

Lesson 9

The Eighth Century Prophets of the North - Amos and Hosea

Contents

Introduction

Section 1 Historical Background

Section 2 The First Writing Prophets

Section 3 The Oracles of Amos and Hosea

Section 4 Assignment

At the end of this lesson you should be able to:

1. Have an overview of the social, political, moral and spiritual situation in the northern kingdom of Israel during the eighth century B.C.
2. Understand how the first books in the written tradition of the Hebraic Prophets were written, collated and edited.
3. Be familiar with the main themes in the oracles of Amos and Hosea. Be able to see the relevance of the message of Amos and Hosea in the context of their times.

Introduction

Having completed all the lessons in the general teaching on the ministry of the prophets of Israel we come now to the final two lessons in this course. In these lessons we shall be studying the background to the work of the eighth century prophets of Israel and Judah. They are the first of the writing prophets and their ministry represents a major development in the prophetic tradition. With the earlier prophets we have accounts of their ministry, message and activities woven into the history of the nation, but with the eighth century prophets we have, for the first time, a record of their actual words.

There were a number of prophets who ministered during the eighth century but by far the most important were Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom of Israel whose capital was Samaria; and Micah and Isaiah in the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital, Jerusalem. These four men each had a company of disciples around them although each began as a lone prophet, or seer, as distinct from the bands of prophets such as those with whom Elisha was associated and from whom Jehu sprang into national prominence and political leadership as an outcome of his prophetic reforming zeal. The four great writing prophets of the eighth century represent a new development in the religion of Israel and Judah. Their ministry is quite distinct from the ecstatic *navvi* whom we meet in the book of Samuel and who used to accompany him to the shrines on the high places in the Judean Hills for the celebration of religious festivals.

The eighth century prophets were not particularly interested in the ritual of religion and often spoke scathingly of the observance of such festivals; 'I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them ...' declared Amos. No doubt this was to the consternation of the priests and the anger of the people with whom such feasts were immensely popular (Amos 5: 21f).

Our study of these four prophets in lessons 9 and 10 has to be seen against the essential background of the international and national situation facing Israel and Judah. The prophets always ministered into real situations. They were men of their times. They took time to study the secular as well as the spiritual condition of the nations. This they carried with them into the council of the Lord and then emerged to declare the word of God with power and authority.

The notes in this lesson together with the biblical text of Amos and Hosea (ideally in the New International version) is sufficient for this course. Nevertheless, additional reading of the historical background to the ministry and message of the prophets would be an advantage. Additional reading could be any good history of Israel such as the classical text - *A History of Israel* by Oesterley and Robinson in two volumes published by Oxford or *The Living World of the Old Testament* by Bernhard Anderson published by Longman.

Historical Background

(a) International Situation

The forty year reign of Jereboam II in Israel which largely coincided with the long reign of Uzziah in the southern kingdom of Judah was a period of great prosperity for both the divided kingdoms. It provided a brief period of respite from the threat of International invasion and an opportunity to develop trade and internal cohesion and social order. During this period the combined kingdoms reached a geographical extent unparalleled since the time of Solomon whose empire stretched 'from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of Egypt' (1 Kings 8: 65) that is, from the pass between Mount Lebanon and Mount Hermon in the north right down to the borders with Egypt in the south.

The wars between Syria and Israel which had characterised the ninth century and drained so much of the resources of both nations no longer troubled Israel in the eighth century. The year 805 was the turning point when Assyria mounted a massive attack upon Syria its western neighbour. This crippled the power of both nations which in the case of Assyria was also weakened by internal factions vying for leadership. For Israel, it meant that there was no longer the threat of invasion from either Assyria or Syria which enabled Jereboam II to embark upon a programme of political expansion and economic prosperity.

(b) Political Situation

The following table gives an outline of the chronology of the northern kingdom during the period of the ministry of Amos and Hosea.

Eight Century

Chronology of the Northern Kingdom

Kings	Reigns	Prophets	Ministry Dates
Jehoash	802-786		
Jereboam II	786-746	Amos	760-740 (approx)
Zechariah	746-745 (6 months)		
Shallum	745 (1 month)		
Menahem	745-737	Hosea	745-725 (approx)
Pekahiah	737-736		
Pekah	736-732		
Hoshea	732-724		
The Fall of Samaria 722-721			

A glance at the above table shows the vivid contrast between the political stability of the first half of the eighth century and the turbulence of the second half. Jereboam's death resulted in three kings in the first year. It was a time of political in fighting and assassination as the different factions fought for control. Israel's political masters ignored the clear warnings of the prophets. They filled the land with bloodshed and violence until finally the prophetic warnings were tragically fulfilled. Hoshea's reign came to an abrupt end and the victorious armies of Assyria swept aside the cities of Israel and smashed through the defences of Samaria, which after a prolonged siege fell in 721.

