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Amos and Hosea: Two Perspectives on the Last Days of Israel

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It is, I believe, a Chinese expression of goodwill which hopes that the hearer may live in interesting times. That somewhat dubious privilege was certainly enjoyed by Amos and Hosea, if 'enjoyed' is the right word, for the experience was indubitably dubious. According to the introductory verses of both prophecies their activity occurred in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam (786-46 BC). The work of Hosea may have extended beyond that period and even as far as 715 or later if the parallel list of the kings of Judah in the first verse of his prophecy is to be believed, but it would be safer to consider it as happening within the overlapping regnal years of Jeroboam and Uzziah of Judah or perhaps a little beyond. Neither heading, however, is thought to be the prophet's own or to come from their contemporaries. The dating problem, moreover, differs with each writer. With Hosea it is a question of 'How long?'; with Amos of 'When?'

Whatever the answers (and we shall consider them later), both prophets found themselves amidst a set of circumstances which brought them no popularity. Each was the harbinger of doom in an age of affluence. For once in Israel's history there was no external threat; indeed, Israel herself was expanding her frontiers. At home, as Bright has remarked, people 'found themselves better off than they had ever been before' (*J Bright History of Israel* 3rd edn London 1980 p 259). But secular materialism and religious idolatry were widespread, and the prophets saw that beneath the superficial well-being of their society 'the enterprise was sick and the whole heart faint'. Whether they also foresaw the imminent fall of Israel to resurgent Assyria we neither can nor need to know. As prophets it was not essential for them to foresee the future, only to fulfil their commission in pointing out clearly what was wrong with the present. I propose to look at the situation as each of them envisaged it, to consider their analysis and finally to make some brief comparisons between their respective attitudes and reactions.

In dealing with Amos we need first, however, to look at one or two problems of date and text, though these are necessarily of subsidiary importance to our main concern. The significance of date relates to the

generally accepted view that Amos prophesied over only a very short period. Koch suggests 'about 760 BC' (*The Prophets* vol I London 1982 p 36), whilst at the other extreme R B Coote favours so late a date as 738 (*Amos among the Prophets* Philadelphia 1981 pp 22-3). J H Hayes chooses an intermediate year and alleges the shortest possible time, saying that 'Amos's preaching at Bethel probably lasted only a single day at the most. It took place just prior to the fall festival beginning the year 750-749.' Coote's dating in particular raises problems about the text, especially in relation to the prediction of the death of Jeroboam who had died several years before. In the crucial passage (7:10-17) Amos describes his call and predicts the exile of Israel. Commentators such as Coote and H W Wolff who favour multi-stage composition, attribute it to deuteronomic insertion of material from Amos' own disciples, who might surely have been expected to recall at least in essentials what the prophet himself had said. This is not a textual survey and I shall therefore be content to concur with what appears to be general acceptance of the passage, to which we must return in any search for 'the historical Amos', who, A G Auld (*Amos* Sheffield 1986 p 35) amongst others believes, was responsible for the greater part of the book as we now have it.

Who was Amos? We must go to this very same crucial passage for the only biographical information which supplements 1:1. Amos 7:14 tells us that he was a shepherd, vigorously rejecting their cultic festivals and sacrifices (5:21,22). He suggests even that they think that formal religious observance gives them licence to pursue their immoral courses: 'Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more' (4:4). He warns them that such complacency will literally get them nowhere, cultically speaking: 'Seek me and live; do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal' (5:4-5). Like Shakespeare's Richard II, they seemed to think that divinity was at their command: 'Yahweh is with us'. That is what they said (5:14) – mistakenly, as Amos assured them. And their mistake was compounded in their misplaced expectations about the day of Yahweh: 'Why do you long for the day of the lord? That day will be darkness, not light' (5:18). Amos' visions make that darkness clear (Chapters 7 and 8), where one nightmare follows another – locusts, fire, annihilating metal and, finally, the fruits of the harvest, with, as Koch remarks, a movement between the first two and the latter two 'from a vision of revocable to a vision of irrevocable doom' (*The Prophets* p 42). Indeed the last vision becomes apocalyptic: 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight' (8:9). Here is the promised fulfilment of the day of Yahweh: 'That day will be darkness, not light.'

