

# A Prophetic Herdsman: Amos's Anti- Establishment Message

*Amos 7,10–17 is a politically charged text with social economic dimensions. It speaks from a time in human history when socio-economic divides were deepening and political and religious authorities were blurring.*

*In this text, the prophet Amos, a messenger of the Lord, distances himself from the political establishment as he delivers an anti-establishment message. The semantics of the text reflect social and economic distinctions.*

*They acknowledge the tug-of-war between religious and political authorities and make a statement about the limitations of human authority within the political and religious spheres of the time. The text reads as follows:*

10. Then Amaziah, priest of Bethel, sent a message<sup>1</sup> to King Jeroboam of Israel saying, “Amos has conspired<sup>2</sup> against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all of his words.
11. For thus Amos said, ‘By the sword Jeroboam shall die. And Israel will indeed go into exile<sup>3</sup> away from his land.’”
12. Then Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go! Flee away for your

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1 Literally: “sent to King Jeroboam.”

2 From רשק , “bind, league together, conspire” (BROWN Francis – Driver S. R. – BRIGGS Charles. 905).

3 From הלג (qal, infinitive absolute) הלגי (qal, imperfect, third person, masculine, singular). The combination of the infinitive absolute and the imperfect creates emphasis, yielding the necessity to insert “indeed.”



own good<sup>4</sup> to the land of Judah. Eat bread there<sup>5</sup> and prophesy there.

13. But in Bethel, do not continue to prophesy, for it is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

14. Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I am not a prophet and I am not the son of a prophet, but I am a herdsman<sup>6</sup> and a dresser of sycamore trees.<sup>7</sup>”

15. The Lord took me from watching after the flock and said to me, ‘Go! Prophesy to my people, Israel.’

16. “Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’

17. “Therefore the Lord says, ‘Your wife will be a prostitute in the city, your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, and your land will be divided by the line. You will die in an unclean land and Israel will indeed go into exile<sup>8</sup> away from its land.’”

4 Literally: “Flee away for you...” (לְיָחִירֶיךָ).

5 Literally: “Eat bread there...” לִכְאוֹם שֶׁסָּחַל (qal, imperative, second person, masculine, singular). Douglas STUART translates this “earn your living,” noting the idiomatic usage of the phrase (374).

6 This is the only occurrence of this particular term in the Hebrew Bible.

7 This is the only occurrence of this particular term in the Hebrew Bible. Of this and the previous term, James Luther MAYS writes: “the precise meaning of both terms lacks certainty, because they appear only here in the Old Testament” (138).

8 See note 3.

## Historic Setting

The narrative that unfolds in Amos 7,10–17 speaks from a time in human history on the cusp of dramatic social, political, and religious change. ANDERSON and FREEDMAN note: “there is not a word about time, place, circumstances, causes, or consequences” in the narrative confrontation between Amos and Amaziah (764).

The book itself, however, does contain such references. ANDERSON and FREEDMAN point to the title of the book (Amos 1,1), which indicates that Amos’ visions took place during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam (II) of Israel (18).

The text implies that a certain *message* is being sent. As James LUTHER MAYS writes in his book on Amos, “When [Amaziah] reports to his king he is doing no more than what is expected of him” (135).

Sending this message is part of Amaziah’s official function as state-sanctioned priest. The word “conspired” is translated to reflect the political tones used by Amaziah in his political correspondence to the king.

Kings Uzziah and Jeroboam were historical contemporaries. James LIMBURG describes their reigns as peaceful and prosperous (84). ANDERSON and FREEDMAN agree: “In the period in which we are speaking, roughly from 785/780 to 755/750, Israel and Judah had few if any worries about the great powers to the Northeast and Southwest, Assyria and Egypt” (22).

Likewise, “international peace, in contrast to the frequent wars of the previous century ... allowed Israel to gain wealth via international trade” (Douglas STUART 283). The historical setting of the book of Amos appears to be a relatively peaceful time, free of wars and international conflict.

But it may have been only a blip on the radar screen for Israel at the time; the Neo-Assyrian Empire was on the rise. Marvin SWEENEY explains: “As for the Assyrians, they did not begin to threaten Israel until after the ascension of Tiglath Pileser III to the Assyrian throne in 745 BCE, but this was well after the time of Amos” (194).

However, Marvin SWEENEY continues, because of political realities of the time, “Amos could speculate that Assyria would someday threaten Israel once again” (194). The absence of an immediate external threat does not necessarily indicate perfectly peaceful conditions existed on the home front.

## All not at Peace

The fact that prophets—such as Amos—stood up against the government suggests some internal situation that is problematic at the very least. Social and economic divides plagued the historical setting of the book of Amos.

