

Amos 5:18–20 in its Exegetical and Theological Contexts

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Since the turn of the 20th century there has been much discussion regarding the origin of the Day of the Lord (*yôm YHWH*). Hermann Gunkel, followed by Hugo Gressmann, declared that the *yôm YHWH* marks the provenance of Hebrew eschatology, which in itself is to be found in Babylonian mythology (and its claim that the world could be divided into several periods, each of which ended in cosmic catastrophe).¹ Some scholars connected the Day of the Lord with holy war.² Others maintained that the origin of this concept is to be found in Israel's cult, when Yahweh as King enthroned Himself and wrought salvation for His people.³ A fourth group notes a nexus between the blessings and curses of the covenant (Deut 28) and the Day of the Lord.⁴ Finally, it is posited that the

¹ H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1901), 242; H. Gressmann, *Der Ursprung der jüdisch-israelitischen Eschatologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1905), 147. See too L. Cerny, *The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* (Prague: Nakladem Filosofické Fakulty, 1948), 34ff.

² J. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1914), 25; W. W. Canon, "The Day of the Lord in Joel," *CBQ* 103 (1926–27): 50–51; S. R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1934), 185; G. von Rad, "The Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Yahweh," *JSS* 4 (1959): 97–108; K. D. Schunk, "Strukturlinien in der Entwicklung der Vorstellung vom 'Tag Yahwes,'" *VT* 14 (1964): 319–30; Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 353.

³ G. Holscher, *Die Ursprünge der jüdischen Eschatologie* (Gießen: Topplemann, 1925), 12; J. Morgenstein, "Amos Studies," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 12–13; A. S. Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos* (Oslo: Oslo UP, 1956); S. Mowinkel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 145; J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 317; J. Gray, "The Day of Yahweh," *SEA* 39 (1974): 5–37.

⁴ W. S. McCullough, "Some Suggestions About Amos," *JBL* 72 (1953): 253; F. J. Helewa, "L'origine du concept prophétique du 'Jour de Yahve,'" *Ephemerides Carmeliticae* 15 (1964): 3–36; F. C. Fensham, "A Possible Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord," in *Biblical Essays of Die*

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Day of the Lord has its origin in the theophany. It “is a day on which the Lord reveals Himself in some way.”⁵

Although Amos mentions the Day of the Lord only in 5:18–20, it is “one of the most intriguing passages in [his] prophetic message. . . .”⁶ Further, this passage “is the only prophecy combining the *hōy*-call and the *yôm YHWH* motif.”⁷ Hence, it merits our attention. Our approach is largely exegetical as we attempt to answer the following questions: Who are those who long for the *yôm YHWH*? Why do they long for this day? What is the essential character of the Day to the Lord in Amos? What are the theological implications?

Translation and Textual Considerations

(18) Woe unto you who long for the Day of the Lord. What is this⁸ day of the Lord to you? It is darkness and not light.⁹ (19) [It is] just like a man who escapes from the face of a lion, but a bear meets him. When he comes into the house and leans his hand on the wall, a snake bites him.¹⁰ (20) Is not the Day of the Lord darkness with no light? Thick darkness with no brightness in it?

Literary Factors. The literary context places 5:18–20 as the first subunit¹¹ of the rhetorical section that extends to v. 27. Nevertheless, the entire unit forms a coherent whole, as indicated by the following factors:

- (i) No special introductory formulas indicating a new beginning appear in the section;
- (ii) A central theme, the topic of cultic services, ties the subunits together;

Outestamentiese Werkgenenskap in Suid Afrika, 1966 (Bepeck, South Africa: Potchefstroom, 1967), 90–97.

⁵ M. Weiss, “The Origin of the ‘Day of the Lord’—Reconsidered,” *HUCA* 37 (1966): 40. Cf. T. Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature,” *ZAW* 80 (1968): 203–15.

⁶ Hans M. Barstad, “The Religious Polemics of Amos,” in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 89.

⁷ C. Van Leeuwen, “The Prophecy of the Yom YHWH in Amos v. 18–20,” in *Language and Meaning: Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis*, Oudtestamentische Studien 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 117.

⁸ The LXX takes *zeh* (“this”) in *lāmmā-zeh lakem yôm YHWH* (18b) as a subject relating to *yôm*. It renders the following: ἵνα τί αὐτῆ ὑμῖν ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου. But as Van Leeuwen correctly notes, “The word *ze* [*sic*] is here, however, not the subject of the sentence, but the intensification of the interrogative *lāmā* [*sic*]” (113).

