

# Introduction to Amos Chapter 3

## *You Only Have I Known: Privilege, Accountability, the Logic of the Prophet, and the Stripped Sanctuaries*

Amos chapter 3 is the first of the three great discourses of the book — the three woe-shaped prophetic speeches that constitute the body of the book between the oracles of chapters 1–2 and the visions of chapters 7–9. The chapter opens with the most explicit statement of the privilege-intensifies-accountability principle available in the prophetic literature: you only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. The therefore is the most counterintuitive word in the book — the community that expected covenant privilege to function as covenant protection discovers that it functions instead as covenant accountability. The closer the relationship, the more serious the violation.

The chapter moves through three sections of carefully constructed argument. The first (verses 1–8) is the wisdom argument: a series of seven paired rhetorical questions — do two walk together unless they have agreed? Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey? — each establishing a principle of cause-and-effect in the natural and social world, before the climax in verse 8: the lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? The series establishes that every effect has a cause, and the effect of Amos’s prophesying has a cause: the LORD has spoken. The prophet is not self-appointed; he is cause-and-effect compelled.

The second section (verses 9–11) is the summons of the witnesses: Amos calls on Ashdod and Egypt — the traditional enemies of Israel — to come and observe the tumults and oppressions in the midst of Samaria. The irony is devastating: the nations that Israel might have expected to stand condemned before the divine bar are being invited to witness Israel’s condemnation instead. They do not know how to do right, declares the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. And the adversary will surround the land and strip down its defenses.

The third section (verses 12–15) moves to the specific visual images of the judgment: the shepherd who rescues from the lion’s mouth only two legs and a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel be rescued who dwell in Samaria. The altars of Bethel will be cut off, the winter house and the summer house will perish, the houses of ivory will perish, and the great houses will come to an end. The prosperity of the north — the ivory-inlaid furniture, the elaborate seasonal residences, the elaborately constructed religious sites — will not survive the judgment that the covenant privilege has made inevitable.

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## Opening Prayer

*Heavenly Father,*

*We come to Amos chapter 3 as the people who have been known by You — not merely acknowledged but known with the intimate, relational, covenant knowing that the chapter's opening verse describes. We have been brought into the covenant community of the new creation, given the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry Abba, Father, made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. We are the you only have I known of every generation that has received the covenant in its fullest form. And we come to this chapter knowing that the therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities follows as inevitably as the roar of the lion from the presence of the prey.*

*Lord, let the seven rhetorical questions of this chapter be received as the wisdom argument they are: every effect has a cause, every alarm has a reason, every disaster in the city is the work of the LORD. And let the cause of Amos's prophesying — the LORD GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? — be the legitimation of the prophetic word that the comfortable community most wants to dismiss. The prophet did not choose to speak; he was compelled. The word that the community finds most uncomfortable is the word most certain to be the word of the LORD.*

*And let the rescue of two legs and a piece of an ear from the lion's mouth be received as the most honest available assessment of what the judgment will leave: not the comfortable prosperity of the winter house and the summer house and the ivory couches, but the remnant — the rescued fragment that is enough to identify what was lost. Let the awareness of what the judgment leaves produce the return that the judgment is designed to provoke.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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## **Amos 3:1–8**

### *You Only Have I Known: The Privilege-Accountability Principle and the Seven Wisdom Questions*

- (1) Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you,  
O children of Israel, against the whole family  
which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying,*
- (2) You only have I known of all the families of the earth:  
therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*
- (3) Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*
- (4) Will a lion roar in the forest,  
when he hath no prey?  
will a young lion cry out of his den,  
if he have taken nothing?*
- (5) Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth,  
where no gin is for him?*

*shall one take up a snare from the earth,  
and have taken nothing at all?  
(6) Shall a trumpet be blown in the city,  
and the people not be afraid?  
shall there be evil in a city,  
and the LORD hath not done it?  
(7) Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing,  
but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.  
(8) The lion hath roared, who will not fear?  
the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?*

## **The Context**

The hear this word of verse 1 is the prophetic summons to attention that opens not merely a new oracle but a new phase of the book. The audience is specified with deliberate comprehensiveness: the children of Israel, against the whole family that the LORD brought up from Egypt. The entire covenant community is in the frame — not merely the wealthy, not merely the corrupt judges, not merely the religious establishment, but the whole family whose identity is grounded in the Exodus that the divine faithfulness accomplished. The word is addressed to all of them because the privilege of the Exodus belongs to all of them and therefore the accountability of the covenant violation belongs to all of them.

