

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGMENT

AN EXEGESIS OF HOSEA 11:1-11

SUBMITTED TO

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

The book of Hosea begins with the words, “The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel” (Hos. 1:1 NIV). King Jeroboam, son of Jehoash (2 Ki. 13:13), died *ca.* 753, which dates the beginning of Hosea’s ministry, and it appears that Hosea did not continue to preach after the fall of Samaria in 721.¹ These were anarchic and tragic days for the northern kingdom, during which six kings reigned within the course of 25 years. It was also a time in which Assyria gained eminence as a world power under the rule of Tiglath-pileser III. As the brutal Assyrian armies pushed west, Israel suffered from internal unrest and political intrigues. Assyria and Egypt were sought alternately as means of protection and support, all to no avail. The fall of the northern kingdom, also referred to as *Ephraim*, was immanent.

If the political condition of Israel was bad, the moral and spiritual condition was even worse: “They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets” (Hos. 7:1b NIV). As detailed in the book of Amos, the Israelites were corrupt politically and unjust to the poor and unfortunate. It was not that the Israelites were not a *religious* people (their ritual life flourished), but they did not acknowledge God with their hearts or with their actions. The LORD rebukes them in words that echo Isaiah’s: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6 NIV). The Israelites fell into the mistake of emphasizing the wrong things—ritual observance instead of heart obedience. Hosea’s main complaint is that the Israelites no longer “know” the Lord: “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6a NIV). By “knowledge,” Hosea did not just mean an intellectual understanding of God, but an act “involving concern, inner engagement, dedication, or attachment to a person.”²

As the Assyrian armies threatened, the Israelites turned to political maneuvers and intrigues to save them, rather than to the LORD: “Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless-- now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria...they do not turn to the Most High” (Hos. 7:11, 16 NIV). These maneuvers demonstrated that the Israelites no longer trusted in the LORD for their protection and sustenance, and it was for this reason that judgment would come. The LORD, through his prophets, repeatedly beseeched his people to turn to him, but they would not.

Hosea is not mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament, but we know from the historical setting that he was a contemporary of Amos, another prophet to the northern kingdom, who also preached during the reign of Jeroboam II. “Some number him among the priests because of his intimate knowledge of religious affairs in the northern kingdom and his grave concern for the

¹ William Sanford LaSor, Robert L. Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 256.

² Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 1:57.

corruption of the priesthood,” whereas others link him with the prophets.³ Whatever his station, there is no mention of any interaction or conflict with the political and religious authorities of his time.

Character of the Prophet

From the book bearing his name, Hosea appears to have been a gentle and god-fearing man, well acquainted with the character of God. The tone of his book is one of compassion and forgiveness; "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (Hos. 11:8 NIV). Hosea deeply sensed the pathos of God, and is often compared with the prophet Jeremiah in this respect.

Perhaps most striking of all is the LORD's command to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD" (Hos. 1:2 NIV). Hosea's wife, Gomer, subsequently leaves him for a life of prostitution and slavery, which he later redeems her from. This experience no doubt impressed upon Hosea's psyche the anguish of the LORD over Israel's prostitution and unfaithfulness. It also demonstrates the limitless love of the LORD in that he continues to love and cherish Israel, even when they are unfaithful. The parallel is unavoidable: to Hosea, "marriage is the image for the relationship of God and Israel."⁴

Amos preached against the social injustices of the northern kingdom, and portrayed a God who was primarily disgusted with the sinfulness of Israel. God's feelings of anger and wrath are provoked by the wickedness of human beings, and His main concern is human conduct.⁵ In contrast, Hosea reveals more of the inner life of God, including glimpses of his love, tenderness, and even nostalgia: "When Israel was a child, I loved him...It was I who taught Ephraim to walk" (Hos. 11:1, 3 NIV). Most similar to Hosea in tone would be Jeremiah, who also combined "a sensitivity to his people's suffering and a gracious humanity."⁶

Book Outline

- I. The Unfaithful Wife and the Faithful/Forgiving Husband (1:1-3:5)
 - A. The Marriage and Children of Hosea (1:1-2:1)
 - B. The Unfaithful Wife/Nation (2:2-23)
 - C. The Faithful/Forgiving Husband (ch. 3)
- II. The Unfaithful Nation and the Faithful/Forgiving God (chs. 4-14)
 - A. Israel Accused and Judged (4:1-6:3)
 - B. Israel's Punishment (6:4-10:15)
 - C. The Lord's Faithful Love (chs. 11-14)

³ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 256.

⁴ Heschel, 1:50.

⁵ Heschel, 1:47.

⁶ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 333.