Politically the collapse of Israel began with the death of Jereboam II when he was followed by a succession of usurpers each of whom assassinated his predecessor. This began a period of tremendous political instability and lack of clear direction. In 738 Menahem paid tribute to Tiglath Pileser III but shortly afterwards Menahem died and was succeeded by his son Pekahiah. He was murdered by Pekah who joined forces with Rezon of Damascus and put tremendous pressure upon Ahaz of Judah to join them in a tripartite coalition aimed at resisting and defeating Assyria.

In Isaiah 7 we read of the tremendous effort the prophet made to stop Judah joining them. Ahaz did not join the coalition but instead of heeding the prophetic warning 'If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all' (Isaiah 7: 9), Ahaz followed the path of political expediency and appealed to Assyria for help. Tiglath Pileser III responded by attacking Syria and raising Damascus to the ground. Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea backed by Assyria but foolishly Hoshea entered into a pact with Egypt and rebelled against Assyria. Hoshea's rebellion was short lived and Egypt did not come to his aid. 2 Kings 17: 4 records that when Assyria discovered Hoshea's treachery they captured him and put him in prison, then laid siege to Samaria for 3 years after which large numbers of people from Israel were deported and scattered across the Assyrian empire.

Sargon came to the throne of Assyria in 721, the year Samaria fell, and it was not his policy to leave the land unoccupied. He resettled whole communities from other parts of the Assyrian empire throughout Israel, no doubt with the intention of breaking down national identity in the conquered territories and reducing the threat of rebellion. The aliens integrated and married into the remnant of Israel thus producing the racially mixed population that later became known as the Samaritans.

Before reading any more of this lesson, turn to the account of the last Kings of Israel in 2 Kings 15: 8-31 and 17: 1-6. Read these passages.

(c) Social Conditions

The tragedy of Israel's demise was wholly avoidable. It was vividly foreseen by the prophets Amos and Hosea who perceived that the real danger lay not in the International situation but in the social, moral and spiritual state of the nation. Jereboam II's long reign was a time of great prosperity and cultural achievement which was strongly denounced by Amos who roundly warned those 'who feel secure on Mount Samaria' (Amos 6: 1). Amos said that 'the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished' (3: 15).

The fact that there was peace in the whole area encouraged trade and strengthened the economy. Jereboam conquered a large area of territory in Trans Jordan. Amos 6: 13 mentions the conquests of Lo-Debar and Karnaim. This would have opened up the major trade routes both to the north and to the east including the commercial highways to Arabia and given their control into Jereboam's hands. This brought incredible wealth to his court and great prosperity to the ruling elite as well as to the merchant class, but at the bottom end of society there was grinding poverty.

(d) Moral Conditions

Injustice was rife. There was cheating in the market places, perjury in the law courts, arrogance among the aristocracy, and greedy self indulgence among the rich while the poor grew poorer and suffered monstrous oppression. If a poor smallholder had a bad harvest following a period of drought and had to borrow corn to feed his family through the winter, he would be required to repay with excessive interest. If he was unable to pay he would forfeit his land which would become the property of the money lender. The man might not be ejected but he became a tenant paying a heavy rent or alternatively the new owner would take a large proportion of the crops hence the statement in Amos 5: 11 'you trample on the poor and force him to give you grain'. The amount left for the poor farmer and his family would not be enough to feed them and provide seed for the following year. He would have to borrow again and this time it would mean mortgaging members of his family. If the debt remained unpaid the peasant's children would be taken into slavery and then finally he himself. This was a process thoroughly denounced by Amos 'they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals' (2: 6).

At the end of six years the man would be set free from slavery but with no land to support himself he would simply be free to starve. Consequently the chances were high that he would choose to remain in slavery where upon the owner would call witnesses and would nail the man's ear to the door post. Once his ear was pierced he would be a slave for life, see Exodus 21: 6.

If a poor man or a widow protested about their treatment at the hands of the rich, when they went to law they would find that the judge had already been bribed by the rich man and the poor would get no justice. This practice was denounced by Amos in 2:7 'they trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.' These practices were shocking in the eyes of the great eighth century prophets so Amos cried out 'assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria; see the great unrest within her and the oppression among her people' (3: 9).

God who was a God of righteousness would not tolerate such behaviour in his covenant people 'they do not know how to do right declares the Lord' (3: 10) so the day would come when God would punish Israel for her sins (3: 14). The warning signs were there clearly for everyone who had eyes to see 'surely the eyes of the sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth - yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob declares the Lord. For I will give the command and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve ...' (Amos 9: 8f).

