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Was Amos among the prophets? Amos 7:14: A prophet in spite of himself¹

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long debated whether the prophets considered themselves as such or were so designated by later generations. Amos is among the literary and oral prophets of the Old Testament who seems to even reject and deny such designation in Amos 7:10-17 although he admits to prophesying. A close look at Amos 3:1-8 in conjunction with 7:10-17 will show that Amos was indeed a prophet, though a prophet in spite of himself. What he rejects is not his authority as a prophet, but his initiative in becoming a prophet as well as any connection with a prophetic guild. As such, Amos is numbered among many of the men called by God who have reluctantly accepted the call.

KEYWORDS: Amos, prophet (נָבִיא), seer (חֹזֶה), son of a prophet (בֶּן-נָבִיא), Amos 3:1-8, Amos 7:10-17.

INTRODUCTION

A large part of the Old Testament is taken up by what the Hebrew canon terms as the נְבִיאִים or “The Prophets.” There is little disagreement over the fact that these literary creations contain oracles against foreign nations and against Israel (including Judah), which were uttered by men “as they were led by God.” At least that is what these men claimed for their words. Thus, what they were doing is commonly characterized as “prophesying.” What is, however, not so quickly admitted is that these men should be called נְבִיאִים, “prophets,” or that they should be perceived as fulfilling the role of a prophet. In this sense, a great distinction is drawn between the verb “to prophesy” and the noun “prophet.”

Such a distinction has recently led A. Graeme Auld and R. Carroll, among others, to argue that, although these men can rightly be said to have “prophesized,” they were perceived as “prophets” only by later generations such as the editors and redactors of their speeches who gathered and catalogued them under the broad

¹ The second part of the title is taken from Hans Walter Wolff characterization of Amos in “The Irresistible Word (Amos),” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 6.

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category of “Prophets.” However, according to these scholars, these men never identified themselves with the נְבִיאִים, in fact at times they overtly rejected such a designation. Thus, a more accurate description of these men is “Poets.”³

The *locus classicus* of the arguments for this position is Amos 7:10-17. More specifically, the advocates of this view claim that Amos clearly denies for himself the office of נְבִיא in 7:14. By use of a Hebrew nominal clause כִּן-נְבִיא Amos seems to distance himself from the term “prophet,” though he admits in 7:15 that what he is doing is called “prophesying.”

This paper, then, will seek to answer the challenging question, “Was Amos among the prophets?” In the process of answering, we will pay close attention to Amos’ self-perception in relation to the term נְבִיא. Crucial to this task is the analysis of two passages in Amos that deal with the legitimizing of the prophet’s call: Amos 3:1-8 and 7:10-17. We have chosen to focus on these two passages because they are the only ones in the whole book that use the singular or plural form of the noun נְבִיא with reference to Amos, though we will also make mention of 2:11-12, the only other passage in the book using the noun, but apparently unrelated to Amos’ identity.

The importance of Amos’ self-perception for the understanding of Israelite prophecy has long been recognized.⁴ At the same time, the words of Amos (particularly in 7:14) are not easy to translate, much less to grasp their meaning. Amos 7:14, for instance, is generally recognized as the *crux interpretum* of the book. But if we are to understand something about the identity of these men in relation to the role of a “prophet,” we must struggle to understand the meaning of Amos’ words. This is all the more important as we realize that Amos is the earliest of the literary “prophets,” on whose footsteps follow the other eighth and seventh century prophets. So Amos, in a way, sets the tone of how the “prophets” perceived themselves. An understanding of Amos’ self-perception in relation to

³ A. Graeme Auld, “Prophets Through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 3-23; R. Carroll, “Poets not Prophets: A Response to ‘Prophets Through the Looking Glass,’” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 25-31; H. G. M. Williamson, “A Response to A.G. Auld,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 33-39; See also the rejoinder by Auld in “Prophets Through the Looking Glass: A Response to Robert Carroll and Hugh Williamson,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983): 41-44. See also S. A. Geller, “Were the Prophets Poets?” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 211-21.

⁴ Contra Matitiahu Tsevat, “Amos 7:14-Present or Preterit,” in *The Tablet & the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, eds. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell & David B. Weisberg (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 256-58. He states: “The answer does not imply a view of the essence of prophecy or the status of prophets it provides no basis for criticism of the history of these passages.” (258).

the נְבִיאִים is therefore crucial not only for the immediate understanding of his words but also for the general theme of Israelite prophecy.

AMOS 3:1-8: AN *APOLOGIA* OF AMOS' PROPHETIC AUTHORITY IN PROCLAIMING DIVINE JUDGMENT

Amos 3:1-8 begins the second division of the book.⁵ Verses 1 and 8 form an *inclusion*—"Yahweh has spoken"—which shows not only that these verses are a unit but also that with verse 8 a certain initial resolution has been reached.⁶ There are primarily two themes that hold this passage together: (1) "evil" (i.e., catastrophe/disaster) in a city shows God's judgment and (2) prophecy is God's warning to people.⁷ J. Jeremias rightly sees 3:1 as announcing Amos' divine discourse, 3:2 as naming it (i.e., judgment), and 3:3-8 as legitimizing it.⁸ As such, this unit is intended to legitimize Amos' prophetic commission and pronouncement. Seeing this passage as an *apologia* of his authority as a prophet of God is important as a starting point in elucidating Amos' self-perception in relation to the role of a prophet.

Setting the Text in Context

In order to see where Amos and his role as God's "prophet" come into focus in this message, we need to notice the logical development of this unit and the relationship of these two major themes. In this sense, Andersen and Freedman are right to see verses 1 and 2 as a "pivotal expression or bridge" between chapters 1-2 and chapters 3-4.⁹ While chapter 2 in particular announces God's

⁵ Contra Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 378, who see chapter 1-4 as the first major unit of the book. In this respect, they take 2:9-3:8 as a unit. Most commentators however see a clear break at 2:16. For a thorough presentation of different views on the structure of Amos, see Stephen J. Bramer, "Analysis of the Structure of Amos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 160-74. How one understands the structure of Amos has little influence on the exegesis of this paper. The smaller segment, i.e., 3:1-8, however, must be seen as a unit within the larger context. See Yehoshua Gitay, "A Study of Amos's Art of Speech: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amos 3:1-15," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 293- 309, for arguments in favor of viewing this passage as a unit. Also Karl Moller, following D. A. Dorsey, suggests that Amos 3:1-15 is a rhetorical unit consisting of a seven-part chiasm. See his *A Prophet in Debate: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Book of Amos*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement, Series 372 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 217- 50.

⁶ Cf., Jorg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (translated by Douglas W. Stott; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 48.

⁷ Cf., Jan de Waard and William A. Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* (United Bible Societies, 1979), 62.

⁸ Jeremias, *Amos*, 48. Also Moller, *A Prophet in Debate*, 224.

⁹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 32. Shalom M. Paul also sees these verses as a "sort of mini recapitulation of some of the main motifs and expressions of the first two chapters..." *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 100-01.

judgment of Israel, it is only beginning with chapter 3 that the specifics of this judgment are presented. Amos 3:1-8, then, is a transitional pericope and is written to have a powerful rhetorical effect on the audience, namely, to convince Israel of the validity of the divine pronouncement of judgment.¹⁰

Verse 1 draws the attention of the audience to the divine speech: “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken.” The expressions used both in verses 1 and 2 echo the language of the covenant made at Sinai.¹¹ There, God spoke to Israel and the result was fear. Here God speaks again, but, as Amos will later suggest, the result is not fear; rather Israel ignores the warning and suppresses it (3:8). The covenant language is particularly evident in 3:1b where Amos reiterates the Exodus motif from 2:10, and in 3:2a where Amos reminds his audience of the special relationship that Israel has with Yahweh.¹²

It is this very covenant language that Amos employs for rhetorical impact. Upon hearing the covenantal language, Israel would have immediately assumed that Amos will proclaim a message of comfort and peace. Thus, when Amos proclaims in 3:2b that God will punish Israel for the very reason of their special status, the audience must have been shocked and alarmed. For them, the past covenant implied present and future protection and salvation (cf. 5:14, 18; 9:10). But they forgot that God was not only the guarantor of salvation but also a righteous God who will punish Israel for her transgressions (e.g., Josh. 24:19-20). In this sense, Amos 3:2b is programmatic for chapters 3 and 4, serving as their hermeneutical key.¹³

In these opening verses of chapter 3, then, an unexpected reversal takes place: From the *special status* of Israel, as God’s covenant people, Amos draws out

¹⁰ Moller, *A Prophet in Debate*, 224.

