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**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:  
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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**Shiur #09**

**The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations (continued)**

In this lecture, we will continue our study of Amos' oracles against the nations. In the previous chapter, we surveyed the history of Eisav/ Edom until the end of the First Commonwealth. We looked at the background of Edomite-Israelite relations in order to put into context their indictment and their punishment. In this lecture, we will do the same with the oracles against Ammon and Moav. From a literary perspective, it may be tough to defend grouping these two oracles together, as one echoes Edom's brutal desires while the other focuses on explicit brutality towards another royal house. Their both having "long" punishment formulae might be sufficient reason to address them in one lecture, but we have more than that to rely on to justify it.

**AMMON AND MOAV: FIRST COMMONWEALTH NEIGHBORS**

Ammon and Moav reside as uneasy neighbors of Israel on the East Bank of the Jordan. Each participates at one point or another in the subjugation of selected tribes of Israel during the period of the Shoftim – Moav over Binyamin (ch. 2) and Ammon over some of Menasheh's territory (both in Gidon's time, ch. 6, and Yiftach's, ch. 11). Both of them are, in turn, subjugated by David during his great eastward expansion (*II Shemuel* 8).

In the Torah, they are grouped together in the Deuteronomic intermarriage prohibitions (23:4-7):

Neither an Ammonite nor a Moabite shall enter God's congregation; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into God's congregation forever. For they did not greet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired Bilam, the son of Be'or from Petor of Aram Naharayim, against you to curse you. The Lord your God would not listen to Bilam; but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you. You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity, all of your days forever.

Parenthetically, David's apparent disregard of this last directive – not to seek their peace – leads to the war against Ammon recorded in *II Shemuel* 10-12. It is during this war – the first one involving David's men which finds him back at home instead of at the front – that the Bat Sheva-Uriah episode takes place. This episode nearly destroys the House of David. Comparing the narrative of this war with the spectacular victories recorded earlier (ch. 8) raises some questions regarding the chronological sequencing of events in the record of David's monarchy.<sup>1</sup>

Ammon and Moav are grouped together earlier in *Devarim* (2:8-9, 18-19) as Moshe recounts the divine directives affecting the Jews' circuitous route to the Land:

And we turned and passed by the way of the Wilderness of Moab. And God said to me: "Neither act as an enemy against Moab, nor contend with them in battle; for I will not give you of his land for a possession; because I have given Ar to the children of Lot for a possession...You are passing this day over the border of Moab, even Ar; and when you come nigh over against the Ammonites, neither harass them nor contend with them; for I will not give you of the Ammonites' land for a possession; because I have given it to the children of Lot for a possession."

Both of these East Bank neighbors are given a "divine pass" and allowed to hold their territory without a sword even being drawn against them (even though they fear Israel's army), both for the same reason: "I have given it to the children of Lot as a possession."

Israel's interaction with these two nations is limited before entering the Land. Sichon the Emorite conquers part of their territory, and since he is not descended from Lot, he is a legitimate target and Israel bests him; the same fate befalls Og. What had once been the territory of Lot, and then the lands of Sichon and Og, now becomes Israelite Transjordan, divided among Gad, Reuven and part of Menasheh. Three centuries later, in the time of Yiftach, the Ammonite king demands his territory back, leading to war (*Shoftim* 11).

To fully understand this complex relationship, we must go back to the genesis of the Jewish nation, to *Bereishit*.

## AMMON AND MOAV: BEGINNINGS

When Avram (as Avraham is then known) is called by God: "Go for yourself from your land" (12:1), the apparent meaning is to leave on his own; indeed, in v. 4,

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<sup>1</sup> The lack of chronological fidelity is made much clearer in the last four chapters of *Shemuel*

the text states: “Avram went as God commanded him” (alone) “and Lot went with him.” This verse seems to present the ideal fulfillment of the divine command. V. 5 radically restates this, recording that Avram “took” his wife, Sarai, Lot his nephew, all of their possessions and all of the people that they had “made” (i.e. purchased) in Charan. Subsequent events suggest that bringing his family was a mistake. Sarai is taken from him when he arrives in Egypt and this happens again in Philistia, in both cases, they are soon reunited; but this is not the case with Lot.

When Avram suggest to Lot that they separate, he uses a curious phrase: “If you choose the left, I will go to the right; and if you choose the right, I will go to the left.” (13:9). This unusual wording is best understood against the backdrop of the biblical compass. The assumption in *Tanakh* is that one is facing east, so that “in front” (*kedem*) is another way of saying east and “in back” (*achor*) is another word for west. Thus, left is north and right is south (viz. 14:15). Avram offers Lot two options: go north (Shechem) and I will go south (Chevron) or vice versa. Leaving the hill country is not on the table, but Lot chooses exactly that, turning east to the lush Jordan Valley, despite the exceeding wickedness of its denizens in Sedom.

