

Chapter 28 Hosea 1-14

Hosea's Love Story

*"I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the Lord."*

Hosea 2:19-20

Hosea was the last of the northern kingdom prophets. He followed Jonah, who prophesied Israel's success in spite of her evil ways (2 Ki 14:25), and Amos, who warned of catastrophic judgment against Israel, because she had "turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness" (Amos 6:12). No one knows whether Hosea and Amos collaborated together, but Hosea undoubtedly knew of Amos and agreed with him. In many ways, his prophesy picked up where Amos left off. Amos concentrated on Israel's rejection of the commands of God and Hosea focused on Israel's violation of the covenant of God; between them we see the devastating impact of breaking God's law and breaking God's heart. It was Hosea's task to explore what it meant for Israel to break a covenant that went back as far as Adam (6:7) and to announce for all to hear and see the utter tragedy of this rejection. "Put the trumpet to your lips! An eagle is over the house of the Lord because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law" (8:1).

In Amos there is a strong emphasis on the inevitable and inescapable judgment of God, and in Hosea there is a deep sorrow for Israel's inexplicable and incredible rejection of the love of God. In Amos, Yahweh roars and the prophet declares, "This is what you have done!" In Hosea, Yahweh remembers, reasons, charges and entreats and the prophet declares, "How could you forsake such love?" Hosea knew that Yahweh's appeal was never out of self-pity, but always out of love, the love that refused to let go for the sake of the beloved. Hosea expounded on Amos' exhortation, "Seek the Lord and live" (Am 5:6), and developed the tension between turning away from the Lord (3:1; 4:13; 5:4; 7:10, 14; 7:16; 8:13; 9:3; 11:5,7) and returning to the Lord (3:5; 6:1; 12:6; 14:1, 2). Israel's only saving recourse, after a history of turning away from the Lord, was to return to the Lord. "But you must return to your God: maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always" (12:6).

A Prodigal Wife

Hosea began his work by obediently becoming a parable that could not be ignored. He translated the message that God sought to send to Israel into a marriage that was bound to get people's attention. Before he ever spoke, his prophecy was played out in a painful real life drama that involved the unprecedented step of marrying a prostitute. The Jerusalem Bible conveys the harsh impact of the original Hebrew, "Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore, for the

country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh” (1:2). It would have been hard enough for Hosea to choose Gomer, a prostitute, to be his wife, but he did so with the full realization that she would be unfaithful to him and persist in her sexual promiscuity and infidelities. He was also aware that the Lord God was causing him to feel personally the acute pain that God felt over Israel’s rejection. Like Abraham who was called to sacrifice his one and only son, Hosea shared the painful privilege of entering firsthand into God’s grief. He embodied the message of God before he delivered the message of God.

Hosea married Gomer and they had a son and the Lord said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel” (1:4-5). For Hosea to name his son, Jezreel, was like someone today naming their child Hiroshima or Auschwitz. In Hosea’s day it brought instant recognition of Jehu’s massacre of Ahab’s children, friends, officials and priests in Jezreel (2 Ki 10:11). What Jehu did to Ahab’s legacy, the Lord God promised to do to Israel. He was determined to execute his judgment against the northern kingdom because of their flagrant apostasy.

There is no assurance that Hosea was the father of Gomer’s second child, but he was commanded by the Lord to name her, “Lo-Ruhamah,” meaning “Not-Loved.” Such a name implied not only Gomer’s infidelity, but publicized God’s grave displeasure with Israel. The Lord named Gomer’s third child, Lo-Ammi, or ‘Not my people,’ adding emphatically, “for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (1:8). In Amos there were few hints of hope until the powerful description at the end (Amos 9:11-15), but in Hosea’s prophecy good news follows bad immediately. Love withdrawn from Israel was affirmed for “the house of Judah” and the verdict of Israel’s judgment was followed by the promise of Israel’s destiny. “...You are not my people, and I am not your God. Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” (1:9-10; see 1 Peter 2:10). Hosea envisioned an ultimate day of salvation under one leader when the people would be reunited as family. “Say to your brothers, ‘My people,’ and of your sisters, ‘My loved one’” (2:1).

