

Hosea: Go, take yourself a wife of whoredom”: “God is a lover”

Hosea is the only prophet native to the Northern Kingdom, where they especially preserved the traditions of Moses and the Exodus. Although Hosea began to prophesy during the final years of the prosperous kingdom of Jeroboam II (783-743 B.C.), the prophecies mainly reflect the chaotic years under the weak successor kings – four of which were assassinated in only five years – when the Northern kingdom hastened toward its tragic end (2 Kings 17:1-6). → Amos had arrived in the South as an itinerate prophet some 10 years before (Hos 1:1; Am 1:1; 7:12), but his ministry lasted only a few short months while that of Hosea appears to have continued for more than 25 years. It began toward the beginning of 750 B.C. and would see the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians (722/21) and the exile of the 10 Northern tribes (according to 1:1, the title that names Hezekiah, king of Judah, 716-687 B.C.).

Outline

1:1	Title
1:2-3:5	Family values: “Go, take yourself a wife of whoredom”
4:1-13:16	Sins and punishment of the “whore” Israel
14:1-8	Repentance, pardon and abundant life
14:9	Conclusion: The wise and the just

1 Liberating Justice (righteousness) for the oppressed. Although Hosea does not explicitly refer to the poor (→ Micah), he takes a stand on oppression. Above all, Hosea assails the urban elite and the leading classes of society: the kings elected contrary to the will of Yahweh, the ignorant and greedy priests and the idolatrous bureaucracy of the urban establishment see 4:1-11a; 5:1; 6:5; 13:10-11).¹ As Pleins points out, the paradigm of the Exodus is fundamental to Hosea’s theology: “El Dios de Oseas es en primer lugar el Dios del Éxodo, que ha liberado al pueblo de Egipto” and Hosea had “una vocación para el trabajo de justicia bajo la bandera del Dios del Éxodo”.²

When Israel was a child I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called my son. (11:1 see the re-reading of Matthew 2:15, concerning Jesus).

Yet I have been the Lord your God
Ever since the land of Egypt;
You know no God but me,
And besides me there is no savior (13:4; see also 2:16-17 [14-16]; 12-10 [9]).

In another text, the prophet refers explicitly to the oppression and its mechanisms, the idolatry that attempts to justify it, and God’s resulting anger:

The princes of Judah have become

Like those who remove the landmark;
On them I will pour out my
wrath (*'ebrah*) like water.

Ephraim is oppressed (*'ashaq*),
crushed (*ratsats*) in judgment (*mishpat*),
because he was determined to go after vanity (5:9-10).

The prophet shows the common mechanism of oppression, to rob land by moving boundaries, (see Deut 19:14; 27:17-19; Job 24:2; Prov 22:28; the Instruction of Amenemope 7:11-19). God's wrath pours out over the oppressors, for the sins of oppression and the idolatry that tries to justify it. As punishment for those leaders' oppression and idolatry, Israel itself suffers the oppression and violence of the conquest by Assyria (722-21). The judgment in this case would be criminal punishment (see also *tsarar* I, "oppression, affliction", in 4:19; 5:15; 13:12).

Hosea denounces another common technique of oppression, in 12:7-8:

A trader (lit. "Canaan"), in whose hands are false balances,
he loves to oppress.
Ephraim has said: "Ah, I am rich,
I have gained wealth for myself;
In all of my gain
no offense has been found in me
that would be sin.

In other texts, oppression is the fundamental cause of poverty, but here Hosea speaks of oppression as fraud and exploitation, which are presented as a fundamental cause of wealth – a very perspective than that of Deuteronomy, where prosperity is the consequence of obedience to the nation and the blessing of God (Deut 28; see Hos 9:6).

The prophet also sees oppression as a punishment for prostitution (metaphorically, for the alliances with idolatrous nations):

For they have gone up to Assyria,
A wild ass wandering alone;
Ephraim has bargained for lovers.
Though they bargain with the nations,
I will now gather them up.
They shall soon writhe
Under the burden (*masa' I*) of kings and princes (8:9-10).

