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# BOOK OF HOSEA

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**Approximate date:** 755-715 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate); 700s-600s B.C.E. (Left)

**Time period:** impending calamity on the Northern Kingdom via Assyria

**Author(s):** Hosea and/or a close associate (Right, conservative-moderate); followers of Hosea, writers and editors (Left)

**Location of prophet/author(s):** Northern Kingdom of Israel (Right, some conservative-moderate); somewhere in the Land of Israel (some conservative-moderate, Left)

**Target audience and their location:** Northern Kingdom Israelites prior to the Assyrian exile (Right, conservative-moderate; some Left); Southern Kingdom Israelites after the conquering of the Northern Kingdom (some Left)

**People:**

Hosea, Gomer, Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, House of Judah, Lo-Ammi, Ephraim or Israel (Northern Kingdom)

**People mentioned:**

Beeri, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Jeroboam (son of Joash), Diblaim, house of Jehu, Baal(s) (deity), David, Adam, Jacob

**Places:**

Valley of Jezreel, Samaria, Bethel

**Places mentioned:**

Valley of Achor, Egypt, Gilgal, Beth Aven, Mizpah, Tabor, Gibeah, Ramah, Benjamin, Gilead, Shechem, Assyria, Memphis, Baal Peor, Tyre, Beth Arbel, Admah, Zeboiim, Aram, Lebanon

**Key Themes:**

Hosea is called by God to marry Gomer / Gomer bears three children: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-Ammi / God compares Israel's unfaithfulness to the adultery of a wife / adulterous Israel will not find satisfaction in its "lovers" / adulterous Israel will not return to the Lord and be restored / God commands Hosea to be reconciled to his adulterous wife Gomer / God condemns the priests of Israel and their faithless service / God condemns the specific sinful actions of the Northern Kingdom of Ephraim / the condition of unrepentant Israel is explained / God decrees that His restoration of Ephraim will still expose their sins / Israel (Northern Kingdom) in spite of outwardly

acknowledging the Lord, will still be judged by Him because of an inherent failure to obey / Ephraim will suffer exile to the very countries that it adulterated with, as it is engrossed in severe judgment / in spite of Ephraim's rebellion, God's affection for the people prevents Him from completely destroying them, and He promises restoration / God describes how casting Israel away is consistent with His actions in the past / God decrees that the reason Ephraim must be judged is because they have forgotten Him as Savior, instead going after idols / God calls Israel to return to Him and experience blessing

**Key Scriptures:** Hosea 1:10-11; 2:16-20; 3:1; 4:1-2, 5-6; 5:9-10; 6:1-3, 6; 7:1-2; 11:1, 6-9, 12; 12:6, 9; 13:4 / **Hosea's wayward wife** (1:1-3:5); **God's wayward people** (4:1-14:9)

**Theological Summary:** The Book of Hosea is the first text among the Twelve Prophets in the Jewish order of the Tanach, because among these books it is probably one of the oldest (b.*Bava Batra* 14b).<sup>1</sup> In the Christian division of the Bible, Hosea is placed as the first of the Minor Prophets.

The name of the Prophet Hosea or *Hoshea* (הוֹשֵׁעַ) is derived from the root *yasha* (יָשַׁע), meaning "to save," and even though the Book of Hosea details many of the problems of Ancient Israel, redemption is a major theme. Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the period of Amos, who himself prophesied judgment upon the Northern Kingdom via an unnamed enemy. Hosea names this enemy as Assyria (7:11; 8:9; 10:6; 11:11). Most scholars agree that Hosea was from the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, even though we cannot know for certain.<sup>2</sup> If indeed Hosea came from the Northern Kingdom, then his is one of only two prophetic works originating from it.<sup>3</sup>

