

# Literary Prophecy: Amos

## Lecture 16 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-16>

### *Overview*

This lecture introduces the literary prophets of both the northern and southern kingdoms. The prophetic books are anthologies of oracles the sequence of which is often determined by literary rather than chronological considerations. This lecture studies the literary features and major themes of classical Israelite prophecy as evidenced in particular in the book of the eighth-century northern prophet Amos. The prophets denounced moral decay and false piety as directly responsible for the social injustice that outrages God. While the Deuteronomist blames the nation's misfortunes on acts of idolatry, the prophets stress that the nation will be punished for everyday incidents of immorality. The literary prophets counterbalance their warnings with messages of great hope and consolation.

### *1. An Introduction to the Literary Prophets*

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* Let me just briefly recap as we are moving into the literary prophets, or the classical prophets, they are sometimes called. It is easiest to think of them as being associated with particular crises in the nation's history. We are not going to be looking at them all, and I have picked out some of the main ones that we will be looking at. Really, they are exemplary in a number of different ways.

[2] So you have prophets of the Assyrian crisis. This is when the two kingdoms still exist. In the north prophesying in Israel, you have Amos and Hosea. And in the south, you have Isaiah and Micah. So think of those four books together. It will be easier to note the differences among them if you group them together. And we will be doing that.

[3] Then the prophets of the Babylonian crisis. By this time the northern kingdom has fallen. We are moving towards the end of the seventh century. The Assyrian Empire has fallen in 612. The prophet Nahum talks about the fall of Assyria. And we move then into the very end of the century and down to the beginning of the sixth century, with the destruction of Judah. So prophets associated with that time: particularly Jeremiah, and also Habakkuk. Then we have the prophet of the exile, who is Ezekiel. And then the post-exilic period, or the Restoration,

when the Israelites are allowed to return to their land and we have several prophets at that time: Haggai, Zechariah, Joel and Malachi will be the prophets we'll be looking at briefly.

[4] There are three long prophetic works, and I have circled those [on the blackboard]: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, one associated with each of the three crises. So again, another mnemonic for you is to think of them each associated with each of those major crises. And the rest are all much shorter works, I think Obadiah being the shortest, really just a very, very short work. There has been a long debate over the degree to which these classical or literary prophets were harking back to long standing Israelite traditions or constructing norms that would later come to be viewed as long standing Israelite traditions. Kaufman describes these classical prophets as the standard bearers of the covenant [Kaufman 1972, Part III]. This is his term. And in his view, they could be seen as conservatives, but by the same token he says the new prophecy conceived of ideas that Israelite thought of the earlier time had not conceived. And in this sense, Kaufman argues they are also radical. He describes them as radical conservatives or conservative radicals. As a result of the radical nature of some of their message, the prophets had to speak with great exaggeration. And you will notice this when you read their writing. Great exaggeration, a lot of dramatic imagery, dramatic features. They denounce the people. They chastise the people.

And as a result, they were often scoffed at or even persecuted in return.

- [5] But eventually the nation would come to enshrine their words in its ancient sacred heritage, which is testimony to the fact that their message must have served a crucial role at some time in the changing political and religious reality.
- [6] Now, we have already talked about the Deuteronomistic historiography, and how it developed as an interpretation of the historical catastrophes of 722 and 586, and this interpretation made it possible for Israelites to accept the reality of the defeat of the nation, the defeat of Israel, without at the same time losing faith in God. The defeat of Israel, the exile of the nation, was not to be taken as evidence that God was not the one supreme Lord of history, or that God was a faithless God, who would abandon his covenant and his people. The defeat and the exile were interpreted to affirm precisely the opposite. God, as the universal God, could use other nations as his tool. He could use these nations to execute judgment on his people, and he did this in an act of faithfulness ultimately, faithful to his covenant, which promised punishment and chastisement for the sins of the people, the sins of idolatry.
- [7] The classical literary prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets, follow the basic thrust of this interpretation of events. They agree that the defeat and the exile are evidence rather than disproof of God's universal sovereignty, and they agree that they are God's just punishment for sin. But they are going to differ from the Deuteronomist in two significant ways. First, they are going to differ in their identification of that sin. For the prophets, it is not just idolatry for which Israel is punished, although that is important, too. And second of all, they are going to differ in their emphasis on a future restoration and glory, a message that we do not find in the Deuteronomistic historian.
- [8] The individual books of the prophets are really arranged according to two interacting principles: size and chronology. So you have the first three books, [they] are the very large, prophetic books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in chronological order of the three crises we have outlined here. And then you have the minor prophets, and the minor prophets, again,

are roughly chronological order, although book size also plays a bit of a role in arranging these materials. That was very common in the ancient world — for size to determine the order of books in a corpus. We are not going to be following the order of the canon, because it does jump around chronologically; first with the three large books and then going back and having some of the smaller books of earlier prophets. We are going to be looking at them in chronological order. We are going to be looking at them against the backdrop of the historical crisis to which they are responding.

