

Amos 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Amos chapter 6. Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes.

Pass over to Calna and see, and from there go to Hamath the Great, then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms, or is their territory greater than your territory, O you who put far away the day of disaster, and bring near the seat of violence? Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away. The Lord God has sworn by himself, declares the Lord, the God of hosts. I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city, and all that is in it. And if ten men remain in one house, they shall die. And when one's relative, the one who anoints him for burial, shall take him up to bring the bones out of the house, and shall say to him who is in the innermost parts of the house, is there still anyone with you? He shall say, No. And he shall say, Silence, we must not mention the name of the Lord. For behold, the Lord commands, and the great house shall be struck down into fragments, and the little house into bits. Do horses run on rocks?

Does one plough there with oxen? But you have turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. You who rejoice in Lodabar, who say, Have we not by our own strength capture Carnaim for ourselves? For behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, declares the Lord, the God of hosts. And they shall oppress you from Lebo Hamath to the brook of the Araba. Amos chapter 5 was a chapter of laments and woes, and chapter 6 also opens with a proclamation of woes. The prophetic message seeks to shock Israel out of its presumption and complacency.

In the preceding chapter we saw the way that many assumed that the day of the Lord would be a positive thing for Israel, a day of vindication and deliverance. The prophet, however, declares that it would be a day of darkness and judgment, a terrible day in which the iniquity of the people would come upon their heads. Coupled with this presumption is the complacency of the elites of Judah and Israel, who imagine that they are secure on account of their wealth and within their walled cities, not realizing that the floor is going to fall away from their worlds. Their complacency is both a false sense of security, and also their lack of moral unease concerning the wickedness and the oppression that they are practicing. Their moral insensitivity is supported by their overconfidence in the military capacity of their nations, the strength of their cities, the affordances of their wealth, and by their misplaced assurance that the Lord is on their side. They seem to regard themselves as the first of the nations, presumably on account of their covenant privilege. Not only is their nation elevated above others, but they are elevated within their nation as its elite, with the people of the land coming to them for judgment and help. Mount Zion and Samaria are both mentioned here, reminding us that Amos' ministry is not exclusive to Israel. He also speaks to his own nation of Judah. Kalnei, Hamath, and Gath were all cities that, by this time, had been much reduced in their power and standing. Kalnei was an old

Hittite capital, while Hamath was a Syrian city-state. Daniel Carroll mentions a number of ways in which verse 2 could be understood. Some critical commentators have seen this as a later addition to the text, from a time after the destruction of those cities by Assyria. Another suggestion is that, due to the success of Israel in expanding its borders during the reign of Jeroboam II, the elites were here boasting about their superiority to other cities in the region that had declined, and that the first half of verse 2 is their words. However, the prophet would then puncture their confidence by disputing their sense of superiority to those kingdoms in the rhetorical questions that follow. Alternatively, Carroll maintains that the prophet is probably the one directing the people's attention to these kingdoms. He's challenging them that, just as the Lord had humbled those once great powers, so he could humble Israel and Judah. Israel and Judah had no grounds for their presumption. While Gath, for instance, had not yet been destroyed, we should note its absence from the oracle against the Philistines in chapter 1, where judgment was declared primarily upon Gaza, and along with it, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron, Gath, formerly a great city of the Philistines, was notable by its exclusion. The elites of Judah and Israel had put far away the day of disaster.

[4 : 58] They had blinded themselves to the precarious nature of their situation, and the imminence of their destruction. In but a few decades, although it would survive, Judah would be brought down to its knees, and Israel would be overwhelmed by the Assyrians.

However, to those at ease in Zion and feeling secure on the mountain of Samaria, such threats could not be further from their minds. They ignored the signs of their times, paid no heed to the warning shots that the Lord had been firing across their bows, and proceeded without regard. While putting away the day of disaster from their awareness, they had been bringing near the seat of violence. Perhaps this refers to the destruction about to come upon them. It could also refer to the injustice and oppression that they were perpetuating in their societies. Verses 4-7 depict the scene of a feast. The decadent elite of the land are lounging on their couches, enjoying an extravagant meal of the finest food, drinking large quantities of expensive wine, anointing themselves with costly oils, and diverting themselves with idle songs and music-making. They are carefree and unmindful of the ruin of Joseph, the moral state of the nation, and the fate that is about to come upon them. They have rendered themselves insensible to the rapidly approaching disaster, a disaster which both their own actions and continuing oppression have largely precipitated. When the disaster actually strikes, they would be the first to be struck. Their revelries would be put to an end. Verse 8 is an intense statement of the Lord's loathing of Jacob's pride, a pride that was seemingly founded in the supposed impregnability of his strongholds. The pride, complacency, and presumption all serve to accentuate the moral indifference and insensibility of Israel. The Lord feels so strongly about this that he swears by himself in making the statement, and is presented as a declaration of the Lord, the God of hosts, the solemn oath being accompanied by a pronouncement formula. His abhorrence of their pride is yet further emphasised by the emotive language of the statement itself. For Jacob's pride and hubris, their city, in which they had placed so much of their confidence, would be delivered up with all who were dwelling in it. From the general city, the text focuses upon a single house, just one of many such residences.

All of the members of the household would die, its entire life snuffed out in the day of disaster. Yerub Yerimius suggests that verse 10, an exceedingly difficult verse to translate and interpret, might look back to chapter 5 verse 3. 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. Here there are ten people in the house, and just one survivor. The verse imagines a situation where, upon searching the house where the ten people, presumably dead, had lived. One survivor was surprisingly discovered. However, when questioned, it is clear that no one else survived the ruin. Perhaps the point of the exchange at the end of verse 10 is that the situation is so charged with the electricity of the judgment that has just occurred, that the lone survivor is terrified, lest the name of the Lord be invoked, and that utterance be the spark that leads to a new disaster. The Lord would bring destruction upon all, the rich elite in their great houses, and the poor in their little houses.

We might here think about the earthquake that would soon strike the land, anticipating the more comprehensive national judgment yet to arrive. In chapter 5 verse 7 we read, O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth.

Verse 12 presents two pictures of unfitting or contradictory situations. Horses running on rocks would ruin their hooves. The second rhetorical question likely refers to ploughing the sea with oxen, as two words were amalgamated in the Masoretic text. The Lord desires justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. But they had poisoned the waters of justice, and made righteousness bitter. Once more, the arrogance of the nation is seen at the close of the chapter. The people celebrated the nation's military successes in the Transjordan under Jeroboam the 2nd, believing that these were proof of their strength and power. Euremuis suggests that there might be an intentional play upon the meaning of the place names here. He renders the verse as follows, You who rejoice in a thing of nothingness, who say, Have we not by our own strength taken horns for ourselves? However, such boasting would be very short-lived. The Assyrians would be raised up against them, and would oppress them throughout the whole length of the land, from its very north to its very south.

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