Amos' condemnation originates from the Israelites' broken connection between religion and morality. Feasts and sacrifices they may observe, but they fail to carry out the simple but absolute moral requisite to 'seek good,

not evil. Hate evil, love good' (5:14,15). Chapter 5 is the very core of Amos' ethical message, and it is here that we meet the two concepts that form its very foundations – 'You turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground' (5:7) – when they should be letting 'justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream' (5:24). *Mišpāt* and *s'dāqā*, in Wellhausen's famous phrase, form the 'ethical monotheism of the prophets'. They are not just moral ideas; they have an integral connection with the cult. Hence Koch can argue that they are more than concepts, that they are 'spheres of power which already exist in advance of human actions' (*The Prophets* p 58). They reside not just within the individual; they suffuse society (*The Prophets* p 59). They derive their vitality from their fundamental association with religion. They are quenched by *pěsa*^c, the negativity which stems from rebellion (*The Prophets* p 61). Out of tune with Yahweh, the Israelites must fail in both *mišpāt* and *s'dāqā*. That is why Amos must speak out against the political, social and economic evils of his day. They are in his eyes an abomination in the face of the Yahweh-inspired powers of justice and righteousness. All his criticisms presume a premiss of theocracy; and that is not just for Israel either. Some of the oracles at the beginning of the book may not be Amos' – with varying degrees of certainty Barton dismisses those on Judah, Edom and Tyre (*Amos' Oracles against the Nations* London 1980) – but there is enough left to demand that we consider what Amos said and why he said it. The oracles follow a regular pattern in which indictment and punishment are enclosed between formulaic introduction and conclusion. These latter remind us that Yahweh is god and judge not only of Israel but of all the nations; and these last he judges, not as a national god for what they may have done to his people, but simply for what they have done, for their war crimes – the extermination of conquered peoples (1:3), the sale of prisoners of war into slavery (1:6), the slitting open of pregnant women (1:13) and the desecration by fire of the body of an enemy king (2:1). All this is the *pěsa*^c of the nations, their rebellious flaunting of inherent moral authority. As Mays reminds us, *pěsa*^c is a term 'which belongs pre-eminently to the language of politics rather than the cult' (J L Mays *Amos* London 1969 p 28).

These oracles are strategic preliminaries to Amos' climactic indictment – on Israel itself (2:6-16) and on his own chosen (3:2). *pěsa*^c does now become inextricably related to the moral ideas of the cult, *mišpāt* and *s'dāqā*, simply because Israel is the chosen of Yahweh. To quote Mays again: 'Israel is the folk in whose history the will of Yahweh for righteousness becomes visible in that all their sins are punished' (Mays *Amos* p 58). That is why in Amos 'the salvation-history turns into a judgment-history' (Mays *Amos* p 8): 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins' (3:2; cf 3:15; 5:17,27; 6:8,14; 7:8; 9:1-4). What the Israelites, confident in their

exclusive relationship with Yahweh, might have least expected turns out to be the severest judgment of all.

Other nations might deserve their fate for the way in which they treated each other. What doubtless surprised Israel was Amos' indictment of them for the ways in which they treated members of their own community. Passage after passage condemns them (2:6-8; 3:9-11, 13-15; 4:1-3; 5:7,10-13; 6:1-8,11-12; 8:4-7) and, according to Auld (Auld *Amos* p 60), 'there is widespread agreement that [they] are all from Amos himself'. Within the oracle against Israel we read about oppression of the poor and perversion of justice (2:7a), of fathers and sons in sexual relations with the same girl (2:7b), of citizens sold into slavery for debt (2:6) and of the possibly sacrilegious, certainly unjust, use of clothes and wines taken in pledge and as fines (2:8).

The general corruption of society is itemized elsewhere. The wealthy are singled out for scathing treatment in a panorama of conspicuous consumption reminiscent of the court of France under Louis XVI. They have built large houses, 'fortresses' Amos calls them, out of their ill-gotten gains (3:9-10) and there they luxuriate, they 'lie on beds inlaid with ivory ... dine on choice lambs and fattened calves ... strum away on harps like David and ... drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions' (6:4-7). As so often in such settings, the women are the most decadent of all. In a phrase which to our ears is and which may actually have been derogatory, though some scholars believe that it may be self-description by the women about their assumed sexual relationship with the bull-statue of Yahweh, Amos calls them 'cows of Bashan' (4:1). These women appear from their requests to their husbands to be the slaves of drink and Amos adds that they 'oppress the poor and crush the needy' (4:1), doubtless by their demands for ever more costly luxuries and doubtless also in their competition with one another for ever more outrageously expensive display. In a vividly bizarre image Amos forecasts that their time will come, when they will be 'taken away with hooks, the last of you with fish-hooks' (4:2).

