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# Bethel in the Book of Amos\*

*Filip Čapek*

## Introduction

Bethel plays a crucial role in the history of Israel and this fact is underlined not only by the very occurrence of the geographical name of this site<sup>1</sup> but also its prominence, very broadly speaking, in important compositions of the Hebrew Bible. This is also true of the book of Amos. Here Israel is addressed as the one who will be punished for all sins, and Bethel is an essential part of this disturbing message that shakes the foundations of this political entity. The general framework of the punishment is given ‘globally’, since the addressees of the words uttered by Amos are not only Israel and Judah but all the nations around them, that is, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, Edom, Phoenicia and, with a stronger emphasis, also Damascus.

If we leave the epilogue to one side for now, the overall logic of the book is based on three imaginary concentric circles of addressees in which the most peripheral relates to the ‘nations’ around Judah and Israel, here with a sub-circle dedicated to Damascus, the second to Israel, and the third one, though not as regards the amount of text, central or seemingly the most focused, to Judah and Jerusalem. Note that the name of the capital occurs only three times in the whole book, pointing at later editorial layers of Amos connecting prophecy with the

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion on identification see FINKELSTEIN – SINGER-AVITZ, *Reevaluating Bethel*, 33-48; GOMES, *The Sanctuary of Bethel*; KOENEN, *Bethel*; LIPSCHITS, *Bethel Revisited*, 233-246; TAVGER, E.P. 914 East of Beitin and the Location of the Ancient Cult Site of Bethel, 49-69; TAVGER, “And He Called the Name of that Place Bethel”, 201-222.

theology of Sion<sup>2</sup> (Amos 1:2; 6:1) and with the observance of the Law (see Amos 2:4-5).

This overall seemingly logical structure raises many questions in scholarship, such as when the book was written, for whom and by whom, and, finally, what theologies/ideologies can be identified. Given all these issues, one appears to be on rather shaky ground, where more partial questions than clear answers remain. And what role does Bethel play in this? Is there a unified view of one particular author or group, or do we have a more complex, multi-layered view of history in which Bethel has its place, whose role – as a result of this multi-layeredness – is not always the same place since the place is embedded in a particular historical context and its role changes?

## 1 Historical and literary considerations

To start with, let us now turn to a brief overview of the research on the Book of Amos. If we skip the traditional view that Amos was only one historical figure living at the time most of the book refers to<sup>3</sup> and that it was written by him, since it is claimed to contain “the words of Amos“, the book as such asserts that<sup>4</sup> or at least the oracles are his own, with only a few later changes, here especially the epilogue in Amos 9:11-15<sup>5</sup>, in the course of the existence of critical scholarship, many compositional theories have been put forward.

The one that substantially challenges the traditional view is advocated, for instance, by Reinhard Kratz, who emphasises the categorical difference between the ‘historical prophet’ and the oldest reconstructable version of the prophetic oracles or sayings in the book, thus pointing to the difference between the spoken word and the written text. According to Kratz, the core of the book behind which he indeed assumes the utterances of a prophet Amos from Tekoa is detectable in “die Bildworte in 3,12aba; 5,2.3.19 und die Partizipien (Weherufe) in 3,12bß;

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. OEPPING, *Von Sinai zum Sion?*

<sup>3</sup> For earlier dating based on the argument that the Jeroboam in 7:7-10 is Jeroboam I but was, because of superscription in 1:1, confused with Jeroboam II see LEVIN, *Amos und Jerobeam I.*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. PARK, *The Book of Amos*, 2001; STUART, *Hosea-Jonah*; PAUL, *Amos*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. PAUL, *Amos*; HAYES, *Amos*.

4,1aa2b; 5,7; 5,18a.20 (oder 5,18aßb.20b) sowie 6,1-6\*.13”<sup>6</sup>. This is an Amos who describes and laments the situation in Samaria in the face of the coming catastrophe in the second half of the 8th century – and who indeed would not be so different from what we know from Neo-Assyrian prophetic texts or the Bileam inscription or the Mari tablets. Later on, this tradition is stylised to the prophecy of judgement after 720 BCE<sup>7</sup>. As for parallels from the ancient Near East in which prophets were part of the royal courts and therefore conformed to those who ruled, it is difficult to determine these as a result of the fact of later editing. Drawing direct parallels within the Near Eastern context is problematic for a number of reasons, as is trying to do the opposite, i.e. to point to the uniqueness of a particular prophetic tradition, as older scholarship in particular attempted to do<sup>8</sup>.

This leads us to another topic concerning the literary compositions of prophetic traditions. The problem of the composition of the book and adding to this the overall composition of the Book of Twelve and the place of Amos there is much more complicated. As for dating, to which we will return, the broadest time frame of the book is given by the references to events and rulers that were known, i.e. from ca. the middle of the 8th century BCE to the terminus *ad quem* and the second century BCE as a result of the discovery of parts of the book in the 4QXII<sup>c</sup>, 4QXII<sup>g</sup>, 4QAm, and MurXII and quotations from the book in some other texts from Qumran. The gradual and very complex editing of the Dodekapropheton speaks in favour of the longer growth of Amos.

