CLARIFYING
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BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

AMBIGUITIES IN AMOS'
RÉSUMÉ
AMOS 1:1 AND 7:14

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XXIV

AMBIGUITIES IN AMOS' RÉSUMÉ
AMOS 1:1 AND 7:14

INTRODUCTION

Amos 1:1

הָיָה בַנֹּקְדִים מִתְּקוֹעַ

[Amos] was among the ranchers from Tekoa

οἳ ἐγένοντο ἐν νακκαριμ ἐκ Θεκουε

[the words of Amos]

which occurred in *nakkarim* from Tekoa

Amos 7:14

לֹא־נָבִיא אָנֹכִי וְלֹא בֶן־נָבִיא אָנֹכִי

I (am/was) not a prophet and I (am/was) not the son of a prophet

οὐκ ἤμην προφήτης ἐγὼ οὐδὲ υἱὸς προφήτου

I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet

בּוֹקֵר אָנֹכִי וּבוֹלֵס שִׁקְמִים

I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamores

ἀλλ᾽ ἢ αἰπόλος ἤμην καὶ κνίζων συκάμινα

but I am a goat herder and a scrapper of sycamores

The résumé of Amos is limited to the above verses, which together in Hebrew consists of fourteen words—excluding prepositions and conjunctions—seven of which are repeated words. Only six of these words are relatively unambiguous: the pronoun אנכי "I" (three times), the verb היה "he was,"[1]

and the noun נביא "prophet" (twice). The other eight words are, to varying degrees, ambiguous and warrant continued investigation. The ambiguities are here examined in sequence.

AMBIGUITY OF נֹקְדִים "RANCHERS"

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference is the transliterated νακκαριμ in the Septuagint of 1:1 for the MT נֹקְדִים "ranchers," which was obviously read as נַקְרִים and treated as a name or a noun unrelated to the stem נָקַר "to bore, to pick, to dig" (BDB: 669); otherwise one would have expected a translation rather than a transliteration.[2] Were the נֹקְרִים original it could be a very appropriate assessment of Amos' character—from Amaziah's point of view—given the semantic range of the Arabic cognate نقر (*naqara*) which includes "to offend, vex, hurt, insult, revile, malign, and defame," as well as "to investigate, to examine" (Lane 1893: 2838; Wehr 1979: 1161). However, Amos' reference to צֹאן "flock" in 7:15 mitigates against reading נֹקְרִים (with the Septuagint's νακκαριμ) instead of the MT נֹקְדִים.

However, there may be more to נֹקְדִים than first meets the eye. It is not a simple synonym of the more general רעה "to pasture, tend, graze." In Arabic نقد (*naqd*) is used for "a kind of sheep of ugly form . . . having short legs and ugly faces" (Lane 1893: 2836) and "a kind of sheep with very abundant wool" (BDB: 667). In I Kings 14:3, it is noted that מֵישַׁע מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב הָיָה נֹקֵד "Mesha king of Moab was a נֹקֵד" and "he had to deliver annually to the king of Israel 100,000 lambs, and the wool of a hundred thousand rams."[3]

In light of Mesha's being a נֹקֵד on a grand scale, Anderson and Freedman (1989: 188) admitted that נֹקֵד ". . . can designate a wealthy pastoralist, which has made some people wonder whether Amos was a sheep owner and not merely a tender of flocks, as the language of 7:14 suggests." They concluded, however, "Amos lived in a different country, in a different century, and in differing economic circumstances from Mesha, so similarity need only be slight." But there may be more than a hint of wealth with נֹקֵד since نقد (*naqada*) also means "he examined money, he separated the bad from the good, he paid the price in cash or ready money"(Lane 1893: 2836; Wehr 1979: 1160).

Amos as a נֹקֵד may have been an *affluent* rancher once it is realized that נֹקֵד has multiple levels of meaning. The Arabic نقد (*naqada*) permits even a third level of meaning, namely, "to examine critically, to criticize, to call to account, to find fault, to show up the shortcomings" (Wehr 1979: 1160–1161). As an *affluent rancher* (נקד) Amos may well have had enough *money* (נקד) to be invited as the speaker at Amaziah's royal sanctuary where, instead of offering *cash* (נקד) he proffered devastating *criticism* (נקד), and, not surprisingly, he insulted and offended (נקד = Septuagint νακ-καριμ) his audience.

