

AMOS – Day of the Lion

Roar of the Lion (Amos 1:1-2:16)

Many of the prophets begin their books by introducing themselves. Many tell us of their family line and for some, such as Jeremiah, their introduction reads like a CV stating their credentials for being God's spokesperson.

For example, Jeremiah begins:

¹ The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin.

(Jeremiah 1:1)

So here Jeremiah is stating that he is from a priestly family. A good position to be in if you want people to take you seriously when you say you have a word from the Lord.

Ezekiel uses similar words:

³ the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, ^[b] by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. ^[c] There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

(Ezekiel 1:3)

Again, Ezekiel states that he is a priest, a man of God from a priestly family. So again, a good family background for proclaiming the word of the Lord with authority.

In this light, the book of Amos however has a surprising introduction:

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa

(Amos 1:1)

If Amos was to take this to a careers adviser today, I'm sure the careers advisor would advise him not to mention his profession in such an upfront manor. If you're applying for a job as God's prophet then you need to convince people that you have experience of discerning God's voice and God's will. Or at the very least that you come from a long family tradition of people that have held high positions in the church. The careers adviser might ask:

Was your father a priest? – no

And you don't have any priests in your family? – no

Have you ever worked in the temple? – no, I work as a shepherd

The careers advisor might then try to use the word 'shepherd' in a spiritual way. What about "Amos, an experienced shepherd who God appointed to be a shepherd of his people"? But the word Amos uses here for shepherd is the Hebrew word 'noqed' means 'sheep-raiser', so he seems to reinforce the idea that he is not a spiritual leader, simply a shepherd.

Why start the prophesy with such a weak statement? Well the answer comes in Chapter 7.

Here we find that Amos is becoming unpopular and one of the priests, Amaziah wants him out:

Amos 7:10-13

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. ¹¹ For this is what Amos is saying:

" 'Jeroboam will die by the sword,
and Israel will surely go into exile,
away from their native land.' "

¹² Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. ¹³ Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴ **Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'**

(Amos 7:14-15)

Amaziah tells Amos to go and earn a living from prophesying in his own town. Basically saying "Go back to your own country and prophesy there." But Amos reminds with Amaziah that he is only a "Sheep-raiser" (Hebrew) so his skills are in agriculture, not prophecy – therefore, if he has a prophetic ministry it has to be from God. He is not a prophet in order to make a living but because God has appointed him to be a prophet.

Amos saw his greatest weakness as his greatest strength. Amos was just a shepherd, a lay person, yet God appointed him to be a prophet to Israel. Amos was untrained and inexperienced but he saw this as an advantage because if he did have a prophesy, it had to be God's doing.

Amos's ministry was quite short – starting in 760 BC and ending in 750 BC (so just 10 years). So it appears that Amos was only concerned with giving the message that God had appointed him to give and after that, we hear no more of him. But his message should by no means be considered to be insignificant. His message calls his readers and us to sit up and pay attention.

And to call us to attention, **his message begins with a LION'S ROAR!**

His message:

As we go through this first chapter of Amos I would like us to go through it together and to visualise geographically where each of the places are that Amos prophesies against. So imagine that the floor space (where you are sitting) is the land surrounding Israel (the area most commonly shown on Bible maps). I would like you to imagine that you are the people of Israel and as we go through each area I would like someone sitting in that direction to read the prophesy out concerning the area that is in your direction. It will make more sense as we go through.

DAMASCUS - about 160 miles northeast of Jerusalem.

We start with Damascus in the far northeast of the area. So could someone in the front corner of the church read v3-5 please.

[read v3-5]

As we go through this chapter you will notice a pattern to the prophecies:

“This is what the Lord says”

These are not merely the predictions of Amos but rather they are the words of God. Amos is simply the messenger.

“For three sins of even for four”

A similar phrase is found a few times in the Bible, especially in the book of Proverbs and it is known as ‘a graduated numerical saying’. Some say it should be interpreted as “For three sins, make that four” (as in The Message) but one commentator (Motyer) has come up with an interesting theory on the phrase used here to mean three plus four (equalling seven). Seven being a number often used in scripture to indicate completeness, this would give the meaning that the nation in question had filled its cup to the full with sin and now judgment was inevitable. This would also tie in with the fact that there are prophecies concerning seven places before Amos prophecies against Israel.

“because...”

Here we get the specific sin that each nation is accused of. This is the reason why God is angry with that nation. It does not mean that this is their only sin, but is perhaps the final straw.

“ I will send fire...”

This phrase is used to introduce a description of the specific judgement of each nation.

“Says the Lord”

In most cases (but not all) these words finish the prophecy. It is an indication that what God has said is final. God has made judgement and his mind is made up.

