

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Hosea**

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“Love is blind, but marriage is an eye-opener.” So goes the old saying.

Morrie Schwartz, whose struggle with Lou Gehrig’s disease is chronicled in Mitch Albom’s best-selling *Tuesdays with Morrie*, said that “Love is when you are as concerned about someone else’s situation as you are about your own.”

Whatever else love may be, it is certainly treated these days as the supreme value in our culture. We effectively reverse what the Bible says about “God is love” by talking as if “love is God.” Call something “love” and you have justified it beyond all questioning. No defense is needed. No explanation is required. It’s love, can’t you see!” People speak of wars fought in the name of religion. Surely, no fewer wars have been fought in the name of “love.”

So what, finally is love?

### **Introducing the Minor Prophets**

A neglected part of God’s Word – the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. These prophets, as you can already see, have at least two strikes against them. First of all, they are in the “Old” Testament. The Old’s not as good as the New, right? And second, these guys are not even in the same league as the “major” prophets. If you are going to go to the trouble of reading the Bible, why give time to the “minor” prophets? Isn’t that like watching a minor league baseball game when you could be watching a major league game?

First of all, the Old Testament is God’s Word. In fact, it is most of God’s Word. The New Testament was never meant to eliminate the Old. In the Old Testament Law, Histories, Prophets, and Writings are accounts of centuries of God’s dealings with his people. The Old Testament lays out the human situation that the New Testament – covering only thirty to forty years of history – addresses so decisively. The Old Testament presents the riddle to which Jesus Christ is the answer, and you won’t understand the answer nearly as well without understanding the riddle.

So what about this name “Minor Prophets”? People misunderstand the name. “Minor” does not mean “unimportant”; it means “short.” The Major Prophets are

simply the longer books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel (Daniel is shorter than a couple of the Minor Prophets, but it is rooted in the same event that Jeremiah and Ezekiel are centered on – the destruction of Jerusalem). On the whole, the Minor Prophets are simply shorter, ranging from fourteen chapters to just one. The prophets themselves may have been every bit as influential in their own times as the so-called major prophets.

The prophets and their writings represent the last four centuries of Old Testament history, from the eighth to the fifth century B.C. And we are pretty sure that these twelve prophets were placed together in one scroll as early as the third century B.C. In other words, they have been recognized as Holy Scripture for a long time.

### **Introducing Hosea**

Hosea is unusual among the Minor Prophets for several reasons. First, it is longer than most of them. Hosea has fourteen chapters. Zechariah is the only other Minor Prophet that is this long.

Second, Hosea was one of the earliest Minor Prophets. We don't know the exact dates of these twelve books, but they do appear to fall into four groups of three, about one group per century. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were the last three books written in the Old Testament – in the *fifth* century. Moving back in time, Joel, Obadiah, and maybe Jonah were written in the *sixth* century, after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (remember, we are in B.C.). Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah were probably written around the same time Jeremiah began his ministry, in the late seventh century, before the fall of Jerusalem. Hosea, Amos, and Micah, then, are the oldest three, having been written in the *eighth* century. They are the three “old men” of the minor prophets, prophesying before the northern kingdom of “Israel” fell to the Assyrians in 722.

That brings us to a third unusual thing about Hosea. Not only is it one of the longest and oldest books of the Minor Prophets, it focuses on the northern kingdom of Israel rather than on the southern kingdom of Judah. Most of the minor prophets focus on the southern kingdom of Judah because only Judah existed when they were prophesying. And one of the three “old men,” Micah, focused on Judah before Israel fell. But the other two, Hosea and Amos, prophesied about the northern kingdom – the ten tribes who had followed Jeroboam in rebelling against Solomon's son a couple of hundred years earlier.

In your Bible, the northern kingdom is sometimes called Samaria because that was its capital city. It is sometimes called Ephraim because Ephraim was its most prominent tribe (like Judah in the south). But generally it is called Israel.

The northern kingdom of Israel was beset with troubles from the very beginning. The decades before Jeroboam II, who reigned when Hosea prophesied, were tumultuous. The nation had gone through king after king after king; and by the time of Jeroboam II and Hosea in the second half of the eighth century, the country appeared to be in terminal decline.

The empire of Assyria, located just north of Israel, was the great power of the day, and it continually nibbled away at Israel's borders, often threatening to strike at its very heart. While Isaiah and Micah prophesied down south in Jerusalem, God called Amos and Hosea to prophesy in the waning days of the northern kingdom.

