“His Hand Is Stretched Out—Who Will Turn it Back?”
Intercession within the Twelve Prophets

THESIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of prophetic intercession as it appears within the Twelve Prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Hosea through Malachi. I begin by defining the term *intercession* as I will use it in this paper, essentially a prayer someone offers on behalf of another in an attempt to have God act positively toward the latter. I include in my discussion intercessory prayers offered by both prophetic and non-prophetic figures, but my discussion will concentrate on the prophets simply because they as a group intercede most frequently. Within each book of the Twelve I determine 1) if intercession occurs in some form, and 2) if intercession occurs, what are the forms, functions, and results of the intercession as portrayed in that book, and how do these relate to examples elsewhere in the Bible. I have limited my study to the Twelve because, with the exception of Amos, intercessory activity within the Twelve is often glossed over or ignored in studies on intercession; most of the attention goes to more famous examples such as Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah. My hope is to fill this void by shining the spotlight directly on these smaller texts.

Over the course of this study we find that Amos contains the clearest examples of intercessory prayer; Habakkuk contains some petitions that, while vague, demonstrate an intercessory character; Joel contains examples of intercession by both prophet and priests; Zechariah contains an unusual intercessory plea by an angel; Hosea and Micah contain passages that are not clearly intercession although some have called them such;
and the remaining books contain no discernible examples of intercession. In these latter cases I discuss why the absence is either expected or surprising.

Intercession can be a complicated topic because it incorporates—and sometimes challenges our assumptions about—topics ranging from prayer to prophets, deity to human agency. This paper seeks to understand what the Twelve have to offer to this ancient and fascinating discussion.
For Alice, my wonderful wife and best friend

*bēkol-ʿēt ʾōhēb hāreʿaʿ*
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Vita

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<tr>
<td>1QpHab</td>
<td>Pesher Habakkuk</td>
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<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATD</td>
<td>Das Alte Testament Deutsch</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBET</td>
<td>Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>EncJud</td>
<td><em>Encyclopaedia Judaica</em>, 2d ed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAT</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITC</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NET</td>
<td>New English Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
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<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIPPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBO</td>
<td>Orbis biblicus et orientalis</td>
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<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLSCS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies</td>
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<td>SBLSymS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series</td>
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<td>Syr.</td>
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<td>VT</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

For YHWH of Armies has planned—who can annul?
His hand is stretched out—who can turn it back?

- Isaiah 14:27

Isaiah’s rhetorical questions lead his audience toward one inescapable answer: No one. No one can change or prevent the designs of God, who has come in judgment “to break the Assyrians” and “trample them underfoot” (Isa 14:25). Assyria was an oppressive empire and its doom meant freedom. But in other circumstances, in cases when Israel herself was the target of God’s wrath, Isaiah’s tone of finality would have signaled the end of hope.

And yet, within Israel there was a person who could try to annul YHWH’s plans, who did, at times, succeed in holding back the stretched-out hand of judgment. This was the prophet. Prophets served as spokesmen (or sometimes, spokeswomen) for YHWH, declaring his word and representing him before the people. But prophets played another role, that of representing the people before God. The prophets acted as the peoples’ voice, such as when Samuel “heard all the words of the people, and repeated them in the ears of YHWH” (1 Sam 8:21). These dual roles of representing both deity and humanity sometimes came into conflict, however. When people sin and YHWH comes in judgment, the prophets can find themselves torn between their conscience and their

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1 Unless otherwise marked, all biblical translations are my own.
sympathy, their loyalty to their God and their identification with their fellow mortals. It is
when the latter prevails that the prophets engage in what we call intercession.

Within this paper I will explore intercession as it appears within the Twelve
(Minor) Prophets, the books Hosea through Malachi. With the exception of Amos’
prominent intercessory prayers, intercessory activity in the Twelve is often overshadowed
by the clearer and more dramatic examples offered by Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah.
Intercession does not appear in every book among the Twelve and at times it appears
only subtly, but it does play a role and makes an important contribution to our
understanding of this important aspect of prophecy.

Scholars of the Bible have defined intercession in a variety of ways. Muffs
describes the prophetic intercessor as “an independent advocate to the heavenly court …;
he becomes the agent of the defendant, attempting to mitigate the severity of the decree.”²
Paul similarly explains that “as an intercessor … the prophet attempts through prayer to
offset the impending doom.”³ Recent studies on intercession routinely cite Balentine,
who calls for greater exactitude and care when using the term intercession. Lamenting
that some studies seem to equate intercession with prayer in general, he suggests a more
restricted definition:

Intercession is essentially prayer on behalf of someone else. That is to say an
intercessor is one who “intercedes for” or “prays for” another person(s). The key
element is the idea of praying “for.” By this definition one does not assume the

² Yochanan Muffs, Love & Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel (New York: Jewish
Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 9.

role of intercessor simply by addressing God … Intercession begins at the point when one addresses God on behalf of the concerns of someone else.⁴

These definitions of intercession introduce several points that I will incorporate into my own definition. First, following Balentine, I will confine my discussion to intercession enacted through prayer. Other actions that might be defined as intercessory do appear in the Bible (e.g., Isa 53:4–6, 10–12), but prayer is the usual means. Second, only prayer offered on behalf of others, not oneself, will be included. Balentine’s point on this matter can only be pushed so far, however, as only rarely is an intercessor truly independent of the troubles about which he prays (the prophets are citizens of Israel too, of course). Therefore, if the one offering the prayer demonstrably exhibits primary concern for the group, or if he demonstrates a unique ability to offer such a prayer on behalf of the group, then I consider it intercession.

Third, following the hint of scholars like Muffs and Paul, I will restrict my definition to cases in which the intercessor in his petition asks that YHWH change his actions, that he do something in response to the prayer. In other words, simple lamenting or discussing does not necessarily make a statement intercessory: it must be directed to deity with at least an implied expectation that God should change the status quo in response.⁵ Fourth, I will not restrict myself to prophetic intercession alone. While the


⁵ This would exclude, for example a case like Hab 3:16. The poet “trembles” and “quivers” at the sight of YHWH’s judgments (3:5–15), but this self-disclosure contains not the slightest insinuation that YHWH alter the scene: its purpose is not intercessory.
prophets serve as Israel’s primary intercessors, a few notable non-prophetic figures do engage in intercession and they will be included in our discussion.\(^6\)

Scholars of biblical prophecy have wrestled over how intercession relates to the primary prophetic role, that of messenger of YHWH. Many scholars describe intercession as a central prophetic duty, an essential aspect of their prophethood.\(^7\) Others, in a minority view, argue against intercession playing a key role.\(^8\) Much of this difference may be attributed to the lack of a standardized definition of intercession. Balentine, for example, makes a compelling call for a more nuanced definition of intercession, but then goes on to claim that intercession is conveyed primarily through three Hebrew verbs, *pll*, *ʿtr*, and *pg* .\(^9\) He never makes a good case as to why these verbs should have special

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privilege, and his list of intercessory passages in the Bible ends up being inappropriately narrow (Amos’ widely-accepted intercession is reduced to a reference in a footnote, for example). Although intercession is not recorded at all in several prophetic texts, the phenomenon appears often enough that we may safely regard it as a fairly standard practice.

Before examining the Twelve Prophets in detail, it will be helpful to review the broader context of intercession (this review will highlight most major biblical examples but is not exhaustive). Within the Bible’s current canonical order, the first example of intercession involves Abraham, who pleads with YHWH on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:22–32). Later God instructs the stricken Abimelech to have Abraham pray in his behalf, ki-nābî’ hū’ wēyîtpallēl ba’adkā wehyēh “For he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live” (Gen 20:7; cf. v. 17).10 Moses intercedes on behalf of the Israelites following their rebellion with the golden calf (Exod 32:11–14, 30–32; Deut 9:18–20, 25–29; 10:10), stops the fire from consuming more people at Taberah (Num 11:1–3), achieves pardon for his sister Miriam (Num 12:13), and minimizes the casualties during the ten spies scandal (Num 14:13–19) and the rebellion of Korah (Num 16:22). The prophet Samuel prays for the people at Mizpah, enabling them to win a decisive victory against the Philistines, who dare not return during Samuel’s lifetime (1 Sam 7:5, 8–10, 13). During a damaging thunderstorm the people beg of Samuel, “Pray on behalf of your servants to YHWH your God, so that we may not die!” (1 Sam 12:19), to which Samuel responds that he will never cease to pray for them (1 Sam 12:23). Later Samuel

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10 Canonically, this marks the first appearance of the word nābî’ “prophet.” The intercessory context is so clear that NJPS translates yītpallēl ba’adkā as “he will intercede for you.”
appears to attempt intercession—unsuccessfully this time—on behalf of king Saul (1 Sam 15:11).

The prophet Elijah openly questions God’s wisdom in allowing the Zarephathite widow’s son to die, but after imploring him thrice, “YHWH hearkened to the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child came into him again” (1 Kgs 17:20–22). Later during a devastating drought the saving rains come in response to Elijah’s word (1 Kgs 17:1; 18:41–45). Some Bible readers, however, have found fault with Elijah for twice condemning the Israelites on Mt. Horeb instead of interceding for them (1 Kgs 19:10, 14); immediately after, YHWH instructs him to go anoint a successor (vv. 15–16). “Elijah’s own career as a prophet ended when he no longer cared to defend his people.”

The successor, Elisha, also intercedes for others, such as when he “prayed to YHWH” to bring a woman’s dead son back to life (2 Kgs 4:32–35). When he and his servant are surrounded by an enemy band, Elisha prays that the enemy may become blind and that the servant might see the heavenly host surrounding them; later he mercifully prays that God restore the soldiers’ sight (2 Kgs 5:17–20).

The books of the Latter (Major) Prophets also contain examples of intercession. During Isaiah’s call narrative a seraph places a live coal on his lips and tells him, “Now … your sin is blotted out” (Isa 6:7). A Jewish midrash explains this as Isaiah’s punishment for having referred to Israel as “a people of unclean lips” (v. 5). “The prophet learned the lesson, that it was his duty to defend Israel, not traduce him.”

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Isaiah’s cry, “How long, O Lord?” (v. 11), as his first intercessory prayer. King Hezekiah recognizes Isaiah’s gift of intercession when, during a siege, he sends an envoy to request that the prophet “lift up [his] prayer for the remnant that is left” (Isa 37:4; cf. 2 Kgs 19:4). Later Hezekiah himself prays on behalf of his people, and Isaiah informs the king that “because you have prayed” the siege will be lifted (Isa 37:15–21; cf 2 Kgs 19:15–20).  

The prophet Jeremiah understands intercession to be an essential feature of prophecy, so much so that he challenges the “false” prophets to make a successful intercession as a test of their abilities (Jer 27:18). He intercedes on several occasions (Jer 4:10; 10:24–25; 12:1; 14:13; 18:20) and his abilities are recognized by others who request his services (Jer 21:1–2; 37:3; 42:1–3, 9, 20). The most striking aspect of Jeremiah’s intercessions, however, is YHWH’s repeated command that Jeremiah not intercede (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:10–12; 15:1): the time for judgment has come, and all hope for mercy has passed.  

Exiled in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel makes occasional intercessory prayers (Ezek 9:8; 11:13; 13:5). On one occasion YHWH explains to Ezekiel that one reason Jerusalem fell was because of the failure of the prophets to intercede for the people (Ezek 22:30). Daniel, who is counted a prophet in Christian but not Jewish tradition, also offers an intercessory prayer for the people while in exile (Dan 9:16–19).  

It is to the Twelve (so-called Minor) Prophets that the rest of this study is devoted. Where does intercession appear among these twelve? We will find that Amos protests

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13 Other prayers or discussions of an intercessory nature include Isa 51:9–11; 62:1, 6–9; 63:7–64:12.

against severe judgments he foresees in vision; Habakkuk offers a series of laments that may be counted as intercession despite their interpretive difficulty; Joel offers an intercessory prayer over invading locusts and calls upon the priests to join him; Jonah presents the singular case of a prophet who wants to do anything but intercede; an angel pleads on Israel’s behalf in the book of Zechariah; and Hosea and Micah contain brief passages which some have labeled intercession although the designation is questionable. In the following pages each of these cases will be taken up in detail in order to explore with precision the role that intercession played in this discrete section of the Hebrew Bible.
Chapter 2: Amos

Introduction

Amos was an eighth-century prophet roughly contemporary with Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. Although he was from Tekoa in the southern kingdom of Judah, his recorded ministry took place in the northern kingdom of Israel. The nine-chapter book that bears his name is a mixture of prophecy, visions, and narrative, and contains one of the Bible’s best examples of prophetic intercession in action.

Amos’ intercessory pleas appear in the context of a series of five visions that frame chapters 7–9. All five are tied together by an introductory phrase featuring the verb $r’h$ “to see”—“he showed me” (literally “he made me see”) in visions 1–4, and “I saw” in vision 5. They are also connected by their unique use of Amos’ first person voice. The closest ties, however, are shared by the first four visions, each of which begins with the opening, “Thus the Lord YHWH showed me, and behold …”¹⁵ These four visions will be the primary focus of the present study, beginning with the translation that follows:

Vision 1

⁷:1 Thus the Lord YHWH showed me, and behold, he was forming a swarm of locusts¹⁶ at the start of the growth of the latter

¹⁵ Vision 3 lacks the title “Lord YHWH.”

¹⁶ The term $gōbay$ “swarm of locusts” appears only here and in Nah 3:17 (but cf. a related form in Isa 33:4); in Nahum its meaning is clarified by poetic parallelism with the more common $’arbeh.$
And when it finished consuming the land’s vegetation, I said, “O Lord YHWH, forgive! How will Jacob stand?—for he is small!”

YHWH changed his mind concerning this; “It will not happen,” YHWH said.

Vision 2

Thus the Lord YHWH showed me, and behold, the Lord YHWH was summoning up a judgment by fire, and it was consuming the great deep and consuming the land.

And I said, “O Lord YHWH, stop! How will Jacob stand?—for he is small!”

YHWH changed his mind concerning this; “It will not happen either,” Lord YHWH said.

Vision 3

Thus he showed me, and behold, the Lord was standing beside a straight wall and in his hand was a plumb line.

And YHWH said to me, “What do you see, Amos?” And I said, “A plumb line.” And the Lord said, “Behold, I am placing a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will no longer pass by them.

“The high places of Isaac will be made desolate and the sanctuaries of Israel laid

17 The term leqeš “latter growth” appears only in this verse (but it is also attested in the Gezer Calendar).

18 “How will Jacob stand?” is the usual translation, but Waltke and O’Connor suggest that the more common meaning of mı́ (“who?”) may be preserved in the rendering, “Who is Jacob that he can stand?” See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 320, n. 10.

19 “Straight” and “plumb line” are the same word ēnāk, which appears only in Amos 7:7–8 and has caused scholars considerable trouble. I have followed the traditional translation “plumb line” despite the protests of some scholars; the exact meaning of this particular word makes no impact on the interpretation of the visions as a whole. For a recent survey of opinions, see Duane A. Garrett, Amos: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008), 212–14.
waste; I will rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Narrative break in 7:10–17

Vision 4

8:1 Thus the Lord YHWH showed me, and behold, a basket of summer fruit.

