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Amos, Prophet of Solidarity

Leslie C. Allen

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'No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe.' The Old Testament is a prime witness to this truth. The concept of solidarity underlies much of the New Testament, and it is in the Old that one may see its foundations laid bare. The short book of Amos gives good scope for a probe into this doctrine of involvement. Three aspects are to be considered, covering the unifying ideals of the community and the relationship of prophet and people to God.

I. THE HEAVENLY COUNCIL

The concept of the heavenly council of Yahweh is now a familiar one in Old Testament study. Apart from such fundamental passages as Job 1-2 and 1 Kings 22, it has been seen to embrace many others in its ramifications. In the council Yahweh announced His sovereign will and planned its execution among 'all the host of heaven' and 'the sons of God'. The prophets too were allowed to stand 'in the council of Yahweh to... hear his word' before proclaiming it to the people, according to Jeremiah 23. 18, 22. So far the book of Amos has tended to be left to one side in the search for traces of the idea. Amos has been viewed as a lonely figure who went from private communion with his God to attack a world of corrupt cult, courts and commerce. But evidence is not lacking that Amos saw himself as part of a larger entity. On the human plane, he was doubtless encouraged by his heritage in the goodly fellowship of earlier prophets. In the very rejection of his message he was not alone: others before him had had their message of judgment spurned (2. 11-12; 7. 12ff).¹ But on a higher plane, indications may be found that Amos was aware of involvement with a supernatural group that shared his concern and co-operated in his mission. 'Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod... and say', he had heard Yahweh command (3. 9). But to whom were those plural imperatives addressed? They are surely a telltale sign of the heavenly council. Elsewhere in the prophetic literature similar cryptic plural commands have been recognized as belonging to this setting.² The supernatural heralds of Yahweh are here sped on their way. Amos was privileged to listen in to the briefing of God's heavenly messengers. It is probable that the plural imperatives in 3. 13, 'Hear and give evidence', also belong to the same milieu: the role of witness was often played by members of the divine council.³

But, it may be countered, is it not strange that such a concept has no prominence in the visions of Amos? The prophet sees Yahweh engaged in various activities, but there is no entourage of heavenly courtiers thronging their Lord. Yet a closer look at the fifth vision in chapter 9 reveals evidence of the heavenly council. Attention has been drawn to the similarity between

¹ On the vexed question of the interpretation of 7. 14 the writer sides with J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (1962), 183f. Amos was a prophet, but not in the sense in which Amaziah was familiar with the term. The immediate context suggests that Amos was speaking of his present self-understanding.

² Cf. F. M. Cross, Jr., 'The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953), 274-7 (Isa. 35. 3-4; 40. 1-8; 57. 14); P. D. Miller, 'The Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War', *VT* 18 (1968), 100-107 (Joel 4. 9; Jer. 51. 27-8). On completing this article, the writer discovered that A. S. Kapelrud ('New Ideas in Amos', *VT Supplement* 15, 1966, 199) has briefly noted in 3. 9 'a form which presupposes the divine council'.

³ Cf. G. E. Wright, 'The Lawsuit of God', *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (1962), 42-9. It is less likely that Ashdod/Assyria and Egypt are addressed, as Wright holds on p. 48: this is a separate oracle from vv. 9ff.

this last vision in which Yahweh appears in judgment at the sanctuary and Isaiah's inaugural vision described in Isaiah 6.⁴ It is not without significance that in the latter passage the prophet saw the heavenly courtroom of Yahweh superimposed upon the earthly sanctuary. In 6. 8 Isaiah overhears Yahweh presiding over a session of the council and, now

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purified, is permitted to participate by becoming its representative.⁵ Turning back to Amos 9, one feels justified in looking for a trace of this wider setting in this other theophany. The singular imperatives 'strike' and 'smash' are surely clues to its presence. These commands are doubtless to be regarded as addressed to an individual council member, although it is significant that the execution of the task is explicitly linked with the personal activity of Yahweh, to whom the ultimate power belonged: 'I will slay the last of them'. The sovereignty of God is an integral part of the Old Testament concept of the heavenly council.⁶ Here is a destroying angel or messenger,⁷ commissioned to carry out the will of God, as the spirit was sent forth from the council chamber in I Kings 22. 22, and Satan in Job 1. 12; 2. 6f.⁸

Isaiah 6 contains primarily a vision of call. But it seems to be implied that just before the events described in the vision a decision of judgment had been made, which the prophet was to communicate to the people.⁹ It is interesting to contrast Amos 9 and Isaiah 6 at this point. Amos' vision was one of judgment, to be carried out by a heavenly representative of Yahweh, whereas Isaiah's commenced after the decision of judgment and culminated in his own selection as the messenger. But at some stage in the visions presumably Amos too heard his own commission, which he describes in 7. 15. 'Go, prophesy to my people, Israel' has a striking correspondence to 'Go, and tell this people' in Isaiah 6. 9, which raises the question whether the setting was not originally the same. The initial verb in the latter command follows on from its use in the previous verse, where it is parallel with sending. To go is to be sent forth from the council room as an emissary of Yahweh. A similar verb of motion is used in both 1 Kings 22. 22 ('go forth and do so') and Job 1. 12; 2. 7 ('and he went forth').¹⁰ Accordingly, it is not improbable that the verb has the same background in Amos 7. 15. It has often been suggested that the visions recorded in Amos 7-9 bear a close relationship to Amos' call to the prophetic ministry,¹¹ although there is the obvious difficulty that no such call is explicitly mentioned. Presumably the five visions of judgment had a sequel corresponding to Isaiah 6, of which only the commissioning words have survived, in the third-person narrative of the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah. Doubtless the placing of that narrative within the context of the autobiographical visions was largely inspired by the knowledge that

⁴ Cf. A. Weiser, *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten*, vol. 1 (1949), *ad loc.*; R. Knierim, 'The Vocation of Isaiah', *VT* 18 (1968), 54f.

