

## Lesson 7

# Amos 1-3: God Will Judge the Nations

## Introduction

The ministry of Amos took place during the very prosperous and peaceful eighth century B.C. Amos hailed from the rural town of Tekoa, some ten to twelve miles south of Jerusalem. Sitting in very rugged hill country, Tekoa's elevation of 2500 feet allowed it to have sweeping views of the Jordan River Valley and the wilderness surrounding the Dead Sea. "Amos" comes from a Hebrew word meaning "burden bearer." Some believe "Amos" is an abbreviated form of the name *Amasiah* which means "born by the LORD."

In our modern terminology we might liken Amos to a rancher. Verse 1 tells us he raised sheep. Amos 7:14 tells us he was a herdsman, and a *grower of sycamore figs*. Hailey suggests that Amos could have raised a small, rugged type of sheep called "nakads." The wool from these sheep would have been of great quality and very valuable. Sycamore figs were often grown in the wilderness near the Dead Sea. Sycamore figs were usually eaten by those in the lower strata of society and had to be pinched or bruised before it would ripen. Amos seems to be a man of means, educated, and someone aware of the world events of his time. He held nothing back in informing Israel of God's message. In speaking of himself he says:

I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock and the Lord said to me, Go prophesy to My people Israel, 7:14-15.

From this Amos appears as a man who would have been well suited to address the life of excess and ease enjoyed by the citizens of Israel.

The ministry of Amos would have been in the years between 792-740 B.C. In 1:1, we are told that his ministry began two years before the earthquake. Tradition says this earthquake occurred when Uzziah attempted to perform the duties of the priests, 2 Chronicles 26:16. Uzziah was struck with leprosy as his punishment from God. If this tradition is true, then we can infer that Amos' ministry in the north began around 752 B.C. Some guess that he could have spent as much as two years preaching in Israel until he was asked to go back to Judah by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, 7:12-13. Could chapters 8-9 have been written after Amos' return to Judah?

It is interesting to consider that God would choose a man from Judah to travel to his kinsman in the north to preach to Israel. He would have been seen as an outsider while proclaiming God's message throughout the country. His message is very objective and sends forth a message of justice.

## The World of Amos

Amos prophesied during the days of King Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel. These were "good" times politically. Assyria was inwardly focused with weak kings, internal rebellion, and strife. Both Israel and Judah expanded the borders of their kingdom and their military power. Uzziah and Jeroboam II

were strong leaders and helped their nations prosper into heights not seen since the days of the United Kingdom. Until the arrival of Tiglath-Pileser on the throne of Assyria in 745 B.C., God's people enjoyed relative peace on all sides. After this, Assyria would begin a rapid expansion to the west, culminating in the fall of the northern ten tribes in 722 B.C. Internally, the politicians of the day were corrupt. In 3:9-10 we read: Proclaim on the citadels in Ashdod and on the citadels in the land of Egypt and say, *Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria and see the great tumults within her and the oppressions in her midst. But they do not know how to do what is right,*" declares the LORD, "these who hoard up violence and devastation in their citadels. Political leaders used violence and oppression to further themselves and did not serve as advocates for the poor. Amos 5:10 tells us that the leaders disliked the judges that upheld righteousness. This says a great deal about the character of the people during this time.

The economic times of Amos' day were very rich and prosperous. Amos addresses the problems associated with a rich and affluent society.

- 3:11 – many of the people dwelt in rich palaces.
- 3:12 – the people slept on couches and "silk cushions." (ASV)
- 3:15 – some people had winter and summer homes.
- 4:1-3 – when women wanted a feast, they did not care how it happened, even if it crushed those who were needy.
- 6:1-7 – the people were at ease, sleeping on beds of ivory and listened to fine music, etc.

The moral and religious conditions were no better. Perhaps this passage sums it up best:

Thus says the LORD, For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment, Because they sell the righteous for money And the needy for a pair of sandals. These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless Also turn aside the way of the humble; And a man and his father resort to the same girl In order to profane My holy name. On garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar, And in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined, 2.6-8.

Amos 5:11 speaks of the extortion of the poor by the rich. Because of their actions, God would bring strong judgment against them.

## The Lord Roars from Zion

Verse one tells us that Amos received his prophetic message in a vision. This message came from the Lord and was directed primarily at the northern ten tribes, Israel. Verse two parallels Joel 3:16 (*the LORD roars from Zion*) and from this Amos begins to speak of the sudden and swift judgment that is about to come upon Israel and its neighbors.

Verse two also identifies the dwelling place of Jehovah: *Zion, from Jerusalem He utters His voice*. This would have been an indictment on the northern tribes who had long forsaken Jerusalem as the place of their worship, serving God from altars in Dan and Bethel. Zion was looked upon by the people as the dwelling place of God, and the roar of His voice would signify judgment on the entire land.