There are theories advocating only a limited number of stages of development, with most of the material being attributed to Amos and his time, that is, the second half of the 8th century BCE<sup>9</sup>. Here, Amos and his recent disciples are those composing a book roofed by the *auctoritas* of the prophet himself. Another interpretative direction is focused on the presumably much longer *process of editing*. It starts with the classical works of the German scholars W. H. Schmidt and H. W. Wolff. The first introduced the idea of intensive Deuteronomistic redaction of Amos explaining the cause of exile as transgression against YHWH and the disobedience of his people<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> KRATZ, Die Worte des Amos von Tekoa, 310-343, here 338.

<sup>7</sup> Here I thank prof. Hannes Bezzel for his valuable comments and clarifications.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion see BARSTAD, No Prophets?; KOCH, *Die Profeten I.*; LAATO, History and Ideology in the Old Testament Prophetic Book.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. ANDERSEN – FREEDMAN, *Amos*; VARŠO, *Ozeáš, Joel, Amos*.

<sup>10</sup> SCHMIDT, Die deuteronomistische Redaktion des Amosbuches, 168-192.

In his commentary on Joel and Amos Wolff<sup>11</sup> counts with more stages that elaborate (a) Amos's own words [thus the oracles against the nations in chs 1–2 and the visions in chs 7–9; in both cases there are five of them], (b) the stage developed by the prophet's disciples [here, for example, 7:7-17, dealing with Amaziah/Amos and Bethel and recorded by eyewitnesses] around 735 BCE, (c) additions from the times of Josiah [the inclusion of anti-Bethel material in Amos 5:6 and doxologies connected to particular liturgical events in Bethel in the last third of the 7th century BCE], and (d) an epilogue from the post-exilic period as a prophecy of the "restoration of Judah"<sup>12</sup>. Wolff's interpretation, which represents in a way the breaking point of modern debate, has been followed by many, but equally rejected or significantly modified by others<sup>13</sup>.

A further attempt towards clarifying the literary history of the Book of Amos was recently made by Tchavdar Hadiev<sup>14</sup>. The history of the edition of Amos, according to him, starts with the assumption that Amos 4:1–6:7 existed as an independent composition that the author termed a *Repentance Scroll* dated between 733 and 722 BCE and was historically anchored in Northern Israel and also focused on Israel. Here an urgent and desperate call for change is uttered and this first edition is later updated in Judah by adding 3:9-15 and 6:8-14, thus creating the *Judahite Repentance Scroll*<sup>15</sup>. Another composition, termed the *Polemical Scroll* by Hadiev, comprises 1:1\*; 1:3-8, 13-15; 2:1-3, 6-16\*; 9:7-8a; 3:3-8\*; 7:1-8; 8:1-2; 9:1-4, 9-10; 7:10-17 and was created shortly before 734 – 32 BCE or shortly before 722. Here, the disciples of Amos defend the validity of his prophecies, thus especially taking the earthquake as the first step in a series of fulfilments of his predictions.

The next step of its literary history is represented by the combination of the two former scrolls, bound by the hymnic passages (1:2; 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6), which is tentatively dated to the 7th century BCE since, on the evidence of 1:2, "Jerusalem is still in existence"<sup>16</sup> and termed the *Liturgical Redaction*. The last stage of the literary history of the book relates to the *Exilic Redaction*, which

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<sup>11</sup> WOLFF, *Dodekapropheten 2: Joel, Amos*.

<sup>12</sup> WOLFF, *Dodekapropheten 2: Joel, Amos*, 121-139.

<sup>13</sup> For this see LESCOW, *Das vorexilische Amosbuch*, 23-53; LESCOW, *Das nachexilische Amosbuch*, 69-101; ROTTZOLL, *Studien*; FRITZ, *Amosbuch*, 29-43.

<sup>14</sup> HADJIEV, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*.

<sup>15</sup> HADJIEV, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 179-193.

<sup>16</sup> HADJIEV, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 199.

expanded the text in several directions. The oracles against the nations are extended by adding the oracles against Tyre, Edom, and Judah (1:9-12; 2:4-6) and by verses (2:7b.10-12) of the oracles against Israel. In the Bethel narrative 7:9 is inserted, as well as 8:3-14; 9:7-15; 5:25-27, and possibly the note on the two kings in 1:1. As for the provenance of this redaction, which should be sought “among the 6th-century BC Judean community”<sup>17</sup>, this is clearly influenced by the “work of the Dtr school”<sup>18</sup> but possibly also by priestly tradition (here see the expressions in 2:7; 8:5; 8:14 and 9:13).