Verse 2 is the most important verse in the chapter and one of the most important in the book: you only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. The known is the Hebrew *yada'* — the word for the most intimate relational knowing available, the same word used for the marital relationship in Genesis 4:1, for the knowledge of God that Hosea named as absent (*da'at Elohim*), for the divine foreknowledge of the prophets (Jeremiah 1:5, before I formed you in the womb I knew you). The knowing that the LORD declares for Israel is the covenant election — the intimate, exclusive, choosing relationship that set Israel apart from all other families of the earth.

The therefore is the counterintuitive pivot. The community that expected the covenant knowing to function as covenant protection discovers that it functions as covenant accountability. The more intimate the relationship, the more seriously the violation of the relationship is taken. The family member who wrongs the close relative has committed a graver offense than the stranger who wrongs a stranger, because the intimacy of the relationship creates an obligation that the stranger relationship does not. The covenant election is not a shield against judgment; it is the intensification of the standard by which the covenant community is judged.

The seven rhetorical questions of verses 3–6 are one of the most carefully constructed wisdom arguments in the prophetic literature. Each question establishes a principle of cause-and-effect in the natural or social world: two people do not walk together unless they have arranged to meet; a lion does not roar in the forest unless it has prey; a bird does not fall into a snare unless the snare

is set; a trumpet does not sound in the city without the people being afraid; disaster does not come to a city unless the LORD has done it. The series moves from the natural world (the lion, the bird) to the social world (the walking together, the trumpet) to the theological world (the LORD doing it), building toward the climax of verses 7–8.

Verse 7 is one of the most important theological statements in the book: surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The word translated secret is *sod* — the intimate counsel of the trusted inner circle, the deliberations of the divine council that the prophet has been privileged to overhear. The prophet is not merely the messenger who delivers a pre-written text; the prophet is the one who has been admitted to the divine counsel, who has heard what the LORD is planning, and who therefore has an obligation to speak what has been revealed. The prophetic word is not the prophet's own imagination; it is the disclosure of what the divine council has decided.

Verse 8 is the climax of the seven-question series and the most direct possible statement of the compulsion that drives the prophetic word: the lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? The pairing is the final cause-and-effect of the series: just as the lion's roar inevitably produces fear in those who hear it, the word of the LORD inevitably produces prophecy in those who have received it. Amos is not choosing to prophesy any more than the frightened person is choosing to fear the lion's roar. The word has come, and the word compels its own proclamation. The prophet who receives the divine word and does not speak it is in the position of the person who hears the lion roar and does not respond — an impossible position.

### Plain American English

*Listen to this message the LORD has spoken against you, people of Israel — against the whole family I brought up from Egypt: Of all the families on earth, I have been intimate only with you. So I will punish you for all your sins. Do two people travel together without making plans to meet? Does a lion ever roar in the woods without first finding a victim? Does a young lion growl in its den without catching something? Does a bird ever get caught in a trap that has no bait? Does a trap spring shut when there is nothing to catch? When the alarm sounds in a city, don't the people get frightened? Does disaster strike a city unless the LORD has planned it? But the Sovereign LORD never does anything without first revealing his plans to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared — so who isn't frightened? The Sovereign LORD has spoken — so who can refuse to proclaim his message?*

### Key Observations

**“You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities”:** This signifies **The Counterintuitive Therefore Is the Most Important Word in the Chapter — the Covenant Knowing That the Community Expected to Function as Protection Functions Instead as the Intensification of Accountability.**

The you only have I known — the exclusive, intimate, covenant election — is the theological foundation on which the community's confidence has been built. Israel has understood itself as the specially known people of the LORD, and has drawn from this understanding the confidence that the covenant relationship protects them from the full force of the divine judgment that falls on the nations. The therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities demolishes this confidence with the most counterintuitive available theological logic: the knowing that grounds the privilege also grounds the accountability. The closer the relationship, the more seriously the violation is taken. The covenant election intensifies the standard, not the protection.

**“Shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it?”: This signifies The Theological Climax of the Wisdom Questions Is the Declaration That the Disasters of History Are the Work of the LORD — Not Random Events but the Purposeful Acts of the God Whose Counsel the Prophets Have Overheard.**

The shall there be calamity in a city and the LORD has not done it? is the most theologically provocative of the seven questions, because it asserts the divine sovereignty over the disasters of history in the most comprehensive possible terms. The calamity — the ra'ah, which can mean both moral evil and natural disaster — that happens in the city is not a random natural event but the act of the LORD. This is not the claim that God is the author of moral evil; it is the prophetic tradition's consistent claim that the disasters that fall on communities are within the divine sovereignty and serve the divine purposes. The cities of Israel that experience calamity will experience the calamity of the covenant judgment, and that calamity is the work of the LORD whose servants the prophets have forewarned about it.

