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CRITICAL NOTE

THE ORDER OF AMOS'S ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS: 1:3–2:16

One of the challenges of understanding the oracles of Amos 1–2 is explaining the order of the oracles. Many scholars consider some of the oracles secondary (usually those against Tyre, Edom, and Judah). It is often asserted that the secondary oracles replaced original oracles against the same nations, preserving the order in which Amos delivered them.¹ A few scholars have defended the authenticity of all the oracles.² The question to be addressed here is whether there are consistent patterns in the order of Amos's oracles and whether the oracles are a coherent presentation or a simply redactional compilation of oracles attributed to Amos.

I. Previous Attempts to Find a Geographic Order to the Oracles

While there has been much scholarly study of Amos's oracles against the nations, there has been little published concerning the order of these oracles. Aage Bentzen argued that the oracles share a common tradition with the Egyptian execration texts, including a similar order based on their geographic location.³ However, the order in the execration texts (southern nations, northern nations, western nations, individual Egyptians) is different from that of Amos's oracles (northeast [Damascus], southwest [Gaza], northwest [Tyre], southeast [Edom, Ammon, Moab], south [Judah] and Israel itself). In addition, Meir Weiss has argued that the pattern of the execration texts does

¹ William Rainey Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (ICC 23; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936) cxxx–cxxxii; Arvid Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1961) 24–30; Edmond Jacob, Carl-A. Keller, and Samuel Amsler, *Osèe Joël, Abdias, Jonas, Amos* (CAT 11a; Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1965) 170; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 139–42; John Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations* (SOTSMS 6; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 22–24; Robert Martin-Achard and S. Paul Reëmi, *Amos and Lamentations: God's People in Crisis* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); J. Alberto Soggin, *The Prophet Amos* (London: SCM, 1987) 17–18.

² Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (trans. John Sturdy; New York: Schocken Books, 1970) 35, 37–38, 45–46; John H. Hayes, *Amos the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 52–55.

³ Aage Bentzen, "The Ritual Background of Amos i.2–ii.16," *OTS* 8 (1950) 85–99.

not prove much since nearly *all* Egyptian documents follow the order south–north–west and the oracles of Amos do not conform to this pattern.⁴

K. Marti argued that the pattern of the oracles originally followed a geographically circular course from Damascus south to Ammon and Moab, then west to Judah and north to Israel. He held that the oracles that intervened between Damascus and Ammon (Gaza, Tyre, and Edom) were secondary additions.⁵

Marti's reasoning itself seems circular. In order to find the circular pattern one must declare three of the oracles secondary. Then the oracles are declared secondary because of the pattern. For this reason Marti's theory has not found many advocates.

II. Attempts to Find Order in the Oracles' Style

More recently John H. Hayes has argued that there is a different type of pattern in Amos's oracles. He notes (as scholars before him) that four of the oracles (against Damascus, Gaza, Ammon, and Moab, which I will label group 1) contain a common pattern:⁶

1. Introductory formula ("Thus says Yahweh")
2. Formulaic statement ("for three transgressions and for four . . .")
3. Statement of wrongdoing introduced by 'al plus an infinitive construct with pronominal suffix
4. Proclamation of the coming disaster opening with a statement about "fire" and ending with a declarative sentence giving the consequences of divine action
5. Concluding formula ("says [the Lord] Yahweh")

In addition, he notes that in these four oracles the statement of wrongdoing (3) is shorter than the proclamation of disaster (4).⁷

Three of the oracles (against Tyre, Edom, and Judah, which I will label group 2) depart from this pattern in similar ways and for this reason (among others) are often considered secondary:⁸

1. Introductory formula ("Thus says Yahweh")—as in group 1
2. Formulaic statement ("for three transgressions and for four . . .") as in group 1
3. 'al plus infinitive clause expanded by the use of one or more finite verbs
4. Description of coming disaster; no declarative sentence giving the consequences of divine action
5. No concluding formula

In addition, Hayes notes that in these three oracles the statement of wrongdoing (3) is

⁴ Meir Weiss, "The Pattern of the 'Execration Texts' in the Prophetic Literature," *IEJ* 19 (1969) 150–57. More recently Hans Walter Wolff has argued that there is no connection whatsoever between the execration texts and Amos (*Joel and Amos*, 45–47; also Barton, *Amos's Oracles*, 12–14).

⁵ K. Marti, "Zur Komposition von Amos 1:3–2:3," in *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft* (ed. W. Frankenberg and F. Kuchler; BZAW 33; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1918) 323–30.

