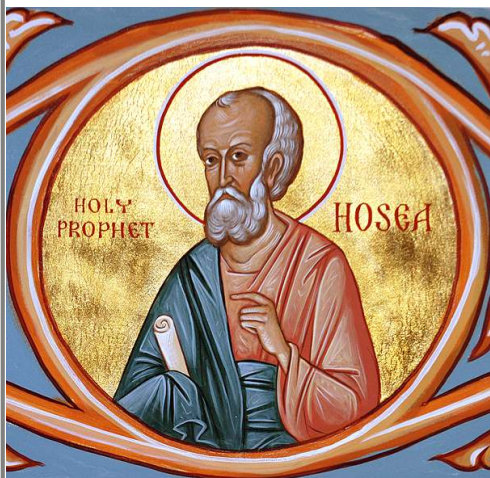


THE GOD OF ISRAEL THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PROPHET HOSEA

Hosea began his prophetic ministry in the mid-eighth century BCE when Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The split came about after the death of Solomon around 922 BCE. The Northern Kingdom of Israel or Ephraim with its capital in Samaria was the larger. Judah to the south was centred on Jerusalem and was both the royal seat of King David and also where Solomon had built a temple for Israel's God, Yahweh. This was a time when storm



The prophet Hosea: oca.org

clouds were gathering in the form of the resurgent power of Assyria. The main highway from Mesopotamia to Egypt ran through Israel and both states were threatened when under their leader Tiglath-Pileser, also known as Pul, started to push west in the years following 745 BCE. Galilee was lost to the Northern Kingdom in 733 BCE and in 722 BCE Samaria was captured and its leading citizens taken into exile, never to return. Effectively, this marked the end of the Northern Kingdom, leaving Israel consisting only of the southern state of Judah. In turn, Judah was overrun by Assyria but Jerusalem itself survived its siege by the Assyrian forces of Sennacherib in 701 BCE, during the reign of King Hezekiah. Hosea clearly understood the rapid changes which preceded the fall of

the Northern Kingdom and he evaluates these contemporary politics by denouncing foreign alliances. Such alliances he argues have brought loss of identity for Israel and alienation from Israel's God. Socially, Israel had seen the incorporation of Canaanite districts, growth of cities, royal administrative and taxation systems, foreign trade and successful enterprises in agricultural activities. At the same time, Israel had become steeped in decadence and idolatry and Hosea apportioned blame for this on both the monarchy and the priests.

Hosea prophesied in the Northern Kingdom during the last part of the peaceful reign of Jeroboam and the period of instability following his death. Certainly, he was active during the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance against Assyria but he makes no reference to the fall of Samaria, thus dating his ministry from approximately 750-730 BCE. It is most likely that Hosea was a native of Samaria because he makes particular reference to the cities and regions of the Northern Kingdom and uses the symbolic name Ephraim for Israel. Again, some of the peculiarities of the language used in the text have been attributed to his northern dialect. Indeed, a poet with a keen sense of observation and an imaginative approach to his world, Hosea is full of compassion for the people he is called to condemn. The prophet's early preaching is a call to repentance, but when this call is ignored, his theme turns to certain judgement. He symbolises Israel's past, present and future in the names that he has given to his three children. However, his concluding and abiding message is one of ultimate restoration.

Hosea uses the symbolism of his own marriage breakdown to portray God's steadfast love for his unfaithful people. In this difficult context, Hosea pleads forgiveness for the infidelities of Israel within the framework of God's infinite love. In the two parallel

accounts of the marriage and at God's command, Hosea takes the harlot Gomer as his wife, thus symbolising God and Israel. Hosea is tempted to divorce Gomer for her infidelity but rather preaches reform for Israel and return to God which can only be secured through suffering in the form of a return to the wilderness. Exile and dissolution of the state would play their part. Divorced from Canaanite culture, Israel would then be subject to God's mercy, love and protection as in the first Exodus. Here, Hosea uses the relationship of a father and son to describe the Exodus. Perhaps seen as a new Exodus, God's steadfast love enables him to abandon his people in the short term but to restore them in their return from exile. Hosea imposes obligation in covenant language which echoes the language of the Decalogue. This new permanent covenant is of a wife betrothed in righteousness and justice. Besides this, it would also bring a harmonious and fruitful relationship with the natural world. Israel's inconstancy, in the quest for knowledge of God, provokes debate for God himself that Hosea expresses liturgically. The emphasis on the primacy of steadfast love over blood sacrifice has affinity with the New Testament and return to life 'on the third day'. Israel's infidelity, symbolised by Gomer, is ingrained in Israel's culture and stems back to the conquest of Canaan. Hosea condemns Israel's corrupt culture change and debased worship of idolatrous 'calves' used to represent the deity. He is clear that such infidelity is embodied in the institution of the monarchy and he equates this with the rape of the Levite's concubine in the city of Gibeah, as recorded in the Book of Judges.

The national religion in the Northern Kingdom, which had become assimilated into the Canaanite worship of baals, is confronted by Hosea. He criticises his people for becoming like their priests and despairs when the people put on a show of repentance, assuming that by so doing, God will restore their fortunes. This response is not genuine. Israel cannot repent so there is little point in Hosea appealing. Sudden and ferocious judgement is therefore inevitable. God will show no mercy and will use Assyria as his instrument of punishment. In Canaanite culture, fertility of the land was dependent upon the sexual relationship between the male deity baal who owned the land and his consort Astarte. Worshippers' ritual practice of sex with so called sacred prostitutes resulted in widespread immorality. Shrines had been taken over by popular Canaanite pagan cult, although reference to the house of the Lord suggests that temples dedicated to God also continued to be in regular use. The communal festivals were celebrated in association with the agricultural year, new moons and Sabbaths. Hosea preached that during these occasions of drunkenness, sex and debauchery, the people thought that they were worshipping the God of Israel, but under a different name and different rites. However, God's purpose is for Israel to discard this false religion by regarding God himself as the husband of the land in the sense of the original idea in Genesis. Through the use of passionate poetry Hosea makes the people see that God is wedded to them morally and spiritually. The final oracle is a further affirmation of hope, in the form of a penitential prayer. Providing Israel abandons trust in foreign alliances and the corrupt worship of baals, a personal relationship with God will be restored, bringing new life and salvation by the action of God's steadfast love.

Certainly, the priority of Moses cannot be challenged. However, that is not to diminish the important influence in our understanding of Israel's God by prophets such as Hosea. Surely, his deep penetration into the heart of God took Israel as close as she was likely to get to her God. For example, "How can I give you up Ephraim? ... my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender ... I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst ..."

Barbara Knight