

## **God's Justice and Mercy in Hosea 11:1-11: Relevance for Today**

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### **Introduction**

This is one of the most engaging and one of the most poignant passages in the book of Hosea. Hosea presents a tender vision of Yahweh choosing Israel for Himself not as a lord choosing his vassal, the relationship characteristic of covenant formulas of the ancient Near East at the time. Rather this is the relationship of adoption – a would-be father who takes up an abandoned child and shows him love, mercy and compassion. Even when Israel has not kept to the terms of the covenant, God skips over the retribution which, under normal circumstances, should be the consequences of Israel's failure. This passage therefore, is the most piercing in the prophecy of Hosea when it comes to the merging of God's mercy and his justice. It provides the meeting point of God's justice and mercy. Israel deserves to be punished for her infidelity, yet it hurts Yahweh to reject and punish Israel. God is the God of justice but he is also the God of mercy, mercy which transcends all notions of human justice and equity.

Hosea traces the life of Yahweh's son, Israel from his earliest youth into his future. The most excitement is generated in verses 8-9. The passage is clothed in the lively expressions of a lawsuit in the city gate. Hosea's theology is rooted in Israel's election tradition which portrays Israel as suffering and in distress awaiting Yahweh's word of mercy.

According to Douglas, the text can be divided into three as follows: God's calling and Israel's rebellion reported in the past tense (Hos 11:1-4); immediate threat for Israel for their continuous rebellion reported in the present and future (Hos 11:5-7); this is followed by Yahweh's refusal to destroy Israel and the promise of restoration expressed in eschatological future (Hos 11:8-11). Israel is presented as the son and Yahweh is presented as the father. Yahweh's words in Hosea 1:1 are best understood in the light of Exodus 4:22-23. Here Israel is described as Yahweh's first son. Exodus and Hosea link the adoption of Israel to sonship with the liberation from Egypt, the emphasis being placed on the very first encounter of Yahweh with his infant nation. I loved him makes a connection with Israel's election and the covenant with Yahweh (Deut 6:5; 7:8,13; 10:15; 23:6).

### **1. Exegetical Analysis of the Text**

Verse 1: This text takes the form of legal complaint made by parents against a rebellious child (Deut 21:18-21; Isa 1:12-20). There is capital punishment for a rebellious child in Deut 21. In Isaiah text hope is given to the rebellious child so that he can repent. Hosea underlines the sentence of judgment but then a surprise in Hos 11:8-11. The plaintiff, Yahweh addressing the defendant Israel, changes his mind and decides not to destroy him utterly but to restore him. Complaints yield to punishment and then to hope.

Yahweh says that he has summoned his child out of Egypt. *Qarah le* (to name) has the connotation of summon, election and adoption. It calls to mind divine guidance and protection. It calls to mind Israel's state of helplessness and Yahweh's liberating action. This is a Messianic Prophecy pointing remotely to that of the child Jesus after the death of Herod (Matt 2:15). It has its own meaning in Hos 11:1 in a context which does not concern itself with the Messiah. It has as well a *sensus plenior*, deriving from the double potential of specific wording chosen.

Verse 2: This verse is in the line of Israel's long history of repeated desertions of Yahweh to serve Baal. The variation of the persons and their pronouns is somewhat unpredictable, but by no means illogical or confusing. This change from singular to plural speaks of corporate view of Israel as a person. Israel is addressed as a nation but also as a person. Israel is portrayed as a child that is weaned. He is still a dependent person (Jer 1:6). In Exod 4:22 (cf. Jer 31:9,20) Israel is described as Yahweh's firstborn son. Israel is the one whom God knows intimately of all the families of the earth (Amos 3:2). As noted above, *Qarah le* means both to summon and to name. This refers to Israel's beginning and it calls to mind Israel's state of helplessness. Apostasy follows Yahweh's liberating call out of Egypt. The youthful Israel gave himself to the cult of Baal. Offerings are burnt before the idols. *Pesel* is primarily a neutral designation for an object that is hewn or carved stele. Baal used in some translation indicates that *pesel* means carved images or idols. Israel committed both the sins of omission and commission, leaving undone what they should have done and doing what they should not. Yahweh mercifully loved his son, Israel and helped him leave Egypt. Unfortunately, Israel responds by rebellion. There is no corresponding affectionate relationship on the part of Israel. Rather Israel is like the Prodigal Son of Luke 15. Israel chose other gods (Josh 24:14-15; Judg 5:8) and in this way Israel broke the most basic rule of the covenant: You shall have no other gods beside me (Exod 20:3). They violated the covenant in making idols (Exod 20:23; 34:17; Exod 32:2-4) and in sacrificing to them (Exod 22:20). Israel responded to Yahweh's love with obstinate renunciation.

