

HOSEA – SHORT VERSION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Hosea, a contemporary of Amos, also preached in the Northern Kingdom. He preached in the eighth century BC during the thirty years prior to Israel's fall to the Assyrians, which took place in 730BC. More specifically, Hosea preached during the last years of the reign of Jeroboam when Israel enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. Hosea also prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam's successors, which turned out to be chaotic years for Israel. Four of the kings were assassinated.

So over a period of about thirty years, Hosea has seen seven kings come and go. Pursuing their own greedy ends and trying to play power politics, the ruling class ignore the poor and the needy in their midst and lead the people into idolatry, a form of spiritual prostitution.

Unique feature of the book of Hosea. The most unique and striking feature of this book is that it is the first book of the Bible to use the metaphor of marriage to describe God's relationship with Israel—an image that would often be used later by other prophets and by Christ and Paul. The marriage image is one that Hosea first *lived* in his personal life before he *preached* it in his oracles or sermons.

In his book, *Set My Exiles Free*, Fr. John Power writes: *“Hosea was a good man whose marriage turned out an unhappy one. Having borne him three children, his wife Gomer took up, not with another man, but with a number of men. Hosea divorced her according to the Mosaic law, and she apparently became a temple prostitute in one of the pagan shrines of the northern kingdom. In the eyes of a pious*

Israelite—and Hosea was one—this was the lowest any woman could go. But Hosea's life and actions are dominated by God, and so Hosea takes her back, in fact, ransoms her from the pagan shrine—‘bought her for fifteen shekels of silver’ (3:2). And he goes on to say (v.5): ‘Afterwards the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God...’ In other words, God enlightens Hosea and enables him to see in his painful domestic tragedy a picture of the infidelity of Israel. Israel had been espoused to God—this is what the Sinai covenant meant for the prophets. But she proved an unfaithful spouse who

turned her back on God to worship false gods. This idolatry the prophets always called adultery. As Jeremiah says bluntly: ‘Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the harlot?’ (3:6).

“Hosea saw that his own generous action in taking back Gomer mirrored, however faintly, the patience of a loving God who will forgive and finally restore erring Israel. And Hosea preached the mercy and tenderness of God so insistently that he has become known as the prophet of divine love. God's special love for Israel is expressed very beautifully in Chapter 11” (p.117).

As we read this book, we will discover that Hosea is a deeply sensitive man whose emotions can instantly transform from violent anger to the deepest tenderness.

It might be good to keep in mind the words of one commentator whose name I cannot recall: “When it comes to the transmission of this text, it seems as if the original pieces fell on the floor but were not put back together properly by the final editor.” For example, chapter 2 begins with verse 4, and verses 1-3 are placed elsewhere. Similarly, the 1991 edition of the New American Bible begins chapter 2 with verse 4, whereas the 2011 edition begins it with verse 1. The English translations of Hosea sometimes offer very different readings of the same passage.

DIVISION OF CHAPTERS

PART ONE: THE PROPHET'S MARRIAGE AND ITS SYMBOLISM (Chs 1-3)

PART TWO: CONSEQUENCES OF ISRAEL'S SINFUL CONDUCT (Chs 4-14)

Two clear themes in chapters 4-13 are God's judgment on Israel and God's love for Israel. *“The dark gloom evoked by the message of judgment is frequently brightened by an insight of love that is irrepressible”* (Peter Craigie). Chapter 14 is a call to conversion.

Suggested texts to read

Chapters 1-3: The first three chapters focus upon the symbolic meaning of Hosea's marriage to Gomer. Chapter 1 explains the symbolic meaning of the names of their three children. In chapter 3, Gomer is asked to take back his adulterous wife.

CHAPTER 11: God's parental love for Israel

"When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the farther they went from me." (vv 1-2)

The language of love dominates this chapter, although it is not the imagery of marital love but rather that of parental love for a rebellious child. From the perspective of a parent, God has done all the right things, providing loving care and encouragement to his children. But as every parent knows, children have a will of their own and are capable of rejecting a parent's love. This is what Israel did when she chose to worship Baal, an act tantamount to rejection of her true parent (God) for another parent.

Those who sometimes say that the God of the Old Testament is a harsh, condemning God have not read Hosea who images God as a very loving being despite having been rejected over and over by Israel, his spouse. *"How could I give you up, O Ephraim.... My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred"* (v.8).

Chapter 11 expresses for the first time the conflict in God's heart for his child, Israel. On the one hand, he loves her very much: *"I fostered her like one who raises an infant to his cheeks..."* (v. 4). On the other hand, like any parent, God is totally frustrated with Israel's lack of response to his love and care: *"Because she refused to repent her own counsels shall devour her"* (v. 6).