

HOSEA, FIGURATION, AND IMPASSIBILITY: A PASSIONED PROPHET AND THE YAHWEH WITHOUT PASSIONS

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Abstract: *Herein I explore the relationship between biblical figuration and the classical doctrine of impassibility. Is a passible prophet able to serve as a genuine figure for the impassible God? In particular, are Hosea's passions to be read up into the nature of the God whom he is figuring to Israel? I argue that while biblical figuration, as exemplified in the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, serves as a true revelation of God, not all aspects of the figure are to be mapped onto God's being. Hosea's figuration of God must be read alongside the biblical canon's diverse-yet-consistent proclamation of the nature of God. When read in this manner, Hosea's own passions are no barrier to continuing to proclaim, with the broader Christian tradition, that our Triune God is indeed impassible.*

Key Words: Impassibility, Hosea, Figuration, Doctrine of God, Classical theism, Analogy

INTRODUCTION

Can a passionate man figure the God who is without passions? Or, to put it another way, is the passible able to be used as a sign-act, a living illustration, for the impassible Yahweh? As one approaches the prophetic narrative of Hosea and Gomer, these kinds of questions surface amidst a situation in Israel that is about to erupt. Continual covenant-breaking and rampant injustice have brought Yahweh's typological nation on the brink of expulsion from the land promised to them and their progeny, and Yahweh's word has come, time and time again, through his prophets to proclaim both judgment and coming redemption. As the reader immerses him or herself into this emotionally charged narrative, believing that this prophetic text is a revelation of the nature of Yahweh and his redemptive plan, confusion may arise as he or she wrestles with the language of the God who passionately pursues a harlot-bride, even to the point of exposing her harlotry through driving her to death in the wilderness. If Yahweh is unable to be acted upon by Israel, then why this provocative and passionate language? Can the prophet Hosea, who is passionate in every sense of the word, serve as a figure of Yahweh who, throughout the Scriptures, has revealed himself to be otherwise?

It is my thesis that Hosea's marital sign-act with Gomer, a living picture of

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Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel, is to be taken in a figural manner that is not intended to be read as a literalistic description of God *ad intra*. The passions of the prophet are not to be read up into the ontological being of the Triune God. With this being the case, however, one must not see Hosea's figuration as being unable to reveal anything about the persons and works of his covenant Lord. Rather, Yahweh, in eternal wisdom, chose a passionate prophet to figure his works of redemption among sinful peoples. Thus, Hosea's figuration, while it is not to be read or interpreted in literalistic fashion, is an accommodated, yet quite real, revelation of Yahweh. This relationship between biblical figuration and divine impassibility, while it has not yet been explored by modern scholarship, possesses a wealth of riches for biblical readers. Classical theology is best done when reading with the grain of the Scriptures, acknowledging the varied means in which our God has chosen to reveal himself, including, for the purposes of this paper, biblical figuration. Before walking through this textual opening into the Book of the Twelve, however, it is necessary to explain briefly what is meant by the classical understanding of divine impassibility. If one is to rightly understand what Hosea's figuration is and is not doing *vis-à-vis* Yahweh's nature *ad intra*, one's hermeneutic must be built upon the proper dogmatic foundation.

Impassibility Classically Understood

Divine impassibility has been a foundation of classical Christian theism since the beginnings of the Church. As the biblical canon was breathed out by the divine author, penned by human authors, and spread throughout the known world, Christian pastors and theologians have wrestled with questions of divine emotions and God's temporal dealings with his creation. While some, as of late, have sought to dismiss divine impassibility due to claims that early theologians simply Hellenized Yahweh,² distorting the God actually presented in the Hebrew Bible, there remain an abundance of reasons to continue affirming divine impassibility as it has been classically understood, though one will not arrive at those reasons by mere word studies or a counting of texts.³ Such ventures would leave the theologian wanting, hence why many theologians and biblical interpreters have felt the need to leave this classical doctrine behind. The task then that lies ahead is a thoughtful and thorough treatment of biblical texts (keeping their unified relationship within the canonical witness in mind) and their philosoph-

²Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1961), 227–8.

³Samuel Renihan, *God Without Passions: A Primer* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2015), 21.

ical or metaphysical implications. Rather than distracting from or distorting the biblical witness, a sturdy metaphysical foundation for who God is will only serve to guide the biblical theologian towards a more faithful and confessional interpretation of passages that, like Hosea's figuration of Yahweh, might cause theological confusion to those who stand on looser ground.

