

Amos and Hosea

Class 1 — Study Guide

1. *Historical Setting*

The two prophets we will be studying, Amos and Hosea, prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos prophesied about 750 BCE (BCE = Before the Common Era), and Hosea appeared somewhat later. From their capital in Jerusalem David and Solomon both ruled over an extensive empire that included all of the territory of the twelve tribes of Israel. At the death of Solomon (922 BCE) the ten northern tribes revolted and set up an independent kingdom. Only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah remained faithful to the descendants of David and Solomon who continued to rule from Jerusalem. We refer to the northern state as the Kingdom of Israel and the southern state as the Kingdom of Judah, or, more briefly as “Israel” and “Judah”. Of the two states, the northern state of Israel had the larger population, the greater amount of land, the larger economy, and much greater strategic importance in the political landscape of the ancient Near East. Judah had a smaller population and land mass, and it was not as rich or as strategically important as Israel. Amos came from a small village, Tekoa, in the southern Kingdom of Judah; but God sent him to prophesy in the temple of the northern Kingdom of Israel in Bethel. Hosea was a native of the northern Kingdom of Israel.

2. *The Texts*

In this first class we will be considering three texts from Amos. Although prophets go all the way back to the beginning of the people of Israel, Amos is the first prophet whose words have come down to us. He prophesied orally, but later his words were collected, edited, and written down in the Book of Amos. Despite its modest size of nine thin chapters, the Book of Amos has had a profound effect on Jews and Christians through the centuries; and important elements of Catholic social teaching reflect insights that go all the way back to Amos, so that in many ways Amos is one of our contemporaries even though he lived almost 3000 years ago!

3. *The first text — Amos and Amaziah*

We discussed the first text in the video introduction to this class, but a close reading of the text will reveal other dimensions of Amos’ prophecy. The main idea we explored in the opening video introduction centered on the nature of the prophetic word. The prophetic word is self judging. The prophet announces what God is going to do. This leaves the human response open. Try to imagine Amaziah’s situation. What could he do? What are his options? What does he choose to do? This passage also sheds light on the call of the prophet. How does God operate? What light does the prophetic call shed on our own call as Christians? How does God communicate with me?

4. *The second text — “Who Will Not Prophesy?”*

The second text consists of eight rhetorical questions. There are three basic types of questions. The most common type of question is the information-seeking question. We may ask

a friend, for instance, “Where can I find a good pair of running shoes?” These information-seeking questions pop up often in our conversations. A second type of question is a rhetorical question. These rhetorical questions occur fairly often in speeches where the speaker wants to engage the audience directly. Often the rhetorical questions have only one answer, but they serve to involve the audience more immediately in a line of reasoning. Core questions make up the third type of questions. Core questions probe deep areas of our attempts to understand our world. Some examples: “What is art?”; “What is a just society?”; “What is the meaning of life?” There are no simple answers to these core questions; all we can do is try to engage them over a lifetime. The second text from Amos rattles off a series of rhetorical questions. How would you answer the first seven? What holds the seven questions together? The passage climaxes in the eighth question. How would you answer the eighth question? What does the passage tell us about the prophetic word?

5. *The third text — The Visions*

The third text records four visions that Amos had. The four visions recount four images of judgment. The first is a plague of locusts that threatened the harvest of the late sowing. The early harvest, the royal mowing, belonged to the king as taxes. The late mowing provided food for the cattle and grain for bread. The second image was a raging fire. This was not a forest fire like the California fires, but a cosmic fire that dried up the great ocean that supported the dry land (ancient Israelites believed that the earth was flat and floated on a deep ocean). The third vision was a plumb-line (or plummet). A plumb-line is just a weight attached to a string. Carpenters use a plumb-line to make sure a beam is perpendicular or straight up and down. Home decorators use a plumb-line when they apply wallpaper to make sure the wallpaper is straight; otherwise, when they circle the room the pattern will not match if the first panel is not perfectly perpendicular. The fourth vision is a basket of ripe fruit. In the first two visions Amos intervenes and God relents. In the third and fourth visions Amos does not intervene. Why doesn't Amos intervene? What does the series say that a single vision couldn't communicate? What is Amos' relationship with the people he is preaching to?

NOTE: The editors who assembled the Book of Amos in its present form inserted the story of Amos and Amaziah which we considered above between the third and fourth visions. The visions belong together. Can you discover why the editors inserted the story here?

6. *Further work*

You might want to read further in the Book of Amos. If you have questions, feel free to contact me at any time by phone. If I am not at home, leave a message with your phone number; and I will return your call.

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