

Amos 6:12-14

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-6/amos-612-14/>

Amos asks two rhetorical questions to expose Israel's perversion of justice. Since the Israelites pervert justice and boast of their military victories, Amos says that the LORD will raise up a nation to afflict them and erase their military exploits.

To expose the level of perversity of the elite of Israel, Amos posed two rhetorical questions. Amos asked, *Do horses run on rocks?* The implied answer to this question is “No.” Horses cannot gallop over *rocks* (large boulders or rocky crags) because the *rocks* would destroy their hoofs, wound them, and preclude them from being able to perform their works.

Amos also asked, *Or does one plow them with oxen?* Again, the implied answer is “No.” People do not *plow with oxen* on rocky crags. To *plow* means to turn over and loose the top layer of the soil, preparing it for sowing. Such an activity was reserved for a soil surface, not rocky terrains. Nobody would even dream of making horses work on rocky crags or large boulders, for this would be irrational and absurd.

However, the covenant people of God had done something equally futile during the days of Amos because they *turned justice into poison*, causing injury, illness, and death in the land. They also *turned the fruit of righteousness into wormwood*. The word *wormwood* is used metaphorically for bitterness. The idea is that the Israelites turned sweet justice into bitterness. They distorted justice and downplayed righteousness. As such, they violated the basic rules of God's covenantal laws, as explained in the Mosaic Law (Exodus 23:1–9).

God's law sets forth two roads, a road of life and a road of death (Deuteronomy 30:15-18). The road of life is to love God and love others (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18). The road of death is to follow the pagan ways of exploitation and indulgence (Deuteronomy 30:17-18; Leviticus 18).

Not only did the Israelite leaders pervert justice in the land, but they also boasted in their military victories. According to Amos, they *rejoiced in Lodebar* and said, *'Have we not by our own strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?'* The place called *Lodebar* was a city located on the left bank of the Jordan River. It is generally identified with Tell 'el-Hammeh, just north of the Jabbok River, in what would have been in the Ammonite territory of the northern part of Gilead.

The place called *Karnaim* is located in central Bashan at Tell es-Sa'ad, on a northern tributary of the Yarmuk River (see Genesis 14:5). Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria made it the capital of the Assyrian province of Qarnina when he conquered the region during his campaign in 738–737 BC.

Under King Jeroboam II, the Israelites were able to capture *Lodebar and Karnaim* and recover all their lands east of the Jordan River (2 Kings 14:25). But while the Israelites boasted of their accomplishments, God was the one who made it possible for Israel to win such a great victory.

According to the Kings materials, the LORD did so because He “saw the affliction of Israel, *which was* very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free, nor was there any helper for Israel” (2 Kings 14:26). Therefore, He saved His people “by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash” (2 Kings 14:27).

Yet, the Israelites boasted in their accomplishment, thinking that they defeated all these cities by their own strength. So, Amos used wordplay to mock Israel since *Lodebar* means ‘nothing’ and *Karnaim* means ‘a pair of horns.’ Simply put, since the word *Lodebar* means ‘nothing’ and the word ‘horn’ symbolizes the strength of a bull (Deuteronomy 33:17), the prophet mocked Israel of their false pride by telling them that their strength or power had been for nothing. The Israelites had accomplished nothing of lasting significance. Therefore, they had no good reason to boast.

Since the Israelites mistakenly boasted of their strength, *the LORD of hosts*, the invincible military leader, *declared*, ‘*For behold, I am going to raise up a nation against you, O house of Israel.*’ The Suzerain God would use an enemy nation as His instrument to carry out His judgment on His covenant people. Such a judgment would be severe because the enemy nation would *afflict* Israel *from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah*.

The place called *Hamath* was one of the principal cities on the Orontes River. It was located in northern Syria, and was the capital of a district in an -Hittite kingdom under the name of Hamath the Great (Amos 6:2). It was on the north of Israel. The *Arabah*, a term used as a virtual synonym for “desert” is the continuation of the Jordan rift between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Elath, approximately 110 miles long (Deuteronomy 1:1). It was on the south of Israel. (Please see map in the Maps and Charts section on sidebar).

While King Jeroboam II had “restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah,” (2 Kings 14:25), the LORD threatened to reverse that victory and erase Israel’s military accomplishments. This would be because Israel had violated the covenantal laws of their Suzerain (or Ruler) God, and would now incur the provisions for breaking the covenant. The LORD may be seen to be severe when He judged His covenant people, Israel. But He is simply giving notice of His intent to enforce the curses for disobedience to which Israel had agreed when they entered a covenant with Him (Exodus 19:8).

Israel’s job was to be a witness to other nations, and show them a better way to live (Exodus 19:6). Israel was to demonstrate the great benefit of living in communal harmony, based on mutual care for one another, protecting one another, and serving the best interest of one another. Such a community will bring about great prosperity and enjoyment. But, as agreed upon in their covenant with God, Israel was to be exiled from the land if they failed to carry out this great responsibility. When leaders use their authority to exploit rather than to serve, they violate their calling and must be removed from their witness.

This is somewhat similar to Jesus’s message to the church at Ephesus, when He tells them He will remove their “lampstand,” their witness, if they do not repent and return to the “first love.” The Ephesian church was excelling at defending truth, but had lost their first love, perhaps enjoying “being right” or lording over others. As such, Jesus told them their witness would be

removed if they did not repent. Jesus desires His people to follow Him in truth as well as love. That is the witness He seeks, and He will remove witnesses that mislead.

Biblical Text

¹² **Do horses run on rocks?**

Or does one plow them with oxen?

Yet you have turned justice into poison

And the fruit of righteousness into wormwood,

¹³ **You who rejoice in Lodebar,**

And say, “Have we not by our *own* strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?”

¹⁴ **“For behold, I am going to raise up a nation against you,**

O house of Israel,” declares the Lord God of hosts,

“And they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath

To the brook of the Arabah.”