

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Marriage of Hosea.

THE modern interest in the psychology of religious experience, combined with critical study of the records of Hebrew prophets, has led to a great deal of attention being given to their inner life and thought. This is well worth while, both for exegesis and for theology in general, though the lack of information about their outer life and circumstances usually leaves our results somewhat uncertain in detail. Their lives were so subordinated to their messages that it is often only through those messages that we can reconstruct their lives. This fact makes the story of Hosea's marriage the more important, for here, if anywhere, we may see the outer event shaping the inner experience, and its resultant expression in the prophet's "Thus saith the Lord." It is the purpose of this article to examine that story for its own sake, and then to consider how far the experience of Hosea throws light on the doctrines of inspiration, the divine nature and the atonement.

The account of the marriage of Hosea is contained in the first and the third chapters of the collection of oracles bearing his name. According to the first chapter, Hosea is commanded to take a harlot for his wife, and children of harlotry; he accordingly marries Gomer bath Diblaim, who subsequently has three children, to whom the prophet gives symbolic names, which become the texts of prophetic messages concerning Israel. According to the third chapter, Hosea is commanded to love an unnamed woman, loved by a paramour, and an adulteress. He obeys by purchasing her, apparently from some kind of undescribed servitude, and by setting her apart for what seems to be a probationary period. These are practically all our facts, and anything else is an interpretation of them, justified or unjustifiable.

(a) The first point we have to decide is this—did these events actually happen, or are they an allegory by which the unfaithfulness of Israel to Yahweh might be the more vividly set forth? I have no hesitation at all in regarding them as real events, issuing from the sex-relation of man and woman, though the two chapters mingle interpretation with event in what to us is a somewhat confusing way. It is not necessary to suppose that Hosea married a woman whom he knew at the time to be unchaste. The terms of the narrative may simply mean that when the prophet did interpret his own life prophetically in the light of after-events as being under the

providential guidance of God, he saw that he had in fact, though unconsciously at the time, taken to himself a woman *destined* to be a wife of harlotry and to bear children of harlotry. This seems more likely than that the prophet knowingly married a woman of unchaste spirit or conduct, though such a supposition cannot be excluded as impossible. The symbolical acts of the Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah's walking about Jerusalem for three years in the dress of a captive-slave, are often strange to us, and are explicable only by the completeness of surrender to the prophetic impulse. But it is more natural to suppose that a discovery of Gomer's infidelity was made subsequently, perhaps after the birth of the first child, and that the story of the first chapter has been written down (not necessarily by the prophet himself) from his subsequent standpoint. We have a parallel to this prophetic interpretation of an actual event which happened independently of it, in the symbolic meaning which Ezekiel gives to his wife's death (Ezek. xxiv. 15ff.), when he abstains from the usual mourning customs to symbolize the effect of the fall of Jerusalem upon the people. We have another example in Jeremiah's purchase of family property at Anathoth, of which the symbolic significance emerges only after the event (xxxii. 7). In further support of the view that Hosea's marriage was an actual event allegorically interpreted, and not an invented allegory, we may notice such details as the name of Gomer, and the weaning of her daughter, or the details about the purchase-price of the unnamed woman in the third chapter, which have no significance for allegory at all.

(b) A much more difficult question to decide is as to the relation of the third chapter to the first. Is it sequel, parallel or prelude? The prevalent, and the *prima facie* natural view is that the third chapter is the sequel to the first, the intervening chapter making the allegorical application of the first. According to this view, the unnamed woman of the third chapter is still Gomer of the first. But in the interval, she must be supposed to have left her husband and to have passed into other hands—those of a private owner, or possibly of a temple, at which she may be serving as one of the "religious" prostitutes of the time. We are not told directly of this separation, at least in the present records of Hosea's life and ministry, any more than we are told what actually happened after the period of probation. But we are given to understand that Hosea intends to take Gomer back to his home when she is ready for it. The second view—that the third chapter is parallel to the first—is based chiefly on the arguments that the important fact of Gomer's departure from her husband

