

***“The Lion has roared - Who will not fear?” Amos 1:2***

The roar of the lion was not unknown to Amos - he was, after all, a shepherd. It seems, however, that at least on one occasion such a roar was the vehicle of a profound prophetic revelation, one that epitomised in an intense and startling way the message he had to convey to Israel (1:2; 3:4, 8, 12). The lion does not roar without intent: he is out to devour. There was now a roar from God, and with similar intent. The roar of God was his word of warning to Israel in the mouth of his prophet. It was not to be ignored. Its import is made plain in 2:12; *“As a shepherd saves from the lion’s mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear, so will the Israelites be saved”*. God was about to devour Israel. His roar was threatening judgement.

**1. The Divine Dynamic of Amos’ Prophecies**

It is very clear that Amos was deeply aware that in speaking as he did he was under a prophetic compulsion. He was not giving his own opinions on the fate of Israel and invoking God as some form of psychological pressure to reinforce his opinions. As a shepherd he was no intellectual or “political observer” (though clearly thoughtful and perceptive), and he never presents himself as such. He operated solely in the conviction that *“the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plans to his servants the prophets”* (3:7), and that he was one of those prophets. Everything about his message conveys the fact that he knew that it was actually God who was speaking through him. For example we find that the statement, *“The lion has roared - who will not fear”* is followed immediately by the words, *“The Sovereign LORD has spoken - who can but prophesy”*. This means that he spoke because he had heard God speak, and therefore could do no other but speak. His whole ministry in fact was undergirded by a profound recollection of his calling to be a prophet: *“I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’.”* (7:14) Thus spiritually he was always fully aware of God himself speaking through him. He came to his nation with a word of disaster because he was divinely impelled.

**2. God Revealed as a God of Judgement**

What he had to speak, therefore, was not a human prognosis of the situation in his nation, but a divine revelation – and that revelation must therefore be not only a revelation *from* God but also a revelation *of* God. If his God speaks out judgement he must by that fact be a God of judgement. And the very language which Amos employs testifies to this, for it directly represents God as actually speaking out his judgement. In 2:6, Amos uses the formula, *“This is what the LORD says”* followed by the words, *“Now then I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain”* (2:13). It was not Amos who was threatening to crush Israel, but God. Later (3:14-15) we read *“On the day I punish Israel for her sins ... I will tear down the winter house and the summer house, declares the LORD”*. Again God is responsible: it is he who is going to do the punishing, the tearing down and the demolishing. God even speaks openly of his anger: *“This is what the LORD says, ‘I will not turn back my wrath’”* (2:6). This is the consistent pattern all through his prophecies: God speaks personally in the language of punishing, crushing and wrath. If Amos is inspired of God we do not have the option of discounting God as a God of judgement and his personal responsibility for it.

**The God who speaks out judgement must be a God of Judgement**

Nor do we have the option of arguing with God about the nature of the appalling and horrific events that make up his judgement. We simply have to receive it. What he is presenting through Amos is not a mildly painful rebuke, but rather a lacerating scourge. The language of destruction is never mere symbolism. What his judgement was going to mean to the Jews was also portrayed in more prosaic and precise terms, spelling out its horror: *“An enemy will overrun the land; he will pull down your strongholds and plunder your fortresses.”* (3:11); *“I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses; I will deliver up the city and everything in it.”* (6:8); *“In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!* (8:3). These words amounted to a total destruction of Israel as the Jews knew it. Only the event itself, when the nation was devastated by the merciless Assyrian war machine, would bring a full realization of the unspeakable human horror and agony that lay in this judgement. It would be something that overtook the whole nation, men, women and children. Where there was not death, there would be untold hardship.

**3. Amos’ Revelations are Borne out by all Contemporary Prophets**

Amos does not come across as an extreme exception among the biblical prophets in this depiction of judgement. His are not the “outlandish bits” in a collection of prophetic writings that are otherwise more “reasonable”. Everything he says is abundantly borne out by his fellow prophets. The fact is that wherever God speaks of judgement he speaks of something for which he is responsible and which is devastating and painful for humanity. Jeremiah says, for example;

*“But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in. “Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together; both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years. Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives, when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land,” declares the LORD.* Jer. 6:11-12

Like Amos (though over 150 years later, and to Judah, not Israel) he speaks out of huge prophetic conviction and is deeply aware of being simply a mouthpiece.

#### 4. The Rejection of a God of Judgement - Then and Now

The sheer horror and weight of what the judgement of God meant is something that Amos' generation had lost. It was no longer a real threat in their thinking. The Israelites of Amos' day came to grief because in their complacency they were not able to engage with such a prophetic message. They did not disbelieve in prophets of course – they had lots of them. Nor did they disbelieve in “God”, or even that he would judge. It was simply that they were so deeply involved in a lifestyle that put a total focus on self-indulgence that they were unable to discern any longer any message which truly came from God. Nor could they receive a message which was so hard. They were spiritually blind. What theology they did have led them to believe that as a nation they could not be destroyed for they were God's people. Amos and his kind were therefore to be dismissed as a nuisance. It was only a later generation, purged in exile, that, having taken due stock of what the prophets had said, and comparing it with what had actually happened in the national history, was forced to acknowledge the validity of the prophetic message and obliged to re-instate its divine origin.

