

The Use of Marriage and Family Metaphors in the Prophecy of Hosea

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Abstract

One of the remarkable features of the book of Hosea is the use of the marriage metaphor. Hosea is the first Hebrew prophet to employ the marriage metaphor to portray God's covenant relationship with Israel, one in which Israel became unfaithful. Hosea is a prophet of divine love. He portrays God as a lover who is betrayed by the infidelity of his beloved people (Israel). Hosea portrays Israel's idolatry and syncretism with the Canaanite religion as adultery. Marital infidelity in any culture has always been frowned at. But if we analyze the Hosean text in the light of modern-day understanding, we cannot but say that the punishment meted out to Gomer by her aggrieved husband is rather too harsh. She is subjected to enforced seclusion, deprived of food and clothing, and stripped naked to shame and humiliate her. This is an expression of violence against women. Unfortunately, in biblical times, such a behaviour seemed to have been allowed towards women who were found to be guilty of adultery. While we must interpret this passage in the light of the culture of the time it was written, the text does not in any way justify any kind of marital violence against women.

Key Words: Marriage, Infidelity, Adultery, Idolatry, Hosea, Gomer

Introduction

One of the outstanding characteristics of the book of Hosea is the use of the marriage metaphors, especially the Wife and Husband metaphor, to portray the covenant relationship between God and Israel, one in which Israel, like an adulterous wife and a rebellious son, has repeatedly broken. Hosea is the first of the OT prophets to portray the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel as a marital relationship (Hos 1-3; Fohrer, 1968; Igbo, 2020). He portrays Israel as Yahweh's covenant partner, a covenant relationship in which Israel became unfaithful. Hosea uses his marital relationship with Gomer, an unfaithful wife, to represent God's covenant relationship with Israel, a covenant to which Israel became unfaithful. Although Hosea was torn apart by his wife's infidelity, he refused to give up on her, with the hope that she would change her ways.

Hosea refers to Israel covenant infraction as adultery. Israel's sin is portrayed as idolatry and a divided loyalty between Yahweh and Baal. Hosea traces out the cause of Israel's sin. It was owing to Israel's material prosperity, especially following the institution of the monarchy. The prophet announces that God will take away all these material things which he himself gave but which have become a major obstacle to the love and fidelity he asks of Israel. Hosea is convinced that nothing short of exile will bring Israel to conversion. Hosea announces that Yahweh will bring Israel back into the desert and speak to her heart (Hos 2:16; 12:10). The desert here is a metonymy for exile. However, Hosea gives out hope of restoration if Israel repents and returns to God.

This article aims to study Hosea's use of marriage/family metaphors. It studies closely Gomer's marital infidelity and Hosea's reaction to her marital infidelity. It seeks to evaluate Hosea's disciplinary measures against his unfaithful wife and evaluate these measures in the light of modern worldview. Granted, as the text indicates, that Gomer breached the marital covenant by her adulterous lifestyle, one wonders why Hosea should mete out such harsh punishments on his wife, even to the extent of stripping her naked in order to shame and humiliate her. In the light of modern-day practice, how justified is Hosea's action? Is Gomer a victim of a metaphor or a victim of marital violence? These are the questions that this article seeks to address. This study employs an exegetico-theological method of biblical analysis. This method involves a critical study of the Hosean text, spiced with theological reflection on it. The Bible version employed in this work is the *New Revised Standard Version*.

Date and Socio-Historical Context (Hos 1:1)

Hosea's prophetic ministry took place in the 8th century B.C., during the time of the expansion of the Assyrian empire. The superscription to this book (Hos 1:1) situates the ministry of Hosea between 750 and 724 BC, i.e., between the last years of Jeroboam II (786–746 BC) and three years before the fall of Israel to the Assyrians in 721 BC. Israel went into Assyrian captivity in 721 B.C. Since Hosea does not speak of these events, it seems likely that his prophetic ministry ended prior to 721 BC (Post, 2021). While the focus of Hosea was directed at the Northern Kingdom, his message encompassed the entire people of God (Post, 2021).

