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1

INTRODUCTION TO HOSEA

THE SITUATION IN HOSEA'S DAY

When the prophetic mantle fell upon a youthful Israelite named Hosea ben Beeri, change was in the wind. Peace and prosperity, the twin blessings that had especially characterized Israel during the fifty years (800-750 B.C.) preceding Hosea's ministry, were slowly ebbing away. Drifting further and further from the course that the Almighty had charted for His people, the Israelites had deluded themselves into believing that they had escaped the curse of that ancient proverb: "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). Instead, in the sight of a holy God they had made their own destruction more necessary than the annihilation of the heathen Canaanites six hundred years earlier (Deut. 7:1-5; Josh. 3:10; 7:1). Nevertheless, Israel was part of God's chosen people. In His mercy God sent to the nation one last prophet to sound the final warning blast to prevent her from plunging headlong into the abyss that had been created by her own sins.

The change that would sweep Israel into captivity had begun to manifest itself openly in the political sphere soon after the Word of the Lord first came to Hosea. The death of Israel's greatest monarch, Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), had brought an eclipse of Israel's glory and political stability. In effect, his death had brought an exchange of monarchy for anarchy. But that change had already made its presence fully known in the religious and social life of Israel, as can be seen by looking back into Israel's historical roots. Jeroboam I (931-910 B.C.) had planted the seeds of destruction when he led the ten northern tribes out of the hand of God's appointed ruling house (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). Having believed that the religion of the people was too tightly bound to Jerusalem, Jeroboam I, in an act of political expediency, set up golden calves at Dan and Bethel as images

of Jehovah (1 Kings 12:25-33). When he had constituted idolatry as the official religion of Israel, Jeroboam I at the same time provided the first link in the chain of sin that had by Hosea's day completely enclosed the Northern Kingdom.

Baalism, the Canaanite religion that Elijah and Elisha would spend their careers routing (1 Kings 18—2 Kings 10), manifested itself openly thanks to Jeroboam's idols. By Hosea's day, Baalism had become an excuse for the ritualizing of sensuality. The people were taught that they were worshiping the same God that had brought them the abundance of the promised land. Jeroboam I was again responsible for that when he deceived the people with these words: "Behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). Through deception, one of Satan's prime tools, the people had confused the truth with lies. To tell the people of a nation, quite satisfied with the state of religion, that they were all wrong was the monumental task to which Hosea was commissioned.¹

The decay of religion had meant a corresponding deterioration of the society's moral fiber. Detailed so thoroughly by Amos (Amos 5:10-17)—Hosea also witnessed what had been the total and unabashed compromise that reigned from the courtroom to the bedroom. Justice was determined by the highest bribe (Hos. 7:1-2; 10:13), whereas faithfulness in word and deed was extinct (11:12). Drunkenness (4:11) and open harlotry (4:14) had taken on epidemic proportions. Established by God as a testimony of His standards (Exod. 19:4-6), Israel had become like her wicked neighbors, blatantly disobeying the laws of God (Hos. 4:2-3).

Although the people had lived rather comfortably in their rebellion until Hosea's day, it was his task to tell them that the commandments that they had broken would now break them. Israel's political instability had come to resemble that of a modern Central American republic as a deadly game of monarchial

1. Baal (meaning "lord," "husband," or "owner") was the epithet of Hadad, the Canaanite god of the late autumn and winter rains upon which farmers were dependent. Using the analogy of Baal as a husband fertilizing the land (his wife), temple prostitution was carried on by the local shrines with the alleged hope that such acts would induce Baal to "have intercourse" with the earth. See James Luther Mays, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 25.

musical chairs kept the crown passing from the hand of one assassin to the next. Six months after his ascension to the throne, Zechariah, the son of Jeroboam II, was murdered by Shallum. Shallum's dynasty lasted but a month before he fell prey to an assassin, Menahem (752-742 B.C.). Menahem's ten-year reign witnessed a major complication of the situation: the awakening of Assyria through its able ruler Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.), who envisioned the occupation of Palestine as a gateway to Egypt and as an opening to commerce on the Mediterranean Sea. When the inevitable attack came, Menahem had realized the folly of resisting the enemy, and, by paying a tribute of one thousand talents of silver to Tiglath-pileser III (Pul in 2 Kings 15:19), had allowed his country to become a vassal state.

