# Amos and the Cosmic Imagination

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# Preface

Every part of the Bible has attracted a massive amount of critical commentary: Jewish, Christian and non-confessional. The book of Amos is extremely well represented in the ever-growing field of biblical studies. What then could be hoped to be achieved by adding to the existing scholarship?

The motivation for this book stemmed from the many changing directions of biblical research over the past few decades. For many years now, historical-critical interests and literary approaches have uneasily shared the limelight. The latter has been marked by an inherent diversity and experimentation while the former line of research has had to contend with a growing crisis of confidence in many quarters. The debates over historical methodology are far from settled, but the face of historical research into the origins of the biblical materials has been changed forever. Even among the many scholars who reject the more recent proposals for late compositional dates for much of the Hebrew Bible, awareness of the textuality of the redacted texts is very high. Analyzing the religious and intellectual contexts of the later stages of production is now seen as a far more important enterprise than it was a decade ago. On the one hand, these newer approaches have produced a number of insightful studies of many biblical books and the readers of some introductory text-books become well acquainted with these developments. On the other hand, a number of new introductions to the Hebrew Bible and its prophetic corpus have yet to acknowledge the full potential of the new historical approaches or the well developed field of literary studies and their impact on more conservative ways of interpreting the Bible. Part of this may stem from the attempt to address as wide an audience as possible. This causes some authors to tread perhaps too lightly or to sit rather precariously on the proverbial fence when dealing with issues that are significant points of contention between confessional and secular criticism.

This volume was born out of a desire to integrate the new historical sensibilities with a literary approach to produce something of a more creative reading of Amos. Above all, my goal was to produce a volume situated firmly within the secular field of religious studies in which even Amos' defense of the poor and weak can be subject to critical analysis. I do not know if there ever was an Amos of Tekoa who left his flocks behind in Judah to denounce business and religious practices in the northern kingdom of Israel. I consider it possible that such an individual existed but I do not know how to prove it with any confidence simply from the biblical book that bears that name. The book, however, remains an historical artefact, and a finely written one at that. It is the product of the human mind and imagination in a world far removed in time and culture from my own. Bridging that distance is easier said than done. The final version of the present study is far less experimental than its earlier manifestations but I hope it opens up new ways of addressing what is one of the most popular books of the Hebrew Bible. The final tone of the volume, however, has been set by a desire to present an in-depth treatment of Amos not only to biblical scholars but to readers with far less experience

in the critical examination of the Bible. It is not an introductory text, but those with some familiarity with the Hebrew Bible in English should not find it impenetrable.

Amos is full of alliteration, deliberate ambiguity, puns and other word-plays. Any attempt to present the full poetic beauty and complexity of the book without reference to these features is doomed to fail. To this end, I have chosen to transliterate the Hebrew for the benefit of readers who have not studied the language. The transliteration system is relatively simple, merging the technical and 'general purpose' scheme employed for the publications of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Consonants are rendered according to accepted technical practice to avoid ambiguity inherent in the simpler scheme. In the SBL 'general purpose' system some Hebrew consonants are represented by two Roman characters, for example, '*šin*', שׁ, is rendered as *sh* and this can be mistaken for two separate Hebrew characters. On the other hand, vowels are rendered as per the SBL 'general purpose' scheme and spares the reader unnecessary complications. This compromise allows non-Hebrew readers to understand the approximate sounds of the Hebrew terms and yet preserves a relatively accurate way of seeing patterns of repeated consonants. In a few cases, the similarity between words is not readily apparent in transliteration. In those cases I have complemented the transliteration with the Hebrew characters themselves so that the uninitiated can see the visual similarities.