The theory of the literary history of the book proposed by Hadjiev is both appreciated and critically questioned. Doubts arise not so much over the idea of scrolls that were later further redacted, but over their specific historical setting, especially the unknown *Sitz im Leben* ‘authors’ or ‘circles of disciples’, and then over the dating of specific texts, such as the post-exilic dating of the oracles against Edom (see Amos 1:11-12), without taking into account the dynamics of mutual tensions that clearly go back to the Iron Age<sup>19</sup>. However, on the last of the critical points, that is, mutual sentiments, it turns out that many of the arguments can be used quite differently, as the research shows, where this theme comes back as if in a circle.

Apart from interpretations focused on processes of editing over a longer period of time based on literary history, it is also possible to look at the book of Amos as a “deliberate literary production”<sup>20</sup>. The book is interpreted as a literary work based on clear literary patterns (here esp. Amos 3–4 with concentric structures, etc.), with the usage of chiasmus thus emphasising the greater importance of the editors than the more or less alleged author/s with their raw texts incorporated into sophisticated literary compositions. Cross-references, the identification, analysis, and correlation of which are in a way *conditio sine qua non* of the critical study of the Book of Twelve, but often with uncertain and not very impressive results being achieved, are a separate topic<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps, also because of the greater difficulty of obtaining an unambiguous result, many scholars assume that Amos is a fictional character who may have existed, but all

<sup>17</sup> HADJIEV, The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos, 207.

<sup>18</sup> HADJIEV, The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos, 204-205.

<sup>19</sup> For this see esp. RICHELLE, Review of T. Hadjiev, The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. BARTON, The Theology of the Book of Amos, 22.

<sup>21</sup> For this see the very helpful contribution by WÖHRLE, So Many Cross-References?, 9-20.

the texts in the book are related to him in such a way as to make him seem like a prophet from the 8th century BCE, actually created in exile and under the baton of Deuteronomistic circles.

In trends focused on later productive phases, logically, what is more esteemed is the coherence of the work itself and early historical developments are left aside. The emphasis is laid, to quote John Barton, on the “mind of the later redactor, quite probably living in the Persian period”<sup>22</sup>. The same author comments on the same subject more than suggestively that it is:

very unlikely that everything in the book of Amos comes from the eighth century; the very discrepancies that lead us to think of later redactors are a sign that there is material in the book that resists being assigned to the postexilic period, during which at least some of the book’s redactors worked. In a word, the book is uneven, and that unevenness results from the fact that material that took its origin in one set of circumstances is being (re)applied in a later age. Both original and later circumstances shine through the text, and this precludes our attributing it all to only the later period(s) in which it was edited. (32)

Bringing Amos to ‘his’ times, there are many indications that at least some parts, if not coming from him, then at least reflect, similarly to Hosea, Mica, and Isaiah, historical events relating to the 8th century BCE<sup>23</sup>. One of them is the earthquake, which occupies not only archaeologists, historians and biblical scholars<sup>24</sup>, but also seismoarcheologists and other fields of science<sup>25</sup>. Among the arguments for an overlap with the 8th century BCE, generally speaking, these are both positive and negative.

To begin with the *negative arguments*, if the book is exilic or later, then it is interesting that it makes no reference to the Neo-Babylonians, as do other later prophetic books, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Here a counter-argument might be used, posited by some, that Babylon, together with Egypt, is mentioned in the Book of Twelve with reluctance, possibly because of the fact that “both geographical locations were known as places of Diaspora”<sup>26</sup> and it was not

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<sup>22</sup> BARTON, John: *The Theology of the Book of Amos*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. WÖHRLE, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches*.

<sup>24</sup> WRATHALL, *Before the Earthquake*, 215-236.

<sup>25</sup> AUSTIN – FRANZ – FROST, *Amos’s Earthquake, 657-671*; ZOHAR – SALAMON – RUBIN, *Reappraised List of Historical Earthquakes, 971-985*.

<sup>26</sup> HAGEDORN, *Diaspora or no Diaspora?*, 332.

always possible “to distinguish between the indigenous and Diaspora population”<sup>27</sup>. Let us add to that the argument that some also assume that this reluctance fits well to its opposite, meaning that Assyria and Persia are present very abundantly. However, if Assyria stands in later editions of the Book of Twelve for the Seleucid Empire, as proposed by O. H. Steck<sup>28</sup>, this does not exclude much earlier phases of composition of the same literary work. On the other hand, Babylon is also present in the book, though not explicitly but through the theme of return, as is evident in later additions such as Amos 9:14.

For *positive arguments*, there are many speeches and oracles clearly focused on Israel. This seems to be not a crushed political entity but a wealthy power with luxurious political centres that is able to occupy territories beyond Transjordan. The political adversary of Israel is Damascus, again the late 9th to 8th century BCE one of the main players in the region, and not, for instance, Persia. Israel itself is the main addressee of harsh criticism, whereas the prophecy of hope is much less present in the book and is more focused on Judah. This disproportion is more than clear in the book, including the quintessential point that the words of judgment are addressed to Samaria and not to Jerusalem, which, just as a reminder, is a place that is mentioned only three times (!) in the whole book. This north-focused emphasis cannot be overlooked, even though parts deal with Judah and the epilogue is clearly addressed to the exile and post-exile community in Judah or in the diaspora (see Amos 9:14). The logic of the subsequent formation of the Book of Twelve makes this clear, but it does not necessarily apply to the earlier periods and literary history of the book, when the southern perspective was not at the forefront of prophetic traditions.

