

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CRUXES IN AMOS – PART II

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אשא עיני אל ההרים

To My Parents

Part I of the paper discussed some cruxes in the book of Amos. Part II continues to present my insights on additional cruxes in this book.

PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE HEIFER

Snaith characterized verse 2:13 as the most difficult in Amos.¹

הנה אנכי מעיק תחתיכם כאשר תעיק העגלה המלאה לה עמיר

The difficulty stems from understanding the words תחתיכם [*tahtekhem*], עגלה [*'agala*] and תעיק-מעיק [*t'aik* or *meik*]. The Jewish Publication Society translation gives two versions:

1. *Ah, I will slow your movements*

As a wagon is slowed

When it is full of cut grain,

2. *I will slow your movements*

As a threshing sledge is slowed

When clogged by cut grain.

"*T'aik*" or "*meik*" was assumed in both cases to mean, "slowing of movement" but "*agala*" was taken to mean a wagon or threshing sledge.²

Hammershaimb observed that "we have no reason to think that harvest-carts were used in ancient Israel"; the harvest was usually brought from the fields on donkeys or camels.³ Carts were not unknown in ancient Israel. The Bible in several places mentions carts for transport, and an Assyrian wall relief in Nineveh

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showing the conquest of Lakhish depicts a cart filled with sacks of grain. However, here we have a metaphor that is intended immediately to invoke an image that is within the listeners' obvious experience. A cart full with harvest would

not do, because that is not what farmers usually saw. They saw animals overburdened, and even had specific rules for such cases (Ex. 34:20). They did not see loaded carts.^{4, 5}

That 'agala could mean a threshing sledge is based on Isaiah 28:27-28:

*So, too, black cumin is not threshed with a threshing board,
Nor is the wheel of a threshing sledge [agalah] rolled over cumin;
But black cumin is beaten out with a stick
And cumin with a rod.
It is cereal that is crushed.
For even if he threshes it thoroughly,
And the wheel of his sledge [eglato] and his riders overwhelm it,
He does not crush it.*

However, this meaning of 'agala does not fit the description *hamleah la'amir*; that is, full with dried bundles of corn.

A small change in the punctuation of 'agala could make it read *egla*, a female calf or heifer. The Bible several times mentions the use of an "egla" (but not a male "egel") for work in the field. This had apparently been a widely practiced usage. A metaphor using an *egla* that struggles with a heavy load of sheaf would have immediately conjured up the desired image of a nation struggling under the pressure of God's burden.⁶ So laden an *egla* would also well fit the image a slow-moving being unable to escape from obvious danger, as depicted in the following verses.

Hammershaimb suggests that *tahat* is originally a substantive, which signifies "the under part." This raises the possibility of a metaphor that is based on the image well familiar to a farmer, of an *egla* that over-ate sheaf עָמַר [amir], and now suffers from pressure on her under part.⁷ Such a metaphor would nicely tie the greed and over-indulgence in the preceding verses with the immobility of the following verses. It would also fit the traditional inter-

pretation of "'akah" as pressure and hurt, and would account for the enigmatic לָ [la].

Amos' choice of מֵלֵאָה [meleah] (instead of 'amusah) and "la 'amir" appear to be intentional. The word "meleah," in addition to meaning "full," also connotes tiredness מֵלֵאָה [leah]), as would fit a fully-laden heifer. The words la 'amir, are probably intended to imply לַעֲה [l'aah -- rashly swallow] sheaf, through a virtual borrowing of an "ain" from 'amir.⁸ This clarifies the dual image that Amos tried to convey. The heifer is in double jeopardy. She is over-burdened and has over-eaten.

Carts were used only for very special purposes, and the text does not admit a threshing sledge. A heifer instead of a cart seems a natural.

THE DMESHEK CONUNDRUM

Verse 3:12 is generally considered to be very difficult.

בפאת חטיה ובדמשק ערש

Numerous proposals for its explication were summarized by Harper,⁹ and since his time little progress has been made. Andersen and Freedman say:

If the Hebrew text is correct, it is unintelligible to us. The crux is *ubidmeshek*, and we have to explain why the Masoretes did not read Damascus, even though this reading was apparently obvious to ancient and modern readers.¹⁰

Most of the efforts to explain this verse assume that it refers to a bed and couch. For instance, the JPS translates:

So shall the Israelites escape

Who dwell in Samaria --

With the leg of a bed or the head of a couch.

