Understanding Amos VI 12 in Light of his other Rhetorical Questions

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Abstract
The MT of Amos vi 12a comprises a pair of rhetorical questions: “Do horses run on the rock(s)? Or does one plow with oxen?” An analysis of Amos’ other pairs of rhetorical questions, which demonstrate a high degree of semantic and structural parallelism, suggests that the MT is corrupt. Four criteria are accordingly derived from these other rhetorical questions to evaluate the numerous proposed solutions for vi 12a. Alan Cooper’s emendation is identified as most consistent with Amos’ general usage: “Do horses run on crags? Or does the wild ox plow in the valley?”

Keywords
Amos vi 12, rhetorical questions, emendation

In its Masoretic (MT) form, Amos vi 12a appears quite enigmatic, partially due to the corruption of 12aβ. The verse comprises a pair of rhetorical questions (RQ) concerning the behavior of horses and oxen, followed by a double rebuke against the Israelites for their own behavior:2

Can horses gallop on a rock? Can it be plowed with oxen?
Yet you have turned justice into poison weed
And the fruit of righteousness to wormwood (JPSV)

1) A special thanks to Karen Sonik, Jeffrey H. Tigay, and Jeffrey Stackert for their help and suggestions on this article.
2) All Hebrew quotations are taken from Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are mine. Abbreviations in this paper follow the list of abbreviations from the Anchor Bible Commentary, 1992.
These paired RQs catch the Israelites’ attention with something they already know and then compare this to something of which they are presumably unaware. By appealing to common sense, RQs become more emphatic than mere declarative statements and effectively seize the audience’s attention. They trap the audience into accepting a presupposed answer, invariably a definite and simple “yes” or “no”. Amos and the audience both know the answers to his RQs, and it is through these that the audience comes to understand what Amos intends in his follow-up declarations.

The enigmatic nature of Amos vi 12aβ in the MT is reflected by the numerous translations and textual emendations proposed. Moreover, a full examination of the RQ genre in Amos, as well as of v. 12aβ’s irregular grammar, suggests that the MT is corrupt. Throughout his book, Amos uses RQs no fewer than 18 times,3 12 of these in pairs. The basic pattern that Amos establishes for his paired RQs provides the model for restoring the corrupt vi 12a, as well as the criteria for evaluating proposed solutions.

The paired RQs in Amos generally display four common characteristics. The most important of these, perhaps already recognized by ancient translators, is (1) that parallel questions always require the same answer.4 Moreover, within each pair of RQs there is (2) a high degree of semantic parallelism and, to a slightly lesser extent, (3) a high degree of parallel sentence structure. Finally, (4) the subject of each verb is typically found within the question; that is to say, there is no need to interpret a verb with a generic subject. Obtained solely from Amos’ paired RQs, these characteristics are derived independently of any of the proposed solutions examined. Consequently, they serve as four objective criteria according to which the solutions proposed for vi 12aβ should be judged.

The Rhetorical Questions in Amos

While the book of Amos has no other passage structurally identical to vi 12, the book does have 16 other RQs, including no less than six other pairs of RQs. In all the other pairs, the two individual questions each imply the same answer (criterion 1). The oracle in iii 4-8 contains four pairs of RQs in an

3) Amos ii 11; iii 3, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 6a, 6b, 8a, 8b; v 20, 25; vi 2bα, 2bβ, 12aα, 12aβ, 13; viii 8; ix 7a, 7b.
extended series. Verse 4 appeals to the audience’s common sense: “Does a lion roar in the thicket when it has no prey? Does a lion cub growl out from his den without having made a catch?” The audience understands that both questions imply a negative answer, the RQs having been asked in the affirmative.  The remaining two pairs of RQs are found in vii 2b and ix 7. Similar to vi 12a, vi 2b follows the ʾled/ʾm-led paired RQ pattern implying two negative answers.  In contrast, ix 7 includes two ʾblw-led RQs, each implying an affirmative answer.

The RQs found in Amos iii display the highest degree of internal parallelism, both semantically (criterion 2) and structurally (criterion 3). The two questions in v. 4 begin with semantically similar verbs: ʾyš, “roar”, and ʾytn gwlw, “raise one’s voice”. Each verb is followed by a “lion” subject, and each question ends its first clause with the lion’s location:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{לו} & \text{וטרףאין} \text{ביער} \text{אריה} \\
\text{N} & \text{O} & \text{L} & \text{S} & \text{V} ? \\
\text{וחתן} & \text{כפור קולוםמענתובלתיאם} \\
\text{V} & \text{N} & \text{L} & \text{O} & \text{S} & \text{V} ?
\end{align*}
\]

The structures of the second clauses differ, though their semantic meanings are the same. The next pair of RQs again shows a high degree of semantic parallelism:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{לה} & \text{פחהארץומוקשאין} \text{התפלצפורעל} \\
\text{N} & \text{O} & \text{L} & \text{O} & \text{S} & \text{V} ? \\
\text{האדמהולכודלאילכוד} & \text{היעלהפחמן} \\
\text{V} & \text{N} & \text{V} & \text{L} & \text{S} & \text{V} ?
\end{align*}
\]

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5) Amos uses the affirmation/negation RQ pattern in iii 3, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 6a, 6b, 8a, 8b; vi 2a, 2b, and 12a. He uses the negation/affirmation RQ pattern in ii 11; v 20; vi 13; ix 7a, and 7b.

6) It is worth noting that vi 2b is the only paired RQ in Amos that uses comparative adjectives and contains no verb.

7) These structure outlines are to be read right-to-left, and the Hebrew is always above the outline. The legend is as follows: ? = Interrogative marker; V = Verb; S = Subject; L = Location; O = Object; N = Negation; Adj = Adjective; C = Comparative; E = Equitative; P = Possessive; A = Ablative; and I = Instrumental.
The verbs are directional, first down and then up. Though the subjects, “bird” and “trap,” differ in this verse, the word “trap” does occur in both RQs of the verse. In addition, the earth serves as the location in both RQs and is governed by a preposition to end each first clause. The pair of RQs in v. 6 is slightly different from the preceding pair. The semantic parallelism is weaker because the verse comprises an internal cause-result chiastic order, but both RQs take place “within a city”:

\[
\begin{align*}
V_2 & \quad N_1 - S_2 \\
L_1 & \quad S_1 \\
V_3 & \quad V_x? \\
& \\
V_4 & \quad N_2 - S_4 \\
L_1 & \quad S_3 \\
V_5 & \quad V_x?
\end{align*}
\]  
(v. 6a)

The alarm of the shofar and YHWH, respectively, frighten people and let the evil befall the city. Thus, v. 6, like v. 8, contains a high degree of internal structural parallelism but with less exact internal semantic parallelism than in vv. 4-5.

As iii 3-8 overall resembles vi 12’s structure in expanded form, the full complex deserves attention. Its five \( h \)-led RQs (vv. 3-5) and two \( m \)-led RQs (v. 6) are followed by two \( ky \) asseverative clauses (v. 7). Verse 8 resumes with another pair of RQs. Ultimately, all nine RQs display a high degree of parallelism, despite the varying structures of the subordinate clauses in vv. 3-5. Since vi 12a contains two relatively short RQs and lacks subordinate clauses, the parallel structure of each main clause in iii 3-6 is the more important aspect for the reconstructed pattern of vi 12a.

The remaining two pairs of RQs in Amos stand alone. In vi 2, Amos compares the Israelites’ security to that of two other nations:

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8) In iii 8, Amos uses the double RQ to liken the subjects to each other: YHWH is a lion. Similarly, Amos i 2 likens YHWH to a lion by stating that YHWH roars and raises his voice. Both of these verbs occur in iii 4 with a lion as the subject. Moreover, the verbs “to roar” and “to speak” are semantically similar. Once YHWH and the lion are understood as equivalent, the remainder of the verse appears more fitting. As a result, Amos supplies his own meaning to prophesying. Fearing and prophesying are, in some manner, synonymous.

9) Y. Gitay observes that in Amos iii 3-6, “The second half of each of these questions is constructed negatively in order to reach a positive answer” (Yehoshua Gitay, “A Study of Amos’s Art of Speech: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amos 3:1-15”, CBQ 42 [1980], p. 303). Notably, Gitay correctly identifies this pattern without fully recognizing the negative/affirmative nature of the questions: the implicit answers to iii 3-6 are negative because the affirmative voices are retained.
Amos uses the b-led/m-led paired RQ pattern, as he does in vi 12: "Are (you) better than these kingdoms? Or is their territory greater than your territory?"

The subjects of the RQs are synonymous, and Amos arranges the possessors in a chiasm. Although "you" does not actually appear in the first half, an ellipsis is assumed and necessary for the comparative nature of the question. What is important is that the subjects of the RQs can be found elsewhere within the questions (criterion 4).

Finally, ix 7 challenges the Israelites’ notion of a unique exodus history, asking, "Are you not like the Cushites to me, Israel… Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" A full analysis of the verse must be conducted to determine whether these are paired RQs or merely parallel RQs:

The first RQ is relatively short, approximately half the length of the second, which contains additional objects. Two nations are mentioned in the first RQ, whereas three nations are mentioned in the second, followed by their place of deliverance. The verse is further complicated because the first RQ assumes a linking verb, whereas the second contains a transitive verb. Moreover, since the RQs are interrupted by a vocative and interjection, this would be the only pair of RQs lacking continuity in Amos, as well as the only pair implying affirmative answers. The only two parallel elements in v. 7 are hluw and Israel, though Israel may only be an interruption appended to the first RQ. Due to the RQs’ difference in lengths, minimal amount of parallelism,

in the main clauses while the negations are relegated to the subordinate clauses. These subordinate clauses do not affect the answer’s affirmation or negation since the particle at the beginning of the RQ is what determines the affirmation.
and interrupting interjection, this verse may be better understood as two individual RQs following different standards from paired RQs in Amos.10

The MT of Amos vi 12 has the only pair of RQs requiring different answers, defying both Amos’ general usage and the typical biblical pattern for paired RQs with a kš asseverative clause,11 almost certainly suggesting a corrupt text. The MT first asks, “Do horses run on the rock(s)2?” The RQ begins with the particle h, implying “no”: as such an action would be dangerous to the animal, the RQ appeals to the audience’s common knowledge in presenting an absurd scenario. The MT then asks, “Or does one plow with oxen?” In the context of vi 12’s paired RQs, the implied answer should be negative. But one can and does plow with oxen, as indicated in 1 Sam. xi 5 and Job i 14.12 Indeed, plowing is the primary value of the ox in ancient Israelite society. The text thus needs correction, and several emendations have been proposed.13 Notably, however, it is insufficient to merely rearrange this text to formulate a question that implies a negative answer. Any emendation should be reconstructed in light of the four criteria derived from Amos’ other paired RQs.

These four criteria suggest pattern x, while the MT of vi 12 forms pattern y (see table 1 for a comparison of all evaluated emendations):

10 Similarly, v. 20 is a hšš-em RQ that implies an affirmative answer and could be considered a RQ because it appears to ask the same question twice. However, because only one interrogative particle is present in this line, it is not considered a true paired RQ here.
12 Deut. xxii 10; 1 Kgs. xix 19; Prov. xiv 4; and Isa. xxx 24 also testify to plowing with oxen but do not use bqr as Amos does.
13 The grammatical form of the word bqr̳y̳m alone gives reason to suspect a corruption in the MT. The noun bqr occurs 180 times in the Bible, either as singular or collective; only twice does it appear in the plural, and both these instances are suspect. The word bqr̳y̳m occurs in 2 Chr. iv 3, though the original text in 1 Kgs. vii 24 has pq̳y̳m, “gourds.” Imagining a process by which the pq̳y̳m in Kings might have become the bqr̳y̳m of 2 Chronicles requires little effort. In paleo-Hebrew script the pq and the bet are graphically similar, as are ṣ̣ỵin and resh. The other occurrence is in Neh. x 37, bqr̳y̳nw, which itself could easily be explained by a later insertion of the yod. However, even if the plural bqr̳y̳m in both 2 Chr. iv 3 and Neh. x 37 are retained, these examples should not be used to justify the grammar of Amos vi 12. These occurrences are from late biblical Hebrew when collectives increasingly appear in the plural (Robert Polzin, Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose (Missoula, MT, 1976), pp. 40-42). Amos, on the other hand, is pre-exilic, when such a phenomenon would not be expected.
The table below solves Amos vi 12a. The legend is as follows: ? = Interrogative marker; V = Verb; S = Subject; L = Location; O = Object; N = Negation; E = Equitative; and I = Instrumental.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>General Pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ב</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>— בא תורש</td>
<td>(x, General Pattern)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>א</td>
<td>ל</td>
<td>תורש על סלע</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>א</td>
<td>ה</td>
<td>ל</td>
<td>תורש על סלע</td>
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<td>א</td>
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<td>ה</td>
<td>ל</td>
<td>תורש על סלע</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Slight deviation is expected, especially when a chiastic structure is involved; however, were the second RQ parallel to the first, pattern z would appear:

Table 1.* Solving Amos vi 12a

* This table is to be read right-to-left, and the proposals are listed in chronological order.
The structural parallelism reflected in pattern z defines the ideal structure for any proposed emendation (criterion 2). Any proposal that deviates greatly from this structure or from any of the other three criteria is unlikely to be correct.

Examining the Proposals

The awkwardness of Amos vi 12a is already apparent in the retroverted Greek translation (pattern a), which follows:

Attempting to imply a negative answer for vi 12a, the LXX renders the second RQ: “Will they (i.e., the horses) stay quiet among mares?” (εἰ παρασιωπήσονται ἐν θηλείαις). Though the Greek may initially appear completely unrelated to the MT, no separate Vorlage need be assumed. The subject of the second RQ, horses, is retained from the first RQ (criterion 4); the Greek confuses ḫrš, which BDB lists as two separate roots: (1) to cut in, engrave, and plow and (2) to be silent;14 and the Greek inelegantly renders the presumably masculine plural bqrμm as a feminine plural meaning "mares". While this rendering results in two RQs implying negative answers—since stallions often neigh when around a mare in heat15—the words "mare" and "rock" have no semantic relationship and "keeping silent" has no relationship with "running". Further, due to the glaring lack of semantic parallelism, the overall structure of the sentence is problematic.

In the 18th century, J. D. Michaelis proposed an actual emendation to the MT (pattern b):16

14 BDB, pp. 360-361. Confusion between these two meanings also occurs in Hos. x 11.
16 For a list of scholars who have accepted Michaelis’ or other treatments, as well as other comments on Amos vi 12, see D. Barthelemy, Critique Textuelle de L’Ancien Testament: Tome 3. Ézéchiel, Daniel et les 12 Prophètes (Göttingen, 1992), pp. 671-672.
Many, including RSV and (tentatively) JPSV, accept his division of *bbqrym* to *bbqr* *ym*,17 translating, “Does one plow the sea with oxen?” This emendation allows for two implied negative answers since it is impossible to plow water (criterion 1). This also transforms the problematic plural “oxen” into the collective noun; however, *bbqr* is now used instrumentally, which has no parallel in 12a. This proposal is at odds with criteria 2 and 4: the structural pattern lacks parallelism, and a subject is imported.

Wilhelm Rudolph offers an alternate reading, proposing two separate emendations to the text (pattern c). As the normally collective “oxen” occurs in the plural, Rudolph divides *bbqrym* into *bbqr* and *rym*, suggesting a haplography. He then suggests another scribal error, in which the preposition *k* was replaced by *b*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>מִיָּרְצֹון בְּסַלָּעָסִים אַמָּה</th>
<th>אָמַּה</th>
<th>בְּבַקְרִים</th>
<th>בְּבַקְרִים</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O₁</td>
<td>I₁</td>
<td>V₁—ט</td>
<td>S₁</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

His emended RQ would thus read: “Or the wild bull plow like the ox?” 18 According to a series of *h*-led/*ʾ*-*m*-led pairs of RQs that God asks in Job xxxix, the wild ox (*rym*) cannot be used for plowing or threshing because it, unlike the helpful *bbqr*, is too wild to be harnessed. Rudolph’s reading thus implies the desired negative answer (criterion 1) and is further in agreement with criterion 4. However, this proposal lacks structural parallelism (criterion 2), and the *k* also lessens any semantic parallelism between the two RQs (criterion 3).

Andor Szabó suggests that *bbqrym* occurred from a metathesis of *bbqym*, providing the resulting translation (pattern d): “Does one plough upon tombs?” 19

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18) Wilhelm Rudolph, Joel- Amos-Obadja-Jona (Gütersloh, 1971), pp. 225-226. That *rym*, and not a human farmer, could be the subject of the verb “he will plow” (yḥw) need not be of concern since Job i 14 has *bbqr* as the subject of the same verb: “the oxen were plowing” (*bbqr* yhw *ḥw*). Moreover, the ox is found as the subject of the cognate verb in Akkadian, suggesting that Job i 14 is not an isolated example, cf. K4806, lines 9-16 (F. Thureau-Dangin, Rituels Accadiens [Paris, 1921], p. 26).
The guiding force behind Szabó’s argument is his desire to place this emended RQ within the context of death presented in vi 9-11. While this emendation is in keeping with criterion 1, it diverges from criterion 4 by requiring the generic “one” as its subject, which also destroys the parallelism required by criteria 2 and 3 (the semantic parallelism between rocks and tombs is forced at best). 20

Complaining that Michaelis’ solution strips the verse of “assonance”, Mitchell Dahood has suggested reading the preposition b as “without” (pattern e, see table 1) to avoid an emendation. 21 Not only is b as “without” wholly unattested, 22 but Dahood’s proposal still lacks structural and semantic parallels (criteria 2 and 3) and lacks a subject (against criterion 4).

Alan Cooper’s proposal, that an ‘ayin dropped from bbq ‘rym, thus creating MT’s bbqym, asks, “Does the wild ox plow in the valley” (pattern f): 23

In accordance with criterion 1, Cooper’s plain sense reading implies two negative answers. The resulting structure of vi 12a is reminiscent of pattern z, demonstrating perfect structural parallelism (criterion 2). Further, this proposal reflects a high degree of semantic parallelism, satisfying criterion 3: the rock and the valley are both geographical descriptions, and both animals are the subjects of their respective RQs. Finally, Cooper’s proposal does not reply upon a generic subject (criterion 4). While Cooper admits to a lack of textual evidence for this emendation, he reconstitutes this reading from vi 11, where bqym (pl. noun—“fissures”) functions as a lead-word and relies on the mili-

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20 Alan Cooper, “The Absurdity of Amos 6:12a”, JBL 107 (1988), p. 726; cf. Paul, Amos, p. 219, n 7. While plowing among tombs may conceptually relate to the dead men of vv. 9-11 and may have influenced their placement within the book of Amos, this is insufficient reason to ignore the fact that Szabó’s emendation meets only one of the four established criteria.


22 Paul, Amos, p. 219, n. 7.

tary context of vv. 13-14. It should be noted, however, that Cooper’s emendation may have two minor difficulties. First, this would be the only occurrence of $bq'$ (“valley”) spelled without a mater lectionis. Thus, his emendation requires an additional letter, which is entirely plausible. Second, in Deut xxii 10 and Judg xiv 18, the preposition $b$ acts instrumentally with the verb $hr'$, meaning “plowing with”, not “plowing in”. However, neither of these issues is overly problematic.

A final proposal (pattern g), offered by Oswald Loretz in response to the readings of Michaelis, Dahood, and Szabó, suggests that the final two letters of the clause (i.e., $m$ and $y$) of $bbqym$ were misplaced from an original $bym $bqr$ (pattern h, see table 1).

The resulting translation reads: “Galoppieren Pferde auf Felsenspitzen, oder pfuegt der Ochse ‘im Meer?’” Though this is much the same as Michaelis’ reading, Loretz has restored the structural parallelism lacking in the original proposal (criterion 3), although his emendation does not fulfill criterion 2, semantic parallelism.

Conclusions

After evaluating the various translations and emendations suggested for vi 12$\alpha$ against the four criteria derived from an analysis of paired RQs in Amos, Cooper’s proposal proves the best fit. Emending the text to $bbq'$ $rym$ from $bbqym$ creates a pair of RQs that: 1) imply two negative answers; 2) contain internal structural parallelism; 3) contain corresponding semantic parallelism; and 4) need not infer generic subjects. Admittedly, this emendation lacks textual evidence and so requires the scribal error to have occurred early in the transmission of the text. Such an early error would fit with the

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24) In the twelfth century, Eliezer de Beaugency concluded that the horse and ox are metaphors for Israel’s military who cannot overcome her enemies: “if the horse or ox were to tread upon [the crag], he would be crushed and shattered by it” (Cooper, “The Absurdity”, p. 726). Elaborating upon Eliezer de Beaugency’s interpretation, Cooper examines vi 12 in the context of the military campaigns in vi 13-14, suggesting that Sela’ and Beqa’ are the names of strongholds located at the southern/Edomite (cf. 2 Kings xiv 7 and 2 Chr xxv 12) and the northern/Lebanese borders (cf. Josh xi 17 and xii 7) of Jeroboam II’s kingdom (2 Kings xiv 25). Accordingly, Israel’s power is as impossible to maintain as it is impossible for a horse to run upon the rock(s) and a wild ox to be harnessed for plowing (Cooper, “The Absurdity”, p. 727).


evidence of the Greek, which appears to be derived from the same Vorlage as the MT, since it must awkwardly translate vi 12aβ to obtain a negative answer through three sleights of hand. Thus, the Greek translation reflects the occurrence of a scribal error before the third or second century BCE. Further, since this proposed error would have occurred through the loss of one letter, leaving a sequence of bbqyrm, had a scribe noticed that “horses” was plural in v.12α and now followed by a plural “oxen”, this new parallelism may have seemed natural and would, therefore, have been left uncorrected. There is no reason why this error could not have occurred as early as Cooper’s emendation demands.27

RQs are meant to challenge the audience. The verse’s absurdity or impossibility is intended to seize the audience’s attention. Amos then strikes, using the ky asseverative clause to make his attack more effective, and accusing the audience of acting just as dangerously or impossibly as the animals by persisting in ill-considered behavior: “Yet, you have turned justice into poison and the fruits of righteousness into bitterness” (v. 12b). While this reproach would have been made regardless of the original reading of the preceding RQs, Cooper’s emendation to bbqyrm is most consistent with Amos’s usage of paired RQs elsewhere in the book.

27) If Cooper is correct in identifying the strongholds Sela’ in Edom and Beqa’ in Lebanon (see above), this identification may serve as additional support for his emendation. However, if he is incorrect about these identifications, the emendation is still the only proposed solution that matches the four criteria for Amos’ RQs.