

**'ISRAEL HAS BECOME A WORTHLESS THING':
RE-READING GOMER IN HOSEA 1-3**

Teresa J. Hornsby

The Divinity School, Nashville, TN 37240, USA

Introduction

Hosea 1-3 is enigmatic with its pervasive stirrings of sexuality mingled with the Sacred, the conflation of violence and eroticism, the pairing of God's anger and tenderness. Interpretations of this story range from recounting abuses heaped upon a promiscuous woman by her husband to questioning whether there is any value in a pornographic, biblical text.¹ Speaking through the text the interpreters relate Israel's estrangement from YHWH. However, there are details about Gomer that bring into question those readings that label her an adulterous wife. Previous works concerning Hosea 1-3 have overlooked a volatile combination, without which one cannot wholly grasp Gomer's character: she is described with prostitute imagery mingled with an aloof indifference to God's manipulations, threats and tenderness.

1. See, for example, A. Brenner, 'Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections', in *JSOT* 70 (1996), pp. 63-86; A. Brenner and F. van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 1; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 167-95; F. van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination: An Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs—The Song of Songs and Hosea 2', in *JSOT* 44 (1989), pp. 75-88; J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (GCT, 3; JSOTSup, 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 101-28; T.D. Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea,' in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), pp. 86-95.

The following paper is an encounter with the complexities of Hosea chs. 1–3. I argue that the active metaphor in this section is one of a prosperous and independent prostitute who is doggedly pursued by an obsessive and dangerous individual who will go to any length to possess her.² I will also argue that Hosea 1–3 is a text written by a person or persons who strongly oppose changes that may be taking place around worship of YHWH. My interpretation recognizes that reading this text as protest depends on an autonomous sexual power of the prostitute. Further, it realizes that the woman is not victimized in this text but evades and negotiates her way out of violence and confinement. In this metaphorical context, the author of Hosea lays out a dreaded though temporary cartel between Israel and her corrupters.

God's Erotic Imagination

In the first two chapters of Hosea, no one, neither God nor Hosea, does anything at all. No one humiliates Gomer, no one banishes her to the desert, no one leaves her to die only later to seduce her, no one marries her. All we have are descriptions of God's own obsessive desire to possess Israel. God seems to want Hosea to re-enact God's own threats of murder and humiliation in the same way that he sought to possess an independent and prospering people. We, along with Hosea, are the hearers of God's soliloquy of Israel's acquisition, played out in an imagined manipulation and humiliation of an actual prostitute. Hosea's only role is to re-enact the history of Israel by hiring and confining an independent and successful prostitute (3.2); it is a kind of prophetic performance art. The primary question to consider is, what are the implications of portraying Israel as a formerly prosperous, autonomous business woman who is finally compromised and controlled through the wealth of an outsider?

One prominent feminist interpretation of Hosea 1–3 is of an account

2. I agree with Brenner's labeling of Hos. 1–3 as pornographic literature. However, labeling something pornographic should not necessarily be a negative ascription. I would call this text negative pornography not because of the objectification and violence, though these certainly are present, but because it is a telling of a violent, sexual fantasy that indeed objectifies the woman without her consent.

of a battering husband and a promiscuous wife.³ This interpretation of Hosea 1–3 brings into play several negative presuppositions. First, this model gives all social and private power to the husband without considering the value of the woman. She obviously attracts many affluent suitors; she is autonomous in that she chooses to go away or to stay; her presence evokes such desire that a man [God] is willing to resort to cruelty, lawlessness, perhaps even self-humiliation just to have her. If one accepts the metaphor of domestic violence and the ensuing model of desire here, the woman is rendered completely powerless.

Second, such an interpretation presupposes that prostitute and prostitution are shameful and degrading. This reading reinforces the notion that accepting gifts from various persons in exchange for sex is something that should inspire murderous rage and that the object of this rage, the whore, is worthy of extreme punishment.⁴ The only positive detail

3. For example, R. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995); Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', pp. 86–95.

