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The Book of HOSEA

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A. LITERARY FEATURES

The received texts of Hosea (Hebrew or MT; Greek versions) are among the most difficult in the OT. “With the possible exception of Job, the book of Hosea has the dubious distinction of having the most obscure passages of the entire Hebrew Bible. . . . The text is traditionally regarded as the most corrupt and poorly preserved of the Hebrew Bible.”

There are several reasons for this. One may be the vagaries of handling the text over time, with the inevitable errors associated with sight and hearing in the repetitive task of copying. The MT of Hosea appears to have suffered more in the centuries of transmission than that of most other books. The other reasons are likely due to Hosea himself, and they made the preservation of the text more difficult for the tradents who handed it on. His poetic elliptical style, frequent shift of subject, penchant for wordplay and assonance, formidable vocabulary, and even elements of a northern dialect, all contribute to the difficulty of handling and interpreting the text. Interpreters vary considerably whether to describe a feature in the text as a corruption or an anomaly. On the one hand, there are corruptions in the Hebrew text and examples of befuddled rendering in the early versions. On the other hand, there are also examples where “standard” Hebrew syntax is violated, but it is likely that some of these are either the product of Hosea’s individualistic poetry or reflect aspects of speech in his day that simply deviate from the norm. Difficulties with the text of Hosea are noted as far back as Jerome, the greatest Christian biblical scholar of his day, who began his commentary with the following:

If in the interpretation of all the prophets we stand in need of the intervention of the Holy Spirit . . . how much more should the Lord be invoked in interpreting Hosea and in St. Peter’s words should it be said, “Expound for us this parable” (Mt 15.15); more especially is this the case since the author himself wrote at its end, “Whoso is wise, let him understand these things” . . . thereby giving a precise indication of the obscurity of the book.


22. Macintosh, Hosea, pp. liv-lvii, has the best discussion of Hosea’s dialectical peculiarities.

23. Quoted from Macintosh, Hosea, liii.
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It is not that the text is hopelessly corrupt — far from it — but that every translation of Hosea has degrees of certainty and uncertainty, depending on the passage in question. Modern translations navigate between the MT, various early versions, and comparative Semitics, as well as the proposals of earlier interpreters for emendation, in search of coherence for readers. That is the case with the rendering offered in this volume, and no one will be happier than I will be to find new and more firm options for old difficulties I was unable to unravel.

Three prominent features of the book are reasons for its uniqueness: the use of metaphors (including similae), paronomasia or wordplays, and allusions to prior national history. In terms of frequency of use, the book exceeds all other prophetic books in these three areas. Hosea has the distinction of being the prophetic book most poetic in the employment of metaphor and wordplay, and most historical with respect to allusions to prior national traditions.

Recent decades have seen a marked increase of interest in metaphors in the OT, with several studies dedicated to Hosea.24 It is not necessary here to review various theories of metaphor in any detail, but only to offer some brief definitions of terms for when they appear elsewhere. Suffice it to say that a metaphor is “a figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms of which are seen to be suggestive of another.”25 A simile is a type of metaphor in which the preposition “like” or “as” functions to compare one thing in terms of another. In the analyses of metaphor the “one thing” can be referred to as a tenor or a target domain, while the “terms of the suggested other” are the vehicle or source domain. Thus YHWH’s statement in 14:5 (MT 6), “I will be like the dew to Israel,” has the “tenor” of divine care and refreshment of Israel which is compared to or explicated by the “vehicle” of dew, an important phenomenon for agricultural produce in Syria-Palestine during the dry summer season.26 It is important to stress that metaphors and similes are not simply literary devices, but also evidence of cognition:


25. This is the widely recognized definition of Janet Soskice, Metaphors and Religious Language (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 15.

26. See further appendix 3, “Flora and Fauna Metaphors in Hosea,” and the excursus below on “Similes and Metaphors for Political Actions in Hosea 4–14.”
Literary Features and Composition

Metaphor is considered not so much as a way in which people speak, but rather as a way in which people think. We use metaphors in our language because, to a large extent, we think metaphorically. The essence of metaphor, according to cognitive linguistics, is that we make use of our knowledge of one conceptual domain (the source) in order to gain new understanding of a second, non-related domain (the target).

Hosea, for certain, does not simply employ metaphors as clever literary devices, but thinks metaphorically, making connections between phenomena in order to instruct an audience. Some of his conceptual comparisons he may have inherited; others undoubtedly were the product of his fertile mind and more particularly his search for coherence in his historical context. For him both nature and history were not impersonal autonomous spheres but revelatory of God. In one sense divine activity was the great tenor (target domain) to which Hosea employed a variety of vehicles (source domain) for explanation. Elsewhere I propose that a root metaphor (a model that holds together a variety of images) for the prophet Hosea is that of God as head of his household.

While the household metaphor certainly does not undergird the significance of every other metaphor used for YHWH or Israel in the book, it assists us, the readers, to see coherence in such different metaphors for YHWH as husband, father, shepherd, farmer, and king. Rather than thinking of these as disparate means of portrayal, they are rooted in the source domains of family and property. Various ways of portraying Israel as YHWH’s spouse, child, land, inheritance, and animals are similarly rooted in this encompassing metaphor.

Excursus: Similes and Metaphors for Political Actions in Hosea 4–14

In Hosea’s poetic descriptions of Israel, Ephraim, and Judah’s failures, one often cannot easily distinguish between indications of political actions (e.g., a coronation, a coup, international diplomacy) and those related to the cult (e.g., sacrifice, polytheism, veneration of images). Charges of rejecting or rebelling against YHWH fit either sphere of activity. This difficulty is true particularly of Hos. 1–3, the first major subsection of the book, where the root metaphor is that of YHWH’s household, symbolized in Gomer and the children, and the primary imagery is that of harlotry and future reconciliation. Most interpreters (rightly) have seen the imagery primarily in covenantal terms, where Israel’s polytheism is rejected, but there may be political overtones as well to Gomer’s lovers.

27. Pierre van Hecke, “Conceptual Blending: A Recent Approach to Metaphor. Illustrated with the Pastoral Metaphor in Hos 4,16,” in Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, pp. 218-19. The “source domain” is essentially the vehicle and the “target domain” is the tenor.

28. See below, IV.B, “Hosea’s Theology: Israel Is YHWH’s Household.”
In chs. 4–14, the second major section of the book, the root metaphor of Israel as YHWH’s household is still at work, but the actions of Israel are variously depicted with sharp and cutting comparisons. Some of these continue the concern of covenantal faithlessness defined primarily as polytheism, syncretism, and idolatry. Nevertheless, as the following list demonstrates, there are a number of poetic analogies for Israel and Ephraim in the realm of politics and international relations. For the most part they are allusive and elusive. They do not, for example, come with the names of any foreign rulers. Both Assyria and Egypt are mentioned repeatedly in the book, and Israel’s entanglements with them are lampooned in multiple ways. The tenor (target domain) is the folly of Israel in its political search for security. The vehicles (source domains) are drawn from a variety of fields.

Political imagery appears more frequent in chs. 7–8 than elsewhere in the book. The two chapters, whatever the prehistory of individual units within them, now employ satire and scorn repetitively to portray Israel’s dangerous engagement in political intrigue and international affairs. It is unlikely, therefore, that we should read Hos. 4–14 as a sequential presentation of Israel’s history, but more as a thematic collection of prophecies and poetic portrayals drawn from Hosea’s efforts.

4:3 “mourning land”
5:1 “snare and net”
5:3-4; 6:10; 9:1 (?) “harlotry”
5:7 “giving birth to strange children”
5:13 “sickness and wound”
6:4 “dissipating morning dew”
6:9 “marauding bandits”
7:1 “bandits and thieves”
7:4-6 “adulterers, like a heated oven”
7:8 “mixed among the nations, yet a half-baked cake”
7:11 “silly dove, without sense”
7:16 “deceitful bow”
8:7 “sowing wind and reaping a storm”
8:8a “swallowed up” (cf. 8:7b)
8:8b “[a broken] vessel no one wants”
8:9 “solitary wild donkey”
8:10b “burden”
9:1 “hiring lovers”

29. This section also has the language of lovers, harlotry, and adultery used in chs. 1–3, and on occasion this terminology is applied to political moves undertaken by Israel or within the state’s leadership (cf. 8:9).

30. One probable exception is the reference to Shalman in 10:14.

31. The strange children may stand for the results of ill-conceived state actions in the political realm or for the failures of the priesthood.

32. This could refer either to a slack bow incapable of drawing an arrow or to a bent bow that might snap and injure the archer.

33. The term applies to the press or the subservience of vassalage.
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10:4 “justice sprouts like poisonous plants in a field”
10:7 “a stick floating on water”
12:1 “shepherding the wind and pursuing the east wind”
12:7 “an oppressive merchant”
13:13 “an ill-timed birth”

Wordplays are similar to, and can be a part of, metaphorical expression. And as with metaphors, we should not think of wordplay as merely a literary or rhetorical device, but as a conceptual mnemonic device. Just as a metaphor speaks of one thing in terms suggestive of another, Hosea’s wordplays speak of one thing in terms of a suggested other that to his mind has a linguistic point of contact. Thus the unflattering depiction of Ephraim (‘eprayim) as a “wild ass” (pêre’) in 8:9 has the mnemonic value of connecting similarly spelled terms from different semantic fields. A number of his wordplays evoke popular etymologies and even etiologies, some of which are employed elsewhere in the OT. For example, he indicates in 12:3 (MT 4) that Jacob supplanted (‘aqab) his brother in the womb and in his maturity he strove (sârâ) with God. The first verb is a pun on the name Jacob (ya‘âqîb), and the second verb is a pun on the name Israel (yišrâ‘êl). Both wordplays are known from the book of Genesis (25:26; 27:35; 32:28 [MT 29]). Not only do these wordplays evoke elements about ancestral lore, they are intended also as comparisons to the Jacob/Israel of Hosea’s day.

I treat the allusions to historical tradition, including stories of prenational ancestors, more fully below. There are clear references to the ancestors Jacob and Esau, and to the people Israel in Egypt and the wilderness. There are also references to prior national history in the land of promise, some of which likely go back to the period of the judges and the rise of the monarchy. These are more difficult to pin down, however, given their allusiveness. We might think of some of these things as analogous to later haggadah and in service to a narrative-based typology. By “typology” I mean a perceived correspondence between events and persons in different eras. The past is employed to understand the significance of the present and the future. So, for example, the rehearsal of the ancestor Jacob’s life in ch. 12 exposes current Israel’s precarious position before YHWH unless repentance and transformation take place. Regarding the future, the new mar-

34. Morris, Prophecy, Poetry, and Hosea, pp. 147-51, offers a substantial list of perceived wordplays in Hosea.
35. See below, IV.A, “Hosea’s Theology: Narrative and Community Identity.”
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riage between YHWH and Israel in Hos. 2:14-20 (MT 16-22) is predicated on the prior election of Israel in the wilderness (2:14 [MT 16]; 9:10a; 12:9 [MT 10]; 13:4-5). Most of Hosea’s allusions to the past, when used to identify or reveal something about the present, are rooted in historical tradition and have a narrative context. As a poet, Hosea has points in common with other poetic renderings of historical tradition, notably Ps. 106 and Deut. 32.

