

Adult Teaching Resources

July 10, 2016



Getting On in Galatia: Paul's Angriest Letter (May 29-July 3)

Living Like You Mean It — Galatians 6:1-16

Nothing 'Minor' About These Prophets (July 10-31)

The Leaning Tower of Israel — Amos 7:7-17

Full Pockets and Empty Hearts — Amos 8:1-12

A Seriously Broken Home — Hosea 1:1-10

A Love That Won't Let Go — Hosea 11:1-11

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The Leaning Tower of Israel

Amos 7:7-17

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Before the Lesson: Bring a plumb line, a level, a laser level, etc. for the information session. Prepare audio/visual equipment to show the YouTube video about Oscar Romero for the information session.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

One tool I own that could be used in a construction project is...

Have you had demolition done in your home? If so, was it for reasons of appearance, practical use, or a need to replace because of damage?

Information

[Hold up plumb line or level.]

Who can tell me what this is? Why would you use it?

In today's passage, Amos sees God holding something like this in God's hand. It was a metaphor of God's role as the general contractor for the kingdom of Israel.

[Have a class member read Amos 7:7-9.]

God is taking a look over Israel and doesn't like the way things look. Things were not the way they should be in Israel.

The last time I used a plumb line was to put up wall paper. I put blue chalk on the string, let the plumb line settle, held the string at both ends, then popped the string onto the sheetrock. Now, there is a perfectly straight line to put the edge of the wall paper against. If I did not use the plumb line, what are the odds that I would put the wall paper up perfectly straight? If I just used my best judgement or decided I would "wing it", the paper would undoubtedly be askew. Frankly, if it were just a little askew, I might let it be. My wife, however, is of a different opinion. It needs to be perfectly straight or it comes down.

God is measuring something less tangible and more important than wall paper.

Our printed lesson notes that the plumb line was "presumably an indication that God

Information *continued*

had built Israel true to plumb from the beginning, calling the people into a clearly defined covenant designed to keep them straight. Now, God had returned with a plumb line to test whether they had remained true.”

Israel was out of plumb. It was distorted and was not according to blueprint. The blueprint was God’s covenant with God’s people. It came first through Abraham.

[Have a class member read Genesis 12:1-3.]

The covenant was not merely that there would be a new people group. Note that God wanted to bless all people through the Hebrew people.

Moses brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness, they were offered a renewed covenant. This next passage, called the Shema, was repeated by Jews twice a day.

[Have a class member read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.]

There was one God and the Jews were the people of God.

But things went awry. God sent Amos to point out how askew the walls of this people had become. Part of the imbalance of the people was due to economic imbalance. The rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer, and the rich were abusing the poor. Part of the imbalance was due to the abuse of women. Part of the imbalance was the attempt to worship and please other gods.

[Have a class member read Amos 2:6-8.]

So God warns - a renovation is coming. The warning is coming through an unusual person. Amos is not a public speaker or a religious professional, like a priest. Amos is a farmer that God called away from his sheep and fields to speak to the nation. We give him a title that he rejected – a prophet. But if a person walks like a prophet and talks like a prophet, well...

When we use the word prophet or prophecy, what do we mean? (someone who tells the future; someone who predicts what will happen, etc.)

“A prophet’s job was not to foretell the future. In fact, this was strictly forbidden. ‘No one shall be found among you ... who practices divination or fortune telling...’ (Deut. 18:9-12) Instead, the prophet’s role – in serving as the spokesperson to the people and on behalf of God’s desires – was to speak the *truth to power*. Thus, prophets often told what others did not want to hear, that all should know of God’s expectations for an equitable society, where the poor, widows, and orphans stood on equal footing with the rich and influential... While they were not predicting the future, they *were* attempting to *change* the future. That is, they were calling on all to cease selfishness, repent from sinfulness, and reclaim the time-tested covenant relationship with Yahweh of justice and righteousness.” (David Jordan. Living with Faith. Charlotte: Pure Faith. 2015. p. 75.)

