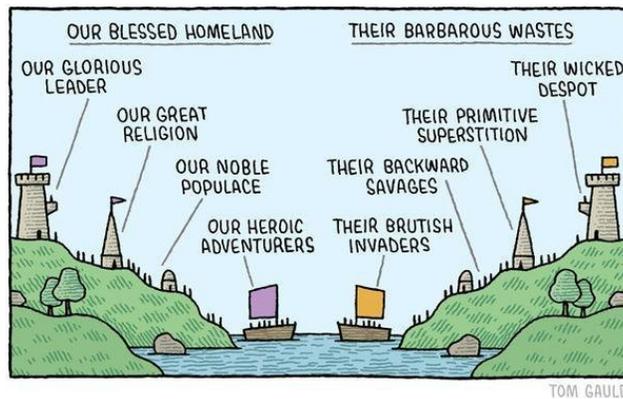


“Toxic Tribalism”

Lessons from the Old Testament Book of Amos



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The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a tremendous amount of upheaval throughout the world. Stretching back now more than a year and a half in its worldwide impact, this respiratory virus has forced organizations, both public and private, to pivot quickly in response to rapidly changing protocols and regulations. On an individual level, people have had unprecedented space and time to reconsider much about life, relationships, and purpose. Many outcomes have been surprisingly positive. For instance, Bryn Nelson notes in the *British Medical Journal* that “(d)octors and researchers are noticing some curious and unexpectedly positive side effects of the abrupt shifts in human behavior in response to the covid-19 pandemic. Skies are bluer, fewer cars are crashing, crime is falling, and some other infectious diseases are fading from hospital emergency departments.”¹ The abundance of unstructured time has been a benefit to workers and families in that it has allowed a slowdown of a normally busy and harried life.

At the same time, there have been noticeable negative outcomes. The World Health Organization, in a statement summarizing the impact of the pandemic, offered the following: “the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating; tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year.”² This type of catastrophic impact on the health, food and economic systems all over the world has also had profound impact on social structures. Typically, in times of difficulty and stress, people turn to the social institutions in their lives for stability and normality. However, over the past 18

¹ Nelson, Bryn. *BMJ* 2020; 369 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1785> (Published 04 May 2020). *BMJ* 2020;369:m1785

²World Health Organization, “Impact of COVID-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our food systems.” <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people-s-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>

months, the fabric of many of these institutions has been stretched tight to the breaking point. This has been particularly noticeable within the context of church ministry. Whereas the church should be a unifier of people, in many settings the church has simply reflected the growing sense of tribalism³ in our culture.

In my church ministry context, this tribalism has manifested in a strong sense of self-righteousness combined with a demonization of “the other”. This dynamic has been readily observable in the political sphere where “red” and “blue” have been tribal colors. Tribalism has come increasingly to the fore in the era of Covid. People have generally been unhappy with just about every decision made by our church staff because it did not quite fit their tribal philosophy. Vaxxers are in a corner without masks while anti-vaxxers are in the opposite corner with masks. Both intend to signal their moral high ground through their response to the pandemic. Families have been literally torn apart by an inability to communicate with one another from differing points of view.

The root of this toxic tribalism is a heart of pride, and I believe this grieves the heart of God. It is the very antithesis of what I believe God wants for His bride, the church. The challenge ahead of us in church leadership is to figure out how to navigate these waters rife with toxic tribalism. To faithfully preach and apply the word of God has never been an easy task that is widely accepted by the culture, so I do not expect these days to be any different. There are a vast number of church experts or cultural sociologists who address this shift toward tribalism. But as is always the case, the most effective textbook for these types of church ministry dilemmas is the Word of God.

³ In this paper, I am using the word “*tribalism*” intentionally and specifically. In this context, I am not referring to ethnic groups but instead to the behavior and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's own tribe or social group.