⁶ Hayes, *Amos*, 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

longer than the description of the coming disaster (4), making the relationship of these features to one another in group 2 exactly opposite of that in group 1.⁹

D. N. Freedman and F. I. Andersen note that the fourth feature, which characterizes the oracles of group 1 and is absent from group 2 (the description of the coming disaster), is a four-colon unit.¹⁰

The final oracle (against Israel) belongs to group 2. It contains an expanded *‘al* + infinitive clause, but does not have the four-colon unit or the concluding formula.¹¹ The oracle against Israel is unique in one feature: it does not contain what Freedman and Andersen call the “punishment formula” (“and I will send fire against . . .”), which appears in the other seven oracles. However, Freedman and Andersen point out that Israel’s punishment is found elsewhere in the book (especially 3:11).¹² Since the oracle against Israel is the climax of the oracles and begins Amos’s focus on Israel, it is not surprising that he reserves the threat of punishment for the rest of the book.

When these are put in the order they appear, it can easily be seen that there is an alternation between the oracles of group 1 and the oracles of group 2 (see table 1).

Table 1

Alternation between Groups 1 and 2 in Amos’s Oracles

Text	Nation	Group
1:3–5	Damascus	1
1:6–8	Gaza	1
1:9–10	Tyre	2
1:11–12	Edom	2
1:13–15	Ammon	1
1:1–3	Moab	1
1:4–5	Judah	2
1:6–16	Israel	2

There are two nations from group 1 followed by two from group 2. These are, in turn, followed by two more from group 1 and one from group 2. The final nation, Israel, which is the focus of Amos’s prophecy, is somewhat different from the other oracles, but is a member of group 2.

In addition to this pattern Shalom M. Paul observed that the oracles against the first six nations are linked to one another in a concatenous pattern formed by catchwords or phrases used in adjacent oracles.¹³ Paul demonstrates that this

⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989) 211–13.

¹¹ See the chart in Freedman and Andersen, *Amos*, 213.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

¹³ Shalom M. Paul, “Amos 1:3–2:3: A Concatenous Literary Pattern,” *JBL* 90 (1971) 397–403. Keith N. Schoville claims that the pattern is not strictly confined to adjacent oracles in the cases of Gaza, Tyre, and Edom (“A Note on the Oracles of Amos Against Gaza, Tyre, and Edom,” in *Studies on Prophecy* [VTSup 26; Leiden: Brill, 1974] 55–63).

concatenous pattern links the oracles to each other according to the scheme outlined in table 2.¹⁴

Table 2

The Concatenous Pattern in Amos's Oracles

Nation	Catchword or Phrase	Text
Damascus	I will cut off the inhabitant from (the valley of Aven) and the one who holds the scepter in (Beth Eden) (והכרתי יושב מן בקעת און) ותומך שבט מן בית עדן)	1:5
Gaza	I will cut off the inhabitant from (Ashdod) and the one who holds the scepter from (Ashkelon) (והכרתי יושב מן אשדוד) ותומך שבט מן אשקלון)	1:8
Gaza	because they took captive the entire captivity to deliver them to Edom על הגלותם גלות שלמה להסגיר לארם	1:6
Tyre	because they delivered the entire captivity to Edom על הסגידם גלות שלמה לארם	1:9
Tyre	and did not remember the covenant of brothers ולא זכרו ברית אחים	1:9
Edom	his brother אחיו	1:11
Edom	because he pursued his brother with the sword and destroyed girls על ררפו בחרב אחיו ושחת רחמיו	1:11
Ammon	because he ripped open pregnant women of Gilead על בקעם הרות הגלעד	1:13
Ammon	with shouting; his princes בחרועה . . . ושריו	1:14, 15
Moab	with shouting; its princes בחרועה . . . שריה	2:2, 3

¹⁴ Paul, "Amos 1:3–2:3," 401. The translations given are those suggested by Paul.

III. Two Other Patterns in Amos's Oracles

These literary patterns are interesting but do not completely explain the order of the nations. For instance, in looking at group 1, why do Damascus and Gaza precede Ammon and Moab? Or, for that matter, why does Damascus precede Gaza or Ammon precede Moab? In order to detect the reason for this, two observations must be made: First, the nations of the oracles are presented in three groups: (a) The first three oracles address city-states: Damascus, Gaza and its sister city-states, and Tyre. (b) The next three oracles address nations by their national identity: Edom, the sons of Ammon, and Moab. (c) Finally, Judah and Israel are presented as special nations with a special relationship to Yahweh. Only in the oracles against Judah and Israel is there a presumption of this special status. Only these two nations are accused of religious crimes (2:4, 7, 8, 12). Furthermore, Judah broke Yahweh's Torah (2:4), and Israel forgot how Yahweh defeated the Amorites, brought them out of Egypt, and gave them Nazirites and prophets (2:10-11). Moreover, the oracles against Judah and Israel are not linked to the previous six by means of a concatenous chain of catchwords. This feature highlights their unique status before Yahweh. Second, the oracles alternate between nations that are neighbors of Israel and nations that are neighbors of Judah.

Table 3 presents these patterns along with the pattern from table 1.