⁹ The negation of noun clauses by *lōʾ* (18b, *wʾloʾ-ʾôr*) carries a special emphasis because the force of the negation falls on a particular word rather than on the whole clause. Hence, the emphasis is on no light. See E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 479.

¹⁰ Only verse 19 uses verbs, and they are all perfects. This places stress on the action of the person in the futile attempt to escape.

¹¹ The other three are: vv. 21–24, rejection of the cult because of injustice; vv. 25–27, rejection of the cult because of idolatry; v. 27, the ultimate judgment, which is exile. See Stuart, 352.

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(iii) No climax or definitive concluding statement (as in 2:13–16; 3:11; 4:12–13; 5:16–17) appears before verse 27;¹²

(iv) The *hōy* particle is resumed in 6:1, indicating the beginning of a new unit.

The literary style—the prose form—is generally considered “an introduction to the first-person poetic judgment sentences which begin in v. 21.”¹³

Structure. The passage may be divided as follows:

Woe Oracle:

“Woe unto you who long for the Day of the Lord” (v. 18a);

Question:

“What is this Day of the Lord to you?” (v. 18b);

Answer:

(a) As a declaration (vv. 18c–19): “[It is] just like a man who escapes . . . a lion but . . . a snake bites him.”

(b) As a rhetorical question (v. 20):¹⁴ “Is not the Day of the Lord darkness . . . with no brightness in it?”

Interestingly, v. 20 demonstrates a parallel structure:

h^olō²-hōš^{ek} . . . w^olo²-²ōr, “Is not [the Day of the Lord] darkness, not light,”
w^oāp^{el} w^olō²-nōgā, “and thick darkness with no brightness (in it).”

Historical Background. Amos’ epic sermon was proclaimed during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel.¹⁵ His preaching announced the imminent demise of the kingdom, an announcement that was not kindly accepted but steadfastly rebutted by the priests of Bethel (7:9–11). Jeroboam, though noted for his wickedness, had restored the ancient boundaries of the Israelite nation.¹⁶ Under him, Israel achieved prosperity and peace, especially because both Assyria and the kingdom of Damascus had become weak. Therefore, as Amos’ speeches indicate, the people felt confident in their riches (6:1, 8, 13). With such political prosperity, individual wealth was accumulated and sharp distinctions made “between the luxury of the rich and misery of the poor.”¹⁷ The rich were indolent and indulgent (4:1; 6:1–6), residing in lavish winter and summer homes (3:12; 6:11), while the poor were exploited (2:6–8; 4:1; 5:10–12; 8:4–6). All of these atrocities were incurred as religion flourished with high festivity (4:4–5; 5:5) and elaborate sacrificial rites and ritual (5:21–23), patronizing the Lord

¹² John H. Hayes, *Amos: His Time and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 170.

¹³ Stuart, 353.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 354, calls this a “second, reinforcing answer.”

¹⁵ Amos 1:1 explicitly states that Amos preached during this time. Since Jeroboam II reigned from 786 to 746 B.C., Amos’ preaching and prophetic task must be dated sometime during that time. Contra Stuart, 353, who places the original delivery of this oracle between 745 and 740 B.C.

¹⁶ See 2 Kgs 14:23–29.

¹⁷ J. L. Mays, *Amos*, OTL (Philadelphia: SCM, 1969), 2–3.

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“with presumptuous arrogance” (5:14, 18–20; 6:3).¹⁸ It was into this milieu that Amos was called to pronounce the message of the “Day of the Lord.”

Interpretation

The *Hôy* Particle. The passage (5:18–20) begins as a woe oracle, as indicated by the *hōy* particle.¹⁹ Since the particle is not completely defined by Amos, it is necessary to first understand its use in the rest of the OT and then relate it to the text under investigation.

The word²⁰ appears to be used in three different ways in the OT:

(i) as a vocative appeal or address (Isa 18:1, *hōy*, “Woe to the land shadowing with wings . . .”);

(ii) as a mourning cry (1 Kgs 13:30, “He laid the body in his own grave and they mourned for him saying, ‘Alas’ [*hōy*]”²¹);

(iii) as the woe oracle in prophetic indictments, as evidenced in Amos 5:18.²²

The debate concerning the *Sitz im Leben* of this woe oracle demonstrates that there is no scholarly consensus. S. Mowinckel maintained that its origin was in the curses of the Israelite cult.²³ However, as van Leeuwen rightly notes, “The lists transmitting such curses (Deut xxvii–xxviii) do not use the particle *hōy*, but the participle *ʾārūr*.”²⁴ E. Gerstenberger²⁵ and Hans Walter Wolff²⁶ have placed the woe-oracle as having originated in the wisdom literature as wise men reflected on how “to turn against the rottenness and corruption of their contemporary society.”²⁷ They insist that the particle *hōy* was used in parallel to *ʾāsrē*. However, *hōy* never occurs parallel to *ʾāsrē* in the OT and is not even found in Wisdom Literature.

