

Amos 1:1-2

'The Lion Roars'

What Martin discovered

Martin Luther was 18 years old when he went to university at Erfurt in 1501. In those days a university education invariably meant studying theology as well. And he became deeply influenced by a theologian called Gariel Biel. Biel's basic thesis was that if a person does their very best morally then God will assist them in attaining eternal life. Doing your best was a preparation for God's grace. On the other hand, if you didn't do your best then all you could expect was the justice of God or the righteousness of God. That is, God will act to punish you for not doing your best. Now Martin was a very intense young man with a great desire to be on the right side of God. And the teaching of Biel made him more and more distraught and worried. He ended up asking himself over and over again whether he had done his very best. He even began to wonder whether any human being could do their very best. Anyway, in 1505 he graduated with a Masters degree. And through a series of incidents he ended up becoming a monk. Martin tells us that he was a good monk. He kept the rules of the monastery so strictly that he was later to say that if ever a monk could get into heaven by monkery, then he would have got there. He maintains that if he had been a monk for much longer he would have martyred himself to death with vigils, prayers, fasts, readings, and other good works. He used all of these mechanisms in order to find some peace of conscience. But the more he strove to be at peace, the more he worried and the less peace and tranquillity he knew. The more holy he became in practice, the more uncertain he became. The only thing he knew for certain was that he would come face to face with a holy and righteous God and that this God would judge him with great severity. He tells us that in the long run he thinks that he stopped loving God. In fact, he came to hate this just God who punishes sinners. Nevertheless, he kept pressing on with his study. And in 1508 he was appointed to the theological faculty of the university of Wittenburg. By 1512 he was awarded a doctorate in theology. But for all his theological learning he still had no peace. He tells the story of how he would sit in his small room in the tower of the monastery and night and day he would search the scriptures for answers. And gradually he began to find truth. The first thing he realised was that no fallen human being could be capable of being good enough to face God. Sin has completely enslaved us. And into this situation Jesus has come. And the New Testament records the one crucial event in all history — the crucifixion of Jesus.

Martin came to see that the crucifixion is all about God offering up his own Son as a sacrifice for the sins of all people.

Therefore the Jesus who hangs on the cross must be our righteousness.

And instead of scrabbling around trying to achieve our own righteousness we should trust in the righteousness that Jesus has won for us.

And we do that by believing.

By having faith in Jesus we can belong to him and participate in God's righteousness.

Martin found this truth revolutionary.

He tells us that it was like being reborn and going through open doors into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning.

Up to this point the justice of God had filled him with hatred.

Now it became to him inexpressibly sweet in great love.

For when we see God through Christ we see pure grace and overflowing love.

We look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness.

Martin said that from this moment on he knew that anyone who saw God as angry was not seeing him properly.

Friends, you and I owe a great debt to this man, Martin Luther.

For he rediscovered something that the church had forgotten.

He rediscovered the heart of the living God and found there a heart of mercy, grace, and overflowing love.

And we who know Christ have been drawn near to this heart of God.

Now I want to tell you that today and for the next two months we are going to study the book of Amos.

And as we do, you and I are going to find ourselves faced with an angry God.

And we are going to have to work out how we can reconcile his anger with the truths that Martin found in the Bible.

And this journey is going to begin today in the very first two verses of the book.

So, as we study, I want you to remember Martin and his discovery.

And we are going to grapple with how his words, and the words of the New Testament, fit with the picture of God we find in Amos.

We are going to ask if God can still be angry with us, his children.

And if he is, we are going to try and work out how we should respond to this anger.

So, let's get started.

Let's open the book of Amos at chapter 1.

An ordinary man

Now today we are simply going to look at the first two verses of Amos.

These two verses are very unusual amongst the books of the prophets in the Old Testament.

They are unusual because of the detail that they give us about the prophet and the situation into which his prophecy came.

They also give us a summary of the core of his message.

So, let's get started by seeing what these verses tell us about Amos.

Well, the first thing that they tell us is that Amos is quite an ordinary man.

His Name

We are told his name – he is Amos.

We are not given the name of his father, just his own name.

His home town

We are told that his home town is Tekoa.

