

Hosea 1:1–2:1



THE WORD OF the LORD came to Hosea son of Berri during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel.

²When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." ³So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

⁴Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. ⁵In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel."

⁶Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah, for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them. ⁷Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God."

⁸After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

¹⁰"Yet the Israelites will be like the sand of the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.' ¹¹The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.

^{2:1}"Say to your brothers, 'My people,' and to your sisters, 'My loved one.'"



HOSEA 1:1–3:5 CONTAINS a direct analogy between the marriage of Hosea and Gomer and the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

The story progresses through three stages: (1) the sinful adultery of Gomer and Israel destroys their covenant relationships (ch. 1); (2) confrontations and redemptive chastenings are begun (ch. 2); and (3) the restoration of the covenant relationship is accomplished through love (ch. 3). This representation of God's future dealing with Israel carries a dramatic and shocking message of callous betrayal by one party, an unwillingness to continue with the status quo by the other party, and the surprising undeserved mercy of God's love.

By setting Israel's sinful behavior in the framework of the vile behavior of a prostitute, Hosea reminds his audience both of the seriousness of sin (it destroys a mutual trusting relationship) and the amazing greatness of God's love. Unfaithfulness to God in Israel and the church cannot be ignored. Either people are believers and are faithful to their covenant commitments to God, or they are not a part of the family of God. Those who are unfaithful to God are really more like prostitutes. They are not and cannot be members of God's family unless two things happen. God must love them in spite of their sins (which he does), and they must respond to God's love with a new commitment of love for him. Hosea reveals that God has and will continue to give undeserved love to those who do not have a covenant relationship with God. The question is: How will people respond to his gracious gift of love?

Regarding 1:1–2:1, after the superscription (1:1), the structure of this narrative segment is ordered around Hosea's marriage and the subsequent birth of three children (1:2–9). Each sub-paragraph contains an initial imperative exhortation from God to Hosea (1:2b, 4a, 6b, 9a), followed by a divine explanation of how each name or action symbolically represents what is happening among the people in Israel (introduced by "because" [*ki*] in 1:2c, 4b–5, 6c, 9b). In something of a surprise ending, the negative implications of the children's names are dramatically reversed in the final paragraph (1:10–2:1; in the Heb. text these verses are 2:1–3) because a future time of covenant renewal and blessing is pictured.

The material in this story is not purely biographical, for the focus of attention is primarily on how God used the prophet's family as a symbolic representation of his dealings with the nation. The biographical details are in fact meager and give no indication of how this dysfunctional family coped with its symbolic role or the tragedy of an unfaithful spouse and mother. No words or emotional reactions (other than Hosea's obedience) from any member of the family are included.

The reference to the future fall of the dynasty of Jeroboam II (1:4–5)

suggests that this material was spoken before the death of Jeroboam II.¹ The purposes for publishing these verses are: (1) to explain the peculiar symbolic names of Hosea's children; (2) to warn Hosea's audience about God's intentions to bring judgment on the nation of Israel; and (3) to encourage the righteous about God's intention to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant.² The prophet hopes he can persuade some unfaithful people in his audience to transform their thinking and behavior to avoid God's judgment on Israel.

God's and Hosea's Symbolic Marriage (1:1–3)

THE BRIEF HISTORICAL superscription places these events in the prosperous days of King Jeroboam II of Israel (1:1).³ The first words the Lord God spoke "through Hosea" (1:2a) came at this time. Additional evidence of the prophetic role of Hosea is provided by the repeated emphasis on what "the LORD said" (1:2b, 4, 6, 9) to Hosea to help him and his readers understand the symbolic meaning of his marriage and children. These words revealed God's plan for Hosea's life. This idea of marrying an impure woman was probably not the family life that Hosea's proud parents planned for their son, but it was what God called him to do. Hosea did not just dream up this stuff about marrying a prostitute out of the rebelliousness of his youth; it was God's idea.

