

**ISRAEL REJECTS  
THE CALL TO REPENT**

**AMOS 3:1 – 5:17**

A prophet must speak

**1Hear 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:  
2You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.**

**3Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?**

**4Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey?**

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

**5Does 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?**

**6Is a horn blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?**

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

**7Surely the Lord YHWH does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.**

**8The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord YHWH has spoken; who can but prophesy?**

Though Amos's ministry is directed particularly against Samaria (see verse 9), the capital of the northern kingdom ('Israel'), the expressions 'people of Israel' and 'the whole family that I brought out of the land of Egypt', indicate that he is addressing them as members of God's chosen people (which includes Judah).

Amos has had a lot to say about what he understands as divine punishment. We needed verse 2 to remind us 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 (see comment on 1:2).

The word 'know' in verse 2 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. As he did throughout chapters one and two ('I will not revoke it'), so here, he does not immediately specify what the punishment will be. This helps create a certain anxious tension.

Amos uses the series of seven rhetorical questions in verses 3-6 to make the point that he draws out in verses 7-8. The words he proclaims come from an encounter with YHWH that he, as a prophet, cannot hold back. Just as there is no escape for Israel from YHWH's judgment ('I will not revoke it', 2:6), so Amos has no choice but to proclaim YHWH's words.

The seventh question (second half of verse 6) is a good example of the underlying assumption, found throughout the Older Testament, that God controls everything that happens in history. We looked at this assumption in the Introduction (see pages 14-15).

In verse 7 we see that Amos recognised himself as belonging to a line of prophets (see 2:11 and Introduction page 3). This is not the first time Amos has associated YHWH's words with the roaring of a lion (see 1:2).

The Septuagint reads ‘Assyria’, not ‘Ashdod’. Though Assyria had not yet begun its westward expansion, Egypt to Israel’s southwest and Assyria to Israel’s northeast were the two superpowers of the region. Two witnesses are required to indict a guilty party (see Deuteronomy 17:6). Whatever evils the witnesses may have been responsible for (Amos showed no interest in this in chapters 1-2), their crimes are nothing compared to the ‘outrageous happening’ and ‘oppression’ that Amos has found in Samaria.

‘Violence’ (חַמָּס, ḥāmās) is named as the main sin that brought about the primeval Flood (Genesis 6:11, 13). It is usually considered a crime against persons. ‘Robbery’ is a crime against property.

The fact that the adversary is not named is another indication that Amos’s words pre-date the western expansion of Assyria. Since the rich have stripped the poor of their possessions, which they have stored in their strongholds, these same strongholds will be stripped.

From his profession Amos knew that, if a shepherd could produce evidence to prove that a sheep had been attacked by a wild animal, he was not bound to make restitution to the owner (see Exodus 22:12-13).

The instruction issued in verse 13 appears to be addressed to Assyria and Egypt, the witnesses summoned earlier (see 3:9). The ‘house of Jacob’ refers to the king and his court (also 9:8). Bethel, 16ks north of Jerusalem, is the southernmost shrine in the kingdom governed from Samaria, and was the royal sanctuary (7:13). With the horns of its altar broken, it could no longer offer asylum or receive sacrifices (compare Exodus 32:34 which speaks of the golden calf).

Was Amos’s threat seen later as fulfilled by the catastrophic earthquake mentioned in 1:1?

**<sup>9</sup>Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod [Assyria?], 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.”**

**<sup>10</sup>They do not know how to do right, says YHWH, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.**

**<sup>11</sup>Therefore thus says the Lord YHWH: An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defense; and your strongholds shall be plundered.**

**<sup>12</sup>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.**

**<sup>13</sup>Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob, says the Lord YHWH, the God of hosts: <sup>14</sup>On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will wreak judgment on the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. <sup>15</sup>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.**

Dragged into captivity

**<sup>1</sup>Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the powerless, who crush the needy, who say to their lords, "Bring something to drink!"**

**<sup>2</sup>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.**

**<sup>3</sup>Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out beyond Harmon, says YHWH.**

Amos is continuing his criticism of the luxurious life style he encountered in 'Samaria' (see 3:9, 12). Some see verse 1 as directed precisely against the women of the upper class. It is possible, however, that Amos is directing his sarcasm against the rulers who cannot have enough of the luxury they are obtaining from trade. They would not have appreciated being likened to cows being fattened up for slaughter, or having those supplying their luxuries being called their 'lords' (אֲדוֹנָיִם, 'adonîm).

The rich are condemned because they 'oppress the powerless'. He has just railed against the 'oppression' occurring in Samaria (see 3:9). This reference to the 'powerless' (דַּלִּיִם, dallîm) recalls his initial criticism of Israel for 'trampling the head of the powerless into the dust of the earth' (2:7). In that same reference he accused them of 'selling the needy for a pair of sandals' (2:6). For the various nuances of 'needy' (עֲבֵיּוֹן, 'ebyôn) see the commentary on 2:6.

The translation 'hooks' and 'fishhooks' are attempts to interpret the meaning of two obscure Hebrew nouns. In any case the general meaning is clear: Amos is declaring that their fate is determined (YHWH has taken an oath, compare Psalm 89:35). They will be dragged into captivity. Note once again that no specific enemy is named.

There will be so many breaches in the city wall that the captured inhabitants can be taken straight from their houses out through the wall. The last part of verse 3 is obscure. If 'Harmon' does indeed refer to a place, its whereabouts are unknown, though it is likely to be in Aram in the region east of Damascus (compare 5:27).