8:2 And he said, “What do you see, Amos?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” And YHWH said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will no longer pass by them.

8:3 “In that day the songs of the temple will be wailings”—utterance of the Lord YHWH. “They will cast many corpses in every place. Silence!”

1. Visions of Locusts and Fire

Visions 1 and 2 open with Amos beholding disaster, first a plague of locusts and later a devouring fire. The grammar in 7:2, 4 has caused some debate over the chronology of these destructions. Is the vegetation completely consumed before Amos intercedes, or is it merely “about” to be completely consumed? Was the fire “consuming” or had it already “consumed”? Some commentators have questioned, assuming the land was

This narrative “break,” which I will not analyze in detail here, contains the book of Amos’ only third-person narrative about the prophet, a description of his confrontation with the priest Amaziah at the shrine in Bethel. Because it interrupts the closely-connected visions in 7:7–9 and 8:1–3, most scholars consider it a later textual insertion. This does not mean the material was placed there haphazardly, however. The mention of king Jeroboam dying by the sword in v. 9 (the end of the vision) and vv. 10–11 (the start of the narrative) suggest a deliberate redactional effort to link the two pericopes together. Perhaps the insertion is meant to demonstrate Amos’ rejection and the wickedness of the people, showing in story form why it is that God will no longer “pass by” the people, or allow intercession to save them. For further discussion on the narrative’s place in Amos 7–8, 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; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 453–77.
indeed devastated completely, whether Amos’ cries can therefore even count as intercessory at all.\textsuperscript{21}

The more important issue, however, is not the timing of these scenes but their very nature. Does the text describe Amos seeing literal disasters in the physical world, disasters that play out in real time while he watches? Or is Amos seeing visionary disasters with a prophetic eye, disasters that will potentially exist but are not yet reality? The latter option makes the most sense in light of YHWH’s response to Amos, “It will not happen,” which implies a future destruction. There is, then, no reason to emend the MT in an effort to soften the completed, past-time nature of the devastations (as some scholars are wont to do).\textsuperscript{22} Paul correctly judges that “because this all takes place in a vision, one need not subject the contents of the vision to the needs of temporal necessity.”\textsuperscript{23} That Amos would be privileged to see YHWH’s future actions is in perfect harmony with a statement from elsewhere in his book: “For the Lord YHWH will not do anything unless he has revealed his secret to his servants the prophets” (3:7).

2. Amos Intercedes

Following the scenes of destruction in vv. 1–2a, 4, come Amos’ intercessory petitions in vv. 2b, 5. While many prophets pray on behalf of others, Amos here reveals a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Auld, for example, interprets the destructions as completed activities and observes that “prophetic intercession … is pointless once the blow has already fallen.” See A. G. Auld, \textit{Amos} (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 17–18; see also 21–22.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} For various proposals, see Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, \textit{Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary} (AB 24A; New York: Doubleday, 1989), 742–43.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Shalom M. Paul, \textit{Amos} (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 228, n. 20. Other prophets similarly related future disasters as though they were present or past realities (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:17; Jer 4:19–21).
\end{itemize}
little more boldness. It is one thing to ask God for some favor or blessing, but Amos
demands (note his verbal imperatives) that God change a course of action that he (God)
has already outlined. Despite the politeness that some translations suggest, Amos’ cries of
“Forgive!” and “Stop!” are remarkably direct.24

The verb slḥ “to forgive/pardon” appears forty-seven times in the Bible and in
every instance God is the subject of the action.25 Besides Amos 7:2 the verb appears
twice in a context of prophetic intercession, each involving Moses.26 Exodus 34 describes
the aftermath of the golden calf affair, including Moses’ request, “Although this is a stiff-
necked people, forgive (wēšālaḥtā) our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your
inheritance” (v. 9). Numbers 14 records the Israelites’ rebellion following the
demoralizing report of the ten spies, followed by God’s threat to strike them with
pestilence and disinherit them. Moses intercedes on their behalf, concluding, “Forgive
(sēlah-nāʾ) the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your mercy!” (v. 19).

24 Amos’ boldness in 7:2 and 5 is softened by such polite additions as “Forgive/Cease, I beg you!”
(NRSV) or “Please pardon/stop!” (NASB; cf. ESV; all emphases added). The origin of such phrases is the
Hebrew particle -nāʾ which follows the imperatives. -nāʾ is traditionally translated as “please” or “I pray,”
but more recent scholars suggest that in most cases it is better left untranslated. See Walkte and O’Connor,
Biblical Hebrew Syntax, 578–79; and Thomas O. Lambdin, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew
(Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), 170–71. The questionable nature of this particle may be observed in the
NJPS and NIV, which in Amos 7:2, 5 translate the particle in one verse (“I beg you/pray”) but not the other.

25 See Gerhard Lisowsky, Konkordanz zum hebräischen Alten Testament (3d ed.; Stuttgart:
Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 998. Thirteen times the verb appears in the passive nipʾal stem, but God
is still the implied agent providing pardon. Unless otherwise noted, all vocabulary tallies in this paper will
be based on the Konkordanz.

26 Daniel, who is considered a prophet in Christian tradition, also employs this verb while
interceding with God in Dan 9:19. One additional intercessory context for slḥ is Solomon’s dedicatory
prayer at the temple, although here he requests forgiveness for future Israelites in hypothetical situations
(see 1 Kgs 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50 // 2 Chr 6:21, 25, 27, 30, 39). One of these situations, however, is
noteworthy in light of Amos 7:2: “If there are … locusts …, [then] whatever prayer, whatever supplication
there be from any man … then hear from heaven your dwelling place—forgive, and respond!” (1 Kgs
8:37–39; cf. 2 Chr 6:28–30).
This account in Numbers 14 contains several literary ties to the intercession in Exodus 34, but also striking connections to Amos 7. First, as noted above, both Num 14:19 and Amos 7:2 employ the verb *šāḥ* in a (relatively rare) intercessory context. Second, out of forty-seven attestations of *šāḥ* in the Bible, these verses are the only two where it appears as a second masculine singular imperative, and with a single exception (2 Kgs 5:18) these are the only two verses where the verb is suffixed by the particle -nā’. Third, in both cases the following verse (Num 14:20; Amos 7:3) contains a two-word response from God acknowledging he will heed the request, preceded or followed by the phrase “said YHWH”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{wayyō’ mer yhwh sālaḥti kidbārekā} & \quad \text{YHWH said, “I forgive according to your word”} \\
lō’ tihyeh ‘āmar yhwh & \quad \text{“It will not happen,” YHWH said}
\end{align*}
\]

Fourth, in both cases, following the request to forgive and the two-word affirmative response, the subsequent verses clarify that despite the initial positive response to the prophets’ intercession, God is not quite done dispensing punishment. In Amos 7:3 a new vision immediately appears showcasing a different disaster, and Num 14:21 begins with “But.” Fifth, for both Moses and Amos the descriptions of disaster that follow their (only temporarily successful) intercessions contain grotesque descriptions of “corpses” (*pēgārîm*), a relatively uncommon term.28

27 In addition to the common use of *šāḥ* in Exodus 34 and Numbers 14, both passages address the question of Israel as God’s “inheritance” (Exod 34:9; Num 14:12) and in Num 14:17–18 Moses even quotes God’s own words back at him from Exod 34:6–7. In Num 14:19, following his plea for forgiveness, Moses (sheepishly?) acknowledges that this is a conversation he and God have had before.

28 The word is found in only twenty-one biblical verses, including one following Amos’ intercession (Amos 8:3) and three following Moses’ (Num 14:29, 32–33).
In sum, Amos’ cry “Lord YHWH, forgive!” seems to share a deliberate literary connection with the account of Moses in Numbers 14. One may have been written in light of the other (the direction of borrowing depends on when one dates the composition of both the Pentateuch and Amos) or at the very least they have been edited so as to make their thematic connections even more explicit.

Amos asks for forgiveness, and God agrees—to a certain extent. “It will not happen” clearly refers to the specified punishment and does not necessarily imply forgiveness. In the second vision Amos is again treated to a scene of disaster, this time destruction by fire. Amos repeats the same intercessory petition with a single variation: rather than a command to forgive, Amos simply asks God to stop. Amos’ exact wording is *ḥādal-nā*’, from the verb *ḥdl* “to stop, cease, desist.” This verb appears in fifty-seven verses of the Bible in a variety of contexts, but it is employed in unique ways in Amos 7:5. First, this is the only place where YHWH is the subject of the verb—a sharp contrast to *slḥ*, which is reserved exclusively for deity. Second, although there are ten other examples of the imperative form of *ḥdl*, this is the only passage where the verb is suffixed by the particle -*nā*’. This is best explained as harmonization with *sēlah-nā*’ in 7:2 (which itself, as noted above, shares a connection with Num 14:19).

29 Freedman and Lundbom provide an additional meaning of “to refrain from” in the sense of not even starting an activity (good examples include Num 9:13 or Deut 23:22 [23:23]) and opine that this is the sense of Amos 7:5. See David Noel Freedman and Jack R. Lundbom, “ח ד ל, chādhal,” *TDOT* 4:217. This is certainly possible. The nuance here depends upon how the visions themselves are interpreted: is Amos seeing live events, or projections of a hypothetical future?

30 In Exod 9:29, 33–34 Moses stretches out his hand and the thunder stops; although the reader assumes that YHWH acted, the thunder is still the grammatical subject.

Considering that the first two visions are so similar in structure and style, varying only in the type of judgment and in the exact word Amos employs in protest, what significance may lie in the shift from “forgive!” to “stop!”? As demonstrated above, for YHWH to slḥ “forgive” is not unusual (the verb is his exclusive domain in biblical texts) but it is unprecedented for YHWH to “stop” in this way. This shift from an appropriate to an awkward word could suggest that Amos is becoming more reactionary … or even more desperate. In addition, “forgive” focuses on the root of the problem, the unpaid debt to divine justice, while “stop” involves only the punishment and leaves the larger problem of justice unresolved. The second request does not seek to gain as much as the first had, and one may see a kind of retreat. As the people remain unrepentant and God continues to plan punishment, could Amos be sensing an increasing inability on his part to hold back the divine hand?

3. Amos’ Argument

Following Amos’ initial pleas for forgiveness and cessation, he provides his reasoning: “How will Jacob stand?—for he is small!” Most read Amos’ statement as sympathetic and emotional, revealing tenderness within a man who is otherwise characterized as a prophet of doom. Brueggemann rejects reading “a mood of tenderness” in Amos’ cry and argues that Amos 7:2, 5 are crafted, forceful declarations that evoke covenant themes and sue YHWH for breach of contract. This argument creates intriguing interpretive opportunities, but it relies heavily on connecting Amos to the

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32 Smith referred to these verses as “the only two [moments] in his ministry [when] his heart contended with his conscience.” See George Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (2 vols.; New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1901), 1:112. Herbert called them “two brief glimpses into the inner life of the prophet” in which we “see something more” than doom and gloom. See A. S. Herbert, “The Prophet as Intercessor,” *Baptist Quarterly* 13 (1949): 77.
patriarch Jacob, a connection which Bruggemann fails to establish convincingly.\(^{33}\) In either case there is no reason to deny Amos the natural sympathies that we normally expect from those witnessing death on a grand scale.

Amos’ argument comes down to the fact that Jacob/Israel would not survive ("stand") the kind of punishment that God proposes. The word “small” cannot refer to a lack of political or economic strength, for the reign of Jeroboam II was characterized by both (2 Kgs 14:23–29).\(^{34}\) “Small” is a relative description, acknowledging that however powerful Israel might seem on the surface, it would be powerless before the kind of “fire”-power that YHWH was preparing to send against it.\(^{35}\)

If total annihilation is meant to suggest other corollary concerns, these remain unstated: for Amos, that fact in itself is reason enough to change plans.\(^{36}\) Amos,

\(^{33}\) Walter Brueggemann, “Amos’ Intercessory Formula,” \textit{VT} 19 (1969): 385–99. Bruggemann ties Amos to Jacob by two main pieces of evidence. The first is the use of \textit{qāṭān/qāṭōn} “young/small” (cf. Gen 27:15, 42; Amos 7:2, 5), but this is not an uncommon word. The second is Amos’ use of the term “Jacob” (instead of “Israel”) in Amos 7:2, 5, which he claims is a deliberate reference to the Patriarchal narratives. To make this claim, however, he argues that “Jacob” in 7:2, 5 is used in an admittedly “peculiar” theological sense. This is difficult to accept when every other “Jacob” in Amos clearly refers to a political entity.

\(^{34}\) Jeroboam II’s reign is recounted only briefly by the Deuteronomistic Historians, who found theological fault with him. Nevertheless, even they mention Jeroboam’s territorial expansions, and archaeology confirms that (due in part to an eighth-century lull in Assyrian power) he reigned during a time of population growth, political stability, and economic prosperity. For a survey of the era see Gabriel Barkay, “The Iron Age II–III,” in \textit{The Archaeology of Ancient Israel} (ed. Amnon Ben-Tor; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 327–34. Of course, economic “prosperity” does not necessarily reach all social strata, and Amos himself often criticized the uncharitable upper class (Amos 2:6–7; 4:1; 5:11–12; 6:4–7).

\(^{35}\) Conrad opines that, based on the use of the adjective elsewhere, the word “small” in Amos also “suggests the image of a young child who is weak and needs special care and protection” (TDOT 13:8).

\(^{36}\) In an effort to convince God not to destroy people, other prophets use a variety of arguments such as YHWH’s reputation among the nations (Exod 32:12), the injustice of the righteous perishing with the wicked (Gen 18:23–25), or God’s own self-description as one who is merciful (Num 14:17–18).
significantly, does not appeal to the peoples’ righteousness or their repentance, for—
given the tone of the rest of the book of Amos—there does not seem to be evidence of
either. Amos offers his plea in the same spirit as Daniel’s intercessory prayer centuries
later: “We do not present our supplication before you on account of our righteousness,
but on account of your great mercies” (Dan 9:18).

4. YHWH Relents

Verses 3 and 6 open with the verb nḥm in the nip’al stem: niḥam yhwh ‘al-zō’t
(“YHWH changed his mind concerning this”). Traditionally the first two words were
translated as “The LORD repented” (e.g., KJV, RSV) but most modern translations avoid
the term “repented” in connection with God, in part because of its connotation of
sinfulness. 37 The verb nḥm is known for the richness of its meanings, especially when
they involve deity. 38 Other meanings can include “to regret,” “to feel sorrow/sympathy,”
“to comfort,” or “to relent/forebear,” the latter of which fits the context best in this case.

The Septuagint contains a significant variant reading here. The first word in these
verses is metanoēson in the LXX—an imperative form that essentially extends Amos’
quoted speech from vv. 2, 5 into vv. 3, 6 as reflected in this translation:

“O Lord, O Lord, be gracious.
Who will raise up Iakob,
because he is very small?
Repent, O Lord, at this.”

37 Conversely, Andersen and Freedman claim that “the language [in Amos 7:3, 6] is strong and
should not be softened in the interest of theological scruples” (Andersen and Freedman, Amos, 744).

