Upsetting the Status Quo: Preaching Like Amos

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Introduction

Noted homiletician Eugene Lowry writes, "The first step in the presented sermon, then, is to upset the equilibrium of the listeners, and is analogous to the opening scene of a play or movie in which some kind of conflict or tension is introduced."[2] Saying what is unexpected causes listeners to stop in their tracks. They might think, "What's going on here? That's not the way I've always heard it!" Once the equilibrium is upset the pastor has gained a hearing, and he may then proceed to the task of probing the problem and offering the solution in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One way to "upset the equilibrium of the listeners" is by employing the homiletical strategy of inversion.[3] By putting the cart before the horse, the pastor alters the normal and expected sequence and thereby elicits people's attention. For example, a sermon on vocation might begin with the phrase, "Take this job and *love* it!" Preaching on the incarnation, a pastor may state, "This is a *riches to rags* story." A homily on the church may announce, "Where two or three are gathered together, there is *Satan* in their midst."[4] Literary critics call this use of language irony.[5] Irony involves the perception of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning or between appearance and reality.[6]

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[2] Eugene C. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 31.

[3] Francis C. Rossow discusses this homiletical strategy in *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 137-140.

[4] For examle, in the field of Old Testament studies Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, 137.

[5] Alonso Schökel writes, "Classical irony is of two basic types: rhetorical irony, which consists in saying the opposite of what one intends, but allowing this to be understood; and dramatic irony which consists in making a character say something which he does not understand or the implications of which he has not grasped" (*A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988], 157). The inversions in Amos come under Schökel's category of rhetorical irony. The classic study on irony in the Old Testament is Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).

[6] Cf. J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1991), 460.

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By the first half of the eighth century B.C. leaders in the Northern Kingdom of Israel had grown accustomed to the nation's theological language to the point that they no longer were able to hear its startling claims.[7] Faced with this situation, the prophet Amos employed homiletical inversions so as to "upset the equilibrium of his listeners" to move beyond the familiar, the expected, and what had become clichés for his audience.

Israel's leadership had become *deaf* to its theological language.[8] They allowed their texts to erode into old news, texts that had been at one point so surprising and remarkable and full of good news. Unbelief dulled Pentateuchal promises into slogans that no longer had the vitality to do the best things that Yahweh's words do: forgive and recreate lives, form and regulate human relationships, serve as the glue that holds people together in community, and provide the sanctions that limit people's abuse of each other. In this vacuum, individual autonomy and selfishness emerged unchallenged, and Israel began to disintegrate. Oblivious to how their language had dulled their spiritual vitality, Israel's elite became intoxicated with violence, bloodshed, and economic exploitation. As long as the nation was up and running, sick as it was, its flow of meaningless words kept it going.

In this situation Amos could not simply repeat words from the Pentateuch, but neither could he embark on a mission that completely jettisoned Israel's theological language. Andersen and Freedman describe the prophet's dilemma this way: "A judicious balance needs to be struck, one in which the prophet's role as conservator of ancient tradition is blended with that of radical critic of current behavior and intention."[9] Amos's challenge, therefore, was to use theological language itself to show the inadequacy of what the language had become, and to reconnect its parts in a

[7] Broadly speaking there are two groups of people in the book of Amos: the "sinned against" and the "sinners"—the righteous and the unrighteous. The targets of Yahweh's destruction are "those who trample the poor" (2:7; 4:1; 8:4), "those who stifle prophecy" (2:12; cf. 7:10-17), "those who store up violence and destruction" (3:10), "those who long for the Day of Yahweh" (5:18), "those who are at ease" (6:1), "those who rejoice in Lo Debar" (6:13) and "those who are saying when will the Sabbath be over" (8:5) as well as those who say, "evil will not overtake us" (9:10). Francis Andersen and D. N. Freedman define this group as follows: "These are the people who are not sick over the crash of Joseph; who are callous, cold, self-indulgent, and avaricious; who oppress the needy; and who welcome the Day of Yahweh, convinced that for them it will be a day of light and not darkness (contrary to what the prophet has said) and in any case that finally no disaster will touch them at all" (*Amos* [New York: Doubleday, 1989], 872). The second group are the "small people" (7:2, 5) who also are called, (1) אביונים ("the needy") 2:6; 4:1; 5:12; 8:4, 6; (2) ("the poor") דלים 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:6; (3) עניים ("the oppressed") 2:7; 8:4; and (4) (ים) צדיק ("the righteous") 2:6; 5:12. People in this group were being abused sexually (2:7b), fiscally (2:8; 5:11), judicially (5:10), spiritually (2:12), and vocationally (2:7; 4:1; 5:11).

