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The Marriage Metaphor in the Book of Hosea

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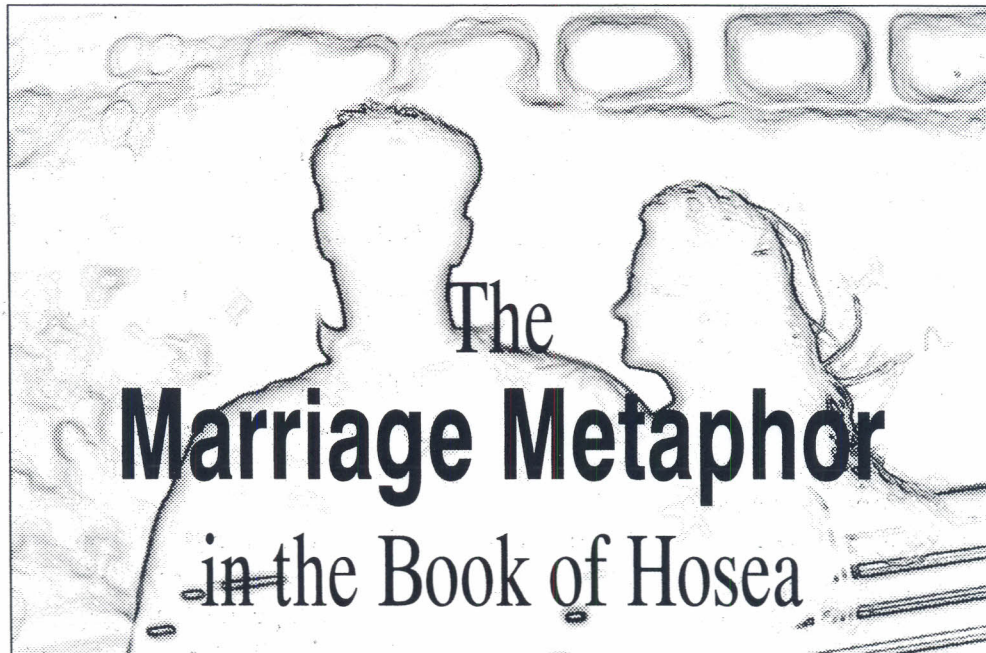


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Amy Bost Henegar

As we search for guidance regarding our marriages, we often turn to scripture. In this quest, however, we seldom focus our attention on the Minor Prophets. Our starting point is usually somewhere in the writings of Paul. Then we may spend a little time in Genesis or in the Gospels, but rarely do we think to turn to a book such as Hosea. Despite our lack of attention, however, Hosea's writings truly are a jewel hidden in the middle of an ancient text—a picture of a marriage personally painted by God. The book of Hosea contains a very detailed picture of a marriage specifically orchestrated by God—a template, placed within our reach, that shows how God would act if God were in a human marriage. In the book of Hosea, God's own relationship with Israel is compared to the relationship of a husband and wife. To concretely illustrate the realities of this relationship, God tells Hosea how to mirror the divine marriage in Hosea's human marriage. Thousands of years later, we can look back at the record of this interaction and learn about marriage from the God who created us and created marriage for us.

In looking at this model, however, we need to be careful to avoid common assumptions that can hinder us from hearing Hosea's true message about marriage. In particular, it seems as though many of

us are hindered from hearing the message by our tendency to focus on the gender roles present in the marriage metaphor. In order to overcome these barriers to interpretation, we must begin by reviewing the scriptures themselves, specifically the first three chapters of Hosea. We also must spend some time looking at the realities of culture and society in regard to marriage in the ancient Near East. With this as a foundation, we will explore two common interpretations of the marriage metaphor and the weaknesses present in each. Then, finally, we will begin to understand the profound message of the book of Hosea for modern marriages.

The Love Story of Hosea and Gomer

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." (Hos 1:2)¹

The book of Hosea comes to ancient Israel in a time when they have forsaken their covenant with Yahweh by worshipping the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites. The first chapter of Hosea tells of God's command to the prophet Hosea to marry an adul-

terous woman in order to illustrate to the people of Israel their unfaithfulness to Yahweh.² Hosea is then led by the Lord to love and marry a woman named Gomer, who, in accordance with the Lord's plan, is unfaithful to him. She bears three children of whom Hosea is not the father and then leaves him to continue her adulterous relationships. Despite the tragedy of unfaithfulness, however, Hosea chapter 1 concludes with a statement of hope—hope that, as a result of Hosea's message, Israel will return and be reunited with the Lord.

Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them "You are not my people," they will be called "sons of the living God." (Hos 1:10)

In this statement God confirms that, despite Israel's unfaithfulness, God will continue to be committed to the covenant made with Israel's ancestors—that Israel will become a great nation, too numerous to count.³

I will ruin her vines and her fig trees,
which she said were her pay from her
lovers;
I will make them a thicket,
and wild animals will devour them.
I will punish her for the days
she burned incense to the Baals;
she decked herself with rings and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
but me she forgot. (Hos 2:12-13)

The second chapter is an account of Hosea's message. The context for these words is the relationship of Hosea and his wife Gomer, but the message is the relationship of God and Israel. In the first half of the chapter, Hosea's words are inflammatory, passionately detailing his anger toward his wife. He speaks of his desire to disown her and publicly shame her. He hates that her children are not his own, and he threatens to cut them off from his love. His words are colorful and furious, mocking her lovers and the life she has found with them. In his anger he considers revenge, desiring for her to experience the pain and humiliation that he has endured. But after

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his fiery words, he softens.

Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her.
There I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of
hope.
There she will sing as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.
(Hos 2:14-15)

In the second half of chapter 2, Hosea's words of anger turn to words of longing for reconciliation and unity, as he remembers his love for his wife. He thinks back to the beginning of their relationship and yearns to return to the days of trust, loyalty, and safe intimacy. Instead of following his angry tendencies and shaming his wife for humiliating him, he chooses to forgive. He chooses to approach her in love, desperately hoping that her love for him will return. Verse 16 illustrates that instead of approaching her in anger and power, aiming to force faithfulness, he chooses to approach her in humility, tenderness, and hope.

In that day, . . .
you will call me "my husband";
you will no longer call me "my master."
(Hos 2:16)

The Hebrew word for "husband" is *'ish*, and that for "master" is *ba'al*. Both words were used in reference to husbands but with very different connotations. While the word *ba'al* connotes control and

domination, the word *'ish* connotes partnership and completion. Corresponding to the word *'ish*, the Hebrew word for “woman” is *'ishshah*. The language itself illustrates the word’s emphasis—the husband as counterpart to his wife, the man as completion of the woman.

These are the same words that are used in the Genesis 2 account of the creation of man and woman. Genesis 2:23 shows their relationship.

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman [*'ishshah*],
for out of Man [*'ish*] this one was taken.
(NRSV)

Hosea’s decision is clear. Instead of approaching his wife from a standpoint of power, attempting to coerce her into faithfulness, he will approach her in humility and enduring love, with hope for sincere reconciliation.

I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and
justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the LORD. (Hos
2:19–20)

Instead of responding to unfaithfulness with unfaithfulness, Hosea confronts his anger with his love and chooses to forgive. And because he makes this choice, he is able to humbly do his part to save the relationship. In his anger his tendency was to place demands on *her* or to specify the conditions under which he would allow her back into the marriage. But in forgiveness he recommits *himself* to the marriage. He recommits himself to his marriage vows, repeating three times his promises of unending righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness.

Hosea’s decision to forgive is even more striking when we understand the culture and the practices surrounding marriage in ancient Israel.⁴ Marriage was often arranged by the family. The woman left her family and became a part of her husband’s family. The wife had two important functions—to bear

children, especially sons to carry on her husband’s family name, and to act in a way that brought honor to her husband. While according to the law, both marriage partners were subject to punishment for adultery, in practice, the woman was punished and the man was not. The punishment for adultery was either public humiliation or execution.

Gomer’s promiscuous behavior brings shame to her husband in a society that functions on an honor/shame-based social system. Gomer’s children are “children of unfaithfulness”—the children of her lov-

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ers and not of Hosea. Thus Hosea’s shame rests not only in his wife’s actions but also in the fact that he has no sons of his own to carry on his family name. Given these realities of culture and society, Hosea’s response to his wife’s unfaithfulness is all the more powerful. In a culture that encourages a man to publicly punish his wife for adultery, if not to have her executed, Hosea chooses to swallow his pride, forgive her, and seek reconciliation.

Go, show your love to your wife again, though
she is loved by another and is an adulteress.
Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites,
though they turn to other gods and love the
sacred raisin cakes. (Hos 3:1)

The immediate purpose of Hosea’s message is to illustrate the character of God’s love. In summarizing the story, the first verse of the third chapter uses the word *love* five times. Ultimately, it is the

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never-ending love of God that calls the people of Israel to return and to respond in love. And, as modern recipients, we can take from this book a profound message about the character of God and the nature of God's love. Additionally, however, we can turn the metaphor around and learn about God's design for marriage.

Hosea's Message for Modern Marriages

If we look carefully at the relationship of Hosea and his wife, Gomer, we see something we recognize. Hosea's emotions are not unlike ones that we experience in our own marriages. We know the joy and excitement of truly loving another person. We know also that in truly loving we risk a great deal. Love makes us completely vulnerable to the beloved, but vulnerability is exactly what love demands of us. We also know that, while the one we love may appear to be perfect through love's eyes, no one is perfect and the recipient of our love is a sinful human being. As such, the person we love will, at some point, in some way or another, betray us. When we have invested so much of ourselves in another person, betrayal moves us to passionate anger that covers our deep pain. Thus when we hear Hosea's words of love and anger, we see ourselves. We remember the pain we have experienced when we have been betrayed by the one that we love, and we imagine

how deep our pain would be if we had walked through Hosea's specific experience of love and betrayal.

While we may recognize the emotional dynamics in Hosea's story, modern readers tend to have a more difficult time hearing the book's message about marriage. The difficulty seems to center around the gender roles present in the marriage metaphor. The way in which a reader reacts to the fact that God is portrayed as the male, the faithful husband, and Israel as the female, the unfaithful wife, depends largely on the reader's background and beliefs.

Many modern readers are not surprised or offended by the gender configuration in this story. Perhaps they have always felt comfortable with the image of God as Father and thus are not at all surprised to see that the male, husband, character represents God in Hosea's story as well. They may even explain this correlation by the passage in which Paul refers to Eve's sin and to its common interpretation that women are more prone to sin than men.⁵ Given their understanding of other scriptures, it is not surprising or upsetting to them that the husband symbolizes God and the wife symbolizes sinful Israel. While they are not upset and they feel emotionally free to read and learn from the Hosea story, the strict gender correlation of the husband with God and the wife with an adulterous Israel is nevertheless problematic. When read with strict gender association, the story does little more for marriage than to encourage unfaithful wives to be faithful to their husbands and to encourage abandoned husbands to be long-suffering and forgiving. While good advice, this message is more commonsense than profound or inspiring.

Other modern readers will take offense at the notion that the man represents God and the woman represents the one in rebellion to God. Perhaps they find great meaning in the fact that God is spirit and feel that any attempt to classify God as either male or female is to deny the essential image of God as the union of male and female.⁶ They are probably deeply concerned with establishing egalitarian marriages and resist what appears to be the model of the husband's having power over his wife in the way that the Lord has power over Israel. They believe that wives have been ordained by God to be equal

partners with their husbands and are skeptical of anything that might undermine that understanding. They are also troubled by Hosea's violent and angry words regarding his wife. They feel that to focus on the marriage metaphor in the book of Hosea would be to somehow lend support to verbal or physical abuse of women. Thus the marriage metaphor itself is a significant stumbling block for them. While they are still able to read the text and hear the powerful message of God's enduring love for Israel, they have no interest in learning anything about marriage from a text that is so deeply rooted in what they deem to be sexist assumptions.⁷

To address both of these perspectives, we must dig a little deeper into the Hosea story. As we study the material further, we will find that there is deep significance in the marriage metaphor itself but there is not tremendous significance in the gender roles of Hosea and Gomer. First, the emotional realities seen in Hosea's words are not gender specific. The feelings that Hosea expresses are common to all people, male or female. The experience of being betrayed, abandoned, and hurt by the person one trusts and loves most is an experience that is common to all humanity. Second, it is important to note that later in the book, the metaphor deviates from that of husband and wife to metaphors that are not gender specific. One significant and powerful metaphor is that of caretaker and child. In Hos 11:1–3 the Lord says:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son. . . .
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms. . . .

It is obvious that this metaphor continues the themes present in the marriage metaphor, with God in the place of the male or female parent and Israel as the young child. As this metaphor continues the themes present in the marriage metaphor without specific gender assignments, it affirms the idea that the gender assignments in the marriage metaphor are immaterial.

Second, in regard to the issue of power, it is crucial to observe that in the marriage metaphor, God is portrayed, not as Israel's master or king, but as Israel's spouse. The language of chapter 2 is not the

language of a powerful leader who has been deserted by a follower. These are not the words of a dominating ruler who desires to make an example of an errant subject. Rather, the language is that of someone who is deeply in love and is betrayed by his partner, his soul mate, the one person in the entire world who is never supposed to leave him. Hosea's words of anger strike in us a psychologically true chord. How often our deepest wounds are expressed as anger. When we invest our hearts and souls in another per-

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son and that person betrays our trust, passionate anger that masks deep pain is the natural reaction. Thus the metaphor in the book of Hosea is this: God loves the people of Israel with a deep and passionate love, comparable in nature to the deep and passionate love between a man and a woman. Israel's unfaithfulness breaks the heart of the living God, just as marital unfaithfulness breaks the heart of one's spouse. As the people of Israel know the deep pain of love betrayed from their own intimate relationships, so they can know the depth of Yahweh's pain at their idolatry.

Thus a profound reality is revealed through the fact that God chose the marriage relationship to illustrate his passionate love for us. When we think of biblical advice for marriage, we tend to think in terms of clear-cut guidelines and simple commands. However, we know from experience that the command "Husbands, love your wives," for example, is enormously more complex in reality than it is in theory.

The reality of becoming one flesh is a deep mystery that encompasses the ups and downs of daily love and enduring commitment. We know that intimate human relationships are anything but simple. And the God who is revealed in the Hosea story knows this too. Through Hosea's story we meet a God who understands all that intimate love entails—who understands the joy and the passion, and also the heartache and the anger. Through Hosea's story we learn that when we participate in a quest for intimacy with another person, we are actually participating in a divine process. Our day-to-day struggles to truly love are not mundane—they are holy.

Therefore, we should be encouraged by the story of Hosea to strive for relationships of deep love, enduring commitment, and real intimacy, knowing that this is truly the work of the Lord. Additionally, we can take away some very practical advice from Hosea's story. Hosea genuinely experiences the horror of his wife's unfaithfulness. He does not deny the pain. His pain is clearly seen in his words of anger. His anger is real and appropriate, and he is not afraid to express it. However, he does not persist in pride, nurturing his anger and taking revenge. Ultimately, he chooses to fight for the relationship by forgiving. He challenges himself to remember his love and to renew his vows. He swallows his pride, works on his own heart, and then sincerely asks his wife to respond in similar humility and love. This process is our only hope for true intimacy and successful relationships. We must let ourselves truly acknowledge the joy and the pain that we experience in intimate relationships. We must humble ourselves and remember our love and promises even in the midst of anger and disappointment. And most importantly, we must surrender our hearts to God and let God work in us the miracle of reconciling forgiveness.

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New International Version (NIV).

² Some translations imply that Gomer was a prostitute, and indeed, some commentators believe that she was involved in temple prostitution—the most obvious sign of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. See Wolff, xxii. However, studies of the Hebrew word translated "prostitute" have led many to believe that a better understanding is that she was promiscuous and habitually unfaithful to her husband, but not a prostitute. See Yee, "Hosea," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, 216.

³ Gen 13:14–17; 15:5–6.

⁴ As Gale Yee points out in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, "[T]wo primary features of ancient Israelite society—its patrilineal, patrimonial, patrilocal kinship structure, and its honor/shame value system—are especially pertinent to this discussion." Yee, "Hosea," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, 207.

⁵ 1 Tim 2:13–14. For a discussion of this passage, see David Scholer, "1 Timothy 2:9–15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Mickelsen, 193–224.

⁶ For more on the idea of the union of male and female as the image of God, see Jewett, 33–40.

⁷ Feminist biblical scholars are deeply resistant to the book of Hosea out of concern for the terrible problem of domestic violence. The God-ordained language of Hosea to Gomer is filled with what could be described as abusive imagery (see Hos 2:2–13). Their concern is that readers will conclude from this graphic language that a husband's abuse of his wife is somehow judged by God to be appropriate. Their solution (as explained in Yee, "Hosea," *Women's Bible Commentary*) is to focus on the theological themes of the book of Hosea, but not to study it for insight regarding marriage.