

Amos the Prophet

The historical background

A wandering people

At the start of what is a series looking at some of the prophets of Israel, it might be helpful to do a little history which gives us a feel of the background. When I recently visited Israel and went in to the desert, it was interesting to note the Bedouin still living there in tents in a very primitive way. I wondered if the reaction to these roaming people was the same as the reaction in England to gypsies. Here in England the wandering gypsy is a figure of loathing and resentment. I was surprised therefore that these wandering tribes of people were actually held in quite high regard. My Jewish guide said to me 'They live like Abraham used to live.'

King David

This was of course how the Jewish people came into existence, from these wandering tribes a nation was formed, and they had as their King David. He himself was drawn from a humble background as a shepherd, yet he was to bring together a nation in a remarkable way. He unified the tribes and he brought the centre of religious worship to Jerusalem. It was to Jerusalem that he brought the Ark of the Covenant.

King Solomon

Then when he died it was the son of David, Solomon who was given the honour of fulfilling his father's dream, to build in Jerusalem a Temple, in which to house the Ark of the Covenant . Solomon was the Son of David and Bathsheeba, from that liaison which was so wrong and which resulted in the death of her husband to satisfy the lust of the king.

Solomon was noted for his wisdom. It was he who ruled that a baby should be cut in half because two women claimed the child to be theirs. When one woman protested and said that in such circumstances she would rather the child be taken by the other woman, Solomon then knew which mother was lying. Solomon was visited by The Queen of Sheeba, he set up trade and became famous. However his reign had a large cost for the people. His great temple and development cost the people in taxes and hard labour, which they resented.

The nation divides

If the people thought that Solomon was a hard king, his son Rehoboam was worse. The northern tribes rebelled and the kingdom became divided. (1 Kings 12:16) The Jewish nation was no longer a united people. Now there was Israel with ten tribes in the North and the smaller Southern Kingdom, Judah, with two tribes in the South . Under Rehoboam the Northern Kingdom succumbed to pagan influence and a succession of rebellions and coups led to the eventual defeat of the Northern Kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians. The Northern Kingdom never broke free from pagan influence.

In Judah the dynasty of King David continued but the future was always bleak, surrounded by powerful enemies. Eventually they were conquered by the Babylonians who destroyed the Temple and took the people away into captivity.

The Prophets

The Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament were much different from the world of the early Christians where Greek philosophy was of such influence. Whereas Greek Philosophy was interested in the world of forms and ideas, disinterested in the physical and tangible, the Jewish prophets stood rather in the cauldron of world events, acutely aware of what was going on around them, immersed in the politics of the day. Note how their works are introduced by linking them to the reigns of kings (Amos 1:1, Mic 1:1 Hos 1:1, Is 1:1). This is important, it gives us a glimpse of how immersed these men were in world events, they were not religiously introspective. For them events happened for a purpose, even an almond tree or a boiling pot were significant.

They came onto the world stage and they believed that events going on around them were not mere chance, they were part of the active working of a God in history. Their God was one who had led them out of Israel and drowned the Egyptian army. Their God was one who had delivered their enemies into their hands and who had helped them conquer the land.

There were always prophets in Israel, Abraham and Moses were prophets. However we tend to think of prophets being more like the prophets who had Biblical book named after them, men like Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Prophecy became more developed as it progressed through the Biblical period and Biblical prophets should be seen in the context of an international prophetic tradition. There would have been influences from other prophetic practices in other religions. Tablets discovered at Mari, a Mesopotamian city tell of figures known as 'answerers' or 'ecstatics' who gave the king communications from the deity. This is not to place prophets on level footing with shamans and dervishes, but it does recognise that the Hebrew prophets were part of a much wider religious awareness. Prophets are mentioned in many ancient religions prior to the 7th Century BC. The Hebrew prophets shared many common features with other religious traditions

Ecstatic Utterances

Orgiastic ecstasy was common, transcendental states in which the human consciousness is so concentrated upon a particular thing, that normal thought and perception is broken. Just like prophets and holy men in other religions, the Hebrew prophets seem to have had ecstatic trances. These conditions have been variously attributed to such things as psychotic episodes and drugs.