Verse 3: The fault was not Yahweh's. Using the image of the tender patient parent training a child to walk, he proclaims his own innocence. There is mercy and pathos in these words. He had held little Ephraim's hands as Ephraim took his first hesitant steps and cared for him when he was sick (restored them to health; Exod 15:26). Ephraim did not acknowledge this compassionate attention. The one who tenderly cared for and raised the child may be guiltless before the law if the child is incorrigible (Deut 21:18-21). Israel could not see that Yahweh had been key to his well-being throughout his history. Upon reaching adolescence, he showed himself to be an ingrate. At Yahweh's command the Israelites set out and encamped (Exod 40:36-38). God faithfully healed their affliction. There is the allusion of tying a vassal as a bond servant to an overlord. The verb *msk* which has a wide range of meanings – 'to tie up in a net', 'to capture,' 'to ensnare with ropes of love' would describe the captivity within the covenant. In Hosea 11:3.8 Ephraim is paralleled by Israel and the tone of the passage shifts to hope and promise of restoration. They follow the basic pattern expressed in the Mosaic covenant (blessing and restoration following destruction and exile: cf. Lev 26:38-45). The passage's logic presents to us a loving God who reaches out to his child in mercy. Yahweh shows His mercy by bringing his children back from exile and giving his new benediction (Hos 2:4-17; 18-25). The election tradition is part of Israel's original creed. Yahweh helped Israel grow to independence and so Israel's apostasy becomes incomprehensible. It was Yahweh and not Baal who saved Israel from the deadly peril in Egypt.

Verse 4: This verse continues the picture of a parent caring tenderly for a little child, capturing the sonship metaphor once again. The entire verse represents a metaphorical statement where Yahweh's love for Israel is paralleled for a dependent beast and a dependent child. He leads the animal gently with human cords and ropes of love. He made the animal more comfortable by graciously removing the yoke.

Verse 5: Suddenly the extended metaphor stops and there is announcement of punishment. The blunt reality of exile and servitude is brought home to them. Israel will return to Egypt. This is the covenantal curse language (Deut 28:68) in which Egypt stands as a metonymy for slavery. There is re-entrance into bondage. Assyria will dominate the captured and exiled Israelites. Assyria is Israel's future king. This implies the end of kingship and national sovereignty in Israel (Hos 3:4; 7:7; 10:3,7,15; 13:11). In contrast to the days when Israel was cared for tenderly by his father, the coming days will bring the fulfilment of his promised wrath.

The term *shub* expresses a central thematic element. The verb is used in various ways 1) the return to Egypt as punishment (Hos 11:5a); Israel's refusal to return to Yahweh (Hos 11:5b); Israel's turning away from Yahweh in apostasy (Hos 11:7); fourth is Yahweh's returning the Israelites to their homes (Hos 11:11). It also has the idea of Israel's return to Yahweh. Added to these is the general concept of the return from Egypt/Assyria. Israel's apostasy is summarised in reference to their stubbornness. Israel refused to return not to Egypt but to Yahweh from whom they have apostasized (Hos 3:5; 5:4; 6:1; 7:10). This is the irony of the covenant curse in Deut 28:68 upon which this verse is partly based. They will return to Egypt because of their disloyalty to the covenant. Yahweh was steadfast but his son was fickle. Yet their willful and persistent violation of his covenant is not the ultimate, unpardonable sin. It is possible to restore the covenant. All Israel needs to do is to amend his way. Refusal to repent is the ultimate sin.

