

Amos 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Amos chapter 5. Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel. Fallen, no more to rise is the virgin Israel, forsaken on her land, with none to raise her up.

For thus says the Lord God, The city that went out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which went out a hundred shall have ten left to the house of Israel. For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal, or cross over to Beersheba.

For Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel.

O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth! He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name, who makes destruction flash forth against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor, and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them.

[1 : 21] You have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins, you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.

Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that you may live. And so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said.

Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord. In all the squares there shall be wailing, and in all the streets they shall say, Alas, alas! They shall call the farmers to mourning, and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation.

And in all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst, says the Lord. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord?

[2 : 21] It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house, and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

And the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. To the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sikath, your king, and Qayun, your star guard, your images that you made for yourselves.

And I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts. In chapter 4, the Lord had declared disaster upon Israel. He had given warning upon warning, so Israel would repent before it was too late.

[3 : 28] However, they had persisted in their iniquity, and so they had to face the Lord's judgment. Chapter 5 opens with a lament for the doomed people, anticipating the terrible fate about to befall them.

The speaker of the lament might be Amos, but it might also be the Lord himself. It isn't entirely clear. Likewise, we might wonder about the tone of the lament. Is it sarcastic, or is it sorrowful?

Is the one voicing the lament, mocking the stubborn people for the consequences of their iniquity? Or is it a genuine expression of distress and mourning? It seems more likely that it is the latter. The real tragedy, of course, is that the disaster that awaits Israel was never inevitable or unavoidable. They were given ample opportunity to arrest their course. Israel is here likened to a young woman, the epitome of life, beauty, and fruitfulness, struck down and forsaken, a horrible and arresting sight.

She is abandoned and will not be raised up. Its cities sent out the flower of their young men to war, and only a tenth of them returned. Like the virgin Israel, Israel's men were cut down in the prime of their strength, leaving only a small remnant behind.

[4 : 41] Verses 4-6 have a chiasmic structure, as Daniel Carroll observes, moving from seeking the Lord in order to live, to a reference to Bethel, a reference to Gilgal, a reference to Beersheba, and then back again through that sequence.

Israel's fate was sealed, yet a small number would survive the destruction. The places of refuge and sources of support that Israel had formerly trusted in would all come to nothing, or fail her in the hour of her need.

The people of Israel might have considered going to Bethel, to the cultic centre of the land, in the time of their calamity. But there was no aid to be found there. They might have gone to Gilgal, another cultic centre, mentioned alongside Bethel earlier in chapter 4, verses 4-5.

Come to Bethel and transgress, to Gilgal and multiply transgression. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings.

Publish them. For so you love to do, O people of Israel, declares the Lord God. Another possibility open to Israel was crossing over to Beersheba. Beersheba was a site in southern Judah, a prominent location in the narratives of the patriarchs.

[5 : 55] Beersheba also was a cultic site at this time. Perhaps people in Israel thought that, if they went further afield, to a cultic site in the southern sister kingdom of Judah, they might find help there.

Beersheba is also mentioned in chapter 8, verse 14. These cultic sites afford no assistance, as they are themselves doomed. Gilgal going into exile involves a clever play upon the sounds of the word Gilgal.

Bethel coming to nothing associates it once again with the word avon, meaning wickedness or vanity, as in Hosea chapter 4, verse 15, 5, verse 8, and 10, verse 5.

The one possible source of help is the Lord himself. They must turn to him as soon as they can. If they do not, he will be the one bringing about their destruction.

The house of Joseph here refers to the northern kingdom, as the leading tribe of Ephraim was the primary son of Joseph. Manasseh, his brother, was also a prominent tribe of the northern kingdom.

[6 : 55] Justice was supposed to be the defining feature of the life of the nation. The responsibility of enacting justice lay upon the entire nation, but especially upon its leaders and authorities.

However, the nation had perverted justice. That which was to give life and wholeness had been made bitter in its perversion and denial. The preceding chapter ended with a great doxology, praising the Lord as the omnipotent creator.

