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**AKKADIAN *BULLUṬU* AND HEBREW רפא:
PARDON AND LOYALTY IN HOSEA AND
IN NEO-ASSYRIAN POLITICAL TEXTS***

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Abstract: *As has long been recognized, Hosea uses the verb רפא to describe YHWH pardoning Israel. This article argues that Hosea expands the meaning of Hebrew רפא from “to heal” to “remitting a punishment.” The Akkadian verb bulluṭu, like Hebrew רפא, means “heal.” The words were therefore perceived as being equivalent, and part of the wider semantic range of Akkadian bulluṭu, namely, remitting the punishment of a disloyal subject, was applied to Hebrew רפא. In Hos 5:13; 6:1; 7:1; 11:3 and 14:5, this expansion of the meaning of Hebrew רפא aims to contrast submission to YHWH with subservience to Assyria. The article suggests that in these and other passages, Hosea deliberately subverts Assyrian imperial rhetoric. It also explores similar usages in Isa 6:10 and in Jer 3:22.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Five verses in Hosea (Hos 5:13; 6:1; 7:1; 11:3; 14:5) use רפא to mean “pardon.” Each of these passages also describes the mending of the covenantal bond between YHWH and His nation through divine forgiveness after an episode of Israelite disloyalty.¹ Furthermore, many of these passages discuss the transfer of Israel’s loyalty back to YHWH, often indicated by the verb שוב ‘to return’. רפא and שוב are linked, since a successful return of Israel (שוב) to God is accomplished by Israel abandoning its reliance on a foreign power or an idol. Upon Israel’s reverting to dependence upon and loyalty to YHWH, God remits the punishment for Israel’s disloyalty (רפא). We argue that this usage, both in meaning and in context, parallels and is ultimately indebted to the Akkadian verb *bulluṭu*.

* The verse references in this paper follow those in the Hebrew MT, which differ in Hosea chapters 5 and 14 from those in English translations. Many thanks to Professor Aaron Koller for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. All translations of Akkadian and biblical texts are the author’s unless another translation is cited.

1. In most cases, the disloyalty consists of submission to Assyria or another suzerain. Disloyalty can also be expressed by worship of other gods.

Below, we first discuss the Akkadian root, and then examine the Hebrew root along with the relevant passages in Hosea and elsewhere. We note a specific meaning of the Akkadian *bulluṭu* in Assyrian royal inscriptions: to remit a punishment after an episode of disloyal conduct. We conclude that several passages in Hosea expand the meaning of אָפַר to include this meaning attested for *bulluṭu*. The goal of this usage is to contrast between submission to YHWH and vassalage to Assyria, as we discuss.

2. AKKADIAN *BULLUṬU*

The Akkadian root *blṭ* has a wide range of meanings, all related to health and life. In the G-stem, *balāṭu* can mean to recover from illness or to remain alive (CAD B 52–53). *Bulluṭu*, the D-stem, also has a range of meanings, including “to keep someone alive or in good health” and “to provide someone with food.” The meaning of *bulluṭu* which concerns us here is attested to in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and in some earlier texts: “to spare someone, to pardon someone, or to prevent someone from being exposed to expected or deserved harm.”² This meaning of *bulluṭu* usually refers to the remission of the punishment of a disloyal subject by the king or other authority, an act that underscores power and control. The earliest example of such a remission appears in Laws of Hammurabi (129). When a married woman is found with her paramour: *šumma bēl aššatim aššassu uballaṭ šarrum warassu uballaṭ*—“If the master of the woman spares his wife, the king shall spare his servant.”³

The term frequently appears in Assyrian royal inscriptions as part of the imperial conception that vassals must acknowledge Assyrian sovereignty. Failure to do so results in punishment, which the king may choose to remit, thereby pardoning the offender. One example appears in the annals of Ashurnasirpal II, which note that Sūru (in Northern Syria) revolted and appointed an anti-Assyrian king. When Ashurnasirpal II approached to attack, Sūru and neighboring cities submitted. The nobles and elders of Sūru begged the king:

2. The CAD (*The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*) formulation (vol. B, pp. 52–53) is “to spare, to pardon, to keep safe, intact” but all of the citations mentioned refer to preventing deserved or expected harm. Throughout this essay, “pardon” is used in its technical legal sense of remitting a punishment, not in the more general sense of excusing an action or forgiving an offense.

3. Cited in M. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Writings from the Ancient World Series 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), p. 105.

ana šūzub napšātišunu ana irtiya iṣūni
šēpēya iṣbutū
mā ḥadât dūku, mā ḥadât balliṭ, mā ḥadât libbakani epuš

To save their lives, they came out to me
 They seized my feet (and said:)
 As it pleases you, kill! As it pleases you, spare. As it pleases you, do what
 you will.⁴

In this passage, *bulluṭu* specifically refers to remitting a punishment incurred by disloyalty to the king. It underscores the sovereign's privilege of determining fate almost arbitrarily.⁵ Significantly, the act of *bulluṭu* is performed after the previously-disloyal group transferred their allegiance back to the king. Put differently, *bulluṭu*, the remission of punishment, is performed after the moment of return of the erstwhile rebel, a point which creates a tight similarity to the usage of 𐎶𐎵 in Hosea, as we will see.

A similar usage of this verb is restored by Tadmor in the annals of Tiglath-pileser III. In describing the treatment of a rebellious vassal, probably Tyre: *ḥītišunu amḥurma, massunu ú-bal-[li-it]* 'I accepted [a plea to forgive] their rebellion, and I spared their land'.⁶

The vassal-treaty of Esarhaddon also uses *bulluṭu* to signify the remission of punishment, underscoring that royal authorities possess the fundamental right to acquit whomever they desire. The relevant paragraph demands that vassals recognize the authority of Esarhaddon's successor. As in the royal inscription of Ashurnasirpal II, nations may seek remission of punishment for disloyalty to Assyria: *dannu lā ušappalūni, šaplu lā imataḥūni / ša duāki lā idukkūni, ša balluṭi lā uballaṭūni* 'He shall lower the strong, raise up the lowly, kill who is of death, and pardon him who is

4. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC (1115–859 BC)* (vol. 1 of *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 2, A. O.101.1, 199 i 79–81.

5. For other examples of a sovereign's exclusive privilege of punishing disloyal vassals or remitting punishment, including an example from Tarhaqa of Egypt, see D. Kahn, "Why Did Necho II Kill Josiah?" in *There and Back Again: The Crossroads II: Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Prague, September 15–18, 2014* (ed. J. Mynářová, P. Onderka, and P. Pavúk; Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2015), p. 520.

6. The *bal* sign is partially restored. H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), p. 176 (summary inscription 8, lines 13'–14') and subsequently in H. Tadmor, S. Yamada, and J. R. Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria* (The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, vol. 1, part 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), text 48, pp. 125–127. For this line as a reference to Tyre, see H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III*, p. 282.

of pardon'.⁷ Here too, the pardon is offered after the previously-disloyal party has once again accepted Assyrian sovereignty. *Bulluṭu* ideologically underpins the king's right to rule by signaling his power to pardon.

Esarhaddon's *Gottesbrief* also employs the verb *bulluṭu* in reference to the royal remission of the death penalty rightly incurred by rebels. Esarhaddon recounts that he wrote a letter detailing his demands to the rebellious king of Šubria, who had previously ignored two similar missives.⁸ He then commands him to gather the rebellious Assyrian officials who had fled to Šubria and inform them that they must return to Assyria. The letter is described as *šipirtu ša bulluṭ napšātišuni*—literally, “a message for the preservation of their lives.”⁹ *Bulluṭ* functions in similar fashion to *šūzub* ‘to save’, in the royal inscription of Ashurnasirpal II cited above, but also carries the promise of remission of punishment if the rebels cease their rebellion. The verb *bulluṭu* is used similarly two lines later in the *Gottesbrief*, when Esarhaddon alludes to the king of Šubria's previous rebellions: *ša ballaṭ napšatišu inši[ma]* ‘who forgot the preservation of his life’.¹⁰ This line refers to previous incidents of rebellion for which the king of Šubria was not punished. He ceased his rebellion, was pardoned and was allowed to continue as a vassal. Here too, *bulluṭu* signals a royal pardon after an episode of rebellion and return.

The above analysis demonstrates that *bulluṭu*—especially in the context of international relations—describes:

- a. the remission of punishment of disloyal individuals who would otherwise be put to death.
- b. an act performed by a ruler towards a subject, which helps define their hierarchical relationship.
- c. an act performed after the erstwhile rebel has desisted from his rebellion and declared his renewed loyalty.

7. S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), p. 36, lines 192–193. The passage cited is part of a larger passage describing the subject peoples' acceptance of Assurbanipal's accession. Recognizing that Esarhaddon can remit punishment means recognizing that he is the effective ruler. Below, we discuss the right to remit punishment as a hallmark of a recognized ruler.

8. Cited from E. Leichty et al, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period vol. 4; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), pp. 79–86, text 33, (henceforth referred to as RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 33). This point is discussed in the legible part of Tablet I, obverse, ii, 1–8, and can be understood by comparison with Tablet II, obverse, i 29–32.

9. RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 33, Tablet 1, obv ii 7.

10. RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 33, Tablet 1, obv. ii 9.

We will demonstrate below that in the book of Hosea the Hebrew word רפא closely follows this pattern, and that it functions rhetorically as a response to Assyrian ideology. That Assyrian royal ideology can aid interpretation and contextualization of semantic nuances in Hosea should come as no surprise. Scholars have long noted that Assyrian royal ideology—textualized in the form of royal inscriptions and articulated orally—had a discernable impact on prophetic rhetoric. The relationship between Isaiah 1–39 and Assyrian royal ideology has been well-studied,¹¹ and its impact on Hosea has also been noted.¹²

It is not difficult to imagine how this Akkadian term might have reached Israel during the Assyrian period. Israelite and Assyrian officials were in frequent contact. Not only are audiences with the Assyrian king referenced in Hos 5:13 and 10:6, but all vassals were required to visit the Assyrian palace annually. Here Israelite officials were barraged with Neo-Assyrian rhetoric and imperial propaganda.¹³ Discussions between Israelite and Assyrian officials also took place at Assyrian centers of government within the land of Israel—at Gezer, Megiddo, and other sites.¹⁴ Communication between Israelite and Assyrian officials most

11. The seminal discussion of this issue appears to be P. Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah,” *JAOS* 103 (1983): 719–737. Subsequent discussions of specific passages include S. Z. Aster, “The Image of Assyria in Isaiah 2:5–22: The Campaign Motif Reversed,” *JAOS* 127 (2007): 249–278; S. Z. Aster, “אחת דיבר סנחריב, שתיים זו שמע הנביא: לעיבוד המקורות האשוריים בסיפור הנבואי” (What Sennacherib said and what the prophet heard: On the use of Assyrian sources in the prophetic narrative of the campaign of 701 B.C.E.), *Shnaton* 19 (2009): 105–124; M. Chan, “Rhetorical Reversal and Usurpation: Isaiah 10:5–34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idioms in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 717–733; W. Gallagher, *Sennacherib’s Campaign to Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 205–216.

12. Among these are S. M. Paul, “Hosea 8:8–10 and Ancient Near Eastern Royal Epithets,” in *Studies in Bible* (ed. S. Japhet; Scripta Hierosolymitana 31; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), pp. 193–204; M. L. Barré, “New Light on the Interpretation of Hosea 6:2,” *VT* 28.2 (1978): 129–141; and J.-G. Heintz, “Osée XII 2B à la lumière d’un vase d’alabâtre de l’époque de Salmanasar III et le rituel d’alliance assyrien: Une hypothèse de lecture,” *VT* 60 (2001): 466–480.

13. See S. Parpola, *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1987) p. 110 on such visits; J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Studia Pohl, Series Major 3; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1974), pp. 117–118; I. Ephal, “משמעותו של השלטון האימפריאלי האשורי על פי תעודות לא-ספרותיות הנוגעות ל”עבר הנהר” (The significance of Assyrian imperial rule according to administrative texts relating to Ebir Nari), in *ישראל וארצו: תעודות* (Israel and its land: Inscriptions and history: Proceedings of a conference in honor of Shmuel Ahituv on the occasion of his retirement; (ed. Z. Talshir; Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), pp. 58–59; W. Morrow, “Tribute from Judah and the Transmission of Assyrian Propaganda,” in *“My Spirit at Rest in the North Country” (Zechariah 6.8): Collected Communications to the XXth IOSOT Congress, Helsinki 2010* (ed. H. M. Niemann and M. Augustin; Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 183–192.

14. For the contact between Israelite and Assyrian officials, see S. Z. Aster, “Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E.,” *HUCA* 78 (2007): 1–44; and W. Morrow, “Tribute from Judah,” pp. 183–192.

probably took place principally in Aramaic, a language used by the elite in both societies.¹⁵ But we can deduce that at least some Akkadian terms were used, for this would explain the appearance in Hos 5:13 of מֶלֶךְ יָרֵב, which appears to be a back translation of *šarru rabbu*, a frequent title for the Assyrian “great king.”¹⁶ Thus, the available channels of transmission make it probable that the Israelite elite of the eighth century (with whom Hosea appears to have been in contact) had knowledge of Assyrian royal ideology in general and of key terms used in expressing it. The term *bulluṭu*, as seen from the survey above, expressed a significant behavior of the Assyrian empire toward client or vassal states, and might well be one of these key terms. Furthermore, the evidence that Barré gathered, showing that Hos 6:2 uses חיה and קום in a manner that parallels the Akkadian verb pair *balātu-tebû*, also suggests that the Akkadian verb may have been known to the author of that passage.¹⁷

In addition to providing yet another example of the nexus between Hosea and Assyria, the analysis below should influence the discussions of redaction and dating of the Hosea corpus, a point to which we return in the conclusion.¹⁸

15. The joiner’s marks on the Samaria ivories are just one piece of evidence pointing to widespread knowledge of Aramaic among the political elite in the kingdom of Israel. For these, see I. Winter, “Is There a South Syrian Style of Ivory Carving in the Early First Millennium BCE?” in *On Art in the Ancient Near East. Vol. 1: Of the First Millennium BCE* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1:316. The extensive diplomatic contacts carried on by Israel’s elite with neighboring states in the eighth century could hardly have been conducted in any other language. That Assyrian officials of this period communicated in Aramaic is clear; some of the sources are discussed by H. Tadmor, “On the Role of Aramaic in the Assyrian Empire,” in *Near Eastern Studies Dedicated to H. I. H. Prince Takahito Mikasa on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (ed. M. Mori, H. Ogawa, and M. Yoshikawa; Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1991), pp. 419–426.

16. For מֶלֶךְ יָרֵב as a back translation of *šarru rabbu*, a frequent title for the Assyrian “great king,” see S. M. Paul, “Hosea 8:8–10,” p. 199. In Hos 10:6, this construction also occurs in the context of paying tribute to Assur.

17. M. L. Barré, “New Light on the Interpretation of Hosea 6:2,” pp. 131–135.

18. A full review of the controversy on the dating of Hosea goes well beyond the scope of this article. We clearly hold with Day that “So much that we find in Hosea is inconsistent with a post-exilic origin, but makes eminently good sense against a pre-722 BCE background” (J. Day, “Hosea and the Baal Cult,” in *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. J. Day; LHBOTS 531; London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 202–224, here at p. 202. Scholars who hold a different view are cited by Day, to these can be added J. M. Bos, *Reconsidering the Date and Provenance of the Book of Hosea: The Case for Persian-Period Yehud* (London: T&T Clark, 2013). Among his arguments for a post-exilic date are the assumptions that scribal activity in the pre-exilic period was limited to scribes supported by the royal administration (pp. 7–13), and that prophets could not freely critique this administration in this period (pp. 35–39), neither of which we find convincing. The present study adds to the linguistic and historical points Day cites.

