

**June 7, 2009**

## **Amos: Working for Justice and Righteousness**

**Purpose:** To help us realize that God rejects worship and offerings that are not accompanied by justice and righteousness

Key Bible reference: Amos 4-5

Key Verse: Amos 5.24

### **Biblical Interpretation**

Refer to the article: "The Divided Monarchies." The information therein can help clarify the historical setting of this lesson.

All we know about Amos is found in the book that bears his name (Amos 1:1). He came from Tekoa [tuh-KOH-uh], located southeast of Bethlehem on the fringe of a desolate area near the Dead Sea (look at a map). Amos was a shepherd. Recent research suggests that he owned sheep, goats, and some cattle. He lived close to nature, as evidenced by his language.

Verse 1 also reveals the historical setting of Amos's prophetic ministry: while Uzziah ruled Judah and Jeroboam II ruled Israel. This was between about 780 B.C. and 745 B.C. Amos was active a short time before the prophet Isaiah, for Isaiah received his prophetic call "in the year that King Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1). The events of Amos's time are recorded in 2 Kings 14:23-15:7 and in 2 Chronicles 26.

The earthquake mentioned in Amos 1:1 is also noted in Zechariah 14:5, but we know of no details. Israel is prone to occasional devastating earthquakes because of a major fault line that runs north to south through the Jordan Valley. Since all natural events are recognized as acts of God in the Old Testament, the earthquake two years after Amos's prophetic activity may have been understood as God's stamp of approval on the prophet's words.

Amos 7:10-17 records the standoff of the prophet with Amaziah [am-uh-ZIGH-uh], the priest in charge of the Israelite sanctuary at Bethel. This religious center was traditionally connected with Abraham (Genesis 12:8). Jeroboam I had established it as a place of worship for Israel (1 Kings 12:25-33). Here Amos explained that he was not a hireling prophet. Rather, God had called him from his normal activities to warn the people in the Northern Kingdom of approaching judgment.

We do not know what happened to Amos after he fulfilled his responsibilities at Bethel. We assume he returned to his homeland a few miles to the south. Clearly, however, his words were remembered by others. Perhaps someone who was present carried the words of Amos back to Judah, or perhaps a devout Israelite at Bethel that day noted them. The prophetic message was some-how remembered and written down. The stirring words of Amos have ever since given spiritual guidance to God's faithful people.

Amos 1-2 records the charges of the Lord against the nations round about Israel and against Israel itself. As bad as the deeds of the surrounding nations were, Israel's deeds were worse. Indeed, the nations were invited to look at what happened in Israel (Samaria). Among the words Amos used to describe the situation there are "great tumults" and "oppressions"

(Amos 3:9) and "violence" and "robbery" (Amos 3:10).

Amos 4:4-5. The "cows of Bashan [BAY-shuhn]" was the prophet's disdainful label for the rich women of Israel (Amos 4:1-3). These women played a significant role in oppressing the poor and crushing the needy. In our text, God extends a call to worship; but it is a sarcastic call. What does the Almighty urge them to do? He encourages the people to sin by worshiping! That is, God finds their pious rituals contradicted by their social practices. Therefore, God counts the rituals themselves as sin.

Amos 5:18-20. Verse 18 begins with an expression that is difficult to translate from Hebrew into English. The Hebrew is hoi! Our New Revised Standard Version translates "Alas!" The New International Version has "Woe!" As we seldom use these terms in everyday speech, the Good News Version has translated the expression, "How terrible it will be for you!"

In the Israel of Jeroboam II, it was religiously correct to express a longing for the "day of the Lord." People did this thinking it would be a day of light, a glorious day.

Amos drew upon the natural world he knew well to explain what the "day of the Lord" would really be like. The Asian lion and bear still roamed wild in the more remote areas of Israel in his time. He invited his audience to imagine a man who escapes from a lion, only to meet a bear. The man manages to flee into his house, where he thinks he is safe. There he leans against the wall to catch his breath. The wall is made of unplastered field stones. Hidden in the gap between two stones where he rests his hand is a poisonous snake, and it bites him!

That is how horrible the "day of the Lord" would be for these self-deluded worshipers who longed for that day. There was to be "no light at the end of the tunnel" for them.

Amos 5:21-24. Amos has shifted from strong warnings (5:18-20) to direct expression of God's strong feelings. These are passionate words!

God hates and despises Israelite "festivals" (5:21). These include the pilgrimage feasts. According to the law of Moses, every Israelite male was to go to the central sanctuary to keep the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14-19; Leviticus 23:444; Deuteronomy 16:16-17). Some of the feasts relate to times for harvesting barley, wheat, grapes, and olives. Participants were to recognize and honor God at these festivals, for it was the Lord who made these harvests possible. Note that God would have taken delight in their solemn assemblies if the worshipers had been faithful to the Lord before they came to appear before him in his sanctuary. But the Lord was well aware of their oppressive manipulation of the poor.

Sacrificial animals were offered as burnt offerings. These were domesticated sheep, goats, or cattle. They were male, firstborn animals in perfect health, fattened for this purpose. Grain offerings would be barley or wheat. The grain could be offered as whole grain or as grain ground into flour or even as flour baked into cakes.

Verse 23 of Amos 5 refers to another part of the ritual activities at a pilgrimage festival. Both vocal and instrumental music were offered to the Lord. But in indignation, God would have none of it. The sound of human voices singing praises to Almighty God can be most beautiful and harmonious. Coming from the throats of

the greedy, however, it was simply discordant noise.

Verse 24 call for the sound that is music to the ear of the Creator. It is the sound of many waters, the low murmur of a constant flow. Such sounds are not created on feast days but in the business of life on those days between festivals.

In semi-dry Israel, the Jordan River flows constantly. However, most of the stream beds are dry until they flow a few days of the year during the fall or spring rainy seasons. The symbol of an ever-flowing stream stands out against that background. The picture is of waters rolling down over the rocks rather than meandering among them. God calls for constant justice in Israel.

Note also that righteousness is paired with justice. Righteousness here is not about how humans deal with God but about how they deal with one another. Righteousness is taking care of the widow rather than taking her land; it is assisting the orphan rather than exploiting those who have lost father and mother. In Israel, how many young people were being pressed into virtual slavery, working for the rich, rather than being helped to become self-sustaining individuals? Amos 5:7 notes, "Ah, you who turn justice to wormwood, / and bring righteousness to the ground!" How horrible for such people would be the "day of the Lord."