God instructed Hosea to marry an "adulterous wife" (1:2), an act that has caused great consternation among interpreters, but surprisingly no negative reaction from Hosea himself. The moral problem involved with this exhortation makes some think this whole story was just a vision or parable, while others conclude that Gomer was actually spiritually unfaithful rather than involved with sexual promiscuity.⁴ Kaufmann thinks that Gomer merely put on the clothes of a harlot to symbolize the apostasy of Israel, much like the theatrical sign-acts of Isaiah (going naked in Isa. 20:1–4) and Ezekiel (cutting his hair and lying on his side in Ezek. 4–5).⁵

1. Wolff, *Hosea*, 12, and Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 25, argue for an early date for this material.

2. The positive words of hope in 1:10–2:1 are sometimes identified as the words of a later redactor, but it is customary for Hosea to abruptly place paradoxical words of hope next to prophecies of judgment. The thematic connections between the original names of the children and the new names in the future require a close connection for the audience to see the great reversal that God will accomplish. See Yee, *Composition and Tradition in the Book of Hosea*, 68–72, who assigns these verses to a second deuteronomistic redactor after the exile. Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 36, gives seven connections between 1:2–9 and 1:10–2:1 that indicate these two sections go together. G. I. Emmerson, *Hosea: An Israelite Prophet in Judean Perspective* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 15–16, maintains these verses are a part of Hosea's preaching.

3. See the Introduction for the political, social, and religious background of this period.

4. See the earlier discussion and critique of these options in the Introduction.

5. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. M. Greenberg (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 370–71.

The plain meaning of these words cannot be easily escaped, however, for Gomer was to symbolize the fact that the land of Israel was full of people who had departed from the Lord and committed adultery by their involvement in the fertility religion of Baalism. Some scholars attempt to lessen the scandal by proposing that Gomer only had tendencies toward immoral behavior. Others suggest that God did not specifically ask Hosea to marry a harlot; instead, this verse is a retrospective realization by Hosea that God providentially led him to marry a woman who turned out to be unfaithful to her marriage vows.⁶

Although it sounds unusual and self-defeating for a prophet of God to marry a prostitute, the Bible only limits the wives a priest can choose. According to Leviticus 21:14 the priest must marry a virgin, not a harlot or a widow. No similar limitations are imposed on prophets or the average Hebrew citizen. Therefore, we conclude that Gomer⁷ was sexually involved with other men before and after her marriage to Hosea and must have received some payment for her sexual favors (Hos. 2:5). Hosea's reception of these instructions from God helped him interpret his life and ministry as the divine plan of God. It changed how he looked at the sinful people in Israel and how he empathized with God's reaction to his sinful wife, Israel.

In accepting God's plan for his life, Hosea submitted his wishes to God's will. He set himself up to feel and know a little bit about the bitterness of God's pain, as well as the depth of his love for undeserving people. He understood how Gomer's adultery represented the behavior of the people in the nation of Israel, God's covenant partner. They were guilty of "the vilest adultery" (1:2). By their unfaithful worship of Baal and participation in the sexual activities in that fertility cult, they defiled themselves and rejected their own God. In God's eyes the nation's syncretism of the worship of Baal and Yahweh was not a minor problem of little significance; it was an affront to the exclusive covenant commitment God desires of those whom he loves.

God's and Hosea's Symbolic Children (1:4–9)

IF GOMER REPRESENTS the nation and its evil culture, the "children of unfaithfulness" (lit., "children of prostitution") represent the individual Israelites who later witness against their mother (2:2, 4). As the mother, Gomer symbolizes Israel's syncretistic religion that its leaders promote, while the children are those pressured to follow this cultural ideology. One should not conclude that

6. Harper, *Amos and Hosea*, 207, takes the first approach, while G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 323, calls the second the proleptic view.

7. We do not know if Gomer's father was Diblaim or if Diblaim was the village where she was raised.