(e) Spiritual Conditions

It was not only moral but spiritual corruption as well that characterised the nation. Hence Hosea cried out about the spiritual prostitution that ran right through the nation. 'They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God. They sacrifice on the mountain tops and burn offerings on the hills' (4: 12). Amos also declared that there was even temple prostitution practiced in Israel similar to those of the pagan fertility cults. This is what lies behind his statement that 'father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name' (2: 7).

Amos' next statement in verse 8 is an interesting one which shows the mixture of spiritual hypocrisy and corruption in Israel. The mosaic law said that if a lender took a man's outer garment in pledge he must return it at sundown so that the man had it for cover during the night. But the practice in Israel which had developed by the eighth century was that if a man could offer a 'religious reason' for keeping the garment saying that he needed it for some religious observance then religious law took precedence over secular law and he could keep the poor man's cloak. Hence Hosea said 'I desire mercy not sacrifice and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings' (6: 6).

Hosea also saw destruction coming upon the wicked nation who had rejected the Lord and prostituted themselves to other gods and turned away from the Torah. He said that God had a charge to bring against his people 'there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed' (4: 1 & 2).

Like Amos, Hosea saw the threat of destruction coming upon the nation but it was a threat which God would bring to pass. Because of his righteousness he could not tolerate the wickedness of his covenant people, 'woe to them because they have strayed from me! Destruction to them because they have rebelled against me! I long to redeem them but they speak lies against me' (7: 13). The real danger to the nation lay not so much in the international threat from invasion as from spiritual wickedness among the leaders of the people whose corruption and reckless self indulgence would bring disaster upon the whole nation.

Read the account in 2 Kings 17: 7-40

Question 1

Summarise the reason why the northern kingdom of Israel fell.

.....

The Writing of the Prophets

Amos and Hosea are the earliest of the writing prophets of Israel and represent a major change in the prophetic tradition. It should not, however, be imagined that these two men actually sat down and wrote the books that bear their name. Like their predecessors among the seers of Israel from Samuel to Elisha they were essentially speakers rather than writers. Their ministry was to declare the word of the Lord as his mouthpiece. This meant personal confrontation with the rulers of the nation and publicly declaring the word of God wherever they could gather a crowd of hearers.

The ministry of the prophets was essentially public. Their words were usually spoken with passion and urgency. They were speaking into real situations and declaring what God was saying to his people concerning the immediate situation before them. The messages they delivered were rarely long. They were not delivered in the form of exegetical orations or even twenty minute sermons! They were usually short pronouncements on a particular theme. These were usually delivered in the form of poetry which by the eighth century had become the acceptable form of prophetic utterance.

Each of the major prophets had their followers, perhaps something like the rabbinic schools in the time of Jesus whereby young men attached themselves to a particular teacher and studied his words and followed his teaching.

Amos and Hosea would each have had at least one disciple who would have acted in the same way as Baruch served the prophet Jeremiah by writing down all his words on a scroll; see Jeremiah 36: 4. The words of Amos and Hosea would have been written down by a disciple possibly from memory after being an eye witness at the occasion when the words were delivered. The disciple would no doubt have been able to check the words with the prophet and so gradually a scroll would have been compiled consisting of a number of short oracles that had been spoken on different occasions. The disciple would collect these and collate them but not necessarily in the order in which they were given.

Most scholars today recognise a second stage in the process of compilation and collation. This would be where a particular prophetic school grew up around the prophet and continued after the close of his ministry with the intention of preserving his work and continuing his ministry. The disciples would remember the teaching of the prophet and would add to the original collection. This then formed a body of oracles and prose narrative, the latter being contributed by the disciples who remembered different events in the life of the prophet which were particularly applicable to his teaching.

At a much later stage, sometime in the post exilic period, an editor took the scrolls containing the words and teaching of the prophet as preserved by his school of disciples and added historical or introductory passages to make a continuous narrative.

The NIV makes it reasonably simple for the English reader to see the difference between the editorial prose passages and the oracular utterances which appear in the Hebrew in poetic form. This process is much more easy to see in Jeremiah which is a much longer book and contains

historic narrative as well as prophetic oracles. But both Amos and Hosea show signs of the editor's hand as for example the first verse in Amos chapter one which clearly did not come from the lips of Amos himself. Similarly in the narrative introduction in Hosea which covers the whole of chapter one. In fact you reach chapter two verse two before you get an actual oracle from the lips of Hosea which goes through to the end of the chapter. Chapter three which is only five verses appears to have been dictated directly by the prophet to his disciple and therefore appears as prose but is in the first person singular. This is followed by a collection of oracles beginning with 4:1 which run right the way through to the end of the book.

A similar process can be seen in the writings of Amos. A good example is in chapter seven where there is a mixture of prose and poetry. Verses 10 - 15 are clearly narrative of the kind contributed by an eye witness disciple with a short oracle inserted at verse 11. It is not difficult to pick out the different short oracles given on different occasions and to see how they have been brought together as a collection of the messages spoken by the prophet with some editorial glue to hold the whole collection together.

