

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

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Shiur #18: The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles Against the Nations

(continued)

As we continue our study of Amos's ultimate prophecy in this series of oracles against the nations, we will devote much of our attention to understanding the background of the central thesis of the praise-section of the oracle. In the previous two lectures, we took a brief but necessary detour from our text to examine the role of the Exodus narrative in the rhetoric of the literary prophets. We now return to considering the text of the praise-hymn which serves as the central text and axis of the oracle against Israel. We will focus our attention on the entire middle passage of the hymn, which details the divine kindnesses regarding the sequence of events which we refer to as the Exodus from Egypt (writ large).

Here, again, is the text:

9 I destroyed 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. **10 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.** **11** And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not even thus, O you Israelites? says God.

12 But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying "Do not prophesy."

Or, as we have laid it out previously:

- 1) I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks
- 2) Indeed, 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 forty years in the wilderness**
- 5) **To possess the land of the Amorites**
- 6) And I raised up of your sons to be prophets

7) And of your young men to be Nazirites

THE EXODUS “AXIS”

Over the past two lectures, we have focused on the specific line “Also, I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” without referencing the rest of the middle line of the praise-hymn. Now we are prepared to take a slightly more panoramic view of the passage, which is made up of three prongs (note that I have reworded the latter two segments and syntactically moved the third clause of the sentence into full parallel with the first two):

- a. I brought you up out of the land of Egypt
- b. I led you for forty years in the wilderness
- c. I disinherited the Amorites to give you their land

This nicely fits the general *schema* of the Exodus as first presented to Moshe at the Burning Bush: “For I will descend to save it from Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a good and broad land, to a land flowing of milk and honey...” (*Shemot* 3:8). In the Torah’s narrative scope, the Exodus is rarely presented as a standalone event but as a necessary first step towards bringing the people to the land. Once the divine plan for the bridge between those two was modified (At Yam Suf? At Sinai? At Paran?), the journey through the wilderness became part of the larger story. Indeed, ultimately the journey from Rameses to Jericho (i.e. from leaving Egypt to entering the Land) is all included in the biblical rubric of the Exodus. The most glaring example of this is the mitzva of *sukka* – “That your generations shall know that I caused the Israelites to dwell in *sukkot* as I took them out of Egypt” (*Vayikra* 23:43). According to most commentators — whether of the school of Rabbi Eliezer (real huts) or Rabbi Akiva (protective clouds) — the *sukkot* were our shelter throughout the forty years. (See, however, the opinion of the Sages in *Mekhilta Bo, Pischea* 14). Thus, Amos’s threefold presentation of God’s kindnesses during that epoch nicely matches the divine promise, the biblical narrative and the commands of commemoration.

There is, however, more to this axis-line than that. The entire oracle is moving towards a threat, as we (and the immediate audience in Shomeron) have seen seven times in the buildup. Following the pattern from the first oracles, the threat is of military destruction, decimation of cities and the leadership and, ultimately, exile. With that in mind, we must return to the original entry into the Land (from which they stand to be exiled) and the constant reminder (see, inter alia, *Vayikra* 18) that the nation’s right to disinherit the previous inhabitants and to take their land rests on one premise — moral superiority. The divine gift of the Land is conditioned on our maintaining that moral high ground:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these things; for in all these the nations are defiled, which I cast out from before you. And the land was defiled,

therefore I visited its iniquity upon it, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. You shall therefore shall keep My statutes and My ordinances, and shall not do any of these abominations; neither the home-born, nor the stranger that sojourns among you — for all these abominations have the men of the land done, that were before you, and the land is defiled — that the land should not vomit you out also, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (*Vayikra* 18:24-28)

Although the proximate context of that warning is sexual immorality, there are other behaviors that the Torah describes as abominations including numerous idolatrous practices but also extending to business fraud (corrupt weights and measures are called an abomination in *Devarim* 25:16). This last certainly hits home in the context of the list of crimes of which Israel is accused. In addition, depending how we interpret “And a man and his father go unto the same maiden” (*Amos* 2:7; see *shiur* #13), sexual perversion may be included in the indictment as well.

