

Prophecy and Theater

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Abstract

The paradigms used to examine the Hebrew prophetic literature are changing. This paper contributes to that change by developing a paradigm drawn from Drama Theory and applying that paradigm to the vision reports found in the book of Amos. The outcome is a form critical study that yields beneficial results in understanding both the design and flow of the visions as well as their integration with the surrounding oracles and narration of Amos 5-9. The application of Drama Theory raises questions concerning the structure and rhetorical design of the current Amos text and provides analytic tools that can be applied to additional prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible.

Introduction

[1] It is not unusual for commentators on the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible to recognize the dramatic associations found in their material. A recent introduction to Zephaniah by Paul House includes that very acknowledgment in the title of the work. Brian Peckham says of the prophets Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea: “Together their compositions reveal the range, repertory, and traditional characterizations of an educated, inspired, and theatrical milieu” (134). While the “theatrical milieu” is recognized by some, it has been seriously analyzed by few.¹ Perhaps the most extensive investigation recently published is that by David Stacy and, although very helpful in suggesting analytical tools, is restricted to a treatment of forty-eight passages narrating prophetic actions (1990, 1995). In some significant ways, the present essay is a continuation of Stacy’s work, applying some of his analysis to passages that he could not investigate and positing certain refinements of the analytical tools that Stacy suggests.² This essay will apply drama theory to the vision reports found in the book of Amos in an effort to refine the function and effect of the vision report within the prophetic audience.

[2] Whenever an analysis like this is undertaken, the danger is always present that the analytical tool will be viewed as an end in itself and the elucidation of the text will be subsumed under the presentation of the tool. This danger is particularly present here, since dramatic analysis necessarily deals with the relationship between an act or speech and the meaning of that act or speech, and we can never be certain that we have got it right when applying that analysis to a culture so separated from us as is that of the world of the prophets (Overholt 1982). Nevertheless, if the enquiry yields a fresh insight or a new set of questions that give a clearer

¹ George Fohrer provided a summary description of symbolic prophetic action and speech (356). See also Bernard Lang who compares some prophetic activities to “street theater” (1983:81ff; 1986:297-316). The utilization of new tools and new questions in the examination of the Hebrew prophets is evidenced by a number of recent articles and monographs including: Ferdinand Deist, Robert Gordon, Hans Barstad, J. Ward, and Ehud Ben-Zvi. A recent dissertation by Joyce Louise Wood applies dramatic theory to a discussion of the redaction of the Amos prophecy.

² Stacy recognizes the need to investigate passages beyond the scope of his study and mentions specifically those that we treat here (1990: 64).

understanding of the world of the prophet, then the journey will have been worthwhile (see Overholt 1986).

[3] Stacy posits a very basic definition of material susceptible to investigation as drama by describing “prophetic action that goes beyond the functional and that is reckoned to signify something beyond itself” (1990: 64). Using this description as a foundation, it is apparent that vision reports form prime material for dramatic investigation for unlike the prophetic act, which is effective independently of its recounting, the vision is effective only if it is reported. Stacy goes even further and is of the opinion that “when an oracle passes from the spoken to the written, it gains in force and validity” (1990: 232). We then are concerned with the function of the written form of the vision report.³ How did it function to aid the message delivered by the prophet and more, how did the vision report, now incorporated into a formal document, effectively function as part of the audience response to the prophetic event (see Linville; Davies)?

Drama Paradigms

[4] Under the wide umbrella of Aristotle’s *Poetics* a number of historically located definitions of drama have evolved.⁴ The two classical positions of the Greek dramatists, Aeschylus and Euripides, continue to represent the extremes of the drama continuum. Aeschylus represents the traditional Greek position that the poet is a moral teacher and his work must fulfill a moral purpose. Euripides took a position, currently in vogue, that art’s function is the revelation of reality, aside from moral and ethical questions (Carlson: 15). Across this continuum, from moral didacticism to revelation and representation, there are universally acknowledged components of the drama that are essential to dramatic form and ultimately dramatic action, comprising the true force of the drama.

[5] Drama, writes Bernard Beckerman, “occurs when one or more human beings isolated in time and space present themselves in imagined acts to another or others” (1979: 20).⁵ By focusing on “drama” as verb, as something that occurs, Beckerman expresses certain modifications to Aristotle’s static model of the drama. Beckerman points to a conception of drama that seeks to explain its function and impact.⁶ Primary to the function and impact of drama is the acknowledgement that, as a form of theater, drama is completely dependent on the presence of human beings. Eliminate the human presence and you eliminate theater. As something that occurs, drama is in the eternal present. Dramatic time is the time of now, even when it conventionally represents the past, the future, or a time only imagined. This was also true for Aristotle, whose famous definition of “tragedy” reminds us that tragedy takes “the form of

³ Wood is of the opinion that a dramatic form is present throughout the structure of the Amos literature (505).

⁴ An excellent source for an historical survey of major theories of drama is Marvin Carlson. Other valuable sources offering fundamental theoretical theories of drama include the works of Bernard Dukore, Francis Fergusson, and Martin Esslin.

⁵ Beckerman argues that drama is organically connected with theater, and is in fact a special form of the art of presentation. It is the element of “fiction,” or imagination, that introduces the crucial distinction between drama and other presentations.

⁶ Beckerman continues his efforts to capture the essence of the drama in action in his follow-up work (1990).

action,” meaning that it is acted on a stage, or that it occurs, isolated in time and space, as an exchange between performer and audience.⁷

[6] In the relationship between performer, audience, and act a schematic framework emerges. A central element of this framework is the imagined act, or what the actor does that brings to life the virtual existence of the world of the drama. What is most often “imitated,” or enacted, is not actuality but a schematic notion of actuality that the audience will recognize. These imagined acts form the body of dramatic activity or the flesh on the bones of plot. Imagined acts are not what they seem, but are a surrogate for some other activity, whether historical, mythical, or fanciful.⁸ Dramatic activity, argues Beckerman, “is always representing an event, a state of being, an idea that is not or, more likely, cannot be revealed directly” (1979: 22).

[7] The range of dramatic activity, from which the dramatist makes choices, is as broad as the range of conventionalized human activities. From Oedipus plucking out his eyes with a brooch, to King Lear looking for signs of Ophelia’s breath on the surface of a mirror, to Willie Loman’s visions of his dead brother, dramatic activity is a schematic notion that can be readily perceived by the audience. The function of dramatic activity is to liberate the spirit by juxtaposing “a human being in his total physical being with an imagined act to produce an illusion of actuality” (Beckerman 1979: 22). The imagined act, an expression of the imagination of the dramatist, must be viewed in Gadamer’s terms as “a creative force which enables one to find questions worth asking in the new context” (quoted in Stacy 1990: n. 8).

[8] Dramatic activity reveals an act-scheme, existing on the level of the theatrical conventions of a given period, and the immediate act of presentation witnessed by the audience. What the act-scheme represents or signifies is the act-image (Beckerman 1990: 101).⁹ The act-image is an elusive concept. Like Aristotle’s conception of action, the act-image is more than the deeds, events, or physical activity of the act-scheme. Fergusson describes action (praxis) as “the motivation from which deeds spring” (1994: 8). Fergusson quotes S. H. Butcher, who writes: “The praxis that art seeks to reproduce is mainly a psychic energy working outwards” (1994: 8).

[9] Beckerman’s act-image offers an explanation of how that “working outwards” happens. He suggests that “what we accept as representation actually consists of signs that are related in a fundamentally schematic manner” (1990: 102). These signs are effective contextually. Take the example of a character dying on stage. There is certainly not one set of activities that will signify

⁷ All references to Aristotle’s *Poetics* are taken from *Aristotle’s Poetics*. Fergusson discusses Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in his introductory essay.

⁸ Beckerman argues that a play utilizes modes of activity conventionalized by the historical era in which it is written. Beckerman is certainly not alone in this position (see especially Esslin). It is important to remember that his notion of conventionalized modes of activity extends beyond the theater to social, political, and economic conventions as well.

