

How Can I Give You Up, O Ephraim?

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Who and What Is It That God Loves?

“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?” (Hos 11:8). This line from the book of the prophet Hosea has spoken to many of the unquenchable and unconditional nature of God’s love for God’s people. We hear of tumultuous battle in the heart of God, conflict between love and wrath. God gets angry at God’s wayward people but cannot give them up, for God’s love is forever and must prevail. That is the comforting reading of the passage. I think it may reasonably also be regarded as a canonical reading. I do not wish to attack it, and I have no expertise to contribute to discussion of its historical accuracy. I do wish to understand it, and the way to understanding leads through questions that may be disturbing. The questions I have in mind are about the objects of divine love. Who and what is it that God loves and won’t give up?

What is said about God’s love in Hosea 11 is said about God’s love for *Israel*, and more particularly for *Ephraim*. What is meant is divine love for a nation or ethnic group that is also a religious community, or perhaps for a nested pair of ethnic groups that are also religious communities. That is a potentially disturbing thought. I, and most of the Christians I know, have been accustomed to think of God’s love as having individual persons as its primary object, rather than groups or social structures formed by persons. Knowing that the book of Hosea begins with love between individuals—Hosea’s love for his wife Gomer—as a model of God’s love, we may be tempted by our personalism to assume that it is a model of divine love for individuals. But quite explicitly it is God’s love for *Israel* that is thus modeled (Hos 1–3). These reflections lead me to a narrower specification of my question about the objects of God’s love. Is it communities or individual persons or both that God loves? And if both,

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then how and to what extent in each case? That is what I want chiefly to discuss against the background of Hosea 11.

These questions have a resonance in interreligious relations that can cause conflict but that I think can also be helpful. Is there a contrast, we may ask, or even a gulf, between Christianity and the religion of the Hebrew Bible on this point? Is it only or primarily individual persons whom God loves in Christianity, and only or primarily Israel as a community or nation that God loves in the Hebrew Bible? And if Christianity and the Hebrew Bible are in fact opposed in the suggested way, is Judaism aligned with the Hebrew Bible against Christianity on this point?

Christianity is certainly characterized from its beginning by a belief that God does love individual human persons. Jesus himself is presented as holding the belief and as embodying divine love for individuals. For Jesus this is not opposed to divine love for Israel as such. For him, God's love for Israel flows through into love for individuals. This is expressed in his giving as a reason for healing a particular woman that she too is a daughter of Abraham (Luke 13:16).

Of particular theological interest is what Jesus says about the resurrection of the dead (Mark 12:27). That the dead are raised is proved, he says, from God saying to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," because God is the God of the living, not of the dead. God does not lose God's loved ones. In the most communitarian reading of the Hebrew Bible, there is no need for an individual resurrection. God's love for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for Israel (= Jacob) and for Ephraim, does not require their individual persistence, because God's love for them is love for a nation or community of which they are primary members, and persistence of that community is all the persistence that God's love for them demands.

Thus far at least, Judaism is not aligned against Christianity, if by Judaism we mean the Judaism of the Pharisees and rabbinic orthodoxy. That Judaism shares Jesus' belief in individual resurrection, which does not make sense theologically without a belief that God cares for individual human persons. Even that Judaism, however, arguably parts company with Christianity if Christianity maintains that God loves *only* individual persons, loves them independently of their ethnicity and ancestry, and does not love communities as such but cares about structures of community only for the sake of individual persons.

Does Christianity maintain that? There is certainly in the New Testament, in the Epistles and the Gospels, some downgrading, or at least relativization, of the religious value of family ties (e.g., Luke 14:26). However, God's particular love for Israel as a transindividual entity is not denied by either Jesus or Paul, and seems to be accepted by both of them. In one way of imposing a consistent reading on Romans and Galatians, we would read Paul as saying that God loves Gentiles regardless of their ethnicity and ancestry but loves Jews not only individually but also for their ancestral membership of the people of Israel. And Ephesians echoes Hosea but with a difference, presenting human

marriage as a model of Christ's love for the Christian church (Eph 5:22–32), which is obviously conceived as a transindividual entity. It does not seem to be a New Testament view that God loves only individual persons, though perhaps some later Christian thought has come close to that view.

