

AMOS CALLS FOR GENUINE RELIGION

Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER

July 29, 1979

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Background Scripture: Amos 1–2; 5

Key Passage: Amos 1:1; 5:6–7, 14–15, 21–24

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This is the last lesson of Part II on “Decisions That Shaped the Nations’ Future.” The previous lesson, which focused on the ministry of Elisha, dealt with events in Israel and Judah in approximately 850 B.C. The current lesson moves to events one hundred years later, around 750 B.C. The one hundred years between Elisha and Amos produced tremendous changes in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. A brief survey of these changes will help in our understanding of Amos and his ministry.

The political situation had changed radically since the time of Elisha. Both Elijah and Elisha were instrumental in bringing Hazael to the throne of Syria (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:13). Once on the throne, Hazael afflicted Israel more severely than had Benhadad, his predecessor. Israel was under attack by Syria during the reigns of Jehu (842–815 B.C.) and Jehoahaz (815–801 B.C.), the notice of which is cited in 2 Kings 10:32 and 13:7, 22. But in the days of Jehoash (801–786 B.C.), whose name also appears as Joash, Israel began to find relief from Syrian domination (2 Kings 13:25). Furthermore, Jehoash was successful in putting Judah in temporary subjection when he defeated Amaziah, king of Judah, and plundered Jerusalem (2 Kings 14:13; 2 Chronicles 25:22–24). Jehoash’s son, Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.), was

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recognized as a “savior” sent by Yahweh to deliver his people, Israel, from the hands of the Syrians (2 Kings 13:5; 14:27). Eventually, Jeroboam was able to extend the borders of Israel to the approximate boundaries established by Solomon.

The historical account of Jeroboam II is briefly stated in 2 Kings 14:23–29. Unless one can fix in mind the general location of Hamath, the full impact of the biblical statement will be lost: “He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath . . .” (14:25). Hamath was about as far north of Damascus as Jerusalem was south of Damascus—it is over two hundred miles north of Samaria. In 150 years Israel had not had such political and military strength as it had under Jeroboam II, permitting it to dominate Syrian territories. This military expansion must have been very costly, but Israel’s economy was evidently strong enough to bear it. Most biblical scholars have recognized this period of military strength and economic affluence as the renascence, or renaissance, of Israel.¹

Contributing to this revival in the economic and political life of Israel was the fact that the dominant world power in the East, Assyria, had fallen into a state of weakness. Back in the days of Jehu the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III, had forced the king of Israel to pay him tribute. Shalmaneser’s “Black Obelisk” shows Jehu kissing the ground before the Assyrian monarch.² But the one hundred years between Elisha and

1. ‘See John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 237, 238-239.

2. G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 156.

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Amos produced changes in Assyria, moving it from strength to weakness. Israel prospered during this lull in Assyrian power.

Under the leadership of Jeroboam II, Israel was also able to establish good relationships with Judah. During the one hundred years between 850–750 B.C., Judah experienced some very bad days under the tyrannical rule of Athaliah (2 Kings 11) and the ambivalent, idolatrous Amaziah (2 Kings 14; 2 Chronicles 25). But Jeroboam II and Uzziah, king of Judah (783–742 B.C.), were able to coexist peacefully. Both monarchs expanded their kingdoms and enriched themselves and astutely avoided confrontation with each other. Thus the political situation was stabilized during the reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah. Such were the political changes between the time of Elisha and Amos.

The religious situation also shows significant shifts over the one hundred years separating Amos and Elisha. Most notable is the way in which the role of the prophets changed. From the time of Samuel through the era of Elisha and his disciples, prophets were active in the political life of the united Israel and in the divided monarchies. The prophets anointed kings and pronounced death sentences upon the monarchs. Kings stood in fear of the prophets, for they risked their crowns if they failed to obey the commands of the prophets. But the power of the prophets had been greatly weakened in the post-Jehu era. This may have been due to the costly discrepancies in prophetic demands. One prophet would anoint a king and call for a coup d'état, but after the coup another prophet would denounce the bloodshed or other evils of the incumbent, and this would lead to another coup. Eventually the kings tired of the primacy of the prophets. Prophets were increasingly expected to speak for the king, not to the king. This was a radical change.

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Perhaps the most explicit example of this change is the confrontation between Amaziah and an unnamed prophet. When the prophet attempted to address the king, the king replied, “Have we made you a royal counselor? Stop! Surely they will strike you down!” (2 Chronicles 25:16, paraphrased). (The Greek translation for this passage reads, “Stop, lest you be scourged,” and the Revised Standard Version renders it, “Stop! Why should you be put to death?”) However one translates the text, the message is the same: the prophet is being threatened with extreme punishment, perhaps capital punishment, for bringing to the king the judgment of Yahweh on the king’s activity.