⁹ Beckerman’s notion of the act-image clarifies the relationship Aristotle establishes between the organic and inorganic “parts” of the tragedy. Here again, rather than simply describing the parts of the drama, Beckerman offers an explanation for how the drama functions. Martin Esslin offers an explanation of dramatic activity that has some resonance with Beckerman as well. However, Esslin focuses more on the literary implications of dramatic structure while Beckerman focuses on the performative. Fergusson also resonates with Beckerman, arguing that the forms of our lives like the forms of our art depend on what we believe to be real (1949). However, Fergusson’s book is a philosophical exploration of the essence of theater and not an examination of the theater as performed event. As Beckerman writes, “in talking about a play, we usually discuss its act-image (plot and story) rather than its act-scheme (presentational forms)” (1990: 101).

death to an audience. However, there are a limited number of motions, sounds, and sequences that stand for “natural signs of dying but that are not true significations in themselves” (1990: 102). These contextual, conventionalized schemes are both the portrayal of actual skill on the part of the performer and of a virtual existence to which the performer points. “In a broad sense,” writes Beckerman, “the act-scheme [and the resulting act-image] has a dynamic, though not necessarily causative, connection to the encompassing code” (1990: 105).

[10] The code, or governing conditions of performance in a given period, largely determines the kind of act-schemes a culture will produce. The conditions of performance influence a number of things from scale, length of performance, variety of performance, and subject matter. The governing conditions of performance (the code), act-schemes (acts in the form that they play before us), and act-images (what the act-scheme signifies or represents), form the analytical framework for dealing with a conception of the dramas as events that occur, events like the prophetic dramas of the Old Testament.

The Amos Vision Reports

[11] The vision reports in the book of Amos (7:1-3; 7:4-6; 7:7-9; 8:1-3; 9:1-4) are concise and may have figured prominently into the structuring of the book: oracles and visions (1:1).¹⁰ Although the reports follow a well defined form with an introductory formula, followed by a report of the vision and concluding with an explanatory oration made by either the prophet or the LORD, there is room for variation in both form and contextual placement.¹¹ The vision report can be followed by the succeeding vision, a narrative, or a judgment oracle.

[12] The vision reports fit very well the classic description of drama established by Aristotle.¹² Four of the five reports consist of time-bound and space-specific actions that are unified and explained by a short story line. Aeschlus’ conception of dramatic structure also can be applied to the vision reports of Amos, for when viewed as five acts within one drama, the reports contain an audience understanding of plot, a conflict and resultant climax (House: 44).¹³

[13] Vision 1 (7:1-3) The Locusts: The plot of this drama is brief and powerful. The prophet observes the LORD God while in the process of forming a devastating plague of locusts bent on devouring the grass of the land and so depriving the inhabitants of Jacob the means to survive. Two characters appear in conflict: the LORD God and Amos, the prophet. Having observed the preparations of the LORD God, the prophet assumes the role of advocate and pleads for pardon on behalf of the endangered and unsuspecting population. The prophet is persuasive and the LORD God relents.

¹⁰ The vision report itself may have an important social function in preserving the memory of the charismatic authority of the prophet (see Clements).

¹¹ The redactional history of the vision reports, as evidenced by the variations in form, need not concern us here for our immediate goal is to analyze the final form of the report within the context of the prophetic book. A recent discussion of the prophetic literature and its relationship to the prophet himself is presented by A. Auld.

¹² Burke Long also identified this association.

¹³ House identifies a sub-genre of drama that has useful application to biblical studies. He defines “closet drama” as drama that “exists as art without being presented” (50). It is literature that has dramatic characteristics (plot, character, etc.) but need not have been staged. As such, the vision reports of Amos are best characterized as tragic closet drama. Amos, himself, functions as the tragic hero and the LORD God functions as the antagonist.

[14] Vision 2 (7:4-6) The Unquenchable Fire: The plot of the second vision is like that of the first. Once again, two characters stand in conflict: the LORD God and the prophet, Amos. This time, the LORD God is preparing an unquenchable fire to devour the land and all those who live on it. Once again, the prophet pleads for the survival of the people by begging the LORD God to stop preparing for judgment. And once again, the conflict is resolved when the LORD God acquiesces to the prophet and abandons his preparations.

