BIB 5173

Prophetic Critique and Vision for Renewal

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Exegesis of Hosea 11:1-12:6

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**Introduction to Hosea**

Hosea is an eight century BCE prophet to the Northern Kingdom of the Jewish people. According to the prolegomena of the book, the son of Beeri prophesied during the reign of the Judahite kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, and during the reign of Jereboam II of Samaria. George Robinson estimates his career as spanning 750-725 BCE,[[1]](#footnote-1) whereas Duane Garrett proposes a more likely but broader range of 760-710 BCE[[2]](#footnote-2)—more likely because it includes the end of the reign of Uzziah and the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah. Jereboam II, son of Joash ruled Israel from 793-753 BCE.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hezekiah ruled from 716-686 BCE. The internal evidence suggests, but does not prove, that parts of Hosea both precede and come after the Syro-Ephraimite war (735-733 BCE). Shalman (Shalmanezer of Assyria) is mentioned (Hosea 10:14), which puts at least part of the prophecy after 722 BCE. If we take the prolegomena at face value, then the prophetic career of Hosea spanned from a time of great political and financial prosperity for Samaria/Ephraim, through political instability and near-constant warfare, with five of six kings murdered in office, down to the complete destruction of Samaria under Shalmaneser and Sargon II of Assyria. In this sense, Hosea is much like Jeremiah, whose prophetic career began in prosperity under the reforming king Josiah, through four disastrous rulers, to the utter destruction of Jerusalem and Judah. The date of the book is of some relevance to the interpretation of our passage.

The set of prophetic writings we call the Book of Hosea are not easily outlined. Although many have suggested emendations and later additions to the book, all agree that at least significant parts of the work can be attributed to the 8th century prophet Hosea. It does no violation either to the evidence or to the content of the book to proceed on the assumption that the entire book was written by the prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Hosea. As for writing style, as we will see in our analysis of the text, Hosea is often purposefully oblique. Hosea is one of the most difficult to translate in the Hebrew Bible, using many obscure words and unusual turns of phrase.

I will make a few general comments about the book as a whole, so that we can see where the passage to be studied fits into the entire document. First, I will briefly mention the main themes of Hosea, all of which, by the way, are expressed in Hosea 11:1-12:6. The themes of Hosea include the following:

1. Apostasy of Israel, especially due to idolatry.

2. The coming judgment of God.

3. The call to repentance.

4. The irrational and undying covenant-love (*hesed*) of God for Israel.

5. Hope for restoration of Israel and Judah.

If Israel’s sin can be distilled down to one thing, it is that she has violated the covenant and failed to show covenant-love (*hesed*) to God. “There is no truth, no faithful love (*hesed*) and no knowledge of God in the land.” (Hosea 4:1 Holman Christian Standard Bible HCSB) Israel is guilty of gross sin. Robinson[[4]](#footnote-4) lists some of the sins of Ephraim as follows: lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6), pride (Hosea 5:5), instability (Hosea6:4), worldliness (7:8), backsliding (11:7) and idolatry (13:2). Many of these are in view in our passage, especially idolatry. God’s wrath and his judgment have been aroused, and they are coming from the North.

However, one gets the sense, in spite of all God’s bitter criticism of Israel through Hosea, that Yaweh’s love for his chosen people is greater still than his wrath and his judgment. In the end, Hosea, despite all the predictions of judgment, is a book of hope. Because of his covenant-love, his *hesed*, God cannot and will not give up on his people. Of course, this theme is memorably expressed in the first three chapters of Hosea. Here God tells Hosea to take back his adulterous wife—one of the most powerful images in the entire Scripture. Less famously, but equally powerfully, this theme is revealed in Hosea 11:1-12:6.

The saving grace of God is illustrated in the very name of Hosea—a cognate of Joshua/Yeshua, which means “salvation,” “help,” “deliverer.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In fact, the inescapable love of God is so prevalent in Hosea that he has been called the “St. John of the Old Testament.” [[6]](#footnote-6) Alice Keefe[[7]](#footnote-7) says that “While the book includes several oracles offering hope of reconciliation and redemption, the overall tone is dark, with warnings of impending national catastrophe.” The political facts on the ground in the eighth century and over half the actual written words in the book support Keefe’s view. However as one that is not involved in the political turmoil of the day, I find myself not agreeing with her overall assessment of Hosea. The message and tone of Hosea are more of hope and love than of rebuke and judgment.

