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T H E G O S P E L A C C O R D I N G T O  
T H E O L D T E S T A M E N T



A series of studies on the lives  
of Old Testament characters, written for  
laypeople and pastors, and designed to  
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,  
and preaching of the Old Testament

TREMPER LONGMAN III  
J. ALAN GROVES

*Series Editors*

LOVE  
DIVINE  
AND  
UNFAILING

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
HOSEA

MICHAEL P. V. BARRETT

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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*Page design by Tobias Design*

Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Barrett, Michael P. V., 1949–

Love divine and unailing : the Gospel according to Hosea / Michael P.V. Barrett.

p. cm. — (The Gospel according to the Old Testament)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 978-1-59638-075-2 (pbk.)

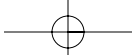
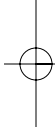
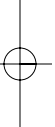
1. Bible. O.T. Hosea—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS1565.52.B37 2008

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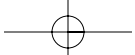
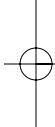
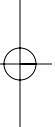
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*To Sandra Ann  
My wife  
Ever faithful—never Gomer*



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## FOREWORD



*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

**C**oncerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them

what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; His coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded His plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

### AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to the proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres, styles, and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing of, and pointing forward to, Christ. Believing in the fundamentally christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testa-

ment, we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

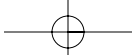
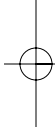
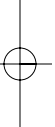
- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than books or themes. Some books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Also, certain themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

TREMPER LONGMAN III  
J. ALAN GROVES



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



**A**dmittedly, I am responsible before God for what I have written, but I am indebted to many. I remember the first time I was confronted with the intricacies and difficulties of Hosea's prophecy—my first Hebrew exegesis class. My professor, Allan Brown, was completing his dissertation on Hosea's theology; the message of the book consumed him and consequently us in the class as well. That was many years ago, and although my interpretations differ some from his, I thank him for his contagious zeal for the message of this prophet. In working on this project, I looked again at his dissertation, and it generated fond memories.

I want to thank Eric Anest of P&R for his initial suggestion to me to submit a proposal for the Gospel According to the Old Testament series and for his work as the supervisor of the project. I express my gratitude as well to Tremper Longman III for his willingness to accept my proposal to write about Hosea for the series and for his insightful comments and suggestions at various stages of the process. He forced nothing, but his constant reminder that this is my book was pressure enough. It was a pleasure to work with him. I give my thanks to all at P&R for their willingness to publish this work and for their support during the entire project. Special thanks go to Caren Silvester. She and I have worked on several projects together, and I salute her for her editorial skills. She knows how to make me sound like me—only better. I should also thank the adult Sunday school class of Faith Free Presbyterian Church for

listening to my thoughts about Hosea week after week. They heard either a synopsis of what I had just written or a preview of what I planned to write during the next week. Many said they were blessed, and I can only take them at their word.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Geneva Reformed Seminary and Faith Free Presbyterian Church for the ministry opportunities afforded to me, including time to write. It is impossible to say how much my association with the Free Presbyterian Church of North America has shaped my ministry under God for over thirty years.

Of course, I must thank my wife Sandra for her constant support. Every morning she prayed that the Lord would help me to write, and every evening she asked if He did. She was always the first to read a finished chapter and always said, "Good job, Michael." Whether that is true or not is beside the point. She has been a constant source of support, not just during this project, but for most of my life. Thanks to Sandra, I know nothing of what Hosea experienced with Gomer.

## INTRODUCTION



**T**he tension between doctrine and experience is common in the Christian life. What we believe and know as fact doesn't always match up with what is happening in our lives. Objective truth often conflicts with subjective experience. More often than not our experience becomes more credible than our doctrine, and this creates the tension in our hearts. This tension extends even to the Scripture, which is the source of everything we believe and the rule of everything we are to do. We believe the Bible is God's Word. We believe that it is a living Word that is "powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). But notwithstanding that confession of faith, Christians far too frequently read the Bible and get nothing from it. Apart from a few familiar stories or a few favorite verses, the majority of the Bible, even for believers, seems irrelevant. Few know anything of what David experienced when he confessed God's Word to be more desired than gold and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Ps. 19:10).

This disconnect between confession and experience regarding Scripture is nowhere more evident than in the Old Testament. For various reasons, the Old Testament is a closed book for many Christians today. There is something about the Old Testament that corresponds to Peter's assessment of Paul's epistles as containing some things hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). From Genesis to Malachi, the reader encounters hard sayings, obscure details, unfamiliar and enigmatic expressions, forgotten customs, family trees with unpronounceable names, and detailed laws

that have no immediately discernible application or relevance to modern life. Much of the Old Testament seems to have no apparent value or purpose, and much seems to be outdated both theologically and culturally. The Old Testament provides a lot of hard reading without a lot of blessing—or so it seems.

Frustrations with the Old Testament often drive Bible readers to more familiar and more obviously devotional texts. Familiar and devotional texts are good, but when believers ignore the Old Testament, they are ignoring the majority of God's revelation and missing the blessing of finding nuggets of truth that are just as vital for modern Christians as they were for Old Testament saints. Indeed, that God's Word is compared to silver and hidden treasure suggests that the prize is not always lying on the surface. Part of the problem in most Bible study is that unless the message is on the surface, the average reader moves on in his reading, kicking up dust until coming across an obvious surface lesson. Shuffling along does not typically result in discovered treasures; sometimes we have to dig. Proverbs 2 says that if we seek truth as silver and search for it as hidden treasure, we will not be disappointed, for the Lord promises to give wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Even the digging becomes profitable and enjoyable when we realize we are handling the very Word of God—the Word without which we cannot survive. From Genesis to Malachi to Revelation, the Word of God reveals changeless and eternal truth. We should keep our Bibles open and not give up until we discover the truth, because we know that God rewards those who diligently seek Him. He promises that when we seek Him with all our heart, we will find Him (Jer. 29:13). That is the truth.

The Bible says that all Scripture is inspired and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16). Faith believes it to be true. Faith in the inspiration of Scripture affirms the Bible's authority, infallibility, sufficiency, and effectiveness. If experience con-



cludes it to be without purpose, irrelevant, outdated, or in some other way without profit, experience is wrong. Faith ought to stop us short every time we are tempted to skip through or over any portion of God's holy Word just because we are not immediately blessed. Before giving up on the passage, we should ask ourselves this question: Why, of all the possible things that God could have said, did He say this? By faith, we know why He said it—"that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). It remains for us to learn, understand, and apply what He said. The Scripture is the means by which God reveals, not conceals, truth.

Yet even here we must be realistic. To assume that we will understand everything in Scripture with equal ease is to reduce the Bible to a document that is less than ordinary and to set ourselves up for more frustration when we do not immediately get the point. The statement of the Westminster divines is a good and comforting reminder:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.7)

God has made enough of His Word so crystal clear that only blind and blatant disbelief will not understand. He has made enough of His Word so deep that even the most faithful must depend on His enlightenment rather than their intellect. There is no book like the Bible—clear enough to speak to the layman, yet challenging enough to keep the scholar humble. Neither layman nor scholar should ever

tire of this special revelation but should endeavor to increase the sphere of knowledge necessary to understand more and more. There is always more blessing to enjoy.

The key that unlocks the meaning and all the blessing of Scripture is the Lord Jesus Christ, the principal theme of the entire Bible. The overriding purpose of special revelation—which for us is the Scripture alone—is to guide men to a proper relationship with God. God’s gracious salvation is the only way guilty sinners can experience that relationship, and God’s gracious salvation is in and through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Himself declared that He was “the way, the truth, and the life,” the only way for anyone to come to God (John 14:6). It follows that if the purpose of Scripture is to guide people to the Lord and if the only way to the Lord is through the redemption of Jesus Christ, then the revelation of Christ should be the grand and predominant theme of Scripture. Indeed, it is. All revealed truth in one way or another relates to and is ultimately defined by the central truth of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed. Obviously, the New Testament develops this saving theme. The Gospels, with narratives concerning His earthly ministry, introduce the performance of His saving work, the historic foundation of the gospel. Acts records the initial proclamation and dissemination of the message of His saving work. The Epistles explain and expound the nature of His person and work and the implications for personal and church life. The Revelation assures the consummation of all the glorious truths of His person and work. Understanding the message of the New Testament is impossible without reference to Christ.

Understanding the Old Testament is also impossible without reference to Christ and His gospel. He is the key that unlocks all the mysteries. This is not speculation; this is the teaching of the New Testament, both by direct statement and by example. When the resurrected Christ walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He

expressed His concern that they were slow to believe what the prophets had written concerning His suffering and glory (Luke 24:25–26). He then started with Moses and continued through the Prophets, expounding what those Scriptures taught about Himself (Luke 24:27). Later in the company of all the disciples, He included the Psalms in that corpus of messianic revelation (Luke 24:44–45). His reference to Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms was the Jewish designation for the entire Old Testament, similar to our referring to the New Testament as the gospel and Epistles. In other words, Christ said that the entirety of the Old Testament spoke about Him. The Pentateuch, the first five books with all their religious rituals, prepares the way for the Perfect Priest to stand between God and the people He represents as the perfect sacrifice for sins. The Historical Books draw attention to the Perfect King, who would come to rule His people and subdue His enemies. The Prophets anticipate the Perfect Prophet, who represents and reveals the only true and living God. The Poetical Books put it all together with the Christ as the great theme for worship and praise. What an authoritative clue for interpretation this is! It means that if we read any book of the Old Testament without reference to what it teaches concerning Christ, we are missing the key element in the book. If we do not see Christ, it is not because He is not there.

This brings us to the special issue of this series, the Gospel According to the Old Testament, and this book highlighting the gospel according to Hosea. The aim of the series is to show the pervasiveness of Christ in the Old Testament and to encourage all who read, teach, or preach from the Old Testament to do so with a view to Christ and His gospel. The book of Hosea, like every Old Testament book, lends itself to this approach. Much of Hosea's message parallels the points of the sermons preached by most of his prophetic and ministerial counterparts: God hates sin, God judges sin, God delivers from judgment upon repentance. Each of

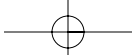
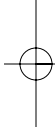
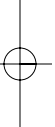
these points certainly has gospel implications. Yet, as is true regarding all of God's servants, there was something unique about Hosea, his ministry, and his message. His life and preaching exhibit a transparency that clearly points to Christ, but they also evidence a deep complexity that places his prophecy among the most difficult to understand in the Old Testament. But whether we look on or under the surface, Christ is the key to meaning. Discovering Hosea's inspired contribution to the progression of God's redemptive revelation is the goal of our study.

To say that Christ is the key to understanding Hosea is not to say that He is the only specific theme in the book, but it is to say that every other truth or command must find its ultimate reference in Him. To attempt to implement anything the Bible requires without reference to Jesus Christ is folly, whether it pertains to Old Testament or New Testament truth. The same principle applies to Hosea. It is beyond the scope of this book to treat exhaustively every verse in Hosea; this is not a commentary. Rather, this will be a theological overview of Hosea's message with a view to its gospel application. Searching for Christ in Hosea is not a vain game of hide and seek; finding Him is a sure thing. God's promise is that those who seek Him will find Him. So as we study Hosea, we want to be on Christ-alert.

I will develop the study in three parts. Part 1 concerns necessary issues of introduction. Introduction is that discipline of study that deals with such matters as authorship, date, historical background, purpose, and theme of writing. Although these may not be the most exciting or edifying elements of Bible study, they are essential facts that help to put a book in its context. Knowing both the historic and the canonical contexts of any book of the Bible is a significant aid and safeguard to proper interpretation. It is important to see where Hosea fits in the progress of both redemptive history and revelation. Part 2 develops the symbolic message of Hosea—his marriage to Gomer.

Unquestionably, the link between Hosea's personal life and his public ministry is unique and therefore critical for the understanding of the message. Understanding the theology of marriage as a biblical symbol and type of God's relationship to His people and specifically of Christ's relationship to His church is essential to grasping the significance of Hosea's experience. The significance of his tragic experience highlights the beauty of the ideal relationship that exists between Christ and His bride. Part 3 establishes the parallels between Hosea's life and the message he preached. If his marriage to Gomer was the symbolic message, his direct message concerns God's marriage to Israel. What Hosea did for Gomer, God did for Israel. What Gomer did to Hosea, Israel did to God. It was a relationship initiated by divine love, spurned by treacherous sin, and maintained by unfailing divine faithfulness. Although many of Hosea's statements are deep and difficult, his overall gospel message is very much on the surface. This particular part of the study will lend itself to the aim of the series to show the gospel in the Old Testament.

Please remember that in this study I am concerned with the big picture of Hosea, not the minute details. Our interest is in why and how the parts fit together to advance the revelation of the Christ and the gospel, rather than a technical exegesis to interpret all the specific parts. There are commentaries for that. So while I acknowledge that all the problems of interpretation may not be resolved, it is my prayer that throughout this study the Lord Jesus Christ will be evidently set forth and that the Holy Spirit will lead into truth by showing Christ and glorifying Him.

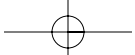
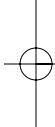
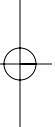


# PART ONE

## JUST THE FACTS



The Bible did not fall to earth from heaven complete and leather-bound. Different men—all of whom were inspired by the Holy Spirit—wrote the Old Testament over a period of about a thousand years. But each one lived in his own time and place; each one reflected and addressed the specific issues of his day. The truths of the Bible are universally and timelessly relevant, but they were first given to a specific people at a specific time to meet specific needs. The ultimate objective of our Bible study is to understand those universal and timeless truths and to apply them to our specific times and needs. An important part of Bible study is to learn what we can about the author, his times, and his particular circumstances. So here are just some facts about Hosea—the man and the book.





# I

## HOSEA: A MESSIANIC MAN



**H**osea, the prophet, shared his name with other prominent characters in the Bible—some good, some not so good. Names are often significant in the Old Testament, certainly more so than they are in our culture. For us a name is a means of getting someone’s attention or distinguishing and identifying one person from another. What a name means is sometimes a point of curiosity or a cute motto for a plaque or coffee cup, but hardly an element that conveys essential information about a person. My parents named me Michael (“who is like God?”), not because they were making a theological assertion but because for whatever reason they liked the name. My wife bought me one of those coffee cups with an inscription that supposedly defines *Michael*, but it says nothing about the Hebrew etymology of the name and instead has some flattering aphorism that I can only wish were true. The point is we use names without necessarily thinking about what the name means. In the Scripture, however, names often made a statement.

Names sometimes conveyed something about the nature, character, or behavior of the one so named. “You shall call His name JESUS: for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). That *Jesus* means “Jehovah saves”

is certainly a significant statement given the purpose of the Savior's birth. Interestingly, the Greek name for Jesus corresponds to the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which is a lengthened form of *Hosea*, meaning "salvation." Joshua, the successor to Moses, sometimes went by the shorter name Hoshea (Num. 13:16; same as Hosea in Hebrew) and certainly his career of delivering the nation victoriously into the Promised Land corresponded to the name. But, on the other hand, Hoshea was also the name of Israel's last king, who ironically delivered the defeated nation into exile from the Promised Land (2 Kings 17:6). So what's in a name, after all?

