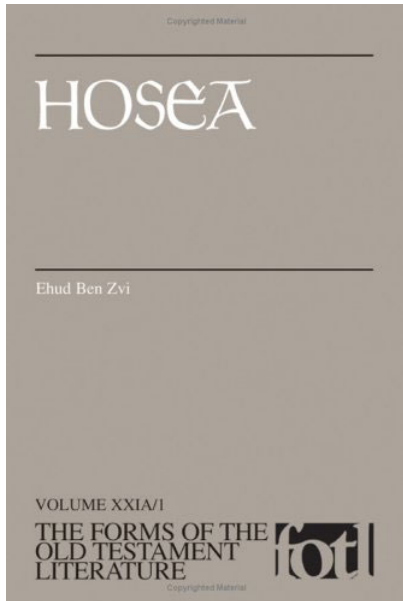


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Ben Zvi, Ehud

Hosea

Forms of the Old Testament Literature 31A.1

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Ehud Ben Zvi is no stranger to those who read and study prophetic texts. In addition to his monographs and commentaries on individual prophets, he has published numerous articles and essays on prophetic interpretation. His recent work is a welcome addition to Hosea studies.

The volume begins with a brief editorial forward explaining the purpose of the series. Unlike the older form-critical method that focuses on the oral prophetic word behind the text, the Forms of Old Testament Literature series limits its investigation to the literary forms of final written texts. The book begins with a brief introduction to the book of Hosea as a whole (ch. 1). The bulk of the book is chapter 2 (23–317!), which features a section-by-section analysis of every unit (or “Prophetic Reading”) in Hosea. Because there are no subsection listings in the table of contents (or section headers at the top of the page), the reader must thumb through these nearly three hundred pages to locate a specific passage. The book concludes with a three-and-a-half page glossary of the genre terms employed in the book. I found it helpful to read this brief glossary before reading the body of the book. Like the other volumes in this series, there are no indices of passages, subjects, or authors. The plan is to print a single index volume when the series is complete (xii). This occasionally presents an inconvenience to the reader who may need

to locate a verse referenced in other sections of the book or find a source listed in a bibliography in the beginning of the book but cited again later. As in all the volumes in the series, each larger section and its subunits (in this volume designated respectively by the genre labels “Sets of Prophetic Readings” and “Prophetic Readings”) are discussed under the fourfold arrangement of structure, genre, setting, and intention. The bibliographies that follow are extensive—they include many obscure works (including unpublished dissertations)—and show the writer’s breadth of knowledge of studies on prophetic literature and Hosea.

In chapter 1 Ben Zvi argues that Hos 1:1 presents the book of Hosea as “A Particular Instance of YHWH’s Word.” The structure, genre, setting, and intention of the book as a whole are discussed here. Ben Zvi uses the first chapter briefly to define Hosea as an “Authoritative, Ancient Israelite Prophetic Book” (11) that claims to be YHWH’s word. As a prophetic book, it contains an introduction (1:1), body (1:1–14:9), and conclusion (14:10), which sets it apart from other prophetic books. The introduction and conclusion provide interpretive keys for the whole book. As an authoritative book it is intended to be read and reread and meditated upon (or studied). In the rereading of the book (or individual readings) various cross-references are found, and multiple meanings emerge, both within a single passage (henceforth “reading”) and as readings are (re)read in view of other readings. Ben Zvi emphasizes throughout the book that these cross-references and multiple meanings are construed *by the readers*, since no one can claim access to the original authors’ intent (e.g., 255). The conceptual structure of Hosea is governed by a postmonarchic metanarrative of YHWH as faithful patron, Israel as unfaithful client, YHWH as the one who punishes Israel. Due to the deity’s love for Israel, however, YHWH will not destroy the people but in the future will bring the relationship to “its proper ideal form” (8–9). The setting of the book is twofold: (1) the world of the book, which is construed by the superscript (Hos 1:1) as eighth-century Israel and Judah (by mention of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah and Jeroboam of Israel); and (2) the world of the intended readers, the literati of postmonarchic Yehud. These literati are also the writers of the book, since they are among the very few who can read and write. As members of transtemporal Israel, the literati are the heirs of the temporal Israel of the book. Evidence for this postmonarchic setting includes references to Israel and Judah, the “quasi-messianic” hope for a future Davidic king (Hos 3:5), references to an exile and return portrayed as a reversal of the exodus and a new exodus, and depictions of an idyllic future where a new covenant will be made with Israel and the wild animals (Hos 2:16–23 [14–25], pp. 14–16; Ben Zvi uses the MT verse enumeration, which at several points differs from the LXX system adopted by many translations, e.g., the NRSV; I will supply the NRSV versification in brackets where it differs from the Hebrew). All of these have parallels in Israelite postmonarchic literature, as do a number of key terms and

word pairs (17–18). Ben Zvi claims that “[a]s with other prophetic books ... the monarchic setting of the world of the book communicates to the postmonarchic readership that some of the events foreseen by the speaker or speakers in the text have come to pass.” The partial fulfillment of the threatened destruction fortifies the hope that the promises of salvation will also come to pass (18).

