

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Why does the book of Amos begin with a series of oracles against Israel's neighbours, and only then turn to denounce the prophet's own people? Is it a remnant of an older way of prophecy, the way of Balaam and of the four hundred prophets of Ahab, reinforcing a narrow nationalism with a word of power; is it the expression of a radically new insight, the discovery, made for the first time in the eighth century, that not just Israel but all nations, whatever their prestige and vaunted might, stood under the judgment of Yahweh; or is it a literary device, designed to throw the urbane and comfortable sins of Israel into high relief by seeing them against the background of the apparently grosser outrages perpetrated by barbarian nations, whom the prophet's complacent hearers would be only too ready to condemn, not noticing until too late that in condemning them they were condemning themselves? All of these explanations are possible, none is self-evidently right, and combinations of them are conceivable. Another question which might be asked, however, adds considerably to the difficulty of choosing between them. Why does Amos think that these other nations *are* accountable for their atrocities – wherein does their particular atrociousness lie? Is it that Yahweh, Israel's lawgiver and judge, has laid down laws which even foreign nations must obey – that extension of Yahweh's moral sphere of influence with which the eighth-century prophets used commonly to be credited? Is Amos drawing some kind of analogy between Israel's known obligation to her God and one supposed to be incumbent on foreigners, perhaps especially on those foreigners who belong to the immediate world of Palestinian politics, who had formed the components of David's empire? Or should we see the prophet's evident sense of moral outrage as indicating a belief in moral principles held to be obvious to all right-minded men, or even as evidence that actual conventions about the conduct of war and international relations existed in the Palestine of Amos's day, to which he might tacitly appeal? Here, then, is a second range of questions which have attracted rather less attention than the first, but which are equally important to an understanding of Amos's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

2

thought; and unless both sets of questions are tackled together, we are unlikely to make much progress in forming a coherent interpretation of the prophet and his book.

The purpose of this study is to examine the oracles against the nations in the first two chapters of Amos, in an attempt to discover exactly what point the prophet was making when he condemned Israel's neighbours for atrocities in war, and did so in this particular literary form. It will be suggested that he was appealing to a kind of conventional or customary law about international conduct which he at least believed to be self-evidently right, and which he thought he could count on his audience's familiarity with and acquiescence in. We shall further maintain that this has important consequences for understanding Amos's whole approach to ethics, since at a crucial place in his message he sees moral conduct as a matter of conformity to a human convention held to be obviously universal, rather than to the overt or explicit demands of God: in other words, ethics in Amos is not simply a question of theonomy, as it is quite widely thought to be. We shall also be concerned with other instances of conventional morality, inside and outside Israel, and with other problems about Amos, his book and his prophetic role, which our interpretation of chapters 1-2 raises.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER 1

Rather than beginning with a lengthy survey of the state of the question, I propose in this chapter to outline the interpretation of Amos's oracles against the nations which it will be the task of the rest of this study to justify. I shall set it out as a continuous argument, and then indicate the points at which it seems specially to stand in need of justification. In the chapters that follow each of these will be taken up and discussed against the background of recent work.

Apart from the oracles of Balaam, Amos 1.3-2.5 constitutes the earliest example in the Old Testament of a genre that was to become a regular feature of prophetic books, the cycle of oracles against foreign nations. These oracles, with the probable exception of those on Judah, Edom, and Tyre, are the work of the prophet Amos himself, and are probably among his own earliest oracles. Unlike many prophetic oracles they are neither old material adapted by the prophet for a new purpose, nor short, individual sayings collected by an editor, but are a free composition which formed from the beginning a continuous whole. The purpose of the oracles on the nations is to lead up to the oracle on Israel in 2.6ff; though it is no longer clear where this ends, it was intended by the prophet as the climax to the whole cycle, and the overall effect is to produce surprise and horror in the intended audience. This is achieved by a rhetorical trick similar to that found in Nathan's parable (II Samuel 12), Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5), and Amos's own visions in Amos 7. The prophet begins by condemning the surrounding nations for atrocities committed during military campaigns, and by mentioning well-known incidents he ensures that his hearers will experience a sense of moral outrage – which indeed he fully shares himself: the condemnations are meant with full seriousness, and might well have been felt by his audience to be a proper expression of his prophetic vocation. Having won the people's sympathy and agreement, he rounds on them by proclaiming judgment on Israel, too. This technique has two obvious advantages. First, it ensures that the prophet's word of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

4

doom will be heard, since he has gained his audience's attention by flattering their feelings of superiority and their natural xenophobia. Secondly, it makes it much harder for them to exculpate themselves or dismiss the prophet's message as mere raving, since they have implicitly conceded that sin and judgment are rightly linked, by their approval of what has gone before. (For our purposes it matters little whether we think of the audience as literally present – say at a festal gathering, as some suggest – or as present only to the prophet's imagination, and the oracles as a literary composition.)

