

“Not My People”

Sermons on the Minor Prophets: Hosea (2)

Texts: Hosea 1:1-9; Ephesians 5:21-33

If anyone present desires to be a prophet, I would simply ask you to consider the prophetic call of Hosea: “Hosea, go and marry a prostitute, have a child with her, then willingly accept her back after she abandons you and becomes destitute, and then accept her other children who may not (likely) be yours.” This should quickly disabuse you of the idea that it might be “cool” to be a prophet. YHWH called Hosea to replicate YHWH’s own relationship to Israel so as to make a larger theological point illustrated by the life of Gomer. YHWH’s covenant people (Israel) repeatedly abandoned him for other lovers, and bore spiritual children who were far more pagan than faithful members of YHWH’s covenant community. Because YHWH is gracious and always keeps his covenant promises, he will restore Israel. But not before the covenant curses fall upon the people and the nation in the form of an Assyrian invasion.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hosea—one the most difficult books found among the Twelve (the Minor Prophets). Last time, we asked and answered the four questions (“Who?” “When?” “Why?” and “What?”) which enable us to establish a context from which to properly interpret, and then apply the message of Hosea. We will work our way through the opening section of Hosea’s prophecy—vv. 2-9, in which YHWH commands his prophet, Hosea, to marry Gomer, a woman of questionable reputation. In this section, we also discover that Gomer bore three children, Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi. These children (especially the meaning of their names) will symbolically tell us the story of Israel’s fate throughout the balance of the prophecy. While we begin by focusing upon the account of Hosea and Gomer—establishing Israel’s spiritual adultery as the main theme of the prophecy, we also discover that Gomer’s children play a major role in our interpretation of Hosea’s prophecy.

Keeping the big picture before us is important as we go through this book—especially chapters 4-14. Hosea will marry Gomer as YHWH commands, but Gomer will leave Hosea for other lovers and even perhaps bear their children. Gomer will become destitute and eventually become a slave. Remarkably, Hosea will purchase her back—in effect, redeeming her. In this enacted parable, we see the story behind the story—Israel has abandoned YHWH and for all intents and purposes has become the husband of Baal. Failing to repent, Israel was facing the curses associated with the covenant YHWH made with them at Mount Sinai. The final and ultimate covenant curse comes upon Israel shortly after Hosea completes his prophecy about 725 B.C. in the form of the Assyrian invasion, in which the last of Israel’s provinces (Samaria) finally falls to King Sargon II in 722 B.C. Israel must die before YHWH will restore true Israel at the dawn of the messianic age. But restoration will come. YHWH always keeps his promises.

Hosea presents us with a significant theological problem from the second verse. Why would God command that his chosen prophet marry someone described as a whore? Gomer is a promiscuous woman, who may even be a prostitute—this is certainly implied. This raises the question, “is YHWH’s command to Hosea merely part of a parable—a fictional story designed to make a larger theological point?” Or did YHWH actually command this of his prophet Hosea? And if so, why?

There have been many attempts to solve this supposed dilemma. A number of commentators avoid the issues this passage presents by contending that YHWH’s command to Hosea is an allegory or fictional

parable without any historical basis. Critical scholars often have as their default setting the view that anything miraculous, or problematic in the text is dismissed out of hand as fiction or myth. For these interpreters, this is merely a parable which makes the point that Israel was engaged in spiritual adultery. But even John Calvin was so troubled by this command that he felt that had Hosea followed through on this command, he would be disqualified from the prophetic office and end up a poor witness to Israel of YHWH's righteousness.¹ Calvin thought YHWH would never ask such a thing of his servant, so the first three chapters of Hosea, he feels, must be a vision in which YHWH is speaking to Hosea in hypothetical terms; "suppose I had a wife named Gomer, and she did this to me." Calvin thought this was done by Hosea so as to make a graphic point about the gravity of Israel's spiritual adultery.²

The view taken by most Reformed and evangelical commentators—and the one I hold—is that this episode is indeed historical. Hosea really did marry a promiscuous woman named Gomer and father at least one child with her. At the same time, there is a larger point being made by Hosea who establishes an obvious allegorical connection between Gomer's conduct (marital infidelity) and Israel's (spiritual adultery). The first three chapters of Hosea then are best described as an "enacted parable." The account is historical while at the same time illustrating a much bigger and fundamental theological point which explains to the reader why YHWH's judgment had fallen upon Israel. Israel has abandoned YHWH for Baal.