More recently, R. J. Clifford²⁸ and W. Janzen²⁹ have placed the prophetic woe-oracles in the context of the ancient mourning cry.³⁰ Further, they have demonstrated that the three categories of woe-oracles are not independent, as has

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ The *hōy* particle implies direct confrontation.

²⁰ The word occurs 88 times in the OT. For its various combinations of usages, see H. J. Zobel, “*Hōy*,” *TDOT* (1978), 2:359–60.

²¹ Cf. *hō* in Amos 5:16, “There shall be wailing in every street and in all open places and they shall say, *hō*, *hō* (‘Alas! Alas!’)”

²² Van Leeuwen, 114.

²³ S. Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien V* (Oslo: Oslo UP, 1924), 119 ff.

²⁴ Van Leeuwen, 114.

²⁵ E. Gerstenberger, “The Woe Oracles of the Prophets,” *JBL* 81 (1962): 249–63.

²⁶ Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 255.

²⁷ Gerstenberger, 262.

²⁸ R. J. Clifford, “The Use of *hōy* in the Prophets,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 458–64.

²⁹ W. Janzen, *Mourning Cry and Woe Oracles* (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 1972). See too, J. G. Williams, “The Alas Oracles of the 8th Century Prophets,” *HUCA* 38 (1967): 75–91.

³⁰ Cf. 1 Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18; 34:5.

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been suggested.³¹ Indeed, “the vocative appeal/address does not constitute a different and special type of *hōy*, but shares in a quality very characteristic of the funerary *hōy* (i.e., the somber quality of the context), and that the latter itself shares in this appellative quality.”³²

Moreover, the *hōy* particle is not only used in laments for the dead, but also in prophetic invective. In such uses (Isa 5:18, 20–22; 29:15, 17; Amos 5:7, 18; Hab 2:5, 9, 12), human misconduct is sharply criticized. Also, since a human being pronounces the *hōy* cry in both invective and funerary lament, a common bond between both is suggested. Therefore, when the prophet cried *hōy*, it was, according to Zobel, “tantamount to a prediction of death, a proclamation of the judgment of Yahweh.”³³

This interrelatedness of usages associated with Amos points to certain conclusions:

(i) The woe oracle is probably not impersonal (“Woe to *them* that long for the day of the Lord”), but rather is the prophet’s direct address to his hearers, (“Woe unto *you* that long for the day of the Lord”).³⁴

(ii) It is not by accident that Amos’ *hōy* oracles are placed in a context where the choice between life and death is so strong (5:14); or where the verdict that threatens God’s visitation will bring death and mourning.³⁵ Hence, the *hō hō* of the mourners of v. 16 appears

to be identical in motivation and content with the *hōy* of v. 18, called out by the prophet over the secure people who will be overtaken by the darkness of the day of the Lord . . . The *hōy* of v. 18 projects a contrast to the expected day of light and brightness (vv. 18, 20), but that contrast consists of mourning.³⁶

It denotes that Amos’ cry was one of judgment and a precursor to death.

We can, then, summarily say that the *hōy* particle in Amos 5:18 has the vocative appeal to catch the attention of the people. It also has the power of a prophetic indictment and the force of the funerary lamentation as a “dramatic way of disclosing the dire consequences of their conduct.”³⁷

The People Addressed. Amos’ death threat is directed to the *ham-mit’awwîm*, those who long for or desire the Day of the Lord. This brings us to the questions: Who are these people? Why do they long for the day? The context

³¹ See G. Wanke, “*’ôy* und *hōy*,” *ZAW* 78 (1966), 217. He sees *’ôy* as a cry of dread, lamentation, and peril, whereas *hōy* stems from the lamentation for the dead. I agree with Barstad, 108, n. 169, that this distinction is unnecessary.

³² Van Leeuwen, 115. He goes further to show the similar usage in Ugaritic literature, in the Legend of Aqhat.

³³ Zobel, 363–64.

³⁴ Van Leeuwen, 116. Hayes, 171, sees it as purely impersonal.

³⁵ Van Leeuwen, 116–17.

³⁶ Janzen, 46.

³⁷ Mays, 103.

