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1

HOSEA, THE PROPHET

THE MAN

THE BOOK OF HOSEA itself is our sole source of information for the life and ministry of the prophet. His name, occurring in the Bible as Hosea, Joshua, and Jesus, means salvation. He was a contemporary of the Judean prophets Isaiah and Micah (cp. Ho 1:1 with Is 1:1 and Mic 1:1). Whereas the ministry of the latter two prophets was directed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the labors of Hosea were centered in the main upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel, founded by Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

Our prophet ministered during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and during that of Jeroboam II, son of Joash of Israel. A comparison of dates will reveal that Hosea long outlived Jeroboam II. However, it is far from necessary to hold that he ministered from the first year of Uzziah's reign to the last of Hezekiah's, a period of about a century. (We must remember that Jotham's reign overlaps Uzziah's, his father, who was a leper; the illness of the latter made imperative a coregency, 2 Ki 15:5.) The prophet probably prophesied somewhat over a half-century, some maintaining seventy or even eighty years.

DOMESTIC LIFE

The home life of no prophet is told forth more fully than that of Hosea, because therein lay the message of God to His people, as we shall see later. Both the wife of Hosea and his children were signs and prophecies to Israel, Judah, and the coming reunited nation. If Isaiah could say, "Behold, I and the children whom Jehovah hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from Jehovah of hosts, who dwelleth in mount Zion" (Is 8:18), Hosea could say as much with equal right. Because this fact has been overlooked, all too often the force of the message of the book has been dissipated by symbolizing the transactions recorded. The message was real because the acts noted were actually lived out in the life of the prophet.

HIS MESSAGE

Chapters 1 to 3 form a distinct section of the book, giving the prophet's own domestic experiences. In chapters 4 to 14, we are given the prophetic discourses proper. Amos had preached repentance to lead Israel back to God; Hosea preaches love. Amos had told forth the unapproachable righteousness of God; Hosea, the unfailing love of God. Our prophet presents the Lord as the God of the loving heart. Someone has well said, "He is the first prophet of Grace, Israel's earliest Evangelist." Just as Luke presents the prodigal son, so Hosea portrays the prodigal wife. Nowhere in the whole range of God's revelation do we find more beautiful words of love than in Hosea 2:14-16; 6:1-4; 11:1-4, 8, 9; 14:4-8.

HIS TIMES

Every prophet's message, in order to be understood properly, must be studied against the background of his times. Hosea lived in a time of outward prosperity. Uzziah's reign was marked by repeated successful wars, increased building projects in the land, the multiplication of fortifications, and the promotion of agriculture (see 2 Ch 26). The kings who followed him, though not to the same degree, prospered also. As for Jeroboam II, he recovered (2 Ki 14:25) for Israel a larger sphere of rule than it had ever enjoyed since the disruption of the Solomonic kingdom, annexing even Damascus, which had been lost already in Solomon's day (1 Ki 11:24).

In spite of the prospering of God, the people substituted outward forms (see Is 1 and 58) for the inward reality; they were committing all manner of sin; and they were in great moral and spiritual decline. Jeshurun had waxed fat and kicked (Deu 32:15). Against this low spiritual state the prophet Hosea, as well as his contemporaries, inveighed.

THE INTRODUCTORY WORD

The first three chapters of the book give us a kind of summary of the whole message of the prophet and are introductory in character. (For the sake of space we shall omit the text of the prophecy, but the reader must have it at hand in order to get the most out of the study.) Hosea begins his prophecy by dating it. Though a prophet of Israel, he marks his message by the names of Judean kings for the most part, because the promises of God were centered in the line of David.

The first word from God to the prophet was an order for him to marry a woman who would later become a harlot. This command of God to the prophet has been the occasion of much discussion and disagreement. It is held that if this were literally so, God was enjoining upon Hosea an

unseemly, not to say sinful deed. This line of reasoning is difficult to understand, because the prophet could not become personally defiled just because he married a woman who later proved to be a harlot, or rather an adulteress, for her crimes are committed after she is married. It is only when the transaction is seen in its literal character as pointing to the relationship existing between God and Israel, that the full meaning of the prophet can be grasped.

