

The Half Hour That Changes the World

Amos

Book 30

Basic Questions behind the book:

How long do you think you can get away with this sort of behaviour?

Summary of book:

Amos was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel who had been a shepherd and sycamore-fig tree dresser in the southern kingdom of Judah. The book begins with the announcement of God's coming judgment (1:1 - 2:16). Following a series of messages where harsh words are spoken to Israel's neighbours, Amos focuses his main message on Israel. Being an Israelite or a Jew was not going to be enough to avoid judgment. The reasons for God's judgment are explored (3:1 - 6:14). He attacks his hearers for their hypocrisy, idolatry and ritualism. God's abhorrence of the gap between the rich and the poor is explored graphically. The 'day of the Lord' is coming but it won't be a good day for them: Instead of vindication, there would be wrath. There are then two visions of judgement (7:1 - 9:15) in which Amos speaks of the plumb-line standard of God by which they will be measured: What isn't straight will be knocked down. The second vision of the basket of fruit speaks of ripeness and they are ripe for judgment. It is nearly time! Only the final five verses of the book offer any hope.

Vital Statistics:

Purpose: To pronounce God's judgment upon Israel, the northern kingdom, for their complacency, idolatry, and oppression of the poor.

Author: Amos, who was a shepherd & vinedresser from Tekoa in the southern kingdom (7:14,15).

Recipients: In the first place the ministry of Amos is addressed to the northern kingdom, although there are messages for Israel's neighbours in Chapter 1 & the early part of Chapter 2.

Dating: Amos' ministry is located in the period of Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah (Azariah) of Judah, therefore around 760 – 750 BC.

Setting: Internally, Israel seemed to be experiencing a good period of rest and prosperity but there were two problems. One issue was that while wealth was increasing for some it wasn't being distributed fairly, and thus an increasingly poor and marginalised population who were crying out for justice. The other issue was the rising power of Assyria in the east who were to eventually conquer the northern kingdom in 722 BC.

Other Reflections:

Amos was a border-crossing prophet. He left the comfort zone of home, family, friends and employment to bring the message he was carrying to people who weren't going to like what he shared. The message he carried was delivered by means of a powerful preaching style as can be seen in the way he lambasts Israel's neighbours, lulling them into a false sense of security, before bringing them into his cross-hairs. He uses striking metaphors and images that remain in the mind long after the hearer or reader has engaged with him. In polite conservative religion we are never comfortable about thoughts of the judgment of God. We like the warm cuddly God but not the one who takes note of the way we live our lives, and can disapprove of some of our behaviour. Also, it is good for those of us in the evangelical tradition to be reminded of God's concern not just for people's souls but also his concern for all of their lives and our calling to show justice and mercy. Note in this book the concern of God for other nations and his activity in and among them as well as in Israel. This would have been a shock for them, but it is a theme that exploded out into the world from the day of Pentecost.

"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!". (5:24)