

1

The whirlpool of judgement

Please read Amos 1:1–2:3, 2 Kings 14:23–29

Israel was prosperous in the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC). In the two centuries since King Solomon's day there had never been such good times. Judah, under King Uzziah (783–742 BC), was also experiencing something of a golden age. They were, in the language of the prophecy, 'complacent in Zion' and 'secure on Mount Samaria' (6:1). Even so, there were still those who were poor and oppressed. And no doubt there was also a remnant of believers who grieved over the prevailing decadence and earnestly cried out to God for his reviving power to turn Israel back from her backslidings.

As in our own national experience today, Israel's relative peace abroad and prosperity at home generated the twin evils of a greedy, pleasure-seeking materialism and an easy conscience-salving formalistic religion. Those that could filled their days with the pleasures of excess. The cry for more and still more was

their only answer to the frustrating transience of sensual joys. 'Bring us some drinks!' is the watchword of the social round (4:1). The 'beds inlaid with ivory' and the addiction to carousing and entertainment stand as the abiding marks of a self-centred culture that lives only for the moment and sensual satisfaction (6:4-6). On the other hand, the disquieting memory of the nation's God, with its implication of offended holiness to be appeased, and the gnawing reality of death, with the uncertain prospect of an eternal destiny in the gift of that God, were alike palliated by an easy religion consisting in the multiplication of ritual observances, never commanded by God but sufficient to ease the seared consciences of wicked people. Outward observances—not excluding the modern ritual attendances at Christmas, Easter and even the odd morning service—make wonderful sops to the deeper, though suppressed, anxieties of the human conscience and to the disturbing eminence of a God whom a man knows he has disregarded in daily life and fears he must meet before too long. Empty ritual is the natural currency of man-made self-justifying religion and that is why God gives no place to it and calls for worship that is in spirit and truth (e.g. Psalm 51:16-17; Amos 4:4-5; 5:4-6; Matthew 23:23; John 4:24).

Into this society, so frighteningly reminiscent of our own, God sends the prophet from Tekoa to tell men and women the truth about themselves—to tell them of their sin in rejecting God's revealed will for their lives, of the justified anger of a holy God who cannot look upon sin, of the divine verdict on their decadent national life and their empty religion, of the impending destruction of their culture and national identity and, far transcending all of these hard words, of the way of salvation and the restoration of the Israel of God. Men who see no need to be saved hear only the words of judgement to come and, characteristically, dismiss God's messenger as a 'prophet

of doom'. 'The land cannot bear all his words,' complained Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (7:10). It is no mere coincidence that the modern cartoon prophet, with his sandwich-board bearing the words, 'Prepare to meet your God,' is drawn from Amos 4:12. How better to relieve yourself of an uncomfortable truth than by turning it into a joke? Men will laugh their way to hell when they would recoil from sober opposition to the living God. What we cannot face we dismiss with ridicule. But some reject the truth with grim anger. If the message cannot be ridiculed, it can be rejected as an aberration. The very idea of the 'prophet of doom' carries with it the supposition that a true prophet would not preach 'doom'. In such a view, doom is not just undesirable but *unthinkable*. This is the same argument as that of the atheist who asserts that because there is so much misery and suffering in the world, there can therefore be no God. His 'God' is, of course, an abstract construction of his own imagination, as opposed to the real God of the Bible who has told us who he is and why he permits the world to continue on its wicked way. The argument is invalid because the atheist's 'God' is a straw man designed only for the purpose of being knocked down. Similarly the idea of the 'prophet of doom' is an excuse to avoid the real facts—both of judgement and salvation. Judgement to come may be unthinkable to sinners, ancient and modern, but it is a fact of God's Word.

The first verse of Amos's prophecy demonstrates the folly of mocking God in these matters. Amos, we are told, prophesied 'two years before the earthquake'. Over 250 years later, Zechariah remembered that first pledge of judgement upon Israel, when he said to the exiles who had returned from Babylon, 'You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah' (Zechariah 14:5). God is not mocked! His Word is sure. His

righteous vengeance is as terrible as it is absolutely just. History itself is the ever-unfolding confirmation of this solemn truth!

