

THE BOOK OF AMOS

Lesson 13, Chapter 8

Last week in Amos chapter 7 we began studying a series of 4 visions that the Prophet received from The Lord. Because of the place in the Amos manuscript where someone several hundred years ago decided to arbitrarily divide chapter 7 from chapter 8 (remembering that originally there were no chapter or verse markings or divisions) the 4th vision wound up being placed in chapter 8, which essentially ruined the flow of the presentation of the 4 visions. All 4 visions are about what Yehoveh intends to do to Israel as punishment for their unfaithfulness to Him. The first 2 are quite different from the second 2. The first 2 have Amos hearing what God intends, then Amos advocating for Israel as an intercessor, and God relenting by saying that He won't do it. The second pair of visions has God interrogating Amos, Amos responding, but God refusing to relent.

Let's read Amos chapter 8.

READ AMOS CHAPTER 8 all

The nature of the 4th vision that begins this chapter is the same as the third vision that ended chapter 7: both are word-play visions. That is, words that sound alike when spoken are chosen to present the vision. Therefore, the visions are more symbolic than literal. Thus, in the 3rd vision we saw that a word-play on the Hebrew words for tin (*anak*) and moan (*anaq*) are used to explain symbolically that the defensive walls of Israel's walled cities will be like soft tin to the invaders who will easily breach them, and because of that the cities' residents will moan and groan as they are put to the sword by the enemy.

This 4th vision of chapter 8 verses 1 – 3 bases its word-play on a type of fruit contained in a basket; often translated as summer fruit. To be clear: the items mentioned in the vision are almost irrelevant; they have no real significance. They were chosen based on how the words sound when pronounced out loud. The basket is merely a woven basket used to gather any type of fruit, and if we can draw any conclusion at all about the fruit it was pictured as containing in this

vision, very likely it is figs. God uses the sight of this basket as a prop to present the vision.

So now, in verse 2, the focus becomes not what the actual object is (a basketful of figs), but rather what it sounds like when the word is spoken. The Hebrew word for summer fruit is **qayits**, which is essentially a homonym for another and different Hebrew word that sounds just like it when spoken. However, that second word means "the final hour" or "the hour of doom". A homonym is a relationship between two words that sound the same or are spelled the same, but those two words have entirely different meanings...often being opposites. Homonyms are literary devices standard in many languages including English and Hebrew. Interestingly, the homonym of these sound-alike Hebrew words in the 4th vision only works when the words are spoken using the dialect of Hebrew that was spoken in the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim/Israel. It wouldn't work at all if it was pronounced as the words were pronounced in Judah. So, this makes it all the clearer that this vision is aimed squarely at Ephraim/Israel and not necessarily to Judah. As with the third vision, the meaning is a simple one: God's declaration of Israel's violent demise and destruction at the hand of a foreign invader will neither be delayed nor reversed.

Verse 3 concludes the 4th vision by portraying a wholesale slaughter of the population of Ephraim/Israel. Formerly joyful and uplifting songs sung and played at the Temple in Bethel will become funeral songs of mourning because of the piles and piles of dead bodies stacked up throughout the land. What the 4 visions depict when taken together as a whole is of certain, unavoidable, severe and widespread destruction and death to every level of Israelite society, but not of total obliteration of the people. God will preserve a remnant that will later-on (as it turns out, about 27 centuries later-on) return to the land. This return is happening in our time, as I speak.

Verses 4 – 6 speak about the shady and hypocritical business practices that go-on in the Northern Kingdom. By the 8th century B.C., Israel had evolved into a 2-class society of haves and have nots. Not by accident, this economic system was deliberate and designed to benefit the upper class by subjugating the lower class. This is directly against the moral code laid out by God in the Law of Moses and is something that modern Western societies need to take into consideration

even in our time. Although a number of passages in the Torah deal with this matter, I think these two passages do a good job of summing up God's attitude and commands about societal structure especially as it concerns finances and the economy. In Exodus, we read this:

CJB Exodus 23:6 *"Do not deny anyone justice in his lawsuit simply because he is poor."*

And then in Deuteronomy...