Hosea does not have a very clear outline. But very broadly we can say that chapters 1-3 contain everything we know about Hosea's personal history as well as some prophecy. Then chapters 4-14 are a collection of prophecies that warn of God's coming judgment as well as several promises of hope.

### **Love's strange story: Hosea and Gomer**

On a human level, that is what this book of Hosea is about – a man married a woman.

The man is Hosea. Who is Hosea? Well, verse 1 tells us his father's name as well as the era in which he lived. But the most important thing about him, clearly, is that God spoke to him and told him to marry this woman.

Who is the woman? Her name is Gomer. That may not be a fetching name for women in our day and culture. Verse 3 also tells us that her father's name was Diblaim, but it is her character that most draws our attention. Let's read Hosea's own words.

1:1-9

Notice that we are told immediately what this book is: "The word of the Lord that came to Hosea" (1:1). Then we have this historical account of God's instruction to Hosea, Hosea's obedience, and the children he has with Gomer.

After chapter 1, the book fades into a prophecy, as the Lord speaks to Israel through Hosea as if Israel was the mother of the people while the Lord was her husband and their father. The only other time Hosea the man is clearly discussed occurs in the brief chapter 3.

3:1-3

Apparently, Hosea's wife had been unfaithful to him. Perhaps she had even sold herself into some kind of temple prostitution. Whatever the exact situation was, God told Hosea to go and buy her back and to continue to love her.

Hosea never talks about himself again in his prophecies. We have just read everything the Bible tells us about him. Throughout this book, Hosea and Gomer – real characters in history – stand for God and Israel. In much of the prophetic portions of the book, God and Israel are directly personified as husband and wife, as in chapter 2. Then, at other times, all the images are dropped, and God talks directly to Israel about himself and about them, as revealingly as in any other book in the Bible.

On the whole, Hosea's prophecy is menacing. It foretells a coming judgment. Over one hundred times in this fairly brief book you can find the little word "will," as God warns of the punishment he *will* inflict on Israel. Look again at these verses in chapter 1.

1:4-6

In the first thirteen verses of chapter 2, the Lord more explicitly describes Israel as his wayward wife, and he promises that he will inflict punishment upon her.

Then in chapters 4-14, God thunders his promises to punish, to ignore, to destroy, to sweep away, to bring shame, to withdraw himself, to discipline, to devour, to lay waste, to pour out his wrath like a flood, to tear like a lion and carry off, to catch like a fowler, to ensure their fall and ridicule, to pursue, to send back into slavery, to burn their cities and consume their fortresses, to exile, to afflict with curses, to bereave of their children, to reject, to disgrace, to deprive of kings and city gates and plans, to leave, and to repay.

Why did God become the attacker of his own people? And, again, what does this have to do with love? Therein hangs a tale, a tale involving sin, repentance, restoration, and you.

## Sin

What exactly was the spiritual state of Israel at the time? Well, the book was written almost three millennia ago, so we cannot say exactly. But it wasn't good. The Lord says, "they have sunk deep into corruption" (9:9). And not only were they corrupt, they were stubborn about their corruption: "The Israelites are stubborn" (4:16), and they "refuse to repent" (11:5).

They had "rejected what is good" (8:3). They had "rejected knowledge" and "ignored the law of [their] God" (4:6). They had "rebelled against" God's law (8:1). They regarded it "as something alien" (8:12). And in rebelling against God's law, of course, they had "rebelled against...God" himself (13:16). "They had not obeyed him" (9:17). The Lord himself summarizes, "my people are determined to turn from me" (11:7).

Breaking the law was not merely the breaking of some impersonal principle. It was the betrayal of a personal covenant, like a marriage covenant. God says, "like Adam, they have broken the covenant" (6:7). And clearly these Israelites were children of Adam. They had followed Adam's example and sinned: "the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law" (8:1).

### *The acts of sin*

These are all sweeping characterizations of the people. But what were the specific sins that Hosea found in Israel? There were too many to mention all of them, but here are some. To begin with, their rulers were not righteous (which you might know from our study of 2 Kings): these rulers "dearly love shameful ways" (Hosea 4:18), and "all their leaders are rebellious" (9:15). How were they rebellious? They turned to Assyria and Egypt for help instead of to the Lord, even though the Lord had made Israel a separate nation and a special people (5:13; 7:11; 12:1).

