

Session 1: The Prophet Hosea

F. Hosea's Marriage

Hosea's marriage was an integral part of the message he was called to bring to Israel. But the interest of those who collected his sayings and put the book together was not on Hosea's life but on his message and it was pretty clear what this was for their day. As a result, it is not clear exactly who Gomer was. Commentaries give a range of interpretations, but the most common is that she was a shrine prostitute, a girl who had been dedicated to the service of Baal to provide sex for the worshippers. Hosea was taking this girl and seeking to make her into a faithful wife.

Feminist commentators are inclined at this point to make an issue of the inequality of Israelite society, in which a man in Hosea's position could require a girl like Gomer to marry him, regardless of her choice. We must not forget this aspect of the Bible's cultural background, but nor must we over-emphasize it to the extent that we miss the essential message of the text. In general, the Bible is quite realistic about human relationships, showing us clearly where both men and women may go wrong. There are frequent passages in which the sympathy of the narrative voice is with the woman, despite their position in society.

In this passage the key point is that through his marriage to Gomer, Hosea was presenting an image of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. By worshipping other gods in addition to Yahweh, Israel was committing spiritual adultery. Now, Yahweh was calling her to return to a faithful life as the wife of one husband.

This was extremely daring. Although sexual imagery was the stock-in-trade of Canaanite religion, the Israelite tradition was very reticent about sex. Hosea was taking over the characteristic image of Baal worship and giving it a new meaning. His message was that the worship of Baal is adultery: both literally and spiritually.