In addition to what was just said, one of the crucial themes of the Book of Amos is Egypt and the deliverance out of there (Amos 3:1; 9:7), and then the references to Jacob and Isaac (3:13; 6:8; 8:7; 9:7-8), all of which originally refer, as also substantiated by Oz 11:1 and 12:4, to the north, but also – as a result of the long process of composition and adoption of the northern traditions – to the connection with the south, where these traditions – no matter how – gradually became ‘at home’. In the Book of Amos, the identity of both Jacob and of Israel changes. In Amos 3:13<sup>29</sup> and 6:8<sup>30</sup> Jacob seems to stand for the north, whereas

<sup>27</sup> HAGEDORN, *Diaspora or no Diaspora?*, 332.

<sup>28</sup> STECK, *Der Abschluss der Prophetie*.

<sup>29</sup> Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob, says the Lord GOD, the God of hosts.

<sup>30</sup> The Lord GOD has sworn by himself (says the LORD, the God of hosts): I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds; and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

in Amos 7:2<sup>31</sup>; 7:5<sup>32</sup>; 8:7<sup>33</sup>, and possibly also 9:8<sup>34</sup> the Judahites felt addressed, while the text itself speaks explicitly of Israel. These transformations are probably part of a long-formed awareness of what some call a pan-Israelite identity, where “Judahites felt addressed by, and responded to, an oracle from YHWH to Israel”<sup>35</sup>. The mention of Joseph and his remnants in Amos 5:6.14-15, considered by some to be a pre-722 BCE account, is also part of this<sup>36</sup>.

All of these themes and references are used as evidence of YHWH’s presence and affection for his people, for Israel, that are ruined by the religious, social, and political misconduct of this territorial entity, ending in disaster, again religious, social, and political<sup>37</sup>. The very same themes, though mostly dealt with in a negative and condemnatory tone, are strong enough to be integrated into the later ‘memory’ of Israel reshaped on the territory of Judah from the people living there and from the prophet commissioned there. These connections and interconnections, between north and south, Israel and Judah, and their historical, textual, and theological parameters, represent essential interpretative points and crossroads<sup>38</sup>. As for Israel, the main part of the book is clearly focused on the north but later compositional efforts are focused on Judah as the new Israel both in the land and in the diaspora<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, “O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small! – Judah

<sup>32</sup> Then I said, “O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!”

<sup>33</sup> The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

<sup>34</sup> The eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth – except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the LORD.

<sup>35</sup> KRAUSE, *Reflections of pan-Israelite Identity*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> KRAUSE, *Reflections of pan-Israelite Identity*, 54-64; but cf. WÖHRLE, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches*, who considers the same text as early post-722 BCE, and WOLFF, *Dodekapropheton 2*, who dates it later after 722 BCE.

<sup>37</sup> For an interpretation focused primarily on the social issues see MACKERLE, *Amos*.

<sup>38</sup> For discussion see ČAPEK – FREVEL, *The Connections between Samaria and Jerusalem*, 199-217.

<sup>39</sup> See Amos 9:11-12.14: On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the LORD who does this. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

In short, the history of the book of Amos covers various editorial phases that are, and in many respects, very problematic to reconstruct, in which the text was expanded, added to, modified, updated, and (cross-) referenced. To elaborate on these requires the grasping of the development of prophecy on the basis of a certain time-conditioned and time-shaped conception of historical experience<sup>40</sup>. To do this, it must be borne in mind that each phase is specifically linked to the previous redaction, creating a *unique continuum* beginning in the 8th century BCE (or historically relatively relevant or reliable memories of it) and ending some centuries later. Part of this continuum includes thematising sanctuaries and cultic and ritual sites predominantly from the north, specifically Gilgal, Samaria, and then Bethel, but as will be shown, not exclusively.

## 2 The Book of Amos and Bethel

The geographical name Bethel itself occurs a total of seven times in the book of Amos. Despite this relatively low frequency, the term is associated with the quintessence of the book, which is religion and cult intertwined with social issues, political blindness and obstinacy. Both, religion and cult are evaluated negatively, and the cause of this is Israel and its practices. We will now focus on these occurrences, including extensions to incorporate important contexts<sup>41</sup>.

### 2.1 Amos 3:14

כי ביום פקדי פשעי־ישראל עליו ופקדתי על-מזבחות בית־אל ונגדעו  
קרנות המזבח ונפלו לארץ:

On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will punish the altars of *Bethel*, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground.<sup>42</sup>

*Comment and context:* The day on which YHWH will punish Israel is announced, together with the punishment of the altars in Bethel. It is said that these will be eliminated since their horns will be cut off, for the reader of the

<sup>40</sup> For this see esp. SCHAT, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuches* and WÖHRLE, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuches*.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. ČAPEK, *Temples in Transformation*, 117-120.

