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The Message of Hosea 1–3: A Harlot's Wages¹

R. MARK SHIPP

By around 740 B.C., during the waning years of Jereboam II's strong and prosperous reign over Israel, Hosea began his prophetic career. While Amos mentions almost nothing about Israel's idolatry, it is Hosea's deepest concern. Indeed, it is an intriguing question why idolatry is barely mentioned by Amos, but ten years later it provides the motivation for Hosea's prophecy. Is it because idolatry went underground during the pseudo-pious years of Jereboam II's reign? Did it suddenly reappear *ex nihilo*? Was Amos just not that well-informed about social and religious practices in Israel? While we cannot answer these questions, we can say that the years following Jereboam II's reign were characterized by political conspiracy, assassination, foreign invasion and social chaos. In times like those, people will look for solutions and stability wherever they can be found. Idolatry was always a tempting option in ancient Israel, because it seemed to offer economic, social and political stability in an uncertain and unstable world.

HOSEA'S MARRIAGE

Hosea's story has always intrigued us because of his unusual marriage and three "sign" children. God commands Hosea to do something shocking and unprecedented: he is told to marry a prostitute and have children by her, as a sign to Israel of her spiritual adultery, or idolatry. Immediately this raises questions. How could God command Hosea to marry a harlot? Isn't that against the law of Moses?² Or perhaps the prostitute ceased her harlotries after her marriage to Hosea, or simply practiced the Canaanite sexual fertility rite before marriage?³ Maybe God didn't command that after all, but he knew the woman had been a harlot, or would subsequently turn to prostitution?⁴ Perhaps the word we translate "harlotry" or "prostitution" should really be translated as "promiscuity"; what Hosea did, if this is correct, is marry a loose woman, given to promiscuity.⁵

1. This paper was originally presented as a two-class series on Hosea 1–3 at the Abilene Christian University Lectures, September 17 and 18, 2007.

2. Douglas Stuart has an interesting way of reading the command of God to "take a woman of harlotry": that is, there is *only* metaphor here—that all Israelites were "adulterous, i.e., idolaters, and so any Israelite woman or man is necessarily a spiritual adulterer." I find this impossible for reasons I address below. See Stuart, *Hosea—Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary vol. 31; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 11, 26–27.

3. See Marvin Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, vol. 1: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 39. For the alleged Canaanite sexual rite, see Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 14.

4. McComiskey thinks she had been a promiscuous woman and brought her children into the marriage with Hosea. See Thomas McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets, Volume 1: Hosea, Joel, Amos* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 13–16. Alternatively, Andersen and Freedman think that she only became promiscuous after her marriage to Hosea. See Francis Andersen and David Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible vol. 24; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 158–159, 162.

5. Mays suggests Gomer was not a common prostitute in the modern sense, but known for her promiscuous tendencies, perhaps as a cult prostitute in the Baal cult. See James Mays, *Hosea* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 26.

Nor can we get a good fix on the chronology. Did Hosea know he was marrying a harlot before he did so? What is the relationship between chapters 1 and 3? When he is commanded to take a harlot *again* in chapter 3, is the unnamed woman Gomer, as in chapter one? Or is she yet another woman, about whom we know nothing? And if it is Gomer, why must Hosea pay to get her back? Is she in debt slavery, or has she gone back to prostitution? I assure you, the number of interpretations of these and other issues related to Hosea's marriage are as many as the commentaries that contain them. I will look first at the significance of Hosea's marriage and his children, than I will try to respond to some of these questions.

God commands Hosea to marry a woman of harlotry, whose name is Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. The word for harlotry implies sexual indiscretion, and is the same root used of Tamar, who pretends to be a harlot in Genesis 38. If Gomer is not a professional harlot, but simply promiscuous, that fine distinction is lost in Genesis 38, where Tamar is accused both of being a harlot and of being pregnant with a child through harlotry, as Gomer is characterized in Hosea 1. The reason for this is so that Hosea's children might be graphic signs of Israel's adultery before the Lord, her practice of spiritual adultery, or idolatry. Israel had abandoned the exclusive worship of the Lord for the worship of other deities. As these three children are the fruit of the union between Hosea and Gomer, so they represent the fruit of Israel's union with foreign deities.

