

Amos 5:21-27

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Amos reports what the LORD says to His covenant people. The LORD rejects Israel's false worship and states He will send them into exile beyond Damascus.

While practicing social injustice and idolatry, the Israelites continued to perform their religious rituals, as prescribed in the Mosaic Law. They apparently thought their religious practice could please God and cause Him to bless them despite their wicked behavior. But the Suzerain (Ruler) God was not pleased with Israel's religious worship because it was offered in hypocrisy. For this reason, He said, *I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.* The verbs "to hate" and "to reject" are used together to display God's strong feeling against Israel's *festivals* or feasts. The proper purpose of worship was to align hearts with righteous actions. God makes clear that this worship is useless.

During Old Testament times, there were three major annual pilgrim *festivals*—Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, and Feast of Booths (Exodus 23:16–17; Deuteronomy 16:1–17). The Israelites participated in these religious *festivals* to commemorate their redemption from Egypt and to thank God for the harvest grain. During these activities, the Israelites were afforded the opportunity to worship their Suzerain (Ruler) God as they fellowshiped together and shared meals with one another. But what had been designed as a means to worship the LORD was not bringing any pleasure to Him because it was not offered with sincerity of heart. The worship was not leading to righteous living. Therefore, God rejected Israel's *festivals* and did not *delight* in their *solemn assemblies*.

The LORD also expressed His strong rejection of Israel's presentation of sacrifices, three of which are specifically mentioned by name. He declared, *Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.*

The *burnt offering* ("olah" in Hebrew) is literally translated as "that which goes up" as the picture of rising smoke from the offering. The worshiper who brought the offerings would normally lay his hands on the animal, so the benefits of the burnt offerings to atone for his sins would be his (Leviticus 1). Such a gift was to be "without defect," that is, with no physical damage (Leviticus 1:3; 1:10). The *burnt offering* was to be cooked completely on the altar. Then portions were to be burned completely, and the rest to be eaten (Deuteronomy 12:27).

The *grain offering* ("minhāh," in Hebrew) was a gift of wheat or barley that the worshiper offered to the Suzerain God to show his gratitude and dedication to Him. The *grain offering* would be "of fine flour," without any yeast in it (Leviticus 2:1, 11). But the worshiper was required to "pour oil on it and put frankincense on it" (Leviticus 2:4, 13). Only a portion was burned on the altar; the rest was kept by the priests, who ate it "in a holy place" (Leviticus 6:16; 10:12–13).

The *peace offerings* were sacrificial meals shared by the worshiper, people, and priests. The worshiper would make the sacrifice to either express gratitude to God for blessings received or to fulfill a vow (Leviticus 7:11–18). A *peace offering* was often presented sometime after the *burnt offering*, symbolizing God's fellowship with His covenant people (Deuteronomy 27:7).

In the book of Amos, the LORD said He would not accept any of those *offerings* because they were not offered with honesty and sincerity. They were merely religious practices that did not reflect the spiritual condition of the people. They did not result in obedience to God's covenant law, to love one another, seek justice for all, and provide opportunity for the less fortunate among them. Not only did the LORD reject Israel's *festivals* and *sacrifices*, He also rejected music in their worship services. He stated, *Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps*. The *harp* ("nēbel") was a stringed instrument. According to the book of Psalms, the *harp* had ten strings (Psalm 33:2; 144:9).

Music and song were an integral part of daily life in ancient Israel. Music often accompanied ordinary domestic events, as explained in the book of Genesis, where Laban said to Jacob, "Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre" (Genesis 31:27).

Music and songs were also used in warfare, particularly with the victory celebration after battle, as evidenced in the song of Moses recorded in Exodus 15. But they were also used in the life of the court. For instance, David was summoned to the court of Saul several times to soothe the king's depression: "So it came about whenever the *evil* spirit from God came to Saul, David would take the harp and play *it* with his hand; and Saul would be refreshed and be well, and the evil spirit would depart from him" (1 Samuel 16:23).

While music and songs were important in Israel's religious worship, the LORD asked the people of Israel to take them away from Him. Instead of religious formalism, the LORD required loyalty from His covenant people and said, *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*. God urged Israel to show concern for the less privileged among them. He wanted them to practice *justice and righteousness* that flow without ceasing, like waters and streams that did not dry. Justice and righteousness must permeate the lives of the Israelites. Such an attitude is much more important than religious observance.