**“Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets”: This signifies The Admission of the Prophet to the Divine Counsel Is the Theological Foundation of the Prophetic Authority — the Prophet Does Not Speak His Own Word but the Word He Has Overheard in the Divine Sod.**

The revealing of the divine sod — the intimate counsel, the inner circle deliberations — to the prophets is the Old Testament's most explicit statement of the epistemological basis of prophetic authority. The prophet speaks with authority not because of institutional position, personal spiritual attainment, or rhetorical skill, but because the LORD has revealed to the prophet what the divine council has decided. The prophet's word is the Lord's word overheard and transmitted. This grounds Amos's authority in the most secure possible way: the shepherd from Tekoa who has no institutional credentials has been admitted to the divine counsel in a way that the institutional prophets apparently have not, and the word he transmits is therefore more authoritative than the words of those whose institutional position might otherwise be expected to outrank him.

**“The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?”: This signifies The Compulsion of the Prophetic Word Is the Declaration That Amos Does Not Speak by Choice but by Necessity — the Word of the LORD That Has Come Upon Him Is as Irresistible as the Fear Produced by the Lion's Roar.**

The lion roars; the fear is automatic, irresistible, not a matter of choice. The Lord GOD speaks; the prophecy is equally irresistible, equally not a matter of choice. The pairing is Amos's most direct statement of the prophetic compulsion that Paul echoes in 1 Corinthians 9:16: woe to me if I do not preach the gospel; for necessity is laid upon me. The word that has come from the divine

counsel and has been revealed to the prophet compels its own proclamation. The prophet who does not speak has not managed to resist a strong temptation; the prophet who does not speak is in the impossible position of the person who pretends not to hear the lion's roar while the roar fills the forest. The compulsion is the credential: the word that cannot be suppressed is the word of the LORD.

### What This Means for Us Today

- 1. Receive the You Only Have I Known... Therefore I Will Punish as the Permanent Correction of Every Version of the Gospel That Treats Covenant Privilege as Covenant Protection Rather Than Covenant Accountability:** The most enduring pastoral application of verse 2 is the correction of the theological error that treats divine election, covenant membership, and spiritual privilege as shields against the divine judgment rather than as intensifications of the divine standard. The community that believes its status as the known people of the LORD exempts it from the accounting that the knowing demands has misread the covenant theology of Amos with the same misreading that Israel made in the eighth century. The new covenant community — the people who have received the Spirit, the gospel, the apostolic word, the long history of the divine faithfulness — is not protected from the accounting by the privilege. The privilege is the accounting.
- 2. Apply the Seven Rhetorical Questions as the Wisdom Framework for Reading the Disasters of the Present Age as the Acts of the LORD Rather Than as Random Natural Events:** The shall there be calamity in a city and the LORD has not done it? is the invitation to read the disasters of the present age within the framework of the divine sovereignty over history that the wisdom questions establish. This is not the claim that every natural disaster is a specific judgment for a specific sin; it is the claim that the disasters of history are within the divine sovereignty and serve the divine purposes, and that the community of faith is equipped by the prophetic word to read them within that framework rather than dismissing them as random events requiring only technical or political responses.
- 3. Honor the Prophetic Compulsion as the Legitimation of the Uncomfortable Word That the Community Most Wants to Dismiss:** The lion has roared; who can but prophesy? is the authorization of the prophetic word that arrives with the force of compulsion — the word that the prophet cannot suppress even when the community wants to silence it. The community of faith that dismisses the uncomfortable prophetic word on the grounds of the speaker's institutional credentials or personal background has not yet understood what Amos establishes in verse 8: the prophet who has heard the lion roar cannot choose not to transmit the fear. The word that is most urgently suppressed is most likely to be the word of the LORD.

### How This Relates to Today

The you only have I known... therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities is the most important available theological corrective to what has been called cheap grace — the version of the gospel that offers the benefits of the covenant relationship without the obligations of the covenant accountability. The community that has been known by the LORD in the covenant relationship of the new creation has received the most comprehensive available expression of the

divine faithfulness: the cross, the resurrection, the Spirit, the apostolic word, the long history of the prophetic tradition. The therefore I will punish follows as inevitably as it did for Israel: the closer the relationship, the more serious the violation. The community that has received the most cannot claim the privilege as protection against the accounting that the privilege demands.

The surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets is also one of the most important available theological statements about the relationship between the divine sovereignty over history and the prophetic word. The disasters, judgments, and redemptions of history are not random; they are the acts of the divine council whose deliberations have been revealed to the prophets. The covenant community that has the prophetic word — the canonical Scripture in its full sweep — has the interpretive framework for reading the events of history within the divine purposes. The community that reads history without the prophetic word is reading without the key.

