

# Exegetical Notes on Amos 6-7 and 10-15

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The reading from the Old Testament which is assigned to the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost in Series B of Lutheran Worship consists in eight verses of chapter 5 of the Book of Amos, namely, verses 6-7 and 10-15.

## THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

Amos, before his sudden call to the prophetic office, had long lived as a shepherd and a farmer devoted to the production of sycamore-figs (1:1; 7:14). He was a denizen of the little town of Tekoa in Judah, some ten miles south of Jerusalem (1:1). Amos, in all probability, proclaimed his various prophecies orally in the year 753 B.C. and then published them in the year 750 in the Book of Amos which we have today (as argued in the author's Pre-Exilic Books of Prophecy). Although he also addresses his own countrymen in Judah, his original audience was mainly the populace of Israel, which is to say the Northern Kingdom in this period of the divided monarchy.

The purpose of Amos in firstly preaching his message and then in writing it down was to bring the people of Israel to repentance and so back to faith in the One True God. Verse 15, in fact, in the pericope before us (from Amos 5) summarizes succinctly the purpose of the Book of Amos in general (as is already noted, too, in The Pre-Exilic Books of Prophecy). The theme of the Book of Amos may be stated in this way: Israel is doomed to destruction by reason of her dead heterodoxy.

The Kingdom of Israel in 753 B.C., in the final year of the reign of Jeroboam II, was powerful and prosperous in worldly terms. Ruling more territory than any monarch since the division of Israel on the death of Solomon, Jeroboam II was the mightiest man in the Levant. In spiritual terms, however, Israel was rotten within, so rotten, indeed, that within two decades nothing would remain of its nationhood. Samaria itself, the erstwhile capital, finally fell to the Assyrians, after a terrible siege of three years, in the year 722 B.C.

The social injustice against which Amos inveighs is the reason why so many scholars describe Israel in the middle of the eighth century B.C. as guilty of dead heterodoxy. In actuality, however, one must speak of dead heterodoxy. For the cultus being sponsored by the king and the leaders of Israel in general was, specifically, the heterodox church, with its main sanctuary in Bethel, which had been established by Jeroboam I already in 931 as a rival to the orthodox church which recognized the temple in Jerusalem as the only legitimate site of sacrificial worship. The institutional heterodoxy, indeed, of Israel was constantly slipping in popular practice into heresy and syncretism and thence into complete apostasy.

The body of the Book of Amos clearly consists in three main parts: his oracles (chapters 1-2), his discourse (3-6), and his visions (7-9). Each of the three discourses which form the second main part of the book (chapters 3-6) begins with the same introductory formula: "Hear ye this word!" (3:1; 4:1; and 5:1). The third of these discourses, comprising chapters 5-6 as the book has come to be divided since medieval times, forcefully asserts the imminence of national death by

introducing a funereal "dirge" in its initial verse: "Hear ye this word which I am taking up against you a dirge O house of Israel" (Amos 5:1). The qinah which follows in verse 2 and is then explained and expanded in the ensuing chapters is, indeed, a classic expression in form and contents of the specific poetic genre (including even a specific rhythm) used in the funerary lamentations of ancient Israel. The discourse which follows falls into the following sections and subsections:

1. The Introduction (5:1)
2. The Qinah ("Dirge") Itself (5: 2)
3. Three Explanatory Oracles (5: 3-17)
4. The First Oracle (5:3)
5. The Second Oracle (5: 4-15)
  1. The Introduction (5:4a)
  2. The First Exhortation to Repentance (5:4b-5)
    1. Its Positive Enunciation (5:4b)
    2. Its Negative Enunciation (5:5a)
    3. Its Rationale (5:5b)
  3. The Second Exhortation to Repentance (5: 6-13)
    1. Its Enunciation (5:6a)
    2. Its Rationale (5: 6b-13)
      1. The Holy Omnipotence of God (5:6b)
      2. The Sinfulness of Israel (5:7)
      3. The Holy Omnipotence of God (5: 8-9)
      4. The Sinfulness of Israel (5: 10-13)
        1. The Tyranny of Evil Men (5: 10-12)
        2. The Impotence of Good Men (5:13)
  4. The Third Exhortation to Repentance (5: 14-15)
    1. Its Enunciation (5:14a)
    2. Its Rationale (5:14b)
    3. Its Reiteration (5:15a)
    4. Its Rationale (5:15b)
6. The Third Oracle (5: 16-17)
  1. Two Related Songs of Woe (5:18-6:14)
  2. The First Song of Woe (5: 18-27)
  3. The Second Song of Woe (6: 1-14)