EXEGESIS OF HOSEA 11:1-11

Literary Features

Chapter 11 of Hosea is a grand illustration of Hebrew poetry at its finest. As such, it “appeals more to human imagination and emotion than to reason.”⁷ God’s tenderness toward Israel is illustrated with vivid word-pictures, such as “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms” (Hos. 11:3 NIV). Here we can imagine God as a loving father who takes his small child by the arms and teaches him to walk. Also, “I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (Hos. 11:4 NIV). “Hosea’s imaginative power is displayed in his striking figures of speech.”⁸

This passage of Hosea also demonstrates the literary feature of parallelism. Parallelism is “the repetition of the same or related semantic content and/or grammatical structure in consecutive lines or verses.”⁹ Hosea uses parallelism to emphasize key points and to illustrate certain concepts. For example, he uses synonymous parallelism (where consecutive lines express the same thought) to convey God’s anguish over Israel in verse 8a: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?” As is apparent, “How can I give you up” is parallel to “How can I hand you over”—they are simply two ways of saying the same thing. Also, “Ephraim” is parallel to “Israel”—both being references to the northern kingdom. This same sort of parallelism is demonstrated in the rest of verse 8: “How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?” Here, Admah and Zeboiim are parallel, both cities that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Deu. 29:23 NIV).

Historic Features

Central to this passage is the foundational experience of the Exodus: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1 NIV). All throughout the Old Testament, and several times in the book of Hosea, the LORD refers to the Exodus as a time of true intimacy between himself and Israel. This was the time when Israel was a “child” and followed the LORD with relative innocence and purity: “But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery” (Deu 7:8 NIV).

And often, as is the case in Hosea, God contrasts the past experience with the present. Whereas Israel was once obedient and single-mindedly devoted to the LORD, they became unruly and disobedient. Time after time, God sent his prophets to chastise the people, yet they became more and more rebellious. The Exodus experience also illustrates the fact that out of all the nations, God chose the people Israel, and called them “my son.” This is the basis both for the loving compassion that God showers upon them, as well as the demands for justice and righteousness.

⁷ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 231.

⁸ Emil G. Kraeling, *The Prophets* (USA: Rand McNally, 1969), 58.

⁹ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 232.

Contrasted to their former innocence, the LORD draws attention to the idolatry of the northern kingdom. Hosea preached during a time of widespread paganism and calf-worship in Israel: “They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images” (Hos. 11:2 NIV). Baal worship had been introduced by Ahab’s queen Jezebel (1 Kgs. 16:29-33), and after several attempts to wipe it out, it still flourished.¹⁰ In addition to the sheer fact that it was blatant idolatry, the pagan rites included sacred prostitution and intoxication.¹¹ Hosea devotes a considerable portion of his book to the debauchery of Israel. God could not turn a blind eye to the wickedness and sins of his people any longer; their crimes demanded justice.

While paganism ran rampant throughout the land, forces abroad threatened the security of Israel. With the ascension of Tiglath-Pileser III to the throne of Assyria, a new threat of annihilation loomed on the horizon. The Assyrians formed a new standing army, and began wars of conquest rather than simply plunder. Soon Assyrian forces were on the border of Israel and Judah, extracting heavy tribute (2 Ki. 15:19). But Hosea, as other prophets had, portrayed the Assyrians not as an enemy to God and his people, but as the instrument of the LORD’s judgment: “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?” (Hos. 11:5 NIV). Their crimes could not go unpunished, but the LORD grieved the fact that He would have to treat Israel like Admah and Zeboim, nations he had utterly destroyed (Hos. 11:3, Deu. 29:23).

Outline of Passage

God’s Love for Israel (11:1-11)

- I. God loves Israel, but Israel defiant (1-4)
 - A. God called Israel from Egypt (1)
 - B. Israel turned to Baals (2)
 - C. God taught Ephraim to walk (3a)
 - D. Ephraim unaware (3b)
 - E. God led them with kindness and lifted their yoke (4)
- II. Destruction awaits defiant Israel (5-7)
 - A. Egypt and Assyria will overrun them (5-6)
 - B. Israel defiant, and it is too late (7)
- III. God anguished over destruction of Israel (8-11)
 - A. God’s compassion (8-9)
 - B. God will return the exiles (10-11)

Central Message

The history of Israel is one of continual ups and downs, faithfulness and apostasy. As God’s chosen people they experienced his love and compassion like no other people on the face of the earth. But as faithful as God was, so were the Israelites unfaithful. Their fickleness and forgetfulness toward God is staggering. But the message of Hosea is that mercy triumphs over judgment. Even though Ephraim (the northern kingdom) is unfaithful and backsliding, God is tender and merciful in his faithfulness.

¹⁰ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 260.

¹¹ Heschel, 1:45.

