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HOSEA

INTRODUCTION

The Hosea Scroll

Hosea's ministry was carried out in the northern kingdom ('Israel'). He began prophesying in the last years of the reign of Jeroboam II (around the middle of the eighth century) and continued through to the beginning of the siege of Samaria in 724. His ministry followed closely upon that of Amos, and continued throughout the troubled years of Assyrian aggressive expansion under Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) and his successor Shalmaneser V (727-722). For a summary of the history of Israel during these years see the Introduction (pages 11-12). We will point out the many connections between Hosea's oracles and the events of his day when we come to comment on the text.

Hosea was conscious of belonging to a long tradition of prophets – a trait that we noted as typical of the prophets of the Older Testament (see Introduction page 3).

It is likely that it was in Israel, and during the period of Hosea's ministry, that we find the beginnings of a spiritual movement that moved to Judah when Israel collapsed, and bore fruit in the writing we know as the Book of Deuteronomy. Hosea seems to have had close connections with this movement.

Hosea's picture of God was, as we should expect, shaped by his own experiences. He married a woman (Gomer) who is called a 'whore' (1:2). She may have been involved in the sexual rituals that were part of the Canaanite cult, encounters that were understood to influence the harvest. The relationship with Gomer appears to have broken down when she committed adultery. However, in spite of her infidelity, Hosea sought her out and paid to have her back as his wife. It was these experiences that led Hosea to picture YHWH as a husband, and Israel as YHWH's unfaithful bride. He speaks of YHWH's hurt and anger, but also of his fidelity and unconditional and passionate love for his people.

In his oracles, Hosea refers to the action of YHWH in redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt (11:1; 12:9). He speaks of the Exodus (2:15; 11:1; 13:4), the journey through the wilderness, and the gift of the Promised Land (9:10; 10:11-12; 11:1-4; 13:5-6). He speaks of the covenant (1:9; 2:19-20; 6:7; 8:1) and the gift of the Torah (8:12; 13:4-5).

He sees the crimes of his contemporaries as repeating the infidelity that was typical of Israel's response to YHWH's covenant of love. He especially blames the political leadership, the failure of those responsible for administering justice, and the priests responsible for the cult.

Hosea's tragic message reached the point where, in YHWH's name, he declared that it was too late for Israel to change. They had rejected YHWH's constant offer of love. Now is the time when YHWH must issue a divorce (1:9; 2:4). Israel must go back to Egypt (8:13; 9:3,6). Hosea saw (and he was proved right – hence the preserving of his oracles) that there was no way of avoiding the annihilation and enslavement of Israel.

However, as a true prophet, his focus is primarily on YHWH. Throughout the scroll, and especially at the end, he declares that Israel's sin, even their obstinate refusal to heed YHWH's warnings, could not stop YHWH's passionate love. Their infidelity could not stop God's fidelity to his choice and to his covenant commitments.

Inspired by Hosea?

As already noted, Hosea's prophetic ministry in the northern kingdom began in the last years of the reign of Jeroboam II. Like Amos he castigates the people for living in luxury (see 2:8-13). There are lessons for us in that. However, because of the change in circumstances, this is not his main focus. He lived through the devastation inflicted on Israel by the Assyrian army. Unlike Amos, Hosea was from the northern kingdom. In fact he is the only one of the writing prophets who comes from Israel. He saw most of his country occupied by Assyria, and the capital, Samaria, under siege. It is this that occupies him, and in flashes of superb poetry he returns to this devastation throughout the scroll.

In accordance with the assumptions of his day, he saw this devastation as organised by God, and therefore as just punishment for the people's infidelity to the covenant they had with YHWH (see 1:2-6; 4:1-4; 8:1; 13:16). We refer the reader to our treatment of this topic in the Introduction (page 14).

