

Amos 3-6



Amos 3:1-2

Hear this word that YHWH has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

Amos has had a lot to say about what he understands as divine punishment. We need this reminder that the aim of punishment is not destruction, but to bring about a change of mind, heart and behaviour (repentance, see 4:6-11), that opens us to receive God's blessing (see 9:11-15). Amos is, after all, speaking of YHWH.

The word 'know' speaks of the special knowledge that comes from intimate communion. Behind it stands the idea of covenant. The people tended to rely on this special relationship as a guarantee of blessing. Amos is making the point that it is precisely because Israel is God's chosen people, that it needs special purifying punishment.

Amos 3:3-8

Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?

Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey?

Does a young lion growl from its den, if it has caught nothing?

Does a bird swoop down to the earth to a trap, when there is no bait in it?

Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing?

Is a horn blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?

Does disaster befall a city, when YHWH has not done it?

Surely the Lord YHWH does nothing without revealing his secret intention to his servants the prophets.

The lion has roared (see 1:2); who will not fear?

The Lord YHWH has spoken; who can but prophesy?

Amos 3:9-12

Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod, and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, “Assemble on the mountains of Samaria, and see the many outrageous happenings within her, and the oppression occurring within her.”

They do not know how to do right, says YHWH, those who store up violence (ḥāmās, Genesis 6:11,13) and robbery in their strongholds.

Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defence; and your strongholds shall be plundered.

Thus says YHWH: 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 live in Samaria be rescued, with nothing more than the corner of a couch and part of a bed.

Amos 3:13-15

Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob, says the Lord YHWH, the God of hosts: On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will wreak judgment on the altars of Bethel

(royal sanctuary of Samaria, 25ks north of Jerusalem), and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I will tear down the winter mansion as well as the summer mansion; the mansions of ivory shall perish, the mansions of the powerful shall come to an end, says YHWH.

Amos 4:1-3

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan (sarcasm?) who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the powerless, who crush the needy, who say to their lords, “Bring something to drink!”

The Lord YHWH swears by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.

Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out beyond Harmon (?), says YHWH.

Amos 4:4-5

Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank-offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!
says the Lord YHWH.

An invitation to a sanctuary is normally understood as an invitation to enter into communion. With dreadful sarcasm, and in YHWH's name, Amos issues the invitation to 'the people of Israel' to come and 'transgress'(the word he uses throughout 1:3 - 2:3 for the atrocities nations are committing as they rebel against the will of the Lord of all nations).

'Has YHWH as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of YHWH? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice' (1Samuel 15:22).

Amos 4:6

I. I gave you ... lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

It is customary for a covenant to include a list of punishments (referred to as ‘curses’) that will ensue if the terms of the covenant have not been met (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). Beginning in verse 6 Amos lists a series of seven disasters that have happened in Israel, disasters which, in the understanding of the day, were willed by YHWH as punishments for infidelity.

The first disaster is famine. These disasters should have acted as a warning of the need for repentance, but the people ignored the warning and continued in their infidelity.

Amos 4:7-9

2. I withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; so two or three towns stagger to one town to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

3. I struck you with blight and mildew. Again and again the locust devoured your gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

Amos 4:10-11

4. I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your horses; and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

5. I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire; yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.

Amos 4:12-13

Therefore thus have I done to you, O Israel; because I have done this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! For lo, the one who forms the mountains, and creates the wind, and reveals his thoughts to mortals, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – YHWH, the God of hosts, is his name!

The God they must prepare to meet is YHWH, their God, the creator of the universe, encompassing everything from the solid mountains to the fluid wind. He knows the most secret thoughts of people better than they know them themselves. Just as the new light of morning inexorably leads on to the following night, so Israel should not think that her present luxury will last when she is confronted by YHWH.

Amos 5:1-3

Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: Fallen, no more to rise, is Maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up. For thus says the Lord YHWH: The city that marched out a thousand strong shall have but a hundred left, and that which marched out a hundred strong shall have but ten left.

It is as though the threatened encounter of the previous verses (4:12-13) has already taken place. It is as though the very people Amos is addressing, and the nation to which they belong, have already been destroyed. All that is left is to utter a funerary lament (a qînâ - verse 1).

Israel is called 'Maiden Israel', for she has been cut off before reaching maturity and bearing a child. Israel is proud of its army, but a thousand is reduced to a hundred, and a hundred to ten.

Amos 5:4-7

For thus says YHWH to the house of Israel: Seek me so that you may live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel will be wickedness.

Seek YHWH and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn **justice** to wormwood, and hurl **righteousness** to the ground!

The key transgression for which Israel must face punishment is named as its neglect of justice. The charge will be repeated in 6:12. Seeking YHWH is not done through hypocritical cult. It can only be done if people are determined to be faithful to the covenant; that is to say, to justice.

Amos 5:8-9

The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls forth the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth, YHWH is his name. It is he who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

Once again Amos the shepherd speaks of YHWH as the all-powerful God of the cosmos. They should have no doubt that YHWH is able to ‘make destruction flash out against the strong’, for he is the God of history, lord of all nations.