⁵ It may well be that in the question 'Who shall go for us?' the preposition should be taken as genitival: 'Who of us shall go?' Cf. I. Engnell, *The Call of Isaiah* (1949), 41 note 3.

⁶ 'The members of his assembly... possess no independent authority or even existence or worship. Their being and authority are derived, not primary' (G. E. Wright, *The OT Against its Environment*, 1950, 38).

⁷ For the prevalence of this idea in the OT, cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT*, vol. 2 (Eng. tr. 1967), 201f. It is precarious to argue, as Weiser, *comm. ad loc.*, does, that since the people are mentioned in the third person Yahweh must be addressing the prophet.

⁸ The same verb *hikkâ*, 'strike', is used in Job 2. 7 as in Amos 9. 1.

⁹ Cf. Knierim's valuable article, 57-9.

¹⁰ Heb. *yāsâ*.

¹¹ E.g., cf. R. S. Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos*, 1929, 101; G. von Rad, *OT Theology*, vol. 2 (Eng. tr. 1965), 131f.

Amos was alluding to his own otherwise unrecorded vocational vision of the Lord of the council.

Certain it is that Amos saw himself in the role of a messenger, sent by Yahweh and bearing His authority. Form-critical studies have shown that such is the implication of the prophetic introductory formula 'Thus says Yahweh', used by Amos and others.¹² J. F. Ross has plausibly suggested that the idea of the heavenly council is to be seen as the overall background of the prophetic messages.¹³ Support for this suggestion may well come from the divine title 'Yahweh of hosts' or 'Yahweh, God of hosts', which accompanies the formula of introduction in 5. 16 and is used with a related formula in 3. 13; 6. 8, 14. At times in the Old Testament the title seems to bear the special connotation of the divine council.¹⁴ In the context of formulae announcing divine messages this sense appears particularly fitting.¹⁵ The Lord of the celestial court had spoken, and Amos, like Isaiah after him, was chosen as herald of the divine decisions.

The statement in 3. 7 is apposite here: 'Surely the Lord Yahweh does nothing without revealing his counsel to his servants the prophets'. The verse is usually regarded as a late gloss, and indeed its prose hardly suits the poem in which it is

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set. The third-person phrase 'his servants the prophets' would sound strange on Amos' lips. The phrase itself is characteristic of the age of Jeremiah. But it may be queried whether the verse need be regarded as much later than Amos' own time. J. P. Hyatt has correctly noted that the idea of the verse as such is not foreign to Amos.¹⁶ The term rendered 'counsel' above, but traditionally translated 'secret' as in the Targum, has the primary connotation of 'council' and a secondary one of 'counsel' proceeding from a council.¹⁷ The very word 'servants' has the association of royal ministers in the council chamber of the divine King.¹⁸ Here again appears the concept of the heavenly council. This explanatory statement in 3. 7 may well stem from a circle closely associated with Amos, echoing as it does the motif already seen to be manifest in his own oracles and visions. If so, then Elijah and Elisha are doubtless to the fore in the reference, especially as they regarded themselves as ministers of Yahweh in this same sense (e.g., cf. I Kings 18. 15; 11 Kings 5. 16).¹⁹ Such antecedents as these reinforce the suggestion that Amos 3. 7 is an early comment faithfully reflecting the prophet's own prophetic consciousness.

The notion of the heavenly council has a firm place in the book of Amos. It would be wrong to regard the idea as purely figurative or expressing stereotyped imagery. Rather, what has

¹² Cf. J. F. Ross, 'The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger', *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, 98-107, and literature cited there. As von Rad has observed, the verb should properly be rendered with a past tense, for the prophet is repeating information previously received (*op. cit.*, 38 note 8).

¹³ *Art. cit.*, 105.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (Eng. tr. 1962), 41 (Psa. 89. 6-8 and Isa. 6. 3 are especially interesting references); Cross, *art. cit.*, 274 note 1.

¹⁵ But in 5. 14f and probably in 5. 27, as in the doxologies (4. 13; 9. 5), the title is used in its wider sense.

¹⁶ 'Amos', *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, eds. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (1962), *ad loc.*

¹⁷ Heb. *sôd*. Cf. H. Wheeler Robinson, 'The Council of Yahweh', *JTS* 45 (1944), 152; Ross, *art. cit.*, 102f.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Lindhagen, *The Servant Motif in the OT* (1950), 279; W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (Eng. tr. 1957), 22.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige* (1911-12), vol. 1, ad I Kings 18. 15; J.P. Ross, 'Yahweh Seba' of in Samuel and Psalms', *VT* 17 (1967), 91.

been said of later prophets may be applied to Amos. 'It provides a permanent basis of fellowship, so marked in the dialogues of Jeremiah, whilst also giving occasion for the "high lights" of special moments, as in the call of Isaiah. It introduces the idea of collaboration and of a personal relation more intimate than any external command suggests.'²⁰ Amos did not stand alone. Man as he was, he took a privileged place beside the supernatural ministers and messengers of the King of kings, and doubtless derived sustenance and strength from the knowledge of this fellowship.