David L. PETERSEN writes: “Economic developments in the Northern kingdom were dispossessing Israelites from their traditional positions as independent land owners and creating a wealthy group who had been securing land through illicit use of the court system” (187).

Marvin SWEENEY explains: “Although Israel seems to have been secure during Amos’ lifetime, the prophet consistently points to the upcoming punishment and exile of Israel at the hands of enemy nations” (192).

The root **גלה** denotes “uncover, remove,” which here carries the meaning “go into exile,” as BROWN Francis, Driver S. R., and BRIGGS Charles explain (162–163). “Uncovering” the land carries the connotation of leaving the land and its people vulnerable, which is a way “exile” can be understood.

Marvin SWEENEY describes the “subservient” relationship the Judean state had with the state of Israel during the time of Amos and the “economic hardship” apparent in the book of Amos (192–193).

He points to economic injustices as root causes of the punishment forecasted by Amos. “[Amos] sees a very wealthy ruling class in Samaria, the capital of the Northern kingdom, which lives on the backs of poor farmers like himself” (Marvin SWEENEY 193).

ANDERSON and FREEDMAN also identify the social and economic problems plaguing Amos’ historical setting: “All of the oracles that are preserved and presented in his book are concerned with oppression and corruption in commerce and courtroom. Crimes against humanity, not deviations from the proprieties of the cult, are his main target” (20).

The economic and social problems on the home front are the internal counterpart to the absence of external political or military threat to Israel on the international level. A Judahite prophet from the Southern kingdom, Amos is certainly aware of the social, economic, and political realities of his time.

## Overlap of Secular and Sacred

David L. PETERSEN writes: “Amos does not discuss the political world, but rather the social and economic conditions of the Northern kingdom” (184). While that is true, the book of Amos certainly reflects a time in history when political and religious authorities overlap.

“In ancient Israel, prophets were compensated by donations ... and in some instances by the government” (Douglas STUART 284). James Luther MAYS elaborates: “Prophets, like priests, in Israel received gifts and fees from individuals or courts for whom they functioned” (137).

ANDERSON and FREEDMAN reference the “spiritual advisors” who served kings Jeroboam II and Uzziah—contemporaries in Israel and Judah, respectively (22).

“The kings could feel secure in the theological implications and applications, undertones and overtones of their policies, which would most likely make them very resistant to any criticism offered by other but effectively unlicensed prophets” (ANDERSON and FREEDMAN 22).

Specifically addressing the situation of Amaziah and Amos, Douglas STUART writes that Amaziah “appealed to the king not simply because Bethel was a royal sanctuary frequented by the monarchy, but also because, in ancient Israel, kings controlled the religion to a substantial degree” (375).

One might say that, to a large extent, the book of Amos reflects a time when the established religion was in the pocket of the state. As Amos himself illustrates, however, it was not a time free from anti-establishment voices.

Certainly the narrative exchange between Amos and Amaziah—and the state priest’s appeal to the highest national authority—points to an underlying tension in Israelite society. James Luther MAYS articulates this reality:

“This encounter between prophet and priest...belongs to the long history of tension between charisma and institution in Israel’s religious life” (134). ANDERSON and FREEDMAN also address this historical tension:

“It is to be noted that in other instances of a similar nature, the ecclesiastical authorities, when confronted with cases of possible civil disobedience, regularly turned to the civil authorities for assistance; often as a matter of policy they handed over people who might be guilty of criminal offenses to the royal administration” (792).

The authority of the state easily crossed over to the religious sphere.

The blurring of the political and religious authorities in ancient Israel was complicated by the political agenda of Jeroboam I, predecessor of Jeroboam II.

“When Jeroboam I was organizing and consolidating the national life of Israel after the Northern tribes had separated from Judah ... one of his most significant projects was the founding of state sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan to compete with the established religious centre in Jerusalem” (James Luther MAYS 135).

James Luther MAYS identifies Jeroboam I’s initiatives as part of a “calculated policy to break the relation of the Northern tribes to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem, by creating a religious structure identified with his own dynasty” (135).

Perhaps it was for good reason that Jeroboam I took concrete steps to solidify state influence and control over the important spheres of religious life. Paul SHALOM describes the history of the Jehu dynasty, the one to which Jeroboam I and II belonged.

“For the king there would be ample reason to fear ... possible treason. Not only did the preclassical prophets on several different occasions instigate insurrections, but also the dynasty of Jehu ... actually came to power as a result of a prophetic conspiracy.” (Paul SHALOM 239)

The historical setting of the book of Amos is electrified by social, political, economic, and religious, controversies and complications. All these historic realities are evident in the rhetoric of Amos 7,10–17.

