

Amos 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 21 August 2021

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[0:00] Amos chapter 2. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom.

So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kiriath, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting, and the sound of the trumpet. I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him, says the Lord.

Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes. But their lies have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked. So I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted, a man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned.

[1:11] They lay themselves down beside every altar, on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God, they drink the wine of those who have been fined. Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and who was as strong as the oaks.

I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath. Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.

And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazarites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel? declares the Lord. But you made the Nazarites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, You shall not prophesy.

Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life. He who handles the bow shall not stand, and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself, nor shall he who rides the horse save his life. And he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, declares the Lord.

[2:21] The book of Amos opened with a series of oracles against the nations, which continue in chapter two. The oracles began in the northeast, with Damascus and the Syrians, moved southwest to Gaza and the Philistines, then up to the Phoenicians in Tyre in the northwest, then to the Edomites in the south, and the Ammonites in the east.

The next in the series is Moab, which was to the east of the Dead Sea. Its southern boundary was the Zerod River, but the northern boundaries of the nation varied significantly. At certain times in its history, its territory extended into land that at other times belonged to Transjordanian tribes of Reuben and Gad.

Israel had first entered into the promised land via the plains of Moab, opposite Jericho and north of the Dead Sea. The Moabite king Balak had sought Balaam, the mercenary prophet, to curse Israel when they had first entered the land.

Naomi and Elimelech had gone to Moab to seek bread, and their son Malon had married Ruth, who later returned to Israel with her mother-in-law after their husband's deaths. Israel had also fought against the Moabites at various points in their history.

For instance, in 2 Kings chapter 3, Jehoshaphat and Jehoram had joined forces with the king of Edom to fight Mesha and the Moabites. The sin for which Moab was condemned was their desecration of the bones of a king of Edom.

[3 : 40] As Daniel Carroll notes, it isn't clear whether they had burned his bones to lime, or for the purpose of lime. In the former case, they might have been thoroughly burned in order to disrupt the king's passage to the afterlife.

In the latter, the purpose might have been thoroughly to defile his remains, employing them as material for plaster. Following the pattern of the oracles against the nations to this point, the Lord declares that he will send a fire upon Moab and devour their strongholds.

We should probably not see the reference to this particular sin as suggesting that the judgment of Moab is exclusively on its account. Rather, such an abomination, like the Ammonites tearing open pregnant women, is a high-water mark, an especially egregious sin that typifies the character of the nation that has committed it.

Moab was reduced to a vassal kingdom of the Assyrians later that century, and then overcome by the Babylonians in the 6th century. Amos was a man of Judah, from the town of Tekoa, 10 miles south of Jerusalem.

His prophecy had begun with the Lord's voice roaring from Zion and speaking from Jerusalem. However, the cycle of judgment that he had been given to declare included Judah as one of its recipients.

[4 : 50] Judah's specific sin concerned their rejection of the law of the Lord and his statutes. In contrast to the surrounding nations, who had in their cruelty and dehumanizing practices violated the natural law common to all men, Judah had the special privilege of revelation of the divine will and the law given through Moses.

This, however, entailed a greater level of culpability for its offenses. They are held accountable to a higher standard. They had followed lies, presumably the words of false and flattering prophets, a matter in which they followed in the footsteps of their unfaithful ancestors.

Judah would suffer the same judgment as the other nations. The Lord would send a fire against it, and its strongholds would be devoured. The series of oracles concludes and climaxes with the oracle against Israel in verses 6-16.

The 4-3 transgressions and 4-4 suggests an X, X plus 1 pattern that might even be operating on the larger level of the oracles themselves. With oracles delivered to seven nations, we might think that the sequence was complete, but Israel is then added as the eighth.

Carroll questions a common reading, which suggests that, leaving Israel to last, the Lord springs a surprise upon his people, who would merely have expected condemnations of the surrounding nations.

[6 : 08] Rather, he argues, this is finally the conclusion of the suspense that has been building to this point. Israel knew that judgment was coming for it, and perhaps, in this litany of judgments against its neighbors, it recognized many of its own sins.

Considering, however, the extent of flattering false prophecy at this time, perhaps there was an element of surprise here. While typical oracles of judgment may have been connected with holy war, and would not very strongly condemn the sins of the prophet's own people, the genuine word of the Lord is one that challenges his own people's sins.

The judgment upon Israel is by far the longest to this point, underlining the fact that it is set apart from other nations, as they are the people of the Lord. The nature of their crimes is difficult to determine in certain cases.

Selling the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals might be a matter of the injustice of the courts, within which even the smallest of bribes could pervert the justice due to the destitute. Alternatively, it might refer to the utter lack of mercy in an oppressive society, where the smallest debt, even of a mere pair of sandals, could end up with someone being sold into slavery.

[7 : 19] The portrait of Israelite society given in these verses is one of cruel greed, oppression and injustice. Several parts of the law instructed Israel concerning ongoing provision and care for the poor.

Such provision was supposed to be built into many of its practices, institutions and customs.

Likewise, the danger of bribery perverting judgment concerning the poor was an issue that was highlighted at many points in the law and the wisdom literature.

Beyond such economic and legal injustice, Israel was a place of sexual immorality, with violations of the laws of consanguinity in incestuous sexual relations.

Others believed that a cult prostitute might be in view in the condemnation here. Such abominations defiled the people and the land, and led to the name of the Lord being profaned among his people and the surrounding nations.

Verse 8 might refer to seemingly common practices whereby property confiscated from debtors or taxed by corrupt officials became means of decadent behaviour. Perhaps what is in view here is an exacerbation of injustice and oppression by using the expropriated property of poor debtors for decadent excess in the presence of the Lord.

[8 : 30] We might think of Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 18 here. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.

The fee of a prostitute was bad enough, but to bring such a thing before the Lord as an offering compounded the offence. Perhaps a similar point is being made here about money and property gained through oppression and injustice.

In verses 9 to 12, the Lord recalls his great deeds for his people Israel in the past. He had uprooted the Amorites and the Canaanites from the land, defeating the giants and giving the people a possession in the land despite the greatness and the strength of their adversaries.

He had delivered his people from Egypt in the Exodus, and he had guided them through the wilderness to the promised land. The Lord had raised up members of the people who were his dedicated servants, Nazarites who had taken the vow of Numbers chapter 6, and prophets with a divine commission.

The Israelites, however, had sought to pervert and undermine the vocations of these persons, seeking to defile them, getting the Nazarites to break their vow by drinking wine, and shutting up the prophets who had been given the word of the Lord to proclaim.

[9 : 43] The sentence upon this wicked nation is declared in verses 13 to 16. It differs from the typical form of the sentences that preceded it. The Israelites would be pressed or weighed down so that they could not freely move.

The fastest, strongest, mightiest, most skilled, and the bravest among them would all be utterly humiliated. None of their might or courage would be sufficient to save them in that day, nor would the strength of weapon or beast.

They are condemned to shameful and utter defeat. A question to consider. Where else can we get a characterisation of the national life of Israel at this juncture in their history?

The National Life of Israel