Thus, we may read his praise-hymn as first noting the *telos*: the goal of all of His kindnesses was to extirpate the indigenous pagan peoples and to completely uproot them and their culture. This was done by taking the Jewish people out of Egypt, guiding them gently and lovingly through the generation of transition in the wilderness and then helping them take possession of the Land (fairly smoothly, per the report of *Sefer Yehoshua*). All of this was geared towards building a holy nation, a kingdom of *kohanim* (cf. *Shemot* 19:6) whose moral beacon would shine for the world and would become a blessing for all families of the earth (*Bereishit* 12:3; see how that phrase is ironically invoked below in *Amos* 3:2).

This would solve a problem we raised in a previous lecture. To wit, anytime that a historic narrative is either conflated or presented out of chronological sequence, as is the case in most historiosophies, we are better served by explaining the motivation for such a rearrangement of the narrative. We noted that the sequence in this hymn-praise is not true to the events – God took the people out of Egypt well before (and as a prerequisite to) dispossessing the Canaanite nations. We can now return to that question with some measure of confidence and respond: the goal of this hymn is not to recount the events, but rather to prepare an argument in favor of the impending punishment and exile of the Northern Kingdom. Beginning with the purpose **which will now be inverted and undone** of destroying the morally depraved nations of the land before Israel, then providing the foundational event which preceded that, all done with divine love and kindness, it is now clear that Israel has strayed from the intended path, if not engaged in outright perfidy.

I BROUGHT YOU UP OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT

Let us consider one final note about the invocation of the Exodus here. In some instances, the Exodus is referred to as “taking out” as in “I am The Lord your God

who **took you out** of Egypt” (*Shemot* 20:2); in other cases, it is described as a “bringing up,” as here and in the previously noted *Shemot* 3:8. A full study of the contrasting contexts in which these verbs are used to describe the Exodus is beyond the scope of this *shiur*, but I’d like to propose some broad considerations. The “taking out” seems to relate, by and large, to being relieved of the servitude of Egypt. For example, “you shall guard the *matzot*, for on this very same day **I have taken out your hosts** from the land of Egypt...” (*Shemot* 12:17). On the other hand, bringing up seems to be used when associated with the broader national-spiritual mission of religious and cultural greatness. For instance, “I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, open your mouth that I may fill it” (*Tehillim* 81:11). The sense there is that God is asking His people to ask things of Him that He may fulfill them: this speaks to a longer and deeper relationship, beyond the political and geographic movement of taking out.

Note that Amos uses bringing up because his critique of the people is that they have failed the mission that that Exodus was intended to facilitate. See, in this spirit, the comments of Rav Yosef Kara on our verse.

I LED YOU FOR FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS

Although the wilderness motif is used by other literary prophets (e.g. *Hoshea* 2, *Yirmeyahu* 2:1), the explicit mention of the forty years of wandering appears only in *Amos* — twice. The first time is in our passage, and the second is in 5:25, in a critique of the sacrificial cult. The forty-year trope, commonly used from the moment that decree is handed down (*Bamidbar* 14), appears frequently in the latter parts of *Bamidbar*, throughout *Devarim* and sparingly in *Yehoshua*. It doesn’t make another appearance in the rest of the prophetic canon, except for the two mentions in *Amos*. We will address it more fully in chapter 5; however, there is a specific aspect of that trope that may have a unique impact on our understanding of this passage.

