

THEOLOGY CLASSES · OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES II

Lecture 16: Hosea: The Marriage That Preaches

Dr. Keith Essex · The Master's Seminary · 32 minutes

BEFORE YOU WATCH

This compact session opens the first book of the Twelve. Dr. Essex sets Hosea against the deceptive prosperity of Jeroboam II's reign, walks through the marriage narrative of chapters 1 to 3 and the names that preach judgment and reversal, and then takes up the question that has followed the book through the whole history of interpretation: did God really command his prophet to marry Gomer? Listen for why the narrative style of the text answers the question.

STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

01 The first of the Twelve

Having leaned with the Masoretic and earliest Jewish tradition that the Twelve form one book, possibly brought to completion by Malachi gathering the words of the prophets before him, the course still studies the books individually as the Christian tradition has done, watching for the thematic development running through the whole. Hosea stands first, and its fourteen chapters yield their themes readily: the prophet's own family turmoil in chapters 1 and 3 becomes Yahweh's illustration, for as Hosea's wife was unfaithful to him, so Israel, the northern kingdom to which Hosea is sent, has been an adulterous wife to Yahweh.

02 Example, then exposition

On the literary structure there is little debate: chapters 1 to 3 give the example, Hosea's marriage, and chapters 4 to 14 give the exposition that flows from it, with the vocabulary of adultery running on through chapters 4, 5, and 9. And the book balances judgment with hope: three times in the opening chapters and three times in the collected oracles Hosea speaks of Israel's future salvation. The purpose is correspondingly clear: though Israel was unfaithful, Yahweh's faithful love will prevail, and will prevail precisely in bringing deliverance to Israel in the future.

03 The setting: prosperity with rot inside

The title names Hosea the son of Beeri and lists the kings of Judah first, Uzziah through Hezekiah, though the message goes to the north, and then Jeroboam king of Israel, whose reign ended in 752 BC. Broadly, the ministry runs from about 760 to 755 BC, when the events of chapter 1 likely occurred, down toward the captivity of 722 BC. The Jeroboam anchor matters: Jeroboam II extended Israel's borders to their greatest Old Testament extent, the northern reach approaching Solomon's, and in his roughly forty years Israel enjoyed its greatest economic wealth and political clout in the ancient Near East. Against that backdrop Hosea begins: everything looks good on the outside while the rot of spiritual adultery eats the inside.

04 Gomer and the wife of harlotry

Chapter 1:2 to 9 is narrative: the word of the Lord comes, and Hosea marries Gomer, a wife of harlotry who bears children of harlotry, children who come through a woman who is a harlot. The command's stated reason: for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking Yahweh; the marriage will be a living example of Israel's relationship to her God. Gomer's unfaithfulness is agreed by all readers; the debated questions, whether chapter 3's woman is the same woman, and what kind of harlotry is meant, belong to the interpretive issues.

05 Three children, three sentences

As with Isaiah 7 and 8, the children carry prophetic names. Jezreel recalls Jehu, founder of the dynasty whose most illustrious king was Jeroboam II: called to destroy the house of Omri and Baal worship, Jehu took the slaughter further than God intended and reestablished the worship system of Jeroboam I, in which elements of Baalism persisted; so Jezreel announces judgment on the house of Jehu and on the kingdom for Jehu's sins. Lo-ruhamah, no compassion: Yahweh will no longer have compassion on Israel, though at that time he will have compassion on Judah and deliver her, a word kept historically when Assyria destroyed the north but Judah was delivered in Hezekiah's day, which is why Hezekiah stands in the superscription. Lo-ammi: you are not my people, and I am not your God.

06 The reversal: sand of the sea

Judgment is not God's final word. In 1:10 through 2:1 the sentences are overturned: the number of the sons of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, the Abrahamic covenant still standing behind the judgment; the sons of Judah and the sons of Israel will be gathered together and appoint for themselves one leader, the Davidic note that chapter 3 will make explicit; great will be the day of Jezreel, the name of judgment become a name of restoration; and the negations fall away: say to your brothers, Ammi, my people, and to your sisters, Ruhamah, compassion.

