
The Cross of Hosea Revisited: The Meaning of Suffering in the Book of Hosea

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What can it mean to talk of ‘revisiting’ the cross that Hosea carried? In the first place, it is a useful piece of academic shorthand; while it proposes to reflect once again upon the prophet’s experience of suffering in his personal life, at the same time it hints that we are to *reconsider* the views offered by the eminent Baptist scholar H. Wheeler Robinson in a series of lectures he gave in 1935 entitled *The Cross of Hosea*. As a later successor to Wheeler Robinson in the Principalship of Regent’s Park College, Oxford, it gives me particular satisfaction to take up this theme. But we may find that to ‘revisit’ the cross of Hosea is more than an academic quest. Wheeler Robinson himself invites us to understand the experience of Hosea as more than a mere illustration or foreshadowing of Calvary; he suggests that the love that transforms a sinful life was made *actual* in the experience of Hosea, “culminated in the Cross of Christ, and is continued in the countless other crosses of God’s prophets and apostles in all generations.”

In this sense, theological reflection upon human and divine suffering in the work of this Israelite prophet of the late 8th century B.C. should help us to understand the crosses that we visit *here and now*—or which visit us. Of course, to understand *how* all these crosses relate to the atoning work of God and are ‘gathered up into one great cross’ is a profoundly difficult theological task that I hope we shall find some light upon as we proceed.

Even to make this claim assumes that the story of Hosea’s painful marriage to Gomer is not an invented allegory of Israel’s unfaithfulness to Yahweh, but history. I see no reason to doubt this. As Wheeler Robinson once more reminds us, the prophecy alerts us to the fact that God is “known by what he does in history.” While Hosea’s sorrow over Gomer is certainly a metaphor of Yahweh’s sorrow over his people, it is a revelation embodied in historic event, for this is the measure of God’s commitment to human existence. As a more recent scholar, Terence Fretheim, has expressed it, “by participating in the realities of God’s life, [the prophet] lives out before the people the life of God.” As Wheeler Robinson affirms, in Hosea we see the interweaving of revelation and human experience; but the exact *manner* in which the human experience of suffering relates to the call to speak on behalf of a suffering God is another of those theological questions that we shall need to tease out, and to this we now turn.

The Call to Share in the Divine Pathos

It is well known that there are two interlinked problems associated with the story of the marriage of Hosea. First, was Gomer actually an unchaste woman and known to be so when Hosea married her, or did he discover this during the course of the marriage? Second, what is the relation of the narrative about the nameless unfaithful woman of chapter 3 to the story of Gomer in chapter 1?

My purpose here is not to develop arguments in detail on these matters of interpretation. But the decisions we take about them do have a strong bearing upon our particular concern with the meaning of suffering in Hosea. To take the second problem first, if we decide (as I have myself concluded) that the third chapter is to be taken at its face value as being in sequence to the first chapter, rather than being a parallel account of the same incident or an account of events prior to Hosea's marriage, then an important insight emerges. The ordering of the first three chapters makes clear that at least part of God's painful experience *precedes* the experience of the prophet.

If we accept a sequential understanding, then in the first part of the story, Gomer is declared to be guilty of adultery (1:2). Her guilt *may* be underlined by the names given to the second and third children—Lo-ruhamah ('not pitied') and Lo-ammi ('not my people')—which could be hinting at Hosea's outraged doubt about their paternity; more likely, however, all three names are an oracular condemnation of Israel. Chapter 2 moves into the style of divine autobiography, applying this picture of a family tragedy extensively to Israel. The nation has committed adultery against her husband Yahweh through allegiance to the Baal fertility cult, and will reap the harvest of the seeds of disaster she has sown. Nevertheless the chapter ends with Yahweh's promise that he will restore his faithless wife, enticing her into a new betrothal (2:14–20), and so reversing the old condemnatory names of the children (2:22–23). Chapter 3 then relates Hosea's aim to reconcile his own adulterous wife, winning her back from servitude to another man or to the temple cult into which she has fallen.

So the sequence of the three chapters makes clear that the painful process of reconciliation is endured first by God. At least in resolve God has suffered the cost of forgiveness and persistent love (chapter 2), and it is in the light of this revelation that Hosea is called to reclaim Gomer: "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, *just as Yahweh loves* the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods" (3:1). That is, the prophet finds that he is called to share in the sorrow and suffering of a God who is grieved for his people; he finds himself caught up into the situation of a God who is already in pain, and only thus does he discover the path of the cross to which he is also called.

We shall return to the theological implications of this shortly, after observing that the same insight emerges when we examine the first problem, even though I

think it less possible to resolve the exegetical issues with any certainty. What are we to understand by God's command to Hosea "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom... for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord (1:2)"? The whole issue is complicated by the nature of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh; because the Baal cult involved its worshippers in ritual sexual acts to ensure fertility of the land and of the people, the meaning of 'whoredom' is really threefold—it is spiritual, physical-cultic and therefore also literal (the worshippers must break their marital fidelity). The two most likely explanations of God's command, however, *both* support our insight, though in admittedly different ways. It may be (and I incline to this view myself) that Hosea is called to commit the prophetic action of wedding a woman who is already known to be unchaste before her marriage, perhaps as a temple prostitute in the cult of Baal, or as a young woman who had undergone a single act of sexual initiation in the cult. If it be protested that God would not require this of his prophet, it must be replied that the action of taking back an adulterous wife in chapter 3 is no less shocking from a Hebrew perspective.

Now, if Gomer is already known to be a "whore" in this sense before her marriage to Hosea, then it is very clear that God's experience precedes that of the prophet. Hosea is being called to take the path of the cross *in imitation* of God's own journey, in order to make God's tragedy visible to Israel. Not just in the pain of reconciliation (chapter 2) but in the earlier agony of discovering unfaithfulness, God's own suffering pre-dates the human tragedy. In fact, we can find the same insight in the alternative exegesis of 1:2, one that understands God's command in an anticipatory or proleptic sense. When the prophet came to interpret his life in the light of events, it is suggested, he came to find God's providential hand in the fact that he had unconsciously taken a wife *destined* to be adulterous. The linguistic argument of Andersen and Freedman that "wife of whoredom" (ešet zenunim) must mean an 'adulteress,' i.e. a *married* woman, and not simple 'unchaste', does not finally settle the matter in favour of this exegesis; the intimate blending of metaphorical and literal senses of 'adultery' I have already referred to is bound to confuse the issue. Nevertheless, if we do accept the anticipatory sense, we still have to ask *why* the marriage of Hosea should be related so starkly as a divine command: "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom." It might be underlining the inevitable nature of God's plan for Hosea's life, but this I suggest would undermine the freedom of Hosea's response to God's call, which is part of the nature of love as this very book reveals it. We would do better to understand the form of command as a way of emphasizing again the priority of God's experience: it would be an idiom for asserting that in fact, though unbeknown to him, Hosea in his personal life would be imitating the example of God himself.

Now, this disclosure of the prevenience of the divine sorrow has important theological implications. So far I have been referring to the pain of God over

Israel's faithfulness as if it were quite proper to speak of a God who actually suffers. In this I have been reflecting the results of much theological thought in this century which has overturned traditional belief in an impassible God; and not least I have been following the affirmation of divine suffering in the studies of Wheeler Robinson on "The Cross in the Old Testament."¹² I believe I have also been faithful to the plain sense of this piece of scripture (among many others) where—as Fretheim puts it—"the sufferings of prophet and God are so interwoven that they cannot be meaningfully separated." But there are, of course, still theologians who want to follow classical thinkers like Calvin in maintaining that when scripture speaks of God's grief and compassion for his people, this is merely a figure of speech that accommodates to our understanding, "in order to move us more powerfully and draw us to himself."¹⁴ Other defenders of divine impassibility in more modern times have attempted to ascribe to God a sympathetic or imaginative involvement in the suffering of the world that touches his feeling but falls short of a suffering in his very *being*.

