

“O Lord God, Forgive!”

Prophetic Intercession in Amos

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Prophets are commonly defined as messengers or spokesmen who represent God and make known his will to people on earth. Less familiar, however, are scriptural depictions that flip this image and show prophets representing humans before God. For example, “Samuel told all the words of the LORD unto the people,” but then he also “heard all the words of the people, and he rehearsed them in the ears of the LORD” (1 Samuel 8:10, 21). One important way the prophets act as emissaries to God is by engaging in intercession, that is, speaking to God in behalf of others in order to defend or assist them.¹ Their pleas for their fellow mortals respond to or anticipate some calamity, often at God’s own hand. In one account, “the LORD sent thunder and rain that day . . . And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the LORD thy God, that we die not” (12:18–19). Not only did Samuel agree to take their plea to the Lord but also told them, “God forbid that I should sin against

the LORD in ceasing to pray for you" (12:23). Samuel saw such prayers as a crucial part of his prophetic ministry.²

Although Samuel, Moses, and Jeremiah are the Bible's most famous prophet-intercessors, in this chapter I will focus on the intercessory activity of a less well-known figure, the prophet Amos. I will begin by analyzing relevant passages in the book of Amos line by line, attempting to clarify their context for those less familiar with them. I will then explore how these passages use intercession to advance the message of God's coming judgment. Like many texts describing intercession, the rhetoric of Amos's experiences can be difficult, even troubling, for modern readers, and so I will close with a more theologically oriented reflection on how we might understand that rhetoric.

Introduction to Amos

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BC, a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah. He describes himself as a "herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit" (Amos 7:14), before "the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and . . . said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel" (7:15). This call brought him from his native Tekoa, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (1:1), to prophesy to those living in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The book of Amos consists of just nine modern chapters, but its internal structure is quite complex, and theories about its composition and editing vary considerably.³ Amos's intercessory petitions appear in the context of four visions, found in Amos 7:1–3, 7:4–6, 7:7–9, and 8:1–3. The first two visions form a complementary pair, as do the last two, and the four together form two contrasting pairs.⁴ The book contains an additional vision in 9:1–4, but it does not share the same structural connections as the first four; therefore, I do not include it in the discussion below.⁵

The First and Second Visions: Amos Successfully Intercedes for Israel

The first and second visions (7:1–3 and 7:4–6) have a very similar structure. Each opens with Amos beholding a terrible disaster: a plague of locusts and a devouring fire, respectively. That Amos would be privileged to preview God’s plans is in harmony with a statement from elsewhere in his book: “Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets” (3:7). As these visions unfold, Amos reacts to the scenes of destruction by interceding in Israel’s behalf. For the locusts he pleads, “O Lord GOD, forgive” (7:2), and for the fire he changes a single word—“O Lord GOD, cease” (7:5). Both “forgive” and “cease” are commands, even in Hebrew, suggesting Amos’s urgency.⁶

Following his pleas to either forgive or stop, the first two visions proceed with Amos offering the same brief explanation: “By whom shall Jacob arise? for he is small” (7:2, 5). “Small” is perhaps best understood as a relative description, acknowledging that however powerful Israel may be, it would be irreversibly devastated by the “firepower” God proposes sending against it. Some have interpreted Amos’s words as an emotional appeal, revealing a tender heart within a man often characterized as a prophet of doom. Others see this as a forceful accusation that total annihilation would violate God’s covenant promises. Whether his words are a sympathetic response or a suit for breach of contract (or both), it is significant that Amos does not appeal to the people’s righteousness or repentance—and given the tone of the rest of the book, there does not appear to be much evidence for either.

Following Amos’s intercessions comes the Lord’s response. After the first intercession, the account reports: “The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD” (7:3). The report after the second intercession varies only slightly: “The LORD repented for this: This also shall not be, saith the Lord GOD” (7:6). The King James Version’s

phrasing of “the LORD repented” is problematic for modern readers. “Repented” translates the Hebrew verb *nĥm*, a theologically rich word with a variety of possible meanings, including “to regret,” “to feel sorrow or sympathy,” “to comfort,” or “to relent or forebear.” Rather than God “repenting” (with that word’s modern connotation of sinfulness), a better contextual translation in Amos 7:3, 6 might be “the Lord relented” or “the Lord changed his mind.”⁷ Thus Amos’s intercessions during the first and second visions meet with success—at least for a time.

The Third and Fourth Visions: Amos Does Not Intercede for Israel

Just as the first and second visions share a similar structure, the third and fourth visions (7:7–9; 8:1–3) can be read in parallel. Each vision opens with God showing Amos an object: first, “a plumbline in his [God’s] hand” (7:7), and second, “a basket of summer fruit” (8:1). In each case God then asks, “Amos, what seest thou?” (7:8; 8:2). To both queries Amos gives a brief response: “A plumbline” and “A basket of summer fruit.” These answers are Amos’s final words in these two visions; God does all the talking from this point forward.

In response to Amos’s identification of the plumbline—a tool used to make a vertical reference line during construction—God states, “Behold, I will set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them any more: And the high places of Isaac shall be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste; and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (7:8–9). The plumbline indicates that Israel’s behavior is not aligned with God’s commands, and it will consequently be destroyed.⁸ This time, Amos offers no intercessory protest.

In response to Amos’s identification of the basket of summer fruit, God states, “The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again

pass by them any more. And the songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day, saith the Lord GOD: there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth with silence” (8:2–3). A Hebrew word-play connects the “summer fruit” (*qāyis*) with God’s pronouncement of the coming “end” (*qēs*). Again, Amos offers no challenge to this plan.⁹

In both the third and fourth visions, God repeats the key line, “I will not again pass by them any more” (7:8; 8:2). The phrase “pass by” translates the Hebrew *ʿbr*, a common verb that usually refers to spatial movement, such as “to pass through” or “go, come, or cross over.” The word *ʿbr* also has a number of figurative meanings, one of which is the forgiving of sin (for examples, see 2 Samuel 12:13, 24:10, Micah 7:18, Job 7:21, or Zechariah 3:4). Something like “forgive” or “pardon” is the most likely fit for the context of Amos 7:8 and 8:2.¹⁰

The final Hebrew word at the end of the fourth vision, *has*, presents some interpretive challenges. In the King James Version, it appears as the adverbial phrase “with silence,” as in, “there shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth *with silence* [*hās*]” (Amos 8:3; emphasis added to show how the Hebrew and English words relate). This interesting little word appears in only six other contexts:

Judges 3:19: “[The king] said [to his courtiers], *Keep silence* [*hās*].”

Nehemiah 8:11: “The Levites stilled all the people, saying, *Hold your peace* [*hassû*].”

Amos 6:10: “Then shall [the survivors] say, *Hold thy tongue* [*hās*].”

Habakkuk 2:20: “*Let all the earth keep silence* [*has*] before [the LORD].”

Zephaniah 1:7: “*Hold thy peace* [*has*] at the presence of the Lord GOD.”

Zechariah 2:13: “*Be silent* [*has*], O all flesh, before the LORD.”

All six of these other examples use *has* in an imperative or jussive (command) sense, that is, “hush!” or “be quiet!” We should probably therefore take *has* in Amos 8:3 as a command as well. Most modern-English translations do render it as a command, such as in this example from the New Revised Standard Version: “‘The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ says the Lord GOD; ‘the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!’”

So if the last word at the end of the four visions commands silence, who does the commanding? The meaning of Amos 8:3 “has been differently perceived by different translators and interpreters” because the difficult Hebrew makes it less than clear how to tie together “the formal, logical, and syntactic connections among the various parts [of the verse].”¹¹ The most common approach among commentators is to compare this verse to Amos 6:9–10, a passage that also speaks of calamity and also uses the word *has*:

And it shall come to pass, if there remain ten men in one house, that they shall die.

And a man’s uncle shall take him up, and he that burneth him, to bring out the bones out of the house, and shall say unto him that is by the sides of the house, Is there yet any with thee? and he shall say, No. Then shall he say, *Hold thy tongue* [*hās*]: for we may not make mention of the name of the LORD.

