



## AMOS: CROSSING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

### Background from the Author

As you enter into the study of *Amos and Hosea*, it will be good to be familiar with the notion (touched on briefly in Session 1 of the *Resource Book*) that the books containing the preaching of Amos and Hosea (as well as those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the others) are composed of several different types of material: some autobiographical accounts, some biographical accounts, and the sermons, or “oracles,” of the prophet.

Often, in the “sermons” of the prophet, the prophet speaks as a messenger of God, and therefore the “I” in these oracles is to be understood as God’s actual speaking. I do not think—as some scholars do—that an ironclad distinction can be drawn between those sermons which are “prophetic speech” [the prophet speaking *about* God] and those which are “divine speech” [the prophet speaking in God’s name]. Sometimes, in oracles introduced by the standard prophetic “messenger formula,” “Thus says the LORD . . .,” we find that the speech refers to God in the third person. Participants may want to look at an assortment of passages from Hebrew prophecy and discuss whether they understand the passage to be the speech of God (through the prophet) or ideas and utterances of the prophet himself—and what difference it makes.

An interesting thread of discussion might revolve around why, beginning with Amos, prophets’ words were compiled in books. This did not happen with earlier prophets, such as Samuel, Nathan, and Elijah. A study of the work and words of the earlier prophets might

prompt some useful theories about *why* a new trend started with Amos. Was it Amos' severe message that prompted the collection? Was it his expansion of God's words of judgment to include other nations (see Session 3)? Was it the fact that within several decades many of Amos' dire prophecies came to pass, imbuing his words with a heightened sense of awe?

One of the most highly debated phrases in the Old Testament is Amos' utterance in 7:14. One might note that the original Hebrew utterance has no verb, so that the wording is simply "Not a prophet I and not a son of a prophet." This ambiguity has provoked the extensive discussion as to whether Amos was (1) denying the title of "prophet" for himself *period* ("I am no prophet . . ."), or (2) reporting that he *was* no prophet until God called him ("I *was* no prophet. . .").

The term "sons of the prophets" (translated in the NRSV as "the *company* of the prophets") occurs rather often in the Old Testament (for example, 1 Samuel 19:20; 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 4:1; 9:1), and (as the NRSV translation suggests) referred to an organization or *guild* of prophets. This would have been essentially a professional band of prophets, and Amos' denial in 7:14 seems to assert that he does (did?) not belong to such a company.

## SESSION PLANS

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### *Learning Objectives*

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Describe the experience of being called into a life of prophecy and list some of the fears and apprehensions that such a call might bring to a prophet.
2. Explain the roles of the prophet, priest and king in Old Testament times and examine how they might come into conflict while trying to fulfill their individual callings.
3. Identify some of the reasons why Amaziah rebuffed Amos.
4. Clarify some modern experiences of coming into conflict with the establishment while trying to be a prophetic voice.

5. List the sins of Israel which caused God to call Amos to prophesy in Israel
6. Examine our own participation in the ministry of justice in our churches, communities, countries and the world.

### ***Resources You May Need***

Bibles

Chalkboard or flip chart with flip chart paper

Masking tape or stick tack

Chubby magic markers in a variety of colors

Copies of **Resource 2A – God’s Word To Moses And Us**

Copies of **Resource 2B – Prophet, Priest and King Worksheet**

One copy of a **Case Study** for each small group (**Resource 2C** – cut into case study slips)

Copies of **Resource 2D – Living Faith: Justice**

Copies of *The Prayer of St. Francis* words and/or music

### ***Leadership Strategy***

#### SETTING THE STAGE

1. **Prayer.** Open the session with a prayer of your own choosing or use the responsive prayer on the call of Moses found in **Resource 2A**.
2. **Calling.** Have the group split into pairs being careful to separate friends and couples. Assign one person in the pair to be the “caller” and the other to be the “callee.” It is usually easier to assign parts than ask them to decide for themselves. The “caller” could be the person in the pair with the bluer eyes, or the lighter colored hair, or the shorter one of the two. They will be swapping roles, so everyone will get a turn.