But ideas of "accommodation" or of a merely "imaginative" response of God to human suffering hardly do justice to the experience of such prophets as Hosea. He believed that *he* was being called into sympathy with *God's* pain. Hosea does not simply find that God is sharing in some way in his sorrow; he is confronted with a sorrow of God that is *already there*, and he is therefore called to actions that would make this visible to others. The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori speaks of this prevenient suffering as God's 'transcendent pain', and with fine exegetical insight he points out that prophets such as Hosea only became aware of the desperation of the human situation around them because they found themselves in God's own situation of suffering. So, he claims, we are called to make human pain "serve the pain of God." Similarly, the Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel speaks of the prophet as a man who is in sympathy with the pathos of God; it is as if God says, "My pathos is not your pathos." As one might expect, Wheeler Robinson strikes a similar note. In his study of *The Cross of Jeremiah* he speaks of the unique "tragedy" of God in the disappointment he suffers over his "defeated purpose." However, I have to remark that the note of God's prior suffering is a little quieter in his study of *The Cross of Hosea*. He certainly insists that the prophet "suffers with the suffering of God," but he places most emphasis upon the way that Hosea's own family tragedy awakens him to the meaning of God's suffering. He can even speak of Hosea's "fearless projection" onto the consciousness of God of his own experience of the cost of a gracious attitude towards Gomer. Of course, Robinson rightly affirms that our experience of suffering love can give us clues to the meaning of God's own love, and he bases this analogy in a "kinship" between human and divine personality rooted in the Incarnation.²¹ In the next section I want to pursue this direction of the analogy further. But perhaps Wheeler Robinson needed to say more in this study about the way that (as he says himself) "God's love for humanity becomes our starting

point.” In the “intercourse” between human experience and revelation, there is a two-way movement. It is not only that revelation can use what is known in human life to illuminate the unknown in the nature of God; the divine self-unveiling first of all illuminates what is mysterious in human personality and relationships, and especially the character of forgiveness.

The Vulnerability of Suffering

When we have been called to share in the suffering of God by his revealing of the cross in his heart, our human experience can thereafter be of some value in testifying to the nature of his own divine love. As I have already suggested, following Wheeler Robinson, this arises for a Christian believer from God’s commitment in Christ to the taking of human personality into himself. But developing an analogy between human and divine suffering has radical results. Often today theological writers express astonishment that the Fathers of the early church and the scholastic theologians could have been so opposed to saying that God suffers. But as soon as we go beyond mere sentimentalism, we can see why they thought patripassianism to be so dangerous an idea. When we think at all carefully about our human experience of suffering, we see that it means being affected, conditioned and afflicted by another. A suffering God must be “vulnerable” in its full definition of ‘open to being wounded.’ As Daniel Day Williams expresses it:

There can be no love without suffering. Suffering in the widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of, or in relation to, another.

To love is to be in relationship, where what the loved one does alters one’s own experience. The person who loves must take the other into account as he or she is, receiving what he or she has to offer. To affirm that God is affected and even enriched in his being by his human partners like this is not necessarily to undermine the sovereignty of God. He would be less than God if he had such conditioning forced upon him from outside; but he retains his sovereign initiative if he *freely chooses* to be open to his world like this for the sake of creating true personalities and real relationships. He remains God if it is his *desire* to be glorified through his creation.

Hosea does not hesitate to depict God as being affected by his unfaithful human lovers. Like other prophets, he typically expresses the divine “hurt” as lying in the rejection of his loving care. A motif that runs through his prophecy is the cry from the heart of God that “they did not understand.” Israel has taken God’s good gifts and rejected the giver. In the area of agricultural life, “she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil,” and she attributed these love-gifts to Baal (2:8). In political life, she did not realize that it was Yahweh who was disciplining her through her circumstances, and instead resorted to diplomatic alliances with the super-powers of Assyria and Egypt

(5:13). In her history of growth as a nation, pictured as the development of a young child, she did not know that it was Yahweh who was nurturing her and helping her to grow towards maturity:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,

I took them up in my arms;

but *they did not know* that I healed them (11:3).

All the hurt of rejected love is summed up in the cry of the parent that “When Israel was a child, I loved him” (11:1). In the two major images for Israel, Yahweh has been rejected by wife (chapter 2) and by child (chapter 11), who have never really known him. Perhaps the lack of “knowledge” (4:6, 14) also reflects Israel’s neglect of the covenant which ought to have stood at the heart of the relationship between God and people with its mutual obligations and demand for “righteousness” (6:7, 8:1). While it seems that the pre-exilic prophets make a rather cautious use of the idea of covenant, recent exegesis has confirmed that it has both an explicit and an implicit place. Hosea personalizes the covenant so that it virtually appears as a set of “marriage vows” (2:18–19), plays upon the sexual connotations of “knowledge” and tends altogether to re-define covenant as *hesed* (‘loving kindness’—2:19, 4:1, 6:4, 6:10–12, 12:6). Despite all the dangers implicit in the idea of “sacred marriage” within the Baal cult, Hosea dares to plunder the treasury of his opponents and to use the language of divine love to describe the bond between Yahweh and Israel. It is significant, however, that there appears to be no equivalent for *hesed* in Ugaritic and Canaanite culture.

