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Hosea and the Book of the Twelve

“YHWH’s Speaking started with Hosea.” Though this translation of Hos 1:2a is not the only possible and not even the most likely one, anybody reading the Hebrew text heard this meaning of the sentence which introduces the book of Hosea, too. It may be that later readers of the book of the Twelve even heard it prior to the other meanings. At least some modern commentaries have favored it following F. Hitzig in his commentary on the Twelve from 1838¹ as the most prominent representative.

1.1 Hosea and Amos

In any case, it is by no means fortuitous that the book of Hosea takes the rank of a starter among the twelve prophets as well in its Hebrew as in its Greek form of the Septuagint. Hosea was the only prophet among the Twelve raised up in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and proclaiming there, while Amos who proclaimed there, too, came from Judah and was educated there. The many points of contact between texts of the books of Amos and Isaiah² are indications of his Judaic provenance. The different background of Hosea and Amos may explain, why Hosea so emotionally condemns “the calf of Samaria” (Hos 8:6) in the sanctuary of Bethel, while Amos doesn’t even mention it though he attacks the pilgrimages to Bethel and Gilgal (Amos 4:4f.; 5:4f.). It may explain, too, why Hosea refers to events of Israel’s history much more than any other prophet after him. As far as we know the religious tradition of the Northern Kingdom dealt much more intensively with history as the field of human experience of God than southern Judah did. Additionally, the difference may explain why the prophetic condemnation of the cult of their days varies so much with Amos and Hosea: While Amos condemns the gulf between worship and all day life – worship no longer positively influences or even changes the brutal and selfish actions of powerful men (Amos 4:4; 5:24) – Hosea attacks the form and contents of Israel’s worship which in his eyes has become Baal-worship.

1.2 The book of Amos and the book of Hosea

¹ P. 74f.

² Cf. R.Fey, Amos und Jesaja and recently J. Kreuch, Das Amos- und Jesajabuch.

Even more important for the pole-position of the book of Hosea among the twelve prophets is the fact that its primary layer probably is the oldest prophetic book to be written. Again a comparison with the book of Amos may be helpful, since Amos was the older prophet proclaiming earlier than Hosea. The book of Amos is structured in a very transparent arrangement. Prior to the addition of the final words of salvation Amos 9:7-15 the central collection of Amos' words in ch. 3-6 was framed by two poems in a strophic order, the first one stressing that Israel is more guilty than their neighboring nations in all their cruelty (Amos 1-2), the final one which transmits Amos' visions teaching a reader that God's patience with his people has come to an end (Amos 7-9*). The collection of Amos' words proper in Amos 3-6 is ordered carefully, too. Its first part is introduced as God's own word ("Hear this word which YHWH has spoken against you, o people of Israel!" Amos 3:1), while the second part is introduced as the prophet's reaction to God's word ("Hear this word which I deliver against you as a dirge, house of Israel!" Amos 5:1). Such a sophisticated order as in the case of the book of Amos is not likely to be the invention of those who arranged a prophetic book for the first time thereby creating a new kind of literature without precedent.

The book of Hosea looks very different. For a reader who starts reading it for the first time there seems to be much more chaos than in the book of Amos. To be sure, chapters 1-3 contain a collection of words and acts of the prophet which are transparent for a reader. These chapters apparently were gathered because of their common subject. They concern the prophet's marriage with a prostitute and relate it to the metaphor of YHWH's marriage with his difficult and stubborn people.³ But readers reaching ch. 4 feel rather lost, at least when reading the following chapters for the first time. They are confronted with a chain of prophetic utterances without evident limits. Usual prophetic formulas introducing a new entity like "Thus says YHWH" or concluding it like "utterance of YHWH" are missing until the end of ch. 11. Formal speeches of God and speeches of the prophet himself intermingle with each other without any rule. Words about Israel in 3rd person are suddenly interrupted by addresses to Israel (or the readers). Until ch. 9 plural imperatives serve for subdivisions (4:1; 5:1,8; [6:1]; 8:1; 9:1), but later on even they are missing. From 9:10 onwards to the end of ch.11 there are prophetic or divine speeches which place historical events into the center of their argument, possibly an arrangement according to a common subject. While the marriage collection of ch. 1-3 contains many words of salvation a reader who started in ch. 4 meets the first word of salvation at the end of ch. 11. Since the formula "utterance of YHWH" concludes

