

# The Prophets

## Study 4: An Introduction to Hosea – Prophet of Reconciliation

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### Background

Hosea lived in the tragic final days of the northern kingdom, shortly after, or during the time of Amos's prophecies (circa 755 to 715 B.C.). He was the only 'writing' prophet from the North. His name means 'salvation' or 'deliverance' and this is perhaps appropriate for how the book of Hosea ends. In verse 1, the only king who reigned in Israel mentioned is Jeroboam II. Hosea did not consider the successors of Jeroboam II to be worthy of mention. Basically, by reading 2 Kings 15:8 – 17:41, we can see why:

- Six kings reigned within a 25 year period
- Four (Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah, Pekah) were murdered by their successors while in office, and one (Hoshea) was captured in battle
- Only one (Menahem) was succeeded on the throne by his son (Hosea 4:2, 10:7, 13:11).

Hardly a fitting testament to the kings of Israel!

It is perhaps quite surprising to learn of a prophet who actually married a prostitute, and according to Birch, "*the book of Hosea is often seen as an embarrassment in the church...the central experience of Hosea's marriage to Gomer, and the way Hosea uses that experience in his preaching, is one of the most striking yet problematic images in all of prophetic literature.*"<sup>1</sup> The very words and language used are somewhat shocking:

*"When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."*<sup>2</sup>

In this our first study on Hosea, we shall focus on these first three chapters which together effectively form the first section of Hosea (with the remaining chapters that form the second section concentrating on the judgement of and salvation for Israel). We should not let our focus in this study on the first three chapters obscure the wider message of Hosea since (as Birch goes on to say) "*It is Hosea who gives us some of the most compelling statements of God's judgment and the failure of God's covenant people. And it is Hosea who first among the prophets makes clear that judgment does not exhaust God's character. God's love speaks the final word.*"<sup>3</sup>

### The Message

The message of Hosea is underpinned by a theme of faithfulness and unfaithfulness and concentrates on Israel's religious deviation. Social sins are mentioned only in passing. The aberrant worship structure and its need for correction (not for thorough removal, as in Amos) are main concerns of this book. It is covenant-centred, and most of the mainstream covenant themes (loyal love, knowledge and fidelity) occur frequently.

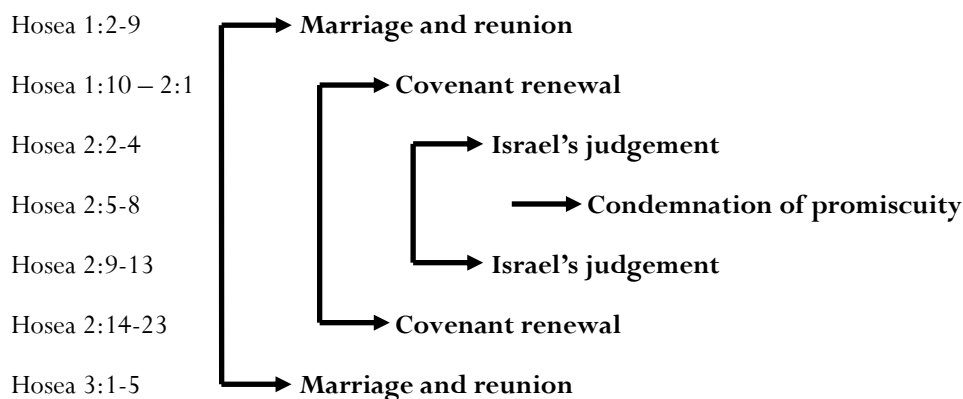
It is a terrible to experience any betrayal of trust. Marital violation must be particularly terrible to experience, but in Hosea we find God using a spouse's unfaithfulness not only to give the Hebrew people a vivid picture of how they had

<sup>1</sup> Birch, B.C., (1997), p.7, *Westminster Bible Companion – Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, Westminster / John Knox Press

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 1:2, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Birch, B.C., (1997), p.7, *Westminster Bible Companion – Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, Westminster / John Knox Press

treated Him but also showing how such a marriage can be saved by suffering and forgiveness. The marriage theme of the first three chapters is in a chiasmic structure<sup>4</sup>, emphasising God’s condemnation of promiscuity and alluding to the sanctity of marriage:



The way in which Hosea leads his life, and in particular his relationship with his wife, is a powerful testimony to those around and to us today. Do we lead double lives, with our public ministry not reflecting our private ministry, or do we live genuine lives that resound with constancy, faithfulness and love? If we look elsewhere in scripture, it seems clear that the way that we are at home is equally important (if not more important) than how we are at work, or socially. We should not be different people at work than we are at home – and yet many people are. We are called to be genuine people, and we must acknowledge that in our sinfulness no marriage is perfect – and there is a need for an abundance of grace towards each other and hope for the redemptive power of God.

Through Hosea we learn of the steadfast love of God – a love that endures forever. In Hosea 1:10, we see something of this love “*Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God.”*”<sup>5</sup> This is a theme that echoes continually throughout scripture, speaking to us of God’s covenant renewal and God’s redeeming love.

## Questions

### Read Hosea 1:1-11

1. Why does God tell Hosea to marry an adulterous wife (verse 2)?
2. Jezreel means ‘God sows’. What is God trying to express to the people of Israel in verses 4, 5 and 11?
3. What is God trying to express in the naming of the second child “Lo-ruhamah” (Not pitied) (verses 6-7)?
4. What does the naming of the third child “Lo-ammi” (Not my people) signify (verses 8-9)?

### Read Hosea 2:1-13

God had told Hosea to marry Gomer, an adulterous wife, to symbolise God's relationship with Israel, a spiritually adulterous nation.

1. Summarize this ‘wife’s’ actions, and her motivations (verse 5)?
2. Why does the wife decide to return home (verses 7-8)?

<sup>4</sup> For further information, please refer to Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G., (2000, c1998), p.402, *Dictionary of biblical imagery (electronic ed.)*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press

<sup>5</sup> Hosea 1:10

3. What is the 'husband's' response to her behaviour (verses 6, 9-13)?

### Read Hosea 2:14 – 3:5

1. What are the husband's plans concerning his wife, and ultimately their future?
2. How is the tone of this last section of Chapter 2 different from the tone of the first part?
3. How many times do the words "I will" show up in this passage? What does this tell you about the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation?
4. What do verses 21-23 reveal about God's forgiveness when the children's names are again mentioned here?
5. What action does Hosea take to restore his marriage in Chapter 3? What does this symbolize?
6. Why do you think it is often the wronged person who must take the initiative in reconciliation? What do we remember of Jesus teaching?

### Meditation

Take time to think what God has forgiven you for. Meditate on the quality of your life when you have walked in God's ways, or when you've rebelled.