THE BOOK OF HOSEA

INTRODUCTION, COMMENTARY, AND REFLECTIONS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

THE BOOK

The play The Marriage of Hosea, published in 1929 under the pseudonym Izachak, carries the subtitle “A Passion Play.” In describing the work as a passion play, the anonymous twentieth-century author understood the ancient prophetic book of Hosea very well. The multivalent word passion captures the incendiary relations existing among the characters of the book. It typifies the feverish lust of a wife chasing after her various lovers. As profound suffering, passion describes the torment her husband experiences because of her infidelity. It also embodies the violent anger with which the husband lashes out against his wife to punish her and bring her to her senses. Finally, it embraces the ardor between the couple as they reconcile and commit themselves to each other again.

Structure and Theological Themes. The prophetic book of Hosea is indeed a passionate work. Its vivid metaphor of marriage for the covenant between God and Israel usually comes to mind when one thinks of this book. Hosea is the first biblical work to employ such an image to describe the God/Israel relationship. Although a major one, however, marriage is not the only covenantal metaphor for Hosea. The book’s structure evinces another important image of the special God/Israel relationship and another kind of “passion” as well.

The book is divided into three sections, each highlighting a particular metaphor for the covenant between God and Israel. Hosea 1–3 concentrates on the husband/wife metaphor. The tragic marriage of Hosea to his promiscuous wife, Gomer, and the births of their three children (chap. 1) parallel Yahweh’s tumultuous union with the faithless wife, Israel (chap. 2). Hosea represents Israel’s worship of illicit gods figuratively as adultery, punishable by death if God so chooses. God’s eventual reconciliation with “his wife,” Israel, provides a model for Hosea’s own reunion with Gomer (chap. 3).

Chapters 4–11, the second and largest section, contain the bulk of Hosea’s oracles against Israelite politics and cult. Chapter 11, which summarizes and concludes this section, takes up the parent/child metaphor for the God/Israel relationship. God becomes the loving, caring parent, while Israel in its transgression of the covenant is the rebellious son. The passion of the
mother/father God exhibits itself in the parent’s compassionate refusal to kill the intractable child, even though the laws of the land would sanction death.

In the third and final section, chaps. 12–14, the prophet interweaves both the husband/wife metaphor and the rebellious son metaphor. The unwise son is threatened with destruction, unless he repents of his accumulated guilt (Hosea 13). The repentant wife returns to her husband and to the land from whence she was banished (Hosea 12). Symbolizing the wife and her reunion with the husband, the land that had formerly been devastated by the husband blossoms forth into a fruitful, luxurious plantation (Hosea 14).

The first and final verses of the work are structurally significant. Hosea 1:1 contextualizes the tradition of Hosea during a particular time in the history of the Israelite people. Hosea 14:9 concludes the book with a word of wisdom, enjoining the reader to heed God’s Word inscribed therein.

Hosea 3, 11, and 14 also have structural importance. These chapters conclude the three major sections of the work. Each presents a story about the God/Israel relationship through the metaphor either of the husband/wife (Hosea 3; 14) or of the parent/child (Hosea 11). Each highlights the themes of human repentance/return (the Hebrew word בושׁ [šûb] encompasses both meanings) and divine forgiveness and mercy. Each chapter also unfolds a journey motif that occurs at two levels: the wife’s/son’s spiritual journey back to the husband/parent and the physical journey back to the homeland from exile.

In addition to the themes of repentance/return and journey home, each major section of the work is characterized by a movement from barrenness to fertility. In Hosea 2 the land that was ravaged and laid waste (2:3, 12) participates cosmically in the bounty that flows from the rebetrothal of husband and wife. The wife/Israel is figuratively sown in the land (2:18–23). In the 4–11 complex, the symbolic barrenness of the people is reflected in the destitution of the cosmos (see Commentary on 4:3). Nevertheless, three hope passages (5:15–6:3; 10:12; 11:10–11) articulate a movement from barrenness to fertility. Hosea 1–3 concludes with the wife/Israel sown in the land. Hosea 14:5–8 manifests the wonderful results of the sowing by depicting the wife/Israel breaking forth as a lush and flourishing land.

