



UNIT 8 HOSEA – LESSON 2

HOSEA'S MARRIAGE.

One of the most debated and discussed problems in Old Testament study is the interpretation of the first three chapters of Hosea and the picture they reveal of Hosea's relations with his wife.

In 1:2-3 we are told that Hosea was commanded to take a "wife of harlotry", Gomer-bath-Diblaim, who bore him three children whom he called by the symbolic names of Jezreel (1:4), Not Pitied (1:6) and Not My People (1:9). Chapter 2 contains some disjointed preaching by Hosea which reflects his disturbed relationship with his wife who has presumably been false to him (2:2-5), although the preaching is directed to Israel and concerned with Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Chapter 3 appears to again take up Hosea's personal story, this time in the first person whereas Chapter 1 had been in the third person. Gomer apparently had left Hosea for her lovers and may even have become a temple prostitute. Hosea is compelled to seek her out (3:1), purchase her freedom from the man who has her in his power (3:2) and bring her back to his home where she undergoes a period of some form of restriction before restoration to normal family life again (3:3-5). Perhaps the preaching of 2:6-7, 13-23 also reflects this restoration.

There are many problems involved in the story and many suggested interpretations can be found. For example in 1:2 God commands his prophet to marry a "woman of harlotry". Does this mean an acknowledged prostitute who was known by Hosea to be promiscuous before marriage? If so does this mean God is unethical in demanding his prophet to do an unethical thing? Some suggest the story is a dream or vision while others suggest it is an allegory with no substance in fact. But what is unethical in practice is equally unethical in allegory or vision. Others suggest the names of the children suggest that the second and third children are recognised by Hosea to be not his own, but this again assumes the prophet to act in a manner inconsistent with his vocation in apparently countenancing Gomer's infidelity by continuing to live with her.

What are we to make of this strange story? Despite the very great scholars who have interpreted it in some non-literal way, I feel we must side with the majority of modern commentators and view the story as a factual account of Hosea's real experiences. As Reuss points out in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (p. 1425) "the details are related in so matter of fact a manner they must be matters of fact." Those who attempt to interpret the story allegorically find difficulty in finding a meaning for such details as the name of Hosea's wife, the sex of the children, the exact price of Gomer's redemption, and the weaning of one child before the birth of the next.



Hosea

The difficulty of the phrase "a woman of harlotry" may be overcome either by arguing that God is speaking proleptically, i.e. foreseeing that Gomer will become a harlot he uses the future condition as if it were the present actuality. But it is far better to understand the phrase as a class-descriptive i.e. all Israel is guilty of harlotry in forsaking Yahweh for other gods. Therefore every Israelite woman may be described as unfaithful simply because she belongs to an unfaithful nation. This is strengthened by the fact that by far the more usual phrase to describe a harlot is "a woman who is a harlot". For the sake of the analogy between Israel's relationship to God and Hosea's relationship with Gomer it is essential that we view Gomer as a pure girl at marriage just as Israel was pure when God took her to him in the wilderness as his bride.

Out of this tragic and sordid story God brought a good thing. It was doubtless in his realisation of his own love for his wife, despite her unfaithfulness to him, that Hosea perceived that God could love an Israel who was unfaithful. Goethe once said "I never had a great suffering but I made it into a poem". The suffering Hosea underwent was the cause of this great poem of God's love for Israel. Such a cry as is expressed in Chapter 11:1-4,8, grows out of Hosea's deeply personal experiences with Gomer.

Hosea's life thus becomes a **sermon** in itself. The most distinctive notes in his teaching have their origin in his personal experience. His proclamation of the love of God which persists despite man's sin and unfaithfulness receives its full expression in the life and teaching of Jesus. H. Cunliffe-Jones *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation* p. 40-41 is right when he says

"We may read the record of the prophet Hosea and hear from him directly a true word of the love of God. But we live in the light of the Cross of Christ and it is unthinkable that we shall read the message of Hosea without it speaking to us Christians of the meaning of the Cross of Christ in which the meaning of the love of God has been fully acted out. The message of Hosea, taken seriously in its historical context, has gained a new dimension of depth because of the Cross of Christ."

QUESTION 1:

How did Hosea use his own personal experiences to understand God's message and will? (Hosea Chapters 1-3). What was used from Jeremiah's life to give a message to the people of his day? (Jeremiah 16:1-4).

QUESTION 2:

What was the significance of the name "Jezreel" for Hosea's first child? (Hosea 1:4). What promise (which was later revealed) did the name hold? (1:11).

QUESTION 3:

There are several possible meanings or interpretations of God's instructions to Hosea in 1:2. With which do you agree? Why?



QUESTION 4:

Hosea described the relationship between God and his people as that of husband and wife. What comparison did Jeremiah use in Jeremiah 2:1-2? Why do you think prophets used human comparisons when speaking of God and not a "divine" vocabulary?

QUESTION 5:

Through Hosea God is giving Israel a last opportunity to repent before judgment breaks on the land. What was the judgment that did occur? (2 Kings 17:13-23).

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What relevance has the experience of Hosea to the Christian understanding of God's way with man? How could you use Hosea's story to explain Christian salvation to an uncommitted person?