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Hosea 2:14-15 (NRSV)

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 land of Egypt.

Embedded within these few verses is a wealth of theology. Several allusions draw upon the already centuries-old history of covenant between God and Israel. This paper will explicate the allusions as well as explore the rich meaning and implications of the text. It will become clear that the passion of God is much deeper and broader than a dry “salvation message” expresses. The language of male-female relational dynamics speaks of the intensity and single-mindedness of romance.

Hosea was a prophet of the 8th Century B.C. Except for the name of his father and the story of his marriage, little is known about his life. His words were directed primarily to the northern kingdom of Israel. There is some scholarly debate over a few references to the southern kingdom of Judah. Some propose that these were inserted later by keepers of the written documents who saw the value of the message and the need for the southern kingdom to take it to heart, most especially since they witnessed the fall of Israel. Others accept their presence without the need to turn to a redactional explanation. David Hubbard states that “the fact that

Hosea's words contained accusations of Judah at a few pivotal spots would have enhanced their use in the 7th and 6th centuries."¹ In either case, the message was preserved and considered relevant to subsequent generations.

The historical context for Hosea's ministry is a time of great prosperity during the reign of Jeroboam II (782-743 B.C.) and political chaos following his death. The people were proud in their prosperity, active in their religious ceremonies (a mixture of Yahweh worship with pagan rituals), and unconcerned with moral law. Hosea addressed the apostasy of Israel by warning of judgment to come. History would vindicate the truth of the message. The beginning of the end was evident in the leadership battles. H. Wheeler Robinson describes the time this way: "After the long reign of Jeroboam II, half a dozen kings of Israel flit like shadows across the stage of the Northern kingdom within a score of years--puppets in the hands of Assyria, or impotent rebels against Assyria's invincible might."² Israel eventually falls to Assyria and is completely obliterated as a nation. The political degeneration, active idolatry, and moral complacency are the backdrop for Hosea's prophecy.

From a structural perspective, the book has two major parts. The first, Chapters 1-3, is centered on marriage as Hosea's enactment of God's heart and message. The second part, Chapters 4-14, is a composite of sayings for which a pattern is more difficult to discern. The Hebrew text is some of the most difficult of the Old Testament writings. Some scholars outline them as generally chronological. A valuable summation is offered by Hubbard who points out that "the thematic and stylish links between the separate short speeches and the larger clusters

¹ David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction & Commentary*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 22.

² H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Speaker's Bible: Minor Prophets*, James and Edward Hastings, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 3.

evince a remarkable oneness of aim, thought, vocabulary and intention throughout the book.”³

Though it is difficult to establish a clear outline, the tone and language of judgment and salvation unite the text as a whole. In substance, it is important to note that their basis presupposes the availability and knowledge of the Pentateuch, and Deuteronomy in particular. As expressed by Lloyd Ogilvie, “The events leading up to the Sinai covenant, the covenant itself, and the blessing and curses of the Mosaic Law provide the objective standard for Hosea’s oracles to eighth-century Israel.”⁴ The people can be appealed to based upon this word of God that has been carried through their history. The passage under consideration appears in the first part of the book which in itself has a clearer structure.

The narratives of Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 provide a frame for a poetic speech of God in Chapter 2. The whole of these chapters is built upon the parallel of marriage. Though Hosea is one of the first to draw so close a connection between human marriage and the divine-human covenant, the dynamics are in place from the beginning. Dillard and Longman point out that, “there are only two relationships that are appropriately exclusive: marriage and covenant. Rivals could not be tolerated in either relationship.”⁵ Fidelity is essential. A breach in faithfulness will have far-reaching consequences in both cases. Hosea is called to speak of the divine-human covenant in the language of the hope and beauty of marriage, as well as the pain and dejection of one who has been abandoned when the other has been unfaithful. Not only is Hosea called to speak God’s message, he is called to live it.

³ Hubbard, 34.

⁴ Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, (Dallas: Word, 1990), 6.

⁵ Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 361.

