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Prophecy, Poetry, and Rhetoric
Andrew R. Davis
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INTRODUCTION

Multiple Audiences, Overhearing, and Entrapment

Thank you. And for your applause.
It has been a pleasure. I
Have never enjoyed speaking more.
May I also thank the real ones
Who have made this possible.
First, the cloud itself. And now
Gurnard's Head and Zennor
Head. Also recognise
How I have been helped
By Jean and Madron's Albert
Strick (He is a real man.)
And good words like brambles,
Bower, spiked, fox, anvil, teeling.

The bees you heard are from
A hive owned by my friend
Garfield down there below
In the house by Zennor Church.

The good blue sun is pressing
Me into Zennor Hill.

Gently disintegrate me
Said nothing at all.

From W. S. Graham's "Enter a Cloud" (1975)[1]

These lines, which make up the fifth and final stanza of W. S. Graham's "Enter a Cloud," mark an abrupt shift in the poem. Up to this point, the poem has consisted of Graham's description of lying in a bower

[1] W. S. Graham, *W.S. Graham, Selected by Michael Hofmann* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2018), 64–67.

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of bramble and gazing at a cloud that sailed between two mounts (Zennor and Gurnard's Head). Here in the last stanza, however, the poem changes scenes from that bower to an award ceremony, where Graham is accepting a prize for what we have just read. The stanza is a parody of the polite applause and name-dropping that are familiar to anyone who has attended such a ceremony or a book review session at an academic conference.

What interests me most about the stanza is the effect of this sneak attack on Graham's audience. For four stanzas we have been detached observers, standing by as Graham creates a dialogue within the poem. In the first stanza we encounter the poet's *I* and then an unspecified *we*. In the second stanza, he apostrophizes the cloud ("O cloud, / I see you entering from / Your west gathering yourself / Together into a white / Headlong. And now you move / And stream out of the Gurnard"). In the third, he addresses "Jean in London," and in the fourth, he imagines Albert Strick waving at the cloud. For four stanzas we readers stand at a safe distance, watching addressees float in and out of the poem.

In the fifth stanza, however, the trap is sprung, and suddenly, we are pulled into the poem. We become another *you* in the poem's dialogue. It doesn't matter if we like the poem or not; we are compelled by the setting to join in the applause. We are also forced to listen appreciatively to the humble-brag thanks that Graham offers to the people and things that inspired the poem. What began as a conventional lyric poem about a cloud becomes, in the end, an ironic critique of literary culture in which we ourselves are implicated. Graham shows that we have been complicit all along, the hidden *we* whom he conscripted at the poem's outset. The poem "underlin[es] the ease with which the applause-seeking, readership-pleasing poet can slip into intellectual posturing. The readerly *you* is as much a figure to be sparred with, discomfited, tricked, as to be flattered, thanked, indulged."[2]

Graham's poem offers a modern example of what Robert Alter has called the "rhetoric of entrapment." Such rhetoric is commonplace in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, where we find prophets setting traps for their audiences not unlike the snare Graham springs on his unsuspecting audience in "Enter a Cloud." Biblical

[2] Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 91.

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audiences, both in and in front of the text, are likewise drawn into prophetic speech, thinking the prophet's polemic is a condemnation of someone else. The audience supposes that they are aligned with the prophet until suddenly, the tables are turned, and they are exposed as a target of prophetic ire no less than the someone else. Alter illustrates this rhetoric with Nathan's famous parable to David in 2 Samuel 12. The story of the depraved rich man is a trap, which the prophet springs as soon as David vents his outrage at the rich man. Nathan's climactic "You are the man!" (*'ātâ hā'îš*) exemplifies the rhetoric of entrapment. That which "might be construed by a complacent listener as referring to 'the others'" leads instead to the conviction of that very listener.[3]

Another instructive example of this rhetoric is the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7. The passage begins with an unidentified singer intoning a love song, and everything seems fine until the grapes are revealed to be rotten (v 2). At that point, the speaker turns and addresses the "dwellers of Jerusalem//men of Judah" and asks them to judge between singer/vinegrower and the vineyard. Only later is it revealed that the same "men of Judah" are the seedlings that have turned rotten (v 7). Like David, these listeners were lured into the role of judge, only to find that they have themselves become the object of judgment.

