

# HOSEA AND GOMER REVISITED

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A substantial body of literature exists dealing with the question of the prophet Hosea's marriage to Gomer bat-Diblain and their three children.<sup>1</sup> Scholars are divided and theories differ with regard to Chapters 1-3 on the nature of the events and their meaning.

## HOSEA'S MARRIAGE: ALLEGORICAL OR ACTUAL?

The non-literal view, popular among medieval commentators including Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and David Kimhi, treats the prophet's marriage either as allegory or as a dream. These commentators rightly considered it morally repugnant that the prophet would be commanded by God to marry an adulterous woman and beget *mamzerim* [bastards]. Nevertheless, one may ask: Does an act that is ethically objectionable in reality become less objectionable when commanded and acted out in a vision or dream?<sup>2</sup>

A second view, held by some modern scholars, suggests that Hosea's marital experience was the cause of his prophetic career. A third view suggests that Hosea's unfortunate marital experience was the result of his prophetic activity. According to the latter, Hosea is commanded by God to marry an adulterous woman and beget illegitimate children in order to dramatize his message concerning Israel's unfaithfulness to God. This view is untenable in view of the fact that the Decalogue, both in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:17, makes adultery a sin. The Talmud (B. Sotah 28a) went beyond the guilty parties and forbade the husband to continue living with his faithless wife: "As the adulterous woman is forbidden to her husband, so is she forbidden (ever after) to her paramour." As for children conceived in adultery, they were excluded from the community of Israel for a period of ten generations (Deut. 23:3). It is hard to believe that Hosea was commanded by God to become involved in so sordid an affair in order to dramatize the prophetic word.

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Moreover, if Hosea knew of Gomer's disreputable character from the very outset, there is no basis for his later indignation and evicting her from his home. His anger under these circumstances would be artificial and indeed unjustified.

A fourth view sees Hosea as a prophet from the very outset. He is commanded by God to marry Gomer and beget children whose names would symbolize the message of doom for Israel. Gomer is described not as a harlot [*isha zona*] but as a woman of harlotry [*eshet z'nunim*]. Gomer is a *woman of harlotry* not because she has personally violated her marriage vow but because she is implicated in the sinfulness of the nation, *for the land is committing harlotry against the Lord* (1:2). Thus, she serves as a symbol of the adultery of Israel, as do her children, Jezreel, Lo-ruhamah ["Not Accepted"; also translated as "that hath not obtained compassion" or "the unloved one"] and Lo-ammi [Not My People]. These names were meant to recall Israel's bloody sin in the valley of Jezreel (I Kg. 21:1-24; II Kg. 9:21-35; II Kg. 10:11)<sup>3</sup> and God's consequent lack of compassion and recognition for His people.

#### RECONCILIATION AND RESTORATION

It is noteworthy that after the birth of the children, all references to Gomer cease and the curtain comes down on the family drama. There is no further mention of Gomer's adultery, her eviction and subsequent restoration, because the scene now shifts to the relationship of God and His faithless people Israel. After beginning with his own hapless marital experience, the prophet goes over to the subject of God's unhappy relationship with Israel, which parallels what has happened in his own family.

The transition between the two is bridged by 2:4 that reads:

*Plead with your mother plead,  
For she is not my wife, neither am I her husband  
And let her put away her harlotries from her face,  
And her adulteries from between her breasts.*

In this verse, both mother and children refer to the people of Israel. Surely, Hosea has in mind the idolatries committed by His people. Nevertheless, the humans who figured in his personal tragedy do not disappear. In Verse 5 it is the human husband who promises dire vengeance upon his adulterous wife:

*Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born,  
And make her as a wilderness, and set her like desert land (2:5).*

In Verse 6 the transition becomes complete:

*I will also disown her children;  
For they are now a harlot's brood (2:6).*

The field of action now rises from the human to the cosmic plane. At this point, the personal lot of Hosea's wife is of no interest and is not referred to again in the chapter. The parable is now employed to foretell the tragic consequences of Israel's disgraceful behavior. As troubles overwhelm her, she discovers that it was not her Baal-lovers who were her source of prosperity and power. Her remorse grows along with her suffering and privation as the Lord visits upon her all the days of her faithlessness.

