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THE MESSAGE OF HOSEA IN THE LIGHT OF HIS MARRIAGE

by H. L. ELLISON

THIS study by Mr. Ellison was read as a paper to the Society for Old Testament Study during the year that the Editor was President. It is as great a pleasure now to present it to readers of *THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY* as it was then to present it to members of the Society.

WITH the exception of Micah and Isaiah there are closer affinities of outlook between Hosea and Jeremiah than we find in any other two of the canonical prophets. Yet it is no misuse of the word to say that it is almost certainly mere coincidence that these two books offer us more insight into the prophet's private life than is otherwise vouchsafed us. In Jeremiah we have the impression that the biographical is mainly the outcome or an extension of his message, even though in its turn it leaves strong traces on the subsequent message. In the case of Hosea I have come to the conviction that much in his prophesying derives from or has been deeply influenced by his marital experiences.

Such a statement will be for most readers virtually a commonplace, but that may be a double justification for examining it more closely. On the one hand we are all too apt to take such statements for granted and so fail to learn their real lessons; on the other we find them being eroded by not a few modern concepts of prophetic consciousness and activity.

In point of fact its whole basis has been challenged by Yehezkel Kaufmann's insistence that Hosea is the work of two prophets separated by about a century.¹ For him Hos. 1-3 is the work of a prophet in the time of Ahab. That he was impelled to this theory by his distinctive views on the influence of external paganism on the religion of Israel is obvious.² It should be equally obvious, however, that if a scholar of his calibre can put forth such a view, the concepts of chapters 1-3 have not left as plain a mark on the subsequent chapters as is often claimed. It is one thing to accuse

¹ *The Religion of Israel* (1961), pp. 368-377. This is an abbreviation and translation by Moshe Greenberg of the first seven volumes of the author's *Hebrew History of Israelite Religion* (1937-48).

² He is a useful corrective to exaggerated views of the Baalization of Yahweh worship, but he undoubtedly takes his opposition too far.

Kaufmann of wishful thinking, quite another to suggest that he deliberately distorted the facts.

In the following three assumptions have been made about the story in chapters 1 and 3. The first may not be very important, but the other two are of major importance for my exposition. I assume (a) that these two chapters are about the same woman, viz. Gomer bat Diblaim (1: 3); (b) that they stand in chronologically correct order; (c) that the whole incident stands at the beginning of Hosea's activity as a prophet, as is indeed suggested by 1: 2. If I leave these three points as assumptions, it is not because I cannot make a good attempt to justify them, but because I wish to save space and because this work has been done far better by Professor H. H. Rowley.³

If these assumptions are correct, there is a logical conclusion that must be drawn from them. However logical and natural such a step might have seemed to his contemporaries and to us as well, we must affirm that Hosea did not divorce Gomer, when she left him. Irrespective of the date of Deuteronomy and of the law of divorce in 24: 1-4, unless Jeremiah had been appealing to a principle deeply rooted in the national consciousness, he could not have spoken in the vehement words of Jer. 3: 1:

If a man divorces his wife
and she goes from him
and becomes another man's wife,
will he return to her?
Would not that land be greatly polluted?
You have played the harlot with many lovers;
and would you return to Me?—oracle of Yahweh.

I find it virtually impossible to believe that such a basic principle was not recognized in the time of Hosea, nor is there any evidence that Yahweh was prepared to exempt His prophets from such ordinances in order to create living sermons.

Let me now pick out two elements in Hosea's message where the effects of his broken marriage may be more clearly seen.

I. IMMORALITY IN ISRAEL

In the lecture room we refer casually to the *qedeshah*, the cult prostitute, as though only decency demanded the drawing of a veil over her ways. In fact there are considerable gaps in our knowledge about her among the Canaanites and other neighbours

³ "The Marriage of Hosea," first published in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 1956, and then in *Men of God* (1963), ch. 3.

of Israel, and we know next door to nothing about her in Israel itself, where we should not assume a mere copying of foreign prototypes. We do not know, therefore, how far the institution of the *qedeshah* was followed and how many were involved, or whether the sexual corruption of religion in Israel showed itself largely in promiscuity at certain feasts, as some passages in the prophets suggest but do not necessarily demand.

