



Hosea? Yes! A God Who Makes Alive¹

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I know of no book in the Bible that portrays the fierce love of God as compellingly as the Book of Hosea. Hosea's complex interweaving metaphors take hold of us and drag us kicking and screaming into the experience of divine judgment, forgiveness, and grace. At the beginning and center of Hosea's images stands the prophet's marriage to his adulterous wife Gomer. This marriage provides the book's principal analogy: Just as Hosea has taken a "wife of whoredom" (1:2), so also Yahweh has taken a wife, Israel, who has acted the whore. Though we might be tempted to ask personal questions about the historical Hosea and Gomer, what presses the text is the narrated simile. We understand as we read Hos 2 that adultery signifies betrayal: betrayal of family, betrayal of community, and, above all, betrayal of husband. And according to the Torah (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), the prescribed punishment for adultery is death. Hosea takes this metaphor and its assumptions and builds a narrative that unmask both Israel and us. We are Gomer, and we meet God.

The metaphor is narrated with consummate skill. Hos 2 is marked by all manner of repetition. The chapter features three speeches of the woman (vv. 5, 7, 12), each reflecting her betrayal or shallow repentance. Her reported actions are shameful as she pursues her lovers, thinking that they provide her with nourishment, clothing, refreshment, and riches. She radically misidentifies the true source of life-sustaining gifts. But the woman is not the only one revealed through speech and action. The surprising revelation is the character of the husband, of God. In v. 3 Hosea/God identifies the wilderness as the place of death for the adulterous wife, recalling the dangerous reality of the desert throughout Israel's history. But notably, death is presented as a threat rather than as a reality. God leaves room for repentance and, in so doing, breaks the law. The divine husband's actions are marked by a thrice-repeated *therefore*, in vv. 6, 9, and, climactically, 14. These three *therefores* play against our underlying expectations of divine justice. We know the woman has committed adultery and *therefore* deserves death. In v. 5 she goes after her lovers, and *therefore* God "will hedge up her way" (v. 6). A hedge might be protection or punishment, but a hedge is not death. In vv. 8–9, God reveals Israel's lack of knowledge and *therefore* takes back his gifts. In the next verses God's actions

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(continued on page 194)

Hosea? No! A Metaphor That Kills

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I understand deeply Hosea's intended message as he compares his own marriage to the life his people have with God. But despite Hosea's best intentions and consummate rhetorical skill, his comparison brings death rather than life. The issue is this. The poetic patterns of speech and word intended to show God's mercy and forgiveness reverberate with patterns of both pornography and abuse.

T. Drorah Setel, writing about pornography in Hosea in 1985, defined pornography as the "objectification of female sexuality."² She identified various characteristics of a pornographic text, including portraying female sexuality as negative when compared to a positive or neutral male standard or as an object of male possession or control; depicting women as sluts or harlots; publicly degrading women; and depicting women as analogous to nature, especially with images of conquest and domination. In addition, pornography describes reality from the perspective of the male by representing female objectification as universal truth, centers on issues of power, and represents degrading and abusive power as recommended and endorsed. The question then becomes, "Is the second chapter of Hosea pornographic literature?" The woman is portrayed as promiscuous. The woman is publicly stripped in the presence of others. The woman is referred to as parched land needful of male fertility. The text is written from the perspective of the male who speaks from the perspective of universal truth. The power of the man to condemn, to punish, and to forgive is absolute. And such behavior is not merely endorsed; it is given divine sanction. While such observations do not settle the matter of whether Hos 2 is pornographic, such observations send warning signals at the very least. And there is more.

Hosea 2 also mirrors patterns of behavior observed by those who deal with domestic abuse. The three *therefores* in vv. 6, 9, and 14 denote an insidious pattern rather than a three-stage journey to repentance. The enforced seclusion of the woman reflects a common abusive practice of separating a woman "for her own good" from all she deems valuable. Likewise the deprivation coupled with the exposure, the name calling, and the threats and acts of violence sound familiar notes. Domestic violence becomes a sign of love. And once such a reading enters into our consciousness, even the final *therefore* when Yahweh brings his wife to the desert

²T. Drorah Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 86.