The period of trial and tribulation is the equivalent to her days of wantonness. Similarly, the generation of the Wilderness had to expiate for 40 years the sin of the faithless spies who had explored Canaan for 40 days (Num. 14:34). After this period of suffering, God will lead her out to the Wilderness, far from the corrupting influence of Canaanite civilization, and gently persuade her to return to Him (2:16):

*Assuredly, I will speak coaxingly to her  
And lead her through the wilderness  
And speak to her tenderly.*

The Lord, who is the true source of Israel's prosperity, will restore her vineyards, formerly the symbol and center of Baal-worship. Israel will then respond to God's call as in the days of her innocent youth (2:17), and never more succumb to the depravities of Baal-worship (2:18,19). The relentless struggle against nature and human predators will cease (2:20) and the Lord will betroth Israel to Himself in an everlasting bond (2:22). The name "Jezeel" will no longer symbolize the sin of Israel's past but God's sowing in the land, and the portentous names of the other two children will be changed to "My People" and "My Beloved" (2:25). Israel will be as numerous as the sands of the sea, while Judah and Israel, once again united under one ruler, will dwell secure in God's favor and love (2:1-3).<sup>4</sup>

FROM DESTRUCTION TO REDEMPTION

Thus, an untoward event in the life of the prophet Hosea is made to serve as a message of warning to his sinful people as well as a call to repentance. Chapter 3 is strikingly similar to Chapters 1 and 2 without being identical. Chapter 3 relates how the Lord spoke to the Prophet again [*odh*] and asked him to *love a woman who is beloved by her husband, yet practices adultery, as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods* (3:1). Hosea takes the woman in marriage. The price he pays for her is the price for the purchase of a slave. He then tells her that she is to dwell in his home as his wife, but there shall be no relations either with her former lovers or with him. Following this period of penance and purification the errant wife, symbol of Israel, will seek the Lord their God and David their King and *come trembling* to the Lord and His goodness.

How then are the differences between the two accounts to be understood? Do they represent two distinct incidents or are they two accounts of the same experience? The most plausible explanation, I believe, can be found in the chaotic conditions that prevailed in the last years of the Northern Kingdom. This period coincides with Hosea's prophetic activity.

Account A (Chapters 1-2), based on historical sources, has been dated from the period prior to 743 BCE. The passage in 1:4: *I shall visit the blood of Jezreel on the House of Jehu*, foretells the doom of the Jehu dynasty that was fulfilled that same year. At that time, more than 20 years before the destruction of Samaria, the state is enjoying a period of prosperity attributed to the successful reign of Jeroboam II.

Hosea is aware of the inner corruption behind the façade of national pride and self-confidence. He nevertheless entertains the hope that his words will lead his people to repent their betrayal of the God of Israel. He therefore castigates the people and warns them of the destruction that is imminent by giving symbolic names to his children. But the headlong plunge into the abyss, as recorded in II Kings 15:8ff. cannot be averted by the prophet's exhortations and in 721 Samaria is laid waste by the Assyrians.

During those calamitous, closing days of the Northern Kingdom, Hosea no longer feels that there is any chance of saving the state. Both during the final agonies of Samaria and the bleak, hopeless days following its destruction, Hosea's concern and focus of his activity is with the people of Israel, the bulk of whom remained in the land after the Assyrian victory.<sup>5</sup> Consolation now

becomes the burden of his prophetic vocation, a pattern all too familiar with Israel's prophets.<sup>6</sup>

After all outward signs point to the demise of hope, Account B (Chapter 3) puts the emphasis upon Israel's restoration. There is no reference to the three children born two decades earlier and whose names sound a message of warning, since they are no longer relevant to the lives of a shattered people. In this account, the accent is on God's love for Israel, whereas the wife's infidelities are mentioned in but one brief phrase.

