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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),[1] may be the key to unlocking the prophet's message.

[1]J. L. Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Subsidia Biblica 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico,

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[A]	ואפרים עגלה מלמדה אהבתי לדוש ואני עברתי על־טוב צוארה	11	*Ephraim is a trained heifer* *that likes to thresh.*[2] *I laid a yoke*[3] *on her good neck.*
	ארכיב אפרים יחרוש יהודה ישדד־לו יעקב:		*I shall harness Ephraim* *Judah shall plough* *Jacob shall harrow for himself.*
[B]	זרעו לכם לצדקה קצרו לפי־חסד נירו לכם ניר	12	*Sow for yourselves in accord with ṣəḏāqâ!* *Reap in accord with ḥeseḏ!* *Till for yourselves a virgin soil!*
	ועת לדרוש את־יהוה עד־יבוא וירה צדק לכם:		*It is time to seek YHWH* *until he comes and rains ṣeḏeq on you.*
[C]	חרשתם־רשע עולתה קצרתם אכלתם פרי־כחש	13	*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

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1990), 17–38; S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible,* JSOT Sup. Ser. 70 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 93–140.

[2]BDB, 12: the MT אהבתי is a feminine singular active participle with a remnant of the old genitive case ending *-î* (cf. Zech. 11:17 *'zby hṣ'n*). The definite article is sometimes omitted in a relative clause whose antecedent is expressed (A. B. Davidson, *Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax*, 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896], 191–193, #143). According to A. R. Guenther, the heifer is quoted in v. 11a "I love to thresh" (אהבתי לדוש) (*Hosea* [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998], 9).

[3]The MT ואני עברתי על־טוב צוארה ("I crossed upon her good neck") does not make sense. Most likely the verb עבר is *piel* ("to put, lay"), and *'ul* (yoke) has been assimilated to the preposition *'al* (upon). B. C. Birch supports the NRSV translation "I spared her fair neck" (*Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, Westminster Bible Companion [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997], 94).

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(Judg. 19–20).[4] The atrocity in Beth-Arbel, which seems to point to a more recent past, has not been recorded elsewhere in the Bible.[5]

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 אסף על (to gather against), v. 13 גבורים (warriors), v. 14 שאון (tumult), מבצר (fortification), שדד (to devastate), שׁד (havoc), רטשׁ (to dash), and v. 15 נדמה (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. 13de, 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 (סררה פרה) to describe the nation. But here "a trained heifer that likes to thresh" (עגלה מלמדה אהבתי לדושׁ) is a more apt description of a farming

[4]P. M. Arnold, "Hosea and the Sin of Gibeah," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 305–311.

[5]D. J. Simundson, *Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 83; M. A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets* Vol. 1, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 111.

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animal.[6] The heifer (עגלה) 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 (עגלות), 13:2 (עגלים), and 8:5–6 (עגל).[7] The laying on of the yoke (עבר על) has been interpreted by some commentators as a symbol of punishment, particularly the exile.[8] 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 (טוב צוארה) most likely

[6]Other occurrences of *lmd* 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 *lmd* ("'Ephraim Is a Well-Trained Heifer' and the Ugaritic *mdl*," *Bib* 41 [1960]: 64–66). According to H. Simian-Yofre, מלמדה 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).

[7]G. Morris thought that "any reference to a calf (עגל) 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 (עגל; also Hos. 13:2 עגלים). The issue in Hos. 10:9–15 is not idolatry or apostasy but Israel's propensity for war and violence.

[8]T. E. McComiskey, "Hosea," in T. E. McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets—An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing House, 1992), 176. D. K. Stuart interprets the "yoke" as the covenant which YHWH imposed upon Israel (*Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 [Waco, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1987], 169).

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refers to a firm and robust neck (cf. מלמדה), 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 חרשׁ (to plow) and שׂדד (to harrow) represent various tasks in the farming technology to be accomplished by the heifer. The statement "for/by himself" (לו) 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, זרע 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

[9]U. 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).

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the whirlwind" (Hos. 8:7); "He who sows injustice will reap calamity" (Prov. 22:8).[10] However, the statement in Hos. 10:12ab is somewhat different from the above idiom in that זרע / קצר do not govern צדקה / חסד as direct objects. The prepositions ל[11] / לפי (like על פי; כפי; אל פי) have a normative sense: לצדקה = "in accord with *ṣəḏāqâ*"; לפי־חסד = "in accord with the norm of *ḥeseḏ*" (cf. Isa. 32:1 for a similar usage). The virtues of *ṣəḏāqâ* and *ḥeseḏ* are to be the guidelines that must govern the action of the people. נירו לכם ניר ("'Till for yourselves an untilled soil") stresses the people's accountability for their own action: they must do the work by/for themselves (לכם in v. 12ac parallels לו in v. 11e) on a ground that has not yet been tilled by others. ניר also alludes to an idle land that has not been cultivated with *ṣəḏāqâ* and *ḥeseḏ* 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 *ṣeḏeq* on you" (וירה צדק לכם ועת לדרוש את־יהוה עד־יבוא).[12] Because the verb דרשׁ 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.[13] The object את־יהוה defines the usage here of דרשׁ as theological rather than legal.[14] Although דרשׁ (like בקשׁ) can sometimes mean "inquiring (an

[10]In 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).