## *2. Structure of and Literary Features in the Book of Amos*

- [9] So we are going to begin with the first of the literary prophets, even though it is not the first in the order of the Bible, and that is Amos. Amos preached during a relatively stable period of time. This was in the northern kingdom. It was around 750 under the reign of Jeroboam the Second, not the first. And this is at a time before the Assyrian threat is becoming very apparent, and Assyria's empire building ambitions — before those are becoming very apparent. There are many passages that suggest that Amos was an ordinary shepherd. He came from a small town about 10 miles south of Jerusalem; so he came from the southern kingdom to prophesy in the northern kingdom. He was called to Bethel, which was one of the royal sanctuaries in the northern kingdom, to deliver his prophecies. But despite the suggestion that he was an ordinary shepherd it seems more likely that he was probably a fairly wealthy owner of land and flocks. He was probably educated and literate. The northerners are said to be very surprised by his eloquence and his intelligence. But they did not like his message, and ultimately, he is going to be forced to go back to the southern kingdom.
- [10] The Book of Amos can be divided structurally into four sections, which I have listed on the board over here. You first have a set of brief oracles of doom. These are in the first two chapters, Amos 1 and 2. And then you have a series of three short oracles, oracles to the women of Samaria, an oracle to the wealthy of Samaria and Jerusalem, and then an oracle to Israel as a whole. These are in chapters 3-6. This is followed then by five symbolic visions which receive interpretation. These are visions

of judgment, first locusts, then a fire, then a plumb line that one uses in building a building, a basket of fruit, and then a vision of God standing by the altar at Bethel. This happens [in] chapters 7-9, about verse 8 and 9 [of chapter 7 for the plumb line version]. This section, besides the five visions, also has a little narrative account of Amos' conflict with a priest at Bethel, the priest Amaziah who accuses Amos of treason. And then there is a concluding epilogue in the ninth chapter that runs for about seven or eight verses to the end of the book.

[11] The Book of Amos is a wonderful place to start for us because it contains many features that are going to be typical of all of the classical prophets, all of the literary prophets by and large. And also this book introduces certain major themes. These will become standard themes of prophecy with some variation here and there. So by setting them out in the Book of Amos then we can really go forward and just look at the variations on some of those themes that are sounded by some of the other prophets.

[12] So first some literary features, and then we will talk about the themes of the book. In terms of literary features, I have jotted down a few here. You see in the book what we would call editorial notes. That is to say, you have notes in the Book of Amos which are in the third person. These will very often occur at the beginning of a book. They sort of introduce or set the stage. So we have in Amos. "The words of Amos, a sheep breeder from Tekoa, who prophesied concerning Israel in the reigns of kings Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam, the son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake." So almost all of the prophetic books are going to contain an introduction of this type. Some third-person phrase which will identify the place and the prophet and his time. There is another kind of writing in some of these works, as well, which is in the first person. It is not always in the third person, but you sometimes have first person passages in which the prophet himself will speak about and describe something about himself. It's a stepping aside from the oracular moment and speaking in some way about some experience that he has had. So we have these first person and these third person passages that give us information about the prophet.

[13] The third-person passages, we surmise, may have been written by the prophet, but they were probably written by disciples or others who were responsible for collecting the prophets' oracles, inditing the prophet's oracles. Amos 7 is an example of this. In Amos 7, we find an example of this kind of writing, again, where you have a description of Amos in debate with a priest, Priest Amaziah, at the Shrine of Bethel. So you have the oracular statements, but you also have these other identifying passages as well, and descriptive passages.

[14] This brings us then to a second point, which is that the prophetic books are a compilation of a variety of materials. They consist of varied materials that have been collected. They have been revised. They have been supplemented. The prophets' oracles, which were delivered in various situations over a period of time, were apparently saved and then compiled, again perhaps by the prophet himself, perhaps by his disciples. We know that prophetic oracles were written down and transmitted in other ancient Near Eastern societies. We know this about Assyria, for example. These were literary compositions and the literary nature of these compositions will account sometimes for their ordering. Sometimes it appears that there is not chronological ordering. This is one of the things that can make it so hard to read some of the prophetic writings, because the oracles are not necessarily in chronological order. They are literary works, and sometimes the prophet or the disciple or the editor would combine principles — I'm sorry, combine oracles or juxtapose oracles according to principles other than chronology — literary principles. So for example, you very often find the principle of a catch word: a prophecy or oracle that might end with a particular word in its last line or last verse, and so next to it will be a second prophecy or oracle which echoes that word in its opening line, and so the two have been brought together for literary reasons. So Amos 3:2, reads: "You alone have I known of all the families of the earth." And that is the concluding line of that particular oracle, and that verb "to know" is probably the catchword for the oracle that follows, because the next one opens, "Do two people walk together unless they know each other?" So that may have suggested the juxtaposition of those two.

