

Marriage Metaphor in Hosea: Implications for Human Relationship

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Abstract

The book of Hosea contains a detailed picture of a marriage specifically orchestrated by God to serve as the quintessential relationship for God's people. It is a template, placed within our reach, that shows how God would act if God were in human marriage. It is in the art of marriage relationship that a husband and wife grow together in conflict, unfaithfulness and quiet resolution. For Hosea it is like building fire in the rain but it can be done with love, patience, tolerance and faithfulness in one partner, even when the other lacks all. To concretely illustrate the realities of this relationship, God teaches all how to mirror the divine marriage in every manner of human relationship. God uses the metaphor of Hosea's marriage to testify of his great love for and patience with us. Hosea genuinely experiences the horror of his wife's unfaithfulness. He swallows his pride, works on his own heart, and then sincerely asks his wife to also respond in humility and love. Marriage as a useful metaphor can be used to repair, strengthen and understand relationships in the society of today characterized by broken relationships. Relationships lie at the center of all social, economic, political and religious activities and the unending faithful love of God as exemplified in Hosea's marriage is important for the stability of every relationship.

Keywords: marriage, metaphor, implication, relationship, love and unfaithfulness

Introduction

The story of Hosea's marriage to a prostitute is fascinating to readers of the Bible. It is a marriage arranged by God to demonstrate how he would operate if he were in human marriage. In looking at this marriage metaphor, however, one needs to be careful to avoid common assumptions that can hinder one from hearing Hosea's true message about marriage. In particular, it seems as though many people are hindered from hearing the message by their tendency to focus on the gender roles present in the marriage metaphor. According to Robinson (1929), "Hosea is the most difficult of all the prophets to understand because of his wealth of allusive imagery, his swift emotional transitions, and the frequent and deep-seated corruption of the text" (p. 729). Sentiment for gender is of course present but the need for stability in relationship more pronounced.

Our society is not in any way what it should be. Almost every section of it is ailing. Part of the reason for this is because there is insincerity and dishonesty in relationships, hence the need for this paper. Government is insincere in its relationship with the governed; the leaders of the churches are not honest in

the way they relate with their congregations, business partners fail in their relationships with one another. It is no news that marital relationships nowadays collapse every moment like pack of cards and no one is ready to forgive each other. Many people, especially the economists and policy makers, measure development only in terms of growth in the economy but it should be said that sincerity and honesty in relationships are also important indices for development. This paper, through the metaphor of marriage, seeks to put God's love and tolerance for Israel in its steady faithlessness as a model for relationships in our society. In order to overcome the barriers to interpretation of the marriage text in Hosea, this paper attempts exegetical analysis of the love story of Hosea and Gomer, specifically the first three chapters of Hosea. It also looks at the realities of culture and society in regard to marriage in the ancient Near East.

Appraisal of the Text (Hosea 1-3)

The book of Hosea comes to ancient Israel in a time when they have forsaken their covenant with Yahweh by worshipping the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites. The first chapter of Hosea tells of God's command to the prophet Hosea to marry an adulterous woman in order to illustrate to the people of Israel their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Thus Hosea is divinely commanded, *קַח-לְךָ אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים וְנַלְדֵי זְנוּנִים* literally this means 'take yourself a woman of harlotry and children of harlotry' (Hos. 1:2). The Hebrew *קַח-לְךָ אִשָּׁת* (take yourself a woman) is an indicative of marriage (e.g., Gen. 4:19). Hosea is then led by the Lord to love and marry a woman named Gomer, who, in accordance with the Lord's plan, is unfaithful to him. Some Bible translations imply that Gomer was a prostitute, and indeed, some commentators argue that she was involved in temple prostitution – the most obvious sign of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh (MacDonald, 1798; Wolff, 1974). There is a moral problem here. Would a holy God ask one of his prophets to marry a 'wife of harlotry'? And would a morally sensitive prophet obey?

