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The difficulties of the book of Hosea are notorious since antiquity (see, e.g., Jerome’s commentary on the book of Hosea). Not only philological problems in the narrower sense (morphology, lexicon, syntax) but also the contents of the book confront scholars with a great number of serious problems, such as enigmatic expressions and verses as well as abrupt changes from one subject to another. Furthermore, the problem arises of identifying central threads running through the three major parts (chs. 1–3; 4–11; 12–14) or at least through the shorter sections of the book, whose underlying logic and structure seem to resist any attempt at explanation. However, these problems have not prevented the majority of modern scholars from interpreting most of the sections of this book as more or less faithful renderings of the prophet’s discourses. Even since the rise of source and redaction criticism, people have attributed only a few parts of the book to exilic or postexilic redactional layers, especially some of the passages dealing with the conversion of Israel (e.g., Hos 2:1–3; 3:5; 14:2–9). Apart from certain studies published in the first half of the twentieth century, in the last two decades some authors have chosen to examine the entire book of Hosea by applying the method of redaction criticism. It is in this line of research that Rudnig-Zelt’s recent monograph should be classified, a revised version of a doctoral thesis presented in 2004/2005 at the University of Münster (Germany). The supervisor was Prof. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann. Before finishing her

In her thesis, Rudnig-Zelt follows a tendency of current exegesis that consists in dating most of the texts commonly ascribed to preexilic authors in exilic or postexilic times. In German-speaking research this approach is characterized by the expression “Spätdatierung.” As for the interpretation of the book of Hosea, Rudnig-Zelt’s approach ends up with a quite radical solution. In fact, she advocates the thesis that the oracles included in this book are neither to be attributed to Hosea the son of Beeri (Hos 1:1) nor have they been arranged by his disciples at the end of the eighth century B.C.E. They do not even mirror the milieu of the last decades of the northern kingdom. On the contrary, according to Rudnig-Zelt the whole book of Hosea is a product of successive phases of theological reflection that are to be situated without exception in the territory of Judah. The oldest layers of this reflection go back to preexilic times, while the latest ones date from the Hellenistic era.

Rudnig-Zelt justifies this conception of the formation of the book of Hosea in the first part of her book (chs. 2–3). After having dismissed all attempts at explaining the Hoseanic texts against the background of the political and social situation of the second half of the eighth century B.C.E., she draws the methodical conclusion that exegesis once and for all must drop the idea of attributing the oracles of the book of Hosea (or at least a part of them) to a particular northern kingdom prophet of the eighth century (43). Rather, one should identify the traces of a “frozen dialogue” preserved in the final text (45). That is, exegesis must become aware of the range of historical situations and theological debates constituting the background of the heterogeneous observations, announcements, and options contained in the book. In other words, the book of Hosea is the result of several Fortschreibungen, that is, successive “actualizations” of an original source, each one of which displays a theological tendency of its own. In order to identify the background and the origin of these layers, it turns out to be necessary to determine those Old Testament texts that share the same language and ideas with the Hoseanic oracles (45). Rudnig-Zelt carries out this objective in chapters 4–9 of her monograph. Chapter 10 serves to summarize the results obtained in the preceding analysis. A bibliography and an index of biblical references conclude the book.

Concretely, Rudnig-Zelt reconstructs the following redactional layers:
1. Going back to an epoch not too distant from 722 B.C.E., the oldest layer is a collection of figurative statements (“Bildworte”) dealing with the lamentable condition of the former northern kingdom (7:8b, 11a; 9,11a, 13a*, 16aβ; 10:7a, 11aα; 13:15abα). The origin of this layer is to be located in circles of southern royal officials commenting somewhat polemically on the defeat of their enemy as well as the failure of his policy.

2. These texts soon became the object of a series of commentaries (7:4b, 5b, 9, 10a, 16aα; 10:3a, 7; 12:2α; 13:12–13) whose purpose was to apply the collection to new situations and to link the elements of the original layer. This second layer dates from preexilic times. Aware of the fate of the northern kingdom, the authors of these comments warned against any kind of opposition to Assyria. In exilic times, that is, after the end of the southern kingdom, this layer was completed by the insertion of 7:10a.