Another way to think of the tone of the book of Hosea is that of Robinson. Hosea’s message is “one long impassioned monologue, broken by sobs.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In Hosea we have a God who shows compassion and undying love for his people. God is no platonic, dispassionate observer of human beings. God is desperately in love with his people, and he will do anything to get them back. If there is any part of Hosea which illustrates this tone, it is Hosea 11:1-12:6

**Analysis of the Text**

The following is the text to be analyzed:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

[The more] they called them, [the more] they departed from me.

They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them in my arms,

But they never knew that I healed them.

I led them with human cords, with ropes of kindness.

To them I was like one who eases the yoke from their jaws: I bent down to give them food. Israel will not return to the land of Egypt and Assyria will be his king, because they refused to repent.

A sword will whirl through his cities; It will destroy and devour the bars of his gates, because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call to Him on high, He will not exalt at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I surrender you, Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

I have had a change of heart; My compassion is stirred!

I will not vent the full fury of My anger; I will not turn back to destroy Ephraim.

For I am God and not man, the Holy One among you; I will not come in rage.

They will follow the Lord; He will roar like a lion. When he roars, His children will come trembling from the West.

They will be roused like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria.

Then I will settle them in their homes.

This is the Lord’s declaration.

Ephraim surrounds me with lies, the house of Israel, with deceit

Judah still wanders with El and is faithful to the holy ones.

Ephraim chases the wind and pursues the east wind. He continually multiplies lies and violence.

He makes a covenant with Assyria, and olive oil is carried to Egypt.

The Lord also has a dispute with Judah.

He is about to punish Jacob according to his ways; He will repay him based on his actions.

In the womb he grasped his brother’s heel, and as an adult he wrestled with God.

Jacob struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.

He found him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him.

Yahweh is the God of Hosts; Yahweh is his name.

But you must return to your God. Maintain love and justice and always put your hope in God.

(HCSB)

General Considerations

The literary genre of the text is prophetic poetry. It can be described as an oracle of God to his people. Here is an outline of the passage:

I. God has always loved Israel. He has always maintained covenant love/*hesed*. 11:1-4.

II. But God’s people have stubbornly broken faith and must be judged. 11:5-7.

III. Although judgment is called for, God cannot give up his treasured child. God will call back a remnant. 11:8-11.

IV. Ephraim and Judah have repeatedly broken covenant love/*hesed*. 11:12-12:2

V. Analogy of Ephraim to Jacob: sin and restoration. 12:2-5.

VI A call to repent. 12:6.

A quick comparison of this outline to the themes of the entire Book of Hosea, listed above, will inform that this passage is, in a sense, the entire book of Hosea in miniature. This is the reason that I have chosen this particular passage to exegete.

Another way of viewing Hosea 11:1-12:6 is that in this section, Hosea is doing for a second time what he did in the first three chapters of the prophecy. In the first three chapters, the themes of the book are brought out through the metaphor of God as husband and Israel as unfaithful wife. God made a covenant with a people who would be unfaithful, yet he cannot give his people up. He will buy them back. So, God has Hosea marry Gomer. She is, predictably unfaithful, but Hosea goes to his unfaithful wife and buys her back to serve him again. God will not give up on his people.

In Hosea 11:1-12:6 Hosea is doing almost exactly the same thing, but through the use of a second metaphor—one thoroughly immersed in the history of Israel. This is the metaphor of God as the Father and Israel/Jacob as the unfaithful son. God loved his people when they were enslaved “children” in Egypt. So, he called them out and made a covenant with them. Predictably, they were unfaithful, yet God, like the father in the Parable of the Lost Son, cannot give his people up. Instead, like a lion, he roars and calls his son back to live with him again.

**Analysis of the text**

I. Hosea 11:1-4.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

[The more] they called them, [the more] they departed from me.

They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them in my arms,

But they never knew that I healed them.

I led them with human cords, with ropes of kindness.

