The Prophetic Movement in Ancient Israel
with a case study of the Book of Amos in the Bible

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And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go prophesy to my people Israel’. “Now therefore hear the word of the Lord...”

Amos 7:15-16a, The Bible

Among the Old Testament prophets, Amos’ call to prophecy was not the first, nor the last. Through the ancient prophets of Israel, God revealed His Word “in history and for history”, in fact, the Lord revealed history. The Lord of History chose his prophets from “such contrasting personalities as the ecstatic dervish and the counselor of kings; the clairvoyant seer and the moral spokesman; Amos the shepherd and Ezekiel the priest; the rough-hewn Elijah and the sophisticated Isaiah; the iconoclastic Jeremiah and the domestically inclined Hosea”. But the prophet was there - the conscience of Israel.

Amos is said to have lived around the middle of the eighth century B.C., a century and a half after Solomon and the schism between the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He was a witness to the sins of the Kingdom of Israel before its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

Before we proceed any further in exploring the prophetic movement in Israel, we need to define a framework and methodology to approach this very central institution of ancient Israel. The foundation of Islam lies in its very basic and fundamental ‘testimony’ that “There is no divinity other than Allāh (the only Divinity), and Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is His Prophet (Messenger)”. The second part of this testimony which bears witness to the prophethood of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is the essence of the belief in the Message which he brings, i.e. the Qur’ān, and a verification of the truth of the latter. It also enshrines the key doctrine of God’s revelation in history through a long series of prophets and messengers from Adam (a.s.) to Muḥammad (peace be upon him), the last of them all. It testifies to the sending of other Books prior to the
Qur’ān, such as the Torah (Tawrāt) of Moses or Mūsā (a.s.), the Psalms (Zabūr) of David or Dā‘ūd (a.s.), and the Gospel (Injīl) of Jesus or ‘Īsá b. Maryam (a.s.). In this manner, God intervenes in history time and again out of His Mercy and Benevolence for the disobedient man, and calls him to His Path, and delivers to him the Guidance. In this process of history, the message of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is intrinsically intertwined in the heritage it claims from ancient Israel and the Christian revolution. Keeping this background in view, it becomes very interesting to look at the divergence and similarity of the concept of prophethood in the Old Testament, which is the second of the two central themes in Islam.

It is not our intention, however, to present a comparative study of this doctrine in these two faiths. We shall concern ourselves mainly with the view presented in ancient Israel, using the prophet Amos as an example. Besides, although the interest in pursuing this subject has a close connection with our own beliefs, yet we shall try to analyze it on a phenomenological plane without any bias whatsoever. Our goal here is academic and not theological.

A few salient points of commonality and divergence would be worth mentioning here though. The usage of the term prophet often gives the mistaken impression that the connotation of the word in the two traditions is the same. This is far from being the case. Whereas in the Islamic framework the prophet is the message-bearer of God, a wanner, a bringer of good tidings for the righteous, a guide, and an example par excellence for mankind to follow and imitate, the Old Testament prophet could perform some of these functions or be a seer, an ‘ecstatic dervish’ moving in guilds of prophets, a moral spokesman, a counselor of kings, etc.

The function of the Old Testament prophet is not well defined, and varies from prophet to prophet. The great Biblical personalities who existed prior to Moses (a.s.) are regarded in the Old Testament as the Israelite Patriarchs in order to establish the purity of lineage. The Muslim tradition considers these “Patriarchs” like Abraham (a.s.), Isaac (a.s.), Jacob (a.s.), Joseph (a.s.) and others to be prophets. The office of prophethood seems to be absent during the period of the Patriarchs in the Old Testament. However, the Patriarchs do communicate with God directly and indirectly on even petty issues.

Unlike the Islamic belief, the Patriarchs and Prophets are also capable of sin in the Old Testament. Thus, the Bible accuses these Patriarchs of lying, adultery, incest, prostitution, deception, etc. The Islamic belief is unequivocal about the infallibility, innocence and sinless
character of its prophets from Adam (a.s.) to Muhammad (peace be upon him). The most that the Islamic view will concede is a mistake in judgment on minor issues. However, it does not accept that a prophet can sin. These prophets are considered to be the examples par excellence so that their communities and followers can emulate them.

There are innumerable other points of commonality and difference between the Old Testament and the Islamic view of prophethood which would require a dissertation in its own right to be able to do justice.

