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Is Yahweh's Faithfulness Contingent Upon Human Obedience?—"For I Am God and No Mortal" Yahweh's Covenantal Faithfulness in Hosea 11:1-11

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Covenant—as a concept common to a multiplicity of cultures across the Ancient Near East—is typically associated with the formulaic expressions of commitment, responsibility, and promise that were foundational to ancient treaty constructions occurring between imperial rulers and their vassals. Despite this commonality, one still finds variable meaning and usage of the concept as it appears in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, we witness human-to-human commitments forged between the biblical characters of Jonathan and David (1 Sam. 20) and Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17) alongside the more prevalent Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants (Gen.

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12–17, Ex. 19–24, 2 Sam. 7:4–16, and 1 Chron. 17:3–15) which signified the reciprocal relationships occurring between humans and the divine. Strikingly, the human-divine bond in the Hebrew Bible displays a provocative disparity in which human participation in the covenantal arrangement appears as both obligatory and non-obligatory.

Given this disparity, we could ask whether it is possible to reconcile what appears as two incompatible views of covenant with respect to Yahweh and the Israelites.[2] David Noel Freedman's inquiry aptly captures the matter,

> Can covenant bond be broken—and at the same time persist? Can God sever a relationship as a result of covenant violations—and nevertheless maintain it in perpetuity?[3]

While the larger context of covenant and covenantal fealty may be understood primarily as overtly political, the Hebrew Bible often yields a unique and illuminating portrait of divine commitment in which the deity Yahweh appears heavily invested and therefore profoundly affected by the human-divine covenantal relationship.

Nowhere is this dedication more demonstrable than in chapter eleven of Hosea. The prophet Hosea attributes Israel's religious disintegration to the people's proclivity toward certain forms of Canaanite (Baal) worship, which he interprets as the Israelites' reckless abandonment of their covenantal obligations to Yahweh.[4] To capture the significance of this offense, the prophet juxtaposes Israel's disobedience with Yahweh's faithfulness, presented as divine speech, and according to Yahweh comes with a cost, not to the Israelites, but rather to the deity. With this portrayal, the concepts of covenantal obligation and divine commitment intertwine such that the reader is afforded an arresting glimpse into what may be construed as the heart and mind of God.

The most striking features found in the book of Hosea are his novel and varied application of familial and animalistic metaphors to depict the tumultuous relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh,

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[2] David Noel Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," in *Divine Commitment and Human Obligations: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman,* ed. John R. Huddlestun (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 176.

[3] Ibid., 177.

[4] The inference here is to Canaanite fertility rites.

his concerns with cultic worship, and the affinities between his covenant theology and that of Deuteronomy. Hosea 11 begins with a contrasting view of the past: "When Israel was young, I loved him and from Egypt I called my son" (1:1). Most translations render *naʿar* as child (or youth), which lends support to the familial imagery projected throughout the book.[5] However, along with the sense of innocence denoted by child or youth, the reference to Egypt permits some flexibility to render the term "young" allowing a contrast to be made between Israelite religion in its earlier pre-exilic state (i.e., new and evolving) and its later more developed state (i.e., post-exilic and beyond).[6] The apparent connections between *ʾāhēb* (love) and the covenantal promises found in Deuteronomy, when applied here may be interpreted as an expression of the deity's profound affection for and allegiance to this particular group.[7] The biblical witness to Yahweh's commitment to Israel is not new, for the history of this people is rooted in the promises that Yahweh made to Israel's patriarchal ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Deuteronomy 7:6–8, Yahweh declares,

> For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are in the earth. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

In the above, we find Yahweh's unilateral and unconditional commitment to the Israelites, a dedication couched in the covenantal language of choice thus highlighting the voluntary nature of Yahweh's actions. Therefore, it is not surprising that the deity's explicit claim and acknowledgement of this group expresses a kind of

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5 New Revised Standard Version, King James Version, and New International Version.

6 The Hebrew נַעַר can be translated "boy," "child," "youth," or "servant." Although not age specific, the inference can denote both innocence and immaturity due to age. In contrast, J. Andrew Dearman suggests the term denotes a portrait of servitude and dependence that reinforces the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 278.

