

An Exegetical–Homiletical Study of Amos 4:4-6, 12-13

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Translation

⁴“Enter Bethel and rebel; at Gilgal increase transgressing. And bring your sacrifices for the morning, your tithes for three days. ⁵And burn a thank offering from leavened (bread), and proclaim voluntary offerings; announce them. For so you love (to do), sons of Israel,” declares the Lord Jehovah. ⁶“And also, I have given to you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, and you have not returned to me,” declares Jehovah.

¹²“Therefore, this I will do to you, Israel. Because of this (which) I will do to you, prepare to meet your God, Israel. ¹³For, behold, he who forms the mountains, and creates the wind, and declares to man what his thought (is), who makes dawn darkness, and treads upon the high places of the earth; Jehovah, the God of hosts is his name.

The Background and Setting of the Book of Amos

Amos is the third of the Minor Prophets. His name means “burden” or “burden-bearer,” a fitting name in the light of the grievous message which he had to deliver to Israel. Jewish tradition says that he was called Amos because he stammered or was slow of speech, but this is doubtful. He belonged to the Southern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah, although his prophetic ministry was carried out in the Kingdom of the North, the Kingdom of Israel.

Amos was, as he himself says, a native of Tekoah, a small town of Judah, situated on a hill about five miles south of Bethlehem, nine or ten miles south of Jerusalem. In 1:1 and again in 7:14 he is described as a herdsman (Hebrew **רֹקֵן** – one who owned or tended a breed of sheep still known to the Arabs as naqad, a small sheep prized for its wool). In 7:14 he tells us also that he cultivated sycamore trees, an inferior fig which was a common food among the poor. His occupation would have taken him throughout the “wilderness of Tekoah,” where David may have tended sheep, and which, in the New Testament times, was the early home of John the Baptist, and also the scene of our Lord’s temptation. The influence of Amos’ surroundings is traceable in his book. Accustomed to the solitary, simple, and strenuous life of the desert, he disdains the idle, pampered lives of the wealthy nobles and their wives in the cities of the North. (3:12; 4:1; 6:4ff). His illustrations are often drawn from the sights and sounds with which he was familiar in his desert calling.

Amos is said to have prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, King of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, King of Israel” (1:1). If we take Uzziah’s reign to be 790-740 BC, and the reign of Jeroboam to be 783-743 BC, the date for the prophecy of Amos would be about 750 BC, conceding that it could not have been at the beginning of Jeroboam’s reign because Amos indicates that his king had already overcome his enemies and regained his lost territory (6:2,13, compared with 2 Kings 14:25). The Assyrians would soon be threatening Palestine. The phrase “two years before the earthquake” does not help much because that event is not mentioned in the historical books.

Amos' time was a time of prosperity and wealth. Jeroboam II of Israel had overcome the Syrians and recovered the original territory of his kingdom. Uzziah, king of Judah, had subdued the Edomites, Philistines, and Ammonites. He raised a powerful army and fortified Jerusalem. Israel, secure from their enemies and strong in their own resources, was far from expecting their destruction. Prosperity in both kingdoms had produced self-pride, luxurious, indulgent living, selfishness, and oppression of the poor. In the northern kingdom of Israel these sins were increased by the calf worship, which was still practiced there. Amos was sent to Bethel, the center of this idolatry, to rebuke their sins and announce the approach of God's judgment. Faithful to his calling, Amos went thus to a people who had been highly favored by God, but who were unspeakably wicked and ungrateful.

Although some critics maintain that there are annotations and additions made by later editors or writers, there is no real reason to deny that Amos is the writer of any portion of the book that bears his name. The prophecy of Amos is an example of the goodness of God to an unworthy nation. We might divide the book of the prophecy of Amos this way: The Approaching Judgment (Ch. 1-2), Prophecies Concerning Israel (Ch. 3-6), Sights or Visions (Ch. 7-9).

A Closer Look at 4:4-6,12-13

The Lord's call to rebellious Israel: Prepare to meet your God!

