

SIN AND INFIDELITY IN THE BOOK OF HOSEA

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Abstract

Hosea is a prophet of divine love. He portrays God as a lover who is betrayed by the infidelity of his beloved people (Israel). Among the Old Testament prophets, Hosea is the first to employ the marriage metaphor to portray God's covenant relationship with Israel, one in which Israel became unfaithful. Just as marriage is built on fidelity, the covenant relationship between God and Israel stands or falls on the people's fidelity to God. Hosea portrays Israel as a wife who became idolatrous. Israel's sin is specifically a divided loyalty between Yahweh and Baal, and participation in the licentious practices of the Canaanite fertility cult. Hosea likens Israel's covenant infraction to the promiscuity of a prostitute. Hosea, therefore, announces that God will take Israel back to Egypt. In the prophecy of Hosea, Egypt is a metonymy for exile. Exile, however, will not be the last word. Hosea leaves out hope of restoration if Israel returns to God in repentance.

Key Words: Sin; Infidelity; Prostitution; Hosea; Gomer; God; Covenant.

Introduction

Hosea is usually referred to as the prophet of love. He uses his marital relationship with Gomer to symbolize God's covenant relationship with Israel. Hosea represents God, and Gomer is Israel, which, like Gomer, is unfaithful to God. Hosea reproached Israel for refusing to give its heart to God; for dividing her loyalty between Yahweh and Baal. Hosea traces out the cause of Israel's sins. It was owing to Israel's material prosperity, especially following the institution of the monarchy. As the prophet sees it, the baneful influence of a materialistic society had caused Israel to forget Yahweh (Hos 13:6). For while Israel was in the desert, i.e., in the early years of her life as a covenant people, living very simply, it gave its heart to God. But once she became an established kingdom, and prospered materially, she thought she could do without God (Hos 13:5-6). The prophet announced that God would take away all the material well-being which he himself gave but which has become a major obstacle to the love and fidelity he asks of Israel. Hosea is convinced that stripped of all its comforts Israel will return to Yahweh (Hos 2:7, 13ff) (Dheilly, 1960). Therefore, the prophet announced that Yahweh will bring her back to Egypt (Hos 2:16; 12:10). In Hosea, Egypt is a metonymy for the exile. The

exile, however, is designed by God to produce conversion and hence be the source of new life (Hos 13:12ff). Hosea is convinced that God will restore Israel if it turns back to God in repentance.

This article studies Israel's covenant infidelity to God and its consequences on the existence of the northern kingdom of Israel. This study employs an exegetico-theological method of biblical analysis. This method involves a critical study of the Hosean text, spiced with theological reflection on it. The Bible version employed in this work is the *New Revised Standard Version*.

Name, Date and Socio-Historical Context

The superscription (Hos 1:1) situates Hosea's ministry between 750 and 724 BC, i.e., between the last years of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC) and three years before the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 BC (Post, 2021). This suggests that Hosea preached during a politically turbulent period (736-724 BC) after the peaceful rule of Jeroboam II (cf. 2 Kgs 14:23-17:41). While the focus of Hosea was directed at the Northern Kingdom, his message encompassed the entire people of God (Post, 2021).

Hosea was a younger contemporary of Amos. While Amos preached at a time of great moral and religious degeneration in Israel, Hosea preached in the period of further socio-moral and religious degeneration in Israel. Unlike Amos, the prophet of justice, Hosea is a prophet of divine love. The basis of Hosea's message lies in the covenant bond between God and Israel. The prophet portrays God as a lover who is betrayed by the infidelity of his beloved people (Israel).

Wife/Israel and Husband/God Metaphor in Hos 1:2-3

The prophecy of Hosea is remarkable in its use of metaphors. Outstanding among these metaphors is the marriage metaphor. Hosea uses his marital relationship with Gomer to portray God's covenant relationship with Israel, to which Israel has repeatedly been unfaithful. At God's command, Hosea took for a wife Gomer, who is referred to in the text as "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešetzenûnîm*; Hos 1:2). The phrase, "wife of whoredom" suggests one who is habitually promiscuous. The *NIV* translates *'ešet zenûnîm* as "adulterous wife". It is shocking that God commanded the prophet to marry a promiscuous woman. The reason for this divine command is given in v.2c: "For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."

