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The Metaphor of Marriage in Hosea

Leif Harald Fredheim

Directed Study - RELB 495

Dr King

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## Introduction

“Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord” (Hosea 1:2). The message of Hosea is provocative. For this very reason, the biblical book of Hosea has frustrated and intrigued scholars for over two millennia. Scholarly debate has raged due to the implications the text has for the character of God and His prophet, and the ways in which God interacts with His people. It cannot, however, be claimed that the discussion has been concluded; “from centuries of critical debate only one consensus on the book of Hosea emerges: that it is a disturbing, fragmented, outrageous and notoriously problematic text.”<sup>1</sup>

The book of Hosea is unique not only on account of the metaphorical nature of Hosea’s ministry, but also because of his message which is one of the clearest illustrations of God’s grace in the Old Testament. Little is known about Hosea; this is indicative of the fact that the book was never meant to be a biography, and that who Hosea was is largely irrelevant to his message. Very few details are offered in the portion of the book narrating Hosea’s marriage to Gomer (Hosea 1-3). The sheer number of conflicting interpretations offered by scholars regarding the relationship between Hosea and Gomer demonstrates the complexity of the issue at hand, and the high degree of caution that must be taken when making authoritative claims concerning the sequence of events outlined in the first three chapters of the book. In addition to the lack of detail in the text, the text itself has been very poorly preserved.<sup>2</sup> This has, no doubt, been used to justify interpretations that appear inconsistent with the plain reading of the text. Due to the relative lack of evidence, scholars should be modest in their claims about Hosea and his marriage; unfortunately, most have not been willing to be so.

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea’s Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Vawter, *Amos, Hosea, Micah: with an introduction to classical prophecy* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1981), 23.

In my study I have attempted to briefly demonstrate the way in which the prevalent views on the marriage between Hosea and Gomer have developed historically, from the church fathers through contemporary scholarship. In doing so, I have identified the two main motivating factors for these interpretations; the interpreter's stance on the spiritual nature of early Israel and view of the character of God. Finally I offer my own interpretation, emphasizing the implications it has for the spiritual history of Israel and the balance between grace and justice integral to God's character. While much has been written about the issue, I have chosen not to discuss the nature of Gomer's "harlotry;" despite being an interesting question, whether or not she took part in cultic prostitution is largely irrelevant to my argument and therefore beyond the scope of this paper.

### **The Development of Interpretation**

The *Targum of the Minor Prophets*, thought to have been written during one of the first three centuries of the Common Era, aptly demonstrates the reluctance of the Jews to accept a literal reading of Hosea. Although the Targums were translations of the Hebrew text, not commentaries, the exegetical position of the translator is often very clear; the Aramaic translation of Hosea is an excellent example of this. The Targum reads that God commanded Hosea to "go speak a prophecy against the inhabitants of the idolatrous city, who continue to sin" (Hosea 1:2).<sup>3</sup> There is no mention of Gomer; there is no mention of a marriage. In fact, the Targum removes the metaphor of marriage from the narrative completely. However, it is interesting to note that the imagery of harlots and adultery is not removed from the second part of the book containing Hosea's sermons.<sup>4</sup> The translator is evidently not opposed to the use of such language in Scripture, but simply uncomfortable with the acting out of the metaphor by God's prophet.

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Catchart, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

From the very beginning, Christian interpretation was dominated by “fundamental hermeneutical differences.”<sup>5</sup> Stephan Bitter suggests that the school in Antioch emphasized the literal reading of the text, while the Alexandrian school favored an allegorical approach because of the text’s offensive nature. While it is known that early commentaries on Hosea were written by Origen and Eusebius, all that remains is preserved through quotations in later commentaries. The writings of Jerome bring to light that Origen favored an allegorical or visionary approach, whereas Eusebius proposed that although Hosea and Gomer lived in the same house, their marriage was never consummated, and the children Gomer later bore were therefore not Hosea’s. The oldest complete commentary on Hosea was written by Theodor of Mopsuestia, probably while still in his youth.<sup>6</sup> Theodor, who belonged to the Antiochian school, believed Hosea actually did marry Gomer and that through their marriage Hosea was able to lead her “back to the path of chastity.”<sup>7</sup>

Bitter presents Didymus the Blind (313-398 CE) as the prime example of the Alexandrian school of interpretation. He wrote that Hosea’s claim that God told him to marry a harlot was no more than an excuse the prophet made to save face. Alexandrian scholars followed the lead of Origen, claiming, among other things, that a harlot was not a fitting parallel to Israel. Thus they took great pains to separate the will and commands of God from the narrative of Hosea, criticizing Hosea for his actions without bearing God’s command in mind.<sup>8</sup>