[8] Isaiah indicates that in his day Israel also had ears but could not hear and eyes but they could not see (cf. Is. 6:9-10). In Isaiah 42:9 the prophet quotes Yahweh as saying, "Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of Yahweh?" (cf. 43:8; e.g., Matt. 13:13; Mark 4:12). Yahweh describes the same problem in Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek. 3:4-7; 33:30-33).

[9] Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 539.

way that would make it fresh and real and alive. Amos's rhetorical task was to recreate the language's *surprise.* Needing to accomplish this using the resources of the language itself, he employed the rhetorical strategy of inversion.

Amos scholars often note the prophet's sophisticated appropriation of forms and traditions as well as his carefully crafted language.[10] For example, James Crenshaw argues that Amos uses liturgical texts and ideas throughout his book to make contact with his audience, only to turn the themes against it.[11] It is almost universally agreed that Amos is a master at inverting texts.[12]

Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971) brought to the forefront this concept of prophetic *Vergegenwärtigung*, translated as "a fresh presentation," "updating," or "reactualization." He argued that prophets reactualized Pentateuchal traditions in light of their new contexts. The opening sentence in his second volume of *Old Testament Theology* is telling: "Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old. For behold, I purpose to do a new thing (Is. xliii.18f.)."[13] For von Rad the "former things" refers to what is commonly called the Pentateuch. The "new things of old" refers to the prophetic recasting and reshaping of these earlier texts. Von Rad maintained that as creative communicators prophets *reshaped* older texts for new situations.

Standing in this tradition, Amos takes Israel's theological premises and reshapes them to awaken his listeners from their spiritual slumber. He employs Pentateuchal language and theology that simply cannot be contradicted *and contradicts it!* Amos peppers the nation's leaders with

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[10] Among Amos commentators there appears to be unanimous agreement on the prophet's literary skill. H. W. Wolff marvels that in the two dozen short oracles one finds such a "wealth of rhetorical forms" (*Joel and Amos* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 91). James L. Mays hails Amos as one who displays "remarkable skill at using all the devices of oral literature available in Israel's culture" (*Amos: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 6). Andersen and Freedman note that Amos is one of the most "versatile verbal craftsmen" among the prophets (*Amos*, 144). Shalom Paul speaks of Amos's "distinctive literary style" as well as the way he uses literary traditions and conventions with "creative sophistication" (*A Commentary on the Book of Amos* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 7, 4). The lone dissent seems to come from John Hayes who claims "there is nothing especially creative in Amos's preaching" (*Amos—The Eighth Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1988], 38).

[11] James Crenshaw, "Amos and the Theophanic Tradition," *ZAW* 80 (1968): 203-215.

[12] For example, Mays says Amos consistently "take[s] up the themes of the theological tradition from his audience and use[s] them in a way that was completely 'unorthodox' and unexpected" (*Amos*, 57). Wolff notes the prophet's use of language that has "shocking surprises" (*Joel and Amos*, 211).

[13] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. II, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd, 1965), 1. Walter Brueggemann writes, "If it turns out that von Rad's entire program is an exposition of Isaiah 43:18-19, as seems likely, then relinquishment of what is old and treasured and reception of what is new and unwelcome is the work at hand" (*The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005], 82).

challenging "in-your-face" questions. "What if Israel is *just like* the other nations?" (1:3-2:16). "What if election means *judgment*?" (3:2). "What if worship is a *crime*?" (4:4-5). "What if the nation is not alive at all, but *dead*?" (5:1-17). "What if Passover happened again, but this time *Israel* is the first-born of Egypt?" (5:17). "What if the Day of Yahweh turns out to be the *night* of Yahweh?" (5:18-20). "What if Yahweh's presence in the temple brings not a blessing but a *curse*?" (9:1-4). "What if Yahweh had accomplished an exodus for *other nations*?" (9:7). By relentlessly posing these unsettling inversions, Amos takes the people's language and turns it against them. Let us now consider these texts in greater detail.

Amos 1:3-2:16

The first example of inversion is in Amos 1:3-2:16, which consists of the longest oracle against other nations in the Book of the Twelve.[14] Whether in a warfare, public lamentation, court, or worship setting,[15] Oracles Against the Nations (OAN) either explicitly or implicitly always boded well for Israel. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:2-3 and 1 Kings 20:26-30 the prophetic proclamation against the enemy is matched with a specific promise of victory for Israel. Amos inverts this genre and adapts it for his own purpose in order to make a stinging accusation against Israel's elite.

