

## AVENGING HUSBAND AND REDEEMING LOVER? OPPOSING PORTRAITS OF GOD IN HOSEA

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**Abstract:** *The book of Hosea depicts YHWH both as an Avenging Husband, unleashing judgment on his wayward wife, and a Redeeming Lover, wooing his beloved back into faithful relationship with him. While many have wrestled to reconcile Hosea's opposing portraits of divine justice and mercy, this struggle has often resulted in disregarding the tension or denigrating YHWH's character. Rather than demeaning God or his prophet, this essay will reexamine the literary images and rhetorical devices with which Hosea paints these pictures, seeking to explain how YHWH can function in seemingly contradictory roles. More than conflicting traits, Hosea's juxtaposition of divine portraits raises tension within the reader in order to highlight God's redemptive goal. Through the nation's contrite penitence and YHWH's commitment to his covenant promises, Israel's Avenging Husband will become her Redeeming Lover!*

**Key words:** *Hosea, theology of God, justice, mercy, repentance, covenant*

In his recent popular work *Good Book*, David Plotz, a self-described agnostic Jew, came to this conclusion after reading through the Hebrew Bible for the first time: “I began the Bible as a hopeful, but indifferent, agnostic. . . . I leave the Bible as a hopeless and angry agnostic. I’m brokenhearted about God. . . . *I can only conclude that the God of the Hebrew Bible, if He existed, was awful, cruel and capricious. He gives us moments of beauty—such sublime beauty and grace—but taken as a whole, He is no God I want to obey and no God I can love.*”<sup>1</sup> This struggle with God’s paradoxical portraits is nothing new. From Marcion to Martin Luther, Augustine to Anselm, many have wrestled to reconcile divine justice and mercy.<sup>2</sup> In the meditations of his *Proslogion*, Anselm prayed, “Though it is hard to understand how your compassion is not inconsistent with your justice, yet we must believe that it does not oppose justice at all, because it flows from goodness. . . . Help me, just and compassionate God, whose light I seek, help me to understand what I say.”<sup>3</sup>

This tension between God’s just judgment and his merciful restoration is expressly highlighted in the structure and message of Hosea. YHWH had chosen to

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<sup>1</sup> David Plotz, *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 302 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, “The Five Books Against Marcion,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (ed. Philip Schaff; ANF; 1890; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:275; Martin Luther, “Schriften, 1525,” in *D. Martin Luther Werke* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883), 18:719. Augustine, “The Enchiridion,” in *St. Augustine: Doctrinal Treatises* (ed. Philip Schaff; NPNF; 1887; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), §27.

<sup>3</sup> *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 92.

make Israel a great nation, delivering her from slavery in Egypt and confirming his covenant with her at Sinai, but she had wandered away from him. Israel had forsaken the one who loved her, prostituting herself with other gods, even attributing his provisions as blessings from Baal. Through his prophets, YHWH repeatedly calls his people to return to covenant obedience. With his life and message, Hosea offers Israel two opposing pictures of YHWH. First, he is depicted as an *Avengeing Husband* who will discipline Israel for her spiritual adultery. Since she had violated their relationship, YHWH threatens to unleash the covenant curses on his wayward wife. Second, he is described as a *Redeeming Lover*, wooing his beloved back. YHWH promises to return her to fidelity and restore his covenant blessings.

Yet, how can these two disparate portraits be reconciled? Answers given by scholars often stress confusion, in the prophet and his God. Unterman attributes Hosea's constant alternation between oracles of doom and oracles of hope to his own inner turmoil, while Brueggemann concludes that YHWH "is a *recovering agent of violence* ... [with] a resolve to be a spouse of generosity and a parent of compassion."<sup>4</sup> Rather than demeaning God as unpredictable or his prophet as uncertain, this essay will reexamine the literary images and rhetorical devices with which Hosea paints these two portraits, seeking to reconcile how YHWH can function in seemingly contradictory roles.

### I. MERCILESS FOE AND MERCIFUL FATHER? (1:2–2:3[1])

While different metaphors are used in Scripture to capture the unique relationship between God and Israel—king and servant, lord and vassal, father and son, mother and child—communicating various facets of their covenant union, Hosea is first to utilize the husband-wife relationship.<sup>5</sup> Like many of the prophets, Hosea not only speaks on God's behalf (4–14), he also embodies his message (1–3; Isa 8:18; 20:3; Jer 27:2; Ezek 24:16). As the book opens, YHWH instructs his prophet to marry a prostitute in order to visually picture Israel's spiritual prostitution (1:2). With this living metaphor, "the pain in the heart of the prophet became a parable for the anguish in the heart of God."<sup>6</sup> To focus the attention of his audience on the adultery of the nation and the anguish of their God, Hosea uses a paranomastic construction (זנה תזנה), repeating the verbal root זנה for rhetorical emphasis—the nation *continually commits spiritual prostitution* by forsaking YHWH (1:2). Israel had abandoned their covenant relationship with YHWH to prostitute themselves with

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah's Thought in Transition* (JSOTSup 54; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 165; Walter Brueggemann, "The Recovering God of Hosea," *HBT* 30 (2008): 19. House notes the coexistence of divine justice and mercy in Hosea but makes no attempt to reconcile them, whereas Landy asserts that these traits are incoherent and irreconcilable. Paul R. House, "The Character of God in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* (ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney; SBL Symposium Series 15; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 131; Francis Landy, "In the Wilderness of Speech: Problems of Metaphor in Hosea," *BibInt* 3 (1995): 39.

<sup>5</sup> Gale A. Yee, "Hosea," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:206.

<sup>6</sup> James Limburg, *Hosea–Micah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 9.

the gods of the surrounding nations. Yet, Israel's Avenging Husband had taken note of their repeated apostasy and threatens to bring severe judgment upon his people.

This imminent and increasing judgment is predicted in the names YHWH chose for Hosea's children—Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Amami. First, playing on the nation's name, YHWH promises to revisit<sup>7</sup> the bloodshed of Jezreel on the dynasty of Jehu. Using the phrase “break the bow,” which often depicts deliverance (Hos. 2:20[18]), YHWH turns salvation to judgment, promising to crush Israel's military power and cut off their royal house (1:4–5). Second, piling up words to show his anger and agony (cf. 2:6[4]), YHWH promises *not to show them mercy any longer* (לֹא נִשָּׂא אֶשְׁמָה עוֹד אֶרְחַם (אֹסִיף עוֹד אֶרְחַם)). Hosea again uses a paranomastic construction (נִשָּׂא אֶשְׁמָה), repeating the verbal root נִשָּׂא to emphasize YHWH's promise to *completely exile* his people (1:6).<sup>8</sup> Using the exact construction, the prophet links Israel's sin, adultery (1:3), to God's promise of severe judgment, abandonment (1:6).

Finally, in addition to cutting off their royal house and their right to the land, YHWH declares that Israel's sin had cut off their relationship—they would no longer be his people (1:8). In his self-revelation to Moses, YHWH had stated, “Tell the people of Israel that I AM (אֶהְיֶה) has sent you” (Exod 3:14). Reversing his name, YHWH now tells Israel, “You are not my people, and I am not I AM to you” (אתם לא עמי ואנכי לא־אֶהְיֶה לכם) (1:9). “There is a terrifying progression in the sequence of names. The first announced a future when Israel would have to live without a king, the second a future without God's compassion, and the third a future without God.”<sup>9</sup> Once their merciful father, Israel's continued spiritual prostitution now made YHWH a merciless foe.

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<sup>7</sup> While most versions translate the verb פָּקַד as “punish” (KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, NET), implying that God promises to take vengeance on Jehu for his bloody massacre of Ahab's house (2 Kings 9–10), God commends Jehu for carrying out his command (2 Kgs 10:30). Instead, פָּקַד would better be rendered “revisit,” signaling that “the bloodshed of Jezreel will reappear hauntingly in Jehu's dynasty, bringing it to an end.” Thomas McComiskey, “Prophetic Irony in Hosea 1:4: A Study of the Collocation פָּקַד עַל and its Implications for the Fall of Jehu's Dynasty,” *JOT* 58 (1993): 100. Chisholm similarly states, “There is great irony, for the dynasty ends in the same way it began, suggesting it had become just as guilty and defiled as the dynasty it so violently replaced.” Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 340.

