“For I Am God, Not Man”: Divine Self-Disclosure in the Motive Statements of Hosea

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Abstract

Commentators have long wrestled with the relationship between the emotional portrayal of YHWH and his decision not to destroy his people in Hosea 11:8–9. The key question in this text is why does YHWH act as he does? What is the basis for his decision? In addition, questions abound with regard to how the reader should understand the emotional portrayal itself. Should it be read as an anthropopathic description, or does it challenge the doctrine of divine impassibility? This study investigates the relationship between YHWH’s emotional portrayal and actions in light of Hosea’s understanding of divine motive. Then the results of the study are applied to questions surrounding divine impassibility.

Keywords

divine motive – anthropopathism – impassibility – YHWH – Hosea – knowledge of God

1 Introduction

Hosea 11:8–9 has long been recognized as an enigmatic text with textual and lexical difficulties, theological conundrums, and obscure historical references; and yet, it is also recognized as a text which might rightly be referred to as “the theological pinnacle of Hosea, one of the most important texts in the Old
Testament, and a point of contact between the Old and the New.\(^1\) At the heart of both the difficulty and the beauty of this text, is the nature of the connection between the emotional portrayal of YHWH and his pronouncement that he will not “carry out his burning anger” (Hos 11:9a).\(^2\) What do we learn about YHWH from this text? What should we take away with regard to his emotional state?\(^3\) What is the connection between his emotions and his decision? Are YHWH’s emotions his motivation for compassion? What is intended by the assertion that “he is God and not man,” and how does it relate to his actions? The questions pile up quickly, and far more neatly, than solutions.

The modest proposal of this study is that Hos 11:8–9 is best read as an act of divine self-disclosure, which is apprehended most fully when considered in the context of other statements of divine motive in Hosea, and when connected to the larger OT theology of divine motive. The study will proceed by introducing the examination of motive, exploring other divine motive texts in Hosea, interpreting Hos 11:8–9 in light of divine motive, connecting Hosea’s theology to the broader OT theology of divine motive, and finally considering how this text intersects with the doctrine of impassibility.

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2 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

3 Although not prevalent in most OT discussions of God, theologians have for centuries labored to articulate the nature of the text’s presentation of divine emotions. Historically, theologians have preferred the term affections to emotions when describing God. This terminological preference is an attempt to avoid a view of God that sees him as uncontrollably moved by external events, as we often are by our emotions. Rather than being passively overwhelmed by emotion, the doctrine of divine impassibility understands God as having strong affections on which he acts. Though genuinely interactive, these affections are eternal aspects of God and are not an external imposition on him. For a brief discussion see Fred Sanders, “Divine Affections Yes; Divine Passions No,” *The Daily Scriptorium*, March 10, 2017, [http://scriptoriumdaily.com/divine-affections-yes-divine-passions-no/](http://scriptoriumdaily.com/divine-affections-yes-divine-passions-no/). For a survey of the issues see Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, eds., *Divine Impassibility: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2019). For an in-depth treatment in favor of passibility, see John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007). For an in-depth treatment in favor of impassibility, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).
2 Why Study Motive?

Discussing the purpose of motive statements, Wittgenstein writes, “Why do I want to tell him about an intention too, as well as telling him what I did? ... because I want to tell him something about myself, which goes beyond what happened at that time. I reveal to him something of myself.”4 “Fundamentally, to inquire into motive is to ask the question, ‘why?’ The answer that we seek in asking ‘why?’ is not the cause of an action, but rather the interpretation of that action. Seeking the interpretation of divine acts narrated in the texts of the Old Testament is at the heart of theological inquiry.”5

Although significant attention has been given to the motives for obedience in the OT law, and to the reasons for praise in the psalter, little attention has been given to specific statements about YHWH’s motives.6 Yet, there are many texts that give an explicit account of YHWH’s motives. In fact, there are over 500 such texts comprising more than 1,500 verses, and these are just those texts that can be identified through the use of lexical terms, such as למען, لهذا, כי (because, therefore, in order to) which can be used to signal motive.7 Many more could be added if syntactically signaled motive statements, or asyndetic clauses were included. The volume and widespread nature of divine motive statements is indicative of the importance of divine motive as a theological theme.

The book of Hosea has thirteen divine motive statements.8 This is more than any other book in the Twelve. When looking at the motive texts in Hosea, we can see that they include key texts which are frequently identified as central to the theology of the book and its contributions to the theology of the OT

7 For a complete list of texts, see the appendix in Thigpen, Divine Motive, 207–09.
8 Hos 2:4–5, 6, 7–8, 10–11; 4:1, 6, 9–11, 14; 6:4–6; 9:15, 17; 11:8–9; 14:5.
more broadly. A brief survey of the statements of divine motive in Hosea will be helpful as we consider the usefulness of divine motive for understanding Hos 11:8–9.

2.1 Divine Motive in Hosea

The motive statements in Hosea can be divided into three broad groups. The first are texts that deal with the restraint of punishment. This group includes: Hos 2:4–5; 11:8–9; and 14:5.9 This group includes the first and the last statement of divine motive in Hosea. These two hopeful announcements are prominently placed. The first is a transition between the two warnings in 2:2–4 and 2:6–13.10 The last is in YHWH’s concluding call to repentance and healing. The reader should notice that the first occurrence in Hos 2:4–5 indicates a hypothetical motivation. God might be motivated to forestall his announced judgment, if the people repented. This is communicated via a ןָפְּת (lest) clause which highlights the negative punishment that might be avoided. The next two, Hos 11:8–9 and 14:5, are the record of reasons why God will actually mitigate his punishment, and not totally destroy the nation. In short, these three texts represent what should and what will happen.

