

Amos

Introduction

Amos



Why read this book?

This book gives us God's perspective on some volatile social issues. It takes a hard look at injustice and gives a call to righteousness. Amos tells us how God feels when the wealthy and the powerful exploit the poor and the defenseless. Whether you're well-off or struggling to make ends meet—or even if you're middle-class—you'll find these words hitting close to home.

Who wrote this book and was it written?

Amos wrote this book between 760 and 750 B.C., a time of economic growth and prosperity. He was a shepherd from Judah with no known ministry credentials—except a word from God.

What was happening at this time?

The leadership and military conquests of Jeroboam II had enabled Israel to flourish. But while everything appeared fine on the surface, the moral fiber of the nation was disintegrating.

To whom was it written and why?

This message was for the people of Israel, the northern kingdom. Amos, from the southern kingdom, challenged their materialism and low morality, which they learned from their pagan neighbors. Many were exploiting the poor. Amos wrote to remind them that God has a special interest in the disadvantaged. His prophecy was God's last appeal to Israel, warning them to repent before it was too late.

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What to look for in Amos:

With strong, poetic imagery, Amos speaks passionately about God's concern for the poor. He urges a return to righteousness and justice by returning to the Lord. Watch for parallels between Amos's time and ours. When he speaks of the poor, think of the homeless, racial minorities, single parents, the elderly and others who are often exploited.

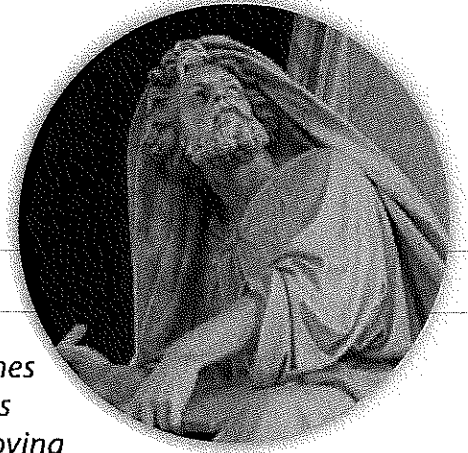
—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*

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How God sees us today

In his commentary The Minor Prophets, James Montgomery Boice writes, "The Book of Amos is one of the most readable, relevant, and moving portions of the Word of God. But in much of church history (until very recent times) little or no attention has been paid to it. Why? It is because the book speaks powerfully against social injustices and religious formalism, and many who would otherwise read the book have been implicated in such sins and are condemned by it."

This study will explore the issues of social justice, spiritual poverty, and hypocrisy addressed in the Book of Amos.

Scripture: Amos

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan

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Part 1 Identify the Issue

Amos is the earliest of the writing prophets. His was a day of unusual prosperity in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As wealth accumulated, people enjoyed leisure like never before. Most said that this was evidence of God's blessing. The only problem was that as the rich got richer, they did so at the expense of the poor. Religion was largely an outward show. It looked good on the surface, but it was internally bankrupt.

Amos was a man with an unusual moral conscience. He was perceptive and courageous. He was willing to speak for God whether that was popular or not. While the people were willing to hear about the sins of other nations, Amos was unpopular because he challenged Israel to see the poverty and hypocrisy of their own spiritual life.

[Q] What kind of response would the prophet Amos get in our society today?

[Q] Compare and contrast Amos's Israel with our modern culture.

[Q] What "prophets" are speaking like Amos today?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God despises social injustice.

The sermon of Amos begins in way that would have initially brought him the admiration of the people of Israel. What we need to know as we read these opening chapters is that they contain eight oracles, beginning with one against each of the six nations that surrounded Israel: Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

At the beginning of his talk, people would welcome the picture of judgment coming against these other nations. We might even imagine them cheering him on and applauding his words. But then the judgment of God begins to hit closer to home, because now Amos is speaking to the southern part of the nation. When we get to 2:6, the people of Israel begin to feel the sting of Amos's whip. In other words, he does not stop at challenging the other nations. He now turns his attention to the Israel herself. This would be the same as us criticizing secular culture, and then leaving the most powerful word of censure for the evangelical church. Ask the group to silently read Amos 1 and 2.

The common denominator in the oracles of judgment in these two chapters is that each involves a sin against basic human rights and rejecting God. So that you understand this,

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work through the judgment given against each nation, noting what they did according to the following passages:

1:3–5

1:6–8

1:9–10

1:11–12

1:13–15

2:1–3

2:4–5

[Q] People are willing to hear about the social injustices of other nations and are quick to condemn them. Give some examples of this today.

[Q] What are some issues we need to address in our own backyard?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To consider poverty and injustice in our world.*

Activity: *Go to a local bank and pick up enough deposit slips for each person. Ask each person to write on the deposit slip where they have invested their lives (i.e. teaching school, leading a small group, children, music, etc.).*

Ask them if they are happy with their investments, and remind them that they choose where to spend their time and energy. Maybe they will want to take time to reevaluate their priorities and to consider poverty and injustice around the world.

Teaching Point Two: God despises empty religion.

If the Book of Amos is a collection of sermons, it seems clear that chapter 3 is a new sermon. This chapter shows not only that Israel has a special relationship with God, but that this creates a higher obligation for holiness because of God's dealings with her. As a nation, she will face a more severe judgment for rebellion against God's law. This brings us to one of the universal laws of life—that is, that greater privilege means greater responsibility.

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Divide the group into four smaller groups. Assign each of them a chapter from Amos 3–6 to read and summarize for the group.

[Q] What picture does this give you of the spiritual state of the nation?

[Q] How does 5:21–26 describe God's feelings about their religious practices?

One of the main ways in which God spoke through Amos was in a series of five visions. They comprise most of chapters 7 through 9. Read the following passages that describe each vision, then summarize what you think the message of these visions was:

7:1–3 **The vision of the locusts**

7:4–6 **The vision of fire**

7:7–9 **The vision of a plumb line**

8:1–2 **The vision of ripe fruit**

9:1 **The vision of God over the altar**

[Q] On a spiritual level, we are often quick to criticize another denomination or church for their shortcomings, until we have to take an honest look in the mirror and see ourselves. What would Amos say to our church culture today?

Teaching Point Three: God will restore the faithful.

Despite an unrelenting parade of oracles, sermons, and visions of reckoning, the Book of Amos ends with God's promise to restore the land and people of Israel. Read Amos 9:11–15.

[Q] What does this passage tell you about God?

[Q] What encourages you here?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Amos prophesied to a prosperous country that had lived at the expense of the poor and embraced empty religious ritual. Sound familiar?

[Q] What is Amos's most important message for us today as Christians?

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Action Point: As a small group, consider participating in World Vision's 30-Hour Famine (30HourFamine.org) as a way to understand injustice in our world. As part of your group's activities, you may want to invite a local ministry leader to talk about social justice in your own community. Who knows what directions these activities may take your small group!

—*Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White*