³ Cf. for these chapters e.g. Y. Sherwood, *The Prostitute*; M.-T. Wacker, *Figurationen*; R. Törnkvist, *Use and Abuse*.

ch. 11 such a reader for the first time is invited to rest a moment from reading continually. Chapters 12-14 ending in a long speech of salvation (14:2-9) seem to form an entity of their own or a secondary prolongation of ch. 4-11. Hos 12:3 uses the same category (“YHWH has a contention [רִיב] with Judah”) for God’s accusation against his people as 4:1 does.

1.3 Elements of composition in the book⁴

Yet, there are evident indications of conscious composition in chapters 4-11 which for the majority of scholars form the nucleus of the prophetic book (for some of them this nucleus would be limited to 4:1-9:9). I restrict myself to the most important indications:

1. The main accusations of the prophet against his people and especially against their leaders in Samaria belong to the area of the cult on the one hand and to that of foreign policy (and of social repression) on the other. From ch. 8 on both kinds of accusations are related to each other, but prior to it in chapters 4:4-5:7 and 5:8-7:16 they are dealt with separately. The contents of the prophetic texts become more complex and more comprehensive the more a reader advances. Chapters 8-11 present a kind of summary of Israel’s guilt, chapters 9:10-11:11 surpassing ch. 8 in their combination of Israel’s present guilt with its guilt in history.⁵ Before chapters 9:10-11:11 start Hos 9:1-9 draws a first consequence predicting the needs of exile; ch.11 concluding the collection of words about Israel’s guilt in history draws a final one.

2. Chapters 4:4-5:7 and 5:8-7:16 which introduce the subjects of Israel’s fault in worship and in foreign policy respectively, are both divided into two parts which in their main orientation run parallel, a longer one first, a shorter one second. This division is especially evident in the case of 4:4-5:7. After a general introduction to ch. 4-11 as a whole in 4:1-3 first the most responsible figures are accused for their guilt (the priests in 4:4-10; the priests and politicians in 5:1-2); then the misguided people are shown in their misconduct, both times initiated by a “spirit of whoredom” (4:11-15; 5:4-5), while a final passage without speech of God and without address sounds halfway like a lament (4:16-18; 5:6-7).

⁴ Cf. among others J. Jeremias, *Hosea und Amos*, 55-66; E. Zenger, *Durch Menschen*, 185-190; F. Crüsemann, “Jetzt”, 13-20.

⁵ Cf. for these chapters e.g. D.R. Daniels, *Hosea and Salvation History*; H.-D. Neef, *Heilstraditionen*; E.K. Holt, *Prophecy and the Past*.

3. Most important is the following observation: In many passages in 4:4-9:9 there are short hints at events that seem to have happened rather shortly, very often located at certain places, e.g. the guilt of a certain priest (4:4-6), the failure of priests and politicians at certain places (5:1-2), single events in the course of the so-called Syrian-Ephraimite war (5:8-11) etc.; cf. 6:7-9; 12:12. Apparently these short hints sufficed for the first readers to remind them of events in which they participated or of which they were informed by other sources. Very likely these hints aim at oral words of the prophet Hosea in a very condensed form. Readers of later generations like us ourselves don't really understand them.

But this does not matter. The authors of the book don't want to discuss these past events, but they want to draw general consequences from it using it as a kind of example. These consequences any reader can grasp at any time; they are relevant to all generations. Let me take two examples, an easy and a complex one. In the case of 4:4-8 a reader is first informed of the failure of a single priest which he only roughly understands. But then the perspective is widened and the guilt of all priests of the prophet's time is touched: Their immense increase because of their intention to celebrate ever more worships has led to a neglect of God's will and the longing of the people for ever more sacrifices combined with pleasant meals of meat. The prophet calls this intention Baal-worship in ch. 2 or prostitution and adultery in ch. 4-5. Thus, the reproach of a single priest with his failure of communicating God's will has led to a general reflection of the elements of worship appropriate to the living God.