¹¹ Cf., Jeffrey Niehaus, *Amos*, The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; 3rd ed. 2000), 322, where he rightly states that, “The phraseology of the prophecy of Amos illustrates the covenant background against which it was written.” Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 382, argue that, “Without the covenant background and the stipulations and sanctions imposed at Sinai the prophet’s argument would be meaningless.”

¹² Paul notices the technical legal meaning of the verb “to know” in 3:2a. He states: “What is actually implied here [by the use of this word] is that the Lord has made a covenant with the people of Israel, who alone are recognized as his sole legitimate covenant partners...Their distinction and dignity stem...from the permanent covenant relationship that permanently binds them to their God,” *Amos*, 102.

¹³ Cf., Jeremias, *Amos*, 48. Henry McKeating, *The Books of Amos, Hosea and Micah*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 26, sees verse 2 as being “virtually a summary of Amos’ entire message.” James Luther Mays considers the appeal to the covenant as “furnishing a theological framework within which other announcements of coming judgment can be understood,” *Amos: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 55.

their *special responsibilities* before God and therefore the divine right to punish.¹⁴ Instead of their election functioning as the foundation for God's care and protection, Amos uses it here as a basis for punishment.¹⁵ The reversal, then, is both shocking and at the same time justified. Robert Martin-Achard and S. Paul Re'emi capture well the rhetorical impact of this reversal:

... from [the election] he draws a conclusion diametrically opposed to that of his partners in dialogue. The latter take it for granted that their election protects them from the divine wrath and shelters them from the menace of destruction. As for the prophet it is precisely because the Israelites are the object of God's choice that he will require them to give an explanation of their iniquities. Just being the people of God offers no absolute guarantee, rather it confers a special responsibility. We are to note the astonishing reversal accomplished by Amos: election takes the place here of the bill of indictment. We can conceive just how scandalized his hearers must have been by his proposition: the prophet had turned the history of salvation into a history of judgment.¹⁶

By drawing unexpected conclusions concerning the covenant's implications, Amos' legitimacy and authority in passing judgment must have been questioned by the audience. We could almost hear the hostile response and the protest of the audience, to Amos' proclamation: "Who does he think he is to make such a pronouncement [3:2b]?"¹⁷ Two objections in particular must have been raised in the minds of the people after hearing the first two verses of chapter 3:

¹⁴ "Therefore" in 3:2b points to the unexpected, opposite, interpretation of the covenant's implications.

¹⁵ Cf. Harry Mowvley, *The Books of Amos & Hosea*, Epworth Commentaries (London: Epworth, 1991), 37. Most commentators notice this shocking reversal that takes place and the interconnection between privilege and punishment. See, e.g., Paul, *Amos*, 102, where he states that, "The imminent judgment is predicated upon their very election." Andersen and Freedman have caught well the use of the covenant language to justify divine judgment, when they suggest the following meaning: "Yahweh has done these things for you in the past, and Yahweh will do this thing to you in the future. You did not deserve the first, but he did them for you anyway; you certainly deserve the second, and in spite of every effort on his part, he finally cannot and will not avert it," *Amos*, 32-3. Richard S. Cripps suggests the following reading of verse 2: "You are indeed the people of my special care, but that fact does not imply that I shall treat you more leniently than I do other nations who transgress my moral laws. The greater your privileges so much the more your responsibility. Or in New Testament language 'Unto whom much is given from him much shall be required,'" *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (London: SPCK, 1929; 2nd ed. 1955), 152. Mays states: "The historical credo has been drawn into the accusation against the nation," *Amos*, 8.

¹⁶ Robert Martin-Achard and S. P. Re'emi, *God's People in Crisis: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handset, 1969), 28.

¹⁷ Cf., Mowvley, *Amos*, 38.

(1) It makes no sense for God to punish his covenantal people and (2) Amos has no authority and is not competent to prophecy judgment. These two objections are answered by Amos in 3:3-8. Thus, Amos' primary concern in these verses is not to reveal their sins nor to describe the punishment, which he will do later, but to convince and persuade them by appealing to their mind and reason of the validity of his pronouncement in 3:2b.¹⁸ In this sense, this unit has an apologetic tone: Amos seeks to defend his right to bring a message of divine judgment.

The Prophet's Legitimization as the Rhetorical Climax of 3:3-8

Commentators agree on several aspects of Amos 3:3-8. Although, Stuart, for instance, calls this unit a "*disputation* in which Amos' or any prophet's necessity to prophesy about disaster Yahweh has cause is defended,"¹⁹ and Niehaus takes this passage as a "covenant-lawsuit address,"²⁰ all see it as a defense of some sort. As such, Amos seeks to secure the assent of the audience to what he has to say by means of a series of rhetorical questions. He uses this device "in order to draw the unexpected audience logically and skillfully into the flow of a persuasive and penetrating presentation of the inextricable relationship of all events and happenings."²¹

Also, commentators generally agree that Amos' method of persuasion based on a series of rhetorical questions resembles the wisdom, didactic literature (e.g., Job 8:11ff; 38).²² Samuel Terrien has convincingly argued for the presence of wisdom motifs in Amos. He states concerning this passage that, "The fact that the prophet expects to stimulate audience approval in a matter of logical thinking involving assent to the principle of empirically observed causation is strongly reminiscent of the teaching method of the wise."²³

¹⁸ Cf., Gary V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 106.

¹⁹ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31 (Waco: Word, 1987), 324.

²⁰ Niehaus, *Amos*, 318. He follows Herbert B. Huffmon, "Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959): 285 in structuring 3:1-8 in the form of such an address: Introduction of plaintiff and judge 3.1a; Introduction of defendant 3.1b; Indictment 3.2; Confirmation of covenant-lawsuit messenger 3.3-8; Summons to witnesses 3.9a; Judgment 3.9b-10; Judgment 3.11-15.

²¹ Paul, *Amos*, 104.

²² See, e.g., Wolff, *Amos the Prophet: The Man and His Background* (translated by Foster R. McCurley; ed. by John Reumann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 10, where he states: "This form has instructional functions in the didactic style of wisdom discourse since it simultaneously provokes insight into and concurrence with the knowledge which is perceived by the series of observations."

²³ Samuel Terrien, "Amos and Wisdom," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (eds. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 112.

The rhetorical questions share at least three features in common.²⁴ First, they are all derived from common knowledge and experience (particularly that of a shepherd as Amos was) and therefore no special training in wisdom was necessary to answer these questions. The answers were self-evident because the analogies were trivial. Secondly, they all illustrate the principle of cause-and-effect (with the exception of 3:6 where it seems to be reversed) in the animal, human, and divine realms. According to the generally accepted principle, every event has its cause.

Amos' argumentation is thus fundamentally logical in nature utilizing the principle of analogy. Thirdly, all rhetorical questions expect "No" as an answer. They press the audience into agreeing with Amos, and thus it is easy to hear the audience whispering in agreement: "It is true; this thing would not happen were it not preceded by the other."

Commentators, however, are divided over what is being defended in 3:3-8. The majority agree that in these verses Amos offers an *apologia* of his prophetic commissioning. J. L. Mays argues that this unit is a "defense of the messenger's work; the prophet speaks to justify his commission."²⁵ Andersen and Freedman agree: "The main objective is a defense of the prophet in his role as messenger of Yahweh." Later they contend: "Amos 3:3-8, with its theme of prophecy is an *apologia* for the compulsive behavior of prophets in the light of the treatment received in 2:12."²⁶ Shalom Paul also states that, "Amos is hereby presenting an *apologia* for his calling. He justifies and legitimizes his prophetic commission."²⁷

Smith on the other hand, argues that the structure of the unit emphasizes the following theme: "The cause of divine punishment versus the results of divine election." In other words, "The real issue of debate is: will God destroy Israel,

²⁴ Cf., John H. Hayes, *Amos. The Eighth Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 124.

²⁵ Mays, *Amos*, 59. See also, Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Henneneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 183, 187; Mowvley, *Amos*, 38. Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (translated by John Sturdy; New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 56- 59.

