

Amos

The Book of

Session Five:
January 25, 2005

Amos 5:1-17—Attending Your Own Funeral

❖The Text (NRSV)

⁵*Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:*

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

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.

⁴*For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:*

Seek me and live; ⁵but 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*Ab, 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.*

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

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.

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.*

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.*

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.*

❖What's going on here?

First, a word about this whole section—we don't quite know what to make of it. The last sections of the chapter, 5:18-20, and 21-27 can be nicely divided into segments that are complete thoughts, but 5:1-17 does not break down so easily. There are clearly common themes in these verses—most notably the death of Israel and the call for justice. But it's very hard to see how all of these brief snippets—and sometimes what seem to be incomplete *fragments*—hold together and why they are arranged as they are. The confused, jumbled feel to these verses as we read them leads many scholars to suggest that some later editor has compiled very short sayings of Amos here with little sense of their original context. Others notice a more sweeping structure in this passage, but don't have many

good guesses for *why* it's arranged in this pattern. One commonly suggested outline for 5:1-17 is called a *chiastic* arrangement (don't worry, that won't be on a test) and looks something like this:

A: 5:1-3—*Lament*

B: 5:4-6—*Exhortation* (“*Seek the LORD and live*”)

C: 5:7—*Description of the evildoers*

D: 5:8—*Hymn of God's power, part 1*

E: 5:8c—*“The LORD is his name”*

D': 5:9—*Hymn of God's power, part 2*

C': 5:10-13—*Description of evildoers*

B': 5:14-15—*Exhortation* (“*Seek good...*”)

A': 5:16-17—*Lament*

Having seen that structure, the big question is: **so what?** What does this structure *mean* for the whole passage? One possibility is that it emphasizes the central piece of the passage, the line from 5:8, “The LORD is his name.” But *why* in a passage about *Israel* do we suddenly change gears and talk about who and what Israel's God YHWH is like? This question seems to stump a lot of commentators—some suggest that someone (Amos or another editor) just put it together like this for lack of a better way to arrange things. Others think the placement is accidental—maybe an accident from copying something in the wrong order so that complete thoughts are split apart. One final possibility is that putting “The LORD is his name” in the center of the passage emphasizes once again that it is Israel's own God who will bring about Israel's death, and not some freak accident or foreign nation's god. Whatever the reason, if as you read along through 5:1-17 and it seems like a thought is left incomplete and dangling, it could well be that the rest of the thought is waiting for you on the other side of the passage's pivot point at the center, 5:8c. From here, we can take a look at what is going on in each individual section of 5:1-17.

-v.1-3—Chapter 5 begins as a song of grief—Amos uses the technical word we translate as “lamentation,” a formal song of mourning sung when someone has

died—this is a funeral dirge. And who has died? Not an individual, but a whole nation. Again, as Amos has done before, he is announcing Israel's death before it happens—in fact, before there is any reason to suspect that Israelite society is in trouble.

The fact that these verses take the form of a funeral song says something about how Amos feels about having to announce the fate of Israel (and maybe even gives us a window on how God feels about it, too). There is genuine sadness in these verses—Amos himself is grieving. Before we dismiss Amos as a harsh and mean naysayer who loves gloating about God's coming punishment, these verses force us to see that Amos—and God—mourns what is about to happen to an entire nation. Amos sees the coming demise of Israel as a genuine tragedy, and he describes it with powerful, poignant language. Israel is described as a dead maiden/virgin—this isn't a symbol of Israel's moral virtue, but rather makes the death even more tragic—Amos is describing the nation as a person who has had no children to live on after her. And in a culture where there was little if any clear sense of an “afterlife” (that develops later in Judaism), to die without children was a supremely tragic turn of events. And even worse, Israel is “forsaken on her land;” the dead, childless mother is left untended and unburied on her own land. For the nation, the very land that had been a mark of God's promise to them is now going to be the site of their own demise. 5:3 picks up with an image for what the death of the nation will look like—cities will be decimated, and again, the “remnant” that is left will only be proof that the nation as a whole has been destroyed.

