

HOSEA

Prophet of God's Unconditional Love

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Hosea, a contemporary of Amos, also preached in the Northern Kingdom. He preached in the eighth century BC during the thirty years prior to Israel's fall to the Assyrians, which took place in 730BC. More specifically, Hosea preached during the last years of the reign of Jeroboam when Israel enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. Hosea also prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam's successors, which turned out to be chaotic years for Israel. Four of the kings were assassinated.

So over a period of about thirty years, Hosea has seen seven kings come and go. Pursuing their own greedy ends and trying to play power politics, the ruling class ignore the poor and the needy in their midst and lead the people into idolatry, a form of spiritual prostitution.

Unique feature of the book of Hosea. The most unique and striking feature of this book is that it is the first book of the Bible to use the metaphor of marriage to describe God's relationship with Israel—an image that would often be used later by other prophets and by Christ and Paul. The marriage image is one that Hosea first lived in his personal life before he preached it in his oracles or sermons.

In his book, Set My Exiles Free, Fr. John Power writes: "Hosea was a good man whose marriage turned out an unhappy one. Having borne him three children, his wife Gomer took up, not with another man, but with a number of men. Hosea divorced her according to the Mosaic law, and she apparently became a temple prostitute in one of the pagan shrines of the northern kingdom. In the eyes of a pious Israelite—and Hosea was one—this was the lowest any woman could go. But Hosea's life and actions are dominated by God, and so Hosea takes her back, in fact, ransoms her from the pagan shrine—'bought her for fifteen shekels of silver' (3:2). And he goes on to say (v.5): 'Afterwards the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God...' In other words, God enlightens Hosea and enables him to see in his painful domestic tragedy a picture of the infidelity of Israel. Israel had been espoused to God—this is what the Sinai covenant meant for the prophets. But she proved an unfaithful spouse who turned her back on God to worship false gods. This idolatry the prophets

always called adultery. As Jeremiah says bluntly: 'Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the harlot?' (3:6).

"Hosea saw that his own generous action in taking back Gomer mirrored, however faintly, the patience of a loving God who will forgive and finally restore erring Israel. And Hosea preached the mercy and tenderness of God so insistently that he has become known as the prophet of divine love. God's special love for Israel is expressed very beautifully in Chapter 11" (p.117).

As we read this book, we will discover that Hosea is a deeply sensitive man whose emotions can instantly transform from violent anger to the deepest tenderness.

It might be good to keep in mind the words of one commentator whose name I cannot recall: "When it comes to the transmission of this text, it seems as if the original pieces fell on the floor but were not put back together properly by the final editor." For example, chapter 2 begins with verse 4, and verses 1-3 are placed elsewhere. Similarly, the 1991 edition of the New American Bible begins chapter 2 with verse 4, whereas the 2011 edition begins it with verse 1. The English translations of Hosea sometimes offer very different readings of the same passage.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

PART ONE: THE PROPHET'S MARRIAGE AND ITS SYMBOLISM (Chs 1-3)

PART TWO: CONSEQUENCES OF ISRAEL'S SINFUL CONDUCT (Chs 4-14)

Two clear themes in chapters 4-13 are God's judgment on Israel and God's love for Israel. "The dark gloom evoked by the message of judgment is frequently brightened by an insight of love that is irrepressible" (Peter Craigie). Chapter 14 is a call to conversion.

COMMENTARY

PART ONE: HOSEA'S MARRIAGE AND ITS SYMBOLIC MEANING

CHAPTER 1: Hosea marries and has three children

The Lord said to Hosea, “Go take a harlot and harlot’s children, for the land gives itself to harlotry, turning away from the Lord” (v.2).

The first three chapters of this book focus upon the symbolic meaning of Hosea’s marriage to Gomer. Chapter 1 explains the symbolic meaning of the names of their three children.

Verse 1 gives us the historical context for Hosea’s prophetic ministry during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, kings in Judah, and in the last years of Jeroboam’s reign in the Northern Kingdom.

God’s first recorded words to Hosea are: “Go take a harlot wife and harlot’s children, for the land gives itself to harlotry, turning away from the Lord” (v.2). Some scholars wonder if Hosea’s marriage to Gomer was symbolic, or if it actually occurred. Was Gomer a prostitute at the time of the marriage, or was the author referring to what actually occurred later in the marriage? Regardless of the actual historical circumstances, the message or symbolism is clear enough. In allowing herself to be lured into the worship of foreign gods, Israel is prostituting herself to other gods, to another spouse. She is being unfaithful to her true spouse, the God of Israel. Israel’s behavior toward God is like that of an unfaithful spouse. Faithless Gomer is an image of faithless Israel.