<sup>42</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the translation follows NRSVUE, except for the reference to YHWH instead of LORD.

Hebrew Bible a not unknown act of discontinuation of the proper use of cultic installations. The main addressee is demonstrably Israel under Jeroboam II (787 – 747 BCE), the House of Jacob is warned as a part of the prophecy in v. 13. Despite YHWH's act of deliverance (the motif of Egypt) and despite the abundance of warnings (vv. 1-8), there has been no repentance (social, religious, etc.) in Israel and doom is therefore inevitable. As a result, wealth will be useless; everything will be destroyed. The cult in Bethel will cease to exist through the exemplary cutting-off of the horns of the altar. As mentioned later in v. 15 many 'houses' will be destroyed, since YHWH "will tear down the winter as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end". The question here is whether these are just buildings, palaces, or houses in the dynastic sense or whether these are interchangeable terms. Samaria is clearly identified here as a representative of power that will not stand before the judgment of YHWH.

## 2.2 *Amos 4:4*

באו בית-אל ופשעו הגלגל הרבו לפשע והביאו לבקר זבחיכם לשלשת  
ימים מעשרתיכם:

Come to *Bethel* and transgress; to Gilgal and multiply transgression;  
bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days.

*Comment and context:* The text is part of the oracles against Bashan and Samaria with a strong social charge. The addressees of the prophetic critique will be punished for their oppression of the poor and needy. The form of the punishment is depicted in drastic terms as hanging those representing the nobility in Samaria on hooks for the present generation and on fishhooks for future generations. Those who oppress others will not be saved, despite their sacrifices in Bethel and Gilgal. Sacrifices of any kind will, as prophesied, be of no avail. Again, Bethel plays an important role, yet now Gilgal seems also to be a place with cultic life, surely with altars, possibly with shrines or temples, though not, similarly to the first place, archaeologically documented<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> See ČAPEK, *Temples in Transformation*, 125-126.

### 2.3 Amos 5:5-6

ואל־תדרשו בית־אל והגלגל לא תבאו ובאר שבע לא תעברו כי הגלגל גלה  
יגלה תִּית־אל יהיה לאון:

דרשו את־יהוה וחיו פן־יצלח כאש בית יוסף ואכלה ואין־מכבה לבית־אל:

But do not seek *Bethel*, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and *Bethel* shall come to nothing. Seek YHWH and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour *Bethel*, with no one to quench it.

*Comment and context:* The fifth chapter of the book of Amos begins with a final vision of Israel as a humiliated house that has fallen once and for all. Yet from v. 3 onward, it is suggested that the damage can be minimised (prophecy of conditioned hope), or at least repaired to a certain degree, if YHWH becomes (again) Israel's god. The prerequisite is abandoning the worship in Bethel and in Gilgal. The restoration of true worship is, as in the book of Amos itself, linked to the restoration of social justice (see Amos 5:7)<sup>44</sup>. Bethel is mentioned here three times, underlining its importance, albeit in a negative sense. But cultic misconduct should be stopped not only in these northern places, but also in Beer-sheba, far to the south. There is a significant variety of opinions among scholars as to what this prophecy means. On the literary level of the present text, we are dealing with an *asymmetrical prophetic admonition* that has its own particular message. However, the question is what kind of message it is.

Bethel	→	not to seek	→	YHWH will bring it to nothingness (יהוה לאון)
Gilgal	→	not to enter	→	will go into captivity (הגלגל גלה יגלה)
Beer-sheba	→	not to cross over	≠	<u>no explanation given</u>

Whereas some assume that the texts reflect the popularity of Beer-sheba “among the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom”<sup>45</sup> after the other sites fell into disuse after the Neo-Assyrian conquest, the other option is that text is later and reflects two stages of differentiation:

- (a) refusal of the northern shrines in general;

<sup>44</sup> Ah, you who turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!

<sup>45</sup> NA'AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 76-95, here 84.

- (b) silencing the praxis of cult in other places in the south except for Jerusalem, with a milder admonition simply not to go to Beer-sheba (why this is so is not explicitly stated).

The second option could relate either to the late 7th century BCE and the so-called semi-legendary Josiah reform or the same praxis theologically invented only later in post-exilic times and written as a retrospective vision of how improper worship should be avoided<sup>46</sup>. It is clear, however, that the focal point is again Bethel, for it is the only place to which v. 6 refers when it speaks of the threat that this place will be consumed by fire.

A similar linking of broader religious, political, and geographical contexts is present in Amos 8:14, where Samaria, Dan, and Beer-sheba are mentioned, but again the assessment of northern places is different compared to the south. Again, this is an asymmetrical view, but not in all textual traditions, as will be substantiated.