**Authorship.** Over a hundred years of scholarship on the prophetic books reveal that not every saying or oracle in the work comes directly from the prophet himself.¹ A prophetic book is the literary result of a long traditioning process, encompassing not only the lifetime of the prophet but also centuries following his death. Successive generations who inherit the prophet’s sayings reinterpret them for their own particular time, putting a distinctive stamp upon the different literary phases of the book.

¹ I am assuming with good reason that the prophet and the collectors and redactors of his tradition are male.

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Earlier biblical scholarship tended to value what it saw as the *ipsissima verba*, or the “authentic words,” of the prophet. Evidence of later editorial activity was regarded as secondary, not only chronologically, but also in theological importance. Recent critical studies, however, recognize the significance of later stages of the work: those of the collectors and redactors. In their collection, arrangement, and commentary on the prophetic tradition they inherit, these later editors are responsible for the biblical work as we have it today.

Hence, the authorship of the book of Hosea is a complex matter that is still disputed. Many scholars insist that most of the book originated with the prophet Hosea. Others think that redactional activity was more extensive than previously thought. Relevant for the oracles of this eighth-century BCE prophet are three major interpretive stages that can be detected in the book of Hosea: an eighth–seventh-century BCE collection of the prophet’s oracles; a seventh-century BCE deuteronomistic redaction during the time of the Judean king Josiah; and a sixth-century BCE deuteronomistic redaction during the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE). Whether one thinks that Hosea’s original oracles were particularly influential for these later interpretive periods or whether one maintains that redactors expanded Hosea’s original oracles during these later times with their own theologies, it is clear that these stages were critical in the book’s formation.

Since the focus of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* is the final canonical text itself, we must reckon very seriously with the later interpretive stages as well as the prophet’s earlier oracles. Although not all of the sayings can be credited to the prophet Hosea, from a scriptural vantage point they now belong fully to him and his book. Acceptance of every stage in the formation of a prophetic book recognizes that God’s word, spoken by the prophet in a specific historical context, was not limited to that context. Later eras appropriated Hosea’s words as tradition that spoke in some way to their own circumstances, often expanding upon or even modifying them. The content of the original message was not dissipated when its initial context was past.

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5 See Yee, *Composition and Tradition*, 1–25, for a review of the literature.
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF THE BOOK

The Period of the Eighth-Century BCE Prophet. Social Turmoil. Very little is known about the northern prophet Hosea. The superscription to his book, which was added later by a redactor (see Commentary on 1:1), identifies Hosea as the son of Beeri, about whom nothing more can be said. The superscription situates Hosea between 750 and 724 BCE—i.e., between the last years of Jeroboam II (786–746 BCE) and three years before the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 BCE. If the superscription is correct, Hosea prophesied during a politically turbulent period after the peaceful rule of Jeroboam II (cf. 2 Kgs 14:23–17:41). The monarchy was plagued by a number of assassinations. Of the six kings to ascend the throne, all but one died violently. Corruption at court and partisan intrigue were rampant (Hos 6:8–10; 7:1–7). The northern kingdom not only contended with the western encroachment of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III, but also clashed with its southern rival, Judah, during the Syro-Ephraimite war (735–733 BCE). Israel’s foreign policy was often unpredictable. The nation curried favor with international powers, such as Egypt and Assyria, who competed with each other in the political arena (Hos 7:8–15; 12:1).

The nation was rife with economic abuses. The social inequities between rich and poor that were very much apparent during the time of Jeroboam II became exacerbated after his death. The war with Judah and heavy tribute to Assyria (Hos 8:10; 10:6) depleted economic resources. The richer classes intensified their exploitation of the peasants in order to pay these debts. Many resorted to fraud and cheating (Hos 12:7–8).

Cultic Turmoil. The book of Hosea is perhaps best known for its condemnation of Israel’s cult. One gets the impression from reading this book (as well as many other books in the Hebrew Bible) that worship of Yahweh had become infected with the Canaanite religion of the land the Israelites had conquered. The wife/Israel is accused of chasing after her lovers, the baals (2:7–8, 13). In Canaanite mythology, Baal was the storm god responsible for life-giving rains. In an arid climate like Israel’s, such rains were a matter of life and death. The fertility rituals grounded in this mythology supposedly involved orgiastic sex with temple prostitutes.