7 Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary, Hosea-Jonah,* vol. 32, ed. Hubbard A. David and Glenn W. Barker (Texas: Word Books, 1987), 178.

exclusivity and particularity that implicitly conveys the intrinsic character of Yahweh as a compassionate, caring albeit possessive deity. As such, these select passages do not simply call attention to the Hebrews' liberation from Egyptian bondage, but they also convey the group's privileged position as the deity's own special and beloved people. In Hosea 11:2, Yahweh's accusation that Israel "sacrificed to the Baals and burned incense to idols" alerts us to the problem at hand, whereby the syncretization of Israelite worship is viewed as a rejection of the God who "caused them to walk" (11:3). Israel has rejected Yahweh's love, which may be understood here as a rejection of the covenant. While one may detect a bit of divine condescension, the verbal constructions "I loved," "I called," "I caused," "I took," and "I drew" (1–4), affirm the deity's benevolent actions on behalf of this group.

When taken together, the opening verses of Hosea 11 function to contrast who the Israelites should have been versus what they had become. That is, they should have been adherents of the covenant rather than covenant violators. With this metaphorical construction, an ancient and modern audience is made aware of the deity's complaint voiced as the group's failure to uphold their end of the divine-human relationship. Herein lies the *first* concern, which surfaces as one of human obligation. Given Yahweh's steadfast behavior concerning the Israelites, is the group obligated to respond to the deity in kind? More importantly, will Israel's non-compliance alter the divine-human relationship such that it affects Yahweh's beneficent actions toward this group?

Closer inspection of covenantal fidelity among the patriarchs reveals models of human obedience that made the patriarchs suitable covenantal partners, while the disobedient were deemed undesirable participants (who were subsequently punished).[8] Similarly, we detect models of obedience and disobedience in the Deuteronomistic accounts of the kings of Israel and Judah. Thus, it appears that validation of the covenant was initially contingent on human

[8] Ellen Juhl Christiansen, *The Covenant in Judaism and Paul—A Study of Ritual Boundaries as Identity Markers*, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und Des Urchristen, vol. 27 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997), 112.

faithfulness rooted in an understanding of Yahweh as one who rewards and punishes.[9]

Nonetheless, there exists other biblical accounts in which this requirement of obedience was absent and yet the human-divine bond, though fragile, remained intact (cf., Isa. 43). If the former understanding of covenant validity was formative in the construction of the book of Hosea, we would expect Yahweh's irritation at the Israelites' rejection in Hosea 11:2 to result in the group's imminent judgment. We are not disappointed, since 11:5 informs us, "They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they refuse to return to me," reaffirming both the deity's complaint as well as his unfilled expectation of human obedience. The text continues:

> a sword will whirl in his city and his gates will be destroyed and his counselors will be consumed, but my people are bent on turning from me and to a yoke he calls him, altogether he will not exalt them (Hos. 11:6–7).[10]

Yahweh had exalted the Israelites, adopted them as sons (and daughters), and liberated them from the yoke of their imperial oppressors. In an act tantamount to spiritual adultery, one of the overarching themes in Hosea, the people respond to the beneficent actions of the deity by becoming yoked to foreign gods, which according to Yahweh, would or could not respond to them in a reciprocal fashion. Clearly, the allusion to Egypt as a return to bondage, along with the reference to Assyria, which foreshadowed the destruction of Samaria, was meant to be taken as both divine indictment and judgment for their violation of the covenantal commitment to exclusively worship Yahweh (Exod. 20:1, Deut. 5:6).

Still, even with this indictment, the text insists upon Yahweh's unwillingness to cast the group aside despite the deity's annoyance at their betrayal. Rhetorically, the profundity of the moment is captured by the series of questions announced in 11:8.

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[9] Ibid.

[10] This chapter is ripe with textual difficulties: Hosea 11:4–7 are extremely difficult to decipher and have the dubious honor of being possibly the most corrupt verses in the entire chapter, particularly verse 7 in which the entire verse with its emendations is clearly ambiguous.

> How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

The internal parallelism between the Hebrew verbs *ntn* (give, deliver into the hand of), *miggēn* (piel: deliver up, hand over) and *śym* (put, place, set) function to intensify Yahweh's extreme anguish over the situation and offsets the accusatory tone found in 11:1–7.

