THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATING OF
AMOS VI 2: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
FROM TELL EŠ-ŠĀFI/GATH

by

AREN M. MAEIR
Ramat Gan, Israel

I

The oracle in Amos vi 1-7 has been the subject of considerable discussion. The social, religious, and cultural realia reflected in these verses have sparked the imagination of many scholars, in the context of understanding both the biblical text and its ancient Near Eastern background. A mere glance at Carroll’s recent compendium of Amos studies is enough to get an idea of the immense volume of research relating to these passages. Among the various issues that have been discussed, numerous commentators have attempted to understand the exact meaning and historical background of verse 2:

Pass ye unto Calneh, and see; and from thence go ye to Hamath the great: then go down to Gath of the Philistines: be they better than these kingdoms? or their border greater than your border? (KJV)

Several central questions have been raised about this passage:

1) What is its narrative significance? Is it intended to serve as a warning to the “wicked Israelites” of the punishment awaiting them, similar to the miserable fate of these three well-known cities or even, as has been suggested, to the postulated future demise of these cities?

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1 I would like to thank W. Schniedewind and S. Paul for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. A quite similar version of this paper was presented at the New England Regional meeting of the SBL (ASOR session) in Newton, MA, May, 2003. Finally, I would like to thank Edna Sachar for copy editing this text.

2 Carroll.

3 E.g., Hammershaimb, p. 99; Wolff, pp. 274-75; Barton, p. 23; Finley, pp. 261-64; Blum, pp. 32-34; Holland, p. 173; Paul, pp. 201-04; Jeremias, p. 114; Shank, pp. 260-61; Na‘aman, pp. 210-12.

4 E.g., Andersen and Freedman, p. 559; Sweeney, pp. 243-44.
Or, perchance, based on the unamended reading of the text ("... or their border greater than your border?")", is it to be understood as the Israelites themselves bragging about their strength compared to these three cities? 5

2) If one accepts that the passage refers to these three cities after they had been destroyed, when did these events occur and what is the *terminus post quem* of this passage? The majority of scholars have seen this as a description of events that occurred after the early 8th century BCE (the accepted dating of Amos’ ministry), most likely in association with the campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III in 745-727 BCE (for the conquests of Hamath and Calneh) and Sargon II in 711 BCE (for Gath). 6 A minority opinion, however, has posited that the events referred to in this passage in fact occurred at an earlier date, most probably during the 9th century BCE, in association with the conquests of Shalmeneser III of Assyria, or Hazael of Aram. 7 Accepting the former interpretation, one is forced to assume either that the passage itself was a later addition to the primary text of Amos (which, to reiterate, is conventionally dated to the first half of the 8th century BCE) or that the entire text is late. On the other hand, the second interpretation allows for the passage to be part of the original text, fitting in well with the geo-political context in Syria and Palestine during the late 9th/early 8th century BCE.

In a recently published study, Na’aman vigorously presents historical arguments that the passage reflects events of the late 9th century BCE. 8 In fact, he suggests that all three of these cities were conquered by Hazael. In this brief note, recently unearthed archaeological evidence is presented that appears to confirm this view. 9

II

Tell es-Sâfi is a large, multi-period ancient mound situated on the border between Philistia and the Judean Shephelah, on the southern

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5 E.g., Mays, p. 115.
6 E.g., Wolff, pp. 274-75; Barton, p. 23; Holland, p. 173; Blum, pp. 32-34; Jeremias, p. 114; Shank, pp. 260-61.
7 Hammershaimb, p. 99; Finley, pp. 261-64; Paul, pp. 201-04; Na’aman, pp. 210-12.
8 Na’aman, pp. 210-12.
9 Na’aman (p. 212) briefly alludes to the archaeological finds from Tell es-Sâfi/Gath that are presented in more detail below; he and the present author indeed discussed these very points during his visit to the excavations in the summer of 2000.