

## **Book of Faith for September: 2 Kings 1-14 and Amos 1-4**

*Here we come to a most interesting reading: history with prophets! The earliest prophets, which we read about, (Samuel, Nathan, even Elijah and Elisha) did not write. All we know about them is what the historians who wrote 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings tell us. But this changes beginning early in the 700s B.C. (150 years after the nation divided at the death of King Solomon, the ten northern tribes seceding from the southern kingdom Judah to form the northern kingdom Israel). Now what the prophets said begins to be written down, either by the prophets themselves or by their students. The first “writing prophets” are Amos and Hosea in Israel and Micah and Isaiah in Judah.*

*That will make this next section of Israel’s history very interesting to read about, because we can read in the history what is happening, and in the inspired prophets what the Lord has to say about it!*

*Especially because 2 Kings was almost the last book of the Bible! It narrates how the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim/Samaria/Israel) was totally destroyed (the lost ten tribes of Israel) by the Assyrian empire. Then it narrates how Judah, the Southern kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire (Babylon succeeded Assyria as the great super-power of that time and place). Would there be a future for the people of Yahweh? How? AND, why? By reading the history with the prophets, we will learn a great deal about the Lord and his ways.*

### **September 4 assignment. Read by (9/11): 2 Kings 1-5**

2 Kings 1 Ahab, the notoriously bad king of Israel, is succeeded by Ahaziah. If we question why Elijah and the LORD were so fierce against the apostasy (faithlessness) of Ahab, read this chapter! The king is sick and inquires not of the Lord but of an idol! Samaria is the capital city of the northern kingdom, which is why the kingdom is called sometimes Israel, sometimes Samaria, sometimes Ephraim. V. 9: do you think the king sent 50 men just to bring Elijah greetings! 13-16 Think how many stories there are where someone’s humility—or even fear—like this captain’s, are applauded and rewarded. *Is his humility toward the LORD or Elijah? Or both—and why?*

2 Kings 2 Elisha is new on the scene. (It is unlucky that in English the two prophets’ names sound so similar!) While the conversation of the two men, teacher and student, seems odd to us (much is un-said, or under-stated), it is like other OT conversations, and was simply the style of the times. V. 8 The Jordan! This miracle recalls when under Joshua the priests of the Lord carried the ark into the Jordan and the upstream waters were miraculously dammed up until all Israel could cross—that miracle itself a clear reference to the Red Sea! Note the use of Elijah’s mantle, about which more later. V. 9 Elisha is made an offer, something like the Lord made to Solomon, and Elisha gives a similarly wise reply. *Why do you think Elisha wants a double share of Elijah’s spirit?* V. 12 did Elisha get his wish? V. 13 from this we get our saying about a succession that “the mantle has passed . . .” 19-25 As always, those who fear and honor the Lord, His Word and servants will be blessed, and those who reject them will suffer.

2 Kings 3 Recall it is the form in 1-2 Kings that, while Jehoshaphat reigns in Judah, the history of Israel is told, king after king, until Jehoshaphat dies and then the focus returns to Judah. Ahab’s unfaithful son and successor Ahaziah reigns only a year, then Jehoram his brother takes over. 2-

3 Such a brief report card! And it is not black and white: “he was bad, though not as bad as some, at least he did this.” 4-5 Here is the details of the teaser we got in 1:1. In that world many kings of cities were “vassals” of a great king (usually as the result of losing a war, or making a treaty to avoid a war). It was somewhat like Europe’s old feudal system. The greater king would protect the smaller, and the smaller paid tribute (taxes) to the greater. In v. 5 “rebel” means simply that Moab broke their covenant by ceasing to pay tribute (apparently thinking that Ahab’s successor was not a strong enough king to enforce the treaty and tribute). V. 6 So the king of Israel does the predictable, he goes to collect his rent! But, to make his victory more certain and casualties less (and by a show of strength, perhaps to avoid battle altogether), he asks help of his fellow Hebrew king, Jehoshaphat of Judah. v. 9 Edom, apparently an ally along with Judah, like Moab had been for centuries small neighboring kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Moab east of the Dead Sea, and Edom south. V. 10 In that arid region natural water sources were seasonal and unreliable; Jehoram of Israel took their absence as sign of God’s disfavor and the three armies, exhausted without water, would fall to the Moabites they planned to invade! *How does Jehoshaphat show his piety? How do you?*

