

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CRUXES IN AMOS: PART III

ARON PINKER

אשא עיני אל ההרים To My Parents

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

TRAMPLED FOR TRAMPLE

The main difficulty in 5:11 לכן יען בושטכם על דל ומשאת בר תקחו מומני . . . is in the meaning of "*boshaskhem*." This unique word has been generally assumed to be another form of "*bosaskhem*," in which the '*samekh*' was replaced by a '*sin*.' In this case, *boshaskhem* would mean, "you trample."

Hammershaimb notes: "Most commentators assume that the form was originally written with a '*sin*' which was then corrected to a '*samekh*,' and that the '*sin*' was kept in the text out of respect for the original spelling (cf. Neh. 11:13)."¹ If the example in Nehemiah is followed, then we should have as the correct version "*boskhem*," with the meaning of "trample" (Isa. 14:25, 63:6, Ps. 44:6, Prov. 27:7). Such an interpretation would require an explanation of the unusual use of "*al*." We would have expected the text to be "*et hadal*," as in Jeremiah 12:10, rather than "*al dal*."

I would suggest that 5:10-11 reflects the dynamics of the prophetic delivery. On a number of occasions we find in Amos possible responses to remarks that were made from the audience. Amos uses "*yadati*" in 5:12, probably because his claims in the previous verses were disputed. Similarly, 5:13 may be taken as an aside to listeners who were moved by the prophet's words and expressed some strong opinions. Amos advises them in an aside:

At such a time the prudent man

keeps silent . . . (5:13). This may be a response to a shout: God is with us!

Also,

7:14-17 is a response to the specific interference in 7:12-13.

Aron Pinker has a M.Sc. in theoretical physics and mathematics from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and a Ph.D. in mathematics from Columbia University, N.Y. He was a professor of mathematics at Frostburg State University, and is currently a Principal Operation Research Scientist at ANSER. He is author of numerous articles and several books which have been published in Israel, among them The Atom and Theory of Relativity. Whatever free time he has is dedicated to Judaic studies. Dr. Pinker resides in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Verse 5:10 may be just such a response to a shout from the crowd: "Shame on you! Shut up!" The prophet's response is: *They hate the arbiter in the gate,/And detest him who sincerely speaks, that is why they say unto him: Be quiet.* Our addition -- *that is why they say unto him: Be quiet* -- is not in Verse 10 but rather at the beginning of Verse 11. We derive it from reading the text thus: *lakhen ya'an bo has* [*Therefore he retorts to him: Quiet!*]. Such a reading would require an insertion of a "hei." In fact, it is possible that two originally existed, and were deleted later to get the meaning "trampled." If our reasoning is correct, then Verses 10 and 11 should read thus: *sanu basha'ar mokhiah vedover tamim it'aevu/ lakhen ya'an[u] bo [h]as/ [h]ashkhem al dal imasat bar tikhu mimenu* [*They hate the arbiter in the gate,/And detest him who sincerely speaks, that is why they say unto him: Be quiet/ start out early onto the poor, exacting from him a levy of grain . . .*].

Another possibility is to read in 5:11 "*sikam*" instead of "*hashkhem*." That would reduce the suggested emendation to that of inserting just one "hei." *Sikam*, from the root *sako*, would have the meaning of "their hooks" or "their thorns" (Job 40:31), or sharp weapons. All these meanings would be appropriate. This interpretation could also explain the transposition of the "*samekh*" and the "*sin*," a natural confusion of letters with similar sounds.

A PAINED FARMER

Verse 5:16: *וְקָרָא אֶכָר אֶל אֲבָל וּמְסַפֵּר אֶל יוֹדְעֵי נְהִי* has given trouble to commentators for two reasons: The parallelism between "*ikar*" [farmhand] and "*yodei nehi*" [skilled in wailing], and its peculiar grammatical construction. The word *ikar* is apparently of Akkadian origin. It occurs six more times in the Bible with the meaning of fieldworker or farmhand on a large estate. Indeed, all the commentators take *ikar* to mean "farmer" or "farmhand," and use creative explanations to turn him into a professional mourner.

There are those that see a bitter irony in calling the farmer to partake in the mourning or burial, because it is the very farmer whose land was usurped by the wealthy who is being called to bury them in that land. While this interpretation would convey to us a sense of some ultimate justice, it cannot be correct if the *ikar* is a professional agricultural worker. He more likely worked for others than on his own land.²

In three of the biblical occurrences of *ikar* it is used together with "*korem*" [vinedresser]; apparently *ikar* and *korem* were a standard couple of professional agricultural workers. The absence of *korem* in Verse 5:16 is puzzling when "*kerem*" [vineyard] is mentioned in Verse 5:17. Andersen and Freedman try to explain it as a merism, one term containing two parts. Thus the farmhand stands for himself and the vinedresser, and "*kramim*" [vineyards] stands for both fields and vineyards. Thus, in their view, the professional mourners summon farmers from their fields and vinedressers from their vineyards.³ While this explanation is sensitive to the absence of the vinedresser, it reads into the text more by far than is in it. The text says *for there shall be lamenting in every vineyard*, clearly meaning *in situ*, and not that the *korem* will be called from there.

