

**BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE:
THE PROPHECIES OF HOSHEA AND AMOS**

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Shiur #15: The Prophecies of Amos: Oracles Against the Nations

(continued)

In this *shiur*, we will continue our study of Amos's ultimate prophecy in this series of oracles against the nations. In the previous chapter, we introduced the "hymn" of praise to God which serves as the axis of Amos's oracle against Israel. We discussed the various types of praise-passages in *Tanakh* and noted that this type is unusual, in that it is God Himself (through the *navi*) who is doing the praising, so to speak. We pointed out the anomaly inherent in such a passage and the possibly harsh subtextual message that may be implied by it.

THE TEXT

9 I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath. **10** Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorites. **11** And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not even thus, O you Israelites? says God. **12** But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying "Do not prophesy."¹

Or, as we delineated in last week's *shiur*:

- 1) I destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks
- 2) Indeed, I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath
- 3) Also, I brought you up out of the land of Egypt
- 4) And led you forty years in the wilderness
- 5) To possess the land of the Amorites
- 6) And I raised up of your sons to be prophets
- 7) And of your young men to be Nazirites

¹ As I suggested in *shiur* #11, v. 12 is a bridge between the historiosophy section and the indictment section.

In the last *shiur*, we proposed a structural definition of the passage; this division, we argued, is self-evident, not only due to the division of the verses and the syntax, but also thematically:

- a) Destruction of the Amorite nations
- b) (1) Exodus → (2) wanderings → (3) conquest
- c) Sanctification of the people

In this *shiur*, we will take a closer look at the first two praises which make up the first segment of the hymn.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

I destroyed the Amorite before them, **whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks.**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at the opening phrase and identified the pluperfect tense, indicating that God was reminding the people that He **had already** (a long time ago) destroyed the Amorite etc. and that **in spite of that** (using *vav ha-nigud*), they had committed the sins enumerated above. Continuing on with the passage, the Amorites are described as tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I'd like to turn our attention to this paired simile, as it is an unusual twinning.

TREE AS METAPHOR

Comparing people — both individuals and groups — to various trees is a common rhetorical device in *Tanakh*. One of the most well-known parables in *Tanakh* is that of Yotam, after his half-brother Avimelekh massacres all the other sons of Gidon as a power-grab. Yotam ascends to the top of Mt. Gerizim and relates an evidently well-known story about the trees seeking a king. After being rejected by the olive tree (I'm busy making oil that honors God and man), the fig tree (I'm busy making sweet fruit) and the grapevine (I'm busy making wine that gladdens God and man), the trees go to the thornbush. The thornbush agrees to be their king, as long as the mighty cedar (there it is again) agrees to bow down to it (*Shoftim* 9). Although the text (*Shoftim* 8) only tells us of one upstanding leader who refuses the monarchy (Gidon himself), the Midrash identifies each of these productive trees as former leaders who turned down the opportunity to rule over the people. The good leader is likened to an olive tree, producing oil that consecrates; a fig tree which produces sweet fruit; a grapevine which produces wine, used to gladden God and humanity. The unworthy person is like a thornbush — lowly and of no benefit to anyone.

Flora are used to characterize people throughout *Tanakh*:

- The righteous will flourish like the date-palm and will grow tall like the cedar. (*Tehillim* 92:13)

- Like aloe bushes planted by God, like cedars by the waters. (*Bamidbar* 24:6)
- His visage is like the Lebanon, chosen like the cedars. (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:15)
- You will be like a terebinth whose leaves have withered. (*Yeshayahu* 1:30)
- And (only) one tenth (of the people) will survive, and it too will be consumed, (but) like the terebinth and the oak, that even when all the leaves have fallen, the trunk remains. (*Ibid.* 6:13)

Yirmeyahu 17:8 compares the righteous to a tree planted by the waters (*Tehillim* 1:3 as well), unlike the lonely bush in the desert that is used to describe the wicked. *Tehillim* 52:10 states: “I am like a fresh olive tree in the house of God.” In Hoshea’s final prophecy, God Himself declares, evoking the cedars of Lebanon:

I will be as dew to Israel and he will flower like a lily, and he will put down roots like the Lebanon. His roots will spread out and his glory will be like an olive tree and he will have a redolent fragrance like the Lebanon...
I am like a fresh cypress tree, fruit can be found from Me.

