

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

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Shiur #10: The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles Against the Nations

(continued)

In this *shiur*, we will continue our study of Amos's oracles against the nations. Last week, we saw the relationship of Ammon and Moav to Yisrael through the period of the monarchy. Over the past four *shiurim*, we've looked at the six neighboring nations whose indictments and punishments comprise the first 16 verses of this oracle series. The next nation to be addressed is Yehuda but, as might be expected, the accusation is of a different type, and we'll pause for a beat before addressing it.

INTERIM SUMMARY – THE SIX ACCUSED NATIONS

The pattern of the oracle-series is quite clear. As outlined in *shiur* #3, the rhythm of the oracle-series is:

Al shelosha pishei [nation] *ve-al arba'a lo ashivenu*; *al* [crime]
Ve-shilachti/ ve-hitzati esh be-[nation/ city]
[General or detailed punishment]

What is the larger pattern? We have identified the **consistent** and **internal** pattern of each oracle. What is the panoramic scheme of the series?

FIRST PROPOSAL: THE CHIASMUS

One of the common structural models utilized in analyzing biblical texts is the chiasmus. The word comes from the Greek letter "X" ("chi") and is defined by the shape of that letter. A text will begin with a particular idea or keyword, move on to a second idea and so forth – and then will begin doubling back on itself, such that it ends with the same keyword and/ or theme as the beginning. There are two general types of chiasma: A-B-B-A and A-B-C-B-A. Neither of these models is limited to two or three themes; chiasmic structures that involve more than a dozen

themes have been identified and proposed.¹ The difference between the two models is the presence of a “pivot verse” or phrase at which point the structure turns back.

A simple example of the first kind is the description of Elkana’s two wives (*I Shemuel* 1:2):

And Elkana had two wives, one named (A) Chana, the other named (B) Penina; and (B) Penina had children while (A) Chana had no children

An example of the pivot-chiasmus is *Bereishit* 28:10-32:3 (all of *Parashat Vayetze*). These nearly four chapters are all one single Masoretic paragraph. The single story of Ya’akov’s sojourn in Charan begins with

(A) Ya’akov having a vision, seeing angels and naming the location (Beit-EI) in honor of that vision,
(B) Ya’akov erecting a commemorative stele
(C) Ya’akov negotiating with Lavan,
(D) Ya’akov interacting with Rachel and Leia (note the order),
(E) Ya’akov and his wives bearing children,
(D¹) Ya’akov interacting with Leia and Rachel,
(C¹) Ya’akov negotiating with Lavan,
(B¹) Ya’akov erecting a commemorative stele and
(A¹) Ya’akov having a vision, seeing angels and naming the location (Machanayim) in honor of that vision.

If we were to propose a chiastic structure for the oracle series (the first six²), we would likely suggest a non-pivot model, as follows:

A: Aram
B: Peleshet
C: Tzor
C¹: Edom
B¹: Ammon
A¹: Moav

The argument in favor of this structure is historical, not literary. Moav and Aram are both active enemies of the monarchy; Peleshet and Ammon are only active enemies during the Davidic era; and Tzor and Edom are never direct enemies of Yisrael during the First Commonwealth. Indeed, both Tzor and Edom are, at times, allied with Israelite sovereigns. The former’s King Chiram is a treaty partner of Shelomo and provides both cedar wood and word-cutters for the

¹ See, *inter alia*, *Between the Lines of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (2012), chapters 5, 10.

² We will not consider a chiastic or any other type of envelope structure involving the first seven oracles exclusively, as that would include Yehuda with the foreign nations. That would be a highly unlikely rhetorical move on the part of a prophet hailing from Yehuda.

construction of the Temple. Edom is the only nation (recorded in *Tanakh*) to ally with both Yisrael and Yehuda at the same time (*II Melakhim* 3).

