

## “The Lord Roars from Zion”

### *Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Amos (1)*

*Texts: Amos 1:1-2; Revelation 5:1-14*

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The Lord Roars from Zion,” “He has spoken against you the people of Israel,” “An adversary will bring you down,” “I will send you into exile,” “I will send a famine of the word upon the land,” and then “I will restore the fortunes of my people.” These are just some of the words of blessing and curse YHWH declares to his people through the Prophet Amos.

Whenever we take up the study of a new book of the Bible it is important to take the time to consider who wrote this book and when. We should also ask why the book was written, as well as identify the specific issues it addresses. Because the books of the Minor Prophets are God’s word, they speak powerfully to us today. But we are not the original audience. If we do not take the time to do ask and answer these questions, it becomes all too easy to use the ancient text as a springboard for any number of moralistic object lessons: “what does Amos teach us about how to be better people?” “Dare to be an Amos.” Or, we can turn his message into a political diatribe about the evils of wealth and materialism.

The latter is an especially strong temptation in the case of the Minor Prophets because they do speak truth to power. Yet unlike political figures seeking reform and change, these prophets speak God’s words to power in a particular redemptive-historical context, a context which we’ve spent the past few weeks working to establish. If we take up each of the books of the Minor Prophets without considering the background questions, “who?” “when?” and “why?” these books were written to the original audience, we risk falling into one of the previously mentioned misuses of the text, and then we likely miss the message these prophets bring to God’s people. We will briefly answer these questions and conduct a fly-over survey of the contents and issues raised in Amos’ prophecy.

Who was Amos? Like Elijah, Amos suddenly appears in Israel (the Northern Kingdom), during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 760 B.C. Jeroboam II is the twelfth king of Israel, taking the name of one of those from whom he descends, Jeroboam I. Jeroboam II’s reign is approximately 130 years after Jeroboam I, and nearly one hundred years after God sent Elijah to confront king Ahab and his successor, Ahaziah. Jeroboam II is likely the most successful of the kings of Israel. He defeated Israel’s nearest enemy (the Arameans—2 Kings 14:25-28) and extended his kingdom as far north as Damascus (in Syria). As a benefit of relative peace, Israel’s economy grew strong through international trade—making land owners wealthy, while their servants suffered terribly because of the demands of a greatly increasing harvest. The population of Israel had grown to more than 350,000, and archaeological evidence demonstrates significant olive oil and wine production during this time, even, perhaps horse breeding.<sup>1</sup>

Israel’s spiritual heath in this period does not match its economic prosperity. YHWH was still officially worshiped at Israel’s chief ancient shrines at Dan (in the north) and Bethel (to the south). But it was also likely that such worship was tied to the use of statues and/or images of golden calves representing YHWH (as instituted by Jeroboam I). This practice becomes the subject of much of the prophetic

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<sup>1</sup> Broshi, M, and Finkelstein, I, “The Population of Palestine in Iron Age II,” Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research, 287: 47–60.

activity in Israel, as YHWH sends forth his messengers to condemn all such idolatrous use of images throughout Israel and Judah. Those priests conducting services in Israel's holy places continued to renounce Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple. Israel's heart toward YHWH had grown increasingly cold and distant after the days of Elijah and Elisha. Many have come to believe their apostate form of Judaism is actually the true religion to be practiced by God's people.

Many of those still worshipping YHWH were going through the motions—doing so out of tradition (since the days of Jeroboam I we have done so), or superstition (if we don't worship YHWH, he'll get mad and punish us), or because they did not know their own Scriptures well enough to know what YHWH requires of them. Hypocrisy was also rampant throughout the land. Amos will expose how the people and their leaders claim to be faithful to YHWH's covenant, while their daily conduct demonstrates how little regard for the covenant actually remains in the land. There is a very important lesson for us here—it does not take long for faith to shrivel up and die, and that we continue to worship out of a sense of tradition and obligation (because we've always done it this way), but no longer motivated by a heart grieved by our sin and filled with a desire to know God through Christ's grace and mercy.

Amos is likely the first of the so-called Minor prophets to begin his prophetic ministry, although he is a contemporary of the more well-known prophet, Jonah, who begins his ministry about the same time or shortly after Amos. We know nothing of Amos's background except what he tells us in the opening verse of his prophecy and from what he tells us about himself in chapter 7:14-15, where we read, "*I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*"

Amos was a herdsman and dresser of Sycamore figs, which meant he probably raised sheep or cattle, and that he harvested, prepared, and then sold or traded figs to compliment his herding business. Amos also tells us that he is from Tekoa, which was a village twelve miles to the south of Jerusalem. Although sent by YHWH as a prophet to Israel, Amos was from Judah—from whom Israel had separated and was still at odds. Given his herding and fig dressing occupation, he may have traveled from Judah to parts north (in Israel), but his message is intended for the Northern Kingdom. Amos is careful to point out that he was not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, an indication that he was not from one of the schools (or guilds) of prophets then operating in Israel. In other words, Amos has a secular job, not a religious one.