²⁶ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 33 and 378, respectively. Later they state: "It is tempting to see in this exposition a defense of the prophet' s right and obligation to speak the word of Yahweh when he hears it," 400.

²⁷ Paul, *Amos*, 104. See also Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 19b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 71 where they state: "Amos spoke here as the defender of his office as messenger as well as the messenger of his God."

his chosen people?”²⁸ In response to the previous view, he adds: “Amos is not defending himself... he is not attempting to vindicate his own authority.”²⁹

Apparently, what distinguishes the two views is the object to be defended: messenger or message, respectively? This, in turn, depends on whether one takes verse 6b or verse 8b to be the climax of the rhetorical unit. According to the latter view, what is being defended in this passage is the message of doom and destruction. Smith rightly argues that 3:3-8 must be read in the context of 3:1-2,³⁰ and as such it functions as an answer to the paradox of 3:1-2.³⁰ What the Israelites reject, according to Smith, is the message of judgment pronounced in 3:2b; it is this message that must be justified.

Besides the argument from structure, support for his view is brought by pointing to the goal of the rhetorical questions. In other words, while the first six rhetorical questions state something straightforward with which the audience would agree, the answer to the question raised in 3:6b (“Does a disaster overtake a city if the Lord does not do it?”) is not self-evident and therefore is considered the goal of the argument up to this point. By the use of the chain of rhetorical questions derived from nature and social relations, Amos seeks to prove that God is the cause of disaster - the implication of the covenant stated in 3:2b. Hayes explains: “Amos’ goal would appear to have been to get the audience to agree to the implication of the first six questions where the response was straightforward and commonsensical and then on the basis of such agreement to assent to the final proposition. Acceptance of this proposition would then support his main contention: the present trouble being undergone by Israel, its oppression by neighboring states was the work of Yahweh...”³¹

The second position argues that the climax and ultimate purpose of Amos’ presentation is 3:8, namely, that he *must* prophecy since God has spoken.³² In the words of Hans Walter Wolff, “Yahweh’s word came as *verbum irresistibile*.”³³ This view perceives as the setting of this unit a hostile encounter between the speaker and audience. The audience must have suspected that Amos proclaimed

²⁸ Smith, *Amos*, 99 and 103, respectively. He follows William R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament, vol. 23 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), 64.

²⁹ Smith, *Amos*, 110.

³⁰ Smith, *Amos*, 106. See also McKeating who supports this interpretation on the basis that “it sees the images as filling out the meaning of verse 2 to which the passage is joined,” 27. However, McKeating, on the same page, rejects verse 7 as authentic, arguing that it is “a prose gloss or explanation introduced by a scribe who placed a different interpretation the passage regarding it as a justification of the prophet’s authority.”

³¹ Hayes, *Amos*, 125.

³² E.g., Niehaus, 375.

³³ Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 5.

the message out of his own initiative and thus Amos seeks to prove that his proclamation is the result of an irresistible call of God, just as any other natural cause-and-effect events in the world. Andersen and Freedman explain:

The point made in this section is that the prophet is privy to the counsel of Yahweh and when a decision is reached Yahweh speaks; then the prophet has no choice but to bring that message to the attention of the people so that they will know about divine plans and decisions. The combination of Yahweh speaking and the prophet prophesying or reporting Yahweh's speech is as firm, certain and inevitable as a half-dozen other combinations in the world of nature and of humanity.³⁴

Later they add: "The heart of the message has to do with the indissoluble link between the word of God and the mission of the prophet. The connection between the speaking of Yahweh and the prophesying of his servant is essential and fundamental—they are two parts or sides of the same reality."³⁵

The rhetorical questions, then, serve as a "trap" for the audience who is unable to escape the snare of Amos' logic. Amos uses this device in order to bring them to acknowledgement of his prophetic authority. Shalom Paul explains:

He first attracts the attention of his listeners by deftly drawing them into his orbit of thinking by means of statements they can readily and favorably accept and then suddenly and dramatically he confronts his already captive audience with a totally unexpected and climactic finale. The phenomenon of prophecy is likewise a product of this same irresistible sequence of cause and effect. The first seven oracles as well as the seven rhetorical questions serve as an effective decoy for his ultimate trap; they are preclimactic. They are completely caught off guard when the prophet adds his eighth and final thrust.³⁶

It is important to observe that in this view, the tendency is to take the rhetorical question in 3:6b as something that Amos' hearers already knew, namely that Yahweh was the cause of civil calamities. It was an appeal to what they took for granted.³⁷ The only thing left to prove was Amos' authority to prophecy.

While both of these views have their valid points of arguments, a more balanced view is possible, which takes into account both themes.³⁸ There is a close

³⁴ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 33.

³⁵ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 371.

³⁶ Paul, *Amos*, 105. He is followed by Smith and Page, *Amos*, 75.

³⁷ E.g., James Ward, *Amos & Isaiah: Prophets of the Word of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 40.

³⁸ De Waard and Smalley allude to the importance of both themes but do not seek to show the coherence of the text, *Translator's Handbook*, 62.

connection between the two major themes of this unit—the evil is the direct act of God and Amos is the valid prophet to proclaim such a message. Stuart explains what the logic of the passage is as a whole: “Yahweh has caused this disaster, has revealed it to Amos, and Amos must proclaim it.”³⁹ Andersen and Freedman concur:

Not only is it true that evil befalls a city because Yahweh does it, he does not do it without telling a prophet. The links in the chain are firm. The lord makes a decision; he tells a prophet; the prophet announces it—he must; it comes to pass—it must. The only mission connection is that the people do not heed the warning.⁴⁰

In this sense, verse 7 plays a crucial role in connecting the two themes and it is not superfluous as some commentators argue.⁴¹ Once Amos has proven with the help of the first six rhetorical questions that disaster is caused by God, he then adds that God warns the people by means of prophets. Thus, both major themes are emphasized by the text, since both statements are not self-evident and need proof. They represent two peaks of the same mountain.

Nevertheless, the rhetorical unit seems to show a certain progression towards an ultimate climax found in 3:8. At least two arguments can be presented in support for this assessment. First, as far as the immediate context is concerned, the rhetorical question in 3:6b is preclimactic. Wolff rightly argues that, “A provisional conclusion can be said to have been reached at verse 6b, a conclusion which finds its precise clarification in v8: the disaster brought by Yahweh upon the city which strikes terror into the people is the message forced upon the prophet in an irresistible way.”⁴² The seventh question found in 3:6b functions as the seventh oracle against the nations in chapters 1-2, namely as a “trap” that leads further to the unexpected conclusion concerning the validity and authority of Amos’ proclamation of divine judgment.⁴³ Thus, the emphasis in the immediate context falls on the validation of Amos’ authority as a prophet.

³⁹ Stuart, *Amos*, 326.

⁴⁰ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 394.

⁴¹ There have been some who have dismissed verse 7 as original arguing that it is a redaction gloss based on the observation that its prose interrupts the poetical genre of the surrounding verses, that it has very little to do with the preceding thought, and that the phrases used (e.g. “servants of Yahweh”) are characteristic of the later prophets. It is mostly the earlier commentators who see verse 7 as a later interpolation. See, e.g., Wolff, *Amos*, 181, “It can be asserted with considerable assurance that 3:7 is a later literary addition.” Also A. G. Auld, *Amos*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 31.

⁴² Wolff, *Amos the Prophet*, 8.

⁴³ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. follows Robert Alter in observing that Amos uses a “rhetoric of entrapment” in his oracles against the nations by using the pattern x/x+1. See his “For Three Sins...Even for Four’: The Numerical Saying in Amos,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1990): 188. The

Second, the rhetorical question posed in verse 3—“Do two go together unless they have arranged to meet?”—can be regarded as the introduction of the theme of the series in 3:3-8. Andersen and Freedman rightly argue that, “Verses 4-7 validate the principle of association adumbrated in the introduction. In each case there are two things that naturally go together.”⁴⁴ Shalom Paul agrees: “The anonymity of ‘two walking together’ makes this theme an appropriate continuation of the cause-and-effect dual relationship just described between Israel and God in verses 1 and 2 on the one hand, and serves in addition as a convenient all-purpose introduction to the remaining six questions of ‘bilateral’ relations on the other.”⁴⁵ In this sense, the two walking together can be contextually identified with God and the prophet from 3:8. The emphasis of the whole pericope falls thus on the inescapability of God speaking and the prophet speaking (in this case Amos).