The issue at hand is the significance of this phenomenon in introducing the book. We might phrase the issue differently by asking what the appeal to the past has in common with metaphor and wordplay, since these three phenomena are major characteristics of the unique text that makes up the book. The suggested answer is twofold. All three items have a point of comparison as a focal point. Elements from historical tradition are brought forth as means to interpret the present and project a future. And in complementary fashion, all three have explanatory potential, in that the focal point potentially brings to light new or different ways to grasp the matter under scrutiny. A wild ass (8:9) or grapes in a wilderness (9:10) offer new foci for thinking about Israel, as does the predator lion (5:14) or evergreen tree (14:8 [MT 9]) for YHWH.

In the case of Hosea, the book offers to readers various ways to identify and to explain why Israel fell to the Assyrians. One can say that Israel sinned and YHWH judged, which is true as far as it goes, but the instructive power comes from the imaginative portrayal of the major figures, YHWH and Israel. Hence the potential power of metaphor, wordplay, and historical typology as means of rendering Hosea’s perceptions. Furthermore, the future is not determined simply by the past national failure. It lies open to be a recreation of another past, that of covenant and intimate communion, indeed the surpassing of that former era as only a new creation can offer. Such matters can be perceived in faith and only glimpsed from afar, and a prosaic recounting of them is seldom persuasive.

The poetry in Hosea has a number of characteristic poetic line forms.

37. Dwight R. Daniels, Hosea and Salvation History (BZAW 191; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), notes that “historical tradition is the lens through which Hosea perceives God and Israel” (p. 130), but hesitates to use the term “typology.” I do not mind the general nature of the term, for it is not intended to define a particular method of citing and applying traditional materials as much as a way of perceiving connections that are rooted in historical tradition and are narrative-based. Indeed, it is a way of thinking theologically.

38. See appendix 5, “Psalm 106 and Hosea”; and appendix 2, “Song of Moses and Hosea.”

Both bicola and tricola are found. An example of the former is 13:12, a classic synonymous parallelism:

Clause/colon A: The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up;
Clause/colon B: his sin is stored up.

The parallelism employs a noun word pair and a verb word pair in which each term of the pair reinforces the other as a synonym.

Verses may comprise two bicola or more. An example is 5:14,40 with two of them:

(A) For I am like a lion to Ephraim, (B) and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
(A') Indeed, I myself will tear and depart, (B') bear away and there will be no deliverer.

The colon in each line reinforces the other. Verse 14 also contains the simile of YHWH as a lion. The tenor is divine judgment that neither Ephraim nor Judah can escape. The vehicle is the lion that overpowers its prey and kills it.

Among the tricola poetic forms, 8:8 is typical (see also 8:9; 9:3):

(A) Israel is swallowed up; (B) now they are among the nations, (C) like a vessel no one desires.

One also encounters the pattern of two bicola + one. An example is 2:19-20 (MT 21-22), spread over two verses and keyed to the repetition of the verb `iras, “to take in marriage”:

(A) I will take you in marriage for myself forever; (B) I will take you in marriage for myself by means of righteousness and justice, (C) and by means of devoted loyalty and compassion;
(A') And I will take you in marriage by giving faithfulness, (B’) and you will know YHWH.

An uncommon form is a verse with two tricola, as in 9:6:

(A) For behold, they will go from destruction; (B) Egypt will gather them, (C) Memphis will bury them.
(A’) Their precious silver? (B’) Thistles will possess them, (C’) briars will be in their tents.

40. Some other examples are in 4:16; 5:3, 8; 9:10.
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Of course, much of the prophetic speech in Hosea is composed of mixed poetic forms and includes elements of prose. Hosea thus gives classic form analysis a headache on this account and also because of the relative lack of introductory and concluding formulas. In this regard Hosea is markedly different from the book of Amos, a prophetic contemporary. When one adds frequent shifts of subject, then both the identification of literary units and potential connections between them are made more difficult. These matters, particularly the compressed style and frequent shifts of subject, prompted Jerome’s understated comment centuries ago: “Hosea is concise and speaks as it were in detached sayings.”

It is possible that the emphasis on prophecy as oral speech is generally correct, but somewhat misleading with regard to Hosea. Instead of a collection of brief, originally oral presentations, Hosea may contain somewhat longer literary pieces. Units the size of modern chapters (or more) are possible. In one sense this would be the opposite of Jerome’s surmise. In any case, the frequent shift of person in Hosea’s text may be difficult to follow for modern or ancient readers, but it is not a sign of incoherence or the haphazard splicing together of small units of speech.

B. WRITTEN COMPOSITION AND OUTLINE

Hosea’s 197 verses in 14 chapters are a medieval arrangement of a text handed down for centuries. But its formation as a literary work shows signs of editing from earlier times. It has a superscription (1:1) introducing Hosea and his context, and an epilogue or conclusion (14:9 [MT 10]) urging discernment in the reading of the book. Between these two points it has two major sections, chs. 1–3 and 4–14, with the latter section in two collections or large panels (4:1–11:11; 11:12–14:8 [MT 12:1–14:9]). The first three chapters are primarily concerned with Hosea’s marriage and family as the metaphorical means to understand the relationship between YHWH and Israel. Chapters 4–14 are made up of prophetic speeches addressed to Israel and Ju-

41. See the complicated survey of options from a form-critical perspective in Ehud Ben Zvi, Hosea (FOTL XXIA/1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). A basic study of speech units and their editorial linking is that of Martin J. Buss, The Prophetic Word of Hosea: A Morphological Study (BZAW 111; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1969). The study by Gisin, Hosea, concentrates on catchwords and linking phrases.
42. PL 28:1015.
dah. In the proposed outline of the book, these chapters will be subdivided into the two panels noted above.

Hosea 1–3 is not an original literary unity, but it is now composed in such a way as to invite its reading as a whole. There is a long history of interpretation concentrating on these three chapters, which is the subject of an extended introduction in the commentary section. There is third-person reporting in 1:2-9, 10-11, paralleled with first-person speaking in 2:1-23 (MT 3-25); 3:1-5. The speaker in chs. 2–3 alternates between Hosea and YHWH. Hosea 1–3 can be outlined briefly as follows:

I. Superscription 1:1
II. Hosea’s Family 1:2–3:5
   A. Marriage, Children, and Judgment on Israel 1:2-9
   B. Reversal of the Judgment and Restoration of Israel and Judah 1:10–2:1 (MT 2:1-3)
   C. Charge against the Mother as a Sign of the Case against Israel 2:2-13 (MT 4-15)
   D. Reversal of the Judgment against Israel and Its Transformation 2:14-23 (MT 16-25)
   E. Love Her Again as a Sign that YHWH Loves Israel and Judah 3:1-5

The outline of the first section above shows that a linear presentation of events in Hosea’s marriage and family (the vehicle or source domain) is not provided. It is the same case in presenting the relationship between YHWH and Israel (the tenor or target domain). Instead, the presentation alternates between judgment and renewal. This sets a pattern that is discernible also in chs. 4–14, where the two panels proposed have both judgment and renewal themes.

The remaining parts of the book may be outlined as follows:

III. God and His People 4:1–11:11
   A. YHWH’s Case against the People 4:1-3
   B. “Spirit of Harlotry” 4:4–5:7
      1. Priesthood and People 4:4-19
      2. Government and People 5:1-7
   C. Alarm over Israel and Judah 5:8–7:7
      1. A Lion against Ephraim and Judah 5:8-15
      2. Failed Repentance and Failed Relationships 6:1-11a
      4. All Adulterers and the Kings Have Fallen 7:3-7
   D. Israel Is Mixed and Swallowed Up among the Nations 7:8–9:9
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1. Calling Egypt and Assyria 7:8-16
2. Broken Covenant and Shattered Calf 8:1-6
3. Calling Egypt and Assyria 8:7-14
4. Days of Punishment Have Come 9:1-9
   1. Grapes in the Wilderness to No Fruit 9:10-17
   2. Luxuriant Vine to Thorn and Thistle 10:1-10
   3. From Trained Heifer to Fruit of Lies 10:11-15
F. A Prodigal Son Returns Home 11:1-11
IV. God and His People 11:12–14:8 (MT 12:1–14:9)
   A. YHWH’s Case Continued 11:12–12:14 (MT 12:1-15)
   B. Death Befits Them 13:1-16 (MT 14:1)
   C. Israel’s Repentance and YHWH’s Healing Power 14:1-8 (MT 2-9)
V. This Is Wisdom: YHWH’s Ways Are Right 14:9 (MT 10)

A theme for chs. 4–14 comes in the “case” (-animation) announced by YHWH against Israel in 4:1-3. Most of what then follows in 4:4–11:11 is but a variation on the theme of Israel and Judah’s culpability and coming judgment. Again, the theme is not developed in chronological or linear fashion, but the poetry circles around the fundamental point and presents it from various angles. In 11:8-9, however, YHWH declares himself moved by compassion and committed to the continuing existence of Israel, his beloved son (11:1). A depiction of scattered Israelites coming back to the promised land follows (11:10-11). Thus a major section of prophecies devoted to uncovering transgressions concludes with restoration and forgiveness.

Culpability and judgment, however, return again in 11:12 (MT 12:1)–13:16. The comparison with Jacob in ch. 12 has elements of judgment and possible change for Israel, with the harshest language against the people reserved for ch. 13. In ch. 14, by contrast, it is the possibility of Israel’s repentance and the declaration of YHWH’s healing restorative power that take center stage. Thus chs. 4–14 provide a recapitulation of the theme of sin-judgment-renewal presented in chs. 1–3. One can see this recapitulation in the ways that the three major sections (II-IV) begin and end.

II. Hosea’s Family 1:2–3:5

1:2 Go, take for yourself a wife of harlotry, and (have) children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry against YHWH.

3:5 Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek YHWH their God and David their king, and they will be in awe before YHWH and his goodness in the latter days.
III. God and His People 4:1–11:11

4:1 YHWH has a case against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness, no loving-kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land.

11:11 They will come trembling like a sparrow from Egypt and like a dove from Assyria, and I will settle them in their homes, says YHWH.

IV. God and His People 11:12–14:8 (MT 12:1–14:9)

11:12 (MT 12:1) Ephraim surrounds me with deception; the house of Israel (surrounds me) with deceit.

14:8b (MT 9b) I am like a luxuriant cypress. From me comes your fruit.