Verse 6: There will be warfare in Israelite cities. This means that the Assyrians would break down Israelite fortifications. They will enter Israelite cities and kill their inhabitants. The sword is identified as a means of destruction for covenant infidelity (Lev 26:25,33,36,37; Deut 28:22; 32:24,41,42). The enemy's sword is like Yahweh's sword (Deut 32:41; cf. 33:29). The false prophets will also be destroyed (Isa 44:25; Jer 50:36). The sword will consume them. The false prophets were essentially diviners and predictors who foresaw good things for Israel instead of the destruction that was in fact at hand (Jer 6:14; 11:8; 1 Kgs 22:1-28). It is possible that Hosea's foreign policy which incurred the wrath of Shalmaneser V was supported in part by divination from the false prophets. Such false prophets gave leadership to Israel's apostasy, encouraging the nation by favourable predictions and by heterodox religious indoctrination so that there was no sense of urgency to abandon Baalism, idolatry, multiple shrines and other covenant violations.

Verse 7: This verse brings to an end Yahweh's protest. The verse reinstates the utter infidelity of Israel, their unified apostasy from Yahweh in favour of Baal. There is a tone of expectation of renewal. It envisions a time when Israel, weary of their suffering under Assyria, will once again turn to Yahweh and seek his Lordship. Despite Israel's unfaithfulness God continues to refer to him as my people because God's word to David is as unchangeable as the skies. This removes from the judgment, all the suggestion of vindictiveness.

Verse 8: In this verse, a shift provides hope for Israel. After Israel's full punishment for disloyalty has taken place (through Assyria's conquest and exile of Israel), Yahweh will restore his people. This follows the pattern of events predicted in Deut 4:25-31. In exile, Israel will turn back to Yahweh. On the basis of this repentance, Yahweh will restore Israel. Yahweh is a merciful God. He will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant he made with your forefathers which he confirmed by oath. Hosea 11:8-11 poetically renews this promise. As a nation in the land of Canaan, Israel was lost. The plaintiff, instead of demanding that the rebellious child be punished by death, has decided to limit its punishment. Yahweh could never finally give up or handover Ephraim/Israel. He will not do to his own people what he did to Admah and Zeboim (Gen 14:3). These cities were obliterated along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 10:19; 14:2-8) in a sudden destruction of divine wrath. These two places are usually mentioned along with the better-known cities of Sodom and Gomorrah whose fate they shared. The cities became proverbial as the ultimate in wickedness and as a standing reminder of how devastating Yahweh's wrath and anger can be. The covenant curses mention these four cities (Deut 29:23) as paradigms for what could happen to Israel if it disobeyed the covenant. Israel's destruction would leave behind only waste as a reminder of what happens to nations who defy God. God will not take the deserved punishment to the extreme because his heart has changed and his change of heart moves him to mercy. Yahweh's change of mind is the product not of whims or circumstances but of his eternally consistent nature. He is a compassionate God whose basic desire towards his people is to win them back to himself (Hos 2:3; 1 Kgs 18:37).

Verse 9: Although Yahweh has every right to eliminate Israel from the face of the earth, the fourfold use of lo' (not) in this verse underlines the fact that he will not. He would be justified in carrying out his fierce anger but he will not go down that road. Yahweh announces that he will restore Israel because his character includes grace. He is not one of the Israelites (a man in your midst) whose emotions might reflect arbitrary passions and whose wrath might be vindictive rather than equitable. He is God, Holy One. His holiness embodies all that makes him different from humans and especially the qualities that elevate his thinking and moral behaviour above that of humans. God pledges not to destroy Ephraim again. Once the divine wrath has struck, Yahweh will begin the process of renewing his people. They need never fear that he will repeat the punishment (Gen 8:21; Isa 40:2). Those who will survive that catastrophe will look forward to a time of restoration and deliverance. Such a hope is part of the expectation of the covenant itself (Deut 4:29-31; 32:43; cf. Hos 6:1-3) and of the pre-exilic prophets. This is not a promise of mercy for those alive in Hosea's day, but for their descendants, the remnant that will follow. To the righteous followers of the covenant, those who heeded Hosea's message, it would nevertheless be a source of great encouragement. Yahweh's saving restoration of his despondent people is founded upon his holiness (Isa 40:25). Yahweh reminds himself that he is God and not man (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29). In Exodus 34:6 Yahweh is portrayed as long-suffering and slow to anger. Theoretically his wrath could be held in check indefinitely. It is as if Yahweh has a mixed mind.

Verse 10: The point of verse ten is that Yahweh will announce the return of Israel upon their conversion. Yahweh, being portrayed as roaring like a lion (Hos 5:14; 13:7; cf. Amos 1:2; 3:8; Joel 3:16; Jer 25:30) seems to function as a symbolic representation of his calling people to hear his judgment. The new Israel will be characterised by their righteous behaviour and true faith (Zeph 3:12-13) and so Yahweh's roaring here speaks more of wonder than terror.

