkness, not light, and God's judgment would begin with them.

But beyond that judgment, the final words of Amos are words of hope.

“*In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.*” — Amos 9:11

God promises to raise up the fallen booth of David — the collapsed dynasty, the broken line of promise. And the restored kingdom will reach far beyond Israel: “*all the nations who are called by my name.*” The book that began with God's judgment upon the nations ends with the nations being called by God's name. The circle Amos drew around Israel at the beginning has become something else entirely at the end.

And the final image is one of extraordinary abundance:

“*The plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed.*”

The harvest will come so fast that the one planting can barely keep ahead of the one already harvesting. God says: I will restore. They shall rebuild. They shall plant. I will plant them.

That is the final word of Amos. Not ivory houses. Not expensive furniture. Not bowls of wine. Not veal. Not the prosperity that Israel had manufactured for itself through injustice and exploitation. Instead, God offers something Israel could never produce on its own: abundance, restoration, home.

The false prosperity of Jeroboam II will disappear. But beyond judgment, God will create something new. He always does.

The question Amos leaves before us is the same one he left before Israel: “*Seek me and live*” — or indifference. Those are the only two options.