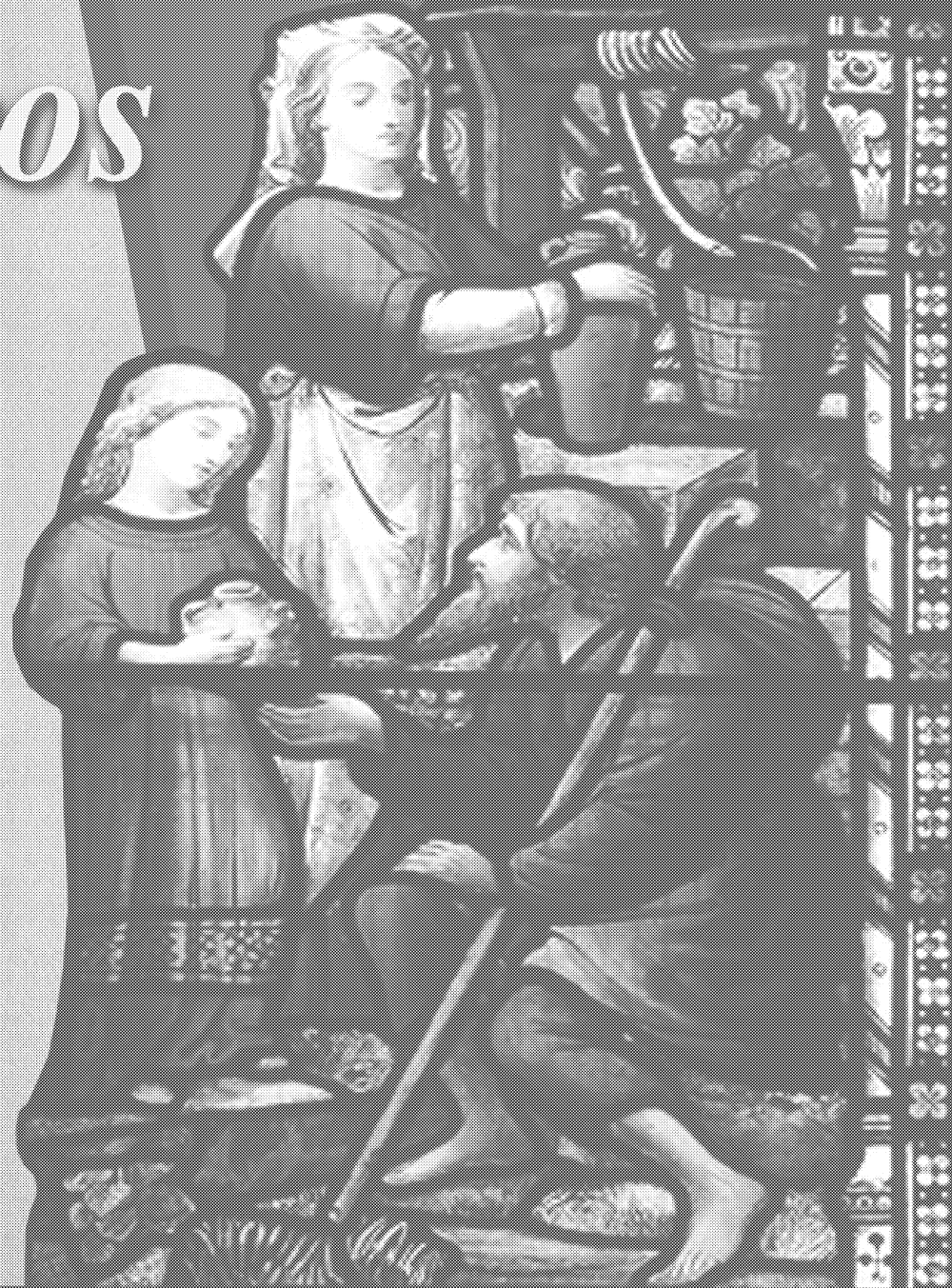


Catholic Scripture Study
INTERNATIONAL

Amos



The Book of Amos

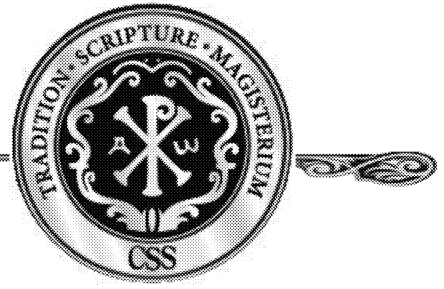
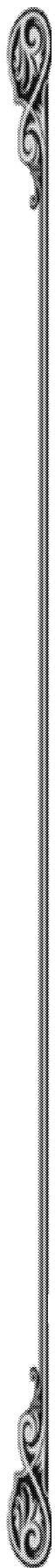
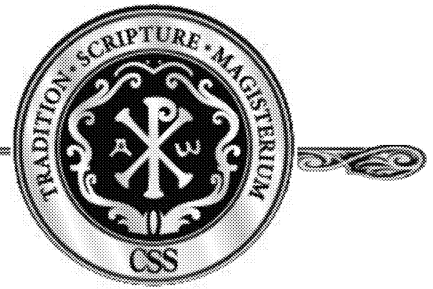


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The Book of Amos



Introduction

Theme

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

This popular quote from Amos defines for many people what Amos is about: social justice. Amos is seen as the quintessential Biblical text on social justice, and for good reason. A major theme of Amos is that religion without justice is no religion at all. Amos describes the Israelites as enthusiastically participating in religious pilgrimages and festivals and even tithing, but their treatment of the “righteous” and “needy” violate their covenant with Yahweh. The rich exploit the poor and the courts are corrupt and offer no redress.

Paganism heavily influenced Israelite religious practices (see II Kings), but Amos, unlike his contemporary Hosea, does not stress this pagan influence and only hints at the corruption of cultic practices (cf. Amos 2:7). He is more concerned with the contrast between the practice of religion and the treatment of the poor. In Amos’ view it is precisely the mistreatment of the poor that is proof of the broken covenant between God and his people, and Israel, who has heretofore thought of herself as special, privileges, and protected by God, is about to endure the consequences.

Amos brings the startling message that, contrary to their understanding, their special election by Yahweh will bring them condemnation rather than protection. Their covenant with Yahweh meant that they were bound to follow God’s laws, including worshipping him alone and treating the poor with kindness. Their failure to live out the stipulations of the covenant guarantees that they will be called to account for failing to love God and neighbor, as God requires.

The sovereignty of God is also proclaimed by Amos: God is not only the God of Israel but of all the nations. Certain laws are written on everyone’s hearts, and so all nations should know what is morally correct. Those who violate the natural law will also be punished, but God nevertheless cares even for these nations.



Authorship, date of composition

Amos was the first of the “minor prophets” to write anything down. (The “minor prophets” are 12 prophets grouped together in the Bible. They are called “minor” not because they are insignificant but because their books are quite short). In the Hebrew Bible he is placed third among the Minor Prophets (the Septuagint places him second). He was, by his own admission, not a “professional prophet.” In other words, he did not belong to any guild of prophets that existed at the time. He was a “shepherd” and a “dresser of sycamore trees” who lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the small village of Tekoa. He was called by God to go to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, to preach against the corruption of the religion, and to defend the poor from exploitation by the wealthy. Amos preached and wrote in the 8th Century, BC. The two kings mentioned in v. 1, Uzziah of Judah (c.785-733 BC) and Jeroboam II (c.788-747 BC) narrow the time that he could have been prophesying. “Two years before the earthquake” is not very helpful, since we no longer know which earthquake he is referring to. One source dates this earthquake, due to some archeological findings, to 760 BC.

