

Amos

The Book of

Session Six:
February 1, 2005

Amos 5:21-27—The Worship Wars

❖The Text (NRSV)

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

²²Even 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.

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

²⁴But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

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

❖What's going on here?

-v.21-24—Again speaking in the voice and place of God, Amos declares that Israel's worship life is not acceptable to God. And just as with his previous attacks on Israel's shows of religion in 3:14-15 and 4:4-5, the problems cannot be fixed with more liturgy or re-formed rituals. As v.24 suggests, the problem is still that Israel's cultic (that is, worship) system has become divorced from the rest of its life. Ceremony and sacrifice have become *alternatives* to practicing justice as a society, and as a result, YHWH utterly rejects their religious displays.

And so to get that point across, Amos names off three of the major elements of Israel's worship and announces God's displeasure with them. God refuses to *smell* and savour (this is the literal sense of v.21's "take no delight") Israel's festivals, refuses to *look* at their sacrifices (v.22), and refuses to *hear* their praises (v.23). In other words, the rejection is total and complete. It is not that the forms of their worship

need to be *revised*—as though God wanted more songs and fewer festivals or different kinds of sacrifices. Rather, Israel's worship has turned it in on itself—it has become about *them* and their self-love rather than their love for their neighbor, much less the God who calls them to love their neighbor.

In addition to the justice issue, which is clearly a part of Amos' criticism of the cultic system, Amos is attacking the people's sense of *control* over God. As a nation, Amos says, Israel claims to know exactly what God wants, and so intends to offer those things—sacrifice, praise, festival—to pacify and contain God and to keep a hold on its prosperity. They had come to see their expressions of worship as guarantors of God's aid and protection—they could claim YHWH as their possession as long as they offered the right ritual forms. Amos' criticism is again that God is not so easily domesticated—Israel did not own its God, but rather YHWH possessed Israel. Israel had collectively assumed that God *had to* accept their worship, as though it were a requirement; Amos contends, and now God declares that their worship is utterly *unacceptable*.

One disclaimer is probably necessary at this point: for all of Amos' criticism of Israel's rituals, he does not seem to be opposed to organized religion altogether. His point is *not* that we should disband all worship of God in favor of an agenda of social programs. For Amos, this is not a question of either/or, but rather a both-and issue: social justice and right worship need to go together. Israel's problem is that there has come to be a disconnect between these two—they have, in fact, made it into an either/or choice, and they have chosen ritual forms at the expense of practicing justice in their courts and protecting the poor in their cities and farms. Because of *this*, Amos says that God has completely rejected Israel's worship forms—not because there is something inherently wrong with any kind of worship. A similar line of thinking is in Micah 6:6-8 and Psalm 51:16-19, among other passages.

After the harsh and comprehensive criticism of Israel's worship, Amos offers an alternative. The Israel that was so certain it knew just what its God

desired turns out to know nothing of what God truly wills, and so Amos announces what should have been plain all along for the people. YHWH calls for the practice of justice and righteousness within Israel's society. And this justice is not to be a temporary change or a practice of a few, it is to flow through their society—in all its relationships, economic, political, social, civic—like an “ever-flowing stream.” The people are to be so immersed by the practice of justice (as understood by the character of YHWH) that they soak it in—that it becomes a way of life.

v.25-27—The same general theme of critiquing Israel's worship life and forms continues here, but now Amos appeals to Israel's history. Like several of the Hebrew prophets, Amos cites the wilderness tradition and looks back to it as a time of faithfulness between Israel and its God, and holds it up almost as a golden age to be restored. The challenge with 5:25, however, is that Amos envisions a wilderness period without any tradition of sacrifice. The question of 5:25 clearly expects a “no” answer—that the people did *not* bring sacrifices in the wandering time, but other biblical books clearly do recall sacrifices even in the wilderness. So either Amos is simply unfamiliar with the other traditions that recall sacrifice, or he may significantly re-interpret them. Perhaps for Amos, the sacrificial system as a *system*, with all its pomp and accompanying festivities, did not develop until Israel had come into the promised land and a permanent temple was built. In any case, Amos' point in 5:25 is that sacrifice offered to God was never at the heart of Israel's relationship with God—but rather being the people of God and being shaped by that God's ways.

Verses 26 and 27 have the same sense of poetic justice that Amos has used throughout the book. The names “Sakkuth” and “Kaiwan” are believed to be the names of Assyrian gods. So the sense of the passage is that if Israel is so insistent on offering sacrifices to a deity that wants sacrifices, then YHWH will send the people into exile to serve a nation whose gods will be satisfied with mere sacrifices and not the practice of justice. Once again for Amos, the worst, most terrible act of judgment God can unleash on Israel is in some sense to give the people precisely what they are asking for.