While divine impassibility has been defined in a variety of ways, a rather recent definition given by one who denies the doctrine shall ironically serve as an initial foray into this discussion on the classical understanding of divine impassibility. R.T. Mullins defines the doctrine this way, "God is impassible in that it is metaphysically impossible for God (i) to suffer; (ii) to be moved by, influenced by, or acted upon by anything external to God; (iii) to have an emotion that is inconsistent with perfect rationality, moral goodness, and happiness."⁴ Or, to put it in more confessional and etymological terms, divine impassibility simply means that God is without passions. Now, this language of God not possessing passions must be clarified, for it can be a temptation to unhelpfully understand this in a rather cold and stoic sense. Passions speak to a change in the subject as the consequence of an agent's action upon it. To experience passions, one must possess a principle of receptivity, or passive potency, whereby a new actuality is brought forth.⁵ The second point of Mullins's definition speaks to this reality in God. If God is impassible, he is unable to be moved by, influenced by, or acted upon by any part of his creation. In this case, the language of moving, influencing, and acting all demand some sort of change in God. This serves to highlight how divine impassibility is wedded to the other classical attributes of God. If God is immutable, or unable to change, then that necessitates that he is likewise unable to possess passions within himself, for passions, as defined, require the potential for change.

This language of passions also brings with it questions regarding divine emotions. Does God being without passions entail that God is without emotion in any sense of the word?⁶ Emotion within the divine, for the purposes of the argument, can be defined as the immutable beatitudes of God, or the unchanging characteristics of divine blessedness that are analogically revealed to his

⁴R.T. Mullins, "The Problem of Arbitrary Creation for Impassibility" *Open Theology* 6 (2020): 394.

⁵James E. Dolezal, "Strong Impassibility," in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, edited by Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 15–6.

⁶Ryan Mullins makes an insightful comment when he notes that the modern impassibility debate is complicated by the lack of an agreed upon definition for emotions and passions. R.T. Mullins, "Why Can't the Impassible God Suffer? Analytic Reflections on Divine Blessedness." *Theologica* 2:1 (2018): 13.

creation. This reality of analogical revelation, or God revealing his being in a manner that can be understood using creational analogs, is paramount before positing the relationship between passions and emotions within God. Such language provides a knowable referent of resemblance, though that resemblance is not to be understood as a one-to-one correlation with the *ad intra* nature of God. Regarding analogy, Thomas Aquinas used words such as “likeness” and “unlikeness” to speak to this referential relationship between Creator and creature that analogical language in Scripture seeks to capture.⁷ Similarly, though not addressing divine emotions in particular, Herman Bavinck helpfully notes that, “On the other hand, it must not be overlooked that we have no knowledge of God other than from his revelation in the creaturely world. Since on earth we walk by faith and not by sight, we have only analogous and proportional knowledge of God.”⁸ Thus, when the reader comes across language of divine emotion in Scripture, he or she is not to think of that language in relation to our own experience with emotion, as a literalistic description of the divine life of God in himself. God’s ways are not our ways, and, as will be shown, the language of emotions within God are not a one-to-one reflection of our emotional life and his. This being true, however, does not mean that such language is unable to reveal God truly to us. Analogical language is, nonetheless, used by both authors, divine and human, to communicate something that is genuinely true of God.⁹ When the Scriptures speak of God’s love, that language is not a mirage. James Dolezal puts it well when he states that,

Denying passions of God by no means entails that he is without love, joy, mercy, jealousy, and so forth, but only that these virtues are not in him as the result of the determinative action of a causal agent. . . . Such virtues (love, mercy, compassion, and justice) are not passions in God because they are not states of being into which God is moved on account of some causal action befalling him. In God no process of undergoing actualizes his virtues.¹⁰

One could say that divine impassibility means that God, unlike creatures,

⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Dominican Fathers Edition of the Leonine Text (London: Burns and Oates, 1924), 1.29.

⁸Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. trans. by John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2:130

⁹Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 59. See also, James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2017), 20.

