



LOVE IN A BROKEN VESSEL



A Novel

MESU ANDREWS



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearance of certain historical figures is therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*To my forever best friend, Joni Edwards Jones.
You saw me at my worst—and you refused to leave.
You saved my life—and then I met Jesus.
How do I thank you for eternity?*

Note to the Reader

When you think of reading the story of Gomer and Hosea, what novel comes to mind? *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers, right? I think I've read it at least four times. It's tied for first place in my all-time favorites, and Francine Rivers is hands down my favorite author. So why would I dare write a novel that might be compared to such a classic? Because *Love in a Broken Vessel* is biblical fiction, and *Redeeming Love* is a biblical story set in a prairie romance. Trying to equate the two stories would be like comparing apples and oranges—both are fruit, but very different yummy flavors. My hope is that readers will enjoy each one for the unique story it is.

Engaging fiction must be believable, but let's face it—a righteous man of God marrying, loving, and repeatedly forgiving a prostitute is hard to grasp. However, as you immerse yourself in the ancient days of Hosea and Gomer, remember that the Bible says Hosea married a harlot named Gomer, and the story mirrors God's desperate attempt to turn the hearts of Israel back to Himself. The story may not have happened exactly as I've written it, but it did happen. It was

the mystery of Christ's love and mercy before the incarnation of our Savior.

Now, regarding the parts that are fiction, there is no historical data linking the prophets Jonah, Amos, and Hosea. However, Amos was indeed a fig picker from Tekoa, and it was feasible that Jonah was still living during the time of Amos's prophecies and Hosea's ministry. I've chosen to weave their lives together in a prophets' camp—a sort of school for aspiring messengers of Yahweh. Though, again, I found no factual basis for a prophets' camp in Tekoa, the Bible often refers to a community of prophets beginning as early as the tribes themselves. Shiloh was the gathering place for prophets with the ark of God. In 1 Samuel 19, Saul sent messengers to Naioth to seize David from a company of prophets, and 2 Kings 6 gives an account of some cantankerous prophets complaining that their living quarters are too tight.

Scripture also describes the details of King Uzziah's leprosy but gives no location of the rented house where he lived out his life while Jotham ruled from Jerusalem. Neither does the Bible declare Uzziah's exact relationship to Isaiah and Amos. Scripture tells us that Isaiah was the son of Amos (2 Kings 19; 20), and according to Talmudic tradition (ancient Hebrew text), Amos was Uzziah's uncle (*Meg.* 10b). This dilemma encapsulates the beauty and challenge of biblical fiction—piecing together Scripture's truths with historical supposition.

Hosea's ministry began approximately 180 years after King Solomon's death. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, angered the northern ten tribes with high taxes and hard labor, so they rebelled against the young king's authority. The kingdom of Israel split into two nations. Israel comprised the northern nation of the ten rebelling tribes, while the tribe of Judah formed a new nation, maintaining its capital in Jerusalem and claiming the tribe of Benjamin as its sole support. The Canaanite people dispersed among both Israel and Judah continued worshipping pagan gods, drawing false parallels between El, the father of gods, and the Hebrews' God, Yahweh.

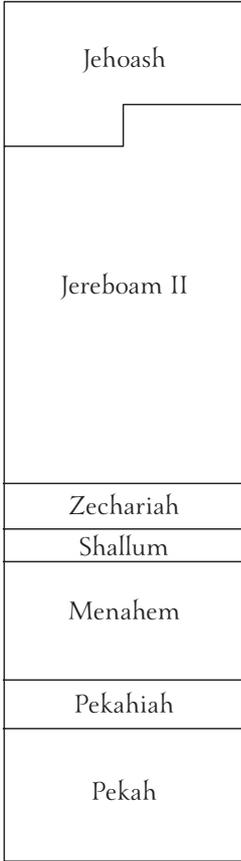
The northern nation of Israel set up golden calf idols in Bethel and Dan, drawing Israelites into idolatry and stoking Yahweh's wrath. But more profoundly—Israel broke His heart. God's chosen people rejected His love. And that is where Hosea and Gomer's story begins.

