

# Amos

## THE GENIUS OF PROPHETIC RHETORIC





# Yitzchak Etshalom

## AMOS

### THE GENIUS OF PROPHETIC RHETORIC

Yeshivat Har Etzion  
Maggid Books

*Amos*  
*The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*

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We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.  
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*In honor of  
Rabbi Etshalom  
Elayne & Howard Levkowitz*



*In memory of our grandparents and our parents,  
and in honor of our children and grandchildren.  
In honor of our friend and teacher, Rabbi Etshalom.  
And in memory of those whose lives were lost  
defending the State of Israel.*

*Wendy & Larry Platt  
Los Angeles, California*

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## *Preface*

**W**elcome to a stimulating journey to eighth-century BCE Samaria<sup>1</sup> – traveling the roads of the text-study approaches developed by the rabbis of the classical period, with frequent visits to the academies of France, Spain, and Provence, and occasional pit-stops in the halls of modern academia. In our tradition, canonical works are taken to be deeply textured, replete with nuances of language and intertextual allusions. It follows that to recapture the full intent of the text, the reader must be both fluent in the language of that time and also familiar with the geo-political and social realities of the period.

Despite a self-deprecating tendency among some to belittle our current generation's ability to grasp the deepest and broadest meaning of the biblical text – based on the argument that we have become increasingly distanced from the sensitivities and mores that informed the life of the original audience – it may be argued that the opposite is, in fact, more likely. With the development of sophisticated tools of discovery along with the panoramic view afforded by eons of distance, the twenty-

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1. In this volume, Samaria and Israel are used interchangeably, both referring to the northern kingdom.

first-century student may be in a better position to fully appreciate the import of the biblical text than his or her forebears.

We generally regard the Tanakh as “written Torah,” in apposition to “oral tradition,” which ultimately takes shape in the literature of exegetes, sages, and decisors. We are accustomed to approaching the biblical text as a written work, which is appropriate but insufficient. Before the biblical texts were written, in most cases they were orally presented. Note that the single most popular verse in all of Tanakh is “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying . . .,” which is followed by a command that Moses was to *relay orally* to the people. It was only later that these commands were committed to writing. If this is true about Mosaic commands, it is yet truer for the speeches of the literary prophets of the eighth to fifth centuries BCE. In order to capture the impact of the prophet’s words and to understand his lexical choice, we have to put ourselves in the place of the “primary audience,” that group of citizens, royalty, or aristocracy who were privy to the “live” version of the speech. This must be done without diminishing by one iota the eternal message of the text, that which we, as the secondary (or “observing”) audience, is meant to receive. To “hear with the ears of the primary target group,” we have to muster as much information as available about the times – and we are more enabled to do so in the modern era, as noted above. This attempt to listen through ancient ears will be a recurring motif in this book.

The scheme of this book is multi-layered. First and foremost, we will peruse the book of Amos, noting those numerous words and phrases that are abstruse and that have challenged the scholarship and imagination of sages through the ages. We will dive into the seas of interpretation and, along the way, I will sometimes recommend one translation or meaning over the others.

Second, we will integrate information about the “realia” of the period, to the extent that it may shed light on the impact of the text to help us hear the message as the primary audience was meant to experience it.

We will also enter the great academies of rabbinic study throughout the ages, chiefly in the medieval period, and join in the robust debates about the meaning and message implicit in Amos’s prophecies. As noted, we will not terminate our journey in the fourteenth century, but will

glean from the scholarship of the modern age as well, to the extent that it enlightens us about the text and the world of that text.

Finally, and perhaps most vitally, we will use our study of these nine short chapters of prophetic rhetoric to examine the broad oeuvre of the literary prophets, from Isaiah of Jerusalem to Malachi. This will operate on both a schematic and a methodologic plane. Schematic, insofar as I will identify texts in Amos that appear, in parallel or paraphrase, in the work of Amos's contemporaries as well as his spiritual progeny. Methodologic, as I will use the 146 verses that make up Amos's literary legacy as a starting point to suggest various strategies to studying the larger body of prophetic literature. It is my hope that the reader will come away not only with a deep appreciation for the genius of prophetic rhetoric, but also with a palette of approaches to study the received works of the literary prophets from Isaiah to Zechariah.

I have numerous teachers and colleagues to thank, and have done so in the acknowledgments. However, it is apt to note here those contemporary works that have been constant companions through this long, arduous, and joyful journey.

The *Da'at Mikra* series, which has endeavored to marry traditional approaches to the biblical text with archaeological finds, ancient Near East text studies, and many more disciplines that have taken serious form in the last three centuries, is a marvelous resource. The late, great Amos Hakham produced the *Da'at Mikra* commentary on Amos, and I reference it frequently. The *Mikra leYisrael* series, coming from a less traditional perspective, has much to add to our study of Tanakh. Shalom Paul authored the commentary on Amos, and his brilliant work contributed much to my own understanding of the text and, ergo, to this volume. Both of these masterful series were written in Hebrew. The Anchor Bible series, a compendium of the finest of biblical research, is an excellent resource not only for understanding various textual nuances, but also for integrating numerous ancient Near East textual parallels into our study. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman authored the hefty Amos volume, and I have referenced it numerous times in this work.



## *Acknowledgments*

**T**his volume is the product of years of study, research, discussions, writing, and rewriting. This adventure began over thirty years ago, when I was asked to teach Amos to a group of high school freshmen and I first fell in love with the Tekoan prophet's brilliant language, imagery, and messages.

Friends, colleagues, teachers, and students have been indispensable to keeping this exciting journey going to its culmination. When Rabbi Reuven Ziegler approached me a few years back and invited me to join the august company of contributors to the Maggid Studies in Tanakh, I accepted all too willingly. When my alma mater, Yeshivat Har Etzion, then invited me to write weekly installments for the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, it gave me a framework (with that elusive motivator – the deadline) to develop the theses that are core to this work. I have deep and abiding appreciation to Debra Berkowitz and the team of editors at the VBM for their assiduous attention to detail and for faithfully circulating the installments. Numerous readers, along the way, asked questions that helped to distill the presentation.

As heavy as this tome is, the original project was nearly twice its size. The editorial decisions of what to cut, how to refine the presentation

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for a book, and how to smooth out one hundred installments into one volume were handled capably by Sara Daniel, Ita Olesker, Leah Goldstein, and the team of editors at Koren – and working with Koren has been a joy and an honor. It is a joy, as the folks at Koren are seriously committed to providing stimulating and thought-provoking Torah to as wide a readership as possible; it is an honor, as joining some of my intellectual heroes as an “MST author” is, in every sense, awesome.

I would also like to express gratitude to the Weiss family of Cleveland and Jerusalem, as well as dear friends Elayne and Howard Levkowitz and Wendy and Larry Platt, for their support for this volume.

Along my own path of study, I have been blessed to learn from great teachers, including Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, Prof. Yoel Elitzur, Dr. Leeor Gottlieb, Dr. Yonatan Grossman, Dr. Hagai Misgav, and Rav Elhanan Samet. Each of these scholars has contributed, both explicitly and implicitly, to this Amos study.

Two special friends who, along the way, readily perused my weekly postings (pre-posting) and offered helpful critiques are my long-time *havruta* Dr. Josh Penn and my teacher and colleague Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman. What you are reading is clearer and more precise in large part due to their erstwhile animadversions.

The opportunities that I have had to teach in my home community in Los Angeles, at YULA High School, and at Young Israel of Century City, have afforded me the welcome challenge to refine my teaching and to teach scores of students.

My children have always expressed a genuine interest and taken pride in my work, and have been supportive in more ways than they can imagine. Yossi, Ariella and Yoni, Roni and Ariella, Avi and Yaakov – you are the most amazing support system anyone could ask for. You are, indeed, the נסיך שבכל יום עמנו.

אחרונה אחרונה חביבה. Stefanie, you have been the friendliest critic, reading my work at the craziest hours and offering gentle, insightful suggestions – and always supporting my writing. It is to you that I lovingly dedicate *Amos: The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*. שלי ושלכם שלה הוא.

