



Amos - Chapter Five

II Amos 1:2-6:14 - Oracles of Judgement (continues)

II.c Amos 2:6-6:14 - Judgements on Israel (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

The virgin of Israel has fallen, i.e. its people have sinned against God and will be taken into captivity unless they repent. The Lord who made the stars invites Israel to seek him, but not in the vain places of sacrifice such as Gilgal, Bethel and Beer-sheba. Israel perverts justice and treads down the poor. There will be wailing and woe in the day of the Lord. Festival days, sacred assemblies and sacrifices are dismissed because the people keep them with a wrong heart.

II.c.iv Amos 5:1-17 - A Lament for Israel's Sin

A special feature of this oracle is God's pleading for his people to return to him. Although they face imminent destruction, it is still not too late to seek God and his goodness.

¹ Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:

Amos 5:1

Lamentation. Neither the prophet nor God takes delight in these pronouncements of doom. Like mourners at a funeral, they and other prophets grieve at what lies ahead for the unrepentant people: <<*Because of this put on sackcloth, lament and wail: 'The fierce anger of the Lord has not turned away from us'*>> (Jeremiah 4:8), and: <<*As for you, raise up a lamentation for the princes of Israel*>> (Ezekiel 19:1). For the same reaction on the part of Jesus, refer to Matthew 23:37-39 and Luke 19:41-44.

2 Fallen, no more to rise,
is maiden Israel;
forsaken on her land,
with no one to raise her up.

Amos 5:2

Maiden Israel is an image used frequently in the prophets to speak of the special value God places on Israel. She is like a virgin daughter to him, and the thought of her selling herself into prostitution or being raped by an enemy is heartbreaking to him. Amos sees Israel as a tragic young woman who is fallen and forsaken, no one coming to her aid. In rebelling against God, Israel is as helpless as a young woman among violent men. Through Jeremiah, God expresses the same heartbreaking lament over Judah after they were taken away to Babylon: <<*What can I say for you, to what compare you, O daughter Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you?*>> (Lamentations 2:13).

3 For thus says the Lord God:
The city that marched out a thousand
shall have a hundred left,
and that which marched out a hundred
shall have ten left.

Amos 5:3

The city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left. Amos predicts that things will be so bad for Israel that when the enemy comes, a city that would have before sent out a thousand soldiers will now only send out a hundred, a loss of ninety percent: <<*Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump*>> (Isaiah 6:13). This is a prediction of the loss that would occur in battle or even through desertion.

4 For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live;
5 but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beer-sheba;

for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nothing.

⁶ Seek the Lord and live,
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

⁷ Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!

⁸ The one 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,

⁹ who makes destruction flash out against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

Amos 5:4-9

Seek me and live. When Israel was ripe for judgement, the key to survival was to simply seek the Lord. This is a powerful plea to seek the Lord as he has revealed himself and not in the pagan forms found at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba. Whenever God is identified with the things of this world, there are two results: ethical behaviour as a means of expressing devotion to God disappears (v.7), and any concept of a purposeful Creator is lost (vv.8-9).

Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba were once places associated with great privilege and spiritual heritage. Bethel was the place where God met Jacob; refer to Genesis 28:11-19 and 35:1-7). Gilgal was the place where Israel's spiritual reproach was rolled away in the days of Joshua; refer to Joshua 5:1-12. Beer-sheba was connected to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; refer to Genesis 21:22-33, 26:23-33 and 46:1-5 respectively. Now these were places of vain, empty worship.

Since Beer-sheba was in Judah, it is not clear what its significance was for the Israelites. Perhaps people from the northern kingdom made pilgrimages there, remembering its association with the patriarchs; perhaps they also felt that there was a special power available there.

There is a play on words in the phrase for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. It does not come across in the English translation, but in Hebrew it is a clever pun.

The religious activities carried on at Bethel would not quench the fire of God's anger. In fact, they would fuel it.

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

Amos again confronts the corrupt legal system of Israel. Justice had been thoroughly spoiled, and righteousness was as good as dead. Wormwood is a plant native to Europe, Asia, and northern Africa, with a bitter-tasting and poisonous extract and also occurs in Amos 6:12. True worshippers of God will manifest justice and righteousness: *<<If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world>>* (James 1:26-27). Refer also to vv.21-24.

Justice, Hebrew *mishpat*, is much more than legal equity; it refers to the entire scope of God's government of his world. Thus, to 'do justice' involves, on the part of government, a fair and just use of power and proper functioning of a fair judicial system, especially to protect the weak from the strong. On the part of individuals, justice involves honest and fair business dealings and faithfulness to keep one's word, as well as not taking advantage of the poor or those with less power or protection.

Righteousness, Hebrew *tsedaqah*, involves doing what is right in the sight of God, especially with regard to conduct toward others.

