CHAPTER 1

Amos: The Critical Issues

A study devoted to the "The Theology of the *Book* of Amos" sounds as though it is meant to bypass the issues that have normally been the preserve of "the historical-critical method" – issues about the historical origins of the book, the context in which the prophet lived and worked, and the possibility of additions and changes to his original words. Contemporary biblical study has rightly put back on the agenda the need to interpret the finished product, the book as it lies before us when we open a Bible, and not to spend all our energies on "genetic" questions about how the book came to be, or on trying to identify an original core. But these conventional critical issues cannot be easily bypassed. Most books in the Old Testament are almost certainly the result of a long period of compilation, and the various stages through which they passed have implications for their meaning even as they now stand. In turn, intuitions about their meaning often condition our hypotheses about how they came to be. So we cannot avoid discussing historical-critical matters as a prelude to trying to analyze the theology of this prophetic book. In point of fact, this, too, is part of the mandate of the present series in which the present book is appearing.

The interwovenness of interpretative and critical issues can be seen most clearly if we begin with the most extreme critical positions. There are still scholars who defend the derivation of the

entire book, or all but a few small fragmentary additions, from the eighth-century prophet Amos himself: examples include John H. Hayes and Shalom M. Paul.[1] For them, the prophet delivered a message to both the Hebrew kingdoms, which included both judgment to come and a following period of peace and prosperity – which is how the message of most biblical prophets appears in the books as we now have them. In this view, because it is quite thinkable that Amos would have uttered this combined message of judgment and hope, there is no reason to "delete" (to use the older critical vocabulary) the "epilogue" in 9:11–15 from the book as a later addition. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have the work of Reinhard G. Kratz, who argues that scarcely any of the words attributed to Amos go back to the prophet himself.[2] All of the prophets, in Kratz's view, were basically supportive of the regimes under which they prophesied, as was normal throughout the ancient Near East. Consequently, almost all Amos's words of judgment must be secondary, which effectively removes nearly all of the book from serious consideration as a deposit of the prophet's teaching.

It is clear in both cases – those of the extreme optimism and extreme pessimism – that critical and interpretative issues are inextricably bound together. So we must begin by examining the book in the light of modern attempts to date and place the various oracles of which it is composed.

[1] John H. Hayes, *Amos, the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (ed. F. M. Cross; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

[2] Reinhard G. Kratz, "Die Worte des Amos von Tekoa," in *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien und Israel* (eds. M. Köckert and M. Nissinen; FRLANT 201; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 54–89.

Hayes and Kratz do indeed represent opposite ends of a spectrum, but the majority of biblical scholars stand somewhere in between. For most, the book does genuinely go back in its core to the eighth-century prophet Amos, but this core has been expanded at various times to produce the book we have today. In what follows, we will work our way along the spectrum, beginning with those who think the book substantially the work of Amos.

COMPOSITIONAL THEORIES

Option 1: Most of the Book Comes from Amos

Many commentators in modern times have seen the book as in essentials the work of the prophet Amos. According to 1:1 and 7:10, Amos worked in the reign of Jeroboam II in the mid-eighth century BCE. He came from Tekoa (Khirbet Teqûʿ), five miles south of Bethlehem, and thus in the kingdom of Judah, but his prophetic activity, which may have lasted only a short time, was exercised in the northern kingdom of Israel, especially at the sanctuary of Bethel. This was a period of prosperity for both kingdoms, under the stable rule of Jeroboam II (789–748) and Uzziah (785–733) respectively. Peaceful times lasted until 745, which saw the rise of Assyria under Tiglath-pileser III, who would begin the military campaigns that led to the eventual demise of the northern kingdom and the decline of Judah into a minor state. So Amos must have worked some time before 745, since, though he predicts disaster for the north, there is no sign that it has yet begun, and he implies that the nation is living in comfort, with the only recent military activity having resulted in victories against Aram.

The Arameans of Damascus had been a constant threat to Israel during the ninth century, but had been checked by the Assyrian king Adadnirari III (810–783) at the beginning of the eighth century,

and so were not a major problem for Israel again. The Assyrians were for a time held in check by the rising power of Urartu to their north, under Sardur III (810–743). Israel, if we are to believe the testimony of the book of Amos, thus enjoyed an "Indian summer" for the first half of the eighth century. Not only were the Arameans no longer a threat, but Israel regained towns in Transjordan from them. We learn this from Amos 6:13:

> you who rejoice in Lo-debar,
> who say, "Have we not by our own strength
> taken Karnaim for ourselves?"