ימי הקציר שנת עז לחמו"  
Los Angeles, Spring 2024

## *Glossary of Academic Terms*

- Anaphora:** Repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses
- Antiphony:** Call-and-response between two groups
- Casuistic:** The presentation of a law as a case (as opposed to a statute)
- Chiasmus:** A literary structure in which the components of the text mirror each other in concentric circles. In some cases (e.g., A, B, C, B', A') they include a pivot verse around which the structure revolves.
- Epistrophe/Epiphora:** Repetition of the same word or phrase at the end of successive clauses
- Eschaton:** Literally “end,” refers to a description of the “end of days”
- Gapping:** The omission of a key word in one of two related clauses, due to considerations of meter; the omitted word is assumed
- Hapax legomenon:** A word or phrase that appears only once in the canon
- Hei:** The letter *hei* functions as a nominal prefix to produce the definite article, or as a verbal prefix to turn the verb into a rhetorical question – this is known as Rhetorical *hei*
- Historiosophy:** A retelling of history with an ideological agenda
- Inclusio:** When a passage begins and ends with a similar or parallel phrase – also known as *envelope structure*
- Leitwort:** A “key word,” which appears an inordinate amount of times in a passage

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**Matres lectiones** (lit. “mothers of reading”): Using Hebrew letters (which are fundamentally consonants) as vowels, typically *vav* or *yod*

**Merismus**: A rhetorical device (or figure of speech) in which a combination of two contrasting parts of the whole refer to the whole

**Metonymy**: The substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant

**Parallelism**: Matching words or phrases in two adjacent clauses of a passage

**Plene/defective** (*ketiv male*, *ketiv haser*): Hebrew words can be spelled with or without *matres lectiones* – if written with, such as וַיְהִי, that is referred to as *plene* spelling or *ketiv male*; if without, such as ויהי, that is considered *defective* or *ketiv haser*.

**Realia**: The material world at the setting of a particular narrative

**Sitz im Leben**: “The setting in life” – the real-world context of a particular narrative

**Stich/hemistich**: A stich is a measured part of verse; a hemistich is half that measure

**Vav**: The prefix letter *vav* has numerous functions, including *vav haḥibur* (conjunctive *vav*), which translates to “and”; *vav haḥipukh* (conversive *vav*), which converts the tense of a verb from past to future and vice versa; *vav habiur* (explicative *vav*), which introduces an explication of the previous clause; and *vav hanigud* (disjunctive *vav*), which is best translated as “but, rather.”

**Vorlage**: The original text from which a given translation or commentary was working



## *Introduction*

# The Prophets

**P**rophecy is as old as humanity. God spoke with Adam and, as such, Adam might be considered a prophet, or *navi*. From another perspective, prophecy only begins with Moses; yet another view is that the onset of the prophetic experience in Israel begins when Samuel anoints Saul. A further approach perceives the prophets of the mid-eighth century BCE – Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah – as belonging to the first era of prophecy, *nevua*. These claims are all valid and largely depend on our definition of prophecy. To better understand Amos and his fellow prophets, we need to take a moment to explore the meaning of prophecy and the role of the prophet. I will scope out eight definitions of *navi*.

(1) A prophet may be considered anyone with whom God communicates. Maimonides explains that to perceive and receive God's word, the individual must have a sterling intellect and superior morals; then they may be trained in the ways of prophecy.<sup>1</sup> This implies that anyone God speaks with is considered a prophet: Adam, Eve, Noah – even Cain.<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Guide for the Perplexed* II:32–46, chiefly in chapter 36.

2. Maimonides is forced, per his approach, to explain God's word manifest in persons

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(2) A more stringent definition is that a prophet is a representative of the divine message. The only “prophet” identified as such in Genesis is Abraham (20:7). When Sarah is seized by Abimelech, God appears to the king in a dream (i.e., a prophetic vision)<sup>3</sup> and orders him to return her to Abraham “because he (Abraham) is a prophet and he will pray for you and you will be revived.” As a prophet, Abraham’s prayers will be most effective in healing the king.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, as a prophet, he knows that Abimelech was innocent of sexual advances.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a *navi* is not only someone who receives divine communication, but also God’s representative, whose prayers are accepted and who has supernatural knowledge of events.

(3) Although God speaks with numerous individuals before Moses, none are entrusted with an explicit oratory mission. The words are dictated to them as commands, warnings, chastisements, punishments, promises, exhortations, and covenants – but at no point are these words intended to be transmitted further.

