

Introduction to Amos Chapter 6

Woe to Those at Ease in Zion: The Complacency of the Comfortable, the Poison of the Ivory Couch, and the Nation of Justice Perverted Like Poison

Amos chapter 6 is the final chapter of the three great discourses before the vision sequence of chapters 7–9, and it is the most socially specific chapter in the entire book. Where chapter 3 established the theological principle of privilege and accountability and chapter 5 delivered the theological heart of the book's argument about worship and justice, chapter 6 descends into the most granular available description of the lifestyle of the prosperous elite — the ivory couches, the finest lambs, the improvised songs on David's instruments, the wine drunk in bowls, the bodies anointed with the finest oils — and names the specific spiritual failure that the lifestyle represents: they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

The chapter opens with the woe that is the formal pronouncement of the covenant curse on the community it addresses: Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria. The double address — to Zion (Jerusalem and Judah) and to the mountain of Samaria (the northern kingdom) — is the reminder that both the southern and the northern communities of the covenant are under the same indictment. The notable men of the first of the nations to whom the house of Israel has been brought — the great men of the most privileged covenant community in the world — are the men who are at ease and feel secure. And the ease and the security are the problem.

The chapter moves through three tightly connected sections. The first (verses 1–7) is the most detailed available description of the lifestyle of the prosperous elite and the most damning theological assessment of what the lifestyle represents: not merely luxury, not merely abundance, but the specific spiritual failure of the community that has insulated itself so thoroughly from the suffering of the vulnerable that it is not grieved by the ruin of Joseph. The second section (verses 8–11) is the divine oath and the description of the judgment that the complacency has produced: the LORD has sworn by Himself that He abhors the pride of Jacob. The third section (verses 12–14) uses two natural impossibilities as the frame for the most concentrated statement of the moral impossibility of the perverted justice, and closes with the announcement of the nation that the LORD is raising up to afflict Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to Amos chapter 6 as people who live in the most materially prosperous society in human history, and who therefore stand most directly in the position of the people whom this chapter addresses. The woe to those who are at ease in Zion is the word addressed to the community that has achieved the comfort that protects it from the felt experience of the suffering

of those around it. We are that community. The ivory couches and the finest oils and the bowls of wine and the improvised songs on David's instruments are our couches and our entertainment and our comfort and our music. We come to this chapter asking for the gift of the grief that has been anesthetized by the comfort.

Lord, let the they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph be the diagnostic that most urgently searches us. Not whether we are aware of the ruin — we may be academically aware of the suffering of the vulnerable in our communities and in the world. But whether we are grieved by it. Whether the ruin of Joseph registers in us as the grief that the chapter is naming as the missing response. The ease that anesthetizes the grief is the ease that the chapter condemns: not merely the ease of the comfortable life, but the ease that has produced the specific spiritual failure of the not-grieved.

Let the do horses run on rocky crags? does one plow the sea with oxen? be the wisdom questions that expose the moral impossibility of the community that has turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. Let the impossibility of the moral perversion be received with the same force as the impossibility of the natural impossibilities that Amos uses to frame it. And let the warning of the afflicting nation from Hamath to the Arabah be the word that breaks through the comfort of those who say the disaster is far off.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amos 6:1–7

Woe to Those at Ease in Zion: The Lifestyle of the Complacent and the Grief That Has Not Come

- (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.*

The Context

The woe that opens verse 1 is the formal covenant curse — the hoy that pronounces the judgment on the community it addresses. The double address to Zion and the mountain of Samaria establishes that the complacency indictment applies to both kingdoms: the notable men of the first of the nations, the privileged leaders of the most blessed covenant community in the world, are at ease in Zion and trust in the security of Samaria. The at ease (shaanan) and the trust (betach) are the words for the comfortable security of those who have been sufficiently insulated from external threat and from the experience of the suffering of those around them that they have settled into the false confidence that the present comfortable condition is permanent and safe.

The pass to Calneh and see of verse 2 is the most historically specific challenge in the section: go to Calneh (a city in northern Syria, probably Kullani, which had been conquered by the Assyrians in 738 BC), go to Hamath the great, go to Gath of the Philistines. Are these nations better than you? Are their territories greater? The argument is the argument from example: the great cities that the northern kingdom's elite might consider comparable — or even inferior — to themselves have already fallen. If Calneh has fallen and Hamath has fallen and Gath has fallen, what makes Israel think it is immune from the same fate? The complacency that pushes far away the evil day is the complacency that refuses to read the lessons of the fallen cities.

