“I WILL LOVE THEM FREELY”:

A METAPHORICAL THEOLOGY OF HOSEA 14

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INTRODUCTION

> *Der Vortrag des Propheten gleicht einem Kranz aus den mannigfaschten Blumen gewunden, Vergleichungen in Vergleichungen geschlungen, Metaphern an Metaphern gereichet. Er bricht eine Blume und wirft sie hin, um zugleich wieder eine andere zu brechen. Wie eine Biene fliegt er von einem Blumenbett zum andern.*[1]

Quaint though it may be in its own selection of imagery in view of the magnitude of its referent, this observation by J. G. Eichhorn fittingly introduces the stylistic complexity of the book of the prophet Hosea. In an approach not only winding but at times even torturous, Hosea captures the attention and imagination of his audience with a myriad of diverse, vivid, and intense imagery unparalleled in any other biblical book of its length and nature.[2] The "whole book bristles with various style forms" drawn from every area of life and directed toward the sole objective of unequivocally communicating the word of God.[3] Hosea relentlessly announces both desolation and consolation to a people who seem manifestly unable or unwilling to hear, and he does so by means of an ever-shifting multiplicity of viewpoints, catchwords, assonance, alliterations, hyperbole, wordplay, parallelism, chiasm, and - preeminently - metaphors and similes.[4]

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[1] J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, in P. A. Kruger, "Prophetic Imagery: On Metaphors and Similes in the Book of Hosea," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 14 (1988): 144.

[2] P. A. Kruger, "Prophetic Imagery: On Metaphors and Similes in the Book of Hosea," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 14 (1988): 144.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid. and Goren Eidevaal, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea*

In its simplest definition, a "metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms of another."[5] Numbering in the dozens in this prophetic work, these metaphors and similes explicitly or implicitly cast Yahweh variously as husband (1:2f), parent (11:1f), shepherd (4:16), carnivore (5:14, 13:7f), hunter (7:12), wound and infection (5:12) and Israel / Ephraim as harlot (1:2f), son (11:1-4), herd (13:5-6), heifer (10:11), vine (10:1), bird (7:11), and cow (4:16), to name but a few. Some are developed in fine detail, as those of husband and wife

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11-14 (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur, 1996), 5.

[5] Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 15. With regard to the categories of metaphor and simile, Eidevaal regards simile as "a kind of metaphor" since it has similar linguistic characteristics, such as vehicle, topic, semantic fields, and cross-categorical boundaries. While the simile is distinguished grammatically by the use of "like" or "as" in its construction, Eidevaal sees no functional difference between the simile and metaphor. See Eidevaal, 31. On the contrary, Oestreich contends that, because of its construction, the simile creates a certain distance between the topic and the vehicle for critical reflection. See Bernhard Oestreich, *Metaphors and Similes for Yahweh in Hosea 14:2-9 (1-8): A Study of Hoseanic Pictorial Language* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), 228. In the passage to be considered, all metaphorical language for Yahweh is crafted by the explicit use of simile. Labuschagne argues that the use of simile with the comparative particle *k* is indicative of a deliberate choice to avoid the possibility of identifying Yahweh with the natural phenomena, animals, trees, or plant life which were used as vehicles in metaphorical religious language. Such identification was common with the deities of the Canaanite cults at the time of Hosea's writing. See C.J. Labuschagne, "Similes in the Book of Hosea" in Kruger, 149.

or parent and son, while others are strung together "as if beads," one image after another (cf. 5:12 - 6:1).[6] Although developed in various ways, metaphor theory fundamentally explores aspects of the interaction between the two thoughts in a metaphorical expression. That thought which is the underlying idea of the text has been most simply termed the *tenor* or *topic*, while the thought expressed in figurative speech has been termed the *vehicle*. In addition, each of these thoughts is part of a *semantic field* which is generally understood as that area of life, experience, or thought from which the *topic* (*tenor*) and *vehicle* are drawn. In the composition of this prophetic book, Hosea and/or his redactors employ *vehicles* like those noted above from a range of *semantic fields* including the anthropomorphic, anthropopathic, theriomorphic, and physiomorphic.[7]

The Function of Metaphor as Religious Language

The use of metaphor and simile as religious language is often a "strategy of desperation" in attempting to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar or in yearning to give voice to that which is essentially beyond words. However, such literary forms also function to promote new insights and to disclose unexpected aspects of the God-world relationship. Playing in the arena of the imagination, metaphor and simile, when fresh rather than well-worn, are dynamic and destabilizing. They often disorient the audience and demonstrate the inadequacy of

[6] Kruger, 143-144.

[7] Eva Kittay, *Metaphor: Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 25-44; Ivor Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90-108; and Gary Allen Long, "Dead or Alive? Literality and God Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (Summer 1994): 521.

speech and the creativity of revelation about divine and human mystery.[8] As powerful devices of discourse, metaphors have the capacity, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, "to project and reveal a world."[9] In addition, the use of a vast variety of metaphors helps to relativize images and provide a diversity of perspectives. In this way, no one particular image gains an ascendancy of value or priority of importance over others, illustrating the Nietzschean perspectival insight, "Stil verbessern, heisst den Gedanken verbessern."[10] While often difficult to interpret, especially in the interaction of religious tradition, ancient culture, historicity and levels of meaning, the use of metaphorical language has the power to stimulate thought, emotion, and response in one's audience by a means which literal language does not possess. Ultimately, in the expanse of prophetic time and place, those who are wise must understand these things and those who are discerning must know them, or be fated to stumble in these winding ways.

Historical and Textual Background

Despite the literary genius of the book of Hosea, historical details regarding its author and its historical referents are sketchy. What is gleaned of the prophet himself and of his own historical epoch is found principally in the superscription of the work and in various geographical and political references. The superscription reveals him as Hosea ben-Beeri, living in the eighth century B.C.E. His own references to Gilgal, Bethel, and Samaria indicate that his prophetic

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[8] Sallie Mc Fague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 22-40 and Long, 522.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* [1975] trans. by R. Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 93.

