

THE COVENANT CONCEPT IN HOSEA

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EVERY STUDENT with more than a purely superficial knowledge of the Minor Prophets needs no telling that Hosea presents major textual and compositional problems. The best commentary on these difficulties is that I know of no examination in which the Hebrew of Hosea is prescribed, though doubtless there are some.

The compositional problems find their most obvious expression in the story of Hosea's relationship with his wife. In chapter i this is told in the third person, and then, according to the interpretation adopted, continued or paralleled in the first person in chapter iii. Even the dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalist will presumably acknowledge that this is not a normal method of writing.

Writers like Theodore Robinson seek to solve these problems by a rather mechanical application of the criterion of oracular poetry, biographical prose and autobiographical prose, but it is probable that the majority would agree that the prophetic books are too individual to be amenable to such general treatment. In addition this method does not seem really to answer any of the problems of Hosea. In particular it fails to explain the mutilated nature of so many sections and the almost complete lack of that literary skill in the arrangement and linking of the original oracles which is such a feature in Hosea's two contemporaries Amos and Isaiah. For our purpose it is unnecessary to ask whether this skill was due to the prophets themselves or to editors and compilers. If it were the former, is it seriously suggested that the townsman Hosea fell so far behind the shepherd Amos? If it were the latter, how are we to explain Hosea's being so unfortunate compared to his Judean contemporaries?

In know of only one line of approach that even begins to do justice to the phenomena. Hosea will have met a violent death in the last troubled, savage days of Samaria. All that we have of his message will be the memories of a few disciples (or even only one), left to record them without the guidance of their master and therefore unable to build up the brief individual oracles into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Should anyone consider that the role of the Spirit is being minimized in this explanation, it is sufficient to point out that nothing bears more eloquent testimony to the tragedy of Israel's collapse and downfall than the broken record of its last prophet's message.

If this explanation is anywhere near the truth, then it is most unlikely that chapters i and iii are parallels. The first person in chapter iii is to be explained by the linkage of the prophet's experience with the oracle based on it. The story in i. 2-9 will have been gleaned by Hosea's disciples in their contacts with him. Piety to his memory will have led them to retain as much of the prophet's tragedy in his own words as possible.

H. Wheeler Robinson has said, 'It is not likely that a prophet of the classical period would have dared to prophesy without an inaugural vision such as Isaiah's in the temple, or an audition like Jeremiah's, or such a characteristically peculiar experience like that of Ezekiel.' In fact, though I agree without hesitation that we must postulate a call for each prophet, there is nothing in the prophetic books to suggest what form the call may have taken. The fact that in the majority of cases the call is not even mentioned suggests very strongly that those prophets who do mention

theirs do so merely because of the light it throws on their message as a whole. From this point of view it is reasonable to call God's command to Hosea to marry his call, though the manner of communication is not recorded, this being evidently irrelevant to his message as a whole.

The interpretation of Hosea's call and its sequel have been a major point of controversy. Since, however, 'the children of whoredom' were indubitably future, there seems to be every reason for our taking 'the wife or woman of whoredom' as a phrase looking to the future also and not to the past. When in addition we realize that by so taking it the typology obviously involved slips into place, we have every reason for thinking that Gomer *bat-Diblaim* was, officially at any rate, a pure woman at the time of her marriage.

While I doubt that the concept of Israel as the bride of Yahweh came as something completely novel to Hosea's hearers, he is undoubtedly the first to use it clearly in canonical Scripture, though there are in earlier writings expressions that are most easily understood, if we assume this picture behind them. Until his time the standard expression seems to have been that Israel was Yahweh's first-born: this picture is, of course, found also in Hosea (xi. 1-3), something that should warn us against any too literalistic understanding of these verbal pictures. It is worth mentioning that this marriage picture is always linked with Sinai, never with the Patriarchs, though in Ezekiel xvi the Patriarchal period is referred to as that of the bride's childhood.

The outstanding features of Hosea's marriage as told in his prophecy are the following:

No special reasons are mentioned for Hosea's choice of Gomer, except probably the Divine choice and command.

Her attitude to him was normal and formal; her calling of him 'Baali' (ii. 16) implies no special intimacy. There is no suggestion, however, that to say 'Ishi' would have been something new and unheard of.

Her unfaithfulness was at first hidden and then became open.

Hosea did not take the obvious step of divorcing her; had he done so, he could not in terms of Deuteronomy xxiv. 1-4 have taken her as wife again; cf. Jeremiah iii. 1, where this principle is applied to the woman who has become a harlot.

He bought her back.

A final question mark is left as to whether Hosea's loyalty and love would be effective in winning the loyalty and love of Gomer; 'Thou shalt sit still for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for (another) man, neither will I go in to thee' leaves the final outcome uncertain.

Though there are a number of pictures of Yahweh's relationship to His people in the Old Testament, there is probably none that expresses the historic facts more accurately than Hosea's marriage. Before we start to look at the details more closely, however, it will be wise to look at the covenant concept among the Semites.