This evaluation of the unit cannot but lead to the conclusion that Amos’ ultimate purpose in the opening passage of chapter 3 is to justify his prophetic authority. The pronouncement of judgment in 3:2b produced shock, doubt, and indignation in the audience. Before he could proceed with the description of judgment, Amos had to make sure that his audience was convinced that his prophetic message is not his thoughts but is the result of the irresistible call of God. His argument, then, is logical and is as follows: just as each event in nature and in human relations has its cause, so every calamity has God as source; moreover, God warns the people of such calamity through a prophet. The implied conclusion of the unit for our purpose is thus this: Amos is a prophet of God who must announce civil disaster, because of God’s irresistible call.

Amos, therefore, clearly identifies himself with the נבאים in this passage. His apparent denial of being נביא in 7:14 must therefore be interpreted in light of his association with the נבאים in 3:7. The hermeneutical rule that supports this position is that the meaning of the harder text (i.e., 7:14) must be interpreted in light of the easier text (i.e., 3:7-8). In other words, whatever the meaning of Amos 7: 14 is, it cannot contradict the meaning of 3:7-8 where Amos is clearly numbered among the נבאים.

same can be said of the 7/7+1 in 3:3- 8. While the Israelites may be persuaded to believe that disaster comes from God as the seventh question, and believe that this was the ultimate point of Amos’ argumentation, they would not have expected the eighth question in 3:8, especially after the chain of questions is interrupted by the prose of 3 :7. See also J. Limburg, “Sevenfold Structures in the Book of Amos,” *Journal for Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 220, who points out that here we have another 7+1 series (i.e., seven rhetorical questions followed by the passage’s focal point).

⁴⁴ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 387.

⁴⁵ Paul, *Amos*, 109.

AMOS 7:10-17: A DEFENSE OF AMOS' RIGHT TO PROPHECY IN ISRAEL

Amos 7:10-17 is the best-known and at the same time most controversial text in the book of Amos not only for its known translational crux of the nominal clause in 7:14, but also for the meaning of the term נְבִיא and the relation of Amos to the נְבִיאִים. Gene Tucker is right to state that the text “provides direct insight into how the prophets were perceived by their followers and their opponents and indirect insight into how the prophets perceived themselves.”⁴⁶

The Immediate Context

Its placement in the present context (between the third and fourth visions) has a specific purpose despite its apparent misfit, namely it has a theological rather than historical or chronological purpose.⁴⁷ Its function is not only to show the historical setting of the prophetic judgment against Amaziah-the debate between the priest Amaziah and the prophet Amos. As Harry Mowvelly correctly argued, “It has been included as a contribution to a discussion about the authority of different groups of people: prophet, priest and king and above all the authority of Yahweh.”⁴⁸

In this sense, the main emphasis of the dispute between the priest and the seer is on the “authority in whose name and commission they are acting in the first place. The priest of the royal sanctuary in Bethel is presented to the reader first in his official function; as is his duty, he sends a message to his state superior the king before turning to Amos. Analogously, Amos is presented first in relation to his superior God before he turns with his divine oracle to Amaziah.”⁴⁹ The conflict is thus not so much between the priest and the prophet, but between human leaders and the inescapable word of God. Ake Viberg rightly states that, “The issue at stake was nothing less than the value and authority of Yahweh’s prophetic message at Bethel.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Gene M. Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity: A Form-Critical Study of Amos 7: 10- 17,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 424.

⁴⁷ Cf., Hayes, *Amos*, 231.

⁴⁸ Mowvelly, *Amos*, 79.

⁴⁹ Jeremias, *Amos*, 137. The conflict between divine and human authorities is characteristic, not an isolated phenomenon. See, e.g., the conflict between Jeremiah and Pashur in Jer. 20:1; Jer. 26, 28; or the conflict between Jesus and the priests and scribes when they ask him: “By what authority are you doing these things?” Mk. 11:29; or the conflict between Peter, John and the religious authorities in Acts 3:18 who order them to speak no more.

⁵⁰ Ake Viberg, “Amos 7:14: A Case of Subtle Irony,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 113. See also Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” who persuasively argues for the authority of Amos’ message as the central theme of the unit. Among his arguments, two are most telling. First, if the text is analyzed as narrative with a plot (exposition, conflict, crisis, and solution), the center of the story and its key are found in verse 15 where Amos defends his commission. Second, “In terms of

Just like in 3:1-8, so in this passage there is a challenge to Amos' authority to prophesy in Israel. The central theme of the passage, then, is an *apologia* of Amos concerning his prophetic commission to Israel. According to Andersen and Freedman, "The main point, almost the only point is that he is under inescapable obligation to deliver the prophetic word to Israel."⁵¹ Smith agrees when he states that, "[The unit's] purpose is to explain the basis for the authoritative message that Yahweh commanded Amos to deliver to 'my people Israel.'"⁵²

Seeing the emphasis of the text on prophetic authenticity, Amaziah's opposition to Amos is due not so much to a denial of Amos' legitimacy and authority as a prophet, but to a denial of the place of his prophetic authority (i.e., Bethel).⁵³ Several details of the text confirm this interpretation. First, Amaziah considers Amos a "seer" and there is no reason to take this characterization as derogatory. Some have sought to support the understanding of נָבִי in a depreciatory sense, meaning that Amos rejects being identified with false prophets who prophesy for gain.⁵⁴ Such an interpretation is tempting since Amaziah commands Amos to return to Judah and there "to earn his living." It also appears to make sense in

tone and content, the narrative is partisan and apologetic." Amos seeks to defend and justify his right to prophecy in the face of Amaziah's challenge and opposition.

⁵¹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 775.

⁵² Smith, *Amos*, 239. Smith and Page concur: "The issue in the narrative of the encounter between Amos and Amaziah was one of authority. Who was in charge of the people called Israel? Was it Jeroboam the king, or Amaziah the priest at Bethel, or Amos the prophet of God, or God himself?" *Amos*, 135. See also Ward, *Amos & Isaiah*, 37.

⁵³ Cf., Paul, *Amos*, 242.

⁵⁴ *Contra* TEV "I am not the kind of prophet who prophesies for pay." So also Simon Cohen, "Amos Was a Navi," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 177; J. L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 124 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 67. Wolff, *Amos*, 312-13; Hayes, *Amos*, 236; Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 785; Hammershaimb, for instance, states that, "Amaziah treats Amos as one of the professional fortune-tellers who sold their knowledge for money and told people what they wanted to hear," as in Mic. 3:5, 11. See his *Amos*, 116. See also Ziony Zevit who takes the נָבִי here to designate seers attached to the court, the so-called "court-prophets," who depended upon royal patronage, "A Misunderstanding at Bethel," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1974): 786-87; Cripps, *Amos*, 232, paraphrases Amos' statement as "No prophet (such as you have in mind) am I; certainly not one of the roving bands of prophets (So prophet, in a better sense, certainly I am)." Thus, what Cripps is arguing is that Amos "is only dissociating himself from the less spiritual and the less worthy prophets of the past and perhaps especially of his own day." For arguments in reading ἡζ<βχο (and therefore aybiān) in a positive light see the next page of this paper. That a prophet may prophesy for gain is attested on several occasions: 1 Sam. 9:8; 1 Kg. 14:3; 2 Kg. 4:42, 8:9. However, Paul rightly argues that, "Although the charge is not unprecedented, the payment of a fee for an oracle is not to be found among the classical prophets. Only false prophets still accept perquisites for their oracles," *Amos*, 242.

light of Amos' response that he is a shepherd and a farmer, as if to say that his means of earning money is not by being a prophet.⁵⁵

But, as we have already seen, the purpose of the inclusion of this text between visions 3 and 4 is theological: to authenticate the authority of Amos to prophesy in Israel. As such, the emphasis is on the place of the utterance of the divine oracles, Amaziah is seeking to convince Amos to prophesy elsewhere, without denying his authenticity as a prophet. The mention of his vocation as a shepherd and farmer is brought into the discussion for the sole purpose of serving as a contrast to what he is now without choice—a prophet. In other words, his choice is that of being a shepherd and a farmer, but the irresistible call of God is that of being a prophet. His denial of being a prophet would thus be not a denial of prophesying for gain, but a denial of being a prophet by choice.⁵⁶ This reading is supported by the obvious contrast between the twice repeated emphatic *I* in 7:14 and the twice repeated *Yahweh* in 7:15.

