

Amos

The Book of

Session Two:
January 11, 2005

Amos 1:1-2—The Untamed Message and God

❖The Text (NRSV)

^{1:1}*The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.*

²*And he said:*

*The LORD roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.*

❖What's going on here?

-v.1—The first verse of the book introduces the prophet Amos and sets his career and message in a particular context. We are given precious little information *about* Amos, but here we are told he was “among the shepherds of Tekoa.” The Hebrew vocabulary suggests that he was a *breeder* of sheep—probably more than just a hired hand. More significant is the second part of that introduction, the mention of the Judean village of Tekoa. Amos came from a small town in the *southern* kingdom and yet announced a message to the whole nation of Israel, the *northern* kingdom. (This probably not only made him a very popular guy in Israel, but also must have shocked his hearers in northern cities.)

The mention of the two kings and “the earthquake” (which was apparently so significant that it was remembered even after Judah returned from exile in the 520s BC; see Zech. 14:5) sets Amos’ career in a relatively short period of time, maybe only a year, around 762 BC. That time-frame is especially significant given the often dark tone of Amos’ message, because it places that message in the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel, one of the most peaceful

and prosperous times in the northern kingdom’s history (see a fuller discussion in Session One, “Historical and Social Context”). But as the rest of the book will show, that prosperity came with a hefty price tag—the corruption of courts, the trampling of the poor by an indifferent wealthy upper crust, and the forgetting of the unique identity Israel was called to have as the people of YHWH. It was all of these things that led Amos to speak such harsh words of judgment in the name of YHWH. In spite of their current prosperity, Amos announced, God would not allow injustice to stand, nor could Israel hide behind its status as the chosen people of God. And coming as it did during this prosperous age in Israel, the message of this backwoods shepherd from Judah was doubly shocking.

-v.2—This brief image of God’s voice roaring like a lion’s stands over the rest of the whole book. The image of a lion, and more specifically of Israel’s God as a lion, comes back throughout the book (see esp. 3:4, 3:8, and 3:12) and suggests an image of YHWH as both fierce and free. Even more significant about this verse is how it echoes several other passages in the prophets (see especially Joel 3:16, but also Jer. 25:30 and Is. 66:6); the image of YHWH roaring, specifically from Jerusalem/Zion, seems to have been a relatively common one, and in all of the above passages, is used in contexts where YHWH is wreaking judgment on the nations. Whether Amos is quoting something else intentionally or just drawing on a tradition he’s aware of, the verse sets the tone and tips the hearers/readers off that we should expect God to roar against the nations (which is just what comes next in 1:3-2:16).

Some scholars think the passage came from a battle hymn of some kind and came out of the school of thought that said Israel was always right and would *always* triumph over their enemies because God was on their side. Amos seems to want us to think in

Connections: Not Safe, But Good

Amos plays with the image of God as a roaring lion, and he will use it to threaten destruction and judgment on an unjust Israel. In fact, there are very few promises of hope in the whole book of Amos. But for Amos, the harsh words of his message are more than just bad news. They are the words of a God who is not bitter and vindictive but rather passionate about justice and compassionate on those who are stepped on by the powerful (who should be *protecting* and *providing* for weak and poor according to the Torah). Amos' image of YHWH-as-lion is in some ways similar to C.S. Lewis' image of the allegorical lion Aslan (who stands in for Christ in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*). Here is how Lewis has the Beaver family describe the Lion to two girls visiting the land of Narnia over which Aslan rules:

"Aslan is a lion—the lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? **'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'**"

For Amos, as for Lewis, the God of Israel is good, but not safe.

-Are there ways that we 'tame' God or turn God into our lucky charm? What are they? Why do we do it? What do we lose by thinking of our faith in God as a magic spell that makes God do what we want or rubber stamps divine approval on our causes? What do we risk if we open ourselves to a God who is not tame?

-What are luxuries we have that might be insulating us from hearing a surprising word from God to us?

those terms—he wants to set up his audience to think that they are going to hear just another round of "bash-the-pagans" that will reinforce the beliefs they already have: that God is their rabbit's foot, their genie, who will come to their aid simply by calling on the right name. Amos will build on that set-up in the rest of chapter one and the first part of chapter two, but a twist is coming. For now, Amos starts by invoking the familiar image of God as a roaring lion, although he is going to turn upside down the expectations of those who think they know what all the roaring is about.

Amos 1:3-2:5—The Set-Up: God and the Nations

❖The Text (NRSV)

³Thus 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.

⁴So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. ⁵I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kir, says the LORD.

⁶Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they carried into exile entire communities, to hand them over to Edom.

⁷So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, fire that shall devour its strongholds. ⁸I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and the one 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.

⁹Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they delivered entire communities over to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of kinship.

¹⁰So I will send a fire on the wall of Tyre, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

¹¹*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; he maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever.*

¹²*So I will send a fire on Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.*

¹³*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 in order to enlarge their territory.*

¹⁴*So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah, fire that shall devour its strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a storm on the day of the whirlwind; ¹⁵then their king shall go into exile, he and his officials together, says the LORD.*

^{2:1}*Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom.*

²*So I will send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; ³I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its officials with him, says the LORD.*

⁴*Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked.*

⁵*So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.*

❖ What's going on here?