AMBIGUITY ABOUT תְּקוֹעַ

There is no uncertainty about the location of תְּקוֹעַ Tekoa, identified with *Ḥirbet Tequᶜa* ten miles south of Jerusalem. It was "exactly on the border between the cultivated land to the west and steppe, the 'wilderness of Judah,' to the east" (Wolff 1977: 123). However, the derivation of the name has been problematic since any connection with תָּקַע "to thrust (a

weapon), to blow (a horn), to clap (the hands)" and תָּקוֹעַ "a wind instrument, horn" (BDB: 1075) seems dubious. But if the תְ of תְּקוֹעַ is only a prefix attached to the stem קוע — like רום and תְּרוּמָה —the Arabic cognate قاع/قوع ($qw^c / q\hat{a}^c$) "an even place, plain or level land that produces nothing"(Lane 1893: 2994; Wehr 1979: 932) is very suggestive. If this is the derivation of Tekoa, it is ironic that one of the Israel's greatest prophets came from a town which, by name, was "a place that produced nothing."

AMBIGUITY OF לא

One of the most surprising statements in prophetic literature is Amos' declaration לֹא־נָבִיא אָנֹכִי, literally, "not a prophet I (am)."[4] Lacking a verb, the tense of the phrase is ambiguous, consequently the debate whether Amos intended to say, (1) "(formerly) I was not a prophet," implying that he acknowledged at that moment though he was *now* a prophet, or (2) "I am not (now) a prophet, implying he never was and never intended to be a prophet.

Even if a temporal modifier like עד היום הזה "until this day" or מן היום הזה "from this day" had been used, ambiguity would remain since the לא may not have been the negative particle לֹא "not" but the emphatic particle לֻא "indeed, surely, verily." Richardson (1966: 89) noted: "[Amos] not only spoke well of the נְבִיאִם but implied that he was one of them (3 8). Moreover he twice used the verb נבא to characterize his own ministry (3 8; 7 15)." Following Richardson's

proposal, the לֹא־נָבִיא אָנֹכִי should be revocalized and read as לֻא נָבִיא אָנֹכִי "Indeed, I am a prophet!"[5]

Richardson rightly read the לֹא of לֹא בֶן־נָבִיא as the negative particle, reconstructing paronomasia with לֻא . . . לֹא rather than simple repetition of לֹא . . . לֹא. A good analogy of Amos' affirmation that he was indeed a *prophet* but not of the *corps of prophets* can be found with Micaiah ben Imlah and his four hundred colleagues (I Kings 22:6–33). Jehoshaphat inquired, הַאֵין פֹּה נָבִיא לַיהוָה עוֹד "Is there not here another prophet for Yahweh?" King Jehoshaphat acknowledged the *corps* of prophets (בְּנֵי־נְבִיאִים),[6] but he was looking for someone outside the *corps*. Amos, like Micaiah, was *surely* (לֻא) a prophet, but just as surely Amos and Micaiah were *not* (לֹא) members of the *corps*.[7]

In terms of today's clerical terminology Amos was a lay preacher who was not among the ordained and credentialed clergy. As an independent lay preacher he was (1) free to speak his mind—not the institutional line—and (2) free to be bi-vocational. As with Amos' prophetic vocation, there were also ambiguities concerning his other jobs.

AMBIGUITY OF בּוֹקֵר

The meaning of בּוֹקֵר "herdsman" has been problematic for the Septuagint reads αἰπόλος "goatherd," whereas other Greek texts have βουκόλος "[cattle] herdsman." Wolff (1977: 306) identified בּוֹקֵר (which occurs only in this passage) "as a substantized participle, denominative from בָּקָר, 'cattle'." As such one would expect Amos to have been involved with cows and bulls rather than with a צֹאן of sheep

and goats. Andersen and Freedman (1989: 778) settled for
"cattleman," suggesting "that Amos was a kind of jack-of-all-
trades: cowboy, shepherd, seasonal farm worker; *but not a
prophet*" (italics mine). Wolff (1977: 306) opted for a "live-
stock breeder." The Arabic cognate بقار (*baqqâr*) is equally
ambiguous since it can mean "cowhand, cowboy" as well as
"an owner or possessor of oxen, bulls, cows" (Lane 1863:
234; Wehr 1979: 84).