Tribalism Addressed: The Old Testament Book of Amos

During this pandemic, I had the privilege to preach on the Old Testament book of Amos during a sermon series. I was astounded to learn more about the history and background of this brief collection of judgment oracles tucked among the collection of minor prophets. The brilliant structure of the Old Testament book of Amos is fascinating and has much to teach us in the modern world about the impact of toxic tribalism. The oracles of judgement are pronounced in such a precise geographic manner that the listeners were led to first believe that the words of judgment were intended for other nations and people groups. This heart attitude of judgment of others is a classic indicator of tribalism and reveals our inclination to be harsh with others but easy on ourselves. However, the oracles that were first presented in a wide geographic circle continued to be narrowed until they became a laser-focused, sharpened point. In their discussion of Amos in “The New Dictionary of Bible Theology”, Alexander and Rosner posit the following:

“The LORD was coming in judgment, bringing destruction in his wake. The fire of judgment would sweep over the surrounding nations, including Judah to the south (1:3–2:5). But much to Israel’s shock, Amos suddenly turned on his northern audience. The ‘day of the LORD’ would not be sunny, but dark (see 5:18–20). Israel was the primary target of divine judgment because Israel had offended the LORD more than had all the other nations (2:6–16).”⁴

The shock for the Northern audience would have been largely due to their prideful tribalism. Amos addresses issues including social injustice, mistreatment of the poor, and hypocrisy of religious traditions void of righteousness. The listeners in the days of Amos would have been extremely uncomfortable because they were quite certain they were on the correct side of the issues. Each of these are cultural issues facing the modern church as well.

⁴ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

In this Master of Biblical Studies degree program, it has been helpful to learn the various critical methods applied to reading the Old Testament and my previous fascination with Amos led me to apply a specific critical method to this book. Redaction criticism has been a new world opened up that has enhanced my understanding of scripture and given me new tools to approach the text of Scripture. In this paper, I will provide a brief summary of the book of Amos and offer details regarding the author himself, the culture in which Amos was produced, an explanation of redaction criticism and finally conclude with the method applied to the book of Amos. All scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version translation of the Bible.

SUMMARY OF AMOS

Amos viewed the harsh disparity between the working class (of which he was a member) and the religious/economic elite. Ultimately, the book of Amos is a manifesto “that persuades the reader that ultimate power, far from being ‘a monopoly of throne and temple,’ remains with Amos’s God.”⁵ In other words, we are not ever capable of claiming the moral high ground. There is only One who can be “in the right” all the time and we must demonstrate the requisite humility to at least consider the possibility that we may be wrong. Without this humility, we run the very real risk of pride and toxic tribalism that plagued the elite of Amos’ day.

The major issue in the view of Amos was the way in which the elite justified their status as a reward from God for their ritualistic worship. Along with this self-righteousness the elite also possessed an attitude of judgment toward the poor and saw their lot in life as a direct result of God’s judgment on the poor. The book of Amos records a number of oracles of judgment

⁵ F. O. Garcia-Treto, “A Reader-Response Approach to Prophetic Conflict: The Case of Amos 7:10–17,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (JSOTSup 143; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 124.

directed at surrounding nations and finally concludes with three distinct visions that are images of the future calamity awaiting the nation of Israel. These three visions (plumb line, basket of fruit, swarm of locusts) directly relate to the impending doom and destruction of Israel and make clear that God's judgment is not actually aimed at the poor but instead at the self-indulgent, self-righteous elite that believe they are earning God's favor. Amos 5:21-24 contains an excellent summation of the major theme of the book:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;

your assemblies are a stench to me.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream!

AUTHOR

There is a wide spectrum of thought relating to “what Amos actually was and did: a Northern government official, a Judean nationalist, a person who was interested in a specific historical situation and the political developments of his time, a cultic prophet, a preacher of the covenant, etc.”⁶ There are sadly very few resources that can be consulted for further

⁶ Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*. Walter de Gruyter, 2009, 2.

biographical information. The little information that exists about Amos is provided in the first verse of the book bearing the name of the prophet. Amos 1:1 reads as follows:

***The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—
the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake,
when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.***

