

STUDIES IN THE **OLD TESTAMENT**

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Hosea

I. Introduction

A. *Date & Authorship*

Dating the book of Hosea is a rather straight forward task in comparison to other books within the Twelve. The book's superscription provides all the pertinent information necessary to locate the author within ANE chronology:

The word of Yahweh which came to Hosea the son of Beerī, during the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel (Hos 1:1).

The reigns of these five kings are well established in archaeological records. The text indicates that Hosea began his prophetic ministry during Uzziah's reign, which spanned from 790-739 B.C., and also during Jeroboam II's reign. This places Hosea's initial ministry sometime before Jeroboam's death in 753 B.C. His ministry ended during Hezekiah's reign, or sometime after 715 B.C. when Hezekiah's co-regency began. Thus, Hosea prophesied during a long span of Israelite history, potentially some 50-60 years.

Hosea's ministry falls squarely within the ministries of other influential prophets of that time. Both Amos and Isaiah provide similar historical details, indicating that the three were contemporary prophets, though Amos was most likely the earliest of the three.

Sadly, little historical details exist about Hosea outside of what he provides in the text itself. He was a man from northern Israel (one of the few), and so his message is aimed heavily towards his own people, though he does direct some of his prophecies to Judah as well.

B. *Historical Background*

Like other prophets whose ministries span many years and multiple rulers (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), Hosea lived and ministered during an ever-changing social and political climate. Both Israel and Judah experienced moments of national fervor. Under Uzziah's leadership, Judah had amassed a sizeable military force and increased influence beyond its borders. Jeroboam, too, had enlarged Israel's territory in the region. Jotham had man-

aged to found a number of new towns and villages, and under Hezekiah, the nation of Judah experienced a religious and spiritual awakening.¹

Yet for all these successes, the spiritual tenor of the time was dark. In Judah, Uzziah's reign led to social alienation when the king took upon himself the priestly duties and was struck with leprosy (2 Chron 26:16-21). Jotham continued the allowances his father made for pagan high places in the nation, and his son Ahaz actually encouraged Baal worship. Hezekiah's brief religious revival only slowed down the general decline that would eventually end in exile.

Meanwhile, Jeroboam II continued in the spiritual traditions of Israel's earlier kings. In fact, Hosea curiously omits a slew of Israelite kings who ruled after the death of Jeroboam II. During the remainder of Hosea's ministry, no less than six Israelite kings ascended the throne. Three of these kings were ultimately assassinated, and two reigned for less than six months.

Israel's spiritual decline went hand in hand with the political circumstances of the time. As Assyria's influence in the region escalated, so did the temptation for Israel's rulers to rely on political alliances and pagan religion to protect the nation. Thus, when Pekah took the throne, he formed a Syrian alliance and attacked Judah in order to force them into joining forces against Assyria. Pekah was later assassinated by Hoshea, who ruled as an Assyrian puppet until the death of Tiglath-pileser III, when Hoshea saw an opportunity to rid himself of Assyrian shackles. His bold move ended in a three-year siege of Samaria, which led to Israel's exile in 722 B.C.

In addition to the political and religious issues going on at the time, there were also social changes that directly related to this setting. As McComiskey observes, "The burgeoning economies of the two kingdoms produced a rift between rich and poor, as an oppressing upper class brought misery to the less fortunate."²

C. *Theological Foundations*

Hosea's prophecies are responses to all of the political, religious, and social issues of his time. His messages include warnings against political alliances that would betray a lack of trust in Yahweh. They include condemnations of the syncretism that characterized much of Israel and Judah's religious policies and demonstrated a lack of national integrity. They condemn that void in social justice and compassion for the nation's vulnerable and less fortunate.

Yet Hosea's prophecies are decidedly covenantal. In fact, familiarity with the message and theology of Deuteronomy is essential to understand the purpose and message of Hosea, for he sets out to expose Israel's and (to a lesser extent Judah's) infidelity to the covenant that bound the nation together with Yahweh in intimate relationship. Deuteronomy describes spells out in detail the relationship that Israel would have with their God--a relationship bound by covenant agreement, and marked by obligations by both parties. Isra-

¹ Thomas Edward McComiskey, "Hosea," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

el was to love Yahweh with absolute loyalty to him, and he in turn would bless them. But failure on Israel's part would result in judgment and eventual exile.

For this reason, the main metaphor Hosea uses to characterize the breach of relationship between God and Israel was that of adultery, for no other human relationship captures the essence of intimate fellowship and union that marked Yahweh's relationship with Israel. And no other act captured the duplicity and treachery of Israel's sin than adultery.