A positive understanding of נְבִיא seems to be supported from the broader context. In 1:2 the verb חָזָה is used in a positive way and though a different yet synonymous word is used in describing the visions of Amos (i.e., רָאָה), there is no reason to deny the fact that Amaziah considered Amos an authentic visionary based on the visions Amos had.⁵⁷ Shalom Paul rightly argues, then, in comparing Amos with Balaam that, “Their legitimacy is not questioned; they are simply *persona non grata*.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Cf. Tsewat, “Amos 7:14,” 257. He paraphrases Amos' response thus: “You are relating my appearance at your temple to material interest which I supposedly have. But you are wrong! I am not a נְבִיא. To be sure, there are men, sometimes called נְבִיאִים who prophesy for economic gain, and this is even more true of those called בְּנֵי-נְבִיא, but I am not one of them. Perhaps some are forced by circumstances to do so, but I am not. I make my living as a cattleman and a gardener.”

⁵⁶ J. D. W. Watts gives a similar interpretation to Amos' denial by suggesting the following translation: “No prophet did *I* choose to be! (I did not choose or seek the status of נְבִיא). Nor did I seek to become one of the prophetic guilds. For *I* (had chosen to be) a herdsman and a tender of sycamores, when *Yahweh* took me from following the flock (the place of my choice) ...” *Vision and Prophecy in Amos* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 12. His emphasis is thus on the mood instead of on the tense; he describes the mood as “a kind of subjunctive of volition.” Though Peter R. Ackroyd gives a different interpretation of the nominal clause, he rightly notices that “By that very emphasis on origin, and by implication on the lack of qualification for office, the motif underlines the divine prerogative, just as this is done in other call material by stunning unwillingness (so Moses, Jeremiah) or unfitness (so Isaiah, Ezekiel).” See his “Judgment Narrative between Kings and Chronicles: An Approach to Amos 7:9-17.” In *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (edited by George W. Coats and Burke O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 87.

⁵⁷ Cf. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 771.

⁵⁸ Paul, *Amos*, 242.

Secondly, as a result, Amaziah shows a certain degree of respect to Amos and therefore he is careful as to how he deals with him. Andersen and Freedman explain: “Amaziah’s advice [to leave Bethel] could express a compromise, a caution and uncertainty in his own mind. He hesitates to take more drastic measures because for all he knows Amos might be a real prophet and therefore sacrosanct.”⁵⁹

Thirdly, Amaziah seems to be perfectly happy for Amos to continue his role as a seer as long as he does it elsewhere. Amaziah’s concern is thus more with political stability than with the divine word, and that without actually denying Amos the status of a prophet. Jorg Jeremias is thus right to argue that, “Neither Amos’ profession nor his legitimate professional income is to be jeopardized,”⁶⁰ if Amos left Bethel, as far as Amaziah is concerned. James Ward however notices the divergent views on the role of a prophet between Amaziah and Amos: “Amaziah’s command did not entail a minor change in Amos’ plans or a mere restriction of the sphere of his operations. It constituted a denial of Amos’ basic commission as a prophet.”⁶¹ For Amaziah the issue is one of *place* of prophetic utterance while for Amos it is an issue of prophetic *authority*. Gene Tucker explains: “When he addresses Amos he speaks in terms of jurisdiction: ‘You are not allowed to speak here.’ In his response it is clear Amos takes the issue to be one of authority. In the face of questions of legality and jurisdiction he asserts that Yahweh himself sent him.”⁶²

Thus, what we may understand from all these details in the text is that Amaziah considered Amos a legitimate seer; what he failed to see was that included in the prophetic commission was also the place of prophetic utterance. In turn, Amos understands his prophetic authority as entailing prophesying *where* God irresistibly sent him. As such, what Amaziah considered being a minor change of plans and place, for Amos it meant rejection and opposition to God’s call, and therefore it deserved judgment.

Such an understanding of the main issues at work in the dispute between Amaziah and Amos may help us to see more clearly what is happening in 7:14 where Amos apparently denies the role of a נְבִיאָה

The Syntactical Force of the Particle לֹא and the Semantic Value of נְבִיאָה, and נְבִיאִים

⁵⁹ Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 771.

⁶⁰ Jeremias, *Amos*, 139.

⁶¹ Ward, *Amos & Isaiah*, 31.

⁶² Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” 428.

Much ink has been spilled over verse 14 of chapter 7 and many are the solutions offered for the interpretation of the nominal clauses. Space does not allow us to discuss all in detail, though we will seek to mention the major ones and then present the two most important ones.⁶³ We will start with the least advocated views, yet possible readings. These views all have in common the fact that they start from the presupposition that Amos cannot be denying the role of a *true* prophet. Therefore, he must be denying either being a false prophet or a court prophet. The arguments then focus on the semantics of *חֹזֶה*, *נָבִיא*, and *נְבִיאִים*, and on the syntactical force of the particle *לֹא*.

Some take the particle not as a negative particle but actually representing an emphatic negative marker, thus changing the Masoretic punctuation.⁶⁴ As such, the nominal clauses should be translated: “No! I am indeed a prophet, but I am not a son of a prophet (professional prophet)!” According to the advocates of this view, this reading is “so natural and logical, and consistent with the thought of the prophet that the only objection that can be raised against it is that it changes the traditional and accepted Masoretic punctuation,” an objection that has no real force since the traditional punctuation did not arise until centuries after Amos.⁶⁵

This high regard of their own view, however, is too reductionistic. This is particularly seen in the paraphrase that Zevit suggests: “No! I am not a prophet enjoying royal patronage (i.e., a *חֹזֶה*); I am an independent prophet-my own man; nor am I a disciple of any prophet, working under his aegis and doing his bidding.”⁶⁶ In their desire to set Amos foursquare within the ancient movement of Israelite *נְבִיאִים*, they deny that *חֹזֶה* and *נָבִיא* synonymous, suggesting that they belong to two different semantic domains, while also suggesting that *חֹזֶה* and *נָבִיא* are to be seen in parallel.⁶⁷ More specifically, *חֹזֶה* is seen to refer to a “royal prophet” who is under the patronage of the king and *בֶּן-נָבִיא* is seen to refer to a “cultic prophet” who is subordinate to the priest. Such prophets would always deliver good news to please their patron, whether king or priest. These false prophets (“seers”) are attested in the Old Testament in places such as Jer. 23: 9-

⁶³ For a more comprehensive evaluation of the history of interpretation of this verse, see Viberg’s article, “Amos 7:14,” especially pp. 99- 107, to whom we are indebted for the material contained in this section of the paper. Our presentation will not include all the views he mentions, so we wholeheartedly recommend his article, though we do not agree with his final conclusions.

⁶⁴ Cf., Zevit, “A Misunderstanding at Bethel,” 783-90; Cohen, “Amos *Was* a Navi,” 175-78; Zevit, “Expressing Denial in Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew and in Amos,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 505- 09; Stuart, *Amos*, 376.

⁶⁵ Cohen, “Amos *Was* a Navi,” 176-77.

⁶⁶ Zevit, “A Misunderstanding at Bethel,” 790.

⁶⁷ *Contra* most commentators who agree that the nouns “seer” and “prophet” are roughly synonymous. See, e.g., Mays, *Amos*, 136; Paul, *Amos*, 240; Smith and Page, *Amos*, 137.

40, Ez. 13:19, Mic. 3:5-7 and 1 Kg. 22. Amos, then, would only refuse to be identified with the false prophets, but accepting for himself the title of a true נְבִיא⁶⁸

This argument, however, does not stand in light of both contextual and linguistic data. From a contextual point of view, if there was no synonymy between חֹזֶה and נְבִיא, why would Amos use נְבִיא when Amaziah referred to him as a חֹזֶה? What would be the sense of Amos' response in light of Amaziah's statement? Clearly Amos, by using the term נְבִיא, responds to Amaziah's use of the term חֹזֶה and his command to prophesy somewhere else, seeing the two terms as synonymous. From a linguistic point of view, the two nouns are sometimes used interchangeably referring to the same person, or in parallel lines making them synonymous (2 Sam. 24:11; 2 Kg. 17:13; Is. 29:10).⁶⁹

Moreover, as Y. Hoffmann rightly notices, Zech. 13:5 understands Amos' response as a double denial.⁷⁰ And last, but not least, the following two affirmative statements identifying Amos' secular profession in 7:15 are obviously presented as a contrast to his double denial.⁷¹ Thus, it is more consistent with the syntax of the text and the semantic values of חֹזֶה and נְבִיא, to understand Amos either refusing both or accepting both titles.