4. Most interpreters talk about the relationship between Gomer and Hosea as a marriage. The 'whore' language is read as a derogatory label meant to shame the woman. (Brenner, 'Pornoprophetics Revisited', pp. 63–86; van Dijk-Hemmes, 'The Imagination of Power', pp. 75–88; Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography', pp. 86–95; G.A. Yee, 'Hosea', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* [ed. C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992], pp. 197–98.) Even those interpreters who argue that Gomer is a prostitute rather than an adulterous or promiscuous wife still read 'prostitute' as shameful and degrading. See for example G.I. Davies, *Hosea* (OTG, 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Y. Sherwood suggests the possibility of a kind of 'sex-positive' reading of Hos. 1–3 which I propose to do in this project. She writes, 'it is possible to read Gomer's speech [in 2.14 and 2.17] as evidence of, as Nickie Roberts approvingly puts it, the untamed, "arrogant and rebellious spirit of the whore"'. She goes on to say that 'the woman speaks in terms of contracts rather than subordination, and suggests that she strikes her own bargain with a society ruled by men and deities' (Y. Sherwood, *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Hosea's Marriage in Literary-Theoretical Perspective* [GCT, 2; JSOTSup, 212; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 319–20; N. Roberts, *Whores in History: Prostitution in Western Society* [London: HarperCollins, 1992], p. 352.) Likewise, Exum recognizes in Gomer's pursuit of other lovers a control over her own body, a certain independence. Exum, however, concludes that she cannot imagine a 'real woman getting away with such free and open behavior'. Therefore, she concludes that Hos. 1–3 is a male sexual fantasy of female desire, born out of fear of female sexuality (*Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 105).

one can glean from the metaphor of abusive husband is that no matter how much he persists in all the manipulations that may work in marital relationships, the autonomous woman cannot be bound by him. If Weems is right in that these abuses as metaphor would be familiar to the audience of the prophet,⁵ that works all the more to strengthen the character and power of the prostitute Gomer in the minds of the people when she resists and defies all his attempts to possess her.

The third and final presupposition perpetuated by a domestic violence interpretation is that the normative and valid function of desire is to seek to dominate and control an objectified other. If one removes the presupposed shame ascribed to Gomer and recognizes her autonomy, then desire can no longer function as hegemonic power-over. Desire would have to be reassigned a positive value in language other than one that acquires, controls and possesses. Otherwise, desire could never be reciprocated; it would always be the pursuit by one for another. The other can never be possessed, the subject never sated.⁶

זָנָה and זָנִיָּה: Adulteress or Prostitute?

Whether or not the relationship is read as abusive, most scholars argue that Gomer is not a literal prostitute but an adulterous or promiscuous wife.⁷ The arguments center on whether or not the phrase 'a woman of

5. Weems, *Battered Love*, p. 40.

6. E. Grosz, 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire,' in *idem* (ed.), *Space, Time and Per-version* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 67-84.

7. See P. Bird, 'To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry Into an Old Testament Metaphor', in P.L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 75-94; H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 97-100. (Eilberg-Schwartz's theses of God's phallus, as they concern Hosea, do not depend on interpreting the metaphorical relationship between God and Israel as a marriage. Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that having God as a male and as a romantic rival poses a nearly impossible challenge to the masculinity of the Israelite male. Further, God's maleness tends to create, according to Eilberg-Schwartz, a relationship between God and the Israelite male that is tinged with homoeroticism. In my interpretation of this passage, that is, God in pursuit of Israel the prostitute, neither the problem of God as romantic rival nor God as the object of homoerotic desire lessens.) See also Setel, 'Prophets and Pornography'; W. Vogels, 'Hosea's Gift to Gomer', in *Bib* 69 (1988), pp. 412-21; Weems, *Battered Love*; Yee, 'Hosea', pp. 195-202. Comparatively, G. Leick (*Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* [London: Routledge, 1994]) notes the tendency of Akkadian scholars to label

prostitution' actually means a prostitute or simply a promiscuous or adulterous woman. In the case of a sexual offense as a violation of the husband's or another male guardian's rights, the root נָאֵף, 'to commit adultery', is more often used, while זָנָה is used when there is no male to whom the woman is held sexually accountable. Primarily, it is used to denote 'the activity of the professional prostitute, who also has no husband nor sexual obligation to any other male'.⁸ P. Bird notes a critical distinction between these two meanings: the first, as an illicit, extra-marital relationship, offends a theoretical proprietary ownership of the woman's body. The woman (as wife, daughter, or levirate widow) is viewed as commodity. Her body, or rather, interaction with her body, becomes an offense, not to her, but to the one who owns her. However, in the relationship of the prostitute's body with her customer, there is no offense. Because there are two occurrences of זָנָה and נָאֵף where the meaning is ambiguous, some have argued that זָנָה and נָאֵף may be used interchangeably. I maintain that there is a clear, economically based distinction between those two terms.