This is seen in the election of Saul the first king of Israel

*"After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; **and you will be changed into a different person**. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you. (1 Samuel 10:5)*

It is also seen when Saul tries to have his men arrest David at Ramah, but each time the men fall into ecstasy

Word came to Saul: "David is in Naioth at Ramah"; so he sent men to capture him. But when they saw a group of prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing there as their

leader, the Spirit of God came upon Saul's men and they also prophesied. Saul was told about it, and he sent more men, and they prophesied too. Saul sent men a third time, and they also prophesied. Finally, he himself left for Ramah and went to the great cistern at Secu. And he asked, "Where are Samuel and David?" "Over in Naioth at Ramah," they said. So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came even upon him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. He stripped off his robes and also prophesied in Samuel's presence. He lay that way all that day and night. This is why people say, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Samuel 19:20)

Perhaps the excesses associated with prophecy are in mind when Isaiah is critical of prophets who apparently use alcohol to fuel their visions.

And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer: Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions. All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth. (Is 28:7)

There is an interesting phrase used in Jeremiah

'The LORD has appointed you priest in place of Jehoiada to be in charge of the house of the LORD; you should put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and neck-irons. (Jeremiah 29:6)

Prophets were clearly not known for behaving decently and in order! Visions and ecstatic experiences are to be expected for the prophet.

1. Isaiah had a calling which comes in a vision in the temple (Is6).
2. Ezekiel had a vision of a valley of dry bones, which was said to be inspired by 'The hand of the Lord.' (Ezekiel 37).
3. Jeremiah had an inaugural vision like Isaiah, with the Lord touching his mouth (Jer 1:9).

Prophets might be seen to be distinguished primarily by four things

1. Intercession
2. Forthtelling
3. Foretelling
4. Causing events.

1. Intercession - Men of the world and men of God

It was because the prophets lived close to God, that they were in a particularly special place from which to intercede. They could speak to God about men, and to men about God.

Prophets were special religious people who had the ability to live on the margins of society, with one foot in heaven. They were firmly committed to the God of Israel and they called the nation to accept the demands laid upon them as a people in covenant with that god.

Intercession was of particular importance.

Abraham was called a prophet because he *interceded* with God on behalf of the people. (Gen 20)

Elijah *interceded* with God on Mount Carmel to end the drought (1 Kings 18)

Nathan was a prophet because was not afraid to communicate God's word and he rebuked King David over Uriah, this is commonly thought of as *forthtelling*. Such prophets often use the formula 'Thus says Yahweh (the Lord)

2. Foretelling and Forthtelling

It is important to point out that the prophets were not renowned as crystal ball gazers, so much as speakers of God's word. This is seen in the word prophet itself, (pro - forth, not before). The fact that they were firmly grounded in the world, does not mean that the prophets were just ordinary political or religious commentators. They were men to whom society attributed supernatural powers.

There is much debate about how prophets arrived at their conclusions. There are two suggestions

1. Were they aware of future events, and hence sought to explain them by looking at such things as social conditions, a Cassandra Experience?
2. Or did they look at the prevailing state of society and think that therefore condemnation must come?

In our context the question we would ask is this

1. 'Did Amos have a vision of the defeat which God would bring about, and then ask why God was going to do this and not just forgive the people. Or
2. 'Did Amos think that the behaviour of the people was so bad God would judge?

It is interesting to read the first few lines

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa--what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel. He said: "The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers."

It all sounds quite visionary - the writer uses the words 'what he saw.' We will of course never know. What we can be certain of is that Amos believed that world events were not random. There were reasons why things happened and God was at the centre of all that took place. No nation was beyond the scope of God's power and he ordained all events. If a nation had power, then God could use that nation to achieve his purpose. He could also remove power from a nation, even his very own chosen people

Causing events.

It is worth reflecting upon the role of the prophet to actually bring about events. In this capacity the prophet neither sees what is going to happen, or predicts what might happen, rather the prophet *brings about* events. As ecstatic behaviour is seen in religious people of other religions, so imitative magic is also common.