Verse 11: The author notes that Israel will hurry home like birds of Egypt and like doves of Assyria. The land of Egypt is paralleled to the land of Assyria. As stated above, the two countries – Egypt and Assyria connote punishment, abandonment and slavery.

## **2. Interpretation**

In this pericope, God's beneficence towards Israel in the exodus and in the wilderness is manifest. The yoke is the symbol of oppression and servitude in the covenant vocabulary (Lev 26:13; Deut 28:48; 1 Kgs 12:4-14). Israel's rescue is like the lifting of the yoke from the jaw of the animal. The reaching out and feeding the animal represents God's constant presence and his feeding Israel miraculously (Exod 16:4-35; Num 11:4-34). The text illustrates vividly God's divine grace and condescension. When the father's help was not appreciated, he became even more loving.

God addressing Israel as a son expresses the intimate relationship of the care he has for Israel. Jeremiah explains this aspect of deliverance from Egypt as the making of a covenant (Jer 31:31-34). Hosea interprets the covenant concept already handed down to him by the analogy of the relationship of a father to an adopted son and combines it with exodus tradition.

Israel is to be closely and inseparably united with Yahweh. This indicates that Israel is Yahweh's personal property. The Deuteronomic School also reflects this relationship when it addressed Israel as Yahweh's son (Deut 14:1). The idea of parentage, procreation and creation is not emphasized. The idea of education combined with Yahweh's love is strongly expressed. Isaiah (Isa 1:2; 30:9) and Jeremiah (Jer 3:14,19,22; 4:22; 31:9,20) also speak of Israel as Yahweh's son.

This text indicates God's profound love for Israel. Yahweh tells of his love for his rebellious child. Consequently, the punishment will not be mortal. God will not do that which, according to legalistic human logic, he ought – annihilate Israel – rather he will make provision for their return from exile, their resettlement in peace after punishment. The accusation against the child and protestation of the parents' innocence (Hos 11:1-4.7) is followed by the severe, although limited, punishment (Hos 11:5-6), and by a change of heart on the part of the plaintiff who not only declines to press the charges to their legal conclusion but also determines to bring the child back home. Three times the sins of the nation are described and three times the loving care and upbringing of the father are contrasted to them, even before the announcement of return from exile completes the picture of divine mercy.

The passage contrasts Yahweh's sovereign holiness and the grace it allows him to exercise with Ephraim's stubborn rebellion and selfishness. Yahweh is free to be himself, to exercise his own eternally consistent motives of compassion, protection and kindness (Matt 20:15). He is totally free to spare Israel rather than obliterate them. They deserve the fate of Admah and Zeboim (Hos 11:8) but instead, Yahweh will look on them with compassion and resettle them in the Promised Land (Hos 11:10-11). The reason is because He is not human but God, not sinful Israelites but the Holy One. His ways are above their ways (Isa 55:8-9). Jonah was expecting God's justice on Nineveh but God showed mercy. This was why Jonah became angry and was afraid to embark on his mission in the first place. Jonah knew that God was gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent (Jonah 4:1-3). Therefore, God would rescue his people in spite of their failures. The promise of Deut 4:30 and its parallels in Lev 26 and Deut 30

that Yahweh cannot forget the covenant is two-sided. The covenant is restorable but only on the grounds of the fidelity of both parties. When Israel fulfils its obligations, the covenant and its blessings will be quickly renewed. The joint return of Israel's remnant began in a literal sense during the Persian regime under Cyrus (539 BC). However, Israel's real return and restoration began only in Christ, the author and finisher of the new covenant (Heb 12:2). In this light Matt 2:15 recognises the return of God's son from Egypt. God's complete plan for Israel was not fully revealed in the sweeping predictions of Deut 4:20-31. God's plan for Israel could be finally understood in its most complete sense, only in the life and work of Christ. Divine disappointment is overcome by divine determination to restore God's people to faith.

The proclamation of a God who is insensitive to suffering is the reason that God has become alien and finally irrelevant to many human beings. God's justice is not God's punitive justice rather God's justifying justice which includes his mercy. Paul Ricoeur focuses on the idea of justice that envisages care for the other and being concerned for his or her well-being. God is simultaneously just and merciful. All four main world religions Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism portray God as the Merciful One.

