THE PARABLE OF THE HEIFER
IN HOSEA 10:11–13
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A parable is a succinct didactic story narrated to illustrate a particular lesson or truth. Christian readers are mostly familiar with Jesus’ parables in the New Testament, but the Hebrew Bible (OT) has its own share of parables. They appear often as narrative prose: e.g., 2 Sam. 12:1–4 (Parable of the Ewe Lamb); 2 Sam. 14:5–7 (the Two Brothers Fighting); 1 Kgs. 20:39–40 (the Escaped Prisoner). Isaiah’s Vineyard Song (Isa. 5:1–2) is a good example of a parable in verse form (also the Lioness and Her Whelps in Ezk. 19:2–9 and the Parable of the Vine in Ezk. 19:10–14).

When a parable employs mythical creatures, animals, plants, and inanimate objects that are anthropomorphized as characters in the story, it is further classified as a fable: e.g., Judg. 9:8–15 (the Trees Choose a King); 2 Kgs. 14:9 (the Thistle and the Cedar); Ezk. 17:3–8 (the Great Eagles and the Vines).

Interpreting Hos. 10:11–13 as a parable or fable of the heifer, rather than just an extended farming metaphor without a storyline (plot), may be the key to unlocking the prophet’s message.

1J. L. Ska, “Our Fathers Have Told Us”: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives, Subsidia Biblica 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico,
Ephraim is a trained heifer that likes to thresh. I laid a yoke on her good neck.

I shall harness Ephraim. Judah shall plough. Jacob shall harrow for himself.

Sow for yourselves in accord with ṣəḏāqâ! Reap in accord with ḥeseḏ! Till for yourselves a virgin soil!

It is time to seek Yhwh until he comes and rains ṣeḏeq on you.

You have ploughed wickedness. Injustice you have reaped. You have eaten the fruit of deceit ...

The parable is enveloped by historical recollections of violent incidents in Gibeah (v. 9) and Beth-Arbel (v. 14). The reference to Gibeah probably recalls the shameful deed committed by the Benjaminites against a visiting Levite which provoked a tribal reprisal...
The Parable of the Heifer in Hosea 10:11–13

(Jdg. 19–20). The atrocity in Beth-Arbel, which seems to point to a more recent past, has not been recorded elsewhere in the Bible.

Despite many textual obscurities, Hos. 10:9–15 can be comprehended to speak of war and its evil consequences. Aside from מלחמה (war) which is mentioned in vv. 9 and 14, many other words illustrate a battle: v. 10 מלחמה (to gather against), v. 13 נחריות (warriors), v. 14 מלחמה (tumult), v. 13 נחריות (fortification), ויה (to devastate), רע (havoc), ויה (to dash), and v. 15 מלחמה (to be cut off).

The main accusation against Israel is its propensity to make war “since the days of Gibeah” (v. 9). Because the people trusted in the strength of their warriors, the violence of war shall engulf and destroy them (vv. 14–15). The irony of it all is that sin brings its own punishment: war, which is often resorted to as a means of national survival, carries the seed of the nation’s destruction.

Midway through the pericope, the topic of war is interrupted by a parable about the nation (vv. 11–13). The didactic story uses graphic farming motifs (e.g., a working animal, plough, sow, harrow, reap, harvest, eat) combined with abstract ethico-religious concepts (e.g., ṣəḏāqâ, ḥeseḏ, dāraš, ṣeḏeq, iniquity, injustice, lies) to portray the nation’s moral character. When the topic of war is resumed in v. 13d, it is pretty obvious that the root cause of all violence is the failure to uphold God’s instructions.