<sup>8</sup> In the final phrase of v. 6 (כִּי־נִשָּׂא אֶשְׁמָה לְהֵם), the text is certain, but the meaning is not entirely clear. Many English versions render the verb נִשָּׂא as “forgive” (ESV, NIV, NASB, JPS), consistent with its usage in the final chapter (14:3) as well as God's own character, “merciful and gracious . . . forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin” (Exod 34:7). Though lexically possible, most occurrences with this meaning specify עוֹל/פְּשָׁע/חַטָּאָה as the object, which is absent here. Also, many versions render the paranomastic construction as modal (“that I should forgive them at all”), which is unattested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Others suggest that the negative particle in vs. 6a modifies the final clause, “I will certainly *not* forgive them,” but the כִּי particle after a negative clause most often indicates a contrast (GKC §163a). Therefore, it seems better to render נִשָּׂא as “take away,” similar to its use later in the book (5:14). This also offers a better contrast to the following verse. For Israel, God promises no mercy, resulting in their exile (1:6), but for Judah, he promises mercy, resulting in their deliverance (1:7). Thomas E. McComiskey, “Hosea,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary* (ed. Thomas E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 24–25.

<sup>9</sup> Limburg, *Hosea–Micah*, 9.

From confrontation of sin and caution of coming judgment (1:2–9), Hosea abruptly shifts to comfort of future restoration (2:1–3[1:10–2:1]). Despite its parallel with Deuteronomic predictions (4:15–31; Lev. 26:14–45), this shift from doom to hope is jarring and disorienting, especially without the insertion of a clear transition or editorial heading. In fact, many modern versions add an adversative (‘yet’) in order to level the sudden disjunction. The previous verses stress Israel’s broken covenant with God. Yet, with an allusion to the Abrahamic covenant promising descendants as numerous *as the sand of the sea* (2:1[1:10]; Gen 22:17), the portrait of YHWH shifts from merciless foe to merciful father. In a series of wordplays on the children’s names, the prophet foretells a future time when the effects of the previous judgment will be reversed. Although they had been severed from a covenant relationship with God (לֹא עִמִּי), without mercy (לֹא רַחֲמָה), and gathered (אִקְבְּצֵם, 8:10) for judgment in the valley of Jezreel (יִזְרְעֵאל), the people of Israel and Judah will be regathered (וְנִקְבְּצוּ) for blessing under one leader in the same valley (יִזְרְעֵאל) and mercifully renewed into covenant relationship with God (עִמִּי and רַחֲמָה, 2:1–3[1:10–2:1]). As McComiskey notes, “The reversal of the names is theologically significant. It represents that Yahweh has not forgotten his ancient promise. The nation will go into captivity, but God’s promise is not vitiated. Beyond the captivity is a bright future, when a new people of God with a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) will be born.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, at some future time, by some means, Israel will be restored into right relationship with YHWH, once again receiving his abundant covenant blessings.

## II. AVENGING HUSBAND AND REDEEMING LOVER? (2:4[2]–3:5)

Shifting back from future to present, from restoration to rebuke, the prophet continues the allegory with an indictment (רִיב, Hos 4:1; 12:3[2]; Jer 2:9) through his children against his wayward wife, symbolizing God’s accusation against the nation (2:4–15[2–13]). After reaffirming that their relationship has been severed, YHWH threatens total ruin if Israel does not turn to him. Using the desert as a motif of punishment, Hosea’s announcement of judgment is filled with irony and poetic justice. Just as Israel had exposed her nakedness to others, God would strip her naked, making her an object of shame (2:4–6[2–4]). However, Israel not only prostituted herself with other gods (2:7[5]), she even attributed her prosperity to Baal, the Canaanite fertility god (2:10[12]). Thus, since she did not recognize her source of blessing, YHWH would show his supremacy, withdrawing the nation’s agricultural fertility.<sup>11</sup> Grain, wine, and oil were covenant blessings, given for obedience and taken away for disobedience (Deut 28:47–51). Ironically, those who uncovered their nakedness in worship of Baal (4:14) would soon be naked due to poverty. There would be no escape (2:10–15[8–13]).

<sup>10</sup> McComiskey, “Hosea,” 32.

<sup>11</sup> John Day, “Hosea and the Baal Cult,” in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (ed. John Day; LHBOOTS 531; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 205.

Yet, amidst this vivid portrait of YHWH as Avenging Husband, hints of his anguish should not be overlooked. Seeing his people pursue other gods, YHWH laments, “But she does not recognize that I myself gave to her the grain, the new wine, and the olive oil. The silver I multiplied for her and the gold, she has used for Baal” (2:10[8]). Hear the heartache of Israel’s God! After threatening to withdraw his blessing, symbolized by the vine and fig tree (2:14[12]; Deut 8:8), YHWH again laments, “She went after her lovers, but she forgot me” (ותלך אחרי מאהביה ואתי שכחה, 2:15[13]). Israel had forgotten that her covenant blessing came directly from her covenant lord. Yet, even in the midst of his promise of imminent judgment, YHWH mourns over the adultery of his people! With its terseness and reversal of order (*object-verb*), the final line highlights Israel’s shocking sin. In one word—*forgot*—YHWH “mingles anger and anguish, accusation and appeal; it summarizes in a word the guilt of Israel and the problem of Yahweh.”<sup>12</sup>

In the preceding verses (2:4–15[2–13]), Hosea issues two accusations of adultery (4–7[2–5], 10[8]), both followed by an announcement of judgment introduced with לכן “therefore” (8–9[6–7], 11–15a[9–13a]).<sup>13</sup> So, when a third accusation (2:15b[13b]) is followed by לכן in vs. 16[14], the previous pattern signals an ominous tone. Yet, the import of YHWH’s promise *to allure his people and lead them into the desert* is not initially clear. The verb פתה is often linked to sexual seduction or divine deception (Exod 22:15; 1 Kgs 22:20; Jer 20:7; Ezek 14:9), and the desert motif repeatedly represents danger and disobedience (Deut 32:10; Hos 13:5). But with an abrupt shift, YHWH moves from Avenging Husband to Redeeming Lover, promising *to speak to the heart of his people*, conveying his tender affection for them (2:16[14]; Gen 34:3; 50:21; Ruth 2:13; Isa 40:2).

In two cycles, Hosea links YHWH’s redeeming love and Israel’s future restoration (2:16–19[14–17], 20–25[18–23]). Although YHWH promised to bring his unfaithful spouse into the desert and speak tenderly to her, likely drawing on the exodus narrative and their “marriage” at Mt. Sinai, this renewed relationship would be different, evident from God’s promise and Israel’s purity. Alluding to the site of Achan’s sin and subsequent execution (Josh 7:26), YHWH promises to transform the “Valley of Trouble” into a “Doorway of Hope,” turning Israel’s symbol of initial failure into a source of future hope. In response to God’s initiating work, Israel would be faithful. Using a wordplay on the different titles for husband, YHWH declares that his people will no longer call him “my master” (בעלי) but “my husband” (איש). While this wordplay may stress that their relationship will now be rooted in inward love rather than external obligation, the further explanation that the people will no longer utter the term *Baal* clearly alludes to the Canaanite cult. Seeking to avoid any syncretism, YHWH will remove the name of this pagan god from their mouths (2:19[17])!

In the second cycle (2:20–25[18–23]), YHWH promises to make a covenant with creation on Israel’s behalf and abolish all instruments of war (cf. Ezek 34:25–

<sup>12</sup> James L. Mays, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 49.

31), reversing the curses of Deuteronomy (28:26) and the previous announcements of judgment involving wild animals (2:14[12]) and foreign nations (1:5). In addition to a covenant with creation, YHWH promises to renew his covenant with Israel and betroth her to himself forever, repeating the verbal root ארש three times for rhetorical effect. Like a bride price, YHWH vows to initiate and impart righteousness, justice, loyal love, mercy, and faithfulness in their renewed relationship. As a result of this divine work, Israel will know him (ידע), a metonymy for intimacy that leads to covenant obedience (2:21[19]; Jer 31:34).<sup>14</sup> Israel's betrothal to her Redeeming Lover will result in her knowledge of him, her recognition of his authority, and her obedience to his word.

YHWH continues his picture of blessing in the chapter's final verses (2:23–25[21–23]). The true creator promises to renew his relationship with the land, restoring its agricultural fertility. Similar to the previous section (2:1–3[1:10–2:1]), he uses the names of Hosea's children to foretell a reversal of Israel's judgment. With Jezreel (זרעאל), YHWH creates a threefold wordplay. First, he alludes to the nation's name (ישראל). He will respond to Jezreel, that is Israel. Second, playing on the following verb (זרעתיה), he stresses the divine element, "I will plant her." YHWH, not Baal, will restore their fertility. Finally, repeating the name of Hosea's son (1:4), he foretells the turning of punishment to prosperity. Likewise, YHWH also overturns the names of Hosea's two other children, "I will have mercy on Lo-Ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-Amami, 'You are my people'" (2:25[23]; 1:6, 9).