Amos had been preaching that the people must change. But his message was rejected. God takes a measurement and this wall is going to fall.

Information *continued*

But things were complicated. Although Amos was getting his message from God, the religious leaders discredited him and even suggested that he was a threat to their way of life – which, of course, he was.

[Have a class member read Amos 7:10-13.]

“Amos has prophesied against the king (‘I will rise, sword in hand, against the house of Jeroboam,’ verse 9). To Amos this is an announcement of divine judgement, but to Amaziah it is sedition. The religious radical threatens the established order, which is why he is often accused of political mischief-making and finds the state and established religion in league against him.” (Henry McKeating. Amos, Hosea, Micah: The Cambridge Bible Commentary of the New English Bible. Cambridge. 1971. p. 57.)

“Amaziah said something that reveals just how completely he had identified religious faith with establishment power. It ought to send a chill up the spine of every religious leader who ever considered sucking up to power: ‘Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, *because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom*’ (7:13). With those words the religious justification of political empire is complete, and faith is reduced to patriotic cheer-leading.” (Dan Clendenin. <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100705JJ.shtml>)

The religion and the state are united, and they are also against Amos.

What are some problems when the institutes of religion and government merge?

Early Americans of the Baptist persuasion were frequently persecuted because they refused to join or support the official church of the state.

“The separation of church and state, or the ‘wall of separation’ talked about by colonial Baptist Roger Williams, American leader Thomas Jefferson and the U.S. Supreme Court, is simply shorthand for expressing a deeper truth: religious liberty is best protected when church and state remain *institutionally separated* and neither tries to perform or interfere with the essential mission and work of the other... The separation of church and state does not require a banishment of religion from public life. In fact, colonial Baptist leaders John Leland and Isaac Backus, for all of their insistence upon the principle of separation, were thoroughly involved in public policy debates and attempts to influence legislation in their day... *Separating the institutions of church and state protects both*. ... History teaches and contemporary geo-politics reveals that nations that abjure a healthy separation of church and state wind up with tepid, attenuated, majoritarian religion, at best, or a theocracy, at worst.” (My emphasis. From the website of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty. <http://bjconline.org/mission-history-church-state-separation/>)

This is not to say that separating religion and state will prevent attacks from one on the other. The Roman Catholic archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, was martyred for confronting his nation’s leaders for many of the same reasons that Amos had for speaking truth to those in power.

[Summarize the following and/or show this five minute video. (Stop the video at 5:30.) If the video link does not work, you may find it by searching YouTube with the words,

Information *continued*

“Monseñor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero (Excerpt 2)” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcgwFuGLohM> Or, here is another YouTube video, found with the words, “CAFOD: Oscar Romero: A life for God and the poor”. Be warned that this one has some graphic imagery. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPMJ9UgkBgQ> (Begin the video at :57 and stop at 4:51.)]

“Romero was an unlikely martyr. He had studied in Rome, distanced himself from leftist radicals and their violence, and earned a reputation as a cautious conservative. The Salvadoran government was quite happy with his ordination as archbishop in 1977, whereas Marxist priests who ministered among the *campesinos* (peasant farmers) were dismayed. Then he did an about face. A few weeks after his appointment as archbishop, Romero’s close friend and Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was slaughtered by machine-gun because of his ministry among the *campesinos*. The murder marked a decisive turning point. ‘When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead,’ said Romero, ‘I thought, “If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.”’ Romero refused to meet with any government officials until they did an investigation. That never happened, and so in his three years as archbishop Romero never attended any state functions. The following week Romero canceled local services and held a single Mass in San Salvador to honor Grande; it was attended by 150 priests and 100,000 people.

“For the next three years he spoke forcibly against the atrocities of the Salvadoran government and its para-military guerrillas — the terror, torture, death squads, rape, and human rights abuses. Every week in his sermons, listened to on the radio by peasants all over the country, Romero detailed the horrors in an understated but explicit manner.