From 1:3 through 2:5 Amos's audience in all likelihood cheered and applauded after each neighboring nation was condemned. "Great preacher, this Amos!" was the mantra of the moment. The sermon builds to a climax as three, four, five nations are placed under divine fire. With the next judgment pointing to Judah (2:4-5), the number reaches seven. The people could then safely assume that the sermon had come to an end and go home saying, "All is well that ends well!" It was probably time for the Aaronic benediction (Num. 6:22-27), a general dismissal, and then the normal post-service discussion of the weather, the events of the week, a bit more chit-chat, and then it would be time to go home. But Amos was not done preaching. The Lion was still roaring (cf. Amos 1:2; 3:8). Yahweh's wrath was about to fall upon *Israel*.

The oracle against Israel (2:6-16) came as a shocking surprise. There are seven oracles, beginning with Aram (1:3-5) and ending with Judah (2:4-5). Seven is a number commonly used in the Bible to denote complete-

[14] Oracles Against the Nations (OAN) constitute almost one-fourth of the material in the latter prophets and are listed as follows: Isaiah 7:3-9, 10-16; 8:1-4; 10:5-35; 13-23; 34; 37:22-29; Jeremiah 25:15-38; 27:1-11; 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32; 35; 38-39; Joel 4:1-17; Amos 1:3-2:16; Obadiah; Micah 4:11-13; 5:5-6; 7:11-13; 14-17; Nahum; Habakkuk 2; Zephaniah 2:4-15; Haggai 2:21-22; Zechariah 9:1-8; and Malachi 1:2-5. The only prophetic book devoid of the OAN genre is Hosea.

[15] It is impossible as well as unnecessary to choose one particular social setting for the OAN; cf. John Hayes, "The Usage of Oracles Against Foreign Nations in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 87 (1968), 81-92. Ronald Clements maintains that there was no exclusive setting for the OAN (*Prophecy and Tradition: Growing Points in Theology* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975], 72).

ness,[16] making an eighth oracle unexpected. Little did the audience (presumably at Bethel) know that the prophet's analysis of the crimes of the nations was in reality a noose that was getting ready to tighten around its neck!

The Israel oracle, therefore, is the culmination of Amos's OAN and the rhetorical goal of 1:3-2:5. The first seven oracles were small sparks of fire when compared to the mighty blaze that fell upon the leadership of the Northern Kingdom.[17] Julius Wellhausen classically puts it this way: "das Gewitter schliesslich in Israel selbst einschlägt"[18]—"the thunderstorm finally smashed into Israel itself."

In the context of judgment against other nations, Amos's audience would not have expected a judgment oracle against them. But Amos intends to include the Northern Kingdom among Yahweh's enemies.[19] He inverts the genre of OAN to announce Law to people expecting Gospel.[20] Amos upsets the equilibrium of those in his audience who were embracing the belief, "Come weal, come woe; our status is quo." But the inversions are just getting started!

Amos 3:1-2

Amos begins this section with the words, "Hear this word that Yahweh has spoken concerning you, O children of Israel, concerning the entire clan which I brought up from Egypt, saying..." (3:1). His audience might have concluded at the end of this verse that the exodus was a sign of Yahweh's ongoing and eternal favor (e.g., Num. 24:8; Judg. 6:13; 1 Kings 8:51-51); it forever guaranteed Israel's "favored nation status" before Yahweh.

In the next verse, however, Amos flatly contradicts these expectations. He quotes Yahweh as saying, "You alone have I known (יָדַעְתִּי) from all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you the fruit of all your iniquities" (3:2). Amos inverts the election verb ידע.[21] Just as he shocked

[16] E.g., Genesis 1:1-2:3; 4:15, 24; Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24; Daniel 9:24-27; Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:4; and much of the book of Revelation.

[17] Although judgment by fire—cited in the previous seven oracles—is not invoked in the oracle against Israel, in 5:6 and 7:4 fire is Yahweh's means to judge the Northern Kingdom.

[18] Julius Wellhausen, *Die Kleinen Propheten übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin: Reiner, 1898), 71.

[19] Isaiah employs the same rhetorical strategy when he includes Jerusalem (22:1-14) in his OAN in chapters. 13-23.

[20] Horace Hummel writes, "Most commentators also agree that Amos here artfully uses the rhetorical device known as *captatio benevolentiae*. That is, first he gains his audience's attention and goodwill by condemning other people, saving his 'knockout blow' until he has them 'eating out of his hand'" (*The Word Becoming Flesh* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1979], 312).

[21] Mays believes this use of the tradition is "radical, breathtaking" (*Amos*, 57); Andersen and Freedman claim the pericope is evidence of Amos's "characteristic vigor and irony" (*Amos*, 381).

his unwary audience with the Israel oracle (2:6-16), so again he overturns expectations by using Yahweh's Gospel events to speak judgment and Law.