This book has been in the making for many years and there are a number of people who have provided me with the necessary inspiration, encouragement and chastisement to see it through to the end despite various crises, relocations, and severe bouts of writer's block. Ashgate Publishing has not only been supportive but also very patient. I am forever grateful to Francis Landy and Ehud Ben Zvi of the University of Alberta. It is there I began work on the book of Amos in 1998 with the help of a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and this resulted in a number of papers which formed the starting point for the present volume. Further work proceeded in fits, false starts and full stops but both Ehud and Francis continued to think I still had something worth saying about Amos. In this regard, I am also indebted to Philip Davies. I would also like to say 'thanks' to my colleagues and friends here in Lethbridge; Hillary Rodrigues, Tom and Sharon Robinson, John Harding, for all their support and especially Lisa Kozleski, who served as my editor and managed to stay cheerful despite the daunting task she faced. Any resemblance the language of this book bears to standard English is largely due to her effort. Two of my students here in Lethbridge must also be named. Mick Macintyre and Helen Connolly read Amos with me on numerous enjoyable occasions and I wish them the best of success in their continuing academic endeavours. Helen also proofread this commentary and worked with me on the transliterations. I deeply appreciate the many hours she devoted to this project. I, of course, remain fully responsible for any remaining errors or oddities.

If this work makes its reader pause to consider alternative routes to thinking about Amos and the other biblical prophetic books the way Mick and Helen have made me rethink what I thought I once knew, then I shall consider this volume a great success. This book is dedicated not only to them, but also to the other students at the University of Lethbridge who have made my five years here so enjoyable and rewarding, including Chelsea Masterman, Chris Roth, J'Lean Lawton, Erika Jahn, Nicole Hembroff, Lori Alexander and Natasha Elder.

## Chapter 1

# Landscaping Amos' Cosmic Temple

> The bay-trees in our country are all witherer'd
> And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;
> The pale-fac'd moon looks bloody on the earth,
> And lean-look'd prophets whisper fearful change.
> *Richard II*, II.iv.8–11[1]

Shakespeare must have had a deep appreciation for the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The Welsh Captain in *Richard II* abandons his post, speaking of withered trees, frightened stars, and a moon both pale and bloody: ominous portents of the fall of a king. But the Captain does not actually quote his whispering prophets. They and their unheard whispers do not so much predict fearful change as they are its omens, symbols and embodiments. The biblical prophets, however, are not remembered for their hushed tones. Many are given speech after deafening speech, but they, too, find withered trees and darkened moons to be portents and symbols of the destruction of many a king and country. And still, when looking at the biblical prophets, we would do well to consider the ominous image painted by the Bard. The world of Amos, like that depicted in any literary text or play, is an imaginary one. Perhaps something might be said of the historical Amos but the real man is hidden. Yet, ancient Judah's scribes have left a masterpiece of Hebrew literature in his name. We must only be careful not to mistake the portrait for the person, the landscape for any real time and place.

The book of Amos is all about transformations. Amos was a herdsman. Now he wears the prophet's mantle and in so doing is accused of plotting the fall of a king. The world has corrupted itself. It will die and be reborn. Yet this transformation is timeless. All the political and military upheavals that the book gives as the backdrop of Amos' preaching follow an eternal model of creation, destruction and recreation. The contingencies of time and place become subservient to the trans-historical processes of cosmic realities. This is the mythic world of our imaginary, literary Amos. It oscillates between heaven and earth, the past and the future.

It has long been realized that the Bible's prophetic texts employ a wide selection of mythic motifs and images, and I will demonstrate something of this range in the book of Amos. I also will demonstrate how these are not mere literary figures or survivals from earlier religious conceptions, but are also fundamental to the book which is itself an articulation of paradigmatic cosmic themes. In this sense, it is a mythic text in its own right. Equally important, however, is that the book of Amos, like the rest of prophetic literature, embeds these mythic themes and progressions

[1] All quotes from William Shakespeare are from *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare* (London: Chancellor Press, 1982).

in a new plot: that of the ancient (and often ignored) prophet of God. The cosmic myth articulated in Amos' message is cast as words of a prophet who is himself an instantiation of a mythical prototypical messenger. Beyond the actual message of judgement, destruction and rebirth is an exploration of an idealized interaction between human and God; it is a model for the experience of producing the text itself.