Menahem's handling of his external foe had served as the catalyst for the strengthening of a growing opposition movement within his own country. Pekah (752-732 B.C.), the leader of that rebellion, set up an opposition government, and he eventually seized the throne by assassinating Menahem's son and successor Pekahiah (742-740 B.C.). Vainly attempting to reconstruct the decaying nation, Pekah secured an alliance with Rezin, king of Syria. The political intrigues that resulted from this alliance caused the destruction of much of Israel in 734 B.C. and all of Syria in 732 B.C. (Isa. 7:1-8:18). Pekah was killed by Hoshea (732-722 B.C.), who ruled as a "puppet king" for Assyria over a much diminished kingdom—the hill country surrounding the city of Samaria. With the death of Tiglath-pileser III (727 B.C.), Hoshea rebelled against Assyria, thinking he could count on the help of Egypt (2 Kings 17:4). Unfortunately for Hoshea, Egypt was as inept as a "crushed reed" (2 Kings 18:21), and Hoshea fell into the hands of the Assyrians, who captured the city of Samaria (722 B.C.) after a three-year siege (2 Kings 17:5-6). According to Sargon II, the conquering king, 27,900 citizens of Samaria were deported to Upper Mesopotamia and Media.²

In such a day of adversity, one would expect the people to listen to the Word of the Lord. "Peace in our time" was no longer an alternative, the clouds of judgment would not blow away. Hosea cried that captivity was irreversibly imminent and

2. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 258.

certain (Hos. 5:6-9; 9:7), yet the people refused to see the handwriting on the wall. Even when the enemy was besieging the walls of Samaria, the stony-hearted citizenry did not call upon the name of the Lord. They had forgotten God (4:1; 8:14).

HOSEA THE MAN

The name Hosea (*Hoshea* in Hebrew) means "salvation," and it is derived from the same Hebrew noun (*yeshah*) that produced the names Joshua (Num. 13:8, 16) and Isaiah (Isa. 1:1). Ironically, Hoshea was also the name of Israel's last king.³ If King Hoshea had hearkened to the Word of the Lord by the prophet Hosea, the land and her people would have been saved from God's judgment. Instead, the salvation that Hosea preached would have to be relegated to that great future day when righteousness shall rule (Hos. 14:4-7).

What kind of man was given the task of bringing the mixed tidings of judgment and salvation? Except for the text of the book of Hosea itself, the Old Testament is silent about the man Hosea. The lack of biographical data within the text forces us to hypothesize about the origin and occupation of this prophet of God. From the numerous geographical notations in the book (4:15; 5:1; 6:8; 9:15; 10:5, 8, 15; 12:11; 14:5-8), it has been assumed that Hosea was a native of the Northern Kingdom. The subject matter of Hosea's illustrations has prompted commentators to suggest that he was either a baker (7:4), a peasant farmer (8:7; 10:13), a priest (5:1), or a son of the prophets (1:2; 4:5; 9:7-8). To reconstruct the character of the prophet from the text would be impossible except that between the lines Hosea reveals his deep-seated love for his brethren. It is significant that rabbinic tradition, perhaps because it noted the unique involvement that Hosea had with his subject matter, classified Hosea as the greatest among his prophetic contemporaries.⁴

3. To keep the two names distinct, English translators have spelled the minor prophet's name without the second *h*. Three others in the Old Testament had the name *Hoshea*: Joshua (Num. 13:8); an Ephraimite chief (1 Chron. 27:20); and a chief under Nehemiah (Neh. 10:23).
4. Shalom Coleman, *Hosea Concepts in the Midrash and Talmud* (New York: Block, 1960), p. 43.

The primary stimulus for that involvement with his subject was Hosea's marriage to Gomer, detailed for us in chapters 1-3. Commanded by God to take a "wife of harlotry," Hosea married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, who bore him three children. Although Hosea knew of the wayward tendencies of Gomer when he took her to wife, his heart was broken as she deserted him for the sensual pleasures offered by that truly "adulterous generation." However, the worldly attractions for which Gomer clamored soon proved illusory, and she fell prey to some form of slavery. Throughout that period of estrangement, Hosea's love never faltered, and when the second command from God came he purchased her freedom and won her affection.⁵

Molded by this crucible of domestic tragedy, Hosea was particularly equipped to give his listeners a glimpse of the pain that God felt when Israel rejected His love and went "a whoring" after other gods. Israel was a harlot in every sphere of life: *religiously*, in seeking after other gods; *socially*, in creating a society of adulterers; and *politically*, in searching for the protection of foreign nations rather than Almighty God. Hosea's message was thus keynoted by a sense of urgency. So personally absorbed was Hosea with the message given him by God that he rarely prefaced his remarks with the familiar phrase "declares the LORD" (2:13, 16, 21; 11:11). The short, broken lines of discourse, the incompleting metaphors that appear and vanish on each page, and the seeming disregard for the fetters of regular grammar suggest the compulsion that Hosea felt. Faced with an adulterous wife and an adulterous nation, his terse words stain each page with the transgressions that he constantly observed being committed before his eyes. Do we grieve and object concerning the disregard that we observe in our society for the laws of God?