The problem was that the nation's elite boasted that because of election they were "the first among the nations" (6:1b). The leadership believed that "evil will not even come close, much less confront us" (9:10).[22] They "knew that they knew" that Yahweh was with them (5:14). Enjoying their economic success (4:1; 6:4-5; 8:5-6), and celebrating their victories on the battlefield (6:13), Israel's *crème de la crème* was sure that the "day of Yahweh" (cf. 5:18) would be for them a day of light and gladness. "In other words, God was unconditionally on their side."[23] The shocking surprise in Amos 3:2 is this. *Because* of their closeness to Yahweh, Israel's elite will *all the more* be punished. Hans W. Wolff summarizes it well: "...he first calls to account those whom he has first called as his own."[24]

What is striking in 3:2 is that Amos does not state that it is because of Israel's sins that the nation is judged; it is rather because of Israel's covenant status. The inversion consists of making election the basis for judgment.[25] Just as he does in 1:3-2:16, the prophet takes a Gospel tradition and places it within the context of a judgment oracle. Amos employs earlier texts in totally new ways to reverse the expected conclusions of his audience to the end that they will awaken from their spiritual slumber (cf. Eph. 5:14).

Amos 4:4-5

Amos has inverted Israel's OAN genre (1:3-2:16) and her doctrine of election (3:1-2). Now in 4:4-5 he takes the genre of priestly Torah and turns it upside down. The prophet imitates the priestly call to worship, not because Israel's worship violated Levitical standards, but because justice and righteousness had been thrown down and poisoned (cf. 5:7, 24; 6:12).

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[22] J. A. Motyer writes, "The people to whom Amos spoke had devalued the doctrine of election into a non-moral doctrine of divine favouritism; Israel was God's 'pet,' surrounded by a divine imperial preference, protected, subsidized, the recipient of many unique allowances and special pleadings" (*The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974], 50). He goes on to write, "Special privileges, special obligations; special grace, special holiness; special revelation, special scrutiny; special love, special responsiveness...the church of God cannot ever escape the perils of its uniqueness" (68).

[23] Motyer, *The Day of the Lion*, 68. Andersen and Freedman state, "...people would naturally react by saying that the idea was unthinkable and impossible because they were Yahweh's people and he was their God—while they were bound to him, he was also bound to them.... They were tied together indissolubly in a mutual assistance pact. In drawing his conclusion Amos could not be more wrong; hence he could not be a prophet at all, and certainly not a true one" (*Amos*, 30).

[24] Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 172.

[25] Wolff writes, "Contrary to the normal procedure, therefore, it is not an infraction of the law which is the reason for punishment, but rather it is Yahweh's own saving act which establishes the ground for punishment" (*Joel and Amos*, 175).

Psalm 95:6-7 is a familiar liturgical piece in the Office of Matins: "O come (לְכוּ), let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before Yahweh our Maker. For (כִּי) He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand." These verses display a two-part structure: (1) the invitation, using an imperative verb (in this case the *qal*, second person imperative of הלך), and (2) the reason expressed in the sentence with the word כִּי ("for," "because"). Psalm 81:1-5 functions in a similar manner. It begins with multiple commands to praise Yahweh, "Sing aloud...shout for joy...blow the trumpet...." These imperatives are followed with "for (כִּי) it is a statute for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob." A pilgrim coming to the sanctuary at Bethel in all likelihood would anticipate these kinds of invitations in Psalms 81 and 95. Amos offers a similar invitation, but turns the established pattern on its head.

Imitating the call to worship, Amos 4:4 begins with an imperative of בוא.[26] "Come (בֹּאוּ) to Bethel," Amos cries out. Then the other shoe drops. Instead of continuing with the theme of worship, kneeling or bowing down, he says, "and commit a crime" (וּפִשְׁעוּ). Amos employs the verb פשע throughout 1:3-2:3 to denote "crimes against humanity." These crimes are as follows:

1. The Arameans used animals to drag flint-studded, weighted pieces of wood back and forth across the prostrate bodies of the Gileadites; this is comparable to impaling and skinning people alive (1:3-5).[27]
2. The textual movement from Damascus/Aram (1:3-5) to Gaza/Philistia (1:6-8) is a move "from the battle-field to the board-room, from the camp to the counter."[28] The city/state of Gaza is ushered before Yahweh's judgment seat because of its practice of selling off conquered peoples as slaves.
3. The charge against Tyre (1:9-10) echoes the previous oracle against Gaza/Philistia, which is similarly accused of handing over an entire community to Edom (1:6). These two nations located on the Mediterranean coast are guilty of complicity in the same crime—slave trade.
4. Edom is accused of pursuing his brother with a sword and ripping open pregnant women (1:11-12).[29] The use of אָחִיו ("his brother")

[26] The imperative verb בוא functions as a call for pilgrims to worship in e.g., Hosea 4:15; Isaiah 1:12; Joel 1:13; Psalm 100:4.

