

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CRUXES IN AMOS – PART I

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אֲשֶׁר עִנִּי אֶל הַהִרִים

To My Parents

Amos, a herder of sheep and cattle and dresser of sycamore trees, appears through his relatively short book to be also a master *par excellence* of the word and innuendo. Prophesying in the Silver Age of Israelite history (about 750 B.C.E.), he saw in success the roots of doom. Then, without fear, with deeply felt sense of loss, and colorful language he brought the Lord's message to the people. The Book of Amos, perhaps the first in the genre of literary prophets, sprouted a voluminous literature because it posed to commentators a number of cruxes that essentially remain unresolved to this day. The following are some of my insights into some verses and possible meanings that Amos may have tried to convey in various cruxes.

AMOS - ψελλοξ

The name "Amos" occurs in the Bible only in the Book of Amos. To understand its meaning we have to remember that in the Bible names were not given lightly. Kluger says, "Names are not 'sound and fume,' but they have magic power; they are so to speak substantial and, therefore, in effect, identical with the nature of their bearers." ¹

Why was Amos named so? According to the Midrash (Vayikra Rabba 10:2), Amos was given his name because he was a ψελλοξ² that is, one who stammered or was unable to pronounce certain letters. This Midrash appears to assume that his original name, given to him on the eighth day after his birth, was changed when his stammering was apparent. It is, however, possible

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that Amos was the original name. However, because of his unclear speech, in his older days, people associated his burdened and heavy speech with his name, meaning in Hebrew "burdened," and said: "Why was he named Amos? Because his tongue was burdened." (Vayikra Rabba 10:2)

Weiss is of the opinion that the name "Amos" was probably derived from the theophoric name "Amasiah" which appears in II Chronicles 17:16.³ The derivation of Amos from Amasiah parallels the derivation of Amoz (II Kg. 19:2) from Amaziah (Amos 7:10). Thus, Amos, as an abbreviated version of Amasiah, would also be a theophoric name and have the same meaning.

The root *ams* or *amsh* occurs in the Bible with the meaning of "support," "protect," "carry in hand," as in:

*Listen to Me, O House of Jacob, all that are left of the House of Israel,
Who have been carried [ha'amusim] since birth,*

Supported since leaving the womb (Isa. 46:3).

Amasiah could mean, "God carried," "God protected by being carried on His hands," or "carried in God's hands." Weiss provides an exhaustive overview of the various etymologies for Amos, of which we shall mention only the following:

1. Amos is not an abbreviation of another name and means "loading," "burdening," or "carrier of a burden."

2. Amos is not the original name, but rather a descriptor of his mission to Israel, which was to announce God's verdict; that is, to load on Israel a burden.

3. Amos is a combination of *am* and *mash*; that is, "a deviating nation," because in his days Israel turned away from God or the king from the Davidic dynasty.

4. Amos was interpreted to mean "strong, solid" by some Christian commentators using the etymology *Amos* = *Amotz* = *amitz*. This incorrect etymology is based on the use of the Greek translation of the Bible rather than the original Hebrew. In Greek, Amos and Amoz have the same transliteration. This fact also led to the erroneous opinion that the prophet Isaiah was the son of Amos. Amos means "burdened with much suffering, thus strong."

5. Amos means not only "the one who is carried [by God]" but also "one who carries, who will support his parents, or family"; that is, Amos has a passive and an active meaning.⁴

Names that were derived from the root *ams* or *amsh* were found in various ancient Northwest Semitic documents. For instance, an Assyrian document from Nineveh (679 BCE) contains the name "*Am-si-i*." In Amorite the name "*Yahmus-AN*" was found, in Ammonite the name "*Amsel*," and in Phoenician the names "*Amsmlk*," "*Ashmn ams*," "*Baalams*," and "*Malqrtams*" occur. The name "*Ams*" as a stand-alone occurs only in Phoenician and Ugaritic. It is possible that Amos was so named because of the popularity of the name in neighboring countries and its meaningful Hebrew cognate.

Anderson and Freedman observe that in Amos' days Amasiah would have been Amasiahu, from which a large set of theophoric names can be derived but neither of which sounds as Amos.⁵ They are clearly undecided on the origin of Amos, awaiting final judgement on whether the seal of "Berekhyahu ben-Neriyahu the Scribe," published by Avigad in 1979, belonged to Jeremiah's friend Baruch.⁶ If it did so belong, then "Amus" could be derived from Amasiahu. Still, Amus is not the traditional Amos. And, the occurrence of Amaziah in Amos 7:10,12,14 and other places, as well as the similar form "Uzziah" in Amos 1:1, clearly attest to the possibility of this form for names in Amos' days.

