

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

## Notes on Hosea's Marriage.

PROF. LEWIS B. PATON, M.A.

HARTFORD, CONN.

THE question whether Hosea's marriage is to be understood literally or figuratively is so important for the understanding of the character of the prophet and for the exegesis of his book, that I venture to offer a few new thoughts on this old theme.

Hosea's first reference to the marriage is found at the opening of his book : "When Yahweh first spake with Hosea, Yahweh said unto Hosea, Go take thee an adulterous wife and adulterous children. And he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim." This is a plain straightforward narrative and contains no hint that Hosea does not mean to be understood literally. The same is true of the other allusions to this marriage ; the prophet always refers to it as a simple matter of history, and never suggests that it is to be understood as an allegory. The names Gomer and Diblaim, in spite of the efforts of commentators to force a mystical meaning into them, admit of no natural allegorical interpretation. They are primitive proper names like Amos, and are mentioned simply because they are real names of real persons. If Hosea meant to allegorize, why did he give the wife a name at all, and why did he speak of her father ; or if he chose to invent a name for her, why did he not give her one that was plainly symbolic, like the names of the children "Un-compassionated" and "Not-my-people" ?

Moreover, in this opening passage of the book Hosea distinctly affirms that the beginning of God's special dealing with him dated from his marriage. It is more natural to suppose, that it was a bitter experience of real life which gave him the insight needed to make him a prophet, than that his career began with a mere suggestion to him by God of a new allegory which he might use effectively in his preaching. If the analogy of the other prophets teaches us anything, it is, that deep soul-experience is always the beginning of Yahweh's speaking to his messengers.

There is nothing in this passage itself, therefore, which calls for an allegorical interpretation. The reasons for this interpretation are not

exegetical but dogmatic. It is claimed, that the command to take an adulterous wife and adulterous children would, if carried out literally, involve immorality; and that it is inconceivable that a holy prophet should have been moved by Yahweh to commit a sin. As Kuenen remarks, however, the allegorical interpretation itself does not relieve this difficulty, for taking an adulterous wife in vision or in thought is as morally reprehensible as taking her in reality.

The force of this dogmatic objection vanishes, when we observe that Hosea's words do not necessarily imply that he knew the woman to be an adulteress, or even one of an unchaste disposition, at the time when he took her. The words "take an adulterous wife" signify no more than that he took as wife one who subsequently proved false to him. Hosea speaks of her as an adulteress proleptically, just as a man might say, "when I was engaged to my wife," although at the time of the engagement she was not his wife. The naturalness of this interpretation is shown by the fact that he is also told to take children of adulteries, although the birth of these children is not recorded until the following verses. If he can speak of taking children before they are born, there is no difficulty in his saying "take an adulterous wife" of one who did not prove herself an adulteress until a later time. Keil, who advocates the allegorical interpretation, has felt the force of this consideration so strongly that he is constrained to interpret the words, "children of adulteries," of children which the adulterous wife brings with her, rather than children which she in allegory bears to Hosea; but this hypothesis has no exegetical foundation. The "children of adulteries" can only be the three children of Hosea who are mentioned in the immediately succeeding verses, and who are the only children referred to elsewhere in the book.

The seeming positiveness of the direction, to take as wife one whom he knew to be an adulteress, arises from the fact that the Hebrew has no indirect discourse. We should say, Yahweh told Hosea that he should take an adulterous wife; the Hebrew cannot say this, but must cast the sentence into the direct discourse.

In vs. 3<sup>b</sup>-5 the prophet continues the narrative, "And she conceived and bare him a son: and Yahweh said unto him, Call him Jezreel, for within a little time I will visit the murders of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and I will cause the kingdom of Israel to cease. And it shall come to pass in that day I will break the bow of Israel in the plain of Jezreel."

Two things strike us at once in this passage; first, the lack of

threatening significance in the name Jezreel, and second, the lack of connection between this name and the threat with which it is accompanied. The name Jezreel means simply "God sows," *i.e.* God has given a seed, and carries with it only associations of blessing and plenty. In fact, the name is so used by Hosea himself in ii. 24, "The earth shall respond to the corn, the wine, and the oil, and they shall respond to Jezreel." It stands thus in marked contrast to the names of Hosea's other children, Lo-ruhamah and Lo-ammi, which have only an evil meaning and must be changed by the prophet into Ruhamah and Ammi (ii. 3, 25) before they can become typical of blessing.

