

Study 7: The Prophet – A People’s Conscience (Rev 15 Feb 2021)

Introduction. Although the chosen people were increasingly unfaithful to their Covenant with the Lord, God didn’t abandon them. Throughout the period of the monarchy, the divided kingdoms, and even during the later exile, God made known His will to His people through the men we call the prophets. Called by God to proclaim God’s Word to His people, they were often rejected, mistreated, and sometimes killed because their primary message was one of repentance for sins, a message few wanted to hear.

Amos, whose prophecy took place circa 760 B.C., is really the first of the “writer prophets” and one of the more illustrative examples of a prophet. Called by some the “prophet of doom,” Amos is really a prophet of warning, a prophet calling God’s people not to doom but back to their covenantal relationship with a loving God who wants only good for them.

Amos is probably best known for his opposition to the self-centered and self-satisfied wealthy of his day and their treatment of the poor. It’s important, however, to realize that Amos’ (and God’s) opposition wasn’t based solely upon the oppression of the poor. This, Amos knew, was merely a symptom of the society’s root problem. The real motive behind Amos’ harsh words was his recognition of the corrosive pride of the wealthy, as well as their false worship focused solely on ritual for the sake of appearances and not out of love for God. These societal failings would lead to the destruction of Israel and, ultimately, of Judah itself.

In studying this wonderful book, our task is to examine this pride closely as it is exposed by the words of the prophet.

Reading. Open your Bible and read the entirety of the Book of the Prophet Amos.

Amos is not a long book, but many readers find the first two chapters somewhat obscure and tend to breeze through them without real understanding. That’s truly unfortunate because these chapters actually set the stage for all that follows. In them we encounter the history of God’s chosen people by looking at their neighbors from Amos’s perspective. The fact that these nations were once part of David’s kingdom, helps us come to terms with the prophetic proclamations of Amos. These two chapters also offer us a magnificent example of prophetic oratory.

Background. The following brief historical survey provides some necessary background to help us understand better the setting in which Amos acted as God’s prophet.

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. Problems began with the struggle for control between David and Saul, a struggle that ultimately resulted in the secession of the ten northern tribes after the reign of David’s son, Solomon. The northern tribes, who had been supportive of Saul, revolted and succeeded in establishing a separate kingdom called Israel. The tiny remnant of David’s kingdom was called Judah. Now, let’s look at some key individuals and groups.

- † **Solomon (970-930 B.C.).** David's son, Solomon, lived life large, a costly lifestyle that had to be paid for. He also greatly expanded his royal government, and undertook numerous major construction projects, including the large Temple, a royal complex, and numerous forts for the nation's defense.

Solomon divided his father's kingdom into 12 districts, each assigned one month of the year in which it would support the Temple in Jerusalem and the royal household. (Judah, the royal territory was not among the 12 and was, therefore, relieved of this burden.) As you might imagine, Solomon, like many political leaders, then and now, funded his expanding government through high taxation.

Religiously, Solomon in the later days of his reign turned from the covenant with God and even built places of worship, "high places" dedicated to pagan gods. Because of this and Solomon's direct disobedience, God warned him:

So, the Lord said to Solomon: Since this is what you want, and you have not kept my covenant and the Statutes which I enjoined on you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant. But I will not do this during your lifetime, for the sake of David, your father; I will tear it away from your son's hand. Nor will I tear away the whole kingdom. I will give your son one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen [1 Kgs:11:11-13].

- † **Rehoboam (930-913 B.C.).** Upon Solomon's death, his son, Rehoboam assumed the throne. When he visited Shechem, the city of the district of Ephraim, to proclaim his kingship, he heard only complaints about Solomon's burdensome taxation:

Your father put a heavy yoke on us. If you now lighten the harsh servitude and the heavy yoke your father imposed on us, we will be your servants [1 Kgs 12:4].

But instead of listening to the sound advice of the elders and easing this burden, Rehoboam ignored them, listened instead to his young friends, and actually increased taxes, telling the people of Shechem:

My father made your yoke heavy, but I will make it heavier. My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions (1 Kgs 12:14).

Obviously, Rehoboam had slept through his Leadership 101 class, something which led to a violent reaction. The people didn't mince words in their reply to Rehoboam:

What share have we in David? We have no heritage in the son of Jesse. To your Tents, Israel! Now look to your own house, David [1 Kgs 12:16].

Predictably, a revolution followed, with the northern tribes seceding from the kingdom and creating their own kingdom, Israel. Its first king was Jeroboam I, the leader of the rebellion. This left Rehoboam with a greatly diminished kingdom, Judah, consisting of just two tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

- † **Jeroboam I (930-910 B.C.).** The first king of the northern kingdom, Israel, Jeroboam had his share of problems with Solomon in the past and had escaped them by

fleeing to Egypt, remaining there until Solomon's death. After Rehoboam's disastrous visit to Shechem, Jeroboam was made king of Israel.

