

THE BOOK OF HOSEA

Message:

The message of Hosea can be stated as follows: The covenant¹ unfaithfulness of God's People (Israel) will result in divine judgment but God's love for His people will ultimately transcend their unfaithfulness. The frequent allusions to Torah and metaphor of marriage suggest that Israel's violation was at its center covenantal and thus relational. Israel had violated their sacred relationship to Yahweh. Thus, the call of repentance to Israel in the book is a call back to a relationship with God.

Author:

According to 1:1, the human author of the prophecy was Hosea (הוֹשֵׁעַ, "salvation" or "deliverance") son of Beeri. A literal reading of chapters 1–3 suggests that Hosea was married and had at least three children.² Little else is known about the prophet's background. It is suggested based on certain clues within the book that Hosea was from the Northern Kingdom.³ Some scholars have called Hosea's authorship into question particularly as it relates to passages that refer to the Southern Kingdom of Judah (e.g., 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12–14; 6:4, 11; etc.) and the so-called "salvation passages" (e.g., 11:8–11; 14:2–9).⁴ The former passages are questioned because Hosea is apparently from the North and the latter is questioned because of the predominant emphasis on judgment in the book. However, neither of these arguments is persuasive in that similar phenomena occur elsewhere in the prophetic writings.

Recipients:

There is little question that the primary original recipients of Hosea were the Northern Kingdom of Israel, frequently called Ephraim, the largest northern tribe (4:17; 5:3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14; 6:4, 10; 7:1, 8, 11; 8:9, 11; 9:3, 8, 13, 16; 10:6, 11; 11:3, 8, 9, 12; 12:1, 8, 14; 13:1, 12; 14:8).

¹ Douglas Stuart states, "Understanding the message of the book of Hosea depends upon understanding the Sinai covenant. The book contains a series of blessings and curses announced for Israel by God through Hosea. Each blessing or curse is based upon a corresponding type in the Mosaic law. Some blessings and curses so specifically parallel the pentateuchal formulations that they border on "citation," though citation per se was unknown in ancient legal procedure; others, more generally, merely allude to the pentateuchal wordings. Although Hosea's style was in many ways original, his message was not at all innovative. Hosea's task was simply to warn that Yahweh intended to enforce the terms of his covenant" (Douglas Stuart, *Hosea - Jonah*, vol. 31, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. John D. W. Watts (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 6-7.).

² However, the interpretation of chapters 1–3 is highly debated. See the discussion on the problems of Hosea 1–3 below.

³ These internal clues include geographical references related to Northern Israel (5:1; 6:8–9; 12:12; 14:6), certain Aramaisms (Israel's northern neighbor was Aramaic-speaking Syria), and Hosea's reference to Israel's king as "our king" (7:5).

⁴ Leon J. Wood, "Hosea," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 162-3.

However, there are fifteen explicit references to Judah in Hosea which may indicate that Judah was a secondary audience (1:1, 7, 11; 4:15; 5:5, 10, 12, 13, 14; 6:4, 11; 8:4; 10:11; 11:12; 12:2).

Dating:

Hosea 1:1 mentions that his ministry spanned four Judean kings (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) and one Israelite king (Jeroboam II).⁵ Since the date of these kings are fairly well established it is possible to locate the general time period of Hosea.

SOUTHERN KINGDOM: JUDAH ⁶	NORTHERN KINGDOM: ISRAEL
Uzziah (792–740 B.C.)	Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.)
Jotham (750–731 B.C.)	
Ahaz (735–715 B.C.)	
Hezekiah (729–686 B.C.)	

So it can be seen that Hosea ministered at the very least from 753–728, or twenty-five years. Several additional clues in Hosea might help to date Hosea's prophecy. For example, the mention of the coming judgment against the "house of Jehu" in 1:4 points to a time before the death of Jeroboam II since he was part of the "house of Jehu." This judgment probably occurred in the assassination of Zechariah, Jeroboam's son in 753 B.C. (2 Kgs 15:8–12). Hosea also appears to refer to other assassinations in the past tense (e.g., 7:3, 16; 8:4). In 5:13, Hosea mentions relations with Assyria which might refer to Menahem's negotiations with Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kgs 15:19-20; see also 8:9; 12:1). Menahem reigned from 752–742 B.C. One other factor is commonly mentioned, namely, that Hosea does not refer to the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722. A number of commentators suggest that Hosea lived through the fall but perhaps stopped writing prior to the fall. In conclusion, Hosea ministered sometime between 753–728, perhaps even down to 710.

