

Barton argues four main theories about the composition of Amos. On the right side, scholars think that most of the book comes from Amos himself. The spectrum moves left by those believing that it is the result of editing, continuing with those claiming it is a deliberate literary production, and it is anchored on the far left by those purporting that “Amos” is an invention of a later time period. There is credible internal evidence that supports Amos as being a real man living in the 8th century BC who preached and wrote this book. References to the prosperity of Israel and Judah, along with societal abuses of the poor, certainly fit within the general historical context of the time. Those who believe the book was a deliberate fabrication of later authors argue that a book demonstrating such skillful construction could not have been written by one person. This argument does not make sense because it ignores the many examples of superior literary works written by individuals who possessed great skill. Consider JRR Tolkien as a modern example.

In Jewish tradition, Amos is part of “The Twelve”. Many modern Christians refer to it as “The Minor Prophets”. As one of the earliest writings of this collection, Amos may have set the stage for subsequent writers. It is difficult for this student to honestly have conviction about who Amos was as a person. This is the problem with literary criticism. If Amos was not real, why is it important to know who he was? If Amos was redacted, who can really know? The uncertainty brought on by academic questioning is unsettling. Many scholars make emphasize Amos’ own claim against being a “nabi”. They reason that his denial means he must not be a prophet. But this makes no sense. I am a pastor and I frequently downplay what I do because otherwise, people treat me differently.

On page 51, John Barton admits to a centrist view on his approach to Amos. He argues for all four of the theories, yet he favors neither of the extremes. I personally lean more towards the view that Amos was the author of the book that bears his name. Why? Because in ministry, it is the most helpful approach. The people served by the Church do not need to know that Amos might have been a contrived figure.