Some scholars understand the command for silence in this passage as reflecting a superstitious fear that speaking the name of the deity—who has destroyed large numbers of people already—will bring down death upon those who have survived.¹² Because Amos 8:3 also uses the word *has* in the context of widespread death, commentators then interpret *has* in Amos 8:3 the same way, as the cry of humans responding to the carnage. And if the final word of 8:3 is spoken by humans, then that word opens the door for the entire second half of the verse to be human speech as well, speech providing the content

of the “howlings” mentioned in the first half of the verse. This is the logic behind such translations as this example from the English Standard Version: “‘The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ declares the Lord GOD. ‘So many dead bodies!’ ‘They are thrown everywhere!’ ‘Silence!’”

I question this common interpretation of Amos 8:3 for two reasons. First, I am unconvinced that Amos 6:10 and 8:3 share such a “similar context”¹³ as many have proposed. Yes, each involves mass death, but Amos 6:9–10 describes men at a house, while Amos 8:3 describes singers at the temple. Apart from the words *bas* and *yhw*h (“the LORD”), the two passages share not a single vocabulary word, even in cases where words very easily could have been identical, such as *lāhōšî* (“bring out”) or *‘āšāmîm* (“bones”) in 6:10, compared with *hišlik* (“cast out”) or *happeger* (“corpses”) in 8:3. Second, I believe the grammatical evidence from Amos 8:3 points away from a change of speakers midway through that verse, meaning God is still speaking clear to the end.¹⁴ Given those reasons, and although it runs against most commentaries, I suggest it is the Lord who commands “Silence!” at the close of the fourth vision.

If God commands silence in Amos 8:3, whom does he command? The most recent indicator of who speaks to whom appeared in the previous verse, where Amos stated, “Then said the LORD unto me . . .” If no change of speaker occurs in 8:3, then the most logical conclusion is that God continues to address Amos. His intentions will be addressed below.

The Message of the Visions

Having surveyed each of the visions, we can now examine them together. Indeed, most scholars have concluded that the reports of these visions were composed together and that “there is a certain development and progression between them.”¹⁵ While we cannot

recover all the details about the experiences that lay behind the vision reports—whether they occurred on separate occasions or in succession, for example—the literary presentations of those visions in Amos 7:1–9 and 8:1–3 probably “form a single composition with its own message which can be discerned only when the separate elements are viewed together in their interrelationship.”¹⁶ Unfortunately for Amos’s contemporaries, that unified message seems to be that Israel is headed toward an irreversible doom. Prophetic intercession, or the lack of it, functions as a rhetorical tool to reinforce that message.

This message of inevitable destruction begins to take shape in the first and second visions. Although Amos successfully intercedes during both of them, it does not bode well that (as presented) the first successful intercession is followed immediately by a second proposal of disaster. In addition, the change from “forgive” in the first vision to “cease” in the second may reveal a subtle but important shift in Amos’s approach. “Forgive” is translated from the Hebrew verb *slh*, “to forgive or pardon.” This verb appears forty-six times in the Old Testament, and in every instance, God is the subject of the verb, the one doing the forgiving.¹⁷ “Cease” is translated from the Hebrew verb *hdl*, “to stop, cease, or desist.” This verb appears fifty-seven times in the Old Testament, but, in contrast to *slh*, this is the only instance where God is the subject of the verb.¹⁸ Thus, Amos moves from asking God to do something perfectly routine to asking for something completely unprecedented (at least within the literary corpus of the Bible). This strange shift may be deliberate. “Forgive” gets back to the root problem of sin, while “cease” targets only the punishment and leaves sin unresolved.¹⁹ The second request seeks to gain less than the first and perhaps represents an awkward compromise as Amos continues to defend a people who reject his prophetic critiques.

If Amos’s transition from “forgive” to “cease” represents a retreat, then that trajectory is made explicit in the shift to the third and fourth visions. As we have seen, God states in that final pair of visions

that “I will not again pass by them any more,” meaning he will not pardon the people. Structurally, this denial of forgiveness foils the clemency shown in the first and second visions, in which God stated that “it [the punishment] shall not be.” The words “again” and “any more” presuppose that forgiveness was granted previously and thus connect the third and fourth visions with the first and second. This deliberate tie back to Amos’s successful intercessions suggests that God, more than simply denying forgiveness, is also denying any new attempts to intercede.