Although the text refers to Gomer as "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešetzenûnîm*; Hos 1:2) or "an adulteress" (Hos 3:1), the text does not use the term *zonāh*, which is the technical

term for prostitute. The text also does not suggest that Gomer was a prostitute (*zonāh*) by profession before Hosea married her. Boshoff (2002) writes that Gomer might have been a virgin (Heb: *betūlāh*) when Hosea married her and only became promiscuous after the marriage.

Hosea uses his marital relationship with Gomer to symbolize God's covenant relationship with Israel, which Israel has repeatedly broken (Kraft, 1971). Hosea represents God, Gomer symbolizes Israel. Gomer's infidelity to her husband represents Israel's covenant infidelity to Yahweh. Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh is seen in her participation in the Canaanite religious rites as Hosea describes in chapters 2 and 4.

Hosea is the first of the Old Testament prophets to portray the Sinai covenant as marriage. Just as marriage is built on fidelity, "the covenant relationship between God and Israel stands or falls on the people's fidelity to God" (Leclerc, 2007). Hosea likens Israel's worship of another god besides Yahweh to the promiscuity of a prostitute. He speaks of Israel's covenant infidelity to Yahweh as adultery (root *nā'ap*). He portrays Israel as committing prostitution (root: *zānāh*) by her religious syncretism.

Hosea's Children as Prophetic Signs (1:4-9)

Just as Gomer's marital infidelity symbolizes Israel's covenant infractions, the names of the children are intended to symbolize the consequences of Israel's sins (Birch, 1997). Gomer bore three children for Hosea. The first child is a son and God orders Hosea to name him Jezreel (Hos 1:4a). Jezreel is the name of the fertile valley situated between the highlands of Samaria and Galilee. It was at Jezreel that Jehu toppled the dynasty of Omri by murdering Israel's king Joram, son of Ahab (2 Kgs 9:2,4) and killing Ahab's wife Jezebel, and children of Ahab (2 Kgs 10; Kraft, 1971). Unlike the author of 2 Kgs 10:30, Hosea condemns this action and reveals that the blood guilt resulting from Jehu's action provokes Yahweh's judgment (Wolff, 1974; Stuhlmüller, 2001). Hosea announces that God will put an end to the "kingdom of the house of Israel" (*mlāḵūt bêt yisrā'ēl*) on account of Jehu's crime (Hos 1:4b). In Hosea's day, Jeroboam II, Jehu's great-grandson, was in power. Jehu's dynasty was violently brought to an end in 746 B.C., when Jeroboam's son, Zechariah (who reigned for six months), was murdered by the usurper Shallum (2 Kgs 15:10).

Hosea's second child is a daughter and Hosea named her "*Lo-ruhamah*." The root *raham* can be rendered in English as 'compassion'. The name, therefore, means "Not pitied," or "No compassion" (Hos 1:6a). The name, *Lo-ruhamah*, points to approaching judgment that will befall Israel (exile). The third child is a son, and Hosea named him "*Lo-Ammi*"

(v.9), which means “not my people.” If we assume that the second child’s name implied an end to the covenant relationship, the name of the third child implies Yahweh’s rejection of his covenant people. At the beginning of Israel’s history, when Yahweh made a covenant with Israel, Yahweh declared in relation to Israel: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7; cf. Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28). Hosea’s third child’s name, *Lo-Ammi*, apparently symbolizes the nullification of that covenant on account of Israel’s infidelity (Yee, 1996). The names of Hosea’s children point to the approaching catastrophe, namely exile that will inevitably come upon Israel on account of its sins.

Divorce: A Consequence of a Broken Relationship (Hose 2:1-2)

Just as Hosea is the first Old Testament prophet to portray the Sinai covenant as marriage, so also, he is the first Old Testament prophet to use the term divorce to figuratively represent the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Hos 2:2). The reason for divorce is the wife’s infidelity, a symbol of Israel’s covenant infractions (Yee, 1996).

Before Hosea issues a debilitating threat of punishment to his unfaithful wife, he asks his children to “plead” with their mother to give up her adulterous practices (v.2b). The children are invited to enter the litigation in the hope of reforming their mother. The statement in 2:2b (MT v.4b), “for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband”, according to P. A. Kruger (1992), is a divorce formula. But, it seems, as Mays (1969) says, that the reason for the statement is not for the sake of divorce, but to move Gomer to repentance and reconciliation.

