

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN AMOS' USE OF TRADITION

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Prophetic oracles frequently maintain continuity with the past by making references to God's mighty deeds or by alluding to ancient Israelite literary traditions.¹ Obvious examples include Isaiah's mention of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa 1:9; cf. Genesis 19), an elder's quotation of a verse from Mic 3:12 to save Jeremiah (see Jer 26:17-18), Daniel's reflection on the seventy years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah (Dan 9:1-2; cf. Jer 25:11-12), and Malachi's remembrance of God's guidelines concerning presenting sacrifices that were lame or sick (Mal 1:8; cf. Lev 22:17-22).² Such references to events or ideas in earlier texts demonstrate that there was a certain level of continuity between earlier and later Israelite beliefs. These traditional teachings naturally resisted change because they contained sacred and authoritative instructions from God that formed the basis of the Israelite worldview. This conservative tendency was aided by stipulations in the divine law that forbid making additions or changes in covenant obligations (see Deut 4:2).

In spite of the strong religious and cultural pressure to resist change, none of the prophets could deny the discontinuity between the nation's early historical, social and religious context in the patriarchal and Mosaic period and its later setting during the era of the great prophets and the exile. These changing circumstances caused a considerable amount of social and religious pressure to adjust or alter the earlier religious traditions that they had received, so that they would be applicable to the nation's new setting.³ Urbanization, the monarchy, the exile, the destruction of the temple, contact with foreigners, and the nation's sinful rebellion

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¹ W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), argues against Wellhausen's theory that the prophets did not use the law, covenant and patriarchal stories because the prophets came before these ideas were put into writing. While agreeing with many of Wellhausen's ideas, G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1965), 2. 132-133, 136, 138, refers to Amos' use of early Pentateuchal tradition at several points.

² D. Knight, *The Traditions of Israel* (Missoula: Scholars, 1973), surveys a somewhat different approach to understanding the development of tradition. Our study will deal with the interpretation and application of known traditions rather than the hypothetical development of traditions.

³ R. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 40, concludes that the prophets "drew upon, modified, and added to the religious traditions of Israel, at times affirming it, and at other times rejecting it."

against God caused the people to make major adjustments in their thinking about reality.⁴ This led to new behavior patterns and some negative attitudes toward their sacred traditions.

In light of these changes in the Israelite world, the prophets were torn between their desire to be faithful to Israel's ancient theological traditional beliefs and the need to adapt them to the cultural and social situations of a new era.⁵ Although the sacred traditions of Israel had served as the basis for their forefathers' worldview while they were a closely-knit tribal group in the Sinai desert,⁶ could they still supply a coherent understanding of divine activity in a time when Israel was suffering defeat at the hands of the Babylonians? If a tradition was no longer applicable to an audience's situation, if it was impossible to adapt it to new circumstances, it would be difficult for a prophet to use it as a basis for explaining God's present activity. Either new explanations would have to be offered or the old traditions would have to be adjusted. This same tension faced preachers and writers in the early Church (see Matt 5:21-48; Acts 15:1-21), and it still confronts those who attempt today to apply the ancient authoritative traditions to modern situations.

Recent studies of the prophets have tended to reduce the tension between past tradition and the prophet's new words from God by emphasizing the extent of continuity between the prophets and earlier Biblical traditions. Continuity is seen in W. Brueggemann's study of Hosea's use of traditions, W. Beyerlin's examination of Micah's references to the law, and E. Würthwein's investigation of Amos' use of legal traditions.⁷ D. Stuart's analysis of covenant curses in the minor prophets also emphasizes that the "prophets carried on their inspired ministries within a tradition that consciously and directly went back to the ancient covenant."⁸ Although few would deny that these points of continuity influenced the thinking and preaching of the prophets, this continuity needs to be placed in tension

⁴ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 19-128, deals with the way people construct their view of reality and the effects that social and religious traditions have on individuals.

⁵ P. R. Ackroyd, "The Theology of Tradition: An Approach to Old Testament Theological Problems," and "Continuity and Discontinuity: Rehabilitation and Authentication," in *Studies in the Religious Tradition of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1987) 17-45, provides an introduction to the struggle to maintain a balance between continuity and discontinuity.

⁶ G. M. Tucker, "The Law in the Eighth-Century Prophets," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of B. S. Childs* (ed. G. M. Tucker et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 201-216, illustrates how frequently the prophets used the legal traditions in their teaching.

⁷ W. Brueggemann, *Tradition in Crisis: A Study in Hosea* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1968); W. Beyerlin, *Die Kulturtradition Israels in des Propheten Micha* (FRLANT 72; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1959); R. Bach, "Gottesrecht und weltliches Recht in der Verkündigung des Propheten Amos," in *Festschrift für G. Dehn* (ed. W. Schneemelcher; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1957) 23-34; E. Würthwein, "Die Ursprung der prophetischen Gerichtrede," *ZTK* 49 (1952) 1-16.

⁸ D. Stuart, *Hosea—Jonah* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) xxxii.

with the prophets' freedom to raise issues of discontinuity.⁹ God was not static or speechless with nothing new to say to his people, nor was he limited by the earlier traditions that had addressed the needs of people a thousand years earlier (cf. John 4:21; Acts 15:1-21). The progressive revelation of God's will and plans demonstrates his dynamic involvement with people who needed new instruction for their lives. As his Spirit moved in the hearts of the prophets, they creatively developed new traditions that addressed the problems of their day.¹⁰ Brueggemann describes this prophetic task as the ministry to "nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture."¹¹ Frequently this happened when a prophet would oppose a king's evil ways or the threat of Baalism, but at other times the prophets even spoke against an earlier accepted tradition (e.g. God's choosing of Zion versus his rejection of Zion). W. Zimmerli's study of the prophetic reinterpretation of traditions showed that several of the prophets went against the traditions that their audience held so dearly.¹² Micah denied the theological idea that the Lord was always patient (Mic 2:7),¹³ Jeremiah confronted the people's false trust in the presence of God in the temple in Jerusalem (Jer 7:1-15), and after the destruction of Jerusalem Ezekiel objected to the deceptive hope placed in the promise to Abraham (Ezek 33:24).

This study will look at the messages of the prophet Amos to discover how he maintained, questioned, adjusted or remolded earlier Biblical traditions. This should reveal both his method of inner-Biblical exegesis and his ability to apply his message to the needs of his audience.¹⁴ Through these examples it will be possible to understand the extent of continuity and discontinuity between the quoted texts and their later usage in Amos' new context.¹⁵

⁹ N. W. Porteous, "The Prophets and the Problem of Continuity," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (ed. B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson; New York: Harper, 1962) 11-25, attributes continuity to the maintenance of traditions in temple worship. Although the priests were to teach the law (Deut 33:10; Mal 2:6-8), the prophetic opposition to temple worship and their ministry outside the temple point to other means of maintaining continuity.

¹⁰ Berger, *Social Construction* 60-61, 104, calls this externalization, the process of constructing new meanings of reality.

¹¹ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 13.

¹² W. Zimmerli, "Prophetic Proclamation and Reinterpretation," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (ed. D. A. Knight; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 69-100.

¹³ L. C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 295-296, refers to the misapplication of truth, giving the wrong word to sinful people.

¹⁴ M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), examines a broad variety of different examples of inner-Biblical exegesis.

¹⁵ An extension of this process to other prophetic books might provide a basis for understanding some of the hermeneutical principles for applying older texts to new situations and might give some insight into references to Hebrew traditions that were used in the NT. See R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), or W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), for discussion of these principles.

I. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN LITERARY FORMS OF SPEECH

Since Amos was one of the earliest writing prophets in Israel, it is difficult to compare his literary forms of speech with patterns that were common before his ministry. When his messages are contrasted with other prophets from the eighth century B.C. it is evident that some of Amos' messages were patterned after the literary speech forms that were common in Israelite society at that time. The judgment oracle in Amos 4:1-3 is similar to the structure of the judgment oracles in Mic 3:1-4, 9-12, the woe oracle in Amos 6:1-7 has a number of similarities with Mic 2:1-5, the salvation oracle in Amos 9:11-15 has points of continuity with Mic 4:1-8, and the disputation speech in Amos 9:7-10 can be closely compared to Micah's dispute with the false prophets in Mic 2:6-11.

Amos also shows some creativity and discontinuity in the specific way he constructs and uses these and other forms of speech. Both woe oracles (Amos 6:1-7; Mic 2:1-4) begin with an announcement of woe, both use plural participles to refer to the wealthy oppressors, and both end the oracle with "therefore" and a judgment statement.¹⁶ The two woe oracles also differ in a number of ways. Amos draws on the context of the *mrzħ* funeral banquet and its lament setting (see Jeremiah 16), but this is absent from Micah.¹⁷ After the woe oracle in Micah a new audience is addressed, but Amos supplements his woe oracle with God's oath of judgment in Amos 6:8-14 to expand and confirm the judgment statement of the oracle. Micah briefly describes the oppressive acts of his audience in Mic 2:1-2, while Amos gives an extensive characterization of his listeners' wealth and opulence without specifically describing their oppressive activities (Amos 6:1, 4-6). Through a unique series of questions Amos creates a comparison between the false security of his audience and the security of other nations (6:1-3), but Micah has nothing comparable. These aspects of discontinuity of form can be primarily attributed to the different audience and setting of the two prophets, the cultural freedom of the prophet to adapt forms of speech to different contexts, and the unique persuasive style of each individual prophet.