Whether or not Beerli and his wife named their son *Hosea* either in hope or in anticipation of what he would do when he grew up is ultimately irrelevant. That Hosea's name means "salvation" is not a clue to the meaning, theme, or purpose of his prophecy, but it nonetheless is a fitting appellation to sum up his prophecies that so wonderfully declare God's sovereign grace in dealing with the undeserving. Salvation—that's a statement! Whether intentional or not, his name encapsulated his message.

Hosea's name says a lot, but it doesn't say it all. There is more to a man than his name—even when the names are as transparent as those of Old Testament characters. Much of Hosea's message relates to his personal life that became such a public one. But before considering the intimate details of that connection, we need to go over some basics about his office and place of employment or ministry that will help shape our understanding of the significance, sobriety, and authority of his message.

## HIS PROFESSION

Ironically, notwithstanding the very public nature of Hosea's home life that provided the main points for his ser-

mons, the Bible reveals very little about who Hosea was. Apart from identifying his father Beeri, the Scripture says nothing more about Hosea's lineage, unless the Beeri of Hosea 1:1 is to be identified with the Beerah of 1 Chronicles 5:6. If those two are the same, Hosea would be of the tribe of Reuben. But that is speculative and ultimately irrelevant apart from confirming his northern roots. The details of his lineage are immaterial because of his profession: Hosea was a prophet. Of the three anointed or messianic occupations—prophet, priest, and king—only the prophetic office was unrestricted regarding pedigree. Priests had to trace to Levi; kings (at least those of the southern kingdom) had to trace to Judah, and even more specifically to the family of David. So whereas priests and kings were born to be priests and kings, prophets became prophets only by the special call of God. Interestingly, whereas priests and kings could not cross over into the spheres of the other's operation, prophets could be priests, kings, or anything else. For the prophet, everything depended on God's call. Understanding something about the prophetic profession or office is prerequisite to understanding the significance of Hosea's ministry. Significantly, understanding something about the prophetic office enhances understanding about how Hosea contributes to the declaration of the gospel. The very fact that Hosea was a prophet points to the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### *A Messianic Occupation*

I've already referred to the prophetic office as a messianic occupation. The noun *messiah* is based on a verb meaning "to spread a liquid over."<sup>1</sup> The liquid most often used was olive oil, and the objects were both things and people. Most of the anointed objects had some function in the ceremonies of worship rituals. For instance, Exodus 29:36 instructs that the altar should be anointed after a sin offering. Exodus 40:9–11 includes, in addition to the altar,

the laver and the entire tabernacle with all its vessels for the purpose of sanctifying the objects. Sanctifying refers simply to the separation of those objects from other things; the anointed objects were set apart for a distinct purpose and use. They were consecrated or dedicated to a particular function. The same meaning applies to the people anointed. The people anointed were usually in some leadership role, either civil or religious leadership: the most common were kings (1 Kings 1:34), priests (Ex. 28:41), and prophets (1 Kings 19:16). In each instance, the anointing was a symbolic gesture of setting the person apart for a special work. The commonly acknowledged association between the olive oil and the Holy Spirit is an important element in the ritual that adds to its significance.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Old Testament uses the noun *messiah* most frequently of kings (28 out of 39 occurrences), any person anointed could be accurately designated as a messiah. Kings, priests, prophets—all were messiahs. The noun form *messiah* in Hebrew conveys essentially the passive idea of the verb: a messiah is one who has been anointed. Being anointed identified the person as being qualified and consecrated for a special task. In other words, there was to be an active demonstration of the office to which the passive anointing pointed. An anointed king was to rule; an anointed priest was to minister; an anointed prophet was to preach. They were all “lesser” messiahs whose functions pointed to the Ideal Messiah who was to come and would fulfill perfectly every messianic operation. Three marks are common to every messianic function.

*An Appointed Position.* First, a messiah was a *divinely chosen* individual. This was true for kings (Deut. 17:15). It was true for priests (Deut. 18:5; Num. 17). It was true for prophets (Deut. 18:15, 18). Although not every prophet recounts the details or occasion of his call to the ministry, I would suggest that the detailed record of Jeremiah’s call

to the prophetic office is paradigmatic for every other true prophet (Jer. 1:4–10); therefore, it is instructive regarding Hosea.

The Lord’s word to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:5 is particularly informative: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; [b]efore you were born I sanctified you; and I [appointed] you a prophet to the nations.” Three verbs express the nature of the divine choice. The Lord said that He *knew* him. This is more than simple awareness or intellectual knowledge. It is, rather, an intimate, special, and selecting knowledge. This knowledge is part of the Old Testament’s vocabulary of election. Humanly speaking, God knew Jeremiah before there was anything to know. The Lord then said that He *sanctified* him. Before he was born, God had set Jeremiah apart for the special purpose of being a prophet. His service was divinely determined before he knew what was happening. Finally, the Lord said that He *appointed* him to be a prophet. This verb has the normal meaning “to give,” but also has the special sense of appointing or assigning to a specific task. God chose Jeremiah to be prophet; He called Jeremiah to be a prophet; and Jeremiah was a prophet. So it was for Hosea and, indeed, for every other true prophet.

What God determined in heaven happened on earth. There was no slip between the eternal purpose and the temporal fulfillment of God’s intent. There never is. That’s an important messianic lesson, particularly regarding the certainty of God’s purpose in redemption. But it is, as well, an important lesson for everything in life, and for everyone’s life. It was certainly true for Hosea. What Hosea preached and what he had to endure in connection with his ministry were the temporal manifestation of God’s eternal plan. We may know nothing of the occasion and the details of Hosea’s call, but the fact of the call is evident from its consequence. The Lord’s beginning to speak by Hosea (Hos. 1:2) is irrefutable verification that he was

God's select spokesman, His prophet. Just as God raised Jeremiah to speak for Him in the final hours of the southern kingdom, so He raised Hosea before Him to preach to the northern kingdom on the eve of its destruction.

*An Authoritative Position.* Second, a messiah was an *accredited* individual. He had the authority to exercise his office. The prophet's authority rested in the fact that he was the representative of God before men, speaking the Lord's word to men. The Hebrew word translated "prophet" implies something of the inherent authority in the prophet's words. It is formed from a verb that most likely means simply "to speak." The word *prophet* evidences the same pattern as the word *messiah* in that it conveys the passive idea of the verb. A prophet, therefore, is one who has been spoken to and who in turn conveys that divine message to men. The only legitimate prophetic word—whether predicting the future, exposing sin, or inviting repentance—was "thus says the Lord God" (Ezek. 2:4).

Perhaps one of the clearest statements that the prophet was God's messenger with God's message is Haggai 1:12–13. Verse 12 actually equates obeying the voice of the Lord God with obeying the voice of Haggai the prophet. Verse 13 identifies Haggai as the "Lord's messenger" speaking "the Lord's message." Although miracles and fulfilled prophecies were visible means to validate the authenticity of the prophet (Deut. 13:1–3; 18:21–22), his ultimate accreditation was his faithfulness in proclaiming the word of the Lord.

When self-proclaimed prophets voiced their opinions, God forthrightly dismissed them; they had no authority (see Jer. 14:14). But regardless of whether the people received or rejected the prophet's word, if the chosen prophet spoke the word of the Lord, then one way or another there would be evidence that a prophet had been there (Ezek. 2:5). The sin, rebellion, and unbelief of the

people would often rob a prophet of honor, but they could not nullify his authority. The authority of the prophet was in the Word. At the very beginning of his prophecy, even in the biography section, Hosea cites evidence of the Lord's speaking to him (see for examples 1:1, 2, 4, 6, 9; 3:1). Significantly, he begins the preaching section of his prophecy, "Hear the word of the LORD" (4:1).