Bird cites the story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 as an example of a supposed inconsistency in how the term זָנָה is used. First, in the story of Tamar and Judah, Bird points out that Tamar is consistently referred to as a זָנָה even after she is no longer playing the whore. This is consistent, however, with the understanding that she is a woman who 'has no sexual obligation to another male'.⁹ Tamar is at a point in her life when she is supposed to be betrothed to Judah's son but she is not. She is therefore a זָנָה in the sense of being a sexually active, autonomous woman. Further, as long as Tamar is 'playing the harlot', that is, having sex with Judah under the guise of a professional, independent woman, she is a 'legitimate' prostitute and there is no cause for her condemnation. However, the moment Judah thinks that she, as his daughter-in-law, is having sex illicitly, he demands her death. While this contradiction implies that Judah wrongly considered that Tamar belonged to him and that she had committed an adulterous offense, it

any mention of a sexual encounter which involves the king a 'sacred marriage'. She writes, 'The persistent obsession of Assyriologists with the Sacred Marriage meant that practically every text with a sexual content was considered to refer to the goddess' wedding. This overemphasis of a marital context needs to be redressed' (p. 147).

8. Bird, 'To Play the Harlot', pp. 75-94.

9. Bird, 'To Play the Harlot', pp. 75-94.

also implies that there was a certain level of social acceptance of the prostitute. Perhaps referring to Tamar in זנה language rather than זנא (adulterous) language identifies her as an autonomous woman acting sexually to carry out what she understands to be the will of God.¹⁰

Following the posited ambiguous meaning of זנה in Genesis 38, the other example offered to bolster the claim that זנא has connotations of adultery rather than prostitution is found in the text of Hosea itself. As I have already noted above, most interpreters argue that the woman in Hosea 1–3 is an unfaithful wife. The claim that there is a marriage involves consistent translations of ambiguous terms such as זנא and זנה as well as translating ‘to take’ and ‘to love’ as verbs of marriage. The strongest argument revolves around the ‘adulterous’ language in Hosea 3. Hosea 3.1a provides the following example.

The root זנא as it is used in v. 3.1a is usually considered to be a reference to Gomer, who is referred to as זנה seven times in Hosea 1–3. Verse 3.1a is the only place that זנא is used in Hosea that the meaning could possibly be suggestive of a marriage between Hosea and Gomer (Israel and God). However, there are other considerations concerning this particular reference. The text is often translated thus: ‘Then YHWH said to me “Go again and love a woman loved by a friend yet an adulteress”’.¹¹ However, reading it thus makes a stronger narrative: ‘Then YHWH again said to me...’ Because, as I stated above, nothing has actually happened yet. The narrative flows more easily if one reads it that after YHWH completes his descriptive, lengthy monologue, he must again tell Hosea what to do.¹² The translation ‘go again and love’ is favored by those who argue in favor of a marriage translation because it implies a marital reconciliation. Further, interpreters who see God’s relationship to Israel as one of marriage prefer translating this passage ‘go again and love’ because this sets up a parallel to 1.2 (‘go and take’).

10. Jennifer L. Koosed has convincingly argued that Tamar may have intended to kill Judah. Koosed suggests that since all her husbands have died, Tamar has no reason not to believe that she somehow has the power to kill men by sleeping with them (‘Murder on Her Mind: Tamar in Gn. 38’, unpublished SBL presentation, 1997.)

11. See for example W. Rudolph, *Hosea* (KAT, 13; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1966).

12. The latter reading is the reading in F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman, *Hosea* (AB, 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 291; Davies, *Hosea*; J. Ward, *Hosea: A Theological Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

Therefore, both verbs, to love and to take are translated 'to marry'. I maintain, however, that **אָהַב** and **לָקַח** are words that here evoke a sense of lust, a type of desire that objectifies rather than one of mere adoration. YHWH tells Hosea what to do in ch. 1; he describes all sorts of threats, maneuvers, and manipulations in ch. 2. It is finally in ch. 3 that YHWH returns to Hosea and reiterates his original command with a subtle difference. Instead of 'take a woman', now Hosea is to 'love (**אָהַב**) a woman'. I suggest that there is not such an acute distinction. The same verb **אָהַב** also used in Gen. 34.3 to describe Shechem's lust for Dinah, as well as Amnon's lust of Tamar in 2 Sam. 13.1.¹³ While the intended meaning here may not be the lust that could precede rape, it is not necessarily the tender love between a betrothed couple.