Amos 1:3-2:3 contain judgments against six nations surrounding Israel and Judah. These nations' iniquity had risen to the level where justice could no longer ignore it. God was about to punish them for the great evil they had committed. All nations, not just Israel and Judah, were accountable to God. Evil

will not go unpunished. It is interesting to note a repetitive phrase found in announcing doom on each nation. In identifying Damascus as a target of God's justice, Amos says, For three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not revoke its punishment..., 1:3. The same words are used in addressing each nation mentioned in the first two chapters, including Israel and Judah. The phrase was common in writing during this time (see Proverbs 30:15) and suggests a cumulative effect. The wickedness of these nations was growing year by year and God could no longer tolerate it. God says each time that He would not revoke its punishment.

## **Judgment on Damascus, 1:3-5**

Damascus was the capital of Syria, located to the north of Jerusalem. Damascus played a key role in the politics of the entire region and was the power most threatening to Israel's security. They would be punished for their war atrocities. 2 Kings 8:7-15 and 13:7 gives us the historical account of the dominance of Aram (Syria) over Israel. The threshing machine mentioned in Amos 1:3 was probably a drag of heavy wooden timbers with sharp stones or iron points attached on the bottom. As the horse pulled the drag, the driver stood on top of the timbers adding weight to press the stones and/or iron into the ground. Prisoners would be lined up on the ground and then soldiers would drive the threshing machine over the prisoners.

The house of Hazael and cities of Ben-Hadad were to be destroyed by God. Hazael, king of Aram from 843-796 B.C., caused great problems for three successive kings of Israel. Jehoahaz finally defeated and killed Ben-Hadad III, Hazael's son (796-770 B.C.). Historical references to Hazael and Ben-Hadad III are seen in 2 Kings 8-10 and 13. The people of Aram would be exiled to Kir. Kir means *a walled place* and its exact location is unknown. Most people speculate that the people of Aram would be sent as captives to the land from which they came, north and east of Israel.

## **Judgment on Gaza, 1:6-8**

Gaza was located in Philistia, southwest of Jerusalem. Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Ekron represent the entirety of Philistine society, which was long known for its participation in the slave trade. They had taken an entire population and delivered it as slaves to Edom. The Edomites would have sold the captive people to traders from around the world. There was no concern for the breaking up of families and their welfare. God would send His judgment on Philistia, and they would lose their identity as a nation, 1:7-8.

## **Judgment on Tyre, 1:9-10**

Tyre was located to the north of Israel and was a major sea port on the Mediterranean. Like the Philistines, God condemns the people for delivering up an entire population to Edom, 1:9. Most likely the people they delivered to Edom were Israelites and for this they were held accountable to violating the covenant of brotherhood. Centuries before, there had been a peace treaty signed between Hiram, King of Tyre and David, King of Israel. God expects people (and nations) to live up to their word. For their treachery they would be destroyed. During the sixth century B.C., Nebuchadnezzar took up the task of destroying Tyre. The city would be destroyed by Alexander the Great centuries later.

## Judgment on Edom, 1:11-12

The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob. Residing to the south of the Dead Sea, Edom was located on important trade routes leading to the east. Much of the nation's income came through the profit of the slave trade. Edom had long been an enemy of the Israelites, and in this place God calls out their continual hatred toward Israel. Parts of verse eleven parallel with Obadiah 10-12. Teman and Bozrah were principal cities of Edom. Because of their lack of compassion and love, Edom would be destroyed.

## Judgment on Ammon, 1:13-15

Ammon was located northeast of the Dead Sea on the edge of the Arabian Desert. Both Ammon and Moab were descendants of Lot, Genesis 19:37-38. They were guilty of unimaginable atrocities against the children of Israel to expand the borders of their kingdom. They heaped out torture on even the unborn, ripping open the wombs of mothers. Some have speculated this was done to decrease the male descendants of Israel. Rabbah was the chief city of the Ammonites, and Amos prophesies that it will be destroyed with divine vengeance, and the king and ruling families would be carried off into captivity.

## Judgment on Moab, 2:1-3

Moab is mentioned next in Amos' prophecy. Some feel it is listed directly after Ammon because of their ancestral heritage. In this passage Moab is condemned for committing what might have been considered the utmost form of disrespect in the ancient world: exhuming the dead body and burning the bones of the king of Edom. Hubbard writes, "Burning a body was an extreme form of criminal punishment designed to purge completely the land of its wickedness."<sup>1</sup> Some commentators feel that the Moabites would have used the ashes of the king of Edom in the erection of a building where one of their gods would have been worshipped. For this, God would send fire down on the Moabites. Isaiah and Jeremiah would also comment on the severity of God's judgment against Moab. See Isaiah 15:5; 16:11; and Jeremiah 48:36.

## Judgment on Judah, 2:4-5

The six nations discussed heretofore are all in the same region as the people of God. Now the focus comes home to Judah and Israel. They too had done great wickedness in the sight of God. Judah's wickedness was in the form of religious apostasy. Their crime was against the Lord. They *rejected the law of the Lord And have not kept His statutes*, 2:4. They delighted in idolatry and the wisdom of men. Even prophets, several good kings (Hezekiah, etc.), and priests could not turn the people back to God's way. This ultimately led them to destruction in 587 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar.

