



Ideographs in Amos and Modern America

In Partial Fulfillment of BI 377, Amos
Dr. Gregory L. Cuéllar
By: Adam W. Anderson

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Introduction: From Occupy to Trumpism

On September 17, 2011, nearly a thousand protestors gathered on Wall Street, protesting a consumerist and elitist culture. The Occupy Wall Street movement grew in the next year to 82 counties, yet as Micah White, one of the co-creators remarked, the protests “didn’t work.”¹ This is an honest assessment backed by data: based on a Google Trends analysis, the occupy movement enjoys less than 1% of the popularity in the media it did at its peak in December 2011.² However, it’s not because the core issues suddenly resolved. Only a couple years later, Thomas Piketty published in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a comprehensive account of the growing inequality in the world, that the top decile of Americans receive 45-50% of the national income, levels not seen since before World War II, with similar trends globally.³ More than three years after its publication, it still enjoys brisk sales for a dense economic treatise, maintaining a Top 20 position for economics books from Amazon. In 2016, the US elected Donald Trump as president, a man who made no qualms about flaunting his gold-filigreed wealth, flanked by the wealthiest cabinet ever assembled.⁴

The titular prophet in the book of Amos contends with a similar problem. A self-described simple herdsman from Tekoa in Judah, he attempts to bring to light the economic injustices in Israel, yet is rebuffed, with likely little influence. This paper argues that this is because, like Occupy and other movements that seek to challenge the dominant Neo-Liberal model of the twenty-first century, Amos is engaged in a battle of ideology and social control both in his time and within the historical discourse of the Israelite people. The use of the word מַכְר in Amos 2:6 acts as an ideograph against the elite economic and political powers in Israel.

¹ “Occupy Activist Micah White.”

² “Google Trends.”

³ Piketty and Goldhammer, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 291.

⁴ Tankersly and Swanson, “Donald Trump Is Assembling the Richest Administration in Modern American History.”

Modern parallels will be addressed in Neo-Liberalism, as well as a discussion on modern implications of Amos' efforts.

Defining Ideograph and Its Use

The concept of the ideograph (indicated by angled brackets) was developed by Michael Calvin McGee. He had an interest regarding discourse (and its development in the public sphere) and how it led to the creation and maintenance of cultural ideologies. His major work on the topic "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology" was published in 1980, and he develops the following definition for the ideograph:

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable. Ideographs such as "slavery" or "tyranny," however, may guide behavior and belief negatively by branding unacceptable behavior. And many ideographs ("liberty," for example) have a non-ideographic usage, as in the sentence, "Since I resigned my position, I am at liberty to accept your offer." Ideographs are culture-bound, though some terms are used in different signification across cultures. Each member of the community is socialized, conditioned, to the vocabulary of ideographs as a prerequisite for "belonging" to the society. A degree of tolerance is usual, but people are expected to understand ideographs within a range of usage thought to be acceptable: The society will inflict penalties on those who use ideographs in heretical ways and on those who refuse to respond appropriately to claims on their behavior warranted through the agency of ideographs.⁵

Joshua Ewalt, in his ideographic criticism of <heritage> and American monuments, outlines the way to perform the approach. First, one must begin "the criticism diachronically, the critic highlights empirical uses in a variety of historically grounded texts. Discovery of the patterns of use throughout discursive history will direct the critic to the function meaning of the

⁵ McGee, "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," 452–53.

ideograph and an understanding on the constraints placed on the present rhetor.”⁶ In other words, what ideological constraints in behavior are maintained through a web of ideographs? Secondly, “the critic then turns to its synchronic use in a present text... whether or not the ideograph’s present confrontation with an ideographic vocabulary is similar to or different than past uses may determine its rhetorical function. That is, the ideograph may be either reinforcing its diachronic precedent... or attempting to warrant social change.”⁷

A cursory search reveals no Biblical studies through the lens of ideographic criticism. This may be due to the difficulties of employing diachronic and synchronic analysis together, as these schools have seemed to be antagonistic. However, in spite its limited use, it may open space for what Sternberg labeled “the New Geneticist,” or one who “will openly put forward an analysis of the discourse, still cutting and remolding with a backward glance at the source, yet no longer by appeal to any special dispensation of the biblicist but to a universal principle of coherence that demands the most wary handling.”⁸ It is with these tensions in mind that the exegesis proceeds.

< מכר >: **An Economic Ideograph**

Translations of Amos 2:6

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עַל־שְׁלֹשָׁה פְּשָׁעַי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל־אַרְבַּעָה לֹא אֲשִׁיבֵנּוּ עַל־מִכְרָם בְּכֶסֶף צְדִיק וְאַבְיֹן בְּעִבּוֹר נְעֻלִים:

Author Translation: Thus says Adonai: “for three transgressions, O Israel, and for four I will not return: *selling* the righteous ones for money, the needy for sandals.

