

# ORACULAR CURSING IN HOSEA 13

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Each student of the prophet Hosea is impressed by the profound focus that the cult assumes in the rhetoric of the book. Notable exceptions are Utzschneider (1980) and Hentschke (1957) who examine tradition-historical evidence to argue that Hosea's true foil is the monarchy. The cult, however, is institutionalized according to past scholarship through the speeches of Hosea in three ways: (1) with connections to the fertility cult; (2) with links to the juridical practices acculturated from secular courts; and (3) as a levitical prophet who is trained to search out and destroy cultic apostasy. The speech forms that hypothetically fit the first two settings—dramas or myths of the fertility cult, and oracles of judgment for the city gate—have been well described. The third explanation, which has gained the most recent adherents, is relatively unsubstantiated with unique or specific speech forms.

After a review of past explanations for Hosea's cultic emphasis, this article proposes a new speech form, the "curse oracle," for the levitical prophet opposed to cultic apostasy. A full argument for the curse oracle in Hosea, including a complete textual, form-critical, and tradition-historical analysis of Hosea 13, can be found in the author's dissertation (Franklyn, 1986).

## *Connection with the Fertility Cult*

Hosea is obviously familiar with the cultic practices assigned to the Ba<sup>c</sup>al deities. We are reminded of the influential essay by H. G. May (1932, pp. 76–98), which comes from a period when the religion of Mesopotamia was far too easily paralleled with that of Canaan. Consequently, some commentators (for example, J. Mauchline, 1956) glossed over distinctions between the cult dominated by a bovine deity and the one dedicated to the dying and rising vegetation deity.

In a more helpful way, we can describe the fertility cult of Hosea's day by identifying cultic sites and language. (a) Several cultic sites are legitimately associated with accusations against idolatry (Vuilleumeir-Bessard, 1960, p. 39 and Emmerson, 1984, pp. 120–130): calf of Samaria

(8:5); calf at Beth-aven (4:15, 5:8, 10:5); bull sacrifice at Gilgal (12:2); wickedness of Bethel (10:15, 12:5); possible child sacrifice at Gilead (6:8, see also 9:15); corrupt Gibeah (9:9, 10:9); corrupt Mizpah, Tabor, and Shittim (5:1–2); and the possible murder of priests on the road to Shechem (6:9).

Nearly every possible cultic site in the north is identified by the prophet. This attention to detail is all the more important because not one contemporary individual (note the exceptions in the Deuteronomistic superscription) is identified by name in the book of Hosea. To be sure, there is no proof in some citations that cultic practices are under scrutiny, but the action in the book of Hosea occurs at these places, and good evidence of altars, ephods, or oracular staves can be supplied for each site (see 4:19; 10:2, 8; 12:12; 4:12; 3:4).

(b) Certain terms such as the verb *ʾašm* 'be guilty', and the nouns *hesed* 'lovingkindness', *ʾemet* 'truth', and *raḥam* 'compassion' are further evidence of Hosea's cultic locus, and such vocabulary is probably learned at the cultic site itself. More specific language is used by the prophet if the prophet is denouncing false gods (Vuilleumeir-Bessard, 1960, pp. 30–33; Andersen and Freedman's false deities, 1980, pp. 649–50): *pēsīlīm* 'idols' (11:2); *ʾāšabbīm* 'calf' (4:17, 8:4, 13:2, 14:9); *māssēkāh* 'molten image' (13:2), *māʿasēh yādēnū* 'works of our hands' (14:4), and *qālôn* 'shame' (4:7, 18).

Though we have this ample evidence of Hosea's interaction with the fertility cult, the cultic drama of the dying and rising deity should not be applied to Hosea's speeches. Mesopotamian parallels are crucial to H. G. May's (1932, pp. 76–77, 96–98) definition of the fertility cult encountered by the prophet. He weaves a dramatic reconstruction of the liturgy in 5:13–6:6 and Hosea 13: The wild animal kills the vegetation deity, but the spring rains engender new birth to Ephraim, the deity. The wounded god, Ephraim, approaches Assyria, the netherworld, for healing. They hope that sacred marriage of the people with the land (mother goddess), which is recreated through cultic prostitution, can restore health and prosperity. In 13:2, child sacrifice is engaged to release the curse of infertility (13:12) and bring the dying god from Sheol back to life, but Ephraim is stubborn and will not break out of the womb. Thus all life-giving water is dried up by the east wind (13:15). Lifelessness is evident in all species (5:6–7, 10:5, 2:8–11, 9:11–14).

Recent students of Hosea do not link Hosea 5:8–6:6 and 13 with the vegetation cult of Tammuz and Adonis because this reconstruction violates the plain sense of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts,

and it asks the reader to draw very difficult analogies between diverse ancient texts. Instead, the pericopes are usually explained as a political metaphor of national sickness (Loretz, 1982, p. 37).

When Hosea mockingly repeats the pious lament of the people (6:1–3), perhaps he is demythologizing Canaanite liturgy to present a veiled attack on nationalistic politics. This widely-held explanation is first suggested from Albrecht Alt's classic essay (1919, pp. 537–68, and 1953–59). Alt broke the text into a series of five discontinuous oracles that outlined the events of the Syro-Ephraimite war (cf. Wolff, 1974, Thompson, 1982, and Lind, 1984):

- 5:8–9 Syria and Ephraim fail in invasion of Judah
- 5:10 Imperialistic Judah deserved the assault
- 5:11 Ephraim is losing the war
- 5:12–14 Ephraim and Judah are now vassals of Assyria
- 5:15–6:6 Religious solution: Return to Yahweh

However, there is credible dissent from this prevailing opinion that Hosea is making thinly-veiled political critiques. George Fohrer (1955, p. 165) and E. M. Good (1966a, pp. 273–86) object to such precise historical allusions underneath the prophetic poetry. Furthermore, Alt radically adjusts the Hebrew text to fit the Syro-Ephraimite setting. We see the direct influence of Alt's essay on Karl Elliger's textual apparatus for *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, and the *Revised Standard Version* duplicates Alt's textual changes twelve times. There are far too many emendations suggested, so we prefer not to remove this text from the sanctuary. It is not a speech about a particular political crisis.

The significance of liturgical poetry at the heart of the oracle, and the demanded return to Yahweh, allow E. M. Good to link the poem to theophany and liturgy in the cult. The three accusations (removing boundary stones, following false torah, and finding foreign assistance); the emphasis on Yahweh returning to the lair "his place" in theophany at the cult site; the acknowledgement of guilt; the seeking after oracles; the dawn liturgy and divination followed by theophany on the third day when Yahweh comes forth like the rain—all these "point to a liturgical setting with two foci: legal judgment and restoration through theophany" (Good, 1966a, pp. 277–80, 285).

Good associates this text and Hosea 9:1–6 with the New Year autumn festival because of numerous allusions to food, threshing floors, winevats, the House of Yahweh, booths, the feast, precious silver, and vessels (cf. Wellhausen, 1893, 1963, p. 122 and Good, 1966b). Yet we should resist

identifying the New Year festival, and the supposed connections with the Babylonian *akitû*. We stretch the parallels by associating Hosea with the autumn festival, Exodus 19, and the *akitû*. Ephraim and Judah, as enemy states, should be identified separately and not at the same national festival in the eighth century B.C.E. It seems more likely that the prophet is operating at a local festival in the north, probably initiated, like most festivals, by a lunar celebration (cf. Caquot, 1960–61). Nevertheless, we remember that the hypothesis of a New Year festival took on great significance in subsequent prophetic research. The prophet is described as a covenant mediator who oversees covenant lawsuits at the annual autumn festival. This is the second manner in which Hosea is connected to the Israelite cult.

#### *Connection with Covenant Law*

By allowing the importance of the Mosaic tradition at 9:10 (wilderness), 11:1–4 (Egypt), 12:13 (a prophet led out of Egypt), and 13:4 (wilderness), Good (1966a) established Hosea as a Mosaic covenant mediator who oversaw the prophetic lawsuit during the annual festival. With little supporting data, the Israelite prophet has often been granted this responsibility for handling public and cultic legalities. The development of this hypothesis is usually focused on Amos or Isaiah, and it can only be explained here as it relates to Hosea.

Claus Westermann argues that a legal setting is present in every judgment speech against the nation (1967, p. 199). J. L. Mays localizes such legal activity at the city gate, where a *rib*, ‘complaint’ could be adjudicated (1969, p. 6). He observes that the term *rib* occurs four times (2:2, 4:1, 4:4, 12:2) and that the change in speaker indicates a trial procedure. Walter Brueggemann (1968) then states the strongest covenant context for the prophetic lawsuit and justice in the gate. Brueggemann develops an extensive description of Hosea’s role as Mosaic mediator from von Rad’s outline of covenant ceremonies in either Exodus 19–23 or Deuteronomy 1–11 (von Rad, 1966).