Anderson and Freedman note that:

The rarity of the name [Amos] is matched by the rarity of the use of the verb to describe an act of God in the Bible. Psalm 68:20b -- *day by day He carries the load for us* -- is about the only case. If the idea had been exploited in the book of Amos, we might have expected the root in 2:13. But no hint of any such connection is given.

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Anderson and Freedman refer to the verse: *Indeed, I am creaking underneath you, just as the cart that is full of sheaves creaks* (their translation). They feel that by replacing the word "full" with "laden" a connection with the name Amos or Amus would have been made. This is a misconception of the Hebrew meaning of "*amus*." In Hebrew, *amus* could designate a situation that is less than full. Such a meaning would clearly defeat Amos' intent. Moreover, the meaning of Verse 2:13 is not very clear. It has been suggested that it should be interpreted thus:

*I will slow your movements
As a threshing sledge is slowed*

When clogged by cut grain.

Replacing "clogged" with "laden" in this interpretation (that is, *amus*) would make little sense.

While much effort has been devoted by commentators to the identification of a name's meaning and form, little is said on the potential motivation for the choosing of a specific name. In particular, commentators neglect the possibility that a name was selected because it echoes a well-known or popular biblical verse. Certainly, trying to delve into parents' motives for choosing a name is highly speculative. However, if there exists such a possibility it should be pointed out for the sake of completeness.

The fact that most of the names based on *amos*, in the Bible and in neighboring countries, are theophoric leads me to suggest that Amos is connected with Psalm 68:20. Amos is then motivated by *yaamos lanu ha'el*. The derivation of a name from a part of a verse relied on its ability to evoke the entire verse. The name Amos should have evoked the entire verse, *and* especially the latter part::

Blessed is the Lord.

Day by day He supports [yaamos] us,

God, our deliverance; Selah,

Are there other biblical names that were motivated by well-known verses? Perhaps, the name Micah is connected with the phrase "Who is like You" מִי כָמוֹךָ [*mi kha mokha*] in Exodus 15:11:

Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials;

Who is like You, majestic in holiness,

Awesome in splendor, working wonders!

It is also possible that the name Amos may be connected to verse 20 of Psalm 68: יַעֲמֹס לָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ [*ya'amos*] which could be interpreted as: "May He heap [*ya'amos*] upon us deliverance". When the Israelite named his son Amos, he may have expressed the wish, or prayer *ya'amos* -- May He heap upon us His deliverance.

DUST ON THEIR HEADS!

The verse:

[Ah,] *you who trample [ha'shoafim al] the heads of the poor*

Into the dust of the ground,

And make the humble walk a twisted course!" (Amos 2:7)

remains a crux to this day. Weiss⁸ says, "The deciphering of the precise intent of the first sentence is only somewhat possible." It has been suggested that the text is corrupt and should be emended to *hashafim* [those that trample], as in the Septuagint, or *hashufim* [those that lie in wait] (cf. Gen. 3:15). Neither of these emendations, nor *hashoafim* [those that pant] goes well with *al rosh dalim*. So, "*al*" was emended to "*el*." The general consensus is that the verse tries to convey attempts to humiliate rather than greediness.

I suggest that the original text was *hashoafim maal*, that is, there were two *mems*, at the end of *hashoafim* and the beginning of *al* making it into *maal*. One of the *mems* was lost in transcription, creating the difficulty in the text. This is a very minor emendation, yet it significantly improves the text. If we are correct, the text would mean:

Who pant after fraud, [ma'al][say] dust on the head of the poor!
and twist the justice of the humble.

That is, the desire for fraud is so strong that the ruling class says "To hell with the poor!" and twists their justice.

It is also possible that *dust on the poors' head!* is an aside, or it is a bitter comment inserted by a copier of the kind of remarks that are made by the ruling class. The gist of the verse would be fraud, rather than humiliation. This perspective would better fit the nature of Israel's sins, which can be characterized as greed and stinginess driven by the satisfaction of having committed fraud. It would also agree with the parallels to our verse in 8:4-6.