The Historical Setting
The Old Testament begins its story with Adam (a.s.) and ends around the advent of Jesus (a.s.). Biblical scholars and archaeologists have spent centuries trying to establish the historicity of the Biblical stories and personalities. Looking at the historical and archeological sources, modern scholarship has been unable to ascertain the veracity of the Old Testament stories with any real certainty. In particular, the period before *circa* 1000 B.C. i.e. before the beginning of the Davidic kingdom lies in oblivion. However, based on whatever they could surmise through Old Testament sources and archeology, Biblical scholars have estimated an approximate chronology for events prior to this age. Following is the proposed chronology of events from the age of Moses (a.s.) (Mūsā) to the end of the Kingdom of Judah.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. 1290 B.C.</td>
<td>The Exodus of Moses (a.s.) and the Israelites from Egypt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1290-1250 B.C.</td>
<td>Israelites wander in the wilderness of Sinai.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 1250-1200 B.C.</td>
<td>Conquest and settlement of Canaan (Palestine) under the leadership of Joshua (a.s.) (Yūsha').</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1200-1020 B.C.</td>
<td>Age of Amphictyony (Confederacy of the 12 tribes of Israel) in Canaan. Philistines settle along the southern coast of Palestine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1020-1000 B.C.</td>
<td>Saul (Tālūt) is King of the united Kingdom of Israel anointed upon the plea of the prophet Samuel (Shamu‘ayl) to Yahweh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 961-922 B.C.</td>
<td>Reign of Solomon (a.s.) (Sulayman) and construction of the Temple of Solomon (a.s.) (<em>Haykal Sulaymān</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>922 B.C.</td>
<td>Schism. The kingdom is split into two - 1) the northern kingdom known as Israel consisting of 10 of the 12</td>
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tribes (excluding Judah and Benjamin) and territories north of Jerusalem, and 2) the southern kingdom known as Judah having its capital at Jerusalem.

922-722 B.C. Northern Kingdom of Israel ruled by 19 different monarchs belonging to 9 different dynasties. The southern kingdom of Judah ruled by 11 monarchs belonging to the house of David (Da‘ūd). Important prophets of his period mentioned in the Old Testament are Elijah (a.s.) (Ilyās), Micaiah, Elisha (a.s.) (Al-Yasa‘), Amos (c.750 B.C.), Hosea (c.745-735 B.C.), Isaiah (c.742-701 B.C.), and Micah (c.730-701 B.C.).

722 B.C. The northern kingdom of Israel, also known as Samaria, falls to the invading armies of Assyria under Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.). The ten tribes of Israel inhabiting the land are taken away by the Assyrians, and disappear from the pages of history. These tribes are henceforth referred to as the "ten lost tribes of Israel".

722-587 B.C. The Kingdom of Judah continues with a further line of 8 kings. Important prophets of this period are Zephaniah (c.630-627 B.C.), Nahum (c.612 B.C.), Habakkuk (c.627-598 B.C.) and Jeremiah (c.627-587 B.C.).

587 B.C. Jerusalem is conquered by Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon. The Jews are deported and exiled to Babylon and the Temple of Solomon is destroyed.

587-538 B.C. The Exile in Babylon. In 538 B.C., Cyrus issues an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Prophets of this period are Ezekiel (c.592-570 B.C.) and Deutero-Isaiah (c.540 B.C.).

539 B.C. Cyrus of Persia takes Babylon and issues edict the following year (538) allowing Jews to return to Judea (Palestine).

520-515 B.C. Temple is rebuilt under Zerubbabel.

We have enumerated the above chronology for the benefit of the Muslim readers so that they may be able to place the various prophets and personalities not mentioned in the Qur’ān within a historical framework. At the same time we have given the Arabic equivalents of those prophets and kings that have been identified within parentheses.
Another important consideration for Biblical Studies is the authorship of the various books in the Bible and their historicity. We shall very briefly summarize the findings of the Biblical scholars in this regard. The Bible comprises of two parts: The Old Testament which is the record of the ancestry and story of the Israelites before Jesus, and the New Testament which is the story of Jesus, his disciples and his times. The Old Testament is further divided into three major classifications. These are the Pentateuch or Torah (comprising the first five books of Moses), the Nebi'im or the Prophets comprising 21 books, and the Kethubim or the Writings comprising 13 books. It is not known for certain as to who were the writers of these books, nor do we know their exact dates. Scholars generally believe that the Pentateuch or Torah was canonized in the fourth century B.C., perhaps in the period of Ezra (a.s.) ('Uzayr) who lived around c.400 B.C. The Nebi'im did not attain canonization until roughly 200 B.C., while the Kethubim did not become a part of the Canon until the year 90. C.E. when the limits of the Canon were finally established at the rabbinical assembly at Jamnia in Palestine.