Paul Translation: Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel / And for four, I will not revoke it; / Because they have *sold* for silver the innocent, / And the need for a hidden gain.

⁶ Ewalt, “A Colonialist Celebration of National <Heritage>: Verbal, Visual, and Landscape Ideographs at Homestead National Monument of America,” 373.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 22.

מכר in the Tanakh

The word “מכר” in its broadest sense is defined in the *qal* as “to sell.” Used 80 times in the Tanakh, but only once in Amos (2:6), it denotes a variety of ways of selling, including items⁹, but also people, either as slaves or prisoners of war^{10, 11}. This term is also used to describe what Joseph’s brothers did to him, as well as when Esau sold his birthright. Finally, it’s term used within the holiness code to describe the way in which fellow Israelites should treat one another in the case of indentured servitude to pay off debts. In this study, < מכר > is an ideograph of <economy> for the Israelites.

Diachronic Analysis of < מכר >

To perform a meaningful diachronic analysis, it is important to place the book of Amos within the history of redaction in order to gain a sense of how < מכר > may have been used in a historically grounded sense. Paul notes that “Amos constitutes the earliest collection of oracles that have been preserved,” and based on general scholarship, Amos 2:6 fits within the earliest part of the book, dating to shortly after 745 BCE.¹² This poses an interesting dilemma for diachronic analysis, because it functions as foundational historical discourse for < מכר >: each subsequent use of the word would be in response to what Amos has posited. However, to presume that to be the only way to consider history within the Tanakh would be to take a thoroughly modernist approach to history, and certainly even in its complete form would not have been read that way: “*the Bible is a single text*, especially from the moment it constituted a fixed canon of literary compositions. This closure establishes new relationships among its different parts, among its distinct literary collections – legal, historical, prophetic, sapiential,

⁹ Like land (Gn 47:20-22), or grain (Neh 10:32)

¹⁰ Ex 21:7, Jl 4:6 (WTT)

¹¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew-Aramaic and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged BDB-Gesenius Lexicon)*, s.v. 5175.

¹² Paul and Cross, *Amos*, 1.

apocalyptic, and so on... it is the unification of a linguistically coded central kerygma.”¹³

Therefore, the analysis will explore both consequence as the first historical discourse, but also as a prophet in the middle of the literary discourse in the Hebrew.

Amos 2:6 constrains < מכר > with two other words: < אֶבְיֹ֑וֹן >, and < נַעֲלִיִּם >. The first word is typically translated as “poor,” “who have no means whatsoever at their disposal to protect themselves.”¹⁴ Given the chiasmic structure of the verse, there seems to be an intentional effort to both consider the poor as some specific group of people, but also not to lose sight of the “צַדִּיק” or righteous, literally right next to the אֶבְיֹ֑וֹן. They are collectively the ones sold “into a slavery to pay a real or assumed debt; the party sold is otherwise guiltless.”¹⁵ The second word is often translated as “sandals,” however, Paul argues that’s a misreading of the word:

the present vocalization of the word is based on a misunderstanding of the original meaning. The hapax legomenon singular noun נַעֲלִיִּם, derived from the root עֲלַם (“to hide”), was confused with the dual and/or plural form נַעֲלִיִּם (“sandals”)... this rare substantive develops semantically from the basic root meaning of that which is “hidden” to a “(hidden) gift” or “payoff.” Other nouns that share a similar development from analogous stems are also attested in Hebrew.¹⁶

Quoting Rudolph, Paul sums up Amos 2:6 succinctly: “the lack of pity and contempt for human dignity.”¹⁷ However, that does not seem to be all that Amos is criticizing. In addition to a rejection of <slavery>, Amos also seems to be bracketing < מכר > with a rejection of hidden gain – a profiteering by forcibly selling people into debt slavery for no reason, a type of <fairness> ideograph. When paired with the parallel passage in 8:6 (considered by both Hadjiev and Paul as original to the text) with 2:6, Amos is developing a discourse on an oppressive human market in which a person is turned into an economic unit for the benefit of another person

¹³ Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 57.

¹⁴ Paul and Cross, *Amos*, 77.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 78. Also footnote 347, 78.