[15] So we need to understand that the prophetic books are really little anthologies, anthologies

of oracles. They can be connected for literary rather than substantive or chronological reasons. You can't assume chronological sequence. It is not like reading the historical books of Joshua through 2 Kings. It is very, very different.

[16] An interesting question concerns the degree to which the prophetic books preserve the actual oracles of the prophets. Certainly, there is no doubt that there has been revision and supplementation of the prophetic books. Not everything in the Book of Amos is from Amos, himself. Additions have been made to most of the prophetic books. It was believed that the words of the prophets had enduring significance. Those who received these words believed that they had enduring significance. And so they were supplemented because of the conviction that they had enduring relevance, not despite of it, because of it. And some scholars believe that this accounts for the oracle in Amos 2 that prophesies the fall of Judah. Amos is living in 750, the latter half of the eighth century, not in the sixth century. He is living in the eighth century. But he prophesies the fall of Judah, and most people would assume that this is an addition which is made to the Book of Amos after Judah's fall. These supplementations and additions and revisions that we will see in some of the prophetic books, and some of them are quite obvious, were not completely promiscuous. I don't want to give you the idea that they were, because there are many instances in which a prophet's words are not updated, are not modified, even though the failure to do this leaves the prophecy woefully out of step with what actually came to be later. So those kinds of inconsistencies between a prophet's words and later fact would suggest that there was a strong tendency to preserve the words of the prophet faithfully. So we will see both tendencies within the literature, a tendency to leave words intact, and at the same place [correction: time], a tendency to supplement or to add sections to the prophet, the prophetic writing.

[17] A third feature that we will see in many of the prophetic books is what we call "the call." And this is common to most of the prophets. It is the claim to authority as a result of having been called by God to deliver his word. We talked before about apostolic prophecy, this notion of the prophet as someone who is sent by God

with a message, not someone who is consulted by a client to find out what God thinks. The irresistibility of the call is a feature of these passages, and we find it illustrated in Amos 3:7-8, after citing a series of proverbs that illustrate inexorable cause and effect. For example, he says, "Does a trap spring up from the ground/Unless it has caught something?" And then the oracle continues, "A lion has roared,/Who can but fear?/My Lord God has spoken,/Who can but prophesy?" There is this irresistible call. We find metaphors used liberally throughout the prophetic writings. And Amos describes his prophecy by means of two types of metaphors, word and vision. So many of the prophetic oracles will be introduced by the phrase "the word of Yahweh came unto prophet X." The word of Yahweh came — sort of an image of God speaking directly to these prophets in human language, which is then repeated or passed on to the audience, to the listener.

[18] This could be understood in a literal sense. We could take this as a metaphor. Behind it, however, is the simple idea that it is God who is communicating to the prophet and the prophet then communicates the message to the people. But in addition to hearing, Amos and many of the other prophets also see. So the word of the Lord comes, but in other moments the prophetic oracle will be introduced by verbs or words connected with seeing and vision. Hence the word "seer" as a designation for a prophet also.

[19] Amos is shown visions of various kinds, particularly those five visions clumped in chapters 7, 8 and 9. And this is true of the prophets generally. These visions might be visions of God speaking, or visions of God performing some kind of action. They might also be visions of perfectly ordinary objects or events that carry some sort of symbolic significance. So we have five visions in Amos in chapters 7-9, and some of them are visions of ordinary objects, but those objects have some special coded meaning or symbolic significance for Israel. And then we have visions of extraordinary things, as well. So we have a locust plague. It is about to consume the crop right after the king has taken his share, his taxes of the crop. Not such an extraordinary vision, but then there is a vision of a fire that consumes the lower waters that are pressed down below the earth, and which threatens to

consume even the soil of the earth itself. So it is an extraordinary vision. We have a vision of a plumb line — the tool that is used by builders. There is a vision of God destroying worshipers in the temple. The vision in chapter 8 is an ordinary vision. It is a vision of a basket of summer fruit. The Hebrew word for summer or summer fruit is *kayits* and this is a pun because the word *kets* means end. So the vision of *kayits* is indicating or symbolizing the *kets*, the end of Israel. And these kinds of symbolic visions will very often typically include puns of this type.

[20] So another point to make about just the literary features of prophetic writings is that they do contain or employ a variety of literary forms. One commonplace form that you will see over and over again in these writings is a form that we call the oracle, an oracle against the nations. This is found in Amos. It's found also in the three large prophetic writings: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Amos 1 and 2 contains seven of these oracles that inveigh against the nations. But Amos gives the form a new twist. And this is what's interesting. Six of the seven oracles are directed against surrounding nations, and they are excoriated for their inhumane treatment of others, Israelites and non-Israelites during wars and conflicts, as punishment for their terrible war atrocities. A divine fire is going to break out and destroy all of their palaces and fortified places. But then the twist comes, because after these six horrific oracles, which condemn the nations for these brutal acts of atrocity in war, Amos then turns to address his own people. And he says the same divine power will consume the people of Yahweh because of the atrocities and inhumanities that they commit even in times of peace!