[27] The vassal treaties of Esarhaddon include the following consequence of covenant disloyalty: "Just as honeycomb is pierced through and through with holes, so may holes be pierced through and through in your flesh, the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and daughters while you are alive" (James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1969], 539-540). The same idea is expressed in Micah 4:13.

[28] Motyer, *The Day of the Lion*, 40.

[29] The problem with the appearance of רחם in 1:11 is that a concrete noun is expected to be parallel with אָחִיו ("his brother"), rather than this abstract one, "his affections"

may refer to the kinship between Edom and Israel, as Esau and Jacob are often referred to as "brothers" (cf. Gen. 25:19; 27:40-41; Num. 20:14; Obad. 10, 12).[30] The crime is then understood as a "violation of the customary ethos of kinship obligations."[31]

5. Ammon also ripped open the stomachs of pregnant women (1:13-15). Daniel Simundson writes, "One shudders to think of the viciousness of killing two lives with one slash for the sake of national expansion;"[32]
6. While Edomites and Ammonites are judged because they destroyed the future, i.e., children in their mother's wombs (1:11, 13), Moabites fall under Yahweh's judgment because they destroyed the past, burned a dead king's bones (2:1-3). These three oracles are therefore woven together by means of a common theme—taking diabolical advantage of helpless people, the fetus *in utero* and the corpse in the grave.

The shock in Amos 4:4, therefore, is that Israel's worship life is placed on the same moral level as these crimes of the nations! *Worship* is a crime against the Divine *Suzerain*. Imagine this sign on a marquee outside of a Christian sanctuary: "Come to this Church and Commit a Crime!"

Amos 4:4-5 goes on to list the normally pious actions of offering sacrifices, bringing tithes, and presenting thank and freewill offerings. These sound more like a list that a church would draw up to describe her "member of the year" rather than an indictment for excommunication. But Israel's elite had the form of godliness while denying its power (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5). Mays writes, "Amos usurps the role of the priests and exhorts the congregation in a shocking parody of ecclesiastical language that must have sounded like irreverent blasphemy."[33]

Amos 5:1-17

The funerary lament in Amos 5:1-17 is similar to David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19-27). Amos 5:1-17 shares the

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(רַחֶמָיו). Because of this, both the LXX (μήτραν) and Jerome (*vulvam eius*) interpret the word concretely as "womb." Understood in this way, רחם adds a link to the mutual crimes of Edom and Ammon (cf. 1:13): both wielded the sword in order to kill females and their babies.

[30] Amos 1:11 includes two allusions to the Jacob-Esau narrative. First, Esau is promised in his blessing that he will live by the sword (וְעַל־חַרְבְּךָ תִחְיֶה; Gen. 27:40). Second, Rebekah thinks that Esau's wrath will only be temporary (Gen. 27:44-45); however, Amos says that it will endure for all time (אַפּוֹ וְעֶבְרָתוֹ שָׁמְרָה נֶצַח).

[31] Mays, *Amos*, 35.

[32] Daniel Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 170.

[33] Mayes, *Amos*, 74 (n. 15).

following elements with David's funerary dirge:[34] (1) a description of the death (Amos 5:2-3; 2 Sam. 1:19, 23, 25, 27); (2) the call for the survivors to respond (Amos 5:4-6, 14-15; 2 Sam. 1:20); (3) a direct address to the deceased (Amos 5:7-13; 2 Sam. 1:26); and (4) a call to lament (Amos 5:1, 16-17; 2 Sam. 1:21). These similarities indicate that Amos is inverting still another genre to suit his rhetorical purposes. In this case he is lamenting the death of a nation that is still very much physically alive!

Amos begins in verse 1 with the noun קִינָה, which denotes a mourning song for dead people. Those who heard verse 1 would naturally ask, "Who died?" The answer in verse 2 is, "*You*, but you aren't aware of it yet!" In the hands of Amos, the dirge communicates the leadership's folly; death negates all of its claims of invincibility (e.g., 6:13; 9:10). The inversion is that, physically, the prophet's audience is very much alive, but spiritually they are dead (cf. Rev. 3:1). People are being addressed as though they are unburied corpses.

