THE COVENANT CONCEPT IN HOSEA

By H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D., Wallington

EVERY STUDENT with more than a purely superficial knowledge of the Minor Prophets needs no telling that Hosea presents major textual and compositional problems. The best commentary on these difficulties is that I know of no examination in which the Hebrew of Hosea is prescribed, though doubtless there are some.

The compositional problems find their most obvious expression in the story of Hosea’s relationship with his wife. In chapter i this is told in the third person, and then, according to the interpretation adopted, continued or paralleled in the first person in chapter iii. Even the dyed-in-the-wool fundamentalist will presumably acknowledge that this is not a normal method of writing.

Writers like Theodore Robinson seek to solve these problems by a rather mechanical application of the criterion of oracular poetry, biographical prose and autobiographical prose, but it is probable that the majority would agree that the prophetic books are too individual to be amenable to such general treatment. In addition this method does not seem really to answer any of the problems of Hosea. In particular it fails to explain the mutilated nature of so many sections and the almost complete lack of that literary skill in the arrangement and linking of the original oracles which is such a feature in Hosea’s two contemporaries Amos and Isaiah.

For our purpose it is unnecessary to ask whether this skill was due to the prophets themselves or to editors and compilers. If it were the former, is it seriously suggested that the townsman Hosea fell so far behind the shepherd Amos? If it were the latter, how are we to explain Hosea’s being so unfortunate compared to his Judean contemporaries?

In know of only one line of approach that even begins to do justice to the phenomena. Hosea will have met a violent death in the last troubled, savage days of Samaria. All that we have of his message will be the memories of a few disciples (or even only one), left to record them without the guidance of their master and therefore unable to build up the brief individual oracles into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Should anyone consider that the role of the Spirit is being minimized in this explanation, it is sufficient to point out that nothing bears more eloquent testimony to the tragedy of Israel’s collapse and downfall than the broken record of its last prophet’s message.

If this explanation is anywhere near the truth, then it is most unlikely that chapters i and iii are parallels. The first person in chapter iii is to be explained by the linkage of the prophet’s experience with the oracle based on it. The story in i, 2-9 will have been gleaned by Hosea’s disciples in their contacts with him. Piety to his memory will have led them to retain as much of the prophet’s tragedy in his own words as possible.

H. Wheeler Robinson has said, ‘It is not likely that a prophet of the classical period would have dared to prophesy without an inaugural vision such as Isaiah’s in the temple, or an audition like Jeremiah’s, or such a characteristically peculiar experience like that of Ezekiel.’ In fact, though I agree without hesitation that we must postulate a call for each prophet, there is nothing in the prophetic books to suggest what form the call may have taken. The fact that in the majority of cases the call is not even mentioned suggests very strongly that those prophets who do mention
from such a distance that no relationship existed between them and Israel wherever it stands in a context where it will be taken for granted. But in addition we realize that by so taking it the<br>obviously involved slips into place, we have every reason for thinking that Gomer bat-Diblaim was, officially at any rate, a pure woman at the time.

While I doubt that the concept of Israel as the bride of Yahweh came as something completely novel to Hosea's hearers, he is undoubtedly the first to use it clearly in canonical Scripture, though there are in earlier writings that expositions that are most easily understood, if we assume this picture behind them. Until his time the standard expression seems to have been that Israel was Yahweh's first-born: this picture is of course found in several of the Patriarchs, though in Ezekiel xvi the Patriarchal period is referred to as that of the bride's childhood.

The outstanding features of Hosea's marriage as told in his prophecy are the following:

No special reasons are mentioned for Hosea's choice of Gomer, except probably a common choice and command.

Her attitude to him was normal and formal; her calling of him 'Baali' (ii. 16) implies no special intimacy. There is no suggestion, however, that she said 'Ishl' would have been something new and unheard of. Her unfaithfulness was at first hidden, and Hosea did not take the obvious step of divorcing her; had he done so, he could not in terms of Deuteronomy xxiv, 1-4 have taken her as wife again; cf. Jeremiah iii. 1, where this principle is applied to the woman who lived with the man of whom she had been divorced.

A final question mark is left as to whether Hosea's loyalty and love would be effective in winning the loyalty and love of Gomer; 'Thou shalt not have her any more days; thou shalt not deny marriage if she is for another (man), neither will I go in to thee' (leaves the final outcome uncertain). Though there are a number of pictures of Yahweh's relationship to His people in the Old Testament, there is probably none that expresses the historic facts more accurately than Hosea's marriage. Before we start to look at the details more closely, however, it will be wise to look at the covenant concept among the Semites.