Hosea 3.1, I believe, signals the transformation of Israel. Until now, she is described in terms of the autonomous **זִנָּה**. The switch to adulteress language indicates that Israel's condition is about to change. She will become legally bound to, perhaps sexually obliged to, Hosea through the economic exchange in 3.2.

The fate of Israel in the text of Hosea is imparted in verse 3.2. However, the translation of the verb **וְאָכַרְהָ** in this verse is crucial in understanding the exact transaction taking place and what it means as far as Israel's political and religious future. There are two primary translations of this verb in 3.2 and elsewhere. One possible root of this verb is **כָּרָה**. This root is found in only three other places in the Hebrew text: in Job 6.27 and 40.30, it is formed with **עַל** and is usually translated 'to bargain over'. Since **עַל** is not used in Hosea, it is more similar to Deut. 2.6, which is commonly translated 'to buy'.¹⁴

The other prevalent translation for **וְאָכַרְהָ**, and it seems to be the most common, is 'to hire'. The Greek word replacing **וְאָכַרְהָ** in Hosea 3.2 is **ἐμισθώσαμην**, from **μισθόω**, 'to hire'. **Μισθόω** is used consistently in reference to hiring soldiers (1 Chron. 19.6-7; 2 Chron. 25.6; Neh. 6.13), workers (2 Chron. 24.12; Isa. 46.6), and in some cases, to procure political favor (see Ezra 4.5; Isa. 7.20). Following this LXX translation, the Greeks translate the Hebrew **אָחַזְהָ** in 2.12 as **μισθωμά**, that is, 'payment given to a prostitute for her hired wage' (cf. Deut. 23.18; Mic. 1.7;

13. See also 2 Sam. 13.4, 15; 1 Kgs 11.1; *ThWAT*, I, pp. 105-28; BDB, pp. 12-13.

14. *ThWAT*, I, pp. 778-81; *DCH*, II, p. 260 suggests 'to commission'; BDB, pp. 136-37 suggests 'to make a deal'. All three sources here interpret **כָּרָה** in terms of negotiation and equitable bartering.

Prov. 19.13; Ezek. 16.31-34). Some have also suggested כָּרָה could mean 'to hire' as in 'leasing out', such as the hiring of beasts (from the Arabic verb, *kara*).¹⁵ The Greek translators clearly understood the exchange between Hosea and Gomer as Hosea giving a certain amount to 'hire' Gomer.

The distinction between 'buying' as opposed to 'hiring' is, I think, a major one. If one buys something, the shift of power from the previous owner to the new owner seems to be permanent. Further, a sales transaction implies that there is a third party to whom the price is paid. Hiring, on the other hand, is a temporary arrangement. Additionally, when hiring someone, whether it is a soldier, a laborer or a politician, the money is usually paid directly to the person whose services are desired.

W. Vogels argues that the parallel construction between 3.2 and 2.21-22 suggests that the money paid in 3.2 is a 'bride price', just as YHWH pays a bride price of 'righteousness/justice/tenderness/love' in 2.21-22. In this parallel, Vogels claims that just as God gives the bride price directly to Israel, so Hosea gives the payment directly to Gomer. He writes, 'based upon the textual parallel, the text indicates that Hosea pays the price to Gomer herself, not to her father or any other male'.¹⁶ Vogels also claims that there is a direct parallel between the gifts given to Israel in 2.10 and Hosea to Gomer in 3.2:¹⁷

	YHWH to Israel (2.10)	Hosea to Gomer (3.2)
clothing:	silver/gold	silver
food:	grain	barley
drink:	wine	wine (LXX)

While I am convinced by Vogels that Hosea indeed makes payment directly to Gomer and that payment parallels the price paid by YHWH to Israel, I do not agree with Vogels that YHWH and Hosea are paying a bride price. The cause for payment is legalistic in a sense, but not as a marriage.¹⁸ The buyer/suitor completes none of the expected marital