The lifestyle description of verses 4–6 is the most detailed and the most damning in the book. The ivory beds and the couches on which they stretch themselves — the picture of the self-indulgent ease of the person who has spread themselves out on the most expensive available furniture. The lambs from the flock and the calves from the stall — the picture of the finest and the most selective available provisions, the best of the livestock rather than the ordinary table fare. The chanting to the sound of the harp and the improvising of their own songs like David — the picture of the elaborate musical entertainment, the claiming of the Davidic musical tradition for the private enjoyment of the wealthy elite. The wine drunk in bowls rather than cups — the picture of the excessive consumption, the bowl being the container for ritual lustrations rather than the ordinary vessel for drinking wine. The finest oils for anointing — the picture of the elaborate personal grooming that characterizes the person who has unlimited resources for self-comfort.

But they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph of verse 6 is the most theologically concentrated indictment in the section, and it is deliberately placed at the end of the lifestyle catalogue to identify the specific spiritual failure that the lifestyle represents. The ruin of Joseph is the collapse of the northern kingdom — the devastating judgment that is coming on the house of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh, the dominant tribes of the north) that Amos has been announcing throughout the book. The wealthy of Samaria who are lying on the ivory couches and eating the finest lambs and drinking the wine in bowls and anointing themselves with the finest oils are not grieved by what is happening to the vulnerable communities around them. The comfort has anesthetized the grief. The insulation of the lifestyle has produced the specific spiritual failure that the chapter names as the core of the complacency indictment: not the luxury in itself, but the luxury that has produced the deadness of the compassion for the suffering of the community.

Plain American English

What sorrow awaits you who lounge in luxury in Jerusalem and you who feel secure in Samaria! You are famous and popular among the people of Israel, and they come to you for help. But go over to Calneh and see what happened there. Then go to the great city of Hamath and down to the Philistine city of Gath. You are no better than they were, and look what happened to them. You push away every thought of disaster, but you are only bringing on a day of judgment. How terrible for you who lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches, eating the meat of tender lambs from the flock and of choice calves from the stall. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest perfumes, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore, you will be among the first to go into exile. Your parties and your lounging will come to an end.

Key Observations

“Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria”: This signifies **The Woe Pronounced Over the Complacent Is the Formal Covenant Curse on the Community That Has Achieved the Security That Insulates It from the Experience of the Suffering of the Vulnerable.**

The woe to those who are at ease is the formal prophetic covenant curse pronounced over the community whose specific spiritual failure is the insulation of comfort rather than the specific wickedness of the act. The ease is not merely relaxation after legitimate labor; the trust is not merely the reasonable confidence of the established community. The at ease (shaanan) carries the connotation of the complacency that has settled in permanently, the settled-ness of the community that has decided the danger is far off and the comfort is here to stay. And the trust in the mountain of Samaria is the specific form of the false security: the geographical and military confidence in the stronghold that appears impregnable. The woe is pronounced not over the wickedness of the specific act but over the spiritual condition of the complacency that has produced the not-grieved of verse 6.

“Ye that put far away the evil day, and cause the seat of violence to come near”: This signifies **The Pushing Away of the Evil Day Is the Psychological Mechanism of the**

Complacency — the Deliberate Refusal to Reckon with the Approaching Judgment That Is the Cognitive Precondition of the Comfortable Lifestyle.

The putting far away of the evil day is the most psychologically precise observation in the section. The comfortable elite of Samaria are not unaware that there is a day of judgment that the prophets have been announcing; they have chosen to push it far away — to refuse to reckon with its proximity, to treat it as a distant theoretical possibility rather than the approaching reality that it is. And the causing the seat of violence to come near is the paradoxical consequence of pushing the evil day far away: the refusal to reckon with the approaching judgment is itself the behavior that brings the violent consequence closer. The complacency that pushes the judgment away is the complacency that makes the judgment inevitable by preventing the return that would avert it.