ought not to be left to the imagination, that Gomer would have been definitely named or indicated, if this were a sequel, and that the narrative of the third chapter is in the first person, i.e., autobiographic, whilst that of the first is in the third person, i.e., biographic, a fact which is taken to suggest that they come from different hands, describing in different ways the prophet's one and only marriage. The third view, that Chapter III. gives us Hosea's own account of events *preceding* his marriage, has been recently advocated by Professor Lindblom of Abo, developing the "parallel" theory of Steuernagel. According to this, Hosea knowingly married a woman of unchaste character, who was openly living with a paramour, but did this only after a period of probation. He tells us this in the third chapter, written at a time when the marriage had not taken place, and the children of the first chapter accordingly had not yet been born. We are informed of these subsequent events by a later biographer, and may infer that the adultery of Gomer took place after the birth of the first child. It is alleged that we have no further knowledge of Hosea's marriage experience than is given in Chapter I., and therefore no ground in it for ascribing optimistic prophecies to the prophet, as his final word; the hopeful period came earlier in his life, whilst he still thought that Gomer might be successfully redeemed from sin.

Obviously, the more romantic story is that of the first view—that Hosea seeks to reclaim the fallen Gomer at the end and not at the beginning. But we must not allow the attraction of this "romance," or its greater theological suggestiveness, to sway our exegesis. Our first duty is to decide on grounds of literary criticism which is the more probable view, and only then to test this by its larger relations. Of the three views, the third seems to me least probable and most arbitrary, and it involves emendation of the text in the interests of a theory. It throws the emphasis of the prophet **on the reclamation** of a woman who has not been faithless to *him*, instead of on that of a faithless wife who has born at least one child of which he is the father. It pre-supposes a double unchastity, and confuses the allegorical application. The second view, that the difference of the narratives is due to their being by different hands, and that they give an inside and outside account of the same events, is difficult to maintain because the events are not the same. In the first chapter Hosea is bidden to take an unchaste woman, in the third to love an adulterous woman. In the first the births of three children are described in succession, in a way that implies the passage of at least five years; in the third, a woman is bought for a slave's price,

and put into isolation for "many days." The two narratives seem irreconcilable, if they are to be regarded as parallel accounts of Hosea's marriage. Certainly, no one would be likely to refer them to the same set of incidents, unless as an escape from greater difficulties. But it is hard to see why we should not take Chapters I. and III. in their present order as parts of a prophetic narrative referring to different periods of Hosea's life. They may not both be written by the prophet; indeed, the change of person from the third to the first suggests this, and it is more natural to regard the first chapter as giving a report by a biographer, which more or less faithfully reflects the earlier life of Hosea, whilst in the third chapter we have a fragment of later autobiography from the prophet himself. There are many parallels in the prophetic books, e.g., in Jeremiah, to this interchange of biography and autobiography. The fact that Gomer is not named in the third chapter means nothing, if "a woman beloved of her paramour and an adulteress" is a sufficient characterization of her, as it would be if she had been unfaithful to Hosea in the course of their married life. It is true that we have to infer this fact from the first description of her, as "a wife of harlotry"; but this applies to all other theories which seek a basis for the allegory in real events. We have always to remember the allusive character of such writing; no more is named than the writer or speaker requires at the moment. We should not have heard that Ezekiel was married, had he not been led to make his wife's funeral a symbol of the national tragedy. In the present arrangement of the first three chapters, there is an intelligible order. We have first the marriage, followed by the births of three children, with the suggestion of their mother's infidelity to her husband. We have in the second chapter the allegorical application of these events: "Plead with your mother, plead; for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband," says Yahweh to the people of the land, i.e., its children, who are "children of harlotry" (ii. 2ff.). This condemnation passes into the promise of a new betrothal of Israel to Yahweh, with new and permanent qualities, and a reversal of the old condemnatory names of the children. This latter part of the chapter obviously runs into the ground of the real experience of the prophet in the following chapter; his love persists, in spite of the infidelity, and is interpreted as divine command to win back his faithless wife to better ways. The experiential text of the sermon found in the second chapter therefore lies in the first and third chapters taken in this sequence; but the preacher reserves the closing part of his text till the sermon

is concluded, when it becomes a human illustration of the divine truth. There are difficulties enough in the oracles of Hosea without exaggerating those of the opening chapters. We may therefore remain content with the ordinary view of the events of Hosea's marriage, with which many Old Testament scholars are still satisfied; the chief fault to find with it seems to be that it has lost the charm of novelty. On the other hand, if sound in itself, it does supply a ground for regarding Hosea as not finally a pessimist as to his nation, and for ascribing to him the oracles which are promises and not warnings.

