

THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF STRIPPING THE ADULTERESS IN HOSEA 2

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Abstract: *In Hosea 2, YHWH threatens to strip naked his metaphorical wife as punishment for her illicit relationship with her “lovers.” The biblical text commands the death penalty for adultery, so what manner of punishment is this threat to strip her naked and expose her publicly? Many commentators have suggested that ancient Near Eastern laws and practices for adultery or divorce best explain the context for this unusual threat. This article examines the relevant texts and proposals for an ancient Near Eastern background and suggests that the evidence for a clear connection to Hosea 2 is lacking. Rather, by analyzing the textual and thematic material in Hosea, the article argues that Deuteronomy 28 provides a better background for the pericope. There, the covenant curses contain the same or similar words used in Hosea 2, and Hosea pictures this metaphorical relationship in explicitly covenantal terms.*

Key Words: *Hosea, nakedness, adultery, divorce, ancient Near East, covenant curses, allusion*

In a unique and shocking move to awaken dull senses, YHWH commands his prophet Hosea, “Take a wife of prostitution, for the land commits great prostitution by forsaking YHWH” (Hos 1:2).¹ Speaking to Hosea and Gomer’s children, YHWH urges them to plead with their mother to turn away from her adulterous living or else there will be severe consequences:

Lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
and make her like a parched land,
and kill her with thirst. (Hos 2:3)²

And later,

Therefore I will take back my grain in its time,
And my wine in its season,
And I will take away my wool and my flax,
Which were to cover her nakedness.
Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers,

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¹ While interpreters may differ as to the nature of Israel’s “prostitution,” they agree that in some sense, Hosea’s marriage is supposed to reflect the relationship between YHWH and Israel.

² Translations are taken from the ESV unless otherwise indicated. Versification will follow the English numbering where the Hebrew numbering differs.

And no one shall rescue her out of my hand. (Hos 2:9–10)

YHWH threatens not only to strip his adulterous wife but also to do so in the sight of those with whom she had been conducting her illicit affairs.³ Given the biblical context for punishing adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), YHWH's threat here seems in one sense to be merciful, that is, something less than death. Yet in another sense, public exposure seems to be cruel and unusual punishment. Is there something in Israel's canonical or ancient Near Eastern (ANE) background that would explain this threat? What is the purpose of threatening her with nakedness?

In this article, I will argue that the covenant tradition of the Pentateuch is sufficient background material to explain the use of stripping as a threat of punishment. First, I will show this by investigating proposals that rely on ANE divorce and adultery laws as the background to stripping as a punishment. This investigation reveals the lack of solid evidence in ANE culture that clearly shows a connection with Hosea. Second, I will discuss briefly the concept of metaphor and highlight how the author of Hosea is aware of and utilizes the covenant material in his metaphor in order to exhort and encourage his intended audience. Because Hosea correlates with the covenant material, I will suggest that it is preferable to understand the stripping threat from this material. Third, I will show how the stripping threat functions in the marital metaphor as a vivid warning to remember the covenant and forsake reliance upon anyone or anything other than YHWH.

I. BACKGROUND: WHAT IS THE CONTEXT FOR THE STRIPPING THREAT?

As the following survey will show, commentators differ widely as to the origin of stripping as a form of threatened punishment. Certainly, Hosea's audience must have some understanding of the context for the warning to have its intended effect. When YHWH threatens to strip his adulterous wife naked in 2:3, 9–10, is this a practice of which they were aware? Was it foreign to their culture, but striking enough to jar their senses? Can we even know?

1. *Divorce in the ancient Near East.* Like many twentieth-century scholars, pre-modern interpreters of Hosea 2 suggested that the threat to strip the adulterous wife followed standard practice in Hosea's time.⁴ Commenting on the phrase "lest I strip her naked" in Hos 2:3, Calvin simply states that it was standard practice for a husband to strip away completely the possessions of his adulterous wife.⁵ He of-

³ The word translated "lewdness" in the ESV, גְבוּלוֹת, is a *hapax legomenon* and unclear as to its meaning. In the context, it likely has something to do with the metaphorical wife's nakedness, though it may refer to her degeneration/ruin, foolishness, or sexual misconduct. See Saul M. Olyan, "In the Sight of Her Lovers": On the Interpretation of *nablūt* in Hos 2, 12," *BZ* 36 (1992): 255–61.

⁴ Brad E. Kelle, "Hosea 1–3 in Twentieth-Century Scholarship," *CBR* 7 (2009): 179–216, gives a helpful summary of interpretative trends in Hosea 1–3 as well as an extensive bibliography with pertinent works up to 2009.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 79.

fers no evidence for this claim, so it is difficult to know whether he knew of such an ANE practice or presumed it from his own context. Likewise, most other commentators prior to the twentieth century perceived the “stripping” threat here as YHWH the husband removing his provisions for Israel his wife.⁶ Where these commentators compared the threat to actual practice, they did not provide evidence for the practice but assumed its existence.⁷

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, commentators began to note comparative practices in ancient cultures. Particularly with regard to a husband stripping a wife, relevant evidence emerged from Tacitus, *Germania*, in which he described the punishment for adultery amongst the Germans.⁸ He stated that the husband crops his wife’s hair, strips off her clothes, and drives her from his house along the street with a whip.⁹ One should note however that Tacitus was writing of the German people hundreds of years after the events of Hosea’s day and not describing ANE culture.

Cyrus Gordon builds on the work of Curt Kuhl, arguing that Hos 2:4–5 [2:2–3 Eng] follows the Akkadian divorce formula, “Thou art not my wife,” and “Thou art not my husband.”¹⁰ Further, he identifies documents from Hana and Nuzi containing contracts which require the wife to go forth stripped and naked if she initiates a divorce or remarries.¹¹ Thus, Gordon suggests that Hos 2:2–3 indicates a divorce between YHWH and Israel and that the punishment matches ANE custom, that is, the wife, at fault for the break in the relationship, should go forth from his house stripped naked. He also suggests that Tacitus’s remarks about the German practice of stripping shows a custom that was widespread both geographically and chronologically. Therefore, *Germania* is relevant in that it shows an ancient practice that continued for several centuries at least.¹²

Gordon’s assertion requires that the text of Hosea 2 depicts a divorce between YHWH and Israel with the accompanying practice of the husband stripping the wife.¹³ Yet the comparative ANE texts are not as clear as Gordon suggests. The

⁶ See the commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Martin Luther, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, and John Gill.

⁷ So Calvin and Poole.

⁸ Both T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of Hosea* (London: Cambridge, 1884), 48; and William R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 227, cite Tacitus, *Germania*, with reference to Hos 2:3. In their commentaries, both Cheyne and Harper reference §§18, 19 though only §19 pertains to divorce and its penalties. Cheyne argues that stripping is only the beginning of her punishment for Lev 20:10 and Deut 22:22 require death as her penalty. Harper mentions these texts as the legal requirement but makes no comment suggesting that Hosea intends the reader to presume this fate for the woman.

⁹ Tacitus, *Germania* §19.

¹⁰ Cyrus H. Gordon, “Hosea 2:4–5 in Light of New Semitic Inscriptions,” *ZAW* 54 (1936): 277–80; and C. Kuhl, “Neue Dokumente zum Verständnis von Hosea 2:4–15,” *ZAW* 52 (1934): 102–9.

¹¹ Gordon, “Hosea 2:4–5 in Light of New Semitic Inscriptions,” 278.

¹² Gordon also suggests that the practice continued in Nippur into the Sassanian Period (3rd–7th centuries AD) (*ibid.*, 278).

¹³ Markham J. Geller, “The Elephantine Papyri and Hosea 2, 3: Evidence for the Form of the Early Jewish Divorce Writ,” *JSJ* 8 (1977): 139–48, also argues that Hosea 2 depicts a divorce formula on the basis of Elephantine parallels. He argues that the text uses the similar formula, “I hate my husband, and

Hana and Nuzi documents presumably concern divorce and *Germania* deals with an adulterous wife.¹⁴ However, the Nuzi document is considered a testamentary will in which, if the wife remarries after her husband's death, she is to be stripped of her clothing and turned out of her husband's household. The text is not concerned with a divorce situation but the woman's relationship to her deceased husband's household. Thus only the Hana text may be relevant to Hosea 2 as a comparative divorce practice. Even there, however, Gordon translates the text, "If the wife [says] to her husband, 'Thou art not my husband,' ... she shall get out (*sc.* of her husband's house) naked."¹⁵ There is very little context to understand the details or purpose of the practice, and the use of the term "naked" here may intend only to clarify that the woman has no right to any of her husband's possessions since she initiated the divorce.¹⁶

Given the scarcity of evidence that Hosea 2 reflects ANE divorce practices, few commentators still maintain this position. Perhaps Hosea 2 depicts a divorce scenario, but one certainly cannot ascertain this from ANE evidence at this point. Further, trends in interpretation suggest that the language of "not my wife/not your husband" indicates an obvious problem in the relationship, but one short of divorce.¹⁷ Thus it is probably best to look elsewhere for evidence corresponding to Hosea 2.

2. *Adultery and prostitution in the ancient Near East.* Some commentators also suggest that there is ANE evidence of stripping a woman due to adultery or prosti-

I am not his wife," and vice versa. The text requires that the person initiating the divorce relinquishes rights to his/her possessions. No practice of stripping occurs in the text.

¹⁴ Moreover, Gordon uses *Germania* to show that the practice of stripping a woman for divorce endured for some time. Because it primarily concerns the situation of adultery and postdates even the latest dating of Hosea, *Germania* offers little relevance to the study. The Nippur text (inscribed on bowls) was part of an exorcism ritual in which the "harmful demons" were served a writ of divorce. Gordon intends for this example to show that stripping the "wife" was typical divorce custom.

¹⁵ Gordon, "Hosea," 278.

¹⁶ See Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel* (NAC 19A; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 77 n. 126; and Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 71, who argues that the word translated "naked" can also be translated "be without means."

