

The Prophet Hosea and *Deus Caritas Est*

Katherine Schilling

University of Notre Dame

Essay Competition

4 May 2007

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI draws upon a series of Biblical passages that illustrate the meaning of the text. Clearly, the title of the encyclical comes from *The First Letter of John*: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). The Song of Songs also allegorically represents God’s love for us, through the notion of erotic love found in young intoxicated love. While Benedict acknowledges the long tradition of this interpretation of the Song of Songs, it is worth noting that he also employs the prophet Hosea, whose master metaphor is erotic love, ordered and disordered, and who links human love and divine love. In his encyclical Benedict writes, “The Prophets, particularly Hosea and Ezekiel, described God’s passion for his people using boldly erotic images. God’s relationship with Israel is described using the metaphors of betrothal and marriage; idolatry is thus adultery and prostitution”¹ (9). The examination of the representations of love and justice in Hosea illustrates the importance of the prophet Hosea in understanding the message of the encyclical.

Pope Benedict XVI’s commentary on love shows that God’s love for humanity is a union of two types of love, *eros* and *agape*. Although these forms of love are explored in two separate parts of the encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* shows that the opposition between them need not exist. Rather, Benedict XVI affirms with clarity that *eros* and *agape* “can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized” (7). Thus, Benedict writes of an evolving growth and interweaving of *eros* and *agape* in that the erotic dimension of love can only be fulfilled in the agapic dimension of self-giving. Therefore, with this emphasis on the unity of the two types of love, the study of *Deus*

¹ Pope Benedict XVI. *God is Love: Deus Caritas Est*. San Francisco: Ignatius P, 2006.

Caritas Est in a Biblical context should include both the erotic and agapic dimensions of love, which are found in Hosea.

Just as the encyclical shows that *eros* and *agape* deepen each other, Hosea shows the mutual relationship of its two forms of love, *hesed* and righteousness. A type of love found in Hosea, *hesed*, is an ordered love growing out of the covenant beyond the call of duty. It is possible to show that *hesed* corresponds to the *eros* of *Deus Caritas Est*, which is a human love that is ascending and possessive. A second type of love in Hosea is discussed in terms of the pursuit of justice that it inspires. Thus, the element of social justice in Hosea corresponds to the *agape* of the encyclical, a Christian love that is descending and oblationary. Hosea addresses the two types of love that define the encyclical, *eros* and *agape*, through expressed commands to regard God as a lover, to work towards justice for the oppressed, and to know God through liberating justice. Hosea suggests that our relationship of erotic love with God instigates our obligation to strive for righteousness.

Justice is of central significance for all relationships of human life among the Old Testament prophets, especially Hosea. The people of the Old Testament were in relationship with God because of the covenant that existed between God and Israel. The last verse of Hosea links justice (righteousness) with wisdom: “Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them” (Hos 14:10). Closing with these words, Hosea refers to the type of life prescribed by a covenantal relationship with God—a relationship of wisdom and one defined by *hesed*. For Hosea, the crucial element in the knowledge of God is the justice, or righteousness that works to remedy the injustices and oppression of the poor and marginalized. So important are the

ideas of freedom and justice that all expressions of love should be founded upon it. At the same time, however, Hosea encourages the union of love and justice, since they are complementary. Hence, in a discourse on oppression, Hosea elucidates the connection between *hesed* and the call to righteousness, or justice.

It is clear that the prophet Hosea endorses the pursuit of social justice as the exercise of the love that Pope Benedict identifies as *agape*. Hosea maintains a strong position against oppression and essentially attacks the urban elite and those of high social status. Those who fell under scrutiny included priests who were uninformed and selfish, kings who were placed in power against God's will, and governments that authorized idolatry. Hosea's motivation for these criticisms as well as his theology can be more clearly understood in the account of the Exodus. After all, the God of Hosea is in the first place the God of the Exodus, who released his people from Egyptian enslavement. In a sense, Hosea had a calling for the work of justice that stemmed from the God of the Exodus: "Yet I have been the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior" (Hos 13:4). Hosea also introduces the concept of deliverance from oppression in the description of God's role in the Exodus and his parental relationship with Israel: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos 11:1). This is a glimpse of the combination of idea of social justice in relieving oppression and the kind of guardian love that God feels for Israel.

Also explicitly discussed in Hosea is the wrath of God in response to devices of oppression and the idolatry that is used to justify it.² As a violation of God's covenant,

² As a reader of this paper indicated, Pope Benedict does not use the prophetic wrath of Hosea in his encyclical. Yet the way that the wrath and love of God are joined in Hosea illustrates the ability of Christianity to reconcile wrath and love, which sets it apart from other religions. The resolution of wrath and love forces all questions of Christianity to the forefront, and is therefore an important theme in *Deus Caritas Est*.

idolatrous behavior is a source of God's anger and exasperation: "The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark; on them I will pour out my wrath like water. Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment, because he was determined to go after vanity" (Hos 5:10-11). Hosea explains that in addition to vanity, a common source of oppression is the stealing of land by changing boundary lines. God punishes those who afflict others and worship false gods in attempts to justify their sins. Their consequence is the suffering of all of Israel from violence and oppression in the hands of the conquering Assyrians.

According to Hosea, another form of Israel's oppression is religious prostitution, a form of disordered erotic love. He shows that the people's infidelity parallels the metaphorical idea of retribution for allied yet idolatrous nations: "For they have gone up to Assyria, a wild ass wandering alone; Ephraim has bargained for lovers. Though they bargain with the nations, I will now gather them up. They shall soon writhe under the burden of kings and princes (Hos 8:9-10). Hosea speaks effectively about the anger of God toward oppression, warfare, and idolatry, and likens it to the rage of an unfaithful husband who is rejected by a woman (Israel) who prefers to prostitute herself: "Your calf is rejected, O Samaria. My anger burns against them" (Hos 8:5). An element of justice is also established in the verse, "Ephraim has given bitter offense so his Lord will bring his crimes down on him and pay him back for his insults" (Hos 12:14). The discussion of oppression and God's wrath in Hosea highlights its messages of justice.

