

Amos 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Amos chapter 1. The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. And he said, The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem. The pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. So I will send a fire upon the house of Haziel, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-Hadad. I will break the gate-bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the valley of Avon, and him who holds the scepter from Beth-Eden, and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Ker, says the Lord. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him who holds the scepter from Ashkelon. I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, says the Lord God. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. So I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bosra. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabba, and it shall devour her strongholds, was shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind, and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together, says the Lord. The book of the prophet Amos is the third book within the book of the Twelve, the collection of the writing of the figures commonly referred to as the minor prophets. It almost certainly predates its predecessor in the collection, Joel, although it can be connected with it thematically, and on a literary level. In Joel chapter 3 verse 16, at the end of that book, we read, The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and in verse 2 of this first chapter of Amos, the same language is taken up. Marvin Sweeney, in his treatment of the book of the Twelve, notes that Amos also contains reference to a locust plague, in chapter 7 verses 1 to 3, and that Amos's vision of the restoration of the people also contains the sorts of references to the extreme fertility and fruitfulness of the land that we see at the end of the book of Joel.

Furthermore, he argues, it leads naturally to the book of Obadiah which follows it, through its focus upon the need to punish Edom at its beginning and end. The ministry of Amos is set in the context of the days of Uzziah and Jeroboam II, both of whom had lengthy reigns beginning around the 780s BC, depending on the chronology that you follow. The prophecy is dated more specifically to two years before the earthquake, a massive natural disaster, which archaeological work has dated to approximately 760 BC. Some geologists have argued that this was the largest earthquake in the region within the last 4,000 years, likely around an 8 in magnitude. What is not mentioned in the books of the Kings or Chronicles, it was a memorable enough event in the nation's life that Zechariah could refer to it over 200 years later, in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 5. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel, and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. It is difficult to date some of the minor prophets with any certainty. However, while Hosea also ministered during the reign of these kings, as did Jonah, Amos's ministry was probably among the earliest of the pre-exilic prophets in the book of the Twelve. During the period of Amos's ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel was in the ascendancy under Jeroboam II, and dominated the southern kingdom of Judah, which was his place of origin. Assyria was not at this point the power in the region that it would soon become, and had recently been under Adad-Narari III. This left something of a regional power vacuum, which Israel was well positioned to fill. The Arameans, or Syrians, who had previously troubled Israel, declined after Adad-Narari III defeated Damascus in 796 BC, a defeat followed up by other significant losses in the decades that followed.

With the Syrians greatly weakened, and Assyria's involvement in the region limited after the death of Adad-Narari, Israel was then able to recover much of the land that it had formerly lost. This is described in 2 Kings chapter 14 verses 25 to 27. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath, as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-Hefa. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. However, many of the gains made by Israel at this time during the reign of Jeroboam II were hollow, and they would all be short-lived. Already some of them seemed to be chipped away in the latter half of his reign. Within a generation, Israel would fall to the Assyrians, and the entire nation extinguished. What appeared to be a great flourishing of the nation was not the cause for confidence that some might have thought that it was, and as we read through Amos, it becomes clear that various cracks were already appearing.

One could imagine people saying 40 years later, looking back on the time of Amos's ministry, that the signs of the coming national disaster were already starting to appear. Among these cracks, as Daniel Carroll observes, was the growing oppression and injustice within the land of Israel itself, pushing back against some earlier overconfident accounts that posited a sharper, polarised distinction between rich urban elites and poorer rural peasants within a tributary system. He suggests that, while such a reconstruction might better fit the situation in Judah in the second half of the 8th century BC, the situation at the time of the Book of Amos likely didn't operate with such a clear centre-periphery opposition. Rather, the problems identified by Amos may have been more pervasive within the society, operating on every single level, with abuse of a system of patronage, which would have had many localised expressions, with not only magnificently wealthy oppressors, but smaller landowners oppressing those who are under them also. Amos is identified as a shepherd from

[7:18] Tekoa, a town in Judah about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. The word for shepherd used of him here is not the regular word, however. We learn more about him in chapter 7 verses 14 to 15.

Determining Amos' social status is not easy. It's quite likely that he was a man of at least some means. He seems to be well educated and likely own flocks and property, where he grew his sycamores. As his own testimony states, he was not born into a prophetic vocation, but he was called out of his former life to prophesy to the people. The dating of Amos' ministry to two years before the earthquake likely implies that his prophetic ministry was of short duration. Furthermore, various of his prophecies seem to look forward to the earthquake, which would have served as an initial sign vindicating his message. See, for instance, 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? Some scholars have suggested that the darkening of the sun at noon, described in the next verse, refers to an eclipse that occurred in 763 BC. Also, in chapter 9 verse 1, 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. And chapter 9 verse 5, 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. The prophecy begins with the voice of the Lord roaring from Zion, causing the land to wither and mourn. He is about to enter into judgment with the nations, and then with Judah and Israel. This opening chapter focuses on the oracles to the nations, statements of judgment against

Damascus and the Syrians, Gaza and the Philistines, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon. Moab will follow in the beginning of chapter 2. Such oracles against the nations might have been delivered in the context of conflict and holy war. We might think of the attempts of Balak to get Balaam to curse the children of Israel, for instance. However, the prophecies concerning the nations that we find in scripture, while resembling such oracles on many occasions, break the mold in others. First, Israel and Judah are often themselves included as recipients of these words of judgment. Second, prophecies to the nations are not purely condemnations, or messages designed to favor Israel and Judah over them. The Lord also addresses foreign nations with words of grace on occasions, and speaks of raising up foreign nations to judge his people.

