



Research article

YHWH RESPONDS TO ISRAEL'S PRIDE (Amos 6:8–14)¹

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ABSTRACT

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In this short text (Amos 6:8–14), YHWH responds to the pride of Israel because of their military strength. Their recent military success and expansion of territory caused them to be proud and trust in their own strength rather than trusting in God. Therefore, YHWH warns that he will bring down their pride through military invasion from a foreign nation, which historically turned out to be the Assyrians. He warns through his servant Prophet Amos that Samaria, and hence, Israel will be devastated because of their pride. The text warns us Christians against our own pride in our “achievements” and invites us instead to put our trust in the Lord.

Keywords:

*pride, military,
strength/might/power,
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1. Introduction

Pride is one of the major sins that plague humans. The Bible is clear about YHWH's abhorrence of the proud (e.g., Isa 2:11–12). If we were to “succeed” in any aspect of our life, there is always a tendency to think that it is by our own strength and abilities that we have “achieved” it. Israel had regained some power during the reign of King Jeroboam II and expanded its territory. Then pride crept in. The Israelites believed that they had achieved this success because of their own military strength and failed to give glory to God and humble themselves before him. In this essay, we will see that in Amos 6:8–14 YHWH responds to Israel's pride and their trust in military strength by pronouncing judgment upon them at the hand of a foreign nation in the form of military invasion, thus bringing their pride to naught.

The text reminds us Christians to humble ourselves and acknowledge that all our “successes” come from the Lord. We also need to be aware of where our sense of security lies—in God or somewhere else such as our status and achievements. Christian ministers need to be careful to give glory to God when he uses us. We need to realize that our so-called achievements are not necessarily because of our abilities but because of his grace even though God does use our abilities. Pride has no place!

2. Text and Context

Amos 6:8–14 is a judgment oracle. It is a self-contained unit because (1) it starts with YHWH's oath to do something, (2) v. 8 and v. 14 form an inclusio with נְאֻם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת and (3) v. 8 and vv. 13–14 also form an inclusio with the theme of pride and destruction. The passage is a mixture of prose and poetry. Douglas Stuart sees vv. 8, 11–13 as poetry and the remainder prose.²

² Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, ed. John D. W. Watts and James W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary

The historical context of the passage is certainly the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 793–753 BCE) when Israel had regained the territories it had lost earlier, and thus, had expanded its boundaries (cf. 1:1). The disaster/judgment envisaged by Amos' prophecy is the invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE when the kingdom was devastated.

3. Critical Exposition

The passage begins with YHWH swearing by himself (lit. “by his soul/life”). YHWH, when he swears, does so only by himself because there is no greater power or authority by which he might swear. YHWH swearing by himself points to the inevitability of the pronounced judgment. Amos uses synonymous parallelism to emphasize that YHWH hates Israel's pride: “I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his citadels.” This means that the pride of Israel is its military power—the fortresses. The parallelism is syntactically chiasmic (אֶרְמְנָתָיו / גְּאוֹן יַעֲקֹב / מְתָאֵב אֲנָכִי / אֶרְמְנָתָיו). David Hubbard comments: “God uses the strongest possible language to express his wrath”³ The problem is that the Israelites were proud instead of being humble before YHWH and trusted in their citadels (military might) instead of trusting in YHWH. They believed that their own strength had acquired their military victories (more below). Therefore, YHWH says he will deliver the city and everything in it (lit. its fullness) into the enemy's hand. Throughout the book, Amos keeps the enemy unnamed. Historically the enemy would turn out to be the Assyrians. The city referred to is Samaria, it being the capital city of Israel. However, it is possible that עִיר here is a

(Waco: Word Books, 1987), 362.

³ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. D. J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1989), 195.



collective reference to each city in the kingdom, as Stuart has suggested.⁴

Verses 9–10 explain the scenario after the disaster of v. 8. C. C. Torrey states: “The conditions described in vi. 9, 10 are those of the pestilence that follows war; the inevitable sequel so often portrayed by the prophets.”⁵ If only ten people remain alive after the great disaster of v. 8, they too will die (v. 9); the destruction will be so complete that no one will be able to escape death. The mention of ten men is probably intentional because it comprises the smallest unit in Israel including the smallest fighting unit.⁶ Moreover, the verse may also be alluding to Amos 5:3.⁷ Billy Smith notes: “‘House’ may designate a royal house or a government building. The survivors could be a large extended family, members of the ruling class, or a unit of soldiers. In any case their survival would be short-lived.”⁸

