



A Course

In

**STUDIES IN THE
BOOK OF AMOS**

Prepared by the
Committee on Religious Education
of the
American Bible College

Pineland, Florida 33945

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The compiler of this course study uses the book by Dr. Kyle M. Yates, Jr. as the basis of this work. We wish to thank the former Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention for its permission to reprint and use their material. This course study will consist mainly of this text book with the inclusion of additional notes from other sources, unless otherwise noted. The scripture texts are altered to conform with the King James Version except where the authors are using their own rendering. It is our desire that this study will be enlightening and spiritually rewarding as you understand Amos' message of Judgment on Israel, yet future Hope.

Respectfully your servant in Christ Jesus,

Dr. Marvin W. Royse

INTRODUCTION

As you study the Scriptures you will find that it is of the greatest importance to approach the Bible in a reverent attitude of mind, looking upon it as the inspired Word of God, and not just an ordinary piece of literature. If the Bible is studied in the same manner as one studies Shakespeare, Milton or some historical work, it may be found interesting and profitable. But by this approach, the Bible student, persistent though he may be, will never find its rich treasures. The Apostle Paul says: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14). For the profitable study of the Word of God, the right spiritual attitude is indispensable.

The Scriptures should be studied as eagerly as a hungry person seeks food. The formal reading of a portion of the Bible may have some worth as a religious exercise, but in order that the complete benefit may be obtained from its truths, they must be appropriate to personal needs. A milkman may deliver thousands of quarts of milk each day and yet go home thirsty. The Bible student may read large portions of the Bible with little benefit unless he makes it his own by personal appropriation and feeds upon it.

In your studies of the Bible will you appropriate the riches thereof to your own personal use, or will you read as you would read a book of fiction, a mystery,

etc. In order to make full use of the pearls of wisdom contained in the Bible readings, it is suggested you reread them. Go into its wonderful fields of truth; go down into its valleys; climb its mountain peaks of vision; follow its streams of inspiration; enter its halls of learning. Many Bible truths do not appear on the surface; they must be dug up and be brought into the light by toil and effort.

There are various methods of Bible study: the exegetical method, the expository method, the topical method, the study by chapters, the study of important passages and the biographical method. In this study we are following the expository method which considers each topic section and analyzes it systematically. In this way the student will see the Book of Amos analyzed historically and prophetically as God has inspired and preserved it.

The central topics of The Studies In Amos course are centered around the topics Sin, Judgment, and Hope to Israel.

Although the American Bible College believes the King James Version is the preserved Word of God, this method of study allows the writer to occasionally condense a passage in his own paraphrase. This should not be construed to imply that the A. B. C. is correcting God's Word. During this course the student is required to read through the entire Minor Prophets in order to see their relationship with Amos.

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THE PROPHET AND HIS WORLD

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THE PROPHET AND HIS WORLD

A STERN PROPHET dressed in rough clothes of animal skins, preaching fire and brimstone — this is often the mental picture called forth by the mention of Amos of Tekoa. Such a response is amazingly accurate but only partially true. For the picture should include more than an appearance which speaks of the past. There is the prophet's message to be considered. These words speak to the past, the present, and the future.

Amos was a person who could never be taken for granted. Whether one agreed with his views or not, the impact of the prophet's message was lasting. The past twenty-eight centuries have not blunted this impact. Any person who looks deeply into the character of this man of God, and studies seriously the message of the prophet, will never be the same. He cannot accept casually the injustices of present-day society nor overlook God's concern for all of his children.

I. THE MAN CALLED "PROPHET"

Many prophets during Israel's history could be recognized by appearance, emotional displays, or professional functions. Three Hebrew words are used to refer to the prophetic calling. Two of the words (*ro'eh* and *choseh*) are rendered "seer." The other (*navi*) is translated "prophet." The latter seems to give particular emphasis to the utterance or message. There were false prophets, cultic prophets, ecstatic prophets, and others related to the organized religious life of the community. However, Amos is not so easy to classify.

1. *His Status as a Layman* (7:14)

In answer to an opponent who tried to silence his preaching, Amos drew some clear lines of distinction about his ministry. He said, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son" (Amos 7:14). Thus he disavowed any contact with the prophetic guilds of his day or with those who practiced prophecy professionally. He claimed no degrees from accredited schools. He

refused to claim Jerusalem or some local shrine as his base of operations or the source of his authority.

