

# OBSERVATIONS ON SOME CRUXES IN AMOS—PART V

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אשא עיני אל ההרים

*Parts I-IV of the paper discussed some cruxes in the book of Amos. Part V continues to present my insights on additional cruxes in this book.*

KING'S REAPING -- A LOCUST

כה הראני ה' אלה-ים והנה יוצר בתחלת עלות הלקש והנה לקש אחר גזי  
המלך.

*This is what my Lord God showed me: He was creating [a plague of] locusts at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout – the late-sown crops after the king's reaping.*

The first of Amos' visions in Chapter 7 contains verse 7:1, which presents commentators with considerable difficulties. Hakham explains the first part of the verse and says that the remainder is unclear. The most accepted interpretation is that reflected by the NJPS translation: *This is what my Lord God showed me: He was creating [a plague of] locusts in the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout -- the late-sown crops after the king's reaping.* The NJPS translators also note that the meaning of the text is uncertain. They suggest that the king's reaping of fodder apparently occurred near the end of the rainy season, and whatever the locust destroyed after that could not be replaced for another year. This meaning of the verse rests heavily on the word *ha-melekh* [the king] and is problematic on several counts.

Hamershaimb notes that it's questionable whether it was the custom in ancient Israel to harvest the hay and to use it for feeding animals. Moreover, the king's privilege of having the first grass of spring cut for his horses is not attested with certainty in the Bible, even in I Kings 18:5,<sup>1</sup> though Roman rulers of Syria later claimed this right in the month of Nisan.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the verb

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"gzz" is used in the Bible for sheepshearing. Using Psalm 72:6 to extend this meaning to grass mowing is very tenuous.

Furthermore, the second "*lekesh*" in the verse is problematic. The word *lekesh* occurs only in our verse. Its meaning is deduced from the Gezer Calendar where it apparently means "late sowing." In this meaning it well fits its first use in the verse: *He was creating [a plague of] locust at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout.* The second part of our verse, however, starts with a dramatic introductory "*ve-hinei*."<sup>3</sup> We would expect in parallel to the first *ve-hinei* an event rather than timing. Thus, Andersen and Freedman feel that the two uses of *lekesh* have different referents and the second *lekesh* is not part of the vision but "a further definition of the time of the event in the real world."<sup>4</sup> The Septuagint reads the second *lekesh* as "*yelek*," which is the name for a locust in the last stage of its development, before it can fly.

Hakham notes that there are commentators who consider both the second *lekesh* and *gizei ha-melekh* to be kinds of locust. Then the entire verse would deal with an attack of a variety of locusts with potentially dire consequences, because it occurs at a bad time in the agricultural calendar. Hakham suggests that "*gez*" (occurring also in the Talmud in Shabbat 106b) is similar to "*gzm*," a type of walking locust without wings.

I suggest reading the second part of the verse thus: *ve-hinei yelek sh[a]har, gezem holekh.* This emendation requires only minor changes in the original text, yet preserves the powerful vision of a locust plague. The prophet sees in his vision how the Lord creates the locust to attack the growth at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout. The *yelek* and the *gezem* appear like flashes in his vision, conjuring a total devastation brought by the locust in its various stages of development.

Support for this interpretation can be found in Feliks's description of the developmental stages of the locust. He says:

The locust [*arbeh*] is the adult insect. The female deposits the eggs in a cylindrical hole excavated in the ground. The young insect emerge from the egg, a dark wingless larva [*yelek*]. It licks up the vegetation [*yelek* -- lick], casts its skin and turns into a *hasil*. This grows very fast and devours all the greens of the field [*hasil* – devourer], then casts off its skin twice and there emerges a semi-developed insect [*gazam*] with rudimentary wings unable

to fly. For lack of greens it cuts and gnaws on tree branches [*gazam* -- lop off].<sup>5</sup>

## A VISION OF BATTLE

כה הראני והנה אדני נצב על חומת אנך ובידו אנך. ויאמר ה' אלי מה אתה ראה עמוס ואמר אנך ויאמר אדני הנני שם אנך בקרב עמי ישראל לא אוסיף עוד עבור לו. ונשמו במות ישחק ומקדשי ישראל יחרבו וקמתי על בית ירבעם בחרב.

