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Sin of Apostasy and Militarism in Hosea

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Hosea introduces the Book of the XII, the story of a father coping with a child who will not fear him, respect him, or even ask him for help except as a last resort. In fact, he is a step-father, as the child comes from another father as the result of the mother's infidelity. The step-father attempts to overcome the child's genetic predisposition and so free him from the tyranny of his biological father. The child prefers the tyranny of his biological father, who constantly demands payment and tribute in exchange for his favor, and the unfaithfulness of his mother, to the freedom and grace of the step-father who would adopt him at no cost but faithfulness.

The book of Hosea—as its own story and as the beginning of the Book of the XII—opens with the question of Israel's patrimony. While the harlotry of the mother, the land, is presented as a given, the step-father, Yhwh, begins with a plea to the children, the people, not to follow in their mother's footsteps to chase after their father, Baal.

The Israelites' sin arises from self-sufficiency, as they believe that through their actions they can hold off the destructive forces of nature and war. Their beliefs give rise to idolatry as a means of controlling natural forces, and militarism, for controlling the forces of war. Yet only Yhwh can control these forces. Sin is therefore not only rejection of and disloyalty to Yhwh, but a willful ignorance of reality. Yhwh will confront the people with plague and war not as punishment, but as a lesson on reality, taught through confronting the people with these very forces and their fear thereof, which prompt them to follow irrational beliefs.

In this paper I will show that the people, Israel, inevitably pursue their biological father, Baal, just like their mother, because of their need to be self-sufficient. Their need for safety and security drive them to slavery of their own fears, instead of choosing safety and security that belong to Yhwh alone. They want to follow empty religious practices to control and guide natural forces instead of following Yhwh's teaching, Torah. In addition, they choose bribery and slavery to various earthly Pharaohs rather than submission to Yhwh.

At the end of this paper, I will suggest that the twin sins of idolatry and militarism flow out from Hosea into the rest of the Book of the XII. The significance of these themes throughout the Book of the XII reinforces their importance in Hosea, and vice-versa.

The Problem of Idolatry

Proving Israel's Patrimony

Israel's desire to control the forces of nature manifests itself in idolatry. They worshiped another deity besides Yhwh, looking to other gods to provide for them. Significantly, the god who is named exclusively in Hosea (besides Yhwh) is Baal, the Canaanite storm god.¹ This god supposedly controls the forces of nature that ensure good growth, and hence plays a central part in the people's agricultural prosperity and so great wealth.²

The relationship between the land and Yhwh confronted and undermined the basic Canaanite fertility myth, wherein the land and Baal make love in order to cause life to spring forth from the land in the form of crops and livestock. Hosea offers a twist to this story, wherein the crops came as payment from Baal to the whoring land, and the offspring was Israel. The land and Baal produce offspring, the people, so they are clearly not Yhwh's children. The land, not the people, perpetrate the original act of harlotry.³

Though the land believes that the lovers, her Baals, provided the produce from the ground, Yhwh will deprive her of these items to show that he controls them (2:10-11; English 2:8-9). In the end, she will no longer even pronounce the word *Baal* or "Husband," but instead will call Yhwh "my man" (2:18; English 2:16). Both mother and children, land and people, will declare their faithfulness to Yhwh in the end (2:25; English 2:23).

The children must demonstrate their patrimony by the teaching they follow, not by genetics. They need to show through their actions whose children they are, or better, who is their father. Their mother showed herself to be faithless; will they? On the one hand, their genetics started them with a disadvantage; they began as sons of Baal and a whore. On the other hand, Yhwh declared them "Pitied" and "My people," and so displayed grace to them. The people must choose between their genetic father, or the father who would provide for them, and act accordingly.

¹ The Baals are named in 2:8, 13, 17 and 11:2 and 13:1, both in the singular and the plural. He is represented by a gold bull or calf, to which Hosea refers in 8:5-6 as the "calf of Samaria," and 10:5 ("the calves of Bethaven") and generic "kissing calves" in 13:2.