07 Contend with your mother: Yahweh's own marriage

Chapter 2:2 to 23 is a long poetic interlude, and as it opens, contend with your mother, for she is not my wife and I am not her husband, the reader begins to wonder whose marriage this is; it is Yahweh's. Because of her adultery he puts his wife Israel away for a time; then, from verse 14, the divorced wife is courted again: he will allure her, remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, make a covenant for her with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, and betroth her to himself forever, in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and compassion, in faithfulness, and they will know Yahweh. The jilted husband becomes the wooing husband, raising, Essex notes, the question of how this coheres with Deuteronomy 24 on remarriage after divorce, a question the betrothal language leaves open.

08 Chapter 3: the purchase and the many days

The narrative returns to Hosea and a woman the course takes to be Gomer: go again, love a woman loved by her husband yet an adulteress. Hosea buys her, and says: you shall stay with me for many days; you shall not play the harlot, nor have a man; so I will also be toward you, purchase without immediate betrothal. The sign is interpreted in verse 4: the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince; and afterward, verse 5, they will return and seek Yahweh their God and David their king, and come trembling to the Lord and to his goodness in the last days. So the frame stands: chapter 1's marriage ends in a word of restoration, chapter 3's remarriage ends in a word of restoration, and between them chapter 2 shows the prophet's marriage mirroring Yahweh's.

09 Did it really happen?

The great moral problem of the book, that Yahweh would command his prophet to marry a woman inclined to or fallen into adultery, produced the majority position across the history of Judaism and Christianity: it never literally happened; it is a vision, a parable, or an allegory, with names as weighty as Calvin and E. J. Young among those reading it as vision or parable. Essex's answer: nice try. Chapter 1:2 to 9 and chapter 3:1 to 5 are prose narrative, and nothing in the text signals otherwise. When Ezekiel sees a vision he says the Spirit took him in vision; when he gives a parable he says so; and no one reads Isaiah 7 and 8 as vision merely because Isaiah's son bears a symbolic name. Every contemporary commentator recommended for the course takes Gomer as a real woman, really married to Hosea, in real historical events.

10 What kind of harlotry?

A second question follows even for those who accept the history: what does wife of harlotry mean? Some soften it to religious harlotry only, an unfaithful Israelite who worshiped the Baals, a usage Hosea himself supports from chapter 4 onward, where the mother who played the harlot is Israel chasing other gods. But the command continues: children of harlotry, children who come through this adulterous woman, and the text's plain force presses beyond the merely religious reading. The session breaks off in the middle of this question, to be taken up as the course continues.

11 The commentaries on Hosea

One surprise leads the bibliography: the Anchor Bible, a series usually too liberal to recommend, contains in Anderson and Freedman's Hosea the most extensive exegetical work available on this portion of the Twelve, Anderson a broadly evangelical scholar and Freedman neo-orthodox in theology yet fairly conservative exegetically; since the early 1980s commentators on Hosea begin by interacting with it, and their Amos volume is likewise recommended. For the shelf, the best single purchase is Garrett's NAC, Hosea and Joel in one volume; Hubbard's Tyndale volume is a good medium-level work, among the better in its series; and Kidner offers a broadly evangelical preaching-oriented treatment where little else exists.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Hosea 1 · Hosea 2 · Hosea 3 · Hosea 4 · Isaiah 7 · Deuteronomy 24 · 2 Kings 10

KEY TERMS

Example and exposition. The agreed structure of Hosea: chapters 1 to 3 give the example, the prophet's marriage, and chapters 4 to 14 the exposition, Israel as the unfaithful wife of Yahweh.

Jeroboam II. The northern king whose forty prosperous years, borders near Solomon's, wealth and clout at their peak, form Hosea's backdrop: outward success concealing the rot of spiritual adultery.

Gomer. Hosea's wife of harlotry, mother of the children of harlotry: taken by the course, with all its recommended commentators, as a real woman in real historical events.

Jezreel. The first child's name: judgment on the house of Jehu, who exceeded his commission in slaughter and preserved Jeroboam I's corrupt worship; in the reversal, great will be the day of Jezreel.

