

The Church of the Servant King

Prophecy Series

(Proph14j_Prophecy in the Prophets_Amos_Introduction)

The Prophet

Amos was a sheep breeder, an agriculturalist, and a rancher; therefore, he could have been a man of substance and respect in his community. Before he began prophesying, Amos had been a sheep breeder in the town of Tekoa located in the hill country of Judah about 10 miles south of Jerusalem.¹ Amos likely managed and owned large herds of sheep and goats and had other shepherds working for him.²

In 7:14, Amos described himself as “a shepherd” and the Hebrew word that is used is only found here in the Old Testament and describes a herdsman or a cattleman.³ In addition to overseeing livestock operations, Amos was involved in agriculture. He either managed or was a laborer at a sycamore-fig tree farm. The sycamore-fig tree was a broad and heavy tree that grew to about 25 to 50 feet high and it produced a fig-like fruit three or four times a year. Before the fruit could ripen properly, a small hole had to be pierced in the bottom of the skin of the fruit. The piercing was done by hand and it was a very tedious and time-consuming effort. These sycamore-fig trees grew most abundantly in the region of Western Judah to lower Galilee around Jericho. After the desert pastures dried up in late summer, the shepherds would bring their flocks to this region where the sycamore fig tree grew. This was the period of the year during which the sycamore-fig tree fruit needed to be pierced. So, whether Amos was a man of substance and respect or not, he followed his flock so that he could watch it while the sycamore fruit was being pierced.

The Historical Setting

Amos lived and ministered during a period of great prosperity in both Israel and Judah – roughly the first half of the eighth century B.C. When the Solomon monarchy was fractured after Solomon’s death in 931 B.C. and the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah were created, both nations were left weak and militarily vulnerable. For the next 35 to 40 years or so, both kingdoms experienced pressure from other nations and each other. During the early years of the eighth century B.C., the two kingdoms experienced a renaissance of sorts.⁴

The king of the Northern Kingdom was Jereboam II who reigned from ca. 793 to 753 B.C. He led Israel in campaigns that restored some of Israel’s borders that had existed during the days of David and Solomon. Amos mentions a few of the cities that were included in this border expansion in Amos 6:13-14, i.e. Lo-debar and Karnaim (to the north) and establishing a border from Lebo-hamath to the Dead Sea (the Trans-Jordan region). Jereboam II’s ability to extend Israel’s borders was due to the fact that Israel’s enemies had problems of their own that pre-

¹ Donald R. Sunukjian, “Amos,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Old Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 1425. See also Earl D. Radmacher, gen editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1473 and Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 55.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 129-

occupied them. Aram (Syria) suffered defeat in 802 B.C. at the hands of the Assyrians. However, Assyria became pre-occupied with the Urartians to her north along with a succession of inept rulers.⁵

This gave the Northern Kingdom of Israel control over trade routes and the nation began to prosper. Increased commerce (8:5) resulted in the emergence of a very wealthy upper class (4:1-3) and expensive homes were built (3:15; 5:11; 6:4, 11). The rich enjoyed a life of relative luxury and indulgence (6:1-6) while the poor became targets for legal and economic exploitation (2:6-7; 5:7, 10-13; 6:12; 8:4-6). Some became slaves to pay off debts (2:6; 8:6).⁶ Landed peasants were thrown off of ancestral lands. Through God's provisions in the Mosaic covenant, the landed peasant class had been the foundation of Israel's society. Under Jeroboam's rule, this middle class virtually disappeared with the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. The increased prosperity resulted in a loss of spiritual focus in the lives of Israelites and immorality and "religion" increased. The Israelites used the yearly festivals for partying and lost focus upon the spiritual aspect of life. Their prosperity caused them to think that they were immune to disaster and calamity (5:14, 18-20; 6:1-3; 9:10).

Even the Southern Kingdom of Judah under Uzziah's rule (790-739 B.C.) experienced prosperity. They subdued the Philistines to the west, the Ammonites to the east, and the Arab states to the south. His fame for these conquests became known in Egypt (2 Chron 26:1-15).

With all of their newly gained influence, both Israel and Judah reverted to their former ways of religious syncretism and economic exploitation. Self-righteous arrogance prevented them from being the beacon of spiritual hope God desired them to be.

Date

Amos' message was primarily directed to the Northern Kingdom about two years prior to a very notable earthquake (1:1 cf. Zech 14:5). Josephus relates the earthquake with the events of 2 Chronicles 26:16-20 – King Uzziah entered the Temple and burned incense on the altar of incense, a privilege reserved for the priests. Archeological excavations in Samaria have uncovered evidence of a violent earthquake in 760 B.C. Therefore, Amos' ministry would have been circa 762 B.C. He ministered for a period of only about a year.⁷ He was charged with conspiracy against Jeroboam II, the king, and threatened by Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel. After fulfilling his mission, he probably returned to Judah.⁸

⁵ Donald R. Sunukjian, "Amos" in *TBKC*, 1425.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1426.

⁸ Merrill F. Unger, 55.