Köhler links \textit{beth} with the root \textit{brh}, 'to share food'. If this is so, then the covenant concept is not one that starts with the exceptional and extends to the everyday, but the reverse. In any case I consider there can be no doubt that the covenant was merely the extending to a wider circle of what already existed as a matter of course. It is therefore unreasonable to consider that normal life was dominated by the covenant concept among the Semites life and people being loyal to it; 'Habakkuk thereby laid the groundwork for the human relationship to obligation, i.e. hostility, or of obligation and peace, and this involved the making of a covenant.

The idea that we should not expect the mention of covenant, wherever it stands in a context where it will be taken for granted, but its non-mention would not for the Semite be in any way a denial of its existence. Marriage is an excellent example of this type of covenant relationship. In addition it is probably the only one of these normal and standard relationships that can serve as a picture of the relationship created between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai. The other covenant relationships of life, those of the family, tribe and nation are not of our choosing or making; we are bound by them whether we wish it or not. The covenant of the old covenant was not and cannot go back on the choice of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

In any case I consider there can be no doubt that the covenant was merely the extending to a wider circle of what already existed as a matter of course. It is therefore unreasonable to consider that normal life was dominated by the covenant concept among the Semites life and people being loyal to it; 'Habakkuk thereby laid the groundwork for the human relationship to obligation, i.e. hostility, or of obligation and peace, and this involved the making of a covenant.

Köhler links \textit{beth} with the root \textit{brh}, 'to share food'. If this is so, then the covenant concept is not one that starts with the exceptional and extends to the everyday, but the reverse. In any case I consider there can be no doubt that the covenant was merely the extending to a wider circle of what already existed as a matter of course. It is therefore unreasonable to consider that normal life was dominated by the covenant concept among the Semites life and people being loyal to it; 'Habakkuk thereby laid the groundwork for the human relationship to obligation, i.e. hostility, or of obligation and peace, and this involved the making of a covenant.

The idea that we should not expect the mention of covenant, wherever it stands in a context where it will be taken for granted, but its non-mention would not for the Semite be in any way a denial of its existence. Marriage is an excellent example of this type of covenant relationship. In addition it is probably the only one of these normal and standard relationships that can serve as a picture of the relationship created between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai. The other covenant relationships of life, those of the family, tribe and nation are not of our choosing or making; we are bound by them whether we wish it or not. The covenant of the old covenant was not and cannot go back on the choice of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

In any case I consider there can be no doubt that the covenant was merely the extending to a wider circle of what already existed as a matter of course. It is therefore unreasonable to consider that normal life was dominated by the covenant concept among the Semites life and people being loyal to it; 'Habakkuk thereby laid the groundwork for the human relationship to obligation, i.e. hostility, or of obligation and peace, and this involved the making of a covenant.

The idea that we should not expect the mention of covenant, wherever it stands in a context where it will be taken for granted, but its non-mention would not for the Semite be in any way a denial of its existence. Marriage is an excellent example of this type of covenant relationship. In addition it is probably the only one of these normal and standard relationships that can serve as a picture of the relationship created between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai. The other covenant relationships of life, those of the family, tribe and nation are not of our choosing or making; we are bound by them whether we wish it or not. The covenant of the old covenant was not and cannot go back on the choice of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

We are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end; throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the promise of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

We are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end; throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the promise of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

We are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end; throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the promise of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

We are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end; throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the promise of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.

We are introduced to a paradox which, for the seeing eye, runs through much of the Old Testament. God, just because He is God, does not break His word, nor does He consider that the covenant has come to an end; throughout the book in one way and another it is stressed that Yahweh will not and cannot go back on the promise of and the covenant promise to Israel. But for all that in the promise of restoration in chapter ii it is made clear that this will to all intents and purposes mean a new marriage: 'I will be their God, and thou shalt be my people'; 'And the wilderness shall rejoice and be glad, and the desert shall also blossom as the rose'.
Not only would the new covenant, the new marriage, be marked by true hesed on the bride's part, but at the present the break-down of this true relationship to Yahweh meant its break-down in all other relationships as Israel is, it is faithful only to the extent that there is no unfaithfulness to Yahweh (ktsv 'kindness'), and no knowledge of God in the land'. The context of verse 2 shows clearly, however, that Yahweh is thinking primarily of social sins: swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery. Israel was not merely a nation with a religion. Like the Church it owed its existence purely to an act of God, and the ignoring of its obligations to God meant the break-down of all internal obligations as well. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' becomes meaningful only in the light of 'Thou shalt love thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength'.

There was another way too in which Hosea's marriage spoke of Yahweh's relationship to Israel. Both in joke and sometimes through grim reality we gain the impression that a man is looking for very much less than the biblical ideal of a help meet. A cook, housekeeper and bed-companion would seem to sum up the ambitions of many single-minded Hosea, when Hosea has bought Gomer back and has established a double and unbreakable claim on her, his refusal to regard her as truly wife will have shocked many of his contemporaries into realizing that when all was said and done he was right. For Gomer really to be his wife he had to have more than her body and her forced obedience.

