

Amos 8:4-6

“Merchants Waiting to Shortchange as Soon as the Sabbath is Over”

“Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales, so as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals, and that we may sell the refuse of the wheat?’”

In discussions about the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* from the Holy Scriptures, it is not too likely that many of us have considered the statements appearing in Amos 8:4-6, mainly because they pertain more to the oppression and short-changing of the poor on the part of rich merchants. The Book of Amos itself, which conservatives tend to date to the mid-Eighth Century B.C.E., perhaps a generation or so prior to the downfall of the Northern Kingdom—although Amos’ prophecies can be witnessed to be issued to both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms—include significant condemnation against the prosperity that has manifested itself. The Book of Amos has been frequently referred to by religious movements in history opposing injustice.¹

The Prophet Amos directs his rebuke to “you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end” (8:4, RSV), *evyon v’lashbit (an’vei-)[ainyei-]-eretz* (עֲבִיּוֹן וְלָשְׁבִית (אֲנֵי-אֵינְיֵי-אֶרֶץ)). It cannot go overlooked how the verb *shavat* (שָׁבַת) is employed here, which appearing in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice), can mean “put an end to, bring to a stop” or “make (s.thg) disappear” (*CHALOT*).² With the Sabbath in immediate view in v. 5 following, those who are seen to “bring to ruin” (NRSV) or “annihilate” (NJPS) the poor, rather than helping to contribute to a Sabbath ethos of rest and refreshment for all of God’s people—are instead witnessed to be working against it, with the Sabbath actually an impediment to their human interests. As Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page further direct,

“Do away with’ is literally ‘cause to cease.’ It is from the root *šbt* and perhaps is a play on the word *šabbāt*, ‘Sabbath,’ in v. 5...Rather than eliminating the poor, Israel’s law called for an open hand of generosity to be extended to them (Deut 15:7-11; Ps 72:12-13). To be on God’s side, God’s people must choose the side of the poor and needy. God requires his people to work for the best interests of the unprotected members of society, which included orphans, widows, aliens, and the poor (Deut 10:14-26; 24:19-21).”³

The Prophet Amos issues a firm indictment against the merchants of his time, trampling upon the poor and needy, eagerly waiting for religious days such as the New Moon and weekly Sabbath to be over: “You say, ‘When will *Rosh-Hodesh* be over, so we can market our grain? and *Shabbat*, so we can sell wheat?’ You measure the grain in a small *eifah*, but the silver in heavy *shekels*, fixing the scales, so that you can cheat” (8:5, CJB). It cannot go overlooked how there is a dual reference in Amos 8:5 to *ha’chodesh* (הַחֹדֶשׁ) or the New Moon, and to *haShabbat* (הַשַּׁבָּת) or the weekly Sabbath. For certain, as can be deduced from the Torah instructions on the Sabbath, work and conducting in activities such as commerce were prohibited. As far as the New Moon was concerned, the Torah says very little, although it would be fair to assume from Amos 8:5 that it was widespread practice for those in Ancient Israel to not engage in commerce. Ehud Ben Zvi notes in *The Jewish Study Bible*,

“The text clearly implies that days of religious observance (Shabbath, new moon) are supposed to be kept, though observance of the new moon by ceasing from work is nowhere recorded in Torah legislation. The book of Amos is certainly not against cultic observance. The problem here is that people are eager for the holiday to be over so they can get on with making money through

¹ If necessary, do consult the entry for the Book of Amos, appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

² *CHALOT*, 360.

³ Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *New American Commentary: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 145.