**Key Lesson:** *\*The opening section of chapter 3 establishes the two governing principles of the entire chapter: the privilege-intensifies-accountability principle of verse 2 (you only have I known... therefore I will punish) and the prophetic compulsion principle of verse 8 (the lion has roared; who will not fear? the LORD has spoken; who can but prophesy?), with the seven wisdom questions of verses 3–6 establishing the cause-and-effect logic that makes both principles intellectually irresistible: the covenant knowing produces the covenant accounting with the same inevitability that the lion's roar produces the fear.\**

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## Amos 3:9–11

*The Witnesses Called: Ashdod and Egypt Summoned to Observe the Tumults of Samaria*

*(9) Publish in the palaces at Ashdod,  
and in the palaces in the land of Egypt, and say,  
Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria,  
and behold the great tumults in the midst thereof,  
and the oppressed in the midst thereof.  
(10) For they know not to do right, saith the LORD,  
who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.  
(11) Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD;  
An adversary there shall be even round about the land;  
and he shall bring down thy strength from thee,  
and thy palaces shall be spoiled.*

### The Context

The summons of Ashdod and Egypt as witnesses to the tumults of Samaria is one of the most rhetorically striking moments in the chapter and one of the most ironic in the book. Ashdod was the Philistine city-state; Egypt was the ancient enslaver of Israel. In the oracles-against-the-

nations sequence of chapters 1–2, Gaza — which included Ashdod— was condemned for the trafficking of the whole people, and Egypt is implicitly the model for the captivity from which Israel was redeemed. Now these nations — whose own moral records are considerably worse than Israel’s in the categories that the oracles address — are being invited to come and observe what is happening in Samaria.

The irony operates on multiple levels. First, the nations that Israel would have expected to stand condemned before the divine bar are being invited to stand as witnesses to Israel’s condemnation instead. Second, the implication is that what Israel is doing is so egregious that even the nations with the worst available records of human rights violations — the trafficking Philistines, the enslaving Egyptians — will be shocked by it. Third, the prophet is addressing the wealthy and powerful in Israel in language that they would recognize as humiliating: to have your conduct observed and judged by the nations you consider morally inferior is the most stinging form of the social shame available.

The specific description of what Ashdod and Egypt will observe is double: the great tumults within her and the oppressed in her midst. The tumults — the m’humōt, the panics, the confusions, the social disorders — are the chaos of a society that has lost the ordering principle of covenant justice. The oppressed — the ‘ashuqim, those who are being pressed down, squeezed, exploited — are the specific victims of the social injustice that Amos has been cataloguing since chapter 2:6. The combination of the tumult and the oppression is the description of a society in which the powerful are in noisy conflict with each other while the vulnerable are being systematically crushed.

Verse 10 is the most damning single sentence of the three-verse section: they do not know how to do right, declares the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds. The do not know how to do right is the most comprehensive available statement of the moral formation failure: not that the wealthy of Israel are choosing the wrong over the right while knowing what right is, but that they have lost the capacity to know what right is. The da‘at — the knowing — that has been absent since chapter 2 has reached its most complete form here: the powerful do not know how to do right because the knowledge of God that generates the knowledge of right has been so thoroughly lost that they have lost even the capacity to recognize the wrong they are doing.

### Plain American English

*Announce this to the leaders of Philistia and to the great power of Egypt: “Gather on the hills of Samaria and see the chaos and oppression in that city.” These people don’t even know how to do what is right, says the LORD. Their fortresses are filled with wealth they have stolen through violence and robbery. Therefore, says the Sovereign LORD, an enemy is coming! He will surround the land, strip away your defenses, and plunder your fortresses.*

### Key Observations

**“Publish in the palaces at Ashdod, and in the palaces in the land of Egypt, and say, Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria, and behold the great tumults in the midst thereof”:** This signifies **The Summons of the Traditionally Condemned Nations as Witnesses to Israel’s Condemnation Is the Most Rhetorically Devastating Irony of the Chapter — the Nations Israel Would Have Expected to Stand Condemned Are Invited to Observe Israel’s Condemnation Instead.**

The invite to Ashdod and Egypt is the rhetorical masterstroke of the section. These are not the most upright available witnesses; they are the most compromised available witnesses. The trafficking Philistines and the enslaving Egyptians are the people whose conduct has been consistently condemned in the prophetic and historical literature. And yet the prophet invites them to come and observe Samaria — implying that what Israel has done is so extreme that even Ashdod and Egypt will be appalled. The contemporary equivalent would be a political leader being hauled before a court composed of their most notorious rivals and found guilty by that court — the humiliation of being condemned by the very people one had expected to condemn. The prophet is deploying every available form of social shame to confront the comfortable elite of Samaria with the reality of what their society has become.

