You should be able to answer all the questions on this sheet, but in writing you only have to answer the questions on the book of Amos, at the end of this handout).

2 Samuel 7.1 to 8.2: A brief dip into the David chapters to read the new covenant the LORD makes with David and his descendants. The first eight verses of the chapter are about David’s wanting to build a “house” – a temple – for the LORD in Jerusalem. The LORD declines the offer for now and extends the covenant instead. Be sure to read the footnote to 7.1-29. (If you’re interested, Harris has very interesting material on kingship in the Ancient Near East and the Davidic Covenant on pp. 187-189 of the sixth edition and pp. 170-171 of the seventh edition.) Question: (a) What are the outstanding points of the covenant to you? I am having you read David’s response because it so well exemplifies how the priestly writers would want everybody to relate to the LORD; also note the – once again – reference to the LORD’s victory over Pharaoh. This kind of faithfulness and obedience is why David gets away with pulling all the shenanigans he pulls in these wonderful chapters. In 8.1-2, we get a tiny glimpse of the kind of military success David has over almost everybody, and also his strategic and political brilliance in bringing the enemy over to his side. Question: (b) How does he treat the defeated Moabites?

Except for this brief dip into David, we are skipping over two hundred and fifty years from the end of Judges and “Give us a king!” in 1 Samuel to the troubles that begin for the Israelites under the bad kings they start getting after Saul, David, and Solomon (who was pretty bad himself, building temples for a bunch of foreign wives!). The stories of these bad kings (and some good ones) occupy 1 and 2 Kings. We also meet the first prophets who start denouncing and attacking them in the name of the LORD – Elijah and Elisha. We won’t be reading these chapters.

Harris, Understanding the Bible: Sixth Edition: pp. 194-199; Seventh Edition: pp. 176-181. Read these few pages, and, especially, compare the maps on pg. 195 and pg. 198 of the sixth edition, pg. 177 and pg. 180 of the seventh edition. 198. (Maps 4 and 5 at the back of our Bible illustrate the same thing.) The break-up of Israel and Judah really starts the decline of the Israelites. Note Harris’s reference to Bethel and Dan. File those names, especially Bethel. They’ll be coming back in the prophets. Find them on the map, p. 198 (180 in seventh edition). Bethel, as a religious sanctuary in the north, becomes a kind of rival to Jerusalem. Question: How many miles away from Jerusalem is it?

Harris, Understanding the Bible: Sixth Edition: Table 5.1 on pp. 196-197; seventh edition, Table 6.1 on pp. 178-179. The second and third columns show the separate kings of Israel and Judah (until the Israel column stops at 725 BCE: Israel is over, conquered by Assyria!). The fourth column shows the Hebrew prophets preaching during these times. We will read Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel from this list. Questions: Who was king of Israel when Elijah preached there? Who was king of Israel when Amos preached there? Who was king of Judah when Isaiah preached there?
You can get a lot out of reading the first few pages Harris’s Chapter 6 in the sixth edition or Chapter 7 in the seventh edition. You could read just through the Amos and Hosea sections for Monday. These prophets were tightly bound up with the history of their own time. They preached to their own time about events in their own time. (Some later faith communities have interpreted their preaching as applying to a more distant future.) So it is necessary to learn some of the history of what was happening during their times.

These “individual spokespersons for God” (Harris’s term) are usually preaching to people – individual kings, or the whole Israelite people – who are morally deaf and blind. So prophets must dramatize their message so it is super-loud and super-clear (and, of course, their audience still never gets it!). Some prophets, such as Elijah, whom we’re not reading about, used actions, such as bringing about droughts. Sometimes they performed some personal act that dramatized their message: Hosea, as we’ll see, married a whore to dramatize the LORD’s feeling that all of Israel is acting like a whore betraying her faithful husband the LORD. But the main way the great prophets dramatize their message is through the poetic power of their preaching. The next prophet we turn to, Amos, is the first of what are called the great “preaching prophets” or “poet-prophets.”

