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978-0-521-09647-8 - The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah

Henry McKeating

Excerpt

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THE BOOKS OF
 AMOS, HOSEA
 AND MICAH

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ISRAEL AND JUDAH IN THE EIGHTH CENTURY

The eighth century falls fairly neatly into two contrasting halves. The first half was for both Israel and Judah a kind of Victorian age, a half-century of great stability and national prosperity, and covered by the reign of a single monarch, Uzziah (alias Azariah), in the south, and Jeroboam II in the north. Such periods for the Palestinian states could only occur when there was no great power strong enough to make life difficult for them; they were therefore rare. Egypt was not strong, and Assyria, which had been active towards the end of the previous century (around the end of the reign of Ahab and subsequently), was for the time being quiescent.

In one other way we may call this period a Victorian age. The national wealth was not at all equitably distributed.

The second half of the century saw violent changes. In 745 B.C. Tiglath Pileser came to the throne of Assyria, and under him there was a great resurgence of Assyrian power. In the north the long reign of Jeroboam (he died in about 742) was followed by a rapid succession of kings, many of whom came to violent ends. In 722 Samaria, the capital, fell to the Assyrians. Israel had tumbled in twenty years from the high point of her prosperity and power to the status of a vassal, deprived not only of her independence but almost of her national identity.

In Judah things were somewhat better. Uzziah's immediate

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successors wisely gave in to Assyrian pressure. But when Hezekiah, nearer the end of the century, reversed this policy and attempted to play an independent role, there was trouble for her too. But this takes us beyond our period.

Relations between Israel and Judah at this time appear to have been good, though they had not always been. Possibly Israel was still very much the senior partner. At any rate Israel was the wealthier, the stronger, the more sophisticated and culturally the more developed of the two.

The two peoples do seem to have felt that they were in some sense one. Hosea often talks of them as such, and seems to have regarded the union of the two as the ideal state of affairs. There was nothing to prevent Amos, a southerner, from appearing in the northern cities of Bethel and Samaria and prophesying there.

WHEN DID AMOS PROPHESEY?

Amos took up his prophetic career very near the middle of the century. The title of the book (1: 1) mentions no other northern king but Jeroboam (died 742 B.C.), and Amos is usually placed at or near the end of his reign. It is clear from the book's contents that Israel's great era of prosperity is still in full swing, and it seems to be implied that there is as yet no obvious threat to it. Amos, though confidently prophesying doom, seems reluctant to specify the means whereby the doom will be brought about. In this case Amos' prophetic ministry probably antedates the rise of Tiglath Pileser in 745.

The length of Amos' ministry

There is a general tendency to assume that Amos' prophetic career was short. Most scholars think of it as not more than a few months. The likelihood is that the clash with Amaziah (7: 10-17) brought Amos' public activities in the north to an abrupt conclusion. The dating of the prophecies 'two years before the earthquake' (1: 1) would appear to confine them

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within a single year, unless the date is intended as the date at which the ministry began. The observation that all the recorded words of Amos could have been delivered in a matter of hours does not, of course, prove anything. So could the recorded words of Jesus.

One thing at least is clear. Amos' prophetic activity concentrates closely on a single issue. There is a relative lack of development in his thinking and an unwillingness to take in side issues. This suggests a short period of activity.

Nevertheless there is *some* development. There is, perhaps, evidence of two phases in his thinking, a phase in which Amos made conditional threats, appealed for repentance, and interceded when that was not forthcoming, and a second phase in which he announced unconditional and total doom.

WHEN DID HOSEA PROPHECY?

It is manifest that in Hosea's time the prosperity is gone, the state is in the throes of dissolution. Though it is conceivable that his work began before Jeroboam's death (the title, 1: 1, mentions Jeroboam, and only Jeroboam, among the northern kings), it is thus clear from the book's contents that the bulk of Hosea's ministry must have fallen within the disturbed years following Jeroboam's reign. The list of southern kings mentioned in 1: 1, though perhaps not much reliance should be placed on it, prolongs his career into the reign of Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.). But the book reflects no knowledge of the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722, and we are doubtless justified in locating Hosea's activities within the third quarter of the eighth century, i.e. between 750 and 725. The record of the prophet's relations with his wife and family suggest that his career occupied a number of years, but we cannot say how many.

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WHEN DID MICAH PROPHECY?

Micah's career, which was carried on in the south, unlike that of Amos and Hosea, seems to have begun before the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. and to have continued after it. The title, which is again not to be trusted very far, mentions the reigns of Jotham (742-735), Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-687). Micah is therefore partly contemporary with the northern prophet Hosea, as he is also partly contemporary with Isaiah of Jerusalem in the south.

WHAT IS A PROPHET?

It is all too easy to cast the men of the Old Testament in roles we are familiar with, to see Amos, for example, as a kind of social reformer. Up to a point this may help us to understand them, but it is also dangerous, for we may end up *misunderstanding* them instead.