¹⁰Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 17, 27.

possesses emotions as perfections rather than as changeable passions, hence why the language of immutable beatitudes, as given in the definition above, describes well what classical theists have argued for centuries. For example, the maxim that God is love, when conceived in continuity with the rest of biblical revelation on God's attributes, could entail divine impassibility, for there is no potential in God for development in that love. God's love is not a virtue, state, or an uncontrollable passion that waxes or wanes in reaction to his dealings with his creation.¹¹ Rather, God simply is love, and he is so impassibly.¹² Or, to put it in the thoughtful words of Thomas Weinandy, "God is impassible precisely because he is supremely passionate and cannot become more passionate. God simply loves himself and all things in himself in the one act which he himself is."¹³

Thus, the confessional language of God being without passions is not intended to indicate that God is without emotions in any sense of the word, for the two, passions and emotions, are not to be, and historically have not been, understood as equivalent terms.¹⁴ Rather, God being without passions is intended to communicate that God is *actus purus*, or pure act, and as such he possesses no lack in his own emotional life, so to speak.¹⁵ His love will never need to be aroused or fanned into flame by his creatures, and neither will it ever dwindle into a faint ember. God simply is his love. He can never be acted upon in such a way that would cause him to experience passions, or emotional changes of state, as creatures do. Thus, this distinction between Creator and creature, as well as an understanding of how analogical language is operating in the Scriptures, both serve to bring clarity to the classical understanding of the doctrine of divine impassibility.

Impassibility Canonically Understood

Any discussion of divine impassibility would be woefully incomplete if left merely in the realm of the philosophical, for, while philosophy is a great handmaiden to theology proper, it cannot serve as the lone and authoritative grounding for any

¹¹This is what I believe Anselm to be doing in the *Prosologion* when he argues that "mercy" is not in God. He is not denying affections within God, rather, he is seeking to demonstrate how God, in himself, is not a reactionary being. Anselm of Canterbury, *Prosologion*, in *The Major Works*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91–3.

¹²Gerald Bray, *The Attributes of God: An Introduction* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 42.

¹³Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 127.

¹⁴Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 32.

¹⁵Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 126.

argument regarding the nature of God. Great attention must be made to see this doctrine as arising from God's particular self-revelation in the biblical canon, for it is the Scriptures that serve as the magisterial authority for any doctrine of God. These authoritative Scriptures testify to the impassibility of God in a divinely-breathed, canonical unity. While the biblical canon is diverse, and often uses language that can cause one to pause and question what is being revealed about God's nature, the reader can be assured that even the diverse and varied language of Scripture is speaking in a theologically cohesive fashion. Before setting out on this brief sojourn through the unified, yet diverse, biblical canon, a brief note needs to be made regarding the term impassibility. The word impassibility, or something akin to it, is never explicitly used in the Scriptures regarding God. While some have used this absence as a justification for denying the doctrine, the absence of a word ought not be a stumbling block. This doctrine will be shown to be a necessary, and one might say explicit, implication from clear biblical texts regarding other attributes such as God's aseity and immutability. Divine impassibility is a logical entailment from how God has clearly revealed himself across the canon.

From the beginning of Genesis, we are shown a God who creates freely without need of anything in creation. He simply creates out of the fullness of who he is in himself as the simple and *a se* God. This can be seen even in the reality of judgment early within the Genesis narratives. The condemnation of Adam and Eve, as well as the worldwide judgment of Noah's generation, both serve to reveal real truths about the Triune Creator. He can judge freely and impartially because he is not a God who is dependent upon creatures. Righteous judgment does not lead to a loss, or an introduction of passions, within him, for what humanity experiences as wrath is not something *new* within God. God's wrath is simply the way in which a sinful humanity encounters the impassible and perfect love, justice, and holiness of God.¹⁶ Rightly understanding how the language of judgment is working within the early Genesis narratives is crucial for the present discussion, for the rest of the biblical canon's language regarding judgment and divine emotion, as will be seen in Hosea, flow from how God has revealed himself in the early pages of Scripture. By introducing language and imagery that will be used later, these first judgment narratives act as an intentionally patterned theological and interpretive grid for how the rest of Scripture will progressively

¹⁶Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2015), 203–4. Augustine insightfully remarks how the language of emotion, using anger as an example, speaks to the creature's relationship with God rather than any substantive change or modification to God's nature.

expound upon both God's wrath and mercy in relation to humanity.

It is similarly within these early narratives, particularly in Noah's flood saga, where biblical readers are introduced to the language of God repenting or changing his mind. Moses writes in Genesis 6:6 that, "the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and he was deeply grieved."¹⁷ The phrasing of "regret" and "deep grief" can, and often has, caused much confusion in relation to what this communicates about God himself. Yet, as shown in the previous discussion vis-à-vis analogical language, this text is not to be taken as a literalistic description of God *ad intra*. To quote Dolezal, "In order to make known to us the truth of his unbounded being, God condescends to refract and repackage that truth into approachable structures of finitude. This accommodation is properly located in the order of divine revelation and providence among creatures, and not in the being of God himself."¹⁸ Humanity in the time of Noah is experiencing God truly. They are not encountering an illusion or a lie. Rather, God is breathing out this revelation in a manner that comports within a finite frame of reference. What we see as divine regret, or grief, is simply the immutable, impassible, perfectly constant love of God providentially expressed in situations where his creation has greatly profaned his name.