In the case of the Syrian-Ephraimite war (733-732 B.C.E.) single events which Hosea accused in 5:8-11 only serve as a starting point for general theological reflections which are directed to both parties of this Judeo-Israelite brother-crisis. Though for a historian both parties acted very differently, for the prophetic text they both failed in an identical way: They looked for help and turned to Assyria instead of longing for divine intervention. Consequently, YHWH who could have become a physician for their "illness" which he himself had sent now has changed to a lion threatening to devour them (5:12-14). Israel as well as Judah tried to solve their problems politically and to avoid any divine contact. But they had to learn that avoidance of YHWH is in vain. Since they rejected him as a physician they will meet him as a lion. For the prophetic text there was and is no chance to act in a context in which God is not present.

Yet, if the story would end here, neither Israel nor Judah would exist. The prophetic reflection continues. It tells of God's unwillingness to act as a lion devouring his people and of his patience which leads him to wait urgently for their repentance. But God waits in vain. Israel's and Judah's sense of a necessary change exists, but it is so careless and brief and so full of Baal-thinking that God's only means to save his people is to send prophets who condemn Israel as well as Judah. But these prophets definitely are his last means to save his people (5:15-6,6). Will they find ears who listen to them? Since their words are written down in the book of Hosea everybody is able to come to know them.

It is evident that such a theological reflection which looks back to the war of two brother-states from a distance and offers the prophetic interpretation of it and afterwards looks back to Israel's and Judah's reaction to the prophetic interpretation of that war, is far distant from the oral words of divine judgment on single military events with which the literary entity started in 5:8-11. Additionally, the final verse of this entity proves that the authors of the text intended more than just a reflection on the Syrian-Ephraimite war. In this final verse God's intention through his prophet to save a stubborn people is condensed in the following words (6:6):

For it is loyalty that I delight in, not sacrifice,
knowledge of God instead of burnt offerings.

Anybody who has followed the arguments of the text so far is confused at first reading. Up to now the prophetic text had discussed political matters, cruelty during the war, futile hope for Assyrian help etc., but never worship and sacrifice. Hos 6:6 shows that the text expects readers to have started in ch. 4, where the reproach with the kind of worship of Hosea's time is treated and sacrifices are dealt with. Additionally, the text expects readers to be able to transfer insights of one subject to another. For Hos 6:6 "sacrifice" – a worship of joy usually combined with meals of meat – fails the true God in the same way as Israel's and Judah's hasty and easy repentance does. It is "knowledge of God" that God cares for;⁶ but knowledge of God" is intimately bound to God's will in history and presence.

1.4 Critical scholarship

⁶ Cf. for this central term of Hosea's theology still today H.W. Wolff, "Wissen um Gott".

What is the idea behind this unusual arrangement of a prophetic book and who is responsible for it? In recent scholarship there is no agreement whatsoever concerning these questions. Opinions differ extremely due to the fact that in the Hebrew Bible no actual parallels exist for this kind of a prophetic book. On the one hand, there are maximalists like W. Gisin, B.E. Kelle or J.A. Dearman who tend to ascribe more or less all transmitted words to the historical Hosea or to his pupils still in the 8th century. The extensive commentary of F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman acknowledges literary layers in the book in principle, but in the majority of cases the authors would not dare to decide which parts of the text are primary, which secondary. On the other hand there are minimalists who either find only very fragmentary words of Hosea in the book⁷ or who detect no words of the historical prophet whatsoever. For M. Nissinen who interprets his texts with a colometric analysis and classifies the layers of the text according to the history of theological ideas, the basic layer are exilic laments; for S. Rudnig-Zelt this basic layer of the book would be some wisdom – not prophetic! – sayings concerning the end of the Northern Kingdom, the latest layers belonging to Hellenistic times; for J.M. Bos the whole book was written in the 6th and 5th century. For all of these authors the book of Hosea got its essential shape in post-exilic times.