*An Energized Position.* Third, a messiah was an *empowered* individual. When the Lord anointed one for some sphere of service, He did not abandon that individual to his own abilities or ingenuity. The Lord always supplied the power for that service, with the ultimate agent of power being the Holy Spirit. This empowering for service would have been the most vivid element in the anointing ceremony. As the olive oil was poured and smeared on the head of the appointed "messiah," so the Holy Spirit came upon him to enable him to perform the ministry for which he was being consecrated, as the passages below illustrate.

Although there is no direct statement of Hosea's empowerment or inspiration by the Holy Spirit, fulfilling his office responsibilities required it. What we read of this experience in the ministry of some prophets illustrates the common experience of all. Immediately after his call to the prophetic office, Ezekiel witnessed a mysterious and magnificent vision of God's absolute glory and fell on his face in worship and recognition of self-insufficiency. Then the Lord commanded him to stand, and the Spirit entered him and caused him to stand (Ezek. 1:28-2:2). Contrasting his ministry with that of false prophets, Micah testified, "But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the Lord, and of justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Mic. 3:8). The Lord assured Isaiah in connection with a profound prophecy of the Redeemer coming to Zion, "My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your

mouth . . . ” (Isa. 59:21). So the Spirit’s empowering prophets enabled them to fulfill their duty of obeying God’s commands, to preach with boldness regardless of opposition, and to do so with the confidence of the ultimate success of the word they preached.

Because he was a true prophet representing the one true and living God, Hosea shared these marks with every other of his messianic colleagues. The certainty of his divine call, his God-given authority, and his Spirit-enabled ministry added weight to what he preached and what he practiced. Hosea, like all his divinely called and inspired counterparts, was a preacher and reformer whose agenda was to motivate the people to repentance and to direct them to obedience to God’s covenant demands. Israel, then, was to look, to hear, and to heed. We, now, are to do the same, since his message is the Word of God that abides forever.

#### *A Messianic Anticipation*

A picture is worth a thousand words—so they say. I’m not sure that we can make such a precise equation, but there is no question that pictures effectively communicate ideas and that illustrations can effectively aid our understanding. Just consider how many toys or appliances have been assembled by the owner’s looking at the pictures rather than reading the instructions. Instructors often use visual aids to grasp or hold their students’ attention as well as actually to impart the desired information. Sunday school teachers have for years used flannelgraph stories, object lessons, and wordless books with colored pages to teach youngsters about the gospel. Graphs, charts, and more sophisticated analogies aid even adults, with their greater attention spans and more advanced knowledge, to learn more easily.

From the beginning of His revelation, God has communicated in comprehensible ways. It is not surprising, therefore, that God, the most effective teacher ever, would



communicate His truth with analogies, pictures, illustrations, and object lessons to clarify the profound and vitally important revelation He was graciously giving, not the least of which was the revelation of the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Himself, the Master Teacher, often pointed to something in the real world—whether a fig tree or a temple stone—to make a spiritual point. Similarly, the apostle John in the book of Revelation relies heavily on symbols to convey his message. So pictures are not just an Old Testament method of revelation.

When those pictures are also predictive, we call them types. It is beyond the scope of this study to review the nature and the hermeneutics of typology except to emphasize that typology is not an interpretation technique arbitrarily imposed on the Old Testament in an effort to rescue it for Christian relevance. Rather, it is a method of divine revelation. Let me put it simply in terms of “X” and “Y.” If X is the picture and Y is the truth, God was saying to look at X in order to understand something about Y. Much of what we read in the Old Testament is God’s using X’s to teach ultimate truths about Y. The principal thing to remember is that X does not equal Y. So X is the type, the object lesson that foreshadows or predicts the actual, future realization of the pictured truth. Y is the antitype, the future realization to which the type points. The type represents and resembles the antitype. This does not mean that X loses its significance or usefulness in communicating the truth. We can still look at the picture and learn about the reality. The key point is that Christ is the ultimate reality: He is the Ideal behind—or perhaps I should say above—all the visible impressions.

These Old Testament picture prophecies, or types, fall into three categories: people, things, and events. For now our interest is the people. Certain people were types of Christ not because of their personalities or character traits, but by virtue of their office. All prophets, priests, and kings

were lesser messiahs and types of the Ideal Messiah. All the features that mark them for their offices are perfectly and ideally true of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was chosen in the covenant of redemption to be the only redeemer of God's elect. He was accredited with heaven's approval and authority to perform all the duties of the anointed Mediator. He was empowered by the Holy Spirit for His work as the Savior. The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes well the evidence of Scripture:

It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man; the Prophet, Priest, and King. . . . The Lord Jesus, in His human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure . . . to the end that . . . He might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a mediator and surety. Which office He took not unto Himself, but was thereunto called by His Father, who put all power and judgment into His hand, and gave Him commandment to execute the same. (8.1, 3)

A prophet, a priest, and a king are essential needs for the human race, whose sin necessarily separates its members from God and precludes them from approaching God on their own. Before the fall, Adam, the head of the human race, enjoyed a perfect communion and fellowship with God, his Creator. But with the fall came a tragic and drastic change in human nature and the loss of any relationship with the Lord. Iniquity separated mankind from God, and sin hid God's face (Isa. 59:2). When Adam fell, he and all his posterity lost the knowledge of God that must be renewed if there is to be salvation from sin (Col. 3:10). Humanity needed a *prophet* to reveal God. When Adam fell, he and all his descendants lost the righteousness and

true holiness enjoyed at creation (Eph. 4:24). Mankind needed *a priest* to reconcile it to God. When Adam fell, he and all his seed became prey to the enemy of the soul who had power to hold them subject to bondage (Heb. 2:14–15). Mankind needed *a king* to reign, to subdue every enemy of the soul. What was needed, God in His wondrous and amazing grace provided in the person of His own dear Son, His and our Messiah. As the ultimate and ideal Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ brought together in His single person all the common features shared by the lesser messiahs and all the specific duties and responsibilities of each of the three distinct offices. The Lord Jesus Christ did it all.

Our focus here is specifically on the prophetic office. The Lord Himself initiated this messianic anticipation with His promise to Moses that He would raise up “a Prophet” (Deut. 18:18), and statements in the New Testament testify to the expectant arrival of that ideal prophet (see, for instance, Matt. 21:11, 46; Luke 7:16; John 7:40). Every passing prophet increased the anticipation for *the* Prophet: When will He come? In one sense, every prophet shared the mission of John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets before *the* Prophet, to prepare the way for His coming. As the fullness of time approached, the expectancy intensified. Remember that John was conducting such a remarkable ministry that some wondered and questioned if he was the promised Prophet (John 1:21). He set the record straight by identifying himself as the voice of one crying to prepare the way of the Lord; he made it clear that he was a pointer to Christ (John 1:23). That is the mission of every prophet, and by the very fact of his being a prophet he achieved that mission.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly defines how Christ carries out the prophetic office: “Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation” (question 24). Put simply, a prophet is God’s representative to

man. Who better than the very Son of God, Himself God, could represent God to man? Speaking of the Lord Jesus in prophetic terms, Hebrews declares that God spoke in various ways through the prophets but has now revealed His final word to man by His Son (Heb. 1:1–2). Although all the Old Testament prophets, including Hosea, were spokesmen for God and men of God, how imperfectly they represented God when compared to the Lord Jesus, who was “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person” (Heb. 1:3). Similarly, Paul said of Christ that He is “the image of the invisible God” and that “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 1:15; 2:9). The bottom line, then, is this: Jesus Christ is the Ideal Prophet because Jesus Christ is God. The proof that Jesus of Nazareth is the Ideal Prophet was and is overwhelming. Christ’s preaching, teaching, and working during His earthly mission constituted what we call His *immediate* or direct prophetic work. He consistently claimed the divine source of His message, predicted the future accurately, and performed the necessary signs and wonders to confirm His election, authority, and ability as *the* Prophet with the last and final Word from God. To Him, all the prophets bore witness.