This reality, while it will gain diverse expression, remains unchanged as God continues to reveal himself across the biblical canon to his covenant people. This language of divine repentance, regret, and grief will continue to be used by the authors of Scripture, divine and human, to reveal the incomprehensible God in ways that are lovingly knowable for those whom he has set his love upon. When moving across the canon, it is vital to place these tough texts alongside those that speak clearly to who God is. For instance, throughout the Prophets, both Former and Latter, we are given this same language regarding divine emotion and repentance, and one's understanding of these texts must flow from the book that was to ground Israel's theological life, the Pentateuch. As noted briefly before, these early narratives of judgment and mercy serve as the intentionally patterned theological and interpretive grid from which to understand other similar texts throughout the Scriptures. In the judgments of both Adam and Noah's generation we are given figures of latter judgments to come, as well as similar expressions of God's mercy towards the undeserving.

As an example of this latter reappropriation of a previously revealed framework, the Latter Prophets take up the language of divine regret, repentance, and

¹⁷Unless otherwise noted, all verses will be taken from the *The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version*. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009).

¹⁸Dolezal, "Strong Impassibility," 33.

grief that has been used throughout the canon thus far. Pertinent to the discussion at hand, the prophet Hosea speaks to a change of heart within Yahweh in 11:8–9. After several declarations of coming divine judgment for an adulterous Israel, Yahweh says that he has changed his mind. His compassion has been stirred, and Israel will not see the full fury of his wrath. Now, it is important to note that this supposed “change of heart” comes not from repentance on Israel’s part. There is little in the text prior to Yahweh’s declaration in 11:8–9 that would make it seem as if the people have had a change of heart themselves. In fact, Yahweh, through the prophet, says the opposite just one verse prior in 11:7: “My people are bent on turning from me. Though they call to him on high, he will not exalt them at all.” Israel’s unrepentance serves to put Yahweh’s declaration in proper perspective.

Rather than genuinely repenting of prior promises of judgment and being acted upon by Israel to relent, God is simply acting against Israel’s sin in a manner consistent with his impassible nature and immutable will. God’s mind-change is the way in which a sinful Israel experiences the true and genuine long-suffering of their God. While a prolonging of the coming exile would appear, to finite creatures, as a change, it is rather an expression of God’s patience as one who cannot be acted upon or moved by Israel. Thus, what is being attested to in 11:8–9 is Yahweh’s impassible nature, grounded upon the theological foundations laid down in the Pentateuch and analogically revealed using states that Israel would understand. Israel has done nothing to warrant this compassionate declaration. They have not acted upon him in any way that would force goodness or mercy to flow from his hand.¹⁹ Instead, through this use of anthropopathic language, or the attribution of human emotion to the Divine, Yahweh is communicating to Israel that he is the God of yesterday, today, and forever. He is the God who is slow to anger, abounding in faithful love, and perfectly and persistently compassionate towards an obstinate people. His affections towards Israel are no mere illusion.²⁰ This anthropopathic language in Hosea, though it is not to be seen as a literalistic description of Yahweh *ad intra*, is intended by the writer of Scripture, human and divine, to truly reveal the impassible nature of God.

Throughout the New Testament, the testimony to God’s impassibility goes unamended. Its necessary entailment can most naturally be seen in James’s words in the canonical book bearing his name. In James 1:17–8, James writes, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. By his own choice, he gave us birth

¹⁹Dolezal, “Strong Impassibility,” 30–1.

²⁰Jerry Hwang, *Hosea*, ZECOT, ed. Daniel Block (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 276.

by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” James is not being innovative with his dogmatics. He is simply imbibing the theology proper put forth throughout the Old Testament. The Father, as well as the other divine persons, do not change as shadows, shifting and morphing with the times. Instead, the immutable God chooses to bestow gifts as he deems fit. Now, how does this necessarily entail impassibility? Well, if God cannot be acted upon by his creatures, if they are unable to cause passions to be roused up within him, then that means that the gifts that he gives are out of his freedom and nature. They have not been forced from his hand by means of some skilled persuasion on the part of his creatures. This is precisely James’s point. By God’s choice, his free and uncaused choice, he chooses to give a new birth through the Word that he has sent into the world. James’s writing, as well as the whole of the New Testament canon, stands in theological solidarity with those brothers God used throughout Israel’s history to pen divine revelation.