Hosea criticizes the Northern Kingdom of Israel for its alliance with Assyria, and accuses the leadership of deliberately leading the people away from worship of the Lord. While outside influences had existed since the division of Israel, it reached its peak during the time of Hosea.<sup>4</sup> Hosea calls the people of the Northern Kingdom back to the covenant of Sinai,<sup>5</sup> and likens their condition to a state of adultery. Messages that predominate the prophecies of Hosea include Israel's abandonment of God, God's punishment upon the Northern Kingdom, and the hope of reconciliation between God and all of Israel including the Southern Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hosea came first: 'God spoke first to Hosea' (Hos. 1:2). But did he speak first of all with Hosea? And were there not any number of prophets from Moses to Hosea? And said R. Yohanan, 'He was the first of the group of four prophets who prophesied at that time: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah.' *So should not Hosea come first? Well, since his prophecies are written down along with those of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, and since Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are designated as the conclusion of prophecy, he is reckoned along with them. So why not write out his prophecy on its own and put it first? Well, his scroll is so small that if copied on its own it might get lost*" (b.*Bava Batra* 14b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Hindley, "Hosea," in *NBCR*, 703.

<sup>3</sup> R.K. Harrison, "Hosea," in *NIDB*, 451.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 451-452.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

It is unknown whether Hosea wrote down his own prophecies, or someone else compiled them. Hosea is often referred to as one of the “writing prophets” (Seow, *ABD*).<sup>6</sup> Some conservatives believe that Hosea did write down his own prophecies, or at least some of them.<sup>7</sup> Others, however, feel that they were written down later and compiled into a narrated form. Particular arguments against total authorship by Hosea often relate to references to the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and how Hosea as a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim could not include references to the Southern Kingdom. Many conservatives feel that although Hosea’s primary message was to the Northern Kingdom, he by no means excluded the Southern Kingdom as God wanted to eventually see all Israel reunified. Conservatives do not doubt the possibility of some final editing<sup>8</sup> of Hosea, particularly in the narrative sections.

Liberal commentators, however, generally feel that the Book of Hosea has been thoroughly edited. They usually argue that the prophecies of Hosea were collected by his followers, and then compiled into a volume,<sup>9</sup> having been written in third person. While this somewhat mirrors what many conservatives believe, liberals often go a step further and suggest that the text was modified by a Judean hand.<sup>10</sup> Some extreme liberals of the past even suggested an exclusive Judean authorship for the text, because of the very mention of Judah and not exclusively the Northern Kingdom (4:15; 5:5, 10, 12-14; 6:4, 11).<sup>11</sup> It is often argued by liberals that only the “doom” elements of Hosea are authentic to the Prophet, but this has been changing in more modern critical circles.<sup>12</sup> Many liberals doubt the historical reliability of some parts of the book.<sup>13</sup>

Some very bad textual corruption of Hosea is present in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, with some considering it the worst among the Tanach books.<sup>14</sup> This makes ancient translations such as the Greek Septuagint to be useful in reconstructing various sentences.<sup>15</sup> Likewise to be considered, “With the possible exception of Job, the book of Hosea has the dubious distinction of having the most obscure passages of the entire Hebrew Bible” (Seow, *ABD*).<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew of Hosea is difficult in some places to render into English, where consultation of versions like the LXX is useful.<sup>17</sup> The difficulties of Hosea possibly originate because of Hosea being a text composed in the Northern Kingdom,<sup>18</sup> and “there is no other northern Israelite

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<sup>6</sup> C.L. Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

<sup>7</sup> E. Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:766.

<sup>8</sup> Dillard and Longman, 355.

<sup>9</sup> J.D. Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 3:648.

<sup>10</sup> Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 2:651; Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:766; Margaret S. Odell, “Hosea, Book of,” in *EDB*, 609.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 869-870; Leon, J. Wood, “Hosea,” in *EXP*, 7:161-163.

<sup>12</sup> Dillard and Longman, 355.

<sup>13</sup> Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:293-294.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 872-873; Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:765-766.

<sup>15</sup> Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 2:651.

<sup>16</sup> Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

<sup>17</sup> Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:766.

