

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART THREE - THE BOOK OF AMOS

By now I trust you are comfortable with some of the useful questions to ask when starting a new book in the Old Testament. First begin with prayer. 'Lord, I ask You to teach me, to show me Yourself in this book, and then live out in me all you teach me about Yourself.' Now move to more specific questions.

Who wrote Amos? Amos, according to 1:1, was the speaker and presumably the writer although shepherds in those days may not have been literate so there could have been a scribe involved. He tells us he was a shepherd from Tekoa, a village near Jerusalem. It will be interesting to watch for anything in his message which sounds like a shepherd writing.(3:12) There had been other shepherd-leaders in the Old Testament like Moses and David who certainly understood the similarity between leading sheep and people.(Psalm 23) To whom was he writing? Again he tells us, to Israel, the northern kingdom whose need was greatest at that time, although his words would not have been lost on Judah who also receive a rebuke in 2:4,5. When was he writing? Uzziah was king in Judah and therefore that country had godly leadership until the later years of his reign when he became proud and was afflicted with leprosy.(II Chron.26) Jeroboam II was ruling Israel which was prosperous and at peace, but living without God, supposing they did not need Him.(II Kgs.14) Interestingly Amos was just before Hosea in time though his message is placed after Hosea and Joel in the Bible. There must be a reason in terms of his theme, so let us look for it.

Where is Amos quoting or referring to other Old Testament books which offer clues as to his message?

1. Chapters 1 and 2 refer to many of Israel's neighbours who had caused God's people major trouble at different times in their history. They had each consistently caused difficulty in the same way and therefore represent the temptations which still affect us. Damascus and Tyre had provided many of the false gods Israel had followed, the Philistines intimidated with sheer force, Edom represented self-sufficiency, and Moab and Ammon lured with the lusts of the flesh.

2. Key events in Israel's history are referred to such as the captivity in Egypt (2:10), Jacob meeting the Lord at Bethel,(4:4) which subsequently became a place of heathen worship. There the stones had been erected into a monument at Gilgal(4:4) beside the river Jordan as a reminder of how God brought Israel through 'death and resurrection' into a new life. But this too became a place of idolatry. Then there is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rescue of Abraham's family,(4:11) and David's ministry through the Psalms,(6:5). Finally there is reference to the 'fallen booth of David',(9:11) presumably the city of Jerusalem which he captured and established.

Where is Amos quoted in the New Testament? There is one important reference in Acts 15:16-18 which will help us. The Christian leaders had been meeting in Jerusalem to deal with a contentious issue of doctrine. There were some Jewish Christians who were insisting that to complete their salvation those who had trusted Christ must now follow the Law of Moses, beginning with circumcision. Paul and Barnabas on the other hand claimed that we are saved through grace alone, received by faith not by works. After everyone had spoken James summarised, and used Amos(9:11-12) to highlight his conclusion that we are saved by faith. In context, the 'fallen booth of David' refers to Jesus as Son of David being raised from the dead and all of us, whether Jew or Gentile, being made part of Him. It is only as we share the risen life of Christ that we can be acceptable to God. Good works will never achieve acceptance. This could be the theme of Amos.

There is also a picture in Amos 7:7,8 of a plumb line which leads to the same idea. A plumb line is used by a builder as a measure of vertical straightness. Jesus is that measure in the New Testament by which we realise how, by comparison with Him, we fail hopelessly.(Rom.12:3; Eph.4:13) Comparison with Him shows us why we need not the Law but His risen life in us to live right.

Putting the book as a whole together this message develops as follows:

1:1,2 **Introduction** - God will not be ignored!

1:3-2:3 **The sins of the neighbours.** One by one Amos reviews the atrocities of the surrounding nations, the Syrians, the Philistines, the people of Tyre, the Edomites, the Ammonites and the Moabites. They have done terrible things and deserve that God should judge them in the same way as they have treated Israel.