The canon of Scripture, from beginning to end, magnifies this impassible God who sovereignly rules over all things by the counsel of his unchangeable will. He simply is his perfections. He always reveals himself in creation in a manner wholly consistent with his nature, and further reveals himself to us throughout the Scriptures in ways that are analogically fitting for finite creatures. He is the God who is without passions and cannot be acted upon by those whom he has created. It is this canonically unified vision of God that Hosea writes in continuity with under God’s inspiration. Though the prophet testifies in quite provocative fashion, this figuring of God, in the marital union between himself and Gomer, will further prove to highlight the way in which God, the divine author, has graciously condescended to reveal his impassible nature to his children.

Biblical Figuration and Divine Impassibility

Biblical figuration, though a topic of more recent conversation in biblical-theological studies, is not a modern innovation. Its conceptual roots go deep into the past, one might say into the ordering of time itself.²¹ But, before walking through how biblical figuration is being used in Hosea 1–3 to speak about God, it is paramount that this concept be defined. In essence, biblical figuration speaks to how God, the divine author, has ordered, or patterned, redemptive

²¹Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). Herein, Radner gives his argument for the way in which Scripture speaks to the figural ordering of time. Even time itself is intended by God, the divine author, to testify to himself and his plan of redemption in Christ Jesus.

history to testify to and reveal his nature and works in both the Scriptures and the world that he has made. To put it another way, there is a providential ordering to redemptive history, as testified in Scripture, that uses temporal persons, events, and institutions as figures, or living illustrations, for the plan of the Triune God to redeem an elect people, and the entire cosmos, through the Son by the Spirit.²² When defined in this way, figuration can be seen as the other side of the typological coin. For an example of this, one only needs to look back to the preceding discussion regarding the way in which the early judgment narratives in Genesis serve as intentional patterns, or one might say a figural framework, for how latter revelation will expound upon that same language and imagery. God intentionally ordained redemptive history, in this case the temporal judgments of Adam and Noah, in order to establish a figural pattern for other judgments seen through the rest of Scripture, which all coalesce in that final judgment on Yahweh's day where the rebellious will be eternally exiled from God's new creation. One will have great trouble understanding latter biblical revelation if one does not see how the language and imagery that those latter authors use is intentionally fitting, under the inspiration of the divine author, within a framework established at the literal beginning of time. It is this intentional patterning within the Scriptures, this consistent re-using of biblical texts and patterns,²³ that testifies to how God has so ordered redemptive history to witness to who he is and how he will redeem the cosmos from sin and death.

It is this reality for which biblical figuration seeks to do justice. The divine author has constructed redemptive time and space and carried the biblical writers along in such a way that they would faithfully and infallibly testify to this work of God, though in their own diverse and unique ways. Thus, the divine author is placing the words and meaning of a particular author, Hosea for example, into the broader witness of the entire biblical canon, which is the sufficient revelation of who God is and how he, in time and space, is bringing about the redemption of all things in the Son by the Spirit. To quote Christopher Seitz, "Figural reading is then historical reading seeking to comprehend the

²² Don C. Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament: Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 17. See also, R.R. Reno, "Biblical Theology and Theological Exegesis," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry, vol. 5: Scripture and Hermeneutics Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 396. Christopher Seitz, "History, Figural History, and Providence in the Dual Witness of Prophet and Apostle," in *Go Figure! Figuration in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Stanley D. Walters (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 4.

²³ Karen Strand Winslow, "Treasures Both Old and New: Figuration in Biblical Interpretation," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45.1 (2010): 213.

work of God in Christ, in the apostolic witness, and the Holy Spirit's ongoing word to the Church, conveyed now through this legacy of Prophet and Apostle, Old and New Testament, the two-testament canon of Christian Scripture."²⁴

The Revelatory Purpose of Biblical Figuration in Hosea 1–3

As stated, it is my thesis that the figuration seen in Hosea 1–3 is not intended by the authors of the biblical text to serve as a literalistic description of the Triune God *ad intra*. The passions on display in the marital sign-act of Hosea and Gomer are not to be understood as a description of the presence of literal passions within God himself. While this marriage is figural, meaning that God's covenantal relationship with Israel is being figured by a marital relationship between Hosea and Gomer, this figuring is to be understood in continuity with both the rest of Hosea's book and the biblical canon. This requires delicate handling, yet it will be shown that Hosea's sign-act reveals God, and his covenantally redemptive work, in a manner consistent with the whole of divine revelation vis-à-vis divine impassibility.