Even with the widespread recognition that the book has two (or three) major sections of material, interpreters still vary widely in their sense of the relationship of the various literary units in chs. 4–14. As noted above, the book has a low percentage of introductory and concluding formulas (e.g., “Hear this word” or “says YHWH”) by which to gauge the beginning and end of literary units. Change of subject and speaker, which occurs frequently in the book, is an inconsistent marker for determining the extent of a literary unit. Such changes may or may not indicate the beginning of new units or topics.

The references to Judah in the book are largely obscured in this outline, but as noted earlier, they play an important role in the question of the book’s editorial history in reaching its final form. The references are as follows: ten references to “Judah” (1:1; 4:15; 5:5, 13; 6:4, 11; 8:14; 10:11; 11:12 [MT 12:1]; 12:2 [MT 3]), three to the “house of Judah” (1:7; 5:12, 14), and one to the “descendants of (bêne) [or people of] Judah” (1:11 [MT 2:2]). We may set aside the reference in the superscription, for the whole verse is an editorial introduction. Of the remaining references, the following are possibly or likely editorial: 1:7; 4:15; 5:5; 6:11; 8:14; 10:11; 11:12 (MT 12:1). “Editorial” can mean several things. Hosea himself may have updated his own material in the task of preparing it for written preservation or in light of changing contexts. Second, when the Hosea materials were taken to Judah in the aftermath of the fall of Samaria, then additional editorial work likely resulted in an early form of the book. What, however, if an early collection made its way to Judah before the fall of Samaria? There is nothing implausible about Hosean materials being transmitted to Judah in the aftermath of Tiglath-pileser III’s campaign in the region in 733-732, which resulted in both destruction and dislocation of people in Israel. Third, it is also possible
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that such updating of the Hosean materials is the work of reformist circles during the time of Josiah and Jeremiah. Just as Jeremiah himself was decisively influenced by the Hosean materials, so their updating for presentation in Judah may have continued into the exilic period.

Three of the references to Judah are positive (1:7; 1:11 [MT 2:2]; 11:12 [MT 12:1]). That they are positive is no reason in and of itself to see them as editorial, although each has been defined as such by some interpreters. If 1:7 and 11:12 are additions to Hosea’s material, as is possible, then that should be determined primarily on the basis of literary and semantic criteria rather than geography and political affiliation.

The same approach should be taken with respect to the “positive” elements in the book of Hosea. There is a long tradition in the historical analysis of Israelite prophecy that some or all of the restoration passages in the preexilic prophets are to be dated as exilic or later. Fortunately, current interpreters are less likely to make such sweeping judgments for some or all of three reasons. One is that more emphasis is put on literary analysis, recognizing that poetic qualities make precise historical analysis difficult and that the book is first a literary document and secondarily a historical artifact. A second is a related concern to deal with texts in their final form and to spend less time reconstructing their earlier hypothetical forms. A third, also related, is reticence to make sweeping historical judgments. This matter can be the loss of confidence in historical judgments due to excesses in the past or to the (increasingly postmodern) conviction that historical analysis is a form of ideological control.

There is no reason to deny to Hosea the view that God can both judge and transform his people. Such is, after all, the witness of the book. If editors can produce a scroll with texts of judgment and a projected future transformation, then why should Hosea be denied that same outlook? It may be, for example, that as a northerner Hosea would not refer positively to a future Davidic ruler (3:5), but we must be aware of controlling presuppositions about what he could or could not have envisioned in a future that only


45. The commentary by F. Landy, Hosea (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), is an example of a “sequential” reading of the Hebrew text, without extended speculation on the history behind it.

46. See the excursus on “David Their King” at 3:5.
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YHWH can bring to pass. Certainly, there is no compelling reason to deny him the hope for a reunion of Israel and Judah under one head, as expressed in 1:11 (MT 2:2).

Nevertheless, we should not draw lines in the sand with respect to affirming the work of the prophet Hosea and then dismissing or denigrating the work of editors in the collecting and composing of the book. The text is a gift. If one can affirm that God worked through Hosea, son of Beeri, then one can give that same affirmation to editors of his work, whatever their role.

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The superscription to the book of Hosea names four kings of Judah and one of Israel in whose days the prophet carried out his work. The total years of reign for the kings of Judah span most of the 8th century B.C. Jeroboam II, the one king of Israel named in the superscription, reigned through much of the first half of the 8th century. Internal clues to the book put the vast majority of the prophecies in the mid-8th century, ca. 760-720 B.C., with Israel, not Judah, as the primary audience addressed by Hosea.

During the first half of the 8th century Israel enjoyed something of a respite after decades of off-and-on struggles with Assyria and the Arameans of Damascus. Both the Assyrians and the Arameans were primarily involved in their own internal matters, so that under Jeroboam II Israel managed to expand its own holdings for a brief period of time (2 Kgs. 14:25-28), although the details remain obscure. Efforts to expand from both Assyria and Damascus, however, soon resurfaced during Hosea’s day.

Long-reigning monarchs in both Israel and Judah provided stability during the time of respite. Jeroboam II ruled 41 years (2 Kgs. 14:23) in Israel, and Uzziah (Azariah) reigned 52 years (2 Kgs. 15:2). In Uzziah’s case


48. Chronological reconstructions of the divided monarchy in the second half of the 8th century inevitably vary among scholars. The dates included in what follows are
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his years of reign likely included a period when he was coregent with his father Amaziah (ca. 787-776), and certainly included a time when he was ill and his son Jotham ruled in his stead as coregent (2 Kgs. 15:5; ca. 750-735). Jeroboam II reigned in Israel from ca. 793/791 to 752/750. He was the third ruler in succession after Jehu, who founded a dynasty in 842/841 through assassination of the last Omride ruler, and who soon after paid tribute to the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III. The situation in Israel changed radically, however, with the death of Jeroboam II. He was succeeded by his son Zechariah (2 Kgs. 15:8-10; cf. 10:30), who six months later was assassinated by one Shallum son of Jabesh, who then took over the government in Samaria.49 The prophecy against the “house of Jehu” and the “kingdom of the house of Israel” in Hos. 1:4 reflects these events. One month later, Shallum himself was dispatched by Menahem son of Gadi (2 Kgs. 15:14-17), who ruled for ten years. Are these changes in rulers the context for the statement, “they made kings, but not through me” (Hos. 8:4)?50

In 745 Tiglath-pileser III ascended the throne in Assyria and rapidly began the process of restoring authority to the central government and engaging in territorial expansion. He turned his attention to north Syria in the first years of his reign, finally reducing the heavily fortified city of Arpad. This was a wake-up call to states in the eastern Mediterranean littoral and Egypt. A second came with the taking of Kullani, biblical Calno/Calneh, in 738.51 At some point between 743 and his death, Menahem paid tribute to

largely those of Kenneth Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 26-32, but it should be emphasized that they are approximate and that no reconstruction is certain due to the difficulties inherent in the data.

Apart from the superscription, the prophecy of Hosea preserves only one named reference to an Israelite king (Jehu in 1:4) and no dates at all. For the purposes of interpreting the prophecy, therefore, precise chronological reconstruction is not usually required. In the summary that follows there are some indications of different options regarding the dating of political events or reigns of monarchs where they may play into the interpretation of Hosea, but not full discussions of chronological options. 49. Jabesh is possibly a personal name, but it may also refer to the city Jabesh, as in Jabesh-gilead. If the latter, it is another example of the role of Gilead in the affairs of Israel. An army officer named Pekah assassinated Pekahiah in Samaria with the assistance of fifty men from Gilead (2 Kgs. 15:25).

50. Cf. Hos. 7:3-7; 13:9-11. These texts may also reflect one of the later times of dynastic difficulties in Israel such as the murders of Pekahiah and Pekah.

51. Cf. Amos 6:2. An enigmatic figure from this period, Azriyau of Yaudi, who was a ringleader in the opposition to Tiglath-pileser III in Syria, has been identified by some with Azariah/Uzziah of Judah. See the discussion in Tadmor, Inscriptions, pp. 273-74, who is cautiously inclined to identify the two. If the figure is the king of Judah, which is not certain (as Tadmor acknowledges), then this would be the first recorded tribute extracted from Judah. Otherwise, the first recorded is that of Ahaz in 734/733.
Tiglath-pileser III at least once and likely more than that. His tribute paying has multiple attestations. During a campaign against the Medes in 737 Tiglath-pileser III had a stele erected describing his imposition of tribute on a list of rulers. Menahem is on that list. 52 For various reasons interpreters have concluded that the list of tribute bearers contains parts of an older list and is not the result solely of the campaign against the Medes. Menahem is named also in a tribute list contained in the Assyrian king’s annals (738?). 53 In 2 Kgs. 15:19-20 Pul (i.e., Tiglath-pileser III) receives a thousand talents of silver from Menahem in order to “strengthen Menahem’s hold” on the kingdom of Israel. One way to read this last text is that Tiglath-pileser III actually moved against Israel with an army, but no record survives of that effort, and the text may mean nothing more than a threatening gesture or ominous signal from the Assyrian side. It is not clear either whether this biblical account reflects another payment from Menahem in addition to that noted in Assyrian sources.

Menahem intended to found a dynasty, and at his death he was succeeded by his son Pekahiah (2 Kgs. 15:22-26). Since Menahem was bound by oath and tribute to Tiglath-pileser III, this transition no doubt came with Assyrian approval. Pekahiah reigned two years only and was assassinated by an army officer of a similar name, Pekah, who was accompanied by fifty men from Gilead. There may have been additional factors at work in this act beside ambition and aggression on Pekah’s part. He may have been anti-Assyrian in his outlook. The compiler(s) of the narrative gives Pekah twenty years of reign (15:27), an impossibly long time given the years assigned to other Israelite rulers and the synchronisms of their rule with those known in Egypt and Assyria. A common suggestion is that Pekah had a base of support in Gilead and that the length of his reign includes time when he “ruled” in Gilead as well. If so, Pekah may have been the leader of a regional faction not fully integrated with or loyal to the ruling house in Samaria. Moreover, the proximity of Gilead to Aramean influence is one way to account for Pekah’s later alliance with Rezin of Damascus (see below). Did Pekah think of himself as ruling Israel from Gilead, while Menahem and Pekahiah ruled

52. L. D. Levine, Two Neo-Assyrian Stelae from Iran (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1972); Tadmor, Inscriptions, Stele III A5. Rezin of Damascus and Ithobaal of Tyre are also on the list. See the discussion below on the possibility of collusion on the part of Damascus, Israel, and Tyre.

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over Ephraim? The curious bifurcation between Israel and Ephraim in Hos. 5:5 could reflect such a state of affairs.