Every lesser messiah was a type—a picture prophecy—of the ideal Messiah. It was said of Joshua and his attendants that they were “a wondrous sign” (Zech. 3:8). As priests, they represented and pointed to the coming Christ. The same can be said of Hosea, the prophet. As one of the lesser messiahs, Hosea contributed to God’s revelation of the gospel by his status as a prophet as well as by the messages he preached. The Lord says to look at a prophet and to learn something about Christ. In his messianic role, he signaled the coming Christ. His presence among the people heralded that One who was certain to come. Hosea was one of God’s installments on the prophetic line leading purposefully and unflinchingly to the Ideal Messiah. Hosea was

a contributor to messianic expectancy; therefore, we are to look at Hosea and learn of Christ. There is a sense in which every Christian is to be a sign of and to Christ. By our lives and words, we are to represent Christ and to point to Him. As a prophet, Hosea was a little messiah. As Christians, we are “little christs.”

## HIS PROPHECY

Called by God to be a prophet, Hosea was given a message to preach and a people to whom he would preach it. What he preached, both symbolically by his life and directly through his sermons, is the principal concern of the theological survey in Parts 2 and 3. My intention now is simply to identify his congregation, the overall scheme of his prophecy, and its place in the canon.

## HIS PARISH

Hosea is unique among the writing prophets in regard to his nationality and parish. He was a citizen of the northern kingdom, and he directed his message principally to the northern kingdom. He was a northerner preaching to the north. In typical prophetic style, he introduced his prophecy by identifying the kings during whose administration he ministered (Hos. 1:1). His reference to Jeroboam, the king of Israel, hints at this northern heritage and concern. Interestingly, notwithstanding his northern connection, he lists all the kings of Judah from Uzziah to Hezekiah while ignoring the successors to Jeroboam whose reigns would have coincided with the Judah regents. Given the chaotic nature of the successions, marked by power struggles, political intrigue, assassinations, dynasty shifts, and brief tenures, it is of little wonder that Hosea disregarded

naming the final kings of Israel. Jeroboam II had already put the nation on the slippery slope, and everything went quickly downhill after him. On the other hand, Hosea's specific inclusion of the Judean kings may say something of his theological, if not political, allegiance to the Davidic dynasty in view of what had to be his prophetic understanding of the Davidic covenant, which set the course for the coming of the Ideal King, his Savior. He anticipated His coming when he predicted the day in which Israel would return to the Lord their God, even David their king (Hos. 3:5). We'll get to that later.

Hosea was not the only prophet that God ever raised for a northern ministry. Like Hosea, Amos preached to Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 1:1), but he was a missionary from the south. Jonah was from the north and also preached during the days of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25), but his prophecy is biographical, recounting his reluctant mission to Nineveh. Elijah and Elisha, perhaps the most famous of the northern prophets, preached a century earlier, but were not counted as writing prophets.<sup>3</sup> Hosea's uniqueness, then, is the fact that he was a northerner who not only preached in the north but also wrote his message that was primarily directed to the northern kingdom. Yet as the inspired Word of God, borders do not restrict its authority and relevance.

One thing stands out in the light of the prophetic activity in the northern kingdom: in times of crisis, God sent a man with a word. At the inauguration of the kingdom, God sent a bold, yet naively disobedient, unnamed prophet to deliver a word against Jeroboam I when he set up what was to become the state religion of Israel (1 Kings 13). When Baal worship attained official status during the "co-regency" of Ahab and Jezebel, God raised up Elijah and then Elisha to affirm the one, true, and living God (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13). At the beginning of the end when Jeroboam II ruled, God had His prophets—including Hosea—to sound

the warning. Hosea's parish was ecumenical in the worst way: the state religion of Jeroboam I was entrenched and Baal worship lingered. Per the Lord's assurance to Elijah, it would be safe to assume that there was also a remnant according to grace (1 Kings 19:18).

The very fact that God raised up Hosea to minister to a people living in such a day of "religious mess" should give us hope. It doesn't require much spiritual insight to recognize the religious mess of our day. Religious pluralism plagues society, and true Christianity, which necessarily is exclusive, is at odds with the majority. Let it be our prayer that God would raise up ministers today with a prophetic boldness to declare His Word. In His grace, God has given His Word as the answer to any crisis.

## HIS BOOK

God told every prophet what to say; He told some prophets what to write. Although there is some dispute even among conservatives regarding the dating of some of the writing prophets, this writing ministry, in all likelihood, extended from the ninth to the fifth centuries B.C. Sometime during his prophetic career, God inspired Hosea to write. What he wrote was immediately canonical—the inspired rule of faith and practice—but in the collection process became the first of the corpus commonly designated as the Minor Prophets. Needless to say, these prophets are not minor in terms of their significance, ability, or authority but only in terms of the length of their writing when compared to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the Major Prophets. The rationale for how the books in this unit of Scripture were arranged is not immediately evident. It is not strictly an issue of chronology or length, but it seems to be a combination of both. Hosea

was not the earliest of the Minor Prophets, but his book is the longest among the earliest. Thus, it heads the collection. The principal issue is not *where* it is in the Bible but *that* it is in the Bible. Hosea's being inspired by the Holy Spirit to write (2 Peter 1:21) guaranteed the canonicity of his writing and assured its preservation. Hosea's book is a part of God's forever enduring Word.

The purpose of this theological analysis of Hosea's gospel message will preclude a sequential consideration of his prophecy, but it may help by way of overview to see a simple outline of his development. A most cursory reading of Hosea recognizes two principal sections: 1–3 and 4–14. The first division includes, though not exclusively, biographical details that establish the foundation for Hosea's using his personal life as a spiritual analogy. The second division records his sermons. The broad outline is obvious; the details are not—evident from the fact of the chapter division disparities between the Hebrew and the English Bibles. The problem is that there seem to be no “on the surface” objective markers to indicate the prophet's transitions, unless perhaps the hope messages signal the movement (Hos. 1:10–2:1; 2:14–23; 3:4–5; 6:1–3; 11:8–11; 14:1–8).<sup>4</sup> As well, the charges of no faithfulness, no lovingkindness, and no knowledge of God made at the beginning of the second division may hint to the main points of development (Hos. 4:1). The bottom line is that there is no consensus, and much work remains to be done regarding the structural analysis of the book. Nonetheless, here is a brief outline that maps the general flow of thought.

- I. Hosea's Personal Life: The Symbolic Message 1–3
  - a. His marriage and children 1
  - b. The application to Israel 2
  - c. His reunion with his wife 3



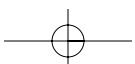
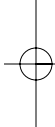
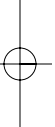
## II. Hosea's Prophetic Discourses: The Direct Message 4-14

- a. Evidence of ignorance of God and statement of hope 4:1-6:3
- b. Evidence of disloyalty to God and statement of hope 6:4-11:11
- c. Evidence of faithlessness to God and statement of hope 11:12-14:9

Although we are left to ourselves to decipher Hosea's table of contents, the theme of his message is on the surface and clear. God remains faithful to His covenant regardless of the gross unfaithfulness of Israel: although spurned, His love is constant. This is the heart of the gospel according to Hosea.

### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How do you continue to benefit from Christ's mediatorial work?
2. God used Hosea's life to communicate the gospel. How should your life communicate the gospel message to those around you?
3. Although today's ministers are not prophets by Old Testament definition, what can preachers today learn about their ministry from their Old Testament counterparts?



## 2

## HOSEA: THE TIME OF HIS LIFE



**H**osea was a real man living in a real world. His society, culture, and times affected him just as ours do us. Sometimes the way we read the Bible obscures the fact of this influence. This is particularly true regarding the Old Testament prophets. Too often, Christians read these books in isolation from the historical context in which they were written, even though a prophet may have directed attention to that context by naming the kings who reigned during his ministry. Those regal references should be enough to set the stage, but our knowledge of Hebrew history is sometimes deficient. And given the order of books in the English Bible, even a faithful and systematic reading of the Bible from cover to cover does not especially aid the memory. There is considerable distance between the Historical Books and the Prophets, and the beauty and blessing of the intervening poetry easily overshadow the facts of the past. Nevertheless, it remains an important step in the interpretation of a particular prophet to take the historical clues and factor them into his message. Hosea's opening reference to Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Jeroboam may not seem to say much, but it actually speaks volumes about the urgent need for his message. This historical setting

helps us to understand why God instructed Hosea to say what he said and to do what he did.

Foundational to understanding history properly is the recognition that all history is ultimately redemptive, converging on Christ. Time is God's servant, and it unwaveringly obeys His will. Time is the kingdom of God's providence in which He governs all things to His eternally designated end. Be careful not to entertain any vague or incorrect conceptions about divine providence. I asked a seminary student one time to define providence. After the predictable student silence, he fumbled the response, "It's kind of like fatalism." After I labeled him a pagan and facetiously threatened to bring out the matches reserved for those making such unorthodox statements, I emphasized the important difference between divine providence and the fatalistic notion that whatever will be will be. A belief in providence recognizes that God has decreed the end from the beginning as well as all the necessary in-between things that contribute to and ultimately accomplish the intended end. It operates according to the divine wisdom that knows the best possible way to achieve the best possible end. Nothing happens by chance; everything happens according to God's wisdom. I'm saying this to emphasize that the time and the circumstances of Hosea's ministry were providentially ordered as part of God's plan unfailingly heading to the first fullness of time when Christ would appear. Nothing in Hosea's life was accidental; Hosea's ministry served in the progression of God's redemptive purpose. Therefore, identifying the time of his life is important.

## THE DATES OF HOSEA

History consists of more than dates, but dates are part of history. Dates help to keep things in perspective. Assigning dates to biblical books is a little complicated since our

calendar reckoning differs from what was used in either Old Testament or New Testament times. But since our reckoning system is what we know and use, we customarily insert our own dates into the ancient time line. Plugging in our dates does not always yield precise results, but neither should it be regarded as guesswork. Scholars use two kinds of evidence for establishing these dates: relative chronologies and absolute chronologies. Relative chronologies simply put names and events in sequential order. Absolute chronologies require the insertion of an actual calendar date in the sequence. These actual dates are often calculated from some ancient documentation that mentions an astronomical event, such as an eclipse. Although I am clueless as to how to calculate and deduce when and where eclipses occurred and will occur again, others, happily, are not. So we rely on those calculations and conclusions. The fortunate thing is that we have plenty of evidence from the ancient world, both from the Old Testament and from the people of Old Testament times, to establish fairly accurate chronologies—at least for the monarchic period. I'm not going to go into all the evidence for assigning a date to Hosea, but I do want to emphasize that the date is not just arbitrarily being pulled from some hat.

The list of kings in Hosea 1:1 covers a span of just over a century—a period of time obviously longer than Hosea's ministry. Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah began their reigns within a year of each other, 793 B.C. and 792 B.C. respectively. Hezekiah's period in office ended in 686 B.C. Hosea lived and preached sometime within these parameters, but obviously not for the entire period. There are some clues, however, that can narrow the time framework further while keeping us within the temporal borders—if we read between the lines. This may get a bit tedious, but stay with me.

Hosea predicts the fall of Samaria, the northern kingdom (Hos. 1:3). Throughout his prophecy, this event looms in the future. Since Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.,

it would seem that Hosea's ministry ended before the fulfillment of what he predicted. Yet, he does mention Shalman, most likely Shalmaneser V (Hos. 10:14). According to 2 Kings 17:3–6, this Shalmaneser imprisoned Hoshea, Israel's last king, and initiated the three-year siege of Samaria that ultimately brought down the kingdom. Consequently, Hosea's ministry must have extended to 727 B.C. when Shalmaneser began to rule Assyria, but not quite to the end of his rule in 722 B.C. that coincided with Samaria's fall.

Fixing the point within those two dates for the end of Hosea's tenure rests on the reference to Hezekiah. The chronology of Hezekiah is riddled with problems, and solving the riddle is beyond our immediate concern. But here are the salient issues. The end of Hezekiah's reign in 686 B.C. is fairly certain, but that is far too late to include Hosea. According to 2 Kings 18:2, he reigned for twenty-nine years, marking 715 B.C. as his inauguration—seven years after the fall of Samaria. The math is easy enough. But that date still seems to be too late in comparison to the other evidence in Hosea, and the relative chronologies between Judah and Israel evince apparent inconsistencies. Here's where it gets fun. I'll try to be clear, but it does get confusing.

Second Kings records a relative chronology with points of reference between Hezekiah and Hoshea that are unexpected given the absolute dates assigned to their individual reigns. Hezekiah's first year was Hoshea's third (2 Kings 18:1); Hezekiah's fourth year was Hoshea's seventh (2 Kings 18:9); and Hezekiah's sixth year was Hoshea's ninth and last (2 Kings 18:10). Without contest, Hoshea's last year was 722 B.C., so on the surface it's not immediately clear how Hezekiah's sixth year (722 B.C. per 2 Kings 18:10) could have been seven years before his first (715 B.C. per his twenty-nine year reign). On the basis of this relative chronology between Hezekiah and Hoshea, Hezekiah's first year would be 728 B.C. rather than 715 B.C. This, happily,

provides a date agreeable with Hosea's evidence, but it yields a reign of forty-two years rather than the twenty-nine stated in 2 Kings 18:2. And to complicate matters, 2 Kings 18:13 marks Hezekiah's fourteenth year as the date of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C., taking us back to 715 B.C. as Hezekiah's first year. There appears to be a contradiction, but any contradiction in the Bible is always only apparent. I told you that this would be a bit puzzling.

However, let me briefly offer a possible explanation. Most likely, in accordance with common practice, Hezekiah served as a co-regent with his father Ahaz before assuming the sole rule of the nation. If this assumption is correct, his co-regency began in 728 B.C. and his sole reign began in 715 B.C. The relative chronology with Israel reckons his co-rule, whereas the reference to Sennacherib is based on his sole rule. It is only fitting, therefore, that Hosea would acknowledge Hezekiah as king. Factoring in Hezekiah's co-regency dates with the other evidence regarding Shalmaneser and Samaria's fall would put the end of Hosea's ministry somewhere about 725 B.C. It all fits.

The only thing left is to narrow down the beginning of his ministry. Although Jeroboam II and Uzziah assumed their throne about the same time, Uzziah outlived Jeroboam, ruling Judah for fifty-two years (2 Kings 15:2). Jeroboam ruled for only forty-one years (2 Kings 14:23–29), putting his death at 753 B.C. That means that since Hosea preached during the administration of Jeroboam II, he had to have begun by 753 B.C. at the latest.

Thanks for staying with me. It seems as though we've been around the proverbial barn, but all this suggests dates for Hosea's prophecy beginning prior to Jeroboam's death in 753 B.C. and ending around 725 B.C., after Hezekiah's ascension but before Samaria's fall. This, of course, refers to the tenure of his ministry, not how long it took to write the book.