Scholars, such as Hans W. Wolff and James L. Mays, offer somewhat differing translations for the *c* portion of verse, respectively, "My heart turns against me, my remorse burns intensely" and "My heart has turned itself against me; my compassion grows completely warm."[11] Others, such as J. G. Janzen, find these translations an unacceptable solution to the theological impasse posed by the tension created with the portrayal of Yahweh's internal struggle.[12]

Yet, it is precisely in verse 8 that the vulnerability of Yahweh bursts forth with an intensity that completely overshadows the previous verses that contained the deity's displeasure. Guenther Allen comments,

> God the parent is also the covenant Lord. The agony of a mother's compassion and a father's love appears in the How…. The exclamation signals deep and intense emotion, usually grief, occasionally of joy. Here one must envision Yahweh, hands extended in love, sobbing at the thought of punishing this wayward son. Pain pervades the scene. Those who have known such pain need no descriptions; for others, words cannot serve.[13]

Yahweh's self-professed love for this people has been portrayed as an emotional attachment, and therefore, the audience becomes exposed to the deity's emotional response in light of that attachment. When read as reflecting the mental state of one in the process of an emotionally heightened decision, Janzen's inquiry are certainly worth consideration regarding whether Yahweh can entertain questions of

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[11] Hans W. Wolff, *A Commentary on the Book of Hosea,* trans. G. Stansell, ed. P. Hanson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 193. See also James L. Mays, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

[12] J. Gerald Janzen, "Metaphor and Reality in Hosea," *Semeia 24* (Chico: Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), 26.

[13] Guenther R. Allen, "Hosea, Amos," *Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1998).

being or must all God speech in this regard be deemed rhetorical.[14] Yes, God is wrestling with God's self! Introspectively, Yahweh performs a self-assessment and evaluates *this* particular divine-human relationship, an association that the deity has coveted as special and unique. Here, we find expressed the anguish of one deeply torn and conflicted over a relationship gone awry. This relationship had withstood a great deal since the people's dramatic and extraordinary liberation from Egyptian bondage.

Going forward, the Israelites would experience moments of prosperity with accompanying occasions of distress. Despite their complaints, Yahweh provided for this group in the wilderness. Succumbing to their request, Yahweh gave them kings, allowing them to conquer and be conquered so that the people might realize the deity's abiding presence. We can only imagine that it is with great sorrow of heart that Yahweh now looks at this beloved group and says, "How can I give you Ephraim, delivery you up Israel."

Thus, the *second* issue before us is one of divine commitment. Will Yahweh choose this people once again? Restated, will the Israelites once again experience the salvation of Yahweh?

The text intimates that the prevailing portrait of the human-divine relationship is fraught with tensions: even the faithful find themselves at odds with their creator. It is apparent that Yahweh's desire for the Israelites' steadfast participation in the covenant too often has yielded the reverse response. In this, they are not alone, since the abandonment of God also manifests in modern society, surviving if you will in human proclivities toward self-actualization, conflict and chaos.

Nevertheless, these verses suggest that God's love transcends these human tendencies toward abandonment by portraying the deity's response to Israel's rejection as *hesed,* unconditional and steadfast faithfulness. Nelson Gleuck is right to assert the interrelationship between *hesed* and *b^{e}rith* (covenant), "*hesed* is the premise and effect of *b^{e}rith*; it constitutes the very essence of a *b^{e}rith* but is not yet a *b^{e}rith,* even though there can be no *b^{e}rith* without *hesed*."[15] Therefore, it is possible to suggest that undergirding the

[14] Janzen, "Metaphor and Reality in Hosea," 36.

[15] Nelson Gleuck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishers, Inc., 1978), 68.

divine-human covenantal relationship is God's own commitment to perform *hesed* over and against the intentions and non-reciprocal actions of the humans who were created in God's very own image.

A similar sentiment resonates within the book of Isaiah. Throughout Isaiah, we find an ill-proportioned depiction of Yahweh's fidelity to Israel without a corresponding response by the people.[16] Referring to this lack of reciprocity on the part of Israel, Susan Ackerman writes,

> there is no mention that the people will give God their love as part of this reconciliation, and this despite the fact that it is within these oracles that we find what is perhaps the Bible's most powerful expression of Yahweh's love for the people.[17]

The anachronistic reference to "Ephraim" provides further evidence of the personal and intimate nature of Yahweh's relationship with this group.

Can we read this textual allusion to Ephraim as a term of endearment that identifies and emphasizes the place Israel holds in God's heart? The tone of the text undoubtedly lends itself to such an interpretation,

> How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; altogether my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea 11:8).