At some point after consolidating his power Pekah emerges in the biblical text in an alliance with Rezin, the ruler of Damascus. Several motives may have been at work in the alliance, but as noted above, opposition to Assyrian control was likely one of them. Pekah may have been a ringleader for anti-Assyrian factions in Israel even before his seizure of the throne in Samaria. Various clues, however, suggest that Rezin was the instigator and leading partner in the alliance between the ruling houses of Damascus and Israel. Meanwhile, the sickly Uzziah finally died in Judah and his son and long-time coregent Joatham became king. His sole rule was short-lived. The sixteen years accorded him in 2 Kgs. 15:33 almost certainly includes his time as coregent (from ca. 751/750 B.C.). During his reign, perhaps in 736, Rezin and Pekah began encroaching against Judah (15:37). At Joatham’s death he was succeeded by his son Ahaz.

A variety of texts (2 Kgs. 16:5-9; Isa. 7:1-9; 2 Chr. 28:1-21) narrate a move by Rezin and Pekah against Ahaz and Jerusalem, likely soon after Ahaz’s accession to the throne (735/734). This move is known as the Syro-Ephraimite or Israelite-Aramean War. It is almost certainly reflected in various Hosean prophecies, but their allusiveness makes identifying specific references to the struggle mostly guesswork. Isaiah records the consternation evoked in Jerusalem and among the house of David by the aggressive alliance. The Chronicler reports quite a battle and the seizure of prisoners from Judah (2 Chr. 28:5-16). One goal of the two aggressors was to replace Ahaz

54. Assyrian references to Menahem describe him as from either the “city” (URU; Annals 13*:10 and 27:2) or the “land” (KUR; Stele III A 5) of Samaria, whereas other Israelite rulers are described as “Israelite” or “from the house [or land] of Omri.” This may be nothing more than variation in terminology. It could reflect, however, recognition that Menahem and his son ruled over a more limited area and that Pekah in Gilead and Rezin from Damascus controlled territory that had been previously part of Israel. See further Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, pp. 34-35; Stuart A. Irvine, “The Southern Border of Syria Reconstructed,” CBQ 56 (1994) 21-41; Nadav Na’aman, “Rezin of Damascus and the Land of Gilead,” ZDPV 111 (1995) 107-8.

55. See Stuart A. Irvine, Isaiah, Ahaz, and the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis (SBLDS 123; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), who proposes that Rezin attempted to build an anti-Assyrian coalition to help create a greater Syria like that of his predecessor Hazael. Hiram of Tyre (successor to Itobaal) played a role in the coalition.

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with a certain son of Tabeel (Isa. 7:6). Perhaps the mysterious figure is a Tyrian prince and son of the Itobaal who paid tribute along with Menahem and Rezin to Tiglath-pileser III a few years earlier. The narrative in 2 Kgs. 16 has Ahaz appealing to Tiglath-pileser III with tribute, whereupon Tiglath-pileser III moves on Damascus and kills Rezin. The Assyrian texts do not provide any clarity in the timing of the campaigns vis-à-vis Ahaz’s bribe.

The texts do preserve a series of campaigns in the years 734-732 that bring the Assyrian army into Phoenicia, Philistia (Gaza), and against Damascus. When these events are joined with the report in 2 Kgs. 15:29 that Tiglath-pileser III captured several Israelite cities during Pekah’s reign and took captives back to Assyria, a broader context for the Syro-Ephraimite War emerges. Rezin and Pekah (and their Tyrian supporters) sought to expand their influence in the region and to maintain control of international trade and the route to Egyptian markets. Perhaps the ruler of Gaza or certain other Philistine rulers were involved, or even Egypt itself. Some have speculated that Rezin and Pekah wanted to force Ahaz and Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. In any case, the consequences for Israel and for Damascus were devastating. Destruction levels at major Israelite cities such as Dan, Hazor, and Megiddo are mute but effective testimony to the Assyrian ravages and rebuilding programs. While Samaria itself was spared, Damascus apparently received more severe treatment.

By 732/731 Samaria was left as a rump state with much reduced territory and severe tribute owed to Assyria. Nothing is said in the Assyrian Annals, however, about either a capture or submission of Pekah. He apparently maintained his anti-Assyrian posture until the bitter end. Given the success of the Assyrian regional campaigns, Pekah fell victim to a conspiracy and was assassinated by Hoshea the son of Elah (2 Kgs. 15:30). A plausible date for this is 732/731. According to Tiglath-pileser III, he confirmed Hoshea on the throne, thereby making Israel a vassal. Jerusalem and the house of Da-

57. See further J. Andrew Dearman, “The Son of Tabeel (Isaiah 7:6),” in Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker, ed. S. B. Reid (JSOTSup 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 33-47. Another possibility is that the son of Tabeel is from Transjordan and perhaps even related to Tobiah the Ammonite (in Ezra-Nehemiah) and the later Tobiads.

58. One reference notes that Hiram of Tyre and Rezin of Damascus are involved together in some form of collusion (Tadmor, Inscriptions, Summary 9:r.5). It is possible that the Philistines were also involved; see C. S. Ehrlich, “Coalition Politics in Eighth Century B.C.E. Palestine: The Philistines and the Syro-Ephraimite War,” ZDPV 107 (1991) 48-58.

59. The territories listed in Isa. 9:1 (MT 8:23) probably reflect the onslaught of the Assyrians at this time.


vid were spared as a result of Ahaz’s submission to the Neo-Assyrian overlord. Thus, as a result of the Assyrian western campaigns, both Israel and Judah were subjugated.

Tiglath-pileser III died in 727 and was succeeded by Shalmaneser V. Very little survives about the latter ruler, who died in 722. Challenges to Shalmaneser’s rule were inevitable in the aftermath of Tiglath-pileser III’s death. At some point (726-724) Hoshea declined to send tribute to Shalmaneser and sent an appeal for aid to “So, king of Egypt” (2 Kgs. 17:4). The syntax of the text and the name So have caused no little discussion. “So” is either an abbreviation for Osorkon IV or a garbled reference to the western Egyptian city of Sais, where for a time the Egyptian government had its seat. At least the appeal to Egypt is clear. According to the brief account in 2 Kgs. 17:4-6, Shalmaneser responded by moving against Samaria. Hoshea was arrested or captured, Samaria was besieged for three years, and the city fell in the ninth year of his reign (722). There is no confirmation of the three-year siege in surviving Assyrian records, but arguments from silence are no reason to doubt a siege of the city and its subsequent fall. Since Sargon II, Shalmaneser’s successor, claims to have subdued Samaria, discussion remains over the details of Samaria’s final collapse.

From the terse biblical account, it is possible to work out a plausible sequence of events in the nine years attributed to Hoshea, but a number of matters are left open by the nature of the sources. This is particularly true regarding the relationship between Samaria and Assyria during the end of Tiglath-pileser III’s reign and the early part of Shalmaneser’s. For example, J. H. Hayes and J. K. Kuan have proposed that Samaria was part of a regional revolt during Tiglath-pileser III’s seventeenth year (728), and this was when Hoshea first withheld tribute to Assyria. A campaign to restore control was


63. For Sargon’s inscriptions and his claims regarding Samaria, see the translations of K. Lawson Younger Jr., *COS* 2:293-98.

underway when Tiglath-pileser III died and was succeeded by Shalmaneser. The report in 2 Kgs. 17:3 that Hoshea paid tribute to Shalmaneser is then placed in Shalmaneser’s accession year (726). Hoshea’s embassy to Egypt (17:4) came in the next year. Shalmaneser’s response was to come up against Samaria again, remove Hoshea, and begin the process of making the rump state a province of Assyria. Samaria, however, refused to acquiesce and instead appointed an Israelite government. Shalmaneser was then forced to return and lay siege to Samaria. This would be a third military move against Samaria by Shalmaneser. While it is possible that Shalmaneser attacked Samaria as early as 726, or that an unnamed Israelite king followed Hoshea, both depend upon an uncertain reconstruction of the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle and obscure references in Hosea.

As noted above, there is also difficulty in sorting out the chain of events surrounding the death of Shalmaneser and the fall of Samaria. One can argue on the basis of the biblical text that Samaria fell to Shalmaneser, and on the basis of his annals that the city fell to Sargon II. Indeed, one can argue that both claims are rooted in fact. The most straightforward interpretation of the biblical text is that Samaria surrendered to Shalmaneser. The report in 2 Kgs. 17:6 says that “the king of Assyria” took the city, but the only king mentioned in the context is Shalmaneser (17:3; Sargon is not named in 2 Kings). Nothing precludes the siege having lasted two years or more and, from the Assyrian viewpoint, having come to a satisfactory conclusion before Shalmaneser died in 722. In his annals Sargon claims that he engaged Samaria militarily and sent 27,000 people into exile. The question is when. Was it directly on the heels of his predecessor, so that in essence Sargon claims what was really the work of Shalmaneser, or was there a gap in time and another submission of Samaria, this time to Sargon? One can make a reasonable case that Sargon took action against Samaria in 720/719, his second regnal year, when Hamath fomented rebellion in the area and Egypt abetted it. Sargon claims to have defeated them all. Thus ended the political state of Israel over two hundred years after its birth in reaction against oppressive policies of Solomon and

65. Hayes and Kuan, “Final Years,” 167-68, suggest that the charge in Hos. 8:4, “they made a king, but not through me,” is the prophet’s assessment of the appointment of an Israelite king (unnamed in any surviving source) after the removal of Hoshea.

66. M. Christine Tetley, “The Date of Samaria’s Fall as a Reason for Rejecting the Hypothesis of Two Conquests,” *CBQ* 64 (2002) 59-77, proposes that there was indeed a three-year conquest of Samaria, but that it was accomplished by Sargon II from 720 to 718. She accepts the claim that Samaria fell in the 9th year of Hoshea (2 Kgs. 17:6), but believes that Hoshea was not appointed king by Tiglath-pileser III until 728/727. Her conclusions have (rightly) been questioned by B. Kelle, “Hoshea, Sargon, and the Final Destruction of Samaria: A Response to M. Christine Tetley with a View Toward Method,” *SJOT* 17 (2003) 226-43.
Rehoboam. Its separatist beginnings were affirmed by prophetic word (1 Kgs. 11:29-39) and its demise was accounted for by prophetic word.

As a result of the Assyrian attacks on Israel and Samaria, the population in and around Jerusalem increased markedly as people fled the conflicts. The area between Shechem and Bethel was apparently the most affected by population shifts. With the displaced people moving south came also those who brought the traditions of Hosea’s prophetic ministry, perhaps including some from Hosea’s own circle of support. The book in its penultimate and then final form was created and preserved in Judah. Although there is no reason to doubt that the prophet included words about Judah in his prophetic work, it is also likely that the edited version of the book in Judah received some updates. A clear example is the superscription to the work, with its four kings of Judah that includes Hezekiah, the ruler whose reign lasted at least until the turn of the century.

Hezekiah was a reforming monarch and one who made overtures to the northern population (2 Kgs. 18:3-8; 2 Chr. 29–31). As noted in the discussion of the book’s composition, the reign of Hezekiah would be a plausible setting for putting the book in essentially its present form.

