



Texts in Context

“Let us press on to know the Lord”: Preaching the Knowledge of God in Hosea 5:15–6:6

JAMES K. MEAD

One of the frequently challenging aspects of my parish ministry was the experience of studying a sermon text that, on the face of it, seemed ripe for a harvest of theological truth and pastoral application. Even a cursory reading of the passage yielded several terms of biblical import, displayed a wealth of vivid imagery, and suggested numerous intrabiblical connections, something especially nice when following the common lectionary. But then, in the midst of my own exegetical bliss, I began to “check the commentaries” to see what the scholars had said. What to me had seemed a straightforward narrative, psalm, or oracle suddenly dissolved into a raging sea of competing interpretations that I was unable to navigate. There I sat in the pastor’s study unable to make even the slightest homiletical move.

A few months ago, as I reacquainted myself with Hos 5:15–6:6, I was transported back to my pastorates in a moment of post-traumatic stress, realizing that my initial assumptions about this prophet’s message would not withstand the scrutiny of the company of scholars. As a Year A lectionary text for the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Hos 5:15–6:6 contains an array of theologically weighty concepts, such as repentance, steadfast love, resurrection, worship, and the knowledge of God.¹ The prophet’s words dance with literary imagery and move us to feel the very heart of

¹Other lections for June 8, 2008, include Psalm 50:7–15; Rom 4:13–25; Matt 9:9–13, 18–26.

Exegetical homework helps the preacher understand the complexity of this reading for June 8, 2008. Faithful proclamation will bring the hearer the prophet’s message of both warning and promise.

God even as they challenge the sincerity of our worship and the authenticity of our knowledge of God. The homiletical potential of these ideas notwithstanding, the preacher must eventually admit that the scholars are onto something when they wrestle with the language of this part of Hosea's prophecy. The quintessential example of this scholarly uncertainty is the lack of coherence between the seemingly devout call to repentance in vv. 1–3 and the anguished divine judgment in vv. 4–6. To put the matter more directly, why is God still upset with the people even after they have called themselves to return to him and renew their knowledge of him? In what follows I propose that, in spite of the substantial critical and theological obscurities within Hos 5:15–6:6, this passage witnesses to God's compassion toward a people who cannot even repent properly without God's grace. The creative energy of its language and form provides a vehicle for carrying God's own call for the church today to live in the knowledge of God and serve God in the world with integrity and loyal love. We will circle in upon this diamond in the rough through its wider historical and literary contexts, ultimately finding a jewel that shines brightly within the matrix of the relationship between God and humankind.

HOSEA 5:15–6:6 AS PROPHETIC ORACLE

Although we cannot completely recover the original circumstances behind the elements that make up Hos 5:15–6:6, we are in much better shape with Hosea than with many other biblical prophets.² Hosea's ministry occurred during the final years of the northern kingdom's (i.e., Israel's) existence, particularly against the background of its social-economic life and the impending threat of the Assyrian empire in the 730s B.C.E. Within all of the pressures and fears associated with threats to national existence, Hosea indicted Israel for her manifold sinfulness: "There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out" (4:1b–2). Much of the responsibility for this situation fell upon the leadership—priests, prophets, and kings—who had ignored their calling to lead the people into the knowledge of God (4:4–5; 5:1). Many scholars believe that the prophetic judgments of Hos 5–6 were a direct response to the invasion of Tiglath-Pileser III in about 733 B.C.E., which brought an end to the Syro-Ephramite war (see 2 Kings 15:29–31).³ Hosea thus portrays the Lord as the metaphorical lion of judgment who, through the actions of Assyrian military power, has brought devastation to Israel and can now return to his den (Hos 5:13–15).

Appreciating the volatility of the historical context should be coupled with sensitivity to the surrounding literary context. Hosea 5:15–6:6 is clearly part of a larger literary unit; the difficulty lies in determining its precise boundaries. There

²See in this issue, Rolf Jacobson's essay, "What Every Christian Should Know about Amos and Hosea" (*Word & World* 28/2 [2008] 182–191).

