# Recollection, Rhetoric, and Composition in Hosea 12–13: John Goldingay

Hosea 12–13 fits the typical profile of First Testament prophecy, while also having distinctive characteristics. It is typical of the prophets, especially in the monarchic period, that:

* On Yahweh’s behalf, they critique Israel for its faithlessness
* They threaten Israel with trouble to come from Yahweh
* They aim thus to turn Israel from its faithlessness
* They deliver their messages orally in poetic missives of a few lines
* They use all manner of rhetorical devices to seek to achieve their aim
* To this end they also appeal to Israel’s awareness of Yahweh’s past involvement with them
* They or their curators put their messages into writing and string them into longer units
* In doing so, they adapt them for later application
* Their messages commended themselves to Israel in such a way that they became part of Israel’s Scriptures

It is a Wittgensteinian “family resemblances” profile: that is, not every prophet needs to manifest every feature in order to count as belonging to the family, and individual members of the family have their personal characteristics. Hosea 12–13 does have all the features and also manifest some distinctiveness in its embodiment of them, in particular in the number and variety of its allusions to the stories of Israel’s ancestors and of Israel itself, which play a significant role in the chapters. The two chapters thus combine a number of characteristics in a way that gives them a distinctive profile.

* They are a piece of rhetoric, in the sense that their aim is to change the thinking and the life of people who read them, and they use language and argument to that end.
* Their language and argument takes poetic form, with features one would then expect such as rhythm, parallelism, paronomasia, and unusual word order.
* They use metaphor, which can enable readers to see things and thus itself has a rhetorical purpose: it is designed to change people’s way of seeing.
* Paradoxically they also seek to achieve their aim by being allusive, bivalent, and ambiguous, rather than transparent in meaning.
* In seeking to change their readers’ thinking, they appeal to their inherited memory of their ancestors’ lives and actions, while likely tweaking their version of that memory.
* In making this appeal, they interact with existent formulations of that memory, semi-fixed in writing or in the way the story is told.

The allusiveness and ambiguity of the chapters is understood in varying ways by (e.g.) the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Targum, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. While these variations might indicate that translators were working with different forms of the text from the one represented by MT, and thus with potentially more ancient ones, it is at least as likely they were wrestling to make sense of a text that is not so different from MT but is more allusive and difficult than (e.g.) Amos. In light of its difficulties, Hosea’s text has also been the subject of many modern suggestions for revising it. In general it seems to me wiser and more productive to work with MT’s text with its challenges and allusiveness, “not because the MT is sacrosanct, but because we cannot pretend to know better.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In this essay I thus make little reference to ancient or modern alternative versions of the text. In addition, I assume that the process of curating Hosea’s messages will have meant that the book we have includes words that did not derive from Hosea himself, but I work here with the version of the text that issued from this process, and when I use expressions such as “Hosea says,” I do not at every point necessarily imply a reference to Hosea in person as opposed to the Hosea scroll that we have.

# Composition

The material in Hosea 12–13 will have begun life as messages of a few lines delivered in a location such as the Samaria city square or the Beth-El sanctuary, or sent as missives to the palace; the chapters we have are a compilation of such messages. I take the first unit, for instance, to be a compilation from at least three short messages, so that there is no original link between 12:1–3, 4–5 and 6–7 [11:12–12:2, 3–4 and 5–6], and something similar is true throughout the chapters. The logic in the resultant arrangement of prophetic scrolls is sometimes clear but sometimes not—at least, interpreters sometimes agree on it and sometimes do not. As is the case with Proverbs, I hypothesize that the curators of Hosea’s messages could sometimes see ways to link sayings, but were sometimes left with messages that evaded arrangement, which they therefore simply juxtaposed to other messages and left as postscripts to them. In Hosea 12–13, I hypothesize that the opening verses, 12:1–7 [11:12–12:6], provide a clue to the arrangement of the chapters; or, to put it another way, I imagine readers of the scroll reading Hosea 12–13 in light of those opening verses. Admittedly, this is to oversimply the interpretive process, because there is commonly a two-way interpretive relationship between the introduction to a document and the material that follows it. Thus the body of Hosea 12–13 draws attention to and clarifies those opening verses, even while those verses introduce what follows.

There is no warrant before the time of the medieval chapter divisions associated with Stephen Langton for seeing Hosea 12 and 13 as two units,[[2]](#footnote-2) and neither does the material in the chapters suggest any such warrant. Consideration of the interaction between the opening verses and what follows rather generates the proposition that Hosea 12–13 consists in a series of five substantially parallel units, assembled from originally briefer messages. The units characteristically comprise critique of Israel, threat of consequences to follow, and recollection of moments from the history of Israel and of its ancestors that encourage reflection on the critiques and the threats and an appropriate response. It seems quite an oversimplification to say that “the main intention of the text [12:1–14:9] is to communicate hope to the readers,”[[3]](#footnote-3) but neither does Hosea wish his readers to think that their situation is hopeless.

