

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 37

Introduction to Amos

Hebrew Alphabet *Resh - Tov*

The United States of America is a country that prides itself on independence, freedom, equality, and economics. The American economic system is termed “capitalism.” It is a free enterprise system that allows the market to dictate prices for goods and services. People are allowed to work in this system for their own individual prosperity.

In college, I was fascinated by economics, enough to make it my minor. The basics and intermediate classes, we fun, but I really enjoyed classes that focused on the interplay between the domestic and international. After law school and after working in a large firm for five-plus years, I became a small business owner. As a small business owner, I have gotten to work within America’s capitalistic marketplace. The nature of my small business (a litigation law firm) has also offered me a close interaction with other businesses in America, small, medium, large, as well as the businesses of multi-national corporations.

From my studies and experiences, I have concluded that capitalism is a wonderful system that can bring out the very best in people and industry. I have also seen that it can bring out the worst. In America, our people have set up laws, courts, and processes to try and maximize the good of our system while minimizing the bad, yet still read of the Enron’s, the Madoff Ponzi schemes, and other scandals.

In the late 1800’s, an American clergyman published a set of sermons as if given by the devil. In these sermons, similar in approach to C. S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, Satan is preaching his message to the American people in an effort to get them to follow him in behavior. In one sermon on economics, Satan preaches the virtue of the monopoly as a tool of economic progress, which could and should be used to the detriment of the people.

This might seem unusual to the 21st century American for at least two reasons. First, we rarely hear sermons on the sin of economic structures! Second, monopolies are more a concern to modern people as a Milton Bradley game idea than an economic problem. This is in part due to laws passed early in the twentieth century to curtail the power and existence of monopolies (called “Antitrust” laws.)

The reason for these and similar laws is to curtail the abuses that can arise from unfettered capitalism. The good side of capitalism is its ability to raise the level of

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life for everyone in a society, as raising water lifts every boat. Left without some manner of regulation, however, capitalism can lead to the wealthy preying upon the poor, letting “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” In a land of opportunity, many believe that kind of unfettered capitalism can be abusive.

These ideas come to the front today as we combine a lesson that teaches the last three letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and begins the study of the prophet Amos.

HEBREW

Our final three letters are Hebrew equivalents of our English “R,” “S,” and “T.” The Hebrew letters are called, “*resh*,” “*shin*” (or “*sin*”), and “*tov*.” Let us consider each:




This is the Hebrew “*resh*.” It is pronounced as an “r.” Looking at it carefully, many early students of Hebrew often get a bit exasperated, exclaiming, “How am I supposed to tell the difference between a *resh* and a *daleth*? Look at the two side by side:



resh) and (daleth).

These two do look quite similar, especially when typed in a smaller font:



resh) and (daleth).

The difference between the letters is found in the top right corner. For the *resh*, the corner is soft and rounded. For the *daleth*, the corner is bold and squared to the extent that it is overly squared. Over time, your eyes will readily see the difference, even though at first it might look like those games where two seemingly identical pictures are presented with the instructions, “Find the seven differences above!”



This letter is called a *shin* or simply *sin*, depending upon where a dot is placed. The *shin* places a dot at the top right (ש) whereas the letter is a *sin* if the dot is at the top left. Not surprisingly, the dot makes a difference in how the letter is pronounced. If at the top right, it is pronounced “sh.” If at the top left, it is pronounced as merely an “s.”

This is the first letter in the Hebrew word *shibboleth*, (meaning “ears of corn” or “ears of grain”). The pronunciation difference in the sin and shin are the point of the story in Judges 12:1-6 where fugitive Ephraimites are challenged to pronounce the word before determining their ethnic heritage. In the Judges story, it is told that the Giliadites said the word pronounced with a *shin*, “*shibboleth*” while the Ephraimites pronounced the letter as a *sin*, “*sibboleth*.” The Ephraimites were slaughtered, so we will learn to pronounce a *shin* as a *shin*, and we will also know a *sin* when we see one!

ת

This final Hebrew letter is a “*tov*.” It is pronounced like a “t,” much like the Hebrew *teyt* (ט) is pronounced. In appearance, this too can cause some students a bit of trouble. To some, the *tov* looks remarkably like a *chayt*. Look at the two carefully and make sure you can see the difference:

ת (*tov*) and ח (*chayt*).