[15] Vision 3 (7:7-9) The Wall: The plot of this dramatic vision is different than those just preceding and shares significant characteristics with the dramatic vision to follow (8:1-3). Once again, however, there are two actors, the LORD God and the prophet, Amos. This time the conflict becomes oblique. The LORD God simply asks the prophet to describe what he observes, and based upon that observation the LORD God pronounces a judgment over the people Israel and in particular their religious and political institutions. The prophet stands mute in the presence of this revelation, and it is he who must acquiesce.

[16] Vision 4 (8:1-3) Summer Fruit: This dramatic vision follows the same plot as that of the previous vision. Once again, the two actors, the LORD God and the prophet, engage in no direct conflict. The conflict has become covert existing in the form of audience anxiety. The prophet is asked to describe what he sees, and the observation is used as a platform from which to describe an impending judgment. Similar to the dramatic episode of 7:7-9, the dialogue lends an air of finality to the judgment pronounced for both dramatic visions proclaim that this is the last visitation that the LORD God will make upon the people Israel.

[17] Vision 5 (9:1-4) Divine Soliloquy: This final dramatic vision is unlike all that have come before. Only one actor, the LORD God, is present. There is no plot, no conflict and no resolution. There is only a dreadful divine soliloquy of complete and final judgment. The act-image is now clearly revealed, stripped from all of its dramatic accoutrements. Those judgments, threatened by the act-schemes of the earlier scenes, have now become unalterably fixed so that there is no escape.

[18] The visions function as the dramatic code, or the site where the action occurs. Implicitly or explicitly, Amos need only invoke the "Thus says the LORD," and the location of his vision, his dramatic imagination, is established. In fact, the prophet can be viewed as the actor/playwright. The prophet is granted social authority through the wide spread recognition of his ability to personify the dramatic code. In preserving the visions as text, the social authority, as well as the historical significance of the prophet/character, is made available to later audiences in the recognizable form of the prophetic drama.

[19] These five visions reveal an act-scheme consisting of a dramatic structure very similar to that found in the extant Greek tragedies of the fifth century Athens. From the dialogue between the LORD God and Amos, a classic dyadic exchange, to the divine soliloquy of vision five, functioning as the final episode invoking Euripides' later use of the *Deus ex machina*, a schematic emerges in recognizable dramatic shape and function.

[20] Each vision contains a single episode, or event, encompassing the complex relationship between the LORD God, Amos, and the people of Israel, all articulated in an isolated situation. The hallmark of these visions is their simplicity and unity. Each vision is a self-contained whole

developing around a single episode yet reaching ahead to the logic of the next. As dramatic events with structured act-schemes, they are concerned only with the bare essentials of the action.¹⁴ With all narrative or prosaic distractions removed, the audience is forced to focus attention upon the essentials required to carry the plot of the drama.

[21] Audience awareness of the plot has been established by the oracles that precede the visions. In no uncertain terms, the prophet has indicated that the LORD is preparing judgment for Israel. The series of dramatic visions remains focused on this one stream of events. This singular movement, from event to event, drives the action of the drama in the time of the present, moving quickly toward a climax that both resolves the conflict within the series of visions and allows recognition of a more complex plot previously addressed by the prophetic oracles. As with Amos' visions, the plot of the drama begins late in the action of the larger story. The "roaring of the Lion" has been heard early in the book and that roar is now echoed in the finality of the judgment pronounced in vision five.

[22] Taken as a unit, the five visions form a structured whole operating on several formal levels. The basic dramatic activity of the first four visions sets up a rhythmic pattern essential to the act-scheme of forgiveness and judgment. Twice Amos is able to persuade the LORD God not to destroy God's own people. Twice the LORD God pronounces judgment predicated by Amos' observations. All finally brought to climax when only God stands on the stage of Amos' vision and pronounces a final judgment. This climactic pattern has the symmetrical balance, dialogic exchange, and the formality of a concluding event still present in much of the drama of our own century. Reading the visions as a drama places emphasis on the human experience of Amos and the people of Israel. Their vulnerability to the LORD God is staged in Amos' visions, along with their dramatic role as the people of Israel. The act-scheme of forgiveness and judgment is predicated on an emerging character (the people of Israel) in relation to a source of action (the LORD God). Visions one and two establish the possibility of tragedy, of death and destruction brought about by a force transcendent of the human being. Read as drama, these visions are rooted in one of the most primal and basic human experiences: terror.