Hosea was a younger contemporary of Amos. While Amos preached at a time of great moral and religious degeneration in Israel. Hosea preached in the period of further socio-moral and religious degeneration in Israel. Unlike Amos, the prophet of justice, Hosea is a prophet of divine love. The basis of Hosea's message lies in the covenant bond between God and Israel. The prophet portrays God as a lover who is betrayed by the infidelity of his beloved people (Israel). This is particularly expressed in Hos 1-3.

Wife/Israel and Husband/God Metaphor in Hos 1:2-3

The prophecy of Hosea is remarkable in its use of metaphors to draw home his message. Outstanding among these metaphors is the marriage metaphor. According to Hos 1:2, Hosea is commanded by God to take for himself "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešet zenûnîm*) and to have with her. The phrase, "wife of whoredom" suggests one who is habitually promiscuous. The NIV translates *'ešet zenûnîm* as "adulterous wife". Since Hosea's wife is referred to as "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešet zenûnîm*), the children born of her are labeled "children of whoredom" (*yaldê zenûnîm*). The assumption is that her children will be inclined to inherit her tendency to promiscuity (Yee, 1996; Birch, 1997; Stuart, 1987). Hos 1:3 identifies the woman as Gomer, daughter of Diblaim.

It is shocking that God should command the prophet to marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her. The reason for this divine command to Hosea is given in v.2c: "For the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." Hosea's marriage to Gomer is used as a metaphor to portray the covenant relationship between Yahweh to Israel. As Hosea realized the infidelity of Gomer, he understood the heinousness of the infidelity of his own people to its God (Owens, 2016). So, Hosea's marriage with Gomer reflects God's covenant relationship with Israel, and Gomer's marital infidelity portrays Israel's covenant infidelity demonstrated by Israel's syncretism with Baals.

Although Hosea calls Gomer a "woman/wife of whoredom" (Hos 1:2) or "a woman who has a lover", "an adulteress" (Hos 3:1), the text does not suggest that she was a prostitute (*zonāh*) by profession before he married her. According to (Boshoff, 2002:25), Gomer might be a virgin when Hosea married her and only later became promiscuous after the marriage. Gomer is never labeled a *zonāh*, the technical Hebrew term for a

prostitute. Here, the prophet uses his wife's infidelity to portray Israel's covenant disloyalty to Yahweh (Kraft, 1971).

Among the Old Testament prophets, Hosea is the first to speak of Israel's covenant infidelity to Yahweh as adultery (root *nā'ap*). He portrays Israel as committing prostitution (root: *zānāh*) by her religious syncretism. The term, prostitution (root: *zānāh*), is widely used in a metaphorical sense in the Old Testament, occurring about 71 times (38 in Ezekiel). In many sources the worship of other gods was called prostitution (cf. Exod 34:15-16; Lev 17:7; Deut 31:16; Ps 106:39; Isa 1:21). Apparently, Hosea chooses this metaphor because of the involvement of the Israelites in the sexual rites associated with Canaanite worship. The worship of another god besides Yahweh is likened to the promiscuity of a prostitute. Hosea offers explicit definitions of what he means by this promiscuity. The people have forsaken (root: *'āzab*) Yahweh (1:2; 4:10); they do not know (*yāda'*) him and their deeds do not permit them to return (*šūb*) to their God (Gowan, 1998). Baal worship and its sexual overtones must have contributed to Hosea's choice of prostitution and adultery as metaphors for Israel's acceptance of another god alongside Yahweh (Gowan, 1998).

