

THE MESSAGE OF HOSEA

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The Book of Hosea is a very intriguing text of Scripture for many within today's Messianic movement. While the attention of many readers of the Tanach's prophetic literature is necessarily directed toward larger books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—Hosea is not something that is totally left out. The Book of Hosea is not a text which is under-valued, considering the fact that it is fourteen chapters, but it is a text that is probably not considered enough for its unique time, setting, and admonitions. Understanding the whole of Hosea, and what this ancient Prophet communicated, is something which we all need to consider in an hour when Messianic Believers across the spectrum, are convinced that the restoration of Israel is *somehow* at hand. The various rebukes, curses, and penalties decreed in Hosea are now in the process of *somehow* being reversed.

What makes the Book of Hosea intriguing is that, along with Amos, it gives us a significant peek into the religious, political, and cultural situation of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms *right before* the former's fall to Assyria in the Eighth Century B.C.E. This makes Hosea a bit of a challenge to read, because many of the references seen to "Israel" are not to the nation of Israel as a whole, but specifically to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim preparing to be judged. As Hosea opens, we see how, "The word of the LORD...came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel" (1:1).

Immediately into Hosea, we see how the Prophet is directed by God to marry a prostitute named Gomer, who would bear him three children (1:2). Understandably, a few readers of Hosea think that the woman Gomer was first loyal to Hosea, and then became unfaithful to him, making the command more narrative than actual. Whatever is the case, the point is that each of the children who are born to Hosea—Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi—all carry with them a depiction of how the Lord will handle the situation in Israel and Judah (1:3-9). While there will be a breaking and a scattering that occurs (1:10a), there will also be a reunification together at a future point in time (1:10b-11).

The word that "The people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited, and they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel" (1:11), is most important to take notice of. The Hebrew clause *v'alu min-ha'erezt* was rendered as *kai anabēsontai ek tēs gēs* in the Greek Septuagint. This may be connected to how the angels issued the word that, "This same Yeshua, who has been taken [*analēmptheis*] from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:2), speaking of the Messiah's ascension into Heaven. When Judah and Israel are finally brought back together in accordance with prophecy, their "go[ing] up from the land" (1:11, NASU) is in all likelihood connected to the saints being brought up to meet Yeshua in the clouds at His return (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Matthew 24:29-31).

It is not difficult to see in skimming through the Book of Hosea, that a great deal of it (chs. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9-10, 11, 12, 13, 14) is delivered in the form of semi-poetic utterances. Many of these words deliver forth rebukes, penalizations, and intended punishment on the part of God toward Israel. It is not difficult to see how the bulk of them are also widely concerned with expressing the displeasure of God toward His people, especially as they have largely disregarded Him.

One difficult feature of reading through the different vignettes within Hosea chs. 2-14, is detecting how much parallelism is actually employed. When, for example, Hosea 5:3 says "I know all about Ephraim; Israel is not hidden from me. Ephraim, you have now turned to prostitution; Israel is corrupt," one would be on safe ground to assume that Ephraim and Israel are largely references to the same group of people. A general resource like the *Archaeological Study Bible*, notes on 5:3, "Hosea frequently used 'Ephraim' as a synonym for Israel. As the northern kingdom's largest tribe, Ephraim had come to be associated with the nation as a whole,"¹ with the Northern Kingdom in principal view. Later in Hosea 5:13a, 14a we see, "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his sores...For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah," historical context requires that we do not treat these references as a parallelism, but instead as two separate political entities. The Lord might be addressing them together, but they are not one and the same. Ultimately, verses have to be considered on their own and read carefully.

Close, contextual reading is not needed for all of what is witnessed in the Book of Hosea, as the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel were *both* riddled with sinful behavior and activity. The sins that one sees listed in ch. 2 against Israel, comparing the nation to an adulterous wife with children adultery (2:2-5), who seeks after her lovers (2:5, 7a), whom God will block (2:6), and who will eventually seek reconciliation with God as husband and provider (2:7b-9)—seems general enough to apply to all the people, Biblical history bears out how both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were punished (2:10-13), occur (2:14-23). In particular, it is decreed, "In that day I will make a covenant for them and with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from

¹ Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al. *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1419.

the land, so that all may lie down in safety” (2:18). Only at a time of global peace and tranquility inaugurated by the God of Israel Himself, will be community of Israel corporate be finally known as “You are my people” (2:23). Paul and Peter both apply Hosea 2:23 to the salvation of the nations in the First Century (Romans 9:25; 1 Peter 2:10), placing it squarely within the expectations of Israel’s restoration.