**“They know not to do right, saith the LORD, who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds”:** This signifies **The Do Not Know How to Do Right Is the Most Complete Available Statement of the Moral Formation Failure — the Absence of the Knowledge of God Has Produced the Absence of the Knowledge of Right.**

The they do not know how to do right is deeper than the they choose wrong over right. The choosing of the wrong while knowing what is right is the failure of the will; the not knowing how to do right is the failure of the formation. The powerful of Samaria have been so thoroughly formed by the values of the exploitative economy — the storing up of violence and robbery in the strongholds, the accumulation of wealth taken by force from the vulnerable — that the knowledge of what right looks like has been lost. The da‘at Elohim — the knowledge of God — that generates the knowledge of right has been absent for so long that the formation it would have produced has not occurred, and the not-knowing has become the structural condition of the powerful class. They are not choosing wrong; they are incapable of choosing right because the knowledge that would make right recognizable has been extinguished by the practices that have replaced it.

**“An adversary there shall be even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled”:** This signifies **The Surrounding Adversary Strips What the Strongholds Have Accumulated — the Violence and Robbery Stored in the Palaces Will Be Taken by the Enemy That the Covenant Violation Has Attracted.**

The adversary surrounding the land and stripping down its strength is the direct consequence of what has been stored in the strongholds: the violence and robbery that the powerful have accumulated will be taken by the power that is stronger than they are. The strongholds that were supposed to protect the accumulated wealth will be the specific targets of the stripping — your strongholds will be plundered. This is the mirror logic of the covenant judgment applied to the hoarding class: the thing they have worked hardest to accumulate and protect will be the first thing stripped away. The stronghold is only as strong as the covenant relationship that the

LORD's protection provides, and the covenant relationship has been violated by the very violence and robbery that the stronghold contains.

### What This Means for Us Today

**1. Consider Whether the Contemporary Covenant Community's Conduct Is Such That the Traditionally Condemned Nations Would Be Shocked by It — and Let the Standard Implied by the Summons of Ashdod and Egypt Shape the Honest Self-Assessment:** The invitation to Ashdod and Egypt to witness the tumults of Samaria sets a standard that the contemporary community of faith should apply to itself: is what we are doing so far below the moral standard that even the most compromised available witnesses would be appalled? The community that has received the most comprehensive available expression of the covenant grace and yet produces a social order characterized by the systematic oppression of the vulnerable has something to answer to in Samaria's court.

**2. Address the They Do Not Know How to Do Right as the Most Serious Available Form of the Moral Formation Failure — the Loss of the Capacity to Recognize Right, Not Merely the Failure of the Will to Choose It:** The do not know how to do right is the diagnosis of the most serious available form of the moral formation failure in the community: not the weakness of will that chooses wrong while knowing right, but the loss of the knowing itself. The community that has lost the knowledge of what right looks like — because the knowledge of God that generates the knowledge of right has been so thoroughly displaced by the values of the surrounding culture — cannot recover by moral effort. It requires the prophetic word that names what right is and calls the community back to the knowledge of God that produces it.

### How This Relates to Today

The they do not know how to do right, who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds is one of the most enduringly applicable descriptions in the prophetic literature of the condition of an economic class that has been so thoroughly formed by the values of the extractive economy that it has lost the capacity to recognize the injustice of its own practices. The contemporary equivalents — the business culture, the financial system, the political economy that systematically disadvantages the vulnerable while generating enormous wealth for those at the top — produce exactly the condition that verse 10 describes: a class of people who are not deliberately choosing wrong but who have been so thoroughly formed by the values of the extractive system that they genuinely cannot see what right would look like in their own economic relationships.

**Key Lesson:** *\*The witnesses section establishes through the devastating irony of the Ashdod and Egypt summons that Israel's conduct has become so extreme that even the traditionally condemned nations will be appalled by it, and names the root cause of the social disorder as the most complete available expression of the formation failure: they do not know how to do right — not the failure of the will but the loss of the knowledge, the moral incapacity produced by the long-term displacement of the knowledge of God by the values of the exploitative economy.\**

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## Amos 3:12–15

*Two Legs and a Piece of an Ear: The Remnant Rescued, the Altars Stripped, and the Great Houses Fallen*

*(12) Thus saith the LORD;*

*As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion  
two legs, or a piece of an ear;  
so shall the children of Israel be taken out  
that dwell in Samaria in the corner of a bed,  
and in Damascus in a couch.*

*(13) Hear ye, and testify in the house of Jacob,  
saith the Lord GOD, the God of hosts,*

*(14) That in the day that I shall visit the transgressions of Israel upon him  
I will also visit the altars of Beth-el:  
and the horns of the altar shall be cut off,  
and fall to the ground.*

*(15) And I will smite the winter house with the summer house;  
and the houses of ivory shall perish,  
and the great houses shall have an end, saith the LORD.*

### The Context

The shepherd rescuing two legs and a piece of an ear from the lion's mouth of verse 12 is the most visually precise image in the chapter and one of the most sobering in the book. The background is Exodus 22:13, which required that a shepherd bring proof of the death of a sheep taken by a wild animal — the shepherd had to produce the remains as evidence that the animal had actually been killed rather than stolen and sold. The shepherd who brings back two legs and a piece of an ear is bringing back the evidence that the lion has consumed the rest: the proof of death, not the recovery of the living animal.