The second group: Hos 2:6, 7–8; 9:15, and 17 present idolatry and the forsaking of God as motives for his judgment of the nation. The third group is the largest: Hos 2:10–11; 4:1, 6, 9–11, 14; and 6:4–6. It deals with the knowledge of God as a divine motive. This group begins with the sad realization that the people have taken the gifts of YHWH and used them to serve Baal. They failed to recognize YHWH as the giver of these gifts.

In chapter 4 we encounter the greatest density of motive texts in Hosea. These texts assert that the basis of YHWH’s conflict with Israel is that they do not know him (4:1). This lack of knowledge has destroyed YHWH’s people. It is clear that the lack is not just an educational failure of the priesthood. The situation is much more dire. The knowledge of YHWH has been actively rejected (4:6). Hos 4:9–11, and 14 make it clear that the rejection of the knowledge of God permeates the society, which is consumed with idolatrous worship and living.

The final text related to the knowledge of God is Hos 6:4–6. This text speaks of Israel’s forsaking of YHWH, and thus ties together the theme of the second group of motive texts with the people’s lack of the knowledge of YHWH. Finally, we should observe that Hos 6:4–6 is linked to Hos 11:8–9. Rhetorically,
it is linked with its doubled question, and in terms of its content, it is linked by the topic of how God should treat his wayward people.11

There are two implications that flow from this survey of divine motive in Hosea. First, the motive texts are intimately connected to the core theme of the book, “the contrast between the passionate love of Yahweh for his people and the lack of response from those people.”12 These texts which address YHWH’s passionate love and the people’s abandonment of YHWH, focus on what YHWH wants by way of a response from his people – true knowledge of him. This is the core of the book and at the heart of the book’s divine motive statements. Secondly, the motive texts as a group, and Hos 11:1–11 in particular, might rightly be considered a “paradigm for all prophetic texts” and indeed for much of the OT outside the prophets.13 That is to say, the juxtaposition of a wayward people, just punishment, overwhelming mercy, and a sovereign God, are at the core of OT theology, and are at the heart of the larger theology of divine motive expressed across the OT canon.14 The divine motive statements teach us that YHWH is sovereignly motivated by his character, the very nature of his person, to make himself known and to prompt proper human acknowledgment of his self-introduction so that his people might be rightly related to him in faithful covenant. Thus as in Exod 34:6–7, the expression of the divine intent is seen broadly in faithful, covenantal mercy and grace, and in faithful, just judgment. He is motivated to be who he is.15

11 The significance of this dense cluster of motives related to the knowledge of YHWH in this text group is highlighted by the observation that “Hosea here repeats” in 6:6 “two of the three qualities listed in 4:1; this shows that 6:6 rounds off, to some extent at least, the discourse that began with” 4:1. “The same virtues are highlighted throughout – ‘mercy’ and ‘knowledge of God’” (Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Anchor Bible [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983], 430).
14 Thigpen, Divine Motive, 80–81.
15 Ibid., 81. As noted in my theological summary, “person” is not used here “in a Trinitarian sense, but simply to indicate that YHWH is treated with personhood and all the mystery entailed in the choices of an individual rather than being treated as a collection of attributes, or as a theological abstraction. Thus, his acts [and motives] cannot be predicted or presumed, but rather they must be made known” (81).
3 Hosea 11:8–9 in Light of Divine Motive

3.1 What Kind of Communication Is Taking Place in Hos 11:8–9?
In his 1982 article, “Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11,” Janzen argued that the questions in Hos 11:8 are existential questions that reveal YHWH’s “personal growth and becoming.” Mays replied forcefully that “Janzen goes too far in claiming that Hosea speaks of a transformation of God’s existence, the verse speaks of the complete arousal of God’s compassion.” So how should one assess Janzen’s proposal? Though I largely agree with the nature of Mays’ critique, I would add to my assessment that Janzen’s proposal fails, at least in part, due its complete lack of attention to the explicit divine motive statements in Hosea.

In his discussion of Hos 6:4–6, which has a similar emotional tone and a comparable context, YHWH’s deliberation over his wayward child, Janzen never addresses the divine motive statement in Hos 6:6. He ends his treatment with Hos 6:5. For Janzen, the net effect of Hos 6:4–6 is to emphasize the prophetic agency, and the judgment that will destroy the people. Yet, if Hos 6:6 is taken into proper account, the passage is actually focused on YHWH’s self-disclosure, more specifically the revelation of his ultimate desire for his people.

For, I desire lovingkindness, and not sacrifice.
knowledge of God, not burnt offerings.

This passage is an example of a cascading motive. Because Israel’s devotion is fleeting, YHWH has slain them through the prophetic word. That is a simple enough statement of motive. Looking back at their behavior, YHWH is motivated to punish them. Yet another motive is nested in the passage, relaying why YHWH acts in this way towards fleeting devotion. He treats ritualistic devotion with judgment because his deeper desire is for true devotion, that is, for Israel to have true knowledge of him. Janzen misses this focal point of Hos 6:4–6 and he similarly misses the motive statement in Hos 11:8–9. Janzen’s reading has lost what the text actually says, and where the text leads the reader.

19 Thigpen, Divine Motive, 61.
20 Janzen is not alone in missing the explicit motive statements in the text of Hosea. Stuart in his commentary on Hosea notes the statement in 6:6, but neglects the explicit motive in 11:9 and assigns the cause of YHWH’s compassion to his change of heart. “But now
As in Hos 6:4–6, the textual focus in Hos 11:8–9 is on divine self-disclosure. If the people are to truly know God, it is critical that he disclose the actual reasons behind both the judgment they will face, and the mercy they will receive. As is clear in texts like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, inferences of the people regarding God’s providence are often quite wrong. So for YHWH to be truly known through his actions, he must reveal his motives.

