

THE PROPHET AMOS ON TRUE AND FALSE WORSHIP

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Amos 2:4-5

4. Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept his commandments, and their lies caused them to err, after the which their fathers have walked:

5. But I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.

Judah's Doom

Amos turns now his discourse to the tribe of Judah, and to that kingdom, which still continued in the family of David. He has up until now spoken of heathen and uncircumcised nations: what he said of them was a prelude of the destruction which was near the chosen people; for when God spared not others who had through ignorance sinned, what was to become of the people of Israel, who had been taught in the law? For a servant, knowing his master's will, and doing it not, is worthy of many stripes (**Luke 12:47**). God could not, then, forgive the children of Abraham, whom He had adopted as His peculiar people, when He inflicted even grievous punishments on heathen nations, whose ignorance, as it is commonly thought by men, was excusable. It is indeed true, that all who sin without law will justly perish, as Paul says in **Romans 2**, but when a comparison is made between the children of Israel and the wretched heathens, who were immersed in errors, the latter were doubtless worthy of being pardoned, when compared with that people who had betrayed their perverseness, and, as it were, designedly resolved to bring on themselves the vengeance of God.

God's Judgment on the Church (the "Bible-believing," more religious southern kingdom of Judah)—Amos now proclaims severe reproofs on his people, the Jews (of the South) as he had preached to the Israelites (in the North). He says that the Jews had rejected the law of the LORD. [The Israelites were the more worldly, pagan, corrupt and cult-like, as they had further abandoned Biblical truth. The Jews, by contrast, still retained more Biblical truth and their worship was less corrupt.]

The Prophet then having up until now spoken of the Gentiles, turns his discourse now to the chosen people, the children of Abraham. But he speaks of the tribe of Judah, from which he sprang, as I said at the beginning; and he did this, lest any one should charge him with favoring his own countrymen: he had, indeed, migrated into the kingdom of Israel; but he was there a stranger. We shall now see how severely he reproved them. Had he, then, been silent as to the tribe of Judah, he might have been subject to calumny; for many might have said, that there was a collusion between him and his own countrymen and that he concealed their vices, and that he fiercely inveighed against

their neighbors, through a wicked emulation, in order to transfer the kingdom again into the family of David. Hence, that no such suspicion might tarnish his doctrine, the Prophet here summons to judgment the tribe of Judah, and speaks in no milder language of the Jews than of other nations: for he says, that they, through their stubbornness, had so provoked God's wrath, that there was no hope of pardon; for such was the mass of their vices, that God would now justly execute extreme vengeance, as a moderate chastisement would not be sufficient. We now then understand the Prophet's design.

I come now to the words: ***For they have despised, he says, the law of the LORD.*** Here he charges the Jews with **apostasy**; for they had cast aside the worship of God, and the pure doctrine of religion. This was a crime the most grievous.

We hence see, that the Prophet condemns here freely and honestly as it became him, the vices of his own people, so that there was no room for calumny, when he afterwards became a severe censor and reprovor of the Israelites; for he does not lightly touch on something wrong in the tribe of Judah, but says that they were apostates and perfidious, having cast aside the law of God. But it may be asked, why the Prophet charges the Jews with a crime so atrocious, since religion, as we have seen in the Prophecies of Hosea, still existed among them? But to this there is a ready answer: the worship of God was become corrupt among them, though they had not so openly departed from it as the Israelites. There remained, indeed, circumcision among the Israelites; but their sacrifices were pollutions, their temples were brothels: they thought that they worshipped God; but as a temple had been built at Bethel contrary to God's command, the whole worship was a profanation. The Jews were somewhat purer; but they, we know, had also degenerated from the genuine worship of God. Hence the Prophet does not unjustly say here that they had despised the law of God.

Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah had false worship, but Israel was more fully degenerate.

. . . we must notice the explanation which immediately follows, — *that they kept not his statutes.* The way then by which Amos proves that the Jews were covenant-breakers, and that having repudiated God's law, they had fallen into wicked superstitions, is by saying, that they kept not the precepts of God. It may, however, appear that he treats them here with too much severity; for one might not altogether keep God's commands either through ignorance or carelessness, or some other fault, and yet be not a covenant-breaker or an apostate.

How serious is false worship and inventing creative new forms of worship?