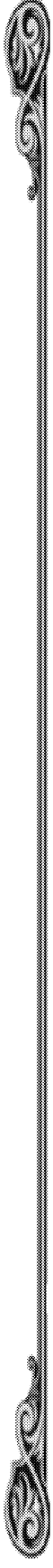
Although there is scholarly discussion on some passages of Amos as to whether or not they are later additions, there is general agreement that the book is written by one author, that being Amos, a shepherd-turned-prophet from Tekoa.

Background of Amos

A short history of Israel/Judah may help to understand the cultural milieu in which Amos preached. Moses led the Hebrews from Egypt around the year 1250-1200 BC. From 1200 BC to 1021 BC the Hebrews lived in the land with various other peoples in a tribal confederacy (this is the period covered by the books of Joshua and Judges).

Around 1021 BC a great new leader rose up, Saul (1 Sam 9-10). Saul was anointed King of the Hebrew tribes. When he failed to carry out God’s command to utterly destroy the city of Amalek, God “repented” that He made Saul King, and chose David instead (1 Sam. 15-16). Under David, the monarchy was firmly established, (1000-961 BC) and under Solomon (961-922 BC) the Kingdom of Israel flourished. After his death, however, it broke into two kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

From 922-800 BC (mostly) ineffective kings led these kingdoms. They were frequently embattled with the two superpowers of the region (Assyria and Egypt) and were often at odds with each other as well. Moreover each kingdom was tempted to follow after Ba’al, the Canaanite god. Israel often succumbed to the temptation. (See II Kings ch. 9-11). In the 8th Century, however, Egypt and Assyria went into a state of decline, as did Syria.



Uzziah and Jeroboam II, as well as their immediate predecessors, Jehoash of Israel (802-788 BC) and Amaziah of Judah (800-785) were strong leaders who presided over a time of prosperity that had not been seen since the time of Solomon.

Cities were re-conquered, lost territory regained, and the Transjordan trade route was secured throughout the territory. The two kingdoms were at peace with each other. There was a feeling of great confidence and optimism. Yahweh's people were protected by Yahweh! They were his special chosen people!

However, not everyone benefited from this prosperity. The wealthy were very, very wealthy. Archeological findings at Samaria revealed beautiful buildings with ivory inlays of Phoenician or Damascene origin. But the poor did not share in this prosperity. The State did not protect them from the dishonest practices of business, and the courts offered no redress since judges were corrupt. Moreover, while people practiced religion, it was often not the religion devoted solely to Yahweh, but was often syncretized (mixed) with the religion of Ba'al. (As stated previously, this is made even clearer in Hosea and II Kings). Finally, the prophets were forbidden to prophesy, and the Nazarites were corrupted and forced to drink wine (2:12). Thus, socially, morally and religiously Israel, which superficially looked in great shape, was actually falling into a dangerous decay.

It is this situation that Amos, a Shepherd and dresser of Sycamore trees, was called by God to challenge.

Outline of Amos

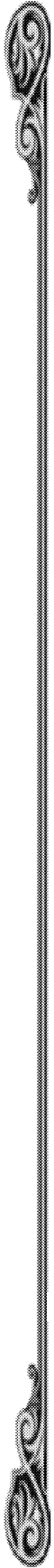
Introduction 1:1-2.

Judgments of the surrounding nations, Judah and Israel (1:3-2:16)

Israel warned and threatened (3:1-6:14)

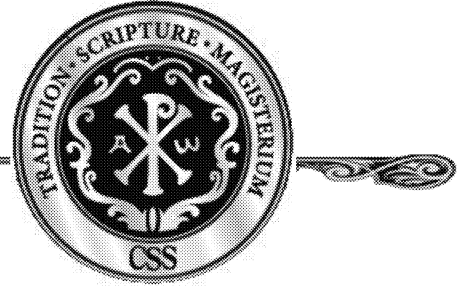
Series of visions (7:1-9:10)

Conclusion (9:11-15)



Notes:

The Book of Amos



Lesson 1

Judgments of the Surrounding Nations

Introduction

The first chapter begins with a short introduction of Amos: he lived in Tekoa as a shepherd, and around 760 BC he “saw” concerning Israel. In other words, he was called into a new role, that of prophet. He received these words as revelation—and then he spoke them.