Recent scholarship calls into question this notion of Canaanite infiltration of a pure Yahwism. Monotheism, belief in a single God to the exclusion of any other, was not always practiced in Israel. The monotheistic theology represented in the book of Hosea eventually became normative for Israel. In their formative stages, however, Israel’s diverse religious beliefs and practices were influenced by those of other cultures.

Particularly important for understanding Hosea is recognizing that the religion of the ancient Israelites had a strong heritage in Canaanite religion. Although Yahweh was its primary God, early Israelite religion included the worship of several other deities. Veneration of the Canaanite

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deities El, Baal, and perhaps even the goddess Asherah, was accepted or at least tolerated in the earlier stages of Israel’s religious development. What stand condemned as Baal worship in Hosea—e.g., cultic rites on the high places (4:13; 10:8), pillars (3:4; 10:1–2), divining rods (4:12), images (4:17; 8:4; 14:8), and calf figurines (8:5–6; 10:5; 13:2)—were for centuries accepted components of the worship of Yahweh. Although these had been taken over from foreign cults, their appropriation had occurred much earlier and was no longer regarded as syncretistic by the people.

A number of complex factors, such as centralization of the cult, the rise of the monarchy, the increased use of writing that disseminated normative views, and a growing religious self-definition vis-à-vis other cultures, eventually led to an evolving monotheism and a rejection of much, though not all, of Israel’s Canaanite heritage. Hence, the worship of Baal, once a legitimate part of Israelite religion, now stands condemned by the book of Hosea.

Although worship of Canaanite deities was most likely a long-established practice in ancient Israel, Canaanite religious rituals are very difficult to reconstruct on the basis of the biblical witness alone. Because of its increasing polemic against that religion, the biblical text presents biased and even distorted pictures of Canaanite rites. One alleged Canaanite practice that is specifically relevant to the book of Hosea is so-called cultic prostitution. We have learned much about Canaanite mythology from the Ras Shamra tablets, discovered some fifty years ago on the coast of Syria. According to these tablets, the storm god Baal was killed by Mot, god of barrenness and death. In its prescientific milieu, this myth explained the hot, dry period between May and September, when no rains fell on the land. Baal’s sister-lover, the goddess Anat, came to the rescue by slaying Mot and bringing Baal back to life. Their passionate sexual intercourse, the Canaanites believed, initiated the rainy season that began in October.

Many scholars think that this mythic drama of death and renewed life was rehearsed every year in a religious new year festival that took place in the fall, even though the festival itself is not described in the Ras Shamra tablets. Supposedly, part of this festival was a “sacred marriage” imitating Baal and Anat, during which Canaanite men, from the king on down, had ritual sex with cultic prostitutes in order to ensure fertility in the land. The religious intent behind these

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8 Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 172–75. Analogously, one would hardly think today that Christmas trees or Easter eggs represent a tainting of a pure Christian celebration of these events, even though trees and eggs were originally part of non-Christian religious rites.

fertility cults was very serious, indeed—nothing less than the survival of the people in a hostile climate. Human nature being of a piece, however, some worshipers may have frequented these cultic prostitutes for less than religious reasons. In the minds of many interpreters, such rituals often degenerated into full-scale orgies at the sanctuaries and high places. Allegedly, it was these services that so offended Hosea (4:11–19; 9:1–3). Some critics even suggest that Hosea’s wife, Gomer, like other Israelite women (see 4:14), was a cultic prostitute.10

Nevertheless, a number of scholars have questioned the phenomenon of cultic prostitution, not only in Canaan, but also in the rest of the ancient Near East.11 No substantive textual or archaeological evidence verifies that such a class of prostitutes ever existed or that such sexual rites were ever performed. Although used by some to support the existence of cultic prostitution, the testimonies of certain ancient authors like the Greek writers Herodotus and Strabo are actually quite unreliable, because they were written at a far later date and are markedly tendentious. Although in the prophet’s mind certain rituals involved sexual intercourse, it would be a mistake to accept this assertion at face value. The biblical text is simply too polemical, revealing more about the prophetic mind that leveled the accusation than about actual observances in the cult.