-v.1:3-2:5—With all the people, place names, and events named in the rest of chapter one and the beginning of chapter two, this may seem like too much to cover in one fell swoop. But this whole passage hangs together with a certain logic and form as Amos indicts all of Israel's neighbors and threatens—or rather, baldly declares—YHWH's judgment on them for their sins. But in order to get

at the main ideas woven throughout these oracles to the nations, it is worth looking at how Amos uses a repeating formula with each nation to get there. Each oracle contains several basic components:

-introductory formula: *“Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of (capital city)/place standing in for a whole nation) and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...”* This introduces each oracle and the nation in Amos' sights. The number formula with three and four seems to be a kind of figure of speech (see Prov. 6:16 and Job 5:19, for similar examples using six and seven); the gist seems to be that each nation has committed an indeterminate number of offenses, but now God will not let those go unaddressed. The last half of the formula, *“...I will not revoke...”* is our translators' best attempt at clarifying vague Hebrew, which more literally reads, “I will not cause it to return.” The question, of course, is what the “it” refers to, and so the NRSV translators have supplied “punishment.” While this seems to be the thrust of the phrase, one almost wonders if Amos intentionally left it ambiguous to hint back at the “roaring” of 1:2, as if to say, “The LORD is roaring from Jerusalem, and for all the continued sins of each nation, will no longer hold his tongue—the roar of judgment will be unleashed.”

-cause for judgment: *“...because they have...”* This is a little more straightforward; here, Amos, speaking in the place of God, gives specific reasons for judgment—actions that have at last provoked God's response. It is worth noting here that the kinds of “causes” named in these verses: YHWH, the God of Israel, accuses the nations of war crimes and atrocities they have committed against each other, *but not necessarily against Israel itself.* God condemns the brutality of nations in war (desecrating the dead, taking whole peoples into exile, cruelty to non-combatants, violating treaties, etc.), and Amos seems to assume that the nations can and should know that

these are wrong. There is some implicit standard to which all nations are accountable, even if they do not have the special law on which Israel would pride itself.

God's response: "...so I will send a fire on..." YHWH spells out the divine action to stop the nations' senseless violence. The place names in these verses are cities or regions in each country being addressed. Generally, God's punitive action is directed at the leaders of each nation—a king or prince is named as the final recipient of judgment. This focuses blame on those primarily responsible, but it also indicts each nation as a whole. These response sections tend to have common phrases and features: judgment depicted as fire, language of "cutting off" and of exile, destruction of defenses and fortresses, and often a concluding statement identifying the divine speaker—"Thus says the LORD."

Given this repeated form, the collection of oracles reveals a coherence as God announces judgment on the brutality of the nations one by one. Several important ideas emerge out of that overarching structure, too. First of all, Amos asserts that God—or more precisely *YHWH*, with whom Israel enjoys a special covenant relationship—cares about the life of other nations, even apart from how they relate to Israel. That also means that God seems to presume some basic "givens" of human life and morality—there is an expectation that cruelty to expecting mothers for the sake of expanding borders is universally, *absolutely*, an offense against God. This also means that God is not bound to take sides with one nation against another—YHWH condemns Edom in 1:11-12 but also condemns Moab for atrocities against Edom in 2:1-3. Amos presents the God of Israel as committed to uncovering brutality *everywhere* and bringing injustice and inhumanity *anywhere* to an end.

The last in the chain of nation oracles thus far is Judah (2:4-5), and here the pattern changes. First of all, we should reiterate that Amos is *from* Judah—he is including his own home country among those against whom God roars. Amos is so committed to announcing God's call for true justice and righteousness that he is even willing to name the sins of his own people. The regular formula Amos has been using varies here, too (this actually leads some scholars to think that this oracle is a later insertion to the book to make Amos relevant to the southern kingdom—it's a possibility, but it functions so well here to help turn the direction of Amos' speech that we can treat it as part of the original).

The charges brought up against Judah are put in terms of failure to keep God's law, rather than naming a specific act of atrocity or violence. In some sense that makes it a more generic oracle, since it doesn't point to a particular act, but in another sense, this charge of abandoning God's law is one that can uniquely be given to Judah and Israel, who both hold in their history a common tradition of having God's special law, the Torah. This is an offense with which no other nations can be charged, even if they can be expected to have some sense of humane treatment of other peoples.

The rhetorical effect of condemning Judah along with the neighbor nations is chilling—the same God who "roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem" now turns to roar against Judah and to "devour the strongholds of Jerusalem" itself. Just as God would not look the other way in the face of the nations' sins, so God will not wink at the sins of Judah. As the second chapter unfolds, it now becomes clear that Amos has been building toward something, and all of a sudden, the strong declarations of YHWH are beginning to hit a little close to home. And all of a sudden, it dawns on Amos' first hearers in Israel that the prophet is not done with his speech....

Connections: “...The Whole World In His Hands...”