II. THE COMMUNITY

Amos assumed the solidarity of the nation to which he was called to prophesy. One way in which this unity finds expression is the treatment of those who heard him as representatives of a larger whole. The prophet identified his audience with a greater entity: his hearers represent their forebears. They are addressed in terms of their ancestors: 'I brought you up out of Egypt and led you in the wilderness...' (2. 10); 'Did you bring me sacrifices... in the wilderness?' (5. 25). They are designated as 'the whole family... brought up out of Egypt' (3.1). Perhaps nobody in the crowd had ever set foot in Egypt personally. But so real was their heritage, so close was their sense of sharing in the community of their forefathers, dead and gone for hundreds of years, that it could be said that they had a share in the experience of the Exodus. Every generation could say in turn: 'We were there when Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt'.²¹ Undoubtedly this conviction was fostered by the cult, which would make frequent use of language of this kind. Amos is echoing cultic terminology for his own prophetic ends and reminding his hearers of a familiar concept. Israel's salvation-history had enduring validity for each successive generation of Israelites.

Also significant is the way in which Amos could address his audience in such national terms as 'Israel' (e.g. 4. 12). He treats his group of hearers as representatives of the total community. It may well be that the oracles which contain an inclusive address of this type were all delivered at a sanctuary, such as Bethel, at

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the time of a festival. The pilgrims who gathered on such an occasion would naturally be reckoned in the cult as the whole people. Amos could easily extend this cultic association and take it for granted in his oracles.

Amos' use of the concept of national solidarity finds further illustration in a narrowing process frequently applied to the nation. It is called Israel's 'house' or family (5. 1, etc.), Jacob's family (3. 13; 9. 8), Isaac's family (7. 16) and Joseph's family (5. 6). The prophet applied terminology basically descriptive of what sociologists have called a primary group to a secondary group, the nation. There is no hint that the idea is a novel one. Amos took up a traditional term and used it pointedly to reinforce his message of solidarity. Over and over again, with merely patronymic variation, he thus stressed the basic unity of the nation, which he had seen so often denied in experience. Less frequently the prophet spoke of 'Israel's sons' (3. 1, 12; 4. 5; 9. 7).²² It is true that this title admits a degree of individualization,²³ but the primary bonds, even if more loosely tied, are still clearly visible in the designation.

²⁰ Wheeler Robinson, *art. cit.*, 156.

²¹ Cf. J. Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, I-II (1926), 278.

²² RSV 'people of Israel'.

Another term originally descriptive of a primary group and re-applied to a secondary society is 'clan' or extended family, used in 3. 1.²⁴ Its context is the introduction to the oracle of 3. 2, and the employment of the term is obviously dependent upon the traditional²⁵ plural use in the actual oracle to describe the nations of the earth. The wide use of the term reveals its semantic fluidity: any national community could be so called.²⁶ But the deliberate way in which the word is taken up in the introduction seems to focus upon its more restricted aspect. The recipients of the oracle all share an intimate relationship as kith and kin through Yahweh's redemptive act.

The illustration in 8. 10 is also relevant here. Coming disaster is compared with 'mourning for an only son'. The community's fate is vividly portrayed in terms of a dreaded family situation. The wiping out of the family name from the face of the earth, which the loss of an only son betokened, was a primary concept real, at least in imagination, to every Israelite. The figure is of a piece with the other primary expressions. National concern would be as total as such a family disaster could evoke in the home. The nation must pay a tragic price for ignoring solidarity hitherto: solidarity of a different kind would be forced upon them.

A more extreme aspect of this narrowing process may be seen in Amos' tendency to refer to the nation in terms of an individual. This trait also appears in references to foreign peoples in the Oracle against the Nations at the beginning of the book: Edom²⁷ and Moab are referred to in singular terms. The use of the collective singular 'the Amorite' in 2. 9f. is also significant. These are examples of the way in which communities could be commonly viewed as single entities. Amos took up this concept and employed it with striking effect. The people are bound together as a corporate personality. His response to the first two visions of destruction is a vivid illustration of this unitary view: 'How can Jacob stand? For he is little' (7. 2, 5). Behind the plea seems to be Amos' personal reaction to the revelation of a transcendent God wreaking mighty destruction. He must have cringed and shrunk within himself at such a sight. Such was his sympathetic concern for the Northern Kingdom that he transferred his own reaction to the nation. He identified them with himself and became their representative and spokesman. In the face of the great God of wrath Israel was, like him, only a puny, little man.²⁸

Closely related to this hapless figure that features in Amos' rejected pleas of

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intercession are two pictures which the prophet drew in his oracles. First, the nation was depicted as 'Israel the virgin... fallen, no more to rise' (5. 2). The metaphor of helpless frailty and premature doom evokes pathos and shock.²⁹ Secondly, he used the simile of a man

²³ Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 246 note 4, finds in it 'a relaxation of the old collective consciousness'.

²⁴ Heb. *mīšpāhâ*. RSV 'family'.

²⁵ Cf. Gen. 12. 3.

²⁶ Cf. Pedersen, *op. cit.*, 46ff.

²⁷ The strophe is often to be secondary, but cf. Hyatt, *comm. ad loc.*; S. Cohen, 'The Political Background of the Words of Amos', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 36 (1965), 159 note 17.

²⁸ Cf. Wheeler Robinson. 'The Hebrew conception of Corporate Personality', *Werden und Wesen des AT, Beihefte zur ZAW* 66 (1936), 56.