² As a sky god, Baal controls weather and so influences agriculture. He is not related to the power of war. "In the Ugaritic sources Baal's meteorological manifestations are expressions of his martial power. In contrast, 1 Kings 17-19 and Hosea 2 deplore belief in Baal's ability to produce rains, but these and other biblical passages are silent on the martial import of his manifestation. Indeed, no biblical text expresses ideas about Baal's status as a warrior" (Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed., Biblical resource series [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002], 79).

³ We read in 1:2, "Go, take for yourself a woman of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry from following Yhwh." In chapter 2, the pronouns alternate between the feminine singular, "she," and the plural, "they," because the people, "they," are the children of harlotry and so bear the traits of their mother, "she." The distinction comes in the beginning of the section when Yhwh says, "Say to your brothers, Ammi, and to your sisters, Ruhamah: Dispute with your mother, dispute, because she is not my wife and I am not her husband. So may she turn away her harlotries from before her and her adulteries from between her breasts" (2:3-4; English 2:1-2). Yhwh addresses the children and mother separately.

Mercy and Not Sacrifice

Although Yhwh spelled out the obligation to follow his teaching, or Torah, and to treat the neighbor well, the people fulfill other, so-called religious obligations. They concentrate their efforts on sacrificing and the vehicles thereof. As a result, they harlot themselves even though they feel faithful.

Wherever the people spend time sacrificing, they conduct themselves sinfully. Yhwh only demands good conduct from the people (4:1-5). Furthermore, the priests must teach people Torah. He emphasizes just and merciful conduct, and condemns sacrifice and ritual action. Nevertheless, the people worship in any place they feel like it, as seen in 4:13-17. In 4:13-14 the worship takes place on mountains, under trees. In 4:15-17, however, Yhwh commands them not to go to Gilgal or Bethaven, which are supposedly legitimate places of worship.⁴ The problem goes beyond rocks and trees, therefore, to even semi-legitimate places of worship, suggesting that the place is not the problem. Their action of sacrifice takes the place of good conduct according to Yhwh's Torah.⁵

Furthermore, altars in general imply straying from Yhwh in Hosea. The Hebrew word *mizbexot* appears five times in Hosea (8:11; 10:1-2, 8; 12:12). The first occurrence is followed by "for sin," the second parallels multiplying altars and multiplying idols, and the last three come with the 3mp possessive suffix *-am*. The fact that these altars are "theirs" and "for sin" highlight that the altars are a problem because they are not for Yhwh, as the people imagine.

By setting up and worshiping at these altars, they commit idolatry because they are straying from—not glorifying—Yhwh. The cult of Baal demands sacrifice in exchange for good agricultural produce. Hosea associates this commercial, transactional paradigm with the teaching of Baal. We should note here that "Canaanite" in Hebrew can also be translated as "trader." Even if the Israelites thought they were worshiping Yhwh, they were following the Torah of Baal, not Yhwh, at those altars.

The people were not to focus on sacrifice, so the multiplication of—let alone existence of—other altars presents a clear problem. Yhwh insists that he does not want sacrifices, so sacrificing exposes the people's true patrimony as sons of Baal. In 6:6-7 Yhwh states, "I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings...but they dealt treacherously against me." Treating each other well and remaining loyal to Yhwh were to be their exclusive concerns. Hence, the people would not need altars to fulfill the daily obligations laid out in his Torah.⁶

⁴ Gilgal is not essentially bad or foreign, as it is the base of operations for Joshua in Joshua 10-15. The people sacrificed there, led by Samuel in 1 Samuel 11-12 when Saul was declared king.

⁵ Verse 12:11 corroborates this, where the people "sacrifice in Gilgal" but whose altars are like heaps of stones in a field.

⁶ Upon leaving Egypt, the focus started off immediately with centralized worship, as we see, for example in Deut 12:5. This fact implies that sacrifice was not necessarily a daily obligation for adherents to Torah who lived far from the central temple, but only for the priests in Jerusalem who fulfilled this function.

