

Amos 8:4-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-8/amos-84-6/>

Amos addresses Israel's lack of concern for the poor. He specifically directs his message to the Israelite merchants who cheat in the marketplace by using dishonest scales in their commercial transactions while hypocritically retaining an outward façade of devotion to the Suzerain God.

Following the fourth vision set forth in Amos 8:1–3, the prophet addressed Israel's lack of concern for the poor. He called the people to *hear this*; that is, to pay attention to what he was about to say. But Amos's call for attention was directed to a special group of Israelites: *you who trample the needy*.

The verb *trample* means to crush. It refers to people who treat others unjustly. The rich oppressors in Israel purposely mistreated the poor to *do away with the humble of the land*. (The term *humble* is used as a synonym for the term *poor*.) But their policy was contrary to God's law in which He asked wealthy people and lenders to freely open their hand to help their needy brothers (Deuteronomy 15:7–11). God's covenant law acknowledged that Israel would always have people that were poor (Deuteronomy 15:11). However, the law also provided for each poor person to have full opportunity to climb out of poverty. Israel was not to have a permanent underclass. In this case, the rich are devouring the poor. Their mistreatment is so severe as to *do away* with them.

In verse five, the prophet switched from addressing the rich oppressors and greedy businessmen in the second person ('you') to quoting what they said. The rhetorical effect of this switch was likely to display more forcefully the wicked intention of the oppressors by allowing the audience to hear them in their own terms.

According to Amos, the merchants were saying, *When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain?* The *new moon* (also called "the Feast of Trumpets") refers to a religious festival that was celebrated on the first day of the lunar month, Tishri (September/October). In Leviticus, the LORD mandates: "In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing *of trumpets*, a holy convocation" (Lev. 23:23–24). This celebration corresponds to our New Year's Day.

Not only did the greedy merchants ask when the *new moon* celebration would be over, they also asked when *the sabbath* would be over *that we may open the wheat market*. Rather than abiding in and enjoying the Lord's sabbath, the merchants only yearned to *open the wheat market* and start making money again.

Like the *new moon*, the *sabbath* was a day of rest and feasting. It was celebrated on the seventh day of the week to commemorate both creation (Exodus 20:8–11) and Israel's redemption from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). The prescribed offering for the sabbath day consisted of "two male lambs one year old without defect, and two-tenths *of an ephah* of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering, and its drink offering" (Numbers 28:9).

Since commerce was prohibited on both *the new moon and the sabbath*, the greedy merchants of the northern kingdom of Israel, eager to prey on the less privileged, inquired when these feasts would be over so that they might *sell* their *grain* or *open the wheat market*. They could hardly wait for the completion of these festivals so they could make their profits in the grain markets. They were anxious to make money at the expense of the poor as they would *make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger*.

The term *bushel* is “ephah” in the Hebrew language. It was the standard for measuring all sorts of agricultural products. It was the unit heavily used in trading and selling. The term *shekel* was first a measurement of weight and later became the term for a coin. When the Israelite merchants made their *bushels smaller*, their customers received less grain than what they were supposed to receive. When the merchants made their *shekels* in the balance *bigger*, they took more silver from their customers. Their policy was to give less grain for more money. They did not care for the welfare of their customers. They were not honoring the Lord’s covenant principle to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). Rather, they were following the pagan ways of exploiting their neighbors.

The Israelite merchants in Amos’s days *cheated* in the marketplace by using *dishonest scales* in their commercial transactions while hypocritically retaining an outward façade of devotion to the Suzerain (or Ruler) God. They completely ignored God’s covenantal law in which He said to them, “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin” (Leviticus 19:35–36). This fraudulence is not only an injustice against the buyer but is also an abomination to the LORD (Proverbs 11:1).

As the prophet closed this section out, he clearly revealed the intention of the greedy merchants in using false measures. Their sole purpose was *to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals*. This expression has already occurred in Amos 2:6 with one minor difference: there in 2:6 the righteous were sold whereas here they are bought. The rich oppressors purchased the poor for something of little value. Profiting from fraudulent manipulation to buy and sell products was bad, but profiting from circumstances such as people’s hardship to buy and sell them was even worse because such an activity involves trafficking human beings made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

The last line adds much more weight to the wicked behavior of the greedy businessmen. In addition to using false and dishonest scales to trick the poor, they sold the *refuse of the wheat*. The term translated as *refuse* describes what is discarded from grain. It was a common practice in the ancient world to remove the chaff from the harvested grains before selling or using the grains. In their efforts to gain as much profit as possible from their products, the greedy merchants in Israel cheated on the desperate poor by not removing the husks (the dry outer covering on the grains) from the wheat they sold. As a result, the poor buyers received even less grains for their money.

The merchants sold to the poor a product that was inferior quality to what was represented, for a measure less than represented, for an amount of money that was inflated. They were in full extraction mode. This is completely counter to the entire emphasis of God’s covenant law, which

focused on Israel creating a society based on truth and mutual love. Israel was called to serve a priestly function, and show to surrounding nations a better way, a way of love rather than exploitation (Exodus 19:6). Now Israel had sunk into exploitation, so they will be removed as a witness.

The Israelite merchants in Amos's days were corrupt. They deceived by falsifying their containers and balances. While they pretended to be religious, they completely ignored God's principles by which they were to live. Amos used their own words to expose their real economic motives and religious concerns.

Biblical Text

**⁴ Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, ⁵ 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,
⁶ 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?”**