Damascus was the capital of Aram and had in the past been one of Israel’s worst enemies. This city was the most influential in terms of politics in the whole region and still posed one of the greatest threats to the people of Israel. They were less of a threat than they had once been because in 732 BC, Aram was defeated by Assyria (2 Kings 16:9) but nevertheless, Israel would be glad to be rid of them.

Hazael was king of Aram and Ben-hadad was Hazael’s son (2 Kings 13:24). So God is basically saying he will bring down Aram just as they had brought down Gilead. The Arameans had been ruthless with other nations and now it was time for a taste of their own medicine.

The Arameans had been slaves in Kir, but here they were free. Decreeing that the Arameans should go back to Kir was like saying the Israelites should go back to Egypt as slaves.

Bad news for Damascus but great news for Israel.

Israel Shouts “AMEN”

GAZA - about 50 miles (80.5 kilometers) west-southwest of Jerusalem.

[read v6-8]

Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron were four of the five major cities of Philistia, an enemy who often threatened Israel. The fifth city, Gath, had probably already been destroyed. Therefore, Amos was saying that the entire nation of Philistia would be destroyed for its sins.

There are a few reasons why Gaza may come next in the sequence:

1. Firstly, it could be to show the two extremes (northeast to southwest) and also to show the extent of God's sovereignty and his judgement.
2. Secondly, the Arameans and the Philistines were historically the most harrowing neighbours to Israel and so were often linked together in prophetic thought.
(Isaiah 9:12) "Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west have devoured Israel with open mouth."
3. The prophecies against these first two places talk about cutting off the inhabitants and 'the one who holds the sceptre'. This forms a link between the two and perhaps indicates the problem they had with power.

Gaza had abused their position of power and had used it to make slaves of their captives. They enjoyed being in control but again, the tables were turning. God would show that he was in control. The city would be helpless against God's control. To make the point, this prophecy ends with the words "says the **SOVEREIGN** Lord". Only this prophecy emphasises this by adding the word 'sovereign'.

Against his authority, the Philistines don't stand a chance.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

TYRE

[read v9-10]

Tyre was one of two major cities in Phoenicia. Several treaties had been made between Tyre and Israel. Hiram king of Tyre got on well with David and in 2 Samuel 5 we see how they worked together on building the temple. The city of Tyre provided the cedar wood and they were very skilful at it. Solomon said to Hiram "You know that we have no one so skilled in felling timber as the Sidonians" (1 Kings 5:6) and at this point a treaty is made between them:

¹² There were peaceful relations between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty....¹⁸ The craftsmen of Solomon and Hiram and the men of Gebal cut and prepared the timber and stone for the building of the temple.

(1 Kings 5:12, 18)

Yet in spite of this partnership, Tyre had been involved in an Israelite slave trade, selling Israelite people to Edom.

So there is a connection here between Tyre and Gaza. Both were involved in the Israelite slave trade but Tyre is picked up on this specifically because of the betrayal of the treaty they had made with Israel. They have turned their back on their 'brothers' and now God will hold them to account.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

EDOM

[read v11-12]

Edom was in some respects Israel's twin brother. Both Edom and Israel had their origins in Isaac. You may remember that in Genesis 25 we have the story of Jacob and Esau. Even before birth they are fighting one another in the womb and God tells Rebekah:

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."

(Genesis 25:23)

Those two nations turned out to be Edom (from Esau) and Israel (from Jacob). But like the two brothers, the two nations were continually fighting. Just like Esau went after Jacob to kill him, so Edom had pursued Israel and had rejoiced at Israel's misfortune. Their relationship with Israel was defined by continual anger and bitterness.

As a result, God promised to destroy Edom completely, from Teman in the south to Bozrah in the north.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

AMMON

[read v13-15]

This is one of the most graphic descriptions of sin mentioned here. It is not certain what caused The Ammonites to 'rip open the pregnant women of Gilead' but we can make an educated guess. It was most likely to do with their geographical location. On the east side of them was the desert so they couldn't expand into that because there was no fertile ground. To the south was the Moabites. To the west was the Israelites of Gilead and to the north was Bashan and the Arameans.

Because of their location the Ammonites always felt hemmed in and were always trying to expand their territory. They were always restless and the attack on the pregnant women of Gilead could have coincided with the attack from Damascus on Gilead (1:3). As Damascus tried to extend their borders and Ammon did the same, Gilead were caught in a pincer movement and coped punishment from both sides.

