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Metacommentating Amos*

Metacommentary, what is that? Let me try this formulation: When we write commentary, we read what commentators say. When we write metacommentary, we notice what commentators do.

This plain and symmetrical account of metacommentary seems to collapse, however, the moment it has been formulated. For what do commentators *do* apart from what they *say*? Apart from playing squash or lying late in bed, which we do not want to know about, what do commentators do other than what they say?

Well, the main thing they do but don't say is not say what they don't say. Not many say, Of course, I am failing to ask this question of the text, or, I am hiding from you, dear reader, my own opinion on the matter, or, I come to this text with a prejudice about what it ought to mean. These are really very interesting matters, for they are being concealed. What is written on the page is only what the author has chosen to reveal; but to every text there is a subtext, which the author has suppressed, repressed, forgotten, ignored, kept from us—and not even told

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us that it has been kept from us. We innocent members of the public, who go on laying out good money on commentaries, need protection against these commentators who are failing to tell us what it is they are failing to tell us. So it becomes an urgent public duty to create a neighbourhood watch committee of metacommentators who will investigate for us how we are being shortchanged.

You can search high and low for metacommentary on Amos and Amos commentators, for it is a rare scholar who will step outside the ideology of the text and notice how severely traditional commentary has been constrained by the outlook of the text. But I did find one, whose feminist perspective gave her a vantage point, outside the text, from which the Amos landscape suddenly took on new and surprising contours. Judith Sanderson, in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, noticed, as everyone else has, how the oracles of Amos vigorously condemn the wealthy women of Samaria for oppressing the poor, but also, as no one else has, that they they do not champion the women among those poor. And when Amos condemns the wealthy women of Samaria, because Sanderson is a feminist reader she does not automatically adopt the prophet's standpoint, but suspects that his condemnation is yet another scapegoating of women, who are being blamed now not only for sexual sins (as usual) but for social and economic injustices in society as well.¹ 'A survey of modern commentaries on Amos 4.1 reveals the alacrity with which women are blamed for societies' evils, [and] their relative powerlessness is disregarded', she writes, metacommentatingly.² She is quite right; but her feminist critique is only a paradigm for several types of criticism that can be made.³

¹. These women, we must recall, are 'the pampered darlings of society in Israel's royalist culture...ruling the society of Israel from behind the scenes with sweet petulant nagging for wealth to support their indolent dalliance' (James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* [Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1969], p. 72).

². Judith Sanderson, 'Amos', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 205-209 (205-206).

³. I am speaking here only of more or less contemporary commentators. Some older commentators, especially when writing from an avowedly Christian perspective, did not feel the same degree of inhibition towards

Metacommentating Amos myself, I propose noticing some of the things commentators do. First, they adopt the view of the text regarding the social and economic situation in ancient Israel. Secondly, they adopt the ideology of the text regarding the existence of God and the authenticity of the prophetic vocation. Thirdly, they conceal from their readers that this is what they are doing.

1. *Commentators and the Social Critique of Amos*

I take here the woe against the rich in Amos 6.4-7:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away (NRSV).

Let me engage first in a little *Sachkritik* as a backdrop to reading some commentators. There is undoubtedly a great deal of anger in this passage against the rich in Samaria, and its spirit of denunciation against idleness and luxury strikes a chord with democratically minded and hard-working readers. But a reader who has not yet opened a commentary pauses, at least long enough to ask, What exactly is the crime of these Samaritans for

evaluation of their text. Here, for example, is Richard S. Cripps: '[T]he Prophet's conception of God is not perfect. One of the mistakes which the Christian Church has made, resulting in damage impossible to calculate, has been to standardise as eternal and ultimate truth that which was but a stage—however lofty—in the slow process of its revelation and discovery... If any picture of God found within the O.T. had been perfect, then one of the reasons for the appearing of Jesus would have become unnecessary' (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* [London: SPCK, 1929], p. 25). However unacceptable today the theory of 'progressive revelation' may be, at least it enabled its adherents to adopt a critical stance toward their texts.