²⁹ It is interesting to note that Amos delivered a similar oracle in plural terms (8. 13f.)

defenceless against superior forces to describe the coming plight of the nation: 'as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him...' (5. 19).

The use of second person singular pronouns in 3. 11; 5. 17, 23 stresses the solidarity of the people.³⁰ In 4. 12 the terror of the threat is increased not only by its vagueness but by its note of personal confrontation. The patriarch Jacob's conflict with God may well have been in Amos' mind.³¹ The conflict was to be re-enacted for 'Israel', but this time with dire results.

In the oracles of Amos there appears to be a conscious development of the concept of corporate personality, especially in the context of judgment. The implications of this emphasis are to be discussed in the next section. But it can be noted here that an underlying reason for the emphasis may be found in the contemporary social situation, which Amos poignantly described as 'the breaking of Joseph' (6. 6). The élite had no sense of responsibility towards the lower classes; they were not 'sickened'³² by the moral 'breakdown' of society.³³ The noun is often used in a physical sense of the fracture of a limb. Its association with a verb of sickness strongly implies a conscious metaphorical meaning of a similar kind here; compare Moffatt's rendering 'with never a single thought for the bleeding wounds of the nation'. One is forcefully reminded of Isaiah's description of national ruin in terms of the wounding of the body politic: 'From the sole of the foot up to the head there is no soundness in it, but bruises and weals and raw wounds, not cleaned of pus nor bandaged nor softened with oil' (1. 5f). It may well be significant that anointing with oil has been mentioned by Amos just before as a feature of the dinner parties of the élite. Joseph needs oil of a different kind, as ointment for wounds. But the malady was ignored. Here was senselessness indeed, for 'if one member suffers, all suffer together' and 'the members... have the same care for one another'.³⁴ But it was not so in the community of Israel that Amos knew. One part of the body politic looked on, healthy and heedless, while other members were racked with pain.

The prophet saw a nation which had undergone a series of social changes. The community had suffered disruption from development which had outstripped due adjustment. The bonds of the old tribal amphictyony had been loosened with the result that traditional norms of social justice had collapsed. An economic boom caused by territorial expansion and new fields of commerce was enjoyed by certain sectors of the people. There developed a two-tier society, comprising an élite class of unscrupulous and irresponsible opportunists and the lower classes, exploited by the barons of commerce and agriculture. Many of Amos' oracles were attacks upon the élite for the abandonment of social and moral values. He exposed their affluence as the proceeds of virtual robbery and violence (3. 10). With rustic insight he castigated the society ladies of Samaria as 'cows of Bashan', a top-class herd of cattle (4. 1): for all their high status, they lived an animal existence, insensitive to the privations of their fellow-Israelites. The prophet vehemently attacked such disastrous class-cleavage in the community and viewed it as a travesty of the solidarity that Israel of old had known.³⁵ There

³⁰ Cf. too the singular references in 3. 14; 6. 8; 7. 11, 17; 8. 2.

³¹ Note the use of the name 'Jacob' in 7. 2, 5. 'ēqeb kî, 'because,' was perhaps unconsciously inspired by *Ya'gôb*. Cf. Hos. 12. 2-6 (Heb. 3-7): 'return' in the preceding strophes and 'your God' in 4. 12 provide links with Hos. 12. 6 (Heb. 7).

³² Heb. *neh'lu*, lit. 'be made ill'.

³³ So G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (1903), *ad loc.*; von Rad, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 137. A reference to the coming break-up of the community in destruction is judged less likely.

³⁴ 1 Cor. 12. 25f. 'The Apostle is true to Hebrew tradition and sentiment in his parable of the human body as a figure of the community' (Wheeler Robinson, 'Hebrew Psychology'. *The People and the Book*, ed. A. S. Peake, 1925, 376).

³⁵ Cf. A. S. Kapelrud, *Central Ideas in Amos*, 66.

was indeed a spirit of nationalism abroad, which must have given a measure of cohesion to the people. Amos called it 'the pride of Jacob' (6. 8, cf. 13). But it was a poor substitute for the solidarity

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which had been based upon traditional ties and had upheld conservative values.

III. THE COVENANT

The traditional nature of the values to which Amos appealed may now be examined. More intensive study of the eighth century prophets and the place of law in Israel has reacted against the view associated with Wellhausen that the prophets with novel insight appealed merely to human decency or the better side of human nature. Rather, it has become more and more clear that they harked back to the ancient traditions of the covenant in which the salvation of God was inseparably entwined with moral stipulations.³⁶ Grace and law were the two sides of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The message of Amos was based upon this ancient foundation. It is true that he was no mere traditionalist: his words came fresh from personal experience of the living God. But this God was the God of the ancient covenant,³⁷ and his message was the re-application of the old ties to a changed society.