If Amos' generation was reluctant to receive such prophetic words, our own is, of course, much more so. Our generation has lost any real grasp of the terrifying fact of God's judgement. Indeed it has lost any concept of prophetic activity which has its source in God. If there is any “prophetic” strain in the world at all, it is purely a human instinct, the wisdom of a knowledgeable person who has a high degree of insight into the affairs of mankind and can make educated assessments that appear far-sighted. The modern world of rational enlightenment is not in the least likely to respond to divine, prophetic insights. It simply responds with contempt.

**To the prophet God  
can love passionately  
but judge severely**

Unfortunately, this attitude is not just to be found in the secular world. It is also present to a very large extent among those who profess faith in God, even among those who in other respects would call themselves of Christian Evangelical persuasion. Much of modern Christian thinking would like to put God at a convenient distance from any activity of judgement. An “enlightened” view of God cannot accommodate the idea of such appalling visitations as those depicted by the prophets. It is a view which would acknowledge that men and women might well do things which bring their own punishment, but that God would not get actively involved in any process of “judgement”. The very idea of God becoming involved in a retribution that had elements of cruelty or pain would seem somehow to diminish any appropriate image of God, who must be epitomised as “Love”. Even less would such modern thinking feel that “anger” was an appropriate term to describe the motivations of God. It would be better to speak of “the consequences of man's folly” or “the inevitable working out of wrong-doing” and leave God at a respectable distance from the causation.

This sort of thinking seems attractive and satisfying to the modern mind, but it certainly does not fit with the prophetic witness and is spiritually disastrous. At bottom it calls into question the prophetic experience. The prophets are seen fundamentally as men of their own age, and speaking of values which belonged to their own times. They may have been useful to their generation but require re-interpretation today. Unfortunately when Christians take this viewpoint they move away from any concept of genuine revelation, and from any firm ground for ascertaining the nature of God. For the re-interpretation that is sought is inevitably based on purely human thinking and concepts. The nature of God, however, can only be found by revelation, never by human wisdom. God has his own double test for the genuineness of a prophetic revelation: if it upholds behaviour endorsing the moral law, and if it comes to pass, then it will be the voice of truth. On both counts Amos abundantly passes the test. His was patently a message to re-instate the moral law and it was a message that came true, and with deadly accuracy, against all the apparent odds. When prophetic words have been so vindicated as have those of Amos, it is the height of folly to act as though they had no stamp of God upon them or to think that God has ceased to act on the principles which such words enshrine. He spoke judgement then, and he remains the God of judgement now.

At another level altogether it is, of course, possible, and rightly so, to see wars, and the cruelty and destruction associated with them, as an expression of Satan's hatred of humanity. There is something demonic about the lust for power and booty that launched the Assyrians on their path to empire, causing them to overrun Israel. There is something equally demonic in the appalling cruelty and oppression they brought to the nations they conquered. That having been said, however, the prophets still insist on the sovereign action of God in judgements (Assyria was the rod of God's anger!). Whatever Satan's part may be in such scourging, ultimately God is orchestrating the events. Moreover, it is clear that God does not condone the behaviour of the oppressing powers: the Assyrian cruelty would itself be judged in due course.

#### 5. Why God must be A God of Judgement

On what basis can the concept of a God of Judgement be defended? The answer to this lies fundamentally in the fact that the God who has been revealed to us through the biblical writings is a God of righteousness – he is a holy God. He is a God who must therefore by nature react against evil when it appears. Certainly he is a God of love, but a love that is pure. Genuine love cannot coexist with injustice, or any other evil, but must ultimately banish it. Love is very patient; something that was very evident in the way God had, over a long period, warned the Israelites of their shortcomings. Love is very faithful and is full of explicit warnings; witness the prolific nature of the prophetic word to Israel. Love is never weak, however, and does not turn a blind eye to everything that happens, nor does it forgive everything that may happen. The reason for this is that real consequential love cannot but be holy and righteous. We cannot, therefore have a God of love who is not at the same time righteous; and we cannot have a righteous God who does not act against evil. The biblical witness is clear: God does act against evil, both at individual and national levels. That action is judgement.

**The understanding of God as one who will judge evil in nations (the clear testimony of Amos) is critical for our generation and for our current situation. Amos' prime testimony is that when God's patience is exhausted then a very painful, destructive reckoning is bound to come. Failure to give this the weight it demands is a great miscalculation. We are in the gravest danger of being in precisely that position.**