³For the historical issues see Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 101–102; Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, ed. Paul D. Hanson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 110–112.

seems to be a new beginning at 5:8, with the call to alertness in the face of judgment, and the section runs on into chapter 7, perhaps all the way to its conclusion.⁴ This larger section reflects concerns of the whole book, highlighting the moral culpability of the priests, the widespread nature of the problem (note the geographical locations mentioned), and the irrevocable certainty of judgment that must come upon the nation. Within this distressing portrait stands the Lord who says, “I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face” (5:15a). Hosea 6:1–3 then lifts up the voice of Israel, perhaps through its priests, and calls for the people “to return to the Lord” who has judged them. Its expectation that Israel can come to know the Lord and receive healing and restoration stands in stark contrast to much of the surrounding context.

With these historical and literary contexts in mind, we tighten the focus even more on Hos 5:15–6:6 as a distinct passage, one that is sufficiently complete to warrant being a full text for proclamation. While it is possible, of course, to begin earlier in chapter 5 for the start of the passage or go deeper into chapter 6 for its conclusion, there are also good reasons for working with the lection as it stands. Hosea 5:15 serves as a hinge between the lion imagery of 5:12–14 with its acts of “tearing” (v. 14) and the allusion to Israel as “torn” in 6:1. It thus allows the preacher to allude to the judgment speeches before the shift to a first-person dialogue between Israel (“us”) in 6:1–3 and Yahweh (“I”) in 6:4–6.⁵ Since Hos 6:7–10 returns to the indictments of sin and the mention of specific towns (Adam, Gilead, Shechem), the boundaries of 5:15–6:6 make sense and provide a manageable textual unit. Within these boundaries comes further evidence of the current unity of the passage, especially in the way that the speech of Israel (6:1–3) reflects the speech of the Lord (6:4–6) in a loose—though not precisely balanced—chiastic structure. The strongest reflection occurs as the human perception of God “like the showers” (v. 3) sharply contrasts with the divine perception of humankind, whose love is “like the dew” (v. 4). The hope of resurrection life in v. 2 contrasts with the language of killing and death in v. 5. Recognizing the power of these contrasting portraits is all fine and well; what we should do with them moves us into the second stage of reflection.

HOSEA 5:15–6:6 AS SERMON TEXT

The tension in the text

My autobiographical introduction referred to the way in which scholarly opinion forced me to reconsider my initial instincts about this passage. What was most disconcerting for me was the fact that the song of repentance in vv. 1–3

⁴See Wolff, *Hosea*, 108, but compare Stuart’s suggestion that 7:1 is a significant break, making 7:1b–16 a new unit (*Hosea-Jonah*, 100). In favor of Wolff’s view is the repetition of *shofar* (horn) found in 5:8 and 8:1, its only two occurrences in Hosea.

⁵James L. Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 92. The Septuagint adds “saying” after v. 15 to transition into 6:1–3.

seemed to be a sincere and laudable statement of true Israelite religion, one that reflected Hosea's own perspective on the situation. Such an interpretation characterized patristic scholars, and the Reformers followed suit. Luther saw Israel's belief that God will heal as the place "where the kingdom of Christ begins." Indeed, the law cannot teach someone the faith "to turn to a God who strikes."⁶ Similarly, Calvin states that we have evidence here "that the beginning of repentance is a sense of God's mercy" and that Hosea "introduces the godly thus speaking for this reason...that they might rise up to the hope of salvation."⁷

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Modern critical scholarship is not as certain that "the godly" are speaking this call to repentance or that Hosea agrees with their theology. One reads that "the song cannot be an ideal model for the people's penitence spoken by Yahweh or recommended by the prophet....The song and the response it represents come short of Yahweh's expectations."⁸ Another scholar calls it a "song of feeble repentance" because "the crucial requirement of 'admitting their guilt' has been omitted."⁹ There remain, of course, scholarly voices that defend the song as "Hoseanic in style," that "it represents a faithful presentation of covenant teaching."¹⁰ Both of these views attempt to account for the disjunction between the human speech of vv. 1–3 and the divine response of vv. 4–6, but they appeal to different aspects of the biblical language and different interpretations of the context. What, then, is the preacher to do with the commentators? Will we miss the message of the text if we adopt one interpretation over another? The homiletical implications and applications could be significantly affected by this decision. On the one hand, if the song of repentance is feeble, then the energy of the text may turn more toward an indictment of Israel's insincere worship and their search for quick-fix solutions to their problems. On the other hand, if the language represents true repentance, then the preacher may focus on the portrait of a God who "heals and revives" after discipline. How do we move beyond this impasse?

