

The Words of Love Between Us: The Covenant in *Hosea*

The book of Hosea reaffirms the first word of the covenant between God and Israel at Sinai: “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods besides me (Ex 20:2-3). At a time when the Assyrian empire is threatening like a flood to overwhelm them, and they are desperately thinking of ways to save themselves—turning to other gods, making covenants with other peoples—Hosea urges the people of Israel to remember that they are YHWH’s people, and his alone, and as such they are to look to no other for deliverance. He reaches back to the book of *Exodus* to find a time when, according to the view of this text, Israel truly knew YHWH. In what’s seen as a wooing of Israel the bride by YHWH the bridegroom, the God in Hosea will call his people back into the wilderness—a state of total dependence upon God, and a place in which the people entered into a covenant with their God after he freed them from slavery—so that they may come to know him anew before returning to the land, a theme which would touch the hearts of those later listeners who were exiled in Babylon:

Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.
(Hos2:14-15)

Through this conceit, he recasts the first word of the covenant as a call to an exclusive love relationship with God/YHWH. This idea of the covenant as a marriage is of profound importance to Hosea, as he urges the people to come to truly know YHWH. For just as in *Exodus*, the source of the obligation to monogamy is the God’s declaration of who he is, and how they are to know him: “I am YHWH your God, who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery [...]” Hosea’s God is a God who loves, and a God who frees; he is YHWH, he is their God, and he is the one who set them free. And so Israel’s obligations to her God are not those of a slave to a master; rather, they are the obligations of love, the promises of the marriage covenant which she entered into with the God who freed her, and who promised her steadfast love.

So in the wilderness of Hosea, just as in the wilderness of Exodus, God tries to break the slave mentality which 400 years of bondage in Egypt put upon the heart of Israel; “he urges the people to imagine themselves as free” (Williams lecture, 2-11). In the book of Hosea, this means even urging the people to see their relationship with him in a new light, or rather one long forgotten, to be sought and found anew. That is, the book of Hosea appeals to the people of Israel, not only to put away their worship of other gods, but to find a new understanding of their relationship with their own God, YHWH. And this new understanding is to be found in the names by which they are to know him:

On that day, says YHWH, you will call me, ‘Ishi’ (my man, my husband)
and no longer will you call me, ‘Baali’ (my master, my Baal.) (Hos 2:16)

The change of names here reflects a whole new experience of the relationship with God on Israel’s part; it expresses the new way in which she is to know him—as husband, and not as master. Both names have layers of meaning which beg each to be given a closer look.

First, *Baal*. On the surface, it is the name of the Canaanite god whose worship in the northern kingdom Israel is the very adultery for which God punishes her, withdrawing from her the fruits of the land, and later sweeping her away. For in the marriage metaphor of this text, to worship other gods is to know other lovers, and to not know YHWH at all. And so to come to a true understanding of their relationship with YHWH, they must first

put away all foreign gods. God goes on to say: “For I will remove the names of the Baalim from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more” (Hos 2:17). That is to say, with the removal of the name *Baal*, Baal will be forgotten, just as YHWH was forgotten when Israel called upon other lovers¹. The loss of the names of the Baals reflects the loss of Israel’s knowledge of them, just as when sometime lovers drift apart, and the once familiar names rust upon the tongue.

But the name works even further within the marriage metaphor. For it is not just a matter of which god Israel knows, YHWH or Baal; it is even a matter of what name Israel knows her God by within their own relationship. God’s words are: “You will call me ‘My Ish,’ *and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’* (Hos 2:16). This clearly seems to say that Israel knew God/YHWH as Baal, and called him by that name; and YHWH wants nothing of it.

This brings one to the inner layer of meaning of the name *Baal*, the meaning it has *within* the relationship between YHWH and his people. *Baal* can colloquially mean ‘husband,’ just like *ish*. But its literal meaning is ‘master,’ and it can never be wholly severed from its connotations with this servant-lord relationship, not any more than it can be from its connotations with the worship of foreign gods. It would seem then that God, in removing the name of *Baal* from their mouths, is given to reject this idea of the relationship between him and his people, and to urge them to look upon it with new eyes. It would seem that God is urging his people to see him not as a master in servitude, but as a partner in love.

¹ “I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says YHWH” (Hos 2:13).

And so they are to call him *Ish*; and the name holds memories. It calls to mind the story of the first moment shared between the first man and woman in the world, the first husband and wife. In that moment, the man joyously named himself *ish* in relation to *ishshah*, because he saw that she was taken out of him, and of his same being². The names were set up as a memorial to that original bond, for which reason men in all ages are said to leave their father and mother, and cleave to their wife in marriage so as to become one flesh³. This is what is established as the original relationship between man and woman/husband and wife, before the breaking of the first covenant with the taste of the forbidden fruit, before their experience of the world and of each other was changed, before the woman was doomed to be subject to the husband she desires⁴. So it would seem that, in causing Israel to no longer call him *Baal*, and instead to call him *Ish*, God is even urging the people to rediscover for themselves the original meaning of the relationship between *Ish* and *Ishshah*, the way the first man and woman knew each other *before* the breaking of covenant, and then to apply it to their relationship with God. And the people will express this found-again knowledge of their relationship with God by calling him *Ishi*, ‘my husband,’ instead of *Baali*, ‘my husband/lord.’