However, the suffering he witnessed, and in a special way the sufferings he experienced in his own personal life, gave him an insight into the suffering of God at what was happening to his people. He felt the pain of YHWH's heart at the destruction of Israel (see 6:1-6; 11:1-9). It is here, perhaps, that we find Hosea's most inspiring contribution to our knowledge of God. Hosea has a lot to teach those of us who say we believe in God, but for whom God is an abstract figure, scarcely acknowledged in our day to day lives except, perhaps, when life gets hard. To live like this is to fail to know God (see 4:1). For Hosea, YHWH is passionately involved in our lives, determined that we should live, and hurt when we do not respond to his love. Not to know God's love and purpose for us is to court destruction (see 4:6).

Like Amos, he speaks out against religious practice that ignores obedience to God's will (see 2:13; 4:12-13). He is especially critical of priests who live off the cult, but fail in their duty to teach (4:6-11). What God wants from us is that we know him and that we be faithful to the covenant of love he has with us (6:6).

When Hosea looked back over the history of Israel he saw a constant story of infidelity, but he saw also the constant call to authenticity. However faithful or unfaithful we might be, Hosea was convinced that God remains faithful. Punishment is necessary, but it is in view of repentance (2:7, 14). Man of the heart that he is, Hosea knows that real repentance must come from the heart (7:10, 14). Religious cult in no substitute for a genuine seeking of YHWH (see 2:11; 6:6; 8:11; 9:4; 10:1-2, 12; 12:6). God cannot impose love. If we are to receive God's love we must open our hearts to God's inspiration and be faithful to the traditions of obedience that have come down to us from those who listened to God in the past (see 10:12; 12:6).

As outlined on page 14, God cannot allow us to avoid the consequences of our infidelity. Rather, God uses these consequences to bring us to a change of mind and heart and behaviour, so that we might enjoy the communion with God that he desires and without which we cannot live. Knowing YHWH's faithfulness, Hosea was convinced that Israel would, once again, enjoy the intimacy of divine communion (see 1:10-11; 2:14-23; 3:5; 14).

HOSEA 1:1 – 3:5

¹The word of YHWH that came to Hosea son of Beerī, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel.

Like Amos (see Amos 1:2), Hosea speaks of God as YHWH, the liberator God of the Exodus.

The Introduction to this commentary includes a brief survey of the history of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom) between the years 770 and 700BC (see pages 11-12). Those responsible for this introductory verse tell us that Hosea's prophetic ministry, which, as we shall see, was carried out in the northern kingdom, was in the days of 'Jeroboam, son of Joash of Israel'. This is Jeroboam II whose long reign ended around 748. It would appear that this verse was composed by scribes from Judah, because, instead of naming Jeroboam's successors in Israel, they mention the reigns of the kings of Judah. Uzziah was a contemporary of Jeroboam II. He had to retire in 749 and was succeeded by Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

In Judah the reins of government were handed over in an orderly fashion from father to son. This was not the case in Israel. Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, was assassinated shortly after his father's death, and this set a pattern that continued till the last of the kings of Israel, Hoshea, was taken into captivity by the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V, in 724. The prophet Hosea carried out his prophetic ministry throughout these turbulent years, from about 750 to 724.

The opening words of this introductory verse underline the fact that the words of the scroll express 'the word of YHWH'. This is an expression that is echoed in the Deuteronomic History (see, for example, 2Samuel 7:4, 'the word of YHWH came to Nathan'). If, as is likely, the beginnings of the spiritual movement that was to produce the Book of Deuteronomy occurred in the northern kingdom, it is interesting to speculate on how Hosea may have influenced or been part of this movement, and on the role the early Deuteronomists may have played in preserving his oracles.

The prophet's name, 'Hosea (הוֹשֵׁעַ)', means 'He has helped'. His father's name, Beerī (בְּרִיעִי) means 'O spring' (expressing a father's joy at the birth of a son).

Hosea's earliest experience of the special communion with God that set him apart as a prophet was when he felt moved by YHWH to marry Gomer, described as 'a wife of whoredom'. If this is meant as a metaphor, she is called 'whore' because she is unfaithful to YHWH by worshipping pagan gods. She is, therefore, typical of the people of Israel who are committing 'great whoredom by forsaking YHWH', breaking the covenant by worshipping the gods of Canaan. Later in the scroll the people's infidelity to YHWH will be called 'the spirit of whoredom' (see 4:12). Later prophets followed Hosea by referring to Israel's infidelity as 'adultery' or 'playing the whore' (see Jeremiah 3:6-10; Ezekiel 16:23-26).

