

Amos 5:21-22 — a Tightly Wrapped Package

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There is general agreement that Amos 5:21-22 constitutes a single strophe.¹ There is less agreement about whether *כי אִם־תַּעֲלוּ־לִי עֹלוֹת*, “even though you offer me burnt-offerings” (5:22aα), was originally a part of this strophe. In his article in the *Festschrift* for Jacob Milgrom, Meir Weiss set forth a careful structural and rhetorical argument for retaining the phrase,² and his article has been cited as support for the phrase’s retention.³ I would argue, however, that if 5:22aα is omitted, the structure that emerges is a much tighter one, and one that reinforces the content of these verses.

In 5:21-22 Amos⁴ attacks the cultic worship of the pious persecutors of the poor, whose behavior external to the cult he has elsewhere condemned. It would appear from a passage like Amos 4:5, with its reference to the offering of the *תודה* (thanksgiving), that those whom Amos condemns had themselves been truly grateful to YHWH for the abundance that had come their way through those condemned actions and hence were assiduous in the

¹ The limits of the pericope to which 5:21-22 belong is debated. For some the pericope includes all of 5:18-27; so, e.g., Pierre Bovati and Roland Meynet, *Le livre du prophète Amos* (Rhétorique biblique 2; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994), 187ff.; Aaron Shart, *Die Entstehung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs. Neuarbeitung von Amos im Rahmen Schriftenübergreifender Redaktionprozesse* (BZAW 260; Berlin: de Gruyter, 199f.; Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 392. Others, with whom I would agree, limit the pericope to 5:21-24; so, e.g., James L. Mays, *Amos. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 81ff.; Gören Eidevall, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 24G; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 167. For others 5:21-27, with some omissions, constitute the pericope; so, e.g., Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos. A Commentary on the Books of Joel and Amos*, trans. Waldemar James et al. (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 258ff. For the purposes of this article the extent of the larger pericope of which 5:21-22 is a part is not relevant.

² Meir Weiss, “Concerning Amos’ Repudiation of the Cult,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. Donald P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 197-214.

³ E.g., Eidevall, *Amos*, 167.

⁴ Robert B. Coote, *Amos among the Prophets: Composition and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 75, assigns 5:21-22 to his seventh century stage B; most commentators, however, attribute the passage to the prophet Amos himself.

performance of their cultic obligations. To Amos this was blasphemous, and in 5:21-22 Amos portrays YHWH's total rejection of such blasphemous worship.

The structure of 5:21-22 reinforces this message of total rejection. We see this first in the manner in which the verbs and nouns in each of the four lines of this strophe (5:21a, 5:21b, 5:22a β , 5:22b) are arranged. In the first line (5:22a) there are three elements consisting of two verbs, שְׂנֵאתִי מֵאִסְתִּי, followed by a single noun, חֲגִיכֶם, which serves as their direct object. In the last line (5:22b) there are likewise three elements, but here there is a two-noun construct cluster, שְׁלֹם מְרִיאִיכֶם, which functions as the direct object of the single negated verb לֹא אֲבִיט. The asyndetic construction of the verbs שְׂנֵאתִי מֵאִסְתִּי in the first line and the use of the construct construction שְׁלֹם מְרִיאִיכֶם in the last line make the connection between the doubled elements in these two lines closer than it would have been had a conjunction been used to join the doubled elements in one of the two cases.

In the last line the verb-noun order of the first line is reversed. A similar chiasm is found in the middle two lines (5:21b verb-noun; 5:22a β noun-verb). Moreover, each of these middle lines is shorter by one element than the two lines which bracket them: the second line is shorter than the first line by one verb, and the third line is shorter than the fourth line by one noun. This produces the following pattern:

verb – verb – noun

verb – noun

noun -verb

noun – noun – verb

The effect of this chiasm within a chiasm is to bracket the two middle lines by the first and last lines, rather like a box within a box.

This box within a box is, as it were, tied together by the manner in which Amos employs the several parts of speech in this passage. The two verbs of the first line, שְׂנֵאתִי מֵאִסְתִּי, are antonyms of אֲרִצָּה, the verb found in the third line. Each of these three verbs denotes both mental attitudes ('hate', 'despise', 'take pleasure in') and actions deriving from these mental attitudes ('reject',

‘spurn’, ‘accept’). In contrast, the verbs of the second line (ארייה) and the fourth line (אביט) each describe an activity of one of the five senses (‘smell’, ‘look at’). The different character of the two sets of verbs produces an A B A B pattern.

