

VISIONS

AMOS 7:1 – 9:10

¹Alas This is what the Lord YHWH showed me: he was forming locusts just when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). ²When they had finished eating the vegetation of the land, I said, "O Lord YHWH, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" ³YHWH relented concerning this; "It shall not happen," said YHWH.

⁴This is what the Lord YHWH showed me: the Lord YHWH was summoning a judgment by fiery heat, and it devoured the Great Deep and was consuming the fields. ⁵Then I said, "O Lord YHWH, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" ⁶YHWH relented concerning this; "This also shall not happen," said the Lord YHWH.

In introducing the scroll (1:1), the editors speak of Amos as one who 'had visions' (חָזָה, *hāzâ*) – a verb which highlights the fact that Amos was 'enlightened' by YHWH, and, in turn, was given the mission to 'enlighten' the people. In 7:12 Amos is called a 'seer' (חֹזֶה, *hōzeh*). Those responsible for organising the scroll (perhaps Amos himself or an immediate disciple) have opted to include here five visions experienced by Amos. They have kept them for the final section of the scroll, though they may well provide insights into the actual development of Amos as a prophet.

The same pattern can be observed in the presentation of the first two visions (7:1-3 and 7:4-6).

The late-sown crops consist of non-cereal crops such as vegetables and onions. A locust plague in the late spring spells disaster not only for them but also for the cereal crops, which have not yet been harvested. Had YHWH gone ahead with the threatened plague it would have been an utter tragedy. However he shared his intention with Amos, the seer (see 3:7). Amos's heart goes out to his people and he intercedes on their behalf. He appeals to YHWH's mercy (see Exodus 34:6-7). One has the impression that YHWH is reluctant to punish. He is almost looking for some excuse not to act. YHWH accedes to Amos's plea, and the people receive a reprieve.

It is perhaps this vision that led Amos to preach repentance (see 5:4-6 and 5:14-15). Likewise the warnings described in 4:6-11.

That his first vision was not a one-off experience is indicated by the second vision which reinforces what happened in the first. This time it is fire from heaven that will destroy everything (compare Joel 1:19-20; Deuteronomy 32:22). The inclusion of the Great Deep points to a punishment of cosmic proportions. By now Amos has experienced resistance to his call for repentance. He does not ask YHWH to 'forgive'. He simply pleads for YHWH to desist – which YHWH does.

Was it this vision that caused Amos to harden his warnings with reference to the 'Day of YHWH' (5:18 - 6:14)?

There is a dramatic shift from the first and second visions (7:1-6) to the third (7:7-9). Amos no longer attempts to intercede. YHWH's decision is final and irreversible. It is reasonable to infer that this is because of the obstinate resistance that Amos met in his call for repentance. YHWH's words: 'I will pardon them no more' are echoed in the oracles found in chapters 3-4 of the scroll.

A problem arises from the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the Hebrew word **אֲנָק** ('anāk) which is used four times in this passage. It is used to describe the wall that YHWH is standing beside, and the material YHWH has in his hand (twice). It is also something that YHWH is going to set in the midst of his people. The word occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The difficulty in translating was experienced from the ancient versions. The Aramaic Targums, the Greek Versions and the Latin Vulgate all came up with different translations.

We may be dealing with a word that was special to the northern dialect, and we may also be dealing with a word that had more than one meaning – which is something Amos was fond of. We will see an example in the fourth vision.

We know that in the Akkadian Semitic language the word 'anāku means 'tin', so, rather than attempt an arbitrary guess, we have translated 'anāk as 'tin' throughout. Tin was the basic element used to make bronze armour. Is YHWH threatening them with superior force? Tin is also useless as a wall.

This time there is no turning back. The time for prophetic intercession is over. The various sacred sites where the tribes of the northern kingdom assembled to carry out their cult (called here 'the high places of Isaac') will be demolished. The agent that will carry this out is not mentioned. There is no reason to think Amos knows. What he does know is that whoever brings down 'the house of Jeroboam' will be the instrument of YHWH. For the first time Amos openly criticises the king.

7This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with tin, with tin in his hand. 8And YHWH said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "Tin." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting tin in the midst of my people Israel; I will pardon them no more. 9The 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."

