

## Chapter 2

# PROPHETS REFUSE TO BE SILENCED

*“Never again prophesy at  
Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary,  
and it is a temple of the kingdom.”*

—Amos 7:13

THE UNITED KINGDOM OF ISRAEL DID NOT REMAIN UNITED for long after the reign of King David and son Solomon. The succession of Solomon’s son was rejected by many, and the monarchy soon split into the northern kingdom of Israel, with its eventual capital city in Samaria, and the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital city of Jerusalem. The royal dynasty of King David, as portrayed in the biblical text, was a *tax-collecting, labor-exploiting, surplus-wealth-exhibiting* regime. It lasted in Jerusalem until the destruction of the city in 587 BCE (see glossary) at the hands of the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 25:8–17). After the northern kingdom of Israel seceded from the Davidic-Solomonic regime and formed its own parallel administration, there is no reason to think that the rule of the northern kingdom was

not also a parallel practice of *exploitative tax collection*, *labor exploitation*, and *surplus wealth exhibition*.

Both regimes, north and south, insofar as they were able, sought to establish an authoritarianism whereby they managed the economy, controlled the political processes, and dominated public imagination. Indeed, in the ancient world the temple (as in Jerusalem in Judah and in Bethel in northern Israel) was the center of media attention, and the several regimes intended to monopolize imagination and to allow nothing outside the scope of their governance. These governing regimes sought to establish a social reality in which alternative imagination or alternative thinking was unlikely to occur.

### THE PROPHETIC POETS

In the midst of these autocracies, south and north in ancient Israel, there came to voice from time to time uncredentialed poets without pedigree or authorization who uttered words from outside the regimes. The tradition calls them “prophets.” In terms of social reality they appear to have been random utterers of startling poetry that was not contained in the familiar categories or approved reason of the royal leaders and their priests. Their speech was highly stylized, but it nonetheless manages to be in profound touch with actual lived circumstance.

These poets (prophets) interpreted their lived context as if YHWH, the God of the old covenantal traditions, were an actual active agent in historical affairs. Given the assumptions of the old covenantal tradition, they spoke as if the old Ten Commandments were in effect, and as

if obeying or not obeying them would determine the future of society, either for good or for evil. Such assumptions deeply contradicted the royal-priestly regimes who assumed that YHWH’s unconditional commitment to the chosen people provided a bottomless guarantee of well-being and security. That bottomless guarantee came, so it was assumed, with an unrestrained capacity to conduct an antineighboring economy in the interest of surplus wealth of the urban advantaged at the expense of the economically impotent peasants. This triad of *exploitative labor*, *unjust taxation*, and *exhibition of surplus wealth* was judged by these poets as both antineighboring and in defiance of the will of the covenantal God. The offensive substance of their poetry was, moreover, matched by offensive imagery as the poets, with immense courage and imagination, utilized savage and daring metaphors in an attempt to pierce the narcotized self-assurance and indifference of the totalitarian regimes.

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These poets had no credentials or pedigree. They spoke beyond any legitimation from the established regime. In order to have authorized standing ground for their subversive poetry, in various ways they claimed that their poetry came from God. It certainly came from elsewhere beyond the reach or approval of

the authorities. Thus the so-called “messenger formula” was regularly utilized: “Thus saith the Lord.” That is, the prophets understood that their offensive utterance cast in offensive figure was not their own idea or speech. Rather it was speech given to them by the Holy God of the covenantal tradition. In making that claim, these poets are not unlike our contemporary poets who frequently attest, “The words came to me.” Such claims of course could not be tested or verified by conventional establishment criteria. Clearly such utterance beyond the legitimacy of the establishment constituted a threat to royal-priestly claims of ultimacy that were given holy legitimacy through the temples and sanctuaries over which the royal authority presided. No establishment figure wants to tolerate affrontive poetry that exposes the failure of the totalizing system and claims it contradicts God’s will.

### THE PROPHETIC CHALLENGE

In the historical memory of ancient Israel we have evidence that the royal establishment went to great pains to silence such dangerous, provocative poets. In the poetry of Hosea, the prophets were dismissed as crazy persons:

The days of punishment have come,  
the days of recompense have come;  
Israel cries,  
“The prophet is a fool,  
the man of the spirit is mad!”

(Hos. 9:7)

In a crisis of war when Jerusalem was under siege,

the prophet Jeremiah was labeled a traitor who undermined the war effort:

The officials said to the king, “This man ought to be put to death, because he is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, and all the people, by speaking such words to them.” (Jer. 38:4)

In almost stylized repetition it is reported that the prophets were killed as enemies of the regime. This was apparently the case in the northern kingdom during the intense conflict between the royal practices and policies of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel on one side and the faithful resisters who claimed allegiance to YHWH on the other (1 Kgs. 18:4, 13; 19:1–2, 10, 14; 2 Kgs. 9:7).

