

Amos

The Book of

Session One:
January 4, 2005

Background and Introduction

❖ The Prophet and the Book

As with the other prophets in the Old Testament and a number of the epistles in the New Testament (think of James, for example), Amos refers both to the book of compiled oracles in our Bibles among the other “minor” prophets and to the prophet himself named in the first verse of that book. Maybe the distinction seems like hair-splitting—after all, we don’t know anything about Amos aside from what we gather of his words in the book, and any attempts to re-create the “historical Amos” outside of what these sayings tell us will probably be pretty speculative.

But it’s worth remembering that there is some difference between Amos the 8th century BC man and the book of Amos’ sayings set in our Bibles between Joel and Obadiah, and for several reasons. First of all, we need to remember that what we read as words on a page were first spoken aloud by a person—the oracles of the prophets were (in large part, at least) delivered *orally*, and we don’t know who did the work of writing and arranging all of his oracles. The text is clear that Amos himself wrote down at least some of what he said (look at ch. 7:1-9 or 8:1-3, for example, and the recurring “I” and “me” who narrates). But there are also sections that are 3rd-person stories *about* Amos (7:10-17, for example) rather than words written *by* Amos, and these may have been written down by someone later to give us a fuller picture of the message of Amos (some scholars also suggest that the message of hope at the end of chapter 9 seems like it must have been added later, once the threatened exile had already come—more on that later, though).

The distinction between Amos the man and the book is also helpful as we think of the historical context in which Amos’ words were first spoken. Lumped in the middle of the minor prophets, we lose a sense of how

original Amos was as he first spoke this message—at least by the dating in 1:1, Amos’ career may have been the earliest of any of the prophets whose words are preserved in the Old Testament. There had been prophets before him, but he was the first to announce the coming exile and end of the northern kingdom of Israel, so in some sense he was “inventing” a new tradition.

We do not know much more about Amos other than *that* he was a prophet. The limited biographical sketch given in 1:1 tells us that he was “among the shepherds” (probably a more well-to-do breeder of sheep than a simple watchman) in the Judean (southern kingdom) village of Tekoa. The geography is worth noting—Amos was from a southern kingdom town and, at least as far as we know, prophesied and ministered *only* in the northern kingdom of Israel (which seems to have gotten him into trouble, as in 7:10-17). Besides that opening sketch, all we have is the snapshot in 7:14 that confirms the shepherd data and adds “dresser of sycamore trees” to Amos’ résumé.

But Amos the man may not have *wanted* us to know all that much about himself—unlike Hosea, who preaches sermons based on his family life, Jonah, whose book gives *only* a story about a prophet and barely a word of his message, or Jeremiah, who spends chapters complaining about how hard his life is as a prophet, Amos pretty much only gives us the message God has given him. Amos goes to great lengths to make it clear that he intends to speak for Israel’s ancient covenant God, YHWH (look at all the times Amos peppers his words with the phrase, “Thus says the LORD”). The important thing for Amos is the word, the vision, that comes from God, a word that he cannot help but speak out to the people of this God, even though it is a message of death. Other, later prophets will announce a joyful Sunday resurrection, but Amos first has to make it clear that Friday’s grief and mourning is not a charade.

❖ Historical and Social Context

Amos had guts. This Judean good-old-boy (he *was* from the rural south) walked up to the religious and political capitals of the North during its most prosperous era in generations and announced that not only the king of Israel but the whole damned country was, well, *damned*, or at least doomed (and the one bringing the doom was Israel's own God!). That's the short version.

The more thorough version is that during the reigns of Uzziah in the southern kingdom and Jeroboam II in the north, Amos went to work in and around Bethel and Samaria, two major cities in the northern kingdom of Israel. The reference to those kings places his career in somewhere between 783-750 BC, and the reference in 1:1 to "the earthquake" further narrows things down. Both other scriptural citations (Zech. 14:5) and the archaeological record report a major earthquake during this time period, and it is generally dated to about 760. So that places Amos' career just before that, around 762 BC, and the content of the oracles in the book fits well with that time period over all.