## 2.4 Amos 8:14

הנשבעים באשמת שמרון ואמרו חי אלהיך דן וחי דרך באר-שבע ונפלו  
ולא-יקומו עוד:

Those who swear by Ashimah [var. guilt/Asherah...or the name of YHWH] of *Samaria*, and say, “As your god lives, O *Dan*”, and “As the way of *Beer-sheba* lives” – they shall fall, and never rise again.

*Comment and context:* In Amos 8:14, the existence of the southern cult, presumably Yahwistic, is preserved only in the LXX mentioning the god of Beer-sheba (ὁ θεός Βηρσαβεε). In the Hebrew text, this clearly-defined religious context is absent and only the cult in the north and that in Dan are mentioned. In Beer-sheba, only the noun path (דרך) is mentioned in MT instead of any god being introduced. Again, one should note, this is in clear contrast to the LXX mention of the god of Dan (ὁ θεός Δαν), thus leaving the northern problem visible while veiling it in the south.

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<sup>46</sup> For discussion see NA’AMAN, *The Abandonment of Cult Places*; EDELMAN, *Hezekiah’s Alleged Cultic Centralization*; HERZOG, *Perspectives on Southern Israel’s Cult Centralization*; ČAPEK, *King Josiah Between Eclipse and Rebirth*, 45-59; KLEIMAN, *The End of Cult Places*, 249-266.

Amos 8:14	<i>contra</i> →	Beer-sheba	Dan
LXX		(god of Beer-sheba)	(god of Dan)
		ὁ θεός σου Βηρσαβεε	ὁ θεός σου Δαν
		≠	↕
MT		(road/way)	(god of Dan)
		דרך באר־שבע	אלהיך דן

The text under discussion in MT is, in our view, similarly to Amos 5:5-6, important evidence of the *asymmetrical* treatment of the cult in Judah and Israel. In Judah, the cult is made intentionally invisible in later times. In the north the existence of another deity is admitted, but not (!) – in contrast to the historical reality – of YHWH<sup>47</sup>, as is evident from the mention of El in Dan and Baal, this especially in Kings, and perhaps Asherah in Samaria, as some scholars assume. As we have pointed out in greater detail elsewhere, these deities are taken as substitutes for YHWH to keep his cult evident only in Jerusalem, while elsewhere in Judah it is hidden and in Israel missing<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, it is not necessary to amend the MT reading road (דרך) in the case of Beer-sheba to read “your divine council” or “your Beloved from Beer-sheba” or consider the LXX reading as erroneous<sup>49</sup>. On the contrary, is it plausible to assume that the LXX is more original<sup>50</sup>, preserving the importance of Beer-sheba as a place where the god of Beer-sheba, presumably YHWH, the god of Israel (and Judah, or later on also of Judah) was worshipped, possibly in an open-air temple as indicated by the remnants of a massive altar and the rich assemblage of unique cult-related pottery<sup>51</sup>. However, this was later deliberately erased from memory, including later compositional stages of the Book of Amos.

## 2.5 Amos 7:10.13

וישלח אמציה כהן בית־אל אל־ירבעם מלך־ישראל לאמר קשר עליך עמוס  
בקרוב בית ישראל לא־תוכל הארץ להכיל את־כל־דבריו:

<sup>47</sup> FREVEL, When and from Where did YHWH Emerge?; BERLEJUNG, The Origins, 67-92; SMITH, Yhwh’s Original Character, 23-44.

<sup>48</sup> ČAPEK, Temples in Transformation, 116-117.

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of these options see NA’AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 87-88.

<sup>50</sup> PAKKALA, God’s Word Omitted, 234.

<sup>51</sup> See esp. AHARONI, Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba, 111-127.

Then Amaziah, the priest of *Bethel*, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.”

ובית־אל לא־תוסיף עוד להנבא כי מקדש־מלך הוא ובית ממלכה הוא:

But never again prophesy at *Bethel*, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.

*Comment and context:* Having previously criticised Bethel, Amos here confronts the priest of Bethel who accuses him in front of Jeroboam II of harming Israel and claiming that the king himself will be killed. Moreover, the criticism is directed at the king’s very sanctuary and his house, confirming again – here more explicitly – the centrality of Bethel, which is emphasised in v. 10 by the statement that the criticism of Amos is happening “in the middle of the house of Israel” (בקרֶב בית ישראל).

The centrality of Bethel was elaborated recently by Nadav Na’aman, who infers that Bethel had an “elevated position among all the Israelite sanctuaries”<sup>52</sup> and was the seat of YHWH of Samaria, the deity in the central hill country. According to him, other manifestations of the same deity were the YHWH of Dan for Upper Galilee and the YHWH of Teman for regions in the southern desert with its seat in Tel Beer-sheba under the name “the Beloved of Beer-sheba” (reconstructed from Amos 8:14)<sup>53</sup>. Interestingly, Na’aman does not attribute the YHWH of Samaria to the capital but to Bethel, with the following arguments:

- (a) the YHWH of Samaria refers to Samaria either as a capital or as a land; the second reference is known from Neo-Assyrian records mentioning Israel as the “land of Samarina”;
- (b) following the ideas of H. W. Wolff and W. Rudolph, Na’aman considers Hos 8:5-6 as not referring to the deity here as the calf from Samaria, but to deity known from Bethel. Therefore, Ahab could not have erected a calf in the capital<sup>54</sup>;

<sup>52</sup> NA’AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 82.