which they are being threatened with exile? Is there some sin in having expensive ivory inlays on your bedframe? (Amos, we presume, is not worried about the fate of elephants.) No doubt meat of any kind was something of a delicacy in ancient Israel, and these people are eating the meat of choice animals prepared for the table; but is that wrong?⁴ (Again we can suppose that Amos is not vegetarian and that the text has no fault to find with the farming methods.)⁵ And as for singing idle songs, who among the readers of Amos can cast a stone? Has karaoke sud-

⁴. Oh yes, say Andersen and Freedman (F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Anchor Bible, 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989], p. 562). 'The details of the menu supplied by v 4b indicate the unconscionable extravagance of the feast... The sumptuous provision of beef and lamb, and young and tender animals as well, points to eating on a scale far beyond the means of the ordinary worker or farmer.' But are we to read a 'menu' in the reference to 'lambs from the flock' and 'calves from the stall'? Can we even say that Amos means that both are eaten at the same feast? In any case, would it be 'unconscionable extravagance' to have two kinds of meat served at the one banquet? How many unconscionably extravagant restaurants have Andersen and Freedman eaten in, I wonder, and shall we say that if Andersen orders lamb and Freedman veal that their 'excessive behavior' is 'its own condemnation' (cf. p. 563)? And, incidentally, exactly how many items are on this 'menu' anyway? Either it is 'beef and lamb' or it is 'young and tender animals', but it is not 'young and tender animals *as well*'. And is there something reprehensible in eating lamb rather than mutton, Wiener-schnitzel rather than Hungarian goulash? Or is it perhaps that the reference to 'young and tender' animals—whom we all feel sensitive about—is nothing more than a rhetorical ploy to make the unsuspecting reader take sides uncritically with the prophet against his opponents?

⁵. The cryptic remark of Hammershaimb, however, gives pause for thought (Erling Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* [trans. John Sturdy; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970], p. 100). 'It hurts the feelings of the shepherd of Tekoa that good animals are used for feasts of this sort', he says, and the reader wonders whether Amos perhaps thinks the rich should serve diseased animals for dinner, or whether he is against them having opulent feasts but would find no fault with, shall we say, humble feasts—or whether, perhaps, the 'shepherd of Tekoa' entertains tender vegetarian feelings toward his charges.

denly become a sin, as well as a social disease?⁶ Drinking wine out of bowls instead of cups does admittedly sound greedy, and anointing yourself with the finest (and presumably most expensive) oil rather than bargain basement value-for-money oil is certainly self-indulgent. But how serious is self-indulgence? Is it a crime? Is it a sin that deserves a sentence of deportation? Does being wealthy and conspicuously consuming renewable natural resources (wine, oil, mutton and elephant tusks) put you in line for exile, by any reasonable standards? What are the rich supposed to have been doing? If expensive oil is on sale in the market and you have the money in your pocket to buy it, where is the sin?

Ah well, say the commentators, it's more serious than that. The prophetic criticism is that these people have been indulging themselves *and at the same time* not feeling any pain at the ruin of their people (6.7). So, says the metacommentator, if they *had* been worried about the fate of the nation, it would have been all right for them to be self-indulgent? Well, no, not quite. Actually, they are being hit on both counts. Anyway, says the metacommentator, how does the prophet know that they do not feel pain about their nation? He is presumably not invited to their parties—surely he wouldn't have the nerve to complain about the extravagance if he were—so how does he know what they feel and don't feel? Ah well, it's obvious that if they felt any pain they wouldn't be having parties. Is it? If Rome really is burning, what else is there left to do except fiddle?

Would it perhaps be just as true to say, Amos hates the rich because he is not one of them? If he were richer, he would be using more expensive aftershave himself. It's easy to condemn other people's lifestyle and to blame the ills of society on them. But the truth about political and economic disaster and well-being is probably far too complex to be explained by the behaviour of individuals. The fate of nations is determined much more by structural matters, the operation of markets, demographic changes, disease, war and chance. To be sure, the personal behaviour of other people is not a negligible factor in everyday

⁶ The commentators think that the phrase 'like David' is an inauthentic addition to the text; but they *would* say that, wouldn't they, because otherwise it would be altogether too hard to say what was wrong with it.

life; we would all like our fellow citizens to behave better, and we know we would feel less envy and less fear if they were all more like us. But if you are a little country being targeted for annexation by a big one, as Israel was by Assyria, the high-mindedness and moral sensitivity of the average citizen are not going to make a lot of difference.