The first child born is a boy named Jezreel. It was at the city of Jezreel, a royal city of the dynasty of Omri of Israel, where the current political regime, the dynasty of Jehu, began. God had ordained Jehu to abolish the family of Ahab from the throne of Israel in 1 Kings 9–10. He was amazingly efficient with this purge of the family of Ahab: King Jehoram of Israel, Jezebel the queen mother, all the sons of Jehoram and relatives of the royal house, as well as all Baal worshippers in Samaria. He did not stop with this. Upon encountering a large segment of the Judean royal house, he had them put to death as well.

It is unclear whether Hosea's first child is called Jezreel because of Jehu's bloody purge there, or if the passage simply means "because of the bloodthirstiness of the dynasty of Jehu," one of whose capitals was at Jezreel. While this is possible, the only extensive narratives we have about the city of Jezreel both involve murder and mayhem: Ahab's execution of Naboth in order to acquire his vineyard in 1 Kings 21, and Jehu's bloody purge of the city during his military coup in 2 Kings 9–10. In light of the fact that Jehu's family is mentioned, it must be the latter which is meant. The point for Hosea's day is that the entire dynasty of Jehu, down to Jereboam, is characterized by bloodshed from its very inception. The word "Jezreel" literally means "God sows," but unlike the names of his other two children, this symbolic meaning is not given until the end of chapter one and chapter two, where God sows blessings upon his people.

The second child was called *Lô Rûhamah*, "Not Pitied." Because of their idolatry, God would no longer have compassion on his people Israel, with whom he had been patient for hundreds of years. *Rehem*, "pity," was supposed to be an attribute of God's people and an attribute of God himself. In an ironic shift, God's patience has become exhausted with his people and he will no longer extend compassion to them.

The last child of Hosea was *Lô Ammî*, "Not My People." Throughout their long history of rebellion and idolatry, Israel never ceased to be the people God claimed as his own. Finally, however, there is no recourse but to divorce his bride, the people of Israel, because of her repeated and obstinate spiritual adultery.

ISRAEL AND IDOLATRY

Something must be said about the symbolism of the names and concepts in chapter two. It is important to remember that all metaphors work on two levels: the metaphorical level and the referential one. Here, the chapter works on the level of the metaphor: God is the jilted husband, Israel is the bride and the mother of the children Jezreel, Not My People, and Not Pitied, and God divorces Israel because she has persisted in pursuing her "lovers": Canaanite fertility deities, who promised prosperity, stability and fertility. The only way to recover his bride is to send her back into the wilderness, where God might woo her again, as he did in the beginning. The children are asked to plead with their mother (the people of Israel), to put away her

adulteries/idolatry. But it is to no avail—there is to be no pity, because Israel is determined to go after her lovers. Hosea 2.5–7a says

For their mother has played the harlot; she that conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink." Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns; and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them.

Canaanite deities were always seductive and alluring to the Israelites, because they dealt with matters of daily life: the economy, the family, the weather, the health and welfare of families, childbirth and political stability. The God of Israel was great for history and international politics, but he was invisible and gave no guarantees of prosperity and health. Furthermore, he was invisible. Canaanite deities, on the other hand, could be appealed to for everyday needs and crises of life. Dagan was the god of grain. He could be appealed to for the regularity and bounty of crops. Hadad, whom we meet most often in the Old Testament under the title "Baal," was the God of lightning and spring rains. Baal Hadad became the head of the Canaanite pantheon in the popular understanding. Asherah and Ashtoreth, mentioned many times in the Old Testament, were female deities of love and fertility. Often, Asherah figurines are found in Israel with exaggerated sexual characteristics. They could be appealed to for matters of sexual fertility, conception, childbirth and love. There are many more deities with specialized interests and functions: gods of wisdom and education, gods of natural phenomena, such as the sea, the sun, the moon, death, and many, many more. Indeed, Israel looked to these entities to provide "their wool, their flax, their water, and their wine," (Hos 2.5) and in the metaphor of chapter 2, Israel is the bride of God who has left God's care and concern and has had illicit relations with the deities of the indigenous Canaanites.