In the outline and discussion of the five units that now follows, I mostly leave questions about rhetoric and recollection for the later sections in this essay, and I presuppose conclusions about many other aspects of the chapters’ exegesis that are discussed in the commentaries listed in the References.

## 12:1–7 [11:12–12:6]

Critique: 12:1 [11:12]Ephraim has surrounded me with deceit,

Israel’s household with fraud.

And Judah, he is still wandering with God,

with holy ones being truthful.

2 [1]Ephraim is shepherding a wind,

pursuing an east wind all day long.

Falsehood and destruction he makes plentiful,

a pledge with Assyria they solemnize,

and oil to Egypt is carried.

Threat: 3 [2]So Yahweh: a confrontation with Judah,

and attending to Jacob in accordance with his practices;

in keeping with his deeds he will give back to him.

Recollection: 4 [3]In the womb he grasped at his brother,

and in his manhood he exerted himself with God.

5 [4]He exerted himself towards an envoy and won;

he cried and sought grace with him.

At Beth-El he finds him,

and there he speaks with us.

Exhortation 6 [5]So Yahweh [is] the God of Armies,

Yahweh [is] his invocation.

7 [6]So you, through your God you are to go back;

commitment in the exercise of authority, keep it,

and hope in your God continually.

First Testament poets sometimes provide readers with hints regarding the beginning and end of units (tricola are a marker in these chapters, as this unit illustrates), but they often leave readers to work things out. Here, MT is surely right to see 11:11 as the end of a subsection, at least, and thus to put a setumah there; the version of the medieval chapter divisions that appears in printed Hebrew Bibles (BHS, NJPS, BHQ) is thus right to begin a new chapter at 12:1 [11:12], not at a verse later, like other English translations.

This opening unit begins with a critique of Ephraim that leads into a threat. While the first Judah line could be a later adaptation of the message, it’s harder to peel off the second Judah reference; I take 12:1–3 [11:12–12:2] as an original two-part indictment and threat. The critique moves from the metaphorical (Ephraim has surrounded Yahweh, like a hostile army), the unspecific (deceit, fraud), the ambiguous (wandering, with holy ones being truthful), the metaphorical and also bivalent (shepherding a wind, pursuing an east wind, falsehood, destruction), eventually to the straightforward and explicit (shepherding wind is spelled out in terms of making commitments to Assyria and Egypt).[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Yahweh* therefore has *a confrontation with Judah*: it is a verbless sentence, a common feature of Hebrew and specifically of Hebrew poetry. Being verbless need not issue in ambiguity, and English translations routinely render such sentences as present tense statements. Here, the verbless construction continues in the parallel colon, which combines it with the convention whereby an infinitive can take the place of a finite verb. But then the unexpected third colon has a finite verb, a yiqtol. I infer that v. 3 [2] refers to the argument Yahweh has now with Judah and Jacob about their faithlessness, which will issue in retribution.

In light of preceding chapters and of what will come in the rest of the Hosea 12–13, the recollection of Jacob’s story in vv. 4–5 [3–4] is not a surprise, but the subsequent exhortation stands out; there will be no more exhortation in Hosea 12–13. This one will in due course be complemented by the substantial exhortation comprising 14:2–4 [1–3]. It faces both ways: it brings chapters 12–13 to a conclusion, resolving the possible suspense raised by the shortfall in the intervening units, and also introduces the conclusion to the Hosea scroll as a whole. Three times Hosea explicitly urges Ephraim to turn back to Yahweh (10:12; 12:7 [6]; 14:2–4), “but everything in between is *implicitly* deployed to that same end.”[[5]](#footnote-5) To put It another way, the rhetorical aim of 12:1–7 [11:12–12:6] remains implicit until the last verse, where the bidding (a yiqtol), *you are to go back*, and the two imperatives, *keep* and *hope*, make unequivocal the aim of what precedes. They take the passage from the metaphorical and implicit to the straightforward and explicit.

## 12:8–14 [7–13]

Critique: 8 [7]Phoenicia: fraudulent balances in his hand,

likes extorting.

9 [8]Ephraim has said, “Yes, I have gotten rich,

I have found wealth for me.

All my labors: people will not find for me

waywardness that is an offence.”

Threat: 10 [9]But I [am] Yahweh your God

since the country of Egypt.

Again I will have you live in tents

as in the days of assembly.

11 [10]I will speak to the prophets,

(and I have made vision plentiful),

and by the hand of the prophets I will represent things.

12 [11]If Gilead [is] trouble,

yes, they have become empty.

At the Gilgal they have sacrificed bulls;

their altars, too:

like rock piles on the open country’s furrows.

Recollection: 13 [12]So Jacob fled to the open country of Aram,

and Israel served for a wife,

for a wife he acted as a keeper.