Ben Zvi stresses that the genre of the composition is literary and theological, not historical. The book of Hosea “does not show much interest in historical, particular events” (19; see also 176–77, 242–43, etc.). In the glossary Ben Zvi says, “It is to be stressed that YHWH’s word that came to Hosea *signifies* a written book, to be read, reread, and studied” (319, emphasis original). Furthermore, the prophet “Hosea of the book is a literary and ideological character that lives within the world of the book” (6). The contemporary reader should not, therefore, resort to looking for the prophetic word in a reconstruction of historical events not *specifically* mentioned in the text (e.g., 80, 223, 237). All the reader has for certain are readings, found within sets of readings, contained in an authoritative prophetic book. The meaning of the text emerges only as these texts are (re)read.

Ben Zvi declares that the intent of the book is to educate, or socialize the literati and the illiterate majority to whom the literati read the book. “Through their reading and rereading of the book of Hosea, these readers are supposed to learn about YHWH and YHWH’s attributes as well as YHWH’s relationship to Israel. The book explains YHWH’s punishment of Israel in the past and above all communicates hope by pointing to the ideal future” (19). Since the word of YHWH is a written text, only those who can read have direct access to God’s word and mind. As such, the literati become “brokers of divine knowledge.” This somewhat likens the worldview of the literati with YHWH’s mind, hence the (re)reading of the authoritative text to others reinforces the notion that these illiterate masses should accept the literati’s worldview as identical with the deity’s (19–20). This places them in the position to fill the role of the wise nonroyal leaders (since the kings are presented as failures in Hosea) until the coming of the ideal Davidic leader (282–83, 286).

The contemporary reader will no doubt want to ponder the sociological implications of this reconstructed setting. In addition, I question why a group’s ability to read and write necessitates that their literary production be addressed primarily to their own circle. (This seems somewhat akin to suggesting that Paul wrote his letters primarily to Barnabas, Titus, Luke, and Silas.) In the community memory preserved in the authoritative books, the message or word of YHWH given to the prophets is always directed to those *outside*, not within, the prophetic circle. This is also the case with written documents, whether or

not the recipients personally read them (e.g., Jer 29:4–23; 36:1–31; 45:1–5; 51:59–64a; 2 Chr 22:12–15).

In chapter 2 Ben Zvi discusses each unit of Hosea according to his analysis of the book's structure. He attributes the following structure to the book: (1) introduction (1:1); (2) body (three sets of prophetic readings: A. 1:2–3:5; B. 4:1–11:11; C. 12:1–14:9 [8]); and (3) conclusion (14:10 [9]). Within each set of readings the first and last readings function as introductions and conclusions to the whole set. These prophetic readings are more narrowly defined as didactic prophetic readings, since their aim is to instruct and socialize the reader by the warnings and promises given to transtemporal Israel through the example of the monarchic Israel in the world of the book. Each set of readings begins with warnings of punishment and judgment and ends with promises of restoration. The last reading, Hos 14:2–9 [1–8], is also a fitting conclusion to the body, since it brings the hope to a high point and grounds Israel's transformation in the healing activity of YHWH. Ben Zvi notes that since the reader cannot know the intent of the writer(s) of the book, such structures being a function of the readers' (re)reading of the book. Therefore, alternative structures are plausible, and Ben Zvi usually notes the opinions of others in this regard. In addition, these alternative structures are just one aspect of the multivaliancy found in Hosea as the texts are read, reread, and studied. Ben Zvi gives several examples where multiple interpretations (or "complementary meanings") of a text might all be construed as valid for the postmonarchic community that ponders the text's meaning for monarchic Israel of the book, then considers its function for transhistorical Israel as represented by their own community (e.g., see the helpful discussion of the problematic Hos 6:1–6, especially pp. 134–35 and 144–45).