Thus far I have assumed that condemnations of Israel’s cult originated with the eighth-century BCE prophet Hosea. If worship of Baal, along with rituals on the high places, pillars, calves, etc., had long been part and parcel of Israelite religion, then Hosea should not be considered a religious reformer, hearkening the Israelites back to “old time religion,” the uncontaminated worship of Yahweh alone. Instead, Hosea would actually be a religious innovator, a spokesperson for a developing monotheistic theology.12 His new theological ideas would influence the later deuteronomistic writers, for whom belief in the one God Yahweh was normative. Another possibility exists, however. It could be that censure of the “baalization” of

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the Israelite cult in the book of Hosea originated in the later deuteronomistic redaction of the book (see below).

**The Period of the Collector.** In 721 BCE the prophet Hosea’s predictions came true. The northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians under Sargon II. Upper-class Israelites were exiled to other parts of the Assyrian Empire, while the poorer classes endured Assyrian occupation of the land. The lucky ones escaped to Judah in the south. Scholars think that Hosea’s oracles survived the destruction because refugees brought them to Judah, where they were collected and preserved.

The collector of Hosea’s oracles played a crucial role in the literary formation of the book. He might have been a disciple of Hosea, or perhaps a scribe to whom the prophet dictated his words. We do not know his identity. Assuming that Hosea uttered more oracles than those actually preserved in the book, the collector’s first task was the **selection** of sayings to be recorded for posterity. The book of Hosea is not simply a collection of Hosea’s oracles. Rather, the oracles appear in the collector’s work as selected traditions, vital enough to be retained. Moreover, the collector was important for the **arrangement** of the various oracles in a particular literary order. Unfortunate for the modern scholar, this order was not chronological. One critical task involves identifying the principles that guided the collector’s organization of the material, as well as theorizing dates for it.

The collector thus created the first written tradition regarding Hosea, which later editing expanded, modified, and reinterpreted. Moreover, the collector seems to have been responsible for Hosea 1, the story of Yahweh’s command that Hosea marry a promiscuous woman and have children by her. This divine commissioning (whether an actual event or not) marks the beginning of Hosea’s prophetic service. Hosea 1 describes Hosea’s “call” to be God’s spokesperson. The collector had two reasons for prefacing the work with this call narrative. First, he grounded his oracular collection in the life of a particular person: the prophet Hosea. Without this contextualization it would be difficult to attribute the collected oracles to this eighth-century prophet. The collector thus established a stronger connection between the oracles contained in his work and the personality of the prophet.

Second, it was usually thought that a call narrative was written by the prophet to vindicate himself and to legitimate his office before his opponents. According to more recent scholarship, however, call narratives originated with the prophet’s tradents, rather than with the prophet.

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14 For example, see Ina Willi-Plein, *Vorformen der Schriftexegese innerhalb des Alten Testaments: Untersuchungen zum literarischen Werden der auf Amos, Hosea und Micha zurückgehenden Bücher im hebräischen Zwölfprophetenbuch*, BZAW 123 (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1971) 244.
himself.\textsuperscript{15} By including Hosea 1, the collector authenticated the prophet’s ministry and his own work as well. He legitimized Hosea by anchoring his oracles in a selected moment of his ministry: the marriage and parenting the deity commanded. By prefacing his collection with a story of divine commissioning, the collector legitimated himself and the corpus he created. Lacking the call from God that authorizes a prophetic ministry, he carried on the prophet’s work (now vindicated by events) by compiling and editing the sayings into a literary tradition for later generations.


Perhaps these similarities can be explained by regarding the prophet Hosea as an innovative theological forerunner of the deuteronomistic groups, an opinion held by those regarding most of the oracles in the book as authentic.\textsuperscript{16} Alternatively, one could account for such correspondences by presuming a redaction of the book of Hosea by these circles, who updated and expanded Hosea’s oracles for their own generation.\textsuperscript{17} In either case, Hosea’s oracles bore a fundamental theological relevance for the editors responsible for Deuteronomy and the deuteronomistic history.

