

Amos 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 27 August 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Amos chapter 8. This is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, Amos, what do you see? And I said, a basket of summer fruit. Then the Lord said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel. I will never again pass by them. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day, declares the Lord God. So many dead bodies. They are thrown everywhere. Silence. Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small, and the shekel great, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell the chaff of the wheat. The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who dwells in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again like the Nile of Egypt? And on that day, declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight.

I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation. I will bring sackcloth on every waist, and baldness on every head. I will make it like the morning for an only sun, and the end of it like a bitter day. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east.

They shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. In that day the lovely virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst. Those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, and say, As your God lives, O Dan, and As the way of Beersheba lives, they shall fall, and never rise again. The visions of Amos continue in chapter 8, with the fourth vision in verses 1 to 3.

This should be paired with the third vision in chapter 7 verses 7 to 9, the vision of the tin, or the plaster, much as the first and the second visions were paired. There are immediate similarities to be observed between the third and the fourth visions. In both cases, the Lord shows Amos images, and asks Amos what he sees. After Amos responds, identifying the object, the Lord proceeds to explain its significance. In both of the visions, the Lord declares that he will never again pass by them. The third vision, of the tin or the plaster, likely involved the play upon words. Marvin Sweeney suggested that the word punned upon the word for sighing, mourning, or lament. The possibility that such a pun or wordplay is being employed is strengthened by the confusing character of the image taken by itself.

Many Bible translations understand the image as that of lead or a plumb line, but Benno Landsberger and others have argued forcefully against this. While convincing suggestions for the meaning of the image of tin or plaster are hard to come by, and commentators sometimes just throw up their hands, if the image were primarily about a wordplay, the object in the image wouldn't necessarily need to make sense apart from that. Here we might helpfully recall Jeremiah's vision of the almond branch in Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12. The significance of the almond branch is found in the fact that the word for almond sounds like the word for watching, as is apparent from the explanation in verse 12.

[3 : 31] Understandably, many readers of English translations of this passage, without explanatory notes in their margins, will be confused by the meaning of the vision. Readers of Amos' third sign can have a similar experience. The wordplay in the fourth sign is somewhat more obvious in the original language, and is even carried over into some English translations. For instance, the New Living Translation.

What do you see, Amos? He asked. I replied, a basket full of ripe fruit. Then the Lord said, like this fruit, Israel is ripe for punishment. I will not delay their punishment again. In Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible, he renders the verse as follows. And he said to me, what do you see, Amos? And I said, a basket of summer's end fruit. And the Lord said to me, the end has come upon my people Israel. I will no longer forgive them. The fruits in the basket would likely include things like figs, pomegranates, and grapes, fruit harvest around the time of the Feast of Tabernacles at the beginning of the rainy season.

Presumably, this was in the same year as the first vision of the locusts, which was set around March or April. Here the word for summer fruit is punned with the word for end, which, although coming from a different root, sounds similar. In the case of the summer fruit, we might perhaps see some further connections. On the surface, the summer fruit might be an image of life and bounty, but it might also be an image of Israel's ripeness for judgment, or of the final harvest that is about to come upon it.

The Lord's announcement of the end in connection with the fruit of the end of the summer might then be significant. While Amos had interceded for the nation in response to the first two visions, after the third and fourth, he does not. The Lord's statement of the end does not seem to invite, or perhaps even allow for, the appeal of the prophet. The vision is a declaration of the finality of the judgment about to fall upon the nation. There will be no return from it.

The vision is followed by a description of the aftermath of the judgment, presenting us with a scene that might be set in the temple or sanctuary, presumably in Bethel, or the palace in Samaria, where the songs would be turned into wailing. The place would be littered with rotting corpses, and anyone there would be commanded to keep silent, perhaps lest any voice might reawaken the horrors that had occurred there. We might recall the similar statement in chapter 6 verse 10.

[5 : 51] The third vision, in chapter 7 verses 7 to 9, was followed by a narrative section, building upon the vision in various ways, and the statement of the judgment coming upon the sanctuaries and high places of Israel, and upon the house of Jeroboam. The rest of chapter 8 does a similar thing with the fourth vision being a word of judgment attached to it. The Lord condemns the economic oppression within the land, addressing those who are mistreating the poor. In places such as Deuteronomy chapter 15, the Lord had instructed his people about how they should treat the poor in their midst.

The fourth commandment also, concerning the Sabbath, placed limits upon commerce and the toil of workers. Here, however, the oppressive rich are pictured as chafing at the burden of having to rest from their buying and selling on the Sabbath, eager to get back to dishonest trading. Trading carried out with weights and measures with which they were tampering, and involving the selling of substandard produce. The poor, who might have thought that they were buying pure grain, would have found a lot of worthless chaff hidden beneath it. As grain was a staple food of the poor, this was particularly wicked.

In chapter 2, verses 6-8, the oracle concerning Israel declared, Thus says the Lord, For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted. A man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned. They lay themselves down beside every altar, on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined. There they were selling the poor into debt slavery, and here the oppressors are purchasing those who have been sold into debt slavery, the other side of the transaction. The echoing of the language of chapter 2 seems clear, though. To exacerbate their sin, they seem to be driven in their dishonest dealing by their intention of using their gains to purchase the poor. Their economics is fundamentally predatory, profiting by impoverishing and enslaving others. The oath that the Lord gives in response is challenging to understand. The pride of Jacob has previously been mentioned in chapter 6 verse 8.