Second Samuel 12 and Isaiah 5 exemplify the triangulation that lies at the heart of prophetic entrapment. Prophets invite their audience to share their contemptuous view of a wrongdoer, only to have the condemnation bounce back on their supposedly sympathetic audience. The central argument of this book is that such triangulation applies not only to audiences within biblical texts but also to the texts' external audiences. Texts like 2 Samuel 12 and Isaiah 5 dramatize a rhetorical technique that is central to prophetic discourse beyond the world within the text. Even in these two examples, there is another level of audience to consider, namely, the audiences of the texts themselves, which are most likely not the same as the addressees within the text.[4] Even if we suppose that 2 Samuel 12 records an actual parable presented to David and that Isaiah 5 was sung to men

[3] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (rev. ed.; New York: Basic Books, 2011), 180; see also Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 125–86.

[4] See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994 [orig. 1983]), 52–53.

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of Judah, neither addressee is the presumed audience of the textual versions of their speech, as it is preserved in the Hebrew Bible. To what extent were the external audiences of the texts likewise drawn into the entrapment that takes place within the text?

More could be said about the entrapped audiences of 2 Samuel and First Isaiah,[5] but I turn instead to the book of Amos, which is the focus of the present study. Amos is an ideal book to explore the entrapment of triangulated audiences because its combination of northern and southern horizons makes it especially difficult to overlook the book's multiple audiences. To be sure, this kind of double horizon and multiplicity is not unique to Amos. There are plenty of biblical texts that were first composed for northern and later reformulated for southern audiences, and many texts, especially biblical poetry, engage multiple audiences at once. What makes the book of Amos distinctive, however, is the prevalence of these traits within the book; they are operative in not just one or two passages but the book as a whole. Nearly every interpreter recognizes that the Amos tradition originated in the Northern Kingdom and was later edited and supplemented in the Southern Kingdom.[6] In no other biblical book is this double horizon more prominent and pervasive than in Amos, and it is more than a happenstance of its composition history; it serves an important rhetorical function within the book.

A good example of how multiple audiences facilitate a rhetoric of entrapment in Amos is the oracles against foreign nations in Chapters 1 and 2.[7] Typically, such oracles announce YHWH's vindication of his people by vanquishing their enemies, and for the first six oracles, it's so far, so good. The jingoistic tour takes an abrupt turn in the final oracle, however, as YHWH's wrath turns to Israel in 2:6. This turn

[5] Good starting points for each would be Seth L. Sanders, "Absalom's Audience (2 Samuel 15–19)," *JBL* 138 (2019): 5123–36, and H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 328–31, respectively.

[6] There are some exceptions, such as those scholars who attribute the entire book to the historical prophet Amos (e.g., John H. Hayes, *Amos, The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988]) and those who interpret the book only as the product of Judahite scribes (e.g., Philip R. Davies, "Why Do We Know About Amos?" in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* [ed. D. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi; London: Equinox, 2009], 55–72).

[7] See Robert B. Chisholm, "'For Three Sins … Even for Four': The Numerical Sayings in Amos," *BSac* 147 (1990): 188–97; James R. Linville, "Amos among the 'Dead Prophets Society': Re-Reading the Lion's Roar," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 55–77 at 62–63.

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reveals the preceding oracles to be a set-up; the Israelite audience was invited to share the wrathful gaze of YHWH against other nations and to acknowledge the justice of divine punishment for their transgressions. In the last oracle this justice is turned against the audience themselves. The book of Amos begins by letting the people of Israel point with the prophet to the transgressions of others, but by the end of the cycle the audience finds the prophet's finger has turned to their own transgressions. The foreign nations created a distant horizon for the oracles, but all along a trap was being set at home.

Moreover, the crimes of the foreign nations serve as more than a backdrop; they also establish the context for Israel's own transgressions. As Jeremy M. Hutton has shown, the crimes listed in 1:3–2:3 are not isolated problems within each nation but a set of interrelated troubles whose common denominator is the Neo-Assyrian imperial economy.[8] The setting for the land-grabbing (1:3, 13), slave-trafficking (1:6, 9), and warfare (1:11) is the booming interregional trade that ran along the "King's Highway," a north–south trade route stretching from the Arabian peninsula through the Transjordanian highlands to Damascus (and then on to Syria and Mesopotamia). Although many scholars draw a sharp distinction between these international crimes and the more provincial transgressions of Israel, Hutton argues that the oppression and deviancy denounced in 2:6–8 are rooted in the same economic system: "It was precisely the upper class's participation in and hegemony over the avenues of international, long-distance trade that permitted their exploitation of the smaller-scale regional subsistence economies."[9] Thus, the rhetoric of entrapment in Amos 1–2 consists of a bait-and-switch but also no small continuity between the crimes of the nations and of Israel.

