

THE MESSAGE OF HOSEA

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Hosea – one of the greatest of the OT prophets

- More than any other prophet he reveals to us the heart of God. He tells us that God loves us – and that God in his love will never let us go.
- More than any other prophet his professional calling and his personal life were closely linked: ‘*the pain in the heart of the prophet became a parable of the anguish in the heart of God*’ (James Limburg)

Hosea – a preacher, not a writer

Hosea was a great preacher, but his book which contains a record of his preaching could have been better written.

There seems to be precious little chronological or logical order.

Apart from the first three chapters, which deal for the most part with Hosea’s marriage, the rest of the book appears to be a motley collection of sayings & sermons.

Here we have a reminder that in the first instance the prophets were preachers – they were not writers. Their words were written down and edited by their disciples.

Sometimes we could wish that the disciples had done a better job of editing!

Hosea – a man about whom we know relatively little

On the whole we know very little about Hosea

- We know his name means ‘help’ or ‘salvation’. An appropriate name for a prophet who speaks about God’s help and salvation
- We don’t know when he was born and when he died. All we know is that he was preaching toward the end of the **8th century**: “**This is the message which the Lord gave Hosea son of Beeri during the time that Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah, and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel**” (1.1). All these kings lived in the 8th century – BC! So too was Amos – but Hosea appeared on the scene a little later. Hosea was probably preaching in the period 750-715 i.e. during the final troubled years of Israel before it succumbed to the Assyrians
- He was the “**son of Beeri**”. We have no idea who his father was
- Unlike Amos who we know came from the village of Tekoa, we have no idea as to where Hosea lived. However, there are so many references to the northern kingdom of Israel, that we have to conclude that, unlike Amos, Hosea was a northerner.

Hosea – a man with mega marriage problems.

The one thing about which we do know a fair amount is that Hosea had massive marriage problems.

The problem is introduced in the very second verse of the book: “**When the Lord first spoke to Israel through Hosea, he said to Hosea: “Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful, and your children will be just like her”** (1.2).

As the GNB note indicates, there is an alternative translation where God says: **“Go and marry a prostitute, and have children by her who will be just as bad as her”**.

A good deal of scholarly discussion has taken place as to whether Hosea’s wife was already on the game when they got married – or whether she began to sell her body for sex after the honeymoon.

Whatever God said to Hosea, it was not the happiest of messages.

Hosea at this stage was probably in his late teens – any later and he would probably have already been married. Here was this young man, no doubt still full of dreams for his future, and God tells him to marry a woman who is going to give him bucket-full of problems.

Hosea married Gomer

“So Hosea married... Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim” (1.3). Wow!

What a wedding day that must have been for Hosea! In the words of one commentator: *“It’s all hearts and flowers for the normal husband-to-be. His picture-book bride floats up the aisle toward him to the strains of the wedding march. The stars in his eyes tend to eclipse any fears that may lurk in the back of his mind. Things like wife-swapping, adultery and divorce are hidden behind a star-spangled blindfold of love. But for Hosea, there was no such blindfold. He proposed with his eyes wide open. He knew there would be problems. He foresaw one domestic tragedy after another. The only stars in his eyes were falling ones”* (Kevin Logan).

Hosea is to be admired. He obeyed God. But he knew that the first rule of loving God is ‘Do as you’re told’ – and he did.

Why on earth did God tell Hosea to marry Gomer? Was God a sadist? Far from it. God called Hosea to marry Gomer in order to provide his people Israel with a visual aid of his love. Listen to the whole of the second verse: **“When the Lord first spoke to Israel through Hosea, he said to Hosea, ‘Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful, and your children will be just like her. In the same way, my people have left me and become unfaithful’”**. Hosea’s relationship with Gomer was to be a reflection of God’s relationship with his people Israel.

When God told Hosea to marry Gomer, he was in effect saying: *‘Hosea, I need your help. I have marriage problems too. Israel is my bride, but she is unfaithful. Yet I have remained faithful to her. I have supported her, even when she has had love affairs with other gods. But the world has forgotten this. Your marriage can remind them. I want you to love Gomer and to marry her, just as I have loved and married Israel. Gomer will have love affairs with other men, but I want you to stick by her. This will be a picture of my marriage to Israel’*.

