

‘No Longer Will You Call Me Ba’al’:  
An Analysis of the Prevailing Interpretive Model in the Scholarship of Hosea and Counter-  
Proposal

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## Introduction

It is almost unanimously agreed upon by Biblical scholars that the text of Hosea depicts a condemnation of the Northern kingdom for its rampant Ba'al worship.<sup>1</sup> I would like to identify what I believe to be the key weaknesses of this interpretation and offer a possible alternative for understanding the backdrop and overall message of Hosea. Specifically, I propose that Hosea's anger is directed not at Ba'al worship, but rather at a ruling class who have used idolatry to reduce Yahweh down to the status of a nationalist symbol and servant of the empire.

### Hosea's Use of the Word 'ba'al'

In order to best address the prevailing notion that Hosea is speaking against a situation of Ba'al worship, it would be prudent to examine each usage of the word ba'al within the text of Hosea. This is not a difficult task, given that the word is only used a total of seven times in the entire text (2:8; 2:13; 2:16; 2:17; 9:10; 11:2; 13:1). This sparing usage is hardly what one would expect to find if Hosea's primary concern was rampant Ba'al worship. Even more interestingly, each time the word is used outside of chapter 2 (9:10; 11:2; 13:1 - nearly half of the times it is used in the text), it is used in reference to one of Israel's *past* sins, specifically the event recorded in Num. 25:1-3, and thus cannot be understood as describing Hosea's current situation. This leaves scholars with only *four* verses which could possibly be taken as evidence that Israel was worshipping the Canaanite god Ba'al during the time of Hosea.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, 1st ed., Westminster Bible companion (Louisville, Ky: Westminster J. Knox Press, 1997); Graham I. Davies, *Hosea: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, The New century Bible commentary (London : Grand Rapids, Mich: Marshall Pickering ; Eerdmans, 1992); William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2002); James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary*, 1969; K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, 2nd extensively rev. ed. (Leiden ; Boston : Grand Rapids, Mich: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 136. Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Atlanta, UNITED STATES: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 112.

The two verses most often cited in support of the above-mentioned view are 2:8 and 2:13. In both of these instances, the word is used in reference to either the creation of an idol (2:8) or the worship of idols (2:13). For example, 2:8 states the following.

“For she [Israel] did not know that I [Yahweh] gave her the grain, and the new wine, and the oil, and I multiplied her silver and gold, which they made for the ba’al.”<sup>2</sup>

I agree with Anderson and Freedman who observe that the phrase ‘made for the ba’al’ cannot refer to offerings of silver and gold for the Canaanite deity Ba’al. The Canaanite god Ba’al was associated with nature and fertility. Offerings of precious metals would have therefore been inappropriate to him.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the text should be understood as referencing the creation of an idol or divine image.<sup>4</sup> But does this verse explicitly identify the idol as being a representation of the Canaanite god Ba’al? I argue that it does not. Rather, I propose that the text is using the term ‘ba’al’ in a more general sense as a way of describing the idol itself. The text could be understood to simply read ‘...silver and gold which they made into an *idol*.’ The verse is a condemnation of idolatry in general, not necessarily of Ba’al worship. Likewise, Hosea’s words in 2:13 can be understood as a condemnation of idol worship in a general sense.

Hosea’s disdain for the Northern kingdom’s practice of idolatry is made clear in several other passages as well (4:17; 8:4; 10:6; 13:2; 14:3; 14:8). Yet, the only idol which Hosea specifically identifies throughout the entire text are the calves of Samaria set up by king Jeroboam in Beth-el and Dan (8:4-6; 10:5-6; 13:2). Given that these are the only idols specifically identified, I propose that the most natural reading of the text would be to understand

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<sup>2</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> Francis I. Andersen, David Noel Freedman, and Hosea, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1. trade paperback ed. 2004, [Nachdr.], The Anchor Bible 24 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 244.

<sup>4</sup> Alice A Keefe, “Hosea’s (in)Fertility God,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 30, no. 1 (2008): 31.

these golden calves as the idols which Hosea is condemning in the aforementioned verses, including 2:8 and 2:13. Thus, in 2:13, the ‘days of the ba’alim’ could be understood as a reference to the unorthodox rival feast days set up by king Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:33) on which sacrifices were offered before the golden calves.

