

PARALLEL GUIDE 26

Amos and Hosea

Summary: This chapter elaborates upon the nature and role of prophecy in Israel. Then it looks at Amos and Hosea, who expanded the role of prophecy to include an ethical dimension. Earlier prophecy mainly condemned idolatry and predicted its dire consequences. These eighth-century exemplars now also denounce Israel's gross social injustices.

Learning Objectives

- Read **Amos** and **Hosea**
- State the nature of Old Testament prophecy
- State the role of Amos as an Old Testament prophet
- State the role of Hosea as an Old Testament prophet
- Express your understanding of prophecy and compare it with today's prophetic expressions

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Amos writes from a particular point of view. Read the text with care and decide what, for you, is the core message of Amos. Then, using the four-source model of Tradition, Culture, Action, and Position draw a series of four squares and note in them what Amos says that comes from each of these sources.
2. You may decide you are more interested in Hosea and do the assignment suggestion in 1 above with the Book of Hosea instead.
3. Analyze the great themes of either Amos or Hosea. What are the issues for these prophets? (Use the definition of an **"Issue"** provided in CLSM, Section 2-4, the Issue Method of Theological Reflection.) What do you see as the issue? Analyze the dimensions (cost and promise) of each aspect of the issue you select.
4. Amos and Hosea offer prophecies that can lead to despair. Where do you find hope in their messages? When all looks bleak, where can you find hope? Where can you find hope if you are living in the midst of a disaster or hopeless circumstances?

Preparing for Your Seminar

State the significance of Hosea and/or Amos for Christians. Limit yourself to one page. Record your responses in your notebook. Come to the seminar prepared to discuss your ideas.

Bibliography

Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997). This is a less technical approach.

Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (Harper & Row, 1960).

An excellent commentary on Amos is James L. Mays' *Amos*, The Old Testament Library series (The Westminster Press, 1969). Mays' commentary is precise and complete. The introduction is brief but very helpful to anyone looking for further understanding of the prophet.

H. W. Wolff, *Joel & Amos*, Hermeneia series (Fortress Press, 1977).

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Chapter 26 AMOS AND HOSEA

The eighth century opens with the reigns of Amaziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel. The overthrow of various dynasties, whether by prophetic instigation or palace revolt, had brought about no noticeable reform in Israel, and conditions in Judah were no better. Religious syncretism continued to threaten to make Israel indistinguishable from "the nations." The ninth-century prophets, Elijah and Elisha, had attempted to turn Israel back to YHWH. But these two prophets perceived Israel's apostasy primarily in cultic terms. Israel's sacrificial cultus and the cultus of the Baals were being mixed. The people "came before" YHWH, but they "came before" the Baals as well, and so the cult was contaminated.

The eighth-century prophets introduce a radically new dimension to the role of the prophet and to the idea of prophecy. Amos and Hosea deplore the ethical depravity into which Israel had sunk. It is easy for us, who are the inheritors of a strongly ethical Judeo-Christian tradition, to miss the revolutionary impact of Amos's words: . . . they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way . . . (Amos 2:6-7).

To us this may sound typical of the Bible as a whole, but **the grandeur of the ethical sections of scripture** is largely the result of the insights first offered by the great prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries. Such insight was implicit in the earliest strata of the covenant laws, but it took Amos, Hosea, and their successors to mine these strata and bring forth their ethical implications.

In this chapter we study the two men who prophesied in Israel during the prosperous reign of **Jeroboam**. The Book of Amos is quite short. It can be read easily in its entirety. Hosea is somewhat longer—we examine representative passages from it.

The Prophetic Word

We began to talk about the figure and the role of the prophet in the last chapter, but a few more words must be said in introduction to the careers of Amos and Hosea. The prophets, of whatever historical period, were "charismatics," in the sense that they acted under the influence of the spirit of YHWH. A frenzied dance, a meaningless babble, or the most profound utterance of the greatest prophet—all are seen by the biblical writers as the work of the spirit of YHWH. As we have seen, the words of the prophet's oracle were never the prophet's own—they were the words of YHWH. The prophetic word is the word of YHWH's revelation.

This is the uniform understanding of the Old Testament. Modern readers cannot fail, however, to see the prophet's own genius apparent in the words he or she speaks. The prophet draws on the traditions of the people and applies them, with whatever note of novelty, to the situations of the day. The prophet is no passive vessel through which God's words and thoughts pour unaffected by the prophet's own understanding and insights.

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Both of the above understandings are necessary to comprehend the prophets. A vision, a dream, some experience which transcends normal awareness comes to the prophet. A silence so profound that it can be heard overcomes Elijah. Nothing is the same again. All looks different. No fear or desire is great enough to overcome the compulsion to speak and to act by the transforming power of that experience. Elijah's own intelligence leads him to seize Jezebel's transgression of ancient Israelite land policy as the occasion to pronounce YHWH's curse on the house of Ahab. The prophets are given an insight, a vision, a compulsion from YHWH, but they apply the "word" which they have received to the concrete events and issues illuminated for them by this word. Their genius is heightened, not obscured, by revelation. It is a mistake, then, to see the eighth-century prophets or their successors of later centuries as nothing more than sage commentators on the political and moral issues of their time. They did not see themselves as such, nor were they so understood by the people they addressed. However much they drew on past traditions—and these traditions provided all the motifs of their messages—the words they uttered went far beyond traditional wisdom.

It would also be a mistake to see them as revolutionary advocates for the oppressed and downtrodden—although it was the oppression of the poor and the arrogance of the mighty that most frequently formed the content of their oracles. They were speaking for YHWH, not for the people. It was not an application of abstract principles of justice that led them to **denounce oppression**, but a response to YHWH's accusation: YHWH's people were profaning YHWH's righteousness.

It is true that a human encounter with YHWH's holiness had not always produced moral sensitivity. Nor had awe in the presence of YHWH always produced a thirst for justice. Not even Elijah had made the leap from the demand that the people choose YHWH over Baal to the accusation that the summer palace of Ahab and Jezebel, with its temples of Baal, was an unjust extravagance. The genius of the later prophets can be seen in how they responded to the experience of YHWH's anger over Israel's political and ethical quagmire. Even greater is the genius that recognized that this anger went unappeased by the frequent cultic observances. It was not simply that Israel worshiped as did the followers of Baal—she lived as they did.

As the prophets wrestled with the implications of their vision, a paradox emerged which cannot be resolved in simple terms: God's justice demands the destruction of the people, but God's love for them invigorates a hope for their salvation. The prophets were convinced—according to their visions from YHWH—of the reality of both sides of the paradox; the prophetic genius struggled to express the paradox. In short, the literary prophets—at least from Amos on—were grasped by YHWH and enabled to see what no one else had seen. But they also strained their intellects to the fullest to interpret their visions according to the circumstances of their times. The Book of Amos is made up of three distinct types of material. These have been identified by James L. Mays as "(1) sayings spoken by a prophet in carrying out

his commission; (2) first-person narratives told by the prophet; (3) a third-person narrative about the prophet" (Amos, p. 12). The book begins with a large block of sayings (1:3-6:14). These consist, in chapter 1 and 2, of a series of oracles against the nations—Damascus (Syria), Gaza (Philistia), Tyre (Phoenicia), Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah, finally ending with an oracle against Israel; in chapters 3 through 6 are extended prophecies against Israel, leading up to a final judgment against her. Following the sayings is a section of vision reports—four of them—in first person (7:1-3, 4-6, 7-9; 8:1-3) with the only third-person report about Amos set between the third and the last (7:10-17). The sayings resume in chapter 8. There is a fifth first-person vision report in 9:1-4. The book closes with a final series of sayings and a pronouncement of doom. (The oracles of salvation in 9:11-15 are thought by many scholars to come from a different time and situation from that of Amos. They may have been added to the collection of his sayings at a later date.)