Hosea uses his marriage with Gomer to symbolize God's covenant relationship with Israel, which Israel has repeatedly broken. Gomer, the unfaithful wife, symbolizes Israel; Yahweh is portrayed as the aggrieved husband. Gomer's unfaithfulness to Hosea dramatizes Israel's covenant infidelity to Yahweh. Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh is seen in her participation in the Canaanite religious rites as Hosea describes in chapters 2 and 4. Just as marriage is built on fidelity, "the covenant relationship between God and Israel stands or falls on the people's fidelity to God" (Leclerc (2007:148). Hosea strongly condemned Israel's covenant infidelity.

Hosea's Children as Prophetic Signs (1:4-9)

Gomer bore three children for Hosea. Just as Gomer's marital infidelity symbolizes Israel's covenant infractions, the names of the children are intended to symbolize the consequences of Israel's sins (Birch, 1997). Hos 1:4-9 relates the births of Hosea's three children, their symbolic naming, and the significance of the names.

Hos 1:4 focuses on the first child, a son. Here, God orders Hosea to name him Jezreel (v.4a). Jezreel is the name of the fertile valley situated between the highlands of Samaria and Galilee. It was at Jezreel that Jehu toppled the dynasty of Omri by murdering Israel's king Joram, son of Ahab (2 Kgs 9:2,4) and killing Jezebel, wife of Ahab, and children of Ahab (2 Kgs 10; Kraft, 1971). Hosea's son's name, Jezreel, is a reminder that God never condoned the sin of Jehu (2 Kin. 10:1-14), and God did not forget (Post, 2021). Unlike the author of 2 Kgs 10:30, Hosea condemns this action and revealed that the blood guilt resulting from Jehu's action provokes Yahweh's judgment (Wolff, 1974; Stuhlmüller, 2001).

According to the threat implied in the birth of Hosea's son, Jezreel, the house of Jehu will be punished for this bloodletting (Hos 1:4a). The interpretation of the name is introduced by the particle *kî* (for). Irvine (1995) notes that the interpretation consists of two divine threats: (1) "I (Yahweh) will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel"; (2) I will "put an end to the sovereignty of the House of Israel." Both threats are governed by a temporary clause "for in a little while" (*kî- 'ôd mā 'at*) which points to the imminence of punishment. Hosea announced that God would put an end to the "kingdom of the house of Israel" (*māḵûṭ bêt yisrā'ēl*) on account of Jehu's crime (Hos 1:4b). In Hosea's day, Jeroboam II, Jehu's great-grandson, was in power. Jehu's dynasty was violently brought to an end in 752 B.C., when Jeroboam's son, Zechariah (who reigned for six months), was murdered by the usurper Shallum (2 Kgs 15:10).

Hosea's second child is a daughter and Hosea named her "*Lo-ruhamah*" which means "Not pitied," or "No compassion" (Hos 1:6a). The name signifies that God's mercy would not continue indefinitely, but judgment would come (Post, 2021). For God to say "no Compassion" would be devastating under any circumstance, but if a direct allusion to Exod 34:6-7 was intended, that was already a threat to the very covenant relationship itself (Gowan, 1998). The name, *Lo-ruhamah*, points to approaching judgment that will befall Israel (exile).

The third child is a son, and Hosea named him "*Lo-Ammi*" (v.9), which means "not my people." This is, perhaps, the worst of the three names. If we assumed that the second child's name implied an end to the covenant relationship, the name of the third child points to Yahweh's rejection of his people. At the beginning of Israel's history, when Yahweh made a covenant with Israel, Yahweh declares in relation to Israel: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Exod 6:7; cf. Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28). Hosea's third child's name, *Lo-Ammi*, apparently symbolizes the nullification of that covenant on account of Israel's infidelity (Yee, 1996). The name indicates that Israel would cease to be God's peculiar people.