3. BACKGROUND TO HEBREW רפא

Like Akkadian *bullutu*, the most common meaning of the Hebrew רפא is “to heal from a physical illness.” Examples include the healing of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:8) and God’s healing of Abimelech and his wives and maidservants (Gen 20:17). In Ps 6:3 (רַפְּאֵנִי יְהוָה כִּי גִבְהָלוּ עֵצְמִי) and in Ps 30:3 (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי שׁוֹעֲתִי אֵלַי וְתִרְפְּאֵנִי), רפא refers to deliverance from mortal danger caused by severe illness.¹⁹

But in many passages, such as Hos 11:3; 14:5; Isa 6:10; and Jer 3:22 (each discussed in detail below), prophets use this root to refer to something other than physical healing. As has long been recognized, the translation “to forgive” is the most apt.²⁰ Lexicographers and commentators differ in explaining why our passages use רפא in this manner. Some scholars posit that the “frequent metaphorical descriptions of sin-sick Israel” inform the background of these passages; namely, these verses describe forgiving sin and remitting punishment as though the sins and punishment were a form of sickness.²¹ There is little reason, however, to impose a generalized metaphorical construct on passages better explained

19. For the connection between pleas to God for salvation and physical illness, see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 1:274. In Ps 30:3, the ailment is so severe that the supplicant is sick unto death, hovering “in the sphere of שאול,” as appears from the subsequent verse. For this passage and others in Psalms in which God’s healing is described, see H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 1–59* (trans. H. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 354. It also refers to repairing objects, as in: וַיִּרְפוּ הַמָּיִם עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה בְּדַבַּר אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר (2 Kgs 2:22); וַיִּרְפָּא אֶת־מִזְבַּח יְהוָה הַהִירוֹס (Ezek 47:8); וַיִּרְפָּא אֶת־מִזְבַּח יְהוָה הַהִירוֹס (1 Kgs 18:30). For explanations of why Biblical Hebrew has a single term that covers both bodily healing and repair of objects, see *TLOT*, s.v. רפא; *TDOT* 13:595–596; *HALOT* s.v. רפא (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 1270–1274.

20. The earliest recognition of this appears in the Targum to Hos 14:5; Isa 6:10; Jer 3:22, which translates רפא as שבק ‘forgive’ as opposed to the standard אסי ‘heal’. Giesebrecht also notes that the term refers to remission of punishment in Hos 5:13; 6:1; 7:1; 11:3; Isa 6:10; 19:22 (F. Giesebrecht, *Das Buch Jeremia* [HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907], p. 21).

21. J. Hempel, *Heilung als Symbol und Wirklichkeit im biblischen Schriftum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 13:238–239. Hempel adduces Isa 1:5–6. The imagery of the sick body in these verses describes the blow of the destroyed land, however, as described in Isa 1:7–9: “Your land is desolate, your cities are burnt by fire.” Although the burnt land is indeed the result of sin, the metaphor of the sick body expresses the reality of the burnt land rather than that of “sin-sick Israel.” Ezekiel 30:21, which Hempel also cites, likewise relates to Pharaoh’s weakness rather than his sin. A similar approach (“Israel’s sickness is their apostasy”) is taken by J. L. Mays, *Hosea* (OTL; London: SCM, 1969), pp. 187–188, in a comment on Hos 14:4—although there too, little basis seems to exist for understanding רפא as a metaphor for “sin-sick Israel” in need of healing. Closely related to Hempel’s approach is that of D. F. O’Kennedy (“Healing as/or Forgiveness? The Use of the Term ‘rpa’ in the Book of Hosea,” *OTE* 14.3 [2001]: 459), who explains רפא as signifying “to forgive” on the basis of an analogy between the healing of the physical body and the mind. The idea that forgiveness makes the soul whole has no clear support in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 41:4–5, which O’Kennedy cites as proof for this idea, is better explained by J. Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben im Alten Testament* (Bern: Francke, 1940), pp. 78–84.

contextually. Others argue that an obvious nexus connects healing and forgiveness, since sufferers know that their agony is intended as punishment for their sins.²² This approach, like the previous one, imposes a universal theological axiom upon texts better explained by appealing to specific lexical meanings used in passages with similar context. Others posit that רפא is used “in every instance with reference to restoring a wrong, sick, broken, or deficient condition to its original and proper state.”²³ This very broad definition flattens the nuances and obscures the unique meaning of רפא in the passages discussed below.

The political nature of רפא in Hosea and its connection to שוב was briefly noted by Jeremias, and our study develops his remarks.²⁴ Both Dearman and O’Kennedy noted the use of רפא in the five Hosea passages we discuss (Hos 5:13; 6:1; 7:1; 11:3; 14:5), and O’Kennedy suggested the meaning “forgiveness.”²⁵ They do not, however, connect this particular usage of רפא to the parallel Akkadian term *bullutu*.

As we will show below, in many of these passages, רפא functions in a manner parallel to the use of *bullutu* in the royal inscriptions. It describes God pardoning His nation, and specifically refers to the remission of punishment incurred for disloyalty after the erstwhile rebel has desisted from rebellion. Furthermore, it emphasizes the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the one remitting the punishment, as discussed above. Hebrew רפא, therefore, parallels the two ranges of meaning of Akkadian *bullutu*.

Both *bullutu* and רפא refer to a process in which a sovereign remits punishment of a vassal after the latter desists from disloyal conduct. The fact that this use of רפא appears repeatedly in the Hebrew of Hosea, and does not seem to appear in earlier biblical texts, strongly suggests that the meaning of the Hebrew verb was expanded, to include the meaning “re-

22. H. J. Stoebe, s.v. רפא, *NIDOTTE*, 3:1257. This approach is developed by Stamm (*Erlösen und Vergeben*, pp. 78–84) in relation to Ps 41:5. In this passage, the sufferer does indeed ask God for physical healing (as seen from Ps 41:4), recognizing that his sickness is caused by his sin. In other passages, however—notably Hos 6:7–7:2; 14:5; and Isa 6:10, where no sickness is mentioned—Stamm understands רפא as indicating forgiveness because the sin is compared to sickness (p. 81).

23. *TDOT* 13:597.

24. J. Jeremias, “Zur Eschatologie des Hoseabuches,” in *Die Botschaft und die Boten: Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff* (ed. H. W. Wolff and J. Jeremias; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981), pp. 217–234 (here cited from J. Jeremias, *Hosea und Amos: Studien zu den Anfängen des Dodekapropheten* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996], p. 84).

25. J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 282, 336. D. F. O’Kennedy, “Healing as/or Forgiveness?” pp. 458–471.

mitting punishment” which the Akkadian verb has. Several of these passages contrast Israel’s disloyalty to YHWH with its vassalage to Assyria. Thus, we further suggest that in some of the passages explored below, the meaning of רפא as “to pardon” not only reflects knowledge of Assyrian royal ideology but acts as a response to it.

4. HOSEA 14:2–5

The clearest example of רפא as remission of punishment for disloyalty occurs in Hos 14:5, where YHWH says that He will pardon (רפא) Israel’s rebellion. Like the Akkadian examples above, the process of רפא consists of rebellion, an expected repentance and a pardon. The larger passage, Hos 14:2–5, also signals the context of international relations—alluding to Egypt and directly mentioning Assyria. Note as well that this passage contains no trace of physical ailments, thus cementing the meaning of רפא in Hos 15:5 as “to pardon.”