The second verse introduces one of the main themes of the book: “The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem. The pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.” (Carmel was a mountain in northern Israel).

Chapters 1-2 then continue with oracles against seven nations, including Judah, the Southern Kingdom, before launching into an extended judgment against Israel.

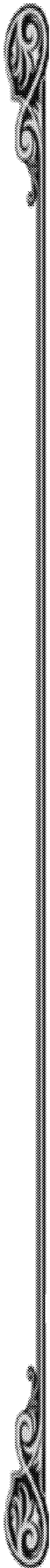
Amos 1:1—2:16

Chapter 1

[1] The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Teko'a, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzzi'ah king of Judah and in the days of Jerobo'am the son of Jo'ash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

[2] 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."

[3] 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. [4] So I will send a fire upon the house of Haz'ael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-ha'dad. [5] I will break the bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and him that holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kir," says the LORD. [6] 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. [7] So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. [8] I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him that holds



the scepter from Ash'kelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron; and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish," says the Lord GOD. [9] 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. [10]. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds." [11] 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. [12]" So I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah." [13] Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have ripped up women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. [14] So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour her strongholds, with shouting in the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; [15] and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together," says the LORD.

Chapter 2

[1] Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. [2] So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ker'ioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; [3] I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will slay all its princes with him," says the LORD. [4] Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but their lies have led them astray, after which their fathers walked. [5] So I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem." [6] Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes -- [7] they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same maiden, so that my holy name is profaned; [8] they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined. [9] "Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above, and his roots beneath. [10] Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of

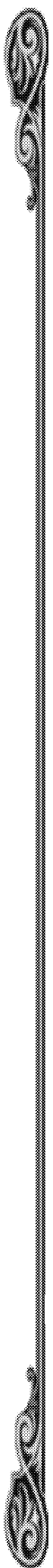
the Amorite. [11] And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?" says the LORD. [12] "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.' [13] "Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down. [14] Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life; [15] he who handles the bow shall not stand, and he who is swift of foot shall not stand, and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself, nor shall he who rides the horse save his life; [16] and he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day," says the LORD.

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Points to Ponder

Amos was from the Southern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom was often at odds with the Northern Kingdom, although they were at peace at the time. Amos immediately sets the tone of his prophecies by stating that Yahweh roars from Jerusalem. This was not a statement designed to incur the goodwill of the northerners. Jerusalem was the site of Solomon's temple, and was the city of David, and therefore the only proper place of worship. But the north had their own places of worship, established by Jeroboam I—Bethel and Dan among them. (See I Kings 12:28-33). Amos makes it clear that the Lord is present in a special way in Jerusalem, and therefore not in the northern sanctuaries.

Yahweh roars from his chosen home. And when he roars, the effects are withering and felt throughout the lands: He will punish all nations that are transgressors. And even more importantly, He will punish Judah and Israel. This would have been a novel message for the people of Israel to hear; after all, they were the chosen people. They had a covenant with God. He was bound to take care of them, or so they thought. In the past, Yahweh was understood to be a warrior God who fought the battles of Israel against her enemies (see Ps. 135 and 136) but now Yahweh will roar and "Carmel" will wither. Yahweh will act against Israel rather than protect her.



A “roaring lion” is also significant, in that lions were terrifying creatures that roamed the lands of Israel and Judah (I Kings 20:36; II Kings 17:25). The roar of a lion, if heard, would prompt the prudent listener to take immediate shelter. (See Hos.11:10). Today many Christians are comforted by pleasant images of God: the Good Shepherd, a gentle mother hen, a nursing mother, and so forth. A terrifying roaring lion is a challenge to our sensibilities.

