

Prophecies of Judgment against Syria and Philistia

Amos 1:1-8

Amos 1:1-2 - *"The words of Amos, who was among the sheep breeders of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king 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 mourn, and the top of Carmel withers."

Background Notes

The prophet Amos lived and prophesied in the 8th century BC. The Kingdom of Israel that had been united under King Saul, King David, and King Solomon had split into the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah. At the time of Amos' ministry, King Uzziah was reigning over the southern kingdom of Judah, and King Jeroboam II was reigning over the northern kingdom of Israel (v1).

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, recounted the earthquake mentioned in verse 1. Archaeological studies have shown that this earthquake occurred in about 760 BC. The prophet Zechariah, another minor prophet, mentioned this same earthquake in Zechariah 14:5 - *"Yes, you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah."* This devastating earthquake caused the death and flight of many people. So the date of Amos' prophecy was around 760 BC.

Amos was from Tekoa (v1). Tekoa was a village in the southern kingdom of Judah, not far from Bethlehem. However, Amos ministered primarily to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos was like a "foreign missionary" - he was from the nation of Judah in the south but he traveled north to the kingdom of Israel to preach and prophesy.

Amos preached out against the social injustice that was rampant in the northern kingdom of Israel. Wealthy and prosperous people were taking advantage of the poor and disadvantaged. Amos spoke out against this social injustice. Thus Amos is known as the prophet of social justice.

There was material prosperity in Israel - but the people were morally and spiritually bankrupt. The situation was similar to our own nation today, so Amos certainly has application for us today. Our nation is certainly guilty of social injustice. It needs to hear the word of the Lord as it was spoken through Amos. And as individual believers, we too need to be reminded of God's anger at social injustice – because some of us may also be guilty of the sin of social injustice.

In verse 2 the Lord was pictured as a roaring lion – a lion that has been aroused: *“The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem.”* You don’t play around with a roaring lion! The Lord was angry! His judgment was about to fall on Israel. The Lord was ready to move out in judgment from His dwelling place in Jerusalem. (Remember, the Temple was in Jerusalem.) God’s roar of warning was heard all the way from the shepherd’s fields in the south to the top of Mt. Carmel in the north (v2).

Rather than zeroing in immediately on the sins of the northern kingdom, in chapter 1 and the first half of Amos 2 he first prophesied against the sins of the foreign nations surrounding Israel. Why did he do this?

For one thing, these nations were guilty. God holds nations accountable for their sins, both then and today. These prophecies against the nations surrounding Israel are sometimes called Amos’s “circle of fire.” If you plot those nations and their capitals on a map, you will find that God was circling in on Israel with these prophecies of judgment. He was getting “closer to home” with each surrounding nation He mentioned. The noose was tightening around Israel.

Our doctrinal points are from the first two prophecies, against Syria and Philistia.

Doctrinal Points

1. God will judge acts of atrocity.

Amos 1:3-5 - *Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with implements of iron. ⁴ But I will send a fire into the house of Hazael that shall devour the palaces of Ben-Hadad. ⁵ I will also break the gate bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitant from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth Eden. The people of Syria shall go captive to Kir,” says the Lord.*

The expression *“for three transgressions, and for four”* used by Amos in these prophecies of judgment does not mean that these nations only committed three or four sins. No! It’s a figurative expression, meaning, “for repeated and innumerable sins.” The measure of iniquity was full and judgment must come. Damascus had gone too far and tipped the scale of God’s judgment. And there is no escaping God’s judgment.

Damascus, of course, was (and still is) the capital of Syria. *Hazael* and *Ben-Hadad* (v4) were kings of Syria, and the *Valley of Aven* and *Beth Eden* (v5) were regions in Syria. By the way, don’t confuse “Syria” with “Assyria.” Syria was the nation northeast of Israel, as it is today. Assyria was the world empire at that time. Its capital, Nineveh, was located on the Tigris River, where Iraq and Iran come together today.

