

The Book of Amos



Introduction

Theme

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

This popular quote from Amos defines for many people what Amos is about: social justice. Amos is seen as the quintessential Biblical text on social justice, and for good reason. A major theme of Amos is that religion without justice is no religion at all. Amos describes the Israelites as enthusiastically participating in religious pilgrimages and festivals and even tithing, but their treatment of the “righteous” and “needy” violate their covenant with Yahweh. The rich exploit the poor and the courts are corrupt and offer no redress.

Paganism heavily influenced Israelite religious practices (see II Kings), but Amos, unlike his contemporary Hosea, does not stress this pagan influence and only hints at the corruption of cultic practices (cf. Amos 2:7). He is more concerned with the contrast between the practice of religion and the treatment of the poor. In Amos’ view it is precisely the mistreatment of the poor that is proof of the broken covenant between God and his people, and Israel, who has heretofore thought of herself as special, privileged, and protected by God, is about to endure the consequences.

Amos brings the startling message that, contrary to their understanding, their special election by Yahweh will bring them condemnation rather than protection. Their covenant with Yahweh meant that they were bound to follow God’s laws, including worshipping him alone and treating the poor with kindness. Their failure to live out the stipulations of the covenant guarantees that they will be called to account for failing to love God and neighbor, as God requires.

The sovereignty of God is also proclaimed by Amos: God is not only the God of Israel but of all the nations. Certain laws are written on everyone’s hearts, and so all nations should know what is morally correct. Those who violate the natural law will also be punished, but God nevertheless cares even for these nations.



Authorship, date of composition

Amos was the first of the “minor prophets” to write anything down. (The “minor prophets” are 12 prophets grouped together in the Bible. They are called “minor” not because they are insignificant but because their books are quite short). In the Hebrew Bible he is placed third among the Minor Prophets (the Septuagint places him second). He was, by his own admission, not a “professional prophet.” In other words, he did not belong to any guild of prophets that existed at the time. He was a “shepherd” and a “dresser of sycamore trees” who lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the small village of Tekoa. He was called by God to go to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, to preach against the corruption of the religion, and to defend the poor from exploitation by the wealthy. Amos preached and wrote in the 8th Century, BC. The two kings mentioned in v. 1, Uzziah of Judah (c.785-733 BC) and Jeroboam II (c.788-747 BC) narrow the time that he could have been prophesying. “Two years before the earthquake” is not very helpful, since we no longer know which earthquake he is referring to. One source dates this earthquake, due to some archeological findings, to 760 BC.

Although there is scholarly discussion on some passages of Amos as to whether or not they are later additions, there is general agreement that the book is written by one author, that being Amos, a shepherd-turned-prophet from Tekoa.

Background of Amos

A short history of Israel/Judah may help to understand the cultural milieu in which Amos preached. Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt around the year 1250-1200 BC. From 1200 BC to 1021 BC the Hebrews lived in the land with various other peoples in a tribal confederacy (this is the period covered by the books of Joshua and Judges).

Around 1021 BC a great new leader rose up, Saul (1 Sam 9-10). Saul was anointed King of the Hebrew tribes. When he failed to carry out God’s command to utterly destroy the city of Amalek, God “repented” that He made Saul King, and chose David instead (1 Sam. 15-16). Under David, the monarchy was firmly established, (1000-961 BC) and under Solomon (961-922 BC) the Kingdom of Israel flourished. After his death, however, it broke into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

From 922-800 BC (mostly) ineffective kings led these kingdoms. They were frequently embattled with the two superpowers of the region (Assyria and Egypt) and were often at odds with each other as well. Moreover each kingdom was tempted to follow after Ba’al, the Canaanite god. Israel often succumbed to the temptation. (See II Kings ch. 9-11). In the 8th Century, however, Egypt and Assyria went into a state of decline, as did Syria.



Uzziah and Jeroboam II, as well as their immediate predecessors, Jehoash of Israel (802-788 BC) and Amaziah of Judah (800-785) were strong leaders who presided over a time of prosperity that had not been seen since the time of Solomon.

Cities were re-conquered, lost territory regained, and the Transjordan trade route was secured throughout the territory. The two kingdoms were at peace with each other. There was a feeling of great confidence and optimism. Yahweh's people were protected by Yahweh! They were his special chosen people!

However, not everyone benefited from this prosperity. The wealthy were very, very wealthy. Archeological findings at Samaria revealed beautiful buildings with ivory inlays of Phoenician or Damascene origin. But the poor did not share in this prosperity. The State did not protect them from the dishonest practices of business, and the courts offered no redress since judges were corrupt. Moreover, while people practiced religion, it was often not the religion devoted solely to Yahweh, but was often syncretized (mixed) with the religion of Ba'al. (As stated previously, this is made even clearer in Hosea and II Kings). Finally, the prophets were forbidden to prophesy, and the Nazarites were corrupted and forced to drink wine (2:12). Thus, socially, morally and religiously Israel, which superficially looked in great shape, was actually falling into a dangerous decay.

It is this situation that Amos, a Shepherd and dresser of Sycamore trees, was called by God to challenge.

Outline of Amos

Introduction 1:1-2.

Judgments of the surrounding nations, Judah and Israel (1:3-2:16)

Israel warned and threatened (3:1-6:14)

Series of visions (7:1-9:10)

Conclusion (9:11-15)



Notes: