

## Why is a Prophet like Hosea Important to Christians?<sup>1</sup>

Biblical criticism is the idea that the Bible must be read 'like any other book'. It has helped us to understand that Old Testament (OT) books show us a community constantly responding to moments of significant historical change.

Prophets like Hosea were concerned to understand and explain the relationship between God and God's people in particular historical situations. They believed that God was always active in history and that God's ultimate purpose for history was continually and repeatedly made manifest in the life of Israel.

This is why the OT, as Christians call it, is the record of an unfinished pilgrimage. God has not finished dealing with his people. Hosea is one of those OT writers who records how, from time to time, his people wanted the pilgrimage to end. They did not like the gamble of faith demanded by the God of Israel. By imitating the religion of their neighbours with sanctuaries, priests, myths, rites and ceremonies, Israel sought greater security and certainty. The prophets warned Israel that nothing could be stable or reliable except the sovereign purpose of God. Failing to trust God would have serious consequences.

Christians see the sovereign purpose of God being worked out in the New Testament (NT). This is why in the gospels, 'what was spoken by the prophet...' is of great significance. For example, Matthew quotes Hosea 11.1: *This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'* (Mt 2.15).

In the NT, Christians expressed their profound conviction that the early church community is continuous with the community of Israel and that the coming of Christ is an event in the history of Israel, in fact is the event to which the prophets had looked forward.

By investigating what was spoken by the prophets and by investigating Israel's traditions and responses to historical events, we may learn what it means to be part of God's pilgrim people. Like Israel, we may also discern the direction our pilgrimage should take through the trackless wilderness which is the modern world.

---

<sup>1</sup> E.W.Heaton (Dean of Durham), *The Old Testament Prophets* (1977) p1-11, 92-98

## The Historical Background to Hosea

Hosea's twenty-five-year prophetic career (c.750-725)<sup>2</sup> begins during the prosperous and peaceful reign of **Jeroboam II** (786-746) king of Israel (the king of Judah in Jerusalem was Uzziah, 783-742). It ends as the history of the northern kingdom moves towards its tragic finale, the Assyrian conquest of 722 BC. Hosea's first marriage and three children probably belongs to the calm early period.

Jeroboam II was the great-grandson of Jehu (841-814). Hence the warning that God will punish the 'House of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel' (**1.4**). As well as killing Ahab's successor Joram (852-841), Jehu had ordered the slaughter of the seventy sons of Ahab (2 Kings 9 and 10). Jeroboam's son **Zechariah** (746-745) ruled for one year and is murdered by **Shallum** (745?) who is quickly murdered by **Menahem** (745-738).

In 745 **Tiglath-Pileser III** ascended the throne of Assyria, an ambitious and talented ruler whose goal was empire. Menahem tried submission and paid a heavy tribute that sorely taxed the landholders of Israel. When **Pekahiah** succeeded his father Menahem in 738, the patriots of Israel rallied to a military clique led by **Pekah**. Pekah murdered the young king, seized the throne and set about the formation of an anti-Assyrian coalition.

In 733, Tiglath-Pileser came to settle accounts with the rebels. He ravaged the land, deported many of the inhabitants, leaving only the city of Samaria and the hill country of Ephraim as a much-reduced northern kingdom. The remnant was saved when Pekah was murdered by **Hoshea** who promptly surrendered, paid tribute and assumed Israel's throne as a vassal of Tiglath-Pileser.

For a time (732-722) Hoshea was subservient. The oracles of chapters 9-12 would fit here. But Hoshea began to seek Egyptian support for a revolt (9.3; 11.5 *They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.* 12.1).

When **Shalmaneser V** succeeded his father Tiglath-Pileser in 727, Hoshea withheld tribute. Chapters 13 and 14 echo the disastrous consequences of the revolt. In 724 Shalmaneser was campaigning in Palestine. Hoshea was taken captive:

---

<sup>2</sup> All dates are BC, counting down from the eighth century (800 to 701 BC) towards the first century BC.

*Where now is your king, that he may save you?  
Where in all your cities are your rulers,  
of whom you said,  
'Give me a king and rulers'? 13.10*

Israel's army was defeated and the capital, Samaria, was besieged:

*Samaria shall bear her guilt,  
because she has rebelled against her God;  
they shall fall by the sword,  
their little ones shall be dashed in pieces,  
and their pregnant women ripped open. 13.16*

## **Hosea - The Man and the Message**

- The material in Hosea was probably collected and edited by someone in Judah familiar with Hosea's ministry in the northern kingdom.
- History is an important source of meaning for Hosea. For example, he understands his office of prophet in terms of the role played by Moses:  
*By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt (12.13)*
- His life and message are inseparable. This enables him to express his theology metaphorically. His marriage is a symbolic act - part of a prophetic message from faithful Yahweh to faithless Israel.

*<sup>2</sup>When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.'<sup>3</sup>So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. (1.2-3)*

Gomer his wife is a faithless woman, possibly a prostitute working in a Canaanite fertility cult. This cult worked by sympathetic magic. The sexual union between prostitute and supplicant enacted the drama of Baal (the Lord) and Asherah, the mother goddess, to ensure dew and rain for a bountiful harvest and the fertility of one's flocks. Only priests were banned from marrying these prostitutes because they had to be 'holy' (Leviticus 21.7).