Amos continues his strategy of inversion in 5:17. Yahweh's promise כִּי־אֶעֱבֹר בְּקִרְבֶּךָ ("I will pass through your midst") in this verse is very similar to Exodus 12:12, "And I will pass through (וְעָבַרְתִּי) the land of Egypt" as well as Exodus 12:23, "And Yahweh will pass through (וְעָבַר) to strike Egypt." Just as Yahweh passed through Egypt and killed the firstborn of every human and animal, so He will again launch an attack. When Yahweh passes through, it will not be to destroy Israel's enemies, but rather to destroy His new enemy—*Israel!*

Amos 5:18-20

In 5:18-20 Amos employs a woe-oracle, a rhetorical question, and a gripping simile to shock his audience out of their lukewarm state (cf. Rev. 3:16). Who was the prophet's audience? They were the government officials making a killing—literally—by storing up ill-gotten gain (3:11). They were legal "experts" turning justice into wormwood (5:7). They were the tradesmen trampling the poor and needy (2:7; 8:4). They were the priestly class silencing the prophetic voice (7:10-17). In short, they were the "movers and shakers" who ignored "small Jacob" (7:2, 5), even while they said, "Evil will not come upon us" (9:10b).

Amos begins this unit with the cry הוֹי which is often translated as "woe," "וָאו" "alas," or something along these lines.[35] Much like church bells in a small town tolling to announce a funeral, when a person cried out "הוֹי"

[34] What follows is from Douglas Stuart, *Hosea—Jonah* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 344.

[35] James Williams believes that Amos was "more than likely the first figure in the history of Israelite prophetism to appropriate the הוי lament and employ it in prophetic oracles" ("The Alas Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets," *HUCA* [1967], 75-91, 88; cf. also Waldemar Janzen, Mourning Cry and Woe Oracle, *BZAW* 125 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972], 84).

one would immediately ask, "Who died?" In Amos's case the answer would be, "*You*!"

In his next inversion Amos announces that the Day of the Lord will actually be the *Night* of the Lord. The phrase יוֹם יְהוָה ("the Day of Yahweh") makes its first appearance in the Old Testament in Amos 5:18-20.[36] This oracle assumes that there were those listening to Amos who could identify with the phrase. Both the rhetorical questions and the repetition of the contrast between "darkness and not light" suggest that the prophet was trying to refute a widely held view that "the Day of Yahweh" would usher in more of Yahweh's blessings.[37]

The prophetic discourse, once again, takes a popular tradition that was positively understood and turns it upside-down. Contrary to popular opinion, when Yahweh appears it will not be a day of national victory and celebration but a night of horrific disaster and defeat. A person will keep experiencing miraculous escapes until "peace at last" turns out to be a biting serpent (5:19).

Amos 9:1-4

In the grand finale of his series of five visions,[38] Amos again takes several time-honored ideas and inverts them. His first move is to employ a cosmological merism in verses 2-3 by means of "Sheol" and "heaven" (v. 2) and "Mt. Carmel" and "the ocean floor" (v. 3).[39] Some psalms employ merism in order to extol Yahweh for His universal power and protecting presence. For example, Psalm 95:3-5 praises Yahweh "in [whose] hands are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are His also" (cf. Pss. 103:11-12; 139:7 [MT 8]; 148:1, 7). However, Amos uses the motif as a guarantee of Yahweh's *destructive* dominion.[40] What was normally affirmed as hopeful—Yahweh's dominion over the universe—is Israel's reason to be utterly hopeless.

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[36] The term יוֹם יְהוָה appears twenty-nine times in the Old Testament, always in prophetic texts, e.g., Isaiah 13:6, 9; Jeremiah 46:1; Ezekiel 13:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; Obadiah 15; Zechariah 1:7; 14; Malachi 3:23.

[37] Stuart writes, "Like the student who receives an 'F' for a paper he thought was brilliant, or the employee fired after doing what he thought was excellent work, or the person whose spouse suddenly announces that he or she wants a divorce when the marriage seemed to be going so well, the Israelites were undoubtedly stunned by such a reversal of their expectations" (Stuart, *Hosea—Jonah*, 354).

[38] In the first vision Amos sees a locust plague (7:1-3); parallel to it is the second vision in 7:4-6, where Amos sees divine fire. In his third vision the prophet sees plaster (7:7-9), while parallel with it is the fourth vision, where Amos is shown a basket of summer fruit (8:1-3).

[39] A merism is a synecdoche in which a totality is expressed by contrasting parts; e.g., "heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1) denotes everything; "from the least of them to the greatest of them" (Jonah 3:5) denotes everybody.