To be clear, in pushing back on Janzen’s proposal, I do not intend to suggest that the emotional portrayal of YHWH is merely anthropopathic, that is, merely an analogy. Garrett’s judicious cautions are worth noting in full.

One may of course regard this as metaphor, as language that somehow puts divine love into terms that a human can understand, even though God himself does not really experience self-doubt and anxiety over issues of justice and mercy. This is certainly true, and we should not press the language too strongly. Still, we should not be overhasty to correct the image that the text gives us. While accepting the fact that God says that he will not take his punishment to such an extreme. Why? His heart has changed, and his ‘change of heart’ moves him to mercy” (Douglas K. Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, WBC [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987], 181). Stuart goes on to acknowledge YHWH’s change is a “product not of whim or circumstance, but of his eternally consistent nature,” but he fails to connect this assessment to the explicit motive statement in 11:9 (181).

On the intention of the passage, see Ehud Ben Zvi, Hosea, The Forms of Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 239. Although he arrives at his conclusion via different means, he strongly argues for divine self-disclosure being at the heart of this unit of Hosea. We might also connect this to Zimmerli’s work on the statement of recognition. Zimmerli rightly noted this same focus on the knowledge of God through divine self-disclosure in the statement of recognition and the proof saying. He writes, “knowledge of YHWH is not the emergence of an image that has first become clear in the human interior; neither is it a process of speculative combination nor the result of an analysis of one’s own creaturely condition” (Walther Zimmerli, “Knowledge of God According to the Book of Ezekiel,” in I Am Yahweh, ed. Walter Brueggemann [Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox, 1982], 35). Rather, what is known of YHWH is known only because he reveals himself. YHWH chooses to reveal himself to his people, because he is the only source of knowledge about himself, and one of his most fundamental motives is to make himself known and to have people acknowledge his self-disclosure. See also Thigpen, Divine Motive, 81.

Consider the people’s reliance on the temple in Jer 7, and the providential inference that the exiles taken in 597 BC were the real problem in Ezek 11. In both of these cases, YHWH discloses his motives to clarify his actions and give true knowledge of his character in place of the people’s misunderstanding of his actions.

See Mays’ retraction of his earlier statement that the anthropomorphisms were merely analogies. Mays, “Response to Janzen,” 49. For an extended exploration of the doctrine of analogy and the related questions of the ways in which textual analogies communicate truly about God, see Steven J. Duby, God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2019), 232–91.
transcends our metaphors and that theological doctrines about the impassability ... of God should never be jettisoned, texts such as this should be allowed to speak to us in the power of their raw emotion. It is precisely in texts such as this that the love of God becomes a vivid reality and not a barren abstraction.24

Instead of viewing these texts as merely anthropopathic, we should, as Vanhoozer suggests, understand these as truthful depictions of “intentional affective attitudes that he eternally chooses to take towards his creatures.”25 Depictions of divine emotions are depictions of divine dispositions – inherent qualities of God’s character.26 The emotional portrayal in Hos 11:8–9 is part of YHWH’s self-revelation of how he chooses to construe his relationship with his wayward people as it relates to his sovereign plans. This portrayal is the context for the disclosure of his motives. The emotional portrait of the broken parent-child relationship in Hos 11, which culminates in the powerful cry of Hos 11:8, is one that is appropriate both for describing YHWH’s assessment of his relationship to his recalcitrant people, and for relating this great brokenness to the reader in an understandable way. It is an apt way of YHWH disclosing himself, of disclosing true knowledge of his affections poured out on Israel.

3.2 **Hosea 11:8–9 in Its Immediate Context**
Hosea 11:8–9 sits within a unit that begins at 11:1 and which ends at 11:11. This section is part of a larger complex that runs from 11:1 to 14:1.

3.3 **The Textual Details of Hos 11:8**
As has been duly noted by many commentators, the reference to Admah and Zeboim is a reference to the total destruction of the cities recorded in Gen 19 and Deut 29. This historical reference combined with the connotation of the verbs נתן and מגן indicate that the point of tension is whether or not YHWH

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26 Ibid., 41. Similarly, Vanhoozer suggests we understand depictions of divine emotion as depictions of his “dispositions to act – based on divine concerns” (ibid.). These dispositions are not additions that occur in time, but rather God’s eternal characteristics viewed through the lens of his relation to creatures in diverse historical circumstances.
would totally relinquish his relationship with Israel.\textsuperscript{27} Will the decision to punish which is found throughout the book, but most closely in Hos 11:5–7, lead to a permanent destruction of the bond? Many commentators have viewed the emotive language of Hos 11:8 as indicating that YHWH was unsure how to proceed, that he was overwhelmed and torn regarding the decision.\textsuperscript{28} On this view it is “as if the contrary will to save and will to destroy gave Yahweh a mind divided against itself, within which the indecisive debate is raging.”\textsuperscript{29}

At issue is the meaning of the phrase, נֶהְפַּךְ עָלַי לִבִּי. Does this phrase mean God is torn over the decision, that his justice and mercy stand in opposition to each other?\textsuperscript{30} It seems clear that the use of חפך is likely intended as another link to the judgment on the cities recorded in Gen 19 and Deut 29.\textsuperscript{31} As to the exact nuance of the phrase, a reading which views the compassion of YHWH as hostilely opposed to his previously announced judgment, is not the only option.\textsuperscript{32} Rather, the collocation בע דַּחַפֵּךְ can be read in light of usages like Isa 60:5 “because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you” (ESV). Combined with the use in 1 Sam 4:19, “for her pains came upon her,” (ESV) this collocation can be viewed as indicating initiation, the start of a change of state, rather than a sense of hostility or


\textsuperscript{28} “In v 8 we glimpse the agony in the mind of God as he searches for some way of evading the response to which he has committed himself in the covenant curses.” Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 587–88. See also A.A. Macintosh, Hosea, ICC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 459, and David Allan Hubbard, Hosea, TOTC (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989), 204, who express similar views.