One of the interesting debates about Amos regards the social status that he enjoyed. In many cultures (including 8th century BC Israel), an agricultural role involving farming and shepherding was not seen as a high-class lifestyle. Horn argues the position of Amos being from a lower caste when he states that “Amos actually came from Tekoa in Judah, a small town west of Bethlehem on the fringe of the wilderness. Amos was of low origin - being a shepherd and gatherer of sycamore fruit - who felt called by Yahweh to go to the north and raise his voice against the evils in that kingdom.”⁷

In 8th century BC Israel there was not only a socio-economic order but also a strict hierarchy of religious authority as well. Again, the debate regarding Amos’s actual status is worth noting. It is readily apparent that Amos was not highly regarded among the religious elite of his day. Bright states that “Of the career of Amos, who began to speak about the middle of the eighth century, we know only the following facts: that he came from Tekoa on the fringe of Judean wilderness (Amos 1:1); that he was not a member of prophetic orders, but a simple herdsman whose only authentication was a tremendous sense of vocation to speak the word of Yahweh (7:14-15, 3:1-8).”⁸

⁷ S.H. Horn and P.K. McCarter, Jr. “The Divided Monarchy: The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel” in H. Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*. Biblical Archaeological Society, 2011, 127.

⁸ John Bright, *A History of Israel*. Westminster John Knox Press, 4th ed, 2001, 244.

Mitchell adds that “Tekoa was in Judah, about sixteen kilometers south of Jerusalem, and Amos identifies himself as a farmer, a header perhaps of cattle as well as of sheep, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and disclaims any prophetic antecedents, but he nevertheless felt himself to have been called by Yahweh to speak his message, or ‘prophecy’, in Israel.”⁹ It is quite clear in the background biographical information offered in the book of Amos that the title character was nothing special in terms of economic success or religious influence. Despite this lack of claimed status, what set him apart was simply the clear call of the Lord to share the message of judgment and hope.

However, the debate about who he was exactly is not concluded simply because of the author’s autobiographical statements. Perhaps these self-effacing descriptions about status and authority were simply an authorial tool to enhance the dramatic effect of the indictment. “The depreciation of the author is intended to increase the force of the text. ... moralizing is addressed mostly to the social elite, because it is their hubris which trouble people. ... Often interpreters are misled by formal literary practices of ancient writers.”¹⁰ There is, therefore, a very real possibility that Amos was actually a man of significant stature that would have commanded the attention of the social and religious elite of his day. In this scenario, the intentional “depreciation of the author” is simply a literary tool that must be understood by the modern reader.

HISTORICAL/CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In addition to gaining deeper understanding regarding the author of the book, it is also critically important to understand the socio-political context of 8th century BC Israel. This

⁹ T.C. Mitchell, “Israel and Judah from Jehu until the Period of Assyrian Domination (841-c. 750 B.C.).” In *The Prehistory of the Balkans, and the Middle East and the Aegean World, Tenth to Eight Centuries B.C.* Cambridge University Press, 1982, 506.

¹⁰ Lukasz Spano, “Biblical Prophet Amos: A Simple, Poor Shepherd from Judah?”. In *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, Institute of History: University of Warsaw, 2002, 217.

background allows for excellence in redaction criticism especially in light of the intended audience of the text. There are two key cultural elements that must be addressed: 1) the prosperity of the nation and 2) the oral transmission of information.

Prosperity

This was not a phase of Israel's history that was marked by tremendous chaos, conflict or turmoil. In fact, it was a relatively peaceful and prosperous era for the Northern and Southern kingdoms. "This is a time of prosperity and relative peace and political stability for both kingdoms. Trade routes traversing the area enrich many people, some of whom own winter and summer homes (Amos 3:15), expensive furniture, ivory beds, and luxurious couches (Amos 6:4). They drink wine by the bowlful and anoint themselves with the finest oils (Amos 6:6)."¹¹

The phenomenal prosperity of both kingdoms is actually the impetus for much of the message of judgment that Amos and the prophets deliver to the elite. "In order to encourage the people to be obedient to the covenant and God's law, the prophets remind them that they must stop unjust economic practices like rushing the end of the sabbath in order to resume business and using false weights to cheat their customers (8:4-5). Amos travels north into Israel, where he condemns the wealthy for oppressing the poor. He tells them that the fine houses they have built and the vineyards they have cultivated will become the property of foreigners when they are taken away into exile as punishment for their unjust policies and attitudes (5:11)."¹²

The prosperity of the 8th century BC population led to a spiritual malaise that spread like a virus throughout the culture. "Soon the sins of idolatry, corruption, and greed proliferate, and the rich and powerful oppress the poor. The privileged people sell 'the righteous for silver, and

¹¹ David Limbaugh, *The Emmaus Code, 1st Edition*. Regnery Publishing, 2015, 275.