Verses 4-5 ⁴“Enter Bethel and rebel; at Gilgal increase transgressing. And bring your sacrifices for the morning, your tithes for three days. ⁵And burn a thank offering from leavened (bread), and proclaim voluntary offerings; announce them. For so you love (to do), sons of Israel,” declares the Lord Jehovah.

After a threat against the self-indulgent rich women of Samaria, referred to as the “cows of Bashan,” Amos turns to all Israel in general. With clear irony Amos tells them to go on with their zealous, even over-zealous, idolatry; to increase their idolatrous sacrifices and thus increase their sin. Bethel, the place that had been named “the house of God” by Jacob had become the center of Israel's idol worship. Gilgal had become another place of such idolatry. Beersheba was another mentioned in 5:5. הַגִּלְגָּל is an accusative, and בָּאוּ is to be repeated from the first clause.

Thus, “[Enter] at Gilgal.” לְבֹקֶר “for the morning,” and לְשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים, “for” or “on the three days.” The לְ is distributive, rendering “every day” and “every three days.” The זְבַחֵיכֶם are not strictly the morning sacrifices, but rather slain sacrifices that are offered every morning, but are not required to be presented every day (Numbers 28:3).

Perhaps Amos was not saying that the idolatrous Israelites had offered sacrifices every morning and tithes every three days, but rather, “*If you would...you would only increase your apostasy from the true God.*” קָטַן, “burn,” the infinitive absolute is used in place of the imperative. Amos charges the people with having offered leavened instead of unleavened bread, and burned it on the altar, contrary to the expressed command of the law (Leviticus 2:11). They were not satisfied burning only unleavened bread for their sacrifices, they burned leavened loaves too, in order to offer as much as possible to God. The Israelites were careful to observe the outward Levitical worship even beyond the letter of the law, though their observance was total idolatry.

Ironically, the prophet tells them to bring their tithes, not, as the law ordered, every year (Leviticus 27:30), or, as in the case of the second tithe, every three years (Deuteronomy 14:28; 26:12), but “every three days.” If they did all this, still they would be increasing their sinfulness and apostasy before the true God.

“Call out voluntary offerings; announce them” can either be explained as to make a public proclamation that free-will offerings are to be made, or to announce boastfully that you are about to offer such “free-will” offerings. Their ordering of or boasting about “free-will” offerings was an exaggerated act of zeal and a self-glorification, for such offerings should have been brought out of a willing, purely spontaneous impulse, but it had been turned into a matter of legal command, and then offered to a false god.

Israel was well pleased with their idolatrous practices. “For so you *love* to do.” What was their own invention they were fond of. And they thought that it must be pleasing to God and merited God’s favor because it was pleasing to their own spiritually blind fancy.

This is the declaration of the true God, the Lord Jehovah. While their idolatrous worship pleased Israel’s self-righteous spirit, Israel was not to think that the number and the amount of their gifts, sacrifices and tithes was pleasing to God. He saw only their wicked and idolatrous heart which made both the people and their offerings an abomination to him and a stench in his nostrils. When the heathen deliberately disregard the law of God in their hearts and in nature, God gives them over to their unnatural lusts and sins before finally destroying them (Romans 1:20ff). So God now announces to his highly favored Israel, who had all of the opportunities and who knew his law by special revelation, that he now is ready to surrender them to their rebellion and their stubborn refusal to return to him. He turns them over to sin and Satan. No longer will he restrain them from heaping sin upon sin, so that his judgments may be heaped upon them in the day of reckoning. “So go ahead now, Israel,” God says, “sin all you want. You are only bringing more and more severe judgment upon yourselves.”

Verse 6 ⁶“And also, I have given to you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, and you have not returned to me,” declares Jehovah.

