

Preserved amongst the collections of sayings in the book of Amos, are the visions and oracles of the man Amos, truly a “social revolutionary.”<sup>1</sup> Amos’ words preserve his mission to present a message of doom to his audience, which for Amos is the result of the theophany of his visions playing on his background combining the standards of justice of the wisdom tradition with Mosaic covenant theology.

Amongst the visions and oracles the editorial hand is betrayed by the interpolation of fragments of hymns and journalism within internally consistent groups of sayings. The problem of finding the original words and the social landscape from which they came amongst the final redaction available today is concerned to some extent with the arrangement of the collection and to the testable accuracy of what is said, but primarily with the further problem of who Amos was, and with the target and meaning of his message. Amos has no direct earlier precedent in the Tanak and as such we can only test for the authenticity of each saying by comparing it to the overall thrust of his message, and applying what we can learn of Amos’ background from his book.

Of the man who delivered the oracles precious little in the way of biographical data is given in Amos. The prophet reveals nothing directly in his visions nor in his oracles, and the third person fragments of journalism are sketchy indeed. The superscript (1:1) places him as a native of Tekoa, ten miles south of Jerusalem in Judea, and in time at about 760 BCE.<sup>2</sup> He is called there a shepherd, and in the only other biographical piece describes himself in answer to Amaziah the priest of Bethel, saying:

I was no prophet, neither did I belong to any of the brotherhoods of prophets...I was a shepherd, and looked after sycamores: but it was Yahweh

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, R.B.Y., “The Relevance of the Prophets” Macmillan, New York. 1968. p185.

<sup>2</sup> Fohrer, G. “Introduction to the New Testament” SPCK, London. 1970. p431.

who took me from herding the flock, and Yahweh who said, “Go prophesy to my people Israel.” Amos 7:14-15.

The Jerusalem Bible’s interpretation, “I was no prophet” is speculative since the tense is not present in the Hebrew,<sup>3</sup> but is sensible as ,since his call, Amos is by definition a prophet, if not a professional.

The indirect evidence from his writing is overwhelmingly that he is a man of intelligence and education; writing forceful, passionate poetry and at times sounding like a Fabian socialist. He is called a “man of some reputation and substance,”<sup>4</sup> and of “solid peasant stock.”<sup>5</sup> He would have been well versed in the tradition of his home community and would likely reflect this in his writings.

A part of this tradition which Amos shows in his sayings is of the Mosaic covenant. He recalls Israel’s election by Yahweh (3:2), and his mighty works in their history, especially the exodus (2:9, 3:1). His community is likely to have been one where the original covenant of the old tribal federation was remembered and kept alive. What is fresh in Amos is his emphasis on the very negative aspects of being chosen by Yahweh.

You alone, of all the families of earth, have I acknowledged, therefore it is for all your sins that I mean to punish you. Amos 3:2

For Amos, the aspect of covenant theology most relevant to his ministry is the curse Israel has brought upon itself by breaking its covenant with Yahweh. Anderson’s exposition of the suzerainty treaty, which closely parallels this covenant, interestingly

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Von Rad, G., “The Message of the Prophets” SCM, London. 1958. p102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

includes “the threat of judgment, even total destruction”<sup>6</sup> upon the nation violating the treaty.

The words of Amos, while revealing he had the covenant tradition available to him, in their form uncover his debt to the wisdom movement. In the sort of words used and the historical devices found in Amos’s oracles, Wolff finds parallels amongst the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Amos repeatedly concerns himself with the administration of justice at the gates (5:10, 5:15) the province of wise elders.<sup>8</sup> Justice and righteousness and the concept of fair dealing are important to Amos and these too are found in the wisdom writings of Proverbs and Sirach.<sup>9</sup> The rhetorical forms of the oracles, the numerical progressions found in the oracles against the nations, for example, reproduce formulae found mainly in wisdom literature.<sup>10</sup>

Amos then is in the position of being a prophet writes in the idiom of wisdom. Wisdom and Prophecy were not an unknown combination, Ahitophel being an example from David’s time (2 Sam 16:23).<sup>11</sup> Around the same time a woman renowned for her wisdom was brought from Tekoa to David’s court (2 Sam 14:1-21).<sup>12</sup> This confirms the wisdom tradition was available to Amos and fills in his background as a prophet drawing on both Mosaic covenant and wisdom traditions.

The five visions are for Amos a call to prophesy containing the insight which demands a response of his ministry. They are his first person accounts of encounters with God, from a homogenous group, and must be authentic, as the centrepiece of the collection, which would be meaningless without them. They show Yahweh’s

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, B.W., “The Living World of the Old Testament.” Longman, Essex. 1978. p89.

<sup>7</sup> Wolff, H.W., “Amos the Prophet.” Fortress, Philadelphia. 1973. p6-74.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, op cit, p89.

<sup>9</sup> Wolff, op cit, p 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> Mays, J.L. “Amos.” Old Testament Library. 1969. p24.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, op cit, p533.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

anger initially restrained by pity, but in the last three visions his mercy is exhausted. The third vision of the plumbline, a symbol of what is true and upright, against which Israel is measured and found wanting, is a coalescence of wisdom concepts with covenant theology. The effect of the visions leading up to the total destruction of Israel is Amos's call to prophesy.