Lo-ruhamah. No compassion: Yahweh's sentence on Israel, paired with the promise of compassion and deliverance for Judah, kept when Assyria fell on the north and Hezekiah's Judah was spared.

Lo-ammi. Not my people: the third name, the covenant formula negated, reversed in 1:10 to 2:1 when the sons of Israel become the sand of the sea and the people say Ammi and Ruhamah again.

One leader. The figure of Hosea 1:11 under whom gathered Judah and Israel unite, identified in 3:5 as David their king, sought with trembling in the last days.

The betrothal. Hosea 2:19 and 20: Yahweh's promise to betroth divorced Israel to himself forever in righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, compassion, and faithfulness, the jilted husband turned suitor.

The many days. The sign of chapter 3: the purchased woman kept without husband or harlotry, as Israel remains many days without king or prince, before returning to seek Yahweh and David their king.

Vision or history. The classic debate over Hosea's marriage: the historic majority, Calvin and E. J. Young among them, read vision or parable to escape the moral problem; Essex answers that the prose narrative signals history, as with

Isaiah's symbolically named son.

Wife of harlotry. The debated phrase of 1:2: religious unfaithfulness only, or actual adultery; the continuation, children of harlotry, presses beyond the softened reading.

Anderson and Freedman. The Anchor Bible Hosea, the rare bright spot in a liberal series: the most extensive exegetical work on the book, setting the terms of Hosea studies since the early 1980s.

COMPREHENSION CHECK: EIGHTEEN QUESTIONS

1. What is the agreed literary structure of Hosea?
 - A. Chapters 1 to 3 give the example of Hosea's marriage; chapters 4 to 14 the exposition of Israel's unfaithfulness
 - B. Seven cycles of judgment and hope
 - C. Two halves divided at the fall of Samaria
 - D. A chiasm centered on chapter 7
2. What is the stated purpose of Hosea?
 - A. To explain the fall of the house of Omri
 - B. Though Israel was unfaithful, Yahweh's faithful love will prevail to bring future deliverance
 - C. To call Judah to avoid the north's alliances
 - D. To defend the prophet's reputation
3. What made Jeroboam II's reign a deceptive backdrop for Hosea's ministry?
 - A. Constant war concealed the kingdom's poverty
 - B. A famine had emptied the land
 - C. Israel's borders, wealth, and clout were at their peak while spiritual adultery rotted the inside
 - D. Assyria already occupied the Galilee
4. Why is Hezekiah named in the superscription of a book addressed to the north?
 - A. Hezekiah ruled both kingdoms after 722
 - B. Hosea fled to Jerusalem in Hezekiah's day
 - C. Hezekiah commissioned the book's writing
 - D. Hosea's message reached into Hezekiah's day, when the promised compassion on Judah brought her deliverance from Assyria
5. What does the name Jezreel announce?
 - A. Judgment on the house of Jehu, who exceeded his commission and preserved corrupt worship
 - B. The restoration of the Davidic line
 - C. The coming locust plague
 - D. The birth of a righteous remnant
6. What double failure marked Jehu, grounding the Jezreel judgment?
 - A. He allied with Baal's priests and taxed the poor
 - B. He took the slaughter further than God intended and reestablished Jeroboam I's worship with its Baalistic elements
 - C. He abandoned the north to Assyria and fled to Egypt
 - D. He divided the kingdom and seized Judah's cities