The application to Israel is devastating in its precision: so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued — with the corner of a couch and part of a bed. The rescued remnant is not the recovery of the living community; it is the fragment that proves what has been destroyed. The wealthy of Samaria who have been reclining on their ivory-inlaid couches and spreading out on their comfortable beds will be rescued the way the shepherd rescues the sheep from the lion: with fragments. The corner of the couch and the leg of the bed are the evidence of the destruction of what was there before, not the restoration of the prosperity that the couch and the bed represented.

Verses 13–14 name the specific religious target of the judgment: the altars of Bethel. Bethel was the site of Jeroboam I's golden calf sanctuary, the most prominent of the northern kingdom's religious centers, the place that Hosea called Beth-aven (house of wickedness) rather than Beth-

el (house of God). The horns of the altar — the projections at the four corners of the altar that were the most sacred part of the sacrificial structure, the places where the blood of the atonement was daubed and where the person seeking refuge could cling — shall be cut off and fall to the ground. The altar that has been the center of the religious life that has been comfortably maintained alongside the social injustice will be stripped of its most sacred features and rendered non-functional.

Verse 15 is the most specific inventory of the prosperity that will be destroyed: the winter house and the summer house, the houses of ivory, the great houses. The winter house and summer house are the seasonal residences of the wealthy elite — the equivalent of the contemporary vacation home, the second residence for the more comfortable season. The houses of ivory are the homes decorated with ivory inlay — a luxury item recovered in archaeological excavations at Samaria, confirming that the prophetic description corresponds to the actual material culture of the period. The great houses are simply the large, elaborate residences of the powerful. All of them — the seasonal homes, the ivory-decorated interiors, the large houses of the wealthy — will be destroyed. The specific inventory of the prosperity is the specific inventory of what will be lost.

### Plain American English

*This is what the LORD says: A shepherd who tries to rescue a sheep from a lion's mouth will recover only two legs or a piece of an ear. That's how it will be for the Israelites living in Samaria — you'll be saved with nothing but the broken corner of a bed or a torn piece of couch fabric. Listen to this and warn the family of Jacob, says the Sovereign LORD, the God of Armies: On the day I punish Israel for their sins, I will also destroy the altars of Bethel. The horns of the altar will be cut off and fall to the ground. And I will demolish both the winter mansion and the summer house. The ivory-decorated homes will be destroyed and the great mansions will vanish, says the LORD.*

### Key Observations

**“As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out”:** This signifies **The Two Legs and the Piece of Ear Are Not the Recovery of the Living Animal but the Proof of Its Destruction — the Rescued Remnant Is the Evidence of What Has Been Lost, Not the Restoration of What Was There.**

The shepherd who brings back two legs and a piece of an ear is not bringing back a rescued sheep; he is bringing back the proof that the sheep has been consumed. This is the most precise available image of what the judgment will leave of Israel's prosperity and security: not the recovery of the living community that the comfortable elite has imagined itself to be, but the fragments that prove what was there before it was destroyed. The application to the wealthy of Samaria reclining on their ivory couches and comfortable beds is deliberate and devastating: the corner of the couch and the leg of the bed that will be rescued are the proof of the destruction of the prosperity that those objects represented, not the survival of the people who owned them. The

remnant that the judgment leaves is the evidence of the judgment, not the promise of the restoration.

**“The horns of the altar shall be cut off, and fall to the ground”:** This signifies **The Stripping of the Altar’s Horns Is the Most Direct Available Statement That the Religious System That Has Been Comfortably Maintained Alongside the Social Injustice Will Share in the Judgment That the Injustice Has Produced.**

The horns of the altar were the most sacred feature of the sacrificial structure — the place where the atonement blood was applied (Leviticus 4:18, 25, 30), the place where the person seeking refuge from the avenger of blood could cling (1 Kings 1:50, 2:28). Their cutting off and falling to the ground is the rendering non-functional of the entire sacrificial and asylum system that the altar represented. The altar of Bethel, which has been the center of the religious life that the wealthy of Samaria have been using to legitimate their social arrangements, will not be available to provide atonement for the transgressions that the altars of Bethel have been facilitating. The judgment that falls on the altars is the declaration that the God whose sacrifice is being performed at Bethel has not accepted the worship, and that the altar that has been the site of the comfortable religious life sustained on the proceeds of social injustice will share in the destruction of the society it has served.