The differences we noticed in the *resh* and *daleth* are here as well. The *tov* has the top and right side of a *resh* while the *chayt* has the top and right side of a *daleth*. There is another difference that makes the *tov* stand out. On the left side, the *tov* has a protruding foot at the bottom. The *chayt* just comes to a straight end.

We will use our new letters as we structure this week’s lesson around three new Hebrew words:

ראה (pronounced ra-ah: “he saw”),

שאג (pronounced sha-ag: “he roared”), and

תורה (pronounced torah: “law”).

Our story is placed in the days of Jeroboam II, the same time frame as the last lessons on the prophet Jonah. We will begin considering the society of Israel at the time and then delve into the beginning of the book of Amos.

ISRAEL AT THE TIME OF AMOS

(ראה) – “HE SAW”

Amos begins with an identification of the era of his prophetic ministry. In what serves as the title verse to the book, Amos 1:1 reads,

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.

We have in this title verse, three indicators of the date of the prophetic words, at least two of which allow us to reasonably date the time period. The king of Israel identified is Jeroboam II, the same king under which the prophet Jonah lived (discussed in the last lessons). This allows, depending upon the dates assigned to Jeroboam II, for the words of prophecy during the time stretch of 793-746 BC.¹ By also adding the ruling king of Judah, the verse narrows down the time period involved. Like Jeroboam II, Uzziah had a long reign. Generally, scholars date his reign from about 783-742 BC.

There is a third time identifier that certainly meant more to the first readers of this prophetic book than it does to us today. That identifier is, “two years before the earthquake.” Evidently, there was a significant earthquake that stood out in the memory of the Israelites such that they could use that event as a reference point in dating. A current example for Americans might be, “We bought our house right before 9-11!” At least one notable Jewish archaeologist (Yigael Yadin²) believes his group found evidence of a large earthquake in the ancient city of Hazor that he dates somewhere between 765-760 BC.³ The earthquake referenced in Amos was so significant that over 100 years later, it is still remembered at the time of Zechariah who wrote,

And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah (Zech. 14:5).

Amos seems to have been a Judahite, based on the identifier as a shepherd of Tekoa. Most scholars understand this to be the town in the hill country of Judah, six miles south of Bethlehem, and ten miles south of Jerusalem fortified by

¹ Jeroboam II reigned for 41 years. Some scholars assign that as early as 793-753 BC. Other

² Born to a famous archaeologist father (Eleazar Sukenik), Yadin first rose to prominence as Chief of Staff for the Israeli Defense Forces. He left the military at age 35 to devote his life to archaeological studies. His doctoral thesis was on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and he was a principal excavator for sites nearby including near Qumran and Masada. Later in life, Yadin entered the political arena starting a political party and rising to the rank of Deputy Prime Minister where many credit Yadin with playing a pivotal role that led to the Camp David Accords and the peace between Israel and its neighbors. Yadin was born in 1917 and died in 1984.

³ Yadin, Yigael, *Hazor II: An Account of the Second Season of Excavations, 1956*, (Magness Press 1960), at 24-37.

Judah's king Rehoboam as noted in 2 Chronicles 11:6.⁴ The name seems to apply also to the shepherding region east of this town (see 2 Chron. 20:20).

This identifying information gives us a time and place for the words of this southern prophet who is speaking a message to the northern people of Israel/Samaria during the mid-eighth century BC. A look back to the Kings narratives gives us our key Hebrew word for studying this period:

Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat [Jeroboam I], which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel... 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 (2 Kings 14:23-26).

Verse 26 in the quoted passage notes that, "the LORD saw," and it is here we cross our first Hebrew word for this lesson. The Hebrew in verse 26 begins with the word רָאָה (*r'h*) pronounced "rah-ah." This word means "He saw." It is followed by the noun "Yahweh" as the subject. We have here Yahweh, the LORD, "saw." The Kings account gives us some insight into what God saw. God saw (רָאָה *r'h*) the "misery of Israel." He saw (רָאָה *r'h*) bitterness and helplessness. Kings also tells us that even though God was offended by the evil of the king and the idolatry of the people, he showed mercy, providing that their boundaries were extended and secured. But this was mercy; it was not a response to covenant loyalty.

History accords this period as the rare time when the superpowers of Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south were both weakened, leaving Israel a chance to prosper in peace.⁵ The prosperity is noted in Kings as Jeroboam II expanded Israel's borders. Kings shows this prosperity as God's act of mercy, undeserved by Israel or its king. The world would have had a different history if Israel had responded to God's mercy with gracious obedience and love. If Israel's leaders had shown love to Yahweh as God and love to each other, then Amos would not have written his prophecy as he did.

