

AMOS—WEEK 1

WRATH



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is by James Tissot (1836–1902)

Amos was the owner of a flock of sheep. Tissot shows him with a stick and a dog.

The prophet Amos, a sheep breeder, declares that The LORD roars from Zion. God is not happy.

Judgement is coming.

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Amos, Week 1 — Wrath
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1 Amos 8:11–12

*“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord GOD,
“That I will send a famine on the land,
Not a famine of bread,
Nor a thirst for water,
But of hearing the words of the LORD.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
And from north to east;
They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD,
But shall not find it.”*

We now move from the gospel of John to the Old Testament book of Amos. His prophecy sets the stage for John’s depiction of the incarnation. It’s all about God’s word.

Israel and Judah are approaching a different kind of famine. They’ll be starved of something they forgot they need—the words of the LORD.

Their exile will lead to a greater suffering than simple hunger and thirst. They will know what it’s like to be truly cut off. Separation from God is a popular portrait of hell.

Those popular portraits are fun and useful, but beware; we shouldn’t take them literally. My favorite is *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis. It’s wonderful teaching, though obviously a fantasy.

We don’t know what hell is exactly like and we should stay mindful of that. The Westminster Confession takes care to not go beyond what’s specifically in scripture.

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. — WCF 32.1

The exile will accomplish its intended purpose; God’s people will again hunger for His word—but God isn’t done with them yet.

Cue the incarnation.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. — John 1:14

2 Amos 1:1–2

The words of Amos, who was among the sheepbreeders 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.

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.”*

Some translations call Amos a shepherd, but shepherd in Hebrew is roe-ay (רעה). The word in verse one is no-qed (נקד). It's doubtful Amos was a mere shepherd. “Sheepbreeder,” as it's translated here in the New King James, is more likely.

So, Amos has connections, which he's going to need. Like most prophets, he's going to preach a message no one wants to hear— that God is not happy.

There's a point to this. Prophecy provides context for events. If a prophet says, “Because of X, God is going to inflict you with Y,” and everyone responds with, “No way,” that sets the stage. It preps people's eyes. When Y happens, they remember the prophecy. It wasn't random. Then they start thinking about X.

But the prophet needs to be heard for all this to happen. That usually isn't through writing. The book of Amos was written later, as evidenced by the way it mentions the earthquake. That's not a prediction.

Amos was literally “heard” because of who he was.

Verse two is a warmup for the blasts that are coming. The word “roar” indicates the LORD's aggressive anger. The pastures mourning and the Carmel mountaintop withering are chilling metaphors.

Mount Carmel is the place where the fire of the LORD came down, proving the prophets of Baal false.

Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!”

And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!” So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there. — 1 Kings 18:37–40

To see so grand a place wither is like seeing God's glory fade. The light is going out.

3 Amos 1:3–5 (ESV)

Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Damascus,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they have threshed Gilead
with threshing sledges of iron.
So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael,
and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.
I will break the gate-bar of Damascus,
and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven,
and him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden;
and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kir,”
says the LORD.*

Now God turns his wrath towards specific peoples and judges them for their sins. He will save the people of Israel and Judah for last. First up is Damascus, which is a synecdoche for the nation of Syria.

The numbers three and four are not meant to be literal. Syria’s sins are much more than three, or four, or even their sum. The three-to-four expression means that the transgressions are multiple, and even more.

The threshing metaphor is especially disturbing. Back then, threshing grain (separating the hulls from the nutritious inner part) involved dragging a heavy threshing sledge over the grain. This crushed the grain, cracking and loosening the hulls.

It’s not exactly clear what the Syrians did to the people of Gilead to evoke such brutal imagery, but it must have been torture.

And so, the punishment will fit the crime. We’re spared the details, but exile means that those who survive the conquering (which may be few) will be enslaved.

There is no clearer evidence of sin than the creative nature of torture. People are at their most inventive when they endeavor to make others suffer. Sin in full blossom turns ordinary people into geniuses.

I won’t list the torture devices used throughout history—you have enough horrible images stored in your head already—but many of them are nothing short of brilliant.

Except that they make no sense apart from the nature of sin. No animal does anything like this. Carnivores typically kill quickly. The rare exceptions (such as a cat toying with a mouse) do not involve long term pain, but rather instinctive indecisiveness over how to respond to movement.

We, on the other hand, are just plain evil.

4 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.
But I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza,
Which shall devour its palaces.
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.*

This passage mentions four main Philistine cities: *Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron*. The judgement isn't really against them though; they just represent the whole nation. The judgement is against all the Philistines.

Gaza gets first mention, possibly because it was the capital at that time. The capital moved around a lot, which is why all the cities can be referenced as synecdoches for Philistia.

And their offense is most offensive. Edom is the land of Esau, Jacob's brother. So, taking some Israelites (it doesn't say whom) and selling them to Edom is especially wrong.

The individual punishments mentioned are brutal enough, but the bottom line is total.

And the remnant of the Philistines shall perish.

Fire is a recurring theme here. There will be a reference to fire in every one of these judgements. This continues the theme started in verse two with the reference to Mount Carmel, where Isaiah called fire down from heaven.

This is typical. Fire is the standard image of God's judgement, both in this world and in eternity. Besides hell and Mount Carmel, the image of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah comes to mind.

*Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the LORD out of the heavens.
So he overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.*
— Genesis 19:24–25

Other examples are too numerous to list.

They're all throughout scripture.

5 Amos 1:9–10

Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four,
I will not turn away its punishment,
Because they delivered up the whole captivity to Edom,
And did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.
But I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre,
Which shall devour its palaces.”*

Tyre did what Gaza did. *They delivered up the whole captivity to Edom.*

But what Tyre did was worse. Tyre had once had a great alliance with David and Solomon. It was much more than a simple military agreement; it was a *covenant of brotherhood*.

Now Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon, because he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father, for Hiram had always loved David. — 1 Kings 5:1

Now it happened at the end of twenty years, when Solomon had built the two houses, the house of the LORD and the king’s house (Hiram the king of Tyre had supplied Solomon with cedar and cypress and gold, as much as he desired), that King Solomon then gave Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee. — 1 Kings 9:10–11

When Tyre *did not remember the covenant of brotherhood*, that was a deep betrayal. To quote the tagline from *Jaws: The Revenge*, “This time it’s personal.”

Covenants are the key to the Bible. The history of God’s relationship with man is a history of covenants. A covenant is an ironclad promise; it can’t be broken. The ceremony in Genesis 15 shows its seriousness.

But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. ...

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” — Genesis 15:8–10a, 17–21 (ESV)

Passing through the cut-up animals is pledging, “If I break this covenant, may what happened to these animals happen to me.”

Breaking a covenant is major betrayal.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Is your desire for God's word really a "hunger"?
2. When have you seen someone gain credibility because of a prediction?
3. Have you ever seen a torture museum?
4. Does the punishment fit the crime in this case?
5. What is Covenant Theology?

Items for prayer: