

# **REBUKE YOUR MOTHER: BUT WHO IS SHE? THE IDENTITY OF THE "MOTHER" AND "CHILDREN" IN HOSEA 2:4-7**

**HAYYIM ANGEL**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Book of Hosea begins with God's commanding the prophet to marry a "wife of whoredom," symbolizing God's relationship with unfaithful Israel prior to the exile of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century BCE. The prophet obeys by marrying Gomer, and has three children bearing symbolic names that form prophecies of doom in chapter 1 and then prophecies of restoration in chapter 2.

Throughout his book, Hosea likens Israel to God's wife and also to God's children. Generally, these images express different aspects of the God-Israel relationship. For example, marriage is the ideal love bond, but a bad marriage can dissolve. In contrast, the bond between parents and children is permanent, no matter how strained the relationship becomes.<sup>1</sup> However, Hosea 2:4-7 stands out in that the prophet appears to give distinct identities to the mother and children. Hosea calls upon the children to rebuke their mother, lest everyone suffer exile. To whom does each group refer?

In this essay, we will analyze the views of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Abrabanel. We then will consider how the interrelationship between 1:2, 2:4-7, and 4:4-9 suggests a different possibility, namely, that the mother in 2:4-7 represents the corrupt religious leadership and the children represent the masses. A mid-rashic tradition cited by Rashi suggests this interpretation, and what had initially appeared to be simply a *derash* wordplay may have impact on the primary meaning of the text.

## **A WIFE OF WHOREDOM AND CHILDREN OF WHOREDOM**

*When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom; for the land will stray from following the Lord' (Hos. 1:2).*

*Rabbi Hayyim Angel is National Scholar at the Institute of Jewish Ideas and Ideals [www.jewishideas.org](http://www.jewishideas.org). He also teaches advanced Tanakh courses to undergraduates and rabbinical students at Yeshiva University. He has published over 100 scholarly articles, primarily in Tanakh, and is the author or editor of ten books, most recently Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim (OU Press, 2013).*

Both expressions, *eshet zenunim* [wife of whoredom] and *yaldei zenunim* [children of whoredom] are unique to Hosea. Most classical commentators interpret *eshet zenunim* as synonymous with *zonah* [prostitute].<sup>2</sup> However, this is the only biblical occurrence of the term *eshet zenunim*. It is similar to expressions such as *eshet ne'urim* [wife of youth] (Prov. 5:18; Mal. 2:14-15) and *eshet medanim* [wife of contentions] (Prov. 21:9; 25:24). These instances indicate characteristic behavior, and therefore *eshet zenunim* suggests an unfaithful wife, rather than a prostitute from beforehand.<sup>3</sup> Even had Gomer been a prostitute before she married Hosea, that detail is irrelevant to the ensuing prophecy. Gomer evidently cheated on Hosea after they were married, parallel to Israel's cheating on their "marriage" to God.

More significant for our purposes is the meaning of *yaldei zenunim* [children of whoredom]. Are the children innocent victims of their mother's adulterous behavior like *mamzerim* (Rashi, R. Isaiah of Trani, and Yehudah Kiel,<sup>4</sup> following TB *Pesahim* 87b),<sup>5</sup> or were the children promiscuous like their mother (Kara, Radak)? Since both wife and children are identically described with the same term *zenunim*, the view of Kara and Radak appears more likely. We will revisit this discussion below.

#### THE MOTHER AND CHILDREN IN 2:4-7

Chapter 2 presents God's tormented feelings over Israel's infidelity. God oscillates between wanting to banish Israel, to punish her, to block her from her lovers, and to win Israel back to a permanent, loving relationship.

Amidst the vivid descriptions of God's emotions, Hosea calls upon the children to rebuke their mother, lest both be punished:

*Rebuke your mother, rebuke her – for she is not My wife and I am not her husband – and let her put away her harlotry from her face and her adultery from between her breasts. Else will I strip her naked and leave her as on the day she was born: and I will make her like a wilderness, render her like desert land, and let her die of thirst. I will also disown her children; for they are now a harlot's brood [benei zenunim], in that their mother has played the harlot, she that conceived them has acted shamelessly [hovishah horatam] . . . (Hos. 2:4-7).*

Who are the mother and children in this prophecy? Since Hosea generally uses both wife and children imagery to describe all of Israel, Rashi suggests that the mother refers to the collective nation of Israel, whereas the children are individual people.<sup>6</sup> The prophet thus calls upon Israelites to rebuke one another and repent, lest they all suffer national exile. It is noteworthy that Rashi on 1:2 adopts the midrashic reading that *yaldei zenunim* are passive victims of their mother's sins. In Rashi's reading of 2:4-7, however, that explanation does not make sense, since the mother and children represent the same sinful people. Therefore, he would need to interpret *beni zenunim* as promiscuous children.

Rashi's interpretation gains support from the fact that throughout the Book of Hosea, mother and children both refer to all Israel, rather than to different subsets of the population. Additionally, both mother and children are contemporaries of Hosea, and are therefore the prophet's audience. Abrabanel objects to this reading, however, since Hosea specifically distinguishes between mother and children in 2:4-7, whereas Rashi views both as referring to the same group of people.

Offering a different interpretation, Ibn Ezra proposes that the mother refers to Hosea's sinful generation, who were later exiled by the Assyrians. The children are the descendants of Hosea's generation who were born in exile.<sup>7</sup> Although later generations experienced exile through no fault of their own, they still are sinful like their mother and must therefore repent. Like Rashi, Ibn Ezra interprets *beni zenunim* in 2:6 to mean that the children are sinful themselves.

Ibn Ezra's interpretation gains over that of Rashi because mother and children appear to be different groups of people in 2:4-7. However, Abrabanel objects to Ibn Ezra's reading, since Hosea addresses both mother and children in the present tense, and both were threatened with exile if they did not repent. According to Ibn Ezra, however, the children were not contemporaneous with Hosea. Additionally, the mother had not yet been exiled and Hosea's point is that repentance still could potentially ward off the exile.

Tellingly, Radak simply cites the views of both Rashi and Ibn Ezra without favoring either. Each view has significant relative strengths and weaknesses in comparison with the other.<sup>8</sup>

Attempting to break out of this impasse, Abrabanel proposes that the mother refers to wicked Israelites, whereas the children refer to righteous Israelites. In his reading, Hosea calls upon the righteous members of his generation to encourage repentance among the sinners. If they fail to do so, everyone will be exiled, and the righteous will suffer along with the wicked.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Abrabanel maintains that the *benei zenunim* are innocent victims of their mother's promiscuity rather than active sinners. They are faithful to God, but tragically live in an age when most people are wicked, and therefore the impending destruction of the Northern Kingdom will cause them to suffer as well if they fail to improve their society.

Thus, Abrabanel proposes independent identities for the mother and children, and also identifies both groups as contemporaries of Hosea. He thereby overcomes the respective weaknesses of the interpretations of Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Because of the advantages of this position, later commentators, including *Metzudat David*, Malbim, and Yehudah Kiel,<sup>10</sup> accept it as most likely.

However, Kiel expresses his concern over Abrabanel's understanding of *benei zenunim* to mean innocent victims of the mother's sins. Their punishment in 2:6 suggests that the children are sinful.<sup>11</sup> Although this question is not nearly as problematic as the difficulties that beset the views of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, there may be another approach to the issue that addresses all the variables more comprehensively.

#### A DIFFERENT MEANING OF MOTHER IN CHAPTER 4

Yehudah Kiel suggests that the first three chapters in the Book of Hosea shed light on interpreting chapters 4-14, and the reverse is also true.<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, chapter 4 may illuminate our discussion of 2:4-7:

*'Let no man rebuke, let no man protest!' For this your people has a grievance against [you], o priest! So you shall stumble by day, and by night a prophet shall stumble as well, and I will destroy your kindred [immekha]. My people is destroyed because of [your] disobedience! Because you have rejected obedience, I reject you as My priest; because you have spurned the teaching of your God, I, in turn, will spurn your children [banekha]. The more they increased, the more they sinned against Me: I will change their dignity to dishonor. They feed on My people's sin offerings, and so they desire its*

*iniquity. Therefore, the people shall fare like the priests: I will punish it for its conduct; I will requite it for its deeds* (Hos. 4:4-9).

In this prophecy, Hosea condemns the wicked priests. Although the NJPS translation renders *immekha* (4:5) as *your kindred*, the expression literally means "your mother." Similarly, God will *spurn your children* in 4:6. The meaning of the terms in these verses is uncertain, but they may symbolically refer to Israel or to subsets of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the corrupt priests and prophets are the mother, and the masses whom they lead are the children. This reading gains support from 4:9, where *the people shall fare like the priests*. Evidently, the people are held accountable for their own sins despite the fact that their religious leaders are wicked (Radak, Abrabanel, Kiel<sup>14</sup>). A. A. Macintosh nicely summarizes the passage: "The notion of primary responsibility does not excuse the sins of those who are guilty because they have allowed themselves to be misled. It is precisely the lack of conscientious objection to wickedness throughout society that is the main focus of God's complaint and its origin is traced to the baleful relationship between priests and people."<sup>15</sup>

We may apply the likening of the corrupt religious leadership to the mother and the sinful masses to children in chapter 4 to our discussion of 2:4-7. In this reading, Hosea calls upon the masses to criticize their wicked leaders for their corruption. If they do not, they will be held accountable for their own sins and all will suffer exile.

If the wicked religious leaders are the mother and the masses are the children in 2:4-7, then Hosea addresses two different groups who are his contemporaries. Additionally, both the mother and the children are sinful. This reading overcomes all of the weaknesses in the views of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Abrabanel.

#### A MIDRASHIC INSIGHT ON 2:7

There is a further dimension of this interpretation in 2:7: *ki zanetah immam, hovishah horatam*. At the level of *peshat*, these two stiches are poetic parallels, and therefore most commentators interpret *horatam* to mean "she that conceived them" (e.g., Kara, R. Isaiah of Trani, Kiel<sup>16</sup>). The NJPS translation follows suit, rendering *in that their mother has played the harlot, she that conceived them has acted shamelessly*.

A *midrash*, however, links Hosea's condemnation of the religious leadership in chapter 4 with 2:7, and plays on the word *horatam* to mean "teachers," from *le-horot*, "to teach."

*The more they increased [ke-rubbam], the more they sinned against Me: I will change their dignity to dishonor* (Hos. 4:7). What is *ke-rubbam*? R. Samuel b. Nahmani said, whatever the leaders did, so did the generation . . . R. Simlai said, it is written, *in that their mother has played the harlot, she that conceived them has acted shamelessly [hovishah horatam]* (Hos. 2:7). They [i.e., the religious leadership] disgraced their own words before the masses. How? The sage would publicly teach "Do not lend with interest," but he would lend with interest. He would say, "Do not steal," but he would steal . . . (*Deut. Rabbah* 2:19).

Quoting the Targum, Rashi on 2:7 adopts this midrashic reading as well. Thus, *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, the Targum, and Rashi suggest a multivalent wordplay with *horatam*. At its primary level, the term means *the one who conceived them*. However, *horatam* also suggests the metaphorical meaning of their teachers. This interpretation fits our identification of the mother as the corrupt religious leadership, and the children as the sinful masses. Hosea ascribes religious and moral responsibility to the masses to make the right choices, despite their leaders' wicked teachings.

Yehudah Kiel observes that Hosea distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by holding his entire generation accountable for their sins. In contrast, Amos and Micah generally depict groups of wicked oppressors and the innocent oppressed, providing a sympathetic portrayal of at least some members of their society.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Through most of the Book of Hosea, the prophet likens all of Israel to God's wife and children. In 2:4-7, however, Hosea appears to distinguish between mother and children, leading to a debate as to the meaning of each term. We analyzed the views of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Abrabanel in light of the local text evidence.