[40] Mays observes, "The hymnic theme is reversed" (*Amos*, 154). J. A. Soggin calls it "a negative parallel to Psalm 139" (*The Prophet Amos: A Translation and Commentary* [London: SCM, 1987], 123).

The second inversion is in verse 4, שׂים עֵינַי עָל ("to set an eye upon"). These words are employed in the Old Testament in a positive sense (e.g., Gen. 44:21; Jer. 24:6; 39:12), yet Amos indicates that Yahweh will "set His eye upon them for *evil* (רעה) and not for good."

Amos 9:7

Israel's leaders believed they were eternally in a position of grace and goodness because of Yahweh's rescue of the nation from Egyptian bondage. It was as though they embraced a "once saved, always saved" theology. But the exodus did not automatically imply Yahweh's divine protection for Israel. In 9:7 Amos records Yahweh as asking, "Are not you like the sons of the Cushites to me? O sons of Israel?' Oracle of Yahweh. 'Did not I bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Qir?'"

The first people Amos compares Israel with are the Cushites.[41] This reference to Cush in Amos, as well as in Isaiah 18, is less about Cush specifically and more about the concept of the farthest reaches of the known lands. That is to say, the people described as "tall and smooth" (Is. 18:2, 7) are not a specific people, nor is a specific destination stated, only both "near and far" (Is. 18:7). Instead of concerning a specific nation, Isaiah is addressing the nations in general.[42] In like manner, Amos employs Cush not because of the color of their skin (cf. Jer. 13:23) or their status as slaves (2 Sam. 18:21; Jer. 38:7), but rather because they represent a distant land (Esther 1:1; 8:9) and, as such, indicate that "even the most inaccessible nation is still under God's surveillance and sovereignty."[43] Yahweh has no "favorites" ethnically, geographically, politically, or historically (cf. Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9).

Yahweh is Lord over the Cushites— indeed over the entire world—but also over those who live within a closer proximity to Israel, in this case also the Arameans and the Philistines, some of the nation's fiercest adversaries.[44] Amos employs a salvific verb (עלה in the *hiphil* stem) with Yahweh

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[41] Cf. Numbers 12:1 where Aaron and Miriam oppose Moses because of his Cushite wife. If the attitude of Moses' siblings reflects Israel's attitude about Cush in general, then to equate Israel with such a people would be particularly humiliating and an affront to their election as Yahweh's people.

[42] In like manner, in Isaiah 34 Edom is a cipher for all of the enemies of Israel. Likewise Ezekiel 38 and 39 are universal oracles, couched in the title "Gog of Magog."

[43] Paul, *Amos*, 282.

[44] The theme of Yahweh's protection and care for "outsiders" is demonstrated, for example, throughout the book of Genesis. He delivers Hagar and Ishmael (16:7-14; 21:15-21), for He is "with the boy" (21:20) even after he leaves the home of the chosen. Yahweh also delivers Abimelech and his family (20:17-18), and the Egyptians together with Joseph witness Yahweh's preservation of life (41:38; 45:4-9; 50:20). Yahweh's grace bestowed upon Egypt includes "the entire world" (41:57). Foundational to all of Yahweh's care and deliverance of "outsiders" is His covenant made with Noah and all flesh (9:9-17).

as the subject in relation to Israel's *enemies*.[45]

These comparisons indicate that in Yahweh's eyes Israel is *just like* Cush, Philistia, and Aram. One can almost hear the audience's reaction: "You have made them equal to us" (Matt. 20:12). Once again, "salvation history is proclaimed as judgment history."[46]

Conclusions

Amos lived among people who did not seem to notice, did not seem to care, and were unable to act. Their leader—Jeroboam ben Joash, ca. 793/2-753/2 B.C. had closed his eyes to human needs, economic inequities, and broken social systems. There remained only "horses and chariots" (Ps. 20:7), unbridled greed, brutality, technology, and stinginess (cf. Deut. 17:14-20). Leadership in the Northern Kingdom was undisturbed and insensitive to these maladies. In this context Amos could not have been effective if he had employed stereotypical language because stereotypical language is a language of cliché. The immediate danger of cliché is the audience's passive response. This is what Homer meant when he spoke about the poet's creativity: "For men praise that song the most which comes the newest to their ears."[47] Amos had to invert language and genres in order to gain a hearing from people.

Jesus went even further than Amos. He not only uttered subversive words, He is *the* subversive Word. Jesus employed inversions in His antagonistic context (e.g., Matt. 23:25-26; Mark 3:6; Luke 4:28-29; John 8:59). Of course, His most well-known are in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-23). But He also says, "For whoever wants to *save* his life will *lose* it" (Matt. 16:25), "The *last* will be *first* and the *first* will be *last*" (Matt. 19:30; 20:8) and "Let the *greatest* among you become as the youngest and the one who *rules* like the one who *serves*" (Luke 22:26). The most joyful Pauline inversion is the promise, "He who had no sin became sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Indeed, inversion is more than an effective homiletical technique. Inversion is the very heart of the Gospel itself.