The one who made the Pleiades and Orion. This is another piece of lyrical poetry, as in Amos 4:13 and 9:5-6, and is used here to contrast the limitless glory of the Creator with the paltry things worshipped in the confines of Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba. Pleiades and Orion are constellations of stars. In ancient Near Eastern religions, the stars were often thought to be gods. There have always been those who know differently: *<<Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing>>* (Isaiah 40:26).

To say that God calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth is to remind Israel that he alone governs the rainfall, which he can and will use to discipline his people.

Who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress. This means that God is strong enough to save, but also more than strong enough to bring judgement against which no one can stand.

10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

Amos 5:10

They hate the one who reproves in the gate. The walled cities of the ancient Near East had covered gatehouses in which there were multiple sets of gates. Thus, if the enemy broke through one set, they were immediately confronted with another. During times of peace all these gates would be open and the gatehouse would provide a shady place where the old men of the city could sit to observe the comings and goings, and where they could decide the cases of those who came to them for justice, as in the case of deciding the rights of the kinsman-redeemer for Naomi: <<*No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'Sit down here'; so they sat down*>> (Ruth 4:1-2). However, in Israel, justice was going to the highest bidder.

They abhor the one who speaks the truth. The truth here is that the people had turned away from God and they did not want to hear it from a prophet or from anyone else: <<*The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, 'There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah son of Imlah; but I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favourable about me, but only disaster.' Jehoshaphat said, 'Let the king not say such a thing'*>> (1 Kings 22:8), and: <<*Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?*>> (Galatians 4:16). True testimony about the Father was a key purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry: <<*Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'*>> (John 18:37).

11 Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

Amos 5:11

You shall not live in them and shall not drink their wine express frustrated hope: <<*You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine*>> (Micah 6:15),

and: <<*Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them*>> (Zephaniah 1:13). Amos reveals God's curse for Israel's wickedness. Although the wicked in Israel gained elaborate houses and vineyards from their oppression of the poor and railroading of justice, their gains were only temporary. God will evict them from their dishonestly gained houses and vineyards.

12 For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins —
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

13 Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

Amos 5:12-13

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins. Nothing is hidden from God's sight and to believe otherwise is foolish: <<*I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me; for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore; Israel is defiled*>> (Hosea 5:3).

Keep silent in such a time. The reference is probably to the legal proceedings taking place in the gatehouse. If someone were to speak out against the manifest injustice taking place, his own life might be in danger, while his objections would do no good because they could not stop the ongoing, entrenched evil. Esther had an opportunity to speak out although she had to risk her life to do so, had she not spoken out God's plan would still have been accomplished but she would have failed in her calling: <<*For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this'*>> (Esther 4:14).

14 Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

15 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.

Amos 5:14-15

Speaking through the prophet, God addresses a further appeal to his people. In that evil time, they should seek good for those around them. If they will, there may be hope for the nation, even at that late hour. Amos proclaims God's cure for Israel's sin. They must begin to simply seek good and not evil: <<*The Lord loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked*>> (Psalm 97:10), and: <<*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good*>> (Romans 12:9). They must transform their corrupt courts and establish justice in the gate: <<*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*>> (Isaiah 1:16-17), and: <<*These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgements that are true and make for peace*>> (Zechariah 8:16).

Just as you have said. There are two possible explanations. It may be that 'God be with you' was a popular form of greeting, as in the original 'goodbye' of English. A more theological explanation is that the religious leaders of the nation may have been saying that the nation could not fall because 'God is with us.' Amos says that God will only be with them if there is a return to godly behaviour in the land.

The God of hosts. This title for God became increasingly popular among the prophets. Hosts in this context refers to heavenly beings or angels; refer also to the comment made on Amos 3:13.

The remnant of Joseph. In this context Joseph refers to the ten tribes of Israel and not just Ephraim and Manasseh, who were the direct descendants of Joseph. This can be seen in other Scriptures, such as the confession of Shimei son of Gera who was a Benjaminite: <<*For your servant knows that I have sinned; therefore, see, I have come this day, the first of all the house of Joseph to come down to meet my lord the king*>> (2 Samuel 19:20); as well as generally in <<*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!*>> (Psalm 80:1a), and: <<*For it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. He made it a decree in Joseph, when he went out over the land of Egypt*>> (Psalm 81:4-5).

¹⁶ 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 those skilled in lamentation, to wailing;
17 in all the vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through the midst of you,
says the Lord.

Amos 5:16-17

Although Israel could have returned to God, the fact is that they would not. As a result, Amos announces that a great funeral cry of wailing, mourning, and lamentation will go up all over the land from the streets of the cities to the vineyards in the countryside.

They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing. This refers to the Jewish practice of hiring professional mourners to wail at a funeral as in the case of Jairus' daughter: <<*When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping'*>> (Mark 5:38-39). Amos describes judgement so widespread that there was a shortage of skilful lamenters, so they had to hire the farmer to mourning. Because the prophet Amos was a farmer or shepherd, he often relates the judgements of God to how they affect the land workers of Israel.