“But they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph”: This signifies **The Not-Grieved Is the Most Theologically Precise Indictment in the Section — Not the Luxury in Itself but the Luxury That Has Produced the Deadness of the Compassion for the Suffering of the Covenant Community.**

The they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph is the specific spiritual failure that the entire lifestyle catalogue of verses 4–6 has been building toward. The catalogue is not the indictment of luxury in itself; it is the indictment of the luxury that has produced the specific spiritual consequence of the not-grieved. The ivory beds and the finest lambs and the wine in bowls and the finest oils are not condemned because they are expensive but because they represent the insulation that has produced the deadness of the compassion. The community that has so thoroughly insulated itself from the experience of the suffering of the vulnerable that the ruin of Joseph does not produce the grief that the ruin should produce has committed the specific sin of the complacency chapter: not the external wickedness of the oppressor but the internal deadness of the one who is no longer capable of the grief that the suffering around them deserves.

“Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed”: This signifies **The Punishment of the First Exile Is the Most Precise Available Mirror of the Crime — the Community That Was First Among the Nations Will Be First Among the Exiles.**

The they shall now be the first to go into exile is the mirror judgment applied to the pride of the first of the nations: the community that has prided itself on being the notable men of the first of the nations will go into exile first, leading the procession of the exiled rather than the procession of the honored. The banquet of those who stretched themselves will come to an end — the specific form of the punishment corresponds to the specific form of the crime: the stretching out on the couches (the Hebrew *mirzach*, the luxurious party or feast) will be removed. The lifestyle that has produced the not-grieved will be the specific thing that the judgment strips away, leaving the first of the nations with nothing of the luxury that had insulated them from the grief that the ruin of Joseph deserved.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Examine the Relationship Between the Comfort of the Lifestyle and the Capacity for the Grief That the Suffering of Others Deserves — Whether the Insulation of the Comfortable

Life Has Produced the Not-Grieved: The most urgent diagnostic in the section is not the luxury itself but the not-grieved that the luxury has produced. The community of faith that has achieved a level of material comfort that insulates it from the felt experience of the suffering of the vulnerable communities in its midst and in the world should examine whether the insulation has produced the specific spiritual failure of the not-grieved. The question is not whether the community is aware of the ruin of Joseph — the contemporary equivalents of the ruin of Joseph are well-documented and easily available. The question is whether the awareness has produced the grief that the ruin deserves, or whether the insulation of the comfortable lifestyle has anesthetized the capacity for the grief.

2. Receive the Push Far Away the Evil Day as the Diagnostic of the Complacency That Prevents the Return by Refusing to Reckon with the Proximity of the Judgment: The putting far away of the evil day is the cognitive mechanism of the complacency that the chapter diagnoses. The contemporary community of faith that treats the judgment of God as a distant theoretical possibility rather than the approaching reality that the prophetic tradition consistently identifies has committed the complacency of verse 3. And the causing the seat of violence to come near is the paradoxical consequence: the refusal to reckon with the approaching judgment is itself the behavior that brings it closer, by preventing the return that the reckoning would produce.

3. Apply the Example of Calneh, Hamath, and Gath as the Pastoral Wisdom of Learning from the Fallen Rather Than Assuming Immunity on the Basis of the Present Comfortable Condition: The pass to Calneh and see is the invitation to the pastoral realism that reads the lessons of the fallen comparable communities rather than assuming that the present comfortable condition of the prosperous community is permanent and safe. The church, the denomination, the theological tradition, the cultural form of Christianity that was flourishing in a previous generation and is now diminished or gone is the Calneh and the Hamath and the Gath that the present prosperous community is being invited to visit. Are you better than they were? Is your border greater? Learn from the fallen rather than assuming immunity.

How This Relates to Today

The woe to those who are at ease in Zion is the most directly applicable verse in the chapter to the contemporary Western church, which has achieved a level of material prosperity, institutional comfort, and cultural insulation that closely corresponds to the condition of the notable men of the first of the nations whom Amos addresses. The at ease of the comfortable church — the church that has achieved the financial stability, the cultural standing, the institutional permanence, and the social comfort that insulates it from the felt experience of the suffering of the vulnerable communities in its midst — is the at ease that the chapter condemns. Not the comfort in itself, but the spiritual consequence of the comfort: the not-grieved.

The improvising of songs like David for the private entertainment of the comfortable elite is also one of the most culturally specific images in the chapter for its contemporary application. The claiming of the great spiritual and artistic traditions of the covenant community — the worship music, the theological heritage, the liturgical forms — for the private enjoyment and the self-expression of the comfortable elite, without the covenant justice requirements that the tradition

was designed to express and sustain, is the contemporary version of the inventing of songs like David for the private entertainment of the ivory couch. The musical tradition of the covenant community is not the private property of the comfortable; it is the expression of the covenant relationship with the God who requires the justice that the comfortable have not been grieved by the absence of.