Historical Setting:

Hosea's ministry occurred during a time of Israelite prosperity and military success. During the first part of Hosea's ministry the Assyrian hold over the region was temporarily loosened. However, the Assyrian domination in the region was reestablished with the Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.). Israel was also on the decline spiritually with godless kings, rampant idolatry (particularly the Canaanite fertility god Baal), and pervasive immorality.

⁵ Interestingly, Hosea does not mention the six kings of Israel that followed Jeroboam II : Zechariah (753 B.C.), Shallum (752 B.C.), Menahem (752-742 B.C.), Pekah (752-732 B.C.), Pekahiah (742-740 B.C.), and Hoshea (732-723 B.C.). Various explanations have been offered including the suggestion that these kings were relatively insignificant or that Hosea considered them illegitimate.

⁶ All dates are from Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 320.

The Problem of Hosea 1–3

One of the most perplexing issues in Hosea relates to the interpretation of chapters 1–3. The numerous interrelated issues to be untangled include the genre of chapters 1–3, the nature of the marriage or marriages mentioned in 1:2–3 and 3:1–3, the identity of the wife or wives, and the relationship of the chapters to one another.

Genre

The issue of the genre of chapters 1–3 is complicated. Each of the three chapters contains some narrational sections but also prophetic oracles. A quick survey of English translations shows the difficulty at times of distinguishing between the prose and the poetic. Furthermore, the transparent symbolism in the chapters might suggest that the genre is allegorical. However, it seems best to understand these chapters as historical narrative mixed with prophetic oracles. For the symbolism to be effective, it seems that the marriage(s) should be literal. As C. H. Bullock notes, “if the events here recorded did not actually take place the impact of the story is greatly diminished.”⁷

The nature of the marriage(s)

Another debated issue is the marriage(s) mentioned in 1:2–3 and 3:1–3. We begin by noting three points of similarity. (1) God commands Hosea to marry. (2) A marriage apparently takes place. (3) The wife is associated with sexual immorality. But here the similarities end. In the first case, Hosea is referred to in the third person in the second Hosea speaks and acts in the first person. In the first reference the wife is named (Gomer) in the second she is not. In the first occasion, Hosea fathers children through his wife in the second it does not appear that he even has sexual relations with her. In the first passage detail is provided regarding Hosea’s children, in the second children are not even mentioned. Instead details are provided concerning the securing and subsequent treatment of the bride.

Not surprisingly, how the above data to be understood is debated. Basically, there are two views: visionary/allegorical and literal.

In the visionary/allegorical view, the marriages are not real events but either visionary or literary constructs (allegory). In the first case the marriage(s) only occur in the mind of the prophet.⁸ In the latter case, the marriage(s) are allegorical constructs.⁹ There are at least two advantages to this view. First, the visionary/allegorical view fits within the symbolic nature of the passage. Second, this view avoids the moral difficulty associated with a prophet of God being told to marry a prostitute in what appears to be a violation of Mosaic Law (Lev 21:7, 14). However, there are also significant disadvantages to this view. For example, the narrative style implies real events. The purpose of the marriage in chapter 1 is to produce real children. Furthermore, several

⁷ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 88.

⁸ Proponents of this view include C. F. Keil and E. W. Hengstenberg.

⁹ Proponents of this view include Luther, Calvin, E. J. Young.

details in the narrative appear to be devoid of symbolic significance (the name Gomer, the reference to weaning, the payment of money and barley, etc). It is also difficult to see how the genuine relationship between God and Israel would be best symbolized by a fictitious relationship between Hosea and Gomer.

We now turn our attention to the literal view, or perhaps more accurately, the literal views. That is, Hosea 1–3 refer to an actual marriage involving the prophet. The difference between the literal views generally relate to Gomer’s pre-marriage condition. Some suggest that Gomer was a prostitute (perhaps cultic) prior to her marriage to Hosea. Hosea 1:2 could certainly be read that way. However, this view raises the ethical dilemma of God asking his prophet to marry an immoral woman. It is also unlikely that this reading of Hosea 1:2 is the best one.¹⁰ Another literal approach understands Gomer’s adultery in spiritual (idolatry) rather than sexual terms. While the Scriptures can refer to idolatry in terms of sexual immorality, how could God ask his prophet to marry an idolater? Perhaps the best view is that Gomer became an adulteress after Hosea married her. The statement in 1:2 is understood proleptically.¹¹ This approach alleviates the ethical dilemma of God’s command to Hosea to marry Gomer and would provide a more appropriate parallel to the relationship between God and Israel. As Wood notes, “In the OT Israel is presented as having been chaste when espoused by God in the wilderness (Jer 2:2–3), though God, of course, knew that she would become unfaithful.”¹²