This is the weight of feeling that lies behind the lament that “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.... you have rejected knowledge” (4:6). It is against this that we may measure the claim of some theologians, defending a divine impassibility, that love need not imply being injured or hurt. R.E. Creel, for example, maintains that a true lover is mature enough not to grieve if he is rejected by the free choice of his partner, and so God “can be perfectly happy no matter what happens to us in this life and no matter whether we choose for or against his kingdom.” Creel argues that God’s satisfaction is fulfilled simply by the fact that his creatures have had the choice. However, it is hard to accept this view of God as the supreme exponent of liberal individualism when confronted by the agony of God as expressed in Hosea: “I took them up in my arms, but they did not know”

Perhaps the greatest challenge to a thorough-going view of divine suffering would be to make a distinction between the immanent being of God and his activity in the world. The argument runs that in his activity towards us, and especially in his encounter with us in the incarnate Christ, God is passible and passionate; in his inner being, however, he is impassible and passionless. Weighed against the pain of God made visible in the relationship between Hosea and Gomer, even this seems to limit the divine vulnerability too much. But what

perhaps such theologians are really concerned about is that God should finally be able to achieve his purposes. He must be able to reach his goal of overcoming evil and reconciling his creation if he is God. This, I believe, can however be described in some other way than keeping a reservoir of invulnerability within God.

Certainly, divine suffering cannot be exactly like ours, or there would be no redemption. As Wheeler Robinson points out, “the Christian conception of God cannot be of a worn and anxious and burdened traveler, fearful lest he may not reach his world-goal.” He carries the burden of his people, but does so willingly, and will reach triumph through apparent defeat. However, the prophecy of Hosea must cause the theologian to ask about the nature of this final triumph. We are not told whether Hosea succeeded in restoring Gomer to a loving marital relationship. It seems that the divine promise for a re-betrothal of Israel apparently failed, as Northern Israel was invaded and conquered by Sargon II of Assyria in 722-1 B.C. and thereafter lost its national identity. What happened to Yahweh’s hopes for his bride? Clearly, she failed to respond with her own *hesed* that would have made for life, but did God then fail to achieve his goal? Just how vulnerable is God? How great are the risks he runs? Wheeler Robinson does not, alas, tackle these questions.

If God truly opens himself in suffering to his world, there must be some openness about the way that his purposes are fulfilled. Reflecting on the Old Testament theme of God’s rejection by his people, Fretheim writes that this means that “God’s future is at issue”; when God asks through Hosea, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (6:4), these are not merely rhetorical questions. How the people respond to God’s attempts to find a way through the breach in relationship “will determine the shape of the future that God and people have together.” We may say that, while it determines the *shape* of the future, it does not alter the fact of God’s victory over evil. To quote another Old Testament scholar, “God fulfils his promises in unexpected ways,”³⁰ because he leaves room for human response and for his own creative freedom to take new paths. God has *promises* and *purposes*, not exact blueprints that he fulfils. There is something open-ended about a purpose, that can be worked out in surprising ways.

In the case of Hosea, the passing of the prophecies to Judah after the fall of Samaria, and its subsequent reception, editing and transmission there, meant that God’s promises (as well as his warnings) were now seen as applying in a new way to the Southern Kingdom (see e.g., 1:7, 11:12) and its successors. God does not fail to go on offering restoration to people who will respond with repentance and faith. At the same time, we should not be too quick to write off Northern Israel; as a nation it ceased to exist, but it still had people with a future—a scattered remnant, often despised, marginalized and of mixed race it is

true, but still precious to God, and still the recipients of his grace (as a certain Samaritan in a parable of Jesus makes clear). In his suffering God is vulnerable to rejection, then, but still undefeated in finding new ways to fulfill his purposes and reach his world-goal.