[21] So the seventh, the climactic oracle, announces that God's wrath will be directed at Israel, and this is a very unwelcome, unexpected statement. And you can see how he perhaps would almost draw his audience in, you know, with these images of their enemies getting what they deserve, only to then turn it around (having drawn them in, seduced them if you will with his words) — to turn around and then charge them with something even worse.

[22] The term "Israel" that he uses is, of course, ambiguous. That is one of the problems with some of the prophetic writings. You are never

completely sure whether they're prophesying against the northern kingdom, Israel, or the House of Israel — both kingdoms together, the whole tribal confederation. Some passages in Amos would suggest one. Some passages suggest the other. The other thing that we find in Amos is an oracle against Judah, against the southern kingdom. This is in chapter 2. It is just two lines, verses 4 and 5, and it is in chapter 2. And many people identify that as a later addition by an editor. First of all, it's written in very standard, sort of Deuteronomistic language. And also, if we leave it out, then we have a nice literary pattern. We have six oracles plus one. We have six oracles against foreign nations, and then we have one against Israel. And that pattern is a very standard, literary pattern, particularly in poetic sections of the Bible and the prophets are written in an elevated poetic style. We very often have a six plus one pattern. That's related to another pattern that we also see in Amos, which is the three plus one pattern. This is just a doubling of it, six plus one. The three plus one pattern you will recognize. It is quite explicit at times. Amos will say, "for three transgressions of Damascus, for four, I will not revoke it" — the decree, the punishment. A similar kind of language is used in verse 6 for Gaza, in verse 9 for Tyre, in verse 11 for Edom, and verse 13 for the Ammonites, and so on. So we often have this pattern. And so the suggestion by scholars is that without that prophecy concerning the fall of Judah, which post-dates Amos, you would have a nice complete six plus one pattern. And this might be the sign of a later editor updating Amos' prophecy, so that it would look as though he had, in fact, prophesied the fall of Judah.

[23] You have other sorts of literary patterns and forms used in the prophetic works. Some of the literary forms we see are hymns. We see songs. We see laments, particularly laments or mourning for Israel as if her destruction is already a fait accompli. You find proverbs. Very often when the prophets cite a proverb, they will turn its accepted meaning on its head. They'll take an old proverb and they'll apply it to some new situation and give it a radically new kind of meaning, to sort of shock and surprise their audience. And Amos 3-8 contains a lot of proverbs.

[24] Another literary form that we will see, and this is an important one, is a literary form that is

called the riv, r-i -v. I have it up there [on the blackboard]: a riv, which basically means a lawsuit, specifically a covenant lawsuit. Many of the prophetic books feature passages in which God basically brings a lawsuit against the people, charging them with breach of covenant, breach of contract, if you will. And in these passages, you have legal metaphors being used throughout: people testifying or witnessing against Israel — can she speak in her [own] defense? — and so on. So the riv, or the covenant lawsuit is a form we will see here. We will also see it again when we get to the Book of Job. So the prophetic corpus draws on the entire range of literary forms that were available in Israelite literary tradition, and very often gives them a rich — and that is what give the books a very rich and varied texture.

### 3. Major Themes in the Book of Amos

[25] So Amos is a model for us in terms of its literary features, but it's also a model for us in terms of some of the themes or the content of the book — because Amos will articulate certain themes that we will see resounding throughout the prophetic literature. There will be some variations on these themes, but some standard themes appear here. So we will review those now.

[26] Many scholars, Kaufman among them, have noted that the literature of the classical prophets is most clearly and strongly characterized by a vehement denunciation of the moral decay and social injustice of the period. It really does not matter what period. “Vehement denunciation” of moral decay and social injustice, is the way the Kaufman phrases it [Kaufman 1972, 347]. Amos criticizes the sins of the nation. He is critical of everyone, the middle class, the government, the king, the establishment, the priesthood — they're all plagued by a superficial kind of piety. For Amos, as for all the prophets we will be looking at, the idea of covenant prescribes a particular relationship with Yahweh, but not only with Yahweh: also with one's fellow human beings. The two are interlinked. It is a sign of closeness to Yahweh that one is concerned for Israel's poor and needy. The two are completely intertwined and interlinked. And so Amos denounces the wealthy. He denounces the powerful and the way they treat the poor. I am going to be reading some

passages from Amos to illustrate some of these themes.

[27] So Amos 4:1-3 — and listen to the dramatic rhetoric that is used: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan/On the hill of Samaria” — that is the capital of the northern kingdom, Israel:

Who defraud the poor,  
 Who rob the needy;  
 Who say to your husbands,  
 “Bring, and let's carouse!”  
 My Lord God swears by His holiness:  
 Behold, days are coming upon you  
 When you will be carried off in baskets,  
 And, to the last one, in fish baskets,  
 And taken out [of the city] —  
 Each one through a breach straight ahead  
 —  
 And flung on the refuse heap.

