

July 24, Ordinary 17C (Hosea 1:2-10)

If Hosea is a factual account, it's horrific. If it's an allegory, it's still horrific.

by [Jessica Mesman](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue

“Every day some woman somewhere is being called a whore,” Wil Gafney wrote in 2018, explaining why she preaches on biblical texts some of us would rather avoid, like Hosea. Let that be my content warning. I can’t write about Hosea without talking about what it feels like to be called a whore.

I won’t try to redeem a noxious text that has for so long hurt women, but neither do I want to pretend it doesn’t exist, that it hasn’t formed our religious imaginations, that it doesn’t carry the authority of scripture.

Hosea tells us that the Lord spoke and told him to marry a whore. Though the word is often translated *prostitute*, the Hebrew is closer to “promiscuous woman” than “sex worker.” Either way, this was a woman whom Hosea would hold in the most disgusted contempt, even if he desired her—and he is told to have children with her.

If this is a factual account, it’s horrific. If it’s an allegory, it’s still horrific; the most repugnant metaphor the poet can imagine to convey God’s malignant anger toward Israel is that of a marriage of shame and the resulting shunned, unloved, and stigmatized children, their status evident in the translations of the names of the youngest: *not pitied, not my people*.

Hosea later refers to the Israelites as wayward cattle, but to be a faithless woman—used, an embarrassment to your father and your husband—appears to be the ultimate insult. God may later be described in feminine terms, but only as the compassionate, long-suffering spouse and mother who will not resort to violence after all but will maintain composure even after being insulted, cheated, and shamed. Meanwhile, the motif of mothers and children becomes increasingly gruesome. Infants are dashed to pieces; pregnant women are torn apart.

Can this really be the voice of God speaking to the prophet? It sounds to me like the voice of an offended, out-of-control abuser on a tear, relishing the humiliation and intimidation of his victim. I know this voice. I've heard it many times from the mouths of those who wield language as a weapon against those who dare to challenge or ignore their authority. I've been tempted to speak with that voice myself in times of impotent rage, when all I had were words to wound. Even the moments of tender conciliation in Hosea call to mind the whiplash logic of the abuser: I'm the only one who really loves you even if you *are* a whore.

I revisited Hosea after what was probably hours of tortured scrolling through commentary about the leaked Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. I read opinions and religious beliefs about my body and what I must or must not endure. I noticed how many felt compelled to offer stories of their own private pain to the public in what seemed like vain efforts to convince the world that women are not villains. I closed my laptop when I saw a far-right Catholic media personality tweet: "Repeat after me: Close. Your. Legs." Every day some woman somewhere is being called a whore.

The whore in Hosea has a name: Gomer. The text tells us almost nothing else about her besides this and that she nursed and weaned Lo-Ruhamah, the daughter the Lord names "not pitied." If the story is true, I can only imagine Gomer caring for her children as they all live out their days under the shame of the words of their husband and father, which they have been told are also the words of God: *Wife of prostitution. Children of prostitution. Wife of whoredom. Children of whoredom.* Many of us have known Gomer or her children. Many of us have been Gomer or her children, lives circumscribed by those who seem to despise us.

I'm grateful to feminist and womanist scholars who have directed me to look for God in unexpected places in biblical texts, particularly in the shadowy figures of mostly anonymous women. Gafney says she will wrestle like Jacob with a difficult scripture until it gives her a blessing. In Hosea, she finds God in Gomer's maternal care for her children, not in the prophet's pronouncements. But when I look for God in Hosea, I can't see past their shame and fear.

Maybe Gomer is just a prophetic fiction, a symbolic gesture. That this violent poetry shaped the church's imagination, which continues to shape the discussion of sexual and reproductive safety and autonomy, is chilling. Scroll through Twitter. The language of Hosea hasn't been relegated to ancient history, though he is far more

dangerously eloquent. Sexuality and motherhood continue to provoke heinous assumptions about personal morality. In response we see the same ongoing conflicts of desire and sentimental tenderness with punishment, criminalization, and control.

We can't ignore Hosea, no matter how much we'd like to. Even if the only blessing the text gives up is compassion for those who have suffered from his words.