**“I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end”:** This signifies **The Specific Inventory of the Prosperity That Will Be Destroyed Is the Most Concrete Available Statement of the Covenant Judgment’s Reach — Every Form of the Material Abundance That the Prosperous Season Has Produced Will Be Taken.**

The winter house and summer house, the ivory-decorated interiors, the great houses — the specific inventory of the prosperity of Jeroboam II’s Israel corresponds to the actual archaeological record of the period, confirmed by the ivory panels and luxury goods recovered from the site of ancient Samaria. The specificity of the inventory is the specificity of the judgment: every particular form of the material abundance that the prosperous season has produced is named as the specific object of the destruction. The judgment does not leave the prosperity intact while addressing the injustice that produced it; it addresses both together, recognizing that the prosperity and the injustice are inseparable — the prosperity has been built on the injustice, and both will be destroyed together.

## **What This Means for Us Today**

**1. Receive the Two Legs and Piece of Ear as the Most Honest Available Assessment of What the Covenant Judgment Leaves — and Resist Every Version of the Prosperity Theology That Promises the Comfortable Preservation of the Comfortable Life:** The shepherd’s two legs and piece of ear are the antidote to every form of the prosperity gospel that promises the preservation of the comfortable life as the outcome of the covenant relationship with the LORD. The judgment of the covenant does not leave the prosperity of the covenant violator intact while addressing only the specific violations; it addresses the prosperity and the violations together, because the prosperity has been built on the violations. The honest assessment of what the judgment leaves — the corner of the couch, the leg of the bed, the

fragment that proves what has been destroyed — is the most searching available challenge to the comfortable religious life that the community of faith has been sustaining on the proceeds of the injustice.

**2. Read the Stripping of the Altar's Horns as the Warning That the Religious System Cannot Provide the Atonement and the Refuge It Claims to Provide When It Has Been Comfortably Maintained Alongside the Social Injustice It Should Have Confronted:**

The altar whose horns are cut off and fall to the ground is the religious system that has been rendering the sacrificial and asylum services while the social injustice that the covenant prohibits has been continuing unchallenged in the society around it. The cutting off of the horns is the declaration that the system has lost its sacramental validity — that the God whose worship it claims to perform has not accepted the worship, and that the atonement and the refuge the system promises are not available from the altar that has been sustaining the comfortable religious life of the unjust society. The warning for contemporary worship is direct: the worship that is not producing covenant justice in the worshipping community does not provide the atonement and the refuge it claims to provide.

**3. Examine the Specific Forms of the Contemporary Community's Prosperity in Light of the Specific Inventory of the Prosperity That Amos Names as the Target of the Judgment — the Winter House and Summer House, the Ivory-Decorated Interiors, the Great Houses:**

The specificity of the inventory in verse 15 is the model for the specificity of the contemporary self-examination: not the general question of whether the community is prosperous, but the specific examination of what the specific forms of the prosperity are, how they were accumulated, and whether they are consistent with the covenant justice requirements of the God whose worship the community is sustaining alongside the prosperity. The winter house and summer house, the ivory-decorated interiors, the great houses — named so precisely because the precision is the honesty of the inventory — call for a proportionally precise contemporary self-examination.