D. *Literary Features*

More will be discussed about the structure of the book later (see IV. Literary Structure), but it is helpful to point out Hosea's unique style that makes his prophecies so powerful. Throughout the book, the reader encounters numerous metaphors and word pictures used to creative evocative meaning. This imagery is applied both to God and to Israel:

WORD PICTURES IN HOSEA³

God is a...	...jealous husband (2:2-13) ...frustrated shepherd (4:16; cf. 11:4; 134:6) ...destructive moth and undesired rot (5:12) ...ferocious lion (5:14; 13:7-8) ...trapper (7:12)	Negative Depictions
	...forgiving Husband (3:1-5) ...healing physician (6:1-2; 7:1; 11:3; 14:4) ...resuscitating rains (6:3) ...loving parent (11:3-4) ...protecting lion (11:10-11) ...life-giving dew (14:5) ...fertile pine tree (14:8)	Positive Depictions
Israel is a...	...unfaithful wife (1:2-9; 3:1-5; 9:1) ...disappearing morning mist (6:4) ...hot oven (7:4-7) ...silly dove (7:11) ...faulty bow (7:16) ...wild donkey (8:9) ...withered plant (9:16)	
God's judgment is...	...harvesting the whirlwind (8:7) ...washing away of debris (10:7) ...yoking a stubborn heifer (10:11)	

In addition to this imagery, Hosea's prophecies take on a clear legal tone. The prophet uses terms such as "case" (4:1), "dispute" (4:4), "guilty" and "oath" (4:15), "judgment" (5:1), and "testifies" (5:5) to capture the essence of Yahweh's problem with Israel. It's as if God the plaintiff is taking legal action against Israel, the defendant, and Hosea is God's lawyer, empowered to argue God's case.

E. *Textual Issues*

³ Adapted from Mark F. Rooker, "The Book of Hosea," in *The World and the Word: And Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2011), 420.

Hosea's textual issues are nearly unparalleled in OT studies. The Hebrew manuscripts available to us contain an amalgam of variations, which has led an entire generation of Hebrew text critics to conclude that the text we have now is hopelessly corrupt and in need of extensive emendation. But as McComiskey points out, "These methods frequently lead only to conjecture, however, because they lack objective controls. To be sure, the Masoretic tradition (MT) is not sacred, and the consonantal text has not come through the centuries unscathed, but we may wonder if the degree to which some scholars alter the text is not extreme."⁴

In more recent times, better understanding of ancient Hebrew has led scholars to explain these textual difficulties in terms of dialectical differences rather than corrupted transmission of the text. Hosea was, after all, one of only a small number of prophets from northern Israel, and current understanding of the dialectical differences between northern and southern Hebrew is still in its infancy.⁵ What is increasingly apparent is that whatever text was used in the translation of the LXX, it most likely was the same Hebrew text behind the current MT, for it is obvious from the LXX that its translators struggled with the same textual issues as scholars today.⁶

II. Major Themes

A. *Israel's Spiritual Adultery*

The overarching thrust of Hosea's message concerns the spiritual infidelity of Israel to their covenant with Yahweh. At the division of the kingdom, northern Israel had moved further and further from their covenant heritage under Jeroboam I's leadership. They had turned away from Yahweh and the covenant as the source of national life, prosperity, and security, and embraced Baalism, a pagan religion centered around the Canaanite storm and fertility god (2:8, 13; 11:2; 13:1).

Hosea captures this infidelity through the dramatic metaphor of marriage. Instructed to marry Gomer, with the promise that his wife would be unfaithful to him, the prophet lived out before Israel's eyes the heartache of marital infidelity and God's determination to recast his love and covenant affection on his adulterous people. Through the marriage metaphor, the true horror of Israel's sin was captured. It was one of the first instances where a prophet used marriage to express the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

In one sense this had to be a carefully explained comparison since sexual prostitution was a viral part of Canaanite religion. And yet the love between a man and woman in marriage was the most intimate relationship; the only suitable to convey God's love for Israel. As in marriage, Israel was to be exclusively faithful to her marriage partner. No rivals could be tolerated (Exod 20:1-6; Deut 4:15-31). One who was unfaithful to God was thus accused of harlotry

⁴ McComiskey, "Hosea," 4.

⁵ Rooker, "Hosea," 414.

⁶ McComiskey, "Hosea," 4.

or prostitution (Exod 34:11-16; Lev 17:7; Num 25:1; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:16-17; Jer 3:2)... The understanding of the covenant as presented in Exodus and Deuteronomy form the background to Hosea's reflections.⁷

Hosea's relationship with Gomer is the focal point of one of the book's main interpretive issues. The text says that God called Hosea to marry "a wife of harlotry" (1:2). Earlier commentators and theologians posed that perhaps there was no actual marriage, but rather chapters 1-3 contain an allegory. This approach has largely been rejected in favor of viewing the marriage as a real, historical event. The question is whether Gomer was a prostitute before the marriage, or whether she later pursued harlotry. Traditionally, commentators have favored the latter view, seeing a moral problem with God's call to marry a woman of such immorality, and noting that only the first of Gomer's three children is directly identified as Hosea's child.

Yet the best approach is to view God as calling Hosea to marry a woman who was already known to be a prostitute. This is, after all, the simplest and most straight forward reading of 1:2. The absence of language directly tying Hosea to the other two children can just as easily be explained on the basis of frugality of words, and nothing in the context suggests that anyone other than Hosea was the father of all three children.⁸ Yet theologically, this view also fits well with what Hosea's marriage was intended to portray. When Yahweh "married" Israel through covenant ceremony at Sinai, they were not a chaste bride. Rather, they were already an idolatrous people, and they continued in their idolatry after the covenant was ratified. Similarly, the picture is consistent that Hosea would be called to marry a known prostitute who continued in that lifestyle even after their marriage.