And sin was hardly limited to the ruling classes. The nation was characterized by drunkenness, mocking, insolent words, and cursing (4:2, 11; 7:5, 16). Over and over they lied and practiced deceit. The people "make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field."

They also stole. In fact, it sounds as if they stole at every opportunity they got – breaking into homes, robbings in the streets, even defrauding in the stores (4:2; 7:1; 12:7). "The merchant uses dishonest scales; he loves to defraud" (12:7).

As long as they were breaking the eighth and ninth commandments prohibiting stealing and lying, the people decided to go ahead and break the sixth commandment against murder as well. So they murdered, shed blood, multiplied violence, left footprints stained with blood, even massacred (1:4; 4:2; 6:8; 12:1). Hosea uses all these images.

Then they disobeyed the seventh commandment, which forbids adultery. Hosea, of course, was personally acquainted with how that commandment was defied. Illegitimacy and prostitution were rife (4:2, 10, 13; 5:7; 7:4).

Hearing all this, you may well wonder, “How did it all get so bad and disordered? After all, these were God’s special people. Had he not gone out of his way to deliver them, lead them, prosper them, give them his law and his prophets, and make them his own?”

### *The core of sin*

If you read through Hosea, I believe that you will find the core of the Israelites’ corruption is pretty clear: their religion was all wrong! Consider these particularly grotesque verses in chapter 4: “The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness” (4:7-8).

They were cheerleaders for sin because they personally profited from it! Can it get any worse? While these charlatans in shepherd’s clothing filled the religious posts in the land, the real religious leaders, like Hosea, perhaps, were treated far differently: “the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac” (9:7). Whatever religious the people may have had was false and insincere. The Lord himself laments, “they do not cry out to me from their hearts” (7:14; cf. 8:2).

Idolatry was the Israelites’ biggest problem. In fact, you could say the whole book is about their idolatry. In Hosea’s day, Israel was dotted with sites of cultic worship of assorted gods – Baal, Yahweh, and others – and they would all be mixed together (cf. 9:10, 15). At one point, the Lord says, “Israel has forgotten his Maker” (8:14). And earlier, “there is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land” (4:1). The word translated “acknowledgment” can also be translated as knowledge, referring particularly to the intimate relational knowledge shared in marriage. And that fits with the context, doesn’t it? God is saying that his people no longer *love, know, or are exclusively faithful* to him, as one should be with a spouse. They have forsaken him. That’s why the book itself opens with the charge, “the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord” (1:2).

Throughout Hosea's prophecies, the Lord uses the images of adultery and unfaithfulness to depict his people's turning from him and serving other gods. Adultery and idolatry very much go together in the Bible, because *idolatry is a spiritual adultery*. And God's own people, through their idolatry, commit such spiritual adultery.

### *The appearance of sin*

What did the Israelites' adulterous idolatry actually look like? It looked like a number of things. It included sacrifices: "They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, where the shade is pleasant" (4:13). It included altars with sacred stones and pillars in the high places of wickedness (cf. 8:11; 10:1-2, 8). It included "idolatrous priests" (10:5), a whole class of people who made their living by servicing this false religion.

Full-fledged idolatry, of course, must also include idols, of which the Israelites had plenty. "They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood" (4:12). The people were "joined to idols" (4:17). They were "intent on pursuing idols" (5:11). They made idols for themselves.

8:4-6; cf. 10:5

Hosea speaks about these calf-idols again later. Evidently, the people were quite taken with them: "they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen. It is said of these people, 'they offer human sacrifice and kiss the calf-idols'" (13:2). Think about that for a moment. They kill people, but they kiss idols!

This is where false worship leads. This is what false religion does. It turns people upside down. It inverts them. What they should love they hate; what they should hate they love. And when a people are saying "our gods!" to what their hands have made, you can be sure all sorts of other perversions follow (cf. 14:3, 8). For their part, the Israelites consorted with harlots and sacrificed with temple prostitutes (4:14, 18; 5:3). Hosea says at one point, "I have seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel. There Ephraim is given to prostitution and Israel is defiled" (6:10).