Internally the country enjoyed prosperity. According to the book of Amos, the lifestyle of the ruling classes became, at least compared with what had preceded it, positively luxurious, with comfortable houses adorned with ivory:

> I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house;
> and the houses of ivory shall perish. (3:15)

> you have built houses of hewn stone,
> but you shall not live in them;
> you have planted vineyards,
> but you shall not drink their wine. (5:11)

> Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
> and lounge on their couches,
> and eat lambs from the flock,
> and calves from the stall;
> who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
> and like David improvise on instruments of music;
> who drink wine from bowls,
> and anoint themselves with the finest oils. (6:4–6)

This picture of luxury is supported to a great extent from archaeological excavations at Samaria. Whether Israel in this period was as hedonistic or self-indulgent as Amos suggests, we cannot tell: prophets are unlikely to underestimate the self-indulgence of their

hearers, and luxury by ancient Israelite standards would probably seem fairly austere to a modern Westerner. But there is no reason to doubt that Amos was faced with a people living comfortably and without immediate fear of war.

Probably a majority of scholars believe, and always have believed, that most of the oracles preserved in the book of Amos reflect this period and are, as it used to be put, "authentic" – that is, they reflect the genuine words of the prophet himself. This is not necessarily to say that he wrote them down himself, as in the old designation of the prophets whose books appear in the Old Testament as so-called "writing prophets." Even on a conservative view of the authenticity of the sayings, most would probably assume that they were compiled by disciples or scribes, since Amos (like Socrates or Jesus) taught orally rather than in writing. But the eighth century provides such a congenial context for much of the teaching preserved in the book of Amos that there seems little reason to think it does not go back to the prophet himself. Paul even thinks that the arrangement of the book is Amos's own arrangement:

> Amos blended his new teaching with time-honored tradition in a very polished and artistic fashion. The book itself is a composite of independent collections with a well-organized structure arranged according to common literary genres.[3]

Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman argue that the prophet's activity went through three stages, from each of which a significant body of oracles derive:[4]

(1) In chapters 5 and 6, and in the first two visions of chapter 7 (7:1–6) the prophet called the people to repent.

[3] Paul, *Amos*, 4–6.
[4] Francis I. Andersen and David N. Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989).

(2) Chapters 3–4, chapters 1–2, and the next two visions in chapters 7–8 (7:7–8:3) proclaim that judgment will inevitably fall because there has been no repentance.
(3) And, finally, in 8:4–14 and 9:1–6 a special judgment is pronounced on the leaders of society.

For Andersen and Freedman, the book is thus a collection of "sermons," rather than an assemblage of small units.

For those scholars who defend the integrity of the whole, or nearly the whole, book, it often seemed necessary to present the theological ideas as not only coherent but also consistent. And yet there appear on the face of it to be real tensions in the book. For example, Amos 3:2 seems to assert the special election of Israel by YHWH:

> You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
> therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities

whereas 9:7 appears to deny it by putting the exodus of Israel from Egypt on a par with the origins of other nations:

> Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
> O people of Israel? says the LORD.
> Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt,
> and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

Or Amos 7:1–6 speaks of YHWH "repenting" of his intention to destroy Israel ("It shall not be," says the LORD), but 7:7–9 announces that there will be no forgiveness:

> See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel;
> I will never again pass them by;
> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
> and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
> and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.

If all the oracles go back to Amos himself, some way needs to be found of reconciling or explaining these discrepancies. One is to suggest that the prophet changed his mind over time, or, as he would have perhaps put it, he received new revelations from God that contradicted earlier ones. Ernst Würthwein proposed that Amos began life as a cultic prophet who was originally, in accordance with a standard prophetic role, a preacher of blessings for Israel, and it is from that period that the more hopeful material derives.[5] Amos fulfilled this role by interceding for Israel, and believed that YHWH was telling him that the people would accordingly be forgiven. But later, he stepped out of role when he became convinced that the time for divine forbearance had passed and that only judgment remained, and that is when Amos added his oracles of divine destruction such as we find in the later visions of 7:7–9 and chapter 8.

