

Preaching with Amos

by Antony Billington

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AMOS IS AN EXCEPTIONAL CRAFTSMAN OF LANGUAGE, A RHETORICIAN WHO USES POETRY TO FULFIL A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY – NAMELY TO RESHAPE PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD AND SO ENABLE HIS PEOPLE TO SEE MORE CLEARLY THEIR OWN PUBLIC AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES.

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Imagine for a moment...

You have gathered with fellow believers for your regular time of worship. As always, there's a large crowd and a sense of anticipation. It's easy to see why. The current government is strong and stable. Threats from neighbouring enemies have been put down. The country is enjoying a period of significant prosperity. Life has been good in recent years, and that feeling of ease is reflected among those present.



The worship gets underway and is dynamic: the prayers are rich, the offerings are received, and the songs are upbeat.

There's a visiting speaker today. He's from the south, apparently, not far from the capital. The rumour is he's already been causing a stir up here in the north; but he claims to bring a message from the Lord, so it'll be interesting to hear what he has to say. It's not long before the visitor opens his mouth:

'I hate, I despise your religious festivals;

your assemblies are a stench to me.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Those words from Amos 5:21-24 capture something of the burden of the prophet and his book.

From 1:1, we learn that Amos ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II (788-747 BC), who had brought a time of prosperity to the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos himself came from the southern kingdom of Judah, where he looked after sheep and the harvesting of figs from sycamore trees (7:14). Like several other prophets, Amos is well-known for his condemnation of exploitative practices towards the vulnerable and poor, and for his call to establish justice in society. Small wonder that Martin Luther King Jr. used Amos' words in his own speeches and letters addressing issues of social injustice.

For us, too, at a time when many Christians are underlining the significance of concern for the poor and the oppressed as a mark of faithful discipleship, the preaching of Amos to Israel in the eighth century BC carries immense significance. Not only are we able to consider his message and its enduring implications for our own time and place, but we can also learn from him as preachers in our engagement with God's people on this issue. Whilst it's not immediately obvious that preachers are prophets, it's reasonably clear that prophets, like Amos, were preachers, and that we can glean insights from their method as well as their message.¹

THE MESSAGE AMOS PROCLAIMS

Prophets were messengers of the Lord, speaking in God's name. In Amos, the repeated phrases 'This is what the Lord says' (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, etc.) and 'Hear this word' (3:1; 4:1; 5:1) not only mark out different sections of the prophecy, but leave us in no doubt that this is a word from God. In 3:7-8, like other prophets, Amos is self-conscious about being allowed access to the council of the Lord to be made privy to God's plans, self-conscious about being commissioned by God to deliver God's message to God's people (7:15). When the Lord speaks, in spite of the unwelcome nature of the message, he cannot but prophesy (3:8).

All that Amos proclaims is dominated by God and the reality of God's relationship with his people. Even if we preachers do not claim the same inspiration as the prophets, we still exercise a forthtelling ministry, directed especially at God's people, confident that the message comes with the authority of the living God.

THE RHETORIC AMOS USES

The Lord speaks, but speaks through Amos. Like other prophets, he's not an automaton, devoid of emotion and feeling. God uses his personality and background – as well as his rhetorical skills – to bring home the message given to him.

The opening of the prophecy is particularly significant. In 1:3-2:3, Amos outlines in turn the war crimes of Israel's near neighbours, describing atrocities that sound all too familiar in more recent times. Amos makes it clear that the nations will be held accountable for their actions. But the sequence takes an unexpected turn as the prophet speaks to his own people in the southern kingdom of Judah (2:4-5) and then, more fully, to Israel (2:6-16). One can imagine an Israelite audience nodding, perhaps even applauding, Amos' denunciations of surrounding nations until they themselves become subject to the verbal entrapment. Their inclusion indicates that the social injustice and oppression of the poor for which they are indicted is just as deserving of God's judgment as the war crimes committed by their neighbours.

In addition, Amos employs multiple analogies and rhetorical questions in 3:3-6. The implied but obvious answers to the questions lead to the inevitable conclusion that the Lord reveals his plans to his prophets, who have no choice but to speak (3:7-8). He uses repetition in 4:6-11 when he appeals to the people's past experiences of God's judgment which they ignored, with the repeated refrain 'yet you have not returned to me' providing both an invitation to repentance as well as reasons for the coming judgment. The many images he uses are drawn from the natural and agrarian world with which he and his hearers would have been familiar – lions and bears (3:4, 8; 5:19), bird traps and snakes (3:5; 5:19), shepherds and plumb lines (3:12; 7:8).

As Ellen Davis comments: 'Amos is an exceptional craftsman of language, a rhetorician who uses poetry to fulfil a public responsibility – namely to reshape perceptions of the world and so enable his people to see more clearly their own public and religious responsibilities.'² Contemporary preachers may follow his example.

THE COVENANT AMOS PRESUPPOSES

The message of the prophets is bound up with God's special covenant relationship with his people – a relationship that brought responsibilities as well as blessings. God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and entered into a covenant relationship with them (2:10; 3:1-2). Yet they seemed to have forgotten this, failing to live in the light of

their own history. Far from bringing immunity from judgment, their special status as God's people brings a greater level of responsibility. In this way, Amos' preaching is not moralistic sermonising. Rather, issues of justice and righteousness are addressed in the light of the relationship between God and his people. A redeemed people were meant to live out that redemption in their lives and relationships with each other. Alas, they have failed to do that.