### **What Were the Calves of Samaria Intended to Represent?**

“And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.’ So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, ‘You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’” (1 Kings 12:26-28, ESV)

According to the story found in 1 Kings 12, king Jeroboam of the Northern kingdom created the golden calves as a form of Yahweh worship to rival the temple in Jerusalem. As such, the calves were intended to be physical representations of Yahweh. There has been much debate within the realm of source criticism over the similarities between the story of 1 Kings 12 and that of Exodus 32.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in both cases, the formulaic saying ‘here are your gods<sup>6</sup>, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt’ is agreed to be a reference to Yahweh, as the idea of ‘bringing a people up out of Egypt’ is not shared among any of the other Ancient Near Eastern deities.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, some scholars have put forward the argument that the golden calves may not have been originally intended as idols, but rather as thrones, over which the presence of Yahweh would have been believed to dwell, much like the ark in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> However, there is

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<sup>5</sup> Joel S Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 82.

<sup>6</sup>There is a possibility that the cultic saying "here is your god" (as preserved in Neh 9:18) was pluralised by the authors of kings in order to accentuate the idolatry. Andrew King, “Did Jehu Destroy Baal from Israel?: A Contextual Reading of Jehu’s Revolt,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27, no. 3 (2017): 309–332.

<sup>7</sup> Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim*, 80–82.

<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have suggested this interpretation but for one well-argued example, see Sweeny, Marvin A., “Hosea’s Reading of Pentateuchal Narratives: A Window for a Foundational E Stratum,” in *The Formation of the*

no evidence for this within the Biblical text itself. For one, the language surrounding the calves' creation and instillation says nothing of this idea. Rather, they are presented as being '[Israel's] gods, who brought them up out of Egypt'. The calves are said to *be* the gods. There is no indication of them being thrones. Likewise, when the construction of the ark in Jerusalem is described, it is explicitly stated that the ark was a throne (Exodus 37:6-9). If this were also the understanding of the calves, one would expect a similar description. In any event, it is clear from the language of Hosea that both *he* and *his audience* believed the calves to be idols and not mere thrones. He even goes so far as to explicitly state on two occasions that the calves are idols and that they *are not gods*. (8:5-6; 13:2) Such clarifications would have been meaningless to Hosea's audience if the calves were not understood as idols, but merely as divine thrones.<sup>9</sup> Given this evidence, I believe that we must accept that the golden calves were indeed understood as idols of Yahweh, at least by the time of Hosea.

If I am correct in identifying the calves of Samaria as the idols being referenced in 2:8 and 2:13, then one might argue that this would indicate that the calves were understood as idols of Ba'al and not of Yahweh. I would like to preemptively dispel this idea. While Hosea openly condemns the calves as being idolatrous (13:2), he never identifies them as symbols of Ba'al. In fact, he never identifies them with any foreign deity at all (8:5-6; 10:5). Likewise, when Hosea mentions Yahweh's disdain for the calves (8:5-6; 10:5-6), Yahweh is recorded as saying nothing about their being representations of a foreign god. If these calves did indeed represent a rival deity, then one would expect this to be the perfect place for Yahweh to renounce them as such.

Even during the reign of king Ahab, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Ba'al worship was officially

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*Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz et al., Forschungen zum Alten Testament 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Day, *Yahweh and Gods and Goddesses* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2002), 40.

incorporated into the Northern kingdom, the prophets Elijah and Elisha never mention the golden calves as being symbols of Ba'al. And in the story of king Jehu's reform, found in 2 kings 10, Jehu is said to have completely eradicated the worship of Ba'al from the land of Israel (2 kings 10:28).<sup>10</sup> Yet, the story specifically mentions that he did *not* end the worship of the golden calves in Beth-el and Dan (2 kings 10:29). The story clearly differentiates between the two practices.