Religiously, like Solomon, Jeroboam drifted away from covenantal worship. To preserve Israel's political independence, the kings of the new kingdom severed all religious ties with the kingdom of Judah. To discourage his people from going to Judah for worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam made two sanctuaries, one at Bethel and a second at Dan, and placed golden calves there, purportedly to represent Yahweh. Over time this northern brand of worship grew increasingly idolatrous and adopted many of the licentious customs and practices of the old Canaanite fertility cults. Even Baal, the most important of the Canaanite gods was worshipped during these days in Israel. Eventually, northerners were not permitted to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

These acts of Jeroboam and those who followed him, and the pagan worship that evolved from them, led the northern kingdom into a deep state of sin that brought about its destruction. Ahijah, a prophet from Shiloh, proclaimed God's punishment of Jeroboam, a punishment that included the death of Jeroboam's son, Abijah, and the destruction of Israel:

Go tell Jeroboam, Thus says the Lord...you have done more evil than all who were before you: you have gone and made for yourself other gods and molten images to provoke me; but me you cast behind your back. Therefore, I am bringing evil upon the house of Jeroboam: I will cut off from Jeroboam's line every male – bond or free – in Israel; I will burn up what is left of the house of Jeroboam as dung is burned, completely [1 Kgs 14:9-10].

And that wasn't all. Go to 1 Kings and read the rest. As a result, Jeroboam I was not treated well by the chroniclers who referred to those kings who followed him as successor of he "who made Israel sin."

- † **Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.).** From a worldly perspective Jeroboam II was a fairly capable king. He took advantage of the internal problems experienced by Israel's powerful neighbor, Assyria, 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. But he continued the errors of his predecessors regarding the covenantal worship of the Lord God and the injustices that plagued the kingdom's poor. He also failed to anticipate the dangers posed by Assyria.
- † **The Assyrians.** A new enemy had arisen to threaten the now divided kingdom. The Assyrians were the totalitarians of their day, not unlike the totalitarians who have 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.
- † **Northern Society and Culture.** Israel became prosperous and its wealthy classes – including estate owners, aristocrats, merchants, judges – built mansions and

summer homes. Peace was at hand, business was good, and the opportunities for increased wealth seemed endless. 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. More on this below...

Into this world of sophisticated extravagance and organized injustice walked Amos, the herdsman and fig-dresser from the hills of Judah. Sometime around the year 760 B.C. he made his way north and began to prophesy.

† **Amos, the Man and Prophet.** 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 am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores, but the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel" [Am 7:14-15].

Amos also tells us a bit more about himself in the opening words of his book:

The words of Amos, who was one of the sheep breeders from Tekoa, which he received in a vision concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake [Am 1:1].

Archaeological excavations point to a major earthquake during the time of Jeroboam II, c. 750 B.C., although the precise year cannot be determined. Amos, however, seems to allude to earthquake damage on several occasions [Am 3:14; 6:11; 8:8].

Tekoa was a town of Judah just south of Bethlehem and not too distant from the border between the two kingdoms.

Many scholars think of Amos as poor, but I suspect he was a man of some means. As a sheep breeder, he likely owned herds of sheep, and possible of cattle as well.

And as a pruner of sycamores – trees that didn't flourish in the high country around Tekoa, he might well have owned property along the coastal plain or in the Jordan sink. Of course, he might have hired himself out for the tedious work of pruning sycamores. But in one telling comment Amos also stated:

I am not a prophet, nor do I belong to a company of prophets [Am 7:14].

By this he meant he was not one of "professional prophets," not a member of that monastic-like community that relied on the charity of the faithful. Amos, therefore, would likely have had sufficient income to live independently of the guild of professional prophets. He comes across as a practical but holy man. He spoke in plain, poetic language, understood the plight of the people, and was well acquainted with the natural world. Amos sums up the experience of his vocation, his call by God, in this beautiful and brief statement:

Indeed, the Lord God does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who would not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who would not prophesy? [Am 3:7-8]

In effect, Amos is telling his listeners and readers that no one can resist the Word of God, particularly His prophet Amos. Amos is not particularly eloquent, but this is really part of his strength as a preacher, and what probably drew the common people to him and led them to listen to his prophetic word.

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.

Some scholars believe Amos visited Israel only briefly and went only to Bethel, but Scripture seems not to support this. Amos apparently stirred up the entire country through his preaching, so much so that the high priest of Bethel complained of it to King Jeroboam:

*Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam, king of Israel:
“Amos has conspired against you within the house of Israel; the country cannot endure all his words [Am 7:10].*

And Amos preached not only in Bethel, but in Gilgal [Am 4:4] and in the capital of Samaria [Am 3:9-11; 4:1-3]. From the prophet's words, it's apparent his observations of the sinfulness of Israel resulted from extensive travel throughout the northern kingdom.