“Romero became the most outspoken critic of the government and a passionate defender of the dispossessed. His first death threat came from none other than President Arturo Molina, who warned him that priestly garments were not bulletproof. In his very last sermon, on Sunday March 23, Romero explained his Amos-like vocation: ‘I have no ambition of power, and because of that I freely tell those in power what is good and what is bad, and I do the same with any political group — it is my duty.’”

“The next evening at about 6:30pm, a gunman shot Romero as he celebrated the Mass at a small chapel in the La Divina Providencia hospital where he lived. Later investigations established that the assassination was contracted by the government military.

“One week later, 250,000 people attended Romero’s funeral Mass. Thirty years later, on the anniversary of his death (March 24, 2010), Salvadoran president Mauricio Funes officially apologized on behalf of the government for Romero’s assassination. A modern-day Amos, today Romero is honored as one of four 20th-century martyrs in Westminster Abbey, London.” (Dan Clendenin. <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20100705JJ.shtml>)

[Have a class member read Amos 7:14-17.]

Israel had lost her way. God sent a farmer to proclaim truth to power. Amos was what we would call a “lay person”. Professional ministers find it hard to be both prophetic and pastoral,

Information *continued*

because of skill sets, calling, and – in reality – because one role is rewarded professionally and one role is often dangerous professionally.

One minister put it this way: “In my United Methodist denomination, there is a ladder that clergy are expected to climb, from associate pastor of a large church, to senior minister of a smaller church, and finally to senior pastor of a large congregation. To climb that ladder it will hardly do to ruffle too many comfortable feathers. Amos is a chief ruffler of feathers. Not to put too fine a point on it, sermons from Amos could knock one off the ladder to success... We must make a place for him today. His uncompromising demands for justice, his withering unwillingness to allow vacuous worship to cover over our unwillingness to care for the poor and needy of the land, his continual call for overt concern for those among us who are in great need, his thorough rejection of the comingling of church and state, are themes that never go out of style. Of course, if Amos were a Methodist, he would serve a different congregation every Sunday! (John. C. Holbert. <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Preaching-Amos-John-Holbert-07-08-2013>)

We believe in the “priesthood of all believers”. Is there also a place for the “prophet-hood of all believers?”

How can lay persons speak and act in ways that professional ministers cannot, to make a positive impact on the world?

Transformational Exercise

In Matthew 24, we have a description of a group of people who would not have passed the “plumb line” test that Amos offers. Jesus has expectations of his followers, but this crowd did not measure up.

[Have a class member read Matthew 25:41-46.]

That is a heavy thought to end our lesson with. But that is the purpose of a prophetic message. It makes us evaluate our lives by God’s plumb line. Are we true to plumb?

[Close in a prayer something like this: *Thank you, God, for sending us messengers who make us uncomfortable. They remind us of your measurements of loving others and we discover that we do not measure up. Cover us with your grace. Give us the will and the energy to be the people you have planned for us to be. Amen.*]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Showdown at the Not OK Corral – Just for fun imagine that the prophet Amos and the high priest Amaziah confronted each other like Wild West gunslingers – except they were wordslingers:

Amaziah stood silhouetted in the sunset, waiting for his adversary, Amos. Amaziah was Chief Priest, High Sheriff, and Head Bartender at the Bethel First Israelite Temple and Saloon, as well as being the king’s number one man in town. Life was good, and he wanted it to stay that way. He was in charge of enforcing the law, and this Amos was an outlaw, as far as he could tell. Amos was preaching against the way Amaziah led worship in the temple at Bethel. He criticized the amount of wine they were drinking there, and he thought it was wrong that they had picked up on the Canaanite practice of cultic prostitution. Not only that, but Amos had criticized the King of Israel himself, and had predicted Jeroboam II’s downfall.