Finally, after YHWH's repeated promise of restoration, chapter 3 opens with a corresponding picture from the life of Hosea. YHWH commands Hosea to renew his love for Gomer, even in spite of her continued infidelity (3:1–2). Just as Hosea redeemed Gomer at great financial and emotional cost, YHWH will redeem his people, despite their repeated rebellion in pursuing other gods. As Martens aptly notes, "God's love is extraordinary in that God reaches out even to those who spurn His love."<sup>15</sup> Yet, God's unconditional love cannot overlook Israel's impurity—his love is punitive and restorative (3:3–5).<sup>16</sup> Pictured in Gomer's purification, YHWH foretells Israel's discipline and deprivation. Whether political, military, or cultic, every possible substitute for their dependence on YHWH will be stripped away.<sup>17</sup> However, after *living* (ישבו) without socio-political and religious institutions, the prophet foretells Israel's repentance, *turning* (ישבו) to seek YHWH and their Davidic king.

<sup>14</sup> M. Douglas Carew, "To Know or Not to Know: Hosea's Use of yd<sup>l</sup>/d<sup>t</sup>," in *The Old Testament in the Life of God's People: Essays in Honor of Elmer A. Martens* (ed. Jon Isaak; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 77–78.

<sup>15</sup> Elmer A. Martens, "Toward an End of Violence: Hearing Jeremiah," in *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament* (ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and J. Blair Wilgus; BBRSup 10; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> David A. Hubbard, *Hosea* (TOTC 24; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 102.

## III. COVENANT JUDGE AND CARING PHYSICIAN? (4:1–6:3)

After recounting his living message (1–3), Hosea records his spoken message (4–14). Following the typical pattern—confront sin and caution of judgment—he opens with an accusation, “For YHWH has a covenant lawsuit (רִיב) against the nation’s inhabitants” (4:1–3). As their Covenant Judge, YHWH presents his charge with corroborating evidence: Israel’s lack of truth and steadfast love reveals their lack of relationship with him. Using two qualities often linked to God’s own character (Gen 24:27; Exod 34:6; Pss 25:10; 40:11–12; 57:4; 61:8; 85:11; 86:15; 89:15; 115:1; 117:2), the nation’s behavior is set in contrast with God. Their broken horizontal relationships were simply a reflection of their broken vertical relationship. YHWH issues an indictment because his people have broken his commands. The sins listed—*swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery*—are violations of his covenant at Sinai (Exod 20:1–18; Deut 5:6–21). As a consequence, YHWH promises a judgment of cosmic proportions. With the phrase *beasts of the field, birds of the sky, and fish of the sea* (4:3), Israel’s Judge alludes to Genesis (9:2; Ezek 38:20; Zeph 1:3), promising to reverse the created order.

With numerous wordplays, YHWH reprimands the priests, calling them to account for neglecting to teach his law (4:4–6). With poetic justice, he will *destroy* (דָּמָה) these religious leaders, just as they have *destroyed* his people through a dereliction of duty. Because they have *rejected* (מָאָס) knowledge, YHWH will *reject* them from serving as his priests. Just as they have *forgotten* YHWH’s law (שָׁכַח), he will *forget* their children. Israel’s Covenant Judge will turn their glory to shame, repaying their greed with ruin. What they consider a blessing from Baal—physical and agricultural prosperity—will be exposed as empty. Because Israel is *multiplying* social injustice and spiritual idolatry (פָּרַץ, 4:2), YHWH will prevent them from *multiplying* in number (4:10). Expanding on his charge, YHWH highlights the nation’s adultery, repeating זָנָה nine times in quick succession (4:11–19). With assonance stressing Israel’s sin (סָרָה סָרָה יִשְׂרָאֵל), he will turn this stubborn *heifer* (פָּרָה) into a helpless *lamb* (כֶּבֶשׂ) wandering in an open space (4:16).<sup>18</sup> For those who love *shame* (קָלוּז), the *spirit* of prostitution that led them astray (רוּחַ, 4:12) will also leave them *ashamed* (בוֹשׁ, 4:19).

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<sup>18</sup> In the final phrase of v. 16 (עֵתָה יִרְעֵם יִהְיֶה כִּכְבֶּשׂ בְּמִרְחָב), the text is clear, but its meaning is debated. Some translations render this phrase as a question, “Can the LORD now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?” (ESV, NIV). Although the phrase lacks an interrogative particle, many scholars prefer this interpretation, assuming the pastoral imagery to be positive. Andrew Dearman, *Hosea* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 168; Mays, *Hosea*, 78; Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Herm; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 91. For example, Macintosh adopts this view “since the verb רָעָה and the noun מִרְחָב are elsewhere used of a good situation (cf. Pss 18:20, 31:9, 118:5).” A. A. Macintosh, *Hosea* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 165. However, a closer look reveals that none of the cited passages use this exact collocation. Both verb and noun often take on the nuance of the context. The psalmist links רָעָה to pastoral images of death, “They will travel to Sheol like sheep, with death as their *shepherd*” (49:15), and Habakkuk uses מִרְחָב to describe the ruin of Babylon’s army, “marching across the *breadth* of the earth to seize dwellings not their own” (1:6). McComiskey, “Hosea,” 71; Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 85. Since עֵתָה normally introduces judgment in Hosea (2:12; 5:7; 8:8, 10, 13; 10:2), YHWH’s promise to pasture his people in a wide-open space is better viewed as an image of abandonment.

Echoing the last chapter, Hosea calls for the attention of the nation—priests, people, and princes—because YHWH’s judgment would affect them all (5:1). Charging Israel with treachery and murder, likely alluding to the assassinations as the northern kingdom spiraled down (2 Kgs 15:8–31), Israel’s Covenant Judge promises personal vengeance, *I will be discipline to all of them* (5:2). While YHWH *kenew* (עָד) their sinful state, Israel’s actions showed that they did not *know* him (יָדַע, 5:3–4). Because of their adultery and arrogance, judgment was imminent. They continued to seek him through ritual sacrifices but could not find him because he had withdrawn from them. Sounding the alarm, Hosea announces judgment against the unlawful and unfaithful (5:5–11).

The chapter’s final verses (5:12–15) contain a staggering portrait of Israel’s Judge. YHWH begins by comparing himself to moldering maggots (שָׂע) <sup>19</sup> and bone-eating decay (רָקַב, 5:12). “The metaphors used for the work of Yahweh are shockingly bold and abrasive, even for Hosea. . . . The comparisons are drawn to the extreme limit but their boldness is meant to reveal how God in hiddenness is already at work, sapping away the vitality of Ephraim and Judah through the actions which they initiate and execute.”<sup>20</sup> Sadly, although they recognize their wound, Israel is blind to the reason they are wasting away. They seek help through alliances with Egypt and Assyria, but these nations cannot bring the cure (5:13). Finally, YHWH likens himself to a lion. Stressing his personal vengeance—I, *even I will tear apart*—he promises to maul his people, without hope of deliverance (5:14–15). “Instead of cleaning, caring for, or healing these wounds of war so that his people can get better, God will be infecting them with more misery. Hosea is jarring his audience awake by showing that God will fight against them rather than for them.”<sup>21</sup> YHWH not only brings his judgment against the nations, as the prophets often proclaim (Isaiah 13–23; Jeremiah 45–51; Ezekiel 25–32), but as their Covenant Judge, he will discipline his own people as well.

After two chapters prophesying judgment on the nation, Hosea again shifts the portrait of YHWH from Covenant Judge to Caring Physician (6:1–3). However, scholars are divided over the precise meaning of these verses. Is this a genuine confession of sin and exhortation to return to YHWH or merely a record of superficial

<sup>19</sup> On the interpretation of this metaphor, there is disagreement among scholars. Some suggest that the term שָׂע refers to a “moth” (BDB 799.2; Dearman, *Hosea*, 185–86; McComiskey, “Hosea,” 83). The moth is depicted as a destroyer of the wicked (Ps 39:12; Job 27:18), but this parasite causes decay to clothing rather than bodies (Isa 50:9; 51:8; Job 13:28). In light of the surrounding context, Driver proposed that שָׂע refers to “pus” or “maggots” (*HALOT* 895; G. R. Driver, “Difficult Words in the Hebrew Prophets,” in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* [ed. H. H. Rowley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950], 66–67. See also Francis I. Andersen and David N. Freedman, *Hosea* [AB 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980], 412; Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel* [NAC 19A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997], 153; Macintosh, *Hosea*, 207; Mays, *Hosea*, 85; Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 105; Wolff, *Hosea*, 115). While both options are possible here, the internal and external evidence favor the latter. The parallel line and subsequent verses clarify the image, as YHWH compares himself to bone-eating decay (רָקַב) and incurable illness (חָלַי). Such threats of disease are also promised in the covenant curses of Deuteronomy (28:21–22).