¹² Victor H. Matthews, *The Cultural World of the Bible, 4th edition*. Baker Academic, 2015, 156.

the needy for a pair of sandals,’ trampling ‘the head of the poor into the dust of the earth’ and turning ‘aside the way of the afflicted’ (Amos 2:6-7). They lose their souls in the process.”¹³

Orality

Aside from the relative prosperity of the people, it is also of great importance for the modern Western student to understand the way information was transmitted. Learning was not primarily done through reading the written word but instead through hearing the spoken word. This indicates that the text of Amos as we read it now was most likely originally intended to be spoken aloud instead of read in silence. The “...rhythmic and recursive structures would also suggest that the text of Amos was written with oral proclamation in view so that the ‘roar of the LORD’ (1:2) would have its full impact upon the audience (the vast majority of whom would have been non-literates. The residual orality of Amos is difficult then to perceive and appreciate when the text is read silently to oneself, especially in translation; it is really manifested, as intended, only in oral-aural form when performed—from memory and in the original Hebrew.”¹⁴

The dynamic of oral performance of the message can be seen in the way the book of Amos is structured. The modern reader must imagine attending a performance in which the text is being read aloud with great precision and passion. This dynamic would lead to an incredible tension as the oracles pronounced slowly close like a boa constrictor closes on its prey. The oracles of judgment slowly got closer and closer to the very place in which the performance was taking place and the tension would have been palpable. “Amos’s tension level is high right from the beginning: ‘The LORD roars from Zion.’ Fulfilling the activity of the prophet (Amos’s project) produces the theatrical tension. The path of this tension is the action: oracles against

¹³ Limbaugh, 275.

¹⁴ Ernst R. Wendland and Lynell Zogbo, *Prophetic Rhetoric: Case Studies in Text Analysis and Translation*. Xulon Press, 2009, 6.

foreign nations leading up to the oracle against Israel. The flow of this action creates the inner life of the drama: the sensations and the experiences that pass between Amos and the spectators. As Amos moves through the mounting tension of presenting the oracles, the inherent linear intensification and relaxation pattern of the drama is revealed.”¹⁵

ORACLES

The concept of an oracle is rather unfamiliar to the modern reader. However, for the 8th century BC Israelite the idea of an oracle would have been easy to understand and decipher. The pattern used in Amos is repetitive and makes each judgment statement unmistakable. “The various oracles of Amos were first presented in oral form to a listening audience, being pronounced either as an independent prophetic discourse (e.g., 5:1-17); as part of an embedded narrative (e.g., 7:1-9, 10-17), or as a vision report (e.g., 8:1-14). Sometime thereafter, these distinct texts were probably gathered together, either by the prophet himself or by his scribe or a disciple and composed in more permanent written form—perhaps in several editions before the final canonical document took shape, as it has been transmitted over the centuries.”¹⁶

The general geographical subject of the first set of oracles found in chapters one and two is as follows: Damascus (Syria) 1:3-5, Gaza (Philistia) 1:6-8, Tyre 1:9-10, Edom 1:11-12, Ammon 1:13-15, Moab 2:1-3, Judah 2:4-5. “Each of the oracles in this first section, except the last one, follows a set formulaic pattern that is enunciated in judicial style proceeding from the Lord’s indictment to his verdict. The first four nations cited form a circuit geographically around Israel. The focus of attention is rhetorically sharpened to rest finally upon the primary

¹⁵ William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance and Power*. T&T Clark, 2005, 116.