It is no coincidence that the events of the Exodus, wilderness wandering and entry into Canaan which Amos catalogues in 2. 9f are also the traditional setting for the covenant of Sinai and its renewal at Shechem. The saving events which demonstrated Israel's election were part and parcel of the covenant traditions.³⁸ The age-old form in which the covenant is expressed in Exodus 20 (cf. Joshua 24. 2-13) includes a historical preamble celebrating what Yahweh had done for Israel: 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt'. 'Yahweh your God-Israel my people' is the basic twin tenet of the covenant, involving privilege and responsibility, which Hosea echoed a little after Amos. It is not unreasonable to look for similar echoes in the message of the earlier prophet. It is significant that the enumeration in 2. 9f of the gracious events associated with the beginnings of the covenant is preceded by the phrase 'their God' in 2. 8. This phrase, taken in a covenantal sense, builds a bridge between the earlier charges of unneighbourly conduct and the following appeals to God's grace. The immediate context is an indictment that worshippers have indulged in the lavish use of other people's property in religious feasts at the sanctuary of 'their God'. The reference to the covenant relationship expresses Amos' shock at the divorce of the cult from the moral side of the covenant. Apparently he has just referred to the legal tradition preserved in Exodus 22. 26f (Heb. 25f), which laid down that a garment given in pledge must be returned before nightfall.³⁹ Here he sees an equal travesty of the spirit of the

³⁶ E.g., cf. G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (1955) M. L. Newman, *The People of the Covenant* (1962); R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (1965); W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets* (1965); J. Muilenburg, 'The "Office" of the Prophet in Ancient Israel', *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, ed. J. P. Hyatt (1966) 74-97.

³⁷ The reason often given why Amos does not use the term *berît*, 'covenant', is that by his time it had been taken to mean a *do ut des* contract (e.g., cf. Lindblom, *op. cit.*, 329f). Alternatively, Kapelrud has suggested that 'The prophets did not need to mention the covenant so much, as they lived completely within it, in their points of view, in their preaching' (*The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, 55).

³⁸ Cf. Clements, *op. cit.*, 55.

³⁹ E.g., cf. E. Würthwein, 'Amos-Studien', *ZAW* 62 (1950), 44.

covenant in another kind of misappropriation of a neighbour's property. 'Their God' paves the way for the covenant claims of Yahweh represented in His saving acts.

Amos stands as champion of law, for there are other echoes, specific and general, of ancient laws which flowed from the covenant relationship.⁴⁰ The accusation in 5. 11 that exactions of wheat were taken from poor farmers has been plausibly explained as an explicit reference to the regulation concerning interest on loans found in Exodus 22. 25 (Heb. 24).⁴¹ To treat the person of a debtor as security for a loan was probably a comparatively new legal principle, which Amos condemned in 2. 6. His ancient authority was doubtless the prohibition of Exodus 21. 16 (cf. Deuteronomy 24. 7), which he re-applied to the new situation.⁴² The denunciation of false weights and measures in 8. 5 was apparently inspired by ancient traditions

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found in Deuteronomy 25. 13-16 and Leviticus 19. 35f.⁴³ Amos' strictures against oppression of the poor in 3. 9 and 4. 1 are generally reminiscent of Exodus 22. 21ff (Heb. 20ff).⁴⁴ They are in accord with the law's 'spirit of solidarity which is based upon the fact that every single Israelite is a member of Yahweh's community and thus possesses value and dignity'.⁴⁵ Denial of justice to the poor was one of Amos' charges, expressed in 2. 7 and 5. 12 against those who 'turn aside the way of the afflicted', who 'take a bribe and turn aside the needy in the gate'. Impartiality in judgment is one of the keynotes of Israel's legal traditions, which is struck especially in Exodus 23. 6 and Deuteronomy 27. 19.⁴⁶ Kapelrud has found in Amos 'the spirit of the Decalogue',⁴⁷ the covenant law par excellence. Perhaps one may go further and see in 5. 26, '(images) which you made for yourselves', a deliberate reference to the commandment of Exodus 20. 4 (cf. Deuteronomy 27. 15).

To return to the covenant formula, 'prepare to meet your God, Israel' (4. 12) is most probably the prophet's terrible parody of a priestly summons to the cult. The preparation must go far deeper than priest or worshipper intended.⁴⁸ On Amos' lips it no longer meant ritual cleansing before enjoying the dramatic and tuneful ceremonies of the cult. The covenant had been broken, and Israel was liable to the curses associated with the covenant and doubtless celebrated in the cult.⁴⁹ Cursing seems to have been an integral part of, or at least an adjunct to, the covenant.⁵⁰ Now the nation must face the wrath of their covenant-God. The challenge

⁴⁰ R. Bach ('Gottesrecht and weltliches Recht in der Verkündigung des Propheten Amos', *Festschrift für G. Dehn*, 1957, 23-34) has endeavoured to show that Amos appealed only to apodeictic covenant law. But Clements, *op. cit.*, 76 note 2, shows that he has overstated his case since casuistic law appears to be echoed too; he rightly adds: 'The administration of justice, where the case laws belonged, was expected to further the aims of the covenant'.

⁴¹ Würthwein, *art. cit.*, 46.

⁴² Cf. Bach, *art. cit.*, 29, referring to H. J. Kraus, *Evangelische Theologie*, 15, (1955) 299.

⁴³ Cf. Würthwein, *art. cit.*, 46.

⁴⁴ *Idem, ibid.* He compares Lev. 19. 13; Deut. 24. 14 where the verb 'āšaq, 'oppress', is used; as in Amos.

⁴⁵ *Idem, ibid.*

⁴⁶ Cf. W. Richter, *Recht and Ethos* (1966), 156f. Heb. *hitta*, 'turn aside', is used in both cases as in the Amos passages.

⁴⁷ *VT Supplement* 15 (1966), 195.

⁴⁸ Cf. P. F. Barrackman, 'Preaching from Amos', *Interpretation* 13 (1959), 309.

⁴⁹ Cf. Clements, *op. cit.*, 40ff.

