

Amos 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 26 August 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Amos chapter 7. This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings.

When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, O Lord God, please forgive. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. The Lord relented concerning this. It shall not be, said the Lord. This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. Then I said, O Lord God, please cease. How can Jacob stand? He is so small. The Lord relented concerning this. This also shall not be, said the Lord God. This is what he showed me. Behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, Amos, what do you see? And I said, A plumb line. Then the Lord said, Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never again pass by them. The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.

And Amaziah said to Amos, O seer, go flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom. Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son.

But I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go prophesy to my people Israel. Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.

Therefore thus says the Lord, Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line. You yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.

[2 : 2 3] The concluding chapters of Amos contain a series of visions, beginning here in chapter 7. This chapter gives the first three of the five visions, and the narrative of a confrontation that Amos had with Amaziah, a priest at Bethel. The first four visions all open with Amos' description of something that the Lord showed him. The first two visions, in verses 1-3 and 4-6, are a pair, and the third vision can be paired with the fourth in the chapter that follows. Beyond the features that they share in common with the other visions, the first two visions both involve the Lord showing Amos a judgment that he is about to bring upon the land. Amos then pleads with the Lord that he relent from the judgment, both times using similar words, pleading on account of the fact that Jacob is so small, and then the Lord relenting. In Amos chapter 3 verse 7, we read that the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. We have an example of this principle in Genesis chapter 18 verses 17-19, when the Lord declares to Abraham his plan to destroy Sodom.

The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.

For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. After this, the Lord declares to Abraham his purpose concerning Sodom.

Abraham then proceeds to intercede for Sodom, getting to the point where the Lord says that if there were but ten righteous in the city, he would spare the city on their account. Here we see that the prophet is not just a messenger, but that the Lord involves the prophet in deliberations concerning what he will do to his people and others. Like Abraham in Genesis 18, Amos does not simply assent the Lord's purpose at this point. Rather, he intercedes for the nation, praying that the Lord might not actually bring his punishment upon them. A judgment of locusts had already been mentioned in chapter 4 verse 9. Here the vision of the locust plague is one that will strike the latter growth, the crops that would be sown after the rains in March and April. This is after the king's mowings, presumably a tax that was taken from the first produce of the people's lands. As the king took some of this earlier growth, the people would especially depend upon what came next for their own survival, and with the arrival of the locusts and the dry summer months to follow, they would be unlikely to have enough to get them through the winter. It would be a time of famine.

After seeing this vision of the judgment that might come, Amos pleads for the people, and the Lord relents. Amos pleads for forgiveness, and also throws himself and the people upon the mercy of the Lord. The people are too small, too weak to survive such a general disaster. The second vision of Amos is a fire that is sent upon the land and upon the great deep. Perhaps the great deep here are the waters beneath the earth that water the land. This fire and its associated drought would dry up and wither the land and prevent it from being fruitful, much as the locusts, which again would be reminiscent of the eighth plague upon the Egyptians, would consume all of its fruitfulness. Once again, after Amos' appeal to the Lord for his mercy, the Lord relents. In response to the second vision, Amos does not plead for forgiveness as he does in the case of the first. Perhaps Israel is too far gone for that.

[5 : 58] Daniel Carroll observes commonalities in the second pair of visions, in chapter 7 verses 7 to 9, and chapter 8 verses 1 to 3. The Lord asks, Amos, what do you see? And then the Lord plays upon words relating to what Amos sees. The Lord explains the images that Amos sees and states, I will not pass by him again, and then declares the aftermath of the judgment that is coming upon the people.

While in the first pair of visions the intercession of Amos is effectual in preventing the disaster, in the three visions that follow, the disaster cannot be averted. While Amos interceded in the first two cases, he does not in the third and fourth. Perhaps the more focused and less comprehensively devastating character of these judgments means that he is more ready to submit to them. The third vision, although it is the most familiar of all of them, is very difficult to understand. What is commonly understood to be the plumb line, and is translated as such in most English Bibles, cannot actually be understood this way. Ben O. Lansberger has made a definitive argument against it. He argues that the word must mean tin rather than lead. Of course, tin would not be suitable as a plumb line, so it must refer to something else. Besides the fact that the word itself cannot be translated as lead or plumb line, the fact that the Lord would place a plumb line in the midst of the people seems strange. The people have already been condemned to judgment, so it seems strange that the Lord would be assessing them at this point and measuring them. Carroll suggests that the tin refers to the weakness of the walls and the fortifications of Israel. From a distance they might look to be as strong as iron, but when you get close you see that they're made only of tin and could easily be broken through. Perhaps the Lord having tin in his hand is a sign that he's taken some from the wall to demonstrate the weakness of it.

