

Barton suggests four main compositional theories for the book of Amos. The first theory proposes that the book contains the genuine words of the prophet himself, though possibly compiled by scribes or disciples. The oracles in the book accurately reflect his time. These proponents see Amos as a highly literate person, a “sophisticated and educated man who could use clever literary devices, and who may well have been in the literal sense a “writing prophet” (Barton, p. 9). The weakness of this theory lies in the discrepancies within the book (Amos 3:2 and 9:7; Amos 7:1-6 and 7:7-9). If Amos wrote the whole book why are there these discrepancies?

The second theory for the composition of Amos is that the book is a result of a process of editing. Multiple sources of texts were combined and altered slightly to make the single document. Proponents of this theory suggest that the development of the book came in stages, (although they do not all agree on the exact stages) and through various means: the prophet himself, his disciples, scribal circles and more. The strength of this theory is that it deals with the observable diversity of the book. However, it is difficult to trace the “detailed development with anything more than reasonable guesses.” (Barton, p. 17) Additionally, this theory of “collections” does not consider the practical realities and complexities of ancient scroll production.

The third compositional theory of Amos suggests that the book is a deliberate literary production by an editor or series of editors. The editor(s) had a lot of materials which they arranged into a skillful literary composition. This theory takes a primarily literary analysis of the book, suggesting the meaning of the book is likely related to its structure. Its weakness, as Barton observes, is that “the effect of these late redactions was to obliterate the differences between the individual prophets, or at least greatly reduce them.” (Barton, p. 28)

The fourth and final theory proposes Amos as a book invented in later times, having no place in the eighth century at all. The weakness in this theory lies in the fact that the book contains preexilic information that did not exist in postexilic times. In Barton’s words (p. 31), “both original and later circumstances shine through the text, and this precludes our attributing it all to only the later period (s) in which it was edited.” Additionally, the book is a book of judgment. Postexilic prophecy did not focus on judgment, but instead restoration and rejuvenation. Amos was a prophet of doom, with very few glimmers of hope. As Barton states (p.30), “No one after the exile would have invented such a prophet.”

Learning about the person of Amos and how this book fits into the context of the Hebrew Bible is essential for its interpretation. Amos was the earliest of the “classical prophets.” The book holds a unique place in the canon of the Hebrew Bible because it was the first written prophetic text. David Peterson (Carroll, p. 3) states that Amos is a “microcosm of work on prophetic literature.” Carroll states (p.5) that “Amos was the founder, and the purest type, of a new phase of prophecy.” Additionally, from the Hebrew text we learn that Amos was not just an individual shepherd, but a *noqed*, a sheep breeder. Amos managed and owned large herds of sheep and goats and supervised other shepherds. He also was a keeper of fig trees. As a member of the “upper class”, Amos knew and understood the issues of his day.

From the many scholarly trends in the reading, I was impressed by Barton’s balanced dealing with the issues of composition. When discussing conflicting theories of composition (or any conflicting theories for that matter) I usually feel compelled to pick one theory to the exclusion of the others. I usually come at conflicting theories with an either/or mindset. Rather than an either/or mindset, Barton approaches the text

with a both/and mindset. He works with three broad categories: (1) material that is likely from Amos or his first disciples; (2) material that must be from a later revision or redaction; and (3) material that seems to belong to the stage at which the book was completed. Additionally, he does not stress exact dating, but ascribes events to broad categories-preexilic, exilic, or postexilic. This broad, inclusive, balanced, and sensible scholarship is compelling to me.