CJB Deuteronomy 15:7-11 *⁷ "If someone among you is needy, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which ADONAI your God is giving you, you are not to harden your heart or shut your hand from giving to your needy brother. ⁸ No, you must open your hand to him and lend him enough to meet his need and enable him to obtain what he wants. ⁹ Guard yourself against allowing your heart to entertain the mean-spirited thought that because the seventh year, the year of sh'mittah is at hand, you would be stingy toward your needy brother and not give him anything; for then he may cry out to ADONAI against you, and it will be your sin. ¹⁰ Rather, you must give to him; and you are not to be grudging when you give to him. If you do this, ADONAI your God will bless you in all your work, in everything you undertake- ¹¹ for there will always be poor people in the land. That is why I am giving you this order, 'You must open your hand to your poor and needy brother in your land.'*

I've pointed out several times during our study of Amos that one of the chief complaints that Yehoveh has against Israel is the treatment (or better, maltreatment) of the poor (the lower class) of Israelite society by the upper class. Every society on earth is susceptible to not properly caring for the less fortunate in their own society because to do so violates the second of the two foundational principles that God has built His entire moral code upon: love your neighbor as yourself. Some societies have delegated that duty to the government, and others rely entirely on the charity of individuals. Clearly, God wants a balance of responsibility between the government and individuals. Then there is also the issue of exploitation. That is, taking advantage of the lower-class workers by not fairly paying them for their labors. So often this shows up as an enormous imbalance of the elite wealthy becoming wealthy beyond even our ability to

comprehend it, while at the same time the people they employ have a hard time making ends meet. God views such behavior as greed and a lack of fairness. How to solve and properly balance these matters in our modern complex societies takes much wisdom. But the beginning of wisdom is to take God's commandments seriously concerning caring for the poor, and treating employees fairly. Ephraim/Israel didn't take these commands seriously, and now the wealthy and elite are on the brink of not only having it all taken away from them, but also by likely losing their lives; and this is at God's doing. Let those with ears, hear.

While verse 4 opened the passage speaking of the economic hypocrisy that was going on, verse 5 gets into the actual accusations. The first accusation is that Israelite merchants want **Rosh-Hodesh** (the new moon observance) to hurry up and get over with so that they can get back to selling and making a profit. And, it is essentially the same attitude about Shabbat. Shabbat has been reduced to an annoyance that prevents them from doing business on that day.

It is interesting to note that apparently Ephraim/Israel observed **Rosh Hodesh** by making it an additional sabbath day (as is done with some of the biblical feasts). **Rosh Hodesh**, the head of the month, signaled the moment that the month changed, and it was done according to the appearance of the new moon. As an aside: the new moon is not to be confused with the full moon. The new moon is when the moon is 100% dark. During the Bible era, the Hebrew calendar was a lunar/solar hybrid. The lunar calendar was used to fix the months, and the solar calendar was used to fix the years. However, since a new moon appears every 29 ½ days, then calendar-wise one month the new moon began a 29-day month, and the next new moon began a 30-day month since there is little other way to account for a half-day on a calendar. Therefore, since a solar year is 365 days, but 12 new moons (12 lunar months) add up to 354 days, a way had to be developed to account for the 11- day difference. Thus, every few years an additional month was added (yes, in some years of the Hebrew calendar a year consists of 13 months).

What is interesting is that there is little evidence in the Torah that **Rosh Hodesh** was ever intended by God to be an additional sabbath day each month. The main instruction about observing **Rosh Hodesh** comes from the Book of Numbers.