Having established his lay status in religious affairs, Amos described himself as a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. His responsibility probably involved the caring for a special breed of small sheep, prized for the quality of their wool. The prophet furnished another interesting feature of his work by referring to his sideline as a cultivator of sycamore trees. These trees, quite different from the trees of the same name in America, were of the fig-mulberry classification. Attaining the size of a walnut tree [40-50 ft.], they provided much-needed shade in the hot and dry climate of Judah. More important for Amos was the fig-like fruit which grew in clusters on these trees. The fruit was similar to the true fig but was inferior in quality (Amos 7:14). They grew only in the plains such as the Jordan (1 K. 10:27) and could not tolerate colder climates (Ps. 78:47) such as Jerusalem. Amos' duties involved part-time cultivation of these trees, either artificially pollinating the trees or puncturing the ripening fruit.

The prophet's condemnation of luxury and his interest in the poor have caused many readers to think of him as belonging to the poorer class in society. However, Jewish tradition has long described him as a well-to-do sheep owner. This idea may be borne out by the word for "herdsman" used in Amos 1:1. In 2 Kings 3:4 it is translated "sheepmaster" or "sheep owner." Even if Amos owned his own sheep, the quality of pastureland available would suggest that his flock was not large.

2. *His Call (7:15)*

While engaged in his primary occupation of keeping his flock, Amos became conscious of a definite call from God. His experience was quite removed from the center of organized religion at Jerusalem. During the course of humble duties, he had kept his mind open and attentive to the movement of God's spirit. As he faithfully watched over his sheep and their needs, he was awake to the word of God as it spoke of Israel's need.

Even though Amos was intent upon denying connection with the professional prophets, he was quick to acknowledge his relationship as God's prophet. God's command to him was specific: "Go, be a prophet to my people Israel." Amos wanted to make it perfectly clear that God was the source of his authority. He was responsible to none other, since he was commissioned to be God's spokesman. No institution or hierarchy could alter the purpose of the

righteous God as it was unfolded to His servant. The prophet's attitude is reflected in these words: "The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (3:8).

3. *His Character Traits*

How can we evaluate the impact of a man removed many centuries from our day? It would be helpful to have an eyewitness report by one who heard Amos in the marketplace of Bethel. A record by one of the court historians would provide yet another viewpoint. No such report or record has been preserved to aid in an evaluation, but Amos projected his personality through his preaching and writing. With only the slightest reference to himself, his dominant nature shines through in every paragraph. Seven major traits become evident in a careful reading of his writing.

(1) *Simple.*—Amos came to town as a plain, homespun man without any pretense. His austere background as a nomad gave to him a note of genuineness which gained him attention. In the midst of a would-be sophisticated community, Amos appeared as a natural and unaffected voice out of the wilderness.

(2) *Stern.*—A large part of Amos' effectiveness came from his stern view of life and his blunt approach to its problems. No other prophet of Israel was so harsh and direct in dealing with overt sin. He was hard, severe, and rigorous, whether speaking of sin or the sinner. To many who heard his messages, this trait may have been viewed as arrogance.

(3) *Keen.*—A simple, blunt person may obtain a hearing from a curious crowd; but he must have piercing insight to keep their attention. Surely few who heard Amos ever doubted that he was wide-awake, sharp, and discerning. His rough appearance contrasted his high intelligence. His words were witness enough of his thoughtful and meditative depth.

(4) *Observant.*—Amos was no introspective mystic, concerned only with the small world around his flock of sheep. He demonstrated an astounding breadth of vision and insight. His knowledge of the world and its basic problems made possible penetrating observations. He was farsighted enough to be able to relate the history of his people to the scene of world history. Living in a remote region, he was nevertheless a citizen of the world.

(5) *Dynamic.*—Coupled with his bluntness was a certain dynamic appeal which came from his clear and incisive style of speaking and writing. His preaching may be characterized as worldwide in sweep, noble in imagery, and profound in intensity. His use of imagery

demonstrated his keenness of mind as well as his close observation of nature and events. All of these factors added up to a style closely akin to the roar of a lion—a sound Amos knew so well.

(6) *Courageous.*—This prophet was no coward. He feared no man, prince or priest. His boldness and daring may have been a product of his self-reliance in the wilderness, but they were founded upon his deep confidence and trust in God.

(7) *Uncompromising.*—Above all, Amos was a man of principle who would not compromise his convictions nor water down the inflexible message of God. His rigid and strict approach to morals may have caused many of his hearers to regard him as prudish and puritanical. However, the depravity and injustice of Israel called for such a stand by the man of God.

II. THE SETTING OF AMOS' MINISTRY

Biblical truths can be applied best when the reader has a knowledge of the setting when God spoke. The teachings of God are timeless, but the application must be consistent with the original intent within the original setting. For this reason, Amos must be seen first as living and speaking to ancient Israel so that he may speak once again—this time to modern America.