¹⁷ E.g. Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Academia Biblica 20; Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 54 n. 29 lists several scholars that disagree with the divorce comparison. See also Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 76 n. 120. John L. Mackay, *Hosea* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2012), 75, suggests that *לֹא אִשָּׁה וְאִנֹּכִי לֹא אִשָּׁה* is actually an unmarked interrogative and rhetorically asks, "For is she not my wife, and am I not her husband?" He cites GKC §150a and Joüin §161a for the idea that Hebrew questions do not need to have an explicit interrogative marker, e.g. Exod 8:26; 2 Sam 23:5; 2 Kgs 5:26; Job 2:10; Jonah 4:11. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Commentary* (AB 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 221–22 also reject the notion that Hosea 2 insinuates divorce between YHWH and Israel. First, they argue that the language of 2:4 is meant to mimic the language of 1:9, "You are not my people, and I am not your God." YHWH's announcement in Hos 1:9 is not the dissolution of the covenant between Israel and himself because the covenant does not contain such a provision. Rather, covenant-breaking by Israel necessitates punishment; there is no opt-out clause. Second, they note that YHWH was not acting as one seeking a divorce but one who still has claims on his wife. Adultery carried the penalty of death (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), which is the outcome of the threats beginning in 2:3. Yet, if YHWH had divorced his wife, he would have no basis to discipline her since her actions would no longer be adultery against him.

tution, and it may be that these practices form the background of Hosea 2. There are numerous laws stipulating actions against adultery. In the Laws of Eshunna §28, a married woman who is found with another man must die.¹⁸ Similarly, in the Laws of Hammurabi (LH) §129, if a couple is caught in adultery, they are both to be bound and thrown into the water.¹⁹ However, this law stipulates that if the woman's husband wants her to live, then they have to permit the adulterer to live as well. In LH §153, the law further clarifies that if a woman has her husband killed in order to be with another man, she must be impaled.²⁰ The Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL) are nearly identical to these, stipulating death for a couple found together but allowing for leniency by the husband. If he should spare his wife punishment or choose a punishment less than death, then the same punishment must be applied to the adulterer.²¹ In each of these law collections, none of the laws stipulates stripping the woman naked for adultery. Thus it certainly does not seem that the practice of stripping a woman naked for adultery was widespread.

One other possible text from Nippur discusses punishment for an adulterous woman.²² To be clear though, the woman was found guilty of destroying her husband's property, stealing from him, and then committing adultery with another man. They carried her to an assembly, and the king decided to have her shameful parts shaved, her nose bored through with an arrow, and for her to be led around the city. Both Greengus and Westbrook compare this example to Hosea 2. Yet, as Baumann notes, this text clearly concerns a crime that extends beyond adultery, that is, destruction and theft of property.²³ I would add that though it describes shaving parts normally covered with clothing, the text does not indicate that this was done publicly, nor that the woman was nude as she was led through the city.²⁴

Another consideration is that it was ANE practice to strip prostitutes under certain occasions. Hillers provides one example from Sefire I which commentators have used to suggest a parallel with Hosea 2.²⁵ The Sefire text is fragmentary, and

¹⁸ See Marth T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 63.

¹⁹ Roth, *Law Collections*, 125. LH §129 is often cited to show the possibility of leniency with regard to ANE adultery laws. Thus in Hosea 2, YHWH threatens to strip the woman rather than put her to death as per the biblical laws regarding adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). See the discussion of the biblical laws below.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 158, 160–61; MAL §§13–16; §§22–24. See also James B. Pritchard, *ANET* (3rd ed.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1969), 181–82.

²² See Samuel Greengus, "A Textbook Case of Adultery in Ancient Mesopotamia," *HUCA* 40/41 (1969–70): 34–35; Raymond Westbrook, "Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *RB* 97 (1990): 559; and Paul A. Kruger, "The Marriage Metaphor in Hosea 2:4–17 against its Ancient Near Eastern Background," *OTE* 5 (1992): 7–25.

²³ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 74.

²⁴ That may have been what actually happened, but the text does not make this clear. As such, it is not clear evidence that stripping an adulteress was enshrined in law or a common practice.

²⁵ Delbert R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 59. The comparison is from *The Treaty Between Mati'el and Bar-ga'yah*. Those who rely on his work include James L. Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 38; Andersen and

several words which Hillers reconstructs are incomplete, namely the phrase “Just as the prostitute is stripped.” Thus, he translates it, “Just as the prostitute is stripped naked, so may the wives of Mati’ ‘el be stripped naked, and the wives of his offspring and the wives of his nobles.”²⁶ Hillers’s entire argument connecting the Sefire text to Hosea 2 is based upon his discussion of ancient treaty curses, yet very few have critiqued his interpretation of the text.²⁷ Though reaching a different conclusion about Hosea 2 than this article, Baumann rightly emphasizes that Hillers simply conjectures the practice of stripping a prostitute and projects it onto the Sefire text.²⁸

A final possibility of stripping related to prostitution occurs in MAL §40, in which a prostitute is forbidden from covering her head while walking along the street. If she veils herself, the one who catches her may take her clothing, and she must be struck 50 blows from a rod and have hot pitch poured over her head.²⁹ While in this case the prostitute loses her clothing, this does not merit a comparison with the text of Hosea 2. She is not an adulteress but merits punishment because she veiled her face contrary to the law.

3. *Divorce and adultery in the biblical laws.* First, in the matter of divorce, the biblical text never mentions a legal precedent for the act of stripping the woman, nor is the practice ever described. Deuteronomy 24 only describes the practice of divorce by indicating that the man gives her a certificate of divorce and sends her out of his house. Further, the law specifies that following this divorce, the woman may not return to her first husband if she marries another, whether she divorces the second husband or he dies. Some have argued that this prohibition clearly precludes interpreting Hosea 2 as a divorce, but this law likely has no bearing on the matter.³⁰ Even if Hosea 2 were announcing a divorce between YHWH and Israel, the law would only apply if Israel “married” another, which the text never suggests.³¹

Likewise, the biblical legal setting for adultery is to punish the guilty parties by death, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev 20:10; cf. Deut 22:22).³² Yet

Freedman, *Hosea*, 246; and Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 48. Andersen and Freedman suggest the Sefire text as an open possibility but do not settle on a conclusion.