If you have not had much experience reading the literary prophets, you may find it difficult at first. Certainly

Amos is different from anything we have read so far. There is—outside of chapters 7 and 8—no story to it, and one thing does not always follow another in any order—at least any that we can readily understand. Read the prophet’s words with this text close at hand. Stop for a moment at the end of each paragraph in the NRSV before going on to the next. Remember that each paragraph of the biblical text is intended to represent a saying unto itself, a discrete unit, that need not have any relation to what comes before or after. To put it simply, the sayings of the prophets must first be read and understood one by one. Only then can we begin to paint a picture of the prophet’s message as a whole.

Please read the passages indicated in conjunction with the discussion in the text.

Amos 1:1 Oracles Against the Nations

This verse is placed before the prophetic book itself, most likely by a compiler of the prophet’s words. It may be understood as a title for the work following. Amos is here depicted as a shepherd of Tekoa, a small town in Judah. In 7:14, Amos refers to himself as “a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees.” These occupations sound quite lowly, as though Amos is a member of the poor peasantry of Judah. His knowledge of international affairs and the high state of his oratorical skill suggest, however, that he was a person of some standing and culture. He may have been an overseer of flocks and lands, or even an owner himself.

Title and Introduction

The title calls the work the “words of Amos . . . which he saw.” The visions which he “saw” are described in chapters 7, 8, and 9; the rest of the oracles apply the visions to the historical circumstances of Amos’ time.

The visions, which constitute Amos’ call, date to the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah—the name given in II Chronicles 26:1 for the king called Azariah, son of Amaziah, in the II Kings account—and of Jeroboam, the son of Joash of Israel. (For brevity, “Jeroboam the son of Joash” is usually called Jeroboam II to distinguish him from “Jeroboam the son of Nebat,” the first king of the northern realm.) The dating is made more precise for the readers of the time by adding that it was “two years before the earthquake” or “during two years before the earthquake”; the Hebrew is

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capable of either translation. The second alternative indicates that the visions took place over a protracted period of time. Unfortunately, there is no way to tell precisely when this earthquake occurred, for there is no reference to it in other datable sources. Some commentators link it with traces of an earthquake archaeologists have found in the excavation of Hazor that dates at approximately 760 BCE. If that date is correct, Amos would have been active late in the fourth decade of the eighth century. Although we may not be able to date these prophecies precisely, it is clear in the text that they are dated. The compiler asks us to read them as the words of one particular man for one particular time and place.

Amos 1:3-5 The Oracle Against Damascus

All the oracles against the nations (1:3-2:5) are expressed in the same format: “Thus says YHWH: ‘For three transgressions of _____ and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,’” followed by the accusation naming the evils that the particular nation has committed and the judgment that shall fall upon it.

Verse 2 is generally considered to be an editorial addition because of its similarity to Joel 3:16 and Jeremiah 25:30. The verse locates YHWH’s abode as Jerusalem—presumably the temple—and thereby shows a Judean origin. This is not inconsistent with Amos being its author, since he was a Judean, but it does not fit well with his general attitude toward the cultus.

The offense which Damascus has committed is stated in general terms, as are the accusations against all the nations except Israel. The reference is obviously to cruel acts of war against Gilead, one of the Trans-Jordan tribes of Israel (v. 3b). The punishment, as is the case throughout the oracles against the nations, is destruction of the cities by fire and, in this case, exile.

The oracles are uttered in poetic form. This may also cause initial difficulty in reading, especially since Hebrew poetry differs significantly from English poetry. It is helpful to know that here each line has three rhythmic stresses—the English translation approximates this, though it cannot be reproduced exactly in every line. The major characteristic of Hebrew poetry is not stress but the use of parallelism. (We see this throughout the prophets.) Verses are made up of two or more statements that (a) repeat the same thought in different words, (b) compare thoughts so as to bring out some inherent relationship between them, or (c) contrast them. So, v. 3, “For three transgressions of Damascus/ and for four I will not revoke the punishment” forms a couplet, each of which has three stressed syllables; “because they have threshed Gilead/ with threshing sledges of iron” is another similarly stressed couplet, related to the first as cause to effect. Verse 4 is a couplet, the second half of which repeats the idea expressed in the first. Verse 5 contains four “strophes” (STRO-fee, lines of poetry), each expressing the same general meaning in different terms.

The oracle closes with the phrase, “says YHWH,” one of the characteristic ways of closing a prophetic utterance, just as “Thus says YHWH:” (v. 6) is a characteristic way of opening one.

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Amos 1:6-2:5 Oracles Against the Other Nations

The oracular pattern is repeated for the other nations. Gaza is accused of delivering a whole people to exile in Edom, perhaps in a massive slave-trading enterprise (1:6-8). Tyre is accused of a similar offense (1:9-10). The strange reference to the “covenant of kingship” in v. 9 may mean that the people sold into slavery were Israelites: in I Kings 9:13 Hiram of Tyre calls Solomon “my brother.” Edom has conducted pitiless warfare, perhaps continual border harassment, against “his brother”—probably Judah (1:11-12). Ammon has committed far worse atrocities (1:12-15), as has Moab (2:1-3).

It is generally accepted by Old Testament scholars that the oracle against Judah (2:4-5) was added to Amos’ oracles by a Deuteronomist: the references to “the law” and “the statutes” and to the people’s walking astray are characteristic of the Deuteronomist. Furthermore, the accusation is different in tone from the others.

Amos 2:6-16 An Oracle Against Israel

The oracle against Israel is longer and more specific than those against the other nations. It is the climax toward which the other oracles have been building. Verses 6b-8 express the major accusations that Amos directs toward Israel, for it is Israel to whom as well as of whom the prophet is speaking. The oracles in chapters 3 through 6 expand and illustrate these accusations with devastating examples, but the essence of Israel’s sin is expressed in these three verses. Israel is guilty (a) of a mindless self-indulgence at the expense of the poor, and (b) of making a mockery of her religious cult.

