

## THE PROPHET HOSEA: HIS MARRIAGE AND MESSAGE

JOHN H. JOHANSEN, S.T.M.\*

The book of Hosea is the longest of the Minor Prophets. Probably for this reason it stands in the English Bible at the first of the Twelve. Hosea was from the kingdom of Israel and according to the superscription (1:1) preached during the reigns of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel; and the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Though the reference to the kings of Judah may represent the work of a later editor, Hosea doubtless did preach during the reigns of Jeroboam II (788-747 B.C.) and some of his successors who followed him to the throne in Israel.

From the name of Hosea's first child and its interpretation<sup>1</sup> it seems certain that the reign of Jeroboam II had not yet come to an end. However, it is doubtful that Hosea preached later than 733 or 732 B.C. because he still refers to Gilead as Israelite territory (5:1; 6:8) which the Assyrians took in 733 B.C. There is no internal evidence in the book of Hosea that during his ministry Israel had broken with her previous ally, Assyria. Neither does the book show any reference to the Syro-Ephraimite War in which Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus joined forces in an expedition against King Ahab of Judah (734 B.C.). Thus, Hosea was probably a contemporary for a time with Amos from Tekoa, who also preached in Israel, at Bethel and Samaria, during the reign of Jeroboam II. Perhaps with Robinson<sup>2</sup> we may say that the dates 750 to 735 B.C. are as nearly correct for Hosea as historical investigation can determine.

So dissimilar are the recorded messages of Amos and Hosea that it is unlikely that they were personally acquainted or that either possessed a detailed knowledge of the work of the other. It has been fashionable, however, for some to speculate that Hosea might have heard the call of God through the impact of the fiery desert prophet from the south.<sup>3</sup>

\*A graduate of Moravian College and Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pa., and The School of Theology, Temple University, Philadelphia, and presently pastor of The Moravian Church, Unionville, Michigan.

1. Hosea 1:4 and 5—"And the Lord said to him, 'Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel and on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.'"
2. H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hosea," *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1929), p. 761.
3. For this view, see Stephen L. Caiger, *Lives of the Prophets* (London: SPCK, 1954), pp. 101-102; Costen J. Harrell, *The Prophets of Israel* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1933), pp. 58-59.

Of Hosea's personal background very little is actually known. The name Hosea, meaning "salvation," seems to have been a fairly common one in Israel. Derived from the same Hebrew root are the names of Joshua and Jesus, meaning "saviour." We are told that the name of the prophet's father was Beeri, "my well," but there is no evidence that this is the Beerah, a Reubenite prince, who is mentioned in First Chronicles 5:6.<sup>4</sup> Though Hosea's birthplace is not mentioned in any extant biblical literature, a site in southern Gilead is to this day called Hosea's Mountain. There is a possibility, therefore, that tradition has preserved for us information not afforded by the Bible.

Opinions concerning Hosea's profession must also fall into the category of speculation, though some have confidently concluded that he was a priest because of his many attacks upon the shortcomings of the priesthood. There seems to be no more evidence that he was better acquainted with the priesthood than he was with royalty. Neither is it wise to conclude that he came from the country simply because he refers frequently to agricultural activities. It is safe to conclude that in this early period even city dwellers were not far removed from the soil. Neither is Hosea's fate known for sure, though there is a tradition which says that he died as a martyr on the east side of the Jordan.

Though there is doubt about many of these things which are well-known concerning the other prophets, we do possess a most intimate picture of Hosea's family life. And since, as Anderson<sup>5</sup> points out, "the key to the interpretation of Hosea's message is the story of his marriage with Gomer," we must come to some conclusion about this most important question. Heated debate has raged around the character of Gomer. The Lord said to Hosea: "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord" (1:2). It is recorded that Hosea, at the command of God, took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, to wife, and had by her two sons, Jezreel and Lo-Ammi, and a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah (Hosea 1:1; 3:9). It is further recorded (Hosea 3:1-3), that by the divine command the prophet purchased an adulteress.

A whole series of questions immediately clamor for an answer. Did Hosea really marry Gomer, daughter of Diblaim, or is it all allegory from start to finish? If he did actually marry her, then what sort of a woman was she when he married her? Did God really command this prophet to marry a woman who was a harlot? Is the woman of chapter 3 the same woman as the Gomer, daughter of Diblaim, of chapter 1, or are they separate and distinct persons?

Of the pitiful story of Hosea's marriage three interpretations have been given.

4. John Mauchline and Harold Cooke Phillips, "The Book of Hosea," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), Vol. VI, pp. 553, 567.
5. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), p. 241.

(1) God commanded Hosea to marry a woman who was literally a harlot. This view has many variations including the contention that she had already borne illegitimate children and later proved unfaithful to the prophet. This was the view held by most of the Latin and Greek Church Fathers.<sup>6</sup> This view rests heavily on the fact that only of Jezreel is it said that Gomer bore the child to him (Hosea 1:3). Further reputed proof is seen in the fact that the third child was named Lo-Ammi, "not my people." This is interpreted by some to mean the newborn child was no more Hosea's than wayward Israel was God's people. Still others have claimed that Gomer was a temple prostitute.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty in understanding how God would command a prophet to do something so morally evil is the most telling objection to this view in all its variations. As Dr. Hyatt<sup>8</sup> has so well stated: "The prophets of Israel did and said things which we consider peculiar, but no other prophet is represented as doing something patently immoral for the sake of his message." Another objection to this literalist theory is that Gomer is described (Hosea 1:2), not by the usual word for harlot, but by the term "woman of harlotries," which should be interpreted to mean that she had only an inclination to harlotry.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, to interpret this literally destroys the parallel relationship between Hosea and Gomer on the one hand and God and Israel on the other. The implication in Hosea is that in the beginning Israel was God's pure bride and only after the establishment of the covenant relationship did Israel become enamoured of paramours.

(2) A second view of the whole problem, widely accepted, is that no such marriage took place, and that the story of Hosea's marriage should be understood allegorically or perhaps parabolically. Those who hold to this view generally make much of the fact that allegory, parable, and such, are often used as literary devices in biblical literature and that prophets are sometimes presented as performing symbolic deeds which they could not literally have performed (Jeremiah 13; Ezekiel 4).<sup>10</sup>

Several weighty objections seriously militate against either a para-

6. See George Adam Smith, "The Book of the Twelve Prophets," *The Expositor's Bible*, W. Robertson Niccol, editor (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), Vol. I, p. 237.
7. Walter G. Williams, *The Prophets; Pioneers to Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 165. "In chapter one Gomer is named, and her occupation as a professional devotee in the temple of Baal is clearly indicated." See further W. A. Irwin's revision of J. M. P. Smith's *The Prophets and Their Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 70-76.
8. J. Philip Hyatt, *Prophetic Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1947), p. 42.
9. Hyatt, *Prophetic Religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
10. H. Wheeler Robinson says, "They serve to initiate the divine activity amid human affairs by performing in miniature that which Yahweh is performing on a larger scale;" quoted by Norman Snaith, *Mercy and Sacrifice* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1953), p. 33. Others who adopt this interpretation are Raymond Calkins, *The Modern Message of the Minor Prophets* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), p. 34; and Fleming James, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 233.

bolic or an allegoric view. If this story is either, it seems natural that some symbolic significance of Gomer's name could be easily discovered. Especially is this true since Hosea's children bore names symbolic of God's relationship to Israel. It must be admitted that attempts have been made to discover such a symbolic meaning, but, as Welch<sup>11</sup> puts it: "The fact that the name Gomer obstinately resists every effort made to turn it into a parable seems to show that we have here to deal with a real woman and a tragedy."

Still another objection to this view is that it implies that Hosea first came to understand God's love for Israel, who at one time was a pure bride but became an adulteress, then he invented or used a story to illustrate this relationship. But this is contrary to what is plainly said in Hosea 1:2, where it is stated that in or through his domestic experience God first spoke to him. Then because of his own heart-break for the wayward Gomer, he began to see God's persistent love for the wayward people Israel.

It should also be noted that the pathos and the vividness of this story would lead one to believe that the prophet is here speaking about a personal experience. Furthermore, the literary form is that of a simple narrative rather than a parable. Certainly its form is not an involved allegory.

