

Amos

The Book of

Session Eight:
February 15, 2005

Amos 7:10-17—The Showdown: Prophet v. Priest and King

❖The Text (NRSV)

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

¹⁶"Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.

You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'

¹⁷Therefore thus says the LORD:

'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,
and your land shall be parceled out by line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile
away from its land.'"

❖What's going on here?

-v.10-15—Breaking from the vision-reports told by Amos, we now have a section that tells a story about Amos. In some ways, this may feel like an interruption, especially if we peek ahead to 8:1-3, which will pick up with another vision very similar to 7:7-9. The connection of this story in 7:10ff to the vision just before it may be the common reference to the house of Jeroboam dying "by the sword"

(compare 7:9 and 7:11). Amos' message—first given to him in a visionary experience and then announced in his public ministry—declared the end of Israel and its ruler, Jeroboam II. Now here in this story, we get a clearer sense of the kind of reception this message had with the people in high places.

To set the scene for this showdown between Amos and the priest of Bethel, Amaziah, we should note some historical background here. Bethel, which had been the target of Amos' verbal assaults before (in 3:14, 4:4, and 5:6, at least), had been set up as a government-sanctioned worship center when the kingdom split, and its priests were appointed by the king. 1 Kings 12 even describes the king of the north offering sacrifices at Bethel. Amaziah, the priest at Bethel in this scene, is then in some sense an official mouthpiece for the royal agenda, and he cannot allow any southern would-be preachers who break with the party line.

In the first part of the account, we hear Amaziah's charge against Amos. It is interesting to note that his report to the king is incomplete at the least and downright deceptive at most. First off, Amos' speech against the "house of Jeroboam" comes across as a death threat specifically on the king, a verbal assassination attempt, rather than an indictment of a whole way of ruling. Second, there is no mention at all of the primary reason for Amos' harsh words: the collective injustices in Israel's society. And finally, it is interesting that Amaziah removes all talk of God from Amos' prophetic message, almost as though he doesn't want to think about what God has to say about the matter. Or, it is also quite possible that as the authorized priest of the authorized religious center, Amaziah assumes that he *knows* what God's will is and that God could never speak judgment against the religious (and political) status quo.

Whatever the motives, Amaziah cannot let this subversive troublemaker continue to ruffle feathers by

speaking against the authorized political and religious leadership. So when he comes face to face with Amos, the priest wants to get him out of his jurisdiction. Amos can be a professional preacher back on his home turf of Judah, but what he has said about Israel and Israel's rulers is awfully close to treason in Bethel.

Amos' reply to all of this is interesting, too—he doesn't dispute or qualify or correct Amaziah's charges. He seems to admit that his message is indeed a threat to the establishment—but Amos maintains that it is *God's* threat, not merely his own. He answers the priest by saying that he is not a professional prophet. This makes more sense if we recall that there were *professional* prophets in ancient Israel, people employed by the king or religious centers to announce essentially that God approved of whatever the official policy was. Elijah clashed with several hundred such payroll prophets in 1 Kings 18, others come up in 1 Kings 22 in contrast to the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah, and Jeremiah 23 announces judgment against these royal yes-men. (On the other hand, Isaiah seems to have had some official position, according to both 2 Kings 19 and Isaiah 7—so they weren't necessarily all pious pretenders and lackeys.)

At any rate, here in Amos 7, the office of "prophet" as an actual occupation was caught up, like that of priest, with rubber-stamping royal policy. The official guilds of these prophets were often known as the "sons of the prophets" (see for example 1 Kings 20:35) and were essentially schools centered around different prophetic leaders. So Amos' reply to the priest is saying that he is not one of these state-sponsored preachers, and he doesn't claim to be a part of the prophetic class. In fact, Amos reiterates what the opening verse of the book told us, that his profession had been herding animals and pruning fruit trees ("sycamore" in the Near East refers to a kind of fig tree). Amos insists that his authority to speak does

not come from being a professional religious person or having proper credentials, but from his call from YHWH. Other prophetic books include accounts of the divine call, often fuller than Amos' here (see, for example, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, and Ezekiel 2), but all are given as evidence of their God-given mission to speak their message. We get very few details of this event of calling from Amos—only his sense of being plucked up from his previous living and being sent to bring a word to Israel. Much as he had said in 3:3-8, his sense of call was more than a nudge or an inkling—rather, God had spoken, and it he could do no other but to speak that same message, too.