[28] It's a wonderful pun here, because the wealthy women of Samaria are referred to as cows of Bashan. Now Bashan is an area that is very rich pastureland in the trans-Jordan. And also it is very common in Canaanite literature to refer to the nobility, and even to gods, with terms like bull or ram or cow. These were not insulting terms, as they might be in our culture. These were, in fact, terms that did not offend. These were very complimentary terms. So when he refers to the cows of Bashan (he speaks to the women of Samaria as the cows of Bashan) he is flattering them to begin with. But the pun is quite wonderful because these women are going to end up like fat cows, as slabs of meat in the butcher's basket or in the fish basket which, you know, is flung out on the refuse heap once it is spoiled. So he takes that term “cows of Bashan,” and leads it to this horrendous end.

[29] Amos 6:1 and 4-7. This is another scathing attack on the idle life of the carefree rich who ignore the plight of the poor: woe to those “at ease in Zion.” Of course, that is the capital of the southern kingdom, Jerusalem, and those “confident on the hill of Samaria,” the northern kingdom:

You notables of the leading nation

On whom the House of Israel pin their hopes;

[...]

They lie on ivory beds,

Lolling on their couches,

Feasting on lambs from the flock

And on calves from the stalls.

They hum snatches of song to the tune of the lute —

They account themselves musicians like David.

They drink [straight] from the wine bowls

And anoint themselves with the choicest oils —

But they are not concerned about the ruin of Joseph.

Assuredly, right soon

They shall head the column of exiles;

They shall lull no more at festive meals.

[30] It is a great image of them lying about as the head of the nation. They will be at the head of the nation as it moves into exile! And on an archaeological note, I understand that in Samaria they have, in fact, uncovered all kinds of ivory furniture and ivory coverings that would then be attached to furniture. So the image of them lolling on ivory couches in Samaria apparently makes a lot of sense. So the moral decay, the greed, the indulgence of the upper classes, this is directly responsible for the social injustice that according to the prophets outrages God. Amos 8:4-6:

Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying, “If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using [a measure] that is too small and a shekel [weight] that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals. The Lord swears by the pride of Jacob: I will never forget any of [their] doings. [See note 1]

[31] Again, notice that they are prone to extreme formulations and high-flown rhetoric, and sometimes when you strip away the rhetoric,

you see that the crimes that are being denounced are not murder, and rape, or horrendous physical violence. These [the latter] are obvious and grievous violations of social morality. Rather many scholars have pointed out, I think Kaufman chief among them, that the crimes that are denounced here are crimes that are prevalent in any society in any era. The crimes that are denounced as being utterly unacceptable to God, infuriating God to the point of destruction of the nation, are the kinds of crimes we see around us every day, taking bribes, improper weights and balances, lack of charity to the poor, indifference to the plight of the debtor.

[32] A second theme that is pointed out again by many scholars, is what Kaufman calls the idea of the primacy of morality [Kaufman 1972, 345]. That is to say the idea or the doctrine that morality is not just an obligation equal in importance to the cultic or religious obligations, but that morality is perhaps superior to the cult. What God requires of Israel is morality and not cultic service. Now, the prophets are all going to have — we are going to see many different attitudes towards the cult among the prophets. So allow that to become a more nuanced statement as we go through. Some are going to reject the cult of the entire nation. Others will not. So there is going to be some variation, but certainly morality is primary. And their words could, at times, be very harsh and very astonishing. Amos 5:21-24. “I loathe” — he is speaking now as God, right? So God is speaking — God says:

“I loathe, I spurn your festivals,

I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.

If you offer Me burnt [sacrifices] or your meal [sacrifices]

I will not accept them;

I will pay no heed

To your gifts of fatlings.

Spare me the sound of your hymns,

And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.

But let justice well up like water,

Righteousness like an unfailing stream.”  
[See note 2]