In the final vision in Amos 9, God is seen standing on an altar issuing an order to strike the capital of the temple's columns and shake its thresholds, bringing it all down on the heads of the people. Here, a glimpse of a common mythic motif in the ancient Near East emerges, the macrocosmic temple in heaven. There, one sees the throne room of the god, the model upon which earthly temples are made, and the foundation of creation. Many ancient myths tell of the establishment of a divine hierarchy only to culminate in the building of a palace for the god or a temple-city on earth. The Israelites had their own versions of this. Jon D. Levenson, for instance, has written on the ancient Israelite temple's cosmic dimensions. The orders to construct the tabernacle in Exodus have lengthy references to the requirement to keep the Sabbath, the festival of imitating the divine rest at the end of the world's creation (see Exod. 31:12–17, 35:1–3). Leviticus twice associates an order to revere the sanctuary with keeping the Sabbath (Lev. 19:30, 26:2).[2] The exodus in the Hebrew Bible is deeply mythic, linking the creation of Israel as a distinct people to a particular way of life and religion and ultimately to the creation of the world itself.

The Psalms are rich in such imagery; the elevated language of poetry links heaven and earth. Psalm 2 celebrates God who is 'seated in heaven' and has installed his King 'on Zion', his 'holy mountain' (vv. 4, 6). Ps. 48:2–3 (Eng. vv. 1–2), sings of Yahweh, 'who is acclaimed in the city of our God, his holy mountain'.[3] The mountain is called beautiful, the joy of all the earth. But here, idealizations of the real Jerusalem give way to mythic conceptions although they are sometimes mishandled in English translations. Many translations, including the New Revised Standard Version, read the word *ṣapon* in v. 3 as indicating that Zion is in the 'far north' but this produces a geographical anomaly. Zion is an intrinsic part of the Jerusalem environs. It is better to see *ṣapon* not as the direction towards Zion, but as a claim that Zion is none other than Mount Zaphon, roughly the Syrian equivalent to Greece's Mount Olympus, the abode of the gods.[4] In Psalm 48, heaven and earth are linked through Zion. Yahweh, the divine king, robed in majesty, is celebrated in Psalm 93. The permanence of the earth is equated with the permanence of his throne. The eternal deity's majesty exceeds that of the thundering seas, which is a clear reference to primeval waters.

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[2] Jon D. Levenson, 'The Temple and the World', *JR* 64 (1984): 275–98.

[3] Christian English Bibles occasionally use different verse numbering than the traditional Jewish text. In those cases, I will include the English numbering after the Hebrew or in parentheses.

[4] See N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilimilku and his Colleagues* (Biblical Seminar, 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 44, 73. Other mountains could be associated with Zaphon, see Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 671, 673.

Psalm 65 is directed towards God in Zion, commenting on the blessings of the divine house. God is credited with providing all the bounty of nature.

The prophetic writings, themselves the poetic equals of the Psalms, are familiar with such ideas, too. A new earthly temple is often associated with Jewish utopias such as in Ezekiel 40–48. There are clear echoes of paradise in some of these temple images. Ezekiel in chapter 47 sees water flow from the temple that provides for every living thing. All forms of trees will be nourished by it, and their fruit will be food and medicine for all (cf. Ps 46:5, Eng. v. 4).[5] Jeremiah 17:12 calls God's eternal throne of glory his 'sacred shrine'. Isaiah 65:17–18 employs language that echoes Gen. 1:1, and tells of God's creation of the heavens and the earth. It reads:

> See! I am creating new heavens and a new earth
> And the first will not be remembered; they will not come to mind.
> But delight and rejoice for evermore over what I am creating!
> See! I am creating Jerusalem – a joy, and her people – a delight![6]

Of course, the heavenly archetype can have many earthy manifestations. In the book of Amos, Zion figures as does the shrine at Bethel and a few other places. All such shrines were meant as representations of the cosmic prototype (I will have more to say about the details of this in the next chapter). This prototype is the conceptual landscape in which the action of the book of Amos takes place. Or, more accurately, Amos uncovers the cosmic reality as hidden bedrock beneath the shifting fortunes of the human and natural world, and, once uncovered, reduces it to chaos. This is what the present study is concerned with: the way Amos imagines the dissolution of the cosmos through a poetic attack on this ephemeral cosmic structure and the resulting paradise that ensues when God restores the universe. Yet, the structure of that universe, at least as it manifests itself in our imaginations, is itself built of the very words that doom it to chaos.