It may be noted that in each case, the narrative of Gomer's bearing of a child is followed by a divine oracle explaining the significance of the name that the prophet is to give to the child (Ehelich, 1985; Igbo, 2020). The names of Hosea's children symbolize the broken covenant relationship between God and Israel. The names also point to the approaching catastrophe, namely exile, that will inevitably come upon Israel on account of its sins. This was fulfilled in 721 B.C. when Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom and carried the cream of the people to exile. Though God decided to punish Israel on account of her infidelity, Hosea foresees a time in the future when the judgment symbolized by Hosea's children's names will be reversed. Then, "Not my people" ("*Lo-Ammi*") will become "My People" ("*Ammi*"; 2:1) and "Children of the living God" (*benê 'el-hay*; v.10); "Not pitied" (*Lo-Ruhamah*) will become "Pitied" (2:1). This is the emphasis in Hos 1:10-2:1.

Divorce as Figurative Representation of Broken Covenant Relationship (Hose 2:1-2)

As earlier said, Hosea is the first of the Old Testament prophets to figuratively represent the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel as a divorce (Hos 2:2). The apparent reason for the divorce between Hosea and his wife is the wife's infidelity (Yee, 1996).

Before Hosea issues a debilitating threat of punishment to his unfaithful wife, he asks his children to "plead" with their mother to "put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts" i.e., to give up her adulterous practices (v.2b). The children are invited to enter the litigation in the hope of reforming their mother. It becomes apparent here that the reason for the proceeding is not for the sake of divorce, but for reconciliation (Mays, 1969). Hosea warns his wife that if she refuses to forswear her adulterous ways, he will humiliate her publicly. P. A. Kruger (1992) interprets the utterance in 2:2b (MT v.4b), "for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband", as a divorce formula. The reason for the divorce is the wife's infidelity, a symbol of Israel's covenant infractions.

The threat issued to Gomer is extended to her children. They are rejected by their father, who, considering his wife's sexual transgressions, suspects their paternity (2:4-5a.) and refers to them as "children of whoredom" (*ḥanê zānūnīm*, v.4). The ultimate threat is the dissolution of the relationship through divorce. This is the effect of infidelity on marriage.

Hosea's Threefold Strategy to Curb the Whoring Wife (2:3-6. 11-13)

In Hos 2:1-6, Hosea announces punitive measures that God/husband would mete out to the unfaithful wife/Israel. In ancient Israel, the penalties for infidelity were severe. The law prescribed divorce (Deut 24:1-4) and even the death penalty for adultery in some cases (Deut 22:22). In 2: 3-6, Hosea announces a three-part strategy to curb his wife's infidelity. First, he decides to isolate her by restricting her freedom and denying her access to her lovers: "I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them, and she shall seek them, but shall not find them" (Hos 2:6-7). This enforced seclusion has a goal – so that she will recognize and acknowledge her dependence on her husband for her needs (vv.7b).

Second, Hosea adopts a series of physical and psychological punishments on his wife, such as withholding food and clothing from her: "I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season; and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness" (Hos 2:9). Third, he announces a more stringent disciplinary measure aimed at putting an end to his wife's whoring:

I will strip her naked ... and make her like a wilderness,
and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst
(Hos 2:3 [MT 2:5]).

Among the ancient Near Eastern peoples, the garment was an extension of a person's personality. According to Wolff (1974), stripping one naked was a sign of humiliation and disgrace. Here, the stripping of Gomer of her clothing was not only intended as a punishment for her infidelity, but it may also be a confirmation of divorce. It was also intended to expose her to shame and humiliation. This kind of punishment was evidenced in marriage situations in the Old Testament period.

In the marriage metaphor in Ezekiel 16, one of the punishments meted out to an adulteress was to strip (*pāšaṭ*) her of her clothes (the same word is used in Hos 2:3a [MT 2:5a]) and leave her "naked and bare" (Ezek 16:39). In Isa 47:2-3, where Babylon is depicted as a whore, a similar punitive measure is recommended: "remove your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs," as a penalty for her transgression. In Nahum 3:5, the city of Nineveh is presented as an unchaste woman who will be uncovered on account of her whorish acts. Then, God will let nations look on her nakedness and kingdoms on her shame. In Ezekiel 16:39, the sin of Israel is portrayed as adultery, and God threatened to strip (*pāšaṭ*) her naked. Against this background, the punishment of stripping in Hosea 2:3a (MT 2:5a) is clearly a sign of public disgrace and is in accordance with similar punitive measures taken against adulterous women elsewhere in the Old Testament times.

