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THE STRUCTURE OF AMOS AS A TESTIMONY TO ITS INTEGRITY

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Scholars have long recognized the constructions used in Hebrew poetry such as chiasmus and parallelism. In addition to increasing our appreciation of the literature, knowledge of poetic structure can be a valuable tool in the higher criticism of the OT—that is, one may have reason to doubt the authenticity of a line that breaks the flow of a passage, whereas it would be almost impossible to challenge the integrity of an acrostic poem. Likewise, wherever it can be shown that a Hebrew text is carefully (but not artificially) constructed after the patterns of chiasmus or parallelism, the integrity of that text is virtually assured. Two disputed texts in Amos illustrate this principle: 5:10-13 and 8:7-9:15.

I. AMOS 5:10-13

Mays in his commentary on Amos says that 5:13 is an addition to the original text of Amos, "a judicious comment of a follower of wisdom."[1] The passage, however, is structured as follows:

(A) 10 They hate the one who rebukes in the gate,
and the one who speaks honestly they abhor.
(B) 11 Therefore, because you tread down upon the poor
and take a grain tax from him,
(C) houses of hewn stone you have built,
but you shall not live in them;
beautiful vineyards you have planted,
but you shall not drink their wine,
12 because I know how many are your rebellions,
and how vast are your sins.
(B') You oppose the righteous man, you take a bribe,
you turn the poor away from the gate.
(A') 13 Therefore the wise man is silent at this time,
for it is an evil time.

The chiasmus is clear:

A—the prudent man's words are hated
B—the wealthy abuse the poor in the gates
C—judgment will befall the wealthy
B'—the wealthy abuse the poor in the gates
A'—the prudent man must keep silent

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[1]J. L. Mays, *Amos* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 98.

Therefore the proposal that 5:13 is a later insertion is not only unnecessary but against the evidence, as it is very unlikely that Amos would write an unfinished chiasmus that was later completed by one of the wisdom writers.

II. Amos 8:7-9:15

Perhaps the most widely accepted and most serious attack on the integrity of Amos is the rejection of 9:11-15. Yet a compelling reason exists for considering 9:11-15 to have been part of the original text of Amos. Loosely but undeniably, 8:7-14 parallels 9:1-15.

In 8:7 Yahweh swears to remember the sins of Israel. In 8:8, in an eschatological judgment passage, it is said that the land will shake, the people mourn, and the land rise, be tossed about and overflow like the Nile. This is followed by heavenly signs (v 9) and calamitous judgment on Israel (v 10), which is described in terms of a famine (vv 11-13). The famine is here want of the Word of God (vv 11-12) and a literal want of nourishment (v 13). The conclusion is irrevocable destruction (v 14).

In 9:1-4, Yahweh stands by the altar and in the language of an oath declares his intent to destroy Israel's sinners (just as he swore against them in 8:7). And 9:5 obviously parallels 8:8: The earth melts, the inhabitants mourn, the land rises and subsides like the Nile. But instead of fearful signs in the heavens, God is said to be the creator of the heavens (v 6). Israel is then said to be like the other nations in the eyes of God and to be heading towards judgment, but she is promised a remnant (vv 7-10). Instead of destruction the nation is now promised restoration (vv 11-12), which is described in terms of plenteous harvest and the drinking of wine (vv 13-14) in contrast to the previous famine and thirst (8:11-13). The conclusion is that reborn Israel will have irrevocable blessing instead of irrevocable destruction.

Thus the parallel between 8:7-14 and 9:1-15 is unquestionable. The first is an oracle of judgment, for which the heavens give terrible signs, and the second is an oracle of the remnant's salvation through judgment, for which God's creation of the heavens stands as a witness to his creating and sustaining power. The destructive overflow of the Nile in chap. 8 contrasts with its beneficial and life-giving subsidence in chap. 9. Yahweh's strength to destroy is also strength to create, and even in judgment he sifts for the righteous remnant, so that "the least kernel shall not fall on the ground" (9:9). Using parallelism, Amos declares God's faithfulness to be operative even in his wrath. The same event is twice described, first with emphasis on the destruction of sinners and second with emphasis on the salvation of the righteous. The means of judgment has thus become the means of vindication and deliverance. The parallel between the two passages is not mechanical, in that not every phrase of one section is repeated in the other (as one might expect of a later redactor); rather, it is subtle indeed. That both sections had the same author is beyond doubt.