

# 2

## SUMMARY

This session takes note of the way the prophet Amos was literally a boundary-crosser but also in the figurative sense in that he refused to acknowledge a barrier between the Israelites' religious commitment to the Lord and their public/social life. The suspicious or negative reaction to his unsettling message epitomizes the reception which greeted many of his prophetic colleagues.

### **BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES**

Amos 3:4-8

Amos 6:4-7

Amos 7:10-17

Micah 3:9-12

Psalm 72:1-4

Isaiah 11:1-4

### **WORD LIST**

Israel (Northern Kingdom)

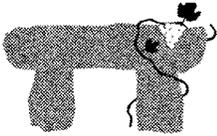
Samaria

Judah (Southern Kingdom)

Tekoa

Amaziah

Bethel



## AMOS: CROSSING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

### Setting the Stage

Imagine a country where the government provides the salary for the clergy, financing for the church's programs, and sermons for the preachers to proclaim each week. We may infer from the evidence available in the Book of Amos that this would not be terribly different from the situation in the kingdom of Israel in the time of Jeroboam II. The government does not wish to hear criticism of royal behavior or policy initiatives, nor do they welcome rebuke of those persons and institutions which are friends of the government. In our first look at Amos's career and preaching, we shall discover the prophet running afoul of these government interests. The state's position seems to have been that if the religious spokespersons cannot support the government policies, they should keep silent.

Following the glory days of kings David and Solomon (roughly the first three-quarters of the 900s BCE), when Israel maintained a position among the major powers of the Middle East, the nation had to adjust to a lesser role in the affairs of that part of the world. In about 922 BCE, very shortly after the death of King Solomon, the nation ruptured into two separate states, northern "Israel" and southern "Judah." The two kingdoms pursued parallel paths, sometimes at odds with each other, sometimes allies. The first king of the northern state, Jeroboam I, was the ringleader of the revolution which in 922 led ten tribes in secession from the house of David, to form the separate state of Israel. To prevent the citizens of his newly-established kingdom from continuing to make pilgrimage southward to Jerusalem (capital of neighboring Judah) for the purpose of worshipping the nation's god Yahweh at the



Jerusalem temple, King Jeroboam I had temples for Yahweh constructed in the cities of Dan, near the northern extremity of the kingdom, and Bethel, at the southern boundary. In those temples Jeroboam I appointed priests (1 Kings 12:25-33).

During the ninth century (the 800s), while the kingdom of Judah enjoyed the continuing rule of the house of David (based on God's promise to King David that his family would always hold the throne in Jerusalem—see 2 Samuel 7:8-16), it was not unusual for the northern kingdom to experience political coups and changes of ruling family. These political rivalries contributed to an extended period of government and military weakness in the northern state; that state suffered the loss of some of its territory and endured dominance by Syria, its neighbor to the north.

After Jeroboam II assumed the throne of the northern kingdom in about 786 BCE, he managed to pull the nation out of its tailspin, and during his forty-year reign in Samaria (the capital of Israel), the land enjoyed relative prosperity. (As we shall see during the next several sessions, not all of his subjects shared in the enjoyment of that prosperity.) Many of the beneficiaries of that prosperity interpreted the good times as God's blessings bestowed on the nation as a sign of divine favor and approval.

## **Amos Encounters Amaziah**

Amos, the first of the “classical prophets,” hailed from Tekoa, a small town outside of Jerusalem, in the Kingdom of Judah. As things turned out, he conducted his prophetic ministry in a country not his own. As he crossed over into the Kingdom of Israel, he found himself in a land where he was not especially welcome. He confronted a people not his own, and this may account for the harshness of his message, which was hardly ever alleviated by any words of comfort or hope.

Read **Amos 7:10-17**. The priest Amaziah would be an official who held his position in charge of the Bethel shrine by virtue of royal appointment (1 Kings 12:31-32, as well as the similar procedures mentioned in 1 Kings 2:27, 35). As the presiding official at that sanctuary, Amaziah would be expected by the king to manage the affairs at Bethel in such a way that the king and his government would not be embarrassed. So the priest had a vested interest in seeing to it that no one rocked the boat.

When Amos traveled from his home in Judah to the country of Israel, Bethel would be one of the first locales which he would encounter. It is not surprising that he should make

the acquaintance of the reverend Amaziah. The story of their tête-à-tête is recorded in Amos 7:10-17.