If one identifies the idols mentioned in 2:8 and 2:13 as the golden calves of Samaria, and if one identifies the golden calves of Samaria as idols of Yahweh and not of Ba'al, then there is simply no evidence for the kind of wide-spread Ba'al worship that so many scholars presuppose as the context for Hosea. Instead, I believe that there is overwhelming evidence in the text that the Northern kingdom understood itself to still be worshipping Yahweh (2:11; 4:15; 5:6; 7:14; 8:2; 9:4-5; 11:7). The Biblical text also attests to the idea that Yahweh, and not Ba'al, was understood to be Israel's God by Israel's neighbors (2 kings 17:26-28).

### **Why are the Calves of Samaria called 'ba'al'?**

Since we cannot identify the calves of Samaria as being symbols of the Canaanite god Ba'al, it must be determined why Hosea uses the word 'ba'al' to refer to them in 2:8 and 2:13. In its most basic form, the word ba'al can mean lord, master, or even husband.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars have concluded, based on the ritual texts found at Ugarit, that Ba'al was understood to be the favored epithet for the god Haddad and that this eventually became his proper name.<sup>12</sup> However,

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew King, "Did Jehu Destroy Baal from Israel?: A Contextual Reading of Jehu's Revolt," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27, no. 3 (2017): 309–332. Makes the case that the complete destruction of the Ba'al cult by Jehu should be understood as an example of hyperbole which was common in the Ancient Near Eastern world. Thus, he claims that one would still be able to interpret the references to ba'al in Hosea 2 as legitimate references to this same Canaanite deity. However, Kelle makes a strong case for the absence of evidence for wide-spread Ba'al worship in the days of Hosea in Kelle, *Hosea 2*.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic; Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, [Nachdr.], Reprinted from the 1906 ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 127.

<sup>12</sup> Day, *Yahweh and Gods and Goddesses*, 68.

we know that, within the biblical text, the word is used to refer to deities other than Haddad. For example, in Jeremiah 2:23, the word is used in reference to the god Molech. In the story of king Ahab and queen Jezebel, the word is used in reference to the god Melquart, who is known among scholars as the ‘Ba’al of Tyre’. However, it some scholars have argued that the god Ba’al-Shamem, rather than Melquart, is the god being referenced in these stories. Although Ba’al-Shamem functioned in the same weather-god capacity as the god of the Ugaritic texts, the case can be made that he still represents a separate deity.<sup>13</sup> Based on these examples, I propose that it is possible that the epithet ‘ba’al’ was used much more generally to describe a *type* of deity, namely a regional deity responsible for that region’s fertility, and that this title over time became synonymous with the name of the Ugaritic god Haddad, much as the epithet ‘Adonai’ eventually became synonymous with the name Yahweh.

Could it be that this epithet was sometimes used in reference to Yahweh as well? There are some scholars who already believe that this is a possibility.<sup>14</sup> But what evidence do we see of this? For one, the word is used in its verbal form by the prophet Jeramiah to describe the manner in which Yahweh rules over Israel (Jer. 3:14).<sup>15</sup> Additionally, both Saul and David, who were known worshippers of Yahweh, display a level of familiarity with the title ba’al when they are naming their children (Ba’aliada & Eshba’al respectively).<sup>16</sup> The names Bealiah (one of David’s warriors – 2 Chronicles 12:6) and Yehoba’al (a name found on an ancient seal fragment) also indicate a cultural acceptance of equating Yahweh with the title ba’al.<sup>17</sup> Hosea 2:16 is also a strong indicator that referring to Yahweh as a ba’al was common practice.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>14</sup> Kelle, *Hosea 2*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>16</sup> Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim*, 112.

<sup>17</sup> Day, *Yahweh and Gods and Goddesses*, 72.Ibid.