Hosea’s Threefold Strategy to Curb the Whoring Wife (2:3-6. 11-13)

In ancient Israel, the penalties for infidelity were severe. The laws allowed the giving the woman a bill of divorce and then sending her away (Deut 24:1ff). The law even prescribed the death penalty for adultery in some cases (Deut 22:22). In 2: 3-6, Hosea announces a three-part strategy to curb his wife’s infidelity. First, he decides to isolate her by restricting her freedom and denying her access to her lovers (Hos 2:6-7). This enforced seclusion has another goal – so that she will recognize and acknowledge her dependence on her husband for her needs (vv.7b). Second, Hosea withholds food and clothing from her (Hos 2:9). Third, he threatens to strip (*pāšaf*) her naked (Hos 2:3 [MT 2:5]), to expose her to humiliation and disgrace (Wolff, 1974). This kind of punishment was evidenced in marriage situations in the Old Testament period (cf. Ezek 16:39).

In Hos 2:3b (MT 2:5b), a shift in the object takes place: the target of the threat is not so much the wife (symbolizing the people) as it is the land. Here, God threatens to “strip her naked and “make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst.” This point to the defeat in battle and the approaching exile, the inevitable consequences of Israel’s covenant infractions (Kavusa, 2016).

A Catalogue of Israel’s Sins (Hos 4–11)

In *Hos 4-11*, which consists of part two of the book, Hosea gives a catalogue of sins for which Israel is to be punished. Prominent among these sins are:

a. Covenant Infraction (Hos 6:7; 9:10-17)

Hosea traces the beginning of Israel’s covenant infractions to the end of Israel’s wilderness journey when Israel “came to Baal-peor” in Moab (9:10-17). At the beginning of the Sinai covenant relationship (i.e., in the wilderness), Israel gave its heart to God. However, this relationship was ruptured when Israel came to Baal-peor in Moab. According to Num 25:1-5, Israel’s first contact with the Canaanite religion began at Baal-peor when the Israelites began to have sexual relations with Moabite women. These women “seduced” them to worship their fertility god, Baal, as well (Yee, 1996).

Second, Hosea identifies Gilgal as another location where Israel apostatized against its God: “Every evil of theirs began at Gilgal” (9:15). There are two reasons for this attack on Gilgal. Gilgal was the location of a shrine where Baal worship had been practiced (Baal-Peor; cf. 4:15; 12:11). It was also in Gilgal that Saul was inaugurated king of Israel (I Sam 11:14-15). Hosea’s attitude to the kingship is generally negative. He seems to regard the monarchy as a source of rebellion and sin against God (cf. Hos 7:3-7; 8:4; 10:3, 7, 15; Phillips, 1953; Birch, 1997).

Third, Hosea mentions the city of Adam as a place where Israel broke God’s covenant (Hos 6: 7): “At ‘adam, they have broken the covenant.” “Adam” is a town in Transjordan, on the Jordan River where the waters were stopped up when the Israelites were crossing the river on entering the Promised Land (Josh 3:16; Yee, 1996). It is possible that the sin Hosea is referring here is Idolatry.

b. Idolatry

In Hos 5:1-4 and 8:4b-8, Hosea identifies idolatry (specifically Baal worship) as the main sin causing Israel’s downfall and ruin. Hosea accused the people of Israel of fashioning gods out of silver and gold (Hos 8:4b-8). This may be an allusion to the calf image erected by Jeroboam I. Jeroboam 1, the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel had installed calf images in royal sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:26-33). These calf images

were intended as pedestals for the enthroned Lord (much like the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem) and not as idols. But under the influence of Baal worship which depicted Baal as a bull, the calf images themselves became objects of worship and devotion. Hosea considers this practice as idolatrous, a violation of the Sinai covenant (Birch, 1997), and a grave sin leading to Israel's fall (Hos 8:5; cf. 1 Kgs 12:25-13:34; 2 Kgs 17:14-23).

