

WORDPLAY AND DIALECT IN AMOS 8:1-2

Al Wolters*

It is well known that the fourth vision in the book of Amos (8:1-2) turns on a pun: The *qayis* ("summer fruit") shown to Amos is interpreted by the Lord as the *qēs* ("end") now imminent over the northern kingdom. A number of versions attempt to reproduce the pun by using the word "ripe": "a basket of ripe summer fruit" and "the time is ripe for my people Israel."¹ This is ingenious and effective, but it obscures the fact that the Hebrew words being punned on are not homonyms. To be sure, some recent commentaries have suggested that the two words may have been pronounced alike in the Hebrew spoken by Amos,² but this goes against the linguistic and textual evidence. The fact is that one of the characteristic features of the Judahite dialect spoken by Amos, by which it was distinguished from both the Israelite dialect of the northern kingdom and from other varieties of Canaanite, was the distinctive pronunciation of words like *qayis* (or *qays*³) compared to words like *qēs*.

Although this point of difference between the Judahite and Israelite dialects of Hebrew is widely recognized,⁴ commentators have generally failed to note its significance for the *qayis/qēs* pun in Amos. To my knowledge only E. Y. Kutscher and M. Dahood (each in a passing remark and apparently independently of each other) have connected the wordplay in Amos with this dialectal difference. Kutscher suggested tentatively in 1961 that Amos, prophesying in the northern kingdom, "attempts to speak with the accent of the

*Al Wolters is associate professor of religion and classics at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario.

¹So *NEB*; similarly *JB*, *NIV* and others. H. W. Wolff, *Dodekapropheten 2: Joel und Hosea* (BKAT 14/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969) 366 uses the German *Ernte* and *Ende*, which is an improvement since it does not suggest homonymy.

²See Wolff, *Joel* 366; W. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona* (KAT 12/2; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971) 239; similarly H. Gese, "Komposition bei Amos," *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980* (VTSup 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 78-79. Another recent interpretation takes both *qys* and *qs* to mean "harvest": K. Koch, *Die Propheten I: Assyrische Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1978) 51 translates *kēlūb qayis* as *Erntebündel* (or *Korb mit Erntefrüchten*) and *qēs* as *Ernte* (explicitly rejecting the traditional rendering *Ende*). The point is obscured in the English translation, *The Prophets I: The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 40, which speaks of "sheaf of ripe grain," "basket with ripe fruit" and "harvest."

³The intrusive or anaptyctic vowel in *bayit*, *yayin*, *qayis*, etc., is not attested in pre-Masoretic sources; see R. Meyer, *Hebräische Grammatik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), I. 119.

⁴See J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. Volume I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 2, 4, 7-8; E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) 66, 70, 78; W. R. Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine: 1000-586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985) 38.

people whom he is addressing" and that therefore *qayis* in Amos 8:2 should perhaps be revocalized as *qēs*.⁵ Dahood made the same point some years later. In a review of the first volume of John C. L. Gibson's *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* he notes that in Gibson's notes on the Gezer calendar "*qs* = *qēs* is correctly contrasted with Judean *qays*" and then adds:

Here it may be pointed out that the pun in Am 8,2 on *qayis*, "summer fruit," and *qēs*, "end," was perfect in the Northern dialect of Hebrew where both were pronounced *qēs*. Hence MT *qayis* should be repointed *qēs* since Amos was prophesying in Samaria.⁶

This proposal by Kutscher and Dahood, however, does not seem to be very plausible either. It is quite possible that Amos received the vision of summer fruit while prophesying in the northern kingdom, but we must bear in mind that in the vision he is not addressing the northerners but the Lord. It is hardly likely that the visionary interchange between Amos and God took place in the Israelite dialect.⁷ After all, an American envoy to London does not speak with a British accent—least of all on the telephone with the president of the United States.

It is our proposal that it is precisely the difference between Judahite and Israelite pronunciation (as preserved in MT) that makes the wordplay work. The point is that the Lord mimics the Israelite pronunciation of *qayis* and in so doing brings into play the entirely different meaning "end." The word *qēs* thus has two levels—parody and double entendre—with the first making possible the second.

To appreciate the rhetorical effectiveness of the pun it is necessary to recall that the reduction or contraction of the diphthong *ay* to *ē* in the northern dialect (as in *yēn* for *yayin* in the Samaria ostraca, roughly contemporaneous with Amos⁸) follows a pattern already well established in other varieties of Canaanite, such as the earlier Amarna glosses and Ugaritic⁹ as well as contemporary Phoenician,¹⁰ and that this development had led to the homonymy in the Hebrew of the northern kingdom (at least in the absolute singular)

⁵E. Y. Kutscher, *Words and Their History* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1961) 34 (Hebrew). I am indebted to S. Morag of the Hebrew University for this reference.

⁶M. Dahood in *Orientalia* 41 (1973) 318. Dahood had made the same point in an earlier review; see *Bib* 50 (1969) 74: "In the dialect of Northern Israel (where Amos was prophesying) the diphthong *ay* was contracted to *ē* (see Samaria Ostraca) so that both words were pronounced *qēs*. The pun was exact, not approximate as in the Masoretic tradition."

⁷It is even less likely that Amos is here actually alluding to the Gezer calendar, where the same pun on "end" and "summer fruit" is allegedly found; see B. D. Rahtjen, "A Critical Note on Amos 8:1-2," *JBL* 83 (1964) 416-417.

⁸KAI, 1. 34; see also Gibson, *Textbook* 6-8.

⁹Kutscher, *History* 78; Garr, *Dialect Geography* 38.

¹⁰Witness such forms as *ʿl*, "chief"; *bt*, "house"; *ll*, "night"; *ʿn*, "spring," corresponding to MT *ʿayil*, *bayit*, *layil*, *ʿayin*. See R. S. Tomback, *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages* (SBLDS 32; Missoula: Scholars, 1978).

of a number of etymologically distinct nouns that had previously been pronounced differently, including *qayiš* and *qēš*.¹¹

As it happens, we are particularly well-informed about the history of the Canaanite word for "summer" or "summer fruit." It occurs in the Amarna glosses as *qēšu*,¹² in Ugaritic as *qz*, and in the northern Hebrew of the Gezer calendar (tenth century) as *qš*.¹³ In all these cases the diphthong is already contracted. Moreover the word had become a homonym of *qēš*, "end," in the northern kingdom. This is evidenced not only by the fourth vision under discussion but also by the Samaritan tradition (perhaps preserving features of the northern pronunciation of Hebrew), in which both words are pronounced *qeš*.¹⁴

To return to Amos, we must bear in mind that he was a Judahite farmer (7:14) who visited the northern kingdom. Not only did he prophesy there (the incident described immediately prior to the fourth vision, for example, took place at Bethel), but he had probably gone every year to the markets in Israel to sell his agricultural products there.¹⁵ These would include not only his flocks but also the ripened sycamore-figs (*qayiš*),¹⁶ which he grew and which he would presumably transport in closed wickerwork baskets.¹⁷ Bethel was situated on the main road to the north, some 22 miles (31 kilometers) from his home town of Tekoa.¹⁸ We can imagine Amos at the Bethel markets listening to an Israelite colleague selling ripe figs (*qayiš*) who in hawking his wares sounded to the Judahite's ears like a prophet proclaiming the end (*qēš*). Whatever the concrete occasion, we can safely assume that Amos was acquainted with this striking homonymy in the northern dialect.

In the fourth vision, Amos is shown the familiar sight of a basket of summer fruit. Asked what he sees, he responds by giving the fruit its Judahite name (*qayiš*). Then the Lord replies by repeating the word in the northern pronunciation (*qēš*) and in so doing simultaneously evoking the meaning

¹¹Other homonyms would be ^ʔ*ayil*/^ʔ*el*, *hayil*/*hēl*, *hayiš*/*hēš*, ^ʕ*ayit*/^ʕ*et*, *šayin*/*šen*, *šayit*/*šet*. Perhaps the "beds of ivory (*šen*)" in Amos 6:4 contains a mocking allusion to the Israelite pronunciation of *šayin*, "urine."

¹²KB³ s.v. *qayiš*; AHW 918b.

¹³KAI, 1. 34; Gibson, *Textbook* 2, 4.

¹⁴See KB³.

¹⁵See G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 1. 79; E. Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1970) 12.

¹⁶Whatever the precise meaning of *bōlēš šiqmīm* (7:14), it is clear that it has to do with the growing of sycamore-figs (note that *balas* means "fig" in Arabic and Ethiopic; Hammershaimb, *Amos* 117-118). Apparently the expression *qayiš*, "summer fruit," refers primarily to figs (KB³).

¹⁷The word for "basket" (*kēlūb*) in the vision normally means "bird cage" (Jer 5:27; Sir 11:28). Accordingly it presumably does not designate an open-ended basket (*sal*, *ʔene*^ʔ) but a covered one, such as was necessary for transport.

¹⁸Smith, *Prophets*, 1. 29.

“end.” The basketful of freshly picked figs, symbol of plenty and prosperity, when given its name in the northern dialect sounds like its opposite: death and disaster.¹⁹ In the mouths of the northerners, *ficus sonat finem*.

In order to appreciate fully the effect produced by the wordplay in Amos it may be instructive to cast about for a modern parallel closer to our own experience. For the speaker of English, the disparity between American and British pronunciation is probably the most widely familiar example of dialectal differences. One feature that has distinguished British English, since the early nineteenth century, from its North American sister is the dropping of the phoneme *r* in final and preconsonantal position.²⁰ This has led to quite a number of homonyms in British English that do not exist (globally speaking) on the other side of the Atlantic: *farther/father*, *arms/alms*, *fort/fought*, *source/sauce*, *larva/lava*, and so on. In standard American speech these words continue to be pronounced differently, while in British usage (at least in the so-called “received pronunciation,” popularly associated with “Oxford English”) they are now pronounced alike.²¹

If for the purposes of our illustration we may be permitted to make Amos an American and to conflate the fourth vision with the first, then we can exploit the last pair of British homonyms listed above as follows:

Thus the Lord God showed me: Behold, the larva of a locust. And he said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “The larva of a locust.” Then the Lord said to me, “Like ‘lahva’ over my city Oxford will I pour out my wrath; I will never again pass by them.”

This adaptation of the prophetic vision (with apologies to my British friends and colleagues) can serve to illustrate the structure of the semantic and dialectal wordplay in the fourth vision. It also highlights another feature that we should note: the element of parody and satire that the mimicking of another’s dialect usually carries with it. Like the sarcasm and irony, the hyperbole and rhetorical questions that characterize God’s speech elsewhere in Amos, so his mimicry of the northern dialect here (in poignant contrast to the continued use of “my people”) highlights his passionate involvement with the northern kingdom.

We may conclude by observing that the light shed by the epigraphic finds of the last century, which have put the Hebrew of the Bible squarely within its Canaanite context, now allows us to appreciate not only the significant similarity in sound between *qayis* and *qes* but also the significant difference.

¹⁹The paradoxical effect of the similarity of sound and the antithesis of meaning is correctly pointed out by A. Weiser, *Die Prophetie des Amos* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1929) 25–26. The paradox is even more pointed if we realize that an identity of sound is involved.

²⁰See E. Ekwall, *American and British Pronunciation* (Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1949) 25–29; *A History of Modern English Sounds and Morphology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975) 65–66.

²¹See J. W. Lewis, *A Concise Pronouncing Dictionary of British and American English* (London: Oxford University, 1972) xi.