¹⁶ Ernst R. Wendland and Lynell Zogbo, 6.

addressees, the leaders of the Northern Kingdom, thus creating a powerful surprise effect to initiate the burden of Amos's message of judgment."¹⁷

The oracles presented here at the beginning of the book of Amos begin to delineate the general message of the book. It also becomes clear that the way the book is organized has significant impact on the intended meaning. "One may summarize the theological idea behind the redactional work in ch 1-2 in the following way: 'by rejecting the Law and the prophets Israel (and Judah) has become like Edom (= the nations)'. It seems that the redactor tried to reinterpret the oracles of Amos in the light of two notions that were developing in his time. The first one was the use of Edom as a representative of the foreign nations and the second one was the Deuteronomistic insistence that the destruction of Jerusalem was the result of the rejection of the Torah and the prophets."¹⁸

As the book develops its message of judgment, a number of questions remain for the reader. "Read Amos 5 in a version of the Bible that does not insert explanatory titles (these headings are only scholarly opinion) and ask yourself whether the chapter is all one prophecy (oracle) or not. If it is a single oracle, why does it have so many changes of subject: lament over Israel's destruction (vv.1-3), invitation to seek God and live (vv. 5-6, 14), attacks on social injustice (vv. 7-13), prediction of miseries (vv. 16-17), description of the day of the Lord (vv. 18-20), criticism of hypocritical worship (vv. 21-24, and a brief overview of Israel's sinful history that culminates in a prediction of exile (vv. 25-27)? If it is not a single oracle, how are its component parts to be understood? Are they all independent of one another? Are some to be grouped together? If so, in what ways?"¹⁹ These questions demand a closer look at the way the

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁸ Hadjiev, 59.

¹⁹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition*. Zondervan Academic, 2014, 200.

material in the book has been compiled by redactors (editors) and arrived at the form that we read today.

REDACTION CRITICISM

Redaction criticism is focused on the compilers of the text and the motivations behind their edits and revisions. In closely examining the editors and their thoughts, the redaction critic is able to glean understanding from what may appear on the surface to be meaningless information (such as genealogies) included in scripture.²⁰ In taking a redaction approach to our criticism of the book of Amos, we are looking beyond the initial composition of the book and aiming to examine the impact of later editors of the book and how they may have changed the original message. “‘Composition’ is the initial stage(s) of the creation of a prophetic book when various disparate (literary and/or oral) traditions are brought together to form one larger literary whole. Composition is therefore more than a collection; it creates a literary piece with its own structure, thought flow and theme. ‘Redaction’, on the other hand, is a subsequent literary activity in which tridents insert new material into a pre-existing work, or change, rearrange or omit already existing material.”²¹

It may be surprising to some modern readers that the version of the Scriptures that we cherish has not necessarily existed in this form for all time. In fact, an attempt to understand the development of the very first books of the Bible was the impetus for the idea of redaction criticism. “The term ‘redaction’ was first used to explain how the Pentateuch could be composed

²⁰ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament, Revised and Expanded: Method in Biblical Study*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 48.

²¹ Hadjiev, 1.

form four distinct literary source documents, and yet still possess an overarching unity of plot and theme.”²²

In essence, redaction criticism is not an effort to discount the message of Scripture. In many instances, it is amazing to note the synchronistic message of the Scriptures despite the many editors that have contributed over the years. But the reality of editors participating in the development of the text after the original composition calls for us to at least acknowledge and examine the impact that this may have had on the message of the Scriptures. “The Pentateuch appears to have passed through three or four stages of editorial composition, the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, King) through at least one comprehensive editorial compilation followed by one or more revisions. Clearly when most of the Bible in its present form is the result of redaction, this phenomenon is worthy of more focused study.”²³

The critic begins to look for signs of variance in the text that are clues to possible revisions and editing that occurred after original composition. “Redaction criticism works with texts thought to possess diversity in origin. Redaction criticism comes into play whenever the interpreter detects those phenomena of style, structure, perspective, diction and detail that point to the individual components of the text having separate origins.”²⁴