There has never been a people with whom God has been more intimate; “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms. . . 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” (Hos. 11:3-4 NIV). The story of the Exodus illustrates a God who cared for Israel like a father would his infant son. He led them with “cords of human kindness”, training and coaxing them in the ways of righteousness and life. They were his chosen and special people, a people who alone would bear His Name. As Hosea’s contemporary Amos preached, “You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2a NIV).

But Israel was a disobedient and ungrateful people, “But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images” (Hos. 11:2 NIV). The Old Testament is rife with the stories of Israel’s running after idols and prostituting themselves to other nations. It seemed that the more the LORD blessed them, the more arrogant and forgetful they became. Neither did Israel acknowledge all that God had done for them; “they did not realize it was I who healed them” (Hos. 11:3b NIV). They credited themselves, or worse yet, other deities, for their successes and triumphs.

But the central message of Hosea is that God’s love and mercy knows no limits, and eventually triumphs over judgment. God is not delighted or even ambivalent to bring destruction upon his chosen people, but is greatly distressed and grieved: “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” (Hos. 11:8 NIV). The LORD is not simply an automaton who simply responds to injustice with wrath and destruction. God is a *person* with a depth of pathos that is immeasurable. “God is not only the Lord who demands justice; He is also a God Who is in love with His people.”¹² God does not deal with Israel as would an ordinary human being, in wrath and anger; “For I am God, and not man-- the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath” (Hos. 11:9 NIV).

Application for First Audience

Hosea’s message in chapter 11 reminded the original hearers, Ephraim, of God’s longstanding faithfulness and his tender loving-kindness in spite of their unfaithfulness. Perhaps it contrasted to other prophets of the time, like Amos, who stressed God’s anger and wrath at Israel’s disobedience. More than any other sentiment, Hosea illustrates God’s anguish over the backsliding of his people. It reminded the hearers of the loving and tender ways that God dealt with Israel in her youth; “I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love” (Hos. 11:4a NIV). Hosea’s words appeal to the heart of his hearers, revealing a God who is in love with his people, and loathe to bring judgment. It is an appeal like that from a father to his wayward son, to remember his father’s love and faithfulness.

“God is conceived, not as the self-detached Ruler, but as the sensitive Consort to Whom deception comes and Who nevertheless goes on pleading for loyalty, uttering a longing for a reunion, a passionate desire for reconciliation.”¹³

Chapter 11 of Hosea follows several chapters that outline the sins of Israel and the punishment that is to befall them. It does not counter this message, but tempers it with the message that God is not delighted to bring judgment, but quite the contrary. God is not like a man, who responds in anger and

¹² Heschel, 1:44.

¹³ Heschel, 1:48.

wrath for sinful reasons, but is the “Holy One”, who takes no pleasure in destruction. Hosea also sets forth a hope among the hearers that after the coming judgment there would be restoration: “They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes,” declares the LORD” (Hos. 11:11 NIV).

Application for Today's Audience

As Matthew Henry puts it, “those that have grown up, nay, those that have grown old, ought often to reflect upon the goodness of God to them in their childhood.”¹⁴ It is often very easy for Christians to forget God’s graciousness to them in the past, and only focus on the struggles and problems that they face in their present circumstances. We may often forget how God first loved us, and brought us “out of Egypt,” out of our past sin, darkness, and despair. Hosea reminds us that God *has* been kind and good to us, leading us with “cords of human kindness” when we most certainly deserved punishment. It also reminds us that just as Israel was God’s son, we today are God’s sons and daughters in Christ, as Paul says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26 NIV). Therefore God looks upon us with the same compassion and desire to treat us with mercy as he did Israel. “We need not be worried, then, that God will discard us when we stray. If he clung to Israel through all of their iniquity as recorded in the Old Testament, he will be patient with us as well, showing persistent, faithful loving-kindness.”¹⁵

Hosea’s message is also a reminder to us that God is not a man, and does not react in anger and wrath as does a man. It is far too easy to ascribe to God the feelings of judgment and disdain that we as Christians can often feel toward segments of society that we see as grossly unrighteous or corrupt. Too often we hear Christian preachers proclaiming the message that God hates this or that political or social group. The LORD has a capacity to withhold retribution and judgment that is beyond our understanding: “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. I will not come in wrath” (Hos. 11:9 NIV).

As Isaiah prophesied, Jesus came to proclaim “the year of the Lord's favor” (Isa. 61:2a NIV). Jesus came not to condemn sinners and proclaim God’s wrath, but to bring mercy and healing. In words that echo Hosea’s, Jesus said, “But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mat 9:13 NIV). This present age is the year of the LORD’s favor, and we would do well to never underestimate the LORD’s mercy, and love for his people.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean: MacDonald), vol. 4, *Isaiah to Malachi*, 1180.

¹⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 965.

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