**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**AMOS-004. THE CARCASS AND THE EAGLES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria, which are named chief of the nations, to whom the house of Israel came! 2. Pass ye unto Calneh, and see; and from thence go ye to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines: be they better than these kingdoms? or their border greater than your border? 3. Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near; 4. That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; 5. That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; 6. That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. 7. Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed. 8. The Lord God hath sworn by Himself, saith the Lord the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein."*

*Amos 6:1-8*

Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. Jeroboam's reign was a time of great prosperity for Israel. Moab, Gilead, and part of Syria were reconquered, and the usual effects of conquest, increased luxury and vainglory, followed. Amos was not an Israelite born, for he came from Tekoa, away down south, in the wild country west of the Dead Sea, where he had been a simple herdsman till the divine call sent him into the midst of the corrupt civilisation of the Northern Kingdom. The first words of his prophecy give its whole spirit: The Lord will roar from Zion. The word rendered roar is the term specially used for the terrible cry with which a lion leaps on its surprised prey (Amos 3:4, 8). It is from Zion, the seat of God's Temple, that the roar proceeds, and Amos's prophecy is but the echo of it in Israel.

The prophecy of judgment in this passage is directed against the sins of the upper classes in Samaria. They are described in verse 1 as the notable men ... to whom the house of Israel come, which, in modern language, is just conspicuous citizens, who set the fashion, and are looked to as authorities and leaders, whether in political or commercial or social life. The word by which they are designated is used in Numbers 1:17: Which are expressed by name. The word carried back the thoughts of the degenerate aristocracy of Israel to the faith and zeal of their forefathers (Pusey, Minor Prophets, on this verse). Israel, Amos calls The first of the nations. It is singular that such a title should be given to the nation against whose corruption his one business is to testify, but probably there is keen irony in the word. It takes Israel at its own estimate, and then goes on to show how rotten, and therefore short-lived, was the prosperity which had swollen national pride to such a pitch. The chiefs of the foremost nation in the world should surely be something better than the heartless debauchees whom the Prophet proceeds to paint. Anglo-Saxons on both sides of the Atlantic, who are by no means deficient in this same complacent estimate of their own superiority to all other peoples, may take note. The same thought is prominent in the description of these notables as at ease. They are living in a fool's paradise, shutting their eyes to the thunder-clouds that begin to rise slowly above the horizon, and keeping each other in countenance in laughing at Amos and his gloomy forecasts. They trusted in the mountain of Samaria, which, they thought, made the city impregnable to assault. No doubt they thought that the Prophet's talk about doing right and trusting in Jehovah was very fanatical and unpractical, just as many in England and America think that their nations are exalted, not by righteousness, but by armies, navies, and dollars or sovereigns.

Verse 2 is very obscure to us from our ignorance of the facts underlying its allusions. In fact, it has been explained in exactly opposite ways, being taken by some to enumerate three instances of prosperous communities, which yet are not more prosperous than Israel, and by others to enumerate three instances of God's judgments falling on places which, though strong, had been conquered. In the former explanation, God's favour to Israel is made the ground of an implied appeal to their gratitude; in the latter, His judgments on other nations are made the ground of an appeal to their fear, lest like destruction should fall on them.

But the main points of the passage are the photograph of the crimes which are bringing the judgment of God, and the solemn divine oath to inflict the judgment. The crimes rebuked are not the false worship of the calves, though in other parts of his prophecy Amos lashes that with terrible invectives, nor foul breaches of morality, though these were not wanting in Israel, but the vices peculiar to selfish, luxurious upper classes in all times and countries, who forget the obligations of wealth, and think only of its possibilities of self-indulgence. French noblesse before the Revolution, and English peers and commercial magnates, and American millionaires, would yield examples of the same sin. The hardy shepherd from Tekoa had learned plain living and high thinking before he was a prophet, and would look with wondering and disgusted eyes at the wicked waste which he saw in Samaria. He begins with scourging the reckless security already referred to. These notables in Israel were at ease because they put far away the evil day, by refusing to believe that it was at hand, and paying no heed to prophets warnings, as their fellows do still and always, and as we all are tempted to do. They who see and declare the certain end of national or personal sins are usually jeered at as pessimists, fanatics, alarmists, bad patriots, or personal ill-wishers, and the men whom they try to warn fancy that they hinder the coming of a day of retribution by disbelieving in its coming. Incredulity is no lightning-conductor to keep off the flash, and, listened to or not, the low growls of the thunder are coming nearer.