15. BDB advocates this reading.

16. Vogels, 'Hosea's Gift to Gomer', pp. 412-21.

17. Vogels, 'Hosea's Gift to Gomer', p. 420.

18. There are also problems with the translation. In order to make the verb fit Vogels's interpretation ('Hosea's Gift to Gomer', p. 416), the verb וְאִכְרָה is simply paralleled with וְאִשְׁתָּיִךְ 'betrothed' in 2.21-22. In other words, God says, 'I will betroth you to myself with righteousness ...' and Hosea says, 'I acquired her to myself with fifteen shekels of silver ...' in 3.2. They do not share roots or meaning;

obligations, such as 'to take her' (Deut. 20.7) and to 'lie with her' (Deut. 28.30). A marital contract would also imply a permanent loss of autonomy for the bride.

Since Leviticus and Exodus name the price of a woman slave to be about 30 shekels, some suggest that Hosea is buying Gomer as he would a servant or a slave. Therefore, there is much speculation about the actual price Hosea pays (fifteen silver [shekels] and a homer of barley and a lethech of barley) to Gomer compared with the amount named in Leviticus and Exodus. The assumption is that the amount Hosea pays, the 15 shekels of silver plus the value of the barley, is roughly about 30 shekels.¹⁹ This fits nicely with the amount paid for a slave in Exod. 21.32, as well as the price of a woman 20 to 60 years old who becomes dedicated to God (Lev. 27.28).

The comparison is tenuous. First, the price of the slave could vary depending on age, sex, constitution, or skills. Furthermore, there is no clear indication that all of Hosea's gifts added up to a monetary unit of 30 shekels. The price of barley fluctuated according to supply and demand. And there is no other mention of the lethech as a unit of measure in the Hebrew Bible at all.²⁰ Therefore, the value of 30 shekels given as the price Hosea pays to Gomer is unstable at best and cannot be used to identify the transaction as a purchase of a servant or slave.²¹ Rather, we could consider Hosea's payment as one rendered to a prostitute for her services.

The text of Hosea already tells us that the prostitute's price is paid with clothing, food and drink (2.5, 9). This is precisely the payment Hosea makes in 3.2. Other texts state or imply that prostitutes were paid with gifts (Mic. 1.7; Ezek. 16.31-34), as opposed to laborers, slaves, and soldiers who were paid with silver and gold (e.g. Exod. 21.32; 1 Chron. 19.6-7; 2 Chron. 25.6). I would suggest the author is telling us that Hosea hires Gomer for a limited time. Perhaps he gives her the standard (?) payment for her services or perhaps more. That question can only be answered by knowing the prices paid for the services of a

they merely share a syntactical relationship.

19. Vogels, 'Hosea's Gift to Gomer', p. 414.

20. Vogels, 'Hosea's Gift to Gomer', p. 414.

21. While Rudolph (*Hosea*, p. 92) also rejects the theory that Hosea is buying Gomer as a slave or servant on the basis that the comparison between the value paid in Hosea to that of Leviticus and Exodus is dubious, he claims that Hosea is 'buying' a mistress.

prostitute, and we do not know that. If Hosea's price is more exorbitant than usual, this would suggest that Hosea could indeed keep Gomer in his house beyond a standard amount of time. The interpretation of Hosea's transaction as a hiring of a prostitute suggests that the author of Hosea saw Israel as being temporarily compromised to a power to which she would not initially yield; she permits another power, one she has been resisting, to hire her and to control her. She is now temporarily occupied and submissive.

From the beginning of ch. 1, God seeks to possess Gomer (Israel). He urges the children to go plead with their mother to come to him and give up all her other suitors, or, rather, to abandon her livelihood and come to his house. After this unsuccessful attempt, God threatens to strip her naked, to humiliate her in front of all her lovers and leave her to die in the desert (2.3). He threatens to isolate her, to banish her from his house so that she would be so miserable that even living with God would be better. Since she does not acknowledge that God is the giver of the gifts—corn, wine, oil, silver and gold—he threatens to take them all back, again to leave her naked in front of her lovers, humiliated. When Gomer (Israel) claims that the vines and fig trees are the fee that her lovers (clients) have paid for her services, God wants to destroy them. Then, since his threats are useless, he resorts to tenderness. God imagines he can woo her, comfort her, appeal to the days of her innocence, before she was such a shrewd woman and could perhaps be outwitted by a manipulative suitor. God romanticizes (in his mind) a sweet commitment ceremony, witnessed by the earth, and they live happily ever after. However, the stark reality is that Israel, the strong, independent woman, never chooses to be with God. God (as re-enacted by Hosea) must ultimately hire the prostitute and promise her he will support her and not have sex with her before she will stay with him. So, Hosea pays silver and barley (plus wine in the LXX) for a prostitute so as to dutifully symbolize God's relationship with Israel. Therefore, the operative metaphor of Hosea 1–3 is not one of an abusive husband chasing after his adulterous wife but one of a jealous client of a prostitute who desires to possess an autonomous, strong woman.