The theological relationship between Deuteronomy and the deuteronomistic history was recognized by Martin Noth, who argued that a sixth-century BCE exilic author composed this


distinct literary complex.\textsuperscript{18} A number of scholars modify Noth’s work by positing two major editions of the deuteronomistic history.\textsuperscript{19} The first edition (Dtr 1) was produced in the seventh century BCE by a Judean author supportive of the religious reform policies of King Josiah (640–609 BCE). One of the principal themes of Dtr 1 is the crimes of Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel (922–901 BCE), and his northern successors against the cult of Yahweh. Jeroboam I appointed Bethel and Dan as the official sanctuaries of the northern kingdom, rivaling the Temple at Jerusalem. Setting up two golden calves at these holy places, he announced to the people: “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kgs 12:28). Dtr 1 blames the fall of Israel upon its supposedly “unlawful” cult and climaxes its history in the reforms of Josiah (c. 622 BCE), who tried to rid Judah of its idolatrous cult objects and personnel (2 Kings 22–23; cf. 1 Kgs 13:1–4).

Parts of Hosea can be contextualized in the seventh-century BCE in relation to Dtr 1, particularly in their similar condemnation of Israel’s polluted worship. Like Dtr 1, Hosea protests against pilgrimages to northern sanctuaries like Bethel and Gilgal (Hos 4:15; 5:6; 9:15; 10:15), rejecting the calves set up there (Hos 8:5–6; 10:5–6). He denounces idolatrous cult practices, priests who should guarantee liturgical correctness, and the laity (Hos 2:13; 4:17–19; 5:6–7; 6:6; 9:4). He condemns the feasts, new moons, and cultic assemblies that Jeroboam I had established in the north (Hos 2:11; 9:5–6; cf. 1 Kgs 12:32–33). He prophesies that God will put an end to worship of the baals, with their altars and pillars (Hos 2:11–13, 17; 10:1–2, 8; 13:1–3), a prophecy fulfilled in the later purge under Josiah (2 Kings 23).

\textsuperscript{18} Martin Noth, \textit{The Deuteronomistic History}, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981). Originally published in German in 1943.

The Period of the Exilic Redactor. The second edition of the deuteronomistic history (Dtr 2) was composed during the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE). This edition brings the nation’s history up to date by including the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah. Addressed to the Judeans in exile, it explains the traumatic time of uprooting theologically: The Babylonian exile was the result of a long history of idolatry and faithlessness that began in Israel and continued in Judah.

Sections of the book of Hosea can be situated during this period, either as earlier oracles relevant during the exile or as redactional commentary updating earlier sayings so that they speak to the needs of the exiled people. Hosea 3:4; 9:3, 6–7, 16–17; 11:5–7; and 13:7–16 may refer to the destruction and exile of the north, yet be pertinent for the fall of the south as well.

Noteworthy in Hosea is the theme of repentance/return. On one hand, the nation is called to seek Yahweh and return to God (3:5; 5:15–6:1; 12:6; cf. 2:7; 7:10; 10:12; 14:2). On the other hand, the spiritual repentance of the people and their return to God has its counterpart in the physical return from exile. The spiritual journey back to Yahweh is bound up with the geographical journey back to the land. Hosea 1:11 speaks of a regathering of Israel and Judah under one head. Hosea 3:5 explicitly names this leader as King David, an obviously exilic editorial comment. Hosea 11:11 announces the restoration of the people to their homes. In rich detail, 14:4–7 describes the healing and flourishing of the people back in the land (cf. 6:11b).

The later historical contexts of the collector, the Josianic redactor, and the exilic redactor represent important interpretive stages in the formation of the book of Hosea. The book is the result of an ongoing traditioning process, wherein each stage articulates a voice that recognizes in some way, whether by appropriation or by editing, the value of the Hosean tradition for its own time. Each stage makes its own distinctive imprint on the tradition, transmitting it to a brand-new audience.

ANCIENT ISRAELITE MARRIAGE, METAPHOR, AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

In the biblical tradition, different metaphors are used to capture the unique covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Some biblical metaphors draw from the bonds between king and servant, lord and vassal, father and son, and even mother and child, to communicate different facets of the covenantal union. The book of Hosea was the first to employ the metaphor of husband for the deity, casting Israel in negative female imagery as God’s adulterous wife. This imaging reflects the historical situation of ancient Israel, where gender relationships were

asymmetrical: The man occupied the more privileged position in this society, and the woman was subject to him. Appropriating this socially conditioned relationship as metaphor has deeply affected the theology of the book of Hosea, for this theology interprets the divine as male and the sinful as female. Using this imagery, the prophet describes God’s legitimate punishment as physical abuse of the wife by her husband. Interpretive problems arise when the metaphorical character of the biblical image is forgotten.

