

Amos

Amos prophesied during a period of national optimism in Israel. Business was booming and boundaries were growing, but below the surface, greed and injustice were festering. Hypocritical religious motions had replaced true worship, creating a false sense of security and a growing callousness to God's disciplining hand. Famine, drought, plagues, death, destruction - nothing could force the people to their knees.

Amos, the country farmer, turned prophet, lashes out at sin unflinchingly, trying to visualize the nearness of God's judgment and mobilize the nation to repentance. The nation, like a basket of rotting fruit, stands ripe for judgment because of its hypocrisy and spiritual indifference.

INTRODUCTION

The basic theme of Amos is the coming judgment of Israel because of the holiness of Yahweh and the sinfulness of His covenant people. Amos unflinchingly and relentlessly visualizes the causes and course of Israel's quickly approaching doom. God is gracious and patient, but His justice and righteousness will not allow sin to go unpunished indefinitely. The sins of Israel are many; empty ritualism, oppression of the poor, idolatry, deceit, self-righteousness, arrogance, greed, materialism, and callousness. The people have repeatedly broken every aspect of their covenant relationship with God. Nevertheless, God's mercy and love are evident in His offer of deliverance if the people will only turn back to Him. God graciously sent Amos as a reformer to warn the people of Israel of their fate if they refused to repent. But they rejected his plea, and the course of judgment could not be altered.

The name Amos is derived from the Hebrew root *Amos*, "to lift a burden, to carry." His name means "Burden" or "Burden-Bearer." Amos lives up to the meaning of his name by bearing up under his divinely given burden of declaring judgment to rebellious Israel.

AUTHOR

The only Old Testament appearance of the name Amos is in this book. Concerning his background, Amos said, "I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet, but I was a herdsman and a tender of sycamore fruit" (7:14). But he was gripped by God and divinely commissioned to bring his prophetic burden to Israel (3:8; 7:15). He came from the rural area of Tekoa in Judah, twelve miles south of Jerusalem, where he tended a special breed of small sheep that produced wool of the best quality. As a grower of sycamore figs, he had to puncture the fruit before it ripened to allow the insects inside to escape. Amos lived a disciplined life, and his knowledge of the wilderness often surfaces in his messages (cf. 3:4-5, 12; 5:8, 19; 9:9). Amos was from the country, but he was well-educated in the Scriptures. His keen sense of morality and justice is obvious, and his objective appraisal of Israel's spiritual condition was not well received, especially since he was from Judah. He delivered his message in Beth-el because it was the residence of the king of Israel and a center of idolatry. His direct attack on the greed, injustice, and self-righteousness of the people of the northern kingdom made his words unpopular.

DATE & SETTING

Amos prophesied "in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (1:1). Uzziah reigned from 767 to 739 b.c. and Jeroboam II reigned from 782 to 753 b.c., leaving an overlap from 767 to 753 b.c. Amos ministered after the time of Obadiah, Joel, and Jonah and just before Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah. At this time Uzziah reigned over a prosperous and militarily successful Judah. He fortified Jerusalem and subdued the Philistines, the Ammonites, and the Edomites. In the north, Israel was ruled by the capable king Jeroboam II. Economic and military circumstances were almost ideal, but prosperity only increased the materialism, immorality, and injustice of the people (2:6-8; 3:10; 4:1; 5:10-12; 8:4-6). During these years, Assyria, Babylonia, Syria, and Egypt were relatively weak. Thus, the people of Israel found it hard to imagine the coming disaster predicted by Amos. However, it was only three decades until the downfall of Israel.