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### PREPARE TO MEET YOUR GOD<sup>1</sup>

By John Cheeseman

A radio “Any Questions” panel was once asked – which of the following had the most influence on British society:- the petticoat, the pulpit or the press? As you can imagine, this provoked some lively debate, but upon one thing the panellists were totally agreed. Of the three, the pulpit was undoubtedly the least significant. Indeed, they said that it would make little difference, if the church ceased to exist altogether!

I guess that is a conclusion with which the majority of folk in Britain today would probably agree. For the most part, the church (and particularly the Church of England) has compromised the truths of the Bible, in order to jump on the latest bandwagon. The church therefore only has itself to blame if radio panellists find it so easy to write off Christianity.

One thing is sure – they would not have found it so easy to dismiss the prophet Amos. Unlike so many preachers today, he wasn’t content just to stick to the safe ground. As we’ve seen from previous articles, he was prepared to challenge the social, moral and political evils of the day and he did so in no uncertain terms. In fact, chapter 4 of his prophecy comes very close to answering the question put to that “Any Questions” panel.

In verses 1 to 3, he comments on the power of women in his day. Verses 4 and 5 contain his thoughts about the influence of the church, and verses 6 to 11 are a comment on the power of the daily news. However, the prophet doesn’t just leave things there. He isn’t merely content to evaluate the influence of the petticoat, the pulpit and the press. In verses 12 and 13, he gives us God’s view of the situation, if we continue to disregard His repeated warnings. We could therefore summarize chapter four as follows:- the petticoat, the pulpit, the press and finally the prognosis.

In verses 1 to 3, Amos addresses the petticoat, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan!”<sup>2</sup> Come off it I hear you say – is that any way to speak of female members of the Israelite aristocracy? Perhaps I should explain that in 8th Century BC Israel, to call a woman a cow was not necessarily vulgar or abusive. In fact, it might even be interpreted as a compliment! In the Song of Solomon the lover tells his girlfriend that she has teeth like a flock of freshly shorn sheep, and a neck like the tower of David (Song ch 4: 2, 4). I can’t see him getting very far today with that chat-up line in the back row of the cinema, but obviously in those days it worked like a charm!

Joking apart, I’m fairly sure this particular metaphor was heavy with sarcasm. “Yes, cows of Bashan – that’s all you noble ladies really are. You are pampered pets, living only to indulge your appetites, like cows in the pasture. The only thing of interest is what’s in the feeding trough. All you care about is your luxurious lifestyle.” Amos goes on to mention how they oppress the poor and crush the needy. They say to their husbands, “Bring, that we may drink!” It doesn’t take much imagination to visualise the number of empty gin bottles in the dustbin. Here was petticoat power in the 8th Century B.C. But notice God’s response in verses 2 and 3. In no way was He going to let them get away with such behaviour. They behaved like cows, so they would be butchered like cows!

Women can have a great influence for good or ill in society. Alec Motyer writes in his commentary on this passage: “women are the trend-setters in society. They have ever been the final guardians of morals, fashions and standards.” (*Day of the Lion* – page 93. IVP 1974). What an awesome responsibility is laid upon the female sex to use that influence for the glory of God. Women have

power within a marriage. It is often said that behind any great man there is usually a woman of equal quality. In the market place, it is the women who are the principal consumers. They decide how money is spent. If you don't believe that, ask the advertisers. Women also have power in the nursery. Who can dispute the special bond which exists between a mother and a baby. Yes, petticoat power is real, and therefore it must be exercised responsibly. It will be judged by no one less than almighty God Himself (verses 2 and 3).

What about the pulpit? In verses 4 and 5 Amos sets about mocking Israel's false worship. Indeed he raises the stakes by urging the people to increase their sin by worshipping more fervently! These words must have sounded blasphemous, but the prophet was really condemning their devotions as a round of pious platitudes. Oh yes, it was great fun. They thoroughly enjoyed it, but there was no real connection with God. In fact, the people of Israel loved religious services more than they loved God. Is it possible that we can be infatuated with praise and worship, because it makes us feel good? Do we worship, because we love God, or because we just love to worship? Singing Christian songs to romantic tunes can sometimes become a big ego-trip.

Why do we go to church? Is it because our friends will notice if we aren't there, and then start asking awkward questions? Or is it out of habit, and we feel guilty if we don't go? Is there any relationship between going to church on a Sunday and the way that we live our lives during the rest of the week? There is no hypocrisy more deceptive than religious hypocrisy.

This brings us to the press. Verses 6 to 11 list a catalogue of disasters in Israel. Indeed their whole history had been a story of close shaves – “you were as a brand plucked out of the burning” (verse 11). Now you would have thought that such happenings as famine and disease would have been newsworthy. Not a bit of it! Like the readers of today's tabloids, the general public was much more interested in entertaining events, like the new disco at Bethel, maybe – or the latest scandal among those rich ladies of Samaria.

As far as Amos was concerned, these calamities were warnings sent by God to shake the people out of their spiritual and moral complacency. But the newspapers of ancient Israel didn't interpret them like that at all. They were just unfortunate accidents – regrettable set-backs, bad luck – nothing at all to do with the judgement of God. Every time the response of the people to news of these events was the same – “Yet you did not return to me”, declares the Lord (verses 6, 8, 9, 10, 11).

How does today's press interpret present-day natural disasters? Drought? It's all due to deforestation. Floods? That's all down to global warming. Earthquakes and volcanoes? That's geological faults. Epidemics? They're caused by viruses. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that science cannot provide explanations for these phenomena. However, the Bible wants to go a step further and say that behind all the natural explanations lies the sovereign plans and purposes of almighty God. Notice the first person singular in every news story of this chapter. “I gave” (v6), “I withheld” (v7), “I would send” (v7), “I struck” (v9), “I killed” (v 10), “I overthrew” (v11). Remember ch 3 v6, “does disaster come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?” When we read of disasters in our newspapers, we are not to regard them as unfortunate accidents. C. S. Lewis once described them as God's megaphone, calling men and women to repentance.

This of course leads us to the prognosis. Verse 12 “Because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel.” How we human beings love to run away from disturbing realities. We ignore the toothache, until we have to have the tooth out. We overspend, until we're bankrupt. We know trouble is coming, but we ignore the warnings. As in Israel, so in today's society. But the Bible says – watch out. Prepare to meet your God. If you were to die tonight, how would it be between you and your Maker? Is the prognosis good or bad?

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Endnotes:

- 1) This is the fourth in a series of expositions by John Cheeseman from the book of Amos.
- 2) All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (E.S.V.).