Nevertheless, YHWH called Amos from his herding-harvesting business to be a prophet announcing the terms of YHWH's covenant lawsuit to Israel. We get a hint of the nature of Amos' prophetic calling in verse 1, when he speaks of things which "he saw" concerning Israel. Unlike Moses, to whom God "speaks as to a friend," prophets like Amos were called by YHWH to their prophetic office through dreams or visions. In fact, three times in his book (in 7:1-9, 8:1-3; 9:1-4) Amos tells his audience that he is proclaiming the words which YHWH has revealed to him in a vision or a dream—"this is what the Lord has shown me." Those things YHWH has shown him are the basis his proclamation to Israel.

Amos began preaching "two years before the earthquake," which likely means he finished preaching the oracles recorded in the book before the earthquake occurred which, based on recent geological study, rocked Israel and Jordan about 760 B.C.<sup>2</sup> The earthquake was significant enough that it was a well-known time marker and very familiar to those receiving Amos's prophetic oracles. It is also likely that

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<sup>2</sup> Steven A. Austin, Gordon W. Franz, and Eric G. Frost, "Amos's Earthquake: An Extraordinary Middle East Seismic Event of 750 B.C." *International Geology Review* 42 (2000) 657–671.

Amos' prophetic ministry was centered in and around the region of Samaria (in the heart of Israel) since Samaria or its citizens are mentioned five times. But it may be the case that Amos preached at Bethel (an important religious center in Israel's history) and that he encountered Samaritans while there.<sup>3</sup>

As prophet called by YHWH, it is important to consider that Amos does not suddenly show up out of the blue ranting and raving about what he thinks is wrong throughout Israel. He is not reactionary, a revolutionary or a political pundit. He often uses what commentators call a "messenger formula." "This is what YHWH says" indicating that the content of Amos' preaching has its origins in the heavenly court, and he is but one chosen by YHWH to bring the verdict to the disobedient people of God. Throughout his preaching he reminds the people that YHWH has "sworn on oath," which refers to the terms of the covenant YHWH established with Israel through Moses' mediation at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20) and then renewed with Israel on the plains of Moab before the people entered the promised land (Deuteronomy 28-34). Amos is a messenger from the heavenly court, reminding the people of YHWH's solemn pledge and oath. YHWH will bless his people when they obey him, but he will dispense the threatened curses if his people forsake him and turn to other gods.

Because of the nature of his office, Amos's task is, in part, to summon the people to hear what YHWH has to say to them. Four times (3:1; 4:1; 5:1 8:4) Amos announces "hear the word of the Lord," which indicates that he is a herald of the Lord, who has been given authority to summon the people to listen and hear what follows, namely the words of YHWH mediated through Amos' prophetic office. Although from Judah, Amos speaks to the people of Israel as God's people, not as a rebellious nation or an enemy of Judah. At the end of the day, we know very little about Amos the man. We know him primarily through the God-given words he proclaims to Israel.<sup>4</sup> God has sent him to call Israel to repentance.

Amos' prophecy is arranged along the lines of three main sections. The first two chapters of his prophecy serve as an introduction to the rest of the book—they provide the context and the setting. Chapters 3-6 are often described as "the words" section of the Book of Amos, while chapters 7-9 recounts the "visions" YHWH gave to Israel through the prophet.<sup>5</sup> Lord willing, we will spend several weeks in the Book of Amos. Today, we will be covering introductory matters and survey the contents of the book. In coming weeks we will focus on specific themes in Amos: (1) Israel's covenant with YHWH ensures that judgment begins in the house of the Lord; (2) God's judgment will come in the form of covenant curse—a famine of the word, and a terrible defeat by foreign nations; (3) Amos gives us a catalogue of Israel's sins—neglect of the poor during a time of national wealth, corruption in the courts and government, (4) He also introduces a number of eschatological issues including the meaning of the Day of the Lord, as well as a prophecy of the future restoration of Israel during the messianic age.

As for the contents of The Book of Amos, even a cursory reading reveals that YHWH is aware of the plight of his people, especially those who are going without the necessities of life at a time of national economic prosperity. Amos exposes the sin of those who exploit the poor, yet who have multiple houses and flaunt their wealth in the face of those barely getting by. In Amos 3:15, he declares YHWH's warning to such people indifferent to the plight of others. "*I will strike the winter house along with the*

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, WBC 31 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 284-285.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 285.

<sup>5</sup> Boda and McConville, eds., Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets, 5.

