

Amos, the Courageous Prophet

Devotional Reading: Psalm 23

Background Scripture: Amos 1:1; 2:6–16; 3:1–15; 7:10–17

Today's Scripture: Amos 1:1; 2:11–12; 3:7–8; 7:10–15

I. Setting

Amos 1:1

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

1a. This half-verse introduces the man *Amos*. Notice that he does not refer to himself as a prophet. Instead, he identifies as being *one of the shepherds of Tekoa*. Tekoa is a small town in the southern kingdom of Judah, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. However, Amos primarily preaches in the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 3:9–15; 4:1–5; 5:1; 7:10–17) and only occasionally addresses the southern kingdom of Judah (2:4–5; 6:1).

Because of the rarity of the underlying Hebrew word translated *shepherds*, his occupation is difficult to interpret. This word appears only one other time in the Bible (2 Kings 3:4). The translation there is “raised sheep,” indicating a man of considerable means. The Hebrew term, therefore, seems to indicate not a poor shepherd but possibly a sheep breeder, likely with significant resources.

1b. This half-verse locates Amos’s ministry during the reign of *Uzziah* the *king of Judah* in the eighth century BC. Amos

adds a second historical marker: *two years before the earthquake*, also mentioned by the prophet Zechariah (Zechariah 14:5), who lived several decades later.

II. Sin

Amos 2:11–12

¹¹ “I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths.

Is this not true, people of Israel?” declares the LORD.

¹² “But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

11a. God now speaks in the first person, highlighting two ways he has blessed and cared for Israel. In the two verses before this one, God references other blessings he has shown Israel (Amos 2:9–10).

The mention of *Nazirites* is somewhat surprising here, as they are not commonly cited as examples of God’s care. Instructions are given in Numbers 6:1–21 for those who wish to make “a vow of dedication to the Lord” as Nazirites. They are not to drink fermented beverages, cut their hair, consume anything that comes from a vine, or be in the presence of a dead body.

There are likely two reasons why God identifies Nazirites in this context. First, their austere lifestyle stands in stark contrast to the luxurious yet sinful practices of oppression and injustice (see Amos 2:8; 4:1; 6:4–6). Second, the Nazirites had consecrated themselves to the Lord. Therefore, they contrast the people of Israel, who live in a manner that contradicts their confession of the Lord as their God.

11b. This rhetorical question proves that the Lord has guided the people with a succession of prophets and has provided Nazirites as examples of consecration. The *people of Israel*, however, have abused or ignored them.

12. In the previous verse, the Lord mentions the prophets before mentioning the Nazirites; in the verse before us, however, the order is reversed. This kind of structure is characteristic of Hebrew literature and serves as an aid to memorization.

Making *the Nazirites drink wine* was to tempt them to violate their vow of consecration. To incite such a violation is no small thing! Likewise, silencing the prophets is also a serious matter. Throughout Israel's history leading up to Amos's time, many prophets had been silenced or ignored. More will follow, and Amos himself will face similar experiences.

III. Servants

Amos 3:7–8

7 Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.

8 The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?

7. God's track record shows that he gives people many chances to repent before his

holy nature requires retributive and corrective action (2 Peter 3:9). In Old Testament times, he voices those opportunities either personally, through an angel, or through *his servants the prophets* (2 Kings 17:13; Jeremiah 7:25; 25:4; etc.). In New Testament times, he conveys those opportunities through his Son (Hebrews 1:1–2).

8. The emphasis of this verse is on the inevitability of the Lord's word of judgment. Lions typically roar after they have captured prey, not before (Amos 3:4). Thus, the image of a roaring *lion* associated with the Lord's speech is a terrifying prediction of impending judgment. *Who will not fear*, indeed!

This word imagery reflects the Lord's roar described in Amos 1:2, which occurs right before a series of accusations directed at the surrounding nations, as well as Judah and Israel.

IV. Struggle

Amos 7:10–15

10 Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words.

11 For this is what Amos is saying: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land." "

12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. 13 Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

14 Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees.