The parable comes in three scenes: A) The first scene presents Ephraim as a heifer being harnessed for work in the field (v. 11). In 4:16, Hosea has already employed the figure of a stubborn cow (חרא) to describe the nation. But here “a trained heifer that likes to thresh” (עלאה מלחמה אבהה לזר) is a more apt description of a farming

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animal. The heifer (גֵּרְשֵׁנָה) is here intended primarily as a character in the parable. Perhaps it is also meant to allude to the idolatrous bull-images disparagingly called “calves” in Hos. 10:5 (גֶּשֶׁנֶּחָה), 13:2 (גֶּשֶׁנֶּחָה), and 8:5–6 (גֶּשֶׁנֶּחָה). The laying on of the yoke (לֹּאֹב) has been interpreted by some commentators as a symbol of punishment, particularly the exile. Such an interpretation is premature for it ignores the whole dynamics or plot of the parable in which the result of the nation’s work is seen only in the end. The heifer’s good neck (גָּזֶרֶת הָאֲדָם) most likely

6Other occurrences of לֹאֹב for a trained animal are in Jer. 2:24; 31:17; Sir. 51:17. M. H. Goshen-Gottstein proposes a link between the Ugaritic mdl and the Hebrew לֹאֹב (“Ephraim Is a Well-Trained Heifer’ and the Ugaritic mdl,” Bib 41 [1960]: 64–66). According to H. Simian-Yofre, mdl may refer to Ephraim’s responsibility for having knowledge of the law (El Desierto de los Dioses: Teología e Historia en el Libro de Oseas [Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 1993], 143).

7G. Morris thought that “any reference to a calf (גֶּשֶׁנֶּחָה) might refer, however obliquely, to Israel’s calves at Dan and Bethel” (Prophecy, Poetry and Hosea, JSOT Sup. Ser. 219 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 95). E. K. Holt believes Hosea is using here a well-known feature from Canaanite cult to repudiate it: “The fair heifer (the symbol for the Ugaritic goddess Anat, now representing Israel) is removed from the threshing floor (i.e., fertility cult) and placed instead in Yahweh’s service” (Prophesying the Past: The Use of Israel’s History in the Book of Hosea, JSOT Sup. Ser. 194 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 89). E. Ben Zvi also argues that “within a patriarchal society such as the one for which the book was written, such an explicit feminization of the statue/idol representing the high deity might be understood as polemical and even derogatory” (Hosea [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005], 212). However, the idol of Samaria in Hos. 8:5–6 is depicted as a male calf (גֶּשֶׁנֶּחָה; also Hos. 13:2). The issue in Hos. 10:9–15 is not idolatry or apostasy but Israel’s propensity for war and violence.

refers to a firm and robust neck (cf. מְלָמְדִים), rather than a soft and fair one that is unaccustomed to the yoke.⁹

V. 11cd expresses the intention of God who plays presumably the role of the farmer: “I shall harness Ephraim; Judah shall plow; Jacob shall harrow for himself.” The names Ephraim, Judah, and Jacob designate collectively the one heifer rather than three different characters in the story. The verbs plowing (to plow) and harrowing (to harrow) represent various tasks in the farming technology to be accomplished by the heifer. The statement “for/by himself” (וַיָּשֵׁר) underlines the responsibility assigned to the animal (=nation); the farmer’s role, on the other hand, recedes from the scene.

B) The second scene is an instruction given on how to accomplish the task (v. 12abc): “Sow for yourselves in accord with ṣəḏāqâ; reap in accord with ḥeseḏ; till for yourselves a virgin soil!” Although the parable continues to use agricultural metaphors (sow, reap, till), the figure of the heifer has now been abandoned in favor of a progressive disclosure within the story of the real actors: heifer → nation → you. The revelatory technique here may not have the same dramatic impact as Nathan’s parable (2 Sam. 12:1–9) or Isaiah’s Vineyard Song (Isa. 5:1–7), but it certainly draws the listeners (pl. “you”) closer to the parable.