Modern sensibilities may be offended by God’s use of children’s names to convey his message of judgment, but when the choice is between speaking the truth or living a lie, even naming a child ought to serve the purpose of God. Names in our culture are little more than labels, but in eighth century B.C. Israel, names were often used to project parental hopes and expectations. Hosea’s own name bore great significance. His name meant “Salvation” and was a variation of Joshua (Hoshea, Nu 13:8; 14:6; Acts 7:45), which in its Greek form is “Jesus.” It would have been the height of contradiction for Hosea to publicize hope when everything in the current situation pointed to judgment. We should not presume that Hosea acted in unloving ways toward his children. It is wiser to assume that his actions accentuated the paradox of his children’s names and illustrated Yahweh’s love for Israel in spite of her actions.

A Spirit of Prostitution

The impact of Canaanite fertility religions was evident in the powerful allure of Baal worship. The word “Baal” meant “lord,” “owner” or “husband” and symbolized for the neighboring cultures the spiritual force behind the fertility of families, crops, and livestock. Sex became a kind of spiritual equivalent to prayer, a sacred rite designed to inspire the pagan mystical forces behind Israel’s abundance and prosperity. The notion that the gods were excited by human sexual activity and responded by facilitating fertilization, germination and reproduction is not unlike the modern myth that sexual activity is critical to self-identity, meaning and personal fulfillment. The sexual activity promoted in Hosea’s day for the sake of fertility is advanced in modern culture for the sake of freedom. What Baal was to fertility, sex is to the existential self. In both ancient as well as contemporary culture, promiscuous sexual pleasure assumes a pagan sacramental importance. On the one hand it blesses ancient fertility rites and on the other celebrates the modern quest for freedom and intimacy. “Baal” reigned supreme in the ancient pantheon of pagan gods and goddesses, even as Sex sits atop a modern pantheon of idols and indulgences today.

The seduction of Israel’s soul went well beyond sexual immorality, but their sexual promiscuity graphically illustrated their spiritual perversity. Hosea claimed that “a spirit of prostitution” led the hearts of the people astray into gross forms of idolatry that promoted sex and self-indulgence (4:12; 5:4). Israel was like a mother of three turned prostitute, who brazenly went after her lovers, rejected the abiding love of her husband and ignored any maternal love for her children. Yahweh is cast as an estranged, yet loving husband who will do whatever it takes to get his wife back. His efforts range from telling it like it is, “She is no longer a wife to me and I am no longer a husband to her” (2:2 GNB), to going public and exposing her sinfulness. Israel had broken God’s heart, not just his law. Yahweh warns he will withhold his blessing and send his judgment. The marriage analogy is not allowed to obscure God’s explicit judgment against Israel for her disobedience, but it serves to heighten awareness of God’s passion for his people. Hosea looked forward to a time when Yahweh would woo his people back, or as the Hebrew suggests, seduce her to return: “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.” Hosea prophesied that the Lord would reverse the disasters of the past, turning the Valley of Achor, made famous by Achan’s sin (Josh 7:26), into a door of hope. Israel’s future joy would be reminiscent of “the day she came up out of Egypt” (2:15).

Hosea envisioned a new day and new relationship, a marriage conceived in everlasting love and founded on righteousness and justice, love and compassion. “In that day,” declares the Lord, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master’ (my Baal). I will remove the names of the Baals from their lips; no longer will their names be invoked (2:16-17). Yahweh’s love poetry to Israel could not have been more loving:

“I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will acknowledge the Lord.”

The day was coming when the terrible estrangement between Israel and Yahweh, which was publicized in the names of Hosea’s children, would be overturned. “I will say to those called

‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God’” (2:23).

These are the words that the apostle Paul quoted in Romans to affirm that the Gospel is offered to the Gentiles. In Hosea’s prophecy, the “not my people” designation belonged to Israel, but Paul transposed the text to refer to the Gentiles. What had been true for Israel was now true for Gentiles (Romans 9:25-26). As the apostle Peter wrote, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet 2:10).

Hosea did not wait until the end of his prophecy to share the good news of Yahweh’s love story, but the reality of Israel’s moral and spiritual state of disobedience dominate his prophecy. When the Lord commanded Hosea, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress,” it was evident that the Lord loved Israel and sought to turn her away from her idolatry, injustice, infidelity and ingratitude. Hosea was to embody the message of God. “Love her the way I, God, love the Israelite people, even as they flirt and party with every god that takes their fancy” (3:1, The Message).

