Amos 4:1 and the Cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria: A Reappraisal

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In Amos 4:1, a Tekoa sheepherder and fig-dresser-turned-prophet introduces a judgment speech with a forceful call to account. Verse 1 may be analyzed as a strophe of five lines:

1a שמעו המר הזה
1b פרות הבשן אשר בחר שמרון
1c הנסקות דלם
1d הרצותי אבונים
1e האמרתם לאזרניים비용א נשתה:

1a Hear this word,
1b O cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria,
1c the ones who oppress the poor,
1d the ones who crush the needy,
1e the ones who say to their lords, “Bring so that we may drink!”

With this opening verse, two issues immediately arise: (1) how to understand “cows” in v. 1b, and (2) how to understand the demand for drinks in v. 1e. I will argue that the phrase “cows of Bashan” refers to the elite women of Samaria and that the demand that they make of “their lords” is part of an overall characterization of these women as perpetrators of injustice (v. 1c-e). Specifically, I contend that in v. 1e, the prophet is accusing these women of attempting to overturn the pre-

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vailing patriarchal social order, which Amos understood to be the mechanism by which social stability and justice were maintained.

The mixture of masculine and feminine forms in the verse has led many interpreters, beginning with the Targum, to understand “cows” to refer to the elite citizens of Samaria, male and female, who conspire with their rulers (בָּשַׁל) (“their lords”) to plunder the poor.² A related view goes back to Jerome and understands this image to identify the nobles or leading male citizens of Samaria, with many regarding the comparison to cows as a feminizing insult. Of those adopting this view, most take נאחזים (“to their lords”) to refer to the nobles of Samaria and/or the king and נָשׁוֹת (“so that we may drink”) to relate to mutual feasting on spoil seized from the poor.³

More recently, a third view has understood פרְּרַת הָבְשִׁשׁ (“cows of Bashan”) to refer to all of the inhabitants of the city of Samaria and נָאחזים (“to their lords”) to the deities venerated by them. This view has been developed most fully by Hans M. Barstad, who initially understood the verse to refer to a baalistic version of the new year festival. Later, on the basis of the reference to drinking in the passage, he modified his view to argue that the context was a baalistic marzēah.⁴


⁴ Hans M. Barstad, “Die Basankuhre in Amos 4 1,” VT 25 (1975) 286-97, here 293, and later 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 (VTSup 34, Leiden Brill, 1984) 37-47 A J. Williams (“A Further Suggestion about Amos 4 1-3,” VT 29 [1979] 206-11) sees a cultic setting here by understanding the term “Bashan” (בָּשַׁל) to be a pun for the common Semitic term for “serpent” or “dragon” (בָּשַׁל). Consequently, he suggests that the passage might criticize the people of Samaria for being as rebellious as the chaos monster. In the face of biblical passages that identify Bashan as a source of fine pasture and livestock, Williams’s attempts to connect בָּשַׁל with the chaos monster are unnecessary John D W Watts’s suggestion (“A Critical Analysis of Amos 4 1ff.,” SBL 1972 Seminar Papers, 489-500, here 489-93) that the passage refers to syncretistic Baal rites relies on excising אֲבָא (v 1b), אֲבָא בֵּר (1c), אֲבָא לִבְּלָם (v 1d) as secondary, he offers no explanation of why drinking must be understood as ritual and connected with the veneration of this particular deity
Barstad identifies the “cows of Bashan” with the population of Samaria as a whole by pointing to what he describes as the “formal agreement” between הרשבים ב羴 vard (3:12) and the earlier phrase אשר בורר משמרות (4:1) and the earlier phrase מַעַרְתָּ בְּשֵׁמָּרָה ֵאָשֶׁר בּוֹרֶר (3:12), where all Israel is in view. In addition, he notes that at Ugarit the term ’adn could be used in reference to a deity and from this argues for a cultic understanding of the phrase בָּהֶר מַעַרְתָּ in Amos 4:1e. To this basic argument he adds that the determinative בָּהֶר may also be an allusion to Baal worship, given the fact that the Baal cult was associated with mountains. Barstad suggests also that mythological traditions underlie the use of “Bashan” in Psalms 22 and 68 and that this too suggests a cultic context for Amos 4:1.

Barstad’s view is problematic for at least five reasons. First, his understanding of “cows of Bashan” as a reference to all the inhabitants of Samaria depends on the presence of a formal parallel between Amos 4:1 and 3:12. Such a connection is hampered, however, by the fact that 3:12 has proved notoriously difficult to translate. For this reason, it is difficult to speak with confidence about “formal agreement” and to use this to define the terms in 4:1. Second, although the term אָלָל (“lord”) can refer to deities, this does not require a cultic interpretation for בָּהֶר מַעַרְתָּ in Amos 4:1e since (as will be demonstrated below) the term בָּהֶר is used most often in the Hebrew Bible simply to identify a social superior. Third, the connection Barstad sees between the term בָּהֶר and Baal worship is tenuous. The most obvious meaning of this phrase in Amos 4:1 is as a geographical point of reference, as all of the occurrences of the phrase outside of the present context demonstrate (1 Kgs 16:24; Jer 31:5; Amos 3:9; 6:1). Fourth, Barstad’s efforts to identify Bashan as a center of cultic activity are unconvincing. As Gunther Fleischer and Gary V. Smith have noted, there is no evidence that Bashan was in particular a center of Baal worship. To the contrary, references in the Hebrew Bible to “Bashan” are typically mundane; most often the term figures as a detail in narrative texts (e.g., Num 21:33), as a point in geographical lists (e.g., Josh 13:30), or as a region renowned as a source of timber or fine livestock (e.g., Deut 32:14; Isa 2:13; Jer 50:19; Mic 7:14; Nah 1:4; Zech 11:2). Even in Ps 22:13 (Eng. 12), where Barstad detects “old mythological traditions,” it is more likely that “bulls of Bashan” is simply used as a superlative describing the strength of the psalmist’s enemies. Likewise, in the case of Ps 68:16-17 (Eng. 15-16) Bashan is not “described in mythological terms” as much as it is personified as envious that the

5 Barstad, Religious Polemics of Amos, 40-41
6 Ibid., 38
7 Ibid., 40 On the difficulties associated with translating 3:12, see Gary V Smith, Amos A Commentary (Library of Biblical Interpretation, Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1989) 122-23
less formidable Mount Zion was chosen as home to the god of Israel. Even John L. McLaughlin, who agrees with Barstad’s view that 4:1 contains an allusion to the marzēah, argues that nothing suggests that the worship of non-Yahwistic deities is in view. Fifth, of the twenty-six occurrences of the term מזרזא in the Hebrew Bible, not one occurs in a non-Yahwistic cultic context, a fact that seriously undermines the claim that here the term identifies a population engaged in idolatry. In fact, where bovine imagery does appear in a non-Yahwistic cultic context, it is as the object of veneration itself, and the term used is a different one, לֶלֶל (“calf”).

By far the most common approach to Amos 4:1 has been to identify the “cows of Bashan” with the wealthy women of Samaria and to understand the image itself as an insult to the women so described. According to this view, these women oppress the poor and demand that their “lords” or “husbands” fetch them drinks. As noted above, a challenge for this position is the mixture of masculine and feminine forms in the passage. If the prophet’s speech is directed to women, why does the verse begin with a masculine plural imperative (ים Yönetות, שמות), and why do do לא ירדו (v. 1), and why do do לא ת㐫ו (v. 2) all bear masculine plural pronominal suffixes? Most interpreters explain the masculine plural imperative by the tendency of Biblical Hebrew to prefer masculine verbs in initial position. The initial masculine

9 Barstad, Religious Polemics of Amos, 38.
11 This term is used particularly where idolatry in the north is condemned (Exod 32:4-5, 8, 19-20, 24-35; 2 Kgs 12:28, 32; 2 Chr 11:15).
plural imperative might be explained also by the character of the verse as the introduction to a public address. Given that the masculine plural in Hebrew can refer to both genders, if the prophet were making a public declaration, then the masculine might be used to call all of the citizens to attention even if only females were to be singled out for condemnation. On the difficulty of the masculine plural pronominal suffixes, Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman suggest that their presence alongside the feminine forms in v. 2b “suggests complementarity.” Beyond this, it should be observed that the crimes of the women of Samaria result in the covenant punishment of defeat and exile, which will affect the entire population. It should be no surprise, therefore, that it is at precisely this point that the masculine suffixes come into view—both men and women will be led out of the ruined city and into captivity. A greater problem is the third masculine plural suffix ...ןל_DURATION ומכות. William Rainey Harper and BHS resolve this difficulty by suggesting that the suffix be changed to feminine. This approach, however, has the drawback of being both arbitrary and without support in the textual tradition. McLaughlin’s solution is simpler and more attractive, noting with GKC that Hebrew sometimes uses “a masculine pronoun where a feminine one is expected.”

If the presence of masculine and feminine forms of v. 1 can be explained based on rhetorical necessity and the commonly understood principles of Hebrew grammar and syntax, then the views that identify the cows as the men of Samaria or the men and women of Samaria are left without a motivating basis. Even if one stands with the majority of interpreters, however, in seeing the cows as referring to the elite women of Samaria, interpretative difficulties remain. First, is the identification of the women of Samaria with “cows of Bashan” intended positively or negatively? Second, to whom does הנל(Duration) refer, and how should the condemnation regarding drinking be understood? It is to these questions that I now turn.

I. The Use of Cow Imagery for Women

If the phrase פירות הבשש עלреш בחר שפריר ("cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria") refers to the elite women of Samaria, as the majority of interpreters maintain, is this identification a positive or negative one? For readers raised in a culture obsessed with dieting or familiar with the use of “cow” in contemporary British slang, the use of פירות פירות with reference to women in Amos 4:1 sounds decidedly negative. As a few commentators have noted, however, the application of an

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15 Harper, Amos, 86.
16 McLaughlin, Marzēah, 111, citing GKC §135o and its attendant examples. See also Soggin, Prophet Amos, 67; Shalom M. Paul, Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 129; and Garrett, Amos, 108.
animal image to a human being is not in and of itself a negative thing in the Hebrew Bible. What is of importance is the nature of the comparison. In Song of Songs, for example, the male figure uses images drawn from the animal world to describe the beauty of his lover. The description of the woman’s hair as being like “a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead” (Song 4:1; 6:5) conveys the idea of youthful beauty—her hair being long, full, and dark, rather than thin and grey. Similarly, the statement that the woman’s teeth are “like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing; each has its twin—not one of them is alone” (Song 4:2; 6:6 NIV) relates that this woman is beautiful in part because her teeth are white and that she indeed retains all of her teeth.

In addressing the question of the identification of women with “cows,” most interpreters have overlooked the obvious association of beauty and bovine imagery found in the figure of the Egyptian goddess Hathor. From the third to the first millennium B.C.E., Hathor was venerated in Egypt and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, being identified with the “Lady of Byblos” (باطل گبل) and having a temple in the Sinai. The images of the goddess on mirror handles, references to her in love poetry, and her titles “mistress of the vulva” and “mistress of love” all attest to her character as a deity of love and beauty. In the Greek world she was identified with Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The fact that Hathor was commonly depicted with bovine features demonstrates that being likened to a cow was not on its face an insult in the ancient world but a comparison that could actually convey the idea of beauty.

As others have noted, fatness in the ancient world was not regarded in the same way as it is in weight-conscious North America. In a society such as ancient Israel, where subsistence farming was widespread and life depended on the unpredictability of the seasonal rains, an ample figure spoke of stability and affluence and a thin figure suggested poverty. In such a cultural context, the lover in Song

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17 Sanderson, “Amos,” 221, Limburg, Hosea–Amos, 99, Garrett, Amos, 107
18 For reasons that are unclear, the idea of perfection in beauty could be conveyed by likening a woman to a dove (לטאת) (Song 2 14, 5 2, 6 9) Richard S Hess (Song of Songs [Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005] 96) sees this image as conveying the inaccessible character of the woman.
19 C J Bleeker, Hathor and Thoth Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion (Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to Numen 26, Leiden: Brill, 1973) 25, 39-42
20 Hathor could be depicted in several ways. In human or bovine form, the goddess is often pictured wearing a headdress featuring two horns surrounding a sun disk. In human form, she is also depicted with cow’s ears and wearing the distinctive “Hathor wig” (Bleeker, Hathor, 22, 30-34, cf plates I, II)
of Songs could flatter his lover with the words “your belly is like a mound of wheat” (Song 7:3 [Eng. 2]), a compliment not often heard in conversation today.

The likelihood that the depiction of the women of Samaria as cows is a positive idea is further conveyed by the fact that the term פירות is accompanied by the modifier הבשים. If the prophet merely wished to condemn the women with a crass comparison to animals, then פירות alone might have sufficed. The addition of הבשים, however, identifies a cow of the finest quality, as Deut 32:14; Ps 22:13 (Eng. 12); and Ezek 39:18 imply and as many commentators have recognized.22 The use of the modifier “of Bashan” then, may be understood as a superlative that identifies these women as occupying the top tier of society. Leading with such a compliment has the effect of capturing the attention of the prophet’s intended audience.

If this identification is indeed a compliment, however, it does not remain so for long. As cows, these women are destined for slaughter, to be forcibly led out through ruined city walls and off into captivity.23 Such a dramatic shift in value is in keeping with the rhetorical strategy adopted elsewhere in Amos. In the oracles against the nations (1:3–2:5), for example, the prophet grabs the attention of his northern audience through a series of prophetic utterances in which he condemns their enemies. Having cunningly enticed his audience into condemning the various acts perpetrated by these nations, the prophet then turns in 2:6 to spring a rhetorical trap—accusing the people of the northern kingdom of many of the acts they have just identified as worthy of condemnation. In 4:1-3, the prophet uses the word פירות in a similar way, initially to grab attention through flattery and then to highlight the destruction that awaits his audience.

II. The Identity of פירות

A second question revolves around how the term פירות should be understood. Most scholars have taken this term to refer to either the royal administration in Samaria or the husbands of the women condemned in the passage. As many have noted, however, the term פירות is an unexpected choice if “husbands” is

22 James L. Mays, Amos: A Commentary (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 72; Jan de Waard and William A. Smalley, A Translator’s Handbook on the Book of Amos (Helps for Translators; New York: United Bible Societies, 1979) 77; Martin-Achard and Re’emi, Amos and Lamentations, 33; Andersen and Friedman, Amos, 421; Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, 84; Paul, Amos, 128-29; Limburg, Hosea–Amos, 99; Jeremias, Amos, 63; Smith, Hosea, Amos, Micah, 287; Sweeney, Twelve Prophets, 225; Garrett, Amos, 107. Bashan is identified as a place of well-watered pastureland in Jer 50:19; Mic 7:14; and Nah 1:4.

23 A vivid and contemporaneous illustration of this image is found in the Lachish reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh, in which emaciated cattle are depicted being led out of the fallen city along with its enslaved citizens (South-West Palace of Sennacherib, Room 36, panel 9). Excellent photographs of these reliefs are available for viewing at www.britishmuseum.org.
intended, the more common term being בּוּלֵל. This fact is used by Barstad to argue that in using the less common term יִשָּׂרָאֵל, the author is intending to point toward non-Yahwistic deities—this despite the fact that the term never seems to be used this way in the Hebrew Bible. In any event, such a polemic against non-Yahwistic deities would be atypical of Amos, who, unlike his contemporary Hosea, seems assiduously to avoid discussion of idolatry in favor of maintaining a single-minded focus on the issue of justice. Only once in the book does the prophet unambiguously address the issue of idolatry (6:26-27), a fact that pairs well with the total absence of the term בּוּלֵל in the book. Given Amos’s overarching interest, the absence of בּוּלֵל in 4:1 is to be expected, since introducing it as a term for “husband” would hold the potential to create confusion with the storm deity who could be designated by the same root. Substituting the term יִשָּׂרָאֵל has the benefit of avoiding this confusion altogether.

Amos’s use of יִשָּׂרָאֵל at this point also has the benefit of being more inclusive than בּוּלֵל. The term לְיִשָּׂרָיִם (“to their lords”) is perhaps chosen over the more specific לְבּוּלֵל (“to their husbands”) as a way to include both married and unmarried women in the condemnation. In the patriarchal society that was ancient Israel, the term יִשָּׂרָאֵל is typically used in first person address with a social superior. Thus, although it is most commonly used in relation to Yhwh or the king, the term also appears in reference to a servant or slave in relation to a master, a younger brother in relation to his elder sibling, or anyone in relation to a perceived social superior. Within this general use, the term also is found in the Hebrew Bible to describe the relationship between a daughter and her father or a wife and concubine and her husband. Given the foregoing, it would seem that יִשָּׂרָאֵל is used as a means of

24 Barstad, Religious Polemics of Amos, 41

25 In a passage that some have taken to be a critique of idolatry, the prophet does accuse Israel’s southern neighbor Judah of following “lies” in the manner of their forebears (2:4). Northern cultic practice (at known Yahwistic shrines) does come in for condemnation in 3:14, 4:4-5, and 5:4-6, but here it seems not to be because of the practice itself but because Israel’s rituals are empty and do not lead to justice

26 A parallel to this is the way in which the author of Gen 1:16 avoids potential confusion over the possibility of a divinized creation by substituting האספיא הרבר (“the greater light”) and האספיא רֹאשׁ (“the smaller light”) in place of the expected ישם (“sun”) and ור (“moon”), since the latter two were names of deities in the Semitic world

27 Servant in relation to master (e.g., Gen 24:27, 39:8, Exod 21:5, Judg 19:11, 1 Sam 30:13, 15, 2 Kgs 6:15, Prov 27:18, 30:10), younger brother in relation to an elder brother (e.g., Gen 32:6 [Eng 5], 19 [Eng 18], 33:8, 13, 15), and any person in relation to a perceived social superior (e.g., Gen 42:10, 44:7, 16, 18, 19, 22, 24, Num 11:28, 12, 11, 36, 2, Judg 4:18, Ruth 2:13, 1 Sam 1:15, 25:24-31, 41, 2 Sam 11:11, 1 Kgs 18:7, 13, 2 Kgs 4:16, 28, 5:22, 6:5)

28 E.g., Gen 31:35 (Rachel to Laban) Barstad (Religious Polemics of Amos, 41 n. 25) and Hayes (Amos, 138) both cite Gen 18:12 (Sarah and Abraham) as the sole case in which יִשָּׂרָאֵל is used in the sense of “husband” To this, several other examples might be added. In 1 Kgs 1:17, Bathsheba addresses her husband, David, with this term. In 1 Sam 25:17, Abigail uses this term in reference to
identifying those who are socially superior to the women of Samaria. Thus, the women in question are depicted as calling out to their husbands—or in the case of unmarried women, to their fathers—demanding that the men serve them drinks.

III. The Problem of Demanding Drinks

In light of the foregoing, what exactly is at issue in the accusation that these elite women of Samaria demand that their social superiors serve them drinks? To answer this question, it is necessary first to review the syntax and structure of 4:1. Following a summons to hear in v. 1a, the prophet identifies the addressees with a vocative followed by a modifying relative clause (מַלְאָכָה בְּבֵשָׁם אֶשְׁר בָּהּ שָׁמָרוּ, "O cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria") (v. 1b). Following this, lines 1c, d, and e, stand in parallel, each consisting of an initial feminine plural qal participle followed by a masculine plural noun. The subject matter of lines 1c and d is clearly oppression, leaving them in agreement both in syntax and in thought. Appearing here, the parallel word pair יִלְיָה וְיִשְׁעָר (“poor” and “needy”)29 shows that these women stand accused of perpetrating injustice by “oppressing the poor” and “crushing the needy.” If the syntax of lines 1c-e is parallel and the thought of lines 1c-d is parallel, then it is likely that the same charge of oppression should be found also in the final line, 1e.

The history of interpretation reveals a range of opinions on how v. 1e should be understood. Most interpreters understand the line “the ones who say to their lords, ‘Bring so that we may drink!’” to indicate that these women live an extravagant lifestyle that forces their husbands to oppress others.30 Maintaining the view

her husband, Nabal After David sends a proposal of marriage to Abigail, she presents herself before David and refers to him as her יִשְׂרָאֵל (1 Sam 25 41) In two contexts, the term is used to describe the relationship between a concubine and her husband (Judg 19 26-27, Exod 21 8, cf. 21 10)

29 These terms are used together eight other times in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 2 8, Isa 14 30, 25 4, Amos 8 6, Pss 27 13, 82 4, 113 7, Prov 14 31)

30 E.g., Mays, Amos, 72, Limburg, Hosea–Amos, 99, Paul, Amos, 128, Smuth and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, 85, and Ngan, “Amos,” Global Bible Commentary, 281 A variation on this view bears a slightly misogynistic flavor, faulting these women and their demands for the injustices perpetrated by their husbands Most prominent and sharp among such interpreters is Martin Luther (Luther’s Works [ed] Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T Lehmann, St Louis Concordia, 1955–72] 18 150), who declares that the “insatiable greed” of these powerful women “has caused their husbands to become wicked ” Applying this verse to his own day, Luther likens these women to the wives of bishops, priests, and princes In blaming the sins of the Israelite men specifically on the material insatiability of these women, Luther is followed in general by Norman H Snaith, Amos, Hosea and Micah (Epworth Preacher’s Commentaries, London Epworth, 1956) 24, Ralph L Smith, “Amos,” in The Broadman Bible Commentary (ed J Allen Clifton et al, 12 vols, Nashville Broadman, 1972) 7 81-104, here 103, T E McComsky, “Amos,” in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary With the New International Version of the Holy Bible (ed Frank E Gaebelein et al, 12 vols, Grand
that the women oppress only indirectly, Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan states that the women "were restricted to the domestic realm" and did not oppress directly, but were "held responsible for their participation in and promotion of a lifestyle that perpetuated oppression." The view that the women of Samaria could not be guilty of direct oppression seems quaintly Victorian. On this point, Judith E. Sanderson is certainly correct in noting, "Amos believed that women were accountable for ethical obligations similar to those incumbent upon men." In any event, the idea that the women oppress indirectly is not borne out by the structure of the passage, for it is difficult to understand how the author could use such forceful language in describing the oppressive activities of these women in lines 1c and d, only to retreat to an indirect and vague accusation in line 1e.

The idea that the women of Samaria could oppress only through the agency of their husbands also fails to take into account the opportunities available to socially elite women in ancient Israelite society. In this regard, Prov 31:10-31 provides a helpful catalogue of the kinds of activities with which a woman of high social standing might be occupied. The heroine in this acrostic poem oversees female domestic servants (v. 15), is able to purchase property (v. 16), engages in trade (v. 18) and commerce (v. 24), and has a reputation that extends to the city gate (v. 31). This range of domestic and commercial activities available to a woman of high standing left ample opportunity for acts of oppression. Women of standing often had charge over male and female servants, who could be abused, as the relationship between Sarah and Hagar clearly demonstrates (Gen 16:6; 21:9-10). Dishonesty could be exercised in commercial transactions related to the household economy. In the case of property rights, it is clear from the experience of both the daughters of Zelophehad and Naomi that there were at least some circumstances in which women in ancient Israel could own or dispose of property (Num 27:1-11; Josh 17:3-6; Ruth 4:1-10). Consistent with this


31 Ngan, “Amos,” Global Bible Commentary, 281
32 Sanderson, “Amos,” 222
34 Although it is true that this depiction represents an ideal picture of what was possible for the person who absorbed the wisdom teaching of Proverbs, it remains the case that such a picture would have had no credibility if some elements of the picture were widely understood to be unattainable.

35 E.g., the wealthy woman of Shunem, who has a young male servant (דבש, "her servant") at her disposal (2 Kgs 4 24)
is the existence of personal seals belonging to women, a situation that implies female involvement in legal and commercial activity. There is no reason, therefore, to assume that women in ancient Israel had no opportunity to oppress others directly.

In addition, it may be noted that if Amos was interested in accusing the women of living an extravagant lifestyle, this could be conveyed simply by stating that the women feasted or reclined on couches, accusations that the prophet levels elsewhere (6.4) If the charge of υ 1e is one of extravagance, then there is no need at all to mention the demands made on the husbands. That υ 1e has the women using an imperative to make a countercultural demand on their “lords” suggests that the prophet’s interest lies in a different direction.

If elite women in ancient Israel did have the opportunity to engage in acts of oppression independent of their husbands, and if the issue of υ 1e is not extravagance, then how does the idea of ordering their husbands to serve them drinks relate to promoting oppression? In view of the foregoing, the explanation that best suits the accusation of υ 1e and its context is that, in demanding that their husbands, fathers, and/or social superiors bring them drinks, the women of Samaria were attempting to overturn the prevailing social structure that in ancient Israel was the primary means by which the vulnerable were protected. Such an explanation conforms with the meaning attached to הָלַכְתָּ and fits exactly the context of oppression that is the clear focus of the parallelism in lines 1c–e.

In ancient Israel, protection of the vulnerable was maintained through the social stability provided by the patriarchal family system and the institution of kingship. As a largely rural, loosely administered society, ancient Israel was lacking most of the mechanisms by which justice and protection of the vulnerable are maintained in contemporary Western democracies. In this ancient context, the הָלַכְתָּ, or the extended patriarchal household, was—for all of its failings in the area of gender rights—one way by which the vulnerable might be protected. In a case in which a woman was left widowed and childless, it was the responsibility of the patriarch to ensure that the custom of levirate marriage was carried out so that the deceased’s name might endure and so that his widow would eventually be supported by a male heir (Genesis 38). Marriages arranged by the family head were


intended to benefit the family as a whole rather than to satisfy the romantic aspirations of the man and woman being joined. In this general context, the commandment “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that Yhwh your God is giving you” (Exod 20:12) expresses well the connection between this traditional family structure and the protection and social stability that it was intended to provide.

The lack of governmentally provided protections not only placed responsibility for physical and financial security at the level of the family but also privileged male status and power. For example, in this social setting where pensions and retirement benefits were unknown, to wish someone a family of “seven sons” was to hope for a person’s financial and physical security (Ruth 4:15). In a world in which professional law enforcement was nonexistent, male power helped ensure that family members and their rights were protected.\(^\text{38}\) Thus, the psalmist could say of sons,

> Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.  
> He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate (Ps 127:5 NRSV)

Where a family head failed to protect those under his authority—especially the most vulnerable—the final form of the text judges him most severely.\(^\text{39}\) Given the social benefits that this patriarchal order was thought to provide, to rebel against it was to challenge the very means by which society was protected. In the most extreme cases, the entire community was involved in removing whatever threatened this social norm, as the fate of the incorrigible son grimly illustrates (Deut 21:18-21).

In Israel as in all ancient Near Eastern monarchies, the king also played a significant role in ensuring that justice was carried out.\(^\text{40}\) For those individuals in society who fell outside of the protections offered by the patriarchal family unit, life was perilous. Thus, vulnerable groups such as the widow (אַלְמָנָה), the orphan (זָרָה), and the refugee from abroad (גָּר) came under the protection of Yhwh and

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\(^{38}\) Note, for example, the actions of the sons of Jacob (albeit without their father’s permission) after their sister Dinah is abused at the hand of Shechem, son of Hamor (Genesis 34).

\(^{39}\) Note especially Abraham’s willingness to give Sarah first to Pharaoh (Gen 12 9-20) and then to Abimelek, king of Gerar (Gen 20 1-18), and Isaac’s willingness to do likewise (Gen 26 6-11). Other examples include the willingness of Lot to offer his daughters to the mob of Sodom (Gen 19 1-11), the Levite’s willingness to do the same with his concubine in the case of the men of Gibeah (Judg 19 22-30), and Jephthah’s foolish sacrifice of his daughter (Judg 11 30-39).

\(^{40}\) The words of the queen of Sheba to Solomon summarize this basic royal responsibility (2 Chr 9 8).

his agent, the king (Deut 10:18; 2 Samuel 14; Ps 72:12-14; Jer 22:1-3; Ezek 22:6-7). Since Yhwh’s character was the basis for Israelite ethical behavior and since the king was his adopted son who delivered justice and stability,\(^42\) to rebel against either was to invite ruin, as the warning in Prov 24:21-22 makes clear:

My son, fear Yhwh and the king, 
do not get involved with ones who desire change, 
for their ruin will arise suddenly. 
The calamity [brought by] the two of them [i.e., Yhwh and king]—who can know?\(^43\)

Although it is clear that monarchs could function as agents of injustice and could come under prophetic censure (e.g., 1 Kings 21; Ezek 7:27; Hos 7:3-7; Amos 7:7-11), in ideal terms the king acted as Yhwh’s agent to ensure that justice was carried out. In ancient Israel, then, to threaten to overturn the existing the patriarchal social order or the institution of kingship was to sabotage the mechanisms that ensured that order and justice would prevail.

Egyptian texts provide a helpful parallel example of how the maintenance of the established social structure was thought to contribute to justice in the ancient world. In pharaonic Egypt, justice depended on the maintenance of a social hierarchy in which the pharaoh functioned to preserve maat, the principle of peace, order, and justice. Things that disrupted this hierarchy were consequently a threat to maat (“justice”) and resulted in its opposite, isfi (“wrong,” “injustice,” “disorder”). Much attention, therefore, was directed toward maintaining the status quo in a way that extended to proper societal relationships and social rank. On knowing one’s own rank and respecting that of others, for example, the Instruction of Amenemope could advise:

Do not sit down in the beer-house 
In order to join one greater than you, 
Be he a youth great through his office, 
Or be he an elder through birth

\(^42\) For example, toward the end of the Book of Judges, the royal role in bringing stability and justice is highlighted by the repeated statement, “In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did as he saw fit” (Judg 17 6 NIV, 21 25, also 18 1, 19 1)

\(^43\) The morphology and syntax of these verses are challenging. The occurrence elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible of the phrase דַּעַּה suggests that it refers to the calamity befalling a group of people rather than calamity perpetrated by a group of people (Deut 32 35, Jer 18 17, 46 21, 49 32, Ezek 35 5, Obad 13, Job 21 17) This being the case, the best antecedent for the third person masculine singular suffix is יִבְיָשִׁים (“changers”) in v 21b. In addition, the ‘אָנָּדָא on דַּעַּה in v 22a suggests that the following clause (v. 22b) should be treated as distinct. In this latter clause, יִבְיָשִׁים (“two of them”) functions as a subjective genitive with the only possible antecedent being Yhwh and the king. Given the foregoing, there is no reason to emend the text or rely on the LXX, as do the NIV and NRSV
Befriend a man of your own measure, 
Re is helpful from afar

If you see one greater than you outdoors, 
Walk behind him respectfully, 
Give a hand to an elder sated with beer, 
Respect him as his children would

In a similar fashion, the Instruction of Any counsels:

Do not sit when another is standing, 
One who is older than you, 
Or greater than you in his rank 
No good character is reproached, 
An evil character is blamed 
Walk the accustomed path each day 
Stand according to your rank

Given the connection between order and justice, the inversion of social order was understood to be a hallmark of chaos. The early-second-millennium text the Prophecies of Neferti imagines a period of national anarchy and illustrates this idea with the following words:

I show you the land in turmoil, 
The weak of arm is (now) the possessor of an arm, 
One salutes him who (formerly) saluted 
I show you the lowly as superior 
One lives in the necropolis 
The poor man will make wealth, 
The great one will [pray] to live 
The beggar will eat bread, 
The slaves will be exalted (?)

With the arrival of Pharaoh Imeny (Amenemhet I, 1990–1960 B.C.E.), however, order is restored and injustice vanquished:

Then order [maat] will come into its place 
While wrongdoing [isf] is driven out

The inversion of social order is a dominant theme in the Admonitions of Ipuwer, a text describing the chaos of the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) and preserved in a copy from the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Dynasty (1580–1200 B.C.E.) Here the writer complains of how social rank has been overturned and along with it, maat

44 "The Instruction of Amenemope," 24 21–25 9 (trans Miriam Lichtheim, COS 1 47 121) 
45 "The Instruction of Any," 6 11-13 (trans Miriam Lichtheim, COS 1 46 112) 
46 "The Prophecies of Neferti," 1 3 (54-57) (trans Nili Shupak, COS 1 45 109) 
47 Ibid, 2 (66-67), COS 1 45 110
Indeed, poor men have become owners of wealth;
He who could not make for himself sandals owns riches.\(^{48}\)

Indeed, the noblemen are in mourning and the poor man is full of joy;
Every town says: "Let us expel the powerful among us."\(^{49}\)

Indeed, the well-born man . . . passes without being recognized;
The child of his lady has become the son of his maid.\(^{50}\)

Indeed, princes are hungry and perish;
Servants are served . . .
Indeed, justice [maat] is throughout the land in its name,
but what they [men] do in appealing to it, is wrong [isf] . . . \(^{51}\)

The connection between social inversion and chaos reflected above was not
lost on the ancient Israelites. Such an understanding is, for example, perhaps
reflected in Nabal’s words to David’s servants: “Who is David? Who is the son of
Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters”
(1 Sam 25:10 NRSV). Isaiah also draws a line of connection between the overturning
of social norms and the spread of oppression and injustice. Speaking in a context
of chaos, the prophet cries out:

Woe to the guilty! How unfortunate they are,
for what their hands have done shall be done to them.
My people—children are their oppressors,
and women rule over them.
O my people, your leaders mislead you,
and confuse the course of your paths. (Isa 3:11-12 NRSV)

This situation of social inversion results in a state of oppression and injustice in
which the elders and leaders of the land are partially complicit and for which they
are ultimately accountable (Isa 3:14-15). In a fate closely matching that of the
women of Samaria, the haughty daughters of Zion will be stripped of their luxuries
and face the sword (Isa 3:16-26).

The close connection between social inversion and injustice is expressed also
in Isa in 32:5-8. In this passage, the elevation of the fool and scoundrel to the rank
of בֶּן גַּהֲל ("noble") results in the spread of injustice that sees the hungry and thirsty
denied and the poor and needy oppressed. Only when the king arrives to reign with
justice are social order and justice restored. The stability that comes with the recog-
nition of the “proper” social order is affirmed in 32:8 with the statement that “the
noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands” (NRSV).

Shupak, COS 1:42:94).
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 2.7 (COS 1:42:94).
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 2.14 (COS 1:42:94).
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 5.2–5.4 (COS 1:42:95).
IV Conclusion

When we return to Amos 4:1, it is evident that, as ones "who say to their lords, 'Bring so that we may drink!'" the women of Samaria are practicing the kind of social inversion that challenges the structures that Amos and Isaiah believed to be crucial for the maintenance of justice in ancient Israel. In this way, line 1e is a fitting parallel to the ones that precede (1c-d) and that also condemn these women for their oppression of the poor. If this is the case, then it should be clear that Amos 4:1 is not a simple condemnation of women for stepping outside of culturally defined gender roles, as some biblical literalists might argue. What the women of Samaria were condemned for is not that they asked others to serve them but that they were intentional in seeking to destroy the mechanism by which the poor and vulnerable were understood to be protected in their society.

For contemporary interpreters, it is important to recognize that, even though patriarchy might have had some protective value in the ancient context, it nonetheless represents a departure from the principles of equality and mutual dependence that were the hallmark of gender relations at creation (Gen 1:27, 2:18, 22-24, cf. 3:16). That humans sought to protect each other and regulate society in a way that departed so markedly from this ideal is a reminder of the fallen nature of the world that Israel inherited and that we continue to call home. In a present-day context, it is important to acknowledge that the social protections now available have rendered irrelevant and undesirable the patriarchal structures and absolute monarchy by which Israel and other ancient societies ordered themselves and sought to protect the vulnerable. In this context, patriarchy has come to lose any protective value it might once have had and has come to be an instrument of oppression. This new context has a significant bearing on how Amos 4:1 may be applied today. It is the principle underlying the words Amos spoke to his eighth-century audience that remains relevant to those who oppress the poor, or who seek to undermine the mechanisms by which society protects the poor, find themselves out of step with God and with what God values.

52 On the complementary nature between man and woman implied in v. 18, see further Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15 (WBC 1, Dallas: Word, 1987) 68.

53 CF Rom 8:22, which states that the imperfections found in the present created order reflect the effects of human sin and stand as a reminder that all is not right in the world.