In 10:5-8, Hosea returns to the calf images at Bethel, a city which he elsewhere in 4:15 scornfully calls *Beth-aven* ("House of Evil"). He admonishes the people to repent and turn back to God in order to avert his wrath. Hosea, however, laments that Israel's idolatry prevents her from returning (*šûb*) to God. He, therefore, declares that God will punish Israel for her idolatrous and wanton cult (10:7) and that the high places of Bethel shall be destroyed (10:8a).

c. A Perverse Priesthood (Hos 4:4-11a)

Hosea indicts Israel's religious leaders - the priests- whom he blames for Israel's current moral degeneration. The priests were the custodians of the Torah. It is the responsibility of the religious leaders to instruct the people and to offer guidance. Hosea condemns them for failing in their duty. Instead of instilling the people with the "knowledge of God," the priests bear responsibility for their lack of knowledge. It is not merely that they were not doing their jobs. Hosea accuses them of living off the people's sins, thus making them fall further into sin.

In 4:6, God makes a damning statement: "My people (*Ammi*) are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Knowledge (*da'at*) here includes recognition of the one God of Israel, what he has done for the people, and what he demands in return. Hosea stresses that the people's ignorance of all this is precisely because the priests have failed in their central responsibility to instruct the people and to give guidance. In 4:6b, the prophet puts it bluntly: the priests have "rejected knowledge" (v.6a), and "forgotten the law of God" (*tôrâ*) (Lundbom, 1986).

In 4:7-8, Hosea makes a damning accusation against the priests: "They feed on the sin of my people..." (Hos 4:8). "Feeding" here is figurative. Hosea may be implying that the priests gain their livelihood from the people's "unorthodox" religious practices (Yee, 1996). The people transgress against God's law and afterward make sin offerings. The priest who performed the sin offering were entitled to a portion of the victim of sacrifice (Lev 7:28-38). Thus, the priests economically profit from the sin offerings (Lev 4). Therefore, Hosea accuses the priests of corruption. Not only were they economically corrupt, but they were also morally bankrupt.

Perhaps, the sin Hosea was attacking what happened during the long reign of Jeroboam II which was characterized by prosperity which benefited the clergy. The priests' uncritical support of the upper classes and indulgence in syncretism and materialism earned them so much wealth through tithes and donations. Hosea laments that material gain, rather than service to God, was the main interest of the priests (Stuart, 1987). In 4:9-11, Hosea announces that God would punish Israel's religious leaders for their evil and corrupt ways and their failure to exercise their teaching function. The punishment announced by Hosea, however, sounds figurative. Hosea announced that the material gain that these corrupt priests have made will not bring them satisfaction: "... They shall eat, but not be satisfied...because they have forsaken the Lord to devote themselves to whoredom...."

d. A Wanton Cult and a Licentious People (Hosea 4:11b-14)

Earlier in 4:4-11a, Hosea had indicted the corrupt religious leaders for failure to perform their central responsibility of instructing the people and giving guidance. In 4:11b-14, he denounces the people for involvement in divinatory and idolatrous practices: "My people consult a piece of wood, and their divining rod gives them oracles" (v.12a); they sacrifice "upon every high hill and under every green tree" (v.13a).

In strong terms, the prophet denounced the people for taking part in the licentious rites of the Canaanite fertility cult which involved sexual parties. These sexual parties were influenced by Canaanite mythology. According to this mythology, the storm god, Baal, after having been rescued from the underworld by the goddess of Anath, engaged in sexual intercourse with her, resulting in the renewed springtime fertility of the land that had languished in winter while Baal was in the underworld. The Canaanites believed that the cycle of the seasons and the fertility of the land are sexual in character. Thus, ritual sexual intercourse was part of the Canaanite fertility ritual (Birch, 1997; Emmerson, 1974). Temple prostitutes (*qedeshôt*) were available and were used by men at Canaanite cultic places (4:14). This is known as "cultic" or "sacred prostitution". The term "sacred" here has nothing to do with morals. Dion (1981) and Stuart (1987) stress that the temple prostitute was referred to as "sacred" because she was used in religious acts. In the Canaanite belief, this ritual sexual act stimulates the god(s) of fertility to fertilize the land. It seems the Israelites took part in this ritual sexual intercourse with cult prostitutes. Hosea condemns this practice and refers to it as playing the whore. Such "cultic prostitution" points to a general immorality and moral degeneration of Israel.