If we were to base ourselves solely on the prophets that preceded the Josianic reformation, with the exception of Hosea, we might well agree with Kaufmann that the phenomenon of religious prostitution was merely a marginal one.⁴ How different the picture becomes when Hosea places the whole of Israel's religious history under the shadow of Baal-peor (9: 10-14) and demands the penalty:

Give them, O Lord—what wilt Thou give?
Give them a womb bereft of children and dry breasts.

To me it seems hyper-critical not to see here the anguish of the betrayed man with illegitimate children under his roof. The prophet's own tragedy seems to have opened his eyes, as is the case with no other prophet, so far as his recorded oracles reveal, to the spiritual and social results of religious prostitution.

This is further seen in his unique oracle, 4: 13c, 14:

Therefore your daughters play the harlot,
and your brides commit adultery;
for the men themselves go aside with harlots
and sacrifice with cult prostitutes,
and a people without understanding shall
come to ruin.

Here he makes allowances for the sexual irregularities of Israel's women because of the atmosphere in which they have grown up and the example they have been set. It is a virtual exoneration of Gomer. It also runs absolutely contrary to conventional standards of morality which are always more ready to excuse the man than the woman.

II. THE COVENANT

A similar difference of attitude may be seen in Hosea's view of the covenant. If we look away from him, it is probably fair to say that the eighth-century prophets take the covenant for granted,

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 319, where it is claimed without evidence that *qedeshah* in Israel was used simply for a common harlot.

and that it presents no particular problems to them. They seem to take for granted that since Israel had not kept the covenant, it could not appeal to it, least of all by an exaggerated fulfilment of the cultus. Here surely lies the meaning of Amos's famous declaration:

"Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel?"—oracle of Yahweh.
"Did I not bring up Israel from the land of
Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor,
and the Syrians from Qir?" (9: 7).

This is not a sudden lifting of other nations to Israel's level of privilege, as was maintained by an earlier liberalism, but a lowering of disobedient Israel to their level. In the framework of a violated covenant Israel stood no better than the nations with whom no covenant had been made, and the greatest events in its history were as lacking in spiritual significance as were the creative movements in its neighbours' history.

Hosea, however, as the initiator in the marriage covenant with Gomer, was given through his own broken heart an opportunity to glimpse something of Yahweh's reaction to the broken covenant. We must beware here, lest we fall into one or other of contrasting errors. We must not attribute to Hosea the feelings and the motives of the modern romantic, but we must equally refrain from regarding him as a passive cypher in the hand of his God. Heschel has said very well: "It seems absurd to assume that the prophet's marriage was performed for effect, as a mere demonstration, as an action intended for public information. One must not reduce the fullness of an act to its operational meaning. We cannot adequately understand a person by the impressions he produces in other people. A person is not a puppet, and martyrdom is not a masquerade."⁵ Since Gomer bat Diblaim resolutely refuses to unlock her secrets to the most skilful of allegorists, and since she is named with no thought of perpetuating her shame and his, I am simple enough to believe that her name has come down to us because her husband loved her.

Because he loved her, her treachery did not end his love. Though she was faithless, he remained faithful. What he demanded of her, when she had become his slave, was not outward loyalty; that he could enforce under penalty of dire legal sanctions. He wanted to see something of a loyalty responding and corresponding to his.

⁵ *The Prophets* (1962), pp. 55f.

This lies behind his best known words,

For I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (6 : 6).

If *hesed* was a covenant word stressing mainly loyalty—and I have no grounds for doubting it⁶—then it must repeatedly have been used in popular language of man's response to the covenant; that the prophets do not so use it does not vitiate this probability. Doubtless it was just through sacrifices that *hesed* was believed to have been shown. Hosea's contrast between *hesed* and sacrifices shows that they belong to different categories. *Hesed* links with *da'at* (knowledge); they are both inner qualities. Hosea wanted love, loyalty and understanding from Gomer, not the finest of roast veal; in some analogous, though much higher way God wanted man's love, loyalty and understanding. In the Sinai covenant God offered and showed His *hesed* and *da'at*—"You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos. 3 : 1)—so in the covenant He desired *hesed* and *da'at* in return.