14 [13]But by a prophet Yahweh brought up

Israel from Egypt,

and by a prophet it was kept.

The nature of 12:8–9 [7–8] as critique is eventually clear, though it might not be immediately so. Hosea here plays the same game as he does in 4:1–3 and as Amos does in Amos 1:3–3:2, where they sound as if they are indicting the nations but they are softening up their hearers for an indictment of the hearers themselves.[[6]](#footnote-6) The unit thus begins with an exclamation about Phoenicia, *kənaʿan*, Canaan; but that word can also denote a trader, the role Phoenicia was known for, and subsequent phrases in vv. 8–9 [7–8] indicate this to be the significance here (cf. Tg). Ephraimites would surely enjoy hearing their prophet critique the great northwestern trading power for its dishonesty, though the sharp-minded might not be surprised when it transpires that really Ephraim itself is the dishonest trader to whom the exclamation refers. In this passage’s context in Hosea, only just now has the prophet indicted Ephraim for deceit, fraud, and falsehood: *fraud* was also Isaac’s accusation of Jacob in Gen 27:35, while Jacob with some ironic bullishness could claim to be free of any *offence* in Gen 31:36. Ephraim cannot make that claim, though Hosea has Ephraim implying, “My prosperity proves I am not a wrongdoer!”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the middle section, the alternating between yiqtol, weqatal, qatal, and yiqtol has generated almost every possible combination of future, present, and past translation of the verbs and the noun clauses. But the semantically and rhetorically redundant pronoun “I” before the surprising qatal verb *(and I have made vision plentiful*)signals a circumstantial clause (see GK 142d) paralleling in its time reference the preceding allusion to *Egypt* and the *days of assembly*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The verse as a whole, then, continues the declaration of intent begun in v. 10 [9]. In v. 12 [11], *Gilead* and *trouble* suggest an allusion to the coup to which Hosea has already referred (6:8–9; 2 Kings 15:25).[[9]](#footnote-9) The verse’s opaqueness likely illustrates how some ambiguity in these chapters reflects our lacking information available to Hosea’s original audience. But Hosea is also trading on the ambiguity of the word *trouble* (*ʾāwen*), which can denote both wrongdoing and its consequences (we will note that the word may have already lurked in v. 4 [3] with this implication); the allusiveness may also link with the upcoming reference to Jacob’s sojourn in Aram and thus with events in Gilead on the way home from there (Gen 31). The context of the threat in vv. 10–11 [9–10] then suggests that the noun clauses in v. 12 [11] can point to trouble and destruction that will follow on Gilead’s becoming *empty*, worthless, false (see Exod 20:7) and on Gilgal’s being the location of sacrifices that were also empty—sacrifices offered on the occasion of the coup, or way back on the occasion of kingmaking (1 Sam 11:15), or simply on regular festival occasions (Hos 4:15). The altars will end up as merely heaps of rocks.

## 12:15 [14]–13:5

Critique: 12:15 [14]Ephraim has provoked to multiple bitterness,

his bloodshed he will let rest on him,

and his reviling he will bring back to him—the Lord will.

13:1When Ephraim spoke with quivering,

when he lifted up [his voice] in Israel,

He incurred guilt through the Master, and died,

2but now they continue to offend.

They have made themselves a cast image,

from their silver, in accordance with their discernment, an idol.

Manufacture by craftworkers, all of it,

they are saying of them.

People who sacrifice a human being,

they kiss bullocks.

Threat: 3Therefore they will be like morning cloud,

or like the dew going early.

Like chaff that is whirled from a threshing floor,

or like smoke from a vent.

Recollection: 4But I: Yahweh your God,

from the country of Egypt.

A God apart from me you do not acknowledge,

and a deliverer, there is none except me.

5I was the one who acknowledged you in the wilderness,

in a country of much drought.

Critique dominates the first section, though the opening line anticipates the threat that follows as the second section. While it would be natural to relate 12:15 [14] to the coup referred to in 12:12 [11], it is more natural to relate 13:1 to the origin of the Ephraimite nation (the meaning of the word translated *quivering* is quite uncertain). Ephraim’s origins, with its encouraging of worship that was too redolent of worship of the Master (*habbaʿal*), sentenced it to death, and led to its being counted dead or effectively dead;[[10]](#footnote-10) “Ephraim continues in the way of sin like zombies, the walking dead.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

## 13:6–11

Critique: 6When they pastured, they were full;

they were full, and their inner being lifted up;

therefore they put me out of mind.

Threat: 7So I have become to them like a lion,

like a leopard by the road I will keep watch.

8I will meet them like a bear bereaved,

and I will rip the casing of their heart.

I will devour them there like a lion,

a creature of the open country that will tear them apart.

9Your devastation, Israel,

because in me [is] your help.

Recollection: 10Where is your king, then,

so that he may deliver you in all your towns,

Or your leaders, of whom you said,

“Give me a king and officials.”