*summer house, and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end,' declares the LORD.*" The Lord is not condemning those who prosper and own multiple homes—a common royal practice throughout the ancient Middle East. A house in the mountains allowed escape from summer heat. A house on the plains was easy to heat and keep warm in the winter. What YHWH condemns is the hoarding of wealth as a supposed sign of his favor, while those who do so, did not care about the fate of those whom they have exploited to gain their wealth.

YHWH also speaks against those who shame the poor. In 6:4, YHWH warns those who live in comfort through the labor of those they mock, "*Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall.*" Such people have no limits. They consume to excess. They care nothing about good stewardship, but live in vulgar comfort. In 3:12 YHWH mocks such people. "*Thus says the LORD: 'As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.'*" What worries such people about YHWH's impending judgment is that they will lose their precious possessions—their "couches and beds."

Likewise in 4:1, YHWH warns "*hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!'*" Apparently there were cliques of wealthy women (the Real Housewives of Samaria) who spend their time gossiping and drinking wine—a supposed sign of their prosperity and cultural superiority. Finally in 6:6, the word from the Lord comes with righteous contempt for those in Israel indifferent to the suffering of others, people "*who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*" The ruin of Joseph refers to spiritual condition of the northern tribal lands (the ten tribes which compose Israel). Such people care about their wealth, their comfort, and their estates, but are completely indifferent to YHWH's covenant (its promises and its demands).

Many have taken these words as a sort of Marxist manifesto about the need for the distribution of wealth (grounded in the erroneous notion popularized by John Rawls, that justice is "fairness" and not conformity to an external standard—the law). Amos, rather, sees the acquiring of wealth without concern for the poor as yet another sign of how far Israel has fallen from her relationship with YHWH. When God blesses Israel with economic prosperity under Jeroboam II, wealthy merchants hoard YHWH's blessings, while exploiting those who have done the back-breaking work that made the wealth possible. Under the terms of the Sinai covenant, Israel is a holy theocracy. This is a unique political arrangement. No nation on earth today exists in a theocratic relationship to God. The conclusion some mistakenly draw—God demands a redistribution of wealth and that those who are successful are somehow to be ashamed—is wrong. This is not a divine manifesto requiring Marxist or socialist economics. Rather, YHWH's condemnation of the wealthy in Israel has to do with the command to love our neighbor in light of the fact the wealthy have not done so. Amos' words are about helping those in need, not ignoring their plight.

God calls many of his people to wealth and prosperous lives. They are free to enjoy their wealth and be thankful, not feel guilty or ashamed. But with wealth comes great responsibilities. Such people are able to hire and provide work for many. They exercise love for their neighbor by paying fair wages and being good bosses, who do not exploit those over whom they exercise economic power. After providing for their own families, they ought to be generous and willing to help those they can. They are able to fund important Christian causes—education, hospitals, relief, etc. But to turn Amos' words into Marxist screech and insist their wealth should be taken from them (which, by the way, is theft) in order to re-distribute it to others, only ends up making everyone poor. Resentment and class envy is not love of neighbor.

The champions of liberation theologies (of all stripes) who love this prophecy completely ignore the context in which YHWH is rebuking his covenant people Israel. They draw erroneous conclusions about wealth in general and contemporary economics in particular. There is no sin in being wealthy. There is much value in hard work. There is no sin in being poor. There is sin in being lazy. And it is clearly sin when the wealthy exploit the poor, hoard their wealth, and fail to love their neighbor. YHWH rebukes Israel because he had blessed them according to his covenant promise, but the poor are prevented from receiving YHWH's good gifts. YHWH loves the poor, and this is why YHWH rebukes Israel through Amos' prophetic office. This is a call for Christians to love their neighbor, not a call to embrace any particular political, economic, or social justice theory.

There are other important themes in Amos as well. Critical to Amos' message is the fact that YHWH is sovereign over all the nations of the earth—not just Israel. We see this when YHWH called a herdsman/fig harvester to be his prophet—a sovereign act of God, not a career change made by Amos. In Amos 1:3-2:3 YHWH proclaims that he is Lord over all the nations, including Damascus (the capital of the Arameans), he directs Syria (to the north) and Gaza (to the South), he is Lord of Israel's enemies (Tyre and Edom), he is Lord of Israel's enemies to the east (the Ammonites and Moab). He even is the Lord of Judah and Israel—even when they forsake him. We read in Amos 3:13, that YHWH is the Lord God, the Lord of hosts (that is, the Lord of heavenly armies). The kings of Israel trust in their recent victories in battle as a sign of the favor of the gods (YHWH and Baal)—having long forgotten that YHWH is their true defender according to his covenant promise. The people and kings of Israel have gone their own way. Yet, YHWH's purposes will not be thwarted, even if Israel chooses the way of destruction. Assyria will wipe Israel off the map, exile, and enslave its people in 722 B.C. less than a generation after Amos's prophetic ministry concludes. It is sheer folly to turn from YHWH's promise of protection. He is Lord of all.

