Power, Metaphor, and Divine Judgment in Hosea 2

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**Abstract**

Divine judgment and power are intensely illustrated through the use of a marriage metaphor in Hosea 2 with the intended purpose of calling Israel back to fidelity to Yahweh. As God's people refuse to return, He threatens divine judgment mediated through the political power of the day, Assyria. The marriage metaphor communicates the exclusive devotion that God expects from Israel, and in view of the understanding of marriage presupposed by the text, it also expresses the power differential between God and Israel. In the book of Hosea, divine judgment will be meted out by means of the Assyrian empire whose unchecked and abusive military power is depicted through the culturally realistic image of a husband who exercises physical, verbal, and financial power over his wife and children. Three aspects of power and judgment are therefore in view: theologically, God's judgment against Israel; politically, Assyria's judgment against the nation of Israel; and metaphorically, a husband's judgment against his wife and children. This paper will address the theological picture of God presented in this text from the perspective of Scripture as a whole and Christian theology. First, this paper will explore the ancient Near Eastern context to illuminate the metaphor in its ancient setting and the political realities of the times in order to better understand the text's rhetorical function for the original audience. Second, insights from the history of biblical interpretation will be utilized as an interpretive bridge from the original historical context to the theological significance of this metaphorical representation of God in Hosea 2.

**Keywords**

Hosea, marriage metaphor, Assyria, prophetic poetry, power, divine judgment, rhetoric

**Outline**

I. Hosea 2: Theology, History, and Metaphor

Hosea 2 depicts several aspects of power employing emotive-inducing metaphors and rhetorical devices to provide a theological interpretation of a historical event. Violence afflicted by a powerful subject against a weaker object in Hosea 2 is conveyed in the following three ways: 1) theologically as demonstrated in God’s judgment of Israel, 2) politically as enacted by Assyria’s invasion of Israel, and 3) metaphorically as illustrated in the husband’s harsh treatment of his wife and children.

A. Theologically, Israel’s disregard for their covenantal commitments and unfaithfulness to sanctioned monotheistic worship results in Yahweh’s violent judgment with the expressed intent of restoring his chosen people.

B. Politically, Assyria wields its powerful military to invade Israel and unleash indiscriminate acts of aggression on the entire nation. Due to their small size and lesser military strength as well as their precarious geographic location, Israel is unable to defend themselves against the brutality of the dominant global force of the time.

C. Metaphorically, the characterization of Yahweh as husband and Israel as wife reflects the harsh reality of a husband’s unchecked power to address allegations of a wife’s unfaithfulness through unmoderated, violent acts against both her and her children.

II. Patristic Reception of Hosea 2

In this section, we will explore how early Christian interpreters integrated the message of Hosea into their overall understanding of the theology of Scripture to construct a Christian message. Patristic commentators such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Jerome of Stridon, Theodoret of Cyrus, Cyril of Alexandria, and Julian of Eclanum will illustrate common postures held by the “church fathers” as they navigated the theological and ethical concerns present in Hosea 2.

A. Hosea 2 exhibits an interpretive strategy common in patristic interpretation of ascribing a positive restorative motivation to divine wrath. Early Christian interpreters were reluctant to equate the same wrath humans experience (often unmoderated, externally incited, and directed towards vice) to God. As a result, they emphasized the redemptive telos of God’s anger and its rhetorical intention of motivating God’s people to return to him. This motif is already present in Hosea 2, and it receives emphasis and elaboration in patristic commentary.

B. In the marriage metaphor at the heart of Hosea 2’s message, several church fathers emphasize the figurative nature of the family metaphor and the national identity (in contrast to stressing the individual) of the wife and children in the application of this literary device. The corporate identity approach ensures that the judgment enacted by the husband can be construed as just since Israel as a nation was in fact unfaithful to Yahweh.

C. Further, along with a persistent connection of Hosea 2 to the account of Israel’s wandering in the desert, the church fathers tend to ascribe guilt to the “children” in Hosea 2, namely, the unfaithful Israelites of Hosea’s day who follow the pattern of their “mother,” that is, the rebellious Israelites in the desert. This alleviates the ethical dilemma of the children being unjustly punished for the adulterous behavior of their mother.

III. A Contemporary Theological Reflection on Hosea 2

Building on the beneficial interpretive strategies proposed through the patristic reception of Hosea 2, our modern theological reflection seeks to resolve the tensions present in the political violence effectuated by the powerful Assyrian empire overtaking the weaker nation of Israel and the abusive implications generated through the marriage metaphor. The gap between the historical realities of the abuse of power in these scenarios and the theological ideal of Yahweh’s just and righteous judgment will be guided by an understanding of the Divine through the totality of the biblical witness and classical theistic doctrines.