So Amaziah had duly reported Amos’ goings on to the king, and now he was waiting to do him in. High noon had come and gone, but Amos had not appeared. The silver spurs on Amaziah’s sandals rubbed painfully on his heels, but still he waited. The big holster filled with scrolls weighed heavily on his right hip, but still he waited. The sun bore down upon him, but he just adjusted his big black hat, dusted off his badge, and waited some more.

Finally, out of the west, Amos came striding into down with his tall white stetson haloed by the setting sun. He seemed to be unarmed, but Amaziah knew he was deadly just the same. As Amos approached, Amaziah shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but stood his ground outside the temple doors. Finally, Amos stopped no more than ten paces away.

The men stared each other down through an awkward silence before Amos made his move. Without warning, the outlaw prophet whipped up a long bony finger, pointed it straight at Amaziah, and fired off three quick shots:

Fire One: “Amaziah! The Lord showed me a plague of locusts coming to eat every bit of grass in Israel,” Amos said. “But I prayed for the Lord to forgive, and he held back.”

Fire Two: “Then the Lord showed me a shower of fire that cascaded from the heavens and dried up the oceans and turned the land into a cinder, but I prayed for the Lord to forgive, and he held back.”

Amaziah felt a bit of relief. Amos had shot twice, and it appeared that he had missed both times. But then came the third shot.

Fire Three: Quick as a flash, Amos reached into his robe and pulled out a small pointed object tied to a string. “That was not all, Amaziah! I saw the Lord himself standing beside a

Digging Deeper *continued*

wall, holding a plumb line to it, and he said ‘Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel, and they don’t measure up! This wall can never be made straight! I’m not holding back anymore, but all the altars and sanctuaries in Israel will be razed to the ground, and I will rise against King Jeroboam with the sword!’”

Amaziah felt the jolt of that fierce volley rattling against his bones, but he shook it off and drew his own weapon – a scroll with the king’s command written on it. He pointed the scroll at Amos, let it unroll in the breeze, and shouted with the most authoritative voice he could muster: “I am the king’s representative. Get out of town, you old seer! Flee this land and go back home to Judah. If you plan to prophesy again, don’t do it around here!”

But Amos dodged the bullet. “You’re mistaken, Amaziah – I don’t claim to be a prophet! I’m no professional religionist: I work for a living. I raise sheep and I manage an orchard of fig trees. I didn’t ask for this job, but the Lord called me from the farm and said ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel!’”

Pointing that long, deadly finger again, Amos cried out “You tell me not to preach,” Amaziah, “you tell me to get out of town – and I will. But know this, you holy hypocrite: your day is coming. Your entire family will be lost to you, and your land will be given to strangers, and you will die in an unclean foreign land, and Israel will go with you. You just remember that!”

With that, Amos turned on his heel and walked out of town, back into the orange sun until he reached the road to Judah, where he turned south and marched himself right out of Amaziah’s life. But Amaziah was shaking where he stood. Amos’ parting shot was still ricocheting inside his head. Some may have thought Amaziah had won the day, because Amos was leaving, but Amaziah knew the truth. Amos had left the scene, but Amaziah had lost the duel.

What do we know about Amos? – What the scriptures tell us about Amos’ personal history can be subsumed in a very few verses of the book that bears his name: he is not mentioned in any other book of the Bible, and by very few early commentators:

Amos 1:1 speaks of the visions of Amos, who “was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

In his confrontation with Amaziah (7:12-15), Amos declared that he was no prophet but a “dresser of sycamore trees” who also kept sheep, but “the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

Since the time of Augustine, most interpreters have identified Amos as a rustic from the Judean village of Tekoa who was called by God to go north and prophesy to the people of Israel. The idea that a Judean peasant would dare to go and beard the great king of Israel makes for a great story. The traditional view has enjoyed long acceptance, though some argue that Amos was more than a simple Judean shepherd.