Love in a Broken Vessel

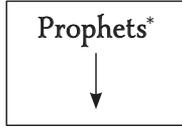
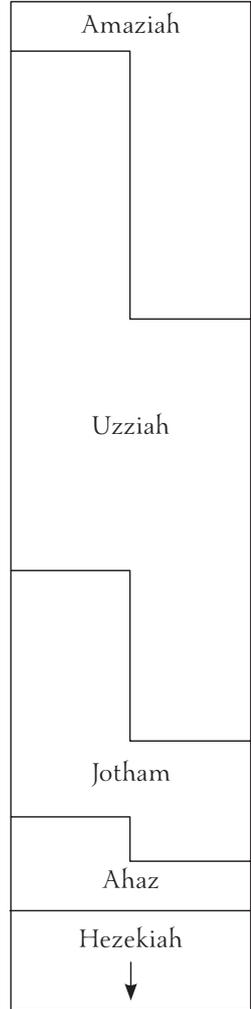
Prophets and Kings

← Divided Kingdom →

Kings of Israel (Northern)



Kings of Judah (Southern)



Jonah



Amos



Hosea



Micah



Isaiah



*The arrows beneath prophets' names do not represent life-span; rather, they represent the time and duration of their prophetic ministries.

- To Nineveh
- To Israel
- To Judah



PART **1**



Prologue

HOSEA 1:2

When Yahweh first spoke to Hosea, Yahweh told him, “Marry a prostitute, and have children with that prostitute. The people in this land have acted like prostitutes and abandoned Yahweh.”

Hosea’s empty house throbbed with sweet silence. He soaked it in, letting it nourish him like the last bite of warm, fresh bread soggy with lentil stew. His stomach rumbled, and he realized it was past time for his evening meal.

The stone worktable stood like a sentry in his main room. Covered baskets hung on the wall, filled with day-old bread and hard cheese. The meager fare would suffice until he could soak lentils for tomorrow’s meal. He approached the table, noticing dust dancing in a shaft of dusk’s golden light.

A second look at the glow drew him deeper into contemplation. *I only see the dust when light shines through the window.* Hosea waved his hand through the light, stirring the dust, but felt no resistance. Visible and real, yet without recognizable sound or weight, the dust was present but immeasurable. A slow, satisfied smile crept across his lips. *Now,*

that is a good topic for the prophets' class tomorrow. Jonah would enjoy the—

A breeze swept through the house, startling him, swaying the hanging herbs. Hosea turned to the front door, confused. Had the wind blown it open?

The door was closed.

“What was that?” he whispered to no one. The wind stirred inside the house again, this time not a breeze but a gale that whipped his robe around his legs.

The wind spoke. *Marry a prostitute.*

Hosea gasped. *Yahweh?*

Marry a prostitute, and have children with that prostitute.

The wind grew stronger, and Hosea covered his face, fell to his knees, listening.

The people of Israel have acted like prostitutes and abandoned Yahweh.

The wind stopped. All was silent. Tranquil again.

1

HOSEA 1:1

Yahweh spoke his word to Hosea, son of Beeri, when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah and when Jeroboam, son of Joash, was king of Israel.

Gomer hurried from her private room, through a connecting breezeway, and into the brothel’s kitchen. Jarah, one of the servant girls, grabbed a few dried figs and, with a trembling hand, held them out to Gomer—an offering. Gomer took two and closed the girl’s hand around those remaining. “Eat them yourself, Jarah. Don’t let Tamir find them and give them to someone else.” Gomer walked away, noticing the girl slip one into her mouth, and tried to remember the last time she smelled warm bread baking in that kitchen. Her stomach rumbled at the thought.

She emerged into the sunlit courtyard of Tamir’s brothel, spotting old Merav tending three toddlers playing in the dust. Gomer glanced left and right, hoping to avoid a confrontation with the owner. The wealthiest businesswoman in Samaria, Tamir had built her business on determination, cunning, and the favor of the gods.

And Gomer.

Yes, Gomer had been Tamir's most lucrative harlot since she'd been dumped on the woman's doorstep after Gomer's twelfth year.

"Why do I have to go to the sacrifice this morning?" Gomer ranted while stomping toward Merav. "Why can't the younger girls go without me? I've had only a moment's sleep, and I'm tired, Merav."

The old woman pressed a single finger to her lips and nodded at the sleeping infant in her arms. Merav, the brothel's midwife, loved all the children inside the gates, whether born within or abandoned at the threshold.

Gomer adjusted her volume but not her tone. "Why does Tamir demand I accompany the girls? They are quite capable and can work the crowd just as well as I." Disgusted, she gathered one of the toddlers in her arms, giving her a little spit bath to clean her smudged cheek.