¹⁰Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the country is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and do your prophesying there, ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor a member of a prophet's guild; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and YHWH took me from following the flock, and YHWH said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

¹⁶"Now therefore hear the word of YHWH. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'

¹⁷Therefore thus says YHWH: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

These verses are inserted here between the third and fourth vision because of the statement at the end of the third vision: 'I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword' (7:9). We see the rejection of Amos's oracles in a confrontation that helps explain the hardening of the message that Amos was inspired to deliver – a hardening seen in the oracles presented in chapters 1-2.

Amaziah, the chief priest of the royal shrine of Bethel (called here 'the house of Israel') reports Amos's words to Jeroboam who would have taken the accusation of conspiracy seriously. After all he belonged to the dynasty of Jehu who came to power as a result of a conspiracy incited by the prophet Elisha (see 2Kings 9:1-10). The threat of exile has been a constant theme in the scroll (see 4:2-3; 5:5; 5:26-27; 6:7 and 9:4).

Amaziah calls Amos a 'seer' (נִחֵן, *hōzeh*), a term which, at its best, denotes someone who is 'enlightened' by God, and who, in turn, 'enlightens' others (see 1:1). Amaziah banishes Amos from Bethel and tells him to go back where he belongs, to Judah, 'and do your prophesying there'.

Verse 14 is interpreted in different ways by scholars. In his commentary on Amos, Paul writes (page 247):

Amos is obviously denying that he is a professional prophet and that he makes his living by such a calling. He is also asserting that his present prophetic activity is due entirely to his being selected by the Lord, who commanded him to address northern Israel. Thus, although he formerly had no connection with any prophets or prophetic guilds, he is now a prophet of Yahweh, and Yahweh's authority supersedes Amaziah's.

In verse 17 Amos utters a curse against Amaziah: his wife, his children, and his property. He will die outside the Holy Land. Amos concludes by, once again, speaking of the exile that the people (Israel) will undergo. We do not know what the outcome of this confrontation was for Amos, but it is unlikely that he was able to walk away free.

This fourth vision (8:1-3) follows the pattern of, and so reinforces, the third (7:7-9). The inserted anecdote (7:10-17) helps strengthen its message.

The ‘summer fruit’ are fresh figs harvested at the end of summer (September). There is a play on words in verses 1-2. ‘Summer fruit’ is קָיִיס (qāyīs); ‘end’ (final hour’, ‘hour of doom’) is קֵץ (qēš). The end is coming, not only for the cult and the royal house (as in vision three), but for the whole nation, ‘my people Israel’. As always in Amos the agent of the doom is not specified. What is important is that it comes from YHWH.

An oracle (verses 4-8) is inserted between the fourth and fifth visions. The unjust practices enumerated in verses 4-6 echo Amos’s earlier indictments in 2:6-7 and 5:10-12. Before recounting his fifth vision, Amos focuses, once again, on his central critique. Those who control the market are taking advantage of the ‘needy’ (עֲבֹיֹן, ‘ebyôn, verses 4 and 6; see commentary on 2:6), the ‘afflicted’ (אֲנָוִיִּם, ‘anāwîm, see commentary on 2:7), and the ‘powerless’ (דַּלִּיִּם, dallîm, see 2:7). From verse 5 we learn that the rich are following the ‘law’ strictly as regards stopping work at the time of the new moon (mentioned also in Isaiah 1:13 and Hosea 2:13) and on the sabbath, but have no interest in justice – which is central to the Torah!

The ‘ephah’ was a unit of dry measure (close to 40 litres). By falsifying the scales they sold less than appeared. The shekel (a little over 11 grams) measured payment. This, too, they falsified so that the buyer was paying more than appeared. Worse still they were involved in human traffic, buying for a pittance into slavery the powerless who found themselves unable to pay their debts.

YHWH takes an oath on himself, the ‘Glory of Jacob’ (כְּבוֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל). Jacob (God’s people) are more interested in their own pride (the ‘arrogance of Jacob’, גִּבְעוּת יִשְׂרָאֵל, 6:8) than in their God in whom alone they should glory. Verse 8 recalls the opening sentence of the scroll which refers to an ‘earthquake’.

¹This is what the Lord YHWH showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ²He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then YHWH said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. ³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord YHWH; “So many corpses! Strewn everywhere! Hush!”

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the afflicted of the land, ⁵saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶buying the powerless for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

⁷YHWH has sworn by the Glory of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. ⁸Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

They shall fall and never rise again

⁹On that day, says the Lord YHWH, I will make the sun set at noon, and I will darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will put sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

¹¹The time is surely coming, says the Lord YHWH, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of YHWH. ¹²They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of YHWH, but they shall not find it.

