

Amos

The Book of

Session Seven:
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Amos 6:8-11—Pride Comes Before A Fall

❖The Text (NRSV)

*⁸The Lord GOD has sworn by himself
(says the LORD, the God of hosts):*

*I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.*

⁹If ten people remain in one house, they shall die. ¹⁰And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, "Is anyone else with you?" the answer will come, "No." Then the relative shall say, "Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD."

*¹¹See, the LORD commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.*

❖What's going on here?

-v.8—Building on the crescendo of indictment and judgment in 6:1-7, this verse gives us a brief summary of God's loud *No* to Israel's society and ways. The idea of God swearing "by himself" makes the word of judgment irreversible in Amos' eyes. The force of the image is that when YHWH makes an oath, there is nothing greater to swear by (like the sun, or the moon, or some other deity), and so must swear by his own being. But even more than that, this verse again emphasizes that when the judgment comes, it will not be a cosmic accident or because Israel's God has failed. Rather, it will be because Israel's God has triumphed in the cause of justice—even if that means taking on Israel as the enemy of God.

The judgment against Israel's (here in 6:8 "Jacob" stands for the nation of Israel) *pride* is important, too. 6:2-3 had exposed the arrogance of the people in the power centers of Israel and Judah, and at the end of this chapter, the same will be said again. Part of the divine verdict is against the people's trust in their own

power and strength, in whatever form these came—expanded borders, religious power, wealth and luxury, or walled cities. So YHWH declares war against Israel's pride, embodied for Amos in Israel's walled cities and fortresses, or "strongholds" (see also especially 3:9-11).

-v.9-10—Amos gives us another verbal sketch of what life will be like when the exile comes on Israel. But for most contemporary readers, it is a sketch that is missing a lot of important details. The scene is rather vague and cryptic read after some twenty-eight centuries, but it is much more likely that the scenario made sense for Amos' hearers. This is one of those places where we can only do our best to reconstruct the situation that Amos has in mind and try to figure out what it meant for him. Here's one attempt to make sense of the scene.

Verse 9 envisions that the coming judgment (presumably in the form of a foreign nation that will attack and conquer Israel—see also 6:14 where this is fleshed out) will be utterly devastating. Amos envisions that coming act of God will be so ruinous that entire households will be wiped out. It is within this setting of widespread destruction that the action of 6:10 happens. Here we get a sense that the description of a whole household being killed may not be literally in store of *everyone* in Israel, but rather *typical* of what will happen.

The speakers in 6:10 are survivors left to pick up the pieces of the foreign onslaught. The image of "burning the dead" is confusing, since we don't have evidence of funeral pyres as acceptable practice for the dead in Israel. (This may just be one of those places we have to admit we don't have access to the whole picture Amos is describing.) Whatever is going on, these people almost seem to be emerging out of the rubble in the immediate wake of the invading enemies and seeing how much damage has been done. Just as the reply from "the innermost parts of the

house” comes, the first voice cuts it off: “Hush! We must not mention the name of the LORD.” The sense *seems* to be that the interrupted person might have made some remark of mourning that invoked God (maybe something like our “God rest their souls,” or “God have mercy on them”). But the first voice recognizes that it is their own God YHWH who has brought on the destruction. Or it may be that in the aftermath of the exile, this speaker realizes that their pious-sounding religious language (exposed as hypocrisy in chapter 5) had only been taking God’s name in vain and now realizes that God will not answer their empty words. In any case, Amos paints a scarily realistic picture of life in the wake of the coming exile. One can only imagine how jarring this description was for Amos’ first audience as it made the announcement of the death of the nation real and vivid. And one can only speculate as to whether any of those who were “not grieved over the ruin of Joseph” in 6:6 were moved to tears and then to a new way of life after hearing it.

-v.11—Again, Amos gives a summary statement emphasizing that the coming catastrophes will be brought on by Israel’s sovereign God. And again, Amos employs a snapshot image to suggest that this judgment will be complete—it will affect the “great house” and the “little house” alike. The *whole* nation will feel the effects of what God is bringing, even those who had previously lounged in luxury in their homes, allowing themselves to turn a deaf ear to the needs of others (see esp. 6:1-7). This seems to echo the language of 3:13-15, where God’s judgment was invoked against the “houses” of the Israelites—both their actual dwellings (especially for those who had *summer* and *winter* homes) and their places of worship (remember that Bethel means “house of God”).

