

# GOD AND HIS PEOPLE IN THE NATIONS' HISTORY: A CONTEXTUALISED READING OF AMOS 1-2

M. Daniel Carroll R.

## Summary

*The Oracles against the Nations in Amos 1 and 2 give important insights into the nature of God's involvement in human history and the place of God's people in it. This essay draws on them in order to evaluate Liberation Theology's claim that Yahweh acts in history for the liberation of the oppressed. This theological conviction has gone hand-in-hand with certain hermeneutical commitments as to how the biblical text should be read. Two liberationists, Gustavo Gutiérrez and J. Severino Croatto are cited in order to raise the key issues for discussion, and then some alternative thoughts on hermeneutical and biblical method are proposed. A literary reading of Amos 1 and 2 suggests that this text can provide insights for a new understanding of God in history that might illuminate the Latin American situation more adequately than the liberation paradigm.*

## I. Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed the birth and maturing of challenging theological and missiological insights from the Two-Thirds World, insights arising from and responding to the pressing issues of those needy contexts. This work from different parts of the globe demonstrates not only that disparate contexts will consider other topics from fresh perspectives, but also that these different approaches can raise important methodological concerns.

For many outside Latin America, to speak of recent creative and contextualised Latin American theology is to refer to Liberation Theology. For those of us who live on that continent, of course, the theological scene is much more complex, but it is certainly true that Liberation Theology has

had an impact on how theology is done and how the biblical text is handled in that part of the world.<sup>1</sup> Though perhaps one might disagree with certain presuppositions or some of the positions of this approach,<sup>2</sup> Liberation Theology has often raised in powerful ways key questions that demand theological and hermeneutical consideration from within Latin social realities.

A continuing fundamental concern of Latin American Liberation Theology has been to reflect upon the nature of history and how to discern divine involvement within the contemporary course of events. To determine the character of God's intervention within history also will influence to a significant extent how the people of God define themselves vis-a-vis the world and how they perceive themselves as participating within that history. Consequently, theological convictions about God and history in Liberation Theology always have had implications for other topics, such as the structure and mission of the Church.

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<sup>1</sup>In order to appreciate the variety of the contextualised theological work being done within Latin America, it is also important to consider the contributions of evangelical scholars. See M.D. Carroll R. with G.W. Méndez, 'Another Voice from Latin America: Concerned Evangelicals and the Challenge of a Continent in Crisis. An introductory and bibliographic essay', *The Modern Churchman* NS 30.4 (1989) 42-46. Roman Catholic formulations of a more traditional sort, whether those directed to the context or those responding to Liberation Theology, must also be taken into account. The conflict between liberationists and traditionalists was evident, for example, in the Bishops Conferences in Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992), the silencing of Leonardo Boff (who would leave the priesthood in 1992), and the publication of the two 'Instructions' by Cardinal Ratzinger in 1984 and 1986.

<sup>2</sup>Evaluations from various perspectives include J.A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979); J.V. Schall (ed.), *Liberation Theology, with selected essays and documents* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982); E.A. Núñez, *Liberation Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1985); M. Novak, *Will It Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1986); E.A. Núñez and W.D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 233-81; C.R. Padilla, 'Liberation Theology: An Appraisal' in D.S. Schipani (ed.), *Freedom and Discipleship: Liberation Theology in an Anabaptist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) 34-50; A.F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

In this essay the liberation perspective on history will serve to underscore a few crucial topics regarding history and an appropriate method for the task of contextualisation. The purpose in alluding to liberationist authors, however, is neither to defend nor critique Liberation Theology, but rather to utilise it as a foil for discussion. God's action in history and how this might mould how his people conceptualise their identity among the nations are timely issues in light of the present situation in Latin America. Our countries are endeavouring to comprehend the meaning of decades of armed conflict, to establish more just democratic regimes in the here and now, and to grasp a sense of the future beyond the confusion. Our history is changing. Where is God to be found in this history? How does he act in this time and in this place? How is the Christian Church to establish its bearings within our context?

The following discussion is divided into three parts. The first section takes a brief look at how two Latin American liberationists, the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Argentine Old Testament scholar J. Severino Croatto, deal with the issue of God in history.<sup>3</sup> The second presents some hermeneutical considerations for a literary reading of the Bible from Latin America. The third offers a reading of certain passages in the book of Amos, with special regard to chapters one and two. On the basis of this reading, the conclusion suggests some theological reflections for the Christian Church in Latin America. This is an attempt, in other words, to bring together some of the constituent elements of contextualised biblical studies: context, theology, hermeneutical method, and textual content.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The object here is to distil a few important ideas from the more wide-ranging theological and methodological works of these authors. Only a summary presentation of these major points is possible within the limits of this essay.

<sup>4</sup>See this author's other attempts to bring these features together for a contextualised biblical method within Latin America: M.D. Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective* (JSOTS 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); 'Context, Bible and ethics: a Latin American Perspective', *Themelios* 19.3 (1994) 9-15; 'Por que lavé despreza o culto em seu nome? O livro de Amós fala ao cristianismo latino-americano de nossos dias' in A.B. Pieratt (ed.), *Chamado para Servir: Ensaio em honra de Russell P. Shedd* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1994), 223-37; 'Reflecting on War and Utopia in the Book of Amos: The Relevance of a Literary Reading of the Prophetic Text from Central America' in M.D. Carroll R., D.J.A. Clines, P.R. Davies (eds.), *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in honour of Professor John W. Rogerson* (JSOTS 200; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press: 1995), 105-21.

## II. God in History in Latin American Liberation Theology

### 1. Gustavo Gutiérrez

Over twenty years ago, in a now classic early systematic articulation of Liberation Theology, Gutiérrez made at least three points pertinent to our interest in history and God's self-revelation in Latin America.

To begin with, Gutiérrez stresses that history is one: there are not two histories—one secular, the other sacred.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there should not be a dichotomy between the Church (for Gutiérrez, this would be the Roman Catholic Church) and the world; at the same time, the activity of God cannot be divorced from the history of the nations. He believes that the growing secularisation of human society in this century has forced the Church to appreciate this theological and pastoral fact. Furthermore, today human beings have come to understand themselves as responsible world-transforming agents within history, so conceptions about God (if indeed still a factor in modern thought) have also changed. On the one hand, this new social and philosophical reality forces the reworking of faith and mission in societies no longer Christian. On the other hand, this modern orientation has actually been a positive catalyst in helping the Church to perceive its potential role in co-operating with others to achieve human liberation. Immersed in history, the Church is to serve humanity and participate in concrete efforts designed to move the world toward this destiny of a fuller humanity. All of this is not to say

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<sup>5</sup>G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) 45-72. Other inseparable issues, which are beyond the purview of this essay, would include the relationship between the kingdom of God and this history and the role of the social sciences to analyse history.

that there is no distinction between the Church and the world, but rather that a separation between Christian identity and life (whether individual or institutional) and social realities is impossible.<sup>6</sup>

A second issue, that supports the first, is that God reveals himself in history as committed to the cause of liberation. At this point, Gutiérrez turns to the biblical text.<sup>7</sup> This commitment is found, he says, from the very beginning of the Bible. The opening chapters of Genesis reveal that ‘the creation of the world initiates history, the human struggle, and the salvific adventure of Yahweh.’<sup>8</sup> This connection between creation and redemption is substantiated by passages from the book of Isaiah (e.g., 43:1, 42:5-6, 44:24) and a number of Psalms (such as 74, 89, 135, 136).

The most important corroborating scriptural text is the Exodus, which is paradigmatic both for Old Testament faith and Liberation Theology.<sup>9</sup> Once again there is a clear link between divine liberation and creation. The Exodus event also serves as the basis for determining the nature of the mission of the people of God. Joining these elements together, Gutiérrez says: ‘The Creator of the world is the Creator and Liberator of Israel, to whom he entrusts the mission of establishing justice.’<sup>10</sup> From this moment on in the biblical revelation and in human history, Yahweh’s commitment and Israel’s calling are clear: Yahweh is the liberator of all the oppressed, not only of his people (Is. 41:1-7, 43:10, 44:8; Am. 9:7), and this community is to be an active participant in the universal struggle for liberation.

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<sup>6</sup>This liberationist view of the Church within Latin American history has also led to new vistas of Church history on the continent. Note E. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation (1492-1979)* (ET; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Dussel (ed.), *The Church in Latin America: 1492-1992* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, 153-60. Also note *idem*, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 3-22, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 154.

<sup>9</sup>For a helpful survey, see E. Dussel, ‘El paradigma del éxodo en la teología de la liberación’, *Concilium* 209 (1987) 99-114.

<sup>10</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 156.

Biblical eschatology in turn is formulated in accord with this perspective.<sup>11</sup> The divine promise of universal justice, although always a future hope, today is mediated concretely within history in the achievement of the eradication of oppression and the establishment of a new social order in particular contexts. Guided by such a faith, which comprehends the meaning of history as rooted in the liberating activity of God, the Church should be involved in these anticipations of the eschaton. Solidarity with the poor and denunciation of injustice are some of the activities by which this conviction is incarnated. This is essentially an optimistic eschatology that is confident that human history is moving toward a more just future, in spite of obstacles and even the suffering of the innocent in the present.<sup>12</sup>

Though the discussion up to this point has alluded inevitably to the vocation of the people of God, what we wish to stress here are two theological postulates. These are, first, that there is only one history, within which God reveals himself and acts on behalf of the oppressed. Second, it is claimed, this liberation explanation of history is demonstrated in the Bible's record of Israel's past and elucidates the unfolding and ultimately the future goal of human existence. A third related issue is how these theological tenets co-ordinate with a particular understanding of the situation of Latin America vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

Gutiérrez posits that the continent, along with other poor countries in other latitudes, is the victim of a global system of oppression, a point of view oriented by dependency theory. In this scheme, world history and the present state of affairs are delineated along a centre-periphery axis.<sup>13</sup> Others have evaluated the strengths

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 160-78, 189-250.

<sup>12</sup>For the concept of martyrdom in Latin American Liberation Theology, note P. Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion: Christians in Central American Revolutions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); J. Sobrino, 'Apuntes para una espiritualidad en tiempos de violencia', *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 29 (1993) 189-208.

<sup>13</sup>Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 21-42, 81-99; *idem*, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 42-48, 77-88, 186-93. Cf. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 3-5, 296-7; *idem*, *Ethics and Community* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1988) 135-57.

and weaknesses of dependency theory as an economic thesis;<sup>14</sup> what is important at this juncture, however, is its value as a conceptual tool that has been utilised by Liberation Theology for positioning Latin America among the nations.

From a dependency perspective, the nations ‘on the margin’ suffer because of the demands of capitalist countries, in which are concentrated cultural, political and financial power. Today this harsh systemic reality would be most visible in the continuing debt crisis, the exploitation of natural resources, and the growing gap between the First and Two-Thirds Worlds. In addition, this inequality finds local expression within Latin American societies in the uneven distribution of wealth and the domination by the few who can take advantage of this arrangement. Moreover, this centre-periphery/international-national pattern has been apparent in the periodic foreign military interventions and the internal aggression of national security regimes supported by capitalist nations.

Gutiérrez believes that a liberationist comprehension of history and of the divine will facilitates the unmasking of this unjust system and offers hope of a better world. God is at work in history to bring about a different reality, and this through a people who are committed to the process of change. Therefore, although Latin America suffers at the margins of the international centres of power as a victim, at the same time it is the locus of a new divine activity of liberating potential. In sum, the two earlier themes concerning the nature of history and of God’s involvement within the historical process resonate within a certain theory of the configuration of the nations of the world.

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<sup>14</sup>Novak, *op. cit.*, 126-53; McGovern, *op. cit.*, 156-76; L.E. Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985); J. Walton, ‘Small Gains for Big Theories: Recent Work on Development’, *Latin American Research Review* 22.2 (1987) 192-201. Gutiérrez has modified his support of dependency theory in the revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) xxiv.

## 2. J. Severino Croatto

Croatto affirms these theological principles articulated by Gutiérrez. He, too, echoes the centrality of the theological theme of God's liberating activity within universal history and the singular significance of the Exodus for this formulation:

The Exodus was the salvific experience of Israel. This meant that this people deepened and expanded its understanding of salvation, the fundamental component of any religious world view, in terms of liberation... This has consequences for a theology of history: God is understood as *savior* because he acts *in human history*, and not, in the first place, in a meta-history.<sup>15</sup>

The work of Croatto is of special interest for this essay, however, not because of its continuity with this theological position, but rather because of his hermeneutical approach to the biblical text itself. Three points deserve special mention. First, Croatto is very interested in what the text *does*. Following Gadamer, Ricoeur, and the insights of semiotics, this Old Testament scholar expounds on the potential of the biblical text to illuminate the present, while at the same time underlining the notion that the today's context also produces meaning; it mines the text's 'reservoir of meaning'.<sup>16</sup> He labels the Exodus a 'foundational event' and considers it archetypal because of its capacity to be appropriated by struggles on behalf of the oppressed.<sup>17</sup>

This vitality of the Exodus account, Croatto posits, is demonstrated by the fact that the tradition is utilised, recontextualised as it were, throughout the pages of the Old Testament in response to new needs in later situations. What is more, Croatto links this

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<sup>15</sup>J.S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (ET; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 27.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 1-30. For a more extended theoretical discussion, see *idem*, *Hermenéutica bíblica. Para una teoría de la lectura como producción de sentido* (Buenos Aires: Aurora, 1984) and 'La relevancia sociohistórica y hermenéutica del éxodo', *Concilium* 209 (1987) 155-64.

<sup>17</sup>This is not to say that Croatto holds to the literal historicity of the biblical account. Note his distinction between the religious symbolic language of the text and the actual event itself: *Exodus*, 14, 20, 22, 25-26; *Hermenéutica bíblica*, 84-7.

theological-contextual view with the notion of redactional levels. At this point, he moves beyond the Exodus theme to the shaping of the canon: redaction is presented as the contextualisation of earlier biblical material.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Amos, for example, Croatto points to the pericope of hope in 9:11-15, which he takes as a later text added to actualise the original denunciatory tradition.<sup>19</sup>

The relevance of Croatto's observations of redactional levels leads to our second point. This scholar's actual biblical work raises the question of which is the most appropriate form of the biblical text and what might be a constructive method for the doing of contextual scriptural study and theology. What form of the text might be the proper object of any biblical reading by the poor and oppressed? Are discussions of redactional histories accessible to those for whom Croatto would hope to labour?<sup>20</sup> We do not make these queries to suggest that Croatto's work is of no value or that it is improper, only to emphasise that methodological options must be consciously defined.

The third and final point deals with the readers of the biblical text. Those who are involved in the practice of liberation (praxis), Croatto says, not only can now see through faith the God of the scriptural narratives working within present historical events; they also can have a deeper appreciation of the meaning of these accounts themselves on the basis of this praxis. The text is no atemporal letter to be applied to today. Instead, the Bible as a sacred text is alive and can shape the imagination of the people of God and motivate them to action. The 'world in front of the text' experienced by Latin American

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<sup>18</sup>Note the brief presentation of Croatto's biblical method with bibliography in Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 317-9.

<sup>19</sup>Croatto, *Hermenéutica bíblica*, 62.

<sup>20</sup>Liberation theologians increasingly distinguish their academic discussions from the approaches and contexts of the common people. See L. and C. Boff, *Cómo hacer teología de la liberación* (Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1986) 19-32; C. Boff, 'Epistemología y método de la Teología de la Liberación' in I. Ellacuría and J. Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium liberationis. Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación* (San Salvador: UCA, 1991) I: 91-8; J.L. Segundo, 'The Shift within Latin American Theology', *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) 67-80.

readers actively committed to liberation allows for a constructive and vital fusion of horizons:

...all this suggests that the Exodus is an event fraught with meaning, as it is indicated by the biblical account and the experience of Israel, and that it is *unconcluded*. If our reading of the biblical kerygma means anything, the “memory” of the Exodus becomes a provocative Word, an announcement of liberation for us, the oppressed peoples of the Third World... it is perfectly possible that we might understand ourselves *from* the perspective of the biblical Exodus and, above all, that we might understand the Exodus *from* the vantage point of our situation as peoples in economic, political, social, or cultural bondage.<sup>21</sup>

Although Croatto’s methodological position concerning the ‘reservoir of meaning’ should presuppose that there can be a plurality of possible readings of any biblical text, in line with the liberationist claim of the indispensability of doing theology ‘from below’ (from the perspective of the poor) he privileges a reading done in solidarity with the poor.<sup>22</sup> Though literary theory expects to witness at least some conflict of interpretations between reading communities and because of different pre-understandings, Croatto asserts that a proper interpretation of the biblical account is possible only from the particular social situation of the poor. Because of God’s option for the oppressed, *relecturas* (‘re-readings’) of the good news must come from the poor, to whom the Bible ‘pertains’ and to whom its words are most ‘pertinent’.<sup>23</sup> That is to say, Croatto has moved beyond

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<sup>21</sup>Croatto, *Exodus*, 14-5.

<sup>22</sup>For discussion and bibliography of this orientation to reading the Bible in Latin American liberation theology, see Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 109-12. Recent important sources not mentioned there include L. and C. Boff, *op. cit.*; C. Boff and G.V. Pixley, *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, (ET; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); C. Rowland and M. Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (London: SPCK, 1990); C. Boff, *art. cit.*

<sup>23</sup>See especially Croatto, *Exodus*, 81-2; *Hermenéutica bíblica*, 66-9; ‘La relevancia sociohistórica y hermenéutica del éxodo’, 161-4.

offering alternative readings from the ‘underside of history’ to a universal claim of interpretative principle.

Whereas Gutiérrez helps surface crucial theological questions about history in Latin America, Croatto’s hermeneutic raises issues about the power of the biblical texts, textual method, and how communities read the scripture. The next section interacts with Croatto in order to clarify some fundamental hermeneutical points before moving on to set methodological parameters for our own reading of Amos. The reading of that prophetic text will provide the foundation for responding to the theological points proposed by Gutiérrez.

### **III. Methodological Options for a Literary Reading**

#### **1. Textual Impact**

The first topic alluded to above regarding Croatto’s approach—that is, the continuing power of the biblical text to impact the horizon of the believing community today—echoes much recent literary theory. Many today appreciate that the authority of the biblical text, at least to some degree, can be considered functional:<sup>24</sup> this sacred book shapes readers by displaying the identity and activity of God, as well as the identity and patterns of life and worship demanded of those who believe in his name; it also pictures a world that impinges on the present, thus shaping the understanding of reality. The explosion of biblical studies in the Two Thirds World is testimony to this textual reality: the Bible is alive around the globe.

Theoretical constructs not employed by Croatto reinforce the notion of the transforming potential of the Bible. Thiselton, for instance, has written extensively on how the horizons of the text and of readers of the community of faith merge by tracing the

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<sup>24</sup>I have dealt with the issue of the functional authority of scripture in *Contexts for Amos*, 140-9. A full discussion of biblical authority would necessarily involve topics concerned with ontology, not simply function, which are beyond the scope of this essay. That is why I say here ‘at least to some degree’. Within the evangelical community there exists a spectrum of belief on these topics, although all parties hold to a high view of the Bible as scripture.

philosophical and theological development of the notion of this fusion of horizons.<sup>25</sup> More recently he has focused on the value of speech-act theory as a helpful framework from which to comprehend this interaction.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, speech-act theory demands more careful thinking through of issues relating reader and text which will be mentioned below.

Studies in the area of how the biblical text affects the imagination of the individual reader and of the Church is also a fruitful avenue to pursue. In Old Testament circles the name Walter Brueggemann is usually associated with the capacity of the Bible to work in several ways on the imagination:<sup>27</sup> the realistic worlds offered within the biblical material help mould thinking about the nature of the believing community, as well as communicate an alternative vision of what life and society should be like now and what they can be like in the future. But Brueggemann's interest in the context of the reader is not limited to the Bible's influence on the context, but also concentrates on the role of the present context in the reading of the text. He appreciates the post-modern hermeneutical reality of what he labels 'perspectivism', where different reading strategies and interpretations compete to have a voice. He is committed especially to local and contextual approaches that can break hegemonic claims about how the Bible should be read.

These new ways of looking at life and the Bible he finds freeing, and, at first glance, one could think that in Brueggemann Croatto has found an ally. Perhaps in reality he has, but I want to apply Brueggemann's concern regarding hegemonic interpretations

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<sup>25</sup>A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>26</sup>*Idem*, 'Reader-Response Hermeneutics, Action Models, and the Parables of Jesus' in R. Lundin, A.C. Thiselton, and C. Walhout (eds.), *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 79-113 (esp. 107-13); *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 272-312.

<sup>27</sup>Brueggemann has developed this perspective in various publications over the last two decades. An early example is *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

within North America to the hermeneutical situation in Latin America. Brueggemann has recently argued that in the United States the predominant approaches to comprehending life and the Bible no longer work. Christian communities, he says, need a new story, a new vision of reality. His target is what he perceives as the controlling points of view of the white, male colonialism of the West. If one sets aside his particular agenda, however, it is possible to see that aspects of his uneasiness can be applied to liberation hermeneutics within the Latin context. For several years for certain audiences the liberation orientation has held sway as the best manner by which to grasp the movement of history, the acts of God, and the mission of the Christian Church on the continent. But the Latin American world is a now a very different place, and those ideals seem out of step with our societies, both present and future. A different comprehension is required, another reading of the biblical text called for in order to reorient the imagination of the people of God in Latin America. To quote Brueggemann:

Transformation [of the imagination] is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counterstory about God, world, neighbor, and self. This slow, steady process has as counterpoint the subversive process of unlearning and disengaging from a story we find no longer to be credible or adequate.<sup>28</sup>

To question the viability of the liberation paradigm is not to deny that there are not other inappropriate hegemonic approaches to the Bible on the Latin American continent. There are, and of many stripes. It is simply to engage this one in conversation and to suggest a *relectura* of the biblical text which might unleash the power of the scripture in new ways.

## **2. Textual Study**

In order to do contextual biblical study, it is necessary to be clear about which text is going to be read. Croatto speaks of biblical

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<sup>28</sup>W. Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 24-5.

traditions such as the Exodus and does do detailed work in particular passages, yet at the same time he often bases his conclusions on theories about the hypothetical process of redactions of the canonical shape. It is our conviction, nevertheless, that the final form of the biblical text is the most appropriate locus for biblical study and theological reflection designed to serve the common people.

Over the last number of years, scholars have opted for the final form of the Old Testament for several reasons. For some, traditional critical methods represent ideological interests that must be rejected; for others, these methods simply have been unable to see textual coherence and literary art because of the goal of seeking earlier stages of transmission and of studying more limited portions of text. Our choice for the canonical shape is grounded in part in the pragmatic reality that, for most of the population in Latin America (that is, of those who are even literate), the only biblical text that they will ever read is the received form. To this practical admission is wedded the pastoral commitment to offer readings from that text, which is their very own Bible, that will come alive within and for their context. This decision for the final form then does not rule out the contributions of other concerns. Rather, this judgement is committed to the accessibility of the biblical text for a certain kind of reader, the common believer in Latin America.<sup>29</sup>

Our reading of Amos, therefore, will be based on the received text<sup>30</sup> and its potential impact within Latin America today.

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<sup>29</sup>See Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 143-56. G. West voices the same concerns about the 'ordinary reader' of South Africa in *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading in the South African Context* (2nd. rev. ed.; Maryknoll, Orbis, 1995) 162-215. Recently within the First World several have offered arguments for reading the canonical text for pastoral and theological reasons. Note S.E. Fowl and L.G. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture & Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); F. Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). These discussions also deal with the issue of the ideology of the final form of the text.

<sup>30</sup>For surveys of theories about the composition of the book of Amos, see R. Martin-Achard, *Amos. L'homme, le message, l'influence* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984) 52-74; A.G. Auld, *Amos* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 50-9; G.F. Hasel, *Understanding the Book of Amos: Basic Issues in Current Interpretations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 91-9.

Recent years have seen a growing number of literary approaches to Amos that reflect a wide range of concerns. Studies have been dedicated to this prophetic book as part of the Twelve,<sup>31</sup> to the book itself as a whole,<sup>32</sup> to literary features of the text,<sup>33</sup> or to portions of Amos—such as the Oracles Against the Nations, which will be the primary concern of this essay. A final form reading of Amos does not necessarily ignore the complex issues of the historical and social backgrounds of the book and the prophet,<sup>34</sup> nor, in the case of chapters one and two, does it deem unnecessary the efforts to specify the historical referents the incidents condemned in the Oracles Against the Nations or the literary origins of these oracles.<sup>35</sup> Ideally, a

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<sup>31</sup>Note the disparate approaches of H. Marks, 'The Twelve Prophets' in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987) 207-33; P.R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve* (Bible & Literature Series 27; Sheffield, Almond, 1990); J. Nogalski, *Literary Precursors of the Book of the Twelve* (BZAW 217; Berlin, de Gruyter, 1993) 74-122.

<sup>32</sup>E.g., K. Koch, *et al.*, *Amos: Untersucht mit den Methoden einer strukturalen Formgeschichte* (AOAT 30; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1976); C. Coulot, 'Propositions pour une structuration du livre d'Amos au nivel rédactionnel', *RSR* 51 (1977) 169-86; A. Spreafico, 'Amos: Struttura Formale e Spuntii per una Interpretazione', *RivBibIt* 29 (1981) 147-76; A. van der Wal, 'The Structure of Amos', *JSOT* 26 (1983) 107-13; S. Dempsey, 'The Lord is His Name: A Study of the Distribution of the Names and Titles of God in the Book of Amos', *RB* 98/2 (1991) 170-89; D.A. Dorsey, 'Literary Architecture and Aural Structuring Techniques in Amos', *Bib* 73.3 (1992) 305-30; P. Bovati and R. Meynet, *Le livre du prophete Amos. Analyse rhétorique* (Paris: Cerf, 1994); P.R. Noble, 'The Literary Structure of Amos: A Thematic Analysis' *JBL* 114 (1995) 209-26. Cf. P.R. House, 'Amos and Literary Criticism', *RevExp* 92 (1995) 175-87. For our contextualised readings, see the references in *supra*, n. 4.

<sup>33</sup>E.g., M. Chávez, *Modelo de oratoria. Obra basada en el análisis estilístico del texto hebreo del libro de Amós* (Miami: Caribe, 1979); H. Gese, 'Komposition bei Amos', *VTS* 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 74-95; J. Limburg, 'Sevenfold Structures of the Book of Amos', *JBL* 106 (1987) 217-22; Dorsey, *art. cit.*.

<sup>34</sup>For a survey of some important historical issues for the book of Amos, see Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 309-11. For a presentation of anthropological and sociological theories and their application to Amos studies, see *ibid.*, 22-47.

<sup>35</sup>For these and other related issues, see the surveys in R.E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 58-72; J. Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations: A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5* (SOTSMS 6; Cambridge: CUP, 1980); Martin-Achard, *op. cit.*, 126-42; Auld, *op. cit.*, 41-9; M.E. Polley, *Amos & the Davidic Empire: A Socio-Historical Approach* (New York: OUP, 1989) 55-82; Hasel, *op. cit.*, 57-69.

full study of the biblical text which has an eye to the relevance of the scripture for the present would integrate the insights from the different kinds of research which highlight, to use labels common in literary studies, what is ‘behind’ the text, the text itself, and the ‘world in front of the text’.<sup>36</sup> The limitations of this essay, however, necessarily confine our attention to the last two more literary and theological issues.

Related to the matter of the shape of the text to be read is that of method. There are a variety of methods available to Old Testament scholars, depending on the purposes of biblical study and the interests of the interpreter.<sup>37</sup> Although we work from within a different contextual framework and from disparate convictions, our choice is for an approach that many call ‘poetics’ and that is linked with such scholars as Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Meir Sternberg, and Harold Fisch. A full poetic reading is concerned with vocabulary, style, structure and rhetorical devices, but also takes notice of point of view, characterisation, and the projection of the world of the text.

### **3. The Community of Readers**

Readings are never totally objective. All interpretations in some fashion are influenced by the socio-cultural, religious, and academic matrix of the reader and his or her community. Liberation Theology has had a major role in bringing this issue to the fore by its conscious decision to read from a particular setting and situation—from the side of the oppressed and marginalised—and in light of a certain ideological framework. Though evangelicals rightly have been

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<sup>36</sup>W.R. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991); Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 558-62.

<sup>37</sup>J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); M.G. Brett, ‘Four or Five Things to Do with Texts: A Taxonomy of Interpretative Interests’ in D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowl, S.E. Porter (eds.), *The Bible in Three Dimensions* (JSOTS 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press), 357-77. Certain textual methods, of course, are tied to the particular kind of text form to be analysed.

concerned to defend the primacy of the authority of the Bible vis-a-vis some expressions of this hermeneutical option, the reality of pre-understandings is now accepted.<sup>38</sup>

Croatto's discussion of readings of the Bible, however, is more pointed. He would limit proper readings to the poor and to those participating with them in the struggle for liberation. On the one hand, his championing of unique readings by a particular group follows the emphasis of certain reader-response theories.<sup>39</sup> No one would deny that certain communities do offer new insights into texts and that these readings can be more appropriate to the context than those from other latitudes; it is undeniable that Third World perspectives have both enriched and challenged more traditional biblical studies. The problem lies in possible dangers arising from privileging one kind of reading over all others.

At this point, Thiselton's distinction between socio-critical and socio-pragmatic interpretations is helpful.<sup>40</sup> Socio-critical approaches, he says, rightly desire to demonstrate how biblical texts can be used in negative ways for social power and domination. At their best, socio-critical approaches are context-*conscious*, but at the same time also hold to what Thiselton calls a 'meta-critical or transcendental dimension' from which to be able to evaluate community readings. Socio-pragmatics, in contrast, propounds that truth is eminently context-*relative* and will highlight only the community's own construction of meaning.

One danger is that socio-pragmatic readings might ignore textual data incongruent with the community's stance. Liberation

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<sup>38</sup>Note the recent textbook by W.W. Klein, C.L. Blomberg, R.L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 98-116.

<sup>39</sup>For surveys, see S.R. Suleiman, 'Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism' in S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 3-45; E.V. McKnight, *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 471-555.

<sup>40</sup>Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 313-557, 587-90, 602-19 (for Latin American Liberation Theology, 411-9).

Theology has been criticised precisely at this point.<sup>41</sup> A second danger is stressed by Thiselton on the basis of speech-act theory and theological considerations: a closed reading process can make it more difficult to fully comprehend the Bible's potential multiple means of addressing the community through its language. Thus, the community cannot respond as it might to the challenge to transform interpretative interests, perspectives, and convictions. In addition, if every community were to defend its own interpretation as the proper one and as the perspective uniquely sanctioned by God, the only remaining arbitrator between competing interpretations could be forceful imposition or intimidation. This result contradicts the aspirations of readers seeking a fresh voice from God. Thiselton comments:

The problem, in this case, is that pragmatic hermeneutics is *diametrically opposed in practice* to the deepest theoretical concerns which lie behind liberation hermeneutics: those whose readings of texts win the day can only be the power groups: the most militant, the most aggressive, the most manipulative.<sup>42</sup>

Our purpose is not to evaluate Thiselton's own proposed meta-critical option,<sup>43</sup> but instead to second his stress on the importance of allowing the biblical text to speak into the community in order to transform readers and scrutinise settled interpretations. We do not presume to offer another meta-critical/socio-critical perspective as a substitute for Liberation Theology's reading from the 'underside of history', but rather hope to encourage more flexibility in readings which strive to be relevant to the Latin American context and faithful

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<sup>41</sup>Ironically, one telling example is the liberationist handling of the Exodus. Note J. Goldingay, 'The Man of War and the Suffering Servant: The Old Testament and the Theology of Liberation', *TynB* 27 (1976) 79-113; Kirk, *op. cit.*, 95-104, 147-52; N.F. Lohfink, *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in Light of the Bible* (ET; Berkeley: Bibal, 1987) 33-52; J.H. Yoder, 'Withdrawal and Diaspora: The Two Faces of Liberation' in Schipani, *op. cit.*, 76-84.

<sup>42</sup>Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 603.

<sup>43</sup>Thiselton grounds his stance in eschatology: *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 298-307, 611-9.

to the scriptures and in so doing stimulate reflection on the nature of God's involvement in history.<sup>44</sup>

This section has endeavoured to highlight three important interconnected issues for contextualised reading of the Bible: the power of the text to impact the imagination of the community of believers, the choice of the form of the biblical text and the methodology of study, and the importance of being open to the changes in perspective generated by the text. It is to the final form of the first two chapters of Amos that we now turn.

#### **IV. Amos 1 & 2, God, History, and the People of God**

The reading of the book of Amos is divided into two parts. The first concentrates on the first two chapters of that prophetic text; the second, more brief, section points out several connections between these first two chapters and the rest of the book and demonstrates how certain themes are thereby developed. This reading is selective and cannot aspire to be a complete poetic analysis. We mention only textual data pertinent to the aim of this essay in order to gain light on God's actions in history and the self-understanding of his people within that history.

##### **1. The Oracles Against the Nations**

Discussions on the Oracles Against the Nations often begin with 1:3. A literary reading, however, begins at the beginning.

The phrase 'the words of Amos' of the opening line of the title is followed by this announcement of the roar and voice of Yahweh from Zion in 1:2. This juxtaposition strongly suggests identification of the prophetic message with the communication of God. A voice from Jerusalem, however, might not be entirely expected in a message that is directed at Israel (1:2).<sup>45</sup> The fact, too,

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. my comments on 'the responsible reader' in *Contexts for Amos*, 162-75.

<sup>45</sup>Because of the mention of Zion and Jerusalem, some scholars assume that 1:2 is a late addition. Besides the commentaries, see W.H. Schmidt, 'Die deuteronomistische Redaktion des Amosbuches. Zu den theologischen Unterscheiden zwischen dem Prophetenwort und seinem Sammler', *ZAW* 77 (1965) 171-2

that the verse pictures the impact of God's speech emanating from Jerusalem as reaching unto Carmel, a site in the North, might also raise questions about Amos and his words. Was not the prophet from Tekoa in Judah?<sup>46</sup> Was this then to be a self-righteous southern nationalistic diatribe directed against Israel? To continue to read the oracles will be to have an answer to these questions.

The language of verse two is ambiguous in meaning and invites several possible interpretations as the book unfolds. On the one hand, the roar, which is the voice of Yahweh, brings devastating effects (1:2b). Carmel withers in the blast, but the pastures... do they dry up, or is it that they mourn? The parallelism of the line suggests that the verb אָבַל might be a metaphoric picture of the same natural phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> But a question lingers: if it is mourning, is there death in the offing? To cite Carmel is to say that there will be death in Israel, but is this loss the lion's doing? Is it both drought and death? On the other hand, there is the noise. Does the roar look back to the earthquake, or does it refer to what follows? Or, is it both? What does the roar signal? These intriguing lines introduce the individual oracles against the Israel's neighbours.

While 1:2 draws in the reader/listener<sup>48</sup> with openings for further clarification, the set of oracles beginning at 1:3 draws attention

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<sup>46</sup>There has been debate concerning whether Amos's Tekoa is to be located in Israel or in Judah. Those who support a northern Tekoa include S.N. Rosenbaum, 'Northern Tekoa Revisited: Two Philological Suggestions', *HebSt* 18 (1977) 132-48; *idem*, *Amos of Israel: A New Interpretation* (Macon: Mercer UP, 1990); K. Koch, *The Prophets*, Vol. I: The Assyrian Period (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 70.

<sup>47</sup>Note H.W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (ET; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 125; J.H. Hayes, *Amos the Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 64; *cf.* NEB, NIV, NRSV. S.M. Paul (*Amos* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 40) and F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman (*Amos* [New York: Doubleday, 1989] 226-8) take the verb here to be 'mourn' (*Cf.* אָבַל II, KB 6; TDOT 1:44-8); *cf.* RV.

<sup>48</sup>'Reader/listener' is used in this essay in light of both ancient and modern audiences, some of whom would read and others hear. For the Third World, which can have a high level of illiteracy, the text cannot be limited to readers. Text reception then and now, in other words, is both visual and aural. At the same time, we are not suggesting that ancient and modern readers and listeners necessarily will understand the text in like manner. For a discussion of how the text draws the reader/listener in, see Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 159-61, 279-306.

by lexical vagueness, its overall structure, and some anomalies. The lexical problem centres around ascertaining the meaning of the suffix on the verb in the first line of each denunciation (אֲשִׁיבְנֶהוּ; 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). Theories abound. The most viable options are that the suffix refers to the place or people named in the preceding colon,<sup>49</sup> the wrath of God,<sup>50</sup> the word of punishment or the punishment itself which follows,<sup>51</sup> or the voice (קוֹל) of verse two that in turn expresses itself in the judgement.<sup>52</sup> In the context each proposal makes a degree of sense and may contain an element of truth, but the only thing that is certain (at least for the modern reader/listener) is that the text is not clear. Perhaps this, too, as in the case of 1:2, is by design. Nevertheless, though the referent cannot be confidently identified, the tone surely continues as ominous. But the target has changed. Israel no longer is being singled out; the divine anger now is unleashed against Israel's neighbours.

Structurally, there is a cohesiveness to 1:3-2:16. To begin with, all of these oracles follow rhythmic patterns, even though these are of two kinds.<sup>53</sup> One set of oracles (Aram, Philistia, Ammon, and Moab) has longer chastisements and a closing formula; the other (Tyre, Edom, Judah), longer indictments and no concluding formula. Nevertheless, in spite of differences between the two sets and slight variations within each one, they have much in common: the graded

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<sup>49</sup>M.L. Barré, 'The Meaning of *l' 'sybnw* in Amos 1:3-2:6', *JBL* 105 (1986) 611-31; D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco: Word, 1987) 310; A.R. Ceresko, 'Janus Parallelism in Amos's "Oracles Against the Nations" (Amos 1:3-2:16)', *JBL* 113 (1994) 485-90. Ceresko believes that the suffix also refers to the 'fire' which follows.

<sup>50</sup>R.P. Knierim, 'I will not cause it to return' in Amos 1 and 2' in G.W. Coats and B.O. Long (eds.), *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 163-75. Cf. G.V. Smith, *Amos: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 45; NIV.

<sup>51</sup>W. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971) 129-30; Wolff, *op. cit.*, 128, 153-4; Paul, *Amos*, 46-7; J.A. Soggin, *The Prophet Amos: A Translation and Commentary* (London: SCM, 1987) 32. Cf. NEB, RV, NRSV.

<sup>52</sup>Hayes, *op. cit.*, 70-1; Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 233-7.

<sup>53</sup>These differences, along with historical and theological considerations, have led some commentators to assign the second set to a later redactor.

numerical sequence ('For three sins, and for four';  $x/x+1$ ) and certain vocabulary.<sup>54</sup> This, however, is not a static framework, as a closer look at the larger structure demonstrates.

Several recent studies have suggested different structural designs for the opening two chapters. Scholars have applied the  $x/x+1$  concept to the whole series of oracles, although now the numbers are seven and eight: Judah as the seventh of the nations might at first be expected to be the end and culmination of the list. This judgement on Judah and Jerusalem would dispel the possible early impression that Yahweh roars from Zion but not against it. Yet then the Israel passage appears, marking  $7+1$ , the ultimate climax of this table of nations.<sup>55</sup> In addition to this literary device, Shalom Paul also has shown that a concatenous pattern of repeated catchwords and phrases links each oracle to the one that follows.<sup>56</sup> I would suggest that the literary effect of the numerical sequence and the lexical associations noted by Paul is that one is continually pulled forward to the next pericope. Step-by-step, the structure moves the reader/listener to the climax at the Israel oracle. Thus, the similar framing of individual oracles, the numerical patterns, and the winding lexical thread combine to produce not only continuity but also directed movement.

Paul admits, however, that the connections are not as neat as he would like: a problem surfaces with the lexical bridge between the Edom (1:11-12) and Ammon (1:13-15) oracles. He resolves this by

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<sup>54</sup>Paul, 'Amos 1:3-2:3: A Concatenous Literary Pattern', *JBL* 90 (1971) 397-403; 'A Literary Reinvestigation of the Authenticity of the Oracles Against the Nations in Amos' in M. Carrez *et al.*, (eds.), *De la Tôrah au Messie* (Paris: Desclée, 1981) 189-204; *Amos*, 11-30; Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 202-14.

<sup>55</sup>See the works by Paul cited in the previous note, as well as Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 210-18; Limburg, *art. cit.*, 222; Dorsey, *art. cit.*, 306-8. Gese eliminates the Tyre, Edom, and Judah oracles because of critical criteria and posits that the remaining oracles reflect the book's penchant for sequences of five (*art. cit.*, 86-93). Bovati and Meynet have proposed a concentric structure for 1:3-2:16, with the centrepiece being 2:4-5 (*op. cit.*, 36-100).

<sup>56</sup>Besides the works by Paul, see the graphic presentations in Bovati and Meynet, *op. cit.*, 60, 84.

saying that the violence ‘by the sword’ of 1:11 is implicit in the ripping open of the pregnant women in 1:13. He also argues for the translation ‘his young women’ for רַחֲמָיו in 1:11 (which is usually translated by ‘his natural affections’ or an equivalent) in order to establish a conceptual bond between the female victims of Edom and Ammon.<sup>57</sup>

Even though his solution is plausible, maybe the poetics is alerting the reader/listener to a discontinuity in the series. Why seek harmonisation? Perhaps one is supposed to pause at Edom. It is interesting to observe, for instance, that the Edom pericope is the fourth oracle and that four verbal statements are used to enumerate that people’s sins. Are these textual data simply a coincidence or do they point to an initial climax within the larger series? Tyre, the third nation, has violated the ‘covenant of brothers’, a phrase most relate to a treaty between Israel and Tyre (note, e.g., 1 Ki. 5:1, 12 [5:15, 26]; 9:13; 16:31). The Edom oracle also alludes to ‘brother’, this also probably Israel (see Num. 20:14; Deut. 2:4, 23:7), but now because of uncontrolled violence. Could it be that the three/four sequence can be applied to the list of nations, not just to the rebellions committed by each country?<sup>58</sup> In addition, the repeated reference to that nation in these two chapters draws special attention to Edom: besides the malice in 1:11, this nation is involved in the trafficking of slaves in 1:6, 9; and, in a surprise turn, in 2:1 Edom’s king is now the victim. If the three/four concept can be applied to Tyre and Edom, then the second such pairing would be at the Judah and Israel oracles, a stylistic observation that would be substantiated by the longer list of sins for Judah and the expanded list of both indictments and punishments directed at Israel. This second three/four pairing also would coincide with the seven plus one frame. The numerical pattern of three/four might be more complicated, therefore, than might be appreciated at first glance.

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<sup>57</sup>Paul, ‘Amos 1:3-2:3: A Concatenous Literary Pattern’, 402-3; *idem*, *Amos*, 14-5, 64-5; Hayes, *op. cit.*, 93. Our goal here is not to resolve the lexical issue but rather simply to mention it to establish a literary point.

<sup>58</sup>This has also been noted by R.B. Chisolm, Jr., “‘For three sins... even for four’: The Numerical Saying in Amos’, *BibSac* 147 (1990) 188-97.

Further consideration of the graded numerical sequence results in the recognition that its utilisation in the book of Amos is somewhat anomalous. Usually in the three/four pattern the various condemned items are listed (*e.g.*, Prov. 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23, 29-31), but this is not the case here. In attempting to explain this deviation, some commentators have thought that the purpose is not to specify all the sins but to represent the habit of rebellion in a general sense;<sup>59</sup> others that the two numbers should be added to make seven, thus communicating the fullness of sin;<sup>60</sup> and still others that the one atrocity that is mentioned is either the worst<sup>61</sup> or the one that finally goes beyond the limits of divine patience.<sup>62</sup> What complicates some of these attempts at resolution is that in several instances more than one sin is stated. In addition to the example of Edom alluded to earlier, the oracles against Tyre (two verbal statements, 1:9), Judah (three verbal statements, 2:4), and Philistia and Ammon (infinitive construct + purpose clause, 1:6 and 1:13, respectively) all seem to indicate multiple rebellious acts. Yet here, too, complexity rears its head: it is also possible that the similarity in phraseology concerning the delivering up of communities in 1:6, 9 could imply a single project in which both the Philistines and the Phoenicians are involved with Edom.<sup>63</sup> When the reader reaches the Israel oracle, the list of sins in 2:6-8 and the consequences in 2:14-16 in fact can be interpreted as comprising two lists of seven.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps each of the first six oracles is

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<sup>59</sup>W.R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1905) 14; Stuart, *op. cit.*, 310; NEB ('crime after crime').

<sup>60</sup>Chávez, *op. cit.*, 40; Limburg, *art. cit.*, 222; Rosenbaum, *op. cit.*, 55.

<sup>61</sup>Paul, *Amos*, 27-30; Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 207, 217.

<sup>62</sup>J.L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 23-4; Wolff, *op. cit.*, 137-8; Barré, *art. cit.*, 621.

<sup>63</sup>Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 261, 276-78, 286, 290ff.

<sup>64</sup>For 2:6-8 and 2:14-16 as lists of seven, see Limburg, *art. cit.*, 219; Dorsey, *art. cit.*, 323; Paul, *Amos*, 76-7, 95; Andersen and Freedman, *op. cit.*, 218, 339-40. Chisolm would include verse 12 as part of the indictment and suggests that this could work in two ways: the list of sins would now go even beyond seven and thus communicate Israel's extreme rebellion; or, instead of listing the sins individually, one could pair them according to synonymous parallelism, thereby achieving a 3/4 pattern, with 2:12 as the fourth member (*art. cit.*, 193-4).

describing a particular atrocity with different degrees of verbal complexity, but at the same time it is possible that the text is trying in still another manner to slow the reader/listener down in order to attune sensibilities to other interlocking patterns which finally culminate in the last.

In sum, Israel is enmeshed within several entwining webs of structural devices that make it part of this world of nations and their history. Besides these *structural* connections, however, there is also *conceptual* linkage. The most obvious relates to the fact that the other nations are to suffer judgement in terms of war. On the one hand, there is death and destruction: fortresses are to be consumed by fire (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5), city gates torn down (1:5), peoples and kings sent into exile (1:5, 15), and the civil population and leaders killed (1:5, 8; 2:2-3). On the other hand, the shouts and trumpet blasts of battle (1:14; 2:2) remind the reader/listener of the lion's roar of 1:2 and establishes at least some tie between that divine voice and the noise of armed conflict. With the description of Israel's devastating military defeat in 2:14-16 going into even greater detail than the previous oracles, the people of God are emphatically included in this history of war.

A more complex connection lies in the notion of the victim. It is interesting to observe the lack of detail in the first two chapters in regards to the targets of aggression. Only in 1:3, 13 is a place name mentioned, Gilead, and this is part of Israel's territory. The allusion to 'brother' in 1:9, 11 probably is a reference to Israel as well. The oracles against the Philistines and Tyre would incline the reader/listener to fill in the lacking information gap by self-identification with the victims, especially if there is the possibility of linking these two with Edom. The people of God, therefore, are the victims of unspeakable cruelty and the expropriation of land by five other nations. Barton has suggested that Israel would follow the prophetic argument by agreeing with assumptions about rules of war, and it has been said earlier that Israel would follow the 3/4 and 7/8 patterning. Here we add a literary argument about the text's vagueness: this open text draws the reader/listener into its world by a self-identifying process.

What makes the impact of this literary effect more powerful is the exceptional case of the burning of the king of Edom's bones by Moab in 2:1. The invader of Gilead and the trafficker in human flesh (1:6, 9, 11) has also been a victim and will be again when chastised by Yahweh (1:12). Israel, in other words, cannot monopolise the justice of God; they are not the only victims within the cruelties of human history. In a perverse twist of divine calling, the people of God oppress the weak within their own borders (2:6-8):<sup>65</sup> now the victim has become the victimiser. What is more, another invasion lies still ahead for Israel (2:14-16): as with Edom, the victimiser once more will be the victim, and this too by God's direct hand. Israel's particular history is turned on its head. This powerless people who in the past had enjoyed divine intervention in liberation from Egypt, the military defeat of an extraordinary enemy, the Amorites, and the gracious provision in the wilderness (2:9-10)<sup>66</sup> has violated its own and now faces another divine intervention in a military attack against them. Self-identification has become self-indictment.

In one sense, history within Amos 1 & 2 is indeed of a single piece. All of the nations, even Israel, participate in the harsh realities of ambition, exploitation, war, and cruelty. On this world stage all are interrelated by the movements of armies and populations; their past and their destinies are interconnected. There is a common flow

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<sup>65</sup>For surveys of interpretations of the social and religious violations of 2:6-8, see especially J.L. Sicre, *Con los pobres de la tierra. La justicia social en los profetas de Israel* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1984) 102-15, 141-68; H.M. Barstad, *The Religious Polemics of Amos: Studies in the Preaching of Am. 2,7B-8; 4,1-13; 5,1-27; 6,4-7; 8,14* (VTS 34; Leiden: Brill, 1984) 11-36; G. Fleischer, *Von Menschenverkäufern, Baschankühen und Rechtsverkehrern. Die Sozialkritik des Amosbuches in historisch-kritischer, sozialgeschichtlicher und archäologischer Perspektive* (BBB 74; Frankfurt: Athenäum Monographien, 1989).

<sup>66</sup>Some scholars have taken this passage as secondary because of the change from third to second person, the reversal in the traditional sequence between 2:9 and 10, and the language. *E.g.*, Harper, *op. cit.*, 53-5; Schmidt, *art. cit.*, 178-83; Vermeylen, *op. cit.*, 537-9; Wolff, *op. cit.*, 112-3, 141-2, 169-71; Soggin, *op. cit.*, 50-1. Others respond that the reversal in order is due to the chiasmic structure—Amorites (v. 9), exodus-wilderness (v. 10a, b), Amorite (v. 10c)—which stylistically focuses upon the divine grace of the exodus liberation.

evident not only in the process of sin and defeat, but also in the ironic reversals. The God of this history is a god of absolute power and shocking actions within the confusing intricacies of the history of nations. Within this complexity and ambiguity Yahweh has spoken through his appointed messengers and representatives whom he has raised up from among his people, but Israel has silenced these voices (2:11-12).<sup>67</sup> How can this people have understood God or the nature and meaning of history, and his role and their placement within it? Can they ‘read’ a history of reversals and come to grips with their complicity in its contradictions? Now Yahweh roars from Jerusalem and the voice, reinforced by the various speech formulas repeated time and time again in these two chapters, communicates to his people that he is speaking anew into their history.

## 2. Developments within the Rest of the Book

A number of issues arising in the first two chapters in this prophetic text reappear in the following chapters. We will mention only three in very succinct fashion.

First, the announcements of war, massive loss of human life, and exile that appear in all of the remaining chapters fill out the picture of military disaster described at the end of chapter two.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, as the reader/listener moves through the book, there is no longer any doubt about the roar of 1:2 being that of a lion that destroys and consumes its victim Israel. Moreover, in chapter three this lion roars apparently after having captured its prey (3:4, 8, 12).<sup>69</sup> To reread the opening verses in light of these suggests that the roar from Jerusalem ultimately announces death, and is not just a warning of judgement. This impression is strengthened by noting that the uses in the rest of text of the verb אָבַל, which was also ambiguous in 1:2,

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<sup>67</sup>Bovati and Meynet place these verses at the centre of a concentric structure that they propose for 2:6-16 (*op. cit.*, 73-92). From this point of view this rejection is the primary point of the oracle.

<sup>68</sup>For development of these themes, see Carroll R., ‘The Prophetic Text and the Literature of Dissent in Latin America’ and ‘Reflecting on War and Utopia in the Book of Amos’.

<sup>69</sup>Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 186-91, 197.

picture the mourning throughout the country for the dead (5:16; 8:8, 10; 9:5).

Second, the theme of the complexity and reversals in history is amplified. The Exodus, for instance, is used in unexpected ways. In 3:1-2 this tradition is not the basis of assurance and hope but of judgement. These lines repeat the idea that Israel's history and their experience of divine intervention truly has been different,<sup>70</sup> but also that their future cannot be separated from the broader stream of common judgement. The text keeps returning to this tradition, only to underline its surprising reversal. In 3:9 Egypt, the oppressor of the Exodus, is now called to witness the sins of Samaria; in 4:10 Yahweh declares that Israel already has experienced the plagues of Egypt but that they still must await his passing through their midst, so echoing the account of the angel of death (5:17; Ex. 11:4, 12:12); in 8:8 Israel is likened to the Nile itself. Finally, in yet another surprising but different turn, Exodus language is extended in 9:7 to include other peoples, among them the Philistines and the Arameans, two of the enemies of the Oracles against the Nations (1:3-8). What could this vocabulary mean? Does it reveal divine involvement in the histories of nations and in the migration of populations, even of the enemies of the people of God? Or, is the text saying that Yahweh has liberated others from oppression, even those who know him not, just as he did for Israel in Egypt, and that there is no true difference between the people of God and the other nations? But surely the second option is too simplistic. No 'liberation' is a guarantee of continued favour, as the reversals of the tradition for Israel in the book itself attest, and Aram's 'exodus' is already declared reversed, as it will now return to Kir (1:5). In light of 3:1-2 and 9:12, the better option perhaps is the notion of sovereign intervention in the course of history, but questions linger: how? why? when? What does this signify for the

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<sup>70</sup>These lines pick up the Exodus theme of 2:9-10. Some suggest that the section encompassing the Oracles against the Nations extends to 3:1-2 for this very reason. See J. DeWaard and W.A. Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook of Amos: Helps for Translators* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1979) 58, 193. Others extend the connection to 3:8: Vermeylen, *op. cit.*, 520-8; van der Wal, *art. cit.*; Noble, 'The Literary Structure of Amos', 218-23.

understanding of the character of God and his concern for the details of international politics?

The greatest reversal comes with the closing lines, 9:11-15.<sup>71</sup> This passage presents national reconstruction after the destruction and loss of life of the previous chapters. Pertinent to our discussion is the appearance of Edom and the phrase 'all the nations' in verse 12. Edom, the one people most cited in the opening chapters, is singled out here in a message of hope, and it along with 'all the nations' (in context, the nations of the book), will bear the name of Yahweh.<sup>72</sup> They will be his in a new world of peace and plenty.

This new relationship distinguishes what has gone on before between Yahweh and the nations. As in 3:1-2, there is a difference between the rest of the nations and the people he calls his own. This distinction is grounded in purifying judgement (for it is the 'remnant of Edom') and a call to his person. The future, therefore, is so unlike the present pain, but that new horizon is not just a liberation from the disasters of the past and the soon-coming invasion, and it is more than the experience of abundance and the end of war. There is no separating historical destiny from the realm of the spirit. There is now grounds for a broader understanding of the people of God.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the difficulty at 2:11-12 that God's people do not often listen to his words is reconfirmed in the following chapters. False readings of history and national realities (4:6-11; 6:13), hollow hopes (5:18-20), self-deluding confidence (6:1-3;<sup>74</sup> 9:10), and

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<sup>71</sup>So sharp is the contrast with the rest of the book that many scholars have denied their authenticity. For surveys of interpretative positions, see Martin-Achard, *Amos*, 63-70; Hasel, *op. cit.*, 105-20. One of the reasons for rejecting these verses is the mention of Edom in verse 12.

<sup>72</sup>In 9:12 Andersen and Freedman (*op. cit.*, 890) take the *waw* on וְכָל as resumptive in order to offer a plural subject for the verb (וַיִּירָשׁוּ); thereby Israel and the nations will possess the remnant of Edom. On another point, we would suggest that this possession of the nations is distinct from the possession by conquest in 2:10 (*cf.* Carroll R., 'Reflecting on War and Utopia in the Book of Amos').

<sup>73</sup>*Cf.* Charles H.H. Scobie, 'Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology', *TynB* 43.2 (1992) 283-305.

<sup>74</sup>For this interpretation of 6:1-3, see Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 254-7.

politico-religious ambitions and jealousies (7:10-17), as well as abuses at the cult and in society, all blind the mind and make it impossible to comprehend what God is like and to discern where he is in history and where history itself is going. The complications and surprises of human history are misunderstood and misinterpreted by his people, and sometimes in fatal ways.

## V. Conclusion

The text of Amos emphasises the untidiness of history, its problematic cruelty and the knotty issues of knowing how to understand its flow and direction when the people of God are immersed in its turbulence. I am not equipped to offer here a theology of God in history.<sup>75</sup> What follows are a few reflections from the Latin American context that have been stimulated by being drawn into the world of this book by its intricate and captivating poetics. These thoughts respond to the three issues raised by Gutiérrez.

This prophetic text teaches that history and God's role within it cannot be reduced to a neat liberation paradigm. On the one hand, with reference to Gutiérrez's initial point, the book of Amos does communicate that human history is one. That is, the people of God indeed are entangled within the world of nations. At the same time, however, the text also clearly points out that there is still a distinction to be made between every people of the world and those that are called by his name, whether in the present or in the future. The people of God live and move in human history but still in some sense are a unique entity.

Second, this book demonstrates that the convulsions of history cannot be so easily harmonised with the liberationist

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<sup>75</sup>For helpful discussions of the issues, see J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1981) 66-96; *idem*, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994) 304-10; J.W. Rogerson, 'Progressive Revelation: Its History and its Value as a Key to Old Testament Revelation', *Epworth Review* 9 (1982) 73-86; 'Can a Doctrine of Providence Be Based on the Old Testament?' in *Ascribe to the Lord* (JSOTS 67; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 529-43.

optimistic linear view of history. Interestingly, liberation theologians have begun to re-examine their positions after a chain of recent events that have made them hard to sustain. For example, the Nicaraguan priest Uriel Molina was at a loss to explain the election loss of the Sandinistas in 1990. If God was with the people and if the Revolution had understood itself also as of the people, he wonders, what had gone wrong?<sup>76</sup> Phillip Berryman has recently looked back over the last twenty years of the failed or aborted efforts of the Left in Chile, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and declares that what counts now is patient day-to-day work at the local pastoral level. He recognises that even the much publicised Base Communities of Liberation Theology never represented more than one or two percent of the population.<sup>77</sup> Hugo Assmann admits the demise of socialism and calls for liberationists to confess their past short-sightedness and overconfidence and to come grips with the realities of a world market economy.<sup>78</sup>

All of these theologians continue to be committed to basic liberation themes, such as the option for the poor and that God is a god of life,<sup>79</sup> but what appears to be changing is their view of history. Perhaps with the appreciation of the limitations of the liberationist vision of our continent's history and of God's involvement in it, another more guarded and humble perspective is called for. The prophetic text must illumine the view of history; and even as it complicates our vision it can push us to a more realistic grasp of contemporary life. John Goldingay's words to Liberation Theology are appropriate to all who reflect upon history in our context:

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<sup>76</sup>U. Molina, 'Dios, el proceso revolucionario y las elecciones del 25 de febrero de 1990', *RIBLA* 7 (1990) 113-20.

<sup>77</sup>P. Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994). Cf. Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos*, 137-9.

<sup>78</sup>H. Assmann, 'Teología de la liberación: mirando hacia el frente', *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 34 (1995) 93-111.

<sup>79</sup>Note P. Richard, 'Teología de la liberación: futuro difícil pero posible' in P.E. Arns et al., *Teología y liberación: perspectivas y desafíos. Ensayos en torno a la obra de Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Lima: CEP, 1989) I:267-81; *idem*, 'Challenges to Liberation Theology in the Decade of the Nineties' in G. Cook (ed.), *New Face of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 245-58.

Liberation Theology insists that '*human* events must be deciphered as the locale of *God's* revelation.' But such events are of ambiguous significance and illustrate the way in which history only becomes revelatory as it leads to renewed study of scripture and renewed insight emerging from scripture. In interpreting anything we inevitably begin from our own situation and move from there to the text we wish to understand. But that point should not be made so sharply as to resolve the dialectic relationship between scripture and history. As well as the movement from perceiving God's activity in current events to understanding scripture better, there is a complementary movement from deepening our study of scripture to gaining clearer insight on God's activity in current events.<sup>80</sup>

In light of this prophetic text, it is paramount for the people of God to admit their inability to fully comprehend history. Perhaps what those of us in Latin America can say is that God is in our history, even though we cannot always understand its direction nor the reasoning of his sovereign control. But maybe this acknowledgement of his presence in the reversals and contradictions of these times in Latin America is enough. Perspectives need reshaping: it is no longer viable to lament that we are but victims on the periphery of world history, Gutiérrez's third point, when there is so much sin in our own midst. The confession of his presence also must not be confused with his advocacy of a political option or popular movement, as he is also judge and exposes the complacency of those who too easily define the nature of his interventions and intentions. The acknowledgement of his presence must be founded upon the desire to pursue holiness and truth in order to avoid the blindness of sin and the temptation of self-gratifying but empty ritualism. Yahweh seeks proper worship as well as justice. In Latin America we must hope for a different world, not only of peace and food when often we have so little of either, but also for a world where nations have been transformed because they have been called by the name of the Lord Yahweh.

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<sup>80</sup>Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 310.