The way forward begins with the recognition that we cannot perfectly reconstruct the original setting of these prophetic oracles nor the process by which they were placed together. This lack of historical certainty about the origin and trans-

⁶Martin Luther, "Lectures on Hosea," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 18 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1975) 31.

⁷John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets," in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 13 (second half) (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 215, 221.

⁸Mays, *Hosea*, 94.

⁹David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989) 124, 125.

¹⁰Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 107.

mission of the text means that both views are resting partly on a conjecture about the relationship of the oracles. Since we have full access only to the text in its present canonical context, we have to appreciate the existing tension for what it is—a true tension that does not resolve itself at this stage in the book. In this regard, Gale Yee insightfully suggests that the book of Hosea is “like a musical score whose notes are read both horizontally in a linear progression and vertically to create chords.” As it now stands, Hos 6:1–3 functions as a “counterpoint” with Hos 10:12 and 11:10–11 in order to “prepare for the conclusion of the book.”¹¹ Thus, even if Yee is wrong about a “later redactor” being responsible for such counterpointing, the literary and theological effect of the passage remains the same. This first, tentative foray into a renewed and revived relationship with God stands side by side with divine consternation over human inconsistency. The preacher can therefore work creatively with the passage’s internal contrast between an imperfect, human repentance and a perfect, divine righteousness.

The exposition of the text

There are many ways to expound a passage of Scripture, and preachers should experiment with a variety of techniques for sermon organization and delivery. What follows, therefore, is one way to articulate the contents of Hos 5:15–6:6. The inherent ambiguity in the text over how well Israel really understands the knowledge of God does not eliminate the value of Israel’s insights. That is, the critique of insincerity in the song of repentance is not necessarily a condemnation of the theology within the song. Building on the tension created by the language and structure of the two contrasting speeches, I see at least three concepts around which God responds to the human search to know God.

1. *The expectation that divine presence is the setting for human knowledge of God.* If the painful experiences of the 730s B.C.E. have done anything, they have awakened within God’s people their sense of need for God. The song of repentance is anchored by the twofold call: “Let us return” (v. 1) and “Let us know” (v. 3). Moreover, the beginning of Israel’s speech of repentance clarifies their awareness that the only place for them to go is to the Lord. Verse 1 consciously repeats the Lord’s own speech of v. 15, though the parallelism in English is not as striking as it is in Hebrew. To translate the phrases rather literally, the Lord says, “I will *come*, I will *return* to my place,” and Israel immediately says, “Let us *come*, let us *return* to the Lord.” The obvious conclusion is that Israel thinks of its place as being with the Lord, who is their “dwelling place” (Ps 90:1). Having received their just punishment for all kinds of violations of the covenant, they may indeed be trying to make amends too quickly, trying to do anything to avoid further pain and suffering.¹² As Mays argues, “Israel and Judah must experience their calamities as suffering for sin.”¹³ But the natural human tendency to avoid facing the awful truth about our-

¹¹Gale A. Yee, “The Book of Hosea,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 249.

¹²The language of 6:5 echoes the covenant curses of Deut 32–33 (Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 109–110).

¹³Mays, *Hosea*, 93.

selves does not mean that Israel is wrong about “their place.” They implicitly understand that they cannot *know of* God if they do not *go to* God. Their leaders were responsible for the people’s “lack of knowledge” (4:6) and for emphasizing the traditional, ceremonial forms of worship that took the focus away from the weightier matters of the law (6:6; see Matt 23:23).¹⁴ Nevertheless, at the core of its being, Israel knew its place was with God because it was their God who thoroughly knew them in all their sinfulness and frailty (5:3).

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God if they do not go to God”*

2. *The awareness that divine justice and loyalty are a model for human relationships.* The instinct to return to the God who created, called, and formed Israel (Isa 43:1) is only the first step for those who make a fledgling attempt to repent. The people have to relearn that their relationship with God is intricately bound up with their human relationships and that God’s very nature is the pattern for Israel’s life. Our passage gets at this problem in a couple of ways, the first by an indirect contrast of imagery and the second through explicit declaration of God’s standards. Israel knows that God is steadfastly loyal, one whose “appearing is as sure as the dawn” (v. 3), but the Lord knows that Israel’s character is just the opposite. Their “love (*hesed*) is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (v. 4b). This not-so-subtle critique is augmented by the direct language of God’s command in v. 6: “I desire steadfast love (*hesed*) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” But Israel has failed to be loyal and loving toward God and neighbor. “*Hesed* means the attitude and acts which loyally maintain and implement a given relationship, the covenant in Hosea’s usage.”¹⁵ The way God had treated Israel—requiring justice and showing loyal love—was the model for how Israel was to exist as a community of the covenant. They had failed miserably thus far, but they could still hope for a new day.