The Lord roars from Zion (1:2)

The prospect of God's judgement, whether upon individuals or nations, could hardly be expected to engender widespread enthusiasm. Perhaps the exception to this rule is when the 'other side' is thought to be getting its just deserts. There is no place for such vindictiveness. It is 'a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31). There is certainly no doubt that God's judgements are continually executed 'in all the earth' (Psalm 105:7). The destruction of Hitler's Germany or the politico-economic decline of Britain may properly be seen as divine judgements. All events in history, however small or personal, are providences; they are, in a certain sense and to a particular degree, the 'finger of God', to be assessed in the light of Scripture-revealed principles by which God deals with men (Exodus 8:19). The interpretation of events is fraught with great difficulties. The precise identification of cause and effect is surely very rarely discernible beyond the general sense that one must gain from all dramatic turns of circumstances, namely, that God has a controversy with men and repeatedly demonstrates his power and paramouncy over our lives. The old cliché is as meaningful as ever: man proposes; God disposes.

Amos, however, was sent by God to declare specific future judgements upon particular nations. History has long confirmed the accuracy of these prophecies—a fact that invests this aspect of God's dealings with the human race with great urgency when viewed in the full light of New Testament prophecy that yet awaits its fulfilment in time.

'The LORD roars from Zion.' The use of the divine name is

emphatic. The name 'LORD', in capital letters, renders the covenant name of God, Yahweh, or, more familiarly, Jehovah (Exodus 3:14-15; 19:3-6). The point is that the name itself indicates God's relationship to his covenant people *and* to the whole human race. Thus Isaiah, in speaking of the future glory of God's believing people, says,

For your Maker is your husband—
the LORD Almighty is his name—
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
he is called the God of all the earth (Isaiah 54:5).

He is sovereign. He 'roars' by right. His law goes forth 'from Zion', that is to say, from the place where he appointed his people to worship him, the place where sacrifice for sin was to be made, the place where he revealed his glory to Israel and, indeed, to the whole race of men. He 'roars' like a lion. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. And, just as the roaring of a lion presages the devouring of the prey, so the Lord's roaring is the harbinger of his righteous vengeance against the wickedness of men and nations (Amos 3:8; Jeremiah 25:30-38).

'The pastures of the shepherds dry up.' The absolute sovereignty of God is further emphasized in the execution of his just judgements. Even the summit of Carmel withers—the very springs that could sustain Elijah through the drought of three and a half years in the previous century! (1 Kings 17-18.) The lesson is clear and simple: God's vengeance, which is holy and just, will be wreaked upon the whole world. As J. A. Motyer has so succinctly stated, 'The whole world is under divine observation, subservient to divine assessment and subdued without refuge before divine judgement.'¹

Approaching thunder (1:3)

Each specific judgement begins with the same basic formula: ‘This is what the Lord says: for three sins ... even for four, I will not turn back my wrath ...’ (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). Two points stand out in this superscription.

1. *‘This is what the Lord says.’* A series of denunciations issues forth upon the nations surrounding God’s covenant people. This whirlpool of judgement draws ever closer to Israel as the approaching thunder of God’s anger consumes one nation after another (Fig. 3). The nations are judged in terms of their relationship to God’s people, with the sole exception of Moab, whose sin was against Edom (2:1). This is no mere coincidence. It tells us something about God’s dealings with the world. His judgements are intimately connected with the redemption of his people. They are, for all their inconsistencies and failings, his people, his ambassadors, in this earth. He will correct them, yes, and with severity appropriate to their backslidings. Yet his handling of the unbelieving world is undertaken with the purpose of vindicating his cause and kingdom in their consciousness. The sins of the nations against Israel become the occasion of God’s demonstration of his purpose to exalt his truth and, in so doing, actually to save people from their sins. As a matter of fact, the prophecy of Amos unfolds just such a scenario. The promise of salvation overarches the inevitability of divine judgement as the message of grace comes increasingly to the fore, rising to that glorious crescendo in the final chapter where the redemption of the people of God is promised in the most sublime language of revelation (3:2; 4:10–13; 5:4–8, 24; 9:8–15).