Moses is a “pioneer” from the outset in two ways. He is the first prophet to undergo an inauguration – the scene at the burning bush (Ex. 3:1–4:17). In addition, his first encounter with God is all about a mission. It is his job not only to confront Pharaoh and lead God’s people out of Egypt – but also to deliver a specific and explicit divine message to both addressees. He is to tell Israel’s elders that God has “remembered” them and will take them out. He is to tell Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews has sent him with a clear message about His people and His plans for them. Moses’s agency is the first time that the formulaic “*ko amar*” (the “messenger formula” – “Thus says”) is used in reference to God.<sup>6</sup>

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of morally dubious character, such as Balaam, Laban – and even the serpent! Nonetheless, when a person would reach a sufficiently sublime level so as to receive divine communication, it may qualify as prophecy.

3. See the discussion of this idea in chapter 9, pp. 285–287.
4. Saadiah, Rashbam, Genesis 20:7.
5. Rashi, Bekhor Shor ad loc.
6. This formula is common in Amos’s rhetoric and is discussed in chapter 2.

If we define a prophet as a messenger of God's word, Moses is certainly the first; he is the "father of prophets."<sup>7</sup>

(4) Moses also serves as the first and, arguably, only example of another role of the prophet – the lawgiver. Not only does he transmit God's word about history and destiny, he receives God's eternal law and enforces its integration into the national ethos. Ezekiel and Ezra (and perhaps Samuel and others) institute various reforms, but rabbinic tradition insists that by and large, Moses is the only *meḥokek* (legislator).<sup>8</sup>

In any case, Moses's position in history as "prophet" is assuredly unique and its uniqueness assured (Num. 12:6–8). Intriguingly, Moses is not explicitly called *navi* until his eulogy (Deut. 34:11).

(5) The fifth type of *navi* is the "court prophet." Samuel was arguably a court prophet, as he anointed kings, but David was the first king to have court prophets, even while fleeing Saul. Gad the Seer joined David early and Nathan "haNavi" remained in the court after David's death. They were to keep the king "in check" and ensure that he followed God's word, rather than be blinded by his own power. We will address the role of the court prophet in chapter 9. For now, a brief definition: a "court prophet" is someone employed by the court, who "dines at the king's table" and whose job is advisor to the king. Tragically, most would typically "prophesy" what the king wanted to hear – few of them were true prophets.<sup>9</sup>

(6) With the loss of proper court prophets, a new type of prophet appeared – the "charismatic prophet." The most famous examples are Elijah and his disciple Elisha, who operate outside of the purview of the court and essentially as opponents to the royal house. Ahab and Jezebel detest Elijah; Ahab's son Jehoram hates Elisha and attempts to have him killed in II Kings 6. Along with various anonymous prophets (such as the "man of God" who addresses Jeroboam I on the altar in

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7. *Av lanevi'im* – Midrash Tehillim 90.

8. See *Sifra*, Leviticus 27:34.

9. See I Kings 12:22 ff for one exception.

Beit El),<sup>10</sup> these charismatic prophets seem to be part of a larger group, “the brotherhood of prophets,” who practice prophetic trances and live ascetic lives. Their chief impact on the nation and the leadership is in their miraculous deeds: they effect famines and rain and unexpected military victories, purify the tainted, and revive the dead. This seems to be an exclusively northern phenomenon, as we find no charismatic prophets in Judea. Intriguingly, this regional distinction continued into the rabbinic period: famous charismatics such as Honi and R. Ḥanina b. Dosa were exclusively Galileans.

A panoramic view, thus far, presents a curious and significant omission. When we hear the word *navi*, we think of impressive and impactful orations that inspire, frighten, console, and exhort. Yet such orations are largely absent among these first six categories of prophets. With the exception of Moses – and he will always be the exception – these prophetic leaders accomplish much but say little. The powerful message Samuel delivers to Saul in the aftermath of his Amalek debacle is impressive but brief.<sup>11</sup> That Abraham, Nathan, and Elijah had much to say is likely; little is found in our canon.

The books commonly known as the “Early Prophets” (*Nevi'im Rishonim*) contain scarce prophetic rhetoric. When we think of the prophets as great orators, as the inspiration for generations of preachers and protestors, righteous rebels, and crusading civilians, hardly anyone in Joshua through Kings fits the bill.