- [33] This is an attack on empty piety, on the performance of rituals without any meaning, perhaps, behind that performance, or in accompaniment to social injustice — the two can't happen at the same time. And that's a theme that is sounded repeatedly throughout prophetic literature. So for Amos, and for all the prophets, injustice is sacrilege. The ideals of the covenant are of utmost importance. That is why they are called the standard bearers of the covenant, harking back to the covenant obligations. And without these, without the ideals of the covenant, the fulfillment of cultic and ritual obligations in and of itself is a farce. That is not to say that they would be rejected were Israel to be upholding the covenant.
- [34] So this rejection of the cult depends, of course, on a caricature of cultic and ritual performance. The prophets caricature it as meaningless. They caricature it as unconcerned with ethics or with the ideals of justice and righteousness. But internal cultural conflicts often do involve the caricaturing or the ridiculing of an opponent's beliefs or practices. But for some of the prophets' rejection of the cult was quite radical. That is an idea that is not yet really fully formed in Amos. We are going to see, again, that some of the prophets will reject the cult of the nation, not just the cult of the wicked, but everyone. Even if performed properly and by righteous persons, there will be one or two prophets who believe the cult has no inherent value or no absolute value for God.
- [35] In some sense, this is a view that we have already encountered in sources devoted to the cult even in a source like P, the Priestly material. The Priestly material is already moving towards the idea, or establishing the idea, that the cult is an expression of divine favor rather than divine need. It doesn't really have an actual value necessarily for God. It doesn't really affect his vitality. It is given to humans as a ritual conduit, as a way to attract and maintain God's presence within the community, or to procure atonement for deeds or impurities that might temporarily separate one from God. So already in the Priestly source, we have a very complicated notion of the function of the [cult] for society and humanity. So the prophetic doctrine of the primacy of morality seems to be a reaction against other views of cultic practice; perhaps there were popular assumptions about the automatic efficacy of the cult and its rites.
- [36] But Kaufman has been joined by many other scholars who argue that the prophets raised morality to the level of an absolute religious value, and they did so because they saw morality as essentially divine [Kaufman 1972, 367]. The essence of God is his moral nature. Moral attributes are the essence of God himself. So Kaufman notes that he who requires justice and righteousness and compassion from human beings is himself just and righteous and compassionate. This is the prophetic view. The moral person can metaphorically be said to share in divinity. This is the kind of apotheosis that you find then in the prophetic writings, not the idea of a transformation into a divine being in life or even after death, but the idea that one strives to be god-like by imitating his moral actions, the idea again of *imitatio dei*.
- [37] A third feature of the prophetic writings, this is again underscored by Kaufman, but also many other scholars, and that is the prophets' view of history, their particular view of history, their interpretation of the catastrophic events of 722 and 586. It is an interpretation that centers on their elevation of morality, because the prophets insisted that morality was a decisive, if not the decisive factor, in the nation's history. Israel's acceptance of God's covenant placed certain religious and moral demands on her [Kaufman 1972, 365]. Now in the Deuteronomistic view that we have talked about, one sin is singled out as being historically decisive for the nation. Other sins are punished, absolutely. But only one is singled out as being historically decisive for the nation, and that is the sin of idolatry, particularly the idolatry of the royal house.

#### *4. Differences between Deuteronomistic and Prophetic Interpretations of Israel's History*

- [38] So the Deuteronomistic historian presents the tragic history of the two kingdoms as essentially a sequence of idolatrous aberrations, which were followed by punishment. And this cycle continued until finally there had to be complete destruction. While it is certainly true that moral sins and other religious sins in Israel were punishable in the Deuteronomist's view, it is really only the worship of other gods that brings about national collapse, national exile.

[39] And that view is exemplified in 2 Kings 17, which I have read to you. It does not mention moral sins as leading to the collapse of the state. It harps on idolatry. Idolatry was what provoked God to drive the nation into exile. The view of the classical prophets is a little different. Israel's history is determined by moral factors, not just religious factors. So the nation is punished not only for idolatry, but for moral failings. And, of course, the two are to a large degree intertwined. But the emphasis on the moral is striking in the prophets. And it may not be so startling to hear that God would doom a generation or doom a nation for grave moral sins, like murder and violence. This is something we have already seen in the generation of the flood. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah — they were destroyed for grievous violations of morality: murder, violence and so on. The prophets, however, are claiming that the nation is doomed because of commonplace wrongs, because of bribe-taking, because of false scales and false weights that are being used in the marketplace. These are the crimes for which destruction of the nation and exile will take place. Amos 2:6 through 8:

Thus said the Lord:

For three transgressions of Israel,

For four, I will not revoke it [the decree of destruction]:

Because they have sold for silver

Those whose cause was just [taking bribes in a courtroom setting],

And the needy for a pair of sandals.

You who trample the heads of the poor

Into the dust of the ground,

And make the humble walk a twisted course!

[40] So this is the first difference really between the Deuteronomistic interpretation of the nation's history — the destruction of Israel — and the prophetic interpretation. For the prophets, the national catastrophes are just punishment for sin, but not just the sin of idolatry, for all sins no matter how petty, now matter how venial, because all sins violate the terms of the covenant code, which is given specially to Israel. And the terms of the covenant — being vassals to the sovereign Yahweh means

treating co-vassals in a particular way, and it is breach of covenant not to do that.

[41] And, again, how much the prophets were harking back to an older tradition, to ancient traditions about Israel and its covenant relationship, traditions according to which Israel's redemption and election entailed moral obligations; how much they were the ones to actually generate and argue for this idea again is hotly debated by scholars. It is not an issue that we need to decide. But I would note that the primacy of morality in Israelite religion certainly dates back at least to the times of the earliest prophets, Amos in the eighth century for example, and may indeed have had antecedents. It certainly didn't just arise in the exile as some scholars would have us believe. It certainly was not the invention of the Deuteronomistic historian. It's alive and well in some of these very early prophets.