Ben Zvi's analysis of the material is impressive. While this is not a full-scale traditional commentary with textual criticism and philological research, within the strictures of the assigned format the reader will find a bounty of useful material. While Ben Zvi is clear about his own views, he often respectfully notes alternative opinions. As mentioned above, each reading is analyzed according to a fourfold format: structure, genre, setting, and intention. Discussion of individual verses, however, is not necessarily complete or conducted in order in each of these sections. Furthermore, these headings are not always adequate to bear a complete discussion of the material in the book, so sometimes it seems that topics are more or less arbitrarily placed under one of these headings.

Ben Zvi avoids many of the pitfalls that beset the interpretation of Hosea. Since the author's methodology commends an interpretation of the written text, it avoids an exposition of the details of the historical prophet's marital life or his supposed inner turmoil and deep suffering—which has fascinated the (sometimes vivid) imaginations of readers for centuries. Too often the outcome of such preoccupation has been the

construction of a metanarrative with insufficient textual grounding, which becomes, nevertheless, a heuristic guide for interpreting the text. Indeed, feminist readers have shown how some of these metanarratives are congruent with—if not constructed by—the patriarchal world of the interpreters. Ben Zvi observes that the “woman of whoredom” is identified with “the land” in 1:2, which symbolizes an important but often neglected aspect of Hosea’s message. In addition, he recognizes the children (as their names suggest) are important as symbols of Israel in Hos 1–2. As the “offspring of the land,” the “children,” or rather their names, take their place as important symbols alongside the feminine imagery in Hos 2–3 (e.g., 36, 64, 68; but see below). Ben Zvi also correctly observes a point missed by some recent interpreters: since the two children are *each* addressed in the plural in Hos 2:3 [1], they function here as the *people*; that is, the text does not depict the prophet addressing his biological children to speak to their biological mother (45–46, 56). If Ben Zvi’s emphasis on the prophetic word in this text rather than prophetic biography were heeded, a lot of ink would be spared about “Hosea’s treatment” of his “children” and “Gomer” in Hos 2:3–25 [1–23]. Ben Zvi also avoids reference to the so-called Canaanite sex cult in his comments on Hos 1–3 and 4 (114–15, 158–60; cf. 197). Ben Zvi notes that when Canaan is explicitly mentioned in 12:8, it is invoked to illustrate economic wrongdoings, not Canaanite rites (251, 260).

I find much to commend about this literary approach to Hosea. There can be little doubt that the final form of Hosea was meant to speak to postmonarchic Israel. I question, however, whether the book of Hosea makes or supports all the claims that Ben Zvi suggests. He often lays before the reader the option of reading a section as a postmonarchic text (which, he states, the text *requires* of the reader) or as attesting a historical/oral background in the proclamation of a historical prophet (which, he says, the text does *not* require). Where interpreters find evidence of historical settings in the text (such as a judicial scene or liturgy), Ben Zvi asserts that the text is “evoking” a social setting that it then “defamiliarizes” in favor of the prophetic reading (e.g., 111–12, 136–37, 257–58, 278–80, 30; it should be observed, however, that even traditional form critics have long stressed the unusual ways in which the prophets employ familiar forms and traditions). While I noted above some interpreters’ tendencies to construct fictional biographies of the prophet’s personal life, I would not advocate abandoning all efforts at historical reconstruction, especially those based upon solid textual clues. So, for example, it could be noted that in the opening of the body of the book the text reads, “The beginning of YHWH’s speaking through Hosea” (1:2, my translation). This functions in the following manner: (1) it associates this instance of “YHWH’s speaking” (דבר, verbal form) with YHWH’s word of 1:1 (דבר, nominal form); (2) it therefore presents 1:2–2:3 [1] as a series of brief events (a marriage and the naming of three children) that are (to use the Ben Zvi’s language) “particular instances of YHWH’s word” in *history* (and

tradition); and (3) implies (by “the beginning of”) that the remainder of the book contains similar instances of YHWH’s word conveyed through the speaking of “Hosea” in particular historical circumstances. The interpreter may also observe that, since the superscription implies an afterlife of the tradition in the Judean community, these instances of YHWH’s word in the book of Hosea are set not only in the life of the prophet but in the (prophetic) community that preserved and expanded the living tradition of Hosea. In other words, I would argue that the book of Hosea contains specific markers that allow the reader to find the prophetic word within a *restrained* reconstruction of events attested by the text. While the newer form-critical method can be heralded as a needed *supplement* to (and corrective to some of the excesses of) the older form-critical method, it would probably be a mistake to consider it as its *replacement*—rumors of its death are, perhaps, premature! It also should be noted that by itself the new form criticism lacks the richness of the “traditional” form criticism. In Hosea Ben Zvi finds basically one form (didactic prophetic reading) and its variant (set of prophetic didactic readings). This means there is also basically one setting and one intention for this genre, as evidenced by Ben Zvi’s nearly verbatim opening statements in each of the setting and intention sections throughout the volume.