One is immediately struck by the concern that God is somehow a partaker of evil by giving Hosea such a command, which appears to be in clear violation of his own standards (e.g., Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). Indeed, adultery is repeatedly condemned in the Scriptures (e.g., 2 Sam. 11:1-5; Prov. 2:16-19) and treated with severe penalty (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23-24). Some have attempted to soften the force of the command by suggesting that since Gomer was a woman without male support trapped in an ancient Semitic culture, prostitution was one way of supporting herself (Keil, 2006). Prostitution sometimes was simply recognized as a fact of life (e.g., Gen. 38); yet this by no means would excuse Gomer's actions as Hosea's wife. The name *גֹּמֶר* (Gomer) is normally given to men (cf. Gen. 10:2, 3; 1 Chron. 1:5, 6). Likewise, the name *דִּבְלַיִם* (Diblain) is unusual since it is a dual rather than singular noun. The nature of Gomer's name and patrilineage may point to the unusual nature of Hosea's entire relationship with his wife.

The divine command, *קַח-לְךָ אִשָּׁת זְנוּנִים וְנַלְדֵי זְנוּנִים* (take yourself a woman of harlotry and children of harlotry), does not imply that the wife whom prophet Hosea was to marry would fall into adultery. It does not even imply that the children of harlotry whom the prophet was to take along with the wife of harlotry are the three children whose birth is recorded in chapter 1:3, 6, and 8. The meaning is rather that the prophet is to take, along with the wife, the children whom she already had, and whom she had born as a harlot before her marriage with the prophet. According to Jerome cited in Keil (2006), prophet Hosea was commanded to take this woman and her children for the purpose of rescuing the woman from her sinful course, and bringing up her neglected children under paternal discipline and care. If, therefore, one assumes that the prophet was commanded to take this woman and her children as explained above, such a command as this would be by no means at variance with the holiness of God, but would rather correspond to the compassionate love of God, which accepts the lost sinner, and seeks to save him. In other words this means rebuilding relationship and reconciliation with God.

However, studies of the Hebrew word זְנוּנִים translated ‘harlotry’ or ‘prostitution’ have led many to believe that a better understanding of it is that Gomer was promiscuous and habitually unfaithful to her husband (Yee, 1996). Gomer bears three children of whom Hosea is not the father and then leaves him to continue her adulterous relationships. Despite the tragedy of unfaithfulness, Hosea in chapter 1 nevertheless concludes with a statement of hope - hope that, as a result of the admonition, Israel will return and be reunited with the Lord. Hosea demanded a response in which the basic element is אֱמוּנָה (faithful love; kindness), that is fidelity to Yahweh in obedience to his demands. According to McCarthy and Murphy (1995), the word אֱמוּנָה belongs to covenant making; it denotes the disposition which should characterize the true party to a contractual relationship.

In furtherance of the expression of hope, Hosea says that 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” (Hos. 1:10). In this statement God confirms that, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, God will continue to be committed to the covenant made with Israel’s ancestors – that Israel will become a great nation, too numerous to count (cf. Gen. 13;14-17; 15:5-6).

Even when the prophet got annoyed again, he still longed for reconciliation. “I will ruin her vines and her fig trees, which she said were her pay from her lovers; I will make them a thicket, and wild animals will devour them. I will punish her for the days she burned incense to the Baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry, and went after her lovers, but me she forgot” (Hos. 2:12-13). The context for these words is the relationship of Hosea and his wife Gomer, but the message is the relationship of God and Israel. Hosea’s words are inflammatory, passionately detailing his anger toward his wife. He speaks of his desire to disown her and publicly shame her. He hates that her children are not his own, and he threatens to cut them off from his love. His words are colorful and furious, mocking her lovers and the life she has found with them. In his anger he considers revenge, desiring for her to experience the pain and humiliation that he has endured. But after his fiery words, he softens.

Hosea’s words of anger turn to words of longing for reconciliation and unity as he remembers his love for his wife. He thinks back to the beginning of their relationship and yearns to return to the days of trust, loyalty, and safe intimacy. Instead of following his angry tendencies and shaming his wife for humiliating him, he chooses to forgive. He chooses to approach her in love, desperately hoping that her love for him will return. “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt” (Hos. 2:14-15). Verse 16 illustrates that instead of approaching her in anger and power, aiming to force faithfulness, he chooses to approach her in humility, tenderness, and hope: In that day, ... you will call me “my husband”; you will no longer call me “my master”. (Hos 2:16).