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of vv. 18–20 does not specifically identify the people. However, the designation is too pointed to be the people of Israel in general. Thus, a more limited group is in view here. There are basically three opinions concerning the identity of these people:

(i) The king and his court may be in view here.³⁸

(ii) The prophets who misguided Israel into believing that God will deliver His people in any situation and that Israel's enemies are not ambassadors of God to destroy Israel (rather, YHWH will destroy them). As such, they lead Israel to complacency rather than repentance.³⁹

(iii) These are the Israelites who acted in self-reliant independence of the sovereignty of Yahweh. They had a false security and were “defiant of covenant obligation towards the poor and needy.”⁴⁰ Hence, these people, I believe, are the covenant breakers, those who have separated or distanced themselves from God by their godless actions and sinful misconduct.

A further clue to the identity of this group is found in the participle *miṭ'awwîm*, which has a nominal function here. It is derived from the root *ʾwh*, the basic meaning of which is “to crave,” mostly in a bad sense (Num 11:34); “to feel a desire for something” (2 Sam 23:15); or “to long for something” (e.g. “a day,” as in Jer 17:16; Amos 5:18). It is used 28 times in the OT, only in the Hithpael (17 times) and Piel (11 times) forms. Amos 5:18 uses the Hithpael participle, the exact form of which is used only in one other place, Num 11:34. There it describes the craving of God's covenant people for meat. It seems likely that this historical picture was in Amos' mind for both groups of people in that they both acted in defiance of God and His covenant. As reported in Numbers, people defied the basic covenant guaranteeing God's protection and care over them. Therefore, they craved meat. So, in Amos, some people defied their covenant obligations toward the poor and needy (5:7, 11), yet they craved the Day of the Lord. These covenant breakers are the *hammiṭ'awwîm*.

The second question is somewhat more difficult. The historical analysis points out that this was a time of prosperity. No obvious calamity was on the horizon of the future. So why did they have this longing for the appearance of Yahweh, an appearance seen as an act of salvation, a fact portrayed in many parts of Scripture (Judg 5:1; 6:12–13; Isa 40:10; 42:13; 52:8)?⁴¹ The answer, I believe, lies in their misguided theology of the inviolability of Zion.

The idea of Yahweh's appearance to destroy His enemies was a primary tenet of Israelite religious and political faith.⁴² In their false religious piety and fervor, fueled by their misplaced confidence that “Yahweh is with us” (5:14b),

³⁸ K. A. D. Smelik, “The Meaning of Amos 5:18–20,” *VT* 36 (1986): 247.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Janzen, 81–82.

⁴¹ Hoffman, 42.

⁴² Mays, 104.

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they cherished “infatuated hopes”⁴³ that Yahweh's theophanic victory would exalt them to might and dominion over all the earth. They never anticipated that God's wrath would be upon those who worshipped Him in the cult. Hence, they longed for the *yôm YHWH*. In their self-satisfaction, surrounded by the wealth and opulence of Jeroboam's government, they could only see it as a day for God to act in their favor while crushing their enemies.

Amos' stinging woe oracle declares that these covenant breakers are invoking their own doom. Further, it “implicitly reveals that God's people and God's enemy are one (cf.3:2), i.e., they have been rejected by God, as vv. 21–27 will make clear.”⁴⁴

The Essential Character of the *Yôm YHWH*

What does the *yôm YHWH* mean in Amos? First, a brief consideration of *yôm* is in place. The word points to a particular time. As time, it is charged with substance, or, rather, it is identical with its substance; time is the development of its very elements. The time or day of a man or a people is therefore identical with their actions and fate when the day of decisive importance in their lives is mentioned. Just so, the day of Yahweh is the violent action in which Yahweh more particularly manifests Himself.⁴⁵

Further studies have corroborated this fact. J. R. Wilch indicates that “*yôm* also implies a qualitative aspect of the particular occasion as . . . ‘the day of evil’ (Amos 6:3), or refers to *crisis* situations, e.g., ‘on the day of battle’ (Amos 1:14) and particularly in the expression *yôm YHWH*. The ‘Day of the Lord’ is . . . the intervening activity of God.”⁴⁶ Hence, “day” here refers to some time or event, and not necessarily a single day.

With this understanding, we can now deal with the *yôm YHWH* in Amos 5:18–20. Note that this is the only passage in the prophetic literature that joins the *yôm YHWH* concept with the woe oracle.⁴⁷ In light of the discussion of the

⁴³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 1:287.