2:4,5 **The sins of Judah.** The southern kingdom who claimed to follow the scriptures, but did not do them, are just as guilty before God and deserving of judgement! The sin of religious hypocrisy is just as great in God's eyes as genocide. All sin is equal. All men are sinners.(Rom.3:9-18)

2:6-16 **The sins of Israel.** Up to this point one can imagine the people of the northern kingdom smiling smugly. But now it was their turn. Their neglect of the poor was just as bad. Their forgetfulness of how good God had been to them in saving them from Egypt, leading them into their beautiful land and sending prophets, whom they ignored, to speak to them, was equally deserving of judgement! They too fell short of God's standard.

3:1-15 **The fate of Israel.** God had given every warning of what He intended to do. They would be taken away captive by another nation. Their idols which could do nothing for them would be destroyed as would the lavish houses which they supposed their false gods had given them.

4:1-13 **The sins of the women** as well as the men. Women who push their husbands to earn more are compared to a superior breed of cow and are as responsible for the suffering of the poor as their husbands are! The pretence of worship will get them nowhere. Time and again when adversity came they did not seek God. They had no excuse.

5:1-27 **The answer to sin** - seek God and live! Repeatedly Israel are urged to seek God for life before judgement came on them in the form of captivity. The theme of darkness and the day of the Lord, from the book of Joel, is taken up again. They were reminded once more that for them, social injustice by the rich towards the poor is sin as much as the atrocities of the neighbours. Sacrifices in their temple accomplished nothing.

6:1-14 **The consequence of sin** - judgement. Their greedy affluence while others suffer would soon bring them to nothing as another nation took them away. Prosperity does not mean the blessing of God!

7:1-17 **The measure of sin, and a reaction against truth.** First a locust swarm and then a forest fire seemed excessive as punishment but a plumb line gets the point across. When our sin is compared to the Lord Jesus, its full extent becomes obvious and there are no longer excuses. Amos is ordered by the priest to shut up and go home but he explains that he is just a shepherd sent by God and refuses.

8:1-14 **Sin is like over-ripe fruit.** It looks good but does not last. Again Amos exposes the unfair treatment of the poor which was the basis of their economic success. Darkness and the day of the Lord are coming when the worst famine will be not for food but for God's word.

9:1-15 **There is a simple choice.** There is no escape from the judgement of the Creator. On the other hand David's line will produce Someone who will rise again to give His life to those of all nations who trust Him. God's standard in the Law is impossible for us to reach but He in us can accomplish it. We cannot, He can, why not let Him? Among other things, social injustice among them would disappear. In the church of Jesus Christ, the world should see a glimpse of this happening already.(Acts 4:34)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Look up in the Bible the history of each of Israel's neighbours to see how they consistently caused the same problems for God's people. What in a few words was God's message through Amos to them? How is a similar message appropriate to the people of the world in which we live?(chapter 1)
2. What were the problems of the two nations of Israel and Judah? Are they better or worse than the neighbours? Again how does the same message apply now to the church of Jesus Christ?(chapter 2)
3. What does God warn Israel will happen to them and why? Why do we find it hard to spell out to people today the reality of the judgement of God?(chapter 3)
4. How might the more affluent women have put pressure on the men which resulted in injustice for the poor? How does the same thing happen in a consumer driven society in the present day? How do we also use religion as an excuse to oppress the needy?(chapter 4)
5. What was the solution for those who realised all was not well in their society? How would you explain the same message to someone in our world who recognises all is not well?(chapter 5)
6. How did success lure the middle-class people of Amos' day into thinking they were safe? How do the same people in the 21st century make the same mistake?(chapter 6)

7. How did God persuade Amos of the inescapability of judgement for social oppression? What trouble did spelling his message out bring on Amos? How can we expect the same?(chapter 7)
8. If they continued to ignore the needy, what consequences would there be? How are there signs of the same famine of the word of God today? What can we do about it?(chapter 8)
9. What is the bad news and the good news with which Amos ends his book? How can we present the same message now?(chapter 9)
10. What in one sentence is the theme of Amos? How does this book logically follow Hosea and Joel?
11. What does Amos say about how a real Christian faith will show in social responsibility? How might he have expressed his message in the 21st century?