1. *The Prophet's Relation to Judah*

Amos lived and labored in one of the most unpromising locations imaginable. His hometown was called Tekoa, a name probably referring to "the pitching of a tent". Prior to the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam, Tekoa was little more than a campsite. Its fame today is limited to its association with a lone prophet called of God from near its location.

The region around Tekoa is a vast wasteland, pitted with gullies which swiftly carry off water during the winter rains. Limestone hills with little vegetation dot the horizon to the north, south, and west. Even more desolate is the view to the east, where the land drops sharply toward the Dead Sea only eighteen miles away. This is the wilderness of Tekoa, remote and foreboding. Here Amos searched for pasture to sustain his flock. In this same area, down the slopes toward the Dead Sea, he cultivated his sycamore trees. In this desolate and silent world, Amos was made aware of the presence of God and realized his mission for God.

Yet, with all its detachment, Tekoa was only twelve miles from Jerusalem, the center of Judah's life. The Temple of Solomon had been standing for about two hundred years, making Jerusalem the hub of religious

life for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. A deep heritage and many traditions had built up around this City of David. However, Amos never appealed to the example of Jerusalem, nor did he seek his authority there. He undoubtedly regarded himself as a citizen of Judah, but he remained aloof from the strong urges of patriotism. He came out of the wilderness of Tekoa with a loyalty toward God and the ideal which God had laid upon his heart.

2. *Amos' Mission to Israel*

Why should Amos bypass Jerusalem with its many problems and go into the Northern Kingdom? Why should a simple shepherd, living in the most detached area of Judah, suddenly become concerned about foreign missions? Surely the primary reason must be discerned in the pointed mandate of God, "Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" (7:15). Amos accepted this charge without question or protest. Many experiences had prepared him for this time. God did not break through into a vacuum but into a life made well aware of the needs in Israel.

It is very likely that Amos had made previous journeys to the markets in Israel. As a shepherd, he would have sold his wool where the demand was greatest. Bethlehem lay only six miles from Tekoa, Jerusalem twelve, and Bethel twenty-two. Other places mentioned by Amos would have been in easy reach; Samaria and Gilgal for instance. Tekoa was within a walk of an hour and a half from an open view of the land of the Philistines. The lands of Moab and Edom were clearly visible from the wilderness of Tekoa.

It is surprising to find that Amos made mention of at least thirty-eight cities and districts in the brief compass of his writing. Through his travels, his contacts with traders and merchants, and his keen observation of life, he was ready for the task when God's call came to him. Amos' solitary life had sharpened his eyes, intensified his ability to hear, and quickened his conscience to respond.

In obedience to the summons of God, the prophet went to Bethel, the site of the chief shrine for northern Israel. There at a pilgrimage festival he preached his strong sermons which finally brought him face to face with the priest Amaziah (7:10-14). How many times he preached is a moot question. It may be that he labored in Bethel, Gilgal, and Samaria for brief periods. Then he might have gone back home to commit to writing the warnings which he had uttered and those messages which he had been prevented from preaching at Bethel.

3. *Amos' Date in Historical Context*

The scene for the ministry of Amos is tersely but systematically set in the opening verse of the book. No other prophetic book has so complete a superscription. Amos is mentioned, along with his primary occupation, his home-town, the area of his ministry and the kings of Judah and Israel. Even an event is mentioned as a means of orientation. The reference to Uzziah as king of Judah suggests approximate limits of 783 to 742 B.C. Corresponding almost exactly was the reign in Israel of Jeroboam II from 786 to 746 B.C.

Amos must have appeared on the scene during the latter part of Jeroboam's reign. The early years of Jeroboam's reign were spent in war to regain Israel's former status, whereas a time of peace and security pervaded the land in Amos' day. The evidence of prosperity and the wide-scale accumulation of wealth demand a date well into the reign of Jeroboam. Since Amos made no reference to the anarchy which followed the time of Jeroboam, it would seem that he completed his work before 746 B.C. It thus appears that the active ministry of Amos falls within the decade 760 to 750 B.C., though the length of his ministry cannot be fixed beyond question.

Amos is not mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures, and many items about his life remain a complete mystery. We do not know when he was born, how old he was when he received God's call, how long he preached, how many years he lived or how he died. Jewish tradition asserts that he met a martyr's death. One source suggests that he was killed by Uzziah, king of Judah. Another claims that he was murdered by Amaziah, the priest who opposed him at Bethel. The historical value of such traditions is certainly dubious.

III. THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

In recent decades, Americans have become painfully aware of foreign affairs. The international situation often becomes the barometer of life and business. Such awareness has caused a new sense of the importance of political affairs relating to biblical times, even those involving nations other than the people of God. Since ancient Israel was so often oppressed, and even more often threatened by outsiders, the international scene becomes a dominant issue. Especially is this point true for the book of Amos. The prophet of Tekoa was extremely conscious of the threatening doom coming as the judgment of God but administered by a foreign army. He was likewise acquainted with affairs of

historical import which were completely overlooked by the majority of Israel's populace.

1. *The Balance of Power*

The fortunes of ancient Israel were subject to rise and fall in proportion to the relative strength of the rival powers on the international scene. By the time of Amos, great empires had already waxed and waned. The major balance of power had long been established between Egypt and the Mesopotamian kingdoms. There were further checks and balances between lesser powers, which brought about times of peace and prosperity.

In 805 B.C. an event occurred which turned the fortunes of Israel. The Assyrians crushed Damascus (Syria) and thus allowed Jehoash to recapture much of the territory lost by his father Jehu. Into such a promising situation came Jeroboam II, who enjoyed even greater military success than his predecessors. He was able to restore all the territory previously lost by Israel and add to his kingdom in every direction, even capturing Damascus itself. Thus he effectively controlled almost all the area once held by David, except for the smaller kingdom of Judah. As Amos came on the scene, during the latter half of Jeroboam's reign, a balance in power had produced a time of relative peace. Assyria had effectively reduced the strength of Syria. Then Assyria entered a period of decline due to a series of weak kings. Since Egypt was likewise weak, there was no dominant power on the international scene. The absence of one overpowering nation made possible for Israel the greatest era of peace which she had known as an independent kingdom.

2. *The Lull Before the Storm*

Even in the midst of peace and prosperity, the dark clouds of war were threatening on the horizon. The rising power of the Assyrians seems to have been ignored by leaders and people alike. But not by Amos! To him, judgment seemed inevitable. He felt it would come in the form of devastation by war. Defeat and exile would complete the cycle of events. Although Assyria is not specifically named, Amos used veiled references which clearly implied that God would use the Assyrian power to accomplish His purposes.

About the time of Jeroboam's death, a new king, Tiglathpileser III, took over in Assyria and quickly established himself as a threat to Syria and Israel. Within a few years he had conquered Syria and taken captives from Galilee. It was only about twenty-five years after the death of Jeroboam that Samaria fell and Israel went into captivity. The doom, which Amos so clearly saw and so fearlessly proclaimed, had arrived!

IV. LIFE IN ISRAEL AND JUDAH

In order to make the book of Amos live, we must be able to identify with the people involved. The individuals originally addressed by the messenger of God must come alive. We must see them as real persons. We need to sense how the wealthy secular-minded person responded to Amos' message and justified his way of life. We need to be sensitive to the deeper feelings of the poor and mistreated. We need to perceive the attitude of the average "man on the street" who may or may not fall into either classification. We must also keep in mind that there were God-fearing men and women who recognized the evils about them but merely kept silent. Although they were not singled out by Amos, his message was applicable to them.

1. *Economic Background*

Amos came upon the scene at Bethel well aware of the booming economy of the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam II. Peace had made possible once again the control of the great trade routes which ran north and south through the country. A strong merchant class had arisen during the hectic days just past. The small businessmen had been forced out. Their properties had been grabbed by those building great estates. The newly rich merchants and landowners had found a place at the top of the social ladder. There was still no real middle class. The rich were busy building and enjoying their winter houses and their summer houses—terminology used by Amos but probably rarely heard before his day (3:15).

The average man lived a simple type of life. While he was either a farmer or a shepherd, he usually lived in a small town or village for protection from enemy attack. Several towns were further guarded by connection with a strongly fortified city nearby. Amos fully realized the difficulties during a time of siege (as he pointed out in chapter 6 of his book). There was usually no systematic planning in the villages or the cities. Most of the houses were crudely built, ranging from one-room huts to more stable houses arranged around an open courtyard. Some of the latter consisted of two stories, the lower used for household chores and storage, the second floor for sleeping. The roofs, normally of straw mixed with mud and lime, had to be repaired after every strong rain. Furniture seldom was found except in the homes of the wealthy.

The diet of the average Israelite further indicates the simplicity of his life. Bread was the basic item. Usually it was made into flat cakes from barley or wheat mixed with olive oil. Vegetables included horsebeans, lentils,

and cucumbers. Some variety of the menu of the bread and vegetables was possible by the addition of onions, garlic, or leeks as flavoring. Grapes, figs, dates, pomegranates, sycamore figs, and raisins played an important part in the diet. Meat was normally reserved only for special occasions such as festivals and feasts.