This is a sampling of the instances where the text uses various trees — or generic “trees” — as a simile for people or nations. The righteous are well-planted trees, offering constant nourishment; the righteous both bear fruit like the date-palm and stand tall like the cedar; while the wicked are rootless and wither away like the tumbleweed in the desert. God promises that one day He will be a nourishing tree for Israel; the sinning nation will be like a tree with withered leaves and so on. This may all be rooted (pun intended) in the phrasing in *Devarim* (20:19-20):

When you besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for you may eat of them, but you shall not cut them down; **for is the tree of the field man (*ki ha-adam etz ha-sadeh*)**, that it should be besieged of you? Only the trees of which you know that they are not trees for food, them you may destroy and cut down, that you may build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.

“*Ki ha-adam etz ha-sadeh*” has been variously interpreted as a declarative statement or as a rhetorical question. If we read it as a declarative, then the metaphor, identifying Man as a tree, has firm roots in the Torah and its legislative prose.

We are, therefore, not surprised to hear the *navi* using tree similes to describe the mighty nations that God defeated in our wars of conquest under Yehoshua. We are, however, a bit surprised by the use of the *erez* (cedar) juxtaposed with the *alon* (oak). The *erez* either stands alone as in the beautiful description of

Assyria which Yechezkel delivers to Pharaoh (31:3-5) or is paired with a tree that provides that which the cedar cannot: the date-palm, known for its fruit and shade; or the cypress, known for its redolence. In our case, however, the tall and stately cedar is matched with the mighty (and deciduous) oak; the cedar is “high” whereas the oak is sturdy and strong. What is even more enigmatic about this simile is the description of what He did: “I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from beneath.” Neither of these trees bears fruit. If the *navi* wants to use a tree with fruit in order to describe the utter destruction of the Canaanite nations, why not pick a fruit-bearing tree to pair with the cedar?

I believe that the solution lies in the historic memory of the Jewish people.

BACK TO YETZIAT MITZRAYIM

When the nation leaves Egypt, the destination is unclear; are the people going out to the desert for a three-day festival only to return to a life of slavery in Egypt? Or are they on the march to an *Altneuland*, a return to their ancestral promised inheritance? It certainly seems that their first understanding at the moment of the Exodus is the former, yet it became clear after the Splitting of the Sea that they are not destined to return to Egypt and that the desert is theirs to cross, the Land theirs to conquer. The powerful promise of Divine protection and military support given at Sinai (*Shemot* 23:23, 27-31) certainly implies that the nations of Canaan are mighty and that without overt and supernatural help, the Jews could not hope to defeat them.

Thus, the image of the population of Canaan as strong and well-rooted in the Land is firmly planted in the nation’s psyche. This picture is further bolstered by the report of the scouts, who add fantastical descriptions of the people who live there as “people of unnatural measure. And there we saw the Nephilim, giant’s sons from the Nephilim. We were as grasshoppers in our own eyes, as we were in their eyes” (*Bamidbar* 13:32-33). The notion of giants inhabiting the Land is thus sealed into the nation’s frightened picture of the enemies it is commanded to fight, a fight the Israelites no longer wish to take up.

The text in *Yehoshua* 11:21-22 indicates that this report is not hyperbolic.

And Yehoshua came at that time and smote the giants from the mountain, from Chevron, from Devir, from Anav, from all of the Judean mountains and from all of the mountains of Israel; he destroyed them along with their cities. There were no giants remaining in the Land of the Israelites; only in Aza, Gat² and Ashdod did they remain.

² There is good reason to believe that the verse should be understood as indicating that the giants fled from the hill country, which was completely seized by Yehoshua’s army, and fled to the Pelishti territory which was never conquered during that era. This may explain how a giant like Golyat — and others identified in *II Shemuel* 21:15-22 — come to serve as fighters (mercenaries?) for the Pelishtim.

Hence, when God describes the mighty enemies that He defeated in the Land on Israel's behalf, He uses the image of trees both tall (cedar, representing the giants) and strong (oak, representing the entrenched peoples).

We still must attend to the “fruit” atop these two trees — but first, let's see **whom** we are comparing to cedars and oaks.

