

## **Amen: The scriptural meaning**

Written by K B Napier

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Everybody says it. Everybody recognises it. But, how many know what it really means? There is an absurdity in repeating a word countless times, when we do not understand it. The word 'Amen' occurs 78 times in scripture; a very serious word.

### **The Law of Jealousies**

The first use of this word is found in Numbers 5:11-22, and it is repeated – unusual, but also found in Nehemiah 8:6. In this text the words are allied to a woman allegedly committing adultery, and the 'jealousy offering'. The priest warned the woman that if she *had* committed adultery, the bitter water she had to drink from a concoction devised by the priest would "make thy thigh to rot, and thy belly to swell." The accused woman then had to respond with the words "Amen, amen".

In this text the words mean 'so be it', as an acceptance of judgment, said twice as a recognition of its seriousness. It has reference to faithfulness, and is used to confirm the words of another. In the text we see a woman accused of adultery and condemning herself by the word 'Amen'. However, this was not an admission of guilt – the bitter water would cause her to suffer if she was guilty. If the water had no ill-effects, then the woman was deemed guiltless. In the text the capital 'A' for the first 'Amen' merely shows it to be the beginning of a phrase and has no other relevance.

### **All the People**

In the Old Testament, the word 'Amen' is used to describe the response of all the people to a national statement. For example, in Deuteronomy 27:15, where the Levites warned the nation not to make idols. The people then had to make a national reply: "And all the people shall answer and say, Amen."

Following that warning came a number of others in the Old Testament, all requiring the same national response: 'Amen'. The same answer of 'So be it' is found in 1 Kings 1:36, where a man confirms and accepts the king's decision. Each use in the Old Testament is usually linked with the whole nation complying with God's command.

A variation of 'Amen, amen' is found in the Psalms. In Psalm 41:13: "Amen and amen". This is when the Lord was blessed by David, on behalf of the people. David repeats this

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double-acceptance in two other Psalms.

Jeremiah 28:6 further defines what is meant by 'Amen', by adding "The Lord do so" and "The Lord perform thy words which thou hast prophesied". Thus, 'Amen' is more than a simple affirmation by the people, or by an individual; it is an acknowledgement that you are agreeing to what God says He will do, even if it is His curse.

### **New Testament**

The Lord's Prayer ends with 'Amen', or amen, so relying on the Hebrew usage. However, in the New Testament, Amen can also mean 'of a truth' at the start of something said, or, at the end, 'so be it' or 'may it occur'. The word was borrowed from the synagogues by many Christians who, in the first few hundred years of Christianity, attended synagogues for worship. By saying the word, Christians accepted whatever was said by God and promised to make it real in their lives.

The word is also closely connected to the Hebrew, *amam*, meaning believe, or faithful. From that, Amen came to represent a statement of utter belief, trust and confidence in God. In the Hebrew, the word would be used thus: "the God of Amen" or, the faithful God.

In reality, no Christian understands what the implication of saying 'Amen' is. By saying the word, he does not just acknowledge what has been said in a prayer or statement, but he promises to faithfully perform it in his life. More than that, he is promising to be bound by the penalties for disobedience. This takes us back to the first use of the word by the woman allegedly found in adultery (Numbers – see above), who agreed to accept any penalty from God, if she was found guilty.

On one occasion 'Amen' is used to describe Christ, because everything God wishes to happen are bound in His person (Revelation 3:14). The proper actions are these: God firstly says 'Amen' meaning 'Thus shall it be'. The human being then responds with 'Amen', meaning 'Let it be so'. God commands and we obey! That is 'Amen'.

In the New Testament Jesus would introduce a new teaching with 'Amen', meaning 'Verily' or 'of a truth'. Thus, there is no contradiction where, say, Matthew and Mark say 'Amen', but Luke says 'of a truth', when referring to the same event, because both mean the same thing. This

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exactly follows the Hebrew use, which can also mean 'truly' or 'verily', as well as 'so be it' and 'may it become true'.

### Conclusions

'Amen' is applied equally to confirmation or endorsement of what God says; it can also be used to express hope, or to confirm a blessing, prayer, curse or oath. In big synagogues, the *hazzan* (he is the precentor who intones the liturgy and leads prayers) standing at the centre would wave a flag to denote when the congregation should say 'Amen' after blessings. In essence, though this was the main response of the congregation (because the priests would say the rest), it was used to mean the congregation virtually repeated everything said, by using that one word.

What we see, then, is that almost no-one today understands what they are doing when they say 'Amen'. Very often, people say it in a very superficial manner. Other times they just say it because it is expected of them, but without understanding why. Hopefully, the reader will see that to say 'Amen' is serious and full of depth.

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