

## IN SEARCH FOR THE IDENTITY OF GOMER

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Scholars have tried to solve the problem in Hosea 1-3 concerning the identity of Gomer by using different methods. But we have to admit that no method is perfect to solve completely the problem. Walter Vogels says,

We are witnessing an exciting period in biblical studies with the appearance of new methods. Historical criticism was until recently the only scientific method and thus practically the only way of looking at texts. Texts have more angles to be looked at. No method can be called "the" method, each one is "a" method. Each method has its richness and its limits. The dialogue between the methods will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of texts. Texts are extremely rich, they hide and they reveal, but they do not easily give up their secret.<sup>1</sup>

The following are the principal questions about the interpretation:

- I. Is the record a literal account of what happened, or is it a purely imaginative allegory?
- II. Do chapters 1 and 3 present successive acts in the drama, or are they distinct accounts of the same event?
- III. Is the unnamed woman in chapter 3 to be identified with Gomer, or is she a different woman?

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Vogels, "Diachronic and Synchronic Studies of Hosea 1-3", *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984): 98.

### I. The answer of the first question

To answer question number one, a summary of the more important interpretations of the marriage of Hosea is given as follows:

A. It is a vision, a transaction in a dream or trance, and never carried out in the real life.<sup>2</sup>

B. It is an allegorical interpretation.

According to this view, no literal marriage occurred. In this interpretation, Hosea cast as a dramatic parable the story of Israel's unfaithfulness and the Lord's persistent love. Hosea represented the Lord and Gomer represented Israel in the allegory.

In defense of both the above as against a literal interpretation, it is urged: (1) that to take it literally is reflection upon the holiness of God, and imputes to Hosea conduct out of harmony with the character of a prophet; (2) that the woman in chapter 3 is not the same as the wife in chapter 1, and that Hosea should have made two such marriages is improbable; (3) that too much time was consumed by these events for Hosea ever to have used them as a basis of a striking appeal to the nation (4) that prophets often represent themselves as being under command to do things which could not have been done; (5) that the chief emphasis in the whole narrative is on the symbolical names; (6) that the interpretation of the act is attached immediately to the command to perform the act, altogether after the fashion of vision and symbol rather than as in actual life; (7) that it would have been psychologically impossible for a man of Hosea's character to have received such a command from Yahweh.

C. It is a literary marriage

Against the preceding views, and in favor of a literal understanding of the narrative, it is urged: (1) that what is morally and religiously objectionable in actual practice becomes no more defensible by being presented as vision

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<sup>2</sup>William R. Harper, *Amos and Hosea in the International Critical Commentary Series* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 208.

or parable; (2) that no indication is given by the prophet that this is vision or parable and not fact (cf. Jer.25:15ff.); (3) that the name Gomer bath Diblaim yields no symbolical significance; (4) that no symbolical meaning can be attached to the fact that the second child is a girl rather than a boy; (5) that the literal view suits the realism of early prophecy better than the supposition that it is a product of literary imagination; (6) that the prophets were accustomed to give symbolical names to real children (cf. Is. 7:3, 8:3); and (7) that a real experience such as this furnishes the best explanation of Hosea's marriage—it was the outcome of the suffering of his own heart;<sup>3</sup> (8) that viewing the narrative as an allegory does not relieve the moral problem of a prophet receiving a command to marry a prostitute. Hosea apparently regarded the command of the Lord as a basic part of his prophetic call from which his authority stemmed.<sup>4</sup>

Those who have maintained that a real marriage took place have differed widely among themselves.

#### 1. Literal Interpretation

According to this interpretation, Hosea married Gomer, who was unchaste at the time of her marriage to the prophet. After the marriage, Gomer left Hosea and degenerated deeper and deeper into sin. At some future time the prophet purchased her from a paramour. God commanded the prophet to marry a prostitute and to buy her back at a future time in order that Hosea might learn from experience the nature of God's love toward a sinful nation. This view also believed that Gomer (a) had already borne children; (b) and she bore children to Hosea in lawful wedlock; (c) she bore, after her marriage, children whose parentage was uncertain.

Support for the literal view comes from the straightforward presentation in the text itself. Several details in the narrative point toward the historicity of the account. The name "Gomer" carries no symbolic significance. The fact that the second child is a girl has no symbolic meaning. The birth of the

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<sup>3</sup>Harper, *Amos and Hosea in the International Critical Commentary Series*, 208

<sup>4</sup>Janice Meier, "Family Imagery in the Book of Hosea", *The Theological Educator* 48 (Fall 1993): 79.

third child after the weaning of the second child also supports the historicity of the narrative.