The two divine activities—condemnation and redemption—go hand in hand but do not have equal weight in the prophet’s

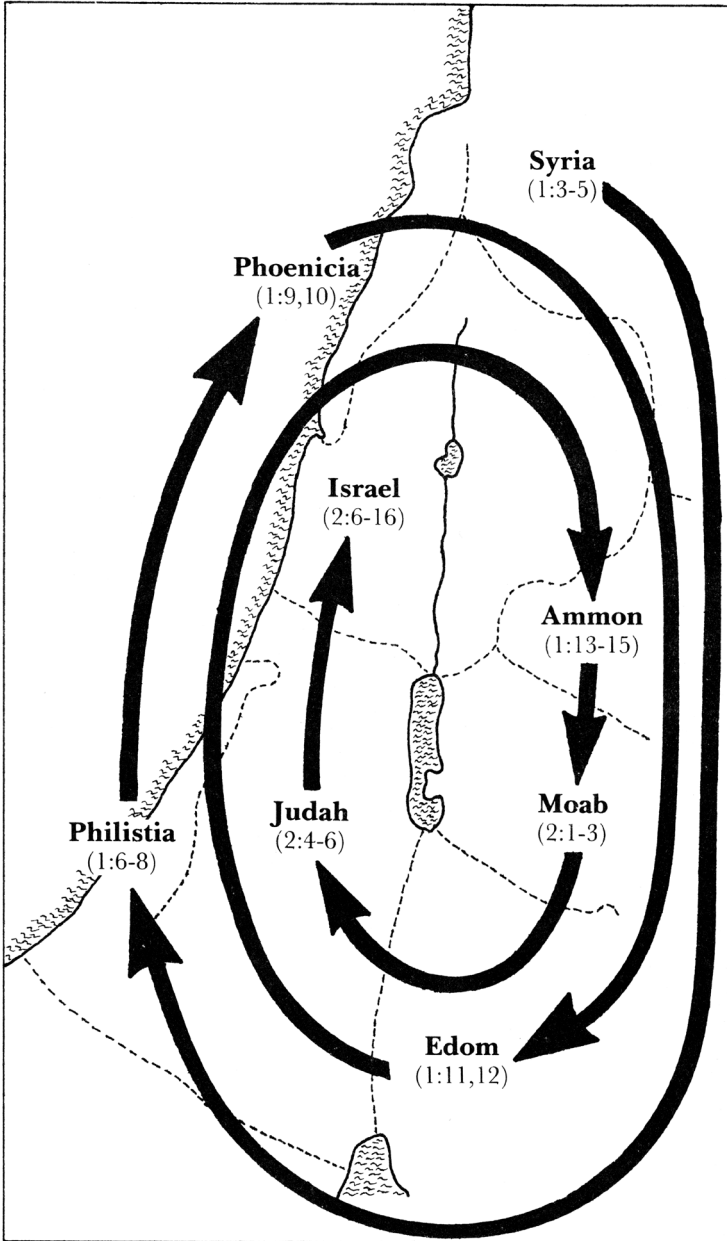


Figure 3. The Whirlpool of Judgement, Amos 1:3-2:16

ministry. Amos is no more a prophet of doom than Jonah will be just a few years later. Yes, there is judgement. But ‘David’s fallen tent’ will be restored (9:11), just as, in Jonah’s case, Nineveh will repent! (Jonah 3:6–10.) The primacy of grace comes out most clearly in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world through his death for sinners. The point is that ‘Whoever does not believe stands *condemned already*’ (John 3:17–18). Christ does not need to do anything to achieve (if that is the right word) the condemnation of the unbelieving, but he must suffer humiliation, even to death on the cross, in order to save sinners. To be sure, he is coming again to judge the living and the dead, but the departure of the reprobate lost into hell is only the necessary concomitant of that central purpose of the messianic work of Christ—God in the midst of his saints, the new heaven and the new earth wherein dwells righteousness, the Lamb of God, worthy of ail praise, and all that pertains to the glory yet to be revealed (Romans 8:18–21; Revelation 20:11–22:21).