B. *Israel's Covenant Consequences*

Since Deuteronomy forms the backdrop of Hosea's covenant message, it is no surprise that the consequences for Israel's spiritual fornication flow out of the curses of Deuteronomy 28. Israel had turned to the nations for military security, and had turned to idols for agricultural and reproductive fertility. So God would judge them for it.

Ironically God's judgment on Israel would affect the very areas believed to be under Baal's domain; agricultural prosperity (9:1-4), sexual vitality and fertility (9:10-17), altars and idols (10:1-6), and military prowess (10:9-15). Appropriately, the Lord would deprive Israel of the very blessings they expected Baal to give them.⁹

Eventually, however, the prophet warned that the ultimate curse of the covenant would overtake them. Exile was coming, and the nation would soon find themselves in a foreign land (9:3, 17; 11:5, 11).

⁷ Rooker, "Hosea," 420.

⁸ Ibid., 416.

⁹ Ibid., 419.

C. *Israel's Future Salvation*

Israel's adultery was only half the picture of Hosea's marriage to Gomer. His painful marital experience also demonstrated the compassionate loyalty of God to his people, seen poignantly in the tender care for which Hosea shows Gomer as he ransoms her and brings her back into his home as his wife (3:1-3). So Yahweh will show compassion once again on his adulterous wife (3:4-5).

Likewise, the prophetic names given to Hosea's children are reversed. Hosea's first child was named Jezreel (1:4-5), not only as a pronouncement of the end of Jehu's dynasty (1:4) but also as a forecast of the coming defeat in the valley of Jezreel (1:5). Hosea's second child was named Lo-ruhamah—"no compassion"—indicating God's withdrawal of compassion on the nation and their lack of access to divine forgiveness (1:6). The third child was named Lo-ammi—"not my people"—a complete reversal of the epithet he gave to Israel at Sinai when he called them "My people" (Exod3:7; 6:7). In essence, this progression indicated God's severing of covenant relationship—a spiritual divorce justified by Israel's ongoing marital adultery.

Yet by the end of chapter 2, the names of his children are reversed. Jezreel will become the place where God pours out blessing on the land (2:21-22). God will once again show "compassion" on Israel (2:23a), and he will once again call them "My people" (2:23b), and they will affirm him as their God. In other words, God and Israel will reaffirm their covenant relationship—will remarry.

III. Purpose

Though Israel was unfaithful, Yahweh's faithful love will prevail.

IV. Literary Structure

Outlining Hosea poses no major challenges. The book naturally breaks into two major sections: chapters 1-3 and 4-14. The difficulty involves how the contents of 4-14 are subdivided, since there appear to be no structural formulae that indicate logical divisions.

Within the first major section, there appears to be a repeated pattern emphasizing the flow from divine judgment to divine restoration. This flow appears in each of the three units within chapters 1-3:

HOSEA 1:2-3:5

The Marriage and Children of Hosea	The Marriage and Remarriage of Yahweh	The Remarriage of Hosea
Judgment (1:2-9)	Judgment (2:2-13)	Judgment (3:1-4)
Restoration (1:10-2:1)	Restoration (2:14-23)	Restoration (3:5)
1:2	2:2	3:1

The second and larger section of the book appears to bring a lawsuit against the people which consist of three elements: a lack of truth, loyalty, and divine knowledge. Throughout the re-

maintaining chapters, the prophet outlines his evidence for each and the appropriate judgment, as well as the restoration that would follow:

HOSEA 4:1-14:9

The Indictment	The Substantiation of the Indictment			The Call to Wisdom
No Truth	No Knowledge:	No Loyalty:	No Truth:	
No Loyalty	Evidence	Evidence	Evidence	
(4:4-19)	(4:4-19)	(6:4-7:16)	(11:12-13:3)	
No Knowledge	Judgment	Judgment	Judgment	
Of God	(5:1-14)	(8:1-11:7)	(13:4-16)	
4:1	Restoration	Restoration	Restoration	
	(5:15-6:3)	(11:8-11)	(14:1-8)	
	4:4	6:4	11:12	
				14:9

The first of these indictments declares that "my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6). But by the end of the section, we find that the people are found says, "So let us know, let us press on to know Yahweh" (6:3). But by the next verse, the prophet moves to his second indictment, declaring that Israel's and Judah's "loyalty is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early" (6:4). Yet by the end of the section, God's compassionate loyalty and protective care will incite the people to "walk after Yahweh" (11:10). Finally, the prophet then turns to the third of his indictments, declaring that "Ephraim surrounds me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit" (11:12). But by the end, he appeals for Israel to "take words with you and return to Yahweh" (14:1), and they are depicted as appealing to God to "take away all iniquity and receive us graciously, that we may present the fruit of our lips" (14:3).