*This is what He showed me: He was standing on a wall checked with a plumb line and He was holding a plumb line. And the Lord asked me. "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. And my Lord declared, "I am going to apply a plumb line to My people Israel: I will pardon them no more. The shrines of Isaac will be laid waste, and the sanctuaries of Israel reduced to ruins; I will turn upon the House of Jeroboam with the sword."*

Much of the effort to understand Amos' third vision (7:7-9) focused on the meaning of "*anakh*" and "*homat anakh*."<sup>6</sup> Most of the commentators appear to agree that *anakh* is associated with lead.<sup>7</sup> From this basic meaning commentators utilize for their explanations its softness, its uselessness, its magic powers to cause evil, as well as its utility, importance, strength, and a metaphor for a sword. The meanings given to *homat anakh* include a symbol of defense, a symbol of attack, and a storage of metals.<sup>8</sup>

It appears that no commentator considered the possibility that *anakh* could be the ancient *ankh*; a symbol of ending, of death, but also of rebirth and perpetuity. When Amos is shown the *ankh* he is initially unaware of its symbolic significance. When he is asked, "What do you see?" He can only answer in puzzlement, "*Ankh!*" He sees this Egyptian symbol, the key to the gates of life and death. But what has that to do with Israel? The entire vision becomes clear when the dual meaning of *ankh* sinks in and is properly assigned to the elements of the vision. The Lord is standing on an *ankh* wall ("intended to last for a perpetuity"). He holds in His hands the *ankh* ("symbol of life and death") unclear yet on what the verdict will be. This suspense and dramatic moment is followed by putting the *ankh* ("symbol of death") among His people Israel. Amos does not plead with the Lord, because the *ankh* contains the promise of rebirth.

I see also in this vision an exact application of the Lord's judgment and am in particular intrigued by Amos' meticulous selection of words to convey this idea. Even a cursory reading of the two verses impresses us with the repeated use of the word "*rb*" [plead a case or contend] as a constituent of the words. We find it in *bekerev*, *a'vor* [reversed], *yeheravu*, *yeravam*, and *beharev*. The implication is that the idea of judgment and contention is the major element of the vision.

The notion of strife is further emphasized by the use of the words *bekerev*, *Yisrael*, *Ishak*, *yeheravu*, and *beharev*. Amos could have said *Hineni sam anakh betokh ami*. Instead he chose *bekerev* to create an association with the word *krav* [battle]. Moreover, *bekerev* sounds very much like *beherev* when the "*het*" is throaty, the way it is pronounced in the Near East.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the dominant elements of the third vision are strife and the sword, connoting judgment and sentence.<sup>10</sup>

Use of "*vekamti 'al*" by Amos is also intentional. The destruction of the house of Jeroboam is not an obvious consequence of war or natural disaster.<sup>11</sup> It is rather the consequence of the Lord viewing this royal house as the enemies of the Lord (Ps. 3:2). No wonder this view has so riled the High Priest Amaziah, who was supposed to keep the royal house in the Lord's good graces.

In addition to these literary devices, intended to imbue his prophecy with rich substrata, Amos is also sensitive to audile elements that are associated with desolation and destruction by using the letters "*samekh*" or "*sin*" four times in 7:8, and the letter "*shin*" four times in 7:9.

Andersen and Freedman say:

There is no doubt a play on words in the second case (Vision 4) and probably in the first case (Vision 3), though we are handicapped by not knowing what an *anakh* actually is, or what the other meaning might be if a play on words were involved which to us at least seems likely.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently they translate: '*What do you see, Amos? I said, 'A lump of tin [anakh]. My Lord said, 'Soon I will put grief [anakh] in the midst of My people Israel.*' Note that the word *anakh* used in this vision sounds very much like the word "*anah*" (with a "*het*" instead of a "*khaf*"). *Anah* means "to sigh." The use of *anakh* not only conveyed exacting judgement but also the sigh of the pain that follows the sentence.<sup>13</sup>

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It is astounding how Amos, a master of the word, was able to enrich two verses with so much meaning and content.

