

## *A Shepherd Speaks*

**Amos 3:1-2, 7-8** Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: <sup>2</sup> You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. <sup>7</sup> Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. <sup>8</sup> The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?

**Matthew 13:54-58** He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power?" <sup>55</sup> Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" <sup>57</sup> And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." <sup>58</sup> And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

## *A Shepherd Speaks*

Who and what is a prophet? In the broadest sense of the word, a prophet is someone who delivers God's message to others. A prophet is a messenger, a spokesperson for God. Essentially, a prophet is a preacher and most often the sermons are preached to the king or religious authorities. In today's jargon, we would say that most often, a prophet is someone who speaks the truth to power. Forecasting the future is not the primary function of the prophet - although they often warned people of the consequences of their actions. Moses is considered to be the greatest prophet of all.<sup>1</sup> He stood up to Pharaoh, speaking truth to the greatest power of that time. At Mount Sinai, Moses brought the Ten Commandments – God's message – to the people. We don't see much mention of prophets again until centuries later when we come to the time of the kings. Maybe it'll help if we look at a timeline of the Old Testament.

What some people refer to as the classical time of the prophets doesn't begin until the prophet Amos arrived on the scene around 750 B.C., about two hundred years after the nation that had been ruled by David and his son Solomon had divided into two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Amos was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees. There are some faint hints in the old Hebrew text that Amos may have been more than a common laborer; he may have owned the herd and the groves of trees. That isn't important, but it is significant that he wasn't a professional prophet. He wasn't a priest. He wasn't the chaplain to the royal family, or some other religious figure. He was a shepherd. Amos was from Tekoa in the southern kingdom of Judah. Tekoa was a little village south of Jerusalem, located a few miles below Bethlehem.

Most of us, if we pay attention, sometimes experience a little nudge from the Holy Spirit, a still small voice, a whisper of inspiration, much like Elijah experienced up in the mountains. But Amos had a much more dynamic encounter with God's Spirit. It was like the roaring of a lion, impressive, undeniable, overwhelming, and probably frightening! Amos set off to deliver the message that he heard from God. He left his country of Judah and traveled into Israel to the north. Centuries later Jesus would say that a prophet wasn't respected in his own country. Perhaps this was why God sent a prophet from Judah up north to Israel. This was no casual trip. Israel and Judah were not good neighbors. The name Amos means "to load" or "to carry a load." Amos took the load God had given him. He carried the load. And he loaded the ones he preached to with that load.

In both Judah and Israel, these were good years. The times were calm, peaceful, and prosperous. Business was good. Housing starts were up. Good food and good wine were being

enjoyed. Attendance at worship was good and tithes were rolling in. Against this background Amos began to deliver the message saying, “Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” “Thus says the Lord.” Amos declares that he is a messenger bringing a message from God. The authority lies with God, not Amos. When Amos uses the pronoun “I,” the “I” is God, not Amos. “For three transgressions and for four” is an expression. Neither God nor Amos is giving an exact count of the sins of Damascus. The expression means, “They’ve sinned again and again.” Repeatedly, Amos uses this formula to condemn the actions of Israel’s neighbors.

The first rant is about Damascus, the leading city of Syria. Syria is a traditional enemy of Israel. The next is against Gaza, that is to say, the Philistines, another long standing enemy. The third is Tyre, a neighbor to the northwest, on the coast. The next three are Edom (south of the Dead Sea), the Ammonites (east of the Jordan), and Moab (southeast of the Dead Sea). These three nations were distant kinfolk. The Edomites were descended from Esau, Jacob’s brother. The Ammonites and Moabites were descendants of the sons of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. But being distant kin didn’t mean that they were beloved neighbors. In fact, just the opposite was true.