"Tamir knows you represent her house well, and the other girls look to you for leadership while they're on the streets." Merav's voice was gentle, and Gomer wondered how much of her soothing was for the sleeping baby boy in her arms and how much was meant to calm Gomer's foul mood. "Here, eat your pomegranate skin." The old midwife held out the dried rind and offered a wry smile. She was done listening to Gomer's complaints.

Gomer planted the toddler back on the ground and reached for the pomegranate rind—but captured Merav's hand and kissed it before letting go. The old woman brushed her cheek. "Now, take some pomegranate seeds with you. I don't want to be holding your baby next year."

A wave of emotion washed over Gomer at the thought. "Well, I wouldn't know if it was my baby, now would I?" The question came out more accusatory than she intended, and when she saw the hurt on Merav's features, she knelt beside the old woman. "I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean anything by that. It's just that, well . . ." She fumbled for words,

trying to unravel the knot of feelings she'd awakened with this morning. "You know me, Merav. I try to forget yesterday and not worry about tomorrow. If it wasn't for you and these pomegranates, I might have a dozen children by now."

The old woman met her eyes and stroked her cheek. "What troubles you this morning, my little Gomer?"

"I awoke with a terrible sense of dread. Perhaps one of the gods is warning me of danger."

"Or maybe you drank too much wine last night." Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

"I'm serious!" Gomer shouted, causing the sleeping infant to stir. A warning glance from the old woman reminded her to lower her voice. "I'm getting older, Merav. I've lived through two childbirths and one rue-induced drop. No matter how many pomegranates you feed me, I'm almost certain to get pregnant again with the number of clients I see each night. Tamir says she'll teach me how to run the brothel, but so far . . ."

"But so far she hasn't begun teaching you the *business* side of harlotry." The old woman finished Gomer's sentence.

"That's right." Their eyes locked in understanding. "She hasn't taught me *anything*! Only you have taught me, Merav. You've taught me what herbs, roots, and teas prevent a man's seed from growing inside me. You've taught me how to bring forth a child on the birthing stones. But I've watched the other girls long for the babies of their womb and become less human with each child that's taken from them. I must know *why* Tamir sends all the male babies away but has decided to keep this one."

"Even I don't know the answer to that, my little Gomer. I've known Tamir since she purchased this house, yet she hides what's special about this boy." The old woman caressed his downy black hair and snuggled him closer to her heart.

"Then tell me why she refuses to let an ima know which babe is her own." Gomer glanced at the little ones playing with sticks and stones at Merav's feet. "Are any of these mine?"

Merav's eyes welled with tears, but her voice was solid stone. "You know I cannot answer that." She raised her chin and swiped her tears. "And you know how hard I try to keep any of Tamir's girls from conceiving. If they would eat the seeds I give them and drink the tea regularly, we wouldn't have to take the babies or give them rue to induce—"

"I know," Gomer said, laying her head in Merav's lap. "I'm not accusing you, my friend. I'm just frustrated, and for the first time I'm trying to see my future—but the path is very dark."

Merav stroked Gomer's hair and began humming a familiar cradle tune while still holding the infant in her other arm. Gomer's mind wandered to her childhood in Bethel. It seemed ages ago. She saw her three younger sisters cowering in the corner during one of Abba Diblaim's drunken rages. He was a priest at Bethel's temple—and a pig at home.

Then she saw Hosea's face. He'd been ten when she last saw him; she'd been six—that day in the temple, when she fell from the rafters. She didn't even get to say good-bye when his abba took him from Bethel. Hosea had been her one friend, her protector.

When Abba Diblaim sold her to an Asherah priestess from Samaria a few years later, she learned the bitter days of a priestess and the lonely nights with drunken men. She'd believed one of the Baal priests when he said he loved her. What a little fool she'd been. Stripped of her ritual duties, she was labeled a harlot and dropped at Tamir's gate. Merav had soothed her broken heart and tended the whipping wounds on her back. The poor woman didn't deserve the tongue-lashing Gomer had given her this morning.

"We've been together almost seven years now," Gomer whispered, letting her tears wet Merav's robe. "I know better than anyone how you love the girls in this house, and I want to make sure we *both* have a place to live after I'm too old to provide food and shelter as a street harlot." She lifted her head, holding the woman's gaze intently. "I need to know

who Tamir talks to at the temple when one of our young girls reaches the age for service in Asherah's grove. And how does Tamir decide which girls become priestesses and which ones work as street harlots or serving maids? What other ways does she bring in food and income for this house besides the street harlots' pay?"

"Well, well," came a silken voice from behind them. "It appears I've happened upon an important conversation this morning."

Gomer saw the fear in Merav's eyes and realized Tamir had heard too much. She leapt to her feet and faced the brothel owner. "I was telling Merav the questions I intended to ask you when I returned from the sacrifice today." She could hear the quiver in her voice and cursed herself for it. She'd perfected her conniving with men but still struggled when lying to Tamir. "Is there anything I can help with before I leave? Any special instructions?"

Tamir's eyes narrowed, and she placed balled fists on slender hips. "Yes, in fact, there is something you should know before you leave this morning. Today's sacrifice will be the first of its kind in Israel. The drought we've experienced for the last two years has affected even King Jeroboam's grain stores." She glanced right and left, lowering her voice. "He's finally desperate enough to show real devotion to the gods. Perhaps he'll live up to the glory of his namesake, Israel's first Jeroboam, who gave us the golden calves at Bethel and Dan. He's built a new altar for the special sacrifice."

She twirled a lock of Gomer's auburn hair around her finger. "The altar fire will glisten off your curls, and the beating drums will arouse the worshipers. Make sure you and the rest of the girls are near the altar at the moment of sacrifice. I expect a full day of celebration, and I want all payment in grain." She dropped Gomer's hair and shooed her away like a fly. "We're low on grain here, and the servants can't make bread from silver."

Everything within Gomer screamed indignation, but what

other choices did she have? Where else could she go? “Of course, Tamir. I’ll do exactly as you ask.” She swallowed hard and tempered her voice, determined to find a way of escape. “Is there any other way I might serve you, my lady?” She bowed, hoping to hide the rage her expression could not.

“Yes. Get to the sacrifice. Now!” The owner of the house stormed away, shouting instructions at one of the serving maids across the courtyard.

Gomer trembled with pent-up fury and whispered to Merav, though she dared not look in her direction, “I will go as she commands, but when I return tonight, my friend, I will have enough silver for us both to leave this hen house.”

Merav reached for her hand. “Just be careful, little one. I’ve seen that look in Tamir’s eyes before. King Jeroboam isn’t the only one who is desperate.”

2

AMOS 8:11 NIV

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.”

Hosea’s thighs burned with each step up Samaria’s rocky hill, and he noted the faltering gait of his old teacher. Jonah leaned heavily on his walking sticks. Why hadn’t Hosea asked Isaiah to stay and help Jonah rather than sending him ahead to await their signal north of the city?

“Let me help you.” Hosea placed a supportive arm around Jonah’s shoulders, but the crusty old prophet issued his familiar reply.

“Yahweh and my walking sticks are all the help I need, thank you.” He shrugged off Hosea’s arm, offering half a smile, assuring his student of his gratitude—and refusal. They’d left Amos’s farm in Judah four days ago. Jonah’s stamina had weakened. His good humor hadn’t.

Hosea sighed, shook his head, and let Jonah lead. In the man’s younger days, he’d traveled to Nineveh and back, survived three days in a fish’s belly, and turned a generation of

Assyrians to repentance. Who was Hosea to insist he needed help? *Yahweh, give him strength. You know how much he means to me.*

Hosea released his teacher to the Lord's care, focusing on the gleaming white palace, awed at the capital city of his homeland—a city he'd never seen, a homeland he'd left twelve years ago.

He cast a sideways glance at Jonah and noticed him shivering. Hosea unwound his mantle and wrapped it around his friend's shoulders. This time Jonah offered no protest but tugged the woolen garb closed at his neck. The winter breeze must feel cooler to an old man's thinned blood. Jonah was now covered head to toe, hiding his milky-white clumps of skin—the enduring evidence of his three-day lesson in the belly of the fish.

“How far from Samaria is your hometown, Jonah?” Hosea decided to make conversation instead of gawking at the poor man, waiting for him to collapse.

“About the same distance north as your hometown Bethel is to the south.” His voice quaked like his shoulders.

Hosea nodded but remained silent. He squeezed his eyes shut, mentally kicking himself for letting Jonah come at all. He'd feared the journey from Amos's farm in Tekoa would be too much for him, but Jonah insisted on accompanying Hosea on his first prophetic mission. The night of Yahweh's first revelation had been the beginning of a three-day holy windstorm, giving Hosea insight into where, to whom, and how to deliver Yahweh's message. But the instructions hadn't included Jonah's presence on the mission.