⁴⁴ Stuart, 353. Owing to space restrictions, we shall not exegete vv. 21–27. However, much interesting work has already been done on these texts. See Stanley Gervitz, “A New Look at an Old Crux,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 267–78; E. A. Speiser, “Note on Amos 5:26,” *BASOR* 108 (1947): 5–6; Charles D. Isbell, “Another Look at Amos 5:26,” *JBL* 97 (1978): 97–99; J. Phillip Hyatt, “The Translation and Meaning of Amos 5:23–24,” *ZAW* 68 (1956): 17–24; S. Erlandsson, “Amos 5:25–27 et Crux interpretum,” *SEA* 33 (1968): 76–82; P. von der Oisen-Sacken, “Die Bucher der Tora als Hutte der Gemeinde: Amos 5:26f in der Damaskusschrift,” *ZAW* 91 (1979): 423–35.

⁴⁵ J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, trans. A. Moiler (London: H. Milford, 1926), 2:487–88.

⁴⁶ J. R. Wilch, *Time and Event* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 166. For a similar view, see James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (London: Oxford UP, 1969), 106ff.

⁴⁷ However, as Van Leeuwen (117), has observed, there are several passages which connect the *yôm YHWH* motif with the mourning motif, by means of the word *hēlilū*, (“wail”), used both against foreign nations (Isa 13:6) and against Judah and Jerusalem (Joel 1:5; Zeph 1:11).

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woe oracle, therefore, it appears that this Day of the Lord was an event filled with frightening realities.

Nevertheless, the longing desire associated with it implies that the populace already saw it as a day of salvation for the people of God. However, the point of interest is Amos' use of the expression. He uses a paradoxical style, "which is typical of his writing, namely, speaking about a familiar idea by applying to it a meaning which contradicts the popular one."⁴⁸

Therefore, Amos' *yôm YHWH*, the oldest such literary expression in the Bible,⁴⁹ is a day of disaster *against* covenant-defiant Israelites. It harmonizes well with the *hôy* funerary lament, preceded by the announcement of doom and waiting (vv. 16–17) that accompanies the theophany: "I will pass through the midst of you," saith the Lord" (v. 17b).⁵⁰

The Light/Darkness Motif (vv. 18b, 20). The rhetorical question of 18b is concerned with what kind of advantage the Day of the Lord will bring. In effect, it inquires, "What is the advantage of this Day of the Lord for you?" "What good is this Day of the Lord for you?" The answer given is that it is *darkness and not light* (18b). This is a recurring theme in the Day of the Lord prophecies outside of Amos.⁵¹ Nevertheless, this motif needs development.

In the OT, darkness is associated with a state of chaos (Gen 1:2; Jer 4:23). However, the good will of God is connected with light. Light, not darkness, is modified by the adjective "good" (Gen 1:4). Darkness is shown to be inferior to light. For example, light is associated with life. To see the light means to live (Job 33:28). An increase of light means increased vitality and joy (Ezra 9:8; 1 Sam 14:27, 29). But darkness is associated with the underworld. It is a land of no order, for when "it is bright, it is as darkness" (Job 10:22). Again, sinners, night, and darkness belong together. Job contends that they do not "know the light" (24:16), devising evil plans at night (v. 14). Light stands for success, prosperity, and salvation (Job 17:12; 18:5ff; 22:28; Lam 3:2; Esther 8:16). It symbolizes the salvation given by God (Isa 58:8; Ps 43:3; 97:11). Conversely, darkness stands for suffering and failure (Isa 8:22; Jer 23:12; Ps 23:4; Job 17:12).⁵² Darkness is used as a symbol for evil, in contradistinction to light symbolizing good (Isa 5:20). Darkness is also associated with ignorance (Job 22:15;

⁴⁸ Hoffmann, 42. He continues that this is not the only place where Amos represents the idea that the appearance of God can cause destruction and not necessarily salvation (4:12; 5:17).

⁴⁹ This is generally conceded by many scholars: Wolff, 25; Jan de Waard and William A. Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1979), 246; Weiss, 46.

⁵⁰ Cf. *br* as a theophanic expression in Exod 33:18ff. See Van Leeuwen, 132.

⁵¹ Cf. Isa 13:9–10; Ezek 30:3; Joel 2:1–2; Zeph 1:15 (cf. Amos 5:8; 8:9). The elaboration of this theme in Zephaniah is significant since he is considered the "great continuator of Amos' thought." See A. L. Welch, *The Religion of Israel Under the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912), 95.

⁵² S. Aaten, "ôr," *TDOT* (1974), 1:157–61.