It is also in the second and fourth lines that Amos expresses himself elliptically. The verb רייה (5:21b) is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only of the physical act of smelling (Gen 8:21; 27:27; Exod 30:38; Lev 26:31; Judg 16:9; 1 Sam 26:19).⁵ When used of the smelling of a sacrifice it signifies YHWH’s acceptance (Gen 8:21; 1 Sam 26:19) or, if negated, God’s rejection (Lev 26:31) of a sacrifice. What is conveyed by the line ולא ארייה בעצרתיכם is, “and I do not smell/accept (the sacrifices offered) in your solemn assemblies.” Similarly, the verb in the fourth line, נבט, does not have a sacrifice as its object anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. What YHWH looks upon is people (e.g., Isa 64:8; 66:2; Ps 33:13), the earth (Ps 102:20; 104:32), and the like. What is conveyed by the line ושלם מריאיכם לא אביט is, “and (the solemn assemblies in which you offer) your communion-sacrifice of fatlings I will not look at.” What Amos had done in the second and fourth lines of this oracle is switch objects, using an object one would expect with the verb of the first line as the object of the verb found in the fourth line, and vice versa:⁶

ולא ארייה	בעצרתיכם
↓	↑
ושלם מריאיכם	לא אביט

A pattern different from the A B A B pattern of the verbs emerges when we examine the nouns of this strophe. The nouns of the first two lines, חגיכם and עצרתיכם, denote the feasts and the solemn assemblies at which the nouns of the cultic activities mentioned in the last two lines, מנחתיכם and שלם מריאיכם,

⁵ The apparent exception to this in Isa 11:3 is probably due to scribal error. See Jeremiah Unterman, “The (Non)sense of Smell in Isaiah 11:3,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992), 17-23.

⁶ This interchange of an object or predicate that logically belongs to one line with its corresponding line has been termed metathetic parallelism. See Norman B. Broznick, “Metathetic Parallelism — An Unrecognized Subtype of Synonymous Parallelism,” *HAR* 3 (1979), 23-29. Broznick does not cite this instance in Amos 5:21-22; however, he does find metathetic parallelism in Amos 6:11; 8:11.

were performed.⁷ This constitutes an A A B B pattern. If, however, we look for a pattern based on the gender of the nouns in the four lines, we see that the nouns in the first and last lines are masculine, while those in the middle two lines are feminine, producing an A B B A pattern.

Next, the negative לֹא appears in each of the last three lines of the strophe, but not in the first. In the first line Amos uses two verbs of negative import, שָׁנָא and מָאֵס, both perfective; in the following three lines, verbs of positive import, all non-perfective, are negated. YHWH's negative reaction to the festivals has as its consequence YHWH's negating a positive response to the solemn assemblies and sacrificial offerings.⁸ The pattern here is A B B B.

Finally, every line in the strophe has the second masculine plural suffix attached to its nouns, producing the pattern A A A A. It is “*your* feasts” that YHWH hates and rejects, “*your* solemn assemblies” YHWH does not “smell,” *your* sacrifices” in which YHWH takes no pleasure, “*your* communion sacrifice of fatlings” upon which YHWH does not look. This fourfold repetition of כֹּחַ- drives home Amos' point that the assiduous worship of those whose unjust behavior outside the sanctuary Amos so roundly condemned is worship totally repugnant to God. It is the worshiper who is condemned, not the cult.

The different patterns which emerge from the manner in which Amos employs the different parts of speech in this strophe, namely,

verbs	nouns	negatives	pronominal suffixes
A	A A	A	A
B	A B	B	A
A	B B	B	A
B	B A	B	A

⁷ In this passage מִנְחָה signifies sacrifice in general, as in Gen 4:3-4; Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 263, suggests that the rare use of this word in the plural in this passage underscores its general sense here. It may be that 5:22aα was inserted by someone who took מִנְחָה here in its more restricted sense of cereal offering and wished to make the point that it was not the omission of the עֹלָה that caused YHWH to reject the cult.

⁸ For this use of the non-perfective as indicating “a real situation which arises as the consequence of another situation,” see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §31.6.2a.

function, as it were, to provide the twine by which box within the box of verb-noun pattern is tightly bound, each piece of twine wrapping the box in its own way. The effect of the manner in which Amos has employed all of the complex structural and rhetorical elements in this passage reinforces the strophe's message of YHWH's total rejection of the cultic worship performed by the pious oppressors of the poor. Nothing can be salvaged, for what is rejected is a single package tightly wrapped.