In Hos 14:2–3, the prophet demands that the Israelites return to be loyal to YHWH (שוב), and in verse 4, he calls on them to make a threefold declaration: they reject Assyria as their savior, no longer ride on steeds, and abjure mislabeling idols as deities.

Hos 14:4

אֲשׁוּר לֹא יוֹשִׁיעֵנו עַל-סוּס לֹא נִרְכָּב וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לַמַּעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר-
בְּךָ יִרְחַם יְתוֹם

Assyria will not save us, and we will not ride on horses, nor will we say
“our god” to the work of our hands, for through You will an orphan be
loved.²⁶

Each declaration underscores Israel’s intent to stop impugning its sole loyalty to YHWH. The formulation “Assyria will not save us” is a repudiation of Israel’s dependence on Assyria, while “we will not ride on horses” is a rejection of reliance on Egypt, the source of horses (as in Deut

26. For the syntax of the phrase בְּלִי-תִשָּׂא עֵן in Hos 14:3, see M. A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000), p. 138, who argues that בְּלִי modifies עֵן. יִרְחַם reflects Aramaic רחם as well as Akkadian *rēmu*. The reference to remission of punishment together with רחם in Hos 14:4–5 has an interesting parallel in Esarhaddon’s *Gottesbrief*, in which the king of Šubria forsakes his rebellion and seeks to resume vassalage to Esarhaddon, asking *rēmu rišanimma, puṭur ennitti*, usually translated as “grant me mercy, remove my punishment” (RINAP 4, Esarhaddon 33, Tablet 2, obv., col. i, line 24).

17:16 and Isa 31:1 and 36:9).²⁷ In 14:4, Hosea requires the Israelites to publicly repudiate their alliance with Assyria and their search for Egyptian help “as a condition for the restoration of their relationship with YHWH.”²⁸ Acknowledging Assyria as sovereign undermines the imperative of accepting YHWH as the one true king. Forming other political allegiances, whether by paying tribute to Assyria or by reliance on Egypt, is disloyal to YHWH since it involves recognizing other sovereigns.²⁹ This disloyalty is equated in 14:4b to another form of disloyalty: ascribing divine status to objects of human design.³⁰

If Israel makes the three-fold vow to cease disloyalty, God will respond:

Hos 14:5

אֶרְפָּא מְשׁוּבָתָם אֶהְיֶם נֹדֵבָה כִּי שָׁב אִפִּי מִמֶּנּוּ

I will pardon their rebellion, I will love them freely, for My anger has abated from them.

27. Thus Rashi and Ibn Ezra and J. A. Dearman (*The Book of Hosea*, p. 339) interpret this way. A. A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1997), p. 565, understands the steeds as a reference to dispatch riders carrying urgent pleas of help to Assyria or Egypt. However, since there were Assyrian administrative centers within the land of Israel from 733 on, who maintained constant communication with the Assyrian center, it is unlikely that Israel would have needed to send its own riders to Assyria to seek help. (On these centers, see A. Bagg, “Palestine under Assyrian Rule: A New Look at the Assyrian Imperial Policy in the West,” *JAOS* 133 [2013]: 119–144; S. Z. Aster, “An Assyrian *Bit Mardite* Near Tel Hadid?” *JNES* 74 [2015]: 1–12.) Like Hos 7:11 and 12:2, Hosea’s critique of Israel’s transfer of loyalty and tribute to Egypt and Assyria (and its alternating between these powers) underlies Hos 14:4. He sees these transfers as both politically vain and theologically dangerous, impugning God’s sovereignty.

Wilhelm Rudolph’s comment (*Hosea* [KAT 13/1; Gütersloh: Gütersloh, 1966], p. 250) that this passage indicates a return to God without any cultic gifts, as in Psalm 51, is correct, but misses the point of the passage, which is the transfer of Israel’s loyalty from Assyria and Egypt to YHWH. The phrase “we shall pay for our bulls with our lips” (Hos 14:3) emphasizes that the declaration in 14:4, in which Israel transfers its loyalty from Assyria and Egypt to YHWH, replaces sacrificial worship. This is recognized by Dearman, who notes: “The book of Hosea states in several ways that Assyria is not the solution to Israel’s dilemma. Now at the end of the prophecy, the people themselves are asked to confess it” (J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 338).

28. M. A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, p. 138.

29. Hosea repeatedly condemns Israel’s multiple attempts to “escape its crisis” by submitting to Assyria: see 5:13 and 8:9, where “going up” to Assyria refers to bearing tribute and becoming a vassal. See J. L. Mays (*Hosea*, p. 121), who also discusses Israel’s attempts to “escape its crisis” (p. 187). This condemnation seems to reflect the sordid internal politics of Israel in the mid-eighth century. Different regional rulers, including Pekah and Menahem, competed for recognition as the legitimate ruler of the kingdom of Israel. Menahem attempted to harness Assyrian support for his claim by offering Assyria tribute, which was seen (not unjustly) by Assyria as an act of submission. Later, Hoshea, son of Elah, also bolstered his position by remitting tribute.

30. In this last statement (וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לַמַּעֲשֶׂה יְדִינוּ), Hosea frames the issue of idolatry as one of recognition and authority rather than merely cultic practice.

YHWH causes His anger to abate (שב), pardons (רפא), and freely loves Israel.³¹ There is no indication of a physical malady, and רפא clearly refers to pardoning a rebellion.³² In light of the previous verses, this rebelliousness must refer to Israel's acts of disloyalty to YHWH.

The use of רפא here to refer to the Sovereign's remission of the punishment expected after a vassal's lapse in loyalty parallels the usage of Akkadian *bullutu* in the royal inscriptions. There, this verb often refers to remitting punishment for disloyalty. As noted, both acts (רפא in Hos 14:5 and *bullutu* in the Assyrian inscriptions) are performed after the vassal desists from disloyalty and returns to the sovereign. The Akkadian term is particularly relevant in this passage, since Hos 14:4 refers to Israel desisting from regarding Assyria as the sovereign savior and resuming loyalty to its original sovereign. As we shall see, such a political background lies behind many of the passages in which רפא means "pardon."

5. HOSEA 11:1–5

Hosea 11:3 uses רפא in a more complex manner. As in 14:1–5, רפא refers to the remission of punishment by YHWH after Israel's disloyalty. But here, the verb may also refer to healing, and this more standard meaning combines with the meaning borrowed from Akkadian.

In Hos 11:1–5, YHWH details His betrayal at the hands of the Israelites and His attempt to reestablish a relationship with them. Verses 1–4 describe the initial relationship, betrayal, and God's encouraging Israel to return, by pardoning them and giving them a "second chance":

Hos 11:1–4

כִּי נָעַר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאַהֲבָהוּ וּמִמְצָרִים קָרָאתִי לְבָנִי
קָרָאוּ לָהֶם בֶּן הָלֶכְוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם לְבָעָלִים יִזְבְּחוּ וּלְפִסְלִים יִקְטְרוּ
וְאֲנִכִּי תִרְגְּלֹתִי לְאַפְרִים קָחָם עַל־זִרְעֹתָיו וְלֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי רַפְּאֹתִים
בְּחֻבְלֵי אָדָם אֲמַשְׁכֶּם בְּעֵבְתוֹת אֲהַבָּה וְאַהֲיָה לָהֶם כְּמִרְיָמִי עַל עַל לְחִיָּהֶם וְאֵט
אֵלֶיז אוֹכִיל

31. The root נד"ב usually refers to a freewill gift which one is not obligated to give (cf. Exod 39:25; Ezra 4:3). God's love expressed by freely granting benefits to Ephraim is also expressed a few verses later in Hos 14:9.

32. The basic meaning of משובה is rebelliousness or apostasy: see J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 340. For the occurrence of this term in Jer 3:22, see below.

