

HOSEA 4 AND 11, AND THE STRUCTURE OF HOSEA

John Goldingay
(johngold@fuller.edu)

Summary

Hosea 4:1-3 pronounces an indictment on the entire world as a way of getting home a message to Ephraim. It opens a series of biddings in 4:1–9:9 that seek to get Ephraim to face the facts about itself and about the danger it is in. Hosea 9:10–13:16 [14:1] then comprises a series of reminders of past and present realities in the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Within it, 11:1-11 is not a self-contained pericope marking mercy's final victory over wrath, but part of 11:1–12:1 [2], which continues to urge Ephraim to choose between doom and hope.

1. Introduction

It is a commonplace of Hosea studies that 4:1-3 is the opening of a major section of the book and that 11:1-11 is the close of a major section – indeed, these two passages are commonly seen as the beginning and end of the book's great central section.¹ I argue here that the assumption about 4:1-3 is correct, but that the interpretation of the passage and the way it relates to what follows needs reconsideration; that 11:1-11 is neither a self-contained pericope nor a conclusion and that its interpretation also needs reconsideration; and that these reconsiderations lead to a more illuminating understanding of the structure of Hosea as a whole.

¹ E.g. G. I. Davies, *Hosea* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992): 39; Jörg Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1983): 5; H. W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974): xxix-xxxi.

2. Hosea 11:1-11

It will be convenient to look at the two passages in reverse order. Two factors generate the belief that 11:1-11 is the conclusion of a major section. One is that it closes with the expression **נְאֻם־יְהוָה** (*ne'um yhwah*, Yahweh's declaration); this expression is assumed to mark the passage as a conclusion.² Yet it is the fourth occurrence of **נְאֻם־יְהוָה** in Hosea (see 2:13,16a,21a [15,18a,23a]), and on none of these earlier occasions does it mark the end of a section. Its function is to place some emphasis on what precedes, without signifying that the section (or even the sentence) is over. The same usage is characteristic of other prophets (e.g. Amos 2:11; 3:10,13; 4:6,8,9,10,11; 6:8,14; 8:3,9,11; 9:7,8,12,13), though there it can occasionally appear at the end of a section (e.g. Amos 2:16; 3:15; 4:3,5). Generally, then, the phrase suggests: 'What I have just said or am here saying is particularly important, so think about it, but I'm not done yet.' This understanding is appropriate in Hosea 11:1-11. It also fits MT's providing at 11:11 a *setumah*, a subsection ending, but not a *petuhah*, a section ending; neither does the English Bible close a chapter at this point.

The second consideration that leads to identifying 11:1-11 as the conclusion of its section is a sense that 11:1-11 forms a climax to the book, in that it resolves the tension between Yahweh's wrath and Yahweh's love, in favour of the latter.³ Yet this sense conflicts with the way the book continues, both in the immediately following verses and in the chapters that follow; the tension has not been resolved. The text goes on:

¹²Ephraim has surrounded me with deceit,
Israel's household with lies –
Judah, too,⁴

סָבְבֵנִי בְכַחַשׁ אֶפְרַיִם¹
וּבְמַרְמָה בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיְהוּדָה

² E.g. Wolff, *Hosea*, xxx, 196-97.

³ See e.g. Artur Weiser, *Das Buch der zwölf Kleinen Propheten I* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1949): 69-70; Joy Philip Kakkanattu, *God's Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Hosea 11:1-11* (FAT 2, 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

⁴ I follow LXX in linking 'Judah too' (Heb.: וַיְהוּדָה) with v. 1a; the format of the Hebrew quotation reflects this judgement. It is then grammatically ambiguous whether the subject of v. 2b is Judah (as in MT) or Ephraim (as I think). If the text of Hosea includes glosses that note its application to Judah, then 'Judah, too' could be one of them.