In his commentary on Hosea, Cyril of Alexandria (370-444 CE) broke from the Alexandrian tradition by being very clear that the text must be taken at its merit. He consciously opposed the views of Origen and Eusebius from the outset by warning the reader

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<sup>5</sup> Stephan Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea: Eine Auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 181; translation by author “prinzipielle hermeneutische Gegensätze.”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; translation by author “auf den Weg der Keuschheit zurück.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

that one should not be persuaded “to condemn the unlikelihood of the facts, to dismiss the tastelessness of the event.”<sup>9</sup> Cyril recognized that the unnecessary inclusion of detail, such as the name of Gomer’s father, “prohibits doubting the reality of the story.”<sup>10</sup> He therefore argued that Hosea did not marry Gomer out of lust, but in obedience to God; through their relationship Hosea saved Gomer, at least for a time, from her promiscuous behavior and made her the mother of legitimate children.<sup>11</sup> In defense of his view, Cyril suggested that it is no more unreasonable that a prophet have intercourse with an impure woman than “that the Word of God chose to communicate with an unclean soul.”<sup>12</sup> By making this argument, Cyril made it clear that he held the parallel between God/Hosea and Israel/Gomer in high regard, and that he recognized God’s willingness to associate with sinful man. This view was, no doubt, the result of reflection over his personal experience of communicating with God, and verses in the New Testament such as Ephesians 5:25-27, where God refers to the imperfect church as His bride. Paul makes it clear that God’s church is not without blemish, but that He is in the process of cleansing it and making it pure; according to Cyril, Hosea’s Old Testament ministry was a reflection of this act.

Jerome’s commentary on Hosea remained authoritative well into the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup> It is likely this was because of the way in which he attempted to balance the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools of interpretation, in addition, of course, to his reputation earned from other writings. Jerome’s introduction, which is widely quoted because it aptly describes the difficulty scholars have been and still are faced with when interpreting Hosea, is a call to the Holy Spirit for wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Jerome’s inconclusiveness is emphasized by Bitter’s survey of

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<sup>9</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 39-40.

<sup>10</sup> Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea*, 35; translation by author “verbiendet, die Wirklichkeit dieser Geschichte anzuzweifeln.”

<sup>11</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, 45-47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet*, 11.

what subsequent scholars have claimed Jerome believed about Hosea's marriage to Gomer; the proposed interpretations range from "inner experience" to "real event."<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Ibn Ezra was one of the most prolific exegetes of the Middle Ages. Although originally from Spain, Ibn Ezra wrote from Rome, Provence, Normandy, and England, thus spreading his reputation all over Western Europe. In his commentary on Hosea, Ibn Ezra forcefully denies the claim that Hosea actually married a harlot. With regard to an interpreter who suggested such a marriage actually took place, Ibn Ezra retorted "did not this blinded man see," and goes on to claim that since it was "far from him [Hosea] to violate the commandment of God," the marriage between Hosea and Gomer happened only in a vision.<sup>16</sup> Having made it perfectly clear that Hosea would never marry a harlot, he proceeds to vindicate God's character by also stating that "it is inconceivable that God should command one to take a harlot and to conceive children of harlotry."<sup>17</sup> Thus it appears that by the time of Ibn Ezra, Jewish scholars were forced to concede that Gomer is described as a woman Hosea married, albeit only in a vision, and that portraying Gomer as an apostate city, as was done in the Targums, is not justifiable on the basis of the text.

As Christianity plunged into the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, questions such as whether Hosea actually married Gomer no longer seemed important. Luminaries like Martin Luther were "first and foremost concerned with dogmatic and practical issues."<sup>18</sup> While Luther does not dwell on the matter of Hosea and Gomer's marriage for long, he does point out that what others have written "does not satisfy me, not even the words of Jerome."<sup>19</sup> He also reveals that he does not believe Gomer was a harlot by stating, "do not take this to

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<sup>15</sup> Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea*, 28; translation by author "inneres Erlebnis" "wirklichen Ereignisses."

<sup>16</sup> Avraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, *The commentary of Rabbi Ibn Ezra on Hosea* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea*, 182; translation by author "vor allem an dogmatischen und praktischen Fragen interessiert."

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I Hosea – Malachi* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 3.

mean, then, that harlotry is charged to the wife, that is, do not take this in the active sense, but understand that the wife has allowed herself, her sons, and her husband to be so named ....