The Lord Yahweh speaks: who can refuse to prophesy? (Amos 3:86)

Our record of his prophetic response is the oracles which reflect a search for the reasons for the coming holocaust, his social commentary all the more acute because of his insight that he speaks to a doomed people.<sup>13</sup> His career was very likely a short one, delivering oracles at Samaria and Bethel, probably at the Autumn festival,<sup>14</sup> prior to likely banishment. The problems of which sayings are delivered by Amos during his ministry can be addressed primarily by what fits the background of the man in his wisdom and covenant traditions.

Commencing with the book's conclusion, Amos here is purported to have abandoned his message of total destruction, for a message of hope (9:9-15). This contradicts the fifth vision and numerous references in the earlier oracles (eg 2:13-16, 3:11-12, 5:1-2). This message of hope for rebuilding is more in tune with Davidic theology, foreign to Amos' ministry and is rightly regarded as a late addition of the exilic period.<sup>15</sup> A more apposite conclusion is found in 9:8 which conceivably once was the ending of the collection.

The oracles to the nations form a collection which gives detail which is investigable and content which can be searched for Amos's trademarks. Damascus, Gaza,

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<sup>13</sup> Von Rad, *op cit*, p103.

<sup>14</sup> Weiser, A., "Introduction to the Old Testament." Darton, Longman and Todd, London. 1961. p242.

<sup>15</sup> Lindblom, J., "Prophecy in Ancient Israel." Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 1978. p285.

Ammon and Moab are subject to Yahweh's judgment for specific crimes against natural justice and fair dealing between neighbouring nations. Amos is interested in individual cases which damn each nation, as befits one of the wise concerned with administration of civil justice at the gate. The oracle against Damascus contains a crime described elsewhere (2 Kings 13:3-7) of their destruction of Gilead<sup>16</sup> only forty or so years prior to Amos's ministry and well within memory.

The oracle against Judah does not sit well with the prophet's background and along with similar pieces against Tyre and Edom is regarded as not authentic.<sup>17</sup> Tyre's crime is merely a copy of that of Gaza, and Edom's crime has been associated with events long after the time of Amos.<sup>18</sup> Judah has no specific crime recorded against it, but general crimes against Yahweh, uncharacteristic of Amos, but most redolent of Deuteronomist style.<sup>19</sup> Other Deuteronomistic insertions have been noted elsewhere in Amos, especially 3:7 where the interruption of the poetry is again out of character for Amos.<sup>20</sup>

Amos had no need for an oracle against Judah because although he delivered his oracles in the Northern Kingdom, he sees judgment coming for all the people of Yahweh. He has no trouble with the concept of the whole people suffering for the crime of one section of a nation. In the oracles against Gaza and Damascus, the whole Philistine pentapolis is judged for the crimes of Gaza, and Arameans as far away as Betheden near the Euphrates are included in the punishment of Damascus.<sup>21</sup> It is not implausible therefore to include Judah in the judgment of Israel, and Amos strongly hints that this is so.

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<sup>16</sup> Mays, op cit, p 30.

<sup>17</sup> Fohrer, op cit, p436.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mays, op cit, p40-41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p61.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Listen sons of Israel, to this oracle Yahweh speaks against you, against the whole family I brought out of the land of Egypt. (Amos 3:1-2)

The prophet spreads his criticisms to Judah, including Judean sanctuaries with the Israelite centres of worship he targets (5:5, 8:14) and notes Jerusalem to be as falsely secure as Samaria. (6:1)

That being said the main thrust of the oracles is the specific crimes and social circumstances of the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam II presided over a politically successful time for Israel, pushing back the northern border to the extent of Solomon's empire, and containing the hostile surrounding nations.<sup>22</sup> Amos rails against the conspicuous material wealth that accompanied this, because it was associated with oppression of the poor, injustice, corruption and a smug, hollow, formal religion devoid of the righteousness Amos valued so much. These oracles fit nicely with his passion for justice and it is likely the majority are authentic. The three oracles against corruption and oppression in Samaria (3:9-12, 5:7-15, 8:4-14) are all basic to this concern with justice, especially toward the poor. Those against self-indulgent luxury (4:1-3, 6:1-7) are again in accord with his concern for fair dealing. The sanctuary of Bethel suffers repeated attacks summarised best in the piece 5:21-2.

Let me have no more of the din of your chanting  
no more of your strumming of harps  
But let justice flow like water,  
and integrity like an unfailing stream. Amos 5:23-24.

Of the remnant of the collection, fragments of a hymn appear throughout the collection, but appear to be inconsistent with the thrust of Amos's ministry. The pieces (4:13, 5:8-9, 9:5-6 and perhaps 1:2) jar with his antifestival, anticult oracles in which he parodies the priests (4:4) and derides the sanctuaries as useless (5:5). It is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p61.

unlikely then that a psalm would find a place in the words of Amos and it is far more likely that compilers of the collection, for use in a later cultic environment more ready for Amos's message, included the verses at appropriate intervals in the collection of oracles.

Finding the original words of an original prophet like Amos depends not only on unravelling the work of the collection's editors, but on finding a tradition against which the individual sayings can be judged. In Amos, a book with no logical antecedents, it is to the tradition of Wisdom and Mosaic covenant theology revealed in the book, and to the internally consistent message of the prophet that we must turn to assist in identifying the original oracles of Amos.

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