\textsuperscript{29} Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 588–89.

\textsuperscript{30} For a survey of opinion see Kakkanattu, God’s Enduring Love, 79–80.

\textsuperscript{31} Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “חַפּ,” NIDOTTE 11:25. “By describing this inner divine change with the word חפָך, which is used elsewhere of the overthrow of the cities of the plain, Hosea highlights the extent of the divine mercy.”

\textsuperscript{32} “Yahweh has become like a man in whose self-consciousness wrath and love do battle with each other. His heart, the seat of consciousness and will, assumes a hostile position against the punishment which he has already announced” (James Luther Mays, Hosea: A Commentary, OTL [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1969], 157). See also Hans Walter Wolff, Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1974), 201. “Yahweh’s will is directed against himself, i.e. against his wrath.”
internal struggle. So here the change of heart is the start of what follows; the pendulum halting and beginning its movement in the opposite direction. At the moment of decision, like when a parent chooses to end the appropriate punishment of a disobedient child, the just wrath subsides and the compassion rises to the fore and is allowed to grow warm.

It is unlikely that any particular understanding of the phrase נֶהְפַּךְ עָלַי לִבִּי will be persuasive to all readers. The issues cannot be settled definitively at this time. However, regardless of how one translates this part of the passage, it is clear that the heart language does not describe why the change occurred in the first place. It is descriptive of the emotional portrayal of the event, but not of motive. God's motive is, however, specifically addressed in Hos 11:9.

3.4 God's Action and Motive in Hos 11:9
After declaring that he would not fully destroy them as he had done previously with Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, God offers his reason for this decision. The motive statement does not reference the emotional metaphor

This is quite similar to how Naham often works. The verb often "has the sense that YHWH's anger is over and he has moved past the incident" (Thigpen, Divine Motive, 152). See also J.A. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 666. McComiskey argues that the parallel line goes against the "idea of a change of heart" ... since the later line speaks "primarily of the welling up of emotion, not of a definitive change of action" (McComiskey, "Hosea," 191). Though this reading is certainly possible, the flow of the passage can just as easily be read as the welling up of compassion being made possible by a change of heart. See Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 181.

"כי (for) introduces the reason why God will not destroy Ephraim in his anger" (McComiskey, "Hosea," 192). The significance of this motive statement has been noted by Duby. See Steven J. Duby, "For I Am God, Not a Man': Divine Repentance and the Creator-Creature Distinction," JTT 12, no. 2 (2018): 165.

For an excellent treatment of Ephraim as a second Sodom and Sodom as the "original Ephraim" see Garrett, Hosea, Joel, 228–29.
in Hos 11:8, nor does it cite a change of heart. It does not even appeal to the general nature of YHWH’s loving relationship with Ephraim. Rather it states quite bluntly that YHWH will act in this manner, or rather restrain his actions in this manner, precisely because he is God and not man.37 As such this study suggests that Hos 11:9 teaches that YHWH is merciful and is able to be merciful, not because he is motivated by shifting emotions, but rather because he is God and not man.

Kakkanattu’s explanation of the meaning of the text is most helpful. “Hosea here wants to communicate that unlike man, Yahweh, being God, does not repent of his election of Israel to be his own and hence he will not execute his wrath to nullify the election.”38 The converse similarity of Hos 11:8–9 to Hos 6:4–6 is striking. Not only does the earlier passage share the form of two rhetorical questions addressing how God should treat his people, it also addresses the issue of faithfulness to the covenant. There the essence of human love for God is its fleeting character. Ephraim’s love, like “[t]he morning cloud is deceptive since it is a dense mass of vapor which the westerly winds bring from the Mediterranean, but which dissipates when the sun appears ... [it] flees before the warmth of the sun’s rays.”39

God’s actions will reveal that he is not like man, and as such he will continue his sure promises that the nation will continue to exist and that the land will be theirs. As McComiskey comments, God will “not again return and vent his yet unquenched anger and destroy them forever.

Such an action would vitiate the ancient promise given to Abraham (Gen 12:1–7; see Lev 26:44).40 The execution of such deserved wrath would

37 If the motive statement referred back to the emotional metaphor of 11:8, the reader should expect something like “for I am compassionate,” or “for I love you,” or “for you are my beloved son” instead of the creator-creature distinction, “for I am God and not man.” There are texts that present YHWH’s character as a motive. See Thigpen, Divine Motive, 70–75, which identifies 124 motive statements which have a character trait of YHWH as the motive. Hos 11:8–9 is categorized in this list as a text in which the divine motive is mercy/compassion (75). However, this categorization of Hos 11:8–9 is insufficiently nuanced. When other passages with mercy/compassion as a motive are examined, we see texts like Exod 22:27, “I will hear, for I am compassionate,” or Judg 2:18 where YHWH is moved to pity by the people’s groaning, or Jer 31:2, “I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful.” Such language could have been used here and would have expressed the emotional metaphor of 11:8 as a motive in 11:9. However, what we get instead is statement on the distinction between the creator and the creature.

38 Kakkanattu, God’s Enduring Love, 89.


be the natural conclusion for a man. But God makes a sovereign decision. This decision, as clearly demonstrated in the verse before is not unemotional, but rather it is holistic and measured. It is not a human decision, uncontrollably compelled by emotion. The death of the nation will ultimately occur, as is made clear in the following passages that plainly reference the exile. Yet, the relationship between God and his people will continue.

Part of the significance of the motive, that God acts because he is God, is the nature of what God alone is capable of doing. He can, as asserted in Hos 6:1–2, bring death and then give life. He can even, as seen in Hos 14:5, heal apostasy.