Oh, how great a cross they suffered with those insulting names for the sake of the Word of God!”<sup>20</sup> Here it is also made clear, as claimed by Bitter, that Luther was more concerned with practical issues, such as the example set by Gomer regarding the sacrifice a Christian woman should be prepared to make for the glory of God.

The reformers who did take a stand regarding Hosea’s marriage followed the Jewish interpretation of the Middle Ages, as outlined by Ibn Ezra, but they did not develop their ideas much further.<sup>21</sup> Calvin set the stage for his position by making the claim that “their opinion, therefore, is not probable, who think that the prophet had taken such a wife as is here described.” He clearly followed the teaching of the earlier Rabbis as he states that “almost all the Hebrews agree in this opinion, that the Prophet did not actually marry a wife, but that he was bidden to do this in a vision.” Similarly, with regard to the third chapter, he stated that “what is narrated there could not actually have been done” and again, “this, we know, was not done” and finally “it follows that this was a representation exhibited to the people.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, Calvin hypothesized “that no vision was given to the prophet ... God only ordered him to proclaim what had been given him in charge .... The people knew that he had done no such thing [married a harlot]; but the prophet spake thus in order to set before their eyes a vivid representation.” Calvin continued by explaining that because Hosea’s marriage to a harlot was only a story Hosea told the people, “his ministry was not on this account made contemptible ... they all knew that his household was exempt from every reproach.” He even went as far as to say, “I see nothing strained in this explanation.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea*, 112.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Hosea*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2005), 44.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



Along with the enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century came a fresh trend in the interpretation of Hosea. Bitter writes that “since then, the leading protestant exegesis has been distinctly independent of the exegetical tradition.” The primary concern was no longer what Hosea could teach about how believers should live, emphasis was now placed on what actually happened.<sup>24</sup> The once prominent visionary and allegorical approaches quickly lost favor, although the same concerns regarding a literal reading of the text paved the way for a new explanation, the proleptic view. The proleptic view on Hosea’s marriage to Gomer became so prominent that Thomas McComiskey rightfully writes that “the majority of commentators have espoused the proleptic view of Hosea’s marriage.”<sup>25</sup> This approach states that Gomer was not a harlot before she married Hosea, but that during the course of their marriage she proved to have promiscuous tendencies. Recently, however, a number of prominent scholars have highlighted the weaknesses of this proleptic view, primarily because the fact that “she [Gomer] was not a virgin at the time of her marriage” is one of the few things the text does tell us about her.<sup>26</sup> Miles Bennett hints at where the motivation for the proleptic view comes from, by writing that it is “the only interpretation consistent with the character of God.”<sup>27</sup> To this, critics respond that it is vital to tread exceedingly lightly when making statements regarding what God would or would not do. Marrying a harlot is far from the only surprising thing God commanded his prophets. As Jon Dybdahl points out in the introduction to his commentary on the first six minor prophets, “the prophets were radicals,” and it is important that we accept them as such.<sup>28</sup> Isaiah was to walk barefoot and naked for three years (Isaiah 20:3), Jeremiah was to remain childless and unmarried his entire life, and

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<sup>24</sup> Bitter, *Die Ehe des Propheten Hosea*, 182; translation by author “erzielte die seither führende protestantische Exegese eine weitgehende Unabhängigkeit von den exegetischen Tradition.”

<sup>25</sup> Thomas McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: an exegetical and expository commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Craigie, *Twelve prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Miles Bennett, *Hosea, prophet of God's love: a study guide and exposition of the book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 20.

<sup>28</sup> Dybdahl, *Hosea-Micah*, 17.

was forbidden to celebrate marriages or grieve death (Jeremiah 16:1-18), and Ezekiel had to lay on first one side, then the other, for a total of over four hundred days (Ezekiel 4:4-6).