Three children were born to Hosea and Gomer and each was given a name that was an announcement of judgment: Jezreel (1.4), Not pitied (1.6), Not my people (1.9).

Later there is possibly a second marriage to a woman living in adultery, with a man she was not married to, to show that Yahweh still loved Israel despite being abandoned by them (3.1-3). He acquires the unnamed married woman and shuts her away from himself and all men as a dramatization of Yahweh's chastisement through which he seeks the return of his people to himself.

## Hosea the Prophet

Hosea says Yahweh is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of Yahweh. Just 'look at the history' (13.4-5)! Yahweh is supremely:

- The God who brought them out of Egypt. Yahweh chose them (11.1).
- The God who protected them in the wilderness. Yahweh made a covenant with them (6.7; 8.1)
- The God who gave them the promised land. The land belongs to Yahweh (9.3).

For Hosea, God's historical dealings with Israel reveal his character as a person. The story of Israel is therefore the story of a family relationship.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
2 The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.  
3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
4 I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them. 11.1-4*

Without this personal relationship, Israel is nothing:

*Israel is swallowed up;  
now they are among the nations  
as a useless vessel. 8.8*

Hosea's purpose is to set Israel free from two alien influences, from the cult and mythology of the god Baal and from international power politics.

1. **Israel's harlotry**, her dependence on fertility rites, is a brazen disloyalty to the God of the Exodus who created her and sustained her. Israel is not a child of nature but a child of God. And yet as soon as they arrived in the promised land, Israel began to flirt with Baal (**9.10**).

Hosea sees that the marriage relationship is a profound mystery which serves as a model for God's relationship with his people.

2. Hosea condemns **Israel's monarchy** for its conspiracies and alliances with Assyria and Egypt. He loses his temper:

*For they have gone up to Assyria,  
a wild ass wandering alone;  
Ephraim has bargained for lovers. 8.9*

*Ephraim has become like a dove,  
silly and without sense;  
they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria. 7.11*

Hosea has no illusions about the coming disaster. The ravaging of Israel in 733 BC was the unalterable doom proclaimed by God himself (**5.9-14**). The coming destruction of Samaria will also be God's judgment:

*I will destroy you, O Israel;  
who can help you? 13.9*

Is Hosea simply a prophet of doom with a conventional theological interpretation of Israel's fate (Israel sinned, Israel must pay) trying to maintain a belief in God's control of history?

This is true, up to a point. But Hosea is much more interesting than this.

<sup>4</sup> Yet I have been the Lord your God  
ever since the land of Egypt;  
you know no God but me,  
and besides me there is no saviour.  
<sup>5</sup> It was I who fed you in the wilderness,  
in the land of drought.  
<sup>6</sup> When I fed them, they were satisfied;  
they were satisfied, and their heart was proud;  
therefore they forgot me.  
<sup>7</sup> So I will become like a lion to them,  
like a leopard I will lurk beside the way.  
<sup>8</sup> I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,  
and will tear open the covering of their heart;  
there I will devour them like a lion,  
as a wild animal would mangle them. **13.4-8**

The very anger of God gives Israel grounds for hope because the personal outrage is inseparable from genuine caring. For Hosea, God's relationship with Israel cannot be broken by Israel's sin.

<sup>8</sup> How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
<sup>9</sup> I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath. **11.8-9**

In the analogy of his redeeming love for his faithless wife, it is the experience of exile which will move Israel to respond to God's open invitation to return.

*The Lord said to me again, 'Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.'* <sup>2</sup>So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. <sup>3</sup>And I said to her, 'You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with

you.’ <sup>4</sup>For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. <sup>5</sup>Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. **3.1-5**

Like a forsaken husband, God will woo Israel into making a fresh start.

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, I will now persuade her,  
and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her.

<sup>15</sup> From there I will give her her vineyards,  
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. **2.14,15**

In Hosea we see a relationship between God and his people founded on love. We see a God who by loving Israel makes himself vulnerable. The breach of the covenant which testified to the personal relationship of Yahweh and Israel provokes a threat (famine, hunger and childlessness; military defeat and political collapse) but the threat (and exile) is not God’s last word.

Yahweh never gives up his desire to be Israel’s Saviour. The redemption of Israel will be entirely the work of Yahweh.

<sup>4</sup> I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely,  
for my anger has turned from them.

<sup>5</sup> I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.

<sup>6</sup> His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree,  
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.

<sup>7</sup> They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon. **14.4-7**

## Reflection

1. Israel's faithlessness with Baal created an identity which became a trap. They became prisoners of their sin, hence God's verdict, 'Not my people'. Who or what is Baal for us? What do we rely on to secure material blessing?
2. Israel's leaders saw the monarchy as the source of Israel's strength and tried to build national security by clever diplomacy with Egypt or Assyria. Hosea sees these alliances as the product of Israel's sin and the foreign nations as agents of Yahweh's wrath. How have we developed false hopes of salvation?
3. What is demanded of Israel is knowledge of God, devotion and faithfulness (4.1; 6.4, 6; 12.6). Israel's sin is not disobedience to law but personal betrayal and estrangement. Israel is an adulterous wife (2.2ff) and a rebellious son (11.1ff).

What is the nature of our history with God: rejection, evasion and desertion or a living dialogue of love and loyalty between committed persons? How might we grow in knowledge of God, devotion and faithfulness? What might bring our nation back to God?