The narrative of Chapter 1 (reiterated in the narrative of Chapter 3) records that God commanded Hosea to take for himself a “wife of whoredom” (NRSV). Three children are born from the relationship and are symbolically named. Through Hosea’s obedience in his marriage to Gomer, he “realized from excruciating firsthand experience the depth of God’s love for Israel.”⁶ His was an existential sharing in the pathos of God. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to present the arguments surrounding whether this was visionary and symbolic or literal and real-life, this writer is in agreement with Abraham Heschel and others that Hosea’s experience was literal and real⁷. Thus, there is a dynamic interplay between the aggrieved expression of God toward His people Israel and the anguished experience of Hosea in his marriage to Gomer. Within Verses 2-13 of Chapter 2, the specifics of Israel’s adulterous acts as well as specific ways God will bring judgment are named.

Israel’s adultery is her idolatry. The people are worshipping Baal, wearing cultic jewelry of Baal, and participating in festival days dedicated to Baal. The covenant is broken; for “the essence of Baal worship was bartered devotion for desired provisions whether it was productivity, fertility, or prosperity.”⁸ These are to be entrusted entirely to God. God’s judgment will expose and uncover the shame of her unfaithfulness and put “an end to all her mirth” (vs. 11). He will also reveal His sovereignty by withholding the produce of the land. The tone is harsh and punishing yet through this she will remember the Husband she has forgotten. This brief overview of these verses sets the stage for a more detailed look at the text at hand.

⁶ Ogilvie, 6.

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction. Vol 1*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 52-56.

⁸ Ogilvie, 31.

Consistent with the genre of prophetic poetry, this passage is rich in its potential to stimulate emotion, imagination, and memory. Based on the preceding delineation of unfaithfulness and judgment, the first word, “Therefore” has one braced for a declaration of a final end to relationship. As Hubbard expresses, “*Therefore* steels us for the fateful announcement.”⁹ Israel is guilty of idolatry. The case has been made. Instead, it is the beginning of a surprising reversal. What follows the harsh, yet just, words of judgment is soft invitation. “Therefore” in this case means after, and in spite of, what has passed before, God continues to initiate relationship. The words are calm and captivating.

As each phrase or important word in the phrase is highlighted in Verse 14, note the intensification of the sentiment. God begins by using a powerfully gentle word: allure. The Hebrew word carries with it a connotation of enticement, even seduction. This is the language of concentrated courtship and wooing. Israel is the object of God’s intense yearning. The will to resist God is weakened in the face of such desire. His desire will bring her into the wilderness.

Once allured, Israel is led to a place of utter dependence upon Him. The wilderness is “as far removed from the tree-shaded shrines of the Baals (cf. 4:13) as it was from the brickworks of Egypt.”¹⁰ The place of wilderness recalls the marvelous and exciting beginning of the love relationship. Divinely drawn away from the distraction and temptation of the Canaanite idols, God will return her to the place of initial receptivity in order to once again engage Israel on a deeply intimate level.

The third tricolon expresses God’s deepest pursuit. He will speak tenderly to her. In

⁹ Hubbard, 83.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Hebrew, the literal meaning is “speak to her heart.”¹¹ The connotation includes the idea of speaking words of comfort and is warmly romantic in tone. He desires to draw out a truly feminine response to His deep, abiding love. From this place of deep relationship, God continues to elucidate the ways He desires to bless Israel. The next verse includes a poetic and moving articulation, largely due to the use of a pain-evoking metaphor rooted in their shared history.

In the opening phrase of Verse 15, the promise of a gift of vineyards is clearly linked to Verse 12, in which God determines to lay waste her vines. Ogilvie emphasizes that “the very vineyards which were to be destroyed in judgment will be restored.”¹² The point is that judgment is not the last word. Rather, it is the necessary precursor to restoration. The reference to the Valley of Achor (Hebrew, “Trouble”) recalls another time of judgment in Israel’s past.