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dishonest means. The text associates lack of reverence for these religious observances and dishonest trade (see Lev. 19.35-37)."⁴

The NLT notably takes Amos 8:5a in the direction not of the merchants asking when the Sabbath can be over, but instead with the Prophet declaring, "You can't wait for the Sabbath day to be over and the religious festivals to end so you can get back to cheating the helpless." Commentators have, for sure, made observations on the motives of those being condemned—ranging from their observance of the Sabbath being outwardly sincere but inwardly disdainful, to being totally contemptuous of the Sabbath because of how lost time would mean lost business. Douglas Stuart offers the rather general thought, "The Law explicitly forbade marketing on the Sabbath (Exod 20:8; 23:12; 34:21; Deut 5:12-15; cf. Neh 13:15-22) because it involved work, and continuous work—even when voluntary—is an unhealthy oppression. But exploitative profits were so good that sellers could hardly stand to take holidays off."⁵

How sincere was the merchants' observance of the weekly Sabbath? S.M. Lehrman thinks, "They observed the holy days scrupulously, but were careless about commercial honesty!"⁶ Outwardly, many of them could have observed the Sabbath, without anyone being able to strictly accuse them of breaking it. But, the spirit of *Shabbat* was surely broken by such merchants wanting the Sabbath to be over quickly, so there could be a return not just to business—but a return to them shortchanging their customers! Smith and Page conclude, "Merchants begrudged the merchandising time lost because of monthly and weekly worship days. Their worship was formal and superficial. Merchandising was their top priority—selling, not worshiping."⁷ Gary V. Smith similarly states, "Their formal piety, however, is betrayed by their true inner desires. They can hardly wait until these nonworking and notprofit-making times are over."⁸

While it is not improper to conclude that the merchants' condemned by Amos were outwardly "Sabbath keeping," there are commentators who are not so convinced. James Limburg just says, "Though their shops were closed on such days, their minds were open to the concerns of their businesses, which would be operating at full tilt the minute the holy day came to an end."⁹ Peter C. Craigie focuses on how the merchants' sole focus of interest was their enterprising, describing, "For them, the day of rest was a day wasted, a day in which the poor could be exploited and profit accumulated. And the merchants did not observe the standards of the Better Business Bureau: they sold light measure for top price. And when the hungry were too poor to pay for food, the merchants traded corn for human lives. The poor themselves could be sold to other rich persons as slaves for a quick profit."¹⁰

As soon as the Sabbath is over, the merchants will be found "using an ephah that is too small, and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals" (8:5b-6, NJPS). These merchants have little issue with using "false balances" (RSV/NRSV/ESV) or "rigged scales" (NET Bible). Elizabeth Achtemeier properly summarizes the swindling and the crimes that these merchants were responsible for:

"To line their own pockets with unjust gain, the merchants falsified the size or content of the 'êpâ [אֵפָה] (NIV: **measure**), which was a forty-liter vessel used to measure out a standard portion of grain. They added to the size of the 'shekel' (see the RSV), which weighed about 11.5 grams, and which was placed on a balance scale to determine how much silver was owed for the grain. And they even bent the balance scale out of shape in their

⁴ Ehud Ben Zvi, "Amos," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1190.

⁵ Stuart, 384.

⁶ S.M. Lehrman, "Hosea: Introduction and Commentary," Abraham Cohen, ed., *Soncino Books of the Bible: The Twelve Prophets* (London: Soncino Press, 1969), 117.

⁷ Smith and Page, 145.

⁸ Smith, *NIV Application: Micah/Amos/Micah*, 383.

⁹ Limburg, 120.

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *Daily Study Bible Series: Twelve Prophets, Volume 1—Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 184; Smith, *NIV Application: Micah/Amos/Micah*, pp 389-391 goes into detail on business ethics; *Ibid.*, pp 392-395 where he discusses contemporary Christians and their business practices.

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own favor—the verb *ʾat* [אָט] has the meaning ‘to bend’ or ‘to distort,’ verse 5. All such dishonest practices were specifically forbidden in Israel’s law (Lev. 19:35-36; Deut. 25:13-16; cf. Mic. 6:10-11) and were an ‘abomination’ to the Lord (Prov. 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23), finally violating the covenant commanded not to steal (Exod. 20:15) and profaning the name of the Lord of the covenant.