This is the first of five judgments that are named (verses 6-11) that had already taken place – famines. The others are draughts, blights, pestilences, earthquakes. Each came with God’s purpose of returning Israel to the Lord, bringing them to repentance so that he might forgive them. But it was all to no avail. Five times we hear, “‘and you have not returned to me,’ declares Jehovah.” God complains of his people’s stubborn impenitence. If they would have returned to him, he would have welcomed, forgiven, and accepted them, and the various troubles they had been in would have been removed. God’s grace would have again enfolded them. This is what Jehovah wanted and this is why he had dealt with them, through these minor judgments, as he had.

The adversative, “and also I,” of this verse forms the antithesis to “so you” in verse 5. “You love to persist in your idolatry, and yet I have tried all means of turning you to me.” “Cleanness of teeth” is explained by the parallel “lack of bread,” lack of anything to put between the teeth. This was not confined to the crowded cities, it was nation-wide, “in all your places.”

This judgment, and the ones in the next verses, did not necessarily occur during Jeroboam’s rule. God is dealing here with the life of a nation, not an individual. The judgments

may have been separated by decades and centuries, and some of them may have been repeated a number of times.

Yet, Israel ignored this warning of famine as well as the others. They did not return to God. If they made an attempt at repentance, it stopped before it reached true and proper, heart-felt, faith-filled repentance. Israel stubbornly continued in its rebellion against God, seeking help from its calves instead of the Lord.

Verses 12-13 ¹²“Therefore, this I will do to you, Israel. Because of this (which) I will do to you, prepare to meet your God, Israel. ¹³For, behold, he who forms the mountains, and creates the wind, and declares to man what his thought (is), who makes dawn darkness, and treads upon the high places of the earth; Jehovah, the God of hosts is his name.

The punishment which God is about to bring upon Israel is introduced with לָכֵן, “therefore.” כֹּה אֶעֱשֶׂה, “This I will do,” cannot point back to the punishment threatened in 4:23, nor to the judgments (chastisements) mentioned in 4:6-11, for לָכֵן-כֹּה is always used by Amos to introduce what is about to happen, and the verb אֶעֱשֶׂה is a future.

God now threatens Israel with more severe judgments than any he had brought upon them so far. God will now deal with them as He had threatened to do with covenant breakers (Leviticus 26:14ff, Deuteronomy 28:15ff). The covenant God, faithful to his Word, now tells them “Prepare to meet your God!” These words should remind us of Israel’s first meeting with God (Exodus 19:15-16) at Mt. Sinai.

God is silent as to what he will do or how he will do it, so that, left in uncertainty (which is more to be feared because of all the things which are then imagined), Israel may repent of their sinfulness, and thus avert what God threatens here. The “this” points back to the previous “this” (or “thus”).

“Prepare to meet your God!” They were now called upon to be ready to stand face to face before God in judgment. They were totally unable to meet God by themselves. They could not withstand him. They could not stand before the righteous God in their unrighteousness. Nor could they escape him. Therefore, it was the only course to prepare to meet him. And how were they to do this? By returning to the Lord. By turning to him with a changed heart, that he might still forgive them and withdraw his heavy hand which was against them.

To give greater emphasis to this command to prepared Amos depicts God in verse 13 as the almighty, all-knowing God. The predicates applied to God are explanations of אֱלֹהֶיךָ, “your God.” Israel’s covenant God is not a weak, man-made God, unable to fulfill his promises or threats. If he is a God as he is here described to be, it is foolishness to seek to escape him; therefore “prepare!”

Jehovah, the Lord of hosts, is the omnipotent Creator who has formed the immovable mountains. He has also created the wind, the invisible, intangible, subtle, evasive, yet highly destructive wind. The power of the air comes from him and is directed by him. “Even the winds and the waves obey him” (Mark 4:41). He is the omniscient Lord. He “searches the heart” (Jeremiah 17:10). He knows man’s thoughts. And he reveals to men the state of their heart. This he does sometimes by the sting of conscience, sometimes by inspiring his prophets to reveal

to man what the true state of his heart is – sinful, unclean, totally unworthy of anything. God judges not only the outward actions, as the world does, but also the innermost thoughts, desires, emotions of the heart. “His thought” refers to man, not to God, although the idea of God revealing his own thoughts and decisions to man through his prophets certainly would not be an idea foreign to the Scripture. The thought here, however, is God’s power, might, and superiority over all his creation, including man. “Thought,” תַּחֲשַׁב “to think, meditate,” is never used of God’s plans. (Psalm 119:15,23,48).