The emphasis on the motive in this passage, however, that God acts because he is God, is the nature of what distinguishes God from man. There are three texts that express very similar ideas outside of Hosea that are also premised on the idea that YHWH is not like man. The first is Num 23:19, “God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind.” This text is the opening of the second word of Balaam. After being asked to nullify God’s first pronouncement, this message relays the fundamental relationship between the character of God and his word. God does not lie nor can he be swayed to abandon his people.42

In 1 Sam 15:29, when Saul attempts to get Samuel to pardon him, he responds by telling Saul, “Moreover, the Glory of Israel does not deal falsely, nor will he relent, for he is not a man that he should relent.” Saul’s punishment has been decreed and will not be reversed. God is not a man and therefore he has not lied about Saul’s punishment, and he will not change his mind.43

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41 The terms ‘sovereign’ and ‘sovereignty’ are often employed without definition. As used here, the terms signal that God is not coerced. As one who is truly sovereign, he has the absolute capacity to act according to his own choices, without being coerced by external forces, or internal forces, such as emotions. As Hodge puts it, “The will of God is free in the highest sense of the word. An agent is said to be free, (1.) When he is at liberty to act or not to act, according to his good pleasure. This is liberty in acting. (2.) He is free as to his volitions, when they are determined by his own sense of what is wise, right, or desirable” (Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology [New York: Scribner, 1871], 1:403). Similarly, “Although this sovereignty is thus universal and absolute, it is the sovereignty of wisdom, holiness, and love. The authority of God is limited by nothing out of Himself, but it is controlled, in all its manifestations, by his infinite perfections” (1:441).

42 God does in specific instances, in his “day to day” interactions, still punish his people. But his long term plans as expressed in his covenant with Abraham are non-negotiable. On the changeability of God’s day to day interactions with nations, see Jer 18. The inclusion of provisions in Deut for redemption after the exile shows the long-term inviolability of his relationship with his people.

43 For the relationship between the various uses of נחם for God’s “regret” in 1 Sam 15:11, 35 and for God not “changing his mind” here in verse 29, see Tsumura, First Book of Samuel, 407.
Finally in Mal 3:6 we see that God’s changelessness is the source of the people’s continued existence. “Because I, YHWH, do not change, you, O sons of Jacob, have not ceased to exist.” Despite the people’s continuing sin and lack of repentance, God’s unchanging character has continued to uphold his plan for the nation. Though they have been disciplined, they have been brought back to life through the return from exile and they continue as the people of God, awaiting the arrival of the new covenant. Ironically, this might be the one text where the people are like God, unchanging! Yet, the emphasis is on the way in which God is not like man. YHWH is faithful to his word, but the people are not.

These three texts all explain YHWH’s actions as being based in his character. His character is expressly cast as being unlike his people’s. His changeless, truthful nature is on full display as he acts based on who he is, because he is YHWH, and because he is not like man. Although the concerns and details of these three texts are distinct from Hos 11, they do confirm that the fundamental elements of the reading proposed here are affirmed elsewhere in the OT. Of these texts, Mal 3:6 is, perhaps, the most significant for our understanding of Hos 11:8–9. In both texts, it is the changelessness of God that serves as the anchor of the people’s salvation. Here in Hosea, neither the people’s sin, nor YHWH’s emotional construal of that sin form the basis of salvation.44 Rather, YHWH’s sovereign choice of Israel as his people maintains the relationship. Unlike a man, who would be overwhelmed by the emotional carnage of betrayal and faithlessness, YHWH continues to act based on who he is – one who does not lie, does not relent, but who also does not change. Because he is God and not man, he will not ultimately and finally destroy his chosen people.

Fretheim, in his commentary on Hosea has argued oppositely. As he understands the passage,

God “turns” because God is God and not a “man”. … Such an appeal to God’s Godness is remarkable given the very humanlike responses God has had over the course of those verses. God’s Godness must therefore contain some characteristics that are like certain human qualities, at least those in evidence in 11:1–8.45

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Fretheim's understanding does not seem to follow the logic of the passage. If, following the emotional metaphor of the father-child relationship, YHWH then says I will not punish you because I am not a man, how can the motive be tied to human qualities? The emotional impact of the metaphor on the reader is to say that a man would not punish his child because of the emotional pain of doing so. Here instead of continuing the metaphor, the grounding of the divine choice is in something other than a divinely analogous emotional angst. It is grounded in the distinction between God and man.46

It is important to note that in Hos 11:9, YHWH, the God who is not like man, the one who will not destroy his people completely, is presented as “the Holy One.” Holiness is often placed in opposition, even in competition with mercy and salvation. Holiness, in the words of Garrett, is “not a trait associated with mercy but with judgment.”47 To be both holy and merciful, God “chose to avoid entering the city, lest he should have to destroy it entirely. This refusal to enter the city is an act both of judgment and of mercy.”48 Yet, as Robson has so helpfully articulated, “divine holiness as love is evident” in God’s self-disclosures, his saving activities, and his presence.49 And as Oswalt has compellingly argued for Isaiah, “being who he is, the Holy One of Israel, he must redeem.”50

So how are we to understand the relationship between mercy and holiness in Hos 11:9? It is helpful to explore other passages where God is “in the midst” of