Through what is known as “Higher Criticism”, scholars have tried to establish the historical circumstances of the development of the Biblical books, their authors, the process of composition, the sources employed, the time and place of origin, etc. Scholars conclude that it is highly unlikely that any written Hebrew documents existed prior to David and Solomon, i.e. c.1000 B.C. Even after that period, most of the Hebrew literature was preserved through a process of retentive memory, and passed down through the generations by the mouth-to-ear method of transmission for centuries. It is now generally agreed that the earliest written books are the books of the Pentateuch. Extensive research conducted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have concluded that the Pentateuch is derived through at least four different sources. The classic chronology is as proposed by Karl H. Graf (1815-1869) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). The four sources are referred to as J (the Yahwist source), E (the Elohist source), D (the Deuteronomic source), and P (the Priestly). The proposed chronological order is: J (c.950 B.C.), E (c.700 B.C.), D (c.650 B.C.), and P (c.500-450 B.C.). The J and E texts were combined to form the JE redaction around c.650 B.C. The D writings were added around 450 B.C. forming JED. Lastly, the Priestly document was added around 400 B.C. during the age of Ezra ('Uzayr) to make the JEDP redaction and the Pentateuch as we know it today. Recent research concludes that even these four sources were probably not written documents but oral traditions. The dating could be earlier, but the
Wellhausen dates are still considered to be the terminal dates of these sources.  

**Early Prophecy**

Historians of the Old Testament consider the rise of prophecy to coincide with the rise of monarchy in Israel. The famous story of Saul (Tālūt in the Qur’ān) being gripped with ecstasy (I Sam. 10:5ff. and I Sam. 19:18-24) is taken as one of the earliest examples of the prophetic experience in ancient Israel. Prior to the monarchy, the Old Testament evidence is obscure about prophecy, and as some scholars maintain, “the prehistory of Israeliite prophecy is shrouded in the mists of antiquity”. The Elohist text in Num. 11:1ff. is probably the only pre-monarchical story that gives us the signs of existence of a “prophetic movement” during the age of Moses (a.s.); but most scholars consider this to be a manipulation by later editors. Hence, the continuity is seen not between the “Jahwism” (as Yon Rad calls the Pre-prophetic Israeliite religion) and the Israeliite prophetic movement, but between the Canaanite milieu and the latter. Numerous sources give us the indication that ‘prophets’ or ‘ecstatics’ existed among non-Israelites in Canaan and Mesopotamia prior to the Israeliite conquest. The story of the Phoenician youth cited by Wen Amon and the Mari texts are seen as examples, which bear out the assumption of the inter-cultural influence. Besides, the celebrated story of Balaam (Num. 22-24) and the mention of several Canaanite prophets of Baal and Asherah in the Book of Kings is seen as sufficient proof.

The acceptance of this assumption defeats our approach. It strips the faith of its religious dimension and attempts to view it only in its sociological dimension. On the other hand, the Islamic theological framework concludes that since God has sent prophets to all nations, it is not surprising to find claims to prophethood among all these nations. This approach gives credence to the development of prophetic movements in different cultures independent of similar developments elsewhere, but emanating through the One and Only God. Presently, the phenomenon interests us as it was revealed through the Old Testament experience only. The archaeological findings of prophetic movements in other cultures of the period interests us here only within the framework of the Deuteronomist. Besides, the absence of evidence in the Old Testament of pre-monarchical prophets (i.e. before the time of David) is not sufficient proof for the denial of their existence. The theology of the Pentateuch, which centers around the 5 themes suggested by Martin Noth was what seems to have interested the writers of these documents. It reflects upon
the religious experience and concerns of these people. Hence, even if the phenomenon of prophecy did exist, it finds no overt mention.\textsuperscript{14}

The prophets classified as the former or early prophets are those who existed before the eighth century. Notable among them as mentioned in the Old Testament are Samuel, Nathan, Gad, Micaiah, Elijah (a.s.) (Ilyās) and Elisha (a.s.) (Al-Yasa‘). All that has survived of these prophets are their stories. We do not have any of their “writings”. Thus, the beginnings of this movement are with the appearance of Samuel around 1070 B.C. Samuel plays a very important role during the transition of Israel to a monarchy during the period of Saul (Tālūt).

