

# OpenTheo

## August 20th: Amos 1 & John 16:16-33

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Introduction to Amos and the oracles against the nations. A little while and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.

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## Transcript

Amos chapter 1. The words of Amos who was among the shepherds 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.

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 Haziel, 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 Avon, and him who holds the scepter from Beth Eden.

And the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kerr, says the Lord. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds.

I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him 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. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood.

So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds. Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever. So I will send a fire upon Timan, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.

Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabba, and it shall devour her strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind, and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together. Says the Lord.

The Book of the Prophet Amos is the third book within the Book of the Twelve, the collection of the writing of the figures commonly referred to as the Minor Prophets. It almost certainly predates its predecessor in the collection, Joel, although it can be connected with it thematically and on a literary level. In Joel chapter 3 verse 16, at the end of that book, we read, The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem.

And in verse 2 of this first chapter of Amos, the same language is taken up. Marvin Sweeney, in his treatment of the Book of the Twelve, notes that Amos also contains reference to a locust plague in chapter 7 verses 1 to 3, and that Amos' vision of the restoration of the people also contains the sorts of references to the extreme fertility and fruitfulness of the land that we see at the end of the Book of Joel. Furthermore, he argues, it leads naturally to the Book of Obadiah which follows it, through its focus upon the need to punish Edom at its beginning and end.

The ministry of Amos is set in the context of the days of Uzziah and Jeroboam II, both of whom had lengthy reigns beginning around the 780s BC, depending on the chronology that you follow. The prophecy is dated more specifically to two years before the earthquake, a massive natural disaster which archaeological work has dated to approximately 760 BC. Some geologists have argued that this was the largest earthquake in the region within the last 4000 years, likely around an 8 in magnitude.

While it is not mentioned in the books of the Kings or Chronicles, it was a memorable enough event in the nation's life that Zechariah could refer to it over 200 years later, in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 5, and you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel, and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. It is difficult to date some of the minor prophets with any certainty.

However, while Hosea also ministered during the reign of these kings, as did Jonah, Amos' ministry was probably among the earliest of the pre-exilic prophets in the Book of the Twelve. During the period of Amos' ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel was in the ascendancy under Jeroboam II and dominated the southern kingdom of Judah, which was his place of origin. Assyria was not at this point the power in the region that it would soon become and had recently been under Adad-Nerari III.

This left something of a regional power vacuum which Israel was well positioned to fill. The Arameans or Syrians, who had previously troubled Israel, declined after Adad-Nerari III defeated Damascus in 796 BC, a defeat followed up by other significant losses in the decades that followed. With the Syrians greatly weakened and Assyria's involvement in the region limited after the death of Adad-Nerari, Israel was then able to recover much of the land that it had formerly lost.

This is described in 2 Kings 14 verses 25-27. He restored the border of Israel from Lebohemath as far as the Sea of the Araba, according to the word of the Lord the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gathhepha. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

But the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash. However, many of the gains made by Israel at this time during the reign of Jeroboam II were hollow and they would all be short-lived. Already some of them seemed to be chipped away in the latter half of his reign.

Within a generation Israel would fall to the Assyrians and the entire nation extinguished. What appeared to be a great flourishing of the nation was not the cause for confidence that some might have thought that it was, and as we read through Amos it becomes clear that various cracks were already appearing. One could imagine people saying forty years later, looking back on the time of Amos' ministry, that the signs of the coming national disaster were already starting to appear.

Among these cracks, as Daniel Carroll observes, was the growing oppression and injustice within the land of Israel itself. Pushing back against some earlier over-confident accounts that posited a sharper, polarised distinction between rich urban elites and

poorer rural peasants within a tributary system, he suggests that while such a reconstruction might better fit the situation in Judah in the second half of the 8th century BC, the situation at the time of the Book of Amos likely didn't operate with such a clear centre-periphery opposition. Rather, the problems identified by Amos may have been more pervasive within the society, operating on every single level, with abuse of a system of patronage which would have had many localised expressions, with not only magnificently wealthy oppressors, but smaller landowners oppressing those who are under them also.

Amos is identified as a shepherd from Tekoa, a town in Judah about ten miles south of Jerusalem. The word for shepherd used of him here is not the regular word, however. We learn more about him in chapter 7 verses 14-15.

Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel. Determining Amos' social status is not easy.

It is quite likely that he was a man of at least some means. He seems to be well educated and likely owned flocks and property, where he grew his sycamores. As his own testimony states, he was not born into a prophetic vocation, but he was called out of his former life to prophesy to the people.

The dating of Amos' ministry to two years before the earthquake likely implies that his prophetic ministry was of short duration. Furthermore, various of his prophecies seem to look forward to the earthquake, which would have served as an initial sign vindicating his message. See for instance, chapter 8 verse 8, Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? Some scholars have suggested that the darkening of the sun at noon, described in the next verse, refers to an eclipse that occurred in 763 BC.

Also, in chapter 9 verse 1, I saw the Lord standing beside the altar, and he said, Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people, and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword. Not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape. In chapter 9 verse 5, The Lord God of hosts, he who touches the earth and it melts, and all who dwell in it mourn, and all of it rises like the Nile and sinks again like the Nile of Egypt.

The prophecy begins with the voice of the Lord roaring from Zion, causing the land to wither and mourn. He is about to enter into judgement with the nations, and then with Judah and Israel. This opening chapter focuses on the oracles to the nations, statements of judgement against Damascus and the Syrians, Gaza and the Philistines, Tyre, Edom and Ammon.

Moab will follow in the beginning of chapter 2. Such oracles against the nations might have been delivered in the context of conflict and holy war. We might think of the attempts of Balak to get Balaam to curse the children of Israel, for instance. However, the prophecies concerning the nations that we find in scripture, while resembling such oracles on many occasions, break the mould in others.

First, Israel and Judah are often themselves included as recipients of these words of judgement. Second, prophecies to the nations are not purely condemnations or messages designed to favour Israel and Judah over them. The Lord also addresses foreign nations with words of grace on occasions, and speaks of raising up foreign nations to judge his people.

Such oracles bear witness to the increasingly international scope of the Lord's message and redemptive work. The Lord is also a concern for the nations, not just for Israel. They also illustrate the existence of more general moral standards, a sort of natural law knowable by people of every nation, offenders against which the Lord, as creator and God of all, would bring into judgement.

Furthermore, the nations here had all had dealings with the Lord and his people over their history, so they weren't ignorant of him, nor without their more particular obligations to him and to his people. Sweeney makes the suggestion that all of these nations would have been allies or vassals of Jeroboam the Second, giving their transgressions a political overtone. As the Lord was the king of Israel, the master of their ally or suzerain, by their actions they were acting unfaithfully or even treacherously.

He makes the further intriguing suggestion that the order of the nations presents an itinerary by which Israel, presuming itself to be surrounded by buffer powers against whom their God was avenging historic wrongs, would actually discover that the Lord had been encircling them and was about to go for the jugular. An interesting feature of the literary form of the oracles against the nations here in Amos is his use of a numerical  $x, x + 1$  formula, more familiar from the end of the book of Proverbs. Here the use takes a for three transgressions and for four form.

The actual transgressions mentioned, however, don't match the number as they do in Proverbs. Carroll speculates that the whole series of the oracles against the nations might be read itself as an  $x, x + 1$  pattern, with Judah being the seventh and Israel the eighth, or that perhaps we could divide it into two, three, four patterns, with the accent falling upon Edom, the most significant of the opposing nations in the wider book, in the first sequence and then Israel in the second. The first of the oracles against the nations is addressed to Damascus, to the Syrians or the Arameans.

They had cruelly treated Gilead, Israel's possession in the Transjordan, threshing it with threshing sledges of iron. This is likely an image of utterly crushing and opposing people. On account of their sin, their city and its rulers would be brought down and consumed by

fire, the Arameans being sent back to Kerr, the place of their origin.

With Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Ashkelon, Gaza was one of the five historic cities of the Philistines. While Gaza is perhaps treated as the lead city here, all of the other historic cities of the Philistines are mentioned in the verses that follow, save Gath, which had probably ceased to be a major city by this time. The Philistines had been a thorn in Israel's side for centuries, especially during the period of the judges and the early kingdom period.

