

Chapter 27 Amos 1-9

Yahweh Roars and Amos Prophecies

*The lion has roared—who will not fear?
The Sovereign Lord has spoken—who can but prophesy?
Amos 3:8*

Amos said nothing to the northern kingdom of Israel apart from what the Sovereign Lord said to him and he says nothing to us today apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. If Amos' prophesy was only applicable to Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753) then it could be read out of historical interest, but its message is timely for believers today and should be heard as the living and active Word of God that it surely is, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, first exposing and then judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (see Heb 4:12). There may be no more potent prophesy in all of Scripture against man-made religion, with its expensive ego performances and showy self-glorifying rituals, than in Amos. And there is no truer advocate for the justice and righteousness that flows from a true personal relationship with the Sovereign Lord than the shepherd from Tekoa.

Tekoa was a small agricultural town about six miles south of Bethlehem in Judah. Amos described himself as a shepherd and tree pruner, but that hardly meant that he was an uneducated country laborer with no other interests than sheep and sycamore trees. His mastery of salvation history and his facility with language reveals a powerful prophet-poet. Like the Shepherd-King David before him, Amos was deeply aware of Yahweh's sovereignty over every aspect of life, including the land and its people, and he gave every indication of identifying completely with God's word on social justice. Unlike Jonah, who resisted the call of God, Amos willingly left the quiet and contented life of a shepherd, which he also saw as the call of God, for the costly and contentious life of a prophet. He confidently described this radical calling and tremendous vocational challenge in a clear, yet understated way: "But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' Now then, hear the word of the Lord" (7:15).

The Sovereign Lord Says

Amos knew that his sole credential and his only means of authority, was that he declared the word of the Lord. "The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem," was the thrust and passion of his message (1:2). From beginning to end his ministry depended exclusively on the word of the Lord, a truth he reiterated constantly and a fact that he used to structure and organize his prophecy. He prefaced his message throughout with the statement, "This is what the Lord says," and constantly reminded his hearers, "Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel," "Hear this and testify against the house of Jacob," declares the Lord, the Lord God Almighty", or "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan....The Sovereign Lord has sword by his holiness..." (3:1,13; 4:1).

Amos had nothing to say other than what the Sovereign Lord said, and no other vision than what the sovereign Lord showed him. His visions of a locust plague, a devastating fire, a plumb line and a basket of ripened fruit, are all prefaced by the refrain, “This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me” (7:1,4,7; 8:1). Amos concluded his prophecy with a vision of judgment and restoration based solely on his personal vision of the Lord, “I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said” (9:1). The voice of Yahweh is in the first person singular, declaring for himself, through the prophet, his final devastating word of judgment, ““Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth— yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob,’ declares the Lord” (9:8). Nothing was said or envisioned by Amos apart from the word of the Lord. Thus, it is fitting that the final message of hope, concluding Amos’ book of prophecy, should end with the Lord’s declaration, ““I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,’ *says the Lord your God*” (9:15).

Amos’ message was delivered with divine authority and poetic power. Amos was a pictorial prophet, who captured meaning with searing images and soul penetrating metaphors. In nine chapters he managed to produce more graphic pictures than the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Nothing was allowed to remain abstract, everything was pictured. Sins were not simply listed they were painted in unforgettable word pictures. Amos did not speak blandly of economic injustice, instead he described the buying and selling of upstanding, righteous people. He spoke of the wealthy grinding the heads of the poor into the dirt and women crushing the needy. He pictured the righteous poor getting cheated out of their legal rights and forced to fork over what they had legitimately earned.

Amos described sin with a decidedly human face. It was the father and son who slept with the same fertility cult prostitute; it was the materialistic mansion builders; it was the self-indulgent wealthy women of Bashan; it was the sincere religious pilgrims who went to Bethel or Gilgal, eager to offer their costly sacrifices; it was the hedonistic party-goers who lavished luxury on themselves; it was the lawyers and officials who robbed the poor of justice and condemned the righteous for a bribe; and it was the worldly-wise investors who hoarded plunder and loot in their fortresses.

The prophet Amos was a master of illustration. He turned life and language inside out to describe the inevitability of inescapable judgment. “The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day,” declares the Lord” (2:14-16). Amos compared what would be left after God’s judgment to a shepherd finding only two leg bones and a piece of an ear after a lion attack (3:12). It was like the survivors of a tornado picking through what’s left of their leveled home or flood victims escaping with only a few mementos. Amos continued to portray the inevitability of God’s judgment. It was like a person running away from a lion, only to meet a bear, and then escaping to his house, only to rest his hand on the wall and be bitten by a snake (see 5:19).