In this text, the prophet utilizes the word *masa' I*, literally "burden", that Zachariah and Malachi employ to describe the "prophecy" of Yahweh that pronounces judgment (Zach 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1).

We have already seen how God's wrath in Hosea pours out over the oppressors, for the sins of oppression and the idolatry that attempts to justify it (5:1-10). However, Hosea is a

prophet who dwells on Yahweh's compassion and love, and he also speaks powerfully of this anger God has toward oppression, violence and idolatry, since it is like the anger of the unfaithful husband, rejected by a woman (Israel) who prefers to prostitute herself:

Your calf is rejected, O Samaria.
My anger burns against them (*kharah 'afi*) (8:5).

Ephraim has given bitter offense (*ka'as*),
So his Lord will bring his crimes down on him
And pay him back for his insults (12:14).

Hosea also interprets the chaotic instability of the Northern Kingdom's last years as an expression of the wrath of the Lord of history:

I gave you a king in my anger (*'af*),
And I took him away in my wrath (*'ebrah*) (13:11).

Like no other book of the Bible, Hosea reveals the divine dialectic, God's strong emotional conflict between anger and compassion.:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath (11:8-9).

In such text we can see just how far the biblical theology is from the patristic theology, which – dominated by Greek philosophy – affirms that God is a purely rational being, '**sin passion o partes**'; which is to say, without emotion. Thus, while the Book of the Covenant (Ex 22:21-24) teaches that Yahweh couldn't be indifferent or passive in the face of oppression and violence, but rather expressed his just indignation against all oppression, Hosea shows us the fury of God as an expression of a painfully injured love, extremely personal (cf. the selfish human anger in 7:5-7, 16).

However, the rhetorical question so strongly posed in 11:8-9 is answered in the hopeful latter texts, where Hosea promises that God will heal Israel's sinful tendencies and love would, at last, take the place of anger:

I will heal their disloyalty;
I will love them freely,
For my anger has turned from them.

I will be like the dew to Israel...(14:4-5; → Rom 11:33).

With this promise that God would heal the sinful ways of his people, Hosea anticipates the promises of the new pact (→ Jeremiah 31:31-14; → Ezekiel 36:25-17).

2 To know God is to practice liberating justice (righteousness). Although Amos had prophesied about God's justice with insurmountable force, Hosea's special contribution is to relate this liberating justice (righteousness) to love and a personal knowledge of God:

14 Therefore, I will allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.

15 From there I will lead her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
As at the time when she came out of Egypt.

16 On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Baal." 17 For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. 18 I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. 19 And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness (*sedeq*) and justice (*mishpat*), in steadfast love (*kheshed*), and in mercy (*rekhem*). 20 I will take you for my wife in faithfulness (*'emunah*); and you shall know the Lord (2:14-20).

Sow for yourselves righteousness (*tsedaqah*);

reap steadfast love (*kheshed*);

break up your fallow ground;

For it is time to seek the Lord,

that he may come and rain righteousness
upon you (10:12).

Other texts speak of Yahweh's penal justice (*mishpat*) against oppression and violence (5:1; 6:5; 10:4; see also 12:7 under oppression above; cf. 4:19).

The last verse of Hosea links liberating justice (righteousness) with wisdom:

9 Those who are wise understand these things;
those who are discerning know them.

For the ways of the Lord are right (*yesharim*),

And the upright walk in them,

But transgressors stumble in them (14:10).

Ending in this way, Hosea makes us remember again that the Bible never refers to ethics or morals, since those are categories of Greek philosophy, foreign to biblical thought. Yahweh, the Lord of history, has "right paths" on which "walk" the just, while the rebels stumble on them.

To understand liberating justice (**righteousness**) in the Bible, we have seen that it is best to begin with the experience of oppression (→ NT). In the same way, in Hosea, the knowledge of Yahweh, so linked with the theme of liberating justice (**righteousness**), we can better understand by beginning with a text which describes the lack of such knowledge:

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
for the Lord has an indictment against
the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.

Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed (4:1-2).

As evidence of this lack of knowledge of God, the prophet cites four of the Ten Commandments. In the same sense, when he affirms: ‘My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge’ (Hos 4:6a), the explanation continues: “...since you have forgotten the law of your God...” (4:6b; see also 2:8, 13; 5:4; 7:9; 8:1-3, 14; 11:3; 13:4-6).

When he denounces the sins of Jehoiakim, the prophet Jeremiah shows in one sentence the essential meaning of “to know God”:

Are you a king because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with him.
He judged the cause of the poor and the needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me? says the Lord (Jer 22:15-16).

The paradigm of the Exodus is fundamental to the meaning of the knowledge of God in Hosea:

Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt;
you know no God but me,
and besides me there is no savior.
It was I who fed you in the wilderness,
in the land of drought (13:4-5).

Hosea also speaks of the knowledge of God in the context of the metaphor of the marriage between God and his people (see Genesis 4:1, “Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain”):

2:19 And I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in righteousness (*tsedeq*) and in justice (*mishpat*), in
steadfast love (*kheshed*) and in mercy (*rekhem*).
20 I will take you for my wife in faithfulness (*‘emunah*); and you shall know the
Lord (see also 2:14-18).

For Hosea, then, as for Jeremiah later, the essential element in the knowledge of God is the liberating justice (**righteousness**) that attempts to correct the injustices and oppression of the poor and the weak.³ Any expression of love which is not founded on liberty and justice becomes paternalistic and damaging. On the other hand, Hosea can not recommend justice without love, since they are complementary and always more important than the cult rituals of worship:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (6:6).

Thus, the prophet's exhortation is not to multiply the cults, but to practice righteousness and steadfast love, which express the authentic knowledge of God:

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth" (6:3).

3 God as lover: Women, sexual minorities and sexual sins

"Go, take yourself a wife of whoredom (*zenunim*) and have children of whoredom (*zenunim*), for the land commits great whoredom (*zanolh tizneh*) by forsaking the Lord." So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim...(Hos 1:2).

No other prophet embodied the word of God in his own life as did Hosea, since his married life became a symbol of his message. The drama with his prostitute wife made Hosea understand the painful effect of sin in personal relationships and it readied him to proclaim a profound love of God – "un amor que no se deja vencer por la infidelidad, sino que siempre hace prevalecer la misericordia sobre la ira" (DHHBE, 1121; Os 11:8-9; see 2 Tim 2:13: "if we are faithless, he remains faithful"). So, for the first time, Hosea succeeded in expressing the relationship between Yahweh and Israel with the terminology of human love (sexual) and matrimony: "Merece una mención muy especial por ser el primero que conoció a Yahvé como el amante de Israel...Grandes profetas que vinieron después de Oseas: Jeremías, el Segundo-Isaías, Ezequiel, iban a retomar esta primera proclamación de Dios-amante" (BL, 616 → 1 Juan 4:16, 23 "Dios es amor").

Feminist theology shows how Hosea identifies sin with woman (whore), but for the prophet this woman represents all of Israel, above all its male leaders. Hosea emphasizes the figure of the woman that abandons her husband and prostitutes herself in rebellion (a sinner). But many prostitutes become prostitutes because they are slaves or for economic necessity and could be better described as an oppressed sexual minority and not as sinners (see Jesus and even Paul in → 1 Cor 6). We usually think of a prostitute (Hebrew: *zonah*; verb: *zanah*) as a person who is paid for his/her sexual services (the exchange of sex for money). The Hebrew root, however, is broader and at times also refers to illicit sexual relations; for example, premarital relations or adultery, or incestuous relations (Lev 18; 20; → 1 Cor 5).⁴ In the Bible a male could take multiple wives or concubines, or have relations with

prostitutes (be they slaves or independent women). The sexual sin did not consist in the exchange of sex for money, but in damaging the sexual property of another man, whether a husband (adultery) or a father (the violation of a virgin daughter) and removing the sexual relation from the patriarchal context of hierarchy, property and inheritance.⁵

