

OLD TESTAMENT EXEGETICAL PROJECT – HOSEA 11:1-11

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Outline:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The Book of Hosea
- 3 Hosea 11:1-11 as a unit
- 4 Selected literary and critical questions
- 5 Exegesis
- 6 Relevance and application
- 7 Conclusion

1 Introduction

Hosea 11:1-11 is “one of the great chapters of the Old Testament”¹ where Yahweh’s love “reaches an explicit tenderness and detail unmatched in the Old Testament”². It is a poem of God’s love for Israel, despite all its failings and lack of repentance, an Israel whose place is of course now taken by the church. In this exegetical project, we use as a baseline the NIV translation, which is set out in Section 5.

2 The Book of Hosea

Hosea was believed to have prophesied in Israel in the 7th Century BC, spanning the time from the ease and prosperity of the reign of Jeroboam II, through political and economic instability and finally Assyrian invasion, which culminated in the sack of Samaria in 721 BC. At that point many citizens were deported or scattered. Some faithful followers of Yahweh probably went to Judah at this time, taking the work of Hosea with them.

Hosea’s book accuses Israel of sins against the covenant with Yahweh – notably syncretism and worship of foreign gods - which were certain to lead to punishment in the short term, although a promise of blessing for the faithful thereafter recurs. There is a close link to the curses of Deuteronomy 4:20-31, as God was prophesied to enforce the terms of his covenant. Hosea would have expected his hearers to realise their disobedience to the broad terms of the covenant, if not all of the Levitical rules, as also set out in broad terms in Psalms 80 and 81.³

¹ Knight, *Hosea*, 108.

² Mays, *Hosea*, 151.

³ Stuart, *Hosea*, 10.

A key issue is whether Deuteronomy (or a similar text) was available to Hosea, even if its current form was finalised later – an argument we consider convincing.⁴ Otherwise, Hosea could itself be a source for Deuteronomy⁵ and, for example, Hosea would be the first to talk of God's love for Israel in such explicit terms.

The book can be subdivided into 2 parts, Chapters 1-3 adopt the metaphor of an unhappy marriage of God to Israel, and of Hosea to his wife Gomer, while 4-14 offer a more diverse set of prophecies albeit in a similar vein. Stuart notes that there is no other Old Testament book with such a high proportion of textual problems due to scribal error,⁶ some of which as noted below occur in our chosen passage, 11:1-11, but this is not considered to threaten the unity and integrity of the book.

3 Hosea 11:1-11 as a unit

It can be argued that Chapter 11 is a unity other than verse 12, which clearly belongs with Chapter 12. In 1-11, there is first a common theme of a father and son relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Speech is by Yahweh himself. The historical sweep of the passage gives further unity, from the Exodus via the present unhappy time to the eschatological future.

There are elements of a court case with evidence (verses 1-4), judgment (5-7), but then insight into the judge's mind and reconsideration (8-11). Wolff calls it a "historical theological accusation"⁷ in respect of a child's rebellion, breaching Deuteronomy 21:18:21. Note also the whole father-son, nurture, revolt and punishment cycle is paralleled in Moses' speech of

⁴ Besides arguing from the content of Hosea per se, Stuart, *Hosea*, 15, argues for a 2nd Millennium BC origin for Deuteronomy on the basis of its resemblance to 2nd and not 1st Millennium BC covenant curses, and linguistic parallels with 2nd Millennium Mesopotamian documents.

⁵ As suggested by Wolff, *Hosea*, 197 and Mays, *Hosea*, 153.

⁶ Stuart, *Hosea*, 13.

⁷ Wolff, *Hosea*, 193.

Deuteronomy 32. The current text can be seen as a working-out of the threatened curse, with the difference that the judge decides to partly lift the curse at the end despite no mention of repentance.

The unity can be seen more broadly in the wider biblical flow of creation/call-sin-punishment-redemption, again with the unusual aspect of insight by the prophet into Yahweh's inner thoughts. Finally, literary evidence of unity includes the repeated motifs, such as call, return and eat/devour.