Such, however, may have been only the most ostentatious, but not the worst, corruption. The merchant classes, for example, are no better. They 'trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land', impatient to market their goods and restive to do so even on festival days, overcharging, under-weighting, even using deceptive scales and then adulterating their wares into the bargain, if that is the right metaphor (8:4-6). The administrators likewise have built their mansions and planted their vineyards out of the fruits of oppression, bribery and deliberate miscarriage of justice (5:11-12). Their time will also come.

In the face of persistent and at times blood-curdling predictions of nemesis we must ask a final question – How could Amos conclude his prophecy as he did with hopes of restoration and a new Davidic kingdom? For Coote and Wolff with their several-stage formation theories, the problem is explained by attribution to post-exilic optimism; for Hayes it is to see Amos within a pattern – ‘Neither Amos nor any other prophet ever proclaimed the absolute extermination of their people’ (Hayes *Amos* p 227), and one might add that with Amos any change could only be for the better. But so much better?

With that question unresolved we must return to the more familiar pessimistic figure of the rest of the prophecy to see how we should place him in the situation about which he spoke. He was concerned for the poor, the *dallim* who, Koch tells us, formed a ‘socially distinct class of peasant farmers (2 Kings 24:14)’ (*The Prophets* p 49), a group who like their successors in the Enclosure Movement of the eighteenth century appears to have been uprooted by the economic changes of the time, about which, however, as Koch remarks, we know no details. They lost out and Amos, their well-informed (cf Chapters 1 and 2) and vociferous fellow, became their spokesman and, as he claimed, the spokesman also for Yahweh, who had taken up their cause.

Amos was at once a radical and a conservative, regretting the passing of an old way of life, regretting also ‘the development of an urban culture based on an economy of trade and capital ... and of a class system which did not exist in earlier Israelite society’ (Mays *Amos* p 64). As with Goldsmith it was a case of:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.
(The Deserted Village)

He deployed his colourful rhetoric in an attempt to save an order that was passing away, even to the extent of repelling the king’s own priest (7:17). Assertion does duty for argument and, like another radical spokesman for small farmers in a later day, William Cobbett, Amos is never afflicted by the slightest self-doubt. As Hayes neatly puts it: ‘the images depicting the indulgency of the Samaritan citizenry derided by Amos no doubt exaggerate reality beyond the level of credulity, but prophets were never noted for their understatement’ (Hayes *Amos* p 186). In the absence of contrasting evidence we should perhaps moderate our judgment, even if Amos was not prepared to do the same with his.

Though prophets may not be notable for their understatement, it would be difficult to find a greater contrast among them than that between Hosea

and Amos. We move from assertion, rant and even arrogance to a more seemly atmosphere, critical yes, very critical, but more balanced altogether and at times compassionate, not least in the memorable account of the prophet's strange marriage to Gomer, adulteress and prostitute (Chapters 1-3). Many scholars are inclined to accept this as autobiographical. If it is, it is nearly all we know about the man Hosea. As for his writings, most are thought to come from the prophet himself or from followers who collected his material. The problem here is not so much that of formation and redaction as of the corrupt state of the text itself.

Like Amos, Hosea does criticize social conditions, but not so comprehensively. We learn of general unrest (7:1) and of two of Amos' specific complaints – dishonest mercantile practices (12:7) and sexual licence (the Gomer story; and 4:13ff; 7:4) – but there is not much other social criticism. Is this paucity incidentally negative evidence against Amos? We know that Hosea was a contemporary and prophesied over a longer period, from around 750 to 730 or even later (G I Davies *Hosea* (OTG) London 1993 p 88). Hosea's interests appear to have lain in different directions, his secular criticism being political rather than socio-economic and his principal concerns being located in Israel's religious shortcomings.

We must not deceive ourselves, however, as to the sombreness of Hosea's mission: 'He was the messenger of her end, nay more, the messenger of Israel's God to whom he had to bear witness as Lord also of this end' (11:8f; 14:5f) (H W Wolff *Hosea* Philadelphia 1974 p xxi). That task embraced the political and the religious together, for they were integrated, not least in the institution of the monarchy. Yahweh complains: 'They set up kings without my consent; they choose princes without my approval' (8:4); and the Israelites are reminded: 'In my anger I gave you a king, and in my wrath I took him away' (13:11). The fall of kings is a recurring prediction in Hosea (7:3-7; 8:4-10; 10:3f,7,15). That reference in 13:11, Mays thinks (*Hosea* London 1969 p 178), may refer to those last desperate years of Hoshea, the sixth monarch in Israel in a mere two decades, but we had been told at the beginning that 'Yahweh will put an end to the kingdom of Israel' (1:4). Whatever may be the failings of the people, errors in government must be firmly placed at the feet of the leaders. In particular, it is egregious foreign policy that is singled out for attack: 'now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria' (7:11); 'He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt' (12:1), and all in vain for the buffer state lying helpless between these major powers. Bribes will form no secure protection (cf also 5:13; 8:9).

