

## The Prophets, Book 6

### Hosea

The Book of Hosea is the first of the 12 books commonly referred to as the Minor Prophets. As we have already seen, they are not called "minor" because they are less important, but because they are relatively short books. Although Hosea's book has 14 chapters, as opposed to only 12 in the Book of Daniel, a Major Prophet, Daniel's chapters are much longer. Daniel contains almost twice as many verses as Hosea, and more than twice the number of words. And, as we have just seen in the study of the Book of Daniel, his words are, to use an excellent chemistry/physics term, super-saturated with meaning.

There is poetry in the writings of all of the books of prophecy; but Hosea is unusually rich in beautiful poetic expression.

Hosea, the Last Prophet to the Northern Kingdom. Hosea, a native of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was a prophet to that wicked kingdom; in fact, he was its last prophet. His ministry to the Northern Kingdom was contemporary with that of Jonah, but Jonah was sent to Nineveh, where his reluctant preaching brought great revival (after his disobedience was corrected by his amazing experience with the great fish). Jonah apparently spent the rest of his life in Nineveh and was buried there, in what is today the city of Mosul in Iraq<sup>1</sup>.

Portions of Hosea's prophecies were also messages to the Southern Kingdom, Judah. And, as we shall see in Chapter 2, he even had a message for us today. His ministry covered a period of about 40 years, approximately 780 - 740 BC. In Israel, his ministry was contemporary with the latter part of the ministry of Amos (who was older)<sup>2</sup>; and, in Judah, his ministry was contemporary with the ministries of Isaiah and Micah (who were younger). Very little is known about Hosea except for what he wrote in his book.

Hosea ministered during the reign of King Jeroboam II, when Israel was prosperous, but wicked. After Hosea's time, God sent no more prophets to the Northern Kingdom; for the next 40-50 years that kingdom steadily declined under the six wicked successors of Jeroboam II, until its final destruction and the carrying away of the people into Assyrian Captivity, about 700 BC.

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<sup>1</sup> In July of 2014 an army of Muslim savages overran northern Iraq including Mosul, bringing mass murders, rape and crucifixion to the Christians there. The majority of the Christians fled north, into Kurdistan. The savages in Mosul destroyed the tomb of Jonah, and then completely destroyed with explosives the mosque built over Jonah's tomb.

<sup>2</sup> Although Amos was a prophet of the Southern Kingdom, along with Isaiah and Micah, much of his ministry was to the Northern Kingdom.

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God's Gracious Dealing with the Northern Kingdom. Nearly 200 years before Hosea's time, the united kingdom of Israel had been divided by the secession of the 10 northern tribes. They had made two golden calves as idols, one in the south at Bethel, and one in the north at Dan; under the leadership of Jeroboam, their first king, they had officially rejected the LORD, and established pagan worship in the new kingdom. God had sent this rebellious kingdom **an all-star lineup** of prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Amos and, finally, Hosea<sup>3</sup>. In spite of this, at no time in its history did the Northern Kingdom repent and forsake its paganism. Hosea ministered to as wretched a mess of sinfulness and degradation as ever existed; yet his consistent message to the people was that God loved them still, and wanted them restored to a covenant relationship with Him.

Ephraim: a Synonym for Israel. Ephraim was the largest, and most central, of the 10 northern tribes. Hosea sometimes uses the word, "Ephraim" as a synonym for the entire Northern Kingdom, Israel.

The Prophet of Grace. The message of Hosea is that God loves His people, in spite of hating their sins and their rejection of His love, and that He is ready to forgive and restore them to a covenant relationship with Him, if they will just repent and return to Him. For this reason, Hosea is sometimes called "the prophet of grace."

Hosea Lived His Message. Several of the Old Testament prophets were required by God to illustrate their messages by their symbolic actions--sometimes for long periods of time, in order to make God's point. In this way Hosea was also required by God to illustrate his message with his actions; unlike the others, however, he seems actually to have had to make these illustrations a central part of his ongoing life. To illustrate God's relationship with unfaithful Israel, Hosea was required to marry a promiscuous woman, Gomer, experience her infidelity, pursue her, buy her back from the one to whom she had prostituted herself, and forgive her.

Symbolic or Real? Some authorities believe the marriage to Gomer and the birth of their children to be a symbolic story; others believe that it is a literal recounting of events in Hosea's life. I believe that it is both. Although the book is rich with symbolic speech, I believe that it is also something Hosea had lived; an unknown (and excellent) writer has observed that "his sentences fall like the throbs of a broken heart."

