

# Amos

*The Book of*

Session Nine:  
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*Amos 8:4-11—No More Business As Usual*

## ❖The Text (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup>Hear this, you that trample on the needy,  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,  
<sup>5</sup>saying, "When will the new moon be over  
so that we may sell grain;  
and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,  
and practice deceit with false balances,  
<sup>6</sup>buying the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

<sup>7</sup>The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:  
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

<sup>8</sup>Shall not the land tremble on this account,  
and everyone mourn who lives in it,  
and all of it rise like the Nile,  
and be tossed about and sink again,  
like the Nile of Egypt?

<sup>9</sup>On that day, says the Lord GOD,  
I will make the sun go down at noon,  
and darken the earth in broad daylight.

<sup>10</sup>I will turn your feasts into mourning,  
and all your songs into lamentation;  
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,  
and baldness on every head;  
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,  
and the end of it like a bitter day.

## ❖What's going on here?

-v.4-6—A new pronouncement begins with the now familiar phrase, "Hear this..." (see also 3:1, 4:1, 5:1). Once again, Amos directly addresses those in his audience who have become unjust and corrupt. Amos describes them much as he did in 2:6-7, as those who

"trample the needy" and "bring to ruin the poor." The rest of these three verses fleshes out who these people are, and it comes by way of an imagined quotation. This is similar to what Amos did back in 4:1, where he put the words, "Bring something to drink" on the lips of the women of Samaria as the epitome of their comfortable lifestyle and attitude.

Here in chapter eight, Amos is again putting words into the mouth of his target audience to embody all that is wrong with their way of life. This time, the target audience is the developing merchant class in Israel, although Amos doesn't draw a rigid line between these people and the powerful and beautiful people he has addressed before. They are *all* caught up in a set of systems that build themselves up at the expense of others, and so yet again Amos is compelled to call them to account. These verses are yet another brief snapshot that indicts the whole nation.

The specific charges put on the lips of these Israelite merchants may need a little bit of historical background in order for us to make sense of them. First of all, both "new moon" and "Sabbath" were festival times when work—and business—apparently ceased. (The tradition of not working on the Sabbath is clear throughout the Torah and is even woven into the creation account at the end of Genesis 1; less is known about the "new moon" festivals, but the weekly and the monthly celebrations occur as a pair elsewhere in the Old Testament—see for example, Hos. 2:11, Is. 1:13, and 2 Kings 4:23.) The merchants (commodities brokers, if you will?) are willing to abide by the custom of closing shop for these times, but they can hardly wait until they can get back to selling their products. They cannot wait to resume with *business as usual*, and as a result, they have emptied the days of rest and celebration of their meaning. As Amos describes them, these merchants are motivated by their desire to make a profit, regardless of whatever liturgical—or human—obstacles are in their way.

Even worse, for the people Amos is describing, “business as usual” includes a willingness to cheat the neighbor into order to increase profits. The “ephah” mentioned at the end of 8:4 was a standard unit of dry measure in Hebrew society at the time, similar to our bushel. The “shekel” was a unit of weight measurement, and more specifically was used to weigh the metals (often silver) used to purchase items like grain. So, from the standpoint of the grain-selling merchants, it was easy to skimp on their product (making the ephah small) and to use slightly larger weights (making the shekel great) in order to boost profits. And on top of it all, the standard operating procedure for these people is to use fixed scales to make sure that, as one commentator puts it, “the customer is always *wronged*.” (An interesting bit of trivia: some commentators note that there is archaeological evidence of merchants’ stores dating to the 8th c. BC that had *two* sets of scales, one set for selling, and one askew for buying.)

The next part of Amos’ attack, still presented as the words of these very merchants he is addressing, focuses on the practice of debt slavery. “Buying the poor” (see also 2:6, where this charge is first leveled against Israel’s society) is probably a reference to forcing people who couldn’t pay their rent or debts into indentured servitude of some kind. Since Amos is focusing here on grain merchants, he may have tenant farmers and their landlords specifically in mind. For Amos, this is simply an affront to God—it places a love for wealth above the love for neighbor (and concern for the neighbor’s well being) and about love for the God who commands such neighbor-love. Regardless of whether these landlords have the “right” to foreclose on their tenant farmers or can legally coerce them into servitude to get payment, Amos understands this practice to be as unjust as using false scales. Finally, Amos condemns the practice of selling the “sweepings of the wheat,” the leftover mix of wheat and chaff left after the winnowing had been done (this is not the makings of

Grade A flour, in other words). All together, Amos exposes a whole way of doing business that had become bent in on itself.