In outline form, a sketch of the events is as follows:

750-749 Death of Jeroboam II
749 Assassination of Zechariah, son of Jeroboam II, six months later by Shallum
749/748 Assassination of Shallum by Menahem one month later
748-738 Reign of Menahem in Israel
745 Accession to the throne in Assyria by Tiglath-pileser III (also called Pul[u])
743-738 Tribute(s) paid by Menahem to Tiglath-pileser III
738-736 Reign of Pekahiah
736-735 Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel put pressure on Judah under Jotham


69. The chronology of Hezekiah’s reign is very complicated. See the discussion in the commentary on Hos. 1:1. It is possible that Hezekiah was appointed vice-regent under Ahaz in 728/727. If so, then his political and religious influence briefly overlapped the prophetic work of Hosea.

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735-734  Syro-Ephraimite War; Rezin and Pekah move against Jerusalem and Ahaz, new king in Jerusalem
734-732/731  Tiglath-pileser III campaigns against Phoenicia, Philistia, Israel, and Damascus
732/731  Hoshea assassinates Pekah and is confirmed on throne by Tiglath-pileser III
728/727  Hezekiah coregent in Judah?
727  Tiglath-pileser III dies and is succeeded by Shalmaneser V; Hoshea pays tribute
726-724  Hoshea withholds tribute, appeals to Egypt for aid, and is captured by Shalmaneser
724-722  Shalmaneser lays siege to Samaria; refugees flee south to Jerusalem and Judah
722  Samaria falls; Shalmaneser dies and is succeeded by Sargon II
720  Rebel elements in Samaria are involved with Hamath in rebellion against Sargon
720/719  Sargon subdues Samaria and sends a wave of inhabitants into exile

IV. HOSEA’S THEOLOGY

A. NARRATIVE AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

A prophetic book like that of Hosea can be understood as an occasional document. It is occasioned by the circumstances of Israel in the second half of the 8th century and presents a portion of one side of a give-and-take between prophet and receiving community. It does not, therefore, present theological views in systematic form, but addresses the particulars that occasioned prophetic responses. The NT epistles, particularly those of Paul, are sometimes described as occasional writings, pastoral responses to particular matters in early Christian communities rather than, say, essays on theological subjects for young churches. The epistles also preserve a portion of one side of a give-and-take between apostle and congregation. A book like Hosea distills prophetic responses over more than twenty years and is edited for public presentation, while a letter like 1 Corinthians comes a few months after Paul has been in Corinth; nevertheless, the two documents still share the characteristics of occasioned response.

Hosea, like an epistle writer, does not present his theology abstractly, but responds from his theological convictions to the issues of his day. He does have a matrix that formed him and from which he developed a world-
TEXT AND COMMENTARY
I. SUPERSCRIPTION (1:1)

1 The word of YHWH that came to Hosea, son of Beeri, in the
days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah; and in
the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel.

1 The initial verse of the book is a superscription, i.e., a heading to the
work that indicates its historical setting and very likely the context for its edi-
ting. It thereby communicates several things to the reader. First, although the
term “prophet” is not used to identify Hosea, he is described as the recipient
of the Lord’s word, which indicates his prophetic status. The Hebrew term
dāḇār is singular and indicates a communication; it is not, of course, a literal
reference to a single word. Three other books begin exactly the same way
(“the word of YHWH came to . . .”), namely Joel, Micah, and Zephaniah.¹
Furthermore, with minor variation the phrase occurs in Ezek. 1:3, Jonah 1:1,
Zech. 1:1, Hag. 1:1, and Mal. 1:1. All of these works are part of the prophetic
corpus in the OT. The phrase in Hos. 1:1, therefore, marks Hosea as a pro-
phetic book with two sources: (1) the Lord, who initiates communication
with Hosea, (2) who in turn communicates with contemporaries through an
edited version of his public activities and speaking.

Second, Hosea’s father’s name, Beeri, is given to identify further Ho-
sea for readers. While this detail might have been significant for Hosea’s
contemporaries, it no longer indicates much to later readers, since the fa-
ther’s name is obscure.² Four other persons in the OT, however, are named

1. In the LXX Jer. 1:2 begins similarly, “the word of God came to Jeremiah,” al-
though the Hebrew text begins somewhat differently.
2. Esau’s Hittite father-in-law was named Beeri (Gen. 26:34). Hebrew b’r means
“well” or “pit.”
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Hosea. It was the earlier name of Joshua (cf. Num. 13:8), the name of the last king of Israel (2 Kgs. 15:30), the name of a leader in postexilic Jerusalem (Neh. 10:23 [MT 24]), and the name of a prominent Ephraimite leader (1 Chr. 27:20). It is formed from the Hebrew verb yāša', which means “help” or “deliver.” The name Hosea means “he [YHWH] has saved” or something similar.

Third, the references to the kings provides the historical setting for the prophet’s words. Four rulers from Judah (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) and one from Israel (Jeroboam, son of Joash, i.e., Jeroboam II) are named. Jeroboam II died ca. 750. Uzziah’s long reign overlapped with that of Jeroboam, although the length of Uzziah’s de facto reign and the year of his death are difficult to sort out. The Judean list of kings in v. 1, however, continues with an additional three names, even though the book’s prophecies are directed primarily to Israel. Hezekiah’s accession is a difficult problem for chronological reconstruction, but his reign continued into the 7th century on almost any reckoning. The dates of the kings in 1:1, when taken in their entirety, cover approximately a hundred years. Moreover, the emphasis on the Judean rulers sits awkwardly at the beginning of a book addressed primarily to Israel, the nation whose capital was Samaria and whose political end came at the hands of the Assyrian rulers Shalmaneser V and Sargon II.

The chronological difficulties can be mitigated on the assumptions that Hosea’s prophetic work began some time toward the end of Jeroboam’s reign, ca. 755-750, and that Hezekiah’s reign began in 728/727, if the synchronism in 2 Kgs. 18:10 is correct,5 so that Hosea’s public activity ran thirty

3. Amos 1:1 is the only other prophetic superscription that refers to rulers from both Israel and Judah. That book is introduced as “words of Amos . . . which he saw (hāčā) concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel.” This chronological indication makes Amos and Hosea contemporaries. Isaiah 1:1 has the same list of Judean kings as Hos. 1:1, which indicates that Isaiah and Hosea were also contemporaries.

4. Uzziah began his reign in the 27th year of Jeroboam II and reigned 52 years according to 2 Kgs. 15:2. He contracted leprosy and his son Jotham served as regent in his stead (2 Kgs. 15:5). The 52 years almost certainly describe the period in which he was king de jure, although Jotham was the de facto ruler during some of that time. Indeed, Jotham may have been elevated officially to the position of vice-regent or coregent. According to 2 Kgs. 15:32, Uzziah died in the second year of Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel.

5. 2 Kgs. 18:10 is complicated by the reference in v. 13 that Sennacherib’s assault on Jerusalem came in Hezekiah’s 14th year. That assault is firmly dated to the year 701 B.C., which would place Hezekiah’s first year in 715. For one explanation of the difficulty, see M. Cogan, “Chronology,” ABD 1:1008, who thinks that Hezekiah indeed came on the throne in Jerusalem before the fall of Samaria. He suggests that the “14th year” in v. 13 originally belonged with the account of Hezekiah’s recovery from illness in 2 Kgs. 20,
years or so. It is not clear from the book when Hosea’s prophetic activity ceased. From the evidence in the book, one cannot discern whether Hosea actually witnessed the downfall of Samaria. Broadly speaking, therefore, the prophet’s public work appears set in a fifty-year period, from 760 to 710 B.C., with the years 750-725 being the most likely setting.

There is still the question of the emphasis on the Judean kings rather than on those in Israel, where Hosea carried out his prophetic task. The majority of modern scholars regard Hosea as a prophet of northern origin, based primarily on the addresses to Israel, Samaria, and Bethel in the book, plus a number of lexical peculiarities in the text that may reflect a northern dialect. If this is the case — that is, if Hosea himself is of northern origin and not, like Amos, someone from the south who travels north to prophesy — then the Judean emphasis of the superscription probably indicates the context in which the book was edited and preserved. This is understandable, since the fall of Samaria meant the political end of Israel. Archaeological investigation indicates that the population of Jerusalem increased markedly toward the end of the 8th century B.C.; the primary reason was probably an influx of refugees fleeing turmoil in Israel. Hosea’s words may have been preserved among various circles who survived the Assyrian onslaught, but the origins of the book we now have likely come from Yahwists who moved southward in the aftermath of Israel’s demise. Whether these preservationists and editors included disciples of Hosea or simply people who passed along a prophetic tradition they valued we cannot now determine.

Other 8th-century prophets have similar lists in their superscriptions. Isaiah 1:1 lists the same four Judean kings as Hos. 1:1, but with no reference to a northern ruler. Micah 1:1 lacks the reference to Uzziah, but includes the other three. Micah, apparently a Judean, is credited with “seeing” (hāzā) YHWH’s word concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Amos, a contemporary of Hosea’s in Israel, also “saw” the words he communicated in the time of Uzziah and Jeroboam II. The similarities of the superscriptions of these four books suggest a common editorial effort in Judah to preserve their contents as witnesses to YHWH’s (recent) past revelation of his word.
INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

When read together, chs. 1–3 have a basic theme: God’s judgment in the historical process will come against a faithless Israel, sometime after which God will initiate a period of restoration. Hosea’s marriage and children are rendered through literary devices to illustrate the theme, and the texts are thoroughly shaped with that goal in mind. Indeed, each chapter — at least in English versification — gives a rendering of the same basic theme, moving from judgment to restoration.

Within the three chapters, readers encounter different literary forms in support of this basic theme. Hosea 1:2-9 is a succinct account, written in third-person prose, that describes Hosea’s marriage to Gomer, a woman of harlotry, who subsequently bears three children with symbolic names. Both mother and children symbolize Israel in flagrant rebellion against the Lord. Hosea 2:2-13 (MT 4-15) covers the same theme in the form of a charge of faithlessness (adultery, harlotry) against the mother. Her actions disqualify her as a wife. As her promiscuity is described, it becomes clear that she symbolizes Israel. Hosea 3:1-5 is a first-person prose account, in which the prophet is commanded to acquire and love an unnamed adulteress. In her adultery she too symbolizes Israel. A time of disciplinary penance is described for her in her guise as Israel (and Judah).

Several decades ago H. H. Rowley wrote a masterful survey of scholarly opinions entitled “The Marriage of Hosea.” With his usual encyclopedic style, he surveyed the gamut of opinions on the subject of Hos. 1–3 and offered his own assessment. Rowley’s essay is still a profitable read, since the options he then surveyed and evaluated remain relevant. Indeed, my own conclusions essentially follow his. In the intervening years, new directions in interpretation have come primarily in two categories: feminist concerns, and various forms of literary analysis such as deconstruction, canonical criticism, and intertextuality. These categories influence, and at times even supersede, those approaches Rowley noted.