To explore this 'word-world' requires something of a long journey with many twists and turns of phrase. Language in Amos is not a neutral quantity. The use of ambiguity, double meanings, alliteration and the like was widespread in the literature of the ancient Near East. Playful etymologies could be used to link deities with particular natural forces and could be used as an operative element in magic. To manipulate the name of an object into another word was to have control over it. The Hebrew scribes had a similar creative bent. Behind the superficial levels of meaning there are allusions to alternative meanings. There are aural and visual puns, words with similar sounds and spellings that allow the reader to relate ideas and concepts not otherwise linked by grammar and syntax. Recent academic literature is full of newly discovered examples of such creativity. From the poetry of the Psalms and Job to prose in books like Samuel, the scribes loaded their texts with dense webs of allusion, patterned sounds and layers of meaning.[7] In this volume, I will follow the

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5 Pss. 52:10 (Eng. v. 8) and 92:13–15 (Eng. vv. 12–14) liken the righteous to cedars and palms growing in the temple, which continue to bear fruit despite their great age.

6 Biblical translations are mine except as indicated.

7 See, for instance, the excellent collection of papers: Scott B. Noegel (ed.) *Puns and Pundits*: *Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, MD:

shifting linguistic landscape as it translates its own depiction of the natural world into the cosmic temple before ordering it destroyed, only to rebuild the world anew as a paradise.

So let us return to Amos' opening lines, and sacrifice a bit of English word order to show the Hebrew patterning of words:

> [1] The words of Amos, who was among the stockmen from Tekoa, who prophesied concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, King of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, King of Israel, two years before the earthquake.
> [2]And he said,
> 'Yahweh from Zion roars,
> And from Jerusalem he gives his voice.
> Mourn [do] the pastures of the shepherds
> Dry up [does] the top of Carmel.'

The phrase, 'the words of Amos', is an odd way to begin a book of divine oracles; only Jeremiah has a similar opening. There is an implied tension between the prophet and God that will come to the surface later in word games of compulsion and coercion. The narrator's dating of Amos to the reigns of two kings sets the text historically, and yet the added reference to the earthquake casts an ominous shadow. There is a pronounced geographical disjunction in these two verses. Amos is from Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, and his visions concern the kingdom of Israel to the north. Yet, the centre of divine speech is Zion and Jerusalem. There is a symbiosis between the human and the natural. The pastures express the emotions of their shepherds. There is irony: the top of Carmel, the mountain whose name suggests a 'Garden Land', withers away. More ironic is how such a view of chaos in v. 2 comes from such a finely structured example of Hebrew poetry. It opens with God's mountain, Zion, and closes with the desiccated Mount Carmel. Between these two mountains stand Jerusalem and the shepherd's pastures. Verbs close the first two lines in the quoted speech, while in the second pair the verbs come first, as if to hasten the terrible effect of the roaring. Order and symmetry bring to life chaos and destruction. The inhabitants of the city and the shepherds themselves are noticeable for their absence. The effect of the desiccating voice on Amos' fellow herdsmen is left up to the reader's imagination. This is the poetic landscape of Amos. And the reader would do well to remember how Yahweh 'roars' and 'gives his voice'; such words have an uncanny way of echoing in this mysterious landscape between the mountain of the garden land and the mountain of God.