Hosea warns Judah not to emulate its fornicating sister, Israel, by frequenting the northern shrines at Bethel and Gilgal. Bethel and Gilgal were famous Israelite sanctuaries in Hosea's day. The name "Bethel" means "House of God". In 4:15, Hosea sarcastically calls it "Beth-aven" ("House of Evil"). Gilgal, on the other hand, was the site where the

Israelites encamped after crossing the Jordan (Josh 4:19). Gilgal became a major sanctuary, which degenerated into a center of heterodox worship (Hos 9:15; 12:11). For, while Yahweh's name was invoked in Bethel or Gilgal, idolatry was not rejected. At Gilgal, the Israelites practiced syncretism which violated the third commandment (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11; cf. Hos 4:2), and Hosea denounced it as whoredom.

e. Destructive International Politics (Hos 5:8-14)

In Hos 5:8-14, the focus shifts from Israel's sin of idolatry to her destructive international politics, especially alliances with foreign powers. Here the prophet sounds a war alarm. It seems the occasion for sounding the alarm is the Syro-Ephraimite war of 735-734 B.C., when Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel unsuccessfully attempted to force Ahaz, king of Judah, into an anti-Assyrian coalition (2 Kgs 16:7). Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help to protect his threatened throne. When Assyria attacked Israel, Pekah appealed to Assyria for mercy, with a willingness to become his vassal to save his kingdom (Israel) from destruction. Hosea condemned both Israel and Judah for appealing to Assyria for help instead of leaning on God for protection. He insists that it is folly to trust Assyria for help (Stuart, 1987). Hosea predicts that both Israel and Judah will suffer at the hands of the Assyrians (vv. 14-15). Hosea's warning came through. In 721 B.C., Israel was destroyed by Assyria and the cream of the people was consigned to exile. In 701 B.C., Judah was invaded by the Assyrian forces under the Assyrian monarch, Sennacherib, but Jerusalem miraculously survived the Assyrian invasion.

Hosea cautions Israel and Judah for their dangerous international politics (vv. 12-14). He calls on Israel and Judah to turn to Yahweh instead appealing to Assyria for political relief. Hosea insists that, instead of getting political healing from Assyria, Israel and Judah are playing into Assyria's political power and religious practices. According to Lind, by turning to Assyria for relief, Israel's and Judah's leaders were unwittingly turning to a false religion and a false politics, a move that, if left unhindered, would lead to their ruin (Lind, 1984).

Hosea returns to Israel's foreign policy in chapter 7, especially its alliance with Egypt or Assyria or Syria. Speaking about Israel's alliances with foreign powers, Hosea portrays Israel (Ephraim) metaphorically as "an unturned cake," one that is baked on one side, but raw on the other. Hosea describes Israel's international policy as "half-baked" (7:) i.e., not well thought out (Yee, 1996). Hosea maintains that Israel's foreign, especially alliances with foreign (like Assyria or Egypt), will end in disaster. These foreign powers sap Israel economically by exacting tributes (taxes). Hosea insists that by seeking alliances with foreign powers Israel is unwittingly scheming itself toward destruction (7:10-11).

Referring to the senselessness of Israel's alliances with Egypt and Assyria, Hosea likens Israel to a silly and senseless dove, flitting back and front: at one point going to seek an alliance with Egypt, at another point flocking to Assyria for security(7:11).Hosea maintains that, as a consequence of relying on alliances with foreign powers for its security, Israel will suffer defeat in battle and exile.

f. Israel's political and Cultic Sins (Hosea 7:1-16 and 8:1-14)

In chapter 8, Hosea returns to Israel's political and cultic sins. Earlier in Hos 4:4-11a, Hosea had blamed the religious leaders for the moral deterioration of the nations. In 7:1-16, he denounces the political leadership for the power politics or dynastic chaos that prevailed in Israel in the period between the death of Jeroboam II (746 B.C.) and the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. In the period between the death of Jeroboam II and the fall of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C., there was a rapid succession of rulers. Usurpers seized the throne by assassination and *coup d'état*, only to be deposed by violence themselves (Birch, 1997; Stuart, 1987). This suggests, as Ward said, that Hosea's prophetic ministry extended into the last decade of the northern kingdom (Ward, 1976).

