

The Courage of a Prophet

Amos 7:10-17

1. Introduction

The prophet Amos lived in a time when Israel enjoyed prosperity and power, a time much like today, yet his vision of God's will led him to preach against the smug and self-satisfied of Israel. This is the only biographical passage in Amos, the only clue to the prophet's life. Yet the sayings in the prophetic books were arranged by the prophets' disciples, writing generations later. Each book is an anthology, a collection which is not necessarily in chronological order. I am indebted to the distinguished Old Testament scholar David Noel Freedman for suggesting that the actual sequence of events in Amos 7:10-17 should be rearranged. Therein we read of a prophet with the courage to confront the rich and powerful, determined to preach God's word at the risk of his life.

When Amos met Amaziah the high priest, Amaziah says to him...(read Amos 7:12-15). Who was Amos? He claimed he was no prophet – not a professional prophet, not ordained, without formal training, not in the employ of priest or temple. There were professional prophets in Israel, like ministers in our time, who preached pleasant words of hope, patriotism, and confidence, words which the people like to hear. Today evangelists like Billy Graham and Robert Schuller preach pleasant words: they must keep up their ratings on TV, and depend upon popularity to finance their ministries. In ancient Israel, professional prophets preached of Israel the chosen nation, forever protected by God and victorious over its enemies.

So Amos, and “unordained minister,” without credentials, appears before the people and begins like a professional prophet: “For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, I will not revoke punishment...” (Read Amos 1:3-4.) Damascus was Israel's arch-enemy, and the crowds approved this message. (Read snatches of Amos 1:6-8, 9-10, 13-15, oracles against other enemies of Israel.) But finally he warms to his theme and turns his message upon Israel: (read Amos 2:6-8). Israel is corrupt, and it too will face judgment. Amos calls upon Israel's enemies to watch and come to plunder (3:9-10). He even chastises the women, whom he calls “cows of Bashan” (4:1-3).

Amos is also a foreigner, a hick from the countryside, a shepherd from Tekoa in the southern kingdom of Judah who dares to preach in the heart of its more cosmopolitan northern neighbor. What impudence this country hick has to appear at Bethel, the royal sanctuary of Israel! Amaziah tells Amos, “Go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary...” He warns Amos to leave the country. But Amos refused. God has given him a mission to preach to the powerful in Israel, and he chastises Amaziah, who puts state policy and propriety over the truth of God, and foretells his fate: (read Amos 7:16-17).

Amos is not the only “unordained” prophet from a far country whom God has called to preach to the powerful at their capital cities. Jesus came from rustic Galilee, a province of no account to the leaders in Jerusalem (John 7:52); he had no formal training or credentials as learned in the Law. Yet God called him to preach in Jerusalem, to purge the temple and bring salvation to all Israel. And so through history God has called people from the provinces, people without formal training, with pure minds uncluttered by religious conventions or the false sophistication of a corrupt world. They are called to confront the establishment with God’s true message, to purge all that is false. (Discuss Rev. Moon as a modern example.)

Amos is recalcitrant, and Amaziah takes more extreme measures, writing a letter to king Jereboam accusing Amos of treason. (Read Amos 7:10-11.) His letter is accurate, since Amos himself prophesies the king’s death in Amos 7:9. This is no light matter, as prophets had instigated rebellion and regicide in the past. Jereboam knew well that a generation earlier, Elijah, during his sojourn on Mt. Sinai, had received God’s word to anoint Jehu king in Israel (1 Kings 19:16), and the resulting coup d’etat, described in gory detail in 2 Kings 9:16), toppled a dynasty and brought Jereboam’s grandfather to power. Amos’s words threatened another coup; they were treason indeed.

Would Amaziah the priest have written this letter to the king, and then warned Amos to flee, as in the present order? Then Amaziah would be guilty of harboring and shielding a traitor. No. Amaziah was a loyal priest, and Amos had already caused enough havoc at the shrine where he was in charge. Amos at first appeared to be a nuisance, and so Amaziah warned him to flee. Then, when he would not be deterred, Amaziah wrote his letter to the king. We do not know the fate of Amos. Presumably he was imprisoned, maybe even executed.

Amos was charged with a mission: to speak God’s message to the king and high priest who were lulled into complacency by the sweet words of their ordained clergy. Yet Amos was a

nobody. The only way he could reach the powerful was to go right to the central shrine and preach in defiance of all authority. There was no easy way for him to find respectability in Israelite society to move at ease among the ruling circles. As a foreigner and without credentials, he came to Bethel armed only with his absolute faith in God and absolute courage to fulfill the mission which God had entrusted to him.

Conclusion

Amos exemplifies the courage of a prophet, a man so devoted to God that he puts God's work above all else. Heedless of the danger, Amos goes to the center of power and preaches an unpopular message. He is warned to flee, but continues to preach in defiance of the authorities. Finally he is accused of treason, and presumably pays with his life. Yet his message lives on in Scripture, and his courage is an inspiration to many.

So today many are called to preach to the powerful, and some of us share Amos's liability that we begin as outsiders, not as part of the establishment. May we too have this prophet's courage to stand up in the midst of the powerful, speaking the truth which they don't want to hear, and prepared to endure the consequences of their offense. Jesus had that courage. Rev. Moon, prepared once again to go to prison, has that courage. May each of us have that courage, the courage of a prophet.