I will pass through the midst of you. This is not a promise to dwell with the people: <<*I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God*>> (Exodus 29:45), but more a warning that he will come as the angel of death did in Egypt: <<*For the Lord will pass through to strike down the Egyptians*>> (Exodus 12:23a).

II.c.v Amos 5:18-6:14 - An Oracle of Woe

This fourth message follows closely on the third, because it details the kinds of sins that will provoke the funeral of the nation. Three times the funeral cry of 'Alas' appears: v.18, 6:1 and 6:4. Each one introduces another category of sin. The first (vv.18-27) is manipulative, paganised religious activity carried on without regard for daily justice and righteousness. The second (6:1-3) is complacency. The third (6:4-7) is self-indulgence. The message ends with an announcement of coming destruction (6:8-14).

II.c.v.1 Amos 5:18-25 - The Day of the Lord a Dark Day

The Israelites' religious activities, far from pleasing God, actually alienated him. The recurrence of the pronoun 'your' in connection with the several kinds of

religious behaviour in these verses gives a clue to the point being made: the festivals and assemblies as they are celebrating them cannot bring them closer to God. God does not want only religious behaviour from his people; he wants their total devotion as shown in the ethical character of their lives.

¹⁸ Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light;

¹⁹ as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

²⁰ Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

Amos 5:18-20

This is the earliest known use of the prophets' expression, the day of the Lord. It also occurs in Isaiah 13:6 and 13:9, Jeremiah 46:10, Ezekiel 13:5 and 30:3, Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31 and 3:14, Obadiah 15, Zephaniah 1:7 and 1:14, and Malachi 4:5. Perhaps in Amos's day the term was in popular use for the time when the Lord would intervene and put Israel at the head of the nations, possibly based on: *<<Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly. Indeed the Lord will vindicate his people, have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone, neither bond nor free remaining. Then he will say: Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge>>* (Deuteronomy 32:35-37); but Amos and all prophets after him clarify what it would mean for the Lord to visit his people: it means judgement upon them if they are unfaithful.

In Amos, the term points forward to the coming judgement on the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians (v.27); in Zephaniah, it points to the coming judgement on Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. Other prophets use the term to signal God's forthcoming punishment of other nations for their brutalities, e.g. Babylon in Isaiah; Egypt in Jeremiah; Edom in Obadiah; and many nations in Joel and Obadiah. In some cases the prophet uses the term to denote something farther off in the future in Malachi and probably in Joel. All of this indicates that the 'day' is not unique, but may be repeated as circumstances call for it. The NT authors apply the term as well to the return of Christ, for example: *<<He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may*

be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ>> (1 Corinthians 1:8), <<But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed>> (2 Peter 3:10).

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Amos 5:21

God hates and despises Israel's religious festivals and solemn assemblies, their offerings (v.22) and songs (v.23), because of their persistent sinful conduct and because of their perversion of worship at Bethel, as well as the absence of justice and righteousness in their conduct towards one another (v.24). This would have amazed, and offended, those in Israel who heard Amos say this. They told themselves that they were really honouring God and pleasing him by their observance of the festivals and solemn assemblies, but God was offended by their religious ceremonialism, disconnected from the heart and justice towards one another. Worshipping God in a way contrary to his Word and without moral integrity in one's life is blatant hypocrisy: *<<The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote>>* (Isaiah 29:13), which was quoted by Jesus in Matthew 15:8-9.

Amos expresses the same idea Jesus did: *<<So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift>>* (Matthew 5:23-24). Israel thought their festival days, their sacred assemblies, their burnt-offerings, their grain-offerings, their peace-offerings, and their songs were nothing as long as there was no justice or righteousness in their dealings with others.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.

Amos 5:22

I will not accept them. God graciously extends his fellowship and forgiveness to those who will accept his covenant, as shown by their changed lives: *<<Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required>>* (Psalm 40:6), and: *<<Thus*

says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt-offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For on the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you'>> (Jeremiah 7:21-23). God cannot be manipulated into doing such a thing by ritualism.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:23-24

It is easy to separate religious ceremonies from the way the church treat others, and to think that God should be happy if people give him 'his due' without regard to justice and righteousness towards others. God will not have it. He says, "Keep your annoying religious ceremonies, But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Or as another prophet put it: <<*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*>> (Micah 6:8).

²⁵ Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? ²⁶ You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images that you made for yourselves; ²⁷ therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.

Amos 5:25-27

The Israelites had in fact given such offerings in the desert, but since their hearts were not right, hence the mention of Sakkuth and Kaiwan, Mesopotamian astral deities, God nevertheless judged them. Thus the religiosity of the people of Israel in Amos' day will not fool God either.

Exile beyond Damascus is just what happened: <<*In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in Halah, on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes*>> (2 Kings 17:6). This is a startling and significant prediction, as Assyria was comparatively weak in Amos' time.