

## AN INTRODUCTION TO HOSEA

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The Book of Hosea is the written record of the prophecies that Hosea son of Beeri<sup>1</sup>, gave to the nation of Israel in the eighth century B.C. The book primarily denounces Israel for apostasy against God and warns of a coming judgment, but it also contains promises of restoration (e.g., 3:4-5; 14:4-7<sup>2</sup>). The book is perhaps best known for the story of Hosea's sad marriage to Gomer. In structure, the book is divided into two major sections: (1) chaps. 1-3, which deal with Hosea's marriage and lessons it provides for Israel, and (2) chaps. 4-14, a collection of various prophecies concerning Israel.

### *The Prophet and His Times*

Nothing is known of Hosea the man apart from the matter of his marriage to Gomer. The metaphors in 7:4-8 hardly prove that he was a baker.<sup>3</sup> All we know is that he was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

A great deal more is known, however, about his times. He tells us that he ministered "during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel" (1:1, NIV). Jeroboam II, who reigned from about

<sup>1</sup> Assuming that  $\text{בְּנֵי בְּעִירִי}$  means that Beeri, otherwise unknown, was Hosea's father rather than an ancestor.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay, verse numbers refer to the English versification except in footnotes where Hebrew text is cited.

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to some interpreters. See R K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 859.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Mays, *Hosea*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 2, observes that Hosea was apparently a young man, of marriageable age, when he became a prophet.

790 to 750 B.C., came to power while Israel's two enemies to the north, Syria and Assyria, were in a period of internal struggle and weakness. He was able to extend the borders of Israel while restoring the prosperity of the nation (2 Kgs 14:25-26). This period is often described as Israel's "Indian Summer." Amos and Hosea make clear, however, that the prosperity was not spread equally among the Israelites. A two-class system developed in which the tedium and poverty of the lower class contrasted strongly with the oppressiveness and glut of the upper class. On Jeroboam's death, Israel fell into near anarchy as almost every king was assassinated by his successor. This, combined with the rise of an invigorated Assyria under Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) and his successors Shalmanesar V (727-722 B.C.) and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.), sealed the fate of Israel.

Internal evidence suggests that Hosea ministered during the latter part of Jeroboam's reign and for some years following (Hezekiah's reign did not begin until about 715 B.C.). This would indicate that he lived to see the fall of Israel (722 B.C.) although he does not speak of it as a past event.

One cannot easily correlate any text in Hosea with any known event of contemporary history. Some scholars assert that Hosea 5 reflects the period of the Syro-Ephraimite war (735-733 B.C.).<sup>5</sup> The suggestion is weak, however, because in Hosea Judah appears to be the aggressor (5:10; contrast the situation described in Isaiah 7). Andersen and Freedman more plausibly suggest that this text refers to border disputes in the reign of Uzziah of Judah.<sup>6</sup> In general, Hosea describes the volatile political situation following the death of Jeroboam II in which power changed hands rapidly (e.g., 7:3-7; 8:4). It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that most of Hosea's extant messages come from the decades of 755 to 735 B.C.

### *The Authorship and Compilation of Hosea*

Few scholars today doubt that the bulk of the book comes from the messages of Hosea himself, but many attribute the actual commitment of his words to writing not to the prophet but to a group of disciples.<sup>7</sup> This outlook on the writing of the prophetic books is not founded on solid evidence, however. Although we know from the example of Jeremiah 36 that prophets employed scribes, that text also informs us that the prophets had a direct hand in the process of pro-

<sup>5</sup> For example, H. W. Wolff, *Hosea*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) xxi.

<sup>6</sup> E. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1980) 34-35.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Wolff, *Hosea*, xxix-xxxii, and Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 53.

ducing written versions of their proclamations. At any rate, there is no reason to doubt that the messages of Hosea come from the prophet himself.

A number of scholars, however, contend that the book has a fair number of redactional interpolations. One opinion is that the references to Judah are from two Judaic redactions of the book; the first was a "pro-Judah" redaction designed to distance Judah from the condemnation pronounced against Israel (e.g., 1:7; 3:5). The second was a redaction that took the condemnatory oracles originally delivered against Israel and redirected them toward Judah (e.g., 5:5; 6:11).<sup>8</sup> This position, too, stems more from the current habits of scholarship than from any real evidence. It is more likely that Hosea regarded the Davidic king in Jerusalem the legitimate anointed of Yahweh and hoped that Judah would reject the apostasy of Israel (e.g., 4:15), but that he knew that difficult days lay ahead for Judah as well.