²⁶ Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, 59.

²⁷ I argue below that Hosea 2 is indeed connected to the covenant curses of Leviticus/Deuteronomy but suggest that Hosea’s background material is not ANE treaties but the covenant between YHWH and Israel.

²⁸ Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 77. Baumann cites Marie-Theres Wacker’s work, *Figurationen des Weiblichen im Hosea-Buch* (Herders biblische Studien 8; Freiburg: Herder, 1996), 28, where she shows the tenuous nature of Hillers’s hypothesis. Much of Hillers’s interpretation rests on the translation in Donald J. Wiseman, *The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), which has been critiqued and updated by Rykle Borger, “Akkadische Staatsverträge,” *TUAT* 1/2: *Staatsverträge* (1983), 160–76.

²⁹ See Roth, *Law Collections*, 167–68; and Pritchard, *ANET*, 183.

³⁰ E.g. J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 114; and Mackay, *Hosea*, 75.

³¹ See Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 222.

³² There is much discussion regarding YHWH’s treatment of Israel in Hosea 2, particularly in light of the command to put to death those guilty of adultery. Henry McKeating, “Sanctions against Adultery

again, no legal texts prescribe that an adulteress be stripped of her clothing. Other prophetic texts use the image of stripping to describe YHWH's punishment (cf. Jer 13:22, 26; Ezek 16:36–37; 23:10, 18, 29; Lam 1:8–9; Isa 47:2–3; Nah 3:5–6), yet these do not provide information regarding the background of the practice.

4. *Conclusions regarding adultery and divorce in the ANE and biblical laws.* The discussion above shows that even though some ANE literature may contain examples where a woman is stripped, there is very little evidence that these situations indicate normal, widespread practice in cases of divorce, adultery, or prostitution. Unless one can demonstrate that these practices were widespread, it is hard to justify the possibility that Hosea and his audience would have had these practices in mind. Further, it is not at all clear that Hosea 2 depicts a divorce, thus divorce law in the ANE or biblical literature may not be relevant. Though the situation of adultery or prostitution is clearly in view in Hosea, the ANE evidence does not bear out legal precedent for stripping an adulteress or a prostitute. The Sefire text is inconclusive at best, and MAL §40 does not concern punishment for the act of prostitution. Moreover, the biblical laws regarding divorce and adultery do not mention the concept of stripping the woman in any way.

Thus, in recent years for a variety of reasons, many interpreters of Hosea 2 have abandoned attempts to understand the text primarily through comparison to ANE laws and customs which deal with adultery or divorce.³³ The evidence for comparison is inconclusive, and as such it is difficult to maintain that Hosea or his audience would have those situations in mind.³⁴ Is it legitimate to expect an Israelite prophet to utilize concepts that function in another cultural context as a metaphorical basis to describe or condemn Israelite belief and practice?³⁵ For this, we

in Ancient Israelite Society with Some Reflections on Methodology in the Study of Old Testament Ethics," *JOT* 11 (1979): 57–72, argues that though Lev 20:10 and Deut 22:22 prescribe death for adultery, other biblical texts and ANE legal texts suggest that actual practice in Israel showed lesser punishment. On the other hand, Anthony Phillips, "Another Look at Adultery," *JOT* 20 (1981): 3–25, argues against McKeating that instead Israelite laws stood in stark contrast to ANE laws and that Israel's practice supported a stronger reaction to adultery. Primarily, Phillips tries to show that adultery was not merely a personal offense but one against God. Thus punishment was not dependent on the husband's decision. See also Louis M. Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (New York: Bloch, 1948), 194–215 who discusses the biblical, ANE, and rabbinic traditions regarding adultery. He, too, suggests that leniency was the norm.

³³ E.g. Kelle, "Hosea 1–3," and *Hosea 2*, 52, 62–64; Baumann, *Love and War*, 78; Mackay, *Hosea*, 28–29; Richard D. Patterson, *Hosea-Malachi* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2012), 17–19; and Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 52.

³⁴ I want to clarify that I think the study of the ANE context is very helpful to biblical interpretation. Yet, as some of the explanations offered above showed, techniques which rely primarily on ANE comparison lead to conclusions that are difficult to fit into the place of covenant in the prophetic texts. In regard to the stripping threat, I think it can be helpful to understand that it was an identifiable Assyrian practice to parade or strip nude prisoners of war as a means to humiliate their captives and deter other would-be rebels. See Pritchard, *ANET*, Figs. 332, 358, 362, 365, and 373 for images of parading/displaying captives nude; and H. W. F. Saggs, *The Might that Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1984), 248–50 for a helpful discussion on Assyria's use of psychological warfare as a deterrent to future rebellion.

³⁵ Cf. Baumann, *Love and War*, 78; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, xxxi–ii. Though Kelle, *Hosea 2*, critiques the positions particularly which link Hosea's marriage metaphor to ANE fertility cults, or even a covenant

need to discuss some aspects of metaphor and how it suggests that Hosea would have used concepts and images that were common to his audience, namely from their shared covenant background.

II. THE COVENANT BASIS FOR HOSEA'S METAPHOR AND MESSAGE

1. *The use of metaphor.* “Metaphor is that figurative way of speaking (and meaning) in which one reality, the Subject, is depicted in terms that are more commonly associated with a different reality, the Symbol, which is related to it by Analogy.”³⁶ Here, Macky means by “analogy” that the two realities have significant points in common, though they will undoubtedly differ in less central ways.³⁷ “Symbol” is the common reality that represents and gives insight into more mysterious realities.³⁸ What is crucial to understand about metaphor is that *common symbols* are used by the author/speaker to explain or describe something that is more or less mysterious to the recipient of the metaphor.³⁹ Thus, the speaker uses things the audience understands well to explain things that they do not.