The triple imperatives found at the beginning of each line change the whole tenor of the parable from narration to instruction. “Sowing” is often used figuratively for an action that is intentional or rampant. When combined with an object denoting either a vice or a virtue, גֵּשָׁה becomes a suitable idiom for moral behavior, e.g., “sow discord” (Prov. 6:14, 19, 28); “sow righteousness” (Prov. 11:18); “sow iniquity” (Prov. 22:8). The word-pair “sow/reap” often stands in a cause-and-effect relationship to express the idea of an act and its natural or “just” consequence, e.g., “Because they sow the wind, they will reap

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⁹U. Cassuto compares the Ugaritic lsmsm(t).bmt.phl (“on the comely back of a donkey”) found in the Aqhat Cycle (Gor. 51:IV:15; 1 Aq 60) with the description of the heifer in Hos. 10:11 (*The Goddess Anath* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971], 29).
the whirlwind” (Hos. 8:7); “He who sows injustice will reap calamity” (Prov. 22:8). However, the statement in Hos. 10:12ab is somewhat different from the above idiom in that do not govern as direct objects. The prepositions (like) have a normative sense: “in accord with ṣedāqa”; “in accord with the norm of hesed” (cf. Isa. 32:1 for a similar usage). The virtues of ṣedāqa and hesed are to be the guidelines that must govern the action of the people. (“Till for yourselves an untitled soil”) stresses the people’s accountability for their own action: they must do the work by/for themselves (in v. 12ac parallels in v. 11e) on a ground that has not yet been tilled by others. Also alludes to an idle land that has not been cultivated with ṣedāqa and hesed for a long time.

In v. 12de, Hosea sets the parable aside to expound in plain language the significance of the moral injunction: “It is time to seek YHWH until he comes and showers ṣeđeq on you” (וה הוזר למס). Because the verb ḥesh has a wide range of meaning (e.g., “to seek, ask, demand, investigate, consult, interpret, etc.”), its specific sense has to be deduced from the context. The object ḥesh defines the usage here of ḥesh as theological rather than legal. Although ḥesh (like בקש) can sometimes mean “inquiring (an

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10In the case of injustice or sometimes due to divine punishment, sow/reap are found in an adversative relationship (sow ... but reap ...) to express a disproportionate result (Mic. 6:15; Jer. 12:13; Hag. 1:6; Ps. 126:5; Job 4:8).

11Some take the l- here as a direct-object marker, but its parallelism with lpy- does not endorse such a view. Emending lpy- to lpy- (“fruits”) in order to allow l- to be read as a direct-object marker only introduces a textual problem where there is none.


14In late Biblical Hebrew, ḥesh has become part of the legal terminology: e.g., Dt. 12–26 uses ḥesh for a juridical inquiry; in Ezekiel (20:40; 33:6;
oracle) of God" especially in cult, there is no hint that that is what is meant here. The previous instruction to follow the norms of ḥesed and šəḏāqā suggests rather that God has to be sought in moral life, i.e., in the ordinary course of one's dealings with others.

In the eighth century prophetic literature, "seeking God" is focused primarily on summons to repentance. "Seek YHWH and live" (יהוה והיהי) in Amos 5:4–7 is an appeal to conversion so as to forestall the coming destruction of the House of Joseph. Amos' call is aimed at an inner transformation (not ritual performance; cf. v. 4 "seek not Bethel … enter not Gilgal") of those "who turn justice (משפטים) to wormwood and cast down righteousness (צדק) to the earth." Amos 5:14, which substitutes tôb for God as the object of רָשׁוֹת ("seek goodness … that you may live"), seems to explain the moral implication of "seeking God" (cf. Mic. 6:8).17 "Seek justice" (צדק ומשפטים) in Isa. 1:17 is also part of a bid to renew life (cf. v. 16 "Wash yourselves clean … remove evil … learn to do good").18 Thus, when Hosea invites the nation to

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15Gen. 25:22; 1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kgs. 14:5; 16:6f; 22:13, 18; 2 Chr. 16:12; 20:3; 34:21, 26; Ps. 34:5; Job 5:8; Jer. 21:2; 37:7; Ezek. 14:7, 10; 20:1, 3.

16Isa. 58:2; 1 Kgs. 22:7f; 1 Chr. 13:3; 2 Chr. 16:6f; 20:3; 34:3.


“seek God,” he reflects a contemporary concern for repentance, for an ethical regeneration of the nation, the urgency and timeliness of which is conveyed so well by the word הָעַט: “it is time to seek YHWH.”