The oppression of the poor (vv. 6b-7a) and the violation of the family (v. 7b) reflect a wholesale social immorality. That “a man and his father go in to the same maiden” is not simply sexual immorality—an “unnatural act” as modern ethicists might call it—but one more example, added to those preceding it, of a social breakdown. The maiden in question here may be a **cultic prostitute**, as the OAB note suggests, but the Hebrew word does not necessarily mean that. Mays has suggested that it might refer to the violation of the rights of a female bond-servant. Making her into a concubine for both father and son would violate the law of Exod. 21:8. But it is “the emphasis of the line on father and son [that] highlights the promiscuity involved”

(Amos, p. 46). The sexual relation of two related people to a third is subject to a number of the laws of YHWH. In this case YHWH's holy people are being profaned, and they are doing it to themselves. The conclusion of v. 7, “. . . so that my holy name is profaned,” probably refers directly to the sexual offense just recounted, but it could be applied equally well to the rest of the accusations. Violations of YHWH's people are violations of YHWH.

In v. 8, the profanation of religious acts themselves is directly addressed. When the people come to an altar to lie down—perhaps in order to attain a communication from God in a dream, as Jacob did at Bethel—they lie on “garments taken in pledge.” The Law required that, if one took a garment from a person as a pledge of repayment of a debt, the garment must be returned at nightfall—a poor person would have only one such garment and would need it for protection against the cold when he or she went to bed. The poor whose garments have not been returned at nightfall are thus being violated at the very moment of worship. Similarly, the wine taken during the religious rites “in the house of their God” has been purchased with fines levied

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specifically for this purpose—and fines are levied against the poor more often than against those of high station.

Verses 9-11 are a recitation of the traditional faith of Israel—the mighty acts in which God gave Israel the land after bringing her out of Egypt, and God's care to provide Israel with prophets and Nazirites to witness to him before her. Israel has rejected God's witnesses and attempted to pervert their calling: she has made the Nazirites violate their oath against drinking wine, and she has prohibited the prophets from speaking the word of YHWH (v. 12).

Thus Israel has totally rejected YHWH. She has violated the holiness of the “people of God.” She has made a mockery of her religious life, even while performing the cult which the Law required. And she has rejected every reminder of her sacred tradition.

Because of this, she will be crushed (v. 13). Her covenant with YHWH, a covenant that promised salvation, in its violation bears judgment. The horrors of Israel's destruction will be so great that no one will be able to escape: the swift will be unable to run, the strong will grow weak, the mighty will be impotent, the soldier will fall, and no means of escape will succeed (vv. 14-15). The bravest of Israel will run off in disgrace (v. 16). The message of Amos is the total destruction of Israel, reaching into every corner of her national life. There is not the smallest ray of light to brighten the picture. And Amos brings the message of doom to Israel with devastating effect by including the chosen nation among the ranks of her enemies. In former days, YHWH marched before the hosts of Israel to defeat her enemies—for they were the enemies of YHWH. Now, YHWH will march against Israel. Israel has become the enemy of YHWH!

The circumstances for the utterance of these oracles is not stated. The scene described in 7:10-14 is the only mention of a public appearance of the prophet. On the basis of this appearance of Amos in the temple, Martin Buber has suggested in his book *The Prophetic Faith* a possible setting for the oracles. There is no way of determining the accuracy of Buber's suggestion, and there is no substantial data to support it, but it does capture the effect of the oracles on Israel.

Buber recounts the historical situation of Israel. The capable Jeroboam II has finally conquered the trans-Jordan area, thereby restoring the kingdom to its former boundaries. The people of Israel have assembled at Bethel to give thanks to YHWH for the victory. Present at this assembly are diplomatic representatives from the nations that surround Israel. The priest has led the people in a recitation of thanksgiving. The cult prophets—those attached to the sanctuary—have come forward one by one and prophesied the greatness of Israel, proclaiming great things for the year to come. At this point, Amos arises from the congregation. He is

recognized—as was traditional when someone was seized by the spirit of YHWH—and he begins to speak.

The word “Thus” at the beginning of each oracle is emphatic—the other prophets have said pleasant things, but, on the contrary, “thus, says YHWH.” Amos faces

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each of the foreign representatives in turn and delivers his devastating denunciation. Embarrassment falls over the Israelite officials, though it is mixed with secret mirth at hearing their onetime enemies scolded. They expect Amos to stop his recitation of national sins before reaching Israel. Amos does not stop. He faces the congregation of Israel and declares a total holocaust for them!

Buber’s reconstruction of the event may or may not be what actually occurred in history; it certainly does describe the emotional and spiritual impact of Amos’ message. Israel is no longer the favored people of YHWH. All YHWH’s might and wrath is directed against her. The prosperity and peace she has enjoyed have not been the gifts of YHWH, but the products of Israel’s gluttonous sin. And now she is listed among the enemies of “her” God!

Oracles Against Israel

Sin brings judgment. Amos does not see the punishment that befalls the nations, including Israel, as an automatic consequence of the sin. There is, in the thought of Amos, no notion of a moral law working itself out to inevitable consequences. The doom is YHWH’s direct act. **YHWH punishes the “nations,” because they are God’s enemies. YHWH punishes Israel because she is the chosen people.**

Amos 3:1-2 Election and Wrath

Amos turns around the idea of Israel’s election. It had been thought that since YHWH had chosen her, YHWH would protect and bless her. Amos says that because Israel is the chosen people, YHWH will punish her (v. 2).

H.W. Wolff has noted that YHWH is the subject of both halves of v. 2. This is contrary to the normal form of such oracles, and it indicates that it is no particular violation of law by Israel that is the reason for her punishment, “but rather it is YHWH’s own saving act which establishes the ground for punishment” (Joel and Amos, p. 175). Against none of the other nations is such total condemnation and complete destruction levied—Israel’s fate is because of her favored position.

Amos 3:3-8 Compulsion to Prophecy

Amos asserts that he has no choice but to speak as he does. He speaks not his own thoughts, nor does he express his own desires. His prophecy is caused by God. In vv. 3-6, a series of questions is asked, each indicating a specific instance of an effect requiring its sufficient cause. The transition in the series occurs in v. 7—God will reveal to the prophets what God intends to do. Therefore (v. 8), as fear must come when the lion roars, so prophecy must be made when YHWH speaks. The one is as natural, as predictable, as inevitable, as the other.

Amos 3:9-11 Invitation to the World Powers

Assyria and Egypt, the ancient seats of world empires, are called to ravage Israel. The key word in the oracle is “stronghold.” The strongholds of Assyria and Egypt represented military might. Both Egypt and the Mesopotamian empires had been quiet for several centuries, weakened by a series of battles. During their period of weakness, Israel and Judah were able to prosper and expand. Now these giants are beginning to

awaken. Raiding parties have reached into the Palestinian region from the east and from the west. These “strongholds” possess great power.

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The “strongholds” of Israel, however, possess only “violence” and “robbery.” If they contained the power of YHWH, they could not be defeated, but the force which they store only consumes Israel herself. Therefore—the terrible word which is a prelude to doom—Israel shall be surrounded and her “strongholds plundered.”

Amos saw the rising threat of the two great world empires, but his prediction does not specify that it will be Assyria which will accomplish the destruction he announces. The revelation that he received did not reach into the future. He cannot announce as a word from YHWH that Assyria will crush Israel and scatter its people. He is certain only of the divine message of doom—this is his revelation.