38 For a well-written discussion on nḥm as it relates to deity, see David Noel Freedman, “When
God Repents,” in Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman
what this verb reveals about God; the case of Amos frames his discussion.
“Even this shall not be,” says the Lord.\(^{39}\)

This reading, significantly, modifies the fact of YHWH’s repentance and instead casts Amos as demanding that God repent (YHWH changes course either way, but the effect is softened by halving the number of lines reporting it). While it has been suggested that the LXX translators were uncomfortable with the narration of God’s “repenting,”\(^{40}\) the idea does have a distinguished history: in the MT the verb nḥm appears in the nip’al stem forty-seven times, thirty of which feature God as the subject.

Although God performs this action elsewhere, the intercessory context is actually quite rare. The only other place in the Bible where God thus acts in response to prophetic intercession occurs in Exodus 32 as Moses seeks to contain the damage from the golden calf fiasco. In v. 12 Moses uses the verb as an imperative against God (wēhinnāhēm ʿal-hārāʾā lēʾammekā “Change your mind concerning this disaster against your people!”) and v. 14 reports God’s positive response (wayyinnāhem yhwh ʿal-hārāʾā ṣēr dibber laʾāšōt lēʾammō “So YHWH changed his mind concerning this disaster which he said he would inflict against his people”).\(^{41}\) This text, then, contains an important precedent for Amos: in an intercessory context, we see examples of 1) a prophet commanding nḥm of God (as in the LXX of Amos) and 2) a narrative report that God does nḥm (as in the MT of Amos). The connection between Amos 7 and Exodus 32 is strengthened by the


\(^{41}\) Ps 90:13 also uses a nip’al imperative of nḥm directed at YHWH (although there is no recorded response). The psalm is titled “a prayer of Moses” and seems to echo Exod 32.
observation that of the thirty appearances of the verb *nhm* with YHWH as the subject, only eleven feature the verb in conjunction with the particle ‘*al* “concerning,” and of these only three use the sequence verb+*yhw*+‘*al*—Exod 32:14, Amos 7:3, and Amos 7:6.42 Once again Amos’ visions feature vocabulary unique to the text of Amos and the texts describing Moses’ intercessions.

As the vision series continues on it will eventually become clear that Amos’ intercessions are not successful in the ultimate sense of totally averting punishment. But before analyzing why success was only temporary, we should pause and first acknowledge that Amos *does* have success. And, as Freedman explains, “that success puts Amos in a very select unit of a very select group. Of true prophets there are a very limited number, and of them only the barest handful could qualify as effective intercessors.”43

**5. Visions of a Plumb Line and Summer Fruit**

Visions 3 and 4 are linked to visions 1 and 2 and yet are different. Visions 1 and 2 describe what Amos sees (various judgments) and record Amos’ intercessory petition and God’s agreement. In these visions, God voices nothing beyond this agreement. A change then occurs in visions 3 and 4. These visions describe what Amos sees (objects with symbolic value) and record God’s request of Amos to describe what he sees, followed by God’s declaration of judgment and doom. In these visions, Amos articulates nothing beyond his matter-of-fact identification of the objects presented to him.

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42 These data were compiled from word searches performed using Emanuel Tov, ed., *Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library* CD-ROM (Provo, Utah: Brill and Brigham Young University, 2006).

43 Freedman, “When God Repents,” 446.
In all four visions Amos sees (ʾrḥ) something, but there is a difference in scale and perception between the first pair and the second pair. In the first pair Amos sees a swarm of locusts and a devouring fire. Such sights are dramatic and their meaning absolutely unmistakable—it does not take a prophet to perceive that Israel is in serious trouble. What Amos sees in the second pair of visions, however, is more subtle, and this is where his status as a “seer” (rōʾeh) is crucial. YHWH’s question to Amos in these visions, “What do you see, Amos?” (māʾattā rōʾeh ʾāmōs), reinforces the significance of prophetic sight in these experiences. What Amos sees are not devastating natural phenomenon but everyday objects small enough to fit in one’s hand (7:7) or inside a basket (8:2).

Amos’ also demonstrates his ability as a seer in the second pair of visions by his responses to YHWH’s query, “What do you see?” Amos gives simple one- or two-word answers: “a plumb line” (ʾānāḵ, 7:8) and “a basket of summer fruit” (kēlūb qāyīṣ, 8:2). Following each answer YHWH predicts a doom for Israel that somehow relates to the object in question. A reader might assume that Amos’ brief answer and YHWH’s elaboration mean that Amos is in the dark until he can have everything explained to him.\textsuperscript{44} It is quite the opposite: Amos’ pointed labels reveal how much he really is seeing. Prophets (especially preexilic prophets like Amos) are noteworthy for their gift of discerning sight, the ability to see events or objects and grasp a significance that eludes ordinary humans. In the fourth vision, Amos could have described the number of fruit, the weave of the basket, the place where the basket was sitting, or any number of other

\textsuperscript{44} Paul, for example, describes Amos in these visions as “unaware”—one- or two-word answers are the “only” thing Amos can come up with. See Paul, \textit{Amos}, 235.
details, but he immediately picked up on the one feature that YHWH wished to incorporate into his prediction.\(^{45}\) The same is true of the third vision: Amos’ narrative description of the vision mentions several simultaneous sights—YHWH (!), a peculiar wall, and a plumb line—but when asked, “What do you see?”, Amos responded with only one item: “a plumb line.” This was precisely the thing that God most wanted Amos to notice: “Behold, I am placing a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” Amos does not just “see” what others cannot see, he intuitively sifts the significant from the ancillary.\(^{46}\)

Meanwhile, Amos’ narrative descriptions of what he sees have been evolving from vision 1 to vision 4. Consider the number of words used in each description:\(^{47}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amos’ description of the vision</th>
<th>Number of words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision 1</strong> (\text{wēhinnēh yōsēr gōbay bīṭhillat ʿālōt hallāqēs wēhinnēh-leqeš ʿahar gizzē hammelek. wēhāyā ʿim-killā leʾēkōl ʿet-ʾēśeb hāʾāreś} )</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{45}\) There is a Hebrew word play here: the “summer fruit” (qāyîṣ, 8:2) signifies that the “end” (qēṣ, 8:3) is coming. This pun may have been even closer than the MT suggests. In southern (Biblical) Hebrew, two things can happen to the diphthong ay: 1) when unaccented, it reduces to an ê, and 2) when accented, it becomes a triphthong ayi. For example, the standard Biblical word for “wine” is yāyin from an older form *yayn. In the north, however, it appears that even accented diphthongs reduced (creating yēn in the case of “wine”). As Amos was prophesying in Northern Israel, the word for summer fruit (qayiṣ in the Bible/the south) would have featured vowel reduction, or qēṣ (as observed in the Gezer Calendar), making it sound even more like the word qēṣ which it is punning.

\(^{46}\) Samuel A. Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2009), 38–44.

\(^{47}\) The natural starting and ending points for each description are indicated by a consistent pattern. Each quotation begins with “behold” (wēhinnēh), which marks the start of Amos’ description, and each ends just before “I said/he said” (wāʾōma/wayyōʾ mer) which signals the start of the post-description dialogue.
The pattern is clear: as the visions progress Amos uses fewer and fewer words to describe what he sees—and remarkably, each vision features exactly five words fewer than the last.

What are we to make of such a pattern? Würthwein describes Amos’ visions as a kind of *biographischen Erkenntnisweg* that traces his development from a “Heilsnabi zum Unheilspropheten.” Building on this image of Amos progressing on a path of self-discovery, we may well understand the increasing sophistication of his visions and his increasingly succinct descriptions of them as two trends that share a common impetus: Amos’ own maturing prophethood. Amos’ ability to “see” and understand God and God’s designs is sharpening with each experience, and his increasingly pointed descriptions correspond with his ability to focus on the most important aspects of his experience. Amos is becoming more attuned to God’s perspective.

### 6. YHWH Forbids Intercession

It is at this point in visions 3 and 4 that, based on the experience in visions 1 and 2, one would expect Amos to intercede, to try to call off the doom he foresees. Instead, abruptly, God declares that he will “pass by” the people no more. This declaration “I will no longer pass by them” ([lōʾ - ʿōsîp ʿōd ʿābôr lô, 7:8; 8:2](#)) makes little contextual sense if

| Vision 2 | wēhinnēh qōrēʾ lārib bāʾēš ʿādōnāy  | 13 |
| Vision 2 | yḥwh wattōʾкаl ʿet-tēhōm rabbā | |
| Vision 2 | wēʾāklāʾ ʿet-haḥēleq | |
| Vision 3 | wēhinnēh ʿādōnāy niṣṣāb ʿal-hōmat | 8 |
| Vision 3 | ʿānāk ʿūbēyādōʾ ʿānāk | |
| Vision 4 | wēhinnēh kēlūb qāyīṣ | 3 |

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"br “pass” refers simply to spatial movement. But "br is a versatile verb with a wide range of semantic meanings, many of which can only be determined by context.\textsuperscript{49} There are a handful of places where context and poetic parallelism indicate a meaning of “forgive,”\textsuperscript{50} opening the door for more nuanced translations of YHWH’s words to Amos such as “I will spare them no longer” (NASB, NIV) or “I will pardon them no more” (NJPS).

God’s denial of forgiveness is not a blanket statement but is closely tied to the structure and narrative progression of the vision series. In the summary of the visions below, note the sequence of double-intercession followed by double denials:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents of Vision</th>
<th>Results of Vision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision 1</strong> 7:1–3</td>
<td>Thus Lord YHWH showed me … locusts Amos intercedes, YHWH relents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision 2</strong> 7:4–6</td>
<td>Thus Lord YHWH showed me … fire Amos intercedes, YHWH relents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision 3</strong> 7:7–9</td>
<td>Thus he showed me … a plumb line “I will no longer pass by them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Narrative break in 7:10–17</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision 4</strong> 8:1–3</td>
<td>Thus Lord YHWH showed me … fruit “I will no longer pass by them”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statement “I will no longer pass by them” in the second pair of visions foils the intercessions in the first pair, and in fact presuppose them.\textsuperscript{51} The wording “no longer” (or “never again”) clearly implies that forgiveness had been granted in the past, and can only be referring to the intercessions from visions 1 and 2. Given its placement in this series of pairs, the statement “I will no longer pass by them” indicates more than

\textsuperscript{49} Fuhs, *TDOT* 10:413.

\textsuperscript{50} E.g., 2 Sam 24:10; Job 7:21; Mic 7:18; Zech 3:4.

YHWH’s decision not to forgive: in essence he is saying he will no longer respond to any intercessory pleas to do so.

Before leaving the topic of YHWH’s forbidding intercession, there is one last line we may examine. It appears at the very end of the four visions in 8:3: “They will cast many corpses in every place. Silence!” (rab happeneg bēkol-māqôm hišlîk hās). The final word has is an interjection that means “hush!” or “keep silence!” (perhaps onomatopoeia). Some biblical translations connect this with the penultimate word hišlîk in a nominal or adverbial sense, and others separate these last two words and give has an imperative or jussive sense. This latter usage of has is to be preferred because all six other attestations clearly indicate an imperative/jussive meaning; it is never used adverbially.

Who is it that commands silence? Some translations and commentators interpret the final phrases of 8:3 as the actual content of the “wailings” mentioned at the beginning of the verse, but others punctuate the final phrases as a continuation of YHWH’s direct discourse. The appearance of nē’um “utterance/oracle” (often verbalized as “declares”) is

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52 BDB, 245.

53 E.g., “There shall be many dead bodies in every place; they shall cast them forth with silence” (KJV) or “Many will be the corpses; in every place they will cast them forth in silence” (NASB; both emphases added). The Masoretic cantillation also connects the last two words.

54 E.g., “The dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!” (NRSV) or “So many corpses left lying everywhere! Hush!” (NJPS; both emphases added).

55 The other attestations are Judg 3:19; Neh 8:11; Amos 6:10; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; and Zech 2:13 [2:17].

56 E.g., “… The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ declares the Lord GOD. ‘So many dead bodies!’ ‘They are thrown everywhere!’ ‘Silence!’” (ESV). Commentators that understand these statements as human speech include Auld, Amos, 19; Garrett, Amos, 229–30; and Paul, Amos, 255.
instructive. Within the Twelve it always indicates God is speaking and always precedes \textit{yhw}, ‘\textit{ādōnāy yhw}, or similar titles.\textsuperscript{57} The appearance of this word in the middle of 8:3, then, strongly indicates divine speech.\textsuperscript{58} But even those that interpret the last half of the verse as human exclamations would concede that God speaks in the first half—cannot \textit{nē’um ‘ādōnāy yhw} mark the end of divine speech and the transition to human speech? The standard use of \textit{nē’um} elsewhere does not support such a change of speakers. An analysis of the twenty other appearances of \textit{nē’um} in the book of Amos reveals that there are seven other places where \textit{nē’um} appears mid-verse (as opposed to its more frequent position at the end). In none of these does \textit{nē’um} mark the end of divine speech and the introduction of a different voice; rather, it functions as a parenthetical reminder that YHWH is speaking, and then continues on with what he is saying.\textsuperscript{59}

If 8:3, then, ends with God commanding silence, whom is he addressing and why?

Commentaries almost universally cross-reference this verse with Amos 6:10:

And if a relative, one who burns [the dead], will take up the bones to bring them out of the house, and will say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, “Is

\textsuperscript{57} In fact, out of 376 occurrences in the Bible, \textit{nē’um} only indicates human speech eleven times (Eising, TDOT 9:110).

\textsuperscript{58} Especially for a preexilic text, the book of Amos is actually quite remarkable for the effort it musters to distinguish divine and human speech. See Samuel A. Meier, \textit{Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible} (VTSup 46; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 226–29. Within the Twelve, taking a tally of the appearances of \textit{nē’um} in each book, divided by the number of that book’s verses, yields the following frequencies in descending order: Haggai (31.58% of the verses), Amos (14.38), Obadiah (9.52), Zechariah (9.48), Zephaniah (9.43), Nahum (4.26), Hosea (2.03), Micah (1.90), Malachi (1.82), Joel (1.37), Jonah (0.00), and Habakkuk (0.00). We should not ignore the indicators Amos is clearly trying to give us.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Nē’um} appears mid-verse in 3:10; 6:8, 14; 8:3, 9, 11; 9:7, 13. Even in the thirteen verses where it appears at the end of a verse there is never a switch to a different speaker in the following verse.
“anyone else with you?” he will say, “No.” Then he will say, “Silence [hās]! We must not mention the name of YHWH.”

The command for silence in this verse is usually interpreted as a superstitious fear that naming the offended deity will bring upon the people still greater destruction. Amos 8:3 is linked to 6:10 because they each use the word has in close proximity to descriptions of death. I wonder, however, if this connection is being made too quickly. Apart from has there is no other unifying vocabulary between the two passages—even in cases that would have made for an easy parallel, such as “bones” in one and “corpses” in the other.

And, despite commentators’ assertions that the two verses share a very “similar context,” the one describes a superstitious exchange between two humans and the other (as demonstrated above) quotes YHWH speaking to his prophet. Does it make any sense for YHWH to instruct people, on that future day, to avoid saying his name in order to keep him from finding them?