But this passage also opens up the possibility of judgment that will affect the poor, too—or at least those whose houses are “little” by comparison. This is one of the challenges of making sense of a

catastrophic event like exile, which surely had terrible, sweeping effects on the whole nation, those who were directly responsible for acts of injustice, those who were relatively uninvolved, and even those who were victims of the systems in Israel’s society. There was for much of the ancient world a much stronger sense of community identity, though, in contrast to contemporary America’s almost defiant individualism. For Israel, by and large, this meant that an event like the exile was first understood as an indictment on the nation as a corporate body for its practice of injustice, and only secondarily aimed at naming specific names as targets. For Amos, the concern is that Israel has allowed itself as a people to become dominated by the arrogant indifference of a wealthy few and thereby forgotten its call to be the unique people of God. The *whole* society, then, is complicit in the ways the nation has forgotten YHWH’s ways of mercy and justice toward neighbor.

Amos 6:12-14—The Tragedy of the Absurd

❖The Text (NRSV)

¹²Do horses run on rocks?

Does one plow the sea with oxen?

*But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood--*

¹³you who rejoice in Lo-debar,

*who say, "Have we not by our own strength taken Karnaim
for ourselves?"*

¹⁴Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation, O house of Israel,

*says the LORD, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.*

❖What’s going on here?

-v.12—Just as in 3:3-8, Amos uses rhetorical questions whose answers are already expected. We’re not supposed to deliberate or contemplate these questions—their answers are so obviously “No” that they can stand alone as questions. The translation of the first question in the NRSV perhaps doesn’t seem so clear—other translators

have suggested that the image is closer to horses trotting up the vertical face of a cliff. In any case, the second question makes it clear that we have entered the realm of the absurd—obviously one does not plow the sea at all, much less with oxen.

All right, so we've got rhetorical questions—what's the rhetorical point? (*Yes, that was a rhetorical question itself.*) In chapter three, there was a cause-and-effect flow to the questions. Amos gave examples of how causes produce their intended effects in defense of his prophetic ministry, concluding that God had caused him to be a prophet and so he could do no other but to prophesy. Here, the conclusion of the rhetorical questions comes in the second half of 6:12. The idea we get from the questions is that even the world of nature does not violate God's design and intent in absurd ways—horses don't run on cliffs, oxen can't walk on water. Of course these things do not happen; it would be absurd to think so. But in Israel, the absurd *is* happening—people have turned to injustice and unrighteousness. Or better yet, as Amos puts it, they have absurdly turned two *good* things, both part of God's design and intent for Israel, into something poisonous and bitter.

The essential message is the same one Amos has been hammering home for six chapters now, but the language here is especially powerful. For Amos, justice and righteousness are to be the natural ways of the people of God—these are to be a part of their essential character. Even if the rest of the world did not find these to come easily, Israel was supposed to be set apart by its way of living in together—with concern for the defenseless and needy in their midst and a passion for upholding justice in their communities. This was in their national and spiritual DNA, as it were, Amos insists. But the tragedy is that Israel has forgotten who it is and has as a result acted in ways that are *unnatural* to what God has called it to be. Amos' point is that it should be *obvious* to the people that their ways of living are sadly “out of whack” with the gracious will and design of God.

-v.13-14—These two verses wouldn't seem so confusing except for all the names. The gist of each is pretty simple otherwise: in 6:13, Amos is describing the “you” of the previous verse, identifying what groups he had in mind as “turning justice into poison.” The problem is with the words “Lo-debar,” and “Karnaim,” both of which probably refer to place-names (cities) that Amos is mocking. The people are becoming overly confident in their own strength and power, demonstrated by how they have conquered these towns (this is the force of the phrase, “Have we not by our own strength...?”). But Amos is compelled to deflate their arrogance and mocks the places the people have named among their conquests. So the town of “Debir,” is mocked as “Lo-debar,” literally “No-thing.” The point is to say that what the people think is a sign of their strength is really nothing. The people were to have trusted YHWH as their strength, not themselves or their military power. This is the sense of the second place-name, “Karnaim,” whose name literally means “horns,” which were a symbol of strength in the ancient Near East. Amos is exposing how the people have forgotten their old sense of faithfulness to the character of YHWH and their trust in YHWH as their strength. And as a result of giving up on those things, they have gotten only empty things and the illusion of strength.