Stuart posits,

> Yahweh's change of mind … is a product not of whim or circumstance, but of God's eternal consistent nature. God is a compassionate God whose basic desire toward God's people is to win them back to God's self.[18]

Similarly, Andersen and Freedman assert,

> These expressions of the utmost reluctance to exercise the fierce anger achieve two effects. They remove from the judgments all suggestions of vindictiveness. And, if the judgment is unleashed in spite of this effort to restrain it—if, as the Psalmist says, Yahweh's nostrils are stronger than his intestines (Ps. 77:10)—it

[16] Susan Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love ('āhēb, 'ahăbâ) in the Hebrew Bible," *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 446.

[17] Ibid., 446.

[18] Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 181.

> is because Israel's sin has gone to the extreme, with no hope of renewal and no trace of contrition to give grounds for compassion.[19]

Yet, the relationship between Yahweh and Israel has always been one infused with hope. Indeed, the prophetic critique of impending judgment is often companioned with hopeful ruminations of restoration (cf. Isa. 49–54; Jer. 31, 33:10–13; Ezek. 37).

Here, as elsewhere, Hosea 11:8 portrays Yahweh as one who is not willing to abandon a faithless and disobedient Israel. Insistently, Yahweh refuses to allow this people to share the same fate that the deity once visited upon the destroyed cities of Admah and Zeboiim. Consequently, rather than annihilation, Israel will experience divine mercy.

This dimension of divine love and forgiveness is captured elsewhere in the biblical record. For instance, in the book of Jonah, we find a wayward and contentious Jonah admitting, "For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2b). Likewise, the Psalmist declares in Psalm 103:2–4,

> Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.

As portraits of divine dedication, these and other biblical passages make it apparent that the desire of God to win back God's people has less to do with Israel's, and by extension, our own faithlessness and more to do with God's faithfulness toward us. As such, it is conceivable that God's steadfast loyalty with respect to covenantal fidelity is not predicated upon human obligation or obedience.

Based on this assessment, we can only surmise that the divine commitment to covenant fidelity, as well as the relationship forged from that commitment, is important to God, so much so that God is willing to expose God's self to mend and restore that which had been ruptured. Thus, the answer to whether Israel will once again experience the salvation of Yahweh becomes a resounding yes! Yahweh declares, "I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again

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[19] Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea—A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 24 (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), 588.

destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hosea 11:9).

For the most part, the initial tension generated by verse 8 appears resolved by the three series of negation in verse 9, "I will not execute," "I will not again destroy," and "I will not come in wrath." Yahweh's self-examination has culminated in divine choice wherein the deity who could destroy makes a conscious decision that results in an act of grace rather than retaliation and annihilation. Triumphantly, Yahweh's compassion arises over and against Israel's rejection of the deity. The three verbal constructions in verse 9 not only complement the initial verbal constructions of 11:1–4, "I loved," "I called," "I taught," "I cared," and "I drew," but they also function to defuse the deity's brooding disposition. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, we encounter situations whereby human intervention provided the initial impetus for neutralizing, delaying or mitigating the deity's anger (Gen. 18:22–33; Exod. 4:24–26). In this case, no human intercessor is needed nor consulted in Yahweh's monumental moment of decision. Having set aside the indictment, Israel's long list of offenses are not catalogued, weighed and brought to bear on the matter.

The sole determining factor and rationale for this change of heart is found in the words of Yahweh himself, "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst." With striking clarity, the contrast between God and God's creation is made abundantly clear: God is not human, and conversely, humans are not divine. With these words, we are invited to envision not only the distinction between heavenly and earthly realms, but we are also reminded that the ways of God differ from the ways of humanity. To be God, is to be wholly other, timeless and eternal, unencumbered by the vicissitudes that plague human life. To be mortal implies limitations and weaknesses. Mortality pits humans against each other in the never-ending battle for supremacy, power, prestige, and wealth. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 summarizes the mortality of human existence.

> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
> a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
> a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

> a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

By acknowledging the temporality of human existence, the passage underscores the fragility of our constructed lives.