Have the “caller” ask the “callee” to do something he or she may not wish to do (travel to a foreign land, sing in front of a thousand people, create a PowerPoint

presentation to be shown in church, etc.). The “callee” is to resist at all costs, responding with valid and not-so-valid reasons why he or she does not want to do it. The “caller” must press the “callee” to do the task. Allow the pairs to do their role-play for a couple of minutes and then invite them to reverse roles and come up with a new task to resist. After a couple of minutes ask them all to return to the whole group.

Have a brief discussion using the following questions:

- What was the “lamest” excuse you heard?
- What was the best excuse you heard?
- When you were the “caller” how did it feel to be refused continually?
- When you were the “callee” how did it feel being pressured into doing something you were reluctant to do?
- Which was the more difficult role for you to play?
- Were any of you immediately excited by the task? Did you have to make up reasons to resist when you really wanted to “Just Do It”?

**or**

Have the group break into pairs, encouraging couples not to work together since they already know each other’s stories. Ask the pairs to recall a time when each of them was asked to do something he/she really didn’t want to do. You may want to prompt their imaginations with ideas like: reading scripture in church, traveling to a foreign land, performing in a play at school or meeting someone you’ve never met before. Ask them to share their stories with each other, mentioning things like:

- Who asked you to do it?
- Why did the person want you to do this thing?
- How did you feel? Why?
- Did you resist having to do it?
- Did you do it in the end? How was it if you did? If you didn’t, do you regret your decision?

**and/or**

Staying in groups of two, have each pair read together at least two of the following scriptures:

Jonah 1: 1-17;            1 Samuel 3:1-10;            Isaiah 6:1-8;  
Jeremiah 1:4-10;        Hosea 1:2-7                1 Kings 19:3-18

Discuss in pairs:

- How did the prophet feel about this call from God?
- Was the prophet's response an immediate YES?
- What are some of the concerns the prophet might have?

### EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

**1. Brainstorm.** Take a few minutes to brainstorm as a group what is known or can be inferred about Amos' personal life from the reading this week. In reality, little is known, but reviewing Amos 1:1; 3:7,8; and 7:14,15 may help add to the information. Using the questions from the previous activity, begin to get a sense of how Amos responded to his call from God:

- How did Amos feel about this call from God?
- Was Amos' response an immediate YES?
- What are some of the concerns Amos might have had about going to Israel as a prophet?

**2. Map.** Review the map in the *Resource Book* showing Amos' travels to the nation of Israel. As we come to Amos' encounters in Israel, we come to the story of the encounters of three people:

1. Amos - Prophet
2. Amaziah - Priest
3. Jeroboam II - King

An understanding of these three roles, their relationship to each other and to God is critical to understand the bigger picture of the issues affecting Israel. Each of these

three roles has certain responsibilities different from one another. Each plays a part in the bigger picture of representing God to the people of God and guiding and caring for the concerns and needs of God's people.

Distribute **Resource 2B – Prophet, Priest and King**, break the group into three smaller groups and have each group answer the questions for each column, representing either prophet, priest or king. Have each group report the results of its findings to the whole group.

Once the groups have reported their findings, ask these questions of everyone:

- What are the points of conflict between the roles of prophet, priest and king?
- Can these conflicts be resolved? How?
- What is the outcome if they are not resolved?

It appears that in order for each to fulfill the role that has been given to him by God, it is necessary for each of them to keep attentive to God's guidance. When prophet, priest and king are able to do this, there should be no conflict among them. They should all be working together on the same page. But when one or more parties place their focus on themselves, rather than on God, problems arise. This is the scenario that Amos walked into, when he crossed the border from Judah into Israel and stopped off in Bethel to meet with the priest Amaziah and deliver God's message to both Amaziah and the king.