11I give you a king in my anger,

I get him in my wrath.

The threat of devastation contrasts with 11:9.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## 13:12–14:1 [13:12–16]

Critique: 12Ephraim’s waywardness is bound up,

its offense hidden away.

Threat: 13The pains of a woman birthing, they will come to him;

he [will be] not a wise son.

Because [at] the time he will not stand firm,

at [the time for] the breaking out of children.

14From the hand of Sheol I will save them,

from death I will restore them?

Where is your great epidemic, Death,

where is your destruction, Sheol?

Relenting will hide from my eyes,

15because he—among brothers he acts the wild donkey.

An east wind, a supernatural wind, will come,

going up from the wilderness,

And his fountain will be shamed,

his spring will dry up.

It—it will plunder the storehouse,

every valuable object.

14:1 [13:16]Samaria will make restitution,

because it has defied its God.

By the sword they will fall,

their babies will be dashed down,

his pregnant women will be torn apart.

An account of Ephraim’s wrongdoing is securely on record against the time when its penalty will be exacted. The subsequent threat is in part a puzzle. Whereas the bulk of 13:13–14:1 [13:16] comprises warnings, “Hosea's last and harshest announcement of Israel's end,”[[13]](#footnote-13) 13:14a looks more like a promise. I assume the usual way of resolving the difficulty, by treating v. 14a as an unmarked question.[[14]](#footnote-14) The subsequent cola about epidemic and destruction either underscore the promise or respond to the question; the last colon in v. 14 with its denial of relenting more directly answers the question and is hard to fit with a promise. Its denial of relenting (*nōḥam*) contrasts with the declaration about relenting in 11:8 (*nihûmî*),[[15]](#footnote-15) but 13:15–14:1 [13:15–16] provides its rationale.

The unit includes no recollection, but exhortation follows in 14:2–4 [1–3]. A regular assumption in the Latter Prophets is that Israel has to decide how to respond to Yahweh’s critique and threats, and its response will determine whether it experiences Yahweh as “life-giver” or “death-dealer.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The effect of the continual switching between the two portraits of Yahweh in Hosea is “to destabilize Israel, to maintain the ambiguity of Israel’s *actual* future among the various *possible* futures presented in the book. It is to communicate that Israel’s future is indeterminate, and which future will obtain depends ostensibly on Israel’s choice of actions.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The unmarked question is a real question, not a rhetorical one.

# Rhetoric: Ambiguity and Paronomasia

While I do picture Hosea proclaiming his messages to an Ephraimite public in the city square or the sanctuary courtyard, or sending them to the king and his staff, the intellectually challenging form of his communication suggests that he aimed in particular to get it home to the people whom Proverbs would call the (supposedly) wise (cf. Hos 14:10 [9]), the opinion-formers, the influencers, the people with power, the people who would argue out what should be Ephraimite religious and political policy, the people equivalent in Jesus’s ministry to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes. Hosea and other First Testament poets, such as the theologians whose work features in Proverbs, sometimes use words and compose sentences of straightforward and unequivocal meaning, sometimes use words and compose sentences that seem ambiguous but whose meaning can eventually be divined, sometimes use words and compose sentences that are systematically ambiguous and stimulate readers’ reflection. And sometimes they use words with homonyms or they juxtapose similar words in a way that can again stimulate reflection. One cannot establish that poets or their original audiences were aware of paronomasia or ambiguity, or that the distinction between apparent and irresolvable ambiguity was real for poet and original audience rather than being one we need because we lack clarifiers that they had. But paronomasia, ambiguity, and allusiveness are regular features of poetry, and it seems plausible to assume that they are inherent in First Testament poetry. When an element in a prophecy seems capable of more than one meaning, then, it is a mistake to assume that we have to decide which understanding the author intended.

Hosea 12–13 begins with a metaphor, *you have surrounded me*, then adds another, *Ephraim is shepherding a wind, pursuing an east wind*. Surrounding need not be a hostile action, but it often is, and here the surrounding involves *deceit* and *fraud*, later *falsehood*. Surrounding suggests encompassing, enclosing, circumscribing, the action of an adversary seeking to overwhelm a victim, in this case by duplicity and treachery. Ephraim goes through the motions of commitment to Yahweh, but they are only motions. Ironically, the subsequent metaphors indicate that Ephraim is also deceiving itself, in that it is trying to do the impossible—to shepherd or pursue wind (pursuing takes shepherding further, and the reference to the fierce *east wind* off the desert takes *wind* further). Hosea thus also extends the irony in a fashion of which Proverbs, again, is especially fond. Ephraim is (unconsciously) seeking to deceive Yahweh, but it is actually deceiving itself. It is seeking to achieve something positive for itself by way of safety or deliverance, which it hopes to make abundant, but it is actually guaranteeing that its own *destruction* will abound. Hosea’s words are not polyvalent in the sense of being open to multiple interpretations according to the readers’ insight (except in the sense that they might be polyvalent on the basis of some theories of language and meaning). They are bivalent in the sense that a double meaning is inherent in them.