Nevertheless, for the vast number of religious believers, this fragility finds itself grounded in the conviction that an omnipotent and righteous God stands at the apex of all of life, efficacious and eternal. Thus, the claim "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" functions for both an ancient and contemporary audience to affirm the sovereignty of God. James Mays aptly captures the significance attending Yahweh's self-disclosure asserting,

> The actions and feelings of Yahweh can be translated into representations of human, and even animal, life. In the dramatic metaphor the personal reality of Yahweh's incursion into human life and history is present and comprehensible. But he transcends the metaphor, is different from that to which he is compared, and free of all its limitations."[20]

As humans, we are necessarily cognizant that individual or collective attitudes of "retribution" and "retaliation" manifest regularly within society for a variety of reasons.

By contrast, the phrase unequivocally declares the same cannot be said of God, whose very essence, if doing so, would be counter-intuitive to God's nature as holy and just. Here, as in other instances of divine initiative, the unwillingness of Yahweh to annihilate this group represents neither the deity's "concession to their sin" nor the curbing of his judgment, but rather corresponds to "a declaration that his relationship in history with Israel shall not end because of their sin and his wrath."[21] Hence, the phrase suggestively advocates that the human-divine relationship is held together and firmly anchored by the deity's rather than humanity's commitment to *hesed*.

As a continuation of the writer's unfolding witness to the steadfast faithfulness of Yahweh, the audience is invited to contemplate the myriad ways in which the holiness of God transcends the world of human reason while simultaneously exposing the depths to which God has through *choice* obligated God's self to humanity.

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[20] James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 158.
[21] Ibid., 158.

The unconditional nature of that choice confirms the elasticity and continuity of both the divine-human covenantal relationship and the expectation of hope that the relationship can and will triumph over the shifting attitudes that accompany human weakness and defiance. For an ancient and contemporary audience, the claim of God's holiness in Hosea 11:9 passionately captures this facet of God's character, emitting rays of hope for the purposes of reconciliation. It is the "Holy One" in our midst who enacts justice for the weak and makes provision for those that have been cast aside and forgotten. This same "Holy One" is willing to forgive the transgressions of his people and call the unfaithful to repentance. Taken together 11:8–9 instructively articulate the struggle and compassion of a God that feels and feels deeply.

The God who has been in the midst of the Israelites all along now seeks to restore the relationship in 11:10–11:

> They will go after Yahweh, like a lion he will roar. For he will roar and their sons will tremble from the West. They will tremble like a bird from Egypt and like a dove from the land of Assyria and I will return them to their houses declares Yahweh.

On the surface, these verses appear a bit disturbing as the writer symbolically presents Yahweh as a mighty lion and Israel as a helpless bird, which could be interpreted as the powerful deity exerting power and extracting compliance from his much weaker constituents. As such, it is apparent that Yahweh has extracted a penalty for Israel's disobedience. Nonetheless, there exists the insistent reverberation of anticipated reconciliation. It is a homecoming invigorated by the knowledge that Yahweh still champions the cause of his people. That is, Yahweh still saves, redeems, and delivers!

Contrasting the human obligation attending the old covenantal promises associated with a pre-exilic Israel and those of its post-exilic progenitors, Freedman asserts,

> The basis of a new order would be the divine promise, the unconditional commitment—the single happy constant in the whole tragic picture—as

> guarantee of the new age. Since the oath was made to himself, God will carry it out; he will restore his people.[22]

Still, he is right to assert that the "moral element" in the human-divine relationship cannot be dismissed.[23] When applied to the present text, God has acknowledged Israel's inability to honor their covenantal obligation, and yet, is still prepared to receive this wayward group back into the fold. In this case, it is clear that the textual aim is to further demonstrate Yahweh's care, concern and commitment to this group.

Metaphorically, the roar, as a beacon of guidance, harkens and welcomes the community back into its privileged position as those cherished by God. Furthermore, we find noticeably absent any indication of repentance as a condition of the group's restored state. Thus, the juxtaposition sets forth an inverted portrait of divine acquiescence as the mighty lion waits to shelter the trembling bird, rather than pursue it as prey. It is the promise of a renewed life and a renewed relationship.

As it stands, God's love and forgiveness continually interceded to redeem Israel, repeatedly enabling pathways for the group's salvation, restoration, and reconciliation. As far as the writer of Hosea is concerned, Yahweh is willing to honor Yahweh's part of the covenant, in spite of Israel's failure to do so, and thus affirming the theological assertion that even if human love fails,

God's love never fails.

[22] Freedman, "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation," 177.
[23] Ibid., 178.