On the international scene, the real regional powers around Palestine were in periods of relative weakness (although in 40 years, Assyria again would be strong enough to conquer Israel for good). And even though the writers of 1-2 Kings didn't care for him, Jeroboam II of Israel was competent (or lucky) enough to expand Israel's borders to be as large as they were in Solomon's heyday. During this time, there was relative peace with neighboring countries, and peace meant relative prosperity—well, at least for some. In addition to an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor, Israel's institutions, including the courts, were growing corrupt. One of Amos' major concerns about life in Israel is the way that the poor get trampled on and the wealthy exploited them. Again and again, he criticizes the comfortable and complacent elites who run the show politically in Samaria or religiously in Bethel, and tells

them that God will end both their comfort and their complacency. But that message came at a time when life was still pretty good for Israel, making Amos' announcement of judgment a shocking surprise.

❖ Themes

-exile—Amos is a book about the death of a nation, and while Israel is going through denial, the prophet is going through nearly every other stage of grief in response to that death—anger, sorrow, and in some sense, acceptance. Amos sees the looming death of Israel as virtually inevitable—rarely does he call for repentance, and even when it happens, the hope of averting disaster is a weak one (see 5:14-15, for example). The reason that the coming exile is so sure for him is that God will be the one to bring it. It is not because Israel's God is weaker than other nations' deities that it will be destroyed—Amos sees God as the agent for Israel's destruction. Most of the whole book consists of Amos trying as many ways as he can of putting that into words; even the words of hope in chapter nine are admittedly addressed to a people who have been decimated by exile. God will only "raise up" and "repair" David's fallen tent (9:11) after it has first been knocked down and torn to pieces.

-social justice—If exile means the death of Israel, then a perversion of justice is one of the diseases slowly killing it. Amos accuses "they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7) of provoking God to "press you down in your place" (2:13). He depicts numerous real life scenes of injustice: courts are abused and corrupted (5:15), the poor are unfairly taxed beyond their ability to survive (5:11), and people are cheated in the marketplace. Sometime Amos puts it in more poetic, metaphorical imagery (for example, letting "justice roll down like waters" in 5:24), but the concern is the same. The people have become bent in on themselves and are even willing to violate God's call to live justly in order to gain for themselves. Amos does not say nearly as much about specifically "religious"

sins within the nation as do other prophets (Hosea, for example, fumes about Israel's idolatry and false worship all the time); rather, he seems to assert that all of life, surely including social interactions and rightness within community relationships, is of God's concern. Worship of foreign gods, when it is mentioned, is never far behind the criticism of injustice and corruption. And when Amos does criticize Israel's religious practices, it is often because his religion has become an excuse not to have to practice justice rather than a constant reminder of how they are to love God by loving their neighbors.

-Israel as God's chosen—Amos draws heavily on Israel's traditional salvation-history story in his oracles. Israel is a people with a unique history with God—they were delivered from Egypt and given a land to possess. Indeed, YHWH has specially chosen Israel “of all the families of earth” (3:2). It seems that many in Amos' day understood that special status to mean that God could not and would not ever let them be conquered. We get the sense that some in Amos' time looked forward to a “day of YHWH” in which all of Israel's enemies would be punished for their wickedness but Israel itself would come out unscathed—even victorious. But rather than giving Israel license to do as it pleased, if anything the fact that God has specially chosen Israel holds it to *higher* standards than other nations, even to the vision of God's own justice (and mercy!). In the book, God cites the salvation history of Israel as evidence against the people. Amos seems to allow that Israel is indeed God's chosen people, but he will not let that become an excuse for Israel to do as it pleases with no concern for others.

-the universal God—The flip side to Israel's special status before God is that God reserves the right—and exercises it—to love all nations and to work in and for them. The opening collection of oracles against other nations (1:3-2:5) reveals that God is concerned not only with Israel's well-being, but with the ways other nations treat each other. And God is not only interested in

how other nations interact with Israel, nor in their religious practices alone. Rather, Amos depicts God as concerned about the ways nations treat each other in war, how they abuse people, and how they trample on each other's innocents. And even more shockingly, Amos hints that YHWH has plans and love for other nations outside of Israel. Amos 9:7, for example, sees the hand of YHWH, Israel's special covenant God, at work raising up the Philistines and the Arameans. Amos, then, wants to stretch the minds of those who think that they can keep God in their back pocket, or that YHWH is their genie or good luck charm. Rather, for Amos, it is the other way around—Israel remains always God's people, but God is never the sole *possession* of Israel.