We ought not let the supposed moral dilemma obscure the fundamental point. Hosea obeyed YHWH, and he and Gomer had a child together (Jezreel). As events unfold in the first three chapters, after Jezreel was born Hosea either separated from Gomer, or else was abandoned by her (2:2a). She returned to her former ways, and had two additional children of questionable parentage (1:2-9). Some scholars have argued that her promiscuity may be in some way tied to the fertility cults and temple prostitution associated with Baal worship. This is certainly possible and would enhance the idea that a much greater spiritual principle is in view than merely the Hosea-Gomer marriage.³ Key too to the overall story is that Gomer was soon disgraced, left destitute, and eventually sold (or taken) into slavery. But Hosea, the faithful husband, redeemed Gomer from these terrible circumstances by buying her back, restoring her as his wife, and even taking all of her children as his own—a most gracious and merciful act. This view sees the events in chapters 1-3 as historical and sequential, but pointing beyond themselves to YHWH's relationship with Israel, hence an enacted parable.⁴

But if correct, this view does force us to deal the fact that under Jewish law (cf. Deuteronomy 24:1-4), a man who divorces his wife cannot remarry her if she has remarried someone else in the meantime. How could God command something like this of Hosea? This is Calvin's concern. Technically, Hosea did not violate God's law, because nothing is said here about Gomer marrying any of her lovers after leaving her husband. It is surely problematic that against all common sense Hosea takes her back after she had been with so many different men. But he does so at YHWH's direct command (3:1). Rather than question the sanctity of Hosea's marriage, understanding the passage as an enacted parable focuses us upon Hosea's faithfulness to YHWH's command, because in Hosea's response to Gomer, we have an illustration of

¹ Calvin, Hosea: Commentaries on the Minor Prophets, Vol. 1 (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1986), 43 ff.

² Garrett, Hosea, Joel, Logos on 1:2-3a.

³ McConville, "Hosea, Book of," 343.

⁴ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, Logos on 1:2-3a.

YHWH as the faithful husband to an adulterous Israel.

We also see that despite her husband's faithfulness to her, Gomer's sinful behavior illustrates YHWH's purpose behind the horrific days currently experienced in the nation of Israel during the days of Hosea. Why is God's stern judgment coming upon his people? The answer is both stark and tragic. Judgment is coming upon Israel because they are no longer his people—they are Lo-Ammi, "not his people," and now the lover of Baal. Israel has done to YHWH what Gomer has done to Hosea. YHWH has divorced Israel because Israel committed spiritual adultery, following Baal, and taking pagan kings as covenant partners.

If we understand why Hosea did what he did (as commanded by YHWH to marry a woman of "whoredom"), then we should be able to connect the dots to see why Israel is being wiped off the map, province by province, by the Assyrian army. Just as Gomer's condition was made worse by her actions after leaving Hosea, so too was Israel's condition after taking new lovers, namely Baal and pagan kings. Israel's attempt to stave off destruction through political alliances with foreign leaders who serve foreign gods (i.e., Israel's attempted alliance with Egypt and Syria, against Assyria) only demonstrates that Israel had lost all trust in YHWH's power to defend his people. You make your bed with these pagan and treacherous kings (which, according to the terms of the covenant is spiritual adultery), you fall to your enemies when your new political partners do not or cannot help you.

Yet, in both cases—Hosea and Gomer, YHWH and Israel—God's grace will ultimately triumph over human sin. Granted, it is not the normal state of affairs for a man to take a woman like Gomer back, after all that she has done. But Hosea did as YHWH commanded him (3:1). Hosea's faithfulness to his whoring wife mirrors what God has done over and over again with Israel. His people have repeatedly cheated on him with Baal, pagan kings, and foreign gods. Israel has had spiritual children by those who serve false gods. The people of Israel are more pagan than Hebrew. So, in light of the big picture of the course of redemptive history, Israel's behavior is as tragic and deplorable as is Gomer's. As Hosea will rescue her from this life of sin, shame, and bondage, so too, YHWH will graciously rescue and redeem Israel. But Israel must pass through the cleansing of judgment and exile, before YHWH's promised restoration will come with the return of exiles and the dawn of the messianic age.