“With such dishonest gain the greedy merchants then could purchase the debt-ridden poor as slaves for as little as the price of a pair of sandals, verse 6. And so desperate were the helpless poor for food sometimes they would even buy swept up grain-leavings from the floor that had chaff mixed in with them, verse 6. The powerful had taken for themselves the lordship over human life that belonged to God.”¹¹

Given the attitudes of the merchants in wanting the Sabbath to be over, and their behavior not only in conducting business with deceitful balances—it would seem doubtful that many of them actually kept religious days like the New Moon and Sabbath. Rather, it is witnessed that they had a monopoly on much of the agricultural produce, which the general population was reliant upon. Stuart indicates, “To such hypocrites, people are commodities to be used for one’s advantage. If they are desperate enough to pay for the מַפָּל [mappal]¹² ‘sweepings—contaminated grain from the bins and wagons—why not mix that in with the grain and sell it too? Buy anything, sell anything—who’s to stop you?”¹³ In his commentary on the Book of Amos, James Luther Mays, while concluding that the Sabbath observance of the merchants was outwardly respectful, goes into detail describing how their corrupt business practices had developed, and were probably not viewed by them as being corrupt:

“In the older peasant society, which largely continued the practices of clan life, every man owned his land and was economically relatively autonomous. Buying and selling played a minor role, and exchange for money was not a major factor in the system. The rise of urban culture under the monarchy led to the development of commerce and an economic upper class. As more and more small farmers were pressed off their land and forced to shift to service and labour, their dependence upon the market became acute. The urban merchants appear to have monopolized the market; they were able to sell to landless peasants at a high price. They had the resources for stockpiling grain, and in a time of poor crops were in a position to control the economy completely. This is the group whose avarice is dramatized in the quotation. Amos applies to this new situation the old norms of the covenant. What appeared to be progress and good business to the merchants was in his eyes disobedience to Yahweh. No so-called progress excused an Israelite from dealing with his fellows as neighbours and brothers. Clearly the merchants saw nothing wrong with what they did. The quotation paints them as respectful of religion. They observed the holy days but underneath their piety was a restless impatience.”¹⁴

What should today’s Messianic readers of Amos 8:4-6 take away from what the Prophet communicates? Those conducting dishonest and oppressive business, are indeed seen waiting impatiently for the Sabbath to be over. Most of us who observe *Shabbat* in the Twenty-First Century, are not waiting for it to be over so we can resume our monopolistic and pilfering business industries—although all of us have been caught at one time or another, wanting for *Shabbat* to be over so we can engage in activities that do not have God, His Word, or His mission for the world as our focus. For many of our Christian brothers and sisters, who have often seen little or no need for the Sabbath—similar to the dishonest merchants of Amos 8:4-6—the Sabbath is to be an impediment removed, so that more common actions, such as one’s business or finances, can take a place where attention *should be reserved for God*.

When we encounter a passage like Amos 8:4-6, we should be absolutely incensed over the degree of injustice that is portrayed in Israel of the Eighth Century B.C.E.—although such is hardly unique in human history. **We should be just as incensed when poor people today are unfairly cheated out of the little money they have**, be they trying to buy food, clothing, a place to live, or other necessities. What we need not overlook, is how crimes committed against people for something as basic as food, are described right alongside the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* being viewed as a barrier to the business successes of the rich. The rich merchants were

¹¹ Achtemeier, pp 225-226.

¹² Heb. *mappal* (מַפָּל); “what is discarded (from grain)” (*HALOT*, 618).

¹³ Stuart, 384.

¹⁴ James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), pp 143-144; also Stuart, pp 383-384.

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hardly contributing to a society where the Sabbath ethos of all being beneficiaries of rest, refreshment, and human wholeness would be realized throughout the working week. Messiah followers today need to learn from this, and take the message of the Sabbath throughout the week—making *Shabbat* the highlight of their week, not a day that needs to be terminated as quickly as possible.