A few scholars maintain that the "optimistic" oracles do not stem from Hosea, but this tendency to regard the prophets as incapable of complex attitudes regarding the place of Israel before God is rightly fallen out of favor. In Hosea's case, the sayings of condemnation and the sayings of salvation are so thoroughly intertwined, and the style is so evidently uniform, that any effort to treat the positive statements as secondary should be abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Hebrew Text of Hosea*

Second only to Job, Hosea contains probably the most difficult Hebrew in the Bible. Problem texts abound. For this reason, scholars of recent generations quickly resorted to emendation of the text or regarded the LXX as a better representation of the *Urtext* than the MT. More recently, scholars have been hesitant to emend the MT or accept the LXX; advances in Hebrew linguistics have allowed for new approaches to the interpretation of enigmatic texts.<sup>10</sup> Even so, problem passages remain.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wolff, *Hosea*, xxxi-xxxii, and W. H. Schmidt, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1979) 204.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 422.

<sup>10</sup> Contrast the following assessments across the generations. W. R. Harper (*Amos and Hosea*, ICC [New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1905] clxxiii) writes that Hosea "is one of the most corrupt [texts] in the O.T., the number of passages which almost defy interpretation being extremely large." Andersen and Freedman (*Hosea*, 60) write that there are "more than enough oddities and peculiarities which can be defended, interpreted, and explained to undermine the hypothesis of extensive corruption."

The text of 5:2a, for example, is especially difficult and an enormous variety of interpretations and emendations have been proposed.<sup>11</sup> The two most common renditions today are, "The rebels are deep in slaughter" (NIV) and "a pit dug deep in Shittim" (NRSV [REB is similar]). The former is an attempt to translate the unemended text but is a questionable rendition of the Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> The second interpretation involves two emendations<sup>13</sup> but fits the context well. The last two lines of v 1 speak of a "snare at Mizpah" and a "net spread on Tabor." The proposed "pit" obviously parallels "snare" and "net" just as the proposed "Shittim" parallels "Mizpah" and "Tabor," and "I will punish all of them" (5:2b) could be taken to refer to Mizpah, Tabor, and Shittim together.<sup>14</sup> Both renditions are therefore defensible.<sup>15</sup> The LXX, by the way, is significantly different.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, although scholars rightly hold the text of the MT in higher regard now than they did some years ago, one cannot slavishly assume that the MT is correct. Other examples of disputed texts where emendation is possible or likely could easily be given.<sup>17</sup>

Another question is whether or not Hosea is written as poetry or prose. Our knowledge of classical Hebrew scansion being as limited as it is, one cannot answer this question definitively. Scholars therefore tend to take the middle way of describing Hosea as prophetic discourse with strong affinities to poetry.<sup>18</sup> Andersen and Freedman, working with the criterion that the definite article, the relative pro-

<sup>11</sup> See Harper, *Amos and Hosea*, 267-72.

<sup>12</sup> The MT reads **יְהַדְּמֵם יְהוָה עַד יִקְוּ**. The noun **יְהַדְּמֵם** occurs only here, but it could be taken as a feminine noun from **שָׁחַ** and thus mean "slaughter." The word **יְהַדְּמֵם** might be translated "rebels" on the basis of the root **שָׁחַ** found in Ps 40:5 and the word **יְהַדְּמֵם** ("deeds that swerve [?]") in Ps 101:3; cf. also the root **שָׁחַ** "to turn aside." The verb **יְהַדְּמֵם יְהוָה** means, "they make deep," although it might be taken adverbially to mean "they are in deep." Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 386-88, support this translation although they admit that the text is "largely unintelligible in its present form."

<sup>13</sup> One must read **תְּהַדְּמֵם**, "pit," for **יְהַדְּמֵם** "Shittim," for **יְהַדְּמֵם** Wolff, *Hosea*, 94; Mays, *Hosea*, 79; and D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987) 88-89 support the emendations.