## **Ignoring The Prophetic Critique**

The first words we hear about this encounter of priest and prophet consist of a report from Amaziah to his king about the threat which Amos poses. “Amos has conspired against you (note how the priest personalizes the threat to the king) in the midst of the house of Israel . . .” He proceeds to quote from the prophet: “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from the land” (Amos 7:10-11). Anyone familiar with the earlier history of Israel knew that prophets from time to time helped to instigate political coups; in fact, the very dynasty to which Jeroboam II belonged had come to power in the mid-800’s as the result of just such a prophet-inspired uprising by Jehu (1 Kings 19:15-16; 2 Kings 9). So such a report from Amaziah might well cause consternation in the capital!

Judging from the words of Amos recorded a few verses earlier (7:7-9), the priest’s allegations are not completely wide of the mark:

He showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

(The vision of the plumb line indicates that Israel’s behavior has been measured and found wanting—“out of plumb.”) But we have much reason to believe that the priest’s report represented a slanted view of the prophet’s message. First of all, we note in 7:10-11 that Amaziah makes no mention of Amos’s words being those of the Lord. The priest insinuates that this treasonous message is simply Amos’s concoction. But it was not simply the source of the message which Amaziah misrepresents; he also, by careful expurgation of his report to Jeroboam, mischaracterizes the rationale in Amos’s diatribe.

It was not unusual for the Hebrew prophets to announce judgment against either the rulers of the Israelites or against the people themselves; see, for example, 2 Samuel 12:7-12;

2 Kings 1:1-4; Isaiah 5:20-25. But it would have been very unusual—virtually unheard of—for a prophet to announce doom from Yahweh upon a king or a people without specifying the transgressions which have led to that punishment. (See Session 1.) The prophets often acted as God’s prosecuting attorneys, and as such they laid out the charges against the guilty. Being a just ruler, the Lord whom the prophets represented does not impose penalties upon the people without specifying the wrongs they have committed. The accusation is spelled out as grounds for the announced punishment which *therefore* is to ensue. The prophet Nathan confronted adulterous King David in this fashion:

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? *You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife* (2 Samuel 12:9-10).

Elijah pronounced judgment on King Ahaziah of Israel:

But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Get up, go to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, *‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’* Now *therefore* thus says the LORD, ‘You shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die’ ” (2 Kings 1:3-4).

And we hear the prophet Micah denouncing the leaders of the state: Read **Micah 3:9-12**.

So it was when Amos presented Yahweh’s case against the Israelites. We read in Amos 3:10, “*They do not know how to do right, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.*” “*Therefore,*” the Lord’s prophet continues, “An adversary shall surround the land . . .”

In Amos 4:1 the prophet denounces the “cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Samaria, *who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’*” And, on the basis of this evil, verse 2 continues, “The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.” Read **Amos 6:4-7**. God’s judgments are always a response to the people’s transgression of the norms of righteousness and justice. In the midst of national prosperity, those with social and political power were

indulging their desires, all the while oppressing the poor and denying the lower classes an appropriate share of the prosperity.

Just as Amaziah made no mention in his report to King Jeroboam of the theological dimension of Amos's message, neither did the priest reference any of the wrongdoings which Amos has exposed. It is safe to assume that Amaziah, in his report to the king, has conveniently remained silent about the prophet's critique of unjust behaviors which were rampant in Israel.

To ignore the bad news of our sin is to make God look like an arbitrary tyrant and the prophet of the Lord appear to be at the very least a malcontent and troublemaker, if not a traitor to the people of God. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. . . . If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8, 10).

### **Ridiculing the Prophetic Critique**

We are not told how (or even if) the king responded to Amaziah's communiqué. But in the way that Amaziah next addresses Amos, we get a clue to the establishment's attitude toward the prophet. Using a term from the Judean dialect, the priest charges Amos, "*O seer*, go flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there." An analogous situation might occur if a prophetic spokesperson from the Southern United States went to Chicago and proclaimed an unpopular message, whereupon an official charged this speaker, "Bubba, why don't you go back to Mayberry and eat yo' grits!" Amaziah's words to Amos are dismissive, representing an attempt to belittle Amos's work. This priestly representative of the king implies that the visitor from Judah is an "outside agitator," intent upon earning a bit of attention and perhaps profit from his scandalous fear-mongering preaching. Go and "eat bread" back in your own country!