Furthermore, a diachronic analysis of Amos 1–2 reveals another layer of audience and entrapment. Nearly all scholars regard the oracle against Judah (2:4–5) as an interpolation, evidence of a later Judahite scribe who updated the text for a southern audience.[10] This

[8] Jeremy M. Hutton, "Amos 1:3–2:8 and the International Economy of Iron Age II Israel," *HTR* 107 (2014): 81–113.

[9] Ibid., 112.

[10] See James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 41–42; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets* (trans. W. Janzen et al.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 163–64; Jason Radine, *The Book of Amos in Emergent Judah* (FAT II/45; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 15–17; Göran Eidevall, *Amos* (AYB 24G; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 110–12.

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compositional development shows a setting beyond the original performance of Amos's oracles against the nations (if there was such a performance) and beyond the initial textual composition by the first tradents of the oracles. The insertion of 2:4–5 shows that the oracles were at some point *re*-read by an audience of later southern tradents who found its indictment relevant to their context. The rhetorical trap laid for Israelite elites could just as well be set for Judahite elites, who were likewise complicit in the oppression that had first been charged against the foreign nations and Israel. In this later version of Amos 1–2, the oracle against Israel is no longer the punchline but has joined the oracles against the nations as part of a set-up to entrap Judah.

This brief look at Amos 1–2 reveals multiple horizons and audiences: the foreign nations mentioned in the opening oracles, the oracles' initial audience(s)-turned-target in Israel, and the Judahite audience(s) who read/heard the later version with 2:4–5 and found themselves convicted alongside the doomed foreign nations and fallen Israel. Was such multiplicity necessary for the prophet's indictment of Israel (and later Judah)? Could the initial prophet have skipped the foreign nations and simply blasted Israel, and could the tradents have dispensed with the nations and Israel and just denounced Judah? Yes, but such straightforward indictments would not be nearly as impactful. The multiple horizons are what give Amos 1–2 its rhetorical force; the plurality is not just the result of editing and updating but a purposeful strategy by successive authors of the book of Amos.

Scholarship on prophetic literature, including the book of Amos, has given too little attention to the various levels of audience at play in a prophetic text from its earliest composition.[11] For example, the only audience Manfred Weippert mentions in his influential definition of prophecy is the "the actual addressees" (*den eigentlichen Adressaten*) of a prophet.[12] Addressees are indeed a crucial element

[11] Notable exceptions are Linville, "Amos among the 'Dead Prophets Society,'" 59–60, 65–76; Radine, *The Book of Amos in Emergent Judah*, 139–40, 169; and Sara J. Milstein, "'Who Would Not Write?': The Prophet as Yhwh's Prey in Amos 3:3–8," *CBQ* 75 (2013): 429–45.

[12] See Weippert, "Aspekte israelitischer Prophetie im Lichte verwandter Erscheinungen des Alten Orients," in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festgabe für Karlheinze Deller zum 21. Februar 1987* (AOAT 220; eds. G. Mauer and U. Magen; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 287–319 at 289–90. Among the various scholars who have enlisted this definition, see Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20–21; David L. Petersen, "Defining Prophecy and Prophetic Literature," in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern*

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in a prophetic text, but as we saw in Amos 1–2, they are not the only audience we need to consider. Already many scholars have recognized the importance of re-reading audiences, who received prophetic texts decades or centuries after their original composition. In the case of Amos 2:6–8, for example, we must consider not just the Israelites addressed in some oral performance of the oracle but also Israelites who encountered it after its collection in Amos 1–2 and even later Judahites who were eventually drawn into its condemnation.