Zechariah, son and successor of Jeroboam II, ruled only six months and was assassinated by Shallum in 746 B.C. (2 Kgs 15:10). This marked the end of the dynasty of Jehu as Hosea predicted (Hos 1:4b). After just one month on the throne, Shallum was assassinated by Menahem. Menahem reigned for ten years. His son, Pekahiah, reigned for two years and was killed by Pekah who reigned in his stead (Doorly, 1991; Gowan, 1998). Hosea condemns this power politics. He compares the passion of the coup plotters to a "heated oven," a fire that devours "their rulers (v.7). The statement in 7:7b, "all their kings have fallen," seems to be a general summary of the series of coups d'état that characterized Israel's political climate after the death of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 15:8-31).

In Hos 8:4-6, Hosea excoriates Israel for installing and deposing kings without consulting God: "They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge" (Hos 8:4a). From the days of Saul and David, God, through the prophets, determined who can be king. The king was God's anointed one, God's representative or regent.

g. Israel's treachery as a reflection of Jacob's treachery (Hos 11:12-13:16)

In 11:12-12:1, Hosea charges sinful Israel with lying and deceit. Hosea links Israel's treachery to Israel's ancestor, Jacob - the trickster (12:2-6, 12-14). Jacob's treachery was legendary: "In the womb, he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood, he strove with God" (Hos 12:3). Here, Hosea harks back to the story of the birth of Jacob and his twin brother Esau in Gen 25:24-26. At birth, Esau was born first, but Jacob was delivered

grasping the heel of Esau as if to hold him back. For this reason, Gen 25:26 says he was named Jacob (*ya 'āqōḥ*). Later, when Jacob deceived his father Isaac and cheated Esau out of his rightful blessing as the firstborn son, Esau bitterly cried that Jacob is rightly so-named because he has “supplanted (*'āqab*) me these two times” (Gen 27:36). The name *Jacob* means “deception or trick.” Using Jacob’s story, Hosea seems to say that Israel is sinful and deceptive like its forefather, Jacob (Holladay, 1986; Birch, 1997; Stuart, 1987). Hosea insists that destruction and exile are the inevitable results of Israel’s sins.

Hosea’s Use of Metaphors to Portray Sinful Israel (10:1-11:7)

In Hosea 10:1-11:7, the prophet employs several rich imageries to portray recalcitrant Israel. The first of these is the grape/vine metaphor (Hosea 10:1-15). Whereas Hos 9:10 describes Israel as a grape that Yahweh found in the wilderness, 10:1 recalls Israel’s settlement in the land where, like a vine, it took root and flourished (cf. Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 17:5-6). Hosea, however, laments that no sooner had Israel settled in the Promised Land and experienced economic well-being than she began to drift away from Yahweh. Rather than being thankful and faithful to God who is the source of her material well-being, Israel increasingly erected altars and pillars sacred to a false deity. This refers to the economic prosperity that characterized the reign of Jeroboam II. Hosea tells us that the more Israel’s material prosperity increased, the more altars and sacred pillars she erected. It was a case of divided loyalty between Yahweh and Baal. Hosea declares that God will not allow these false altars and pillars to endure. They will be smashed in the Lord’s judgment, and Baal, their supposed benefactor, will be powerless to help. This was a reference to the exile.

In 10:11-14, Hosea refers to Israel as a stubborn heifer (*heparā*), although she was once a “trained heifer” (*eglā mulummadā*), perhaps referring to the wilderness period. As a well-trained heifer, Israel was docile and obedient. Unfortunately, Israel abused her status with God by its sin and self-indulgence. Hosea declares that God will place a yoke on Israel. It will be the yoke (chain) of captivity (Hos 10:11).

Israel as a Rebellious Child (Hosea 11:1-7)

In Chapter 11, Hosea employs the parent-child metaphor to portray the relationship between God and Israel (11:1). Here, God’s liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage is figuratively portrayed as the birth of Israel. In Exod 4:22, Israel is referred to as God’s “first-born son” or a “child” (*na 'ar*) whom Yahweh loves. Hosea portrays the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt as Israel’s “call”. “Call” (*qārā*), here, is used in the sense of “election”/ “adoption.” Yahweh says he called his “son” (Israel) out of Egypt. Sonship

here is not biological; it is adoptive. The motive for God's liberation of Israel from Egypt is made clear: "I love him." Though Yahweh lavished steadfast love on Israel, Israel is portrayed as a rebellious child, drawn to the Baals: "The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols" (11:2). Because of Israel's rebelliousness, Hosea announces that Israel will suffer defeat in battle and that God will give her over to the hands of Assyria.