-v.4-6—The next section in the chapter is an “exhortation,” a call to act a certain way. The refrain in this passage (which comes back in 5:14-15 in a slightly different form) is “Seek the LORD and live.” This is language similar to the call to worship we saw in 4:4-5—“seeking” is not so much about looking for an object that is actually lost, but about coming into

the presence of someone and orienting oneself to something. And just as in chapter 4, the point is to contrast seeking YHWH and seeking after religious places—one scholar puts it well as “the Holy One, not the holy place.” There is not the same sarcastic edge as in 4:4-5, but once again Amos does let loose on Israel’s traditional religious centers—Bethel, Gilgal, and then Beersheba (which is actually way down south in Judah). The point for Amos is to show how Israel’s religious life has become separated from its entire way of life—they have stopped truly seeking God and God’s ways and instead have filled the void with liturgy and religion. This is *not* to say that Amos thinks organized religion is bad or wrong—his criticism is that there is now a divide, a disconnect, between the people’s pious talk and their unjust and unmerciful practices. And what is necessary to heal that disconnect is not more ritualized acts of devotion or pilgrimages to shrines but rather a renewed seeking of God—a new re-orientation to who God is.

-v.7—This is a different animal altogether. 5:7 has the feel of a sentence fragment and seems to come out of nowhere—the Hebrew is even more abrupt and confusing. The thought in 5:7 gets cut off again, too, by vv.8-9, leading some to think that 5:7 actually is continued with vv.10-12. If that is the case, here, Amos is giving a generic description of the people he is writing against and then names off specific injustices they have committed in the second part. It is also possible that Amos is referring back to the people in Bethel in v.6. In any case, Amos is again announcing that the sin of the people has to do with *justice* and *righteousness*—at the core of Israel’s current brokenness is a refusal to treat each other fairly and a willingness to step on the other (especially the poor and the powerless) to get what is desired.

-v.8-9—Back at the end of chapter 4 (v.13), and then coming up in 9:6, there are two other poetic passages that have a similar feel to these verses. All three sections describe God’s majesty and power as seen in

creation, and all come to a climax with a variation on the refrain, “The LORD is his name.” This is another one of those places where scholars often see reasons to think that a later editor has come and inserted something—none of these three passages seem to fit exactly where they are, and it is possible that they all came from a common hymn. (*Of course, it is also worth asking why an editor would add these changes, especially if they make the book more confusing—we usually think of editors doing things to make more sense of confusing material and smoothing things out, not deliberately making a mess of what is already clear. So maybe Amos himself did want things this way, and the problem of making sense of the passage lies with us and not with him.*) As the passage stands now, it seems to emphasize to a nation of Israelites (who think they have God in their back pockets) that their covenant partner God YHWH is powerful enough to create and destroy in nature—and is perfectly able to make and unmake a nation as well, even Israel. The power of the language is even stronger if Amos (or an editor) is intentionally quoting some familiar hymn in Israel that celebrates how strong and powerful Israel’s God is. Instead of bolstering Israel’s nationalistic pride in itself, the hymn now shows Israel that their God can be strong and powerful *against* them as well as in defense of them. If this is the case, it is the same ironic twist that Amos used in chapters 1-2 and repeatedly throughout the book.

-v.10-13—The description of the unjust ones in Israel back in 5:7 was generic. Here Amos presents specific charges of injustice in the nation, and they all center on matters of civil and economic fairness. That is, they are all what we would term “secular.” This makes for an important reminder that in Amos’ culture and time, there was no clear division between “secular” and “sacred” realms—rather, Israel’s religious tradition emphasized that *all* of life was under the reign of God because God cared about *all* parts of life and all people. And even more significantly, justice was not thought of in individualistic terms—how *I* as a single person do what is right for myself—but in

terms of how an entire community protects those without power and ensures that everyone has enough. The scene for the action in these verses is mostly the city gate, a public area in many ancient cities where business could be done and where people could assemble impromptu courts to hear their complaints against their neighbors. Amos suggests that the wealthy are cheating poor farmers out of their crops and corrupting the courts with bribery and manipulation to keep from being held accountable for it. They have taken what is not rightly theirs—and so God will take their ill-gotten possessions away from them. Again, there is a sense of fitting reversal as Amos announces the consequences for the wealthy ones who have flaunted justice—they have built houses, but they will not get to live in them. They have planted vineyards, but will not drink their wine.

Verse 13 is, again, just a different sort of animal—it almost has the feel of a proverb rather than a continuation of the earlier thought. One possibility for making sense of 5:13 (and again, it is just a *possibility*, but one that fits well with Amos’ style and tone) is that this is meant as a sarcastic remark. The effect would be to say, “If I were smarter/more prudent, I’d just keep my mouth shut about all this bad news from God.” If this is the sense, it again echoes the themes of what gives Amos the right to be a prophet and the authority to speak such harsh words of judgment. Amos knows that announcing this word of God will get him into trouble, and yet he announces it *nevertheless*.