Ultimately, the goal of redaction criticism is to arrive at deeper understanding of the text that is based on the revisions made by later editors. “The redaction critic is an interpreter who seeks an awareness of the human community that bequeathed the text to us.... To ignore the text’s character as a human achievement ultimately dehumanizes it.”²⁵ Again, “redaction-critical concerns tell us about the gradual formation of the text and the reasons behind the continuous

²² Eugene Carpenter, Editor, *A Biblical Itinerary*. Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 79.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

textual growth.”²⁶ This approach is especially helpful in understanding the book of Amos because of the culture from which the book was first developed and the oracle judgment form that was used in the presentation of the material.

The idea of a vision narrative without any interpretive oracle of judgment would not have made sense culturally. This suggests the work of an editor that saw it as a sacred duty to inject meaning into the text. “Given the scarcity of the vision-report-form without an adjacent oracle, I suggest that the addition of an interpretive layer to any given vision accounts may have been a standard and accepted procedure. I might even go so far as to say that a later redactor would have understood it to be his obligation to add one or more interpretive oracles to any given vision account, in this way using the existing vision account as the hook upon which to hang the divine oracle that he wanted to convey.”²⁷

Redaction Criticism of Amos - Major Contributors

In surveying the landscape of the redaction criticism of the book of Amos, there is a wide variety of perspective offered by a range of authors. The extreme end of the spectrum posits that the entire book was developed much later than claimed. “Regardless of the possibility that an Amos of Tekoa did preach to Israel of Jeroboam II’s time, the extant book that now bears his name is first and foremost a literary product of (most likely) post-monarchic time. What the ‘real’ or ‘historical’ Amos said and meant is virtually immaterial.”²⁸

Other scholars fall on the opposite extreme end of the spectrum and hold that is consistent with the Amos of Tekoa that the book is attributed to. “There are forty-nine divine

²⁶ Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, “The Vision Report Genre Between Form-Criticism and Redaction criticism: An Investigation of Amos 7-9 and Zechariah 1-6”. In *The Book of the Twelve and New Form Criticism (Ancient Near East Monographs)*, Mark J. Boda, editor. Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2015, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁸ James R. Linville, *Amos and the Cosmic Imagination*. Ashgate Publishing, 2008, 402.

speech formulas in Amos. These formulas occur in such a way that there are seven, or, in one case fourteen, of them in each major section of the book. The distribution of these formulas is too close to the natural divisions of the book to be coincidental. Why they have been so distributed is a matter of conjecture.”²⁹ One of the stated reasons for holding this view is the tremendous organization of the book. This leads some critics to conclude that it could not possibly have been produced by a huge number of people. “The intricately patterned discourse organization of Amos as a whole would indicate that this compositional process was not the product of some patchwork redactional activity, but was rather the result of careful literary construction, with a minimum of additional editing, most likely by a single hand.”³⁰

A third approach is more centrist in which the acknowledgement of redaction is made but is done within reason. In other words, the middle view would hold that there have been items added by later editors while the thematic elements and overall message of the book remain unchanged. For example, several scholars consider the second verse of Amos to be a later addition that was added by one of his later disciples. “Verse 2 is a snatch of poetry. It does not properly belong either to the title or to what follows. It is probably a fragment of a hymn used in the Jerusalem temple and placed here when the book of Amos was taken over for use in public worship or reapplied to the needs of Judah. There is no other suggestion in the book that Amos had any special attachment to Jerusalem or its temple.”³¹

One of the major contributors to redaction criticism of Amos is R.B. Coote. He proposes that the book of Amos is “the end result of a series of re-compositions of the original words of a named prophet.”³² However, his theory on the development of Amos is not as technical (or

²⁹ J. Limburg, ‘*Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos*’. *Journal of Biblical Literature* v. 106, 1987, 221-222.

³⁰ Ernst R. Wendland and Lynell Zogbo, 6.

³¹ Henry McKeating, *The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah*. Cambridge University Press, 1971, 13.