II. The justification for this discussion of Hosea's marriage is that it has important results not only for exegesis, but also for theology. In regard to exegesis a careful study of the book of Hosea would show how deeply the oracles which it contains are coloured by the experiences of his marriage, how frequently the figure of marital infidelity enters into them, how warm is the feeling with which the relation of Yahweh to Israel is described, how passionate is the longing of God portrayed in them to betroth a faithful people to Himself. We may not feel warranted in relating all the oracles to this one series of events as closely and comprehensively as Professor Lindblom has done in his recent book; but there can be little doubt that the chief psychological explanation of the oracles is derived from Hosea's relations to Gomer. It may even be, as Professor Hans Schmidt has recently argued, that the bitterness of the prophet's attack on the immorality of the high places and of the priests connected with them is due to a personal element—that it was from one of these sanctuaries that he had, in the literal sense, to redeem the temple-prostitute Gomer, because she had first been led astray by the licensed sexuality of their festivals, and had left her husband for professional connection with a sanctuary. There is certainly a depth of personal emotion in this book which can be paralleled nowhere else save in the greater prophet so like Hosea—Jeremiah, who knew the sorrows of a lonely life as Hosea did those of an unhappy marriage. But our present concern is not with the detailed exegesis of the book of Hosea, but with its theological significance. He is the first to make a profoundly ethical application of the figure of marriage to the relation between God and man. Of course, the sex element had taken a great place in primitive religion, including the Canaanite. The mystery of sex, like the mystery of blood, was an inevitable feature in early interpretations of the comprehensive mystery of life, and of its relation to the superhuman powers surrounding

man and his existence. But the moral side of the sex relation, the higher principles which lead to its sublimation in human experience, and may make human love the most divine of all man's experiences, because the most fully reflecting the love of God, and preparing man to understand and respond to it—all this great line of thought which culminates in the Gospel of the New Testament was initiated by Hosea. We see it already working in the Jewish interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the history of Israel, the bride of Yahweh, from the Exodus to the final restoration of all things. An anthology of love lyrics, containing nothing that is religious at all in the ordinary sense, was thus raised to what a Jewish Rabbi called the Holy of Holies of Israel's sacred literature. We know how profoundly the figure has affected Christian thought and its devotional vocabulary, from St. Paul's comparison of marriage with the relation of Christ and the Church onwards. Hosea is the first begetter of all this line of thought, and he holds this place because of the actual experiences of his life, prophetically interpreted. We have here, then, a supreme example of the place of experience in the prophetic consciousness, and of the warp of human life on the loom of Scripture, across which the shuttle of the Spirit of God so constantly moved. We are reminded here, at the beginning of Israel's higher conceptions of God, that revelation lies in and through that unity of religious experience in which the human and the divine personality lose their "otherness." In the prophetic consciousness, which is one of the noblest kinds of religious consciousness, all is human, and all is divine. These things have been made familiar to us by historical criticism of the Bible, but it cannot be said that their full theological consequences for a doctrine of inspiration have yet been recognized. A sound doctrine of inspiration really raises the issues of the Incarnation itself—the fundamental kinship of human and divine personality. So long as revelation is regarded as the communication to man of a truth about God already existing externally to the man himself, *in that form*, so long the process remains mechanical, and reduces man to a mere amanuensis, as Calvin describes it. But when we see that the revelation is made in and through a human experience, in which experience the truth to be revealed is first created, *in that form*, we are ready to face the implication of this, viz., that human experience is capable of representing the divine. There will of course be all kinds of limitation due to man's imperfection, mental and moral, and we must suppose a divine "kenosis" in God's acceptance of these limitations for His purpose—a kenosis as real in its way as that