**and**

Read Amos 7:10-17. This is the story of Amos, Amaziah and Jeroboam II coming to figurative if not literal blows over the prophecies of Amos in judgment of the King (Jeroboam II may not be present at this altercation, but he is definitely in the room). It is evident from the text that the three parties are in conflict and the priest and king are unable to hear God's voice and respond to the issues of sin and judgment that Amos has placed before the king on God's behalf.

- What prevents Amaziah from recognizing that Amos comes on God's behalf?

- What methods did Amaziah use to prevent Amos' message from being heard by the king or others?
- What are the consequences of Amaziah's decision?

**and/or**

In Mark 11:15-18, Jesus encounters the establishment in the synagogue while trying to speak God's truth. Using this and the story of Amos for guidance, consider together some of the following case studies that come out of situations like this. You may wish to work in three small groups, assigning one case study per group, or pick one or two cases to discuss together. A copy of these cases can be found as **Resource 2C** for easy photocopying and clipping apart.

**Case One:** Your minister has been asked to speak at an environmental rally in the community. The ruling body of the church comes to the minister and informs him/her that a prominent and generous member will leave the church if the minister speaks as planned. The minister feels strongly that God wants us to care for creation and this is a great way for the minister and the church to stand visibly in the community in this arena.

- When someone is "paid" to be a church's minister or lay leader, to whom is the religious leader responsible?
- How does a minister respond to the prophetic call of God while striving to please the church's membership?

**Case Two:** A local politician has asked to speak from the pulpit one Sunday morning during his political campaign. He is a favorite and well-loved community leader. An individual in the church has come to the minister and governing body asking that the church decline his offer, stating that the pulpit is not a platform for politicians, but the church is God's sanctuary. Citing the separation of church and state, the individual waits for the governing body to render its decision.

- Does the church bear civic responsibilities in addition to religious ones?
- How might the church relate to the state, seeking to influence its decision making while reserving its right to point out any injustices that it might commit?

- How does the church's leadership encourage the prophetic voice coming to them from the laity while maintaining the tradition and openness of the church?

**Case Three:** A friend of yours invites you to join the bus heading to your capital to deliver a stack of petitions demanding more funding for the homeless. You signed the petition and feel strongly about the needs of the homeless. You know your spouse is upset about a shelter moving into your neighborhood and is concerned that house values will plummet. You check your calendar and the day is open.

- Is it possible to voice our opinions, be a prophetic voice and not rock the boat at the same time? Why or why not?
- How do you reconcile personal convictions with harmony with family and friends?

- 3. Conflict.** Amos came into conflict with Amaziah over the issue of permission for Amos to prophesy to the king and in Israel. Life was great in Israel at the time. One might think that the king's wealth and the lack of political conflicts implied God's satisfaction with Jeroboam II's leadership. Jeroboam II lived in a palace in Samaria, reflecting the wealth and success of his leadership in bringing stability back to Israel. Yet, Amos came into his midst declaring that his palace of ivory carvings and inlays was to perish because of the social ills that this prosperity had brought to the land.

Amos reaches a crescendo in his speech when he cries out, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). For all of the prosperity there is injustice in the land. The king has not taken care of God's chosen people and their needs. Amos lets Jeroboam II know of these injustices before he declares God's judgment upon Israel. These injustices are scattered throughout Amos chapters 3 - 6. Together, read over these passages to get a sense of the wrongdoings in Israel. Create a list of what is clearly stated and what you can gather about injustice in the Northern kingdom from the following passages:

Amos 2:6-8; 2:12; 3:10; 4:1; 5:11,12; 6:4-7

- How could these things happen in a kingdom of great wealth?
- How or how not have times changed?

**and**



Jesus stood in the tradition of Amos calling out for justice and righteousness in the appropriate treatment of all. Read Matthew 25:31-46. Use Eugene Peterson's *The Message* if possible. Jesus clearly states the judgment upon the unjust in this parable.