In short, it would be uncritical of us to accept Amos's analysis of his society, to simply buy the ideology of the text. Somehow we need to distance ourselves from the prophetic voice, and recognize that the prophet's is only one voice in his community. The prophet, and the text, have a corner to fight, a position to uphold, and we for our part need to identify that position, and to relativize it, not so as to discard it but only so as to give it its proper due. But, hardly surprisingly, most of the books about Amos simply take Amos's point of view for granted. Amos is right, his opponents are wrong; Amos is fair; Amos is accurate; Amos is immensely perceptive; Amos is inspired.⁷

⁷. Here is a striking example of commentators' incapacity to distinguish between the text and themselves. Andersen and Freedman (*Amos*, pp. 88-97) have a section on 'The God of Israel in the Book of Amos'. It opens by saying, 'Our purpose is to present Amos' picture of the deity, not ours, and to keep it within the thought world of the ancient Near East and the Bible rather than to translate it into contemporary theological or philosophical language' (p. 88). That sounds scholarly and objective enough. But the section concludes by saying: 'What it finally comes down to is the nature of the God of the Bible, the person with whom the prophet must deal (and vice versa) and the person around whom everything turns. When all of the superlatives have been exhausted and when all of the authority or majesty have been accorded and the recognition given to the one incomparable deity who stands uniquely alone and against everything that is perishable, vulnerable, corruptible, and the rest, he nevertheless remains a person. That is the fundamental and ultimate category in the Bible, as without it nothing else matters...Once it is agreed that this God—creator and sustainer of heaven and earth, sole and unique—is the God of the Bible and Israel and Amos and the rest of us, then we may draw closer and ask him who he is, what he is like, and how things run in this world' (p. 97). By this point, plainly, we readers are not reading any more about Amos and the ancient world, for Amos had no Bible and thus no God of the Bible. Nor are we reading about Amos's God when we read that God is 'against everything that is perishable, vulnerable, corruptible'—for are those terms not true of humanity, and is Amos's God 'against' humanity in general? And

In order to practise metacommentary, we need to do some close reading of commentaries. Here is my first exhibit:

In eighth-century Israel the rich got richer and the poor got poorer... Amos sketches the well-being enjoyed by the upper classes in the capital cities, the splendid society that was built upon the misery of the weak and poor... Expensive furniture, indolent ease, succulent food, the sound of music, and extravagant indulgence—so the affluent in Samaria live. Every item represents a luxurious sophistication that had been possible in earlier times only for royalty, and remained a world apart from the life in the villages. The hollowness of it all only becomes apparent in 6c where this heedless hedonism is thrown into relief against the ‘ruin of Joseph’ from which it is completely insulated.⁸

Such a rich text repays close reading.

*In eighth-century Israel the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.*⁹ If it is true that the rich got richer, can we be sure that the poor got poorer? The gap between rich and poor can widen even while everyone’s standard of living is improving. What about those who were neither rich nor poor (? the majority). And in any case, how can we possibly know whether the poverty portrayed in Amos was widespread; how can we know whether the rich were in some way responsible for the poverty of the poor or whether there was some structural cause, which was really no one individual’s fault, for the poverty of a minority?

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‘Splendid’ is ironic, is it not? It is not an objective scholarly description, is it? It is actually representing Amos’s (ironic) point of view in the guise of a scholarly description, is it not? And

when, at the end, we start to read about what is ‘agreed’ and are told that ‘we’ may ‘draw closer and ask him who he is’ (how?), we can feel sure that the authors’ trumpeted scholarly interests in the ancient world have been submerged by their own ideological beliefs.

⁸. Mays, *Amos*, pp. 114, 116.

⁹. Mays, *Amos*, p. 114.