Theological issues affecting the interpretation of Hosea’s marriage metaphors will be highlighted in both the Commentary and the Reflections on the text. As will be seen, the marriage metaphor for the God/Israel covenant becomes problematic for women who continue to be victims of sexual violence. Hosea’s marriage metaphor arises from a particular ancient social context. Thus understanding Israel’s institution of marriage and its laws regarding adultery is critical to its interpretation.

Two primary features of ancient Israelite society—its patrilineal, patrimonial, patrilocal kinship structure and its honor/shame value system—are especially pertinent to this discussion. Israel practiced a patrilineal kinship ideology, tracing descent through the male line. This ideology was supported by a number of social practices. Power and authority over a particular family household resided with the oldest living male. Ownership of goods and resources lay with this paterfamilias, who passed on his assets as patrimony to his eldest son, according to customs of primogeniture.

Marriage arrangements were patrilocal—i.e., the young woman had to leave the household of her birth and enter into the unfamiliar and often hostile abode of her husband’s father, adapting herself to it as best she could. Love and romance were not major factors in joining a couple in wedlock. Fathers often used the marriages of daughters to forge or strengthen alliances with other households and larger clan groups.

A new wife occupied an ambiguous position when she entered her husband’s household. She retained ties to her own family, who must support her if ever she left her husband’s house (cf. Judg 19:2–3). She became a full member of her husband’s household only when she bore a son. Furthermore, if the husband was polygamous, his new wife had to contend with other wives, who vied for the husband’s attention and the ensuing status it could bring, particularly with the birth of sons. By its patrilineal descent, patrimonial inheritance, and patrilocal residence customs, then, ancient Israel privileged the male and disenfranchised the female in a hierarchy of gender.

In a labor-intensive agricultural society such as Israel’s, the birth of children was crucial for survival. Sons were especially valued because they continued the patriline, were beneficiaries of the father, and did not leave the household. In fact, they brought additional human resources into the household in the persons of wives and the potential children they would bear. The wife’s primary contribution to the household was to bear legitimate sons to carry on the family name in order to keep limited commodities such as land and other resources within the family.

The sexuality of wives, daughters, and sisters was carefully guarded and controlled, because it comprised the material basis for an ideology of honor and shame that legitimized the
androcentric hierarchy of this society. Honor was one’s reputation, the value of a person in his or her own eyes and in the eyes of his or her social group. Male honor was manifested in wealth, courage, aggression, the ability to provide for one’s family and defend its honor, and the frank display of sexual virility. According to the male ideology of honor and shame, women could acquire or be ascribed honor, but their honor differed from that of men. If honor was exemplified through one’s personal independence—based on wealth, status, kinship, care of the weak, etc.—then women occupied the lowest rank within this honor system. They were peripheral to the patriline and usually did not inherit any material resources.21 As a result, they were socially and economically dependent upon men. Their honor was derived from the men with whom they were explicitly connected. Theirs was the honor of the weak, which exhibited itself in deference, modesty, and meekness toward men and in sexual propriety and concern for reputation.22

In the Hebrew Bible, shame or disgrace was the very opposite of honor, evoking negative feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and worthlessness. Like the ideology of honor, notions of shame were divided along gender lines. A man was shamed by his lack of wealth, courage, aggression; by the inability to support his family and protect its honor; and by sexual passivity or impotence. A woman was shamed if she were strong willed, independent, assertive, disrespectful of men, or sexually immodest.

In a patrilineal kinship structure, a large measure of a man’s honor depended on a woman’s sexual behavior, whether his wife’s, daughter’s, sister’s, or mother’s. Men had various strategies for keeping their women (and, by extension, themselves) honorable, such as insisting that women remain veiled in public, segregating them, and restricting their social behavior. A woman’s sexual shamelessness constituted a public statement that her husband, father, brother, or son had failed to preserve the family honor by his inability to control her. The male would consequently forfeit his honor in the community.