Before speaking to the relationship between figuration and impassibility in Hosea 1–3, however, one must have an understanding of what exactly this marriage is figurally doing, broadly speaking, in the narrative and life of Israel. Hosea's words are prophetically falling upon a context where Israel is on the cusp of being vomited out of God's land due to her covenantal rebellion, to use Deuteronomic language, and sent into exile in a foreign land. It is into this tumult that God providentially brings the prophet into a marriage with Gomer, who is described throughout the narrative as one caught up in harlotry.²⁵ Hosea is explicitly commanded by Yahweh to, "Go and marry a woman of promiscuity." So, he obeys Yahweh, marries Gomer, and she conceives three children, all of whom are given names that serve to highlight Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Even Hosea and Gomer's children are being figurally used to testify to what Yahweh is presently doing in the life of Israel in both judgment and redemption.²⁶ To quote commentator Jerry Hwang, "The sign-acts of the prophet's family are a microcosm of the historical drama of judgment and salvation in

²⁴Seitz, "Figural History," 6.

²⁵To say that this is a matter of modern debate would be an understatement. Recent Hosea scholarship has sought to address the issue of Gomer's whoredom through the lens of sexism and injustice. Many feminist interpreters, for example, have argued that the description of Gomer could simply be a lie on Hosea's part to continue his manipulation and patriarchal oppression over her. This paper assumes that the biblical text is neither oppressive nor sexist in its presentation of Gomer.

²⁶Bo H. Lim and Daniel Castelo, *Hosea*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 60.

which Israel would readily participate for the next few hundred years.”²⁷

The narrative continues with Yahweh's declaration that, by some quite provocative means, he will thwart his bride's adultery and bring judgment upon her for what she has done. All the paths to her other lovers will be blocked with thorns and thistles, she will be led into the desert wilderness, her idolatry will be exposed for all to see, and she will die of thirst in that exilic land. These statements from Yahweh certainly raise the eyebrows of the reader, possibly provoking questions as to what they communicate about the God who gives them. Passionate would be a fit descriptor of what is put on display in Yahweh's speech in Hosea 2, though the implications of that *vis-à-vis* figuration and impassibility will be discussed in due time. As quickly as Yahweh pronounces judgment, however, he also issues the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation. There is a soon-coming day where Gomer, and the Israel she figures, will be brought back into covenant with her husband, and she will be his in faithfulness, righteousness, love, justice, and compassion. This marital narrative then finishes with Yahweh calling for Hosea to show love towards his adulterous wife, buying her back from those who had taken her, and declaring that the days will get far grimmer before light shines again upon the Israel of God.

Figurally, the text is clear about who and what the characters are meant to symbolize. Hosea and Gomer's marriage is a sign-act for Yahweh's covenantal relationship with Israel, now on the brink of collapse as Israel continues to spiral into idolatrous depravity. Yet, this figuration goes even deeper than the historical context surrounding Israel's covenantal life. Through Hosea's eventual forgiveness of, and reconciliation with, Gomer, the text is figuring the work of the Triune God in the better covenant to come. A day is coming when Yahweh's bride will be brought back from exile, and his goodness will shine upon her. This promise that Hosea and Gomer figurally testify to something far greater than the mere return of national Israel from temporal exile. Yahweh is ordering Hosea and Gomer's marital life in such a way as to reveal a coming day of spiritual return from exile, a greater exodus if you will, in which the reconciled bride of God, the true Israel, will be resurrected in order to live beneath the shade of Yahweh's peaceful, splendidous tree.²⁸ Thus, this rocky marriage between a prophet and an adulteress is a means of God's providential revealing of who he is as the perfectly compassionate redeemer, and how he has planned from eternity past to bring his chosen bride from death to life. This beautiful and stunning

²⁷Hwang, *Hosea*, 91–2.

²⁸Hwang, *Hosea*, 324. Hwang remarks how Hosea's use of language ought to cause the reader's mind to recall the garden of Eden.

figural revelation, however, is nothing particularly new within the biblical canon. This marriage is simply another patterned image in a line of other patterns that are all weaved together by God into an awe-inspiring tapestry of revelation and redemption. From Scripture's beginning, humanity is presented with the need for another Adam, a better husband, who will rescue his bride from the depths of sin and death that humanity has been plunged into through the transgression of our Edenic parents. Through Hosea's figuration, readers are given yet another revelatory fabric in that grand tapestry.