<sup>20</sup> Mays, *Hosea*, 90–91.

<sup>21</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 104.



repentance and false assurance of salvation? Is the nation speaking or the prophet? In light of the subsequent rebuke of their fleeting faithfulness and empty rituals (6:4–6), some suggest that these verses describe the people's presumption and lack of true confession. The phrases *after two days* and *on the third day* are viewed as an overconfident attitude that YHWH's discipline would be short and his restoration swift. Noting their lack of repentance, Harper summarizes this viewpoint, "In a wonderfully conceived pair of soliloquies, the poet represents Yahweh as waiting for Israel to come back, and Israel as, in fact, coming back, but with a conception of repentance so inadequate as to make the whole action a farce."<sup>22</sup>

However, this view does not align with the timing in the context. In the verses preceding (5:14–15) and following (6:4–6), Israel's punishment is imminent, while this passage (6:1–3) describes their judgment as complete. Thus, similar to the book's conclusion (14:1–9), these verses are best taken as a call for repentance aimed at a future generation. As Chisholm states, "The cynical understanding of vv. 1–3 should be rejected. Hosea's sinful contemporaries are not speaking here. The perspective is that of a future generation that would experience God's severe judgment. The prophet included this prayer as a model for that generation to follow once judgment had fallen."<sup>23</sup>

This shift from present doom to future hope aligns with Hosea's repeating pattern. Over and over, YHWH is depicted as Israel's Redeeming Lover overturning his previous judgment. This motif is evident here in the parallels linking this passage to the final verses of the preceding chapter. YHWH had lamented that his people did not *know* him (יָדַע, 5:4); but with a twofold repetition, Hosea now urges Israel to seek to *know* him (וְנִדְעָה נִרְדָּפָה לְדַעַת אֲתִיּוּהוּ, 6:3). YHWH had promised to *tear* Israel apart like a ravenous beast (טָרַף, 5:14), with no one to *heal* them (רָפָא, 5:13); now *torn* apart (טָרַף, 6:1), Hosea assures Israel of YHWH's ability to *heal* them (רָפָא, 6:1). Like a lion, YHWH promised to *return* (שׁוּב, 5:15) to his den until his people would *seek* him (בִּקֵּשׁ, 5:15), *earnestly seek* him in their distress (שָׁחַר, 5:15). Now, Hosea calls Israel to *return* (שׁוּב, 6:1) to covenant fidelity, to *seek* to know him (רָדַף, 6:3). Then, YHWH will respond to them, as sure as the sunrise (שָׁחַר, 6:3). With a ray of hope amidst the ruin, Hosea urges Israel to recognize that their Covenant Judge is also their Caring Physician.

#### IV. PROWLING HUNTER AND PASSIONATE HEALER? (6:4–7:16)

Shifting back from admonition to accusation, YHWH repeatedly contrasts his desires and his people's deeds, confronting Israel's allegiance (6:4–6), atrocities (6:7–7:2), assassinations (7:3–7), and alliances (7:8–16). Expressing his frustration, *What am I to do with you?* (cf. Exod 17:4), Israel's suzerain laments their lack of loyal love, contrasting his fidelity, *sure as the dawn and rain*, with their infidelity, *like passing clouds or fading dew* (6:3–4). For this reason, YHWH sent his prophets and prophetic word, using images of cutting and killing to signal the violence of Israel's coming

<sup>22</sup> William R. Harper, *Amos and Hosea* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1905), 281.

<sup>23</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 353–54.

judgment. Rather than rituals, he desires the nation's loyal love—love born out of their vertical relationship and borne out in their horizontal relationships, a common theme in the 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophets (6:4–6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:6–8; Isa 1:10–17).

In contrast with YHWH's desire for loyal love (6:6), Israel transgressed his covenant (6:7). Using numerous terms for their abominable acts (6:9–10), Israel's Avenging Husband highlights their depravity, particularly among the religious and political leaders. Religiously, the priests, those charged to teach God's law, were the very ones breaking it. Their bloodguilt near Shechem recalls Levi's murder of Shechem (6:9; Gen 34:26). The sons of Levi had now become like their father. Politically, Israel had spiraled into chaos, with a quick succession of kings taking the throne by force. The picture of Gilead as *a city of evildoers* (6:8) may allude to the murder of Pekahiah by Pekah and fifty men of Gilead (2 Kgs 15:25). As a result, YHWH foretells their final reckoning. Playing on the term *harvest* (קציר), often a sign of covenant blessing (Deut 24:19), he will turn salvation into judgment, bringing sweeping destruction on both Israel and Judah (6:11a).

However, Israel's Covenant Judge is also her Passionate Healer. YHWH expresses his desire to help and heal his people (6:11b), though his desire to bring good is negated by Israel's desire for evil resulting in their judgment. Yet, YHWH's intent is not merely retribution, but reformation. Even his healing is intended to expose their sin—*When I restore the fortunes of my people, when I heal Israel, the sin of Ephraim will be exposed*. As McComiskey fittingly notes, “The statement in 6:11b–7:1 is thus an affirmation that God will restore his people, but not as long as their sin remains an impediment. He will expose their sins first, and this will lead to their healing.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, despite his great deeds and gracious desires, Israel continues to rebel against YHWH.

Having confronted Israel's allegiance and atrocities, YHWH now addresses their politics, both internal and external. YHWH compares their king to a baker and his court to a heated oven. *With their evil* (ברעתם), *burning* (בערה) like an *oven* (תנור), the nobles delight their king (7:3–4). Yet, *lying in wait* (בארבם), *burning* (בער) like an *oven* (תנור), his officials plot his demise while he sleeps.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, what brought his victory also brought his defeat (7:5–7). In addition, YHWH also rebukes Israel for her alliances. Instead of acting as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5–6), they had joined themselves to other nations, adopting their culture and religion (7:8). Like a senseless bird flitting from place to place, Israel waffled between pacts with Assyria and Egypt (7:11). Because their political infidelity and social injustice had *spread* (פרש, 5:1), Israel's Prowling Hunter will *spread* out his net (פרש, 7:12), as a fowler traps his prey. With poetic justice, he will reward Israel's worship of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, with agricultural infertility (7:14). Using *אוי*, which often laments death and destruction (Hos 9:11–12), YHWH signals the nation's end

<sup>24</sup> McComiskey, “Hosea,” 100.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Morris, *Poetry, Prophecy, and Hosea* (JSOTSup 219; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 150.

(7:13). Reversing his foundational act of salvation in the exodus, Israel will return in shame to Egypt (7:16).

However, even amidst this vivid portrait of Israel's Judge and judgment, Hosea again offers a brief glimpse of her Passionate Healer, stressing his distress and desire. Despite being surrounded by their wickedness, Israel gave no thought to YHWH—they *do not consider that I remember all their evil* (7:2). With their kings falling around them, they still paid him no mind, "The lament of Israel's true sovereign is plaintive and bitter, *not one of them calls on me*" (7:7).<sup>26</sup> Even being debilitated by foreign armies and decreasing strength, his people did not recognize his hand, stressed by the repeating phrase *but he does not know it* (7:9). In the final verses (7:13–16), YHWH's emotion rises to a fever pitch. Piling up first-person pronouns and synonyms for Israel's sin, YHWH is profoundly and personally wounded by Israel's faithless ways—they *have wandered from me* (7:13a), *they have rebelled against me* (7:13a), *they speak lies against me* (7:13b), *they do not cry to me from the heart* (7:14a), *they have turned against me* (7:14b), *they devise evil against me* (7:15b). This is a remarkable testimony to God's personal stake in the actions of his people.<sup>27</sup> Yet, in spite of YHWH's desire for relationship with his people, to redeem and restore them, though he had *strengthened* (יִסְרַתִּי, 7:15) and sustained them, Israel *rebelled* against him (יִסּוּרָה, 7:13), running headlong toward destruction.

#### V. REJECTED PARENT AND RESCUING GOD? (8:1–11:11)

Renewing his call to alarm with the ominous image of a vulture (cf. Deut 28:49) and intensifying its imminence by omitting any verb (8:1a), YHWH repeats his charge. He highlights Israel's rejection (8:1–3; 9:1) and their coming retribution (8:4–14; 9:2–9), concluding with four representations of the nation's fall (9:10–17; 10:1–8; 10:9–15; 11:1–7). Though they claim to *know* YHWH (יָדַעַ, 8:2), their covenant violations prove otherwise (cf. 5:4). Since Israel *rejected* YHWH (זָנָה, 8:3) and his *good* covenant (טוֹב, Deut. 30:15), seeking protection and provision through human kings and man-made idols, YHWH *rejected* their adulterous worship (זָנָה, 8:5). Samaria's calf figurine would be reduced to pieces. Yet, amidst his burning anger, YHWH's sorrow must not be overlooked, evident in his piling up of first-person pronouns—they *transgressed my covenant* (8:1c), *they rebelled against my law* (8:1d), *To me they cry, "my God"* (8:2), *they select kings but without me* (8:4a), *they set up princes but without my recognition* (8:4b)—as well as his expression of frustration (8:5b), and a final lament on the folly of Israel's idolatry (8:6).