Ahab fearfully had imprisoned the prophet Micaiah, and Micaiah may have died in prison because King Ahab died in battle and did not return to release him. But Amaziah had no fear of the prophet. He was free to listen, if he pleased, and was able to kill the prophet, if he pleased. By the time of Amos, preaching to a king could be as risky for the prophet as it was for the king. The primacy of the prophet had ended before the time of the great preaching prophets like Amos had started. By denying that he was a “prophet” or “a son of a prophet,” Amos may have been demanding more authority than the king would have given to a prophet.

The Biblical Setting

Archaeological excavations at Samaria have uncovered numerous fragments of ivory inlays dating from the eighth century B.C. These fragments attest to the wealth that was a part of Jeroboam II’s affluence. These fragments give credence to Amos’s words: “Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory. The houses of ivory shall perish” (Amos 3:15; 6:4). Compared to the “golden age” of David and Solomon,

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Jeroboam's kingdom was just "gold-plated." But there was wealth, and where there is wealth, there is usually poverty. Israel was no exception. The affluence of Jeroboam's re-nascent kingdom was constructed out of economic oppression and social injustice. The archaeological finds stand as a witness to the affluence of Israel around 750 B.C., but the testimony and prophecy of Amos stand as witnesses to the plight of the poor and the oppression perpetrated by the pious and the wealthy.

Along with the wealth and poverty in Jeroboam's Israel, there was an equal amount of "religion," an "old-time religion" with tested orthodox doctrines. Two tenets of the religion of the pious, privileged class were (1) riches and the righteous go together, since God blesses the righteous with riches, and (2) poverty and punishment are divinely related, since sin is punished by suffering, and poverty precludes comfort. Such doctrine was compatible with ritualistic, sacrificial worship since the rich had enough sacrificial animals to keep their god happy. The rich became richer and the poor became poorer—a process that was theologically justified. Israel's religionists under Jeroboam II had successfully separated ethics and theology.

Into such a world of social injustice and religious arrogance walked the prophet Amos. Amos was probably a man of wealth himself and was therefore called to prophesy unto people of his same social class. Even though he was from Judah and thus an alien in Israel, where he did his preaching, he was very much at home with the socially elite and politically powerful people of Israel.

As noted above, Amos did not consider himself to be either a prophet, or a prophet's son, neither a clergyman nor a seminarian (Amos 7:14). Instead, he identified himself as a

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herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. These two vocations are commonly misunderstood to mean that Amos was a kind of migrant handyman, who was a shepherd, a “cowboy,” and a tree trimmer. To the contrary, the terms probably mean that he was a rancher and a lumberman. There is no evidence that Amos ever got his hands dirty. He was more likely a big businessman with a diversified portfolio. Amos was not a poor man, calling out from poverty to the rich to change their ways. He was a rich man denouncing financially kindred rich people for the oppressive, inhumane, and unjust ways in which wealth was accumulated and then squandered. He was an “establishment man” passing judgment on the “establishment.”

Had Amos been only a poor man, he could have been readily deported or further impoverished. Had he been poor, he could have been silenced, but money talks, and Amos undoubtedly had the riches sufficient to guarantee freedom of speech. Thus, when King Amaziah invited him to leave the country (“O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there”) and to refrain from speaking at the royal chapel (“Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary” [see Amos 7:12–13]), Amos responded to Amaziah more boldly than a poor man would ever dare speak to a king. He replied to the king with the same confidence a rich man has when he talks to a politician today. Amos politely ignored the king’s invitation and spoke his mind.

But Amos was not the prototype of a modern-day lobbyist seeking preferential treatment for his interests as a cattleman or lumberman. To the contrary, Amos was an advocate for those who shared none of his upper-class advantages. He was a layman, who used his position of influence in calling for

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religious orthopraxy (right behavior) to unseat ostentatious orthodoxy (right beliefs) and insensitive ritualism. Amos was demanding a change from the “old-time religion” which tolerated injustice and reinforced oppression.

But Amos was not introducing anything new in his demands for truth and justice. His was an old-time ethic! The demand for justice for all and welfare for the poor, the widow, and the orphan was older than Moses. It was even an ethical goal of the Canaanites!