- What is your report card like according to this parable?
- What is your church's report card like?
- What is your community's report card like?
- What is your nation's report card like?
- How are you ensuring that not only you have a good report card, but so does your church, community, nation and world?

### CLOSING

1. **Justice.** Lead the group in the reading of **Resource 2D – Living Faith: Justice.**

**and/or**

Close with the singing or saying of the *Prayer of St. Francis*.

## Resource 2A

### God's Word to Moses and to Us

- Leader:** God said to Moses from the burning bush, "Moses, Moses." (Exodus 3:4)
- People:** Help us, God, to hear you when you speak to us, and to say as Moses did, "Here I am."
- Leader:** God said, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)
- People:** Remind us, O God, that wherever you meet us, that is a holy place.
- Leader:** God said, "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued." (Exodus 3:7)
- People:** May we see through your eyes, the needs of people to be rescued and may we be willing to respond to their cry.
- Leader:** God said, "I am sending you so that you can lead my people." (Exodus 3:10)
- People:** We are overwhelmed by the immensity of the task that you place before us; give us strength and wisdom, O God, sufficient for the task.
- Leader:** God said, "I AM WHO I AM. This is my name forever; this is what all future generations will call me." (Exodus 3:14,15)
- People:** Thank you, God, for revealing to us your name and yourself, so that we may know you as the One who delivers all who call upon you.
- All:** Amen

(Adapted from Don Griggs, *Meeting God in the Bible*, The Kerygma Program. 300 Mt. Lebanon Blvd., Pittsburgh, PA 15234 U.S.A. 1992. **Participant's Resource – 19.**)

## Resource 2B

### Prophet, Priest and King

Prophet	Priest	King
1 Samuel 3:10-20; Jeremiah 1:9,10	Exodus 28:1; Leviticus 9:6-7, 22-24; 10:8-11	1 Samuel 9:15-17; 10:1
What is the role of a prophet?	What is the role of the priest?	What is the role of the king?
How could this role be corrupted?	How could this role be corrupted?	How could this role be corrupted?
How could the role of prophet come into conflict with the other two?	How could the role of priest come into conflict with the other two?	How could the role of king come into conflict with the other two?

## Resource 2C

### Case Studies

**Case One:** Your minister has been asked to speak at an environmental rally in the community. The session comes to the minister and informs him/her that a prominent and generous member will leave the church if the minister speaks as planned. The minister feels strongly that God wants us to care for creation and this is a great way for him/her and the church to stand visibly in the community in this arena.

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- How do you reconcile personal convictions with harmony with family and friends?

## Resource 2D

### Living Faith: Justice

**Voice (or Group) 1:** God is always calling the church to seek that justice in the world which reflects the divine righteousness revealed in the Bible.

**Voice (or Group) 2:** God's justice is seen when we deal fairly with each other and strive to change customs and practices that oppress and enslave others.

**Voice (or Group) 3:** Justice involves protecting the rights of others. It protests against everything that destroys human dignity.

**Voice (or Group) 1:** Justice requires concern for the poor of the world. It seeks the best way to create well-being in every society. It is concerned about employment, education, and health, as well as rights and responsibilities.

**Voice (or Group) 2:** Justice seeks fairness in society. It involves the protection of human beings, concern for the victims of crime, as well as offenders. It requires fair laws justly administered, courts and penal institutions that are just and humane.

**Voice (or Group) 3:** Justice opposes prejudice in every form. It rejects discrimination on such grounds as race, sex, age, status, or handicap. Justice stands with our neighbors in their struggle for dignity and respect and demands the exercise of power for the common good.

(Taken from *Living Faith – A Statement of Christian Belief*. The Presbyterian Church in Canada. 50 Wynford Drive. Don Mills, Ontario M3C 1J7 Canada. Section 8.4)