Adultery was a capital offense in a society that operated under patrilineal and honor/shame-based social systems. In the first place, it violated a man’s absolute right to the sexuality of his wife and placed his paternity of her children very much in doubt. In a society governed by a patrilineal kinship structure, a man needed to know for sure that a particular son was his. Second, adultery resulted in a considerable loss of honor for the husband and his household. A “shameless” wife (one who defied his authority) revealed his failure to supervise her sexuality and preserve family honor.

Two types of punishment seem to have been applied to adulterous acts. The first was the stoning to death of both parties (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). In practice, however, this punishment was often

21 An exception would be Num 27:1–11, where the daughters of Zelophehad petition Moses to inherit their father’s land.

incurred only by the woman (see Gen 38:24; John 7:53–8:11). According to the law, the couple had to be caught in the act by witnesses in order for the death penalty to be applied (Deut 19:15). This, of course, was not always feasible. Moreover, the woman was more vulnerable than the man to the accusation, because she could later become pregnant from the union. The second type of punishment is recorded in Hosea, that of publicly stripping the adulteress naked and exposing her shamelessness (Hos 2:2–3; cf. Ezek 16:37–39).

An implicit double standard existed in the biblical evaluation of a man who broke wedlock. Extra-marital activity, which would have been inexcusable for the wife, was tolerated for the husband in many cases. From an honor/shame perspective, a lack of chastity in women placed in jeopardy their own family honor, accumulated in the patriline, whereas a lack of chastity in men threatened the honor of other families. A man was not punished for having sex unless an engaged or married woman was involved and he was caught in the act (Deut 22:22–29). Engaging the services of prostitutes was acceptable (see Gen 38:12–23; Josh 2:1–7; 1 Kgs 3:16–27). This double standard underscored the issues of honor and legal paternity that so characterized the ideological structure of Israelite society, making the woman the primary offender in adulterous acts.

As we will see, the husband/wife metaphor of the God/Israel covenant in the book of Hosea is embedded with specific, culturally conditioned notions of what it means to be male or female and how each should behave in a particular society. Present-day Euro-American societies are quite different in their understanding of marriage and gender relations. Biblical interpreters and readers must reckon with the adequacy of the husband/wife metaphor in describing the divine/human relationship today.

THE DYNAMICS OF RHETORIC AND METAPHOR

In order to assess the appropriateness of the marriage metaphor (and others) for God’s covenant with Israel, one must pay close attention to the rhetoric in which this metaphor is couched. Rhetoric is the art of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform, to persuade, or to move an audience. Prophetic rhetoric is intended to call the nation to judgment, to denounce its social or religious abuses, to criticize its political dealings, to bring the people to repentance and return to God, and to inspire the renewal of their covenantal relationship with the divine. A significant aspect of Hosean rhetoric is his use of metaphor, through which he seizes the imagination of his (male) audience.

A metaphor is a comparison composed of two elements, the lesser known element, the *tenor*, and the better known element, the *vehicle*. In Hosea 1–3, the prophet attempts to convey something profound about the lesser known, God’s covenant with Israel, through the vehicle of a better known institution in ancient Israel, the human marriage between husband and wife. (Hosea also

uses the metaphor of the parent/child in Hosea 11–13. See the Commentary and Reflections on these chapters.) The elements of the marriage metaphor break down as follows:

**TENOR: lesser known**
- God’s covenantal love
- Israel’s sin of idolatry
- God’s punishment of Israel
- Israel’s repentance/return to God
- God’s renewal of covenantal love

**VEHICLE: better known**
- a husband’s marital love
- a wife’s sexual infidelity
- a husband’s beating of wife
- a wife’s repentance/return to her husband
- a husband’s renewal of marital love

The metaphor of human marriage provides unique access into the depths of God’s covenantal relationship with Israel. Understood from a twentieth-century Euro-American perspective (the perspective of many modern biblical scholars), marriage embodies both symbolically and physically the intimacy between two individuals who consciously choose each other out of many possible life partners. It involves a “revelation” on both sides of one’s deepest self: one’s fears, hopes, desires. This “knowledge,” which is often shielded from other people, is bestowed upon the beloved in a daring act of trust. The revelation of this self-knowledge makes one vulnerable to the other. And yet, one will risk this vulnerability and its potential for hurt for the sake of the lover and for the deeper knowledge of self and of the other that love brings. Commitment, intimacy, enduring love, “being there” for the other, physical desire, sexual union—all are bound up in the human institution of marriage. In many ways, this contemporary understanding of marriage is imposed upon the words of Hosea.  