2 Kings 4 1-7 Reminiscent of Elijah and the widow of Zaraphath! Again, the Lord and his prophet are faithful to those who have been faithful. (Elisha seems to prefer to work at a distance—watch for that in coming stories.) 8-37 a long story, again resembling a story about Elijah. Remember that hospitality was extremely valued in that culture. The man of God will not be in her debt, but wants to repay her. 18-25 we have to admire the courage and decisiveness of this unnamed woman. (*Speculation: why do you think she did not tell her husband, but closed the door?*) 27 Did she know that Elisha prefers to deal through go-betweens? Is that why she said everything was fine, so that she could get close enough to grab hold of Elisha, which his servant Gehazi knew he hated? V. 29, again remote prophet work. (Jesus, once sent his disciples out with this urgency: greet no one on the way!) We will meet this woman again in chapter 8. 38-44 Again Elisha makes something unwholesome healthy. And a story like Jesus’ miraculous feeding. *A chapter of miracles. Does God do miracles in your life?*

2 Kings 5 This chapter is one great story, with much humor. “Aram” is another name for Syria, thus Namaan is Syria’s Pentagon. 4-5 Protocol: the Commander cannot go to a foreign country without his king’s OK, and the king sends a nice reference letter along, asking for help. Of course, you never approach a king to ask a favor without bringing great gifts! 6-7 is humorous: it is the man of God, not the king, who has the miraculous powers! And the king of Israel is afraid he is being set up. V. 9 So Namaan and the whole diplomatic corps of Syria with all their gifts leave the capital (where they mistakenly looked for help) and finally got to the man of God (*remind you of another foreign embassy in the NT, that went to the capital when the God they sought was elsewhere?*). Elisha does not even leave whatever domestic task he is doing, but sends out a single sentence message. Namaan, who is used to high diplomatic treatment, is angry. And what, this Syrian patriot says, would make this Israelite water any better than the waters of Syria! But he has a good staff, who reason with him, and he is smart enough to listen. V. 15 Conversion of this idolator to the Lord! V. 17 Though he despised the waters of Israel, now that he is converted he wants “holy ground” to take home so that he can kneel on it to pray! V. 18 Namaan asks, please, if when in the unavoidable course of duty he has to participate briefly in idol worship, knowing that he doesn’t mean it, can he be pardoned that. Elisha says, yes. In the end, the faith of a Gentile has saved him, in more ways than one!, and the sin of an Israelite has condemned him.

**September 11 assignment. Read by (9/18): 2 Kings 6-10**

2 Kings 6-7 The collection of Elisha stories gets longer, even with the peculiar one in 1-7. 8-23 is famous for the wonderful vision of v. 17. *Do you believe, when you are surrounded by enemies of any kind, that the Lord's angels are on your side helping you? Why or why not?* 24-7:20 War, as we have seen, was mainly economic; little more than national military robbery. V. 25 A vivid description of how severe the food shortage is under siege. V. 33 The king asks an interesting question. Since this devastation is so severe—mothers cooking and eating their children to survive!—why should the king trust the Lord to deliver? *When in your life have you doubted that the Lord would help you? And how did it turn out?* 17-20 It is so important to believe what the Lord says.

2 Kings 8 1-6. V. 4 lets us know how we know the stories of Elisha. Gehazi, his servant and student, and perhaps others, saw what Elisha did and repeated the stories over and over until someone wrote them down. 7-15 Remember the “still small voice” that spoke to EliJah at the mouth of the cave? It gave three commands. One was to anoint EliSHa as his successor, which he did. Here EliSHa carries out the second, making Hazael king of Aram (Syria). The prophet knows that part of Hazael's commission from God will be to sharply punish Israel for its idolatry (yet in Amos we will hear about the Lord's punishment on Hazael for his war crimes!). V. 10 the riddle of “recover yet die” will become apparent in events to come. 16-24 According to the usual structure of Kings, when a king dies and his successor begins, the narrative focus shifts to that kingdom. Jehoshaphat had been a good, faithful king. Confusingly, both Judah's king, son of Jehoshaphat, and Israel's king, son of Ahab, are named Jehoram! (The northern king is here called Joram for short.) Good king Jehoshaphat had a bad son. Again, his wife is a bad influence. 25-27 And his young son, Ahaziah, was no better.

