

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

Shiur #02: The Prophecies of Amos: Introduction

This chapter will present the historic background of Amos's prophecies, along with a brief biographic sketch of the prophet. We will then look at the opening lines of his prophecy and assay its role within his oratory.

The Middle East, c. 8th century BCE

Any assessment of the 8th century BCE in the Levant must take into account the role of Assyria. The empire to the east goes through periods of expansion and conquest, punctuated by lulls when the empire is led by relatively weak rulers. After the demise of Shamshi-Adad V (811 BCE), Assyria enters a "quiet" period and its potential vassals to the west have a nearly-seventy-year respite. As its traditional enemy Aram is weakened, the Kingdom of Israel (also known as the Northern Kingdom and as Shomeron, after its capital) enters a period of nearly unprecedented growth and prosperity. This wealth accrues exclusively to the ruling classes, creating and expanding the social and class divide in the nation. The prosperity leads to a (nearly inevitable) overconfidence, which impacts in two critical areas. First, the cockiness inherent in material success erodes military readiness. More critically – from the perspective of the prophet – religious sensitivity diminishes as the haughtiness of "my own strength and the power of my hands generated this wealth" sets in.

It is on this stage that Amos, Hoshea, Mikha and Yeshayahu appear – during a period of material success with dark clouds on the horizon that only a prophet could see. By the time that Tiglath-Pileser III ascends the Assyrian throne in 745 BCE, Israel has already suffered a devastating earthquake likely understood by the people (in retrospect) as a sign of things to come. Tiglath-Pileser III reinvigorates Assyria's lust for territory and resumes the westward conquest. This

process culminates, from a parochial perspective, with the decimation of the Israelite kingdom a mere twenty-three years later. In hindsight, this is an era that almost begs for the messages of the prophets; but, of course, the audience isn't listening...

Amos: The Superscription

The words of Amos, who was one of the *nokedim* from Tekoa, who prophesied concerning Yisrael during the reign of Uzziya the king of Yehuda and during the reign of Yeravam ben Yo'ash the king of Yisrael, two years before the earthquake.

Part 1 – The Biographical Sketch

Like a number of prophetic books, Amos begins with an introductory verse that sets the context for the prophetic collection. In the first half of this title verse, we are given the name of the prophet (Amos), his livelihood (*noked* – see below) and his hometown (Tekoa). The biographic data given about prophets varies. In some cases, the opening verse of a prophetic book tells us about tribal association (e.g. “Yirmeyahu... of the Kohanim”) or the prophet's lineage (e.g. “Zekharya ben Berekhya ben Ido”). Rabbinical tradition has a formulaic approach to these variations. If we are given the father's name, it means that the father was also a prophet. In the case of Zekharya, both his father and grandfather were prophets. If we are not told of the prophet's hometown, the default is Yerushalayim.

Being informed about the prophet's livelihood is unusual. Although in some cases we may be able to infer how the prophet made a living, this is the only case where his vocation is explicitly stated. The significance of this becomes apparent in the one narrative piece in the book. In Chapter 7 (vv. 10-17), Amos confronts Amatzya, the priest at the royal sanctuary at Beit El. When Amatzya tells him to leave the royal temple, he states: “Seer, flee to the land of Yehuda...” (ibid. v. 12). Amos's response is the source of a well-known aphorism: “*Lo navi anokhi ve-lo ven navi anokhi*,” “I am neither a *navi*, nor am I a *ven navi*.” (We will leave the full translation of that phrase for our treatment of Chapter 7). Amos then concludes that he is in fact a herdsman (*boker*) and a dresser of sycamores. His defense is that he had never intended to act as a messenger of God's word and that he has a “regular” job from which God plucked him, directing him to deliver *nevua*. We now understand why we are told about Amos's livelihood when we first meet him.

Parenthetically, we seem to be facing a surfeit of data. Unless *noked* (the vocation given in our opening verse) means “herdsman” or something to do with tending trees, we have conflicting information about what Amos does for a living.