[10] Kruger, 143.

ministry was situated in the Northern Kingdom between the years of 760 - 723 B.C.E. before its fall to Assyria.[11] While recorded prophetic callings often involve direct address to the prophet, Yahweh's initiatory revelation to Hosea is transmitted in third person language by an "unknown voice." This unnamed speaker is obviously aware of the event "When the Lord first spoke through Hosea" and "to Hosea" (1:2) as well as of the enigmatic and troubling command to "take to yourself a wife of harlotry." This marriage to Gomer assumes the character of prophecy in itself and begins the course of judgement which is brought to implicit fulfillment toward the conclusion of the work.[12]

Although attempts to historicize specific events in the book have yielded a variety of plausible conjectures,[13] the available evidence seems, in one commentator's estimation, to be "masterfully obscure." While anonymous allusions, references to Assyria and Egypt, and cross-texting of biblical and extrabiblical sources provide some parameters for speculation, pinpointing specific historical occasions is a "frustrating task."[14] Whether this ambiguity is the result of a stylistic choice of the prophet, a function of damaged texts, or the linguistic peculiarities of Northern Kingdom dialects, historical precision is patently elusive.[15] It has been suggested in

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[11] Elizabeth Atchemeier, *New International Biblical Commentary: Minor Prophets I* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 4.

[12] Ibid., 5-6.

[13] Eidevaal, 13-15.

[14] Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 35.

[15] Kruger, 147; Andersen and Freedman, 35, 61.

fact that such attempts at historicizing may be a violation of the intent of the prophet himself:

> Hosea kleidet seine Geschichtsbetrachtung in verschiedene Bilder. Die Ausdeutung dieser Bilder ist ein besonderes Problem. Sie ziegen die Eingenart der hoseanischen Geschichtsbetrachtung. Man wird ihnen auf keinen Fall gerecht, wenn man sie vorschnell historisiert.[16]

Therefore, the historical value of this prophetic book may lie more in its religious and metaphorical perspectives on political and cultural entanglements than its capacity to yield any information about actual historical events.

The prophetic text may be divided into two broad sections. Chapters 1 through 3, introduce the spousal metaphor between Yahweh/Hosea and Israel/Gomer and combine narrative and poetic elements. Chapters 4 through 14, conversely, contain fewer prose elements and more poetic constructions. This difference is consistent with the function of this portion of Hosea as prophetic utterance or oracular discourse, which, though recognizable from its content, lacks typical (e.g. "Thus says...") prophetic introductions and conclusions.[17] These textual peculiarities convey the sense that Hosea and, by extension, his audience are privy to the "actual deliberations of Yahweh in divine council"[18] through the mode of "direct divine discourse."[19] The predominant use of the first person pronoun for Yahweh and of shifting pronouns for

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[16] J. Vollmer, "Geschichtliche Ruckblicke und Motive in der Prophetie des Amos, Hosea und Jesaja," in Kruger, 147-148.

[17] Atchemeier, 8; Andersen and Freedman, 44, 61; Eidevaal, 5.

[18] Andersen and Freedman, 44.

[19] Eidevaal, 5.

Israel/Ephraim accentuates the theological dimension of the oracles. This theological revelation, furthermore, is distinguished by "turbulent vacillations"[20] of divine pathos reflected in Yahweh's impassioned utterances. The circumstances which provoke such torment in Yahweh and which are voiced in Hosea's unparalleled literary style are both cultic and political in nature. The chosen people of Yahweh are given to idolatry and apostasy, both in the worship of the false gods of Baalic cults (11:2) and graven images (4:12-13), as well as of military might and political alliances (12:1). In contrast, Yahweh passionately challenges them to devote themselves to steadfast love and knowledge of God (6:6).

Theological Ramifications: The Goal of this Present Study

In view of this opportunity to enter into the interiority of the Divine, it is the aim of this paper to explore the theological ramifications of the book of the prophet Hosea by considering the metaphorical imagery in Chapter 14: 1-9. This is done with intratextual and intertextual comparison of its metaphorical language, as well as in dialogue with other commentators on this passage. As is well documented, a good deal of time, energy, and scholarship has been devoted to the imagery found in the first three chapters of the book. These efforts have produced significant insights and commanded considerable attention. However, this narrowing of focus has disregarded the very purpose and function of the use of metaphor as religious language. In fixating upon the spousal/harlotry imagery as the focal image and controlling paradigm of the book of Hosea, many commentators have allowed this one metaphor to overshadow the profusion of other metaphors in the next eleven chapters which relativize its dominance. Such

[20] James Mays, "Hosea" *The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 9 and Andersen and Freedman, 44.

fixation is tantamount to idolatry itself, as the spousal/harlotry image is given priority, while others are relegated to being insignificant or only marginally revelatory. In an adaptation of Nietzschean perspectivalism, the more ways in which one views a Subject, the fuller, richer, deeper, and truer the understanding will be of the Subject of one's investigation.

The decision to make the final chapter of Hosea the focus of these considerations is the belief that, despite the conflict of emotions within the Divine heart evident throughout the text, it is the resolution of unconditional love and compassion which most reveals the nature of God and the power of God (cf. 1 John 4:8). Regardless of the mental and emotional contradictions which arise during any personal conflict, whether divine or human, it is the *ultimate decision* which most clearly reveals one's priorities, one's nature, and even one's grace. This remains true despite the suffering, destruction, and judgement which human beings bring upon themselves by their own choices. This remains valid despite the anger and torment which God suffers in humanity's exercise of free will.

The God who acts in history is the God who moves all things to fullness of life-beyond-death through unconditional love and compassion. Furthermore, this God does so *despite* and, more profoundly, *because of* the frailty and powerlessness of God's beloved humanity. Certainly this interpretation of Divine agency is disputable on many fronts, particularly from the Hebrew notion of God's action in history. However, one clue to the mystery of the triumph of Divine love, life, and compassion over retribution, anger, and destruction is to be found in the turning point of God's own internal conflict in Hosea 11. Despite Yahweh's enduring anguish, the Divine is moved to say:

> My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender.
>
> I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim;

for I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (11:8-9)

As incomprehensible and irreconcilable as it may seem in the view of human frailty and failing, this God insists "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14), often beyond human capacity to rationalize and to comprehend.