Andersen and Freedman leave דמשק [dmeshek] untranslated in their version:

In the same way shall the Israelites be rescued --

Those who dwell in Samaria -

Only the corner of a bed -

*Only the dmeshek of a couch.*¹¹

The Septuagint shies away from the bed and couch simile: *So shall be drawn forth the children of Israel who dwell in Samaria in the presence of a foreign tribe, and in Damascus.*¹²

Paul says:

Even though the etymology and meaning of the word are still unknown, most likely it refers to another part of the bed. In the light of the first half of the verse, in which the prophet uses the imagery from bottom (legs) to top (ear) to create an anatomical merism, it stands to reason that here too, he names chiastically the two opposite sides of the bed, from top to bottom: *peah* ("front/head") and *dmeshek*, which in the present context would represent the "rear/foot" of the bed.¹³

None of these interpretations is satisfactory. Beds and couches were for the rich; they could not serve as effective metaphors in a speech addressed to the general public. The Septuagint's understanding of מִטָּה [*mita*] as מַטֶּה [*mate* - a tribe], and doing away with עֶרֶשׁ [*ares*] does not make the text more intelligible. Some commentators have tried to reconstruct the text seeing in *ubidmeshek* the words *ubad mishok 'ares*, thus translating "a chip from the leg of a bed." However, [*shok*] is never used for a foot of a bed.¹⁴

To the plethora of attempt to resolve the crux in the second part of Verse 3:12, I suggest adding the following: Instead of *bifat mita ubidmeshek 'ares*, read עֵיר וְבֶד מְשֻׁקַּבְּפָאֵת מִטָּה [*bifaat mate ubad mishuk ir*]. That is: With the end of a stick and the cloth for carrying from the city's market. The suggested emendation is minimal and it suggests imagery that is very obvious to all. It was the custom in ancient times, and to this day in primitive societies, to carry produce to and from the market in a cloth on the back, often using a stick to hang it on or for support. The destruction prophesized by Amos will leave the Israelites with an empty cloth and the end of a stick. Indeed, a very clear and powerful metaphor.

A FISHY STORY

Does Verse 4:2 have anything to do with the sea and fish?

אִנְשָׁא אֶתְכֶם בְּצִנּוֹת וְאַחֲרֵיתְכֶן בְּסִירֹת דּוֹגָה

The JPS translation only smells of fish:

When you will be carried off in baskets,

And, to the last one, in fish baskets.

Andersen and Freedmen are hooked on hooks and translate *when they will take you away with grappling hooks and your rear guard with fishhooks*.¹⁵

Most of the commentators interpret *tzina* to mean "shield" or "thorn" and by

extension "container" and "hook" respectively. Paul says, "After all the possibilities have been reviewed, clearly the fewest difficulties are attached to the interpretation of *tzinot* and *sirot* as 'baskets' and 'pots,' respectively."¹⁶ There are, however, some who consider *tzinot* to be large boats, apparently because *tzinot* parallels *sirot duga* and these appear to be fishing boats.¹⁷

Hakham says:

Those who interpret *tzinot* as ships did so because they interpret *sirot duga* as small boats used by fishermen for fishing, these boats are called in the language of the Mishna *dugit*. This interpretation is the basis for the meaning of *sirot* in today's Hebrew vernacular. But there is nowhere support for such use in the Bible nor the language of the sages.¹⁸

While Hakham is in principle correct in his statement, there is more than a whiff of the sea in *sirot*.

We find in Midrash Tehillim to Psalm 2, *ma hayam haze kol sirotav al piv kakh siroteikhem shel reshaim al pikhem*. This is usually translated: "As all the refuse of the sea is on its mouth [shore], so the foulness of the wicked is in their mouths." It is also possible to take the Midrash as a play on the word "*sira*," meaning both "boat" and "thorn." Thus, "as all the boats of the are usually on its shore so the barbs of the wicked are at their mouths." In Yalkut Isaiah 350 and Yalkut Numbers 771 we find "*ma hanahar shotef et hasirot kakh Yom Hakipur . . .*"; that is, "as the river carries off the refuse, so does the Day of Atonement . . ." Here too, we could say, "as the river carries away the boat so does the Day of Atonement carry away the sins." The connection between *sira* and boats is not altogether so far- fetched.

Another link to boat and sea can be found in Tractate Bava Batra 73a. We read there "Raba said: *Butzith* and *dugith* are the same: R. Nathan, the Babylonian, called it *Butzith*, as they say [in Babylon] 'the *Butzitha* of *Maisan*'; while Symmachus, who was a Palestinian, called it *Dugith*, for so it is written: and your residue [will be taken away] in fishing boats (Amos 4:2)." At least according to Symmachus, our verse clearly refers to fishing boats and so by parallelism should *tzinot* be some kind of boat.¹⁹

We can not overlook the orthographic similarity between בּוּצִיִּת [butzith] and תִּצְנוֹת [tzinot]. If we assume that the "*nun*" in *tzinot* is a late corruption of a "*bet*," then a one-to-one correspondence can be established between *tzinot* (with a "*yod*") and *butzith*. This similarity is very intriguing, because it af-

fords a reasonable explanation of the verse. Speaking to an audience that was familiar with fishing boats, Amos painted a very vivid picture of destruction. The picture on purpose included a reference to a Babylonian type of boat to indicate a faraway power. Later, this reference became obscure. An attempt was made to associate it with a fleet, to preserve and improve on the text. The solution was צִי [tzi].²⁰ However, the word "tzi" itself was not generally known; it required a close-by explanation – אֲנִיּוֹת [oniot]. Thus "tzi oniot" replaced "butzith" and eventually led to its contraction "tzinot."