Therefore, Israel's rejection of YHWH, pursuing satisfaction and security through other means, would result in scarcity and subjugation. Since his people sought provision through the worship of Baal, the Canaanite *fertility* god, YHWH would bring *infertility*, an ironic reversal stressed by the assonance of agricultural terms (קִמָּה "stalk," צִמָּח "head," and קִמָּח "flour," 8:7). Because Israel strayed to

<sup>26</sup> Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 76.

seek protection from Assyria,<sup>28</sup> YHWH promised to gather them together to be oppressed and devoured by foreigners (8:8–10). Though קָבַץ “gather” is often used to describe the regathering of dispersed peoples, YHWH reverses the verb’s usual positive connotation to describe his gathering of Israel for judgment (8:10; 9:6).<sup>29</sup> Because they *forgot* their maker (שָׁכַח), trusting in fortified cities and empty rituals—*multiplying* altars and breaking *multiple* commands (רַב, 8:11–12)<sup>30</sup>—YHWH rejected them, promising to *send* (שָׁלַח) *fire on their cities* (אֵשׁ בְּעָרֵיו) and exile them (8:13–14).

Playing on YHWH’s initial accusation of *rejection* (זָנָה, 8:3) Hosea again charges Israel with *spiritual adultery* (זָנָה, 9:1), prostituting themselves for physical provision. Yet, the things in which his people seek satisfaction will ultimately fail them, and their rejection of YHWH and his covenant will result in their exile from his land and expulsion from his presence (9:2–9). Linked by similar sound, Hosea stresses that Israel cannot *remain* (יָשַׁב) in YHWH’s land but must *return* (שָׁב) to exile (9:3). As Moses promised, covenant disobedience will result in ruin: agricultural infertility, military defeat, national destruction, and foreign exile (Deut 28:15–68). They claim to *know* YHWH (יָדַע, 8:2), but for their sin, Israel will *know* punishment (9:7). YHWH will repay them for their sinful deeds (9:9; cf. 8:13).

With four parallel representations (9:10–11:7), Hosea traces Israel’s downward spiral, from their choice beginning to their corruption and collapse. First, despite being chosen by YHWH, Israel chose to dedicate themselves to shame. Using a viticultural metaphor for divine love, Israel’s sin, more than a legal rebellion, centered on their rejection of a loving relationship with YHWH for an empty alliance with Baal.<sup>31</sup> As a result, Israel’s Covenant Judge will turn their desire for *fertility* (פָּרָה), playing on the nation’s name (אֶפְרַיִם, 9:16), into *infertility*—*no childbirth, no pregnancy, no conception* (9:11). Thus, because of their *rejection* (8:3), *wandering* from him (נָדַד, 7:10), YHWH will *reject* Israel, making them *wanderers* among the nations (9:17). Second, despite being YHWH’s fruitful vine, Israel’s heart was far from him. Playing on רַב and טוֹב, the nation’s *prosperity* only *increased* their cultic symbols, not their fear of YHWH (10:1). Thus, Israel’s Judge promised poetic justice—*breaking their cultic symbols, banishing their calf idol, and bringing shame for their corruption* (10:1–8).

Third, YHWH urged Israel, as his trained heifer, to sow *righteousness* (צְדָקָה) and seek him, promising *salvation* (צַדִּיק, 10:12). Yet, Israel only plowed wickedness, resting in their own strength. So, YHWH promised to personally punish them, stressed by a string of first-person verbs and parallel promises of ruin (אָסַרם “I will discipline them,” אָסַרם “I will bind them,” 10:10). With two wordplays, Israel’s

<sup>28</sup> “A wild ass hiring love is a metaphor of cutting sarcasm, intended to shame Ephraim and its diplomatic frenzy. Here is a solitary wild ass . . . out paying for its lovers.” Dearman, *Hosea*, 229. “What a whore is Israel. She does not wait for customers like the ordinary prostitute, but pursues her lovers anxiously.” Mays, *Hosea*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Although in the Piel stem קָבַץ most often refers to gathering for restoration (Deut 30:3–4; Mic 2:12; 4:6; Isa 11:12; 40:11; 43:5; 54:7; 56:8; 66:18; Jer 23:3; 29:14; 31:8–10; 32:37; Ezek 11:17; 28:25; 29:13; 34:13; 36:24; 37:21; 39:27; Zeph 3:19–20; Zech 10:8–10; Pss 106:47; 107:3; 1 Chr 16:35), there are a few other examples of this ironic reversal to gathering for judgment (Mic 4:12; Ezek 20:34; Joel 4:2).

<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann, “Recovering God,” 7.

<sup>31</sup> McComiskey, “Hosea,” 148.

Covenant Judge again announces certain judgment. As Shalman defeated *Beth Arbel* (בֵּית אַרְבַּאֵל), *Bethel* (בֵּית־אֵל) will be violently destroyed. When the dawn is *cut off* (גְּדַמָּה), Israel's king will also be *cut off* (גְּדַמָּה). Finally, Israel is depicted as YHWH's beloved child (11:1–7). Yet, despite YHWH's tender care for his son, Israel rejected him for idols. With the intimate images and plentiful first-person pronouns, YHWH's anguish here is palpable. With poetic justice, he promises to return Israel to exile, reversing the exodus. Since the people did not recognize that YHWH *fed* them (אוֹכִיל, 11:4) the sword of Assyria would *devour* them (אֹכְלָה, 11:6). YHWH desired a relationship with his son, but Israel rejected his father; therefore, the Covenant Judge will discipline his people.

With another jarring shift, YHWH moves from Rejected Parent to Rescuing God, interjecting a thread of hope and promise of future salvation (11:8–11). Having just foretold Israel's coming destruction, his compassion overwhelms him. With a series of rhetorical questions, YHWH asks how he could treat his people like Admah and Zeboiim, two cities destroyed in God's judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24–29). Elsewhere in Scripture, this well-known event is described as an *overthrow* (הִפְךָ) of evil (Deut 29:22; Isa 13:19; Jer 20:16; 49:18; 50:40; Lam 4:6; Amos 4:11).<sup>32</sup> However, in this passage, YHWH's heart, not the evil nation of Israel, is *overthrown* (נִהְפָּךְ, 11:8). His tender mercies are aroused, and YHWH relents of his plans to annihilate Israel. Instead of the Covenant Judge coming as a *lion* to tear Israel apart (5:14; 13:7–8), the Rescuing God will roar like a *lion* to call his people back from exile. Rather than flitting about like a *dove* (צִפּוֹר), deceived and lacking discernment (7:11), Israel will return home from exile as swiftly as a *dove* (11:10–11; cf. 9:15).

## VI. PREYING ANIMAL AND LIFE-GIVING PROVIDER?

(12:1–14:10[11:12–14:9])

His voice still ringing with the hope of future restoration (11:8–11), Hosea shifts back to YHWH's present rebuke. In this section, the prophet alternates between accusation, allusion, and application. In short, Israel's deceit will bring her destruction (12:1–10[11:12–12:9]), her dependence will result in her disappearance (12:11[10]–13:3), and her defection and degradation will lead to her devouring (13:4–14:1[13:16]). Like the start of his spoken message (4:1), Hosea restates YHWH's covenant lawsuit against his people (רִיב, 12:3[2]), accusing them of social injustice and political infidelity. Israel's Judge confronts her deception, repeating and multiplying terms for treachery (בִּחַשׁ, 4:2; 12:1[11:12]) as well as condemning her dependence on surrounding nations. Echoing an earlier phrase (4:9), YHWH reiterates his promise of retribution—I will punish them for their ways, I will repay them for their evil deeds (12:3[2]). Israel's deeds are compared to the life of Jacob, linked by themes of deception and dependence. Currently, the nation reflects their father's early example of seizing and struggling by his own *strength* (אֵז, 12:4[3], 9[8]). In contrast, Hosea urges Israel to imitate Jacob's later desire to *find* YHWH (מִצָּא),

<sup>32</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 43.

rather than *wealth* (און, 12:4[5], 9[8]). Playing on their similar sound, Israel *must turn back* (תשוב, 12:7[6]), reflecting YHWH's steadfast love and justice (2:21[19]) and looking to him for their deliverance, or he will again make them  *dwell* in tents (אוישיבן, 12:10[9]). With the repetition of *God's memorial name*, YHWH (זכר, 12:6[5]); cf. Exod 3:15),<sup>33</sup> and his redemption of the nation from Egypt (12:10[9]), Hosea gives a glimpse of Israel's Life-Giving Provider, offering hope based in YHWH's redemptive character.