In Mesopotamian mythology men had been created to be the slaves of the gods; the priests were essentially their personal servants. So far as I know the Canaanite mythology, as established in the Ugarit finds, does not contain sufficient creation matter for us to say with certainty how far it paralleled the Mesopotamian concept, but we have no grounds for thinking that the former sight was any significantly different to the latter. But then — and there is much biblical evidence to support the supposition — that on the popular level the Sinai covenant was regarded less as an act of grace on Yahweh's part and far more as a strict covenantal compact between the two, that one could have thought of denying the display of Yahweh's power, but it will have been very generally accepted that it was displayed to serve His own personal ends; the due celebration of the cultus with its sacrifices will have been regarded in particular as something from which Yahweh drew personal advantage.

By interpreting the covenant in terms of marriage and in the light of his own broken marriage Hosea placed it on an entirely different level. However different the psychology of man and woman, however different their functions in marriage, however different their status in Israelite society, their mutual hesed in marriage is fundamentally of the same type. So too, however great the gulf between God and man, man was made in the image and likeness of God, and so within the covenant between God and man, man's hesed must be in some way of the same type as God's hesed. We may express it by saying that God does not in the first place look for acts but for loyalty and love, though these cannot fail to express themselves in acts.

Hence Hosea can say in Yahweh's name: 'I desire hesed and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings' (vi. 6).

Guillaume has stressed correctly in Prophecy and Divination that the Hebrew idiom means not a rejection of sacrifice and burnt offerings but rather an emphatic insistence on hesed and the knowledge of God. The cultus is the outcome of hesed and of the knowledge of God and not a substitute for them or a way to them.

It is worth noting that the great saying in Amos: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities' (ii. 2), probably has the marriage concept behind it. It is taken in its literal English meaning is manifestly theologically false and is clearly contradicted by other verses in the same prophet. Nor is Moffatt's interpretation much better: 'You alone, of all men, have I cared for.' You shall love thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength'.

It is clear that Hosea takes Amos' message of the unqualified and absolute justice of God for granted. Over against this he places God's absolute and unqualified hesed arising from an act lying in His own freedom, viz His covenant with Israel at Sinai. He makes no effort to reconcile the two messages. It is clear that Yahweh can no more tolerate lack of hesed from His covenant people than He can injustice from any people.

It is often said that the answer is offered by Isaiah. In fact this is an over-simplification. What Isaiah did was to shift the centre of the problem by stressing God's work in the creation of a remnant. The agony of Divine love and loyalty faced by human sin and rebellion remains a heart-breaking problem and is met again as one of the constituent elements in Jeremiah's message. In Isaiah xxiii we find the answer on God's side to the problem, but there is no indication as to how it will work out in practice.

It is rather remarkable that Calvinism, in which the covenant concept is more stressed than in any other system of Christian theology, has hardly done adequate justice to Hosea's message. It is typical that G. C. Berkouwer in his recent work Divine Election refers to Hosea only three times over 300 pages, if we may trust the index. Had the stress been laid, it is not likely that the formulation of Calvinistic doctrine would have been much modified, but it is probable that much of the hardness too often found in it would have been diminished. In addition the proclamation of irresistible grace might well at times have been much more guarded.

We can best conclude this brief consideration of the covenant concept in Hosea by looking at an even greater Lover, who suffereth the rejection of His love. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Mt. xxiii. 37-39).

This is not merely mercy and judgment come together but also a hope that is rooted in the mercy of the loving God. In Hosea, as in the other prophetic theorists, the love of God is expressed not in the rejection of His love. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Mt. xxiii. 37-39).

However, even greater Lover, who suffers the rejection of His love. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Mt. xxiii. 37-39).

Nor is Moffatt's interpretation much better: 'You alone, of all men, have I cared for.' You shall love thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy strength'.

It is rather remarkable that Calvinism, in which the covenant concept is more stressed than in any other system of Christian theology, has hardly done adequate justice to Hosea's message. It is typical that G. C. Berkouwer in his recent work Divine Election refers to Hosea only three times over 300 pages, if we may trust the index. Had the stress been laid, it is not likely that the formulation of Calvinistic doctrine would have been much modified, but it is probable that much of the hardness too often found in it would have been diminished. In addition the proclamation of irresistible grace might well at times have been much more guarded.

We can best conclude this brief consideration of the covenant concept in Hosea by looking at an even greater Lover, who suffereth the rejection of His love. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Mt. xxiii. 37-39).