According to the evidence in the Old Testament however, the mantic movement does not seem to have gained real force until the ninth century B.C., i.e. during the period of Elijah (Ilyās) and Elisha (a.s.) (Al-Yasa‘). The detail of the stories clearly points to the historicity of Elijah (a.s.) (Ilyās), which seems to be lacking in the previous prophets like Gad and Nathan.\textsuperscript{15} The prophet seems to be performing a number of roles at this juncture. For one, he is a counselor to the king. By King Ahab’s time (who was king of the northern kingdom of Israel during 869-850 B.C.), there were no less than four hundred prophets standing by to counsel him (I Kings 22:6). Among these “yes-men”, we also find lone dissenters like Micaiah (I Kings 22). This raised the thorny question of who is a true prophet and who is false? The Deuteronomist laid down the criteria of the truth of a prophet’s claim upon two principles: “(1) its correspondence to the established claims of the Yahweh faith (Deut. 13:1-5), and (2) its consistency with empirical facts (Deut. 18:21-22)”.\textsuperscript{16} The fallacy of a prophecy on the other hand did not disqualify a prophet’s claim. The Lord, as Micaiah is reported to have said, can also “inspire” false prophecy along with the true (I Kings 22:21-23).

A second characteristic of the prophet during this period is his ecstatic experience. The claim by some scholars that this seems to be a characteristic of only the “primitive” (i.e. earlier) prophets as against the “classical” (i.e. latter) ones has now been rectified. This numinous experience seems to continue right through the prophetic period, and we see it particularly in Ezekiel among the latter prophets. The Old Testament accounts seem to portray this phenomenon much more frequently during the early period though. This may be due to the style of writing of the Deuteronomist, which is more like a narrative as against the oracular style of the latter prophets.

Thirdly, we see the rise during this period of prominent individual figures like Elijah (a.s.) (Ilyās) and Elisha (a.s.) (Al-Yasa‘) who wield
great influence. They also seem to function as masters or ‘fathers’ of a group of disciples (I Sam. 10:12; II Kings 2:12; 6:21; 13:14). The parallelism with Muslim mystic (Sufi) orders that existed two millenia later is striking.17

Lastly, we see these holy “men of God” acting as the agents of Yahweh to fight against the syncretism bred by Baalism. Baal was the most active god in the Canaanite pantheon. He was the god of storm and fertility, and was considered to be active in the fertilization of spring time. As the Israelites turned from nomadic ways to agrarian lives in Canaan, they mixed up their worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal in order to conform to the needs of agriculture practised by the Canaanites previously. Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:20-46) is the classical portrayal of the role of the prophet. He is supported by miracles from God, while the prophets of Baal are unable to replicate these miracles. Thus, Elijah proves the veracity of his claim of the superiority of God over Baal.

The miraculous nature of this and other stories of the earlier prophets and Patriarchs in particular is widespread in the Old Testament. The attempt by some scholars to explain away the miraculous element as some form of a trick denies the raison d’être of the Old Testament. Its defiance of the logical intellectual capacities need not overlay the possibility of looking at such phenomena through another dimension. In reality, the expression of the numinous becomes manifest at its highest level through the miracle.

The Latter Prophets

The dichotomy between the earlier and the latter prophets is expressed probably due to the existence of books attributed to the latter, which give their oracles in detail. The narratives and stories of the earlier prophets are substituted by “collections of disconnected logia”18 of the latter prophets.

The period of the latter prophets starts with Amos who lived around the middle of the eighth century B.C. The prominent prophets in this group are

- During the decline and fall of Samaria (northern kingdom of Israel): Amos (c.750 B.C.), Hosea (c. 745-735 B.C.), Isaiah (c. 742-701 B.C.), Micah (c. 730-701 B.C.)
- During the decline and fall of the southern kingdom of Judah: Zephaniah (c. 630-627 B.C.), Nahum (c. 612 B.C.), Habakkuk (c. 627-598 B.C.), Jeremiah (c.627-587 B.C.)
During the period of the Exile in Babylon: Ezekiel (c. 592-570), and Deutero-Isaiah (c. 540)

After the Restoration from Exile to Judea in 538 B.C.: Haggai (c. 520 B.C.), Zephaniah (c. 520-518 B.C.), Malachi (c. 450 B.C.), Trito-Isaiah (unknown dates), Obadiah (unknown dates), Joel (unknown dates), and Jonah (unknown dates).