Yahweh roars from Zion, Amos in Tekoa hears, and Carmel withers. Tekoa has its own ominous portents, the name being based on a Hebrew root that can mean 'to thrust (a weapon)' or 'to blow a horn'.[8] So we can imagine our prophet going north to initiate that violent sound by confronting a corrupt king. But let us now jump ahead to the start of Amos' ninth and final chapter and the book's last of five chilling visions:

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CDL Press, 2000).

[8] See Judg. 3:21 for thrusting a weapon and many instances in Joshua 6 regarding the noisy fall of Jericho. Also note Jer. 6:1: 'in Tekoa blow *tikʿu* the shofar', and Ezek. 7:14.

> 9:1 I saw Adonai standing on the altar, and he said,
> 'Strike the capital, and the thresholds will shake.
> Cut them off, the *first/head* of them all.[9]
> And the last of them I will slaughter with the sword.
> No refugee of theirs shall flee.
> No fugitive of theirs shall take flight.'

In the third vision, God was first seen standing on a wall (Amos 7:7), but now he stands on the altar itself. Amos has entered the world of the divine as much as God has imposed himself on the natural and human order in Amos 1:1–2. This is the divine roar; the withering of Carmel and the mourning of the pastures are implicit in the destruction of the temple. This temple is not the one in Jerusalem, Bethel or anywhere else. It is God's heavenly temple; it is the cosmos. Intimations of this will surface in the following passage. After witnessing how God vows that no refugee will escape, we read how the people will be cut off or even crushed with the temple debris. Any remnant will be dragged back from heaven, the underworld and the ocean's floor only to be exiled and killed (Amos 9:2–4). Afterwards, God's terrifying power is celebrated (vv. 5–6). This fifth vision and its aftermath show the sweeping away of any boundaries set for human life. With the loss of the eternal landmark for creation, the world is set adrift in chaos as it was in the prophet's vision of the fiery consumption of the great, primal ocean (Amos 7:4–6). Yet, the dissolution of the ordered universe is the point at which the book begins to make its dramatic shift towards recreation and a new paradise.

But why was such literature produced? A brief return to that most eloquent Elizabethan provides one answer. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the tragic hero is moved to vengeance after the ghost of his father reveals his killer's identity. The villain is the dead monarch's own brother, who has now married the queen and become king. Hamlet arranges a (strategically lengthened) performance of 'The Murder of Gonzago' that offers a suitable parallel to the crime against his father. Hamlet gambles that upon seeing 'The Mousetrap', as he calls the play, the murderer would lose his composure:

> I have heard,
> That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,
> Have by the very cunning of the scene
> Been struck so to the soul, that presently
> They have proclaim'd their malefactions;
> For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
> With most miraculous organ.
> *Hamlet* II.ii.598–600

The Amos I am dealing with in this volume is similar to Shakespeare's Hamlet, and even has much in common with the characters portrayed in the melodrama produced by the Danish prince. They are the servants of their author; they draw their audiences

[9] Hebrew *roʾš* can have various meanings in this context, including 'head' or 'first', and, as will be discussed in the final chapter, even 'poison'.

into their fictive world. Like Hamlet's 'Mousetrap', the book of Amos is something of a trap. It would be rare to find a biblical scholar willing to commit to the notion that Amos was produced without a message if not an agenda or ideology to impart to its reader. But alongside the social or politico-religious motivations of the book's composition and editing processes there is also an individual, human element in the book, and that is as much a trap as any rhetorical intent to convince a reader of any point of view. On either the social or personal level, the bait in Amos' trap is its beautifully crafted condemnations of all that is ugly with the world: its selfishness, greed, injustice and violence displaced from the reader by its setting in a former time, place and circumstance. Yet, the trap's sting is its universality, timelessness and demands for a personal engagement. There is no way out; the text leads one to concur that destruction is past and imminent, and if one chooses to side with the prophet and hopefully be spared, the text leads one to conclude that the call to prophecy itself is not bound by Amos' life and times. The word of doom is not constrained by the limits of the text.