The Book of the Prophet Amos. In Amos' book of prophecy, we encounter the three principal types of prophetic literature:

1. A collection of oracles [Am 1-6]
2. Biographical details, a third-person narrative of the prophet's life [Am 7:10-17]
3. Vision narrative testimony in the first person [Am 7:1-9; 8-9]

This division of the text is obvious, but there is another way to view Amos' book. The prophet began by saying:

“The words of Amos...which he saw” [Am 1:1]

For us this might seem a bit odd. How can one “see” words? But when we examine the Hebrew, we find the answer. The word *dabar* can mean word or *event* – something that has happened. The use of this word, then, could mean that the prophet saw these words by means of the events he experienced while preaching throughout Israel. From this, then, we can identify a two-fold division of the book: Words [Am 1-6] and Visions [Am 7-9].

Key Passages.

We will now look more closely at each of these prophetic types as they occur in Amos, and as we do so I recommend that you first highlight these key passages in your Bible by writing key words in the margins.

† Oracles against the nations [Am 1:2-2:3]

The nations mentioned here were all at one time part of the empire of David and Solomon. All are guilty of various crimes, usually related to their ignoring of the covenantal relationship with the nation of God's chosen people and the breaking of treaties.

† Oracles against Judah [Am 2:4-5]

In his oracles against the sinfulness of the nations, Amos doesn't exclude his own nation of Judah. The prophet castigates his own people for ignoring God's Law and for the idolatry of worshipping false gods. They too will suffer grievous punishment for their sins.

† Oracles against Israel [Am 2:6-6:14]

Amos, however, reserves the brunt of his condemnation for Israel, the nation God has instructed him to visit and to whom he is to preach God's Word. The sins of Israel are many and touch on almost every aspect of God's Law: oppression of the poor; sexual morality; drunkenness; ingratitude toward God Himself; religious indifference; idolatry; gross selfishness; greed; pride; gluttony; rampant injustice; bribery; and many more. Their punishment will be severe and swift, unless they repent and change their ways, for God always extends His mercy to His people when they turn back to Him in faith:

Seek the Lord that you may live... Seek good and not evil, that you may live; then truly the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you as you claim [Am 5:6,14].

† Five visions [Am 7:1-9; 8:1-9:10]

The five visions shared by Amos must have been more than terrifying for those who heard them. The first two – swarms of destructive locusts [Am 7:1-3] and a rain of fire [Am 7:4-6] – so disturb Amos that he begs God not to inflict them on Israel. God accepts Amos' prayer and relents.

In the third vision – the “plummet” [Am 7:7-9] – Amos sees God measuring the infidelity of the people with a kind plumb-bob. He continues describing the destruction of Israel's royal house as well as the high places where idolatry is rampant:

The high places of Isaac shall be laid waste, and the sanctuaries of Israel made desolate; and I will attack the house of Jeroboam with the sword [Am 7:9].

In the fourth vision [Am 8] the Lord shows Amos a basket of “end-of-summer fruit” and explains its meaning to Amos:

The end has come for my people Israel; I will forgive them no longer [Am 8:2] -- The Hebrew actually involves a play on words that would have been be evident to the Jew.

The description of punishments that follow are horrendous, but perhaps the greatest punishment is that of God denying Israel of His Presence:

They shall stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east in search of the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it [Am 8:12].

In the fifth vision [Am 9:1-10] Amos sees the Lord standing next to an altar that symbolizes the destruction of the sanctuary at Bethel because Israel has long refused to return to the Lord God and worship Him, and Him alone. He reminds them that He has acted to help other nations as well [Am 9-7] but then tells Israel of their total destruction, although a remnant – likely those from Judah who return from exile in Babylon – will be spared:

See, the eyes of the Lord God are on this sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth – but I will not destroy the house of Jacob completely – oracle of the Lord [Am 9:8].

† **Encounter: Amos and Amaziah [Am 7:10-17]**

In the midst of Amos' descriptions of the five visions, we find this personal encounter between Amos and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel. Some scholars believe these verses were just haphazardly added at a later date, but it's actually a logical time for this encounter to occur, and a logical place to describe it. If Amos has been preaching to the people about these visions -- especially the first three -- one can see why Amaziah would be upset and want to attack Amos. Recall that the third vision described the destruction of the House of Jeroboam II as well as the sanctuaries, presumably including Amaziah's sanctuary in Bethel.

Of course, Amos has no trouble responding to Amaziah's verbal attack and even lets the priest know how the Lord's punishment will affect him and his family:

You say: "Do not prophesy against Israel, do not preach against the house of Isaac." Therefore, thus says the Lord: "Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword. Your land shall be parceled out my measuring line, and you yourself shall die in an unclean land; and Israel shall be exiled from its land" [Am 7:16-17].

