

Hosea 1:2-5

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The LORD commands Hosea to take an unfaithful wife and have children with her. Hosea's marriage and family serve to illustrate how the Israelites have forsaken their covenant partner, Yahweh.

At the very beginning of Hosea's prophetic work, the LORD gave him what seems to us a strange command. The text tells us that *when the LORD first spoke through Hosea*, the LORD commanded him, saying, *Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry*. The verb "to take" is usually employed in the context of marrying someone (Genesis 4:19; Exodus 34:16). The word translated as harlotry ["zēnûnîm" in Hebrew] describes the behavior of the woman who was to be Hosea's wife as a woman who was sexually promiscuous.

God's command to Hosea to marry *a wife of harlotry* could have parallels to the story of Tamar, a Canaanite woman. Tamar was accused of harlotry because she became pregnant without having a husband. But Tamar was considered righteous because she had tricked her father-in-law Judah into sleeping with her by posing as a harlot. She did this because Judah had failed to provide her a husband, as was her right (Genesis 38:24-26). Tamar is honored by being listed as an ancestor of Jesus in Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:3). In Hosea's instance, God asked him to take a harlot as his wife in order to make a point to Israel. In each case it seems that God makes a point about redeeming human brokenness. In a sense, the entire human race is adulterous, since all have sinned against their Creator (Romans 2:23).

The most straight-forward meaning of the text is that *Gomer* was an immoral woman who depended upon payment from her patrons, in exchange for sex. In this way, God's command to Hosea to marry *a wife of harlotry* parallels His order to Isaiah to go "naked and barefoot" for three years (Isaiah 20:1-6), or His instructions to Ezekiel to avoid mourning and weeping for his beloved wife (Ezekiel 24:16). They all constitute outrageous behavior ordered by God, intended to get a point across.

The second part of the command in which God asked Hosea to *have children of harlotry* does not necessarily mean that Hosea's children were illegitimate, having been fathered by another man. Rather, it means that the children would bear the reputation of their mother's attitude and conduct. As we will see, Hosea's wife will (apparently) bear Hosea's children, then go back to her old, promiscuous ways.

The reason Hosea was asked to marry *a wife of harlotry* was to display Israel's attitude toward their Suzerain God, who cared for them as a faithful husband cares for his wife. Israel is unfaithful to its covenant with God as a wife is unfaithful to her covenant with her husband, in this case because *the land* (the nation Israel) *commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD*. Israel had agreed to follow God's laws when it entered the covenant with Him (Exodus 19:8). Now it is openly and flagrantly defying the laws it had agreed to faithfully follow. Thus, the prophet was instructed to build a family with an unfaithful woman, and his wife and children

were to serve as an object lesson that demonstrated Israel's unfaithfulness to the Suzerain (Ruler) God, who was its faithful husband.

In obedience to God's instructions, the prophet *went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim*. The root of *Diblaim* means "cakes of figs." Because of this, Rashi, a 9th century Rabbi, makes this comment: "they would tread upon her like a pressed fig (הַדְּבִלָּה). That is a euphemism for sexual contact." Thus Gomer's mother is presumed to be a prostitute as well.

Through Hosea's union with *Gomer*, three children were born. The LORD named the three children and gave each one a significant name. Although the children were real, and their names were real, each name was also symbolic.

Gomer, Hosea's wife, first *conceived and bore him a son*. The LORD commanded Hosea to *name his son Jezreel*, a name that means "God sows" or "God scatters." Here, there is a wordplay between the word "Israel" and "Jezreel." These two words sound almost alike in the Hebrew language.

The term *Jezreel* appears as a proper name in 1 Chronicles 4:3 and as the name of a town in Judah, the place where "David had taken" one of his wives, Ahinoam (1 Samuel 25:43).

It should also be noted that *Jezreel* was the name of the place where Naboth had his vineyard, "beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria" (1 Kings 21:1). King Ahab wanted the vineyard, but Naboth refused to sell it. So Ahab's wife, Jezebel, had Naboth stoned to death (1 Kings 21:1-15). Consequently, the LORD pronounced judgment on Ahab's family to take place in *Jezreel*. *Jezreel* is also the name of the valley where the city of Megiddo is located. It is, accordingly also known as Armageddon, which means "hill of Megiddo."

In 841 BC, Jehu, at the command of the LORD, destroyed the line of Ahab and became king himself (1 Kings 19:17-18; 2 Kings 9-10). During his massacre, Jehu assassinated Joram, the king of Israel and Ahab's successor just outside the walls of Jezreel. He then sent letters to the royal officials in Samaria, asking them to kill the sons of Ahab and send their heads to Jezreel. "So Jehu killed all who remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, and all his great men and his acquaintances and his priests, until he left him without a survivor" (2 Kings 10:11). Thus, Jezreel had become a place for violence, murder, and shedding of blood.

Jehu was used by God to destroy the dynasty of Ahab, and the LORD commended him, saying, "Because you have done well in performing what is right in My eyes, *and* have done to the house of Ahab in accordance with everything that *was* in My heart, your sons to the fourth *generation* shall sit on the throne of Israel" (2 Kings 10:30). Through this wordplay between *Jezreel* and Israel, the LORD announced that He would scatter Israel throughout the nations. This prophecy was fulfilled in 722 BC, when the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered them throughout the earth to cause them to be weakened as a nation.

However, because Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of the LORD with all his heart (2 Kings 10:31), the LORD pronounces here in Hosea judgment on Jehu's line using the name

Jezreel, saying, for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. God expected Jehu to learn from what happened at *Jezreel* since Jehu was the instrument God used to carry out His judgment on Ahab's family. Unfortunately, Jehu did not learn from that experience and was not careful to walk in God's ways. Therefore, Jehu fell under the same judgment as Ahab. This prophecy was fulfilled in 752 BC, when Shallum assassinated the son of Jeroboam II, Zechariah, who was the fourth of Jehu's line to reign on his throne (2 Kings 15:8-12).

The LORD then added, *On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.* The term *bow* was the common long-distance weapon of the ancient Near Eastern nations (1 Kings 22:34; 1 Samuel 31:3; Jeremiah 46:9). It is used here metaphorically to represent the military power of the nation Israel. The LORD said He would break Israel's military strength in the famous battleground of the *valley of Jezreel* to cause the nation to become weak.

This prophecy was likely fulfilled in 733 BC, when Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria defeated an Aramean-Israelite coalition. He struck Israel with full force, overran all Israelite lands in Galilee and in the eastern part of the Jordan River, and deported portions of the population (2 Kings 15:29). This was the beginning of the end of the nation Israel, which was completely destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC. This will be reversed in the last days of the age, when the armies of the nations gather in the Jezreel Valley (also called Armageddon) to go up against Israel, where they will be destroyed.

Jezreel will be used in this chapter both in the sense of scattering as well as gathering. God uses the name *Jezreel* in the first of this chapter to picture the scattering of Israel from the land because of its disobedience. In the last part of the chapter, God will use *Jezreel* again to indicate the re-gathering of Israel as a kingdom under a single monarch, which will be the Messiah, the son of David.

Biblical Text

² When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.” ³ So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. ⁴ And the Lord said to him, “Name him Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.”