(continued on page 195)

pile up: God uncovers her shame, puts an end to her mirth, lays waste her vines, and punishes her for her ultimate sin of forgetting her husband (vv. 10–13). *Therefore*, we expect finally the sentence of death. And what do we get instead? The ultimate sin becomes in v. 14 an occasion not for death but for a divine act of salvation. The verse speaks of the overwhelming grace of God. The husband entices his wife into the wilderness and there, literally, “speaks to her heart.” The desert is transformed into a place of purity and fidelity where Israel, at last, is alone with her God.

The desert is not the only thing transformed. In v. 15 the speech of the woman becomes a response of faith. The earlier misidentified gifts are now given in abundance. Yahweh, the presumed warrior, abolishes in v. 18 the bow, the sword, and war in the land and replaces it with safety. Answers are multiplied, and the negative names earlier given to the wife and children are reversed.

Particularly noteworthy is v. 16, where the Lord says, “You will call me ‘My husband’ (my man), and no longer, ‘My Baal’ (my lord or master).” The relationship transformed is a relationship of man and woman, husband and wife, *not* master and servant. This relationship is marked by righteousness, justice, love, mercy, and mostly faithfulness born of true and deep knowledge of the Lord (vv. 19–20).

We hear the law; we hear the gospel. We, like Gomer and Israel, are unfaithful. God, like Hosea, remains faithful and exhibits this faithfulness by bringing Israel home through a process of disciplined isolation. The three *therefores* mark a three-stage journey to repentance: separation, deprivation, and purification. Such disciplined isolation reflects a twice-repeated pattern in Israel’s history—in the wilderness and in the exile. God is victim of our faithlessness. Yet God’s mercy blossoms out of and beyond God’s justified wrath. Through trial the woman is given the gift of repentance so that the marriage is finally marked by mutuality. Ultimately, faith itself is a gift of God. In, with, and under this reading, faithful marriage is held up as the ideal relationship. Notably, marriage is not solely for the purpose of raising up children, though clearly the well-being of children is at issue. Notably, the woman is fully a person, not property. At root marriage is about faithful relationship and, by analogy with God’s covenant with Israel, demands trust and commitment. Monogamy is an ideal reflection of monotheism. The sexual ethic of the church, I would contend, is based more on texts such as Hos 2 than on specific laws. Reading and hearing and studying this text together helps the church to form its community ethos and identity, so that, together with Hosea’s child, we say, “You are my God.” ⊕

and speaks to her heart rings false. First, hit them, then bring them flowers and tell them you love them. The trip to the wilderness becomes the worst sort of seduction. The man, having vented his rage, becomes docile and loving and now seeks reconciliation.

The effect of hearing the reconciliation of v. 14 as part of the abusive pattern is devastating. Suddenly a reader cannot even rest in the promise of the text. Even worse, once this text is heard as revealing a pattern of abuse, the entire history of Israel is open to question. Punishment precedes reconciliation and forgiveness both in the exodus and in the exile. The demands of the covenant are clear. What manner of God are we dealing with here? Though we are surely guilty, does guilt ever justify abuse? The line between punishment and abuse becomes fuzzy precisely because of the metaphor. The problems stirred by the metaphor overwhelm any more benign reading.

The corollary question is what kind of sexuality and marriage are here commended. Are we to value the covenant of marriage above all else in the face of systematic abuse? Is the church, in commending this text, suggesting that maintaining the sanctity of marriage has without question a higher value than protecting an abused spouse? Or, worse yet, is abuse to be commended in the case of an adulterous wife? All right, she is guilty, but should the husband then strip and shame her? Can this metaphor ever really be used compellingly to speak of God's forgiveness and grace? The positive valuation of Hos 2 is undermined not only through the reading of this specific text but also by what happens to this metaphor when it travels from Hosea to Jeremiah and particularly to Ezekiel. What can be read in Hosea as subtle and open to question becomes in Ezekiel lewd to the extreme. What then are we saying when we continue to use the marriage metaphor for God and Israel, or for Jesus and the church? Has the metaphor any value? Hosea himself clearly uses dangerous language subtly. But can Hosea's intention for the metaphor settle the matter? I suggest not. The intent of an author can never itself prevent the real effect of a text in and on a community. Just as the church has had to come to grips with Scripture's inherent, albeit largely unintended, anti-Semitism, so also the church must face the abusive effect of even our most cherished biblical texts. If the text is heard as abusive, apologetics and an appeal to the "real" or "correct" meaning cannot solve the problem. The problem is real, not merely misguided or willful. ⊕

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