

THE MINOR PROPHETS

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HOSEA**Frank E. Gaebelien, Litt.D.****INTRODUCTION**

Hosea begins a unique but neglected portion of Scripture, commonly known as the Minor Prophets. The Hebrews called this section of the Old Testament the Book of the Twelve, a better designation, because only in size are these books minor. That they are short is, of course, plain enough, for all twelve of them total fewer pages than are covered by any one of the first three major prophets. Nevertheless, when it comes to their message, these little books are of no less than major importance.

It is a pity, therefore, that they are so slightly known among the rank and file of Christians today. There are several reasons for this neglect. For one thing, the meaning of these twelve books lies rather far below the surface of the words, and the difficulty, combined with their comparative obscurity, has led to their being passed over.

For another thing, most of these twelve stress an aspect of prophecy that is too often overlooked. While prediction or foretelling is by no means absent from the pages of these little books, their greater emphasis is upon another aspect of prophecy -- that of speaking out the message of God in relation to the moral and spiritual condition of the people at the time when the prophet lived. It is a mistake to think of Biblical prophecy as being only the startling prediction of the future. It is much more than that: it is also the searching declaration of God's counsel in warning, in judgment, in comfort, or in reassurance. And the so-called Minor Prophets, with their emphasis upon the concern of the living God for the spiritual and ethical soundness of Israel, provide a wholesome corrective to the kind of prophetic study that occupies itself mostly with the most spectacular aspects of prediction.

From this brief introduction to a neglected and difficult, yet fascinating, section of Scripture, we turn directly to Hosea, the first in order of the Book of the Twelve.

About Hosea the man we know a good deal, because the first three chapters of his book are so intensely autobiographical and also because so much of his spirit and convictions are communicated to us through the eleven remaining chapters.

The prophet's name, as is often the case with Bible characters, is meaningful. It is related to "Joshua" with its Greek equivalent of "Jesus," and it means "salvation." Hosea was indeed well-named, for his message is so evangelical that he has been called "the St. John of the prophets." And it is significant that, of all the minor prophets, Hosea is more frequently quoted than any other, there being over thirty references to his book in the Gospels and Epistles. The book is best divided into two main divisions: the first part covers chapters 1-3; the second part, covers chapters 4-14.

THE FIRST DIVISION OF HOSEA - CHAPTERS 1 TO 3

If you will look in your Bible at the end of the first verse of chapter one, you will see that Hosea began his ministry during the reign of King Jeroboam II over Israel. That he continued it over a period of at least several decades until shortly before Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 BC we infer from mention in this first verse of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. He was also a contemporary of the great prophets, Isaiah and Micah.

Now it is an important principle of Bible study that a particular book or passage must be related, whenever possible, to the times when it was written. In the case of Hosea this principle is especially relevant, for the period in which he lived vividly illuminates his message. He began his ministry, as we have seen, under Jeroboam II, when the northern kingdom of Israel was at its height of military power outwardly, but when it was far gone inwardly in spiritual and moral corruption. And no sooner had Jeroboam died than there set in an appalling time of intrigue and assassination, during which kingdom followed kingdom like "foam upon the water," to use the prophet's striking phrase in chapter 10 verse 7. All the while, as one weak ruler after another sought help from heathen alliances, rottenness ran wild. Apostasy was everywhere; princes and people worshipped not only the golden calf, but also the hideous pagan deities, Baal and Ashtareth, going even to the length of human sacrifice. At the same time, the priesthood was wholly corrupt, so that the prophet could say in chapter 4:9, "like people, like priest".

Such were the times in which Hosea lived. Surely they were enough to break the heart of a man of God who loved his country and his Lord. But Hosea had still greater cause for grief.

If you will turn to the first chapter and read the second and third verses, you will see that as great as was the tragedy of his nation, Hosea suffered in personal life an even greater trial. What this trial was, we learn from the three opening chapters, which constitute the first of the two main divisions of the book.

