

Hosea

1. Introduction

1. Background

“The word of the LORD that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel” (Hosea 1:1).

David reigned 1010-970 BC and Solomon 970-931 BC. In 931 BC the kingdom split in two.

The southern kingdom of Judah was ruled by Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, and continued under the house of David until the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. The reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah spanned 790-686 BC.

The northern kingdom of Israel was ruled by a succession of dynasties. Its first king was Jeroboam son of Nebat (reigned 931-910 BC). Jeroboam set up idols in the form of golden calves in Dan (in the north) and Bethel (in the south), establishing a pattern of religious pluralism which characterised the whole history of the northern kingdom.

In 841 BC Jehu son of Nimshi exterminated the ruling house of Omri (father of Ahab) and established his own dynasty. Ahab had officially sanctioned Baal worship and Jehu had officially purged the land of it. However, Israel continued to worship Baal, and it is clear from Hosea that this was widespread during his ministry.

Omri established the capital of Israel in Samaria. Often “Samaria” refers to the whole nation. Of the ten tribes that comprised the northern kingdom, Ephraim was dominant. So “Ephraim” is another way of referring to Israel.

Jehu’s great-grandson, Jeroboam II, reigned 793-753 BC. His reign was characterised by international influence, expanded borders, military strength, a good economy, social decadence and pagan religion. After his death his son, Zechariah, was assassinated. Israel quickly fell apart at the seams. The Assyrian empire recovered from a period of weakness, and in 722 BC overran Israel.

Hosea was the only writing prophet to have come from the North. His ministry began sometime before 753 BC and probably continued until 722 BC or shortly after. He only mentions Jeroboam II – this may be because the kingdom was chaotic after Jeroboam’s death. The chilling words with which chapter 13 closes (“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) suggest that he lived to see the destruction of Samaria by the Assyrians.

2. Theme: Turning away from God, turning back to God

Hosea's prophecy makes liberal use of words based on the basic idea of "returning". E.g. "Come, let us return to the LORD" (Hos. 6:1); "My people are bent on turning away from me" (Hos. 11:7); "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (Hos. 14:4).

Hosea calls Israel to serious repentance, but he recognises that this is beyond them, and that God's gracious intervention is essential.

3. Structure and Content of Hosea

Part 1 (Hosea 1-3) *Hosea's family is a parable of Israel's national life*

- 1:2-9 The children's names presage judgement
- 1:10-2:1 Israel's restoration is Jezreel's great day
- 2:2-15 Divorce proceedings with a surprise ending
- 2:16-23 Images of restoration
- 3:1-5 Israel is loved and therefore chastened

Part 2 (Hosea 4-13) *Israel's national life spirals out of control*

- 4:1-19 The LORD's case against Israel
- 5:1-7 An unclean people is summoned to judgement
- 5:8-7:1 Wrath, return and restoration
- 7:1-16 Ephraim is mixed up among the nations
- 8:1-14 Israel reaps the storm for its sin
- 9:1-9 From festival days to punishment days
- 9:10-17 Ephraim is rejected, exiled and unloved
- 10:1-8 The end of the cult, the king and the capital
- 10:9-15 War against the wicked ones
- 11:1-11 Israel in and out of Egypt
- 11:12-13:1 Israel is a deceiver
- 13:2-16 The end of the nations: "I will destroy you, Israel"

Part 3 (Hosea 14:1-8) *The way back is prescribed and restoration promised*

- 14:1-8 A promise for the remnant that will return

Postscript (Hosea 14:9) *Hosea urges his readers to ponder and learn wisdom*

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2. *The Parable of Family Life*

1. **The Wife**

“When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, ‘Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.’ So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son” (Hos. 1:2-3).

Despite popular opinion, it is not certain that Gomer was a prostitute. The Hebrew text does not call her a prostitute. Instead it says that she and her children were characterised by prostitution, just as the whole land committed “great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” In other words, Gomer was an unfaithful wife.

In chapter 3 it appears that she entered into an entangling relationship which resulted in some form of bonded labour from which she was unable to release herself.

2. **The Children**

The names of the children are symbolic:

- Jezreel’s name was notorious, being associated with the purging of the house of Ahab which began at the valley of Jezreel.

“And the LORD said to him, ‘Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel” (Hos. 1:4).

- Lo-Ruhammah’s name is tragic – it means “She has not found mercy”. God’s mercy will be withdrawn from the nation and they will experience chastisement.

“She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the LORD said to him, “Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all” (Hos. 1:6).

