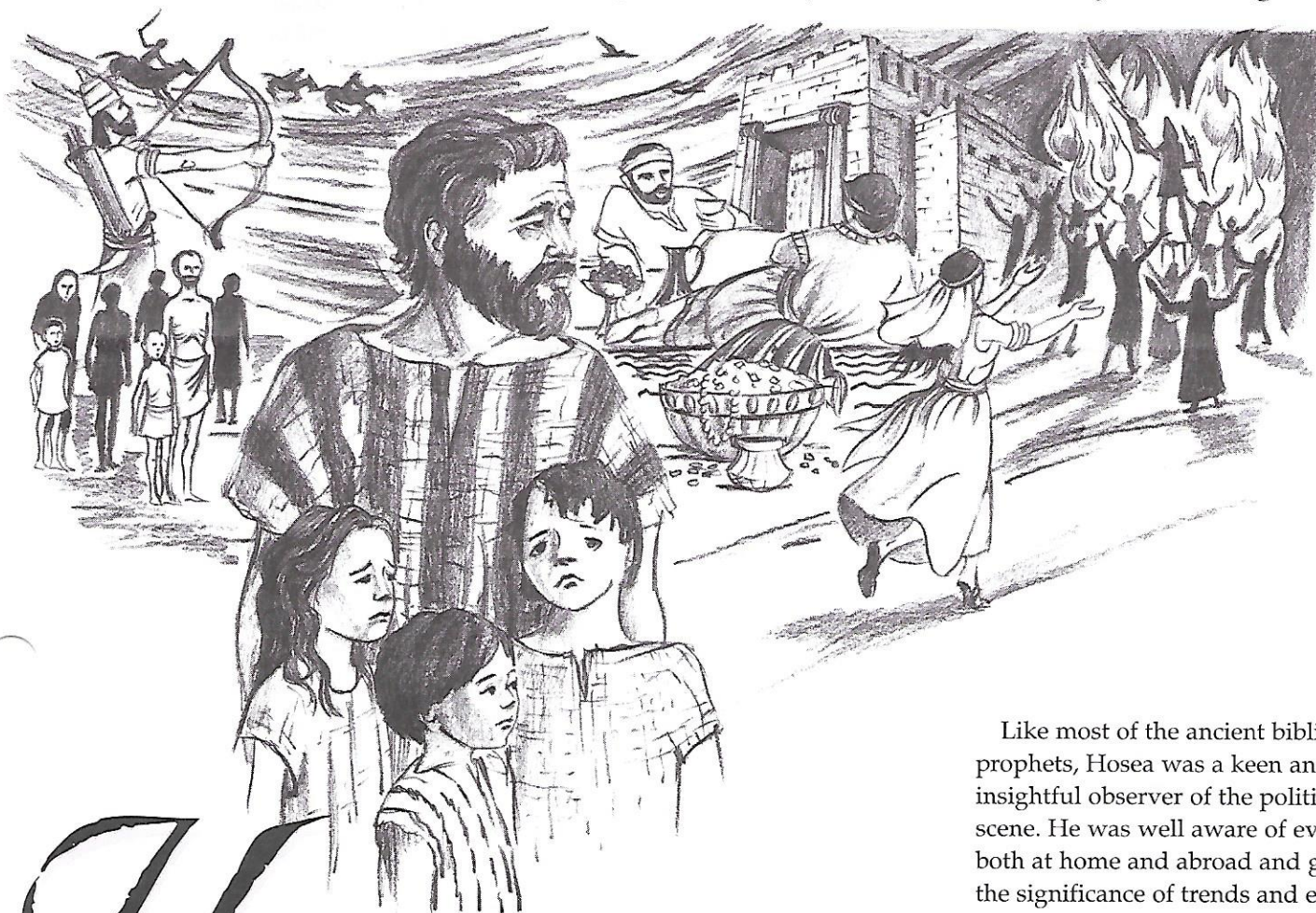


ScripturefromScratch

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Illustrations by Vicki Shuck

Like most of the ancient biblical prophets, Hosea was a keen and insightful observer of the political scene. He was well aware of events both at home and abroad and grasped the significance of trends and events

Hosea Prophet of Divine Love

By Leslie Hoppe, O.F.M.

What would attract the most attention: a story of adultery, a spurned husband and a family abandoned by a promiscuous wife and mother? Or a tract about political and economic policy? The first three chapters of Hosea have engaged scholars and general readers alike. But there is a lot more to Hosea. While commentary on political and economic policy may not be as glitzy as tales about a promiscuous wife, it is the stuff that made his prophecy a unique phenomenon.

better than the professional politicians of his day. Hosea's prophecy is so significant because it is the work of someone who witnessed the final years of the Kingdom of Israel. It exudes a certain poignancy not only because of Hosea's personal tragedies, but also because the prophet warned his people of a great national tragedy that was approaching quickly. Unfortunately, Hosea was not successful in persuading his fellow citizens that disaster was coming.

Background

Small national states like Israel and Judah emerged in the eastern Mediterranean region because there was a vacuum of imperial power. Both Egypt and the Hittites exhausted themselves in conflicts in the region by the end of the 13th century B.C. The next 500 years witnessed the rise of the Philistine city-states, the Phoenician mercantile cities of Tyre and Sidon, the Kingdom of Aram in the north, and several kingdoms astride the Jordan River: Israel and Judah west of the Jordan and Ammon, Moab and Edom to the east. These small nations vied with each other for dominance, and there was almost constant warfare in the region. No single nation was successful at dominating the others, although Aram and Israel were the principal regional powers.

