

AMOS: STRAIGHT TALKING FROM A TREE SURGEON

Really? Well almost. Amos tells us he had what nowadays might be called a portfolio rural enterprise career. He was a shepherd and a “dresser of sycamore trees”. These are not the sycamores we know (and often hate) in this country. If you must know, they are *ficus sycomorus*, a large tree that bears edible fruit, smaller than figs proper and not as good. Amos may have been dressing (pruning) them just to keep them in shape, or to cut the leaves for livestock. This is the same sort of tree that Zacchaeus, a fraudulent tax collector, climbed up to get a view of Jesus because he was too short to see over the heads of the crowd (Luke 19.4). Anyway, the point was that Amos was not a professional prophet or a city dweller and was more likely to be in touch with ordinary working folk and their concerns.



a priest of the shrine at Bethel, complained about him to King Jeroboam and tried to have him banished. Not surprisingly, Amos includes among the sins of Israel that they suppressed prophecy (2.12).

THE LION HAS ROARED, WHO WILL NOT FEAR

No whispering, tentative prophet this. The Lord roars from Zion and denounces Israel and Judah and all the neighbouring states.

Significantly, the states round about are denounced for what we would now call war crimes but Judah is condemned for deserting God’s laws and Israel is condemned for oppressing the poor and for depravity, for living in uncaring luxury. They “lounge on their couches” and “sing idle songs to the sound of the harp”, they take bribes, they elbow aside the needy, they fiddle the weights and measures, they sell rotten food, they enslave debtors, all without realising the disaster that is about to strike.

CONTEXT

Amos seems to have been active around 750BC when there were still two kingdoms – Israel (10 tribes) in the north based on Samaria and Judah (two tribes) in the south based on Jerusalem. A complication is that “Israel” is sometimes used to mean the northern kingdom and sometimes to mean all the children of Israel. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. The book of Amos as we now have it was edited later, possibly once in Judah after the destruction of Israel and again after the exile in Babylon.

PROPHECY

We sometimes take prophecy just to mean “foretelling the future”. The Old Testament prophets were much more about commenting on the present, offering advice and warning in God’s name and sometimes predicting the outcome if warnings are not heeded. Prophets were often unpopular - look at what happened to Elijah when he opposed Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19.2). Amos was no exception. Amaziah,

SO ARE THEY ALL DOOMED?

Amos says that God will destroy the kingdom but spare the righteous among the people to rebuild the ruined cities and plant gardens and vineyards and enjoy the produce. The beloved remnant will flourish. Maybe this part of the book was edited to celebrate the fact that although both the kingdoms **were** destroyed, some of the exiles **were** able to return and do their best to start again, chastened by their experience.

WASN’T THIS WAS ALL A LONG TIME AGO?

Yes, but who can deny that there are lessons here about the danger of living without regard for God or for the welfare of our fellow humans, blindly overlooking moral decay within and storm clouds outside?