In fact, it would have been more natural to have "*korem*" instead of "*yodei nehi*" in 5:16. Unless the original text did not have *ikar* but rather *kra* [כרא *k-r-a*: to be pained or sorrowful] as in Daniel 7:15, to read "*etkriath ruhi*" [my spirit was grieved].⁴ If *kra* was the original text, then the meaning of the verse is: *Call the sorrowful to the mourning and the skilled in wailing to the lament . . .* This interpretation brings to the fore the two main players in the mourning rites: the aggrieved and the functionaries.

If instead of *ikar* there was originally *kra*, a play on the word *kra* is restored: we would have two words that sound *kr* (though differently spelled) at the beginning of the second part of the verse, and two words that end with the sound of "*ei*" or "*hi*."⁵ The first two sounds of *kr* recall the customary "*keri'ah*" [tearing] and the *ei* or *hi* sounds at the end recall the sounds made by the professional lamenters. Amos thus very cleverly selected his words to fit the subjects to which he refers. He used for the aggrieved, who are going to make a *keri'ah*, words that bring out this sound and similarly for those who will engage in wailing. The custom of play on words in such cases is attested in many places (Isa. 14:4).

It can be surmised that the original *kra* [pained, sorrowful] of Aramaic origin, was in use at the time of Amos at least in the learned circles. Later, when a less learned person transcribed the text, or at a time when *kha* fell into disuse, it was no longer clear what *kra* means and it was assumed that *kra* was a corruption of *ikar*. A farmer was created giving great pain to generations of commentators.

DAY OF THE LORD -- A HOLIDAY?

Ah, you who wish for the day of the Lord! Why should you want the day of the Lord? It shall be darkness, not light! As if a man should run from a lion and be attacked by a bear; or if he got indoors; should lean his hand on the wall and be bitten by a snake! Surely the day of the Lord shall be not light, but darkness, blackest night without a glimmer (Amos 5:18-20).

Almost all commentators see in Verses 5:18-20 a well-defined unit that addresses the notion of the "Day of the Lord" as commonly held by the people.⁶ What specifically this notion was we do not know. The term Day of the Lord occurs only 16 times in the Bible, in 10 prophecies of 7 prophets. Nowhere else does this term appear as a special technical term.⁷ The masses apparently thought this day to be a good one, full of light and happiness. Perhaps it points to a popular eschatology, in which on a special day in the future the Lord will reveal Himself in His might and take vengeance on all the enemies of Israel. There are commentators who understand the Day of the Lord to be a reference to a theophany rather than to an eschatology.⁸ It is difficult to accept either of these views from the negation of the expectations in Amos' prophecy (18-20).

Amos says that the Day of the Lord will be darkness, not light. Is this darkness somehow related to the plague of darkness, as the end of 5:17 is related to the plague of the firstborn? Does it refer to some cosmic phenomenon? And what are the consequences and implications of this darkness? Does it imply restriction of movement, as with the plague of darkness in Egypt? Is it a metaphor for a reversal; instead of happiness there will be sadness?

The declaration on darkness is followed by a series of frightful mishaps, none of which is fatal. On the Day of the Lord, in the darkness, they will be as a person who escapes a lion, meets a bear, and is bitten by a snake. This is very unusual. In the ancient Near East the lion was considered to be the most dangerous animal. Encounters with lions and bears in the Bible are as a rule fatal. Only some outstanding heroes could subdue a lion (Jud. 14:8; I Sam. 17:34-36; II Sam. 23:20). Otherwise, it is *lest, like a lion they tear me apart,rending in pieces, and no one save me* (Ps. 7:3). Meeting a bear also

led to unpleasant consequences, as Hosea says: *Like a bear robbed of its young I attack [lit. meet] them/And rip open the casing of their heart;/I will devour them there like a lion . . .* (Hos. 13:8). Yet, on this Day of the Lord, the day of darkness, they escape an obvious predicament. How can that be?

