

HOSEA 2:2-23: WARNING AND HOPE FOR YHWH'S COMMUNITY

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I. Introduction to the Passage

Hosea 2:2-23 (MT: vv. 4-25) is a passage bracketed by the account of the personal history of Hosea's well-known, unhappy marriage with his adulterous wife Gomer. YHWH commands an eighth-century (ca. 750-725 B.C.) prophet of northern Israel to take an adulterous woman to be his wife. Three children are born to the couple, and their names are prophetically significant: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi. After Gomer deserts Hosea, he must buy her back.

All are agreed that the marriage images (symbolizes) the turbulent relationship which has existed between YHWH and His people Israel. YHWH has bound Himself by covenant to this people, and in the book of Hosea marriage is the metaphor used to illustrate God's case (*rib*) against Israel. Hosea 2:2-23, lying as it does between the historical chapters 1 and 3, summarizes much of the rest of Hosea's prophecy. Hosea 2:2-23 is not independent of either what precedes or follows it.¹ Hosea 2:1 belongs to chapter one's message. Chapter 2 gives both God's indictment of Israel's sin along with His intentions which will restore Israel to being a faithful covenant partner. Hosea 2:2-23 is thus a microcosm for much of the rest of the book. Says Ward, "Here is one of the most interesting passages in the prophetic canon, and it is one of the most important theologically. In it the prophet interprets the history of Israel as a marriage between God and the covenant people."²

II. Message of the Passage

The passage is a lawsuit against the wife/mother Israel. YHWH calls in 2:2 for the children to press the case against the mother. The

repetition of the courtroom terms ("plead . . . plead") stresses the urgency of the matter. The husband is YHWH, the mother is Israel in the north (viewed corporately), while the children may be seen as single or individual Israelites.³

Hosea thus distinguishes between the community/nation as a whole and between responsible individuals within it. The emphasis, nevertheless, rests on the corporate identity of the nation. YHWH has a case against Israel, and He will execute it Himself.

The sins of the Israel community are spelled out in 2:5,8. Israel is chasing after "lovers."⁴ The verbal root for lover is the word which YHWH says describes His relationship toward Israel.⁵ In the covenant relationship YHWH loves the community Israel, but Israel chases other lovers. Israel does not acknowledge (*yada'*) Him. Instead, Israel confesses that her lovers, the *ba'alim*, gave her all her rich gifts. YHWH actually gave her agricultural and monetary gifts, but Israel confesses that it was Baal who did so, and then Israel uses these same gifts for Baal (2:8).

God's response is a lawsuit. In some cultures of the Near East an adulterous wife would be stripped publicly to expose her shame to the public (2:3,10). Israel's *torah* prescribed death, on the other hand. But YHWH does not press for the extreme penalty. The harsh treatment which God proposes for Israel is a stripping away of two things: all her gifts (2:9,10) and her cultic celebrations (2:11). To lose both these things is a punishment. Without daily provisions of food and clothing the continuation of life becomes extremely tenuous.

Losing the cultic rites and feasts is also a judgment of God. Perhaps a modern person might wonder how this is so, especially when many no longer make attendance at worship services a priority. But without the cultus the "love talk" between God and His covenant people is not heard and cannot be carried on. There is then no joy, no confessions, no explanations of *torah*, no guidance or directions for life. Without these things a community/civilization/culture withers and dies. What ensues is a famine for hearing the Word of YHWH, as Hosea's contemporary Amos had said (Amos 8:11-12).

God's lawsuit against His community is punitive for a positive purpose. His interest is not in a permanent divorce, but His actions are to result in an ultimate reconstruction of the loving, covenant relationship.⁶ YHWH does not want Israel to die but to live. But the

community must make a proper confession, saying *'ishi* and not *ba'ali* (2:16-17).

The restorative or recreative actions of YHWH are spelled out in 2:14-23. The marriage metaphor is not yet abandoned, but the stage of the relationship will have to be taken back to that of courtship. Israel will be allured into the desert so that God may romance His people again with tender words to their heart (2:14).

Does this indicate a time of brokenness, as in a harsh exile? Or does it indicate an undoing of her national sophistication, a return to simplicity, to youth, to an almost unspoiled naivete? Israel's desert experience, following her departure from Egyptian slavery, was time away from grape vineyards and away from baalistic fertility religion. In the desert YHWH had Israel all to Himself without any competition from other lovers. "Hosea is not the advocate of a nomadic ideal with a simple nostalgia for life away from the agricultural civilization of Palestine."⁷ YHWH wants a new beginning with His people. Therefore, one dimension of the Lord's positive restoration of Israel's community is to impress on her the Exodus/Wilderness experience, Israel's historical "honeymoon." YHWH is the God of a salvation history which is a constitutive element in Israel's existence as God's covenant people.