<sup>14</sup> The change from the second person in v 1 to the third person in v 2a, however, is a problem for this emendation.

<sup>15</sup> On balance, I prefer to emend to "pit" and "Shittim." Y. Mazor, "Hosea 5.1-3: Between Compositional Rhetoric and Rhetorical Composition," *JSOT* 45 (1989) 119-20, shows that in the emended version of the text, 5:1c-2 has precisely the same rhetorical structure as 5:1ab.

<sup>16</sup> It reads, **ὃ οἱ ἀγρεύοντες τὴν θήραν κατέπηξαν** ("which the pursuers of the hunt held fast"). The use of hunting imagery, however, could be taken as a support for the emendation.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. C. S. Ehrlich, "The Text of Hosea 1:9," *JBL* 104:1 (1985) 13-19.

<sup>18</sup> Wolff, *Hosea*, xxiv, for example, speaks of Hosea having "elevated prose" that can easily shift into "stricter poetic forms."

noun, and the definite object marker are more rare in poetry than in prose, have found that these particles are more frequent in chaps. 1-3 than in 4-14. While the exact numbers for each passage of the book vary,<sup>19</sup> they support the impression many readers have of the book, namely, that chaps. 1-3 are a more prosaic introduction while chaps. 4-14 constitute the more poetic main body of the prophecies.

Sometimes Hosea is taken to be a representative of a northern, Israelite dialect of Hebrew. This deduction is not surprising in light of the difficulties in the language, but we do not possess enough data to conclude that his language was typical of a northern dialect.

### *The Imagery and Style of Hosea*

Hosea uses striking images; a typical condemnation of Israel begins with the simile, "Ephraim is like a dove" (7:11). He then portrays Ephraim like a senseless bird fluttering between Egypt and Assyria in search of a place of safety and straying far from God. In 6:4, he declares that Israel's love is like a morning mist that quickly disappears in the heat of the day. In 9:16 Ephraim is a blighted, withered plant that bears no good fruit, which in context apparently refers equally to good deeds and to children. Sometimes his imagery turns on a Hebrew word play.<sup>20</sup>

Wolff observes that Hosea uses a wide variety of metaphors for Yahweh; some are quite surprising. In addition to the traditional husband (2:2), father (11:1), and physician (14:4) images, Yahweh is also a fowler<sup>21</sup> (7:12), a lion or leopard (13:7), a bear (13:8), a dew (14:5), a green tree (14:8), and even decay or infection<sup>22</sup> (5:12).<sup>23</sup> Hosea can use non-traditional and even shocking language to get his point across to a hard-hearted and perhaps jaded people.

Hosea can turn his images in unexpected directions. In 7:4-7, the nation is likened to a hot oven with the meaning that Israel is hot with debauchery and intrigue. In 7:8, however, Ephraim is like a flat cake

<sup>19</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 60-66.

<sup>20</sup> In 8:9, the image of Ephraim as a wild ass may have its origin in a word play on אֶפְרַיִם and פָּרָא. In 9:16, the prophet states that Ephraim (אֶפְרַיִם) yields no fruit (פֶּרִי). For further examples, see P. A. Kruger, "Prophetic Imagery: On Metaphors and Similes in the Book of Hosea," *J Northwest Semitic Languages* 14 (1988) 143-51.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of this metaphor, see P. A. Kruger, "The Divine Net in Hosea 7:12," *Eph Th L* 68 (1992) 132-36.

<sup>22</sup> The line וְאֲנִי כְעֵשׂ לְאֶפְרַיִם וְכִרְקָב לְבֵית יְהוּדָה is generally rendered something like, "I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah" (NIV). Wolff (*Hosea*, 104) makes a good case for translating עֵשׂ as "pus." See also Stuart, *Hosea*, 105. Andersen and Freedman (*Hosea*, 412) takes it to mean "maggots." Cf. NRSV.

<sup>23</sup> Wolff, *Hosea*, xxiv.

not turned over; instead of being the oven that produces the heat, Israel is dough in the oven and is sure to be burnt on the bottom. The meaning is evidently that Israel's associating with the gentiles is sure to result in being "burnt," i.e., suffering loss.<sup>24</sup>

Hosea also brings penetrating pathos to his message through the use of questions in the mouth of God. A particularly strong example is 11:8 (NIV): "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." See also 6:4 and 8:5. Through the anthropomorphism of God seeming to be at wit's end about his people's stubborn sinfulness, Hosea transforms the abstraction of divine compassion into vivid reality.<sup>25</sup>

A difficulty in interpreting Hosea is his tendency to use short, pithy declarations rather than longer prophetic discourse. Context is of limited value in interpreting some passages because sometimes one can scarcely be sure where one text breaks off and another begins. This is not to say that it is impossible to demonstrate structure in a larger text. On the basis of an analysis of 5:1-3 and 5:15, Y. Mazor sees rhetorical unity in chap. 5;<sup>26</sup> J. Lundbom, similarly, uses an inclusio pattern to maintain the unity of 4:4b-9a.<sup>27</sup> Even so, large scale rhetorical structure is not nearly so obvious in Hosea as in some other prophetic books.

At times, the sayings seem almost contradictory. In 13:14-16, for example, the text promises that God will redeem Israel and then abruptly declares that he will have no compassion<sup>28</sup> on the nation and that their children will be slain and their pregnant mothers ripped open. The prophet obviously intends for the reader to take in each short declaration in sequence, without transitions, so that the reader might fully experience the jolting effect of these pronouncements. Rather than distill his message down to a logically consistent whole, he confronts the reader with diverse truths presented in the most

<sup>24</sup> Thus C. E. Keil, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 1:107.

<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, these questions do not have the significance that J. G. Janzen ("Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11," *Semeia* 24 [1982] 7-44) ascribes to them. Janzen is operating in the framework of process theology and sees here evidence of existential development in God.

<sup>26</sup> Mazor, "Hosea 5.1-3," 115-26.

<sup>27</sup> J. R. Lundbom, "Contentious Priests and Contentious People in Hosea 4:1-10," *VT* 36 (1986) 52-70. See also Lundbom's analysis of 4:11-14, "Poetic Structure and Prophetic Rhetoric in Hosea," *VT* 29 (1979) 300-308.

<sup>28</sup> Although the meaning of  $\text{רַחֲמֵי}$  is not certain (it is a *hapax legomenon*), it probably means "compassion" here. Cf. NIV; NRSV; and REB. Andersen and Freedman (*Hosea*, 625, 640) take it to mean "the cause of sorrow."

stark and unqualified possible form. This forces the reader to reckon with the full impact of his words.

### *Form Criticism and Hosea*

A number of scholars, principally Wolff, attempt to apply form criticism to Hosea. Wolff observes that Hosea uses, for example, the "prophetic speech," the "divine speech," the "lament," and the "exhortation." The "disputation"<sup>29</sup> is crucial to his analysis; the Book of Hosea is at the same time Yahweh's legal indictment against Israel and the prophet's dispute with his fellow Israelites. Wolff imagines Hosea addressing the audience in short "kerygmatic units" between which the audience may have responded with questions or objections. In this way, Wolff accounts for the somewhat choppy, uneven style of Hosea. The analogy of the court dispute at the city gate is the backdrop for Hosea. Wolff also believes that some addresses were given to small circles of disciples rather than to larger, open crowds (e.g., 11:1-11).<sup>30</sup>

Other scholars are less certain about form criticism as applied to Hosea. Stuart, for example, states that "typical prophetic formal composition characteristics are either so subtly combined or so artistically modified in Hosea's oracles that one has to consider each oracle on an ad hoc basis."<sup>31</sup> This is tantamount to saying that traditional form criticism is impossible in Hosea, since form criticism by definition is not ad hoc but seeks to demonstrate repeated, meaningful patterns in the literature (e.g., the forms observable in the Psalms). Fohrer is specifically skeptical about Wolff's reconstructed *Sitzen im Leben* for his "kerygmatic units,"<sup>32</sup> and Andersen and Freedman share that skepticism.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Wolff's analyses are undermined by their very complexity as he seeks to demonstrate which lines are original, which are redactional, why the oration is so irregular, and how the whole fits into its purported setting.<sup>34</sup> The best one can say is that although one may well identify a number of motifs in Hosea, and that an atmosphere of legal dispute is no doubt deliberately created in the book, true form critical investigation has yet to yield convincing results.