This editing process took place during the second temple period when the writings of the prophets, the historical records and the wisdom literature of both Israel and Judah was gathered in Jerusalem where scholars in the temple worked on them to bring them into the form in which they have been preserved for many centuries. Throughout this whole process of transforming the oral tradition of early Israel, the spoken testimony of the prophets, the wisdom of the sages of Israel, the songs sung in the temple and by the pilgrims visiting Jerusalem, God watched over the whole process to complete what we know as the scriptures of the old covenant. As Paul says to Timothy 'all scripture is God breathed' (2 Timothy 3: 16). We are privileged to see it in its final and completed form - the unchanging word of God.

Question 2

Write down a typical short oracle in either Amos or Hosea.

.....

The Oracles of Amos and Hosea

The Oracles of Amos and Hosea are often compared and contrasted. Amos is usually characterised as the Prophet of Justice and Hosea as the Prophet of Mercy. This is a highly superficial assessment and fails to take note of the rich complexity of the message of both these prophets. It also fails to take note of the situation in the nation which was the background to their ministry. It is essential to remember that the prophets always ministered primarily into the contemporary situation and took note of the social, economic and political situation as well as the moral and spiritual condition of the people and the leaders of the nation. We have already noted that the reign of Jereboam II was a time of immense economic prosperity enjoyed by the rich and powerful minority and at the same time it was a period of shameful oppression and suffering endured by the poor. Amos reacted sharply against the injustices and corruption which he saw. He knew God to be a God of justice who hated oppression hence the strong condemnation of the unrighteousness he saw all around him which resulted in so much suffering among the ordinary people.

Amos knew that God would not allow the wickedness among his covenant people to go unpunished. Moreover he realised that the arrogant complacency of the rich was endangering the very existence of the nation. He knew that if the country was attacked the overfed rich elite would not be able to defend the nation without the help of the peasants who, being undernourished, and having nothing to lose but their chains, would be no match for a well armed highly trained and determined enemy.

Amos saw that the real weakness of the nation lay in its spiritual condition hence he thundered the message of judgment and the warnings of doom. In fact there appears to be only one hint of the possibility of God's forgiveness and that he might relent from the judgment he was determined to bring upon the unrighteous nation. That hint is found in Amos 5: 14-15 - 'perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy'.

The final words in the book of Amos (9: 11-15) are clearly out of character with all the rest of the book and would appear to have been added by a disciple after the fall of Samaria in 721 and the deportation of thousands of citizens from Israel which Amos himself did not live to see. The message of restoration and bringing back the exiles after the fulfilment of the prophecies of Amos was the hope of a later age.

The ministry of Hosea was even closer to the fall of Samaria than that of Amos. It is more than likely that he knew of the latter's ministry and built upon it. Hosea did not in any way weaken the warnings of judgment upon the nation, for he was fully aware of the unrighteousness that pervaded the nation; 'there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery' (4: 1-2). But Hosea was also conscious of the compassion of the Lord who did not want to reject his people or see them come to great harm. He hears God saying 'My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim for I am God, and not man - the Holy One among you, I will not come in wrath' (11: 9).

It may have been that Hosea sensed that the disaster was very close and this added a note of urgency to his appeal for repentance and the offer of forgiveness and mercy from God. But he was up against tremendous spiritual forces of evil which were driving the nation so that 'the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac' (9: 7-8). The people were powerless and the rich rulers were blind and deaf to the message of the prophets.

Both Amos and Hosea appealed to the covenant relationship which God had established with the people and into which the nation had voluntarily entered in the time of Moses and Joshua. They both appealed to the history of the nation and how God had dealt with them in the past. Hosea in particular was conscious of God's love for Israel (see 11: 1-4). Both prophets were strong in their calls for repentance as well as in their warnings of what would happen if the message was ignored. They both knew that the only hope for the nation lay in turning to the Lord, getting rid of the idolatry and spiritual wickedness in the nation, following ways of righteousness and justice, and putting their trust in the Lord their God.

Question 3

Find an example in each of Amos and Hosea of the prophets' appeal to the covenant relationship with God.

.....

Assignment

Write an essay of not more than one thousand words on the condition of the nation of Israel in the eighth century as revealed through the oracles of Amos and Hosea.

Answers for Lesson 9

1. The account in 2 Kings 17 states that idolatry was the primary reason why Israel fell. But the prophets Amos and Hosea also saw injustice, oppression, immorality as contributing causes.
2. Amos 5: 18-20 is a good example of a complete short oracle. A good example in Hosea is 5: 8-12.
3. Amos 3: 3 and Hosea 11: 1-4.