

Hosea 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Beri in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take to yourself a wife of Hordom, and have children of Hordom, for the land commits great Hordom by forsaking the Lord. So he went and took Gomer the son of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him, Call his name Jezreel, for in just 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. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.

She conceived again and bore a daughter, and the Lord said to him, Call her name No Mercy, for I will have no more mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen. When she had weaned no mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, Call his name Not My People, for you are not My People, and I am not your God. Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or 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. And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head, and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel. Hosea is the first of the twelve minor prophets, which, running from Hosea to Malachi, conclude the Old Testament canon. Isaiah, Jeremiah with Lamentations,

Ezekiel and Daniel, are typically classed as the major prophets, while Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, are referred to as the minor prophets, chiefly on account of their shorter length. While there are twelve books of the minor prophets, since before the time of Christ they were treated as a single book, the book of the twelve, the books within the book were divided from each other, but they belonged to a greater single book, and were volumes within it. In the writings of Eusebius in the second century BC, for instance, the twelve minor prophets are referred to in a manner that suggests that they were classed as a single text. In Acts chapter 7 verse 42, Stephen refers to the book singular of the prophets when citing Amos. Melito of Sardis in the second century AD also refers to the twelve in one book. The ordering of the twelve volumes of the book of the twelve varies in different textual traditions. Christian orderings of the twelve follow the order of the Masoretic text. The prophecies contained in the book of the twelve cover a period of Israel's history from the first half of the 8th century BC to around the middle of the 5th century BC, addressing situations before and after the exile, moving from an emphasis on judgment to one of restoration. The book of the twelve is held together by themes such as that of the day of the Lord. Some scholars have also seen connections between the books and their current ordering, observing catchphrases that connect the beginning of books to the end of those that preceded them, although some of the volumes seem to have a more stable place within the larger book. For instance, Hosea chapter 14 verse 7 mentions the flourishing of the grain and the wine, but then Joel chapter 1 refers to the laying waste of the grain and the wine by the locust invasion. In Joel chapter 3 verse 16 we read,

The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem. The exact same words are taken up in Amos chapter 1 verse 2. Hosea is one of the longest of the twelve minor prophets, with only Zechariah being longer than it. It is the first of the volumes of the book of the twelve in both the Septuagint and in the Masoretic text. Not all of the books of the minor prophets can clearly be dated, but Hosea begins by giving us the period of Hosea's prophetic ministry. Hosea was a close contemporary of Isaiah, prophesying during the reigns of the same kings. Amos also prophesied during the reign of Uzziah, which suggests that Hosea might not have been the earliest of the minor prophets. Hosea lived during an exceedingly eventful period in the history of Israel and Judah.

The power of Assyria rose rapidly under Tiglath-Pileser III to become the dominant force in the region. It would later overthrow the northern kingdom, and it almost overcame the southern kingdom of Judah too. As Assyrian power rose, the kingdom of Israel flourished for a time under Jeroboam II, as the Arameans were weakened and no longer troubled it. Israel's foreign policy was a fraught issue during this period, as it had to determine whether to throw in its lot with the Syrians or Arameans, or whether it had to do so with the Assyrians. Differences on this question seem to have contributed to the extreme political instability of Israel after the death of Jeroboam II. After his death, there were a number of kings in short succession. Around 738 BC, Pekah the king of Israel formed an alliance with Rezen, the Syrian, a former enemy, and they attacked Judah and Jerusalem in the Syro-Ephraimite war around 733 BC. Ahaz of Judah appealed to Assyria for aid, and Tiglath-Pileser III defeated the northern kingdom and set up Hosea as an Assyrian vassal. However, after Tiglath-Pileser's death, Hosea rebelled and sought to align Israel with Egypt instead. The Assyrians came up against

[5 : 43] Samaria and the northern kingdom fell around 722 BC. Hosea's ministry spanned this period of immense upheaval. Hosea speaks to both the northern and the southern kingdoms, both Israel and Judah, within his prophecy, although his focus is more upon the north. Although the kingdoms were separate, the people were a single, albeit divided, family, and even though they were at war with each other for some periods of Hosea's ministry, we should expect some sense of their kinship would always have been present. Although Hosea seems to have been a prophet operating chiefly in the north, it is the names of the kings of Judah that head the list of the kings during whose reigns Hosea ministered. Furthermore, Jeroboam II's reign ended around 746 BC and Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah all reigned during the period after that time in Judah, Hezekiah coming to the throne around 715 BC.