Idolatry Started at the Very Beginning

The genetic disposition of the people towards their father pulled them from Yhwh since the beginning. As soon as Israel was freed from Egypt, they turned to Baal. In 9:10, Yhwh describes how he discovered Israel in the wilderness like wild fruit. They managed to survive, but Yhwh came to bring them to a better land. Immediately after Yhwh freed them they went to Baal-Peor for shame (*boshet*) and became abominations (*shiqqutsim*). They thus immediately showed a tendency to be less than what they could have been if they had responded correctly to Yhwh's mercy and Torah.

They display the same tendency to leave Yhwh in 11:1-3. Yhwh loved Israel; he considered them his son. Yet as soon as the Baals called to them, they pursued them. They sacrificed to the Baals and burned incense to their idols. The parallel between Baals and idols emphasizes that the Baals were simply manifestations of their own creation, the work of their own hands. They did not know that Yhwh, not Baal, raised, sustained, and healed them. Hence, they left Yhwh at the very beginning, in spite of the love and fatherhood of Yhwh, to follow the work of their own hands.

Another link between idolatry and the Exodus comes in 13:1-4, where the work of their hands caused them to forget the first of the commandments they received after they left their Pharaonic enslavement. Ephraim became ashamed because of Baal and died, yet the people continue to sin and make idols, even allowing the idols to expiate the sin of sacrificing another human being. In an echo of Exodus 20:2, Yhwh reminded them that he is their exclusive god and added that they have no other savior. He thus contrasts their dependence on the work of their hands with the reality that he alone delivered them from Egypt and is the only one who can provide for them. The people not only forgot this message: they never remembered it.

Idolatry did not just happen a couple times, but is constant in the people from the moment of their "birth" from the land of Egypt. The introduction of Yhwh as their god introduced idolatry, as their liberation from slavery under Pharaoh was immediately followed by turning to Baal.

Idols and Gentiles Cannot Protect Israel

Chapter 8 sets up a remarkably tight parallel between Israel's sins of idolatry and militarism, while ironically weaving together the consequences of their counting on the work of their own hands for protection. War is coming to Israel because of their idolatry and militarism, as described in 8:1-4. The people broke the covenant and rebelled against Yhwh's Torah, doing all sorts of evil, which prompt Yhwh's action (8:1-3). Ironically they sinned in this way while claiming that they knew Yhwh (8:2). Verse 4 enumerates these sins: they set up kings and made idols. This verse, more clearly than any other, so explicitly associates these twin sins.

As Israel tries to hold back the forces of nature and war, the Gentiles will nevertheless destroy the people's idols, as described in the next section (8:5-10). Their golden calf—the symbol of Baal—will cut them off and be smashed by invaders (8:5-6). Their efforts were empty and produced nothing, so Hosea called them "sowing" and "reaping" wind (8:6-7). Israel will end up among the Gentiles, in Assyria whom they had "hired" as "lovers" (8:8-10).

As we see in the final section of the chapter, the people effectively return themselves to the state of slavery in Egypt they were saved from (8:11-14). The altars Ephraim built resulted in sin,

emphasized twice in 8:11. This religious practice contrasts with Yhwh's Torah, which they considered foreign in 8:12. Once again, the result of their sacrificing will not be Yhwh's favor but return to Egypt (8:13). The people built temples and fortifications, again referencing the twin sins of idolatry and militarism, that Yhwh will burn down equally (8:14).⁷

Chapter 8 thus explicitly associates idolatry and militarism twice: creating idols and setting up kings in verse 4, and paralleling temples and fortifications in verse 14. This association sets up an irony: foreign invaders will destroy Israel's foreign gods, after the people could not understand Yhwh's Torah because it sounded foreign. Rejecting Torah by setting up foreign gods and hiring kings and outside protectors send them back to their enslaved state under Pharaoh. Their vain attempts cannot protect them against the forces they feared.