⁵⁰ The curses in Deuteronomy 27 are associated with an old covenant ceremony celebrated at Shechem. The contingent nature of the covenant relationship is found expressed in Exod. 19.5: 'if you obey my voice and keep my covenant'. Cf. too Deut. 11. 26ff; Lev. 26; Jos. 8. 33f.

comes fittingly at the end of a poem of complaint. Five warnings had Yahweh given Israel in the form of natural disasters, but His people had heeded none of them. The refrain tolls out with a plaintive and foreboding ring: 'yet you did not return to me'. Here, as so often, 'return' has covenantal associations.⁵¹ Israel had drifted away from their God. His people had broken loose from their solidarity with Him by their neglect of the moral terms of the covenant. Indeed, it may well be that 4. 6-11 is based upon the pattern of the old covenant curses of Leviticus 26.⁵² Hunger for bread is the common theme of 4. 6 and Leviticus 26. 26, while unsatisfied craving is mentioned in 4. 8 and Leviticus 26. 26; death from the sword appears in both 4. 10 and Leviticus 26. 25, and 'pestilence' in 4. 10 may well echo Leviticus 26. 25 too.⁵³ Lack of rain is the subject of 4. 7 and Leviticus 26. 19, and poor crops of grain and fruit are dealt with in 4. 9 and Leviticus 26. 20.

The phrase 'my people' echoes the solidarity between Yahweh and Israel. In the account of the third vision, of the wall and plumb-line, Amos records Yahweh's explanatory comment: 'I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of *my people* Israel' (7. 8). The metaphor is one of judgment, as not only the overall context makes clear but also the use of the figure elsewhere in the Old Testament. But an important feature of the vision as it appears in the Masoretic Text is that an old standard is re-applied. The phrase literally rendered 'a wall of plumb-line' in 7. 7 involves an unusual extension of the use of the genitive. Presumably in the context it means 'a wall built with a plumb-line', as the English versions have taken it. Despite its attestation in the ancient versions, the word for 'plumb-line' is often deleted here on the grounds that not only is the construction doubtful but also the occurrence of the same word four times in two verses is clumsy. But when the passage is viewed in its covenantal setting, to which 'my people' points, the force of the phrase becomes evident and the emphatic repetition meaningful. The people had originally been upright, established according to the ancient covenant stipulations which they had once accepted. Now that the wall failed the test of uprightness, it must be

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condemned and pulled down. It was out of true, for Israel no longer matched the old standards. Seen in this light, the first mention of the plumb-line is not otiose, but provides an important part of the imagery and corresponds to an element that; underlies Amos' message.

The interpretation of the fourth vision contains the same covenant formula as the third: 'The end has come upon my *people* Israel' (8. 2). The basket of autumn-ripe fruit carried an omen of finality not only in sound⁵⁴ but also in symbol. 'The late-ripe fruit proclaims the fall of the year; the fall of the year brings before the prophet's mind the fall of Israel.'⁵⁵ There is a reversal of what Yahweh had done in the beginning. Destruction and fruit find a place elsewhere in the book of Amos. Long ago, when consent to the covenant was fresh upon

⁵¹ Cf. W. L. Holladay, *The Root Šûbh in the OT with Particular Reference to its Usages in Covenantal Contexts*, 1958, 116-120.

⁵² Cf. H. Graf Reventlow, *Das Amt des Propheten bei Amos*, 1962, 75-90. One need not follow Reventlow in rejecting much of the material in this passage as secondary nor in his view that Amos held a cultic office. W. Breuggemann, 'Amos IV 4-13 and Israel's Covenant Worship', *VT* 15 (1965), 1-15, has built upon Reventlow's literary work and seen in 4. 4-13 a single unit comprising denunciation of false covenant-making, curse upon Israel for infidelity, and summons to covenant renewal.

⁵³ Reventlow, *op. cit.*, 83.

⁵⁴ Heb. *qayis-qēs*.

⁵⁵ E. A. Edghill, *The Book of Amos*, Westminster Commentaries (1914), *ad loc.*

Israel's lips, Yahweh had destroyed the Amorite fruit and root, for His people's sake (2. 9). Now He must turn against them the very means by which He had implemented the covenant for Israel. They in their turn must be destroyed, the covenant relationship being deemed at an end. Activity which betokened the salvation of old is wrought anew with devastating effect.

The long poem in 1. 3-2. 16 has not unreasonably been traced back to an execration oracle used in the cult.⁵⁶ First would come a survey of neighbouring nations; then the enemies of Yahweh among His own people would be condemned in a ritual curse upon traitors and criminals. If this hypothesis is correct, Amos was courting the attention of his audience not merely by appealing to their jingoism but also by using a stylistic form with which they would be familiar. Even the denunciation of the chosen nation would initially be no surprise. But the innovation injected into the old form is that the whole nation is now condemned.⁵⁷ No longer is there conventional mention of 'Cursed is the man who...' or 'To the wicked man God has said...'⁵⁸ The condemnation takes on wider scope: the principle of collective responsibility is enunciated. Amos' attacks chiefly centre upon the failings of the upper classes. Not exclusively so, it is true. The charge in 2. 9 that 'a man and his father resort to the girl' seems to imply that everybody does it. The prophet is apparently denouncing a new focus of solidarity expressed in the syncretistic cult. 'Young and old alike go to the shrine, allegedly of Jehovah, to the *qedeshah*, the temple prostitute.'⁵⁹ But most of Amos' charges are hurled at the élite in positions of responsibility. Yet the nation as a whole is to be the object of Yahweh's judgment. Compare 9. 1-4, which hammers home the message that 'not one of them shall flee away, not one of them shall escape', referring to the worshipping community. In no stronger way could the national solidarity of Israel be expressed. Dissolution and solidarity go hand in hand.