In other words, God chose Israel and brought her into a most blessed relationship with Himself, likened to the marriage bond, and while in this state she committed harlotry. Her sin is explained as departing from the Lord. Just as harlotry and adultery, sins of the deepest dye and utterly abhorrent, are the result of infidelity, so spiritual harlotry (a case where the physical is transferred into the realm of the spiritual, as many times in Scripture) is the outcome of spiritual defection from God. God had entered into an eternal covenant with Abraham and desired to be bound to His people. But in all fitness He expected His people to remember their bond to Him. This they did not do, and God portrays their infidelity to Him through the domestic life of the prophet. (See Ps 78:27. Any good concordance will show the reader how many times the natural figure of harlotry is transferred to the spiritual realm. It will be illuminating to see how many times God's messengers use this comparison.)

Need we say how much the heart of the prophet was wounded over the shameful conduct of his wife? Of how much greater wounding was the conduct of Israel toward God? The children of Gomer are called "children of whoredom," not because they were not the children of Hosea. Nor were they some already begotten but rather those yet to be born. In other words, the marriage of the prophet was normally to issue in children, who are so named ("children of whoredom") because their mother was unfaithful in marriage. The mother represents Israel corporately, while the children speak of the nation individually, although the transaction in the home of Hosea was literal and historical.

THE CHILDREN AS SIGNS

The first child of this union of the prophet and Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, was a son. God commanded his name to be called Jezreel, for in a short time God was to avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and was to bring an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. What did God mean by the name? The long, sad story of Jezreel begins back in the days of vacillating and weak Ahab and his wicked and designing wife, Jezebel (1 Ki 21). Naboth the Jezreelite, who owned a vineyard near the palace of Ahab, was murdered through the infamous plotting of

Jezebel in order to dispossess him of his father's heritage. For this atrocity God pronounced doom upon Ahab, Jezebel, and their descendants, this doom to overtake them in Jezreel in the very place where Naboth was slain. The sentence on Ahab was executed first, when he fought at Ramoth-gilead (1 Ki 22); then the blow fell upon Jezebel and Jehoram through Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat the son of Nimshi (2 Ki 9).

Jehu was the instrument of God to execute His judgment upon the house of Ahab. But he came to the throne through dastardly crimes of bloodguiltiness (2 Ki 9:14 and following). True, his act was commended (2 Ki 10:30), for it was such in itself, but later events showed the motivating causes in Jehu's life had been pride and ambition. The prophet Hosea's pronouncement had point here, for Jeroboam II then reigning was of Jehu's house. God would not only visit that house because it had gone into idolatry, but all Israel with the destruction of their kingdom because of their gross departure from the Lord.

A DISTINCTION WITH A DIFFERENCE

We must digress here for a moment, because a great governing principle of God is here being enunciated. It is clear that although Jehu was the instrument of God for a visitation upon punishment-deserving Ahab and his dynasty, nevertheless God required it of him because his own heart was not right and because he had personal ambitions contrary to the mind of God. Can we not learn a lesson here with regard to Israel and the nations of the earth? Though God prophesied the Egyptian bondage and it was in a sense a chastisement upon Jacob's seed because they left the land of blessing, nevertheless God judged the Egyptians for their oppression of His people.

It is clear from the prophet Habakkuk that Israel was ripe for judgment because of evil on every hand, and God foretold that the Babylonians would be that instrument of visitation. But the same prophet reveals the wrath of God upon these enemies of Israel, because they were not executing the will of God in their acts, but were directed of their own wicked hearts. No man, Hitler or any other, can oppress God's people with selfish motives and expect reward from God because they claim to be instruments in the hands of God. God requires truth in the inward parts, and He wants such in the hearts of others as well as Israel. Some one has well said, "So awful a thing is it, to be the instrument of God in punishing or reproving others, if we do not, by His grace, keep our own hearts and hands pure from sin." No nation nor individual has accomplished it thus far, so the safest path and the one with the approval of wisdom upon it, is to lay no violent hand upon Israel under any condition or circumstance.