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Jer 18:15), disaster (Job 15:22, 23), and death (1 Sam 2:9, where darkness becomes a poetic name for Sheol).⁵³

Therefore, when Amos characterizes the Day of the Lord as darkness and not light, he is painting a sordid picture of destruction and calamity. This picture is intensified by the use of rhetorical questions with the addition of two other words—*ʾapel* (“darkness,” “gloom”) and *nōgâ* (“gleam,” “brightness”)—in parallel construction to *hōšek* (“darkness”) and *ʾôr* (“light”).

The word *ʾapel* appears only ten times in the OT—six times in Job, twice in the Psalms, once in Isaiah, and here in Amos.⁵⁴ In Job 3:6, Job bewails the day he was born. He wishes the deepest gloom to overtake it so it would not be reckoned with according to regular time (i.e., days, months and so forth). In Job 30:26, when he looks for light (*ʾôr*), then came gloom (*ʾapel*) or misfortune. Further, “darkness and gloom are frequently used as metaphors indicating trouble, distress, misery and even death.”⁵⁵ Consider Job 5:14, “They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night.” Further, Ps 91:6 claims that the “pestilence walks in darkness.”

The noun *nōgâ*, which occurs nineteen times in the OT, is derived from the verb *ngh*, (“to shine”). The noun carries the idea of “brightness,” or “gleam.” The force of the negation *wʾlō* emphasizes that there is absolutely no light, let alone brightness or gleam.

Hence, Amos’ message is crystal clear. The Day of the Lord, contrary to popular belief, will be filled with misery, destruction, distress, and death. J. D. Smart puts it succinctly:

Popular expectation in Amos’ time was fixed on a glorious ‘day of Yahweh’ when Israel would triumph over her foes . . . The existing prosperity was interpreted as a sign of God’s favor. But, where kings, priests, prophets, and people saw only a culmination of national success in the near future, Amos saw only darkness and disaster. He proclaimed a day of Yahweh, but it was to be darkness and not light, fiery judgment and not deliverance.⁵⁶

This is the significance of the light/darkness motif. Undoubtedly, the Northern Kingdom is faced with destruction and annihilation, not deliverance.

⁵³ A. Ringgren, “*hāšak*,” *TDOT* (1986), 5:252–56. For further information on the light/darkness motif, see A. P. B. Breytenbach, “The Connection Between the Concepts of Darkness and Drought as well as Light and Vegetation,” in *Essays in Honor of A. Van Selms*, ed. H. Eybers, F. C. Fensham, C. L. Labuschagne, W. C. van Wijk, and A. H. van Zyl (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 1–5; H. Ringgren, “Light and Darkness in Ancient Egyptian Religion,” in *Studies in Honor of C. J. Bleeker* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 140–50; C. J. Bleeker, “Some Remarks on the Religious Significance of Light,” *JANES* 5 (1973): 23–24.

⁵⁴ Job 3:6, 10:22 (used twice); 23:17; 28:3; 30:36; Pss 11:2; 91:6; Isa 29:18.

⁵⁵ Stuart, 354.

⁵⁶ J. D. Smart, “Amos,” *IDB* (1962), 1:120.

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Inescapable Destruction (v. 19). Amos illustrates the people's predicament by use of the simile. Thus he discusses Israelite life by using a device characteristic of his style. A man escapes a lion, but a bear confronts him; finally he arrives home, leans against the wall, and a snake bites him.⁵⁷

This is what I call comic irony. The man escapes the lion only to meet a bear, an animal just as dangerous as the first. However, he escapes this threat and enters a place of safety, his house. In exhaustion and relief, he leans against the wall in this place of safety and is bitten by a snake,⁵⁸ the enemy of human-kind.⁵⁹ Precisely when the person feels secure at last is when he is fatally bitten.

Here is depicted a deadly serious pedagogical picture. The finger is pointed against the violators of the covenant, since "harm from wild animals is a covenant curse (cf. Ezek 14:21)."⁶⁰ Further, the audience learns that there is no deliverance. Every word drives home this fact, because the audience never envisioned or expected any kind of defeat. As the covenant people, they felt that Yahweh was obliged to protect them, claiming that "harm or disaster will not come near us or overtake us" (9:10). Also, God had singularly delivered them from their enemies in the past,⁶¹ so they lived with the expectation of deliverance only; never disaster.

The dramatic story⁶² vividly reveals that "any deliverance will be illusionary."⁶³ In fact, the Day of the Lord will be "a time of inescapable crisis, a time of unavoidable judgment, a time when man would be abandoned by every known source of aid."⁶⁴

Theological Implications

Consequent of the above discussion, several theological implications may be observed.