Tekoa is a village in the highlands of Judah on the edge of the Judean desert. It is 16 kms out of Jerusalem and approximately 8 kms from Bethlehem. The surrounding countryside was suitable for pasturing flocks, which brings us to his occupation.

His occupation/s

Amos 1 tells us that Amos is a shepherd. Now the term here for shepherd is not the usual one. It is a term that is used to refer to breeder of livestock. In Amos 7:14 another couple of terms are used that indicate that he was a cattle breeder who was in charge of flocks of sheep and goats. In other words, he probably bred sheep, goats and possibly cattle that he would trade with others. Amos 7:14 tells us that Amos also had another occupation. He was a cultivator of sycamore fig trees. Sycamore figs are a wild fig variant. It appears as though the fruit needs to be nipped at the right time if they are to grow and ripen as clean, insect free fruit that the lower classes could afford. As a cultivator of sycamore fig trees, Amos would have to go through the crop at the right season and individually nip or puncture each individual fig. The only problem is that sycamore fig trees didn't grow in his home area. Tekoa is too high for sycamore trees, which means that Amos would have needed to travel to pursue this occupation as well. So, there is a portrait of this man. We don't know whether or not his occupations brought him wealth. But we do know that he was responsible for producing two sought after items in this ancient economy – sycamore figs and livestock. And we do know that he would have needed to travel both to look after these products and to sell them. And we do know that he was an ordinary man.

His visions

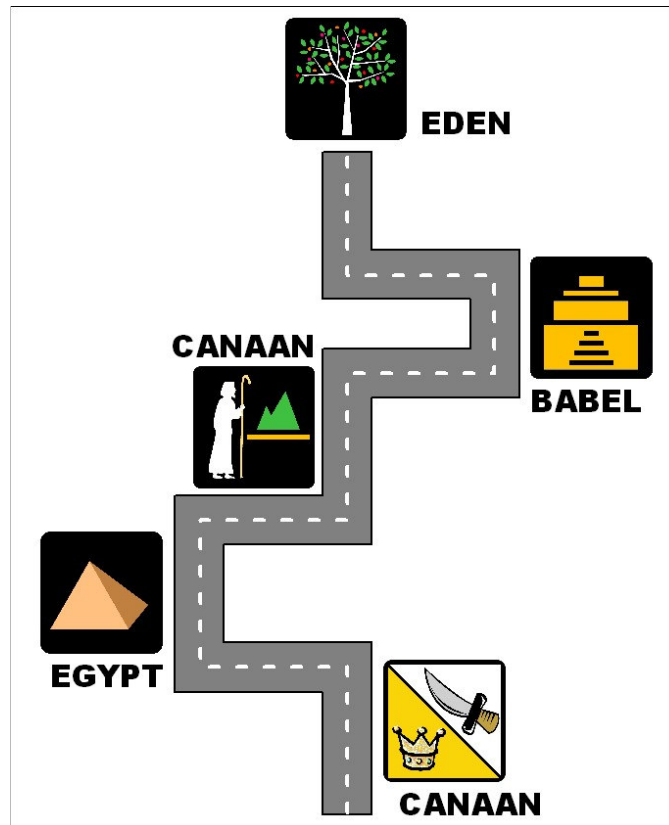
And God chose this ordinary man to be a prophet. Verse 1 tells us that Amos had visions – he saw things concerning Israel. Amos 7:14 tells us that God took this ordinary man who was not a prophet nor the son of a prophet and took him from tending flocks. He told him to go and prophesy.

In an ordinary time

Now, let's look at what Amos tells us about the time in which he lived. Amos gives us two ways of locating his time.

At the time of Uzziah and Jeroboam II

He does the normal thing of dating his prophecy by the reign of a king or kings. The two kings he names are Uzziah and Jeroboam. At this point we need to do a bit of historical overview.