The Hebrew word for “husband” is אִישׁ, and that for “master” is אֲדֹנָי. Both words were used in reference to husbands but with very different connotations. While the word אֲדֹנָי connotes control and domination, the word אִישׁ connotes partnership and completion. Corresponding to the word אִישׁ, is the Hebrew word for “woman” - אִשָּׁה. The language itself illustrates the word’s emphasis - the husband as counterpart to his wife, the man as completion of the woman. These are the same words that are used in the Genesis 2 account of the creation of man and woman. Genesis 2:23 shows their relationship: This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (אִשָּׁה), for out of Man (אִישׁ) this one was taken.

Hosea’s decision is clear. Instead of approaching his wife from a standpoint of power, attempting to coerce her into faithfulness, he will approach her in humility and enduring love, with hope for sincere reconciliation. Instead of responding to unfaithfulness with unfaithfulness, Hosea confronts his anger with

his love and chooses to forgive. And because he makes this choice, he is able to humbly do his part to save the relationship. In his anger his tendency was to place demands on her or to specify the conditions under which he would allow her back into the marriage. But in forgiveness he recommits himself to the marriage. He recommits himself to his marriage vows, repeating three times his promises of unending righteousness, justice, love, compassion, and faithfulness.

Hosea's decision to forgive is even more striking when we understand the culture and the practices surrounding marriage in ancient Israel. Two primary features of ancient Israelite society – its patrilineal, patrimonial, patrilocal kinship structure, and its honour/shame value system – are especially pertinent to this discussion (Yee, 1996). Marriage was often arranged by the family. The woman left her family and became a part of her husband's family. The wife had two important functions - to bear children, especially sons to carry on her husband's family name, and to act in a way that brought honor to her husband. While according to the law, both marriage partners were subject to punishment for adultery, in practice, the woman was punished and the man was not. The punishment for adultery was either public humiliation or execution. Gomer's promiscuous behavior brings shame to her husband in a society that functions on an honor-shame-based social system. Gomer's children are “children of unfaithfulness” - the children of her lovers and not of Hosea. Thus Hosea's shame rests not only in his wife's actions but also in the fact that he has no sons of his own to carry on his family name. Given these realities of culture and society, Hosea's response to his wife's unfaithfulness is all the more powerful. In a culture that encourages a man to publicly punish his wife for adultery, if not to have her executed, Hosea chooses to swallow his pride, forgive her, and seek reconciliation.

The richness of Hosea's idea of the true character of covenanted union is best evident in the image peculiarly of his own, which is, the presentation of Yahweh and Israel as husband and wife (Hos.1-3). His own experience of the marriage union, characterized by a tender, understanding love and unshakable fidelity despite a tragic mismatch, provides the insight through which he can understand and convey something of Yahweh's union with Israel. He knows beyond any doubt that Yahweh's love is unchanging no matter how the partner breaks faith

The immediate purpose of Hosea's message is to illustrate the character of God's love. In summarizing the story, the first verse of the third chapter uses the word love five times. Ultimately, it is the never-ending love of God that calls the people of Israel to return and to respond in love. We can take from this book a profound message about the character of God and the nature of God's love. Additionally, however, we can turn the metaphor around and learn about God's design for the whole gamut of human relationship and contract.

Indeed, the marriage metaphor in Hosea is a prominent one not only in chapters 1-3 but in various places in Hosea's prophecy. For example, God is portrayed as a jealous husband (2:2-13) due to the infidelity of his wife Israel (as symbolized by Gomer). Israel has played the harlot by flirting with pagan idolatry (e.g., 4:10-18; 5:3-4; 6:10; 7:4; 8:4-6; 9; 9:1, 10, 15; 10:5; 11:2, 7; 12:11) as well as in its unwise political alliances and unrighteous social immorality. Yet God is also portrayed as a faithful, honest, sincere and loving husband who longs for and is willing to forgive Israel (2:14-3:5; 14:4).