## THE WORLD OF HOSEA

Dating the book is one thing; understanding the significance of the date is another. Factoring in what we know about Hebrew history with the overall history of the ancient Near East marks Hosea's time as a climactic point on the timeline of Israel's history. I have emphasized that all history is redemptive, the stage for divine providence to accomplish its eternal purpose. God had His reasons for what was happening in Israel and His ways for achieving His aim. The Old Testament reveals the reasons for Israel's situation; the political history of the ancient Near East unfolds the method by which God accomplished His purpose. The next chapter will detail the theological "why's" of Hosea's world; here, I want to overview what his world was like but without digressing to a detailed development of either Hebrew or Assyrian history. A macroscopic view of the history of both will suffice.

Before summing up Hosea's world, I need to issue a caveat about the evidence. Both sacred and secular resources supply the data for what we know about this time period, and sometimes the records conflict. This ought not to be a surprise in light of the nature of history and historical accounts. The database for history is everything past, but not everything past constitutes especially significant history. Writing history requires not only knowledge of what has happened but also some criteria for selecting from that corpus of knowledge what is significant. The very nature of history hampers historians because of their limited knowledge of the past, and it also breeds justifiable suspicion about every historical account because of the biased perspective of the recorder. In one way or another, every new generation of historians depends for knowledge in part on earlier records, which themselves suffer from the recorder's ignorance of all the facts and necessarily reflect some bias. The ancient chroniclers were usually



employed by the royal court, and consequently they skewed facts in favor of the throne. It was their job to justify or glorify official policies and ventures and to create a legacy for the king. Today, we call them “spin doctors.” Governments have always used them. Just because something is written in stone, it doesn’t make it so.

Here’s the point. If writing a truly important and accurate history requires knowing everything about the past, as well as the ability to identify the salient parts from that body of knowledge, Scripture is the only truly significant history that exists. Only God is omniscient; only God is infinitely wise. Therefore, only God, the ultimate author of Scripture who knows everything, has the skill to select from what He knows to record a history that is both infallibly accurate and eminently significant. So at whatever point secular history disagrees with sacred history, we know that the secular historian was either mistaken about the facts or misleading in how he presented the facts. We can be certain of two things as we read the Bible: it is true, and it is important. Nothing ever written is more true, and nothing ever written is more important. This gives confidence as we use the Bible as our history text and raises caution as we use other sources. We believe that whatever the Bible says is true. What the other sources say may well be true, but we can’t be as certain. So with this simple philosophy of history in mind and with my promise not to write a detailed account of Hebrew and Assyrian history, we’re ready for the relevant facts of Hosea’s world—at home and abroad.

### *His World at Home*

The Old Testament supplies the points of interest. Israel had a checkered history from its inception, alternating between bad and worse. Tragically, the northern kingdom never had a good king. It had powerful and prosperous kings but never a good one. That assessment alone testifies to

how differently the omniscient Historian evaluates significance. Military exploits, economic affluence, and building projects are usually the stuff of royal chronicles. The inspired histories typically glossed over these accomplishments and zeroed in on the king's moral character and his spiritual influence on the nation. For Judah, the standard was how well the king did in comparison to David; for Israel, it was how bad he was in comparison to Jeroboam I, who from the beginning taught Israel to sin.

As we've observed from Hosea's calendar of events, Hosea began his career toward the end of the administration of Jeroboam II. Although the Scripture refers to him simply as Jeroboam, we number him "II" to distinguish him from Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom, whom we number "I." But the two were not related, which itself says something about the state of Israel. Whereas Judah's dynastic kings ascended to David's throne as evidence of God's covenant faithfulness (2 Sam. 7:12–16) and His unrelenting determination to set David's greater Son—His Son—on that throne (Ps. 2:6), Israel's kings could hardly get a dynasty going.<sup>1</sup> Israel was a kingdom marked by royal instability and insecurity.

Jeroboam II, the third in the line of Jehu, was the next-to-last king of Israel's fourth and longest dynasty (eighty-nine years). Were it not for the fact that God had promised Jehu a dynasty extending to four generations (2 Kings 10:30; 15:12), Jeroboam might as well have been the last. For all practical purposes, he was. His son Zechariah lasted only for six months before his assassination by Shallum, who in turn reigned for only a month before Menahem killed him (2 Kings 15:8–12). The early days of Hosea's ministry were marked by political intrigue and chaos—little wonder he didn't bother naming the kings after Jeroboam.

Notwithstanding all the political maneuvering and murdering, everyday life was pretty good, at least at the

beginning of Hosea's prophetic career. Jeroboam II enjoyed significant military success, regaining territories to the north, south, and east that almost matched the borders of the glory days of David and Solomon in those regions (2 Kings 14:25, 28). His administration also fostered an economic prosperity that set a standard of living affecting all of society in one way or another. Luxury led to a materialism that translated into class divisions and struggles, with the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer. Amos, the southern missionary to the north during the days of Jeroboam, is often characterized as the prophet against social injustice because of his pointed accusations of societal abuses. The extreme wealth among the people is manifested, for instance, in his references to seasonal vacation homes and residences filled with ivory (Amos 3:15). He attests to their selfish materialism in his condemnation of the wives of Samaria—whom he calls cows—who pressure their husbands to maintain their style of living even if it means extorting and taking advantage of others to do it (Amos 4:1). Hosea states the fact unequivocally when he quotes Ephraim—another name for Israel—as saying, "I'm rich" (Hos. 12:8). In many ways, life was good—at least for some.

Affluence, however, is seldom friendly to the gospel. It tends to breed carnal security and a self-confidence that cause the comfortable either to see no need for God or to interpret the ease of life as a token of God's favor. The same Ephraim that declared its wealth also professed its innocence by claiming it was free from iniquity (Hos. 12:8). So, for a prophet to announce God's displeasure and to threaten impending doom seemed to be incongruous with reality. Convincing a sinner of his sin is always prerequisite to pointing him to the gospel solution to his sin. Hosea, obviously conscious of that logic in evangelism, focused much of his message on exposing the sin of

the people. He was dealing with a people whose spiritual callousness, hardened by material riches, desensitized them to spiritual matters. The good life, thanks to Jeroboam, made Hosea's job hard.

The good life provided by Jeroboam's leadership did not last; peace and prosperity gave way to foreign domination and economic deprivation. Repentance and spiritual renewal, however, did not ensue. It's not the environment, after all, that determines character or spiritual consciousness.

The fatal connection between Israel's foreign and domestic policies surfaced during the reign of Menahem (2 Kings 15:14–22). His predecessors, Zechariah (six months) and Shallum (one month), did not rule long enough to establish or enforce any kind of policy. My guess is that the conspiracies and violence that marked the transitions in power served only to create anxiety and uncertainty among the people. Well within a year of Jeroboam's long and stable reign (forty-one years), Israel saw three kings on the throne. They had to be wondering what was happening; it appeared their comfortable world was falling apart. Menahem brutally terrorized those who did not submit, to the extreme of savagely murdering pregnant women (2 Kings 15:16). He answered the Assyrian threat by paying Assyria tribute money, a foreign policy that he subsidized by imposing outrageous taxes on the wealthy (2 Kings 15:19–20). It bought a bit of peace with the Assyrians, but the cost was immense.

Not surprisingly, Menahem's dynasty was short-lived. His son, Pekahiah, ruled for only two years before Pekah assassinated him in what appears to have been a military coup (2 Kings 15:23–31). There is some evidence that Pekah had set up a rival government in the Transjordan during the administration of Menahem,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps the heavy taxation necessary to support the pacifistic policy with Assyria fostered the boldness to take military action. It

seems that the concerns over the domestic economy always trumped the issues of foreign policy. Pekah's more aggressive military policy, evidenced in part by his ill-conceived alliance with Syria against Judah (2 Kings 16:5-7), led to an Assyrian invasion into Israel and the deportation of many of its inhabitants (2 Kings 15:29). And finally, there was Hoshea, Israel's last king. He ascended to the throne according to what had become typical procedure: conspiracy and assassination (2 Kings 15:30). Thanks to Pekah's policy, much of the land had already been lost to Assyria, so to preserve what little was left, Hoshea reverted to Menahem's policy of paying tribute money to buy a peace (2 Kings 17:3). For some reason, either depletion of resources, assistance from Egypt, or an increasing anti-Assyrian sentiment, Hoshea stopped payments and thus led his nation to its end (2 Kings 17:4-6). He was imprisoned, Samaria was besieged, and the people of Israel were exiled from home (2 Kings 17:5-6).

