

“I am setting a plumb line among my people” Amos 7:8

1. Amos Lived in Times which Vividly Mirror our Own

When Amos began to prophesy in the northern Jewish kingdom (about 750 B.C.) he spoke out in the midst of unparalleled prosperity. He was able to look back to more than 30 years of such prosperity, and beyond that to a previous 20 years of post-war reconstruction during which the ravages of a war with Syria had been painstakingly overcome. He must have been deeply thankful for those 50 years of peace and plenty.

The future, however, looked very different. His prophetic eye had been opened, and he could see nothing but an increasingly rapid national disintegration, culminating in war, devastation and exile. He could see that there would be a gradual movement toward a point when God would deal devastatingly with the sin of the nation. He was not to know it would take nearly another 30 years before the final catastrophe took place, but he knew it would come, and he knew it would come in the shape of war and loss of the land. He knew God was speaking to the nation in severe warning terms, and he also knew that very few were listening.

As we look back over the last 60 years of our own national history we have a remarkably similar vista to that of Amos. We too look back on 40 years of unparalleled prosperity, and prior to that a twenty year postwar reconstruction which began in 1945. Like Amos we view things from the standpoint of a scenario of enormous trade, wealth, luxuries and large houses. Like him we look into the future feeling nervous about whether the prosperity can or will last and whether some catastrophe lurks ahead of us. Most shrug off such thoughts and get on with living well, as did Amos’ contemporaries. However, the comparison with Amos is remarkably close, too close in fact for comfort. Many Christians have an uneasy feeling that a day of reckoning for the blatant sins of the nation cannot be postponed indefinitely. The concluding years of disintegration and destruction which Amos began to prophesy for his nation have to be seen as serious pointer to our own future.

2. Amos Read the National Situation with a Spiritual Mind

Whilst he was prophesying coming disaster, Amos was well aware that around him Jeroboam’s rule was strong and prosperous. He saw all too clearly the immense wealth that unhampered trade had brought to Israel. Everywhere he saw the new buildings and the sophistication of refined luxury.

However, behind all this he saw the social and spiritual disintegration. He saw that Mammon ruled; money-making and covetousness were everywhere. Whilst the rich denied themselves nothing, the poor were really poor and were shamelessly exploited; *“they suffered from property rackets (2:6-7), legal rackets (5:10-12) and business rackets (8:5). Authority and the rule of law were despised and national leadership, while revelling in the publicity and dignity of position were not facing real issues (6:3a)”* (Motyer: Amos). Public standards of morality were at a low ebb: Amos spoke of sexual indulgence (2:7) as well as sharp commercial practice and bribes. The religious leaders and the religious cult of the time were caught up in the general self-indulgent flow, and offered nothing to stem the disintegration. Both cult and leaders were nakedly idolatrous. Their world, like that of the rulers, was one of wealth accumulation, feasting, lounging and complacency (6:1, 7).

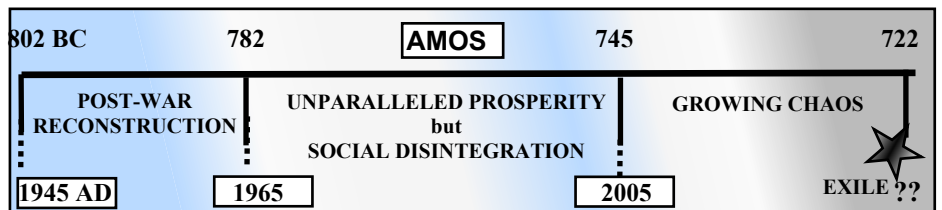
One would have to be blind not to notice similar trends within our own “prosperous” society. Family disintegration, massive scrambles for profit along with monstrous debts are today’s trends. Many people feel uneasy. Christians certainly should be. If such a scene set the marker for judgement in Amos’ day, it cannot but do the same in our own day. God does not change.

3. Amos Read the Signs of the Times with Prophetic Eyes.

When Amos began to prophesy to Israel he had gone well beyond the stage of merely feeling uneasy about the nation. He had come to see that the hand of severe judgement was hovering over it. He recognized clearly that God had already shown his divine displeasure, even in the midst of plenty, with warning shots of judgement, and that he was now going to take things a further stage.

These warning shots had come in the guise of natural afflictions that the nation had been suffering. Part of Amos’ prophetic work was to draw the attention of his contemporaries to these events and underline what they meant. They are listed for us in 4:6ff. They were famine and drought, times of blight and mildew, times of pestilence and possibly even a time of earthquake. To him they were unequivocal warnings from God of the danger of rejecting him and his laws. To his contemporaries, especially priests and princes, they were irrelevant. The very mention of them by Amos drew down their anger and despite.

Many Christian intercessors throughout our 40 years of prosperity have been only too aware of this dimension of “warning shots” in our own national life, not least in the form of foot and mouth disease and BSE, etc. This, thankfully, has given rise to appropriate prayers of repentance. On the other hand, of course, anger and despite have been the reaction on the part of intellectual and religious leaders to such judgemental concepts, which they deem to be theologically immoral and intellectually untenable. The very least such leaders will allow is that mankind has in some cases brought a kind of judgement on itself by its own selfish actions, but they are generally very reluctant to associate any form of judgment with God. Peddlers of doom like Amos are never popular!



