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The formation and theology of the
Book of Amos

Abstracts

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Introduction

The Book of Amos tackles the issue why and how Israel was devastated. From the point of view of the formation of the Book it is clear that the canonical version resulted from a long transmission process and we can see different layers in the Book. The following literary layers and larger units of the Book deal with different theological questions:

- *The prophecies against the nations* (Am i 3–ii 16) contain well-structured strophes and stress that YHWH would not retain judgment, i.e., the judgment is unavoidable.
- *The five visions* (Am vii 1–8; viii 1–2; ix 1–4) tackle two different subjects. First, they show the prophetic intercession. Second, they state that Israel deserved judgement for it had the opportunity to change (YHWH accepted the intercession of the prophet and did not destroy Israel). However, Israel did not change, so the devastation was unavoidable.
- *Chapters iii–vi* do not display a clear structure, unlike the visions and the prophecies against the

nations: they contain different themes. They show the large devastation, call upon the sinners to seek YHWH's presence, proclaim the day of YHWH. Hope and mourning are juxtaposed in these chapters.

- The end of the Book (Am ix 11–15) witnesses to future salvation, to the restoration of Davidic kingdom and salvific times.

The above units display different structures and contain different theological stresses; however, they share the common theme: they deal *with the fall of Israel, with the tragedy of the Northern Kingdom*. The question must be raised when the different layers emerged, which goals they aimed at, and what kind of theological message they contain. The basic issue is what the original preaching of the prophet was which, in turn, launched the long process resulting in the formation of the canonical book.

Proposition 1: The first layer contained the words of Amos: v 1.16¹–20.

Amos proclaimed *the coming of the Day of YHWH: YHWH passes through His people* which would be an event of death and dying and no one may escape. For his contemporaries Amos proclaimed a day of darkness, and this was new for them as they attached positive expectations to this day. In the preaching of Amos YHWH's passing through the land results in total devastation, weeping and mourning pervades the country. Amos is also mourning Israel (v 1. 18) still alive in his days. This prophecy dates back to the 8th century B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II, when no one has felt menaced in Israel.

Proposition 2: The first collection which was attached to the preaching of Amos and served as basis of the book: v 1. 7. 10. 12b. 16.² 17–20.

It is not clear if Amos has said precisely in what consisted the sin of the people, but if he did, so the charge is said in

¹ Except for the term *YHWH Sabaoth* in v. v 16.

² Except for the term *YHWH Sabaoth* in v. v 16.

verses v. 7. 10. 12b – false judgement and oppression of righteousness are named here.

Proposition 3: The next literary layer is vii 1–8 (the third vision) and viii 1–2 (the fourth vision) which state that **YHWH's passing through the land could not be cancelled**. This layer emerged during the Assyrian threat but still before the fall of Samaria. In the footsteps of Amos people regarded this threat as the realisation of the judgment prophesied by Amos.

Proposition 4: The next literary layer reflects the fall of **Israel, clearly after the event**. Scribes from Israel took the Amos tradition to Judah and elaborated on it: the additions made up a layer which tackles Israel's fall. They state that YHWH sent an enemy nation against Israel which destroys the land and takes captive the people. The events of the time explain well the verses vii 9 and viii 3 as the actualisation of the third and fourth vision. The Israel strophe of the prophecies against nations may date back to

this time, expanded by I 1a³ – this latter might have been the inscription of the so compiled ‘book of Amos’. In the light of the Israel strophe, further strophes were created: those of Damascus, Gaza, Ammon and Moab which theologically deal with the historical fact that these countries (like Israel) were also subdued to the Assyrian rule.

Proposition 5: The next literary layer was inserted to the book **before the fall of Jerusalem** and was meant as a warning lesson of Israel for Judah (verses viii 4. 6a. 7. 9. 10. 13–14. vi 1 the addition *those living at ease on Zion*). Cult criticism and the voice of hope may also emerged in this time. The debate between Amos and Amaziah may have been inserted between the third and fourth vision also in this time. This layer expresses that the fate of Israel was fulfilled when it refused the preaching of YHWH’s prophet. The verses iii 3–6.8 may also come from this time for they display the reasons for the proclamation of the prophet.

³ *The words of Amos, one of the sheepfarmers of Tekoa... words of visions about Israel ... two years before the earthquake.*

Proposition 6: The fall of Jerusalem was the next tragedy which can be traced in the book in the form of a new layer. The fifth vision might be dated back the Babylonian exile (ix 1–4) for it resounds a bitter voice: there is no escape from the judgment, even the exile is no refuge. Into this layer the doxologies were inserted: the doxology of ix 5–6 was closing the exilic extension of the book. It exalts YHWH and alongside with i 2 it gives a framework to the book. Documenting the repentance liturgy of the congregation in exile, the verses iv 6–13 reflect also exilic times.

Proposition 7: Further expansions in the Babylonian exile are the first two visions (vii 1–6) which tackle the role of the prophet and stress that YHWH had pardoned his people until it deserved it. The verse describing the role of the prophets in iii 7 belongs to the Deuteronomistic layer of ii 10–12. iii 1b2. v 25–26 and viii 11–12 as well as the inscription of i 1 – this latter refers to the reign of the kings as dating. Similarly, against the background of the Babylonian exile come the verses ix 7–10 which interpret the judgment as cleansing.

Proposition 8: Post-exilic are the strophes of Tyre, Edom and Judah, the Deuteronomistic additions of viii 5. 6b, and the promises of salvific future. This latter may be divided into two sections, the first of ix 11. 14. 15 and its expansion: ix 12–13. These promises were added in the course of the formation of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets. The latest expansion is the verse v 13.

The above propositions display the different literary layers of the Book of Amos in the order of their supposed origins. The scholarly investigations into the book we may conclude that **the prophet Amos proclaimed the devastations of the *Day of YHWH* for the still flowering Israel, even though the people expected a positive day. In the preaching of Amos, however, this day meant that *YHWH would pass through His land* and this would bring death. The further parts of the Book are interpretations of this prophetic preaching: further thinking, expansions on the basis of historical events and personal experiences.**