Second, the play upon the name of the city Jezreel is far-fetched, and the roundabout way in which the prophet thus introduces a threat of national judgment which shall begin at Jezreel is very different from the direct statement in the case of the third child, "Call his name Not-my-people, for ye are not my people and I am not your God."

Two conclusions follow, it seems to me, from these facts: first, that Hosea did not yet know the true character of his wife at the time of the birth of his first child; and, second, that he was not yet conscious that he was acting under special divine direction. If Hosea at the time when his first child was born had known that his wife was unfaithful to him and that this was intended to typify Yahweh's relation to Israel, he must have given him a significant name such as he gives to the other children. But he does not do this: he calls him Jezreel, 'God-soweth,' a name which suggests no suspicion that the child is not his own, and merely expresses grateful recognition that Yahweh has given him a seed. The significance which is put upon the name Jezreel through the play upon the name of the city is evidently not its original meaning but an afterthought, a new construction put upon it in the light of later knowledge. This fact not only confirms our previous conclusion, that Hosea did not know his wife's true character at the time when he took her, but shows also that he did not yet recognize this event as the beginning of his prophetic career.

Verse 6: "And she conceived again and bare a daughter, and He said to him, Call her name Un-compassionated, for I will no longer show compassion to the house of Israel that I should forgive them." Here it is clear from the name which he gives the daughter, that Hosea has at last apprehended Gomer's unfaithfulness, but it is by no means clear from the name that he yet comprehends the pro-

phetic significance of these happenings. The name Un-compassionated shows, no doubt, that Hosea did not regard the child as his own, but does not suggest, any more than the name Jezreel, that he gave this name originally with reference to God's dealings with Israel. It seems probable, therefore, that even at the time of the birth of his daughter Hosea was not yet conscious of his prophetic vocation, and that the words "for I will no longer show compassion to the house of Israel," are to be regarded as an interpretation given to the name in the light of later knowledge, like the interpretation which is given to the name Jezreel in the preceding verses.

Verse 8 f.: "And when she had weaned Un-compassionated, she conceived and bare a son. And he said, Call his name Not-my-people, for ye are not my people and I am not your God." The mention of the weaning of the daughter is a little touch of natural parental feeling, which speaks strongly for the literalness of this narrative and is incapable of an allegorical interpretation. The fact that Gomer is still in Hosea's house and bears her son there is very significant. It shows that, although her husband knew what she was when the second child was born, yet he did not cast her off but forgave her the wrong she had done him and kept her still beneath his roof. Apparently he continued to treat her as his wife and her children as his children, sought to guard her from temptation, and hoped for her reformation and restoration. This view is confirmed by the allegorical application which he subsequently made of this experience. Addressing the Israelites in the name of Yahweh (ii. 4) he says, "Plead with your mother [the nation], plead; and let her put away her whoredoms from her face and her adulteries from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born" (*i.e.* denounce her publicly as an adulteress: cf. Ezek. xvi. 38 f.). Also ii. 9: "She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but she shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better with me than now."

The name Not-my-people, which in the bitterness of his heart Hosea gave the third child, is doubly significant. It shows both that he knew that Gomer's unfaithfulness was persistent and that he now saw that his experience was typical of Yahweh's experience with Israel. Lo-ammi is a distinctly prophetic, symbolic name, like the names of Isaiah's sons, Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and the explanation which he appends to it, "For ye are not my people and I am not your God," is one that lies naturally in the name itself.

This leads to the interesting conclusion that Hosea first became conscious of his prophetic vocation in the period which elapsed between the birth of Lo-ruhamah and the birth of Lo-ammi, which, since it followed the weaning of Lo-ruhamah, presumably occurred about three years after her birth.

