

Preface

Every part of the Bible has attracted a massive amount of critical commentary: Jewish, Christian and non-confessional. The book of Amos is extremely well represented in the ever-growing field of biblical studies. What then could be hoped to be achieved by adding to the existing scholarship?

The motivation for this book stemmed from the many changing directions of biblical research over the past few decades. For many years now, historical-critical interests and literary approaches have uneasily shared the limelight. The latter has been marked by an inherent diversity and experimentation while the former line of research has had to contend with a growing crisis of confidence in many quarters. The debates over historical methodology are far from settled, but the face of historical research into the origins of the biblical materials has been changed forever. Even among the many scholars who reject the more recent proposals for late compositional dates for much of the Hebrew Bible, awareness of the textuality of the redacted texts is very high. Analyzing the religious and intellectual contexts of the later stages of production is now seen as a far more important enterprise than it was a decade ago. On the one hand, these newer approaches have produced a number of insightful studies of many biblical books and the readers of some introductory text-books become well acquainted with these developments. On the other hand, a number of new introductions to the Hebrew Bible and its prophetic corpus have yet to acknowledge the full potential of the new historical approaches or the well developed field of literary studies and their impact on more conservative ways of interpreting the Bible. Part of this may stem from the attempt to address as wide an audience as possible. This causes some authors to tread perhaps too lightly or to sit rather precariously on the proverbial fence when dealing with issues that are significant points of contention between confessional and secular criticism.

This volume was born out of a desire to integrate the new historical sensibilities with a literary approach to produce something of a more creative reading of Amos. Above all, my goal was to produce a volume situated firmly within the secular field of religious studies in which even Amos' defense of the poor and weak can be subject to critical analysis. I do not know if there ever was an Amos of Tekoa who left his flocks behind in Judah to denounce business and religious practices in the northern kingdom of Israel. I consider it possible that such an individual existed but I do not know how to prove it with any confidence simply from the biblical book that bears that name. The book, however, remains an historical artefact, and a finely written one at that. It is the product of the human mind and imagination in a world far removed in time and culture from my own. Bridging that distance is easier said than done. The final version of the present study is far less experimental than its earlier manifestations but I hope it opens up new ways of addressing what is one of the most popular books of the Hebrew Bible. The final tone of the volume, however, has been set by a desire to present an in-depth treatment of Amos not only to biblical scholars but to readers with far less experience

in the critical examination of the Bible. It is not an introductory text, but those with some familiarity with the Hebrew Bible in English should not find it impenetrable.

Amos is full of alliteration, deliberate ambiguity, puns and other word-plays. Any attempt to present the full poetic beauty and complexity of the book without reference to these features is doomed to fail. To this end, I have chosen to transliterate the Hebrew for the benefit of readers who have not studied the language. The transliteration system is relatively simple, merging the technical and 'general purpose' scheme employed for the publications of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Consonants are rendered according to accepted technical practice to avoid ambiguity inherent in the simpler scheme. In the SBL 'general purpose' system some Hebrew consonants are represented by two Roman characters, for example, 'šīn', שׁ, is rendered as *sh* and this can be mistaken for two separate Hebrew characters. On the other hand, vowels are rendered as per the SBL 'general purpose' scheme and spares the reader unnecessary complications. This compromise allows non-Hebrew readers to understand the approximate sounds of the Hebrew terms and yet preserves a relatively accurate way of seeing patterns of repeated consonants. In a few cases, the similarity between words is not readily apparent in transliteration. In those cases I have complemented the transliteration with the Hebrew characters themselves so that the uninitiated can see the visual similarities.

This book has been in the making for many years and there are a number of people who have provided me with the necessary inspiration, encouragement and chastisement to see it through to the end despite various crises, relocations, and severe bouts of writer's block. Ashgate Publishing has not only been supportive but also very patient. I am forever grateful to Francis Landy and Ehud Ben Zvi of the University of Alberta. It is there I began work on the book of Amos in 1998 with the help of a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and this resulted in a number of papers which formed the starting point for the present volume. Further work proceeded in fits, false starts and full stops but both Ehud and Francis continued to think I still had something worth saying about Amos. In this regard, I am also indebted to Philip Davies. I would also like to say 'thanks' to my colleagues and friends here in Lethbridge; Hillary Rodrigues, Tom and Sharon Robinson, John Harding, for all their support and especially Lisa Kozleski, who served as my editor and managed to stay cheerful despite the daunting task she faced. Any resemblance the language of this book bears to standard English is largely due to her effort. Two of my students here in Lethbridge must also be named. Mick Macintyre and Helen Connolly read Amos with me on numerous enjoyable occasions and I wish them the best of success in their continuing academic endeavours. Helen also proofread this commentary and worked with me on the transliterations. I deeply appreciate the many hours she devoted to this project. I, of course, remain fully responsible for any remaining errors or oddities.

If this work makes its reader pause to consider alternative routes to thinking about Amos and the other biblical prophetic books the way Mick and Helen have made me rethink what I thought I once knew, then I shall consider this volume a great success. This book is dedicated not only to them, but also to the other students at the University of Lethbridge who have made my five years here so enjoyable and rewarding, including Chelsea Masterman, Chris Roth, J'Lean Lawton, Erika Jahn, Nicole Hembroff, Lori Alexander and Natasha Elder.