If a message challenges our priorities or our behaviors and makes us uncomfortable, we will often look for any excuse to dismiss it and disregard it. "She's an outsider and does not understand our traditions and our culture." "People of his race (or gender or nationality or educational background or religion) should not presume to speak to our circumstances." If we can construe as alien or "other" those who offer a critique of our religion or society, we can more easily convince ourselves of the unfairness or irrelevance or wrongness of that critique.

## Silencing the Prophetic Critique

When ignoring and ridiculing the prophetic critique are insufficient to discourage the voice of prophecy, we discover often an effort to silence that voice. The priest Amaziah bluntly instructs Amos, “Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (Amos 7:13).

Dissent is not to be tolerated in the kingdom of Jeroboam. This attitude was not unique to the northern kingdom. Less than a generation after Amos, the Judean prophet Isaiah would hear the “rebellious” and “faithless” people of that kingdom deride him and instruct him,

“Do not prophesy to us what is right;  
speak to us smooth things,  
prophesy illusions,  
Leave the way, turn aside from the path,  
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”  
(Isaiah 30:10-11)

In the mid-600s the kingdom of Judah experienced what was by all odds the most corrupt of all the Hebrew kings, Manasseh. Although we do read of unnamed prophets during Manasseh’s lengthy reign (2 Kings 21:1, 10), we know of no great individual prophets in that era. The author of 2 Kings relates that “Manasseh shed much innocent blood,” and it is not unreasonable to conclude that intentional efforts were carried out by the establishment to silence any who might dare to speak out prophetically against government policies.

One may recognize a common tendency among sinners, when confronted by the exposure of their wrongs, to become defensive, to silence the voice of criticism, refusing to face up to the ugly truth. John Calvin commented on this tendency among even those who profess devotion to the Lord: “There is no one who pretends not, that he desires to obey God, but yet hardly one in a hundred really receives his word. For as soon as [God] speaks, almost all raise a clamor; or if they dare not furiously, and in a hostile manner, oppose it, we yet see how some evade it, and others secretly oppose it.”

There is a dismaying irony to the words of Amaziah when he expels Amos from Bethel, declaring of that temple, “it is the king’s sanctuary.” This represents, of course, a

gross theological error. The temple was supposed to be the special earthly abode of God. This verse in Amos 7 is the only Old Testament text in which the temple or the sanctuary is referred to as belonging to any human. The temple is most often referred to as “the temple of the LORD” (1 Sam. 3:3; 2 Kings 18:16; Ezra 3:6), “his temple” (2 Sam. 22:7; Psalm 27:4),” or “your temple” (Psalm 5:7; 48:9; Jonah 2:7).

Another nuance which may be discerned in the priest’s words is the desire of the employees of the kingdom to ensure that their lord and master will be protected from adverse criticism. The temple, rather than being a holy place where everything else is subordinated to the will and the service of the Lord, has become a “sanctuary,” a haven where nothing contrary to the king’s agenda is to be countenanced.

It was a fundamental part of the Old Testament understanding of kingship that the interests of the government should cohere with the purposes of God; indeed it was part of the king’s mission to promote the norms of the Covenant. Read **Psalm 72:1-4**.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned the coming of a king who would embody the desired virtues: Read **Isaiah 11:1-4**.

But in this fallen world, we discover that those in “the establishment” (and it happens not only in governments, but also in corporations and in churches) habitually seek to insulate themselves from any adverse analysis of their policies or practices. In our own American history, we have witnessed national leaders suggesting that anyone who would criticize national policy, especially in times of national crisis, was unpatriotic. One alliterative allegation leveled against critics of the Vietnam war was that those critics were “nattering nabobs of negativism”; this is the modern equivalent of epithets hurled at Amos and Jeremiah.

George Ready, who served in several U.S. administrations in the twentieth century, on the basis of what he had observed in the corridors of power in Washington, wrote the following in his book *The Twilight of the Presidency*: “By the twentieth century, the presidency had taken on all the regalia of monarchy except ermine robes, a scepter, and a crown. . . . During the early days of a president’s incumbency, the atmosphere of reverence which surrounds him acquires validity in his own eyes because of the ease with which he can get results . . . . [In White House councils] a thesis which could not survive an undergraduate seminar in a liberal arts college becomes accepted doctrine . . . . It is only an inference but an inescapable one that the White House is an institution which dulls

the sensitivity of political men and ultimately reduces them to bungling amateurs in their basic craft—the art of politics . . . . An occasional ‘go soak your head’ or ‘that’s stupid’ would clear the murky, turgid atmosphere of the White House and let in some health-giving fresh air” (George W. Ready. *The Twilight of the Presidency*. New York, 1970, pp. 9, 10, 12, 14, 23). At least in the case of Amaziah’s priesthood, there was no such counterweight provided to the monarchy—and no willingness to tolerate a prophetic challenge to that monarchy or to the friends and supporters of the king.