Some have argued that God could not have commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute because it was against God's law to do so. Dybdahl argues that this, quite simply, is untrue. The law prohibiting marriage to prostitutes concerned only the priests (Leviticus 21:7); there is no indication in the text that Hosea was one.<sup>29</sup>

The critics of the proleptic approach are keen to point out that ironically the belief that Gomer was sexually pure before marrying Hosea is not only without scriptural backing, it also fails to fulfill the purpose it was intended for. The proleptic approach was introduced because of the moral dilemma presented by God telling Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman.<sup>30</sup> As long as God's command to Hosea to marry Gomer still stands, however, claiming that Gomer was not a harlot yet, but that she had impure tendencies, does not defuse the issue. God still commanded Hosea to marry a woman who would later become an adulteress.<sup>31</sup> Others, realizing this, have taken a more extreme proleptic approach maintaining that God did not, in fact, speak to Hosea directly. God's command was written by Hosea in retrospect, reflecting on the way in which God had worked through him.<sup>32</sup> A more pertinent argument for the proleptic interpretation of Hosea is the regard for the integrity of the analogy between God's relationship with Israel and Hosea's marriage to Gomer. This is a concern of utmost importance because this analogy is the force behind Hosea's prophetic message. Norman Snaith claims that Gomer must have been pure prior to marrying Hosea, because Israel was faithful to God at first; later they began practicing idol worship.<sup>33</sup>

The proleptic view can be regarded as a modern adaption of the once popular interpretation that Hosea's marriage to Gomer is an allegory. Despite being popular among

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<sup>29</sup> Dybdahl, *Hosea-Micah*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>31</sup> Duane Garrett, *Hosea, Joel* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 48-49.

<sup>32</sup> Jack Scott, *The book of Hosea: a study manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Norman Henry Snaith, *Amos, Hosea and Micah* (London: Epworth Press, 1956), 53.

the church fathers, it is rejected by virtually all scholars today. Both Heschel and Garrett provide a number of arguments for why this is the case. The most obvious of these is that the text offers no indication that Hosea is describing a dream, vision, or parable.<sup>34</sup> Garrett recognizes that Calvin may have been correct in stating the text does not exclude the possibility of the story being a vision. However, he does point out that as the text gives no indication that it was, he suggests it is up to Calvin to prove that it was a vision.<sup>35</sup> In fact, it has been pointed out that the literary features of the text imply that the events actually did take place. The details given, such as the personal names of Gomer, and her children, the irregular order of the sexes of the children, and the mention of the quick succession between the second and third births all indicate that an actual event is being described.<sup>36</sup> Garrett argues that if Hosea made up the story, while happily married to Gomer, it would not only make him a most cruel husband, it would not “have its intended rhetorical effect.”<sup>37</sup> Heschel also recognizes that if Gomer was a sexually pure woman, or if Hosea was single, it would make no sense for him to make up such a story.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the idea that Hosea’s relationship with Gomer did not actually happen fails to solve the dilemma the reader is faced with. Heschel rightly points out that “what is morally and religiously objectionable in actual practice becomes no more defensible by being presented as vision or parable.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Interpretation Favored by the Author**

As a result of my study of the development in interpretation of the marriage between Hosea and Gomer, I have come to believe that in order to determine the intent of the author, one must, as far as possible, shed any preconceived notions and take the text on its own merit.

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<sup>34</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> James Luther Mays, *Hosea: a commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

There are no textual features favoring an allegorical interpretation of the narrative regarding the marriage of Hosea and Gomer; in fact, it has been demonstrated that the text itself implies a literal interpretation was intended.<sup>40</sup> A literal reading of the text must conclude that God told Hosea to marry a harlot *before* he sought out Gomer to be his bride. It is therefore clear that allegorical and proleptic interpretations must be the result of preconceived opinions regarding the character of God and a concern with preserving the integrity of the analogy inherent to the narrative. I take these concerns very seriously; I do, however, believe that they are both unfounded. The reluctance to accept the literal reading of the text is founded on two misconceptions: the belief that Israel was a pure nation deserving of God's love and care prior to the initiation of their covenant relationship at Mount Sinai, and that God's character is such as would prohibit Him from commanding one of His prophets to marry a harlot.

The metaphor of harlotry and prostitution for spiritual unfaithfulness is common in the Old Testament and would have been familiar to Hosea (Leviticus 17:7, 20:5, Numbers 15:39, Judges 2:17, 1 Chronicles 5:25). It is commonly described as the act of idol worship (Exodus 14:15-16, Judges 8:27, 33, 2 Chronicles 21:11-13). God did, in fact, predict that Israel would prostitute themselves with Canaanite gods (Deuteronomy 31:16); Hosea was presumably aware of this. It is therefore clear that the metaphor was not foreign to the Israelites in Hosea's day. While God's command to Hosea most surely was shocking, the meaning of the metaphor was crystal clear. While it could be argued that the familiarity of the metaphor enhances the likelihood that God would utilize it, these same texts have more often been used to argue that God would never have commanded His prophet to marry a harlot. This is perhaps not surprising, considering the strong language that is used regarding sexual promiscuity and the people involved in such acts, both in the Old and the New Testaments. It is described as an outrageous evil (Deuteronomy 22:21); prostitution is described as what has