¹⁰. Mays, *Amos*, p. 114.

does the author literally mean, 'built upon the misery of the weak'? It is no doubt true enough that in a competitive and entrepreneurial society the weakest go to the wall if there are no programmes for social care; but we cannot simply assume that a prosperous society owes its prosperity to the deprivation of its poor.¹¹ You couldn't say that about modern Switzerland, for example. Should not biblical commentators have to do a course in economics before they deliver themselves of opinions about Israelite society that they proffer in their own voice? Certainly, they shouldn't be allowed to parrot the prophets and pretend they are doing scholarly analysis.

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What authority has the commentator to take this high moral tone? Would he care to compare his own living standards in, let's say, Richmond, Virginia, with those of the affluent in Samaria of the eighth century BCE? Why does he seem to sneer at the spread of wealth and sophistication from the court to a wider section of the populace? Why does he not approve, as a loyal American, of the democratization of privilege that his text attests? Why does he suggest that if the villages cannot have cable TV no one else should? And what right has he to talk of 'heedless hedonism' when he himself, if he is anything like most of us academics, has probably never contributed to the gross national product, having devoted himself to the selfish pursuit of non-practical knowledge, and being parasitic, like most scholars, upon the wealth-creating sectors of the community for

¹¹. Mays actually says that 'The economic base of such luxury is violence...against the poor' (p. 117). What economic theory, we suddenly wonder, does Mays subscribe to? Can it be perhaps that he is a Marxist? Or is this not a serious economic and political remark, but only preacher's rhetoric?

¹². Mays, *Amos*, p. 116.

his own bread and butter?

And here is my second exhibit:

The prophet brutally smashes the attraction of these banquets of the chosen few in society which go on long into the night, by a mournful *hoy* ['woe']. He disturbs the fastidious and dubious atmosphere of these ceremonies where the other man's fate is completely disregarded... There are some who profit at the expense of the community; they enjoy life while the rest weep in misery. Amos does not desire a prosperity founded on oppression. That is why this fastidious set will be deported and this refined but rotten society will vanish away.¹³

From whose point of view does Amos 'brutally smash the attraction' of these banquets? Not that of the readers, presumably, since they will not be very attracted to a party where everyone has long since gone home. It will be that of the party-goers themselves; Amos thinks the national situation too serious for people to be enjoying themselves. And so, apparently, does the commentator. Without thinking, without questioning, he assumes that if Amos says it, it must be right. And what is more, it must be effective. So if Amos stands outside the window and shouts *hoy*, 'woe' (remember, he hasn't been invited to the party), everyone inside finds the party entirely spoiled, its attraction smashed and its fastidious atmosphere fatally disturbed. Really?

Amos doesn't desire a prosperity founded on oppression, says the commentator, no doubt quite correctly. But he omits to mention that neither do the wealthy of Samaria, in all probability. No one except the most depraved and cynical people walk around boasting about founding their prosperity on oppression. So the difference between Amos and those he opposes is not that he is evidently in the right and they are evidently in the wrong; it is a difference in conviction about what is and is not fair dealing. Perhaps Amos is in the right, but perhaps he is not. All I am saying is that to jump to the conclusion that he is in the right is not a scholarly procedure; it is simply the reflex of an uncritical reli-

¹³ R. Martin-Achard, *A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, in R. Martin-Achard and S. Paul Re'emi, *God's People in Crisis* (International Theological Commentary; Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1984), pp. 48, 49.

gious belief that assumes that what a prophet in the Bible says must be the truth. And yet that very Bible gives us plenty of evidence about the existence of false prophets in ancient Israel, and about the capacity for error even of those who are genuine.

2. *Commentators and the Religious Ideology of Amos*

Amos, or the book of Amos, is full of religious ideology (or theology, as we tend to call it when we are not being critical but giving our implicit assent to it). The question the metacommentator asks is whether the commentators on Amos recognize ideology when they see it. Here are some ideological statements you find in the book and in the commentaries.

a. *The Prophetic Sense of Vocation*

The book of Amos is founded on the belief that Amos the prophet had actually been spoken to by God. This is what he claims when he says, ‘Thus says Yahweh’. It is an amazing claim, and a shocking one. Most of our acquaintances, we ought to recall, think that people who claim to hear voices from the sky should be locked up. Commentators are hardy souls, however, not easily alarmed, and generous of spirit. How else to explain the fact that almost every textbook on Amos accepts Amos’s claim, the book’s ideology?