The echoes of Genesis continue: God is next given to say that he will make a covenant for his people on that day with all the other living creatures, and that he will abolish violence from the land⁵. The language brings to mind the original state of the world as it was imagined by the author of Genesis 1, a state wherein there was no

² Cf. Gen 2:23.

³ Cf. Gen 2:24.

⁴ “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16).

⁵ Cf. Hos 2:18.

violence between any creatures with the breath of life, and all was “very good”⁶. Then, his next words are stunning:

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH. (Hos 2:19-20)

In response to her awareness of him as her husband, which she acknowledges by calling him *Ishi*, God takes Israel as his wife; the covenant between the people and the other living creatures in the land is followed by a covenant of love between the people and their God. She has answered his wooing; and now he answers her appeal to him as “Ishi.” The language is that of the covenant; but here the covenant at Sinai is seen anew as a marriage vow, with both sides affirming their acceptance of the other’s love, and taking on the duties—faithfulness, righteousness, steadfast love—owed to the other. And then, the marriage is to be consummated: “You shall know YHWH” (Hos 2:20).

Know here is a stunning word. For in the context of marriage, it takes on a particular meaning. To know someone in this sense is to enter into the most intimate relationship with them that two persons can. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, it describes the very act of conjugal union in which a man cleaves to his wife such that the two become one flesh. It is used thus for the first time in Genesis 4:1, when it is said: “Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain [...]” So in this God is given to make a great affirmation of the dignity of his human partner Israel; you can and will know YHWH your God in the most personal and intimate way possible.

The assertion that Israel can and will enter into this relationship with God hangs wholly upon the use of the divine name here. It completes the affirmation of the people’s knowledge of God; for they are to know him once again as YHWH, by his personal name,

⁶ Cf. Gen 1:28-31.

which he gave them when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness to make covenant with them.

Just as with human lovers, this relationship of mutual knowledge bears fruit and blessings. Out of that intimate knowledge springs new life, and that new life is the children, just as in Gen 4:1. Here the three children of Israel—Jezreel, Lo-ruhamah, and Lo-ammi—are adopted by God through a renaming, as he undoes the names which he gave them before⁷:

On that day I will answer, says YHWH, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel; and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, “You are my people”; and he shall say, “You are my God.” (Hos 2:21-23)

God’s acceptance of the children of Israel, acknowledged through this renaming of them, is symbolic of a return to the blessed state in the land. The children will call, and God will answer through the land and the forces of nature which bring forth life. The name of Jezreel, not even changed, is reinterpreted. Before, it was given by God to be a memory of the site of Jehu’s rebellion against the house of Ahab, king of Israel, a thing which, in the view of this text, is a cause for punishment by God⁸. Now the name, taken for its literal meaning, ‘God sows,’ is to be a sign of the newly recovered fertility of the land, and a promise by God to once again establish them in the land as his chosen portion: “I will sow him for myself in the land.” Lo-ruhamah, ‘the unpitied, unloved,’ becomes Ruhamah (‘pitied’) once more; and Lo-ammi, ‘not my people,’ becomes Ammi (‘my people’) again, just as in Hosea 2:1. Through this renaming, the children whom God before called “children of whoredom” become the legitimate children of God and Israel,

⁷ Cf. Hos1:4-9.

⁸ “And YHWH said to him, ‘Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel’” (Hos 1:4).

the fruit of their common love. So in this conception, the fruit of Israel's recovered knowledge of YHWH is a return to the blessed state in the land. The marriage metaphor is complete, as Israel's children are blessed in the knowledge of YHWH, and become his own; now that they truly know YHWH as YHWH, they can return to the land once more.

God's acceptance of the children is answered by their acceptance of him in the final vows to belong to one another: "You are my people; you are my God." This call and answer is the sum of Hosea's interpretation of Exodus: the covenant at Sinai was so many words of love between Israel the bride and YHWH the groom, marriage vows exchanged in the wilderness. Hosea urges the people of Israel to remember that YHWH is their God, the God who set them free, who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness because he loved them. The ideal relationship between God and his people, then, is one not of servitude, but of mutual knowledge, as of a man and a woman in marriage; and the fruit of that knowledge is a return to the original blessed state in the land, and the original blessed state of Israel's relations with God.

Works Cited

Williams, Ralph. Lecture. University of Michigan. 11 Feb 2008.