The verb בָּקַר "to inquire, to seek" (BDB: 183) is well
attested in Hebrew in the *Piᶜel*, consequently no one has
proposed to read בּוֹקֵר as a *Qal* participle "examiner, inves-
tigator." However, the Arabic بقر (*baqara*) in form I (= *Qal*)
is clearly attested meaning "he examined, or inspected" and
"he inquired, he searched" (Lane 1863: 233). In light of this,
בּוֹקֵר could be the *Qal* participle "inquirer," rather than the
singular example of the denominative meaning "cattleman."
In view of the Septuagint νακκαριμ (= נֹקְרִים "investigators,
examiners") in 1:1, the possibility that בּוֹקֵר means "exam-
iner" cannot be discounted—not to mention that נוֹקֵד can
also mean "an examiner (of money)." If Amos was an
"examiner" the object of his investigation will be hidden in
the ambiguities in the last two words of his résumé.

AMBIGUITY OF בּוֹלֵס

Just as בּוֹקֵר is the only example in the Hebrew Bible of a
denominative from בָּקָר "cattle" becoming the participle
"cattleman," בּוֹלֵס is the only example of a denominative
from the Arabic cognate بلس (*balas*) "fig" meaning "a tender
of figs" (Harper 1905: 174). The Targum omitted בּוֹלֵס but

it noted that the sycamores were in the Shephelah, not in the highlands of Tekoa. The Septuagint translated בּוֹלֵס as κνίζων "scraping," and Theodotian rendered it as χαράσσων "marking." Wright (1976: 368) has well summarized the varied evidence, ancient and modern, about what Amos did to the Shephelah figs, concluding "one of the tasks of Amos was to nip the sycamore fruit in order to hasten ripening. . . .[or] the concern of Amos with the sycamore was in providing fodder for those [animals] in his charge."

Because the Arabic س (*s*) regularly appears in Hebrew as a שׂ rather than שׁ, the original spelling of בּוֹלֵס may have been בולשׂ. This seems to have been the reading of Aquila who translated בּוֹלֵס as ἔρευνον "he examined," as though this verb was from בָּלַשׁ "to inquire" (Jastrow 1903: 175, BDB: 119, n. pr. בַּלְשָׁן "inquirer" [?]). Because Aquila is renowned for extreme literalisms, בולשׂ warrants serious attention. The interchange in Hebrew of שׂ and ס is well attested, as with (1) סוּג or שׂוּג "to backslide" and "to fence about" (2) סוּר or שׂוּר (Hosea 9:12) "to turn aside," and (3) סַפַּחַת "scab" but שָׂפַח "to cause a scab" (BDB, 705). Aquila's translation suggests that the *Vorlage* was בולשׂ (= בּוֹלֵשׂ "searcher") which was *misread* as בּוֹלֵשׁ and changed to בּוֹלֵס when שׁקמים was read as "sycamores." If בולשׂ was originally in the text and בּוֹלֵס was secondary, the question arises, "Did Amos search for sycamores trees or really have anything to do with figs?" This question leads to the final ambiguity in Amos' résumé

AMBIGUITY OF שקמים

There is more than one way to read and interpret שקמים. It can obviously be vocalized שִׁקְמִים "sycamores" as traditionally understood." But it can also be pointed as שֶׁקָמִים and read as the relative particle שֶׁ affixed to the plural participle of קוּם. The relative שֶׁ followed by a participle of קוּם is attested in Jud 5:7, עד שקמתי דבורה "until the rising of Deborah." (שֶׁ + קמת + י [the *hireq compaginis*, GKC 90ᵐ]). Instead of speaking of *tending* cattle and *searching* for sycamores, Amos may have stated: בּוֹקֵר אָנֹכִי וּבוֹלֵשׁ שֶׁקָמִים "I am an inquirer and an investigator of what are the happenings."[8] (The participle suggests that the events under investigation were current events.) Had Amos simply said אָנֹכִי דוֹרֵשׁ אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יְהְיֶה "I am investigating what will come to pass" rather than אָנֹכִי בוֹלֵשׁ שֶׁקָמִים, the "figs" and "sycamores" would never have made it into his résumé.