“Do you need the blanket from my pack?”

“Enough! I'm fine,” Jonah said, his voice muffled beneath the folds of his robe. “Stop fussing like an overbearing ima.” Hosea noted a slight twinkle in his eyes. “I'm not sure whether I'm cold or nervous for you, but I can't seem to stop shaking.” He pulled back his mantle just enough to issue an encouraging wink.

Hosea saw pride in Jonah's eyes, and he threw his arm around the man's shoulder. "Don't tell me you don't want help," Hosea said before his mentor could protest. "I'm resting my arm on you because *I* need the support."

Jonah chuckled, and they walked in companionable silence up the steep and rocky path. Hosea's mind wandered to the first time he'd seen "the fish prophet," as Gomer had called him when they were children. She had convinced him to sneak into the temple rafters again, spying on their abbas' priestly duties, when Amos, accompanied by Jonah, had arrived to deliver Yahweh's message of judgment on Israel. Hosea would never forget Amos's words: "A famine of God's Word is coming to Israel." The high priest Amaziah had scoffed at the threat. But the words rang true in Hosea's abba Beeri, and he left Israel with other faithful Yahweh followers and took Hosea to Amos's farm to be taught with other would-be prophets.

"Have I ever thanked you and Amos for beginning the prophets' school in Tekoa?" Hosea kept his eyes forward, afraid his emotions would choke his words if he met Jonah's gaze.

"I'm sorry your abba Beeri isn't here to see you prophesy. I think he'd be pleased that you are the first prophet to speak in Israel since Yahweh's declared famine of His word twelve years ago."

Hosea's heart squeezed in his chest. He missed his abba at moments like this. Jonah had been his guardian since Abba died two years after they arrived on Amos's farm. Jonah had been both spiritual and earthly mentor since.

"I miss Abba Beeri, but you have been a faithful abba to me, my friend."

Jonah stopped his trudging and straightened, forcing Hosea to meet his gaze. "The day you told me of your first Yahweh encounter—I think it was the happiest day of my life. Remember? I danced for joy—without these walking sticks!"

Both men chuckled, recalling the spectacle. "I remember,"

Hosea said, wiping happy tears. “Did Yahweh tell you He would command me to take a wife? Before you left that day, you said I shouldn’t take a wife unless Yahweh commanded it. Did you know He would speak to me?”

Jonah’s merriment faded to growing intensity. “Yahweh hasn’t spoken to me directly for quite some time. I receive nudges—leanings. But you, Hosea—you are Yahweh’s prophet for this moment in Israel’s history. Speak boldly, my son. Speak with the authority Yahweh has given to you.” His piercing eyes set in that eerie white skin would make any man wince.

Silence lingered between them as weary travelers walked past. Hosea felt like a child but needed to ask. “Yahweh told me to marry a prostitute, but He didn’t say exactly how to find one or how to go about—well, securing her agreement.” Feeling heat rise in his cheeks, he scuffed his sandal in the dusty path. “What if I find a harlot but she refuses me? I’m not as handsome as Isaiah. He would have no trouble winning a woman’s heart. He’s already won Aya.” He lifted his gaze, voicing the deepest fear of his soul. “What if I can’t even attract a *harlot*?”

Still standing amid the tide of travelers, Jonah gathered Hosea under his arm and started trudging up Samaria’s hill once more. “Your harlot may refuse you.”

“What?” Hosea stopped, but Jonah yanked his robe and drew him back under his arm to continue their walk.

“I said she *may* refuse you, but you must remember why you’re here. Yahweh’s heart has been broken by Israel’s unfaithfulness. You must become vulnerable to the affection of the one you seek to marry. You must publicly declare your intentions to her and thereby risk rejection.”

“This is not making me feel better, Jonah.” He kept re-playing Isaiah’s happy dance after Aya’s bride negotiations, cringing that he’d never feel that sweet triumph.

“It’s not my intention to make you *feel* better, my son. It’s my hope to prepare you for the calling Yahweh has given.

Your struggle, your emotions, your joys and sorrows will often mirror Yahweh's own."

Hosea fell silent once more, glancing again at Samaria's white limestone palace. He realized his days as a student in the prophets' school were over, but the days of learning to be Yahweh's prophet had just begun.