For when Israel was a child, I loved him, and from Egypt I called My son.
They called them, and they went from before them, they sacrifice to the
Ba'alim and offer incense to the idols.
But I trained Ephraim, taking him on his (My?³³) arms, even though they
did not acknowledge that I had pardoned them.
With cords of man I will pull them, with bonds of love, and I was for them
like those who lift the yoke over their cheeks, and bent down to him
and fed (him).

In verses 1–2, Israel is described as responding to YHWH's love with disloyalty.³⁴ They sacrifice to בָּעַלִים and פִּסְלִים as their true benefactors. This disloyalty ought to elicit punishment from YHWH, but instead, YHWH treats Israel (referred to as Ephraim in vv. 3–5) kindly.³⁵ Although he deserves punishment, YHWH attempts to train (תרגל) him by showing him the loving care (קָחָם עַל-זִרְעֹתָיו) one would exhibit when training a child.³⁶ These demonstrations of affection show רפא—in other words, that YHWH will not punish Ephraim. He has pardoned them for disloyalty.

Ephraim's ultimate reaction to YHWH's tender care, however, undermines any attempt at fostering a meaningful relationship. In 11:3, Ephraim is described as refusing to recognize that YHWH has remitted his punishment, and the essential component of “return” (שוב) is missing. As in the vassal-treaty of Esarhaddon, recognizing someone as a legitimate remitter of punishment is tantamount to recognizing him as sovereign. Ephraim's disloyalty is developed in 11:5, where Hosea employs international imagery to describe Ephraim:

33. For the understanding of MT זִרְעֹתָיו as reflecting an originally 1cs possessive ending, see F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), p. 579. As Andersen and Freedman note, the similarity to Isa 40:11 is limited, Hos 11:1–3 describing the guiding or training of a child to walk.

34. The combination of אהב and רפא in our unit reflects both the emotional (love) and the political (loyalty) components of אהב. The expectation in verses 1–4 is that love and pardon will elicit loyalty. For the political meaning of אהב, see W. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *CBQ* 25 (1963): 77–87.

35. This kind treatment is detailed in Hos 11:3, in which Hosea portrays Ephraim as a child being taught to walk. Ephraim is Hosea's typical cypher for his northern audience. The clearest example is Hos 7:1, where Ephraim forms a poetic parallel with Samaria. Hosea here telescopes from Israel's past to his present audience.

36. The contrast between Ephraim's deserts and the caring treatment he receives from YHWH is emphasized by the waw of distinction at the beginning of Hos 11:3, where וְאַנֹכִי signifies, “But nevertheless, I.” As Dearman notes, רפא in this verse refers to healing “the alienated state of relations between (God) and Israel” (J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 282). It is difficult to understand רפא here as referring solely to physical healing, since there is no mention of Israel's sickness. The verse here bases itself on the idea of physical healing but expands the meaning of the verse.

Hos 11:5

לֹא יָשׁוּב אֶל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאַשּׁוּר הוּא מֶלֶכּוּ כִּי מָאֲנּוּ לָשׁוּב

Will they not return to the land of Egypt?³⁷ Assyria is his king! For they have refused to return.

Verse 5 twice describes Ephraim's refusal to "return," and the reference to Egypt links the imagery to 11:1. The statement that Ephraim "refuses to return" to God at the end of the verse transitions to verses 6–7, which describe the dire fate in store for him if he persists in acknowledging Assyria as his true overlord.

There is a clear repeated pattern in 11:1–5: God picks Israel for special treatment (v. 1) but Israel leaves Him and worships idols (v. 2). God treats Ephraim kindly (v. 3a) but he does not acknowledge God as remitter of punishment (רפא) (v. 3b). God once again pulls Ephraim toward Him (v. 4) but Ephraim refuses to return, preferring to acknowledge Assyria as king (v. 5). In both this passage and in 14:5, רפא refers to the Sovereign's remission of punishment for a vassal's disloyalty. In both passages, רפא is connected to שׁוּב and in Hosea 11:5, "return" to God is connected to recognizing Him as remitter of punishment.

In these passages, Hosea employs רפא in a manner that closely parallels the way royal inscriptions use *bulluṭu*. Furthermore, both Hosea passages directly cite Assyria as at least one major cause of Israelite disloyalty. The use of רפא as "to pardon" seems to be a direct response to Assyrian claims that only the Assyrian king can offer remission. The use of רפא as counter-ideology is evident in the following example.

6. HOSEA 5:13 AND 6:1

Two further instances of רפא in Hosea (5:13 and 6:1) form part of a single pericope and should be treated together. In both these verses, רפא operates on multiple semantic levels simultaneously, meaning both "to heal" and "to remit punishment."

37. As J. A. Dearman (*The Book of Hosea*, p. 285) notes, the MT of this verse is difficult, given Hos 8:13—which, like Deut 28:68—regards descent into Egypt as the ultimate punishment for rebellious Israel. The NIV thus reads the first two phrases in the verse as rhetorical questions. We have opted to read only the first phrase as such a question. It is also possible to follow the LXX, as M. A. Sweeney (*The Twelve Prophets*, p. 114) does, in reading לֹא as לוֹ, and appending it to the end of verse 4. In either case, the sense of the verse is similar.

The sub-unit of 5:11–6:3 begins with Hosea’s cry that Israel has gone astray. He is oppressed and weakened because he has stumbled by obeying a (false) command (5:11).³⁸ As a reaction to Israel’s disloyalty, God promises to allow both Ephraim and Judah to rot (5:12).³⁹ By means of this punishment, God expresses His claim as sole suzerain over Israel. He alone punishes disloyalty. Rather than recognizing YHWH as the source of their malady, and seeking His pardon, Ephraim and Judah choose to look elsewhere (5:13):

Hosea 5:13

וַיֵּרָא אֶפְרַיִם אֶת־חֲלִי וַיהוָה אֶת־מְזֻרוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶפְרַיִם אֶל־אֲשׁוּר וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל־מֶלֶךְ
יָרְבֹּה וְהוּא לֹא יוֹכֵל לָרְפָא לָכֶם וְלֹא־יִגְהֶה מִכֶּם מְזֹר

38. The problematic nature of the command (MT: צו) is not clear. Multiple possibilities are cited as far back as W. R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1905), pp. 276–277. The emendation שוא , following LXX and Targum, is frequently followed: see W. R. Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 276–277; G. I. Davies, *Hosea* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 156; S.-H. Hong, *The Metaphor of Illness and Healing in Hosea and Its Significance in the Socio-Economic Context of Eighth-Century Israel and Judah* (SBL 95; New York: P. Lang, 2006), p. 142. J. L. Mays (*Hosea*, p. 85) follows Rudolph in reading צר ‘enemy’.

In Hosea 2:7 the phrase הלך אחרי is used to refer to following those who vie with God for Israel’s loyalty, and Hosea 5:11e conforms to this model. (This develops the Deuteronomistic usage [Deut 4:3; Judg 2:12; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5], in which the phrase הלך אחרי is used in connection with going after false gods). The context of 5:11 strongly suggests that God’s rivals here are political entities rather than idols. Two verses later (5:13), Israel is said to walk to Assyria, echoing the language of 5:11. It, therefore, seems preferably to understand צו as a reference to Assyria—perhaps a reference to Assyrian royal commands (*awat šarri*). The idea that צו refers to a political rival was noted by J. L. Mays (*Hosea*, p. 90), who suggests that צו here is a derisive term for the Arameans with whom Pekah allied. For earlier discussions of צו as a reference to Assyria, see T. K. Cheney, “Professor Hommel on Hos 5:11 with a Suggestion on Baasha,” *Expository Times*, 10.8 (1899): 375.