The Syrians would be judged because they *“threshed Gilead with implements of iron”* (v3). What does that mean? It means that they tortured the captive people of Gilead by literally dragging heavy threshing sledges over them. Threshing sledges were studded with iron teeth or knives for threshing grain, so obviously the bodies of their victims were horribly mangled when the threshing sledges were used in this atrocious way. This was torture – this was a horrible atrocity - and this sin would be judged.

And Syria was judged for her sins. About 30 years later in 732 BC, the Assyrians under Tiglath-Pileser set fire to Damascus and took the Syrians captive. The account of this conquest is in 2 Kings 16:9 - *“So the king of Assyria heeded him; for the king of Assyria went up against Damascus and took it, carried its people captive to Kir, and killed Rezin.”*

God judges acts of atrocity - then and today. If God were to say to America today, *“for three transgressions, and for four,”* what one particular sin do you think He would mention? I have little doubt that He would call for judgment on this nation for horrible atrocities that have been committed against millions of unborn children. God will judge acts of atrocity.

2. God will judge the deportation of people.

Amos 1:6-8 - *Thus says the Lord: “For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they took captive the whole captivity to deliver them up to Edom. ⁷ But I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, which shall devour its palaces. ⁸ I will cut off the inhabitant 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.*

Philistia was the next foreign nation that was declared to be under judgment. Four of the leading cities of the Philistines were mentioned in verses 7-8: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron. Which one was not mentioned? Gath. Gath, Goliath’s town, was probably not mentioned because King Uzziah of Judah had already destroyed it. (See 2 Chronicles 26.) The particular sin of the Philistines, as mentioned here, was the wholesale deportation of Jews to Edom to be sold as slaves. Verse 6: *“Because they took captive the whole captivity to deliver them up to Edom.”*

It’s hard to say exactly which invasion by the Philistines was in view here, but this inhumane trafficking of captives was very wrong, and God would judge the Philistines because of it.

God’s judgment on Philistia came first at the hands of the Assyrians, and then again later during the inter-Testamental period. The Philistines are no more.

God will judge nations that are involved in human trafficking, slavery and the deportation of peoples. Many examples could be given. The sins of Nazi Germany are only one example. Our own nation is not free of this sin. Think of our

treatment of Native Americans in the past (and even in the present). We don't like to think about this sin – but consider this: who really owns the land on which your own house sits?

God will judge the deportation of people.

Practical Application

God may call you to be an Amos!

Amos was a farmer. He was among the sheep breeders of Tekoa, and he farmed sycamore fruit. In Amos 7:14, he said, *“I was no prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet. I was a sheep breeder and a tender of sycamore fruit.”*

In other words, Amos was not a product of “the schools of the prophets” that were established in the land of Israel. The “schools of the prophets” were the Bible colleges or seminaries of Old Testament times. The beginnings of these schools went all the way back to the days of Samuel, and they were later developed further by the prophets Elijah and Elisha. So Amos was not a seminary graduate when God “called him into the ministry.” The point is that God called Amos straight out of “secular employment” to be a preacher and to speak out God’s judgment against the social injustices of his day.

Maybe God is calling you to be an Amos! But you might say, “No way! I can’t be a preacher like Amos because I haven’t been to seminary or Bible college.” We all need to learn the practical application from the book of Amos. God may call you to be an Amos, right out of your no-Bible-college background, and right out of the ordinary job you’re doing now.

In fact, we all should be like Amos. We all should speak out against the social injustices we see around us. But God may be calling **you** in some special way, to give more time and effort to exposing the sins of social injustice of our day. If you sense He’s calling you, don’t just sit there like a zombie! Get active in His service right where you are, and He will lead you to the area where He wants you to minister.

If God is calling you to this kind of ministry, realize that you won’t be popular. But God will bless you for taking the side of the poor. He will bless you for speaking out for the disadvantaged. And He will bless you for defending those who cannot defend themselves - **including the unborn.**

God may call **you** to be an Amos!