

HOSEA: HIS MESSAGE, HIS WIFE, AND HIS CHILDREN

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Among the many problems that have long plagued Old Testament scholars is that of the opening chapters of the Book of Hosea and their relation to the message of the entire book. It has long been felt that if we could reconstruct from the documents precisely the experience through which Hosea went, then we should have some clue to the motivations of the prophet and perhaps an indication of the immediate incentives that led him to function as a prophet. The purpose of this paper is to present some suggestions that may aid in furthering the search for a satisfactory solution. Recent studies in the culture of the Hebrews, and that of their neighbors, have made available some evidence not accessible to the older commentators, and this fact alone would necessitate a re-examination of this old question.

The difficulties facing us may be summarized briefly under two main heads. First are the problems that revolve around the discrepancies between chapters one and three. In general two main positions have been taken by various writers. Some have assumed that the chapters are variant accounts of the same experience and have sought by several means to harmonize these stories.¹ Others have settled the problem by excising chapter three.² It is to be noted, however, that this is done without linguistic evidence. Harper, in "International Critical Commentary,"³ and Pfeiffer in his "Introduction to the Old Testament,"⁴ both indicate that there is no satisfactory linguistic reason for deleting either account. Any attempted solution by the method of disregarding some of the evidence simply because it is difficult to handle, or because it does not fit a particular line of reasoning is neither scientific nor satisfactory. The second group of

problems concern the evaluation of the story of the domestic difficulties of Hosea. Was the experience fact or fancy? If it was an actual experience,⁵ then we must face the problem as to whether or not it is realistically recorded, or whether Hosea is being reminiscent, interpreting this experience in the light of later results in his life. If it was fancy, then we must decide between vision and allegory.⁶

Some have dismissed the stories of Hosea's marriage all too lightly. They have given consideration to them as merely anecdotes on the life of Hosea. Their means as an insight into the psychology of the prophet have been recognized, but the more important question is: have the stories of the marriage of Hosea any bearing upon the message of the succeeding chapters? To be sure there is no reference after chapter three to either the wife or the children. Again and again, however, there are references to the love and relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

We shall face in turn the problems of the dual stories in chapters one and three; the relation between the marriage stories and the message and call of Hosea; the peculiarities of the marriage purchase in chapter three; the differing emphases in chapters one and three; and, finally, a suggested solution of the apparent conflicts.

Let us assume, until evidence shall cause us to change opinion, that the

¹ Steuernagel, Kittel, L. Gautier, T. H. Robinson, Eissfeldt.

² Marti, W. R. Smith, Volz, Haupt, L. W. Batten, C. H. Toy, Holscher, H. G. May.

³ Harper: *Amos & Hosea*, pp. 207f.

⁴ Pfeiffer: *Introduction* pp. 567f.

⁵ J. M. P. Smith: *The Prophet and His Problems* (1914) pp. 109-136.

⁶ Hoonacker, H. Gressman, E. Day, C. H. Toy.

record is correct, and that we have in these chapters evidence of an actual experience in the life of Hosea. Most scholars agree that chapters one and three are varying accounts of one experience, but disagree as to which account is secondary. If the two stories could be harmonized we might be one step nearer to a solution, but there are outstanding variations which cannot lightly be dismissed. Pfeiffer has suggested that chapter three refers to a different woman,⁷ and his interpretation is that in this case there was no marriage, that we have simply the concern of a good man for an unfortunate woman, purchasing her from slavery and taking her into his home to redeem her from her past life. This theory leaves chapter three without any particular relation to the remainder of the book.

We must note that much that has been written on this problem has been done in the light of twentieth century standards instead of the prevailing morals of the eighth century B.C. Many theories have been more concerned with preserving or restoring the characters of Hosea, Gomer, or Yahweh, than with letting the facts speak for themselves, and then building the theories out of the facts.