The third oracle explaining the dirge (5: 16-17) makes a skillful transition from the oracles of explication to the related woes by predicting wailing in all of Israel with people lamenting "hoi-hoi" (verse 16). The word hoi, there doubled, is then used to begin each of the following two songs of woe. The vocable itself is an exclamation, ordinarily of pain, which may be translated more properly as "alas!" (as in the NASB) than as "woe!" (as in the Authorized Version) so as to distinguish it from 'oi (BDB, 222b-223a).

All the verses of Amos 5 to be studied here fall within the second of the three oracles which explicate the dirge of verse 2 in some way. This second oracle (verse 4-15) provides the rationale of the dirge. These verses, then, reprehend the dead heterodoxy of Israel which would

necessarily lead to the destruction of the nation unless there was repentance and, therein, a return to faith in the Lord.

## **A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS**

6. Seek the LORD and so live lest He rush like a fire through the house of Joseph then it would eat up even as there would be no one quenching for Bethel

The two plural imperatives which begin the verse effectively reiterate the invitation with which the Lord began the oracle in general: "Seek Me and so live!" They inaugurate thereby, as indicated in the outline provided above, a new subsection of the oracle. The phrase "and so" in the translation is intended to convey the idiomatic use of the standard conjunction connecting two imperatives to indicate a logical consequence desired by the speaker. Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley depicts the usage in this way: "The imperative in logical dependence upon a preceding imperative, jussive (or cohortative), or ... interrogative sentence ... serves to express the distinct assurance or promise that an action or state will ensue as the certain consequence of a previous action" (GKC, 324-325 [section 110 f or 2]). Such a significance appertains especially to the "imperative when depending (with waw copulative) upon the imperative. In this case the first imperative contains, as a rule, a condition, while the second declares the consequence which the fulfilment of the condition will involve. The imperative is used for this declaration, since the consequence is, as a matter of fact, intended or desired by the speaker" (GKC, 325 [section 110.f. or 2.(a.)]).

Here, then, the idea is that God desires the people of Israel to live and assures them of living if they seek Him where He has promised to be found, which is to say in the words (spoken and written) of His true prophets and the sacraments administered by His true priests. The life of which he assures those who seek Him by means of the imperative of *chyh* is not a continuation of earthly life, which would in any case eventually end, but rather spiritual life (as opposed to the dead heterodoxy of Israel) and so eternal life with Him even beyond temporal death.

The imperfect of *tslch* is used with subjunctive telic force to indicate in this case negative purpose (listed as II.B.2.B.9.a in CHEL). The verb *tzlch* meaning "rush" is listed by Brown-Driver-Briggs as a root distinct from the more common one pertaining to prospering (BDB, 852a). The two roots may, however, be one, or at least related, considering that the idea of advancing attaches to both of them in the Semitic family of languages (*ibid.*).

The phrase "even as" in the translation above represents a *waw* before a non-verbal word introducing a new clause. Here, specifically, the non-verbal word involved is the substantive of negation 'en (literally, as a construct, "nothingness of"). In the "distinctive" use of the *waw* found here the clause which follows contrasts in some way with the clause which precedes but less strongly than it would if the *waw* were acting as a complete adversative (this usage being listed as IV.D.1.b. in CHEL, where such translations as "whereas" (on the other hand) and "while" (at the same time) are suggested). Here the contrast is between the all-consuming fire symbolizing the wrath of God and the impotence of any human being to quench such a fire.