But should this reading of Amos be so utterly grim? *Hamlet* is a tragedy; as much as the prince of Denmark caught a murderer, the prince himself was caught in the violent aftermath. Amos is a comedy; there is a very bright light at the end of its tunnel. I do not wish to disown the book's glorious ending or strike it from my ideal book of Amos on the grounds that it was penned by someone other than the one (or ones) who produced the first eight and one half chapters. Yet, this vision of a new Eden is itself as much bait as it is the prize. The world is recreated as beautiful, plentiful and stable, yet this world is also the product of the same mythic, cosmic processes as the forces of destruction. Can it really endure? Like the restoration of Job's fortunes, one can ask if the ending of Amos is not deliberately superficial, leading the reader to probe ever deeper the themes of the book as a whole.

Shakespeare had his own reasons for presenting the vengeful prince turned playwright, some purely artistic or personal and some maybe even political. Perhaps the Bard, too, found himself sometimes unpleasantly trapped by implications of bringing his characters, plots and poetry to the public. But what of Amos? What sort of social dynamics lay behind it?

As will be outlined in the next chapter, the book of Amos should be seen as the property of the latter half of the Persian period, when so many of the now familiar biblical traditions were taking a familiar shape. Typically, scholars look to the earliest possible dates first (mid eighth century BCE), although many do date some parts of Amos to Judah's post-monarchic period. Rather than begin with the hypothetical 'historical Amos', this study begins with the post-monarchic setting as the locus for the construction of the book as a whole, while remaining open to the idea that it contains many passages of a more ancient provenance. In this sense, this study is grounded in the so-called 'minimalist' paradigm that has raised a good deal of controversy in Hebrew Bible studies. This unpleasant situation resulted from the furious debates over how much of the Hebrew Bible's depiction of Israel's religious and political history is a reliable source of information for historians. The labels 'minimalism' and 'maximalism' represent two extremes of opinion possible (as opposed to the actual positions of the individual scholars which are typically

far more nuanced than the well-publicized polemics suggest).[10] In any case, many scholars now raise serious critiques of long-held notions underlying biblical studies, especially the common assumption that there is an essential kernel of historicity behind most biblical depictions of the past. This includes conceptualizing the prophetic books as literary productions reflecting on the past and creating a world of meaning by articulating a heritage of great prophets in Israel's history. Too often, scholars have turned literary artefacts like Amos into sociological information about actual prophets without coming to terms with such texts as literary productions, as I will describe in the next chapter. Some cautions concerning the new historical approaches must be raised, however.

The academic work labelled 'minimalism' must be understood as historical–critical research and not, as some polemicists would have it, a rejection of historical inquiry. The greatest contribution of the new approaches to historical–critical research is in its examinations of the social, institutional and ideological contexts of the production of the biblical texts. In general, these contexts are found within the Jerusalem priesthood and scribal institution of Persian and/or Hellenistic Jerusalem. The new approaches emphasize the production of prophetic literature as part of the construction of a heritage and the transmission and further development of older traditions. The social standing of the compilers and authors is vitally important. One scholar holds that the producers of the Hebrew Bible were scribes who functioned as 'brokers of divine knowledge' to the illiterate masses.[11] Many modern readers of the Bible remain brokers of divine knowledge to their synagogues and churches and many are brokers of intellectual knowledge to university, college or popular audiences. Scholars are often respectful towards the work of their predecessors, and yet, scholarship is an industry that thrives on innovation and progress. The ancient writers hardly shared an identical world-view to ours, but like us, they would have had to strike a suitable balance between tradition, adaptation and innovation. There would always be circumstances that required new ideas and ways of thinking about tradition. Inherited stories and oracles attributed to the great prophets of old would have been given a new emphasis and meaning as circumstances changed.

The new historical paradigm also demands awareness of the high artistry of these prophetic texts. Even more so than modern readers, the ancient audience would have been caught in the subtleties of Amos and, presumably, would have relished the experience. Developing these subtleties was all part of the producers' role as the literati: why produce a book that can be understood completely the first time?