4 Selected literary and critical questions

In terms of genre, the unit is not a classic prophetic judgement speech⁸ with simple accusation and judgement. In line with the rest of the book, Hosea adds other elements – complaints, presentations of history and reporting of God's own thoughts.⁹ Nevertheless, one may conclude that the unit remains prophetic oracle.

The prophecy in this section modifies the message put forward elsewhere in Hosea, for example that God will not act on his fierce anger (8:5) or be unable to reconsider (13:14) or destroy a people he no longer loves (9:15).¹⁰ However, rather than arguing a corrupt or inconsistent text, it must be argued that God can react differently, as he does in this passage itself. The other passages may relate to earlier stages of Hosea's ministry.

Feminist commentators have suggested that Hosea 11 shows a female God who cares for her son and is unwilling to have him put to death. More specifically, it is argued that verse 9 talks

⁸ Westermann, *Basic*, 129-98.

⁹ Davies, *Hosea*, 34-35.

¹⁰ Davies, *Hosea*, 253.

of “God not man” as opposed to woman – but this may depend on “questionable emendations”.¹¹ At least, one can agree that the passage can relate to love from both parents.

Some critics maintain that verse 10 was a later insertion to add explanation, because it shifts from Yahweh’s own point of view to that of the prophet and lacks “poetic diction”.¹² But Stuart points out that it does not refer to Judah, which tells against a later Judean editing.¹³

Then, there are some major disagreements as to meaning based on the Hebrew texts, to which we return in Section 5. Notably, some argue from the Hebrew that verse 9 does not state that Yahweh will give up his punishment, as most translations imply.¹⁴ This is a crucial question since it would imply a change in the meaning of the passage. Others would add “again” in verse 9 suggesting that God has already completely devastated Israel. Some authors such as Mays¹⁵ argue that the situation in verses 5 and 6 are actuality and not prophecy, which could fit with the early loss of territory prior to 721, but the tense seems to be inappropriate.

Other questions are more stylistic and do not change the sense, and again are considered further below. For example, there is a difficulty with verse 4 which some maintain is about lifting a child to one’s cheek, as opposed to gentle treatment of a beast of burden. Other issues arise in verse 6 (whether destruction is of the bars of gates as opposed to false prophets) and verse 11, whether the exiles return trembling or swiftly like birds.

5 Exegesis

I "When Israel was a child, I loved him,

¹¹ Yee, ‘Hosea’, 279

¹² For example Wolff, *Hosea*, 195.

¹³ Stuart, *Hosea*, 176.

¹⁴ Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea*, 589.

¹⁵ Mays, *Hosea*, 155-156.

and out of Egypt I called my son.

Yahweh recalls the Exodus when out of “love” he made himself manifest¹⁶ and rescued Israel from unjust oppression in Egypt. “Son” emphasises adoption of the nation by God, which forms a permanent bond. Indeed, in Exodus 4:22, God requires Pharaoh to free Israel as “my firstborn son” to the end that he may serve God and not Pharaoh.¹⁷ “Child” stresses that Israel was unable to help itself, and indeed rescue was solely due to God’s grace and not Israel’s qualities.¹⁸ “Call” besides election and being “summoned into a relationship”¹⁹ can be seen as showing that Israel has a prophetic role in the wider world.²⁰ The Hebrew “love” is linked to covenantal loyalty as well as affection,²¹ thus bringing in the covenant theme at an early stage.

*2 But the more I called Israel,
the further they went from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals
and they burned incense to images.*

Israel provides an immediate counterpoint to God’s positive actions – his “calling” via the prophets was ignored and followed by apostasy. These sins of omission and commission were committed despite evidence Israel had of God’s kindness and concern. Breaking Exodus 20:3. Israel chose to worship foreign Gods. “From me” implies abandonment of worship of Yahweh, who is personally present to worshippers.²² “Images” emphasises that Canaanite gods are mere idols with no power to save, despite which the “sacrifice” due to Yahweh in the law (e.g. Leviticus 17) was misdirected to them.

*3 It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;*

¹⁶ As noted by Mays, *Hosea*, 153, it is the Exodus that gives Israel as a nation the knowledge of Yahweh per se.