Jeremiah himself was on trial for his life and came very close to a death sentence (26:7–19, 24), being rescued only by powerful sympathizers among royal officials. The story of his trial is followed, moreover, by a narrative report that another prophet, Uriah, spoke “in words exactly like those of Jeremiah,” and was indeed sought out and killed by King Jehoiakim (26:20–23).

This tradition of *royal authoritarianism* and of *poetic (prophetic) interruption* is a rivalry that permeates Israel’s tradition. Our attention to this rivalry permits us to see that in our own time this same contestation is underway with the royal role performed by a wealthy, greedy oligarchy and the poetic dissent enacted by a variety of intrepid advocates who engage a voice from elsewhere in many forms, from direct political action to community organizing to comedic mockery to subversive music to relentless artistic exposé. The contest always remains open and unresolved. This general

contestation between royal totalism and poetic interruption prepares us to consider the dramatic confrontation in our particular text about Amos.

## AMOS

Among those unwelcome poetic interrupters came the prophet Amos. He follows a century after the dramatic appearance of prophets Elijah and Elisha in northern Israel (1 Kgs. 17–2 Kgs. 8) and is commonly reckoned as the first of the great classic prophets in ancient Israel, that is, the first who left us a literature based on his utterance. He appeared in northern Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, the most successful and prosperous of the northern kings (786–746 BCE).

Amos regularly inserted, “Thus says the Lord,” so that it is clear his utterance comes from elsewhere beyond the reason or approval of the royal regime in northern Israel. His words suggest that YHWH, the God of Israel, is not unlike a marauding lion that is on the loose in a way that jeopardizes northern Israel. At the outset the book of Amos (named after the prophet) introduces his words as the roar of lion YHWH:

The LORD roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem.  
(Amos 1:2)

When Amos asserts his own prophetic-poetic authority, he reports that he has been moved by the roar of YHWH, the lion God. And when he comes to speak of the “rescue” of Samaria, the capitol city, from the hungry rage of the lion (in context the ravaging

### Sorting Out Some Names and Dates

The term *Israel* came to be used in a variety of ways over the course of time. *Israelites* is the name given to all the descendants of Jacob, who was also called Israel (Gen. 35:10). Jacob, or Israel, had twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of these sons was Judah. Things became confusing hundreds of years later when, two generations after King David’s reign, the kingdom of Israel split into two nations. The northern kingdom continued to call itself Israel, with capital Samaria, and the southern kingdom took the name of its largest tribe, Judah, with capital Jerusalem.

But after the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in the eighth century BCE, *Israel* once again became available as a name for all the descendants of Jacob, including the Judeans. At this point the names became somewhat interchangeable. Though the political name of the nation that was left remained *Judah* (and later *Judea*), and though the terms *Judaism*, *Jew*, and *Jewish* derive from this name, *Israel* continued to be used side by side with these terms.

The other three names are easier to distinguish. *Jerusalem* is the city in Judah that King David adopted as his capital. *Zion* is another name for Jerusalem. *Canaan* identifies the physical land that the Israelites occupied, because it was originally inhabited by Canaanites.

### Key Dates and Prophets

1,000 BCE	King David reigns.
922 BCE	Israel divides into north (Israel) and south (Judah, which includes Jerusalem) after Solomon dies.
Key Northern Prophets	Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea
786–746 BCE	Amos prophesies in the north during the reign of Jeroboam II.
722 BCE	The Assyrians destroy and annex the north.
Key Southern Prophets	Isaiah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel
587 BCE	The Babylonians destroy the south and exile many leaders.
587–538 BCE	The exile in Babylon (see glossary).

Assyrian army), he describes the leftovers from a hungry lion as the wee remnant of northern Israel to be left behind:

Thus says the LORD: As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed. (Amos 3:12)

The verb “rescue” is precisely “snatch,” that is, snatched out of the mouth of a lion at the last instant. Amos sees that the political-economic life of northern Israel is in radical contradiction to the will of YHWH,

and therefore the royal state can have no viable future. The geopolitical expression of that threat from YHWH is in the form of the expansive policies of Assyria (present-day Iraq) that Israel could not resist.

The narrative report of Amos 7:10–17 is in response to this stance, seen in verse 9, in which Amos speaks of YHWH’s harsh judgment against the “house” (that is, dynasty) of King Jeroboam:

“The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

In response to this oracle, Amaziah, the priest who presided over the important temple at Bethel, sent word to King Jeroboam about the threat posed by the poetry of Amos (7:10–11). Two matters interest us in this opening statement by Amaziah. First, the priest misquotes the poet. Amos had said that “the house of Jeroboam” would suffer, but he never cited the king per se. In his misquote the priest makes the poetry of Amos more personal in its attack, as if it were a direct assault on the king himself, which it is not. Second, the priest invokes the ominous word “conspire,” a term that intends to suggest a deliberate strategy for the overthrow of the dynasty. Thus when Amos speaks the truth of the covenantal tradition, it sounds like treason to the priest.