Prophetic books like Amos are compilations of the prophet’s sayings and spoken poetry, along with material that seems to have added by others. Indeed changes and additions to Amos, who preached about 750 B.C.E. were still going on in 200 B.C.E. As Harris says, “editorial additions of virtually all the prophetic books continued well into the last centuries B.C.E.” (I will append a handout on this.) This can make the books a little hard to follow if you try to read them straight through. And anyway, it is a pity to have to read them straight through, since it is probable that the prophets’ audiences heard only certain individual parts at one time. (These individual parts are known as oracles, by the way.). Remember this as you read.

Questions:

(a) Which nation does Amos indict first? (You will need footnotes.)
(b) Which nation does he indict next?
(c) How many nations does he indict before he gets around to Judah and then Israel? Amos came from Judah but preached in Israel. How do you imagine his Israelite audience might have reacted when he got around to denouncing Israel?
(d) What specific sins of Israel does he seem to focus on?
(e) In 3.2, why will God especially punish Israel for “all [its] iniquities”?
(f) What form will the punishment take in 3.11?
(g) In 3.15, why will God tear down “the winter house as well as the summer house”? What are they an image of?
(h) Who are the cows of Bashan, and why do they come in for criticism? They’ll come back in Isaiah.
(i) In 4.4-5, what is his attitude towards the Israelites who go to the shrines in Bethel and Gilgal?
(j) In 4.6-13, we have one of the self-contained poems found throughout Amos. Can you see that? In the first line of this poem, isn’t that an interesting way to describe famine?
(k) What sins are mentioned in 5.10-13?
5.18-20 seem very important. What had the Israelites expected the “day of the Lord” to be? What is it going to be instead? (Footnote helpful.)

5.21-24 are not only very famous; they’re also a favorite of Michael’s (not to mention Martin Luther King, Jr.). You can ensure that they become among your favorites, too, simply by reading them aloud with gusto. (Anybody willing to perform them for the class?) To appreciate the full force of these lines, one needs to have a sense of just how much of the earlier Hebrew Bible is devoted to how to run “festivals. . . and solemn assemblies” and how to offer grain offerings. Between the previous lines on the day of the Lord and at least one more real shocker still to come in the last chapter, Amos is the prophet of “You have another thing coming”!

5.25: again, we haven’t read much about the Israelites’ years in the wilderness (in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers). But the general understanding is that yes, they did bring God lots of sacrifices and offerings then. Amos seems to be revising the story here (see footnote). Another you-have-another-thing-coming.

6.1-7: When the Israelites are forced into exile, who will be the first to go?

7.1-9 seems to be a little poem with a pattern. How does it end? (Note the image of the plumb line. We’ll encounter it again.) What does God mean when he says “I will never pass them by again”?

7.10-17: very important for several reasons. Just who is Amaziah, and what is his job? At 7.11, he is being scornful: try saying the line with a heavy, sarcastic emphasis on “Amos.” This is more than sarcastic; it is sinful because it suggests that God is not speaking through Amos. Amos is the outsider, the humble herdsman. Does he sound ashamed of this or somewhat proud? Is he cowed by the official guy? Listen to the punishment he curses Amaziah with in 7.17!

8.4-6: Again, what are the sins?

9.1-4: A stunning poem! (Sheol, line 4.2, is the underworld region to which the dead go in ancient Hebrew belief. It’s not a particularly pleasant state, but it’s not a place of punishment like hell.) What aspect of this God does it capture?

9.7-8: The final shocker! (The footnote may be helpful.) What? He was working for the Philistines, too? The Philistines?? (We may not have read enough for you to realize that the Philistines were one of the worst bad-guy groups.)

What is promised here. Does it seem a little out of keeping with the mood just before? See footnote on one reason scholars believe it was added on by later editors interested in the “remnant” idea.

According to the handout outlining a theory of the development of the book of Amos, how does it come about that, in the preachings of this northern prophet, we find verses such as 5.5-6 about how the only place to worship is Jerusalem, not Bethel or Gilgal, which were in the north?

So what do you want to talk about in seminar?