CHAPTER XV

REJECTION AND RECONCILIATION IN THE BOOK OF HOSEA

Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible is the polarization between divine wrath and love, or between punishment and forgiveness as stark and extreme as in the book of Hosea. And it is this contrast that makes its interpretation so difficult. The more dramatic the swing from one extreme to the other, the more acute the questions of authorship and dating become. The main problem in the first three chapters is that of historical authenticity: is the story of Hosea’s marriage factual, or is it an allegory designed to depict the relationship between the covenanted people and their God?

Much spilling of exegetical ink has shown that it is not possible to answer this question solely by textual analysis. In solving the most difficult puzzles, human universal conjectures and experiences become relevant whether one wishes that to happen or not. Identifying the most profound explanations of the persistence of divine forbearance—despite the continuing apostasy of the people—is among the most significant of these; another is that of the threats or declarations of merciless divine punishment. These in turn give rise to the urgent question as to what kind of link exists between the repentance of the people and divine mercy.

The book of Hosea comprises two formal, distinctively different sections: 1) chapters 1–3; 2) chapters 4–14. The first part is biographical (chaps. 1–2) and autobiographical (chap. 3), while the second is a collection of the prophet’s speeches.¹ Both sections are largely metrical in form al-

¹ The question of the structure of Hosea is of prime interest to recent commentators. It has also led to special studies. The problem remains insoluble when interpreters are biased and depend too much upon the formal criteria of structure, although some motives and phrases are repeated throughout the book. Thematic aspects should thus be taken more into account, for they bear witness to the fundamental unity of the book with its permanent tension between the declarations on punishment and forbearance. See particularly recent interpreters who also summarize the views of earlier ones: W. R. Harper, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905); A. Weiser, Das Buch der zwolf Kleinen Propheten, vol. 1 (ATD 24; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950), 1–104; H. W. Wolff, Dekaprophethon, 1: Hosea (BK 14/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965); T. J. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 24; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980); J. Jeremias, Der Prophet Hosea: Übersetzt und erklärt (ATD 24/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); E. Bons, Das Buch Hosea (NSK.AT 23,1; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996). H. W. Wolff, T. J. Andersen, and D. N. Freedman are particularly exhaustive, especially in view of their extremely full bibliography. For special questions of structure and poetry, see H. Frey, “Der Aufbau der Gedichte Hoseas,” WuDNF 5 (1957), 9–103; E. M. Good, “The Composition of Hosea,” SEÂ 31 (1966), 21–63; M. D. Zulick, Rhetorical Polyphony in the Book of the Prophet Hosea (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University, Diss., 1994); I. Sporâcić, Das untreue Volk: Zum Sprachfeld der Untreue bei Hosea (Rome, Pon-
though the first contains a higher proportion of prose than the second—as is natural, for the speechmaker always inclines more towards rhetoric and poetry than does the narrator.

1. The Marriage of Hosea (Chapters 1–3)

Despite differences in style and what appears to be an apparent discontinuity between individual sections, the three opening chapters of Hosea are unified in theme. The account of Hosea’s marriage is sequential: the infidelity of his wife, the rejection of her children, and a reconciliation brought about by Hosea’s—or rather—God’s forbearance. Embodied in the paradox of Hosea’s marriage is the process towards the validation of the truth of the divine dealings with a covenanted people. Israel rejects the Lord completely, despite which God does not abandon her but instead draws up a fresh covenant that carries with it the promise of a bright tomorrow. The section divides into the following units: an introduction (1:1); the story of Hosea’s wife, the naming and renaming of her children (1:2–2:3); accusations of unfaithfulness, conciliation, and renewal of the covenant (2:4–25); the autobiographical narrative of the purchase of Hosea’s estranged wife; and the assurance that the children of Israel will come in fear to the Lord “in the latter days” (3:1–5). No clear indications of any current reform of the people of Israel are given, so it must be accepted that Hosea’s paradoxical reconciliation with his wife symbolizes an about-turn by the people of Israel only in an undefined future—little though we may like that conclusion.

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