- Lo-Ammi means “not my people” – this is a negation of the covenant which is summarised with the words “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” But the covenant had been broken by Israel’s apostasy.

“And the LORD said, ‘Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hos. 1:9).

3. **Reconciliation and Redemption**

The broken relationship between God and Israel was intolerable to God, while for Israel it was a matter of no great concern.

So there is no prayer in Hosea. Apart from Hosea 6:1-3 Israel seems unconcerned about her relationship with God. And even Hosea 6:1-3 is remarkable for the easy attitude adopted towards repentance.

But on God's part there are many expressions of pain and sorrow and desire. For example:

- Hosea 2 opens with a promise and a plea: "Say to your brothers, 'You are my people,' and to your sisters, 'You have received mercy.' 'Plead with your mother, plead – for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband – that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; (Hos. 2:1-2).
- Hosea 2:13 and 2:14 sound almost contradictory: "And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals...and went after her lovers and forgot me..." (2:13); "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (2:14). God is not confused, but he is expressing the strength of his emotions concerning Israel.
- In Hosea 3:1 God states plainly his love for Israel: "And the LORD said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.'"

So God demonstrates that, just as Hosea redeemed his wife from the slavery from which she could not release herself, so He would redeem Israel from a slavery from which Israel could not release itself.

And the names of the children, which were tokens of doom, are changed into promises of restoration: "And in that day I will answer, declares the LORD, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezebel, and I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on 'She has not Found Mercy', and I will say to 'Not My People', 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God'" (Hos. 2:21-23).

4. The Lessons

The lessons taught by Hosea's family will be worked out in painful detail in chapters 4-14. At this stage, however, we can outline the following lessons for us.

- The sin of which Israel was guilty was brazen and persistent unfaithfulness. So, although all sin is deadly serious, Hosea's prophecy speaks especially to people who make a profession of faith, but whose lives are clearly oriented towards the world. See James 4:3-4, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?"
- Apostasy is a prison from which we cannot deliver ourselves. "It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened...and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance" (Heb 6:4-6). There is a tendency to talk far too lightly about "backsliding" as though it were a temporary condition.
- The picture of the husband who faithfully and sacrificially loves his faithless wife illustrates the truly amazing quality of God's love for his people. This ought to motivate us to respond with a matching faithfulness to our Redeemer.

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3. Apostasy and Repentance

The Hebrew verb “to turn” has a range of meanings and Hosea exercises great skill in the way that he employs them:

- 11 times the verb means “to return” or “to turn back” and refers to repentance (2:7; 3:5; 5:4; 6:1; 7:10, 16; 11:5; 12:6; 14:1, 2, 7). Some of these occasions are calls to repentance; some are expressions of repentance; and others talk of Israel’s failure to repent.
- Twice Hosea uses a rare word based on the verb “to turn/return” to speak of Israel’s “apostasy” (11:7; 14:4) – deliberate and prolonged turning from God.
- 3 times the verb refers to a return of Israel to Egypt (8:13; 9:3; 11:5).
- 5 times the verb is used of God’s judgement on Israel. God “takes back” his blessing from Israel (2:9); he “repays” the people for their sins (4:9; 12:2, 14); and he “returns” to his own place so as to be away from the people (5:15).
- 4 times the verb is used in the context of restoration. God restores the fortunes of his people (he “brings back their captivity”, 6:11) and “causes the people to return in tents” (12:9). God himself “repents”: he says that he “will not return to destroy Ephraim” (11:9) and turns back his anger (14:4).

This is a total of 25 uses in 197 verses, a frequency significantly higher than that of Isaiah or Ezekiel, and greater even than Jeremiah.

In this study we will consider “apostasy and repentance”; we will consider “punishment and restoration” in a later study.

1. Turning away from God results in apostasy

Every sin is a turning away from God. But not every sin is apostasy. Apostasy is a deliberate and prolonged turning from God – a wholehearted and determined rejection of God in favour of some other object of worship and source of security.

For Israel the other objects were:

- International agreements – dependence on Assyria to provide security against the aggression of Israel’s neighbours (5:13; 12:1; 14:3; 2 Kings 5:19).
- Military expansion – horses were bought from Egypt to strengthen the army (12:1; 14:3). The result was an expansion of Israel’s borders (2 Kings 14:25).
- Social decadence – the increasing wealth of the wealthy encouraged licence, oppression and pride (4:14; 5:4; 12:7-8).
- Pagan religion – Israel went deeper and deeper into the worship of Baal, the storm god who was supposed to make the land fertile (2:7-8; 11:2; 13:1; 14:7).