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<sup>40</sup> Mays, *Hosea*, 23.

corrupted the earth (Revelation 19:2). Acting like a prostitute is described as causing the Lord's fury (Ezekiel 16:30); a Levite's daughter turning to sexual immorality was shameful enough for her to be burned alive (Leviticus 21:9). In the Epistle to the Ephesians God's people are described as a people among which "there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality" (Ephesians 5:3). No doubt the recollection of texts such as these is what has led many Christian and Jewish scholars to refuse a literal interpretation of Hosea's marriage to Gomer, yet only a literal interpretation reveals the potency of Hosea's message.

The power of the first three chapters of Hosea lies in the power of the analogy. The existence of an allegorical approach to Hosea is therefore not surprising. The whole point of the drastic command given to Hosea was its symbolic value. The fact that the narrative has large allegorical value does not, however, mean that it is afactual. As Dybdahl points out, "the power of the book lies in the poignancy and pathos of Hosea's experience. Much of that impact is lost if the story of Hosea and Gomer is not literally true."<sup>41</sup> Protagonists of the proleptic approach argue their view based on their concern with preserving the integrity of the analogy in Hosea. Norman Snaith contends that "if the allegory is to be complete, we need a Gomer who is at first faithful and later becomes unfaithful, just as Israel was faithful at first to Yahweh and later was false to him."<sup>42</sup> Snaith's belief is common; his concern for preserving the analogy is commendable, yet his conclusion is unnecessary.

The claims made by Snaith and others raise the question of Israel's origins and the nature of Israel's relationship with YHWH as a nation. Especially crucial is the spiritual condition of Israel prior to the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. Recently, a number of scholars have pointed out that Israel actually never was the pure bride Snaith claims she was. Among them is Thomas McComiskey who states that there is "no clear evidence ... that Israel was pure in the wilderness period of her history. On the contrary, there is positive

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<sup>41</sup> Dybdahl, *Hosea-Micah*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Snaith, *Amos, Hosea and Micah*, 53.

evidence that she had engaged in spiritual harlotry before the finalization of her union with God at Sinai.” This is clearly a bold statement, but one that if true would render the concern for the integrity of analogy in Hosea useless in defense of a proleptic interpretation.

The most direct example of Israel’s spiritual harlotry in the wilderness is Aaron’s initiative to construct and worship the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-35). Interestingly, this event took place at Mount Sinai immediately before God entered into covenant with Israel as a people. This blatant display of unfaithfulness toward God is persuasive, and commonly used by commentators who argue that Israel was not spiritually pure at the time of its “marriage” to God. The people asked Aaron to shape an idol for them to worship because they lost faith in God in the absence of Moses’ presence. This loss of faith is not exceptional in the Exodus narrative; it is symptomatic of Israel’s relationship with God during the first few months following their departure from Egypt (Exodus 16:1-8, 17:1-7).

The lack of spiritual maturity highlighted by the people of Israel stooping to idol worship raises the question of when Israel’s spiritual decline began. The fact that Israel’s lack of faith manifested itself so quickly raises the question of the people’s spirituality during their enslavement in Egypt. Little is known about the Hebrews during the time between Joseph and Moses; even less is known about the Hebrews’ relationship with God. The prophet Ezekiel does, however, shed some light on the matter. The picture painted by the prophet is very bleak. He indicates that the Israelites took part in idol worship (Ezekiel 20:5-7), and were spiritually promiscuous (Ezekiel 23). To make matters worse, they did not leave all their idols behind in Egypt although God commanded them to do so (Ezekiel 20:8). According to the prophet the situation did not improve much, despite God’s mighty intervention culminating in the Exodus itself (Ezekiel 20:13-26). The Israelites’ spiritual adultery continued in the period of the Judges; they forgot what God had done for them in the past and went whoring after other Gods (Judges 2:10-19).