The book of Genesis tells us in Genesis 12 that God called Abraham. God promised that he would give him a land and that he would make him a great nation. Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob and Esau. Jacob became the father of twelve sons and one daughter. The sons in turn became the father of twelve tribes. And these twelve tribes end up in Egypt at the end of the book of Genesis. The book of Exodus tells us that God rescues his people out of Egypt and begins them on a journey to the promised land of Canaan. The books of Leviticus through to Joshua tell us how God gives them the promised land. The book of Judges describes how they stay in their tribal groupings within the land and are ruled over by Spirit-appointed and Spirit-filled leaders called 'Judges'. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel tell us how the people of God ask God to appoint kings to rule over them and how God grants their request. He gives them their first king, Saul. Saul is succeeded by David. And David is given kingship over the whole nation. The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell us that David's successors don't rule as David did. And the nation becomes divided. Twelve tribes go one way under the kingship of a series of kings who are not sons of David. They are the northern kingdom, sometimes known as 'Israel' in this part of the Bible. Its capital city is Samaria. The other two tribes are based in the south. They are ruled over by sons of David and the nation is sometimes known as 'Judah' in this part of the Bible.

Its capital city is Jerusalem.

With this in mind, let's return to the kings that are mentioned here in Amos.

King Uzziah is a descendant of David.

He is king over Judah in the south and reigns from approximately 790 BC to 740 BC.

King Jeroboam II is king over Israel in the north and reigns from approximately 790 to 750 BC.

With this background in mind, let's have a look at a map of the two nations at this time.



There are a number of things I want you to notice.

First, check out where Israel is, where Judah is, where Jerusalem is, and where Samaria is.

Remember that Amos lives near Jerusalem.

He is therefore from the southern kingdom.

However, we will find out as the book progresses that his ministry is mainly directed towards the northern kingdom.

Second, notice the surrounding nations.

Third, notice the boundaries of the northern kingdom.

The reign of Jeroboam II was a time when the big powers of the day were too busy to be overly concerned with Israel and Judah.

This meant that the northern nation in particular was able to expand to the boundaries that had been in place during the golden age of Solomon.

The time of Jeroboam II was therefore a kind of silver age of Israel.

Trade was relatively free.

A wealthy merchant class began to develop and they became richer and richer.

But the book of Amos tells us that the wealth was not shared.

The poor of the land became increasingly deprived and oppressed.

Money was poured into lavish religious rituals.

But this was just a cover up for greed and empty religion.

As so often happens, material wealth was associated with spiritual poverty and social injustice. As we read on through Amos's book, we can see that these trends are quite well progressed. This probably means that the prophecy is to be dated toward the end of the reign of Jeroboam.

The earthquake

You may remember that I said that Amos gives us two bits of information that enable us to pinpoint the time of his prophecy.

The reign of kings is very broad.

But the second bit of information is very specific.

Take a look at verse 1.

Amos tells us that his visions came to him during the two years before the earthquake (ESV is to be preferred here).

Now, the geology of Palestine is such that earthquakes are a reasonably familiar occurrence.

So, it appears as though there must have been some specific earthquake that everyone reading his prophecy would identify.

And sure enough, the book of Zechariah tells us there was a very dramatic earthquake during the reign of Uzziah (Zechariah 14:4-5).

Archaeological digs at Hazor tell us that there was an earthquake in the region around about 760 BC (give or take 10 years).

This probably means that we can date the prophecy of Amos to 760 BC, plus or minus 10 years.

The point that I want to make, however, is that we are dealing with a fairly ordinary time.

Sure, the nation was rich and secure at this time.

But the people were doing what we know were the normal activities of human beings.

They were living as though God did not exist.

They were living ordinary lives – trading, marrying, having kids, giving their kids in marriage, practicing a form of religion, but basically living lives of a self-centred sort.

They were ordinary people in an ordinary time.

And it is to these people that God sends this ordinary shepherd and cultivator of sycamore trees.

And his message is an extraordinary message.

Let's now turn to it in verse 2.

With an extraordinary message

Now, I'm going to use the ESV version at this point.

It reads:

And he said: "The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers." (Amos 1:2, ESV)

Lions were common in Palestine at the time of Amos.

Amos tells us in 3:4 that lion's roar when they have prey in their sights.

This aggressive roaring is part and parcel of the way they assert their place in the natural world.

It is designed to paralyse or frighten anyone within audible range.