Lest we miss the point for our own day, I think it is important to emphasize that idolatry is not only a primitive practice, long gone from our enlightened age. Modern idolatry is all the more seductive because of its subtlety. The ancients personified and deified natural forces and human phenomena beyond their control. Through sacrifice, prayer and sympathetic enactment, the gods could be appealed to for help with economic, personal or political needs. It wasn't that they had abandoned completely the worship of the LORD; it was that the LORD was good for matters of national identity and morality, but when it came to the economy, family, health, security and local politics, Canaanite deities seemed to speak to these more directly. I do not think it is greatly different in our own day. Most Americans believe in God; most even consider themselves Christians. But Wall Street, Washington, Hollywood, the Federal Reserve Bank, the Pentagon and a host of insurance and investment companies speak to daily issues and crises in a practical way, and we tend to trust these idols more implicitly than we do the true provider of ancient Israel and the modern church.

Israel forgot that it was the Lord who was the real provider of her blessings:

And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold which they used for Ba'al. (Hos 2.8)

Because of their obstinate idolatry, God was going to

... take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season; and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand. And I will put an end to all her mirth, her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts. And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, "These are my hire, which my lovers have given me." I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them. And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals when she burned incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says the LORD. (Hos 2.9–13)

GOMER AND HOSEA AGAIN

Let us return to the referential level of the parable: Hosea and Gomer. It is important to clarify and attempt to answer some of the questions that were raised earlier. First, one must remember that the marriage of Hosea and Gomer was real, and her adultery and harlotry likewise real. I think it makes little sense to suggest that only later did Gomer fall into harlotry. It is the nature of this metaphor that Gomer be the harlot that Hosea must be married to, to symbolize Israel's continued idolatry throughout her history. Furthermore, the command to marry a harlot seems unequivocal.

On this issue, it is sometimes said that God would never make such a command, for it is against the law. Setting aside all the other accounts of prophets whom God commanded to do strange things (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah), nowhere is it forbidden for someone to marry a harlot in the Old Testament, except for a priest (Lev 21.7, more or less quoted in Ezek 44.22).

The other significant issues are whether Hosea takes Gomer back,⁶ whether Gomer falls back into prostitution, and whether the unnamed woman in chapter three is someone other than Gomer.⁷ Again, it is helpful to remember the nature of the living parable that the story of Hosea and Gomer depicts. If Hosea utterly left Gomer and went to another woman, then the point of the parable falls apart. It no longer has to do with God's patience and jilted love, but his righteous retribution. Second, I do not think it necessary to suggest that Gomer was a harlot, then married Hosea and left harlotry, then decided to go back into harlotry, whereupon Hosea took her back by buying her out of debt or prostitution slavery. It is more likely that Gomer never left her profession to begin with: she was a harlot, and had "children of harlotry." This symbolized God's broken-hearted love for his adulterous people. Then, whether she had fallen into debt slavery or worked as a harlot in indentured service, Hosea buys her back and binds her to himself. This symbolizes God's persistent plan to return his true love to himself, out of servitude to idols, to which we now turn.

"I WILL BRING HER INTO THE WILDERNESS"

The symbolism of Hosea's marriage is not exhausted by the story of the marriage and children. The children are the ill-fated fruits of the union between Israel and her idols, but in chapter two, they are called upon to plead with their mother, asking that she reject her idolatry. But it is no use. Israel is determined to pursue her idols, for she feels that it is they "who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" (Hos 2.3). God's only recourse is to impede her steps and confuse her path (Hos 2.6), remove the grain, wine, wool and flax which Israel thought came from their idols (Hos 2.8-9), expose her nakedness before her idols (Hos 2.10), and remove her physical blessings and feast days to idols (Hos 2.12-13).

Perhaps more than any other prophet, Hosea is the prophet of Israel's covenant with God at Sinai and the period of wilderness wandering. At the same time, there is little attention given to the Judean traditions of the covenant with David and the Jerusalem temple. The northern kingdom of Israel stressed the traditions of exodus, Sinai, law, covenant and wilderness wanderings, where Israel first became the people of God. Hosea portrays this wilderness period as a honeymoon or a courtship period, the first blush of love between Israel and God. If God has divorced his people because of their adulterous relationship with idols, the only way to recover his first bride is to send her back to the wilderness, back to the beginning, where he might woo her once again.