So far in this article we have been discussing one meaning of suffering in the book of Hosea. Suffering may be in sympathy with the suffering of God. This may happen because the result of imitating God's love in a fallen world will be to suffer the reproach and hostility of others. Other sufferers will begin as the mere victims of the sinful choices that others make, choices that stem from the free-will that God gives to all his creatures when he allows them the freedom to become real persons. According to such a "free will defense" of the fact of suffering, God does not design or plan the suffering of the victims "for their own good." But the victims—like Hosea, a victim of a broken marriage—can actively take hold of their suffering and turn it into the suffering of love. So they may "stand by God in his hour of grieving" (Bonhoeffer) or allow their pain "to serve the pain of God" (Kitamori). What this love may achieve in a redemptive or vicarious way we shall see later.

Suffering as Judgment

But there is another kind of suffering in the Book of Hosea, the suffering of those who have turned away from the nurture of God. We have been discussing the divine sorrow for human life, and in Hosea's prophecy God's grief is not only for rejected love, but for the plight to which his people have come through that rejection. Here we touch upon one reason for suffering which we ought not to neglect—sin. Of course, there is the danger that this will harden into a dogma of retribution, and the Old Testament book of Job stands as a protest against the view that a person's suffering is always—or even often—the result of his or her sin. But it remains as one reason for suffering.

Hosea re-uses the religious traditions of Northern Israel in a surprising and shocking way in order to pronounce judgment. The Northern tribes had cherished the traditions of the Patriarchs and the Exodus from Egypt (whereas the favorite Southern tradition had been the choice of Jerusalem by Yahweh and the establishment of the Davidic house), and they seem to have relied upon these stories as cast-iron guarantees of Yahweh's election and favour. They thought that these were assurances of their survival despite social injustice against the poor, violence, murder and religious hypocrisy (4:1–3, 6:7–10). While the theme of the covenant is not prominent, and Sinai itself is never mentioned, it seems to be implied that Israel has exalted the traditions it finds congenial, and ignored the covenantal one under which it had obligations to live a life pleasing to God. Hosea now reverses expectations: those who celebrate the Festival of Tents in remembrance of the wilderness wanderings that followed the Exodus from Egypt will find themselves repeating it now in deadly earnest; they must re-trace their

steps back into Egypt—that is the new “Egypt” of slavery in Assyria (12:9, 9:5–6, 8:13, 11:5–6):

They shall return to the land of Egypt

and Assyria shall be their king,

because they have refused to return to me ...

Nor is their descent from the Patriarchs any guarantee of safety. Hosea mocks this pride of inheritance, presenting a divine law-suit against them by making a satirical report on the offences of their eponymous ancestor Jacob (“in the womb he tried to supplant his brother,” 11:2–3). Judah does not escape judgment either; many of the indictments against the Southern kingdom are too enmeshed within Hosea’s oracles of judgment to be later Southern editing. Like Israel, Judah has neglected the guidance of God by making opportunist alliances with foreign powers, and in particular has taken the occasion of Israel’s weakness after the failure of Israel’s coalition with Syria against Assyria (735-32 B.C.) to join forces with Assyria to invade the North and extend the Southern border into its territory (5:10, 8:8–14).

The suffering that will result from sin is depicted in graphic terms; the ravaging invader will lay waste cities, and kill not only the officials but children and pregnant women in the most brutal way. For the theologian, this raises acute questions of theodicy; is God inflicting suffering like this as a punishment? In what sense can the merciless Sargon be said to be his instrument? The prophecy of Hosea presents Yahweh as a suffering God, and modern theologians of liberation have rightly stressed that a suffering God places himself on the side of the victims not the oppressors. Is there then a contradiction here between the vulnerability and the judgment of God?

Actually, we find that Hosea depicts the judgment of God not so much as a penalty upon sin inflicted from outside, but as God’s underwriting of the natural consequences of the sin itself. Sin is portrayed as containing the seeds of its own self-destruction, as being its own penalty. Here Wheeler Robinson made a notable contribution in his study of Hosea, showing how the prophet portrays sin as breeding an inner attitude of alienation from God and a deadly “atrophy of the will.” He lays stress upon the psychological perception of Hosea: promiscuity and drunkenness sap the will (4:11), evil acts prevent the doer from turning to God (5:4), abuse of the body leads to lack of strength (7:9), people become like the things they love (9:10) and sowing wickedness results in the reaping of injustice (10:12–13).