If, however, we are meant to understand the word 'whore' literally, it is possible that Gomer was involved in sexual rites in which young women were impregnated by males playing the part of the god Baal (see Deuteronomy 23:17). The thought was that, by a kind of sympathetic magic, Baal would ensure that the seed planted in the fields would issue in an abundant harvest.

Hosea married Gomer and experienced a call from YHWH to name the son born from this union in a way that would speak to Israel of YHWH's judgment. 'Jezreel' (verse 4) means 'God sows'. It was the name given to the fruitful plain between the mountains of Samaria and Galilee. King Omri of Israel built his capital there. The 'blood of Jezreel' refers to the extermination of the house of Omri by Jehu the founder of the dynasty to which Jeroboam II belonged (compare Amos 7:9). The Deuteronomic historians approved of Jehu's action as being carried out on YHWH's command (see 2Kings 10:30). Hosea sees it as the beginning of a long history of violence which was continuing under Jeroboam, son of Joash – a violence which YHWH is determined to punish.

In his commentary in the Hermeneia series, Hans Walter Wolff suggests that verse 5 is a later oracle from Hosea, commenting, perhaps, on the annexing of Jezreel by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III, in 733.

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

³So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

⁴And YHWH said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in 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.

⁵On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

6She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then YHWH said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel. I will withdraw it from them.

7But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by YHWH their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen."

8When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. **9**Then YHWH said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I, I am not your I AM."

10Yet 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."

11The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

2:1Say to your brother, Ammi, and to your sister, Ruhamah.

Hosea's second child was a daughter. Once again he was instructed to give her a name that would be a sign to Israel of God's judgment. The Hebrew לֹא (lō') means 'not'; and רַחֲמִים derives from רַחֲמִים (rahāmîm) meaning 'feelings of pity'.

Verse 7 bears all the marks of a pious gloss (marginal insert) from a scribe from Judah, added, perhaps, as a reflection on the 'miraculous' saving of Jerusalem in 701, when the Assyrian army under Sennacherib lifted the siege and withdrew to Assyria.

The name of the third child is also given as a sign. As in verse 6 'lo' means 'not'. The Hebrew אַמִּי ('ammī) means 'my people'. 'Not my people' functions as a formal declaration of divorce. YHWH declared to Moses: 'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God' (Exodus 6:7; see Deuteronomy 27:9). On their first encounter at the burning bush, Moses asked God his name. God's answer was 'I AM' (Exodus 3:14) – not so much a name as a promise that God would be with his people, for his people, committed to them in a covenant of love. The name given by Hosea to his third child was a sign that Israel's infidelity, its 'whoredom' had driven God to terminate the covenant.

As a prophet whose focus is always on the presence and action of YHWH, Hosea could not restrict himself to God's judgment condemning Israel for its infidelity. Verses 1:10 – 2:1 (numbered in the Hebrew Bible as 2:1-3) speak of YHWH's fidelity, which transcends human sin. God's judgment is always in view of repentance. The promise is always there that if we do repent, YHWH will certainly fulfil what he has promised.

The expression 'sands of the sea' recalls God's promise to Abraham (see Genesis 32:12). Besides the reversal of the names given to Hosea's children, we have the promise that one day Judah and Israel will, as at the time of David, be one people. Jezreel, lost to the Assyrians in 733, would be restored (verse 11).

YHWH is calling the people to accept as true the accusation he is bringing against their country, Israel, for its failure to honour the covenant. The metaphor of YHWH as husband of an unfaithful wife continues (see 1:2). The divorce formula in verse 2 corresponds with the negation of the covenant in 1:9. Part of the procedure involves an attempt at reconciliation (see verses 2b and 7b). This is dependent on Israel getting rid of the signs of her whoredom: the sanctuaries of Baal.