Digging Deeper *continued*

The word *noqed* is not the usual word for “shepherd,” and may refer to one who supervises other shepherds. And, the phrase *bolesh shiqmim*, usually translated “fig-pincher” or “dresser of sycamore trees,” is a bit problematic, because sycamore figs do not grow in Tekoa, which is at 2,500 feet elevation, but only below 1,000 feet. So, it is often suggested that Amos may have been an agriculturalist of some wealth who had interests in other parts of the land. Others point out that shepherds tend to wander far with their flocks, and that Amos might have agreed to tend the sycamore trees in return for allowing the sheep to graze on others’ land.

Other scholars question whether Amos was really a southerner. A town that may have been named Tekoa has been identified in the north, but it was not inhabited until the late Iron Age, long past Amos’ day. However, some suggest other evidence to think that Amos was in fact a native of the north, perhaps a mid-level manager of the royal flocks and lands, who preached against his own king and was exiled to the south, where he settled in Tekoa.

Stanley Rosenbaum is an outspoken proponent of this view (*Amos of Israel*, Mercer University Press, 1990). He argues that Amos is too cultured and eloquent to be a rustic, and too familiar with the inner workings of Israelite government and society to be a southerner. He points out that Amos uses a number of foreign loan words and dialectical spellings that indicate that he “spoke with a northern accent.” Also, he argues that the word “flee” in 7:13 (*barah*) usually means “to flee from one’s homeland.”

One thing seems clear: whatever his original home and occupation, Amos thought of himself as a layman. He was not a professional prophet, not an appointed religious leader. He was called by God to proclaim a message, and he did it with courage and flair.

A religious people? — The people of Israel were apparently quite religious. They had a splendid temple at Bethel and religious services were well attended, according to Amos 4:4, 5:21, and 9:1. People often made pilgrimages to other sanctuaries (4:4, 5:5, 8:14). Tithes, offerings, and sacrifices were contributed cheerfully (4:4-5), and impressive festivals capped the religious year (5:22-23). The people looked forward to even better days (5:18a; 6:1; 9:10b).

They thought of themselves as favored by God, but Amos disagreed, and insisted that Yahweh would not accept their worship, because it was an empty faith of ritual but not ethics – a faith that kept the feasts but did not feed the hungry.

There is also considerable evidence that Israelite religion had incorporated elements of pagan worship into it. Jeroboam I, who first led the northern kingdom, had installed golden calves at new temples in Dan and Beersheba. Samaritan worship practices such as the worship of the sky gods Baal and Astarte were probably widespread on “the high places” – sacred altars built atop mountains or hills. There was a time when such sites were also used for the worship of Yahweh, but after the construction of the temple, worship on the high places was no longer considered legitimate.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Amos saw a day when both the high places and the golden-calf bearing sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel would be laid waste, even as the royal family would fall to an enemy's sword.

Lord GOD – Amos 7 is one of the few places in scripture where the divine name Yahweh is indicated by “GOD” in all capital letters, rather than the more familiar “LORD.” This is because Amos’ favored address to God was ’adonai Yahweh. When applied to God, the name ’adonai is usually translated as “Lord,” but one wouldn’t want to render Amos’ address to God as “Lord LORD,” so the traditional translation is “Lord GOD,” denoting the underlying name Yahweh with the use of “GOD” in capital letters.

Plummet, tin, or lead? – The word translated as “plumb line” (’anak) is used only here in the Hebrew Bible, and is not known from other Hebrew sources. It is traditionally translated as “plumb line” because that is one of the few translations that makes sense. Some scholars, followed by the NET translation, note the word is similar to the Akkadian word annaku, which means “tin.” Thus, the NET has “He showed me this: I saw the sovereign One standing by a tin wall holding tin in his hand. The LORD said to me, ‘What do you see, Amos?’ I said, ‘Tin.’ The sovereign One then said, ‘Look, I am about to place tin among my people Israel. I will no longer overlook their sin” (vv. 7-8).