THE AMORITES

In this description, the defeated and dispossessed natives are called “the Amorite(s)” (*Ha-Emori*). This is a tribal-national name that is used in three ways. It is the name of one of the seven (or six or five) Canaanite tribes of the Land (e.g. *Shemot* 3:8). It is a name used generically to identify the hill-tribes, as opposed to those that live in the plains and by the sea, e.g. *Yehoshua* 5:1: “All of the Amorite kings on the other side of the Jordan and the kings of the Canaanites living by the sea heard that God had dried up the waters of the Jordan.” “The Amorite” also seems to be synonymous with Canaan, as we sometimes refer to the Land and the nations there with the catch-all word “Canaanite” and sometimes “Amorite”. For instance, in the Covenant between the Parts, Avra(ha)m is promised: “And the fourth generation will return here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its fullness” (*Bereishit* 15:16).

In our case, it seems that the text is referring to all of the conquered nations who were part of the Canaanite tribes, so why call them “Amorites”? Amos Hakham, in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary, suggests that since treetops are known as *amir* in biblical Hebrew (cf. *Yeshayahu* 17:6-9), the text, employing word-play, deliberately chose the cognomen *Emori* to associate it with the tree simile. It may, alternatively, be creating an association with the words in Yehoshua's final address (24:15) to Israel: “Choose whom you will worship, whether the gods of the Amorites (*elohei ha-Emori*)” — since our praise-unit is part of a larger passage, which is a diatribe against the sins of Israel. This is not a compelling explanation, however, since the chastisement of Israel is mainly focused on crimes of abuse of power and mistreatment of the poor; as we have pointed out in earlier *shiurim*, it is not focused on idolatry. (There will be plenty of that later on...)

I'd like to suggest that the use of *Emori* here may be pointing us in a slightly different direction. When we look back at the conquest of the Land as described in *Yehoshua* (as opposed to the different picture presented at the beginning of *Shoftim*), the psychological component of the battle is won long before any sword is drawn. Rachav testifies to the two spies:

For we have heard how God dried up the water of the Reed Sea before you, when you came out of Egypt; **and what you did to the two kings of**

the Amorites, that were beyond the Jordan, to Sichon and to Og, whom you utterly destroyed. (Yehoshua 2:10)

One of these kings makes a fateful incursion into the east bank of the Jordan that ultimately leads to our conquest of that side of the river; the other intervenes in that war. Both are referred to as “Amorites,” even though Sichon seems to be the only one to have originated on the west bank of the river. Sichon is consistently seen as a mighty foe; his defeat causes the fear of Israelite conquest to paralyze the local population. Moshe’s description of Og’s height (*Devarim* 3:11) is spoken to the very people who fought against him and reflects a reality they have experienced first-hand. Thus, it would not be out of place to interpret destroying the Amorites as referring to the defeat of Sichon and Og. This then evolves, in a subtle rhetorical fashion, into a reference to the entire conquest of the Land — much as happens in other historiosophic passages in *Tanakh*, as we outlined in last week’s *shiur*.

HIS FRUIT ABOVE AND HIS ROOTS BELOW

The second item in the praise unit describes how God made their reestablishing themselves as worthy enemies a moot point. As pointed out above, the two trees used in this simile do not bear fruit, but it is a loose simile. The fruit of the tree are, after all, the impact that it has and carry the potential for a replanting and reestablishment of its power. Fruit are planted and the tree flourishes from that sowing. The manner in which God defeats the enemies, as described in *Yehoshua*, precludes even that possibility. It is the Israelites themselves who fail to follow through (see *Shoftim* 1, followed by Chapters 2-3); otherwise, the Canaanites would never have been able to rise up and oppress Israel. When the roots are destroyed — the natives displaced from their own cities and no longer in control of their own political and economic lives — there is no reason for the trees to tower above the Land ever again. These are the first two kindnesses that God does for the people, who, per this laudation, have the opportunity to ride this wave of victory and remain sovereign and empowered forever.

In next week’s *shiur*, we will continue our analysis of the hymn-section with particular attention to the next verse, lauding the Exodus. We will examine both the manner of presentation and its relationship to the rest of this part of the oracle.

For Further Study:

Sandra Scham, “The Days of the Judges: When Men and Women Were Animals and Trees Were Kings,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 26 #3 (March 2002), pp. 37-64.