God wanted to have a visual aid to show Israel his love.

But what a visual aid it was going to be. Hosea was to be the loving caring husband, while Gomer was to spend her life jumping into her neighbours’ beds!

Hosea had three children

The OT tends to have a positive view of children: “Children are a gift from the Lord”, says the Psalmist; “they are a real blessing” (Ps 127.3). But children don’t seem to have been much of a blessing to Hosea.

In Hosea 11 Hosea likens Israel’s relationship with God to that of a rebellious child: **“The Lord says, ‘When Israel was a child, I loved him... But the more I called to him, the more he turned away from him’** (11.1,2). Are there some personal undertones present, I wonder?

For some people children can be a compensation when the marriage relationship is not 100% happy – but not in Hosea’s case. Hosea ended up having three problem children – poor old Hosea!

Child 1: Jezreel

Presumably when the first child arrived life was still hunky-dory – Hosea had perhaps pushed into the back of his mind the reason why God wanted him to marry Gomer. But then God intervened. Look at 1.3-5: **“After the birth of their first child, a son, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Name him “Jezreel”, because it will not be long before I punish the king of Israel for the murders that his ancestor Jehu committed at Jezreel. I am going to put an end to Jehu’s dynasty. And in the Valley of Jezreel I will at that time destroy Israel’s military power”**”.

‘Name him “Jezreel”’ – that’s the equivalent of a child today being called Auschwitz. For Jezreel was a place with a dreadful history. It was at Jezreel that Jehu had killed the kings of Israel and Judah. It was there that he displayed the heads of the seven sons of Ahab. It was there that Jezebel had died a cruel death – it was there where there had been a mass extermination of Baal worshippers. Jezreel I’m told is a beautiful place – but it was a place of dreadful memories.

Child 2: Lo-Ruhamah (‘Unloved)

Then came another child, a girl. First a boy, then a girl – ‘how sweet’ you might have said. Save that the child was not Hosea’s.

In the words of 2.4: **“It was the child of a shameless prostitute”**.

What was Hosea to do? He could have thrown his cheating wife into a pit and have his neighbours stone her to death. That was the usual punishment for adultery.

But as it was, Hosea chose to forgive. His love was too strong to be broken by Gomer’s weakness for the opposite sex. And, of course, he had to consider God’s plan for his marriage. After all, it was supposed to show the world what was happening in the bigger partnership between God and his people. Without a forgiving husband, Israel would have disappeared off the map of human history long before Hosea came up on the scene. So Hosea forgave Gomer and accepted the child as his.

But God didn’t make things easy for Hosea: he told him to call the girl ‘Lo-ruhamah’. The Hebrew name sounds a lovely name until you know it means ‘Unloved’.

Listen to 1.6: **“Name her ‘Unloved’, because I will no longer show love to the people of Israel”**.

Child 3: Lo-Ammi ('Not my people')

A little later another son arrived – but yet again, it would appear from 2.4, that she was not Hosea's. Gomer was on the game – and in those days there was no such thing as safe sex. Selling your body and giving birth went hand in hand.

Poor old Hosea. Just imagine his pain. It would appear that at his stage he washed his hands of her and sent her packing – but not before God intervened again with another suggestion for a name: 1.9 **“The Lord said to Hosea, ‘Name him ‘Not-my-People’, because the people of Israel are not my people, and I am not their God’”**.

Since the days of Moses, the relationship between God and his people was often expressed with such phrases as **“I will make you my own people, and I will be your God”** (Ex 6.7). But now God appears to be turning his back upon his people.

There is in fact a terrifying progression in the sequence of these three names:

- The first name, **Jezeel**, announced that a day would come when Israel would have no king – what a disaster that would be
- The second name, *Lo-ruhamah*, announced that that Israel could no longer count on God's love
- The third name **‘Not my People’**, announced that Israel could no longer count on God at all – their future would be a future without God.