These types of action seem to have more than just descriptive force, they appear effective and creative. The words of the prophet might be seen to bring a situation about as well as to speak of it. Here are some examples -

1. Zedekiah made himself horns of iron to enact the overthrow of the Syrians by the kings of Israel and Judah 1 kings 22:11
2. Elijah made himself like a cloud - a rainmaker
3. Ahijah tore his mantle into 12 pieces and gave 10 to Jereboam
4. Isaiah walked barefoot and naked for three years Is 20:3
5. Jeremiah buried a loin cloth to spoil it as God would spoil Judah Jer 13
6. Jeremiah smashed a clay jar to show God would smash the nation Jer 19
7. Ezekiel lay paralysed on his side
8. Ezekiel shaved off his hair and beard (5:1)

Amos

**The lion has roared-- who will not fear?
The Sovereign LORD has spoken--
who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:8)**

What was Amos like

Amos came from the Southern Kingdom and preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The kingdom of Israel at that time had already been divided into two parts for 170 years. Jeroboam I had introduced an own idol-worship with the worship of two calves both in Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:25-33). The Baal-worship was also popular in Israel. The kingdom of Israel was prospering under Jeroboam II as never before. During that time (around 30 to 40 years before the ten tribes were led away into Assyrian captivity) Amos came to Bethel and pronounced his prophecies. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, Hosea only prophesied regarding Israel. We find two quotations from the book of Amos in the Acts of the Apostles: Amos 5:25-27 in Acts 7:42-43 and Amos 9:11 in Acts 15:16.

1. He was perhaps not so primitive as the prophets who had come before, yet still Amaziah calls him a seer. The fact that we are told he had a 1:1 vision indicates something of the ecstatic utterance.
2. His words are formed into their own book of written record. He is the first classical prophet. This raises the question of who wrote down his words? Was he a lone individual or were there others who supported him?
3. He makes the point that he was not a professional paid prophet, he was a shepherd from Tekoa, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. Amos was more solitary, there is no evidence that he lived in community like many of the prophets of Israel, or like the Islamic dervishes who travelled around in groups.
4. For Amos it is a source of pride that he has a proper job. He is often spoken of as a blue collar, a bit rough. He was obviously not a professional prophet but we must not assume too much. Indeed he might have been more important than some suggest, he was certainly educated enough to go and speak in front of many important people, understand world events, he was not an ignorant peasant.
5. He was clearly courageous. His task was one of provoking the rich and powerful, pronouncing that they were bringing judgement upon the nation because of their behaviour. He did not want the task that was given to him. 7:13
6. With Amos we see much less of the supernatural. The clairvoyance, wonders, magic, that characterise the earlier prophets recedes. Unlike Elisha he does not raise the dead, predict drought or bring rain.
7. His message as we will see was undoubtedly unpopular. Surely the prophet would have chosen to avoid at all costs the need to utter words of such an unpatriotic nature. Little wonder that Amos tells us that he has no choice about whether to speak, he is compelled, he is a conviction prophet.

What was his message ?

Amos understood that the Jews were God's special chosen people. He does not use the word 'Covenant' and yet it lies behind the use of words such as 'my people' 7:8, 15, 8:2, 3:1, 4:12, 9:7.

As Amos looks around him he sees many things which do not reflect the demands laid upon the people by virtue of their covenant obligations. It might be argued that under such circumstances the punishment of the nation was an inevitable result of the breach of the covenant by the people. The covenant made with Israel, like the Hittite vassal treaties

which it copied, involved the promise of blessing for obedience, and curses for lack of faithfulness.

Amos uses phrases which remind the people of their obligations to Yahweh
I brought you out of the land of Egypt 2:10

The covenant is also in his mind when he say
*You only have I known of all the families of the earth,
therefore I will punish your iniquities 3:2*

There is a big difference between Amos and the prophets who had gone before. The earlier prophets had condemned kings for lapses of morality, or false worship, they had never called into question the existence of the nation. This was anew epoch, the prophet was no longer nationalistic. Amos predicts the fall of the house of Jereboam (7:9)

What were the sins of the nation ?

