

Profit from

# The Minor Prophets

## 4: Amos

Amos tells us he was among the shepherds of Tekoa, a Judean town in a bleak part of the country on the edge of the wilderness about ten miles south of Jerusalem (Amos 1:1). The word he uses indicates that he was not a hired shepherd, but the owner of one or more flocks of sheep but even so, as a shepherd he would have been in the social basement. Some rabbis rated a shepherd no higher than a heathen. Any gift a shepherd tried to put into a synagogue's offering box would have been thrown back at him and indeed it was not unknown for synagogues to be totally off-limits to shepherds.

Amos also describes himself as a “dresser of sycamore figs” (Amos 7:14). The fruit of the sycamore fig tree is smaller and not as good as that of the common fig. Before its fruit could ripen properly, a small hole had to be pierced in the bottom of its skin. This piercing was done by hand and was a tedious and time-consuming task. Western Judah, the oasis of Jericho, and lower Galilee were the regions where sycamore figs grew most abundantly. The shepherds needed to bring their flocks to one of these regions in late summer, after the desert pastures had dried up. Since this was the time for piercing the sycamore fruit, landowners would exchange grazing rights for labour. A shepherd could watch his flock while sitting on the broad limbs of the sycamore, piercing its fruit.

Wealthy sheep breeders hired shepherds to tend their flocks but Amos followed his flock himself and when that meant piercing sycamore fruit, he pierced sycamore fruit — he was not a wealthy man. Nevertheless the style of the book of Amos suggests that he was an educated man. One commentary says that 'his polished skills in debate and his familiarity with a range of literary forms mark him as a man of uncommon experience, opportunity and sensibility. Amos' gifts and experience equipped him well for the mission he was given by God.

Although Amos came from Judah, his primary mission was to the northern kingdom, Israel. The Lord sent him to Bethel to prophesy of coming judgment on Israel. Israel's first king, Jeroboam I, had made Bethel a centre of pagan worship and had encouraged the Israelites to worship there instead of at the temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites who gathered at Bethel would have looked on Amos, a Judean, with suspicion and hostility.

### When Did Amos Prophesy?

Amos lived in one of the most prosperous times in the history of Israel. He prophesied in the days when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam II, the son of Joash, was king of Israel. For a brief time Uzziah and Jeroboam together ruled an area nearly as large as the empire of David and Solomon. People were well off, business was booming, God was blessing.

"In the fifteenth year of Amaziah (father of Uzziah) the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel. And the Lord did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash."

2 Kings 14:23 – 27

Uzziah (also known as Azariah) was crowned king of Judah as a teenager and ruled from 792 to 740BC, while Jeroboam II ruled Israel from 793 to 753BC. This gives us a window of about forty years during which the book of Amos could have been written. Amos also tells us that God's word came to him 'two years before the earthquake' but he gives no indication of when it happened. Some 250 years later the prophet Zechariah

reminded his contemporaries that their predecessors 'fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah' (Zechariah 14:5), but again he gives no date for the event. However archaeologists tell us that there was a major earthquake in the region around 760BC.

Amos's dialogue with Amaziah, the priest of Jeroboam's temple at Bethel (Amos 7:10 – 17), suggests that the period of Amos's prophetic activity was short. He went to Bethel from Tekoa, delivered his prophetic oracles, and returned home. He probably stayed in Bethel only a few days.

## **Outline**

### **Introduction 1:1 – 2**

### **Prophecies against the nations 1:3 – 2:16**

- Damascus 1:3 – 5
- Gaza 1:6 – 8
- Tyre 1:9, 10
- Edom 1:11, 12
- Ammon 1:13 – 15
- Moab 2:1 – 3
- Judah 2:4, 5
- Israel 2:6 – 16

### **Israel's guilt and coming judgment 3:1 – 4:5**

- Israel's privileged position 3:1 – 2
- The inevitability of judgement 3:3 – 8
- A summons to Israel's enemies to rise up 3:9 – 10
- Israel will be overrun 3:11 – 15
- A warning to Israel's privileged women 4:1 – 3
- A sarcastic invitation to sin 4:4, 5

