

Hosea

Hosea 1-7

Hosea, like Amos, prophesied mainly to the northern kingdom of Israel or Ephraim in the 8th century BC. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and Micah who mainly prophesied in Judah, the southern kingdom.

Hosea especially focuses on the idea of Israel as God's wife. That idea recurs in other prophets as well, but is dramatically spelled out in the first 3 chapters of Hosea. Pagan gods often had their mates, and the Israelites tended to blend God into those pagan pantheons of the nations around them, and worship a feminine fertility goddess, a queen of heaven. Hosea's message puts Israel herself into that role of God's covenant wife, his chosen queen of heaven. Except that Israel is and has been repeatedly an unfaithful wife. Hosea especially focuses on the idolatry of Israel as a kind of spiritual adultery, giving credit for what God had done and giving love and devotion to the gods of other nations or to the nations. As a result, despite his great love for his chosen one, Israel would be divorced and left to reckon with the true price of her infidelities. Yet, God's love would not let him simply abandon them and so the quest for reunion and reconciliation continued, even after the destruction of the nation.

Hosea became a living parable, marrying a woman who was unfaithful to him. Having a child with her (1:2-3) and then she bearing other children who were not his (1:6, 1:8). Even those who were his, the house of Jehu (recall 2 Kings 9-10), had pursued their own agenda beyond the will of God. Nevertheless, immediately in chapter 1 we see the LORD's conundrum, that while Israel consorts with foreign gods and produces children that are not His own, he has made promises of devotion that he himself will still keep. And so 1:10-11 asserts that God will faithfully keep his promises to Abraham and have innumerable "sons of the living God." This is the expression Peter echoed in Matthew 16:16 when he identified Jesus as the "Christ, the son of the living God." And Jesus is "bringing many sons to glory" and calls Christians "brothers" in Hebrews 2:10-11. Right in the middle of making his case that Israel is unfaithful and unworthy of the love of God, Hosea asserts that God's promises of a redeemed people stand firm, and the New Testament assures us that Jesus is the one head described in 1:11 and that Christians along with Jesus are the sons of the living God the prophets predicted.

Chapter 2 carries forward the idea that while the nation of Israel was unfaithful, not every member of that nation was rejected. God longed for a turnaround, and even giving her up to the consequences of her sins was motivated by a desire to see her wake up and see the truth. v8 is the pitiful reality of what sin amounts to, taking God's good gifts and squandering them in opposition to him. When God speaks of alluring Israel into the wilderness and recapturing the honeymoon era when they came out of Egypt (2:14-23) we should perhaps recall John's vision of the Lords' people being nurtured in the wilderness in Revelation 12:6, 13-17. The church appears to be experiencing what Hosea saw then, building an enduring relationship with God.

Chapter 3 pictures a time of no kingdom for Israel, followed by a resumption of the reign of (the line of) David in v5. Again, the latter days envisioned there are identified in the New Testament with the ongoing reign of the glorified Christ. Israel scattered among the nations was called with

the nations back into relationship with God.

Chapter 4 highlights some classic problems. v6 notes the great problem of ignorance of God, “my people perish for lack of knowledge.” God has made himself known, has sent his lawgivers and prophets and finally his own son (Hebrews 1:1-4), and yet people neglect the great salvation that rests on having a relationship with him, knowing him. And, v7, prosperity and apparent success are no assurance of faithfulness. We all need to receive the kingdom like children, with trust in the Lord and not in ourselves or our programs or other people or anything except the Lord himself.

As with several other warnings in the prophets and the histories, there are strong ties between intoxication and the excesses of idolatry (4:10-11, 17-18).

Chapter 5 notes, among other failures, seeking political solutions to spiritual problems. Ephraim and Judah both sought alliance with Assyria (5:13, 2 Kings 15-16) as an answer to their obvious difficulties, but political remedies were no remedy at all. Only humbling themselves before God (5:15) could produce real answers.

Chapter 6 has a striking prophecy about being struck down and bound up and then raised up again after 3 days (v1-3). No doubt one of the many references to 3 days Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples of his imminent suffering, death, burial and resurrection on the 3rd day, according to the scriptures (Matthew 16:21, for example). Jesus took on the whole of Israel’s guilt as well as our own, and fulfilled her purpose as servant of God.

6:5 is a striking depiction of the role of the prophets and the word of God as sword.

6:6 is the center of the book, the core message, cited by Jesus in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7.