<sup>29</sup> Hebrew: כִּי.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf, *Hosea*, xxiii-xxx. Wolff believes that larger prophetic orations are marked by the naming of the addressee, the beginning of a new theme, and the absence of a copula.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart, *Hosea*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Fohrer, *Introduction*, 421-22.

<sup>33</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 72, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Wolff, *Hosea*, 74-76, as an example of this.

*The Marriage to Gomer*

The story of Hosea's marriage to Gomer is at the same time both the dominant theological metaphor and the major interpretive problem of Hosea. That the faithless wife is symbolic of Israel's apostasy is beyond doubt; more questionable is the actual interpretation of chaps. 1 and 3. Although there is risk of oversimplification, common interpretations of these texts may be set forth in the following schema.

- I. Chapters 1-3 are a parable or allegory with no historical basis.
  - At least two variants of this interpretation are proposed.
    - A. The whole story is a vision and has no relationship to Hosea's actual marriage and family life.<sup>35</sup>
    - B. Gomer was a real but faithful wife and chap. 1 is only indicative of Israel's sin; in chap. 3, Hosea shows kindness to a wretched prostitute (not his wife) as a prophetic symbol of God's compassion on Israel.<sup>36</sup>
- II. Chapters 1 and 3 are historical but refer to two different women. Hosea first married the prostitute Gomer, at the beginning of his prophetic ministry, to illustrate Israel's sin against God. Later in his ministry he married a second woman, also a prostitute, to illustrate God's compassion and the hope of salvation.<sup>37</sup> Interpretation I. B. above could also be considered a variant of this interpretation.
- III. Chapters 1 and 3 are historical and refer to the same woman (Gomer). At least three interpretations follow this reasoning.
  - A. God commanded Hosea to marry an immoral woman. He did so, and she gave him one son but soon returned to her old ways and bore him two children of doubtful paternity (1:2-9). Hosea then apparently separated from her or was abandoned by her (2:2a). She fell into poverty and disgrace, and eventually into slavery. Hosea bought her out of slavery and restored her to the family (3:1-3).<sup>38</sup>
  - B. Essentially the same as III. A., a variant interpretation seeks to avoid the scandal of God commanding Hosea to marry a flagrantly immoral woman by asserting that the reference

<sup>35</sup> Thus J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) 1:43-45. Calvin misses the point when he argues that there is no reason it could not have been a vision; the onus is on him to show that it was a vision.

<sup>36</sup> R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941) 567-70.

<sup>37</sup> Fohrer, *Introduction*, 420-21.

<sup>38</sup> For example, J. Limburg, *Hosea-Micah*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 8-15.

to Gomer's immorality in 1:2 is proleptic, or that when he married her she had tendencies to immorality but had not yet actually engaged in extramarital sex, or that Hosea did not deliberately marry a wanton woman but only retrospectively realized that his unhappy marriage was actually, in the providence of God, a portrayal of God's relationship to Israel.<sup>39</sup>

- C. Chapters 1 and 3 are variant accounts of the same event; no sequence is intended.<sup>40</sup> Hosea was commanded to marry a prostitute (1:2), he purchased Gomer from a slave market (1:3; 3:1-3), and then had one child by her before she returned to her immorality (1:3-9). The word "again" in 3:1 is an editorial insertion.

Which of these interpretations is preferable? First of all, the view that the whole narrative is parabolic and non-historical must be rejected out of hand. Hosea could not have credibly proclaimed the story of his wayward wife as the representation of Israel's spiritual harlotry if at the same time he was living as a happily married man.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, it is implausible that he would have presented his wife in the terms of chap. 1 if in fact she was a woman of virtue.

The second major interpretation, that two separate women are in view here, is also unlikely. While it is true that the Hebrew of 3:1 is indefinite ("love a woman loved by another"<sup>42</sup>) and does not specifically say, "your wife," context strongly suggests that Gomer is intended. Andersen and Freedman offer several reasons for believing that the same woman is meant and that a sequence of events from chap. 1 to chap. 3 is intended. First, the woman of 3:1 is already an adulteress, which suggests continuity with chap. 1. Second, the word "again" in 3:1 implies continuity.<sup>43</sup> Third, in chap. 1 he was to marry an immoral woman but in 3:1 he was to love a wife already fallen. This, too, suggests development. Fourth, 3:3 does not describe the training of a new wife but the discipline of a wayward wife. This also goes against interpretation III. C.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 155-70. cf. G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 323.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the discussion in C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 91. Bullock cites R. Gordis (HUCA 25 [1954] 9-35) as holding to this view.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. A. Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 249.