In Hos 2:3b (MT 2:5b), a shift in the object has taken place: the target of the threat is not so much the wife (symbolizing the people), but the land. Here, God threatens to "strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born," and "make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst." This points to the approaching exile, an inevitable consequence of Israel's covenant infractions.

A Return to the Initial Honeymoon (Hos 2:14-23)

In Hos 2:14-23, the tone shifts from punishment to reconciliation. Earlier in Hos 2:1-13, God threatened to punish his bride/Israel for her idolatrous acts. In v.14, God resolves to "allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her." The Hebrew verb, *pātaḥ*, used in 2:14 for 'allure' usually means 'deceive, fool, seduce,' and 'speak upon her heart.' This marks the beginning of the move for restoration. Here, God resolves to woo (*pātaḥ*) Israel again: to take her back to the wilderness "and speak tenderly to her (Hos 2:14). The wilderness was the place where God and Israel had first pledged themselves in a covenant relationship following the deliverance from Egypt. It was also a time of harmony and a rich relationship between God and Israel – a honeymoon. God here proposes a second "honeymoon" (Birch, 1997). God will take her back to the wilderness and speak to her heart. In Hos 2:16-17, the central theme is Yahweh's renewed effort to win back his unfaithful wife. It is interwoven with marriage symbolism: Yahweh starts a new courtship (Kruger, 1992).

The journey to the wilderness, as Yee (1996) said, has a two-fold objective. On the one hand, the husband seeks to thwart the wife's physical pursuit of lovers, in the hope that

she will return to him. On the other hand, it is a spiritual journey aimed at moving her to repentance (v.15), and ultimately to a renewal of the relationship. The objective is that, in the wilderness, deprived of all the material possession which has made her turn away from her God, Israel will return (*šûb*) to her God and once again recognize Yahweh as "my husband" and no longer as "my Baal" (Hos 2:16). Yahweh, in turn, will forgive Israel's transgressions and restore her to divine favour (Hos 2:19). This signifies the renewal of their covenant/marriage relationship. This renewal of the covenant/marital relationship will lead to a return of a period of cosmic peace (Hos 2:18a [MT 2:20a]). As DeRoche (1981) said, in the prospect of this reconciliation and covenant renewal, God promises to "make" for her "a covenant" "with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground." God "will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land. God will make Israel "lie down in safety" (Hos 2:18 [MT 2:20]). With the return of cosmic peace, the fertility of the land is restored.

With the relationship restored, the critical question of the paternity of Gomer's children is resolved (Hos 2:23). Israel as Jezreel (God sows) had become alienated from the land on account of sin. But now God says, "I will sow him for myself in the land" (Hos 2:23a [MT 2:25a]). God will have pity on 'Not pitied'. God will say to "Not my people" that "You are my people." And she will respond, "You are my God" (Hos 2:23b [MT v.25b]).

Second Divine Command to Hosea (Hosea 3:1-5)

Hos 3 opens with a second command from Yahweh to Hosea: "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress" (*nā'āpheṭ*, Hos 3:1a). This is reminiscent of the command in 1:2a: "Go, take for yourself a 'wife of whoredom'" (*'ešet zenūnîm*). Authors, like A. Szabo (1975) and J. L. McKenzie (2002), are of the view that the woman in 3:1 may have been the same Gomer as in 1:2-3. While Chapter 1 refers to the prophet in the third person, chapter 3 employs the first person "I" style. This suggests that Hosea is speaking directly of his personal experience. Owing to this change in person, North (1958) is of the view that Hosea 3 is autobiographical.

