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Hosea 11:1-11

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Mixing metaphors is not generally counted among the many sins of Israel. But then it does have divine license. The drama depicting the relationship between God and Israel as that of a husband and wife (Hosea 1-3) is initiated at the deity's command; the use of the parent-child metaphor to depict the same relationship in Hosea 11 is part of a divine speech. Given that the former (with its portrayal of spousal abuse) is troubling to today's readers, one might hope that a switch to the latter might at least bring some relief, but then the image of a parent threatening a child with severe punishment is hardly more wholesome. Add to this that the parent-child metaphor was not infrequently employed in the ancient Near East to express the empire-vassal/ruler-ruled relationship, and any hopes of viewing it sentimentally are further dashed.

Genders, it seems, are as mixed in Hosea as metaphors. Whereas Hosea 1-3 configures the Yhwh-Israel relationship as male-female, the parent-child relationship in Hosea 11 is generally assumed to be father-son and so male-male. However, given that the role taken by the parent in these verses is predominantly maternal, as careful linguistic studies of 11:3-4 could suggest (for example, *tirgalti*, 'walk' even 'pampered' should, perhaps, be read as 'suckle' and *lecheyhem*, generally 'cheeks', as 'breasts'),[1] it might well be argued that the gender alignments have simply been switched. Yhwh-as-*mother* now represents the female; Israel-as-*son*, now the male. That said, the conventions of Hebrew literature are not only unafraid of mixed metaphors, they are apparently unembarrassed by slippages in voice too. The messenger formula, 'declares Yhwh' in Hosea 11:11 frames the chapter in its entirety as first-person divine speech. But then the prophet-messenger makes his own presence palpable by referring to the deity's arms in the third person as 'his' (11:3). More significantly, this use of the masculine pronoun has the further effect of making Yhwh's maternal behavior appear to be no more than a form of drag. Thus the hope that this metaphor provides a much-needed feminizing of a predominantly male-identified God is somewhat frustrated—if not queered.

Gender constructions aside, the metaphor of parent-child, which is understood to be the outcome of an adoption, no more indicates that the link between God and Israel is natural than the metaphor of husband and wife. While the theme of adoption is mostly obscured in the NRSV—'out of Egypt I called my son'—it is perhaps overemphasized in the JPS translation: 'And I have called [him] My son ever since Egypt' (Hos 11:1). The term 'called' (*qar'a*), though generally used in namings and prophetic commissions, here conveys not only election, but (unusually) the exodus also. Yet while Israel may be divinely called (here the Hebrew of 11:2 has literally '*they* called them' which translators commonly modify to '*I* called them'), this does not prove to be irresistible—the people, we read, nevertheless 'went their own way' (11:2). As the second half of the verse indicates, this does not mean that they struck out alone in the wilderness; but rather, that they went after idols and Baals.

To emphasize the unreasonableness of this defection, the deity details his/her acts of nurture and the

[1] For a detailed discussion, see Helen Schüngel-Straumann, 'God as Mother in Hosea 11' in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 194-218.

fact that he/she guided them with a leash: 'I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love' (11:4). However, the remainder of this verse is somewhat scrambled. As already suggested, we may have mothers lifting infants to their breasts, parents lifting children to their cheeks, or—as the JPS has it—a divine complaint that 'I seemed to them as one, who imposed a yoke on their jaws, though I was offering them food' instead (11:4)—what we *can* agree on is that cords are involved. As a consequence of this verse, the phrase 'cords of love' has become stock for expressing an aspect of the connection between humans and the divine. In this particular context, it may, to the modern mind, invoke the idea of toddlers in reins; an alternative possibility (though breaking with the parent-child metaphor) comes from G. K. Chesterton via Evelyn Waugh. After a character in *Brideshead Revisited* mentions Chesterton's reference to a character hooking a thief with 'a twitch upon the thread,' the phrase becomes thematic in the novel for the divine tug that brings wanderers back to the faith.

Yet for the moment there is no such tug. Either out of a perverse willfulness or because the deity is undoing his/her good work, Israel is heading off again (*shuv*) to Egypt, and as a result of this, Assyria (the imperial power of the moment) will become Israel's new king. All this because—and note the poetic justice—'they have refused to return [*shuv*] to me' (11:5). If the mention of Egypt refers to a desperate political alliance, we would indeed expect this to incite the Assyrian backlash detailed in 11:6. Israel's tendency to engage in the wrong sort of returning (*shuv*) is again cited as justification for the severity of this. The remainder of 11:7 offers a lesson in futility to Israel and translators alike. At best, two possibilities can be gleaned from the uncertain Hebrew: either Israel is calling upon pagan deity who *cannot* help, or to Yhwh, who simply *will* not.

But as if halting whilst walking away, the deity then begins to reconsider: 'How can I give you up, Ephraim?' (11:8) This particular pet name for Israel has already been used in 11:3; its reoccurrence here thus links the merciful about-turn to the impulses of parental love—an association confirmed by the reference to a 'compassion' (*nichumim*) growing warm and tender (11:8). Although the phrase 'my heart recoils within me' (11:8) suggests that this is indeed a mostly emotional response, in Biblical Hebrew the word 'heart' (*lev*) typically signifies the seat of resolve, indicating that this actually denotes an alteration in the divine intent. The rationale offered for the decision, however, is that Yhwh is 'God, *not man*,' which, while implying that the deity is above such foibles as vengeance, opens the possibility that the deity might well be above a parent-child attachment also. Certainly, reference to the dissimilarity between God and man is not going to sit comfortably in the midst of a metaphor presuming there to be at least *some* likenesses. But in this very awkwardness resides something more significant than a peculiarity in Hebrew prose: while we can, perhaps, only appreciate God in terms derived from the human realm (by *analogy*, as classical theology would say), this contrary word reminds us that we cannot suppose that God is prey to human whims. Thus it expresses the unavoidable tension that exists between those doctrines confirming a divine interest in human action and those reminding us of the divine freedom from it.

Elsewhere, the claim that *God is not man* prefaces a word about the inevitability of divine destruction (Num 23:19). In Hosea 11:10-11, however, Yhwh is resolved *not* to execute his/her 'fierce anger' or 'again destroy Ephraim' (11:9)—the 'again' acknowledging that Assyria has already made at least one attack. Unlike Admah and Zeboiim, destroyed alongside the better known Sodom and Gomorrah (Deut 29:22), Ephraim will not be remembered in legend alone (11:8). Elsewhere too, when Yhwh roars like a lion it is from Zion, as if holy terror spreads out from there. But now when he/she roars, it will be less to terrify his/her people than to clear a path for their return. And, rather surprisingly, it will charm the very birds, if not down from the trees, certainly from the west, south (Egypt), and east (Assyria), as part of a new exodus, since from these regions Yhwh's children will come 'trembling…like doves' in a return (*shuv*) to their home, says Yhwh (11:11).