The strongest objection to the literal view is the moral problem posed by God's command this had been intended, *וְנָה* would have been used instead of *אִשָּׁה זְנוּנִים*; (b) that it is contrary to the regular custom of Hosea and the prophets in general, who always represented Israel as pure at the time of her union with Yahweh.<sup>5</sup> Smith says, "The theory that he (Hosea) consciously married a harlot at the Divine command is contrary to the whole spirit of his history and to the essence of the analogy it is made to serve."<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Modified Literal View can be divided into several groups:

(a) According to this interpretation Gomer was a cult prostitute. Their concern is not the moral problem presented by Hosea's marriage to a prostitute, but rather with a correct understanding of the nature of Gomer's "adulteries." They believe that Hosea was commanded to take a wife who participated in the popular Baal cult.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that if Hosea married one of the cult prostitutes, not only would there be a special appropriateness in the description of her as a harlotries wife and her children as children of harlotry (the term 'harlotry', *זְנוּנִים*, being from the same root as words used to describe Israel's "harlotries" infidelity to Yahweh), but in marrying her Hosea would be depicting in act Yahweh's union with his harlotries bride, Israel.<sup>8</sup> But if such were the case, Hosea's preaching and his use of his wife for illustrative purpose would have had little force with people who were all sinners like his wife and saw no evil in their conduct. Clearly Hosea, like Jeremiah, held that the time when the covenant bond was established between Yahweh and Israel was a time of mutual love and loyalty (Hosea 2:14 cf.

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<sup>5</sup>Harper, *Amos and Hosea in the International Critical Commentary Series*, 209.

<sup>6</sup>George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1, rev. ed., (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 249.

<sup>7</sup>Meier, "Family Imagery in the Book of Hosea", 80.

<sup>8</sup>G. W. Anderson, "Hosea and Yahweh: God's Love Story", *Review and Expositor* 72 (Fall 1975): 428.

Jer.2:2), and that the apostasy belonged to a later period. The Israel whom Yahweh chose as his bride was not already harlotries.<sup>9</sup>

(b) Some have held that Hosea took Gomer, the harlot, not as a full wife, but only as a concubine (so Thomas Aquinas, Schmidt). But this view is even less acceptable than literal one

(c) Another attempt to escape difficulty is the view that makes the wife and children virtuous and honorable, but says that Hosea called them adulterous for parabolic purpose (so Luther, Os.). However, this is out of keeping with his character, and might have brought upon him open ridicule abroad and misunderstanding at home.<sup>10</sup>

(d) The other kind of modified literal interpretation says that God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, who was faithful to Hosea at the time of marriage, but who became unfaithful after the birth of the first child. The text supports this view by noting that the first child was Hosea's (Hosea 1:3). The text does not indicate that the second and third children belonged to Hosea (1:6, 8). According to this view, the command Hosea received to marry a harlot (1:2) is interpreted as the prophet's later reflection on the experience of his life.

The Lord commanded Hosea to marry "a wife (a woman) of adulteries" אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים. Significance should be placed on the fact that Gomer is not described by the term זְנוּנָה, designating a common prostitute or a cult prostitute. The description "wife of adulteries" has been viewed as a reference to the idolatrous character of Israel rather than as a reference to the moral character of Gomer.<sup>11</sup> R. H. Pfeiffer suggested that Gomer was described as a wife of harlotries simply because she was a northern Israelite and not because she was personally impure. They were inevitably in a state of (religious) fornication because the whole land was in such a state.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Harper, *Amos and Hosea in the International Critical Commentary Series*, 209.

<sup>11</sup>Meier, "Family Imagery in the Book of Hosea", 80.

<sup>12</sup>Robert H. Pfeiffer, *The Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1948), 569.

The advantage of this view are: (1) It accepts the narrative as being the simple recital of historical facts which is apparently is, while, at the same time, it does away with the moral difficulties involved in other views that do the same; (2) It furnishes a reasonable basis for Hosea's evident love for his wife; (3) It is the easiest way to explain the processes through which Hosea came to a realization of the mutual relationship of Yahweh and Israel; (4) It is strongly supported by chapter 3, which describes Hosea as taking back his wife who had been dismissed on account of her adultery, which dismissal would not have been justifiable if Hosea had married her with full knowledge of her having been previously immoral.