Why then, did God choose to redeem Israel if not because they were a people faithful to Him? Ezekiel repeatedly claims that God stuck by Israel because the reputation of His word was at stake (Ezekiel 20:5-6, 20:9, 20:14, 20:22). These texts explicitly state that God brought Israel out of Egypt because of His promise to their forefathers (Exodus 2:23-24). This is not to say that there were no Israelites who remained faithful to YHWH, merely that the reasons the Bible gives for God's deliverance of Israel are the covenant promises God made to Abraham (Genesis 15:12-21), Isaac (Genesis 26:2-5), and Jacob (Genesis 35:9-15), not the righteousness or greatness of the people (Exodus 7:7-8). Ezekiel later writes that God stayed faithful to Israel because of His reputation, despite their rejection of Him. The prophet is pointing out that being faithful to His promises is a fundamental part of God's nature; the Bible is riddled with expressions that verify this (Numbers 23:19, Titus 1:2, James 1:17), the most explicit being Hebrews 6:18 which states that "it is impossible for God to lie."

Many conservative scholars, especially rabbis, like to believe that Israel was chosen by God because of the people's purity and virtue, but this is not the picture painted by the Bible. Scripture describes the people of Israel as one broken by slavery and caught up in idolatry, a spiritually adulterous people God had to nurse back to spiritual maturity through teaching the virtues of chastity and faithfulness. This picture seems to parallel Hosea's experience very well, as he liberates a woman from the life of sexual promiscuity and is forced to endure the emotional suffering of watching his wife fail to recognize the value of the freedom and authentic love he is offering her. It is as a result of this painful experience that Hosea is able to understand God's pain and is able to preach powerful, heartfelt sermons, some of which are compiled in the second half of the book (Hosea 4-14).

While those who do not believe the integrity of the analogy in Hosea is important enough to warrant sweeping claims about Israel's spiritual state at the time of the Exodus, scriptural evidence does not support Snaith's claim that Gomer had to be spiritually pure at

the time of her marriage to Hosea in order to preserve the central analogy in Hosea. By arguing that Gomer was not a harlot before her marriage, the message of grace, which is the very essence of Hosea, is lost. God is attempting to demonstrate His enduring love for Israel through the life of His prophet by letting them witness what they have put Him through. As McComiskey points out, the fact that Gomer does not have an impeccable character “is why Hosea’s marriage is so shocking. But against the dark background of that marriage the grace of God shines all the brighter.”<sup>43</sup>

Fundamental to any study of the character of God is a humble acceptance of the limitations regarding human knowledge on the subject. The Bible is a report of God’s interactions with humans through history; God is depicted through what He has done, not by descriptions of who He is. The Judeo-Christian concept of God is therefore almost exclusively founded on conclusions made by inductive reasoning. A few absolutes are known from scripture, such as that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that God is the creator of the earth (Genesis 1:1), but the scarcity of these demonstrates the frailty of our images of God. This fact is demonstrated further by the number of troubling facts regarding God which fail to mesh with our images of Him, such as His regret regarding the creation of humanity (Genesis 6:6).

A yet more pertinent demonstration of the inaccuracy of our pictures of God is the fact that the truest rendition of God’s character, Jesus Christ, was so foreign to people’s concept of God that He was crucified by those who claimed to worship Him. In his book, *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey describes the Jews’ disappointment with Jesus: he seemed so ordinary. There was nothing about Jesus that reminded the Jews of the fearful descriptions of God at Mount Sinai; “Jesus did not match their image of what God should

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<sup>43</sup> McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets*, 15.



look like.”<sup>44</sup> The Jews were expecting the Messiah to restore the Jewish nation, to drive out the Romans. Like many Jews in Jesus’ day, many Christians today are primarily concerned with physical well-being; this was not Jesus’ focus.<sup>45</sup>

In his book *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel cautions his readers regarding generalizations about God. He writes that creating abstractions of God’s character creates a “split between situation and idea, a disregard for the fullness of what transpires, and the danger of regarding the part as the whole.” Due to the limited description of God’s character and finite number of examples of His interactions with humans with which to inductively synthesize an image of Him, readers should be cautious when making claims about God’s character. Heschel continues by explaining that “an idea of God can easily become a substitute for God, impressive to the mind when God as a living reality is absent from the soul.”<sup>46</sup> Christians and Jews alike would do well to remain aware of the danger that they are worshipping *their image* of God, in place of God the Creator. More importantly, and crucially relevant to this topic, is the danger of the reader imposing his personal interpretation of the character of God on the text; thereby making bold claims about what God would or would not do, rooted in the identity of their “god.” It is vital that the reader of Hosea recognizes that the prophets “did not offer an exposition of the nature of God, but rather an exposition of God’s insight into man and His concern for man. They disclosed attitudes *of* God rather than ideas *about* God.”<sup>47</sup> Hence the care that must be taken when making sweeping statements about what God would or would not do. Bearing in mind that ideas about God are constructed from the Bible, of which the book of Hosea is a part, rejecting that Hosea the prophet married Gomer the harlot, simply because it does not fit one’s ideas about God, is indefensible.