Köhler links *berith* with the root *brh*, 'to share food'. If this is so, then the covenant concept is not one that starts with the exceptional and extends to the everyday, but the reverse. 'In any case I consider there can be no doubt that the covenant was merely the extending to a wider circle of what already existed as a matter of course. It is therefore not unreasonable to consider that normal life was dominated by the covenant concept. Among the Semites life and people seem to have been divided into two categories, those to whom certain obligations were owed and those who stood outside any obligation. The Gibeonites pretended to be from such a distance that no relationship existed between them and Israel. The creating of a relationship between them could be either one of no obligation, i.e. hostility, or of obligation and peace, and this involved the making of a covenant.

It follows from this that we should not expect the mention of covenant, wherever it stands in a context where it will be taken for granted, but the non-mention would not for the Semite be in any way a denial of its existence. Marriage is an excellent example of this type of covenant relationship. In addition it is probably the only one of these normal and standard relationships that can serve as a picture of the relationship created between

Yahweh and Israel at Sinai. The other covenantal relationships of life, those of the family, tribe and nation are not of our choosing or making; we are bound by them whether we wish it or not. The stoning of the stubborn and rebellious son (Dt. xxi. 18-21) is clearly based on social as well as religious grounds. But every marriage, however much it might be taken for granted, was the voluntary action and covenant, between a man and a woman, and hence it could serve as a picture of the covenant, voluntary on both sides, at Sinai. In addition, however simple the preliminaries and the ceremony, every marriage had that about it that could be equated with the covenant ceremony.

Marriage was the more suitable picture because in it the initiative throughout was taken by the man, and, at least in popular thought, the two partners were not conceived of as being on equal footing; this was clearly shown by the wife's normally addressing her husband as *baali* or *adoni*. But the prophetic revelation in Hosea is not in his stress that marriage may be employed as a picture of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The revelation is through Hosea's own marriage. Marriage foredoomed to failure, as stressed in Ezekiel xx and xxiii, is the only adequate parabolic or metaphoric expression for the Sinai covenant.

The thing that marked out that marriage from others was the loyalty of Hosea, the disloyalty of Gomer. Loyalty within such a relationship was expressed by the word *hesed*, which Köhler translates 'the mutual liability of those who are relatives, friends, master and servant, or belonging together in any other way (social responsibility), solidarity, joint liability'. He goes on to point out that *berith* and *hesed* carry to a great extent the same obligations. *Hesed* will always remain a difficult word for us to translate, seeing we are no longer dominated by the covenant concept. A full rendering should vary from context to context, but it will never be adequate unless loyalty to obligation is implied. Loyalty can never express adequately the obligations of the partners in marriage, but all the other factors have little value without it.

I pointed out earlier that Hosea showed his *hesed* by not divorcing Gomer, when he became aware of her unfaithfulness. In so doing he added to it that element of love and it may be of compassion that are probably always implied, when *hesed* is used of God. But though Hosea did not break his marriage pledge, Gomer by her unfaithfulness ceased to have the right to claim her marriage rights. Purchased back, and hence doubly her husband's, she was denied marital relations until Hosea was convinced, I presume, of the reality of her *hesed*.

But this is precisely what is implicitly stated about Yahweh. Right throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the choice of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her (make love to her). . . . And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness: and you shall know the LORD' (verses 14, 19, 20).

Here we are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end because His people have been disloyal to it; 'His steadfast love endures for ever'. But for all that the covenant is as good as gone and awaits the coming of a new covenant. That is why *hesed* is more than loyal love and is in fact virtually *hen*, i.e. grace. It was grace that made the covenant, but it is also grace that causes God to show His loyalty to a covenant that had been irreparably broken. One of the most tragic elements in Israel's history is the constant renewal of the covenant by reformers, and I have no doubt that scholars are correct in assuming that a covenant renewal festival was a regular feature of pre-exilic religion in Israel. That which man has broken only God can renew. It is too easy to stress the differences between the old and the new covenants; the new covenant is the application of God's Torah to His people in a new way, but it is not a new Torah.

Not only would the new covenant, the new marriage, be marked by true *hesed* on the bride's part, but at the present the break-down of this true relationship to Yahweh meant its break-down in all other relationships as well. In iv. 1 Israel is charged that 'There is no faithfulness or *hesed* (RSV 'kindness'), and no knowledge of God in the land'. The context of verse 2 shows clearly, however, that Yahweh is thinking primarily of social sins: swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery. Israel was not merely a nation with a religion. Like the Church it owed its existence purely to an act of God, and the ignoring of its obligations to God meant the break-down of all internal obligations as well. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' becomes meaningful only in the light of 'Thou shalt love Yahweh, thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength'.