The connection between the covenant mediator and the lawsuit *or* the speech of judgment is well known in the description of Israelite prophecy. Brueggemann calls it “indictment speech,” but he admits that the form is “broken to an exceptional extent.” He still identifies nearly every attack or accusation as a fragment of the legal form, but the only pure text cited is 4:1–2, which is said to outline the classic lawsuit (Brueggemann, 1968, p. 55, 58–59):

- |                    |                          |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Summons to hear | 4. Announcement of trial |
| 2. Name of accused | 5. General accusation    |
| 3. Name of accuser | 6. Specific accusation   |

The judicial sentence then follows in 4:3, but it is not a threat since that would imply anger or vengeance. Rather it appeals to covenant cursing in Leviticus 26, which affects several speeches in Hosea:

5.2b	//	26:18,28	(the guilty will be chastized)
4:5, 5:5b	//	26:37	(the unfaithful will stumble)
11:6, 13:16	//	26:25	(the vengeful sword will destroy)
5:14, 13:7-8	//	26:22	(the wild animals will ravage)
4:10, 13:6	//	26:26	(the food will not satisfy)

Both parts of this lawsuit (indictment and sentence) are said to exist in broken form throughout Hosea as part of a covenant liturgy, which includes stipulations or laws (Lev 26:1-2) and cursings (26:14-39). Brueggemann proposes more than the simple juridical context allowed by Westermann. He discerns a solemn cultic gathering for covenant renewal. There may be no actual legal trial, but it is the closest functional analogy to the covenant encounter.

Brueggemann's emphasis on covenant cursing is important, but the commitment to the lawsuit analogy overwhelms the more important clues to an institutional setting for the oracle. If this explanation of a lawsuit is questionable with 4:1-3, it should not be risked on the so-called "broken" forms.

Michael DeRoche demonstrates that the usual translation of *rîb* as "lawsuit" is too dogmatic (1981, pp. 400-09). In Hos 4:3 there is a "dispute" between two arguing but friendly opponents. In this text there are two parties involved, not the three (plaintiff, defendant, and judge) required of the courtroom. The model of the lawsuit is forced too far if we claim that Yahweh functions as both plaintiff and judge, for in other examples of the so-called lawsuit, the mountains and heaven do not judge; rather they witness (hear) the accusations, like reporters. In the very act of passing judgment during a *rîb*, the deity assumes fault in the opponent. Yet this emphasis on divine authority does not qualify Yahweh in the sense of legal office. A *rîb* is a contention; a lawsuit is but *one* way among several of solving a *rîb* (DeRoche, 1983, pp. 568-69).

By limiting the functional setting of the passage to a courtroom proceeding, we are unnecessarily required to narrow the model further

into a choice between secular law (H. J. Boecker, 1964) and covenant law (Mendenhall, 1970). Those who opt for covenant law are unwilling to eliminate the elements of the secular court from the process. Without recourse to the city gate, it may be more helpful to explain the role of priestly blessing for obedience and cursing for apostasy. Such activity still occurs regularly during solemn or festive assembly, but it does not have the liability of the controversy over a New Year festival.

### *Connection with Apostasy*

The history of judgment speech is inseparably linked to that of covenant mediators who prosecute. But the specific accusations and the nature of cultic guilt have, according to the commentaries on Hosea, led to some hints of cursing. It is suggested also that Amos borrowed some ideas and forms of speech from a ritual cursing ceremony (Reventlow, 1969, p. 90; Mays, 1971, p. 74). Rather than forcing on Hosea the structures of judgment speeches, which are more appropriate to other prophets, we note with Westermann (1967) that the speeches of Hosea predate the ideal form of the judgment speech.

Some curses in Hosea have no connection to the known curse collections in Leviticus or Deuteronomy: rot and moth (5:2), fire (8:14), miscarriage (9:14), unclean food (9:3), nets (7:12), and thistles and thorns (10:8). But some of these curses can be found in other ancient Near Eastern texts (Buss, 1969, p. 113) and combined with those known from the stock collections of curses in the legal narrative of the Hebrew Bible. Thus Wolff (1974), Andersen and Freedman (1980) yoke Hosea to the cultic ceremony in terms of cursing on apostasy.