I answer, — That in these words of the Prophet, not mere negligence is blamed in the Jews; but they are condemned for designedly, that is, knowingly and willfully departing from the commandments of God, and devising for themselves various modes of worship. It is not then to keep the precepts of God, when men continue not under His law, but audaciously contrive for themselves new forms of worship; they regard not what

God commands, but lay hold on anything pleasing that comes to their minds. This crime the Prophet now condemns in the Jews: and hence it was that they had despised the law of God. For men should never assume so much as to change any thing in the worship of God; but due reverence for God ought to influence them: were they persuaded of this — that there is no wisdom but what comes from God — they would surely confine themselves within His commands. Whenever then they invent new and fictitious forms of worship, they sufficiently show that they regard not what the Lord wills, what He enjoins, what He forbids. Thus, then, they despise His law, and even cast it away.

The most grievous sin of innovating in God's religion and not confining themselves within the boundaries set by God's law.

This is a remarkable passage; for we see, first, that a most grievous sin is condemned by the Prophet, and that sin is, that the Jews confined not themselves to God's law, but took the liberty of innovating; this is one thing: and we also learn how much God values obedience, which is better, as it is said in another place, than all sacrifices, (**1 Samuel 15:22**). And that we may not think this a light or a trifling sin, let us notice the expression — that they despised the law of God. Every one ought to dread this as the most monstrous thing; for we cannot despise the law of God without insulting His majesty. And yet the Holy Spirit declares here, that we repudiate and reject the law of God, except we wholly follow what it commands, and continue within the limits prescribed by it. We now perceive what the Prophet means.

False worship is a lie. The Jews' defense was that their worship flowed from a heart with "good intentions." Yet, Scripture alone is the true standard by which all people shall be judged by God.

But he also adds, that *their own lies deceived or caused them to go astray*. He here confirms his preceding doctrine; for the Jews had ever a defense ready at hand, that they did with good intent what the Prophet condemned in them. They, forsooth! sedulously worshipped God, though they mixed their own leaven, by which their sacrifices were corrupted: it was not their purpose to spend their substance in vain, to undergo great expenses in sacrifices, and to undertake much labor, had they not thought that it was service acceptable to God! As then the pretense of good intention, (as they say,) ever deceives the unbelieving, the Prophet condemns this pretense, and shows it to be wholly fallacious, and of no avail. "It is nothing," he says, "that they pretend before God some good intention; their own lies deceive them." And Amos, no doubt, mentions here these lies, in opposition to the commands of God. As soon then as men swerve from God's word, they involve themselves in many delusions, and cannot but go astray; and this is deserving of special notice.

We indeed see how much wisdom the world claims for itself: for as soon as we invent anything we are greatly delighted with it; and the ape, according to the old proverb, is ever pleased with its own offspring. But this vice especially prevails, when by our devices we corrupt and adulterate the worship of God. Hence the Prophet here

declares, that **whatever is added to God's word, and whatever men invent in their own brains is a lie**: "All this," he says, "is nothing but imposture." We now see of what avail is good intention: by this indeed men harden themselves; but they cannot make the Lord to retract what He has once declared by the mouth of His Prophet. Let us then take heed to continue within the boundaries of God's word, and never to leap over either on this or on that side; for when we turn aside ever so little from the pure word of God, we become immediately involved in many deceptions.

It then follows, *After which have walked their fathers; literally it is, Which their fathers have walked after them*: but we have given the sense. The Prophet here exaggerates their sin, the insatiable rage of the people; for the children now followed their fathers. This vice, we know, prevailed in all ages among the Jews; leaving the word of God, they ever followed their own dreams, and the delusions of Satan. Since God had now often tried to correct this vice by His Prophets, and no fruit followed, the Prophet charges them here with hardness, and by this circumstance enhances the sin of the Jews: "It is nothing new," he says, "for children to imitate their fathers, and to be wholly like them: they are then the bad eggs of bad ravens." So also said Stephen, 'Ye are hard and uncircumcised in heart, and resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers also did formerly,' (Acts 7:1). We now understand the intention of the Prophet.

The Papists transgress in following the sins of their "fathers" and of antiquity.