With one hand these sinners tried to push away the evil day, while with the other they drew near to themselves that which made its coming certain--the seat of violence, or, rather, the sitting, or session. Violence, or wrongdoing, is enthroned by them, and where men enthrone iniquity, God's day of vengeance is not far off.

Then follows a graphic picture of the senseless, corrupting luxury of the Samaritan magnates, on which the Tekoan shepherd pours his scorn, but which is simplicity itself, and almost asceticism, before what he would see if he came to London or New York. To him it seemed effeminate to loll on a divan at meals, and possibly it was a custom imported from abroad. It is noted that the older custom in Israel was to sit while eating. The woodwork of the divans, inlaid with ivory, had caught his eye in some of his peeps into the great houses, and he inveighs against them very much as one of the Pilgrim Fathers might do if he could see the furniture in the drawing-rooms of some of his descendants. There is no harm in pretty things, but the æ³´hetic craze does sometimes indicate and increase selfish heartlessness as to the poverty and misery, which have not only no ivory on their divans, but no divans at all. Thus stretched in unmanly indolence on their cushions, they feast on delicacies. Lambs out of the flock and calves out of the stall seem to mean animals too young to be used as food. These gourmands, like their successors, prided themselves on having dainties out of season, because they were more costly then. And their feasts had the adornment of music, which the shepherd, who knew only the pastoral pipe that gathered his sheep, refers to with contempt. He uses a very rare word of uncertain meaning, which is probably best rendered in some such way as the Revised Version does: They sing idle songs. To him their elaborate performances seemed like empty babble. Worse than that, they devise musical instruments like David. But how unlike him in the use they make of art! What a descent from the praises of God to the idle songs fit for the hot dining-halls and the guests there! Amos was indignant at the profanation of art, and thought it best used in the service of God. What would he have said if he had been fastened into a front-row box and treated to a modern opera?

The revellers drink wine in bowls by which larger vessels than generally employed are intended. They drank to excess, or as we might say, by bucketfuls. So the dainty feast, with its artistic refinement and music, ends at last in a brutal carouse, and the heads anointed with the most costly unguents drop in drunken slumber. A similar picture of Samaritan manners is drawn by Isaiah (chap. xxviii.), and obviously drunkenness was one of the besetting sins of the capital.

But the darkest hue in the dark picture has yet to be added: They are not grieved for the affliction (literally, the breach or wound) of Joseph. The tribe of Ephraim, Joseph's son, being the principal tribe of the Northern Kingdom, Joseph is often employed as a synonym for Israel. All these pieces of luxury, corrupting and effeminate as they are, might be permitted, but heartless indifference to the miseries groaning at the door of the banqueting-hall goes with them. The classes are indifferent to the condition of the masses. Put Amos into modern English, and he is denouncing the heartlessness of wealth, refinement, art, and culture, which has no ear for the complaining of the poor, and no eyes to see either the sorrows and sins around it, or the lowering cloud that is ready to burst in tempest.

The inevitable issue is certain, because of the very nature of God. It is outlined with keen irony. Amos sees in imagination the long procession of sad captives, and marching in the front ranks, the self-indulgent Sybarites, whose pre-eminence is now only the melancholy prerogative of going first in the fettered train. What has become of their revelry? It is gone, like the imaginary banquets of dreams, and instead of luxurious lolling on silken couches, there is the weary tramp of the captive exiles. Such result must be, since God is what He is. He has sworn by Himself; His being and character are the pledge that it will be so as Amos has declared. How can such a God as He is do otherwise than hate the pride of such a selfish, heartless, God-forgetting aristocracy? How can He do otherwise than deliver up the city? God has not changed, and though His mills grind slowly, they do grind still; and it is as true for England and America, as it was for Samaria, that a wealthy and leisurely upper class, which cares only for material luxury glossed over by art, which has condescended to be its servant, is bringing near the evil day which it hugs itself into believing will never come.