Hosea’s words are open to a further double reading. Ephraim is engaged in fraud and falsehood with Yahweh. Does Hosea imply that Ephraim also engaged in fraud and falsehood in its relationships with Aram and/or Assyria and/or Egypt? In explicitly referring to the two imperial powers, Hosea does speak straightforwardly and explicitly as well as metaphorically and theologically, though his words do illustrate how statements that may have been unequivocal for his listeners are less clear to us. Ephraim’s falsehood lies in the solemnizing of pledges on different occasions with Assyria or with Egypt, pledges that would be encouraged by gifts of oil or sealed by anointing with oil or paid for in forms such as oil; Hosea’s parallelism works by separating what could be a prose sentence into two cola, dividing between them what would be the elements in the prose sentence. Ephraim is not false just once, perhaps by oversight; it makes falsehood plentiful (and also makes destruction plentiful). Although the description of the falsehood is down-to-earth in its reference to specific political alliances, it intensifies the critique of the falsehood because solemnizing a pledge (*karat bərît*) with anyone other than Yahweh is exactly what Israel should not be doing (Deut 7:2).

Hosea’s words are bivalent or multivalent in yet a third connection. Hosea’s critique of Ephraim in 12:1–2 [11:12–12:1] is clear concerning Ephraim. But in its midst lies an ambiguous line about Judah with numerous possibilities of interpretation that make the line open to being read as complimentary or critical. Hosea might compliment Judah to underscore his critique of Ephraim (or a curator might incorporate a compliment to Judah), though elsewhere Hosea includes a number of critical remarks about Judah, and a compliment here would be unique. The translation above preserves some of the line’s ambiguity. Its two verbs could be participles or qatals, though this makes little difference. The preposition *with* (*ʿim*)can be positive or negative; Hosea will shortly refer to a pledge *with* Assyria and a confrontation *with* Judah (12:2–3 [1–2]). *Wandering* (*rûd*) could be positive, negative, or neutral; the verboccurs elsewhere in the First Testament only a handful of times (Gen 27:40; Jer 2:31; perhaps Ps 55:55:3 [2]), and its meaning is uncertain to us, though it might have been clear to Hosea’s readers. Further, it is sufficiently akin to more familiar verbs (*rādâ* “rule,” see Aq; *yārad* “descend,” see, e.g., Vg ) to confuse people or provide alternatives to a critical reading of the statement (see, e.g., Tg, NRSV). In this context in Hosea, it can be no coincidence that the reference to wandering constitutes a first link with the Jacob and Esau story in Genesis: Isaac had destined Esau to be a wanderer, whose life would thus contrast with Jacob’s (Gen 27:40). It is therefore a neat, snide description to apply either to Ephraim or to Judah, who are drifting in their relationship with Yahweh, drifting away from Yahweh.

In the parallel colon about Judah, the idea of *holy* *ones* (*qədôšîm*) being *truthful* would raise no problems, but it is odd that *truthful* is singular. Might *qədôšîm* refer to Yahweh, the word being formally plural yet singular in its reference (like *ʾĕlōhîm*)? But there are no parallels for that usage; more likely the colon refers to Judah being truthful towards holy ones other than Yahweh, to other supernatural beings. Positively, this could signify truthfulness in Judah’s relationship with Yahweh’s staff as well as with Yahweh himself, truthfulness with the holy ones who “surround” Yahweh as his servants along with his own “truthfulness” (Ps 89:8–9 [7–8])—whereas Ephraim has *surrounded* Yahweh with deceit. On the other hand, as part of a critique the colon would signify Judah’s wrongful truthfulness towards supernatural beings who are Yahweh’s rivals. Most of these aspects of the line that are ambiguous for us would have been ambiguous for Hosea’s audience, who would need to think fiercely about the words even while they assimilated Hosea’s straightforward critique of them and his pointing out the trouble they were bringing on themselves and the scandalous implications of their political and religious policies.

In 12:8–14 [7–13], the critique section begins with the multivalent *kənaʿan* (Canaan/Phoenicia/merchant) and goes on to finding wealth (*ʾôn*) *for* *me* and to people not finding waywardness (*ʿāwō*n) *for* *me*. Hosea again implies that Ephraim is deceiving itself; the similarity in the words for wealth and waywardness implies a closer association of the two than Ephraim acknowledges. Further, the word for wealth was also the word for manliness or vigor in v. 4 [3]. So Ephraim’s ancestor Jacob reached manliness or vigor, and Ephraim might also be prepared to claim it. But once again, for Ephraim the juxtaposition implies something that Ephraim half-acknowledges by its use of words, that in its case manliness or vigor and waywardness are akin.