I personally agree with this last view that when Hosea married Gomer, she was a chaste woman and was faithful to Hosea but later she became unfaithful by being a cult adulteress. Here I would like to do more word exegesis on the word אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים. This term cannot mean "a prostitute" or "a prostitute for a wife". "Prostitute" would appear in Hebrew as either זֹנָה or זֹנָה אִשָּׁה (cf. Josh. 2:1; Judg. 11:1) or קְדֻשָּׁה (cf. Gen. 38:21, 22; Num. 13:26; Judg. 11:16; Deu. 23:18; etc.). Instead זְנוּנִים as a plural abstract refers more to a trait than a profession.

Hosea's later use of the term זְנוּנִים helps fix the definition, particularly as the word is used in the phrase רוּחַ זְנוּנִים "spirit of prostitution" or "prostituting spirit" in 4:12 and 5:4. There, the clear referent is the inclinations of Israel, whose "cohabitations" with all sorts of syncretistic and heterodox doctrines and practices are metaphorically depicted as analogous to the promiscuity of a common prostitute. Israel's waywardness and infidelity constitute a national "prostitution"; Gomer as a citizen of that thoroughly wayward nation is described, just as any Israelite woman could be an זְנוּנִים אִשָּׁה, precisely because she is a *typical* Israelite, and this is an indictment in itself. God has commanded Hosea to marry a woman who by reason of being involved in the endemic Israelite national unfaithfulness "prostituting." To marry any Israelite woman was to marry a "prostituting woman," so rife was the religious promiscuity of Hosea's day.<sup>13</sup> Mays says,

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<sup>13</sup>Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* in Word Biblical Commentary Series (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 26.

"Harlotry" זְנוּנִים (a plural of abstraction) denotes a category of person, their class more than their activity.<sup>14</sup>

Hosea's "prostituting children" זְנוּנֵי אִילָרִי were so called because, like their mother, they would be part of the corrupt, faithless nation. No suggestion is made that the children were: (1) born in adultery to Gomer before she married Hosea; (2) automatically inclined to inherit their mother's tendency to promiscuity; (3) nor Hosea's own natural offspring. Rather, precisely because the (whole) land has gone thoroughly into prostitution away from Yahweh they are here linked with זְנוּנֵי "prostitution." Indeed, according to the prevailing metaphor at this point in the pericope, it would have been conceivable for Yahweh to have described even Hosea as an זְנוּנִים אִישׁ, "a prostituting man," or for Hosea to have replied, as Isa. 6:5, "Woe is me, for I am a prostituting man, living among prostituting people." Prostitution is Hosea's most common metaphor for the covenant infidelity that provoked Yahweh's wrath against Israel, and the term is used in that sense throughout the book.<sup>15</sup>

## II. The answer of the second question

Now we try to answer question number 2, do chapters 1 and 3 present successive acts in the drama, or are they distinct accounts of the same event? Both the sequence of passages in the book as we now have it and the presence in 3:1 of the Hebrew עוֹר (KJV, RV, "yet" RSV, NEB, "again") suggest that chapter 3 is the sequel to chapter 1. The natural assumption then is that, after Gomer had left Hosea, or had been driven away by him, he bought her back, presumably from some kind of slavery. The עוֹר is thus to be taken with לָךְ, and not with וַיֵּאמֶר in contrast to "in the beginning" (1:2).<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew accent permits the term to be taken either לָךְ or אֵמֶר.

<sup>14</sup>James Luther Mays, *Hosea* in The Old Testament Library Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 26.

<sup>15</sup>Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* in Word Biblical Commentary Series, 27.

<sup>16</sup>Harper, *Amos and Hosea* in the International Critical Commentary Series, 216.

It has been suggested that chapter 3 does not describe the sequel to chapter 1, but is Hosea's own account of how he came to marry Gomer, recording what led up to the marriage rather than, as in chapter 1, the events which followed. The word עֹר is not a serious difficulty. Some scholars have adopted the rather cavalier device of deleting it as an editorial addition. If it is left in the text, the sense may be not "Go again and love...", but The Lord said again, "Go and love..."; or the "again" might refer back to part of the autobiographical account which has not been preserved. I agree with Anderson's statement, "It is, however, most unlikely that chapter 3 records an earlier stage in Hosea's relations with Gomer, since 3:1 would then presuppose her infidelity to a previous husband, and if (as would seem inevitable on this view) he is the "first husband" of 2:7, then the direct parallel between Hosea-Gomer and Yahweh-Israel is shattered."<sup>17</sup>

Robert Gordis from Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Columbia University adds his own view which he says is a new approach, but actually is just a modification from an old view. He suggests that *the two accounts represent two interpretations by the prophet of the same experience, but at different periods in his career and from varying viewpoints.*<sup>18</sup> Nothing is to say about this view because it is the same with the view which holds that chapter 1 and 3 are the same event.