I propose the possibility that in 8:3 YHWH does not address the surviving humans but is still speaking to the prophet Amos. After all, the most recent indicator of who is speaking to whom in the previous verse is wayyōʾ mer yhwh ʾēlay “and YHWH spoke to me”—that is, to Amos. And if this is correct, there can only be one reason why God would so speak to him: once again, YHWH cuts Amos off and forbids intercession. This is, after all, the last word of the last of vision in the series. This is also perhaps the time when Amos would most wish to intercede. Vision 1 saw the destruction of the “land’s vegetation,” vision 2 the “great deep” and the “land,” vision 3 the “high places,”

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60 Paul, Amos, 255. Paul also suggests that the prophet himself may be reacting to the grisly scene before him.

61 Andersen and Freedman, Amos, 799.
the “sanctuaries,” and the “house of Jeroboam”—but it is only in vision 4 that the people
themselves are the direct target, and Amos is forced to behold “many” of them, all
“corpses.” We read of no open protest from Amos here (which is normal in visions 3 and
4) but God apparently feels the need to close the vision series with one final declaration
that the time for discussion is over.

7. Why Does Amos Stop Interceding?

Amos’ lack of explicit protest at the end of the vision series brings us back to a
bigger issue that needs to be explored, indeed, one of the most central questions regarding
Amos’ intercessory activity. Why does Amos intercede in the first two visions but not in
the next two? Among commentators there seem to be two general lines of thought.

First, Amos stops interceding because he comes to adopt God’s point of view and
agrees that justice must be satisfied. The people have not repented and show no
inclination to do so: their breach of covenant demands a response.62 The generally harsh
and judgmental tone of most of the book of Amos certainly lends itself to this view. This
perspective is also suggested by, as discussed above, Amos’ increasingly clear prophetic
sight: the closer one comes to God, the more difficult it becomes to tolerate sin.

Second, Amos stops interceding because he cannot, or at least he recognizes that
it has become utterly futile to attempt it. This is suggested by the dramatic change in
structure that separates the two vision pairs. In the first pair, God is obvious about his
intentions and Amos immediately reacts against them. In the second pair, Amos sees
ordinary objects that pose no immediate threat until their purpose is revealed later. When

62 Cf. Amos’ poor reception at Bethel and how he reacted to the priest who tried to banish him
(7:10–17).
YHWH does explain the full significance there is barely a moment before he informs Amos in no uncertain terms, “I will not pass them by again”—do not intercede this time. God’s patience has run out. God also dominates the second pair of visions by monopolizing the dialogue and, in the case of the third vision, appearing personally to render the verdict. He gives all appearances of making sure that this time, any plans for canceling the judgments will be nipped at the bud.

Which interpretation, then, is correct? Is Amos gradually souring against his fellow mortals, or is the ability to help them being systematically torn from him? In reality, both views may be defensible. Prophets by nature are always fulfilling dual roles, both representing God to the people and representing the people before God. We can observe this conflict of interest in several stories. In Exodus 32, for example, God informs Moses while still on Sinai that the people had made a golden calf and had defiled themselves. God grows “angry” (ḥrh, v. 10) and reveals his plan—kill off the people—and Moses intercedes on their behalf. He is successful: “YHWH changed his mind” (wayyinnāḥem yhwh, v. 14), just as he had for Amos. But then Moses descends the mountain and changes roles. Once among the people, Moses himself grows “angry” (ḥrh, v. 19), destroys the calf and makes the people drink the dust, and orders the Levites, “Thus says YHWH the God of Israel:”—note whom Moses is now representing—“Everyone put his sword on his side … and everyone kill his brother, his friend, and his

63 Andersen and Freedman calculate that in the first pair of visions Amos speaks 20 words and YHWH 6; in the second pair Amos speaks 3 and YHWH 29. “The word count and the shape of the dialogue reflect the undoubted fact that Yahweh has the last word” (Andersen and Freedman, Amos, 624).

64 Würthwein (“Amos-Studien,” 92) names this appearance of “Jahwe selber” as the reason why Amos does not dare intercede in the third vision—after all, who would want to challenge the “lebendigen Gottes der Gesichte” while he is looking you in the eye?
neighbor” (v. 27). The same prophet who pleaded for God not to kill the people now orders them slain. The next day Moses changes roles yet again. “Moses said to the people … I will go up to YHWH; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (v. 30). There follows a second intercessory prayer (vv. 31–32).

Moses’ role changes can shed light on Amos’ own conflicting loyalties. Heschel describes Amos’ dilemma in this way:

Amos’ compassion for his people is profound. When beholding a vision of how “the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire … it devoured the land,” he prayed for mercy (7:4 ff.). And yet he also identified himself with God’s threat of doom for the whole people. This is the burden of a prophet: compassion for man and sympathy for God.65

**Conclusion**

Amos 7:1–9; 8:1–3 contain the best examples of prophetic intercession in the Twelve, and indeed some of the best in all prophetic literature. The text presents Amos as a prophet who, much like Moses, could successfully intercede with God and buy the people at least a temporary reprieve. And, also like Moses, Amos came to find that if the people persist in wickedness, appeals to God’s mercy will only shield them for so long. Eventually, inevitably, the demands of divine justice must be met.

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Chapter 3: Habakkuk

Introduction

The first two of Habakkuk’s three chapters contain a series of dialogues between the prophet and God, as the former complains to the latter about a number of injustices. Scholars give mixed evaluations about whether Habakkuk’s complaints should be counted as intercession. Some deny intercession in Habakkuk, some acknowledge it, and some concede a somewhat ambiguous kind of intercessory activity. I believe that the diversity of opinions results, at least in part, from a problem that plagues many aspects of Habakkuk study: the text lacks any kind of cohesive narrative. As modern readers we thirst for context, for story, but reading Habakkuk is like tuning into a radio drama half-way through the production. We hear a voice calling out in obvious distress; we hear oblique references to “trouble,” “violence,” “justice,” “the wicked,” and “the righteous”; we hear another voice addressing a group to which we have not been

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introduced; we hear a great many things as the minutes go by, but in our attempt to reconstruct what we missed we find that much of it is too vague to make any completely certain conclusions.

This (deliberate?) editorial preference for generality makes some interpretive questions much more difficult, including the issue of intercession. Nevertheless, the text as it stands provides enough hints to justify an intercessory reading of Habakkuk. In this chapter I will argue that Habakkuk’s defense of others and by the strong prophetic context of the dialogues give evidence of intercession. I will then analyze the rhetorical strategies Habakkuk employs in order to intercede.

The text of Habakkuk 1:1–2:4 is presented below, with some less-relevant verses omitted:

1:1 The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

**Habakkuk’s complaint**

1:2 How long, YHWH, will I cry for help and you will not listen?— Or cry out “violence!” to you and you will not save?

1:3 Why do you make me see iniquity and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me—there is strife, and contention arises!

1:4 Therefore instruction is ineffective, and justice never comes. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted.

**YHWH’s answer**

1:5 See among the nations and look! Be astonished and be astounded!
For a deed is being done\(^{69}\) in your days which you would not believe if told.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, Who go through the breath of the land to take possession of dwellings that are not theirs.

(Menacing descriptions of the Babylonians continue through v. 11)

Habakkuk’s second complaint

1:12 Are you not from everlasting, YHWH my God, my holy one? We will not die.\(^{70}\)

O YHWH, for judgment you have appointed them, and—O rock!—for reproof you established them.

1:13 Too pure are your eyes to see evil, and to look upon trouble you are not able; Why do you look upon treacherous ones, or remain silent as the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?

(The discussion continues in 1:14–17)

2:1 At my watch I will stand, and upon my watchtower I will station myself, I will wait to see what he will say to me and how he\(^{72}\) will answer my complaint.

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\(^{69}\) The LXX adds \textit{egō} and thus some translations incorporate a first-person subject, i.e., “I will do a deed” (cf. KJV, NASB, ESV, NIV).

\(^{70}\) The reading “We will not die” follows the MT. The rabbinic textual corrections known as the \textit{Tiqqune Sopherim}, however, suggest that the phrase originally read “You [YHWH] will not die.” The associated tradition postulates that pious scribes altered the verse to avoid associating God with mortality (despite the fact that the phrase itself aims to deny any such association). \textit{BHS} recommends the emendation and some translations such as NRSV and NJPS follow it, but I have retained the traditional reading. A defense of the MT phrasing may be found in Carmel McCarthy, \textit{The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament} (OBO 36; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 105–11.

\(^{71}\) “My” is added here based on 1QpHab’s \textit{mšwry}. This reading better parallels \textit{mšmrt}.

\(^{72}\) The MT reads \textit{ʾāšîb} “I will answer” which makes little contextual sense and does not parallel \textit{yēdabber}. This reading is retained in several translations (e.g., KJV, NASB, ESV, NIV) but with evidence from the Syr. I prefer emending the verb by one letter to \textit{yāšîb} “he will answer” (cf. NRSV, NJPS).
YHWH’s second answer

2:2 And YHWH answered me and said:
Write the vision and inscribe it upon tablets,
in order that he who reads it may run.

2:3 For the vision is yet for the appointed time;
it hastens to the end and will not fail.
If it tarries, wait for it, for it will surely
come and will not delay.

2:4 Behold his soul is proud, it is not upright
within him; but the righteous will live by
their faithfulness.

Habakkuk’s Defense of Others

In some ways Habakkuk’s complaints sound like a kind of individual lament, a
call for God to save him from his personal troubles. There are several personal references
(all emphases added):

“How long, YHWH, will I cry for help …?” (1:2)

“Why do you make me see iniquity …?” (1:3)

“Destruction and violence are before me” (1:3)

“I will wait to see what he will say to me and how he will answer my complaint”
(2:1)

Given these first-person references, the first complaint especially could be read as
nothing more than a personal trial. Even Habakkuk’s phrase “the wicked surround the
righteous” could be taken as self-referential, as “righteous” is singular.

Other factors, conversely, suggest more of a communal background to
Habakkuk’s complaints. His statement that “instruction (tôrâ) is ineffective, and justice
(mišpâṭ) never comes … [and] justice comes out perverted” (v. 4) evokes images of

73 “And” is absent in the MT but present in 1QpHab, the LXX, and the Vulg.
widespread social ills. The woe oracles in ch. 2 also attack social, not personal, problems.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, if YHWH’s sending the Babylonians is, as most scholars take it, meant to address the injustice described in Habakkuk’s complaint, then the punishment only makes sense if the complaint has broad application; it would be highly disproportionate to send the whole Babylonian imperial army to deal with a handful of the prophet’s personal enemies.\textsuperscript{75}

The text of Habakkuk in its present form, then, presents a mixture of concerns, both for the prophet as an individual and for the community of which he was a part. Some scholars have suggested that these focuses represent different redactional layers in the text.\textsuperscript{76} Irrespective of the textual history, the concerns as they currently read are not mutually exclusive. Andersen cites studies on the book of Psalms which conclude that the “I” in some laments is an individual voice meant to represent the voices of all the people before God. He suggests that “this dual role would apply to Habakkuk as an intercessor or as a prophetic covenant mediator on behalf of his people.” Later he states:

It does not have to be a choice between the prayer as individual (Habakkuk’s personal altercation) or communal (Habakkuk speaks in solidarity with his people)… Habakkuk is a prophet, and, like Jeremiah, his personal struggle is inseparable from the problems of Israel in his time. Making intercession on behalf

\textsuperscript{74} Andersen, \textit{Habakkuk}, 125–26.

\textsuperscript{75} Not all scholars see 1:5–11 as addressing the concerns of 1:2–4. Sweeney interprets the “wicked” of Habakkuk’s first complaint as the Babylonians, not corrupt Judahites. If both 1:2–4 \textit{and} 1:5–11 are describing the Babylonians, then Habakkuk’s complaint has never really been answered. Széles defends the interpretation of wicked Jews. Either way, Habakkuk’s complaint suggests a communal (not just personal) problem. See Marvin A. Sweeney, \textit{The Twelve Prophets} (2 vols.; Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 2:455; and Mária Eszenyei Széles, \textit{Wrath and Mercy: A Commentary on the Books of Habakkuk and Zephaniah} (trans. George A. F. Knight; Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 19–20.

\textsuperscript{76} Paul L. Redditt, \textit{Introduction to the Prophets} (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 297–99.
of the community does not exclude deep personal involvement of the prophet himself. In compassion, he identifies with the victims on whose behalf he prays.\textsuperscript{77}

Viewed in this light, even the first-person references can be taken as a voice acting on behalf of others. The second complaint especially reads like a discussion about a group of people, not just the individual speaker. YHWH’s answer to the second complaint comes with instructions to have it written and proclaimed by runners (2:2), confirming that these dialogues involve the community at large. Because intercession by definition involves one person acting on behalf of another, Habakkuk’s concern for the group supports an intercessory reading.

**Habakkuk’s Prophetic Context**

Three features attest to a strong prophetic context in Habakkuk: the superscriptions, the focus on special sight, and the divine council. The prophetic context in turn supports a reading of intercession.

Habakkuk opens with a superscription, “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.” The third chapter opens with a second heading, “A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet \textit{ʿal šigvônôt}.”\textsuperscript{78} It is significant that both lines designate him “the prophet,” which is not as common as one might expect. Among the literary prophets, only Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Zechariah are referred to as “[Name] the prophet.”\textsuperscript{79} That the author of the

\textsuperscript{77} Andersen, \textit{Habakkuk}, 21, 127.

\textsuperscript{78} Although some attempt to translate the phrase \textit{šigvônôt}, there is no solid evidence by which one may deduce its meaning. Most scholars understand it as some kind of direction meant for a musical/liturgical setting. See David J. Clark and Howard A. Hatton, \textit{A Translator’s Handbook on the Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah} (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 115.

\textsuperscript{79} Isaiah also receives this title, but only in chapters lifted directly from the book of Kings. Uses of the title include “Isaiah (the son of Amoz) the prophet” (Isa 37:2; 38:1; 39:3), “Jeremiah the prophet” (Jer 20:2; 25:2; 28:5–6, 10–12, 15; 29:1, 29; 32:2; 34:6; 36:8, 26; 37:2–3, 6, 13; 38:9–10, 14; 42:2, 4; 43:6;
superscriptions (likely a redactor) twice bestowed this title on Habakkuk suggests that he saw Habakkuk’s prophethood as a key for understanding the book.

The first superscription also introduces a key theme when it states that what follows is a “oracle” (maśṣāʾ) that Habbakuk “saw” (ḥāzāh). This wording is likely redactional in its origin and served to link Habakkuk to other prophetic texts. At first it may seem like an odd way to describe how Habakkuk 1–2 came about, for these chapters are made up of dialogues, laments, and woe oracles, not visions. However, a closer reading of Habakkuk reveals that whatever the redactional intent behind the word ḫāzāh, it appropriately introduces a text peppered with references to special sight:

Redactor: “The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw (ḥzḥ)” (1:1)

Habakkuk: “Why do you make me see (r ’ḥ) iniquity and look at (nḥt) trouble?” (1:3)

YHWH: “See (r ’ḥ) among the nations and look (nḥt)!” (1:5)

Habakkuk: “Too pure are your eyes to see (r ’ḥ) evil, and to look upon (nḥt) trouble you are not able; why do you look upon (nḥt) treacherous ones …?” (1:13)

Habakkuk: “And I will wait to see (r ’ḥ) what he will say to me …” (2:1)

YHWH: “Write the vision (ḥāzōn) and inscribe it upon tablets … For the vision (ḥāzōn) is yet for the appointed time …” (2:2–3)

45:1; 46:1, 13; 47:1; 49:34; 50:1; 51:59), “Habakkuk the prophet” (Hab 1:1; 3:1), “Haggai the prophet” (Hag 1:1, 3, 12; 2:1, 10), and “Zechariah son of Berechiah son of Iddo the prophet” (Ze 1:1, 7).