Biblical Figuration and Its Implications for Divine Impassibility

While this theologically rich and provocative figuration in Hosea could lead one into an abundance of biblical conversations, the matter at hand is the issue of what figuration reveals about the doctrine of God, and particularly divine impassibility. While it is evident in the narrative that Hosea is figuring Yahweh, how far does this figuration take the theological reader? With a brief summation of Hosea's introductory figural narrative in view, one can see how the prophet's *verbum* in Hosea 1–3 serve as a reflection of how the marriage between Hosea and Gomer is purposefully and providentially acting as a *signa*, or a sign, of both who Yahweh is as well as the nature of his planned pursuit of an adulterous bride, namely Israel. Thus, the *signa* of Hosea's marriage is providentially ordered to reveal the *res*, or one could use the medieval language of “thingness,” of Yahweh and his redemptive plan. So, if this figuration, as has been argued, is not intended to be a one-to-one, literalistic description of Yahweh *ad intra*, then how, exactly, does figuration operate to reveal Yahweh in an accommodated, yet genuinely true, fashion? Or, to ask another question, exactly what manner of “thingness” is being revealed about Yahweh through the covenantal marriage of Hosea and Gomer?

It is worth noting as these questions begin to be answered that biblical figuration does not demand that biblical persons, events, or institutions possess a literalistic correlation with that which they are figuring. For example, David, as a royal king of Israel, is providentially figuring the royal kingship of the coming messianic king, the Son of God himself, though not every aspect of David's life and rule can be faithfully figured upon the person and work of our Lord Jesus. For instance, one should not import David's peccability onto the Son, for while David, as mere man, was incapable of being unable to sin, the Christ, as both God and man, is unable to sin in any way. Similarly, the naturally fallen aspects of David's kingly rule, i.e. instances where he abuses his power and authority, cannot be attributed to the kingly rule of the Christ, for he is one who will eternally rule with

a perfectly loving authority over all those who are citizens in his eschatological kingdom. This is but one example of how biblical figuration reveals truly but not literalistically. Every descriptor of a figural person, event, or institution is not intended to be mapped onto that which he, she, or it is providentially testifying to. Namely, for the purposes of this particular argument, the creaturely components of a figure are not to be read up into the very nature of that one who is, by nature, not a creature. It is in this vein of thought, then, that one can better grasp how figuration is being used by Hosea to reveal Yahweh truly though not literalistically.

What, then, is being genuinely revealed about Yahweh in this prophetic narrative through the figural marriage of Hosea to Gomer? As noted, while that which is inherently creaturely ought not to be interpreted up into the divine nature, that which is communicable, so to speak, is certainly being made manifest. This is where the very intention of figural language is of great service to the interpreter. Figuration is meant to cause the reader to look at a particular person, event, or institution with a broad, canonical lens. The reader is being led by the author's hand, both human and divine, to think about various figures with all of the biblical canon in view, asking questions of how any particular figure has been used and re-used across the biblical landscape. Thus, as one approaches this figural language in Hosea 1–3, he or she is to think broadly about how marital language is used of Yahweh elsewhere in the Scriptures, and, with this broad lens held up to the eye of the reader, one should be able to quickly notice how much of the language used throughout Hosea 1–3 is reminiscent of that used in a passage such as Exodus 34:6–7.

Just as he did at Sinai, Yahweh, through Hosea's figural marriage, promises to take this adulterous people to be his bride in faithfulness. Unlike his covenant spouse, he will be faithful in his love towards her. It is telling that both passages involve an adulterous spouse. Israel whored herself to the golden calf at Sinai, akin to how the Israel of Hosea's day whored herself to the calves at Dan and Bethel. Yet, amid this covenant infidelity, Yahweh remains the same. He responds with both judgment and promise, being both holy and merciful. He does not respond, either on that typological mountain or here in Hosea, as one engulfed with passions. He responds according to his eternal nature and his divine decree, not being forced or manipulated into any action that he had not otherwise predetermined from before time's foundations.