It is the Levites who are guardians of the first *da'at ʿēlōhīm* 'theology' (Wolff, 1953, pp. 182, 193). The levitical priests and their subsequent Ephraimite prophetic support group were to educate the people on the difference between the holy and the profane: They discern the nature of cultic sins (*ḥaṭṭā'ot*) which brings on cultic guilt (*ʿāwôn*) and which requires cultic exposure (*ʿāšām*). Rather than a personal intimate knowledge of God (which is more appropriately included by the marriage metaphor of Hosea 1-3) the theologian requires a cognitive, legal estimate of the deity, a proper discernment of the presence of the Holy One in piety, worship, and ritual matters (see W. Harrelson, 1976, pp. 12-16).

There are many examples of this levitical conservation in the book of Hosea. We turn to 13:1-3 to illustrate how this oracular cursing functions in his speeches.

## HOSEA 13:1-3

During the infancy of form criticism of the Bible, the book of Hosea was a prime example of the earliest setting and structure for Israelite prophecy. Hosea's oracles appear to be short bursts of speech of one or two lines that were never organized (Hölscher, 1914) and were the result of ecstatic behavior. Later, with the popularity of messenger speech, the book of Hosea lost its place as the ideal example of pure prophetic speech.

Westermann propelled the form-critical study of prophecy toward a consensus based on messenger speech which introduces or concludes the judgment speech. The speeches announced before the king by preclassical prophets have a very specific orientation, but by the classical period the form had evolved to include the entire nation. Thus the accusation was broadened to contain a large number of violations. The announcement of judgment was also expanded (Westermann, 1967, pp. 170-71).

1. accusation
  - a. general reproach
  - b. citation of misdeeds
2. announcement of punishment
  - a. first-person intervention by Yahweh
  - b. third-person sentence of judgment

Each of Westermann's examples of the two-part judgment is found outside Hosea (with the possible exception in Hosea 2:5-7). Other "fragments" of the judgment speech are cited as prooftexts but not pure examples. Hosea 13:1-3 is unanimously described as a judgment speech or oracle (the difference between speech and oracle is often left unexplained) in the commentaries. We examine this label for Hos 13:1-3 to show how it does not fit the rhetoric, and we offer an alternative structure and setting.

*Structure of Hos 13:1-3*

When Ephraim spoke—dismay.

He lifted himself up in Israel;  
so he became guilty at Ba<sup>c</sup>al [Peor], and he died.

So now they continue sinning.

They make for themselves molten calves,  
from all their silver, idols according to their patterns.  
all of it for themselves is the work of craftsmen.

They are speaking of those who sacrifice humans;  
 they kiss calves.

Therefore,

may they be like the morning fog,  
 like dew that rises early,  
 like chaff blown from a threshing floor,  
 like smoke from a chimney.

Wolff places 13:1-3 within the search for justice at the city gate (1974, pp. xxiii, 222). Jacob (1965, p. 92) and Mays (1969, p. 171) accept the same setting and outline the form of the passage using similar terminology:

1. Indictment
  - a. general guilt
  - b. specific sinning
2. Verdict

Note that the terms chosen to name these structures prejudice the setting in life which is accepted. Hosea 13 brings together many prior accusations against Ephraim (4:17, 8:4b, 10:5, 11:2). But does this require the use of loaded terms such as *verdict*, which beg the interpreter to envision a courtroom setting? There is little evidence which links these words to gatherings at the bar of justice.

The same qualification is true of the judgment speeches in the hermeneutical crux at Hos 11:1-9, where similar elasticity of form prevails. Assertions of guilt *and* lament (vv. 8-9) are mixed with so-called announcements of punishment. Many other examples of this mixed form are provided: 2:4-17, 4:14, 5:11, 6:1-3, 7:7-8, 7:11-12, 7:16, 8:1-3, 8:8, 9:11-14 (Wolff, 1974, pp. xxiii-iv and Buss, 1969, p. 120). Wolff calls these speeches lawsuits, with a special twist derived from Yahweh's internal struggle with the consequences of judgment. In each case, however, the lamentation is part of the statement of guilt which exists in the present.

It is appropriate to identify a different form of speech for the prophet Hosea, rather than plug the word *lamentation* into the previously expected judgment speech or modified lawsuit, neither of which are found with any frequency in Hosea. An announcement of guilt that is delivered with heart-wrenching words of lamentation seems appropriate if we recognize that the threatening words which follow are most likely curses. One might expect an anguished, lamentable description of guilt to climax in the ritual ejaculation of a curse.