Hosea sends Gomer away

But to return to the story – there was a parting of the ways.

Indeed, more than a parting: Hosea sends Gomer packing. Enough is enough! And understandably so. How would you feel if your wife produced not just one illegitimate child, but two?!

It would appear that Hosea stayed at home and looked after the kids – while Gomer thumbed through her little black address book to look up her former clients: according to 2.5 she said to herself, **“I will go to my lovers – they give me food and water, wool and lines, olive-oil and wine”**.

But things didn't work out in the way in which she hoped: 2.7 **“She will run after her lovers but will not catch them. She will look for them but will not find them”**. Her lovers had had their fun – and no longer wanted to pay for more sex with her.

Life must have been tough for Gomer at that stage. What became of her, we don't know. Instead of being a free-lance, did she go into the religious sex-trade instead, and become a 'priestess' of Baal?

Baal-worship

You have to remember that at that time, along with the somewhat austere worship of Yahweh, Israel's official God, there was also an alternative and to many a more attractive form of religion which pandered to people's sexual appetites.

This alternative form of religion was 'Baal' worship.

The word 'Baal' simply means 'master' or 'lord'.

The original residents of Israel – the Canaanites – had been into Baal worship.

When Ahab had married Jezebel, there had been a fresh resurgence of Baal worship – for Jezebel was from Sidon. She imported 100s of priests of the Baal cult from Sidon. Elijah had done his best to oppose them – but it’s like when you combat bine-weed in the garden: at one moment you think you are on top of it, the next moment it comes up again and it’s everywhere. In Hosea’s day Baal worship was as strong as ever.

This Baal worship was essentially a fertility cult.

As is often the case with fertility gods, Baal was closely identified with the seasons. He was represented as dying when the spring (‘latter’) rains ceased and the summer sun scorched the earth, and as coming to life again in the autumn. His so-called ‘resurrection’ caused the autumn (‘former’) rains to fall and launched the agricultural year on yet another cycle.

Baal worshippers attempted to encourage their Lord in giving rain to the land by engaging in ‘sympathetic’ magic. It was a kind of Voodoo – save that instead of sticking pins into a doll, it involved having sex with sacred prostitutes.

It was to these practices to which Hosea refers when in 4.11-18 he declares: **“The Lord says... They have left me. Like a woman who becomes a prostitute they have given themselves to other gods. At sacred places on the mountain tops they offer sacrifices, and on the hills they burn incense under tall, spreading trees, because the shade is so pleasant! As a result, your daughters serve as prostitutes and you daughters-in-law commit adultery.... You yourselves go off with temple prostitutes, and together with them you offer pagan sacrifices... The people of Israel are under the spell of idols. Let them go their own way. After drinking much wine, they delight in their prostitution, preferring disgrace to honour”**

To make matters worse, this Baal worship was sometimes integrated with the worship of Yahweh. Thus in Hosea 8.6 we read of **“the gold bull”** of Samaria.

We know from 1 Kings that Jeroboam I had set up two golden bulls – one in Dan and one at Bethel. There is little doubt that the average Israelites saw in the bull the symbol par excellence of strength and fertility, which was so central to the cult of Baal.

It would appear that as a result of a crisis brought about by the threat of war some form of religious renewal took place. So in Hosea 6.1 we read: **“The people say, ‘Let’s return to the Lord! He has hurt us, but he will be sure to heal us; he has wounded us, but he will bandage our wounds, won’t he?’”**

Alas, there was a superficial quality to this form of renewal. It was a repentance prompted by momentary distress - not by a sense of God’s holiness and their sinfulness. In return the Lord says (6.4): **“What am I going to do with you? Your love for me disappears as quickly as morning mist; it is like dew, that vanishes early in the day”**.

This then leads up to the verse which according to Matthew (9.13 & 12.7) Jesus quoted on at least two occasions: **“I want your constant love, not your animal sacrifices. I would rather have my people know me than burn offerings to me”**. God loves his people intensely – and he wants them to love him in return! But as it is, they not only do not love him, they do not even love one another.