However, this modern notion is not what Hosea intends in adopting the marriage metaphor for God’s covenant with Israel. Marriage in ancient Israel was certainly not a partnership of equals. Precisely the inequity in such unions determines why Hosea appropriates marriage as a vehicle for the divine/human covenantal relationship. The rhetoric in Hosea is one-sided and directed to a very specific audience: ancient Israelite men. The book of Hosea takes up the marriage analogy to teach these men about the depths of God’s covenantal love by appealing to their personal experiences as husbands, as the superior partner in a marriage. In a patriarchal society in which notions of descent, inheritance, marital residence, and honor are intricately bound up with legitimate sons, a faithless wife and her illegitimate children are exceedingly threatening and disruptive. Hosea highlights rhetorically the tremendous effort an ancient Israelite man must make to forgive and take back an unfaithful wife and to accept her children as his own, even if

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they may have been fathered by another man. To stand by his wife and her children, enduring the social stigma it entails, would be one of the most difficult experiences an Israelite man could undergo. And yet, God has precisely this kind of magnanimous love for faithless Israel. God’s steadfast love for a people who certainly do not deserve it eventually compels their repentance and return.

The book of Hosea transforms the marriage of a husband to a promiscuous wife into a heuristic vehicle for the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. For modern readers, however, several interpretive problems become evident. In the first place, the metaphor conflates the deity and the human husband. God is cast as an all-forgiving male. The divine becomes a male, and inevitably the male becomes divine. Second, the sinful is embodied in the image of the licentious wife. As is typical in ancient Israelite culture, the female is considered the primary offender in adulterous affairs. In this covenantal metaphor, woman becomes the ultimate transgressor and the epitome of evil as an adulteress and a whore. Third, the metaphor comes perilously close to sanctioning a husband’s domestic violence against his wife. The explicit punishment of the wife/Israel by God “for her own good” arises out of God’s steadfast love in order “to make her see reason.” As scholars point out, Hosea 1 and 3 do not provide any particulars of friction between Hosea and Gomer. Instead, flanking the narrative of God’s marriage in Hosea 2, the stories of their marriage are stereoscoped with the stormy relations between God and Israel. Hosea 3 implies what Hosea 2 describes in vivid detail: the physical abuse of Gomer in Hosea’s attempts to “love” his adulterous wife into reason. Modeling the behavior of God toward Israel, Hosea isolates Gomer from her lovers (2:8–9; 3:3). He offers Gomer gifts, just as God offers gifts to Israel (2:19; 3:2). He ultimately makes a heroic effort to abstain from sex with Gomer during this period (3:3). What is not explicitly stated is that Hosea, like God, beats his wife into submission. If God’s behavior is the model for Hosea, this battering is implied, but not articulated.

ENGLISH AND HEBREW VERSE NUMBERING

At different points in English translations of the book of Hosea, chapter and verse numbering diverges from the original Hebrew text. The Commentary and Reflections will follow the verse numbering found in most English translations. When checking the Hebrew text, however, one should note the following variations:

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25 According to Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, Hosea, AB 24 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980) 187, the text allows for the possibility that Lo-ruhamah might be illegitimate. A faithless wife arouses her husband’s suspicions, whether valid or not, about the paternity of his children.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


AB Anchor Bible

*JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*

NCB New Century Bible

RSV Revised Standard Version

DR. GALE YEE, PH.D. 16

King, Philip J. *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988. Not a commentary on the texts of these prophets, but a survey of archaeological artifacts and material remains that may help to illuminate selected texts. Helpful in visualizing the cult that Hosea criticizes.


Stuart, Douglas. *Hosea-Jonah*. WBC 31. Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987. This commentary presupposes that the book of Deuteronomy is Mosaic, a product of the second millennium and not of the eighth, seventh, or sixth centuries BCE. Deuteronomy, then, would have directly influenced the prophet Hosea, rather than vice versa.