Hosea employs the symbol of marriage in chapters 1–3, and particularly the gravity of adultery, as an analogy for Israel's unfaithfulness toward YHWH.⁴⁰ The subject of the metaphor is the nation Israel, namely the people who dwell in it, and their relationship with YHWH.⁴¹ YHWH grounds his command for Hosea to take a wife of whoredom (and children of whoredom) in the reality that the land com-

basis, his own position falls prey to the same critique that it is based on much speculation regarding ANE practice for which we have little contextual evidence.

³⁶ Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 19; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁹ Macky's work is one of the most thorough treatments of metaphors used in the Bible. Other general discussions of metaphor are in: I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford, 1936); C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); Max Black, *Models and Metaphor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); and some specific to prophetic texts or Hosea specifically: Ehud Ben Zvi, “Observations on the Marital Metaphor of YHWH and Israel in its Ancient Israelite Context: General Considerations and Particular Images in Hosea 1.2,” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 363–84; Peggy L. Day, “Adulterous Jerusalem's Imagined Demise: Death of a Metaphor in Ezekiel XVI,” *VT* 50 (2000): 285–309; Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (SBLDS 130; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ Of course, there are numerous suggestions as to the nature of this “unfaithfulness,” but one can generally get the idea from the text that the metaphor seeks to impact the audience most with the weight of being unfaithful. Kelle, “Hos 1–3,” is the most thorough and accessible resource for the various interpretations of Hosea 1–3.

⁴¹ Certainly, many interpreters seek to specify the subject of the metaphor. Most common is the position that the wife/mother in the metaphor is Israel, e.g. among others, Harper, *Amos and Hosea*, 225; Mays, *Hosea*, 9; Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 32; Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 39; Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea* (trans. Gary Stansell; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), xxvi. Of course, though these commentators agree on the subject as “Israel” generally, they differ in their understanding as to which constituents of Israel Hosea targets with his prophecy.

mits great whoredom by turning away from him (Hos 1:2).⁴² Thus, Hosea sets the metaphor in the prophet's speech-act of marrying an adulterous woman to symbolize YHWH's "marriage" to an adulterous nation.

2. *The covenant relationship as Hosea's background.* My contention is that it is preferable to conclude that Hosea communicates to his audience in the language of their covenant with YHWH and in this context utilizes the stripping threat, among others, to convey that God will remove every provision he has given in order to remind them of their relationship to him and warn them of the consequences for their failure, should they choose to remain unfaithful.⁴³ The role of the covenant in the prophetic message is certainly not a new interpretation, yet many studies on Hosea overlook its significance for the interpretation of Hosea 2, particularly where the stripping threat is concerned.⁴⁴ This suggestion notes the reality that metaphor relies on information common to both the speaker and his hearers/readers. While it is possible that some ANE concepts discussed above may have been understood by Hosea and his audience, we don't have strong evidence that this is true. Yet, if the discussion of the role of the covenant and its literature proves true, then it would have the kind of impact on Hosea's audience necessary for his metaphor to be effective.

⁴² For a helpful discussion of the various interpretations regarding the identity of the woman Hosea marries, see Derek D. Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture: An Analysis of His Hermeneutics" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 45–49.

⁴³ I hold to the position that the Pentateuchal material predates the prophetic message. Thus, the kingdom of Israel was built around the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel as described in the Pentateuch. This is my intention with the use of the word "background." Yet readers who do not hold to this position typically agree that even if the Deuteronomistic text grows out of the prophetic era, there is undoubtedly a connection between the two. Thus, the idea of a covenant was not foreign to Hosea or his audience. Theologically speaking, the argument below holds then that in Hosea, YHWH speaks from the position of a covenantal relationship, and the stripping threat in Hosea 2 should not be understood apart from the covenant. This contradicts Kelle, *Hosea 2*, 51, who insists that the idea of covenant as the basis for the marriage metaphor has several deficiencies. He gives only slight attention to this model, citing Baumann, *Love and Violence*, 64–66, and essentially dismisses it as a possibility on the basis of the common 7th-century dating of the Yahweh-Israel covenant (Baumann's claim depends on this as well). Yet, when trying to understand the origin of adultery as unfaithfulness to the relationship, Kelle relies on the assumption that Hosea, the Deuteronomist, and others relied on the same stream of tradition which is evidenced in their vocabulary and thought (96 n. 68)! Would this stream of tradition not also include the idea of the Yahweh-Israel covenant? I would like to see him interact with the idea of a covenant basis in Hosea, particularly in light of Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture" (see discussion below). See also Gary Hall, "Origin of the Marriage Metaphor," *HS* 23 (1982): 169–71, who argues for the Canaanite myth background. Apart from the problems of his position as discussed above, he asserts incorrectly that the covenant background position has to deny the obvious connection with Canaanite myths (p. 170).