It is religious sin which Hosea condemns. Whereas Amos is primarily concerned with the social sins of injustice and oppression, Hosea is much more concerned with Israel’s apostasy. So we read in chapter 8: **“The Lord says, ‘Sound the alarm! Enemies are**

swooping down on my land like eagles! My people have broken the covenant I made with them and have rebelled against my teaching. Even though they call me their God and claim that they are my people and that they know me, they have rejected what is good. Because of this their enemies will pursue them” (8.1-3).

Hosea proclaims doom and destruction. 8.7: **“When they sow the wind, they will reap a storm... Stubborn as wild donkeys, the people of Israel go their own way. They have gone off to seek help from Assyria... But now I am going to gather them together and punish them. Soon they will writhe in pain, when the emperor of Assyria oppresses them” (8.9-10).**

Hosea takes Gomer back!

But let’s go back to Gomer again. Knowing something of her past, it is possible that Gomer did get involved in the worship of Baal and the religious sex-trade.

But, alas for Gomer, things went from bad to worse, with the result that by the time we reach chapter 3 Gomer is on sale in the market as a slave.

Hosea 3.1-2: **“The Lord said to me, ‘Go again and show your love for a woman who is committing adultery with a lover. You must love her just as I still love the people of Israel, even though they turn to other gods and like to take offerings of raisins to idols’. So I paid 15 pieces of silver & 150 kilograms of barley to buy her”.**

Absolutely amazing. Just imagine the comments people must have been making:

- *‘I’d rather be dead than bid for that slut’.*
- *‘He must be out of his mind, after what she’s done to him’*
- *‘She should be stoned, not sold’*

But Hosea took Gomer back. He paid 15 shekels and 150 kgs of barley for her.

- Joseph was sold for 30 shekels (Gen 37.28)
- In Ex 21.32 a slave girl is said to be worth 30 shekels.

In taking Gomer back and loving her, Hosea models God’s love for Israel.

Yes sin had to be paid for – just as at one stage Hosea turned his back on Gomer and sent her away, so God turned his back on his people and punished them for their sin.

But judgement is not the end. For God cannot give up on his people forever.

14.4: The Lord says, ‘I will bring my people back to me. I will love them with all my heart; no longer am I angry with them”

There is going to be a honeymoon period again. Look at 2.14ff: **“I am going to take her into the desert again; there I will win her back with words of love. I will give back to her the vineyards she had and make Trouble Valley a door of hope” (2.14,15).**

The Lord goes on: **“Israel, I will make you my wife; I will be true and faithful; I will show you constant love and mercy and make you mine for ever. I will keep my promise and make you mine, and you will acknowledge me as Lord” (2.19,20)... I will say, ‘You are my people’, and they will answer ‘You are our God’ (2.23).**

The message of Hosea for today

There in a nutshell is the message of Hosea.

Hosea's message is a message to the people of 8th century Israel.

The question arises: has he a word for us today, a word for people in 21st century?

He has indeed! For the God whom Hosea depicts is a God of love – a God of undeserved love – a God of grace. A God who centuries later revealed his love and grace in his Son Jesus Christ – there we discover that his love and grace are not just for Israel, but for us all.

The fact is that we have all wandered away from God. In Hosea's time the people had gone to worship their false gods – and we in turn have done the same.

But God in his mercy still calls us back.

In some ways Hosea anticipated Jesus' story of the prodigal son – of the son who wandered into the 'far country'. The good news is that that none of us have wandered too far away from God – God is always ready to receive us back.

To sum up the message of Hosea in a sentence: '*God loves us, despite our sin – and he wants us back*' (Nick Page)

A postscript

Hosea ends with a postscript. 14.9: **“May those who are wise understand what is written here, and may they take it to heart. The Lord's ways are right, and righteous people live by following them, but sinners stumble and fall because they ignore them”**

I.e. if you have any sense at all, sit up and take notice of what God says!