2. ‘*For three sins ... even for four.*’ These words are a way of saying that the cup of wickedness and injustice is filled up as far as God is concerned and he will no longer seek to turn them back. The words of Genesis 6:3 echo down the centuries: ‘Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with man for ever ...”’ ‘God is measuring human wickedness and there will be a reckoning and absolute justice will be served. God stays his wrath to remember mercy, but his slowness to anger is taken by wicked men as a proof of his non-existence and as a licence to go on in sin. The psalmist was troubled by the apparent prosperity of the wicked:

‘When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me

till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny' (Psalm 73:16-17).

Men and nations are filling up the measure of sin—one at a time, day after day, year after year. If Christ will not be your Saviour, he will certainly be your Judge!

Perhaps the people of Israel were pleased, at first, to hear of the destruction of their enemies. Were they not getting their just deserts? Perhaps you feel much the same about the famines and wars that are destroying whole nations in Africa, Asia and Central America. 'No doubt, the judgements of God are abroad in the earth,' you say and console yourself that we have the Mother of Parliaments and the EEC grain mountain between us and anarchy and famine. Do you really not hear the approaching thunder?

Epitaphs for the nations (1:3-2:3)

A relentless catalogue of international sin and the retribution to follow is now unfolded. In no case will God turn back his wrath.

1. *Syria* (Damascus) is condemned for *atrocities* against the people of Gilead, a part of Israel (1:3-5). 'She threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth,' may refer to the dismembering of prisoners with a device similar to a farmer's threshing sledge of that day. For this, Syria's rulers, her capital Damascus, her kings' pleasure resorts, the Valley of Aven and Beth-Eden, will be destroyed and her people sent into exile in Kir, whence they had originated (9:7).

2. *Philistia* (Gaza) has practised *slavery*, having sold God's people to Edom (1:6-8). These inveterate foes of Israel are to be

extinguished as a nation (Zephaniah 2:4–7). They regarded men as no more than chattels.

3. *Phoenicia* (Tyre) has broken her treaty with Israel and sold her people into slavery in Edom (1:9–10). The God who deals with men in terms of covenants takes a dim view of *covenant-breaking*. All sin is covenant-breaking and broken covenants between nations are but one aspect of human sin. Tyre's sin was a sin against light, against the trust of brethren and against a solemn promise before God and men. She too will perish (Ezekiel 26–28).

4. *Edom* indulged a long-standing *racial prejudice* against God's people (1:11–12). Edom was descended from Esau and the bitterness consumed the whole nation (Genesis 25:19–34; Numbers 20:14–21; Obadiah 10–14). She too would be obliterated from the roll of nations.

5. *Ammon* was guilty of *genocidal imperialism* (1:13–15). They were descendants of Lot (Genesis 19:30–38). In the effort to enlarge her borders Ammon slaughtered whole populations—a fact signaled by the murder of mothers and their unborn children. This nation would fall and her people be exiled.

6. *Moab*, sandwiched between Ammon and Edom, was guilty of the *desecration of the dead*. The Moabites cremated the exhumed corpse of an Edomite king and ground his bones for use as mortar for building (2:1–3). They too were descendants of Lot. For their barbarism, of which this was no doubt only the tip of the iceberg, they would be destroyed.

The prophetic witness of the church

The church of the Old Testament was the nation of Israel,

although in Amos's day, it was represented by the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The judgements upon the surrounding nations were not given to lull the church of that time into a greater—and false—sense of security. They had more and to spare of that commodity! The church would not be exempt from purging as by fire, for the *status quo* was the fundamental problem. The church had become 'the world' and must be reformed and renewed in order to fulfil her calling as God's messenger to lost humanity.