**A. Author.** The human author was the prophet Hosea, son of Beerī. Even most critical scholars, who tend to doubt and attack the ancient authorship and validity of many things in the Bible, generally concede this.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to these great prophets, God had sent un-named prophets, including the remarkable young prophet who confronted Jeroboam I, and prophesied that on his pagan altar there would be burnt the bones of the pagan priests of the Northern Kingdom (I Kings 13).

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**B. Place and Date.** The book was probably written in Samaria, Israel's capitol. It was probably compiled during Hosea's ministry, and finalized at the end of his life, around 750-725 BC.

**C. Theme.** The theme is the grace of God, especially His willingness to forgive those of us who sin, but repent and return to a right relationship with Him.

**Highlights.** Highlights in the Book of Hosea include the following:

1. Hosea's Unhappy, Prophetic Marriage. (1:1-5)

In the first recorded instance of the Lord's speaking to Hosea, the prophet is told to take "a wife of whoredoms, and children of whoredoms." In obedience, Hosea marries a woman named Gomer, the daughter of one Diblaim, and little but heartache lies ahead for him<sup>4</sup>. Gomer conceives and bears a son, and the Lord commands Hosea to name the boy "Jezreel," saying that He will avenge the blood of Jezreel on the house of Jehu, and bring about the final end of the wicked Northern Kingdom. In that day, the Lord says, He will "break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel<sup>5</sup>." Thus, the marriage of the man of God, to a promiscuous and unfaithful woman, is symbolic of the relationship of God Himself with the promiscuous and unfaithful Northern Kingdom. And the first-born child of this marriage is a prophetic illustration of the coming final judgment on that unfaithful kingdom.

2. "No More Mercy." (1:6-7)

Gomer conceives again and bears another prophetic child. This time it is a girl, and the Lord commands Hosea to name her "Lo-ruhamah," meaning "not pitied," or "not favored"; for, He says, He will have no more mercy on the Kingdom of Israel, but will cause them to be utterly taken away<sup>6</sup>. However, He adds, he will have mercy on the Kingdom of Judah, and will save them from destruction; but the saving of Judah will be supernatural, and not by their own strength.

3. "No Longer My People." (1:8-11)

When Gomer has weaned her first son (at about age three), she conceives and bears another son. God tells Hosea to name this son "Lo-ammi," meaning "not my people," or "no longer my people." The Lord is making the point that His patience with the unfaithful people of the Northern Kingdom is at an end. Yet, here again is illustrated the mercy and grace of God, for the final end and destruction of the rebellious nation is more than 40 years into the future. There is plenty of time for them to repent. Of course, the Lord knows that they will not repent during the

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<sup>4</sup> Nothing is known of this man other than his name, which means "cakes of figs."

<sup>5</sup> The meaning of this statement about breaking the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel is unclear. It may refer to a decisive defeat of Israel in a battle fought there; or it may refer to the final end of the luxury and power of the kings of Israel, which had been typified by their palace at Jezreel. There is no weapon more ineffective than a broken bow.

<sup>6</sup> In Hebrew, the prefix "Lo" negates the word that follows. Thus, since "ruhamah" means "mercy," with the prefix "Lo," its meaning of the name becomes "no more mercy."

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next 40 years; yet in this declaration of final judgment on the wicked kingdom there is a message of hope for the distant future. He says that in that place where He has said, "Ye are **not** my people," in that same place He will someday say, "Ye **are** the sons of the living God."

#### 4. A Promise for the Gentiles (Us). (2:14-23)

Chapter 2 is a poetic prophecy, spoken as if the Lord were speaking to Hosea's two sons about their mother. He is speaking symbolically of the rebellious, disloyal, Northern Kingdom. In the last ten verses, He speaks comfortingly of the eventual reconciliation of the kingdom, and their reestablishment there in the Promised Land in blessed righteousness. But, if we read Paul's letter to the Romans, he quotes from these ten verses and explains that they also refer to the Gentiles--in other words, they refer also to us<sup>7</sup>. This is definitely good news.

#### 5. The Episode of the Runaway Wife. (Chapt 3)

Gomer has left Hosea and the children and run away, back to her old sinner friends and her former life as a prostitute (see also 2:5). Hosea goes after her to bring her back. He buys her freedom from her "lovers" for 15 pieces of silver and 1 1/2 homers of barley (about 16 bushels). It appears that, by the time he finds her, she has literally sold herself; "15 pieces of silver," the amount that he pays to buy her back, was the price of redeeming a slave. All that barley, in addition to the price of her redemption, may have been to pay off her personal debts. He takes her back home and tells her that she must stay, even though her heart is elsewhere. The last two verses are clearly a prophecy about the future of the Israelites after being defeated by the Romans in 71 AD (verse 4), and of the future coming of the Messiah as Eternal King, in the final restoration of the end times (verse 5).