Samson, Saul and David had each had significant conflict with the Philistines. The Philistines had also dealt Israel a defeat at the battle of Aphek at the end of Eli's life that was a watershed moment in its history. Gaza and the Philistines are here condemned for carrying a people into exile and delivering them over to Edom.

Verse 9 refers to Tyre doing the same and it seems likely that the three nations were united in this particular crime. Perhaps they had taken captive a whole town, likely of Israel or Judah, in a raid and sold them to the Edomites, with the Phoenicians from Tyre as intermediaries. Such man stealing was punishable with the death penalty under the law and this international trade in forcibly captured slaves was an abomination to the Lord.

Sweeney wonders whether the historical context behind this was the revolt of the city of Libna and Edom against the rule of Judah, mentioned in 2 Kings chapter 8, with the Philistines assisting Edom in encroaching into former territory of Judah. The Philistines would suffer a similar judgement to the Arameans. Fire would also be sent against them and they too would be cut off.

They would be crushed, albeit not completely destroyed, by the Assyrians a few decades later. The judgement upon Tyre that follows is a shorter one but it is very similar to the one that precedes it, the one addressed to the Philistines. Perhaps the most significant detail is its reference to the covenant of brotherhood.

Perhaps this might refer to the relations between Israel under David and Tyre under Hiram. Tyre has subsequently betrayed and acted against its historical ally. This it seems to me is a more likely interpretation of the expression here than many of the others that have been proposed.

Edom, the fourth nation in the sequence, was, as we should remember, descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob. At the height of Israel's power, Edom had been under its rule and also during many periods of Judah's prosperity. Perhaps Israel is the brother that is in view in verse 11 or perhaps the brother is a covenant partner that Edom betrayed.

Whatever the historical events behind the condemnations here, once again Edom is being judged on account of its brutality and possibly also on account of its practice of

man stealing and the slave trade. Its two chief cities, Teman and Basra, would be judged as a result. It would suffer the same fate as the other cities that have been judged to this point.

The Lord would send a fire upon them and devour the strongholds. Gilead was the victim of the predations of Damascus with which this chapter began. Gilead also suffered the cruelty of the Ammonites, the fifth of the nations in the sequence.

In warfare they had performed the most abominable of acts, cutting open pregnant women, all for the sake of their territorial expansion. Like the other nations in the oracles, their punishment for their cruelty and their wickedness was sure. It would not be revoked.

While the other sentences speak of the Lord's sending of fire upon the walls of certain cities, here it speaks about the Lord kindling a fire in the wall of Rabba. It too would have its strongholds devoured, its rulers being sent away into exile. A question to consider.

Can you think about ways in which each of these nations mentioned in the oracles against the nations in this opening chapter had had previous dealings with the Lord? John chapter 16 verses 16 to 33. A little while and you will see me no longer, and again a little while and you will see me. So some of his disciples said to one another, What is this that he says to us, a little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me, and because I am going to the Father? So they were saying, What does he mean by a little while? We do not know what he is talking about.

Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I mean by saying, a little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a human being has been born into the world.

So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. I have said these things to you in figures of speech.

The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf, for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and

have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.

His disciples said, Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech. Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you. This is why we believe that you came from God.

Jesus answered them, Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered each to his own home and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace, in the world you will have tribulation.

But take heart, I have overcome the world. At the end of John chapter 16 Jesus concludes his farewell discourse to his disciples. The end of John chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16 speak about the suffering and persecution that they will all experience in the world.

Even in that situation of suffering and persecution, Jesus will give them his joy and his peace. The opening part of our passage focuses upon Jesus' riddle that he gives to his disciples in verse 16. A little while and you will see me no longer, and again a little while and you will see me.

In a somewhat amusing manner this statement is repeated almost four times in succession in the verses that follow. It recalls earlier statements that Jesus had made to his disciples. John chapter 14 verse 19 for instance.

Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. The meaning of Jesus' statement in verse 16 is not entirely clear. To what is the little while or are the little whiles referring? Are there two little whiles or merely one? If we read it as just one little while it might be referring to the same thing from two different perspectives.

In some sense they will see him no longer and in another sense they will see him. Another possibility is that Jesus is referring in the first little while to the period between his death and resurrection and then in the second little while to the period before his second coming. We could also read this first of all as a reference to the period of Christ's death when they will see him no longer and then the little while referring to the period after the resurrection.