Connections: The “No” of God

- What do you think of when you think of “justice?” What images does our culture use to symbolize justice? What does Amos' image of running waters that never fail suggest about the nature of what “justice” is?
- What would you say is the *point* of going to worship? What would Amos say?
- Are there places in our liturgies that make a connection to how we live in the rest of the week? Are there places where you can see a *disconnect* between how we act on Sundays and how we act the rest of the week?
- Does God ever say *no* to us? What things might God say *no* to us about? What things might keep us from hearing it? Do we lose some of the power of the “yes” of God in Jesus if we do not first hear the “no”?

Amos 6:1-7—The First Shall Be **First**?

❖ The Text (NRSV)

- ^{6:1} *Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!*
- ² *Cross over to Calneh, and see;
from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
Are you better than these kingdoms?
Or is your territory greater than their territory,*
- ³ *O you that put far away the evil day,
and bring near a reign of violence?*
- ⁴ *Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall*
- ⁵ *who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;*
- ⁶ *who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*

*⁷Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.*

❖What's going on here?

-v.1—Chapter 6 begins with a “woe-cry” similar to chapter 5’s, and also recalls the judgment against the powerful and the beautiful people of chapter 4. Here, once again, Amos aims that woe to the capital city of the north, Samaria, but now also to Zion (Jerusalem), the capital of the south. Also new to this passage is the language of the “notables of the first of the nations.” The phrase suggests the “upper crust;” the best of the best, or the “crème de la crème.” Amos is addressing those who are in power within Israel, who see their country as the “first of the nations;” these are the first of the first—their own estimation. This is again a build-up to an ironic finish, much like the “bulls of Bashan” in chapter 4, and just as in chapter 4, a twist is coming. The whole passage has a feel of judgment, but the opening word, “Alas,” also conjures up the sorrow and mourning for those who are about to meet with disaster. Much as with earlier chapters, the message of judgment against those who were living the “good life” in wealth and luxury would have come as a great surprise—as great as wailing in grief for someone still alive.

-v.2-3—(*Disclaimer: there are some translational difficulties with these two verses that could make for a long, drawn out argument over the rhetorical effect of these two verses. Suffice it to say that other commentaries do a great job in describing the issues, and if you're interested, I can recommend one. For the time being, we'll take what we have with the NRSV and just remember to ourselves that we are reading a translation that is making its best guess for making sense of these verses.*)

As these verses stand in the NRSV, Amos is inviting the people of Israel to see the fates of other nations that had seen themselves as “great” and refused to believe that judgment could come. This is almost the opposite of the invitation in 3:9-11, where Amos invited foreign representatives to come and see the oppression and injustice going on in Israel. Here the sense is that Israel pretends it is better or holier or greater than its neighbors who have been conquered or destroyed—and Amos’ point is that, no, Israel can

expect a similar fate for its actions. These verses also suggest what we saw in the first two chapters of Amos—a sense of equality between all nations in the eyes of God. Yes, Amos says, there is a sense in which Israel is God’s chosen, but there is also a sense in which God is concerned for justice and compassion in all nations, and Israel cannot play its “chosen status” as a trump card to escape that concern. Israel is no greater than its neighbors, and it certainly doesn’t act that way—so when the day of YHWH comes, it will not be a day for Israel to triumph over its enemy neighbors but for God’s ways of justice to triumph over Israel.

-v.4-6—Amos launches another assault on the “first of the first,” the beautiful and powerful people of Israel, and here we get a fuller description of their lives of insulated opulence. Amos piles up the luxuries in the scene he paints: furniture for lounging, choice food (meat was a rarity for many then), the luxury of time enough to play music for themselves, and fine wines and oils. In fact, there is so much commotion in the scene that the noise has deafened the ears of these revelers to the needs outside their houses. They are, quite literally, amusing themselves to death; they have become so insulated by their possessions and the joys their wealth brings that they are not grieved at all that their nation has forgotten its concern for the poor and itself will come to an end.

-v.7—Amos now declares the result of the way of life he has just described with his usual irony: the beautiful people who were the life of the party, these “first of the first,” will be the *first* to go into exile. Again, there is almost the sense for Amos that the worst God can do is to give the people the effects of their own actions, to withdraw the divine reign over them, to give them what they want. So these elites see themselves as the first of the first—they will be the first when the exile comes, too, shipped off to serve foreign gods and foreign peoples.