There was another way too in which Hosea's marriage spoke of Yahweh's relationship to Israel. Both in joke and sometimes through grim reality we gain the impression that a man is looking for very much less than the biblical ideal of a help meet. A cook, housekeeper and bed-companion would seem to sum up the ambitions of many. Yet, when Hosea has bought Gomer back and has established a double and unbreakable claim on her, his refusal to regard her as truly wife will have shocked many of his contemporaries into realizing that when all was said and done he was right. For Gomer really to be his wife he had to have more than her body and her forced obedience.

In Mesopotamian mythology men had been created to be the slaves of the gods; the priests were essentially their personal servants. So far as I know the Canaanite mythology, as established in the Ugarit finds, does not contain sufficient creation matter for us to say with certainty how far it paralleled the Mesopotamian concept, but we have no grounds for thinking that it will have been significantly different. It is reasonable to suppose then — and there is much biblical evidence to support the supposition — that on the popular level the Sinai covenant was regarded less as an act of grace on Yahweh's part and far more as a strict example of a *quid pro quo*. No-one will have thought of denying the display of Yahweh's power, but it will have been very generally accepted that it was displayed to serve His own personal ends; the due celebration of the cultus with its sacrifices will have been regarded in particular as something from which Yahweh drew personal advantage.

By interpreting the covenant in terms of marriage and in the light of his own broken marriage Hosea placed it on an entirely different level. However different the psychology of man and woman, however different their functions in marriage, however different their status in Israelite society, their mutual *hesed* in marriage is fundamentally of the same type. So too, however great the gulf between God and man, man was made in the image and likeness of God, and so within the covenant between God and man, man's *hesed* must be in some way of the same type as God's *hesed*. We may express it by saying that God does not in the first place look for acts but for loyalty and love, though these cannot fail to express themselves in acts.

Hence Hosea can say in Yahweh's name: 'I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings' (vi. 6).

Guillaume has stressed correctly in *Prophecy and Divination* that the Hebrew idiom means not a rejection of sacrifice and burnt offerings but rather an emphatic insistence on *hesed* and the knowledge of God. The cultus is the outcome of *hesed* and of the knowledge of God and not a substitute for them or a way to them.

It is worth noting that the great saying in Amos: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities' (ii. 2), probably has the marriage concept behind it. Taken in its literal English meaning it is manifestly theologically false and is clearly contradicted by other verses in the same prophet. Nor is Moffatt's interpretation much better: 'You alone, of all men, have I cared for.' When, however, we remember that 'to know' is the regular Hebrew expression for sexual relationships and that unity of two hearts and minds that results, it should be clear that Yahweh is claiming a knowledge which is the fruit of a special relationship. So too in Hosea vi. 6 the knowledge

of God is not primarily intellectual or the fruit of theology, but the outcome of a relationship based on *hesed*.

I have no intention here of entering into discussions on irresistible grace or on the problem of the northern tribes today. However important theologically these questions may be and however much light Hosea may throw on them, they are fundamentally irrelevant to Hosea's prophecy. We are faced with the contradiction between Yahweh's *hesed* and refusal to give up Israel and Israel's refusal to listen. Though we have a beautiful prayer of repentance in chapter xiv, it falls into the same category as that in Jeremiah iii. 21-25; it has never yet been prayed. It is quite clear that Hosea does not proclaim the irresistibility of either God's grace or love. Over Israel's future he leaves the same question mark he has left over his own marriage.

It is clear that Hosea takes Amos' message of the unqualified and absolute justice of God for granted. Over against it he places God's absolute and unqualified *hesed* arising from an act lying in His own freedom, viz His covenant with Israel at Sinai. He makes no effort to reconcile the two messages. He is clear that Yahweh can no more tolerate lack of *hesed* from His covenant people than He can injustice from any people.

It is often said that the answer is offered by Isaiah. In fact this is an over-simplification. What Isaiah did was to shift the centre of the problem by stressing God's work in the creation of a remnant. The agony of Divine love and loyalty faced by human sin and rebellion remains a heart-breaking problem and is met again as one of the constituent elements in Jeremiah's message. In Isaiah xl-ly we find the answer on God's side to the problem, but there is no indication as to how it will work out in practice.

It is rather remarkable that Calvinism, in which the covenant concept is more stressed than in any other system of Christian theology, has hardly done adequate justice to Hosea's message. It is typical that G. C. Berkouwer in his recent work *Divine Election* refers to Hosea only three times in over 300 pages, if we may trust the index. Had the stress been laid, it is not likely that the formulation of Calvinistic doctrine would have been much modified, but it is probable that much of the hardness too often found in it would have been diminished. In addition the proclamation of irresistible grace might well at times have been much more guarded.

We can best conclude this brief consideration of the covenant concept in Hosea by looking on to an even greater Lover, who suffered even more in the rejection of His love. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Mt. xxiii. 37-39). Here not merely mercy and judgment come together but also a hope that is greater than merely the saving of a small remnant of the elect. Neither Hosea nor our Lord can remain content that the ultimate purposes of God should come to fruition in some other people than that to which He pledged His *hesed* in the Patriarchs and at Sinai.