<sup>53</sup> NA’AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 88-90.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. ČAPEK, Temples in Transformation, 115.

- (c) Hosea and Amos did not consider Samaria as an important place that “deserved special criticism”<sup>55</sup> but the prophetic criticism is levelled against Bethel. Here, we can skip for the sake of scope of this study the horn-bull debate<sup>56</sup>;
- (d) the reasoning above is supported by the reading of Amos 8:14 as “blurring the reference to the God of Bethel and dismissing the concept of YHWH as a regional God”<sup>57</sup>. The original reading “those who swear by [the name of] YHWH of Samaria” was, in Na’aman’s view, changed to ‘guilt of Samaria’. The reason for that was to suppress the understanding of YHWH, the God of Bethel, as the regional God named as ‘YHWH of Samaria’;
- (e) Na’aman infers that “because of Bethel’s elevated position among all Israelite sanctuaries, the prophet opened his criticism of the oaths that the inhabitants swore by mentioning the oath sworn in the name of YHWH of Samaria, the God of Bethel’s sanctuary”<sup>58</sup>. According to this suggestion, Bethel was the main 8th-century BCE sanctuary of YHWH in the political entity of Samaria under Jeroboam II;
- (f) in addition to this, the missing link to Bethel as the seat of a cult of YHWH could be deduced from other texts concealing this place by its derogatory renaming as Beth-Even, the ‘house of sin’<sup>59</sup>.

Na’aman’s proposal to consider YHWH (of Samaria) the god with the main sanctuary in Bethel is very attractive and emphasises the importance of the second place. Nevertheless, such an interpretation leaves aside the literarily intriguing but, in our view detectable, deliberate concealment of Samaria as also the place where YHWH of Samaria (!) was worshipped in a temple. Therefore, Samaria was important as regards the cult, although the very phrase YHWH of Samaria could simultaneously serve as a designation of a supra-territorial god which would not be surprising, given the city’s central position<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> NA’AMAN, *In Search of the Temples of YHWH*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> PAKKALA, *Jeroboam without Bulls*, 501-525; BERLEJUNG, *Twisting Traditions*, 1-42.

<sup>57</sup> NA’AMAN, *In Search of the Temples of YHWH*, 79.

<sup>58</sup> NA’AMAN, *In Search of the Temples of YHWH*, 86.

<sup>59</sup> KLATTER, *Were Temples Rare in Israel/Judah?*

<sup>60</sup> For this see also ČAPEK, *Temples in Transformation*, 120-121.

Though no temple has been excavated (similarly to Bethel) in Samaria, the analyses of texts bring to light the highly over-exaggerated Baalistic nature of the capital that seems to document the opposite, which is the centrality of Samaria in terms of both political and religious affairs with a cult and temple dedicated to YHWH that does not relate only to Jeroboam II but also to the preceding Omride rulers there, who were worshippers of YHWH, as documented, for instance, by the Mesha Stele and also by the Yahwistic names of most of the kings from this dynasty. However, it should not go unnoticed that many of the names in both the allied kingdoms also carry Baalistic elements<sup>61</sup>.

The question is why Amos 8:14 should refer to Bethel if the main aim of the text is to render the Yahwistic (?) cult in Samaria invisible and the site in the south of Israel is not mentioned at all since only, to make it explicit, Beer-sheba, Samaria, and Dan are the subjects of the prophetic criticism. This is even more surprising given the fact that Na'aman anticipates the existence of YHWH in Samaria and reconstructs the original text, which, according to him, might be “those who swear by [the name] YHWH of Samaria”<sup>62</sup>.

Why Na'aman considers other readings of *אשמת שמרון* unconvincing, including those that try to blacken and defame Samaria on the religious level, is not quite clear<sup>63</sup>. Although it is stated in Amos 7:13 that Bethel was the king's sanctuary and royal residence (*מקדש־מלך הוא ובית ממלכה הוא*), this does not exclude the importance of the capital in Samaria also as a place of the YHWH of Samaria and possibly of his central sanctuary or one of his sanctuaries. In this context, one cannot help feeling that Samaria, not only in the later stages of history when it was no longer the capital of Israel, is made to be both completely invisible and despicable in terms of religious provenance as a place with which nothing good is to be associated and becomes a standard for all that is the worst imaginable and most irredeemable<sup>64</sup>. In other words, concealing Samaria as a place of worship and cult in the biblical record indicates exactly the opposite.