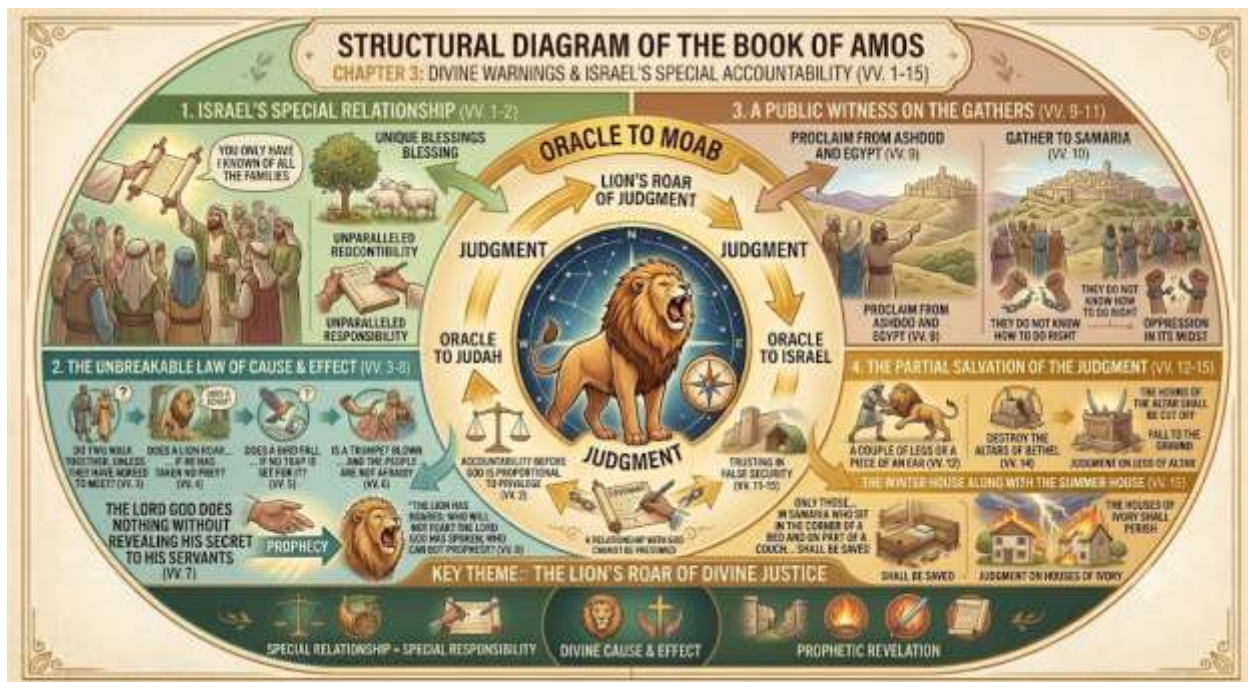
### **How This Relates to Today**

The two legs and a piece of an ear that the shepherd rescues from the lion's mouth is one of the most memorably specific images in the prophetic tradition for what the covenant judgment leaves — and its contemporary application is as direct as its ancient one. The community of faith that has been accumulating the forms of prosperity that the covenant God has given — the institutional resources, the social standing, the cultural influence, the economic stability — and has been sustaining those forms of prosperity alongside the social arrangements that the covenant God has explicitly prohibited is in the position of the wealthy of Samaria with their ivory houses and seasonal residences. The judgment that strips the houses of ivory will strip the contemporary equivalents with the same specificity that verse 15 names.

The cutting off of the altar's horns at Bethel is also one of the most pointed images in the chapter for the relationship between the quality of the worship and the social arrangements of the worshipping community. Bethel's altar is being stripped not because the worship itself is performed incorrectly — the sacrificial procedures are presumably being followed — but because the God whose worship is being performed has not accepted the worship of the

community that simultaneously maintains the social injustice. The contemporary church whose worship is liturgically correct and whose social arrangements systematically disadvantage the vulnerable has spread the pledged garments at the altar of Bethel. The horns will be cut off.

**Key Lesson:** *\*The closing section of the chapter brings the specific inventory of the prosperity and the specific targeting of the religious system together as the double object of the covenant judgment: the two legs and piece of ear that are all the shepherd rescues from the lion's mouth are what will be left of the comfortable life that the ivory houses and the seasonal residences represent, and the altar of Bethel whose horns will be cut off and fall to the ground is the declaration that the religious system that has been sustaining the comfortable life alongside the social injustice shares in the judgment that the injustice has made inevitable.\**



## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Amos chapter 3 having received the three-part argument of the shepherd from Tekoa: the you only have I known... therefore I will punish, the seven wisdom questions that establish the cause-and-effect inevitability of the judgment, and the specific inventory of what the judgment will leave and what it will strip. We have heard the compulsion of the prophetic word: the lion has roared; who will not fear? The LORD has spoken; who can but prophesy? We have been summoned along with Ashdod and Egypt to observe the tumults of Samaria. And we have heard the cutting off of the altar's horns and the destruction of the ivory houses and the seasonal residences and the great houses.

*Lord, let the you only have I known be received in its full theological weight — not as the comfortable assurance of a protected status but as the intensification of the accountability that the intimate knowing demands. We have been known by You in the covenant of the new creation more intimately than Israel was known by You in the covenant at Sinai. The therefore is proportionally heavier. Let it be proportionally more effective in producing the covenant faithfulness that the knowing requires.*

*And let the surely the Lord GOD will do nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets be the authorization of the prophetic word that we most need to hear and most want to silence. The word that compels its own proclamation — the word that the prophet cannot suppress any more than the frightened person can suppress the response to the lion's roar — is the word most likely to be the word of the LORD. Let us hear it before the horns of the altar are cut off. Let us hear it before the corner of the couch is all that is left.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

***Soli Deo Gloria***  
*Glory to God Alone*