Here is the commentary of that learned German, Hans Walter Wolff. Under the heading ‘The Man Amos’ he tells us, with due scholarly caution:

When Amos was born and when he died, we do not know. How old he was at the time of his appearance around 760 BC remains hidden from us... Amos was not a native of the northern kingdom, but a Judean come from Tekoa... As a sheep breeder (and as such to be distinguished clearly from a lowly shepherd) he was probably not exactly poor.¹⁴

‘Probably not exactly’; it is the very quintessence of scholarly reserve. But then, in the very next paragraph, scholarship is thrown to the winds and pious statements of belief in the intangible and unknowable are paraded as if they belonged to the

¹⁴. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 90.

same world of discourse:

It was the hand of Yahweh which uprooted him temporarily from his familiar realm and made him break the silence of the wise in evil times (5.13). Whenever he reveals the basis for his prophetic appearance, he points exclusively to Yahweh's irresistible insistence... To those who attribute his appearance to his own brazen self-will, he directs the question whether then terror at the sudden roar of a lion could be self-willed; it is Yahweh's address that has

irresistibly impelled him to make proclamation (3.8)... [B]ecause he has been constrained by Yahweh to proclaim his judgment, Amos also exposes Israel's guilt as reason for this judgment.¹⁵

So there is a God, and his name is Yahweh, and Yahweh did indeed speak to Amos, just as Amos claims, and I am telling you this with all my authority as a German professor.¹⁶ There were those, no doubt, in Amos's own time who 'attributed his appearance to his own brazen self-will'—though the text, if I read it rightly, tells us only of those who demanded that Amos go home and stop prophesying at Bethel; whether they implied that it was not God who brought Amos to Bethel but Amos's own self-will is rather harder to determine. Anyway, says Wolff, Amos has the better of that exchange because he can whip out the lines, 'The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?' (3.8). Somehow that proves that Amos is in the right, that he has been sent by God, that there is a God, and all the rest of it. And any modern readers, by the same token, who attribute Amos's appearance at Bethel to his own brazen self-will—or even say, more modestly, that they suppose Amos just thought it was a good idea to go to Bethel and say what he believed—they too stand condemned by the prophet himself. Amos's rhetorical question is unanswerable. No matter that it is only a claim. No matter that you can't prove the validity of one claim by making another. Amos *has* been impelled by God, he *has* been constrained by Yahweh; this is historical fact. No, we do not know when he was born, and no, we cannot be sure whether he was rich or poor, but yes, we do know he was sent by God and that he was in the right and Amaziah was in the wrong.

¹⁵. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, p. 91.

¹⁶. American professors are no different, of course. Says Mays, opening his section on 'The Message' of Amos: 'Amos was Yahweh's messenger to Israel' (*Amos*, p. 6)—which six words, being interpreted, mean, Yes, there is a Yahweh, and yes, Amos is his authentic prophet and Amaziah is a fraud; I know, and I am telling you. It has all the critical finesse and scholarly sobriety of the muezzin's call to prayer: There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God. There is of course nothing wrong about the muezzin's claim, especially if you are a believer (I don't disbelieve it myself, actually); it's just that it's not critical scholarship.

b. *Inner-Religious Conflict*

There's another thing, the matter of Amaziah. I don't mind admitting that my own antipodean sympathies and prejudices every time are with the rough-hewn prophet from down under by comparison with the smooth authoritarian toady, the priest Amaziah. But I can't help thinking, But this Amaziah wasn't an atheist, he wasn't a pagan, he wasn't an irreligious man. He worshipped the same God as Amos, and he and Amos believed in almost all the same things. From my perspective, from the perspective of an Assyrian, from the perspective of almost anyone who is not caught up in the political and religious situation of the eighth century BCE, the conflict between them was no more than a minor sectarian dispute. And since we only have Amos's side of it—and that, moreover, is couched in the colourful rhetoric of poetry—how can we ever decide where right and wrong lay? and what, for that matter, would right and wrong in matters of this kind actually be?