¹⁷ Ibid., 79.

entirely; one which angered God greatly, to the point of imposing the same punishment on Israel as all of its neighboring countries.¹⁸

At its historical roots, < מכר >, bracketed by < צדִיק > and < גַּעֲלִים > was an ideograph that helped guide unacceptable behavior. Moreover, the ideograph was directed to a particular group of people – the “not poor,” who were “not innocent” and had apparently enough power in a market to facilitate the dealings. This kind of market is plausible at this time in Israel. In addition to the Samaria Ostraca providing evidence of some specialized trade, during Amos’ prophecy “the full complement of statehood in the northern kingdom can be identified: literacy, bureaucratic administration, specialized economic production, and a professional army.”¹⁹

However, as the canon took shape, the later writers of the literary “early” history began to reshape discourse around < מכר >. In particular, the use of < מכר > in Judges and Leviticus, all concerning the selling of people, provide a sense of how the writers and redactors wanted to bracket Amos.

Most scholars contend that Judges was likely written sometime in the 7th Century BCE. If it were written in the early part of the century, it would place it closer to Amos, and would reflect “the shocked mood in Judah after the downfall of the kingdom of Israel in 722.”²⁰ The < מכר > is used four different times²¹ but each time the same way – to describe what God had done to the people after God became angry because of their disobedience. As a result, < מכר > is augmented with a new ideograph: < עזִב >, translated commonly as “to abandon.” Put another way, this new ideograph is primarily about <obedience>. The people would not have been < מכר

¹⁸ Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos*, 101; Paul and Cross, *Amos*, 259.

¹⁹ “The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies - Israel to the End of the Persian Period: History, Social, Political, and Economic Background - Oxford Biblical Studies Online.”

²⁰ Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version*, 355.

²¹ Jud 2:14, 3:8, 4:2, 10:7.

> had they followed God's commands and not decided to abandon God and do what they wanted. And while the discourse around Judges gives no sense that the writers believed that the Israelites were innocent, they were אָבְיָוֹן, with nothing to protect themselves from being sold outside of obedience. It was only when God interceded with a judge were the people protected and saved. Moreover, <נְעֻלָּיִם> has been obscured. If there now is an ideograph of <fairness>, it has been constrained by God: <מִכָּר > is now in the domain of power.

In Leviticus, <מִכָּר > is discussed within the Holiness Collection, with scholars generally agreeing sometime in the exilic or post-exilic period, with “aims to persuade and create obedience rather than simply instruct. It projects a picture of the ideal Israel, devoted to [Adonai] alone.”²² The series of mentions of the ideograph come in Leviticus 25 in the discussion of Jubilee. Again, there are changes to the discourse. Now, instead of <אָבְיָוֹן > as the operant ideograph to describe <poverty>, it has become <מוֹד>, a word related to the Syriac word meaning “be brought low, humble,” a word unique to this time. It is now no longer just about needs, as אָבְיָוֹן tends to connote, but instead tells a narrative – an individual has progressively been made poor. The reader is never given an explanation, but they have become so destitute that they must enter into servitude. This is not a rejection of a market that requires this level of indentured servitude, as Amos seemed to advocate for. In fact, this is a part of describing the Jubilee – the Sabbath of Sabbaths. Moreover, there is still a realized gain – in order to redeem a bondservant, a relative would need to pay the price between the year of hire and Jubilee.²³

Finally, the emphasis of <מִכָּר > is on the self. The individual who has been made low is self-selecting into the market to rectify his debt. The fact that the individual's <poverty> has

²² Dunn, Rogerson, and Houston, “Leviticus,” 103.

²³ Lev 25:50

become so desperate that he must sell himself eliminates the “not innocent” character in Amos’ < מכר >. The <economy> must exist to contend with <poverty>.

Synchronic Analysis of < מכר >

Moving to a synchronic analysis of < מכר > is complex, because it must consider that historically, Amos was one of the first completed texts, and its discourse was at the foundation of the ideographs. However, literarily, Amos would come last amongst the trio of texts observed. If Amos’ place in history privileges him to pre-historical knowledge that is not in text, then it’s likely that even if the writers of Judges and Leviticus had not seen the text, they were aware of its stories. Therefore, they were likely responding the discourse in Amos, and realigning memory to suit the power structure they hoped to maintain, or inventing tradition. In his essay on the topic, Edward Said notes

the invention of tradition was a practice very much used by authorities as an instrument of rule in mass societies when the bonds of small social units like village and family were dissolving and authorities needed to find other ways of connecting a large number of people to each other. The invention of tradition is a method for using collective memory selectively by manipulating certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way. Thus memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful.²⁴

So where is the appropriate moment for syncretic analysis? In light of Croatto, it may be where the diachronic analysis become one single text that creates an enunciative field for its discourse, as each ideographical statement can be “constituted as serious by the current rules of a specific truth game in which they have a role.”²⁵ Yet in the Foucaultian sense, it would be a rejection of a hermeneutic fusion of horizons. However, in a rhetorical approach like ideographs, there may be some common ground: “we can at least say that inasmuch as rhetoric can be broadly understood as a tradition that favors persuasion over dogma, construction over

²⁴ Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” 179.