## Judgment on Israel, 2:6-16

While the sins of Judah were primarily spiritual in nature, the sins of their northern neighbors were that of a moral and political nature. The indictment begins in verses six through eight as Amos points out Israel's covetousness, immorality, and lack of compassion for the poor. Selling the poor into slavery

(2:6) indicates the character of a people who had long forsaken God. Israel's society during the days of Amos was very litigious, which resulted in the trampling on the head of the helpless. Many Israelite landowners had an incredible desire to acquire more land. Going along with this was the rampant immorality. This would have related to the worship of Baal. Men and their sons would have thought nothing in using the same prostitute—all in the name of religion. Verse eight mentions garments taken as pledges. These were the outer garments worn by the poor, and if they were pawned, they were to be returned by dusk, Exodus 22:26; Deuteronomy 24:12. This law was being violated, and again, it reveals the character of the people of Israel. This corruption and immorality involved the entirety of society—even those in the ruling class. While all this immorality was going on, persons were in the temple hypocritically praising God.

After outlining these sins, Amos contrasts the great acts of God in taking care of His chosen people. God gave them their land, delivering it to Israel from the Amorites. God had taken a strong and powerful enemy and delivered it into the hands of Israel for victory. God was the one who brought them out of Egypt, sustaining them through the wilderness. God had liberated them and blessed them. God made Himself available to prophets so His message could be communicated to the people. Nazarites were people who had consecrated their lives in service to God. They were to abstain from the consumption of grapes and any of its products. They were not to shave their head (see Numbers 6). They were a symbol of being made separate for the Lord, but Israel had forced the Nazarites to violate their vows. They prohibited the prophets from prophesying. Rejection of all that God did for them reveals the ultimate in ingratitude.

Because of their rebellion and lack of thankfulness, in verses thirteen through sixteen God reveals what He is going to do to Israel. The weight of God's judgment would come crashing down upon them. The enemy would come and:

Flight will perish from the swift, And the stalwart will not strengthen his power, Nor the mighty man save his life. He who grasps the bow will not stand his ground, The swift of foot will not escape, Nor will he who rides the horse save his life. Even the bravest among the warriors will flee naked in that day, declares the Lord, 2:14-16.

There was a day of the Lord coming for Israel. They would not go unpunished.

## **Amos defends his right to speak, 3:1-8**

God was bringing judgment against Israel. The relationship between God and Israel was special and is brought out by the usage of family in verse one. They were privileged-You only I have chosen among all the families of the earth..., 3:2. God had redeemed Israel from bondage and had made a covenant with them. Because of their refusal to keep this covenant, they would be punished. The language of verse two suggests that God knew Israel in a very personal way, which was more special than the relationships with other nations. Israel had been called to a higher plane and because of their violation of the covenant, God would punish them for all their iniquities. In verses three through eight Amos defends his right to speak. He had been sent out on a mission to deliver God's message to Israel. Israel needed to know they had crossed the line and would be caught in their sin just as a lion roars when it catches its prey and just like a

bird caught in a trap. God's message should have made the people move in fear. They needed to be aware of the impending doom coming on their nation.

## **Judgment is coming, 3:9-15**

Israel took great comfort in that they were God's chosen people. They felt safe and secure to engage in whatever conduct they pleased without punishment. The message of Amos and other prophets is that God was going to hold them responsible for violating the covenant they made with God at Mount Sinai. Divine favor had now become a thing of the past. Israel would be destroyed. Their great enemy (Assyria) would surround the land, rob the nation of its strength, and loot its cities. Samaria (Israel's capitol) would be destroyed.

Imagine how this message must have sounded to a materialistic, arrogant, and prosperous society. No doubt Amos' message fell on many deaf ears who could not possibly imagine their land being destroyed. Living in the lap of luxury (3:14-15), persons living in the Northern Kingdom would be brought down and destroyed by their great enemy, the Assyrians.

## **For discussion**

1. Where was the home of Amos? What was his occupation before becoming a prophet?
2. Describe the political times of Amos.
3. Describe the social & economic times of Amos.
4. Why do you think God would choose a herdsman from Judah to bear His message to the northern tribes?
5. What does the phrase for three transgressions of \_\_\_\_\_ and four mean?

6. Who were Hazael and Ben-Hadad III?
7. What was the sin that connected Gaza, Tyre, and Edom? What made this sin so devastating?
8. What was the atrocity committed by Ammon?
9. Why did God bring swift and severe judgment on Moab?
10. What was the nature of Judah's sin?
11. Find four separate sins committed by Israel in 2:6-8.
12. Describe the ways God showed His favor on Israel in 2:9-12.
13. How severe was God's judgment going to be? See 2:13-16.
14. How is God's relationship with Israel described in Chapter 3?

15. How did arrogance, prosperity, and materialism lead to Israel's downfall?

(Endnotes)

1 Hubbard, David Allan, Joel and Amos, p. 137.