When this evil reaches its climax, God is prepared to destroy the Sedom and its suburbs, but first He consults Avraham, who convinces God to spare the area if ten innocents are to be found there (18:17-33). Two angels come to visit the town (ch. 19) and we soon learn that the wickedness of the town is near-absolute. (The treatment of these two outsiders is deliberately placed in apposition and contrast to the generous and unqualified hospitality practiced by Avraham and Sara.). When it is time to destroy the city, Avraham’s merit suffices for Lot, but the only members of Lot’s family who agree to go with him are his wife and his two unmarried daughters, although the former ends up violating the angels’ command and looks back, becoming a pillar of salt.<sup>2</sup>

Lot and his two daughters flee to a cave on a hill (*har*) near the town of Tzoar; the daughters are somehow convinced that the entire region or earth has been destroyed and prepare to act to save the future of humanity. Perhaps they see themselves cast as a latter-day Noach. For some reason they don’t include their father in their concerns but instead get him drunk (and where was that wine from?) and have sex with him on subsequent nights (19:36-38).

And the two daughters of Lot became pregnant (*va-taharena*) from their father. The elder gave birth to a son and she called him Moav (lit. “from father”); he is the father of Moab until this very day. And the younger also gave birth to a son and she called him Ben Ammi (lit. “son of my people”); he is the father of the Ammonites until this very day.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ralbag 19:26.

This etiological tale, distasteful as it is, establishes the tribal families of Ammon and Moav, neighbors to the east, in a somewhat tense relationship with Israel. On the one hand, they are kin and are accorded special status as such. For instance, the *Mekhilta (Yitro, Ba-chodesh 5)* records that before God offers the Torah to Israel, he approaches other Abrahamic nations: the progeny of Eisav, Lot and Yishmael. Ammon and Moav demur because of ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ saying “We are all born of incest!” Nevertheless, their aggadic presence in itself indicates their status as part of the family of Avraham, and the idea of Lot’s divine inheritance above seems to reflect the same idea.

The flipside is that their callous inhospitality to their cousins in the desert (first failing to offer them bread and water, then actively hiring Bilam to curse them — not to mention, one suspects, their ignominious beginnings) leads God to permanently keep them at arm’s length. It is only through the persistence of Rut (and the delicate parsing of “a Moabite, but not a Moabites”) that Moav gains entry into God’s congregation.

In a delightful Midrashic twist, “I found David My servant” (*Tehillim* 89:21) is expounded, “Where did I find him? In Sedom” (*Bereishit Rabba* 40:6). The angels tell Lot, “Arise, take your wife and your two *found* daughters.” The two girls who ultimately give birth to the Moabite and Ammonite nations are “found” in Sedom, and that is where David, great-grandson of Ruth, is “found.”

## THE TEXT

### AMMON (1:13-15)

**13** *Ko amar Hashem:* For the three sins of the children of Ammon, and for four I will not reverse it: because they ripped up the pregnant women of Gilad, in order to expand their border. **14** So will I kindle a fire in the wall of Rabba, and it shall devour her palaces, with shouting in the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; **15** And their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together, *amar Hashem.*

Note that unlike the other nations listed in this series, the Ammonites are called “**Bnei Ammon**” – even Israel does not merit the more familiar “*Bnei Yisrael*.”<sup>3</sup> This name is supported by the foundational story in *Bereishit* 19 (above) where Lot’s younger daughter calls her son “Ben Ammi.” It is also supported by external texts. An inscription found on a bottle in Tel Siran in the spring of 1972 (on the grounds of the University of Jordan in Amman) mentions King Amminadav of “*Bnei Ammon*”; similarly, a shard found in an ancient theater in Amman mentions “*Bnei Ammon*.” Significantly, in both cases, it is one word, “*bn’mn*.”

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<sup>3</sup> One might argue that “*Bnei Yisrael*” would not be a fitting cognomen for the Northern Kingdom, as they are only part of the Jewish people, and never its heart.

The crime of which the Ammonites are accused is a more explicit version of the indictment of the Arameans (v. 3). Whereas we could have interpreted the latter accusation as being one of “scorching earth” (although we rejected it), there is no ignoring the plain meaning of this horrific crime. There is a deliberate play on words here. *Harot* (pregnant women) reminds us of *harim* (mountains), and Gilad is indeed mountainous. However, the plain meaning of the text leaves no such possibility. The Ammonites ripped open the bellies of the pregnant women among the vanquished — perhaps members of the eastern Israelite tribes — in order to expand their territory. This may be a (poetically) exaggerated reference to the actions of Nachash, king of Ammon, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE. As recorded in *I Shemuel* 11, Nachash attacks the Israelite residents of Yavesh Gilad (likely Gadites). When they offer to surrender, the king presents his terms. The vassals would have to poke out their right eyes as a mark of shame (and defeat — perhaps subjugation?). This leads to Shaul’s first military victory, which wins over his detractors (ibid. v. 12).