Westermann (1967, p. 190) has already dismissed cursing because it is “not a genuine prophetic speech genre. From the viewpoint of its origin it does not belong to the messenger speech but to the borrowed speech forms that were inserted or made to resemble the messenger’s speech.” This commitment to messenger speech is too strong since the book of Hosea all but ignores the messenger formula, *nē’ûm yhw̄h*, with only two occurrences at 2:15 and 2:18.

The similarity between several of the similes in Hosea and those in Akkadian incantations is documented by Watson (1984, pp. 242–46). He concludes that the Akkadian curse collections—including the Lipšur litanies, the Šurpu collection, and the *dingir.ša.dib.da.* series—contain a high number of similes (17, 17, and 11, respectively) which, as in Hosea, are clustered together. Some similes are even identical to those in Hosea, for example, at Hos 13:3.

The comparison between Akkadian incantations and the book of Hosea is not necessarily significant due to possible coincidental verbal similarity for curses using dew, smoke or chaff. Such curses are also noted often in the Psalter. Nor should we conclude that the many similes in Hosea automatically signify a curse. But simile clusters are appropriate to curse collections, as Westermann notes (1967, p. 193). This point is strengthened at Hos 5:10–12. The speaker accuses Judah of moving boundary stones and laments Ephraim’s oppression which is required by her pursuit of false torah (*šav*). By a simile formula, Ephraim is cursed with mothholes, Judah with dry rot. The same structure can be found at 7:11–12, 9:10–12, and 11:8–9.

We give this emerging structure a name such as *curse oracle*. Its ideal framework is described in two parts at 13:1–3:

1. Accusation
  - a. assertion of cultic guilt (*’āšām*)
  - b. lamentation (*wayyāmōt*)
2. Curse
  - a. jussive (*yihyû*)
  - b. simile cluster (four; cf. four similes at 13:7–8)

The accusation can be characterized as a description of guilt-ridden self aggrandizement. The clause in v. 1b (*nāsā’ hû’*) is translated as reflexive: “he lifted [something] upon himself in Israel.” Similar constructions appear in Num 11:17, 18:23, and Isa 53:12. In Num 18:3 the Levites bear upon themselves their own iniquity. In Hos 13:1 there is a clear link to Hos 4:8: “To their own iniquity they [the priests] lift up

their *nepesš*.” Thus the content of the curse oracle includes cultic apostasy and iniquitous pride in the priesthood.

### *Setting of Curse Oracles*

The identification of a curse oracle is consistent with Hosea’s function in the cult. To be sure, widespread disagreement prevails over the relationship of cursing and cult (see Clark, 1974, pp. 114–15, who summarizes the debate), but we are not derailed if cursing originated outside the cult—perhaps within a clan ethos—at some earlier date. If the Deuteronomists are clearly concerned with linking the legal cursing of Deuteronomy 26 to the cult, then students of Israelite prophecy agree that Hosea led the way in championing such rhetoric.

In 13:1–2, the technical vocabulary of cultic law, “they became guilty at Ba<sup>c</sup>al [Peor],” is combined with a word that functions as a legal motivation clause. The priest often declares in the law code that “you shall surely die.” The prophet laments this because Ephraim did die. A parallel example of cursing (by the king) is found in 1 Sam 14:44. Saul restates, without the technical word, <sup>2</sup>*ārûr* ‘cursed be’ of 12:24, his curse on Jonathan: “Thus Yahweh will do and add more: You will surely die.”

In Hos 13:2, the restated denunciation of making idols “according to their pattern” is further technical vocabulary from the cult. The same phrase is used in the prohibitions of Deut 4:16–18. And finally the discussion of those who engage in human sacrifice and kiss calves involves another specific accusation of cultic guilt.

One can picture Hosea operating at a solemn cultic assembly when he emerges to deliver a curse oracle—cursing in the name of Yahweh and alternating divine and prophetic speech—against the local priests who are charged with cultic apostasy. We should read Hos 4:1–8 with this motive in view. Rather than a lawsuit, we should project the typical role of the priest who is expected to ferret out immorality and false torah. In this case, we believe that Hosea was informed by the levitical tradition. Perhaps he was a priest, as was Jeremiah (Rudolph, 1966), who is another apparent student of Hosea’s rhetoric. Hosea’s confrontation with apostasy turned inward toward controversies between people, priests, and kings. Hosea’s decision to make accusations of cultic guilt which are completed into an oracular expression by curses is what allows the priest to cross over our imaginary line into prophecy.

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