In all six of these pronouncements the nations appear to be condemned for international crimes - but there was no international law back then. Abraham Heschel, a great rabbi of the last century and an expert on the prophets, says, “Amos presupposes the conception of a law which was not embodied in a contract, the conception of right and wrong which precedes every contract, since all contracts derive their validity from it.”<sup>2</sup> Even without treaties, even without international law, even without a Geneva Convention, the concept of right and wrong still exists. Just because something isn’t illegal doesn’t make it right. These six nations are being raked over the coals for the brutal ways that they have acted against other nations. The Ammonites used gross brutality in their campaign to expand their territory, ripping open the bellies of pregnant women with the sword. The Moabites burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime. That action didn’t gain them any territory or increase their power. It was nothing but “the gratification of hate.” (Abraham Heschel)

In these judgments of six surrounding nations we see that God isn’t “the private deity of Israel. The Lord cares when the Moabites commit crimes against Edom.”<sup>3</sup> God is God of all nations and all people, not just of the Hebrew people with whom a covenant was made at Mount Sinai.

You can almost hear the people of Israel cheering. “You go, God! We’ve fought with those people for years. Wipe them out. Get them out of our hair and out of our way.” The crowd gathered around Amos has been counting. Things like this have a rhythm. A seventh proclamation will make this string of messages from God complete. And they weren’t disappointed.

The seventh declaration of God’s displeasure was against Judah, the southern kingdom, closer relatives still, fellow Hebrews whose ancestors had also been part of the exodus from slavery in Egypt. But there’s no love lost between the nation of Judah and the nation of Israel. If God is mad at Judah, that’s great news! Wild cheering breaks loose! The crowd roars with elation! God is mad at all of our enemies! They expect a rousing benediction - and then they’ll head to the wine shop to celebrate.

But Amos isn’t through! Surprise, surprise! “Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” (Amos 2:6) Israel? The crowd is stunned! Israel? What have we done? We thought God was mad at our enemies – and on our side!” The list is long. It has nothing to do with actions toward other nations. Instead it’s about how the nation of Israel treats its own people. The poor are exploited and sold into slavery. The afflicted are pushed aside and neglected. Father and son both force sex on the same housemaid. There is no justice in Israel. Instead, violence and robbery are the system that prevails. The poor are ground into the dust while the wealthy have summer and winter mansions richly decorated with ivory.

Speaking for God, Amos declares, “I rescued you from slavery in Egypt; I redeemed you. I led you and protected you for forty years in the wilderness. I brought you into this good land – and

look at how you have treated me and treated each other.” God isn’t just angry. More than that God is hurt. “There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern. The message of God is not an impersonal accusation, but the utterance of a Redeemer who is pained by the misdeeds, the thanklessness of those He has redeemed.”<sup>4</sup> (Amos 2:10-12) Out of all the people on earth, God had chosen the Hebrews to have a special relationship with them. God redeemed them and revealed more of himself to them than anyone else. And they had been prodigal children. Amos had to remind the people that “chosen-ness” isn’t divine favoritism or immunity from consequences. On the contrary, it means being more seriously exposed to divine judgment.

Already in this book of Amos, there are three lessons for us - just as there were for the nation of Israel. First, God cares about all peoples, not just us. Second, God cares about how we treat others, both foreigners and our own people. Third, those who have a closer relationship with God are held to a demanding standard of love and justice. Israel had forgotten those lessons. God held six other nations accountable for their brutality in war, especially in regard to how much the non-combatants suffered. God held Judah accountable for neglecting their relationship with God. And Israel was held accountable for the way the poor suffered and the rich ignored them. The charges leveled by God through Amos aren’t about the personal relationships that individuals have with God. The charges and the consequences involve the policies and the cultures of nations. We would do well to remember them, lest we too become a disappointment to God. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 34:10 Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, Harper & Row, 1962) p 38

<sup>3</sup> James Limburg, *Hosea – Micah, Interpretation Series* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1988) p 89

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, Harper & Row, 1962) p 38-39

Amos 3:3,7 These verses suggest intimacy. The prophet is one who walks together with God. Intimacy is not familiarity. God is Lord; the prophets are servants.