THE FULFILLMENT

Though the Northern Kingdom was prospering at the time and all seemed well, Hosea forewarned of the end of Jehu's dynasty and the destruction of the Northern Kingdom with its military power in the valley of Jezreel, verse 5. These events took place, though at least forty years apart, just as foretold. (See 2 Ki 15:8-12 and chap. 18.) The valley of Jezreel is the great plain of Esdraelon in central Palestine. Hosea lived to see this prophecy realized in Shalmaneser's victory at Beth-arbel (10:14). It was the last dread admonition from God before the fall of Samaria.

NOT PITIED

The second child of Hosea and Gomer was called Lo-ruhamah, "not compassionated or pitied." The word in the original expresses great depths of love and tenderness. The hour for Israel, the Northern Kingdom, has struck and her punishment is inevitable. She is ripe for judgment and it draws on apace. But God promises at the same time that His wrath will not go forth against Judah at the same hour. For them He had reserved mercy yet, a deliverance to be brought about by no human agency, but solely by the power of God. The defeat of Sennacherib before Jerusalem at the end of the eighth century BC, when 185,000 were slain by the Angel of Jehovah in one night (see 2 Ki 19 and Is 37), was a glorious fulfillment of this prediction, but the prophecies of all the prophets are luminous with promises of the future complete deliverance (physical) and salvation (spiritual) of Israel.

NOT MY PEOPLE

When Lo-ruhamah had been weaned (in the East this takes place two or even three years after birth), the wife of the prophet conceived and bore him a second son, Lo-ammi. God was thus saying to Israel they were not His people and He was no longer their God. How can this be true? Has God scrapped His unconditional covenant with Abraham? Does not Paul still call Israel "His [i.e., God's] people" in Romans 11:1? The difficulty is resolved if we realize that the Abrahamic covenant stands fast and sure, no matter what Israel does. First and last it is an unconditional covenant. This makes Abraham's seed always God's chosen people. But they must be in obedience and following the will of the Lord before they can have this experimentally realized in their lives. When they depart from the way of the Lord and are dealt with by God in chastisement, they appear for all intents and purposes to be "Not My People," Lo-ammi. When they return to God through Christ in a coming day, they will be in fact what they have always been in the counsels of God.

This same principle is seen to operate with the believer in Christ today, whether from Israel or from the Gentiles. Through faith in Christ and His finished work on Calvary, any soul, Jew or Gentile, is born again of the Spirit of God unto eternal life. However, that child of God can possibly live in lack of separation from the world and appear as though he knew nothing of the Father care of God and enjoy none of the blessings of intimacy with the heart of God.

For this reason, Paul exhorts the Christians of Corinth to separate from the world so that God may be their Father and they may be His sons and daughters (2 Co 6:14-18). But were they not already such, for they were believers? Yes, but Paul wants them to realize in daily experience what they are in actual standing before God. The situation is similar with regard to Israel, and we stress this great truth, because there is so much error abroad on this vital feature of God's relationship to Israel. In short, Israel, having lightly esteemed the privilege she sustains toward God (a veritable Gomer), will not enjoy the blessing and reality of it. The patriarchal blessings and promises are never abrogated, for Israel nationally is "beloved for the fathers' sake" even while they are enemies of the gospel for the sake of the Gentiles (Ro 11:28-29).

PROMISE OF BLESSING

Just as no other prophet pronounces doom alone upon Israel without a promise of future blessing, so Hosea follows his dark predictions with words of great comfort. In verses 1:10 through 2:1 the prophet promises five great blessings to Israel: (1) *national increase* (1:10a); (2) *national conversion* (1:10b); (3) *national reunion* (1:11a); (4) *national leadership* (1:11b); (5) *national restoration* (2:1). In view of the unspeakable decimation of Israel in Europe through the Nazi criminals, the promise of national increase is a bright hope indeed.