2 Kings 9 1-13 Now the third command of the “still small voice:” to anoint Jehu king of Israel (though he is “son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi” this is not the Jehoshaphat who is the good king of Judah, for his father was Asa, another good king). Even in an unfaithful kingdom Jehu, apparently, was still faithful to the Lord in a vigorous way, as events will show. V. 11 sounds like it might be a hard-headed military man's estimation of the excited prophesying of the prophets. Yet when the others hear that the Lord has spoken, v. 13, they take his Word (though this may be reverence of these Gentiles for divine words in general, rather than specific reverence for the Lord). 14-28 Notice that here, as also in the case of Hazael, the Lord's *Word* that something would happen was not taken by Hazael and Jehu as a reason to sit and wait the Lord's action, but a reason to make it come true! *Do you think people should act to make the Lord's words come true, or wait for him? Or is it not that simple? If not, can you think of how to tell when we should act and when we should wait?* V.21 Remember Naboth! He is the one whom Jezebel had killed because pouting Ahab (Joram's father) wanted his vineyard (1 Kings 21). Of course this event happens on his (confiscated) property! 30-37 *Do you think Jezebel deserved it?* (Re-read 1 Kings 18-21 to recall what she had done.)

2 Kings 10 1-17 The slaughter of the house of Ahab and Jezebel continues. 18-27 And the officer of Baal are also destroyed. *What do you think? Is religion that important? As important as life? For an individual or for a community? Were they executed for their own false faith, or for bringing others from faith in the Lord to faith in Baal? Or both?* 28-31 Even though he was very good, and rewarded, we are told that he could have been better.

**September 18 assignment. Read by (9/25): 2 Kings 11-14**

2 Kings 11 Ahaziah was king of Judah (8:25-27) and is condemned as “walking in the way of the house of Ahab,” to whom he was related through his mother Athaliah (Ahab and Jezebel supported Baal worship and persecuting those faithful to the Lord). He allied with Ahab’s son, Joram, and fought against the new and faithful king of Israel whom Elisha had anointed, Jehu (8:28). 1-3 Almost unbelievably, Athaliah saw to the death of all the king’s family so that she could reign, which she did for six years. 4-12 Jehoshaba, who hid her nephew, the rightful heir of the throne, in the Temple to protect him from being murdered by his grandmother, plainly had a friend in Jehoiada, the high priest. Jehoiada uses his resourcefulness and cunning to accomplish a *coup* for the sake of true religion. The culmination is a covenant renewal, where king and people commit themselves to the Lord and to each other, and Baal worship is exterminated. *What do you think of all the bloodshed? What would you fight for, or die for, or kill for?*

2 Kings 12 1-3 is the formula for introducing a reign. Let v. 2 stand as an important commendation of confirmation instruction!! Again the historian judges carefully: Jehoash/Joash was really good, but he did leave some important things undone, to the detriment of the people’s religion. 4-16 the Temple, neglected during the previous kings’ reign when Baal worship was popular, is to be repaired from offerings. The details are interesting. 17f Hazael of Aram/Syria, anointed by Elisha, was a king who made war to take other nations’ riches. Joash spared his people war by simply giving the wealth.

2 Kings 13 After telling of one reign in Judah, now the focus switches to the concurrent reign in Israel. 1-9 King Jehoahaz, son of Jehu, who began to reign 23 years into Joash’s reign, was not good. Now that Ahab’s whole dynasty has been destroyed, according to the Lord’s word, by Jehu, the sins of Jehoahaz are compared not to Ahab’s but to Jeroboam’s, the first king of the north (after Solomon’s death). 4-5 Though not very faithful, Jehoahaz in the midst of great troubles called out to the Lord for help. *Do you think this means Jehoahaz was faithful after all, or just desperate? What would you say about people you have known, or yourself, who turn to the Lord only when things are very bad?* The Lord, though punishing Israel through Hazael, yet had pity when the king asked. *Does that surprise you? What do you think is the relationship between the Lord’s wrath and his mercy?* 10-13 Jehoahaz’ son takes the throne (inconveniently he has the same name(s) as the king of Judah: Joash/Jehoash). Another bad northern king. Now comes to the throne another man with a confusing name: Jeroboam II. His name clearly shows that Joash did not share the values of the historian of 2 Kings, since he named his son and heir apparent with the very name of the first king of Israel who set so bad a precedent! 14-21 Religious professionals have not made an appearance since Elisha in Chapter 8, except for the excellent high priest Jehoiada in ch 11, but now attention returns to the Prophet, Elisha. In fact, even though 13:13 put Joash’s son Jeroboam II on the throne, the narrative here turns back to Joash. 22-25 Again we see the Lord’s mercy, here with reference to his covenant with the Patriarchs, despite his anger with Israel’s faithlessness. Most parents can understand this mix of feelings, though of course the Lord is more righteous than we!