⁴⁴ For a short list of those connecting Hosea's prophecy to the YHWH/Israel covenant, see Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (trans. Israel Abrams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), 1:79–100; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 361–62; Walter Brueggemann, *Tradition for Crisis: A Study in Hosea* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1968), 13–25; Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 131–32; Mark E. Rooker, "The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Hosea," *CTR* 7 (1993): 51–66; John H. Sailhamer, "Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15," *WTJ* 63 (2001): 87–96; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 23–27; Garrett, *Hosea-Joel*, 27–29; John Day, "Pre-Deuteronomistic Allusions to the Covenant in Hosea and Psalm LXXVIII," *VT* 36 (1986): 1–12; and Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 398–401.

3. *The covenant relationship in Hosea.* In his dissertation, Derek Bass defends the idea that the book of Hosea contains a variety of allusions in great number which suggests dependence upon the Pentateuch and much of the historical books in at least a similar form as the MT.⁴⁵ He argues that Hosea's hermeneutic is firmly rooted in redemptive history, retrospective theology (analogy between his contemporary audience and prior people/events in Israel's past, typically negative), and the Abrahamic covenant (which he connects to the Mosaic covenant).⁴⁶ Notably for this study, Bass identifies remarkable correlation between the text and themes of Hosea and Israel's other scriptural texts.⁴⁷

As one moves through the first chapter of Hosea noticing this connection to covenant language, it becomes clear that Hosea already perceives that the YHWH/Israel relationship is like a marriage. YHWH begins his message to Israel first by commanding Hosea to take a wife of whoredom, "For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (Hos 1:2).⁴⁸ Raymond Ortlund has shown that the Pentateuchal literature used the metaphor of adultery to describe unfaithfulness toward YHWH.⁴⁹ Certainly, Hosea expands this metaphor significantly, but his use of the metaphor of adultery for unfaithfulness shows that he has the covenant literature in mind.⁵⁰ In the context of Hosea, then, YHWH accuses Israel of forsaking him and then states that the covenant relationship is in jeopardy. It is in this covenant context that the stripping threat finds its background and can fulfill its intended purpose.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture," 2–3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 272–76.

⁴⁷ He identifies correspondence with the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel (Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture," 2).

⁴⁸ Land being metonymy for the nation of Israel; see Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture," 105; Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 169.

⁴⁹ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife* (NSBT 2; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 25–40. See also F. Charles Fensham, "The Marriage Metaphor in Hosea for the Covenant Relationship between the LORD and His People (Hos 1:2–9)," *JNSL* 12 (1984): 71–78. Scholars also suggest that covenant promise, "I will take you to be my people and I will be your God" (Exod 6:7; Deut 4:20), should be viewed as a marriage formula (לְיָי וְלִי לְאִשָּׁה); see Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture," 105; Seock-Tae Sohn, "I Will Be Your God and You Will Be My People": The Origin and Background of the Covenant Formula," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine* (ed. Robert Chazon, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 364–68. Bass, "Hosea's Use of Scripture," 105–9, shows that the harlotry motif is connected to Hos 1:2 through linguistic and syntactic correspondence to key Pentateuchal passages (Exod 34:15–16 and Deut 31:16), which he calls "definite allusion."

⁵⁰ Exod 34:15–16 (seeking other gods); Lev 20:5–6 (worship of Molech through child sacrifice and consulting mediums and necromancers); Num 15:39 (disobedience to the covenant terms); Num 25:1–3 (intermarriage and following pagan rituals); and Deut 31:16 (prediction that Israel will abandon the covenant and pursue the foreign gods of the land).

⁵¹ Feminist interpreters see the marital metaphor arising from a male-dominated society rather than a covenant background and propose a variety of meanings for the metaphor. Cf. Francis Landy, *Hosea* (2nd ed.; Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 11–12; Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (JSOTSup 338; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 104–39; Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 45–52; Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (Sheffield: Sheffield

Bass also shows significant linguistic and contextual correspondence between Hos 1:10–2:1 and the idea of covenant promise and curse in the Pentateuch.⁵² He suggests that this passage alludes to Gen 32:13; Exod 1:10; and Deut 30:3–4; 32:8:

In the face of covenant breach and exile, Hosea (2:1 [Eng. 1:10] // Gen 32:13) and Moses (Deut 30:1–10) both look to the Abrahamic promises for the basis of future hope, not Sinai. Just as the Abrahamic covenant functioned as the grounds for the Exodus from Egypt culminating in the covenant at Sinai (e.g., Exod 6:2–8), so in Hosea 2:1–3 (Eng. 1:10–2:1) and Deuteronomy 30:1–10, these promises form the basis for YHWH's restoration of the exiles to the land, which in 2:16–25 (Eng. 14–23) culminates in a new covenant.⁵³

Thus, the threats which begin in Hos 2:3 are made in the context of covenantal breach on the part of Israel in which Hosea has already brought in the key concepts of exile and restoration from the Pentateuchal texts. Furthermore, in 2:14–23, Hosea moves abruptly from warning the people of covenant curse to a stunning reversal of fortune in which YHWH restores his wife to himself in covenant faithfulness. This, too, was described in the Pentateuch in Deut 30:1–10.

4. *Covenant curses: Deuteronomy in Hosea 2.* It is significant to understand that the threat to strip Israel naked (2:3, 9–10) coexists with other threats of punishment which find their basis in the covenant curses of Deuteronomy.⁵⁴ For instance, the curse section of Deuteronomy 28 begins with the warning, “If you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deut 28:15). What follows this verse is the exposition of what “all these curses” are.

