THE ROLE OF IMAGES IN THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF HOSEA VII 8-VIII 14

by

EMMANUEL O. NWAORU
Port Harcourt, Nigeria

It is a preferred method to use stylistic devices such as inclusio, word repetitions, climactic lines, verbal and thematic associations and other mnemonic techniques to determine the literary structure or the composition of the literary units of Biblical books. The reliance on such rhetorical markers has resulted in unresolved questions about the composition of the book of Hosea because of poor attestation of those general literary devices. The lack of consensus is not only evident in the first major part (chs. i-iii), but also in the second major part (chs. iv-xiv).¹ One of the instances where there seems to be unanimity on the beginning of a new section is the first verse of chapter eight. On the basis of the call to sound the trumpet, Hos. viii 1 is said to open a new sequence of oracles² that are unique in themselves and only appended associatively to the preceding section, Hos. v 8-vii 16.³ This article seeks more than an appendage in the relation between chapter eight and the preceding chapter. It seeks to demonstrate, using essential structural indicator other than the general literary devices of composition, that Hos. vii 8-viii 14 is a structural and functional unit of discourse.

¹ J.L. Mays, for instance, registered as many as thirty units in chapters iv-xiv; while H.W. Wolff divided the chapters into fourteen units F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman had twenty units.
Images as structural indicators in Hosea

Literary images have long been recognised by Lindblom as a key to the literary analysis of Hosea, especially in establishing the unity of the text. In other words, they are essential structural indicators, which according to Frey play an important role, besides strophes and lines, in the structuring and composition of the poems of Hosea. Several commentators on the book of Hosea affirm this view. It means that a more holistic approach to literary structuring is required for Hosea’s oracles than the use of surface literary markers. The prophet sets out in each oracle to lead his audience, with images as essential literary indicators, to specific themes and, in the case of Hos. vii 8-viii 14, to the picture of Ephraim/Israel in his external policy among the nations.

That Hos. vii 8-viii 14 can be read as a unitary whole is a proposal this article is making against the pleonastic structuring that has dominated the study of the composition of the book of Hosea. It is our contention that the general trend of isolating chapter eight or, at most, appending it to another chapter must be reconsidered and another hard look be taken on the “fixed” literary and stylistic devices used in rhetorical criticism, especially in relation to the prophetic books. Image association with a definitive focus must be taken seriously as a rhetorical device that is as important as any other device in delimiting a text. The range of oracles about Ephraim/Israel in Hos. vii 8-viii 14 is a typical example of such literary unit of discourse bound together by metaphors and similes.

Hos. vii 8-viii 14 as unit of discourse

A close analysis of the images, especially metaphors and similes, in the early section of the second major part, shows that the focus is on

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7 Good (“The Composition of Hosea”, p. 24) named image association as one of the four mnemonic techniques that play important role in grouping poems together at the oral level. Here is a typical instance where image association provides a literary unity for otherwise different oracles.