But YHWH is also the God of creation/nature. The *ba'alim* can have no advantage in their wooing of Israel. Hosea 2:18-22 shows God restoring the harmony which should exist between His community and His world. Man and woman were placed in creation to have dominion over all things, bring all things into subjection under God's sovereignty and lordship. Sin disrupted that harmony in such a way that human work became a curse of sweaty toil as humanity tries to sustain life but, in the end, the dust still claims all. Sinfulness throughout mankind ruins all creational relationships so that even creation groans in longing for the revelation of the sons of God. It is quite likely that Paul's words in Romans 8:19-23 build on the words of Hosea 4:3.

YHWH will make a covenant on behalf of two other parties: His community and His creation. This action will result in peace for Israel as weapons of war are removed (2:18b). The new word of grace will be passed along, beginning with YHWH and ending with the three symbolic children. They will confess that YHWH is their God as they hear of and experience God's love and mercy (2:22b-23). Not only will the community of Israel enjoy tangible blessings, but the covenant relationship will be restored in a new

betrothal. Hosea clusters a number of rich terms to describe how Israel may relate to YHWH forever and how He will relate to His community: in/with righteousness and justice, covenant loyalty, compassion/mercy, and faithfulness. Then Israel will know and acknowledge YHWH (2:20b). Hosea foresees not a deadly divorce but a time of punishment leading to restoration. Or to put it into language more characteristic of the New Testament, Israel will go through death and resurrection.

III. Hosea's Place in the History of Revelation

The message of Hosea came at a time early in the period of inscripturation of God's Word. The covenantal relationship between YHWH and His people Israel is historically established in the Exodus and is given formal definition (stipulations and sanctions) at Sinai. The history of Israel (and Judah) was being experienced but not yet being made canonical Scripture. Hosea belongs with the earliest of the so-called writing prophets: Amos, Isaiah, and Micah. Yet the "text" for Hosea's message is the covenantal bond of love and knowledge between YHWH and His community, a bond explicated in the Pentateuch.

Hosea's usage of the marriage metaphor is fitting. Geerhardus Vos points out that for the prophet marriage and *berit* (covenant) are identical. But behind the *berit* "lies something deeper and more fundamental, the nature and will of Jehovah."⁸ The union or relationship has its origin with God and in His election, but, of course, it is an election that emerges in time, specifically at the Exodus. God loves this community Israel initially because of who He is and because of what His sovereign choice is. To receive God's love the community of Israel does not meet any preconditions.

Hosea's usage of the marriage metaphor is also striking. There was nothing that mandated a husband to be tender to his wife. He had authority over her since he was her lord (*ba'al*). But in Hosea 2 God reveals a relationship that transcended the social customs of the day.⁹ YHWH certainly is sovereign in the relationship with the community of Israel, but it is not a sovereignty that lacks tenderness. YHWH will woo Israel, win her, seek her affection. YHWH certainly gives natural blessings, but Hosea reveals that a community also needs more than that. A community needs faithfulness, truth, justice, love, loyalty. YHWH Himself must give these things in order that His community may survive. Marriage fits the historical beginnings of this union very well: a man and a

woman come together and then are husband and wife. When the relationship is honest and open, the special fellowship of intimacy can result. Or to use Biblical terms, the two partners know each other and do not forget each other.

Thus the knowledge of God, rooted in the experiences of both saving events and natural gifts, is meant to lead Israel as a community into greater degrees of holiness. Vos observes that "this knowledge is intended to make Israel like unto Jehovah, it has a character-forming influence; this is so fundamental a law that it holds true even in idolatry (9:10)."¹⁰ People act according to the god(s) that they follow. If the god be cruel, the people are cruel. If the God be YHWH, the people who follow Him will love justice and practice kindness.

Hosea's message also possesses its own distinctives when compared with the prophets contemporaneous with himself. With Amos, Isaiah, and Micah revelation stresses an ethical point of view: God desires righteousness and justice within the community rather than sacrifices. With Hosea revelation stresses an affectional point of view: God desires knowledge of Himself more than sacrifices.¹¹ Hosea does not condemn the cultic institution *per se*. He describes the priestly sin of neglecting to teach *torah*. The resulting ignorance leads to the death of a community (4:1-9).

Here then lies the area of Hosea's concern: the confessional/cultic dimension of the community's existence. If true worship, righteousness and justice, mercy and compassion all belong to the heart of a true community of YHWH, then it is the worship and confessional dimension of existence that Hosea addresses. Amos focuses on Israel's lack of compassion and righteousness which makes her baalized piety even more repugnant to the Lord. Hosea narrows the concern by saying that Israel's worship/cultus is wrong and misdirected. To be sure, Hosea mentions social sins,¹² but his prophecy reveals that a community begins its stumbling when it no longer knows YHWH and His *torah*.¹³

IV. *Contours of Application*

It is important to remember that Israel believed that she was worshipping YHWH, but in fact such worship had been baalized. The principle that underlies Baalism must be understood. Modern people would not think of kissing calf-images as ancient Israelites would do (13:2). Baalism appears in a different form today. Israelites became "secular" when life became secure and satisfying.