Amos' oracles sometimes extend the latitude of cultural variation to the limit. In chaps. 1-2 Amos remolds a war oracle which would typically be given before a group of troops entered the battlefield. D. Christensen has found several different types of war oracles before the time of Amos. These include (1) oracular divinations, which used the ephod, a fleece or the Urim and Thummim to determine if it was God's will to go to war (see Judg 1:1-2; 7:9-14; 1 Sam 14:18-19); (2) the summons to battle, which encouraged the troops to fight because God would give them the victory (see Num 14:41-43; 31:1-4; Josh 6:1-5); and (3) the prophecy of victory, which is illustrated in

¹⁶ J. L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 114; *Micah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 61.

¹⁷ G. V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 192-194.

the Balaam oracles (Num 24:15-24).¹⁸ Amos' war oracle shows lexical and ideological continuity with these early traditions, particularly the Balaam oracles, but its discontinuity is much more striking. Amos' war oracle is much longer, has a much more rigid structural consistency in its repetition of several identical phrases in each subsection, and surprisingly ends with a prediction of the defeat of Israel instead of the expected salvation oracle. The extent of discontinuity may be partially explained by the development of the secular war oracle in Judah at the time of Amos, but the prophet's willingness to break with tradition and redesign the structure and theological climax of his new war oracle is surprising. The discontinuity seems primarily related to the prophet's creativity in using culturally bound forms of speech in new ways, so that he could persuade his audience through the use of logic and surprise. These two examples illustrate the need for each new generation of prophets and preachers to examine the old traditional rhetorical forms to see if they still effectively communicate the divine message. Since the medium of communication has an influence on the message, new forms that will more adequately and creatively address the setting, needs and thought patterns of a new audience are sometimes required.

II. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

In Amos' speeches against Israel he demonstrates his dependence on Israelite legal (see Amos 2:6-8; 8:4-6), hymnic (see 4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6), wisdom (see 3:3-6; 6:12) and cultic information (see 4:4-5; 5:21-24). One of the central theological foundations of Israelite faith that Amos used was the exodus tradition (2:9-10; 3:1-2; 9:7). Closely associated with the exodus was the Biblical tradition about the plagues on Egypt (used in 4:10) and God's passing through the midst of Egypt to kill the firstborn in the final plague (used in 5:17). The reference to these traditions demonstrates the prophet's desire to maintain continuity with Israel's ancient theological traditions and to remind the people of God's gracious deeds on their behalf. But Amos' rhetorical use of the exodus tradition shows that there is some discontinuity between (1) the Pentateuchal tradition, (2) Amos' theological interpretation of the significance of the exodus, and (3) his audience's view of the exodus. In some cases Amos focuses on the continuity between these three approaches, but at other times there seems to be a good deal of discontinuity between these different ways of interpreting the exodus. The reasons for this continuity or discontinuity between the approaches are primarily related to Amos' principles of exegesis and his principles of application.

Amos' exegetical understanding of the exodus events suggested a comparison between the plagues on Egypt and God's chastening of Israel

¹⁸ D. Christensen, *Transformations of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 1-15.

through the death of many of their young men in a military conflict in 4:10. Although some believe the point of comparison is the quickness of both events, or the severity of the events, Rudolph correctly connects this plague to the death of the "firstborn" (*bēkôr*) and the "young men" (*bāhûr*) who died in battle.¹⁹ The continuity between these events lies in the fact that God killed the young men of two nations as a severe judgment on his enemies. The startling discontinuity arises because in Amos' time God did not destroy Israel's ancient enemy Egypt. He destroyed the young men of Israel.

A similar reversal is found in Amos' reference to "God passing through the midst of Israel" in 5:17. This statement recalls God passing through the midst of Egypt in the final, climactic tenth plague. God brought death to the firstborn of every household where there was no blood on the doorpost (Exod 11:4-5; 12:12-13).²⁰ In both cases God "passes through the midst" of a nation in judgment, but Amos shockingly applies an old tradition about Egypt to Israel. He does not deny the ancient tradition by exegetical trickery but draws an analogy from the old tradition to forcefully make new applications in a new situation.

The rehearsal of the conquest, exodus and wilderness traditions in 2:9-10 also shows signs of continuity with earlier traditions in Exodus-Joshua. Amos affirms three traditions: (1) God destroyed the Amorites before the children of Israel when they came into the land of Canaan (2:9a); (2) God brought the people up out of the land of Egypt (2:10a); (3) God led the people through the wilderness for forty years (2:10b). But after Amos quotes these traditions, he applies them to his Israelite audience with some variations.²¹ For example, he ignores the chronological order of events by referring to the conquest of the Amorites in 2:9 before he speaks of the exodus in 2:10a. Another minor change is his comparison of the Amorites to trees in 2:9 (the spies' report in Num 13:32-33 uses a grasshopper comparison). But the greatest discontinuity results from Amos' placement of these verses immediately after accusations of oppression of the weak and poor in 2:6-8 and immediately before God's declaration of judgment on Israel's army in 2:13-16. Two applications are possible: (1) God's gracious deliverance of his weak people from the strong Egyptians and Amorites is not appreciated, nor is it allowed to determine social relationships with the weak in Israel in Amos' day. (2) The oppression of the weak in 2:6-8 is inconsistent with God's past deliverance of his weak people from slavery in Egypt and the powerful military forces in Canaan. Amos' exegetical analysis maintains the principle within his tradition that God will deliver his oppressed people but identifies Israel as the oppressor instead of Egypt or the Amorites.

¹⁹ W. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona* (KAT; Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1971) 179.

²⁰ J. Crenshaw, "Amos and the Theophanic Tradition," *ZAW* 80 (1968) 206-207.

²¹ H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 141-142, 169, and W. H. Schmidt, "Die deuteronomistische Redaction des Amosbuches," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 178-182, believe that 2:10 is a later addition to the text. But there is nothing deuteronomic about the unusual order of events given here or the use of *lh*, "to go up." See T. R. Hobbs, "Amos 3:1b and 2:10," *ZAW* 81 (1969) 384-387.

These traditions about God's great deeds of grace for his people become accusations in this context rather than words of praise and joy.

Throughout the book of Amos there is no indication that Amos' audience accepted his message concerning the destruction of Israel in 2:13-16. Since Amos brings up the exodus tradition at the beginning of chap. 3, it appears that his audience rejected his message because they believed that God would not destroy his chosen people who were redeemed from Egypt (3:1-2). In continuity with his audience Amos held to the importance of the exodus and election tradition, but he realized that the privilege of election and the exodus carried a great responsibility. In contrast to Amos' exegetical understanding, the Israelites seemed to believe that their election was an eternal guarantee to all the seed of Abraham and that the exodus was an undeniable proof of God's deep, everlasting love and protection for all succeeding generations (see Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-8; Exod 6:1-8). There is a clear discontinuity between the way Amos and his audience understood their traditions.²² Amos believed that the eternal promises were conditionally available to those who maintained their covenant relationship with God. Because the elect who were redeemed from Egypt broke their covenant relationship with God, he will punish them for all their iniquities (3:2b). Amos' view is consistent with the nation's covenantal traditions, which his audience has ignored or perverted.

The final reference to the exodus tradition in 9:7-8 may be the most significant because Amos' position reveals its highest degree of discontinuity with ancient Israelite traditions. Since his audience still believes that the calamity that Amos speaks of will not touch them because God redeemed them from Egypt (9:10), Amos takes the bold step of denying the uniqueness and the present value of the exodus experience. Amos accomplishes this by revealing that God has not only had his hand over Israel but also over the distant and foreign Ethiopians (9:7). God has even brought about an exodus event for the Philistines and the Syrians (9:7). Amos draws on historical information outside the nation's Biblical tradition to deny the ultimate uniqueness of Israel's exodus event. Since God's rule of the world extends to all peoples (Amos 1-2) and he cares and acts on behalf of other nations from time to time (9:7), a more fundamental issue must determine each nation's relationship to God. Amos' exegetical conclusions do not deny any earlier tradition; he simply identifies which traditions are the primary ones that determine God's relationship to his people. If God's exodus for the Philistines does not prevent him from destroying them for their transgression (1:6-8) and if his exodus of the Syrians from Kir does not prevent him from destroying the people of Damascus (1:3-5), why should the exodus of Israel from Egypt prevent God from punishing the Israelites for their transgressions (2:6-8)? The key that

²² Mays, *Amos* 57, thinks Amos' words in 3:2 are "an ironic, scornful response to hearers who lay claim to the dogma of a special relation to Yahweh as a defense against Amos' message of judgment."

determines a nation's relationship to God is sin.²³ Amos concludes that the sinful kingdom will be destroyed (9:8), and therefore his application must be that the sinners among the Israelite nation will be killed by the sword (9:8). Amos sees that covenantal love, faith and obedience will determine the nation's future, not the fact that they were delivered from Egyptian slavery at some point in the past.

III. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THE APPLICATION OF TRADITION

The examples we have considered show how the prophet Amos quoted and reused some of Israel's traditions. His principles of application can be grouped into a number of general classes. First are those accusations that are based on a literal interpretation of a legal concept from the law and that demonstrate total continuity with past customs. In this category would be Amos' condemnation of the merchants who falsify weights and measures to steal from others (see 8:5). The prophet legitimates his condemnation by drawing on traditions from Lev 19:35-36 or possibly Deut 25:13-15.²⁴ In a similar manner Amos predicts in Amos 5:11 that the curse in Deut 28:30 will fall on those who have built houses and vineyards.²⁵ In complete continuity with the covenant curses, Amos announces that these people will not live in their houses or eat of the fruit of their vineyards. He does not twist or alter his covenant tradition but applies it in the same way it was originally intended.

A second group of traditions functions as simple analogies that remind an audience of a principle of life that God uses to rule people on earth. Amos' comparison between God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and his judgment on Israel in Amos 4:11 is based on analogies between the two events. Another simple analogy exists between what a shepherd finds after a lion has attacked and eaten a lamb and what the people will find in Samaria after it is attacked by the enemy that God will send against it (3:11-12).²⁶ Amos does not twist or change his traditions in these examples. He simply notes some shocking similarities in two comparable situations. At other times his analogies are manipulated to bring out contrasting similarities. For example, his references to God passing through the midst of Egypt in 5:17 creates an analogy between God's past acts against Egypt and his future action toward an Israelite audience. The analogy of a similar destruction creates continuity between the two events, but his application of this threat to an Israelite audience rather than an Egyptian

²³ Smith, *Amos* 269-272.

²⁴ Mays, *Amos* 145. Excavations at Tirzah uncovered two sets of weights to enable the merchant to cheat both the seller and the buyer.

²⁵ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* 348, calls this a futility curse.

²⁶ The textual analysis of I. Rabinowitz, "The Crux of Amos 3:12," *VT* 21 (1961) 228-231, has clarified many of the problems associated with Amos' application of this analogy to his audience in Samaria.

audience produces discontinuity. In these cases Amos is not suggesting that he has some new principle of exegesis that reveals to him a new meaning or that his application is identical to the original meaning of their tradition.²⁷ He is simply saying that God acts in similar ways when he judges a nation. Because of the level of discontinuity, there were probably many in Amos' audience who refused to accept the logical connection between their past tradition and the prophet's new significance found in his application.

In a third series of traditions, the applications refer to the same audience but the context of the tradition brings about a new focus. Amos never denied that the exodus, wilderness and conquest traditions in 2:9-10 applied to Israel, but he used these traditions as part of the basis for judgment in 2:13-16. When positive traditions about God's grace to the weak are applied to support a judgment on Israel rather than a positive message of hope, it is evident that the prophet is applying these traditions in a new way.

In a few cases a tradition may have both positive and negative aspects, and the positive aspects will not be applied to Israel according to the pattern of the original tradition. Amos' reference to the day of the Lord in 5:18-20 draws on an ancient promise of hope for God's people and a gloomy day of judgment for his enemies.²⁸ Amos agrees with this tradition but concludes that it will not apply to his Israelite audience because of their sinfulness. This discontinuity means that they will not participate in the light of God's salvation but in the darkness of his judgment designed to destroy his enemies.

The most striking examples of discontinuity occur when the prophet rejects a tradition or suggests that the importance of a key tradition may be diminished because there is a more determinative tradition that undermines its centrality. Amos' conclusion in 9:7-10 that sin was more central than the exodus in determining the future of the nation was almost as radical as Paul's conclusion that circumcision was not as important as faith for the Gentiles in the early Church.

IV. CONCLUSION

This brief investigation into the hermeneutical method of dealing with tradition demonstrates that Amos employed ancient traditions in several ways. It appears that his exegetical conclusions concerning the meaning of texts are consistent with their meaning in the Pentateuch. His applications sometimes legitimate a fundamental principle of justice that did not change just because the people were living in an historical period that was

²⁷ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), makes an important distinction between meaning and significance.

²⁸ For an overview of several different approaches to the origin of the day of the Lord concept see Smith, *Amos* 176-180.

socially and culturally very different from the time of Moses. Other traditions referred to specific events and were not open to a broad application. Nevertheless, these could be used for illustrative purposes to explain how God would work in the future. A more radical use of tradition was to recognize the limited application of some traditions and to adjust them to a new setting so that the word of God could escape the chain of the past and come alive to address the needs of a new audience.