

Introduction to Amos

“An Overview of the Prophet, his times and the structure of the prophesy.”

This morning we are beginning our Fall sermon Series on the Prophet Amos. The prophetic books of the Old Testament make up over a quarter of the Old Testament (16 of its 39 books). The prophets were called by God to be organs and channels of revelation. They were men of God who stood in his council, knew his mind, and were enabled to declare it. God the Holy Spirit spoke in and through them. It was because they understood the work of the Holy Spirit speaking through them in this way that they dared to start messages with “this is what the LORD says” or “an oracle of the LORD,” and to present God himself as the speaker of what they were saying.

Prophecy involved prediction (foretelling), but usually this was done in a context of declaring God’s warnings and exhortations to his covenant people here and now (forth-telling). The predictions had to do with the coming of God’s king and kingdom after purging judgments; the prophets’ chief concern was to exhort to repentance, in hope that for the present the judgments might be averted. They were primarily reformers, enforcing God’s law and recalling God’s people to the covenant faithfulness from which they should never have lapsed.

Jesus speaks of this connection between the law of God and the prophet’s role to recall the people to live by the law when in the passage read this morning he has Abraham say to the rich man: ‘They have Moses (the man to whom the Law of God was given) and the prophets (the men who interpreted the law); they should listen to them.’³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

Here is one of the clearest passages in which the Lord Jesus affirms the authority of the prophet’s role. We are to listen to them. So this Fall we want to attempt to follow Jesus’ command by listening to God speak to us through the prophet Amos.

In the passages read this morning, we learn something about who Amos was and when and where he lived.

Amos was a Hebrew prophet of the eighth century B.C.. He was a shepherd living in Tekoa, a village about ten miles south of Jerusalem, when God spoke to him in a vision (Amos 1:1-2).

The author's name, given in 1:1, means "burdened." Amos's heart was heavily burdened for the cause of the LORD and the plight of the people. His name tells us something important about the prophetic ministry. It is a calling that grows out of a deep longing for God's will to be fulfilled in the lives of God's people. The central theme of this book and the burden Amos carries is expressed vividly in 5:24 "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

During Amos' lifetime the Jewish people lived in a divided kingdom. Uzziah was the king of Judah in the south and Jeroboam II king of Israel in the north. In Amos's vision, the Lord appeared like a lion, roaring out his judgment against injustice and idolatry, especially the idolatry of God's own people. Amos insisted that he was a common man, called of God to go to the Northern Kingdom to be His spokesman (7:15).

In his book, Amos is shown preaching only at Bethel, in Israel, about twelve miles north of Jerusalem and just over the border. Bethel was the royal religious sanctuary of Israel. Here Amos prophesied that Israel would be overrun and its king killed. The priest of Bethel, Amaziah, called Amos a traitor and told him to go back to Judah and do his prophesying there. "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

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

In these verses we learn that Amos was not a professional prophet. The professional prophets were not the biblical prophets whose 16 books are found in the Old Testament. Rather they were false prophets and were a bane to Israel. Professionally linked with Israel's organized worship, they said what the king and people wanted to hear and spoke their own dreams and opinions rather than words of God.

Amos is making it clear to Amaziah that he is not one of these prophets. Amos was a God-fearing man who deeply felt the mistreatment of the poor by the rich. He did not want to be identified with an elite group of professional prophets. He spoke a message given him by the Lord God of Hosts: As we will see Amos called Israel to

repent of personal and social sins and return to the worship of the one true God.

Uzziah who is mentioned in verse 1 was Judah's king from around 792 to 740 B.C. He came to the throne at the age of sixteen after the death of his father.

Uzziah was a capable, energetic, and well-organized person. The Lord blessed him in all of his doings, so that he prospered. He is characterized as one who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Kings 15:3; 2 Chronicles 26:4). He determined to seek God and went to Zechariah (not the prophet) for spiritual instruction. Consequently, "as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper" (2 Chronicles 26:5). The prophets of the Lord were active during his reign. Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos began their prophetic work in the time of Uzziah (Isaiah 1:1; Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1).