An invitation to a sanctuary is normally understood as an invitation from YHWH 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).

Bethel has featured already (see 3:14). Gilgal was the first sanctuary established after crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land (see Joshua 4:19).

Amos is 'encouraging' them to take their religious observances to the extreme ('every morning', 'every three days'). The sacrifices he speaks of are those that go beyond the strict requirements of the Law: 'thank-offering', 'freewill offerings'. He is not against these offerings. His point is that, without a genuine adherence to YHWH – an adherence that demands that they carry out YHWH's will by acting justly – religious cult is a sham.

He is not the first prophet to make this point. Samuel is quoted as saying to Saul:

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

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 (see Introduction pages 14-15), 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 (see comment on 3:2).

**<sup>4</sup>Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; <sup>5</sup>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.**

**<sup>6</sup>I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says YHWH.**

Prepare to meet your God

**7**I also 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; <sup>8</sup>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.

**9**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.

**10**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.

**11**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.

**12**Therefore thus have I done to you, O Israel; because I have done this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!

**13**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 second calamity is drought. The failure of the spring rains led to failure of the barley and wheat harvest. The drought affected the farmer. It also led to the drying up of the wells and cisterns in the towns. People were desperately searching for water. Here, too, the lesson was not learned.

Verse 9 speaks of disease hitting the cereal crops, and locusts again and again stripping bare the gardens, the vines, and the fig and olive trees – and still the lesson is not learned!

Amos reminds the people of the times of pestilence, and of military defeat.

Finally, in verse 11, he takes them back to the catastrophic destruction of the Dead Sea cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24). Unlike these two cities, Israel has survived the earthquakes and fires that have devastated the land, but only because at the last minute YHWH has snatched her from the conflagration.

Because Israel has refused to return to YHWH, Amos issues a threat (verse 12), all the more menacing because it is not specified, and is reinforced by repetition.

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.

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 (אֲנִינָהּ, qînâ - verse 1).

Israel is called ‘Maiden Israel’ (verse 2), 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 (verse 3).

Unexpectedly, in verse 4 YHWH offers Israel a chance of life. There is still hope. The word ‘seek’ (דָּרַשׁ, dārāš) is often used of seeking God in a sanctuary. Amos explicitly excludes this (verse 5). As he will make clear shortly, life comes from communion with YHWH. It consists in sharing in the justice of Him who hears the cry of the poor.

For Bethel and Gilgal see 4:4. It appears that people from the north were accustomed to cross into Judah to visit the sanctuary of Beer-sheba (see also 8:14), a sanctuary associated with the patriarchs (see Genesis 21:33). The threat of being consumed by fire takes us back to the oracles at the beginning of the scroll (see 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5). The ‘house of Joseph’ as used here by Amos appears to refer to the royal house of the northern kingdom, of which Ephraim and Manasseh are the dominant tribes (Joshua 17:17).

In verse 7 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.

Verse 8 parallels 4:13. 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’ (verse 9), for he is the God of history, lord of all nations.

**<sup>1</sup>Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel: <sup>2</sup>Fallen, no more to rise, is Maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up. <sup>3</sup>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.**

**<sup>4</sup>For thus says YHWH to the house of Israel: Seek me so that you may live; <sup>5</sup>but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel will be wickedness [‘aven’]. <sup>6</sup>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.**

**<sup>7</sup>Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and hurl righteousness to the ground!**

**<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>It is he who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.**

A final chance is lost

**<sup>10</sup>They hate the one who re-  
proves in the gate, and they  
abhor the one who speaks  
the truth. <sup>11</sup>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.**

**<sup>12</sup>For I know how many are  
your transgressions, and how  
great are your sins – you who  
hound the righteous, who take  
a bribe, and subvert the cause  
of the needy in the gate.**

**<sup>13</sup>Therefore the wise will keep  
silent in such a time; for it is  
an evil time.**

**<sup>14</sup>Seek good and not evil, that  
you may live; and so YHWH,  
the God of hosts, will be with  
you, just as you claim. <sup>15</sup>Hate  
evil and love good, and es-  
tablish justice in the gate; it  
may be that YHWH, the God of  
hosts, will be gracious to the  
remnant of Joseph.**

**<sup>16</sup>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.**

**<sup>17</sup>In all the vineyards there  
shall be wailing, for I will  
pass through your midst, says  
YHWH.**

In verses 10-12 Amos continues to list the crimes for which Israel deserves to be punished. Public hearings customarily took place in the open space near the city gate. The powerful hate anyone attempting to speak out for justice by daring to speak the truth.

In verse 11 he speaks again of exploitation of the powerless (see 2:7; 4:1). 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. They refuse to stop hounding the innocent; they pervert the course of justice by using bribes, and ensure that the rights of the ‘needy’ (see 2:6; 4:1) are set aside.

A wise person would not speak out against the prevailing injustice. He would know what to expect in this ‘evil time’ (verse 13). Amos has no choice. He cannot refrain from declaring what YHWH has revealed to him.

Once again Amos holds out hope that it is still possible to ‘live’ (verse 14; compare verse 4). If they want to ‘seek YHWH’ (5:4), 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 (verse 15). 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 (verse 14). Not so! says Amos. Their only chance is to act justly.

Verses 16-17 reveal 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.