Although Hosea shows the ways in which God punishes injustices, he focuses on the compassion and love of God. In fact, Hosea is singular among the prophets in his depiction God's intense emotional struggle between anger and compassion: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like

Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (Hos 11:8-9). The Book of Exodus teaches that Yahweh could not be uninterested or unreceptive to oppression and violence, but rather he is angered by all cruelty. Yet more importantly and as Pope Benedict indicates, this quote reveals that God’s forgiving love is so great that it turns “his love against his justice” (10).

The aforementioned rhetorical questions presented in Hosea 11:8-9 are somewhat answered in Hosea’s statement that God will indeed cure Israel’s inclinations to sin, and love will immediately replace anger: “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel...” (Hos 14:4-5). Thus Hosea, believing in the healing nature of God, looks forward to the assurances of the new covenant.

The covenantal relationship of God to the people of Israel is described in Hosea with examples of erotic love: the relationship between Hosea and his wife and the parallel relationship between God and his people. Hosea is hurt by his wife’s expression of disordered love through repeated infidelity. He knows that he should disown his wife, but he is torn because despite her behavior he still feels love for her—a love of ordered *eros*. Similarly, and as Hosea comes to realize, God is terribly hurt by the unfaithfulness of Israel, especially since he is not a God who is unreceptive and distant, but rather one who is deeply in love with his people. Hosea and the loving God of *Deus Caritas Est* are connected by their demonstration of *eros* as a response to the disordered love committed by Hosea’s wife and metaphorically expressed by the people of Israel. Thus, in the face of disordered love, Hosea functions as a connection between human and divine love.

Pope Benedict XVI also seems to make an effort to connect human and divine love through the analogy of the relationships found in faithful marriage and the manner in which God has chosen all of humankind for his love. The encyclical addresses the concept of God's *eros* found in Hosea: "God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being...and a lover with all the passion of true love" (10). Thus the inherent sacredness of sex is established when it is considered as a means to draw closer to God and his ways. Benedict continues, "*Eros* is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified as to become one with *agape*" (10). In other words, the love found in a blessed marriage is both the closest resemblance of God's love and the best example of the union between *eros* and *agape*.

It is true that Hosea succeeds in linking human and divine love through the description of the relationship between God and Israel in terms of human love and matrimony. Hosea was a unique prophet in that his marriage became a symbol of his message. Upon God's request, Hosea marries Gomer, who is sexually promiscuous: "...the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord'" (Hos 1:2). Thus, Hosea's life completely embodied the word of God. The turmoil he experienced with his prostitute wife helped Hosea to comprehend the hurtful effect of sin in personal relationships. His marriage also prepared him to declare a deep love of God—a love that allows compassion to prevail over anger and augments our understanding of God.

Knowledge of God is also discussed in Hosea in the context of the metaphor of the marriage between God and his people: "And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord (Hos 2:19-20). Hosea shows

that God's love for humanity is ordered like that of a spouse. Even God's words, "I will be your God and you shall be my people" closely resembles ancient marriage vows (Jer 7:23). Although other prophets spoke about the justice of the Lord, Hosea uniquely connects his understanding of justice with marriage and his personal comprehension about God himself.

Hosea translates the idea of marriage and God as a lover to ancient religion. Using a reversion of the Canaanite concept of Baal, Hosea introduces emotion to the understanding of the Covenant. The people of Israel needed a religion that provided an outlet for their feelings, so Hosea takes the idea of Baal and transforms it into the idea of God as a husband and lover. In doing so, he substitutes the notion of a marriage for the old meaning of the Covenant as only a legal contract between Israel and their God with specific duties and obligations. Thus, Hosea documents the shift from a religion that had become one of demands to a religion of covenant—a loving and obedient partnership.

Hosea beautifully portrays the way that God's love for humans is completely *agape*. Benedict writes, "Hosea above all shows us that this *agape* dimension of God's love goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity. Israel has committed "adultery" and has broken the covenant; God should judge and repudiate her. It is precisely at this point that God is revealed to be God and not creature" (10). Benedict explains, "God's passionate love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice" (10). Benedict's brief reference to Hosea describes the relationship of faithfulness between Israel and God.

Like Hosea, *Deus Caritas Est* is a convincing reminder that God is love, that he is the source of all true love. Because of his love for us, we can love others. Written in the language of *eros*, the teachings in the first part of the encyclical correspond to the term *hesed* that is found in Hosea. The second half of *Deus Caritas Est* indicates the role we

play in spreading God's love on earth by our efforts for the poor and marginalized. As an example of this activism, Christians look to Jesus, who seeks to save because of love for others. Christ, in his life, passion, and death, is the supreme example of *agape*. In his encyclical, Benedict distinctly identifies the bond between love of God and love of neighbor. Thus, our motivation to generously share love with our neighbor is rooted in our desire to become spiritually united with God.

Just as *Deus Caritas Est* presents the two core values of *eros* and *agape*, Hosea emphasizes two core covenantal values: "But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hos 12:6). Hosea's construal of the Covenant, which combines the themes of the mystic bond with God and the Christian responsibility to promote social justice, can be compared to the encyclical's emphasis on the unity between *eros* and *agape*. Hosea further indicates that the motivation for effecting justice and change in the world must come from an understanding of God's *hesed* (or *eros* in the context of the encyclical) for humanity. Hence, Hosea encapsulates the overarching message of the encyclical—the welding of the different dimensions of love—*eros* and *agape*—into a single reality.