Amos 3:12 Who Shall be Rescued?

There has been considerable debate over the question of whether there is any ray of hope at all in the Book of Amos. This verse is one that is sometimes used to indicate that there is. A small, torn remnant is all that will be left after the destruction of Israel, but this much will be saved. The imagery Amos uses suggests the contrary. Exodus 22:13 says: “If it [a sheep or other cattle] was mangled by beasts, let it be brought as evidence; and no restitution shall be made.” It is this legal custom that stands behind the saying of Amos. To demonstrate to the owner of the beast that he is not responsible for its loss, a shepherd will try to pull a small fragment of it from the jaws of the lion which has killed it. In the same way, Joseph’s brothers sent his blood-smearred coat to their father, Jacob, as evidence that a wild beast had killed him (Gen. 37:31-33). Such fragments serve only as proof of death. Thus says YHWH of Israel: not a surviving remnant, but only the evidence of death shall be left!

Amos 3:13-15 The Temple and Palatial Homes Are Destroyed

The buildings which, according to the people’s understanding, have stood as signs of divine favor will be destroyed. The imagery of a law court is often used by the prophets. In these verses “the house of Jacob” (Israel) is on trial, and the prophet’s hearers are invited to hear the sentence which YHWH pronounces. The phrase “the houses of ivory” was not clearly understood until recently. It brings to mind extreme luxury, but it is hard to believe that anyone would build a house entirely of such a material. Excavations at Samaria, however, have discovered the palace of Ahab, in which ivory was used extensively as an inlay for furniture (cf. I Kings 22:39).

Amos 4:1-3 and 6:1-7 Luxury and Oppression

The “cows of Bashan”—the well-fed, well-cared-for women of wealth—demand that their husbands satisfy their gluttony at the cost of the poor. When the walls of Samaria are breached by invaders, these shall be led away like cattle, with hooks in their noses. “Harmon,” where they will be cast, is not known as a place name, but the Hebrew word, slightly modified, would become “dung hill”—this is the translation chosen by NEB. This is an apt figure of speech for the humiliation they would suffer.

The picture of luxury painted in 6:1-6 bears witness to the prosperity of Israel under Jeroboam II. Zion and Samaria, the capitals of the two kingdoms, are at ease. The people of Israel seek out nobles who dwell in them. Verse 2 is difficult to interpret. Calneh and Hamath are Syrian cities. If these cities, with Gath, have been destroyed by Assyria, and the questions of 2b are amended to read, “Are you better than these . . . ?”—this could be a warning of disaster.

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The meaning of the remaining verses, however, is clear: the people who “lie” and “stretch” on beds of ease, who are so unmindful of the needs of the future as to eat the young of the wool-producing flocks and milk-producing herds, who idly sing, who drink, and groom their bodies with great care—all unmindful of the destruction of Israel—“they shall now be the first of those to go into exile.”

Amos 4:4-5, 5:4-7, 5:21-27 The Abomination of Religion

It is not the luxury of the noble class in and of itself that is condemned, but their unmindful and luxurious living in the midst of the privation of most of the population. The religious cult, here represented by the shrines at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba, is also excoriated. At one time most interpreters of the Old Testament thought that the prophets totally rejected the sacrificial system of the temple. Prophets and priests were seen as opponents of one another. This interpretation is now largely rejected. It is not the cult as such that Amos rejects, it is the mindless conduct of it to the neglect of all that the covenant with YHWH demands.

Earlier prophets had protested improper cultic practices, particularly the Baalist-Yahwist syncretism, which produced a “ritually polluted” cultus. Amos’ complaint in 4:4-5 is not this. Sacrifices are brought every morning, tithes are paid, all is as it should be—but with exaggerated frequency: there is a superabundance of worship, beyond the requirements of the Law—and all of it published! There are showy displays of religiosity for all to see—“for so you love to do, O people of Israel.” It is worship but for the glorification of the people, not the adoration of YHWH. **Worship polluted by Baalism was bad, but scrupulously correct worship done in a spirit of blasphemy is worse.**

In 5:4-7, Amos addresses the true purpose of worship. “Seek me [YHWH] and live” (vv. 4b and 6a). But one does not rightly seek God merely by attending the sanctuaries at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba, the first two northern shrines and the third an ancient shrine of Judah (v. 5). To seek YHWH means to seek justice and righteousness. But Israel has turned justice into wormwood—a bitter herb—and has brought “righteousness to the ground” (v. 7).

Because Israel has used worship as a showy spectacle for her own glorification while rejecting its substance, YHWH hates the sham celebrations of her congregation. (In 5:21, the “solemn assemblies” are cultic congregations.) YHWH will not accept Israel’s sacrifices (5:22) and turns away from her songs of praise (5:23). Here is a long list of cultic acts—though not as complete as that in Isaiah 1:10-15 (a similar passage you may want to examine). Mays suggests rightly that these items indicate a richness and vigorous enthusiasm in worship at Bethel, Gilgal, Beer-sheba, et al. “The prophet did not address secular or indifferent people, but a folk who went about public religion with zeal and extravagance” (Amos, p. 107). There is no hint of irregularities either—this is worship of YHWH. Yet, once again, the worship is rejected, because the issue is not worship but justice and righteousness. YHWH’s justice should roll down like water and righteousness “like an ever-flowing stream” (v. 24). “In effect Amos is saying that the worship of the cultic community is unacceptable because Israel does not live as the community of YHWH” (Mays, p. 108). (Verses 25-27 may mean that Amos saw the simplicity of worship in the wilderness

years as preferable to the ornate elaborations Israel had borrowed from neighboring religions.)

These passages raise questions about how we worship God today. Does our worship seek YHWH that we may live? That is, does it look beyond the forms of word and sacrament to the God whose kingdom that word proclaims and that sacrament celebrates? Does it empower us to seek that kingdom, to quest after YHWH’s justice and righteousness? For Amos the word “seek” (darash) has the sense of the German word suchen, “to

search for,” “to go questing after,” always with the connotation of somehow applying what is found. In 5:4-5, Amos has YHWH say, “Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel.” Worship must turn us toward the way of YHWH, it must not confine us within its own otherwise empty practices.

There is also in the word “seek,” as Amos uses it, the sense of “turning away from”; seeking good is turning toward good, but it is also turning away from evil. And here evil, as much as good, is represented as “applied”—it may be found alive and active in the corruption throughout Israelite society—particularly in the turn of “justice to wormwood” and the casting down of righteousness. Insofar as our worship does not turn us away from evil and toward good, Amos would want to say, it is not true worship. True worship of YHWH always reaches beyond the outside of itself—beyond its proclamations and celebrations to the one it proclaims and celebrates.

Amos 4:6-12 YHWH Attempts to Correct Israel

Famine so complete that there was not enough food to stick between one’s teeth did not turn Israel to YHWH (4:6). Lack of water (vv. 7-8), scourges upon the crops (v. 9), diseases of people and animals (v. 10)—none of these natural disasters caused the people to ask about the sins that might have brought such judgment upon them. Verse 11 refers to some event, now unknown, in which some people had been saved from a terrible catastrophe at the last moment—perhaps during the earthquake mentioned in 1:1. Even this did not turn the people to YHWH.

“Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel” (v. 12). “Thus” refers to the entire pronouncement of doom in the prophet’s message—it has no specific reference in this verse. Because YHWH will do “thus,” Israel is to prepare herself to meet her God.

Amos 5:18-20 The “Day of YHWH”

“Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” Although the account of Israelite history in Samuel and Kings has not told us of it, there seems to have been a popular expectation that YHWH would come in person to meet the people. The “day of YHWH” as a “messianic expectation”—the final time when YHWH, through the “anointed one” would vindicate the people in the face of their oppressors—became a feature of Jewish thought only at a much later time, though it may have had its origins as early as the time of Amos. Here, however, the meeting with YHWH seems to have been expected to take place at some future time when God would bring the people the fullness of God’s blessing. Or the “day of YHWH” may have been a cultic day, such as the fall new year’s festival, when atonement was made for the sins of the past, and YHWH came with blessings for the coming year.

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Whichever it was, **Amos dashes the hopeful mood of the people.** The interjection hoy, translated “woe,” was used normally as a wail of grief over the dead. The people are longing for the “day of YHWH,” expecting it to result in blessings for them. Amos says that when YHWH comes to meet the people, YHWH will bring “darkness, and not light” (vv. 18, 20). Israel may think that her life is not yet full and desire that YHWH come to fulfill it. The contrast between the present state and that which will come will not be the contrast between “good” and “best,” but between “bad” and “worse”—to flee from a lion, and meet a bear; to rest oneself against a wall, only to be bitten by a serpent (v. 19).

“Prepare to meet your god, O Israel” (4:12) is not a call to repentance, so that salvation may come—it is a warning that the “day of YHWH” is approaching with destruction beyond imagination.

Amos 5:4-15 Is There a Message of Hope in Amos?

Along with 3:12, this passage has been taken by some scholars to indicate that, as pessimistic as Amos is, he offers a slight hope of rescue for Israel. If Israel will “seek good and not evil,” and if she will “establish justice in the gate,” perhaps a remnant will be saved.

This interpretation may be correct—the paradox of the prophetic knowledge of certain destruction and the hope of at least partial salvation runs throughout most of the “writing prophets.” It may be found in Amos as well. But several recent scholars, including H.W. Wolff, ascribe the passage, by its language, not to Amos himself, but to a later disciple, familiar with the wisdom tradition—the passage has affinities with “wisdom sayings”—and likely working in a circle that has carried on Amos’ message, developing it to the point where there has come to be a hope for a remnant. This, Wolff wants to say, is a more optimistic statement than any Amos himself might make.

Whatever its origin, the exhortation ends with a command to “seek good and not evil.” It is important to understand that by “good” the prophet means something concrete, “right action.” It is, in other words, something to be done. Moreover, the term is parallel with “justice in the gate.” The good to be sought is the establishment of justice.

It is that kind of good that the hearers are to seek instead of evil. Evil is to be hated—all forces at emotional command to be turned against it—and good is to be loved—those same forces to be turned toward it—“that you may live.” That is the essence of the “reward” attached to each warning. It is no more than that, not abundant life, but escape only from death. Perhaps it may be that if you seek good and not evil, YHWH will protect you, as you have claimed. It may be that if you shun evil and cleave to what is good, if you commit yourselves to right action—to justice for all, poor as well as rich, those who cannot protect themselves as well as those who can—it may be then that God will be gracious to you, that a remnant, a few of you, will survive.

Amos 7:1-9 Vision of Doom

The promises here are not unconditional; they are subordinate to the exhortations.

Nor are they certain. YHWH’s grace is the grace of a superior to a slave—it is neither to be counted on nor even expected. Three visions of Amos are described in a first-person report in 7:1-9. These seem to be the experiences that moved Amos to leave his tasks at Tekoa and prophesy in Israel. This is an account of his call. The message Amos is called to deliver to Israel is harsh, and the prophet is not unfeeling. The first vision, in which locusts eat the crops, moves Amos to plead for Israel. Israel is helpless in the face of such a threat: “How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” This poignant plea is repeated after the second vision—a fire so great that it consumes the sea and is beginning to consume the land. Both times, YHWH relents before Amos’ call for mercy. The burden of the third vision cannot be turned aside (vv. 7-9). YHWH stands beside a wall with a plumb line. The line, with a weight at its end, will reveal any sign that the wall is not true. YHWH asks Amos what he sees. Amos has been shown the standard of judgment which called forth the destruction depicted in the other visions. The plumb line, the righteous demand of YHWH, is set against Israel, and Israel is shown as hopelessly out of line. YHWH can no longer overlook her sin, but will lay waste her shrines and kill the house of Jeroboam with the sword. This time Amos knows the decree is final. He does not plead for mercy again.

The visions are well placed, immediately preceding the complaint by Amaziah the priest against Amos (v. 10). Whether or not they happened then is not certain, but v. 9b expresses part of the oracle which Amaziah quotes to King Jeroboam in v. 11; it is the only passage in which this direct threat to the king is made.

Amos 7:10-17 Amaziah Expels Amos From Israel

After appealing to the king and telling him of the threat made against his life (7:9), Amaziah, priest of Bethel, addresses Amos with scorn. He calls Amos a “seer,” apparently a belittling term for a prophet—it seems to indicate someone who makes predictions for pay—and he tells him to return home and make his living there, never to return to the sanctuary of the king of Israel (vv. 12-13).

Amos’ reply is to deny that he is a prophet or “a prophet’s son” (v. 14a). It is improbable that Amos is denying prophecy. “A prophet’s son” is probably better translated “a member of the ‘sons of the prophets’”—the bands of prophets associated with the cultic centers. Amos is not one who prophesies for hire or whose prophecies spring from association with a sanctuary. He was personally and directly called by YHWH while tending his herds and his sycamore trees (v. 14b).

Because Amaziah has forbidden Amos to do what YHWH has commanded, Amaziah receives a thunderous curse: his wife shall become a harlot, his children will be killed, his land taken from him, and he himself shall die in the exile that shall surely come to Israel (vv. 16-17).

Amos 8:1-3 A Fourth Vision

Amos is given a vision of summer fruit. But the message of this vision, unlike those of the other three, is not in the vision itself but in the play on words suggested by

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it. “A basket of summer fruit” in Hebrew is *qayits* (kay-YEETS), a word which looks and sounds similar to another word that means “end”—*qets* (kayts). The play on words means that the vision pronounces the “end” for Israel. In a sense this summarizes the other three visions; it announces their result.

The remaining verses of chapter 8 contain some of the most dire predictions of calamity ever spoken, penned, typed, or processed. The rich merchants practice all manner of injustice as they trample the poor and kill the needy. They are barely able to wait until the new moon and sabbath worship are over so that they can cheat the people with small measures for great price (the “ephah” is a measure of dry produce and the “shekel,” a weight of silver). They own the souls of the poor and needy, giving them small payment in silver and goods, while selling garbage in return (vv. 4-6). For this YHWH has sworn by himself (“the pride of Jacob”) that he will utterly destroy Israel (vv. 7-8).