For Amos to have supposed that this technique would be successful, he must have held the following beliefs about his intended audience's mentality:

- (1) That they thought manifest evil-doing both deserved and would receive divine punishment.
- (2) That they regarded the nations condemned as moral agents, i.e. as answerable for their actions, particularly in the conduct of war.
- (3) That they thought Israel had a specially privileged position which indemnified her against divine judgment.
- (4) That they did not expect prophets to proclaim judgment on Israel.
- (5) That they did not regard the kind of sins of which Amos accuses Israel as at all comparable in gravity with atrocities in war.
- (6) That it was more obvious to them that the nations had moral obligations towards each other than that Israelites had moral obligations among themselves.

It cannot be shown that any of these assumptions was in fact correct; but it can be shown that unless Amos thought they were, his tactics in constructing chapters 1 and 2 were unintelligent. For if he did not believe (1) or (2), he could not expect the people to react with approval to his condemnation of the nations; if he did not believe (3) or (4), he could hardly expect to surprise them with the oracle against Israel; if he did not believe (5), then the Israel oracle could not be expected to produce any *more* surprise than the others; while unless he believed (6), his chosen literary form would be a piece of sheer bathos. For so far from the Israel oracle coming as a surprise, it would be the only part of the cycle that would occasion none. Any successful didactic technique must begin from the better known and move on to the less well known: and if the moral obligation owed by the nations is a novelty, whereas that owed by Israel is common ground, then the whole cycle is very incompetently put together, building down to a spectacular anti-climax.

It might be thought that we should add a seventh assumption:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

5

(7) That the people expected prophets to denounce foreign nations.

– for otherwise would they not have been surprised at Amos's foreign oracles, and thus spoiled for the extra surprise of the Israel oracle? But this is an unnecessary supposition. Certainly, it cannot have been thought strange that anyone should denounce foreigners; but need the people have thought of this as a specially prophetic activity? One might guess that anyone was welcome to speak out against the crimes of aliens. We may not validly deduce that it was regarded as part of a prophet's role to do so; though of course this might be true in fact, and demonstrable on other grounds.

If this analysis is correct, then certain conclusions may be drawn about the moral norms appealed to in the oracles against the nations, and also about the theological importance of Amos. These are:

(1) Amos did not think that he was being original in claiming that foreign nations were subject to certain moral obligations, at least in their international relations, nor in claiming that God would punish infringements of them. In this he was merely echoing what he took to be popular belief and sentiment. Consequently no interpretation of the prophet can be correct which regards him as an innovator in this respect.

(2) Since Amos thus appeals to a supposed consensus so far as the conduct of war by the nations is concerned, it is unlikely that we should be able to discover any underlying rationale for such moral norms. In particular it is improbable that they were seen by the prophet's audience as deeply theological, or as deriving from divine laws; rather they seem best classified as customary law or convention, or even a kind of commonsense morality: after all, they need reflect no more than the feeling that there ought to be a convention banning certain kinds of conduct, even where no convention in fact exists. It would be interesting to compare these with the norms of conduct Amos supposes to be binding within Israel. *Prima facie* there is no reason to suppose that the prophet had any overall 'theory' of ethical obligation, such as that it derived from the covenant relationship, from the universal rule of God, or from the order of nature. The existence of merely conventional morality in the Old Testament has not been much explored, and so we may hope to break a little fresh ground. Further, since the area of conduct involved is that of international relations, especially in warfare, it will be interesting to explore the question whether any conventions did in fact exist on this subject, either inside Israel or elsewhere in the ancient Near East: and here we hope to provide a convenient summary of some material not previously collected together.

(3) Although we have been careful throughout to say that Amos

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

6

*supposed* his hearers to hold certain beliefs, rather than that they did in fact hold them, it would be odd if he were badly mistaken in his assumptions. What a man takes for granted in arguing with opponents, what he never feels it necessary to prove, is generally the best evidence for the popular beliefs of his day precisely because it is not being insisted upon.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore probable that the first six points outlined above do fairly represent the beliefs of a good many eighth-century Israelites, though we should of course reckon with the possibility that Amos deliberately exaggerates their obtuseness, just as St Paul would widely be held to exaggerate the heterodoxy of teachers against whom he warns his converts. We can therefore form some idea of popular notions about morality, prophecy, and divine judgment, and also about the relationship of Yahweh and Israel. And in the light of this it will make sense to raise the perennial question about the distinctiveness of classical prophecy, attempting to pinpoint the 'new thing' in the preaching of Amos. Our conclusion must be that Amos is not original in proclaiming that sin calls down divine judgment, nor in seeing that Israel had moral obligations to Yahweh, but chiefly in two things:

(i) in regarding social morality as a decisive area of conduct, just as important for the continuance of Yahweh's favour as the avoidance of much crasser and more 'obvious' crimes; and

(ii) in arguing with the people so as to show that their conduct is unreasonable and their complacency foolish and shortsighted. It is presupposed by the use of the 'surprise' technique and also by the insistence on giving reasons for Yahweh's judgment that the people are at least in principle open to rational persuasion, even if in practice they have succeeded in blinding their own eyes and are now too far gone to recover – the problem which both Isaiah and Ezekiel were later to face and discuss. This emphasis on rationality in Amos, indeed, aligns him very clearly with Isaiah, and our discussion is related to recent attempts to trace 'wisdom influence' on his book – though we shall not try to define the point in precisely that way.

In the chapters that follow we shall discuss in detail what may be regarded as the 'sensitive' areas of this line of interpretation. Since our argument is that the thought of Amos himself may be detected behind the oracles in chapters 1 and 2, we shall devote a chapter to examining the provenance of these oracles, considering a number of recent arguments which try to show that the prophet or his editor is simply taking over an older collection, possibly cultic in origin. In chapter 3 we turn to examine the oracles for authenticity, attempting to decide on literary and historical grounds

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

7

whether any of them need to be regarded as later additions to Amos. These two chapters together may be seen as making a case for at least a core of the oracles against the nations as the work of the prophet himself, and as an attempt to make their simple exegesis clear. This leads us, in chapter 4, to ask whether the historical circumstances of the atrocities they condemn can be established, and we conclude that, although it is fair to think that all of the events will have been readily identifiable to the prophet's audience, there is not enough evidence for us to identify them positively. This in turn rules out interpretations of the oracles which absolutely require that they refer either to very remote or very recent events. Chapter 5 looks in more detail at the case for seeing an effect of climax in the juxtaposition of oracles against foreign nations and against Israel, suggesting that this is both inherently probable and consonant with what we know of the prophet's method from other parts of his book. Finally in chapter 6 we try to show that it is better to see the underlying ethical approach in these oracles as an appeal to (at least supposedly) international norms of conduct than to tie them down to any covenant- or Israel-centred ethic. An appendix surveys a little of the evidence for the existence of such international conventions on war and other matters in Israel and among her neighbours: this is intended to show that the kind of interpretation we have proposed is not historically impossible, and to illustrate it with some interesting parallels, but it is not supposed to be in any way probative.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER 2

Do the first two chapters of Amos represent a new departure in Israelite prophecy, or are they part of a long-established tradition? There seems to be something like a consensus in recent writings on the prophets that Amos is here drawing on a tradition already very old by his time, and perhaps even on old oracles against the nations which he simply selected because they suited his purpose. Thus R. E. Clements, in his recent study *Prophecy and Tradition*:

In the earliest literary collection of such prophecies in Amos 1.3-2.6 there are strong indications that the form of such oracles, the style of their presentation, and perhaps also the type of motive adduced for such threats, were already well-established features of prophetic preaching.<sup>1</sup>

The main reasons for such a judgment were summarised by N. K. Gottwald's detailed study *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*<sup>2</sup> and developed by J. H. Hayes in an article four years later,<sup>3</sup> though both build on a great deal of previous discussion. The arguments may be reduced to three main types, all in fact closely connected.

1. Hayes suggests that prophetic oracles against the nations have their roots in 'the tradition of Holy War', and are closely related to taunts and challenges to battle.<sup>4</sup> But whereas a taunt is essentially directed against an individual, and is specially appropriate in cases of single combat,<sup>5</sup> the prophetic oracle is primarily directed against the whole hostile nation. The earliest example of this form in the Old Testament is probably Numbers 21.27-30, the taunt-song against Heshbon, which Gottwald suggests may go back to a pre-Israelite poem, perhaps from the Amorite period.<sup>6</sup> Cases of the actual use of the second-person form in time of war are not common in the Old Testament, but it passes into the prophetic tradition and appears in classic form in Isaiah 10 and 14, and Ezekiel 27 and 28. But the commonest form of prophecy relating to war is reached when the direct second-person address to the enemy<sup>7</sup> is aban-



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Amos's Oracles against the Nations*

