

The Love Covenant

The book of Hosea presents a different view of God's relationship with Israel than many of the previous books. The extended metaphor employed in Hosea 2: 2-4 portrays God as Israel's husband, but, more precisely, its spurned lover. This metaphor lays the foundation for a new portrayal of God's covenant with Israel, a covenant of love, which is detailed throughout the book.

The metaphor of God as Israel's lover highlights a new sense of the relationship God has with his people. The God in this passage (Hosea 2: 2-4) is not the unfeeling and indiscriminately violent God presented earlier in the Bible. One example of this earlier idea of God is in Genesis—“And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence...now I am going to destroy them along with the earth’” (Genesis 6: 13).

In contrast, Hosea's God is intimate with Israel—“Plead...that she put away whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts...” (Hosea 2:2). The metaphor makes God very human-like and his jealous anger can be understood in the realm of human emotion. His anger is notably softer than previous accounts where God would simply strike down any offenders. For example, in the book of Exodus, God tells Moses, “‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book...I will punish them for their sin...’ Then the LORD sent a plague on the people...” (Exodus 32: 33-35).

In Hosea, God's anger is also passionate; the lines in Hosea suggest an image of a man whose passionate love is mixed with passionate jealousy as he remembers the look of his lover's face and the shape of her breasts. The memories are soft, but deeply painful as the husband laces them with their new marks of sin—his lover turns into a

promiscuous wife as her face becomes “whoring” and her breasts cradle “adultery.” His violence is also intensely personal. Rape imagery is employed as the spurned lover threatens to “strip her naked and expose her” in order to punish the wife’s sins (Hosea 2:3). This is no longer a God who dictates and punishes from above at a removed distance, but one who wishes to make Israel suffer for its crimes.

The punishment outlined for the adulterous woman parallels the slow way God will punish Israel. This punishment is of abandonment—“make her like a wilderness”—and of slow death—“turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst” (Hosea 2: 3). The metaphor turns God into the angry man who finds out his wife has taken other lovers and then systematically outlines the detailed ways of his vengeance. He is so angry that he will even dismiss his children in order to punish her. “Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of whoredom” (Hosea 2: 4). However, it is exactly this intense and detailed jealousy which illustrates the love between the man and the woman, between God and Israel. If he did not love so deeply, so passionately, he would not be so offended or take the time to punish so thoroughly.

In this way, the metaphor of God and Israel as lovers sets up the covenant as a covenant of love which is prevalent throughout the book of Hosea. This covenant appears different than past representations of God’s covenant with Israel. In Exodus, the covenant stated that Israel needed to heed God’s commandments. In Hosea, the covenant seems less specific and more human; God desires “steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6: 6). This covenant requires that the Israelites love God steadfastly without becoming adulterous and loving other gods.

Hosea's metaphor certainly reestablishes the idea of the covenant as one of love, but it is unclear why this new covenant is expressed here or why it is important. It does seem important to Hosea to weave together the old ideas of the covenant with this new covenant about love. He seems to want to unite the previous notion of a wrathful God with his new version of a loving God, and the text vacillates between the two. At one point the text reads, "...therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as...when mothers were dashed in pieces with their children" (Hosea 10: 14). Very shortly after the tone of God changes drastically—"I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love" (Hosea 11: 4). The text is silent about how these two different portrayals of God actually fit together.

Again, it is unclear why the covenant is presented as one of love in Hosea. One idea is that the book of Hosea is trying to reinterpret the covenant so as to end the repetitive cycle of the Israelites breaking covenant which exists throughout the Bible. In a way, it seems as though Hosea realizes that the original presentation of the relationship between God and Israel has a history of failing, and it may be helpful to create a new version of that relationship. Hosea attempts this by making God more human-like and giving him human emotions that the people would be able to understand. The employment of the lovers metaphor also allows the Israelites to understand their relationship with God by basing it off human experiences with love.

Going along with the idea of strengthening a covenant that seems again and again to be too weak is Hosea's idea that love is the strongest bond. This book may be seen as Hosea's final effort to bond the Israelites to God before Israel is taken. Hosea may see the use of love then as the motivation needed to inspire the people to stay with God.

With the old covenant it was necessary for Israel to fear punishment for abandoning God. However, this punishment was God's wrath and destruction. Hosea employs a much more powerful fear—the fear of losing love. The threat now is not that God will just be angry, but that he will “hate them,” “will drive them out of [his] house,” and “will love them no more” (Hosea 9: 15). Losing someone who once loved them is much worse than losing someone who never loved them.

The need for this love covenant may also have grown out of what was going on at the point in time Hosea was a prophet. In the first covenant between God and Israel, the people had been suffering under Egyptian rule and God had brought them out of slavery. They had nothing and relied on God to protect them. However, at the time of Hosea, it appears that the Israelites are doing fairly well. They have established themselves on their land and are no longer poor. A God who can provide for them may not seem as necessary; it may be easy for this generation to forget God since they no longer need to ask him for help.

So then in order to bring the Israelites to God, Hosea may use the idea of love since one can endlessly aspire for love. In the original covenant, the people asked for and God provided them manna, but here the people need to strive for his love. There is no longer something concrete and tangible to receive from God, but something abstract. When the Israelites received the manna, or whatever else it was they desired, it was easy then to forget God. However, since they can never truly know if they have God's love, they must work for it forever. Love may be the strongest motivation for action and Hosea uses it to his advantage.

The love covenant may also be presented here to inspire repentance among the Israelites. In the past, the notion of covenant has been absolute. If the people obey God, he will protect them. If the people disobey God, he will abandon or destroy them. If the people come back to God, he will return to them. However, the covenant in Hosea does not seem to be so concrete. The book presents the idea of needing to heal one's relationship with God, just as a husband and wife would work to heal a problematic relationship.

The important twist in this idea of healing is that it is God who creates the wound by taking away his love, but also happens to be the only one who can heal the wound by returning his love. This is pointed out in Hosea: "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound" (Hosea 5: 13). In this way, the love covenant leaves no room for other Gods or other kings if the Israelites wish to be healed.

The blurred lines of this covenant allow for temporary punishment that may inspire repentance. Much like the angry husband who cannot help but still love his adulterous wife, God will also take back his people. They seem to know that "it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him" (Hosea 6: 1-2).

The strongest part of the covenant may be that in this idea of covenant God never truly abandons his people; even though he threatens to deny them love, he cannot do so. This may be more effective in motivating the people to admit their sins and return to God than if they thought of God's anger and abandonment as absolute. The promiscuous wife

will be more inclined to return to her husband if he is temporarily angry than if he cuts her off completely.

It is uncertain why the book of Hosea employs this idea of the covenant between God and Israel as a covenant based on love. However, while there are confusion and holes in the text, it seems that Hosea does present the idea of the covenant successfully or persuasively. The first metaphor of God and Israel as lovers creates the foundation for the ideas and human emotions that course through the rest of the book. These ideas then expand into even greater metaphors about God's love covenant that seem almost too big to be contained by the small book of Hosea. The successful presentation of the covenant as love rests on an important ending in Hosea. The lovers reconcile. "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel... they shall again live beneath my shadow" (Hosea 14: 4-7).