There will be darkness, mourning, and lamentation without relief (vv. 9-10). Most horrible of all, there will be famine—not of food, “but of hearing the words of YHWH.” Israel shall seek over all the land, but not find the word of YHWH (vv. 11-12). YHWH will completely abandon the people. The elected nation can no longer presume upon the blessings of the covenant, for YHWH will have deserted them! Yet YHWH will not have left them entirely. YHWH will pursue them wherever they go (9:1-4)—to commit them to the *cherem*, the sacrificial ban requiring total destruction. In words which are similar to those of Psalm 139—where tradition, at least, has given them a more reassuring tone—YHWH promises to follow the Israelites down into Sheol or up to heaven, from the top of Mt. Carmel to the depths of the sea (vv. 2-3). Sheol, the place of the dead, had been considered to be a region completely removed from YHWH. And so it was, as far as blessings might be concerned. But even death would not be able to remove the Israelites from the power of YHWH’s curse. The chaos of the sea—frightening enough to the land-bound Israelites—would hold even greater terrors than they might have imagined, for the sea monsters themselves obey YHWH’s command! Even the disgrace of exile would be intensified—YHWH would command the sword to slay them (v. 4).

Amos 4:13, 5:8-9, and 9:5-6 Three Doxologies

These should be mentioned at least in passing, so that our treatment of Amos may be complete. A

“doxology” is an expression of praise to God. Three are found in the Book of Amos, almost certainly by someone other than the prophet. The style is different from the other portions of Amos.

YHWH reminds Israel that, as God had brought her out of Egypt, so God had also brought the Philistines from their former home across the sea, and the Syrians from Kir. These nations, and the Ethiopians as well, are of concern to YHWH. Thus, Israel is not the only people over whom YHWH is Lord, even though she has been granted a more intimate relationship with YHWH through the covenant.

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Amos 9:7-8a The Extent of YHWH’s Lordship

This is one interpretation of these verses. According to it, monotheism is not explicitly affirmed, but it is approached. Another interpretation, made by scholars who doubt that so monotheistic a belief was possible in eighth-century Israel, allows that instead of saying that the other nations mean as much to YHWH as Israel does, the verses mean that Israel now counts for no more than these nations. Verse 7a would support such an interpretation, but to align v. 7b with it is difficult.

Almost all scholars are agreed that the sayings of Amos end at 9:8a—“The eyes of the LORD God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth. The rest of chapter 9 was added later. Mays suggests that the “reservations concerning YHWH’s judgment in 9:8b would stem from a time that saw that the fulfillment of Amos’ message did not involve the whole Israel of God” (Amos, p. 13), and he dates 9:11-15 at the period of the Exile, or later, suggesting further that “when the prophetic message of judgment had been fulfilled, the oracles of salvation in 9:11-15 were added to let the broken community hear the full counsel of God” (p. 14).

Although they are not from Amos, vv. 13-15 portray a beautiful picture of a redeemed land. Verse 15 has been engraved on a bronze plaque in the Garden of Victory in present-day Jerusalem to express the sentiment of modern Jews over their return to their ancestral land.

The message of Amos is a simple and straightforward one. It is, first of all, a message of doom. The people of Israel are a people constituted by their relation to YHWH. But their covenant with YHWH is not a guarantee of salvation; quite the reverse, it is a basis of judgment. The judgment is a harsh one, but it is no more than Israel deserves. Her exploitation of the weak, perversion of justice, and failure in righteousness show that the entire fabric of her national life is shot through with corruption. The nation lives contrary to the will of YHWH, and so salvation history has become judgment history. For the covenant does not bind YHWH to Israel; the God of her judgment is God of all the nations of the earth.

Hosea

Amos was a Judean. **Hosea was an Israelite.** Amos’ message was simple and direct: YHWH has rejected Israel. Hosea’s is more complex. Hosea seems to feel more deeply the evil results of cultic syncretism. While Amos has little to say about the cult beyond castigation of its folly and emptiness, Hosea, more intimately involved in it, deploras it as “harlotry.” Amos accentuates the social and moral depravity of Israel; Hosea traces it to its roots in idolatry. Yet Hosea, like Amos, has moved beyond a view of sin as mere “ritual pollution.” Idolatry is evil not simply because it is idolatry but because of the moral blindness it produces in the people.

Hosea seems also to reflect a northern conservative view of the monarchy. The roots of the confederacy ran deep in Israel. Although the demand for a king, “that we may be as the nations,” arose in Israel, so also did the opposition to it. At several points in Hosea an attitude toward the monarch similar to that in the “Samuel Source” of I Samuel can be seen. (Hosea’s attitude toward the monarchy is one means of identifying him as a

northern prophet, an Israelite. He makes no mention at all of the covenant

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with David or of Zion, both associated with the south. He does, on the other hand, have great concern with the exodus traditions, and those were peculiarly associated with the northern kingdom, especially with the sanctuary at Shechem.)

Amos' message is one of unremitting doom; Hosea cannot bring himself to let the message of doom be the final word. He is torn by two convictions: Israel's sin has brought her to destruction, yet YHWH loves her. The two are at war within his writings, and each is left to stand.

The basic figure of speech which determines the form of his message is given in the story of his experience of an unfaithful wife (or wives, chapters 1-3). There is considerable debate among scholars about whether this experience is an actual one or is merely an allegory by which Hosea expresses his prophecy. There have been advanced at least four options for the interpretation of these chapters:

- 1) that they represent not biography but symbolic action or allegory;
 - 2) that Hosea married twice, two women of harlotry;
 - 3) that Hosea married a cult prostitute as a sign and converted her to faithfulness; or
 - 4) that Hosea married a local woman (not a prostitute), who fell into prostitution and departed from him, eventually to return and to be reconciled—so that their covenant is renewed.
- Each of these is possible, but the details of the story and the depth of feeling with which the prophet tells it lead one to believe that he was speaking from personal experience rather than merely fashioning an allegory.

Hosea and His Wife

We next examine the story of Hosea and Gomer (1-3), and then look at several examples of his oracles to show the range of his concerns. Before we do so, read Hosea 1-3.

Hosea 1:1 Introduction

The title of Hosea indicates that he prophesied somewhat later than Amos. His work took place during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel and of Uzziah (Azariah) of Judah, as did Amos', but it extended for a longer time—through the reigns of three successors to Azariah in Judah. Thus he prophesied during the decline of Jeroboam's kingdom. After Jeroboam II, a rapid succession of kings would lead to a time of increased foreign control of Israel, eventually reaching its climax in the Assyrian conquest of the land.

Hosea 1:2-9 Hosea Takes a Harlot as a Wife

This first chapter is written in the third person—it is about Hosea. Chapter 3 is in the first person—Hosea speaks of himself. (Chapter 2 contains words of YHWH given to Hosea.) Assuming that there is only one woman involved in the story, there are three different interpretations of the relationship between the third-person and first-person accounts: (1) The two are parallel accounts of the same event, one by a disciple of Hosea and the other by the prophet himself. (2) Chapter 3 gives us Hosea's view of the situation before he enters the marriage spoken of in chapter 1. (3) Chapter 3 is a sequel to chapter 1—**Hosea buys his wife back after she has left him**. The third interpretation is the one which will be adopted here.