CJB Numbers 10:10 ¹⁰ *"Also on your days of rejoicing, at your designated times and on Rosh-Hodesh, you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; these will be your reminder before your God. I am ADONAI your God."*

While there is some evidence that at various points in Israel's history **Rosh Hodesh** was scrupulously observed by Israel, there is no reasonable evidence to say it was also treated as a sabbath. So, what we learn from this passage in Amos is that one of the many religious observances of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C. was to not only observe the New Moon celebration but also to treat it as a sabbath. Ephraim/Israel was a deeply religious kingdom and went out of their way to ritually embellish every event and observance. The problem was, they essentially re-wrote the Torah as they saw fit by incorporating their Traditions, and then added many pagan elements to it as well. As happens in such situations, these new observances along with the customs used to celebrate them are declared "holy" by the religious authorities, and therefore are holy to the people, with all believing that God is quite pleased with their observances. Christianity has done the same with the non-biblical holidays of Easter and Christmas. It's one thing to add an observance as a religious Tradition; it is quite another to declare it holy. Only God decides and declares what is holy. Humans have no authority to do so (although Catholicism says the Pope indeed does have such authority). On the surface this may seem harmless enough and to speak against it is making a mountain out of mole hill; it is not. Rather, it is the same slippery slope Israel began to slide down, which began with small changes to God's Torah and to various biblically ordained observances; but that soon led to bigger and bigger ones until their Traditions and customs overwhelmed God's biblical commandments. What we wind up with is a manmade religion instead of a most specific, God-ordained and designed biblical faith. This sort of scenario greatly riled Yeshua and He spoke out about it.

CJB Mark 7:13 *Thus, with your tradition which you had handed down to you, you nullify the Word of God! And you do other things like this."*

Amos paints an unflattering picture of the merchants and the wealthy of Israel as begrudging that they have to stop making money on **Rosh Hodesh** and on

Shabbat. They pretend piousness, but in their hearts they are greedy. This greedy nature continues into the next issue Amos brings up, which is the use of unethical business practices in order to increase their profits. They use false weights and measures. First, they shrink the size of an ephah. An ephah equates to about half a bushel. That is, they use a basket for measurement purposes that is supposed to legally represent an ephah, but in reality the basket they use is intentionally smaller. Second, they overweight the shekel. A shekel, unlike today in Israel, was not a unit of money (like a dime or a quarter), but rather it was a measurement of weight, such as an ounce. A shekel at that time was the equivalent of around 2/3rds of an ounce. The trickery worked this way: a balance scale was used. Merchants had small standard weights that represented various amounts of a shekel; one weight might be a half shekel, another a shekel, another that was 2 shekels, etc. If what was owed was 1 shekel of silver, the merchant would put a 1-shekel weight on one side of the balance scale, and then put an amount of the buyer's silver on the other side until the scale balanced, indicating that the amount of silver equaled 1 shekel. But, the merchants were dishonest. They would use weights that were a little heavier than they were supposed to be. So, for instance, perhaps a supposed 1-shekel standard weight might actually have been made to weigh 1.1 shekels. Therefore, when they put that weight on a balance scale, the buyer would have to put on the other side of the scale an amount of silver that he thought was 1 shekel, but it actually more and was none the wiser of the deception.

The third way the merchants cheated was simply by using scales that were rigged in their favor. The Law of Moses specifically addressed these issues.

CJB Leviticus 19:35-36 ³⁵ *"Don't be dishonest when measuring length, weight or capacity. 36 Rather, use an honest balance-scale, honest weights, an honest bushel dry-measure and an honest gallon liquid-measure; I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*

Verse 6 speaks of buying the needy. This is quite literally talking about slavery; human trafficking. This is something that was accepted and par for the course on most nations on earth at that time; but it was not allowed according to the Law of Moses. This slavery is not the same as bond servitude in which a person agreed, or was judicially sentenced, to work for another person until a debt was

paid off. A poor person had few ways to acquire material things if they didn't have the money on hand (which they hardly ever did), and bond servitude was one of them. But they were not "slaves"; they were not owned by their masters. They were closer to how we think of laborers under contract to their employer. However, clearly in Israel they had adopted the common practice of their pagan neighbors of buying and selling human beings.