The people had also given themselves over to worship of the fertility god, Baal (cf. 2:17; 13:1). They had not become irreligious; they had simply switched the object of their worship (cf. 2:8). So they had ascribed their blessings, like the blessings of harvest, to Baal (2:12-13). They burned incense, ate sacred raisin cakes, had New Moon celebrations, and performed all the rituals they thought would give them full

harvests of grain and grapes. And in front of these images they had made, they prostituted themselves and offered sacrifices, even human sacrifices (2:13; 3:1; 4:10; 5:3-4, 7: 7:14; 9:1; 11:2; 13:2). You can see why the Lord says that “Ephraim has sold herself to lovers” and “sold themselves among the nations” (8:9-10). She was no different than they were.

### *The root of sin*

What was at the root of such sin? Based on my reading of Hosea, I believe it was the Israelites’ arrogance (5:5; 7:10). The Lord tells them, “you have depended on your own strength and on your many warriors” (10:13). Elsewhere he says of them, “when I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me” (13:6).

### **Repentance**

Throughout the dark night of Hosea, God calls his people to repentance.

In chapter 2, he calls Israel to remove the adulterous look from its face and unfaithfulness from its chest (2:2).

In chapter 6, Hosea sounds the first fully explicit call to repentance.

6:1-3

In chapter 8, Hosea decries the Israelites’ false repentance (see 8:2-3) but then calls them to “throw out your calf-idol” (8:5) – a very concrete call.

In chapter 10, Hosea proclaims, “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love [what a beautiful phrase! You may want to underline that in your Bible] and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord” (10:12a).

In chapter 12, he instructs them, “you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always” (12:6).

Along with the verses we just read from chapter 6, the call to repentance in chapter 14 is one of the two clearest calls in the book: “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips’” (14:1-2).



Finally, the book itself concludes with what is essentially a call to repentance, righteousness, understanding, discernment, and wisdom. The very last verse reads, “Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them” (14:9).

The empire of Assyria did eventually destroy the kingdom of Israel, as Hosea prophesied (9:3; 10:6; 11:5). They did so within a few short years of Hosea’s writing. God’s threat of punishment could not be avoided, because Israel had ignored God too much. They had sinned too grievously.

### **Restoration**

Repentance offers the way of recovery. And then the restoration becomes our hope. Hosea is filled not only with warnings of judgment and calls to repentance; somehow, piercing all these divine forebodings of doom, we find prophecies of hope!

In the very first chapter, the Lord promises:

1:10-11

In chapter 2, after God clearly pronounces a coming judgment upon Israel because of her unfaithfulness, he also promises her restoration!

2:14-23

Notice, God promises to lead his people out into the desert, almost like a second exodus through which he will once again deliver them: “Okay, we are going to take this again from the top. Once again you are among the nations, so once again I am going to bring you out of the nations.” He tenderly allures her. He takes her to himself. She calls him “my God.”

In chapter 3, as we have seen, God calls the prophet Hosea not only to speak these words of restoring love but also to exemplify them. So he instructs Hosea concerning Gomer, “Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods” (3:1). In the same way that Gomer will return, God’s people will return: “Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessing in the last days” (3:5).

In the verses we have already looked at in chapter 6, God promises restoration if the people repent: “let us return to the Lord... After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence” (6:1, 2).

In chapter 7, God wonderfully reveals his heart to us. Have you ever noticed the little phrase that God inserts right in the middle of a list of his people’s sins? “I long to redeem them,” he says (7:13). That is God’s will, his wish, his desire, his heart!

In chapter 8, he promises, “Although they have sold themselves among the nations, I will now gather them together” (8:10).

And then there is chapter 11. This magnificent picture of restoration must be one of the best chapters in the Bible.

11:1-11

Then in chapter 13, the Lord promises, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?” (13:14).

Finally, in chapter 14, God assures those who are listening.

14:4-7

Do you see what all these promises of restoration are based on? They are based entirely on God’s own love, and the fact that his compassion has been aroused (11:8). They are not based on what the people deserve.

Now, how could God make such promises? There was no nationwide revival of prayer and fasting that prompted his blessing. In fact, the Assyrians came and destroyed Israel.

Well, the Old Covenant kingdom of Israel was destroyed, but God’s true people were not. In Romans 9, Paul quotes from Hosea’s passages of restoration twice (Romans 9:25, 26). Paul understood that Hosea’s prophecy would not be fulfilled in some Middle Eastern nation-state to come, but in the church.