[23] Visions three and four establish a vector, or line of attention, that points the audience to consider the LORD God's judgment over the religious and political institutions of the people of Israel. These middle visions, placed after the establishment of plot and before the climactic resolution, occupy a distinctive place in the structure of the drama. Placed as the last scenes before the drama ends, these two visions carry the extra weight of functioning as the drama's crux. In the complex plots Aristotle favored, the third and fourth episodes often contained the reversal of the hero's fortunes and the moment of recognition, or failure of recognition, which set up the end of the drama. Such is the case in this series of dramatic visions. The prophet's acquiescence to the determined judgments of the LORD God indicates that moment of recognition in which the protagonist must accept the unalterable resolution made clear in the final act. It is at this moment in the drama that the consequences of being human and of being the people of Israel are made most clear. The prophet is now compelled to act, to describe what he observes to the LORD God. His words, describing the actions of the people of Israel, become the thing upon which the LORD God acts in return. Amos resembles the Greek tragic heroes who, following the moment of recognition, must publicly profess what they have seen and done as an integral part of

¹⁴ This was a key feature of dramatic structure until the Renaissance.

the climax and resolution of the drama. In doing so, Amos brings the tragic rhythm of the drama to the final moment of judgment.

[24] Vision five, the LORD God's divine soliloquy, completes the movement of plot begun in vision one and developed in discreet episodes through visions two, three, and four. The logic of the vision episodes is only fulfilled by the singular presence of the LORD God on the stage of Amos' prophetic drama (code), a stage representing (act-image) the religious, political, and social institutions (act-scheme) of the people of Israel. The LORD God's final judgment completes the logic of the drama's action. God stands alone on the stage of Israel's very existence with a view from which none can hide. The terror of the earlier visions now turns to trembling as the LORD God strikes the final chord of feeling in the drama. The scheme of the action is realized; the culprit (the people of Israel) is found in order to purify human life.

Conclusion

[25] The vision reports in the book of Amos exhibit an economy of action, as well as a clear schematic relationship to an encompassing code, that effectively lend themselves to the tools of dramatic analysis. Even more than prophetic dramas that require no reporting to be effective, the visions presuppose that they will be reported and so require a structure that unites act-image, act-scheme and the surrounding literary code. A form critical analysis using drama theory makes plain the structure and movement of the vision reports in Amos. The five reports form a dramatic unity and use the surrounding narrative and oracles to enhance the dramatic action.

[26] Even though the intent of this article was not to produce a source critical study of the book, the application of dramatic analysis to the vision reports does offer a challenge to the scholarly consensus that accepts a multi-layered composition of the book. There is a unity to the visions and a clear rationale to their present placement within the book of Amos. When condensed and placed back to back, the dramatic visions flow quite naturally as a series of acts in a unified dramatic presentation.¹⁵ The strategic placement of the vision reports within the current structure of the text is an important feature that assists the development of the act-scheme of the visions. When left in its present literary structure, the interspersed oracles and narratives further develop the code and act-scheme of the visions and so form a coherent whole dramatized in the act-image. While recognizing the differences in form and vocabulary among the visions, there is an even greater unity in function and message. Even if composed in multiple layers, the current redaction of the visions has brought them into a unified whole that integrates well with the surrounding oracle and narrative material.

[27] It is the nature of the integration of the vision reports and the oracles and narratives of Amos chapters 5-9 that must now be reviewed. The term "prophetic," as descriptive of a body of literature, is undergoing severe challenge in modern scholarship due to the great variety of form and content resident within the so designated literature of the Hebrew Bible (House: 111; see also Gottwald). This paper suggests, as does a growing body of scholarly literature, that the term "dramatic" may well be applied to this literature and beneficially provide analytic tools with which to decipher the communicative techniques resident in the literature. Specifically, the concepts of code, act-scheme, and act-image, drawn from dramatic theory, can be applied with benefit to the vision reports embedded within the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁵ The strategic placement of the vision reports within the current structure of the text is an important feature that assists the development of the act-scheme of the visions.

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