Having called them back through his prophets and parables, YHWH condemns Israel's continued dependence on foreign gods (12:11[10]–13:3). Using a set of wordplays, Hosea asks two rhetorical questions, accusing the nation of sin and announcing their judgment—*Is idolatry* (און) *in Gilead? Certainly, they will come to nothing* (שוא)! *Do they sacrifice bulls in Gilgal* (גלגל)? *Surely, their altars will be like heaps of stone* (גלים) *in the furrows of the field* (12:12[11]). Since Israel served vain idols, *no-gods* (און), they will be brought to nothing! Though YHWH *kept* Israel, as Jacob *kept* his sheep (שמר, 13–14), they *bitterly* provoked (תמרור) him to anger (12:15–13:2).<sup>34</sup> Ephraim was exalted in Israel, but they will be brought down because of their Baal worship. Like Israel's fleeting faithfulness (6:4), their presence in the land would also be fleeting—*like a morning cloud, fading dew, blowing chaff, or disappearing smoke* (13:3). As Hubbard succinctly summarizes, “The point is that idolatry carries its own punishment: you worship nothing; you get nothing; you end as nothing.”<sup>35</sup>

Having confronted Israel's deception and dependence, YHWH now accuses his people of defection and degradation (13:4–14:1[13:16]). Alluding to Sinai, Israel's Judge reminds his people of their redemption and responsibility—*You must know* (ידע) *no other god but me* (13:4; cf. Exod 20:2). YHWH is Israel's only savior, and idolatry profanes his renown. Though he cared for them (ידע) in the desert, when Israel entered Canaan and was satisfied by his provision, they became proud and forgot him (13:5–6; 2:15; cf. Deut 8:11–14). Thus, Israel's provider will become their predator, and the *well-fed* nation will soon be *devoured* by their enemy. Because they *forgot* (שכח) their God, YHWH will be a devouring *lion* (שחל), a lurking leopard, and a *bereaved* (שכול) bear, seeking to *destroy* (שחת) his people (13:7–9; 5:14). Because their *hearts* were proud (לב, 13:6), he will tear their *hearts* out of their chest (13:8). These violent metaphors have their background in ancient Near Eastern covenant curses. Wild animals are invoked to threaten those who break the covenant (cf. Lev 26:22).<sup>36</sup> Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with YHWH, and now the Preying Animal will wreak judgment. No one can save them, not even their king (13:10–11). Like birth pains before labor, signs of impending judgment are on the horizon, and there is no turning back. Israel has not turned back, and

<sup>33</sup> Dearman, *Hosea*, 308.

<sup>34</sup> Since Hosea's message (12:11–15) is organized by linking terms and wordplays, the northern prophet may have chosen the rare root תמרורים “bitter” as a phonetic wordplay on the root שמר “keep” (13–14). The Akkadian (*tamriru*) and Ugaritic (*šmrr*) cognates favor a phonological similarity (*CAD* T 146; *DUL* 818; Dennis Pardee, “The Semitic Root *mrr* and the Etymology of Ugaritic *mr(r)/brk\**,” *UF* 10 [1978]: 288). If this is the case, YHWH's *preservation* is being contrasted with Israel's *provocation*.

<sup>35</sup> Hubbard, *Hosea*, 228.

<sup>36</sup> Mays, *Hosea*, 175–76.

thus, ruin is inevitable. YHWH will show no compassion. Death and Sheol will bring violent judgment, with Samaria suffering unspeakable atrocities (13:14–14:1[13:16]).<sup>37</sup>

In a final shift, Hosea closes with a call to repentance and a divine promise to relent and restore blessing (14:2–10[1–9]). Reminding the nation of their downfall, the prophet calls Israel to return to YHWH (שובה, 14:2[1]). Since God would not restore his favor to Israel until his people turn back to him (6:1–3), Hosea offers another model prayer (14:3–4). Highlighting the three areas of accusation, *social injustice, political infidelity, and spiritual idolatry*, he urges the nation to turn back to YHWH to receive his mercy. Playing on Hosea's call to repent (שובה), YHWH promises to heal *their waywardness* (משובתם) ... *for my anger will turn away from them* (שב, 14:5[6]). Whenever Israel would *turn* to him, he would *turn* to them, and the Preying Animal would become the Life-Giving Provider. YHWH compares himself to morning dew, a luxuriant tree, and fine wine, stressing the renewal of his agricultural blessing (14:6[5]; 9[8]). No longer a symbol of Israel's fleeting faithfulness (6:4) or their passing presence (13:3), the morning *dew* (טל) pictures YHWH's promise to nourish his people (14:6[7]). His people will no longer worship other gods under the shade of the forest (4:13) because YHWH will be a luxuriant tree, bringing protective *shade* (צל) and provision, like the superior splendor of Lebanon's cedars and wine (14:6–9[5–8]). As promised in the opening chapters (2:23[21]), YHWH will *respond* (ענה, 14:8[9]) to his people. He will no longer act as a Preying Animal, *lurking* (אשור) by the path and ready to devour (13:8), but he will *care* for his people (אשורני, 14:9[8]).

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<sup>37</sup> There are two main interpretive options concerning the meaning of Hos 13:14. First, ancient versions (LXX, Vulgate, Peshitta) as well as some modern translations (NIV, NASB) view the opening imperfects as a restatement of God's restorative intent, "I will ransom them. ... I will redeem them." In favor of this view, Hosea often abruptly shifts from judgment to restoration, as noted throughout this essay. As McComiskey concludes, "The placing of an affirmation of deliverance immediately after a denunciation serves to intensify the promise of redemption. It gives greater emotional value because it is not a theological treatise but an expression of God's heart (11:8–9) that will not allow him to exterminate his people." McComiskey, "Hosea," 224. Yet, any link between 11:8 and 13:14 is best seen as a contrast. In the former, YHWH's compassions (נחומי) are aroused; in the latter, they (נחם) are hidden. Thus, the final line of the verse revealing YHWH's refusal to show compassion remains difficult to explain. If this view is adopted, one must conclude that YHWH's promise of redemption for a future remnant has been combined with his intent to withhold compassion from Israel's present generation. Second, some versions (ESV, NET) and scholars interpret these phrases as rhetorical questions, though lacking an interrogative marker (GKC §150a), "Shall I ransom them.... Shall I redeem them?" In support of this view, the context centers on Israel's coming ruin (13:7–13; 13:15–14:1 [16]). Also, the word pairs tying this verse together (מות-שאול, דבר-קטב, בדה-גאל) suggest that the debated phrases (14a) are best interpreted in a manner similar to the subsequent rhetorical questions (14b). Dearman, *Hosea*, 328. As the previous verse illustrates, with its contrast between safe delivery and stillbirth (13:13), the possibility of deliverance is mentioned, only to be denied. Graham I. Davies, *Hosea* (OTG; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 295. Though still uncertain, the latter view better fits the context and best explains all parts of the verse.

## VII. UNLOCKING THE PARADOX: PENITENCE AND PROMISE

From the preceding analysis, the portraits of YHWH as Avenging Husband and Redeeming Lover are evident, but the questions remain: *How can such contradictory caricatures be reconciled? What is the relationship between these opposing portraits?* An examination of the book's literary structure reveals one of two keys to unlocking the paradox—*contrite penitence*. As outlined above, Hosea is arranged in parallel panels, moving from judgment to restoration. In each panel except the first, **שוב** plays a vital role. Used twenty-five times, Hosea gradually unfolds this central theme.