With this big picture in mind, we turn to our text, Hosea 1:2-9. According to verse 2, "*when the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.'*" We know from the time span of the kings mentioned in verse 1, that Hosea had a long prophetic career, possibly some 50 years. Given what we are told in verse 2, his prophetic career began with the word of YHWH coming to Hosea, commanding him to marry Gomer. If Jonah fled from his call, it is rather amazing that Hosea did not. This is the first instance of YHWH's call of Hosea to the office of prophet, establishing Hosea as a prophet in the sense that this will not be the last time YHWH speaks to him over his long career.⁵ As YHWH's prophet, Hosea speaks YHWH's words to Israel.

At the very beginning of his call, YHWH commands Hosea to take a wife "of whoredom." The Hebrew word literally means "a promiscuous woman." Her actions demonstrate that she is an adulteress (she has relations with men other than her husband). Hosea does not identify her as a prostitute—there is a Hebrew word he could have used to do so. But in the ancient world, women did not work outside the home, and

⁵ Francis Andersen and Noel David Freedman, *Hosea: The Anchor Bible, Vol. 24* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 155.

had absolutely no means of support apart from family (husband or father). If Gomer left Hosea because she was at some fundamental level “promiscuous,” the only way for her to survive after she left her family home or Hosea’s would have been to sell herself for money.⁶ There is nothing said about this in the text, but given the obvious analogy between Gomer and Israel, it may very well be the case that Gomer was not a common prostitute (i.e., a woman who lived in and around the local inns—many of which functioned as brothels), but a temple prostitute who was devoted to Baal worship and the cult associated with him.⁷ That may very well be the case, but what Hosea specifically says is that this woman was habitually promiscuous, she ends up destitute, enslaved, and must be purchased to regain her freedom. This is why she is the perfect illustration of Israel’s infidelity to YHWH.

When Hosea mentions “children of whoredom,” it is difficult to know what exactly he means. At least one of the children mentioned (Jezreel) appears to be the natural child of Hosea and Gomer and the two others (who may or may not be Hosea’s) were born after he married Gomer. Jezreel was legitimate, but we are not sure about the others. In 2:1, Hosea speaks of his children having “brothers” and “sisters” (which seems to indicate that there was at least one other daughter than Lo-Ruhamah). Some have argued that Gomer had “children of whoredom” before Hosea married her, and that is Hosea’s point of reference here—children Gomer had as a prostitute before marrying Hosea.

I think it better to take Hosea’s meaning to be that any children born to Gomer also bear her guilt, shame, and bad reputation. The ancient world was very much a world of small town morality and stress upon a family’s reputation. Children of a mother known to be a promiscuous woman would still be tainted by her reputation even if she married a bank president or a judge and had their children. It is unfortunate and unfair, but that is how it was. Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi are “children of whoredom” simply by virtue of their mother’s reputation. Hosea’s mention of brothers and sisters is not to his own family (or Gomer’s prior to their marriage), but rather is a reference to the Israelites as a people, who, because of their nation’s spiritual adultery, bear the nation’s shame in renouncing YHWH and embracing Baal and foreign kings. To break YHWH’s covenant is to engage in spiritual adultery. There is a kind of corporate solidarity here foreign to us as Americans. All the people of Israel are guilty for the sin of their leaders—the kings and priests. Therefore, all Israelites are in this sense the metaphorical children of whoredom, which explains why Hosea even speaks of the land (the nation) as a “land of whoredom.”

In verse 3, we are introduced to the infamous Gomer. “*So [Hosea] went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.*” We know nothing about this woman or her family, except what we find here. Hosea married her and they had a child. When the child was born, “*and the LORD said to [Hosea], ‘Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel.’*” The biographical facts of both Hosea and Gomer are irrelevant to the big picture, which their marriage and the birth of Gomer’s children symbolize. This is likely why there is so little information given about either Hosea (as a prophet) or Gomer (except that she is promiscuous). Hosea’s prophecy is organized around these children and their mother as symbols of Israel’s fate and future.

Jezreel is very rarely used as a personal name, but is the name of both the infamous city and valley

⁶ Garrett, Hosea, Joel, Logos on 1:2-3a.