By the direct command of the Lord, Hosea was married to an unfaithful wife, Gomer by name, who was to put it plainly, an adulteress. Although some expositors think that this situation was only allegorical, we may be certain that this was not the case. The whole tone of these three chapters makes it clear that the prophet was writing out of the deep anguish of first-hand experience. The statement in verse two of chapter one need not, however, be interpreted as meaning that Gomer was overtly immoral at the time of her marriage, but rather that God read her character and foresaw what she would become.

At any rate, Hosea deeply loved his erring wife, who bore him a son, named Jezreel in token of the vengeance that was to come upon the house of Jehu. (See II Kings 10:1-14). Two other children were born to Hosea and Gomer, as the first chapter (verses 6-9) goes on to say - a daughter, Lo-ruhamah, and a son, Lo--ammi. Lo--ruhamah means "not pitied" or "not having obtained mercy"; Lo-ammi means "not my people." Both names are symbolical of Jehovah's rejection of unfaithful Israel.

It is significant that these names are alluded to in two key New Testament passages: Romans 9:25-26, where the reference is to the Gentiles and 1 Peter 2:10, where the thought includes the restoration of Israel and the calling of the Gentiles.

As for Hosea's marriage, the wickedness of Gomer became so flagrant that she left the prophet to sell herself as an adulterous slave. Yet all through the record of this domestic calamity, told by Hosea with such moving intensity, there are passages of hope, like shafts of light shining through the blackness of bitter sorrow. In this connection look particularly at chapter 1:10 and chapter 2:14-23. In chapter three these rays of hope and forgiveness come to a focus, when the Lord tells Hosea to seek out faithless Gomer and buy her back for fifteen pieces of silver (according to Ex. 21:32, one-half the price of a common slave) plus a homer and a half of barley, so that she might be his wife again, forgiven and redeemed.

Thus Hosea, out of his tragic experience, became the great prophet of forgiving, redeeming love that culminated in the cross upon which God gave to the whole world the gift of His son, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. Moreover, it is to God's strange and wonderful dealing with Hosea in the prophet's marriage that we owe the great Biblical allegory in which Jehovah and Israel are likened to husband and wife.

THE SECOND DIVISION OF HOSEA - CHAPTERS 4 TO 14

The second and longer division of Hosea (chapters 4-14) is, as it were a wonderful distillation of the very essence of the prophet's ministry. With great power, Hosea sounds again the main themes of the book: the spiritual unfaithfulness of Israel (frequently called Ephraim by the prophet) and Jehovah's forgiving and redeeming love. Through it all, there is heard over and over again the note, common to all the Old Testament prophets, of the future restoration of the weak and chastened people of God. See, for instance, chapter 6:1-3; 11:8-9, and especially chapters 13 and 14.

Throughout this second section, as in the first part of the book, there are many memorable phrases, for Hosea was a eloquent man. Some examples of his gift for vivid expression are the following: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6); "I desired mercy and not sacrifice: and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings" (6:6); "They have sown the wind, and shall reap the whirlwind" (8:7); "Ephraim, he hath mixed himself among the people; Ephraim is a cake not turned" (7:8), a striking reference to compromise with the world; " O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction" (13:14), phrases echoed by Paul at the end of his great resurrection chapter, 1 Cor. 15; and especially the first two verses of chapter 14, of which these words of tender entreaty are representative: " O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou has fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto Him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips."

So the book ends with the Lord's gracious assurance of restoration, as His people will in the future return to Him in the true devotion of their hearts. And also we are eloquently reminded that, whether it be Israel or the Church, God's relationship with the people whom He has called out of the world to be His own is finally a relationship of love.

As we read and study Hosea, there might well be sounding in our ears the familiar hymn, " O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go;" for the ultimate message of this prophet is summed up in the words of John's First Epistle, "God is love" and in the words of Paul at the close of 1 Cor. 13, "Love never fails."