6. J. Mays, Hosea (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), pp. 23-24: “The narrative is kerygmatic, not biographical. Through it, as well as oracle, the word of Yahweh is known — and that is its sole purpose. The details of Hosea’s family life are hidden behind the word-function of the narrative.”


8. To see developments in the interpretation of Hos. 1–3, one should compare Rowley’s survey and evaluation with those of Y. Sherwood, The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea’s Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective (JSOTSup 212; Sheffield: 80
One cannot stress too strongly that the interpreter must begin and end with the text of Hos. 1–3. This seems trite to express, but insistence on this principle should keep interpreters focused on the fact that the only source of information available on the topic (Hosea’s marriage and family) comes in ancient literary form. Those who are interested in such matters as Hosea’s feelings about his wife or the nature of her infidelity pursue legitimate questions, but we must keep in mind that the literary composition we know as Hos. 1–3 may not adequately answer them. Readers must first attend to the literary properties of Hos. 1–3 before seeking what is “behind the text.”

A reading of Hos. 1–3 raises a number of questions for interpretation that can be grouped essentially in three categories.

1. **The Promiscuously Adulterous Female.** Is the Gomer of ch. 1 the mother of ch. 2 and also the unnamed adulteress of ch. 3? Put slightly differently, how many women are depicted in chs. 1–3?

2. **Narrative Sequence.** Do chs. 1–3 provide a basic sequence of events (marriage, marriage breakdown, reconciliation), or is the first-person account of ch. 3 the earliest presentation of the marriage, with ch. 1 a later, originally parallel, rendering? Regarding sequence, is the command to marry a “woman of harlotry” presented retrospectively (i.e., Hosea married normally, his wife’s promiscuity developed subsequently), or did the command come initially to him as his sense of prophetic call, so that the woman he chose had already been involved in some form of sexual misconduct?

3. **Symbol and Reality.** Should these chapters be read only as a symbolic

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Hosea’s Family

1:2–3:5

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3. **Symbol and Reality.** Should these chapters be read only as a symbolic
rendering of Israel’s history (allegory, parable, vision, dream account), or in their symbolic import do they also reflect actual events in the life of Hosea, son of Beeri, and his family?

To begin with category 3, symbol and reality, is to begin properly with literary questions. What kind of literature makes up Hos. 1–3? As noted above, these chapters comprise more than one literary type, but the best parallels to the commands in 1:2 and 3:1 are with accounts of symbolic acts performed by prophets, not with dream reports (e.g., Gen. 40:1–41:36), parables (e.g., Judg. 9:7-21), or vision reports (e.g., Jer. 4:23-28; Zech. 1:7–6:15). Not only do these commands give structure to the reading of Hos. 1–3 as a unit, but they have particularly close parallels with narratives about the prophet Isaiah and symbolic acts undertaken by him through his family. At least two of Isaiah’s children have symbolic names, both of whom served to illustrate the prophet’s message (Isa. 7:1-9; 8:1-4). The children are signs (‘ôt, 8:18) from the Lord to Israel. In both cases the child’s role is introduced by commands from the Lord to Isaiah: “Go . . . take your son” (7:3); “Take a tablet and write . . . . The Lord said to me, ‘Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz’” (8:1, 3). One encounters both third-person account and first-person report in these narratives, just as in Hos. 1:2-9 and 3:1-5. Apparently Isaiah’s marriage (to a prophetess, Isa. 8:3) also served a symbolic role. At the command of the Lord, Isaiah went naked and barefoot for three years as a sign (‘ôt) against Egypt and Cush (20:1-6). Bizarre behavior is thus not out of the question for prophetic signs!

Ezekiel 3–5 depicts a series of symbolic acts to be carried out by the prophet to illustrate his message. A couple of these are so bizarre that some scholars wonder if they were literally carried out (e.g., lying on his side for 390 days; 4:4-15), but other commands (e.g., shaving his hair and beard with a sword, 5:1-4) indeed appear to be physical acts carried out as part of the prophetic task. It seems that being bizarre or offensive did not disqualify an act as a prophetic communication.

On the other hand, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel contain depictions of Israel and Judah as adulterous fornicators in language that is metaphorical and in instances even allegorical (Jer. 2:2-3, 20-37; 3:1-5, 6-14; Ezek. 16:1-12. This is widely acknowledged among modern interpreters, irrespective of the importance they attach to the similarities in rendering Hos. 1–3. On these acts, cf. S. Amsler, “Les prophètes et la communication par les actes,” in Werden und Wirken des Alten Testament: Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag, ed. R. Albertz et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), pp. 194-201; W. D. Stacey, Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament (London: Epworth, 1990), especially pp. 96-111.

13. Ezek. 3–5 is predominately composed in the first person, and 4:3 describes one of the acts as a sign (‘ôt).
1:2–3:5 Hosea’s Family

63; 23:1-49). In them the language of harlotry and family dynamics are used metaphorically to describe the faithlessness of Israel and Judah and/or that of Samaria and Jerusalem. These texts also have a number of parallels with vocabulary and metaphors employed in Hosea. It would seem, then, that the portrayal of Hosea’s family is also an earlier example of literary presentation that owes as much to metaphor as it does to historical report.

Perhaps it is best to see Hosea’s marriage, the naming of the three children, and the acquiring of an adulteress as public acts to illustrate a prophetic message, with the offensiveness, indeed the impurity and scandalousness of the report (see below), as integral to the prophetic sign. The Hebrew term ’ôt (“sign”) is not used to characterize these actions, but this is their function. At the same time, Hos. 1–3 does more than simply render these acts in literary form for public consumption. Mother and children are metaphorical symbols for Israel and the land. In metaphorical terms they are the vehicle (source domain) through which to interpret the tenor (target domain) of Israel and the land in dereliction of duty. The goal, therefore, is to render Israel and the land in breach of covenant with YHWH through sign-act and literary symbol, not to provide a simple digest of family history.

Nevertheless, if Hos. 1–3 interprets the prophet’s actual family, as seems most likely, then a question from category 2 is raised: Should one interpret the command to marry a harlot retrospectively or as the initial step in a prophetic act? The thought that God would ask a prophet to do something immoral has caused consternation, so that a number of interpreters have concluded that 1:2 is a retrospective presentation, produced by the prophet and his editors “after the fact,” when the prophet had come to realize the spiritual relevance of his family turmoil over his wife’s adultery. This would mean that Hosea married in acceptable fashion, only later to discover his wife’s infidelities. After discovery, he came to see that his anger and disappointment mirrored that of God toward wayward Israel. According to this view, he presents his personal circumstances in literary form as originating with God, including a proleptic description of his wife’s promiscuity.

14. Consternation over a literal interpretation of the command “to marry a prostitute” is perhaps the main reason that interpreters have seen Hos. 1–3 as an allegory, vision, or parable. Rowley cites several examples of those who take this point of view, but he does not cite Calvin, Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets, vol. 1: Hosea (trans. John Owen; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 44, whose conclusion puts the matter succinctly: “It seems not consistent with reason, that the Lord should thus gratuitously render his Prophet contemptible; for how could he expect to be received on coming abroad before the public, after having brought on himself such a disgrace? If he had married a wife such as is here described, he ought to have concealed himself for life rather than to undertake the Prophetic office. Their opinion, therefore, is not probable, who think that the Prophet had taken such a wife as is here described.”
Hosea

Such a retrospective view is plausible.¹⁵ A charge of adultery against a woman presupposes her status as married and that her sexual activity is with someone other than her husband. Since Gomer is charged with adultery (2:2 [MT 4]), so the interpretation goes, her promiscuity began after her marriage. Some find the retrospective view difficult to square with 3:1 and the statement that “the Lord spoke to me again (‘ôd),” issuing a command to go and love an adulteress. In this case, it is clear that the command to reacquire or to reconcile with an adulteress presupposes that Hosea enters the relationship already knowing of her infidelities.¹⁶ A natural (but not necessary) corollary is that the same circumstances held for the first time that God commanded Hosea to marry a woman of harlotry (1:2). Nevertheless, one can neither find a beginning to her sexual history nor reconstruct much of her marital history from the command in 3:1. It is simply a claim that she had committed adultery prior to her (re)acquisition by Hosea. The difficulty comes in distinguishing a legal meaning for “adultery,” as it might apply to Gomer in Israelite society, from its metaphorical meaning of faithlessness, with her representing Israel in breach of covenant fidelity. Gomer may, for example, have been married to someone else and subsequently divorced before her marriage to Hosea (cf. Deut. 24:1-4). She may have engaged in sexual relations with someone other than her husband. Her “adultery” could be related to one or more fertility practices or even commercial prostitution to support herself during her estrangement from Hosea.

One must deal with two related matters before one can reject the retrospective view on the basis of the “again” in 3:1. The first is whether Gomer is to be identified with the unnamed adulteress in 3:1, and the second is whether ch. 3 could still be interpreted as a parallel text to the command to marry in 1:2, rather than a sequel, as suggested here. The issue turns on the question of reading Hos. 1–3 as a unit and whether an editor has contrived a false sequence of events through the rendering of 1:2 and 3:1 and the adding of the third-person report in 1:2-9. Otherwise, is not the more natural reading of the unit one in which details from chs. 1–2 are presupposed in ch. 3, so that the latter serves as a sequel?¹⁷ Interpreters who see ch. 3 as a parallel account to 1:2-9 could be correct, but it is a conclusion based on taking the two

¹⁵. The commentary by Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, is a sustained presentation from this point of view.

¹⁶. In terms of Hebrew grammar, the adverb ‘ôd, “again,” in 3:1 can modify either the verb wayyôśmé, “spoke,” or the imperatives lêk, “go,” and ‘êhab, “love.” Typically the adverb comes after the verb. The more natural sense is to read the adverb as modifying the preceding verb “spoke” and to interpret God’s “speaking again” in light of the previous command to “go” and marry that opens the book (1:2).

¹⁷. If Hos. 3:1-5 is a summary of the marriage, i.e., a parallel to chs. 1–2, it is strange that it does not mention either the names of the children or the woman.
passages from their current contexts and drawing a historical judgment from a hypothetical reconstruction of their prehistory. Exegesis have offered several intriguing alternatives to reading ch. 3 as a sequel to ch. 1; but as Rowley has shown, they are forced either to accept a difficult literary-critical solution in 3:1 or otherwise to reject Hos. 1–3 as a coherent unit. Moreover, whatever one concludes about the coherence of Hos. 1–3, one should acknowledge one thing about prophets and symbolic acts — the acts can be bizarre or offensive! Indeed, a bizarre or offensive act may effectively communicate the horror felt by the prophet (and by God!) concerning Israel’s wretched state.