Symbolic names of Hosea and Gomer’s children (vv 4-8). In the Bible, names are very important. They can tell us something about the person and his/her destiny. For example, the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.” Simon’s name was changed by Jesus to Peter (from the Greek *petros*, i.e. Rock). Peter was destined to become the rock on which the church would be built. Names could also speak to the destiny of a nation. The names given to the children of Hosea and Gomer became “walking signs” of God’s word to Israel. The names of the three children are:

Jezreel (v.4). Jezreel is the name of the royal house where King Jehu carried out a terrible massacre. The child Jezreel is a walking reminder that Jehu’s dynasty will be punished for this terrible deed.

Lo-Ruhama (v.6), Hosea’s second child whose name means “not-pitied,” is a walking reminder that the time of God’s pity for Israel is coming to an end. The

days of the northern kingdom are numbered because of her infidelity to God.

Lo-Ammi (v.8) which means “not my people” is a walking reminder that Israel (the northern kingdom) will no longer be God’s chosen people.

The southern kingdom of Judah will continue to be God’s chosen people. The names of the three children signify an increasing alienation in the relationship between God and Israel. The first child represents a looming judgment against the royal family; the second speaks of God’s compassion running out; and the third symbolizes the end of Israel’s covenant relationship with God. Israel had sinned and resisted God’s warnings and so the judgment of a terminated covenant is announced: Israel will no longer be God’s people or God’s bride.

Pause: Do you know the story behind your first and middle name? Do you have the same name as a saint? If so, what do you know about the saint?

CHAPTER 2: Israel’s punishment and restoration

“I will lay waste her vines and fig trees, of which she said, ‘These are the hires my lovers have given me.’” (v.14)

“I will allure her....into the desert and speak to her heart.... She shall respond to me as in the days of her youth when she came from the land of Egypt.” (vv 16-17)

“I will espouse you to me forever. I will espouse you in right and justice, in love, and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord.” (vv 21-22)

When we read this chapter, we will notice again the rearrangement of the verses by *The New American Bible*.

The verses in this chapter can be interpreted on two levels: Hosea’s relationship with his family and God’s relationship with Israel. The former is intended to mirror the latter. Sometimes the two levels are so intimately intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish between them.

In verse 4 of this chapter, we can envision Hosea and his children in a divorce court. They address words to the judge in the presence of Gomer. Hosea’s purpose is to obtain a decree of divorce from his unfaithful wife. “She is not my wife and I am not her husband.”

Hosea's tragic personal situation mirrors God's relationship to Israel. In the divine court, Israel is arraigned. God is present in his multiple roles of aggrieved party, prosecutor and judge. In this divine court, Israel's crime is brought to light, i.e., unfaithfulness to God in pursuit of other lovers or other gods. As a result, the marriage covenant between God and Israel can no longer continue. God must divorce Israel.

In the divorce proceedings, Gomer and, allegorically speaking, Israel, are condemned on three counts:

1. Gomer and Israel had chased after other lovers (v.7).
2. Gomer and Israel had willfully ignored their spouse who provided for them. *"Since she has not known that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil..."* (v.10).
Just as Gomer did not know that her husband provided for her needs, Israel did not acknowledge God as the provider of "the grain, the wine, and the oil for her."
3. Gomer and Israel had a bad case of memory lapse. In going her own way, Gomer had forgotten Hosea, her spouse. Israel, in worshiping Baal, had forgotten God, her spouse.

Verse 9 speaks of the reaction all too common to us when we run back to God after feeling the emptiness of promises made by false gods. *"Then she will say, 'I will come back to my first husband.'"*

Verses 12-15 is an oracle of doom which can be applied to Gomer for her infidelity to her husband—or to Israel for her infidelity to God, her spouse.

Promise of Restoration (vv 16-25). For Israel to reconnect with her true love, God, she will need to be led out into the desert. It was in the desert that Israel and God experienced their closest relationship. The desert is a place of purification. In the desert, Israel *"shall respond as in the days of her youth when she came from the land of Egypt"* (v.17). In the desert, stripped of all her idols, Israel will call me *"my husband"* and God *"will remove from her mouth the names of the Baals"* (v.19).

Verse 20 speaks of a future new covenant which will be characterized by peace with the world of nature, the arrival of all living things, and the absence of war.

Using the imagery of marital love and commitment (vv 21-22), the prophet portrays God as once again

entering into a covenant with Israel. As a loving husband, God will bestow on his bride the gifts of justice, loyalty and compassion.