46 For a fuller exploration of the distinction between God and man, see Duby, “For I am God, Not a Man.” For a broader analysis of Fretheim’s hermeneutic and its relationship to the God-man distinction, see Matthew R. Schlimm, “Different Perspectives on Divine Pathos: An Examination of Hermeneutics in Biblical Theology,” *CBQ* 69, no. 4 (2007): 673–94. In the context of Hos, the God-man distinction presents, in part, that man’s affections are fleeting. As a result of man’s fickle nature, punishment alone is insufficient to achieve YHWH’s intentions for his people that they would exhibit חסד and that they would truly know him (Hos 6:4–6). So if the analogy were to hold, then God’s emotions would, like man’s, be fleeting. The intensity of his love would be offset by the intensity of his wrath and he would be in turmoil as a man would be. But the logic of the text is that despite the great affection and the great wrath he has towards the people, he is not torn and his affections are not fleeting. Rather, he makes decisions differently. He chooses not to come in anger, because he is the creator and not the creature. And as such, he is committed to being who he is, and being faithful to his covenant purposes for his people. Thus, he will not come in wrath, not because he is compassionate (something given as a motive in other texts) but rather because he is not a man and not subject to being emotionally torn. He will not come in anger precisely because he is God and not man. In this way, I would nuance my earlier characterization of Hos 11:8–9 in Thigpen, *Divine Motive*, 70.


48 Ibid.


his people to see how his people are impacted by his holiness. Key texts include Exod 33:5; Deut 6:15; 7:21; Isa 12:6; Amos 5:17; Zeph 3:15, and 17. Among these texts, Exod 33:5; Deut 6:15; and Amos 5:17 are negative – his presence makes destruction possible. In Exod 33:5 and Deut 6:15 the peril is expressed in a יִפְשָׁכֵן “lest” clause. The other four are positive – his presence is saving. Exodus 33:5 is helpful as we see there, as Garrett has suggested for Hos 11, that withholding his presence can be an act of mercy. In fact this is the very point of the motive statement in Exod 33:5.51 Isaiah 12:6; Zeph 3:15, and 17, however, suggests that it is the holy presence of God which saves. Robson maintained that “Hosea 11 is the clearest place where we see holiness linked explicitly and directly to the gracious reaching out of God.”52 Similarly, Wolff wrote that here in Hosea, God’s holiness “provides the foundation, not for his judging but for his saving will.”53 On balance the OT shows that God’s holy presence brings both judgment and salvation, but the hope of salvation comes through judgment not around it.54 This is made clear even in Hos 11:8–9 with the following passage which is set in the context of exile.

3.5 Hosea 11:8–9 and Divine Motive in Hosea
As shown in the survey above, the divine motive statements in Hosea focus on the knowledge of God. That is to say, God is motivated to disclose himself to his people, and to have his people properly acknowledge his self-revelation through true acts of worship. He intends for his people to know him. So here in Hos 11:8–9, through the restraint of the just punishment, he is showing who he is. His relationship with his wayward people is emotional, but the choice is made on the basis of who he is, and on his decision to reveal himself by disclosing his motivation for compassion. Yet, as noted in other motive statements in the book such as Hos 6:4–6, he is going to judge them because they have refused to know him.

If we read Hos 11:8–9 together with the next and final divine motive statement, Hos 14:5, we see again that the restraint of punishment and the provision of salvation is not on the basis of God’s emotional state, or the repentance of the people. In Hos 14:5 YHWH says, “I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, because my anger has turned back from him.” It is based once again, as

51 Thigpen, Divine Motive, 60–62.
52 Robson, “Forgotten Dimensions,” 141.
54 This theme of salvation through judgment is evident throughout Oswalt’s work on Isaiah (Oswalt, The Holy One of Israel).
in Hos 11:9, in the very person of YHWH. He will heal the ultimate source of their rebellion, their apostasy, and will love them, freely, because of his own sovereign choice, to move beyond his just wrath.

Other than this text and a reference to abundance of rain in Ps 68:9, every occurrence of נדבה, “freely,” refers to voluntary (freewill) offerings, and freely offered vows. This is the perfect parallel to God’s free choosing of Israel. It was his free choice, and continues to be his free and sovereign choice, despite their sinfulness and their lack of repentance. He will freely fix their lack of repentance as well, so that his love is the source of their repentance and not merely a response to it. The emphasis on the free nature of the love God provides indicates that though he is responding to their repentance he is not bound by it. “This is a love which will not be earned – what could Israel possibly present to Yahweh as an acceptable payment?” The commanded repentance, which will come, does not motivate God to heal or love. Rather he promises their repentance and is motivated to produce repentance in his people because he has chosen to love them and to heal them.

4 Hosea 11:8–9 and the OT Theology of Divine Motive

What does it mean that God’s wrath has “turned from them” or that his “heart has changed” and his “compassion is growing warm”? YHWH’s people will after all, from the historical perspective of Hosea, still experience the national death of exile. Judah will fall and will also die in exile. Yet, the readers know, as God promised in Hos 1, those who will one day be “not loved” and “not my people” will once again be “loved” and “my people.” So how does this happen? How does wrath turn and healing come?

To explore this further we must attend to Jer 23:19–20 and 30:23–24. There the combination of בוש (return, turn back, repent) with יא (anger) is found

55 Here again it should be noted that “person” is not being used in a strictly trinitarian sense. See note 15 above.
56 Exod 35:29; 36:3; Lev 7:16; 22:18, 21, 23; 23:38; Num 15:3; 29:39; Deut 12:6, 17; 16:10; 23:24; Ezek 46:12; Hos 14:5; Amos 4:5; Ps 54:8; 68:10; 110:3; 119:108; Ezra 11:4; 3:5; 8:28; 2 Chr 31:14; 35:8. Ps 110:3 potentially views the people as a metaphorical freewill offering. The LXX, however, reads differently, prompting some to revocalize the text.
57 On God’s motives in choosing Israel, see Thigpen, Divine Motive, 71–72.
58 Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 215.
59 For a broader discussion of the relationship between divine motive and repentance see, Thigpen, Divine Motive, 115–24.
together with divine motive statements in a way that makes clear how justice, wrath, mercy, and salvation are bound together with divine motive.\textsuperscript{60}

\begin{quote}
Behold, the storm of the LORD!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.
The anger of the LORD will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intents of his heart.
In the latter days you will understand it clearly. (ESV)
\end{quote}