The Ammonites were hostile to Israel; and although Israel began to worship their idols, the Ammonites still attacked (Judges 10:6-8). After Saul had been anointed Israel's king, his first victory in battle was against the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11). Rabbah was Ammon's capital city. Amos's prophecy of Ammon's destruction was fulfilled through the Assyrian invasion.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

MOAB

[read 2:1-3]

The ancient practice was that the corpse of a royal enemy should be treated with respect. At the end of 2 Kings 9, when Jezebel is killed, Jehu orders, "Take care of that cursed woman and bury her, for she was a king's daughter."

In fact she has been trampled by horses so badly that they only find her skull but the point is that Jehu knew that even though she was considered evil, she was royalty and so her corpse should be treated with respect.

The Moabites however had not respected the corpse of Edom's king. They had bunt the bones to nothing. Burning a body was an extreme form of criminal punishment that was designed to purge the land of the person's wickedness and this is how Moab had treated the corpse of Edom's king. There is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible called 'the Targum'. In the Targum the translation of this verse also accuses the Moabites of using the chalk of powdered bones for whitewash. Hardly a mark of respect.

Moab were always trying to defeat Israel. Balak, king of Moab, had tried to hire the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites so they could be defeated (Numbers 22–24). Balaam spoke the Lord's word of blessing instead, but some of the Moabites had succeeded in getting Israel to worship Baal (Numbers 25:1-3). The Moabites were known for their atrocities (2 Kings 3:26-27). An archaeological artifact, the Moabite Stone, reveals that Moab was always ready to profit from the downfall of others. But now it was Moab that would suffer downfall and Moab that would be burnt to cinders.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

JUDAH

[read 2:4-5]

Amos must have won over his audience as he proclaimed God's judgment against the evil nations surrounding Israel. But then he even spoke against his own nation, Judah, before focusing on God's indictment of Israel.

After Solomon died, the kingdom divided, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the southern kingdom (Judah) under Solomon's son Rehoboam. The other 10 tribes became the northern kingdom (Israel) and followed Jeroboam, who had rebelled against Rehoboam. God had punished other nations harshly for their evil actions and atrocities. But God also promised to judge both Israel and Judah because they ignored the revealed law of God. The other nations were ignorant, but Judah and Israel, God's people, knew what God wanted. Still they ignored him and joined pagan nations in worshiping idols. If we know God's Word and refuse to obey it, like Israel, our guilt is greater than those who are ignorant of it.

Judah of course were close neighbours of Israel and therefore were also close rivals. So Israel were most likely pleased to hear a prophesy against Judah.

Israel Shouts "AMEN"

So we have been through seven nations and seven prophesies all speaking of God's judgement on each place because of the sin of the people.

But what can WE learn from all of this?

1. Sinful practice can become a way of life.

The New Living Translation translates the phrase "for three sins... and even for four" as "...have sinned again and again." For each of the nations mentioned, sinful practice had become a way of life. The problem starts when we stop feeling guilty about our sinfulness and we start to become complacent. We can then suppress the guilt of sin so much that it no longer bothers us and we can

even begin to justify our wrong behaviour. God will not stand by and watch us ruin our lives – he cares too much about us to allow that.

2. God's concern for humanity.

Firstly, if we look at the sins that are mentioned, in virtually all of these cases, with the exception perhaps of Judah, the sins are all to do with a disregard and disrespect for fellow human beings.

Damascus was guilty of brutality,
Gaza was guilty of enslaving its captives,
Tyre was guilty of breaking a covenant of brotherhood,
Edom was guilty of its angry pursuit of their Jewish brothers,
Ammon was guilty of brutal extermination of the helpless for the purpose of expansion.
Moab had a deep spirit of revenge which went as far as desecrating the tomb of the Edomite king
Judah turned away from the law of God and committed religious apostasy

These things are detestable to God because they go against his design. Notice that even in the nations that do not follow God's laws, God still considers their actions to be sinful and punishable. God still expects that they know that these sins are wrong not only by God's standards but even by evil human standards. If other human beings find this behavior unacceptable, how much more will God find it unacceptable?

3. Don't judge others.

So Amos is concerned for the welfare of human beings and he speaks out against injustice. And he appears to have the backing of Israel. But there is a warning here about pointing the finger at others. Children are often told that when you point the finger at someone else, you have three fingers pointing back at you. This is true of Israel and Amos is about to drop the bombshell that the main target for his prophesy and for the raw of the lion, is the people of Israel.

Jesus said:

How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

(Luke 6:42)

The sins of the other nations are almost all amalgamated in the people of Israel. God condemned Israel for: (1) selling the poor as slaves (see Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Amos 8:6), (2) exploiting the poor (see Exodus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:19), (3) engaging in perverse sexual sins (see Leviticus 20:11-12), (4) taking illegal collateral for loans (see Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:6, 12, 13), and (5) worshiping false gods (see Exodus 20:3-5).

Israel Shouts "Oh No!"

We will look more at that next week.