The significance of the conjunction *afar-haaretz* [dust of the earth] appears to have escaped the commentators. Andersen and Freedman see it as a match to *anwei-haaretz*, as in Isaiah 11:4 and Psalm 76:10. However, in both of these cases the reference is to a class of people, while in our verse it is to a state of being.⁹ The conjunction *afar-haaretz* usually appears when detail is required. Thus, it is used in Exodus to describe the Plague of Lice and in many places to describe a multitude. Neither of these connotations would be applicable here. Why did Amos use it? I feel that its purpose was to create an association with *am haaretz*. It was the social elite, the *am haaretz* that was engaged in the merciless exploitation of the poor, not some nebulous *shoafim* [panthers].

The suggested interpretation is based on an emendation that creates the word *maal* [perfidy]. It should be noted that this word appears only in Ezekiel (who was a priest) but not in any of the other literary prophets.

Closely related to Verse 2:7 is Verse 8:4. However, *hashoafim* cannot be used with the same meaning in both cases. If in 8:4 we use *hashoafim* [those that ambush], then it would follow well to read *velishbot* [to capture] instead of *velashbit* [to destroy]. This last possibility requires a minimal emendation, if any. It is surprising that it was not considered. Using *lishbot* instead of *le-hashbit* provides a better continuation to 8:6 and a more complete description. We have ambush-capture-sale, the traditional process of producing slaves.

THE GIRL AND HER VISITORS

Father and son go to the same girl [ha-n'ara],
and thereby profane My holy name (2:7).

This conventional translation follows the Septuagint by introducing "go" instead of "walk" and "same girl" instead of "the girl." Who is this mystery girl that is visited by father and son to the utter indignation of the prophet? Is she a harlot? An underprivileged maiden? A servant girl? A betrothed girl? What is the sin of going to her?

Weiss convincingly argues that she was not a *kdeisha*, a young woman devoted to immorality in the temple in the service of Astarte¹⁰ to promote fertility. Simply, the word *n'ara* is never used in this meaning, nor does it mean a prostitute. Also, it can not be a euphemism for a *kdeisha* because this term has been used repeatedly.¹¹ Weiss concludes that the *n'ara* represents a class of underprivileged girls who need protection but who are instead cruelly abused not only in the open, by coercion of the law, but also by wanton invasion of their privacy. This conclusion appears to be an unwarranted extrapolation from the situation described in the text.

When father and son go to "the girl," sexual connotations are natural. We should, however, note that prostitution was not in principle forbidden. No law in the Bible forbids both father and son to have intercourse with the same unmarried woman.¹² Thus Rashi and Metzudat David make the girl explicitly an *arusah* [betrothed]. Radak as well as Ibn Ezra see in the act a lack of shame, that the son is not ashamed to consort with a girl with whom his fa-

ther formerly had intercourse.¹³ The text is, however, very careful to say that they go [*yeilkhu*] to the girl, rather than come [*yawou*] to the girl. This avoids the sexually laden term "coming" [*byia*]. Thus, a sexual act could be ruled out.¹⁴ Still, in this going God's name was profaned. Indeed, in Amos' view the whole purpose of going to "the girl" was to *halel shem kodshi* [profane My holy name].

The term *halel shem kodshi* is a priestly legalistic term used only in Leviticus and Ezekiel. Probably two variants were in circulation: *halel shem kodshi* and *halel shem elohim*. It may refer to solemn acts in which God's name was invoked, as in bringing sacrifices (Ex. 20:39; Lev. 18:21, 20:3,22:2), giving an oath (Lev. 19:12), and in a theological context, when at issue is God's uniqueness and omnipotence, as stated in the first commandment (Lev. 22:32-33). There is an interesting use of this term in Ezekiel 36:20:

*But when they came to those nations,
they caused My holy name to be profaned,
in that it was said of them,
'They are the people of the Lord,
yet they had to leave His land'*

Here, *hilul shem kodshi* occurred because Israel's behavior led to a punishment from which other nations could infer that God was not strong enough to keep them in His land.