Jehovah, the Lord of hosts, is the ruler of the universe. He makes dawn darkness. This can refer simply to changing the light of the day to the dark of night, thus simply being a further instance of God’s power. It could also refer to the action of the clouds, or to an eclipse. Or it may be used metaphorically; God changing hope and joy and prosperity to bitter woe and despair. Most think it simply to mean that God makes dawn and darkness, “the” being omitted because of the oratorical nature of the prophecy.

Jehovah “treads upon the high places of the earth.” He is not only higher than the highest mountains, having created them, but he has dominion over all things. To “tread upon” is to be victorious over. He is the conqueror. He is Jehovah. He is the unchanging Lord. And he is the conqueror over the “high places,” the shrines of idolatrous worship which Jeroboam had set up at Bethel (1 Kings 12:31ff) and elsewhere. Israel’s idolatry was seen and known by Jehovah, still the only true, omnipotent, omniscient, Lord God.

Jehovah, the God of hosts, the eternal, self-existent, covenant God, is he who thus reveals himself. He is to be heeded. He is to be obeyed.

Therefore, “prepare to meet your God, Israel!” Israel, conqueror of God, as Jacob had been called, had now lost that lofty position. But they could once again become “Israel” by turning in their spiritual bankruptcy, in their dire need, and clinging to him in humble, repentant faith, and in confident trust that in Jehovah, their God, there is still salvation. But refusal to heed this final appeal would bring upon them God’s most severe and perhaps final judgment.

A Homiletical Look

In this section the prophet Amos turns from the women of Israel and addresses the people as a whole. His language is strong irony. He encourages them to do the very thing he knows they have been doing. And they will keep on doing it in spite of the impending punishment which he predicts. The prophet’s intention is to get them to see themselves as God sees them and as they really are, steeped in sin, particularly the sin of idolatry.

Worship Israel did. But it was an empty worship without the heart. Without true faith in Jehovah. They used the proper *form* of worship. They observed various sacrifices, but it was an external observance. Even after their sinful life was well entrenched their conscience still gave them trouble. And one of the common salves for an accusing conscience is to lose oneself in the externals of religious observance. It “feels” good, other people see them worship. And they are “doing their duty.”

So, many today may go to church because it is “the thing to do.” They may “talk a good game” of Christianity because they want to look good. But the heart is empty. And their “worship” is nothing more than idolatry, just as surely as Israel’s was.

Not only did they observe the letter of the law in these sacrifices, tithes and free-will offerings, they went beyond the letter of the law. They offered *slain sacrifices every day*. Not

content with burning unleavened bread on their altar, they burned also the leavened cakes which were to be eaten at the sacrificial meal. They boasted of their free-will offerings as if to make them mandatory.

We notice one important omission in the observance of the various ordinances by Israel, however. This is the omission of the sin offering and the trespass offering. Israel was not conscious of their sin. They brought their empty praise and hollow gifts, but felt no sin to confess or to be atoned for. How akin to the immorality and “new morality” of our day, by which men slap God in the face with their open sin and never give it a second thought. How like the humanistic philosophy of today which says there is no such thing as sin, and follows its merry selfish and self-righteous way and feels *good* about it! How like the Pharisee of Jesus’ time and the modern day Pharisees who love to say, “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men!” (Luke 18:11).

And how pleased such people are with themselves and their hypocritical service. “For so you love to do, sons of Israel.” People love outward observances and forms of religion. And they love them even more, if by observing them, they think they can accomplish their salvation, salvation by works. And they love them even more if those observances are at least partially their own invention. The Mormons, among whom I served in Salt Lake City, are a prime example of this with their man-made laws and rules, leading to self-glorification, by which they think they are serving Jesus Christ, just as surely as Israel thought so. But we remember Jesus’ words and Isaiah’s words: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matthew 15:8-9).