### *His World Abroad*

Even a cursory survey of the world scene boldfaces the Lord's absolute sovereignty over all the affairs of the world to accomplish His purpose. Although the then-current events had military and political explanations that would have engaged the news media of the day, they confirm over and over again the truth of Proverbs 21:1—"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes."

Because God is totally sovereign, He can choose to work either with or without external means to accomplish His will. The Lord's behind-the-scene manipulation of nations was His primary method of executing the consequences of His will regarding Israel. This means of accomplishing His will showed itself most obviously when the time came for Israel to be expelled from the land because of their unbelief. Hosea warned the nation

that their rampant idolatry disqualified them from the land and that judgment loomed. Hearing the threat, however, did not cause them to pack their bags and leave their homes on their own. As the biblical record highlighted, they did everything they could to maintain their homes, whether by mollification or through bravado. So the Lord used the Assyrians as His instrument to effect the expulsion. Isaiah, with prophetic insight, identified the Assyrians as the rod of God's anger (Isa. 10:5).

From a natural historic perspective, it is not surprising that the Assyrians were able to conquer Israel. By the eighth century B.C., Assyria, militarily and politically, had become the most powerful nation in the world of the Near East with their control extending throughout Mesopotamia all the way to Egypt. They ruled an empire. Secular accounts from the period<sup>3</sup> detail a military genius and cruelty that stood unmatched. Certainly, neither Israel nor Judah possessed military machinery sufficient to resist Assyrian advances. So from a natural perspective Israel's defeat at their hands is not surprising. From that same natural perspective what is surprising is that Assyria did not defeat Judah the same way. More was going on than the eye could see.

A detailed account of Assyrian history would be interesting but beyond the scope of what is relevant to our concern about Hosea's world. But Assyria was a part of Hosea's world, and the threat of Assyrian domination was a specific point in his preaching (Hos. 11:5). Understanding something about Assyrian strategy and policy gives a bit of insight into how God used this pagan power to accomplish His purpose.

As the borders of Assyria expanded to empire proportions, the Assyrian kings developed ingenious ways to consolidate and control their territorial interests. Both biblical and secular records illustrate the varied tactics, which seem to have been determined by the level of "trouble" being caused by the tributary. First, those pro-Assyrian

nations willing to pledge allegiance to Assyria and pay tribute money to buy protection and maintain peace continued to enjoy a degree of national independence and identity, but at significant expense. This peace-at-any-cost was Menahem's course of action and Hoshea's at the beginning of his reign. Interestingly, Ahaz of Judah volunteered for this arrangement when he felt threatened by the Israeli-Syrian coalition, doing so against the advice of Isaiah (Isa. 7; 2 Kings 16:5–9). Second, those nations who rebelled and withheld the tribute payments became subject to invasion, which resulted in the loss of territory to Assyria's direct control. As part of this territorial incorporation, the Assyrian authorities deported many of the natives to other provinces. This is what happened during the reign of Pekah and would have happened during Hezekiah's reign had not God interrupted the normal course of events (2 Kings 19:35–36). Third, those nations whose rebellion persisted met Assyria's full fury: they were destroyed, and the population was even more thoroughly dispersed. This happened to Samaria after Hoshea stopped payment again and solicited support from Egypt. Assyria had had enough.

Most striking was the Assyrian policy of deportation used to control the conquered lands and people. It was an ingenious way both to demoralize a people and to reduce the threat of rebellion. An expatriated people would have little incentive to revolt in a land which was not their native soil. What is even more notable is the fact that in the history of warfare, this seems to be the first time such a tactic was employed. In the providence of God at the very moment when His patience with idolatrous Israel had expired and the time of their expulsion had arrived, there was a mechanism in place to accomplish His purpose. Let me pose this question: Where did the Assyrian commanders get the idea of deportation? Remember that Proverbs 21:1 says the king's heart is in God's hands.

Isaiah had it right when he identified Assyria as the rod of God's anger (Isa. 10:5). That Assyria was not successful against Judah underscores the truth that it was merely an instrument in God's hand. Militarily, Sennacherib should have had no difficulty carrying out his threats against Hezekiah, whose withholding tribute payments qualified Judah for the next stage of Assyrian reprisals—incorporation and deportation. But it was not yet time for God to execute His judgment on Judah, so Judah was preserved. God's direct intervention showed that He was the One in control. Without any human means, God caused the mighty army of Sennacherib to retreat in confusion after slaying 185,000 soldiers in the darkness of a single night (Isa. 37:36).

Although the Assyrians were ignorant of their manipulation by God and their role as the agents of providence, they were nonetheless subjects of God's kingdom. God certainly held them accountable for their transgressions against His law and dealt with them according to their works. Hosea lived in a world that was in God's hand, and he witnessed the absolute sovereignty of God using the events and circumstances of life to accomplish the very message he was preaching. In hindsight, it does not require much spiritual acumen to recognize God's amazing control over the nations of the Old Testament world. So now let me pose this question: At what point in the history of the world did God stop controlling the nations of the world?

In our hearts we know the biblically correct answer to this question. In our heart of hearts we know that God controls governments and the course of human events as much today as ever. Yet so often we live as though God at some point in history abdicated His throne in exchange for a bleacher seat. Too many Christians live as though God is pacing back and forth in heaven, wondering and worrying about what He will or can do if this or that happens on



earth. At the very least, that is not a biblical view of God. If Hosea's world was in God's hand, so is ours.

The history of Hosea's world delineates the fulfillment of his prophecy that the Lord would first bring the demise of Jehu's dynasty and then the end of the whole kingdom of Israel (Hos. 1:4), and that He would do so at the hand of the Assyrians (Hos. 11:5). Hosea lived and ministered during most of that history and, therefore, preached to a nation on the brink of disaster. There was a sense of urgency to his message, but the nation was oblivious: Israel constituted a tough congregation. What Israel experienced in the swirling demise of their national sovereignty and standard of living consistently affirmed the veracity and authority of Hosea's message. Hosea was a true prophet: the evidence was irrefutable (Deut. 18:21–22). Would that they had been wise and understood (Hos. 14:9)!

Yet ironically and graciously, the tragic consequences of Israel's ignorant and foolish rejection of Hosea's message anticipated the grace of the gospel. Ironically, the territory of Israel that first experienced God's judgment (all the land of Naphtali, 2 Kings 15:29) was by God's grace the first region of Israel that would witness the ministry of Christ (Matt. 4:12–16). The darkness of Hosea's day would give way to the light of Christ. The time of darkness was a providentially ordered step toward the fullness of time in which the Light would shine. God's purposes and plans always come together.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Review the major developments of God's redemptive plan.
2. Generally, how do we establish dates for Old Testament history?

3. What should be your attitude when the “facts” of secular history disagree with the “facts” of biblical history?
4. Why did the southern kingdom maintain a single dynasty of kings when the northern kingdom did not?
5. Why does prosperity sometimes conflict with the gospel?
6. Think about the ways in history that God manipulated pagan governments to accomplish His purpose. What are the implications for current events?
7. What is the irony of Christ’s beginning His public ministry in Galilee?