To them I was like one who eases the yoke from their jaws: I bent down to give them food. (Hosea 11:1-4 HCSB)

In this section, Hosea uses the analogy of God, as a father, calling his people out of slavery in Egypt. Else Kragelund[[9]](#footnote-9) notes that this metaphor is of a youthful son (Hebrew: *ben*), “taken from the sphere of family life.” It is not a unique use of this metaphor, as it is also found in Jeremiah 2:2 and 3:4. There is great rhetorical power in Hosea’s appeal to the deepest historical memory of the Jewish people. “When Israel was a child” is a reference to a much younger Israel. Hosea reminds God’s people that he has always loved them. Despite appearances to the contrary—even when the expected blessings that come with sonship are not in evidence—God has always kept *hesed*. This reminds us of Malachi 1:2-3. “I have [always] loved you.” The people challenge this claim in Malachi: “How have you loved us?” “Yet I have loved Jacob, but I hated Esau.” As Hosea is echoed in Malachi, so Paul uses Malachi 1:2-3 for slightly different purposes in Romans 9:10-13. Here he reminds Jewish Christians that, even if he is currently blessing Gentiles, he will never stop loving his elect people. God never breaks faith with his beloved children.

God uses many powerful metaphors for his relationship with his people. In Hosea 1-3 it is that of a husband who loves his unfaithful wife, in Hosea 11:1-4 it is of a father and his wandering son. In Ezekiel 16 the metaphor is of a loving adoptive father with an orphaned female child, thrown out to die. In Isaiah 49:15 the picture is of a mother and a child nursing at her breast. Every trait God has he has, that trait intensely. This is no less true of his passionate and emotional love for his people.

It should be noted that in Matthew 2:15 Hosea 11:1 is used as a passage with messianic implications. Matthew notes that Jesus’ journey with his family into Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod and his subsequent exodus from Egypt back to Galilee is a fulfillment of the historical foreshadow of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Skeptics dismiss this use of Hosea 11:1 by Matthew, noting (accurately) that Hosea is not talking about Jesus but Israel. However, in his commentary on Mathew, R. T. Francis has an excellent response to this criticism.[[10]](#footnote-10) “Matthew’s quotation thus depends for its validity on the recognition of Jesus as the true Israel, a typological theme found elsewhere in the New Testament, and most obviously paralleled in Matthew by Jesus’ use of Israel-texts in the wilderness. There too it is as God’s son that Jesus is equated with Israel. Israel’s exodus from Egypt was taken already by the Old Testament prophets as a prefiguring of the ultimate Messianic salvation, and Matthew’s quotation [from Hosea 11:1] here thus reinforces his presentation of the childhood history of Jesus as the dawning of the Messianic age.” We can add Joseph and Moses, as well as all who are saved by Christ to the list of those who were called out of Egypt as God’s son. In Hosea 11:1 and 11:5, but also in Revelation 11:8, Hebrews 3:16 and elsewhere, Egypt is used as a metaphor for sin and slavery. Out of Egypt I called my son, means that God calls Israel as well as us out of slavery to sin through the saving call of the new Moses, Jesus of Nazareth. It is not an accident that Egypt is mentioned five times in the short passage we are studying.

Hosea 11:2 presents some interpretive difficulties. Here the NIV has, “But the more they were called, the more they went away from me.” This makes the difficult Hebrew of the text relatively easy for a modern reader to understand, but, unfortunately, this is not the sense of the original. The original Hebrew, literally, has “they [Israel] called to them [Egypt], that is how they [Israel] went from them [Egypt].”[[11]](#footnote-11) “Me” is not found in the Hebrew. The correct sense of this passage is that, even as Israel was wandering in the desert, under the protection of Yaweh, their minds and hearts were still lingering in Egypt. They never truly left slavery behind. Their hearts were still in Egypt. God was always fully committed to his people, but his people were *never* fully committed to Him.

This makes sense with the rest of the section. God says through Hosea that, even when, as a doting father, he was teaching them how to walk (v.3a), and even when he loved them with human-like cords of kindness (v. 4a), and even as he gave them manna every morning to eat (v. 4b), at a time when most children would still be completely innocent; Even then, they were already worshipping the Baals (v. 2b) and forgetting who had healed them (v. 3b). This fact that Israel never stopped looking back is well-illustrated by Numbers 11:4-6 and Numbers 21:4-9.