If this be the case, it is easy to see the psychological genesis of Hosea's conviction that he was called to be a prophet. In those sad years which followed the birth of his daughter, when he was staggering beneath the load of shame which Gomer had brought upon him, when he was vainly striving to win her back to purity, and was seeking to find some explanation of Yahweh's mysterious dealings with him, the illuminating thought dawned upon him, that he was not alone in his sorrow, but that God himself was passing through the same experience with his people Israel. He had taken her as his bride in the land of Egypt, and had loved her ever since with constant affection; but she had forsaken him for the Baalim. Yet he did not cast her off. He warned her that, if she persisted in her ways, he must give her over to punishment. He put restraints about her to keep her from temptation and he had looked for her repentance and return to his love.

This thought not merely brought him the consolation of the sympathy and fellowship of God in his suffering, but was for him a new revelation of the character of Yahweh. Yahweh is no Baal, such as Israel conceives him to be, whose business it is to dispense the material blessings of life in return for the punctilious rendering of offerings, and who is bound always to defend and support his worshippers. He is a free being, whose relation to Israel rests upon moral choice. He is not the tutelary, tribal God; he is the husband who has chosen of his own accord, who has the right to reject the apostate wife, but who in mercy still grants her opportunity for repentance.

This was Hosea's vision of God, and it was this that made him a prophet. Having this new truth in regard to the divine character, he saw that he possessed the key which would unlock the religious problems of his day, and he could not but proclaim to others the discovery which meant so much for him. By the time that his third child was born he was fully conscious of his prophetic mission, for he gave him a name which was expressive not merely of his own private emotions but of the message which he felt himself called to deliver to Israel. Lo-ammi would convey unmistakably to every one who should hear it the thought of the illegitimacy of the Israel which has apostatized from Yahweh.

And now in the light of his vision of God and of his vocation he saw the meaning of his whole bitter experience. The espousal of Gomer was not fortuitous, but Yahweh had commanded it in order that through it he might teach him his will, and, therefore, it was the true beginning of Yahweh's speaking with him. He had named his son Jezreel with no higher thought than that Yahweh had given him a seed, but now he saw in that naming a providential reference to Jezreel, the capital of the northern kingdom, where the murder of Ahab was to be avenged upon the house of Jehu. He had called his daughter Lo-ruhamah with no other thought than that he could not feel towards her the love of a father, but now he saw that this name was also expressive of God's feeling towards Israel. It is in this larger knowledge of a time subsequent to the whole experience that the narrative of Hos. i. is written.

In ii. 4-25 Hosea gives a summary of his preaching after the consciousness had come to him through the tragedy of his domestic life that Yahweh had a message for him to deliver. The political conditions depicted in this prophecy show that it was not uttered later than the reign of Jeroboam II. Keeping in mind what, as we have just seen, must have been the content of Hosea's experience by the time that his third child was born, we cannot agree with Wellhausen when he says (*Kleine Propheten*, p. 101): "The sermon in ii. 4-25 goes beyond the text in i. 2-9, since in ii. 16-25 we hear of a restoration of Yahweh's relation to Israel, while in ch. i. the corresponding feature in the life of the prophet has not yet appeared. This feature comes in as an afterthought in iii. 1-5." If our previous conclusion is correct, that Hosea knew his wife's character by the time that his daughter was born, but forgave her and restored her to his home, then the trait in the life of the prophet which corresponds to his confidence that Yahweh will have mercy upon Israel is present and we do not have to go to ch. iii. to find the explanation of ch. ii. I cannot here discuss this point in full, but I think that it can be shown that there is no feature in the picture of God's dealings with Israel as described in ch. ii. which cannot be shown by legitimate inference to have been an element of Hosea's experience as recorded in i. 2-9.

With the death of Jeroboam II. a new era in the history of the northern kingdom began. It was a time of anarchy in the state, of apostasy in religion, and of utter degeneracy in morals. The message which Hosea had preached in the days of Jeroboam was no longer adequate, and he needed a new preparation for a new minis-

try. This was effected through a new development in the tragedy of his life. His wife, to whom he had shown so much forbearance, forsook him completely, and for a period whose length cannot be determined passed out of his knowledge and influence. The narrative is found in ch. iii., which forms the introduction to the second part of Hosea's ministry, in the same way in which ch. i. forms the introduction to the first period. The more advanced apostasy and the coming exile referred to in this chapter show that it belongs to a later period than the narrative of i. 2-9.

"And Yahweh said unto me, Go again, love a woman beloved of her paramour and an adulteress. . . . So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver, and a homer of barley, and a half homer of barley: and I said unto her, Thou shalt stay quietly with me for many days; thou shalt not be a harlot, and thou shalt not belong to any man, and I also will not belong to thee" (iii. 1-3).

That the woman here referred to is the same as the Gomer of ch. i. has been denied because of the indefinite expression "a woman" in verse 1, but the absence of the article in Hebrew may denote quality as well as indefiniteness, and the context makes it plain that the same woman is meant here who has been mentioned before. The Lord says, "Go again, love," and this implies that Hosea has loved the woman before. The prophet says, "So I bought *her* for me," not indefinitely 'a woman,' as we should expect if "a woman" in verse 1 were really indeterminate. Besides, there would be no allegorical significance in Hosea's taking a second wife who was just like the first, while there would be a profound meaning in his taking back the woman who had already wronged him so deeply. We must assume, therefore, that it is Gomer who is referred to in this chapter.

The fact that he is compelled to buy her for himself for a sum which is about equivalent in value to thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave, shows that in the interval which has elapsed since the narrative of ch. i. a great change has come about in the relation of Hosea to his wife. We must suppose that his efforts to reform her as implied in ch. i. served only to make her more rebellious, so that at length she forsook him and her children and plunged into the depths of degradation, until at last she was enslaved, presumably for debt, and Hosea was compelled to buy her in order to secure her return.

The commandment of the Lord to love once more is, doubtless, to be interpreted as the religious construction which the prophet



puts upon the fact that, in spite of his wife's utter infidelity, his love for her did not die out. This persistency of his love, as well as the original marriage, was designed by Yahweh for his instruction. Even in her abject degradation he loved her still, and when the opportunity came to save her, as it were against her will, by purchasing her as his slave, he eagerly embraced it. He took her back to his home once more, and, as his slave, secluded her from temptation in a way which he had not been able to do when she was his wife. By this act of supreme, unquenchable love he seems to have melted her heart and won her back to purity, for we read no more of her forsaking him, and in the allegorical use which the prophet subsequently makes of this episode he evidently implies that the wandering wife was reclaimed.

Bitter as this latter experience was, and disappointing to all of Hosea's earlier hopes, it was God's way of fitting him to preach to the degenerate age which followed the death of Jeroboam. In the moment of his deepest anguish, when his wife had deserted him, when his life seemed forever blighted, but when he still kept on loving the cause of all his misery, the divine comforter again came to him and whispered within his soul, If thine own love can be so pure and strong that no injury can quench it, no sin kill it, what must be the divine love? If thou canst still follow and bring back beneath thy roof her whom thou hast once loved, how much more must the heart of God yearn after the people which he has chosen to be his own, but which, nevertheless, has been unfaithful to him?

This gave Hosea a new message for the degenerate times which were now come upon Israel. He saw that even this last and most awful stage of his experience had its divine counterpart. Just as he still loved Gomer in spite of her complete defection, so Yahweh loved the children of Israel in these dark days of seemingly hopeless apostasy which had now come, when they turned, not merely to the Baals, but to foreign gods and idols which were served with offerings of cakes of raisins (iii. 1). Just as he bought her back for himself, so Yahweh will never suffer Israel wholly to slip away from him. Just as he has kept her under restraint as a slave, and has thus removed temptation from her, so Yahweh will send his people into the slavery of exile, where they shall no more be subjected to the seducing influences of wicked kings and corrupt religion (verse 4). Just as Gomer has repented and been restored to her place as wife, so the children of Israel shall return and seek Yahweh their God . . . and shall come tremblingly to Yahweh and to his goodness in the

after days (verse 5). Chapter iii. is thus not only an account of Hosea's own experience but a tracing of the correspondence of that experience with Yahweh's dealings with Israel. It forms, therefore, the programme of Hosea's subsequent teaching, and the remaining chapters of the book are merely an unfolding in detail of the thought which is here sketched in outline, just as ch. ii. is a development of the outline given in ch. i.