The qametz beneath the prepositional kaph prefixed to 'esh("fire") need not be taken as tantamount to the definite article. The inseparable prepositions sometimes take qametz when prefixed to the tone-syllable of a word (as stated by Ronald Williams, 28).

The clause "then it would eat up" in the translation above reflects the feminine singular perfect of 'kl with prefixed waw. The feminine ending shows that the subject has changed from the Lord (who is still the subject of tzlch) to the fire to which He is being compared. Here the perfect, by virtue of its nature as the most basic form of the verb, is used, following waw, to indicate the consequence of a clause implying a condition, even though still in the future (in line with II.B.1.B.2.b.(1.) in CHEL).

The name "Bethel" is used here by synecdoche to refer to the whole of the Northern Kingdom, which had sinfully accepted Bethel as the site of its central sanctuary. The "house of Joseph" is a more common synecdoche in the prophets to the same end, by reason of the two tribes descended from Joseph namely, Ephraim and Manasseh possessing the lion's share of land and influence in the Northern Kingdom.

7. O those who turn judgment into wormwood, even as they have put righteousness down to the earth.

The qal active participle of hpk is present continuous in time (the most common use of the participle) with a definite substantival force (listed as II.B.5.C.3.b.(1.) in CHEL and connected with the original demonstrative force of the article in GKC, 404 [section 126.a-b or 1 and 1.(b.)]). Here, contextually, the use appears to be vocative, as can be the effect of attaching the definite article to any noun: "O those who turn" in the translation above. Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley describes this usage thus: "Strictly speaking ... the substantive with the article is really in apposition to the personal pronoun of the 2nd person, which is either expressly mentioned or virtually present (in the imperative) ..." (GCK, 405 [section 126.f or 2.(e.)Rem.]). The article here is referring back to the subjects of the two imperatives in the independent clause of the previous verse.

The la'anah (translated traditionally as "wormwood") to any of several plants belonging to the genus *Artemisia* which grow in the Levantine setting of Holy Scripture. There is no need to isolate one specific species, but, while Brown-Driver-Briggs mentions specifically *Artemisia Absinthium* (BDB, 542a), Mitchell Reddish identifies *Artemisia Herba-Alba* Asso as the species most common in Palestine and its vicinity (Mitchell G. Reddish, "Wormwood," ABD, VI, 973). This "white wormwood" is "a small, heavily branched shrub with hairy, gray leaves" (973a). The plants, in any case, commonly called "wormwood" have an extremely bitter taste (973b). Thus, la'anah is used in all eight of its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible as a figure of bitterness or bitter sorrow (Deuteronomy 29:17; Proverbs 5:4 [of intercourse with a loose woman], Jeremiah 9:15; 23:15; Amos 5:7; 6:12; Lamentations 3:15, 19). Two of these eight appearances fall in the Book of Amos, here and in 6:12. In this latter passage, as in several of the others which name it, la'anah is linked with the bitter and, indeed, poisonous plant known as "gall" (973b). In the New Testament the same plant is used in Revelation 8:11 to depict in visionary terms the contaminating bitterness of false doctrine.

The phrase "even as" in the translation above renders a waw before a noun beginning a new clause. The reasoning behind the rendition is the same as the rationale already given of the same phrase in the translation of verse 6.

10. They hate one who reproves in the gateway, even as one who speaks with integrity they abhor.

The word sha'ar is applied in the Old Testament not only to the gates of a walled city themselves but also to the open space which was usually to be found immediately inside of such gates (BDB, 1044b-1045a). The space served ordinarily as a market- place, as seen in 2 Kings 7 (verses 1 and 18) and as a place of public assembly and official business. It was, therefore, in most cities the chief place in which the elders and judges and even kings would conduct administrative and judicial proceedings, seen in Deuteronomy 21:19 and 22:15, Ruth 4 (verses 1 and 11), 2 Samuel 18:24, Isaiah 29:21, and here in Amos 5 (C. C. McCown, "Gate," IDB, II, 355a).

