

# Exegesis of Hosea 1:1-5

*by James J. Westendorf*

[Presented at the Metropolitan North Conference on Monday, March 12, 1976.]

## Translation

1.) The Word of the Lord which came unto Hosea, son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah; and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel. 2.) When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, “Go! Take to yourself an adulterous woman and adulterous children. For the land has committed gross adultery in turning away from the Lord.” 3.) Then he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim; and she conceived and bore him a son. 4.) “Call his name Jezreel,” the Lord told him, “for in a short time I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will bring the kingdom of the house of Israel to an end. 5.) In that day it will come to pass that I will break Israel’s bow in the valley of Jezreel.”

## Exegesis

### Verse 1

The book of Hosea starts out with the identical introductory formula that we find in the opening verses of Micah and Zephaniah, D’BAR-YHVH A’SHER HAYAH...BIME..., “The Word of the Lord which came unto...in the days of...” This sameness has led some scholars to look upon these words as a stereotype formula added by a much later editor of Hosea’s sayings. They also find it convenient to blame the ignorance and the confused mind of this supposed editor for the problems in dating the book, as we will see later.

But how absolutely necessary are these words at the beginning of Hosea’s shocking deeds and message. They are his credentials, his divine authority for what follows. In other words his judgments on his nation are not human speculation or a good guess of what might happen. They are not even the words of a God-fearing preacher confronting his sinful and deaf people. And certainly they are not an old man’s effort to find meaning in his past troubled life and marital problems. Hosea acts. Hosea gives his message. But it is the Lord Who speaks, and His people had better listen. He is a God Whose faithful love has been spurned by a faithless people. They will suffer for it, and have only themselves to blame. The words, HAYAH AL, “came unto,” can actually have the meaning, “take possession of,” as in the case of the evil spirit taking possession of Saul (I Samuel 16:23).

Hosea is called “the son of Beeri.” This, however, gives no clue to his origin. Some have tried to connect the name with Beerah, one of the captives of the tribe of Reuben, carried away by Tiglath-pileser (I Chronicles 5:6). From his manner of speaking and his evident knowledge of the Northern Kingdom and its circumstances most commentators describe Hosea as the only prophet whose writings we possess who was a native of the Northern Kingdom, a man of rural background, but well educated.

Strangely enough, however, when dating his prophecy, this native of the north uses the reigns of rival Judean kings to the south. Only Jeroboam II is mentioned from the north. Discarding theories which state that this obviously shows the confusion of a later editor, we can find two possible reasons for Hosea’s method of dating his career. First of all Hosea may have felt that the men following Jeroboam on the throne didn’t deserve the name, “King of Israel.” In the thirty years after Jeroboam’s death until the end of the northern kingdom there was much political chaos accompanied by assassinations and rival reigns. Some of these six kings were no more than puppets of Assyria. Secondly there is strong evidence from Hosea’s book that he regarded the members of the house of David still ruling in Judah as the only valid, divinely elected rulers of Israel. Therefore the kings of the north would be usurpers.

Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:5)

They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not: of their gold have they made them idols, that they may be cut off. (Hosea 8:4)

Hosea probably was called to his work toward the end of Jeroboam's reign (754 B.C., all dates in this section follow *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* by Edwin R. Thiele). His marriage and the birth of his three children also no doubt took place during Jeroboam's lifetime since the names of the children speak of impending judgments that began at the death of Jeroboam. This puts the opening date of Hosea's work around 765-760 B.C.

The closing date of the book is not so easily ascertained. The dating of Hezekiah has caused endless problems. If we accept the late date for the beginning of Hezekiah's reign (716/715 B.C.), then Hosea was active during the fall of Samaria, and it seems very strange, although possible, that he would not have mentioned this catastrophic event. If we accept an earlier date for Hezekiah (727 B.C.), then Hosea could have concluded his work around 725 B.C. The later date for Hezekiah definitely fits an orderly historical reconstruction of this period of Israelite activity

## Verse 2

T'CHILLAH, "the beginning," indicates that the following command of the Lord marks the commencement of Hosea's career. The word, T'CHILLAH, is in the construct case, but the genitive following it is a complete sentence which cannot be reproduced in English. We have to say, "When the Lord first spoke," treating the noun, T'CHILLAH, as an adverb. Whether the prefix, B', on B'HOSHE'A refers to the Lord speaking "to" the prophet or "through" him has evenly divided commentators. "Through" is a more literal translation. In the end both are true. The Lord obviously spoke to Hosea, but He was only using the prophet as an instrument. Through Hosea's words and actions the Lord finally was speaking to His people.

