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CRITICAL NOTE

ANOTHER WORD-PLAY IN AMOS?

COMMENTATORS agree that the writer of the book of Amos uses a paranomasia involving a basket of summer fruit (קִי) and a prediction of the coming end (קֵץ) in 8:1-2 to make a specific point.¹ Such word-plays are not uncommon in Scripture; their general function is aptly described by von Rad.² It is suggested here that the device in 8:1-2 is actually the second of two used by the writer of this book.

The first word-play occurs on the root קמא, forms of which occur only three times in this book. In 2:14 a Piel form of the verb is used and in 2:16 an adjectival form. In both cases the prophet is speaking of those who are powerful by human standards but whose power is futile in the face of the harsh judgment of 2:14-16.

The last instance of the root קמא appears in the proper name of the priest of Bethel: Amaziah (7:10, 12, 14). To suggest a word-play here in the conventional sense seems unfounded at first, since the terms are not physically adjacent in the text. But the likelihood that this is such a literary nicety grows once a larger part of this book is considered.

One of the dominant themes of Amos's prophecy involves his denunciation of Israel. This begins at 2:6, and the prophet's subsequent words show a repeated emphasis on the people's refusal to acknowledge God. Because of this attitude, they are subject to judgment. One

¹See, e.g., R. S. Cripps, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Amos* (London: SPCK, 1969) 240; E. Hammershaimb, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970) 120; W. R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (New York: Scribner's, 1905) 175; J. L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 141; and H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 317, 319. Also, the study by B. D. Rahtjen, "A Critical Note on Amos 8:1-2," *JBL* 83 (1964) 417, notes a use of קֵץ in the Gezer Calendar that is remarkably similar to that in Amos.

²G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 2.84 says: "the word in question loses a certain amount of its meaning, and apparently acts as a series of sounds rather than as a way of conveying meaning; but this series of sounds, which is the word reduced to its original value, is at the same time given a greatly intensified meaning, in that it is now, in respect of its form, surrounded by new associations and new meanings." Von Rad identifies word-plays in Isa 10:29-31; Jer 1:11-12; Mic 1:10-15. Cf. Harper, *Amos and Hosea*, 175, where word-plays are identified in Jer 50:20, 34, 51:20; Ezek 25:16; and Hos 1:5.

aspect of the people's obduracy is reliance on their own understanding and abilities: they reverse the proper procedure for prophets and Nazirites (2:12), oppress the unfortunate (5:12), worship false gods (5:26), and engage in insouciant lounging (6:4-6). All this contrasts with the acceptable attitude of respect and worship that is characteristic of an overt dependence on God.

Because of this independence, Amos predicts terrible destruction destined to fall first on the leaders of the people (6:1) who were castigated as impotent despite their power in 2:14-16. When the prophet then refers in 7:10-16 to one whose very name speaks of power, Amos reminds his readers of God's powerful judgment already pronounced. Now, Amaziah himself is to receive a similar punishment since he denounces the prophet of God (7:17).

The possibility of a word-play on אָמִיָּה is further suggested by the fact that this Amaziah is a character otherwise unknown in Scripture. There are references to three other figures with the same name,³ but none of these can be Amaziah of Bethel. It is significant, then, that of all the detractors encountered by Amos, only this one is specifically named.

The first word-play depends on information that runs through most of the book. It highlights a problem rife in the OT: the independence of Israel from God. This paranomasia in turn sets the stage for the obvious device of 8:1-2. In the context of Amos's fourth vision, a second word-play serves as the most complete indication of destruction given up to this point in the prophecy. The end (8:26),⁴ when the powerful ones will certainly perish, is very near.

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³These are: (1) a son of Joash and king of Judah (2 Kgs 14:1-20; 2 Chronicles 25); (2) a descendant of Simeon (1 Chr 4:34); and (3) a temple musician in the line of Levi (1 Chr 6:45).

⁴Also called "that day" (8:3, cf. 2:16).