Any healthy society needs its critics, and the prophets performed this function. In our own society the same function is fulfilled by the press, by the parliamentary opposition and by all sorts of consumer organizations and citizens' councils. But the prophet is far more than all or any of these. He is first and foremost a man of God. He is a religious visionary. His criticisms therefore were felt to have a force and authority with which we should not credit the criticisms of any modern functionary, and our society, therefore, offers no real parallel to his office.

It is also easy to see the prophet as an innovator, as an original thinker, impressing his own new moral insights on society and arriving at fresh ideas about religion. It would be a mistake to discount the originality of the prophets altogether, but assuredly this is not how they saw themselves. The prophet sees himself as the bearer of a tradition. He judges society by a set of standards received from the past. He is at once the most truly radical and the most truly conservative of men, for the

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most disturbing radicalism is that which demands that we take seriously the ancient beliefs which we already profess to hold, and put into practice the principles to which ostensibly we already adhere. The man who does demand that society take its professed beliefs with absolute seriousness, whether these beliefs be enshrined in the Sinai covenant or the Sermon on the Mount, is apt to appear simplistic, and this is how the prophets often appear.

But though the prophet is a man of God, and delivers what he believes to be a divine message, this does not mean that we are obliged to accept him or his word entirely at his own valuation. It does not prevent us from recognizing the more mundane influences which have coloured his thinking. When we hear Amos conveying God's indignation against the unrighteousness of Samaria, we can hardly help seeing it also as the expression of a countryman's disgust at what he regards as the vices of the town. And our acceptance of the prophet as inspired of God must not induce us to cloak the fact that he is a man of his time and shares the presuppositions of his time; presuppositions that we cannot always share with him. All the prophets, for example, accept a moralizing view of history which most modern men cannot regard as satisfactory.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT
ABOUT THE EIGHTH-CENTURY PROPHETS?

The eighth-century prophets are different from earlier prophets first, and most obviously, in that earlier prophets did not have their words written down at length. Why did this happen to those of the eighth century?

It seems that the eighth-century prophets, while adhering to the traditions received from the past, drew certain conclusions from those traditions which their contemporaries found surprising.

The ancient tradition was that Yahweh (on the name Yahweh see p.13) had not always been the God of Israel.

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What is different about the eighth-century prophets?

He had adopted her and made a carefully defined agreement with her on Sinai (a 'covenant'). This agreement was confirmed at Shechem after the entry into Canaan. In the agreement God appears as a rather stern and inflexible character who insists rigidly on the keeping of the agreed conditions. Josh. 24: 19 states unambiguously, 'He is a holy god, a jealous god, and he will not forgive your rebellion and your sins... he will make an end of you.'

The eighth-century prophets deduce from this that, since Israel has manifestly not fulfilled the conditions of the covenant, God will destroy her. Since he managed without her before the agreement was made, he could presumably do so again. There is therefore no reason why he should not destroy her totally.

The prophets' contemporaries found this surprising, first, because it was by no means as obvious to them as to the prophets that they were not fulfilling the terms of the covenant. They interpreted their religious obligations more liberally. But more important, the tradition of the conditional covenant had been overlaid in their minds by more comforting notions. They saw in the presence of the divinely appointed king, and in the presence of God himself with them in the sanctuary, the guarantees of divine favour. That God could punish them if they displeased him they did not doubt, but that he should totally and finally destroy them they found unthinkable. Moreover, they must have seen their prosperity during the first half of the eighth century as evidence that God was anything but displeased.

Now as far as the Northern Kingdom was concerned, the predictions of the prophets were fulfilled to the letter, and within the prophets' own lifetime or shortly afterwards. They were fulfilled while there were still plenty of people around who could remember what they said. Their words were therefore treated with respect and eventually written down, for the dire conclusion which they had drawn from the old traditions seemed to be abundantly confirmed by events.

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The materials of the prophetic books

THE MATERIALS OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

The most prominent type of literary material in prophetic books is the poetic oracle. Poetic oracles may stand alone or in short series. When standing alone they may have a brief narrative framework, describing the event that called them forth. When they appear in series we have to decide whether they were so arranged by the prophet himself or by his editors. How we decide this question will make a difference to the interpretation we place on them. Sometimes oracles in similar form are scattered throughout a prophetic book, and we deduce that they may once have been a series which is now broken up.

Occasionally an oracle may appear twice in different forms, perhaps as a poetic oracle and then as a prose summary. From this we may deduce that it has been handed down by at least two different groups of people, who may each have set their own stamp on it. The fact that the book of Amos, for example, provides no instances of this phenomenon argues for a short and uncomplicated phase of oral transmission. That is to say, there was only a short period before the material was written down, and during which it was passed on by word of mouth. The apparent duplication of 2: 6 and 8: 6 is not a real exception; see note on 8: 6.