39. As S.-H. Hong suggests (*The Metaphor of Illness*, p. 149), 5:13 moves to engage Judah because the issue of vassaldom was equally relevant to Judah and Israel in the period after 733. עש in Hos 5:12 should be translated “moth,” which is also used with רקב ‘rot’ in Job 13:28. A. A. Macintosh (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 207) follows H. W. Wolff (*Hosea* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974] p. 104) and others in challenging this meaning of עש in this verse because of the larger context of disease, translating “emaciating disease” based on a suggested Arabic parallel. The context may well support the standard meaning “moth” for עש . The moth (Aramaic: סס) also appears in the Sefire treaty (1A line 31) as one of the predators who will devour treaty violators in punishment for disloyalty. See A. Lemaire and J.-M. Durand, *Les Inscriptions Araméennes de Sfiré et l’Assyrie de Shamshi-Ilu* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), p. 114; D. R. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and the OT Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), p. 56. The use in this verse of punishments found in political treaties may fit with the larger political context of issues of loyalty and disloyalty.

Ephraim became aware of his sickness, and Judah of his sore, Ephraim went to Assur and sent envoys to the patron king.⁴⁰ But he cannot cure you and he cannot heal from you the sore.

The illness in these verses designates Israel's weakened political or economic condition. To cure this, Ephraim sent emissaries to Assur, and thereby became a vassal state.⁴¹ But Hosea warns that Assyria will not רפא Israel, referring to two related aspects of Assyrian policy: vassalage to exploitative Assyria will not heal Israel's political-economic weakness, and furthermore, Assyria will not remit the punishment that is due from a disloyal vassal. This contrasts with the portrayal of YHWH in the passages discussed previously.

Much like the passages explored above, this unit demonstrates Israel's conflicting loyalties. Instead of obeying YHWH, whose help and pardon Israel actually requires, Israel submits to Assyria. This submission to Assyria might refer to multiple historical contexts between 738 and 720 BCE in which Israel rebelled against Assyria and then sought Assyria's pardon, remission of punishment, and resumption of its vassal status after the rebellion failed.⁴²

Hosea 5:11–13 polemicizes against Israel's request for pardon and restitution of its vassal status. As in 11:1–5, Hosea in 5:11–13 rhetorically contrasts the salubrious nature of Israel's relationship with YHWH with the destructive nature of its bond with Assyria. Although Ephraim believes that Assyrian pardon will cure his sickness, Hosea declares (in 11:4) that only reestablishing a relationship with YHWH by recognizing His pardon and His authority can help Israel. In Hosea 5:11–13, רפא denotes both the political pardon necessary for re-establishing a relationship as well as metaphoric healing. More particularly, Hosea recasts רפא in light of Akkadian *bulluṭu* while undermining and reframing the imperial royal ideology that the process of *bulluṭu* entails. That polemic against imperialism is at play is not just evident from רפא or the mention of Assyria,

40. Dahood's suggestion of understanding קִזֹּר as a "flowing sore" is reasonable: M. Dahood, "Philological Notes on Jer 18:14–15," ZAW 74 (1962): 208. It clearly refers to some sort of illness. The phrase שְׁלַח אֶל with no direct object usually means "to send envoys" (cf. Num 22:37 and 1 Kgs 20:5).

41. For the importance of the annual sending of emissaries as an expression of vassaldom, see J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription*, pp. 121–128. For the importance of these interactions to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, see W. Morrow, "Tribute from Judah."

42. Rebellions against Assyria by vassal states such as Israel often resulted in annexation, transformation into a province, and exile of a portion of the population. However, if the political circumstances were right, the Assyrian king would accept a rebellious vassal's plea for remission of punishment, and let him resume its vassal status, as we saw in the passages from the royal inscriptions cited above.

but also the use of מֶלֶךְ יָרֵב, a back translation of *šarru rabbu*, a frequent title for the Assyrian “great king.”⁴³

The process of reframing royal ideology continues in Hos 5:14–6:1, which describe the outcome of Ephraim’s seeking healing and pardon from Assyria. This act provokes YHWH to act like a lion in 5:14. Hosea here appropriates the lion imagery for the Assyrian king in Assyrian inscriptions and applies it to YHWH.⁴⁴ The Assyrian king presents no obstacle to the real lion-king, YHWH. Believing his salvation to lie with Assyria, however, Ephraim pays tribute to the self-proclaimed Assyrian lion-king. In addition to demonstrating the Assyrian king’s inability to cure Ephraim, the true lion-king, YHWH, pounces upon Ephraim and tears him asunder.⁴⁵

The second רפא in this unit (6:1) exhibits similar characteristics to the first (5:13). After Israel’s troubles continue, Israel proclaims:

Hos 6:1

לְכוּ וְנָשׁוּבָה אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי הוּא טָרַף וְיִרְפָּאנוּ יְדֹ וְיַחַבֵּשְׁנוּ

Let us go and return to YHWH. Although He tore, He will heal us; He hit, He will bind us up.

Israel wishes to reestablish its relationship with YHWH, understanding that “He can tear and heal, wound and bind.” This declaration of loyalty, in conjunction with the cohortative of שׁוּב, allows us to understand the wound and its healing as more than a physical ailment and its cure. The message of the verse is: only YHWH can punish and pardon.

The רפא in Hos 6:1 inverts the reality presented in 5:11. In 5:11, Israel misidentified Assyria as the source of healing, and therefore abandoned its relationship with YHWH in favor of paying Assyrian tribute. Hosea 6:1 upends this situation by having Israel proclaim its willingness to return to YHWH and identify Him as the cause of illness and healing. Instead of

43. For מֶלֶךְ יָרֵב as a back translation of *šarru rabbu*, see S. M. Paul, “Hosea 8:8–10,” p. 199.

44. The Assyrian kings frequently describe themselves as devouring lions: “Like a lion I raged, then put on armor”; see A. K. Grayson and J. Novotny, eds., *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)* (RINAP 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), “I raged like a lion and gave command to march into Babylonia against him” (text 22 v 67; text 1, line 16).

45. The failure to acknowledge YHWH resulting in provocation and punishment is also found in Hosea 2. In 2:7, the harlot pursues her lovers rather than seeking sustenance from YHWH. This lack of perspective causes YHWH to block her path and stem her income until she realizes her true lover and returns to him. Disloyalty via misappropriation and misattribution (2:10) are salient themes in both Hosea 2 and 5:11–6:3.

seeking Assyrian absolution, Israel recognizes the potency of divine pardon. Once again, loyalty, return, and the meaning of רפא as pardon are inextricably related. And once again, this mirrors the pattern of forgiveness found in royal inscriptions that use *bulluṭu*.

7. HOSEA 7:1

The remaining incidence of רפא is in Hos 7:1, which forms part of the larger unit of 6:11b–7:3.⁴⁶ This passage is textually difficult but by no means incomprehensible. It highlights both Israel's property crimes and its disloyalty. Key to understanding this unit is the link in 7:1 between the action of רפא, which YHWH will perform, and the uncovering of Israel's property crimes. We propose that the passage refers to the end of Israel's vassal relationship with Assyria, or in other words, to the point at which Israel asks for (and receives) YHWH's remission of punishment. By acknowledging YHWH as remitter of punishment, Israel effectively acknowledges His sovereignty, and resumes its status as vassal of YHWH. It is specifically when Israel's vassal relationship to Assyria ends (and its vassal relationship with YHWH resumes) that the property crimes of Israel's elite will be uncovered:

Hos 7:1–3

כְּרַפְאֵי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִגְלָה עֵזֶן אֶפְרַיִם וְרַעוֹת שְׁמֵרוֹן כִּי פָעִלוּ שָׁקֶר וְגִנְבּ יְבוֹא פָשַׁט
גָּדוֹד בַּחוּץ
וּבְלִיאָמְרוֹ לְלִבָּבָם כָּל־רַעְתָּם זִכְרָתִי עָתָה סִבְבוּם מֵעַלְלֵיהֶם נִגְדַּד פָּנָי הִיוּ
בְּרַעְתָּם יִשְׁמַחוּ־מִלֶּדֶד וּבְכַח־שִׁיהֶם שָׂרִים

When I remit the punishment of Israel, the disloyalty of Ephraim will be revealed, and (so too) the evil deeds of Samaria, for they act treacherously: the thief would come and the band would take property in the street.⁴⁷

46. The coherence of Hos 6:11b–7:2 is noted by H. W. Wolff, *Hosea*, p. 108; J. L. Mays, *Hosea*, pp. 99–100; M. A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, pp. 77–78. S.-H. Hong (*The Metaphor of Illness*, p. 155) notes that 7:3 is unlikely to begin a new unit since the recurrence of רעה in three successive verses links 7:1–3 in a single unit, and since the opening verses of a unit are unlikely to contain a pronominal reference with no antecedent, as in 7:3 רַעְתָּם, כַּח־שִׁיהֶם.