Verse 14 makes explicit what Amos has been hinting at for a long time now—God's response to the people's arrogance, apathy, and indifference will be exile. A foreign nation will be allowed to conquer Israel from its northernmost border to its southernmost (this is the idea behind the place names “Lebo-hamath” and the “Wadi Arabah,” which are on the northern and southern edges of Israel's territory). There is again the hint that God is now giving the people exactly what they have asked for—they want to pretend they have military strength and can conquer their enemies alone? Then God will let them feel what it is like to have to *only* their weapons

to trust, even though that will mean the demise of the nation. God will have to act in a wholly new way to relate to Israel now.

Connections: Meant to Live

-Amos seems to assume that there are certain ways of living that God desires for us. There seems to be a sense for him that by forgetting justice and righteousness Israel was failing to live out that divine design and purpose. What things might Amos say we are called to do and be as we try to live within God's will? Aside from the popular (if rather simplistic) "Purpose-Driven" craze in many churches, how might we talk about God's purpose for us as the people of God?

-What are the things we put our trust in as a nation? As individuals? How do you know it—what tells you what you trust in? What might Amos say to us on both those fronts?

Amos 7:1-9—Three Visions

❖ The Text (NRSV)

^{7:1}*This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). ²When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,*

"O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small!"

³*The LORD relented concerning this;*

"It shall not be," said the LORD.

⁴*This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. ⁵Then I said,*

"O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small!"

⁶*The LORD relented concerning this;*

"This also shall not be," said the Lord GOD.

⁷*This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,*

"See, I am setting a plumb line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by;

⁹*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."

❖ What's going on here?

Together with 8:1-3, these verses comprise a set of four visions that Amos reports, all with the same basic form and introduction. Here in chapter 7, we have three visions placed right next to each other; this is another one of those places where the passage progresses and comes to a climax at the end through the use of this repeated form (see also chapters 1-2, 3:3-8, as other examples). Several things need to be said about the visions as a unit before looking at the particulars of each section.

First of all, these visions may well have been the beginning of Amos' call to prophetic ministry; many of the other books of prophets record visions, which often are also their calls to public ministry (Jeremiah 1 is a good example, as is Isaiah 6). The visions are, at least for the prophets, a form of evidence of their call—they testify that the message the prophets bring is not their own but comes from God. Amos may be giving us his own initial experience of God's message here in part to defend his annunciation of that message. This gets at the same question going on in chapter 3—by what right does Amos speak this harsh word against Israel (and specifically against Israel's legitimate religious and political authorities)? Amos' answer back then and here in this chapter is the same: his words have come from God.

Another important point for this whole section is the continuing sense of both Amos' and YHWH's patience and love for Israel, even in its waywardness. We saw in chapter 5 how both Amos and God grieved at the coming death of Israel, and here Amos is put in the role of intercessor, pleading with God for mercy. This is another strong reminder that Amos does not delight in his task of bringing bad news to Israel, nor is he so vindictive and petty as to want to see the nation be destroyed.

But that is *not* to say that YHWH is petty or vindictive, either. This passage, as well as the chain of events in 4:6-11, suggests a patient God who has tried all sorts of ways to get the nation to return to its identity as the just and merciful people of a just and merciful God. Rather, God relents, or "repents," of the threatened judgment in these first two visions (7:1-3, 4-6) and is willing to hold back. It is also worth noting that even in the third vision when judgment is not withheld, YHWH still calls Israel "*my* people." There is almost a sense of wistfulness, of divine sorrow at having to bring about Israel's destruction, and yet an even stronger sense of faithfulness in the midst of that. Despite the coming judgment, these are still *God's* people—even as the nation dies God claims Israel, leaving us to wonder, even if it is *only* wonder for now, if God has something in mind for this people on the other side of death and exile.

This section hangs together as we make sense of the repeated forms it uses. And actually, the first two visions in 7:1-6 share an almost identical form, while the second two, 7:7-9 and 8:1-3, share their own form. For the first two, the pattern is obvious: a statement of what YHWH showed Amos (in both cases, an image of a coming judgment on Israel) is followed by Amos' plea for God's *forgiveness*. This assumes that Amos understands the threats not to be random disasters but to be the consequences of the nation's actions. In these first two visions, God's reply is that the displayed judgment will not come—God relents.