Turning for a moment to the remainder of the book, what are the outstanding points of emphasis? The prophecy is a message of doom, of condemnation of Israel for its sins, and it is relieved only slightly with passages of hope and expectation. It has been recognized by critical scholarship that most of the passages of hope are post-exilic in character. Condemnation by Hosea is largely on two counts: first, a failure of leaders and people to respond to the love and nurture of Yahweh;⁸ and second, wholesale acceptance of the low standards and the philosophy of the nature religion of Baal.⁹ Herbert G. May¹⁰ has correctly indicated that we can better understand the meaning of

the message of Hosea if we recognize that often he uses the phraseology of the Baal religion to express his message, a phraseology that was understood perfectly by his hearers. This technical terminology is scattered throughout the book, in chapters one and three as well as in chapters four to fourteen. This terminology provides a clue to the marriage experience as well as to the pronouncements of the prophet.

In chapter one Gomer is named and her occupation as an hierodule of the temple of Baal is clearly indicated. Hosea is told not only to take unto himself a woman "of zenunim" but also "children of 'zenunim'." Whatever characterized the woman also characterized her children. The emphasis of the chapter is entirely upon the children and not the wife. The names of the children are all important." Nothing in the record suggests that they are not the children of Hosea. Attempts have been made to show that the children's names involve the idea of martial infidelity but this is not warranted by the text. Hosea, in common with other prophets, despised the Canaanite cultus. He used Gomer, or rather the children borne by her, as a means of heaping ridicule upon the philosophy of the Baal religion. Whereas children borne to the temple women were given names of special significance indicating the particular relation between the Gods and the people through the temple worship, these children of Hosea's bore names that indicated special disfavor from Yahweh.¹¹ The name "Jez-

⁷ Pfeiffer: *op. cit.*, p. 570.

⁸ Batten: "Hosea's Message and Marriage" *J.B.L.* XLVIII (1929) p. 263.

⁹ Hosea 2:2ff. 4:11ff. 8:4ff. 9:10. 10:1ff. 13:1ff. cf. Ezek. 12:9ff.

¹⁰ H. G. May: "The Fertility Cult in Hosea," *A. J. S. L.* XLVIII, 89 ff.

¹¹ Batten: p. 266; H. G. May: "The Names of Hosea's Children," *J.B.L.* LV, (1936), pp. 285ff.

¹² This interpretation follows that of May with slight modification.

reel" meaning "God sows" is used as a foil to indicate that God will reap. The names "Lo-Ruhammah" and "Lo-Ammi" are built upon the substitution of the negative "Lo" for the noun "El" (God) with the resulting messages that Israel is not the beloved of God nor the people of God. These children, then, offer us another clue to the solution of the conflict between chapters one and three. The children are the center of the message of chapter one, and no mention is made of them in chapter three.

The woman of chapter one is a devotee of a cultus with which Hosea is not in sympathy, and she bears children to him whose names he uses to contradict its philosophy. Just as Gomer was a woman of the cultus so are these children off-spring of the cultus. It was not necessary for Gomer to leave the temple life, and the record of chapter three indicates that she did not do so. From her point of view and that of her fellow-worshippers, she was a deeply religious woman.¹³ The fact that licentiousness grew out of the fundamental philosophy of Baalism stirred the prophets to action. But because the desires of men were so gratified by a practice that bore religious approval, it became difficult for the prophets to offset the inroads made by this philosophy of life into the religious life of Israel. Three verses of chapter three are all that may be attributed to the hand of Hosea. These three verses do not record the name of the woman and there is no mention of the children. The emphasis in this case is entirely upon the woman, and upon the love that Hosea had for her. Hosea has been called the "Prophet of Love"¹⁴ but Graham's designation of Hosea as "the prophet of unrequited love"¹⁵ is a truer description. The application made in the succeeding chapters was that just as the woman had been unresponsive to Hosea's love, so Israel had been guilty of

failing to respond to God.