Verse 10 presents vivid imagery of a hypothetical situation in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. People have died in large numbers, and the situation in the verse is the one in which a relative comes to one of the houses to carry the dead body. The relative is likely he who is responsible for performing funerary rites for the dead. In the process, he also asks someone in the rear or inner part of the house if anyone was still alive. The answer comes that none has survived. We do not know who the person in the rear of the house is; there are two possibilities, as Donald Gowan has noted. First, he is a survivor of the disaster. Second, he is one of those who

have come to search the house and has made it to the rear part of the house through the rubble.⁹

The major complexity of the verse is the *hapax legomenon* מְסַרְפוֹ. Many suggestions have been put forward regarding the proper reading of this word. Some translate it as “embalmer” (NEB) or “undertaker” (NASB) referring to the practice of embalming the corpse as part of the last rites (e.g., Gen 50:2–3). Shalom Paul believes this is the correct reading and finds support in the fact that the practice is attested in the Mishnaic period and in the NT (e.g., Matt 26:6–12; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1)¹⁰ but this is a much later period than that of Amos’ time. We cannot project a practice found in the NT and the Mishnaic period back to the 8th century BCE. The practice of embalming the dead body in the OT times is found only in the Egyptian context.¹¹

Some following the LXX emend סָרַף to פָּסַר meaning “urge” or “press upon” (cf. Gen 19:3, 9; 33:11).¹² This involves emending the word, and this should be done only as a last resort; as far as possible, no change should be made to the text itself, more importantly the consonants. Following other scholars, Hubbard sees the possibility of מְסַרְפוֹ (maternal uncle?) being synonymous to דִּדְלוֹ (paternal uncle) because it was the responsibility of the near relatives to properly handle the dead.¹³ This is an interesting suggestion and it keeps the text intact, but it is a conjecture that is highly dubious with no good

⁴ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 364.

⁵ C. C. Torrey, “Notes on Amos ii.7, vi.10, viii.3, ix.8–10,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 15 (1896): 153.

⁶ See Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 364.

⁷ This observation was brought to my notice by Nancy Eavenson.

⁸ Billy K. Smith, “Amos,” in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen et al., New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 122.

⁹ Donald E. Gowan, “The Book of Amos: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. David L. Petersen et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 402.

¹⁰ Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 215–16.

¹¹ Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 196.

¹² *Ibid.*, 196–97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 197.



foundation to stand upon. Paul says that “the existence of such a word has been contested.”¹⁴

Others emend it to שָׂרַף supposing שָׁ was misspelled as ס. However, it is possible that סָרַף was a variant of שָׂרַף.¹⁵ Paul states on this reading: “This is then related either to the custom of burning aromatic spices in honor of the dead or to the practice of burning corpses at the time of a plague in order to restrict the danger of infection.” However, he adds that the former is attested only for royalty and the latter is an “unproven assumption.”¹⁶ While Paul is correct in questioning the validity of the practice, burning the dead to avoid pestilence in case of mass deaths is quite plausible. However, the burning of the corpse could be due to an emergency, just as King Saul’s dead body was burned by the people of Jabesh-gilead in 1 Sam 31:12.¹⁷ This latter reason seems to be the case here (possibly coupled with the goal of avoiding the pestilence). Hence, the most likely scenario is that the MT is correct and סָרַף is a variant of שָׂרַף; as such, the body was being taken by the dead person’s relative to be burned because of the emergency in the midst of the chaos of vast disaster with a great number of corpses scattered everywhere.¹⁸ The word עֲצָמִים (“bones”) is a metonymy standing for the whole corpse.

¹⁴ Paul, *Amos*, 215.

¹⁵ So Andor Szabó, “Textual Problems in Amos and Hosea,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 506; see also Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1906; reprint 2006), 977.

¹⁶ Paul, *Amos*, 215.

¹⁷ See Szabó, “Textual Problems,” 506.

¹⁸ See also Robin Wakely, “שָׂרַף,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1285–86 for a brief coverage of some major views and their proponents on מָסַרְוּ.

According to Stuart, the word סָרַף is often used in the contexts of “the imminent arrival of Yahweh (Hab 2:20; Zech 2:17; and esp. Zeph 1:7, in which silence at the arrival of the Day of Yahweh is enjoined).”¹⁹ The word follows with the remark that YHWH’s name should not be mentioned. The concern here is not merely pronouncing the name because “YHWH” has been pronounced but most probably the issue is calling upon his name, i.e., petitioning. Hubbard writes that “the Lord himself stands behind the judgment with such ferocity that the survivors dare not mention his name.”²⁰ Fear has so gripped the people overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster that they dare not call upon his name lest further disaster strike them.²¹

Verse 11 says that YHWH will “smash the great house to bits and the small house to pieces.” Hubbard suggests that the expression great house and small house is a merism meaning all the houses, both big and small, which will be destroyed; again, a picture of complete destruction. He adds that the houses smashed into bits and pieces suggest earthquake rather than military invasion.²² However, even the military invasion can cause such destruction through the vandalization by the victorious army, and this is more likely the prediction here. The overall picture of the pericope suggests military invasion (esp. vv. 8, 14) as Stuart has noted, “The passage begins, ends, and concentrates on the well-deserved military defeat that Yahweh will impose upon Israel.”²³ The scenario in vv. 8–11 resembles the one predicted in Lev 26:31–33.