The people forgot the Torah, which is both the story of the people's liberation from Pharaoh and the content of teaching they received. This founding story of the creation of the people by the providence and grace of Yhwh continues to make the people who they are. They expose their ignorance of Torah when they continue to "supplement" their trust in Yhwh by creating temples, altars, and idols, as well as kings and foreign allies, to turn to. As soon as they forget this story, they cease to be the people of Yhwh, and revert to slaves of Pharaoh's domain. They return themselves to Egypt through their unwillingness to submit completely to Yhwh.

The Problem of Militarism

The people's desire to control the forces of war manifests itself as militarism. Waxing Assyrian strength in the region substantiates a national existential fear. As the wealth of the people increases, they need to protect it. This situation appears to necessitate military strength, through heightened self-defense and diplomacy with foreign nations. The people's propensity to war and their extreme loyalty to their leaders establish their adherence to militarism.

Hosea alluded to other events in the Hebrew Bible to demonstrate that the people have been turning to earthly powers for protection since their beginning. The prophet refers to Israel's past, looking back to the destructive, senseless wars they engaged in. Moreover, he reminds them of their sinful request for a king, in light of their current desire for protection from Assyria. Rather than complete dependence on Yhwh for peace, they look to their king and foreign kings, further witnessing against them.

Locus of Fratricide and King-worship: Gibeah and Mizpah

The cities of Gibeah and Mizpah are mentioned four times and once in Hosea, respectively, as locations of extraordinary rejection of Yhwh's Torah. Both cities appear in Judges 19-20, which recounts the shameful episodes that began with a lack of hospitality and goodwill, and ended in a fratricidal war.⁸ Elsewhere, in 1 Samuel 10, the city of Gibeah represented the

⁷ We should note that the "temples" (*hekhalot*) they built, are in the plural, paralleling the multiplication of altars I mentioned above, and so further emphasizing the discord with the command for a single place of worship.

⁸ Of 47 references to Gibeah in the Hebrew Bible, 24 of them cluster within these two chapters. In that episode, a Levite needing to spend the night away from home, turned into Gibeah of Benjamin. He turned to this city after he rejected staying the night in Jebus—the home of Gentiles (Jdg 19:11-13). Only one old man offered them hospitality in

birthplace and residence of Saul, the first and failed king of Israel, and Mizpah designated the place where Samuel took the people to task for abandoning their god.⁹ The fratricidal war showed preference for war and vengeance over mercy, and the demand for a king, the desire to abandon Yhwh.

Hosea's judgment against the king, therefore, comes in the context of these two episodes. In Hosea, Gibeah stands out as a moment that displays the leaders' deep corruption. The prophet describes them in ch 5 as a snare and rebels who slaughter and whore (5:1-3). The spirit of whoredom shows that they did not know Yhwh (5:4) and that their children do not belong to him (5:7). In light of the cultic offenses of the people, this questionable patrimony damns the people further. When the horns are blown for war at Gibeah and Ramah, the people will be destroyed (5:8-9).

The prophet cryptically refers to "the days of Gibeah" in ch 9, but does explain why. Because Gibeah is associated with the two significant events I mentioned above, Hosea exploits this ambiguity in describing the corruption of the people. We read, "They deepened their corruption, like the days of Gibeah. He remembers their iniquity; he visits their sin" (9:9). From the context of Judges 19-20, the people were corrupted by their brothers' blood on their hands. From 1 Samuel 10, the people's desire for a king from Gibeah and rejection of Yhwh show their corruption. In both cases, the people prefer war and a warlord over Yhwh's will. Militarism witnesses to rejection of their god.

Significantly, the following verses in ch 9 link the corruption of Gibeah with the immediate apostasy to Baal-Peor after the Exodus (9:10). In addition, this corruption came from birth, the womb, and even their conception (9:11). The substance or glory of the people always seeks out militarism or apostasy, that is, other lovers and providers. As the people turn to other gods to provide security, so also they turn to a king to provide safety. I showed above and will present further below that submission to their own king does not satisfy their need for security, so that they will submit to foreign kings, as well.