Much of the kind of rocky relationship that God has with His people, as depicted in the Book of Hosea, is actually demonstrated in the kind of arrangement that the Prophet Hosea has with his wife Gomer. The Lord directs Hosea to love Gomer, even though she is disloyal. Hosea is to love Gomer the same way that He loves Israel (3:1). There will be a period of separation between Hosea and Gomer (3:2-3), just as there will be a period of separation between Israel and God (3:4). The implication is that “the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessing in the last days,” *b’acharit ha’yamim* (3:5). Similar to how Judah and Israel are being brought back together and going up from the Land or Earth (1:11), are we to take a reference to “David” being the King as a reference to Messiah Yeshua? If so, then we have obviously not reached this point in history—yet!

The charges that are issued against Israel by God in ch. 4 are general enough to apply to both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, although there is some targeting to the two groups witnessed. The severity of what is seen is that “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing, and adultery” (4:1b-2a). There is bloodshed (4:2b), there are ecological problems (4:3), charges are issued by people against one another (4:4), the people ignore God’s Torah, and they may not be regarded as His “priests” (4:5-6). The priesthood does not serve the Lord like it should (4:7-9), and it will be punished along with the people in general (4:10). The priests themselves are guilty of participating in idolatry (4:11-13a), and the daughters of Israel have turned to prostitution and adultery (4:13b-14). Much of the sin which is seen among the people reflects on the relationship that they have with God. One gets the feeling from Hosea 4:15a, “Though you commit adultery, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty,” that the Northern Kingdom is targeted as being fully sinful, and the Southern Kingdom is only partially so (at least at this point in time). There is nothing that will really be able to stop the sinful inclinations of such people (4:16-19).

That a careful reading of many of the oracles in Hosea is required can be seen in Hosea 5:1: “Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgment is against you.” This is hardly some kind of parallelism, but rather details different sectors of Israel which will be punished by God. They are to be regarded as some kind of rebels (5:2). Parallelism can be partially seen in 5:3: “I know all about Ephraim; Israel is not hidden from me. Ephraim, you have now turned to prostitution; Israel is corrupt.” This is obviously a reference to the Northern Kingdom’s sin (5:4-5b), but it is sin which the Southern Kingdom of Judah is also guilty of (5:4c-7). God will judge the sin of Ephraim (5:8-9, 11-12a, 13a,c, 14a) and Judah equitably (5:10, 12b, 13b 14b). The Lord decrees, “I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them. Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me” (5:14c-15). We detect that until both the House of Israel repent of their sins, restoration to all of Israel will not be enacted.

The ultimate answer for a divided, sinful, and curse-laden Israel is seen in an important event that will take place, lasting for two days and a day. Hosea 6:1-7 asks some critical questions of readers:

“Come, let us return to the LORD, he has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth. What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you. For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. Like Adam, they have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there.”

Hosea 6:1-2, specifically, are verses which are frequently heard in much of today’s Messianic community, and also much of evangelical Christianity, to justify some kind of end-time scenario based on the past 2,000 years since the ministry of the Messiah. There is, in fact, **a much better approach** to this prophetic word, which needs to be highly tempered by something that the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” While arguments can be made in favor of important Biblical events occurring on or by a third day,² one usually does not just appeal to “the Scriptures” unless there is a specific prophetic word available with which to substantiate such a conclusion. Jewish anti-missionaries, in seeing Paul’s word of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, can sometimes have a field day with naïve Messianic Believers in getting them to think that there is no prophecy of the Messiah being raised from the dead on the third day.

Hosea 6:1-2, most contrary to what any anti-missionaries might state, gives us our answer. Judah and Ephraim stand as a proxy for all of sinful humanity—“Like Adam...” (6:7), *k’adam*—and Israel’s restoration is to come in its identification with something that is to last for two days, with them able to be standing by the third day. We should think that an appropriate parallel with Hosea 6:1-2 in the Apostolic Scriptures would be in recognizing how Believers are to be “buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,

² Important events associated with the third day may also be detected in: Genesis 22:4; 2 Kings 20:5; Jonah 2:1-9; cf. Exodus 19:10; Esther 6:1; Ezra 6:15; Genesis 40:1-23; Leviticus 7:17-18; Judges 20; Joshua 1:11; 3:2.
Cf. Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus, Volume 3: Messianic Prophecy Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), pp 182-183.

we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4; cf. Colossians 2:12). **Hosea 6:1-2 is rightly taken to be a prophecy of how Israel’s restoration is innately tied together with the Messiah’s death, burial, and resurrection.**³ And, Israel’s restoration is no isolated affair if its sinfulness (6:8-11) is traced all the way back to Adam and Eve. Only with the Messiah Yeshua having died, been buried for two days, and being resurrected by the third day—could the restoration process of Israel begin!