He swallowed hard, gathering courage to venture another question, glad Isaiah wasn't with them. Though Hosea and Isaiah were raised together at the prophets' camp, Isaiah was four years his junior and could be as annoying as any younger brother. And because Isaiah was born into royalty, he might not understand Hosea's concerns.

"What if I don't want to obey Yahweh's calling, Jonah? What if I don't want to marry . . . a harlot?" Even the word tasted bitter on his tongue.

Jonah smiled, and Hosea was humiliated. "I don't see what there is to smile about!"

Jonah lifted one crinkled eyebrow. "You're asking *me* about disobeying Yahweh?"

Hosea realized the irony of posing his question to the runaway prophet, and his defenses weakened.

"God will have His way—with or without our participation. If we're unwilling to obey, He'll use another circumstance or find someone else to serve His purpose. But God *will* have His way because ultimately, His way is best."

Hosea nodded, and they continued their walk in silence, caught in the swell of humanity approaching King Jeroboam's city. Samaria, like Jerusalem, was chosen as the nation's capital by a long-ago soldier because of its military advantage. King Omri had valued Samaria's position high atop a steep hill and carved its rear walls directly into a mountainside. Omri's son, Ahab, added to the city by building extensively; in fact, it was Ahab's extravagance and gifts to his wife, Jezebel, that caused merchants to muse about Samaria's ivory palace.

Hosea halted, shielding his eyes from the glare. He stared up at the palace and its grounds that occupied nearly one-third

of Samaria's hill. The two-story mansions east of the royal properties testified to the luxury and excess of all Israel's leaders. Hosea's heart squeezed inside his chest.

Jonah stopped, anxiously watching those who hurried past, and tugged at Hosea's sleeve, "What are you doing? If merchants' reports are true, the sacrifice could begin at the temple any moment."

But Hosea turned in a circle, drinking in the sights. "I'm an Israelite by birth, Jonah, but I've never seen Samaria."

A man tilled the soil with his mule and plow. Children ran through an olive grove, laughing.

Hosea's throat tightened with emotion. "This will be destroyed if Jeroboam doesn't listen to my message from Yahweh."

"Remember your training, Hosea. You are God's prophet. You are not God."

Jonah placed his arm around Hosea's shoulder and leaned into his support as the two walked through the city gates. Once inside Israel's capital, they turned west, climbing up Samaria's famed hill. In the center of the street flowed the city's drainage ditch. Even two prophets from the country knew to stay as far from its foulness as possible. The smell nearly made Hosea retch. When the crowd slowed, he looked behind him and saw poorer dwellings at the bottom of the hill, the natural drainage destination for all the garbage and refuse of the city. *Another reason the rich and powerful live at the top of the hill in two-story mansions.*

"It looks like we may have to separate," Jonah said, nodding in the direction of the stalled crowd. "You'll need to get as close to King Jeroboam as possible, and you won't be able to get as far if you're dragging an old cripple." Hosea started to protest, but Jonah silenced him with a raised hand. "Yahweh has chosen you to deliver this message, my son. He will make the way clear and give you wisdom. Now go." Jonah shoved Hosea's shoulder, leaving no room for argument.

With his heart thundering in his chest, Hosea took his first

steps toward a large building connected to the palace's east side. Above the apex of the portico was perched the Phoenician god Melqart—no doubt built by Ahab for his queen, Jezebel. Hosea glanced behind him several times, watching more and more people separate him from Jonah—until finally, he could see his teacher no longer. The stunning white, two-story temple loomed before him. Immaculate gardens trimmed its outer edges, and stone images of every size and persuasion dotted the courtyard. He commanded his feet to keep moving, and the crowd pushed him forward.

Delivered into the main sanctuary, Hosea gasped. Unlike the simple golden bull from his childhood home in Bethel, an enormous idol consumed much of Samaria's temple. The shining bronze image of a man with a bull's head nearly reached the peak of the temple. Its belly was aglow, belching smoke from a blazing fire. Hosea had heard stories of this god—to the Moabites, he was Chemosh; to the Ammonites, Molech. The Canaanites called him Mot and taught the Israelites that he must be appeased when drought threatened their land. Their stories told of Mot conquering the rain giver, Prince Baal, and taking him to the underworld until a sacrifice was made. No matter which god was named in this abomination, Hosea knew what that altar meant.

A child was about to die.