

Hosea

Marriage is the most sacred of human relationships. Its violation is tragic and destructive. Israel existed in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, her creator and redeemer. When she forsook Him and served other gods He was forced to withdraw His blessing and expose her to the consequences of her infidelity. However, God's love for His chosen nation never wavered and He promised to continue to love Israel until she returned in faith and devotion. Hosea is called to enter a marriage relationship that would demonstrate the ugliness of infidelity so that Israel might be moved to repentance and restoration. Though the lesson was lost on the nation during the moment of Hosea's pain, one day Yahweh and his bride will experience a great reconciliation.

Authorship

The only thing known about the author is his name and what he reveals about himself in the first three chapters. "Hosea" means "salvation" or "deliverance," which is what Israel was in need of. Hosea's ministry was much like Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's in that his personal experience embodied God's message to the nation of Israel.

Date

Uzziah's reign began in 790 B.C. and Hezekiah's extended from 715 to 686 B.C. (though he served as co-regent with Ahaz beginning ca. 729 B.C.). Jeroboam II reigned in the north from 793 to 753 B.C. There are several reasons for including kings from both Judah and Israel in the date reference to Hosea's ministry, since he is clearly a prophet to the northern kingdom, Israel. First, the reign of Jeroboam II defines the spiritual and moral climate that was being addressed by Hosea. Second, the four southern

kings witness the events leading up to the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians and the subsequent threats to their own security. The book contains a warning for Judah as well as Israel. Hosea probably ministered from ca. 760 B.C. until at least the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.¹

Historical Setting

The historical account of 2 Kings 14—17 serves as the background for Hosea's ministry. Under Jeroboam II Israel had experienced a time of prosperity and relative security, though within a context of spiritual degeneracy. After Jeroboam's death anarchy and chaos ensued; his son Zechariah was assassinated and a series of usurpers ruled over Israel. Eventually Israel became a vassal of Assyria (2 Kings 15:19) and was finally destroyed by them (2 Kings 17:5–6).

Original Readers / Occasion

The objects of Hosea's prophetic ministry were obviously the rulers and people of Israel, the northern kingdom. However, the canonical writing was intended to convey wisdom and prudence (cf. 14:9). Judah, and the righteous remnant, received Hosea as warning and instruction in the righteous ways of their covenant God.²

Special Issues

God's command for Hosea to marry a prostitute. While it is obvious that

¹ For a discussion on issues of dating see C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 86-87 and Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 175-76.

² Childs comments: "The prophet's words are seen to lead the reader into right and wise action. By characterizing the collection of Hosean's oracles as wisdom, the canonical editor offers another indication that the metaphorical function of this prophetic language has been recognized by its being tied to the mysteries of God's purpose. The message of the prophet was true and faithful above all for later generations within Israel, but the reality of the symbolic language required the insight and penetration of the wise in order to comprehend." (Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 382-83.)

Hosea's marital circumstances are designed to symbolize God's covenant faithfulness to a spiritually adulterous people, Israel, the personal demands upon the prophet with respect to marriage are difficult to reconcile with the sanctity of marriage as presented in Scripture. Some would argue that this is pure metaphor and not historical. Others take the view that Gomer was merely an "adulterous type of woman" though not a practicing prostitute. The text seems clear, though, that she was actually a practicing harlot. Though taking her as a wife would have been violation of Torah for a priest, there is no such restriction for Israelites in general.³

Message

Having repudiated God's loyal, covenant love Israel persisted in being like an unfaithful wife for which God had to judge her; however, eventually the nation will be restored and will faithfully pursue her covenant keeping God.

Outline

Title: The Lord's word to Hosea in the days of Jeroboam.	1:1
I. Prophetic message illustrated: Hosea marries a harlot.	1:2—3:5
A. Hosea is instructed to take a wife of harlotry as a symbol of Israel's relationship with God.	1:2—2:1
1. Hosea marries Gomer who bears him a child, Jezreel ("God Sows / Scatters").	1:2—5
2. Gomer bears two other children.	1:6—9
a. She bears a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah ("No Mercy").	1:6—7
b. She bears a son, Lo-Ammi ("Not My People").	1:8—9
3. Israel's future will be a contrast to Hosea's children.	1:10—2:1
B. Hosea is instructed to separate from his wife for infidelity as a lesson to the adulterous nation Israel.	2:2—23
1. Hosea lodges the complaint against his wife.	2:2—5
2. Hosea reveals the consequences for infidelity.	2:6—13
a. There will be rejection by her lovers.	2:6—8
b. There will be depletion of her resources.	2:9—13
3. Hosea declares the coming restoration of the relationship.	2:14—23

³ See Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 357-58. For an alternate view see Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 724-25.

C.	Hosea is instructed to take back his adulterous wife as a sign of hope for the wayward nation of Israel.	3:1–5
II.	Prophetic message delineated: God sets forth His case against Israel.	4:1—14:8
A.	The covenant lawsuit is summarized.	4:1–3
1.	The lawsuit is announced.	4:1a
2.	The charges are summarized.	4:1b–2
3.	The sentence is delivered.	4:3
B.	The covenant violations are specified.	4:4—13:16
1.	Israel does not know Yahweh.	4:4—6:3
a.	Failure of priest and prophet to instruct Israel in the knowledge of Yahweh has led to the nation seeking counsel from idols.	4:4–19
b.	Judgment will come in the form of abandonment to hostile forces.	5:1–15
c.	Repentance will be the proper response for Israel.	6:1–3
2.	Israel has not acted in loyal love.	6:4—11:11
a.	They have violated God’s covenant thereby committing spiritual adultery.	6:4—8:14
1)	The charge of covenant unfaithfulness is stated.	6:4–11
2)	The specifics of the charge are set forth.	7:1—8:14
a)	They are personally defiled.	7:1–10
b)	They seek political alliances.	7:11–16
c)	They trust in human contrivances.	8:1–14
b.	They will be judged by God for their disloyalty.	9:1—10:15
1)	They will experience barrenness in the absence of their God who is withdrawing from them.	9:1–17
2)	They will experience defeat by their enemies.	10:1–15
c.	They will yet experience the steadfast love of Yahweh.	11:1–11
3.	Israel has acted in deceit.	11:12—13:14
a.	They have consistently been deceitful takers.	11:12—12:14
b.	They will be devoured in judgment.	13:1–8
c.	They will yet know Yahweh’s gracious redemption.	13:9–14
4.	Israel’s imminent judgment is specified.	13:15–16
C.	The covenant renewal is anticipated.	14:1–8
1.	Israel is called to repentance.	14:1–3
2.	Yahweh affirms His covenant faithfulness.	14:4–8
III.	Epilogue: The wise will understand the ways of Yahweh.	14:9

Argument

Hosea very naturally breaks into two parts the first centering on his painful marriage and the second on Israel’s persistent rebellion. By symbol and by prophetic proclamation Hosea delivers God’s covenant lawsuit against His rebellious people.

I. Prophetic message illustrated: Hosea marries a harlot (1:2—3:5).

Whether with a practicing prostitute or an adulteress type of woman, Hosea is instructed to enter a relationship that will bring him much pain, just as Yahweh had with the nation of Israel when He had brought them out of bondage in Egypt. Hosea's first child with his wife Gomer was named Jezreel which means "God sows / scatters." It was a historic place name but also a symbol of God's activity with His people, negatively and positively; they would be scattered among the nations (1:4) and once again sown back into the land (1:11; 2:22-23; cf. Jer 31:27).⁴ Gomer's next two children, probably by adultery, are appropriately named "No Mercy" and "Not My People" signifying Israel's present condition before God. However, for the nation there was the guarantee that in the future the essence of these names would be reversed (1:10-11).

In order to communicate the nature and purpose of the judgment that was soon to come on Israel, Hosea is instructed to separate from his wife for her infidelity so that she would be exposed to the consequences of her unfaithfulness (2:2-23). It is transparent that Israel is the subject as well as Gomer. Rejected by her lovers (2:6-8) and depleted of her previous resources gotten by harlotry (2:9-13) the adulterer (Gomer/Israel) will be open to the wooing of her estranged husband and will respond (2:14-23). God's relationship with Israel will then be like a whole new beginning (cf. 2:19-20). Hosea is then instructed to take back his adulterous wife as a sign of hope for the wayward nation after they have experienced the deprivation of exile and dispersion (3:1-4); the result will be the millennial kingdom under the rule of Messiah-David (3:5).