The majority of scholars find their place in between of these extreme positions. Few of them would deny that some late texts of the book like 2:1-3, 18-25; 3:5 or 6:10-11; 7,10 etc. belong to post-exilic times, at least in their final form. None of them would deny the many additions from Josianic and exilic times which intend to relate Hosea's accusations against the cult and the politics of the Northern Kingdom to readers in Judah. It is evident that the book of Hosea got its final shape in Judah. There are investigations which try to find out, how the book of Hosea was read and interpreted in Persian Period Judah;⁸ there are monographs asking for the change of meaning when the northern book of Hosea was transmitted to the south.⁹

The main differences among the majority of scholars belonging to the middle group are threefold:

1. The more critical exegetes (e.g. R.G. Kratz, H. Peiffer, R. Vielhauer) would hesitate to ascribe already to the historical Hosea ideas like a clear-cut differentiation between YHWH and Baal or the demand for an exclusive veneration of YHWH. Therefore they tend to diminish the words attributed to Hosea or his immediate pupils.

⁷ For G.A. Yee, *Composition*, e.g., words of Hosea in ch. 4 are V.4*, 5b, 12aα, while there are none in ch. 11.

⁸ Cf. the commentary of E. Ben Zvi and J.M. Trotter, *Reading Hosea*.

⁹ E.g., G.I. Emmerson, *Hosea*; T. Naumann, *Hoseas Erben*.

2. Some critical exegetes would tend to take the many changes of speeches of God and speeches of the prophet and the changes of words addressing Israel and words speaking of Israel in the 3rd person as indications of literary growth, in this respect in general agreement with the minimalists. The more conservative scholars (e.g. E. Bons, F. Crüsemann, G.I. Davies, J. Jeremias, A.A. Macintosh, W. Schütte, M.A. Sweeney, E. Zenger) would interpret these changes as a conscious means of literary intention.

3. There are points of contact between texts of the book of Hosea and texts of the book of Jeremiah as well as texts of the Deuteronomistic History. But there is no typical deuteronomistic language in the book of Hosea and very rarely typical Jeremianic language. Thus, in cases of dependence the majority of scholars would attribute priority to the book of Hosea which influenced the texts of the book of Jeremiah and of the DtrH. Minimalists would usually differ in this respect; critical scholars of the middle group would do so sometimes.

1.5 The lyric of Alkaios: a possible model

In any case, there is agreement that even the oldest layer in the book of Hosea presupposes the fall of Samaria and the end of the Northern Kingdom. The book of Hosea in its primary stage may have been composed rather early after 722 B.C.E., because the proclamation of Hosea concerning the end of the state had become true so soon. According to his datable utterings Hosea must have started his prophetic career some 15 years before the fall of Samaria; apparently, it ended with this very fall. There are also indications of terms of typical northern dialect in the texts.¹⁰ Though Hosea's oral words were rejected by the majority of his contemporaries (Hos 9:7-9), his message must have been preserved in a condensed form, probably already in written shape, by a group of pupils or followers. If it was preserved in a written form, it served the needs of this group at first and was not created immediately for the public.

In recent years some scholars – H.M. Niemann, F. Crüsemann and following him W. Schütte¹¹ – have pointed to a possible analogy for the literary peculiarities of Hos 4-11 in Greek literature. The political lyricist Alkaios of the 7th/6th century had formed a group of pupils discussing his poems in regular meetings. According to W. Rössler¹² who is the source

¹⁰ Cf. A.A. Macintosh, Hosea, LIII-LXI.

¹¹ Niemann, ; Crüsemann, „Jetzt“, 26-28; Schütte, *Gerechtigkeit*, 19-22. 194-198.

¹² W. Rössler, *Dichter und Gruppe*.

for the scholars mentioned above these discussions found their way into literary tradition which again was presented orally in symposia of this group. As a result of such lively discussions one meets sudden addresses and “dark hints” in the Greek text comparable to the addresses and “dark hints” in the book of Hosea. These Greek texts represent a kind of archaic literature which did not aim at a public audience but was written down for insiders. Very probably this is true for the basic layer of the book of Hosea, too.