Judgment. Undoubtedly, the text of Amos 5:18–20 is pregnant with the tone of punitive judgment. A negative outcome is forecast. This is most markedly depicted in the light/darkness motif, a theme that is also present in other

⁵⁷ Mays sees this as two separate adventures (105). However, I agree with Wolff that "the chain of consecutive perfects and the single reference to 'someone' speak unequivocally in favor of there being here one single story" (256).

⁵⁸ There seems to be some word play here in that *nšk*, "to bite," has the same sound as *nšq*, "to kiss."

⁵⁹ In the OT, the snake is portrayed as people's enemy (Gen 3:15; Num 21:6; Jer 8:17). See Wolff, 256; O. Grether and J. Fichter, "ophis," *TDNT* (1967): 5:572, where the snake is described as "an especially dangerous animal."

⁶⁰ Stuart, 354.

⁶¹ One only has to recall the history of God's protection over Israel to see this fact. The Exodus and the Conquest of the Promised Land both show significantly that God was acting in behalf of His people.

⁶² This has been called a "fairy tale" by W. Baumgartner, *Die Religion in Geschichte fur Theologie und Religionwissenschaft* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1957–1965), 4:586–87.

⁶³ Stuart, 354.

⁶⁴ Roy L. Honeycutt, *Amos and His Message* (Nashville: Broadman, 1963), 104.

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passages where God's judgment is portrayed in the darkening of celestial bodies (Isa 13:9–10; Joel 2:1–2). The same subject is behind the dramatic story of verse 19, defining the absolute inescapability of judgment. The language expresses disorder and chaos, and the Day of the Lord becomes the key expression for the announcement of judgment.

While vv. 18–20 leave unspecified the reason why Israel's expectations of deliverance will be dashed to pieces, those reasons are spelled out in vv. 21–27. Furthermore, these verses also indicate the type of judgment that was forthcoming: rejection of the cult and ultimately exile.

Indeed, "in Amos the announcement of impending judgment never wavers. The unrepented sin of the nation is certain to bring doom."⁶⁵ Amos details various forces for punishment, including fire (1:4); drought and hunger (4:6–7); war (9:10); and deportation (5:5; 6:7; 9:4). All express the certainty of desolation. Further, the oracle of judgment arises not only from reflection on the immoralities of the nation, but because the people are confronted by a holy God whom they must meet (Amos 4:12).

Further, this judgment comes because of covetousness, as indicated in the word *ʾwh*, which has a negative connotation referring to coveting, as in Num 11:34 and 2 Sam 23:15. Judgment is also due to pride and arrogance (6:1–6; cf. Isa 2:12ff). Because of the people's carelessness and indifference, their apathy and ease in luxury, the Lord declares that Israel will go into captivity (6:1–7); because of their bold audacity, self dependence, and disregard of justice, Israel will be overrun by a foreign nation.

Finally, one must recognize that it is God Himself and not some neutral agency who is the focus of this prophecy of judgment. God is the one who will, in effect, direct the judgment against His people. They cannot claim "favored nation" status. Therefore, "Judgment is pronounced on the false religion that claimed national security in the Lord but could ignore the ethical demands of the covenant."⁶⁶

Covenant. While Amos does not mention the covenant, it is implicit in his preaching. Amos denounces crimes that come as a result of breaking the covenant. Some of these crimes include the oppression of the poor and exploitation of the defenseless by the rich (2:7; 5:10–12). Further atrocities against the covenant may be pointed out, such as a righteous man being sold for silver and a poor man for a pair of shoes (2:6); violence and robbery as the trademarks of the palace (3:9–10); the rich oppressing the poor and crushing the needy (4:1); taking wheat from the poor for debt (5:11) and accepting bribes, thus denying the poor their rights (5:12); ruling through violence (6:3) and turning right into gall (6:12); and trampling down the poor and cheating them in every possible way.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Smart, 120.

⁶⁶ J. Robertson and C. Armerding, "Amos," *ISBE* (1979), 1:115.

⁶⁷ Kapelrud, 64.