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10 The bibliography is growing steadily. Some representative works are the two part essay by Charles Isbell, 'Minimalism: The Debate Continues Part I', *JBQ* 32 (2004): 143–7; Charles Isbell, 'Minimalism: The Debate Continues Part II', *JBQ* 32 (2004): 211–23; Keith W. Whitelam, 'Representing Minimalism: The Rhetoric and Reality of Revisionism', in Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies (eds) *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll* (JSOTSup, 348; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 194–223.

11 Ehud Ben Zvi, 'The Urban Center of Jerusalem and the Development of the Literature of the Hebrew Bible', in W.E. Aufrecht, N.A. Mirau and S.W. Gauley (eds) *Urbanism in Antiquity: From Mesopotamia to Crete* (JSOTSup, 244; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 194–209 (200).

Who would ever reread it? One might even argue, as Ehud Ben Zvi does, that the complexity of the literature is part of the mechanism by which these 'brokers' defended their status in society.[12] The message or agenda of Amos, then, may be found in the religious, social and political interests of this educated elite stratum of society. Still, there is much more to this literature than only that. It must have meant something on a very deep level to those who produced and read it. But what purpose could these Jerusalem scribes have had in preserving, editing, or even fabricating the words of an ancient critic of the Northern Kingdom? At whom was their rhetoric and poetry aimed? There are implications to this question beyond institutional agendas. How was the literary world shaped by the reality, and even personal experiences of its producers? How would the image of the brave Amos from Tekoa have motivated and inspired the people shaping the traditions of his prophesying and visionary experiences into the book familiar to us today?

Of course, none of these questions can be answered with anything other than speculation. Yet, something might be said of it. Audiences 'enter' the worlds depicted in the literature they read or hear. Or better, they enter the worlds created in their imaginations. Readers can identify with particular characters, and respond in sympathy with them.[13] However, for characters that actually existed or were believed to exist, the duration of the emotional influence on a reader's actions may be significantly increased.[14] While literary theorists probe how readers enter a textual world, other scholars are interested in how textual worlds enter and shape perceived reality. Some scholars have noted a close relationship between art and religion, at least in psychological terms.[15] Hjalmar Sundén holds that religious experience can result when people discover that their own situations are like those facing the characters in literature they consider sacred. A corollary to this self-discovery is the realization that one's own world includes the God from the sacred text.[16] God will act in the believer's life as he acted in the story or tradition. The potential depth of the role adoption should not be underestimated and is comparable to learning

[12] Ehud Ben Zvi, 'Studying Prophetic Texts Against Their Original Backgrounds: Pre-Ordained Scripts and Alternative Horizons of Research', in S.B. Reid (ed.) *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (JSOTSup, 229; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 125–35 (133).

[13] David S. Miall, 'Affect and Narrative: A Model of Response to Stories', *Poetics* 17 (1988): 259–72; David J.A. Clines, 'Language as Event', in R.P. Gordon (ed.) *The Place is Too Small For Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship* (SBTS, 5; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 166–75 (167–9), excerpted from David J.A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (JSOTSup, 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976), pp. 53–6, 59–65.

[14] Eva M. Dadlez, *What's Hecuba to Him? Fictional Events and Actual Emotions* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 160–61.

[15] Paul W. Pruyser, 'Lessons from Art Theory for the Psychology of Religion', *JSSR* 15 (1976): 1–14; Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, 'Religion as Art and Identity', *Rel* 16 (1986): 1–17.

[16] Hjalmar Sundén, 'Saint Augustine and the Psalter in the Light of Role-Psychology', *JSSR* 26 (1987): 375–82. This journal volume features the proceedings of a symposium on Sundén's theories. See also Nils G. Holm, 'An Integrated Role Theory for the Psychology of Religion: Concepts and Perspectives', in B. Spilka and D.N. McIntosh (eds) *The Psychology of Religion: Theoretical Approaches* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 73–85 (73–6).

a foreign language fluently. The patterns perceived in the textual world shape the recipient's own reality.[17] What Sundén says about readers should also be seen as relevant to writers, especially if the writers are working with some form of received story or tradition. Indeed, Sundén himself develops his ideas partly in response to an examination of Augustine's writings about his personal encounter with God through his engagement with the Psalms. In our case, that received story is the inherited traditions of 'ancient Israel' including, presumably, traditions about a prophet named Amos. Also part of the tradition is the well-established mythic conceptions of the macrocosmic temple and the cycle of creation, destruction and recreation.