Intratextual and Intertextual Background

This study proposes, therefore, that, against the backdrop of overwhelming Divine anger and condemnation, Chapter 14: 1-9 may be characterized as the final of three specific movements of "relent" in the heart of Yahweh. It represents the decisive moment when the relentless barrage of threats and denunciations gives way to the possibility of healing and hope, through the unconditional love of God. The first of these movements occurs in chapter 2:14-23 when Yahweh, cast as husband to Israel as promiscuous wife, relents from violent pledges of punishment to the allurement and tenderness of renewed courtship and covenant. However, the respite is short-lived. After a command in Chapter 3 to Hosea to be reconciled to his own wife in *imitatio Dei*, the oracles of chapters 4 through 10 resume the reproaches of Yahweh toward Israel/Ephraim through the voice of God and of the prophet. These reproaches, for the most part, burst forth from the anguished interiority of Yahweh, who is torn with righteous anger, passionate desire, just judgement, wrenching interrogation, and inevitable alienation concerning the beloved of God's heart.

As previously noted, throughout these chapters, Yahweh is metaphorically characterized as a moth and as dry rot (5:12), as lion (5:14), as fowler (7:12), and, implicitly and explicitly, as destruction (10:2). In turn, Israel/Ephraim is referred to as sickened and wounded (5:13), as dissipating dew (6:4), as cake not turned (7:8), as useless vessel (8:8), as grapes in the wilderness

and first fruits (9:10), and as luxuriant vine, surrounded by a judgement of poisonous weeds (10: 1, 4). Yet, in the midst of this desolation, threat, and condemnation (10:14-15), the imagination of God is apparently seized by memories of the earliest days of relationship with Israel/Ephraim, but now in parental imagery (11: 1-9) rather than spousal. Perhaps in the face of imminent destruction, Yahweh has begun to remember the days of Israel/Ephraim's youth, and, in doing so, to reconsider his capacity to remain faithful to the covenant in the midst of threats and temptations on every side. Perhaps they are seen by Yahweh at this moment less as free and agentic adults and more as children, possessed and swayed by their desires and fears. Although once, "When Ephraim spoke, men trembled" (13:1), the impact of surrounding cults and military threats has reduced him to his former stature as "the fewest of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7), the chosen one of the covenant upon whom God's heart is set. In seeing them in this way, Yahweh is drawn to remember the exodus-wilderness days of relationship with the child whom the Divine Parent carried, healed, nurtured, fed, and taught to walk in the ways of Divine freedom, "leading them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love" (11:4). And once again, Yahweh relents (11:8-9). Though "They shall go after the Lord" who will "roar like a lion," Israel/Ephraim "shall come trembling" from Egypt and Assyria, and Yahweh "will return them to their homes, says the Lord" (11:10-11).

Nevertheless, chapters 12 and 13 return to the recounting of Israel/Ephraim's iniquity, particularly in his reliance upon his own strength (12:8) and in idols made by human hands (13:2). It is interesting to note that the proposal above regarding Yahweh's reminiscence of the earliest days of covenant relationship gains support here in the discussion of Jacob's youth (12:3f). In addition, the vision of a return to dwelling in tents (12:9) and the recollection of the sending of prophets, particularly that one who led them from the land of Egypt (12:13) is

suggestive of the exodus-wilderness experience. Chapter 13 enters into a specific discussion of the exodus-wilderness experience in juxtaposition to Israel/Ephraim's involvement with Baalic cults (13: 1-6). In grief over having been forgotten by those who had received such care, Yahweh reveals the depth of Divine anger through intense and vivid theriomorphic language - as a lion and a leopard lurking in wait, as a bear robbed of her cubs, tearing and devouring like a wild beast (13: 7-8). The prophecies of doom in chapters 4-12 "reach a crescendo"[21] of inevitable destruction, piling utterance upon utterance of annihilation, attack, loss of rulers, abandonment, drought, and war. In an apparent willingness to endure the total destruction of the nation, Yahweh envisions Ephraim as an "unwise son" unwilling to be birthed (13:13), as a reed which withers in the presence of God (13:15), and as bereft of water and wealth (13:15). Ultimately, since "they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed to pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open" (13:16), Samaria is conceivably denied the possibility of a future, as their hope for posterity is destroyed. And yet, in the face of these prophecies of destruction which historically reach fulfillment in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria, Israel/Ephraim hears, "Return...."

Divine Resolution and Reconciliation: Metaphors of Restoration: Hosea 14:1-9

The general structure of Hosea 14: 1-9 is threefold: an opening summons to return (1-3), a divine utterance of resolution and restoration (4-8), and a concluding admonition in the wisdom tradition (9). At the outset, two questions may be asked. The first question involves whether this passage is part of the original prophecy of Hosea or whether it was appended by a later redactor.

[21] Douglas K. Stuart, "Hosea 13-14: Promise of Destruction and Restoration," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36 (Fall 1993): 33.

On the first point, the position of this paper is clear and is consonant with that of other commentators.[22] As articulated above, Hosea 14 fits the pattern of renunciation and relent within Yahweh which is exemplified from the outset of the text. The elements of this passage are finely crafted and reflect the recurrent themes of the prophecy as a whole. Furthermore, the retrieval and reversal in this conclusion of many of the metaphors which have been used from the beginning of the text renders it most plausible to ascribe this passage to Hosea himself.

The second question involves the issue of whose voice is being heard throughout the threefold structure of this passage. As has been noted, the shifting of pronouns and perspectives here, as throughout the book, makes possible different suppositions about speakers and referents. Moreover, a comparison between this passage and Hosea 6: 1-6 supports these different possibilities. Perhaps the most logical conjecture concerning the opening voice in this passage is to attribute this summons and the supplication it contains to the prophet Hosea himself. Confronted with both the assurance of the people's destruction (13: 3-16) *and* the assurance of Yahweh's unconditional love and acceptance (14: 4-8), Hosea entreats Israel to return with an implicit assurance that *this* turning will not be rejected (cf. 6:5 - 7:16). This certainty is grounded in the divine utterance which follows the opening sequence, placed here as if to answer his hearers' implicit questions, "How can you assure us that we shall be received? Why should this turning be different?" Not only does the divine utterance provide this unequivocal assurance

[22] Gerald Morris, *Prophecy, Poetry, and Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1996), 115-116; A.A. Macintosh, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Hosea*. The International Critical Commentary, ed. J.A. Emerton, C.E.B. Cranfield, and G.N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1997), 558-559.