¹⁷ Knight, *Message*, 108.

¹⁸ Kidner, *Message*, 101.

¹⁹ Mays., *Hosea*, 153.

²⁰ Davies, *Hosea*, 254.

²¹ Stuart, *Hosea*, 178, cites Deuteronomy 6:5 as well as the Amarna letters between Pharaoh and his vassal kings.

²² Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea*, 578.

*but they did not realize
it was I who healed them.*

God was innocent of provoking this rebellion, as shown via a touching image of a parent²³ teaching their son to walk and healing his wounds when he fell. This epitomises God's nurturing and sustaining care for Israel since the period of testing in the desert.²⁴ Israel, however, seems to have misunderstood and assumed their good fortune was due to worship of Canaanite fertility gods instead.

*4 I led them with cords of human kindness,
with ties of love;
I lifted the yoke from their neck
and bent down to feed them.*

After stressing the metaphorical bonds of love by which God leads his son, the verse makes a comparison of Israel with an ox, which is treated more as a pet than a working animal²⁵, despite it being a “stubborn heifer” at times (4:16) The animal's burden (the yoke) is lifted by Yahweh who graciously feeds it as he did Israel in the desert with manna, and now in Canaan also. The “yoke” is often used for human oppression as in Egypt (e.g. Exodus 6:7), while Deuteronomy 28:48 threatens an “iron yoke” for covenant disobedience. As noted, the verse can also be interpreted as “lifting a child to their cheek” which would continue the theme of parental nurture.²⁶

*5 "Will they not return to Egypt
and will not Assyria rule over them
because they refuse to repent?"*

²³ Davies, *Hosea*, 254, notes that these actions could equally be those of a mother.

²⁴ Mays, *Hosea*, 154.

²⁵ Kidner, *Message*, 102.

²⁶ This point is argued by Wolff, *Hosea*, 191. But Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea*, 581, see this as unlikely given the plural verb (hence their).

From here onwards Yahweh considers the punishment for Israel, a son who not only worships Baals but also “refuses to repent” –showing fickleness in contrast to Yahweh’s steadfastness.²⁷ Accordingly, it is prophesied that due to disloyalty, Israel will return metaphorically to “Egypt” for continuing punishment, reversing verse 1.²⁸ This is to be realised in terms of captivity by Assyrian “rule” as contrasted to Yahweh’s kindly fatherhood and the period of independent kingship.

*6 Swords will flash in their cities,
will destroy the bars of their gates
and put an end to their plans.*

The punishment will²⁹ involve violence in terms of a military invasion (“swords”) and destruction of the cities where people take refuge (“gates” being a metonymy). The independent thought and action exemplified by “plans” – themselves often misconceived - will no longer be feasible. Some translations talk of the sword “devouring” in contrast to the “feeding” by Yahweh in verse 5, while instead of “gates” some have “false prophets” or “idle talkers”³⁰ who helped lead Israel to apostasy and lack of repentance.

*7 My people are determined to turn from me.
Even if they call to the Most High,
he will by no means exalt them.*

“Determined to turn” away from Yahweh further stresses refusal to repent. Calling to the “Most High” is useless, be he Baal (who does not exist) or Yahweh himself (who has decided

²⁷ Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea*, 584.

²⁸ Wolff, *Hosea*, 200, suggests rather that the reference to Egypt refers to Israel’s desire to go back to a situation preceding salvation history; Again, Mays, *Hosea*, 155 suggest it refers to a current situation where some refugees have fled to the south and the king is seeking an alliance with Egypt. But this does not square with the future tense; Davies, *Hosea*, 251 suggests “it is hardly possible to understand verse 5 in the way suggested”.

²⁹ Mays, *Hosea*, 155 sees the process as a current situation where in 733 Tiglath-Pileser III had already taken over most of Israelite territory.

³⁰ Davies, *Hosea*, 259.

on punishment³¹). “Call” recurs from verse 1 – God once “called” kindly and now Israel “calls” in vain. Also “turn from” recurs from verse 2 for emphasis and also to stress the consequence in verse 6 – return to Egypt. God’s pain of unrequited love at Israel’s revolt is shown by the repetition of “my” and “me”.