The verb ykch occurs, as here, only in the hiphil aside from three appearances in the niphal and one each in the hophal and hithpael. The connotation of the root and the two feminine nouns derived from it are emphatically forensic. Here, specifically, the reference would be to any man who would rebuke the leaders of Israel for abusing the judicial proceedings of the country to enrich themselves at the expense of those too weak to defend themselves.

The phrase "even as" in the translation above renders a waw before a participle which is being used as a substantive. The reasoning behind the rendition is the same as the rationale already given of the same phrase in the translation of verse 6.

The phrase "with integrity" in the translation above represents the masculine singular adjective tamim modifying the nominal participle dhobher ("one who speaks"). The basic idea of the root tmm is completeness (BDB, 1070a-b), and so the adjective signifies "complete, whole" and thus, in religious terms, "wholesome" and "having integrity" (BDB, 1071a). Brown-Driver- Briggs construes seven instances of tamim, including this one, as neuter uses signifying "what is complete, entirely in accord with truth and fact" (ibid.). Such an interpretation, however, is unnecessary in the verse before us.

11. Therefore, because of your trampling upon a poor man even as exaction of wheat ye take from him houses of hewn-stone ye have built, but ye will not continue to dwell in them; vineyards to be desired ye have planted, but ye will not continue to drink their wine.

The phrase "even as" in the translation above renders a waw before a noun beginning a new clause. The reasoning behind the rendition is the same as the rationale already given of the same phrase in the translation of verse 6.

The word "exaction" in the translation above corresponds to the feminine noun mas'eth (673a), which derives from the verbal root ns' (BDB, 669b-672a). Even as "lift" is the most basic meaning of ns', so too mas'eth refers to the action of "lifting up" (as in Psalm 141:2) or to something which is lifted up in some way. Brown-Driver-Briggs gives the meaning in this one

place in the Hebrew Bible as being an "exacted or enforced gift" from an inferior to his superior (BDB, 673a), making reference to a Phoenician (Punic) vocable with the same consonants and the meaning "payment" or "tax" (BDB, 673a). There seems, however, insufficient grounds to assign so precise a significance to the word. Certainly, however, the reference is to some exaction of grain from the needy by those who were already rich enough to possess the most expensive of houses and vineyards.

The translation above of the two imperfects as "continue to dwell" and "continue to drink" assumes the durative use of the imperfect aspect. The luxurious houses and vineyards which the leaders of Israel had prepared for themselves by exploiting the poor would go to wrack and ruin as the leaders themselves would either be killed or deported by the armies of Assyria within two decades.

12. For I know that your violations are many, even as your sins are great O harassers of a righteous man, who take a bribe, even as they turn away needy men in the gateway.

The phrase "even as" in the translation above of verse 12a renders a waw before a predicate adjective introducing a new clause. The reasoning behind the rendition is the same as the rationale already given of the same phrase in the translation of verse 6.

"O harassers" in the translation above renders a substantival participle being used as a vocative. Brown-Driver- Briggs distinguishes the root of this form, with meanings related to hostility (II: BDB, 867b), from two other roots with the same letters (BDB, 864-866), including the more common tzrr which has "bind" as its basic significance (I: BDB, 864b).

The phrase "even as" in the translation above of verse 12b renders a waw before an adjective being used as a substantive to introduce a new clause. The reasoning behind the rendition is the same as the rationale already given of the same phrase in the translation of verse 6.

The verb nth (with teth as its middle letter) begins with "stretch out" as its most basic significance (BDB, 639b). Already, however, in the qal the idea of turning in an intransitive or even transitive sense develops therefrom (BDB, 640a-b). The hiphil, then, has as its usual significance "turn" in various transitive ways, including the turning away or aside of people in want (BDB, 640b-641a). In this form of the doubly weak verb, being both pe-nun and lamed-he, the final he has disappeared and the initial nun has been assimilated to the teth, which is therefore written with dagesh forte.