Weiss thinks that the bite of the snake was fatal.⁹ However, this cannot be deduced from the text (for the dangerous, if not deadly, bite of a snake, see, Num. 21:6, 9; Jer. 8:17; Amos 9:3; Prov. 23:32; Eccl. 10:8, 11). In fact, the word "*nahash*" in the Bible is a generic name, designating many species, which include both the poisonous and the non-poisonous kinds; "*saraph*," not used by Amos, refers to poisonous snakes only. The Mishnah says: "No harm has ever come to anyone on account of an attack by snakes or scorpions in Jerusalem" (Mishna Avot, 5:5). Moreover, it is difficult to see how leaning on a wall could result in snakebite. We can imagine that a snake would hide in a fence of loose stones. Indeed, *he who breaches a stone fence will be bitten by a snake* (Eccl. 10:8). But the walls of the house must have been solid, at least most of them were, not to afford a hiding place to a snake. Hammershaimb apparently senses this difficulty and consequently explains that inside the house the light was often bad, so that a snake hidden inside could be easily overlooked by someone coming in from the outside.¹⁰ However, Amos explicitly says that the bite of the snake is a consequence of the man's leaning his hand on the wall. Whatever the case, we can assume that the bite of a snake in the house was not pleasant, but very likely not life-threatening.

Thus, the Day of the Lord, contrary to the peoples' expectation, would be a scary day but not one of devastation, a day of darkness and confusion but not of catastrophe. It is a day akin to one described by Isaiah:

*We hope for light, and, lo! there is darkness;
for a gleam, and we must walk in gloom.
We grope, like blind men along a wall;
Like those without eyes we grope.
We stumble at noon, as if in darkness;
Among the sturdy, we are like the dead.
We all growl like bears
And moan like doves (Isa. 59:9-11).*

The simile of the lion-bear-snake is incomplete in the sense that it does not continue with something like "So will Israel be . . ." Perhaps, that is where the prophet spelled out the gory details of the tragedy. Perhaps, as Weiss contends, Amos could not pull himself together to enumerate the specifics.¹¹ Perhaps, he said them and they were deleted. All these views would be pure surmises. As the text was transmitted, it is obvious that the description does not fit the image of a negated eschatology or theophany. We would expect instead of eschatology to have a description of a reversal, the enemies of Israel launching devastating attacks against it. Instead of a theophany, we might have expected a day of judgment. The sequence of lion-bear-snake mishaps is so mild that in no way can it measure up to a negation of the expected Day of the Lord, whether a eschatology or theophany.

Could the Day of the Lord be a holiday; one of the three festivals [*hagim*]? There is some advantage to such a view. It would provide a framework for the inclusion of 5:21-25 and perhaps even 5:26-27. Certainly, 5:18-20 as a prophecy unit appears somewhat truncated and incomplete. While 5:21-25 clearly refers to the festivals, how could 5:18-20 be associated with them?

Note that Amos uses "*ha-mitavim*" ["long" or "wish"], a word usually associated with a desire for personal gratification, with something that would occur here and now and not in the far future, an apocalyptic event. Also, Amos carefully selected the animals in the sequence of mishaps, to be *ari* [lion]-*dov* [bear]-*nahash* [snake], though he could have selected other animals to a greater dramatic effect.¹² Now, the first letters of *ari-dov-nahash* form the acronym *adn* That is exactly the term used for the Deity in the commandment to partake in the three festivals: *Three times a year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign* [lit. *ha-ad(o)n*], *the Lord* (Ex. 23:17, 34:23). Moreover, *adn* without a "*vaw*" occurs only in the cited places in Exodus. Note also that in 5:19 Amos uses "*ish*" without the definite article, but uses *ha-ari*, *ha-dov*, and *ha-nahash* with the definite article, though the particular is not necessary. Could it be that Amos wanted to strengthen thereby the link between the acronym and the use of *ha-ad(o)n* in Exodus?

In 5:19 "*ha-bait*" is usually taken to be "indoors" or "home." This, too, is a very unusual usage of *bait*. Why did not Amos use *la-bait* or *le-beito*? Could *ha-bait* refer to a temple, as the term is repeatedly used for the Temple in Jerusalem in I Kings 5-6? Could the snake in the sanctuary be a deity, an idol

that was worshipped in the Northern Kingdom? We know that in the ancient Near East the snake was a symbol of the deity and of fertility. Jars and incense vessels decorated with snakes give evidence of a snake cult in early Palestine. At Dan, one of the two national sanctuaries of the Northern Kingdom, excavators uncovered a large storage jar decorated with a snake in relief. This jar, dating from the 10th-9th century BCE, was found in a storage area adjacent to the "high place." At such sites as Gezer, Beth-Shan, Beth-Shemesh, Hazor, and Shechem, the snake-goddess Hathor was worshipped during the early Iron-Age.

Just as the calf was worshipped in the Northern Kingdom because of its historical connection with the golden calf, so could the snake have been part of the pantheon of gods. Certainly, the snake appears to have an important mythological role in the Garden of Eden, in the miracle displayed by Moses before Pharaoh, and as a cure for the Israelites when bitten by snakes in the desert (Num. 21:9). Amos may be engaging here in a sarcastic remark; that the frightened escapee from the lion and bear, seeking refuge in the temple and protection from the idol [*nahash*], as the Israelites did in the desert, is instead bitten by him.