3. *The hopefulness that divine consistency will transform our human inconsistency.* God’s consistent character forms the basis for Israel’s confidence that by returning to the Lord they will be transformed from death to life (v. 2).¹⁶ Scholars

¹⁴Issues of liturgical reform may lie behind the contrast between sacrifices and steadfast love. The Israelite religious establishment surely thought that ceremonial practices were a sufficient step in the right direction. James Limburg correctly identifies here what *ultimately* can become “two fundamentally different notions of religion” (*Hosea-Micah* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1988] 29); but in the eighth-century B.C.E. context it is likely that Hosea believed that *hesed* (steadfast love) had priority over the external observances (Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 110). On Jesus’ use of this passage in Matt 9:9, see Mary Hinkle, “Learning What Righteousness Means: Hosea 6:6 and the Ethic of Mercy in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Word & World* 18/4 (1998) 355–363.

¹⁵Mays, *Hosea*, 98. Wolff, *Hosea*, 120, states, “The concept of *hesed* indicates how completely the right relationship with God forms the basis of the Old Testament ethos.”

¹⁶Scholars have explored the historical and religious roots of the language of resurrection. Yee provides a helpful summary of the proposals (“The Book of Hosea,” 249–250). Israel’s understanding of national resurrection is only loosely tied to ancient divine resurrection myths (Wolff, *Hosea*, 118–119).

have debated whether the language of “two days...on the third day” is further evidence that the people have not admitted the seriousness of their guilt. Others say the language should not be taken literally but as a figurative allusion to the coming age of the kingdom. Once again, however, the ambiguity highlights the divine-human contrast. Whatever the level of Israel’s sincerity, their hope is not completely off base. Whenever the day of God’s appearing may be, it will bring a miraculous renewal of life to God’s people, a refreshment compared to the “the showers” and “the spring rains that water the earth” (v. 3).¹⁷ Of course, the language of rising “on the third day” moved many early church theologians to see the pattern of Christ’s resurrection, and the prophet’s language probably does serve as a partial basis of the New Testament’s tradition (1 Cor 15:4; Luke 24:7). The force of the words in Hosea’s book, however, is that God’s covenantal nature is to restore the people after disciplining them, for the very heart of God is bound up with the people about whom God asks, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?” (6:4). Later in Hosea, a similar soul-searching question moves the Lord to declare, “How can I give you up, Ephraim?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender...they shall come trembling...and I will return them to their homes” (11:8–11). Such oracles are ultimately Israel’s only hope, and our only hope as well.

FOR US

The congregation that gathers in worship will hear both conviction in the indictment of ritualistic tendencies and comfort in the promise of spiritual renewal. Such is the ebb and flow of the life of God’s people. At any given time, we struggle with some issues while we thrive with others. The principles on which Hosea critiqued ancient Israel surely warn us that a society that abandons the needy and prizes mere ritual over integrity will eventually run aground on its own self-absorption. The prophet also spurs us on to seek the God whose steadfast loyalty claims us and moves us into the knowledge of God in the midst of sincere worship. And that is finally our goal as preachers. We arrive on Sunday morning with the fruit of our labor in the vineyard of scriptural truth, humbled by the difficulty of discerning just how that knowledge is apprehended in the pastor’s study and proclaimed to the community of faith. ⊕

JAMES K. MEAD is associate professor of religion at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. He is the author of Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes (Westminster John Knox, 2007).

¹⁷The imagery of rain may indeed be an allusion to Israel’s struggle over Baal worship, since that ancient Near Eastern deity’s “peculiar provenance” was rain (Mays, *Hosea*, 96), but Stuart is also correct that the image does not require us to assign Canaanite thinking to this verse (*Hosea-Jonah*, 109).