3. In the Persian epoch, the two previously mentioned layers were gradually enriched by a variety of elements whose common denominator is a critical attitude to priesthood (“priesterkritisch”). Rudnig-Zelt calls this quite heterogeneous layer a “Konglomeratschicht” that consists of the following texts: 4:4b, 7–8, 10a, 13, 14a; 5:1*, 10a, 10b; 6:4b, 9, 10a; 7:2–4a, 5a, 7aβb; 9:8; 10:3b, 4a. These additions are to be explained in terms of conflicts between priests and prophetic circles of the Second Temple period in disagreement as to whether Samaria could expect salvation or not. Whereas the priests did not refrain from murdering those who maintained contacts with Samaria (6:9; see p. 144), prophets continued advocating a “Samaria-friendly” theology.

4. It should be stressed that the three layers mentioned above are to be conceived as an anonymous collection of prophetic texts. A subsequent Fortschreibung consisting of the addition of 1:1, 2b, 4–6; 4:1abα, 2a linked this anonymous book to a particular prophet. However, the information about Hosea’s marriage and children is secondary and associated with Hosea son of Beeri in the same way Jonah’s mission to Nineveh is related to Jonah son of Amittai (2 Kgs 24:25). In so doing, the redactors emphasized that the message of the formerly anonymous book concerned both Israel and Judah.

5. The bulk of the remaining parts of the book of Hosea is due to several late redactional layers. The first one includes a series of texts dealing with infidelity and conversion (“Abfall-Umkehr”), such as 2:4–25; 12:3–7, 11, 13–14; 14:2–4, 6–8). As a programmatic text, 2:4–25 underlines that both Israel and Judah incurred guilt in the past. Another layer that is heterogeneous as well consists of texts showing a polemical attitude toward Samaria (e.g., 1:5; 3:5; 5:3). Rudnig-Zelt particularly distinguishes between different types of polemics: on the one hand, texts that exclusively underline the guilt of the northern kingdom (e.g., 5:3); on the other, texts that criticize Samaria’s inadequate answer to God’s efforts in favor of his people (e.g., 11:3b). After all, this layer includes some positive
statements about Samaria’s future conversion (e.g., 3:5) and God’s desire to “heal” its infidelity (14:5).

Rudnig-Zelt’s approach to the book of Hosea is certainly impressive and original. However, some critical remarks are appropriate.

1. As for the author’s detailed examination of each section of the biblical text, her first step is source analysis. However, some of the major criteria she relies on need to be called in question, such as the observation of the different levels of theological reflections leading to “Dubletten” (see 121, 163), the use or nonuse of the parallelismus membrorum (176, 189, 201). In my opinion, Rudnig-Zelt separates coherent texts. In a second step she joins together the text fragments, postulating redactional layers covering all of the book.

2. As for the dating of texts, an important argument is their alleged originality. If a text is evidently not interested in theological questions, it does not follow automatically that it is older than other ones. Many conclusions of this type are drawn without a thorough analysis of the texts in question (see 90, 93, 203). Furthermore, the author often states a literary dependence between a Hoseanic expression and alleged Old Testament parallels. She usually concludes that the Hoseanic expression is younger than the other ones. For example, the fact that Hos 5:1 quotes the imagery of hunting, which is present in the lamentation psalms as well, prompts her to conclude that Hos 5:1 is younger than the psalms that date from the exilic and postexilic era (111). More often she observes linguistic similarities between Hosea, on the one hand, and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, on the other (see 144, 186). For instance, the phrase šm’w dbr YHWH followed by a vocative (see Hos 5:1) has also been adopted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. However, do these mere similarities prove that Hos 5:1 depends on the language of these latter prophets (see 124)? One could easily quote other passages where analogous conclusions are drawn without any exact analysis of the text to be compared (e.g., 173, 205, 219). Finally, it seems arbitrary to base the dating of a verse on the argument “paßt besser in die Perserzeit” (“better fits the Persian epoch”; see 165).

3. The late origin of the majority of the Hoseanic texts that Rudnig-Zelt takes for granted creates a lot of new problems. Some examples might be singled out: (a) the king mentioned in 7:3 is possibly the king of the Persian Empire (145); (b) verses such as 7:1 are to be related to the growing conflicts between Israelites and Samaritans (156); (c) 7:11b (“they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria”) goes back to Hellenistic times, when Palestine became the bone of contention of the Ptolemaic and the Seleucid reigns (250); and (d) 10:3 (“we have no king”) is a statement of southern priestly circles favoring a theocratic government (201).
In sum, I am convinced that the monograph offers many correct and useful observations from which further study of the book of Hosea can surely benefit. Nevertheless, Rudnig-Zelt’s exegesis suffers from two major deficiencies: the manner in which she adopts the method of source criticism as well as her persistence in looking for a postexilic *Sitz im Leben* of the Hoseanic oracles. The explanations she offers raise many new questions.