Key Lesson: **The opening section establishes the chapter's governing indictment: the woe pronounced over the complacency of the comfortable notable men of the first of the nations who have achieved the insulation of the luxury lifestyle — the ivory couches and the finest lambs and the wine in bowls and the songs improvised like David — and have produced thereby the specific spiritual failure that is the core of the complacency crime: they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph; and the punishment is the precise mirror of the pride: the first among the nations will be first among the exiles.**

Amos 6:8–11

The LORD Has Sworn by Himself: The Abhorrence of the Pride of Jacob and the Silence of the Survivors

*(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.
(9) And it shall come to pass,
if there remain ten men in one house, that they shall die.
(10) And a man's uncle shall take him up,
and he that burneth him,
to bring out the bones out of the house,
and shall say unto him that is by the sides of the house,
Is there yet any with thee?
and he shall say, No.
Then shall he say, Hold thy peace:
for we may not make mention of the name of the LORD.
(11) For, behold, the LORD commandeth,
and he will smite the great house with breaches,
and the little house with clefts.*

The Context

The LORD has sworn by himself of verse 8 is the most solemn form of the divine oath available in the prophetic tradition — the self-oath that has no greater guarantee because there is nothing

greater than the divine self by which to swear. When the LORD swore by His holiness in chapter 4:2, the guarantee was the most fundamental divine attribute. When the LORD swears by Himself, the guarantee is His entire divine being: the oath is as irrevocable as the existence of the LORD. And what He has sworn is the abhorrence of the excellency of Jacob and the hating of the palaces: the pride of the first of the nations (verse 1), the greatness of the notable men of the most privileged covenant community, the palaces that have been built on the exploitation of the poor (chapter 3:15) — these are the objects of the divine abhorrence.

The I abhor the excellency of Jacob is the most comprehensive statement of the divine rejection of the covenant community's pride in the chapter. The excellency (gaon) is the word for the pride, the elevation, the greatness that the community has claimed for itself — the first of the nations pride that verse 1 named as the source of the complacency. And the abhor (maas) is the same word used in chapter 5:21 for the divine rejection of the feasts — the utter contempt for the worthless, the throwing away of what has no value. The excellence of Jacob that the community most values about itself — the pride of the covenant election, the greatness of the chosen nation, the notable-ness of the first of the nations — is the specific thing that the LORD most abhors about the community.

The scene of verses 9–10 is the most vivid and the most horrifying in the chapter: ten men surviving in a single house, then dying; the kinsman coming to remove the bones; the question is there anyone else with you? answered with no; and then the most chilling instruction: hush! for we must not mention the name of the LORD. The silence at the name of the LORD in the midst of the catastrophe is the most complex moment in the passage. Is the hush the protective silence of the person who fears that the mention of the divine name will attract more of the divine attention to the already catastrophic situation? Is it the silence of the person who has realized that the invoking of the divine name in this situation would be the false piety of the person who has brought the catastrophe on himself by his covenant unfaithfulness? Either way, the silence is the most complete available expression of the condition of the community that has reached the point where the name of the LORD cannot be spoken without the weight of the covenant violation crushing the speaker.

The great house smashed to pieces and the small house to bits of verse 11 is the comprehensive statement of the judgment's scope: not merely the wealthy elite who have been lying on the ivory couches, but the great and the small houses together. The judgment does not discriminate in favor of the small house because it was not lying on the ivory couches; the judgment is comprehensive and reaches everything in the city that the LORD delivers up with all that is in it (verse 8). The great house and the small house, the notable men and the ordinary inhabitants, the first of the nations and the last of the exiles — all of them go together in the judgment that the pride of Jacob has produced.

Plain American English

The Sovereign LORD has sworn by himself, and this is what the LORD God of Armies says: "I hate the arrogance of Israel, and I despise their fortresses. I will hand over this city and

everything in it to the enemy.” Then, if ten men are left alive in one house, they will all die. A relative who comes to carry out the body for burial will call to someone inside the house, “Is anyone else still in there?” The other person will answer, “No,” and then say, “Shh! Don’t mention the name of the LORD.” For the LORD has spoken, and when he speaks, the great houses will be totally demolished and the small houses will be smashed to pieces.