With respect to a sequence of events, Rowley makes a persuasive case that while Hos. 1–3 provides only a few details, it is a basic summary of Hosea’s marriage and family life used as a comparison to the Israel/YHWH relationship. He married a prostitute, however the term is defined; she bore three children; she and Hosea separated over her adultery; subsequently the two of them reconciled. Such a conclusion answers affirmatively one of the questions from category 1: Are Gomer, the immoral mother, and the unnamed adulteress the same woman? One reads across the grain of Hos. 1–3, rather than with it, to conclude that Hosea married a second woman in ch. 3. That option seems open, since oddly Gomer is not explicitly named in 3:1, but neither are the children. Silence is not a persuasive argument to find in the unnamed woman a second wife of Hosea, any more than the silence with respect to children in 3:1 means that there were no children. The symbolic representation of Israel is better maintained if one spouse represents the corporate identity of the people from adultery to reconciliation.

Two matters remain from category 1: the nature of Gomer’s prostitution, and the identity of the person(s) she symbolically represents. I treat her “harlotry” in appendix 6, where I conclude that the term is metaphorical and indicates primarily faithlessness in religious practice or social ethics. This is the most common use of the term in the OT, and it is too difficult to sort out from there the precise nature of Gomer’s sexual offenses (which we may think were real enough). As we should remain cautious in reconstructing the sequence of Gomer’s harlotry and her marriage to Hosea, so we must be cautious with any conclusion defining the nature of her particular sexual offense. Her representation of Israel is the primary matter in every aspect of her portrayal.

The increased attention given in recent years to the matter of gender

19. Ibid., pp. 91-94.
20. Sweeney, Hosea, p. 39, is a recent interpreter who opts for the view that the unnamed woman is different from Gomer. He suggests that she is a prostitute whom Hosea purchased after his marriage with Gomer failed.
in biblical interpretation has resulted in a reexamination of her symbolic role(s). One form of the reexamination comes in the interrelationship of gender, personification, and metaphor in Hos. 1–3, and more particularly how a female can or cannot symbolize a male. Since Israel is a masculine name, the masculine predominates in metaphor and personification in the OT. Some argue that Israel, where named or clearly presupposed, is exclusively symbolized through masculine imagery. If this is correct, then Gomer cannot symbolically represent Israel — she must represent a female character. The obvious candidates would then be the city of Samaria or the land, since both cities and “land” in Hebrew are feminine in grammar and personification. Indeed, it is “the land” (hā‘āres) that metaphorically commits harlotry in 1:2, but this just transfers the question to that of the entity represented by the land. In context the land is a metonym, representing the nation of Israel. The character of the people is represented by the personification of a geographical and political term that happens to be female. Regarding the personification of Samaria, there is no overt reference to the city in Hos. 1–3 as there are to the entities Israel and Judah. Furthermore, the role and the personification of Samaria are slight elsewhere in the book of Hosea, especially when compared to the rich imagery for the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Nevertheless, royal cities, even when they are not city-states, can represent the polity of a whole people. And as Second Isaiah makes clear (50:1), they can be considered the “mother” of the people.

Some scholars see Gomer as representing a Canaanite goddess. The proposal is more ingenious than persuasive. Its strength comes in the overlap between imagery for the fruitfulness of the land and the corresponding fertility roles of male and female deities in the various Canaanite pantheons. There is persuasive evidence that some Israelites and Judeans were polytheists and that one or more forms of their polytheism may have held


that YHWH had a female consort. Nevertheless, the difficulty with the proposal that Gomer represents a goddess is twofold. First, the root metaphor of Hos. 1–3 is that of family or household. As a female, Gomer represents Israel (people, land, Samaria) through that metaphorical model. Second, it is her masculine lovers, who do represent Canaanite deities, who have ruined the integrity of YHWH’s house and rendered void the exclusivity of the covenant established with Israel. In this symbolism Gomer’s gender and sexuality are not linked to a role in the divine world. Hosea is not trying to rid himself of a spouse, as if YHWH were divorcing Astarte or Asherah, but seeking to restore her.

It is the case that grammatical gender and personification are closely linked in Hebrew texts, and also that the link is important in Hosea, but it does not seem to be the case that female imagery is limited only to female gender (or vice versa). Regarding Hos. 1–3, this is best illustrated by the naming of Gomer’s three children, each of whom symbolically represents the people or nation of Israel. The daughter named Lo-ruhamah (No Mercy) metaphorically represents the people, as do the two sons, Jezreel (God Sows) and Lo-ammi (Not My People). Likewise, the adulteress of ch. 3 represents Israel collectively, as the symmetry of address in 3:3-4 seems to indicate.

Indeed, Hos. 1–3 includes a variety of gender images and metaphors, all of which represent one or more aspects of Israelite character and identity. Three of them are introduced in 1:2-9 and set the tone for the first three chapters: woman engaged in prostitution (female), land engaged in prostitution (female), children derived from prostitution (male and female).

A number of interpreters consider Gomer’s rendering in Hos. 1–3 to be an unfortunate gender stereotype, ill at ease with feminine sexuality, as well as sexist and pornographic, if not misogynistic. This interpretation illustrates both the power of metaphor and something of the divide between antiquity and modernity. On the one hand, there seems to be no way to avoid

25. Some have suggested that Hosea’s children are literally “children of harlotry” in the sense that they are Hosea’s through an extramarital liaison with a prostitute; so Scoralick, Gottes Güte, p. 150. Also Hornsby, “Israel Has Become a Worthless Thing,” pp. 115-28, has raised the question whether Hosea actually married Gomer. Although the children, male and female, could represent Israel symbolically in its rebellion against YHWH through their status as children out of wedlock, the covenant YHWH made with Israel in the wilderness is better represented by the actual marriage of Hosea and Gomer.

APPENDICES
1. Baal in Hosea

The noun *ba’al* occurs seven times in Hosea (2:8, 13, 16, 17 [MT 10, 15, 18, 19]; 9:10; 11:2; 13:1). Three of those are plural (2:13, 17; 11:2). In Hebrew the root *b*l is also used as a verb meaning to “own” or “possess,” and thus to represent the act of marriage in which a man acquires a wife. As a common noun it represents an owner or master, hence its application to Canaanite deities, who can be owners of holy places and possessors of powers. The noun can refer to a husband (Gen. 20:3), an owner of a commodity (Exod. 21:28), and leaders of a community (Josh. 24:11). It is not a personal name.

A standard interpretation of the references in Hosea has been that both the plural and the singular terms are references to Canaanite deities other than YHWH, the sole exception being 2:16 (MT 18), where Israel is no longer to call YHWH by this term. With the discovery of the Ugaritic texts and their representation of a powerful Baal named Hadad, Lord of heaven and earth, some interpreters emphasized the singular references in Hosea and interpreted the plural ones as synonymous for “other deities,” based on the assumption that Hosea’s contemporaries were tempted to worship one primary Baal. One alternative to this debate over the nature of Canaanite deities is the suggestion that the term *ba’al* is a cipher for syncretistic worship of YHWH as Baal. Another alternative is to attribute some of the references in Hosea not to deities but to kings and political leaders with whom Israel has concluded entangling political alliances.

2. The Song of Moses and Hosea

The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43) is a poetic instruction to Israel that portrays the people in their history as objects of YHWH’s fatherly affection and judgment. In Deuteronomy the song is described as Moses’ hymnic composition (šûrâ), presented to the people by him and by Joshua (32:44). It is likely an independent, preexilic composition that has been incorporated into the book of Deuteronomy, representing “prophetical thoughts in a poetic dress.” It has a number of literary-thematic connections to Hosea. These connections can be (and have been) explained in at least three different ways. One is to see a partial dependence of the song on Hosea’s prophecies, and more broadly, to see the song as an heir to preexilic and exilic prophets. A second is the reverse: Hosea and other prophets drew upon the song. The third is that both drew upon some common traditions. Depending on the forms of the traditions in common, there may be little difference between the second and third options. A decision on this matter is not crucial for the task of noting the parallels, but the third option seems the more likely one, given

11. The MT has hôšē’u, “Hosea,” son of Nun, an abbreviated form of yêhôšû’a’, “Joshua.”
12. So S. R. Driver, Deuteronomy (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), p. 345. One can see the force of this observation in the details provided by Sanders, Provenance, pp. 354-424.
3. Flora and Fauna Metaphors in Hosea

There is no single category for all the metaphors (and similes) in the book of Hosea, but two prominent and related categories are those of flora and fauna. These metaphors have both negative and positive tenors (target domains) and vehicles (source domains). Negative and positive are not necessarily moral categories, though they can be. They are more impressionistic and intuitive judgments; furthermore, the impression of a “positive” vehicle may indicate a “negative” tenor and vice versa. For example, that Israel is a luxuriant vine (10:1) is intuitively positive, since a vine that produces edible fruit is positive. The tenor, however, is negative, since the comparison is that of Israel’s increased agricultural productivity (intuitively positive) resulting in increased cultic paraphernalia (altars, standing stones) of a suspect nature, which is negative. To cite another example, YHWH will roar like a lion (11:10-11), a negative vehicle typically from a human point of view, but his victory is not that of a predator bringing home a kill, but of one who brings home trembling subjects, a positive image for exiles.

Lion metaphors illustrate another point for interpreting the book of Hosea: Vehicles and tenors are particular, but not immutable or comprehensive. Their particularity allows for variety and overlap. YHWH is a lion in judgment on his people (5:14), but he also roars in victory in prevailing over forces to bring them home. Two cow metaphors, one where Israel is a stubborn cow (4:16) and the other where Ephraim is a trained heifer (10:11), further illustrate this point. These are not contradictory comparisons, but particular to time and action. In continuing disobedience to YHWH, Israel is a recalcitrant cow. At a different time in its history, Ephraim took its instruction seriously and was productive.

Flora and Israel/Ephraim

9:10  Israel, like grapes in the wilderness, early figs on the tree
9:16  Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up
4. Love in the Prophecy of Hosea

Various passions run deep in the poetic prophecies of Hosea. In a literary sense these are embedded in the text. They are also likely part of the historical prophet whose family becomes a metaphorical vehicle to bring readers to understand the great passion of YHWH for Israel, his “family/household.” It is thus the witness of the book that such love runs deep in the character of YHWH.