As for the second two visions (the first of which is here in 7:7-9), the beginning is the same: an announcement of something shown to Amos by God. But here the images are more metaphorical—not a cloud of locusts or rain of fire, but symbolic objects like a plumb line and a basket of fruit. This leads God to explain the meaning of these images, and in both cases it is an announcement of God's judgment over Israel. There is *no* plea from Amos in these two visions, and there is no relenting from God, either. At this point, the coming action of God is understood to be unrelenting—God *will* act to undo the nation's unjust ways.

-v.1-3—Some particulars to note about this vision: locusts were nasty in general for an agricultural society, devouring whole crops. But by Amos' time there is already a tradition of God using insects as instruments of divine judgment, making this vision even more potent (one remembers gnats and flies in the plagues of Egypt in Exodus; the prophet Joel also describes a plague of locusts on Israel in the first two chapters of his book). The mention of timing is significant, too—the "latter growth" was the last time crops would grow until the dry summer season was over. If these crops were devoured, the people would have no food and no hope for another crop for a year. The "king's mowings" is probably a reference to a royal levy taking the first harvest of the crop to pay for and feed armies and other costs. One last thing worth mentioning in these verses is Amos' plea to God in 7:2 (identical in 7:5, also). It is interesting to note what the grounds for Amos' appeal to YHWH are *not*. Amos does *not* uphold Israel's election as the "chosen people of God" as a reason for God's relenting, nor does Amos appeal back to the history of God's saving acts in the past. Both of those are further grounds for judgment in Amos' mind, since the people have been chosen by God *for* something—to be a new kind of people—and their own history only shows how God has been faithful when Israel has been unfaithful in the past. No, for Amos, the grounds for God to relent from judgment

lies in Israel's weakness. Amos assumes that God has a special concern for those who are weak and small. And ironically, this "smallness" of Israel is exactly what Amos had been saying by way of critique at the end of chapter six. There, Amos had been exposing Israel's claims to strength and self-sufficiency as illusion and effectively telling the nation that it was small and weak apart from the strength of God. And now, Amos uses that very same idea as a reason for God to relent from judgment—Israel is not self-sufficient or strong at all, but depends wholly on the God who first made it. It seems that on those grounds, God did indeed relent.

-v.4-6—This vision has the same form as 7:1-3 and its conclusion is virtually the same as in the first vision. Here the only difference is the "shower of fire" from God in place of the "locusts." Again, there is the tradition within the Old Testament that fire from heaven implies God's own judgment—not a freak accident or random happening. Yet again, Amos' cry to God based on Israel's own weakness proves effective, although that is not to say that there is divine bargaining going on. There is a sense in which God shows Amos this judgment as a possibility, but always reserves the right to be merciful (this is the point of the whole narrative of the book of Jonah, too). So it is not that Amos convinces a mean and nasty God to be nice but that the character of God is always one that is open to mercy.

-v.7-9—Here the form of the vision changes and there is not the same kind of conversation between Amos and YHWH. The vision itself functions differently—it is not an image of an potential but realistic *event* but a symbolic object. The image of a plumb line is not meant to suggest that God will literally dangle a gigantic lead weight over the skies of Palestine but rather refuses to ignore the ways that Israel has become bent and crooked—that is, not plumb. This also changes the image of judgment, too, and makes it clear that God is not sending a capricious and vindictive punishment on Israel so much as setting things right that have gone wrong. A wall that is not plumb, although an interesting tourist attraction, cannot support the weight it needs to—it cannot be what it was designed to be. And so, in order to be set right, a crooked wall needs to be torn down in order to be rebuilt to be faithful, true, and square. This is the kind of image suggested for God's treatment of Israel. YHWH has relented in the past, according to Amos, but Israel is now so bent and turn in on itself that patch-up jobs will not do any longer. Israel must be torn down if something new is to be built, and this is exactly what Amos sees God doing in Israel, even if he doesn't have a clue as to what God might build (or even yet *if* God might build) again in its place. The images of what the "plumb line" will look like in the real life of the nation are familiar—destruction of