But we hence learn of what avail is the subterfuge resorted to by the Papists, when they boast of antiquity. For they set up against the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, this shield, — that theirs is the old religion, that they have not been the first founders, but that they follow what has been handed down to them from early times, and observed for many ages. When the Papists boastingly declare all this, they think that they say enough to put God to silence, and wholly to reject His Word. But we see how frivolous is this sort of caviling, and how worthless before God: for the Prophet does not concede to the Jews the example of the fathers as an excuse, but sets forth their sin as being greater because they followed their perfidious fathers, who had forsaken the Law of the Lord. The same thing is also said by Ezekiel, 'After the precepts of your fathers walk not,' (Ezekiel 20:1). We now see what sort of crime is that of which the Prophet speaks. At last a threatening follows, "The Lord saith, Fire will I send on Judah, which shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.' But all this we have already explained. Let us now proceed —

Amos 4:4-6

"Come to Bethel and transgress, At Gilgal multiply transgression; Bring your sacrifices every morning, Your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, Proclaim *and* announce the freewill offerings; For this you love, *You* children of Israel!" Says the Lord GOD. Also I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places; Yet you have not returned to Me," Says the LORD."

False worshippers weary themselves in vain.

The Prophet here again pours contempt on the perverse confidence, in which the Israelites were become hardened. They thought, indeed, that their worship was fully approved by God, when they offered Sacrifices in Bethel and Gilgal. But the Prophet here shows, that the more sedulously they labored in performing sacred things, the more grievously they offended God, and the heavier judgment they gained for themselves. "What do you obtain by wearying yourselves, when ye so strictly offer sacrifices, and omit nothing that is prescribed in the law of God? Only this — that you provoke God's wrath more and more."

But he condemns not the Israelites for thinking that they rendered a compensation, as hypocrites were accustomed to think, and were on this account often reproved by the Prophets; but he denounces their modes of worship as vicious and false, and abominable before God. The Prophets reprobated sacrifices for two reasons; — first, because hypocrites brought them before God as a compensation, that they might escape the punishment they deserved, as though they paid God what they owed. Thus at Jerusalem, in the very temple, they profaned the name of God; they offered sacrifices according to what the law prescribed, but disregarded the true and legitimate end; for they thought that God was pacified by the blood of beasts, by incense, and other external rites: it was therefore a preposterous abuse. Hence the Prophets often reproved them, inasmuch as they obtruded their sacrifices on God as a compensation, as though they were real expiations for cleansing away sins: this, as the Prophets declared, was extremely puerile and foolish.

But, secondly, Amos now goes much farther; for he blames not here the Israelites for thinking that they discharged their duty to God by external rites, but denounces all their worship as degenerate and perverted, for they called on God in places where he had not commanded: God designed one altar only for His people, and there He wished sacrifices to be offered to Him; but the Israelites at their own will had built altars at Bethel and Gilgal. Hence the Prophet declares that all their profane modes of worship were nothing but abominations, however much the Israelites confided in them as their safety.

This is the reason why he now says *Go ye to Bethel*. It is the language of indignation; God indeed speaks ironically, and at the same time manifests His high displeasure, as though He had said, that they were wholly intractable, and could not be restrained by any corrections, as we say in French, *Fai du pis que to pouvras* [Do the worst you can.]. So also God speaks in Ezekiel 20:1, 'Go, sacrifice to your idols.' When He saw the people running headlong with so much pertinacity into idolatry and superstitions, He said, "Go", as though He intended to inflame their minds. It is indeed certain, that God does not stimulate sinners; but He thus manifests His extreme indignation. After having tried to restrain men, and seeing their ungovernable madness, He then says, "Go;" as though He said, "Ye are wholly irreclaimable; I effect nothing by My good advice; hear,

then, the devil, who will lead you where you are inclined to go: *Go then to Bethel and there transgress; go to Gilgal, and transgress there again; heap sins on sins.*"

But how did they transgress at Bethel? Even by worshipping God. We here see how little the pretense of good intention avails with God, which hypocrites ever bring forward. They imagine that, provided their purpose is to worship God, what they do cannot be disapproved: thus they wanton in their own inventions, and think that God obtains His due, so that He cannot complain. But the Prophet declares all their worship to be nothing else than abomination and execrable wickedness, though the Israelites, trusting in it, thought themselves safe. "Add, then, to transgress in Gilgal; and offer your sacrifices in the morning; be thus diligent, that nothing may be objected to you, as to the outward form."

After three years, that is, in the third year, "bring also your tenths"; for thus it was commanded, as we read in Deuteronomy 14:1. Though, then, the Israelites worshipped God apparently in the strictest manner, yet Amos declares that the whole was vain and of no worth, yea, abominable before God, and that the more they wearied themselves, the more they kindled the wrath of God against themselves.