Surely, however, we must add two further stages to Robinson’s argument. In the first place, the *consent* of God to this working out of sin to its conclusion is a personal kind of judgment. We notice that the Old Testament prophets speak of the wrath of God as his “giving up” people to the consequences of their own actions; he “hides his face” or “turns away from” or “surrenders” his people.

Through Hosea God says “Ephraim is joined to idols—*let him alone*”, and he asks: “how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?": God’s wrath consists in allowing people to rush towards and even over the precipice if they insist on going that way. Similarly, the Apostle Paul takes up this Old Testament insight when he defines God’s wrath against the wicked as his “giving them up to the futility of their own desires” (Romans 1:24–32). But it is important to stress that this is not an impersonal process of judgment. Since God as Creator is intimately involved in all the processes of life, his consent to the consequences of sin is a personal act, and one which Hosea shows costs him great anguish and sorrow; this is no gloating abandonment. A modern theologian, Paul Tillich, identifies this divine consent as “belonging to the structure of being itself,” so that justice can be understood as “the structural form of love.” Without justice love is mere sentimentality.

In the second place, we should add that the consequences of sin are not just interior, but affect social and political life. Societies as a whole can self-destruct, and in the Book of Hosea we are given a vivid portrait of a society that is so rotten, deeply divided within and lacking leaders of integrity, that it is no match for the Assyrian invader. It is ripe for plucking. Wheeler Robinson perceives this at one point in passing, observing that “a nation that has gone so far down the slippery slope of civil strife, conspiracy and disorder as Israel could hardly have escaped from Assyria” God’s painful consent to this historic process is also his judgment,, so that he can be truly pictured as a preying lion on the road, or a rotting moth in the house (5:12–14). The theologian has to decide how to interpret two kinds of language of judgment—the language of “letting people go” and the language of direct punishment through a foreign power. I suggest that it is consonant with the nature of God revealed in Hosea to interpret the second language in terms of the first. While the Hebrew idiom is that of direct causation, with God’s sending the Assyrian army to wreak havoc, we are to understand this theologically in a more indirect way; God consents to the self-destructive consequences of sin in Israelite society, which make it an easy prey to the invader. By no means then should we suppose that God plans or approves the brutality of the Assyrian king and army, for which they, in due time, will be under the same judgment.

The Unique Pathos of God: a Blend of Love and Wrath

The view of divine judgment that emerges from Hosea’s prophecy throws light on what has sometimes been thought to be a struggle or conflict in the heart of God. The sorrow of God because his people reject his love leads to a unique kind of pain ascribed to him, a state of feeling that is characterized by the Old Testament prophets as a blend of love and wrath. The prophet Jeremiah penetrates to this anguish in the heart of God when he presents God as lamenting:

Is Ephraim still my dear son,
A child in whom I delight?
As often as I turn my back on him
I still remember him ... (Jer. 31:20).

Similarly, we find in Hosea God's apparent turmoil of heart over his son, Israel:

They shall return to the land of Egypt
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me ...
My people are bent on turning away from me...
How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel? ...
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender,
I will not execute my fierce anger ...
for I am God and not man (Hosea 11:5–9).

But this painful blend of love with wrath ("I turn my back on him") in which the love-element finally triumphs presents us with some hermeneutical problems. Some commentators and theologians identify God's unique pain as being torn between the urge to punish offenders justly, and the urge to forgive. Luther had described salvation through the cross of Christ in terms of a drama: the wrath of God comes into conflict with his love, and his love for the unworthy finally conquers; "the curse clashes with the blessing and wants to damn it and annihilate it. But it cannot."³⁷ Christian commentators in the Lutheran tradition will thus find the pain of God to be his struggle with himself in our interest—God against God. But apart from the questionable image of God this promotes, the result is to ascribe a pathos to God which is so unique that we are shut out from it; his pain is an internal transaction that does not involve us, and it is hard to see how we can be called to sympathize with it.