The reference in 2:1 is particularly telling; notice that Habakkuk waits to see what God will say, rather than waiting to hear what God will say. The visual imagery is reinforced in the same verse by Habakkuk’s station upon a watchtower, a location that is strategic because it increases one’s visual (but not necessarily audible) range. YHWH also suggests the importance of sight when he emphatically tells Habakkuk to “see” and “look,” followed by the suggestion that an audible revelation would be insufficient or inferior: “You would not believe if you were told” (1:5 NRSV; emphasis added).

This emphasis on the visual in Habakkuk underscores the prophetic nature of Habakkuk’s dialogues. As we observed in the case of Amos, special sight—the ability to see what others do not see and to discern the true significance of events—characterizes prophets.

The first dialogue begins in 1:2 but clearly alludes to a previous history (“how long …?”). We find ourselves stepping into the middle of a conversation without any explanation regarding how long it has been going on or what has been said already. I suggest that this narrative gap represents the unrecorded account of YHWH initializing the dialogue by revealing certain unpleasantries to his prophet. Habakkuk hints as much as he asks, lāmmā tarʾēnî ʾāwen wĕʿāmā lāmāl tabbît “Why do you show me [literally, ‘make me see’ in the causative hipʿil stem] iniquity and make me look at [again a hipʿil] trouble?” (1:3). The focus on special sight that pervades these dialogues suggests that Habakkuk is not simply walking through Jerusalem observing social ills; rather, he is in some way being aided by God to perceive and better understand the very problems about

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81 This wording is unique. Only three other places in the Bible feature the sequence verb+mah+dbr, and in all three the initial verb is šm ‘to hear,’ thus “hear what he/they will say” (see Judg 7:11; Ps 85:8 [85:9]; Jer 5:15).
which he now complains. Viewed this way, 1:1–2 could be paraphrased as “Why are you showing me these problems if you are not even doing anything about them?”

YHWH’s response to Habakkuk in 1:5 also reinforces the prophetic context of their dialogues. All four of the commands—see! look! be astonished! be astounded!—are in the second masc. plural form, indicating YHWH is addressing not just the prophet, but a group. This remains true as the verse continues: “For a deed is being done in your [plural] days which you [plural] would not believe if told.”

Whom is YHWH addressing? As with much of Habakkuk, the narrative background is missing and we must rely on contextual clues. Many scholars have suggested that a “community” associated with Habakkuk is being addressed, and have proposed identifications ranging from the Davidic royal family to the cult at the temple. Meier explains the most likely setting:

The prophet Habakkuk’s dialogue is most comfortably explained as a part of the prophetic participation in the divine council…. The divine council is the body to whom God characteristically reveals his plans, and it is probably presupposed here as well, particularly as Habakkuk continues to dialogue with God (Hab 1:12–27; 2:1–2).

As participants on that council, prophets were privileged to know God’s future plans, to contribute to deliberations over what should be done, to volunteer for assignments, and to argue for a change in plans (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Isa 6:1–2, 8; Jer 23:16–22; Amos 3:7; 82 Andersen dismisses the idea that Habakkuk sees these problems “in a prophetic vision” because “Habakkuk blames the desperate situation on the failure of the Torah in the real world” (Andersen, Habakkuk, 113). The purpose of divinely-mediated prophetic sight, however, is precisely to illuminate the significance of what is going on in the “real world.”


84 Meier, Themes and Transformations, 23–24.
7:1–6).\(^{85}\) That Habakkuk “sees” current and future events, receives instructions as part of a larger group, and protests God’s plans as part of a back-and-forth dialogue, all suggest that the divine council may appropriately fill in some of the text’s missing situational background. The council setting may also be alluded to in 2:1: “At my watch I will stand (˙md), and upon my watchtower I will station (ṣb) myself …” These two verbs appear in other council contexts:

I saw YHWH sitting on his throne, with all the hosts of heaven standing (˙md) beside him to the right and to the left of him. (1 Kgs 22:19)

It was the day when the sons of God came to present (ṣb) themselves before YHWH, and the accuser also came among them. (Job 1:6; cf. 2:1)

For who has stood (˙md) in the council of YHWH …? (Jer 23:18)

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up … Seraphs were stationed (md) beside him … (Isa 6:1–2)

The interpretive labels in the superscriptions, the focus on special sight, and the setting of the divine council all reinforce the image of Habakkuk as a prophet, acting in accordance with the nature and duties of his office. Habakkuk complains, yes, he laments, yes, but he is not simply another disgruntled victim. Inasmuch as intercessor was one of the roles of Israel’s prophets, this thematic image in turn supports a reading of intercession in Habakkuk.

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Habakkuk’s Rhetorical Strategies

If Habakkuk engages in intercession, he does so both differently than and similarly to others. For one, Habakkuk is much less direct than either Moses or Amos. The transcriptions of their intercessory prayers record several instances of grammatical imperatives directed at YHWH (Exod 32:12 [2x], 13, 32; Num 12:13; 14:19; Amos 7:2, 5). In contrast, Habakkuk employs no such commands (though he receives several). He asks questions instead:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>HABAKKUK</th>
<th>YHWH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:2a Question</td>
<td>1:5a Imperatives (4x)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:2b Question</td>
<td>1:5b Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:3a Question</td>
<td>1:6–11 Statements</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:3b Statement</td>
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<td>1:4a Statement</td>
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<td>1:4b Statement</td>
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First Complaint

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>HABAKKUK</th>
<th>YHWH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:12a Question</td>
<td>2:2a Imperatives (2x)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:12b Statement</td>
<td>2:2b Statement</td>
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<td>1:13a Statement</td>
<td>2:3a Statement</td>
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<td>1:13b Question</td>
<td>2:3b Imperative</td>
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<td>1:14–16 Statements</td>
<td>2:4a Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:17 Question</td>
<td>2:4b Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:1 Statement to self</td>
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Second Complaint

Habakkuk’s questions are the rhetorical counterpart to YHWH’s commands; they are his weapon of choice. In the first complaint, the prophet asks “how long” (ʿad-ʿānā) he will cry for help without YHWH listening, and “how long” he will cry “violence!” without YHWH saving. The phrase suggests exasperation and strongly implies a call to action; it appears in other contexts in which a human feels God is slow to help (4x in Ps
13:1–2 [13:2–3]) or in which God himself responds to the people’s unresponsiveness (Exod 16:28; Num 14:11 [2x]).

The second complaint demonstrates an even more reasoned argument, as the prophet responds to the shocking response of the first. It begins with a rhetorical question that establishes YHWH’s immortality and constancy. Verse 12 is sprinkled with personal addresses and epithets—YHWH, my God, my Holy One, YHWH, Rock—that serve to heighten the irony as the argument continues. In the midst of all these comes a plea, “We shall not die!” which Hesse interprets as intercession inasmuch as Habakkuk “erbittet … eine Wandlung des Vernichtungsgerichts in ein Züchtigungsgericht.” Verse 13a continues to describe YHWH’s purity and goodness, which out of context might sound like simple praise. The irony, which now borders on sarcasm, continues as he states that YHWH is not able “to look upon trouble” (habbîṭ ʾel-ʿāmāl)—a deliberate echo of v. 3 when Habakkuk had already asked “Why … do you make me look at trouble?” (lāmmā ... ʿāmāl tabbîṭ).

Verse 13b contains the heart of Habakkuk’s second complaint, and it is all the more potent for the climax that has been so carefully crafted. The irony is embedded in the chiastic structure of v. 13:

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86 Another Hebrew phrase ʿad-mātay also means “how long?” and is similarly employed by humans against God (Ps 6:3 [6:4]; 74:10; 80:4 [80:5]; 90:13; 94:3 [2x]; Isa 6:11), by an angel against God (Zech 1:12), and by God against humans (Num 14:27; 1 Sam 16:1; Jer 4:14; 23:26; 31:22; Hos 8:5). That these two phrases are conceptually interchangeable is apparent from their parallel use in Jer 47:5–6. The peoples’ lament in Ps 74:9 intriguingly connects this phrase with prophetic intercession: “We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, there is no one among us who knows ‘how long’.”

87 Hesse, Die Fürbitte im Alten Testament, 46.
Too pure are your eyes to see evil (rā’),
   and to look upon (nbṭ) trouble you are not able;
   Why
do you look upon (nbṭ) treacherous ones,
or remain silent as the wicked (rāšā’) swallow up those more righteous than they?

This is more than a simple complaint about an unfair situation: it is a logical argument
that employs superb rhetorical strategy. As with the first complaint, Habakkuk makes no
explicit demand of God, and yet God especially could not miss the fact that he is being
systematically attacked by someone who clearly feels cheated.

Though Habakkuk does not give YHWH orders, his method of barbed
questioning can be found elsewhere. Other intercessors similarly ask questions that
remind YHWH of his positive attributes in a not-so-veiled effort to suggest that such
attributes are threatened by his current actions:

   “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? … Far be it from
   you to … slay the righteous with the wicked … Shall not the ‘Judge’ of all the
earth make ‘judgment’?” (Gen 18:23–25)

   “O God—God of the spirits of all flesh—will one person sin and you become
   angry with all the congregation?” (Num 16:22)

   “I will recount the loving-kindness of YHWH, the praises of YHWH … For he
   said, ‘Surely they are my people …’ and he became their savior. …
   “Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea …?
   “Where is the one who set his holy spirit in their midst …? …
   “Where are your zeal and your might? The yearning of your heart and your
   compassion?” (Isa 63:7–8, 11, 15)88

88 My translations add some punctuation and italics that of course are not found in the Hebrew but
do help the English reader pick up on the intended irony. Many English translations miss in particular the
wordplay between hāšōpēt “the Judge” and mišpāṭ “judgment/justice” in Gen 18:25, e.g., “Will not the
Judge of all the earth do right?” (NIV).
Habakkuk’s intercessory strategy is to ask questions, but to do so in a way that demands a response. He very much expects that God will answer:

At my watch I will stand,
and upon my watchtower I will station myself,
I will wait to see what he will say to me
and how he will answer my complaint. (2:1)

The prophet’s expectant waiting indicates, again, that he is not engaged in simple lamenting nor is he merely ruminating on a theological question. He wants God to save and act justly with his people. In other words, he is trying to intercede.

**Conclusion**

The intercession of Habakkuk is supported by the fact that he speaks on behalf of others and by the strong prophetic context of the book. Habakkuk intercedes as he laments the conditions around him and asks God, pointedly, where he is and why he is allowing such injustice to continue in the world. It is clear he expects God to answer.

Nevertheless, the intercessory activity in Habakkuk is far from the Bible’s clearest example. Hesse observes that in Habakkuk, “Die Grenzen zwischen Fürbitte und Bittgebet verschwimmen.”89 *Verschwommen* might apply to a lot of issues in the book of Habakkuk, but there is enough there to support Habakkuk’s place among the intercessors.

Introduction

The book of Joel is a relatively short prophetic text, famous for its description of a locust plague and for its apocalyptic imagery. No consensus exists regarding a date for the book. We will explore two questions dealing with intercession in Joel: First, who speaks the prayer found in 1:19, and does it represent intercession? And second, can any of the groups called upon to lament and pray in chs. 1–2 be considered intercessors?

Joel’s Intercession

Joel 1:19 sits within the larger pericope of 1:15–20. Several features reveal these verses to be a unified subunit within the larger literary structure. With the exception of v. 16, each verse contains a statement of disaster, the conjunction kî “because/for,” and a subsequent statement explaining the cause of the first. Verses 15–20 contain no grammatical imperatives, in contrast to vv. 2–14 which contains no less than eighteen. With one exception (3:10 [4:10]), they are the only verses in Joel in which a human speaks in the first person, either the plural (“our,” 2x in v. 16) or the singular (“I,” v. 19). Collectively, these six verses read like a lament or complaint (appropriately, v. 15 begins with “Alas!”). They are presented and translated below:

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90 The phrase “my God” appears in 1:13 of the MT, but this appears to be an error. It lacks harmony with “your God” later in v. 13 and in v. 14 (contextually, there is no apparent reason to make a distinction between “my” and “your” God here) and the LXX reads simply theō “God.”
Alas for the day!
Because the day of YHWH is near, and it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

Is not food being cut off from before our eyes,
Joy and gladness from the house of our God?

The seeds shrivel under their clods,
The storehouses are desolate, the granaries are in ruins,
Because the grain has dried out.

How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed
Because there is no pasture for them;
Even the flocks of sheep are suffering.

To you, YHWH, I call!
Because fire has consumed the pasture of the wilderness
And flames have burned all the trees of the field.

Even the animals of the field pant to you,
Because the watercourses are dried up,
And fire has consumed the pasture of the wilderness.

Among these six verses, v. 19 shares the strongest connections with v. 20. They share the word 'ēlēkā “to you” (found nowhere else in Joel) and the line ’ēš ’āklâ nēʾōt (ham)midbār “fire has consumed the pastures of (the) wilderness.” Although the human speaker in v. 19 does not perform the same action as the animals in v. 20 (as misleadingly suggested in some translations, e.g. NRSV) the opening particle in v. 20, gam “even/also,” suggests that the animals’ panting is to be seen as a parallel to the human’s calling in the

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91 This phrase is notoriously difficult to translate because of its unique vocabulary. The exact meaning makes no impact on the pericope as a whole and so I have simply followed the traditional translation.
preceding verse. Verses 15–16 and vv. 17–18 share similar connections that justify dividing this lament into three two-verse segments.

Who speaks this lament? The two most reasonable possibilities are either Joel, the prophet who presumably is receiving this entire oracle (1:1), or the individuals named in vv. 13–14—including priests/ministers, the elders, and “all the inhabitants of the land”—who had been called upon to “lament,” “wail,” and “cry out” to YHWH. To separate Joel from these latter groups, however, may make for too fine a distinction. While the contents of the lament may well represent what the people are supposed to “cry out” as they address God, people do not actually recite rote prayers in unison unless some individual first provides a model to follow. Whether the lament is meant to be read as spoken by Joel alone or whether Joel first provided an example for others to follow, the initial speaker of the lament would be the prophet in either case.