Beginning in Hos 2:3, then, with the covenant relationship already in mind, the threat that YHWH will strip the mother naked (ערמה) is followed by further threats that he will make her as the day of her birth, make her like a wilderness, make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst. As Garrett suggests, this means that “Israel will lose everything, the land will be emptied, and the people will go into exile.”⁵⁵ In Deut 28:48, the curse states, “You will serve your enemies whom the LORD your God will send against you in hunger and thirst, in nakedness (עירם), and lacking everything.” This threat to strip the wife serves to remind Israel that YHWH promised specific punishment for failure to remain faithful to

Academic, 1995); William Boshoff, “The Female Imagery in the Book of Hosea,” *OTE* 15/1 (2002): 23–41.

⁵² Bass, “Hosea’s Use of Scripture,” 122–31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 130–31.

⁵⁴ Because the language of nakedness occurs in Deuteronomy 28, this paper will not consider Hosea’s connection to the covenant curses in Leviticus 26. For the connection between Hosea and the covenant curses and blessings, see Rooker, “Use of the Old Testament in Hosea,” 64–65; Stuart, *Hosea*, xxxi–xl; House, *Old Testament Theology*, 398–401. Many studies which discuss the link between Hosea and the covenant blessing/curses also note the connection to Leviticus 26.

⁵⁵ See Garrett, *Hosea-Joel*, 77; Bass, “Hosea’s Use of Scripture,” 132; Mackay, *Hosea*, 79.

the covenant.⁵⁶ Hosea 2:3 brings to mind the concept of nakedness as a lack of provision, and the lines that follow convey what the threat of stripping suggests: having absolutely nothing. YHWH takes back what he had provided.

In Hos 2:5, the woman pursues her lovers and attributes her provision *to them*, that is, her bread and water, wool and flax, and oil and drink. Yet, in the blessing section of Deuteronomy 28, YHWH makes clear that *he* is the one who provides abundantly for them (Deut 28:1–14). In Hos 2:8–9, YHWH declares that he provided her grain, wine, and oil, and that he will take back his grain and wine as well as his wool and flax, which cover her nakedness.⁵⁷ In the curse section of Deuteronomy, these specific items constitute the provision that YHWH threatens to take away from Israel.⁵⁸ Hosea 2 continues on, threatening the end of her religious observances and the removal of her vines and fig trees. The religious observances would certainly cease while in exile, particularly as Deut 28:64 states, “And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.”

Notably, in the text of Hos 2:8–9, YHWH summarizes his provision as grain, wine, oil, and clothing.⁵⁹ These are the items of provision that Deuteronomy 28 specifies YHWH will take away from Israel, particularly in 28:48–51, “Therefore you shall serve your enemies *whom the LORD will send against you*, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the invading nation (whom the LORD sends) will not leave Israel grain, wine, or oil (Deut 28:51). Bass suggests that Hosea most likely alludes to Deut 8:13 and 11:14 in these two verses (not mentioning Deuteronomy 28), again noting the linguistic and contextual correspondence.⁶¹ I do not think that Bass’s conclusions argue against mine here, since Hosea displays evidence of allusion to multiple sections of the Pentateuch, as Bass’s work shows. The inclusion of nakedness before her enemies and the examples of provision such as grain, wine, and oil, along with the theme of exile in Hos 2:3–10 make it likely that Hosea alluded to Deuteronomy 28 as well as chapters 8 and 11.

5. *Considering the word “naked.”* Before concluding this study, one must consider that Deut 28:48 and Hos 2:3 use slightly different spellings of the word “naked.”⁶² Both texts employ the adjectival form and technically denote a state. Thus, in Deuteronomy the meaning is, “You will serve your enemies in a state of nakedness,” and in Hosea 2, “Lest I strip her to a state of nakedness.” The usage is the same,

⁵⁶ Bass, “Hosea’s Use of Scripture,” 132, describes this as a probable allusion, displaying clustered vocabulary and slight contextual awareness. This is a “category 2” allusion (p. 101).

⁵⁷ 2:9 uses the nominal form for nakedness (עֵרוֹה).

⁵⁸ See Stuart, *Hosea*, xxxii–xl.

⁵⁹ E.g. Mays, *Hosea*, 41; and Patterson, *Hosea*, 19.

⁶⁰ Garrett, *Hosea-Joel*, 82–83; and Mackay, *Hosea*, 79, note the connection to Deuteronomy 28 here.

⁶¹ Bass, “Hosea’s Use of Scripture,” 133–36; see also Cassuto, “Hosea and the Pentateuch,” 93–94.

⁶² Hos 2:9 has עֵרוֹה which is the noun for “nakedness.” As the argument below shows, I do not think that these slight differences affect the likelihood that Hosea alluded to Deuteronomy 28. In this case, he has already introduced the concept of nakedness in 2:3, so using the nominal form here makes sense.

but Deuteronomy uses עירם from עירם and Hosea uses עֲרֻמָּה from ערום. There appears to be no distinction between the meaning or use of these two forms, with lexicons noting only that both forms exist.⁶³ Both words generally convey the state of being without clothing.

Both forms occur in the Pentateuch and prophetic literature, and ערום also appears in Job and Ecclesiastes. It is noteworthy that except in Genesis, when either term occurs, OT books only use one form or the other and not both. Because the biblical authors convey the same concepts with either word but never use both in their writings, this suggests that the use of either word may indicate personal preference or colloquial norms.⁶⁴

As mentioned, however, the narrative in Gen 2:25–3:24 utilizes both terms. Rather than indicating different ideas with either term, though, it is most likely that the writer of Genesis used both terms to highlight a word play between 2:25 and 3:1.⁶⁵ The author states that the man and his wife were both עֲרוּמִים (naked) and the serpent was עָרוּם (crafty). The Pentateuch only uses the adjectival form for “naked” here in Genesis 2–3 and Deut 28:48, and except for the occurrence in 2:25, uses the word עירם.⁶⁶ It stands to reason, then, that the use of both terms in Genesis 2–3 serves to set apart the word play in the narrative instead of indicating different meaning. Certainly it shows that the author of Genesis was aware of both terms, knew his audience would understand both, and saw no problem using both to convey the couple’s nakedness.