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

[12]D. Williams, "Hosea 10:12," *Rev Exp* 90 (1993): 257–262.

[13]S. Wagner, "דרשׁ *dāraš*, מדרשׁ *midrash*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* Vol. 3, eds. G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978), 293–307.

[14]In late Biblical Hebrew, דרשׁ has become part of the legal terminology: e.g., Dt. 12–26 uses דרשׁ for a juridical inquiry; in Ezekiel (20:40; 33:6;

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oracle) of God"[15] especially in cult,[16] there is no hint that that is what is meant here. The previous instruction to follow the norms of *ḥeseḏ* and *ṣəḏāqâ* 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" (דרשו את-יהוה וחיו) 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 (משפט) to wormwood and cast down righteousness (צדקה) to the earth." Amos 5:14, which substitutes *tôb* for God as the object of דרש ("seek goodness … that you may live!"), seems to explain the moral implication of "seeking God" (cf. Mic. 6:8).[17] "Seek justice" (דרשו משפט) 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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34:10) and the Priestly source (Gen. 9:4–6; 42:22), it also has the sense of a legal requirement.

[15]Gen. 25:22; 1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Kgs. 14:5; 22:7f; 2 Kgs. 1:16; 3:11; 8:8; 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; Ezk. 14:7, 10; 20:1, 3.

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

[17]Some exegetes regard Amos 5:14 as a later interpretation of Amos 5:4–5 (A. Weiser, *Die Prophetie des Amos* [Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1929], 183–194; N. H. Snaith, *Amos, Hosea, and Micah* [London: Epworth, 1956], 93; W. Nowack, *Die kleinen Propheten*, 2nd ed., HKAT III/4 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903], 145; H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia, trans. W. Janzen, et al. [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], 250). Many, however, accept the authenticity of the passage (J. L. Mays, *Amos*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969], 99–102; W. Rudolph, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, KAT 23/2 [Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971], 93; J. Lust, "Remarks on the Redaction of Amos V 4–5.14–15," *OTS* 21 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981], 129–154).

[18]J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 98–99; H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, trans. T. H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress,

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"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 עת: "it is *time* to seek YHWH."[19]

"Seeking God" (i.e., repentance) has to be relentlessly pursued "until he comes and showers *ṣeḏeq* on you" (עד־יבוא וירה צדק לכם). God's coming (בוא) 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 (ירה 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 צדק, which is clearly meant to reciprocate the people's צדקה (v. 12a). *Ṣeḏeq* and *ṣəḏāqâ*[20] 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).[21] The exact nuance of these words must be deduced from the context.

1991), 49–50. O. Kaiser suspects a Deuteronomistic reworking of the traditions in Isa. 1:10–17 (*Isaiah 1–12*, OTL, trans. J. Bowden [London: SCM Press, 1983], 27–28).

[19]According to A. Fanuli, "Il tempo della permanenza d'Israele nel Canaan doveva esere visto come un continuo *Kairós* di Iahvè: un tempo cioè di costante invite a vivere nella ricerca (*dāraš*) della volontà de assistenza, benedizione, salvezza (*ṣeḏeq*) …" (*Osea-Michea* [Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1984], 83).

[20]Some scholars make a distinction between צדק and צדקה. A. Jepsen claims that צדק designates the proper social order, while צדקה is used for the right human attitude or behavior ("צדק and צדקה im Alten Testament," in fs. W. W. Herzberg, hrsg. H. G. Reventlow, *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965], 78–99, esp. 79–81). The same distinction is followed by H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtigkeit als Weltordnung*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 40 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968), 67, 179.

[21]H. G. Reventlow, *Rechtfertigung im Horizont des Alten Testaments*, BEvTh 58 (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1971); F. Crüsemann, "Jahwes Gerechtigkeit

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Since צדק here is attributed to God's action (ירה), 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 צדק 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 משפט, חסד, רחמים, and אמונה.[22] 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 YHWH's saving deeds (צדקות), and then to reciprocate by "doing justice (משפט), loving kindness (חסד), and walking humbly (הצנע) with God."

The צדקה demanded of the people (v. 12a // v. 12b חסד) refers to acting justly towards other people. In Isaiah, *ṣəḏāqâ* occurs twelve times (8x // משפט)[23] as a moral rectitude governing social relationships. The same meaning can be deduced from Amos 5:7. Furthermore, *ṣəḏāqâ* (like *ḥeseḏ*) 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 חרש (to plow), קצר (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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(צדקה / צדק) in Alten Testament," *EvTh* 36 (1976): 427–450. For the history of research, see B. Mogensen, "צדקה in the Scandinavian and German Research Tradition," trans. F. H. Cryer, in K. Jeppesen & B. Otzen, eds., *The Productions of Time: Tradition History in the Old Testament Scholarship* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1984), 67–80.

[22]צדק / צדקה 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*.

[23]Isa. 1:27; 5:7, 16; 9:6; 28:17; 32:16, 17; 33:5.

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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 with צדקה and חסד, the people have done iniquity (רשׁע), injustice (עולתה), and lies (כחשׁ). 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 of *ṣəḏāqâ* and *ḥeseḏ*. 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]

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[24]M. 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).

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