The lament shifts somewhat when it reaches the third of its two-verse segments, vv. 19–20. While it had previously used the first-person possessive plural “our” (2x in v. 16), v. 19 suddenly becomes even more personal as it narrows the subject to the singular “I.” Verses 19–20 are also one of the very few passages in the book of Joel which address YHWH directly in the second person (cf. 2:17; 3:11 [4:11]). If the lament thus far was meant as a model for the people at large to follow, vv. 19–20 seem to finish these

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92 Of course, as a literary construct groups may indeed be portrayed as speaking spontaneously in unison, e.g., Exod 19:8; 24:3, 7; 32:1, 4; Josh 24:16–18, 21–22, 24; 1 Sam 8:5, 19–20, etc.

93 Joel 3:11 [4:11] addresses YHWH in the MT (“Bring down your warriors, O YHWH”), but the line is jarringly out of context and BHS considers it corrupt. The LXX reads ho praus estō machētes “let the weak be a warrior,” which lacks any reference to YHWH.
instructions with a more personal petition, offered directly from the prophet Joel to God.\(^{94}\)

The contents of Joel’s appeal consist of a mere three Hebrew words, ʾēlēkā yhwh ’eqrā’ “To you, YHWH, I call!” After this follows the usual kî “because/for” and the reasons for the petition—reminiscent of Amos’ experience, Joel responds to a devouring fire that is consuming the land. The common verb qrʾ “to call” appears in the Bible more than 700x, including 98x in which a human “calls” to YHWH, as here in Joel. These 98 cases display a wide variety of contextual nuances, from praise, proclaim, and thank, to lament, cry, and call for help.\(^{95}\) In the case of Joel 1:19, then, any translation more specific than “call” must rely on context and interpretation, not semantics. Many translations are content with “call” (ESV, NJPS, NIV), some modify to “cry” (KJV, NASB, NRSV), and some contextualize even further (“call out for help,” NET). All of these fit the context of lament in 1:15–20.

The appeal in 1:19 appropriately meets the definition of intercession: Joel, a prophet, cries out to God on behalf of others who are suffering. The appeal itself is a mere three words, though Amos’ classic petition counts just four before he similarly stops and gives an explanation of why he is interceding. Joel makes no direct demand of YHWH comparable to Amos’ “forgive!” or “stop!” but the cry to YHWH followed

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\(^{94}\) This reading of a “model” liturgical form in vv. 15–18 with a switch to the prophet’s more personal appeal in vv. 19–20 is supported by James L. Crenshaw, Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 24c; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 110; and Sweeney, The Twelve Prophets, 1:160–61. Most commentators are comfortable assigning at least vv. 19–20 to Joel, but some still prefer to read a communal lament, the “I” signifying the unity of their emphatic plea. See John Barton, Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 63.

\(^{95}\) C. J. Labuschagne, “qrʾ to call,” TLOT 3:1159, 1163.
immediately by kîʾēš ʾāklā “because fire has consumed …” clearly implies a desire that YHWH do something about the fire and its attending circumstances.

The Priests’ Intercession

Although the verses surrounding 1:19 represent the petition of the prophet Joel, he is still just one among many who pray to YHWH in his book. Do any of these others qualify as intercessors?

Before the lament in 1:15–20 begins, vv. 2–14 name a series of groups with accompanying commands to pay attention to their dire situation, to wail over their distress, and most importantly, to pray to God. These commands are summarized below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who is commanded</th>
<th>What they are to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:2 hazzĕqēnîm “the elders”</td>
<td>šîmê ʿē “hearken!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōl yōšêbē hâ ārēς “all inhabitants of the land”</td>
<td>haʾāzînû “hear!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:3</td>
<td>sappērû “tell (your children)!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:5 šikkôrîm “drunkards”96</td>
<td>hāqîṣû ... ūbēkû “awake … and weep!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōl-šōtē yāyin “all who drink wine”</td>
<td>hēlîlû “wail!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:8</td>
<td>ʿēlî “lament!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:11 ikkārîm “farmers”</td>
<td>hōbîšû “be dismayed!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kōrĕmîm “vinedressers”</td>
<td>hēlîlû “wail!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:13 hakkōhănîm “the priests”</td>
<td>bigrû wĕsipêdû “gird yourselves [with sackcloth] and moan!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mēšārtê mizbēaḥ “ministers at the altar”</td>
<td>hēlîlû “wail!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mēšārtê ʾēlōhāy “ministers of my God”</td>
<td>bōʾû linû bašsaqqîm “come, pass the night in sackcloth!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:14 qaddĕšû-ṣôm qîrē ʿašārā “sanctify a fast! call a solemn assembly!”</td>
<td>ṣêpū zĕgēnîm kōl yōšêbē hâ ārēς ... wēzaʾāqû ʾel-yhwh “gather the elders [and] all the inhabitants of the land and cry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

96 Although there is a prophetic tradition of condemning drunkenness (Isa 5:11–13; 28:1–8; Amos 6:6) some scholars do not regard “drunkards” as carrying the appropriate connotation here, interpreting the reference as a neutral description to those to drink wine, i.e., everyone. See Barton, Joel and Obadiah, 50.
Hiebert groups these addressees into three “sectors of society”: consumers (vv. 5–10), farmers (vv. 11–12), and priests (vv. 13–18). Verses 2–4 serve as an introduction, explaining the problem and calling upon the “elders” and “all the inhabitants of the land” to pay attention. These latter two groups are again mentioned at the end of v. 14, thus framing vv. 2–14 before the beginning of the lament in v. 15. If just one of the verses among 2–14 were read in isolation it might be tempting to see the individuals mentioned there as intercessors, especially v. 13 with its mention of the “priests … who minister.” However, the total effect of all thirteen verses is to nullify any special status that one group may have. In the wake of a disaster of such epic proportions, every member of society—cultic leaders, day laborers, the old and the young—has come together to plead to heaven. Intercession, as we have defined it, involves one capable individual or group praying on behalf of others. The picture Joel paints is of a community praying on behalf of itself, and no particular group seems particularly singled out as privileged in this matter.

If no group can claim the title of intercessor in ch. 1, there is still ch. 2 to consider. The first eleven verses of the second chapter describe a devastating invasion; whether this is the locusts described as an army or an army described as locust-like is debated, but for our purposes it does not matter either way. 2:12–17 contain a call to

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98 Joel ch. 1 and ch. 2 do not necessarily follow one another as a continuous narrative and are dissimilar in important ways; see Hans Walter Wolff, Joel and Amos (trans. Waldemar Janzen, et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 6–7. Wolff himself, however, defends the overall authorial unity of Joel (see pp. 6–8).
“turn back” to God in order that he might “turn back” to the people. Similar to the call to lament in 1:2–14, these verses address several groups. A major turning point occurs at 2:18, as YHWH indeed forgives and heals his stricken people.99 The most relevant verses are presented and translated below:

**Call to repent (started back at 2:12)**

2:15 Blow the *shophar* in Zion! 
Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly!

2:16 Gather the people! Sanctify the congregation! Assemble the elders! 
Gather the children and those that suck the breast! 
Let the bridegroom come out of his chamber and the bride her room!

2:17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of YHWH, weep! 
And let them say: “Spare, O YHWH, your people! 
“Let not your inheritance be given to reproach, a byword among the nations! 
“Why should it be said among the nations, ‘Where is their God?’”

**Oracle of salvation (continues until 2:27)**

2:18 And then YHWH became100 zealous for his land, and he had pity on his people. 
And YHWH answered and said to his people: “Behold, I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied;

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99 The shift in 2:18 is so dramatic it that some scholars have assigned 2:18ff. to a different hand than the preceding material; even those that accept the book’s essential unity usually understand 2:17–18 as Joel’s literary fulcrum. See Crenshaw, *Joel*, 29–34.

100 Translations are divided on whether to translate 2:18ff. as a past tense series of events (*NRSV*, *ESV*, *NJPS*) or future tense promises of hope (*KJV*, *NASB*, *NIV*). The “waw-conversive” *wayyiqtol* form usually indicates completed action, and the translations that rephrase these actions as future events may be reacting to the apparent narrative “gap” in between vv. 17, 18, i.e., we never read that the people actually repented as instructed. If we assume that repentance did occur then there is no difficulty in reading 2:18ff. as YHWH’s positive response to their efforts. See Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 86–88.
“And I will no longer give you to reproach among the nations.”

As in ch. 1, several types and segments of society are called upon to participate in a communal lamentation. And, once again, the extent of this participation cautions against too quickly assigning a specific intercessory role to a particular group. And yet in ch. 2 the priests do receive special attention. They are given final position in the roll call (they held the penultimate position in ch. 1). In ch. 1 the priests were told to put on sackcloth and hêlîlû “wail!” (1:13)—nothing too unusual considering both the drunks and the farmers were also asked to hêlîlû (1:5, 11)—but here in ch. 2 the non-priestly groups are given only commands to gather/assemble, and the priests alone are told to weep and pray.101 Furthermore, the exact contents of a specific sixteen-word prayer are provided. In a style at home with the intercessory prayers of Moses or Amos, the prayer begins with a grammatical imperative directed to deity (“spare!”). It also joins a history of intercessory prayers that appeal to a concern for YHWH’s international reputation.102 Finally, the prayer addresses YHWH in the second person, and the other passage in Joel which does so is Joel’s intercessory prayer in 1:19.

Does the priests’ prayer in 2:17 then qualify as intercession? Crenshaw freely refers to the priests as intercessors, as does Finley; even Balentine, well-noted for his extremely narrow definitions of intercession, lists Joel 2:17 as an example of intercessory

101 2:12 contains instructions to weep and lament, but this is not directed to any particular group.

102 Cf. Exod 32:12; Num 14:13–16; Deut 9:28, which make it clear that Moses is portrayed as making particularly good use of this line of reasoning. As one commentator notes, Joel 2:17 contains “more than a hint of blackmail”! See Richard Coggins, Joel and Amos (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 45.
prayer. Given their unique assignments in ch. 2, I am persuaded that the priests here do indeed fulfill an intercessory role during the crises. While they too are affected by the disasters, their priestly status grants them a special ability to plead with God on behalf of the nation.

**Conclusion**

The book of Joel contains two examples of intercession: a prayer offered by the prophet himself in 1:19 and a prayer offered by the priests in 2:17. These verses make an important contribution to our understanding of intercessory prayer by recording the specific contents of the prayer and demonstrating how a prophet might share this task with other Israelite leaders.

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Chapter 5: Zechariah

Introduction

The prophet Zechariah was active from at least 520 to 518 B.C.E. (Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1). At that time the Jews still suffered the effects of the Babylonian Exile and had yet to fully restore Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The first six chapters of his book describe Zechariah’s journey through eight visions, mediated at each step by an angel. During the first vision the plight of Judah comes to view and intercession is made on their behalf—the twist, however, is that this time it is not the prophet who makes it.

Words of an Angel

As the first vision (1:7–17) opens, Zechariah describes seeing divine horsemen and asks about their meaning. He is informed that they are sent from YHWH to patrol the earth. The horsemen then give their report: “We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth is resting and quiet” (v. 11). In another context “resting and quiet” would sound positive, but at this time (c. 519 B.C.E.) Jerusalem and Judah had yet to be “actively and mightily” rebuilt and restored. An “angel of YHWH” and YHWH himself then share a conversation, as presented and translated below:

ו י ָ֣ע ן מ לְא ךְ־יְהו ה֮ ו יֹאמ ר֒ יְהו ָ֣ה צְב אִ֔ות
ע ד־מ ת ָ֗י א ת ה֙ לֶֹּֽוא־תְר חֵָּ֣ם אֶת־יְרוּשׁ ל ִִ֔ם
וְאֵּּ֣י יְהוּד ָּ֑ה אֲשֶָׁ֣ר ז ע ִ֔מְת ה זֶ ה שִׁבְעִֵּ֥ים
שׁ נ ֶּֽה׃

The angel of YHWH answered and said: “O YHWH of hosts, how long will you not have compassion on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, with whom you have been angry these seventy years?”
YHWH answered good and comforting words to the angel who spoke with me.

And the angel who spoke with me said to me, “Proclaim: Thus said YHWH of hosts—‘I am zealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great zeal.’”

The angel of YHWH, “overwhelmed” at the pitiful state of the Judahites, offers an intercessory petition to God on their behalf. Sweeney interprets the angel’s question as primarily a query for chronological information, an attempt to ascertain the divine plan regarding the timing of world affairs. But it reaches further than that. The angel could have described Judah’s plight in a much more neutral sense, such as, “How long until Jerusalem will be restored?” Instead, the question is framed to highlight YHWH’s role in Judah’s continued suffering: “How long will you not have compassion on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, with whom you have been angry these seventy years?” (emphases added). The issue of God’s delinquent compassion comes across as just as important (or more so?) than the condition of fallen Judah. Still, the angel’s “sore distress” for the Judahites prompts Meyers and Meyers to label him “their advocate or defense attorney … who acts as intercessor.”

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104 As described by Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 103.


The first surprising feature of this account is the appearance of an interceding angel. Angelic intercession appears very rarely in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Job 5:1), though it would play a major role in later Jewish and Christian literature. Angels (malʾākîm) perform a number of tasks for YHWH, from instructor (Gen 16:9) to assassin (Num 22:22–26, 31–33), from messenger (Judg 13:3–5) to rescuer (Isa 63:9). Angels are members of the divine council, whose members freely offer their thoughts to YHWH, who himself demonstrates amazing deference in soliciting the opinions of his council (Gen 18:17–18; 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Job 1:6–12; Isa 6:1–3, 8). And yet apart from Zech 1:12 we have no biblical record of an angel voicing such an accusative comment against his enthroned Master. He gives no commands, to be sure, but his question is piercing and implicative enough to make even Habakkuk proud.

The second surprising feature of this account is related to the first: why does Zechariah, the prophet, not intercede? We might not fault Zechariah in this regard—a number of prophets left no record of intercession, after all—except that the angel’s appeal makes it obvious that in this situation intercession is possible, necessary, and ultimately efficacious. Zechariah, however, comes across as relatively powerless. In all the book that bears his name (the longest of the Twelve) he never once says anything to God. In

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109 Mullen describes Zech 1:12 itself as taking place in a council setting (The Assembly of the Gods, 275, n. 269), but the only evidence he cites for this reading is a reference to N. L. A. Tidwell, “Wāʾōmar (Zech 3:5) and the Genre of Zechariah’s Fourth Vision,” JBL 94 (1975): 352. Tidwell in turn assumes a council setting throughout Zechariah 1–8, which is unlikely given the general lack of council depictions within post-exilic prophetic texts. See Meier, Themes and Transformations, 24–27, esp. n. 6 on p. 24.
addition, most of his revelations are not received directly from YHWH but are mediated through angels and visionary sights. Zechariah’s spiritual inefficacy may explain both why he fails to intercede and why the angel of YHWH steps in and takes on that role.

Rhetorically, the angel’s intercession follows some familiar patterns. As noted above it consists of a question, which (in the tradition of Abraham and Habakkuk) is designed to highlight certain positive attributes of YHWH that are presently lacking, in this case compassion (cf. Gen 18:23–25; Hab 1:2–3, 12–13). The angel’s opening phrase, ʿad-mātay “How long?” appears with an intercessory tone in Isa 6:11, and we observed a similar phrase in Hab 1:2. The angel’s reference to “these seventy years” harks back to Jeremiah’s prophecy regarding the length of the Exile (Jer 25:11–12; 29:10; cf. Dan 9:2). The appropriation of Jeremiah’s statement by the angel may be an attempt to quote YHWH’s previous statements back at him in order to force his hand, another strategy that intercessors use elsewhere (Num 14:17–18; Jer 4:10).