Another interpretation of Hosea's portrayal of the anguished mixture of love and wrath in the heart of God would be that it is simply a way of depicting an intense emotional state. He is in a torment of desire for his people, a longing which is suffused by a sense of disappointment at their failure to respond. While in v.8 Yahweh speaks as if he is a man incapable of action because of his divided feelings, indecisively hovering between the demands of the broken covenant and a love which can never desert his child, in v.9 he announces his resolve on the grounds of his utter *difference* from man. So J.L. Mays aptly points out that this "apparent inconsistency" is a warning that God "transcends

the metaphor.” The actions and feelings of Yahweh can be translated into a dramatic metaphor where “the personal reality of Yahweh’s incursion into human life and history is present and comprehensible”; but at the same time, he is free of all the limitations of the image. What this portrayal of an apparent struggle tells us is that the future of Israel shall not be determined by her sin and the wrath that follows upon it, but by the identity and love of God himself.

This is really as far as Wheeler Robinson also goes in commenting on this poem. It presents, he suggests, “the fundamental fact in the relation of God to Israel; he cannot let her go because He is what He is.” While I agree with this insight, and that of J.L. Mays, I think we may say a little more about the supposed “conflict” in the heart of God. When we understand the judgment of God as his active consent to the working out of sin into its consequences, then we cannot view it as a divine indifference, a standing back in non-involvement. Just because God is passionately concerned with the life of his world he cannot “give up” people to their own desires without feeling all the pain of the consequences himself, and without protesting against the situation which sin has brought into being: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How surrender you, Israel?” As God suffers the anguish of giving them up in his judgment, so at the same time he continually woos them back to himself in his love; if they will only return, there will be no more “wrath,” since they will no longer be on their headlong rush towards calamity. Neither wrath nor restoration are a mechanical process of causation, but are to do with personal relations, and so both mean pain for God. There is then no *conflict* of love and wrath within God; *both* mean suffering for him, in an intricate double movement of pain, a complex experience that can be described poetically but not literally as a struggle with himself.

Any Christian commentator will, of course, want to add that this divine experience reaches its climax in the cross of Jesus. There we can dimly glimpse the mystery of the pain of God, suffering in enduring the consequences of his own judgment against human life, and suffering with a love that opens up the future in hope. To affirm that the cross reveals both the judgment and the love of God does not mean that they are in conflict with each other. Out of that deep identification with human desolation there comes a power to transform human personalities, and it is to this aspect of suffering in Hosea to which we finally turn.

Suffering as Transformative

Theologians seeking to construct a theodicy will sometimes appeal to an “instrumental” view of evil and suffering. Pain, it is suggested, is necessary for growth and development towards maturity, in a world which is a “vale of soul-making”; it can be educational either for the sufferer himself or for those who observe and cope with his suffering, giving them opportunities to develop virtues that could not be gained in any other way.⁴¹ As a theodicy in itself this is less than satisfactory, as the amount of suffering and misery in the world is far too

disproportionate to be thought to be an educational project of a good creator. But there is some truth in the idea as a support to a “free-will theodicy”; while no theodicy can ever finally convince, we might begin to understand the world as the work of a good creator, if suffering is the result of human free choice, and also if God does all he can to redeem the situation of suffering that results. So suffering that God does not intend or plan can still be used by him to produce virtues such as compassion and sacrificial care, and to refine human personality.

It is this kind of picture that emerges from the witness of Hosea. Through his prophet God declares that punishment (the consequences of sinful choices) can become discipline, that judgment can become the means of reforming his erring people. This redemption of suffering is depicted in terms that recapitulate Israel’s exodus experience of the past. Israel must re-trace her steps into “Egypt” (i.e., exile in Assyria), but God’s commitment to his people in *hesed* can create a repentant response, which means they can move on from “Egypt” into the stage of the “wilderness” experience (2:14). Although ascetic movements such as the Rechabites had a purely romantic view of this period of Israel’s early history, outside the temptations of the settled land of Canaan, it seems that Hosea himself sees a negative side to the wilderness. As Gomer is to be reclaimed through the discipline of being deprived of intimate human relationship (3:3), so Israel is to endure the discipline in the wilderness of being deprived of all the features of her civilized life that she thought so important (3:4, cf. 2:6 “I will hedge up her way with thorns”). Under the transforming effect of God’s *hesed*, the wilderness can then in time become a positive experience of new betrothal between Yahweh and his bride. As in the days of her youth, when she first came out of Egypt, Yahweh will court her and win her (2:15–16), and she will respond with new covenantal vows to her husband. This is no nostalgic, Rechabite dream of a return to a nomadic existence, for Yahweh will lead his newly won bride through “the door of hope” back into the land of Canaan, and it is there that new fertility is to come in harmony among people, animals and fruits of the earth (2:18–22).

