

# OpenTheo

## August 23rd: Amos 4 & John 18:28-40

August 22, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

Unheeded warnings to Israel. Jesus before Pilate.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share)).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Amos chapter 4. Hear this, you cows of Bation, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, Bring, that we may drink. The Lord God has sworn by His holiness that, Behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks, and you shall go out through the breaches, each one straight ahead, and you shall be cast out into Haman, declares the Lord. Come to Bethel and transgress, to Gilgal and multiply transgression.

Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days. Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings. Publish them, for so you love to do, O people of Israel, declares the Lord God.

I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest. I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city.

One field would have rain, and the field on which it did not rain would wither. So two or three cities would wander to another city to drink water, and would not be satisfied. Yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord.

I struck you with blight and milled you, your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locusts devoured, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. I sent among you a pestilence after the manna of Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your camp go up into your nostrils, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord.

I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and you were as a brand plucked out of the burning, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel, because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel. For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness and treads on the heights of the earth, the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name.

Amos chapter 4 continues from chapter 3. The rich men of the land had just been addressed, the Lord declaring a judgment about to come upon their winter and summer houses, and their houses of ivory. Now the Lord turns to their wives, who played a large part in inciting them to their oppression. The cows of Bashan in verse 1 are described as well fed, indulgent and oppressive, crushing the poor and needy while being preoccupied only with their own pleasures.

By comparing these wealthy women to the highest quality cattle, perhaps the prophet wants his hearers to consider what such cattle are destined for, such animals are fattened in order that they might be slaughtered and eaten. James chapter 5 verse 5 makes a similar point. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence, you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

Here it is their thirst for wine, and presumably feasts, parties and a life of excess and luxury, that draws condemnation upon them. Their husbands' crimes were far more overt, but their selfish, decadent and entitled indifference to the poor and their need is presented as a driving force of the injustice that their class represented and perpetuated. We find comparable condemnations of indulgent wealthy women in passages like Isaiah chapter 3 verses 16 to 26.

The Lord said, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet. Therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will lay bare their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets and the scarves, the headdresses, the armllets, the sashes, the perfume boxes and the amulets, the signet rings and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks and the

handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans and the veils.

Instead of perfume there will be rotteness, and instead of a belt, a rope, and instead of well-set hair, baldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty. Your men shall fall by the sword, and your mighty men in battle, and her gates shall lament and mourn, empty she shall sit on the ground. As Daniel Carroll notes, there is a glaring contrast between the way that these pampered women boss everyone around, expecting to have their every whim and desire catered to by their husbands and others, utterly unmindful of anyone else and the fate that awaits them.

They will be dragged away by hooks, powerless to resist and completely humiliated. Describing their departure into captivity in such a manner underlines the poetic justice that they will be receiving. They will be taken out through the breaches in the wall of their conquered city and cast into Haman, whose exact location we don't know.

As in verse 4 of this passage, Bethel and Gilgal were also singled out as places of particular cultic sin in Hosea chapter 4 verse 15. Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-Avon, and swear not, as the Lord lives.

Bethel was the site where the Lord had appeared to Jacob, and he had seen the vision of the ladder to heaven. Later, however, Bethel was the primary cultic centre established by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, as a rival location to Jerusalem. There he had set up his golden calf and altar.

This was often presented as the foundational sin of the northern kingdom of Israel, the sin that had set them off on the wrong path at the outset. Gilgal was a site associated with the first entry into the land, a place where Israel had dedicated themselves to the Lord, set up memorial stones, and had practiced the first Passover in the land. Yet it too had become a place associated with unfaithful worship.

Here the Lord gives the people a satirical summons to worship. However, the summons is not really to worship, but to transgress. The people's sacrifices in these unfaithful cultic locations, however much they might multiply them, do not assuage the wrath of the Lord or gain his favour, but are transgressions that incite his anger against them.

In part, the fault might be seen as the perversion of the worship of the Lord through idolatry. Yet here in this context, there might be more of an accent upon the way that such worship was persistently falsified by the behaviour of the people towards their neighbours, although the statement here is not narrowly focused upon the rich of the land as the previous judgements were. True worship must be confirmed in transformed moral practice.

Where it is not, worship can be little more than the practice of whitewashing tombs,

masking deeply defiling uncleanness rather than dealing with it. Such sites of worship can also be compared to dens of robbers, places that bandits and thieves would return to for safety. Israel and Judah often seem to approach their worship in such a manner.

Jeremiah, for instance, prophesying immediately prior to the exile, condemned Judah for its presumptuous confidence in the temple, for its belief that it gave them immunity from serious judgement. Israel here, as addressed by Amos, seems to view its worship as a sort of flattery or bribery of the Lord, presuming that the multitude of their sacrifices would close his eyes to their oppression of the poor and their wicked self-indulgence. The Mosaic covenant came with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

The curses of the covenant had several different degrees of severity. In practice they would become progressively worse as the people resisted the Lord's correction and failed to respond. In the end they would be violently vomited out of the land and returned to Egypt.