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. It seems strange that the Lord would swear by something that he has said that he abhorred just a couple of chapters earlier, should we understand this as a sarcastic statement, trying to read the expression in keeping with its earlier use in the book. Alternatively, we could take the pride of Jacob as properly referring to the Lord himself. The Lord elsewhere swears by himself. Perhaps this is a roundabout way of speaking about that.

Yet another possibility is that the pride of Jacob is a reference to the land, as we see the expression the pride of Jacob used with that sense in Psalm 47 verse 4 and Nahum chapter 2 verse 2.

[8 : 47] The Lord would judge them for their wickedness, causing the entire land to mourn. The reference to the Nile is challenging to understand. This is likely a reference to the earthquake that would come upon the nation in probably only a couple of years' time, an initial vindication of the message of Amos. However, while the trembling of the land and the being tossed about are natural images for an earthquake, Daniel Carroll notes the strangeness of the image of the Nile rising and falling. As he observes, the Nile rises and falls, not suddenly, but over a period of months. Carroll suggests that the imagery should be understood as illustrating not the destabilizing and moving up and down of the earth in a sudden movement, but the more general effects of the earthquake upon the land. Another possibility is that the reference to the Nile is drawing our minds back to the story of the Exodus, a story that was precipitated by the oppression of the poor slaves. As the rich of the land have reduced their brothers and sisters to servitude, the land itself starts to behave like Egypt and to suffer similar judgments. The remaining verses of the chapter contain a series of three oracles, all connected with some days that are coming. The first refers to making the sun go down at noon and darkening the earth in broad daylight. Some have seen this as a reference to the partial eclipse that would have occurred on

June the 16th, 763 BC. Both the earthquake and the darkening of the sun refer to concrete physical disasters or phenomena within the land, but also gesture beyond those more concrete reference to the Lord's greater shaking of the earth and darkening of the heavens. We might think of the imagery associated with the opening of the sixth seal in Revelation chapter 6 verse 12.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked and behold there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth. The full moon became like blood. The darkening of the heavens connects with the theme of mourning in the verse that follows. Much as in the vision of Revelation, the sun itself becomes like sackcloth. It takes on the shrouded appearance of the mourner. The mourning is especially bitter.

It's described as like the mourning for an only son. A similar description of terrible mourning is found in Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10. The prophetic word of the Lord irrigates the land and sustains its people.

Man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The word of the prophets was the means by which the Lord primarily guided his people. In the prophetic word, the Lord addressed his people as the one who was their God. He directed them towards life and when those words were followed, it gave them health and prosperity in the land. Now, however, those words are going to be cut off. The Lord is going to be silent towards them. They're thrown back completely upon their own counsels, counsels that had led them to this point of destruction. In vain, they will look in every corner of the land to find that word of guidance, to find that word of the Lord's presence and favour towards them. But there will be nothing there. They'll just experience his judgment and a shrouded heavens from which their prayers will receive no answer.

[11 : 44] The third oracle in the sequence seems to be connected also with the second. It continues the theme of thirst. Here it is the young people of the land, the lovely virgins and the young men, who are fainting from thirst. Perhaps we should see here the way that the word of the Lord is particularly that which opens up and promises a future to the people. And when that word is cut off, that future is cut off. The removal of a future from the people is something that will particularly hurt the youth of the land. It is difficult to survive for long without hope. The final verse refers to the guilt of Samaria. The guilt of Samaria may be the calf of Samaria. That is the way the calf of Bethel is described in Hosea chapter 8 verses 5 to 6. Samaria was the capital of the nation, and the nation's cultic centre and the golden calf that was built for it was at Bethel. Swearing by the guilt of Samaria might be a way of speaking about those who swear by the name of the Lord, connecting him with the calf for Bethel. Along with Bethel, Dan was the site of the other golden calf that was set up by Jeroboam I. Again here we have an identification of the Lord in association with idolatrous practice. The true word of the Lord has been cut off, and now people can only seek him in the mute idols that they have given themselves to. The final reference was to Beersheba, which was also mentioned in chapter 5 verse 5 as a place of cultic worship for people in the north. While people in the north went to Beersheba, Beersheba was in the south. Beersheba was the other extent of the land.

In several places in scripture, from Dan to Beersheba is a way of speaking about the whole length of the land, from the very north to the very south. In the preceding oracle it spoke of them wandering from sea to sea, from north to east, and running to and fro to seek the word of the Lord.

Now it speaks about them swearing by the guilt of Samaria, by Dan, and by Beersheba. It's another way of saying a similar thing. They are caught in a futile, idolatrous quest, and their fate is to fall and never rise again. A question to consider. In verses 5 to 6 the people expressed their desire that the Sabbath and the new moon would be over so that they'd be able to get back to practicing their economic oppression. How did the principle of the Sabbath, which was at the very heart of the Mosaic Covenant, the great sign of the covenant itself, served to resist the practice of economic oppression within the land?