[42] I am going to turn now to the second difference between the Deuteronomistic and the prophetic interpretation of Israel's history. And that is that the prophets coupled their message of tragedy and doom with a message of hope and consolation. And this is something that just simply doesn't come within the purview of the Deuteronomistic historian's writing. First let me say a little bit about the message of doom and then the message of hope and consolation. One of the things that's so interesting in the classical prophets is that they give a new content to older Israelite ideas about the end of days, or what we call eschatology. Eschatology = an account of the eschaton, eschaton meaning the end. So eschatology is an account of the end.

[43] The prophets warned that unless they changed, the people were going to suffer the punishment that was due them. And, in fact, the people were very foolish to be eagerly awaiting or eagerly expecting what was popularly known as the Day of Yahweh, or the Day of the Lord. And so the prophets refer to the Day of Yahweh as if it were a popular conception out there in the general culture. It was a popular idea at the time that on some future occasion God would dramatically intervene in world affairs and he would do so on Israel's behalf. He would lead Israel in victory over her enemies. They would be punished. Israel would be restored to her full and former glory. And that day, the Day of the Lord or the Day of Yahweh, in the popular

mind, was going to be a marvelous day, a day of victory for Israel, triumph for Israel and a day of vengeance on her enemies. Amos 5:18 and 29, talks about the people as desirous of the Day of Yahweh. They are very confident that this is going to be a day of light, a day of blessing, a day of victory, he says.

[44] But the prophets, Amos among them, tell a different story. According to them, if there is no change then this Day of Yahweh is not going to be some glorious thing that the people should be eagerly awaiting. It's not going to be a day of triumph for Israel. It will not be a day of vengeance on her enemies. It's going to be a dark day of destruction. It is going to be a day of doom when God will finally call his own people to account. So this is another instance of the way in which the prophets try to radically surprise their audience by taking an older concept and reversing its meaning, changing its meaning. And here they have transformed the popular image of the Day of Yahweh from one of national triumph to one of national judgment. Amos 5:18 through 20:

Ah, you who wish  
For the day of the Lord!  
Why should you want  
The day of the Lord?  
It shall be darkness, not light!  
— As if a man should run from a lion  
And be attacked by a bear;  
Or if he got indoors,  
Should lean his hand on the wall  
And be bitten by a snake! [there is going  
to be no place to hide, in other words]  
Surely the day of the Lord shall be  
Not light, but darkness,  
Blackest night without a glimmer.

[45] Or chapter 8:9 through 12:

And in that day — declares my Lord God  
—  
I will make the sun set at noon,  
I will darken the earth on a sunny day.  
I will turn your festivals into mourning

And all your songs into dirges;  
I will put sackcloth on all loins  
And tonsures on every head. [mourning  
rites]  
I will make it mourn as for an only child,  
All of it as on a bitter day.

[46] So again at the heart of this idea that the Day of Yahweh is being transformed into this day of judgment, is the old idea that God is the God of history. Right? God can control the destiny of nations. He can control the actions of nations. That is not a new idea. But in the past, or not so much in the past, I suppose — it would have been present to the prophets — the prophets were reacting against a notion that God's involvement with other nations was always undertaken on Israel's behalf. This is the idea they seem to be battling. In other words, they are battling the idea or the assumption that God controlled other nations by exercising judgment on them and punishing them and subjecting them to Israel. And the prophets are challenging this idea. And they are making what would have been heard as a shocking and extraordinary claim.

[47] God is, of course, yes, a God of history, of all history. He is concerned with all nations, not only Israel. But his involvement with other nations doesn't extend merely to their subjugation. If need be, or rather if Israel deserves, then God will raise up another nation against her. So the final chapter in Amos begins by proclaiming this idea of utter destruction. I will slay them all, God says, and "not one of them shall survive." Wherever they hide, under the earth, in the heavens, at the bottom of the sea, God is going to haul them out and He is going to slay them. And what about the covenant? Isn't it a guarantee of privilege or safety? Again, for Amos, its primary function is to bind the nation in a code of conduct, and violations of that code are going to be severely punished. So in chapter 9 verses 7 to 8, Amos makes the startling claim that in God's eyes Israel is really no different from the rest of the nations. He elevated her. He can also lower her.

