

Four Preaching Aims of Amos

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Amos, the Old Testament prophet, aims to hit when he preaches. Four of his preaching aims seem to be: attention, authority, audience appeals, and action. He clamors for instant and constant attention. He builds for accepted authority. He bombards basic audience emotions with his strong appeals. Mere mental assent or personal agreement is never his goal—he demands action.

A. *Attention.* Amos is the prophet of the lion's roar. He begins by bellowing:

The Lord roars from Zion
and utters his voice from Jerusalem.

His outdoor preaching demands constant struggle for attention. Like Jesus, he seems concerned lest his hearers wander away. Amos earnestly contends for their primary attention. Taking little for granted, he is casual about nothing. He risks sledge hammer blows to crack thin-shelled nuts, never assuming his hearers are thin-skinned souls super-sensitive to his sermons.

Amos seeks attention. He does not demand as an autocrat—he aims, he adjusts, he appeals, he wins attention. The laws of attention—intensity, movement, and change—are his sermon guidelines. His preaching is earnestly intense; it moves with variety and progress; its one constant element is change.

Whether he preaches one sermon or ten in the Book of Amos, there is a constant bid for attention. In this quest his preaching is (1) visual, (2) vital, (3) vivid, and (4) varied.

1. Visual. Amos paints a series of vignettes. See the colorful pictures of Hebrew life in 760 B.C.: The Queen's Tea for the upper 400, where, as a vagrant sheep-herder, he cries out against "You fat cows of Bashan" (4:1-3); the cheating merchant (8:4-7);

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the corrupt court at the city gate (5:7, 10-13); shameful, sham religious festivities at Gilgal, with God holding his nose and stopping his ears (5:21-24; 4:4, 5); Bethel's encounter of priest and prophet when Amaziah, the king's chaplain, calls Amos a stray bread-and-butter preacher, but Amos sees God standing by the altar of Bethel, and the temple crashing down upon the crowd worshipping there—Bethel is doomed—Israel shall fall (7:10-17); people fleeing from destruction (9:1-5); Israel's restoring, rebuilding, replanting in their own peaceful land (9:11-15)—these are the words Amos *saw* (1:1).

2. Vital. Vital interests arouse attention. Amos relates everything to persons. In our day he would not be afraid of the word "relevant." Vital issues are his only concern. Life as lived—this is his only interest. Behavior is even more important than belief, he says. Right actions and right attitudes are inseparable. Life and death hinge on righteousness. Justice has no substitute. "Prepare to meet thy God." This is major. This is vital. He has a passion to relate religion to right living. He makes his message vital, personal, relevant, individual, and contemporary.

3. Vivid. From the opening roar to the concluding scene of peaceful abundance, Amos utilizes vividness and vigor to energize his ideas with concrete, specific, graphic words and phrases. His vivid sentence structure includes balance (1:2, *et al.*), antithesis (5:11b, 23, 24), repetition (1:3-2:4; 4:6-11), and progressive statement (1:2, 11, 12; 6:3-6; 7:17). Amos employs direct discourse 76 times, analogy over 40 times, many vivid illustrations, 22 historical allusions, 496 personal pronouns, 580 verbs (11 verbs in the first verse of chapter 9 and an average of 6 verbs for each verse of the final chapter). He also uses suspense, climax, and movement for arousing attention and maintaining audience interest. There is intensity of the speaker, of the language, and of the style as he translates the divine word into a shepherd's vernacular. He employs vivid conflict when he dramatizes the classic clash between prophet and priest (7:10-17). Like other preachers in the Bible he is never linguistically remote. He is concrete—never abstract.

4. Varied. Variety has been called "the foremost factor in holding interest." Amos achieves variety through his imagery, vocabulary, sentence structure, rhythm, illustrations, and his individuality. The graphic language of imagery Amos uses can be classified as visual (21 times), auditory (17 times), gustatory (17 times), olfactory (3 times), tactual (21 times), kinesthetic or muscle strain (59 times), and organic or internal (25 times). His varied stylistic devices include 19 similes, 85 metaphors, and 31 rhetorical questions, in addition to puns, personification, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, euphemism, and synecdoche. By diversity in words he aims at holding attention. For example, as recorded in the King

James Version, he uses 52 different terms to speak of injustice, 42 for judgment, 25 for redemption, and 64 for suffering. Sentence variety ranges from a five-word complex, "And I said, a plumbline" (7:8), to 102 words in one sentence comprising three verses of the second chapter (2:6-8). Rhythm varies too, even in English translation. For example, note three accents in first and third lines, two accents in second and fourth lines:

Fállen no móre to ríse,
is the vírgin Ísrael:
Forsáken she líes on her lánd,
with nóne to ráise her (5:2).