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TO PREACH ON ISSUES OF JUSTICE IN THIS CONTEXT IS NOT TO PREACH ANOTHER GOSPEL, BUT RATHER TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THE TRUE GOSPEL HAS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS.

Bob Fyall

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AMOS

DOES NOT SPEAK OF ISRAEL'S SIN IN A GENERIC OR ABSTRACT SENSE. HE DOCUMENTS IN CONCRETE TERMS THE WAYS IN WHICH ISRAEL HAS BROKEN THEIR COVENANT AGREEMENT WITH GOD AND HOW OTHERS HAVE SUFFERED AS A CONSEQUENCE.

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THE INJUSTICE AMOS DENOUNCES

Amos does not speak of Israel's sin in a generic or abstract sense. He documents in concrete terms the ways in which Israel has broken their covenant agreement with God and how others have suffered as a consequence.

The words 'justice' and 'righteousness' are used together on three occasions (5:7, 24; 6:12; cf. 5:15), and they provide the focus for his message. Instead of justice and righteousness being exercised, the wealthy and powerful have exploited the poor and the weak (2:6-8; 4:1-3), denied them access to courts and bribed judges (5:10, 12), and engaged in deceitful business practices (8:4-6). The rich were building opulent houses and planting vineyards with the income made from overburdening the poor (5:11). Amos denounces the extravagant lifestyles of the rich (6:1-7), those guilty of defrauding the weak in order to line their own pockets, and he condemns the social system which took the land out of the hands of ordinary Israelites as they were forced to sell themselves into debt slavery (2:6-8).

Like other prophets, Amos is also concerned with the integrity of the creation order and how it can be disrupted through the actions of humans. The earth is not immune from suffering or the effects of injustice, seen not least in the opening of Amos' prophecy: 'The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers' (1:2). Hilary Marlow notes that in Amos the natural world acts as God's 'megaphone' to rouse an unhearing world.³ The power of God in the

created world is acknowledged (Amos 4:13; 5:8-9; cf. 9:5-6), and ecological disasters are seen as evidence of God's judgment (4:7-10; 7:1-6), even as future flourishing is also promised (9:13-15).

In all this, as Bob Fyall notes, 'Amos gives us an effective model of how to preach on these issues': 'Amos links social justice with the nature of God. The God whom Israel claims to worship is merciful and just, and his followers must show those same qualities in their lives... Also, this concern for social justice springs from the Torah and thus shows obedience to the Word of God... a powerful reminder of how the Torah governs the whole of life and is not simply for "religious" activities... To preach on issues of justice in this context is not to preach another gospel, but rather to demonstrate that the true gospel has social implications.'⁴

THE JUDGMENT AMOS ANNOUNCES

The Lord dominates the book from the start, as he 'roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem' (1:2). The number of times God is the subject of the verbs of destruction in chapters 1 and 2 show that he is the agent of judgment. We may anticipate that the nations will be judged, but God's people are by no means exempt from God's opposition to sin. It's not that God hasn't exercised considerable patience. Several crises have warned the people of God's judgment, but the people have not turned back to him (4:6-11). When the nation refused to listen, there was no other course but to promise that judgment would fall (4:12), and to declare an end to Israel (8:2; 9:1). If and when we reflect on God's judgment, the instinct might

be to brush it aside or to apply it to others. But, first and foremost, Amos' message came to God's people. Difficult as it is, we must not neglect to reflect honestly as well as sensitively on the implications of such passages for ourselves.

THE COMPASSION AMOS DEMONSTRATES

In spite of his announcements of judgment, there's every indication that Amos didn't enjoy the confrontation his message inevitably brought. He twice intercedes for the people and the Lord relents in sending judgment (7:1-6), even though he understands the consequences of their sin will eventually become inevitable (7:7-9; 8:1-3). His compassion is also seen in presenting the positive course of action to the people of God. Along with Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:6-8, Amos 5:24 captures the exhortation of the prophets at this time: 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (cf. 5:14-15). Our relationships in the covenant community are to be marked by justice and righteousness, which then spill over to others. In our stand for truth, and in any preaching about judgment, we dare not lose the quality of compassion – which prays for people and which encourages them to pursue the right track.

THE RESTORATION AMOS PROMISES

Although Amos promises exile for Israel (5:5, 27; 6:7), he also indicates there will be a remnant (3:12; 5:3; 9:8). These occasional glimmers of hope in the book become a bright light at its close as Amos looks forward to a time when a Davidic king would reign (9:11-12), and when the people would

return to the land from exile and be prosperous again (9:13-15).

Unlike his people, God can't abandon his side of the covenant so lightly, and judgment will not be his last word. As Robert Carlson writes, the key to prophetic preaching is not merely social critique, so much as 'bringing both past redemption and future hope to bear on present realities and right living', reminding 'a forgetful people of what God had done for them and of the blessing he had promised them... Preachers today can rightly apply the prophet's corrective message when we rightly understand the foundation of redemption and the anticipated restoration on which their rebuke and call to repentance is based.'⁵

So it is that hope is held out for a new beginning, a restoration of people and land, described in words that reach beyond Amos' time to others, including ourselves, holding out the promise that God – out of his own faithfulness – will restore his people to himself.

1. Robert A. Carlson, *Preaching Like the Prophets: The Hebrew Prophets as Examples for the Practice of Pastoral Preaching* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017).
2. Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), 228.
3. Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 146.
4. Bob Fyall, *Teaching Amos: Unlocking the Prophecy of Amos for the Bible Teacher* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006), 155.
5. Carlson, *Preaching Like the Prophets*, 28.

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