Apart from considerations of biblical authority, can we see reasons why we should think that God loves communities as such, and not just individuals? I think we can see such reasons in the character of human relationships with God, as such relationships appear empirically in human history. There is certainly evidence of individual relationships with God. As early as Jeremiah, in the Hebrew Bible, there is striking evidence of such a relationship. But there is also plenty of evidence of relationships of human communities with God, and much of Christian experience of relationship with God is at least partly experience of relationships of a community or communities with God. We worship God together, we pray to God together, we wrestle with God together, we seek to understand God together, we experience God's presence together. We may relate to God in those ways individually, but also together. The concrete particular relationship of a religious community with God, like that of an individual, has a narrative structure that may carry much of the religious significance of the relationship. The narrative of an individual's relationship with God may be part of the narrative of a community's relationship with God, and the structure of the communal narrative may be in some ways clearer and more richly significant, as well as more inclusive, than that of the individual narrative.

What we think about relationships with God is important for what we think about God's love, especially if we follow Hosea (and Ephesians) in taking a marriage relationship (or more broadly an intimate personal relationship) as a model for God's love. In both Christianity and Judaism the relationship of the community with God, like that of individuals with God, is seen as one of mutual love. Should we not accept that believing in the reality of the communal as well as the individual relationship with God involves believing in the reality of God's love for the community as well as for the individual? Indeed, is it not likely that belief in the reality of God's love for the individual typically grows out of belief in a reality of God's love that has been experienced together?

These thoughts give rise to lots of questions. I begin with some issues that arise between different (and to some extent competing) religious communities. First of all, issues of "supersessionism." Should Christians believe that God used to love Israel, as an ethnic and religious community, but now loves the Christian church instead? This of course would not necessarily imply that God loves individual Jews any less than before; but still the idea is offensive, and there is much in the New Testament that speaks against it.

Hosea 11 may also raise in our minds an issue of something like supersessionism within the Hebrew tradition. Hosea speaks specifically of God's love for Ephraim, which it is natural to assume that the prophet himself understood as a rather restricted metonymy for Israel. It seems less natural to suppose it was originally a wider metonymy for a nation conceived as having its perma-

nent center (from David onward) in Judah (not in Ephraim) and in Jerusalem. The latter reading fits well with some themes in later portions of the Hebrew Bible, but there is something analogous to supersessionism in that, which carries over to later relations between Jews and Samaritans.

How might we avoid supersessionism and its analogues in thinking about God's relations with different religious communities? Harking back to Hosea's use of marriage as a model of love between God and God's people, my suggestion is that God is polygamous. This is a biblical idea. In Ezekiel 23, Samaria and Jerusalem are likened to two sisters, both married to the God of Israel—at the same time, in any historically likely application of the parable. (And Ezekiel characterizes Samaria as the *elder* sister.) It is quite clearly part of the point of the parable that Ezekiel sees Samaria and Jerusalem as two distinct communities, each with its own real and religiously significant relationship with God. Ezekiel makes it clear that he thinks it was in principle possible for either of the two relationships to go better morally and religiously than the other.

The Bible allows, I think, for God to be “married,” so to speak, with more than one religious community—just as one who is prepared to think of an individual soul as “married” to God is not likely to balk at the thought of more than one being married to God. What biblical exclusivism is really concerned to reject is religious polygamy running the other way. A community that is “married” to God is not to be “married” to other gods as well. But if *God* is polygamous, members of different communities “married” to God can honor each other's religions without even flirting with another god. This is a point that we can recognize and even appropriate without approving of the gross asymmetry in power relations between the sexes that is reflected in the biblical imagery of polygamy.