### *ERETZ* – A KEY WORD

Sections 8:4-7, 8:8, 8:9-10, 8:11-14, 9:5-8, and 9:9-15 all start with a verse that includes the word "*eretz*" [land], as if this word served for a thematic separation of the text. The word *eretz* occurs with the following connectives and contexts: '*anyei eretz* [the poor of the land], in a context of oppression; *tirgaz ha-aretz* [anger of the land], in a context of revulsion; *ha-hashakhti la-aretz* [darken the land], in a context of retribution; *ra'v ba-aretz* [a hunger in land], in a context of repentance; *ha-noge'a ba-aretz* [that touches the earth], in a context of the Lord's strength; *yipol tsror aretz* [a stone falling to the ground], in a context of selective retribution.

These contexts in which *eretz* occurs form a logical chain. The poor of the land are oppressed to a point that the earth becomes angry and repulsed. Darkness descends on the land as a consequence of the Lord's retribution. The lesson is learned; repentance is expressed in a hunger for the word of the Lord. The Lord re-establishes His contact with the earth in a touch that illustrates His strength and great salvation comes. Salvation is, however, selective. Those stones, or stone-hearted, do not merit a life on earth.

By placing *eretz* at the start of each section, Amos provides us with a convenient summary of his prophecies. Moreover, this structure also points to an underlying integrity of the prophecies as well as the likelihood that vision 9:1-4 is out of place.

### EARTHQUAKE OR INUNDATION?

העל זאת תרגו הארץ ואבל כל יושב בה ועלתה כאר כלה ונגרשה ונשקה  
כיאר מצרים.

*Shall not the earth shake for this*

*And all that dwell on it mourn?*

*Shall it not rise like the Nile*

*And surge and subside like the Nile of Egypt?*

Verse 8:8 has been generally assumed to be a description of an earthquake, likened to the rise and fall of the Nile.<sup>14</sup> Hammershaimb, while adopting this view notes: "The comparison is not entirely felicitous, since the Nile rises and falls gradually, and is of benefit to the land. The probable explanation is

that Amos has never been in Egypt, and only knew of the rise of the Nile by hearsay."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Andersen and Freedman ask: "What is the picture: inundation or undulation?" The strong references to the Nile lead them to conclude that the picture is that of both events. In their view, "The comparison with the Nile suggests inundation. It rises and falls; but is not a cataclysm and does not generate gigantic, destructive waves. The shock waves of an earthquake are more like the waves of the sea."<sup>16</sup>

Verse 8:8 contains several parallel words that highlight what must have been of import to Amos: "*ha'al*" echoes "*ve'alta*"; "*tirgaz*" parallels "*venigresha*"; "*khaor*" is almost the same as "*khiyeor*." The literary emphasis is thus on the rise or upheaval of the land, its anger, and the similarities to the Nile. Note that Amos could have established a stronger similarity with *tirgaz* had he used "*venirgesha*" instead of "*venigresha*." Then we would have anger parallel to excitement, and the two first letters of each of the verbs "*rgz*" and "*rgsh*" would have been the same. Amos, however, chose "*venigrash*," probably because it conveyed two other meanings that were important to him: "*nigar*" [flow] and "*garesh*" [expel]. This is also supported by 9:5.

The picture that Amos means to sketch now becomes much clearer. He wants to describe an angry earth disgusted with the evil committed on it. This earth heaves in revulsion and melts to expunge the evil from its surface, like flotsam on an angry and turbulent river. The image is very close to that in Isaiah: *But the wicked are like the troubled sea/ Which cannot rest,/ Whose waters toss up mire and mud* (Isa. 57:20). The wicked are the flotsam, the dirt that the troubled sea expels.<sup>17</sup> In this explanation "*nishka*" (the *ketiv* נִשְׁכָּא) makes very good sense. It is derived from "*shkk*," meaning lively, running to and fro, or turbulent.

The image that Amos tries to convey is neither that of inundation nor of undulation but of revulsion. His careful selection of words proves it. Verse 9:5, which is part of a doxology describing God's might in nature, does not contain "*nigresha*" or "*nishka*" because there was no need for them. "*Tamog*" [tremble, melt] picks up the meaning of "*nigar*," but the anger and turbulence have no place in the doxology so they were omitted. In parallel to "*alta*" [raised] we have "*shak'a*," [sank] a description of an awesome event on the Nile, but all natural and provided by God. Similarly, in 9:5 *veavlu kol yoshvei ba* is a description of the dependence of all living on God's providence and grace. In 8:8 these same words, however, have a completely different mean-

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ing: all the living should be saddened by the evil on earth and should conjoin the earth in its anger. The sadness and anger, perhaps in equal measures, are expressed by the six-fold repetition of the "*lamed*" giving the sound of ululation and "*resh*" giving the sound of gritting.