One last comment about this period. Prophets consistently appear on the national and regional scene at critical turning points. Samuel oversees the transition from tribalism to monarchy. Which brings us to the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Global events can sometimes seem unremarkable *in situ*, yet their impact grows with time. After the death of Solomon (c. 930 BCE), the tribes of the north (chiefly Ephraim, Manasseh, and Issachar) engaged in a tax rebellion, throwing off the yoke of the House of David; they appointed Jeroboam b. Nebat of Ephraim to be their king. In order to preempt

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10. I Kings 13:2–3.

11. I Samuel 15:22–23.

a return to loyalty to Jerusalem, Jeroboam established worship sites to God at his two border cities, Beit El and Dan; at each one, he erected a golden calf, declaring “this is the God that took you up out of Egypt.”

All of these events play a central role in the next stage of prophecy and, most directly, in the prophetic career of Amos.

As the kingdom splits, several “minor” prophets appear; prophetic warnings and/or encouragement are heard before decisive battles; famine is heralded and resolved by the charismatics. Yet only with the impending destruction of the (northern) nation do the literary prophets step onto the biblical stage.

(7) The mid-eighth century BCE brought earth-shattering changes to the region. The Assyrian empire, which had made inroads west but had been rebuffed in the previous century,<sup>12</sup> was rearing its ravenous head toward Egypt – and, as always, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were in the way. By the middle of the eighth century BCE, the threat was palpable and, as if to underscore the dire times ahead, around 760 BCE a devastating earthquake struck the region.

It was during this period that “literary prophets” first appeared in the streets, palaces, and courts of Israel – orators whose main form of leadership and persuasion was rhetorical. Whether they intended their words to be committed to writing or not is an age-old debate which has not yet been settled. Although we have numerous biographical and autobiographical passages about these prophets, their main impact is through their words. And oh, what amazing words they spoke! Isaiah’s rhetorical thunder about the flirtatious women of Jerusalem; Hosea’s soothing promise that the people’s repentance will be joyfully accepted; Amos’s challenge to the complacent, greedy “cows of the Bashan”; Micah’s beautiful description of Jacob’s travails – all attest to impressive rhetorical mastery.

These “anti-establishment” prophets came in two large waves: one before the northern kingdom of Samaria’s demise, the other before the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah. And it is no wonder. Their job – a hopeless and thankless one – was to warn the people in the hope

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12. In 853 BCE at Qarqar.

of saving them: only via the rarely traveled road of national repentance would they be spared from impending doom. But, alas, the prophet is heeded only when it is too late – or hundreds of years later by his admirers who, with the safety of time and distance, recognize the truth of his words. During the two centuries from the split of the kingdom until the Assyrian threat, the divine mission to the people shifted from prophetic *leaders*, to charismatics, to powerful orators. It now became the prophet's job to convey God's word to the royal house, the judiciary, the aristocracy, the priestly class, and, occasionally, the people of the Land.

Any assessment of the eighth century BCE in the Levant must consider Assyria. The empire to the east had gone through periods of expansion and conquest, punctuated by lulls when the empire was led by relatively weak rulers. After the demise of Shamshi-Adad V (811 BCE), Assyria entered a “quiet” period, and her potential vassals to the west had a nearly seventy-year respite from active aggression. Along with the weakening of Israel's traditional enemy, Aram, the kingdom of Samaria entered a period of nearly unprecedented growth and prosperity. This wealth was realized exclusively by the ruling classes, creating and exacerbating social and class division. Wealth also prompted military and spiritual complacency.

It was on this stage that Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah appeared – during a period of national success (so to speak) with dark clouds on the horizon that could only be seen by a prophet. Amos was the earliest of them; his agency was likely completed before the earthquake of 760 BCE. Tiglath-Pileser III's ascent in 745 BCE reignited Assyria's lust for territory and the empire resumed its westward conquest. This process would culminate, from a biblical perspective, with the decimation of the Israelite kingdom a mere twenty-three years later. In hindsight, this was an era in dire need of the voices of the prophets; but, of course, the audience wasn't listening....