Conclusion

In summary, Zech 1:12 features intercession made by an angel on behalf of the people of Judah. Although the intercessor is unique, the mode of intercession follows established patterns. YHWH accepts the angel’s implied call to action and responds with “good and comforting words.” The prophet Zechariah, a silent observer to this conversation, then receives the good news: it is time to rebuild.
Chapter 6: Books with No or Questionable Intercession

Introduction

This chapter will review the remainder of the Twelve, including the cases of Hosea and Micah, which have passages that some scholars have considered intercession, and the books Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi, which definitely do not contain intercession.

Hosea

Hosea was an eighth-century prophet who preached in the northern kingdom of Israel. The book named after him is the second longest of the Twelve. Hosea is not usually considered an intercessory prophet as there are no clear examples of intercession in his book. However, Hosea 9:14 has been called intercession by enough scholars that it is worth exploring. The verse and its context are presented and translated below:

9:10 Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your fathers. They came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to shame, and they became abominable like the thing they loved.

9:11 Ephraim is like a bird: his glory will fly away!—Without birth, without pregnancy, and without conception!

9:12 Even if they rear their children, I will bereave them until no one is left.
Indeed, woe to them when I depart from them!

I saw Ephraim planted in a lovely meadow like Tyre,
But Ephraim must bring out his children for slaughter.

Give them, O YHWH!—what will you give?
Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts.

Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal; for there I hated them.
For the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them from my house.
I will love them no more; all their leaders are rebels.

Ephraim is stricken,
Their root is dried up, they will make no fruit.
Even though they give birth, I will kill the beloved offspring of their womb.

My God will reject them because they have not listened to him;
They will become wanderers among the nations.


This section features multiple voices, and although some lines must clearly belong to God and some lines cannot, the voices are often unlabeled and sometimes difficult to
untangle from one another.Verse 14 addresses YHWH and must therefore be the voice of the prophet. Because the surrounding lines in vv. 13, 15 seem to be the voice of YHWH, v. 14 stands apart as a separate outburst in the midst of the surrounding proclamations. The prophetic voice picks up again at least in v. 17.

Verse 14 contains a repeated set of masculine singular imperatives, “give them!” (tēn-lāhem) and in the repetition we learn what God is commanded to give—“miscarrying wombs” and “dry breasts.” Between the commands lies a question, “What will you give?” The plain sense of v. 14 is that Hosea is calling upon God to curse Israel with stunted fertility. This plain-sense reading sounds nothing like intercession. Many scholarly works dealing specifically with intercession never mention Hosea 9:14 (or any other passage in the book of Hosea, for that matter). For some scholars, the possibility of 9:14 containing intercessory activity is suspect simply because such activity is so glaringly absent from the rest of the book. Andersen and Freedman bring up the notion of Hosea interceding but quickly dismiss it. “On the contrary,” they write, “he is urging Yahweh to proceed with the extreme penalties.” They do not provide any detailed

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110 This ambiguity is ubiquitous in Hosea: “There is a notable disdain for clarity in distinguishing divine … from human speech” (Meier, Speaking of Speaking, 215).

111 Studies that include a survey of intercessory figures in the Bible but that never mention Hosea in such a context include Balentine, “The Prophet as Intercessor”; Hertzberg, “Sind die Propheten Fürbitter?; Rhodes, “Israel’s Prophets as Intercessors”; and Vassar, “A Portrait in Prose”; and Widmer, Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer.

112 Hesse, for example, describes Hosea 9:14 as a “Stoßseufzer,” but the contrast with the surrounding context is so jarring he assigns authorship of the verse to “späteren Lesers.” See Hesse, Die Fürbitte im Alten Testament, 43–44.
rational for their interpretive choice, but they are not at fault in this omission: in this case the burden of proof falls upon those arguing for a veiled intercessory intent.\(^{113}\)

How \textit{have} some scholars interpreted 9:14 as intercession? They arrive at this conclusion through several means. Mays acknowledges that the barrenness which Hosea summons is a curse, but he sees it as a curse that ultimately blesses. Despite the warfare and destruction that he is obliged to bring, God can still show mercy by limiting new births during the years leading up to the end. “Better that mothers bear no children than to see them slaughtered (see Luke 23.29). Better for wives not to conceive than for husbands to watch them ravished and split open.” Thus, for Mays, Hosea prays with Israel’s best interests at heart.\(^{114}\) Guenther echoes this thought and additionally suggests that Hosea hopes barrenness will inspire repentance, and that thereby the greater disasters might ultimately be avoided.\(^{115}\)

Wolff interprets v. 14 as intercession by contrasting its punishments to those in the surrounding verses. He compares Hosea to king David, who was once offered a choice among three supernatural punishments and was required to choose which would fall upon his people (2 Sam 24:10–14):

\begin{quote}
    Ihm bleibt nur die Wahl unter den vernommenen sich steigernden Drohungen: Versprengung (11a)—unfruchtbare Mütter (11b)—Sterben herangewachsener Söhne (12a, 13)—Abkehr Jahwes (12b). Nur \textit{eine} dieser Drohungen nimmt er auf, wenn er ruft: „Gib ihnen kinderlosen Schoß und vertrocknete Brüste!“ Es ist, als wählte er nur eben dieses als das geringste Übel aus oder doch als die ganz
\end{quote}


In a similar vein, Lindblom finds evidence for intercession in comparing Hosea’s prayer to the preceding verse. If Hosea were entirely in agreement with YHWH, how does he transition from the gruesome imagery of slaughtered children in v. 13 to barrenness in v. 14? The contrast between such awful punishments to a (relatively) much milder one suggests that Hosea must be reacting against what he has seen. Lindblom also reads a “pitiful and appealing ring” in v. 14, but this is of course subjective.\footnote{Lindblom, \textit{Prophecy in Ancient Israel}, 204–5.}

Robinson senses intercession because of the alternating voices in these verses. Such an alternation, he says, indicates that there is “einen Dialog zwischen Jahwe und dem Propheten.”\footnote{Theodore H. Robinson, \textit{Die Zwölf kleinen Propheten: Hosea bis Micha} (HAT 14; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), 37.} Why have a “dialogue” if both parties see everything the same way?

Weise also sees Hosea’s prayer as intercession. For him, the most important indicator is the “innehaltende Frage, ‘Was willst du ihnen geben?’” in the middle of v. 14. That pause reveals to us the “Spannung” Hosea experiences “zwischen Gehorsam

\footnote{\textit{Hans Walter Wolff, Dodekapropheteon 1: Hosea} (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), 216; emphasis added.}
gegen Gott und Mitleid mit dem Volk.”119 In other words, there is a great deal of unstated meaning in Hosea’s mid-verse hesitation and questioning.

Scholars on both sides of the issue would agree that Hosea is calling upon YHWH to curb Israelite fertility, and that such infertility was generally seen as a great misfortune at best and as divine punishment at worst (cf. Gen 20:17–18; 30:1; Deut 28:15, 18; 1 Sam 1:6). The difference lies in how Hosea’s intent is interpreted: does he call for this punishment in order to punish, or is it an effort to avoid more terrible punishing?

Are there other cases in which an intercessory figure seeks out a punishment, albeit a lesser punishment? While some cases of intercessory prayer seem to be all-or-nothing propositions (“forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out!”, Exod 32:32), others do reflect what might be termed negotiation. Abraham successfully lowers the required number of righteous individuals needed to spare Sodom from destruction, for example, and while Amos could not completely prevent judgment he does successfully avoid destruction by locusts and fire. After YHWH announces his intention of destroying “this people” (ḥāʿām hazzeḥ, Num 14:11) Moses successfully limits the destruction to those over 19 years of age (14:29). On another occasion when YHWH plans to consume “this congregation” (ḥāʿēdā hazzōʾt, Num 16:21), Moses points out the impropriety of destroying everyone for the sake of a few and effectively limits punishment to the rebels (16:23–26). And when David asks YHWH, “Pardon the iniquity!” (2 Sam 24:10), it is YHWH’s turn to negotiate with the intercessor: “I give you three options …” (šālōš ʿānōkî nōṭēl ʿālēkā, 24:12).

While there are examples of intercessors negotiating lesser punishments, Hosea 9:14 still leaves us with the problem of intent. Yes, there is a history of intercessory negotiation, so Hosea might conceivably be on the peoples’ side even while agreeing to a punishment. Yes, people might have conceived of barrenness as better than infanticide. Yes, Hosea’s mid-verse question might conceivably reflect some hesitation and soul-searching. But there is just too little there to make any certain conclusion about Hosea’s motivation. The text does not say that barrenness will mercifully spare future innocents, it does not necessarily deny the other punishments just because it only names one, and the question “What will you give them?” could, with the right tone of voice, be purely rhetorical.\footnote{120 This is how Andersen and Freedman interpret the question—“it is more like the affirmation: ‘I know what you should give’” (Hosea, 544). Sweeney interprets it as a rhetorical pause intended to heighten anticipation of the answer. See Sweeney, The Twelve Prophets, 1:100–101.}

I leave it as a possibility that Hosea 9:14 features intercession. There is a case to be made for such a reading, but it bears the interpretive burden of reading against the plain sense of the text. It certainly does not move us in the same way a prayer by Moses or Jeremiah or Amos might. Whether this is intercession or no, I would not want Hosea to be my defense attorney.

Obadiah

The book of Obadiah consists of a short oracle against Edom; its dating is uncertain. Although Obadiah also gives a brief oracle of Israel’s vindication (vv. 19–21) he presents it matter-of-factly and no intercession seems necessary to bring it about. The majority of the book is concerned not with Israel’s future success but with Edom’s
condemnation and downfall. We would not expect intercessory attitudes in such a context.

**Jonah**

Uniquely among the Twelve, the book of Jonah gives us a narrative *about* a prophet rather than a collection of his messages. It contains no examples of intercession, but in Jonah this omission serves the author’s purposes.

The superscription introduces us to “Jonah son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1), known elsewhere as a prophet who lived during the mid-eighth century in the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 14:25; the dating of the *book* of Jonah is disputed). His commission to preach to the Assyrians at Nineveh, his flight to Tarshish, and his three-day residency in the belly of a fish are among the best-known stories in biblical literature. When Jonah finally preaches to the Ninevites he experiences the greatest repentant response of any prophet in history: everyone from the king to the pack animals fasts in sackcloth (3:5–9). “When God saw what they did, [he] changed his mind about the doom that he had said he would bring upon them … but [this] was very displeasing to Jonah” (3:10; 4:1).

In the dialogue between YHWH and Jonah that takes place over the course of ch. 4, Jonah defends his anger over YHWH’s act of leniency and YHWH in turn defends his decisions. The scene is at once striking because it reverses the expected picture: rather than a prophet interceding between a doomed people and an angry deity, here it is God himself who justifies mercy to an angry prophet who demands justice. But just as Jonah predicted that Nineveh would be “turned over” (*hpk*, Jonah 3:4), this prophet regularly turns our expectations on their head. His call to preach to a non-Israelite people, his flight
from YHWH, his spectacular success, and his disappointed response truly make Jonah a prophet of opposites.

Jonah’s anti-intercession relates to examples of actual intercession in a number of interesting ways. As he opens his case against YHWH in ch. 4, he complains spitefully that this whole time he knew that YHWH is “… a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah adapts YHWH’s famous self-description from Exod 34:6 and suggests that YHWH’s virtue of mercy has overextended to become a vice. Other prophets, however, cite the same description either to remind people of YHWH’s mercy (Joel 2:13; Mic 7:18) or, as part of intercession, to “remind” YHWH that he is supposed to be merciful:

And now, therefore, let the power of YHWH be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, “YHWH is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression …” Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love! (Num 14:17–19)

After criticizing YHWH’s overabundant mercy, Jonah declares, “And now, YHWH, take my life from me, for better is my dying than my living!” (Jonah 4:3). Moses also offers himself: “And now, if you will take away their sin—but if not, wipe me out of the book you have written!” (Exod 32:32). Jonah would rather die than live with an act of divine mercy, while Moses cannot stand to see the people punished.

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121 Jonah, like Joel (2:13), conveniently omits the lines from Exodus 34:7 that speak of YHWH’s justice; these do not help the point he is trying to make about YHWH’s mercy. See Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 167–68.
A central issue in Jonah 4 is the prophet’s anger.122 YHWH asks Jonah pointedly, “Is it right for you to be angry (ḥrh)?” (4:4; cf. vv. 1, 9). The prophet clearly stands in the wrong, but once again he makes for an interesting contrast with Moses, who makes intercession by asking, “O YHWH, why does your anger burn (ḥrh) against your people?” (Exod 32:11).

The lack of intercession in Jonah, then, is a deliberate omission which underscores the point of the book. The author’s critique of Jonah, the prophet of opposites, suggests among other lessons that a normal prophet should defend and seek the welfare of the people among whom he serves.

**Micah**

Micah was an eighth century prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah. The book of Micah contains one passage that could be considered intercession. The setting is a prayer to YHWH found in 7:14–17. These verses are presented and translated below:

7:14 Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, Who dwells alone in a forest, in the midst of a fertile land; Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in ancient days.

7:15 As in the days when you came out from the land of Egypt—I will show him123 wonders!

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123 “I will show him” reflects a literal reading of the MT. All the versions (LXX, Vulg., etc.) support this reading but it presents some difficulties: 1) There is no antecedent for “him”; and 2) the “I” suggests that YHWH is speaking, but in the surrounding context he is consistently spoken to. *BHS* recommends a one-consonant emendation from *arʾennî* to *harʾēnu*, or “show us” (cf. NRSV). This creates its own problems (e.g., YHWH nowhere else “comes out” of Egypt, he only “brings out” the Israelites). If YHWH does speak in v. 15 perhaps he is being quoted or is in fact answering the prayer.
Nations will see and be ashamed of all their might; They will lay their hands on their mouths; their ears will be deaf. They will lick dust like a serpent, like that which crawls on the earth; They will come trembling out of their fortresses; they will dread YHWH our God, and they will be afraid of you.

Although some scholars have described these verses in terms of intercession by the prophet Micah, most do not, reading them instead as a prayer offered by the community. The communal origin for the prayer is suggested by the first-person plural voice in v. 17; this voice continues in vv. 18–20, which is sometimes linked with the preceding verses. Some date this communal prayer early, perhaps as early as Micah himself, but contextual clues point many others to a post-exilic setting.

Although “Shepherd your people!” certainly invokes YHWH to act on behalf of the Israelites, the petition is probably spoken by the very group YHWH is being asked to bless, and thus does not qualify as intercession as we have defined it.

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124 E.g., Finley, Joel, Obadiah and Micah, 180–81.