Do the words not remind one of the very assurance given to Abraham of a great progeny? Not only so, but they will then live up to their heritage, by His grace, as sons of the living God. See Romans 9:25 and 1 Peter 2:10 where the expression is applied to both redeemed Gentiles and Jews, because they stand alike before God in grace. The reunion of the divided nation will manifest the restored favor of God to His people. (See Eze 37:15-23.) The one head over them will be their glorious Messiah King, David's greater Son, in whom they shall trust. (Cp. Ho 3:5; Jer 23:1-5; Eze 34:23; 37:15.)

Their going up from the land has been interpreted as their going up to Esdraelon to the battle which will be decisively victorious for them, but it is perhaps better to see in the prediction the going up of the people

from all parts of the land to celebrate their solemn feasts. (Of the many references see Is 2:1-4; Zec 14.) "Great shall be the day of Jezreel" for in that day God will in Christ rout the enemy once for all when Israel's Messiah stands upon the Mount of Olives to espouse their cause in person. Then will they be Ammi (My People) and Ruhamah (Pitied). Thus all three names have reappeared, but now in blessing.

THE BLIGHT OF DISOBEDIENCE

In verses 2 to 13 of chapter 2, we have the declaration of God concerning the judgment to fall upon Israel for her many sins. God disowns Israel: this is the valley of Achor. In the latter part of the chapter (vv. 14-23) the blessings of obedience and restoration are set forth. God reclaims Israel: this is the door of hope (see 2:15 which is the key of the entire chapter).

Those addressed in verse 2 are Israel, not the children of the prophet. Israel as a whole is viewed as the mother; the children are the individual members of the nation. The purpose of such a distinction is to bring upon the mother the reproach she merits for her sinful acts and to dissuade her from her continued unfaithfulness.

Throughout the passage by means of the physical figures employed, the enormity and heinousness of the spiritual defection of Israel from the Lord are more clearly seen. The brazenness of her infidelity is pictured by the words "her whoredoms from her face." God never glosses over sin. This is a distinctive feature of the Bible that differentiates it from all other books, ancient and modern. It never palliates sin regardless of who is involved in it. Hence, Israel must bear the bitter pain and blight for her spiritual whoredoms and adulteries. The warning is that she will be deprived of all subsistence and all earthly possessions. All this is brought out under the picture of nakedness (see Eze 16:4), desolation, waste, and death by thirst. Here we have an intimation of the coming captivity to Assyria for the Northern Kingdom, but it is not yet specifically stated.

THE SHAME OF INFIDELITY

As an unabashed harlot, Israel has declared her intention of pursuing her "lovers" (the idols of her pagan worship) in order to receive her bread, water (necessities of food), wool, flax (necessities of clothing), oil, and drinks (luxuries). The time of prosperity in Israel, a gracious manifestation of the love of God, was taken by them as a benefit from the worthless gods they were worshiping.

The prophet thunders in the name of God, "She did not know that I gave her the grain, and the new wine, and the oil, and multiplied unto her silver and gold, which they use for Baal" (v. 8). Note the em-

phasis on "my" in verse 5: Israel took these bounties as rightfully belonging to her. But in verse 9 they are shown to be actually God's, for He claims them by a reiterated "my." For a comparable case see Jeremiah 44:15-23 where Israel again attributes the benefits of God to her worship of vain idols. No words could bring out more forcefully the insanity of idol worship; such service so befogs and darkens the mind that the beneficences of God are credited to senseless vanities which profit not. (See Ro 1.)

RETRIBUTION FROM GOD

Because of this festering cancer in Israel's spiritual life, God will hem her in on every side, so that she shall be separated from her paramours. She will pursue her lovers relentlessly but will not find them. Her disappointment will be so keen, that she will desire to return to her true and "first husband." She will be deprived of grain, new wine, wool, and flax: a depression of real proportions will be her lot. God will lay her bare before her lovers to her shame. Yea, more, God will remove every occasion of joy and gladness from her; her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths, and her solemn assemblies. At these times her consorting with idolatry found its fullest expression instead of being times for honoring God.