### III. The answer of the third question

After we decide that chapter 1 and 3 are two different events and one follows another, it is easy for us to determine the identity of the woman in chapter 3. We apply the same principle with the one that we use to determine whether the two events are the same or different. The word עֹר is to be taken with לך and then we translate the phrase as "Go again and love..." The "woman" is unquestionably the same woman, Gomer, described in chapter 1, because (1) she is later defined as an adulteress; (2) she plays the

<sup>17</sup>Anderson, "Hosea and Yahweh: God's Love Story", 427.

<sup>18</sup>Robert Gordis, "Hosea's Marriage and Message," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 25 (1954): 30.



part, in parallelism with Israel, represented by Gomer; (3) the pronoun "her", in "and I bought her" (3:2), refers to a particular woman, the one described in 3:1; (4) if this is another woman, why are not some reference made to the fact? (5) the introduction to two women would entirely spoil the essential thought. Furthermore, some textual evidences support the view that the woman in Hosea 3 is Gomer. In Hosea 3:1 the Lord commanded Hosea to "love" this woman who has played the harlot. The command to "love" stands in contrast to the command in 1:2 to "take" a woman. The verb translated "take" לקח can carry the meaning "to take a wife," or "marry."<sup>19</sup> Since לקח is used in Hosea 1:2 with the meaning "to take as a wife," this seems to indicate that Hosea either was not to take the woman in chapter 3 as a wife or that Hosea already had taken her as his wife. In other words, in chapter 3, the Lord commanded Hosea to love again her wife who had become a harlot. If the Lord wanted him to marry again of course the author will use the same word that he used in chapter 1, which is לקח.

An important argument for identifying the woman in chapter 3 with Gomer of chapter 1 is the need for consistency in symbolism. If the woman in chapter 3 is not identified as Gomer, then the parallelism of the Lord's relationship with Israel as symbolized in the relationship of Hosea with his unfaithful wife is lost, and thus the message of the prophet loses its force. The book of Hosea is not primarily a story of Hosea's domestic problems. Rather it is the story of God's unchanging love for his people in spite of their unfaithfulness. One thing or one word has been ignored by all scholars.

The word is אַהֲבַת יְהוָה "as the love of the Lord" (3:1). These words are very important because they are the key words of the message that Hosea want to communicate. The central message from Hosea is to reflect the love of the Lord through the domestic life of his own. No wonder so many scholars come to their conclusion that the woman in chapter 3 is not Gomer because they have lost the central message of these chapters.

Also from the structure that I provide, the restoration of Israel becomes a very important part of each chapter. Hosea used his marriage relationship

<sup>19</sup>R. Laird Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 481.

to illustrate the union between God and Israel. The relationship of husband and wife becomes a reflection of God's love for his people.

One more important word for our understanding of God's relationship with Israel is אָהַב "to love/ show love" (3:1). This word occurs four times in the verse, dominating its vocabulary. Hebrew has a wider range of meaning than does the English verb "to love." It includes divine love (Gr. ἀγάπη), parental love (στοργή), general human social life (φίλος), and romantic love (ἔρως).<sup>20</sup> Hosea is "to show love for" a new wife in the sense of caring for her and protecting her. Gomer, by contrast, "loves" evil, in the sense of "takes delight in/ prefer/ like." Yahweh loves Israel in that he is loyal to her as a nation. This "love" is a technical, covenantal term for a relationship of loyalty. Israel "takes delight in/ prefers/ likes" raisin cakes. In Septuagint the first three אָהַב are translated as ἀγαπάω and the last one, when this word expresses the love of Israel of raisin cakes, is translated as φίλεω.<sup>21</sup>

Yahweh's love for Israel is noble, unselfish, generous, and protective. Israel's love for its raisin cakes and the adulteress love for evil are selfish, indulgent, and pleasure-oriented. Gomer does not deserve Hosea's love, but she will receive it. Israel does not deserve Yahweh's love, but he has been showing it to her all along- and will continue to do so both during and by means of the long season of disruption he will impose on her. This is the central message that the author wants his readers to know.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>21</sup>The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 1072.