(3) A few claim that the woman in chapter three is not the same as Gomer. Here again, as in all of these views, there are varying shades of opinion. Some claim that even though Gomer was a woman of harlotries, i.e., a woman with inclination to harlotry, she remained faithful to Hosea.<sup>12</sup> The woman in chapter three is then another woman, an actual adulteress, whom Hosea purchased, brought to his home and separated from her lovers to show how Yahweh would separate between Israel and her sins.

The fatal argument against this position is found in Hosea 3:1. God said to Hosea, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins" (RSV). The RSV rendition of this verse could possibly mean that another woman is involved in chapter three. However, the clause "go again love a woman" could just as logically be translated "keep on loving a woman." "We cannot escape the impression," Anderson<sup>13</sup> says, "that the language of verses 1 and 2 takes it for granted that the woman has already been mentioned."

For the woman in chapter three to be any other than Gomer would

11. Adam C. Welch, *The Religion of Israel Under the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p. 102.
12. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), pp. 568-569. See also Norman Snaith, *Mercy and Sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
13. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, *op. cit.* p. 242.

surely destroy the obvious analogy between Hosea and his marital situation and God and sinful Israel. And again there is the serious moral problem of the prophet being commanded by God to take such a woman into his home.

In the judgment of the writer there seem to be the fewest difficulties in the following view. Gomer was faithful at the time of the marriage to Hosea, but had within her the spirit of harlotry, so she could be called a "woman of harlotries." Her potentially unchaste nature did not reveal itself until after the marriage, but when it did become evident, Hosea was able to see that this had been in her character all along. Hosea lived happily with Gomer for a time, prophesying to Israel largely messages of doom and destruction. Three children born to the union were given prophetic names indicative of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel and having nothing to do with the relationship between Hosea and Gomer. After the birth of the third child Hosea discovered Gomer's infidelity. Gomer is now alienated from Hosea, deserts her children, finally leaves her home, and at length Hosea finds her in a slave-market exposed for sale. He pays down the price demanded for her, and brings her back to his home. The story breaks off here. "It is in the nature of its purpose," Bewer<sup>14</sup> has said, "that we are not told with what success Hosea tried to woo back the love of his erring wife and to build a new happiness on the ruins of that of his youth, for his experience has become symbolic of Yahweh's experience."

The Book of Hosea falls rather naturally into two unequal divisions, chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-14. The first section, as we have seen, is autobiographical in nature, while the latter section is composed primarily of his prophecies. Having related his own trouble in chapter 1-3, the prophet goes on in chapters 4-11 to set forth the causes of the downfall of Israel. These causes are: Lack of Knowledge (Chapter 4); Pride (Chapter 3); Instability (Chapter 6); Sinful Alliances (Chapter 7); a Godless Monarchy (Chapter 8); Corrupt Religion (Chapter 9); and Backsliding (Chapters 10 and 11). Hosea is no less severe in his judgment, than Amos, of the evils of his people; on the contrary he shows himself even more deeply affected by them, and his descriptions are far more sombre and ominous than those of Amos. But Hosea, as Cornill<sup>15</sup> has said, "cannot rest content with a negation." For God is not a man whose last word is anger and passion. He is the Holy One, the Merciful One, whom pity overcomes. He cannot cast aside the people whom He once loved. He will draw them to Himself, improve them, save them. To quote Cornhill again: "God is a kind Father, who punishes his child with a bleeding heart, for its own good, so that He may afterwards en-

14. Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament*, rev. edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 90.

15. C. H. Cornill, *The Prophets of Israel* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1896), p. 47).

fold it all the more warmly in His arms.”<sup>16</sup> Thus it is that Hosea ends his writings with an offer of forgiveness (Chapters 12-14), with a message of hope. In view of this tender relationship it is not strange that, after a severe denunciation of Israel, Yahweh cries out, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender” (Hosea 11:8). Or again: “I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely, for my anger is turned from them” (Hosea 14:4).

So Hosea became the first prophet of repentance, anticipating the Prodigal Son in his appeal to the Prodigal Nation. This is the greatest thing about his message, the persistence of God’s love. Unfaithful as Israel had been, and certain as was her doom, this fact did not obscure the divine love. God’s love is constant; it is not canceled by human sin. No wonder Hosea stands as the greatest Old Testament exponent of the redeeming love of God. Gethsemane and Calvary must ever precede our resurrection unto eternal life and love.

16. Cornill, *op. cit.*, p. 48.