13. Therefore, the insightful man at such a time is struck dumb, for it is an evil time.

The phrase "such a" represents the rendition required in English of hahi' in the particular context. The reference of hahi' is to the time which has been described in the preceding verses. If the time so depicted were in the past or future, hahi' could be translated as "that" in the usual way (BDB, 216b). In this case, however, the reference is to the very time in which Amos was preaching.

Even if the "scholars differ greatly" the various meanings of the root skl are perhaps less "hard to classify" than Brown-Driver-Briggs asserts (BDB, 968a-b). They all, in any case, revolve around insightfulness, whether applied to insightful thinking and speaking or to the insightful activity which necessarily issues in prosperity of one kind or another. Since the qal of skl is found on but one occasion, the hiphil embraces not only transitive, but also intransitive meanings, which are, in fact, more common and so to be assumed in the absence of contrary evidence.

The basic significance of dmm is "be or grow dumb" and so can issue in "be struck dumb ... in amazement and fear" (BDB, 198b-199a). Brown-Driver-Briggs cites Exodus 15:16 and Isaiah 23:2 as examples of such a usage (BDB, 199a). Theodore Laetsch, who argues for a like meaning here "be stricken dumb with horror and anguish" adds to Exodus 15:16 the following instances: Leviticus 10:3; Lamentations 2:10 and 3:28; and Ezekiel 24:17 (160). The context seems, indeed, to require such a significance here if maskil is "never used" in the pejorative sense "of a time-serving schemer" (ibid.).

14. Seek good and not evil, in order that ye may live that the LORD, the God of Hosts, may so be with you, even as ye have said.

The command of verse 14a represents the necessary logical consequence of the initial commands in verses 4 and 6. Seeking the Lord must necessarily eventuate in seeking good as opposed to evil. For something is "good" by definition by virtue of concurrence with the will of God, whereas something is evil by reason of conflicting with the will of God.

The conception of living is here clearly defined in the sense which was already ascribed to the imperative "live" in verse 6, which is to say as life in the presence of God. The people of Israel were, of course, already claiming that the One True God was with them spiritually and therefore, in terms of the Mosaic Berith, providentially to bless the nation with prosperity and security. In actuality, however, by reason of the infidelity of Israel to the aforesaid bond, God would now about to abandon her to devastation and final destruction. Only repentance could bring a return of the gracious presence of God to which the nation was now laying claim quite falsely.

15. Hate evil and so love good, and so establish judgment in the gateway. Perhaps the LORD, the God of Hosts, may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

The imperatives which begin verse 15 strengthen the command which began the previous verse. A personal seeking of good rather than evil fails to please God if evil is still excused as acceptable in oneself or others. The relationship between the three imperative in verse 15a is the same as the one which has already been ascribed above to the imperatives which began verse 6.

The reference to Joseph has already been discussed in the comments on verse 6. Here, however, instead of "the house of Joseph" the hope is only the survival of the sh'erith of Joseph. The "remnant" is used as a technical term in the prophets to denominate the "faithful" in Israel or Judah (BDB, 984b). The rationale is, of course, the smallness of the minority in Israel living a life of repentance and faith in the One True God. The Lord was, indeed, in the event, gracious to the remnant of Israel in spite of the necessary destruction of the nation as a whole by reason of

its rejection of the call to repentance issued by Amos and his fellow-prophets. For the remnant which was dispersed in many places in the Assyrian Empire served, even before the deportation of the people of Judah to Babylonia, as the basis of the diaspora which was so pivotal to the speedy dissemination, in the apostolic period, of the gospel of the redemption which had now been accomplished by the Messiah. Even in the old homeland itself, indeed, many of the Samaritans, who descended in part from the ten tribes of Israel, came to faith in the Messiah during the course of His own visible ministry and then the ministry of His disciples.