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 117.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-21.

<sup>46</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 285.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

The search for texts to prove that God would never ask Hosea to marry a harlot has led scholars to verses such as “they [priests] must not marry women defiled by prostitution ... because priests are holy to their God” (Leviticus 21:7), and “shall I then take members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!” (1 Corinthians 6:15). These texts raise serious questions regarding the nature of Gomer and Hosea’s relationship, but the inquiry would only stop here if the goal was to prove the hypothesis that God would not command Hosea to marry a harlot. The objective of a study must, however, never be to prove one’s hypothesis correct, but to discover the truth; therefore the search is not complete before an attempt has been made to explain how God could make the command of Hosea 1:2, in light of Leviticus 21:7 and 1 Corinthians 6:15.

Unfortunately, those who argue that Hosea could not have married a harlot on the basis of Leviticus 21:7 overstep the text’s self-imposed limitation. Despite the fact that the text is specifically referring to priests, they proceed to apply the command of the text to Hosea by claiming that his marriage to Gomer would be in direct contradiction to God’s command.<sup>48</sup> There is no indication that Hosea was a priest; therefore the objection as raised, is irrelevant to the context of Hosea.

Leviticus 21:7 would, however, not be irrelevant with regard to Hosea’s marriage if more moderate claims were made. The argument is that God’s character would not allow Him to command his prophet to marry a prostitute; in order to prove this, a direct prohibition is not necessary. The second half of Leviticus 21:7 points out that the reason why a priest cannot marry a promiscuous woman is “because priests are holy to their God.” Hosea was a prophet; therefore there is reason to believe that he also was considered holy (Luke 1:70, Romans 1:2). This meshes well with 1 Corinthians 6:15, which states that believers cannot be involved with sexual immorality because they are part of the body of Christ. Thus, anyone

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<sup>48</sup> Scott, *The Book of Hosea*, 17.

holy should not marry a promiscuous woman; even more so, God, who is the most holy, must never be united with a prostitute. If, however, God could be shown to have established relationships with prostitutes, there would be no grounds for maintaining the implausibility of God's command to Hosea to marry a harlot.

Interestingly, the way in which Jesus related to promiscuous women was one of the many things about Him that provoked the Jews and surprised His disciples. Conversing with a known sexual offender, letting her salve His feet, and dry them with her loose hair seem diametrically opposed to the attitude of the God behind commands such as Deuteronomy 22:21. Yet the Bible teaches that Jesus is God, and that He is the clearest revelation of God's character given to man (Hebrews 1:1-4). Lest one get carried away, it should be pointed out that Jesus never married a prostitute; he did, however, welcome her presence, and value her as a human being. This warrants a closer look at the Bible's testimony about how God feels about prostitutes, and what He says about His willingness to be in relationship with one.

When discussing biblical prostitutes it is difficult to overlook the most famous prostitute of the Old Testament, Rahab of Jericho. Rahab, despite being a prostitute, was spared because of her actions (James 2:25). She was welcomed among the Israelites and was allowed to travel on with them (Joshua 6:25); in fact, Rahab was an ancestress of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). It is not likely that Rahab continued to live as a prostitute among the Israelites, thus Rahab's story does in no way condone prostitution; it does, however, demonstrate that forgiveness and a new life was possible for prostitutes in both the Old and the New Testaments (John 5:10-11, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

From both the story of Rahab and the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 21:31-32) it is clear that God is willing to forgive and redeem former prostitutes, but would he ever tolerate the behavior of Gomer? She was not only a harlot before her marriage to Hosea, she later returned to prostitution and moved in with another man. It is interesting how closely the

sermon of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 3) resembles that of the metaphor of marriage in Hosea. Jeremiah appears to have no qualms extending the metaphor of Israel's whoredom to Judah, declaring his disbelief that Judah does not fear the Lord despite His "divorce" of Israel (Jeremiah 3:8). Yet God's heart pains for Israel; despite their whoredom He exclaims:

"Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the Lord; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree, and that you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord. Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord; for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion" (Jeremiah 3:12-14).