126 Delbert R. Hillers, Micah (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89.

Nahum

The prophet Nahum lived during the second half of the seventh century, and the book bearing his name concerns itself with the fall of Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire. That empire had oppressed Judah—and indeed the whole Near East (Nah 3:19)—for centuries, and many nations undoubtedly saw its fall as a cause for celebration. Redditt succinctly summarizes Nahum with this thought: “Nahum is vindictive. No doubt he thought he had cause to be, but he is vindictive.”\(^{128}\) Considering the subject matter, it is not surprising that there is no hint of anything like intercession. Nahum does not share the charity for the Ninevehites that the author Jonah recommends (Jonah 4:11).

Zephaniah

The superscription in Zeph 1:1 dates the prophet to the second half of the seventh century. Zephaniah’s prophecy opens with the statement, “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the land” (Zeph 1:2), which sets the tone for the rest of the book. The imagery focuses on the destruction and calamity that will accompany “the day of YHWH” (Zeph 1:7, 14), although the end of the book contains an oracle of salvation (3:9–20). Given the violent images that pervade Zephaniah we might expect one of two scenarios with respect to intercession: The condemning message he bears might provoke the prophet to intercede for the sinful nation, or the sinfulness of the nation might provoke the prophet to identify with his condemning message. We do not know Zephaniah’s personal outlook, but within his book he certainly comes across as “a relentless critic of his age.”\(^{129}\) No intercession appears.


\(^{129}\) Széles, *Wrath and Mercy*, 63.
Haggai

Haggai the prophet encouraged the Jews in Persian Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, c. 520 B.C.E. (Hag 1:1; cf. Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Their slow construction rate had provoked divine curses, including drought (1:9–11), but following Haggai’s admonitions the people get back to work (1:12–15). YHWH in return promises prosperity and restoration (ch. 2). No intercession appears in the book, but neither is there a need for it: the solution to the peoples’ problems is specific and straightforward, and when they do as instructed everything becomes right once again.

Malachi

The final book in the Twelve is often dated to the late sixth or the fifth century. Much of the text consists of disputation speeches between Malachi and those he sees as corrupt, such as the priests. The prophet “was clearly a man of considerable personal piety, grasping the import of God’s holiness and the seriousness of personal sin before God (cf. 2:17–3:4; 3:6–7; 3:13–4:1). His staunch convictions … bespeak a man of commitment and integrity.” In light of this, it is not surprising that there is no recorded intercessory activity in the book. For Malachi, the solution for divine curses is repentance. “Return to me and I will return to you, said YHWH of hosts” (3:7). A little righteous prevention is worth a great deal of intercessory cure.

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130 I will refer to the prophet as Malachi, though I acknowledge that some interpret this as a title (“my messenger”) applied to an anonymous prophet.

Chapter 7: Synthesis and Conclusion

Introduction

Having reviewed intercession within the books of the Twelve, this chapter will highlight some issues that appeared in one or more books but that are best treated collectively. We will review why some books contain no intercession, the role of non-prophetic intercessors, and what intercession reveals about the character of God.

The Absence of Intercession

As we observed in Chapter 6, more than half of the Twelve Prophets do not contain any examples of intercession. No mortal blow has been dealt to the institution of prophetic intercession, however. We are not in a position to state that if a prophetic text contains no intercession then the prophet associated with that text must have never engaged in it.\footnote{Rhodes, “Israel’s Prophets as Intercessors,” 125.} Such would be an argument from silence alone. Miller concludes that even though “we do not have evidence for every prophet … [intercession] is so consistently a part of the prophetic stories that we can only assume that such prayers for the people were as much a part of their being God’s servants as their speaking the word of the Lord.”\footnote{Miller, \textit{They Cried to the Lord}, 265.} Additionally, even if a particular prophet did not engage in intercession it would not necessarily mean that he never had the power to do so. Vassar compares the
situation to the Constitutional powers of an American president, whose authority exists “whether or not the specific powers are actually invoked” during the course of his administration.¹³⁴

There exist a number of ways to explain why, if intercession were a basic prophetic duty, several books of the Twelve contain no examples of it. First, not every situation requires it. In the previous chapter I summarized the contents of several books and why intercession might or might not make sense in such contexts. For example, while some prophets could envision foreign nations uniting with Israel to serve YHWH (e.g., Isa 2:2–4; 45:20–25; 60:3–11; 66:20), others were not so tolerant of non-Israelites (the author of Jonah apparently satirized such attitudes). If prophets like Nahum fell into this latter camp it would make sense why their oracles contain uninterrupted condemnation.

Second, intercession may fail to appear in several books of the Twelve simply because the books are so small to begin with. Nahum contains only forty-seven verses, Haggai thirty-eight, and Obadiah twenty-one. We cannot expect every aspect of prophecy to appear in such relatively short texts. If we take the Twelve as a group (and in antiquity, they were indeed collected together on a single scroll), they contain 1,050 verses in typical English Bibles. This is roughly similar to the lengths of the Major Prophets: Jeremiah contains 1,364 verses; Isaiah, 1,292; and Ezekiel, 1,273. When compared as a group against their larger counterparts, the examples of intercession within the Twelve do quite well. The cases of Amos, Habakkuk, Joel, and Zechariah easily outnumber anything in Ezekiel and come out about even with Isaiah. Intercession appears often in Jeremiah

but even in that book there exist chapters upon chapters where the topic does not appear, suggesting that we should not be surprised when the Twelve contains similar groupings.

Third, the lack of intercession in some books of the Twelve may relate to their post-exilic setting. As a general trend, pre-exilic texts portray prophets as having a more intimate, congenial relationship with YHWH than post-exilic texts. As part of this same pattern, post-exilic prophets often appear less capable and spiritually independent than their pre-exilic predecessors.\footnote{Meier, \textit{Themes and Transformations}, 52–62.} We saw with Zechariah, for example, that the prophet, at least as recorded in the book bearing his name, never addresses YHWH directly and only rarely hears the voice of God; instead, he speaks and listens to angelic mediators. It may come as no surprise, then, that the prophet never intercedes on behalf of his people and an angel steps in to fulfill that roll in the book of Zechariah. The lack or near-lack of intercession in exilic texts like Haggai, Malachi, and others may be influenced by this particular pattern.

These three apologies for the absence of intercession do not explain away every example. Hosea, for example, 1) features several cases of judgment where intercession would have been contextually appropriate; 2) is the second-largest book of the Twelve; and 3) describes a pre-exilic prophet. We expect more from Hosea and do not find it. Nevertheless, intercession appears frequently enough that we may still fairly describe it as an important, even if not always evident, aspect of prophecy.

\underline{Non-prophetic Intercessors}

Our survey of the Twelve revealed two cases of non-prophetic intercession, the priests in Joel and the angel in Zechariah. These cases from the Twelve fit rather neatly...
into the picture painted by other biblical texts which do occasionally record successful intercessory prayers given by other kinds of leaders. Examples include David in 2 Sam 24:10–25 or Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 19:14–19. And yet the actions of Joel’s priests are not entirely independent, as the instructions regarding the prayer are mediated through Joel, a prophet. Even in the aforementioned cases of David and Hezekiah, the intercessors are not acting independently of prophetic control, but their conversations with God are mediated through the prophets Gad and Isaiah, respectively (see 2 Sam 24:11–14, 18; 2 Kgs 19:20–21). Furthermore, kings, priests, and other leaders may only engage in intercession for a present crisis since they are not privy to YHWH’s plans and are therefore unable to intercede for an impending doom (cf. Gen 18:17, 23; Amos 3:7). Intercession, then, remains closely tied to the office of prophet even when other figures engage in it on occasion. The real outlier in the Twelve is the depiction of intercession by an angel, which, as mentioned, reflects a trend gaining momentum at the end of the biblical period.

**Intercession and the Character of God**

The accounts of prophetic intercession that we have reviewed in this study force us as modern readers to grapple with some complex questions. Certainly some of the most important concern these accounts and their portrayal of deity. Some readers have been understandably shocked by narratives in which God appears to be short-tempered,
angry, and even vengeful. These difficult passages require a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of intercessory prayer.

During intercession, how do the authors of the biblical texts intend us as readers to respectively view deity and prophet? Are we to piously identify with God, to mentally seek the peoples’ just punishment? Or can we help but feel a kinship with our fellow humans and thus see the prophet as “our” hero? As we read of Habakkuk’s anguished complaints or Amos’ defiant *Forgive!* the prophet sounds much like a legal advocate … which leaves God playing the role of prosecutor. Inasmuch as the biblical texts were written for a religiously-minded audience that should recognize sin and error in their own lives, are readers (ancient or modern) supposed to extrapolate God as prosecuting *them*?

These questions are so analytically engaging—not to mention theologically compelling—that I am surprised how many books and articles are written on intercession that skirt these issues or ignore them altogether. When these questions *are* addressed they are sometimes answered by one of two polar extremes, both of them unhelpful. One is to condemn the God of Israel as dictatorial, blood-thirsty, and cruel; the other is to make an apology for God by arguing *ad extremum* that the people do indeed deserve what is coming to them. Both views fail to grasp the subtlety of the intercessory experience.

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137 Part of this shock originates with common, but not entirely biblical, perceptions about God’s nature. Heschel writes that both Jewish and Christian theologians “have been deeply embarrassed” by the biblical portrayal of God’s emotions, especially anger. He attributes this attitude to the influence of Greek philosophy which saw passion as a weakness, both damaging to humans and incompatible with deity (Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:27–37; cf. 79–86). But, he argues, “the ideas that dominate the Hellenistic understanding of the emotional life of man must not affect our understanding of … the Bible[, which does not] share the view that passions are disturbances or weaknesses of the soul … Only through arbitrary allegorizing was later religious philosophy able to find an apathetic God in the Bible” (37–39).

138 The desire to exonerate God may be observed in the way scholars handle the book of Joel. Despite the locusts and armies that plague the Judahites, the book of Joel nowhere mentions any particular
Prophetic intercession involves a dialogue between the prophet and God. Even Habakkuk, none too pleased about the answers he receives, nevertheless remains fully confident that a response will come (Hab 2:1). A dialogue by definition involves some give and take, a back-and-forth exchange of ideas and identities. But for the prophets the line between dialogue and monologue blurs. They fulfill two different but overlapping roles, revealer of the mind of God and representative of fellow mortals.\footnote{David L. Petersen, \textit{The Roles of Israel’s Prophets} (JSOTSup 17; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 93–95.} They dialogue with God, yes, but theirs is a dialogue between minds that are linked in a way that perhaps only the prophets themselves understood.

Following this line of thought, some scholars have bridged the God-as-prosecutor, prophet-as-advocate dichotomy by scrutinizing more carefully how their respective roles overlap. The first question to ask is, if YHWH were solely interested in prosecuting Israel, why bother holding these conversations with the defense in the first place? YHWH also serves as judge, after all, and if the defense were not invited to the hearing then the prosecution could proceed independently. But he does not do this. “Will I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Gen 18:17), YHWH deliberates, before deciding no. Abraham and YHWH look together over Sodom and the intercession begins. One cannot help but sense that YHWH had intended this all along. He gives forewarning to prophets such as Moses (Exod 32:10; Num 14:12; 16:21), Amos (Amos 7:1, 4), and Habakkuk (Hab 1:5–11), following his pattern of doing nothing without first revealing his plan to

\footnote{Barton points out that many commentators seem to be uncomfortable with the implications of undeserved punishment and rush to fill in the gap with any number of conjectured offences. See Barton, \textit{Joel and Obadiah}, 77–80.}

sin of which the people may be guilty.
his servants the prophets (see Amos 3:7). This mutual collaboration between the prosecution and the defense hints that the prosecution has more in mind than simply winning. Furthermore, the fact that YHWH the judge so often decides against YHWH the prosecutor suggests either that the prophet argues better than God—a thought we will set aside—or that YHWH the judge really is not rooting for YHWH the prosecutor after all. The division between judge, prosecution, and defense begins to break down.

What we discover is that this is not a debate between God and prophet. It is ultimately a struggle between God and himself. YHWH is a God of justice; he is also a God of mercy, a paradox best captured in his own self-description: “YHWH, YHWH, a compassionate and caring God, slow to anger and great in graciousness! … yet by no means pardoning the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children” (Exod 34:6–7). Muff suggests that during intercession, YHWH employs the prophet to embody and personify YHWH’s own merciful element:

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 prophets 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.140

Heschel explains how the prophet is able to “represent” God. For Heschel, God does not merely allow the prophet to portray his mercy, the prophet comes to actually feel and experience that mercy, and thus the reaction toward intercession comes naturally:

Sympathy is a state in which a person is open to the presence of another person. … In prophetic sympathy, man is open to the presence and emotion of the

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140 Muffs, Love & Joy, 33; emphasis added.
transcendent Subject. … Thus the prophet is guided, not by what he feels, but rather by what God feels. In moments of intense sympathy for God, the prophet is moved by the pathos of God, Who is disillusioned by His people. … Yet, in taking God’s part he defends the people’s position, since in truth God’s pathos is compassion.\(^\text{141}\)

This paradigm leads to a new question. If YHWH acts as judge, prosecutor, and defense, why involve the prophet at all? Laytner suggests that the rationale may be didactic. There is a world of rhetorical difference between YHWH saying, “I will not destroy Sodom if I can find at least ten righteous people” and what we actually find, eleven verses of dialogue between Abraham and YHWH as the former pleads for a lower and lower threshold and the latter accepts again and again. The back-and-forth dialogue, explains Laytner, leads the reader to understand that YHWH is both just and merciful. The point is not necessarily the outcome of the conversation (the city failed to meet the ten and was destroyed anyway) but rather how our conception of God changes as we get there.\(^\text{142}\)

What about cases when intercession fails, or when YHWH forbids it? The best explanation is that circumstances arise when mercy is no longer possible: justice has been pushed too far, and can no longer be ignored. YHWH told Jeremiah, “Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight!” (Jer 15:1). That two successful intercessors would fail if they tried in

\(^{141}\) Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2:89, 94–95. Meyers and Meyers suggest a similar role for the interceding angel in Zechariah 1:12: “The angel [and not Yahweh] is the one who is [depicted as] sorely distressed at the long removal of divine favor from Israel. Yet the angel is an extension of God’s being, he is Yahweh’s alter ego. That he suffers suggests in a rather subtle way the possibility of divine suffering at the plight of Israel” (Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 116).

Jeremiah’s day indicates that the critical variable is circumstance, not who intercedes. As Amos found out, intercession only buys so much time: if the people want to ensure long-term prosperity their only permanent solution lies in repentance and covenant-keeping. “Even now, says YHWH, return to me with all your heart … return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and merciful … Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him …?" (Joel 2:12–14).

**Conclusion**

We opened the present investigation with Isaiah’s query, “His hand is stretched out—who can turn it back?” We have seen that one reason YHWH changes his plans is in response to special individuals, the intercessors. Most often prophets but sometimes not, these figures offered prayer on behalf of others who were or would soon be suffering. Stories about intercession challenge and enrich our understanding of YHWH and how he relates to his people within the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Some intercessors like Moses and Samuel receive most of the fanfare for their work, the Bible itself celebrating their particular intercessory achievements (see Ps 99:6; Jer 15:1). But some among the Twelve Prophets also “stood in the breech” (Ezek 22:30; cf. Ps 106:23) and made their own contributions to biblical intercession. They provide an additional and sometimes dramatic witness that God honored his invitation that “you will seek me and find me, when you search for me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13).


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