Thus these Greek texts may serve as a model to conceive the origin of an early prophetic book and especially of Hos 4-11*. Representing a continuing discussion the Greek texts could explain why a critical reader of Hos 4-11 often gets the impression to participate in an actual dispute either of Hosea with his audience or of a group of pupils of Hosea who wanted to decide how to relate different prophetic subjects to another. They could explain, too, why there are many allusions in the book of Hosea which later readers of the texts can grasp only roughly.

2.1 The books of Hosea and Amos again

The history of the Twelve starts with the books of Hosea and Amos. Already these books of the two earliest among the so-called writing prophets contain a number of verses which are formulated under the influence of the other prophetic book, respectively.¹³ By these allusions to the other book a careful reader apparently is called to relate both prophetic books to each other instead of reading them in isolation.¹⁴ A. Scharf has analyzed verses showing these mutual influences and has supposed that both prophetic writings were combined on a common scroll.¹⁵

Yet, there is a big difference between both prophetic books. In the book of Hosea all texts which sound like words of Amos or which show literary connections to the book of Amos evidently belong to secondary layers. This is not true for the book of Amos in an analogous manner. In the case of the book of Amos the influence of texts of the book of Hosea are much

¹³ Of course, methodologically these literary connections must be separated carefully from some common traits of the proclamation of both prophets.

¹⁴ For a discussion of these connections cf. J. Jeremias, *Die Anfänge des Dodekapropheten*, in: id., *Hosea und Amos*, 34-54.

¹⁵ A. Scharf, *Entstehung*, 101-155. Yet, J. Wöhrle, *Frühe Sammlungen*, 242-243, opposes the assumption of a common scroll with strong reasons.

more numerous and they often concern the primary layer of the book's formation as e.g. in Amos 3:2.¹⁶ This again is a clear indication of the priority of the origin of the book of Hosea. In any case, the early tradents as well as the redactors of the books of Hosea and Amos wanted their readers to grasp the guilt of Israel which had led to God's punishment and to the end of the state comprehensively. In their eyes such comprehensiveness could be reached only by studying the book of Hosea and the book of Amos together and in combination with each other. Only when read in relation to each other both prophetic books were able to lead to a new beginning for a guilty people and to convey God's actual will as an orientation to them.

2.3 A book of three prophets?

Some scholars have assumed that – in exilic time – a scroll existed which comprised not only the books of Hosea and Amos but also (an early shape of) the book of Micah.¹⁷ Viewed from the perspective of the book of Hosea this hypothesis is attractive, though the book of Micah evidently developed separately afterwards. In the Greek tradition of the Septuagint the three prophets still follow each other.

1. According to its present shape, the first chapter of the book of Micah – especially Mic 1:2-7 – is a late redactional text; together with 5:14 its beginning (Mic 1:2) forms a frame for Mic 1-5. The nucleus of 1:2-7 probably consisted of 1:6-7*, a retrospect to the fall of Samaria which in the context of ch.1 serves as a warning for Jerusalem. The reason given for the fall of Samaria is nothing else but a condensation of the theology of Hosea. Since Hosea already had transformed his metaphor of Israel's "whoredom" from the area of the cult to that of foreign policy – exaggerating the imagery by stating that the "whore" Israel in this respect had to spend her fee instead of receiving it (Hos 8:9-10) – the older part in Mic 1:7 (V. 7b) actualizes this metaphor using it for Israel's bargaining with Egypt and Assyria, while the later part of the verse (V. 7a) takes the more usual contents of Hosea's metaphor and directs it against Samaria's veneration of iconic representations of God or foreign gods.¹⁸ The guilt of the Northern Kingdom is conceived in categories of Hosean theology in both parts of the

¹⁶ Cf. J. Jeremias, *Interrelationship.*, 173-186.