This all may sound nice and well, or it may be just another fish story.

THE MISSING STONE

Verse 5:5 reads וְאַל תִּדְרָשׁוּ בֵּית אֱלֹהֵי גִלְגָּל לֹא תִבְאוּ וּבֶאֱרָשׁוּ שִׁבְעָה לֵאמֹר
תֵּעָבְרוּ כִּי הִגְלִיגְלָה גִלְגָּל וּבֵית אֱלֹהֵי יִהְיֶה לְאֵוָן

The English translation,

*Do not seek Bethel,
Nor go to Gilgal,
Nor cross over to Beer-sheba;
For Gilgal will go into exile,
And Bethel shall become a delusion.*

does not reveal an important play on words contained in the Hebrew text. Clearly, עֲבָרוּ [avoru] is a play on בֶּאֱרָשׁוּ [beer] and גִּלְגָּל יִגְלֶה [galo yigleh] is a play on גִּלְגָּל [Gilgal], in each case two characters parallel. Commentators have been baffled by the play on the word בֵּית אֱלֹהֵי [Bethel], unable to see any connection between it and אֵוָן [aven]. Weiss says that in *ubeth el yihyeh l'aven* is hidden a midrash (homiletic) on "el" but it cannot be deciphered. In his view, it had to do with an aspersion of אֵל [el], but we do not know what it is because of the many possible meanings of אֵוָן [aven].

Some read *aven* as אֵין [aiin -- naught], as in Isaiah 41:29, Hosea 12:12, and Proverbs 11:7. They see *aiin* as a play on "el" [might] (as in Gen. 31:29).²¹ The meaning of *ubeth el yihyeh l'aven* would be "the house of strength will be to naught." This, however, would require another play on words. Paul suggests reading "Bethal" instead of Bethel. Then the *nomen est omen* is "the house of nothing becomes nothing more than a nullity."²² This approach would make Bethal confusing in its sophistication. Others emend the text to

read *ubeth el yihyeh lebeth aven*, creating a repetition rather than a play on words.

It appears that a simple play on the word בֵּית [beth – house] and אֶבֶן [even -- building stone] has been overlooked. אֵרָא [aven -- sin] and אֶבֶן [even – stone] sound alike, though they have a somewhat different spelling. What Amos perhaps said was that their house of god (Bethel) would become a rubble of stones in the ruins of which dwell ogres and demons. His device was a play on the dual meanings of the sound "aven." The temple in Bethel, clearly a *beth-even*, will become *even* (stones) and *aven* (dwelling place of ogres and demons). Scattering of stones is an obvious description of destruction.

The suggested play on words supports Mowinckel's translation of the passage, as quoted by Hammershaimb,²³ "Bethel becomes a house of ogres," alluding to the idea that ogres and demons dwell in the ruins of devastated cities (Isa. 13:21; 34:12; 34:14). Have we found the missing stone? We hope that there is no *aven* in the search for the *even*.

RESTRAINT ON THE PLUNDER

Verse 5:9 reads:

הַחֲבִלִּיג שָׂדַע עַל עֵז וְשָׂדַע עַל מְבָצָר יִבּוֹא

It is He who hurls destruction upon strongholds, so that ruin comes upon fortresses. It is difficult to understand this verse because the meaning of חֲבִלִּיג [hamavlig] is not clear. The root ל-ג-ב [b-l-g] appears in Jeremiah 18:8, Psalm 39:14 and Job 9:27, 10:20. In each case it is usually interpreted according to the context of the verse. For instance, the JPS translates this root in Amos as "hurl," in Jeremiah as "seek comfort," in Psalms as "that I may recover," and in Job as "be diverted." Based on Arabic it was assumed to mean "cheering up," resulting in awkward translations.

Andersen and Freedman²⁴ say on Amos 5:9:

The bicolon itself is extremely difficult to analyze and interpret, and may in the end be a loose fragment. But the subject of the verbs seems to be God, and the content apparently links the God of the created world with the particulars of violent destruction incident to warfare, especially siege operations.