-v.14-15—The theme of “seeking” is back from vv.4-6, but now it is more specifically connected to action. We might have been unsure about what it meant to “seek the LORD”—especially since Amos made it clear that going to church more (or going to special holy places) was not the way to do it. But here, Amos connects seeking YHWH with seeking and doing what is good. And it will mean overhauling the systems that allow courts to be manipulated and the poor to be taken advantage of. One other point is worth

mentioning from these verses. Amos says that as the people seek, then “the LORD, the God of hosts will be with you, *just as you have said*.” There seems to have been a sense among the people that God was “with them” (and presumably this meant God was always on their side and would never hold them accountable) regardless of how they acted. Amos upholds the idea of YHWH as a God who comes to be *with* people—but right now there is a disconnect between the people and “their” God, even though they insist God is already in their corner. In fact, Amos seems wary of talking about YHWH as “their” God, as though Israel possessed or owned God. Yes, Amos will say, God will come to be with you, but God is not your plaything to pretend to control—God is indeed *good* (and will be with you), but God is not tame enough to be owned.

-v.16-17—As the section closes, we return to images of lament and grieving. In fact, Amos describes people doing the very kinds of things Amos was doing in 5:1-3—singing songs of mourning. The sadness and sorrow that Amos now feels over the coming death of Israel will be felt by the people themselves when it comes. There is also a powerful sense of God’s presence in these verses—but again with a reversal. Just as Amos talking about “meeting God” in a way that was threatening and terrifying, here God will “pass through the midst of you” in a context that means judgment. There may again be an ironic twist here—the people seem to claim that God is right with them and on their side, and so Amos says that YHWH will let them feel what it is like when God comes that close and they persist in their pretending. Even in these verses which announce judgment with a sense of irony, though, there is still a note of real grief underlying this whole passage, and it is at least Amos’ own grief. Beyond that, Amos is declaring God’s own grief at the death of Israel, even though that same God is the one who will bring it about. In some sense, God himself laments that death will have to come for things to be set right.

Connections: Hide and Seek

- What does it mean to “seek God”? What would it mean to “find” God?
- Amos mentions that people have “trampled on the poor” by taking “levies of grain” in 5:11—the sense is something like taking an unfair percentage of the crop from tenant farmers. What are situations today that might be parallels to this kind of “trampling” of the poor? How about paying a living wage to employees? (And if so, who decides what a *living wage* is—the employer, the employee, the government?) What about requiring certain fees to be paid in order to work? What are examples you can think of?
- What are areas of our lives and societies that we generally regard as “secular”? What areas are considered “sacred”? What might Amos say about these boundaries between the parts of our lives that God ‘cares’ about and those that God ‘doesn’t care’ about?
- As Christians, part of our unique story and belief is that in Jesus, God really has come to be *with us* in a powerful and permanent way. But what does it mean to say that God is “with us”? Is God always on “our side”? Does God have to approve of whatever we are doing on account of being “with” us? How might we become complacent about what it means to say that God is “with” us—how might we abuse that language? How might we also be changed *positively* by that kind of language?
- Amos continues to give his harsh words in chapter five, but he also reveals that he himself grieves for a dying Israel. Are there times when we as the church need to speak out and hold firm while still having and showing compassion?
- What might it say about God to suggest that God grieves and laments over the death of Israel in this passage? What sounds strange about that kind of talk? What seems right about that kind of language? What does God grieve in our world today?

Amos 5:18-20—Out of the Frying Pan...

❖The Text (NRSV)

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?*

❖What’s going on here?

The idea of mourning and lamenting continues briefly here with the opening word, “Alas.” And here Amos is lamenting the coming action of God on those who will be taken by surprise by it. There is again this feeling that Israel’s society saw itself as having God in its back pocket. The “day of the LORD” is a theme that will get developed by later prophets who see it sometimes as an occasion of God’s judgment, but

most often as God’s future redemption. Generically, talk of “the day of the LORD” looks forward to a coming time when God will act in a definitive way. In Amos’ day, there seems to be an assumption that this “day” will be one when God will affirm the ways of their society and trample on all the foreign nations. The surprise, of course, is that Amos sees the coming “day of the LORD” as a time when God will *expose* and *overturn* the ways of their society and *give them over* to foreign nations. As he has done so often, there is a sense of irony and reversal to Amos’ words. The people have prayed and waited expectantly for God to act definitively—and Amos says they will get what they ask for. The problem, though, is that God will act for justice, and that will mean putting an end to what is unjust. For the people who have become the victims of injustice, this day of the LORD will indeed have a sense of redemption, but for a society that has become numb to its own greedy injustice and has become accustomed to the darkness, the light of this new day may feel too bright for their eyes.