The basic theme of Account B is that a period of penance must of necessity intervene before reconciliation can be realized. During this period, the Kingdom of Israel will be stripped of its independence and all cultic practices will be suspended. For Hosea, these disabilities were by no means an unmitigated disaster, since the existence of a separatist Northern Kingdom, steeped in idolatrous, syncretistic religious acts, was abhorrent. Hosea looks forward to the day when Baal-worship will be replaced by a sincere return to the Lord, God of Israel. The Northern Kingdom will be replaced by the reunion of Israel and Judah ruled by a scion of the House of David.

This emphasis upon a united Hebrew nation, representing the Divinely ordained consummation of Israel's history, is at the core of biblical prophecy. It was precisely this message that helped to forge a sense of national unity among the tribes and clans in ancient Israel. All the prophets, whether from the North or South, regarded themselves as proud sons of the people of Israel and the Hebrew nation. This, in time, made the prophets of Israel the authentic architects of Jewish nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, for those God-intoxicated teachers of all the children of men, nationalism was not the ultimate ideal. It was but the prelude to a more universal ideal based on the over-arching sovereignty of God. Still, they never denied the value and significance of Israel's particularity that was to be cultural in content and moral in its expression.<sup>8</sup>

The essential prerequisite for achieving that goal was the elimination of the divisiveness and enmity that were tribal and regional in character. These had to be overcome and replaced by a sense of loyalty to the One God and to His undivided people. This ideal of national unity, which the prophets helped to fashion during the period of political independence, they relentlessly propagated even after the destruction of the state.

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In the midst of prosperity they announced the inevitable destruction, but when the catastrophic blow was struck they sounded, against all odds, a message of hope and reconstruction.

Hosea had undergone a soul-shattering personal experience. Twice, he turned to it and found guidance for his people. His personal tragedy helped to dramatize the timeless themes of Divine chastisement, sincere repentance and God's pardon and forgiveness. Two decades later, when the national life of the people was in ruins, he discovered new meaning in his personal suffering and moral triumph. His immortal insights and profound perceptions were used to sound the eternal message of hope to his beloved people, and through them to an unredeemed world; redemption, regeneration and reconstruction through unity and faith.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. H. H. Rowley in *The Book Lists of the Society for Old Testament Study*, 1946-56; R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941) pp. 566-569.
2. For other cogent objections to this view, see W. R. Harper, *International Critical Commentary on Hosea – Amos* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) p. 208.
3. A reference to the murder of Naboth the Jezreelite in order that King Ahab might take possession of his vineyard.
4. It is widely recognized that Verses 2:1-3 are misplaced at the beginning of the chapter. They belong after 2:20, so that 2:1-3 complete the theme of restoration.
5. II Kings 17. S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), vol. I, p. 95: "The 27, 290 deported from Samaria in 721, mentioned in the well known inscription of Sargon, represents only a fraction of the Israelite exiles" Moreover, the fact that the Judean kings regarded Northern Israel as a legitimate national irredentist objective argues for a substantial Israelite population in the former Northern Kingdom after 721. It should likewise be noted that King Hezekiah actively seeks to win the religious loyalty of the Northern Israelites for the Jerusalem sanctuary after the destruction of Samaria. Cf. II Chronicles 30:6,10,11.
6. Isaiah 36-38; Jeremiah 30 and 32; Ezekiel 37:12-14, 15-28.
7. Baron, p. 94: "For [the biblical historians] the people of Israel and Judah are an indivisible unity." On the prophetic concept of nationalism, cf. S. W. Baron, *Modern Nationalism and Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948) pp. 213-214.
8. Cf. my article, "Universalism and/or Particularism," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXX:1 (Jan.-Mar. 2002) pp. 3-9.
9. Cf. Robert Gordis, *Poets, Prophets and Sages* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971) pp. 242-246.