Oracles themselves fall into different types. There are judgement oracles pronounced on individuals, and judgement oracles on communities. Both types abound in the books with which we are concerned. Salvation oracles, on the contrary, hardly occur at all in Amos, but are more abundant in Hosea and still more so in Micah.

Oracular material may sometimes be modelled on forms of speech which properly belong to other areas of life. A prophet may deliver his address in the style of a lament (a kind of premature obituary), for example, or in the manner of counsel for the prosecution making a formal accusation. Or he may deliberately adopt the style of a sanctuary prophet and pronounce a solemn execration, a cursing of the enemies of God.

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We are often aware that a fresh oracle is beginning because of the introductory formula which stands at its head. Examples of such formulae are, 'Hear the word of the LORD', 'These are the words of the LORD', or 'Hear this word'. It is important for our interpretation to know where an oracle begins and ends.

Descriptions of visions comprise another common class of material, and the visions themselves can be classified into a number of varieties.

In addition, we have biographical and autobiographical material. This is of the greatest interest to us, but we have to realize at once that the early collectors of the traditions were certainly not interested in it for its own sake. It is included only where it is strictly relevant to the message. Perhaps the commonest autobiographical accounts in the prophets are accounts of the call. These are common because the call constitutes, at least for the prophet himself, his authority to speak. He tends to refer to his call, therefore, when his authority is challenged, though even then he may do so very cryptically.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Amos

What part did Amos play in the composition of the book which bears his name? A whole range of views is still possible. Some are prepared to argue that Amos composed it virtually as it stands. Other scholars, at the opposite extreme, reckon with a long period of oral transmission which would leave no possibility that Amos had a hand in the writing. Such scholars do, however, insist on the accuracy and dependability of oral tradition and assert that we nevertheless possess many of the actual words of Amos.

A number of attempts have been made to identify two 'books of Amos' which have been put together to make our present one: e.g. a 'book of visions' and a 'book of words'; or, a book containing both visions and historical sections, and

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a book of oracles only; or, a book of speeches delivered by the prophet before his expulsion by Amaziah, and a book of later speeches and visions. The scholars who advance these analyses sometimes ascribe to Amos an active part in the compilation, and see him as retiring, after his dismissal from Bethel, to a southern sanctuary to edit his prophecies and wait for their fulfilment. The failure of the exponents of the two-book theories to agree in their reconstructions of the two books does not inspire confidence in analysis of this sort.

The view taken in this commentary is that Amos is responsible not merely for the individual oracles but for the arrangement of many of them into series: i.e. he delivered some of them, orally, in series, but is unlikely to have written them down. We therefore have to reckon with a short period of oral transmission. The present ordering of the series and of the other materials in the book is due to those who handed the materials on. The bulk of the book is likely to have been collected in a single operation shortly after 722 B.C., when events seemed to have justified Amos' predictions. The hopeful prophecies at the end of the book, and a few other small passages, were added later. Some additions and minor changes were made by a Judaeen editor, for at some stage the book was taken over by the southern community and adapted to their needs.

Several prophetic books seem to have grown by a process of accretion, passing through a period in which an original body of written material was supplemented from a still living body of oral tradition. Few traces of such a process can be discerned in the book of Amos. There is an almost total lack of duplicate or overlapping material, and a concentration of the subject-matter on a single theme. Books which have grown by accretion are unlikely to exhibit these features.

Hosea

The book of Hosea falls into two parts. Chapters 1–3 are concerned with the prophet's marriage and the message he

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derived from it. The variation between first person ('I') and third person ('he') styles shows that these chapters were not originally a single, continuous account. Chapters 4–14 are a mixed bag of oracles, mostly oracles of judgement. There is little discernible pattern in the collection, oracles being linked largely by catchwords, though sometimes by similarity of content. This suggests that Hosea himself was not responsible for bringing them together. Catchword links are characteristic of oral transmission.

The text of Hosea

Attention must be drawn at the outset to the fact that the text of Hosea has been very badly preserved. Many lines, or whole verses, of the Hebrew text as we now have it are very obscure, and sometimes they are complete nonsense. Often we can make a reasonable guess as to what was originally written, but sometimes we have to admit that the meaning is irrecoverable. The notes to the N.E.B. indicate a number of points at which obscurities exist, and the commentary indicates yet more, but neither notes nor commentary has space to catalogue all the difficulties. The poor state of the text also explains why there are so many places in Hosea where different translators produce wildly different translations.

The reader might easily gain the impression from this that the biblical text is largely incomprehensible even to the experts, and that biblical translation and interpretation are hazardous enterprises. This is not so. Most Old Testament books contain obscure passages, but in most cases they are relatively few. Hosea is altogether exceptional in the severity of its textual problems.

Micah

The book of Micah, in complete contrast from that of Amos, must have grown up over a long period. It contains collections of the words of the eighth-century prophet, but these have been substantially added to in later generations. The book can-