Hosea's principal concern, however, is with what should also be Israel's principal concern. The nation is not right with Yahweh. Celebrated in

Yahweh's name, the religion of Israel is being prostituted (and that is a favourite word with Hosea) into the worship of Baal. That is the main burden of the marriage story – 'she burned incense to the Baals ... but me she forgot' (2:13). Hosea details their idolatrous practices – 'They consult a wooden idol ... They sacrifice on the mountain tops and burn offerings on the hills' (4:12,13), they set up calf-idols (8:5-6; 10:5-6; 13:2) and sacred stones (3:4), and the sexual licence mentioned above is all part of the same activity when 'at the culmination of the feast ... the barriers of everyday morality broke down and promiscuous copulation was practised' (*The Prophets* p 83). To cap it all, 'the more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me ... They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness' (4:7,8). The ritual is futile at best, foul at worst. Yahweh is looking for a relationship. There are three key expressions – *hesed*, *dā'ūt 'elohim* and *brīt*. The first two occur in the contrast baldly stated in 6:6: 'I desire devotion (*hesed*) and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God (*dā'ūt 'elohim*) rather than burnt offerings.' The third follows: 'Like Adam they have broken the covenant (*brīt*) – they were unfaithful to me' (6:7). The covenant (and *brīt* occurs no less than five times in Hosea) is the total relationship with God; and *hesed* is attachment and faithfulness to that covenant: but this can only exist if there is knowledge of God, and the responsibility for this lies with the priests who must pass on the *torah* or instruction to the people. This they have failed to do (4:6), and the result is moral chaos – 'no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds' (4:1-2).

Because of this Hosea can do no other than preach judgment. His is a more thoroughgoing theocracy than Amos'. Yahweh had once delighted in his people. In the lush imagery of abundant fruitfulness we hear of his finding Israel 'like finding grapes in the desert' (9:10) and of Israel being 'a spreading vine' (10:1), and then in the tenderness of a fatherly relationship, teaching 'Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, [he] led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love' (11:3,4). But in all these passages we read of Israel's unfaithfulness and desertion to Baal. They are reminded of Yahweh's delivering mercies in the past (eg 12:9-10), but to no avail. Judgment must follow: 'so I will come upon them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk by the path... Like a lion I will devour them; a wild animal will tear them apart. You are destroyed, O Israel' (13:7-9).

Yet one must return to the opening story and the faithful husband with his faithless wife. In the passage which has been described as 'the pivot of the whole book' (Davies *Hosea* p 29) we hear the anguished questions: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?' (11:8). Despite everything, Hosea's is a salvation-history, not a judgment-history. The judgment is not destruction, but discipline; and so there is

room for hope. By contrast with Amos, Hosea, as he prophesies on the verge of Israel's end, can, despite everything, still call the nation to repentance (14:1-2), and assure them of forgiveness, restoration and glory: 'I will heal their waywardness and love them freely ... I will be like the dew to Israel... His splendour will be like an olive tree' (14:4-7).

Hosea's outstanding emphasis is on man's relation with God, a god who displays the whole gamut of emotions from wrath to love, from threats of destruction to promises of salvation. Moreover, he is such a god as cannot be insulted by desertion and attachment to inferior deities. It is the people alone who demean themselves by such whoredoms. This in no way detracts from the view of Hosea as a member of the 'Yahweh-alone' party (eg by B Lang *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority* London 1983). Indeed, if anything, it elevates that view in just such proportion as it regards the other deities as beneath consideration. Hosea's is a noble vision of the god he proclaims. What then are we to make of the two prophets? Both of them saw amidst the material prosperity and, at best, spiritual complacency of their society that at a fundamental level things were seriously awry. Contrasts are easy and may not always be as accurate as we might wish. Nevertheless, they serve to point up differences and may even throw light beyond themselves. With this qualification we can say that both prophets, each within his own vision of theocracy and a coherent moral view of society, bring distinctive emphases to their proclamations. Each sees evil all around him, but one detects in Hosea a warmer heart and a more measured condemnation, whereas Amos, perhaps nearer to the sufferings of ordinary people, is more impatient and more earthy. One can picture Hosea in the pulpit, but Amos seems more suited to the soap-box.

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