The period of the latter prophets is full of upheavals and disobedience to the Divine Law. We see a general decline after Solomon. Thus, by the time of Amos during the middle of the eighth century B.C., the role of the prophet becomes quite pronounced.

The reported concerns of the latter prophets seem to broaden vastly. Muilenburg classifies the concerns of the prophets of this period into six areas. These are 1) the political order, 2) the economic order, 3) the land, 4) administration of justice, 5) power and pride, and 6) the world of nations.

1. *The Political Order*: Yahweh was King over Israel. The loose tribal structure of the Israelite society led to invasions by other peoples, particularly the Philistines. The people demanded a new order of life with a king ruling over them. Eventually Yahweh granted the plea through Samuel (Shamū‘ayl), and Saul (Tālūt) was anointed king. The initial concept of the king being the servant and vicegerent of Yahweh during the reigns of Saul (Tālūt), David (Dā‘ūd), and Solomon (Sulaymān) transformed into a west Asiatic style kingship in later years. The Covenant was forgotten and Yahweh became one of the gods being worshiped. The prophets rose up time and again reminding the kings of the higher sovereignty of Yahweh, but to no avail.

2. *The Economic Order*: The change in the political order accompanied a greater reliance on the socio-economic norms of the people around them. Along with Phoenician mercantilism, a capitalistic and urban class arose in Israel, replacing the nomadic culture. "With the loss of old restraints we hear of commercial dishonesty, exploitation of the poor, the luxury of the rich, gross indulgence, and insensate lust for profit. Amidst all the feverish preoccupation with riches and power and comfort and pleasure; all the bustling commercial activity and the ever-rising prices; the building of fortifications for defense and of fine houses for the privileged; the elaboration of cultic observances with their sumptuous festivals and celebrations, their pilgrimages and rites, their music and choirs, and, withal, the syncretism with the cults of nature and prosperity – amidst all there was one voice that was stifled and repressed. It was the voice of Israel’s covenant-making
and covenant-keeping God. But was it stifled? Not quite! For there were prophets in the land to sound the cry of protest and outrage, repeating with the urgency born of faith and memory and holy awe, God’s categorical and insistent “thou shalt not”.

3. Land: “The land belongs to me” (Lev. 25:23). Yahweh had given this land as a gift to Israel for them to sojourn; but He retained ownership. The Israelites were technically strangers in the land. (Lev. 25:23). But Israel had defiled the land by its conduct. It is this conduct that determined the productivity of the land, “for both land and people live under a common historical and moral sovereignty. When God commands it to yield, the land breaks forth into fertility and abundance; when he pronounces judgment upon it, it lies barren and desolate, and all that it has to yield is thorns and thistles”.

4. The administration of justice: With the rise of the urban and capitalistic economy and new political order, the greed for wealth and property led to misuse of judicial powers. The prophets condemned this outright. “The courts have come under the control of the privileged and powerful, the rich and prosperous, the successful and aristocratic elements in the population. As the king was reminded that he was subject to a higher sovereignty, so the judges are told that there is a Judge who judges them.” “This incessant and insatiable greed for gain is one of the recurring themes of prophetic protest. But what is even worse is that the judges acquit the guilty for a bribe and deprive the innocent of their rights (Isa. 5:23; Mic. 7:3; Ezek. 22:12).”

5. Power and Pride: The prophets are most vehement in their criticism of power in all its forms and guises. They are least concerned about the realities of political and international problems, alliances or compromises that result thereof. “All the professions are subjected to the same acidic criticism: priests, prophets, scribes and sages, princes, and judges. They are all tempted to abuse their power and status and to become victims to their pride. Even women, especially the wives of the rich are bitterly denounced for their haughtiness and heartlessness. The prophets show little chivalry; the modern ideal of the gentleman is not to be found in the Old Testament.” “The mighty empires – Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and the rest come within the range of prophetic scorn and disdain. ... The vaunting pride and arrogance of the mighty will be brought low by the Lord of history. There is a monition that keeps interposing itself throughout the Scriptures: Be not proud!”