Chapter 4, verse 13. Here in verses 8 and 9, we have another doxology.

The Lord is the master of the heavens and the one who rules over the seas. He controls the most elevated celestial powers and holds in place the threatening and untamable powers of the waves. Here he pours out the waters of the sea upon the surface of the earth and darkens the day into night. He is able to overturn the order of the cosmos, as he is its creator.

[8 : 02] Verse 9 is exceptionally difficult to translate in its current form. However, the basic point of it might be that no creature is immune to or independent of his power. Even the strong, who might fancy themselves protected in a fortress, are subject to his might and judgment.

These verses remind Israel of the one with whom they have to do. They must reckon with the creator of the universe. The gate was the site of judgment and rule. It was the site of the elders and of legal proceedings.

Characteristic of the fool is resistance to counsel, correction and judgment. Here the few faithful leaders in Israel who are reproving wickedness in the gate, or speaking the unpleasant truth, are loathed for their candor and correction.

The wealthy are economically oppressing the poor, exacting excessive rent from them to enrich themselves and live in luxury. However, they would not enjoy the use of their ill-gotten wealth. They had multiplied their forms of injustice. They afflicted the righteous, perverted justice for bribes, and denied justice to the poor and needy. Their society was corrupt through and through.

[9 : 09] Founded upon oppression, lies and injustice. Verse 13 could be read in different ways. Our interpretation will depend upon a number of considerations. For instance, how do we understand the evil time?

Is this the current time, or is it the time of judgment that is coming? Is the word translated as the prudent here, better read as the wealthy? Is the silence the silence of the righteous when the Lord's judgment falls, because they assent to it or cannot question it?

Is their silence a silence of grief, or of assurance in the Lord's work? Alternatively, is their silence the silence of wise persons who know that it is not prudent for them to speak out in a society so committed to folly and wickedness?

Holding their counsel, such people might survive. However, the society has silenced those whose counsel might have saved them. They've done this because they hate reproof and the truth.

Earlier, in verses 4-6, the people were encouraged to seek the Lord. In verses 14-15, they are once again called to do this, as their one hope of life.

[10 : 12] Addressing the injustice that pervades Israel's society, beginning with a fundamental shift in their moral posture, learning to hate evil and love good, some glimmer of hope of restoration, or at least preservation through judgment, might remain.

This hatred of evil and love of good must be manifest in the gate. Justice must be desired and pursued in their life as a society. Verses 16 and 17 return us to the theme of lamentation, with which the chapter began.

Verses 1-17 of this chapter seem to follow a chiasmic or book-ended structure. Carol, who draws the structure from others, summarises it. Lament for Israel in verses 1-3 corresponds with lament for Israel in verses 16-17.

The charge to seek the Lord and live is found in verses 4-6, and then again in verses 14-15. There is a warning to Israel in verse 7, and then a warning to the powerful in verses 10-13.

The power of the Lord to create in verse 8 is counterbalanced with the power of the Lord to destroy in verse 9. And at the very heart of the chiasm is the statement, The general lamentation described occurs as the Lord passes through their midst.

[11 : 28] We should probably recall the Passover and the mourning of all Israel at the death of the firstborn. A similar general judgment is going to strike Israel in the day of its calamity.

Israel has already been compared to Egypt in the book of Amos. In chapter 4 verses 9-10 for instance, Once again, as Israel had become like Egypt, it would now suffer the fate of Egypt. The day of the Lord is perhaps the greatest of the unifying themes of the book of the Twelve. For many, the day of the Lord was synonymous with deliverance and salvation. The Lord would come in righteousness and deliver his people, overcoming their enemies.

However, the prophet tells the people that they have been laboring under a terrible delusion. The day of the Lord is a day not of light, but of darkness. It is a terrible day, a day of devastation and destruction.