Verses 5 and 8 presuppose a thriving economic situation such as we find in Amos. This oracle fits with the final years of the reign of Jeroboam II, prior to the Assyrian invasions and the constant assassinations that were part of the argument in Israel as to how best to respond to Assyria. Hosea's criticism is that Israel is looking to the pagan Canaanite gods for the blessing of prosperity (verse 5), when it is YHWH who is responsible for it (verse 8).

When hard times come upon Israel, when Israel recognises that the Canaanite gods are powerless to really help, she will be tempted to go back to YHWH, who has always been the source of her blessings (verse 7). YHWH complains about the blindness and fickleness of Israel, who should have known all along that it was YHWH, not the Baals, who was giving her everything she cherished. Yet they were using these blessings as offerings to Baal. The folly of this is highlighted by Hosea who declares that the Baals themselves were made by the people out of the silver and gold which were YHWH's gift to them.

²Accuse your mother, accuse – 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, ³or I will strip her naked and expose her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst.

⁴Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of whoredom.

⁵For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, "I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink."

⁶Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns; and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths.

⁷She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then she shall say, "I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me than now."

⁸She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal.

⁹Therefore I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season; and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. ¹⁰Now I will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand.

¹¹I will put an end to all her mirth, her festivals, her new moons, her sabbaths, and all her appointed festivals.

¹²I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, "These are my pay, which my lovers have given me." I will make them a forest, and the wild animals shall devour them.

¹³I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered the smoke of her sacrifices to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says YHWH.

¹⁴Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak to her heart.

¹⁵From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Since Israel fails to acknowledge YHWH as the source of her blessedness, YHWH will withdraw these blessings and leave the land stripped bare.

The economic prosperity during the reign of Jeroboam II was accompanied by peace and the ability of the people to enjoy 'her appointed festivals'(verse 11), something that was not possible in the chaotic years that led up to the Assyrian occupation (compare Amos 8:5).

Verse 12 repeats the threat to destroy Israel's prosperity, and verse 13 repeats the reason for the destruction, namely, Israel's playing the whore with the various local Canaanite gods (the 'Baals').

Deuteronomy uses many of the same expressions as Hosea. YHWH's complaint that Israel has forgotten YHWH (verse 13) recall the complaint that they have 'forgotten' the covenant (Deuteronomy 4:23), and YHWH as their Saviour (Deuteronomy 8:14-20). They do this by 'following after other gods'(Deuteronomy 6:14; 8:19).

Just as 1:10–2:1 shifted focus from Israel's infidelity to the constant faithfulness of YHWH, so here in verses 14-15 we see YHWH, the lover, taking his wife away from her 'lovers' and wooing her as he wooed her in the beginning in 'the wilderness'. Hosea senses that YHWH suffers because of Israel's infidelity. Somewhere at the heart of this insight we can assume that Hosea is reflecting on his own experience of love with Gomer (compare 6:4).

Wolff locates the Valley of Achor to the northwest of Jericho: 'Like a verdant gateway, it invitingly ascends to the fertile hill country and its vineyards'(page 43). Hosea can foresee the day when Israel will respond 'as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt'(verse 15).

Each of these loosely connected sayings looks to ‘that day’ (verses 16, 18, 21), the day of YHWH’s decisive action, as a day of salvation (compare Amos 5:18). This new attitude is the result of the continued love shown Israel by YHWH (see verses 14-15). These verses continue to look beyond necessary punishment (see verses 9-13) to a renewal of the love-covenant between YHWH and Israel.

Continuing the marriage metaphor, Hosea speaks of a renewed intimacy. ‘Baal’ means ‘lord’: a formal way of acknowledging a husband’s authority. ‘On that day’ Israel will address YHWH, using the more intimate ‘my husband’. As verse 17 makes clear, we are meant also to hear in the word ‘Baal’ the title of the pagan Canaanite gods (see verse 13).

In verse 18 the sentence imposed in the second part of verse 12 is reversed. Harmony with the animal world—a feature of paradise—is restored, and Israel will be at peace with hostile nations.