2 Kings 14:1-22 1-6 The new king in Judah, though with the same name as his grandfather, Amaziah. Again, though the enthronement of Jeroboam II in Israel is already stated, the history of Amaziah takes us back to the reign of Jeroboam’s father, Joash. Amaziah revenges his father’s murder but in unusual mercy for that time (as we have seen in other blood-dripping stories!) he does not kill the murders’ children, out of respect for the Law of Moses. 7-16 He

had a successful campaign against Edom (the kingdom south of the Dead Sea) and was inspired to challenge Israel. Its king, Joash, gave a taunting reply to Amaziah's challenge, which the latter ignored and was defeated and his capital, Jerusalem, sacked. 17-22 Murder of Amaziah and the enthronement of his son Azariah, also known as Uzziah. 23-29 The focus returns to Israel and we read about the reign of Jeroboam II. In military matters he continues the successes of his father, regaining the territory lost to Hazael, the great warrior of Aram/Syria.

*Here we interrupt our reading of 2 Kings. For it was during Jeroboam's long, prosperous and successful reign that the first two great writing prophets (remember that Elijah and Elisha did not write down their words) were active: **Amos** of Tekoa and **Hosea**.*

### **September 25 assignment. Read by (10/2): Amos 1-4**

*Introduction to Amos: SUCH STORIES we have heard in 1-2 Kings! War and murder and sin and revenge and famines and sieges and plots and deceptions and faithful martyrs and unfaithful kings and queens! How different is that world from our quiet, middle-class, mid-America life. But however peaceful we may want our church life to be, the Lord God is active in all the world, not only in peace but also in revolution and famine and politics and war, always using His faithful for His good purposes, and bending the unwilling to serve His ends. "Some serve the Lord willingly; the rest serve him anyway."*

*The background of 1-2 Kings is very important as we read Amos, the original prophet of doom, for this is not Sunday School material. Amos is strong, brave, faithful and says what the Lord wants said. Buckle your seatbelt!*

*Amos prophesied during the long reign in Israel of Jeroboam II. Israel is at its height: powerful, with its greatest territorial expansion, and very prosperous. In time, this is the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC (about 788-744 BC), 150 years after David and Solomon reigned, and after the 12 tribes split into the southern kingdom Judah, with Jerusalem its capital, and the northern kingdom Israel (or Ephraim) with its capital city Samaria. Let me quote from the introduction of the New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*

*In this period, Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. At the same time, this prosperity led to gross inequities between urban elites and the poor. Through manipulation of debt and credit, wealthy landowners amassed capital and estates at the expense of small farmers. The smallest debt served as the thin end of a wedge that lenders could use to separate farmers from their patrimonial farms and personal liberty.*

Amos 1-2:8 V. 1 In ancient times events were dated by the reigns of kings. This makes Amos contemporary with Hosea, and a little earlier than Isaiah, who was commissioned as prophet "in the year that king Uzziah died" and Micah who worked during the reigns of Uzziah's three successors. Amos was a shepherd, not a religious professional. V. 2 is a frightful beginning to Amos' frightful message!

1:3-2:3 Take this section at one sitting. Eight times the same pattern repeats. Start with the first six.