Apostasy is not an over-night transformation. For Israel the slide into apostasy was hundreds of years in the making (9:10).

But apostasy is a process we cannot reverse: “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD” (5:4). It is the spiral of death described by James (Jas. 1:14-15).

It binds the will, preventing a return to God: “Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me” (11:5b). See also Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31.

2. Turning back to God requires repentance

Apostasy is a condition that only God can cure: “I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them” (14:4). So when God calls for repentance, he is making an offer of grace.

Israel's light-hearted approach to repentance

When God punished Israel's defections, Israel repented...but only half-heartedly. The people seemed to adopt a light-hearted approach to the solemn task of mourning for sin. They said, “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up” (6:1). But God responded, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away” (6:4). See also Hosea 2:7 and compare with the story of the *Judges*.

God's expectations of the repentant people

The use of the word “turn/return” indicates what God looks for in repentance:

- Turning from all false hopes, securities and gods (14:2-3).
- Seeking God's face (3:5; 7:10)
- Trusting in God's mercy (6:1-3; 14:1-2).
- Doing what is right (12:6)

The promise made to the repentant people

God promises repentant people that he will be to them everything they looked for in the world (security, happiness, fruitfulness, transcendence): “They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon” (14:7).

3. Applications

- There are no safe levels of sin. Every sin places us on the path of apostasy. The longer we remain unrepentant, the further we travel away from God. The process may creep up on us and bind us slowly (Heb. 12:15).
- Apostasy is deadly serious. A flippant attitude towards “backsliding” is wrong.
- Christian fellowship is a God-given preventative against apostasy (Heb. 3:12-15; 12:12-17).
- Apostasy is not necessarily final. God calls people again and again to repentance, and he is able to restore the penitent.

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4. Punishment and Restoration

Last week we began to consider Hosea's use of the Hebrew word that means "to turn/return" – Israel had "turned away" from God (to such a deep degree that it had become apostate), and only by God's grace was "turning back to God" (i.e. repentance) possible.

This week we will look at two other diametrically opposed uses of the word "to turn/return", namely punishment and restoration.

1. Punishment that fits the crime

Hosea uses the word "to turn/return" five times of God's judgement on Israel. It is a case of the punishment being made to fit the crime.

(a) *You have abused what I gave you – so I will take my gifts back.*

God had sustained Israel with all sorts of good agricultural produce and wealth (2:8). But Israel had turned her attention to Baal, attributing her prosperity to him and lavishing her worship on him. So God "takes back" (literally "turns/returns") his blessing from Israel. "Therefore I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season, and I will take away [note: a different Hebrew verb] my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness" (2:9).

(b) *I am going to punish you according to your deeds.*

The word "to turn/return" is used to describe divine retribution. God quite literally "pays Israel back" "repays" the people for their sins. "And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds" (4:9). "The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds" (12:2). "Ephraim has given bitter provocation; so his Lord will leave his bloodguilt on him and will repay him for his disgraceful deeds" (12:14).

Notice that in 4:9 and 12:2 repayment is parallel with punishment. The word translated "to punish" is literally "to visit" or "to appoint". Hosea uses this word with the sense of "to punish" seven times (1:4; 2:15; 4:9; 4:14; 8:13; 12:3) in 197 verses – this is a very high frequency.

(c) *You have turned away from me – so I am going to turn away from you.*

Hosea 5 reports Israel's sin in terms of revolt, prostitution, defilement, pride, faithlessness. God has withdrawn from her (5:6). Aware that something is wrong, Israel has sent to the king of Assyria for a solution (5:13) – but to no avail. Why? Because God is like a lion who has torn Israel and then returned to his lair – he punishes his people and withdraws from them, so as to move them by the experience of distress to seek him once again.

“I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me” (5:15).

So we see that, not only does the punishment fit the crime, but the punishment also aims at restoration of the nation.

2. Restoration like a second Exodus

God is unwilling to remain angry with his people for ever. In grace he “repents of” or “turns back from” his anger. He says, “I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy [literally ‘I will not return to destroy’] Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (11:9).

In the climactic oracle of hope, God promises, “I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger *has turned from* them” (14:4).

The turning back of God’s anger is expressed in terms of a restoration like a second Exodus. God speaks of this in 2:14-15, “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor [Achor means “Trouble”] a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.”

So God promises, “I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; I will again make you dwell [or ‘cause you to return’] in tents, as in the days of the appointed feast” (12:9). In Hebrew “I will make you dwell” and “I will cause you to return” are very similar, and the latter translation is probably preferable. The “appointed feast” would be the feast of Tabernacles.