It is the darkness in which the Lord visits death upon the firstborn of Egypt, for instance. This day is dreadful, yet inescapable. Amos gives the example of someone fleeing from a lion, thinking that he had made good his escape and then being met by a bear, or going into his house and being bitten by a venomous serpent, just when he thought he was safe.

[13 : 02] The day of the Lord is deadly and cannot be evaded. The lights are going to be turned out over Israel, and there is nothing that they can do to avoid it. One of the purposes of cultic worship was to seek the favour of the Lord.

Sacrifices would be offered, songs and psalms sung, solemn assemblies convened. Yet all of these activities were a stench in the Lord's nostrils, an abomination to him, something that he despised.

While Israel might have fancied that it would escape judgment for its many sacrifices and great assemblies, these actually served to compound its iniquity. Every time they came before the Lord in their injustice, offering to him as if that secured his favour, they were rubbing their wickedness in his face.

The Lord's abhorrence of sacrifice and cultic practice, divorced from righteousness, is a common theme in the prophets especially. True worship must be confirmed in faithful practice, and where worship is a mask for injustice, the Lord's anger is aroused.

What the Lord really desires from his people is justice and righteousness. Justice and righteousness are here compared to an ever-flowing stream that never ceases to irrigate and give life and fruitfulness to its land.

[14 : 15] Righteousness and justice are not a dry and dead legalism, but living and life-giving waters that make the land and its people fruitful, reliably and continually afforded to all.

Water was that which sustained the land and the people. They depended upon it for their survival. In this image of continual and bountiful irrigation, the Lord was showing his people that, if only they would pursue them, justice and righteousness would be like rains and rivers upon their parched and arid land, restoring all to life.

Verse 25 is challenging to understand. Is it suggesting that Israel didn't offer any sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness? This seems to be at odds with various passages in the Pentateuch. Perhaps the claim is a slightly narrower one. Perhaps Israel offered sacrifices at the establishment of the priesthood, for instance, and was given instructions for sacrifice, but largely did not offer during the years of wandering, only offering when they entered the land.

We might consider that the wilderness generation was not circumcised until they entered the land, which would have limited their potential for cultic practice. The 40 years, then, would be a reference to the 38 years of wandering more particularly.

[15 : 26] At various points in the prophets, the wilderness experience is depicted in more positive terms, Israel going out after the Lord, like a bride after her bridegroom. Is Amos' point here working with a broadly positive portrayal of the 40 years, a reading that several commentators follow?

This would seem to cause some problems, as the lack of sacrifices was likely a consequence of Israel's rebellion, not a positive thing. Other commentators suggest that Israel lacked the material to perform such sacrifices.

The point for such a reading would be that even without sacrifices, Israel was able to have a relationship with the Lord. Perhaps some form of this position still makes sense. Without idealising the wilderness, The point is that, during the 40 years, which was far from wholly characterised by unfaithfulness, Israel's relationship with God, whether due to their lack of materials for sacrifice, or the non-practice of sacrifice in judgement upon their sin, was sustained without the performance of sacrifice.

The Israel of Amos' day, however, has a multitude of sacrifices, but does not exhibit the faithfulness and obedience that the Lord truly desires and requires, which is what the children of Israel exhibited after the 40 years of their wandering.

After those 40 years, they were prepared to enter the land, but not because they had performed some great quantity of sacrifices. The consequence for Israel and its sin would be exile.

[16 : 52] They had wedded themselves to their false gods, and their false gods would be sent into exile with them. The meaning of the words Sikath and Qayun here have been discussed quite a lot by scholars, but they most likely refer to Assyrian astral deities, as they committed themselves to these false gods, perhaps in part as an expression of their vassal status under Assyria, they would be expelled from the land and sent into exile beyond Damascus.

This would all come upon Israel in 722 BC, as the northern kingdom fell to Assyria. A question to consider, how might the scriptural vision of justice in society, described in places like verse 24 of this chapter, speak to modern debates about justice in society?