In some respects, the problem for Amos is *business* itself, which, in Amos’ time, was not so old a concept. Before the development of larger cities in Israel, most people would have been self-sufficient for the most part, farming for themselves what they needed. But as cities grew and commerce developed, the emerging class of merchants became consumed with gaining wealth for themselves. Beyond having what they needed and providing for the others in their community, the traders Amos targets have focused their energies on getting more money by any means necessary. And again for Amos, the ways of these merchants serve to illustrate how the *entire nation* has given itself over to amassing wealth, even at the expense of others’ livelihoods.

-v.7-10—If the previous three verses were the charges against the people, now comes God’s verdict and sentence for the people’s actions. And it is the same one that Amos has declared from the beginning—the kind of society Israel has become cannot stand. As in 6:8, YHWH swears an oath not to ignore the situation described above. And YHWH’s response is to promise to shake this unjust society to its foundations. This unsteady, crooked wall of a nation (see 7:7-9) will have to be knocked down if something upright is to be built out of it.

And so to describe this action of God, Amos employs the imagery of an earthquake in 8:7-8. The power of this image is worth exploring—this may have been the most devastating force known in the ancient world. For in an earthquake, the most secure, seemingly fixed thing people can think of—the very ground—becomes *unstable* and *unsound*. And as a result, an earthquake is something one cannot simply choose to ignore—it affects *everyone*. (It’s also interesting to note that the book of Amos’ prophecy is dated as being “two years before the earthquake;” there’s no way to know for

sure, but it is at least possible that a real earthquake occurring in the same time frame as Amos' message could have made this pronouncement of his even more powerful to hear.

In any case, the imagery of an earthquake suggests just what Amos has been saying about the coming action of God toward Israel. Aimed especially at those in power and positions of privilege who have placed their security in religious systems, their business savvy, or their political connections, God's new action will level all those towering idols and bring them all to the ground. Those who have been casually and comfortably distracted from the needs of others will be unable to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the coming action of God. They will be compelled to feel God changing things, even things that seemed unshakable. Verse nine picks up this same idea, but with the sun's light, which also might seem unfailing and unfaltering. Just as an earthquake shows us that the ground we walk on isn't as solid as we pretend, the imagery of an eclipse reminds people that the seemingly invincible light of the sun can fail as well. The point, for Amos, is that God's act will be so radically new and decisive, so earth-shattering, that all the things Israel's elites have counted on will fall apart. YHWH's promise and threat is to undercut all the things in which people have wrongly placed their trust, all the things which *seemed* stable and secure.

And once again, Amos sees that this coming act of God to destabilize Israel's own security will overturn the people's expectations of prosperity and happiness. Now-familiar images of reversal describe what Amos announces—festivals become times of mourning, songs of praise into lament. And Amos insists that those who were "not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" in 6:6 will be made to feel God's action as "the mourning for an only son." To some extent, the nation will be made to share in the grief that *God* has at bringing about the death of Israel (which is referred to as God's son in other prophetic books, interestingly).

### Connections: Converting Shekels to Dollars

-All right, so no one in the United States uses scales to weigh out the money to pay for something, and we don't have debt slavery in a literal sense anymore. But what *kinds* of practices in our contemporary society might Amos be concerned about? Sweatshop conditions in foreign countries? Price gouging? What about the presence or absence of living wages—paying people according to what will allow them to subsist, rather than according to what one can get away with?

-You hear on the news that a clothing line that you often wear uses sweatshop labor overseas to make their clothes. As a result, you're thinking about whether to continue buying from this company or not. On the other hand, you also consider that maybe the factory's conditions and wages, even if they are not up to American standards, are better for employees than the alternative of having no jobs at all. How do we deal with all the conflicting and competing concerns in this kind of situation? What kind of action can you take here in the U.S. that might both protect individuals and families whose income depends on those factories and also promote better conditions and pay for them at the same time?