In the second panel (2:4[2]–3:5), at the center of Israel's infidelity and YHWH's promise to inflict punishment is his intent for the coming calamity—*repentance*. The reason that YHWH threatens *to take away* (**אשוב**, 2:11[9]) his covenant blessings is to drive Israel back to him, "I am about to fence in her way with thorns. I will wall her in so that she cannot find her paths. She will pursue her lovers but not overtake them; she will seek but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back (**אשובה**) to my former husband, for it was better for me then than now'" (2:6–7[8–9]). YHWH's educative plan is intended to bring repentance, not merely retribution. Yet, Hosea also foretells Israel's future penitence. After a period of purification, "The children of Israel *will return* (**ישבו**) and seek YHWH their God and David their king" (3:5). Thus, by juxtaposing the absence of repentance in the present and its certainty in the future, Hosea reiterates Israel's need to repent but implicitly raises questions about its process—*How can Israel move from retribution to redemption?*

In the third panel (4:1–6:3), after accusing priest and people, Hosea announces YHWH's fitting punishment, *repaying* Israel (**אשיב**) for their deeds (4:9; 12:3[2]). As a devouring lion, he will tear his people apart, *returning* (**אשובה**) to his lair until they seek him (5:15). In response, the prophet offers a model prayer of repentance, calling for Israel to *return* (**נשובה**), to earnestly seek to know YHWH (6:1–3). Yet, amidst his promise of injury and pattern for instruction, YHWH reveals the people's inability, "Their evil deeds do not permit them to *return* (**לשוב**) to their God, for a spirit of prostitution is in them" (5:4; 4:12). Thus, while explaining the process of repentance and emphasizing Israel's need, Hosea's juxtaposition of YHWH's instruction and Israel's incapacity sets up the question of its possibility—*How can Israel overcome its present inability?*

In the fourth and fifth panels (6:4–7:16; 8:1–11:11), Hosea again highlights the nation's bent to rebel, refusing to *return* (**שוב**) to YHWH (11:5) and intent on *turning away* (**משובתי**, 11:7). Because Israel is *turning away* from their God and *turning* (**ישונו**) to other gods (7:16) and nations (7:10), YHWH will cause them to *return* to Egypt (**ישונו**, 8:13; 9:13; 11:5). Yet, YHWH also speaks of a sure *restoration of fortunes* (**שובי שבות**, 6:11) with healing for the nation, and he vows not to *completely* destroy them (**לא אשוב**, 11:9). Thus, by juxtaposing Israel's persistent refusal to repent in the present and YHWH's sure promise of redemption in the future, Hosea reignites questions about the process of penitence—*how can Israel move from retribution to redemption?*



In the final panel (12:1[11:12]–14:10[9]), the prophet repeats the threat of YHWH's fitting retribution, *repaying* them (ישיב) for their evil deeds (12:3; 4:9) and *returning* (ישיב) their shame upon them (12:15). Hosea restates the divinely-prescribed process, calling the nation to *turn back* (שׁוּבָה) and offering a pattern for their prayers (14:2–3). However, while the remedy repeated in the prophet's model prayers—*exclusive devotion reflected by their internal affections and external actions* (6:1–3; 14:2–3)—may answer questions about the process of returning to YHWH, the question of its possibility remains—*how can Israel overcome its present inability?* If the nation has been led astray by a spirit of prostitution, unable to return to YHWH because of their deeds (4:12; 5:4), how can Israel's Avenging Husband become her Redeeming Lover? Von Rad suggested that this tension between wrath and love is resolved in God's own heart (11:8f).<sup>38</sup> Though this is partly true, Hosea offers greater specificity on the solution. With hints in earlier panels (2:19), the final section answers the question of possibility. Illustrated by the life of Jacob, Israel's penitence will require YHWH's intervention,<sup>39</sup> “As for you, you must *return* (תשוב), *by the help of your God*,<sup>40</sup> keeping loyal love and justice and waiting on your God continually” (12:7[6]). Later, YHWH promises that if Israel will *return* to him (שובה), 14:2[1]), then he will heal *their waywardness* (משׁוּבָתָם), *turn away* his anger (שב), and *return* his covenant provision and protection to his people (ישׁבו, 14:5–8; cf. 9:3).<sup>41</sup> In Hosea, there is a wide chasm between Israel's present rebellion and their future repentance, between YHWH's present retribution as Avenging Husband and his future restoration as Redeeming Lover. The first key to crossing this chasm is the

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:145.

<sup>39</sup> Odell rightly stresses the need for Israel to recognize their guilt but misses the necessity of divine intervention for internal change. Margaret S. Odell, “Who Were the Prophets in Hosea?” *HBT* 18 (1996): 90–91.

<sup>40</sup> Many translations (NIV, NASB, NET, NRSV, JPS) render this opening phrase as “return to your God” (12:7[6]). Yet, this collocation is often expressed with שׁוּב אֵל (Exod 32:31; Deut 30:10; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Kgs 23:25; Isa 44:22; 55:7; Jer 3:1, 7, 10; 4:1; 24:7; Joel 2:13; Zech 1:3; Mal 3:7; Ps 22:28; Ruth 1:15; Lam 5:21; Neh 1:9; 2 Chr 19:4; 24:19; 30:6; 36:13), less commonly with שׁוּב עַד (Deut 4:30; 30:2; Isa 9:12; 19:22; Joel 2:12; Amos 4:6, 8–11; Lam 3:40) and twice under Aramaic influence with שׁוּב עַל (2 Chr 15:4; 30:9). This phrase is used five times in Hosea, mainly with the first combination (Hos 5:4; 6:1; 7:10; 14:2–3). However, the collocation in 12:7[6] שׁוּב בּ is never used in the Hebrew Bible for *returning/turning back to a person*, particularly YHWH. Thus, it seems better to understand this example as an instrumental use of the preposition (GKC §119o). Although שׁוּב + *beth instrumenti* is certainly rare, one example is the phrase “return by way of,” describing the means by which one goes back to his place of origin (1 Kgs 13:9–10; 2 Kgs 19:33/Isa 37:34). Another example is YHWH's promised punishment for Israel's covenantal disobedience, “YHWH will return you by ships on a route I said to you that you would never see” (Deut 28:68). Earlier in the book, YHWH refers to himself as the instrument by which Judah's redemption would come, “I will deliver them by YHWH their God” (1:9). Davies, *Hosea*, 277; Macintosh, *Hosea*, 491; Mays, *Hosea*, 165; Wolff, *Hosea*, 214. Glenny similarly suggests that the LXX (12:6) reflects this instrumental use of the preposition with the phrase ἐν θεῷ, “by God.” W. Edward Glenny, *Hosea: A Commentary Based on Hosea in Codex Vaticanus* (Septuagint Commentary Series 10; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 164.

<sup>41</sup> Lambert reduces Hosea's use of שׁוּב to politics, neglecting his dominant focus on Israel's idolatry (2:11; 7:16; 11:7), as well as their inability (5:4) and need for divine intervention (12:6[7]; 14:5[4]). David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 79.

necessity of Israel's *contrite penitence*. Yet, in the above passages (12:7[6]; 14:2–8[1–9]), human responsibility is linked with divine enablement. In fact, Israel's history of fleeting faithfulness shows that their greatest hope is “the passionate grace, unilateral initiative, and transforming work of Yahweh to create penitence that is authentic and enduring.”<sup>42</sup>

In addition to contrition, Hosea's echoes in both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah reveal the second key to unlocking YHWH's opposing portraits—*covenant promise*. First, the prophet repeatedly references Israel's covenant at Sinai—its king, its commands, and its consequences. In Hosea, YHWH's favorite self-description—*I am YHWH your God from the land of Egypt* (12:10; 13:4; 12:14)—recalls the opening of his covenant at Sinai (Exod 20:1; Deut 5:6). Israel's motive for covenant fidelity was their redemption from slavery. Yet, from his initial accusation of adultery (1:2; Deut 31:16), breaking God's command of exclusive devotion (13:4; Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7), to their social injustice in *murder, stealing, adultery* (4:2; Exod 20:13–15; Deut 5:17–19), Hosea repeatedly indicts Israel for violating the Mosaic covenant (כִּי, 4:1; 12:3). Having been warned about the dangers of spiritual idolatry and self-sufficiency, Hosea rebukes the people for provoking YHWH with idolatry (12:15; Deut 4:25), injustice (5:15; Deut 27:17), and their pride in forgetting their source of blessing (13:6; Deut 8:11–14). He also draws on the punishment predicted by the covenant curses—eating without satisfaction (4:10; Lev 26:26), turning fertility to infertility (2:8–9; Deut 28:47–51), and the resulting oppression (5:11; Deut 28:33) and desolation (5:9; Deut 28:37, symbolized by the vulture, 8:1; Deut 28:49).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin & Its Remedy in the Old Testament* (Siphrut 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 304.