“Seeking God” (i.e., repentance) has to be relentlessly pursued “until he comes and showers ṣeḏeq on you” (נְדָעֵיהָ יְהוָה תַּעַשׂ לְךָ). God’s coming (שָׁעַם) marks the beginning of salvation, the bestowal of favor upon his people (cf. Hos. 6:3 “He will come to us as a spring rain”). Likewise, the onset of the seasonal rain (רָם is used here as a verb) symbolizes God’s fidelity and blessings on those who seek him by living according to his will. Note that “rain” still belongs to the agricultural metaphors used in the parable.

God’s blessing is expressed by the word צדakin, which is clearly meant to reciprocate the people’s צדakin (v. 12a). Ṣeḏeq and ṣəḏāqâ have a very broad semantic range: from legal uses (justice, impartiality, legitimacy, acquittal) to proper order and comportment (righteousness, fairness, honesty, propriety) to God’s saving action (military success, rescue of people in distress, restoration of a just order in society, reestablishment of legitimate cult, future salvation). The exact nuance of these words must be deduced from the context.


21H. G. Reventlow, Rechtfertigung im Horizont des Alten Testaments, BEvTh 58 (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1971); F. Crüsemann, “Jahwes Gerechtigkeit
Since קדש here is attributed to God’s action (יהוה), the word can only mean salvation directed to the well-being of the nation. Because the whole context of Hos. 10:9–15 speaks about war and its destructive consequences, God’s saving deed may take the concrete form of rescuing the nation from the ravages of war, or reestablishing peace and order in the community. The only other occurrence of קדש in Hosea (2:21–22 “I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and mercy … in faithfulness”) associates the word with the other covenantal blessings of חסד, חסד, חסד, and חסד. Although these verses are regarded as a later addition, they conform to Hosea’s view that God will answer the nation’s need in time of repentance (cf. 2:17, 21ff; 6:1–3; see also Isa. 1:17). Conversely, Mic. 6:5–8 invites the people to recall יהוה’s saving deeds (儦ל), and then to reciprocate by “doing justice (חסד), loving kindness (חסד), and walking humbly (חסד) with God.”

The קדש demanded of the people (v. 12a // v. 12b חסד) refers to acting justly towards other people. In Isaiah, סָדָגוּת occurs twelve times (8x // חסד) as a moral rectitude governing social relationships. The same meaning can be deduced from Amos 5:7. Furthermore, סָדָגוּת (like חסד) may also pertain to a proper relationship with God: a person’s righteousness before the Lord.

C) The third scene presents the actual result of the work assigned to the nation: “You have ploughed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies.” The words קָרָה (to plow), קָרָה (to reap), including אכל (to eat the produce), resume the agricultural parable. The first two verbs have already been used in the preparation and

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22 קדש / חסד are often found in word-fields (Ps. 33:5; 36:1, 11; 40:10–12; 72:1–3; 85:10–14; Isa. 40–66 passim.

instruction for work, and so here it is just a matter of reporting what has already happened (note the perfect tenses). Instead of working in conformity withוהיה andוהיה, the people have done iniquity (חטא), injustice (עבידה), and lies (יהלום). These vices obviously reflect the prevailing culture of war and violence (v. 13de). There is a tint of irony in the statement, because those who made war (“ploughed iniquity”) are now made to suffer its evil consequences (“have reaped injustice and eaten the fruit of lies”).

Thus the parable ends in a tragic note: Israel has not repented and has failed to live up to the moral demands ofṣəḏāqâ andḥeseḏ. As a consequence, “… the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Beth-Arbel on the day of battle when mothers were dashed in pieces with their children” (v. 14).24

References


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24M. L. Ruffin speculates that the incident at Beth-Arbel may refer to an occurrence during the invasion of Shalmeneser or by Salamanu of Moab (“Unwrapping the Prosperity Package,” in C. P. Stanton, ed., Hosea for Teaching and Preaching [Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993], 121).