In verses 6-11 the Lord lists a series of warnings that he had given his people. The very purpose of these judgments was cautionary, to encourage Israel to repent and to return to the Lord their God. As the Lord multiplied these warnings, his intent was their turning from their self-destructive path before it was too late.

Just as parents can punish their children in order to save their children from experiencing the far more devastating consequences of a willful course of action, so the Lord disciplined his people in order to divert them from their own ruin. The Lord preserves his people in part through threats. Declarations of judgment are typically designed not to give people a fatalistic sense of their own doom, but to encourage them urgently, immediately and wholeheartedly to return to the Lord in hope that he will relent.

These verses describe a situation where, through inconsistent rainfall and local droughts, the Lord sought to warn the people before bringing a more general punishment upon them. As Jesus taught in the case of the Tower of Siloam and the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, such disasters can be warnings to a people more generally that, if they do not repent, they will perish in a similar manner. Drought-struck towns were here serving as the canaries in the coal mine, graciously designed to alert Israel to disaster that awaited them all.

Such local disasters were reminders and alerts to Israel that they depended entirely upon the Lord's provision for them in his land, and they needed to get right with him. As they failed to respond to these initial warnings, the judgments would ramp up. He devastated their crops.

The exact form of the devastation isn't clear. It's possible that the two diseases that afflicted the crops in verse 9 afflicted the barley and the wheat respectively. This would be devastating, as these were the two staple crops.

These were followed by locusts, which would have eaten what remained. All of these judgments should have recalled the curses of the covenant mentioned in places like Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 38 to 40. But you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off.

As they failed to respond to the striking of their crops, the Lord took the lives of their animals and young men, with pestilence and the sword. So great was the death toll that the slain weren't able to be buried before the stench of their bodies became overpowering. In addition to the sickening smell, the inability to bury the bodies of the dead would have been a judgment in itself.

We might here think of the ways in which the judgments of the Egyptian plagues gradually escalated, and clearly the Lord wanted his people to make that connection, comparing the pestilence that he sent against them to the pestilence that he sent upon Egypt. A similar thing had happened to Israel, and like Pharaoh, rather than repenting, they had hardened their hearts. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities of the plain in Genesis was the great symbol of the Lord's final judgment, his cutting off of a wicked people.

At a few key moments in Israel's history, Israel had fallen to a similar state. At the end of the book of Judges, for instance, Gibeah had sinned in a similar manner to the city of Sodom, and the tribe of Benjamin had almost been completely extinguished as a result. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 19 was also a foil against which the blessing of Abraham and Sarah was more clearly seen.

They had just been promised a son, but Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly destroyed and rendered absolutely barren. The Lord had delivered the remaining people of Israel from this end like a bran taken out of a fire, much as Lot had been rescued from the destruction of Sodom, albeit not on account of their being credited righteous. Once again, Israel was supposed to learn from their near ruin, to take the cautionary lesson, and to repent and turn back to the Lord.

However, as in the case of the previous warnings, they failed to repent. And by this point, Israel had no excuse. They could not complain that they were unwarned.

They had received ample warning. The Lord had given them warning after warning, without response from them. Now they would have to suffer the great reckoning for their sins, coming face to face with God himself.

The coming of the Lord's holy presence is the most devastating thing of all for a sinful people. Preparing to meet with God here requires the people to ready themselves for confrontation with a holy God. We might think of the purification of the people prior to the Lord's arrival on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19.

However, here there is also the sense of the Lord approaching as an enemy, to bring judgment upon them. The chapter ends with a doxology, declaring the glory and the power of the Lord. However, the doxology serves to underline just how outmatched sinful Israel is.

The Lord is the creator of all, and the master of all cosmic forces. Israel has been worshipping a domesticated God of the tribe, a God who underwrites their wicked society, rather than confronting it in its iniquity. Now, however, they will come face to face with the living God and must do business with him.

The Lord treads on the high places of the earth, including the false high places like Bethel, and now the time has come for Israel's reckoning. A question to consider. Where else in scripture can we see the Lord's use of judgment as progressive levels of warning? John chapter 18 verses 28 to 40.

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover.

So Pilate went outside to them and said, What accusation do you bring against this man? They answered him, If this man were not doing evil, we would not have delivered him over to you. Pilate said to them, Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law. The Jews said to him, It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death.

This was to fulfil the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus answered, Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world.

If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world. Then Pilate said to him, So you are a king? Jesus answered, You say that I am a king.

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice. Pilate said to him, What is truth? After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, I find no guilt in him, but you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover.

So do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews? They cried out again, Not this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas was a robber. At the beginning of John chapter 18, Jesus has been arrested and has faced Annas and Caiaphas.