Yahweh is not man but the Holy One. God demonstrates that he is the Holy One in that his remorse overcomes his wrath and thus creates a new life of security for Israel. Israel's election is founded upon God's love. This love proves to be incomparable. It is the holy essence of God himself. Yahweh cannot set aside his love as he cannot set aside his divinity. His love shows itself in a multitude of calls and actions. As suffering love, it struggles against the divine wrath and thus bears the anguish of neglect within itself (Hos 11:8-9). The Father turns his wrath into a new expression of divine love. God's ultimate, powerful and liberating action will free Israel, his son, once and for all. The struggle between God's love and his wrath takes place within God himself so that the destructive overturning and burning of judgment against Admah and Zeboim now takes place in God's heart instead of in Israel. God, the Holy One averts the catastrophe for his own sake, since as in Sodom, ten just men cannot be found in Israel. God's judgment stood in the service of his love. Now Yahweh contains his smoldering anger. Only opposition to his salvation is expressed; but his love emerges to overpower it. This is in line with 1 John 4:8 which says: 'God is love.' This tallies with Paul's words in Rom 5:20: 'where sin abounds grace abounds even more.'

### **3. Relevance of the Text in Today's Context**

There is war in Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic coupled with violence in various parts of the world. Most of the perpetrators of these wars and violence claim they want justice. They are fighting for justice. Often times this search for justice leads to spiral violence. It becomes clear that human justice leaves much to be desired. The only option for peaceful future for humanity is mercy. In the face of vicious circle of evil, there can be no hope of a new beginning only if we can hope in a gracious, merciful and simultaneously all-powerful God, who alone can establish a new beginning. He can give us the courage to hope against all hope and he can give us the strength for a new beginning. He is a living God who gives life to the dead and who is able to wipe away every tear and make everything new (Rev 21:4). He made this happen in the life of Augustine.

Vatican Council I took place in 1870 and came up with Syllabus of Errors. This publication condemned various doctrines and trends characteristic of modern time then such as pantheism, socialism, religious indifferentism and the like. There were a lot of anathemas. However, Vatican two came with a different tone. John XXIII while opening the Council wrote: Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity . . . The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness towards her separated children. Blessed Paul VI spoke in a similar vein at the closing of the Council: we prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of this Council . . . the old story of the Good Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council, a wave of affection and admiration flowed from the Council over the modern world of humanity. Errors were condemned, indeed, because charity demanded this no less than did truth, but for individuals themselves there was only admonition, respect and love. Instead of depressing diagnosis, encouraging remedies, instead of direful predictions, messages of trust issued from the Council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honoured, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed . . . Another point we must stress is this: all this rich teaching is channelled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need. This explains why Pope Francis on March 13, 2015 the second anniversary of his election as the 266th Successor of St Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Jubilee started on December 8 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception and it will end on 20th November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. This is the first Holy Year that Pope Francis is convoking to celebrate, not an anniversary of some kind but one of the greatest attributes of God the Father which is most exalted in both OT and NT. The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV; the face of mercy) was given on April 11, 2015, eve of Divine Mercy Sunday.

Right from the beginning of his pontificate, mercy has occupied a central place in the pontificate of Pope Francis. His papal motto is the same with the one he had as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires – *miserando atque eligendo* (by having mercy on him, he chose him). The motto is taken from a homily of St Bede the Venerable, who wrote in his commentary on the Gospel story of the calling of Matthew, the Evangelist: Jesus saw the tax collector and by having mercy on him chose him as an Apostle, saying to him: Follow me. This homily, which focuses on the divine mercy, is reproduced in the Liturgy of the Hours on the Feast of St Matthew; and it has taken on special significance in the Pope's life and spiritual journey.

## Conclusion

We have analysed the text of Hosea 11:1-11 and noted how God relented in his anger. Israel deserved to be punished and abandoned by God. But God reminds himself that he is God and not mortal. It is in God's nature to be merciful. There is a popular saying that to sin is human and to forgive is divine. God would not be true to his nature if he were only justice without mercy. Therefore, God's mercy is God's justice. This is what Hosea expresses in the passage just analysed. It is similar to the experience I had with my mum when I was a child. The Church must follow suit in going beyond the boundaries of justice to embrace mercy.