15 But the LORD took me from tending

the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ ”

10. In Amos 7:1–9, the Lord shows Amos three visions of judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel. After each of the first two, Amos intercedes, and the Lord relents. After the third vision, however, the Lord leaves no room for intercession; he will indeed destroy the religious sites where Israel worshiped pagan deities.

It’s dangerous to challenge vested interests! Yet that is exactly what Amos has been doing. As a result, one member of the vested interests—*Amaziah the priest of Bethel*—now feels threatened enough to report his concerns to the *king of Israel*.

Throughout the book of Amos, tension has been building between God’s sending of prophets and Israel’s response (or lack of response) to them. This tension comes to a head here in a battle of credentials.

11. Prophets often introduced divine speech with the phrase, “This is what the Lord says.” Amos himself uses the phrase more than a dozen times. In this context, Amaziah mocks Amos by reporting *For this is what Amos is saying*, insinuating that Amos is just making things up.

12. Some commentators suggest that *Amaziah* slights *Amos* by calling him a *seer* and not a prophet. However, this interpretation is unlikely since the terms often appear together in descriptions (example: 2 Samuel 24:11). The word *seer* is the older of the two words (1 Samuel 9:9). Since *Amaziah* doesn’t acknowledge God to be the source of *Amos*’s teaching, the use of the word *seer* here is likely sarcastic.

13. *Bethel* is *Amaziah*’s domain, and he does not want further interference from *Amos*. The most important aspect of both *Amaziah*’s report to *Jeroboam* and his challenge to *Amos* is the absence of any mention of God. *Amaziah* does not challenge *Amos*’s interpretation of God’s

message or his role as a divine spokesperson. Instead, *Amaziah* is interested only in countering threats to the vested interests.

14. *Amos* begins his response by clarifying his occupation. By denying that he is *the son of a prophet*, *Amos* denies that he comes from a prophetic school, such as we see in 1 Samuel 19:18–21. This could imply that he speaks freely and is not beholden to any particular group or person in the giving of his message.

Amos has the background of a farmer. The word translated *shepherd* here differs from the term translated that way in Amos 1:1, and it is quite rare; this verse is the only instance in the Old Testament where the underlying Hebrew word appears. Our best interpretation suggests that it refers to someone who cares for livestock. Therefore, the combination of these two rare terms may indicate that *Amos* was a businessman.

His additional work as one who takes *care of sycamore-fig trees* adds to his résumé. Trees bearing figs were common in the region during antiquity. *Amos* does not need to prophesy for financial gain; he already has his own vocation.

15. *Amos* is not eager to be a prophet. He is not looking for an opportunity to speak out against *Amaziah*, *Jeroboam*, or the *people of northern Israel*. God took the initiative and asked *Amos* to *Go* and speak.

It is important to note that *Amos* is not a political operative or rabble-rouser. Rather, he is a divine spokesperson. This heightens the seriousness of *Amaziah*’s resistance to *Amos*. *Amaziah* opposes not merely an individual prophet or even a school of prophets; he opposes the Lord, *Israel*’s God. As *Amaziah* functions as a representative of his king and the nation of northern *Israel*, their rejection of *Amos*’s messages is essentially a rejection of God’s message.

Involvement Learning

Amos, the Courageous Prophet

Into the Lesson

Unscramble this word:

UISJTEC

Write down what comes to mind when you hear the word.

When have you seen an injustice in the news or experienced an injustice?

Today we'll examine the life and message of a prophet who spoke out against violations of God's justice.

Into the Word

Read today's Scripture text. What was Amos's occupation before receiving God's call?

Why did God send Amos to prophesy?

What was Amos's message to Israel?

How was that message received?

How did the response to Amos's message compare to the responses to other prophets of God?

In what ways might Israel's leaders have felt threatened by Amos's message?

Why might a call for justice be perceived as a threat by those in power?

Key Text

"But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"
—Amos 7:15

Into Life

Jot down a list of perceived injustices that require God's justice to be corrected.

Choose one item and list ways that God's people can promote God's justice and righteousness in response to that injustice.

Thought to Remember

Listen to the Lord's words of challenge, "Repent and obey."