Still drifting⁵ in relation to⁶ God –

yes, in relation to the truthful Holy One.⁷

¹Ephraim – it’s shepherding a wind

and pursuing an east wind,

As all day it makes manifold deceit and
destruction,

when they seal a pact with Assyria,
and oil is carried to Egypt.⁸

עַד רֵד עַם־אֵל

וְעַם־קְדוֹשִׁים נֶאֱמָן:

אֶפְרַיִם רֹעֵה רוּחַ

וְרֹדֵף קְדִים

כָּל־הַיּוֹם כְּזָב וְשָׂד

יִרְבֶּה

וּבְרִית עַם־אַשּׁוּר יִכְרְתוּ

וְשֶׁמֶן לְמִצְרַיִם יִבָּל:

(Hos.11:12–12:1 [12:1-2 in the printed Hebrew Bible])⁹

Preceding chapters in Hosea have repeatedly spoken of inevitable doom, but have also spoken of hope: ‘the conflict between the two is apparently resolved at the end of ch. 11 in favour of restoration, only to be withdrawn at the beginning of ch. 12’.¹⁰ Succeeding sections then continue the critiques that have characterised the book so far, until we come to the final bidding to turn back to Yahweh in 14:1-8 [2-9]. This bidding does point the way to a resolution of the tension in the book,¹¹ but it is a resolution that involves Ephraim’s action as well as Yahweh’s.

If we do not cut off the chapter at v. 11 but continue reading, 11:1–12:1 [2] fits neatly both with the chapters that precede and with the chapters that follow. A common dynamic runs through 9:10–13:16 [14:1], which recounts a sequence of unhappy recollections – of the grapes in the wilderness, the vine, the heifer, the son, the heel, the shepherds. Yahweh and Hosea recall a number of events from early in Israel’s story, either good events after which things went wrong or unfortunate events whose regrettable nature continues in the present. To

⁵ For רָד (*rad*) from the verb רָדַד (*rud*) Aquila implies a second root רָדַד (*rud*), a byform of רָדָה (*radah*), ‘rule’, but this make poor sense in the context. The Vulgate has ‘he went down’, implying יָרַד (*yarad*; cf. the Targum). For עַד רֵד עַם (*‘od rad ‘im*), LXX implies a form such as יָדַעַם (*yeda ‘am*) – ‘[God] knew them’ – developing Hosea’s stress on knowing/acknowledging.

⁶ For the negative or hostile sense of עַם (*‘im*), see BDB, 767b.

⁷ I take קְדוֹשִׁים (*qedoshim*) as a plural of majesty (see GKC 124h) but then as qualified by a singular participle (see GKC 132h).

⁸ English translations are my own.

⁹ The present paper arises from work on Hosea in connection with a commentary on Hosea to Micah which deals in more detail with the textual issues in these and the other passages mentioned (John Goldingay, *Hosea – Micah* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Prophetic Books; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).

¹⁰ Francis Landy, *Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 14.

¹¹ See Hubert Irsigler, “‘An mir findest du reiche Frucht’: Hosea 14,2-9 als ein Höhepunkt des ‘Evangeliums’ von Gottes Zuwendung zu seinem Volk im Hosea-Buch”, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 59 (2015): 257-78.

call them a sequence does not imply that they form a series from which one could infer a continuous or linked story. They do not in themselves presuppose a salvation history. Their point is rather to illustrate a pattern from Israel's past story on which Ephraim in the present needs to reflect. Hosea 11:1–12:1 [2], which starts from the exodus, is one instantiation of this pattern; it is followed by another in 12:2–11 [3–12], which starts from Jacob and Esau, then by another in 12:12 [13]–13:16 [14:1], which starts from Jacob's flight to Aram. It would make little difference if these sections came in a different order. Chapter 11 does not close the sequence.

3. Hosea 4:1–3

Hosea 4:1–3 does form the beginning of a major section, as is usually assumed. Two considerations support this view. One is the verses' distinctiveness over against what precedes. Chapters 1–3 relate how (1) Yahweh chose Israel, (2) Israel was unfaithful, (3) Yahweh therefore chastised Israel and all but let go of it, but (4) Yahweh intends to restore Israel, and (5) Israel will come back to him. Hosea 1–3 has thus told a story that could be called a salvation history or metanarrative, though it too does not simply tell this story sequentially. Chapter 1 covers episodes (1) to (4), chapter 2 episodes (2) and (3), and chapter 3 episodes (4) and (5). But the three chapters form a complete whole and would not have seemed odd as a complete book (a little like Jonah).

The bidding to listen in 4:1–3 then marks a new start. Indeed, these verses would not require chapters 1–3 to precede them; 1:1 could lead straight into 4:1–3 (compare Joel, Amos, or Micah). What immediately follows 4:1–3 in 4:4–9 is allusive, but the drift of 4:4–19 as a whole is clear enough. Another bidding then follows in 5:1, another in 5:8, another in 8:1, and another in 9:1, which takes us to the transition into the sequence of unhappy recollections that begins at 9:10. Each bidding to pay attention leads into an indictment of Ephraim for its unfaithfulness and a threat that Yahweh will chastise and let go of Ephraim. Thus 4:1–3 indeed begins a major section of the book, a sequence that extends from 4:1–9:9.