The priest does not await a response from the king. He knows what to do. He acts on what he knows the king would have said, namely, “You must silence the poet.” The poet must be silenced because his

dangerous utterance would serve in popular opinion to delegitimize a king who violates the will of the covenant God. Thus the priest turns promptly from addressing the king (who never appears in the narrative) to addressing the prophet (v. 12). He issues an order of banishment of Amos not only from the temple over which the priest presides but also from the land of northern Israel over which the king presides. Amos had come from Judah in the south, and now the priest dispatches him back there. The phrase “earn your bread there” suggests that the prophet was at his work for money, thus trivializing and dismissing his urgent word. What interests us is the reason the priest offers for the expulsion of the poet: “Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (v. 13).

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The temple belongs to and serves the king and royal interests, as all ancient temples have done. In that temple, all that could be said—in liturgy, instruction, and proclamation—must be in line with the interests of the royal establishment. No other words are allowed, no word of judgment or critique or negation, a prohibition that comes to mean “no truth telling.” And of course many churches in our own time are simply chapels for the establishment, in which those who speak in church

are expected to support establishment claims and so to “show the flag.” No other voice is allowed in the required collusion of liturgy and established interests.

Amos makes two rejoinders to his expulsion. First, he dissents from the priest’s accusation that he does his poetic work “for bread.” He is a “tent-maker” poet, not a professional one. This is not his “job.” His job, as a tent-maker, is to be a shepherd, a quite menial assignment. What he does in truthful utterance to which the priest objects is not a job from which he can be fired. He is under assignment from the Lord who has confronted him directly and dispatched him to such utterance. His statement is an insistence that the priest, or the king for whom the priest speaks, has no authority to banish him. The prophet is not subject to such royal silencing.

In the wake of that reassertion of authority from elsewhere, Amos then utters a poem that makes clear his refusal to be silenced by priestly dictate. In 7:16 Amos reiterates the formula of banishment from the priest. Only he revises the words of the priest; he is also capable of misquoting! Now it is not “the house of Jeroboam” but the “house of Isaac” as the prophet reaches back more deeply into the tradition. Amos, for inexplicable reasons, has already linked “the high places of Isaac” with the “house of Jeroboam” in 7:9 and now reiterates that enigmatic connection.

But what we notice is that verse 17 is introduced by the formidable and prophetic “Therefore.” That is, as a result of this priestly attempt at banishment (v. 16), Amos repeats a judgment against the royal apparatus and then intensifies his more general indictment,

making it immediately personal. Now the judgment is pronounced against the priest. God's sure dismantling judgment is certain in this voicing:

**Your wife** will have become a vulnerable prostitute, for the coming army of Assyria will, like every invading army, abuse highly placed women.

**Your sons and daughters** will die in the military assault.

**Your land**, the land of Northern Israel, will be reassigned and redeployed among the military winners (or among the locals who had colluded with the coming army).

**You** will die elsewhere, deported out of the land of Israel, to a land not governed by God.

(aut. trans.)

And then, after judgments against Amaziah's wife, sons and daughters, and land, Amos's ultimate judgment is the priest's exilic deportation to a strange land. Amos's anticipation of exile in 7:17 is quite personal toward Amaziah, but the priest is surely the point person for the privileged elite in Samaria. They will all go! It is reported in 2 Kings 14:29 that Jeroboam "slept with his ancestors," that is, died in his own land; he was not deported. But the king per se was never the target of the poet. The target was the narcotized population of the elite who lived off economic surplus and who never noticed the sufferings that their policies and practices imposed on the vulnerable who sustained them by their labor.

The evidence of the Amos tradition, as given to us in the book that bears his name, is that the formula of silencing pronounced by the priest did not work. Amos

was not and could not be silenced. Thus, Amos continues to speak "unhindered" and has the last word with Amaziah. The priest does not speak again and appears to have been silenced by Amos's poetic insistence. Unlike the priest, this uncredentialed poet continues to speak, unsilenced. In his tradition, moreover, he continues to speak an unwelcome word amid his self-deceived society that featured bad labor policy, unfair taxation, and shameless exhibits of surplus wealth. His refusal of royal-priestly silence evoked a vision of an "end," a prospect that was surely illicit in the royal-priestly temple.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why does the author call prophets "poets"?
2. Prophets claim to speak words from God that challenge establishment priests and leaders. Name someone you believe is a prophet in our time and how that person challenges the establishment with words from God.
3. The establishment tries to silence prophets and discredit them. Why must they silence prophets, and what are ways that they do this?
4. The author says that the temple "belongs to and serves the king and royal interests, as all ancient temples have done." Where do you see instances of this today?
5. What is the purpose of prophets breaking silence?