

## The Book of the Prophet Hosea

Hosea was an 8th-century BCE prophet in Israel, the Northern Kingdom of 10 tribes that broke away from Jerusalem and throne of David (the Southern Kingdom, also known simply as Judah). Hosea was from the North and preached to his own people. He is a near contemporary of the Prophet Amos. Both preached during the reign of Jeroboam II, whose 40-year reign was marked by prosperity, peace and a burgeoning period of art. Hosea preached closer to the end of the reign and into a period of internal instability, with intrigues at the royal court leading to the assassination of several kings.

Hosea witnessed the revival of Assyria, which led to the kings making numerous treaties with Egypt as well as Assyria. The goal was to survive as a nation. Hosea's long ministry (ca. 750–725) seems to have ended before the capture of Samaria in 722 BCE by the Assyrians.

The Book of Hosea has two major parts:

- The Prophet's Marriage and Its Symbolism (1:2–3:5)
- Israel's Guilt, Punishment, and Restoration (4:1–14:9)

It is in Hosea that Israel's relationship to God is described in terms of marriage, a tradition that continues in the Old Testament (e.g., [Jer 3:1](#); [Ez 16:23](#); [Is 50:1](#)) and into the New Testament where the marriage imagery describes the union between Christ and the Church (e.g., [Mk 2:19–20](#); [Eph 5:25](#)).

The name *Hosea*, meaning 'salvation', or 'He saves', or 'He helps'

We do not know much about Hosea apart from his marriage. The scripture speaks of three moments in the relationship: first love, separation, reunion. This marriage serves as a symbol of the covenant between the Lord and Israel. Hosea speaks about the first love, the short period of Israel's loyalty in the desert, which was then followed by a long history of unfaithfulness lasting until his day. Hosea accuses Israel of three crimes in particular. Instead of putting their trust in the Lord alone, the people break the covenant:

- (1) by counting on their own military strength,
- (2) by making treaties with foreign powers (Assyria and Egypt), and
- (3) by running after the *baals*

*Baal* is an interesting word, also connected to marriage. In older Hebrew and its related Semitic languages (e.g. Aramaic), *baal* included the meaning of "husband" only later becoming exclusively connected to false gods, the gods of other people. The kings often introduced *baals* to Israel's worship as an accommodation to one of their foreign-born wives that were married as part of a treaty with a foreign power. That accommodation led to addition of images and other gods to the sanctuaries in Bethel and Dan, the center of cultic worship in the Northern Kingdom.

As a result, Israel forgets that the Lord is its strength, its covenant partner, and giver of prosperity. This unfaithful behavior will lead to Israel's destruction by Assyria, but God's love will have the last word. The back and forth movement from doom to salvation is typical of the Book of Hosea.

According to the Book of Hosea, he married Gomer but she proved to be unfaithful. Hosea knew she would be unfaithful, as God says this to him immediately in the opening statements of the book: "*When the LORD began to speak with Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: Go, get for yourself a woman of prostitution and children of prostitution, for the land prostitutes itself, a turning away from the LORD*" ([Hosea 1:2](#)) The relationship between Hosea and Gomer parallels the relationship between God and Israel. Even though Gomer runs away from Hosea and sleeps with another man, he loves her anyway and forgives her. Hosea's family life reflected the "adulterous" relationship which Israel had built with false gods. Even though the people of Israel worshipped false gods, God continued to love them and did not abandon his covenant with them. His marriage will dramatize the breakdown in the relationship between God and His people Israel.

Similarly, his children's names represent God's estrangement from Israel. They are prophetic of the fall of the ruling dynasty and the severed covenant with God.

- A first born son - "Give him the name 'Jezreel'" ([Hosea 1:4](#)) Jezreel: (lit., "God will sow") the strategic valley in northern Israel where Jehu brought the dynasty of Omri to an end through bloodshed (2 Kgs 9–10). Jeroboam II was the next to the last king of the house of Jehu. The prophecy in this verse of the end of the house of Jehu was fulfilled by the murder of Zechariah, son of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 15:8–10).
- A daughter named "Not-Pitied" ([Hosea 1:6](#)) in Hebrew *lo-ruhama*. (In Hosea 2:23 she is redeemed, shown mercy with the term *Ruhamah*.)
- A second son: "Not-My-People" (Hosea 1:8) - in Hebrew *lo-ammi*. It can also be understood more literally as "I am not 'I am' for you", a reference to the divine name revealed to Moses, "I am" (Ex 3:14). This reversal of the relationship marks the end of the covenant (Ex 6:7).

Hosea saw relationship inaugurated by Yahweh's grace in Israel's distant past. Jacob, the patriarch, was not always a grateful recipient of it ([ch. 12](#)). Israel, the people, tasted it in the Exodus (2:15; 13:4), the wilderness (2:15; 9:10) and the settlement in the land (2:15). That grace viewed Israel as special to Yahweh, cared for by him and commissioned to serve him.

Hosea also saw the relationship jeopardized from the beginning by Israel's forgetfulness. Like a geography teacher Hosea took his hearers from place to place reminding them of their penchant to tax the relationship by their fickleness: '*Baal-peor—and consecrated themselves to the Shameful One*' ([9:10](#)); '*Gilgal—All their misfortune began in Gilgal*' ([9:15](#)); "Bethel" where they desecrated Yahweh's name and Jacob's memory with the golden calf ([10:5–6](#)); "Gibeah"— where the Book of Judges 19 records a gruesome tale of gang-rape'.

Despite that sordid past, Hosea saw in his own times the relationship sunk to its lowest point in Israel's unrepentant history. The cult of the Baals, the instability of the monarchy and the naivety of foreign policies were its three chief expressions. Hosea's accusations were laced with metaphors that exposed Israel's rebellion: stubborn calf ([4:16](#)), loaf half-baked ([7:8–9](#)), silly and senseless dove ([7:11](#)), baby too refusing to be born ([13:13](#)). And his announcements of judgment were conveyed in pictures of appropriate ferocity: God would be a lion, a leopard, a she-bear ([13:7–8](#)).

So sorry was the present that the near future could mean only a relationship severed by invasion and exile. Military intervention, with all the brutality for which the Assyrians were famous, and removal from the land, with all the pain of dislocation and deprivation—these were the necessary means of purging the nation.

Yet in the face of all of this, Hosea has a clear picture of the covenant relationship restored at Israel's return to Yahweh. Five times in the flow of the book, this reconciliation is intimated ([1:10–2:1](#); [2:14–23](#); [3:1–5](#); [11:8–11](#); [14:1–7](#)), conveying the overall intent of the book: the persistent presence of Yahweh's love despite his people's endemic waywardness. A new marriage awaits Israel in God's time and on God's terms. Because Hosea knew this, he had the courage to rebuild the relationship that Gomer had shattered, and to demonstrate both the reality and the cost of such reconciliation.

Hosea 14 is offered as a measure of Hope: "*Return, Israel, to the LORD, your God; you have stumbled because of your iniquity.*" Hosea offers that if the will return to the Lord, He will heal their apostasy, turn away his anger, be like dew on the morning blossom, and they will again be verdant and fruitful. The final verse, Hosea 14:10, notes "*Who is wise enough to understand these things? Who is intelligent enough to know them? Straight are the paths of the LORD. the just walk in them.*"

There is time for conversion and repentance, but only the wise will discern what needs to be done.