Hos 3:1b is interpretative; it supplies the reason for which God asked Hosea to marry a woman who has a lover: "Just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods...." In 2:3 (MT 2:5), Hosea threatened to punish his adulterous wife by stripping her naked, making her like a wilderness, turning her "into a parched land," and killing her "with thirst." Here, Hosea resolves to forgive her, despite her adulterous lifestyle. When Hosea resolves to forgive Gomer and accept her into his household again, he gives back to her what he had withdrawn: silver to purchase clothes, barley for food, and wine for a drink (Hos 3:2). In 3:2, the prophet is said to "acquire" or "buy" (root: *kārah*) her: "So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine" (Hos 3:2). The expression, "I bought her" (*wā'ekkarēhā*), apparently refers to the payment of the bride price: "fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a

measure of wine.” But, instead of giving these items to Diblaim (Gomer’s father), Hosea gives them directly to Gomer.

Though Hosea resolves to take Gomer back as his wife, he does not do so without conditions. First, Hosea imposes some discipline on her - sexual abstinence. Hosea said to her,

You must remain (*yāsab*) as mine for many days;
you shall not play the whore,
you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you
(Hos 3:3).

The sexual abstinence that Hosea imposes on Gomer does not apply only to her, but also to Hosea himself. The sexual abstinence is interpreted as a reference to the exile: “For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice...” (Hos 3:4). “Prince,” here, according to Kraft (1971), refers to political leadership – the monarchy. This implies that Israel in exile will be deprived of political leadership and religious observances and festivals. However, beyond the period of deprivation, there is the hope of restoration of Israel to God’s favour (McKeating, 1971). The objective of Israel’s political and cultic deprivation is to move the people to repentance.

Idolatry as Israel’s Whoredom (Hos 9:9-17-10:8)

Hos 9:1-11:11 discusses Israel’s history of infidelity to Yahweh. Hosea stresses that Israel’s sins have roots in Israel’s past (9:9). Israel’s sins are said to be great “as in the days of Gibeah.” The expression, “in the days of Gibeah” refers to the people’s depravity which, as the prophet sees it, began with the institution of the monarchy. Hosea is evidently anti-monarchical.

Using agricultural imagery, Hosea compares Israel to “grapes in the wilderness” - a rare and pleasant discovery (9:10a). God “found” Israel in the wilderness, made a covenant with her, and protected and sustained her like grapes in a desert land (cf. Deut 32:10; Ezek 16:6-14; Hos 11:1-4). However, this relationship was ruptured at the end of Israel’s wilderness journey when Israel “came to Baal-Peor” in Moab. According to Num 25:1-5, Israel’s first contact with the Canaanite religion began when the Israelites began to have sexual relations with Moabite women. These women “seduced” them to worship their fertility god, Baal, as well (Yee, 1996).

In 10:1-8, Hosea uses the grape/vine metaphor to portray Israel’s initial relationship with God (cf. 9:10-17 and 8:1-14). Whereas Hos 9:10 describes Israel as grapes that Yahweh found in the wilderness, 10:1 recalls Israel’s settlement in the land, where like a vine it took root and flourished (cf. Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 17:5-6). As a nation in covenant relation with Yahweh, Israel was the recipient of Yahweh’s blessings. Rather than being thankful and faithful to Yahweh, Israel increasingly erected altars and pillars to a false deity. This refers to the economic prosperity that characterized the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). Hosea tells us that the more Israel’s material prosperity increased, the more altars and

sacred pillars she erected (for the Baals). It was a case of divided loyalty between Yahweh and Baal, a case of syncretism which Exod 34:14, Deut 5:9, and Josh 24:19-24 spoke against. Hosea declares that God will not allow such false altars and pillars to endure. They will be smashed in the Lord’s judgment, and Baal, their supposed benefactor, will be powerless to help.

Exile as Punishment for Infidelity (Hos 11:1-7)

In 11:1-7, Hosea employs the father-son metaphor to portray the relationship between God and Israel (11:1). Here, God’s liberation of Israel from Egyptian slavery is figuratively portrayed as the birth of Israel. In Exod 4:22, Israel is referred to as God’s “first-born son”. Though Yahweh has lavished steadfast love on Israel, Israel is portrayed as a rebellious child:

The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols” (11:2).