A Hebrew root for “love” (\(\text{\`ahab}\)) occurs 18 times in the book. While frequency alone does not make a word central to a document, there can be little doubt that \(\text{\`ahab}\) is central to Hosea’s prophecy. A cluster of references comes in the description of Gomer’s harlotry in 2:2-13 (MT 4-15), where the Piel participle is used for her “lovers” (2:5, 7, 10, 12, 13 [MT 7, 9, 12, 14, 15]). The lovers are not otherwise explicitly identified, but contextually their identity as Canaanite deities is firm. In 2:13 (MT 15) the “days of the \(\text{\`alim}\)” will be visited upon Gomer, who has bedecked herself with jewelry and gone after her lovers. The phrase “to go/walk after” is used in the context of following after, i.e., worshiping, a deity. The terminology can be used in political relations as well. In 8:9 the prophet complains that Ephraim has hired “lovers” (\(\text{\`ahabim}\)). In context this clearly refers to intrigue in interna-
5. Psalm 106 and Hosea

Both Ps. 106 and Hosea are poetic renderings deeply indebted to Israel’s premonarchical history as a source of continuing revelation from YHWH. Psalm 106 is a long poetic rendition of the story line of the exodus and wilderness generations (cf. Pss. 78; 105). Hosea draws from these same traditions more than any of his prophetic contemporaries. On the one hand, the psalm and the prophetic book share vocabulary that is general and widespread, and thus is not persuasive evidence of direct dependence of the one upon the other. Indeed, a simple dependence of one composition on the other does not seem demonstrable. On the other hand, both share some vocabulary and angles of vision on the past in ways that suggest they are drawing on a common matrix of text and tradition.

Hosea’s poetic and succinct allusiveness often make it difficult to grasp the nuance and the significance of historical detail. The commonalities with Ps. 106 listed below, however, underscore that allusion to earlier history is an important aspect of the prophet’s poetry, even when nuance and detail are lost upon later readers. In particular the two also share an aversion to idolatry, its interpretation as “harlotry” (no. 10 below), the influence of Israel’s experience at Baal-peor (no. 7 below), and engagement with bovine symbols (nos. 4-5 below).

3. “To be swallowed” (bāla`) in judgment: Ps. 106:17 (Dathan and Abiram); Hos. 8:8.

23. Terms such as “sin” (hātā`), “iniquity” (āwōn), or “sacrifice” (zābah) fall in this general category.
6. Sexual Infidelity in Hosea

With the command in 1:2 that Hosea marry a woman of harlotry, the book of Hosea opens with the complicated metaphor of sexual promiscuity as representing Israel’s faithlessness toward YHWH and rejection of him as their sufficient and exclusive provider. The terms for harlotry employed in 1:2 are forms of Heb. ħānā, whose basic meaning is to perform sexual acts for payment and/or to be sexually active outside marriage. This basic meaning of the word is clear from the narrative of Gen. 38, the account of Judah and his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar (cf. also Prov. 7:6-23). As he travels along his way, Judah sees a woman with a veiled face sitting alone at the entrance to a village. From these cultural cues he surmises that she is a “prostitute” (ḥānā, Gen. 38:15), and he proceeds to proposition her for sex. They agree on the fee of a kid from the flocks for services rendered. He does not know that the veiled woman is his daughter-in-law Tamar, or that she had set the events in motion deliberately in order to conceive an heir for the family. Eventually Judah realizes that her risky behavior is in service to the well-being of the family, and he pronounces her more righteous than he because of her familial commitment (38:26). When Tamar is first discovered to be pregnant, however, she is accused of prostituting herself (38:24). Both the verb ħānā and the plural noun ħānānim (“prostitution/harlotry”) are used in this verse to describe her activity. The latter term is the same one used in the phrase “woman of harlotry” in Hos. 1:2. As a plural noun ħānānim represents an abstraction of the activity of the verb.

The root ṣnh is used elsewhere in Hosea. In 2:5 (MT 7) the children’s mother is accused of engaging in prostitution. In 3:3 the unnamed adulteress

Hosea employs several terms to convey the conviction that YHWH had chosen Israel as his own. They illustrate the variety of ways in which the prophet adopts and adapts historical tradition to communicate with his audience.

1. “allure/entice” (pātā, Piel). In the complex presentation of his family, Gomer and the children represent Israel in various ways. In 2:14-15 (MT 16-17) Gomer represents Israel’s ancestors whom YHWH chose in the wilderness (cf. no. 4 below). More particularly, Gomer is the young bride whom YHWH will again acquire to renew the marriage (cf. Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8-13). The verb used in Hos. 2:14 (MT 16) is one appropriate to the man who seeks to woo or to persuade his betrothed of his intention to consummate the marriage (cf. Exod. 22:16 [MT 17]; Judg. 14:15; 16:5). In the context of Hos. 2:14-23 (MT 16-25), the “alluring” of Israel will result eventually in the transformation of the betrothed people as redeemed members of YHWH’s household.

2. “take” (lāqāḥ), “love” (ʾāhab), and “acquire/purchase” (kārā). These three verbs are all used to describe Hosea’s actions toward Gomer. Twice he “takes” her (1:2; 3:1), a term used for marrying a woman who is taken from her home to become a wife in another household. This is also an act of “love” (3:1). In the case of the adulterous Gomer, Hosea must pay to settle her debts or obligations, so that once again she is his (3:2). In “taking,” “loving,” or “purchasing” Gomer, the prophet is acting out what YHWH had done initially in making Israel his own and what YHWH would do again after a period of judgment and discipline.

3. “called/summoned” (qārā’ lē) and “loved” (ʾāhab). According to Exod. 4:22-23, the people of Israel were metaphorically YHWH’s “firstborn son.” As part of a retrospective on Israel’s history, the prophet portrays them as YHWH’s “son, called from Egypt” (Hos. 11:1). Such a description may presuppose the act of adoption. In any case, it is predicated on divine love.37

37. YHWH’s “love” is also behind the mystery of his “choosing” (bāḥar) and “joining himself to” (ḥāšaq bē) Israel in Deut. 7:6-8.

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Hosea refers several times to the land east of the Jordan River. An examination of these texts is a good indication of ways in which historical geography may contribute to the book’s understanding.

Perhaps the clearest reference is 9:10b, where the prophet reminds his hearers/readers of Israel’s sinfulness at Baal-peor, sometimes called Beth-peor in the OT. It is located east of the Jordan Valley on the plains of Moab, near Shittim, where Israel encamped at the conclusion of the wilderness journeys to the promised land (Num. 25:1, 3; 33:48-49; Deut. 3:29). Beth-peor is assigned to the tribe of Reuben (Josh. 13:20) as part of its inheritance.

Nearby is Mt. Nebo, a place associated with the burial of Moses (Deut. 34:1-6). Baal-peor cannot be located definitely, but possibilities include Ras es-Siyagah, Khirbet Ayun Musa, and Khirbet el-Muhatta, all west of Madaba overlooking the descent to the Jordan Valley and the northern edge of the Dead Sea. According to a narrative account in the book of Numbers (25:1-13; cf. 31:16; Deut. 4:3-4; Ps. 106:28-31), Israel became engaged sexually (zānâh; Num. 25:1) with women there, apparently in conjunction with the cult of a deity known as Baal (of) Peor.

42. Ras es-Siyagah is the location of a Byzantine period memorial to Moses, i.e., Byzantine Mt. Nebo. Iron Age Nebo (Khirbet el-Muhayyat) was just to the east of this site. The promontory of Siyagah may have had an Iron Age site or shrine, which could be identified with Pisgah (Num. 23:14), Peor (23:28), or one of the “high places of Baal” (Num. 22:41). The springs of Moses (Ayun Musa) are in the valley immediately to the north of Siyagah, and Khirbet el-Muhatta is a modest ruin on the ridge line to the northwest of Ayun Musa.

43. George R. Boudreau, “Hosea and the Pentateuchal Traditions: The Case of the Baal of Peor,” in History and Interpretation, ed. Graham et al., pp. 121-31. Boudreau improbably thinks that Hosea alludes not to some form of the account now included in Num. 25:1-11 and Deut. 4:3-4, but to an event after the settlement in the land that was interpreted as idolatry. One may readily agree to the possibility that Hosea knew a somewhat different
9. Worship Centers in Hosea

Criticism of worship centers in Israel plays a prominent role in the book of Hosea. Much of that criticism comes as part of the prophet’s broader institutional critique, including his opposition to the cultic practices of his day.\textsuperscript{51} Gilgal and Bethel (sarcastically nicknamed Beth-awen, “Wicked House” or “House of Nothing”) are two places for worship paired in Hos. 4:15. They are paired also in Amos (4:4; 5:5), an 8th-century prophetic contemporary of Hosea.\textsuperscript{52} Both have altars for sacrifice and Bethel has a temple (Amos 7:13). Gilgal is named in Hos. 9:15 and 12:11 (MT 12), where Israelite intrigue and transgressions are rooted. Hosea makes reference elsewhere to Beth-awen (“Wicked House”) in 5:8 and 10:5 and to Bethel in 10:15 and 12:4 (MT 5). Amos also refers to Bethel separately in 3:14; 5:6; 7:10, 13. In both prophets, where contemporary religious practices or corporate assemblies are in view, the references are negative.

Apparently more than one site in Israel had the name Gilgal (“rolling” or “round stone”; cf. Josh. 5:9), but the references in Hosea are most likely to the best known of them, a site located on the west side of the Jordan River and east/northeast of Jericho. Its remains cannot be located with certainty, as it appears to have been more a place for assembly and cultic service rather than a permanent urban center.\textsuperscript{53} In narrative and prophecy alike, it is the end of the wilderness wandering for Israel (Josh. 4–5; Mic. 6:5). It was likely an open-air shrine with an altar and ceremonial stones but lacking a temple. It

\textsuperscript{51} See also the full discussion in Emmerson, \textit{Hosea}, pp. 117-55. She is of the opinion that the prophet’s criticisms of activities at Bethel and Gilgal have been strengthened by the Judean editors of the book and made to seem as opposition to the sanctuaries themselves.

\textsuperscript{52} Amos 5:5 also includes Beer-sheba in the Judean Negev as a place of pilgrimage and worship that should be avoided.

10. YHWH’s Self-Definition (Exod. 34:6-7) and Hosea

According to the narrative of the golden calf episode (Exod. 32–34), YHWH revealed himself to Moses in the following manner:

YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness and faithfulness; who maintains loving-kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; but the unpunished he will punish, bringing the iniquity of the parents on their children and grandchildren, unto the third and fourth (generation). (Exod. 34:6-7)

This formulaic self-definition in Exod. 34, which occurs in the context of a breach of covenant, has its intertextual echoes elsewhere in the OT (e.g., Pss. 78:38; 86:15; 99:8; 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Jer. 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Mic. 7:18-20), including the second commandment of the Decalogue (Exod. 20:5-6; Deut. 5:9-10). It is also the completion of the theophany begun in Exod. 33:19, with YHWH’s expressed intent to show Moses his goodness and an assertion that he will “be gracious to whom he will be gracious, and show mercy to whom he will show mercy.”

As such, YHWH’s self-definition is a significant text for organizing the OT claims about divine character and activity, and it is also one of the base texts for Hosea. Unlike Joel and Jonah, there is surprisingly no citation of a portion of the self-presentation formula in Hosea, and thus one cannot reconstruct the precise form in which Hosea knew this authoritative tradition.

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