⁴ See, e.g., Draper, Charles, *et al.* (ed), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Holman 2003), at 1559.

⁵ See the explanation in the earlier lesson on Jonah. The ancient *limmu* lists of the Assyrians note two major outbreaks of the plague in this time period. As might be expected, after these outbreaks decimated the local population, for years the Assyrian kings fought internal civil strife and were not able to go to war externally expanding the empire's borders or enforcing the vassalage of neighboring states. A compounding problem was the external northern threat of Urartu to Assyria.

The Israelites did not make right choices. Rather than appreciate God's mercy, the Israelites abused it even as they abused the less prominent in society. This abuse is described through the eyes and words of the prophet Amos.

As we delve into Amos, we see a more expansive view of what God saw (ר'ח) in Israel, as Israel took advantage of God's mercy and the prosperity of the days of Jeroboam II. A snapshot of God's indictment against Israel is found in Amos 2:6-16. As declared through the prophet Amos, God saw:

- “They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals” (2:6).
- “They trample on the heads of the poor” (2:7).
- They “deny justice to the oppressed” (2:7).
- They are sexually immoral (2:7).
- They are idolatrous loan sharks and drunkards (2:8).

A recurrent theme is shown here.

The powerful and wealthy in Israel were enjoying themselves at the expense of the powerless and destitute.⁶

The Israelites were pronounced in these sins, in spite of the many acts of mercy from God that had allowed their very existence, as well as their prosperity, yet the riches were allowing the rich and powerful to trample the poor and less fortunate. To put it into America's capitalistic terminology from the introduction of this lesson, wealth and prosperity were not lifting the boats of all with opportunity. It was lifting the boat of the privileged on the back of the un-privileged.

The picture painted is stark and clear. Israel was finally in some “good days.” It gave a chance for everyone to benefit from God's mercy, repent, and serve each other as they served God. Instead of that happening, those in position to take advantage of their fellow Israelites were soaking up every opportunity to do so. Courts of justice became places where the rich could manipulate the law to the disadvantage of the poor. Opportunities to serve became times of abuse. This was something God would not allow to stand, as we see in our next word.

⁶ Page, Frank and Smith, Billy, *The New American Commentary: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, (Holman 1995).

GOD'S RESPONSE TO ISRAEL (לִשְׁמַע) – “HE ROARED”

The prophetic word given Amos was not a quiet whisper of God found in the wind or the still places of a quiet desert morning. Amos begins loud and bold with the attention-getting proclamation:

The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers (Amos 1:2).

The word used for God's voice is “roar” (לִשְׁמַע - *sh 'g*) pronounced “sha-ag.” This is the roar of a lion:

Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold a young lion came toward him *roaring* (לִשְׁמַע - *sh 'g*) (Judg. 14:5).

The young lions roar (לִשְׁמַע - *sh 'g*) for their prey, seeking their food from God (Ps. 104:21).

This roar was a deep guttural sound that reverberated through the countryside. It was the roar of a thundering storm:

Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. Under the whole heaven he lets it go, and his lightning to the corners of the earth. After it his voice roars; he thunders with his majestic voice, and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard (Job 37:3-4).

Page gives a good synopsis of this roar of God,

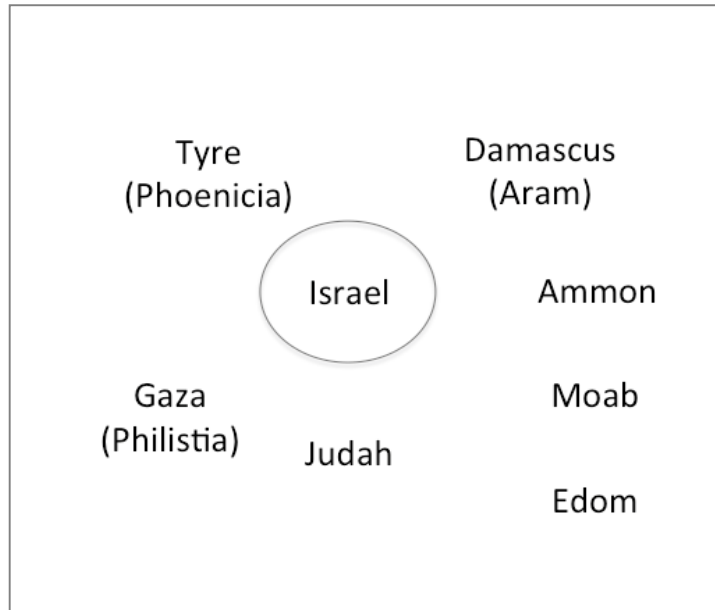
The message of Amos must have sounded like the roar of a lion capable of freezing its prey in its tracks (cf. Isa 5:25–30). As loud claps of thunder rattle buildings, so the word of the Lord through Amos startled and shook his audiences with its power. God's message delivered by his authorized messengers will always have an authentic ring and a startling effect.⁷