<sup>18</sup> Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

text tradition with which Hosea may be compared” (*EDB*).<sup>19</sup> Modern studies in Semitic languages such as Ugaritic are shedding more light on the difficulties of Hosea.<sup>20</sup>

Hosea probably prophesied for a period of about 38 years, given the kings listed (1:1),<sup>21</sup> between about 755-715 B.C.E.<sup>22</sup> Hosea lived during the tragic period of the fall of the Northern Kingdom (cf. 2 Kings 15:8-17:6) to Assyria.<sup>23</sup> It is imperative for anyone reading Hosea to consider the Syro-Ephraimite crisis of 735 B.C.E. and the politics of intrigue that led to the Northern Kingdom being defeated. Most of Hosea’s prophecies were fulfilled within thirty years of them being delivered. It can be hard at times to determine the relationship and correlations between Hosea’s and Amos’ prophecies,<sup>24</sup> even though Hosea is probably just realizing some more specifics of what Amos expected.

The first part of Hosea (chs. 1-3) narrates the family of Hosea and his marriage to the adulterous prostitute Gomer. Some Jewish<sup>25</sup> and Christian<sup>26</sup> interpreters over the centuries have felt that this is only to be taken as an allegory, that perhaps draws upon traditions of the Canaanite god Baal.<sup>27</sup> Many, however, still maintain that it is a literal story.<sup>28</sup> Those adopting a more figurative view have difficulty believing that God would tell His Prophet to marry a prostitute. Some adopt a middle position of believing that Gomer was inclined to prostitution prior to Hosea marrying, only to become engulfed by it after marriage.<sup>29</sup> All views are present among both conservative and liberal interpreters.

Hosea’s marriage is a point of tension in contemporary examinations of the book. “We cannot provide a definitive answer to this problem...these chapters do not intend to provide us with a biography of Hosea” (Dillard and Longman).<sup>30</sup> Whether one adopts a figurative or literal view of his marriage to Gomer, his marriage does draw important imagery from the Ancient Near East.<sup>31</sup> Hosea’s marriage mirrors the rebellion of Israel, and how God could have divorced Israel but did not (2:4, 9, 18). Israel was, however, to go through a period of exile and separation (7:16; 9:3, 6, 17; 11:5). Israel’s return is likened to a second Exodus (1:11; 2:14-23; 3:5; 11:10-11; 14:4-7). And, what is most difficult about these passages is to remember that references to “Israel” throughout the Book of Hosea are largely to the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, although context ultimately determines whether the

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<sup>19</sup> Odell, “Hosea, Book of,” in *EDB*, 609.

<sup>20</sup> Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 860; Hindley, in *NBCR*, 703.

<sup>22</sup> Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:762; Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

<sup>23</sup> Wood, in *EXP*, 7:161-162; Dillard and Longman, pp 355-356.

<sup>24</sup> Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 2:648.

<sup>25</sup> Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 2:649; Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:763; Seow, “Hosea, Book of,” in *ABD*, 3:292.

<sup>26</sup> Smart, “Hosea (man and book),” in *IDB*, 2:650-651; Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 866-867; Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:763; Wood, in *EXP*, 7:164.

<sup>27</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1253.

<sup>28</sup> Hindley, in *NBCR*, 703-704; Wood, in *EXP*, 7:164-165.

<sup>29</sup> Ball, “Hosea,” in *ISBE*, 2:763.

<sup>30</sup> Dillard and Longman, 357; cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 863-865.

<sup>31</sup> Sweeney, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1143.

Northern Kingdom or the whole people of Israel, Northern and Southern Kingdoms, are in view.

The second part of Hosea (chs. 4-14) relates to Israel's involvement in pagan Canaanite religion, and includes a series of direct prophetic oracles. Israel fails to acknowledge God (4:1, 6; 8:2-3; 13:4), yet God remains faithful because of His love for Israel (2:19; 4:1; 6:6; 10:12; 12:6). The disloyalty that Israel demonstrated toward God was considered tantamount to adultery against a husband (4:13-14; 5:4; 9:1). Conservative examiners of Hosea often give important weight to discoveries made at Ugarit, comparing Canaanite religion to the idolatrous practices of the Northern Kingdom Israelites, much of which included various sexual rites. Understanding how the Baal cult had permeated Israelite religion is very important for understanding Hosea's message.<sup>32</sup>