This passage links the intention (motive) of YHWH’s heart with the punitive act of exile, yet the connection to the ultimate redemption of the people is made clear in the broader context of Jeremiah. Here in its first occurrence, the storm of the Lord is “the epitome of the divine word of judgment ... the opposite of the false prophets’ message.”\textsuperscript{61} God intends not to pull back his righteous judgment until it has accomplished all that he intends. Yet, the mention of the branch earlier in Jer 23:5–6 and the reference to the latter days in Jer 23:20 prepare us for the second occurrence of the text in Jer 30:23–24.\textsuperscript{62} There, coming after a series of exhortations, including the promise of new leadership in Jer 30:9 and Jer 30:21, the second storm warning “adds emphasis to the promise of judgment on Israel’s foes.”\textsuperscript{63} Just as the fullness of God’s wrath would be poured out on the false prophets and the people who lapped up their easy words, so too, God affirms that the enemies of his people would be judged.\textsuperscript{64} “Here as in 23:20 the linkage of YHWH’s intentions with both judgment and restoration is clear. The stark contrast between the overwhelmingly negative context of the first occurrence in Jer 23 with the tenderly comforting setting in Jer 30 makes the linkage that much more apparent when the two are read together.”\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Other passages that have the combination of בָוֶ֣שׁ and נָ֣ה include 2 Kgs 23:26; Isa 525:9:6–17; Jer 2:35; 4:8; Amos 11:1; Prov 24:18.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, Jeremiah 26–52, WBC (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 105.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Thigpen, Divine Motive, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Thompson, Jeremiah, 563.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Cf. Jer 30:11, 16, and 20.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Thigpen, Divine Motive, 181.
\end{itemize}
Hosea’s statements about the turning of God’s anger suggests that as his anger turns, it abates, when his purpose for the anger is fulfilled. His intentions then turn to compassion, as the enemies of God’s people are judged, and Israel is brought to repentance and granted forgiveness in the new covenant.

In all of this it might seem that this interpretation is favoring God’s sovereignty over his mercy, that his “choice” is more basic than his compassion, that we are in danger of going to one extreme that Garrett warns us about, undoing the real emotional intensity of the language of Hos 11:8. Here, too, the larger theology of divine motive is helpful. The key to understanding the divine motive statements is to see that at their core, the motive statements assert that he acts because he is God. More precisely, through the motive statements, God reveals to us that he acts because he is YHWH.

YHWH is sovereignly motivated by his character, the very nature of his person, to make himself known and to prompt proper human acknowledgment of his self-introduction so that his people might be rightly related to him in faithful covenant. Thus as in Exod 34:6–7, the expression of the divine intent is seen broadly in faithful, covenantal mercy and grace, and in faithful, just judgment. He is motivated to be who he is.

In this passage, having read on from Hos 6, the reader would see that YHWH is not like them. His affections are not fleeting, and here in the very place where they might sympathetically see the potential plight of one torn between the love of a child and the just need for punishment, he teaches them that because he is God and not a man, he is not caught in that trap. He does not say, because he is loving, compassionate, and cannot stand the idea. Rather, because he is God and not man, he will not execute his burning anger. Note here the anger has not subsided on the other side of 11:8. It is still burning in 11:8. He holds both, but decides because he is creator and not creature. As such he is perfectly faithful to his word and will not ultimately and permanently destroy his people, even though he may take them through death back to life (Hos 6:1–2).

There the distinction between acting “for the sake of his name” and acting “because he is YHWH,” see ibid., 130–37. With regard to Exod 34, a key consideration is that Exod 34 presents God as both loving and just, merciful and judging. What it does not explain is when and why YHWH will choose to act in one way or another. The motive statements ground the expression of the various character traits most broadly in the phrase “because I am YHWH” (Thigpen, Divine Motive, 80–82). In this way, the personal sovereignty or freedom of YHWH to choose to act in various ways in varying situations is at the heart of the mystery of YHWH. He will be who he is, and the reader discovers that his attributes cannot be pitted against each other, nor does one overwhelm the other. Rather in all circumstances, however YHWH acts, whether in judgment or in salvation, he is YHWH. See Thigpen, “The Storm of YHWH,” and John N. Oswalt, “Judgment and Hope: The Full-Orbed Gospel,” TJ 17, no. 2 (1996): 191–202.
Part of the disclosure of who he is includes his heart for his people. Two examples outside of Hosea will have to suffice. The first is Jer 32:41. After detailing the effects of his wrath on the people, YHWH affirms that he will indeed regather his people into the land, that he will be their God and they his people, that he will change their heart for their own good and as a gift to their children, and that he will make an everlasting covenant not to stop doing good for them. Then comes the remarkable statement in Jer 32:41. “I will delight over them, in doing good for them. And I will plant them in this land faithfully, with all my heart, and with all my soul.” The holy God promises his faithful and wholehearted work to his people. Just as he had commanded his people in the great Shema to love him wholeheartedly, so too, he gives the same holistic devotion to his people.68

The second passage is Lam 3:32–33, “Even though he causes suffering, he shows compassion according to the greatness of his lovingkindness; because he does not afflict from his heart, or cause suffering to the sons of man.” Here we have another passage similar to Hos 11:8 where there appears to be emotional tension between the intention to inflict just punishment and the desire to save. This tension between the delight of God in doing good, and his resolute willingness to punish evil is at the heart of OT theology because it involves the very heart of God. It is expressed in the classic articulation of his name in Exod 34:6–7, in the great statement on justice and individuality in Ezek 18, and is scattered throughout the texts of the OT in the motive statements.

