

Intimate Love for a Wayward Wife (The Book of Hosea)

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The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel.² When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD (1.1-2).

Introduction

Hosea locates his prophetic ministry from the time of Jeroboam II to the exile of the northern kingdom by reference to the kings of the southern kingdom from Uzziah down to Hezekiah (1.1: **The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel**). This is a time of political intrigue. Israel vacillates between friendship with Egypt and Assyria (5.13, 7.11, 8.9-10, 9.3, 11.5, 12.1). They end up under the destructive hand of the Assyrians, as Hosea proclaims with repeated warnings and calls to repentance. Hosea is remembered not only because he married a prostitute but for the striking, even troubling, fact that he did so in obedience to the command of God. This truth is so remarkable that it dominates our thinking about His message from beginning to end. Therefore, two divisions can be given to the book of Hosea: the prophetic enactment of this marriage, and the implications of this marriage.

I. The prophetic enactment of the prophet's marriage to a wayward wife

We barely get our bearings on the prophet's place in the history of Israel (1.1) when we are presented with the unique (the mind boggling; shocking) reality that the man of God was called by God to marry a wife of whoredom (1.2): **When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD."** There is no need to consider the various interpretations of this account because it is intuitively clear that it is not merely a parable about a holy man and an unholy woman. Indeed, it is a record of a man and woman, marriage, and their children. To be sure, as a prophetic enactment (a message from God embodied by the prophet in his own life), as such, it is loaded with symbolic significance. A clue to that significance is the very connection of his marriage with his call to be a prophet because the call came: **when the Lord first spoke through Hosea**. The Lord told him to marry a whore because **the land commits great whoredom**. In other words, the people of the Land of Promise commit **great whoredom by forsaking the Lord**. Accordingly, chapters 1-3 begin with marriage and end with the theme of love.

A. First, on marriage and children in prophetic enactment

Hosea obeyed the word of God. We are given no hint of his personal feelings about doing this. Instead, we are told that he complied and was given three children. The names of the children had specific meaning that revealed God's mind about the children of Israel. Thus, he married Gomer and she bore him a son, a daughter, and another son. The naming indicates coming destruction with the promise of restoration.

1. The coming destruction is revealed in the names

The first child is named Jezreel, which calls to mind the sins of Jezebel who killed numerous prophets and was killed by Jehu at the city of Jezreel. Notably, Jehu also killed the king of Israel and the king of Judah at the same time and place. The sins of Jezebel and Jehu token the sins of **the kingdom of the house of Israel** (1.4) for which the Lord will punish the northern kingdom (1.5: **I will break the bow**, i.e. defeat the army on the battlefield surrounding Jezreel). The second child's name was **No mercy** (1.6) because the Lord will punish the northern kingdom

without the kind of mercy He will bestow on Judah (1.7). Shortly, there will be exile for Israel; but Judah will be spared exile for the time being. The third child's name was **Not My People** because, the Lord says, **you are not my people, and I am not your God** (1.9). In effect, the parents call out to the children, "defeated army, it is time to come home, time for dinner, defeated army without mercy and without a covenant bond with the Lord God!" What a message given every time the names of the children are spoken!

2. The promise of restoration is revealed suddenly

In the style of Amos, the prophet reaches beyond this rejection of the covenant people (1.10): **Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."** The covenant with Abraham is reiterated! With it, a promise of a united kingdom is affirmed as a reversal of the destruction that will overtake Jezreel (1.11): **And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head** and (2.1), say to your brothers and sisters: **"You have received mercy."**

This promise is repeated in chapter 2 in a context of judgment for the nation's lewdness (2.10-13): ¹⁰ **Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers... declares the LORD.** Nonetheless, the promise is that Israel will return to her Husband (2.14-16):¹⁴ **"Therefore, behold, I will allure her (woo her powerfully), and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.** ¹⁵ **And there I will give her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor [where Achan was stoned and God's wrath turned away, Josh 7.24-26] 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.** ¹⁶ **"And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.'** So in 2.19-23, the Lord says that He will sow Israel for myself in the land (v. 23a) by instilling in His unfaithful wife a covenant commitment of marriage that will last forever (19-20): **And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy.** ²⁰ **I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.**¹ Accordingly, the reversal is stated again in the language of *mercy to "No Mercy"* (2.23b): **And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he [Israel] shall say, 'You are my God.'** Unquestionably, Israel's vow to God arises from the efficacy of God's vow to Israel. That is the embodied message Hosea's marriage and children.

B. Second, in this prophetic enactment, we also have love despite adultery

Chapter 3 presents the expected result of a marriage to a wayward woman. She became an adulteress and God said to Hosea (3.1): **Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods.** For her sins, Israel will be many days without a king, but (3.5): **afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.** What explains this returning, seeking, and coming to the Lord in fear? The answer is depicted in the prophet's action of paying the price to buy her back from slavery in sin (3.2): **so I bought her.** So, Hosea says to his redeemed wife, **you must dwell with me...you shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so I will also be to you** (3.2). Likewise, **the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king... in fear to the LORD** (3.5).

II. The implications of the prophet's marriage to a wayward wife

In chapters 4-14, the prophet gives a collection of oracles that represent his preaching, but there is no clearly ordered pattern. Progression through the book is difficult to detect. We have to read Hosea like we read Proverbs and Psalms. We are forced to connect the parts of the book

¹ This is God's promise to give a new heart and renewed covenant commitment to Israel (**I will betroth you to me**). Hence, you will manifest your knowledge of me, a knowledge that I will give you; therefore, you shall know the Lord. His working in Israel will issue in covenant renewal by Israel.

together by similarity of theme. Apparently, this is not a book to read from cover to cover for the storyline (though you can do that partly in 1-3). Instead, it has to be read slowly with sensitivity to emotional outbursts that reflect what happens when intimate love is violated and reclaimed. So, let's consider the rest of the book under the umbrella of violation and affirmation.

A. First in overview of 4-14, we have intimate love violated

The Lord God has a controversy (4.1) with the inhabitants of the Promised Land because His people have violated the intimacy of the bond of love between them (4.1b-2): **There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land;² there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery... bloodshed follows bloodshed.** These evils are present because Israel lacks knowledge.² What she lacks is love, covenant intimacy, loyalty, and obedience, not merely correct information or formal worship.³ That is what makes her a whore spiritually. The call is to **know** with covenant intimacy (6.3; 4.1; 5.4). It is to press on to **know the Lord** because He is faithful to His promises in all that He does (6.3): **Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.** By contrast, the love of His wife Israel is like a morning cloud or the dew that **goes early away** (6.4b). In this connection, 6.6 is quite revealing: **For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.** Without question, knowledge is not academic information and sacrifice is not what God desires.⁴ The connections here reveal that true knowledge and true worship are grounded in steadfast intimate covenant keeping love for God that revels in His love. By contrast, the people wail and cry in prayer on their beds but **they do not cry to me from their hearts** (7.14). Instead, they are disturbed about material things. Their true concerns are **grain and wine**; that is what they seek from their hearts as their gods.

Playing the role of a whore is a refrain throughout the book; this conduct will lead to Assyrian captivity (9.1, 3): **Rejoice not, O Israel! Exult not like the peoples; for you have played the whore, forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute's wages...³ [you] shall not remain in the land of the LORD, but [you] shall return to Egypt, and [you] shall eat unclean food in Assyria.** Thus, the Israelites will become wanderers among the nations (9.17).⁵ According to 11.5, they will not return to Egypt literally, but they will return (figuratively) to Egyptian bondage as slaves in the land of Assyria.

B. Second, in overview of 4-14, we have intimate love affirmed

Even with the sin and coming exile, God's love is powerfully affirmed in the promise of return from the destruction that is imminent (11.8-10): **How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I**

²You will recall from Amos that to be known by God refers to His electing love, not to His knowledge *per se*.

³ Thus, there is no knowledge of God in the land (4.1). This is Hosea's call to love the Lord God, even though his call to repentance went unheeded on a national scale (5.4a): their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. They are slaves in sin; their conduct prevents them from returning to God because the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD (5.4b).

⁴ This is so without denying His commands to offer sacrifices.

⁵ The reason is because the love of God for Israel was spurned (11.1-5): **When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2 The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. 5 They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.** They will not return to Egypt literally, but they will return to Egyptian bondage (figuratively) as slaves in the land of Assyria (11.5) because "my people are bent on turning away from me" (11.7). God's overture was (10.12): **sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you,** but in response (10.13): **you have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors. Therefore (10.14-15): the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed...At dawn the king of Israel [Hoshea] shall be utterly cut off.**

hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? [That is, how can I make you like the little known cities destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah, Deut 29.23?] **My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.** ⁹ **I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.** ¹⁰ **They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.** The answer to all these questions is that under the constraint of covenant love God cannot give them up completely to Assyrian destruction. These answers express the love of a husband for his wife who has violated her covenant at its core. The Lord is intensely grieved, but He cannot annihilate the object of His love. He recoils from that thought and His compassion grows warm and tender. So, He says, my anger will be channeled into a saving call like a roaring lion. At this call my children shall come to me in fear and trembling.

Therefore, He will punish Israel but in doing so He will not forget His covenant love as expressed in the call of Jacob and the deliverance under Moses (12.1-14). On one hand (with Amos like style again), the Lord says, I will fall upon them like a lion, leopard, and a bear robbed of her cubs: I will tear and rip them open (13.7): ⁷ **So I am to them like a lion; like a leopard I will lurk beside the way.** ⁸ **I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs; I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rip them open.** ⁶ On the other hand, He gives a word about victory over death in some questions and what they imply (13.14): **Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?** Yes, I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol. Yes, I shall redeem them from Death. The plagues of death will be gone and the sting of Sheol will not be found.

In the end, through Hosea, the Lord lovingly gives a call to repentance. He calls Israel to return (14.1), to return with a plea for forgiveness and covenant commitment (14.2), to acknowledge that turning first to Egypt and then to Assyria for salvation was foolish; and to say, “we repent of calling the work of our hands, our God” (14.3b) and “we come with confession that the Lord is merciful to orphans like us in need” (14.3c). In this context, God gives His promises: of healing for their apostasy (14.4a), of free love to them without anger (14.4b), of the blessings of abundance in the land like a garden blossoming with lilies; the land, Israel will be blessed with rootedness, with spreading shoots, beauty and fragrance (14.5-6). In time, the people of God will dwell beneath God’s comforting and protective shadow; they will flourish like grain, blossom like the vine and wine of Lebanon (14.7). Hence, the question and answer (14.8): **O Ephraim what have I to do with idols?** Answer: I have nothing to do with idols for they are without life, value, meaning; they give no response to your prayers, but I do, I answer. I am an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.

The book closes with a word of wisdom (14.9): **Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.** Apply yourself to understand the things I have written. With patient discernment, work your way to knowledge as a foundation for living in the ways of God instead of stumbling in the darkness of sin.

Conclusion

1. What is God’s last word in the overall thrust of the book of Hosea?

Whoredom, guilt, and relentless punishment are not God’s last word. Hosea’s action with his wayward wife reveals God’s redemptive work through Christ, who says of His bride the church (3.2): **so I bought her.** This purchase indicates God’s redemption of His unholy wife Israel

⁶ In the execution of judgment on Israel the Lord says (13.14-16): **Compassion is hidden from my eyes. 15 Though he may flourish among his brothers, the east wind, the wind of the LORD, shall come, rising from the wilderness, and his fountain shall dry up; his spring shall be parched; it shall strip his treasury of every precious thing. 16 Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword [in battle against the Assyrians]; their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.**

who has been blended into the nations as not my people. It shows that He betrothed her to Himself by giving her saving knowledge that flows from the work of Christ as the Redeemer of Israel and the nations (2.19-20). So, Hosea says to his redeemed wife, **you must dwell with me...you shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so I will also be to you** (3.2). Likewise, the church, the new Israel, shall dwell with Christ as **the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days** (3.5). Justice is executed at the cost of His life.⁷

2. What drives this final word that issues in the return of the covenant breaker?

It is the love of God that is powerfully affirmed (11.8-10): **How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?** [how can I make you like the cities destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah, Deut 29.23?] **My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.**¹⁰ **They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.** The answer to all these questions is that under the constraint of covenant love He cannot give them up. Surely, we do not have a right view of God if we say with Anselm, “thou art compassionate, according to our nature, and not according to thine” or with Aquinas, “to sorrow...over the misery of others belongs not to God.”⁸ We simply have to acknowledge the mystery here and thankfully embrace the fact that while God is impassible as to His essential properties (**I am God and not a man**, v. 9), He also has extraordinary feelings of compassion for His people. He feels and loves deeply. This is covenantal love that goes with His condescension to deal with us as a husband with His covenant violating wife.

The Lord is intensely grieved, but He cannot annihilate the object of His love. He recoils from that thought and His compassion grows warm and tender. So, He says, my anger will be channeled *into a saving call like a roaring lion*. At this call my children shall come to me in fear and trembling. As Jesus said, **my sheep hear my voice and follow me** (Jn 10.27). Knowledge is good and following the law is right, but what is most important is your commitment of heart. The kind of knowing spoken of in Scripture is that of loving intimacy and commitment to obedience. Actual obedience is critical but the heart attitude is of first importance. Performance without the commitment of heart is worthless, even despised. A heart for God with stumbling performance has His approval in a process of growth in holiness that is rooted in repentance with acknowledgement of sin at its core.

3. What then is true and intimate knowledge of God?

In Hosea 6.3, the call is to know: **Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD** because He is faithful to His promises in all that He does, as sure as the dawn and as faithful as the replenishing showers and the spring rains. Our love should not be like a morning cloud or the dew that **goes early away** (6.4b). Remember the Lord says (6.6): **For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.** The connections here reveal that true knowledge and true worship are grounded in intimate love for God. Steadfast love is intimate covenant love for God that revels in the intimate love of God revealed in His daily faithfulness.

4. What is the full promise of the redeeming love of wayward sinners by Christ?

⁷ What is the solution to the problem of justice? If God will by no means clear the guilty being just and terrible in His judgments, then how can anyone be saved? Hosea shows us that a tension exists between God's compassion and His anger and the book cries out for a resolution. The answer is in the big picture of judging Israel and yet sparing a remnant. In the coming of the king to which the new Israel will submit, He will be judged, not spared, in order to spare His elect people, the church. Being true to His holiness, God saves sinners by pouring out His terrible judgment on Christ, who laid down His life for His sheep, so that each one given to Him will hear His voice, follow Him, and be saved for, as He says (11.10): **They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.** That is how He will save His people from His wrath. Efficacious love and perfect justice flow mingled down from His head, His hands, and His feet.

⁸ Cited by Oliphint, *God with Us*, 86, fn. 81.

In 6.2, there is a muted statement of resurrection (**After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him**). Israel will be killed and raised from death on the third day. Thus, *the* Israel in federal headship, Christ, will obey with love, fall under the judgment of God in death, and be raised from the dead on the third day.

So, we know the answer to the questions about death and Sheol in 13.14: **Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?** Yes, I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol. Yes, I shall redeem them from Death. The plagues of death will be gone and the sting of Sheol will not exist. This is how Paul interprets this text in 1 Corinthians 15.54-55. Fundamentally, God gives us victory over death through Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 15.57). Then, the promises will come to realization: of healing for our apostasy (14.4a), of God's free love to us without anger (14.4b), of our inheritance of the blessings of abundance in a garden blossoming with lilies. Then there will be rootedness with spreading shoots, beauty, and fragrance (14.5-6). In time, you and I will dwell beneath God's comforting and protective shadow. We will flourish like grain and blossom like the vine of Lebanon (14.7). This is our promise of eternal resurrection life in the coming glory of the heavenly Canaan. It is because of the deep, deep love of Jesus whose bodily resurrection from the grave is the firstfruits of our bodily resurrection, as both foretaste and guarantee.

5. How does the book close with a word of wisdom?

In 14.9, we read: **Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.** Hosea says, apply yourself to understand the things I have written. Therefore, the covenant Lord says, with patient reading, careful discernment, and covenant commitment come to me and learn from me. Do this as a foundation for living in my ways instead of stumbling in the ways of darkness. Do this with the constant prayer: "teach me O Lord thy holy way and give me an obedient mind, that in thy service I may find, my soul's delight from day to day" (*Trinity Hymnal*, 456).

May we fall down before the transcendent majesty of God with thankful joy in knowing that He has reached out loving arms to gather us to Himself; may the Holy Spirit impress on our hearts the astounding truth that a virtual forest of spears in battle pierced the Lord Jesus in our place; may we be ever aware of the price He paid for us being afflicted with the terrible judgment of God that fell on Him with the fury of a bear robbed of her cubs; then may we worship Him to the glory of the triune God, now and forevermore, amen.