The idea of God as polygamous provides, I suspect, a relatively promising framework for thinking about the plurality of religions and their relation to God. It works most easily among the monotheistic faiths of Near Eastern origin—which may also be, in most parts of the world, those that have, at the present time, the greatest tensions with each other. It is unreasonable as well as uncharitable for adherents of any of those faiths to claim that others of them do not worship the same God as they do. If there is a single supreme personal being who created and governs the universe and wishes to be personally related to human beings, that being is worshiped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, despite differences in theological belief among and within those faiths. The idea of God as polygamous invites us to begin our thinking about inter-religious relationships by bypassing worries about whether we must or must not accuse each other of false belief, and focusing instead on the concrete relationship of each community to God as something that has a sacred reality that claims respect. That does not, and should not, eliminate doctrinal disagreements, but it puts them in their place.

The image of God as polygamous, and even the use of marriage as a model, is not exactly forced on us in this context. The image of Israel's marriage with

God is prominent in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as well as in Hosea, but in Hosea 11, after all, Ephraim is God's *son*, not God's spouse. Is it really a good idea, then, to make my point by saying that God is polygamous? Wouldn't it seem more familiar and easier to accept to say only that God has many different children?

Nevertheless, there is reason to stay with the image of God as polygamous, and not just a parent of many. It is biblical, as pointed out above. And the spousal relation offers resources that the parent-child relation lacks for addressing the issue that I see the conception of God's particular love for Israel/Ephraim in Hosea 11 as raising for us, namely, the issue of God's love for particular religious communities.

The parent-child relation begins with the child being brought into the world by the parent. The parent preexists the relationship, but the child does not. In these respects the parent-child relationship fits Christian ideas of a covenant made unilaterally by God with all humanity in the Incarnation, earthly activity, death, and resurrection of Christ. But these ideas do not fit the kind of relationship between God and particular religious communities that I am taking as a reason for hanging on to the idea of a particular love between God and religious communities. The latter kind of relationship cannot come into being without something more mutual in character, such as the Sinai covenant.

If we believe that our own community's relationship with God is real and willed and one of love on God's part too, then both charity and reason urge us to suppose that there is a similar reality of love on God's part in relation to other religious communities. But I think our most plausible grounds for believing that God loves any community, and not just individual persons, will begin with phenomena that are conscious and willed on the part of the community, and will therefore be grounds for believing in the reality of a relationship of considerable mutuality between the community and God. That is not to deny that God's activity precedes the community's and is the foundation of the relation, but I do not think the relationship attains convincing reality as a relationship of a *community* without a considerable amount of activity that is willed by members of the community.

So does God never give up Ephraim? In more general terms we can hardly avoid the question whether there are not only individual persons but also religious communities that God never gives up, and if so, which ones. Concretely it can seem reasonable to suppose that the time has come, in God's providence, for the existence of a particular religious community, as such, to end. The presbytery executive and the district superintendent may well be right in agreeing that there is no longer adequate reason for the Westminster Presbyterian Church and the Trinity United Methodist Church to continue their separate existence as religious communities in the town of Prairie Corners, whose population is not even a third as large as it was sixty years ago. If the particular relationships of those communities with God are to endure forever, church leaders may conclude that it will only be as influences and memories in the relationships of individual persons with God.

Do we or should we think differently about Israel or the whole Christian church? Theologies will differ on this point. My belief is that the worth of individual persons transcends that of social systems and structures, including the structures of community. It is reasonable for us to care for their own sake about human communities, their structures, and their shared projects. But it is as part of our concern for human life that such caring about social objects is reasonable, and human life is most fundamentally the life of persons. Likewise I think it reasonable to believe that communities are by no means ruled out as objects of God's love, but that God's love for persons is deeper, more unconditional, and more permanent. If all humanity will be finally united "in Christ," I doubt that a Christian eschatology needs to hope for more persistence of the church than that. However, such issues about the permanence and religious importance of particular communities and of their structures are among the points on which we should expect disagreement among (and within) religious communities that have real relationships with God.