Earlier in Amos chapter 2, the practice of selling the poor into slavery was condemned. Here the practice of buying them is spoken about. The buyers are those with money who can purchase a human being at a dirt-cheap price so they can use them as the cheapest possible labor in order for them to make more profit. To buy a poor person "for a pair of shoes (sandals)", is an ancient expression (just as dirt-cheap is an expression and not literal). But, the lack of integrity of the merchants gets even worse. They are accused of sweeping up the refuse of the threshing floor and adding it to the grain they sell, or selling it separately to the poorest as very cheap food.

Verse 7 makes it clear that despite the unethical merchants and the greedy rich thinking they are getting away with something, God sees what they're doing and He never forgets what He saw. For one reason, Yehoveh has nominated Himself as the protector of the poor. But what is this about Yehoveh making a vow and swearing to uphold it according to "Jacob's pride"? The reality is that this is the only place in the Bible that we find such an expression, and so no one can be certain what it's getting at. Perhaps the two most common interpretations are that 1) Jacob's pride is the land God gave to Israel, and 2) it is actually an ironic expression that God offers to guarantee to Israel something that is based on Israel's pride and arrogance. I don't know if it is one or the other... or neither. The important point is that God is making a vow to do what He says He's going to do. And here, to never forget means that punishment for the listed crime or crimes will happen sooner or later. Time may pass such that Israel forgets about their crimes, but God doesn't forget and punishment will be unleashed upon them at some point.

In verse 8, the abundant land of Israel...so fertile and productive...a land that has brought forth great wealth for Israel, will suddenly become a death-pit for them. A complete reversal of their salvation history accompanied with a complete

reversal of their blessings' history. What was an incredible blessing for them (their land) becomes a place of torment and death, much the same way an auto-immune disease works in a human. Our immune systems were created by God to protect us from illness. But, when something goes wrong with them and they become corrupted, what was intended for our protection becomes an enemy that *afflicts* us.

In speaking about the convulsing of the earth, no doubt it is referring to earthquakes. Earthquakes are among the most common symbols of God's anger and wrath in the Bible. One of the most vivid and memorable biblical passages describing an earthquake and its effects is found in the Book of Isaiah.

CJB Isaiah 24:17-20 ***17 Terror, pit and trap are upon you, you who are living on earth. 18 He who flees at the sound of terror will fall into the pit. He who climbs up out of the pit will be caught in the trap. For the windows above have been opened, and the earth's foundations shake. 19 The earth cracks and breaks open, the earth crumbles to pieces, the earth trembles and totters. 20 The earth staggers to and fro like a drunk, sways back and forth like a watchman's shelter; its transgression weighs heavy upon it; it will fall and not rise again.***

In an earthquake, the land literally trembles because it rises and contorts and usually falls back again, each cataclysmic movement causing fear and more damage. So, it is likened by Amos to the Nile River that also rises and floods, then recedes and rests. It can be for good (watering and fertilizing fields), but it also caused terrible damage and death at times.

The opening words of verse 9... "on that day"...indicate the beginning of a new literary unit. "On that day" is equivalent to the Day of Judgment or the Day of the Lord. It is something that is guaranteed to come, but it is not speaking about a specific 24-hour period that we can circle on our calendar with a day and a name. Rather it is about some unspecified time in the future, and of an unspecified period of time during which God's judgment is finally poured out. God says that when that time arrives He will make the sun go down at noon, and during normal daylight hours all will turn to the darkness of nighttime. This is speaking of a full solar eclipse. That is, the sun is not going to literally rush across the sky at double

speed in order to set over the horizon hours before it normally does. Rather, at mid-day, at the brightest part of the day, the sun's light will so dimmish that it will be just as like when the sun disappears over the horizon every 24 hours.