c. *Knowledge versus Belief*

Let me try a rather more subtle example, this time from the Danish scholar Erling Hammershaimb. The reader is invited to detect the point at which the scholarship stops and the religious assumptions begin:

Amos not only knows the land of Israel...; he is also familiar with his people's history and the accounts of Yahweh's acts of kindness to the people. For him Yahweh is the creator God, who has led the people out of Egypt and preserved them during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and then defeated the Amorites in the land of Canaan, so that Israel could dwell there (2.9ff.; Amos 9.7). He knows too that Yahweh has continuously cared for the spiritual well-being of the people, and sent prophets to speak to the people and remind them of his commandments (Amos 2.11). Amos does not therefore regard himself as proclaiming something completely new...¹⁷

Amos is familiar with his people's history—that is an uncontroversial inference from the text of the book itself (provided, of course, that we leave aside the trifling matter of whether the author of the book is actually the prophet Amos). He knows the

¹⁷ Hammershaimb, *Amos*, p. 12.

'accounts' of the national god's deeds; no problem there. 'For him' Yahweh is this and that—which is the scholarly way of representing the views of others without at the same time committing oneself to them. But when we read, 'He knows too that Yahweh has continuously cared for...his people', we are bound to ask, 'Knows, does he?' How can he *know* something that is not a fact? He knows the *tradition* that Yahweh has cared for his people, but Hammershaimb cannot say that Amos 'knows' it unless Hammershaimb believes it. He cannot mean that Amos knows it but Amos might be wrong; we don't say someone 'knows' it is four o'clock if we ourselves believe it is six. Hammershaimb, though he hasn't done anything very wicked, has let his guard slip nevertheless. He persuaded us at the beginning of the paragraph that he was speaking purely as an 'objective' scholar, dispassionately describing the views of Amos, but by the third sentence he let us see that in fact he was not a disinterested observer of Amos at all, but an adherent and promoter of Amos's theological ideas. Any reader who thinks that such an analysis of the scholar's religious commitment is hypercritical might like to consider how the sentences would sound if we substituted Zeus for Yahweh, and, shall we say, Aeschylus for Amos. For Aeschylus, Zeus is the creator. Fine, we say. He knows too that Zeus has continuously sustained the Greek people. Has he indeed?, we cannot help asking.

d. *The Contrast between 'True' and 'False' Prophets*

Take another example, the matter of the terms in which the contrast between Amos and the 'professional prophets' is cast. In insisting he is not a prophet nor a prophet's son, Amos, says Hammershaimb, 'means that he is not a prophet by profession, does not belong to a band of prophets, and has not uttered his prophecies for financial gain like the professional prophets'.¹⁸ Does this mean that *Amos* claims that the 'professional prophets' utter their prophecies for financial gain, or that *Hammershaimb* believes that the 'professional prophets' did so? Given that sentence alone, it is hard to tell. Certainly, when we read that 'Amaziah himself forbids Amos to prophesy in the Northern Kingdom, and orders him out, as being a professional prophet

¹⁸. Hammershaimb, *Amos*, p. 11.

who had appeared there for the sake of gain',¹⁹ we have no doubt that the point of view being reported is that of Amaziah and not of the modern critic. But when we read, a few pages on, that Amos 'wishes to protest at being included in the same class as the professional prophets, whose preaching was not dictated by Yahweh, but by the wish to earn money',²⁰ the relative clause beginning 'whose preaching' can only be taken as the words of the scholar.²¹ It is the scholar who advances the view that the prophets Amos dissociates himself from are false prophets ('not dictated by Yahweh'), and not even sincerely mistaken, but corrupt, and motivated only by the desire for money. Amos himself (the character Amos in the text, I mean) never says that other prophets are false prophets, and never hints that the preaching of prophets and the sons of prophets is dictated by the wish to earn money. He only says that he is not a 'professional' prophet.²² As far as we know, he may have nothing against pro-

¹⁹. Hammershaimb, *Amos*, p. 113.