While the word of the Lord roars like thunder, the effect is the opposite of a rainstorm. The pastures, which welcome rain, “mourn” and the top of Mount Carmel is not refreshed with water, but instead “withers.” This thunder will

⁷ Smith, B. K., at 39.

devastate the land, bringing drought, and stripping away its productivity and sustenance.

Following this roar, Amos begins with seven oracles of judgment for the people surrounding Israel (Phoenicia, Aram, Philistia, Ammon, Moab, Edom, and even Judah). The oracles dot all around Israel geographically, no doubt earning “Amens!” among the Israelites up until the final eighth judgment is delivered. This eighth and final oracle pronounced a harsh and thorough judgment on Israel. At that point, it becomes clear that the earlier seven judgments against the foreign powers were not excluding Israel, but were zeroing in on Israel as the bull’s-eye of the roar.



God makes it clear through this succession of oracles that *he* will be executing judgment upon the sins of the nations surrounding Israel. The verbs for judgment include “I will send a fire” (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 2:2, 5), “I will break the gate-bar” (1:5), “I will cut off” (1:8, 2:3), and “I will turn my hand” (1:8). God will not sit idly by while the nations wallow in sin. These people sold others into slavery, ran through cities killing men, women and children, committed unspeakable atrocities on pregnant women, and in the case of Judah, committed what may be the most significant sins of all. The indictment against Judah brings us to our third Hebrew word.

THE ROOT OF JUDAH’S SIN (תורה) – “LAW”

The final oracle among those that start the book of Amos concerns the southern kingdom of Judah. Immediately, at the start of this oracle is the proclamation that Judah will get the LORD’s wrath,

Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees (Amos 2:4).

The word translated “law” is the Hebrew word “torah” (תּוֹרָה). This is a word that has different connotations depending upon its usage. In classical Jewish usage, Torah was assigned seven different meanings. Those meanings ranged from a scroll containing divine words to a set of everyday rules unrelated to divine sources (e.g., “the *torah* of driving a car”).⁸ Our concern here is what the hearers of Amos’s oracle would think by “*Torah*.”

Even in the Hebrew Bible, *Torah* can mean several things. Torah can generally refer to God’s instructions, parallel in this sense to a commandment, a statue, or a law. We see this idea in Genesis 26:5,

...because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws (*torah*).

There are a large number of Old Testament references to the *torah* dispensed by God to Moses. In this sense, *Torah* included not simply the laws, but the stories, narratives, speeches, songs and poems included in the revelation:

And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Dt. 27:3).

Deuteronomy continually uses the reference to *torah* in describing the laws and statutes God issued:

And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law (*torah*) that I set before you today? (Dt. 4:8).

It is in this sense that we need to understand Amos and Judah’s betrayal of the *torah*. At its root, the *torah* – whether a book, a verse, Ten Commandments on stone, or a collection of narratives and laws set before Moses for the people of Israel – the *torah* is divine revelation. It is God’s message communicated to God’s people. This gives the source of God’s indignation and roaring.

The Israelites were not like the other nations, seeking to understand God through his general revelation. The Rabbi Paul would later write the Christians at Rome that even the secular world was without excuse in their failure to honor God because the world reflects much of God’s nature that people ignored:

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20).

⁸ Neusner, J., et al., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Brill 2000), Vol. 3, at 1448.

Paul would later add that the non-Jews,

...show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them (Rom. 2:15).

In spite of the fact that all have some measure of revelation of God and his standards, the Israelites had something more. They had the special dispensation that came from a revealed and direct involvement of God in their history. Among the first advantages Paul considered for the Jews was this point:

Then what advantage has the Jew? ... Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (Rom. 3:1-2).