If that is correct, making sense of the prophecy is a challenge. Some scholars suggest that, since tin and lead are both soft metals of similar color, an alternate meaning could be “lead,” a heavy metal that would make an ideal plummet for a plumb line. Thus, by extension, “lead” could be translated as “plumb line.”

Jeroboam – The Jeroboam mentioned in Amos 7:9 is not the Jeroboam who became the first king of Israel in 922 BCE, earning the ire of prophets and religious historians by establishing two new sanctuaries and installing golden calves in them.

Rather, Amos spoke of Jeroboam II, who ruled the northern kingdom from 786-746 BCE. Internal troubles in neighboring nations left them relatively weak, allowing Jeroboam II to preside over a long period of peace and prosperity. Unfortunately, the good times spawned greed, corruption, and bad times to come.

The Carolina Israelite – I picked up Harry Golden’s quote from *The Carolina Israelite* from an address by historian Wayne Flint during a lecture at Campbell University on April 5. I have not tracked down the exact issue and date, but Flint is a very careful historian, so I trust that the quotation is reasonably accurate: “No state can long prosper that exiles its prophets and exalts its fools.”

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Digging Deeper *continued*

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The Hardest Question

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Why were the kingdoms divided?

Amos, like Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea, prophesied during a time when the Hebrew people lived in two kingdoms, a historical reality that many readers don't fully appreciate. What happened to the united Israel under David and Solomon, and how does that impact our understanding of the situation Amos faced? Here's a brief history lesson:

When Saul became Israel's first king, he ruled over an unruly consortium of tribes who didn't necessarily trust each other. In particular, the ten northern tribes were often at odds with Judah, the dominant southern tribe (Simeon had largely been absorbed by Judah). Benjamin was often caught in the middle. After Saul's death, David ruled over Judah for several years while Israel was nominally led by Saul's son Ishbosheth (or Ishbaal). After Ishbosheth was assassinated, the elders of the northern tribes invited David to become king over them as well. In a sense, David was the first to truly unite the tribes.

Under David's leadership, Israelite foreign policy was undiluted Imperialism, as he defeated surrounding nations in order to expand Israelite territory and ensure safe borders. Solomon was not David's oldest son and others thought his brother Adonijah should have succeeded David, but Solomon became the next king, and perhaps even more powerful than David had been. Solomon's foreign policy involved consolidation, conciliation, a plethora of political marriages to foreign princesses, and commercial alliances with other lands.

Solomon was not as successful in his own country. While building the temple, his palace, and other government buildings, Solomon drafted workers from all over the country, forcing them to work for several months each year in timbering, stonemasonry, transporting materials, or constructing buildings. The northern tribes believed that they bore the brunt of both taxes and the labor corvée, while Judah – David and Solomon's tribe – got off easy.

Discontent simmered until Solomon died. Afterward, his unwise son Rehoboam threatened to treat the northern tribes even more harshly. The northern tribes responded by seceding from the union and naming their own king, Jeroboam the son of Nebat – pointedly not a descendant of David.

Jeroboam established a new capital in the north and built sanctuaries at Dan (in the far north) and Bethel (in the southern part of the northern kingdom). The new kingdom, with a larger population, retained the name Israel, though the prophets also referred to it as "Ephraim" (after the largest northern tribe) or "Samaria" (after the city that later became its most influential capital). The southern kingdom, consisting mainly of the tribe of Judah, kept the capital in Jerusalem and went by the name "Judah."

The Hardest Question *continued*

After the kingdoms split, the two nations became more vulnerable. Their land, a fertile strip nestled comfortably between the high and dry plateaus east of the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, was highly attractive to other countries. Two important highways (the Via Maris and the King's Highway) ran through it. Palestine was a crucial link for commerce between Egypt to the south, Syria to the north, and the Mesopotamian giants to the east.