"Go! Take to yourself an adulterous woman and adulterous children." This is without a doubt one of the most shocking commands the Lord ever gave. As a result the interpretations of this passage are legion. They do fall into three main categories, however, 1.) The marriage never happened, but was received by Hosea in a dream and was used by him as a parable. 2.) This interpretation feeling that it would be immoral for the Lord to command his prophet to marry an adulteress states that Gomer was virtuous at the time of the marriage. She is described as a woman inclined toward adultery. The seeds of adultery were already sown by the immoral idol worship of the time, but they bore no fruit until later. Hosea didn't realize why he was commanded to marry Gomer until much later. The argument states that were it otherwise, the participle ZONAH, "committing adultery," would have been used rather than Z'NUNIM, "of whoredoms." However, E. B. Pusey points out that the Hebrew phrase, "woman of whoredoms," cannot refer to a virtuous woman or one who was inclined toward adultery. "Woman of whoredoms" means one already guilty of playing the whore as 'ISH-DAMIM in Psalm 5:6 refers to a then guilty of shedding blood, not one only inclined to do so. There are several other interpretations of this passage that make the marriage a real thing and yet try to save Gomer's virtue. Luther and the other sixteenth century reformers contended that Gomer was never an adulteress. Instead she was given the shameful name, "woman of whoredoms," by the Lord simply to symbolize Israel's disgraceful conduct. Her name was symbolic of Israel's sin in the same way that the children's names were symbolic of God's judgment on that sin. Another interpretation says that Gomer was guilty of spiritual adultery, that is, idolatry. 3.) This final interpretation says that whether you regard Gomer as one who only committed adultery in connection with the idol cult worship, or as a notoriously wicked woman in everybody's eyes, she was not a virtuous woman at the time of her marriage to Hosea.

The third interpretation is the best one. First of all there is the Lord's command, "Go! Take..." There is nothing symbolic about those words. Rather it is a direct command of the Lord. There are no other indications

in the text either that even hint at a dream or vision. Furthermore it would weaken Hosea's message. James L. Mays in his commentary points out, "The very character of prophetic symbolism requires that the divine word be actualized in a representative event." Another argument against the parabolic interpretation is that the names Gomer and Diblaim have no symbolic meanings which would be in keeping with the names given to the children. The objection of interpretation two that Hosea's marrying an adulterous woman would not be an accurate portrayal of the Lord's whole historical relationship with Israel, can best be answered by quoting from David A. Hubbard's commentary, "Hosea's marriage with Gomer was not meant to recapitulate, but to thrust into sharp relief Israel's present degeneracy."

The next phrase, YAL'DE-Z'NUNIM, "children of whoredoms," also carries with it many interpretation problems. Were they children of previous adulteries brought with Gomer into the marriage? Were they offspring of illicit affairs after the marriage? Do they get this name simply because they came from the womb of a whore, or might the children themselves in some way deserve this name? All these interpretations have their champions. I prefer the last one. In view of the last clause of verse two, "for in turning away from the Lord the land has committed gross adultery," both Hosea's wife and children are representative of unfaithful Israel. As a nation Israel is pictured as the Lord's wife. As individuals the Israelites are called the Lord's children. Both have committed adultery. And Hosea's family is an accurate reflection of this situation. The children side with their mother. They fully agree to and later perhaps even join in her adulterous living. They became as much a sorrow to Hosea as his wife was. God's judgment carried in their names was intended not just for Israel as a nation, but for each individual, unfaithful Israelite. Hosea's children were such individuals, and their names were a warning to them.

The word KI now introduces the explanation for the Lord's command. The phrase KI ZANOH TIZNEH is an infinitive absolute construction that indicates a great emphasis. "For the land (as a metonymy for its inhabitants) has committed gross adultery." It wasn't an occasional visit to a heathen shrine or the adoption of a few heathen rituals and rites that the Lord is condemning. The religion of Baal was virtually the religion of the common people. They considered Baal their great provider and protector. The worshippers of the Lord were perhaps even more in the minority than the Lord's seven thousand in the days of Elijah. Hosea's marriage is to be an indictment of this spiritual adultery. His children's names would be the judgment to follow. The word MI'ACH'RE is actually the preposition MIN with the construct case of the noun 'ACHAR meaning "that which is behind." They combine to form a compound preposition meaning "from after" or "away from."