Yet this was the logical outworking of the covenant. The oracle in 3. 2 sets out Yahweh's combined care and claim in the covenant: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities'. 'Know' betokens a personal relationship. It is even used of the intimacy of marriage, and at least one scholar has seen here such a reference.⁶⁰ Certainly the bonds by which Yahweh had united Himself with Israel were very close. But it is here made clear that 'His special relationship to His own people means not privilege to do wrong but responsibility to do right.'⁶¹ Israel too was committed as the result of this knowledge. The context of the same verb in Genesis 18. 19 brings out the moral and theological overtones of the concept: 'I have known him in order that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh by

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⁵⁶ A. Bentzen, 'The Ritual Background of Amos 1. 2-2. 16,' *Oudtestamentische Studien* 8 (1950), 85-99. He cites Psa. 50 as a very close parallel to the strophe directed against Israel.

⁵⁷ Cf. Kapelrud, *op. cit.*, 20.

⁵⁸ Psa. 50. 16. Cf. Weiser, *The Psalms*, *ad. loc.*

⁵⁹ N. H. Snaith, *Study Notes on Bible Books: Amos, Part 2* (1946), 43; cf. T. H. Robinson, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten: Hosea bis Micha, Handbuch zum AT* (1938) 79. The suggestion that a form of common incest is in view (cf. Würthwein, *art. cit.*, 45; M. A. Beek, 'The Religious Background of Amos 2. 6-8,' *OTS* 5 (1948), 135f; Bach, *art. cit.*, 32f; Clements, *op. cit.*, 76) is less likely. Instead of Heb. *yelekû*, 'resort', which so often has cultic associations, *yābō'û*, 'go in', with a sexual connotation, would have been expected.

⁶⁰ K. Cramer, *Amos. Versuch einer theologischen Interpretation* (1930), 32, 57, paraphrased: 'Allein euch gilt mein Ehebund'.

⁶¹ T. H. Robinson, *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (1923), 19.

doing righteousness and justice'. 'Righteousness and justice' occur together three times in the book of Amos (5. 7, 24; 6. 12), and undoubtedly carry the same covenantal associations as in Genesis 18. 19.⁶² Weiser, commenting, upon this pair of terms in Psalm 33. 5, has described them as 'the ordinance of the Covenant which God himself observes and which is therefore binding also on the life of the God. fearing man; it is the ordinance which alone makes it possible for a community to remain in being'.⁶³ Amos could see no such social expression of the covenant in contemporary Israel. The covenant had been broken, and now its curses confronted Israel. It is significant that the phrase 'punish iniquity' in 3. 2 recurs in a credal formula which is found in a covenant setting as the motivation for the law in Exodus 20. 5: '...punishing the children for the iniquity of the fathers'.⁶⁴ Amos is echoing language associated with the covenant.

The introduction to the oracle, in 3. 1, takes the reference further by using a statement which is akin to the preamble to the terms of the covenant found in Exodus 20. 2. 'I brought up [Israel] out of the land of Egypt' sounds like an echo of older covenant terminology. The fact that a different verb is used is no obstacle to the link. In Psalm 81. 10 (Heb. 11) 'bring up' is used in a covenantal context.⁶⁵ The provenance of the psalm was the Northern Kingdom, and the second part of the introduction in Amos 3. 1 is probably a deliberate quotation from a cultic composition of this type. The introduction is often held to be composed of diverse elements on the ground of the change of person. But if the last part is put in quotation-marks, the whole verse can stand as a unity.⁶⁶ In the introduction to the divine oracle Amos is underlining the basic concept of covenant grace, to which the first half of the oracle refers. Israel owes its existence as a nation to the creative work of Yahweh on its behalf.

'Seek Yahweh and live' was probably part of the cultic liturgy used at Bethel, which is put to a new use in Amos 5. 4. It would suit a covenant setting as an invitation to the cult, and indeed 'seek' is employed in a cultic sense in the next clause. In its original sense it expresses finely the expected solidarity between Israel and their God, and the blessing of full life that accrues to those who are in obedient covenant relationship. 'Those who seek Yahweh lack no good thing' (Psalm 34. 10). But in the oracle transmitted from Yahweh through Amos it takes on a grimmer meaning. Mere survival, escape from mortal destruction, is only conceivable if the people obey the revealed will of God, the obligations of the covenant.⁶⁷ In the prophet's interpretation of the divine oracle in verses 14f the moral implications are brought to the fore: to seek Yahweh means to 'seek good and not evil', to 'hate evil and love good'.⁶⁸ That these terms are covenantal is suggested by Hosea 8. 3 'Israel has spurned the good' in the light of 8. 3, and also by Micah 6. 8 'He has shown you, O man, what is good' in the light of 6. 4f. Only when these conditions were fulfilled could the cultic claim of the presence of Yahweh with His people come true: 'and so Yahweh, God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said'. Solidarity could only thus become real.

⁶² Cf. Cramer, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁶³ *Comm. ad loc.*

⁶⁴ Heb. *pāgaḏ* 'āwōn 'al in both cases. The force of Exod. 2. 5 is that the entire family is to be wiped out (cf. Zimmerli, *op. cit.*, 58). It is noteworthy that this solidarity of the family in punishment finds illustration in Amos 7. 17.