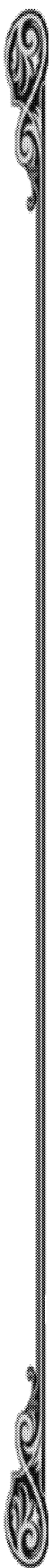
Amos begins his oracles against the nations with a formulaic “For three transgressions...and for four”. This method of introduction is found in other texts of the ancient near east, and in wisdom literature of the Bible (see Prov. 6:16; 30:15; 30:21; 30:29 and Job 5:19 for examples). It can be seen as a rhetorical device to help to memorize the oracle.

The first six oracles concern the neighboring nations. The basic charge against all the nations is the same; they have all rebelled in some way against Divine rule. The Hebrew word for “transgressions” (“pesha'im”) implies the idea of rebellion. Their transgressions all occurred during war. Damascus attacked Gilead with extreme cruelty; Gaza and Tyre carried off people into slavery; Edom went to war with “his brother” (likely Israel); the Ammonites attacked Gilead and ripped the wombs of women. Moab attacked Edom. They will all be punished with fire.

While Yahweh did not have a covenant with these nations he is God and thus sovereign over all these nations. He acts within their histories (peek ahead and see Amos 9:7). Although they did not know him in the same way as Israel and Judah, the natural law was written in their hearts. They should have known that it is not just to carry off entire peoples into slavery, burn bones of Kings to make plaster, and rip out children from their mothers' wombs. (See Romans 1: 18-21.)

Imagine Amos' first listeners. These first oracles would have been met with approval. They would have been quite happy to hear that their neighbors, who often made war on them, were going to be punished by Yahweh. Imagine, too, their growing shock when Amos begins his oracles against Judah and especially against Israel. Judah's crimes are different than the other nations; Judah has rejected the covenant. Judah is judged on different criteria because Judah does have a special relationship with Yahweh. The northern listeners would have been uncomfortably reminded by this - that they too, have this special relationship.

The pattern of each preceding oracle was the same: it is introduced by “Thus says the Lord” followed by an indictment, then a punishment, and finally concluded with “says the Lord”. The oracle against Israel is not the same. It is much longer, and the crimes are not war crimes, but crimes against her own people.



Israel is accused of these crimes:

- 1) The righteous are being sold as slaves, and the needy are sold into slavery to pay back a debt even when they owe a very little (such as the cost of a pair of sandals) (see II Kings 4:1-7).
“The righteous” indicates that innocent people, who should be protected by the courts, are being unfairly sold.
- 2) The poor are trampled and are treated unfairly by the courts. Corruption of the courts is also mentioned in Amos 5:10, 12, 15. This was a pervasive problem in ancient Israel that was addressed in Ex. 23:6.
- 3) A man and his son “go into” the same woman (this could be a slave, forbidden in Ex.21:8-9, or a cult prostitute, forbidden in Deut. 23:17).
- 4) A debtor is required to give his garment in a pledge (see Ex. 22: 26-27). These garments were supposed to be returned at sundown.
- 5) Poor farmers are being forced to pay fines with their produce (in this case, wine). The mention of the “house of God” seems to indicate that the wealthy are enjoying cultic celebrations with the profits gained by the exploitation of the poor. The wealthy do not seem to notice any difficulty with worship on one hand and exploitation on the other.
- 6) The prophets are silenced and the Nazirites are forced to drink wine i.e., to violate their vows

So, the social crimes of Israel are contrasted with the war crimes of the neighboring nations, and the crime of selling the righteous into slavery is going to be punished just as is ripping children from the womb. These sins of Israel don't seem to be nearly as egregious as those of the neighboring nations, yet Israel is being held accountable. But Amos is proclaiming that the God who is concerned with the international relationships between nations is equally concerned with the weak and the powerless.

Why is Israel held accountable? God, through Amos, reminds them of his deeds for them: he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and raised prophets and Nazirites (see Num 6:1-21), who have now been silenced and corrupted. To disregard the prophets and force the corruption of the Nazirites is to deny Yahweh himself, because it is he who raises them up. Faith is not merely a belief in the past, to acknowledge God's saving hand in the Exodus, but is also obedience before the manifestations of God in the present, particularly as seen in the prophets and Nazirites.