Verses 23-25. In these final verses of chapter 2, the names of Hosea's children are changed. 1) Jezreel remains the same but its meaning is changed from that reminiscent of the place of bloody massacre and doom, to one that signifies fertile bread basket, or "I will sow." 2) Lo-Ruhama, which originally meant "not-pitied" is changed to "pitied." 3) Lo-Ammi, or "not-my-people" is now known as "you are my people." And Israel, as in a marriage ceremony, will respond: "You are my God."

Pause: How do you feel and react when people break their promise to you? What helps you to deal with the experience of broken promises?

CHAPTER 3: Hosea is asked to take back his adulterous wife

The Lord said to Hosea: *"Give your love to a woman beloved of a paramour (a mistress), an adulteress; even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods..."* (v.1).

This short chapter of five verses concludes the first section of this book, which contrasts Hosea's relationship with Gomer, to God's relationship with Israel. Hosea is not only asked to take back his unfaithful wife, but to buy her back. Verse 2 implies that as Gomer had become a slave, probably at the temple of Baal, her freedom had to be purchased.

In Verse 2, *"You will wait...."* is a reference to the purification process Gomer will need to undergo before she can again experience true love. In a similar manner, Israel will need to go through the same purification process before her covenant with God can be renewed. Hosea's call to love an adulterous wife is intended to be a powerful way of communicating God's unconditional and merciful love for us when we turn our backs on him.

Pause: What are some means that God seeks to purify us today of all that is not of him?

PART TWO: CONSEQUENCES OF ISRAEL'S SINFUL CONDUCT (chs. 4-14)

CHAPTERS 4:1-5:7: The Lord's complaint against Israel

*Hear the word of the Lord,
O people of Israel,
for the Lord has a grievance
against the inhabitants of the land:
There is no fidelity, no mercy,
no knowledge of God in the land.
False swearing, lying, murder,
stealing and adultery!
in their lawlessness,
bloodshed follows bloodshed. (vv 1-2)*

Part Two of this book is a collection of oracles or sayings, without much sense of unity or story-line. This chapter opens with an oracle of complaint by God against Israel.

As in the words of the Act of Contrition, Israel “has failed to do good”—to be faithful and merciful, to have knowledge of God—and instead she “has chosen to do wrong” by swearing, lying, murder, etc. Israel failed in her relationship with God and the people.

Harsh words for the priests (4:4-5:7). This first oracle is a harsh condemnation of those in charge of Israel's religious life.

- The clergy have failed in their responsibilities as teachers, denoting a lack of knowledge of the Lord and his ways. “*My people perish for want of knowledge...*” (v.6).
- Rather than condemning the national apostasy, they have encouraged it and prospered from it, turning the nation's disgrace into personal profit. “*They feed on the sin of my people*” (v.8).
- Rather than leading their people in true worship of God, they have led them into false worship (vv 13-15).

The shameful leadership of the priests is the primary reason why the nation has become like “*a stubborn heifer*” (v.16).

In 5:1-7, Hosea continues his condemnation of the leaders and the nation as a whole. Amongst other things, they try worshiping both Baal and God, thinking that the latter will save them from harm. Because the spirit of harlotry is with them, they will be unable to ever find the Lord if they seek him.

CHAPTER 5:8-15: Assassinations, instability, loss

The years following the death of Jeroboam II are marked by chaos in Israel. Over the next ten years, the nation has been ruled by five kings, few of them with any legitimate claim to the throne. At the same time, Tiglath-Pileser becomes the new king of Assyria with ambitions to expand his empire.

5:8-16 are ominous words from the prophet about what is in store for Israel (also called Ephraim in this book. Ephraim is the name of Joseph's second son.) Hosea perceives an even greater threat than the Assyrians: God's turning his back on Israel because of her infidelity to him.

CHAPTERS 6:1-7:2 – Condemnation of empty ritual

“In their affliction they shall look for me: ‘Come let us return to the Lord.’” (6:1)

“For it is love that I desire not sacrifice, and knowledge of God and not holocaust” (6:6).

Hosea attacks the Israelites, as Jesus will later attack the Pharises (Mt. 23) for putting their confidence in external rituals divorced from internal dispositions of love and obedience. Like Samuel (1 Sam 15:22) Hosea stresses that love and obedience is more important than sacrifice.

CHAPTERS 7:3-8:14 – Foreign alliances condemned

All their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon me (7:7).

Ephraim mingles with the other nations . . . They call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria (v. 11),

In these verses the monarchy is condemned for its wicked ways and for entering into alliances with foreign nations.

Pause: Is it possible for us to go through the motions of our religion (pray, tithe, etc.) and yet have hearts not truly given to God?

CHAPTER 9: Exile without worship

They shall not dwell in the Lord's land; Ephraim shall return to Egypt and in Assyria they shall eat unclean food (v. 3).