³² Robert B. Coote, *Amos Among the Prophets*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981, 2.

tortured) as several of his colleagues. “In contrast to most theories offered in the German-speaking world, Anglo-Saxon scholarship has tended to go for simpler redactional models. Coote reconstructed the redactional history of the book in only three stages.”³³ The three stages proposed by Coote are as follows: “First comes an 8th cent. BC poetic collection of oracles (Stage A) criticizing the ruling elite of Israelite society for their oppression of the poor. In the 7th cent. BC this collection underwent a radical and extensive revision (Stage B) which is responsible for a large amount of additional material and the present structure of the book of Amos. Finally, a scribe at the end of the 6th cent. BC updated the work intervening mainly at the beginning and at the end of the book (Stage C).”³⁴ This 3-stage approach to the development of the book seems most reasonable in light of the available evidence.

Not everyone agrees with this approach because of the implications of acknowledging additional redactors that contributed to the process. A major implication is that the original message is perhaps compromised by the inserted thoughts of later editors. This is a major critique of the redaction approach. “Coote...has factored the text into three stages of composition, each of which must be interpreted independently first of all, and then reinterpreted when combined in the light of a supposed new editorial setting.”³⁵

REDACTION CRITICISM: APPLIED TO AMOS

The redaction critic is looking for telltale signs of later additions and revisions to the text. Amos contains a number of these markers and scholars have written extensively on them. Included below is a further explanation of four typical signs of redactor’s work (interpretive statements, material added later, change of hand and content disagreement).

³³ Hadjiev, 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ Ernst R. Wendland and Lynell Zogbo, 41.

1) Interpretive Statements

In several instances in the book, a strange interlude is included that offers further (perhaps later) explanation and interpretation of the previous remarks. For instance, “many scholars have noted the explanatory character of 7:9 and 8:3.”³⁶ Chapter 7 of Amos contains a vision narrative in which Amos sees several visions from the Lord and is interacting directly with the Lord. Chapter 7, verse 8 reads as follows:

And the LORD asked me, “What do you see, Amos?”

“A plumb line,” I replied.

Then the LORD said, “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel, I will spare them no longer.”

Immediately following this interaction is an interpretive statement to help the reader understand what is meant by the idea of a “plumb line”. Chapter 7, verse 9 reads as follows:

“The high places of Isaac will be destroyed

And the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;

With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.”

The same pattern follows in chapter 8 in which verse 2 reads as follows:

“What do you see, Amos?” he asked.

“A basket of ripe fruit,” I answered.

Then the LORD said to me, “The time is ripe for my people Israel;

I will spare them no longer.”

Immediately following this interaction is an interpretive statement to help the reader understand what is meant by the idea of a “basket of ripe fruit”. Chapter 8, verse 3 reads as follows:

“In that day,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “the songs in the temple will turn to wailing.

³⁶ Tiemeyer, 13.

Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!”

Redaction critics including Mays have noted that both Amos 7:9 and Amos 8:3 create “an element which stands outside the common structure (of the four vision reports).” The style of speech changes from direct interaction to reported speech and the vision is literally explained to the listener to ensure there is no confusion. Mays suggests these were added later to “make clear the consequences of Yahweh’s withdrawal of forbearance”.³⁷ In other words, the two visions (plumb line and fruit basket) were interpreted by redactors and emphasis was perhaps added by a later editor to make the message plain.

2) Material Added Later

There are also several elements in Amos that appear to be added later. The best example of this is in Amos 9. The beginning of the chapter contains a severe vision of the judgment of God. Verse 1 leaves no room for mistaking the wrath of God:

“Strike the tops of the pillars

So that the thresholds shake.

Bring them down on the heads of all the people;

Those who are left I will kill with the sword.

Not one will get away,

None will escape.”

But then in verse 11, a dramatic shift takes place in the tone of the Lord’s voice:

In that day

I will restore David’s fallen shelter—

I will repair its broken walls

³⁷ James L. Mays, *Amos: The Old Testament Library*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1969, 124.