Chapter 7 again highlights failures and imbalances among the people of Israel/Ephraim, injustice and selfishness, immorality and idolatry, excesses and abuse of power. v11 is restated by Jesus in Matthew 10:16, that his disciples should be “harmless as doves, but wise as serpents.” Hosea’s generation though was looking to human/political alliances, Egypt and Assyria, thus participating in laying out the nets that would entrap them to their own destruction.

Hosea 8-14

Hosea 8 continues the prophetic diatribe against the useless ungodly pursuits of Israel, religious and political and economic. A people “incapable of innocence” (v5) who “sow the wind and reap the whirlwind” (v7). Israel had gone to Assyria of her own accord, seeking political and military alliances, but would be swallowed up by Assyria’s greater and greater demands until they were destroyed, as happened in 721 BC. More and more laws with more and more details (v12) were no solution then or now.

Hosea 9 Israel lived in a land of abundance, but would not continue to enjoy abundance because that was God’s gift, and he would take it away. The future was increasing desolation because

“the days of punishment have come” (v7). Prophets who actually spoke for God in Israel were objects of contempt and hatred, hunted by the ungodly (v7-8). The sin of Baal-peor that the 2nd generation of the Exodus indulged in (Numbers 25) proved to be a habit rather than an episode (v10). In the language of a broken marriage family, God determines to leave Israel (v12) and drive them out of his house (v15), with all the tragedy that implies. Israel was destined to be “wanderers among the nations” as they are to this day (v17).

Hosea 10 again points up that the more blessings God gave to Israel the further from Him they went in their prosperity. Those who have been arrogant will be reduced by God’s judgments against them to appeal to the mountains and hills to hide them (v8). The “days of Gibeah” in v9 takes us back to the horrific war of attrition against the tribe of Benjamin in Judges 19-20 because of horrific sin in their midst. Pampered Ephraim (Israel) was going to learn the meaning of hard work in v11, as was her sister Judah. The thing they needed to plant was righteousness, in order to reap faithful love, rather than injustice and deceit (v12-13), a metaphor used several times in the New Testament including Galatians 6:7-10.

Hosea 11 has a beautiful poem expressing God’s love for Israel as that of a father for his son. How can a loving father give up the son he has nurtured? Yet, that is exactly what the LORD determined to do, and this passage is linked for us to Jesus Christ by Matthew (v1, Matthew 2:15). Where Ephraim, beloved as God’s son (recall Exodus 4:22-23), failed to follow the Father who loved him, Jesus would follow and bring redemption for Israel and for all the world. Israel would go to Assyria (5) but God was not giving up on his son, and would come, not to destroy and not in wrath, when God became a man (consider v9), the lion of the tribe of Judah (v10-12).

Hosea 12 notes the nature of Israel, Judah as well as Ephraim, as marked in the life of the patriarch Jacob from the womb to his return to Bethel (v2-6, Genesis 25:19-35:15). As Jacob had returned to Bethel with God’s help, so Judah could return to the LORD with love and justice and faithfulness. ... God despises oppression through dishonest trade, deception v7-8. ... The role of the prophets is again noted in v10-14, with repeated themes of coming back from exile. The prophet who would bring Israel up the next time would be the Christ.

Hosea 13, the one and only deliverer or savior Israel had ever had from Egypt onward was the LORD God. “Besides me there is no savior” (v4, and see Isaiah 45:21). Their dream (1 Samuel 8) of a king to protect them had proven vain (Hosea 13:10-11), as God told them it would be. There are no political solutions to spiritual, moral, problems. ... Nevertheless, we have another glimpse of Messianic deliverance, not from Assyria but from the real adversary, death itself in v14, a passage cited by Paul in the resurrection chapter of the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15:55.

Hosea 14 continues an admonition to return to God, with the marvelous instruction to “take with you words and return to the LORD” (v2). God cares very much about what we say. What we say to him and about him, what we say to each other, and the sacrifice of praise. He cares about our confession of faith and confession of sins. Words matter in coming to God. ... As with many of the prophets Hosea has glimpses of the Messiah’s kingdom in his closing words, especially v4-7. God would have an Israel, a people of his own, who he could love freely and bless with beauty and fruitfulness, and so he does, thanks to Jesus. ... v8 reminds us of the opening story of the

book, an unfaithful wife looking to those who use and abuse her as her benefactors, rather than the faithful and true husband who keeps on caring. So, v9, pay attention to the metaphors and allegories and learn the ways of the LORD, and walk in them.