After Peter denied him, Jesus was then sent from Caiaphas to Pilate. This was done early in the morning, probably around dawn so that this would be the first thing on Pilate's desk in the morning. They are dealing with Jesus as a matter of urgency.

They are concerned to be able to eat the Passover. This of course raises chronological questions. How are we to relate this account to the account that we find within the Synoptic Gospels? There are some details in Mark that might support John's chronology, but it seems difficult to reconcile the fact that Jesus eats the Passover with his disciples, and then at this point, the people are preparing to eat the Passover after Jesus has eaten with his disciples and been arrested.

Unsurprisingly, there have been a number of suggestions put forward. Some have suggested that the Last Supper is an early Passover, that it's connected to the Passover but not actually the Passover meal itself. Others have suggested that the disciples were using a different calendar from that of the Judeans.

The Jews are using a lunar calendar, but Jesus was using a solar calendar. In John, as in the Synoptic accounts, it would seem that this occurred on a Friday. The question then is not what day of the week this occurred on, but how it relates to the celebration of the Passover.

An important consideration here is that the different Gospel accounts have their differing purposes. John, as elsewhere, focuses more upon the relationship between the symbol of the Passover and the fulfilment, with Christ as the Passover lamb himself. Christ is our Passover, sacrificed for us.

In the other Gospels, however, there is more of an emphasis upon the new symbol of the Last Supper, which is then connected to the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and so there is a connection more between the two symbols than between the symbol and the ultimate reality to which it points. This fits into John's theology more generally, which connects Jesus with the Lamb of God, the Passover lamb that is sacrificed for the people. It helps us to understand a bit more of the theology of the cross that John is operating in terms of.

Jesus is the Passover lamb, he is the firstborn son, and this gives a very clear Passover context for what takes place on the cross itself. Such a theology is also seen in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 5, where Paul speaks about Christ as our Passover sacrifice for us. Pilate asked for an accusation about Christ.

He isn't particularly keen to get involved. The fact that no compelling charge can be brought against him might serve an apologetic purpose. Likewise, highlighting the fact that Pilate is a reluctant participant might underline the point that the true enemies in John's Gospel are not the Romans, but Jesus' own people.

As the Gospels spread throughout the Roman world, this might have been a helpful point to emphasise. Even though he was put to death by the Romans, they were never his primary opponents. The Jews didn't have the authority to give a death sentence and so they brought Jesus to Pilate so that they might have a death sentence delivered upon him by Pilate.

Once again we are reminded that Jesus' word is being fulfilled even as he is being condemned to death. Pilate questions Jesus, presumably after hearing the accusation that he presents himself as the king of the Jews. Naturally Pilate would interpret this as revolutionary.

On the surface of it, that's what it sounds like. The claim is a political one. Jesus needs to be challenged as such a figure.

There are details within John's Gospel that would seem to give some substance to such a claim. Jesus had a triumphal entry into Jerusalem which suggests some sort of royal aspiration. The people wanted to make him king after the feeding of the 5000.

But yet as he speaks to Pilate, it becomes clear that Jesus' kingdom is not what Pilate might have expected. Jesus defines himself not primarily as the king of the Jews, that is a title that was given to him by others. He never fully owns it.

Rather he thinks of his kingdom in terms of truth rather than in terms of ethnic identity. His is a different sort of kingdom. He is the king of the Jews but that's not primarily the way to understand him.

If he really were a pretender to be the king of the Jews in the way that the Judean leaders were presenting him to be and in the way that Pilate initially presumed, his servants would have fought to protect him. But they didn't. Rather Jesus' kingdom is a kingdom of truth.

Truth might mean different things to different ears. To the ears of a Greek it might be associated with philosophical claims about the nature of reality. To a Roman it might be more about factual accuracy of things that occurred.

And to a Jew it might be more about God's covenant faithfulness. Pilate's response, what is truth, is ambiguous. Probably he's dismissing Jesus as a mere philosopher, a harmless, innocuous figure for Pilate's political purposes.

He's not really a political challenge to the Romans. He's just someone who's an annoyance to the Judean leaders who have their own peculiar religious sectarian objections against him. Pilate wants to set Jesus free but he does not want to aggravate the crowd and the Jewish leaders and so he refers to the custom of absolution at the time of the Passover.



The Jews however insist that he should release Barabbas the insurrectionist instead. They falsely present Jesus as a political revolutionary but then they asked for an actual violent revolutionary to be released to them instead of him. This is an example of some of the irony that's going on in John's Gospel.

John frequently uses irony to highlight and to contrast certain things to help us to perceive what is really taking place. A question to consider. In his conversation with Pilate Jesus speaks about his kingdom.

At this point we might start to wonder why this is such a rare occurrence within John's Gospel. Neither Jesus nor John the narrator typically speak about the kingdom. In the other Gospels however we have constant references to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God yet it's very rare that we find references to it in John's Gospel.

Why might this be?