Another view is to interpret the first particle לֹא not as a negative but as an assertative "surely." The sense of the verse would then be: "I am surely נְבִיא, but not a member of the prophetic guild."⁷² The major weakness of this view, as with the previous one, is that it takes the particles לֹא in very similar adjacent and parallel clauses as different (v.14 and v.16).⁷³

⁶⁸ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol.25; Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), seems to agree that Amos rejects the idea of belonging to "the cult prophets and the bands of their disciples," when he states that "Amos seems to renounce any concern for prophetic office, and more particularly for any possible income from such office..."

⁶⁹ For details see, Alfred Jepsen "chazah," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 4 (edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Frey; translated by David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 280- 90, where he rightly regards hzh as "a technical term for aybiPn's revelation. Ackroyd takes Is. 29:10 as a gloss in order to avoid synonymy; "Judgment Narrative between Kings and Chronicles," 75.

⁷⁰ Yair Hoffmann, "Did Amos Regard Himself as a NABI?" *Vetus Testamentum* 27 (1977): 210.

⁷¹ Cf., Paul, *Amos*, 245.

⁷² H. Neil Richardson, "A Critical Note on Amos 7:14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 89.

⁷³ Viberg, "Amos 7:14," 104.

A similar interpretation is that which takes the particle לֹא to have an interrogative force, which can be interpreted as assertative.⁷⁴ As such, the reading of the verse would be something like: “Am I not a prophet? Am I not the son of a prophet?” One problem with such a view, however, is that this translation “makes Amos the son of a prophet, which is what he most certainly is not.”⁷⁵ Such a criticism of course is valid only on the assumption that בֶּן-נְבִיא, refers to a prophetic family or guild. But, according to Peter Ackroyd, the phrase in question means “quality which belongs to a prophet” and therefore synonymous with “prophet.”⁷⁶ This meaning however is questionable in light of the use of the phrase בֶּן-נְבִיא in the Old Testament. Outside of Amos 7:14, the phrase is confined to a period of about 120 years during Elijah’s and Elisha’s ministries and was referring to the prophetic guild.⁷⁷ Thus, a more reasonable reading of the phrase would be “disciple of a prophet” or “under the authority of a leader prophet,” “one who has undergone training as a prophet.” Such an understanding is in line with the biblical evidence that at times describes the prophet in leadership as “father” (e.g., 1 Sam. 10:12 “But who is their [the prophets’] father?”—Samuel).⁷⁸

In addition to that, while it is true that the two colons of 7:14 are parallel and therefore roughly synonymous, we are not dealing here with a “simple parallelism”; there is still some semantic distinction between נְבִיא and בֶּן-נְבִיא. According to Robert Alter for instance, one feature of Hebrew poetry (like we have in our text) is what he calls “dynamics of repetition” in which parallel phrases develop, rather than repeat an idea introduced in the first phrase.⁷⁹ Alter rightly emphasizes the subtle shifts in meaning that the parallelisms bring to bear upon the initial colon or phrase. Having said this, however, it doesn’t mean that

⁷⁴ Cf. G. R. Driver, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 67 (1955-56): 91- 92; Peter R. Ackroyd, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 68 (1956-57): 94.

⁷⁵ MacConnack, “Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 67 (1955- 56): 318.

⁷⁶ Ackroyd, “Amos 7:14,” 94. For such a sense he points to Neh. 3:8. But for the meaning of בֶּן-נְבִיא, it is not sufficient to look at בֶּן; the combination of בֶּן and נְבִיא is an idiomatic construction that cannot get its meaning from the sense of the individual parts. For a similar meaning see Hayes, *Amos*, 236, where he states that, “‘Son of a prophet,’ is simply a way of saying ‘one who belongs to the class of the prophet,’ that is a prophet.” Also Ward, *Amos*, 34; Cripps, *Amos*, 233, rightly see in the phrase a Hebrew idiom such as “sons of Belial” meaning “worthless men,” or “sons of the bride chamber” with the sense of “guests at a wedding,” or as in Ez. 2:42 “the children of the porters” meaning “door-keepers.”

⁷⁷ See, James G. Williams, “The Prophetic ‘Father’: A Brief Explanation of the Term ‘Sons of the Prophets’,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 345. He gives the following biblical references: 1 Kg. 20:35; 2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1. See also Niehaus, *Amos*, 462; Jeremias, *Amos*, 140.

⁷⁸ Cf., Williams, “The Prophetic ‘Father,’” 344-48. For other biblical references to prophets in leadership as “fathers” see, e.g., 2 Kg. 2:12; 6:12. See also Andersen and Freedman who agree with this meaning of the “son of a prophet,” in *Amos*, 778.

⁷⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 11.

the second colon brings completely new information, unrelated to that found in the first colon. Rather, it means that the second colon builds on the meaning of the first colon. It is therefore justified to see בֶּן־נְבִיא not so much as a different category from נְבִיא but as a “more precise delineation of the extremely comprehensive נְבִיא”⁸⁰ As such, those who take the *waw* of the second colon as epexegetical or explicative may be closer to the meaning of Amos’ use of the nominal clauses.⁸¹ Thus, Amos seems to be saying: “I [am/was] not a נְבִיא, namely I [am/was] not a בֶּן־נְבִיא.” By this, Amos seems to be saying that he is under the authority of no human spiritual leader.

In light of the evaluation of the previous views, it is more consistent with syntax and semantics to take Amos’ statements in 7:14 as a negation of the title נְבִיא. Before we proceed with the meaning of Amos’ words, there remains one thing to be clarified: the temporal aspect of the nominal clauses (either past or as present tense).

The Temporal Aspect of the Nominal Clauses in 7:14

One should know that a nominal clause can presuppose either the present or the past tense; both tenses are equally possible.⁸² However, what ultimately determines the tense of the nominal clause is the context. Gesenius states: “To what period of time the statement applies must be inferred from the context.”⁸³

There are some who interpret the nominal clauses of 7:14 as preterit: “I was not a prophet, and I was not the son of a prophet.”⁸⁴ There are several strengths of this view. First, it is based on a natural and contextual reading of the nouns נְבִיא and בֶּן־נְבִיא as advocated above (being synonymous).

⁸⁰ Jeremias, *Amos*, 139.

⁸¹ Cf. Ernest Vogt, “*Waw* Explicative in Amos 7:14,” *Expository Times* 68 (1956-57): 301-02; Jeremias, *Amos*, 135 n. 2 where he explains that “The second sentence offers a partial statement of the more comprehensive first one, the connective *we* is to be understood explicatively.” For *waw* as explicative, see Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* (edited by E. Kautzsch, translated and revised by A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 154 n. lb. Tsevat, “Amos 7:14,” 254, takes the *waw* not as restricting but broadening *aybiḥn*: “Not a *aybiḥn*”, and much less a בֶּן־נְבִיא.”

⁸² Duane A. Garrett, *Amos. A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 222. He states that “Amos is deliberately exploiting the temporal ambiguity of the verbless clauses.”

⁸³ *GKC*, 141: 3f; see also B. K. Waltke and M. O’ Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §4.5c.

⁸⁴ H. H. Rowley, “Was Amos a נְבִיא?”, in *Festschrift Otto Eissfeldt zum 60. Geburtstag* (edited by J. Fück; Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1947): 191-98; Mays, *Amos*, 138-39; Tucker, “Prophetic Authenticity,” 432; Paul, *Amos*, 247; Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 778; Jeremias, *Amos*, 139; Ward, *Amos*, 33.