Hosea’s mention of Baal (v. 2b), the storm-god of the Phoenicians and Canaanites seems at first to be anachronistic when applied to the Jews wandering in the wilderness, but it is likely an oblique reference to the bull-worship on Sinai (Exodus 32, with its current equivalent bull-worship at Dan and Bethel), or it may be a reference to Baal of Peor (Numbers 25:1-18). Hosea is using the different sort of Baal-worship of their forebears to bear witness to their continued worship of the Canaanite Baal as more mature adults. They have never changed! However, before we move on, let us not forget the main point here. God has always loved his people and he has never failed to keep his covenant of love to his people. He has always maintained *hesed*.

II. Hosea 11:5-7.

Israel will not return to the land of Egypt and Assyria will be his king, because they refused to repent.

A sword will whirl through his cities; It will destroy and devour the bars of his gates, because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call to Him on high, He will not exalt at all.

God has never broken faith with his people. However, because they have continually gone after the Baals, and because they have not faithfully kept the covenant they made at Sinai—because they have not kept *hesed*, God will bring judgment on the people he loves. This is the mournful cry of a passionate God in these verses. Hosea points out that the return to a place of shame and slavery in this case will not be to Egypt (v. 5a), instead, this time around, the slavery will be to Assyria. “A sword will flash in their cities” is a prophecy of the destruction of Samaria under Sennacherib in 722 BCE. It is also a fulfillment of the curses prophesied in Deuteronomy (Deut 28:25, 36-37, 49-50, 53-54) There is an interesting play on words in v. 11. Hosea laments here that the hypocritical claim of the citizens of Ephraim that they believe in a God Most High. Their hypocrisy will not result in their being exalted on high. “By no means” will God exalt those who “are determined to turn from me.”

III. Hosea 11:8-11.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I surrender you, Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

I have had a change of heart; My compassion is stirred!

I will not vent the full fury of My anger; I will not turn back to destroy Ephraim.

For I am God and not man, the Holy One among you; I will not come in rage.

They will follow the Lord; He will roar like a lion. When he roars, His children will come trembling from the West.

They will be roused like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria.

Then I will settle them in their homes.

This section is a beautiful and compelling emotional cry of a God who, as a father, cannot bear to punish his children. “How can I give you up Ephraim?” God recounts in his mind what he was compelled to do to the citizens of Admah and Zeboyim (v. 8). Here is a poetic and obtuse reference to the destruction of their sister cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is also the second use by Hosea in this section of what we can assume was a very familiar story from Israel’s past. Hosea is being purposefully indirect as a rhetorical device to catch the attention of Ephraim and of those of us who know enough Bible to “get” the oblique reference to Genesis 19. This use of the first book in the Torah may not prove that Genesis in its current state existed in the eighth century BCE, but it is compelling evidence that much of the source material for Genesis not only existed at that time, but was part of the deep historical self-knowledge of the Jews in the eighth century BCE.

“How can I treat you like Admah?” Here we see a God of great compassion and pathos. As Garrett puts it, “It is precisely in texts such as this that the love of God becomes vivid reality and not a barren abstraction.[[12]](#footnote-12) What kind of God does Ephraim have to do with? “For I am God, and not a man—the Holy one among you.” God is not human, yet he has very human-like qualities here. Yaweh is a relational God. In this he is not like the self-seeking gods of the Phoenicians, the Assyrians or the Canaanites. The mournful cry in Hosea 11:8 reminds us of the heart of Jesus as seen in Matthew 23:37, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem… How often I wanted to gather her chicks under her wings, yet you were not willing.” Yet, like the citizens of Jerusalem, on whom Jesus pronounced judgment in spite of his fierce love, Ephraim will be judged and sent to Assyria.

In 11:9 Hosea has God declaring that, unlike with Sodom and Gomorrah, he will not vent the full fury of his wrath on his people Ephraim. He will not destroy them again. Here, “I will not again destroy” is preferrable to the HCSB “I will not turn back to destroy.” Why does God not do what justice seems to call for him to do? “For I am God and not man.” That is why “I will not come in rage.” (Hosea 11:9) Like Jonah complained, “You are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to become angry, rich in faithful love (*hesed*), and One who relents from sending disaster.” (Jonah 4:2 HCSB) Indeed, God will roar, but when he does so, it will be to call a remnant, “trembling from the west.” They will come out of Egypt and Assyria as well, which can be a reference to the return of Israel and Judah during the time of the Persian kingdom, or can be an allusion to a future call of a remnant of all nations to the Church after Pentecost. We would do well not to limit the allusion to one application, as this is the pattern in Old Testament kingdom prophecies. This section is concluded with great comfort for the remnant of God. “Then I will settle them in their homes.” (Hosea 11:11)

IV. Hosea 11:12-12:2.

Ephraim surrounds me with lies, the house of Israel, with deceit

Judah still wanders with El and is faithful to the holy ones.