A fruitful bivalence then opens the threat section in 12:8–14 [7–13]. It drives people to think about what Yahweh intends to do. The first thing is to have them *live in tents as in the days of assembly*. Is this good news or bad news? Might the threat suggest living in tents in the manner of a festival, but imply an irony, with negative implications?[[18]](#footnote-18) If Yahweh speaks to the *prophets*, will this mean an encouraging message or a critical and threatening one? Prophets were means of slaughter in 6:5. Prophetic *vision* in the past has heralded both blessing and trouble. To *represent* things could likewise go either way. And which verb is it that that closes the verse, anyway? *Dāmâ* I (piel) indeed means *represent.* But every other occurrence of *dāmâ* in Hosea has been *dāmâ* II (qal or niphal; 4:5, 6; 10:7, 15, five of the verb’s fourteen occurrences), which means *destroy* (so NRSV here). The threat then closes with the opaque references to trouble and devastation that issue from people having become *empty* or fake (*šāwʾ*)as they sacrificed bulls (*šəwārîm*), which will issue in the *Gilgal* becoming mere rock piles (*gallîm*).

In 13:6–11, Yahweh’s threat to keep watch (*ʾāšûr*) is a threat to be Assyria (*ʾaššûr*; cf. LXX). But the great possible ambiguity is the word *ʾĕhî*. In v. 10, LXX, Vg, and Tg take it as an alternative to *ʾê* and *ʾayyē*, as a word meaning “where.”[[19]](#footnote-19) But in v. 7 *wāʾĕhî* on Yahweh’s lips means “and I was”; *ʾĕhî* is the apocopated form of Yahweh’s *ʾehyeh*, “I am” (1:9; also Gen 26:3, to Isaac; 31:3, to Jacob; Exod 3:12, 14; 4:12, 15, to Moses).[[20]](#footnote-20) Could it be that “*ʾĕhî*, as ‘I am,’ vanishes into *ʾĕhî* as *“*where?”[[21]](#footnote-21) Does Yahweh challenge Ephraim simultaneously to face the question, “Where is your king now?” and his own assertion, “I am your king”?[[22]](#footnote-22)

In the final unit (13:12–14:1 [13:12–16]), Ephraim has to ask itself whether the verse about rescue from Sheol is a promise, a rhetorical question, or an open question. And it has to face the possibility that its name, which Ephraim’s father linked with fruitfulness (*pārâ*, Gen 41:52), suggests that it is a wild donkey (*pereʾ*: the verb in v. 15 is the hapax *pārāʾ*). The subsequent threat then pictures a fountain and spring failing and drying up; but the verb for failing (*yābēš*) is pointed as if from the verb for being shamed (*bûš*). And Samaria for its defiance of Yahweh will bear guilt and therefore have to make restitution (*ʾāšam*; cf. 13:1); but bearing its guilt will imply desolation and devastation (*šāmēm*).[[23]](#footnote-23)

# Recollection

“Metaphor is a form of memory” and “‘YHWH, God of Hosts, YHWH is his memory’ (Hos. 12.6)”; metaphor “opens the possibility of continuity” and of retaining a sense of the past.[[24]](#footnote-24) Hosea 12–13 makes multiple appeal to Israel’s past story and Yahweh’s past involvement with Israel. In the terms of current interpretive trends, it is thus open to study in the frameworks of intertextuality and of the study of social memory; in the terms of an older framework, Hosea implies a typological relationship between Israel’s past story (particularly the story of its ancestor Jacob) and its present life.[[25]](#footnote-25) Allusiveness and ambiguity continue in Hosea’s appeal to Israel’s memory and to its awareness of its story known to us from the Torah and the Former Prophets, as he pursues his aim to get Israel to turn from its faithlessness.

Hosea 12–13 refers to a number of scenes in the Torah and the Former Prophets: the exodus, Yahweh’s giving prophets visions, Gilead and Gilgal, Jacob’s flight to Aram, Moses’s bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, the setting up of the state of Ephraim, the journey through the wilderness, the appointment of kings. The sequence of references thus bears no relationship to the sequence within the scriptural narrative. While there is no doubt about some of these references, some allusions are less certain. In general, Hosea’s lexical connections with other texts are not numerous, they are thematically reworked, and they prize rhetoric over historical detail.[[26]](#footnote-26) But some verbal links with the Jacob story are noteworthy: e.g., Jacob “fleeing,” “serving” for a wife, and “keeping” sheep in that connection (e.g., Gen 27:43; 28:2; 29:15; 30:31).