❖ The Medium and the Message

In addition to being largely oral in its first delivery, it is important to understand Amos' message in terms of poetry. Unlike a New Testament epistle or a book of historical events and interpretation, the books of the prophets are often filled with figurative language and poetic forms. They may use poetic forms and structures, borrow from hymns and liturgical pieces of their day, and draw out their point with repetition. If we wanted “just the facts” of what Amos had to say, we might be able to summarize the book into a few good sentences. But for Amos, as with all who deal in poetry, the message is more than a few bullet points—part of the message's punch lies in the *way* it is delivered.

For example, Amos borrows the form of a lament, a funeral dirge, to describe Israel in chapter five. The rhythm and meter is clearer in the Hebrew, but even in English, it is clear how the words recall mourning and death. Given the time in which these words are uttered, this has a powerful effect—Israel is declared dead at the height of its prosperity! This has a great deal more power than saying simply, “Israel will be destroyed because it has sinned.” It shocks the hearer, in part because it connects the grief and sorrow felt

at a loved one's death with the life of the nation. And hopefully, it jars the hearer enough to change—to abandon pretense and illusion, to break old ways of hoarding wealth at the expense of others, to turn a new way. If nothing else, it makes the gravity of the situation all the more real—it makes Amos' message hit home.

Amos will also take other poetic forms and use them to turn his readers' expectations upside down. For example, the opening oracle about YHWH 'roaring from Zion' was a sort of nationalistic refrain that popped up in battle hymns; the image occurs again in other prophets like Jeremiah, too. But Amos turns the refrain upside down by depicting God as declaring war, not on those *other*, 'evil' nations, but on Israel itself. And with that he pulls the rug out from under those who see Israel as God's eternal darling who can get away with murder.

One last note about the poetic style of much of Amos—by its very nature, poetry is both more and less dense than prose. One could easily reduce a poem down to a single summary statement of the "point" or the main idea, and so poetry can feel as though it takes a long time to say a very little amount of substance. But at the same time, part of the very 'point' of poetry lies in the way the words are delivered. The and arrangement of words, the power of images, the choice of form—these all "say" something, even if they do not add a new fact or step in a logical argument.

This is especially true of Hebrew poetry, which is dominated by one major feature (especially when translated into English and we lose any sense of the original rhythm or sounds of words)—parallelism. Hebrew poetry, and this includes much of the prophetic writings, found countless ways to say the same thing over and over again—sometimes by way of contrast, sometimes with synonyms, sometimes by arranging ideas in new orders. This may mean that two (or three or four) lines or verses say essentially the same idea, even though together they carry more force. It is important, then, to ask why and to what end poetic devices like this kind of

repetition are used. A classic example of parallelism in Amos is the image in 5:24:

*"But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

Understanding this as parallelism helps us to see that "justice" and "righteousness" are overlapping concepts for Amos. In fact, he very frequently will pair the two. So as we think about whatever "righteousness" means, we know that it cannot be too far off the mark from whatever Amos intends by "justice." While nearly all of the Hebrew poets and prophets use devices like this, in some ways, this kind of repetition serves Amos especially well, since his message is in many ways tragically simple—Israel is going to die. The sheer newness of this message, as well as its unpleasantness, meant that Amos had to say it over and over and over again for it to even begin to sink in. And even then, the people clearly did not want to hear it—even if it came from the mouth of

Connections: Who listens to prophets?

- What do you think of when you hear the word "prophet"? Is it a positive word, a negative one, somewhere in between? What gives you this impression?
- Who are people you think of today as "prophetic" in some sense? Do all prophets speak in religious terms? Should they?
- It seems like there will be some bad news ahead in the book of Amos—what value is there for us today in reading Amos' message of judgment and destruction that was addressed to people thousands of years ago? Is there value in it?
- Think of a favorite poem of yours—what does it mean? Is this the same or different from the "point" or "main idea" of a poem? Does it lose something if you try to summarize it? What might this mean for how we read poetry in Scripture?