²⁵ Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 54.

bedrock, interpretation over the imposition of supposed fact, there may well be a commonality here.”²⁶ In a similar way that the diachronic and synchronic hold tension with each other in Biblical criticism, holding the two together provides greater meaning through two seemingly incompatible approaches. In diachronic ideographic analysis, a critic is able to create a genealogy of sorts, and “rather than relying on an inflexible notion of the individual an individual experience, here the stress is on the development and management of a particular intersubjective realm, a community, understood not as an organic *Gemeinschaft* but more as a construction, an invention, as Foucaultians are wont to call it.”²⁷ However, in the subsequent synchronic analysis, a critic “must ‘suppress her subjective aims [and] attend [to] the saying’ of the historically effective text as it is revealed in particular circumstances.”²⁸ It is in this moment of attention that horizons begin to fuse – making connections through the text. McGee makes a similar argument, “insofar as we can explain the diachronic and synchronic tensions among ideographs, I suggest, we can also explain the tension between *any* “given” human environment... and any 'projected' environments... latent in rhetorical discourse.”²⁹

Therefore, a summary of the synchronic analysis would be the following³⁰: the redactors and compliers of the DH school were likely aware in some way of Amos’ ideograph concerning the behavior of <economy>, and especially as it pertained to <poverty>. The market that created economic beings was destructive because of <fairness>, and Amos was acutely aware of the consequences. However, the system in place was still politically viable (and common throughout the region), and so the redactors set to reshape the discourse around <economy>. In Judges, the redactors were able to connect <economy> with <obedience> - God will not sell

²⁶ Wickam, “Foucault and Gadamer: Like Apples and Oranges Passing in the Night,” 938.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 941.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 938.

²⁹ McGee, “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology,” 453.

³⁰ With ideographs in English for clarity.

someone if he or she follow God's laws, and by extension those who came after the judges to bring calm and order – the kings. In Leviticus, the redactors were able to legitimize <economy> as a positive aspect of the idealized Israelite culture. Now, instead of <economy> as a result of defenselessness, the discourse of <economy> and <fairness> now shifts to the one in <poverty> and not the one who still stands to gain from <poverty>. Amos becomes a voice that is speaking from the margins, a pitiable character: collector of words, dresser of figs, only a herdsman.

Amaziah and Amos: Synchronic Culturetypal and Counter-Cultural Rhetorics

Nowhere is the competition between Amos and the Israelite power structure clearer than in the scene in Amos 7:10-17, as Amos speaks with Amaziah. At this point, in spite of all the jeremiads and visions about Israel, there is no indication anyone responded to Amos' original complaint of <מכר> in regard to <אֶרְבֵּי־זָן> and <נְעֻלִים>. What reason, ultimately, would Jeroboam and the ruling class need to listen? Paul notes that during this time "Israel reached the summit of its material power and economic prosperity as well as the apogee of its territorial expansion."³¹ Additionally during this period, the kingdom of Judah was required to pay tribute to the northern kingdom, and it is likely that "Amos is at Beth-el in his role as herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees to present a share of the Judean tribute to Israel."³² It was only when Amos was considered a threat to the established power, predicting violence, was there any response – and even then, it was not from the king, but instead from Amaziah. The reader has no way of knowing if ultimately the king had any real concern about the message that Amaziah forwarded.

³¹ Paul and Cross, *Amos*, 1.

³² Sweeney, "Reconceiving the Paradigms of Old Testament Theology in the Post-Shoah Period," 156.

Clearly in 2:6, God has a particular stake in the regulation of < מכר >, negative intersections of < אָבִיּוֹן > and < נִעְלָמִים >, yet to Amaziah (a chief priest) “only the political dimension of Amos’ threats is mentioned. There is no indication that the threats are divine judgements, and Amaziah evaluates them solely in social-political terms.”³³ This becomes even more clear when Amaziah tells Amos that he may not prophesy in Beth-el because it is royal sanctuary and national temple. This irony should not be easily lost on the reader, as the politically appointed representative of God explains that literally “the house of God” was “completely under the control of the monarchy, its affairs are conducted in accordance with the requirements of national politics than religious propriety, with the consequence that those whom [Adonai] has commissioned to prophesy are forbidden to speak there.”³⁴ In wealthy Israel, there is no room for God – or, perhaps even more accurately, the King is God.

Any attempt at that moment to have a rhetorical debate about < מכר > will fail. The kingdom will not respond to the questions posed by Amos about their conduct. Political power has been used to maintain a particular of the < מכר > ideograph, one that on an intertextual reading is far more aligned with the moves made in Judges and Leviticus: < economy/מכר > is not about < poverty/אָבִיּוֹן >, but about < obedience/עֹזֵב >; < fairness/נִעְלָמִים > has become an obscured idea, lost within political discourse disguised as religious. Amos will go home. Inequality will persist. People will be bought and sold (or will sell themselves), valued not by Adonai, but by מֶלֶךְ. And only a couple centuries later, the stories will be written to support the < מכר > of Amaziah and Jereboam.

³³ Noble, “Amos and Amaziah in Context,” 429.

³⁴ Ibid.

< מִכָּר > and Neo-Liberalism: Modern Retellings

While the story of Amos and Israel is over two millennia old, the ideographic analysis feels as modern as current discourse, as Judeo-Christian values are pitted against Neo-Liberal hegemony. It is not much of a stretch to overlay the ideographs of Amos onto current discourse: the views on <economy>, <poverty>, <obedience>, and <fairness> have become polemic fodder in a culture that seems fraught with meaning-making as modernism continues to fade. LaMothe contends that previously Christianity was able to provide “overarching collectively held truths that people accepted and used to provide meaning, organize social relations, and establish social authority... this said, nature abhors a vacuum, and... what filled the vacuum was not the Babel of numerous competing language games, but rather the social imaginary of capitalism.”³⁵ He further argues that “with the backing of wealth individuals, corporate leaders, and politicians, the gospel of neoliberal capitalism spread in Western industrialized nations... Hayek’s winning the ‘battle for ideas’ was, in the United States, a form of occult colonization from within.”³⁶ These narratives, now certainly ensconced in the American psyche as evidenced by the election of Donald Trump “establish I-It perceptions and relations that accompany a contractual-commodified trust and fidelity... completely conditional, contingent, transient... simply put, foster life-limiting ways of being in the world.”³⁷ When Judeo-Christian values attempt to engage with Neo-Liberal ideals “is not a fight against a competing anthropology that proposes what it means to be human vis-à-vis care, faith, and the common good. Rather, it is a fight against an ideology that masquerades as an anthropology.”³⁸ This last point is what perhaps makes the connection between the discourse of Amos and today so compelling. When Amos

³⁵ LaMothe, “Neoliberal Capitalism and the Corruption of Society,” 14.

³⁶ LaMothe, “The Colonizing Realities of Neoliberal Capitalism,” 24.

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

³⁸ Ibid., 39.

and Amatziah argued in chapter 7, the ideograph of < מַכַּר > did not ever come into play, and in fact, Amos was not treated as anything other than a political problem, a logical extension of the discourse of Judges and Leviticus, which sought instead to obfuscate the Amos' bracketing ideograph of < נְעִלִים >. This is nearly the exact same issue facing Judeo-Christians (and humanist narratives that value interpersonal care, as LaMothe argues) against Neo-Liberalism: whether Americans realize it or not, the fundamental presumption of one another is not as <humanity>, but <economy>; not <fairness>, but <obedience>. Moreover, Neo-Liberalism has become so wrapped up into the narrative of the US that an if an individual speaks against it, he or she is label a “socialist,” and non-American. Now, <economy> *is* <America>.

Conclusion: New Priests, New Power, or None At All

How Judeo-Christian discourse fares in light of the Neo-Liberal idea depends in part on what role individuals choose to take within the culture. As powerful a polemic Amos proclaimed in 2:6 against the Kingdom of Jeroboam, Amaziah, the for-all-intents-and-purposes theologically compromised high priest, focused on the preservation of a discourse of power and the administration of all things religious and otherwise by the state, and stopped Amos' message from reaching the highest ranks of Israel's power structure. Furthermore, Amaziah acted as information gateway to the Jeroboam, and was able to shape the message from Amos however he chose. Amos needed was a sympathetic priests who maintained the same discourses around dominant ideographs. For Judeo-Christians and humanists who are deeply committed defeating a colonializing presence like Neo-Liberalism to utilize whatever social location and privilege available to them to occupy positions of power: for every person protesting in the street, one should be in an office in local and state executive and legislative bodies developing the policies and political discourse that seek the justice that Amos so rightly desired. Otherwise, the

subjugation of people as only economic creatures will continue, while the remaining prophets will be sent home, left to collect words, dress figs, watching others become chattel for global economic gain, lamenting the days when they could still clearly hear God's voice proclaiming justice in a soon-to-be exiled land.

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