*8 "How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?
How can I make you like Zeboiim?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.*

The direction of the passage abruptly shifts as we witness Yahweh’s inner turmoil, emphasised by repetition of “How can I” in a series of rhetorical questions. Israel is being addressed directly. In sorrow and love, God questions his own resolve to justly punish Israel (of which Ephraim is the leading tribe) with annihilation akin to that of the cities of the plain (Deuteronomy 29:23). This is despite the fact that unlike in Genesis 18 Abraham is not pleading for them³² and there are no “just people” there (i.e. there is no repentance visible), and Deuteronomy 21:21 prescribes stoning for a disobedient son. God has a “change of heart” due to his “compassion”, recalling the passionate, unconditional love of the father for the child. This is a natural but very controversial interpretation, with Calvin saying God cannot be touched with repentance and to “imagine such a thing is impiety”.³³ The general issue may be anthropomorphism, only by such words via Hosea can we understand God’s decisions.

*9 I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.
For I am God, and not man--
the Holy One among you.*

³¹ However, Stuart, *Hosea*, 181, notes that the line could be reconstructed differently as envisaging the people turning back to Yahweh once they are in exile, while Davies, *Hosea*, 260 sees it as “so they are appointed to the yoke and none shall remove it” i.e. reaffirming the subjection announced in verse 5-6.

³² Wolff, *Hosea*, 195, however, suggests that the prophet may have been entreating Yahweh’s forgiveness between verses 7 and 8.

³³ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 402

I will not come in wrath.

The consequences of the change of heart is that Yahweh will not “devastate” Ephraim in his anger at their disobedience, leaving a possibility of renewed life. This is not “injustice” - a plaintiff may choose not to exercise his rights to the full, and the judge also may suspend the capital element of the punishment.³⁴ The context – and history – say the prophesied invasion of verse 7 will still occur. Rather, in eschatological time, there will be a remnant which is saved and redeemed, as promised in Deuteronomy 4:29-31. Yahweh emphasises he remains committed to Israel (the Holy One among you), but holiness implies being set apart. Holy character hence differs from humankind which can be partial and vindictive. It leads him to mercy rather than mechanistic judgement. As noted, some³⁵ see the passage as saying the opposite i.e. “I will destroy”, contrary to the overall tone that love triumphs over justice. Meanwhile some have “again destroy”³⁶, implying a repeated process of total destruction which is hard to accept as an appropriate translation.

*10 They will follow the LORD;
he will roar like a lion.
When he roars,
his children will come trembling from the west.
11 They will come trembling
like birds from Egypt,
like doves from Assyria.
I will settle them in their homes,"
declares the LORD.*

In contrast to earlier “turning” away, Israel now “returns”. The covenant is restored in a future eschatological time. The lion of God who in 5:14 is the destroyer – or who in Amos 1:2 calls Israel to judgement - is now the redeemer who “calls” them, possibly destroying their enemies (cf. Joel 3:16). Those saved “children” will faithfully follow the Lord and tremble in fear at

³⁴ Stuart, *Hosea*, 176.

³⁵ Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea*, 589.

³⁶ Mays, *Hosea*, 157.

his lion's roar,³⁷ rather than arrogantly disobeying him, although note their repentance only takes place after the Lord's initiative.³⁸ Hosea foresees a Diaspora, with people over the seas as well as in Egypt and Assyria. Besides trembling, the bird analogy also emphasises speed and ability to cross-geographical barriers. And finally, the way God settles the Israelite "children" back in their homes recalls his fatherly care; the return is solely in his strength and not in theirs. The oracle formula, unusual in Hosea, sets God's seal on the prophecy of the chapter.