Exile as Punishment for Israel's Covenant Infidelity

As earlier said, Gomer's marital infidelity symbolizes Israel's covenant infractions. Similarly, the names of Hosea's children point to the approaching divine judgment, namely exile that will inevitably befall Israel on of her covenant infidelity (1:4-9).

As a punishment for Israel's covenant infidelity, God threatens to strip (*pāšaf*) her naked (Hos 2:3 [MT 2:5]), and "make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land." Second, God threatens to place a yoke of captivity on the shoulders of sinful Israel. In a very imaginative way, Hosea announces that God will take Israel back to Egypt. This harks back to the covenantal curse for infidelity announced by Moses in Deut 28:68: "The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt..." Egypt was Israel's first place of bondage and servitude. In Hosea, "Egypt" stands as a metonymy for exile to Assyria and a return to bondage.

From Punishment to Hope (Hos 2:14-23; 11:8-11)

In Hos 2:14-23, the tone shifts from punishment to reconciliation. Earlier in Hos 2:1-13, God threatened to punish Israel for her idolatrous acts. In 2:14, God resolves against punishment. Instead, he resolves to allure/woo (*pātah*) Israel and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her." This marks the beginning of the move for reconciliation. The wilderness was the place where God and Israel had first pledged themselves in a covenant relationship following the deliverance from Egypt. It was also a time of harmonious relationship between God and Israel – a honeymoon. God resolves to initiate a second "honeymoon" (Birch, 1997) or a new courtship (Kruger, 1992). This expresses Yahweh's renewed effort to win back his unfaithful wife/Israel.

The journey to the wilderness, as Yee said, is a spiritual journey aimed at moving Israel to repentance (v.15) and a renewal of covenant relationship with Yahweh (Yee, 1996). The objective is that, in the wilderness (exile), deprived of all the material possession which has made her turn away from her God, Israel will return (*šûb*) to Yahweh and once again recognize him as "my husband" and no longer as "my Baal" (Hos 2:16). This signifies the renewal of the covenant/marriage relationship which will lead to a return of cosmic peace

(Hos 2:18a [MT 2:20a]). With the restoration of peace, the fertility of the land is restored. God “will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land. God will make Israel “lie down in safety” (Hos 2:18 [MT 2:20]) (DeRoche, 1981).

With the relationship restored, the critical question of the paternity of Gomer’s children which was in contention, is resolved (Hos 2:23). Israel as Jezreel (God sows) had become alienated from the land on account of sin. But now God says, “I will sow him for myself in the land” (Hos 2:23a [MT 2:25a]). God will have pity on ‘Not pitied’. God will say to “Not my people” that “You are my people.” And she will respond, “You are my God” (Hos 2:23b [MT v.25b]).

Although God resolves to show mercy instead of unleashing his wrath, despite Israel’s catalogue of sins, this does not mean that there are no consequences for Israel’s sin. As 8:11 makes clear, exile to Assyria is part of the fate Israel has chosen by its sin. However, while the exile is a punishment on Israel for her sins, the exile is meant to lead Israel to repentance and make possible a new fellowship between her and God (Hos 8:11; [Eissfeldt, 1965; Phillips, 1953]). Earlier in 6:1a, Hosea had summoned the people to return (*sûb*) to Yahweh” in repentance. Hosea, however, laments that instead of heartfelt repentance, Israel displayed extravagant sacrificial offerings. Hosea declares that what God desires is steadfast love, not meaningless sacrifices (6:6). In 14:1-3, the prophet summons the people to repent and return to their God. He announces that God will restore the people to the land if they return to him. Thus, the book of Hosea closes, not in judgment and death (chap 13), but with a promise of restoration and salvation (chap 14).

Conclusion

The book of Hosea has perennial validity. The book is addressed not only to the Israel of his day but also to us in the present contemporary age. Hosea is a book about God’s love in spite of sin. The word of Hosea emphasizes how Israel failed to respond to God’s love. People today, as in the days of Hosea, still have the same tendency to seek ‘God-replacements’, the same unwillingness to listen to God and obey his commands. The book stresses the importance of turning away from all God-substitutes, from trust in political solutions or in our own ability and to return to God (Igbo, 2020).

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