I will concede the possibility that the cultural understanding of Yahweh in 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel had been so influenced by their Canaanite neighbors that Yahweh could more or less be equated with the Canaanite god Ba'al. Within this framework, one could interpret Hosea's use of the word ba'al as a pejorative characterization of the state of religion in the Northern kingdom by equating it to Ba'al worship. But I do not think that this is likely. For one, the reference to multiple 'ba'alim' in 2:13 & 2:17 would be strange if they were intended as a reference to the singular foreign god Ba'al.<sup>18</sup> This interpretation would also compel us to understand Yahweh's words in 2:16 as sarcasm. It seems more natural to me to interpret the verse as referring to actual practice (i.e. Israel really was referring to Yahweh as 'my ba'al'). I propose that it is more likely that the word ba'al (lord/master) had become a generic way of referring to a national/regional deity or perhaps even a synonym for 'idol'.<sup>19</sup> In this way, Israel's use of the word 'ba'al' to refer to Yahweh (2:16) can be taken as indication that they had begun to understand him as nothing more than one of many national deities. The command to do away with the epithet 'ba'al' in 2:16-17 could also then be understood as an attempt to clarify Yahweh's true nature by distancing him from these other deities.<sup>20</sup>

### **Other Notes on the Possibility of Foreign Worship in Israel**

It is not only the use of the word ba'al which causes scholars to propose that syncretistic worship was taking place in the Northern kingdom during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Many take 4:14 as evidence of foreign fertility cults (like those believed to have been a part of Ba'al worship). However, close examination of the word *kadasha*, often translated as 'cult-prostitute', will show

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<sup>18</sup> There is a possibility that the reference to multiple ba'alim is intended to reference the different local manifestations of the singular deity Ba'al. However, on at least one occasion, we know that the word in its plural form is used to refer to a deity other than Ba'al (Jer 2:23). Day, *Yahweh and Gods and Goddesses*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Keefe, "Hosea's (in)Fertility God," 31.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 35; Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*. (Place of publication not identified: Liturgical, 1985), 42-43.

that this is cannot be the case. In the article entitled *The qdesha in Hosea 4:14: Putting the (Myth of the) Sacred Prostitute to Bed*, Jessie DeGrado argues that the word *kadasha*, like its Akkadian cognate, *kaditsu*, originally meant a female cultic practitioner or priestess. However, over time, the word underwent a process of “semantic generalization and derogation” that resulted in a wide range of meanings from ‘a woman who is employed outside the house’ to ‘sexually available woman’. By the time of the Rabinic period, it was a term used almost exclusively for prostitutes.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, while the word cannot mean ‘cult-prostitute’, as it is usually taken, it is likely that the word had already adopted the additional connotation of sexual promiscuity by the time of Hosea. In this way, it can be understood as a dig at the priesthood of Beth-el and Dan by comparing them to sexually promiscuous women. This of course would fit with Hosea’s overarching metaphor of adultery and sexual promiscuity in the form of incorrect religious practice.

Scholars also often interpret the mention of people ‘inquir[ing] of a piece of wood’ in 4:12 as a reference to Asherah worship. This interpretation is certainly appealing, as the verse comes just before the mention of people worshipping under shady trees in 4:13. Since trees were commonly understood as symbols of Asherah, this connection is indeed plausible. Additionally, some scholars argue that Asherah was understood to be the consort of Yahweh.<sup>22</sup> As such, this would not detract much from my overall point as the mention of her worship would be signs of yet another deviation away from orthodox Yahweh worship. However, given the larger context of the chapter, such a reference to Asherah worship would appear to be a strange and sudden departure from Hosea’s main point. If, instead, one were to adopt DeGrado’s translation of the

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<sup>21</sup> Jessie DeGrado, “The Qdesha in Hosea 4:14: Putting the (Myth of the) Sacred Prostitute to Bed,” *Vetus Testamentum* 68, no. 1 (January 12, 2018): 9.

<sup>22</sup> Joel F Drinkard, “Religious Practices Reflected In The Book of Hosea,” *Review & Expositor* 90, no. 2 (1993): 209.

text, “*My people ask council from their rod, and their shaft instructs them, For a spirit of horniness leads them astray, and they cheat on their god.*”, then the verse can be understood as yet another mockery of the priesthood, likening them to sexually uncontrollable young men – the ‘piece of wood’ being understood as a phallic metaphor.<sup>23</sup>

In truth, the verse which I believe provides the most convincing argument for the presence of syncretistic worship is the reference to ‘the names of the ba’alim’ in 2:17. This verse is typically taken as one of the prime examples of Ba’al worship in 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel.<sup>24</sup> However, given the reasons listed above, I would argue that this cannot be the case. While I would offer that it is possible to interpret this as a pejorative reference to the calves of Samaria, it is also entirely possible that this phrase is meant to reference the national gods of Israel’s neighbors. This would not necessarily indicate that Israel is worshipping these other gods. In fact, given that the phrase comes right after a verse in which Yahweh indicates that Israel has been referring to him as ‘[their] ba’al’, it would make sense to view this merely as a recognition of the fact that Israel currently views Yahweh as one of many regional deities. The reference to ‘removing the names of the ba’alim from her mouth’ would then be an indication that the day will come when he will correct this misunderstanding by proving himself to be far more than just a national/regional deity.