These re-readers, not the addressees of 2:6–8, were the audiences of the tradents who preserved, textualized, and supplemented the oracle, and they are just as integral to its overall meaning as the original addressees. In fact, in many ways, re-reading audiences were the most consequential for the shape and meaning of the book of Amos as we know it. There is wide agreement among scholars that the key historical context for prophetic *books* was not the setting depicted within the text but the post-exilic period when the books were produced.[13] Insofar as prophetic books were the products of post-exilic *literati*, we should focus on the intended audiences of these Yehudite scribes as much as or more than the addressees mentioned (or presumed) within a prophetic text or book.[14] Thus, our interpretation

Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives (SymS 13; ed. M. Nissinen; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 33–44 at 39; Radine, *The Book of Amos in Emergent Judah*, 83–84; Konrad Schmid, "Prognosen und Postgnosen in der biblischen Prophetie," *EvT* 74 (2014): 462–76 at 465; Jonathan Stökl, "Deborah, Huldah, and Innibanna: Constructions of Female Prophecy in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible," *JAJ* 6 (2016): 320–34 at 320; Alexandra Grund-Wittenberg, "The Future of the Past: Literarische Prophetien, Prophetenspruchsammlungen und die Anfänge der Schriftprophetie," *VT* 71 (2021): 365–96 at 368.

[13] For prophetic literature more generally, see Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Prophetic Book," 290, 293–94; idem, "Introduction," 10, 15–16; idem, "Toward an Integrative Study of the Production of Authoritative Books in Ancient Israel," in *The Production of Prophecy*, 15–28; Diana Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books: The Fixing of the Divine Word," in *The Production of Prophecy*, 29–54 at 40–43; Matthijs J. de Jong, "Biblical Prophecy – A Scribal Enterprise. The Old Testament Prophecy of Unconditional Judgement Considered as a Literary Phenomenon," *VT* 61 (2011): 39–70 at 55–58; Schaper, "Exilic and Post-exilic Prophecy," 324–42; Floyd, "The Production of Prophetic Books," 285–92; Nihan, "The 'Prophets' as Scriptural Collection," 74–78; Thomas Römer, "From Prophet to Scribe: Jeremiah, Huldah, and the Invention of the Book," in *Writing the Bible*, 86–96 at 94–95; James M. Bos, "The 'Literarization' of the Biblical Prophecy of Doom," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writing*, 263–80 at 276–78. For Amos in particular, see Davies, "Why Do We Know about Amos?," 68–69.

[14] See Ehud Ben Zvi, "Micah 1.2–16: Observations and Possible Implications," *JSOT* 77 (1998): 103–20; idem, "The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic

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should consider what a prophetic text meant to its addressees as well as what it meant to the re-reading scribes who curated it and the re-reading audiences for whom they were writing.[15]

With this focus on re-reading, or *relecture*, comes new opportunities for interpretation. Ehud Ben Zvi, for example, has highlighted the polysemy that is created in the process of re-reading. By reinterpreting earlier oracles in light of their present contexts, scribes generated new meanings and new ambiguities within the texts.[16] Ben Zvi's insight is reminiscent of the term "classic" in the hermeneutical theory of David Tracy and others. Tracy uses this term to denote expressions of a religious tradition, which bear an excess of meaning and therefore raise new questions and new interpretive possibilities as the classic is situated in new contexts within its developing tradition.[17] Because of its surplus of meaning, a classic is inevitably re-read, and these re-readings serve to evaluate past meanings and influence future ones. A re-reading is shaped by the particular context of a classic's first formulation and, in turn, shapes its significance for later audiences.

Such polysemy is not just a function of expanding readership over time but is part of a prophetic text from its initial stages of composition. A central argument of this book is that the multiple audiences and meanings of prophecy are built into its rhetoric from the beginning of its compositional history. The triangulation of entrapment – and also identity, as we will see – was an inherent feature of

Literature," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (eds. E. Ben Zvi and M. Sweeney; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 276–97; idem, "Remembering the Prophets through the Reading and Rereading of a Collection of Prophetic Books in Yehud: Methodological Considerations and Explorations," in *Remembering and Forgetting in Early Second Temple Judah* (eds. E. Ben Zvi and C. Levin; FAT 85; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 17–44.

[15] Besides the production of the book itself, this curation took a variety of forms, such as glosses, *Fortschreibung* (updating), and the redaction of earlier collections of material. For a discussion of distinctions among these forms, see H. G. M. Williamson, "The Vindication of Redaction Criticism," in *Biblical Interpretation and Method: Essays in Honour of John Barton* (eds. K. Dell and P. Joyce; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26–36.

[16] See Ben Zvi, "The Prophetic Book," 287–88; also idem, "A Deuteronomistic Redaction in/among 'The Twelve'?: A Contribution from the Standpoint of the Books of Micah, Zephaniah and Obadiah," in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism* (JSOTSup 268; eds. L. Schearing and S. McKenzie; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 232–61 at 243 n. 29.