- ◆ "Thus says the Lord:"

- Amos does not speak out of his own person, but, as v. 1 said, these are the words (or “things”) which Amos saw concerning Israel (remember, the northern kingdom of the ten tribes).
- ◆ “For three transgressions of X, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.”
  - This odd formula is meant to indicate that the sins are habitual. Something like: three transgressions would have been enough to lose patience and begin to punish, but there are even more than three!
- ◆ X is usually a foreign nation! Two points are worth noting. First, even though Amos is preaching in Israel, he is making it clear that the Lord is God of all the earth, that all nations are under his jurisdiction whether they acknowledge him or not (as of course these pagans do not). Second, *what do you think is the reaction of the Israelites when they hear how God is going to judge all their neighboring rivals and perennial enemies?*
  - Damascus is the capital of Syria/Aram, and Hazael and his son Ben-hadad were its kings.
  - Gaza (and the other cities in v. 7) are Philistine cities.
  - Tyre a long-standing city on the coast north of Israel.
  - Edom the kingdom south of the Dead Sea
  - Ammon the kingdom northeast of the Dead Sea and Edom the kingdom east of the Dead Sea.
- ◆ Then comes specification of the charges.
  - Generally, they were war crimes. V. 3 “threshing” is an image of military brutality; Gilead was part of Israel. V. 6, 9 refer to slave trade. V. 11 “Brother” is Judah. V. 13 atrocities against Israel. 2:1 desecrating a royal corpse.
- ◆ “I will . . .” specifies the punishment; mostly it is destruction of city gates or wall, that is, by an invading army that will then kill, despoil, and/or enslave the inhabitants.

2:4f This judgment is not upon a pagan nation but on Judah (though from Israel’s perspective, it is still a foreign nation)! 6-8 And now the judgment falls on Israel itself! The charges are not war crimes but—in a sense even worse--crimes against neighbors, fellow Israelites! There are economic crimes—not robbery but the kind of “white collar” crimes by which the wealthy and powerful take legal but unjust advantage of the powerless or poor. There are sexual crimes. And in specific violation of the law against keeping the cloak of a poor man, that he gave as collateral for a loan, overnight lest he be cold, these exploiters not only do so but in the very house of God! *The Lord probably has the same wrath against rich and powerful Americans who take advantage of the poor; what examples of such crimes are you aware of through the news or personal acquaintance?*

2:9-16 9-11 The Lord reminds Israel of all the good, even miraculous good, he did them, and specifically, v. 11, making some citizens especially full of the Spirit and dedication to the Lord, for the uplifting of their neighbors. The point is that he is fair to expect worship and obedience in return. 12-16 But they suppressed the spiritual people. Therefore the Lord will “press you down,” even those with physical gifts and skill will be unable to save themselves from the Lord’s judgment. *Do you know people who believe that their gifts and skills will enable them usually to prevail—even against the Lord?*

Amos 3 1-2 Israel, the most generously treated by the Lord of all nations, is rightly held to a higher standard, and having failed deserves a harsher punishment. *Do you think America fits that description?* 3-8 These rhetorical questions all demand the same answer, a momentum that leads to the conclusion in 8b: Amos speaks for the Lord. *Is it surprising that Israel would think Amos*

*was false because he had such bad news for them? How do you treat criticism personally? How does your church? Nation? 9-15 Neighboring nations (already judged as guilty in chapters 1-2) are invited to Samaria (capital city, build on a mountain) and see the crimes so awful that the Lord says “They do not even know how to do right!” Where in your community do you see that some do not even know what is right any more? So the Lord will bring a nation to defeat and punish Israel. Bethel is one of the greatest sanctuaries of Israel; one would expect God’s own sanctuary to be the last place to be destroyed; this sharp judgment indicates that God is especially displeased with their religion because the religion tolerates the crimes against the poor and vulnerable. Are there American religions or churches that tolerate crimes against the vulnerable? V. 15 the rich will have their houses destroyed.*

*Amos 4 1-3 The wealthy, greedy, self-indulgent women will be sorely punished. 4-5 A bitter, sarcastic command to worship. What does the Lord think of people who fulfill their worship obligations but are dishonest in their business dealings? What will he do to them? 6-13 The Lord has already reminded the people of all the good he did them. Now he recounted on the discipline in love he inflicted in his effort to persuade the people to return to him. Can God force anyone to turn to him? Have you ever tried unsuccessfully to get someone to return to you? What tools did you use? Why did the person not return? (Do 7-8 refer to the drought that Elijah caused?) V. 10 stench is of unburied corpses. V. 12 “prepare to meet your God!” In your life, or in your church’s or in America’s, can you think of a small or large disaster that God may have sent in order to get people to return to him?*