Key Observations

“The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself: I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces”: This signifies **The Self-Oath Is the Most Irrevocable Form of the Divine Commitment, and the Object of the Abhorrence Is the Specific Thing the Community Most Values About Itself — the Excellence and the Greatness That the Pride of Jacob Most Prizes.**

The sworn by himself is the most absolute form of the divine commitment because there is nothing greater than the divine being by which to swear — the oath is as irrevocable as the existence of God. And the object of the sworn abhorrence is the excellency of Jacob — the pride, the greatness, the elevation that the covenant community most values about itself. This is the theological precision that makes the divine oath so devastating: the LORD does not abhor the community’s obvious failures and obvious wickedness; He abhors the community’s pride in what it considers its greatest strengths. The excellency — the first-of-the-nations greatness, the notable-man privilege, the covenant election pride — is the specific thing that the LORD has sworn to abhor. The community that most needs to hear this is the community that most identifies its covenant privilege as the basis of its confidence.

“Hold thy peace: for we may not make mention of the name of the LORD”: This signifies **The Silence at the Name of the LORD in the Midst of the Catastrophe Is the Most Complex and Most Searching Moment in the Section — the Name That Cannot Be Spoken Without the Weight of the Covenant Violation Pressing Down on the Speaker.**

The hush! we must not mention the name of the LORD is one of the most haunting sentences in the book. The two most probable readings produce different but equally searching theological implications. If the silence is the fearful silence of the person who believes that invoking the divine name will attract more divine attention to the catastrophic situation, it is the silence of the superstitious panic of the one who has so thoroughly misunderstood the divine character that they believe the safest response to the divine judgment is to avoid mentioning the divine name. If the silence is the theologically aware silence of the person who recognizes that the invoking of the divine name in the midst of the catastrophe that the covenant violation has produced would be the hypocrisy of the one who calls on the name they have dishonored by their unfaithfulness, it is the silence of the honest acknowledgment that the name cannot be spoken without the weight of the violation pressing down. Either way, the silence is the most complete available description of the condition of the community that has reached the end of the covenant violation’s trajectory.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Receive the I Abhor the Excellency of Jacob as the Standing Correction of Every Form of the Covenant Community's Pride in Its Own Covenant Privilege, Its Own Spiritual Greatness, Its Own Notable-ness Among the Communities of Faith:

The divine oath of abhorrence is directed at the specific thing the community most values about itself — the excellency, the greatness, the first-of-the-nations pride. The contemporary church that takes pride in its theological heritage, its numerical growth, its cultural influence, its institutional legacy, its spiritual depth — and treats that pride as the basis of its confidence before God — has claimed for itself the excellency of Jacob. And the LORD has sworn by Himself that the excellency of Jacob is the object of His abhorrence. The covenant privilege is the ground of the accountability, not the ground of the pride.

2. Let the Silence at the Name of the LORD Produce the Honest Self-Examination of Whether the Community Is Maintaining the Forms of the Covenant Relationship in Ways That Make the Invoking of the Name a Form of Hypocrisy:

The hush! we must not mention the name of the LORD is the word for the community that has reached the point where the invoking of the divine name in the context of the community's actual life has become a form of hypocrisy — where the gap between the name being invoked and the life being lived has become so wide that the honest person cannot speak the name without the weight of the gap pressing down on the speaking. The honest self-examination is: can we invoke the name of the LORD in the context of our actual economic, social, and political life without the silence of the honest recognition pressing down?

How This Relates to Today

The I abhor the excellency of Jacob is one of the most directly countercultural verses in the book for the contemporary church that has been formed by the prosperity theology of the present age — the theology that treats numerical growth, financial abundance, cultural influence, and institutional success as the signs of the divine approval. The divine oath of verse 8 declares that the excellency — the very forms of the success that the prosperity theology treats as the evidence of the divine blessing — is the specific object of the divine abhorrence when it is the product of the covenant violation and the pride that the complacency has generated. The church that has achieved the excellency of Jacob by the methods of the comfortable elite of Samaria has achieved the object of the divine abhorrence, not the evidence of the divine blessing.

