THE LAND IN THE BOOK OF HOSEA

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1. Introduction

“‘The land’ is a central theme in Hosea’s thought.”¹ Two observations suffice to justify this statement. First, in the book of Hosea יראה “the land” is found in the very first verse after the superscription, that is, in Hos 1:2. There the land is accused of unfaithfulness to Yhwh by committing whoredom. Second, the noun also figures prominently in the first verse of the main corpus of Hosea’s prophecies, that is, in 4:1. This text affirms that Yhwh is involved in a dispute or lawsuit against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness, no loyalty and no knowledge of God in the land.

Given the huge amount of data with respect to the land in Deuteronomy and related literature (including Jeremiah), it is hardly surprising that research into the topic has mainly concentrated on these books.² This study widens the scope of investigation by analysing the way in which the land functions as a “central theme” in Hosea.

The investigation will be restricted to texts in which the noun יראה occurs and in which it may refer to the land of Israel, viz. Hos 1:2; 2:2, 20, 23–25; 4:1, 3; 9:3; 10:1.³ The main reason for choosing this approach is that some of these texts present remarkable statements with respect to יראה. In 1:2, for example, one would expect the people of Israel to be charged with fornication, rather than יראה. Hosea 2:2 announces

¹ In honour of Prof. Ed Noort, who has spent so much time and energy on “the land.”
³ The following texts are left out of consideration: Hos 2:5, 17; 6:3; 7:16; 11:5, 11; 12:10; 13:4–5.
that the people of Judah and Israel will “go up” (למעלה) from ירושלים. What do these words mean and why are they part of a description of the blissful future promised to God’s people? Similar questions can be asked with respect to the enigmatic והשליחת אל הארץ “I will sow her for myself in the land” in 2:25. The meaning of these texts must be clarified before a comprehensive analysis of the topic of the land in Hosea can be carried out properly.

Furthermore, the discussion of the exegetical issues relating to the selected texts will be strictly synchronic, for two reasons. First, as many contemporary scholars assume, synchronic analysis should precede diachronic analysis. Second, there is no consensus with respect to the authenticity and date of several of the texts involved. Therefore, a consensus cannot be taken as a point of departure, whereas a balanced discussion of these matters would exceed the format of this article.

2. Hosea 1:2

In Hos 1:2 Yhwh orders the prophet to marry a wife who is inclined to fornicate and to have children of similar disposition, because “the land” (ארץ) fornicates and thus forsakes Yhwh. Since the rest of the chapter proclaims judgment on the people of Israel, ארץ is, understandably, mostly taken as a metonymical reference to the people. More recently, however, some authors have claimed that ארץ actually refers to the land. According to Laurie J. Braaten, for example, Yhwh’s bride in Hos 1:2–2:15 is “the land per se,” whereas the children, who are called on to plead with their mother in 2:4, represent the people of Israel. In support of this interpretation, he argues that in Hos 4–14 “Israel/Ephraim is always represented by masculine imagery” and is never God’s bride. Besides, he points to the agricultural imagery applied to the bride in Hosea 2. In his view, it is only from 2:16 onward that the bride includes Israel.

4 Cf., e.g. E. Talstra, Oude en nieuwe lezers: Een inleiding in de methoden van uitleg van het Oude Testament (Ontwerpen 2; Kampen 2002), 115–116.
5 On this interpretation of ארץ והשליחת, see HALOT, 276.