

THE DAY OF YHWH

AMOS 5:18 - 6:14

18Alas for you who long for the day of YHWH! Why do you want the day of YHWH? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as 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. ²⁰Is not the day of YHWH darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I loathe your festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them; and the communion offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon favourably. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let right judgment roll down like waters, and justice 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; ²⁷I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says YHWH whose name is the God of hosts.

In this oracle Amos reverses popular expectations attached to ‘the Day of YHWH’, just as earlier he upset the people’s confidence that ‘God is with us’ (5:14) meant approval and blessing. Israel eagerly looked forward to ‘the Day of YHWH’, for it meant for them the intervention of their God to bring liberation and salvation from their enemies. Not so, says Amos. YHWH will appear, YHWH will intervene, but it will be to judge Israel, not to bring down her enemies. There is no way that they can escape from impending judgment (compare 2:14-16). Even when they think they have escaped, doom awaits them.

Having reversed the popular expectation of ‘the Day of YHWH’ Amos goes on to reverse the popular understanding of the significance of the cult (compare Isaiah 1:11-15). Not that the cult itself is the problem. The problem is the lack of justice. ‘Burnt offerings’ were called such because the whole offering was consumed and went up to heaven as smoke (see Leviticus 1:3-17). On cereal offerings see Leviticus 2:1-16. Communion offerings involved the sacrifice of an animal which was then eaten by those offering the sacrifice (see Leviticus 3:1-17). Amos is declaring that the cult is as abhorrent to God as their unjust social practices. Verse 15 reminds Israel that the sacrifices they were so scrupulous about were not offered during the long years of wandering in the wilderness (compare Jeremiah 7:22-23).

When YHWH intervenes on the ‘Day of YHWH’ it will be to send Israel into exile ‘beyond Damascus’. Amos, with his sharp focus on justice, has little to say about idolatry. In verse 26, however, he tells them to take with them the gods ‘which you made for yourselves’. ‘Sakkuth’ is an astral god known from Mesopotamia and Ugarit. ‘Kaiwan’ is a Hebrew name for the star god Saturn. Amos is making fun of the solemn processions in which gods are carried triumphantly. All will be bundled off into exile by the one and only God ‘YHWH, whose name is the God of hosts (armies)’.

During the time of Amos Israel had extended its boundaries as far as Damascus. Very well, they will go further, but into exile!

Here we find Amos's second reference to his own homeland (see 2:4-5). Though his main focus is Samaria we should not be surprised to hear his concern for the southern kingdom which was also enjoying prosperity at the time. 'The house of Israel' may refer here to the sanctuary of Bethel.

'Calneh' (see Isaiah 10:9), on the lower Orontes, was the capital city of a late Hittite state. It was conquered in 858 by Shalmaneser III of Assyria (and again in 739 by Tiglath-pileser III after the time of Amos). Hamath Rabbah was an important Syrian city-state on the middle Orontes just to the south of Calneh and north of Damascus. It, too, had many battles with Shalmaneser III. If these states suffered defeat, what right had Israel to think that its present prosperity would go on for ever? To the south of Israel, Gath was overrun by an army from Aram led by Hazael (see 2Kings 12:17) in the last decade of the 9th century, and was again destroyed by Uzziah of Judah.

By carrying on as they are, all Israel is doing is bringing upon themselves 'the day of calamity', a 'reign of violence' that they think will never overtake them.

In verses 4-6 Amos appears to be parodying the communion banquets carried out in their shrines. The word translated 'bowl' in verse 6 is customarily used in a cultic setting, as is the word translated 'anoint'. Here again Amos appears to be criticising those who are observant in matters of cult, but behave in ways that show no respect for the covenant they have with YHWH – a covenant that demands justice of them.

While indulging themselves they show no concern over the impending 'ruin' of their country ('Joseph').

They see themselves as the 'first' (פְּרִשְׁתִּי, rō'š) of nations (verse 1), and use the 'finest' (שֶׁמֶן, rō'š) oils (verse 6). They will be the 'first' (פְּרִשְׁתִּי, rō'š) to go into exile (verse 7; see 5:27).

¹Alas for you who are at ease in Zion, and who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, who have come to the house of Israel!

²Cross over to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath Rabbah; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than yours?

³O you who rush along to the day of calamity, and draw ever nearer to the reign of violence!

⁴Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, sprawled out on their couches;

who dine on lambs from the flock, and on calves from the stall;

⁵who sing idle songs to the sound of the lute, and like David improvise on instruments of music;

⁶who 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 gone will be the revelry of the sprawlers.

Israel will be overrun

⁸The Lord YHWH has sworn by himself (says YHWH, the God of hosts): "I abhor the arrogance of Jacob and hate his strongholds; and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it".

⁹So it will be, that, if ten people remain in one house, they shall die. ¹⁰Then the nearest relative and the one who burns the dead will arrive to remove the corpse from the house. One will say to the other in the innermost parts of the house, "Is anyone else with you?" The answer will come, "No." Then the former shall say, "Hush! We must not mention the name of YHWH."

¹¹See, YHWH commands, and the great house shall be shattered to bits, and the little house to pieces.

¹²Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen? Yet you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood

– ¹³you who rejoice over Lo-Dabar, who boast, "Have we not by our own strength captured Qarnaim for ourselves?"

¹⁴Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation, O house of Israel, says YHWH, the God of hosts, and they shall oppress you from Lebo-Hamath to Wadi Arabah.

The double mention of YHWH, and the inclusion of the oath, underline the irreversibility of the impending punishment. As throughout Amos, no conqueror is specified. Jacob takes pride in its fortifications. YHWH rejects them. They will not withstand the onslaught of divine anger.

Even the few left over from the carnage, and huddling in a house, will not be spared. The 'one who burns the dead' may refer to the practice of burning corpses during a plague. Since the calamity is recognised as coming from YHWH, the two men are careful not to attract the attention of the deity, lest they, too, be killed.

They are sensible enough not to gallop onto rocks or attempt to plough the sea. How come they are so foolish as to distort justice?

Verses 13-14 reflect the successful military excursion of Jeroboam II into the lands to the east of the Jordan. 'Lo-Dabar' (see 2Kings 14:25) is generally located north of the Jabbok River in Ammonite territory in northern Gilead. The name is a pun on 'no-thing'. Their rejoicing is over nothing! Qarnaim ('Double Horn') is in central Bashan in Aramean territory, north of the Yarmuk River.

Once more, the nation is left unspecified (see Amos 3:11). 'Lebo-Hamath' is frequently given as Israel's northern border. It is in northern Lebanon, south of Kadesh. Wadi Arabah is given as Israel's southern border. In 2Kings 14:25 we are told that Jeroboam

restored the border of Israel from Lebo-Hamath as far as the Wadi Arabah, according to the word of YHWH, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.

Is Amos responding by declaring that that success will be short-lived?