

Barton's Purpose for Each Chapter

Chapter 3 of Barton describes the unique central pillars of Amos' theology including the non-election of Israel and the coming judgment by YHWH, national sin, cultic ritual sacrifice, suffering as divine punishment, and the conditional nature of Israel's relationship to YHWH.

In chapter 4 Barton examines the various later oracles added to Amos and how their coherent message differs from the theology of Amos and his immediate circle. The differences lie in the concepts of the covenant, the Torah, the role of the prophet, the condemnation of idolatry, judgment, the remnant, the restoration of the House of David, and the transformation of nature.

Through the lenses of the final form of Amos, Barton, in chapter 5, presents a theology of the entire book.

Chapter 6 answers the question of how past readers received and understood what the book of Amos was saying. Barton states there is little evidence of Amos being read or pondered much in Early Judaism or Christianity (Barton, p. 167). He goes on to state that there was "a thin line of reception of the book" in Rabbinic Judaism and the Christian Fathers (Barton, p. 168). However, the message of Amos was significant during the time of Savonarola, the reformation, and in liberation theology.

Finally, in chapter 7 Barton looks at central ideas in Amos (the idea of God, corporate and individual identity, covenant, theological ethics, divine action, and eschatology) and assimilates and applies them in the light of more recent theological insights.

A New Perspective from Barton's Treatment of Popular Religious Beliefs

I was surprised to read in Barton that during Amos' time Israel was not monotheistic (Barton, p. 55). I assumed that Israel was always monotheistic but Barton states that during that time many gods were worshipped in Israel along with YHWH. "There can be little doubt that polytheism was the normal religion of Israel in practice" (Barton, p. 56).

Theological Concept with a Mixed Message

The concept of National Sin appears to have a mixed message. What is the sin of the nation? Sacrificing improperly? Too much sacrifice? Barton states that according to Amos "The sins that have caused YHWH to decide on judgment are concerned almost exclusively with how people behave toward each other" (Barton, p. 76). The need for social justice was known, but what was the standard for morality? "The emphasis seems to fall more on a kind of self-evidence about the moral norms being transgressed: people simply ought to know (from whatever source) that these things are wrong" (Barton, p.

84). What was the role of the law in the standard for the national sin? Did the law spell out for Israel rules about proper behavior toward other people?

Main Message Derived from the Three Approaches to the Final Form

Through the lens of the redaction and composition criticism form, the changes made by the latest contributors shape the book through additions to convey their own message (Barton, p. 159). “The book tells a story of past history, and its relevance to the present does not lie in any revival of the harsh messages of the prophet but in its presentation of the terrible suffering that culminated in the exile-though that is now over and done with” (Barton, p. 147). YHWH has purposes for Israel that are ultimately good and beneficial (Barton, p. 144). “Doom is not the book’s last word, but instead it ends on a note of hope and blessing in the epilogue.” (Barton, p. 143).

From the viewpoint of literary criticism, reading the finished form without much attention to the history of its composition, “Amos’s book moves from darkness to light”, and this is the message it conveys. (Barton, p. 149). This is a story of disaster followed by blessing, the theme of much Jewish and Christian theology. (Barton, p. 149).

The canonical reading form takes the entire book as part of the canon of Scripture and asks what it contributes to that wider context (Barton, p. 155). In this view Amos gives theological truth in both the declaration of coming judgment and in the promises of salvation (Barton, p. 156). The book of Amos does not neutralize disaster through a message of eventual restoration or neutralize blessing through a message of doom but is a witness to the paradoxical character of God’s way of acting in the world. (Barton, p. 157-158).

Theological Category for Further Study

I would like to learn more about the oracles against the nations and the morality in war. Obviously, YHWH has the power to inflict disaster on nations other than his own. The concept of war is not pleasing to me and yet the Old Testament is filled with war and images of war and oracles against the nations. I would like to understand what the universal moral norms of conduct are in war. What are acceptable norms in the matter of war? Are they God-given or human convention?