<sup>42</sup> Translating אֶהְבֶּה אִשָּׁה אֲהַבְתָּ רַעִי.

<sup>43</sup> This is true regardless of whether עוֹד is connected to לְךָ or יְאִמְרָה.

<sup>44</sup> Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 293. They also give a fifth argument related to their interpretation of 2:6 (MT = 2:8).

Interpretation III. C. is not persuasive for the reason given above and also because it fails to serve as an adequate model for Hosea's theological message. Hosea not only describes the covenant violation and punishment of Israel, he also speaks of Israel's restoration and healing. If one treats chap. 3 simply as a doublet of chap. 1, one loses that sequence in the analogy. Also, the language of chap. 2 favors reading chap. 3 as a subsequent development.

Interpretation III. A., in spite of (or perhaps because of) the offenses it carries, is the most plausible explanation of the text. The argument that Hosea was told to marry a woman described "proleptically" as immoral or that she merely had promiscuous tendencies but had not yet actually committed any immoral acts is meaningless. Apart from the fact that there is no credible argument that the Hebrew of 1:2 means, "a woman who is going to commit fornication,"<sup>45</sup> one must recognize that in Hosea's actual situation the distinction would have been immaterial. What could be worse than marrying a woman with full knowledge that she would be faithless in years to come? In that context, concern about what she may have done prior to the marriage quickly loses relevance. One may of course argue that Hosea only retrospectively saw the hand of God in the events of his unhappy marriage, but that flies in the face of the most natural reading of 1:2-3, that first he was told by God to marry an immoral woman and then he did it. Finally, elements in the text imply that Gomer was in fact a prostitute.<sup>46</sup>

The marriage to Gomer was the most poignant, painful, and dramatic "prophetic speech-act" in the Old Testament.<sup>47</sup> Other prophets also did things that were strange, difficult, and even shameful in order to convey their message to Israel. Isaiah walked about naked and barefoot for three years as a sign of the coming exile of Egypt and Cush (Isa 20:3-5). Ezekiel lay on his side before a representation of Jerusalem under siege every day for over a year and during that time ate food cooked with manure (Ezekiel 4). Closer to Hosea's condition, he was also forbidden to mourn when his wife died (24:15-18). Jeremiah, by contrast, was not allowed to marry (Jer 16:2). In short, it was not unusual for the prophets

<sup>45</sup> Although the phrase אִשָּׁה זָנִיָּהּ is unusual and its precise meaning is debated, there is little reason to regard it as proleptic or as a description of a psychological tendency. Indeed, Gomer may well have been a prostitute prior to the marriage, although we cannot be certain.

<sup>46</sup> Comparing ancient Near Eastern customs, P. A. Kruger ("Israel, the Harlot," *J Northwest Semitic Languages* 11 [1983] 107-16) observes that 2:5b refers to the fee paid a prostitute and that 2:2b may allude to ornaments worn by prostitutes.

<sup>47</sup> Mays (*Hosea*, 24) who translates Hos 1:2a as, "The beginning of Yahweh's speaking through Hosea," comments that the "marriage was not a way for Yahweh to speak to Hosea but through him" (emphasis original).

to behave in a manner contrary to custom and normal human longing in order to give their words dramatic force.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the history of Hosea's marriage is that he would take Gomer back after she had been with other men. Such a practice contradicts Deut 24:1-4. This does not refute the interpretation of Hosea 1-3 proposed here but in a paradoxical manner confirms it. From the standpoint of Israel's legal tradition, it was unthinkable that a man would take back an unfaithful wife who had been separated from him and living with other men.<sup>48</sup> But when Hosea bought her out of slavery and restored her to the family,<sup>49</sup> he illustrated in the most profound way possible the depth of God's grace.