Protection from Human Rulers

On four occasions Hosea called out the leaders for turning to Assyria for help: another manifestation of their harlotry. Not only do they want a king to keep them safe, but when their king seems powerless, they turn to other kings—still refusing to turn to Yhwh. When judgment is imminent, when they risk losing their substance and wealth, they look for whatever protection they can find. They do not understand that Yhwh provides peace (2:20; English 2:18). They turn to earthly powers to provide the security that only Yhwh has the power to give them.

Following on the passage about the corruption of Gibeah in ch 5, Hosea condemns Ephraim because they sought the king of Assyria to cure their sickness (5:13). They tried to walk

Gibeah, but after some time, the locals came, took the Levite's concubine, and abused her to death. The Levite divided and sent her remains to all the tribes of Israel to incite them to war against Benjamin. This fratricidal war killed many thousands of Israelites on both sides. Furthermore, the people of Jabeshgilead were also killed because they did not come out to war against Benjamin. In Judges 20 the armies clashed in Mizpah.

⁹ It is referenced 12 times in 1 Samuel. He manifested the people's sin in demanding a king. After the people demanded a king (1 Samuel 8), Samuel took them to task at Mizpah for abandoning their god (1 Samuel 10).

after the commandments, but their deep corruption did not allow them to (5:11). Yhwh, therefore, will rot them from the inside, implying judgment and destruction (5:12). Ephraim decided to turn to king Jareb of Assyria (5:13; cf. 13:6). Curiously, this is not an Assyrian king historians are familiar with. The name means in Hebrew either “He contends” or “He becomes great,” so we are dealing with an anti-Yhwh, one who contends or who puffs himself up. Thus Ephraim chose the earthly power who goes against Yhwh, rather than accept the fate given to them from Yhwh.

They want to avoid the consequences of the judgment primarily because they will lose their agricultural, and so their material, wealth, as we see in ch 7. They show no intelligence or the ability to decide their actions, so they foolishly flee to what appears to be the safest place, Egypt and Assyria (7:11). Mirages of safety, these kingdoms represent the past and future homes of earthly slavery. Yhwh will catch them before they go, and laments how they fled from him, betraying him in spite of the safety he provides them (7:12-13). They only want to protect their grain and wine, even if they have to mobilize against Yhwh (7:14).

Looking for safety in a king is foolish. As I mentioned above, Hosea explicitly links in chapter 8 the sin of militarism with idolatry, showing that both betray Yhwh as apostasy. Militarism illustrates another aspect of their apostasy from Yhwh. They thought that militarism could save them, so Yhwh mocked them. When they cried out to him for protection against enemies, he reminded them that they had chosen a king for protection (8:2-4). Later on in ch 10, the people renounce their king, but Yhwh declares their words empty and faithless (10:3-4). Yhwh mocks their king again in 13:10-11.

Ultimately, controlling would-be invaders lies beyond their capacity. Cutting a covenant with Assyria is like trying to buy off Egypt; powerful nations are going to do whatever suits them. For this reason, the prophet compares their international pursuits to “shepherding the wind” (12:2; 12:1 English). As Yhwh alone can control the wind, so he directs the power of the surrounding nations.

The people do not declare Yhwh their father, but shower their king and the king of Assyria with gifts. Bowing to an earthly king is no different than bowing to an idol. Both display the harlotry, unfaithfulness, and corruption of the people as they look to someone besides Yhwh as their protector.