*Amos 8:11-14—Not By Bread Alone...*

#### ❖The Text (NRSV)

<sup>11</sup>*The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD,  
when I will send a famine on the land;  
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the LORD.*

<sup>12</sup>*They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east;  
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD,  
but they shall not find it.*

<sup>13</sup>*In that day the beautiful young women and the young men  
shall faint for thirst.*

<sup>14</sup>*Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria,  
and say, "As your god lives, O Dan,"  
and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives"—  
they shall fall, and never rise again.*

❖What's going on here?

-v.11-13—For Amos himself, this may be the most frightening message to announce from God. In the end, the worst thing that God can do is to give the people over to their own ways and break the relationship with Israel. Or rather, as Amos has been telling the story, God will stop re-making and re-building the relationship that Israel has consistently broken itself. From the beginning of the book, Amos has charged the people with rejecting and refusing to hear the words of God sent to them. Back in 2:12, Israel was condemned because they censored the prophets and would not listen to the words God spoke through them. In 3:8, Amos defended his own message, saying that he couldn't help but speak because God had first spoken to him. And then of course, in 7:10-17, the religious leadership in Bethel banished Amos because of the message he brought. As Amos tells it, YHWH has been speaking, but the people have refused to listen—in fact, they have done all they could to prevent the message from getting to them. Now, here at the end of chapter eight, God announces with terrible irony that the people will get what they have been asking for—the heavens will be silent.

This is what will make the new act of God against Israel so radically and terribly new. Chapter four had listed a long line of physical events that Amos understood to be the acts of YHWH trying to bring a wayward Israel back to faithful relationship—to the practice of justice and mercy. And at the top of that list was “cleanness of teeth” and “lack of bread,” in addition to drought (4:6-7). If such a famine and drought failed to turn Israel back, the final act God can take is to bring about a famine of divine speech, a withdrawal from relationship. And this kind of famine will affect everyone—even those who epitomize strength and vitality (the young men and women fainting of thirst in 8:13).

-v.14—This announcement continues with the word-famine of vv.11-13, here stressing that the new act of God will affect *all* of Israel. But there is enough technical language here that it is helpful to take a look this verse separately. Part of the thrust of 8:14 is to

expand on 8:12-13—the withdrawal of YHWH's word from the land will take place over the whole nation, from young to old, and from sea to sea. The place-names in 8:14 suggest the same here—Dan and Beersheba were traditionally associated with the northern and southern borders respectively of the whole land of Israel (even in the days of the united kingdom). And of course, right in the center, the capital of the northern kingdom was Samaria. So part of the announcement in 8:14 reiterates the universality of this divine word-famine—wherever they run, they will not find any word.

The language of swearing, and of what one swears *by*, complicates this verse a little. Oaths mean very little to our culture, and even the form may be strange to us. In the ancient Near East, an oath often opened with an invocation of a deity—“as surely as name of god lives, I will do such and such...” Amos is not so much opposed to people swearing or taking oaths as much as expressing the *futility* of calling on the name of *any* god—even Israel's own covenant God YHWH—when this famine of the divine word comes.

Now whether Amos understands the names here in 8:14 to be false, pagan gods or just titles for one god applied to particular places is a little less clear. We've seen earlier in Amos (see 5:25-27) where the prophet attacks the worship of other gods, even in connection with the worship of YHWH, and we've seen Amos play on place-names to mock them (for example, Lodebar, meaning “thing of nothingness” in 6:13). So it is possible here that Amos is mocking the worship of other deities that was taking place in Israel, and his message is that they will not find the life-sustaining word of God in them. It is also possible, though, that Amos is simply announcing the futility even of seeking Israel's one true God, YHWH, at any of their traditional worship sites. Whether they call on God in Dan or make a pilgrimage to Beer-sheba, their own efforts will be empty. And since God has sworn (8:7) to undo the unjust ways of Israel's society, there is no magic oath the people can swear, by any name or any place, to make a quick fix. Just as Amos has attacked the people's religious shows when they are just shows, so too, their oaths are empty words as long as they refuse to hear God's call to a new way of life.