9

done in favour of an assurance given to the prophet's own nation or its ruler, referring to the enemy in the third person, and denouncing him. This form reaches its first literary expression in Israel in the oracles of Balaam, which recent studies have suggested go back at least to the period of the United Monarchy and are probably based on pre-monarchic poems.<sup>8</sup> But that it was one function of a prophet to deliver such oracles is plain, according to Hayes, from I Samuel 15.2-3, I Kings 20.26-30, and II Kings 13.17b - and we might add I Kings 22. Several commentators have suggested that Isaiah's oracles in 7.3-9 can be understood against this background as an 'oracle of assurance to the king in time of battle' (*Kriegsansprache*);<sup>9</sup> and their common use of such forms has been one of the factors inclining Old Testament scholars to see affinities between Israelite prophets and the ecstasies of the Mari letters.<sup>10</sup>

But even supposing all this to be right, its relevance to Amos's oracles against the nations must surely be judged very slender. The theory of dependence on such a prophetic tradition can be dismissed on quite general grounds: we can appeal to Fohrer's standard objection<sup>11</sup> that the context in which a form originates tells us very little about its use in any given case, especially when that use is manifestly literary; we might also argue that Israel was not at war with any of the nations in question, and even in theory could scarcely have been at war with all of them at once.<sup>12</sup> Yet against this it might still be held that Amos was taking an old tradition and transforming it for his own purposes. But we can surely go further and maintain that the 'tradition of Holy War' (supposing such a 'tradition' to have existed) has played no part at all in shaping these oracles. Not only is Israel not in fact at war with the nations mentioned: their attitude to Israel is in several cases not the point at issue anyway, as is made specially clear in the oracle against Moab (2.1).<sup>13</sup> Amos is neither encouraging his people to fight in assurance of victory, nor encouraging them to remain passive in expectation of Yahweh's deliverance. He is not, indeed, encouraging them at all; but in view of the oracle on Israel our point is that he is not even pretending to encourage them. We shall have later to examine the actual incidents referred to, and shall suggest that at least some of them may have taken place during comparatively recent attacks on Israel by the nations concerned; but it is not plausible to suppose that Amos, prophesying under Jeroboam II, saw Israel threatened and hemmed in on all sides.<sup>14</sup> Common sense tends rather against the derivation of these oracles from the background of 'Holy War'.

We may add as a rider to this an interesting observation made by Clements on prophetic oracles against the nations in general. He points out that the feature of Israel's enemies most commonly condemned by

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10408-1 - Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5

John Barton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the prophets is their pride or *hybris* towards Yahweh; thus in Isaiah 14.12ff, 16.6, 23.6-12; Jeremiah 48.28-33; Ezekiel 28.1ff, 31.1ff, 32.1ff, 32.12ff.<sup>15</sup> Now in most of these cases the most likely reason for such a charge would seem to be the wish to suggest that the nation in question has failed to subordinate itself to Yahweh by accepting the privileged position of Israel, and instead has set itself up as God, thinking to put down Yahweh's chosen people. A case could reasonably (I think not compellingly) be made for seeing this particular charge as a lineal descendant of the taunt before battle: compare David's exchanges with Goliath in I Samuel 17.43-7. But Amos's oracles make no mention of *hybris*; they concentrate on moral outrages committed by one nation against another. Thus the similarity between Amos 1-2 and other prophetic oracles against the nations is not very great, and Hayes's interesting suggestion cannot readily be made to cover the case of Amos.

So much can be said even on the supposition that Hayes's general thesis is correct. But Clements<sup>16</sup> adduces powerful arguments that suggest that it is not. As he points out, it is hardly surprising that oracles on the downfall of foreign nations should use military expressions and be similar to propaganda against an enemy: no form-critical explanation is necessary. We may also note a further weakness in Hayes's case. This is that the execration or taunt in the second person is formally quite distinct from the *Kriegsansprache* speaking of the enemy in the third person, and the development of the two should be considered separately. Now where the taunt does appear in prophetic oracles against the nations, it is most often in the form of a taunt-song, which is generally held to owe more to the funeral lament than to anything connected with the conduct of war. And the third-person references in the prophets are only occasionally (as in Isaiah 7) cast in the *Kriegsansprache* form anyway; in most cases they have no relation to any decision on the part of the Israelite king about whether or not to fight, and in many cases are directed towards nations with which Israel is in any case not at war. Hayes's theory gains its plausibility from lumping all 'oracles on the nations' together, and mixing form-critical considerations with observations about content. It does not really illuminate the complex picture presented by classical prophecy.

2. Hayes's second point (really a very closely related one, in view of the cultic associations of 'Holy War') is that another *Sitz im Leben* for oracles against foreign nations may be found in cultic ceremonies of lamentation, as attested by the existence of communal laments in the Psalter and elsewhere. He cites Psalms 20, 21 and 60; Lamentations 4.21-2; and II Kings 18.13-19.37. The transition from lamentation about military defeat (or petition for aid) to thanksgiving for either promised or actual deliverance