Likewise, Ben Zvi asserts that when speeches or liturgies are reconstructed from written texts, the depicted events are too brief to be considered historical accounts (280, 301, 311). In the memory of postmonarchic Israel, however, prophets were usually depicted as conveying YHWH’s word to their audiences in very brief oracles (e.g., 2 Sam 12:1–15; 1 Kgs 21:15–23; Amos 7:14–17; Jer 7:1–15; 2 Chr 20:15–17; Jon 3:4b) or, less often, in short written documents (e.g., Jer 29:4–23; 45:1–5; 2 Chr 22:12–15). Similarly, the liturgies (or, more accurately, the liturgical readings that belong to a liturgical event) attested in the psalms are often quite brief. I, of course, am not advocating a return to a purely historical analysis of biblical texts or the outdated view that prophets, as “primitives,” were capable of making only short speeches (an opinion based on a flawed nineteenth-century anthropology). Rather, I advocate that the multivalency of texts can be found not only at the final literary level (*Sitz im Buch*), but also *sometimes* in the settings of the life of the speaker(s).

It should also be noted that, contrary to Ben Zvi’s assertions, there are no specific historical markers *within the book of Hosea* that demand of the interpreter a postmonarchic setting. His evidence for a postmonarchic setting for the book of Hosea (see above) has been plausibly interpreted by others as belonging to the monarchic setting(s) suggested by the superscript. It is my contention that there are specific markers for a Yehudian reading for Hosea, but they are found not in Hos 1–14 per se; rather, they are to be located in the literary setting of Hosea in the Book of the Twelve (which dates no earlier than the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). This option is not open to Ben

Zvi, however, since he excludes the prospect that the Book of the Twelve was constructed to be read as a literary unit (see 6–7, 11, 24, 31; 319). As noted above, it is my contention that the multivalency of the text demands that such a postmonarchic reading is not to be considered the only reading.

The text of Hosea is notoriously difficult to understand, so every reader will no doubt have a few disagreements with specific points of Ben Zvi's interpretation. I note one major point where I disagree with Ben Zvi's reading. Despite his concern not to overinterpret the prophet's marital life, Ben Zvi still construes the image of *Israel* as YHWH's bride as a dominant symbol in and interpretive key for the book of Hosea. While one can clearly demonstrate that Israel is presented as a bride in a few verses at the end of Hos 2, and within the five verses of chapter 3, I (and a few others) have plausibly argued that textual evidence for feminine imagery of Israel is completely lacking in Hos 1 and 4–14. (Ben Zvi cites most of these studies, so he is aware of the argument.) Rather than present Israel in *dominantly* feminine imagery, Hosea depicts Israel (who bears a *patriarchal* eponym) more consistently as YHWH's child(ren), usually as a son (e.g., 2:2 [1:11]; 2:6 [4]; 11:1–9; 13:12–13; 14:4 [3] and likely 1:9; 4:6; 5:7; and 9:15). Yet Ben Zvi finds a feminized Israel throughout the book (including 1:2–9 and most of the passages just mentioned), where I find no convincing textual support (e.g., 59, 108, 127, 134, 197, 259, 261, 273, 297–98). Similarly, since the bride imagery does seem to be diverse in a few verses in Hos 2 and 3, it would be helpful if Ben Zvi would explain how the worldview of the text supports such a mixing of imagery. I find a very promising start toward solving this problem, however, in Ben Zvi's proposal that Hos 2 depicts Israel in royal imagery as mediators of YHWH's blessing on the land in (see 76).

Over the centuries, the task of making sense of the book of Hosea has not only been difficult but has also has sparked much controversy in the interpretive communities. Ben Zvi has made an enormous contribution to Hosea studies and the understanding of this enigmatic prophetic book. His readings of Hosea are arguably cutting edge and deserve the careful attention of those who wish to keep current in Hosea studies and recent methods of interpretation. I found here much to employ in my future work. Likewise, as the methods Ben Zvi advocates are further refined by the academy, his work will undoubtedly be viewed as an enduring contribution to this endeavor.