

The Prophet Amos

The Prophet: Amos

Family Background and Place of Origin. Amos lived in the first half of the eighth century. He prophesied for a very short period of time and did not consider himself a professional prophet (7:14). The first verse tells us that Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa – a town in Judah five miles south of Bethlehem. It has been argued that Amos was from the northern kingdom around Galilee. Proponents of this view base their conclusions on at least two facts. First, Amos’s ministry is set in the north. Second, the sycamore-fig tree, of which Amos was a “dresser” (7:14), does not grow in the area of Judean Tekoa. Longman and Dillard note that these arguments are not compelling and are easily answered.

As noted above, Amos was a dresser of sycamore fig trees. There is some debate surrounding whether Amos was from the lower or higher social classes of ancient Israel. Traditionally, Amos was understood to be a man of humble status. However, since the 1950s many scholars have argued that he could have been a large-scale breeder or broker of herds; making him a man of higher social standing. In the end the text is unclear whether Amos was a simple farmer or a wealthy member of Israelite society. Amos does speak of himself as “tending” or “following” the flock (7:15). Further, the fruit of the sycamore tree, because of its bad taste, was inexpensive and a food that poor people ate. These two facts would cause one to lean toward the position that Amos was of the lower social class.

The Historical Situation.

The Date(s). The suggested date for the book of Amos is 760-755 BC. Amos is said to have prophesied only for a few weeks, shortly before an earthquake hit in Israel (Zech 14:5).

The People to Whom or Against Whom He is Writing. Before this tragic event, Israel lived in a period of great prosperity and political stability. Under the reigns of Jeroboam and Uzziah, Israel and Judah had expanded to encompass almost all of the land they once had during the empire of David and Solomon. These conquests resulted in an influx of wealth, thus developing a rather powerful upper class in Samaria. They began to abuse their power, by neglecting justice and the poor. Belcher notes that “the rights of small farmers were ignored” (See notes, Lesson 4.I.D.1). They had become “at ease in Zion” (6:1).

Though their prosperity had led to neglect of the poor, they remained rather religious. Indeed religion was high, but morality was quite low. The people, because of their religious zeal, longed for the Day of the Lord. Though Amos began his message to surrounding nations (ch.1), it was primarily to these religious, zealous, wealthy, neglectful people of Israel that he preached. He was a rural layman from the south bringing a message to the professionals in the north. What they did not know was that their Kingdom was soon to be invaded and overthrown by the Assyrians. They were at ease and rather sure of their blessing, while judgment was drawing near.

The Jewish Kings and Their Reign. Amos ministered “in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam II the son of Joash, king of Israel” (1:1). Jeroboam II reigned from 793-753 BC. Uzziah reigned in the South from 739/40-767 BC. Under the reigns of Jeroboam and Uzziah, Israel and Judah had expanded to encompass almost all of the land they once had during the empire of David and Solomon (See above).

Jeroboam II (2Kings 14:23-29) began to reign in Samaria in the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah. He reigned forty-one years. The book of 2Kings tells us the “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat.” He did restore

the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah. He also restored Damascus and Hamath to Judah in Israel.

Uzziah (2Chronicles 26:1-23) was sixteen years old when he became king of Judah – he reigned fifty-two years. He built Eloth and restored it to Judah. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord and set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah. He was instructed in the fear of God and because as he sought the Lord, “God made him prosper.” After breaking through the walls of Gath and Jabneh and Ashdod, he built cities in the territory of Ashdod and other places among the Philistines. He became very strong, because of the Lord. He built towers in Jerusalem and in the wilderness. He was very prosperous and victorious in war. Because of his fame – he grew proud, “to his destruction” (26:16). He went into the temple to burn incense on the altar, but was withstood by Azariah and eighty others. He became angry and was stricken with leprosy until the day of his death.

Foreign Nations and/or Kings. During the prime years of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, the Assyrian empire was, for the most part, held at bay and posed little threat. However, when Israel grew proud, the Assyrians began to build their empire. Assyria was not in decline, but merely ‘catching its breath.’ In 745 BC, Tiglath-pileser III would take the throne of Assyria, 20 years later, in 722, the northern kingdom of Israel would see its destruction.

Other Important Events. The only other significant event would be the earthquake mentioned in 1:1 that “shook Israel’s national existence” (VanGemeren, 127).

The Theme of the Book. Longman and Dillard make mention of, not one, but many themes in Amos. They note, “Much of Amos’s preaching can be gathered under several distinct themes.” Mentioned themes are as follows:

Divine Sovereignty and Judgment. The Lord is not only sovereign over Israel, but over all creation and over all nations. All creation under heaven is subject to His will and cannot escape His judgment (9:2-4).

Idolatry and Social Injustice. Idolatry was commonplace in Amos’s day (2:8; 5:5, 26; 7:9-13; 8:14). Worship of Yahweh had even become corrupt as morality and concern for the poor declined. Justice was purchased and not accessible to the less fortunate (2:7; 4:1; 5:11). But God reveals Himself as the protector of the poor – those who crushed the poor (2:7; 4:1) would be crushed in turn (2:13).

The Covenant and the Remnant. Amos does not come with a random message, but one that is founded upon the covenant. The divine judgments mentioned are clearly taken from the curses in Deut 28 and Lev 26. Amos pleaded with Israel, as the elect and chosen people of Yahweh (3:1-2), to choose the “ancient paths” and to “walk in the good way” (Jer 6:16). It is only the faithfulness of God to His covenant that would give assurance that there would be a remnant. Though God would bring judgment, He would plant a small remnant in the land (9:11-15).

The Day of the Lord. According to Amos, there would be a future divine intrusion of judgment (5:18-20). The only problem is that Israel had always thought of that judgment as being vindicatory in nature, where God would judge the surrounding nations only. The message that Amos brings is surprising in that he stresses this judgment as coming to Israel as well! The judgment Amos speaks of is not a final judgment – there would be a remnant in which God would carry on Redemptive History (See above).