God’s denial of intercession to Amos—his message of irreversible doom—may also be reflected in how their dialogue is portrayed in these texts. A count of the number of Hebrew words each party speaks to the other reveals a striking pattern:²⁰

First vision:	Amos, 10	God, 2
Second vision:	Amos, 10	God, 4
Third vision:	Amos, 1	God, 26
Fourth vision:	Amos, 2	God, 28

In contrast to the first pair of visions, God has almost completely monopolized the conversation in the second pair. Given the intercessory content of Amos’s words in the first two visions, his diminished speaking role in the final two visions highlights that the option to intercede has been withdrawn.

God’s denial of intercession may also be emphasized by the final word of the final vision, *has*, “silence!” I argued previously that God gives this command to Amos. Assuming that reading is correct, I find it plausible that the purpose of this order is to cut off any further intercession. This is, after all, the final word of a vision series that is very much shaped by its intercessory dynamic. This is also perhaps the point where Amos might most wish to intercede. The first vision saw the destruction of “the grass of the land” (7:2);

the second vision, “the great deep” and “a part [of the land]” (7:4); and the third vision, “the high places,” “the sanctuaries,” and “the house of Jeroboam” (7:9)—but only in the fourth vision are the people *themselves* the direct target, and Amos is forced to behold “many” of them, all “dead bodies” (8:3). While the text records no open protest in the third and fourth visions, it is telling that God must state yet again that the time for discussion is past.²¹

Intercession and the Character of God

Amos’s experience being denied intercession highlights the theological discomfort that may arise when modern readers study intercessory accounts in scripture. Defensive arguments like Amos’s make the prophet sound very much like a legal advocate, which leaves God playing the role of prosecutor—and in some depictions, a very vengeful prosecutor. As readers, are we to piously identify with God, to mentally seek acceptance of the people’s well-deserved penalty? Or can we not help but feel a kinship with our fellow humans and thus see the prophet as “our” hero? Bible readers over the centuries have often resorted to two interpretive extremes, either condemning Jehovah as a cruel and bloodthirsty deity on the one hand or apologizing for God on the other by arguing *ad extremum* that the people very much deserve to suffer. Both views fail to grasp the full dynamics of the intercessory experience.

Prophetic intercession involves a dialogue between the prophet and God, a give-and-take flow of ideas and identities. Because prophets tap into the mind of God, even as they remain mortal men, the roles both parties play in relation to one another are not always what they seem. We may ask, if God were solely interested in prosecuting Israel, why bother holding conversations with the defense in the first place? God also serves as judge, and judgment would certainly be easier without the debate. But easier is not what he chooses.

“Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do[?]” God asks, before deciding no (Genesis 18:17). He tells Abraham of his plans to destroy Sodom, Abraham balks, and the intercessory probing begins (see 18:20–33). One cannot help but sense that God had intended this all along. The invitation to be challenged hints that the prosecution has more in mind than winning. Furthermore, the fact that God the judge so often decides *against* God the prosecutor suggests that, despite all the talk of death and doom, God the judge really isn’t rooting for God the prosecutor after all. The division between judge, prosecution, and defense begins to break down.

Despite their literary presentation as such, intercessory episodes are not really a fight to change God’s mind. Perhaps it is better to understand them as creative explorations into one of the marvelous paradoxes of our theology: the simultaneous operation of both justice and mercy within God himself. Exodus 34:6–7 records God’s own description of this duality: “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.” Latter-day revelation provides equally poignant depictions of this internal contradiction: “And the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them; and in my hot displeasure will I send in the floods upon them, for my fierce anger is kindled against them. . . . Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (Moses 7:34, 37).

As Amos and other prophets speak out against God’s plans for punishment, they may actually personify God’s own desire to grant mercy. Jewish scholar Yochanan Muffs argues the following:

If there is no balance in the divine emotion, if justice gets the upper hand over mercy, then the world is placed in great danger. Therefore, God allows the prophet to represent in

his prayer His own attribute of mercy, the very element that enables a calming of God's feelings. . . . Even at the moment of His anger, He manifests His love by listening to the prayers of the prophets, prayers that control and calm His anger.²²

As prophets give voice to God's own desire to forgive, the literary dialogues may serve a didactic purpose—that is, the story may be there to teach us something. God could have simply told Abraham he would spare Sodom if he could find ten righteous people. But that would not have the same rhetorical effect as our actual text—eleven verses of Abraham pleading for a lower and lower and lower threshold, while God shows mercy again and again and again.²³