Second, this view rightly takes into consideration the immediate context in which both Amaziah and Amos describe what Amos was doing as *תִּנְבֵּא* (“prophesying”), which etymologically must mean something like “act the part of a *נָבִיא*.” In this sense, the act of prophesying is always connected to the person of a prophet.⁸⁵ The context does not seem to make a distinction in meaning between the *נָבִיא* in 7:14 and *תִּנְבֵּא* in verses 13 and 15. The distinction is usually drawn only by those who see an irreducible contradiction and a lack of coherence between Amos admitting being called to engage in the act which defines a prophet-prophesying, on the one hand, and refusing the very title which is given to the one engaged in prophesying- prophet, on the other hand. Bruce Vawter, for instance, argues that: “I would suggest that the verb went its own semantic way independently of the noun, and probably much earlier.”⁸⁶ The reason these charismatic men of the eighth century used the verb to describe their activity, but did not use the noun to define their identity was because there was no other verb to use for what they were claiming to do. As a result, Vawter argues, “In Hebrew, one could prophesy, *תִּנְבֵּא* without being a *נָבִיא*, in the original sense of the word, simply because “prophesy” had become something other than the narrow matter of its etymology.”⁸⁷

Thomas Overholt, however, is more realistic and closer to the tenet of the whole book of Amos in recognizing that “prophets were performing a recognizable social role.” This means that though “It is not clear why the noun should be unacceptable while the verb acceptable... the use of the verb implies some observable behavior. It follows that the prophetic role is being performed and recognized. This presupposes that both the performers and the audience had a view of what was transpiring.”⁸⁸ If that is the case, Overholt asks, “What sense does it make to say audiences recognized that people were prophesying but did not understand them to be prophets?”⁸⁹ G. R. Driver raises the same question: “Why should he say that he was not a prophet when he was seen and known by everyone to be one?”⁹⁰ Keeping in mind that Amos was performing God’s irresistible call to prophecy in a social context in which an audience knew who

⁸⁵ This is also the case of Saul in 1 Sam. 10:10--11; He is also characterized as a “prophet” engaged in the act of “prophesying,” though we see him as only a temporary (“short-term”) prophet and not vocational. Amos is similar to Saul in the fact that both had no choice concerning prophesying; they both responded to an irresistible work of God.

⁸⁶ Cf. Bruce Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” *Biblica* 66 (1985): 217.

⁸⁷ Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” 218. On p. 217 he states: “the *נָבִיא* association could have carried over to denominate those who continued to use the *Gathering*, even though they were not *nebi'im* in the first sense of the word.”

⁸⁸ Thomas W. Overholt, “Prophecy in History: The Social Reality of intermediation,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 10. See also, Vawter, “Were the Prophets *nabi*’s?” 216.

⁸⁹ Overholt, “Prophecy in History,” 11.

⁹⁰ Driver, “Amos 7:14,” 91.

a prophet was and what he was like, Overhold rightly argues that “Even if it could be established that Amos and the others did not claim to be prophets we would not be entitled to conclude that no one understood them to be performing the role of prophets.”⁹¹ Thus, there is no question that Amos functioned as a prophet and was a prophet, as the past tense rendering asserts.

Thirdly, the preterit rendering of the nominal clauses seems to fit naturally before verse 15, the total meaning being: “I used to be a shepherd and a farmer until God called me to prophecy; only then did I become a prophet, so now I am a prophet.” This reading is also supported by the LXX and Peshitta.

Fourthly, the past tense reading of the nominal clauses also is in agreement with the broader context of the book.⁹² We have sought to prove in the first section of this article, that Amos made a strong point in being understood as a prophet in 3:3-8. In both passages, the aim of Amos is to defend his authority to prophesy and his legitimacy as a prophet sent by God.

Thus, it is impossible to see Amos arguing on the one hand that he is a prophet of God, and on the other hand arguing that he is not a prophet. This apparent contradiction is solved by reading the past tense into the nominal clauses.⁹³

In spite of making sense of the flow of Amos’ argument, the past tense lacks, however, support from the literary context. Though it may be argued that verse 15 is in the past tense, that cannot be said of verse 13, to which Amos responds. Also, if we are to read verse 14 in the past, it would make no sense as a response to Amaziah. Why would Amos tell Amaziah biographical information when Amaziah is talking about the present? It would interrupt the flow of the argument.⁹⁴ The purpose of the passage, after all, as argued before, is not biographical or historical, but theological.

Secondly, if the first nominal clause is taken in the past, then the second one, which is parallel to the first colon, should also be taken in the past. Thus, Amos would be saying: “I used not to be a son of a prophet, but now I am.” Such a

⁹¹ Ibid., 14.

⁹² Cf., Niehaus, *Amos*, 462.

⁹³ See Daniel Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005 who also suggests a possible past tense, suggesting that Amos “was not a prophet until God called him directly for the task at hand...he did not go to prophet school, take seminars on how to be a prophet, or join the guild of practicing prophets.”

⁹⁴ Viberg, “Amos 7:14,” 103. Also A. G. Auld, *Amos*, 26, states: “‘Not a prophet’ demonstrates that Amos is bent on *contradicting* Amaziah’s assumption that he is a professional prophet, not somehow *reinforcing* it.”

statement, however, is obviously meaningless especially that Amos emphasizes being commissioned directly by God to prophecy, and does not prophecy by human authority, by implication.⁹⁵

Thirdly, the form *lo' hayiti* with a predicate noun would have been available to Amos had he wanted to make a statement in the past tense. In other words, Amos could have said that he had not always been a prophet in a clearer and less ambiguous way, had he intended to do it.⁹⁶

In light of these problems of the preterit rendering of the nominal clauses, the only viable option is to read them in the present tense: "I am not a prophet, and I am not a son of a prophet I am a shepherd and a farmer." This is the most natural understanding of the nominal clauses and it is the present tense that is usually presupposed in a nominal clause, which is why no verbal form is needed on the surface level of the text.⁹⁷

Secondly, the present tense is supported by the Vulgate and, more importantly, Zech. 13:5 uses Amos 7:14 with a present tense meaning. In other words, later biblical revelation understood the nominal clauses in Amos 7:14 as being present.

But while there are literary and contextual arguments in favor of the present tense, the question still remains: Is Amos not contradicting himself when he states that he is not a prophet, on the one hand, but that he is prophesying as a result of the irresistible call of God? Is there no contradiction between defending his authority as a prophet in 3:3-8 and his denial of being a prophet in 7:14?

Ake Viberg has sought to solve this paradox by interpreting Amos' denial as an example of irony.⁹⁸ Quintilian defined irony as that figure of speech or trope "in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood (*contrarium ei quod dicitur inte/legendum est*)."⁹⁹ Since a text does not contain the paralinguistic aspects (i.e., tonal inflexion, facial expressions and body language) in order to

⁹⁵ Similar critique was seen for the view that takes the particle **לֹא** as interrogative.

⁹⁶ Viberg, "Amos7:14," 103; H. -P. Millier "**נָבִיא**" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. 9 (edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; translated by David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 138.

⁹⁷ See Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §4.5c. The nominal clause is similar to the well-known nominal clauses "Me Tarzan, you Jane."

⁹⁸ Viberg, "Amos 7:14," 107.

⁹⁹ As quoted by William H. U. Anderson in "Ironic Correlations and Skepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12 (2000): 68. Webster's definition is very similar: "Irony is the use of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of [their] literal meaning."

determine irony, since these belong to the stage, the only hermeneutical key which helps in determining irony is the context. The most important element of irony is that irony, according to William Anderson, “is a criticism which points out some *incongruity* by *using the opposite of what is meant to demonstrate what should be* (though *what should be* may be elusive or unattainable).”¹⁰⁰ With such an understanding of irony and how to detect it in written material, Viberg claims that, “What we have in Amos 7:14 is a case of understating, in which Amos claims to be less than he actually is in order to reveal the arrogance of the object of his irony, i.e., Amaziah.”¹⁰¹ He further states:

Through his irony Amos makes himself into someone quite insignificant, in order to highlight Yahweh’s role in directing him away from tending to livestock to carrying out the word of one of his prophets... Making use of the contrast created by the irony in v. 14, he emphasizes that his status as a prophet owes nothing to man, and therefore he is not subject to any form of institution such as the cult at Bethel, only to the command of Yahweh. Amos is indeed a prophet, a נָבִיא, but that is not the issue; the important question is who has made him a prophet, who has commissioned him and who legitimates his message.¹⁰²

This ironic interpretation of the nominal clause לֹא נָבִיא has several strengths to command it as the most possible reading of Amos 7:14, of all the readings surveyed so far. First, it takes at face value the present tense of the nominal clause. It also interprets correctly the nouns חֹזֶה and נָבִיא as synonyms and positive in meaning. Moreover, it makes very good sense of the broader context and of the apparent incongruity between Amos claiming to be a prophet (3:1-8) and at the same time denying it (7:14).

