CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS POLEMICS IN AMOS

4.1. The Composition and Contents of Chapter 5

As in the message of the prophet contained in Am 4 the words of the present chapter seem, more or less, to constitute an ideological unity consisting of pronouncements of judgement and of accusations concerning the ethical and religious behaviour of the Israelites.

With regard to vv. 18-27 containing, among other things, the famous words about the “Day of Yahweh” (vv. 18-20) and the cryptic statement in v. 26 containing the words skwot and kywn, it is difficult to decide upon the original relationship of this text to the obvious unit vv. 1-17. It is equally difficult to decide whether or not in vv. 18-27 we are dealing with a series of disconnected Amos words which have been linked together by a compiler.

All these problems, however, are very considerably reduced by the fact that all these different verses belong within the same ideological context: they are all words by one prophet, directed towards the one and the same audience. Whether they were originally uttered on one particular or on several different occasions is of less importance. It should also be stressed in this connection that the means available for discerning the strata of a certain composition, late interpolations in a text, etc. is altogether rather illusory.

Vv. 1-17 may be divided the following way: v. 1. Introduction to the words of judgement through the formula šm&w ʾt-hdbr hzh, “Hear this word!” The same formula is used in 3, 1³ and 4, 1.

¹ For the translation of the text, see below pp. 77 (vv. 2-3), 77-78 (vv. 4-6), 81 (v. 11), 82 (vv. 16-17), 108-09 (vv. 18-20), 111 (vv. 21-24), 119 (v. 25), 119ff. (v. 26).
² The statement is not meant categorically, of course. When we consider the size of the Book of Amos, however, it must be regarded as quite obvious that we do not have at our disposal sufficient textual material to make such statements with regard to authenticity as may frequently be found in some of the most used commentaries. This does not imply that we are totally incapacitated when it comes to making critical observations on the text (cf. B. Vawter, “Prophecy and the Redactional Question”, No Famine in the Land (1975) 127-39, where one will find at least one good example with regard to the Book of Amos).
Amos defines his utterance as a *gynh*, a “dirge”⁴. The *gynh* being the lament for the dead, Amos uses a form taken from quite another sphere of life in his pronouncement of doom. V. 2 brings the lament itself:

“'She has fallen and will rise no more, the virgin Israel, prostrate on her land, with no one to raise her up.’”⁴

V. 3 gives another pronouncement of doom:

“'For thus speaks 2dny *[yhw]*: The city from which a thousand went out, shall have a hundred left, and the one from which a hundred went out, shall have ten left, for Israel.’”

The utterance of doom of v. 3 belongs together with v. 2 in a unity. Obviously, the figures appearing in this verse should not be taken literally. They are simply a means of describing the total annihilation of the Israelite people. Nor should the reference to the hundred and the ten that are left be regarded as references to an idea of “‘a remnant’” as some scholars do⁵. As is the case with the description of the shepherd who rescues a pair of legs or a bit of an ear from the lion’s mouth (3, 12) and of the man that carries the bones out of the ruined house (6, 10), the purpose of the description of the prophet in 5, 3 is to describe the total annihilation of the Israelites.

The verb *ysh*⁶ used in v. 3 is a technical term for “‘going to war’”⁶.

The concept that *yhw* punishes his people by means of war is also found in Am 2, 14-16; 4, 10; 7, 11. The phenomenon is commonly found in the prophetic writings⁷.

V. 4 introduces a new and quite different section vv. 4-6:

“'For thus says *yhw* to the House of Israel: Seek me and you shall live. Do not seek* Bethel,

⁴ The use of the *gynh* metre in the preaching of doom is found in other prophets as well. Besides Am 5, 1 and 8, 10, cf. Jer 7, 29; 9, 9; 9, 19, Ez 2, 10; 19, 1; 26, 17; 27, 2.32; 28, 12; 32, 2. For a combination of the lament over the dead and the song of derision, see Is 14. For the *gynh* in general, see W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* (1969) 420-21.


⁶ E.g. Gen. 14, 18, Num 1, 3.20ff, Deut 20, 1; 23, 10, 1 Sam 8, 20; 18, 30, 2 Sam 11, 17; 18, 2-4.6.


⁸ Pointing to the fact that the verb *drš* is never used in connection with a place name, O. Eissfeldt has suggested that the reference in Am 5, 5 is to the deity Bethel, rather than to the place name (“‘Der Gott Bethel’”, *ARW* 28 (1930) 16-17. On the deity Bethel, see also below p. 167). In view of 4, 4, however, as well as of the context in general, this is not likely. If *drš* were not used in connection with a place, it would be more reasonable to assume that here we have a pun on the “Seek me” of the preceding line. For a detailed treatment of the verb *drš*, see G. Gerleman, E. Ruprecht, “‘drš’”, *THAT* I (1975) 460-67, S. Wagner, “‘drš’”, *TWAT* II (1977) 313-29.