Although Abrabanel's reading is preferable to the alternatives of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, it appears that chapter 4 opens a new interpretive possibility, name-

ly, that *mother* refers to the corrupt religious leadership, whereas *children* refers to the sinful masses. Applying this interpretation to 2:4-7, the respective weaknesses of the views of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Abrabanel are overcome.

The midrashic reading of *horatam* as referring to teachers, quoted by Rashi on 2:7, initially appears to stray from the primary meaning of that term. However, understanding this interpretation as a secondary layer of meaning based on a wordplay is consistent with the distinction between mother and children in 2:4-7 in conjunction with the prophecy in chapter 4.

If this interpretation is correct, Hosea's prophecy dignifies all Israelites by insisting that they are not innocent sheep blindly misled by corrupt priests and prophets. Rather, Hosea calls upon each individual to live righteously, even when their leaders teach and act otherwise.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. TB *Kiddushin* 36a: "You are children of the Lord your God (Deut. 14:1): when you behave as sons you are designated sons; if you do not behave as sons, you are not designated sons: this is R. Judah's view. R. Meir said: In both cases you are called sons, for it is said . . . and instead of being told, 'You are Not-My-People,' they shall be called Children-of-the-Living-God (Hos. 2:1)."
2. See Rashi, Kara, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abrabanel, Malbim: Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Twelve Prophets* vol. 1, *Hosea* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) p. 3 (Hebrew).
3. See F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Anchor Bible 24: Hosea* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) p. 159; A. A. Macintosh, *International Critical Commentary: Hosea* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) p. 8. Kiel also acknowledges the possibility that the term might mean "wife of whoredom."
4. Kiel, pp. 3-4.
5. Cf. Gen. 38:24 regarding Tamar: *ki harah li-zenunim* [*she is with child by harlotry*].
6. Cf. Andersen and Freedman, p. 219.
7. Isaiah 50:1 similarly uses mother imagery to refer to the generation who experienced the destruction of the Temple: *Thus said the Lord: Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed? And which of My creditors was it to whom I sold you off? You were only sold off for your sins, and your mother dismissed for your crimes.* The children would therefore refer to subsequent generations.
8. Macintosh also cites these two views as the most likely (pp. 40, 46).
9. Shortly before the destruction of the First Temple, Ezekiel prophesies: *Say to the land of Israel: Thus said the Lord: I am going to deal with you! I will draw My sword from its sheath, and I will wipe out from you both the righteous and the wicked* (Ezek. 21:8). The Talmud offers two fundamental approaches to this verse. TB *Bava Kamma* 60a states that destruction is indiscriminate: "Once permission has been granted to the Destroyer, he does not distinguish between righteous and wicked. Moreover, he even begins with the righteous at the very outset, as

it says: *And I will wipe out from you both the righteous and the wicked.*"Alternatively, TB *Avodah Zarah* 4a maintains that the righteous are held accountable if they do not rebuke the wicked: *And I will wipe out from you both the righteous and the wicked* that refers to one who is not thoroughly righteous . . . . It was in their power to protest against [the wickedness of the others] and they did not protest, they are not regarded as thoroughly righteous." Both approaches work well within Abrabanel's reading. Hosea could mean that if the righteous do not rebuke the wicked, all will be exiled indiscriminately; he could also mean that the righteous will be held accountable for their failure to attempt to improve the religious state of their generation.

10. Kiel, p. 9.

11. Kiel, p. 10.

12. Kiel, introduction, p. 10.

13. See Kiel, pp. 28-29; Z. Weissman *et al.*, *Olam ha-Tanakh: Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1997) p. 41 (Hebrew).

14. Kiel, p. 29.

15. Macintosh, p. 146.

16. Kiel, p. 10.

17. Kiel, introduction, p. 13.



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