This is an interesting consideration, but not a very compelling proposal. A chiasmus is a literary structure. As such, it should be parsed in literary terms, not geopolitical ones.³

SECOND PROPOSAL: THE REVERSE HISTORICAL CHAIN

The oldest enemies Yisrael has in the region are Moav and Ammon, the former acting more heinously with the hiring of Bilam. Hence, the final enemy mentioned is the oldest (Moav), preceded by the next oldest (Ammon). This even fits their birth order per their etiology in *Bereishit* 19. Edom, which is not an enemy during this period (and, unlike Ammon and Moav, is not barred from entering “God’s congregation,” *Devarim* 23:4-9) becomes an enemy at a later point (perhaps when Hadad the Edomite becomes a “troublemaker” for Shelomo; see *I Melakhim* 11). We do not know when Tzor becomes an adversary of Yisrael (if ever), although *I Melakhim* 9:11-13 records some overt tension between treaty partners Chiram and Shelomo. The Pelishtim, although unpleasant neighbors from Shimshon’s time and throughout Shaul’s and David’s reigns, may continue to act badly and be troublesome after Shelomo’s reign.

In any case, it is clear that Aram is the “newest” enemy on the block, as presented in the *shiur* on the first oracle. If these (somewhat sketchy) suppositions pan out, we find an intriguing and unprecedented rationale behind the sequence of oracles; they are presented in reverse historical order, beginning with the current enemy, Aram, and moving backwards in Israelite history to the oldest enemies, with whom we share a complex family history and relationship.

As noted, however, the analysis rests on several unsubstantiated premises. To posit that the “friendly disagreement” between Chiram and Shelomo constitutes a state of enmity is a bit of a stretch; suggesting that the adversarial relationship with the Pelishtim continues in any meaningful manner after Shelomo’s time requires more substantial textual support. All of this leads us to a third proposal, and then a fourth.

THIRD PROPOSAL: *AL SHELOSHA... VE-AL SHELOSHA*

We have already addressed the opening refrain of the oracles and its contribution to both the poetic rhythm⁴ of the oracle-sequence as well as, possibly, a

³ Geographic considerations might be taken into account in reckoning the literary structure, as we saw in the introductory chapters to this section.

⁴ Following the *n/ n+1* pattern found here and throughout wisdom literature; viz. *Mishlei* 30.

metaphysical lesson about God's grace.⁵ Is it possible that this anthemic opening also alludes to the structure of the oracles?

At first blush, we are tempted to read the opening segment, *al shelosha*, as numbering not only the "minor" violations that lead up to the cataclysmic "fourth" but as setting out the pattern. There are two sets of three nations here: on the one hand, (a) Aram, (b) Peleshet and (c) Tzor; and in the parallel set, (a) Edom, (b) Ammon and (c) Moav. What is particularly attractive about this *schema* is that the first three are all "foreigners" who come to the region from distant areas. The Philistines and Phoenicians are sea-peoples who come from the northern Mediterranean. Aram, as we see in both our chapter and in the final chapter of *Amos*, comes from Kir, near the headwaters of the Euphrates in Asia Minor. On the other hand, Edom, Ammon and Moav are all "locals" whose roots are right where they live now. As Yirmeyahu states (48:11):

Moab has been at ease from his youth, and he has settled on his lees, and has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, neither has he gone into captivity; therefore his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed.

Moreover, the first "set" of nations are not part of our extended tribe and we have no significant family affiliations with any of them. On the other hand, Edom, Ammon and Moav are all from Abrahamic stock; it is the territory of the latter three that we are to avoid conquering (*Devarim 2*) as opposed to the Aramean, Philistine and Phoenician lands that are all part of the broader sweep of conquest.

Again, this would be a tempting structural scheme, but it fails on its own literary and structural terms. Structurally, the first two oracles (Aram and Peleshet) are similar to each other, then the next two (Tzor and Edom) are of a single, shorter type. Then Ammon and Moav return to the first model. From a literary perspective, neither the crimes nor the punishments match up on the three → three model. The brutal crime of "threshing the (pregnant woman of) the Gilad" (Aram) does not match "chased his brother with the sword" and "crushed his own compassion" (Edom). The punishment of destruction and ultimate exile to one's birthplace (Aram→Kir) is unmatched in Edom's fate.

FOURTH PROPOSAL: *AL ARBA'A... VE-AL ARBA'A*

Having suggested that the refrain that introduces each oracle may hold the key to understanding the structure, we now turn to the end of the phrase and the number four. In each case, it is the alleged fourth crime that generates the harsh divine sentence. As we have already noted, the "For the three sins of X, and for four I will not reverse it" formula should not be taken as an exact reckoning of

⁵ See e.g. *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:5, following Tosefta *Yoma* 4:13

moral violations, but rather as a poetic and literary convention. Nonetheless, the numbers utilized in that convention are three and four. Perhaps we are to look at our sequence as two sets of four in order to decipher the structure and, thereby, gain a deeper understanding of the message of the oracles. That would match (a) Aram with (aa) Ammon; (b) Peleshet with (bb) Moav; (c) Tzor with (cc) Yehuda (see below) and (d) Edom with (dd) Yisrael. Let's examine this proposal and see if it fits.

