

PROPHET AMOS REMEMBERED AS TOP-NOTCH ORATOR

The closer you get to election time, the more you have to put up with second-rate speeches. Most of today's political rhetoric is less than memorable. Maybe that's because politicians depend on their PR agents and TV coverage and social media, rather than on their own rhetorical skills, to win votes.

In biblical times, however, those who wanted to influence public opinion had to pay more attention to their speech-making abilities. They didn't have any media men to hype their act. Consequently some of the most effective stump speakers were the Israelite prophets.

Obviously they won high ratings, at least in the long run, because their speeches were the only ones quoted and remembered.

Nothing remarkable about that, except for the fact that at the time they delivered their speeches they were the odd men out. Almost without exception the prophets whose remarks finally made it to the "ten most read" list started out on the politicians' "ten most wanted" list.

The earliest of the so-called writing prophets is a good case in point: Amos, the south-of-the-border tree-pruner and flock-herder who went on a preaching trip through the northern Kingdom of Israel. His oracles are in the book of Amos in the Jewish scriptures.

Just the first two chapters of his book make a dandy example of oratorical skill. Amos 1:3-2:16, about two pages in most Bibles, is a carefully worded sermon calculated to knock its audience off their feet.

It's the kind of speech people like to hear because it castigates the other guys. Who are the other guys in this case? The various competing cultures and feuding cousins and hostile nations which surround the Israelite kingdom. In each case Amos promises that God will punish them.

He starts with the capital of Syria. "For three sins of Damascus, and for four, I won't take back the punishment, says the Lord. I'll send a fire on them."

Seven times the same song and dance is repeated. "They have sinned once too often, says the Lord, so I'm going to burn them!"

Amos rails against the people to the north and to the south. He hits at three countries to the east of Israel's borders. He even scores their blood brothers to the south in the land of Judah.

Time after time he picks on some antisocial sin. The Philistines sent an entire populace into exile; the Edomites slaughtered their brother nation; the Ammonites killed pregnant women; the Moabites desecrated a king's bones; the Judeans told lies. Time after time Amos announces, "God'll get them for that."

You can guess how his listeners will have responded. They must have applauded after each paragraph. It would be like the audience reaction at a patriotic America-Love-It-Or-Leave-It rally.

"God's gonna get the Russians for annexing Crimea!" (Cheers.) "And he won't let those money-gouging OPEC nations off the hook, either! (Applause. Applause.) "He has a punishment in store for those ISIL terrorists!" (Hurrah.) "And for that matter, the Canadians and Mexicans better not get too feisty." (Right on.)

By the time Amos has criticized all their traditional enemies, he must have the Israelites in the palm of his hand. He is working them like putty. Then he sticks it to them: "If you think your neighbors are going to get burned, wait till you see what's in store for you."

No wonder Amos wore out his welcome and got run out of the country. He must have been as unpopular as a radio broadcaster who would dare to announce: "The Chinese are suspect; the Russians are bad; and the radical Islamists are worse. But Americans are worst of all." He would lose more than his job.

That's roughly the spot Amos was in. He certainly didn't put anybody to sleep with his sermon. It is a masterpiece of oratorical skill, as he manipulates his audience to the point where he all but literally crushes them.

When he gets to the bottom line he has brought them to the point where they cannot evade his indictment of their own national policies.

Whether any parallels should be drawn between Amos' day and modern times is not quite the point. But for the purposes of this column it's enough to note the prophet's oratorical skill.

Amos looks so good today if for no other reason than that his kind of speech-making ability is currently in such short supply.