Amos projected the grief of the coming judgment into a visual scene that could be felt: “‘There will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square. The farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail. There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst,’ says the Lord” (5:16-17). Amos compared God’s judgment to a devastating locust plague and a disastrous fire, a judgment made certain by God’s exacting plumb line and timely by the image of a basket of ripe fruit (7:1-8; 8:1-2). In Amos’ description of spiraling intensity, the mourning becomes even too great for wailing. “‘In that day,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!’” (8:3).

Yahweh’s roar through his prophet Amos was as devastating as it was comprehensive. It was universal in scope, specific in condemnation, graphic in description, certain in execution, and compelling in conviction. The hope announced in the end comes only after the social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of Israel’s life have been exhaustively examined and soundly condemned. Inspired by the Spirit of God, Amos knew how to work the angles to produce a devastating impact. For a shepherd from Tekoa, Amos knew his political geography as well as any king, and expressed as thorough an understanding of salvation history as found anywhere in Scripture. In his judgment against Israel’s neighbors he was able to invoke the memory of atrocities with a deft reference to a name or place and expose man’s inhumanity to man with a single line of indictment and condemnation. Damascus faced the wrath of God, “because she pounded Gilead to a pulp, pounded her senseless with iron hammers and mauls” (1:3, *The Message*). Syria (Ammon) deserved the wrath of God, because “she ripped open pregnant women in Gilead to get more land for herself” (1:13). Moab earned the wrath of God, because “she violated the corpse of Edom’s king, burning it to cinders” (2:1, *The Message*). Nothing long-winded, only penetrating poetic prophecy which cut through all the political rhetoric and historical myth to reveal the awful, tragic irrefutable nature of evil.

Yahweh’s Prey

By beginning with the surrounding nations, Amos demonstrated the scope of Yahweh’s judgment and might have even lulled Israel into an initial feeling of complacency and false privilege. The prophet never forgot that Yahweh is the Lord of the nations. At times he called the nations to witness God’s justice (3:9) and at other times he called Israel to assess their position in relationship to the nations (6:2). Amos was conscious of representing the Sovereign Lord, not some tribal deity or ethnic god, but the Lord of the universe who held all the nations accountable.

Amos’ opening judgment against the nations offered a significant model for the apostle Paul in Romans, who followed Amos’ example in detailing the target of God’s wrath. When Paul said, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18), he was in the tradition of Amos, who declared the word of the Lord, “For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath” (1:3). Both the prophet Amos and the apostle Paul began their Spirit-inspired work by making it perfectly clear that both Jew and Gentile deserve the judgment of God, “for

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). What did the people of Israel think when they heard Amos’ declaration of judgment against the surrounding nations? I am sure they said, “Amen,” to Amos’ condemnation of Damascus and shouted in agreement with his judgment against Gaza (Philistia). Undoubtedly, they agreed that Tyre (Phoenicia) , Edom, and Ammon (Syria) deserved God’s wrath. But did they grow nervous when Amos turned against Judah and declared, “This is what the Lord says: For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because they have rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods...” (2:4)? If judgment was well-deserved and overdue for Judah, it was easy to see where Amos was headed next.

The Lord God called Amos, a shepherd from Judah, to zero in on Israel as God’s target for judgment. This is the same region and under the same king, Jeroboam II, that Jonah had been called of God to announce blessing and national expansion in spite of Israel’s evil ways (2 Ki 14:24-25). Years of material and political success led to unprecedented wealth and arrogance. Jonah might have been still alive when Amos arrived, but it is impossible to know whether he would have accepted God’s message of judgment through the prophet Amos. Two more different prophets would be hard to find. Jonah’s message of success went over well with Jeroboam and the establishment, but Amos’ message of judgment was taken as a threat. Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam accusing Amos of conspiracy and quoting the prophet as saying,

“Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land” (7:11).

Amaziah wanted Amos out of Israel:

“Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom” (7:12-13).

Undoubtedly, Amos was reminded more than once of Jonah’s positive prophecy, but that did not stop the shepherd from Tekoa from delivering God’s extreme message of judgment. He confronted Amaziah:

“Now then, hear the word of the Lord.
You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.’

Therefore this is what the Lord says: ‘Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile away from their native land.’” (7:17).

A further irony with respect to Jonah’s ministry, was that Assyria, with her capital city of

Nineveh, was the pagan power that eventually overran Israel, exiled the people and repopulated Samaria with people from other regions conquered by Assyria (2 Kings 17:22-24; Isaiah 8:4-8).