The allusions to Jacob in Hosea 12:4–5 [3–4] are particularly intriguing. There are numerous ways of understanding the overlaps between Hosea 12–13 and people and events in the Torah and the Former Prophets, particularly Jacob in Genesis, and all have advocates: Hosea knew Genesis in something like the form we know it, in written or oral form, or the author of Genesis knew Hosea in something like the form we know it, or Hosea knew the stories in Genesis in an earlier written or oral form, or the references to the Jacob stories found their way into Hosea at a later stage in the development of the Hosea scroll. Consideration of the question is complex because of ongoing scholarly debate on the origin of Genesis and of Hosea.[[27]](#footnote-27) In connection with Genesis, in particular, this debate has been proceeding for the best part of two centuries and shows no signs of reaching resolution. But whereas some approaches to intertextuality depend on knowing which text came first, other approaches operate with the assumption that one can learn from comparing texts without knowing the answer to that question. My working assumption is that Hosea knew the Jacob story in something like the form we have it in Genesis, but nevertheless he is “making free use” of traditions known to us from Genesis.[[28]](#footnote-28) “Hosea is not writing out a history of Jacob; he uses the Jacob narrative for his own rhetorical ends.”[[29]](#footnote-29) But most of the words in 12:4–5 [3–4] parallel words in the Jacob story, and a number are unusual enough to confirm that it is no coincidence; Hosea is familiar with a version of the story that is not so different from the one in Genesis.

After the move within 12:1–3 [11:12–12:2] from metaphor through ambiguity to explicitness and clarity, and from Ephraim and Judah to the Jacob of the present, 12:4 [3] jumps back to long ago events involving ancestor Jacob, and returns to ambiguity. In some way, the action of Ephraim/Judah/Jacob in the present needs to be considered in light of the past story of Jacob, as a replay of his actions in the past (and perhaps of Judah’s actions, for which see Gen 38; Josh 7, though Hosea does not pick up that possibility). Genesis does not explicitly critique Jacob, and neither does Hosea. In general, Genesis just tells the story of Jacob and Esau, without painting either character as a good guy or a bad guy, and Hosea does the same.

When Esau and Jacob were born, Jacob (*yaʿăqôb*)was holding into Esau’s heel (*ʿāqēb*), which was why they named him Jacob (Gen 25:26). The urgency with which Jacob was pursuing Esau foreshadows the story that will follow, without there being an implication that Jacob was at fault in the urgency of his pursuit. Genesis leaves open the possibility that he was simply pursuing the destiny he was to have within Yahweh’s purpose; he was acting in fulfillment of Yahweh’s word (Tg). In due course, not unreasonably Esau does critique Jacob (Gen 27:36), turning the noun *heel* into the verb meaning “grasp by the heel” (*ʿāqab*), and Hosea picks up this verb, leaving readers to work out whether it implies critique, or rather, to work out how it suggests they should think about themselves.

The parallel colon in 12:4b [3b] not only fails to resolve that ambiguity but deepens it. Like Genesis, Hosea leaps from birth to adulthood and thus to *manhood* or vigor. Or is it to trouble, sorrow, or impiety? In their absolute form, *manhood* (*ʾôn*) and *trouble* (*ʾāwen*) are distinguishable, but in their suffixed forms they are identical. In the narrow context of the parallelism in v. 4 [3], manly vigor provides an apposite complement to the womb, but in the broader context of 12:1–7 [11:12–12:6], impiety fits well (cf. LXX). With this sense the word occurs six times in Hosea, usually in pejorative references to Beth-El as Beth-Aven or Aven (contrast v. 5b [4b]), but also shortly in v. 12 [11]. One could say that Jacob was indeed in trouble (though the word is not used) on the occasion to which this colon refers. But on that occasion *he exerted himself* (*śārâ*) *with* *God* (or a god or gods; Vg turns *ʾĕlōhîm* into an envoy). The verb corresponds with Gen 32:29 [28]; it occurs only in these two passages, and there is doubt as to its identity. It looks like a back-formation from the name Israel with which Gen 32:29 [28] connects it, and possibly Hosea is assuming the name change in Gen 32:29 [28] and the paronomasia.

In 12:5a [4a] Hosea extends the reference to or reworking of the passages in Genesis or of an alternative version of their story. *He exerted himself* has the same meaning as the verb in v. 4b [3b], though it must come from a byform *śûr* rather than *śārâ*. But retrospectively the colon underscores the ambiguity in v. 4b [3b] by speaking of Jacob exerting himself *towards an envoy* (*malʾāk*). Genesis 32 itself is systematically ambiguous regarding the identity of Jacob’s wrestling opponent. It refers to him as an *ʾîš* and as *ʾĕlōhîm*, though not as *malʾāk* (here, Aq and Theod turn the envoy into God), though there are *məlākîm* in 32:1 [2] and Jacob referred to one in 31:11. Jacob’s opponent “saw that he did not win in relation to him” and then acknowledges, “you have exerted yourself with God [or with a god or gods] and with human beings, and won” (Gen 32:26, 29 [25, 28]). Hosea agrees, at least on the verbs: “he exerted himself towards an envoy, and won.” But there follows in the parallel colon the most strikingly independent note in Hosea, that he *cried and sought grace with him.* Is the envoy crying and seeking grace?[[30]](#footnote-30) Syntax does not point in this direction, and it is not what envoys usually do. More likely, Hosea invites the current Jacob to see the ancestor Jacob as providing a model as he cries, seeks grace, and finds Yahweh at Beth-El (it is Hosea’s only positive reference to Beth-El).[[31]](#footnote-31) If it is Yahweh who finds Jacob at Beth-El (it can also be hard to interpret the third-person references in v. 5b [4b], as it is in Gen 32:26 [25]),[[32]](#footnote-32) that extends the invitation to reflection and the possible encouragement; Yahweh’s finding Jacob was an election motif earlier (9:10).[[33]](#footnote-33)

