

Amos 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Amos chapter 9. I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said, Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people, and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword. Not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape.

If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them. If they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them. And if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them, and I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good. The Lord God of hosts, he who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell in it mourn, and all of it rises like the Nile and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt, who builds his upper chambers in the heavens, and founds his vault upon the earth, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth. The Lord is his name.

Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel, declares the Lord? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Kaphtor, and the Syrians from Kerr? Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, declares the Lord.

For behold, I will command and shake the house of Israel among all the nations, as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the earth. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, Disaster shall not overtake or meet us.

[1 : 46] In that day I will raise up the booth of David that has fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it, as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the Lord who does this.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes, him who sows the seed. The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities, and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards, and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens, and eat their fruit.

I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God. Amos chapter 9 is the final chapter of the prophecy, and the final of the five visions with which the book concludes.

As Daniel Carroll notes, it's quite different from the others, and containing no reference to an exchange between the prophet and the Lord. Rather, the prophet Amos sees the Lord in a vision, and hears the Lord's word concerning his people.

[2 : 55] The Lord is standing beside the altar, at the heart of the people's worship. Presumably this is the altar at Bethel. The altar at Bethel, we must remember, was condemned to destruction in chapter 3, verses 13-14.

Hear and testify against the house of Jacob, declares the Lord God, the God of hosts, that on the day I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off, and fall to the ground.

The Lord here commands the capitals, the top of the great pillars of the temple, to be struck, until the thresholds at the bottom shake. The temple is being unsettled from its top to its bottom.

The temple, we must consider, was a microcosm of the entire world order, and of the people, but also a macrocosm of the human being. By shaking the temple, the Lord is throwing the whole symbolic order into instability.

The hero might naturally think of the earthquake that was about to come upon the nation in a couple of years' time. However, the earthquake is a concrete symbol of a greater judgment that is about to arrive.

[3 : 57] By focusing upon the trembling temple, the vision helps us to connect these two levels, the immediate and more literal referent of the physical disaster in two years' time, and the greater disaster that it symbolises.

Carroll argues that the phrase translated, shatter them on the heads of all the people, should rather be rendered, cut off the heads of all of them, referring not to the capitals of the temple, but to the people.

He argues that those at the temple would lose their lives as the disaster struck the building, perhaps even during a festal celebration. It's also possible that the heads of all of the people particularly refers to their civil, religious, and political authorities, who would be present at the temple, leaving the people without many of their leaders.

We could, however, also read this in a more symbolic way. The heads of all of the people are akin to the capitals of the temple, the top of the great supporting pillars of the body politic.

They are going to be radically shaken. We might think here, for instance, of the striking of the house of Jeroboam, and the weakening of the monarchy after the assassination of Zechariah, Jeroboam's son.

[5 : 02] All but one of the six kings in the three decades after the death of Jeroboam II, to the extinction of the northern kingdom, were assassinated by rivals or removed by foreign powers, and the nation was also at war for a lot of time during this period.

With the striking of the capitals of its pillars, the whole nation would be shaken, and destruction would come for them all. Vertical extremities symbolically related to the tops and bottoms of the pillars of the temple also appear in the two verses that follow, the depths of Sheol, the realm of the dead, and the heights of heaven, the dwelling place of God and the divine council, and the top of Mount Carmel, and the depths of the sea.

There was nowhere to escape from the Lord's judgment. He was going to bring down the house of Israel, from its rafters to its roots, and no part of the nation would escape the general catastrophe. The Lord would seek them out, and destroy them with the symbolic serpent and the literal sword. His purpose is set upon their ill, no longer their good. The literal earthquake would be the sign of the cosmic earthquake that was going to destroy the whole house of Israel. The literal earthquake was a great enough disaster in itself.

It would be remembered 200 years later, being referenced in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 5. In verses 5 to 6 of this chapter, we encounter the third of the doxologies of the book associated with the statements of judgment.

[6 : 22] The others are found in chapter 4 verse 13. For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth, the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name.

And then in chapter 5 verse 8 to 9. He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name, who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

The doxology in verses 5 to 6 picks up on elements of the statement concerning the extent of the Lord's judgment in verses 1 to 4. It also reminds us of chapter 8 verse 8.

Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? As in the preceding doxology, there is a reference to the waters of the sea being poured out on the surface of the earth.

This is an image, among other things, of a foreign nation invading the land and overwhelming it. The doxology, which particularly relates to the coming literal earthquake, also expands to refer symbolically to the greater shaking of the land.

[7 : 40] It implies a connection between the land and Egypt, whose character the land has taken on. The creation themes of these verses, who builds his upper chambers in the heavens, and founds his vault upon the earth, stand alongside themes of decreation, the Lord, as it were, is going to reverse day three of creation, the raising of the land out of the waters.