III. THE PURPOSE OF THE STRIPPING THREAT: COVENANT CURSE AND BLESSING

According to the evidence given above, instead of trying to understand Hosea 2 through the lens of ANE practice, we should first recognize the covenant background that Hosea brings to bear with his marital metaphor. Through his prophet, YHWH is reminding his people that they are in a covenant but utterly unfaithful to their obligations. Because of this, he is threatening to bring upon them the curses about which he had already warned them. In metaphoric language, he brings these curses to mind when he threatens to strip his wife naked as the day of her birth, making her like a wilderness, and killing her with thirst. In essence, he returns her

⁶³ “ערום,” *NIDOTTE* 532–33; “ערום,” *TWOT* 349–54; and “ערום,” *HALOT* 835 suggests that ערום derives orally from עירם. The LXX also translates every occurrence of both adjectives with *εργυμνος*, suggesting that translators saw no distinction in meaning.

⁶⁴ I am not aware of a study which attempts to distinguish between the uses of either word. Both words describe the state of newborns/newly created, the poorly clothed, those captured in battle, or those who are punished by God. The term is also used metaphorically in Job 26:6 to describe Sheol being completely exposed before God’s gaze. This is similar to the nominal form for nakedness *ערוה* used by Joseph in Gen 42:9, 12 to describe the undefended or exposed parts of the land.

⁶⁵ See Zvi Ron, “Wordplay in Genesis 2:25–3:1,” *JBQ* 42 (2014): 3–7 as a recent example. Ibn Ezra notes this word play as well as Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 95; and Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 11.

⁶⁶ This evidence is stronger if the Pentateuch was written by a single author or final editor.

to the state in which she was before he “found” her (cf. Ezek 16:4–5).⁶⁷ So, in the metaphor, YHWH strips his wife naked. This symbolizes YHWH taking back everything that he had given to her, which is borne out in the verses that follow (Hos 2:4–9).

While it is difficult to understand Hos 2:10 because of the lack of information concerning the meaning of גְּבוּלוֹת, the dual purpose of the word גָּלָה to mean “uncover” and “go into exile” probably conveys the idea that Israel will go into exile in the sorry state YHWH puts her. In the metaphoric language of 2:9, YHWH takes back his grain and wine, and wool and flax, which cover her nakedness. By implication, his wife is naked, and in 2:10, he uncovers her and sends her into exile before the eyes of her lovers. This would correspond with the idea in Deut 28:48 that Israel would serve her enemies *whom the LORD sends against her* in hunger, thirst, nakedness, and lacking everything. He sends her back to her lovers naked, that is, with nothing.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the evidence often cited for an ANE background to the stripping threat in Hosea 2. While one should keep a careful eye on this evidence, and any that may emerge in the future, its connection as background to Hosea 2 is tenuous. Comparative religious and legal practices are difficult to establish for ancient cultures. Moreover, particularly where an author uses metaphor, it is vital that his audience is familiar with the symbol and subject used to show analogy between the two. The author uses a symbol with which the audience is familiar, marriage and adultery in this case, and uses it to remind his audience of their covenant relationship with YHWH. Given the tenuous nature of the ANE background and Hosea’s use of covenant language in Hosea 1–3, I have argued that the covenant provided a better option for the basis of the marital metaphor in the text.

Within this marital metaphor, then, which derives from covenant literature, YHWH threatens to strip his wife naked and return her to the state in which she was before he took her as his wife. The language of a man stripping his wife naked (2:3) and even doing so before her lovers (2:10) is the kind of imagery that cannot be ignored. For those who connect the analogy to their unfaithfulness toward YHWH, the implications are staggering. In the metaphor, this unfaithful woman is being punished in the same way the covenant states that Israel would be punished in the event she was unfaithful to YHWH.

With this covenant background firmly in mind, I think connections with ANE culture can further solidify the force which the threat of stripping would have on its hearers. For instance, as discussed above, Assyria was known to strip captives naked and parade them as a message to potential rebels: this is how Assyria treats insubordination. If Hosea’s audience were aware of this practice, it would

⁶⁷ Bass, “Hosea’s Use of Scripture,” 133, shows how “killing with thirst” from Hos 2:5 occurs elsewhere only in Exod 17:3, where Israel complains to Moses that YHWH led them into the wilderness to “kill them with thirst.” In essence, YHWH is threatening to take them back to where he found them.

make YHWH's threat seem valid and imminent. Not only might YHWH take away everything he has given, but the enemies he sends might actually drive them out naked.

Future work regarding the background of the stripping threat should further identify and establish covenant dependence in the book of Hosea. Work could be done to determine if the other "stripping" texts, e.g. Ezekiel 16, 23; Jeremiah 13, etc., also share a background with the covenant between YHWH and Israel. Additionally, there should be a thorough study on any potential distinction in the use of ערום and עירם to solidify or dispel the possibility of allusion to Deut 28:48 in Hos 2:3.