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The command given in 1:2, that Hosea marry a prostitute, has caused trouble for many interpreters. Does it

mean that God commanded Hosea to commit an unclean act by marrying a known prostitute? It may well mean this, but it is also possible that the experience of Hosea with a faithless wife has been read back into the beginning of the relationship.

The children of Gomer are given symbolic names. (Scholars have also differed over whether the children belonged to Hosea. Some have contended that they were not his—this interpretation is derived from the phrase “children of harlotry” in v. 2.) By giving them these names Hosea delivers his prophecy against Israel in a dramatic form—whenever and wherever his children appear, their names will be oracles against Israel!

Hosea names the first child “Jezreel,” after the city of the house of Ahab. Jeroboam II was of the house of Jehu, and Jehu had destroyed the house of Ahab. Probably Hosea’s intent is not to defend the idolatrous Ahab, but to condemn the dynasty which has succeeded him—“I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel” (v. 4).

The second child is named “Not pitied, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel” (v. 6). The final child is called “Not my people.” This is the most devastating oracle—the words “not my people” are in the same form as those used by a husband to divorce his wife: “She is not my wife.” YHWH has divorced his people. They are no longer in covenant with one another.

Verses 10-11 are probably a later addition. They show the influence of Ezekiel, and probably come from the time of the Exile. There have been at least two suggestions for reading 2:1. One is to attach it to these verses. If it is a positive word, that would provide the basis for placing 1:10-11 here. It could be, however, that our translation of 2:1 is misleading. It sounds like a reversal of the judgment suggested by 1:2-8. Israel is once again “my people” and “has obtained pity.” It seems likely that the names are given here in an abbreviated form, without the Hebrew prefix which means “not,” for the rest of the passage (2:2-13) speaks of YHWH’s divorce of Israel and the absence of his pity upon her children.

Hosea 2:2-13 An Allegory Based on “Not My People” and “Not Pitied”

These verses are vivid in their description of the lewdness of Israel, expanding the imagery of prostitution to its uttermost. It is the harlotry of a nation that has left YHWH, her husband, for the lechery of the Baals. Verse 12 depicts Israel counting the fruits of the earth—which YHWH has given her—as if they were the payment that the Baals have given her for her favors.

Hosea 2:14-23 YHWH’s Love for His Faithless Wife

In spite of her infidelity, YHWH calls Israel back to God. YHWH brings her back to the time of her original innocence in the wilderness (v. 14). (There are some scholars, it should be noted, who think the “time in the wilderness” in Hosea and early Isaiah may be used to make quite a different point: “You were faithless even in the wilderness,” God is saying, “and still I will be faithful to you.” Certainly our stories of those forty years are hardly descriptions of unwavering covenant loyalty

on Israel’s part. The Lord will allow Israel to begin national life again, by recrossing the Jordan and undoing the shame which occurred at Achor. (Achor, which means “troubles,” was the site of the punishment for the first sin of Israel, when Achan refused to commit Jericho to the cherem—Josh. 7:16-26). Now the Valley of Achor shall be a “door of hope” (v. 15).

Israel shall again be faithful to YHWH, and shall call God “my husband” rather than “my baal.” (Recall that “Baal,” as a common noun rather than the name of a deity, means “lord.” In calling YHWH “my Lord” Israel could well have used the word “baal.”) At that time, YHWH will have pity on “Not pitied” and will betroth

himself again to “Not my people.” The remarriage shall be sealed as Israel, the bride, retakes YHWH for her husband with the words, “You are my God” (v. 23).

Hosea is commanded to take Gomer back. This interpretation sees chapter 3 as a sequel to chapter 1, rather than a parallel version of it. So interpreted, it carries out the motif given in the allegory of chapter 2. Hosea is to take the faithless Gomer back as a sign that YHWH will reclaim Israel. (The reference to “David the king” in v. 5 is a later addition.)

Hosea 3:1-5 Hosea Remarries Gomer

Here we look at some of the images that Hosea uses as well as the basic content of his indictments. The imagery of the faithless wife runs through several oracles. In its broader meaning—that of a faithless Israel and YHWH’s love for her—it might be said to run throughout. But other images are used as well.

Read the passages indicated in conjunction with the discussion in the text.

Harlotry

The oracles in 4:11-14 and 5:3-4 contain examples of the harlotry image. In 4:12, Israel asks oracles of “a thing of wood” (an idol? a phallic symbol?). The sacred groves on the hilltops, where the Baalite shrines were, are frequented “because their shade is good” (v. 13)—that is, because they seem to offer pleasant rewards. YHWH will not concentrate wrath on the women only, for the men, who offer themselves to the cult prostitutes, are equally guilty (v. 14). Indeed, the “spirit of harlotry” has so completely taken over the lives of the people that they cannot return to YHWH (5:4).

Monarchy

Several passages suggest that Hosea shared the anti-monarchical view of the “Samuel Source.” In 5:1b, the reference to Mizpah and Tabor could be a repudiation of Saul: Saul was anointed at Mizpah, and at Tabor he called on the witch of Endor. In 8:4-5, the rejection of royalty is more explicit, but it is not clear whether it is the monarchy as such or particular kings who are denounced. “They made kings, but not through me” (8:4) could mean that the monarchy was begun against YHWH’s will, or it could refer to the rash of assassinations which had plagued the northern kingdom, during which kings were made in rapid succession.

A general anti-monarchical stand is clearer in 13:10-11. The people have a king because they said to YHWH, “Give me a king and princes.” But the prosperity of Jeroboam II’s reign is fading. The people will certainly be able to recognize the

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truth of Hosea’s evaluation. This king—one given in anger?—will not be able to save them.

Other important images in Hosea include the image of a return to the wilderness—and to the faith of the Exodus/Sinai event—and that of “the knowledge” of YHWH. These are discussed below in the context of a brief overview of the content of Hosea’s prophecy.

When we look at the content of Hosea’s indictments, we find them to be of four kinds. They are ethical, political, cultic—that is, indictments of the cult,—and priestly indictments of the priesthood.

Ethical Indictments

In 4:1-3, several charges, actually recapitulating the second half of the Decalogue, are brought against the

people. “Charges” is the correct word here, for what is described is a trial scene with Israel in the role of defendant. YHWH “has an indictment with the inhabitants of the land” (v. 1), and, as prosecutor, charges them with lack of faithfulness and kindness, with forgetting God, and with swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery. (Remember that both forgetting and remembering are much more active than just calling an event to mind. Both involve the whole life of the person, of the community.) Indeed the corruption of the land has become so great that all bounds are broken and “bloodshed follows bloodshed” (v. 2). As judge, YHWH pronounces the sentence. The land will mourn and all in it languish, not only the people of the land but the beasts, the birds, and even the fish.