[17] See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 99–153. For related discussions

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prophetic discourse and one that I will explore in this book through the concept of "overreading." My use of concept is adapted from the concept of "overhearing," which is prevalent in poetry studies as a way to describe how a single poetic work engages multiple levels of audience. The first level consists of the addressees within the poem, such as the apostrophized cloud and Jean in London in the poem "Enter a Cloud," but the poem is never meant just for these addressees. Rather, it is meant to be overheard by other audiences who are expected to eavesdrop on the dialogue taking place within the poem. What makes "Enter a Cloud" clever and funny is the way in the last stanza Graham drags the overhearing audience into the poem itself. As we will see in the next chapter, which discusses "overhearing" at greater length, the engagement with multiple audiences is an inherent feature of various poetic traditions. Interpretation requires that we consider what a poem meant to its addressees as well as the audiences expected to overhear it.

One advantage of "overreading" as a rubric for my study of the book of Amos is the way it correlates addressees and overreaders (and subsequent audiences). It is an interpretive lens that recognizes each audience as distinct, while also taking into account rhetorical and literary continuities from addressee to audience (to audience). Even when the addressees within a text are fictive, they are nonetheless integral to its meaning for other audiences. In this way, overreading as an interpretive lens reflects my reliance on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of distanciation.[18] According to Ricoeur, the discourses that take place on the linguistic and literary levels of a work create distance both between the work and the audience(s) and between the work and its writer(s). These distances are what make new meanings possible for successive audiences, and in the biblical text this distanciation takes place at every stage of the text's formation. The overall meaning of a text is an ongoing

of "classic," see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2d rev. ed.; rev. trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall; New York: Crossroad, 1991), 286–91; Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theory* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 161–62. Both cite the definition of Friedrich Schlegel, a poet and literary critic at the turn of the eighteenth century, that "a classic is a writing that is never fully understood. But those that are educated and educate themselves must always want to learn more from it" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 290 n. 218; Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 161).

[18] Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. and trans. J. Thompson; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 93–106.

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synthesis of these continuities and discontinuities over time, but it begins with a dynamic that takes place within the text itself.

One of the geniuses of prophetic speech is its seeming ability to close gaps of time and space, so that "the readers' sense of overhearing a prophet speaking to his contemporaries is quickly lost, and it seems that the prophet is directly addressing the readers."[19] This effect, however, applies not just to later re-readers of a prophetic text but also to the overreading audiences at earlier stages of composition. "Re-reading" accounts for the long history of receptions of a text by subsequent audiences unimagined by its authors; "overreading" points to the impact of a text on the actual audiences whom the authors intended to eavesdrop on the discourse taking place in the text. Probably, one of the reasons that prophetic texts have been so good at entrapping re-readers is that triangulation among audiences was a rhetorical strategy all along. Many prophetic texts are addressed to one audience (real or fictive) but were meant to be overread (or overheard) by another audience outside the text.

The presence of overreading audiences should be no surprise since overhearing seems to be an essential feature of the prophetic self-presentation. In the words of Jeremiah, "Who has stood in the council of YHWH and seen and heard his word?" (23:18; cf. 23:22). According to this rhetorical question and other depictions of prophets in the divine council (1 Kgs 22:19–22; Isa 6:1–13; 40:1–8), the true prophet is the one who has access to the council's deliberations and is tasked with disseminating its judgments.[20] Thus, at the heart of prophecy is a complex layering of addressees and audiences. YHWH's speech in the divine council is addressed to the councilors but also overheard by the prophet, who interjects and becomes an intermediary of the divine speech to yet another audience, that is, the people who are told what the prophet overheard. The meaning of the speech varies for each audience; for example, the divine speech in Isaiah 6 serves as a message of doom as well as a ratification of

[19] Michael H. Floyd, "The Production of Prophetic Books in the Early Second Temple Period," in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* (ed. M. Floyd and R. Haak; LHBOTS 427; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 276–97 at 289; see also in the same volume, idem, "Introduction," 1–25 at 6–7.

[20] See Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in *Prophetic Divination*, 461–77 (orig. 2002); Ellen White, *Yahweh's Council: Its Structure and Membership* (FAT/II 65; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 134–37, 168–72.

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