Yet another possibility is seeing Jesus' departure not so much in terms of his death as in terms of his ascension to the Father. In such a framework his coming to them will not primarily be through the resurrection but through the gift of his spirit at Pentecost. Jesus gives the example of a woman struggling to give birth and then the joy in the birth that follows the suffering of the birth pangs as an example for understanding his death and resurrection.

The language that Jesus uses and the figures of speech that he employs are important.



In talking about a woman and her hour coming Jesus is employing language that has a great charge within the Gospel of John. This language of the hour that comes is usually applied to his own death.

Here however it is used in reference to a woman. Throughout the Gospel of John there are a number of references to and stories involving women. Jesus' mother Mary for instance is not named in the book of John.

Rather she is spoken of or spoken to as his mother or as woman. In speaking of and to Mary in a less particularised way I think the Gospel highlights her symbolic purpose. She is significant as an individual of course but she is also significant for what she stands for.

She is the mother or the woman who is about to give birth. Bringing a new man into the world after birth pangs is a paradigm for understanding what Jesus is going to do in his death and resurrection. His death is an event of birth pangs and his resurrection is being the first born from the dead.

Jesus opens the womb of the tomb. Such a connection between the womb and the tomb is found throughout the Old Testament and it continues into the New. We can think about poetic statements such as knit together in the lowest part of the earth in Psalm 139 referring to the womb.

Or we might think about the statement of Job naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return. That connection between the woman and the earth is also seen in the original judgments upon humanity where the judgment upon the woman and her womb is paralleled with the judgment upon the man and the earth. The womb and the earth are connected to each other.

For the first man Adam, the earth was his womb. He was fashioned from the clay. Every subsequent human being comes from the womb of their mother.

Recognising the connection between the womb and the tomb I think we can gain an insight into a deeper theology of the cross as the cross is an event of birth pangs followed by birth. We'll see John picking up on the symbolism a bit more in his crucifixion account but we should already register its presence here. After the resurrection and the ascension the disciples will have greater access to the Father in Christ's name.

Praying in Jesus' name does not mean praying for Jesus to pray for us but rather on account of Jesus having privileged access to the Father as we are known and loved by him. Now this more direct access to the Father should be related to the advocacy of the spirit that is at work through and in us. We might think of this as Christ's gift of his spirit by which we can pray with him and in him.

When we approach the Father we are not approaching a reluctant father who has to be persuaded by the Son to take concern for the church. He loves the church himself,

especially as he sees the church and the disciples of his son sharing his own love for his dearly beloved son. Jesus wants his disciples to approach the Father with confidence, asking things in his name.

This access to the Father and the union with Christ that they will enjoy is one of the causes of their joy as they will see Christ again. Even as their hearts are weighed down with sorrow at this point and will be weighed down further after Christ's death, the joy that they will experience in the resurrection will not be removed even by the ascension. Christ's departure then will not be an absolute departure, rather it is a departure that allows for a more intimate presence in and with them by his spirit.

Jesus warns his disciples once more about what is going to happen in the future. They are told they will soon be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. While it might seem in this situation that Jesus has been left alone, he will not in fact be alone as the Father will be with him.

Even in the agony of the cross, the Father is there. This is important to bear in mind lest we overstate the reality of Christ's forsakenness. Jesus promises his disciples that in their time of tribulation, in their time of trial, they will not be left alone.

He has already promised his disciples joy that will follow from their agony and their sorrow and now he promises them peace within the world and his presence. He has overcome the world. Even all of the attacks that we might experience within the world are ultimately futile, the futile flailing of a felled foe.

We should take good cheer, recognising in Jesus' victory the definitive character of his overcoming of the world. The ruler of this world, who presumes that he has triumphed at this time, has been decisively and definitively defeated. A question to consider.

Once again Jesus speaks about the new way that his disciples can address and approach the Father in prayer. This is a running theme of the farewell discourse and chapter 17 will bring this theme of prayer to its most powerful and pronounced expression. What sort of theology of prayer might we develop from the discourse to this point? How might we trace the Trinitarian character of prayer from Jesus' teaching in the farewell discourse?