(8) We come to our final category, which we will refer to as “the people's prophet.” Once the dust had settled after the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah, prophets were again called by God. This time, instead of rebuke, they were prophets of consolation and rebuilding. This period is known as *Shivat Tziyon* – “The Return to Zion,” or the period of national

renaissance. The second half of Isaiah, Zechariah (chapters 1–8), Haggai, and later, Malachi all offer words of encouragement, some chastisement but largely consolation to a battered and exiled people who have been given a chance to return, restore, and rebuild. Although these prophets used the same rhetorical flourishes as their forebears and often referenced the familiar tropes, the message and tone were suited to a nation at a nearly antithetical place in its trajectory. Prophecies usually state the least obvious: in times of plenty, they warn of the corruption of power; in times of sorrow, they express the hope and promise of God’s eternal covenant.

With this brief post-destruction period, the age of prophecy came to an end.

This volume will explore the brilliant rhetoric of one of the first of the literary prophets: Amos of Tekoa. We are in for an enchanting, challenging, and uplifting encounter with a monumental figure who spoke harsh words to a soft people and whose words, sadly but predictably, were treasured far more when they mattered far less.

One final note before moving on. Prophecy was always primarily an auditory experience, directed at the present “real-time” audience. Nonetheless, those relatively few prophecies committed to writing and included in the eternal biblical canon have import for generations. “Only prophecies intended for the generations were committed to writing.”<sup>13</sup> The words of the prophets speak to two audiences: the prophet’s immediate audience and future generations. We will study with an ear attuned to what Amos’s contemporary audience heard, yet with an eye open to the eternal messages of this time-bound yet timeless prophetic text.

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13. Song of Songs Rabba 4:11; Megilla 14a.





## Chapter 1

# Anthem (1:1–2)

(א) דְּבַרֵי עַמּוּס אֲשֶׁר הָיָה בְּנִקְדָּים מִתְּקוּעַ אֲשֶׁר חָזָה עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּיָמֵי עֲזִיָּה מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה וּבְיָמֵי יָרְבֵּעַם בֶּן יוֹאָשׁ מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁנַתִּים לִפְנֵי הָרָעַשׁ: (ב) וַיֹּאמֶר הִי מִצִּיּוֹן יִשְׁאַג וּמִירוּשָׁלַם יִתֵּן קוֹלוֹ וְאָבְלוּ נְאוֹת הָרְעִים וַיִּבֶשׂ רֹאשׁ הַכְּרָמָל:

1 The words of Amos, who was one of the *nokdim* from Tekoa, who prophesied concerning Israel during the reign of Uziah the king of Judah and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Joash the king of Israel, two years before the earthquake. 2 He would say: “The Lord roars from Zion, and from Jerusalem He sends forth His voice. The pastures of the shepherds will become parched, and the top of the Carmel will wither.”

The introductory verse of most prophetic collections presents the prophet’s name and select biographical information. This may include his patronym, tribe, hometown, or livelihood, as well as the period of his agency and audience. Amos, a *noked* (see below) hailed from Tekoa. We are told nothing more about him except a time frame for his agency, which approximates the third decade of the eighth century BCE, and his target audience, “Israel.”

Amos is the only prophet whose livelihood is explicitly noted; we will explore its significance in chapter 9. Amos’s defense of his mission

## *Amos: The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*

is the source of a well-known aphorism: *Lo navi anokhi velo ven navi* – “I am neither a *navi* nor am I a *ben navi*, rather I am a herdsman (*boker*) and a splicer of sycamore figs” (7:14). Amos never trained or aspired to become a prophet; rather, God plucked him from his regular job to deliver prophecy, and this is essential to understanding his mission.

Amos is a *noked*, a “herdsman” or, alternatively, something to do with tending trees. Classical commentators as well as modern Bible dictionaries direct our attention to II Kings 3:4, where it is clear from context that a *noked* is a shepherd.<sup>1</sup> Amos was likely a seasonal worker who herded sheep and cattle and also worked in sycamore groves. In any case, our prophet is not a “professional” prophet, but rather a farm-worker summoned by God.<sup>2</sup>

Amos prophesied during the reign of Uziah of Judah, who ruled for fifty-two years during the mid-eighth century BCE. Amos is the only one of the four contemporary prophets who prophesied during Uziah’s reign alone (the others also prophesied during the reigns of Yotam, Ahaz, and, in the case of Isaiah and Hosea, Hezekiah as well), indicating that his prophetic mission took place during the thirty or so years when both Uziah ruled in Judah and Jeroboam was king of Israel. Although we cannot pinpoint for how long he actively prophesied, I will propose that his career was likely even shorter than that potential window in the biblical text.

