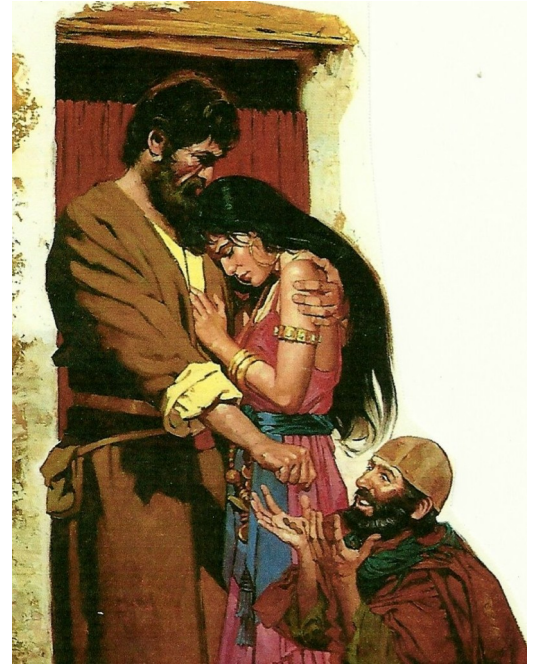


Hosea

Hear the voice of Hosea – When I was a young man I had fire in my belly. I looked at the people around me and I was in despair. Could they not understand the word of the Lord when it was given to them? Did they not hear the words of the prophets calling them to turn from false gods and be faithful to the Lord? Could they not turn from their sacrifices to idols and walk in the paths the Lord had set for them? It seemed so simple to me, in my time of innocence. Then the Lord spoke to me, and told me that he was pleased with me, with my devotion to him and for his people, my people, the Israelites, and he wanted me to live a life dedicated to him.



I thought, I will be a prophet to the Lord's people, I will be a man of honour. How wrong I was. The first thing that the Lord asked me to do, was marry a woman he had chosen for me. Still, I preened like the callow youth that I was, until he told me her name. Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. Of all the people in Israel that Yahweh could have chosen for me, she would have been my last choice. She had a reputation, even then, for taking to her bed any man who would have her. Still, I did as I was asked and went to the marriage broker and asked her to arrange with Diblaim to take Gomer to wife. Diblaim didn't ask too many questions. He was just relieved that Gomer was finally going to be a respectable married woman. The one question he did ask, probably unsurprisingly, was;

'Why?'

I gave him the answer that Yahweh had given me.

'Like an adulterous wife, this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord.'

I don't know what answer he was expecting, but it was not that one. His face turned white and he turned away from me. I wrote down what the Lord has asked of me. I recorded all that the Lord told me. Diblaim will go down in the annals of the history of the people of Israel as the father of a prostitute. I will go down as the cuckolded husband of one.

Gomer surprised me though. She remained faithful to me long enough to become pregnant and she gave birth to our son. The Lord spoke to me,

"Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel."

After a few lapses, Gomer decided to remain faithful and became pregnant again. This time she gave birth to a daughter. The Lord said to me,

“Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means “not loved”), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them. Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the Lord their God, will save them.”

This time the Lord only just gave Gomer enough time to wean Lo-Ruhamah before she became pregnant again, and gave birth to another son. The Lord said,

“Call him Lo-Ammi (which means “not my people”), for you are not my people, and I am not your God. Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’ The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.”

After the birth of Lo-Ammi, Yahweh said nothing to me about what to do with Gomer, so I left her alone, and she reverted to her old ways. Yahweh had many words for me to give to his people of Israel and I had to share with Israel the humiliation of being the husband of an adulteress, as she had now left me and our children and was living with another man.

Then the Lord said to me,

“Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.”

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and some barley. Then I told her,

“You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you. For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days.”

For sixty years now I have prophesied to the people of Israel. I have called on them to repent. I have warned them again and again. I have pointed out the error of their ways, the faithlessness of the Priests and the people who sacrifice to false gods. The people have called me a prophet of doom, and maybe I am. But the Lord led me to Gomer. The Lord instructed me to marry her, the Lord instructed me to have children with her. The Lord demanded that I reconcile with her. At great personal cost I bought her back. The Lord will wipe away the faithlessness of his people if only they will turn to him. The Lord will go before them into battle and lead them to victory, if they call on his name. The Lord will buy back his people with grain and fruit and honey from his own stores, if only they would remember the promises made to their forefathers Abraham and Isaac.

I have used images of marriage and adultery over and over again to try and explain to the people of Israel why they should stop sacrificing to Baal. But the people say to me,

‘Yahweh is a God of war. He has given us this land, he has beaten back our enemies, who have fallen at our feet, but what does he know of peace, what does he know of crops? Baal is the god of crops and agriculture. Now we need the land to provide us with food. Now we need Baal’

And I say to the people,

‘Do you not remember the journey out of Egypt when Yahweh fed and watered his people through the long years travelling in the wilderness? Do you not think that he can stop your crops and leave you starving, or make the sun to shine and the clouds bring forth rain so that you have food in abundance?’

The Lord says to the Priests and the people who do not listen,

‘I will bring you low, I will allow your enemies to conquer your land, to eat your food, to kill your warriors. It will not be enough to say we will return to the Lord for a few days, and he will restore us. The people of Israel will be scattered in Assyria.’

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have been able to control my own destiny. I wonder sometimes what it would have been like to choose my own wife, to have known or hoped that I would be faithful to her and she to me. I wonder what it would have been like to not look at other men and wonder if she had been with them. Then I have to give myself a shake and stop feeling sorry for myself and return to the work the Lord has given me to do. I feel so sorry for my children. I at least chose to accept the work that the Lord has given me. From the days of their births Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi have been marked, their names talked about and remarked upon. They have grown into fine people and make me proud of them each and every day, but their paths have been difficult and not of their choosing. If I could have spared them I would have. But I could not. The Lord has not spared me.

But the Lord cannot forget his people,

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor

will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man— the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities. They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves. I will settle them in their homes,”

‘If only you would repent’, declares the Lord.

FOOTNOTE

In the Hebrew Bible, Hosea, son of Beeri was an 8th-century BC prophet in Israel and the author of the Book of Hosea. He lived a long life which spanned the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, Kings of Judah, and prophesied to the people of Jeroboam, son of Jehoash king of Israel throughout his long reign. He is the first of the Twelve Minor Prophets. In the Old Testament the minor prophets are separate books, but for the Jewish community they are a single book in the Tanakh. The Talmud claims that he was the greatest prophet of his generation. The period of Hosea's ministry extended to some sixty years, and he was the only prophet of Israel of his time who left any written prophecy.