## Rhetorical Setting

Without a doubt, Amos 7,10–17 is steeped in politically charged language. The text begins with the state priest, Amaziah, sending a message to the king (v10). The text identifies Amaziah as **לֹא־תִיב כֹהֵן**, priest of Bethel (v 10).

“This title is unique. It points to a head priest of a specific shrine” (ANDERSON and FREEDMAN 766). In his message, Amaziah accuses Amos of conspiracy (vv 10–11).

Douglas STUART writes: “Amaziah’s report probably took the form of an official letter ... it was certainly worded to arouse the king to action in that it presumptuously accuses Amos of **רשק**, ‘conspiracy,’ a highly political word” (375).

Already in the first verse of the narrative exchange between the state priest and the prophet (v 10), the language of the text places the dialogue within a quite tense and treacherous political context.

As Amaziah renders his report to king Jeroboam, he does not mention any theological or divine references as being a part of the Amos' message (v 12). James Luther MAYS describes Amaziah as making a "fundamental change in the quality of Amos' prophecy" by describing Amos' message in "de-theologized" and "quite neutral terms" (136).

"There is no hint of any reckoning with Amos' presentation of his message as the word of Yahweh and therefore a message from the God of Israel. Amaziah's readiness to reduce the whole crisis to an incident of mere political proportions is one more measure of the true state of official religion in Israel" (James Luther MAYS 136).

Amaziah, as a high priest sanctioned by the state, recasts the divinely inspired prophecy of Amos into purely political terms. He thereby attempts to recast the issue in an entirely political light.

There are more than political dynamics at play, however, in Amos 7,10–17. In addition to the theological dimensions of Amos' divine prophecy (v 17; v 11), the rhetoric of Amos 7,10–17 reveals social and economic aspects as well.

## Not a Prophet, but a Herdsman

While it attracts a broad scope of interpretations, v 14 is a crucial to the discussion of social and economic aspects within this dialogue. Amaziah commands Amos to discontinue prophetic activity at Bethel (v 13), and Amos responds (v 14) with a statement that is "grammatically ambiguous and has thus engendered considerable scholarly discussion" (Douglas STUART 376).

Paul SHALOM explains: "the basic problem lies in the apparent contradiction between [Amos'] denial of being a prophet and the ensuing verse, in which Amos acknowledges that God selected him to prophesy in Israel" (244).

The response of Amos (v 14) is a nominal sentence, which is quite neutral in reference to time (Paul SHALOM 244). Douglas STUART summarizes possible renderings for Amos' response (v 14):

"I am neither a prophet nor a professional prophet (or member of a prophetic guild);" "I am indeed a prophet and indeed a professional prophet;" or "I am indeed a prophet but not a professional prophet" (376).

Verse 14 is complicated and provokes various English renderings. While its precise English translation may be unclear, a few key dimensions of v 14 can be noted with certainty. Without a doubt, both

key participants in the text of Amos 7,10–17 dialogue are identified with a certain profession.

Amaziah, “priest of Bethel” (v 10), and Amos, “herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees” (v 14), speak from distinct professional backgrounds. In his response to Amaziah’s instructions that he flee to Judah, Amos distinguishes prophets and sons of prophets.

Marvin SWEENEY writes: “the term ‘son of a prophet’ is well recognized as an indication of professional status rather than biological descent, as indicated by the use of the term to designate prophetic guilds” (260).

Marvin SWEENEY arrives at the conclusion that Amos’ response was designed to describe himself as “a simple person who, with no thought of personal advancement or motivation, responded to a spontaneous call by YHWH to serve in a special and authoritative capacity” (260).

Douglas STUART reads Amos’ reply in distinctly social and economic terms: “the evidence suggests ... that Amos intends to identify himself as one who had no financial reason to prophesy at Bethel or anywhere else” (377).

By identifying himself as a “herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees” (v 14), Amos stands in stark contrast to Amaziah, a professional priest who is quite undoubtedly on the government payroll.

Thus the preferred translation of this text could be: “I am not a prophet and I am not the son of a prophet, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.” (v 14) Paul SHALOM writes in his book:

“Amos clarifies that, contrary to whatever Amaziah may think, he does not earn his livelihood by delivering oracles.” (245) Amos’ reply to Amaziah articulates a sharp contrast between his independently employed lifestyle and Amaziah’s professional priesthood on the government payroll.