Indeed, the classical commentators as well as the modern biblical dictionaries direct our attention to *II Melakhim* 3:4. “Mesha, king of Moav, was a *noked* and he paid the king of Israel a tribute” — annually? once? — “of 100,000 fatted lambs and 100,000 rams with their wool.” It is clear from context that a *noked* is a shepherd. Radak explains that a shepherd is called a *noked* because sheep are often spotted (*nekudim*, cf. *Bereishit* 30:32). It is reasonable to suggest that *noked* is synonymous with *boker* in Chapter 7. Indeed, Driver even suggests emending the text; but, as is often the case with such extravagant proposals, it is unnecessary. Amos is likely a seasonal worker, who herds both sheep and cattle for ranch owners, as well as working in sycamore groves. In any case, he is not a professional prophet, but rather a farmworker summoned by God for his mission.

Part 2 – The Timeframe

As sketched out in the introductory chapter, the first four of the “literary” prophets operate during the same time period. Their books, which comprise the “first wave” of prophetic oratory, are identified temporally in their opening verses; with one exception, they are dated based on the kings who rule during their careers. The one exception is our case, as we will see.

These four all have careers that span parts of the last two thirds of the 8th century BCE. Hoshea, Yeshayahu and Amos are all associated with the king Uzziya, who ruled from somewhere around the beginning to around the middle of that century. The information that we do have is that he ruled for fifty-two years (including the last years of his reign spent in seclusion due to his *tzara’at*); scholars are divided as to where to place these fifty-two years. Amos is the only one who is limited to Uzziya’s reign; the rest have careers that last through the periods of his successors, Yotam, Achaz and – in the case of Yeshayahu and Hoshea – Chizkiyahu. Indeed, the most famous narratives in Yeshayahu involve his direct interactions with Chizkiyahu. Does this mean that Amos’s career ends earlier than that of the others? This is quite possible, but not definitively so.

As may be seen from the chart below, Amos is the only one of the four whose prophecy is singularly aimed at the Northern Kingdom. Yet for some reason, his prophecy is also dated to the reign of Uzziya, king of the Southern Kingdom. Yeshayahu, whose prophecy is exclusively addressed to the Judean kingdom, is not dated to any Israelite king. Hoshea, whose intended audience is not stated at the outset, is associated with those same four Judean kings, as well as Yeravam ben Yo’ash (commonly known as “Yeravam II”). This is strange, but resolving the difficulty may help explain the mention of Uzziya in Amos 1:1.

Here’s what’s unusual: Yeravam rules for forty-one years, but his rule terminates early in Uzziya’s reign. It is therefore asynchronous to have a prophetic career dated to Yeravam (and no later king), along with the four Judean kings.

I would like to suggest that the dating scheme is not *merely* a device for identifying *when* the prophet operates. It also tells us something about the content of each mission.

In the case of Yeshayahu, it is an entirely Judean book. Yeshayahu lives in Yerushalayim, addresses the aristocracy and royal families there and pays more attention to the surrounding nations (chapters 13-23) than to the Northern Kingdom.

Regarding Mikha, the mention of his mission being to “Shomeron and Yerushalayim” is a way of mentioning the north yet avoiding any mention of the names of those kings (Radak at *Mikha* 1:1). Those kings are generally regarded as wicked and if mentioning their names can be avoided, so be it.

Hoshea’s prophecy is aimed at both communities and, as such, both houses are mentioned.

Amos, however, is a unique prophet whose home base is as symbolically significant as is his audience. He is identified as hailing from the south (Tekoa is a city of Yehuda and is identified with *Khirbet Tuqu’*, just outside of modern-day Tekoa in Gush Etzion). Yet his mission is to chastise the Northern Kingdom – and *only* the Northern Kingdom. As we will see in 1:2, the opening verse of his prophecy expresses exactly that geographic dissonance; the roaring of God from the south withers the pastures of the north. As such, it is vital that a Judean king be mentioned in his introduction, to generate the association with Yerushalayim, the source of his message. The mention of Yeravam, however, may also serve a purpose beyond dating. In the narrative passage in Chapter 7, Amos is presented by Amatzya the priest as being a troublesome rabble-rouser against Yeravam. It may indeed be the case that Amos’s career outlasts Yeravam’s – but the exclusive mention of Yeravam in the title verse may serve to foreshadow the confrontation between king and prophet that will define Amos’s agency.