The LORD recalled Israel's worship history from their wandering in the wilderness and asked them, saying, *Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel?* The answer to this rhetorical question is apparently "no." With the exception of a single Passover offering mentioned in Numbers 9:2, Israel apparently failed to follow God's instructions to worship Him during the period in which they wandered in the wilderness. This seems to indicate that the sacrifices were completely voluntary in the wilderness and with this one exception, Israel chose to ignore them.

This can also be seen by the fact that none of the Israelite boys who had been born in the wilderness those forty years were circumcised on the eighth day as commanded (Joshua 5:5). The Lord commanded Joshua prior to entering the Land to circumcise all the males who had been born in the wilderness. God said, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from

you” (Joshua 5:9). We also have this testimony from the book of Ezekiel; God explains how He threatened to destroy Israel because of their disobedience and idolatry:

“I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands, because they rejected My ordinances, and as for My statutes, they did not walk in them; they even profaned My sabbaths, for their heart continually went after their idols. Yet My eye spared them rather than destroying them, and I did not cause their annihilation in the wilderness.”

(Ezekiel 20:15–17)

When Israel came into the land of their possession it seems the religious observances were treated as obligatory. However, obligatory worship is no better than ignoring worship if the heart is not right. In neither case were the people seeking the Lord.

The New Testament speaks of the inadequacy of religious observance. Hebrews tells us that as Jesus entered the world, He stated what is written in Psalm 40:6, “Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired” (Hebrews 10:5). The passage goes on to state that Jesus came to earth as a human in order to become the final sacrifice to take away all our sins (Hebrews 10:10). Using religious observance to manipulate God misses the entire point. The point is to turn the heart of the worshipper to the Living God, our Redeemer.

The LORD’s reason for asking the rhetorical question *Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel?* here in Amos was to remind the Israelites that they neglected offering sacrifices to Him (but offered to other gods) in their wilderness wanderings. Their heart was evidenced in the golden calf incident (Exodus 32:1–6). Amos makes the point that Israel had been consistently idolatrous from the time of the Exodus until the time of Amos (Ezekiel 20:7–26; Acts 7:39–43). Amos makes the point that although *sacrifices and grain offerings* were important, they were not the essence of the LORD’s demand. What the LORD demanded was loyalty, which would be expressed through obedience.

Moreover, the LORD said, *You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves.* The term *Sikkuth* was an astral deity in Mesopotamian religion. The Assyrian war god commonly named “Adar” was also called Sakkut. Similarly, the term *Kiyyun* is one of the epithets or appellations of the star god, Saturn, in Mesopotamian religion. The term occurs as *kajamanu* in Akkadian texts and has the meaning “the steady one.” The Assyrians had a long history of worshiping an astral deity known as Kaiwan or Saturn. Thus, it seems the Israelites may have been influenced by the Mesopotamian astral cult as well.

The verb translated *carried along* indicates a continuing, sequential action. It seems God is telling them that their mixing of false gods together with their observance of Him has continued to this day from the time of their disobedient wandering in the wilderness. They continued to honor these false gods (*Sikkuth* and *Kiyyun*) instead of honoring the true God. This would of course be completely consistent with the unjust behavior toward the poor being condemned in Amos. Idols are gods to be manipulated for our own ends. They justify exploitative behavior.

Israel has the opportunity to seek Yahweh, who redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. But they have neglected this opportunity. Consequently, they would fall under God's judgment. As God said, "*I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus,*" says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts. Damascus was the same city then as now. It is roughly 40 miles beyond the eastern border of modern Israel. The LORD who is all-powerful would deport the Israelites along with their astral deities. This deportation occurred in about 722 BC, when Israel fell to Assyria. At that time, the Israelites went into exile in Assyria, which was located northeast of Damascus.

Amos ends this chapter attributing these statements to *the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts*. The word translated *LORD* is Yahweh, which means "Existence," the I AM. This is the covenant maker with Israel. Yahweh is also the *God of hosts*. The term translated *hosts* can be translated "armies." *The LORD* is the God of armies, and is about to direct a foreign army to invade Israel and execute judgment on them, pursuant to the terms of the covenant between Him and His people.

Biblical Text

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Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² **"Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,**

I will not accept *them*;

And I will not *even* look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

²³ **"Take away from Me the noise of your songs;**

I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

²⁴ **"But let justice roll down like waters**

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

²⁵ **"Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel? ²⁶ You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves. ²⁷ Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus,"** says the Lord, whose name is the God of hosts.