described by the apostle Paul in regard to the Eternal Son of God. But if the love of Hosea for his faithless wife does really represent, in spite of its human limitations, the love of God for Israel, if the word "love" in fact is to be allowed any human connotation at all in regard to God, it must be because the human personality is in some sense akin to the divine. Moreover, the revelation is made through the unity of fellowship between God and man, and is born of their intercourse. The prophets doubtless interpreted the message as coming from without, in accord with their general psychology. They saw visions of external happenings, heard voices as with their physical ears, felt the hand of Yahweh upon them in quasi-physical compulsions. But all these features belong to their own interpretation of the physical events, and we may describe them in different terms without injustice to the events themselves or their divine significance as "revelation." The sorrowful experience of Hosea as a man and not as a prophet might have had no such significance, however warm his affection for Gomer, and however loyal his endeavour to raise her from shame. The new fact is made when Hosea the prophet reinterprets this experience as having such significance, and makes the prophetic "venture of faith" in saying that this is how God sorrows and God loves. He could not make this venture unless he implicitly believed that God's nature was somehow like his own. No doubt he does not explicitly put it like this; in fact, he represents Yahweh as saying, "I am God and not man." The transcendence of God is explicit; the immanence of God is implicit. But the whole revelation through prophecy rests on the assumption that human experience and thought *can* reveal God, which means that there is no fundamental unlikeness between the human and the divine personality.

This leads to the second question, the doctrine of the passibility of God, the ascription of sorrow and suffering to Him. Dr. J. K. Mozley, in *The Impassibility of God* (1926), has virtually confined himself to a historical record, pointing out the marked contrast between ancient and modern Christian thought on this subject. Until the Reformation and indeed after it, there was "a steady and continuous, if not quite unbroken, tradition in Christian theology as to the freedom of the divine nature from all suffering and from any potentiality of suffering" (p. 127). In modern theology, on the other hand, there has been a strong reaction against the doctrine of impassibility, represented by such theologians as Bushnell, Fairbairn, Canon Streeter and Bishop Temple, and by such Christian philosophers as Lotze and Pringle-Pattison.



The last-named claims that the open secret of the Universe is "a God who lives in the perpetual giving of Himself, who shares in the life of His finite creatures, bearing in and with them the whole burden of their finitude, their sinful wanderings and sorrows, and the suffering without which they cannot be made perfect" (*The Idea of God*, p. 411). Professor H. R. Mackintosh says, in his *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (p. 216), "Ideas of the Divine impassibility derived from ages which were very far from humane, and which too often regarded suffering unconcernedly as a mark of the weak and the vanquished, can now make little appeal." On the other hand, we have such a study as the late Baron von Hügel's *Suffering and God*, published in the second series of his *Essays*, in which he contends that whilst men sin and suffer, and Christ suffers but does not sin, there is as little room for suffering as for sin in God, who is pure Joy. This essay seems to me quite wrong in its contention that the prophets of Israel did not attribute suffering to God (p. 186), and that what they say is to be dismissed as imagery. Let us apply that contention to one of the most moving passages in the Book of Hosea (xi. 8-9):

"How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?  
 How shall I hand thee over, Israel?  
 How shall I give thee up as Admah, set thee as Zeboim?  
 My heart is turned upon me,  
 My compassions are kindled together;  
 I will not carry out my hot anger,  
 I will not again destroy Ephraim."

If we say that this expresses only a passionless "sympathy," and that God does not sorrow and does not suffer because of the sin of his people, how much force is left in such words? How can a God who is apathetic be also sympathetic? But if Hosea's words are interpreted by that experience of the prophet in which they seem to have arisen—Hosea's own inability to detach himself from Gomer because of his sorrowing and suffering love for her, then the words become charged with a Gospel, and point on directly to the truths of the New Testament. We may indeed ask how there can be "sympathy" at all without suffering? If sympathy be a "feeling with" the sufferer, is not that very feeling itself a form of suffering? If the love of God is more than a metaphor, must not the suffering of God be as real, though with all the qualifications in both love and suffering which come from the reference to God instead of man? It seems a dangerous thing to dismiss such sayings as imagery, unless we go on to admit quite frankly