Because of Israel’s covenant infidelity, God resolves to apply stern disciplinary measures. God will take them back to Egypt. The exile to Assyria is symbolized here as a return (*sûb*) to Egypt. This reflects the covenant curse in Deut 28:68: “The Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt....” In Hosea, “Egypt” stands as a metonymy for exile and a return to bondage. Assyria is portrayed as God’s instrument of the chastisement of Israel. This punishment comes upon Israel because of its break of moral order (Kavusa, 2016). Hosea is convinced that exile is the unavoidable condition for the healing of recalcitrant Israel and for making possible a new fellowship between her and God (Eissfeldt, 1965).

From Judgment to Hope of Salvation (Hos 11:8-11; 14)

The fate of Israel is reflected in Hos 11:5-7. Earlier in 8:8, Israel is said to be “swallowed up”, and “are among the nations as a useless vessel.” Though God resolves to punish Israel for her infidelity, the punishment (exile) is not the last word. The prophet hopes that in exile, Israel will repent and turn back to Yahweh. On the basis of this repentance, Yahweh will restore the nation (Stuart, 1987; Mays, 1982).

In 11:8-9, there was a sudden shift of tone from punishment to hope. God uses a series of rhetorical questions to engage in self-reflection: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?” (11:8ab). Admah and Zeboiim were cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah (Deut 29:23). Hos 11:8c provides a glimpse of God’s deepest feelings: “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” This verse, according to Dempsey (2000), presents a human portrait of a loving God with intense feelings for Israel.

Although Israel’s disloyalty merits divine caution, God resolves to show mercy instead of unleashing his wrath on Israel: “I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim” (Hos 11:9a). But even as God resolves not

to destroy Israel, the prophet declares that exile to Assyria remains inevitable. It is part of the fate Israel has chosen by its sin. But the exile is not God's last word. Hosea looks forward to the day Israel will return to Yahweh and God will restore her from exile (Phillips, 1956). In this way, the Book of Hosea closes, not in judgment and death (chap 13), but with a promise of restoration and salvation (chap 14). In Hos 14:1-3, the prophet summons the people to repent and return to their God: "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord" (Hos 14:1-2). Hosea urges returning Israel to bring, not sacrifice, but true repentance.

Negative Valuation of Women in Hos 1-3

The nuptial metaphor plays a central thematic role in the message of Hosea. Hosea uses it to convey his perception of the covenant bond between Israel and God (Fohrer, 1968; Setel, 1985). In the text, Hosea represents Yahweh; Gomer stands for Israel. Gomer's infidelity corresponds to the apostasy of Israel, especially its syncretism with the Canaanite religious practices. The prophet portrays God as a husband who is betrayed by the infidelity of his covenant partner, Israel. The estrangement between Hosea and his wife corresponds to Yahweh's punitive discipline of his people. Hosea's enduring love for his faithless wife corresponds to Yahweh's steadfast purpose of good for Israel. The text reveals the character of God as faithful, forgiving, and unconditional loving. Though God is enraged by Israel's trope of infidelity; though he punishes Israel with exile on account of her sins, he will not give up on Israel. This is a demonstration of God's steadfast love (*hesed*).

Hosea's message fits into three "movements": accusation, punishment, and restoration. In the first of movement, God accuses Israel of idolatry and syncretism with Canaanite religious practices. The second movement highlights punishment for covenant infraction. As a punishment for infidelity, Israel is banished to the wilderness, a metonymy for exile. The wilderness was initially depicted as desolate and chaotic, but it became a place where God originally found Israel, and where he finds her again (Boshoff, 2002). The third movement is the reconciliation and restoration. Hosea portrays the reconciliation between Yahweh and Israel as a new covenant, a return to the initial honeymoon.