The waters of the sea will once again cover the surface of the earth, sinking it into the great deep. Of course, symbolically speaking, the dry land was Israel, which was brought up out of the sea in the Red Sea crossing, and the deliverance from Egypt, drawn up and out of the waters of the nation.

Now those waters are going to engulf it once more. It's being decreed, and returned to the domain of the Nile, and the dominion of the deep. Israel was in constant danger of presumption.

They prided themselves in their privileged covenant status, and did not sufficiently consider the consequences of their unfaithfulness. The Lord here punctures their complacency, and their false sense of a unique immunity to catastrophic judgment on account of their elect status.

Verse 7 is a remarkable verse. It flies directly in the face of cherished and virtually unchallenged beliefs concerning Israel's privilege as the elect people. Everyone would have instinctively answered no to its questions, but they imply affirmative answers.

[8 : 59] Israel is indeed like the Kushites, the Philistines, and the Syrians. Kush is in the region of modern Sudan, and would have been one of the extremities of the known world for the Israelites of that day. The book began with oracles addressed to the various nations, and here the Lord suggests that he had been graciously involved in the histories of other nations beyond Israel.

Israel might be the Lord's firstborn, but that does not mean that he is the Lord's only son. Rather, the firstborn is to mediate between the father and the other sons, and the father is actively concerned for them too.

He had brought them up out of their former lands, much as he had brought Israel out of Egypt. We might have hints of a similar analogy between Israel's experience and that of other nations in Deuteronomy chapter 2.

In verses 5, 9, and 19 of that chapter, the Lord declares that Israel is not to harass or contend with Edom, Moab, or Ammon, as the Lord had given them their respective lands, in a manner that suggests a similarity between their reception of their lands and Israel's reception of the gift of the land of Canaan.

While Israel does have a special relationship with the Lord as his firstborn son, the relationship is not as popularly imagined. It does not offer grounds for presumption. Indeed, the kingdom of Israel would be destroyed.

[10 : 15] The Lord would shake them among all of the nations, another judgment that the earthquake would literally anticipate. However, there would be mercy in the judgment. Although there are different ways to take the image of the sieve and the identity of the pebbles left in it, it seems clear that it is an image of judgment that would involve some sort of separation, and different degrees or modes of judgment for different elements of the population.

Carroll suggests that we should think of the pebbles as the comfortable and self-confident perpetrators of injustice, who would experience targeted judgment in the land, while the rest of the nation would be scattered through the sieve among all the other nations.

The chapter and the book concludes with two connected prophetic statements of hope and reversal. That of verse 11 and 12 begins with, in that day, and that of verse 13 to 15 with, behold, the days are coming.

The judgment will come upon Israel and the people, but it will not be the final word. There is hope of restoration and new life on the other side. The Lord declares that he will raise up the booth of David that has fallen.

There are numerous opinions among commentators about what this might refer to. Many see it as a reference to the Davidic dynasty more generally. The booth of David could be a reference to the kingdom of David, which was torn apart after the death of Solomon.

[11 : 30] As Jerusalem is referred to as a booth in a vineyard, in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 8, some have seen this as a reference to Zion, others as a reference to the temple. Peter Lighthouse has made the argument that this is a reference to the shrine for the ark in Jerusalem that David set up.

After the battle of Aphek at the beginning of 1 Samuel, the worship of Israel was torn in two. There was the site of the tabernacle, and then there was the site of the ark. In 2 Samuel, David brought the ark into Jerusalem and set up a shrine for it.

David's booth, or his shrine for the ark, was a place of prayer and song. The ark shrine was also more open to the Gentiles. We might think of the fact that the ark was in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite, prior to its being brought into Jerusalem.

Peter Lighthouse has argued that the vision here refers to the restoration of that ark shrine, a place more of song than of sacrifice, and which included Gentiles among its worshippers.

In verse 12, remnants of other nations are brought into the enjoyment of these blessings. The use of the word possess might initially connote for us a sense of violent or coercive conquest, but that is challenged both by the context, where in verse 7 the Lord declares his interest in these other nations, and also by the description of the nations as those who are called by the Lord's name.

[12 : 47] Israel is not the only nation that is called by the Lord's name. The remnants of other nations will be called by his name also, and they will be joined into a common possession of the blessing of the Lord's presence in their midst.

Along with this vision of the raising up of the people again, and the bringing in of other nations, in verses 13 to 15, there is a vision of the restoration of the land and its fruitfulness. Verse 13 recalls Joel chapter 3 verse 18, which is earlier in the book of the 12, but later historically as a text.

And in that day the mountain shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water, and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the valley of Shittim.

The vision is one of restoration, rebuilding, and reversal. The Lord will establish his people in the land, and they will not be uprooted from it again. A question to consider.

In Acts chapter 15, James, in summing up the decision of the council of Jerusalem, refers to Amos chapter 9 verses 11 to 12, presenting those words as being fulfilled in the work of Christ and his church.

[13 : 56] Reading these two passages alongside each other, how can each one shed light upon the other?