## Prophetic Rebuttal

The structure of the text supports this semantic distinction. The structure of the dialogue distances Amos from Amaziah. There is no back-and-forth exchanging of words in the Amos 7,10–17 narrative.

The text begins with Amaziah’s message to the king, and his instructions to Amos (vv 10–13). The text then concludes with Amos’ rebuttal to Amaziah and his message from the Lord (vv 14–17).

Not only does Amos have the last word, but Amaziah is silenced immediately after giving instructions to Amos, which Amos flatly



ignores (v 13). The character of Amaziah changes from a priest with authority at the Bethel temple (v 10) to an ignored and contradicted mute, destined for a shamed and cursed future at the hand of the Lord (vv 15–17).

Amos, as prophet of the Lord, has the last word in the exchange, and concludes his comments with the Lord's reply to the priest sanctioned by the state, his family, his land, and finally his parish.

## Struggle of Authority

Douglas STUART explains that the history of monarchical control of religion was quite strong in the Northern kingdom of Israel (376). It is by this authority that Amaziah sought to dismiss Amos from Bethel (Douglas STUART 376).

Not only does the structure of the dialogue between state-sanctioned priest and divinely-sanctioned prophet illustrate the power struggle between national and divine authorities, but the semantics and grammar of the text illustrate this as well.

Douglas STUART identifies Amaziah's use of a hendiadys (v 13) in describing Bethel as שדקמ קלמ "royal sanctuary" and תיב הכלממ "state temple" (376). These expressions reveal the interrelationship between the king's authority and the religious reality in early or mid-eighth century Israel.

Paul SHALOM translates these descriptive terms as the "king's sanctuary" and the "state temple," and describes Bethel as representing "both the private and public sanctuary and/or temple of both the king and all of Northern Israel" (243).

In light of the official status of the sanctuary and temple at Bethel and Amaziah's political (and "de-theologized") spin on Amos' words, Paul SHALOM writes: "Amos, according to Amaziah, has set himself up directly against state authority" (243).

The stakes are high in the dialogue between Amos and the priest of Bethel. Amaziah speaks as a state official and is ignored by Amos. The structure of the dialogue of the narrative clearly makes a statement about the limitations of human and state authority in the face of divine commission and prophetic message.

The structure of the text has two main parts: Amaziah's actions and speech to Amos (vv 10–13) and Amos' response and delivery of the message of the Lord (vv 14–17). Both parts contain these similar features: identification of social and professional status (v 10a; vv 14–15), relating of a message to or from a higher authority (vv 10–11; vv 15 and 17), and issuance of instruction (v 13; v 15).

It is precisely these similar features that bring out the points of contrast between the characters of Amaziah and Amos and all that they may represent. ANDERSON and FREEDMAN describe Amos 7,10–17 as “full of contrasts:”

The themes and tensions of the confrontation are ... seen to be complex and closely interwoven. It is full of contrasts. Amaziah’s report of Amos’ activity as “conspiracy” (vv 10–11) contrasts with Amos’ own account of his activity as compulsion (vv 14–15).

Amaziah orders Amos to be silent (vv 12–13, 16b); Yahweh orders Amos to speak out (vv 14–15). Amos’ reported prediction of the king’s death and the people’s exile (v 11b) is matched by a similar prediction of death for the priest and his children, and the exile of the people (v 17b) (765).

These many contrasts are a rhetorical device used to juxtapose Amaziah, as spokesperson for the temple at Bethel (and state-sanctioned religion), and Amos, as divinely-commissioned messenger and prophet for the Lord.

Through this juxtaposition and comparison it provokes, the text makes a statement about the limitations of human authority when it finds itself in opposition to the word of the Lord.

## The Divine and Dissident Message

Amos 7,10–17 makes a statement about divine limitations on political vitality and human authority within political and religious spheres. It is set within a historical context that has a long history of tension between “charisma and institution” in religious life.<sup>9</sup>

Among the deepening social and economic divides, and blurred religious and political authorities, Amos 7,10–17 pits “charisma” against “institution” in a dialogue designed to identify, clarify and assess the relative powers of the competing authorities.

Through the means of semantics and structure, the text presents the prophet Amos as being outside the social-political establishment of the state and the religious structures instituted by the state.

A messenger from the Lord, Amos speaks directly to the establishment as he delivers the Lord’s anti-establishment message. The Amos 7,10–17 narrative indeed makes a statement about the limitation of human authority relative to divine authority, and in this dialogue the Lord of course has the last word.

<sup>9</sup> MAYS James Luther. 134.

**Suggested Reading**

ANDERSON F. I. – FREEDMAN D. N., *Amos: Anchor Bible 24a*. Garden City, 1989.  
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