The three main festivals were cherished by the populace because they were very joyous occasions when people could meet friends and relatives, contract marriages, conduct business, and get the feel of a metropolis with its worldliness and sophistication. Multitudes congregated in Jerusalem on these days to celebrate, socialize, and be inspired. It is not surprising that Jeroboam I saw the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem as such a danger to the fledgling Northern Kingdom that he had to establish centers of worship in his own kingdom to compete with it (I Kg. 12:26-33).

Jerusalem, a relatively large city, was a very crowded place during the festivals. It can be expected that the smaller cities in the Northern Kingdom that had sites of worship were also overflowing with worshippers during the festivals. If the Day of the Lord refers to the three festivals, which were celebrated also in the Northern Kingdom albeit not always at the same time as in Jerusalem, then we can hear in the words of Amos the people's longing for these festivals, days of light and happiness. Amos, however, sees a different image. Instead of light and happiness he sees darkness and sadness, instead of controlled and orchestrated rites, he sees confusion and fear, and

instead of finding solace and protection in "the house" he sees the bite of the idol. This happens because *I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies . . .* (5:21).

Commentators appear to have missed the implication of the gradual decrease in the sounds emitted by the three animals. As we move from lion-to-bear-to-snake we also move from roar-to-growl-to-hiss. While all focused on the man's escape from danger to safety, the intent of the verse may be escape from the roar and din of the crowds to the quietude of the temple.

The Day of the Lord is not in far future; it is neither eschatology nor theophany. The Day of the Lord is a holiday, one of the three festivals so much cherished. Unfortunately, it will not be what people expect it to be.

NOTES

1. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos, A Commentary*, trans. John Sturdy (New York: Schocken Books, 1970) p. 83; Shalom M. Paul, *Amos – A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 179. Paul quotes Gese's translation, "*Grundbesitzloser Landarbeiter*" [a farmhand without landed property].
2. Francis I. Andersen & David Noel Freedman, *Amos*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989) p. 517.
3. H.W.F. Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 1979) p. 413.
4. Note also that in 5:16-17 the letter "*resh*," representing in its sound trembling and terror, is used nine times. The letter "*lamed*," representing the sound of ululation, is used eight times. This does not appear to be accidental.
5. Because of the similarity between II Kings 14:26 and Deuteronomy 32:36, Hakham sees in the peoples' desires for the Day of the Lord an anticipation that all that is written in Deuteronomy 32:39-43 would come to be. Though Jeroboam II restored the historical borders of Israel, it did not happen overnight. Jeroboam II ruled for 41 years, and it could be expected that the territorial expansion took much time. Amos, however, refers to a specific day.
6. Meir Weiss, *The Book of Amos, Commentary*, Vol. I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992) p. 164. Amos uses the term "Day of the Lord" only in 5:18 and 5:20. In other places he uses a variety of different expressions: "*day of battle/On a day of violent tempest*" (1:14); "*day of woe*" (6:3), "*that day*" (2:16, 8:3, 8:9, 8:13, 9:11) All these instances refer to the same concept as the prophecy in 5:18-20.
7. Weiss, p. 165.
8. Weiss, p. 167.
9. Hammershaimb, p. 89.
10. Weiss, p. 168.
11. Weiss, p. 168. Weiss tries to explain why this particular trio of animals was selected. The lion was selected because it hunts at the onset of darkness and the Day of the Lord is going to be a day of darkness. The bear is usually mentioned in the Bible together with the lion. The snake was

OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CRUXES IN AMOS: PART III

included because, like the lion, it is a metaphor for a horrible disaster. This appears to me as a rather disconnected and flimsy rationale.

12. Andersen and Freedman, p. xxxv.

13. We find in Yalkut Shimoni on Lamentations 1 that Jeremiah thought he is supposed to give the cup of desolation to the nations. But the Lord told him, "You should deduce who deserves the cup from accepted manners, 'Isn't it served first to the one who sits at the head?' See who sits at the head of the nations and serve him first -- Jerusalem is the one who sits at the head of the nations."

**VERSES FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE CONTAINING
ETHICAL, MORAL, AND THEOLOGICAL TEACHINGS**

**Readers are encouraged to submit one or two verses and
brief explanation for publication to:**

**MEMORABLE VERSES
JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY
POB 29002
JERUSALEM, ISRAEL**

*These two verses have been submitted by Rabbi Dr. Joshua Adler of
Jerusalem.*

***By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until you return to the
ground.***

The Bible realistically reflects the fact that life, more often than not, consists of hard work and that death is the inevitable end for all.

***The Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel ?' and he said, 'I do not
know. Am I my brother's keeper?'***

Already, the earliest chapters of the Bible record fratricide and denial of responsibility to one's brother and fellow man. The history of mankind unfortunately reflects this reality and clearly violates what God wants and expects from man.