This perspective might also be helpful to Latter-day Saints who wish to read these texts through a doctrinal lens that understands prophetic intercession as typological for the role of Jesus. Several scriptural passages pick up this imagery, describing Christ as one who “make[s] intercession” (Hebrews 7:25, 2 Nephi 2:9, Mosiah 15:8) or one who is our “advocate with the Father” (1 John 2:1, D&C 29:5, 32:3, 110:4), “who is pleading [our] cause before him—saying: . . . Father, spare these my brethren” (D&C 45:3–5). The rhetoric of advocacy does not force the conclusion that God, as judge and prosecutor, delights in punishing people. Indeed, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught that one of the great purposes of Christ's ministry was to act as the Father's love personified, to teach the people through his actions what the Father's own compassion looks like.²⁴

What about circumstances where intercession fails? Amos, after all, was successful only in diverting judgment for so long. As God explained with his plumbline analogy, those who fail to align with his covenant standards cannot forever escape the consequences. Most of the rest of the book of Amos consists of a series of indictments against the Israelites, such as his skewering of the upper class for exploiting the poor (Amos 2:6–7, 4:1, 5:11–12, 6:4–7). In such circumstances, blame for the penalty lies not with God for acting nor

with the intercessor for failing to act but with the people who have refused to repent. Seen in this light, God’s command for Amos not to intercede anymore becomes an ironic echo of the Israelites who told Amos, “O thou seer, go, flee thee away . . . [and] prophesy not again any more” (Amos 7:12–13).

Still, when justice does demand that God act, prophetic literature often records a promise of renewal; even as bleak a book as Amos ends with hope for better days (Amos 9:11–15).²⁵ Jeremiah, another prophet who was denied intercession, promised:

For thus saith the LORD, That after [the penalty] be accomplished . . . , I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you. . . .

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you.

And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:10–13)

Notes

1. Although the definition of intercessory prayer has been debated, most scholars maintain that the petition must be offered in behalf of another and that it must invite God to act in response (i.e., simple lamenting is not enough). See Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 9–48; Samuel E. Balentine, “The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 161–73; and Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 262–80.

2. Other biblical texts involving prophetic intercession include Genesis 18:22–32; 20:7, 17; Exodus 32:7–14, 30–32; Numbers 11:1–2; 12:13; 14:11–20; 16:20–22; Deuteronomy 9:14, 18–20, 25–29; 10:10; 1 Samuel 7:5, 8–13; 15:11; 1 Kings 17:20–22; 18:41–45; 2 Kings 4:32–35; 6:17–20; Isaiah 37:4; Jeremiah 4:10; 7:16; 11:14; 14:11–12; 15:1; 18:20; 21:1–2; 27:18; 37:3; Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13; 13:5; 14:14, 20; 22:30; Amos 7:1–6; John 17; Acts 7:60; and possibly also Habakkuk 1:2–4, 12–13; 2:1; Joel 1:19; and Hosea 9:14. Some relevant texts from Restoration scripture include 1 Nephi 1:4–6; 18:21; 2 Nephi 33:3–4; Jacob 5:26–28, 49–51; Enos 1:9–12; Mosiah 27:14; Alma 14:10–11; 15:10–11; 30:54; 31:32–33; Helaman 11:3–4, 8–18; Ether 1:34–37; Moroni 9:21–22; D&C 109:47–53; 121:1–6; Official Declaration 2; and Moses 7:49–51.
3. For a well-written and relatively up-to-date review, see Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 393 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).
4. A story describing Amos's clash with Amaziah the priest at Beth-el interrupts between the third and fourth visions (7:10–17). This narrative may have been placed after the third vision (either originally or by a later editor) because the story describes the negative reaction to Amos's announcement in the third vision that king Jeroboam would die by the sword.
5. The first four visions begin with the same opening line: "Thus hath the Lord GOD shewed unto me: and, behold . . ." (The third vision lacks the title "Lord GOD.") By contrast, the fifth vision begins "I saw . . ." and features several other differences. Scholars have never reached a consensus regarding the relationship between the four visions and this final vision. See Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 60–73.
6. The King James Version follows both "forgive" and "cease" with the phrase "I beseech thee," which attempts to translate a Hebrew particle, *nā'*, that follows each verb. This word has traditionally been translated with meanings like "please" or "I pray" based on the understanding that it makes a request more polite, but its exact nuance is rather enigmatic, and

many authorities now recommend that it is better left untranslated. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §34.7.