It is not difficult when reading any part of the Bible, especially the Prophets, to see that God is not pleased when He sees His people committing sin. This is especially true in the case of the Holy One’s laments against Ephraim, as He exclaims, “Whenever I would restore the fortunes of my people, whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria are revealed. They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before me” (7:1-2).

Elsewhere, Psalm 103:12 says, “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” When repentant people ask for forgiveness of their sins, the Lord is most gracious He forgets such offenses. In the case of Ephraim’s sin denounced in Hosea, however, such sin is always before Him—*because sin is always being committed!* No national confession or repentance has been offered; when God looks down from Heaven at the Northern Kingdom, all He sees is rebellion and lawlessness. All the Lord sees is Ephraim’s adultery with the nations (7:5-8). The people have some gray hair, meaning that they are aging prematurely (7:9). “Israel’s arrogance testifies against him, but despite all of this he does not return to the LORD his God or search for him” (7:10). Whether it be Ephraim’s relationship with Egypt or Assyria, humiliation and destruction are inevitable (7:11-16).

That the bulk of the judgments decreed in the Book of Hosea are issued against the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, and that sudden calamity is soon to come, is easily seen “because the people have broken my covenant and rebelled against my law” (8:1). In spite of the Northern Kingdom at least partially crying, “O our God, we acknowledge you!” (8:2), the fact is that it has rejected good (8:3), it has had multiple royal families (8:4a), and idolatry is commonplace in Samaria (8:4b-6). Like foreigners eating grain (8:7), so is the destiny of the people of the Northern Kingdom to be “swallowed up; now she is among the nations [*b’goyim*] like a worthless thing” (8:8), as the Assyrians would come and take a huge number of exiles away (8:9-10) and force them to assimilate into the world at large. The people of the Northern Kingdom built altars for foreign gods (8:11), and as such God’s Torah became something “alien” to them (8:12). Their judgment will involve some kind of return to Egypt (8:13). But while “Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces; Judah has fortified many towns. But I will send fire upon their cities that will become their fortresses” (8:14). While Assyria’s aggression will largely befall the Northern Kingdom, the Southern Kingdom will not be totally exempt from it, either.

The words issued by Hosea against the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim only continue to get worse. Nothing positive is seen in the world, “Do not rejoice, O Israel; do not be jubilant like the other nations. For you have been unfaithful to your God; you love the wages of a prostitute at every threshing floor” (9:1). Of course, given the fact that the significant punishment by Assyria will come around two centuries *after* the division of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, with much pain and suffering on the horizon, the forbearance and patience of God for His people should be at least partially detectable. But now their agriculture will fail (9:2), returning to Egypt and Assyria and eating unclean things will occur (9:3), and no more wine offerings or sacrifices can be offered to the Lord (9:4). Even if some are able to escape to a place like Egypt, there will still be significant punishment (9:5-8, 9b-16). An appropriate epitaph to the fall of the Northern Kingdom is simply: “They have sunk deep into corruption...God will remember their wickedness and punish them for their sins...My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him; they will be wanderers among the nations” (9:9a, 17).

The sins and transgressions of the Northern Kingdom are compounded upon themselves. Even though God blessed the people with fruitfulness, all it did was spur on the desire to build more pagan altars (10:1-2). The people are lost because of no steady leader (10:3-4), and all that they can anticipate is their false deities being taken away to Assyria as a tribute, a form of great humiliation (10:5-6). Whatever monarch the Northern Kingdom does have will float away (10:7), and the high places it has built will fall (10:8). The sin of Ephraim will get the better of it (10:9-11a), and Judah will suffer to some extent too (10:11b). The admonition for those who hear is, “Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you” (10:12). These kinds of verses in Hosea carry with them a timeless quality for all generations, as Bible readers the world over are to learn from the rebukes issued by God upon Israel, **and be sure to not plant unrighteousness and reap evil** (10:13-15).

The Lord is not at all happy or overjoyed at the required punishment that He must issue. Hosea 11:1 communicates how “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” This not only refers to Israel as the whole nation brought out in the Exodus, but is appealed to in Matthew 2:15 to speak of the child Yeshua returning home after Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt. One can definitely see hints and clues throughout Hosea that *the only solution* to Israel’s problems and sins—which largely represent the world’s problems and sins—is going to be found in the Messiah to come! The sorry dilemma is that the more God called Israel to Himself, the more they left Him (11:2). In the case of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, idolatry prevailed (11:3-4), a return to Egypt and Assyria is destined (11:5-6), but a promise of future restoration is definitely present—because God’s love outweighs His anger (11:7-11).