Traditionally, Judaism and Christianity have considered prostitution as always sinful. So, the fact that God commands Hosea to marry a whore was a great problem, and the Biblicists invented many hypotheses to solve it. They suggested that (1) the story was an allegory or merely represented a dream or vision of the prophet, nothing that really happened; or (2) that Gomer was not a prostitute at the beginning, but that she prostituted herself after marrying Hosea. However, since the publication in German of Bernard Stade's *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (1905), Biblicists began to recognize that, according to the Hebrew Bible, it was not a sin for a man to have sexual relations with a prostitute.⁶ The six much-discussed texts are:

1 Genesis 38, Judah and Tamar. Although Judah demanded that Tamar be burned, he does not show any sense of guilt for having bought her sexual services. Cf. Genesis 39, where Joseph resists the temptations of Potiphar's wife.

2 Joshua 2, the spies visit Rahab the whore. The language is sexually suggestive⁷ (Judges 16:1; Psalms 51:1).

3 Judges 16:1-3, Samson visits the prostitute of Gaza, (*ba'* + *'el*, "entered");

4 Exodus 21:7-11, the daughter sold as a slave (DHHBE, note or 20:22-26; BJ note 20:22); the conjugal (*'onathah*) rights of the wife-slave.

5 Exodus 22:16-17 [15-16 Hebrew] // Deut 22:28-29, the violation of a virgin.

6 1 Kings 3:16-28, Solomon and the two prostitutes who ask for justice. Solomon does not question the profession nor recommend a punishment.

7 Hugenberger (1994/98:334-337) thinks that Proverbs 5:15-21 points out that a husband should maintain an exclusive and permanent relationship with his spouse ("conjugal fidelity". But Countryman insists that the concern of Proverbs is not "Fidelity" – as if marriage in Israel were a matter of a pact with vows between two people – but that the patriarch should not squander his resources on whores: "in sexual matters, one should buy, not rent".⁸ The eldest son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son perfectly reflects the fundamental concern when it is protested to the father: "this son of yours...who *has devoured your property* with prostitutes" (Luke 15:30).

Hosea also denounces sacred prostitution, related to the idolatrous cults of fertility (4:10-19):

For the men themselves go aside with whores (*zonot*)
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes;
thus a people without understanding come to ruin (4:14).

Note: Sacred Prostitution. The Bible contains various references to sacred prostitution, related to the idolatrous cults of fertility: see the various masculine references in Deut 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:14; and feminine in Gen 38:21,22; Deut 23:17 and Hosea 4:14; see also Ex 32:6; Num 25:25; 31:13-20; Psalms 106:28-31; Deut 22:5; 1 Cor 10:6-8.

However, recently various Biblicists are questioning the existence of such practices. They point out that we lack archeological evidence of such cults and that the only classical reference to these practices comes from Herodotus, that it is tendentious and overdue (Fifth Century B.C.). So, they suggest that the citations don't reflect the historic reality of the pagans and are rather a type of ideological propaganda against idolatry (cf. Isa 44:9-20; Psalms 115:3-80. Karel van der Toorn concludes "Las civilizaciones del Antiguo Oriente Cercano conocieron prostitutas/os que trabajaron en servicio del templo, como también el fenómeno de la prostitución para pagar votos. Sin embargo, en ningún caso pareciera existir una conexión consciente con ritos de fertilidad".⁹

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End Notes

1. David Pleins 355-356
2. Pleins 2001:360
3. Miranda 1972:67-77; 1974:44-53; Hanks 2000:221; 2001:161
4. S. Erlandsson, 1980, TDOT IV:99-104
5. William Countryman 1988:164-166
6. E. Neufeld, 1944; William Countryman 1988:164-166; cf. Gordon Hugenberger 1994/98:319-326
7. Hugenberger 320, “titillating language”: *ba’* + *’el*, “entered”
8. Countryman 1988:165
9. Karel van der Toorn 1992: 512-513