Andor Szabó calls v. 12 “[t]he most problematic verse in the book of Amos”²⁴ because the phrase

¹⁹ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 364.

²⁰ Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 196.

²¹ See *ibid.*, 197.

²² *Ibid.*, 198.

²³ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 362.

²⁴ Szabó, “Textual Problems,” 506.



אִם-יִחְרוֹשׁ בַּבְּקָרִים is difficult. The phrase, as it stands, reads “Does one plow with the cattle/oxen?” and the answer to the question is an obvious “Yes.” But this makes no sense in the context, particularly in light of the first question, “Do horses run on the rock?” The answer here would be “No.” One expects the second question to be in line with the first, which is also required by the remainder of the verse. Thus, various suggestions have been put forward for the reading of this phrase. One suggestion involves dividing בַּבְּקָרִים into two words without changing the consonants, viz., בַּבְּקָר יָם.²⁵ The reading then will be, “Does one plow the sea with oxen?” (e.g., NRSV). This is a likely option; it allows for the absurdity of the first question to continue unambiguously in the second, but it involves emendation to the MT, albeit a minor one. Regarding this emendation, Szabó comments: “The metaphor is possible but grotesque.”²⁶ He thus puts forward another suggestion, that of exchanging the positions of ב and ק in the word, i.e., בַּבְּקָרִים to be read בַּקְבָּרִים. The translation would then be “Does one plough among/upon tombs?” Szabó believes that the letters likely changed their positions either in the copying of the text or while the text underwent change to the use of square Aramean script. The change could also be “due to the fact that even the idea of disturbance of tombs was shocking.” In addition, Szabó says that the *bet* and *qof* looked similar in the Aramean script.²⁷ Although Szabó’s suggestion is intriguing, it is highly unlikely that such a change could have happened.

Alan Cooper has a radical suggestion. He sees בַּבְּקָרִים as the name of a place in Edom captured by King Amaziah of Judah (2 Kgs 14:7; 2 Chron 25:12), which later likely came under Israel

through the efforts of King Joash. And with some amendment to בַּבְּקָרִים, he translates the second phrase, “Does a wild ox plow in the Valley?” Here the “Valley” refers to the place in Lebanon known as Beqa’. Thus Sela and Beqa’ are equivalent to the wadi of the Arabah and Leboto-Hamath respectively, which were the southern and northern boundaries of Israel at the time of Jeroboam II.²⁸ Drawing from Eliezer de Beaugency, Cooper believes that the horses and oxen in the verse represent Israelite army.²⁹ The overall suggestion, to say the least, is quite far-fetched.

The simplest, and I reckon the best, solution to the problem is to keep the text unchanged and to see here a gapping (ellipsis) of the object בַּבְּקָרִים and supply it to the second phrase as well. The translation would then be “Does one plow *there* with the cattle/oxen?”—*there* in this case refers to בַּבְּקָרִים (“upon the rock”). This reading makes perfect sense without emending the text and also maintains the absurdity of the first question. The message of v. 12a is: “Israel’s unrighteous life was as unnatural as horses running on rock or a plowman attempting to plow a rock.”³⁰ The aim of both the questions is to get the audience to the position of seeing that the actions mentioned from the animal life are absolutely absurd, and then to strike them with the mention of their even greater absurdity—their intentional corruption of justice and righteousness (cf. 5:7). Justice, which is supposed to be “life-giving,” has been turned into “death-dealing” poison for the poor, and the ‘fruit of righteousness’ supposed to be “sweetly nurturing” has been turned into bitter-tasting

²⁵ See Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 198; Paul, *Amos*, 218.

²⁶ Szabó, “Textual Problems,” 506.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 506–07.

²⁸ Alan Cooper, “The Absurdity of Amos 6:12a,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107.4 (1988): 726–27. See v. 14 and comments below.

²⁹ Cooper, “The Absurdity,” 726.

³⁰ Carl G. Howie, “Expressly for Our Time: The Theology of Amos,” *Interpretation* 13.3 (1959): 282.



wormwood.³¹ Such actions are absolutely absurd and unacceptable in YHWH's sight.