The charges here are not as specific as those brought by Amos, but in 12:7-8, Hosea does bring one particular charge against the people. The wealth that they are so proud of has been gained by false practices. Israel may boast about her wealth, but these riches have been obtained by oppression. In Amos, the punishment for such an offense would surely be death, but Hosea sees in it an opportunity for purification. So we are introduced to another important image in the sayings of this prophet—the wilderness. Israel shall “dwell in tents, as in the days of the appointed feast” (v. 9), that is, she shall return to the ways of the wilderness wandering under Moses, when her faith was strong and she walked rightly in the way of the Lord her God.

A Political Indictment

In verse 6:1b-7:7 the ethical situation in the land relates to the political situation. We have discussed Hosea’s anti-monarchical attitude. The king is depicted as glad in the wickedness of the people, for he is as wicked as they. The day of his enthronement—“the day of [the] king” (v. 5)—is depicted as an occasion for dissipation, even orgy. But such a people deserve such a king, and such a king deserves such a people, for king after king is devoured by the people; ruler follows ruler in bloody order.

Indictment of the Cult

We have looked at 4:11-14 as an example of the imagery of harlotry. The imagery refers particularly to Israel’s religious practice; it can be described in no other way. Apparently the number of Baals has multiplied, so that there is one in every little place in the land, “on the tops of the mountains . . . upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth” (v. 13). It is not a matter any longer of simple unfaithfulness, as in the days of Elijah, but of wholesale promiscuity. Israel has gone whoring after a fertility

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god, who is sadly—and laughably—no god at all. When they seek him—for their own purposes—they will find that he is only a piece of wood.

Indictment of the Priesthood

The failure of the people cannot be laid entirely at their door, for the people are the responsibility of a priesthood that has failed them. The scene is once again a trial, but this time YHWH brings charges against priest and prophet. God’s people are dying “for lack of knowledge,” and they lack knowledge because their religious leaders have “rejected knowledge” (4:6). They have failed to convey the saving knowledge of sacred history, of the covenant, and of the Law. YHWH will reject them and their children.

The Hebrew word for knowledge here is a form of the verb *yadagh*, which means both “to know,” and “to know how.” The term is also frequently used in reference to sexual intimacy. Here, as elsewhere in Hosea, the word has a double meaning, referring to an intimacy of personal relationship with YHWH and also to an awareness of the history of YHWH with the people. YHWH is the only “savior,” the one who brought them up from Egypt, “who led [them] in the wilderness, in the land of drought” (13:5). “Knowledge” refers then to knowledge—cognitive knowledge—of the Heilsgeschichte (or “salvation history”), and it refers also to

relationship. This is not a relationship as with the Baals, one based on manipulation, both of the “god” by humankind and of humankind by the “god.” Humankind does not manipulate YHWH, and YHWH does not manipulate us.

This is knowledge that the priests and the prophets have failed to convey to the people. They have forgotten, and for their forgetting, they stand justly condemned.

Hosea 11:1-9 YHWH’s Anguish Over Israel

This passage, one of the most beautiful in the entire Old Testament, takes the same form as Amos 4:6-12 and can be fruitfully compared with it. Please read both passages.

The passages are what scholars call “historico-theological accusations.” There is in each a review of the history of YHWH with Israel, and this historical review leads to an indictment: the people have failed in their knowledge of YHWH. They have failed to learn from their history; they have not returned to their God. But the culmination of the indictment in Hosea is far different from the culmination found in Amos. There the charges lead to condemnation: Israel must prepare to meet the God of her destruction, who “makes the morning darkness” (Amos 4:13). Here (Hosea 11:8-9), we find—to our surprise—not judgment but a declaration of amnesty, an amnesty occurring (historically) right in the midst of destruction, the fall of the northern kingdom. (For despite what Hosea is to say, Israel will be destroyed.) The passage begins with a review of both Heils and Unheilsgeschichte, of YHWH’s love and Israel’s apostasy. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (v. 1). As a parent—the “husband” imagery has been displaced momentarily. It is quite possible that mothering images are intended here, considering the usual limited role of fathers with infants and toddlers in that society—YHWH taught young Israel to walk, carried him, and loved him, “but they did not know that I healed them” (v. 3). The image shifts, and YHWH is like a driver of oxen who

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is gentle with the yoke and feeds the beasts lovingly (v. 4). But now—and vv. 5-7 may well be a depiction of current events—the yoke shall become harsh, and Israel shall be conquered: “they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it” (v. 7) But The word translated “how” in v. 8 suggests that what follows is a bit of self-caution, a word of warning to oneself; it suggests that YHWH is actually in conflict with himself. Pity will finally overcome wrath for YHWH says, “For I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (v. 9). YHWH’s decision not to destroy is not rooted in the covenant—if it were, God would destroy (cf. Deut. 21:18-21, the punishment for filial disobedience). It is rooted instead in God’s grace: God chooses not to obey God’s own law. The freely given love of God—springing solely from grace, not dependent on the loved one—is the last word; love is victorious.

Miscellaneous Passages

The work of a prophet as great as Hosea could be mined for many more themes. At least a few phrases ought to be pointed out.

5:12. Hosea likens the destructiveness of YHWH to a moth and to dry rot, both of which do their work hidden from human eyes—the moth in the darkness of the clothes closet and dry rot inside the wooden timber. The damage is discovered only when it is too late.

6:1-2. Broken Israel is bandaged by YHWH, left to heal for two days, and then raised up to health on the third day “that we may live before him.” Is it possible that this passage could have failed to influence the terminology of the early Christian church as it declared its resurrection faith?

8:7. This is the origin of the well-known expression, “to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.”

12:2-6. Hosea recites the story of Jacob and Esau wrestling within their mother’s womb and of Jacob wrestling with God at Bethel. Although the Book of Genesis was not yet in existence, the stories in it were apparently well-known. 14:9. This final verse of the book is added by a later “wisdom” writer who may have been simply commending the book for its wisdom, but it appears more likely that Hosea’s preaching of unmerited love had caused him some distress. The verse asks that the book be read with discernment—“for the ways of YHWH are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.” Let no one presume upon the merciful favor of YHWH!

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End of chapter

Ethical insights ^{back}

What does this tell us about the ethics of people in previous generations?

Denounce oppression [back](#)

So what was the attitude of YHWH toward oppression, as opposed to his own dignity? We could discuss.

Cultic prostitution [back](#)

The EFM writers have a bit of a thing about this. But see all the filthy details in [Wikipedia](#), though pay no attention to their rubbishing of Herodotus. He speaks the truth about what he sees.

YHWH punishes ^{back}

You really can't win with YHWH, can you?

Luxury and oppression [back](#)

This kind of hits home. So where are we going for dinner tonight?

Amos dashes the hopeful mood [back](#)

This is actually the same message proclaimed by Westboro Baptist.

Hosea was an Israelite [back](#)

Actually that's a very reasonable deduction, not something to be stated as bald fact. See the following paragraph.

Hosea buys his wife back ^{back}

How "buys?" There's no indication that she's in any kind of bondage.

Terminology of the early Christian church [back](#)

But Jesus *did* rise on the third day. Or let's go home.