## CONCLUSION

The words of Amos have over time inspired a sizable library of interpretative works. It is conceivable that this library will continue to grow, because many of the cruxes remain essentially unresolved.

In suggesting resolutions to some cruxes, I took the position that the reader is expected to speculate beyond the explicit text. The text or oratory is the means by which the prophet has to convey the Lord's sentiments and the prophet's views to the audience. It is incumbent on him to choose a most effective delivery, often employing a multi-layered or multi-symbolic approach. Moreover, the prophet has to be sensitive to what the reader or listener can read or hear in the text. While letting the text stand as it is, with all the possible innuendoes, interpretations and symbolisms, the prophet implicitly legitimizes any analysis of any depth beyond his very presentation. Since the reader or listener must not be drawn to unintended conclusions, this is a most delicate task.

I pray that I did not stray from what Amos had to say.

## NOTES

1. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos, A Commentary*, trans. John Sturdy (New York: Schocken Books, 1970) p. 109.
2. *Ibid.*
3. It appears that the NJPS omits this *ve-hinei* altogether, assuming that the repetition of the late-sown crops captures it.
4. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989) p. 741.
5. J. Feliks, *The Animal World of the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1962) p. 115.
6. Shalom M. Paul, *Amos, A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) p. 235. Paul says: "The attempt to discover here onomatopoeia based on Hebrew roots *ank/annah* ("to sigh") is very tortuous and unconvincing."
7. The meaning of *anakh* was obscure to scholars of antiquity. They thought that it means "judgment" (Targum), "a wall of plaster" (Vulgate), "molten" (Theodotion), "shining" (Aquila), "tin" (Jerome), "steel" [*adamaz*] (LXX). The word appears to be borrowed from the Akkadian *anaku* meaning "tin" or "lead". See Weiss, Vol. I, p. 220.

8. Amos Hakham, *Amos* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1973) p. 58. Hakham notes that any war in the Bible is called *herev*.
9. Meir Weiss, *The Book of Amos, Vol I, Commentary* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992) p. 223. In Weiss's view, "It stands to reason that there is no special significance to this form (Ishak), except from the point of view of language development and pronunciation."
10. Hakham, p. 58. Hakham says, "God considers the house of Jeroboam as an enemy, and Himself will battle it."
11. Andersen and Freedman, p. 616.
12. H.W.F. Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979) p. 64. The Arab verb *ank* means thick, troublesome, slow. Andersen and Freedman use it in this sense the second time it occurs in the text.
13. Paul, p. 226. Paul leaves *anakh* untranslated.
14. Weiss, Vol. I, p. 253. Commentators think that 8:8 describes an earthquake because: (a) analysis of biblical verses where *ragaz*, *ra'ash*, *ga'ash*, and *mog* refer to *eretz* appears to indicate an earthquake; (b) an earthquake occurred at the time of Uzziah's rule and is mentioned at the beginning of the book; (c) there are some hints in Amos' prophecies of an earthquake; and (d) the understanding of 8:8 and its parallel in 9:5. Weiss, however, thinks that *tirgaz ha-aretz* can be understood only in its context of 8:8. There it appears to depict a supernatural upset to the normal state, yet it also depicts an emotional shake-up and anger.
15. Hammershaimb, p. 125.
16. Andersen and Freedman, p. 812.
17. Andersen and Freedman, p. 813. Andersen and Freedman liken the wicked in Isaiah 57:20 to the sea. They say, "If we ask how the wicked are like the sea, the answer is given by the two verbs, they are expelled and they expel. The sea was expelled from the land, and it retaliated by expelling muck and mud onto the land." I think that an allusion to a conflict between earth and sea dating to primordial times makes the simile too esoteric and removed. In such a perennial conflict it would have sufficed just to mention mud. Isaiah, however, uses both *refesh* (which may stem from the same source as "refuse," and is connected to *peresh*) and *tit* (mud). It is the dirty flotsam that is important to Isaiah and he strengthened this element by tying it to the normal sea deposit of sand, albeit in its dirty form of mud.

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