(14:4), but it also offers multiple rich and sensual metaphors of the envisioned future restoration of the remnant which returns (14:5-7).

An alternate possibility regarding the speaker of this summons and supplication is suggested by a comparison of these verses with 6:1-4. Following the oracles of destruction in 5:1-14, Yahweh vows to withdraw and "return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress they seek me, *saying*, 'Come'..." (RSV, 5:15). While other translations do not include the explicit "*saying*" and use instead a colon - quotation combination, one presumed speaker of the summons in 6:1-4 is Yahweh's own self. In these verses, Yahweh proposes what the people of Ephraim/Judah will say *in summoning one another* to return. There is a presumption on the part of the people in this hypothetical summons that Yahweh will heal what was torn, bind up what was stricken, revive and renew them as they "press on to know the Lord" (6:3). But Yahweh's perception of the people's desire as expressed in this summons indicates that they are not sufficiently aware of the grievous nature of their infidelity. There is no specific admission of sinfulness or guilt, beyond the use of the word "return" (*sub*). Its tone is presumptuous of the compassionate and forgiving nature of Yahweh, which is in conflict throughout the text. Therefore, Yahweh's response to this self-constructed summons is rejection. The steadfast love and knowledge of God which is desired by Yahweh is lacking or short-lived in this people and dissipates as a morning cloud or early dew (6:4). Their turning is not acceptable and their destruction proceeds.

Therefore, in the light of this passage, it is conceivable that the summons of 14:1-3 is also voiced by Yahweh, but now founded on the *pre-condition* of Yahweh's own resolution to "love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (14:4), rather than on any merit of their own. It is this pre-condition of Yahweh's love and healing which assures that this turning will be

accepted and that restoration will proceed after destruction. Finally, the intrusion of an unnamed voice at different points within the text (cf. 1:2, 12:6) might suggest a third possible speaker of these verses, as well as of 6:1-3, which have a cultic quality to them (cf. 10:12, 12:6). Nevertheless, there is no internal evidence which compels ascribing these verses to either Yahweh or to an unnamed speaker, and, as noted with regard to the authenticity of this passage, its style and internal consistency make attribution to Hosea himself the most reasonable position.

There seems to be little doubt that the speaker of verses 4-8 is Yahweh's own self, either in the mode of direct divine discourse or through the prophet, despite the characteristic absence of "Thus says..." here as elsewhere. The origin of the final verse of this passage and of the book as a whole is another issue. The majority of commentators ascribe this verse to a later redactor.[23] However, the influence of the wisdom tradition on other prophetic books and connections with that tradition in the text itself [24] leave open the possibility, in the final analysis, of attributing this verse to Hosea himself.

Analysis

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,

for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

[23] Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 382; Page E. Kelley, "The Holy One in the Midst of Israel: Redeeming Love (Hosea 11-14)," *Review and Expositor* 72 (Fall 1975), 472; and Atchemeier, 11; *contra* H.W. Wolff, *A Commentary on the Book of Hosea* [1961, 1965] trans. by G. Stansell (Hermenia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 239.

[24] Oestreich, 228.

Addressed to the nation Israel by means of the singular pronoun *you*, the summons to "return" is characteristic not only of the book of the prophet Hosea, but also of the prophetic genre in general. Based on the Hebrew word *sub*, the term is used more than twenty times in various forms and contexts by Hosea, most frequently to express Israel/Ephraim's *turning toward* or *turning from* Yahweh, his God (e.g. 2:7, 3:5, 5:4, 6:1, 7:10, 11:5). Conversely, it is also used to signify their turning toward the false security of Egypt and Assyria (8:13, 9:3, 11:5) or toward false gods (e.g. 3:1, 7:16), both considered to be metaphors of idolatry and apostasy. As will be seen in the discussion of 14:4, this root may refer to the actions of Yahweh as well, as in 5:15 to describe Yahweh's withdrawal until the people acknowledge their guilt and in 11:11, when Yahweh promises to return the people to their homes after they forsake their allegiance to Egypt and Assyria. Here, Israel is urged to take the first step away from these idolatrous alliances and toward "*your* God."

The declaration that Israel has "stumbled" because of "iniquity" is a recapitulation of similar accusations made by the prophet in previous chapters (5:5). While most translations retain the metaphorical language of "stumbling," the New International Version (NIV) adopts the less imagistic rendering "your sins have been your downfall." Echoed in the prophecies of Isaiah (3:8) and Jeremiah (18:15), the vehicle of "stumbling" communicates a lack of strength which incapacitates and topples those who are previously able.[25] In addition to the general references to Israel/Ephraim, Hosea singles out both priest (4:4-5) and prophet (4:5) as those in particular who have stumbled and have failed to lead the people rightly. Later he issues a warning to transgressors that they shall do likewise if they do not heed and understand (14:9).

[25] Macintosh, 560.

Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him,

"Take away all iniquity; accept that which is good

and we will render the fruit of our lips."

Following upon his summons, the prophet aids the fallen Israel, now addressed as *you* in the plural, in formulating the petitions with which they will approach the Lord. This directive is expressed in a series of imperatives: *take*, *return*, *say*, *take*, and *accept*. The unequivocal tone of these instructions conveys the sense that Israel no longer can depend on its own resources or on its inadequate knowledge of God and, having stumbled, must be led step by step in its return. The request to "take away all iniquity" is a technical term which implies that the one who forgives bears the penalty of the sin.[26] It is God who is being asked to bear the burden of their failings, and, perhaps in doing so, to assist their turning back. The summons to prayer has a cultic and sacrificial character in its language of offering ("take") and of receiving ("accept"). The "fruit of [Israel's] lips" serves as a metaphor for the usual sacrifice of calves or bulls, which the King James Version makes more explicit ("we will render the calves of our lips'). In anticipation of their rendering, Israel asks God to "accept that which is good" ("receive us graciously" [KJV]) in the hope that the words which they bring might be an acceptable sacrifice of praise and contrition. Though in the past, Israel/Ephraim has spurned what is good (8:3) and has uttered empty words (10:4), there is hope these actions might be transformed to serve as first fruits, full of the steadfast love and knowledge of God (6:6) which Yahweh desires.