7. The Joseph Smith Translation contains significant reinterpretations of these two verses. For Amos 7:3 the JST manuscript reads, “And the Lord said, concerning Jacob, Jacob shall repent for this, therefore I will not utterly destroy him, saith the Lord.” And for verse 6 it says, “And the Lord said, concerning Jacob, — Jacob shall repent of his wickedness; therefor; I will not utterly destroy him, saith the Lord God.” See Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2004), 847; strikeouts and brackets removed.

How should these readings affect a Latter-day Saint interpretation of the text of Amos? We must remember that the JST was produced by studying and revising the King James Version of the Bible in English. Latter-day Saint scholars have proposed that these changes fall into at least five categories, including restoring the original text, revealing true but unrecorded events, editing and modernizing to make the KJV more understandable, harmonizing theology, and providing latter-day commentary. See a full explanation in *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible*, 8–11; see also Ben Spackman, “Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 51–53. Of these five categories, editing to make the KJV more understandable for modern readers seems to account for “more individual corrections . . . than . . . any other [category].” Kent P. Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” *Religious Educator* 6, no. 3 (2005): 153. I believe this is also the best lens through which to understand the JST emendations to Amos 7:3 and 7:6. The changes made to the KJV in these verses fit within a larger pattern seen in several passages of the Old Testament in which the KJV says that God “repents” (which, as noted, is an unfortunate translation of the verb *nĥm*), and the JST responds not by changing the word *repent* itself (the strategy taken by most modern-English translations) but by creatively

rewriting the sentence so that some other party becomes the subject of the verb *repent*. See Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible—A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1985), 311–13. Thus I interpret the Prophet’s revisions in Amos 7:3, 6 as a response to an idiosyncrasy in the KJV and not as a restoration of original text, and for that reason I do not give priority to the JST readings in my discussion of the text of Amos.

8. Beginning with a 1965 article that examined comparative evidence from Akkadian sources, several modern interpreters have suggested that the Hebrew word *’ānāk* means “tin” rather than “plumbline,” though the traditional translation still has its defenders. For a survey of positions, see H. G. M. Williamson, “The Prophet and the Plumb-Line: A Redaction-Critical Study of Amos 7,” in *“The Place Is Too Small for Us”: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 459–67. The overall meaning of the third vision is clear in either case.
9. Some have taken Amos’s brief responses (just one word and two words in Hebrew) to mean that he was in the dark about what these objects signified until God explained their meaning to him. For example, Tzvi Novick has argued that “God rigs the third and fourth visions so that the prophet will unwittingly sentence Israel, and thus preclude himself from again intervening on their behalf.” “Duping the Prophet: On אָנָה (Amos 7.8b) and Amos’s Visions,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (2008): 127. However, Amos may understand more than it first appears. Consider that, in the third vision, Amos’s answer could have focused on the wall, the plumbline, or God himself, but “a plumbline” correctly identifies the component most crucial for understanding God’s point. Similarly, in the fourth vision, Amos could have described the number of fruit or any other detail, but Amos’s precise wording was the only possible answer that could have provided the wordplay God was looking for. As a prophet, Amos does not just “see” what others cannot see; he intuitively sifts the significant from the ancillary. See Samuel A. Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 38–51.

10. H. F. Fuhs, “עָבַר, *‘ābar*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 10:421–22. Context is extremely important in establishing this interpretation, because while “passing by” means to pass through *without taking action* in this situation, ‘*br* can also be used with the opposite meaning; see Amos 5:17, where “I will pass through [*‘ēbōr*] thee” is God’s warning that he will pass through *punishing as he goes*.
11. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 798.
12. See Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 282–83; and Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 214–17.
13. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 799.
14. The phrase “saith the Lord GOD” appears in the middle of Amos 8:3, and its position there is often used to justify the interpretation that God’s voice, which began in 8:2, effectively ends at this point in 8:3 and that the rest of the verse switches to quoting terrified mortals. I disagree with this position. The word translated “saith” in the KJV is actually a noun, *nə’um*, which means “utterance (of)” or “declaration (of).” It appears 376 times in the Old Testament, most often in prophetic texts and usually preceding a divine title such as “the LORD”; in fact, only eleven times is *nə’um* used to refer to something spoken by a mortal. H. Eising, “נְאֻם *ne’um*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green and Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 9:110. Many scholars have said that *nə’um* normally comes at the end of direct speech, but a more careful analysis reveals “this stance to be without support,” as *nə’um* actually appears with “extreme variability” at the beginning, middle, and end of quoted material. Samuel A. Meier, *Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 310; for the full