Comparing the Introductions of the “Four Prophets”

Name	Father	Town	Livelihood	Judean Kings	Israelite Kings	Target
Yeshayahu	Amotz	--	--	Uzziya, Yotam, Achaz, Chizkiyahu	-	Yehuda, Yerushalayim
Hoshea	Be’eri	--	--	Uzziya, Yotam, Achaz, Chizkiyahu	Yeravam ben Yo’ash	--
Amos	--	Tekoa	herder, dresser of sycamores	Uzziya	Yeravam ben Yo’ash	Yisrael
Mikha	--	Maresha	--	Yotam, Achaz,		Shomeron <i>and</i>

				Chizkiyahu		Yerushalayim
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The final note in the superscription is, again, unusual in the introduction of a prophetic collection. It dates (the onset of) Amos's career to "two years before the earthquake." In all other introductions to prophetic collections – when such introductions exist at all – some biographical information is provided; a timeframe, when given, is always associated with the reigns of either Israelite or Judean kings – or both. Just as no other prophet is introduced with a mention of his vocation, similarly no other prophet is dated against the backdrop of a natural event. To be sure, some of Yirmeyahu's and Yechezkel's prophecies are dated against the background of political events of the day (e.g. *Yirmeyahu* 24:1, *Yechezkel* 1:1). The relevance of these associations is, however, quite evident, since the content of each prophecy is directly related to that event. For instance, Yechezkel's vision in which he is informed about the significance of the tenth day of the tenth month comes with his being informed that on that selfsame day the king of Bavel began his siege against Yerushalayim. In the case of Amos, however, things are not as clear. What does the earthquake have to do with his prophecy? Is it relevant to the entire collection, which would justify its inclusion in the superscription? How so?

Midrash Tanchuma (Tzav 13) associates the earthquake with Uzziya's being stricken with *tzara'at* (see II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 26:16-21). Alternatively, *Seder Olam Rabba* (ch. 20) identifies the earthquake with *Yeshayahu* 6:1, "the year of Uzziya's death." This last dating is difficult in light of our superscription. Since Uzziya rules for fifty-two years and the last thirty-eight of those are after Yeravam's time, it would mean that Amos's prophetic career begins in Uzziya's fiftieth year – well after Yeravam's death. This would make the mention of Yeravam, not to mention the indirect confrontation between them (Chapter 7), indecipherable. We will leave the relevance of the mention of the earthquake for later and will revisit it towards the end of our study of Amos.

Amos's Anthem

Verse 2 reads:

And he would say (*va-yomar*):

God roars from Tziyon,

And from Yerushalayim He sends forth His voice.

The pastures of the shepherds will mourn

And the top of the Carmel will wither.

Even though the opening word *va-yomar* is generally seen as a syntactically-driven synonym with *va-yomer*, I have chosen to translate and read it as a refrain, "He would say," for two reasons. First of all, had Amos uttered this only

once, in advance of the first collection of oracles, it would have read “*Va-yomer Amos, And Amos said,*” or, more likely, “*Ko Amar Hashem, Thus says God,*” and the description of God’s voice would have been presented in the first person. In addition, the verse would have been appended to other prophecies, instead of its actual place, juxtaposed to the superscription. More significantly, the image of God’s voice emanating from Yerushalayim, from the Temple, is a subtext throughout Amos’s prophecies. The overall messages of Amos’s oracles fit this theme and it is reasonable to call this passage an “anthem.”

This tense is one we refer to as the “continuous future,” which is expressed in *Tanakh* in the future tense but clearly intended, from context, to be a description of ongoing, regular behavior. The classic example of this is *Iyov* 1:5: “*Kakha ya’aseh Iyov kol ha-yamim, This is what Iyov would do all the days.*”

In addition, a significant number of the instances of *va-yomar* in *Tanakh* preface sayings that are either repeated or that seem to be part of a regular prayer tradition. For instance, when Avraham addresses God in his request to spare the cities of Sedom, the text prefaces his arguments with *va-yomar*, and these are repeated, formulaic arguments. When Malkitzedek praises God and Avraham (*Bereishit* 14), the text prefaces his blessings with *va-yomar*; but, again, these seem to be somewhat formulaic blessings. It is not hard to imagine that these were blessings that the king of Shalem bestowed on special occasions. Most telling is the description of Yona’s declaration in Nineveh, which is prefaced by “*Va-yikra va-yomar*” (*Yona* 3:4). From the context of the story, it seems clear that the warning that “in forty days Nineveh will be overturned (i.e. destroyed)” was repeated by the prophet and was not a one-time declaration.