Finally, evangelicals should know that feminist interpreters approach Hosea from a radically different direction, one in which Gomer is more victim than villain. Some accuse Hos 2:3-6 of endorsing sexual violence toward women.<sup>50</sup> Dijk-Hemmes develops a more abstract but more radical interpretation. She argues that Hosea gives us distorted fragments of Gomer's love poetry-love songs that were analogous to the woman's parts in Song of Songs. In this reconstruction, these love songs extolled the erotic and nurturing power of the woman/goddess, but Hosea misconstrued them in order to crush the religion of the mother-goddess and establish patriarchal, oppressive religion.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Although Hosea may not have been in technical violation of Deut 24:1-4 since, as far as we can tell from the text, he did not give her a written certificate of divorce. D. B. Wyrzten ("The Theological Center of Hosea," *BSac* 141 [1984] 320-21) on the other hand, argues that 2:2 represents an actual divorce rather than separation. Also, the act of publicly stripping a woman taken in adultery was an outraged husband's ritual of divorce elsewhere in the ancient Near East; cf. Kruger, "Israel, the Harlot," 111-12.

<sup>49</sup>The precise significance of וְלֹא תִהְיֶינָה לְאִישׁ וְגַם אֲנִי אֶלְיָי ("and you shall not be for a man but indeed I [shall be] to you") in 3:3 is widely debated. It would appear that a period of isolation for Gomer is in view after which Hosea perhaps resumed marital relations with her. Cf. Wolff, *Hosea*, 61-62; Andersen and Freedman, *Hosea*, 301-5. It is of course possible that he did not resume normal sexual relations with her.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. R J. Weems, "Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?" *Semeia* 47 (1989) 87-104, and T D. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in L. Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 86-95. It is not sufficient to respond to this allegation by saying that Hosea 2 is "only a metaphor" and therefore does not condone abuse of women. A meaningful evangelical interpretation of Hosea 2 must come in the context of a fully developed theology of family life.

<sup>51</sup> E van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination: An Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs," *JSOT* 44 (1989) 75-88. Apart from the fact that the representation of Gomer singing love-songs analogous to Song of Songs is pure hypothesis, one should note that Song of Songs does not promote goddess religion (see my volume on Song of Songs in the New American Commentary) and that Hosea is not so much in a struggle against the goddess as he is in a contest against Baal, the metaphorical rival of Yahweh (2:16-17). Cf. Mays, *Hosea*, 11-12.

*The Theology of Hosea*

Readers understandably interpret Hosea through the metaphor of the unfaithful wife as a representative of Israel. Childs explains the message behind the marriage to Gomer as a metaphor that not only addresses Hosea's generation of wayward Israelites but reaches back to describe the entire history of the nation (including Judah).<sup>52</sup> In short, the story of his marriage retells the whole sad experience of the covenant people. Ezekiel draws upon the marriage image and retells it in Ezekiel 16 with Jerusalem playing the part of the unfaithful wife. The importance of "faithfulness" in Hosea, as well as the metaphor of the "lawsuit; naturally merge into the marriage metaphor.<sup>53</sup> Israel should have shown fidelity to the covenant just as a wife should show fidelity to her marriage vows, and Israel now faces the indictment of God just as an adulteress faces the charges brought by her husband.<sup>54</sup>

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that this is the whole of Hosea's message. In chaps. 4-14, although the analogy of the wayward wife never disappears entirely, Hosea does not dwell upon it but rather uses other metaphors for Israel. In 11:1, for example, Israel is not a wife but a son. In 5:13-6:3, the image of Israel and Judah as people suffering from disease and wounds controls the text (cf. Isa 1 :5-6). It would be a mistake to expound the whole of Hosea as if the picture of the fallen wife dominated every passage, for clearly it does not.

Hosea's message contains, as one would expect, a great deal of condemnation. He particularly abhors the degenerate priesthood of Israel (e.g., 4:4-9). Indeed, he regards them as little better than a gang of thugs (6:9). He also has little respect for Israel's kings and in 8:4 appears to allude to the rapid succession of kings after Jeroboam II. The mention of only Jeroboam II in the title (1:1) may in fact imply that Hosea considered him to be the last king of Israel with any shred of legitimacy.

At the same time, no other biblical text so vividly portrays the personal love of God. The vivid picture of God as a loving parent remembering when he taught his now deviant child to walk (11:3) is unsurpassed in tenderness and pathos.