***NOTE:** In that time and place, grain was as valuable as gold and silver; in times of famine, it was worth much more than gold and silver.*

#### 6. "My People Are Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge." (4:1-11)

Beginning with the first verse of Chapter 4 there is a revelation of a profound reality; it is one that underlies all of life--the life of the individual, of the family, of the local church, of denominations, and of nations. It is a description of the situation prevailing in the Northern Kingdom at the time of Hosea's writing; and, significantly, it is a description of our culture today. Self-destructive sin is destroying the people of Hosea's day with "swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery." These, and all related sinning, are bringing the kingdom to the point of terminal destruction. But the root cause of all this lawless, violent, behavior is explained in the first verse: "...because ['because' is a key word--we should always pay close attention to this word, and to what follows

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<sup>7</sup> See Rom 9:22-26.

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it] there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land." The passage goes on to describe endless, uninterrupted, violence ("...and blood toucheth blood"). The key to all this misery is summarized in verse 6: the people are destroyed for lack of knowledge of the Word of God, which they have rejected. To compound the problem, and make it virtually hopeless, the spiritual leaders have not maintained a godly example; instead, they have themselves rejected the truth of God, and are setting a sinful example for the people ("like people like priest"). "No truth" in this passage has more than one meaning: it obviously means lying as a way of life (a hallmark of our present "post-modern," post-Christian culture, and which is a way of life in our federal government); it also means rejection of the Word of God which, Jesus declared, "is truth<sup>8</sup>."

And so, the pathological wellspring, from which flows all of this self-destructive sin, is the lack of knowledge of the rejected Word of God, led by the priesthood. **NOTE:** *This should bring to mind at least two examples. First, it should remind us of the reign of good King Josiah in Judah, ca 600 BC (II Kings 22-23; II Chron 34-35), when he decreed the teaching of the previously abandoned Scriptures to all his people, and personally led the kingdom back to a happy state of righteousness and prosperity. The key to the blessedness and prosperity of the kingdom was the teaching of the Scriptures to all the people, and the honoring of their authority in personal and national life. Second, it should remind us of our own sin-sick, blood-drenched, back-slid, nation today, traceable to the rejection of the truth and authority of Scripture, led by humanistic, "modernist," theologians, ministers, priests and bishops, who have rejected the truth and authority of the Bible, and our nation's formal rejection of the Word of God in 1963. The Word of God, abandoned as a final authority, and no longer universally taught in schools, churches and homes, has ceased to have its blessed effect on the lives of individuals, families, and the life of the nation. Our nation is rushing to the brink of destruction, just as did the sinful, apostate, Kingdom of Israel so long ago; and it is for the same reason: we are being destroyed for lack of knowledge of the keystone of our prosperity and happiness, i.e. the unchanging, life-giving, wellspring of Truth, the supernatural Word of God.*

7. "As a Backsliding Heifer". (4:16)

The Bible is rich with vivid metaphor--colorful, symbolic language--which makes a point by creating a descriptive, visual illustration in the mind of the reader. Here, in Chapter 4, there is one of my favorites. The history of the Israelite people consists of a series of ups and downs in their relationship with the Lord--periods of righteousness and prosperity, followed by dismal periods when they slid back into the rejection of God and His Word, and practiced the licentious

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<sup>8</sup> John 17:17.

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idolatry of the pagans around them. Backsliding is never pretty or graceful; but only those of us who have raised cattle and moved them across a creek or river, one with high banks, can fully appreciate the imagery of a "backsliding heifer." As the cattle cross the stream and try to climb the high bank on the far side, they struggle to reach the top, often sliding, spraddle-legged, back down into the stream. What would be an easy, graceful, climb for a goat or a deer, is an awkward struggle for a cow; they are designed for meandering on level or gently rolling terrain--not for hill-climbing. As more cattle cross the stream, the problem becomes worse, for the bank becomes wet, muddy and slippery. There is nothing quite to compare with the awkward, undignified, struggle of such a backsliding cow--especially as viewed from the rear. In the effort, the cattle get weary, and are in danger of being injured. Think of it, and realize that, as the cow slides back down into the stream, so it is when we slide back down into a sinful past. It is never pretty; and, no matter how long we remain down the slope, back in the muck of sin, we will exhaust precious time, strength and resources; and, unlike the heifer who may be hurt in the process, we are certain to be hurt.