The idea may have been for Israel to recall the helpless stumbling around experienced by the Egyptians in order to get Pharaoh to release Israel. Or, I think more likely, it is to recall a curse pronounced in the Law of Moses for Israel's rebelliousness against Him since Amos constantly equates Israel's sins and their punishments to what is said in the Torah.

CJB Deuteronomy 28:28-29 ***²⁸ ADONAI will strike you with insanity, blindness and utter confusion. ²⁹ You will grope about at noon like a blind person groping in the dark, unable to find your way. "You will be continually oppressed and robbed, and there will be no one to save you.***

Just as with the fear, mourning, and lamenting that occurs after the earthquake, verse 10 says it will be the same for the aftermath of the solar eclipse. It's not hard to understand the devastating emotional and psychological effects of a big earthquake; but why would a solar eclipse freak out everyone so badly since it causes no actual harm? It is because both of those things signify the unleashing of God's wrath. Festivals are usually a time of joy and celebration; but not when this cosmic event happens that announces God's intent to harm. Rather there will be intense mourning and wailing all across the land. Donning sackcloth and shaving one's head are standard ways the ancients mourned. The grieving will be so intense that it will be as sorrowful as when an only son dies. The death of an only son signified the end of a family's blood line and little was as greatly feared as that eventuality. The idea is that the grief of the Israelites will be as universal as it is extreme; all will be affected, there will be none spared.

We are now presented in verse 11 with another oracle of doom. God says He is going to send a famine over the land. It will not be a famine in the typical sense of the lack of food, but rather it will be as a lack of His presence. Yehoveh will become inaccessible and unavailable. What is meant by this? Especially in ancient times, the presence of one's deity was paramount in peoples' thoughts and religion. The presence of one's god was quite literal; it was believed that the Temples housed the deities and that they literally were located there. A Temple

was where a particular deity's priests would approach him or her. Especially since it was thought that deities were regional, and that they operated within specified territories...usually the territory of whatever's national god they were... then to the Israelites way of thinking Yehoveh is saying He is going to leave the territory of Ephraim/Israel.

When the verse speaks of Israel being deprived of hearing the words of Yehoveh, do not mistake this for meaning "the Word of Yehoveh". This is not about the people being unable to access the Torah...the Bible...what we often label today as God's Word. Rather, it means that Yehoveh won't reside there any longer. Therefore, when He is sought by Israel to provide answers to problems or questions, the result will be silence. Further, in that era, it was mainly God's Prophets that provided communication from God to the people. It was the Prophets that taught, warned, and also acted as intercessors for Israel. Thus, if God was not there in the land, neither would His Prophets be there. The people will lack the divine direction they claimed to count upon. This puts Israel at a distinct disadvantage against their neighbors as they will have their gods available to help them, but Israel won't. This is the disaster above all disasters. The survivors, as exiles, will find themselves in foreign lands where their gods are active by where Israel's god is nowhere to be found. Even so, there is hope. This hope was expressed in the Torah that Ephraim/Israel barely knew any longer. In a most remarkable prophecy contained in the Book of Deuteronomy we read this:

CJB Deuteronomy 4:25-31 ***25 "When you have had children and grandchildren, lived a long time in the land, become corrupt and made a carved image, a representation of something, and thus done what is evil in the sight of ADONAI your God and provoked him; 26 I call on the sky and the earth to witness against you today that you will quickly disappear from the land that you are crossing the Yarden to possess. You will not prolong your days there but will be completely destroyed. 27 ADONAI will scatter you among the peoples; and among the nations to which ADONAI will lead you away, you will be left few in number. 28 There you will serve gods which are the product of human hands, made of wood and stone, which can't see, hear, eat or smell. 29 However, from there you will seek ADONAI your God; and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and being. 30 In your distress, when all these things have come upon you,***

in the acharit-hayamim, you will return to ADONAI your God and listen to what he says; ³¹ for ADONAI your God is a merciful God. He will not fail you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your ancestors which he swore to them.