⁶⁵ Heb. *he^elā* in Amos and Psa. 81; *hōšî* in Exod. 20. Cf. J. Wijngaards, '*Hōšî*' and *he^elā*, a Twofold Approach to the Exodus', *VT* 15 (1965), 99-101.

⁶⁶ Cf. von Rad's conjecture that in 2.10 Amos is quoting from a psalm (*OT Theology*, vol 1 (Eng. tr. 1962), 281).

⁶⁷ Wijngaards has suggested that in ch. 5 Amos 'may be singing of the people's covenantal death and the renewal promised to those who seek Jahweh in a renewed covenant' ('Death and Resurrection in Covenantal Context (Hos. VI 2)', *VT* 17, 1967, 238).

⁶⁸ Cf. F. Hesse, 'Amos 5. 4-6, 14f.' *ZAW* 68 (1956), 1-17.

This passage and a few others in the book seem to imply a less vigorous judgment than the collective doom already observed. Another trace of possible reprieve may be found in 9. 10: "All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword". There seems to be little literary reason for denying the verse to Amos, especially as the second half has an authentic ring about it, compared with 6. 3. But, embarrassed by the lack of logic, commentators have not infrequently tended either

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to sever the saying from the earliest prophetic tradition or grossly to re-interpret it as a reference to the whole people rather than to a class set apart from the whole.⁶⁹ My people' evokes the same covenantal image as earlier in the book, and is set in the same context of judgment. But the distinction between the apostate and the rest, however small, seems to be a lapse into the pre-Amos formulation of the covenant. Nor is this inconsistency so isolated as many interpreters of the book have claimed. It is true that the idea of a remnant is given a cynical treatment in 3.12: a few broken sticks of luxury furniture will be all that is left.⁷⁰ The concept seems to be known to the prophet—and dismissed. In 6. 9 too the remnant is a negative idea. The escape envisaged in 2. 16 and 5. 3f may be regarded as but the prelude to further destruction (cf. 5. 19). The survivors of 6. 10 and 8. 3 may be interpreted as prospective exiles (cf. 9. 1, 4). On the other hand, the approach to the concept in 5. 15 is positive, howbeit cautious: 'Perhaps Yahweh, God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph'. Those whose desire it is to force Amos to speak with a single voice may dismiss the passage as secondary. But 'the literary form, hortatory tone and conditional nature of the hope speak in favour of his authorship'.⁷¹ Amos was apparently conscious of a tension between grace and wrath so that he hesitated to affirm categorically that last-minute repentance would avail. It is conceivable that the doubt was partly a device to coerce his hearers, as the evangelist urges 'It may be too late tomorrow'.⁷² At any rate, the prophet holds open, however gingerly, an emergency exit. The apparent contradiction is not unparalleled in the prophets. 'The paradoxical juxtaposition of promise and condemnation is characteristic of all the prophets and must not be eliminated from their preaching.'⁷³

To a certain extent the suspicious-looking escape-clause in 9. 8c stands or falls according to one's view of 5. 15. Its originality has been attacked on grounds of metre as well as of content.⁷⁴ It is possible that the qualification was added by the prophet after his expulsion from Bethel when he imparted his oracles to the circle that preserved them.⁷⁵

A feature of the 'happy ending' to the book which is here relevant is that the twin concepts of 'my people' and 'your God' reappear in verses 14f. They are now associated with Yahweh's protection and blessing. The different usage reflects a general tendency in 9. 11ff deliberately to take up vocabulary linked with judgment earlier in the book and to put it in a new setting of

⁶⁹ Cf. Kapelrud, *op. cit.*, 54. for the latter expedient.

⁷⁰ Cf. I. Rabinowitz, 'The Crux at Amos III 12', *VT* 11 (1961), 228-31; H. R. Moeller, 'Ambiguity at Amos 3. 12', *The Bible Translator*, vol. 15 (1964), 31-34.

⁷¹ Hyatt, *comm. ad loc.*

⁷² Cf. A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the OT* (1948), vol. 1, 201.

⁷³ Lindblom, *op. cit.*, 350 note 24.

⁷⁴ Cf. Kapelrud, *op. cit.*, 53.

⁷⁵ Cf. H. L. Ellison, *Men Spake from God* (1952), 34.

salvation.⁷⁶ It is not beyond the realm of possibility that Amos himself subsequently developed the positive side of his teaching and, using older cultic language, looked forward in this way to the hope of ultimate salvation beyond the imminent judgment of destruction and exile.⁷⁷ Yahweh was not to forsake His covenant-people for ever. Where sin now abounded, grace would eventually triumph and transform.

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⁷⁶ H. E. W. Fosbroke ('The Book of Amos', *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6, 1956, *ad loc.*) notes that v. 14 recalls 5. 11 and 'my people Israel' stands in striking contrast to 8. 2. One may also spy in 9. 11 echoes of 'breaches' in 4. 3 and 'fallen, no more to rise' in 5. 2; 8. 14. In 9. 14 the mention of 'vineyards' and 'gardens' reverses 4. 9, and in 9. 15 'out of their land' is surely a rejoinder to 'away from their land' in 7. 11, 17 (*mē 'al ad^hmātām/me 'al 'ad^hmāiō*).

⁷⁷ Concerning 9. 11f cf. von Rad, *OT Theology*, vol. 2, 138; Clements, *op. cit.*, 111f. Concerning vv. 11-15 cf. Th.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of OT Theology*, 1958, 359; Reventlow, *op. cit.*, 90ff.