[26] Philip King, "Hosea's Message of Hope," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (July 1982): 94.

"Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses;

and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands.

In thee the orphan finds mercy."

However, the fruit of their lips is not expressed in pledges of good deeds or of positive actions. Israel's fruit is that of self-denial, a litany of renunciation of their former idolatry and apostasy. If viewed from a historical perspective, the assertions that "Assyria (rendered "Asshur" in Young's Literal Translation [YLT]) shall not save us" and that "we will not ride horses" are at this juncture literally true. However, if taken as simply an historical declaration, this litany no longer serves as the sacrificial sin offering implied in the summons to supplication. It becomes simply an expression of Israel's present reality. It is more plausible, therefore, to regard Assyria, horses, and "the works of our hands" (cf. 8:5, 6) in a symbolic fashion, as vehicles which carry the sense of idolatry and apostasy which Israel now will renounce. For until this point, it is Assyria to whom Israel/Ephraim has turned for political protection (8:9-10), for healing (5:13), for leadership (11:5), and for strength (7:9-11). Failing to attain this security through military alliance, they are left in the condition of suffering, vulnerability, weakness, and desolation. They did not understand Yahweh's warning (1:7) that neither war nor horses nor horsemen would save them, but only the Lord their God.

It is this state of affairs which is characterized in the metaphor of the orphan, the "fatherless" one (KJV, NIV, YLT) seeking mercy. The imagery of the orphan retrieves several noteworthy and expressive metaphors from earlier chapters. It calls to mind the children of Gomer whom Yahweh named Loruhamah ("Not Pitied") and Loammi ("Not My People") and to whom Yahweh said "I am not your God" (1:6, 8). Its significance is deepened by Yahweh's prior threat to "drive them out of my house...(and) love them no more" (9:15). Most clearly, it stands in

blatant contradiction to Yahweh's poignant profession, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1f). Forsaken and wounded, this child returns again, seeking the compassion and mercy he once knew (11:3, 4). While some commentators place the orphan imagery in the semantic field of a kingship metaphor,[27] the argument is not compelling, considering the familial and parental vehicles which are clearly developed in the text.

I will heal their faithlessness;

I will love them freely,

for my anger has turned from them.

In view of all the anguish and vacillation that the reader has witnessed throughout the first thirteen chapters of Hosea's revelation, this unequivocal declaration of Yahweh seems almost incredible. The anguish and vacillation are conspicuously absent; the pronouncement is serene and resolute. Were it not for the actual devastation which this people had already suffered, this profession of Yahweh could seem like a revocation of impending doom. However, several peculiarities of this verse must be considered, especially in relation to the summons and the supplication which precede it. The first aspect of this verse that must be noted is that it is *not* a *response* to the prayer which precedes it. Yahweh refers to Israel in the third person "*them*." This conveys the impression that Yahweh is speaking to someone *about* Israel, rather than *to* Israel. The identity of the hearer is undisclosed. It may be the prophet or the reader to whom Yahweh directs this marvelous revelation. One might even imagine that it is a response to an unrecorded question, as suggested earlier in this paper. In view of the dismal failure of Israel to

[27] Oestreich, 229.

make choices in keeping with their covenant relationship and the repeated rejection by Yahweh of their feeble attempts, why should this prayer make any difference? What hope had Israel of being received? What has Israel to offer but its brokenness and supplication as the fruit of their lips?

The answer is that Israel, in truth, has only itself to offer, only its suffering and need. It is not any power or prayer on Israel's part which effects this declaration by Yahweh. It is the resolution and the reconciliation within Yahweh's own being which makes possible Israel's restoration, a resolution foreshadowed in the recoiling of the Divine heart and the stirring of Divine compassion in 11:8. The only choice within the power of Israel/ Ephraim is the decision to return. Based in Yahweh's self-assertion that "I am God not man, the Holy One in your midst," God refuses to execute anger or cause destruction (11:8, 9). This is Yahweh's revelation of the definitive truth of the Divine Self, whose Being is unconditional love and compassion unmitigated by the iniquity of human beings. If this proposal leaves unanswered the question of the action of God in salvation history, perhaps the reader finds her/himself in the very state of wonder and awe of their religious ancestors before the mystery of Yahweh's unbounded love in the face of their own iniquity.

This declaration of Yahweh begins the reversal of the metaphors of devastation and denunciation which represented the rupture between Yahweh and Israel throughout Hosea's prophecy. Yahweh's healing attends to the sickness and woundedness of Israel/Judah/Ephraim which could not be cured by their turning to Assyria and Egypt (5:13). Yahweh's healing is the antithesis of the dry rot (5:12), the rending (5:14), the tearing and devouring (13:8) which Yahweh envisioned inflicting upon the chosen people. Yahweh is disclosing the healing which

was hidden from Ephraim when he was a child (1:3) and affirming Israel's earlier presumption that "he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us" (6:1). Furthermore, Yahweh promises not only to heal them of their woundedness, but also to heal their faithlessness (RSV), their backsliding (KJV, YLT), their waywardness (NIV). Yahweh will facilitate their return and restoration by "tak(ing) away all iniquity" (14:2) and bearing the burden of their guilt.

And all this Yahweh will do through the freely-given gift of love and willingness to turn (*sub*) from anger. Once again, the language is that of a ritual sacrifice; Yahweh's love is a free-will offering to Israel with no demands in return. This is the love with which Yahweh desired to betroth Israel (2:19), the steadfast love which existed even though the people "love raisin cakes" instead (3:1). In this profession of love and relinquishment of anger, Yahweh reverses the rejection "I will love them no more" (9:16) and reaffirms the love for the child Israel (11:1). Though Yahweh's "anger burned against them" (8:5), Yahweh first decides not to execute that anger (11:9), and now to turn it from them completely - indeed, to relent. In this unambiguous and astonishing declaration, Yahweh implicitly asks of Israel what Israel is encouraged to ask of God - "accept that which is good and *I*, *Yahweh*, will render the fruit of *my* lips" (cf. 14:2), this promise of salvation and restoration.