Even scholars who defend most of the book as authentic tend to accept one of the oldest critical judgments – namely, that the "epilogue" of the book is a late addition:

> On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,
> and repair its breaches,
> and raise up its ruins,
> and rebuild it as in the days of old;
> in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom
> and all the nations who are called by my name.
> says the LORD who does this.
>
> The time is surely coming, says the LORD,
> when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps,
> and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
> the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
> and all the hills shall flow with it.

5 See Ernst Würthwein, "Amos-Studien," *ZAW* 62 (1949–1950): 10–52.

> I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
> and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
> they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
> and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
> I will plant them upon their land,
> and they shall never again be plucked up
> out of the land that I have given them,
> says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:11–15)

Julius Wellhausen famously caught the difference between this passage and the bulk of the book by saying that it spoke of "roses and lavender instead of blood and iron."[6] Nevertheless, there are those who accept it as authentically part of Amos's message. Note, for example, Hayes's assessment:

> The historical context presupposed by the text and its allusions synchronize perfectly with what has been seen elsewhere in Amos, and with what can be reconstructed from other Old Testament texts. The text presupposes the troubled existence but not the demise of the house of David … The uniqueness of the terminology in verse 11 argues for the text's authenticity. References to the booth of David occur nowhere else in Scripture. One would assume that a redactor adding a complete passage rather than merely glossing an existing text would have employed traditional terminology.[7]

To be sure, Amos was a southerner himself, and may well have seen the future as lying with Judah after the northern kingdom had been obliterated. Nevertheless, most scholars see the passage as an addition, probably reflecting the exilic or postexilic age when the line of David had ended – one that expressed the hope that it

6 Julius Wellhausen, *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten 5: Die kleinen Propheten übersetzt und erklärt* (3rd ed.; Berlin: Reimer, 1898), 96: "Rosen und Lavendel statt Blut und Eisen."

7 Hayes, *Amos*, 226.

would be restored, and this must mean that it does not come from Amos himself.

A great deal depends here on presuppositions about what is likely in the preservation of prophetic sayings. Some scholars, especially those influenced by the mid-twentieth-century, predominantly Scandinavian, emphasis on the reliability of oral transmission, have argued that the prophet's disciples probably transmitted his words faithfully to later generations, and, consequently, we have real access to his *ipsissima verba*.[8] Others, like Paul and Hayes, think in terms of the prophet himself as to some extent a highly literate person. Amos was no desert-dwelling, hairy seer like Elijah, but a sophisticated and educated man who could use clever literary devices, and who may well have been in the literal sense a "writing prophet." For example, Amos parodies the lament form in 5:1:

> Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation,
> O house of Israel:
> Fallen, no more to rise,
> is maiden Israel;
> forsaken on her land,
> with no one to raise her up

Here, the *qinah* form (a 3 + 2 beat pattern, common in lament texts such as Lamentations) is used to lament over an Israel that does not see itself as at all dead. Or again, in the oracles against the nations, Amos uses the form of the "numerical saying" known from Proverbs (see, e.g., Prov 30:18, 21, 24, 29):

> For three transgressions of Damascus,
> and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.
> (Amos 1:3; cf. 1:6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6)

[8] See Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

And in 3:4–5, we find a parody of a priestly instruction or *torah*, in which the prophet sarcastically urges the people to sin by offering sacrifice:

> Come to Bethel – and transgress;
> to Gilgal – and multiply transgression;
> bring your sacrifices every morning,
> your tithes every three days;
> bring a thank-offering of leavened bread,
> and proclaim freewill-offerings, publish them,
> for so you love to do, O people of Israel!
> says the LORD.

If we see the prophet in this light, we will be disposed to think that the book may well derive from him rather than from disciples or anonymous scribes of later generations. Be that as it may, it remains true that the scholars who take this "high" view of the book's origin from Amos's own hand are in the minority.

Option 2: The Book Is the Result of a Process of Editing

The middle of our spectrum, and probably the most occupied area at present, is represented by those who think that, whatever Amos's own literary skills may or may not have been, the present book is the result of redaction – in truth, probably several stages of redaction.

The primary impetus to this way of thinking was represented by two influential works. The first, in 1965, was W. H. Schmidt's seminal paper on the deuteronomistic redaction of Amos, which argued that the book is not simply the product of one or more generations of disciples of the prophet but rather of the deuteronomistic movement, which during the exilic period in the sixth century took up the editing of prophetic literature with the consistent purpose of showing why the exile had occurred and how it had