

THE BOOK OF HOSEA

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR HOSEA

- Content: Yahweh's compassion for the northern kingdom (Israel), yet his condemnation of them for their unfaithfulness to him
- Prophet: Hosea, a northern prophet, probably from Samaria
- Date of prophetic activity: ca. 758–722 B.C.
- Emphasis: Yahweh's unfailing love for his people, even when he must punish them for unfaithfulness

B. OVERVIEW OF HOSEA

The structure of this first—and longest—of the Book of the Twelve is less easy to discern than that of most of the prophetic books, due in part to the general lack of introductory or concluding formulas (e.g., “thus says the LORD [Yahweh]”). Two major divisions are clear (chs. 1–3 and 4–14). Part 1 seems intentionally introductory, and its own alternating pattern of judgment (1:2–9; 2:2–13; 3:4) followed by future restoration (1:10–2:1; 2:14–23; 3:5) may serve as a pattern for part 2 as well. The judgments are predicated on Israel's “adultery” (= idolatry, 2:8, 13, 17), and the restoration on Yahweh's unfailing love for his people (2:1, 14, 23; 3:1). Indeed, the tension in the book, as in Micah later, is between Yahweh's love for his people and his justice in carrying out the curses for covenantal unfaithfulness.

So images from Hosea's marriage both mirror Yahweh's long relationship with Israel (marriage, unfaithfulness, “divorce,” restoration) and serve as a pattern for the book in its present form. A first cycle of oracles (4:1–10:15) tells the sordid story of Israel's unfaithfulness, both religiously and politically, along with Yahweh's (necessary) coming judgments; while 11:1–11 promises future restoration based on Yahweh's love and compassion. The story of unfaithfulness and judgment is repeated with even greater intensity in a second cycle (11:12–13:16), while 14:1–8 concludes the book with Yahweh's final love song for his people.

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING HOSEA

Along with the close relationship between Hosea's own symbolic marriage actions and Yahweh's relationship with Israel/Ephraim, three other matters are crucial for a discerning reading of Hosea.

First, the *historical context* (see 2 Kgs 14:23–18:16) is influenced in large part by the downs and ups of Assyria. According to 1:1, Hosea began his prophetic calling toward the end of the relatively tranquil and prosperous days of Jeroboam II (see “Specific Advice for Reading Amos,”

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

pp. 223–24), but the list of Judean kings, as well as Hosea’s own oracles, suggest that most of them were delivered during the years of rapid decline following the death of Jeroboam II (753). Six kings ruled in Samaria in rapid succession—through intrigue, caprice, and assassination (see 8:4)—until the northern kingdom was overthrown by Assyria in 722/1. Part of the intrigue was related to a king’s willingness or unwillingness to pay tribute to Assyria, which in turn was related to looking elsewhere (7:8–11) for alliances to protect them against Assyria. In the end, Yahweh will use Assyria as his rod of punishment (10:6–7).

Second, and more important still, is the *religious/theological context*. Although Hosea regularly throws side-glances to Judah (see below), his passion and pathos are for Israel. Picking up where the reforming prophets Elijah and Elisha had left off a century earlier, he is both astounded and incensed at Israel’s propensity to abandon Yahweh in favor of Baal—or to mix the two in syncretistic fashion (2:11, 13; see “Specific Advice for Reading Deuteronomy,” pp. 57–58). Just as marriage is simultaneously both absolutely exclusive and deeply personal, so is Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. Thus Hosea repeatedly reminds his hearers/readers of their beginnings (2:15; 9:10; 11:1–4; 13:4), while he also recalls Israel’s history of unfaithfulness (9:10, 15; 10:9). The people’s present unfaithfulness, reflected primarily in their idolatry, also finds expression in breaking most of the Ten Commandments, as the preamble in 4:1–3 spells out so forcibly.

At stake in all of this is Yahweh’s own character. In turning to Canaanite fertility gods (the Baals and Asherahs), Israel has attributed fruitfulness of both crops and people to them (2:5, 12) and thus has abandoned Yahweh, the Creator of all, who alone provides the crops and opens the womb (2:8, 18, 21–22; 9:11, 14). At the same time the Israelites have become like the gods they worship—full of lies, deceit, and caprice. Thus the bottom line for Hosea—and the reason for the coming judgment—is that although it should be otherwise, the people simply do not *know* Yahweh (4:1, 6, 14; 8:2–3); they have come to think of Yahweh, not in terms of their own story of redemption, but in terms of Canaanite religion—and the result is deadly.

Third, if at times you find Hosea a difficult read, that, at least in part, may be because he so clearly wears his heart on his sleeve. Here is *passion and pathos* let loose on Israel in oracle after oracle, irony upon irony—and such passion is not always easy to track in terms of where things are going (indeed, hardly any two commentaries agree on the details). At the same time, the oracles themselves do not always fit the ordinary formal patterns, since announcements of judgment and the reasons for it are not neatly packaged, and in many instances they simply blend in the same sentences. Furthermore, his Hebrew text has suffered much in transmission, so there are moments that are very difficult to figure out (observe the many footnotes in the NIV).

But at the same time this very passion is what makes Hosea such a great read. Striking metaphors are his specialty. Watch how Yahweh is lion, leopard, bear, eagle (vulture), trapper (5:14; 11:10; 13:7–8; 8:1; 7:12), as well as husband, lover, parent, green pine tree (2:14–23; 14:3–7; 11:8–9; 14:8). And Israel in her sins is even more vividly described: adulterous wife, stubborn heifer, snare and net, heated oven, half-baked bread, senseless dove, faulty bow, headless stalk, a baby refusing birth (2:2; 4:16; 5:1; 7:4, 8, 11, 16; 8:7; 13:13); she will disappear like mist, dew, chaff, and smoke (13:3); she will float away like a twig on water (10:7); she has sown the wind and will reap the whirlwind (8:7). It is hard not to get the picture. So enjoy, even as you weep with Yahweh and his prophet.

A final word about the book itself, as a book to be read. Although the prophecies are primarily directed toward the northern kingdom (Israel), it is very likely that the book itself was preserved in Judah. Evidence for this is in the heading, which takes the ministry of Hosea down to the reign of Hezekiah in Judah (715, six years after the fall of Samaria). This suggests that, even though Hosea seems to pay only passing attention to Judah in his oracles (see 1:7, 11; 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12–14; 6:4, 11; 8:14; 10:11; 11:12; 12:2), he will not expect his later Judean readers to do the same regarding Judah—nor should we who now read it from the hindsight of the fall of both kingdoms!¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 211–214.