4 Amos Engaged in Intercession.

It is not the nature of the true prophet simply to be aware of such flaws in society and to view them with no sense of personal involvement. The revelation of them along with their destructive consequences brings out new depths of concern and prayer. We see this clearly in Amos 7: ff, where he records visions he had of judgements about to break in the form of locusts and fire, each of which would totally devastate the land. He cried out in deep distress for God to stay his hand. God heard his intercession and the judgements were turned away.

Intercession was, therefore, as much a part of Amos' life as was prophetic pronouncement. It is clear from Amos 7 that the effect of his prayer was immense in staving off disasters, as undoubtedly the prayers of Christians have been in our own nation over the past 40 years. But the process of interceding and seeing God turn away from his judgements was now about to change, indeed it was coming to an end.

5. Amos delivered a "new Word"

The fact was that Amos was not sent by God to stand in the gap and pray for a turning of the wrath of God and a sparing of the Israelites. Nor was he sent merely to underline the warnings which had been given through the natural catastrophes such as drought etc. He was not even sent to warn of worse warnings. He was sent with a much more devastating word. This word was that God's time of such warning shots of judgement had come to an end: henceforth there was to be judgement on a much bigger scale, judgement that would involve war, captivity, humiliation, death and banishment to a foreign land. Six simple words summed up God's message through Amos: "***I will spare them no longer***". It was the time for very severe judgement, and intercessions would no longer ward them off.

This new message is particularly clear in Amos 7:7 to 8:14 where he records two visions he had received, each speaking the same message. The first was of a plumb line against a wall built true to plumb (7:7). As Amos looked at the plumb line, God said "*Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; ***I will spare them no longer****". Immediately Amos prophesied, "*Jeroboam (i.e. the house of Jeroboam) will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land*" (7:11). The second vision was of a basket of ripe fruit (8:1). As Amos pondered this vision God said, "*The time is ripe for my people Israel; ***I will spare them no longer****" (8:2). God then added, "*In that day the songs of the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies – flung everywhere! Silence!*" (8:3).

The severity of what was to come runs throughout the whole book of Amos. To convey it he uses the most graphic terms from his pastoral background: "*As a shepherd only saves from the lion's mouth two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved*" (3:12); "*Now then I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain*" (2:13). In more prosaic and direct terms: "*An enemy will overrun your land and pull down your strongholds*" (3:11). The degree of severity would be without precedence in Israel's history, for the Israelites would actually lose their land.

It is important to remember that this "new word" that Amos was sounding came whilst the prosperity was still at its height, some five or perhaps even ten years before Jeroboam died. The prophet was proclaiming the unthinkable: the monarchy, the city of Samaria, even the nation was to come to its end. It was, of course, a word that was bitterly rejected. Time, however, vindicated the prophet, for in 722 all his critics were consumed in the appalling conflagration of the Assyrian onslaught.

We need to take note of the fact that, as a nation, we find ourselves in a precisely similar situation to Amos. Mammon rules, standards of morality are low and God is rejected. These symptoms get steadily worse, though the prosperity seems to increase. The fact is that the word that Amos brought to Israel, "I will spare them no longer", now hangs over us with equal threat. Like the bubble of Amos' times, the prosperity is set to burst. What lies ahead cannot be anything but severe judgement.

6. Amos Was Backed Up By Other Voices

It is a well known principle that what God has to say is always confirmed by at least two witnesses. So it was with the

"What lay ahead was extremely severe judgement"

"new word" of Amos. The prophets Hosea and Micah were near contemporaries, and in the 20 or so years of growing national chaos that followed Amos' pronouncements they supplied such further witness. Hosea prophesied, "*The Israelites are stubborn The whirlwind will sweep them away*" (4:17, 19), and, "*I will tear them to pieces; I will carry them off with no one to rescue them*" (5:14). Micah prophesied, "*I will make Samaria a heap of rubble ... I will pour her stones into the valley and lay bare her foundations*" (1:6). **Nationally today there is no lack of witness**

to the predicament we face.

7. The Response called for by Amos

Amos, then, was prevented from calling for more intercession that would keep the judgements away. That response was no longer possible. We do not hear Amos even raise the cry of Habakkuk, "Lord, in wrath remember mercy" (Hab. 3:2), though it might well have been appropriate, and might well be appropriate for us.

The prophecy of Amos is one of unrelieved and devastating judgement. Like Jonah's word to Nineveh, it was simply a stark pronouncement concerning the coming overthrow of Israel. It is evident, however, that Amos' charge, like Jonah's, was designed to spark repentance. Twice Amos utters the cry, "Seek me and live" (5:5,6), which strongly suggests that if there should be the same kind of widespread seeking of God in Israel as there was in Nineveh, the nation would be spared. Salvation through repentance was always possible right up to the moment of destruction. We might on that account, therefore, seek God for the grace of repentance on our own nation. But there seems no way to repentance except through strong proclamation of judgement, and the effect of such proclamation in bringing about repentance is by no means certain, for antagonism to such proclamation is always fierce.

Today we might well despair of seeing such levels of national repentance as were exhibited in Nineveh, and might be more prone to think of our nation following the pathway of the Israelites. Such despair would be no excuse, however, for failing to make a personal response of repentance. We must stand aside from the grossly covetous, permissive and callous flow of life around us, and respond more than ever to a call to godliness and righteousness.