CHAPTER 4

The Nations in Amos

In comparison with Hosea’s dismissal of any important relation (other than complete independence) between Israel/Judah and the nations, and even in comparison with Joel’s eschatological focus on the nations as YHWH’s opponent, Amos accords a significant place to the nations in both the immediate and distant future. Equally striking is the way that Amos uses oracles against the nations: rather than employing them to affirm Israel’s safety and superiority, as suggested by some theories about their origins, Amos does precisely the opposite.1 Beginning with brief descriptions of the nations’ rebellion (פשע) in the present and the punishment that YHWH will soon bring upon it, the bulk of the book outlines in detail the rebellion of the northern kingdom and the inevitable, nearly complete destruction that will come upon it as a result. Further, when the book does finally develop an eschatological denouement, some of the nations participate in Israel’s deliverance in surprising ways.

This interplay between Israel (and to a lesser extent Judah) and the nations makes clear that there is some significant relationship between the two in Amos. The movement from the nations to Israel in the opening chapters is unified by a shared literary form (regardless of whether the Tyre and Edom oracles derive from the same source as the others) in which every group’s behavior is termed פשע and will meet with divine judgment, typically under the image of אש.2 A similar connection between the fates of Israel and the nations appears in the material following the book’s fifth and final vision, where the complex changes announced with respect to Israel also have significant effects on some portion of the nations (9:12).

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2 A.C. Hagedorn, “Edom in the Book of Amos and Beyond,” in Aspects of Amos: Exegesis and Interpretation (ed. A.C. Hagedorn and A. Mein; LHBOTS 536; London: T & T Clark, 2011), 41–57 (45–46) notes an interesting analogue to some of these oracles’ content (though not to their form and genre) in Shalmaneser III’s Kurkh Monolith: “I departed from the city of Aleppo…I approached the cities of…I captured…and) his royal cities…I carried off his captives, his valuables, (and) his palace possessions. I set fire to his palaces.”
4.1 Terminology

We begin with a taxonomy of nations terminology in Amos, using categories that are as objective as possible but which also usefully categorize Amos' language.

4.1.1 Proper Nouns for Groups

A number of proper nouns designate city/nation-states and ethnic groups in Amos. In two cases ethnic groups are identified by gentilics: Ammonites (בני עמון, 1:13) and Cushites (בני כשיים, 9:7). None of these entities are unattested outside Amos, although in some cases we are almost entirely without substantial knowledge of their history (e.g., Calneh). The complete absence of Assyria from the book is remarkable, even if it is hinted at as the destination of exile in 5:27 and even if the mysterious ענך of 7:7, 8 is an Akkadian loan word that hints at the nation responsible for the destruction that is announced there. This feature is partial evidence that these oracles date from a time when there was no appreciable Assyrian threat.³

The following is an exhaustive list of the proper nouns that refer to non-Israelite nations (or, occasionally, territory) in Amos:

- Edom (1:6, 9, 11; 2:1; 9:12);
- Philistines (1:8; 6:2; 9:7);
- Tyre (1:9, 10);
- Moab (2:1, 2);
- Amorite (2:9, 10, as destroyed [שמד, as 9:8] by YHWH in the conquest of Canaan);
- Egypt (2:10, 3:1, and 9:7 as the point of origin for Israel's exodus; 3:9, as a witness of Israel's sin; 4:10, as a point of comparison; 8:8; 9:5 as the location of the Nile);
- Sodom and Gomorrah (4:11, as comparisons with punished Israel);
- Calneh (6:2, as already punished);
- Hamath the Great (6:2, as already punished; 6:14 as the northern limit of Israel's territory);
- Aram (9:7, the region standing for its associated people group).

³ Aaron Schart, personal communication.