

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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Shiur #11

The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles against the Nations (continued)

In this *shiur*, we will begin our study of Amos's ultimate prophecy in this series of oracles against the nations. In the previous chapter, we summarized the structure of the condemnations against the first six (non-Israelite) nations and proposed several possible configurations. We then briefly considered the oracle against Yehuda and its likely impact on the Samarian monarchy and aristocracy, Amos's real target audience.

The oracle against Yisrael is the goal of the entire series and is, by far, the longest one. It occupies 16 verses, taking us to the end of chapter 2. It contains the skeletal elements of each of the other prophecies; it includes an accusation and a punishment. However, there are two significant expansions in this passage that make it stand out. First of all, along with the indictment and sentence, there is a mini-historiosophy in which the great kindnesses that God has done for Yisrael are recounted. Secondly, both the indictment and punishment are expanded. The accusation is not limited to a single crime (the "fourth"), nor is the punishment as monochromatic as the earlier ones.

In order to properly evaluate this final oracle, we will first present the text and suggest a structure. In the next two *shiurim*, we will comment on several of the more challenging words in the oracle as well as investigate the implications of these terms and imagery within the *Sitz im Leben* of mid-8th century BCE Samaria. Then we will summarize this specific oracle and the entire oracle series.

THE TEXT

Thus says God:
For the three sins of Israel,
And for four I will not reverse it:
Because they sell the righteous for silver,
And the needy for a pair of shoes;
That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor,

And turn aside the way of the humble;
And a man and his father go unto the same maid,
To profane My holy name;
And they lay themselves down beside every altar
Upon clothes taken in pledge,
And in the house of their God they drink
The wine of them that have been fined.
Yet destroyed I the Amorite before them,
Whose height was like the height of the cedars,
And he was strong as the oaks;
Yet I destroyed his fruit from above,
And his roots from beneath.
Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
And led you forty years in the wilderness,
To possess the land of the Amorites.
And I raised up of your sons for prophets,
And of your young men for Nazirites.
Is it not even thus, children of Israel?
Says God.
But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink;
And commanded the prophets, saying: 'Prophesy not.'
Behold, I will make it creak under you,
As a cart creaks that is full of sheaves.
And flight shall fail the swift,
And the strong shall not exert his strength,
Neither shall the mighty deliver himself;
Neither shall he stand that handles the bow;
And he that is swift of foot shall not deliver himself;
Neither shall he that rides the horse deliver himself;
And he that is courageous among the mighty
Shall flee away naked in that day,
Says God.

This oracle is made up of a list of accusations (vv. 6-8), a kerygmatic historiosophy listing kindnesses done by God for the people (vv. 9-11) and a detailed punishment (vv. 13-16) that concludes with the army in utter flight. Note that this prima facie structural analysis skips v. 12, to which we will return later.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORACLE

Let's begin by looking at the crimes (!) of which Israel is accused.

Because they sell the righteous for silver,
And the needy for a pair of shoes;

That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor,
And turn aside the way of the humble;
And a man and his father go unto the same maid,
To profane My holy name;
And they lay themselves down beside every altar
Upon clothes taken in pledge,
And in the house of their God they drink
The wine of them that have been fined.
(vv. 6-8)

Or perhaps we may present it as follows:

- 1) They sell the righteous for silver
- 2) (they sell) the needy for a pair of shoes
- 3) That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor
- 4) (they) turn aside the way of the humble
- 5) A man and his father go unto the same maid to profane My holy name
- 6) They lay themselves down beside every altar upon clothes taken in pledge
- 7) In the house of their God they drink the wine of them that have been fined.

Until now, we have read the anthemic refrain “*Al shelosha...ve-al arba’a*” as representing a literary cliché, not necessarily a specific three sins that lead up to the fourth. We also read the numeric sequence as ordinal (even though the form is cardinal) – i.e. for the **fourth**, not “for four.”

Nevertheless, here it seems that the refrain is literal, and the numbers “three” and “four” are cumulative! Amos has brilliantly turned the literary trope on its head and counted out 3+4 sins, totaling seven specific transgressions.

This may be Amos’s original intent in using the anthemic refrain in the first seven oracles. As he does in so many other ways, Amos sets up his audience for a rhetorical shock. Hearing “*Al shelosha pishei Yisrael ve-al arba’a lo ashivenu*,” the audience is likely waiting to hear the **one** crime of which they will be accused by the seer from Tekoa. Hearing **one crime after another** has the potential to break through the wall of insouciance and move the aristocrats to reflect on their behavior.

After reading their detailed indictment, the prophet interrupts the seven-time repeated pattern with a historiosophic interjection, listing great kindnesses that God has done for the people:

Yet destroyed I the Amorite before them,
Whose height was like the height of the cedars,
And he was strong as the oaks;
Yet I destroyed his fruit from above,
And his roots from beneath.

Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
And led you forty years in the wilderness,
To possess the land of the Amorites.
And I raised up of your sons for prophets,
And of your young men for Nazirites.
(vv. 9-11)

Or:

- 1) Destroyed I the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and he was strong as the oaks
- 2) Yet I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath
- 3) Also, I brought you up out of the land of Egypt
- 4) And led you for forty years in the wilderness
- 5) To possess the land of the Amorites
- 6) And I raised up of your sons for prophets
- 7) And of your young men for Nazirites

The prophet cleverly matches seven kindnesses to seven alleged crimes. This pattern has an antecedent in *Tanakh*. In *Shoftim* 10, the text (v. 6) records:

And the Israelites did that which was evil in God's eyes, and served

- a) the Be'alim
- b) and the Ashtarot
- c) and gods of Aram
- d) and gods of Tzidon
- e) and gods of Moav
- f) and gods of the children of Ammon
- g) and gods of the Pelishtim

Subsequently and consequently, Ammon oppresses Yisrael. When the people cry out to God, His response (vv. 11-12) is:

“Did I not,

- a) from Egypt
- b) and from the Amorites
- c) from the children of Ammon
- d) and from Pelishtim
- e) And the Tzidonim
- f) and Amalek
- g) and Maon¹—

they oppressed you and you cried out to Me and I saved you out of their hand!”

¹ Evidently a Bedouin tribe that lived in the vicinity of Mount Seir (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 4:41).

The final segment of the oracle presents the detailed and sequenced punishment fated to Yisrael. This third section bears a greater resemblance to the punishments in the other oracles, as opposed to the sins, which are significantly different; the recitation of the divine kindnesses is completely unmatched in the earlier prophecies. The oracles which include the “long” pattern (against Aram, Peleshet, Ammon and Moav) detail destruction of military prowess, death of the leadership and some form of exile or subjugation. While each is accused of a single crime, the punishments include a sequence of calamities. In these ways, the punishment fated to Yisrael is similar:

Behold, I will make it creak under you,
As a cart creaks that is full of sheaves.
And flight shall fail the swift,
And the strong shall not exert his strength,
Neither shall the mighty deliver himself;
Neither shall he stand that handles the bow;
And he that is swift of foot shall not deliver himself;
Neither shall he that rides the horse deliver himself;
And he that is courageous among the mighty
Shall flee away naked in that day,
(vv. 13-16)

And again:

Behold, I will make it creak under you, as a cart creaks that is full of sheaves.

- 1) And flight shall fail the swift,
- 2) And the strong shall not exert his strength,
- 3) Neither shall the mighty deliver himself;
- 4) Neither shall he stand that handles the bow;
- 5) And he that is swift of foot shall not deliver himself;
- 6) Neither shall he that rides the horse deliver himself;
- 7) And he that is courageous among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day.

One note about the opening line, which I have excluded from this septad. Like the verse before it, it requires some analysis to adjudge its function within the oracle. However, it clearly cannot rightly be included among the punishments, as it does not delineate a specific attack on the people. Indeed, it seems to function as an introductory line to the punishments; we will expand on this below.

Thus we have seven crimes, seven divine kindnesses and seven punishments; or, perhaps more accurately: in spite of seven divine kindnesses, we have seven sins and, thus, seven punishments.

This rhetorical pattern is evidently anchored in the rhetorical rhythms of the Curses in *Vayikra* 26: “And if you will not heed Me after all these things, then I will chastise you seven times for your sins” (v. 18). This sentiment is repeated, nearly verbatim, three more times (vv. 21, 24, 28). As the *Sifra* observes (*Bechukotai* 2:5): “You committed seven sins before Me, come and accept upon yourselves seven punishments.” Rashi paraphrases this in his commentary (ibid. v. 18, s.v. *Sheva*): “Seven punishments for the seven abovementioned sins.”² Note what Rashi adds (“abovementioned”) and what he omits (“come and accept upon yourselves seven punishments”). This implies that the punishments only serve their purpose if they are received willingly by the people.³

Typologically, seven represents a complete natural cycle.⁴ This paradigm of seven sins is established in the Covenant at Sinai. It is attested to from the earliest era of biblical history through the end of the First Commonwealth. It appears in *Shoftim* (cited above), in our text and in Yirmeyahu’s invoking the 70 years of Babylonian exile as punishment for the 70 sabbatical (!) years not observed.⁵

ASSESSING THE STRUCTURE

We will return to the mystery of vv. 12-13, but in the meantime we may observe three clearly demarcated units. Each is three verses long and contains seven items.

The structure may be understood as linear: rebellion, in spite of divine benevolence, resulting in punishment. Alternatively, the first two units may be read as cyclical — to wit, committing sin X despite gift A, committing sin Y despite gift B etc. Ultimately, this sevenfold pattern of ingratitude is repaid with seven punishments. This might explain the two “buffer verses” between the recitative of praise and the pronounced sentence. In this schema, the two verses serve to “push” the first two units into perpetual symbiosis, which is finally resolved with the final unit.

However, I would like to propose another way to understand the relationship between these three units that also takes the two “wayward” verses into account.

First, we must consider the middle unit: the praise for God’s kindnesses. Its function in the larger oracle is opaque. After all, if the people have sinned so grievously and wantonly, they deserve punishments no less than — indeed, more than — their neighbors, who never had the close relationship with the Divine and

² I will leave it to the reader to review the verses leading up to v. 18 to reach seven sins.