¹⁷ Cf. D.A. Schneider, *Unity*; A. Scharf, *Entstehung*, 155; W. Schütte, *Gerechtigkeit*, 200. J. Wöhrle, *Frühe Sammlungen*, 244 doubts that a book of three prophets existed. Following J. Nogalski he pleads for a book of four (including Zephaniah) as the root for the book of the Twelve.

¹⁸ For this differentiation cf. the commentaries of H.W. Wolff, *BK XIV/4* (1980) and J. Jeremias, *ATD 24/3* (2007).

verse. In the horizon of the growing book of the Twelve the subject of Samaria's fall is finished definitely in Mic 1:2-7.

2. The three prophetic books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah are combined by reporting the vivid polemics of the primary audience against the proclamation of these three prophets. In all cases the focus is directed to the standing and the function of a prophet. In all of the three books the attacks against the prophets are actualized by direct citations of the opposition (Hos 9:7-9; Amos 7:10-17; Mic 2:6-10). Thus, the reader is urged to move into position; he or she can't stand neutral and indifferent. Whoever reads the prophetic book as a whole will understand that for God's people these prophetic voices, though uncomfortable and offensive, are necessary for the people's survival.

2.3 The book of Hosea as part of the Twelve

The further growth of the book of the Twelve apparently developed without much influence of the book of Hosea. This observation has led J. Wöhrle to the assumption that for a long time the book of Hosea was excluded from this development.¹⁹ Placed immediately behind Hosea, the much younger book of Joel gained a leading function for the growth of the Twelve.²⁰ It had learned much from the book of Amos, but once placed in front of Amos it offered the hermeneutical key for understanding Amos and the following books. Its main subjects became the main subjects of the developing Twelve: Judgment and salvation of the nations, the "Day of YHWH", Zion as the place for last hope, the famous confession of YHWH's overwhelming surplus of his grace over his anger (in Exod 34:6f. and its parallels) etc. All these subjects were lacking in the book of Hosea.

Yet, the book of Hosea was not necessarily excluded from this development. As the only witness to the "northern theological spirit" among the Twelve it stayed rather untouched by the new growth of the other books – with one important exception. The final chapter added to the prophetic book, ch. 14, in which God offers final salvation to those who return to him, firmly links Hosea with Joel. In both texts, Hos 14:2 and Joel 2:12, the call for return is combined with the unusual preposition לְ and is rooted in God's foundational promise of his

¹⁹ J. Wöhrle, *Frühe Sammlungen*, 54-58. 450-453.

²⁰ Cf. J. Nogalski, Joel as „literary anchor”.

salvific intention (Hos 14:5-9; Joel 2:14).²¹ According to Hos 14 God first will heal the *משובה* of his people, i.e. their unwillingness and even inability to return to him (Hos 14:5; cf. 5:3-4; 11:7), before his call to return will be answered; according to Joel 2:12-14 God's call to return is founded in the surplus of his grace over his anger (cf. Exod 34:6-7). On the other hand, the subject of Israel's return to God not only links the first two books of the Twelve together, but is prominent in the last two books as well (Zech 1:3-4; Mal 3:7). It forms a frame for the book of the Twelve.

Once read prior to the book of Joel, the book of Hosea shows many traits of subjects common to the Twelve. Though there are no hints at Zion, at least David is named (Hos 3:5; cf. Amos 9:11; Mic 5:1; Zech 9:9-10). Hosea's "days of retribution" (9:7) could easily be related to the "Day of YHWH" so often mentioned in the Twelve; Hosea's lament about Israel's "mixture with the nations" (7:8) could be interpreted in the horizon of the prophetic question for the future of the nations. Especially Hos 1-3 and 4:1-3 gain special importance in their new function as an introduction to the Twelve: The enduring love of God to his rebellious "wife" and his unwillingness to divorce her forever determine all history, and his will basically revealed in the Decalogue and cited in Hos 4:2 is actualized in the following books of the Twelve for presence and future.

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²¹ Additionally, Hos 14:8a shows many terms of Joel 1 and may have been added as a further link between both books; cf. Nogalski, *ibid.* 97-98; *id.*, *Precursors*, 69-73.

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