If we analyze Hosea's text critically, in the light of modern-day understanding, we may be inclined to say that there is a negative valuation of women in the text. Marital infidelity remains an offence against the marital union in any culture. Evidently, Gomer breached her marital bond with Hosea by her wayward and adulterous lifestyle. But the punishment meted out to her by her aggrieved husband seems rather too harsh. First, her husband suspends the essential sustenance from her, which is demanded from him in terms of the marriage laws (Kruger, 1992). Second, she is subjected to enforced seclusion (Hos 2:6 [MT 2:8]). Third, he metes out a series of physical and psychological punishments to her, including withholding food and clothing from her (Hos 2:9

[MT 2:11]). He even threatens to strip her naked to shame and humiliate her publicly (Hos 2:3 [MT 2:5]). Gomer's husband claims that she adorns herself with vulgar jewellery that flaunts her promiscuity (Hs 2:13). He, therefore, threatens to strip her not only of her jewellery, but also to strip her naked (Wolff, 1974).

It seems that in Hosea's book, the female partner is considered the inferior partner of this marital bond, and therefore, subject to male possession and control. Apparently, Hosea took these stringent disciplinary measures to preserve his marriage. In the eyes of the aggrieved husband, such physical and psychological punishments and public stripping are justifiable and fit the crime (Boshoff, 2002:32). In fact, the text seems to present Hosea as the victim of Gomer's wayward lifestyle. While these measures seem to have been allowed in ancient Israelite law, judged in the light of modern worldview, these measures would be considered as absurd, degrading, and even a kind of violence against Gomer, which would even imply violating her sexually and infringing on her dignity as a woman. The justification of Hosea's stringent disciplinary measures on Gomer becomes even more complicated since, as Hos 1-3 indicates, Hosea represents God, and Gomer is portrayed as symbolizing the unfaithful Israel (McKenna, 2001).

Another disturbing issue is the portrayal of Gomer as "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešet zenûnîm*) and her three children with Hosea as "children of whoredom" (*yaldê zanûnîm*). Gomer might have become promiscuous at some point in her marital life. But should that be the rationale for terming her as "a wife of whoredom" (*'ešet zenûnîm*)? And, even if she became promiscuous, does it make any sense to describe the children she bore for Hosea as "children of whoredom" (*yaldê zanûnîm*)? Such a term is undeniably derogatory and can affect these children psychologically. Unfortunately, in biblical times, such a behaviour by an aggrieved husband towards his adulterous wife seemed to have been allowed. Hosea's text must be interpreted in the light of the culture of the time it was written. However, if we judge Hosea's action toward Gomer in the light of modern understanding, we must say that Hosea's disciplinary measures on his adulterous wife are undeniably abusive and violent. This position, however, does not justify marital infidelity. We must bear in mind that the nuptial and sexual imagery in the book of Hosea is used as a metaphor. On this basis, therefore, we may ask: Is Gomer a victim of violence or victim of a metaphor? The prophecy of Hosea does not in any way justify marital violence or any kind of violence against women.

Conclusion

One of the remarkable features of the Book of Hosea is the use of the marriage and family metaphor. Hosea is the first Hebrew prophet to employ the marriage metaphor to portray God's covenant relationship with Israel, one in which Israel became unfaithful. Hosea is a prophet of divine love. He portrays God as a lover who is betrayed by the infidelity of his beloved people (Israel). Hosea presents Israel's covenant infidelity

using the marital imagery of adultery or infidelity. He also uses the term divorce to figuratively represent the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Hos 2:2). In a very imaginative way, the prophet announces that God will punish Israel's infidelity with exile to Assyria. God will take her back to Egypt. In Hosea's prophecy, Egypt is a metonymy for exile and a return to bondage. The exile, however, will not be the last word. Hosea hopes that God will restore Israel if she repents and returns to God (Hos14:1-3). In this way, the text ends not in gloom but in hope of restoration.

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