

Amos and Hosea

Class 3 — Study Guide

1. Historical Setting

Hosea prophesied around the same time as Amos in the northern kingdom of Israel. Unlike Amos, though, most scholars think that Hosea was a native of the northern kingdom of Israel. There is no evidence that the two prophets knew each other. Hosea faces the same situation that Amos faced. The northern kingdom seemed to be flourishing under a powerful king, Jeroboam; but Hosea, like Amos, saw that the prosperity derived from economic exploitation of the poor.

To understand Hosea we need a little more background. Jeroboam was the fourth king to reign over Israel from the dynasty of Jehu. Jehu was an army general in the service of the king who was a descendent of Ahab, one of the most notorious kings of the northern kingdom. Ahab had married a Phoenician princess Jezebel, and Jezebel brought with her the worship of Baal. Almost a century before Hosea prophesied Jehu rebelled against his king and destroyed Jezebel and the descendents of Ahab in a bloody purge in the city of Jezreel. The story of Jehu's rebellion is recounted in Chapters 9 and 10 of the Second Book of Kings.

Jezebel was not the first to introduce Canaanite worship into Israel. The Book of Joshua gives the impression that Joshua conquered the whole of Palestine with a series of campaigns. However, other parts of the Old Testament give a more accurate picture in which segments of the Canaanite population remained after the conquest. These Canaanites continued the worship of Baal. Besides overt worship of Baal Amos and Hosea show that Canaanite practices infiltrated the Israelite worship of Yahweh, thus perverting Israel's worship of the one true God.

2. The Texts

The words of Hosea were collected and edited some time after he prophesied. The editors have at times added to Hosea's words, and at times the additions add later viewpoints. For example, many of the references to Judah were probably added later as the book was assembled in the southern kingdom after the fall of northern kingdom of Israel. In the texts presented here I have omitted these later additions so that Hosea's message stands out clearer. Each reader can compare the text present in this class with any good translation of the Hebrew Bible.

3. The first text — A Tract for the Times

This first text is a tiny tract that recounts four prophetic signs that Hosea performed. A prophetic sign is an unusual action that the prophet performs that the prophet then explains. Often the sign is strange or indefinite, and it only becomes prophecy when the prophet adds to the action the prophetic word.

In the first sign Yahweh tells Hosea:

“Go, take for yourself
a whorish wife
and whorish children;
For the land is utterly prostituted,
away from Yahweh.”

This first sign is directed against the land which has been prostituted. Modern readers find this sign strange because most people see the prophets attacking the people for their sinfulness. The prophets are more complex than that, and we must resist the urge to level the oracles of the prophets and make them all say the same thing. It is of course, the people that have abused the land, but we need to remind ourselves that the land is Yahweh’s. It’s the land Yahweh promised to give Abraham.

In the second sign when Gomer gives birth to a son, Yahweh says:

“Call his name Jezreel,
for yet a little while
And I will avenge the bloodshed of Jezreel
upon the house of Jehu.”

This second sign is directed against the dynasty of Jehu, the dynasty of the current king, Jeroboam. Jezreel was the city where Jehu slaughtered the king who descended from Ahab.

In the third sign Hosea names his daughter, “Not-Pitied”, because God would have no pity on the House of Israel, the northern state. In the fourth sign Hosea names his son “Not-My-People” because the people are not God’s people, and God is not their “I AM”. The name “I AM” refers back to the disclosure of God’s name to Moses in Exodus 3:13-14.

So the four signs are carefully arranged to summarize Hosea’s message. The first and fourth signs are formulated in the present, and the second and third in the future. The dynasty of Jehu and the nation of Israel will be destroyed in the near future, but the people in the present have already ceased to be God’s people because they prostituted the land.

4. *The second text — An Allegory of Covenantal History*

The second text is the most important text in the Book of Hosea and also one of the most important in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, but it is often not understood. Many readers want to identify the woman in this text as Gomer, Hosea’s wife, and claim that she was unfaithful to Hosea, and he divorced her but still wanted to win her back. Instead, the text is an allegory of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. The allegory uses marriage imagery to dramatize Israel’s history as Hosea understands it as God’s prophet.

The allegory opens with a divorce procedure in which the husband sues for divorce —

— for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband.

The reason is that the wife has played the harlot.

For she said,
“Let me hurry after my lovers,
Who give me my bread and my water,
my wool and my flax,
my oil and my drink.”

Here again we are confronted with Hosea’s analysis of the people’s situation and the people’s orientation. Concretely this analysis comes down to identifying the lovers. Who are the lovers Israel is chasing? Again, most readers think of the Canaanite gods, but this line of interpretation does not do justice to Hosea’s analysis.

For Hosea the Canaanite gods certainly come under attack, but Hosea has also in mind the people’s pursuit of economic goals like exploiting the land to produce more and more wealth. There is nothing inherently wrong in pursuing economic goals provided that the justice God demands is respected, but the Israelites have pursued these goals by exploiting the weak. Hosea also has in mind the pursuit of sensual experiences such as ritual prostitution which degrades women and undermines faithful marriage. Hosea also has in mind national policies like foreign alliances and militarism that aim to increase power and expand Israel’s territory. The charge of adultery is complex as is the identification of the lovers.

Unlike Amos, Hosea is convinced that Yahweh will try again to win Israel back to the covenant. God will take Israel back to the wilderness (the exile) and “speak to her heart” — woe her again as her true lover. The terms of the covenant are breathtaking. God promises:

- 19 And I will betroth you to me forever,
in righteousness and justice
in love and compassion.
20 I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
and you shall know Yahweh.

Spend as much time as you can with this text. What is Hosea’s view of a covenant community? How can we as twenty-first century Christians create a covenant community? What are the implications for our personal lives? What are the implications for our communal life as a Christian community, as a nation?

5. Further work

You might want to read further in the Book of Hosea. If you have questions, feel free to contact me at any time by phone. If I am not at home, leave a message with your phone number; and I will return your call.

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