It is precisely this theological continuity that is being figurally testified to through Hosea's marriage with Gomer. Hosea's Yahweh is the same Yahweh that brought the typological nation of Israel into covenant with him at Sinai. His

nature is unchanged, even in the midst of his covenant-bride's rebellion and idolatrous promiscuity. One could make the argument that a passible Yahweh is precisely not what is being figurally communicated in this text, for it would be quite difficult, if not impossible, for a passible and passionate bride-groom to respond with a perfectly immutable love towards his adulterous wife. A passible bride-groom can be acted upon by his bride, with his love and faithfulness being affected by her adulterous actions, forcing him into decisions he may not have made otherwise. This is where it is important to keep in mind that divine impassibility is integrally connected to the other classical attributes of God. If Yahweh can be acted upon by Israel and manipulated into changing his mind, then he is, by definition, mutable. He can change based on the circumstances he has chosen to enter into, and that is, again, precisely not what is being revealed through Hosea and Gomer's marriage. Yahweh is not being forced from outside himself or manipulated into casting his bride into the exilic wilderness. The covenant curses promised in the Pentateuch and soon to be brought upon Yahweh's figural bride in Hosea are not the reaction of a passionate bridegroom. They are the just action of an impassible, unmanipulated Yahweh.

Now, one could respond to this canonically-influenced approach to Hosea's figuration of Yahweh by holding up Yahweh's own speech in 2:1–13 as a counter-argument. Does the passionate language attributed to Yahweh in this passage tear any holes in the argument that has been made thus far *vis-à-vis* figuration and impassibility? Firstly, it can be honestly affirmed that much of the language used throughout Yahweh's speech is jarring. The imagery of Yahweh stripping this woman naked, exposing her to the watching world, and forcing her to run off into the desert to die of thirst is not to be taken lightly. This is not a text that one can gloss over or try to hide under the proverbial bed in order to present a faithful theological reading of Hosea. While detractors would see the language of this text as clear evidence for passions within Yahweh himself,²⁹ of his being moved to a state of conflicted anguish within himself, biblical figuration serves to provide an honest, and canonically faithful, understanding of what is being communicated by Yahweh and his prophet.

When one approaches this text with the understanding that this woman is being used figurally to represent Israel, then the language used throughout the speech begins to gain some resolution. These are not enraged acts being done upon a literal woman. They are Yahweh's figural declarations of what will soon happen upon the rebellious nation whom this woman is representing. They serve

²⁹ David J.A. Clines, "Hosea 2: Structure and Interpretation", in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1998*, JSOTSup 292 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 297–8.

as a literary picture of death in Israel's life, if the nation does not repent of her adultery. Just as language of Yahweh changing his mind throughout Scripture, and even later in Hosea, is not to be read up into the Triune nature *ad intra*, so, too, this language in Hosea 2 is not to be understood literalistically as an expression of sexualized rage from Yahweh towards this woman or the Israel whom she represents.³⁰ Figural language does not require a one-to-one, literalistic correlation between *verba* and *signa*. Israel must not be literally stripped naked and marched throughout the wilderness in order for these words to ring true to what they are intended by the author to convey. Instead, this figural language is communicating within the broader framework, established since Genesis, of exile as divine judgment. While there is no need to minimize the provocative nature of the imagery that is used, interpreting this imagery literalistically, similar to that of divine repentance, misses the theological and figural purpose of this speech.

Thus, as the reader gazes upon Hosea's words, a revelation of God himself, he or she must not do as so many in the prophet's own day did, fashioning a deity after their own, passible image. The ancient world was full of gods and mythological figures who were mere heavenly copies of mankind. Yahweh, however, is neither creature nor copy. His actions in time and space are not rash or passioned responses. They are the consistent application of his immutable beatitudes in the world that he has made. This holds true, even for the inbreaking of his covenantal curses upon his bride, Israel. One could argue that a central message of Hosea, and of the prophets more broadly, is that Yahweh is utterly unlike the idols that Israel has formed for themselves. While the Baals and other pagan deities must be convinced to act for the good of their followers, Yahweh is unchanging and unforced goodness within himself. The graces, blessings, and gifts that mankind receives are not the result of pulling at Yahweh's proverbial heartstrings. Rather, the varying gifts that fill the earth are the result of Yahweh's impassible nature. As Gomer mistook the blessings around her as coming from the hands of her lovers, so Israel, and all humanity, worshipped and gave thanks to mere creatures rather than the Creator. It is into this idolatrous context that the prophet, and the divine author himself, comes to a sinful people, whether it be Israel or the present-day Church, declaring that the Triune Yahweh is the God who is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving sins, and maintaining that love for a thousand generations. And this is true precisely because Yahweh is the God who is impassible.

³⁰Contra Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), xvii. Weems argues that this text justifies sexual violence against women.