This approach is particularly significant in light of Malbim’s claim that the roaring voice of God withering the pastures is a poetic reference to the earthquake mentioned at the end of the superscription. This would explain the inclusion of the earthquake in the superscription and may militate in favor of this being a repeated anthem that Amos uses to preface each of his prophecies.

God Roars from Tziyon

The use of the lion and its roar as a metaphor for God’s voice and God’s anger is not unique to Amos. Although, significantly, Yeshayahu uses it (5:29) to describe Assyria’s impending attack, Amos (here and 3:4, 8) and Hoshea (11:10) both use it to describe God’s voice. Although Yirmeyahu adopts Amos’s imagery (25:30), this is not unusual. Further on in the series, we will investigate Yirmeyahu’s strong reliance on Amos’s prophecies.

The closest parallel to Amos’s anthem-phrase is found in *Yoe/* 4:16:

God will roar from Tziyon and will send forth His voice from Yerushalayim; the heavens and earth will shake but God will be a refuge for His people and a stronghold for the Israelites.

The first two phrases in this verse are an exact duplicate of Amos's first stich. One would have to surmise that, following nearly all authorities who date *Yoel* to a later era (Abravanel excepted), Amos's anthem is a well-known prophetic aphorism and appropriated by later prophets. The significant difference between Yoel's use and that of Amos is timeframe. If Amos is referring to his own words as representing the roaring voice of God, then God's voice is currently going forth. If, per Malbim, it is a prophetic hint to the earthquake, it is imminent. On the other hand, the entire last chapter of *Yoel* is eschatological and is a terrifying vision of "*Yom Hashem*, the Day of God." The added phrase, "the heavens and earth will shake," serves to raise Amos's imagery to the level of otherworldly and associate it with apocalyptic typology.

The other obvious difference is in the second stich. Whereas the impact of God's roar in Amos's vision is the destruction of Israel, Yoel's carries with it protection for Israel. The critical difference rests in the meaning of the "vav" that connects the stichs. The "vav" in Amos, "*ve-avelu*," is interpreted as a straight conjunction, perhaps causal. To wit, "God roars," and as a result "the pastures... will mourn." On the other hand, the vav in *Yoel* is a *vav ha-nigud* (vav of negation). In other words, *even though* "God will roar from Tziyon and will send forth His voice from Yerushalayim" – shaking heaven and earth – nonetheless, He "will be a refuge for His people and a stronghold for the Israelites." Yoel turns Amos's anthem inside out, using it apocalyptically rather than locally, and presenting it as a source of consolation rather than a threat.

A final word about Amos's "anthem." If, following Malbim, we read this passage as referring to the earthquake, the imagery of the withering of the mountaintops and the "mourning" of the pastures seems a bit forced – the metaphor appears to be somewhat mixed. The withering of lush fields and the subsequent mourning in the pastures is, again, something we find explicated in the prophecies of Yoel (Chapter 1). In that case, quite clearly, it is due to a plague which destroys the crops. It could, of course, be caused by a drought – but our first association of the devastation of an earthquake is not chiefly agricultural. Per Malbim, we would expect the palaces of the north to be laid waste, not the pastures. This may be why most commentators do not connect this line with the earthquake. What remains to be seen is how figurative this destruction will be. Are God's words going to create fear and trepidation in the north that will cause mourning? In that case, we would interpret God's roaring as the words of the prophet, carrying the divine message to Shomeron. If, on the other hand, we read the destruction as real, then the roar is not God's word through the prophet. Rather, it foreshadows some natural devastation which will accompany or follow the prophecies that Amos will present.

In the next *shiur*, we will begin our study of the first series of oracles of Amos – against the surrounding nations – and the use of number schemes in *Tanakh*: “For three sins of Damascus, and for the fourth I will not reverse it..”

For further reading:

Concerning the geopolitical setting of the mid-8th century BCE, see:

Premnath, D.N., *Eighth Century Prophets: a Social Analysis*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003.

Malamat, A, *The Wars of Israel and Assyria*, in Liver (ed.), *The Military History of the Land of Israel in Biblical Times*, Tel Aviv: Maarachoth, 1964, pp. 241-260 (Hebrew).