The division of the kingdoms can be dated to about 922 BCE, followed by a tumultuous 50-year period of civil war and general unrest. Around 875 BCE, Jehoshaphat ushered in a time of stability in the south (Judah), and King Omri established a strong dynasty in the north. He moved the capital from Tirzah to Samaria, which became the most impressive city of the north, with city walls that were 33 feet thick on the weakest side. Long after Omri's death, Assyrian annals referred to Israel as *bît Humri*, "the house of Omri."

Under the Omrides, the northern kingdom became closely aligned with Phoenicia, as typified by Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a princess from Tyre. This was a prosperous period: if had not been for Jezebel and the incident with Naboth's vineyard, Ahab might have been remembered as a new Solomon. He even made an alliance with Judah by marrying his daughter Athaliah to Jehoram (853-841).

In 841 BCE, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858-828) overpowered the Syrian coalition that had previously withstood him, and brought his army as far as the Mediterranean Sea. In the years to follow, Israel and Judah were constantly at odds over whether they should ally themselves with the Arameans (Syrians), who often threatened, or with the Assyrians, who might keep Aram (the Hebrew name for Syria) in check. An Israelite general named Jehu took advantage of the conflict and murdered the king of Israel (Joram, 852-841), along with all the descendants of the house of Omri (2 Kings 9-10). For good measure, he also assassinated Ahaziah, who had just come to the throne in Judah, along with 42 other "princes" of Judah. With these acts he alienated most of his former allies and had no choice but to align himself with Assyria, which required the payment of tribute. Only a few years later, Judah came under attack from the Syrians, and was saved only by a massive bribe paid by the young king Joash (2 Kings 12:18).

These upheavals would have been remembered by Amos' family and his audience, for they were no further in their past than World Wars I and II are in ours. About the time Amos was born (probably around 810 BCE), Adad-Nirari III of Assyria (810-783) had begun another serious push into the West. Assyria's incursions against the Syrians enabled Israel to break free of Damascus' domination over them as Jehoash (798-782) defeated Damascus (with Elisha's encouragement).

About this time, an unfortunate thing happened. Amaziah of Judah (796-767) hired a band of Israelite soldiers to aid in his war with Edom. They won the victory, but he did not give them any of the spoils. The angry Israelites pillaged Judah on their way home (2 Chronicles 25), leading to a war between Judah and Israel. The Israelites defeated Amaziah's forces at Beth-Shemesh, then pushed on to Jerusalem (17 miles away), where they breached the city walls

The Hardest Question *continued*

and plundered the temple (2 Chron. 25:20-24). This probably took place around 792 – an event Amos would have known about. Amaziah was captured and held hostage in Samaria, while his son Azariah (also known as Uzziah) took his place on the throne. When Jehoash died (782), his son Jeroboam II released Amaziah as a sign of good will, but he did not return to the throne.

Fortuitously, the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III died, leading to a decline in Assyrian power. Argishti I became king in Urartu (780) on Assyria's northern border, drawing their attention away from the west. To the south, Egypt was caught up in a civil war that kept that nation out of Palestine for a while. Other kingdoms attacked Syria, allowing Israel to regain some lost territory.

The end result was the dawning of an age of political stability for both Israel and Judah. Jeroboam II ruled from 786-746 in the north, while Uzziah ruled Judah from 783-742. The political climate was stable and there was apparent peace, but all the old grudges were still very much alive.

Thus, we recognize that Amos did not spring forth newly hatched when he began preaching around 760 BCE. He had lived through many things that affected his own perception of things, and other significant events had taken place in the life of his parents and grandparents.

The “political chessboard” of Amos’ day included many players. Alliances were made and broken on a regular basis. Nations lined up against each other and often made alliances, not with their neighbors, but with the power on the opposite side of their neighbors, thinking this would help keep everybody honest. Amos understood that it wouldn't take much to upset the chessboard: if God wanted to bring judgment on the people of Israel, any one of several nations stood ready to wield the sword.