The nation was enjoying prosperity, wealth and privilege. It was a time of great prosperity because King Jereboam II had restored international trade. However not everybody shared this great wealth. The rich grew ever richer, whilst many were poor and struggled to survive. If you were rich you could buy justice, live extravagantly, whilst the poor struggled. Amos is most critical not of worship but of behaviour. He does not criticise idol worship, even though it is going on, when he criticises religion he is critical of the worship of Yahweh. 5:21

1. Corruption in the courts 5:7,12
2. Creating big estates enslaving landowners 2:6, 3:9-15, 5:11
3. Heavy taxes 2:8, 5:11, 8:6
4. Degrading the needy 4:1
5. Charging high prices for basic commodities 8:4-5
6. Demanding costly sacrifices 5:21-23

Amos is critical of the leading centres of cultic worship. Bethel was the place where Jacob once heard the voice of Yahweh promise the land Gn 28 13,

The teaching of Amos

So Amos spends his words on issues primarily of morality and justice, these were expected from all, God demanded it (9:2). God was not a local or tribal deity, he expected decent behaviour from all, even other nations are expected to share a common standard of humanity, irrespective of which gods they worshipped.

Wisdom

There are elements of Wisdom literature in Amos also.

1. Do two walk together unless they have an appointment 3:34 (Rhetorical question)
2. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord 5:18 (Woe form)
3. Fro the transgression of Damascus and for four 1:13 (numerical device)

Doom and gloom, but a future hope

The complete destruction of Israel pronounced by Amos is always at the forefront with Biblical commentators. It is easy to see why, the destruction which Amos sees is extreme. However there is to a future hope, it is just that it is a much reduced hope and only after a considerable period of suffering.

The people were looking forward to a great 'Day of Yahweh.' Amos uses such literary devices as the funeral dirge to show that the nation was doomed and the great day which they looked forward to would instead be a day of disaster. Disaster would come, and it would be at the hand of Yahweh, not of a foreign power. The foreign power would be the agent of God himself. Assyria would carry out God's work

Doom. For Amos, telling Israel the future means telling them that they haven't got one. The 'Day of Yahweh' would be anything but a day of celebration, their God would destroy them.

The destruction is so complete that Amos can speak in word which give little hope

1. Fallen and no more to rise is the virgin Israel 5:2
2. He uses a funeral dirge 5:1
3. The destruction is so decisive as complete as that of a sheep or goat of which a few bones and a piece of an ear are recovered from the mouth of the lion 3:12

Hope

Perhaps because Israel had such a special place in the heart of God, then there might be a glimmer of hope. This comes through especially in Chapter 9

THE KINGS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Before the division into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (see The Divided Kingdom, opposite), the land was governed by a united monarchy. The first of the kings, Saul (c.1050–10BCE), was elected by the people. His successor David (c.1010–970BCE) expanded the territory of the Israelites and formed the dynasty that lasted 400 years. David was succeeded by his son Solomon (c.970–30BCE), who built the Temple in Jerusalem. Few dates, however, can be given with certainty. Those given here should be regarded as approximate only.

| JUDAH | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Rehoboam (924–07) | Asa (905–874) | Jehoram (850–43) | Athaliah (843–37) | Amaziah (800–791) | Jotham (7–742) | Hezekiah (727–698) | Amon (642–40) | Jehoahaz II (609) | Jehoiachin (598–97) |
| 950BCE | 900BCE | 850BCE | 800BCE | 750BCE | 700BCE | 650BCE | 600BCE | 550BCE | |
| Abijam (907–06) | Jehoshaphat (874–50) | Ahaziah (843) | Joash (837–800) | Uzziah (7–?) | Ahaz (742–27) | Manasseh (697–42) | Josiah (639–09) | Jehoiachin (608–598) | Zedekiah (597–87/6) |
| ISRAEL | | | | | | | | | |
| Jeroboam I (924–03) | Baasha (902–886) | Omri (885–73) | Ahaziah (851–49) | Jehu (843–16) | Joash (800–785) | Zechariah (745) | Menahem (745–36) | Pekah (735–32) | |
| 950BCE | 900BCE | 850BCE | 800BCE | 750BCE | 700BCE | | | | |
| Nadab (903–02) | Elah (886–85) | Ahab (873–51) | Jehoram (849–43) | Jehoahaz (816–800) | Jeroboam II (785–45) | Shallum (745) | Pekahiah (736–35) | Hoshea (732–23) | |