Amos’s home base is as symbolically significant as his audience: though he hails from the south,<sup>3</sup> his mission is to chastise the northern kingdom – and *only* the northern kingdom. This would be tantamount to a Massachusetts abolitionist coming to preach in antebellum Richmond. As I will soon explore, his anthemic phrase expresses exactly that geographic dissonance; the roaring of God from the south withers the pastures of the north. As such, it is vital that a Judean king be mentioned in his introduction, to generate the association with Jerusalem, the source

1. Radak explains the word as related to *nakud* – spotted; sheep are often spotted (see Gen. 30:32).
2. See Introduction, category 6.
3. Tekoa is a city of Judah and is identified with Khirbet Tuqu’, just outside of modern-day Tekoa in Gush Etzion, not to be confused with *Tekoah* (or *Tokea*) in Mishna Menahot 8:3, Eruvin 91a, and elsewhere.

of his (and His) message. The mention of Jeroboam, however, may also serve a purpose beyond framing the date of his prophetic career. In the confrontation at Beit El (7:10–17), Amos is accused of being a troublesome rabble-rouser against Jeroboam; this introductory verse foreshadows the confrontation that will define Amos’s agency.

The final phrase in the superscription is also relatively unique: it dates the onset of Amos’s career to “two years before the earthquake.” Amos is the only prophet introduced by his vocation, and he is the only one whose career is related to a natural event. Some of Jeremiah and Ezekiel’s prophecies are dated against the background of political events,<sup>4</sup> whose relevance is self-evident. For instance, Ezekiel’s vision about the significance of the tenth day of the tenth month comes with the revelation that on that selfsame day, the king of Babylonia began his siege against Jerusalem. In the case of Amos, however, things are not as clear. We, the long-distance audience,<sup>5</sup> are curious: How is the earthquake related to his prophecy? Is it relevant to the entire collection, which would justify its inclusion in the superscription? If so, what is that relevance? Amos will gradually, brilliantly, reveal its meaning until it fully emerges in his final set of speeches.

We suggest adopting a dating of the earthquake during the fifth decade of the eighth century BCE (between 760 and 750).<sup>6</sup> *Midrash Tanḥuma* (*Tzav*, par. 13) associates the earthquake with Uzziah’s *tzara’at* (skin-blight).<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, *Midrash Seder Olam* (ch. 20) identifies the earthquake with the description in Isaiah 6. In any case, the earthquake takes on immediate meaning for us in the next verse, and we will experience its aftershocks throughout the work.

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4. *Inter alii* Jeremiah 24:1, Ezekiel 1:1.

5. Amos’s immediate audience, of course, knew nothing about the earthquake until it was, quite literally, too late.

6. See Steven A. Austin, Gordon W. Franz, and Eric G. Frost, “Amos’s Earthquake: An Extraordinary Middle East Seismic Event of 750 B.C.,” *International Geology Review* 42, no. 7 (2000): 657–671.

7. See II Chronicles 26:16–21.

## AMOS'S ANTHEM

And he would say (*Vayomar*):  
The Lord roars from Zion,  
And from Jerusalem He sends forth His voice  
The pastures of the shepherds will become parched  
And the top of the Carmel will wither

Even though the opening word *Vayomar* is generally read as synonymous with *vayomer*,<sup>8</sup> I have chosen to translate and read it as a refrain – “He would say...” – for two reasons. First of all, had Amos uttered this only once, in advance of the first collection of oracles, it would have read “*vayomer Amos*” or, more likely, “*Ko amar Hashem*,” and the description of God’s voice would have been presented in the first person. In addition, the verse would have been appended to other prophecies, instead of being juxtaposed to the superscription. More significantly, the image of God’s voice emanating from Jerusalem is a subtext throughout Amos’s prophecies. The overall messages of Amos’s oracles fit this theme, and it is reasonable to call this passage an “anthem.”