### Verse 3

Verse three is the account of the prophet's carrying out of the Lord's command. It must have been a painful task, because with our understanding of the situation Hosea knew beforehand that both his wife and children would be a constant source of anguish and sorrow to him. In the comments on verse two I have already indicated that I take everything that is described here as actually happening. One question that the words VATELEK LO, "and she bore to him," seem to settle is whether this child was actually Hosea's or a result of Gomer's unfaithfulness. This child and the ones to follow were fathered by Hosea which makes the adulterous attitude and life they later adopted all the more grievous to him.

### Verse 4

The Lord commands Hosea to name his first son, "Jezreel." Jezreel was the name for two places. It was first of all a city some twenty miles north of Samaria where Ahab had his summer home. It was there that Ahab killed Naboth. Jezebel, Jehoram who was Ahab's son and king of Israel, and Ahaziah who was Ahab's grandson and king of Judah also died there at the hand of Jehu. Jezreel also was the name of the broad flat valley north of the city running east to the Mediterranean Sea north of the ridge of Mt. Carmel. From ancient times already that valley along with the fortress guarding its southern access, Megiddo, was a battle site.

As Jezreel was a name for two places so the judgment that the name of Hosea's child carried with it was twofold. It was first of all a judgment on the house of Jehu and secondly it was a judgment on the whole nation. Although as I have already said, Hosea saw the fall of the house of Jehu as the beginning of the end for all Israel.

In verse four the Lord pronounces the judgment on the house of Jehu. The Lord says 'OD M'ATH, "in a short time" the judgment will come. This must have seemed incredible to Hosea's hearers if indeed he had any in Israel. Nothing seemed further from reality than destruction and chaos just around the corner in the prosperous and peaceful reign of Jeroboam II. The borders were stretched as far as in Solomon's day. Wealth was pouring in. Great years were ahead. It was ridiculous to think that it would end now.

But Hosea's prophecy is in keeping with II Kings 10:30 which states, "...thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." Jeroboam was the third generation of Jehu's children. His weak son, Zachariah, who ruled for only a few months would be the fourth, then the Lord's words through Hosea would be fulfilled.

The word UPAQADTI, "and I will punish," can also have the good sense, "I will visit with blessings." Here from the context it obviously is used in the bad sense of "visiting with punishment." He who will be punished becomes the object of the preposition 'AL, in this case the house of Jehu, and the sin to be punished is put in the accusative case, here the D'ME-YIZR'EL, the bloodshed of Jezreel.

What is meant by the bloodshed of Jezreel? Plenty of blood was shed there. It seems rather far-fetched to go along with Theodore Laetsch when he makes this apply to the killing of Naboth. That guilt rested on the house of Ahab, not Jehu. But that leaves only the killing of the house of Ahab and the Baal worshippers at the beginning of Jehu's reign. And although Jehu virtually waded through the blood of Ahab's house and the Baal worshippers to get to and secure his throne, his bloody actions still received the Lord's blessing in II Kings 10:30, "And the Lord said to Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hath done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart..." The Bible scholar who does not believe in divine inspiration and an absence of real contradictions in the Scriptures says this passage shows that a century later the prophets of Israel took an opposite view of the deeds of Jehu from the prophets of that day who had been persecuted by the house of Ahab. A far more Scriptural interpretation is that Jehu carried out the Lord's will, but for his own selfish ends. He wasn't really devoted to the Lord and religious reform, or he would have destroyed the calves of Bethel and Dan also. II Kings 10:31 complains that he did not. But that was not in keeping with his political ambitions. Jehu wanted to be king of Israel and destroying the sanctuaries that separated Israel from Judah would not have furthered that aim. Jehu was ready to rebel against Ahab's house anyway as is seen from the eager way he jumped at the opportunity. And it was very convenient that the Lord also was moving against the house of Ahab at that time. Pusey states it well when he says, "If we do what is the will of God for any end of our own, for anything except God, we do, in fact, our own will, not God's." So it was with Jehu and his descendants. Now their cup of iniquity was full.

With the fall of Jehu's house MAML'KUTH, "royal dominion," would be at an end in Israel.

### Verse 5

Verse five gives the second part of the Jezreel prophecy. It marked doom for the entire nation. In the valley of Jezreel the Lord would "break the bow" of Israel. "Break the bow" indicates the crushing of all strength. Israel would be shorn of all weapons and of defenses. Her power would be smashed by the Assyrian armies and shortly she would crumble completely in the fall of Samaria in 723 B.C. Great power and riches in thirty short years would turn to dust and captivity. The Lord would divorce His adulterous wife and disinherit His adulterous children.