This first bidding to listen reads:

¹Listen to Yahweh's word,
Israelites.

שִׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Because Yahweh has an argument
with the people who live in the earth.
Because there's no truthfulness
and no commitment,
and there's no acknowledging of God
in the earth.

²Swearing, lying, murder,
stealing, adultery – they've spread out;¹²
bloodshed has followed hard on bloodshed.

³Therefore the earth will wither
and everything that lives in it will be wasted.¹³

With the creature in the wild
and with the bird in the heavens,
and also the fish in the sea –
they will be gathered up.

כִּי רִיב לַיהוָה
עִם-יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ
כִּי אֵין-אֱמֶת
וְאֵין-חֶסֶד
וְאֵין-דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים
בָּאָרֶץ:
אֵלֶּה וּכְחֹשׁ וְרֹצֵחַ
וְגַנְבִּים וְנֹאֲפֵי פְרָצִוּ
וְדַמִּים בְּדַמִּים נִגְעוּ:
עַל-כֵּן תֵּאָבֵל הָאָרֶץ
וְאִמְלֵל כָּל-יֹשֵׁב בָּהּ
בְּחַיַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְגַם דְּגַי הַיָּם
יִאָסְפוּ

(Hos. 4:1-3)

At first glance, 4:1-3 may seem a rather straightforward piece of prophetic polemic, though that fact in itself may arouse suspicion; Hosea is even less inclined to the straightforward than other prophets. It is also noteworthy that nowhere else does Hosea talk in the manner of other prophets about matters such as stealing, adultery, and murder. Yet further, the opening of 4:1-3 as commonly interpreted actually constitutes an oddity. Hosea speaks to the Israelites (that is, the Ephraimites) and tells them about an argument he has with all the people of the אֶרֶץ (*'erets*). That word can denote the land of Israel or the earth as a whole. But Hosea's form of speech suggests that the addressees of his words and the subjects of his words are different people. He is speaking to one group about another group. The passage compares and contrasts with the opening of Micah (1:2-7), where the prophet speaks to the heavens and the earth about Ephraim and Judah. When a prophet thus requires that there should be some listening to an argument or indictment, he is speaking to the potential witnesses of the court hearing, not to the people he has the argument with. If Hosea is addressing Ephraim in 4:1, then, one would expect the people concerning whom Yahweh has an indictment to be someone else. And rhetorically, so it is. The Ephraimites

¹² With LXX and the Vulgate I take the infinitives as gerunds and as the subject of the main verb, which makes for parallelism with the third colon in the line: to put it another way, the third colon clarifies the syntax of the preceding lines.

¹³ The verb is *waw*-consecutive but in the context it is in effect coordinating with *yiqtol* תֵּאָבֵל (*te'eval*) – 'will wither'.

are summoned as witnesses to an argument he has with the people of the earth, not the people of this particular land. The critique that follows in vv. 1b-2 thus concerns the behaviour of the earth as a whole. Hosea's rhetoric also compares with that in Isaiah 24, where the prophet speaks to Judah about the earth. It compares even more closely with that in Amos 1:3–2:16. There, Amos tells Ephraim about his intention to take action against the nations around, then turns to lambast Ephraim itself. Here, Hosea speaks to Ephraim about his indictment of the world around, but it will transpire that the real object of his lashing is Ephraim itself.

One can then see why Hosea talks in terms of the acknowledgment of *God* as opposed to the acknowledgment of *Yahweh*. His assumption is that the whole world ought to acknowledge God in its life. Even if it doesn't know about Yahweh, it knows the basic truths about God and about right living – it knows about truthfulness (אֱמֶת – *'emet*) and commitment (חֶסֶד – *hesed*). Hosea goes on in v. 2 to speak about swearing, deception, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed. The collocation of vv. 1 and 2 suggests the Godward and the humanward halves of the Decalogue. His indictment implies that the whole earth ought to have known about the Decalogue's expectations, even though it did not know the Decalogue itself. His assumptions cohere with the assumptions underlying Amos's remarks about the nations in Amos 1:3–2:3, even though the latter do not relate specifically to the Decalogue. As Ephraim's rhetoric compares with Amos's, so does his theology. Rhetorically and initially, then, it is the swearing, deception, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed of the rest of the world that Hosea is attacking and declaring to be reason for the earth's withering. We ourselves might see this withering as something to worry about in itself, but initially Hosea may seem to be encouraging Ephraim to congratulate itself on not being like those other people.