The marriage metaphor is more than anything else closely allied to the phenomenon of covenant. Even though God had redeemed his people out of Egypt and brought them into covenant relationship with him (11:4; 12:9; 13:4), they have violated that covenant repeatedly (e.g., 6:7; 8:11-14). Israel's sole hope lies in the fact that God's covenant loyalty and redemptive love for them remained (2:18-23; 3:1-5; 8:1-14; 13:16). Due to Israel's violation of her fidelity to God and his covenant with them, there was need of repentance. Repentance, therefore, becomes a prominent theme in Hosea (e.g., 2:14; 3:5; 5:6; 6:6-7; 7:8-10;

14:4) as well as the need for Israel to practice righteousness (10:12; 12:6; 14:9). Love, faithfulness, honesty and sincerity in repentance and righteousness surely repairs, builds, stabilizes and strengthens relationships.

Marriage Metaphor for Relationships

A careful look at the relationship of Hosea and his wife, Gomer, has enormous implications for relationships in contemporary time. Hosea's emotions are not unlike the ones that are experienced in modern relationships. The joy and excitement of truly loving another person is well known to everyone who had one time or the other experienced it. It takes the whole of one's being. In truly loving, one risks a great deal. Love makes one completely vulnerable to the beloved, even though vulnerability is exactly what love demands. While the loved one may appear to be perfect through love's eyes, no one is perfect for every beneficiary of love remains a sinful human being with human frailty. As such, the loved one will, at some point, in some way or another, betray the lover. When people have invested so much of themselves in other people, betrayal moves them to passionate anger that covers their deep love. Thus, Hosea's words of love and anger reveal contemporary experiences in relationships. People remember the pain they have experienced when they have been betrayed by the one that they love. To be frank, walking through Hosea's specific experience of love and betrayal in modern time is actually nauseating.

When the narrative is read with strict gender association, the story does little more for marriage than to encourage unfaithful wives to be faithful to their husbands and to encourage abandoned husbands to be forgiving. The notion that the man represents God and the woman represents the one in rebellion to God is not proper. God is spirit and any attempt to classify God as either male or female is to deny the essential image of God as the union of male and female (Jewett, 1975). To focus on the theological themes of the book of Hosea is more enriching than reading into the text what is immaterial. There is deep significance in the marriage metaphor itself but there is not tremendous significance in the gender roles of Hosea and Gomer. First, the emotional realities seen in Hosea's words are not gender specific. The feelings that Hosea expresses are common to all people, male or female. The experience of being betrayed, abandoned, and hurt by the person one trusts and loves most is an experience that is common to all humanity. It is also important to note that later in the book, the metaphor deviates from that of husband and wife to metaphors that are not gender specific. One significant and powerful metaphor is that of caretaker and child. In Hosea 11:1-3, the Lord says: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms...."

It is obvious that this metaphor continues the themes present in the marriage metaphor, with God in the place of the male or female parent and Israel as the young child. As this metaphor continues the themes present in the marriage metaphor without specific gender assignments, it affirms the idea that the gender assignments in the marriage metaphor are immaterial.

Second, with regard to the issue of power, it is crucial to observe that in the marriage metaphor, God is portrayed, not as Israel's master or king, but as Israel's spouse. The language of chapter 2 is not the language of a powerful leader who has been deserted by a follower. These are not the words of a dominating ruler who desires to make an example of an errant subject. Rather, the language is that of someone who is deeply in love and is betrayed by his partner, his soul mate, the one person in the entire world who is never supposed to leave him. Hosea's words of anger strike in us a psychologically true chord. It is not often that our deepest wounds are expressed as anger. When we invest our hearts and souls in another person and that person betrays our trust, passionate anger that masks deep pain is the natural reaction. Thus the metaphor in the book of Hosea remains that God loves the people of Israel with a deep and passionate love, comparable in nature to the deep and passionate love between a man and a woman in marital relationship. Israel's unfaithfulness breaks the heart of the living God, just as marital unfaithfulness breaks the heart of one's

spouse. As the people of Israel know the deep pain of love betrayed from their own intimate relationships, so they can know the depth of Yahweh's pain at their idolatry. Thus a profound reality is revealed through the fact that God chose the marriage relationship to illustrate his passionate love for us.

