

# Hosea 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Hosea chapter 3. And the Lord said to me, Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man, and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins. So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver, and a homer and a letheck of barley. And I said to her, You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man, so will I also be to you. For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

In Hosea chapter 1 the prophet was instructed by the Lord to take a wife of Hordom, and to have children of Hordom by her. He had married Gomer, and had three children by her, Jezreel, no mercy, and not my people. In taking such a wife, Hosea would have invited shame upon himself, and his children would also have carried a stigma. All of this represented the Lord's relationship with unfaithful Israel, but the statements of judgment were followed by promises of restoration. The names that formerly spoke of the people's judgment were given very different connotations as the Lord reversed their former sentence. While chapter 1 described the Lord's instruction to Hosea in the third person, in chapter 3 there is a shift to a first person account, as Hosea himself takes up the narrative. Hosea is instructed to take Gomer, a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, back to himself. More particularly, he is charged to love her. Here Gomer is presented not merely as sexually shameful, as a wife of Hordom, but as guilty of adultery with another man. She isn't only a dishonourable woman more generally, but a woman who has openly betrayed Hosea. The emphasis on the verb love in verse 1, which John Goldingay highlights, underlines the emotional stakes of the situation. The adultery of the wife is made so much more painful, shameful, and cruel on account of the fervent love that her husband has for her. This is not a woman rejecting an indifferent or abusive husband, but a wife turning her back on the husband who loves her most deeply. The cakes of raisins are associated with gifts and expressions of love, as in places like Song of Solomon chapter 2 verse 5.

Presumably they were used as some part of idolatrous celebrations. In loving this unfaithful woman, Hosea is taking on a position analogous to the Lord's relationship with Israel. He is assuming a position that will help him to understand more fully the heart of God. Goma seems to have been reduced to bond service, as Hosea has to redeem her from a master by a price. The relationship, however, is re-established through this redemption. In verse 3, Hosea expresses the faithfulness that was to characterise his relationship with his formerly wayward and shameful wife Goma from that point onwards.

She must dwell as his. He would be faithful to her, and she must be faithful to him. We ought to appreciate the shame that Hosea would be assuming in taking such a woman back to himself. The rationale for the first command in verse 1, loving a woman who was loved by another man, was the Lord's own love for his people of Israel. The rationale for Hosea's speech to Goma in verse 3 is given in the verses that follow, in verses 4 and 5. Just as Goma has been reduced to a sort of servitude, so the children of Israel must be reduced. Losing the form of privilege and status that they had enjoyed, they would be without king or prince, sacrifice or pillar, ephod or household gods. The king and prince were marks of Israel's sovereignty and their standing among the surrounding nations. The removal of the sacrifice and the pillar refer to the loss of Israel's cultic life, whether associated with idolatrous practice or the worship of the Lord. The ephod and the household gods were means of divining God's will. The ephod had the Urim and the Thummim, and the household gods would also be consulted by idolaters. They would lose their national status, they would lose their communion with God, and they'd also lose direction and means of guidance. However, just as the reducing of Goma to servitude was not the end of her story, so Israel would know restoration as they returned and sought the Lord their God, and David their king. The nation that had rejected the house of David would return to David.

They would also return to the Lord and once more know his goodness in the latter days. A question to consider. In the ministry of Hosea, he represents the Lord in his taking of this unfaithful wife. When he speaks, he speaks as the one who's the prophet of the Lord, but also the one who's symbolizing the Lord. How might his symbolizing of the Lord's relationship with his people have changed the way that people heard the message, and also changed the way that he received and delivered it himself?