Amos 5:10-13

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the powerless and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions ... you who hound the righteous, who take a bribe, and subvert the cause of the needy in the gate. The wise will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

Amos speaks again of exploitation of the powerless. By unfair taxing of the poor, the wealthy are able to build luxurious houses – but, says Amos, ‘you shall not live in them’. Nor will they drink the wine from the vineyards created from the same unjust behaviour. A wise person would not speak out against the prevailing injustice. He would know what to expect in this ‘evil time’. Amos has no choice. He cannot refrain from declaring what YHWH has revealed to him.

Amos 5:14-15

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so YHWH, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you claim.

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that YHWH, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Once again Amos holds out hope that it is still possible to 'live'. If they want to 'seek YHWH', they must 'seek good'. To seek YHWH is defined as 'to hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate'(verse 15). If, even at this late hour, they change their ways and commit themselves to honouring the covenant 'it may be' that YHWH will be gracious. The implication is that the chances are slim, but they may still have a chance! They claim that their prosperity is proof that YHWH is with them. Not so! says Amos. Their only chance is to act justly.

Amos 5:16-17

Therefore thus says YHWH, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall cry, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in wailing, to lamentation. In all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst, says YHWH.

This reveals Amos’s conviction that his words are falling on deaf ears. They won’t change and so there is room only for lamentation (see verse 1). This takes us back to the opening chapters of the scroll, which outline the inescapable punishment that results from their failure to listen and to repent.

Amos 5:18-20 The Day of YHWH

Alas for you who long for the day of YHWH!

Why do you want the day of YHWH?

It is darkness, not light;

as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of YHWH darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

In this oracle Amos reverses popular expectations attached to ‘the Day of YHWH’, just as earlier he upset the people’s confidence that ‘God is with us’(5:14) meant approval and blessing. YHWH will appear, YHWH will intervene, but it will be to judge Israel, not to bring down her enemies. There is no way that they can escape from impending judgment (compare 2:14-16). Even when they think they have escaped, doom awaits them.

Amos 5:21-25

I hate, I loathe your festivals,
I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the communion offerings of your fatted animals
I will not look upon favourably.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let right judgment roll down like waters,
and justice like an ever flowing stream.
Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings
the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

Amos goes on to reverse the popular understanding of the significance of the cult (compare Isaiah 1:11-15).

Amos 5:26-27

You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says YHWH whose name is the God of hosts.

When YHWH intervenes on the 'Day of YHWH' it will be to send Israel into exile 'beyond Damascus'. Amos, with his sharp focus on justice, has little to say about idolatry. In verse 26, however, he tells them to take with them the gods 'which you made for yourselves'. 'Sakkuth' is an astral god known from Mesopotamia and Ugarit. 'Kaiwan' is a Hebrew name for the star god Saturn. Amos is making fun of the solemn processions in which gods are carried triumphantly. All will be bundled off into exile by the one and only God 'YHWH, whose name is the God of hosts (armies)'. During the time of Amos Israel had extended its boundaries as far as Damascus. Very well, they will go further, but into exile!

Amos 6:1-3

Alas for you who are at ease in Zion, and who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, who have come to the house of Israel! Cross over to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath Rabbah; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than yours? O you who rush along to the day of calamity, and draw ever nearer to the reign of violence!

‘Calneh’, on the lower Orontes, was the capital city of a late Hittite state. Hamath Rabbah was an important Syrian city-state on the middle Orontes just to the south of Calneh and north of Damascus. These states suffered defeat. What right had Israel to think that its present prosperity would go on for ever? To the south of Israel, Gath was overrun by an army from Aram led by Hazael (see 2Kings 12:17) in the last decade of the 9th century, and was again destroyed by Uzziah of Judah.

Amos 6:4-7

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, sprawled out on their couches;
who dine on lambs from the flock, and on calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the lute,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and gone will be the revelry of the sprawlers.

They see themselves as the 'first' of nations (verse 1), and use the 'finest' oils (verse 6). They will be the 'first to go into exile (verse 7; see 5:27).

Amos 6:8-10

The Lord YHWH has sworn by himself (says YHWH, the God of hosts): “I abhor the arrogance of Jacob and hate his strongholds; and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it”. So it will be, that, if ten people remain in one house, they shall die. Then the nearest relative and the one who burns the dead will arrive to remove the corpse from the house. One will say to the other in the innermost parts of the house, “Is anyone else with you?” The answer will come, “No.” Then the former shall say, “Hush! We must not mention the name of YHWH.”

The double mention of YHWH, and the inclusion of the oath, underline the irreversibility of the impending punishment. As throughout Amos, no conqueror is specified. Jacob takes pride in its fortifications. YHWH rejects them. They will not withstand the onslaught of divine anger.

Amos 6:11-14

See, YHWH commands, and the great house shall be shattered to bits, and the little house to pieces. Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen? Yet you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood – you who rejoice over Lo-Dabar, who boast, “Have we not by our own strength captured Qarnaim for ourselves?” Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation, O house of Israel, says YHWH, the God of hosts, and they shall oppress you from Lebo-Hamath to Wadi Arabah.

Verses 13-14 reflect the successful military excursion of Jeroboam II into the lands to the east of the Jordan. ‘Lo-Dabar’ is generally located north of the Jabbok River in Ammonite territory in northern Gilead. The name is a pun on ‘no-thing’. Their rejoicing is over nothing! Qarnaim is in central Bashan in Aram. ‘Lebo-Hamath’ is frequently given as Israel’s northern border. It is in northern Lebanon, south of Kadesh. Wadi Arabah is given as Israel’s southern border.