Hosea Commentary

Hosea is the first of the twelve books of the Minor Prophets. This makes it particularly important as it sets the tone for the entire collection commonly referred to as “The Twelve.” Hosea prophesied, approximately, during the years 753 to 687 B.C., and most likely during the early part of this time frame. Up to this time, the northern kingdom (“Israel”) had experienced an extended period of stability and prosperity. We would observe from the book of Amos, who was prophesying just a bit earlier, that God was appalled at the stratification that had emerged in society, with the super rich taking unjust advantage of the poor in the land. We find Hosea prophesying near the end of this period, when Assyrian dominance was finally making headway into areas of the northern kingdom, eventually conquering the region in 722.

The setting of Hosea, then, involves the prophet announcing his final judgments to the people during this period when they were on the verge of being overtaken by Assyrian invaders. Hosea often refers to Ephraim, the tribe that had become the most dominant in the northern kingdom, and thus was essentially a synonym for the entire northern kingdom. We also see mention of Samaria, the capital city of the northern kingdom. There are a few prophecies directed at the southern kingdom of “Judah” as well, but the main thrust of Hosea’s prophecies are towards the northern kingdom. It should also be noted that a consistent literary feature of Hosea is the use of metaphor and simile, e.g., “Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria.” (7:11).

The book of Hosea rather neatly subdivides into two sections; chapters 1-3, and chapters 4-14. The first three chapters include as their main feature the description of Hosea taking a “wife of whoredom” and siring “children of whoredom” with her. The children are given names that serve as symbolic representations of Hosea’s prophetic announcements to Israel. There is no reason to doubt the historical accuracy of these events, or to try to tone them down.

They were God’s directives, and they were a visceral allegory of what the relationship between God and his people was like during Hosea’s
day: God, whose words and thoughts and deeds are pure and holy and righteous, was in a covenantal relationship with a people who had utterly cheapened themselves through their unjust actions and their impure religious harlotries. They had sold out their loving husband by going after the Baals.

And yet, because they were married, there is also an enduring love and commitment, especially from God. With the stark picture of the first section of Hosea as a background, then, the second section of the book is essentially an expansion upon the first section. The second section contains two broad prophetic cycles, each starting with oracles against Israel and ending with language of love and promise (4:1 to 11:11, and 11:12 to 14:8).

The curious mixture of Hosea speech patterns further extends the analogy of Hosea’s marriage; he speaks as God in the 1st person, but also refers to him as the 3rd person, and the shifts can be unpredictably mixed within the same oracle (e.g., notice this pattern in chapter 5). It is as if the marriage experience of the prophet brought him so close to knowing God’s heart that he could speak on God’s behalf without the usual formulaic marker of “Thus says Yahweh, …”

The second section starts by declaring that Yahweh is bringing a covenant lawsuit against the inhabitants of Israel, and especially her priests (see 4:4). Indeed, this second section is replete with legal language, as Hosea recounts Israel’s unfaithfulness, even mocking the stupidity of their actions, e.g., “My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray and they have left their God to play the whore.” (4:14). This section also highlights the rise of injustice that resulted from the unbridled prosperity, e.g., “Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt.” (10:1-2).

But we also see that, despite Israel’s hardened rebellion, God is grief stricken because of the situation. For instance, we see God’s tender thoughts displayed in chapter 11, with the emotional outburst of verses 8-9: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? … My hear recoils within me; my compassion grows
warm and tender…” But despite his love for his people, his mind is made up – Israel is going to experience the promised judgment. The overall picture, however, highlights the deep love that God has for his people, and that he is thankfully not easily dissuaded from his commitments. Because of this intertwining of a requirement of fealty with a desire to see a partner prosper, covenant relationships (including human ones) are always messy and complicated, and the narrative flow in Hosea offers a reminder of this reality.

But then, as is true of most of the latter prophets, Hosea also has sections that indicate that Israel will experience a latter day restoration. See especially verses 3:5 (following the picture of Hosea’s restored marriage), 11:11, and 14:4-7. Israel was going to undergo a severe judgment, and even become somewhat irreversibly marred in the process, eventually becoming the loathed (by the Jews, at least) land of Samaria, named after its capital city. This restoration is an important eschatological feature that is often overlooked in the New Testament. Jesus’ love for and commitment to the Samaritans was obvious, but is explicitly stated in Acts 1:8 when he orders that Samaria was to receive the witness of the gospel even before the Gentiles. This is fulfilled in Acts 8:1-17; God did not forget his promise.

A very good argument can be made that Mark’s Gospel was written with a Samaritan audience in mind, especially with its portrayal as Jesus as a Davidic figure – a man of action who is vanquishing God’s enemies and restoring all his scattered people as one people. It is this David who Hosea foresees in verse 3:5: “Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek Yahweh their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to Yahweh and to his goodness in the later days.” The gathering of the chosen among the Samaritans into God’s new covenant, then, was an important eschatological development. This was a fulfillment of God’s promises, some of which are voiced in Hosea, and allowed for the final establishment of God’s eternal reign under the kingship of David’s greatest son, whose reign we enjoy today.

This is a key to understanding how the continuously troubled region of what we today call the Middle East will finally find peace: for until they can come together as brothers under the banner of Jesus, the
Prince of Peace, and relinquish their long and deeply held prejudices that trace back to these ancient times, they will never enjoy a real healing, or an enduring peace.