The identity of the wife/wives, and the relationship of chapters 1–3

If one accepts a literal understanding of Hosea’s marriage(s), then a second step must be taken to clarify the relationship of chapters 1–3 to one another. There are basically three approaches to understanding these inter-relationships.¹³ First, it is possible to understand chapters 1–3 as portraying different events and different women. This view understands the differences between the marriages in chapter one and three to indicate different marriages. The marriage in chapter one inaugurates the prophet’s career and pictures judgment whereas the marriage in chapter two concludes the prophet’s career and pictures hope. A second option is to view chapters one and three as parallel accounts. This view would explain both the similarities and differences in the account. The problem with these two views is that do not adequately explain the presence of chapter two. Thus, we suggest that the better view sees two events but the same woman. Broadly speaking, Hosea marries Gomer (chapter one), Gomer falls into immorality and the relationship is broken (chapter two), and then Hosea takes Gomer back (chapter three). This view has the advantage of harmonizing chapters 1–3 and provided a good analogy to Yahweh’s relationship with Israel.

¹⁰ Wood, argues this grammatically (“Hosea,” 164) and Chisholm argues it from the case of the implied symbolism to the relationship between Israel and God (Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 337.).

¹¹ For a slightly different grammatical approach see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 280.

¹² Wood, “Hosea,” 166.

¹³ The following discussion owes much to C. Hassell Bullock’s discussion (Bullock, *Introduction*, 88-92.

Purpose:

The purpose of Hosea is basically threefold. First, the book was written to reveal the faithlessness of Israel (and Judah) toward their covenant with Yahweh. Second, the book was written to call Israel (and Judah) to repentance. Third, the book was written to reveal God's faithfulness to His covenant people in spite of their unfaithfulness.

Contributions:

The greatest contribution of Hosea is the metaphor of marriage employed in chapters 1–3 to vividly portray the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Hosea also holds the distinction of being the longest book in the Minor Prophets (if one goes by content).

Hosea and the New Testament:

Hubbard has noted that Hosea's contribution to the New Testament takes the form of echoes, direct quotations, and motifs.¹⁴ For example, echoes from Hosea include "the apocalyptic prediction of people calling for the rocks to cover them from judgment (Lk. 23:30; Ho. 10:9); harvest of righteousness (2 Cor 9:10; Ho. 10:12); fruit of the lips (Heb. 13:15; Ho. 14:2); "I am rich, I have prospered" (Rev. 3:17; Ho. 12:8).¹⁵ Direct quotations occur about six times in the New Testament (Matt 2:15 [11:1]; Matt 9:12; 12:7 [6:6]; Luke 23:30 [10:8]; Rom 9:25 [2:23]; Rom 9:26 [1:10]; 1 Cor [13:14 LXX]). Hosean motifs found in the New Testament include "the priority of relationships and compassion to ritual," "the idea of the "knowledge of God" with its strong connotations of obedience, loyalty and intimacy," and "the marriage metaphor."¹⁶

Literary Features:

The Book of Hosea is generally poetic with two important narrational sections (1:1–2:1; 3:1–5). Hosea is characterized by significant intertextuality, rich imagery, and literary variety. The intertextuality in Hosea can be seen most readily in frequent references to the Pentateuch. Duane Garrett has identified a number of allusions from Genesis (see the table below), references to the Exodus,¹⁷ the Decalogue, and the curses of Deuteronomy 28.¹⁸ The rich imagery of Hosea includes the marriage metaphor (1–3); Ephraim as an unturned cake (7:8), silly dove (7:11), blighted-fruitless plant (9:16), a trained heifer, (10:11), Samaria's king is a twig on the water (10:7). The literary variety includes a variety of forms (e.g., judgment speeches, salvation

¹⁴ David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 47-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-8.

¹⁷ See Hos 7:13; 8:4–6; 9:10; 10:9–10; 11:1–4; 12:9–10; 13:4–6.

¹⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, vol. 19a, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (n.p.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 28.

speeches, proverbs, battle warnings, exhortations to repentance, prohibitions, and love song).¹⁹ There are also a variety of literary devices including irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions (11:8), similes and metaphors, puns (e.g., 1:3; 2:22–23, etc.), riddles (12:11)

HOSEA TEXT ²⁰	GENESIS REFERENCE
1:10	22:17, blessing on Abraham
2:18	1:20–25, creation of wild animals
4:3	1:20–25, creation of wild animals
6:7	3:6, sin of Adam
6:9	34:1–31, destruction of Shechem
9:6	47:29, burial in Egypt
9:14	49:25, blessings of the breasts and of the womb
11:8	14:2 (and Gen 19), destruction of the cities of the plain
12:2–5	25:19–35:15, story of Jacob
12:12–13	30:25–31:16, Jacob's sheep
13:15	41:2, 18, pharaoh's dream