²⁰. Hammershaimb, *Amos*, p. 117.

²¹. It is the comma after 'professional prophets' that proves it: if there had been no comma, the 'whose preaching' clause could be understood as defining the professional prophets, and in that case could be representing the perspective of Amos; but the comma turns the clause into a descriptive clause, which can only represent the perspective of Hammerschaimb. The distinction is the same as that between 'that', which introduces a defining clause, and 'which', which introduces a descriptive clause. If it is protested that the comma may have been introduced by the translator, I offer my apologies to Hammerschaimb, and fasten the blame on the translator. And if it is protested that I am making a lot of fuss about a comma, I will reply that, in this case, on that comma hangs the difference between giving the impression that one is uncritically adopting the opinions of Amos or being a critical scholar. Real critical scholars will go to any lengths to prevent a comma cheating them of their reputation.

²². He may even be saying that he *was* not a professional prophet, but he *is* now. If Yahweh has *taken* him from following the flock, he is not being a shepherd any longer, is he? And if he is not earning a living from shepherding, is he perhaps earning it from prophesying?

But where does the idea of 'professional prophet' come from, anyway? Does *nabi* mean that? Was Ezekiel, who was a professional priest, also a professional prophet? And in any case, is Amaziah implying that Amos is prophesying for the sake of income, and is he urging Amos to earn his living from prophesying elsewhere, or does 'eat bread' mean what it means

fessional prophets; the sum and substance of his reply to Amaziah might well be simply his affirmation of the genuineness of his own calling. And we too might do well to think twice before assuming that ‘professional’ prophets are in the business of prophesying just for the money; Hammershaimb was a professional biblical scholar, but we wouldn’t dream of saying that he was motivated by the wish to earn money.

e. *Punishment*

It is an essential element in the text’s ideology that sin should be punished. The book opens with a powerful indictment of the nations that surround Israel for their crimes, and a repeated threat of punishment. As each nation comes into focus, the prophetic message is: ‘For three transgressions of X and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof’ (e.g. 1.3).²³ Any ‘departure’ from God is visited with punishment, as in the catalogue of disasters in ch. 4 (famine and plague and war) that failed to make Israel ‘return’ to the Lord. And the repeated ‘therefore’ is a further sign of the prophetic ideology; the familiar pattern is: an account of a sin, followed by the ‘therefore’ that introduces the punishment. The denunciation of the rich that we have already looked at, ‘Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory’, likewise comes to a conclusion with such a ‘therefore’: ‘Therefore they shall be the first of those to go into exile’ (6.7). And to the sin of Amaziah in forbidding Amos to prophesy, there is the same ‘therefore’ of punishment: ‘Therefore thus says the LORD, Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city...’ (7.17)—which Amos, interestingly enough, thinks of as a punishment of *him*.

What do the commentators make of this ideology? They never discuss it; they only repeat it. They agree with Amos that both Israel and the surrounding nations *deserve to be punished*, and that such punishment should be *capital*. Here, for example, is John Bright:

everywhere else, ‘eat’, not ‘earn’? In sum, has the whole idea of ‘gain’ perhaps been entirely imported into the text?

²³ Actually, the Hebrew text does not have a word for ‘punishment’, but it is obvious—from the ideology of the book as a whole, really—that it can only be punishment that is inevitable after a crime.

Amos's message was a devastating attack on the social evils of the day, particularly on the heartlessness and dishonesty with which the rich had ground down the poor..., but also on the immorality and the careless pursuit of luxury which had sapped the national character...—all of which he viewed as sins that Yahweh would surely punish.²⁴

The metacommentator is bound to ask whether modern scholars are aware of what they are doing. They are adopting the view, and presenting it as their own, that the best way, or perhaps the only way, of dealing with heartlessness, dishonesty, immorality and luxury (to adopt Bright's terms) is to wipe the offenders out of existence. The metacommentator observes (but is not surprised) how, when it is the deity who is punishing, high-minded commentators who would not harm a fly themselves suddenly join the hanging and flogging brigade and think no punishment too severe.