When thinking of biblical advice for marriage, many people tend to think in terms of clear-cut guidelines and simple commands. However, the command "Husbands, love your wives," for example, is enormously more complex in reality than it is in theory. The reality of becoming one flesh is a deep mystery that encompasses the ups and downs of daily love and enduring commitment. We know that intimate human relationships are anything but simple and the God who is revealed in the Hosea story knows this too. Through Hosea's love story we meet a God who understands all that intimate love entails - who understands the joy and the passion, and also the heartache and the anger. Through Hosea's story we learn that when we participate in a quest for intimacy with another person, we are actually participating in a divine process. From the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, according to Ugwueye (2002), "we learn about love and loyalty, about responsibilities and priorities in relationship. We learn what it means to belong to and to be committed to another person, whether that is God or a fellow human being..." (p. 76).

The understanding of the marriage metaphor in the book of Hosea is bound to affect our relationships with others. Hosea shows how willing God is to forgive his wayward people and to restore the broken relationship and this enables Hosea to symbolically love his adulterous wife. This should challenge us to test the depth of our own love for partners in relationships of all kinds. How much love are we able to show in situations of hurt and rejection? Many Christian and non-Christian marriage unions in contemporary Nigeria and elsewhere are separated on the slightest provocation by one of the partners. It is divorce here and there without recourse to the matrimonial oaths taken on the connubial day.

Every type of government has a kind of relationship with the people being governed. In Nigeria for instance, this relationship between the government at all levels and the people is highly characterized by betrayal on the part of the leaders. They appropriate for themselves what are meant for the people. No good roads, poor electricity, no pipe borne water, poor hospitals, pitiable schools, deplorable security system etc. These leaders ought to be like the character 'Hosea' in prophet Hosea's narrative. Hosea, the symbol of the faithful God, is superior to Gomer, the symbol of faithless Israel; yet he kept on showing love. Our leaders have the people's money and security. They live in comfort zones free and everything used by them and their households is financed from tax payers' money. In short they are superior to lead in every way, yet they are the faithless ones in this relationship between the government and the governed.

Of course it is expected that the leader, just like God in the narrative, who knows better should appreciate relationships more than the led. To be a leader is to be God in a way or to have God's blessing and this involves active commitment to God. Commitment to God is seen and expressed best in loving our fellow men and this is the best form of building, repairing and strengthening relationships. Faulty or broken relationships are very expensive to developments of all types. They can promote Boko Haram menace, necessitate and orchestrate killing, stealing and insecurity which are serious setbacks to development in any society.

Since the leaders are the faithless traitors, the led are hereby encouraged to keep calling them back to the right track bearing in mind from our narrative that only faithful love can solve the problem of faithlessness in relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, people should be encouraged by the story of Hosea to strive for relationships of deep love, enduring commitment, and real intimacy, knowing that this is truly the work of the Lord. Additionally, some very practical advice can be taken away from the love story of Hosea and

Gomer. Hosea genuinely experiences the horror of his wife's unfaithfulness. He does not deny the pain. His pain is clearly seen in his words of anger. His anger is real and appropriate, and he is not afraid to express it. However, he does not persist in pride, nurturing his anger and taking revenge. Ultimately, he chooses to fight for the relationship by forgiving. He challenges himself to remember his love and to renew his vows. He swallows his pride, works on his own heart, and then sincerely asks his wife to respond in similar humility and love. This process is the only hope for true intimacy and successful relationships.

To be a leader is to have God's blessing in every way and to be in a divine relationship with the led. For a leader not to act in a manner reflecting this blessing towards the led amounts to betrayal in leader-led relationship and this could trigger off developmental impediments. As our leaders have continued to refuse to appreciate their relationships with the led, the led in accordance with our narrative model are to be persistent and consistent in loving faithfulness calling them back like Hosea did to Gomer because only loving faithfulness can solve the problem of faithlessness and betrayal in relationships

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