The people are gathered to celebrate harvest time. Hosea throws a wet towel on their celebration by proclaiming: “Rejoice not, O Israel” for you are about

to be carried away from your land by the Assyrians and then you will be forced to eat unclean food. You will be unable to offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Verses 7-9. The prophet is ridiculed. “The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad” (v. 7).

Verses 10-17. Baal-pear and Gilgal are places of worship in the northern kingdom, places that have become hateful in God’s eyes because of their idolatry.

CHAPTER 10: Punishment for idolatry

“Israel’s heart is false (v.2)... It will be carried to Assyria.” (v.6)

Hosea continues in a reflective mood as if conversing to close friends about Israel. First, he speaks about Israel’s past rising through the image of the vine. Rather than bringing Israel closer to God, prosperity leads her to spiritual decline. *“The more productive his land, the more sacred pillars (false idols) he set up” (v.1).* Because their heart is in the wrong place, the people will soon see the destruction of their altars and pillars. No one will want to survive the coming devastation (v.8). They will plead to be buried beneath the mountains and hills. The only hope for Israel is to seek the Lord (v.12).

CHAPTER 11: God’s parental love for Israel

“When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the farther they went from me.” (vv 1-2)

The language of love dominates this chapter, although it is not the imagery of marital love but rather that of parental love for a rebellious child. From the perspective of a parent, God has done all the right things, providing loving care and encouragement to his children. But as every parent knows, children have a will of their own and are capable of rejecting a parent’s love. This is what Israel did when she chose to worship Baal, an act tantamount to rejection of her true parent (God) for another parent.

Those who sometimes say that the God of the Old Testament is a harsh, condemning God have not read Hosea who images God as a very loving being despite having been rejected over and over by Israel, his spouse. *“How could I give you up, O Ephraim.... My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred” (v.8).*

Chapter 11 expresses for the first time the conflict in God’s heart for his child, Israel. On the one hand, he loves her very much: *“I fostered her like one who raises an infant to his cheeks...” (v. 4).* On the other hand, like any parent, God is totally frustrated with Israel’s lack of response to his love and care: *“Because she refused to repent her own counsels shall devour her” (v. 6).*

Pause: God is a God of justice and unconditional love. How are you able to reconcile these two sides of God in your relationship with him?

CHAPTER 12: Infidelity of Israel

“Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, the house of Israel, with deceit....” (v.1)

In order to make his point about Ephraim’s lies, Hosea recalls the lies which Jacob told to win his father’s birthright (v.4). But unlike Jacob who continued to seek God, Israel would not quit seeking other gods.

CHAPTER 13: Sentence of death

“...Men kiss calves!” (v.2)

*“...Where are your plagues, O death!
Where is your sting, O nether world!
My eyes are closed to compassion.” (v.14)*

Hosea’s ministry is drawing to a close and the time is coming when the northern kingdom will be overthrown by the Assyrians. In these dark days prior to the fall of the nation, Hosea has little to be cheerful about. God, who had been their companion through the hard times in the desert, will now be a dangerous lion who will destroy his unfaithful spouse. Men “kissing calves” is a reference to the misplaced affection of a nation that has forgotten its first love.

CHAPTER 14: A call to repentance

*“Return O Israel to the Lord your God; . . . (v. 2)
“I will heal their defection, I will love them freely;
for my wrath is turned away from them” (v. 5).*

By way of dialog, Hosea expresses what God would say to Israel (vv. 5-9) if Israel would heed God’s call to conversion (vv. 2-3) and respond with a cry for forgiveness. It is only when Israel refused to repent that God punished her with destruction and exile.

Hosea had hoped that his people would turn to God in repentance. If they had, God would willingly have spared them. But because they continued to turn their backs on God, they experienced the consequences of their sinful decision.

A concluding word

Peter Craigie writes:

For all the gloom that has dominated the prophet's ministry, Hosea's book ends on a note of love. His vision of God outstrips conventional theology and law" God continues to love even when the divine love has long been rejected. And his vision of God reaches beyond the historical events of his time; when at last all his contemporaries understood that Israel had no future, suddenly Hosea perceived that there was a future after all. For love, in the last resort, cannot be restrained. God's love cannot die, despite the persistent efforts of mankind to bring it to an end.

And we have only grasped Hosea's message fully if we leave this book with this message of love firmly in the forefront of our mind. It is a book written long ago, but it was specifically written down so that the future generations could understand its message, as the postscript (verse 9) so clearly states. To those who recognize that they are as orphans in this world, there comes still the word of God proclaimed by Hosea: "I will love them freely" (The Daily Study bible Series – Twelve Prophets, Vol I, p. 84).