It can be concluded that the going to "the girl" must have been a direct assault on God's uniqueness and omnipotence, an affront to God, not some trivial sexual act. The only act falling into this category is idol worship. The walking [*yeilkhu*] strongly suggests religious pilgrimage, and the girl [*han'ara*], the well-known lady, must have been a goddess. "The girl" may have been a euphemism for one of two pagan goddesses, Astarte [the biblical Ashtoreth] and Asherah (who perhaps appears in the phrase *ashmat shomron* in 8:14). The prophet accuses Israel of long-term idolatry. Father and son, generation after generation, worshipped idols to profane God's name. Going to the temple of Astarte or of Asherah was a *pesha*, a breach of contract with God. Amos was right to castigate Israel.¹⁵

Could we any better identify the father and son who visited the girl? The commentators take *father and son* in a sense of an activity that is on-going, or similar to *they and their fathers* (Jer. 9:15); that is, a man continues in the

footsteps of his father -- like father like son. I suggest seeing in "father and son" an euphemism for "from Jeroboam to Jeroboam."

In the later years of his reign, *Solomon followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Phoenicians and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites* (I Kg. 11:5). When Jeroboam became the first king over the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom, he created new centers of worship in Dan and Bethel, in competition with the Temple in Jerusalem. It is likely that besides the golden calves, that represented the old desert tradition, these centers also had shrines to those deities adopted by Solomon, simply not to be outdone by Judah. Indeed, Amos refers to these centers in 4:4 and in 8:14, where he adds *ashmat shomron*, possibly Ashima, a Syrian goddess (II Kg. 17:30) to the names by which Israelites swear. The worship of the girl (either Astarte or Asherah) continued from the days of Jeroboam I to the days of Jeroboam II in the time of Amos.

Was it fear of the King that prompted Amos to use a euphemism such as "Father and son"? Was it diplomatic tact? Was it a clever literary device? We cannot know what went on in Amos' turbulent soul. To his listeners it probably sent a clear message: "This has been going on for too long!"

NOTES

1. Rivkah Scharf Kluger, *Satan in the Old Testament* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967) p. 25. It has been stated that the name of a person determines his destiny (Tract. Berakhot, 7b). We find in Tanhuma on Ha-azinu : "One should ever examine names, to give his son a name worthy for him to become a righteous man, for sometimes the name is a contributory factor for good or for evil."
2. C.N. Bialik and Y.C. Ravnitzky, *Sefer Ha'aggada* (Dvir, 1987) p. 373. The authors quote the following midrash: Isaiah said: "I was pacing in my study when I heard the voice of my Lord saying: 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? I sent Mikhaihu and he was struck on the cheek. I sent Amos and they called him psellos--so, whom shall I send? Who will go for us?'"
3. Meir Weiss, *The Book of Amos*, Vol I (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992) p. 2.
4. Weiss., Vol II, pp. 2-3.
5. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos*, The Anchor Bible, Vol 24A, (New York: Doubleday, 1989).
6. N. Avigad, "Baruch the Scribe and Jerahmeel the King's Son," *Biblical Archaeologist*, 42 (1979) pp. 114-118.
7. Andersen and Freedman, p. 186.
8. Weiss, Vol I, p. 51.
9. Andersen and Freedman, p.315.

10. Same as Ashera or planet Venus, the goddess of love and fortune.

11. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos, A Commentary*, trans. John Sturdy (New York: Shoken Books, 1970) p. 49.

12. According to the Mishna in Tractate Yebamoth 11:1 this act may well be legitimate. The Mishna says, "A man can wed a woman that was raped or seduced by his father, or one that was raped or seduced by his son. Rabbi Yehuda forbids when she was raped or seduced by his father." The law, however, is not according to Rabbi Yehuda. According to the laws of the Hittites a father and son who use the same whore are not guilty.

13. Ibn Ezra does not consider the girl to be in a status that precludes sexual relations with her. In his view there is in the act a lack of shame. But he does not explain why this lack of shame constitutes a *hilul hashem*.

14. Shalom M. Paul, *Amos, A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 82. Paul makes a strong argument based on Akkadian usage of *halakh*, that *yeilkhu* has sexual connotations. However, he then tempers this argument by also suggesting that *halakh* was perhaps used to connect it with 2:4. Paul tries to salvage his main interpretation by saying that the connection is verbal not contextual. It is interesting that in 2:4 the context is ritual, not sex.

15. Verse 2:7 has to be split into two parts. The first part, with the second part of the preceding verse deal with fraudulent judicial proceedings. The second part of 2:7 and 2:8 deal with activities at the temple. Note, the temple is the *house of their gods*.(2:8)

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