One of the most interesting stories recovered from the archaeological finds of ancient Ugarit, which was a prosperous trade center along the Coast of northern Syria until 1200 B.C., is the legend of King Keret.³ [page 44] According to legend, the son of King Keret wanted his father to abdicate the throne since he was too old and infirm to establish justice and welfare in his land properly. The young crown prince wanted the chance to fulfill the ethical demands of monarchy by equitably judging the cases of the widows, the orphans, the oppressed, and the poverty stricken. The ancient text ends without telling if the crown prince ever had the chance to govern on his platform of welfare and justice. But the son of King Keret would have been comfortable with the message of Amos, although the king of Israel was not.

Amos was seeking to establish in the Israel of Yahweh an ethical standard that five hundred years earlier had been the aspiration of some Canaanites. God’s people in Israel lacked standards of justice and decency, which were the goals and

3. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 149.

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objectives of some followers of Baal. Amos recognized that in Israel some “old-time religion” needed to be corrected by some old-fashioned ethics. The ethical demands of Yahweh were no less demanding than those attested for by some followers of Baal.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Amos 1:1—“The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa.”

According to 2 Chronicles 11:5–6, Tekoa was one of numerous cities built by Rehoboam, Solomon’s successor, for the defense of Judah. It was located about ten miles south of Jerusalem. Amos was obviously a southerner who decided to preach up north. During the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah, religious and social conditions were better in the south than in the north. Amos perceived that the end of the Northern Kingdom was in sight; therefore he labored under the imperative to prophesy while there was yet some chance for repentance.

Amos is called a “shepherd” in this introductory verse, but the Hebrew term is not the ordinary word used for a shepherd. The term used here occurs in only one other Old Testament text, 2 Kings 3:4, which refers to Mesha, the king of Moab, as a “shepherd” responsible for delivering annually to the king of Israel “a hundred thousand lambs, and the wool of a hundred thousand rams.” This is obviously big business. Amos was probably a “shepherd” like the king of Moab. This same term, used twice in the Bible for Amos and Mesha, occurs elsewhere in nonbiblical texts indicating “shepherds” who functioned as high officials.⁴ In the light of this evidence, it

4. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Ventnor, N.J.: Ventnor Pubs., 1965), p. 447.

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was stated above that Amos may never have gotten his hands dirty since he was a wealthy lumberman and rancher.

Amos 5:21—“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.”

Attendance at formal worship services was not easy in ancient Israel. There were no “neighborhood churches” for people to attend. Worship was restricted to special sacred cities that had become holy places from the time of the patriarchs. Amos noted some of these, namely, Bethel, Beersheba, and Gilgal (Amos 5:5). Worship consequently involved pilgrimages, feasts, and festivals, such as Passover (Exodus 34:25), Booths, or Harvest (23:16), and Weeks (34:22), as well as the new moon and sabbath services. But the religious holy days and the sacrificial offerings were totally objectionable to God. He hated them and despised them!

Amos made no qualifying reservations about Yahweh’s hate and distaste for organized, formal, religious celebrations. Amos recommended no reformation of the sacrificial system, nor did he charge Israel with ritualistic irregularities. Amos demanded ethical reform and the removal of traditional “religious” activities. *True religion was to be demonstrated by social justice and ethical rightness.*

Applying the Lesson to Life

It is possible for an immoral and unjust social system—comfortable with poverty and tolerable of oppression—to let justice and mercy trickle temporarily in a spasm of tokenism. But prophetic religion demands a perpetual torrent of justice, love, and mercy. The only way to apply the words of Amos to life is to appropriate them in the appraisal of one’s own nation and culture. Few would disagree that in modern America, as in ancient Israel, it is easy to sustain and support artificial

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“sacrificial” systems that demand at the most one-tenth of all that we possess. Were we to fulfill the standards of love and justice advocated by Amos, there would need to be a radical shift in our personal and national life-style. We would need to sell all that we possess and give to the poor!

We have no way of knowing if we are in the “golden age of America” or the “gold-plated” era, but we can admit that we are living in a day of affluence at least comparable to the days of Jeroboam II. It is an affluence that tolerates poverty, injustice, ignorance, and discrimination.

History could repeat itself, but it does not have to. We can restructure our national and religious priorities. What needs to be repeated is the return of Amos; that is, our day could well benefit from the ministry of lay people who are neither “prophets nor sons of the prophets” but who are concerned with orthopraxy (right doing). Many have called out for orthodoxy, but too few have picked up Amos’s mantle and advocated from the position of wealth and power the demands for orthopraxy: Seek good, hate evil, care for the poor and needy. This is the way one finds Yahweh; this is the road to life. This is the very way God came to us in Jesus!