The division of the rich and poor could also be seen in the typical clothing. Garments of the well-to-do class were carefully dyed with costly purple and elaborately decorated with fringes and tassels along the borders of the cloth. The poorer person wore a simple tunic covered by a cloak of wool, linen, or skins. The women and the elders wore long tunics. A workman or warrior probably wore a short tunic with a "T-shirt" type of covering for his upper body.

2. *Social Problems*

To the outsider, Israel's economic outlook might have appeared encouraging. But it did not seem so to the prophet from Tekoa. He could sense the mutter of discontent on every side. Even more, he could see the moral decay beneath the veneered surface.

(1) *Luxury and extravagance.*—Luxury among the wealthy was apparent. Many Israelites interpreted this as an evident token of God's blessings of peace and prosperity on their land. The houses of hewn stone, the ivory-paneled walls, the furniture of inlaid ivory, and the cushions of silk were not evil in themselves. The evil which Amos recognized was in the contrast of luxury with the conditions of people in the lower class. Society was organized in such a way that equality of opportunity was impossible. The "have's" had no concern about the necessities of the "have not's." The primary thought among the wealthy was how they might increase their own possessions.

(2) *Injustice and dishonesty.*—Amos saw in the unbridled luxury a deeper problem than the inequalities between the two classes. The wealthy had gained their position not by honest toil but by oppression and injustice. For a trifling debt, a poor man was sold into slavery or his children were taken from him. Justice was sold to the one who could pay the highest bribe or offer the costliest present. The widow, orphan, or alien had little chance for justice. The merchants had their special weights and measures always ready for the unsuspecting buyer or the one whose complaint would not be taken seriously. The small holdings of land were being steadily taken from the poor by unscrupulous men intent upon building great estates.

(3) *Immorality and self-indulgence.*—Amos abhorred the excesses of the nation's leaders. The perpetual feasting and revelry of the wealthy presented

a sharp contrast to the suffering of the masses. Some even used bowls for their wine, and the society women were able to keep up with the men in their drinking. Although the prophet only once mentioned sexual immorality, he left an indelible picture of debauchery (2:7-8).

3. Religious Factors

The deplorable social problems were compounded by a mixed-up religious system. The Mosaic faith had been watered down by the addition of pagan practices and symbols. Some of these pagan factors had been introduced by the Canaanites who remained in the land after the conquest. Golden images of young bulls had been set up at Bethel and Dan by Jeroboam I, when the kingdoms divided at the time of Solomon's death. Other pagan practices crept in through Jezebel and the tolerant attitude of Ahab. She sought to kill all of God's prophets and replace them with her false prophets of Baal. (Elijah had to deal with this problem in I K. 19.)

In order to understand Amos' great concern, it is imperative that we recognize the insidious nature of the Canaanite or Tyrian Baal worship. Baal worship was inseparably linked with the cycles of nature throughout the year. The earth was viewed as dead during the dry summer months and could be revived only by awaking the deities of fertility. This was believed to be accomplished by the physical union of men and women in acts of prostitution in the name of religion. Thus by sympathetic magic, fertility was supposed to come to all of life-field, flock, husband and wife alike.

Not only were the lowest aspects of human desire brought into the faith of Israel; but the basic essentials of Mosaic faith were treated in a hopelessly superficial

manner. "Church" attendance was good; sacrifices and offerings were abundant; tithes were multiplied. Yet, to the prophet these things appeared as mere ritual, going through the motions in the name of religion. There was no deeply spiritual effect upon the conduct of the people when they left the shrine.

Such was the moral and spiritual level of the Israel to which Amos addressed himself. Is it any wonder that he thundered as a young lion?

FOR ADVANCED STUDY

1. For a summary of statements evaluating the impact of Amos:

A. C. Knudson, *The Beacon Lights of Prophecy*. pp. 57-58.

R. L. Honeycutt, *Amos and His Message*. p. 2.

K. M. Yates, Sr., *Preaching from the Prophets*. pp. 40-41.

2. For a description of the rugged country around Tekoa:

G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*. I, pp. 72ff.

3. For a vivid picture of the daily life of the Israelites:

G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (rev. ed., 1962) pp. 183ff.

M. S. and J. L. Miller. *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*.

E. W. Heaton, *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times*.

4. For a more comprehensive view of Baal worship:

G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*. pp. 107-120.

W. F. Albright. *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, pp. 68-94.

END OF SAMPLE