We can learn from Amos's rhetorical strategies because far too often our sermons are full of dull, conventional, and routinized speech. People slumber spiritually because they become used to theological jargon. One alternative is to employ adrenalin-laden inversions that push beyond the status quo. To be sure, the preaching of Law and Gospel requires language that is faithful to the text and in accord with sound doctrine. But at the

[45] Abraham Heschel writes, "The nations chosen for this comparison were not distinguished for might and prestige—countries such as Egypt or Assyria—but rather, nations which were despised and disliked" (*The Prophets*, vol. 1 [Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2004], 33).

[46] Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 170.

[47] As noted by Yehoshua Gitay, "Reflections on the Study of Prophetic Discourse: The Question of Isaiah 2-12," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 213, 223-230.

same time it must shock sensitivity, call attention to what is not noticed, break the routine, and cause people to redescribe things that have long since seemed settled.

But Amos offers more than just a *rhetoric* of preaching; he also teaches a *theology* of preaching.[48] The prophet's audience readily accepted Yahweh's past action of the exodus and conquest (e.g., 2:9-11), even as they longed for Yahweh's future action (e.g., 5:18). But Israel's elite had no room for a *present* word from Yahweh. They did everything they could to squelch the *viva vox Dei* (2:12; 7:10-17). Their reasoning went something like this: "If we can successfully deny that Yahweh has any word for us in the present moment, then we can remain 'religious' and even 'orthodox' and still be free to do anything we want!" Amos's theological task, then, was to strip away the past and the future and confront Israel's leadership with Yahweh's Word for the present moment.

Luther stated this theology of preaching in the well-known phrase, *viva vox evangelii*—"the living voice of the Gospel." The reformer stated that when a pastor steps down from the pulpit, he may say "with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets...'Here God speaks.' God himself has said it. And I repeat it...[W]hoever cannot boast like that about his sermon should leave preaching alone."[49] Much is made of the doctrine of the Real Presence in Luther's sacramental theology, yet he also had another "Real Presence"—the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in proclamation. In this way Luther followed in the footsteps of Paul, who "placards" Christ before the eyes of his hearers (Gal. 3:1) and brings people into the present moment: "Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2; cf. Rom. 8:1). Although the history of Israel and Jesus are once-for-all, finished, and by-gone events, they still have contemporary relevance for people. The Word of God "is living and active" (Heb. 4:12); it still confronts and courts and claims. Preaching is to take past history and future events to confront people in the present moment.

If the past and future are the only focal points in our preaching, then our error is not only rhetorical; it is theological. A sermon that focuses solely upon what God has done in the past or will do in the future neglects that preaching is the proclamation of the *viva vox Dei*. God always has a present Word for His people. Christ is not preached if He is not preached as condemning and absolving *now*.

Gerhard Forde maintains that all too often the proclamation of the Gospel gets displaced by explanation, teaching, lecturing, and the like.[50] But Lutheran preaching—indeed prophetic and apostolic preaching—is to be "the direct declaration of the Word of God, that is, the Word *from* God";[51]

[48] I am indebted to Dr. David Schmitt, Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Concordia Seminary, for many of the insights in this section.

[49] WA 51, 517. Cf. Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983).

[50] Gerhard Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 1.

[51] Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 2 (emphasis in the original).

this, as opposed to preaching *about* God. Preaching like Amos means that we include present-tense verbs and first and second person nouns. Just as the pastor absolves, baptizes, and distributes the Eucharist in the present tense, so the sermon is to be God's present action, His current mighty act.

Moral chaos and unbridled exploitation will not change through more advanced church programs or better parish strategies, but rather by the bold and rhetorically charged proclamation of Yahweh's Word for the present moment. This Word brings holiness back into history, lets justice sound in the presence of oppression, embraces suffering in a climate of complacency, voices hope in the midst of despair, and refuses brutality in the name of the coming kingdom of Christ.

Instructed by Amos and fired by the Holy Spirit, the employment of the homiletical strategy of inversion uses Law for the sake of the Gospel in order to awaken the church from what has grown ordinary, stale, and routine. Following the lead of Amos, pastors will be better equipped to proclaim Yahweh's Word of Law that finally yields to the Gospel's greatest inversion of all "Why do you look for the living among the *dead*? He is not here; He has *risen*!" (Luke 24:5b-6a).