The extraordinary part of this verse is that God is pictured as a lion here.

He is aggressively roaring.

He is roaring from the place where he is seen to dwell.

Not in Samaria, but in Jerusalem, in Zion, in the city of David in Judah.

In other words, God is roaring aggressively toward the northern nation.

And as we read on in Amos, we will find that he is affronted with their false religion.

And he is affronted with their social injustice.

The second part of the sentence tells us that God 'utters his voice'.

The words used here are words that are often associated with thunder.

They often occur at times when God is revealing himself in dramatic ways in the giving or affirming of a covenant or coming in judgment.
And the next half of the sentence is clear as to which it is that God is doing here.
He is roaring in surprising and terrifying judgment.
And his judgment will result in devastating and thoroughgoing drought.
The Carmel is a range of hills near the Mediterranean coast.
The name 'Carmel' literally means 'garden land' or 'fruitful land'.
It is a densely vegetated and little-inhabited stretch of land full of luxuriant growth.
The thrust of the prophecy is clear.
God is about to enact judgment and what he is going to do with be so severe that the pasturelands of the shepherds will mourn and even Carmel will wither.
The background of this prophecy is that God had instituted a covenant with his people.
In that covenant, he had promised to care for his people.
He would be their God.
And they would respond.
They would be his people.
They would keep his commandments.
They would have no other gods but him and they would act justly and kindly toward each other.
But they have broken this covenant.
And so the covenant curses are to be applied.
Instead of caring for them as a good shepherd cares for sheep, he will become a roaring lion seeking its prey.
Not only will nature itself rise up against God's people in God's land.
God himself will rise up as a lion and bring catastrophic judgment.
He will act swiftly, firmly, and in a devastating manner against his people.
The prosperity that God's people are experiencing now will be gone and in its place with be drought and dissolution.

Conclusion

The point of the message of Amos is clear.
God has chosen a people.
But with these people he is not pleased.
And because he is not pleased, they can expect his judgment.
You see, they are people of privilege.
And so they are under a somewhat stricter judgment.
God expects more from them because he has given more to them.
With this in mind, I want us to go back to where we started.
Do you remember Martin Luther?
Luther reminded us that if we are Christians then we have come to know the mercy and kindness of God in Jesus Christ.
He reminded us that the heart of God is a heart of mercy, grace, and overflowing love.
This is God's overwhelming disposition.
And Amos knew that this was God's disposition.
The last chapter of his prophecy makes this clear.
You see, what I'm saying is that we can trust that in Jesus we have come to know the core of God's being.
However, having said this, I need to say more.
You see, when I read the New Testament, I find that Jesus and the New Testament authors still speak about judgment.
So Jesus can talk about having to give an account for how we have used what God has given us.

Paul can talk about rewards and punishments for the Christian people of God according to how they have acted.

The writer of the Hebrews can talk about God being a consuming fire.

Peter can talk about judgment beginning with the household of God.

And James can talk about Christians needing to grieve, mourn, and wail before the Lord who is coming as judge.

The point is that God has bought us with the price of the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.

We are his covenant people.

But the reality is that we are also still vacillating, sinful people who are so easily inclined towards going off after other gods and acting with injustice.

And we should be in no doubt as to God's attitude to such attitudes and actions.

He hates sin.

And he particularly hates it in those who should know better.

He despises it in those to whom he has been so rich in kindness and mercy.

Do not fool yourself.

God's kindness is not an excuse for corruption.

Idolatry and injustice and failing to live in the light of the kindness that God has shown you is sin.

It amounts to contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience.

And if you act in this way, then you are simply storing up wrath against yourself for the coming day of the Lord.

And we will find on that day that God will be a roaring lion, the agent of devastating judgment.

Brothers and sisters, let us take note of the book of Amos.

He is going to have some tough things to say to us.

He is also going to remind us of the God we know in Jesus, who longs for our salvation.

We are going to find in this book what we find in all of scripture – things that will make us wise for salvation, and things that are useful in teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us in righteousness, so that we can be equipped for every good work.

So, keep coming over these next few weeks.

Please also keep in mind that next week's talk on Amos will be particularly suited for those who are not Christians.