To Me, O Israelites, you are  
Just like the Ethiopians  
True, I brought Israel up

From the land of Egypt,  
 But also the Philistines from Caphtor  
 And the Aramaeans from Kir.  
 Behold, the Lord God has His eye  
 Upon the sinful kingdom:  
 I will wipe it off  
 The face of the earth!

have just finished the first half of verse 8 in Chapter 9. So 9:8a — you have this oracle of complete and devastating judgment: “Behold, the Lord God has His eye/Upon the sinful kingdom:/I will wipe it off/The face of the earth.” But then, the second half of the verse, and the beginning of this epilogue that has been added, immediately dilutes this: “But, I will not wholly wipe out/The House of Jacob — declares the Lord.” It seems that an editor has qualified this last oracle of doom, has desired to qualify this last oracle of doom. And the editor continues,

[48] These are harsh, harsh words. And you also have to remember that Amos was living in a time of relative peace and prosperity, about 750. National confidence is riding high. The people of Israel were pretty convinced that God was with them. They weren’t in any real imminent or obvious danger. And Amos was convinced that despite this external appearance of health, the nation was diseased. They were guilty of social crimes and unfaithfulness to their covenantal obligations. And so he says they are headed down this path of destruction. Perhaps because of the optimism of the time, Amos had to emphasize this message of doom, because his book is a pretty depressing book.

[49] Later prophets who were speaking in a different historical setting, in a more desperate historical setting, would often speak words of much more comfort and hope. But Amos doesn’t do this. He does indicate that his purpose is the reformation or the reorientation of the nation. He wants to awaken Israel to the fact that change is needed. Amos 5:14 and 15, “Seek good and not evil,/That you may live,/And that the Lord, the God of Hosts,/May truly be with you,/As you think.” Right now you think he is with you. He’s not. Change, so that he will truly be with you. “Hate evil and love good,/And establish justice in the gate;/Perhaps the Lord, the God of Hosts,/Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” The “perhaps” is important, and it is very indicative of Amos’ fatalism. This is very much a fatalistic book. The overriding theme of Amos’ message is that punishment is inevitable. It is pretty much inevitable. And this is one of the reasons that most scholars believe that the final verses of the book, verses halfway through [chapter 9 verse] 8 down to 15, are a later addition by an editor. It is an epilogue, and it was likely added in order to relieve the gloom and the pessimism and the fatalism of the prophet’s message, because in these verses, Amos does an almost complete about-face. We

For I will give the order  
 And shake the House of Israel —  
 Through all the nations —  
 As one shakes [sand] in a sieve,  
 And not a pebble falls to the ground.  
 All the sinners of My people  
 Shall perish by the sword,  
 Who boast,  
 “Never shall the evil  
 Overtake us or come near us.”  
 In that day,  
 I will set up again the fallen booth of David;  
 I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew.  
 I will build it firm as in the days of old,  
 [...]
 A time is coming — declares the Lord —  
 [...]
 When the mountains shall drip wine  
 And all the hills shall wave [with grain].  
 I will restore my people Israel.  
 They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them;  
 [...]
 They shall till gardens and eat their fruits.  
 And I will plant them upon their soil,  
 Nevermore to be uprooted  
 From the soil I have given them — said the Lord your God.

[50] In other words, according to this epilogue, God's punishment of Israel isn't the end of the story. It is one step in a process, and the affliction and the punishment serve a purpose. It is to purge the dross, to chasten Israel. They are going to be put through a sieve. Only the sinners will really perish. A remnant, presumably a righteous remnant, will be permitted to survive and in due time that remnant will be restored.

[51] To summarize Amos, and hopefully this will give us then some foothold as we move into other prophetic books, we need to understand that the Book of Amos is a set of oracles by a prophet addressing a concrete situation in the northern kingdom. It's been subject to some additions that reflect the perspective of a later editor. Amos' message was that sin would be punished by God and it would be punished on a national level — the nation would fall. When the northern kingdom fell, it was understood to be a fulfillment of Amos' words. The Assyrians were the instruments of God's just punishment. So his words were preserved in Judah. After Judah fell, presumably a later editor added a few key passages to reflect this later reality, most significantly the oracle against Judah in chapter 2, verses 4-5, and the epilogue in chapter 9, verse 8b through 15, which explicitly seem to refer to the fall of the southern kingdom. It refers to a future day when the fallen booth of David will be raised. That reflects a knowledge of the end of Judah, the end of the Davidic kingship. And the phrase "on that day" which is used, is a phrase that

often signals what we feel is an editorial insertion in a prophetic book. It is pointing forward to some vague future time of restoration. Okay. On Monday, we are going to be moving on to Hosea and Isaiah.

[52] [end of transcript]

—

[53] Notes

[54] 1. For clarity, in this quotation Professor Hayes substitutes "a measure" for the JPS Tanakh translation's "an ephah."

[55] 2. In this quotation, Professor Hayes substitutes "sacrifices" for the JPS Tanakh translation's "offerings."

—

[56] References

[57] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. No part of this text can be reproduced or forwarded without written permission of the publisher.

[58] Kaufman, Yehezkel. 1972. *The Religion of Israel*. Trans. Moshe Greenberg. New York: Schocken Books.