⁷ Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 158-159.

located between Samaria and Galilee. Israelites would immediately know the significance of this name. The Jezreel Valley was the site of a number of military defeats, disasters, and bloody battles in Israel's history. According to 1 Samuel 29:1, Israel lost badly to a Philistine army at this place. The failed kingdom of Ishbaal was located here, as was the vineyard of Naboth who was killed at the behest of Jezebel (1 Kings 21:1). Jehu killed Jehoram and Jezebel in a bloodbath here, (2 Kings 9-10). Jezreel was also the place where Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanites (Judges 4-5), and where Gideon won a great victory over the Midianites (Judges 6-7). It was the site of Egypt's victory over Judah (according to 2 Kings 23:29-30). Jezreel was therefore a place associated with terrible events, battle, and death. Naming your child Jezreel, would be like naming your child "Gettysburg," or "Flanders Field" or "Stalingrad." The readers of Hosea also knew that the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser had occupied the Jezreel Valley in 733, as a precursor to an eventual occupation of all of the Northern Kingdom. That Hosea was commanded to name his son Jezreel is clearly a symbolic harbinger of bad things to come.

YHWH also informs Hosea that he will punish the "House of Jehu." Jeroboam II is Jehu's grandson. The kings of Judah were of the "house of David." But the self-appointed kings of the House of Jehu did not have the divinely-ordained Davidic pedigree. This illegitimate dynasty which produces so many illegitimate rulers and illegitimate subjects (figuratively speaking) will soon come to an end. As blood was often shed at Jezreel, so too blood will be shed to bring down the house of Jehu as a political reality.⁸ In fact, it will happen on a day set by YHWH ("that day") for the final administration of the covenant curse—the breaking of Jehu's bow, which symbolizes a total military defeat. This will either take place in the Jezreel Valley, or else call to mind that place of death and bloodshed. This tells us that end of Israel is now certain, and just a few years off in the distance when this word comes to Hosea.

After Gomer gave birth to Jezreel, the account mentions two additional children—a daughter and a son. According to verses 6-7, "[Gomer] *conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, 'Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.'*" The Hebrew name Lo-Ruhumah means something like "no love, no compassion," or as the ESV translates, "no mercy." It is hard to think of a more troubling name for a child because it implies rejection and being cast away. In a culture (such as Hosea's) names spoke of the family lineage and the parent's hope for the child. The name frames the child's self-identity. In America the equivalent would be "nobody likes you," an open invitation to bullying. Why would the Lord command this? Again, in an enacted parable, this daughter's name is highly symbolic of greater redemptive historical themes, and obviously outside normal custom.

Tied to her name is the missing direct biological connection of this daughter to Hosea, unlike Jezreel, who was specifically identified as conceived by Gomer and Hosea. The third child is also not specifically identified as Hosea's. The implication is that both Lo-Ruhumah and Lo-Ammi are the offspring of Gomer and one of her lovers. Since, in the parable, these children represent Israel's spiritual condition, when Lo-Ruhamah was given her name by YHWH, we are put on notice that Israel's status as YHWH's covenant people has now changed.⁹ Her name, "no mercy" speaks of covenant curse, not covenant blessing. Her name tells us (and Israel) that YHWH is through being merciful to this people. They have crossed the line. The House of Jehu will be wiped out, recalling Jezreel as a place of

⁸ Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 175 Andersen and Freedman, Hosea, 158-159.

⁹ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 31.

bloodshed. The birth and naming of Lo-Ruhamah tell us that YHWH's patience is over, and that the final covenant curse is about to come. Destruction and exile are at hand.

Yet, since YHWH is merciful, he will deliver Judah from this Assyrian invasion, because YHWH is not yet finished with the Southern Kingdom, which does not fall to Babylon until 587 B.C. YHWH will deliver Judah from war with the Assyrians in the manner depicted in verse 7—*"I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen."*¹⁰ Rather, Assyria will eventually fall to the Babylonians, who defeat and assimilate much of the Assyria empire in the century after Assyria conquers Israel. YHWH brings one nation upon Israel in judgment, then brings judgment upon that nation for its crimes and cruelty to YHWH's people. So, even as Israel is destroyed and its people taken into exile, Judah will be spared and given more time to repent and return to YHWH. YHWH will show Judah mercy and extend forgiveness even as he brings judgment upon adulterous Israel. The covenant lawsuit, as we will see, includes a divine decree of divorce.

Shortly after the birth of her second child, we learn that Gomer has a third, a son. According to verses 8-9, *"when she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the LORD said, 'Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.'"* The third child born was to be named, "Lo-Ammi," or "not my people." Hosea gives us a time frame which demonstrates that this series of events is historical (not merely allegorical) and covers a span of about five-six years from Jezreel's birth until the birth of Lo-Ammi. Through the birth of these children, and in light of their names, YHWH is foretelling that long-threatened curses are about to become a reality.