Nor do the commentators seem to notice the conflict between the apparent justice of punishing those who deserve it and the obvious injustice of punishing those who do not. Mays, for example, can write that the 'prophecy of Amos can be heard as Yahweh's response to their [the poor's] cry, for the weak and poor are the special objects of Yahweh's compassion and concern';²⁵ but at the same time he can say that 'the consistent burden of his [Amos's] oracles is to announce the disaster that will fulfil Yahweh's decree of an end for his people'.²⁶ He doesn't seem to notice that Yahweh can't be very compassionate to the poor if he intends them to be carried into exile because of the wrongdoing of their leaders, or that the prophet's demand for justice does not seem to apply to the deity.²⁷

²⁴. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 3rd edn, 1981), p. 262.

²⁵. Mays, *Amos*, p. 10.

²⁶. Mays, *Amos*, p. 9.

²⁷. Here is a typical commentatorial utterance on the subject: 'The conception of Yahweh which Amos entertains is that of a god of justice... [Amos] makes the idea the very centre of his conception of God... Righteousness being a vital element in Yahweh's character, he not only will demand it in those who profess to be his followers, but will also enforce the demand... It is a demand for justice, which, in its simplest and most natural form, includes honesty, integrity, purity, and humanity... It demands the

These commentators surely know that they have many options open to them when they themselves are wronged by someone else, and that inflicting injury on others is either a raw instinctive impulse or else a cruel cold-blooded decision that they come to at the end of their tether, feel guilty about, but try to justify nevertheless on some rational grounds. But once they start commenting on Amos they accede to Amos's simple moral defeatism. Not one of them has the courage—or the intellectual capacity—to extract himself (they are all males) from the ideology of the text and to pronounce a moral judgment upon the prophecy. To be sure, the future was very much as the prophecy says—whether it predicted it or wrote it up in hindsight. Things were awful, for rich and poor alike. But it is even more awful to ascribe the destruction of a state and the forceable deportation of its citizens to an avenging God. If that is how a believer finds himself or herself impelled to conclude, that it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God, the metacommentator can respect that. But to affirm it casually, to pretend that it is unproblematic—that is not scholarly, it is not even human.

Must the metacommentator be so waspish?, readers are likely to be asking themselves. Does everything have to become so *personal*, and is it truly scholarly to question the motives and interests of our colleagues, as I have been doing throughout this paper?

The answer is, Yes. It must be, once we admit that we are not all engaged in some objective quest for determinate meanings, and that our ideologies, our locations, our interests and our personalities determine our scholarship—and separate us from one another. Strip away the bonhomie that passes for scholarly inter-

utmost consideration of the poor and weak,—*moral justice*' (William Rainey Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* [International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905], pp. cxvii-cxviii, cxx). It simply does not occur to this commentator to ask whether in Amos's conception this moral standard applies to Yahweh, and whether the threats of famine, fire, exile and the like can be accommodated with 'the utmost consideration of the poor and weak'. At least Harper does not try to argue that the punishments are 'a token and proof of divine concern and commitment' (Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, p. 383), a disingenuous claim if ever there was one.

change in the corridors of the international congresses, and we find that there is a lot we don't like, don't approve of, and will not stand for, in our colleagues, a lot that has yet to be brought into the light, taken the measure of, and fought over. Managing personal conflict within the academy may well be the new skill, harder still than Assyriology or deconstruction, that scholars will need to acquire in this decade.²⁸

²⁸. Examples of the 'new brutality', as we might term it, in biblical scholarship, may be found in the recent pages of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; witness the paper of Ben F. Meyer against E.P. Sanders ('A Caricature of Joachim Jeremias and his Scholarly Work', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 [1991], pp. 451-62), and that of Meir Sternberg against Danna Fewell and David Gunn ('Biblical Poetics and Sexual Poetics: From Reading to Counter-Reading', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 [1992], pp. 463-88). I neither welcome it nor deplore it; the tensions that come to the surface in such acerbic reviews are already in existence, and no good can come of suppressing them.