

Midweek of Lent 4: leader

Locusts Here, Locusts There, Locusts Seem to Be Everywhere Amos 7:1–6

Introduction

Prophets were sometimes called “seers” (1 Samuel 9:9). It is therefore not surprising that references to their visions are prominent in their oracles. (Cf. Zechariah 2:10.) This behavior is also attested in the words that introduce prophetic books, such as “the vision of Isaiah” (Isaiah 1:1; cf. Nahum 1:1; Obadiah 1; Habakkuk 1:1). These visions often occur in a series. For example, Ezekiel offers four vision reports (Ezekiel 1:1; 8:1; 37:1; 40:1), Zechariah contains eight visions (Zechariah 1–6), and Jeremiah has two sequential visions (Jeremiah 1:11–13). Amos stands in this great company of prophetic seers.

1 Samuel 3:1b states that during the time of Eli the high priest and his sons Hophni and Phineas, the word of Yahweh was rare; a vision did not burst forth. This was due, in part, to Eli’s corrupt priesthood (cf. e.g., 2:12–17; 22–25). Israel faced a similar situation in the early part of the eighth century BC. The priesthood was apostate (cf. Amos 7:10–17), and so the word of Yahweh was rare (2:12b). In the days of Eli, Hophni, and Phineas Yahweh raised up Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1–10) to bring about a reformation in Israel. So also in the days of Amaziah, Yahweh spoke to Amos and empowered him to unsettle the status quo. In Amos’s first two visions (Amos 7:1–6) the prophet’s approach to Yahweh is more active than deferential, more combative than submissive. He approaches Yahweh much like Jacob did in his all-night wrestling match with Yahweh (Genesis 32:22–32).

Questions and Answers

(Note: Questions only are found in the student section.)

Q1. What did a locust plague indicate? See Deuteronomy 28:38, 42.

A1. Israel was under a covenant curse. The use of “judgment” in Amos 7:4 provides a framework to understand much of the Book of Amos as a covenant lawsuit (see Micah 6:1–8). Yahweh is the judge, the prophet is the prosecuting attorney, and Israel is the defendant who was guilty of breaking the Sinaitic covenant. The verdict is that covenant curses (e.g., Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28) must follow. These are reflected most prolifically in Amos 4:6–11, where the prophet interprets the plagues as Sinaitic covenant curses punishing Israel for her sins.

Q2. What does Amos 7:1–6 tell you about the prophet?

A2. It would be easy to see Amos as a “fire and brimstone” preacher who delights in telling people that they are going to be obliterated by God. A quick reading of the book might convince someone that Amos is a “turn or burn” zealot who travels north from Tekoa and dumps Yahweh’s wrath at Bethel in a heartless manner. But nothing could be further from the truth. Amos’s first two visions not only announce Yahweh’s grace, they also bring Amos the prophet into a sharper focus. He intercedes for the people not once, but twice. He takes up the cause of the “least of these my brothers” (cf. Matthew 10:42; 25:40) when he prays for Jacob who is so small (Amos 7:2, 5). This is not a “fire and brimstone” preacher who delights in placing sinners into the “hands of an angry God.” Amos seeks neither revenge nor retribution, but mercy and grace. He is an advocate for the downtrodden, the poor, and the afflicted who appear throughout the book. *Caring* about poverty is one thing; *ending* poverty is revolutionary. Amos seeks to do both.

To know this about Amos is to understand that throughout the rest of the book his disturbing oracles against Israel, Judah, and the nations are not spoken with sadistic glee. Like Jesus after him, Amos looked at the multitudes who were harassed and helpless, sheep without a shepherd, and he had compassion upon them (cf. Matthew 9:36; Mark 6:34).

Q3. In the Old Testament, the verb “forgive” (in Hebrew *salach*) is used only with Yahweh as its subject and refers to a total pardon of sins. The denial of forgiveness is rare (e.g., 2 Kings 24:4). Much more common is Yahweh’s willingness to forgive. See Exodus 34:9; Jeremiah 31:34. On what basis, then, does Amos ask for divine pardon?

A3. The prophet’s plea in Amos 7:2, while not denying the justice of the plague, begins from the premise that these are Yahweh’s people, and on this basis begs for forgiveness. If this vision is equated with the plague described in Amos 4:9, then the people did not repent. Their only hope was for Amos to intercede. So the prophet does not plead Israel’s extenuating circumstances, the frailty of their human nature, or the force of their temptations. Amos begs for forgiveness, not because Israel’s sins were small, but because Jacob was so small. He casts himself upon the mercy of Yahweh (Exodus 34:9; Jeremiah 31:34).

Q4. Who is “little Jacob”?

A4. “Little Jacob” denotes the poor and needy people in the Book of Amos who stand before the wealthy and powerful (e.g., Amos 2:6–8; 4:1; 5:11). Amos is interceding not for the “notable men of the foremost nation” (Amos 6:1) but for the masses who are described throughout the book as the righteous and needy people being oppressed by the systemic sin that kept them down and lifted others up. He is praying for “Joseph” who is

ruined (cf. Amos 6:6c). The axiom is as follows: people with a small view of Yahweh (cf. 9:10) have a small heart for people. People with a big view of Yahweh (cf. Amos's five visions) have a big heart for *all* people. Yahweh's compassion for "small Jacob" is echoed in any number of earlier texts. For example, in response to their cry in a time of national weakness, Yahweh delivered Israel from Egyptian political, economic, and spiritual bondage (Exodus 3:7–9). The cries of widows and orphans are heard in heaven (Exodus 22:21–24), while Israel was chosen as "the fewest of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7–8).