But Hosea's aim is not ultimately to lambast the world around for failing to acknowledge God and for swearing, deception, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed. It is to confront Ephraim with its distinctive take on those wrongdoings. As Amos 1:3–2:16 critiques the nations around and then turns on Ephraim, so Hosea critiques the world around and then turns on Ephraim, the real object of his lashing. The real significance of the references to wrongdoing in 4:1-3 will thus become clear in retrospect. Within Hosea, the introductory function of 4:1-3 consists in the way its string of critiques introduces themes that will recur in what follows. Subsequent references to swearing, deception, murder,

stealing, adultery, and bloodshed will suggest that 4:1-3 not only alludes in general terms to the kind of habitual wrongdoing on which the Decalogue focuses, either on the part of Ephraim or on the part of the world in general. It will have more concrete reference.

The process starts with what immediately follows in 4:4-9.

Yet 'no one is to argue,	אָד אִישׁ אֶל־יָרֵב
and no one is to reprove.	וְאֶל־יִזְכֹּחַ אִישׁ
Your [Hosea's] people	וְעַמִּי
being such as do ¹⁴ argue with a priest, ¹⁵	כַּמְרִיבֵי כֹהֵן:
you will collapse today. ¹⁶	וְכָשַׁלְתָּ הַיּוֹם

(Hos. 4:4-5a)

In broad terms, the link between vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-9 is elliptical, as is often the case with the logic or sequence of passages in Hosea. Further, while there are no great difficulties about the individual words in the passage, it is notoriously difficult to understand as a whole. I follow the Targum in inferring that Hosea begins by quoting a rebuke that has been issued to him by a priest (perhaps the senior priest at Bethel? – compare Amos 7:10-17!).¹⁷ Perhaps this priest has already had a chance to be acquainted with Hosea's message, and/or he can work out where Hosea's rhetoric is going. Fortunately, for our present purposes, the contextual links are clear: the speaker in v. 4 protests at the idea of anyone arguing or confronting or indicting (the verb רִיב – *riv*); cf. the noun רִיב (*riv*) in v. 1) and issuing a threat about the fate of people who do so.

I omit the next line, which is even trickier. But Hosea's reply is:

My people are cut off	גָּדְמוּ עַמִּי
through lack of acknowledging.	מִבְּלֵי הַדַּעַת
Because you have rejected acknowledging,	כִּי־אַתָּה הִדַּעַת מְאַסָּתָּ
I reject you	וְאִמְאַסְתָּ אֶדְ
from acting as priest in relation to me.	מִכְהֵן לִי

(Hos. 4:6a)

¹⁴ Not simply 'like ones who'; see GKC 118x.

¹⁵ LXX has 'my people is like a priest who is argued with'. The Targum has 'your people argue with their teachers'. The Vulgate reads as MT. Modern scholars have suggested a variety of emendations, but none has carried conviction.

¹⁶ Cf. Vulgate. It is doubtful whether הַיּוֹם (*hayyom*) ever means 'by day' (LXX); Neh. 4:16 is the only possible other example (see the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*). The Targum significantly adds the preposition ב (*b*).

¹⁷ Cf. Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980): 345, though they differ over how far they see the priest's rebuke extending.

As the two forms from the verb for arguing in v. 4 take up the noun in v. 1, the word for acknowledging from v. 1 recurs twice in v. 6. In both cases the words no longer apply to the world as a whole but explicitly relate to a confrontation of and acknowledgment by Ephraim or its prophet or its priest. Both words came in these connections in Hosea 1–3 (2:2,8,20 [4,10,22]) and will recur in later chapters (5:4; 6:3,6; 8:2; 11:3; 12:2 [3]; 13:4).

The rest of the section that follows and the succeeding chapters will illustrate how the more specific topics of the arraignment in v. 2 apply to Ephraim.