Jehovah had dealt with Israel before, seeking to lead them to turn to him again, but to no avail. Verses 6-11 list various attempts which God had made to bring them to repentance. Nothing had worked. Famine is listed first (6). It should have done the trick, but that, and every thing else so far, seemed to have no effect at all. Sadly we hear, “But you have not returned to me.” This was God’s purpose, this was his goal, in everything he had done as he dealt with Israel as a loving father disciplines his children. How dearly he wanted them to return! But they *would not!*

That same loving Father waits for our return also every time we sin against him. But, like Israel, many refuse. God may send them the signs of his displeasure, whether it be trials, judgments, calamities, hardship, sickness, or what have you, but the unbeliever and the hypocrite go on unheeding. May we never be among them. But let us daily be among those who confess with repentant and faithful hearts like the tax collector; “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Only as we return to *him* for forgiveness and salvation can we remain his children and heirs of eternal life.

Luther says, “God threatens to punish all who transgress these commandments. Therefore, we shall fear his anger, and not disobey what he commands.” Jehovah now pronounces more severe judgment, yet to come upon Israel as they continue in their idolatry, hypocrisy, and impenitence. While God does not specify the judgment which is now to come upon Israel, the terror of the words, “Therefore this I will do to you,” is not lessened but strengthened by the vagueness. What kind of judgment will God bring down now? He has the whole arsenal, all things, at his disposal. If they do not turn to him, his anger will not be turned away.

So, Israel, “Prepare to meet your God!” Such a meeting is inevitable. We cannot fool God, we cannot deceive him, we cannot escape him. Therefore, prepare to meet him. The kind or occasion of the meeting with God is not explained, therefore it includes all occasions where we

meet God, whether in life, or death, or at the final judgment. The idea of meeting God face to face is the essence of terror to the unbeliever. And it was to be that for Israel. Therefore, prepare! Another call to repentance.

But for the believer, meeting God whenever, wherever, and in whatever way, is a blessing indeed. That is, if we are prepared. Prepare with a heart of faith firmly grounded in God's Word and sacraments. Prepare with heart-felt worship and praise of Jehovah. Prepare with faith in the Son of God as your only Savior and Redeemer.

Prepare to meet *your* God. Jehovah still wanted to be Israel's God. He reaches out to them here even as he proclaims his judgment upon them. He still reaches out to each of us through his Word of Life, and by God's grace, he is *our* God.

And what a God our God Jehovah is! All things are in his power. He is the creator God, who created all things, even the lofty mountains. He is the all-knowing God, who can tell us everything that is on our mind and heart right now. He is the controller God, whom even the wind, the light and the darkness obey. He knows our sinfulness, he knows our hypocrisy. He is the almighty God, Lord over all, blessed forever.

He is Jehovah, the "being one," the "living one," not an idol which has no real existence. He is "God," the sum of all holiness, the object of all worship, the one who deserves and commands the heart's whole allegiance and devotion. He is "God of hosts," God of the "armies." The hosts are the heavenly bodies (Genesis 2:1; Deuteronomy 4:19), the angels (Joshua 5:14; 1 Kings 22:19), and men (Exodus 12:41). All these he made, he owns, he keeps, he controls, he uses. He is the Sovereign Lord, and he does according to his will everywhere and at all times.

May he help us to prepare to meet him, in his Word, in life, at death, and in the Judgment. He says, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Suggested Outlines

Prepare to Meet Your God!

- I. He is the almighty God (13)
- II. He hates sin and will punish sin (4-6, 12)
- III. Prepare by turning to the Lord (6b, 12b)

Prepare to Meet Your God!

- I. Worship him in spirit and in truth (4-5)
- II. Prepare to meet him in life (6)
- III. Prepare to meet him in judgment (12-13)

Hypocrisy

- I. It mocks the almighty God (13, 4-5)
- II. It brings his judgment upon the hypocrite (6, 12)
- III. Therefore, return to him (6b, 12b)