Key Lesson: **The oath section establishes the divine commitment to the judgment with the most irrevocable available form — the self-oath of the LORD who abhors the excellency of Jacob and hates the palaces — and the scene of the silence at the divine name is the most complex and most searching moment in the chapter: the haunting picture of the community that has reached the point where the name of the LORD cannot be spoken without the weight of the covenant violation pressing down on the speaking.**

Amos 6:12–14

Do Horses Run on Rocky Crags? The Moral Impossibility of the Perverted Justice and the Afflicting Nation

*(12) Shall horses run upon the rock?
will one plow there with oxen?
for ye have turned judgment into gall,
and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock:
(13) Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought,
which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?
(14) But, behold, I will raise up against you a nation,
O house of Israel, saith the LORD the God of hosts;
and they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hamath
unto the river of the wilderness.*

The Context

The two rhetorical questions of verse 12 are the most compact wisdom argument in the chapter and one of the most elegant in the book. Do horses run on rocky crags? Does one plow the sea with oxen? The expected answer to both is no: these are natural impossibilities — things that cannot be done because the nature of the activity is incompatible with the medium. Horses cannot run on rocky crags because hooves require level ground for the running that horses are made for; plowing the sea with oxen is impossible because the sea has no soil to plow and the plow has no medium to work in. The natural impossibilities are the frame for the moral impossibility: yet you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. The turning of justice into poison is as unnatural as the running of horses on rocky crags; it requires the same violent incompatibility between the nature of the activity and the medium in which it is being performed.

The you who rejoice in a thing of nothing of verse 13 is the most compressed description of the pride that preceded the fall: the community that has been celebrating its military victories and its political achievements — have we not taken Lo-debar for ourselves? have we not taken Karnaim by our own strength? — is rejoicing in things that are nothing. The lo-debar literally means nothing in Hebrew — the town whose name means not a thing is the thing being celebrated. The Karnaim means two horns in Hebrew — the symbol of strength and power. The community is celebrating the capture of a nothing and claiming it has achieved the horns of power by its own strength. The pride is self-generated and the celebration is over the nothing.

The I will raise up against you a nation of verse 14 is the most specific announcement of the judgment's human instrument in the chapter: a nation that the LORD will raise up to afflict Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah — from the northernmost to the southernmost extent of the territory that Israel has been celebrating the retention of under Jeroboam II. The complete sweep of the territory — from Hamath in the north to the Arabah in the south — is the complete sweep of the judgment: the same territory that has been the source of the military pride will be the territory that the afflicting nation sweeps from end to end. The horns that the community took by its own strength (verse 13) will be stripped by the nation that the LORD has raised up against it.

Plain American English

Can horses gallop over boulders? Can one plow the sea with oxen? But that's how absurd it is when you pervert justice into poison and the sweet fruit of righteousness into a bitter plant. And you brag about your conquest of Lo-debar. You say, "Didn't we capture Karnaim for ourselves by our own strength?" But the LORD God of Armies says: "O people of Israel, I am about to bring a foreign nation against you, and they will oppress you throughout your land — from Lebo-hamath in the north to the brook of Arabah in the south."

Key Observations

“Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock”: This signifies **The Natural Impossibilities Are the Frame for the Moral Impossibility — the Turning of Justice into Poison Is as Unnatural as Running Horses on Rocky Crags, Requiring the Same Violent Incompatibility Between the Nature of the Activity and the Medium.**

The wisdom argument of verse 12 is the most elegant in the chapter because it uses the self-evident natural impossibilities to establish the moral impossibility with the same logical force. The community that can easily affirm that horses cannot run on rocky crags and that the sea cannot be plowed with oxen is invited to apply the same logical force to the moral claim: the turning of justice into poison is equally impossible, equally unnatural, equally the product of the violent incompatibility between the nature of justice and the medium in which it is being administered. Justice is as incompatible with the poison of the perverted gate as hooves are incompatible with rocky crags. The image is not merely rhetorical; it is the most accurate available description of what the community has done: it has run the horses of justice on the crags of the corrupt gate and found that the horses cannot run there.

“Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?”: This signifies **The Celebration of the Nothing and the Claim of the Self-Generated Strength Are the Two Defining Features of the Pride That Has Preceded the Fall — the Military Victories That Are Celebrated as the Evidence of the Community's Own Power.**

The rejoicing in a thing of nothing and the have we not taken horns for ourselves by our own strength? are the two defining features of the pride that the chapter has been diagnosing from the first verse. The military victories of Jeroboam II's Israel — the retaking of territory, the extension of the borders, the capture of cities that the community is celebrating — are being claimed as the evidence of Israel's own military power rather than as the gift of the divine faithfulness that the covenant has always made clear is the only source of Israel's military success. The by our own strength is the most direct available statement of the pride of self-generated power — the claim that the community's achievements are the product of its own capacity rather than the gift of the covenant God whose strength is the only source of the community's genuine achievement.