- The old, familiar song from Sunday School reminds us that the entire world is in God’s hands. Amos, too, wants to be clear that God is concerned for all peoples, not just those with claims (however valid) of special status. What might this mean for how we view other nations and the political scene today? Can any country, Christian or otherwise, claim to be on the side of God or name other countries as God’s enemies?
- What might Amos’ oracles against the nations say about how we deal with both the clear human rights violations in Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the horrors of Abu Ghraib at the hands of U.S. soldiers?
- Do you think God accomplishes divine purposes *through* the actions of nations? What leads you to your answer? If so, are we always (or sometimes— or ever) able to nail down what those purposes are?

Amos 2:6-16—The Twist: God and Israel

❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

⁶Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals-- ⁷they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; ⁸they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

⁹Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of cedars, and who was as strong as oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath. ¹⁰Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. ¹¹And I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?

says the LORD. ¹²But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy."

¹³So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves. ¹⁴Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives; ¹⁵those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives; ¹⁶and those who are stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the LORD.

❖ **What’s going on here?**

Up to this point, Amos had been attacking and condemning *other* nations for their sins, and chances are that his message wasn’t too controversial thus far. He has strung his hearers along to expect judgment on all those ‘evil’ countries *out there* somewhere and to hear about how Israel will triumph over them. First, he had opened with the excerpt of the battle hymn, and he had followed it with a long list of the sins of each of Israel’s neighbors—and an accompanying list of how God was going to redress those sins. One might have expected a more politically savvy prophet to announce that God was supporting King Jeroboam’s plans for expansion. But now Amos pulls the rug out from under his audience by turning his sights onto Israel itself. He names Israel as the enemy of God, thus completing the twist he started in the Judah oracle earlier.

The shock value of this final piece of the speech must have been incredible. First, Amos names the usual suspects with regard to the “bad guys” from Israel’s point of view—everything’s fine. Things get a little tense when he indicts Judah, but the bottom falls out when Amos names Israel in the same terms and with the same pattern as he had done with the rest of the nations.

The oracle against Israel in these verses follows much of the earlier pattern, but it is considerably developed. For one, the charges are more than single events in war-time. Amos attacks Israel's society for practicing debt-slavery ("selling the poor"), for general disregard for the poor in their midst, and then for broader violations of their identity as God's *holy* people. The image of the father and son "going into the same girl" suggests a disregard for sexual fidelity and a violation of family rules, but Amos compounds this image of sexual sin with economic and religious offenses as well—the "garments taken in pledge" as collateral from the poor were supposed to be returned to them each evening so that they would have something to wear. And setting these violations in "God's house" makes them doubly heinous for Amos. Amos is concerned for the whole tangle of Israel's sin—not only is its society as a whole caught up in its own self-indulgence, but the upper crust is financing it at the expense of others and baptizing their actions by doing them in holy places. Amos' picture of Israel's society, although painted in very broad brushstrokes, is unflattering to say the least.

By contrast, Amos breaks up his formula with a brief history of God's faithfulness and goodness to this people in 2:9-11. Amos draws on the Exodus traditions and the stories of the conquest of the promised land, suggesting that YHWH had always been good to Israel. He also sees the presence of reforming figures like prophets and nazirites (people who took vows and were seen as specially consecrated to God) as further evidence of God's abiding goodness. This rehearsal of salvation history will become a recurring theme for Amos, and he gets a lot of mileage out of it. Here, by invoking those stories, Amos (1) asserts that God is not asking them to be or do anything that they have not always been called to be and do, (2) highlights the contrast between YHWH's unfailing faithfulness and Israel's turning away, and (3) helps us get a fuller sense of who he thinks God is. That is,

with all the words of judgment in chs. 1-2, one could easily assume that Amos believes God to be a rigid rule-maker or vindictive vigilante, punishing left and right. But Amos refuses to let God be made into such a flat character—rather the God of Israel, although provoked to action against injustice now, is the same God who has always acted mercifully and graciously toward Israel.

-Connections: Taking a Close Look at—Ourselves

-We may tend to want to define "sin" in narrow categories—as *only* private violations of moral rules, as limited to social structures and public acts, or in terms of wrong religious practice. Amos seems to insist on recognizing *all* the ways we turn from God's will for us for the sin they are, even though he will highlight the social aspects throughout the book. What would you say "sin" is? What parts of "sin" are we uncomfortable with naming? Is it important to name "sin" as sin—why or why not? Once we've named it, where do we go from there?

-Maybe this is obvious, but how might people with less income be at a disadvantage from others with more? Is this *always* a question of justice and injustice? How does an individual's responsibility for his/her own living mesh with a community's responsibility to care for all its members?

-Imagine an American political pundit giving a speech about the "Axis of Evil," those nations identified by President Bush as committed to "terror" and opposed to "freedom." Imagine that first, nations like North Korea, Iraq, and Iran are named. How might the audience's reaction change when France, Germany, and Britain are named as part of the "axis of evil"? How about if the speaker says that *Canada* is in it as well? What if the speech concluded by naming the United States as part of the "axis of evil" in even harsher language? How might this be like Amos' address to Israel in 1:3-2:16?