Uzziah was also active with military campaigns. His primary success was against Israel's strong historical enemy, the Philistines. Uzziah had an army "fit for war." It was drafted according to census and organized into divisions. There were 2,600 officers and 307,500 fighting men who could wage war with mighty power. The army was well-outfitted, with weapons, such as spears, bows, and sling stones. Armor included shields, helmets, and coats of armor (2 Chronicles 26:14). Second Chronicles 26:15 describes a kind of catapult, which was to be stationed on the towers and at the corners of walls for defensive purposes. This type of weapon could hurl arrows or large stones. Through his achievements and especially his military power, he became famous. But Uzziah had a sad downfall. As Proverbs 16:18 says, "pride goes before a fall." His pride became clearly evident when he took on the function of a priest. He entered the temple to offer incense on the altar of incense. He was confronted for his arrogant behavior by Azariah the priest and eighty other priests. When Uzziah became angry, the Lord struck him with leprosy. As a result, he was forced to live in isolation and could not enter the temple. His son, Jotham, became acting head of state and then succeeded to the kingship at the time of Uzziah's death.

Jeroboam II, reigned over Israel longer than anyone. His reign of forty-one years included eleven years in which he ruled along with his father, Joash. Jeroboam II ruled in the city of Samaria (2 Kings 14:23). Archaeological evidence suggests that Joash and Jeroboam II undertook a reconstruction project in the royal temple; over 60 invoices or labels for oil and wine that had been sent to the royal store were found in 1910. These illustrate the riches and opulence of the royal house in Israel during Jeroboam II's reign. Large numbers of carved decorative plaques and panels of ivory

were also found in the ruins of Samaria, a reminder of the wealth of the Northern Kingdom during the time of Amos. Pictures of various gods have been carved on the ivories, which indicates the influence of the pagan societies of Syria, Assyria, and Egypt. Although Jeroboam's reign was late in the history of the Northern Kingdom, it reached its greatest extension since the time of Solomon during Jeroboam's reign. Israel's prosperity did not save it from war and political problems. The extensive corruption in government and the degenerate spiritual state of the people propelled Israel into its final days. Jeroboam's own life must have been in danger from conspirators; Amaziah, a priest at Bethel, even accused the prophet Amos of conspiring to kill Jeroboam (Amos 7:8-17). Amos actually did prophesy the destruction of Israel and the fall of Jeroboam's kingdom, and perhaps the king felt the word of God to be a threat. Economic depression, immorality, political weakness, and government corruption hastened the fall of Israel. The rich landowners, including Jeroboam II, had oppressed the less wealthy citizens and had forced small landowners to migrate from their farms to the cities.

It was to the Northern Kingdom of Israel that Amos, the man from Judah, spoke his message at Bethel.

As we study the book in the weeks to come we will notice the following division:

- I. Introduction to Amos 1:1, 2**
- II. The Eight Judgments 1:3–2:16**
 - A. Judgment on Damascus 1:3–5
 - B. Judgment on Gaza 1:6–8
 - C. Judgment on Tyre 1:9, 10
 - D. Judgment on Edom 1:11, 12
 - E. Judgment on Ammon 1:13–15
 - F. Judgment on Moab 2:1–3
 - G. Judgment on Judah 2:4, 5
 - H. Judgment on Israel 2:6–16
- III. The Three Sermons of Judgment 3:1–6:14**
 - A. The First Sermon: Israel's Present 3:1–15
 - B. The Second Sermon: Israel's Past 4:1–13
 - C. The Third Sermon: Israel's Future 5:1–6:14
- IV. The Five Visions of Judgment 7:1–9:10**
 - A. Vision of the Locusts 7:1–3
 - B. Vision of the Fire 7:4–6

- C. Vision of the Plumb Line 7:7–9
- D. Opposition of Amaziah (Historical Parenthesis) 7:10–17
- E. Vision of the Summer Fruit 8:1–14
- F. Vision of the Stricken Doorposts 9:1–10
- V. The Five Promises of the Restoration of Israel 9:11–15**

I would invite you to take the outline home with you today and take forty five minutes this week to read through Amos. Then when we gather together next Sunday you will be ready to study the sections dealing with the eight judgements.