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Other forms of unfaithfulness to the covenant include sexual immorality (2:7) and idolatry (8:14). Smart is correct in his evaluation:

What Amos rejects is not the covenant itself but its perversion, whereby God's grace in delivering Israel from Egypt becomes an excuse for national pride and for extravagant claims upon God . . . Because of its covenant relation with God, Israel must reflect in its life the justice and truth and mercy of God, and the absence of these in the common life of the nation is evidence that the bond with God has been broken.⁶⁸

Therefore, in His rejection of the cult, God counsels, "Let judgment roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream" (5:24). As Douglas K. Stuart comments, "Justice and judgment cannot stop and start like a wilderness wadi that flows with water only during the rainy seasons and otherwise is just a dry stream bed. They must instead continue night and day, all year, like the . . . strong stream that never goes dry."⁶⁹

Furthermore, it is the covenant of love between God and Israel that made God more severe in His dealings with Israel than with any other nation. God declares, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (3:2). Hence, God advises Israel, "Seek the Lord and live" (6:6); "Seek good and not evil and ye shall live" (5:14). This is a practical appeal to make the people turn away from their sins and come back to Yahweh and His covenant.⁷⁰ We may conclude that the Day of the Lord, as a day of destruction, also rejects the perversion of the covenant.

Theophany. A theophany is when God appears in person. This concept is implied in the word *nōgâ* ("brightness") in verse 20. The word, used nineteen times in the OT, has a very limited usage in describing the luminary bodies. It is never used with reference to the sun, even in texts devoting special attention to the moon (Isa 60:19) and two references to the stars (Joel 2:10; 3:15). However, the occurrence of the word in Ezek 1,⁷¹ definitely describing a theophanic activity, strongly suggest that this is a "technical term (which) refers to God in His theophany."⁷²

Eschatology. Indeed, the motif of light/darkness is an element of prophetic preaching with regard to the future. This is especially so in light of the fact that darkness spreads over the land (cf. Amos 8:9; Isa 5:30; Joel 2:2). Of course, the basic theme is the Day of the Lord. However, I agree with Wolff that "the oracle

⁶⁸ Smart, 120.

⁶⁹ Stuart, 355.

⁷⁰ Kapelrud, 41.

⁷¹ Ezek 1:4, 13, 27, 28; 10:4; cf. similar usage in Ps 18:12; Isa 4:5; 62:1; Hab 3:4.

⁷² Aelen, 164. One must also note that theophany is linked with judgment in the Scriptures (cf. Pss 7:6–12; 9:19–20; 33:23–28; 82:8; 94:1–2). As such, the various traditions of cosmic upheaval and judgment of evil point essentially to the motif in prophecies dealing with the Day of the Lord. See Hoffmann, 45.

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can be called eschatological only in the precise sense that it testifies . . . that the end of the state of Israel is totally inescapable."⁷³

The evidence is insufficient to posit a view of the universal, terminal epoch in history. Nevertheless, if one compares the animals of Amos, namely the lion and the bear, with that of Daniel 7, which definitely has a cosmic eschatological character, it seems likely that a similar eschatological view may be present in Amos. Also, when one puts the darkness motif alongside Zephaniah's description of the Day of the Lord stressing "finality and extinction,"⁷⁴ one can see a cosmic eschatology. But Zephaniah wrote his prophecies about 150 years *after* Amos, and by then the expression "Day of the Lord" could have already assumed the proportions of a universal eschatology.

Salvation. The Day of the Lord signifies annihilation of all sinful people and, at the same time, the deliverance of those who are faithful to God. These loyal ones constitute the remnant. This motif is clear in Amos. Note the following: "It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph" (5:15). Hence, deliverance and salvation are possible for those who seek God and His will (5:4; 6:14). The same concept is found implicitly in 2:16; 3:12; 5:3, 16; 7:17; 8:11–13. However, it is very explicit in chapter 9. In v. 1 everything is destroyed, but 9:8 declares that God will not utterly destroy the House of Jacob. Therefore, we may infer that the Day of the Lord is equal to physical destruction of the kingdom, but a limited group will be saved. This salvific quality must not be overlooked.

Conclusion

It is clear that Amos understood the nature of the Day of the Lord. However, he pronounced a crucial difference: to those who desired it (namely, the covenant breakers), the Day of the Lord was not to be deliverance but disaster. This is most dramatically portrayed in the metaphoric use of light and darkness and also in the ironic story of the fleeing man who encounters new dangers until, "safe" at home, the deadly serpent bites him.

Further, it is insufficient to say that the Day of the Lord originated only in the theophany or in some other singular motif. The text of Amos 5:18–20 and related passages indicate that the covenant is also essential, in that it underscores who the Day of the Lord is directed against, namely, the violators of the covenant. Hence, I propose that the Day of the Lord must be seen in the context of the theophany *and* the covenant. These two must not be separated, for indeed, Yahweh's appearing to destroy His enemies results in deliverance and salvation only for those within, those adhering to the principles of the covenant.

⁷³ Wolff, 257.

⁷⁴ Hoffmann, 46.

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