Though many emendations have been suggested for "hamavlig" in Verse 5:9, surprisingly, these emendations do not include the obvious possibility of

הַמַּגְבִּיל [hamagbil – "restrain" or "limit"]. Such an emendation involves a simple transposition of letters and happens frequently when texts were transcribed by hand. Textually, this emendation not only makes the reading of the verse much more obvious but it also creates a logical connection with the following verses.

It was the custom of warfare in ancient days, that a fortified city which put up a fight was subject to unrestrained plunder and devastation (Deut. 20:10-14). The text points to God's greatness by referring to His ability to restrain the pent-up murderous desires of besiegers, well known and often retold in folklore. Replacing *hamavlig* with *hamagbil* would make the verse read: *He who restrains the plunder of the strongholds, and [limits] the ruin that comes upon fortresses.*²⁵ This behavior of the Almighty then is contrasted with that of the Israelites who exploit the poor to a level exceeding that of a plundered fortress or stronghold (5:11).

Another possibility is to view *al* as a guiding word. This word appears three times in verse 5:9 and once in verse 5:11 connecting the two verses by juxtaposition. God limits the thorough plunder to the fortresses and strongholds, which are the rich sites. However, the Israelites exercise the excessive plunder on the poor.

It is all greediness versus control.

NOTES

1. Meir Weiss, *The Book of Amos*, Commentary (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992) Vol. II, p. 99.
2. C.F. Keil, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Hendrickson, 1991 [reprint]) Vol. I, p. 387. Keil suggests that "*meik*" instead of "*metzik*" is a peculiarity in orthography. Jewish traditional commentators follow the Targum in giving this meaning to *meik*.
3. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos, A Commentary*. trans. John Sturdy (New York: Schocken Books, 1970) p. 54.
4. Shalom M. Paul, *Amos, A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 95. Paul says: "The objection that such carts were unknown in ancient Israel is unwarranted in the light of the biblical verses (Gen 15:19, 21, 27; 46:5; 1Sam 6:7) and the actual reliefs from that period."
5. The Mishkan and its utensils (except for the Ark) were transported in carts pulled by cattle (Num. 7:3 etc.). Even the Philistines returned the Ark in a cart pulled by two cows (1 Sam. 6:10). *Terumah* was transported from the barn to the city by a cow. In Tractate Hulin 134b it is said:

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"He hires a cow and brings it (the *terumah*)," However, the regular crop was transported on human back, donkey, or camel (Tractate Bava Metzia 80a).

6. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989). They admit the possibility that the verse deals with a heifer rather than a cart. They say: "it requires no change in consonants to read 'the heifer who has glutted herself with grass.' Some fodder generates gastric gas, which can be very painful, even fatal, if not relieved." Their final translation is, however, conventional: *Indeed, I am creaking underneath you, just as the cart that is full sheaves creaks.* p. 334.

7. The image that is suggested is similar, though in a different context, to that in Job 32:18, where Elihu says: *For I am full of words; the wind in my belly presses me.* It is also useful to note that the verb '*ako*' can be found applied to the loins (see Ps. 66:11) this would fit the image of an *egla* with a bulging stomach.

8. The root of *laah* has two meanings, one is to swallow (Mandelkern, 'vorare') the other is idle talk (Mandelkern, 'temere loqui, inania effutire'). It is possible that Amos used this word in both of its meanings. The heifer too quickly fills herself and being overburdened lows (same origin as *laah*?) or moos.

9. W.R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T.& T Clark, 1905) p. 80-82.

10. Andersen and Freedman, p. 408-409.

11. Andersen and Freedman, p. xxx

12. Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1987) p. 1087
1987, p. 1087

13. Paul, p. 122.

14. Paul, p. 120-122. Paul provides a fuller discussion of the various emendation and cognates.

15. Andersen and Freedman, p. xxx. These commentators, however, fail to explain why this unusual form of *sirot duga* was used when a more common and better known word *hakha* could have been used. Weiss' (Weiss, Vol I, p. 104) attempt to answer this question by stressing the more painful stab of a *sir* compared to a *hakha* is not convincing.

16. Paul, p. 134.

17. Weiss, Vol II, p. 169.

18. Amos Hakham, *Amos*, Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1973, p. 27.

19. *Butzith* or *dugith* are small boats carried by ship for the transport of passengers from and to the ship when it can not dock at a pier.

20. *Butzith* (or *Bizith*) is derived apparently from *Beiza* (egg) and is called so because of its oval shape. Interestingly, that may also be the reason for using *sira* as the name of a boat -- its similarity to a *sir* (pot).

21. The word *izi* is used altogether four times in the Bible, once in an obscure text in Num. 24:24, and in Isa. 33:21, Ezek. 30:9, and Dan. 11:30. The word *oniot* is used many times and was probably well known.

22. Weiss, Vol I, p. 140.

23. Paul, p. 164.

24. Hammershaimb, p. 79.