-v.16-17—Coming at the end of this exchange with the priest is Amos' word to Amaziah himself. Or rather, as Amos is quick to emphasize, this is in fact YHWH's own word spoken against the priest and the priestly system of Israel. Amos paraphrases Amaziah's warning, "Do not prophesy against Israel," a phrase we heard back in 2:12 when Amos bemoaned how Israel told *many* of its prophets, "Do not prophesy." Amos sees the rejection of the divinely-sent prophets as yet another example of the way Israel has turned from the ways of its God. The judgment announced in 7:11 may not have happened to Amaziah's own immediate family (as the Assyrians would not actually conquer Israel for another generation), but it was typical of the kind of devastation and degradation that happened when the exile did come.

We don't have a conclusion to this story beyond Amos' speech here. We don't know how—or *if*—Amaziah responded, nor, for that matter, whether Amos was compelled to leave Israel and end his ministry as a result. This narrative does, however, make it clear that Amos' message got him in trouble and that he was well aware of the political implications of announcing God's call to justice—as well as God's judgment against *injustice*.

Connections: Called to Confront?

-Imagine someone upset with the President (maybe it's not that hard to do) about his proposed tax cuts in the 2005 budget; as a part of the protest, this person publicly threatens that Bush and his family's rule will all come to an end. How does this make you feel?

All right, now imagine that this same person starts declaring that America will be attacked and overthrown by terrorist—and that it will be the consequence of our treatment of others. What would we—in the government, and in society at large—do to someone who talked this way? How is Amos' message and situation similar? How is it different?

-While there are certainly voices in the New Testament that commend peaceful submission to governing authorities (see for example Rom. 13 and 1 Peter 2), Amos presents us with a model—and perhaps a call?—for us to speak out against injustices and the lack of mercy in our own society.

What structures and systems might we be called to speak against right now? What do the examples of prophets like Amos—or even of Jesus—say about how we offer that critique?

What kind of trouble are we willing to get ourselves into for the sake of announcing God's ways and will for all people?

Amos 8:1-3—The End

❖The Text (NRSV)

^{8:1}This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ²He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me,

The end has come upon my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by.

³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD;

"the dead bodies shall be many,

cast out in every place. Be silent!"

❖What's going on here?

Amos gives us one more vision that seems to fit the form and style of those in 7:1-9, especially the vision of the plumb line. Once again, in the first-person, Amos recounts that God shows him an image, and again it is a symbolic object. When God asks what he sees, Amos replies, "A basket of summer fruit" (in Hebrew, the word is *qayits*), not knowing what the significance of this image is yet. The word makes more sense if we know the Hebrew for the "end" in 8:2 is *qets*. Amos records a divine pun—a play on the word "end" in order to make it visible, imminent, and real. But this is not a funny pun at all—it is profoundly tragic. YHWH announces that the old ways of dealing with Israel's waywardness are over: "I will never again pass them by." For too long, Amos has reminded us, Israel has refused to return to its God (see 4:6-11), and now something terribly new must happen to deal with the brokenness of the society. But even though this stark, final-sounding word offers no hope of averting God's disaster, it is worth mentioning that even now YHWH calls the nation "my people Israel" (see also 7:8 and 7:15). Again, there is the *hint*—if only the hint—that God still claims and laments over this nation consigned to death.

8:3 gives us again the recurring image of coming reversal. And once again it comes as God exposes the self-absorbed religious life of Israel. The temples and other places of worship, which had been consumed with the illusion that their God would only give them prosperity and happiness, will become places of grief and mourning. This is the general sense of God's speech in 8:2-3, and to convey it, Amos gives snapshot images again—wailing in the temple, the bodies of the dead heaped up outside of shrines, and the sheer anger, grief, and sorrow of one who can no longer cope but can only cry out in frustration, "Be silent!" For the prophet who has pleaded for Israel in the past, for the God who still calls Israel "my people," the looming reality of death—of the end—is almost too much to bear, even as they must announce that end. Beyond that, there is nothing else to be said for now, only the solemn silence of Holy Saturday.