Such oracles bear witness to the increasingly international scope of the Lord's message and redemptive work. The Lord is also concerned for the nations, not just for Israel. They also illustrate the existence of more general moral standards, a sort of natural law knowable by people of every nation, offenders against which the Lord, as creator and God of all, would bring into judgment.

Furthermore, the nations here had all had dealings with the Lord and his people over their history, so they weren't ignorant of him, nor without their more particular obligations to him and to his people.

[10:50] Sweeney makes the suggestion that all of these nations would have been allies or vassals of Jeroboam II, giving their transgressions a political overtone. As the Lord was the king of Israel, the master of their ally or suzerain, by their actions they were acting unfaithfully or even treacherously. He makes the further intriguing suggestion that the order of the nations presents an itinerary by which Israel, presuming itself to be surrounded by buffer powers against whom their God was avenging historic wrongs, would actually discover that the Lord had been encircling them, and was about to go for the jugular. An arresting feature of the literary form of the oracles against the nations here in Amos is his use of a numerical x, x plus one formula, more familiar from the end of the book of Proverbs. Here the use takes a for three transgressions and for four form.

The actual transgressions mentioned, however, don't match the number as they do in Proverbs. Carroll speculates that the whole series of the oracles against the nations might be read itself as an x, x plus one pattern, with Judah being the seventh and Israel the eighth, or that perhaps we could divide it into two, three, four patterns, with the accent falling upon Edom, the most significant of the opposing nations in the wider book, in the first sequence, and then Israel in the second.

The first of the oracles against the nations is addressed to Damascus, to the Syrians or the Arameans. They had cruelly treated Gilead, Israel's possession in the Transjordan, threshing it with threshing sledges of iron. This is likely an image of utterly crushing and opposing people. On account of their sin, their city and its rulers would be brought down and consumed by fire, the Arameans being sent back to Kerr, the place of their origin. With Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Ashkelon, Gaza was one of the five historic cities of the Philistines. While Gaza is perhaps treated as the lead city here, all of the other historic cities of the Philistines are mentioned in the verses that follow, save Gath, which had probably ceased to be a major city by this time. The Philistines had been a thorn in Israel's side for centuries, especially during the period of the judges and the early kingdom period.

Samson, Saul and David had each had significant conflict with the Philistines. The Philistines had also dealt Israel a defeat at the battle of Aphek at the end of Eli's life that was a watershed moment in its history. Gaza and the Philistines are here condemned for carrying a people into exile and delivering them over to Edom. Verse 9 refers to Tyre doing the same, and it seems likely that the three nations were united in this particular crime. Perhaps they had taken captive a whole town, likely of Israel or Judah, in a raid and sold them to the Edomites, with the Phoenicians from Tyre as intermediaries. Such man-stealing was punishable with the death penalty under the law, and this international trade in forcibly captured slaves was an abomination to the Lord. Sweeney wonders whether the historical context behind this was the revolt of the city of Libna and Edom against the rule of Judah, mentioned in 2 Kings chapter 8, with the Philistines assisting Edom in encroaching into former territory of Judah. The Philistines would suffer a similar judgment to the Arameans. Fire would also be sent against them, and they too would be cut off. They would be crushed, albeit not completely destroyed, by the Assyrians a few decades later. The judgment upon Tyre that follows is a shorter one, but it is very similar to the one that precedes it, the one addressed to the Philistines.

Perhaps the most significant detail is its reference to the covenant of brotherhood. Perhaps this might refer to the relations between Israel under David and Tyre under Hiram. Tyre has subsequently betrayed and acted against its historical ally. This, it seems to me, is a more likely interpretation of the expression here than many of the others that have been proposed. Edom, the fourth nation in the sequence, was, as we should remember, descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob. At the height of Israel's power, Edom had been under its rule, and also during many periods of Judah's prosperity.

[14 : 56] Perhaps Israel is the brother that is in view in verse 11, or perhaps the brother is a covenant partner that Edom betrayed. Whatever the historical events behind the condemnations here, once again, Edom is being judged on account of its brutality, and possibly also on account of its practice of man-stealing and the slave trade. Its two chief cities, Teman and Bosra, would be judged as a result.

They would suffer the same fate as the other cities that had been judged to this point. The Lord would send a fire upon them and devour the strongholds. Gilead was the victim of the predations of Damascus, with which this chapter began.

Gilead also suffered the cruelty of the Ammonites, the fifth of the nations in the sequence. In warfare, they had performed the most abominable of acts, cutting open pregnant women, all for the sake of their territorial expansion. Like the other nations in the Oracles, their punishment for their cruelty and their wickedness was sure. It would not be revoked. While the other sentences speak of the Lord's sending a fire upon the walls of certain cities, here it speaks about the Lord kindling a fire in the wall of Rabba, it too would have its strongholds devoured, its rulers being sent away into exile. A question to consider, can you think about ways in which each of these nations mentioned in the Oracles against the Nations in this opening chapter had had previous dealings with the Lord?