It is possible that Hosea moved to the southern kingdom of Judah as things heated up for him in the north, as his message went contrary to the nation's foreign policy. Verse 2 introduces the first of the words delivered by the Lord through Hosea, likely around 750 BC, as it deals with the house of Jehu, which ended less than a year after the death of Jeroboam II. The opening three chapters of the book of Hosea contain elements of narrative and present the hero of the book of the Twelve with an arresting metaphor for the Lord's relationship with his people at its very opening. While several biblical prophets were instructed to perform various prophetic sign acts, perhaps none is so shocking as the one that Hosea was given here, taking a wife of Hordom. In this chapter, Hosea is commanded to perform actions by the Lord on four successive occasions. The first occasion, given in verse 2, outlines the Lord's commission to Hosea more generally. He must take a wife of Hordom and have children of Hordom. The wife of Hordom was a woman of sexual ill repute, whether on account of prostitution or something else.

To marry such a woman would be shameful, and that shame would also affect the way that the children of the union would be regarded. It seems most likely that the children that were born were Hosea's own children, but they would have carried the deep stigma of being children of a whore. The power of the prophetic sign is seen in the relationship between this disgraced woman and the land, presumably thereby referring to the unfaithful Israelites. Throughout scripture, adultery and idolatry are repeatedly related. The Lord entered into a covenant with Israel at Sinai, taking her as his bride, yet she had proven unfaithful to him. Such a metaphor for the Lord's relationship with Israel is developed at length in Ezekiel chapter 16, although no other prophet was given a commission so remarkable as that of Hosea here in order to illustrate it. Hosea obeys the Lord's commission by taking a woman called Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, as his wife. When she conceived and bore a son, Hosea was instructed to name him Jezreel. Such naming of children as prophetic signs is also seen in Isaiah chapter 8 verses 3 to 4.

The name Jezreel probably relates to scattering. The valley of Jezreel was a strategic geographic location in the land of Israel in the north, giving access to its territory. Jezreel was also the site of Jehu's defeat of the Omrides, the house of Ahab. However, the blood of Jezreel would soon come back on the head of the house of Jehu, which would be cut off shortly afterwards. Having named one son after scattering, and in allusion to the bloody dawn of the house of Jehu that would soon be matched with its bloody sunset, Hosea has a second child by Gomer, this time a daughter. This child has a more troubling name, No Mercy. Israel relied upon the covenant mercy and goodness of God for its continued existence. For the Lord to cease to extend such mercy to her was a serious matter indeed.

The Lord would not, however, spare Israel, which would fall to the Assyrians. Nevertheless, he declares that he would have mercy on the house of Judah. Judah was miraculously delivered from the Assyrians by the angel of the Lord, just when it seemed as though Jerusalem was doomed.

[10:08] The third and final child born to Gomer was a son, to be called Not My People, the most threatening name of all. The familiar covenant formula was that God would be the people's God and that they would be his people. However, this child is named after the inverse or negation of that. You are not my people, and I am not your God. The covenant bond is broken. The chapter ends on the most surprising note, however. It moves from a devastating statement of judgment to one of restoration so quickly that the hero might get whiplash. The final two verses reversed the previous judgments. The children of Israel would be multiplied as the sand of the sea in fulfillment of the promises first given to Abraham.

The people who had been scattered would now be gathered. Jezreel, which was the place of the fall of the dynasty and the influx of the adversaries into the land, would become the place where a united people would venture forth against their enemies as a mighty power under one, presumably Davidic king.

A question to consider, can you think of other occasions in the prophetic literature where Israel is compared to an unfaithful wife?