Finally the punishment is announced: The Day of the Lord, which in popular imagination was thought to be a time of reward and a fulfillment of Yahweh's promises to the Patriarchs, will be a disaster for Israel. There will be terror and helplessness. Amos reveals a major shift in the understanding of salvation history. Israel had begun to think of herself as saved and protected

by God because she was something special among the nations. She had begun to think of herself as beyond punishment. Amos reminds his listeners that the relationship between God and Israel is covenantal. A covenant is an *exchange of persons* in which each gives himself to the other. Israel has broken the covenant by withholding true devotion to Yahweh alone. The consequence will be a punishment from which no one will escape.

Catechism Connection

- To understand the basis of “just war theory”, see CCC 2309.
- To understand the authority of the state, see CCC 1897-1903.
- To understand the basis of social justice, see CCC 1929-1933.

Rome to Home

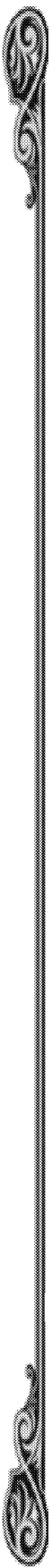
“The ‘new evangelization,’ which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a *proclamation of the Church’s social doctrine*.” As in the days of Leo XIII, this doctrine is still suitable for indicating the right way to respond to the great challenges of today, when ideologies are being increasingly discredited. Now, as then, we need to repeat that there can be *no genuine solution of the ‘social question’ apart from the Gospel*, and that the ‘new things’ can find in the Gospel the context for their correct understanding and the proper moral perspective for judgment on them.


~His Holiness John Paul II

Study Questions

It’s best to read the entire scripture reading for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the questions.

1. Why is it significant that Yahweh is portrayed as a roaring lion?

- 
2. Why is it significant that He roars from Jerusalem?
 3. Why might the mention of Jerusalem be alienating to the people of the North?
 4. How are the transgressions of each of the neighboring countries similar?
 5. Why is it “fair” that Yahweh, God of the Hebrews, punish these peoples, who would not have known him and did not have a covenant with him?



6. Why should these neighboring countries have known that their behavior was immoral (see chapter 1 Romans)?

7. How is the transgression of Judah different from the transgressions of the surrounding nations?

8. What are the specific crimes of Israel?

9. How does Yahweh punish Israel?

10. Why is Yahweh particularly grieved with Israel?

Voices of the Saints

“He that is kind is free, though he is a slave; he that is evil is a slave, though he be a king.”

~Saint

Augustine

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you’ve made in this lesson can be applied to your own life.

1. What difference might it make for you to see God as a “roaring lion” rather than as a “gentle nurse” or “Good Shepherd”? How might one reconcile these very different images?

2. As Christians, are we, like Judah and Israel, held to a different standard than “the nations” (for example non-Christians) by God? How can we make God sovereign in our lives?

Summary: Lesson 1

In this lesson we learned:

1. Amos was a shepherd from Southern Judah who was sent by God to the northern Kingdom, Israel, to pronounce judgment upon them.
2. He preached around 760-750 BC.
3. Israel suffered from a great disparity between the poor and the rich, from corrupt courts, and a syncretization of Yahwism with paganism.
4. Amos was most concerned about the treatment of the poor by the rich and the corrupt courts that failed to protect the poor.
5. Amos preached that the “Day of the Lord,” was to be a day of wrath and judgment rather than a day of vindication for God’s people.
6. Amos begins with an oracle against seven nations, including Israel and Judah, which God has judged and will punish.
7. God punishes the other nations for transgressions against him even though they were not in a covenant relationship with him. They would have known that what they were doing was wrong because of natural law, and because God is sovereign over all nations.
8. The idea that God would punish Israel and Judah would have seemed shocking to Amos’ listeners, who thought of themselves as protected by God.
9. The crimes of the nations were war crimes. Israel’s crimes are crimes against her own people.
10. God is concerned with large, international problems and concerned as well with the weak and powerless individual.