- Hosea will upbraid Ephraim for swearing falsely (הֲלָהָה – *'alah*, 10:4, as in 4:2). In the nearer context he will also bid Ephraim not to take oaths (עֲשֵׁבַע – *shava'*, 4:15). If they don't trust in Yahweh but trust in their various other deities, it doesn't make sense to take oaths in Yahweh's name, which would be one of the acts one undertook in going to a shrine to pray to Baal. Such oath-taking needs to be done with truthfulness and faithfulness (Jer. 4:2).
- He will critique the deception (שִׁחַשׁ – *kakhash*, 7:3; 4:2 had the verb שִׁחַשׁ – *kakhash*) by means of which they implement their coups. They've eaten the fruits of such deception (10:3). They've reaped in the community a harvest of villainy, consumed the fruit that comes from the deception that has characterised the nation's politics and thus had an effect on its moral life. Ephraim's reliance on its own decision-making and on its human military resources is an expression of the faithlessness, villainy, and deceptiveness of its claim to rely on Yahweh. In fact, it has surrounded Yahweh with deceit (11:12 [12:1]). As an ironic consequence, by poetic justice, the new wine will deceive the people (9:2).
- He will critique the murder committed on the road to Shechem (רָצַח – *ratsakh*, 6:9, as in 4:2): apparently the assassination of Pekahiah (see 2 Kgs 15:23-25). Hosea implies that the coup had the support of some priests, who were thus involved in behaving like a raiding gang laying an ambush. Whether or not they wielded the weapons, they were taking part in the scheme and thus in the killing.
- He will critique that act as the act of a thief (גָּנַב – *gannav*, 7:1; 4:2 had the verb גָּנַב – *ganav*) by someone who operates like a bandit coming in from outside to steal the throne.

- He will critique their committing adultery (נָאֹף – *na'af*, 4:13-14; 7:4, as in 4:2), which covers unfaithfulness to Yahweh but also unfaithfulness in the political realm.
- He will confront the way bloodshed thus follows on bloodshed (דָּמִים – *damim*, 12:14 [15], as in 4:2). One spilling of blood follows hard on another; one killing spurs a revenge killing. The indictment of murder on the road to Shechem also made reference to the spilling of blood (דָּם (*dam*) singular, 6:8).

Hosea 4:1-3, then, introduces 4:1–9:9 as the first of a series of biddings to listen, and it functions by seeking to beguile Ephraim into nodding in approval at the prophet's condemnation of the world as a whole, before it realises that it is thereby joining in his condemnation of itself for contravening the basic religious and moral tenets expressed in the Decalogue in its national, religious, and political life. Not only is it the case that 'the meaning [of עֲרֵצִים (*'erets*)] may not be stable through the poem'¹⁸ – the meaning of 4:1-3 as a whole is not stable.

4. The Structure of Hosea

I began from the view that 4:1-3 and 11:1-11 are clues to the structure of Hosea as a whole. In light of a reconsideration of these two passages, I suggest the following understanding of that structure.¹⁹

- 1:1-2a and 14:9 [10] form an interpretive frame around the book.
- 1:2b–3:5 tells the story of Yahweh and Ephraim (and Judah) with a stress on Yahweh's intention that this story should come to a good end; the section is thus designed to give people hope.
- 4:1–9:9 issues a series of biddings to Ephraim (and Judah) to face the facts about its unfaithfulness and the threat of Yahweh's devastating chastisement.
- 9:10–13:16 [14:1] shares a series of painful recollections concerning long-ago aspects of the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, and present realities.

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, 'The Uninflected *Therefore* of Hosea 4:1-3' in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds, *Reading from This Place* (vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995): 231-49 (241).

¹⁹ It overlaps most with that of Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament* (repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 1966): 385-87.

- 14:1-8 [2-9] issues a final bidding to turn back and a promise of restoration and flourishing, which will bring the story to the good end that chapter 1–3 envisaged.

Whereas there is broad agreement about the structure of most prophetic books, for Hosea there are as many understandings as there are scholars writing on the subject. As a scholar, my natural instinct is therefore to declare ‘At last! I can tell you the answer to the question that has defeated everyone else.’ I might with more diffidence assume that Hosea or his disciples were not thinking in terms of a single structure when they brought the Hosea scroll into being, and I might acknowledge that analysing its structure can be compared with describing paintings or pieces of music or poems or stories. There may be no one right answer to the question of structure, and many descriptions or analyses can be illuminating; they interweave with interpretations of the text.²⁰ My account of the scroll’s structure takes up what I think are key aspects of its nature, and I would like to think that it is *the* answer, but I suggest that at least it is *one* illuminating answer.

²⁰ See Ehud Ben Zvi’s comments, *Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), e.g. 121-24.