“I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, and they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of the wilderness”: This signifies **The Afflicting Nation Raised Up by the LORD Sweeps the Same Territory That the Community Has Been Celebrating the Retention of — the Pride in the Territory Becomes the Frame of the Judgment That Strips It.**

The from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah is the complete sweep of the territory of Jeroboam II’s expanded Israel — the same territory whose military retention has been the source of the pride and the celebration of verses 12–13. The afflicting nation will sweep this territory from its northernmost to its southernmost extent, covering precisely the ground that the community has been celebrating as the evidence of its own military strength. The judgment takes the specific form of the specific pride: the territory that was taken by our own strength will be stripped by the nation that the LORD raises up. The by our own strength of verse 13 meets the I will raise up a nation of verse 14, and the claim of the self-generated achievement meets the reality of the divine sovereignty that the claim was denying.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Apply the Natural-Impossibility Wisdom Argument to the Moral Impossibility of the Perverted Justice — Learning to Name the Moral Impossibility with the Same Logical Force as the Natural Impossibility: The elegance of the horses-on-crags argument is its accessibility: everyone can see that horses cannot run on rocky crags and that the sea cannot be plowed with oxen. The challenge the wisdom argument poses is to apply the same logical force to the moral impossibility: to recognize that the turning of justice into poison is equally unnatural, equally the product of the violent incompatibility between the nature of justice and the medium in which it is being administered. The community of faith that can easily name the natural impossibilities should be equally able to name the moral impossibilities — to say with the same logical confidence that running justice on the crags of the corrupt system cannot work, that plowing righteousness in the sea of the exploitative economy will produce no harvest.

2. Examine the Military, Economic, and Institutional Successes of the Community for the Presence of the By-Our-Own-Strength Pride That Denies the Covenant God as the Source of Every Genuine Achievement: The have we not taken horns for ourselves by our own strength? is the standing diagnostic for every community of faith that is celebrating its institutional successes, its numerical growth, its financial achievements, its cultural influence — and attributing those successes to the community’s own capacity, strategy, talent, or effort. The covenant theology of the prophetic tradition is consistent and uncompromising: the genuine achievement of the covenant community is always the gift of the covenant God whose faithfulness is the only source of the community’s genuine strength. The by-our-own-strength pride is the pride that most thoroughly denies the covenant theology while benefiting from the covenant God’s faithfulness.