Gomer had sunk so low in the bondage of her lifestyle that she had to be bought with silver and barley in order to be liberated. Hosea paid the price of a slave to release her (Ex 21:32) and laid down an ultimatum: “From now on you’re living with me. No more whoring, no more sleeping around. You’re living with me and I’m living with you” (3:3, The Message). Hosea’s deeply troubled marriage pictured Yahweh’s painfully shattered relationship with Israel, and Hosea’s love for his wife illustrated Yahweh’s covenant love for Israel. Hosea prophesied with hope and certainty that Israel would return to Yahweh (3:5), but not before Yahweh hauled Israel into divorce court and made his case against her.

Yahweh’s Divorce Court

Hosea went from being a parable to being a prosecutor. The prophet used the language of the courts to present Yahweh’s case against Israel’s moral and spiritual state. “Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: ‘There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land’” (4:1). Hosea presented a comprehensive opening argument against Israel, which he went on to develop with irrefutable thoroughness. First, he documented the devastating impact of disobedience on the moral, spiritual and social life of Israel. It ranged from vulgarity and violence to ecological and environmental disaster (4:1-3).

Second, he traced the root cause for this disobedience to Israel’s failure to understand and obey God’s commandments. He indicted the priests for this failure. “...My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children. The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged my Glory for something disgraceful.” It appears that the apostle Paul drew on Hosea’s language when he made his case in Romans 1 against human wickedness (see Romans 1:22-23). Instead of resisting sin and warning

the people against disobedience, the priests instigated and supported sinful practices. Hosea presented Yahweh's case, "They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness" (4:8). The priests encouraged idolatry and sanctioned cult prostitution. It was the priests who should be judged for prostitution and not their daughters (4:14). Their worship centers were so utterly corrupt that Hosea repeatedly called Bethel ("House of God"), Beth Aven, a House of Wickedness (4:15; 5:8; 10:5). Famous sites like Mizpah (1 Sam 7:5-16; 10:17-25) and Tabor (Judges 4) which held special significance in salvation history had been desecrated by Baal worship (5:1). If we did today what Hosea did, we would name specific places like Princeton Theological Seminary or San Francisco Theological Seminary and make the claim that these once famous centers for theological learning have become a snare for the seminarian and a trap for the faithful (see Kidner, p.57). Hosea stated the bold fact bluntly, "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord" (5:4).

A third concern in Hosea's court case was to attack the obstacles that stood in the way of Israel's return to Yahweh and the restoration of covenant love. This involved challenging Israel's reliance on pagan powers, such as Assyria and Egypt (5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 12:1), exposing Israel's disingenuous and superficial repentance, and mocking her multi-faith syncretism. Hosea ridiculed Ephraim's strategies for coping with her political vulnerability, moral decline, and spiritual apostasy. He used graphic images to capture the perversity of her response and resistance. He quoted Yahweh saying, "I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah" (5:12). Israel seemed intent on treating the Lord God as if he were powerless and worthless, preferring to turn to the "great king" of Assyria than to put their trust in God (5:13). But Yahweh was set to overturn the false image they had of him through judgment. "For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me" (5:14-15).

Religiosity was one of Israel's biggest obstacles to returning to the Lord God. They knew how to talk the talk and conduct impressive church services, but they didn't mean what they said or live it in their lives. Like a wayward spouse that prides himself on his ability to talk his way out of trouble, Israel paid Yahweh lip service:

"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us in pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth" (6:1-3).

Yahweh wasn't buying it. "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears" (6:4). Like Amos (5:21-24) before him, and Isaiah (1:12-17) and Micah (6:6-8) after him, Hosea voiced the famous divine protest, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. Like Adam, they had broken the covenant" (6:6-7; see 2:18; 8:1). In hard times they did not turn to the Lord. "They do not cry out to me

from their hearts but wail upon their beds.” And the same was true in good times. “They gather together for grain and new wine but turn away from me” (7:14). They cried out religiously, “O our God, we acknowledge you!” but then they proceeded to set up kings without God’s consent, chose princes without God’s approval, and made idols out of silver and gold (8:4). They built altars for sin offerings but these became altars for more sinning (8:11). They built mansions for themselves and forgot all about their Maker (8:14). Their resistance to true repentance and devotion was in spite of prophetic protest (6:5; 9:7) and a history of divine judgment (9:15; 10:9). Their rebellion was in spite of Yahweh’s parental love. “I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (11:4). Regardless of what they said, God’s verdict was in: “My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them” (11:7).