In ch. 1, YHWH commands Hosea to take for himself a woman of זונות and have children of זונות. He 'takes her,' but there's no reason to assume he means to marry here. The Hebrew קח-לך אשה זונה can mean literally 'go and take for yourself', that is, have sex with, a woman of prostitution. Further, another meaning for the root לקח means 'to

procure', which parallels the verb action in 3.2.²² Rather, God narrates the history of Israel with the metaphor of Israel as prostitute and he himself as a man who desires to possess her. There is no marriage that takes place in Hosea.²³

By interpreting the metaphor of Hosea 1–3 as one of a jealous and crazed husband seeking vengeance on his promiscuous, adulterous wife, one completely overlooks the power and autonomy of Gomer and therefore Israel's thriving state of independence.²⁴ In my interpretation, that is, with God as a man obsessed with possessing the strong, independent, wealthy Israel; as a man who will threaten, manipulate, and entice in order to control her, one finds the impetus behind Hosea 1–3. Out of this tale comes not the adoration of a God who takes pity on a wanton land and provides her with fertility, beauty and riches. Rather, it is a story of nationalist pride. It is a protest of one who sees Israel, once strong and independent, now compromised and corrupted. The heroine is Israel, the sovereign woman who thrives through the adoration of all others. It is in 3.2 that we find the author's record of Israel's demise: she was acquired for a price and kept by a master. But what is the meaning behind the symbol of this power that is now over her? When could conflict of this sort produce such a document?

Hosea 1–3 as a Persian-Period Document

One possible reading is to suggest that Hosea 1–3 originates in Persian-period Yehud. It was a time and place of social, political and religious turmoil. The rhetorical struggle for control of the city comes out in sev-

22. DCH, IV, p. 119; BDB, p. 543. See Exod. 5.11; Neh. 5.2. Davies argues that in Lev. 20, the root לָקַח may be used interchangeably with שָׁכַב עִם, 'to lie with'. It is 'an expression for sexual intercourse, irrespective of whether there is a legal marriage. So the meaning of Hos. 1.2 may be: "Take (in a sexual sense) a prostitute and get children born of whoredom"' (*Hosea*, p. 90); see also A. Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 136–39.

23. A primary work that deals with the complexities of Hosea's marriage is H.H. Rowley, *Men of God* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1963), pp. 66–97 (the chapter entitled 'The Marriage of Hosea'). See also Davies's chapter on 'The Marriage of Hosea' in *Hosea*, pp. 79–92.

24. Though it could be argued that Israel at this time (whether exilic or post-exilic) was not independent, I suggest that an author or redactor with strong nationalist ties would make such a claim.

eral texts originating from this time. A particularly fascinating text is Isaiah 56–66, which has preserved three distinct and adversarial voices, according to a recent reading by J. Berquist. It was during this time of intense conflict, conflict about how Yehud could economically thrive, about who should be able to control the social workings of the state, and about how God should be worshipped, that Third Isaiah records dissension between the natives, the political immigrants and the priestly immigrants.²⁵

