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Prophets In Context (MB – 631)
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Prophetic Text in Contexts – Amos 8:4-8

Intro

This paper will present Amos 8:4-8 in three contexts: the Covenant and its enforcement by the prophets (Covenantal Context), surrounding religions and cultures (Cultural Context) and social-economic conditions (Socio-Economic Context).

The selection boundary is uncommon. Some commentaries go from v. 1-14 and others from v. 4-10.¹ This selection is based on a 3-part division of chapter 8 – vision (1-3), accusations (4-8) and warning of judgment (9-14). Verses 9, 11 and 13 begin with 'in that day', 'the days are coming' and 'in that day' respectively, constituting the subsequent warning implied in v. 7-8.

Covenantal Context

The Covenant between God and His people was accompanied by a covenant charter document. The books and Law of Moses formed this authoritative charter, to which the people were held by the prophets.²

The prophets saw themselves as enforcing the covenant, and in some way carrying on the tradition of Moses.³ Likewise, Amos – in 'covenant lawsuit' style – accuses the people of breaking the covenant charter. He appeals to Moses' commands concerning Sabbath observance and treatment of the poor.⁴ Therefore, we see Amos in covenantal context, acting as a 'prophet like Moses' in enforcing the foundational covenant charter.

Cultural Context

The prophets were one of several groups in the ANE that had covenant charters⁵ to adhere to, and there are quite striking similarities

1 E.g., 1-14 – NIV Application Commentary (Smith, 2001) & 4-10 – The New Interpreters Bible Commentary (Gowan, 1996)

2 Moses himself was viewed as a prophet (Deut. 18:15-22) and is often viewed as the greatest prophet of all (based on Deut. 34:10).

3 Overholt – 'Prophets' (Ed. Freedman, 2000)

4 Likely echoing Exodus 23:6-12

5 See the codes of Hammurabi, Ur-Nammu, Sumeria, Hittite, Assyria (Matthews & Benjamin, 1991)

between some of these codes.

Amos' accusation of the grain trade in v. 5-6 closely mirror Article 94 from The Code of Hammurabi: "*If bankers use a light scale to measure the grain or the silver that they lend and a heavy scale to measure the grain or the silver that they collect, then they shall forfeit their investment.*"⁶ Though the Hammurabi code is from 1700's BC, it is more than likely that the code was still relevant in the Babylon of Amos' time.

Richard Cripps cites two references from 'The Teaching of Amenophis' that are equally striking: "*Tamper not with the scales, nor falsify the kite-weights, Nor diminish the fractions of the corn-measure.*" and, "*Fashion not for thyself deficient kite-weights.*"⁷

Amos is seen, in Cultural Context, alongside other religious cultures striving often for the same kind of social justice.

Socio-Economic Context

The social and business world was characterised by what has been called a 'Tributary Mode of Production'. Payments to the King and Temple for struggling farmers, especially in times of low production.⁸

Increased taxes or injustice in the markets made a hard situation impossible. Kings forced these farmers to pay for every expense; bureaucracy, building projects and luxurious living – causing them to become poorer and poorer, often having to give family land to relieve debt.⁹

This was the world of kings and taxes, farmers and crops – and prophets and judgment. We see Amos then, in socio-economic context, rebuking the abuse of these farmers.

Conclusion

Awareness of these and other contexts, helps us to see God's word acting in real time and space, giving us a fuller appreciation of the heart of God.

6 Matthews & Benjamin, 1991

7 Cripps, 1955, p. 244 footnotes

8 Bulkeley, *Hypertext Bible – Amos*. <http://hypertextbible.org/amos/amos/index.htm>)

9 Yee, 1987 (referencing Gottwald, 1993; and others)

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