The duplicity of their religiosity was also evident in their multi-faith syncretism that blended sacrifices to Yahweh with sacred stones and saw nothing wrong with combining the ephod (Ex 28), a symbol of the Tabernacle ritual with Canaanite idols (3:4; 10:1-2). Today’s professing Christian culture may not have sacred stones, but it does have “sacred cows.” American Christianity rejoices in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but it also worships success, idolizes the nuclear family, seeks pleasure over sacrificial service, and accepts pre-marital sex as normal. Cultural Christianity easily blends “worship” with entertainment and patriotism with “devotion” to Christ. Its tendency is to think of one’s own denomination as *the* Church and to preach a gospel of cheap grace. American Christianity has more in common with eighth century BC Israel than we may care to admit. For we have our share of “cleverly fashioned images” (13:2) that turn our attention away from Christ and onto self-help strategies and charismatic personalities. At Christmas millions of professing Christians who approve of abortion celebrate the birth of Christ without a hint of guilt and at Easter they remember the resurrection of Jesus but put their faith in health and wealth. Hosea made his point in Yahweh’s divorce court: “It is said of these people, ‘They offer human sacrifice and kiss the calf-idols’” (13:2). But this could also be said of today’s cultural Christian who sees nothing wrong with practicing adoration and abortion and celebrating sexual promiscuity and spirituality.

Hosea illustrated Israel’s spiritual state with simple, yet vivid images. Forget the beautiful pastoral scene of lambs in a meadow, Ephraim was like a stubborn heifer intent on doing her own thing (4:16). She was like a half-baked inedible cake good for nothing but to be thrown out (7:8). She was as clueless as a person who didn’t notice that her hair was turning gray (7:9). Like a flighty bird, Ephraim was “easily deceived and senseless” (7:11) and as worthless as a broken weapon (7:16).

Yahweh’s case against Israel was overwhelming. Ephraim did not have a leg to stand on. Nevertheless Yahweh’s intent was never to break the covenant and in spite of the inevitable and inescapable judgment that was sure to fall on unrepentant evil, Yahweh’s covenant love was destined to prevail. If Yahweh had to haul Israel into divorce court in order for her to see her ways, then so be it. G. K. Chesterton wrote, “Love is not blind; that is the last thing it is. Love is bound; and the more it is bound the less it is blind” (p.71 Orthodoxy). That was surely true of Yahweh’s love in Hosea’s day and remains true for today and forever. Yahweh’s covenant love

was by no means blind to Israel's condition, but it was bound by his covenant of grace and mercy.

The Bride of Christ

Hosea's prophecy points forward to "that day" when Israel will call Yahweh "my husband" and Yahweh will pledge a fresh start to a new covenant that will endure forever. "I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion, and you will acknowledge the Lord" (2:16, 19-20). In that day, Israel, having been portrayed as a prodigal wife, will be like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, who returned to the father ready to repent. "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips'" (14:1-2).

Yahweh's intent is pure grace, "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them" (14:4). And in language reminiscent of Amos' picture of hope, Yahweh is described as the perfect ecosystem, a garden of flourishing flowers, fruitful vines, deeply rooted cedars and evergreen trees (14:5-8). Hosea's description points forward to the promise of Jesus, who drew a similar analogy when he said, "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener...If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (Jn 15:1,7). As in Hosea, love is the theme in Jesus' picture of a flourishing, fruitful vine. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love" (Jn 15:9). But as Jesus' developed the analogy of the vine and the branches to illustrate his abiding love, he clearly had the costly love of the cross in mind. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:12-13).

Of course Hosea knew from personal experience that God's redemptive love was costly. He had paid the price to win Gomer's return and he prophesied that God would pay the price to win Israel's return. In the context of describing God's judgment against Israel, Hosea suddenly revealed Yahweh's personal redemptive promise. In between describing graphic scenes of judgment, a still birth and a famine, Hosea boldly represented the saving word of the Lord:

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death.

Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave is your destruction?" (13:14).

We recognize Hosea's prophesy in Jesus' mission statement: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). And we recall the apostle Paul's paraphrase of Hosea when he described the victory of the resurrection: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Paul then added, "The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:55-56).

Hosea based his prophecy on the love story between Yahweh and his people and in doing so he

pointed forward to the Lord Jesus and the wedding of the Lamb, when the bride of Christ, the Church, will be re-united with her Lord and Savior (Rev 19:7). The analogy of marital love was meant to be the most intimate and costly expression of God's love for us. It was a truth affirmed by the apostle Paul in a way that would have surely pleased the prophet Hosea:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Ephesians 5:25-27