In this vision there is a fluidity in the movement between scenes set in Egypt, wilderness and Canaan which may cause exegetical problems, but which expresses the shifting boundaries between punishment, discipline and reconciliation. Exactly where, for example, discipline flows into the period of courting is difficult to demarcate in chapter 2 (“I will now allure her and bring her into the wilderness,” v.14). Judgment becomes a learning experience as a repentant attitude grows: “she will make answer as in the days of her youth.” But what creates the repentance? Here Wheeler Robinson in his study of Hosea takes a leap of theological imagination, proposing that the response is created precisely through the suffering identification of God with his sinful people, bearing their burdens.

Robinson finds that Hosea's redemptive action towards Gomer consists in accepting the burden of responsibility for the unholy will of another, with the result that "the sin is transformed in [his] consciousness into suffering." He suggests that when someone enters in solidarity into the life of an offender, there is objectively "an actual transformation of the evil of suffering" into good within the one who forgives. Subjectively, this bearing of the burden is an "evangelical appeal" to the sinner, which can produce the victory of grace in his or her heart. If this was true of Hosea, how much more of Yahweh as husband of Israel, a persistent love which was finally expressed in Jesus Christ as friend of sinners. "In the mystery of man's life within God, God bears the sin through suffering, and shares the burden with his saints." So Robinson, as a Christian systematic theologian—whose skill is in making connections—weaves together the image of the faithful husband who woos back his unfaithful wife (2:14, 3:1) with the portrayal of the suffering heart of God (11:8–9), in the immediate context of Hosea's own experience of suffering, and against the larger background of Calvary.

We may therefore notice that suffering is presented in this prophecy as "transformative" in two ways. The forgiver suffers in empathy with the one he wants to help, and this suffering becomes redemptive for the offender. At the same time, through the influence of this redeeming love, the faithless one experiences the suffering of judgment as discipline. Suffering, though not directly inflicted by God, can be used as a path to more fully personal life. There is a mysterious but intimate link here between the will to forgive, the experience of judgment and the creation of penitence. I have already referred to the fluid boundaries between these concepts in chapter 2, and this must place a question mark against any attempt to divide Hosea's oracles up between those which apparently simply promise restoration and those which require repentance.

For example, Grace Emmerson's significant study reclaims most of the prophecies of hope for Hosea himself, but she is perhaps a little over-confident in finding "two theologies of repentance" in the way they are arranged and edited. She suggests that Hosea himself understands the nation's repentant response to be entirely prompted by Yahweh's saving act in re-making the broken relationship, as shown in 2:14–15 ("I will now allure her and speak tenderly to her"). In contrast she finds that while the collection of oracles in 2:16–25 also comes from Hosea, they have been arranged in a way that betrays a Judean theology; the arrangement suggests that Israel's response has been assisted by the process of judgment (v.17, separation from the influence of the Baals) and that her response is also in some way prerequisite to God's reconciliation ("I will answer, says the Lord," v.21). But the transformative power of suffering cuts across these boundaries of thought; for instance, though God's initiative in offering pardon is totally unconditional upon any response, forgiveness aims at achieving reconciliation; so the completeness of its work is dependent upon the

response of the offenders, and this in turn involves the pain of recognizing that their life is under judgment.

If all this be true, however, we may take the insights of Wheeler Robinson one stage further. He affirms that God chooses to redeem human beings through bearing their burdens, through taking their sins into his own consciousness and transforming their effects by the power of love. In this sense, we may add, not only human beings but God himself is on a journey of discovery. Through the pain of forgiveness, God desires to enter ever more deeply into the experience of his creatures, to dwell in his own creation, to make it new and to be himself enriched through fellowship with the persons he has made.

The Christian story is that God never entered more deeply into the depths of human life in order to overcome sin than in the cross, in the person of his own Son. He has never gone further on his voyage of identification with his world. But the uniqueness of his journey in the cross does not deny his journey of experience elsewhere. So we catch just a glimpse of what it might mean for all his servants through the ages to allow their suffering to “serve the pain of God,” as they travel with him on his pilgrimage of love.¹

¹ . *Vol. 90: Review and Expositor Volume 90*. 1993 (2) (172–188). Louisville, KY: Review and Expositor.