I will be as the dew to Israel;

he shall blossom as the lily,

he shall strike root as the poplar;

his shoots shall spread out;

his beauty shall be like the olive,

and his fragrance like Lebanon.

The decision to treat of verses 6 and 7 together is based upon their intratextual

interdependence and their common intertextual referents. In these verses, Hosea continues to retrieve and recraft those metaphors which he has previously employed throughout his prophecy. His mastery of wordplay and literary ingenuity enable him to interweave and recontextualize these metaphors as powerfully in this passage as throughout his work.

The metaphor of *dew* has both intra- and intertextual referents. Within the prophecy, Hosea, in the words of Yahweh, has compared Israel's love (6:4) and, ultimately, Israel's very existence (13:3) to the "dew which goes away early." The vehicle here suggests transience and indecisiveness, and bears no relation to the critical nature of dew in sustaining and promoting growth in the aridity of the Middle Eastern climate. In assigning and recontextualizing the metaphor of dew to Yahweh (cf. Is 26:19, Micah 5:7), however, Hosea reclaims the fortuitous and life-giving nature of dew which waters the earth and promotes new life. It functions metaphorically as a sign of God's promise of deliverance (Judges 6:36-40). In contrast to coming in judgement, Yahweh's mercy comes like the dew - silently in the dark of night, heaviest in the valleys and low places, and essential for life and growth.[28] The metaphor of dew also suggests the exodus-wilderness experience of Yahweh and Israel, an image which Hosea recalls repeatedly throughout his prophecy (e.g. 2:14; 11:1,4; 13:4-6). In conjunction with the parental metaphor of feeding in chapter 11, the dew recalls the providence of Yahweh in providing manna during Israel's sojourn in the desert (Exodus 16:13-15) which miraculously sustained and nourished them.

The effects of Yahweh's life-giving and life-sustaining providence are described in metaphors of lush and vibrant plant life. Commentators point out the Eden imagery suggested

[28] Atchemeier, 4; Kelley, 471.

by these metaphors,[29] their relationship to the love language in the Song of Songs of the wisdom tradition,[30] and their implicit rebuff to Baalistic fertility cults as a source of life and fecundity.[31] The specific use of the singular pronoun "he" in reference to Israel grounds the metaphor of flourishing in the renewed covenant relationship with Yahweh, which is then expressed in the sensual language of love. The magnitude of Israel's blossoming is illuminated when seen in the light of the imagery of the Song of Songs (e.g. 1:14, 2:13, 6:11, 7:12), as is the significance of the image of the lily which is found no less than seven times in the Song of Songs as a metaphor of beauty (e.g. 2:1,2; 5:13). The blossoming metaphor is also used as a sign of redemption in the book of the prophet Isaiah in conjunction with the spreading forth of shoots (27:6, 35:1, 61:11). The literal language of the poplar once associated with idol worship in Hosea (4:13) and the metaphor of the root which was once dried up (9:16) is redeemed as an image of groundedness and sturdiness (cf. "Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots" [NIV], "he will cast forth his roots as Lebanon" [KJV, YLT]).

The metaphor of the olive tree echoes descriptions of the promised land in the book of Deuteronomy (cf. 8:8, 28:40) and suggests a state of divine beneficence. In its association with oil, it recalls and redeems the actions of Gomer, who sought the grain, the wine, and the oil from her lovers, rather than from Yahweh who vowed to take them back (2:5-9). Now the oil (and, as will be seen, the grain and the wine as well) will be provided in Israel's restoration. The

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[29] Oestreich, 229.

[30] Kelley, 471.

[31] Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 119.

metaphor of fragrance returns to the Song of Songs for its significance (1:12, 2:13, 4:10, 5:13, 7:13), as does the image of Lebanon (4:11, 5:15, 7:4), with connotations of the fragrance and sturdiness of its cedars (cf. also Psalm 92, Isaiah 2:13, Jeremiah 22:23, Amos 2:9, and Zechariah 11:1). The image of Lebanon also functions as a metaphor of restoration in Isaiah (35:2, 60:13).

They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow,

they shall flourish as a garden;

they shall blossom as the vine,

their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Several images from verses 5 and 6 recur in the continuing profusion of metaphors for Israel's restoration. There is, however, a shift in third person pronoun from singular to plural in this verse, which may signal a transition from the restoration of the *nation* to that more specifically of its *inhabitants*. This shift produces a conflict in translation and, thus, interpretation. As seen in the RSV translation above, Yahweh proclaims that "they shall return and dwell beneath *my* shadow," while the KJV, YLT, and NIV translations render it as "*his* shadow." The question here is one of reference. Will those who return dwell under *Yahweh's* shadow (cf. 14: 8) or under *Israel's* shadow, who has "struck root as the poplar?" Since the reference falls between the two tree metaphors, the issue of interpretation has led some commentators to emend the text to *my* to make its reference to Yahweh, who is the speaker, more explicit. Conversely, others maintain that the pronominal reference of *his* is to Israel and needs no emendation.[32] Eidevaal contends that the issue of interpretation need not be resolved; the two

[32] Macintosh, 573.

may be seen as complementary. In fact, the ambiguity may have been a deliberate decision on the part of the prophet.[33]

There is also a discrepancy in translation in the second line of this verse. The various translations are as follows:

they shall flourish as a garden (RSV)

they shall revive as the corn (KJV, YLT)

he will flourish like the grain (NIV)

and again, "Those who dwell in his shadow shall again revive the growth of corn."[34]

The predominant interpretation of those who accept the translation as grain or corn refers to the resettling of the people on their own land with its subsequent cultivation.[35] Others accept the emendation of the RSV as an extension of the paradisiacal or Eden imagery of abundance and growth.[36] While both the garden (Genesis 2:8, Song of Songs 4:12, Ezekiel 36:35, Isaiah 58:11, Jeremiah 31:12) and the grain (Deuteronomy 7:13, 11:14, Jeremiah 31:12) interpretations could find intertextual support which is consistent with other Hoseanic themes, it is interesting to consider the metaphor of the grain in conjunction with the (olive) oil (14:6) and the wine (14:7d) as repeatedly used in Hosea 1 and 2. As noted above, the grain, the wine, and the oil were the commodities which precipitated Gomer/Israel's choice to pursue the idols of Baal instead of fidelity to Yahweh (1:5-9). In response, Yahweh swore to take these goods away as punishment

[33] Eidevaal, 217.

