

Bible Book of the Month Club – The Prophet Amos

Introduction

Amos was not part of the prophetic guild that served the king. As he told one of his opponents (7:10-14) he was a sheep farmer who also tended olive trees. While not part of the prophetic guild he speaks in the language of the prophets with arguments that are of the most well-constructed of all the prophets. His elegant use of the Hebrew language is rivaled only in the Psalms. His prophecies date to the first half of the eighth century B.C.E., making him one of the earliest prophets whose writings appear in the Bible.

The Story Line

Amos was acting as a prophet during the time of king Uzziah (783-742 B.C.E.) of Judah, the southern kingdom, and of king Jeroboam (786-746 B.C.F.) of Israel, the northern kingdom. Being a southerner from Takoa south of Jerusalem, he prophesied mainly at Bethel, a royal sanctuary of the northern kingdom. While never mentioning the Assyrians by name, Amos prophesied that the northern kingdom would be judged, and the people would be taken into exile beyond Damascus. (5:18-27). His prophecies came to pass when the Assyrians defeated Israel and captured its capital. Samaria, in 722 B.C.E. (see 2 Kings 17:1-6) Amos brought his message of judgment to the north because, like the other 8th century prophets, he wanted to invite the ten northern tribes (Israel) back into communion with their God YAHWEH and with their southern “brothers” Judah and Benjamin. The southern tribes of Israel severed the brotherhood that existed under the reign of kings David and Solomon. After the death of Solomon in 921 B.C.E., the northern tribes worshiped in the wrong places, Samaria and Bethel, using rituals regarded as improper by the southern tribes. As rich as the history of this family separation is, it can be told quite simply: Judahite interpreters from the southern tribes blamed the north and its leaders for the broken relationship. They blamed the northern rebellious spirit on the influence of Canaanite and Phoenician politics and religious practices. They worshiped other gods in addition to YAHWEH, which was a severe offence. They also practiced economic inequality. The mistreatment of the poor and disenfranchised was a key offense. Southerners accused the north of having abandoned their shared values of equality based on their equality before God.

Outline of the Book of Amos:

Introduction, 1:1-2

Oracles condemning Judah, Israel, and neighboring nations, 1:3–2:16

Oracles against Israel, 3:1-6:14.

Visions of judgments, 7:1-9:10

Vision of a restored kingdom, 9:11-15.

The Message of the Book of Amos

Amos announces God's concern for Justice, properly observing Worship practices, and that festivals and sacrifices had little meaning if people did not treat others with justice and righteousness (5:21-24) Even though people of the Northern Kingdom lived at a time that was relatively peaceful and prosperous, they used their wealth for personal comfort, not to help others. Unfair business practices and oppressive taxes that squeezed the poor were common.

Poverty and lawlessness were conditions that should never have come to exist in ancient Israel and Judah. The land, a visible sign of God's presence and promise, was a trust from God for the sake of all Israel and Judah. Laws and customs described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy prohibited the accumulation of land and goods in ways that would impoverish a fellow descendant of Abraham and Sarah. Regular land redistribution was part of the ideal religious landscape.

The message of Amos issues a challenge to people and nations caught up in the pursuit of material wealth and comfort. Societies driven by consumerism can lose sight of faithful stewardship of wealth and the just distribution of goods. Amos reminds the people that true faithfulness is trusting in God alone and treating the neighbor with justice.