Q5. Amos's two intercessions in these visions indicate that a prophet's role was not only to see visions and preach but also to pray for people. Moses is Israel's paradigmatic prophet (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15), and one of his roles was to intercede for Israel (e.g., Exodus 32:11–14; Deuteronomy 5:5). Amos follows in this tradition, while Yahweh prohibits Jeremiah from taking on this role (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11–12; 15:1–4). Who is Israel's greatest intercessor? See Isaiah 53:12; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; Luke 23:34.

A5. Jesus intercedes for sinners (Isaiah 53:12; Romans 8:34). One of His chief functions as High Priest is to make intercession for His people (Hebrews 7:25). Luke 23:34 records Jesus' intercession for the Roman soldiers who crucified Him. The Spirit of Jesus also intercedes for the baptized when we do not know what to pray (Romans 8:26–27). Paul, after the manner of Jesus, repeatedly interceded for the unsaved Jews of his day (Romans 9:1–5; 10:1). Climactically, Jesus not only prays for His enemies, He steps into our place (2 Corinthians 5:21) and rises again for our vindication (Romans 4:25).

Q6. Amos's next vision, the vision of fire, closely parallels his first vision. This time, however, Amos indicates that the entire land *along with the crops* is being destroyed. "The great deep" in Amos 7:4 further points out that the historical account of the fire is universal in its implications. In this way, the second vision repeats the first, only with more intensity. Just as he did in 7:2, again in 7:5, the prophet pleads with Yahweh and this is met with the same gracious relenting (7:6). Why do you think Yahweh relented (in Hebrew *nacham*) two times for Amos?

A6. God's change of mind is one of the most neglected themes in Bible studies. He changes His course of direction at some of the key junctures in the Old Testament: the flood story (Genesis 6:6), the Sinai revelation (Exodus 32:12, 14), and when the monarchy is instituted (1 Samuel 15:11, 29, 35). *Nacham* is incorporated into Israel's creedal statements about Yahweh (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Jeremiah 18:7–10). The King James Version translates *nacham* with "repent." Contemporary translations seek to find other words, with the most common being "regret," "be sorry," "grieve," "have compassion," "retract," "think better of," "change one's mind," and most often, "relent."

To be affected and to interact genuinely does not mean some imperfection in God. In fact, it is a sign of stubbornness and sinful pride when someone is unwilling to listen and respond authentically.

Q7. Amos, an agriculturalist, was acutely aware of the fact that a fire in the field during the dry season would destroy acres of crops. By analogy, Southern California, with a climate similar to that of Israel, experiences these kinds of fires every summer. The prophet sees the drought in true perspective (see Amos 3:7). Yahweh's fire is consuming the tillable soil and its produce as well as the underground sources of water. The results of this second vision are more severe than the first. How does the prophet's use of fire in Amos 1–2 connect with his second vision?

A7. Amos's vision of fire and judgment oracles in chapters 1–2 have the same outlook: Yahweh is the Firefighter par excellence. Death by fire is a means of capital punishment (cf. Genesis 38:24; Leviticus 20:14; Joshua 7:25). Its purpose is the complete annihilation of evil. God's judgment by fire also anticipates the everlasting fire of hell to which all unbelievers will be consigned on Judgment Day (Matthew 3:12; 5:22; 13:40; Revelation 20:9–10, 14–15).

Q8. There is a close connection between the first two visions and the plagues in Amos 4:6–11. What are they?

A8. In both cases Yahweh sent plagues, and in both instances Israel had the opportunity to repent. Ironically—in the visions—Yahweh is the one who changes. Israel will not (Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Because the plagues listed in chapter 4 did not “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8) Amos proclaims, “Prepare to meet your God” (Amos 4:12). Visions three, four, and five depict what will happen when Israel meets Yahweh. It will be a catastrophic end.

Q9. Moses (Exodus 3:1–15), Jesus (Matthew 3:16), and Paul (Acts 9:1–9) are empowered for ministry after their visions. Read Amos 7:10–17. What did Amos's first two visions do for his courage and confidence?

A9. After the visions it would be unlikely for the prophet to be intimidated by King Jeroboam ben Joash, the priest Amaziah or any other human authority. Just like Paul, Amos was “not disobedient to the vision from heaven” (cf. Acts 26:19), but went about preaching with boldness because he had been in Yahweh's presence (cf. Amos 3:7). Isaiah 6:1–7 has the same function. After being in Yahweh's throne room this prophet says, “Here am I. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Conclusion

A God who is willing to change His course of action from Law to Gospel and a prophet who is willing to intercede for people means that Israel has a hope and a future (cf. Jeremiah 29:11). The nation will experience the most severe judgment, but there will also be mercy. Yahweh, who backs away from earlier decisions in Amos's first two visions, will change again. In the greatest reversal in the book, forgiveness and new life are declared to be Yahweh's final words (Amos 9:11–15). Divine change enables the primary attributes of Yahweh to remain at the forefront, namely, that He is a Person whose proper work is steadfast love and mercy.

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