Structure:

Identifying the structure of Hosea is a daunting and debated task.²¹ The issue is complicated by the fact that chapters 4–14 seem to consist of a loosely structured collection of prophetic speeches.²² There is general agreement that the book contains at least two major sections: chapters 1–3 and Chapters 4–14. Robert Chisholm has identified five panels moving from judgment to salvation.²³

<i>Panel</i>	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Salvation</i>
1	1:2–9	1:10–2:1
2	2:2–13	2:14–3:5
3	4:1–5:15a	5:15b–6:3
4	6:4–11:7	11:8–11
5	11:12–13:16	14:1–9

¹⁹ Hubbard, *Hosea*, 35–7.

²⁰ Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 28.

²¹ For a helpful discussion of the issues and various proposals see Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 30–39.

²² A. R. Guenther proposes that 4–14 is structured around the names and symbolic significance of Hosea's three children: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, Lo-ammi (Allen R. Guenther, *Hosea, Amos*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1998), 23–24.).

²³ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990), 22.

Outline

- I. The Marriage of Hosea (1:1–3:5)
- A. The Superscription (1:1)
 - B. Hosea’s Tragic Marriage to Gomer and the Birth of Three Children (1:2–2:1)
 - C. Hosea’s Troubled Marriage Is Applied to Israel (2:2–23)
 - D. Hosea’s Troubled Marriage to Gomer Is Restored (3:1–5)
- II. The Messages of Hosea (4:1–14:9)
- A. First Cycle of Prophetic Messages (4:1–11:11)
 1. A confrontation of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (4:1–19)
 2. A condemnation of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (5:1–15)
 3. A call to repentance ignored (6:1–7:16)
 4. A complete punishment of Israel (8:1–10:15)
 5. A confirmation of God’s love for Israel (11:1–11)
 - B. Second Cycle of Prophetic Messages (11:12–14:9)
 1. A concluding indictment of Israel’s sins (11:12–13:16)
 2. A call to repentance and blessing (14:1–8)
 3. A concluding proverb concerning wisdom (14:9)

Chart

The Marriage of Hosea 1:1–3:5				The Messages of Hosea 4:1–14:9					
Superscription	Hosea’s Tragic Marriage to Gomer and His Three Children	Hosea’s Troubled Marriage Is Applied to Israel	Hosea’s Troubled Marriage to Gomer Is Restored	First Cycle of Prophetic Messages				Second Cycle of Prophetic Messages	
				A confrontation of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (4:1–19)	A condemnation of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (5:1–15)	A call to repentance ignored (6:1–7:16)	A complete punishment of Israel (8:1–10:15)	A confirmation of God’s love for Israel (11:1–11)	A concluding indictment of Israel’s sins (11:12–13:16)
1	1:2–2:1	2:2–23	3:1–5	4:1–11:1				11:12–14:9	
Emphasis on the Prophet				Emphasis on the People					

Expositional of Hosea:**I. THE MARRIAGE OF HOSEA (1:1–3:5)**

- A. The Superscription (v. 1)

- B. Hosea's Tragic Marriage to Gomer and the Birth of Three Children (1:2–2:1)
 - 1. Yahweh commands Hosea to marry Gomer (1:2–3a) –

 - 2. Yahweh commands Hosea to name his children symbolically (1:3b–9) –
 - a. Jezreel (1:3b–5) –

 - b. Lo-Ruhamah (1:6–7) –

 - c. Lo-Ammi (1:8–9) –

 - 3. Yahweh countermands His own rejection of Israel (1:10–2:1) –

- C. Hosea's Troubled Marriage Is Applied to Israel (2:2–23)
 - 1. Yahweh's rejection of Israel (2:2–13) –

 - 2. Yahweh's restoration of Israel (2:14–23) –

- D. Hosea's Troubled Marriage to Gomer Is Restored (3:1–5)
 - 1. The actual restoration of the marriage (3:1–3) –

 - 2. The analogy of the restoration of the marriage (3:4–5) –

II. THE MESSAGES OF HOSEA (4:1–14:9)

A. First Cycle of Prophetic Messages (4:1–11:11)

1. A confrontation of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness (4:1–19)
2. A condemnation of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness (5:1–15)
3. A call to repentance ignored (6:1–7:16)
4. A complete punishment of Israel (8:1–10:15)
5. A confirmation of God's Love for Israel (11:1–11)

B. Second Cycle of Prophetic Messages (11:12–14:9)

1. A concluding indictment of Israel's sins (11:12–13:16)
2. A call to Repentance and Blessing (14:1–8)
3. A concluding proverb concerning the wise (14:9)

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