47. עֵזֶן often refers to disloyalty (cf. Hos 14:2–3; Isa 1:4) rather than to general sin. This is supported by the mention of deceitful acting in the next phrase (כִּי פָעִלוּ שָׁקֶר). For the root פש"ט as denoting "to take property," see 1 Sam 27:10; 30:1, 14. חוץ may refer to the street (as in חוץ הָאֵפִים [Jer 37:21]) or outdoors in general.

They would not say in their heart “I (YHWH) remember all their evil.”
Now (i.e., at the point where Israel’s relationship with Assyria ends),
their deeds surround them, and are before My face.
In their wickedness they would make the king glad, by their treachery—
the officers.

YHWH reveals Ephraim’s sins of disloyalty, deceit, and property crimes (7:1), trespasses that please the king and his officers (7:3). These iniquities are best understood within a political matrix: dishonesty (כחש) combined with property seizures benefit the political leadership.⁴⁸ This strongly suggests that the verse refers to the king and officers seizing property of less highly-ranked citizens in order to ensure tribute payments to Assyria. By ensuring such payments, the elite bolstered their own status, since Assyria would act to ensure their power.⁴⁹ Such transfer of wealth to Assyria was of course central to the vassal relationship. For Hosea, Ephraim’s persistence in sinning stems from the fact that he is unaware of YHWH’s constant gaze (7:2).

This understanding of the passage as referring to the “point of transfer” of Israel’s vassal loyalties from Assyria to YHWH, an understanding which hinges on seeing רפא as meaning “remission of punishment,” explains the first two words of 7:1 and their connection to the remainder of the verse.⁵⁰

48. Hosea 7:3 describes the actions both as רעה, resuming the language of 7:1, 2, and כחש. The latter term refers to oath repudiation, being used with this meaning in Hos 4:2 and in parallel to מרמה in 12:1. In the latter passage (12:1–2), כחש and the semantically-related term כזב refer to Israel’s pursuit of vassal relationships with Assyria and Egypt that repudiates Israel’s prior covenant relationship with YHWH, thus constituting oath breaking and lying.

49. On the term “bolstering,” referring to local elites who cooperate with empires in order to ensure their own status, see B. L. Stark and J. K. Chance, “The Strategies of Provincials in Empires,” in *The Comparative Archaeology of Complex Societies* (ed. M. E. Smith; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 193. On tribute payments before the reign of Menahem, see S. Z. Aster, “Israelite Embassies to Assyria in the First Half of the Eighth Century,” *Biblica* 97.2 (2016): 175–198.

50. Other interpreters have also addressed this issue, but the proposal here more clearly interprets the verses. Among these interpreters is Dearman, who understands the verse as a failed attempt at divine pardon: God cannot forgive the people because of their sins. But the words כִּרְפָאִי לִישָׁרָאֵל do not indicate an unsuccessful attempt at forgiveness, nor do other passages in Hosea (such as those discussed above) support the idea of God denying Israel pardon.

Dearman translates: “(6:11b) When I would turn the fortunes of my people, (7:1) when I would heal Ephraim, then the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria. They indeed deal falsely: the thief enters in and a band marauds in the street.” (J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 200). A. A. Macintosh (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 253) similarly understands the passage as an attack on the “faulty reasoning of Ephraim,” “the supposition that YHWH does not see or pay attention to faulty deeds.” While this explains 7:2, it fails to elucidate the use of וְנִגְלָה in 7:1 or its connection with רפא. S.-H. Hong (*The Metaphor of Illness*, p. 156) asserts that רפא was chosen for its assonance with Ephraim, but this does not explain why pardon or healing should cause the revelation of the sin.

Reading 7:1–3 in light of 5:11–6:3, which focuses on the economic damage inflicted on Israel by vassalage to Assyria, explains why God’s pardon reveals the crimes in 7:1–3. With the end of Israel’s vassalage to Assyria comes an accounting: “Ephraim’s disloyalty is revealed.” The full cost of the vassaldom, which ultimately benefited the Israelite political leadership at the expense of the populace, is now made clear.

Hosea 12:1–2 also explicitly links vassalage and theft. The prophet decries frequent robbery and pillaging, connecting it with treaties with Egypt and Assyria.⁵¹ Hosea 7:1–3 describes a similar scene. Hosea condemns the Israelite nobility for robbing less-fortunate Israelites of their property in order to establish a vassal relationship that ultimately benefits only the political elite. God’s pardon reveals this disloyalty and theft. Here, רפא refers to an action performed by the suzerain after the vassal has desisted from rebellion or loyalty to another suzerain, and sought to resume its vassal status.⁵² This corresponds to the way Akkadian *bulluṭu* is used in many of the royal inscriptions.

8. ISAIAH 6:10

The use of רפא mapped above is not limited to Hosea. At least one passage in Isaiah 1–39 employs רפא to signify “pardon” in contexts of loyalty and return. Isaiah thus appears to adopt Hosea’s innovative use of רפא. We are unaware of any discussion that calls attention to Isaiah’s use of רפא as remission of punishment.

As has been recognized, the opening scenes (6:1–8) in Isaiah’s throne vision have a Neo-Assyrian background, and seem connected to the prophecy delivered in verses 9–13.⁵³ The message Isaiah receives in 6:9–

51. See J.-G. Heintz, “Osée XII 2B à la lumière d’un vase d’alabâtre de l’époque de Salmanasar III et le rituel d’alliance assyrien: Une hypothèse de lecture,” *VT* 60 (2001): 466–480. Hosea 12:2 may refer not to shipping oil to Egypt but to vassal oaths given to both Egypt and Assyria.

52. If we follow the numerous scholars who conjoin 6:11b (בְּשׁוּבִי שְׁבוּת עָמִי) with 7:1a, the terms רפא and שׁב collocate in this passage. This approach is followed by NJPS and by the following scholars: G. I. Davies, *Hosea*, p. 178; J. L. Mays, *Hosea*, p. 99; J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 200. There are legitimate objections to this collocation on stylistic grounds: A. A. Macintosh (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 249) argues that the verse cannot begin with such a long dependant clause in light of Hosea’s terse style. S.-H. Hong (*The Metaphor of Illness*, p. 155) contends that units usually start with proper names rather than pronouns. Furthermore, שׁב in 6:11b has a different nuance than in Hos 14:2; 11:5; 6:1. Nonetheless, the collocation of these terms is interesting.

53. On the Assyrian context of this vision, see S. Z. Aster, “Images of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II in Calah in the Throne-Room Vision of Isaiah 6,” in *Marbe Hokma: Studies in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East in Memory of Victor Avigdor Hurowitz* (ed. S. Yonah et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), pp. 13–42; A. Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,” *HUCA* 60 (1989): 39–89.