However, seeing irony in the Amos’ denial of being a נָבִיא does not explain the parallel nominal clause וְלֹא בֶן־נָבִיא. As argued above, the two clauses are parallel and should be interpreted similarly. If that is the case, then one should see irony also in the second nominal clause. Amos, thus, would be saying that he is not a son of a prophet when in fact he would mean the opposite: *incongruity by using the opposite of what is meant to demonstrate what should be* (though *what should be* may “I am the son of a prophet.” But, as argued earlier, such a statement is absurd in light of the fact that Amos was a shepherd and a farmer by vocation. As a result, though irony may be a better solution than those

¹⁰⁰ Anderson in “Ironic Correlations and Skepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?” 82 (emphasis by the author). Thus, he defines irony as “that *Gathering* which uses the literary device of stating the opposite of what is meant in order to have the literary *effect* of criticizing the incongruity between the two: irony can only be determined by the context in which it is given.”

¹⁰¹ Viberg, 111.

¹⁰² Viberg, 112.

presented above, it still falls short of offering an adequate explanation of the parallel nominal clauses.

Such being the case, there is need of another explanation with the following caveat offered by J. L. Mays: “If objective indications in the text itself could settle the matter, the question would have had a convincing answer long ago. One can speak then only in terms of probabilities which are indicated by overall considerations and what makes plausible sense in the context.”¹⁰³ With this humility in mind we can start by pointing to the following conclusions that we have reached so far during the process of evaluating different interpretations of Amos 7:14.

First, **לֹא** should be understood as a negative particle modifying the implied verb, rather than standing on its own as an independent clause. Second, the nominal clauses are most naturally read in the present tense, particularly given the quotation by Zach. 13:5. Third, **חֹזֶה** and **נְבִיא** are roughly synonymous and are referring to a *true* prophet. Fourth, **נְבִיאִים** is a more precise delineation of **נְבִיא**, meaning one belonging to a prophetic guild or, by implication, one whose prophetic authority is legitimized by a prophet-leader. Fifth, the *waw* in the second colon is to be taken more as a *waw* explicative, meaning “namely.” Sixth, there is no semantic distinction between the verb **הִנָּבֵא** and the noun **נְבִיא**; they characterize the activity and the title of one and the same person (in this case Amos). Seventh, in light of Amos’ *apologia* of his authority as a prophet in 3:3-8, Amos cannot be denying the fact that he is a prophet of God in 7:14. Eighth, in light of the immediate context, Amos is denying being a prophet by choice. Ninth, by implication, Amos is emphasizing Yahweh as the source of his authority to prophesy, which supersedes any human authority (even his own). Tenth, Amos using irony in his denial of being a **נְבִיא** is very unlikely, given the fact that he would have to admit that he was also a **בֶּן־נְבִיא**.

Based on these observations, we are forced to say that the most plausible explanation of what is happening in this text is that there is a sense in which he is claiming to be a prophet (as in 3:3-8) and there is a sense in which he is not a prophet (as in 7:14).¹⁰⁴ Such an explanation may seem simplistic, but it takes into consideration all the factors surrounding Amos’ self-perception in both 3:3-8 and 7:10-17. In what sense, then, is he a prophet and in what sense is he not a prophet? The only answer that the text allows us to give is that he was a prophet because he was called by God to prophecy and to warn the people of the imminent evil that was to befall Israel. At the same time, he was not a prophet

¹⁰³ Mays, *Amos*, 137. The same caution is signaled by, e.g., Paul, *Amos*, 247; Ward, *The Prophets*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Vogt, “*Waw* Explicative in Amos 7:14,” 301.

in the sense that he did not choose to be a prophet and that he became a prophet as a result of the irresistible call of God. In this sense, Wolff may be right to describe Amos as “a prophet in spite of himself.”¹⁰⁵

This conclusion is further corroborated by the observation that the tenor of the whole book of Amos is that Amos functioned as a prophet.¹⁰⁶ J. L. Mays states:

What is known of Amos from the undoubtedly authentic material in the book adds up to a total picture which is connected with other men who were called נָבִיא. Amos received visions and reported these experiences in terms and patterns typical of other prophets. His intercessions have characteristically prophetic function. He was called and sent by Yahweh of Israel. In his mission he used predominantly the formulae and forms of the messenger and the judgment word which represent the basic style of earlier prophets. Amaziah took him for a ‘seer’ an alternate name for נָבִיא. The verb to prophesy was used by Amaziah and by Amos to designate his speaking. What is such a man to be called? If he were not a prophet, he was functioning as a prophet.¹⁰⁷

Thus, even though Amos appears to be denying being a prophet right there and then, that he functioned as a prophet, and therefore was a prophet, is supported by the details of his ministry, from his commissioning and his opposition to the call, to his prophesying and his confrontation with the royal and religious authorities.

Maybe Amos should be seen as a type of John the Baptist. When the delegates of priests and Levites sent by the Jews from Jerusalem to ask him whether he was Elijah, his answer was straightforward: “No!” (Jn. 1:20). Yet, when Jesus was asked about Elijah in Matt. 17:10-13, he made it clear that Elijah had already come and the disciples “knew that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.” The only way to account for this incongruity is to see in John a genuine and humble desire to point people away from himself and his importance in the salvation history to Jesus. He thus identifies himself as a “transitional figure.” That is the reason he preferred defining himself in the words of Isaiah, rather

¹⁰⁵ Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 6. See also James Luther Mays, *Amos, A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 137-9.

¹⁰⁶ Cf., Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 777.

¹⁰⁷ Mays, *Amos*, 138. See also, Hayes, *Amos*, 236; Cohen, “Amos Was a Navi,” 175; Tucker adds to these the fact that, “By employing here (7:15) the traditional language of a commissioning report, our text places Amos in a traditional Israelite role”; see “Prophetic Authenticity,” 432; Also Wolff, “The Irresistible Word,” 9 who reminds us of other prophets who were witnesses to “an irresistible Word,” such as Jer. 20:7; Acts 4:20 and 1 Cor. 9:16ff. To these one may add the similarity between Amos’ call and Moses and David’s calls from “behind the flock,” in Ex. 3:1 and 2 Sam. 7:8 (and Ps. 78:70), respectively. One should keep in mind that Moses actually was called a prophet (cf. Deut. 18:15).

than Malachi, as “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord.”¹⁰⁸

In like manner, Amos wanted to take the people’s eyes away from him and the authority associated with the title “prophet” and to point to the irresistible and inescapable authority that is associated with the one who gives the call to prophesy, namely Yahweh. Thus, Amos is denying only self-importance and personal initiative and choice in prophesying; his desire was to make Yahweh the center of attention. In this sense, Amos was a prophet, but a prophet in spite of himself.

CONCLUSION

The book of Amos is an important book for the understanding of Israelite prophesy, since it is the earliest of the literary prophets. In this sense, Amos’ self-perception answers the question of whether Amos thought of himself as a prophet or not. Our investigation of the problem has led us to an exegesis of Amos 3:1-8 and 7:10-14, two passages that deal, seemingly in a contradictory way, with how Amos saw himself in relation to the נְבִיאִים. The most plausible conclusion we have reached is that Amos was among the prophets, and that he was a prophet in spite of himself, as in fact most of the prophets and men of God were and are. He was a prophet, though not by his own choice, not from a tradition or school of prophets, and definitely not from among the court prophets.

Amos’ comments about his calling as a prophet is instructional for any person called into the ministry. There are those who go to seminary, who come from a family tradition of ministers, or who become ministers as a result of sitting under a teacher as a disciple. But there are also, few as they may be, who fulfil the function of a preacher without any of this background to provide them with authorization. They may fulfill such a calling temporarily or for a specific task, but they nevertheless may have God’s calling upon them. In the end, all ministers, regardless of their ministerial background or lack thereof, should be faithful to God’s calling, should fulfill their calling without regard for economic or social benefits, and should reluctantly claim any credit for such calling. Rather, they should have the attitude Paul had regarding his calling: “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor.9:16)

¹⁰⁸ See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 61, who states that, “The Baptist denied being ‘Elijah’ to counter the expectation that the same Elijah who escaped death in a fiery chariot would return in like spectacular manner.” In the Old Testament we see the same reluctance to identify as a prophet in Moses and Jeremiah, among others.

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