People of Privilege

In one very important respect, Amos picked up where Jonah left off. Israel was the recipient of unprecedented privilege and blessing. Amos was acutely aware of Salvation history and Yahweh's covenant with Israel through Abraham and Moses. The surrounding nations deserved judgment for their violation of God's moral law, but the people of Israel deserved judgment, not only for their injustice and immorality, but because they had disdained and defamed their God-given privilege. Their sin was worse than the sin of the surrounding nations, because the Lord God had called them into a covenant relationship, given them his law, protected them from their enemies, opened up the Promised Land (2:9), delivered them from bondage (2:10), and sent them prophets (2:11). God had even sent famine and disease to shock them into reality before it was too late, but it was all to no avail (4:6-11). Yahweh intended to make them a blessing to the nations, but instead they copied the sinful ways of the nations and destroyed their testimony. Amos stated it clearly:

“Hear this word the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel—against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: ‘You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins’” (3:1-2).

The reason Amos followed this declaration with a series of questions was to drive home the fact that Yahweh's judgment of Israel was beyond dispute. The prophet asked, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” The obvious answer is, “Not likely!” “Does a lion roar in the thicket when he has no prey? Does he growl in his den when he has caught nothing?” No, of course not! “Does a bird fall into a trap on the ground where no snare has been set? Does a trap spring up from the earth when there is nothing to catch? When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (3:3-6). The logic behind these rhetorical questions was to underscore the irrefutable character of God's case against Israel. The case was so obvious that it required no defense, nevertheless, the Sovereign Lord used the prophets to make his plan known. As far as Amos was concerned, he was only stating the most obvious truth.

“Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken—who can but prophesy?” (3:7).

Yahweh's irrefutable and inevitable judgment against Israel for their persistent and flagrant violation of God's blessing stands as a sober warning to professing Christians everywhere. The church which is described by the apostle Paul as “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), has received far more from the Lord than the Israel addressed by Amos. Like eighth century B.C Israel, the followers of Jesus are the children of Abraham and Isaac (Gal 6:16), but we stand at an even more privileged point in salvation history because of the revelation of Jesus Christ, the

fulfillment of the new covenant and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jer 31:31-34; cf. 1 Cor 11:25; see Alex Motyer, Amos, p.18). If Israel was in peril for its privilege, how much more are we, who profess to live by the grace of Christ, in peril for our self-indulgence, blatant materialism, sexual immorality, disdain for the poor and disregard for justice.

If Amos were alive today, what would he say to the consumer-oriented, market-driven church? Would he commend the Christian business person for manipulating the truth in business deals or boasting of his success at the expense of others? Would he approve of fund-raising campaigns that pressure the poor to give, when they deserve to be the recipients of financial support? What would Amos think of our accumulation of wealth, our taste for good wine, our love of travel, our preoccupation with having a good time, and our indifference toward the poor? If Amos were called to the church, “the Israel of God,” he would warn us of the perils of privilege and cause us to remember the words of Jesus, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12:48). Israel had forfeited the grace that could be theirs (Jonah 3:8) and today’s church is in danger of doing the same thing.

Complacent in Zion

Amos warned Israel of the beautiful side of evil, that is, the evil that looks deceptively innocent, attractively popular, and religiously superior. He prophesied in Israel’s heyday, at the height of her success under Jeroboam II. He delivered Yahweh’s message from Bethel, the principle holy site for the northern kingdom. After Solomon died and the northern tribes rebelled against Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, Jeroboam I (931-910) sought to compete with the temple in Jerusalem so he built two golden calves, placing one in Bethel and the other in Dan. He said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (1 Ki 12:28). Under Jeroboam II, some 150 years later, religion was as popular as ever. It thrived in the user-friendly, pragmatic atmosphere of Bethel, known for its open-minded tolerance of various spiritualities. In the spirit of pluralism Israel proudly respected the fertility religions alongside their traditional worship of Yahweh. Ironically, the hard facts of Israel’s moral decline were accompanied by a heightened desire for spirituality and a deeper appreciation for religious liturgy, ritual and pride.

Amos zeroed in on their religious practices with biting sarcasm.

“Come along to Bethel and sin!

And then to Gilgal and sin some more!

Bring your sacrifices for morning worship.

Every third day bring your tithe.

Burn pure sacrifices—thank offerings.

Speak up—announce freewill offerings!

That’s the sort of religious show you Israelites just love. God’s Decree.”

(4:4-5, The Message)

Religion became a substitute for a true, meaningful relationship with Yahweh. The people were

excited about pilgrimages and rituals, but they did not know God. They sang great hymns, but they didn't know the first thing about genuine worship. Amos declared the word of the Lord, "Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba." (5:4-5). They had no true sense of the power and majesty of God and that was why their justice had turned sour and their righteousness had become dirt. Amos declared,

Woe to you who turn justice to vinegar
and stomp righteousness into the mud.
Do you realize where you are? You're in a cosmos
star-flung with constellations by God,
A world God wakes up each morning
and puts to bed each night.
God dips water from the ocean
and gives the land a drink.
God, God-revealed, does all this.
And he can destroy it as easily as make it.