For this desecration of the things of God, He will lay waste the land as a forest and multiply against them the beasts of the field. The "days of the Baalim" wherein Israel forgot God will all be visited upon her. The prophet thus, in vivid and unmistakable language, outlines the curse and blight of Israel's disobedience; nakedness, waste, hunger, thirst, shame, sadness, loneliness, and desolation will be her sad portion.

THE BLESSINGS OF OBEDIENCE

Again, Hosea will not close this prophecy until he has told forth the future blessings and glories in store for Israel when in obedience to the revealed will of God. In that day God will bring Israel into the wilderness, that is, alone and will speak to her heart. From this face-to-face meeting with the Lord, Israel's valley of Achor, valley of troubling, will be turned into a door of hope.

The mention of the valley of Achor is another of Hosea's frequent uses of past events in the history of Israel. It reminds us of the entering of Israel into the land of Canaan in the days of Joshua. Through faith, the Lord had given glorious victory over Jericho. But Achan had taken of the accursed booty of the city, which had been strictly forbidden of God. The result of this sin was the defeat of Israel at Ai. After Achan and his house had been found out and stoned, then the Lord gave success to their cam-

paign against Ai. Thus Achan's sin was turned into blessing by the opening up of the land through the defeat of Ai. See Joshua 7:24-26; also Isaiah 65:10, where the valley of Achor becomes a place for herds to lie down.

In similar manner, when Israel has owned her sin and put it from her in truth, there will be restoration. The valley of Achor will thus be changed into a door of hope. The Lord will restore and more the years that the cankerworm hath eaten. Even the very names of the Baalim (the idols of Baal) will be removed from Israel. They shall call God Ishi (my husband) and not Baali (my lord or master). Affection is implied in the first, while rule is expressed by the second. But even more, the word *Baal* must go now because of its evil connotations and the sins committed in Baal worship.

MULTIPLIED MERCY

In the hour of return to the Lord, Israel will have all creation in subjection to her. The beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the earth will have the restraint of God upon them, so that Israel may dwell in safety. The bow, the sword, and battle will be no more. As Micah prophesied, every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall make them afraid (Mic 4:4).

Best of all, however, will be the new relationship into which Israel shall be brought. There will be a renewal of the marriage vows. Thrice does God say to Israel that He will betroth her unto Himself: (1) forever; (2) in righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, and mercies; (3) in faithfulness. (Vv. 19 and 20 of chap. 2 are recited by every orthodox Israelite as he places the phylacteries on the middle finger of his left hand.) The word used for "betroth" (*aras*, to woo a virgin) speaks volumes of the grace of God that blots out sin. Israel is no longer seen as a harlot or an adulteress, but, mind you, as an unsullied virgin. She is seen as though she had never sinned. Compare this to 2 Corinthians 11:2 of the Church in spite of all her failings. For Israel see also the remarkable statement in Numbers 23:21 and the gracious designation in Deuteronomy 32:15 (Jeshurun means, as a diminutive, "little upright one").

Then the earth will yield her fruit, and the land shall be prosperous once more. This is given under the figure of personification in verses 21 and 22, as though the heavens asked the Lord to be permitted to rain refreshing showers upon the earth to give grain, new wine, and oil. The answer of God will be in the affirmative, and Israel shall be sown of the Lord, Jezreel. (See Mic 5:7 and Is 37:31.) Finally, the promise is that Lo-ruhamah shall be Ruhamah and Lo-ammi shall be Ammi. A cycle is

thus completed. Every curse shall be not only averted, but turned into blessing. For our summary of the blessings upon Israel we see: (1) comfort—verse 14; (2) fruitfulness of the land—verses 15, 21, 22; (3) removal of idolatry—verse 17 (*Zec 13:2*); (4) restoration of nature's glory—verse 18 (*Is 35*); (5) safety in the land—verse 18; (6) mercy of the Lord in His restored favor—verse 23; and (7) national conversion—verses 19, 20, 23. Truly the valley of Achor shall be the door of hope!