No one in Israel, in either the Northern or Southern Kingdoms, is entirely innocent within the scope of Hosea’s prophetic message: “Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, the house of Israel with deceit. And Judah is unruly against God,

³ For some further thoughts, consult the relevant sections of the author’s article “The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology.”

even against the faithful Holy One. Ephraim feeds on the wind; he purses the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt. The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds” (11:12-12:2). Everybody in Israel is guilty for a collection of sins (12:3), in spite of some of the goodliness of the Patriarch Jacob in seeking God (12:4). How easy or difficult will it be for the people to return to the Lord as their Sovereign, even when remembering His past dealings with their ancestors (12:5-13)?

The ending sections of the Book of Hosea are directed squarely at the punishment that will be due to the Northern Kingdom of (12:14-14:9), although if anyone from the Southern Kingdom had been listening—they should have taken them very seriously as *sin is still sin*. It is detailed how “Ephraim has bitterly provoked [God] to anger; his Lord will eave upon him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt” (12:14). At one point, “When Ephraim spoke, men trembled; he was exalted in Israel. But he became guilty of Baal worship and died” (13:1). Living in a state of death and separation from the Lord, not only is idolatry present (13:2a-b), but “They offer human sacrifice...” (13:2c)—*zov’chei adam* communicating “Those who slaughter man...” (ATS) or “They offer human sacrifices!” (TNIV). It is no wonder why these people will be like chaff or smoke before Him (13:3). The Lord was the Savior who brought their ancestors out of Egypt (13:4), who cared for them and who fed them (13:5), yet now the time has come for their once Helper to see that they are devoured up and that their sins are answered for (13:6-16).

Far be it from the Book of Hosea ending on a negative tone, if Israel—in particular the Northern Kingdom about to fall to Assyria—turns to the Lord, then He promises redemption. The short nine verses of Hosea ch. 14, serve as a rightful reminder to all readers since, that the Lord promises restoration and blessing to those who direct themselves toward Him in repentance:

“Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses. We will never again say “Our gods” to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.’ ‘I will hear their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain. He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon. O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree; your fruitfulness comes from me.’ Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.”

The words, oracles, and rebukes of the Book of Hosea may continue to remain elusive and ambiguous for much of the Messianic community for quite some time. Much of what the Prophet Hosea communicates can only be considered by readers placing themselves into the Divided Kingdom era of Ancient Israel, reading what he says very closely, and contemplating the unique punishment that God would deliver upon the Northern Kingdom via Assyria. A great amount of Messianics being uncomfortable with the Book of Hosea is because it requires each reader to actually deal with the subject matter of the Divided Kingdom era in Biblical history. *Controversy is associated with such a subject matter, from whatever angle one chooses to approach it*. Many of the references seen to “Israel” in the Book of Hosea, are contextually required to be to the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim.

Many of those who compose the Two-House sub-movement have gone far beyond the Biblical text, in basically promoting that every non-Jewish Messianic Believer is a scattered “Ephraimite,” and this can present some serious challenges. But at the same time, many of today’s Messianic Jews cannot really handle the implications of words such as “Israel is bewildered; they have now become among the nations like an unwanted vessel” (8:8, NJPS), and “God will cast them aside, because they wouldn’t listen to him, and they will become wanderers among the *Goyim*” (9:17, CJB). These passages are not only directed to the people of the Northern Kingdom, but they also directly relate to how we understand the fuller ramifications of a variety of key end-time prophecies regarding Israel’s restoration (i.e., Isaiah 11:12-16; Jeremiah 31:6-10; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Zechariah 10:6-10). There is a greater or larger restoration of Israel prophesied to come in salvation history, **beyond** what we have witnessed thusfar with the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land and establishment of the State of Israel—as important as this has surely been.

I think it is likely that for a little while longer, there will be much in the Book of Hosea that Messianics will continue to not explore. The size of Hosea at fourteen chapters, which hardly makes it a small text of Scripture, should pique our interest on its important admonitions for men and women of faith. Much like how our own Planet Earth remains largely unexplored—with various jungles, deserts, and especially deep oceans yet to be seen with human eyes—the Book of Hosea might remain one of those uncharted frontiers for a while. When its words are finally charted, though, and we are able to read Hosea in more specific detail with much more attention given to its ancient setting and context: **Will we be prepared to handle its fuller message?** Be advised that as it concerns the Book of Hosea, a requirement is issued to all who encounter its words: “Let the wise understand these things, and let the discerning know them” (14:9, CJB). This implies that one must be very careful, tactful, and pay attention to various details if Hosea’s direction is to be fully heeded. *And with God’s help, may we each be able to do so!*