The message of Hosea is simple: the justice of God brings punishment for sin; the love of God brings restoration for repentance. After a personal illustration of God's sovereign plan of redemption in the life of the prophet (chaps. one-three), Hosea reveals God's holiness through an indictment of faithless Israel (chaps. four-seven), His justice through an announce-

5. For an excellent analysis of Hosea's marriage, check H. H. Rowley, "The Marriage of Hosea," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 39, no. 1 (September 1956): 200-233.

ment of the penalty for that faithlessness (chaps. eight-ten), and His love through a proclamation of the certainty of the promise of national restoration (chaps. eleven-fourteen).

OUTLINE

- I. Hosea's Marriage: A Revelation of the Heart of God (1:1-3:5)
 - A. Harlot Wife and Faithful Husband (1:1-2:1)
 1. The commission from God (1:1-2)
 2. The bitter fruits of harlotry (1:3-9)
 - a. Jezreel: God's judgment imminent (1:4-5)
 - b. Lo-ruhamah: God's mercy withheld (1:6-7)
 - c. Lo-ammi: God's love removed (1:8-9)
 3. The triumph of God's grace (1:10-2:1)
 - B. The Perils of Profligacy and the Quest for Restoration (2:2-23)
 1. Israel indicted (2:2-5)
 2. Israel punished (2:6-13)
 3. Israel renewed and restored (2:14-23)
 - C. Gomer's Redemption and Israel's Restoration (3:1-5)

- II. Hosea's Message: Revealing the Character of God (4:1-14:9)
 - A. God's Holiness Indicts an Unrepentant Israel (4:1-7:16)
 1. The subjects of indictment (4:1-19)
 - a. The people indicted for breaking the commandments (4:1-3)
 - b. The leadership indicted for misleading the people (4:4-19)
 2. The inevitability of judgment (5:1-14)
 - a. Inevitable because of Israel's harlotry (5:1-7)
 - b. Inevitable because of God's holiness (5:8-14)
 3. The necessity of complete repentance (5:15-6:3)
 4. The impossibility of immediate restoration (6:4-7:16)
 - a. Impossible because of Israel's lack of loyalty (6:4-11)
 - b. Impossible because of Israel's secret sins (7:1-7)

- c. Impossible because of Israel's dependence on other nations for security (7:8-16)
- B. God's Justice Punishes an Unrepentant Israel (8:1-10:15)
 - 1. The necessity of judgment (8:1-14)
 - a. God's goodness rejected (8:1-3)
 - b. God's sovereignty rejected (8:4)
 - c. God's worship rejected (8:5-7)
 - d. God's omnipotence rejected (8:8-10)
 - e. God's commandments rejected (8:11-14)
 - 2. The nature of judgment (9:1-10:15)
 - a. Judgment brings sorrow (9:1-2)
 - b. Judgment brings exile (9:3-9)
 - c. Judgment brings death (9:10-17)
 - d. Judgment brings terror (10:1-15)
- C. God's Love Restores a Repentant Israel (11:1-14:9)
 - 1. The compassion of Israel's divine Father (11:1-11)
 - a. The past: The love of the Father met by ingratitude (11:1-4)
 - b. The present: The ingratitude of Israel met by punishment (11:5-7)
 - c. The future: The compassion of the Father brings restoration (11:8-11)
 - 2. The longsuffering of Israel's divine Father (11:12-12:14)
 - a. Ephraim's unrepentant deceit (11:12-12:1)
 - b. Ephraim's precedent for repentance: The example of Jacob (12:2-6)
 - c. Ephraim's misplaced love (12:7-14)
 - 3. Ephraim's tragic response to God's love (13:1-16)
 - a. Choosing dissipation rather than exaltation (13:1-3)
 - b. Choosing destruction rather than salvation (13:4-8)
 - c. Choosing a human king rather than the King of kings (13:9-11)
 - d. Choosing death rather than life (13:12-16)
 - 4. The final triumph of God's grace (14:1-9)
 - a. The final call receives a repentant response (14:1-3)

- b. Repentance brings full restoration (14:4-5a)
- c. The fruits of true repentance (14:5b-7)
- d. Israel eternally betrothed to God (14:8)
- e. The final word (14:9)