This tense is one we refer to as the “continuous future,” which is expressed in the Bible in the future tense but clearly intended, from context, to be a description of ongoing, regular behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, a significant number of biblical instances of *vayomar* preface sayings that are either repeated or that seem to be part of a regular prayer tradition. For instance, when Abraham addresses God in his request to spare the cities of Sodom (Gen. 18), the text prefaces his arguments with *vayomar* – and these are repeated, formulaic arguments. When Malkizedek praises God and Abraham (Gen. 14), the text prefaces his blessings with *vayomar* – again, these seem to be somewhat formulaic words, perhaps blessings that the king of Shalem bestowed on special occasions. Most telling is the description of Jonah’s declaration in Nineveh, which is prefaced by *vayikra vayomar* (Jonah 3:4). Based

8. The difference usually being a function of syntax, not meaning.

9. The *locus classicus* of this is in Job 1:5 – *Kakha ya’aseh Iyov kol hayamim* – “This is what Job would do all the days.”

on the narrative context, it seems clear that the warning “in forty days Nineveh will be overturned” was repeated by the prophet as he walked through the doomed city.

This approach is particularly significant in light of Malbim’s claim that the roaring voice of God that would wither the pastures was a poetic reference to that earthquake. This illuminates its mention at the end of the superscription, and perhaps supports the theory that Amos would repeat this anthem before each of his prophecies.

## 2: The Lord roars from Zion

The lion and its roar as a metaphor for God’s voice and God’s anger is not unique to Amos. While Isaiah (5:29) uses it to describe Assyria’s impending attack, Amos (here and at 3:4, 8) and Hosea (11:10) both use it to describe God’s voice. Over a century later, Jeremiah adopts Amos’s imagery (25:30); as we will see throughout the book, he was fond of Amos’s rhetorical flairs.

The closest parallel to Amos’s anthem-phrase is found in Joel 4:16:

The Lord will roar from Zion and will send forth His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake but the Lord will be a refuge for His people and a stronghold for the children of Israel.

The first two phrases in this verse are a duplicate of Amos’s first stich. One would have to surmise that, following nearly all scholars who date Joel later than Amos,<sup>10</sup> this anthem was a well-known prophetic aphorism used by later prophets as well. The significant difference between the usage by Joel and Amos is time frame. If Amos is expressing that his own words represent God’s roar, then God’s voice is *currently* going forth; it is imminent. In contrast, the last chapter of Joel is eschatological, a terrifying vision of “the day of the Lord.”<sup>11</sup> The added phrase, “the heavens and earth will shake” serves to raise Joel’s imagery to apocalyptic typology.

10. Exception noted: Abravanel maintains that Joel was much earlier; his overall approach to the chronology of *Trei Asar* is iconoclastic.

11. See chapter 7, “Day of the Lord.”

The other clear difference is in the second stich. God's roar in Amos brings Israel's destruction, whereas in Joel it expresses Israel's protection. The critical difference rests in the meaning of the conjunctive *vav*: The *vav* in Amos (*ve'avlu*, "Will become parched") is a conjunction, either the common *vav haḥibur* or perhaps the explanatory *vav habiur*: "God roars, *and as a result* the pastures wither." In contrast, the *vav* in Joel is a *vav hanigud* (disjunctive *vav*): *even though* God's voice will roar from Zion and His voice will go forth from Jerusalem – and the heavens and earth will shake, *nonetheless*, He will protect His nation. Joel inverts Amos's anthem, using it apocalyptically rather than locally, yet presenting it as a source of consolation rather than a threat.

A final word about Amos's "anthem." If, following Malbim, we read this passage as alluding to the earthquake, the imagery of the withering of the mountain tops and the pastures becoming parched, or "mourning," seems forced – the metaphor is somewhat mixed. The withering of lush fields and the subsequent mourning in the pastures is, again, something we find in Joel (chapter 1), where it is explicitly attributed to a plague that destroys the crops. The expected result of an earthquake's devastation, however, is not chiefly agricultural. Per Malbim, we would expect the palaces of the north to be laid waste, not the pastures. This may be why most commentators do not connect this line with the earthquake. What remains to be seen is how figurative this destruction will be. Are God's words going to create a fear and trepidation in the north that will cause mourning? If so, we would interpret God's roaring as the prophet's words carrying the divine messenger to Samaria. If, however, we read the destruction as real, then the roar is not God's word through the prophet. Rather, it foreshadows some natural devastation which will accompany or follow Amos's prophecies.

This anthem is the setting of Amos's first speech-set, the oracles "against the nations." We can envision the Samaritan audience tensing for the roar and anxiously waiting for God's words to wither the lush pastures of the Carmel.