The question that confronts the New Testament church—the Israel of God of this present age (Galatians 6:16)—concerns the content of the prophetic witness of Christians today and, not least, the practical godliness with which Christians carry themselves before God and men.

Firstly, it is clear that God is concerned about vindicating his law in the affairs of all nations. God's Word claims the obedience of all men—as individuals and as nations. We, in our so-called "post-Christian" age, are too used to thinking of the Christian faith in personal, individualistic terms—as if the gospel is solely concerned with individual piety and ethics, but not with the ethics of men in the mass, in institutions and in nations. God might have spared Sodom for the sake of a few righteous men (Genesis 18:32), but the point is thereby made that Sodom was responsible to God for her sin. The nation—the state, if you like—is not neutral with respect to Scripture's moral teaching. Amos shows us that, among other things, nations are not to commit atrocities, not to persecute God's people, not to break treaties and not even to desecrate the bones of heathen kings! Christ has revealed himself as King of kings and Lord of lords. He is Head over all things to the church (Ephesians 1:22). It is Jesus Christ, not the pragmatism of Machiavelli—the

prince of politics of the West today—who is to set the ethics of national policies. For those nations which rebel against Christ the prophecy of Amos has the most urgent significance. He who has ears, let him hear!

Secondly, it follows that the church has the prophetic task to declare the mind of God as revealed in the Scriptures on social, national and international issues. The Lord's voice is not to be silenced—not by a 'tyranny of the experts', which disqualifies all but graduates in political science from expressing a valid viewpoint, not by the apathy or opposition of a vast unbelieving majority and not by a notion of the state as a morally 'neutral' institution, whose only obligation is to avoid the appearance of being influenced unduly by the principles of biblical truth. The widely held American doctrine of the 'separation of church and state' is frequently invoked as necessary to the prevention of religious bias in public policy and to the protection of the religious pluralism of modern society. Whatever one's view of religious pluralism, it is certain, from God's Word, that the witness of God's church is to call men *and* nations to submit to Christ's lordship in terms of the biblical principles appropriate to personal and national life.

Thirdly, the prophetic witness of the church to the nations cannot be separated from the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ as the sin-bearing Substitute for sinners. Lives are to be changed, patterns of thinking reformed, behaviour transformed, sins confessed and repented of, and all through receiving Jesus Christ in a faith that looks to him as the only Saviour for time and eternity. Christ is Lord—not a social programme or a political theory. That is the error of the 'social gospel'. It is knowing Christ, personally, that is the heart of the matter, from which all the rest flows, namely, the application of the Word of

Christ to every area of human life-experience. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved' is the heart and soul of all Christian witness.

God has revealed himself as the one who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. His instruction to the prophet Ezekiel was this: 'Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?"' (Ezekiel 33:11.)

Questions for study and discussion

1. What was the political, social and spiritual condition of Israel in Amos's day? Do prosperity and/or religiosity imply the favour of God? (See Psalm 73:1-20.)
2. What does Amos 1:2 say about Israel's prospects? But compare with Amos 9:8-15.
3. What is God's relationship to the nations of the world? (Psalm 100:1; 117:1.) Is God interested in them? (See Romans 1:18-20.)
4. What is the covenant nation of the Old Testament? And the New Testament? In what sense is our country a Christian nation, if at all? In what sense is the Christian 'nation' spread throughout the world? (See 1 Peter 2:11-17.)
5. Discuss the representative sins of the nations in Amos 1:3-2:3. Relate this to the policies of modern nations. How should we respond to this? Have things improved? (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:23.)
6. Why is the subject of God's law and his judgements resented

or ridiculed? Is the prophetic witness of the church in every age a message of doom and gloom? What was the core of the prophets' message? (Amos 9:8-15; Ezekiel 33:11-20; Isaiah 55.)