

YHWH'S FAITHFUL LOVE

HOSEA 11

¹When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

²The more I called them, the more they strayed from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and sent up the smoke of sacrifice to idols.

³Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I cared for them. ⁴I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like one who lifts an infant to his cheek. I bent down to him to feed him.

⁵He turns to the land of Egypt, but Assyria is his king. For they refuse to return to me. ⁶The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.

⁷My people are bent on turning away from me. To the high god they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

Hosea is drawing on his experience as a father to portray YHWH's relationship with Israel. It is a relationship which, from the beginning (from the call out of Egypt), is characterised by love. YHWH is broken-hearted at the behaviour of his beloved son. He complains about Israel's obstinate rejection of his tender love, and their turning to false gods (compare 9:10).

YHWH remembers the intimate joys of fatherhood, the times of tender care, the many ways in which he showed his love during the difficult years when Israel was journeying through the wilderness. He finds Israel's behaviour incomprehensible.

Verses 5-6 may offer a hint as to the timing of this oracle. When Shalmaneser V came to the throne in Assyria in 727, king Hoshea of Israel 'turned to the land of Egypt' (see 2Kings 17:4). This provoked Assyria's retaliation – a retaliation which was to issue in the capture of Hoshea (see 2Kings 17:4) and the three-year siege and eventual capture of Samaria (724-722). Since there is no hint in Hosea's oracles of Hoshea's capture or of the siege, we should, perhaps, locate this oracle at the beginning of Shalmaneser's invasion of Israel.

Verse 7 continues YHWH's lament at the failure of his people to respond to his love. They call to 'the high god' – a title for the Canaanite god, Baal. But Baal 'does not raise them up at all'.

With the coastal area lost to Tiglath-pileser III in 734, and Gilead and Galilee, as well as the Valley of Jezreel the following year, and now with Shalmaneser V attacking the highlands, it is not surprising that Hosea would compare the situation to the utter annihilation of the cities of the Dead Sea area (see Deuteronomy 29:23). Surely, YHWH would not allow things to go that far! He loves Israel too much.

Being God ‘the Holy One’, YHWH’s decisions are not linked with those of Israel. His will, his intentions, transcend the decisions and indecisions of people. He must chastise in order to prevent Israel hurtling to its own destruction, but his chastisement is always with a view to repentance, not annihilation. Even if Israel does not repent, YHWH’s decision is his own to make and to carry out. YHWH will be faithful to his commitments, even if Israel is not.

In verse 10 the conviction is expressed that YHWH’s turning will eventually lead to Israel’s turning. It is, perhaps, a later insert, from a time when the people of Israel were exiled, not only in Assyria and Egypt, but in the lands to the west across the Mediterranean.

The future will be determined, not by Israel’s infidelity, but by the fidelity of YHWH (compare 3:5). The exiles will come back, filled with awe at the power and fidelity of their God.

As a true prophet, Hosea must warn the people. But, again as a true prophet, his focus is always on YHWH, declared here to be a God of love who is faithful, however foolish his people have been and continue to be.

⁸How 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.

⁹I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not human, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

¹⁰They will go after YHWH, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.

¹¹They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says YHWH.

[Hosea 11:12 = 12:1 in Hebrew.
See following section]