The balance of chapter two (and chapter one!) reverses the language of adultery, destitution, deprivation and rejection in the earlier parts of these chapters. In no sense will it be Israel's initiative. As the divorce

6. Scholars are split on whether Hosea was actually married to Gomer in the first place and whether he buys her back in chapter three. For those who think the unnamed woman of chapter three is Gomer and that Hosea takes her back to himself, see James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 13; Gary Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 73.

7. See G. I. Davies, *Hosea* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1992), 108. See also Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 66.

of Israel was God's doing, her restoration will be also. God will court her in the wilderness once again, speaking to her like young lovers do, with tender words. It must be in the wilderness where God reverses all of the faithlessness and falsehood of Israel's past. In the wilderness, God will give her the blessings which she thought came from her fertility gods—her wine, oil and flax. The Hebrew text is most helpful. It is "from there," from the wilderness, that these things will happen:

And there [in the wilderness] I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. (Hos 2.15)

In this new wilderness period, the faithlessness of Israel, depicted in the disobedience of Achan in Joshua 7 at Ai, will be turned into faithfulness and blessing. In the Joshua account, Achan is executed at the Valley of Achor ("trouble" or "calamity"), because of the trouble he brought upon Israel. Rather than such punishment and calamity, God was going to put before Israel in this new wilderness a "door of hope." The closest analogy to such language is found in Isaiah 65.10:

Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down, for my people who have sought me.

The point is that Israel's history of rebellion, and the deserted, wilderness areas, will be places of blessing.

The last image in this verse is significant for understanding Hosea's theology. To go into the wilderness again, for God to court her, requires that Israel be captive once again in a foreign land. Once God has brought Israel out of the new Egypt, this time Assyria, God will bring her into the new wilderness and court her again. The new Egypt, the new wilderness and the new covenant all set the scene for a return to Hosea's basic metaphor of covenant as a marriage relationship.

NEW COVENANT, NEW MARRIAGE, NEW CREATION

At the end of chapter two, Hosea returns to the marriage metaphor. When he has brought Israel back to the wilderness and courted her, God was going to take her once again in marriage. In verse 16, there is a brilliant play on words, which describes the heart of Hosea's metaphor: "And in that day," says the LORD, "you will call me, 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal'" (Hos 2.16).

The play occurs on the word "baal," which can mean either "Lord" or "husband," and is incidentally the nickname of the most popular Canaanite god, Hadad. When God restores his wife, Israel, he will not even let her refer to him with the normal word for husband, *baal*, because that word had come to be used commonly for the chief Canaanite god. Rather, another word for husband, *ish*, is used, which means "man." This brings about a rather strange analogy: no longer does God want to be referred to as Israel's husband, *baal*, but instead as "My Man," somewhat absurd relative to God, but the metaphor works.

The balance of the chapter deals with covenant language. Verses 19–20 have several terms that occur in different combinations in passages that refer to divine, or human, covenants. When God courts Israel in the wilderness, he will betroth her in righteousness, in justice, steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness and knowledge. These terms help us understand the nature of covenant-keeping in Hosea and elsewhere in the Old Testament.

First, "righteousness," *tsedeq*, has to do with rightness, legitimacy and blamelessness before the covenant. It has to do with moral, legal and religious rectitude relative to the *torah*. *Tsedeq* is not an attribute inherent in Israel; it is a characteristic God bestows when he betroths Israel to himself. Our society is not known for its moral and legal uprightness.

Mishpat, "justice," has to do with right and equitable behavior towards the neighbor. *Mishpat* can also be translated "judgment," making proper distinctions with wisdom and uprightness. It has to do with fairness

and rightness in judgments with those over whom we have power. If justice exalts a nation, it is those nations that treat their citizens with equity, especially those weakest and least capable of influencing or contributing to our quality of life, which will be exalted.