Amos in verse 12 amplifies this lack of divine direction by picturing the people metaphorically staggering from "sea to sea" and from the "north even to the east". This is about people desperately searching for God's direction and wisdom but not finding it. Here, however, the meaning of the phrase "word of Yehoveh" shifts from what it meant in verse 11. In verse 11 it had to do with God communicating through His prophets to the people of Israel on a regular basis. In verse 12, the sense is of BOTH the Torah (the Law of Moses) and prophetic revelations. The expression "sea to sea" means from the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea. From the north to the east speaks of Israel's northern and eastern territorial boundaries. One might ask why "south" wasn't mentioned (north to south rather than north to east). While I can't be certain, I think it is because to the south of Israel is Judah, and Judah is not yet having God remove His hand of blessing over them, nor is He yet removing Himself from Judah. In other words, this oracle pertains only to Ephraim/Israel and not to Judah. This clarity would have been important to Amos and to the Hebrew people of that era.

Verse 13 opens with "at that time". This is a rather common prophetic word formula that indicates (at the least) a new thought; or more typically a new oracle of judgment. "That time" is of course speaking about the moment that the many predicted judgments against Israel finally happen, but offers no hint as to the nearness or to the distant future nature of the events. The prophecy is that young people will faint from thirst. The word in Hebrew that is usually translated as young women or fair virgins is **yapheh**. It means beautiful or handsome. So, in English the better translation is beautiful virgin girls. The Hebrew that speaks of the young men is **bachur**. It means youthful males. The notion is of young women and men...probably mid to late teens...those who are in the flower of their youth and the most resilient against hunger and disease, that will suffer great thirst. This thirst ought to be taken literally as a lack of available water, which inevitably goes along with famine. As is common in most cultures, it is so very sad for mature adults to see young people with their entire lives ahead of them, being suddenly thrust into a survival mode so early in life.

The thought continues in verse 14. Those who swear (that is, they make vows) by the sin of Samaria, as still speaking of the youth who have been trained since birth in their perverted manmade religion practiced by the Northern Kingdom. These youth know no other way. The "sin of Samaria" may speak of the various Ba'al idols that were in rampant use in Samaria. Or, it may also be indicating the calf god that was erected in both Dan and Bethel. The young people, when making vows (and vow making was a rather regular activity in that era) call on the gods of Samaria as their guarantor instead of Yehoveh, God of Israel. It is in this way that such invoking of false-gods is sin.

"As thy God, Dan, lives" is an oath formula. I have no doubt this is referring to the golden calf god erected at the city of Dan; a god they nonetheless called The God of Israel. Although I've made this point before, I'll make it again. The people who spoke that oath, and who worshipped the golden calf were sincere in their beliefs. And, if you asked them who they were worshipping they would say it was the God of Israel. The absurdity of such a notion would have flown right over the heads of those ancient Ephraim/Israelites. They would have seen no contradiction in using a pagan god symbol to represent their Israelite God, Yehoveh...even one as strictly outlawed as a golden calf! They were most sincere in what icon they worshipped and that it was godly and in line with the Torah. Yet, sincerely believing something doesn't make it truth. I could sincerely believe that I was a garage door; but that doesn't make me one. Such beliefs don't have to be as absurd as that in order to put us on the wrong track. For Israel to have reached this point of mindless deception, it took many decades of incorrect doctrinal training.

The other oath formula "as the way of Be'er-Sheva lives", is similar to the last one. Although located in the south in Judah, Be'er-Sheva at this time identified more with Ephraim/Israel than with Judah. So, they too had some sort of idol they worshipped there. To all these Israelite worshippers of false gods, the final words of God in this chapter are: "they shall fall and never rise again". This means that their demise will be total. Israel has no hope that what has been prophesied will somehow pass them by or be called -off.

We'll begin the final chapter Isaiah the next time we meet.