In verses 19-20 all references to Israel as a ‘whore’ have disappeared. In a binding marriage contract YHWH states three times ‘I will take you for my wife’. The indissolubility of the marriage commitment is emphasised by the word ‘forever’, and by the accumulative effect of ‘justice’ (צֶדֶק, *sedeq*), ‘just judgment’ (מִשְׁפָּט, *mišpāt*), ‘covenant love’ (חֶסֶד, *hesed*), ‘mercy’ (רַחֲמִים, *rahāmîm*) and ‘faithfulness’ (אֱמוּנָה, *‘mūnâ*). The fruit of this commitment is that Israel will ‘know YHWH’ with the knowledge that comes only from intimate communion.

In verse 21-22 the beneficence that commences in YHWH answers the call of the rain, the fertile earth, the grain, the new wine and the oil of the olive. God’s answer will ensure the fertility of Jezreel, reversing 1:5 and confirming 1:11.

In verses 22-23 the names of Hosea’s three children reappear (see 1:4, 6, 9). In the final words the covenant is completely restored, reversing 1:9.

¹⁶On that day, says YHWH, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” ¹⁷For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more.

¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in justice and in just judgment, in covenant love, and in mercy. ²⁰I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH.

²¹On that day I will answer, says YHWH, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; ²²and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel; ²³and I will sow him for myself in the land. And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, “You are my people”; and he shall say, “You are my God.”

**^{3:1}YHWH said to me again,
"Go, love a woman who has
a lover and is an adulteress,
just as YHWH loves the peo-
ple of Israel, though they
turn to other gods and love
raisin cakes."**

**²So I bought her for fifteen
shekels of silver and a hom-
er of barley and a measure
of wine.**

**³And I said to her, "You
must remain as mine for
many days; you shall not
play the whore, you shall
not have intercourse with a
man, nor I with you."**

**⁴For the Israelites shall
remain many days without
king or prince, without
sacrifice or pillar, without
ephod or teraphim.**

**⁵Afterward the Israel-
ites shall return and seek
YHWH their God, and
David their king; they shall
come in awe to YHWH and
to his goodness in the latter
days.**

It is Hosea's personal experience of 'love' that is the source of his insights into YHWH's commitment to Israel. The 'woman' in verse 1 is not named. The simplest interpretation is that it is Gomer (see 1:3), and that, having been rescued by Hosea from 'whoredom' (1:2) and having borne him three children, she took a 'lover' and committed adultery against the prophet.

There are close links between chapter three and chapter two. Hosea is moved by God to 'love' his unfaithful wife; that is to say, to remain committed to her, just as YHWH remains committed to Israel in spite of Israel's infidelity (see 2:14-15). This has been the theme of chapter two (note the repetition here of 'other gods', see 2:13, 17).

It cost Hosea to get his wife back. A 'shekel' was a measure of weight (about 11.5 grams). A 'homer' is a dry measure (about 11 bushels), and the 'measure' is half a homer. This gives him some insight into what it 'costs' YHWH to be faithful in his commitment to unfaithful Israel. Verse 3 echoes 2:6-7. Hosea, like YHWH, isolates his wife from her former lovers (see 2:6-7). Hosea must have pronounced this oracle in difficult times. Israel's 'lovers' (significantly Assyria) have turned against her, and she is not yet experiencing the prosperity promised by YHWH (2:15, 21-23).

This is reinforced by verse 4, Israel has lost effective leaders, political and military. The offering of sacrifices is no longer possible, and the customary ways of inquiring into the will of God ('ephod and teraphim') are removed. A likely setting for this oracle is after the victory of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria in 733. Only the Samarian highlands remained under the rule of Pekah, King of Israel. All the lowlands and the plains in the north (Dor, the coastal plain; Megiddo, the valley of Jezreel and Galilee; and Gilead, east of the Jordan) were annexed to Assyria (see Isaiah 9:1).

Typically (see 2:7, 15) Hosea concludes with verse 5 – punishment is in view of repentance ('return and seek'). YHWH's action issues in new life. 'In the latter days' Israel and Judah will be one – hence the mention of 'David'.