¹³On that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint from thirst.

¹⁴Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "May your god live, O Dan," and, "By the life of the circle of gods at Beer-sheba"— they shall fall, and never rise again.

Continuing from the previous verses, the whole cosmos shares in the outpouring of God's anger, punishing his people. Verse 9 echoes 5:8 and the description of the Day of YHWH in 5:18-20 (see also 9:5).

They have been deaf to YHWH's revealed word. They will experience a profound need for it, but it will be too late. Now YHWH will cease speaking.

They will experience the wandering that Cain experienced when he killed his brother (Genesis 4:12, 14). They will not be able to satisfy their deepest needs.

The deity 'Ashimah' was introduced into the northern kingdom by the resettled population of Hamath only after the destruction of Samaria in 721 (see 2Kings 17:30). This could suggest that verse 14 was added later by members of an 'Amos School'. However the Hebrew word can also be translated 'shame', and Amos may be referring to the image of a calf that was set up by Jeroboam I in the Bethel sanctuary (see 1Kings 12:28-30). Jeroboam I also erected a calf in the sanctuary of Dan.

We have already noted that people from the northern kingdom crossed into Judah to worship in the sanctuary at Beer-sheba (see 5:5). Amos appears to be including all the local gods worshipped in shrines all the way from Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south. They are all nothing. So will it be for those who worship them. All 'shall fall and never rise again' (compare Jeremiah 25:27; Psalm 20:8).

In this fifth and concluding vision (9:1-4) it is YHWH himself who is seen by Amos. The altar is probably the one in the sanctuary of the royal shrine at Bethel (see 3:14; 7:13). We are not told who is being commanded to strike the capitals of the pillars that hold up the roof. The collapse of the shrine demonstrates that salvation cannot be found there. Its fall will be followed by the complete destruction of all who try to escape.

The language of verses 2-4 is that of myth. There is no escaping YHWH's wrath. We find an echo of verse 2 in Psalm 139:7-12.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

As previously in 4:13 and 5:8-9, the scene closes with a hymn of praise of YHWH's sovereign power (verses 5-6). For a second time (see 8:8), the convulsion caused by YHWH's judgment is compared to the rising and subsiding of the Nile.

There are echoes of verse 6 in Psalm 78:69.

He built his sanctuary like the high heavens,
like the earth, which he has founded forever.

In the psalm the temple is described in cosmic terms. In Amos the cosmos is likened to a temple.

¹I saw YHWH standing beside the altar, and he said: Strike the capitals so that the thresholds shake. Cut off the life of all those who lead the people. Those who follow behind I will kill with the sword. None of those fleeing will escape. None of them will save their lives.

²Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. ³Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the Sea, there I will command the Serpent, and it shall bite them. ⁴And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies, there I will command the Sword, and it shall kill them; and I will fix my eyes on them for harm and not for good.

⁵The Lord, YHWH of hosts, is he who touches the earth and it quavers, and all who dwell on it mourn; everything rises like the Nile, and sinks again, like the River of Egypt.

⁶He who builds his upper chambers in the heavens, and founds his vault upon the earth; who summons the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the land – YHWH is his name.

⁷Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says YHWH. I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt. Did I not also bring up the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Qir?

⁸The eyes of the Lord YHWH are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth – except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says YHWH.

**⁹For lo, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, but no kernel shall fall to the ground.
¹⁰All the sinners of my people will die by the sword, who say, “Never will disaster approach or overtake us.”**

Even the most inaccessible of nations (Ethiopia) is under YHWH's sovereignty. Israel cannot claim any special privilege because YHWH brought the people up from Egypt. YHWH was also the one who brought the Philistines to the land from Caphtor (Crete?), and the Arameans to their country from Qir (already mentioned in 1:5), just north of the Persian Gulf.

These verses take us back to the description of destruction in the first two chapters of the scroll. Any 'sinful kingdom' that does not act justly will suffer the consequences, for YHWH sees everything that is. However, there is something special about the people of Israel. Amos does not need to mention it: it is the commitment YHWH has made to them. The 'kingdom' will be destroyed, not so the people. Though they have not honoured their part of the covenant, YHWH has made promises, and YHWH is faithful.

What remains in the sieve after the shaking is what is to be destroyed. Verse 10 makes it clear that it is 'the sinners of my people' who will die by the sword. YHWH's judgment falls upon those who persist in treating others unjustly, those who have been singled out throughout the Amos scroll.