7. What covenant stands behind the reversal in Hosea 1:10?
 - A. The Mosaic covenant
 - B. The covenant of peace
 - C. The Abrahamic covenant: the sons of Israel like the sand of the sea
 - D. The Noahic covenant
8. How are the names of judgment treated in the restoration?
 - A. They are never mentioned again
 - B. They are transferred to the nations
 - C. They are given to new children
 - D. They are reversed: great will be the day of Jezreel, and the people say Ammi and Ruhamah
9. Whose marriage does Hosea 2 turn out to describe?
 - A. Yahweh's marriage to Israel: the divorced wife wooed, betrothed forever in righteousness and faithfulness
 - B. Hosea's marriage retold in poetry
 - C. Jezreel's future marriage
 - D. The marriage of Samaria to her idols
10. What tension does Essex note in Yahweh's remarriage to Israel?
 - A. Leviticus forbids a priest to marry a harlot
 - B. How it coheres with Deuteronomy 24's law about remarriage after divorce
 - C. The bride price is never stated
 - D. The prophets forbid oaths of betrothal
11. What does Hosea's purchase of the woman in chapter 3 signify?
 - A. Israel's ransom from Assyria for silver
 - B. The end of the northern priesthood
 - C. Israel remaining many days without king or prince before returning to seek Yahweh and David their king
 - D. The prophet's withdrawal from public ministry
12. When does Hosea 3:5 place Israel's return to Yahweh and David their king?
 - A. Within Hosea's own generation
 - B. At the fall of Nineveh
 - C. At the return under Cyrus
 - D. In the last days, coming trembling to the Lord and his goodness
13. Why did the historic majority deny that Hosea's marriage literally happened?
 - A. The moral problem: that Yahweh would command his prophet to marry a woman inclined to or fallen into adultery
 - B. No prophet was permitted to marry
 - C. The chronology of the children is impossible
 - D. Gomer appears nowhere else in Scripture

14. What is Essex's textual answer to the vision-or-parable reading?
 - A. The Septuagint adds that it truly happened
 - B. The rabbis unanimously read it as history
 - C. Chapters 1 and 3 are prose narrative with no signal of vision, whereas Ezekiel labels his visions and parables, and Isaiah's symbolically named son is literal
 - D. Hosea elsewhere denies speaking in parables
15. How do all the course's recommended contemporary commentators read Gomer?
 - A. As a composite of several women
 - B. As a real woman really married to Hosea in real historical events
 - C. As a personification of Samaria
 - D. As a later editorial addition
16. What consideration presses beyond the religious-harlotry-only reading of 1:2?
 - A. The command continues: children of harlotry, born through this adulterous woman
 - B. Gomer's name means faithless
 - C. Chapter 2 never mentions the Baals
 - D. The priests certify her adultery in chapter 4
17. What is unusual about the leading recommendation in Hosea's bibliography?
 - A. It is a medieval Jewish commentary
 - B. It is out of print and untranslated
 - C. It comes from the Anchor Bible, a series usually too liberal to recommend, whose Hosea by Anderson and Freedman is the most extensive exegetical work on the book
 - D. It was written by a former student of Essex
18. What is the best single volume to own on Hosea, per Essex?
 - A. Hubbard's Tyndale volume
 - B. Kidner's exposition
 - C. Anderson and Freedman's second volume
 - D. Garrett's NAC, which includes Hosea and Joel in one volume

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 A · 2 B · 3 C · 4 D · 5 A · 6 B · 7 C · 8 D · 9 A · 10 B · 11 C · 12 D · 13 A · 14 C · 15 B · 16 A · 17 C · 18 D

TALK IT OVER

1. God asked Hosea to live his message, at real personal cost, before he preached it. What does that pattern suggest about the relationship between a messenger's life and words, and where have you seen it?
2. Israel's greatest prosperity coincided with her deepest unfaithfulness. Why do good times so often conceal spiritual rot, and what practices help you examine what success is hiding?
3. The names of judgment, no compassion, not my people, are exactly reversed in the restoration. What does it mean that God's threatened judgments and his promises can attach to the very same words and people?
4. Yahweh responds to Israel's adultery not only with judgment but with courtship: alluring, wooing, betrothing forever. How does that picture of God pursuing the unfaithful sit with your instincts about what sin deserves?

5. Interpreters through the centuries softened Hosea's marriage into vision or parable to protect God's character. What do we risk when we adjust the text to resolve our moral discomfort, and how does Essex's appeal to the narrative style model a better way?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Hosea 2:19

GO FURTHER

Read Hosea 1 to 3 straight through, marking each child's name and its reversal, then read chapter 2 again asking at each verse whose marriage is in view. Set Deuteronomy 24:1 to 4 beside Hosea 2:14 to 20 and sit with the tension Essex names. Next session: a brief wrap of Hosea's message, then Joel, where a locust plague becomes a window onto the day of the Lord.