YHWH fed Israel, and Israel forgot YHWH (13:6). Israel attributed her success and prosperity to the nature forces personified in the *ba'alim* (2:12). Israel provided honor for Baal, and in turn Baal paid Israel with vines and fig trees. This is a *do ut des* principle of religion: "I give in order that you give." Instead of thanking YHWH in utter humility for His abundant gifts, Israel confessed her trust in *ba'alim* who paid her for favors rendered. Israel worked for wages; she did not serve out of gratitude.

Since the *ba'alim* represented the forces of nature that operated in a system that Israelites believed they could influence through their cult, perhaps a modern analogy (not an equation) could be attempted. Western civilization exists in a post-Enlightenment and post-Kantian situation. Reality is divided into two realms, modernity confesses. There is a closed system of nature/fact/science, an area open to everyone's common, rational comprehension and understanding. Then there is another realm, a realm for religion, private values, opinions, the great "leap into the dark." This realm continues to get smaller as our knowledge grows, and it is in this realm that "God" belongs, not in the closed system of natural law. So the modern secularist can be a rationalist in all of life since God is not needed there, but in the area of "religion," if he or she feels the need for religion at all, the modern person often seems content to be a complete mystic.

But is the modern secularist really content? Christianity affirms that all mankind is created in the image of God with a heart-rooted *sensus divinitatis*. Humanity cannot avoid the Creator. The image-bearer must give YHWH the thanks which is due to Him. Giving thanks to a God who is clearly revealed and known in all parts of His creation, is one dimension of life that is absolutely essential. In the New Testament Romans 1:18-25 is the *locus classicus* where this is stated. When God is not glorified or thanked, then the community of mankind finds new gods within the creation itself: bull-calves, Science, "Mother" Nature, the human "spirit," the State, Aryan blood and soil, and a host of other gods. Yet man remains restless.

Secularism is a closed-system religion. Baalism comes around in principle in such secularism, a world-and-life view which believes that a transcendent yet immanent God is unnecessary. Man has now "come of age," it is thought. But if humanity has come of age in the spirit of Hosea 2:5 and 13:6, then there is destroyed one of the basic components of true community and true humanity.

Secularism destroys community. It leaves many individuals powerless, empty, isolated, and without purpose.

It has been said that today people do not worship their god(s), but instead they study or analyze them. If the Christian church is to be the new humanity and the true community, she must provide authentic worship experiences in which the whole Bible is clearly preached. YHWH is not to be paid for favors received, but He is to be thanked, worshiped, and sincerely obeyed. The pulpit is thus a crucial place for the creation of and sustaining of the true community in Christ. Gospel-denying liberalism and creation-ignoring fundamentalism cannot be helpful here because the inner principles in both of them promote a truncated knowledge of God.

Hosea makes clear that YHWH is the God of the Exodus/Wilderness but also the God of (re)creation. He relates to both His people and His creation covenantally. *Shalom* in community occurs and reoccurs when God restores covenant with His people and with the creation for His people.

But there first must be a death before there is a resurrection. When Christ invites people to be His followers, He invites them to die, suggests Bonhoeffer. Yet when a community dies with Christ in baptism and in the daily bearing of the cross, such a community is also assured of resurrection to everlasting life.

The message of Hosea is thus a call to the Christian community to safeguard a Biblical confession of truth so that the Gospel may be purely proclaimed. The blessing that results is the liturgical dialogue with is rooted in ancient history, a love talk in which YHWH says to His faithful community, "You are My people in Jesus Christ," and the community responds, "You are my Lord and my God."

NOTES

¹Cf. William Rainey Harper, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904), 225. Harper asserts, without argumentation, that chapter 2 is independent of chapters 1 and 3.

²James M. Ward, *The Prophets* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 130.

³James Luther Mays, *Hosea: a commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 36; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 282.

⁴Hosea 2:5,7,10,12,13.

⁵Deuteronomy 7:9,12,13.

⁶Mays, *Hosea*, 36.

⁷Mays, *Hosea*, 44.

⁸Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 280.

⁹Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 281.

¹⁰Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 282.

¹¹Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 282.

¹²Hosea 4:2,3,8; 6:6-9; 12:7,8.

¹³Hosea 4:6ff.; 4:10ff.; 8:1,11ff.; 9:10b; 11:2; 13:1,2; 14:3.