One can only wonder the effect these words of prophecy had on Amaziah.

† **Restoration prophecy [Am 9:11-15].**

The final five verses of the Book of Amos are considered by some to be late additions because they don't focus on punishment and doom but look to a new beginning and address God's faithfulness even in the midst of the people's infidelity. They claim that these verses run counter to his overall message.

I don't agree and believe that these concluding words accurately reflect the faith of Amos who on numerous previous occasions encouraged repentance and offered the hope of God's forgiveness if Israel would only return to Him. With these words Amos sends a hopeful message to the remnant, and also echoes the theme we encounter throughout classical prophecy, a message that looks forward with joy to God's

redeeming acts of love. Just imagine the effect of these hopeful final words on those who survived the imminent destruction of Israel by the Assyrians and the future destruction of Jerusalem and exile by the Babylonians:

I will restore my people Israel, they shall rebuild and inhabit their ruined cities, plant vineyards and drink the wine, set out gardens and eat the fruits. I will plant them upon their own ground; never again shall they be plucked from the land I have given them – the Lord, your God, has spoken [Am 9:14-15].

Some Highpoints.

- † **The Word of God.** From Amos we hear not only God’s words, but also the sound of His voice.

The Lord roars from Zion, and raises His voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds languish, and the summit of Carmel withers [Am 1:2].

Indeed, the Lord God roars like a lion! By rejecting Amos and trying to silence his prophecy, Israel shows its unwillingness to hear the Lord. This prosperous land will then experience a deep, pervasive famine – not a famine of food or water, but a famine of hearing God’s word.

See, days are coming – oracle of the Lord God – when I will send a famine upon the land; not a hunger for bread, or a thirst for water, but for hearing the Word of the Lord [Am 8:11].

Israel’s refusal to listen to God, then, will mean the Lord will refuse to speak to her for a period of time.

- † **The Chosen People.** 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 different meaning of “chosen.”

Hear this word, Israelites, that the Lord speaks concerning you, concerning the whole family I brought up from the land of Egypt: You alone have I known, among the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities. Do two journey together unless they have agreed? [Am 3:1-3]

Amos continues with similar poetic language applying various natural and human occurrences to God’s decision to punish His chosen ones for their infidelity.

- † **The Remnant.** 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.

As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion a pair of sheep’s legs or the tip of an ear, so shall the Israelites escape, those who dwell in Samaria, with the corner of a couch or a piece of a cot [Am 3:12].

Spared, yes, but with little to show for it. Times would, therefore, be very tough for the remnant that survived.

- † **Social Justice [Am 3:13-4:5].** In this passage Amos begins his condemnation of the rich, particularly their pride, callousness, and 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 [Am 5:21-24].

It was evident to Amos that injustice reigned in Israel – injustice of every sort: oppression, disorder, terror [Am 3:9]; theft, violence, and destruction [Am 3:10]; the poor cheated [Am 2:6; 5:12; 8:4,6]. Amos goes on to offer dozens of other examples of injustice that directly violated the Law given to the chosen people by God through Moses.

Interestingly, this is one of the first appearances in recorded history of an underprivileged social class whose misery has religious overtones and is not simply the result of economic incompetence. For Amos calls these poor and oppressed “just men” who have been deprived of their rights.

- † **The Choice [Am 4:6-11].** Even though his words were harsh, Amos wasn't at all vindictive. He merely told it as he saw it and a God revealed it to him. In these verses God describes how he has warned His people again and again and yet they continue to resist Him. Through Amos, God depicts Himself as the rejected lover who sees His people abandoning Him for a path that leads only to death and destruction. Despite His pleading, the people continue to turn away from God. To ensure they get the message, God has Amos repeat the words “You did not return to me...” God's final statement would strike fear in the heart of anyone who possessed even the smallest kernel of faith:

Yet you did not return to me...Therefore, thus I will do to you, Israel: and since I will deal thus with you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! [Am 4:11-12]

- † **Day of the Lord [Am 5:8-27].** This passage describes the grandeur of God and His infinite power and majesty. Here Amos contrasts God 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 different picture of this day.

Woe to those who yearn for the day of the Lord! What will the day of the Lord mean for you? It will be darkness, not light! [Am 5:18]

Amos also includes an eloquent plea for the importance of interior change, the return to justice, and the need for true worship of the Lord God; for example:

Rather let justice surge like waters, and righteousness like an unfailing stream [Am 5:24].

Throughout his book, Amos frequently calls the people to the holiness that the Lord God desires of them.

Old and New Testaments.

- † **Rom 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 [Am 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. [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 [Am 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 [Am 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 that lives one's faith 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 is the nature of the transgressions of which Amos accuses Israel?
2. What light does Amos throw on the nature of true religion? [Am 5:18-24]
3. What can Amos teach us 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?