The story is told in Joshua 7 of the sin of Achan. Early in the conquest of the land, God gave Israel a miraculous victory at Jericho. Shortly thereafter, what should have been an easy victory at Ai became an embarrassing defeat. This was directly due to the disobedience of Achan who kept and hid plunder for himself that should have been destroyed. The penalty commanded by God for the purification of the nation was the execution of Achan and his family. This took place in a valley subsequently named Achor. According to Ogilvie, “The word *Achor* was a technical term for the breaking of a taboo.”¹³ The plunder of the conquered people was taboo by express command of God. After judgment was meted out, Israel was made right in relationship to God and Ai was later defeated. The Valley of Achor perpetually symbolized

¹¹ Ogilvie, 39.

¹² Ogilvie, 40.

¹³ Ibid

defiance and punishment. Hosea's hearers would likely have shuddered to be reminded of it. Yet in this word from God is another surprising reversal. A promise of hope and restoration is ahead, for "the valley that meant doom shall bring them deliverance."¹⁴ God names the place of deepest gloom in order to show that He will use it as a portal to His grace and light. The response that is called forth is youthful exuberance. Verse 15 closes with an enticement for Israel to joyfully remember.

God foresees that she will "respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt." Some translate the word "respond" as "sing" which conveys a joy and spontaneity of worship springing from deep gratitude. This describes a part of who she was as a young nation. Ogilvie explains that "the reference is to the liberated, joyous, singing people coming out of the bondage of Egypt before the stubbornness and disobedience described in Exodus and Numbers set in, and especially before the people's later syncretism with the Baals."¹⁵ God's word to Hosea is meant to evoke the image of the young woman, Israel, whose heart God has won. Though she has undeniably gone after other lovers, hope remains for her to re-experience the elation of allowing her heart to once more be won over to God.

By way of this detailed analysis, one can see the power of the poetry. In so few words, so much emotion, imagination, and memory is evoked. Laden with compassion and anticipation, we discover something of the heart of God. Though some may be reluctant to speak of God as a Lover, this is precisely what Hosea was called to do. Heschel is helpful in explaining the purpose: "The idea of the divine pathos is not a personification of God but an exemplification of divine reality, an illustration or illumination of His concern. It does not represent a substance,

¹⁴ Robinson, 13.

¹⁵ Ogilvie, 43.

but an act or a relationship.”¹⁶ Speaking in the language of courtship and romance is one way of illuminating a truth of the amazing and everlasting love of God. His deepest desire is relationship and His ongoing activity is to intensely pursue and call forth the fullest heart of His people.

Reflected in the Old Testament, the theme continues in the New Testament. The connection is apparent in John Balchin’s perspective of the prophet’s message: “Hosea makes it clear that the basis of religion is a real relationship with God. This relationship makes demands on God’s people, but it is also costly to God, who suffers when his love is rejected and his people are unfaithful.”¹⁷ The suffering of God becomes tangible in the humanity and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The way is made for all time, though unfaithfulness abounds, to restore relationship between humanity and God. He has taken the judgment upon Himself and become our Mediator. The mysterious romancing by God is expressed by Paul in Ephesians 5:32, where he uses the metaphor of human marriage to describe Christ and the Church. Even more striking is the occasion of the marriage in Revelation. At the end of all time, where ultimate hope resides, the Bride of Christ will be received and the celebration will be a marriage supper (Rev. 19). The same richness of male-female dynamics seen in Hosea is seen in the New Testament when it speaks of the end of time. Indeed, this is often referred to as the Final Consummation.

Hosea 2:14-15 represents God as gentle and persistent romancer--One who knows of and transforms the darkest places of rebellion and pain in the past--fully determined to speak tenderly to the heart and win it over. He anticipates and envisions a responsive heart and an exuberant time of singing, dancing and partying. Compared to a propositional description of faith, this

¹⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets. Vol 2*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 53.

¹⁷ John Balchin, *The Compact Survey of the Bible*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1987), 146.

poetry is vivid and stunning. How much more full can the invitation to living relationship be than to believe that we are the object of intense romance just waiting to be celebrated.

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