discussion, see pages 298–314. Because of this variability, “context is the only means of discriminating when [*nə’um*] functions as a marker of the close of speech, the beginning of speech, or a medial marker in the midst of speech.” Meier, *Speaking of Speaking*, 309. Unless we predetermine that *has* in Amos 8:3 *must* be human speech due to its alleged connection to Amos 6:10, there is little contextual indication that *nə’um* in Amos 8:3 marks the end of God’s discourse. Additionally, among the twenty other appearances of *nə’um* in the book of Amos specifically, seven of which also appear mid-verse, the word never indicates a switch from one speaker to another.

Of course, one could understand God continuing to speak in the second half of the verse while *quoting* what humans will say, but I also find this unlikely. The book of Amos is extremely attentive to distinguishing divine and mortal speech (see Meier, *Speaking of Speaking*, 226–29), which is especially remarkable given that the trend for prophets of Amos’s era was to more loosely blend those voices (see Meier, *Themes and Transformations*, 70–77). An ambiguous change of voices in Amos 8:3 would thus be highly unusual. The lack of markers for such a change of speakers is even more striking when we compare Amos 8:3 with the other *has* passage in 6:10, where *wə’amar*, “he will say,” appears three times to indicate a change of speaker (all human).

15. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 60.
16. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 60. Some scholars do attempt to link the vision reports to various places in Amos’s life story. Andersen and Freedman, for example, interpret the first and second visions as belonging to an early stage in Amos’s ministry when repentance was still possible and intercession could successfully win a reprieve from the plagues afflicting Israel. In their reconstruction, the third and fourth visions belong to a later stage when Amos’s calls to repentance have been rejected and punishment becomes inevitable. Further, they divide Amos chapters 1–6 into sections that correspond with the historical setting of each vision. See Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 5–6, 83–88. While proposals such as these are interesting, they must ultimately remain speculation.

17. I derived this count from the list in Gerhard Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 998. Thirteen times the verb is used passively (the *niphal* stem), but God is still the implied agent providing pardon.
18. Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum Hebräischen Alten Testament*, 464.
19. See J. Hausmann, “שָׁלַח *sālāh*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 10:258–65.
20. The Hebrew text consulted here and throughout is the Masoretic Text as presented in *Biblia Hebraica Quinta, Fascicle 13: The Twelve Minor Prophets*, ed. Anthony Gelston (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010).
21. This interpretation of “silence!” is strengthened by the fact that God explicitly forbids prophetic intercession elsewhere in scripture; see Exodus 32:10; Deuteronomy 9:14; Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 15:1; Ezekiel 14:14, 20; Alma 14:11; 30:54–55; and Moroni 9:21.
22. Muffs, *Love and Joy*, 33.
23. See Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1990), 3–8. Nathan MacDonald has characterized the exchange between Abraham and God as “a learning incident” for Abraham: “Abraham does not appeal to the mercy of God and ask for full forgiveness; instead, presuming [God] to be a harsh judge, he prepares to barter with him. His strategy is undone by [God’s] persistent acceptance of Abraham’s offer; [God] turns out to be far more merciful than Abraham imagines.” “Listening to Abraham—Listening to Yhwh: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16–33,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2004): 40.
24. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Grandeur of God,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 70–73.
25. Scholars usually identify the final five verses of Amos as an editorial insertion coming from a time much later than the time of the eighth-century prophet, the optimistic tone being one feature that contrasts with the rest of the book (other differences include a sudden focus on the house of David, which the passage assumes has already fallen). See Hadjiev, *The*

Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos, 31–32; and Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 893. Whether these verses go back to Amos or whether they were added later, the present text fits within a pattern found in prophetic literature of following judgment with a message of hope. See D. Kelly Ogden, “The Book of Amos,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 4, *First Kings to Malachi*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 59–60.