He can turn this vast wonder into total waste. (5:7-10, The Message)

It is as if Amos struggled to find language strong enough to voice Yahweh's displeasure with their religious practices and worship services. "There cannot be a passage in the Bible more deliberate in expressing divine distaste than this." (J. A. Motyer, p.131).

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps" (5:21-23).

The language literally implied that God could not "stomach the stench nor sight of such flagrant abuse of worship" (Hubbard, p.181). Yahweh would have nothing to do with their rituals and ceremonies, and stamped his disapproval on their religion "by branding them your feasts, your gatherings, your offerings, your fatted calves" (D. Hubbard, p.181).

In the flow of his prophesy, Amos interjected what Yahweh really wanted, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (5:24). The energy expended in religious performance amounted to nothing. It was an offensive sacrilege that got in the way of what God really wanted: justice and righteousness. Man-made religion was no substitute for God-ordained justice and righteousness. Eugene Peterson's translation of Amos' prophesy directs it against the contemporary church.

I can't stand your religious meetings.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,

your public relations and image making.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
When was the last time you sang to *me*!
Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's *all* I want.

Amos attacked the “pride of Jacob” and delivered his exclamatory woes against the religious establishment: “Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord!” and “Woe to you who are complacent in Zion....to whom the people come!” (5:18; 6:1,8). They bare a striking affinity with Jesus’ pronouncement of seven woes against the religious leaders of his day (Mt 23:1-39). Jesus called the Pharisees and teachers of the law man-pleasing performers (Mt 23:5), hypocrites (23:15f), blind guides (23:16), and snakes (23:33) for doing the very same religious things condemned by Amos. Jesus declared, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Mt 23:23).

Like a castaway at sea, who is dying of thirst, Israel was awash in religion yet dying of spiritual thirst. There was a famine in the land, but “not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.” Amos prophesied, “People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it” (8:11-12). But in spite of this life-quenishing thirst, Israel refused to turn to Yahweh, preferring to cling to their fertility cults and regional deities (8:14).

Keeping Hope Alive

Because of the revelations he received, Amos held some frightening pictures in his mind, nightmarish visions of extreme judgment. He pictured bodies strewn everywhere in the temple at Bethel (8:3) and bloody scenes of mass decapitation (9:1). Amos’ prophecy left no doubt that Israel’s judgment was inevitable and inescapable—and nearly total. ““Surely the eyes of the Sovereign Lord are on the sinful kingdom. I will destroy it from the face of the earth—yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the Lord” (9:8).

Hints of hope are scattered throughout Amos’ graphic portrayal of judgment. Surely the prophet’s constant plea for Israel to hear the Word of the Lord was not simply that they might know the dire consequences of their sinful behavior, but that they might turn their hearts to the Lord. “This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: “Seek me and live...”, must not be ignored. Amos continued to deliver a powerful appeal to come back to the Lord (5:4). His emphasis was on judgment, but the opportunity for repentance and reconciliation was always there: “Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire...” (5:6); “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is” (5:14).

Amos was also committed to keeping hope alive by interceding on behalf of Israel. His visions of the locust plague and devouring fire were so devastating that Amos cried out twice, saying, “Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small! And each time the Lord responded in his vision by relenting and pulling back from total destruction, declaring, “This will not happen” (7:3,6).

However the hints of hope hidden in Amos’ hurricane of judgment do not prepare us for his shockingly hopeful conclusion. Suddenly, and without warning, Amos stopped his pulverizing message of judgment. As if to say, “Enough is enough. You’ve been warned to the nth degree!” And as quickly as he ceased one thought, he grabbed hold of another and introduced a new vision, not of judgment, but of joy and restoration. Hope finds expression in a beautiful picture of “David’s fallen tent” repaired, restored, and built up as it used to be. It is a picture that takes in “all the nations that bear my name,’ declares the Lord” (9:12).

In keeping hope alive, Amos leaves us with a beautiful picture of a harvest of unparalleled abundance, a joyous reunion of God’s people, and a restoration to life as Yahweh meant it to be. “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes” (9:13).

If the Lord God could sustain hope in Amos, given the awful state of Israel and the burden of his prophetic ministry, how much more can he sustain hope for those who are in Christ, the hope of glory (Col 1:27). If Israel in Amos’ day bore a responsibility for their unique privilege, should not those who follow Christ today be able “to give the reason for the hope” that they have (1 Pet 3:15)? If Amos could be confident, should we not be confident, for “we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Heb 6:19)?