that all human language about God is but symbolic, though not the less capable of symbolizing ultimate truths. The danger is continued in the realm of Christology, if with von Hügel and many others we say that Christ suffered as man, but not as God. Somehow that distinction, however convenient to the theologian, does not seem to ring true to the story of the Gospels, or to the strong language of the Epistle to the Hebrews about the suffering of the Son of God. It is well for us to ask, especially in an age when the mass of men look askance on what they regard as the abstractions and unrealities of theology, whether Browning is not a truer exponent of the Biblical doctrine of God than many "orthodox" interpreters of it. I am thinking of the familiar passage in which Hercules is joyfully starting out to rescue Alcestis from the underworld:—

"I think this is the authentic sign and seal  
Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,  
And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts  
Into a rage to suffer for mankind,  
And recommence at sorrow; drops like seed  
After the blossom, ultimate of all.  
Say, does the seed scorn earth and seek the sun?  
Surely it has no other end and aim  
Than to drop, once more die into the ground,  
Taste cold and darkness and oblivion there:  
And thence rise, tree-like grow through pain to joy,  
More joy and most joy,—do man good again."

(*Balaustion's Adventure*, p. 654).

The final joy of God must be beyond question; the Christian conception of God cannot be of a worn and anxious and burdened traveller, fearful lest he may not reach his world-goal. God is a burden-bearer, according to the Hebrew prophets (Isaiah xlvi. 3-4), but it is because He carries willingly the burden of His people. He is, as a later Jewish teacher said, "forever young," and His triumph is no uncertain thing in a universe of risks. But the Christian conception seems to be that of a triumph through the Cross, a victory through apparent defeat, a joy that is all the richer for because it is won, like that of Jesus, through great suffering, voluntarily accepted and endured for the joy that was set before Him. The conception of a God who cannot suffer makes theology much more manageable, but leaves it high and dry.

This theme naturally opens into the third feature in which the marriage of Hosea may be regarded as having significance for theology—the doctrine of atonement. Here, again, it would

seem that an Old Testament approach to New Testament truth has its value, just because we see our problems and the line of their solution in simpler fashion and in a setting less familiar. If we have rightly understood the story of Hosea's life, he not only appeals to Gomer by the declaration of his unbroken love, but tries to help her practically towards recovery of her lost place. But he does more than this; he suffers with her and for her. Indeed, it may be said quite properly that he suffers far more than she can, just because of his forgiving love. Shall we not say with Professor H. R. Mackintosh, in the book already quoted, that the forgiveness of God "must prove as full, as unqualified and over-powering in generosity, as the forgiveness of good men" ? (p. 30). In man, as in God, true forgiveness *costs* something. Its measure may be partly seen in the attempt of the good man to raise the fallen, as a real element in his forgiveness. But behind the visible acts of helpfulness and reconciliation, there is an inner cost, a suffering born from sacrificial love, a suffering greater in the saint than in the sinner, and surely greatest in God. Thus we may speak with Bushnell of "a cross in God before the wood is seen upon Calvary" (*The Vicarious Sacrifice*, p. 35). To identify the atonement ultimately with the sacrificial love of God is not to minimize in the least the significance of the Cross of Christ in history, for that becomes the supreme actualization in time of the truth that holds for all eternity. But this way of facing the doctrine of atonement does remove it from the category of a transaction, a mere event, a sort of device belonging to the "plan of salvation." Atonement then becomes something deep—based in the very nature of God, as natural to Him as the forgiving love of a human saint. If it be true that in God we live and move and have our being, then our sins must somehow be conceived as within the circle of His holiness. Yet how can they be conceived there save as suffering within the Godhead—suffering of men, penal, disciplinary, chastening, and suffering of God, sacrificial, redemptive, and at last transformed into the joy of triumph? We should like to know whether the suffering love of Hosea did avail to win back the sinning Gomer; but, whether it did or not, that suffering love has transformed a sordid story into a prophecy of the Gospel. Similarly, the sacrificial love of God is always faced by the mystery of human personality and freedom, and none can declare the issue of its appeal to the individual; but the love behind it transforms the meaning of the world's history and makes it glorious with the "iridescent" wisdom of God.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.