Although we generally see the forty years of wandering as a punishment (and, indeed, that is the original context of the decree), there is yet another angle to it. As Moshe relates it, the forty years of deprivation and challenge are both a proving ground to demonstrate the people’s readiness to maintain loyalty to God as well as a crucible through which their fortitude and commitment are refined:

All the commandment which I command you this day shall you observe to do, that you may live and multiply and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might afflict you, to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by everything that proceeds out of the

mouth of the Lord does man live. Your clothes did not grow old upon you, neither did your foot swell, these forty years. And you shall consider in your heart, that, as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastened you. And you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to fear Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths, springing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates; a land of olive-trees and honey; a land wherein you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig brass. And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given to you. *Devarim* 8:1-10)

As presented here, the “wilderness sojourn” is a period of both growth and realization – growth in Israel’s appreciation of the divine gifts and realization that they are capable of far greater challenges than, perhaps, they had heretofore imagined.

TO POSSESS THE LAND OF THE AMORITE

Note that unlike the first two clauses (and the way I “reimagined” the phrase at the beginning of this *shiur*), this clause is not a third act of kindness, but rather a definition of the goal of its antecedent — which raises an interesting syntactical question which is quite meaningful. What is the referent? Is it the Exodus, the sojourn through the desert or both? This may, to some extent, be dependent on how we understand the forty-year narrative and its purpose, as discussed in the last section. We may read this passage as

And I took you up out of Egypt (and led you forty years through the wilderness) to possess the land of the Amorite.

In this case, the necessary prerequisite to conquering, settling and inheriting the Land is the Exodus and the forty-year sojourn is an inescapable need which in no way contributes to that gift.

Alternatively, we may read it as

I led you forty years through the wilderness to possess the land of the Amorite.

In this read, a significant (if not main) purpose of the wilderness years is to enable the people to conquer the Land, as proposed earlier. This seems to be the way that Radak reads it in his first approach (before the brief alternative he proposes at the end):

Before I brought you to the Land, I brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves, and I led you forty years through the wilderness, as you lacked for nothing. I accustomed you to My laws so that you would not learn the customs of the Amorite land when you came to inherit it. Alternatively, perhaps “to possess” is associated with “I brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”

Ibn Ezra states this even more clearly:

“And I...” the meaning is as follows: I guided you for forty years, until you learned My laws, so that afterwards you would disinherit the Amorites.

Finally, we could read it as a composite:

And I took you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years through the wilderness, (all) to possess the land of the Amorite.

This combines the two elements and describes the entire range of divine kindness and caretaking as aimed at the successful conquest of the Land.

Each approach leaves us with a different emphasis in Amos’s oracle and, quite possibly, a modified message emerges.

If we read it the first way, the conquest of the Land is the direct result of the Exodus (and the forty-year wandering is a necessary intermediate stage) and the message seems to be as follows: You were in exile, I brought you up out of there to this Land — and now, due to failing to fulfill the mission of your Exodus, you will be re-exiled.

If we read it the second way, the sense seems to be more disappointment than threat: All those years of guiding you, teaching you and refining you in the desert were apparently a waste.

This doesn’t speak to the impending punishment as much as something perhaps worse, divine disappointment, which portends the worst result — divine abandonment.

The final proposal — reading both the Exodus as well as the forty years of wandering as being preparatory to the possession of the Land — serves to combine the two messages.

Although we have analyzed the axis passage of the hymn (verse 10) as speaking of the kindnesses God bestows on His people which stand in contrast to their wanton behavior, there is a (slightly) different approach proposed by Rav Eliezer of Beaugency (12th-century France; some suggest that he was a student of Rashbam) which is so elegant, it bears sharing here:

Behold **I destroyed the Amorite from before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars**, and they would steal and act violently against those who were lower and smaller than they. They should have remembered **that I took you up out of the land of Egypt** from the house of slaves, from those who stole from them and oppressed them; therefore, they should not have defrauded and oppressed orphans and widows. **And I led you forty years through the wilderness**, so you should have had compassion and taken care of the poor as I did for you. For I took care of you **for forty years** until I dispossessed for you **the land of the Amorite**, so you should not have dispossessed and driven the poor and orphans from their ancestral inheritance.

In the next shiur, we will examine the final clause of the “praise-hymn” – *and I raised of your sons to be prophets and of your young men to be Nazirites.*