His varied illustrations are gleaned from history, other nations, nature, pasture, farm, and city. Individuality stamps the words of a prophet. Varied personalities give varied expression to varied concepts. The mold is broken after a prophet speaks. Amos is Amos. He differs from all others. He stands alone with his individual differences. In all these ways this preaching prophet aims for attention.

B. *Authority*. In his aim to establish authority Amos does not assume as adequate an ascribed or delegated authority based upon his position or profession. He builds until he has achieved authority based upon intellectual and emotional proofs acceptable to his audience. He recites the refrain 54 times, "thus saith the Lord," or, "the Lord said" (as Billy Graham does in our day), and Amos also combines his personal authority and his authority as a prophet with the inductive logic of experience, history, common sense, and the much-lauded scientific method. He does not depend, as so many preachers have, upon deductive reasoning from a major premise *not* accepted by his hearers. He combines the authority of historical experience, authority figures, and divine decree with his own personal proofs (intelligence, character, goodwill); he builds on basic human desires; he reasons by causal relationship from cause to effect, from effect to cause, from effect to effect, from past to present to future.

Amos does not hang all his proof on an assertion of authority. He diversifies, he undergirds, he builds logically and solidly. His preaching has the accepted and effective ring of reality, as if the Hoover Commission of *his* land and time had said, "the most fundamental change in the intellectual life of the [nation] is the apparent shift from biblical authority and religious sanctions to scientific and factual authority and sanctions."

C. *Audience Appeals*. Amos is a vehement preacher aiming at audience appeals or basic human needs. With fear-threats and faith-promises he bombards the wayward people. Building upon sound logic of causal relationship and upon basic human emotions, he appeals to their fears and to their faith. He threatens loss; he prom-

ises benefits. He employs powerful motives to incite men to action. His subject matter is emotional; his language is emotional; his appeals to action are largely emotional. By ten to one his fear-threats (91%) outnumber his faith-promises (9%), so Amos stands as one of the more negative prophets in his manner of expression. His appeals based upon audience emotions are these:

<i>Fear-Threats</i>		<i>Faith-Promises</i>	
Loss of Security	54	Success	5
Guilt	46	Satisfaction	4
Suffering	25	Integrity	4
Failure	7		
Indignation	1		
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Total Verses	133	Total Verses	13

Amos aims his appeals at deep-seated audience needs and desires. He accents his own ethical appeal as a speaker with intelligence, character, and goodwill; he declares and demonstrates the logical soundness of his reasoning, but his chief appeal is emotional—to the fears and to the faith of his hearers. Despite his strong negative appeals to fear, Amos is basically positive since (1) he begins on common ground in his classic “Yes-response” approach (chapters 1, 2) like a good salesman getting his hearers to nod their heads at their neighbors’ inequities and iniquities, and (2) he concludes with a vital bright hope—“home at last.”

D. *Action*. Amos aims at action—right action. “Doom or discipline,” Amos roars. “Do something about your injustices. Cause and effect are inseparably united—injustices bring doom. Be disciplined or be doomed!”

Seek good, and not evil, that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.
Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate (5:14, 15).
But let justice roll down like waters
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24).

A specific plan of action, a detailed way of escape, a clearly defined, concrete course of behavior—these seem outside the prophet’s province. Justice in action—this is his plea. Be just. Live right. He aims at reformed action—both individual and corporate. “I gave, I withheld, I sent, I sent none, I smote, I laid waste, I slew, I carried away, I overthrew. . . . Yet you did not return unto me,” says the Lord in a five-fold refrain. “Therefore prepare to meet thy God!” (4:12). Act! Act right! Act right now! Positively his action-words are “seek and live” (5:4, 6, 8, 14), making Amos a leading advocate of repentance.

Conclusions. Today, amid a continuous barrage of words, men need to hear preaching that aims at their attention by being visual, vital, vivid, and varied. Declining respect for authority necessitates more than deductive preaching. Our day demands an authority not merely assumed or ascribed, but achieved by the preacher and accepted by the hearers. Preaching must be undergirded by strong personal *ethos* of the preacher and by the inductive proof of experience, common sense, and scientific method. Sermon appeals must build upon basic audience needs rather than upon tradition, decree, analogy, or the preacher's whims. Emotional appeals based upon sound reasoning can be tailored to convince even a highly cultured congregation. Preaching can transcend all lesser speech purposes. Besides informing, stimulating, motivating, entertaining, and persuading, preaching can move men to action. These are the preaching aims of Amos—attention, authority, appeals, and action. Today the voice from the pew says to the preacher, "You aim, too, please" (don't aim to miss).