Ephraim chases the wind and pursues the east wind. He continually multiplies lies and violence.

He makes a covenant with Assyria, and olive oil is carried to Egypt.

The Lord also has a dispute with Judah.

He is about to punish Jacob according to his ways; He will repay him based on his actions.

Here is why, in spite of his unfailing love and father-like devotion to Samaria, judgment is coming, not only on Israel, but eventually on Judah as well. Israel is full of lies, but Judah is not much better at keeping *hesed*. She, like Ephraim is a spiritual wanderer, wavering in her expression of covenant devotion. There is some interpretational difficulty with Hosea 11:12. This is because in some contexts El is used for the God of the Jews, but El is also the name for the highest God in the Canaanite pantheon of gods. To make it more confusing, El was also a generic name for deity. Because in the context Judah is being accused of apostasy, we would do well to take the third option. Judah wanders after deity and various “holy ones.”[[13]](#footnote-13) She is Oholibah and Samaria is Oholah (Ezekiel 23).

Hosea 12:1-2 reflects the facts of history during the ministry of Hosea. Both Israel and Judah were not trusting in Yahweh for deliverance. Instead, they were like the wind, switching back and forth between relying on the two dominant worldly powers in the Near East, Assyria and Egypt. We, too, can find ourselves seeking comfort and economic support from worldly power and from “olive oil… carried out of Egypt.” This is a deadly error.

V. Hosea 12:3-5.

In the womb he grasped his brother’s heel, and as an adult he wrestled with God.

Jacob struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.

He found him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him.

Yahweh is the God of Hosts; Yahweh is his name.

In a fascinating allusion we have our third reference to the history of Israel in this relatively short passage. Hosea uses the tempestuous relationship between Jacob and Yaweh as a metaphor for Ephraim’s relationship with God. Else Holt[[14]](#footnote-14) calls Hosea 12:3-7 a *rib-*statement—an indictment against Israel. She sees nearly all the descriptions of Jacob, the patron-saint of the Northern Kingdom, as negative. Holt says with good reason that “Jacob is used as an example for Israel. Just as Jacob surrendered himself to Yaweh of Hosts in Bethel, so must the people come back to the proper cult of Yaweh… They should learn from Jacob.” However, I agree with Garrett,[[15]](#footnote-15) who gives a more positive spin on the career of Jacob and his relationship to Yaweh (and therefore also to Israel and Judah). He says that in these allusions, “Jacob the struggling conniver became Israel the recipient of grace.” In this passage we see the sin of youthful Jacob who grasped his brother’s heel, but we also see the mature Israel who zealously “struggled” with and ultimately found God at Bethel. Like Moses, he spoke with God.

The allusions to historical Jacob are reason for concern, but also for hope. If Israel will, like their namesake, zealously seek God, perhaps they will, like Jacob, receive God’s blessing. It is not too late for Jacob’s descendants.

VI. Hosea 12:6 A call to repent.

But you must return to your God. Maintain love and justice and always put your hope in God.

We complete our study of Hosea 11:1-12:6 with what is the most common call of all the prophets. It is time for Israel, it is time for Judah, and it is time for the reader of Hosea to repent of their sins, both corporate and individual. For Israel, to repent is to return to what they had under Moses in the wilderness. The call to repentance in Hosea is the call to recommit to *hesed*—to a faithful covenant love. To return to God means to behave like God. No longer can Ephraim hope in the power of Egypt or of Assyria to save them. They must put their hope in the God who loves them like a son, who calls them out of slavery in Egypt.

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2. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 19a (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* ((Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984), p. 23-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* ((Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1984), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Else Kragelund Holt, *Prophesying the Past: The Use of Israel’s History in the Book of Hosea* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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11. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 19a (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Duane A. Garrett*, Hosea, Joel*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 19a (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this I am not quoting, but I am using Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 19a (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 19a (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)