***And restore its ruins—
And will rebuild it as it used to be.***

The shift of tone does not make sense because it is incredibly hopeful and constructive as opposed to destructive. In verse 1 the walls are literally being reduced to rubble while in verse 11 the walls are being repaired and restored. How can this be explained? Perhaps, “after the Exile, when the prophetic message of judgment had been fulfilled, the oracles of salvation in Amos 9:11-15 were added to let the broken community hear the full counsel of God.”³⁸ This section in chapter 9 could very well have been added as a means of demonstrating that God is not only wrathful and vengeful but ultimately offers hope and healing. While this is a true message, it may not have necessarily been included in the original message that Amos proclaimed.

3) *Change of “Hand”*

Another element in the text that signals the presence of later redactors is when there is a clear “change of hand”. “The presence of some unevenness in a text is an initial indication that there may have been different hands at work. The clearest and most convincing example of that phenomenon in the book of Amos is the narrative in 7:10-17. The change of genre (vision report - narrative - vision report), the change of first (7:7-8) - third (7:10-17) - first (8:1-2) person speech, the close structural similarities between the third (7:7-8) and the fourth (8:1-2) visions as well as the structural arrangement of the whole visions report (7:1-8 + 8:1-2), in which the first two and the second two visions go in pairs, clearly demonstrate that 7:10-17 is intrusive in its present context. The same can be said of some smaller units like 3:7, 5:8-9, 6:2. It is most significant that in all these cases when the intrusive material is removed the text flows seamlessly.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

³⁹ Hadjiev, 26.

4) Content Disagreement

There are also moments when the themes presented in the book of Amos do not agree with one another. This internal disagreement is not necessarily a sure sign of redactors at work, but it nonetheless begs the question. “Sometimes there is tension in content between certain passages within the book of Amos. Although it is not impossible for a person to contradict himself, when we are faced with such thematic tension it is worth asking the question whether it does not reflect the viewpoints of different people. For example, the conditional promise of deliverance in 5:14-15 stands in contrast to the unconditional and confident hope expressed in 9:11-15.”⁴⁰

REDACTOR’S IMPACT ON AMOS

The clear evidence of redactor’s work does not pave the way for any questions regarding the overall theme of the book of Amos. It is clear that the message from the prophet was originally communicated in an oral/aural culture and was intended to produce a dramatic effect. The overarching unity of the themes in the book address a common issue: the confusion of the people of Israel who believe that they are earning God’s favor through ritualistic worship while ignoring the social justice issues of the day. The redactors that added content and interpretive voice to the message of Amos serve the modern reader and help provide further context and background. It is as if a real time commentary is offered and this only enhances the overall impact of the book instead of negating it. To ignore the obvious work of redactors in the book of Amos is to read the text from a chosen platform of religious arrogance tinged with academic ignorance, an approach which Amos would undoubtedly chuckle at if he were around today. His very message was aimed at the religious elite of his day that operated with arrogance and ignorance, so we must be careful to avoid the same pitfalls of the elite of the 8th century BC.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 30

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The lessons in the book of Amos are highly applicable to the modern ministry context. This summer our nation celebrated its 245th birthday. July 4th is a National Holiday and this year it happened to fall on a Sunday. In our church ministry context, the timing of the holiday raised an interesting question regarding how to celebrate this milestone. It has become quite clear that many our congregation equate following Jesus with being American. The preference was to sing patriotic songs on Sunday, July 4th instead of typical worship songs. This surprised me but as I learn about the context and culture of our church, I am seeing a deep root of toxic tribalism that causes pride. Addressing this dynamic, the argument of Amos that is damning for modern Western church goers is that we have equated our nationality with Godliness. Amos “criticizes the hegemonic interpretation of what it meant to be God’s elect people”⁴¹ and points out that God is not impressed by our traditions or even our treasured heritage. There is nothing inherently wrong with tradition, but it can become empty very quickly. The primary takeaway for our ministry context is that we must not allow our traditions (ie our “religious festivals”) to become hollow and stale with a focus on ourselves, but instead we must carefully and intentionally seek to promote justice in our communities.

⁴¹ R.J. Weems, “Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2: 1980–1992, ed. J. H. Cone and G. S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 222.

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