The next term, “steadfast love” or *hesed*, occurs over three hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. It is not easy to define, not having a corresponding term in English. It is often translated “steadfast love,” “loving kindness,” “tender mercies,” “kindness,” “loyalty” and “love.” Its root meaning is “covenant loyalty,” keeping promise because of committed relationship to the parties to the covenant, i.e., “loving loyalty.” It is not always easy to spot this term translated in English—Hosea 2 translates *hesed* three different ways in the same chapter! It is rarely an attribute of people in the Old Testament—a few times it describes David’s loyalty to his covenants—but otherwise it is one of the most prevalent characteristics of God, along with such attributes as holiness. God keeps his promises. It is not primarily an emotive term, but has to do with faithfulness to the covenant in action.⁸ Of all these covenant terms, this I think is the one most misunderstood and most needed in our churches and our society. In a society where covenants are lightly made and lightly broken, it is exceptionally important that our churches be known as people who keep covenant, who always keep their promises.

The next term is an “emotive” term: *rahamîm*, “mercy” or “compassion.” Its root form means “belly” or “womb,” the Hebraic seat of the emotions. The Sinai covenant is not just about fairness, justice, morality and loyalty. It is also about compassion on the neighbor. Half of the ten commandments can be summarized as the lawyer in Luke 10 does with Jesus: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” a quotation from Leviticus 19.18.

Emûnah, “faithfulness,” is based upon the root word from which we get our word “amen.” The root word means “firm, reliable, or stable,” and so every time you say “amen” you are making a confession—that God is firm, reliable and stable. Faithfulness is reliability, like *hesed*, another term for “promise-keeping.”

The last term is possibly the most important term of all for understanding the message and theology of Hosea: *da`at` Elohîm*, “the knowledge of God.” Knowledge in Hosea is intimate, deeply personal knowledge, and especially covenant knowledge. It is what allows Hosea to move so easily between the strange marriage of Hosea and Gomer and the metaphor of the intimate marriage of God and Israel. Knowledge of God in Hosea is covenant, relational knowledge, but how one acquires this knowledge is by performing righteousness, justice, loyalty, compassion and faithfulness.

These covenant terms are preceded and followed by God’s binding himself in covenant to restore not only his covenant with Israel, but to restore all creation. Somehow, creation itself is damaged and fails to be a blessing due to human corruption, as if there is an unbreakable bond between justice, righteousness and the created order. The blessing which creation is supposed to be is restored with the restoration of Israel as God’s bride in Hosea 2.

THE END OF THE STORY OF HOSEA AND GOMER

And so we come to the end of the story of Hosea and Gomer. Let us look back at the end of chapter one and chapter three. Something was already said above about difficulties in interpreting Hosea’s relationship with Gomer. I suggested that she was a harlot, and didn’t leave that lifestyle until chapter three. Hosea either declares Gomer “not his wife,” or divorces her. Since there is no language of “sending away” here (Hebrew *shalah*, typical language for divorce, see Mal 2.16), it is best to go with the language the text provides. In the marriage metaphor, God declares to Israel through the “living parable” of Hosea’s marriage: “I am not your husband and you are not my wife.” But whether in the language of the parable or the language of the referent, that is not God’s nor Hosea’s last word.

8. See Katharine Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

In chapter 3 God commands Hosea to “Go again and love a woman loved by another.” I mentioned above that it must be Gomer who is intended in chapter three, or we compound the problem and fall out of the metaphor. Hosea buys her back, possibly out of debt slavery or indentured service. She must then live with Hosea in faithfulness, but with the consequence that they will not have relations for “many days,” symbolizing Israel’s exile without priest, temple or the trappings of worship.

Chapter 1 ends with restoration on the other side of exile (as does the book of Hosea in chapter 14.4–9): “Where it was said, ‘not my people,’ they are sons of the living God.” Chapter 1.11 and 2.1 repeat all three names of the sign children, this time as positive oracles, rather than as judgments: “Great is the day of Jezreel; the brothers are *Ammî* (‘my people’) and the sisters are *Rûhamah* (‘pitied’).” The final metaphor is in chapter 2.21–23, in a new creation context. God will “sow Jezreel” (i.e., “God Sows”) in peace and prosperity, show pity on Not Pitied, and declare, “You are my people,” to Not My People.

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