Therefore, the crucial question is, then, why the YHWH of Bethel is not mentioned in the Book of Kings, Amos, and Hosea and why a temple there is not mentioned either. Bethel is indeed a key place, not least because of its proximity

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<sup>61</sup> For this see, for instance, STAHL, God's Best “Frenemy”, 45-94.

<sup>62</sup> NA'AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 86.

<sup>63</sup> NA'AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 87.

<sup>64</sup> NA'AMAN, In Search of the Temples of YHWH, 88.

to Judah, in two respects: first, as the place from which northern traditions were transferred – whatever the specific form of this transfer – to the south<sup>65</sup>; second, as a place that had to be negatively rebranded for this very reason. This, however, complicates the matter even more and has not yet been clarified by archaeology, despite numerous attempts to find any cultic architecture from the Iron Age in Bethel or its vicinity<sup>66</sup>.

## Conclusion

On the basis of an overview of the literary history of the book of Amos, the historical events it reflects in very complex, highly ambiguous, and frequently overlapping ways, and then on an analysis of the toponym Bethel occurring in this book, we come to the final observations:

1. In general, Bethel is crucial for understanding religious history and interactions in different time horizons and political contexts. The texts of Amos (here 3:14; 4:4; 5:5-6; 8:14, 7:10.13 in particular) also because of the very small horizon of knowledge in the field of archaeology, provide substantial information in this regard, which is nevertheless ambiguous in a number of aspects.

2. In the Book of Amos, Bethel can be seen as a litmus test that reflects the relationship to the site at various times, perhaps as early as the 8th century BCE, but certainly also later, after 586 BCE, when the site (like Mizpah/Tell en-Nasbeh) came to rival expectations focused on Jerusalem as the one and true centre of Judah and ‘Israel’<sup>67</sup>.

3. More importantly, the occurrence of the name not only has historical value, but also provides an evaluative and discerning function, both of which again reflect the decisions of the authors and editors in specific historical situations and contexts. However, their precise identification is very difficult because of the complexity of the history of the growth and composition of the book. As the history of the composition of the book suggests, there are multiple

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<sup>65</sup> NA’AMAN, Dismissing the Myth of a Flood, 1-14; FINKELSTEIN, Migration of Israelites, 188-206; ČAPEK, *Archaeology*, 88-117.

<sup>66</sup> For this see see FINKELSTEIN – SINGER-AVITZ, Reevaluating Bethel, 33-48; GOMES, *The Sanctuary of Bethel*; KOENEN, *Bethel*; LIPSCHITS, Bethel Revisited, 233-246; TAVGER, E.P. 914 East of Beitin, 49-69; TAVGER, “And He Called the Name of that Place Bethel”, 201-222.

<sup>67</sup> ZORN, Tell en-Nasbeh, 413-450; DAVIES, *The Origins of Biblical Israel*; KNAUF – GUILLAUME, *A History of Biblical Israel*.

intentional *decontextualisations* and *recontextualisations* present, which makes the determination of the specific historical setting all the more difficult, and this applies to Bethel too.

4. The main part of the book relates to the north. This particular aspect should not be overlooked, despite the long history of the editing of the book. To paraphrase the above-mentioned statement by Barton this means that the *unevenness* of the book should be considered since the reapplication of circumstances in a later age precludes the attribution all of the texts to only later periods.

5. It is evident that the traditions of the north that also incorporate Bethel in some way are so strong that they could not be silenced and, therefore, had to be integrated into a new identity by being called “Israel” and “Jacob” and interpreted anew under the guidance of the authors from the south. Thus, for instance, Jacob seems (cf. Amos 3:13) to be contrasted with Samaria in the book, proving the transfer and reshaping of northern traditions in the south. Closely related to the theme of Jacob, the traditions of deliverance from Egypt that are also substantially present in the book should be considered too.

6. When one reads the book as a whole, it is clear that the goal is in later stages of its editing (!) to delegitimise and displace the worship of YHWH from Israel and bring it exclusively to the south. Bethel here serves as a pretext for the reason for this transfer. This is contrary to the reality, whether the Yahwism here is connected to the 8th century BC under Jeroboam or to a later time<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. ČAPEK, *Temples in Transformation*, 110-111.

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### *Summary*


Bethel is one of the key places mentioned in the Book of Amos. Despite the relatively low frequency of this toponym, it is important for tracking changes in the composition of the book during its formation and the relationship between Israel and Judah, in which, in addition to the theme of worship, specific social criticism also comes to the fore.

*Keywords:* Book of Amos, Bethel, Israel.

### *Shrnutí*

Bétel je jedním z důležitých míst zmiňovaných v Knize Ámos. Toto toponymum, navzdory relativně nízké frekvenci výskytu, je důležité pro sledování kompozičních změn a proměn vztahů mezi Izraelem a Judskem, při nichž je v popředí, kromě tématu kultu, také sociální kritika.

*Klíčová slova:* Kniha Ámos, Bétel, Izrael.

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# Obsah

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