<sup>43</sup> Based on the work of de Wette and Wellhausen, many modern scholars link the writing of Deuteronomy to the 7<sup>th</sup>-century BCE religious reforms of Josiah. Jack R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 6–7. As a result, the themes shared by Deuteronomy and Hosea (e.g. YHWH's covenant love demands Israel's covenant fidelity, and Israel's covenant infidelity, without repentance, will bring YHWH's covenant curses) are often explained as dependence. Wolff, *Hosea*, xxxi. Some suggest that Hosea was redacted by the Deuteronomist editors. Gale A. Yee, *Composition and Tradition in the Book of Hosea* (SBLDS 102; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 309. Still others posit a common source or tradition. Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 75; Brueggemann, “Recovering God,” 7; John Day, “Pre-Deuteronomic Allusions to the Covenant in Hosea and Psalm 78,” *VT* 36 (1986): 1–12; Dearman, *Hosea*, 39; Moshe Weinfeld, “Hosea and Deuteronomy,” in *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 367. Finally, a few scholars maintain that the written form of Deuteronomy was already well-known by the time of Hosea. Umberto Cassuto, “The Prophet Hosea and the Books of the Pentateuch,” in *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), 79–100; Mark F. Rooker, “The Use of the Old Testament in Hosea,” *CTR* 7 (1993): 62–65; Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 15; Gordon J. Wenham, “The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-pin of Old Testament Criticism,” *Them* 10 (1985): 18. The dating of Deuteronomy involves many issues outside the scope of this essay. Yet, as Andersen and Freedman note, “Hosea's discourses are threaded with Deuteronomic ideas in a way that shows that they already were authoritative in Israel. Whether already written in an early form, or still largely oral, Deuteronomic material served as the background for much of Hosea's thought.” Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 75. For example, Vang recently argued that Deuteronomy's stress on YHWH's immediate retribution for covenant unfaithfulness, as well as its curious omission of the marriage metaphor for YHWH's covenant love, are incredibly difficult to explain if its editors were dependent on the preaching of Hosea. Carsten Vang, “God's Love According to Hosea and Deuteronomy: A Prophetic Reworking of a Deuteronomic Concept?” *TynBul* 62 (2011): 193.

Second, Hosea's comforting words about Israel's future restoration, based in the Mosaic covenant (Deut 30:1–11), are later expanded in the new covenant language of Jeremiah (31:1–40) and Ezekiel (36:22–38; 37:15–28). For example, Hosea's link between the nation's *repentance* and *redemption* (14:2–9[1–8]) recalls Moses's foretelling of Israel's *return* (שבת) and *restoration* (שבותך שב, Deut 30:3) and is echoed in the voice of penitent Israel in Jeremiah—*Bring me back* (השיבני) *that I may be restored* (אשובה, 31:18; 33:26). Likewise, the prophet's declaration of Israel's inability and the necessity of divine intervention (5:4; 12:6[7]) recalls Deuteronomy's hope for YHWH *to circumcise their hearts* (Deut 30:3) and is later echoed in the language of heart change in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 4:4; 31:33; Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 36:26). In fact, Hosea's call to *return* (שובה, 14:2[1]), followed by YHWH's promise to heal Israel's *waywardness* (משובתם, 14:5[4]), is quoted by Jeremiah, “*Return* (שוב) O faithless sons, I will heal your *waywardness* (משובתיכם, 3:22). Also, many of the blessings promised by Hosea's Redeeming Lover are enlisted and expanded by later prophets—a reversal of their current plight (6:11; Jer 29:14; 30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26; Ezek 39:25; cf. Zech 10:6), a covenant with creation-restoring fertility and security (2:20–25[18–23]; Jer. 32:37; Ezek 34:25–31), and a relationship of devotion (2:22; Jer 31:34) and service (3:5; Jer 30:9) resulting from YHWH's loyal love (11:4; Jer 31:3).<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in addition to the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant, Hosea's depiction of Israel's Redeeming Lover also invokes YHWH's covenant with Abraham. In the opening panel (1:2–2:3[1]), after renewing their broken relationship (2:1[1:10]; Exod 6:7), reversing the curses of the Mosaic covenant (2:2[1:11]; Deut 29:22[23]),<sup>45</sup> and revealing the reunification of Israel later linked to the new covenant (2:2; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:19–25), Hosea anchors Israel's future restoration in YHWH's promise to Abraham to make his descendants *as numerous as the sand of sea that cannot be measured or counted* (2:1[1:10]; Gen 22:17). Thus, by invoking the Abrahamic covenant at the beginning of his portrait of Israel's Redeeming Lover, in a context ironically devoid of any reference to repentance, Hosea highlights YHWH's enduring commitment to Israel's future redemption and restoration.

In sum, the keys to unlocking the paradox of Hosea's divine portraits are Israel's *contrite penitence* and YHWH's *covenant promises*.<sup>46</sup> First, tracing the use of שוב reveals the prophet's rhetorical aim, Israel's *repentance*—from YHWH's intent in

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<sup>44</sup> As Brueggemann aptly notes, “Of all the prophetic traditions, Jeremiah stands closest to and most in debt to Hosea.” Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (OT Theology; New York: Cambridge, 2007), 149.

<sup>45</sup> Dearman, *Hosea*, 106.

<sup>46</sup> While highlighting the expectation of Israel's repentance and the necessity of YHWH's intervention to bring healing, Walker misses the foundational importance of YHWH's covenant commitment to redeem and restore his people (Gen 22:17; Deuteronomy 30). Thomas W. Walker, “The Metaphor of Healing and the Theology of the Book of Hosea” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1997), 178b–92. Wyrzten, though noting the importance of covenant in Hosea's theology, overlooks the central role of repentance in the book as well as the expansion of Hosea's promises of restoration in Jeremiah's new covenant. David B. Wyrzten, “The Theological Center of the Book of Hosea,” *BSac* 141 (1984): 323–24.

punishment, to his injunction for penitence, to his intervention for Israel's purification. Second, tracing Hosea's relationship to the biblical covenants reveals that Israel's Avenging Husband is bringing calamity on his people, as he promised in the Mosaic covenant, in order to turn them back to him. Yet, even in his judgment, YHWH is not finished with them. He is committed to fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham. In the future, Israel's Redeeming Lover will transform their hearts to enable enduring change, as he reveals in the new covenant, in order for his people to return to him and experience the fullness of his blessing.

### VIII. CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS

The book of Hosea concludes with this admonition, "Who is wise? Let him discern these things? Who is discerning? Let him know them" (14:10[9]). So, what theological lessons can we learn? In wrestling to reconcile divine justice and mercy in Hosea, every reader must beware of two pitfalls regarding Hosea's portraits of God and the problem for Israel. First, in seeking to resolve seemingly contradictory caricatures—YHWH as Avenging Husband and Redeeming Lover—we *must not denigrate God*. Our temptation as Christians may be to emphasize his justice and minimize his mercy, or to highlight his mercy and neglect his justice. Yet, this imbalanced approach distorts and denigrates God's character! As Hosea aptly shows, his justice and mercy work together to serve one purpose—*bringing his unfaithful people back into a faithful relationship with him*. "There is no anger for anger's sake. Its meaning is instrumental: to bring about repentance."<sup>47</sup> Hosea's juxtaposition of divine portraits serves to raise questions within the reader, pointing to God's goal of redemption.

Second, in our desire to reconcile this theological tension, *we must not ignore the need for human initiative and divine intervention*. In some theological systems, there is a temptation to emphasize God's activity to the exclusion of Israel's responsibility, or vice versa. Brueggemann notes a "leap" from Deuteronomy's restriction of pardon for the penitent to Jeremiah's revelation of God's unilateral pardon without reference to repentance (31:31–34),<sup>48</sup> but Hosea does not divorce restoration from repentance. Alongside his stress on God's radical shift from retribution to redemption, intervening to restore their broken relationship, Hosea repeatedly calls Israel to a radical shift from rebellion to repentance, highlighting what the people must do—*Return to your God!* Using Hosea's life and message, YHWH calls Israel to return to him, and their return will require his enablement (5:4; 12:7[6]; 14:2–5[1–4]). Whether one can fully reconcile these statements in their mind, both are evident

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<sup>47</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 66.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Trevail of Pardon: Reflections on slh," in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 292. Yet, Brueggemann misses that Jeremiah also joins pardon and repentance, "It may be that house of Judah will hear of all the disaster that I am devising to do to them so that each one may turn (שוב) from his evil way, that I may forgive (סלח) their iniquity and their sin" (36:3).

and must be affirmed.<sup>49</sup> Through YHWH's call for his people's *contrite penitence* and his commitment to his *covenant promises*, Israel's *Avenge Husband* will become her *Redeeming Lover!*<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Yates draws a similar conclusion for the whole Book of the Twelve, "The Book of Twelve certainly emphasizes divine initiative as the ultimate cause of Israel's final salvation, but without completely removing the tensions between these two models [conditional/unilateral pardon]. The timing and manner of Israel's restoration in some sense remains contingent on human response to the divine initiatives, and this interplay between divine initiative and human response is central to the ongoing drama of salvation history." Gary E. Yates, "The Problem of Repentance and Relapse as a Unifying Theme in the Book of the Twelve," *Them* 41 (2016): 262.

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