### **Israel's stubbornness 4:6 – 5:27**

- Previous warnings unheeded 4:6 – 11
- Prepare to meet your God 4:12, 13
- A plea for repentance 5:1 – 15
- The coming universal mourning 5:16, 17

### **The coming day of the Lord 5:18 – 6:14**

- Do not look forward to that day 5:18 – 20
- Israel's insincere and unfaithful worship 5:21 – 27
- Woe to the frivolous and the unjust 6:1 – 14

### **Three visions of Israel's coming disaster 7:1 – 9**

### **Amos's confrontation with Amaziah 7:10 – 17**

### **Further visions of Israel's end 8:1 – 9:10**

### **A promise of future restoration 9:11 – 15**

## **Amos' Message**

The main theme of the Book of Amos is God's concern for justice. The prosperity that came to Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II brought new wealth to the upper classes. They used that wealth to enlarge their landholdings and to build great houses for themselves but in doing it they violated the rights of the poor, throwing many of them off their ancestral lands.

Through God's provisions in the Law, ownership of land was foundational in Israel's society but under Jeroboam's rule God's law was ignored, the rich became richer, the poor became poorer and more numerous and as a result many were sold into slavery. Israel's whole social structure was undermined and became thoroughly unstable.

The immediate purpose of Amos's prophetic ministry was to call Israel's leaders to repent and reform. Amos warned them that if they did not heed his call, their injustice against the poor and the weak would destroy the nation. God would not allow them to continue in their unrighteous, unjust course.

When Amos reached Israel he began by pronouncing judgement on six neighbouring heathen nations: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. God's message to each of them began with the phrase, 'For three transgressions... and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. It was a way of saying that God

was judging them not for merely three or four offences but for many, committed over a long period of time. However, in it all one appalling sin is pinpointed: all were guilty of gross injustice.

Amos prophesied that God would severely punish the heathen nations in ways that would reflect their particular sins. The fact that they were not among God's covenant people was immaterial.

Before turning specifically to Israel, Amos adds a short, sharp warning to Judah, whose people had rejected God's law and turned to idolatry. While the heathen nations had sinned in ignorance of God's written law, Judah had deliberately sinned despite knowing it, making their guilt even worse.

Israel's leaders would have been happy to hear what Amos had to say against their neighbours (and against Judah, for that matter) but when he turned his focus on their own nation they quickly changed their tune. An influential priest called Amaziah warned King Jeroboam, 'The land is not able to bear his words' (Amos 7:10) and then (presumably on the king's authority) told Amos, 'flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel' (Amos 7:12- 13). In reply, Amos told Amaziah, 'I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son... But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"' (Amos 7:14 – 15). He backed that up by adding, 'Now therefore hear the word of the Lord' (Amos 7:16). Amos was not out to make friends. He preached with the conviction that he was God's ambassador and that neither priest nor king had any right to silence him.

Many of the words spoken by Amos came to pass within the lifetime of many who heard him. Israel was first attacked and then, in 722BC, occupied by the Assyrians under the leadership of Shalmaneser V.

There is no escaping Amos' emphasis on impending judgement but he ends by looking even further ahead to a time of restoration, prosperity and security. He is looking forward to the eternal kingdom of the Messiah: a time of victory, satisfaction and security.

### **Questions for Discussion**

- Some think the Bible teaches that money is the root of all evil. Others claim that God has a bias to the poor. Some imagine that as the poor are denied so many material possessions in the present world they can be assured of eternal riches in the world to come. Often the book of Amos is used to support these and other such views. How would you summarise what Amos has to say on the subject of wealth and poverty?
- What does Amos tell us about the state of religious life in Israel in his day? Are there lessons in this for us?
- How does Amos add to your understanding of the Day of the Lord?
- In what ways are Amos' prophesy and the message of Jonah complementary?

### **For Further Study**

Viewing them in their context, what can you learn from these verses?

- Amos 3:3
- Amos 3:6
- Amos 4:12
- Amos 5:21 – 24
- Amos 6:1a
- Amos 9:13 – 15