Hosea demonstrates that God is faithful to His people, but that He will also punish sin. Restoration is offered to those who repent of sin (1:10-11; 2:14-23; 3:5; 11:10-11; 14:4-7), but individuals must make the conscious decision to repent. The Hebrew terms *chesed* (חֶסֶד) or "lovingkindness," *ahavah* (אַהֲבָה) or "love," and *rachamim* (רַחֲמִים) or "mercy" feature throughout the text.<sup>33</sup> While Hosea was primarily a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, ultimately his message would concern all Israel.<sup>34</sup>

A major theme seen in Hosea is theodicy, which is the attempt to justify Divine righteousness in the midst of evil: "Perhaps...[a] most notable theological contribution is his insight into the personal and social dynamics of behavior—the relationship of action to will and disposition, the pervasive self-destruction worked by the apostate heart, the moral interdependence of all the members of a community, for good or ill, and the need for divine initiative to break the web of corporate self-enslavement" (*IDBSup*).<sup>35</sup> Modern Jewish theologians have had to consider the message of Hosea in light of the Holocaust, and many liberals today consider its message to be very important in view of terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>36</sup>

Hosea's prophecies significantly affected the worldview of the Apostles,<sup>37</sup> as Hosea strongly stresses God's redemption. We see the Apostles incorporating the ideas of Davidic kingship restored to the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah. Paul (Romans 9:25) and Peter (1 Peter 2:10) appropriate the theme of Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 about Israel being scattered and apply it to God's mission assigned them among the nations. Paul refers to Hosea's sarcastic call against the Canaanite God Mot or "Death" (13:14) and applies it to the resurrection of Yeshua and His defeat of death (1 Corinthians 15:55). Hosea 11:1 and the calling of Israel out of Egypt are applied to the brief period Yeshua resided in Egypt (Matthew 2:15).

The Book of Hosea plays an important role in the Jewish liturgical tradition. Hosea 14:2-10 is read during the afternoon service on the Ninth of Av, and on *Shabbat Shuvah* which

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 870-871; J.M. Ward, "Hosea," in *IDBSup*, 422; Ball, "Hosea," in *ISBE*, 2:762; Seow, "Hosea, Book of," in *ABD*, 3:294-295.

<sup>33</sup> Hindley, in *NBCR*, 703.

<sup>34</sup> Ball, "Hosea," in *ISBE*, 2:766.

<sup>35</sup> Ward, "Hosea," in *IDBSup*, 422.

<sup>36</sup> Sweeney, in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1254.

<sup>37</sup> Ball, "Hosea," in *ISBE*, 2:766-767; Dillard and Longman, 362.

occurs between *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Hosea 1:1-22 is read in conjunction with the Torah portion *Bamidbar* (Numbers 1:1-4:20), and Hosea 2:21-22 is read when Jewish men wrap *tefillin* or phylacteries for morning prayers.<sup>38</sup>

There is some limited Messianic handling of the Book of Hosea. Most of this is relegated to either specific Messianic prophecies applied by the Apostles to Yeshua, or other prophecies in regard to the restoration of Israel. If there is any area that needs improvement among Messianics regarding Hosea, it would be in failing to examine Hosea as a whole, rather than just bits and pieces of the text.

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON HOSEA:

- 1. Describe the significance of Hosea's and Gomer's marriage. How does this compare to the judgments that God will declare on His people throughout Hosea's prophecy?**
- 2. Of all the sins listed against Israel in Hosea, which ones do you consider to be the most severe?**
- 3. Having read through Hosea, how do we balance Hosea's words directed specifically toward the Northern Kingdom, versus Israel as a whole? How much of Hosea's prophecy really does need to be considered in light of its ancient context?**

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<sup>38</sup> Sweeney, in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1143.

**4. How do you balance the negative *and* positive words seen in Hosea's prophecy?**

**5. Do you believe that today's Messianic community takes the message and themes of Hosea seriously? Why or why not?**

## REFLECTION ON HOSEA'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Hosea:*