6. The World of Nations: The prophets do not present a unified view of the world they lived in, nor of the people they were surrounded
by. Unlike most other prophets, Amos and Isaiah present a universalistic outlook by placing Israel at par with other nations and including it within the judgment to come. They also admonished other nations against their deeds. Otherwise, most other prophets are concerned about the unique position of Israel among the nations. Israel is chosen to fulfill the divine purpose in history.

We turn now to a specific example, the Book of Amos, to give us a clearer picture of the concerns of the latter prophets.

The Book of Amos – A case study

The age of the latter prophets ushers in individual prophets who tend to gain more influence. Among the books that have been preserved, the earliest is that of one such individual prophet, namely Amos of Tekoa. Although Amos comes from the southern kingdom of Judah, His prophetic mission seems to have been directed towards the northern kingdom of Israel. He prophesied around the year 760 B.C. (or possibly sometime between that year and 750 B.C.), although some scholars give an even later date.26

Amos was a shepherd. Therefore his call to prophecy was considered unique. How is it, asked Israel, that Amos was a prophet? His reply is simple. He is not a prophet by profession, nor is he a prophet’s son. Yet the Lord said to him ‘Go prophesy to my people Israel’.27

The Book of Amos does not give a chronological account either of Amos’ life or of his mission. In fact it has very few biographical details. The last three chapters give us an indication that the prophetic call was connected with the five visions of doom that were revealed to Amos. It is almost certain that his mission to the northern kingdom of Israel followed these visions. The five visions were:

- locusts devouring the grass28
- a fire engulfing the whole land29
- the plumb line which indicated the judgement30
- the basket of summer fruit (qayits) which symbolised the end (qets)31, and
- the Lord standing beside the altar,32

Of these five visions, Amos succeeded in pleading with the Lord against the first two disasters. But in the case of the latter three, when the guilt of Israel was brought to judgement, he could not intercede. The irony
was that when the warning was proclaimed by Amos, the response of Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (the royal sanctuary north of Jerusalem), was a complaint to Jereboam II, the king of Israel (786-746 B.C.), saying: "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words ...".

The predictions of disaster and invasion of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians are so accurate that some scholars have suggested that Amos lived later than he actually did. This obviously assumes no divine intervention in history; rather the assumption is that Amos was merely a good political analyst. On the other hand, some other scholars retain the conclusion that Amos existed around 760 B.C., and that he was far ahead of his time in his analysis of the situation. This again suffers from a similar bias. The numinous is reduced to mere fiction, and the Deuteronomic view of history is overlooked. This is not to undermine the keen insight of Amos though.

The first six chapters of the book are generally divided into two sections – chapters 1 and 2, and chapters 3 to 6. The first section deals with eight oracles condemning the actions of various nations, while the latter section comprises oracles addressed to Israel which share the common theme of judgement awaiting it.

The oracles against the nations are addressed to Damascus (1:3-5), Philistia (1:6-8), Phoenicia (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), Ammon (1:13-15), Moab (2:1-3), Judah (2:4-5), and Israel (2:6-16). The most striking part of these oracular judgements is the placing of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah on an equal footing with the other nations; rather Israel and Judah face a greater responsibility by being the covenant people. Besides, we find in at least one oracle (2:1-3) where the sinner and the oppressed party are both non-Israelites. In this case, Moab is condemned for burning the bones of Edom. The emergence of this universalist outlook in Amos is indeed remarkable.

The last oracle, which is against Israel, may be taken to include the whole of the Israelite nation – the north and the south. The mention of the salvation-history (2:9-11) gives this indication. The crimes cited, however, apply much more to the northern kingdom than to the south, i.e. social oppression, moral laxity, and opposition to righteousness. Thus, Israel’s accountability for the broken covenant will be strict and the recompense severe.

The collection of oracles in chapters 3 to 6 expound upon the sins of Israel and call her to return and repent. This faint glimmer of hope for
Israel appears occasionally (5:5, 6, 14-15, 24), summoning Israel to “seek the Lord and live”. But Israel remained disobedient. Her sins had surmounted all limits. Hence, the Lord said, “... I will take you into exile beyond Damascus” (5:27), and that “Jereboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land” (7:11). The prophecy is clear. The destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians was foretold.

It is almost certain that the northern kingdom is the one to which these oracles are addressed. The geographical locations mentioned i.e. Samaria, Bethel, and Gilgal, etc. are all in the north. The only reference to the south is in 6:1 where Zion is mentioned.