*NOTE: All of v 16 is metaphor, for the second part of the verse compares the result of the sinning and rebellion against God with being "a lamb in a large place." Sheep are defenseless on their own, and the lambs most of all. For this reason a shepherd keeps his flock closely together, and watches over them. Nothing is more at risk than a lamb, in a large grazing area, alone. There is a great deal of truth packed into this one verse.*

#### 8. "They Have Sown the Wind, and They Shall Reap the Whirlwind." (8:1-14)

Here in Hosea there is a memorable expression of the law of sowing and reaping<sup>9</sup>. There is no more powerful force in nature than the forces within a tornado. This is the metaphor that Hosea uses to describe the coming, final, judgment that God is bringing upon the Kingdom of Israel. It is irresistible, unavoidable, and overwhelmingly, indescribably, powerful. Hosea probably alluded to a tornado in 4:19 where he says, "The wind hath bound her up in her wings...." For him to compare a tornado with the coming Assyrians, who will overwhelm the Israelites with their irresistible power, and carry them far away, is a perfect analogy; for tornados can pick up people, livestock, and entire buildings, and carry them far away. The unfaithful people, led by their priesthood and illegitimate kings, have sown the winds of rebellion and idolatry; and they will reap the whirlwind of God's judgment. They will rely on Egypt to protect them ("hired lovers"), but it won't work.

*NOTE: In World War II the German Air Force accidentally bombed the outskirts of London in a night raid. In retaliation, the Royal Air Force bombed Berlin. The*

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<sup>9</sup> Galatians 6:7.

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*result was, for the first time in history, the deliberate, unrestricted bombing of civilian cities. Britain's chief of Bomber Command, Sir Arthur Harris, summed up the situation for the British people with a slightly paraphrased quotation from Hosea: "They sowed the wind, and now they are going to reap the whirlwind." In that day of almost universal biblical literacy, the general public recognized the quotation and immediately understood. Today, sad to relate, General Harris would need to pause and explain his meaning, in Britain or in the United States.*

#### 9. God's Justice vs His Love. (Chapt 11)

At the end of the existence of the Northern Kingdom, the hope of its leaders is in Egypt to protect them; thus the frequent mention of Egypt in Hosea, but their hope is in vain. The king is playing a deceitful game of double-dealing with Egypt and Assyria, one against the other; but it won't work. Because God is just, He must bring final judgment on the wicked kingdom; but because He is also Love Personified, it breaks His heart to do it<sup>10</sup>. Chapter 11 is an eloquent expression of both. In v 8 He asks Himself how He can go through with the obliteration of Israel; yet He compares the permanent end of the kingdom to Admah and Zeboim, two cities permanently destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah.

***NOTE:** Verse 1 of Chapt 11 will later be quoted in Matt 2:15 as a prophecy of the child Jesus, when His parents brought Him from asylum in Egypt after Herod's death.*

#### 10. The Mystery of Israel's Kingdom. (13:11)

As the Northern Kingdom staggers to its final end, drunk with sin, and with the Southern Kingdom on the same path and not far behind, the prophet amazingly summarizes 400 years of Hebrew history in only 15 words. God, in anger and contrary to His will, had allowed the people to have a human king, and had warned them that they would regret it<sup>11</sup>. Now, 300 years after Samuel and Saul, He is bringing the northern half of that kingdom to an end, also in anger; in another 100 years the southern half of the kingdom will likewise fall. God was angered by the fact that the people wanted a human king ("like all the nations [around us]"), when He had been their perfect king. Four hundred years later, He will angrily allow their human kingdom to self-destruct. It was a bad idea from the start, and He had plainly told them so.

And yet, God used this 400-year-long disaster, one which flowed from an adolescent desire to be like those around them, and of which He strongly disapproved. He used it to establish an everlasting Kingdom, based upon the Throne of David, one which will be the central fact of the rest of human history, and which will continue into eternity. Think of that--He used a temporary

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<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 18:27-32; II Pet 3:9; I Jn 4:8.

<sup>11</sup> I Samuel 8.

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disaster, one which was wrong from the start, to establish something wonderful and inexpressibly important, that will last for eternity. His ways are, truly, far above our ways, and His thoughts far above our thoughts; and this is a point worth pondering.

**11. The Blessed Future for Israel. (Chapt 14)**

Hosea's book ends with the promise, in beautiful Hebrew poetry, of a future blissful, blessed, happy ending<sup>12</sup>. He speaks of the necessity of words--to ask forgiveness, and to offer the acceptable sacrifice of praise ("calves of our lips")<sup>13</sup>. In the coming Kingdom there will no longer be the requirement for animal sacrifices, for they will be replaced with spiritual sacrifices. Idol worship will be a thing of the past, and God will, at last, be free to bless His people beyond all that they could ask or think.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 29:11.

<sup>13</sup> Hebrews 13:15.