The fourth and unpardonable crime of which Aram is accused is "*al dusham be-charutzot barzel et ha-Gilad*," threshing the Gilad with iron threshers. Ammon's violation is "*al bikam harot ha-Gilad*," slicing open the pregnant women of the Gilad (in order to expand their border). The affinity between the two crimes is quite clear; indeed, both LXX and one of the *Amos* fragments from Qumran (5QAm [4]1) read *harot ha-Gilad* in Aram's indictment. The Gilad is positioned directly between Aram to the north and Ammon to the south; indeed, in the battle for Rabbat Ammon which leads to the Bat Sheva episode, David's armies are attacked from the south by Ammon and from the north by Aram (*II Shemuel* 10).

Aram's punishment, following the burning of major cities which is common to all seven oracles, ends with the destruction of the leaders and exile of the people. Ammon's punishment follows a similar route.

Peleshet, in this proposal, is paralleled with Moav; significantly, both of them play a central role in David's life. Moav is not only where David's roots are found (in the person of Rut), but when he flees from Shaul, he first runs to Moav. He later moves across the territory of Yehuda and finally "emigrates" to Peleshet. The crime of which Peleshet is accused is one of treachery: handing over a refugee population (with whom they presumably had a treaty relationship) to Edom. Moav similarly stands accused of an act of brutality against the king of Edom – again, presumably, a peer who had reason to trust his counterpart in Moav.

Peleshet and Moav are to suffer the same consequence – burning the cities and destroying the leadership – but not exile.

Tzor and Yehuda seem an unlikely pairing. Yet the most significant role that Tzor plays in Israelite history is in their commercial interaction with the crown at the time of the united monarchy. Chiram is a treaty partner of Shelomo's and provides the wood for the Temple. Tzor's crime is the same as Peleshet's, but v. 9 adds "*Ve-lo zakhru berit achim*," "They did not remember the covenant of brothers." We may assume this refer to Shelomo and Hiram's treaty. Yehuda stands accused (see below) because "they have rejected God's Torah and have not kept His laws, and their lies have caused them to err, [those lies] after which their fathers had walked." Both of them — and they are the only ones — are accused of forgetting a covenant. Tzor did not honor its covenant with the people it handed over; Yehuda did not stay true to its covenant with God.

Both Tzor and Yehuda are slated for a simple punishment: a burning of their main city (Tyre, Jerusalem). That is all that each oracle foretells.

Edom, the final oracle in the first set, is accused of a spiteful attitude of fratricide. When we study the culminating oracle against Yisrael, we will see that much of the web of sin that the residents of Samaria have woven for themselves is anchored in wrong, venal and corrupt attitudes. These deviant perspectives impact first and foremost on their relationships with their own people who are poor and destitute – much as Edom destroyed their own natural compassion for their brothers and deliberately fanned the flames of their hatred.

This is the coup de grace of the “rhetorical entrapment.” If the listeners have been entranced by the rhythm of the oracle-sequence, they expect their own kingdom to be accused of a “milder” crime of attitude and to hear of a brutal but brief punishment. This is where the greatest surprise awaits the Samarian audience – but more of that when we get to the final oracle.

In sum, it seems that our last proposal, to view the oracles as two parallel sets of four, is the most compelling structural scheme.

AND THEREFORE...

A question we might term “meta-methodological” is the following: why try to discover the underlying literary structure of the oracles or, for that matter, any biblical passage? The words are what they are; the message is what it is; and whether it is part of a chiasmus, a historical sequencing or a parallel system of six or eight nations, how does that impact on our understanding of the text or its import for us?

In some cases, defining or discovering the structure helps to inform meaning. Since the rule of thumb in a chiasmus is that it highlights the middle, we can comfortably assume that Penina is the favored wife in Elkana’s household and that the birth of his children is the pinnacle of Ya’akov’s sojourn in Charan. The problem with this is that we **already** believe these to be true before looking at the text and use our “discovery’ to support our preconception. Sometimes, however, identifying a chiastic structure can help lead us in a new direction. For instance (see fn. 1, ch. 10) the long chiastic structure stretching from the border of Egypt to the edge of Sinai helps identify the story of the manna as central to that narrative and refocuses our attention on that episode.