Reverberations in the XII

The rest of the Book of the XII recounts Yhwh’s attempts to turn Israel from idolatry and militarism, but they do not work. In the book following Hosea, Joel reinforces the centrality of the dual sins of idolatry and militarism. Joel 1 warns the people that their fear of agricultural ruin will come to pass. Hosea posited that idolatry consisted of vain sacrifices for the sake of agricultural bounty, but the famine that Yhwh will inflict on Israel will specifically prevent the ability to sacrifice (Joel 1:13). Joel 2 describes invasion by an enemy that at once looks like locusts and a foreign army (Joel 2:4-11). The priests should not sacrifice but weep and supplicate on behalf of the people (Joel 2:15-17).

In the end, Yhwh will return the people to safety, more specifically, return the wheat, wine, and oil, and remove the foreign armies (Joel 2:19-20). The phrase “wheat, wine, and oil” repeats verbatim the phrase from Hosea 2:10 (2:8 English), what the people thought Baal provided for

them, not Yhwh. In this way, Joel 2:19 expresses Yhwh's mercy and the lesson that Israel must learn: Yhwh alone provides.

The eschatological vision of Zechariah also mirrors the themes of militarism and idolatry, namely, their reversal. In the last section of Zechariah, 14:16-19, the nations will come to pay homage to Yhwh in Jerusalem, reversing the tribute paid by Israel to Egypt and Assyria in Hosea 7:11.

Later, sacrificing at an altar will no longer be necessary because all pots in Jerusalem and Judah will be pure like in the temple because "there will be no Canaanite left in the house of Yhwh" (Zech 14:20-21). This cannot signify ethnic purity, because as I just mentioned, the prophet promised that all the nations and all tribes will go up to Jerusalem to worship. "Canaanite" may indicate a dweller of the land who does not worship Yhwh. As I mentioned above that "Canaanite" can also mean "trader," perhaps this passage in Zechariah plays on this double-meaning, as the Canaanite worships Baal, whom the Book of the XII associates with a *quid pro quo* type of worship. Hence, no one will be left in the house of Yhwh who follows this "commercial" religion and does not submit to his Torah. Once the entire people follows Torah, their everyday meals will suffice for sacrifices.

I do not have time in this paper to address all the instances of militarism and idolatry in the Book of the XII, but I will venture an initial hypothesis. The danger of agricultural destruction and war continue to loom over Israel, and they will continue to fear and to try to control them. In the future presented by Joel and Zechariah, the people will follow Torah in Yhwh's kingdom. Sacrifice will no longer exist, as Yhwh's Torah will be all-encompassing, and Yhwh will provide for the people in peace.

Conclusion

The people are not doing well. Yhwh gave them an opportunity to prove their patrimony, even though their mother was unfaithful and father was Baal. They cannot remain faithful to Yhwh, even when given the chance and the warning. From the first moment, Israel, in spite of brief moments of faithfulness, repeatedly betrayed their god.

The dual sins of idolatry and militarism lie on the surface of their deeper sin: fear. They fear the pain of drought, pestilence, and war. These are natural fears, and they react as true sons of Baal by trying to control their environment by "hedging" their bets and invoking the name of any power, whether Baal or the king of Assyria. Yhwh warns them of the ultimate end of their fear, which is slavery. The forces they invoke for protection will control them, and he will show them as he unleashes these very forces against them. Furthermore, these forces cannot protect them, but only Yhwh can.

Turning to Yhwh is the only logical choice for protection because he alone controls the forces of nature and the Gentiles. More importantly, he does not require the sacrifices that the other powers do. He does not demand altars like the Baalim, and he does not require gifts and tribute like the foreign kings. He only requires that one follow his Torah and treat his neighbor correctly. What one has, one owes to the weaker brother, not to a fickle god or imperial monarch.

As an introduction to the Book of the XII the Book of Hosea lays the foundational principles of the scroll. He defines sin as foolish, whorish self-reliance, expressed in diplomatic and religious promiscuity. Israel bears faithfulness to their father, Baal, as a genetic trait; they are

unable to overcome their biology, in spite of pleading and judgment by Yhwh. This sets the stage for the future envisioned in the remainder of the Book of the XII: a land of prosperity and peace, founded upon universal adherence to Yhwh's teaching, Torah.