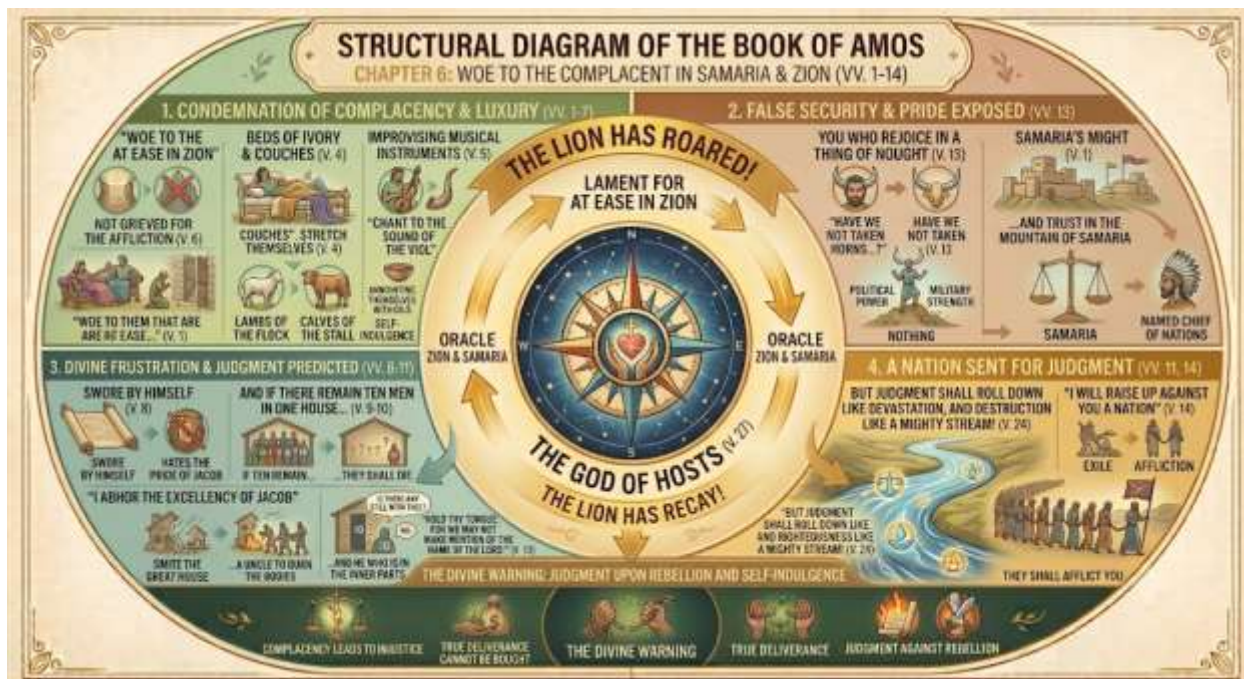
How This Relates to Today

The do horses run on rocky crags? wisdom argument is one of the most accessible and most applicable rhetorical devices in the chapter for the contemporary preaching and teaching of the

prophetic tradition's social ethic. The wisdom argument from natural impossibility to moral impossibility — from the self-evident natural truth to the equally self-evident moral truth — is one of the most effective available forms of the prophetic social critique because it does not rely on the hearer's prior commitment to the prophetic tradition's authority. The hearer who can see that horses cannot run on rocky crags can be invited to see that the community's justice cannot function in the medium of the corrupt gate — that the same incompatibility operates in both cases.

The afflicting nation from Hamath to the Arabah is the announcement of the Assyrian conquest of 722 BC in its most specific geographical form, and it closes the chapter with the reminder that the theological argument of the prophet is not merely abstract moral philosophy but the announcement of a specific historical event that is coming in a specific historical form. The nation that will afflict Israel from end to end of the territory that the community has been celebrating retaining is the Assyrian empire, whose advance Amos is announcing approximately forty years before it arrives. The comfort that pushes the evil day far away is the comfort that refuses to read the historical trajectory that the prophetic word is making plain.

Key Lesson: **The closing section of the chapter uses the natural impossibilities of the horses on rocky crags and the plowing of the sea to frame the moral impossibility of the perverted justice, names the celebrating of the nothing and the claim of the self-generated strength as the defining features of the pride that the LORD has sworn to abhor, and closes with the most specific geographical announcement of the judgment's human instrument: the afflicting nation that will sweep the territory from Hamath to the Arabah, stripping the same territory that the by-our-own-strength pride has been celebrating.**



Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close Amos chapter 6 having received the most socially specific word in the book. We have heard the woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and we have recognized ourselves in the comfortable community that the woe addresses. We have heard the catalogue of the ivory couches and the finest lambs and the wine in bowls and the improvised songs and the finest oils, and we have recognized the lifestyle of the community that has insulated itself from the ruin of Joseph. And we have heard the most damning indictment of the catalogue: they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. Not that they are unaware. Not that they are deliberately indifferent. But that the comfort has anesthetized the grief, and the grief that the ruin deserves has not come.

Lord, produce in us the grief that the ruin of Joseph deserves. The ruin of Joseph in our own time and our own context — the suffering of the vulnerable communities in our midst and in the world, the poverty and the injustice and the structural oppression that the comfortable life of the covenant community has helped to sustain and has failed to address — let this ruin produce the grief that the insulation of the comfort has been preventing. Let the anesthesia wear off. Let the not-grieved become the grieved.

And let the do horses run on rocky crags? be the wisdom question that produces the honest acknowledgment of the moral impossibility of the justice we have been attempting to run on the crags of the corrupt system. We have turned justice into poison. We have turned the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. Let the natural impossibility expose the moral impossibility with the same clarity that the wisdom argument deploys, and let the exposure produce the return to the seeking of good and the establishing of justice in the gate that chapter 5 called for.

Let the excellency of Jacob that we have been priding ourselves on become the object of the honest examination rather than the ground of the comfortable confidence. You have sworn by Yourself that You abhor it. Let us see it as You see it, and let the seeing produce the return that the abhorrence is designed to provoke.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone