

## THE USE OF THE WORD “AMEN”

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This article concerns the liturgical use of the “Amen” in Christian churches. I must confess that prior to this study I would not have suspected that I would reach the conclusions which are presented here. I must also add that this brief article is not necessarily the last word on this matter. However, I do believe that I have raised some food for thought.

### **The Meaning of ‘Amen’**

The word ‘amen’ comes from a Hebrew root which in its various verbal forms can mean: *to support, to be loyal, to be certain, and to place faith in*. The cognate particle ‘amen’ is commonly translated as ‘truly’.<sup>1</sup>

It is remarkable that this word is generally not translated in the (Greek) New Testament. The Greek speaking churches in the first century after Christ, appear to have been confronted with a Hebrew word that they preferred not to translate. The word ‘amen’ is certainly not the only Hebrew word which the new churches used in its original form. Consider only the word “abba” (= father<sup>2</sup>); although the use of *this* word is always immediately followed by a translation (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). With the word ‘amen’ this is not considered necessary.

And yet Luke does sometimes translate this word when it is used by the Lord Jesus in a very special manner, namely, at the beginning of a sentence in order to emphasise what is said (see below). Luke then sometimes uses the translation, ‘truly’ or ‘verily’ (Luke 4:25; 9:27; 12:44; 21:3). Further, in Revelation 1:7 and 2 Corinthians 1:20, and possibly Luke 12:5, ‘amen’ is translated as ‘yes’ (= ‘even so’). In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament current in the time of the Lord Jesus), outside of the apocryphal books, the word ‘amen’ is left untranslated only three times (1 Chron 16:36; Neh. 5:13; 8:6).<sup>3</sup> Once it is translated as ‘truly’ and every other time as ‘may it be so’.<sup>4</sup> The very literal Greek translation of Aquila (second century AD) always translates ‘amen’ as ‘truly’.<sup>5</sup>

The translation ‘may it be so’ is supported in the Old Testament itself where the word ‘amen’ is followed by the words ‘may the Lord do so’ (1 Kings 1:36; Jer. 28:6).

Beyond these indications about the meaning of ‘amen’ we must also look at the *use* of this word. The context in which a word is used is very important in determining its meaning and usage.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I do not wish to suggest that the use of other word forms from the same root are necessarily trustworthy indicators for the meaning of a word. On this point see J. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: University Press, 1961] 100-106.

<sup>2</sup> See further on this word the excellent article by J. Barr, “Abba isn’t ‘Daddy,’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988) 28-47.

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of completeness, the word ‘amen’ is used six times untranslated in the apocryphal books.

<sup>4</sup> Respectively, ἀληθῶς (Jer. 35:6, MT 28:6) and γένοιτο.

<sup>5</sup> ΠΕΠΙΣΤΩΜΕΝΩΣ.

## Use in the Old Testament

The first thing that strikes us in the Old Testament is the limited use of the word 'amen.' We meet it only thirty times, five times doubled ('amen, amen'), so that there are only twenty-five passages where we find it. The use of the word can be categorised under four headings of which the first two are by far and away the most important.

### 1. Acceptance of a curse expression (16 times )

When priests (or other office bearers) uttered a curse formula on behalf of the Lord then the addressee(s) accepted the consequences of the curse with the word 'amen' (see Num. 5:22; Deut. 27:15-26; Neh.5:13; Jer: 11:5).

I interpret Jeremiah's 'amen' in Jeremiah 11:5 here as a confirmation of the covenant curse which God has just told him to pronounce to the people. It is also possible to interpret this 'amen' as a confirmation and concurrence with the task God has given him to pronounce the covenant curse to the people, in which case it should be placed under category three.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Concurrence with an expression of praise to the Lord (10 times)

'Amen' is also used after a *baruch* (praise) formula by the person speaking the formula (Pss. 41:14; 72:19; 89:53) as well as all those who hear it (Ps. 106:48; 1 Chron. 16:36; Neh. 8:6). This type of praise-formula has a standard structure and always begins with the word *baruch*: translated as "Blessed / Praised be....." Jepsen suggests that hearers of such praise who utter the 'amen' effectively make the words of praise their own.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Concurrence with a prophecy or an announcement made by another person (2 times)

In Jeremiah 28:6 Jeremiah expresses sarcastic agreement with the false prophecy of Hananiah by the words: "Amen! May the Lord do so." In 1 Kings 1:36 Benaiah concurs with David's announcement that Solomon will be anointed as king. He literally says: "Amen! May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, say so." The fact that both these passages appear to translate the word 'amen' give the impression that we are dealing with exceptional situations.

### 4. As a characteristic of God

In Isaiah 65:16 the Hebrew text twice speaks of "the God of (the) Amen."

This last text requires some comment. Because some think the phrase "the God of (the) Amen" unlikely and difficult, they choose to 'correct' the text to "the God of truth / faithfulness."<sup>8</sup> The suggested emendations concern only the vowels which (in Hebrew) do not belong to the original text. One possibility is to read '*ōmen*' instead of '*āmēn*.' In Isaiah 25:1 the same consonants are in fact pointed as *ōmen* ('truth'), but this form would be a *hapax legomenon* (i.e., a word that only occurs once in the entire Bible) and must

<sup>6</sup> For this interpretation see, for example, A. Jepsen, "amen" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, transl. J. T. Willis, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 320-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. Cit.* 321.

<sup>8</sup> Both emendations discussed here are mentioned in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977). The second is mentioned in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, rev. ed. transl. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson, CDRom ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000) s.v. *ēmūn*.

therefore remain suspect. In addition, it should be noted that the Septuagint and Aquila both read *āmēn* and not *ōmen* at Isaiah 25:1, a reading which seems to be supported by a Hebrew text found at Qumran (1QIs<sup>a</sup>). The Septuagint, however, appears to have interpreted the consonants at Isaiah 65:16 as *ōmen* or *ēmun*! A second possibility is to point the consonants as *ēmun* (“faithfulness”). The form *ēmun* is however normally an adjective (‘faithful’) and only in Deuteronomy 32:20 does it appear to function as a noun. The plural form of this adjective is, however, used in the sense of ‘faithfulness,’ several times following a construct noun denoting some kind of person (e.g. Prov. 13:17 “messenger of faithfulness” [= “faithful messenger”]; 14:5 “witness of faithfulness” [= “faithful witness”]; 20:6 “man of faithfulness” [= “faithful man”]). These examples cannot, however, support a translation “God of faithfulness” (= “faithful God”) in Isaiah 65:16 where the operative word must be pointed as a singular. When we realize that the phrase “God of faithfulness / truth” is nowhere else used in the Bible, there seems to be all the more reason to accept the reading “God of (the) Amen,” a reading which seems to have influenced the wording of Revelation 3:14 (see below).

We may now address the question as to the meaning of the phrase “God of (the) Amen.” We read in Isaiah 65:15b-16a ...

*But His [Yahweh’s] servants he will call by another name, so that he who is blessed on the earth shall be blessed by the God of (the) Amen; And he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of (the) Amen.*

The context here in Isaiah 65 and 66 is the description of the renewed world of the returned exiles from a prophetic perspective, a perspective that the New Testament shows us to be essentially a vision of the restored heavens and earth at the second coming of the Messiah. In this respect Revelation 2:17 (the conclusion of Jesus’ letter to the church at Smyrna) picks up on the new name to be given to those who remain faithful (taken from Isa. 62:2 and 65:15). In the same vein Revelation 3:14 gives Jesus the name “Amen, the faithful and true witness” (cf. Rev. 1:5) at the head of His letter to the church at Laodicea. This is almost certainly an allusion to Isaiah 65:16 and may suggest how the phrase “the God of Amen” was understood. In any case we ought to consider that if one had wanted to say “the God of faithfulness,” several other normal expressions could have been used. “The God of Amen” refers to the God who is connected with that unique word ‘amen’ that is only used in certain contexts, namely (mostly) to affirm blessings made to God and curses placed over oneself when swearing an oath. It is then no coincidence that Isaiah 65:16 speaks both of blessings and the swearing of an oath when speaking of “the God of Amen.” God may be seen here as the God that guarantees the surety (‘amen’ as the adverbial confirmation ‘surely’) of blessings and guards the truth of oaths. In this respect Jesus can be called the ‘Amen’ as a faithful and true divine witness to the surety of God’s promises (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19-20).

Equally important to an overview of the texts where we find the word ‘amen’ in the Old Testament are the places where it is *not* used. Two points are noteworthy. First, we note that, although ‘amen’ is often used in signification of accepting a curse-formula, it is never used to accept a blessing intended for oneself! Secondly, ‘amen’ is never used to conclude

a prayer.<sup>9</sup> We will return to these interesting two points after an overview of the data in the New Testament.

### **Use in the New Testament**

Apart from the translated cases mentioned above, the word 'amen' is used 131 times in the New Testament (statistics follow the 27<sup>th</sup> edition of Nestle / Aland *et al*). This number can, however, be deceptive. 103 times it is used by our Lord Jesus Himself in a very unusual manner. He often begins a sentence with this word or uses it to give emphasis to what He is saying. Given the quite restricted way in which 'amen' is used in Hebrew up to this time, it is possible that Jesus' usage presupposes a self-imprecation which he confirms with "amen", i.e. "May I be cursed if what I now say is not the truth...". As our present study concerns the liturgical use of the word 'amen' we will not delve further into Jesus' manner of speaking, except to say that it is probable that, in conjunction with what has been said about Isaiah 65:16 above, this peculiar usage also led to Jesus being called the 'Amen' (Rev. 3:14, cf. 2 Cor. 1:19-20).<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the foregoing, this word is used twenty-eight times. When we apply the same categories as we used for the Old Testament then we see the following...

#### **1. Acceptance of a curse expression**

There are no examples of the acceptance of curse-formulae in the New Testament. This category is thus not applicable.

#### **2. Concurrence with an expression of praise for the Lord (22 times)**

A statement of praise (at times, but not always, in the same form as used in the Old Testament) is often concluded with an 'amen' by the person expressing it (Rom.1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; Gal. 1:5; Eph. 3:21; Phil.4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; 5:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 1:25; Rev. 1:6; 7:12) as well as by those present who hear it (1 Cor. 14:16; 2 Cor. 1:20; Rev. 5:14; 7:12; 19:4.).

In addition to the texts already cited we may add Matthew 6:13 where, according to many manuscripts, an expression of praise (followed by "amen") concludes the Lord's Prayer.

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<sup>9</sup> Contra R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, & B. K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, electronic ed. 1999) 52, who offer no evidence for their statement that 'amen' is used to end prayers. Similarly H. Schlier ("*Amēn*" in *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, & G. Friedrich, transl. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76] 1.337) whose citations for 'amen' closing a prayer in writings of the early church refer to prayers which close with praise to God. The 'amen' should be connected to the immediately preceding praise formula, not to the whole prayer.

<sup>10</sup> It is unfortunate that this use of the word 'amen' is disguised in most Bible translations. Even if it would sound strange to our ears to read: "Amen, amen, I say unto you ...," we ought to realise that it would have sounded *just as strange* to a Greek reader of the Gospels! Although this unusual usage only occurs with the Lord Jesus, it is interesting to note that he also places it in the mouth of others when speaking in parables (see e.g. Matt. 25:12). The only other known examples of this usage are a 7<sup>th</sup> century BC potsherd written in Hebrew (see J. Strugnell, "'Amen I say to you' in the Sayings of Jesus and in Early Christian Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974) 177-82 according to D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983, 165) and the *Testament of Abraham* 8:7 (which may, however, be of Christian origin).

### **3. Concurrence with a prophecy or an announcement made by another person (2 times)**

In Revelation 1:7 and 22:20 we find a prophecy / announcement concluded with an 'amen.' In the first passage the amen is expressed by the one making the announcement, John, himself. In the second passage it is unclear whether the 'amen' is intended to be the concluding word of what Jesus says, or an affirmation by John to Jesus' words (Nestle / Aland punctuate for the latter option). In Revelation 1:7 the word 'amen' is used in addition to its translation 'yes.' In Revelation 22:20 John repeats the words with which he concurs (given the punctuation of Nestle/Aland). As in the Old Testament, so also here, the impression is given that this is an extra-ordinary use of the word 'amen.'

### **4. As a characteristic of God**

The texts from Isaiah discussed above appear to receive an echo in Revelation 3:14 where "the Amen" is used as a title for Jesus (see the discussion above).

In addition to these categories we may add two more...

### **5. Confirmation of a blessing formula**

A blessing formula (greeting) is often affirmed with a concluding 'amen' by the person passing on the blessing (cf. Rom. 15:33; Gal. 6:18). Many manuscripts also add an 'amen' to the following texts: Rom. 16:24; 1 Cor. 16:24; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 4:23; Col. 4:18; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2 Thess. 3:18; 2 Tim. 4:22; Tit. 3:15; Philemon 1:25; Heb. 13:25; 1 Pet. 5:14; Rev. 22:21.

Given that these texts are all at the end (or nearly at the end) of a letter, it is difficult to decide if they should be separated from the following category. Such difficulty is increased when we notice that blessings at the beginning of letters (e.g. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3 etc.) are never concluded with the word 'amen'!

### **6. As a conclusion**

Just as in the previous category the word 'amen' was used as a conclusion, it is also used as such in many manuscripts of the first two letters of John (without a preceding word of praise or blessing). The same goes for Mark 16:9 in the so-called short ending of that gospel. This use for the word amen was frequently employed in the early Christian church. In this way the 'amen' marks the end of the story or letter.

In respect of category five (the confirmation of a blessing formula) it is sometimes suggested that when 'amen' is used in passages like Romans 15:33; 16:24 and Galatians 6:18 Paul is thinking of the congregations who would have spoken this 'amen.'<sup>11</sup> Paul, however, never indicates this in any way in his letters. It is a *theory*. In order to make this *theory* plausible, it must first be demonstrated that there was an established practice whereby a communal 'amen' was spoken *after the giving of the blessing*. This is not easy. The *only* information which we have from the first century AD is 1 Corinthians 14:16 where we learn that it was the practice (at least in Corinth) to say a communal 'amen' after a praise-formula (Blessed / Praised be the Lord ..."). From the second century AD we learn that it was the practice (at least in Rome, but see also Dionys. Alex. in Eus. *HE*. 7.9.4) to say a communal 'amen' after the praise-formula at the end of the thanksgiving prayer in the Lord's Supper liturgy (Just. *1 Apol.* 65.3). We do not possess any other information

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<sup>11</sup> For example, J. Smelik, "Amen door gemeente ook aan slot gepast," *Nederlands Dagblad* 23 January 1998.

from this century concerning the use of 'amen' in the worship service.<sup>12</sup> It may be mentioned that in the worship services of the great synagogue in Alexandria around the middle of the second century AD it was the practice to say a communal 'amen' after a praise-formula (Tosefta, *Sukka* 4.6). From a much later source, the Babylonian Talmud (eighth century AD) we learn that an 'amen' was communally spoken after each of the three sections of the Aaronic blessing (*Sota* 39b — that Jews around the time of the third century AD no longer felt any objection to an 'amen' after a blessing-formula may be deduced from Mishnah, *Sota* 7.5). In the small ascetic Jewish sect at Qumran by the Dead sea, which appears to have been instituted around the third century BC, there was also the practice of pronouncing a communal 'amen.' Such an 'amen' was spoken after the blessings and curses of their covenant ceremony which was modelled on Deuteronomy 27 (1QS 1.16ff). It is not clear whether this 'amen' was only spoken at the end of the ceremony (i.e., after the curses that followed the blessings) or also directly after pronouncement of the blessings. All things considered, there is insufficient evidence for a communal 'amen' after blessing-formulae in the time of the New Testament. A theory concerning such an 'amen' in Paul's letters can therefore not be made plausible.

### Conclusions

We may in the first place conclude that the most frequent use of the word 'amen' is to affirm praise to the Lord. This may be expressed by the speaker as well as the hearers of the word of praise. Hearers using the word 'amen' in this context effectively appropriate the words of praise as their own.

It is, in the second place, a remarkable fact that the word 'amen' is never used in the Bible to affirm a blessing directed at oneself. I would suggest that this would be considered haughty and therefore inappropriate. If someone is so kind as to say something good about me it would be impolite to respond with "Amen, it is true and certain"! This would certainly apply to a blessing received from the Lord. The practice, which is becoming more and more popular, of allowing the whole congregation to say 'amen' after the blessing at the end of a worship service ought therefore to be rejected. If an 'amen' is uttered after the blessing then it should be spoken by the minister / elder as a kind of conclusion in line with the examples in category five above.

Equally remarkable is the fact that 'amen' is not used to conclude any prayers in the Bible. In the Lord's Prayer the 'amen' affirms the expression of praise that concludes the prayer. I do not know when, in the course of the centuries, it became common to use 'amen' as a conclusion for prayer.<sup>13</sup> For us it has a practical advantage since we pray with our eyes closed. In biblical times men prayed by lifting up their eyes toward heaven with outstretched arms and uplifted palms. This meant that everyone could see when the prayer was finished. That is not so easy when everyone has their eyes shut.

In the early Christian church by far the majority of prayers ended with an expression of praise concluded with an accompanying 'amen' (following the example of the Lord's Prayer), and that is possibly a good idea for us. While not required, it is appropriate to conclude our prayer with an expression of praise, even if it is no more than the loanword 'Hallelujah' ("Praise Yahweh"). The concluding 'amen' would then also receive a richer meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> Hippolytus' *Traditio Apostolica* 21 (cf. Tert. *Spec.* 25), written ca. AD 215, records the practice whereby those receiving the elements of the Lord's Supper say 'amen' in response to the words of the presbyter who provides them. This practice may go back to the second century and would come under category three, an affirmation of the words of someone else.

<sup>13</sup> The earliest example that I know of is to be found in the apocryphal book Tobit 8:8.

I also have a few remarks with regard to a typical Reformed liturgy. If it is inappropriate to say 'amen' after a blessing directed toward ourselves then an 'amen' after the *votum* is also inappropriate. The traditional *votum* ('Our help is in the name of the LORD ...', Ps. 124:8) is often expressed by the minister / elder on behalf of the congregation at the beginning of the worship service.<sup>14</sup> The congregation expresses hereby its dependency on God, His goodness and grace by which He desires to be our help. It would, however, be better for the whole congregation to say or sing the *votum*, but without an attendant 'amen.'

The expression of 'amen' after the greeting at the beginning of the service does not follow biblical examples either. When it occurs it is a result of the uses noted in category five. It certainly ought not to be expressed by the congregation since the greeting brings a blessing intended for the congregation itself.

In the liturgies often in use in Reformed churches there is not a separate place for a spoken expression of praise for the Lord. That does not mean that we cannot find expressions of praise for the Lord in Reformed worship services (consider the psalms, prayers, etc.), but it does not form a separate part of the liturgy. This was, however, not the case in the synagogue services around the time of the Lord Jesus. They began with such an expression of praise. This use of a praise formula in Christian form was copied by the apostles who often begin their letters in this way (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-5; Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). The most well-known *baruch* (praise) formula in the New Testament is probably the first half of the so-called Song of Zachariah (Luke 1:68-75).<sup>15</sup> I would suggest that a praise formula (possibly from the aforementioned texts and with an attendant communal 'amen') could very appropriately follow the greeting. In this way we could give form to a part of the liturgy from the Jewish synagogue which was used by the apostles and is often echoed in the psalms (e.g. Ps 72:18-18; 144:1-2; etc.). If this element remains absent in the liturgy, it is still possible to let the sermon end with an expression of praise. It would be very fitting for the whole congregation to conclude such an expression of praise with their 'amen.' The texts listed above show that both in the Old as well as in the New Testament it was common for the whole congregation to communally express such an 'amen.'

It is my hope and prayer that this short study on the use of the word 'amen' may encourage all of us to heartily engage in the affirmation of God's wondrous deeds and promises with the surety and certainty of faith that can only come from the One who may justly take the title 'Amen' upon Himself, Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead. Hallelujah, amen.

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<sup>14</sup> The use of the *votum* has a rather complex history. The word is ecclesiastical Latin for 'prayer' and this shows the origin of its use. During the middle ages it was customary for the priest and altar boys to say a prayer before the service began. This prayer began with the words of Psalm 124:8. At the time of the Reformation the Scriptural quotation at the beginning of this prayer was used in the worship service just before the sermon. The words of the psalm, which are not actually a prayer, however were still called the *votum*. Later, around the beginning of the seventeenth century, the '*votum*' was moved to the beginning of the service. As an expression of the dependence on the LORD, it is a nice way to begin a service. See further, G. van Rongen, *Zijn Schone Dienst: Studies over de Gereformeerde Liturgie* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1956) 34-9.

<sup>15</sup> For Jewish practice see the tract *Berakoth* in the Mishnah.