6 Relevance and application

The passage is of clear relevance to later prophecy, where God's change of heart, what Davies calls the "pivot of the book"³⁹ is also the theological basis of a key strand in prophecy more generally, as in Jonah (the change of mind over Nineveh) and also Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah 40-66. There are clear prophetic references to the later history of the Jews. Is the "return" of verses 10-11 linked to the return from Babylonian exile to Judah, or to God in Acts, or even the re-establishment of Israel in 1948? And if God promises to not devastate Ephraim, what of the Shoah?

Although written to Israel, the exegesis itself immediately shows relevant aspects for Christians, "heirs together with Israel" (Eph 3:6). God's love and grace contrasts with humankind's stubborn rebellion dating back to the Fall and common to all humanity, not just the Jews. God's generous and kind character, his "suffering love", is shown in the Old Testament where uninformed Christian tradition often sees only a vengeful tyrant. His ways are far beyond ours, as Isaiah 55:8 stresses.

³⁷ Stuart, *Hosea*, 182 prefers "hurry" to "tremble" here.

³⁸ Kidner, *Message*, 105.

³⁹ Davies, *Hosea*, 261.

In the New Testament, Matthew uses verse 1 to exemplify the call of Jesus, the beloved Son of God, from Egypt as a child. Jesus is the perfect Israel,⁴⁰ who did not stray from God's laws and fulfilled the task laid out for him - to be Isaiah's suffering servant. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), God can be linked to the forgiving father despite the fact his son was unruly. The analogy is imperfect as the repentance of Israel is not stated in Hosea 11. The reference to the yoke in verse 4 can be linked to Matthew 11:28-30, that Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light.

Crucially, God's agony over humanity's rebellion led ultimately to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, as God chose to execute his just wrath at sin on himself, thus showing infinite mercy to humankind. He thus restored the covenant and his people to faith. I would see the "Holy One among you" as the incarnation of Jesus, and most graphically as Jesus between the thieves sharing humanity's just punishment on the cross. His sacrifice, following Hosea 11, highlights that God is love (1 John 4:8), as shown by sending his son (John 3:16).⁴¹

One could preach the passage to Christians as an illustration of God's fatherly – and generally unrequited - love for an ungrateful humankind, weaving in the above-mentioned New Testament links. We may explore God's kindnesses to us as we ourselves grow up, as well as our acts of rebellion against him by our own sin. We could note the parallels with the Prodigal Son, how much God wants to save us when we are lost. As an illustration, one could discuss how we who are parents sometimes experience provocation and ingratitude – does it help us to empathise with God? Can we realise how much more perfect a father God is, being neither indulgent nor a tyrant, his love both more "ardent and vulnerable" than ours?

⁴⁰ Kidner, *Hosea*, 102, although as Calvin, *Hosea*, notes, Jesus is the begotten and Israel the adopted son.

⁴¹ Wolff, *Hosea*, 204.

Are our hearts as Christians not as far from him as the Israelites', especially when life seems to be "going well"? What are the "Baals" to which we sacrifice – house, job, wealth, fame? We may consider the just punishment in hell that should await us, and the fact that God chose not to go to the full measure of his justice, owing to his mercy in sending Jesus – at what a cost to himself! We may consider what "returning to Egypt" might mean on earth also, such as the horror of world war if we forget past ones. That there is a future for those of us who remain faithful to him, although the way is not a smooth one. The Narnia film can topically be referred to in respect of God acting first before we repent by sending Christ as the lion calling his people home. As Matthew Henry notes "holy trembling at the word of Christ will draw us to him".⁴²

Concluding reflections could be to pray for our country, which is in a similar time of disobedience. To pray for our families, that we might be the parents of our children God wants us to be. And to personally repent of our own sins, as the "lion roared" long ago.

7 Conclusion

We learn conclusively from Hosea 11:1-11 that due to his unconditional love, God's relationship with his people shall not end despite their sin and his wrath. Although punishment will not be withdrawn entirely, he will take the initiative to call his people back to faith and a redeemed future. The Chapter stands as one of the finest chapters in the Old Testament, points strongly to the New Testament message of Jesus' advent and death on the cross, and has powerful applications for today's church.

WORD COUNT: 2984 WORDS EXCLUDING NIV TEXT (276 WORDS)

⁴² Henry, *Hosea 11*.

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