5 Divine Motive and Divine Impassibility

Systematic theologians and biblical exegetes have wrestled with what is means to be “biblical” as with regard to texts that portray God emotionally. The key question to which I hope to contribute with this study, is whether “divine impassibility is an exposition of the text or a conceptual imposition” on it.69

The exposition of Hos 11 in this study suggests that impassibility arises from this text and is not an idea foisted on it. YHWH does not act in this text because he has been emotionally moved. Instead the explicit statement of motive is that he acts because of who he is.70 He acts in compassion and mercy because

69 Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology, 391.
70 To be clear, this does not settle the question of how the emotion-laden metaphor of Hos 11:8 should ultimately be interpreted with regard to whether or not God experiences emotions. It does, however, give a plausible reading that the divine action in Hos 11:9 is not motivated by emotion, but rather by God acting as God, and not as man. There is at
he is God and not man. Man, often overwhelmed by emotion, would have rejected Israel and ended the relationship. But God, true to his word, and able to effect salvation through judgment, shows how much he values his relationship with his people, and he shows how far Israel has strayed from his intentions for the relationship. The explicit statement of divine motive is, at least in Hos 11, one piece of evidence that impassibility is not necessarily an imposition on the text.

To say that impassibility is supported by the divine motive statement in Hos 11 does not mean that we have here a text which is devoid of emotion. Rather we have a text that is rife with emotional depictions of the relationship between God’s eternal character and his creatures in this particular circumstance. The emotional portrayal is an analogical or metaphorical depiction of God’s relationship with his people.

The motive statement of Hos 11:9 may be seen to support a reading in which the emotional portrayal of YHWH does not necessarily suggest that he has emotions which are an imposition with which he must cope. They are not an outside force acting on him. Rather “God’s emotions proceed from his construals of the way in which human beings respond to his own words and deeds – to the drama of redemption .... Moreover, God’s construals, unlike ours, are always objective, hence his judgments about situations are always right and true.”

YHWH’s focus is constant. He is attentive to his covenant relationship with his people. Thus he construes, evaluates, and imputes value to the state of the relationship. He considers the discrepancy between his will for Israel and the current state of the relationship, and likens it to the emotional state of a husband and a wayward wife. It is presented as emotionally weighty as it would be for a human relationship, but it is not a human relationship and thus is in some respects asymmetrical.

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71 Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology, 413.
72 For the language of construal, value, and emotion, see Roberts, Emotions.
73 As Duby writes, “An analogical view of theological speech attempts to honor divine transcendence and divine communication by maintaining that the sense in which our language applies to God is neither exactly the same nor entirely different from the way in which it applies to creatures” (Duby, God in Himself, 242). The depiction of emotion in YHWH uses analogical language which does speak of him truly, but differently than the way the same language might apply to humanity.
Though YHWH expresses himself in deeply emotional language through the prophet, unlike us, YHWH is still absolutely sovereign. His actions flow from his evaluative processes and are not imposed on him. He chooses to construe, to act, and to communicate as he does, because of who he is. His affections are like, but yet different from our emotions, in that he evaluates and therefore construes the state of affairs from the vantage of the whole. “God construes the theodrama from the perspective of eternity, as a complete and unified whole.”

As such, “God never suffers because he is overtaken by worldly events, but only because he uses them for his own.” This conception of divine affection is consistent with my prior assessment of divine motive.

In summary, YHWH is sovereignly motivated by his character, the very nature of his person, to make himself known and to prompt proper human acknowledgement of his self-introduction so that his people might be rightly related to him in faithful covenant. Thus as in Exod 34:6–7, the expression of the divine intent is seen broadly in faithful, covenantal mercy and grace, and in faithful, just judgment. He is motivated to be who he is.

As Vanhoozer concludes, “Divine compassion is kyriotic. It is not a commiserating but a commanding, effectual compassion that does not share but transforms the sufferer’s situation. It is a commanding compassion ... because it is self-moved.” Divine compassion is an act of God’s will. It is based in his sovereign self-motivation. “Divine impassibility means not that God is unfeeling ... but that God is never overcome or overwhelmed by these feelings such that he ‘forgets’ his covenant, or who he is as covenant Lord.” “Impassibility means that God’s love is absolutely steadfast and perfect ... If it could weaken or wane, then God would be caught up in the same vortex of passion that surrounds and encompasses.” This would lead to a God who could not declare that because he does not change, his people are not consumed in judgement (Mal 3:6).

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74 Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology, 414.
75 Ibid., 430.
76 Thigpen, Divine Motive, 81.
77 Vanhoozer, Remythologizing Theology, 446.
78 Ibid., 432–33.
6 Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to suggest that if we hope to successfully navigate difficult, emotionally charged texts like Hosea 11:8–9, we must take care to pay close attention to the explicit statement of YHWH’s motives. YHWH acts because of who he is. He will love Israel by saving them through judgment, and by ultimately healing their incurable wound, because he is God. The Holy One in the midst of his people is both holy and in the midst of his people. He truly feels, but passions do not rule him. YHWH will love his people, through judgment when necessary, in order make himself known, so that he might fulfill his greatest intention for them, that they would truly know him.

Thus Israel’s proper response to YHWH’s revelation of himself in Hos 11:8–9 is to surrender itself for better or for worse to the God of election and in submission before his just wrath to believe nevertheless in his word of promise and to take refuge in the miracle of his love, only then can there be any hope for survival in the time of judgment now begun. The holy God exalted in his majesty above all human thoughts, who nevertheless strives in judgment and grace for the turning of his people to his saving love: this is the real content of the theology of Hosea.80

Bibliography