## Amos’s Defense

In reply to the rebuke from Amaziah, Amos succinctly seeks to set matters straight:

“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’” (Amos 7:14).

Much debate has taken place over the exact meaning of Amos’s declaration “I am no prophet.” Strange words these seem to be, especially since in the latter part of his utterance Amos says that the LORD told him to “Go, *prophesy* . . . .” Commentaries will enlighten you about the various suggested interpretations. To this writer, the likeliest meaning of Amos’s words is that he is not to be considered a professional out to make a living (earn his “bread,” if you will) off his preaching. Amos declares that his profession is that of a herdsman (see also 1:1) and a farmer. The priest Amaziah would no doubt have some familiarity with professional prophets who worked for pay, and who would tailor their messages to suit their patron. 1 Kings 22 tells of just such a situation. Four hundred prophets endorsed the desires of the king to launch a military undertaking, and it was only the prophet Micaiah who ventured a minority view; the king acknowledged regarding Micaiah, “I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me” (1 Kings 22:8). The classical prophet with a similar name, Micah, also knew something of this breed of “profit prophet”:

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets  
who lead my people astray,  
who cry “Peace”  
when they have something to eat,  
but declare war against those  
who put nothing into their mouths.

Therefore it shall be night to you,  
without vision,  
and darkness to you,  
without revelation. (Micah 3:5-6)

Further in his own defense, Amos makes it clear that he is carrying out this work of proclamation not on his own initiative or volition, but because he has been called and constrained by the Lord to do so. Many of God's great servants were pressed into God's work against their own human will. Moses resisted mightily when called to go to Egypt (Exodus 3-4). Jeremiah pleaded desperately to be excused from the prophetic vocation (Jeremiah 1:3-9). The apostle Paul was a hard case who "kicked against the goads" of the Lord (Acts 26:14). Amos's words in 7:14-15 make it appear that, if Amos had his preference, he would be back on the Judean hillsides with his sheep and his sycamores.

The constraint which Amos felt is expressed in another passage. He uses a number of rhetorical questions, making the point that events always have a reasonable cause or effect: Read **Amos 3:4-8**

And then he concludes with these words, to make it clear that it was the Lord's powerful commission, and not any ambition of Amos himself, which brought him north across the border from Tekoa to prophesy in the northern kingdom:

The lion has roared;  
who will not fear?  
The Lord GOD has spoken;  
who can but prophesy?

In the behaviors of Amaziah and Amos we witness two strikingly different positions on the proper relationship of religion and government. In the case of *Amaziah*, we observe a religious establishment which was aligned with the government's interests and was not therefore free to provide any kind of check or balance to restrain the government in the name of the government's God. In a manner of speaking, the "church" is in debt to the state and therefore subject to the will of the state.

*Amos*, on the other hand, embodies a recognition that, in order to be genuine, religion must be free from state control or manipulation and must have the freedom and the

courage to express an independent judgment about the priorities and practices of the state. The prophet answers first to God, not to the government.

## **FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION**

### ***Memory Bank***

1. Memorize Isaiah 11:1-4
2. Memorize Psalm 72:1-4

### ***Research***

1. Compare and contrast the three situations in Amos 7:10-17, Jeremiah 7:1-15, and Mark 11:15-18, where Amos, Jeremiah, and Jesus, respectively, were at odds with the representatives of the establishment.
2. If possible, examine Stephen Carter's book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, for provocative insights into the problems of trying to distance religion too much from the public arena.

### ***Reflection***

1. What similarities do you see between the reception accorded Amos at Bethel and the treatment of Jesus when he preached at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30? What differences?
2. Do you think that the principle of the "separation of church and state," so well-established in the U.S., is compatible with the approach of Amos and other biblical prophets who spoke out so often on matters of state policy?

### ***Looking Ahead***

1. For the next session, read the opening two chapters of the Book of Amos. Consult a map and locate the various countries named in those chapters. What pattern(s) do you detect developing in those two chapters?