<sup>52</sup> B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 381.

<sup>53</sup> Various forms of the root **אָמַן** ("faithfulness") occur in (Hebrew text) 2:21; 4:1; 6:4, 6; 10:12; 12:17. Various forms of the root **נָסַח** ("lawsuit" or "contention") occur in 2:4; 4:1, 4; 12:3. 4:1 is especially significant in that it has both roots and is to some degree programmatic for the whole of 4:1-14:9.

<sup>54</sup> This metaphor does not occur elsewhere in the ancient Near East for the relationship between a god and his followers according to Kruger ("Israel, the Harlot," 107).

Hosea makes allusions to, and builds his theology upon, the Torah. U. Cassuto points to many examples of parallels between Hosea and the Pentateuch, and conclusively shows that Hosea was dependent on the Law rather than the other way around.<sup>55</sup> A number of scholars recognize Hos 12:1-6, where the prophet alludes to Genesis 25 and 32, as an example of "inner" biblical exegesis that can serve as a guide in the interpretation and application of Scripture.<sup>56</sup> Stuart demonstrates that not only Hosea but other prophets also looked back to the "curses and blessings" of the covenant as a primary source for their messages.<sup>57</sup> Also, when God curses the land and its inhabitants in Hos 4:3, he does so in a sequence that is the reverse of the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and thus nullifies the blessings of creation.<sup>58</sup> In short, Hosea shows us that sound theology is based upon the Canon.

A remarkable feature of Hosea is that it ends with a wisdom saying comparable to Prov 1:1; 30:4-6 and Eccl 12:13-14: "Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them" (Hos 14:9, NIV). In one sense this is not surprising because Hosea's book is characterized by the pithy, aphoristic statements common in wisdom. It is remarkable, however, for a prophet to end with so obvious a wisdom statement. Scholars generally regard the verse as redactional, but that conclusion is unnecessary.<sup>59</sup> The self-conscious admission that the text is difficult to understand refers to the paradoxical way in which it presents its truths. Gross

<sup>55</sup> "The Prophet Hosea and the Books of the Pentateuch," reprinted in U. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973) 1:79-100. For further comment, see D. A. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 54-55. Contrast J. Day, "Pre-Deuteronomistic Allusions to the Covenant in Hosea and Psalm 78; VT 36 (1986) 1-12.

<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, interpretations differ. W. J. Kaiser, Jr. ("Inner Biblical Exegesis as a Model for Bridging the 'Then' and 'Now' Gap: Hos 12:1-6," *JETS* 28 [1985] 33-46) develops an evangelical model. S. L. McKenzie ("The Jacob Tradition in Hosea 12:4-5; VT 36 [1983] 311-22) operates in the documentary hypothesis framework but argues that Hosea is giving a parody of a blessing that was pronounced at Bethel in order to condemn the cult at the shrine and equate the people with the deceitfulness of Jacob. L. M. Eslinger ("Hosea 12:5a and Genesis 32:29: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis; *JSOT* 18 [1980] 91-99) argues that the Hosea text is based on the Genesis text but has radically reinterpreted it.

<sup>57</sup> Stuart, *Hosea*, xxxi-xlii; 7-8; passim.

<sup>58</sup> The sequence in Hosea is people, beasts, birds, and fish; contrast Gen 1:20-27. It contains the verb  $\eta\delta\alpha$ , which is important in other creation reversal narratives (cf. Zeph 1:2-3 and Jer 8:13). See M. Deroche, "The Reversal of Creation in Hosea," *VT* 31 (1981) 400-409.

<sup>59</sup> Wolff (*Hosea*, 239) who regards the verse as redactional, nevertheless observes that it contains the typical Hosean word "stumble" ( $\text{כשל}$ ) used here and in 4:5; 5:5; 14:2.

infidelity leads to a divorce that, contrary to Law and custom, is resolved in reconciliation. Terrible judgment and unfailing compassion, as well as promises of absolute destruction and of healing restoration, are set side-by-side with no guide to how all of this is to work itself out. Convolved as it all may seem, the final verse assures the reader that Yahweh's ways are in fact straight and urges that the true path to understanding and life is through submission and obedience.

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