The primary interests of the native class are centered around agricultural concerns and, of course, right worship of God. Their livelihood depends upon retaining ownership of their land and being able to produce and sell their crops. Therefore, issues of social justice and righteousness, according to Berquist, would be a primary concern. The priestly class, as Berquist notes, was centered around keeping the temple as locus of social control. The priests were the strongest advocates for ‘correct’ sacrifices. Their representative voices in the Isaiah text would be focused on Sabbath, dietary regulation, right sacrifice and any discussion that centralizes the Temple and Zion.²⁶ The political immigrants were concerned primarily with maintaining wealth (as a tax base for Persia) and political control, the need for punishment for residents, and the control of foreigners.²⁷ By identifying the prevailing interests of each class, Berquist is then able to divide Third Isaiah into four cycles of increasingly heated and violent rhetoric as each struggles to represent their position and argument. Berquist writes, ‘By the end of the fourth cycle, intermediation between all three groups becomes impossible, because the discourse has diverged so radically, and so the two immigrant groups combine their rhetoric into a final rejection of the natives’.²⁸ Third Isaiah is a written record of the ‘rhetorical violence’ between the two schisms of Yehud—the natives and the immigrants—in which the immigrants bury the voices of the natives and ultimately retain social, political and religious control of Yehud. Perhaps Hosea 1–3 records the protests of the natives.

25. J. Berquist is able to separate the voices in the text by first noting their ultimate concerns and then finding how those concerns are promoted or, when in conflict, how they polemicize the counter-interest within the text (*Judaism in Persia's Shadow* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995], pp. 73–79).

26. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, pp. 73–79.

27. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, pp. 73–79.

28. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, p. 74.

At the very least, Berquist recognizes that the role of the prophet is not entirely theological. The authors stand as interested individuals in advocacy of certain ends. My suspicion is that Hosea 1–3 functions as a rhetorical uprising in response to the vanquished voice of the native in Third Isaiah. If I am right, Hosea is an enraged representation of how the Yehud natives perceive what has happened to Israel at the hands of the immigrant factions, particularly the priests.

I offer that Hosea 1–3 is speaking to a specific situation, one in which the prophet feels that Israel's (Yehud's) relationship to God and the wholeness and perfection of their homeland are being corrupted and destroyed through improper worship exacerbated by the inclusion of foreigners.²⁹ The author of chs. 1–3 could have read all of Hosea in the context of the Persian period hostility, therefore reappropriating verses such as 7.9, which states that 'foreigners drain [Israel's] strength'. Further, the verbal onslaught against foreigners continues in language that incorporates agricultural metaphors, just as someone representative of the natives would be expected to do: 'The stalk has no head; it will produce no flour. Were it to yield grain foreigners would devour it—Israel is being devoured. Now she is among the nations like a worthless thing' (8.7–8). The author of Hosea finally portrays Israel's return to wholeness in chs. 12–14 also with agricultural motifs. Thus Gomer's name 'completion, perfection' is descriptive of the Israel (Yehud) imagined by the author of Hosea.

In conclusion, I suggest that Hosea 1–3 is a Persian-period account of Israel's perceived downfall at the hands of immigrant priests and immigrant political appointees. The author, a Yehud native, tells the story of Israel's previous strength in a metaphorical imagining told by YHWH to the prophet Hosea. The metaphor unfolds as the story of a prostitute, an independent and self-willed woman who eludes the obsessive desire of the pursuer. She is literally referred to in language of prostitution so there is no need to doubt the meaning of the author. It is, I argue, a distortion of the text to speak in terms of marriage.

The pursuer, who is YHWH in the story, is representative of the

29. Martin Buss writes that in his diatribe against sacrifice Hosea stands in direct contrast to the Pentateuchal directions concerning sacrifices. Buss decides that Hosea must be speaking to a specific situation, 'one in which sacrifices are inappropriate' ('Hosea as a Canonical Problem: With Attention to the Song of Songs', in S.B. Reid [ed.], *Prophets and Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* [JSOTSup, 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 79–93).

foreigners, particularly the priestly class, who have drained Israel of her former strength and autonomy. In violent rhetoric evocative of those voices in Third Isaiah, the author denounces sacrifices and foreigners in language sprinkled with agricultural motifs, then uses the same motifs to imagine Israel's return to her wholeness, to her perfection. Thus, Hosea's only action is to go and hire the prostitute Gomer, whose name means perfection and wholeness, to symbolize to all those who can understand that Israel has been removed from her life of prosperity and self-worth and has been reduced to a 'worthless thing'.

ABSTRACT

In Hosea 1–3, the woman 'Gomer' is often read as Hosea's promiscuous and adulterous wife. In this paper I propose that the metaphor of Israel should be read as prostitute and 'prostitute' should be understood as an independent, strong business-woman rather than YHWH's whoring wife. When one reads 'prostitute' without negative coding in Hosea 1–3, understanding of the historical and social context completely shifts.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.