³ Analysis of this editorial modification by Rashi is beyond the scope of this *shiur*.

⁴ Creation lasts seven days, and *shabbat* is later extended to cycles of seven years; in addition, various formulae for ritual purity depend on cycles of seven,

⁵ *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 36:21.

were never privy to prophetic leadership. These two units are consistent in all the oracles, although given in more detail and so forth (as we have stated earlier) in this final oracle.

As we find in other historiosophies in the canon (e.g. *Yehoshua* 24, *I Shemuel* 12), the purpose is didactic and exhortative, not merely informational. The purpose in *Yehoshua* is to convince the people that they owe complete allegiance to God and should not stray after the foreign gods of Canaan. In the latter example, Shemuel is making a last-ditch effort to keep the people from moving towards monarchy, arguing that God is their one King and choosing a flesh-and-blood ruler is a (minor?) rebellion against God, Who has dealt so beneficently with them.

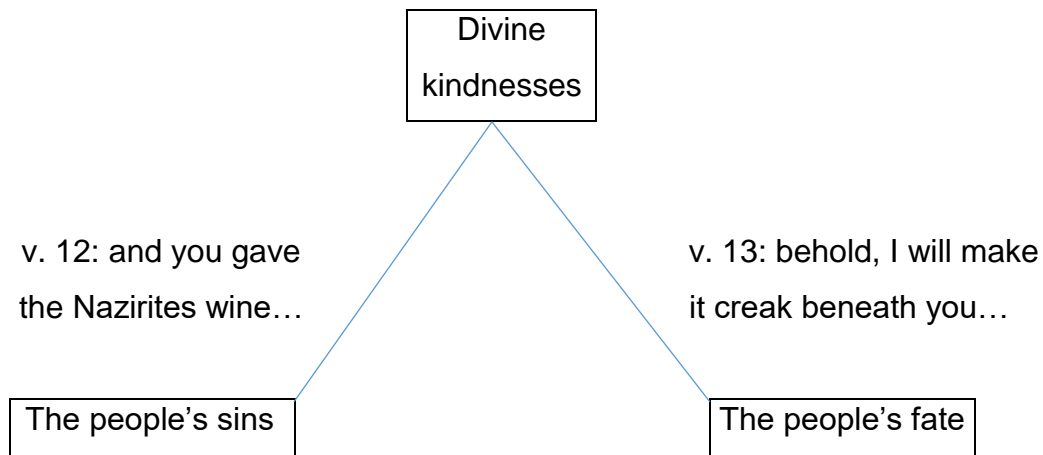
Note that this component does not appear in the Curses in *Vayikra* 26, but is prominent in the prophetic introduction in *Shoftim* 10.

In both cases, the “kindnesses” unit is presumably introduced to convince the people to reverse their current attitude towards God (and foreign gods) and to fully embrace the commitment to the covenant.

In much the same way, Amos’s purposes is **not** merely to read the people their sentence, but to persuade them to mend their ways. If they never again “sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes,” if they never again “drink the wine of them that have been fined,” then his goal will have been accomplished. There are two ways to convince people that they must change: the fear of consequence or the call to duty. If they cannot imagine their once-impressive army fleeing in impotent terror as described in the punishment, then perhaps a sense of loyalty, obligation and gratitude might sway them. As such, the middle unit serves as an alternate motivator for the final unit.

From another perspective, however, the middle unit informs both other units. The God Who forbids such behavior is the same God Who has done so many astounding kindnesses for them. The crimes of which the people are accused rise in their ugliness when contrasted with God’s kindnesses. These kind acts are then reversed in the punishments that God will mete out to the sinning population.

In this scheme, the entire oracle should be viewed as a triangle, as follows:



Thus, verse 12 and verse 13 each become a bridge between the axis and its offshoots.

God acted kindly with us; beyond salvation, He gave us the opportunity to become sanctified people. Nevertheless, we spurned this offer and acted to profane the holy ones among us. This is the ultimate rejection of divine kindness and speaks to the direct relationship between the kindnesses unit and the indictment unit.

Since God has been so intimately involved with the people, He suffers (so to speak) when the people sin. In the poetic landscape painted by Amos, God is no longer “capable” (as it were) of carrying the people, as He creaks beneath their sins and the result is that their military might will no longer sustain them. Implicit in this structural analysis of the oracle is that the people have forgotten that their military success and prowess is a Divine gift and that failing the presence of God and His support, their army will have no abilities whatsoever.

In this reading of the final oracle, Amos not only threatens the security of Samaria (in God’s name) but also calls for a significant attitude adjustment regarding the relationship between the people and God, between their behavior and their success up to this point.

Next, we will turn from the structure to the text of this oracle, looking at some of the more difficult and challenging words and phrases in Amos’s words to the aristocracy and monarchy in Samaria.

For further study:

Structural Analysis: Weiss, Meir *Scriptures in Their Own Light: Collected Articles*, Jerusalem, Mossad Bialik, 1987 pp. 293-390 [Heb]