[34] Macintosh, 573.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Atchemeier, 110.

for Gomer/Israel's infidelity. Therefore, in the context of retrieval and reversal which has been evident in this last chapter, it is conceivable that the restoration of the grain, the wine, and the oil is symbolic of Israel's restoration and of the blessings they will receive for their anticipated fidelity to the covenant relationship (cf. Deuteronomy 7:13, 11:14; Jeremiah 31:12). This is also suggested in Yahweh's declaration that "the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, and I will sow him for myself in the land" (2:22f). Furthermore, in a foreshadowing of restoration and reconciliation, Yahweh's declaration includes the return of pity to Loruhamah and the claiming of Loammi as "my people" who will once again say, "You are my God."

The symbolism throughout the Scriptures of the vine as a sign of the flourishing, fruitfulness and vitality of Israel is well established. The significance of this metaphor in chapter 14, therefore, can best be seen in the reversal of its use in comparison with earlier references in Hosea. In 2:1, Yahweh threatens to "lay waste her vines," and in 10:1 refers to Israel as a "luxuriant vine" who nonetheless pursued idolatry, "the more his fruit increased." Like Gomer/Israel at the outset, Israel seems to be unaware again of the source of his sustenance and growth. The use of the metaphor of the vine for Israel's restoration, therefore, may once again be seen in relation to the opening metaphor of this prophetic book. One will note that, in Yahweh's alluring the beloved into the wilderness, the promise is made that "From there I will give her her vineyards" (2:15), having laid waste to them when they were associated with Baal. A restoration of the covenant, therefore, will result in Israel's flourishing and vitality once again, but this time in knowledge of and in right relationship with the God of such providence.

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?

It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress,

from me comes your fruit.

From speaking *about* Israel in the last several verses, the perspective of Yahweh now shifts to speaking to - or possibly with - Israel, who here is addressed as Ephraim. The change in address has caused less discussion among commentators than has the translation and interpretation of the first line as a unit. Is this a "climactic, exuberant cry" from Yahweh which affirms Divine love, healing, and providence?[37] Or perhaps it is a final appeal from Yahweh and a final act of Ephraim to forsake all idols and commit to God alone.[38] A particularly intriguing argument is that the verse as a whole represents a "rapid dialogue in the climax of love" between Ephraim and Yahweh.[39] While this interpretation is disputed on the grounds that the implied speaker throughout this section has been Yahweh,[40] it is interesting to note how this dialogue plays out. The foundation of this position is the contention that Yahweh, in fact, never had anything to do with idols and that a linguistic indicator in the Hebrew calls into question whether Ephraim is integral to the phrase or not. Therefore, emendations of the text may read:

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? (RSV)

Ephraim shall say, What have I to do anymore with idols? (KJV)

O Ephraim, what to Me any more with idols? (YLT)

What more has Ephraim to do with idols? (NIV)

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[37] Birch, 120.

[38] Kelley, 472; Wolff, 233.

[39] Macintosh, 576-577.

[40] Eidevaal, 218.

Ephraim (will confess): What need have I anymore of idols? (ICC)

The dialogue then proceeds as follows:

Ephraim: *What have I to do with idols?*

Yahweh: It is I who answer and look after you.

Ephraim: *I am like an evergreen cypress.*

Yahweh: from me comes your fruit.

However, in order to legitimate this position, one also needs to postulate that the "evergreen cypress" ("fir tree": KJV, YLT; "pine tree": NIV; "juniper": ICC) is a metaphor for Ephraim, rather than for Yahweh.[41] The possibility of its referring to Yahweh is discounted because of the fact that the metaphor of a tree had not been applied to Yahweh anywhere else in the Bible. This absence is attributed to the danger of creating a confusion between the fertility cults of the goddesses Anat and Asherah and the worship of Yahweh.[42]

While a plausible case can be made for this position, it seems more reasonable to follow the intratextual clues which point to Yahweh as the speaker of these words. As to the question of what Yahweh had to do with idols, it is obvious that, at the very least, Yahweh frequently raged against the political and cultic idol worship in which Ephraim persistently engaged (cf. 4:17; 5:13; 7:11; 8:4,9; 9:3; 11:2; 12:1; 13:2). With the resolution of the conflict in Yahweh's own heart, perhaps Ephraim's idol worship no longer consumed the Divine pathos. Perhaps enough Divine anger had been poured out in the polemics against Ephraim's infidelity. Perhaps the point had been made in the destruction and desolation which Ephraim had suffered and now the focus of Divine love and passion must be directed toward assuring Ephraim that "It is I who answer

[41] Macintosh, 577.

and look after you." The verb "answer" recalls the wilderness experience of Yahweh and the beloved, a wilderness experience which Ephraim/Israel was now living. All the "answers" promised in the wilderness in Chapter 2 are received in this final chapter of Hosea's prophecy. Resounding with the cries of a vanquished people, the heavens receive their answer in Yahweh's promise of unconditional love and healing. The earth receives its answer in the presence of Divine dew which provides for its blossoming and thriving. The grain, the wine, and the oil receive their answer in the planting and rooting which permits them to grow and flow freely again. And Jezreel, symbol of posterity, receives his answer in being sown and settled upon the land in prosperity and peace (cf. 2:21-23).

In view of such Divine fidelity, constancy, and love, the metaphor of the evergreen for Yahweh is entirely fitting.[43] While this "daring switch"[44] of tree imagery to Yahweh was both novel and risky, it certainly would not have been the first risk which Hosea had taken at Yahweh's command along this prophetic journey! The evergreen is truly symbolic of that which lives and thrives in the midst of aridity. It continually bears seed ("fruit") for its own propagation in every season, and, therefore, symbolizes fecundity. Metaphorically, it represents that which is constant and unchanging in the face of the vicissitudes of life. Furthermore, the metaphor of the evergreen undoubtedly points toward the Tree of Life of the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22, Ezekiel 47: 7, 12). In so doing, it draws together countless metaphors of Divine creativity, compassion, care, and commitment which have been used throughout this prophecy to exemplify the meaning of steadfast love and true knowledge of God. Dwelling in the shadow of such

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[42] Ibid., 580.