Either way, much of v. 5 [4] does not follow the story in Genesis 32; it either reflects another version or it constitutes a piece of creative midrash. And even if the Genesis story existed in Hosea’s day in something like the form we know, Hosea’s acquaintance with it may be an acquaintance with a story that he hears told, rather than a story he reads in a scroll. His words resonate with other elements in the Jacob story in Genesis and reflect the way an intertextual relationship works by allusion to half-remembered phrases that come to be part of new combinations. Thus:

* Jacob cried; in Gen 33:4, Jacob and Esau cried (they had cried earlier: 27:38; 29:11).
* Jacob sought grace with the envoy (*ḥānan* hitpael); in Gen 32:6 [5]; 33:8, 10, 15, Jacob hoped to find grace with Esau.
* There is a finding; Gen 32:6 [5]; 33:8, 10, 15 refer to finding grace.
* The finding happens at Beth-El; Genesis 28 and 35 refer to events at Beth-El.
* At Beth-El Yahweh speaks; in Gen 35:15 Jacob refers to God speaking to him there.

For vv. 3–5 [2–4], the implications are:

* Hosea’s taking up the Jacob story can further Yahweh’s confrontation of Ephraim by getting Ephraim to reflect on that story.
* Mixing up reference to the past and to the present and future can encourage the audience to make the link; the function of appeal to memory is to enhance self-understanding in the present.
* The very last word in the verses makes that point most explicit: *he speaks with us*.
* The result is to mollify the confrontation in 12:1–2 [11:12–12:1], not reducing the challenge, but indicating that turning to Yahweh (exerting oneself, seeking grace) is open to Ephraim.
* The parallels making links with elements scattered through the Jacob story in Genesis make possible a summary of the story that relates to Hosea’s aims in speaking to Ephraim.
* The location of the links, scattered in this way, makes it more likely that Hosea is using the story in order to formulate his message than that the narrator is using Hosea in order to tell his story.

In these verses Hosea thus continues to work with an ambiguity and allusiveness that is sometimes reducible but often not, because he wants Ephraim to keep thinking of different possibilities for itself.

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1. Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 628. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Gruber, *Hosea*, 522. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ben Zvi, *Hosea*, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Naʾaman, “Book of Hosea,” 236–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lancaster, “Wounds,” 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Goldingay, *Hosea*,73–88; “Hosea 4.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Macintosh, *Hosea*,497. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Ibn Ezra and Qimchi in *Miqraʾot Gedolot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Naʾaman, “Harsh Criticism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Qimchi in *Miqraʾot Gedolot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mays, *Hosea*,172. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I take *šiḥetkā* as a noun (Macintosh, *Hosea*, 535–36), though it looks more like a qatal verb; so understood, v. 9 would belong with what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mays, *Hosea*,179. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ben Zvi (*Hosea*, 274–75)surveys ways of understanding the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Landy, *Hosea*,194 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Yee, “Hosea,” in her “Reflections” at 13:15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lancaster, “Wounds,” 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rudolph, *Hosea*,234. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See, e.g., Rudolph, *Hosea*, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. So Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Qimchi in *Miqra’ot Gedolot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Landy, *Hosea*, 194; see Gruber’s discussion, *Hosea*, 540–44. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. Yee, “Hosea,” on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rashi in *Miqra’ot Gedolot* assumes the first verb, Ibn Ezra and Qimchi in *Miqra’ot Gedolot* at least invite an association with the second. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Landy, *Beauty*, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. So Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 376–78, Blum, “Hosea 12”; Moon, *Hosea*, 192–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Smith, “Wilderness,” 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, e.g., Blum, “Noch einmal“; “Once Again”; “Hosea 12”; Schott, “Jakobpassagen”; Whitt, “Jacob Traditions”; Naʾaman, “Jacob Story.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Macintosh, *Hosea*,476 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Moon, *Hosea*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. So Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Qimchi in *Miqraʾot Gedolot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cf. Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets*,120. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ben Zvi (*Hosea*, 249–51)surveys ways of understanding the third-person references. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wolff, *Hosea*, 213; but contrast Dozeman, “Hosea,” 65, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)