The concept of the ‘remnant’ that will survive the debacle is also found in this section (5:3, 15). One wonders whether this refers to Judah or to those who would flee to Judah before the oncoming tide. Besides this, two of the three doxologies (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6) are to be found in this section.

In light of this summary and analysis of Amos, we see glimpses of the six areas mentioned by Muilenburg. In particular, we find emphasis in three of the areas, namely the economic order, the power and pride of Israel, and the world of nations. The voice of Amos is raised against the oppression of the ‘cows of Bashan’ (4:1), a reference to the women who use their husbands to oppress the poor and needy for their worldly pleasures. Out of their power and pride, the altars of Bethel defy the sovereignty of the Lord (3:14). The universalist approach of Amos towards all nations has already been mentioned in the context of the first two chapters. Besides, in the last chapter, Amos quotes the Lord as saying “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people of Israel?” (9:7a). God goes on to equate the Exodus of Israel with similar exoduses of other peoples: “Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?” (9:7b).

Besides these three areas, the political order is also Amos’ concern to an extent. The political destruction of Israel is imminent, but the dichotomy of the Lord’s sovereignty over and against the king’s is not explicitly dealt with. Neither is the Land, Yahweh’s gift to Israel, nor is the mal-administration of justice by the judicial authorities quite dealt with in this book.
Conclusion

The question of whether the approach and concerns of the latter prophets were totally different from those of the earlier prophets can never be satisfactorily answered as long as one wishes to study the sources within themselves. The most one can say is that the considerations of each period would pose different emphases requiring varied concerns due to the changed socio-political and religious circumstances. Hence, rather than regarding the earlier and the latter prophets as two different species, one must place them all under the title of nabi (prophet) and give due consideration to the concerns of each individual prophet. Thus, in the case of Israel, one would be safe in using a generalized definition of the phenomenon of prophecy like the one given by Davie Napier as “that understanding of history which accepts meaning only in terms of divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation”.

Such were the prophets of ancient Israel. They challenged the kings, questioned the oppressive social order, condemned the moral laxity and syncretism, and spoke on behalf of the downtrodden, and in the name of Yahweh, the Lord of History. His sovereignty could not be compromised. Such was the conscience of Israel.

End Notes

1. Muilenburg, James, The Way of Israel, p. 44.
2. Historical narratives in the Old Testament like the Exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, the conquest, etc. are not merely incidents in history, but also revelations as such. Thus, the Deuteronomic creed (Deut. 26:5-9) becomes the statement of faith.
4. Abraham accused of lying about Sarah in Genesis 20:1-18, Lot accused of incest and adultery with his own daughters in Genesis 19:30-38, Isaac accused of lying about his wife Rebekah in Genesis 26:6-11, Jacob accused of lying and deception to his own father Isaac in Genesis 27:1-40, Reuben commits adultery and incest with his step-mother, the wife of Jacob in Genesis 35:22, Judah, the son of Jacob and the ancestor of Jews goes to a brothel to satisfy his ‘needs’ and there he commits adultery with his own daughter in law Tamar who plays the harlot in Genesis 38:1-30, etc.
5. This is based upon the chronology given by West, James King, op. cit., pp. 498-501.
7. For example, cf. Wellhausen, Julius, Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel: Cleveland, Meridian Books, 1957; and West, James King, op. cit. for details on the discussion about Biblical criticism.
For example, cf. Lindblom, J., *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, p. 47; West, *op. cit.*, p. 224; etc.


Noth, Martin, *Uberlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*, Stuttgart; cf. West, *op. cit.*, p. 47 for the reference. the themes are (1) the Exodus from Egypt, (2) the entrance into the Promised Land, (3) guidance in the wilderness, (4) the promise to the Patriarchs, and (5) the primeval history.

Gottwald, Norman K., *All the Kingdoms of the Earth*, pp. 47-51, where he argues in favour of prophecy during the period of Moses and also the judges as prophets. cf. also Lindblom, *op. cit.*, p. 47.


Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-98.


*The Book of Amos* in the *Bible*, 7:14-16.


33 Ibid., 7:10.
34 West, op. cit., p. 237.
35 Ibid., p. 239; cf. also von Rad, op. cit., pp. 133-134.
36 Cf. Supra, pp. 8-9.

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