THREE CHRISTIAN COMMENTATORS ON HOSEA

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The interpretation of the prophets underwent a massive change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ The most important aspect of this change was not the literary-critical approach—although it was over questions of authorship and date that some of the biggest battles were fought—but the shift in theological evaluation of the prophets. The change is above all one from seeing the importance of the prophets for Christian faith and theology as lying primarily in their predictions of the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church to a more historical view which emphasises their religious ideas, the ethical element in their teaching and their critique of their contemporaries for failing to match the demand of God. This change was not reversed, but only softened, by the fact that subsequent studies of the prophets represent something of a swing back towards the traditional pre-critical viewpoint. A Christian understanding of the prophets in the first decade of the new millennium will quite rightly be shaped by developments in biblical scholarship at the present time. But it will also benefit from a discriminating study of earlier interpretation, for many of the old issues remain with us. This essay is a small contribution to that task which I hope will bring pleasure to an Old Testament scholar who has long counted the Christian literature of the past among his interests.

The primary purpose of this essay is to gain a more detailed perspective on this change in theological interpretation by examining three major figures in Christian interpretation of the book of Hosea: John Calvin, Edward Bouverie Pusey and George Adam Smith. They are of course a small sample from the much larger number of commentators who wrote on Hosea, and even the study of them could have benefited from more comparison with their predecessors,

contemporaries and successors. But they have the merit of representing a variety of approaches to biblical interpretation and each of them can fairly be described as an important and influential commentator, as the reprinting (and in Calvin’s case the translation) of their works indicates. Calvin is an obvious choice for an interpreter who lived long before the period of change that is in question here, while yet being, through his setting in the world of the Renaissance and the Reformation, closer to the modern world even than some of his near-contemporaries. His inclusion has additional relevance because of the fact that it was in the mid nineteenth century that most of his biblical commentaries were translated into English for the first time and annotated by those who believed that his interpretation still had much to say to the Church. Pusey and Smith, while separated in time by only a few decades, stand on either side of the “great divide” and as such provide a particularly revealing insight into the changes that were taking place. With them, however, it will become apparent (and in some ways the same is even more strikingly the case with Calvin) that by no means everything changed in the late nineteenth century. To illustrate the character of the three commentaries I have chosen most of my examples from two less well-known chapters of Hosea, chapters 9 and 10. It will, of course, in the space available be possible to present only a little of what might be said about these commentators’ work.

Calvin’s commentary on Hosea was published early in 1557 and was a transcript of lectures which he had given in the school in Geneva, in the Auditoire adjacent to the church of St. Pierre. The exact dates of the thirty-eight lectures are unknown, but in view of what is known or can be deduced about Calvin’s lecturing practice

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3 The Latin text appears in G. Baum et al. (ed.), *Joannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Corpus Reformatorum: Brunswick, 1863ff.), vol. 42, cols. 197–514, hereafter abbreviated as *OC* 42. For an English translation sponsored by the Calvin Translation Society see *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets by John Calvin* (tr. J. Owen), vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1846), hereafter abbreviated as *CTS Hos*. On the general background see T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 13–29. I have made my own translations from the Latin in view of Parker’s observations on the English translation (1986) pp. 2–3, but give page references to the latter for those who may wish to consult the context of the passages quoted. For the use of the *Auditoire* for the Hosea lectures see *OC* 42, cols. ‘183–84’ (CTS Hos, p. xxii, mistranslates “in auditorio” as “of my hearers”).