There is a significant addition found in one of the fragments of *Shemuel* found at Qumran. In 4QSam<sup>a</sup>, written c. 50 BCE, we have the following text which bridges the end of chapter 10 to the beginning of chapter 11 (supplemental text in bold):

But some worthless fellows said, "How can this man save us?" And they despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace. **Now Nachash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nachash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Yavesh Gilad.** About a month later, Nachash the Ammonite went up and besieged Yavesh Gilad; and all the men of Yavesh said to Nachash, "Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you." But Nachash the Ammonite said to them, "On this condition I will make a treaty with you, namely that I gouge out everyone’s right eye, and thus put disgrace upon all Israel."

Whether this is an aggadic addendum for edification or a variant vorlage (always a question in Qumran research) is unclear. Nonetheless, there was certainly a tradition — written or oral — that the Ammonites had *actually* acted with great brutality towards the Israelite tribes on the East Bank, more than just the unrealized threat recorded in the Masoretic text. It may be that Amos’s indictment here serves as support for this expanded version of *Shemuel* and that it is this act of brutality to which he refers and which his Samaritan audience would recognize. Using the hyperbolic image of ripping open the bellies of pregnant women (which may have been Aram’s crime) would serve to heighten the revulsion against their actions.

This rhetorical flourish accomplishes yet another literary aim. As we have pointed out along the way, the eight indictments are structured as long-long-short-short, and this pattern repeats right up to the denouement. This deliberately misleads the audience into a more relaxed attitude so that even when they hear that Israel is the “next” nation to be named, they anticipate a short and relatively mild punishment. The abrupt shift serves to surprise and hopefully shock them into repenting and mending their ways.

The argument for this structure is further supported by the mention of this crime here. As the pattern restarts, with two long and detailed punishments meant for Ammon and Moav, the crime matches the “fourth crime” in the first oracle. Seen from a structural perspective, the oracles have two parallel sub-sequences:

- 1) A war crime of utmost brutality described as threshing open the pregnant women of the Gilad in order to seize more land — with a long, detailed punishment culminating in exile;
- 2) Treachery towards a treaty partner — with a long, detailed punishment including destruction of key cities as well as smiting the leaders;
- 3) Treachery towards a treaty partner — with a short punishment including destruction of the capital city alone;
- 4) An accusation addressing criminal attitudes — here is where the structure splits between the brief punishment awaiting Edom and the detailed punishments that await Israel.

The punishment awaiting Ammon begins like the rest, with a variant verb used for lighting the fire against the city. Instead of the usual “*ve-shilachti esh*,” here we have “*ve-hitzati esh*,” “So will I kindle a fire.” Most scholars believe that this is simply driven by literary considerations, with no difference in meaning or import.

Once the city of Rabba is burned, the punishment moves into “new territory.” The crime of which Ammon stands accused is explicitly a war crime. Their punishment is to be defeated in war: the blasts of a shofar or screaming (*terua*) and the terror of storms and hurricanes, which are often used as metaphors for the horrors of war, are invoked here.

The final step is that the king will be exiled — perhaps. The text reads “*malkam*,” “their king,” but this may be an alternative way of referring to Milkom, the Ammonite god, in which case “his princes” would refer to the priests of the cult. This clever play off of Milkom is attested to elsewhere (e.g. *II Shemuel* 12:30).

#### THE TEXT MOAV (2:1-3)

**1** *Ko amar Hashem*: For the three sins of Moav, and for four I will not reverse it: because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into

lime. **2** So will I send a fire upon Moav, and it shall devour the palaces of Keriyyot; and Moav will die with tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the shofar; **3** And I will cut off the judge from their midst, and will slay all of their princes with him, *amar Hashem*.

## THE CRIME

The crime of which Moav is accused is a curious one and stands out on several counts. Most critically, this is the only crime that in no sense can be construed as involving Israel. In other words, God is not just acting vengefully against those who harm His people; He is holding all nations accountable for their moral station.

The specific crime is, like most mentioned in these indictments, hard to trace in biblical history. The closest we come is the bizarre and ruthless act taken by the king of Moav against *his own son*, sacrificing him and putting his corpse on the wall of the city, which somehow ends the battle between the beleaguered Moav and the attacking Yisrael, Yehuda and Edom (*II Melakhim* 3). It is unlikely that this act is the referent here, as the point of this indictment is acting against another king.

The end of v. 1 (*la-sid*) would imply that he burnt the bones of the king to use the ashes as plaster. This is a difficult read, as the ashes could not be used effectively. A more likely read is that he burnt the bones and used that fire to make plaster.

In the punishment, the war motif returns (as it does above, in the case of Ammon). After burning Moav and devouring the fortresses at Keriyyot (situated between Divon and Meideva), Moav is to suffer as did Ammon. War will “kill” Moav and again the blasting of the war-shofar is mentioned. The leaders are targeted again, both the judge and the princes; presumably, they were the instigators or supporters of the terrible crime that stands at the beginning of this indictment.

### **For further study**

Ammonite inscriptions: Shmuel Ahituv, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: 1992), pp. 223-226 [Heb.]