The second Exodus looks beyond captivity to restoration: “For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed, when *I restore the fortunes* of my people” (6:11). Literally, “when I turn the captivity of my people” – it is a pun in Hebrew – “b^eshuvi sh^evuth ammi” – notice “ammi” which is half of the name “Lo Ammi” (“Not my people”).

The restoration is complete when Israel once again dwells with God (14:5-8).

3. Applications

- God is never vindictive. When God punishes, he does so with perfect equity. The punishment is made to fit the crime (Luke 12:47-48).
- Punishment in this life is not final – the door of hope is held open even in the valley of trouble (see the story of Achan in Joshua 7).
- The believer should receive God’s rebukes as chastisements, and therefore tokens of his love (Hebrews 12:3-11). As such, God’s severity is *more* than we deserve, and rather than asking, “God, don’t you care?” we should say, “By your grace, I repent and humble myself, Lord, under your mighty hand.”

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5. God's Love for Israel

The previous two studies beg the question, *Why should God heal Israel's apostasy? Why should God turn from his punishment for Israel's restoration? Why does Hosea 2:14 ("Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her") come hot on the heels of Hosea 2:13 ("And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals when she...went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the LORD")?*

The answer is God's love for Israel. The word "to love" appears far more frequently in Hosea than in any other Old Testament book.

- It is used of Israel's lovers (2:5,7,10,12,13; 8:9).
- It is the love between a man and a woman (3:1 [twice]).
- It is also used of Israel's love of things (3:1; 4:18 [twice]; 9:1,10; 10:11; 12:7).
- It is God's love for Israel (positive – 3:1; 11:1; 14:4; and negative – 9:15).

Pointedly, it is never used of Israel's love for the LORD. And yet this was Israel's primary duty: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5).

Note that the Hebrew word on which we are focusing our attention is different from the word translated "steadfast love". "Steadfast love" is God's covenant loyalty, whereas the word for "love" suggests "affection". Clearly "steadfast love" and "affection" are woven together in God's relationship with his people. In Deuteronomy 4:37 Moses declares that God redeemed Israel from Egypt "because he loved [the word we are considering in this study] your fathers and chose their offspring after them."

1. Love that excels a husband's

"And the LORD said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins'" (Hos. 3:1).

It seems that Gomer was not content to stay at home. Somehow she got herself entangled with another man to such a degree that she lost her liberty. What would any human husband do under such circumstances? He would divorce his wife – and good riddance to her!

We do not know Hosea's mind. But we do know God's – he commanded Hosea to go and love Gomer because he, the LORD, loved Israel. Note that v. 1 twice places a noble form of love "in grating proximity" to an ignoble and base form.

What cost love? The phrase, "So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley" (Hos. 3:2), sounds like Hosea had to pay part

cash, part kind. The impression is given that he had to scrape together Gomer's ransom price.

The reality is that Israel will be shattered (v. 4). But it is through this "tough love" that God will move them to return "to his goodness in the latter days" (v. 5).

2. Love that excels a father's

When we get to Hosea 11, the end for Israel is very near. And God casts his mind back to the start: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). Happy days!

The picture of parental tenderness in vv. 3-4 is very endearing. But v. 2 is a slap in the Father's face from his rebellious son – more than a slap – Ephraim kept on slapping: "The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols."

The Law provided for the punishment of such a son (Deut. 21:18-21). But God's love cannot let go. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hos. 11:8). Why? "I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst" (Hos. 11:9).

It's God's Fatherly love that calls the scattered children to return home (11:10-11).

3. Love that that expels apostasy

We have seen that God's conjugal love and paternal love is the necessary and sufficient condition for the return of his people after the period of severe chastisement. Precisely the same is seen in the third text that speaks of his love. Vv. 1 and 2 command "Return...return!" and v. 7 promises "They shall return."

How is this possible? Because "I will heal their apostasy [literally, "their turning away"]; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them" (Hos. 14:4).

At the end of the day, everything for Israel hangs on the love of God. Did God not love them, there would be no restoration. But God does love them, and the restoration is a picture of the garden of Eden (vv. 5-7). V. 8 is particularly generous – reminiscent of the Song of Songs (e.g. Song 2:3-4).

4. Applications

- God's love is the foundation of my salvation (John 3:16; Romans 5:7-8).
- Christ paid for my redemption because of his love (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 1:5).
- God has adopted me into his family because of his love (1 John 3:1).
- God has shed his love abroad in my heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).
- The love of God will be the source of my fruitfulness, joy and satisfaction throughout eternity (Hosea 14:8).