Lo-Ammi, likely the child of adultery, is given a name which is the complete negation of the covenant promise repeatedly given by YHWH to his people, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (i.e., Exodus 6:7, Leviticus 26:12; Deuteronomy 27:9), and throughout the prophets (i.e., Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4). This child's name reveals that YHWH has divorced Israel—with good cause and with fair warning. The covenant relationship has been severed by Israel's adulterous and idolatrous relationship to Baal, and through treaties the nation as made with foreign kings. Both acts (spiritual adultery and illegitimate treaties) amount to the open and willful rejection of YHWH's covenant made with his people at Mount Sinai, and about which he warned Israel of curses and promised blessings over a span of some six hundred years. Sadly, Israel has chosen the curses. The covenant of Sinai is broken. Israel is no different than Gomer. Her children symbolically represent the nation of Israel and its people, who are no longer the children of promise. Instead, they are children identified with a notorious field of battle (Jezreel), who are no longer receiving YHWH's mercy (Lo-Ruhamah), and tragically, are now no longer YHWH's people (Lo-Ammi). Now YHWH says of Israel, "no mercy," "not my people."

Well, where does this leave us as we look for application? The realization of this sad state of affairs from verses 2-9, accomplishes several things in Hosea's prophecy. On the one hand, this enacted parable explains why Israel is about to be conquered by the Assyrians, and why most of the survivors will go into exile. As we will see, the destruction of Israel sets the stage for Hosea's reader to understand the subsequent prophecy (4-14) with its laments and warnings. On the other hand, Israel has become Lo-Ammi ("not my people") setting the stage for Israel's future restoration at the dawn of the messianic age with the coming of Jesus Christ. This is a sad chapter in redemptive history, but not the final chapter.

Israel's fate and its relationship to the Sinai covenant (from which Israel can be severed) serves as an

¹⁰ Stuart, Hosea-Jonah, 31-32.

important reminder of how much better is the new covenant. Unlike those living in Israel at this time who were YHWH's covenant people, but who ceased to be his people when YHWH divorced Israel, we Gentiles were always "Lo-Ammi." Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 2:11-12, when reminds Gentile Christians in Ephesus, "*remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by Jews, "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."* Israel was cut-off from the covenant, but we Gentiles were never in the covenant of grace until the coming of Christ. Now, we have been grafted in, and we can never be cut off. "*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."* Having been brought near by Christ's shed blood, Christ will never divorce us. We are his bride whom he is in the process of sanctifying. If we are in Jesus Christ, through faith, and through a union created by the Holy Spirit, we need never fear hearing the terrible words Lo-Ammi, "not my people."

This principle becomes clear in Ephesians 5:21-33 (our New Testament lesson), when Paul explains the profound mystery of Christ and his church, using the same analogy Hosea did, that of marriage. The vast difference, however, between Israel operating under the blessing/curse principle of the Sinai covenant in the days of Hosea, and that of the new and better covenant established by Christ when he begins his restoration of Israel, is that Christ's death has forever removed the covenant curses from us—despite our great sin and our spiritual adultery. In Christ, we are all spiritual virgins, washed clean and spotless.

In verse 21 Paul writes, "*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."* The institution of marriage and the command for wives to submit to their husbands—a creation ordinance—reflects a much deeper spiritual reality. In the new covenant, Paul says, Christ is the new Israel, and we (the church) are his bride. We submit to each other in life and in marriage, because in doing so we submit to Jesus who is the head of his church. We are not to be like Israel in the days of Hosea and seek the love of others than our spouse—Jesus. To claim to follow Christ, but embrace other religions, or the idols of our culture is to cheat on our bridegroom. It is to fail to learn the tragic lesson of Israel in the days of Hosea.

In the command for husbands to love their wives, we see why spiritual adultery is such a great sin, as well as why the new covenant is so much better than that of Sinai. In verses 25-27, Paul writes, "*husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."* In the new covenant, we are the Israel of God, under the authority of Christ, who has given himself up for us, is sanctifying us, is even now cleansing us by word and sacrament, and making us ready to be his spotless and radiant bride when Jesus returns for the great marriage supper of Christ the lamb. We Gentiles may be Lo-Ammi by nature, but in Jesus Christ, we are God's beloved people, and we are presently being prepared to be the spotless and holy bride of Jesus Christ—who is the perfect bridegroom, who loves us and gave himself for us to make us "his people" and his bride.