Verse 13 is rich in pun and sarcasm involving the two place-names—Lo-debar and Karnaim. לֹא דְבָר seems intentionally misspelled to mean “nothing”; the place is otherwise spelled דְּבָר (2 Sam 17:27), לוֹ דְּבָר (2 Sam 9:4–5), or maybe לְדְבָר (Josh 13:26). The Israelites rejoiced over “nothing.” The choice of Karnaim also seems an intentional sarcasm as the word means horns; and horns symbolize strength.³² The issue here is that the Israelites were proud of their military strength. They rejoiced over their victories thinking that the victories were the result of their own might. They failed to humble themselves before God and trusted in their own military might rather than in YHWH. This pride and trust-in-self would be undone by YHWH (v. 14). Verse 13 presupposes Jeroboam II's military actions (cf. 2 Kgs 14:25–28); he had recently reconquered the two cities among others. Lo-debar was located “about three miles east of the Jordan and twelve miles south of the Sea of Galilee” and Karnaim was located “over halfway from Samaria to Damascus.”³³

Verse 14 responds to the pride of Israel in that YHWH will raise a nation against Israel that will oppress them from Lebo-Hamath to Wadi of the

Arabah. This means the pride of Israel in their military strength will be crushed by means of an enemy nation's army. Jeroboam II's territory has been described as being from Lebo-Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah (2 Kgs 14:25; cf. 1 Kgs 8:65). Lebo-Hamath “is located in northern Lebanon, south of Kadesh”³⁴ while Wadi of the Arabah marked the southern end of the Dead Sea.³⁵ More significant is the fact that Lebo-Hamath and Wadi of the Arabah were the northernmost and southernmost boundaries of Israel at the time.³⁶ Thus, the picture is again of complete destruction; no territory will be spared. Israel's military strength will be crumbled and their pride crushed. The somewhat awkward position of “the utterance of YHWH, God of hosts” is a rhetorical device in that it builds suspense, heightens tension, and creates fear in the hearers.³⁷ Moreover, the “God of hosts” is a military language, which is apt in a war-like context.

4. Amos 6:8–14 for Today

Pride and trust in one's own abilities while he/she is “successful” is not a new temptation but it is so subtle that they can fall into the trap if not careful. This is more so for ministers who have “made it big,” e.g., mega-churches, big ministries, national and/or international fame, etc. The temptation is there to think that they have “achieved” it because of their own charisma, abilities, strength, and forget that God is the one who uses them in spite of their weaknesses. Pride gets a foothold and they begin trusting in themselves without realizing the need for God. Often they forget the days of humble beginnings when they truly trusted in the Lord.

Amos 6:8–14 cautions us against such tendency by reminding us through the life of Israel that we

³¹ Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 198–99.

³² On the names of these two places, see Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 199; Jeffrey Niehaus, “Amos,” *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 446–47; Smith, “Amos,” 123.

³³ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 365. Lo-debar, according to Paul, “is generally identified with Tell ‘el-Hammeh, north of the Jabbok River in the Ammonite territory of the northern part of Gilead”; and Karnaim “is located in central Bashan, in Aramean territory. It is identified with Sheikh es-Sa‘ad on a northern tributary of the middle Yarmuk River, some four kilometers north of Tell ‘Astarah, biblical Ashtaroth” (Paul, *Amos*, 219).

³⁴ Paul, *Amos*, 220.

³⁵ Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 365.

³⁶ See Paul, *Amos*, 220; Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 365; Smith, “Amos,” 123.

³⁷ See Paul, *Amos*, 220.



need to acknowledge God in all our “achievements.” We need to remain humble before God and give him the glory in everything. In addition, we have to watch as to where our sense of security lies. The Israelites felt secure because of their military might and their fortresses. Do we feel secure in the Lord, our true fortress, or in our own ministry, education, charisma, position, influence, riches, and the like?

5. Conclusion

Amos 6:8–14 speaks of a time when Israel was relatively powerful under Jeroboam II and had regained much of the territory that it had lost earlier. In the midst of their “success,” the Israelites were proud and put their confidence in military might and the fortresses without acknowledging YHWH. YHWH responded by announcing that he would send an enemy that would crush Israel and its strength. While Amos kept the enemy anonymous, historically it turned out to be the Assyrians who destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. The passage cautions us even today that we should watch against pride and trust-in-self, especially when we “succeed.” We should continually remember that it is YHWH, who by his grace, gives us all that we may call success or achievement. He should receive all the glory; and we should always humble ourselves before him and find our security in him alone. May the Lord help us!

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