God's emotional pain is palpable as he cries out for the nation He rescued from obscurity. Interestingly, God's cry, as described by Jeremiah, fits the emotional suffering of Hosea perfectly, as he realizes that his pure love has been spurned by his adulterous wife. This is fitting, as Hosea's experience was intended to be a testimony to the emotional suffering God was forced to endure as described in Jeremiah 3:

"How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land, a heritage most beautiful of all nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the Lord." A voice on the bare heights is heard, the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons because they have perverted their way; they have forgotten the Lord their God. "Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness." "Behold, we come to you, for you are the Lord our God. Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel" (Jeremiah 3:19-23).

Throughout the Bible, especially in the prophets, God is depicted as being torn between his hatred of sin, and his love for sinners. The prophets Hosea and Jeremiah demonstrate God's love for His people, and his reluctance to give up hope that they will

return to Him. In His love for humanity, the Creator humbles Himself before the universe as He takes on the role of a lover spurned, a lover who refuses to give in even when the object of His love turns around and spits Him in the face through public prostitution. “The prophecy of Hosea is a tapestry of grace. As the prophet loved a woman whose crudeness and brazenness must have hurt him deeply, so God’s grace comes to his people in their unloveliness. Our spiritual condition is never so low that God cannot woo and receive us back to himself as Hosea received Gomer.”<sup>49</sup> Because of his image of God, Calvin could not allow for Hosea, one of God’s prophets, to have his ministry “made contemptible.”<sup>50</sup> How tragic that one of the great reformers could not recognize that Hosea, through his marriage to Gomer, was displaying humility and self-sacrifice, two of the most striking characteristics of God’s love; for as Hosea was willing to be “made contemptible” in order to minister to his people, Jesus “became sin” to make salvation possible for all (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The rejection of the unfolding of events, as described by a literal interpretation of the book of Hosea, appears symptomatic of a failure to fully fathom the depth of God’s grace. The Bible is clear that all humans are sinners; not one of us deserves His love (Romans 3:23). Hosea’s marriage to the tainted and undeserving Gomer is the embodiment of God’s gracious love toward us. God sent Jesus to redeem the world, not because it deserved redemption, but because of His great love (John 3:16). Scripture makes it clear that like Gomer and the Israelites, God loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8); this is necessary because it would be impossible for us to love God if He did not first love us (1 John 4:19). Hosea’s marriage to Gomer parallels not only God’s love for ancient Israel, but God’s love for us. What hypocrisy to reject the beauty of Hosea’s love for the impure Gomer, because of our belief that she was undeserving, and yet embrace God’s gracious love for us, equal sinners. Hosea’s marriage to Gomer is a testimony to God’s unchanging nature (Malachi 3:6). God’s

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<sup>49</sup> McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Hosea*, 45.

grace is not unique to the New Testament; it is a powerful truth also in the Old, a surging force which reaches its climax in Hosea.

### **Conclusion**

When studying the marriage of Hosea it is vital to appreciate the complexity of the issue at hand. Reviewing the interpretations of the great scholars of the past is an effective way of fostering such an appreciation. A study of the development of interpretation highlights the many factors which affect which conclusions are drawn, and provides the reader with an awareness of these factors which, if left unchecked, will shape any new interpretation. As a result of two thousand years of scholarship, two factors have emerged as key to any interpretation of the metaphor of marriage in Hosea. These are a concern for the integrity of the analogy inherent to the text, and the question of the character of God. Having studied both these factors I have come to the conclusion that Hosea must be read as it was written; Hosea married a harlot as part of his prophetic ministry and thus formed a marriage which was to represent God's relationship with Israel.

Today the belief that the God of the Old Testament is cruel and vindictive is widespread. This is surprising as such a gross generalization clearly is at odds with the testimony of scripture. The Bible teaches that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and that "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6). The book of Hosea is compelling because of its testimony to the nature of God in the Old Testament. It is exceptional with regard to the fact that its theme centers not on what God does, but how he feels, and why he feels that way. Some might argue that God does not *feel* the way we do, that His lack of feeble human emotions is one the attributes which makes Him infinitely superior to us. I, for one, would however argue that emotions such as love and pain are an integral part of the way in which God created humans in His image (Genesis 1:27). While, as Heschel points out, we must never believe we

understand God completely,<sup>51</sup> the Bible is riddled with mentions of God's emotion; Hosea, though perhaps the clearest testimony to this, is only one of many. As Abraham Heschel so eloquently puts it, "[Hosea] flashes a glimpse into the inner life of God as he ponders His relationship with Israel."<sup>52</sup> This relationship is one in which God has proven faithful, yet He has been turned the cold shoulder. In Hosea we find a tragic story of true love spurned, the ultimate heartache for any lover, human or God.

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<sup>51</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 285.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

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