⁴ Ibid., 723.

II. Prophetic message delineated: God sets forth His case against Israel (4:1—14:8).

The proclamation against Israel takes the form of a covenant lawsuit, through which God formally charges His people with violation of Torah, proves His case, and then pronounces judgment.⁵ Three general violations are specified and then developed (in reverse order) each with its own special word of encouragement.⁶

A. The covenant lawsuit is summarized (4:1–3).

The case is announced and the summary charges stated, namely that Israel was without truth (reliability), mercy (loyal love, covenant faithfulness), and knowledge of God (4:1–2). The sentence for such a crime is exile (4:3).

B. The covenant violations are specified (4:4—13:16).

The charge of being without knowledge of God is developed first (4:4—6:3). This is fundamental because covenant faithfulness is based entirely on knowing the God of the covenant. The priests and prophets have special culpability in this deficiency since it was their responsibility to instruct in Torah and proclaim its violation (cf. 4:4–5). Israel had forfeited her role as a holy nation and kingdom of priests (4:6; cf. Exod 19:5–6). Not knowing Yahweh, Israel resorted to idolatry for guidance and provision (4:11–19). For this they would be abandoned and defeated (5:1–15).

The major charge is lack of “mercy” (Heb. *hesed*) which is best understood as pertaining to loyal love or covenant faithfulness rather than pity or compassion. This of course is the major point of Hosea’s marriage to a harlot. There was no honoring of the

⁵ For a discussion of the concept of the covenant lawsuit see J. Carl Laney, “The Role of the Prophets in God’s Case against Israel” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (October-December 1981): 313-24 and James Limburg, “The Root byr and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (September 1969): 293–95.

⁶ This is the basic structure of Dyer and Merrill, *Explorer*, 729-35.

vow of commitment entailed in covenant of marriage. That is why this is the longest section (6:4—11:11). The absence of loyalty to Yahweh according to the terms of the Sinaitic Covenant manifested itself in several areas. There was the personal aspect, whereby individual Israelites were defiled and debased in their dealings with God and with each other (7:1–10). There was also unfaithfulness on a national level as they entered into protective political alliances (7:11–14), looked to themselves for grain and wine (7:15–16), set up kings according to their own designs (8:4), and manufactured their own religious systems (8:4–14). God will judge them for these things by withdrawing the blessings that stem from His presence (9:1–17) and opening them up to defeat at the hands of their enemies (10:1–15). However, as serious as their violations had been and as devastating as their discipline would be, Israel was still loved by their covenant-keeping God (11:1–11). He had called them out of Egypt as a son (11:1) and had stooped to train and protect them along the way (11:3–4). Though they would go into captivity under Assyria (11:5–7), Yahweh could simply not turn His back on them forever (11:8–11). They will eventually be restored, just like Gomer had been.

The third sin for which Israel was being judged was deceit (11:12—13:16). They were simply unreliable at keeping their word, a result of the lack of commitment to covenant for which they had just been convicted. Once again both judgment (13:1–8) and hope (13:9–14) are pronounced. They will be redeemed by a ransom that Yahweh Himself will pay (13:14). In the meantime they must undergo judgment from the east; Assyria is poised to pour into Samaria like an easterly wind (13:15–16).

C. The covenant renewal is anticipated (14:1–8).

After judgment Israel could return to Yahweh and be restored if they were to repent by asking the Lord for forgiveness, vowing allegiance to Him, and repudiating dependence upon anything else (14:2–3). A time will come when Yahweh will heal Israel's iniquity, love them freely and bless them (14:4–8; cf. Deut 28:2–14).

III. Epilogue: The wise will understand the ways of Yahweh (14:9).

Hosea ends with a universal appeal in the form of a wisdom saying. The way of wisdom is one that learns from Yahweh's judgment of His special people for their spiritual infidelity. He is just and proper in this and the wise person will recognize it and be instructed for righteous living.

Conclusion

Hosea contributes a moving image of the depth of God's love for His unfaithful people, a love that endures, disciplines, exercises endurance, and in the end is willing to restore that relationship out of grace. By identifying with the pain of the prophet over the violation of the sacred covenant of marriage, the reader begins to enter into the heart of God and is moved to maintain covenant loyalty as the means of personal blessing and responsible witness.

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