10 enjoins him to prevent the people from understanding his prophetic declamation. In verse 9, the prophet is ordered to instruct the people to listen without understanding. Like Hos 14:2–5; 11:1–5; and 5:11–6:2, Isa 6:10 collocates **שב** and **רפא**:

Isa 6:9–10

וַיֹּאמֶר לֵךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ לָעָם הַזֶּה שְׁמָעוּ שְׁמוֹעַ וְאַל־תִּבְיִנוּ וּרְאוּ רְאוּ וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ
הַשְׁמִין לִב־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְאָזְנוֹ הִכָּבֵד וְעֵינָיו הִשָּׁע פֶּן־יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּבְאָזְנוֹ יִשְׁמָע
וְלִבָּבוּ יָבִין וְשָׁב וְרָפָא לוֹ

And He said, “Go, say to the people: ‘Hear indeed, but do not understand;
see indeed and do not know.’”

Fatten the heart of this people, and make heavy his ears, and plaster over
his eyes, lest he see with his eyes and hear with his ears and his heart
will understand and he will return, and He/he will pardon him.

The first part of verse 10 is structured according to an abc–cba pattern: fattening the mind parallels understanding, hardening the ears corresponds to hearing, and sealing the eyes aligns with seeing. The final clause presents the result of an understanding heart, open eyes and ready ears. If the Israelites were to fully comprehend the message delivered in verse 9, they would return to God (**וְשָׁב**) and thus gain His pardon and avoid punishment (**וְרָפָא לוֹ**). Aster has argued that this passage reflects a competition between God and Assyria for Judah’s loyalty, which uses artistic motifs from the Assyrian palaces to undermine Assyrian claims of royal omnipotence.⁵⁴ The return described in verse 9 indicates returning to rely on God rather than Assyria (as in Isa 9:12 and 10:21–22). The remission of punishment here results from the transfer of Judahite loyalty from Assyria to YHWH. Like Hos 7:1, it uses the term **רפא** to refer to YHWH remitting punishment of the Israelites and re-accepting them as vassals, after they have repudiated their loyalty to Assyria. The usage parallels that found in the inscriptions of Assurnasirpal II and Tiglath-pileser III, in which the action of *bullutu* by the sovereign marks the end of the vassal’s disloyalty and the re-acceptance of the vassal into the protection of the king.

54. See S. Z. Aster, “Images of the Palace,” S. Z. Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Reactions to Assyrian Ideology* (Ancient Near East Monographs 19; Atlanta: SBL, 2017), pp. 56–80.

9. JEREMIAH 3:22

Jeremiah uses רפא once (3:22) to denote pardoning. As in the verses explored above, the context involves return and loyalty. The close connection of this verse to Hosea is noted by Dearman, who describes it as a type of microcosm of Hosea.⁵⁵ We agree with Fischer's view that the source is in Hosea 14:2–5, since this passage collocates the terms רפא, שוב, and משובה.⁵⁶ The surrounding verses describe how YHWH adopted Israel, gave him desirable land, and expected fealty (Jer 3:19). Israel, however, became rebellious, betrayed Him, and broke faith with Him (v. 20). Undeterred, YHWH issues the following declaration:

Jer 3:22

שובו בָּנִים שׁוֹבְבִים אֶרְפָּה מְשׁוֹבְתֵיכֶם הִנְנוּ אֶתְּנוּ לָךְ כִּי אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ

Return rebellious children, I will pardon your rebellions. “Here we are, we have come to You for you are YHWH our God.”

This verse consists of two units: YHWH's declaration and Israel's response. In the former, YHWH extends His favor to Israel and commands His rebellious children to return. Jeremiah maintains the motif of father-son relationship expressed in Israel's initial refusal to call YHWH “Father” (Jer 3:19). Much like a forgiving father, YHWH wishes his back-sliding children to return. In conjunction with returning, YHWH declares: “I will pardon (רפא) your rebellion.” The language of רפא and משובה is very similar to Hos 14:5.⁵⁷ The use of the term “rebellion” further indicates that the pardon is specifically for the sin of disloyalty, as in the Hosean passages noted above. If Israel returns and declares its sole loyalty to YHWH, He will pardon his rebellion.

10. CONCLUSION

In light of the fact that Akkadian *bullutu* signifies both “heal” and “pardon,” the latter frequently appearing in political contexts and royal inscriptions, we argue that the use of רפא in the Hosean passages discussed

55. J. A. Dearman, *The Book of Hosea*, p. 340.

56. G. Fischer, *Jeremia 1–24* (HTKAT; Freiburg, 2005), p. 198.

57. Note that משובה is used elsewhere in Jeremiah (2:19) to describe Israel's alliances with Assyria and Egypt, alliances Jeremiah sees as expressing disloyalty to YHWH.

above is influenced by Akkadian *bulluṭu*. Strengthening the case for the influence of the Akkadian term in expanding the meaning of the Hebrew term are the following points:

- a. *Bulluṭu* most frequently refers to an action performed by the sovereign after the vassal desists from disloyalty, as do many of the usages of רפא in Hosea.
- b. Many of the passages in Hosea that use רפא in the sense of “pardon” discuss or imply discussion of Israel’s vassal relationship with Assyria, which Hosea clearly sees as inimical to his covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Hosea’s use of רפא to express remitting punishment for disloyalty seems to have a specific rhetorical goal. The prophet rhetorically attributes the action of רפא to YHWH in order to persuade his audience to recognize YHWH as their true political suzerain. YHWH demands allegiance from his vassals, punishing them for disloyalty. He will, however, remit the punishment of those who repent and return. Hosea uses רפא to impress upon his audience the idea that YHWH is a more beneficent suzerain than the Assyrian king.

Hosea’s borrowing of *bulluṭu* gives added depth to the contrast he draws between divine sovereignty and Assyrian governance. Little attention has been devoted to the question of how Assyrian ideology and rhetoric influenced Hosea’s theological conceptions, however. This discussion demonstrates that Hosea intentionally contrasted Assyrian suzerainty with divine sovereignty, seeking to persuade his audience that Israel’s political weakness and economic woes are the direct consequence of their vassaldom to Assyria.

Significantly, while Isaiah’s reactions to Assyria reflect a broad encounter with Assyrian notions of universal kingship and royal omnipotence, Hosea focuses specifically on the emissaries sent to Assyria and the vassalage relationship.⁵⁸ The differing images of Assyria appear to reflect differing experiences of Assyria.⁵⁹

58. B. Levine, “Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism,” *Iraq* 67 (2005): 411–427.

59. Hosea is less concerned about the broader claims of Assyrian imperial ideology. It is possible that these claims simply did not reach the social milieu in which Hosea operated, Isaiah being aware of them as a member of a more restricted intellectual elite. But an explanation grounded in intellectual history seems more likely. Northern Israelites had become familiar with Assyrian imperial ideology through a tradition of encounters with Assyria dating back to the middle of the ninth century. During the early eighth century, Assyria went through periods of decentralization, characterized by a

This borrowing further demonstrates that at least some of the passages using this formulation in Hosea date to the Assyrian period. It is difficult to imagine an author inventing such a calque at a time when Assyrian suzerainty was not a practical reality. Although the linguistic phenomenon in Hebrew seems to have survived past the Assyrian period—as evidenced by its use in Jeremiah—the calque must have been firmly established in Hebrew prophetic language, transmitted orally or in writing, during the Assyrian period. It would certainly have resonated more strongly when used within a historical context of Assyrian sovereignty.

weakening of its control over the Levant. Therefore, Northern Israelites did not see Assyrian ideology as representing an invincible power, and therefore found it lacking in persuasive power. They, therefore, did not find it as intellectually threatening as their southern brethren did. Judahites, in contrast, were exposed to Assyrian ideology for the first time in the late eighth century, in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, when Assyria indeed appeared invincible, and this ideology, therefore, appeared more convincing and constituted a greater intellectual threat.