Table 3

Amos's Oracles and Several Characteristics of the Nations

Text	Nation	Presented as	Neighbor of	Group
1:3-5	Damascus	City-State	Israel	1
1:6-8	Gaza	City-State	Judah	1
1:9-10	Tyre	City-State	Israel	2
1:11-12	Edom	Nation	Judah	2
1:13-15	Ammon	Nation	Israel	1
2:1-3	Moab	Nation	Judah	1
2:4-5	Judah	Special Nation	Israel	2
2:6-16	Israel	Special Nation	Judah	2

From table 3 it can be seen how the oracles are organized. The nations alternate between those that border Israel and those that border Judah. As they alternate they move progressively closer to Israel and Judah's common border. Damascus and Tyre were on Israel's extreme northern border. Gaza and Edom were on Judah's extreme southern border. Ammon was further south on Israel's eastern flank. Moab was further north on Judah's eastern flank, across the Dead Sea. Judah and Israel shared a common border.

This pattern is interlocked with another pattern, that of the manner in which the nations are presented. The Arameans, Philistines, and Phoenicians are presented by their leading city-states. Next the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites are presented by their national identities. Judah and Israel are presented in a manner similar to that of the preceding three nations, except that their special relationship to Yahweh is

noted. That there are two groups of three nations followed by one group of two is significant. It may be that Israel is, in effect, the second and third nations of the final group. The oracle against Israel is four times as long as the average length of the other oracles.¹⁵ Thus, the author of Amos 1–2 may have expected the audience to consider Israel as receiving a “double portion” of punishment, since it is the focus of his prophecy.

Both of these patterns (manner of presentation [city-state, nation, or special nation] and geographic location) are interlocked with a literary pattern, that of the alternation between groups 1 and 2. Thus, Amos’s oracles against the nations are arranged in three interlocking patterns with a fourth pattern, the concatenous chain, extending over the first six oracles.

IV. Conclusion

What are the consequences of recognizing these patterns in the order of Amos’s oracles? Many scholars have held that some or all of the oracles of group 2 are secondary additions and not from the original author of Amos 1–2.¹⁶ Occasionally there have been arguments against these oracles on historical grounds or because the theological condemnation against Judah lists no specific crimes.¹⁷ More often, however, these oracles are presumed to be secondary because of their unique (as a group) syntactic, stylistic, and structural features (listed above).

Nevertheless, Hayes, Hammershaimb, and Freedman and Andersen have argued that the oracles of group 2 are original.¹⁸ Amos (or whoever was the author of chaps. 1 and 2) was creative and varied his presentation. Hayes notes:

None of these arguments against the genuineness of any of the nation oracles seems well founded. The entire section appears to be a well-structured, artistic unit with sufficient framing to provide repetition and regularity, allowing the hearer/reader to anticipate, and yet with sufficiently varied structural blocks to stimulate interest and appeal to the intellect.¹⁹

Noting the three interlocking patterns and the concatenous chain of the oracles lends even more weight to Hayes’s argument that this is a “well-structured, artistic unit.” Although it is possible that a later redactor might have added the oracles against Tyre, Edom, and Judah and edited (and arranged?) the oracles so as to produce the threefold interlocking pattern of these eight oracles and the concatenous pattern of the first six, it is less cumbersome (and produces a less complicated scenario) to posit that all the oracles in their present form are to be attributed to the author of Amos 1–2.

¹⁵ The length of the oracles is as follows: Damascus, 42 words; Gaza, 39 words; Tyre, 26 words; Edom, 29 words; Ammon, 38 words; Moab, 38 words; Judah, 31 words; Israel, 145 words; average of oracles 1–7, 35 words.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 140. Wolff notes that Wellhausen, Marti, Nowack, Sellin, Weiser, and Werner H. Schmidt also held this opinion.

¹⁷ See B. Duhm, “Anmerkungen zu den Zwölf Propheten. I. Buch Amos,” *ZAW* 31 (1911) 1–18; Marti, “Komposition,” 323–30.

¹⁸ Hayes, *Amos*, 52–55; Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 213.

¹⁹ Hayes, *Amos*, 55.

Conversely, if it is assumed that different oracles against Tyre, Edom, and Judah were originally in the text and that a later redactor replaced them with the oracles now present in the text, the problem of the existing interlocking patterns is not solved. It would then have to be posited that the redactor recognized the concatenous pattern and preserved it for the oracles against Tyre and Edom. However, he also would have had to recognize that it did not extend to Judah or Israel and would have had to understand why it did not, so that he did not add such a pattern to link Judah with Moab and Israel with Judah. Such a scenario requires more faith than simply accepting the fact that the oracles and their interlocking patterns and concatenous chain were the product of the original author of Amos 1-2.

Thus, the patterns in the order of the oracles, although not decisive in determining whether all of the oracles are authentic to the original author of Amos 1-2, demonstrate that these oracles are a coherent presentation. Thus, the recognition of these patterns shifts the burden of proof off of those who maintain that these oracles originate from one author and places it on those who maintain that some of them are redactional additions.

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