An undercurrent of this work, therefore, is the question of the link these scribes made between themselves and the ancient prophets, and between their own audiences and those ancient hearers harangued by Amos and company. What traps did the scribes lay for their readers, and what traps did they find themselves caught up in? How did God's communications with Amos shape the perception of God in the lives of the scribes? In many of the Bible's prophetic texts, it is not clear how much autonomy the prophetic voice has. Are the oracles compositions of a prophet describing what God says, or are they the very words of God? The question of autonomy is at the heart of the vision-cycle in the Amos-book, and, as will be illustrated here, many other passages in the book too. These scribes transmitted an older tradition of heroes and arch-villains. They would have seen their own world, at least in part, through the lenses of these traditions. At least some of them would have walked in their heroes' footsteps, or at least tried to, caught as they were between their vision of the past and their present realities. Powerful empires and economic factors that had as much impact on them emotionally as they did financially, and politically shaped their world. What would it have been like to remember King David when you are not allowed to forget Artaxerxes?

Indeterminacy, intrigue, masks and traps: these are well-known items in the tool kit of both storyteller and playwright, but they are also the stuff of real lives. If the subjective and unpredictable 'human element' behind the text is to be acknowledged, care must be taken to keep from reducing every feature of the Amos-book to institutional propaganda. On the other hand, neither should Amos be reduced to manifestations of psychological phenomena for which there is no real data since there is no access to the real minds that produced it. Yet the human element does not go away even if it is ignored. People produced the book of Amos. The present study, therefore, is something of a thought experiment in that it treats Amos as expressing the producers' desire to fulfil in their writings a personal religious quest, whose success is attained vicariously through Amos. This quest is to explore the nature of communicating on behalf of an omnipotent deity. 'Brokers' of divine knowledge they may well have been, but this work is predicated on the assumption that they were meditating on the divine knowledge as well. They have created a world of words in which the secrets of this knowledge might be divined, at least by the initiated. Alas, all that remains of these great minds are those words.

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[17] Hjalmar Sundén, 'What is the Next Step to be Taken in the Study of Religious Life?', *HTR* 58 (1965): 445–51 (446–7); Hjalmar Sundén, 'Exegesis and the Psychology of Religion', *Temenos* 11 (1975): 148–62.

This study, then, explores Amos' word-world. That world is an imaginary, mythic space pregnant with meanings and associations. Built upon traditional motifs and images, the book's words are not only signs but also embodiments of the world the language itself constructs and destroys. Francis Landy finds the prophet Hosea torn between normal and paranormal prophetic and shamanic experiences:

> This tension may also be exhibited in the pressure on language in the poetry of the book, mediating between inspiration and control, the desire to articulate a fragmenting reality and the collapse of language which that articulation necessitates.[18]

This study traces how the collapsing language of Amos is itself a double entendre that speaks of a more transcendent, cosmic reality. But it is also in this chaos, both cosmic and linguistic, that the potential for restoration and reconstruction is found. The word-world of Amos describes a tension between a prophetic voice inspired to speak destruction and a will to intercede on behalf of those marked for death. Amos found that prophecy was inevitable. His realization, expressed as a rhetorical question, 'Who can but prophesy?' (3:8) leaves the readers to find their own prophetic voices, ones they presumably uncover by ever more closely identifying with Amos himself. Amos provides a means to a vicarious divine–human interchange through the paradigmatic figure of an ancient prophet. It is an interchange, however, that is on some levels inscrutable and problematic.

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[18] Francis Landy, *Hosea* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 17.