It was YHWH's faithfulness to his covenant promises which brought Israel recent prosperity. Instead of giving thanks, the people slap each other on the back and take credit for their accomplishments. But this provokes the covenant curses. In Amos 1:2, YHWH speaks and the vegetation withers—he brings drought and disaster. As we will see in chapter 7, YHWH is sovereign even over the affairs of Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, who leads Israel in the worship of golden calves. YHWH removes kings and destroys their pagan worship sites, as in Amos 7:9, where we read, *“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.”* The choice for Israel is clear. YHWH is the sovereign and merciful covenant Lord. Return to him and seek his forgiveness, his protection, and his blessing. Or forsake him, and face the hosts of Heaven and the wrath of Israel's enemies when YHWH directs them to defeat and destroy the Northern Kingdom, before they, in turn, are destroyed by his hand of judgment.

Because YHWH is sovereign, he directs the course of human history, which is why another important theme in Amos's prophecy is the inevitable coming of the Day of the Lord. The “Day of the Lord” is YHWH coming in judgment. He comes in judgment at various times in Israel's history, but this “coming in judgment” will one day culminate in the final day of human history, when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. But Israel has now forsaken YHWH to the point that no one desires his approach, or fears his judgments. In Amos 5:18–20, YHWH warns Israel, *“Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?”* YHWH's judgment upon Israel is certain as the Day of the Lord will come. But this is not the end of the story.

Amos also foretells of a time when Israel will be restored. In 9:11-15, Amos indicates,

“in that day [the messianic age to come] I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the LORD who does this. “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the LORD your God.”

Those in Israel who heard Amos’ preaching likely took him to mean that after a time of severe judgment [the Day of the Lord] God would restore the two kingdoms (Israel and Judah) under a Davidic king. David’s fallen tent would be restored and prosperity and material blessing would return to both kingdoms.

But when the Apostles meet to discuss the role of faith and works at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), James appeals to this passage from Amos 9 as being fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the true Davidic king, whose fallen tent is rebuilt by countless Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus, greatly expanding God’s messianic kingdom. The true prosperity which Amos predicts is the not merely a fruitful land, but the birth of Christ’s church and the countless spiritual blessings (of which material prosperity is a symbol) that Christ wins for his people. The Day of the Lord will come, but so too will the messianic age of restoration.

In light of our survey of the content of Amos’s prophecy, it should not surprise us that after introducing himself as a shepherd from Tekoa (in the opening verse), and then informing us that he saw the things which YHWH revealed to him, Amos announces in verse two that, “*the LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.*” The roar of a lion would send fear and chills down the spine of anyone living in ancient Palestine—lions were not plentiful, but were around and feared because of their stealth and power. YHWH’s speech is like that of a lion’s roar—it is the very symbol of power and dread.

But when YHWH roars, he roars from Zion . . . from Judah, from Jerusalem, his Holy City where his temple stands. He does not roar in Bethel or Dan—Israelite religious shrines. He speaks from Zion. YHWH’s roar is a stern rebuke to disobedient Israel coming through the words of his prophet Amos. That YHWH roars from Zion warns all who hear or read these words that the true and living God will speak in righteousness and truth—something the lifeless idols and false gods of Israel cannot do. His words will cause shepherds to weep, the mountains to wither before his breath. The God who created all things, who called his people from Egypt, who made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, who established his temple in Jerusalem, the God whom Israel has forsaken—that is the Lord who will now speak to this unbelieving and rebellious people. This declaration would send shivers down the spine of any Israelite hearing them.

The Lord who roars as a Lion appears again in John’s vision of the unopened scroll (a record of God’s redemptive purposes) in Revelation 5:1-14 (our New Testament lesson). John recounts that “*then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.*” John’s deep anguish melts away in what comes next. “*And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep*

*no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”* The lion who roars from Zion, from the tribe of Judah, and a descendant of David, is none other than Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to break the seals and open the book.

Amos will speak of Israel’s future restoration in earthly terms (material blessing), but John sees what Amos could not. *“I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.”* This Lion of Judah will indeed restore and redeem his people through his death for our sins—because the Lion who roars is also the lamb of God, whose death is that one sacrifice which alone can wash away our sin and turn the Lion’s roar into a glorious gospel promise. *“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”*

YHWH roars from Zion! Judgment will fall upon Israel! This is Amos’ task—to announce these awesome and frightening words to a disobedient and sinful people, just like us. But with the benefit of New Testament hindsight, we know that as God is holy he is also merciful. He roars, but he roars to secure the redemption of his people. This lion doesn’t lay merely lay down with the lamb (as Isaiah foretells). This lion, for us, and for our salvation, become the lamb—the lamb who was slain for complete and full remission of our sins. Beloved, the lion roars from Zion. This is the message of Amos the Prophet.