Similarly, if we maintain a parallel construction (either two sets of three or two sets of four), we may be able to glean information from one oracle to its parallel. It is just this consideration that compels us to abandon the three-to-three model in favor of the four-to-four structure.

With this in hand, we can now expand our understanding of Aram's crime. In our Masoretic text, all that we are told is that they threshed the mountains of Gilad. The parallel with Ammon helps us understand this expression as a pithy way of describing their brutality, which finds fuller expression in the explicit detailing of Ammon's actions. It may also help us understand Aram's motivation; just as Ammon is explicitly charged with these war crimes for the purpose of expanding their territory (as opposed to defense or quelling an internal rebellion), similarly we may propose that Aram ripped open the bellies of the pregnant women in Gilad in order to broaden their southern border.

Identifying the parallel pattern here also generates a more specific type of anticipation among the intended audience (in Samaria). Note that the first set – Aram, Peleshet, Tzor, Edom – progresses from the most brutal crime imaginable to being an accessory to war crimes and treachery to criminal intentions alone. When the second set begins, there is a sense of *déjà vu* – Ammon is accused of the same war crime as Aram, then both Moav and Yehuda are accused of crimes of treachery against treaty partners – and when they hear “*al shelosha pishei Yisrael,*” they anticipate condemnation of criminal thoughts and attitudes. Indeed, this is what happens, as we will discover beginning in the next chapter when we assess the last oracle in the set.

There is much to be gained from discovering the underlying literary structure of any biblical passage. It gives us not only additional meanings that can only be found between the lines of the text, but also allows us, in some cases, to propose what the impact on the original audience might have been.

YEHUDA: THE FINAL “SET-UP”

Perhaps the biggest surprise here is that Yehuda is included at all in this series. Keep in mind that the prophet who is uttering all of these imprecations is decidedly from Yehuda and his anthemic refrain (v. 2) is all about God's voice roaring from Yerushalayim and that voice withering the lush north.

The inclusion of Yehuda — the substance of which is which is consistent with the contemporaneous prophecies of Yeshayahu (see e.g. ch. 1-3) — is meant to serve two nearly opposite rhetorical purposes. On the one hand, it sends a clear message that no one is exempt from accountability to God: not foreign nations who have no Abrahamic background and blood, not those nations who are distantly related, not even that segment of the nation that resides closest to the source of the divine voice. On the other hand, the mention of Yehuda here should lull the Samarian audience into a sense of false comfort that they are being spared, which makes the final oracle in this sequence all the more powerful. Contrasting the crimes of which Yehuda is accused with the detailed list of Yisrael's failings should profoundly shock the audience. Hearing the “short-form” punishment awaiting their neighbors (and brothers) to the south and then the

much longer and detailed punishment awaiting them should, in ideal circumstances, jolt them into a state of repentance. Alas and alack, the state of the audience is far from ideal and the prophet's words go where they usually went – in one ear...

THE TEXT

4 *Ko amar Hashem:* For the three sins of Yehuda, and for four I will not reverse it: because they have rejected God's Torah and have not kept His laws, and their lies have caused them to err, [those lies] after which their fathers had walked. **5** So will I send a fire upon Yehuda, and it shall devour the palaces of Yerushalayim.

Note that the punishment here is "lighter" than the earlier ones in three ways. First of all, it does not end with an exile. Secondly, the leaders (indeed, all people) are spared — or at least not explicitly mentioned as being killed. Thirdly, the signature "*Ani Hashem*" which concludes most of the oracles is not found here. The crime is quite clearly of a different nature and that cuts to the very different and more intimate relationship that God has with His people who reside in Yehuda.

And when the audience hears "*Al shelosha pishei Yisrael,*" what do they expect to hear next? Of what crimes will they be accused? What punishment awaits them? We'll allow that anticipation to gnaw at us for a week.

For Further Study:

Pivot-Chiasmus: Nathan Klaus, "Pivot Patterns in the Former Prophets," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 247 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

Edom: Elie Assis, "Identity in Conflict: The Struggle between Esau and Jacob, Edom and Israel" (*Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, 19; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).