### **Hosea’s Connection to Amos**

In many ways, Hosea is the prophetic heir to Amos. The time between the end of Amos’ ministry and the beginning of Hosea’s could hardly have been more than 10 years and numerous examples show the similarities of language and theology between Hosea and that of his

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<sup>23</sup> DeGrado, “The Qdesha in Hosea 4,” 10.

<sup>24</sup> Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos*; Davies, *Hosea*; Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, 187–185; Mays, *Hosea*.

predecessor (Hos 4:3 vs. Am 8:8; Hos 7:10 vs. Am 8:7; Hos 8:14 vs. Am 2:5; Hos 9:3 vs. Am 7:17; Hos 10:8 vs. Am 7:9; Hos 12:7 vs. Am 8:5).<sup>25</sup> The primary aim of Amos' ministry, as demonstrated by Lewis B. Paton in his article, *Did Amos approve the calf-worship at Bethel?*, was to announce that Israel's conception of Yahweh was so completely off-base as to render her worship invalid. It was worship of Yahweh in name only.<sup>26</sup> The message of Hosea can thus be understood as continuing the work of Amos by arguing that the idolatrous calves of Samaria are warping Israel's understanding of Yahweh. The Yahweh represented by these calves is nothing more than a localized deity who can be bribed into providing a harvest and is placated by ritual sacrifice (2:12). This stands in stark contrast to Hosea's understanding of Yahweh as the cosmic creator God who is concerned with the state of the human heart (7:14). In this way, Amos' prediction had come true and Beth-el (house of God) had become Beth-aven (house of wickedness)<sup>27</sup> (Am 5:5 vs Hos 4:15; 5:8; 10:50).

### **Lessons to be Learned from This Interpretation**

The golden calves of Samaria were established by king Jeroboam in order to legitimate the government of the Northern kingdom and to protect his own kingship. They were political tools intended to serve Samaria. They were not established out of good intentions or out of an overflow of love for Yahweh. They were national symbols just as much as they were idols. As such, over time they distorted Israel's view of Yahweh until he became nothing more than just another national deity. He was responsible for maintaining the kingdoms agricultural and economic success (2:5; 2:12; 4:18; 7:14; 10:1; 12:8) and nothing more.

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, "Did Amos Approve the Calf-Worship at Bethel?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 13 (1894): 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 19.

But as we learn with Amos, it is impossible to have an incorrect relationship with Yahweh without also having an incorrect relationship with neighbor. Thus, we see several key symptoms of Israel's idolatry. First, there is the rampant corruption among the priestly and ruling classes (1:4-5; 4:4-8; 4:18; 5:1-2; 6:9; 7:3; 7:5-7; 7:11; 8:4; 8:8-10; 8:14; 10:1; 10:13-15) Second, there is wide-spread immorality among the people (4:1-2; 4:12-14; 10:4) And third, if we combine the witnesses of Hosea and Amos, we see an overwhelming level of neglect for the poor and needy (Hos. 12:7-8; Amos 2:6-7; 5:11; 8:5). Israel's own prosperity drove them to forget God (13:6).

These symptoms are presented as the results of reducing God down to the size of a national deity and ignoring his commandments. Thus, Hosea can stand as a warning for us in our own day not to follow in the footsteps of the Northern kingdom by trying to enlist God into the service of a particular group. Rather, Hosea argues that we must remember that Yahweh is the God of all creation. He is the God of all peoples. He is more than just a divine vending machine where we input loveless ritual and get prosperity in return. His desire is for faithfulness and steadfast love.

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