Seemingly the only point of contact between chapters one and three is the characterization of a woman guilty of extra-marital relations. There is nothing in the story as it stands that designates the woman as having been previously married to Hosea, nor is anything said about the conduct of the woman after her purchase by Hosea. The purchase seems to be a normal transaction, though as has been suggested, there is difficulty in the fact that Hosea should have to purchase the woman if she were already his wife.¹⁶ The price is well within the range of price levels at that time. It's the troublesome phrase "Go, again" (or more probably "Yahweh said to me again, Go") that has suggested the second experience theory. There is also the difficult problem of the different personal pronouns in the two chapters. In chapter one the third person is used, and in chapter three the account is given in the first person. Two questions may be raised here. Did Hosea do his own writing, or were his important messages written down later by his hearers? Also we must ask, is the prophecy of Hosea to be considered a literary unit, whether written by Hosea or by a follower, or are we to understand that this book is a collection of the sayings of Hosea uttered on various occasions? If we are right in assuming the latter to be correct, then we have no right to expect that the speaker will always speak in the same person, but that his language will suit the mood and message of the particular occasion. In any case the

¹³ A. T. Olmstead: *History of Palestine* pp. 437ff.

Waterman: *J.B.L.* XXXVII, 1918, 193ff.

¹⁴ Knudson: *The Beacon Lights of Prophecy* (1914) p. 89.

¹⁵ W. C. Graham: *The Prophets and Israel's Culture*. (1934) p. 82.

¹⁶ Harper *op. cit.*, pp 218-19 Cf. Waterman.

"The Marriage of Hosea" *J.B.L.* XXXVII (1918) pp. 202 f.

woman of chapter three is likewise a woman of the cultus. There is no cogent reason why she may not be identified with Gomer of chapter one.

Our reconstruction then is this: Hosea, called to the prophecy by his hatred of the Baal religion, takes a woman of that cultus and begets children. The names of these children are the public disavowal of the philosophy of the Canaanite Baalism. He does it with the firm conviction that Yahweh is so using him to teach the people of Israel. No question of morality is involved. Particularly is this true as we come to recognize that Hosea's action was condoned by the moral standards of the cultus that he so used, and probably no question was raised by the Israelites themselves. His duty done he is prepared to return to his place, but something has happened through the years. Hosea has fallen deeply in love with this woman. She is no longer simply a means of producing children whose names are prophetic messages, but she is the mother and the beloved one. A second, and a deeper message of unrequited love arises from this situation. Already deeply in love it is not difficult for him to hear the command "Go, love." This time she must be really his, but before she can be wholly redeemed from the temple life he must pay to the temple her purchase price.¹⁷ She must undergo a period of probation. The final result was that her unresponsiveness broke the heart of Hosea. His message now is that Israel's attitude toward Yahweh has been that of a temple woman toward Baal, interested only in what gifts she could get, she goes to the highest bidder. Yahweh desired more than that. He wants the response of love to love. Thus we see that while formerly the emphasis was placed on the condemnation of Gomer, and Israel, for infidelity, actually the

yearning heart of Hosea emphasized a message of unrequited love.

There is a threefold significance for the story of chapters one and three as we have reconstructed it. First, we have an outstanding example of the complete devotion of a prophet, in all of life's relations, to the will of God. Nothing was held in reserve. Every possession and every relationship was used by the prophet to reveal the message of God. Second, the prophets, though oftentimes far ahead of their contemporaries in moral, religious, and social thinking, were nevertheless tied by the patterns of the day in which they lived. As we come to understand better the cultural patterns of the periods in which the great prophets lived, we shall come closer to a thorough understanding of their messages. Finally, we have an indication that Hosea came the closest to a message of salvation of any man in the pre-exilic period. It has become the fashion in some quarters automatically to classify as post-exilic any message of hope. We raise the question as to the motivation of the prophets unless it was that through their messages there could come a change in the thinking and the devotion of the people that should lead to the preservation of the nation. Hosea discovered his message through the depths of human suffering. His experience might even be called "vicarious suffering." He was "expendable" and the great value to mankind has been his message that man's hope lies in man's response to a God "who first loved us." We shall not hesitate to call Hosea the greatest of the pre-exilic prophets, and it is not without significance that he who suffered greatly transformed his suffering into a magnificent message.

¹⁷ See above p. 33