III. SOME AMBIGUITIES

I pass on to two passages where the ambiguity in the Hebrew can be best grasped and interpreted in the light of Hosea's experience. Ambiguity there is; it is not merely the product of clever expositors.

In chapter 11 RSV translates v. 8 :

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
How can I make you like Admah!
How can I treat you like Zeboim!
My heart recoils within me,
my compassions grow warm and tender.

Exegetically this creates no difficulty. Some such thoughts must have passed through Hosea's mind from time to time as he watched Gomer obedient yet resentful. Either to give her her freedom or to grant her her full rights as wife without a previous change of heart would have been easier than this stalemate between love and resentment. It was no great step to seeing God's love facing a greater problem as He dealt with His stubborn son.

The trouble comes with v. 9 :

I will not execute My fierce anger,
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
For I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy.

⁶ For a good discussion of cf. N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (1944), pp. 94ff.

Though this is apparently the meaning of the Hebrew, there is surely something wrong, when a prophet is made to say something that contradicts the rest of his message. That Hosea's love might break down his resolution, that his disgust at his wife's unfaithfulness and lack of response might destroy his *hesed*, could never be ruled out as possibilities. But here is not man but God—'El, i.e. the Mighty One—the Holy One in their midst. Was His resolution to break down?

Rudolph⁷ tries to rescue the difficulty by appealing to a return from exile (cf. vv. 10f.). But, as we shall see later, this is to minimize, potentially and actually, the meaning of the exile. It is far more likely that T. H. Robinson was correct, when he translated by questions:⁸

Will I not execute My fierce anger?
Will I not again destroy Ephraim? . . .
and will I not come to destroy?

It is true that through his broken marriage Hosea came to understand the love of God for Israel better, but he also came to know how awesomely higher the character of God was than his.

The other passage is 13: 14, which RSV translates:

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol?
Shall I redeem them from Death?
O Death, where are your plagues?
O Sheol, where is your destruction?
Compassion is hid from My eyes.

If ever there were apparently deliberate ambiguity it is here. No specific answer to the questions is of necessity suggested. We are not told whether there will be a ransoming or not from death and Sheol. God may be deriding their power—it is so interpreted by Paul in 1 Cor. 15: 55—or calling on them to do their task. The last clause, more accurately "Repentance is hid from My eyes", may mean that God refuses to see Israel's last moment repentance, even if it exists, or that He will not change His purposes of mercy, whatever happens.

A mention of only a few opinions will suffice to show how differently this verse has been understood. On the side of hope we have the ancient versions, AV and RV, Cheyne, T. H. Robinson, Weiser, G. A. F. Knight; on the side of doom RSV, Phillips, Harper (ICC), G. A. Smith, Horton, Moffatt, Ackroyd, Martin-Achard, Rudolph.

⁷ *Hosea* (KAT), *ad loc.*

⁸ *Die Zwölf Kleinen Propheten* (HAT), *ad loc.*

I suggest tentatively that in Hosea's own experience we may have the clue to this ambiguity. What little is told us of the prophets is not out of biographical interest, but to help us understand God's message. For all that, by any criterion of interpretation, it seems strange that we are never told the outcome of Gomer's "sitting still" for Hosea "many days" (3: 3). Because I am a realist, not a romantic, I have to recognize that love, even Hosea's love, even God's love, does not always triumph. I have no right to assume that Gomer did not finally yield; I have equally no right to assume that she did. But for me the question mark over Gomer's future is God's question mark over Israel, over all mankind, if we will. By temperament and theology we all tend in one direction or the other, but our trend does not remove the question mark of whether God's love will triumph in this one or that.

Hosea's doubt was a qualified one. For him in this passage Sheol and Death represent exile and the end of national existence. But there are no real grounds for denying 3: 4, 5 to him. So we find his certainty that though his own love might go down to Sheol unsatisfied, yet there might be a national resurrection in which God's love would yet triumph.

Dawlish, Devon.