This is the *torah* that brings God's special wrath down. The Israelites were blessed with special revelation of God. They were blessed in order to be a blessing to the other nations. Instead of taking God's divine revelation and *torah* and using it to be a light on a hill shining to light the way to the world, they trampled upon the letter and spirit of God's instructions.

They did not love God with their heart, soul, and mind; they were using idols to sustain their pagan lifestyles. They did not love their neighbor as themselves; they abused their neighbors to enrich their own lives. God instructed the Israelites to care for the destitute and those inadequately defended. Scripture is replete with passages like Exodus 22:22.

You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.

In Deuteronomy 10:17-18, the Israelites were told of God's position on the treatment of those without a voice in society:

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

This describes neither the heart nor the actions of the Israelites in Amos's day. Amos indicts them for turning "justice to wormwood" (Amos 5:7). They "trampled on the poor" (Amos 5:11) and took "bribes" for justice (Amos 5:12). They lived in direct violation of the direct requests and instructions given them by God. At this, God roared!

CONCLUSION

Three Hebrew words help us introduce the book of Amos. With these three words, we study and learn:

God sees. God speaks (loudly if necessary). God governs.

In the words and visions of Amos, we see God loudly proclaiming judgment that will echo forth from Israel beyond into the nations. The God who sees, does not sit idly by in the face of sin. He speaks with power and authority as the God who comes in judgment.

This point should especially ring true in the ears of the church today. The final book of Scripture contains seven letters to seven churches. In these oracles to the church, a common refrain echoes from each of the seven letters,

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22).

We may live in a time of the eternal forgiveness of the cross, but we are still called to holy obedience before a God who sees, who speaks, and who governs!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...*the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter*” (2 Kings 14:26).

Over and over in Scripture, we read that God sees. God does not suffer from man’s limitations of space, time, limited attention or vision. God sees not only the outside, but he is able to look upon the heart of man. God’s eyes saw our “unformed substance” (Ps. 139:16) and our length of days before we were even made.

I wonder if sometimes we think that since we are ignoring God, he is likely ignoring us as well. That is foolish. God sees. His vision is beyond 20/20. He sees the actions and the motives.

Realizing this should be our constant drive toward the Lord’s Prayer’s phrasing, “forgive us our trespasses” (Mt. 6:12).

2. “*The LORD roars from Zion*” (Amos 1:2).

Do you have one of those alarms that starts out quietly and then escalates in volume until your neighbors can hear it? God started out so quietly with man. In the Garden, we read of afternoon strolls and gentle provision. God is indeed patient and long-suffering. But he is still God. And he is a God who speaks.

Paul explained it well. God's voice is heard in nature and in our hearts, yet there is a very clear expression of God that is unmistakable in its message. That expression is divine Scripture—the Bible.

I think for many of us the Bible is like the consumption of calories or the spending of money in reverse. I know that when I do not keep track of what I am eating or spending, more times than not, I overeat or overspend. In the opposite way, I think many of us fail to spend regular time in God's word hearing his voice because we do not keep track of it. We know the importance of time in his Word, but one day leads to another and without a routine that holds us accountable, times passes by with little to no time spent hearing him speak.

We have an incredible gift in Scripture that should command our time and attention, yet at times we all take it for granted. Might I suggest we stop now and make a mental and spiritual commitment to regularly sit before God and his revelation and listen for his voice before it becomes a roar!

3. “...*they have rejected the law of the LORD*” (Amos 2:4).

We know some basic laws that are not that troublesome for most of us. We stay out of trouble on stealing, murder, and many of the big ones. But we need to pause and consider that the law of the Lord was much more than that. When Jesus was asked the most important *torah* of the *torah*, he listed two: first, to love God and second to love our neighbor.

How are we doing on the second point? Do we consider it met when we are kind to the people in our lives? Do we feel good about it when we give some money to a beggar or homeless person? If we give money to assist in an international tragedy are we satisfied?

How are we as a nation on this point? Do our national priorities reflect a Christian thirst for justice regardless of power or position? Do we push our politicians to responsibly help educate and provide opportunities for everyone, regardless of status?

I suggest this as a lunch topic after class. Discuss real help and compassion for those less fortunate. How can we use our blessings in the church and in America to be a blessing for others?

WANT MORE?

Amos as a book is structured into words and visions. Many of these are built around the number seven. Take time this week to read Amos, making notes on the “sevens” in the book and the themes that recur. Email us your thoughts at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.