

Amos 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Amos chapter 3. Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt. You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. Do two walk together unless they have agreed to meet? Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?

Does a young lion cry out from his den if he has taken nothing? Does a bird fall in a snare on the earth when there is no trap for it? Does a snare spring up from the ground when it has taken nothing? Is a trumpet blown in a city and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city unless the Lord has done it? For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy. Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt and say, Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria and see the great tumults within her and the oppressed in her midst. They do not know how to do right, declares the Lord, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. Therefore thus says the Lord God, an adversary shall surround the land and bring down your defences from you, and your strongholds shall be plundered. Thus says the Lord,

As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed. 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 altars shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will strike the winter house along with the summer house, and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end, declares the Lord. In Amos chapter 3 we arrive at the beginning of a new section of the prophecy, with a dramatic summons to attention.

Both Judah and Israel are addressed in the preceding chapter, in the series of the eight oracles nations that climaxes with them. In this new chapter the people of Israel are addressed, but here defined as the whole family brought out of Egypt at the Exodus. Israel and Judah are thereby connected. They are, despite the division between the two kingdoms, a single family sharing in the same spiritual condition. The Lord here grounds the punishment that they will receive in the uniqueness of his relationship with them. The Lord had not known any other nation in the way that he had known them. He had heard their cries. He had plagued and delivered them from the hands of their oppressors.

He had led and provided for them in the wilderness. He had brought them into the promised land and given them victory over those within it. With no other nation had he acted in such a fashion. Israel was, according to the book of Exodus, the Lord's firstborn son. And as a father will punish his son in a way that he would not punish a child who was not his own, so Israel's special relationship with the Lord is the reason why they must expect judgment for their iniquities. Israel's election was all too often treated as a basis for presumption and complacency. However, this statement shows that it must be exactly the opposite. Because Israel alone among the nations has the Lord as their God, with them being his people, they must expect to face the severer judgment. In verses 3 to 6 we are given seven rhetorical questions, which are then followed by a further two questions that are set apart from them. Perhaps once again we are seeing something of an X, X plus one pattern, with a complete sequence of seven being followed by extra elements that provide the climax to the sequence.

[3 : 47] The first question concerns two people walking together. Do two people walk together in that manner unless they belong together? The second question, does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? Daniel Carroll suggests that on the basis of what we know about lions and the way that we could translate this verse, it should be better read as snarl or growl. The same is the case with the question that follows. In both cases we have lions who are in possession of their prey and they do not want to have it taken from them, and so they snarl or growl at anyone who might approach them.

The fourth and fifth questions are also a pairing, presenting us with the same event from two different perspectives. Once again a cause is being inferred from a particular perceived effect. The bird doesn't fall in a snare unless there has been a trap set for it. Looking at that event from the other perspective, from the perspective of the snare, the snare doesn't snap unless it has been triggered by the bird.

We should note a progression in the pairings to this point. First of all we have two people walking together, then we have the predator and the prey, then we have the hunter and their quarry. In verse 6 we have a trumpet blown in the city, with the figures of the prey and the quarry close in the background.

Who is the hunter or the predator in this instance? The city which is not here identified is thrown into confusion or fear by the blowing of the trumpet that announces the coming of the adversary.

The preceding chapter of the prophecy had spoken about the Lord sending fire against the walls of various cities and devouring their strongholds. Perhaps in Israel's complacency, believing that they were immune from the Lord's judgment, that because they were his special people, the descendants of Abraham, they had the impression that they would not be punished like the nations. They might think that the Lord is their great defender, but they would find that he is the hunter, the one who will snare them and judge them in their iniquities. Verse 7 sets off the questions of verse 8 from the other questions that precede it. The word of the prophet is connected to the roar of the Lord as the lion, just as the lion's growl or snarl reveals that he has taken some prey, so the Lord's actions and intentions are revealed through the words of his prophets. His roar is heard in their prophesying.

[5 : 57] From the words of the prophets can be inferred the actions and intentions of the Lord, much as in the pairs of effects and causes in the rhetorical questions of verses 3 to 6. The prophet, as a servant of the Lord, is a member of the divine council. In chapter 7, for instance, we'll see the Lord declaring purposes to Amos, Amos praying for mercy for the people, and then the Lord relenting and not bringing the announced judgment about. In verse 9, the Lord calls for witnesses. He summons people from the strongholds in Ashdod and in the land of Egypt, from the Philistines and the Egyptians. They are to assemble themselves in the mountains of Samaria, around the city, as if in a great amphitheater, and these great historic enemies of the people are to witness the violence and the wickedness within this capital of Israel.

The Lord would bring a great enemy upon them, who would bring down their defenses and plunder their strongholds. We can presume that this is a reference to Assyria. At various points in the text of Amos to this point, the metaphor of a lion and its prey has appeared. The book of Amos itself begins with the figure of the lion, in Amos chapter 1 verse 2, 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. In verse 4, we had a lion growling in the forest, and a young lion snarling in its den. In verse 12, we have another picture of a lion who has been successful in capturing his prey. He has snatched a sheep from the flock, and the best that the shepherd can do is recover a few pieces of the animal, as evidence that he has not stolen it for the owner. However, the sheep or the lamb has been almost completely devoured, and so the best he can do is recover two legs or a piece of an ear. The people of Israel who lived in the capital of Samaria would face a similar fate. As the Lord, the great lion in this passage came upon them, only the smallest tokens of their former wealth and luxury could be recovered from the wreckage.

The pairing of a bed and a couch can be seen elsewhere, in Amos in chapter 6 verse 4, Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches.

Although it has little impact on our understanding of the greater sense of the passage, the items that are in view here have been variously understood by the commentators. Historically, many of the commentators have read the second item as containing a reference to Damascus. However, the word here has a different spelling from other uses of the word Damascus in the book. Others have suggested at the footboard of a bed, or have seen a reference to cushions.

Carroll argues that if we keep the original text but repoint it, reordering the vowels and the division of the words without changing anything else, we get a far more reasonable interpretation, a piece of a leg. This would also connect well with the image of the limbs of the animal taken from the mouth of the lion. Having spoken about the judgment upon Samaria, the political capital of the nation, the Lord then goes on to declare judgment against Bethel, its cultic center. Here the Lord's name is given as the Lord Yahweh, the God of hosts. The elaborate nature of the divine name here probably serves to underline the solemnity of the statement that follows. Bethel had first been established as a rival cultic center to Jerusalem by Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat. He had erected a golden calf there and a golden calf at Dan and placed an altar before it. In 1 Kings chapter 13, judgment was proclaimed against the altar by the man of God from Judah. That destruction would later occur through the reforms of Josiah. Here judgment is proclaimed both against the altars of Bethel and the horns of the singular altar. Presumably the singular altar is the great sacrificial altar and the altars plural probably include one or more altars of incense. Bethel was, through the actions of Jeroboam I, connected with Israel's primal sin as a nation and also recapitulated their sin with the golden calf at Sinai, along with the altar in Bethel that would be brought down. The Lord would also particularly judge the wealthy of the land. He would strike the winter house along with the summer house and the houses of ivory and the great houses. Israel had, as it were, been fattening themselves on a day of slaughter and the wealthiest in this oppressive nation would face the most severe consequences.

[10:05] One can imagine that the earthquake that would follow in a couple of years would have been a first sign of this coming judgment. A question to consider. Verse 7 declares, What are some examples in scripture of the Lord entering into council with his prophets concerning his purposes? Are there any ways that we could apply this principle to the life of the church?