[43] Cf. Eidevaal, 217-219.

[44] Atchemeier, 111.

constancy and care, Israel/Ephraim can grow and thrive; his fruit (*pry*) is the metaphor for his own being, growth, and becoming (*prym*: Ephraim).

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things;
whoever is discerning, let him know them;
for the ways of the LORD are right,
and the upright walk in them,
but transgressors stumble in them.

There is some temptation, in considering this last verse, to take the route of least resistance and to postulate, with the majority of commentators, that this wisdom saying is a later addendum to a redacted work (cf. Ecclesiastes 2:14, Proverbs 4:11,12).[45] However, this would not do justice to the evidence of the influence of the wisdom tradition discussed above. This advice to the audience to "understand these things" may imply that this prophecy has become an object of study and a guide to life in the community. The addition of this passage in the process of redaction would then function as counsel to later generations. However, the admonitions to "understand" and to "know" and the consequence that those who do not will "stumble" echo Hoseanic themes and vocabulary (cf. 4: 1, 6, 11, 14; 6:3, 6; 14:1).[46] This at least allows for the possibility of attributing the saying to Hosea himself.

Perhaps the more important question, however, is the meaning of the saying for its audience. The association of a lack of knowledge and understanding with political and cultic idolatry

[45] See n. 23.

[46] Cf. Wolff, 239.

throughout Hosea clearly calls the reader to pursue knowledge of God and God's ways. But the ways of God are by no means clear in this prophecy. The spectrum of emotions and intentions which has been revealed in the interiority of Yahweh challenges the human capacity of discernment and understanding. Which ways of this God are right - the violence, the abuse, the threatening, and the destruction or the tenderness, the compassion, the relenting, and the steadfast love? Can these opposites exist in the Divine heart? Which hold sway in God's actions in human history? In which of these ways do the upright walk and over which of these ways do transgressors stumble?

If the prophetic word as the revelation of God is to be held true, then there is no question that seemingly irreconcilable emotions and intentions can and do coexist in the heart of God. In truth, a similar spectrum of responses exists within each human being, made in the image and likeness of God. There is no doubt that both human and divine beings have the capacity, therefore, for incomprehensible violence and unimaginable love. History witnesses to the results of this capacity in human actions. The mystery lies not in the issue of human agency but of God's. Furthermore, the loving and life-giving interventions of God into history disturb one less than the destructive and death-dealing potential of God. Does God precipitate and participate in the devastation of nations or persons as punishment for their deeds? Does God condone and contribute to violence and abuse against those who do not follow God's way? What are the ramifications of understanding this wisdom saying in a way which validates similar actions in human beings? What is the role of human freedom and choice? The prophecy of Hosea does not provide unequivocal answers to these questions, but it does provide signs that the wise and the discerning might grasp.

In the background for this analysis, it was suggested that Hosea 14:1-9 is the last of three

"relents" of Yahweh in the Divine anguish over Israel/Ephraim. Each follows a torrent of renunciations and threats by Yahweh in response to the idolatry and apostasy of God's people. It is important to note that, while examples of infidelity are, for the most part, either *present* or *past* actions of Israel/Ephraim (e.g.1:2; 4:1c-2, 12-19; 5:11,13; 7:2-11; 13:2), the threats and renunciations of Yahweh are generally expressed as *future* deeds (e.g. 1:4-7; 2: 6, 9-13; 4:6; 7:12; 8:14; 10:10; 13:7, 8, 15). Though Yahweh "has a controversy" (4:1), "rejects...priests" (4:6), "has withdrawn" (5:6), "declare(s) what is true" (5:9), has "hewn them *by the prophets* and slain them *by the words of my mouth*" (6:5), has "seen a horrible thing" (6:10), "remember(s) all their evil works" (7:2), and burns with Divine anger (8:5), the actual devastation poured out on Israel/Ephraim is never *directly* ascribed to Yahweh's own hand. On the contrary, this devastation comes from the hands of their enemies in response to Israel/Ephraim's political folly. In point of fact, Yahweh is the one who "gave the grain, the wine, and the oil, and lavished upon her silver and gold" (2:8), who "loves the people of Israel" (3:1), "desires steadfast love and...knowledge of God" (6:6), "trained and strengthened their arms" (7:15), "found Israel (in the wilderness)" (9:10), "spared (Ephraim's) fair neck" (10:11), who "loved...called...taught... healed...led...eased...bent...and fed them" (11:1-4), although Israel/Ephraim did not know that it was Yahweh. While Yahweh declared "you are not my people and I am not your God" (1:9), "I am not her husband" (2:2), and "I am like a moth...and dry rot" (5:12), Yahweh also proclaims "my heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender" (11:8), "I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst" (11:9), "I am the Lord your God...besides me there is no savior" (13:4), "It is I who answer and look after you" (14:8), and, most surprisingly, "I am an evergreen cypress, from me comes your fruit" (14:8).

The wise and the discerning who are confronted with these things have a daunting task. In the

end, the God of Hosea embraces within the mystery of the Divine self the full spectrum of emotion, intention, and potential for response, not unlike the human person made in the Divine image. In the presence of such mystery, the wise will understand that, despite the range and intensity of emotion and intention, Yahweh's ultimate choice of response is to heal deeply, to love freely, and to turn from anger. In the presence of such mystery, the discerning will know that, in the face of aridity, inconstancy, and destruction, Yahweh is dew and evergreen and fruitfulness. In the presence of such mystery, those who can believe these things will find the courage to walk upright and hopeful in God's presence, while those who find them too incredible to be true will stumble in their own despair. Surely the prophecy of Hosea will leave many questions yet unanswered. But in the Presence of such Mystery, the unanswered question is always more revelatory than the unquestioned answer.