CONCLUSION

Ambiguities can seldom be resolved into certainties, but ambiguities addressed can provide probabilities. Concerning Amos' résumé, the reference to צאן in 7:15 ("the Lord took me from following the *flock*") corroborates the tradition that Amos was a נוֹקֵד "rancher" of sheep/goats (probably on a grand scale like Mesha of Moab) and was successful enough to have time, energy, and finances for an *avocation* as well as a *vocation*. While tradition asserts that Amos' second vocation was a lowly job working with figs and fodder, the consonantal Hebrew text suggests—upon reading שׁ for ס—that Amos' other occupation (or preoccupation) was that of a

researcher and an examiner of what was happening in his time.

In support of this untraditional interpretation of 7:14, one can appeal not only to cognates and the semantic range of all the lexemes, but also to Amos' oracles themselves which are as erudite as they are artistic. Amos demonstrated a breadth of knowledge which came as much by education as from direct revelation. His inquiries may have been the by-product of his success as a rancher, which accorded him leisure for an avocation of search and study. Far from being a jack-of-all-trades, Amos may well have been a master of two: ranching and research. Personal wealth from ranching may have been the "credential" which opened the doors of the royal chapel to him as a prophet; and his personal integrity in declaring the truth he learned may have closed those same doors against him. Being a בּוֹלֵשׁ "searcher" and a בּוֹקֵר "researcher" was preparation for Amos's becoming a prophet. His *avocation* became primary, culminating in a career change from *rancher* to *prophet*.

NOTES

1. The Septuagint reads the plural ἐγένοντο as though the Hebrew was היו rather than היה, with the initial דִּבְרֵי as the subject rather than עָמוֹס.

2. Theodotian also had difficulty with נֹקְדִים and simply transliterated it as νωκεδείμ (Hatch and Redpath 2: 956; Wolff: 116, citing Jerome's commentary, as *nocedim*).

3. The Septuagint reads καὶ Μωσα βασιλεὺς Μωαβ ἦν νωκηδ "and Mesha, king of Moab was a *nôqēd*," having only a transliteration of the Hebrew נוקד.

4. It should also be noted that the Arabic cognates of נבא / נביא
are: (1) نبيء (*nabîʾ*) or نبى (*nabî*) "a prophet who acquaints or
informs mankind, or who is aquainted or informed, respecting God
and things unseen" (Lane 2752–2753); or (2) نبو (*nabû*) / نبا (*nabâ*)
"to be in conflict, to irk, to offend"; or (3) نبه (*nabih*) "noble,
famous, distinguished, perspicacious," with نبا (*nabaʾ*) meaning
"news, information, intelligence, report" (Wehr 1100, 1104–1105).
On the interchange of א and ה, see GKC §19ᵃ.

5. Wolff (1977: 306) noted Richardson's proposal but followed
tradition. Andersen and Freedman (1989: 777) made no reference
to Richardson's proposal; but Driver's article (1955: 91–92) is
noted, though not discussed. Driver observed that "the simple *lōʾ*
'not' is used with interrogative force, which easily becomes as-
severative, strange as this may seem . . ." The literature on the
emphatic ל and לא continues to grow. In addition to references
cited by Richardson, note McDaniel (1968) 206–208; Dahood
(1975): 341–342); Whitley (1975: 202–204; and Huehnergard
(1983) 569–593, especially 591. See also Chapter XV, 129–130,
above.

6. Ackroyd (1956: 94) has well summarized the options on the
ambiguous בֶּן־נָבִיא,

> Either it means 'I belong to a prophetic family' where the
> word family may be equivalent to 'guild' or 'profession,'
> just as in the expression 'sons of the prophets' we have in
> such associations in Israel (cf. also I S 10⁵). Or it means
> 'I have the quality which belongs to a prophet,' just as
> בֶּן־חַיִל means 'a man who has the quality of חַיִל' and
> the בְּנֵי־אֱלֹהִים are 'beings which have the quality of
> אֱלֹהִים.'

7. See also Wolff (1979) 313, especially the final paragraph of his
excursus on "The Vocation of Amos," where he stated "Amos

establishes a sharp contrast . . . between a prophet by virtue of office . . . a salaried cult official and his own independent activity sanctioned by Yahweh alone."

8. For the semantic range of קוּם, see See BDB: 877 and Wehr 1979: 934–938, where the following definitions are included, "to come to pass, take place, be on-going; to happen."