Marvin Sweeney, who also argues that it cannot mean lead, interprets it as plaster instead, not thinking that there is a convincing argument in favour of tin. He argues that the point of the word here is not to be seen in the actual substance, whether it's plaster or tin or lead, but rather it's about the wordplay that is taking place. The word employed in the vision plays upon the word for lament, sighing or mourning.

That such a wordplay is taking place is supported in part by the wordplay that is in chapter 8 verses 1 to 3. Another example of such wordplay in a similar sort of vision can be seen at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 1 verse 11 and 12.

If we were to focus upon the almond branch itself, trying to find significance in that, we might miss the point, which is the wordplay. The almond branch is a branch of the watcher tree, and so the Lord is watching over his word. Here the Lord placing tin or plaster in the midst of his people is the Lord placing mourning and lament in the middle of his people. This would make sense when we read the judgment in the sentence that follows. The Lord is going to leave the people desolate. He's not going to pass by them again.

[9 : 07] The high places and sanctuaries will be laid waste, and the house of Jeroboam will be cut off by the sword. In the book of Jeremiah, we read of several confrontations that Jeremiah had with false prophets and leaders of his time. In this chapter, Amos has such a confrontation with Amaziah, the priest of Bethel.

It seems that Amos had been delivering his message in Bethel, presumably to be heard by many people who came there to worship. Perhaps Amaziah saw Amos' message receiving traction among the people.

Amos was a man who was gaining standing, people were paying attention to him, and his message was starting to cause waves. And so he sent the king, Jeroboam II, telling him that Amos was conspiring against him, causing trouble in the midst of the people, and that the land could not long sustain his troublemaking. He misreports Amos' message, saying that Amos said that Jeroboam should die by the sword. Amos had not said that. He had said that the Lord would rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword. That does not mean that Jeroboam himself would die. But Jeroboam's house would be violently cut off in his son Zechariah. Amaziah commands Amos to return to Judah at once, to his land of Tekoa, and not to come back. He is not welcome at Bethel anymore. Speaking of Bethel as the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom, it is notable that he makes no reference to the Lord.

It is as if the sanctuary at Bethel exists primarily to prop up and support the nation, rather than to serve as a site of faithful worship of the Lord. We might think back here to an earlier confrontation between a man of God and the king himself at this site of Bethel. In 1 Kings chapter 13, where another man of God from Judah had confronted Jeroboam's predecessor and namesake, Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat. In responding to Amaziah, Amos stresses that he was no prophet. He did not come from a prophetic school. Being a prophet was not his primary vocation. He was a herdsman, an addresser of sycamore figs, perhaps primarily as fodder for animals. The Lord called him from his primary vocation, and presumably he's going to return to that when the mission is over. As Amos' mission is dated relative to a single year, being a couple of years before the year of the earthquake, it's quite possible that all of these visions and prophecies occurred within a very short span of time. When this whirlwind of prophecies is over, Amos expects to return to regular civilian life.

Amos then declares a great judgment upon Amaziah by the word of the Lord. Amaziah had tried to expel Amos and with him the word of the Lord from the place of Bethel. He had forbidden him to prophesy in Israel. As he has tried to expel the word of the Lord from the land, he is going to be expelled from the land by that word. His wife will be a prostitute in the city. Whether this woman of high standing is going to be raped by an invading army, or whether she's going to have to sell her body to survive, is not entirely clear. Either way, it's a terrible fate. His sons and daughters are going to die by the sword, and his whole household is going to be cut off and humiliated. His land is also going to be divided up with a measuring line. We might see in Amaziah a picture of what's going to happen to the entire nation. A question to consider, why do you think that the Lord declares judgments to Amos that he is going to relent from performing?