The eighth century B.C. began well enough for the Kingdom of Israel, ruled by Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). Even the Book of Kings, which hardly ever says anything positive about the rulers of the Northern Kingdom, has to acknowledge the success of his expansionist policy (2 Kgs 14:25). The Books of Amos and Hosea describe Jeroboam's rule as a time of economic prosperity for the urban elite, who used their political and economic power to exploit the vulnerable peasant class. Archaeology has given us a more precise picture. Excavations suggest that the eighth century was a time of economic stagnation. The bills for the extensive building projects and

military adventures undertaken by Jeroboam's predecessors had come due and Israel's agrarian economy staggered under the strain. The economic pressure felt by the country's peasant class was overwhelming. The people of means, however, concerned themselves with adding to their wealth and power (Hos 12:7-8).

The second half of the eighth century was to be disastrous for Israel. Zechariah, Jeroboam's son and successor, reigned for only six months before he was assassinated by Shallum who, in turn, was assassinated after only one month and replaced by Menahem (746-737 B.C.). More serious than Israel's internal instability was the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 B.C.) to the throne of Assyria. Pul, as he is known in the Bible (2 Kgs 15:19; 1 Chr 5:26) was responsible for changing the face of the ancient Near East by a policy of expansionism through military conquest. Both the Bible (2 Kgs 15:19-20) and the Assyrian Chronicles attest to Menahem's submission to Tiglath-Pileser. The Israelite king bought time by paying a high tribute to the Assyrians. Of course, Israel's farmers ultimately paid the price to keep Menahem on the throne. By 734 B.C., the Assyrians brought the entire region under their control and established a military and trading post

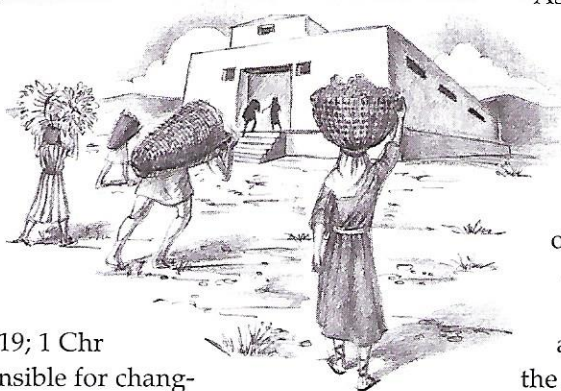
in Gaza on the border of Egypt, which Tiglath-Pileser dreamed of incorporating into his empire.

Assyrian Attack

Menahem was succeeded by his son Pekahiah, who ruled only two years before he was assassinated during a military coup led by his adjutant Pekah (735-732 B.C.). Israel's military leaders were foolish enough to think that they could force the Assyrians from Syria-Palestine.

They formed an anti-Assyrian alliance with Israel's long-time foe Aram. Though it appears as delusional now, the people of Israel were confident in the ability of their army to deal with the Assyrians (10:13-14). The result of Israel's

ill-conceived military adventure was foregone: the Assyrians crushed the revolt. Aram was incorporated into the Assyrian provincial system along with much of Israel's northern and eastern territories. The Kingdom of Israel was reduced to the city of Samaria and the hill country of Ephraim. Hoshea then assassinated Pekah and became Israel's last king (732-722 B.C.). Hoshea sealed his doom and that of his kingdom by trying to take advantage of the interregnum following Tiglath-Pileser's death in 727 B.C. (2 Kgs 17:4). After Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) solidified his hold on the Assyrian throne, he came to Samaria, captured it, deposed and imprisoned Hoshea, incorporated the last vestige of Israelite territory into the Assyrian Empire and exiled many leading citizens. So ended the Kingdom of Israel (see 2 Kgs 17).



Praying With Scripture

- **Hosea criticized Israel's worship because it was not accompanied by a commitment to social justice. Do your prayer and worship move you to transform society according to the ideals of the Gospel? Pray for the gift of the Spirit to enlighten and empower you for the service of all those on the margins of society.**

Hosea witnessed these events and tried to lead the people of Israel to understand what was happening to the nation and why one disaster followed upon another. He takes note of Israel's political instability exemplified by the assassination of four of its last six kings (Hos 7:5-7; 8:4; 9:15; 13:10-11). He has God mockingly ask Israel: "Where now is your king, that he may save you?" (13:10). God then takes responsibility for ending the monarchy: "I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath" (13:11).

The prophet reflects on the political maneuvering that marked Israel's final years. He states that, for all its efforts, Israel did no better than "a silly and senseless dove" flitting about, searching for some safe refuge (7:11). The treaties, plots, revolts, coalitions and alliances formed by Israel's political and military leaders were as foolish as chasing after an east wind—a scorching, blinding wind that brings destruction and death in its wake (12:1). In the end, all Israel's scheming would amount to nothing more than a source of shame as the nation will find itself exiled from the land (10:6).

Unlike some of the other prophets of the eighth century, Hosea was not interested in the fate of Assyria or the other nations in the region. His book contains no "oracles against the nations" (compare Amos 1:1-2:3; Is 13:1-23:18). Hosea focuses all his attention on Israel and does not offer an opportunity for the people of Israel to consider the future of other nations that flaunt the divine will. The prophet does not want to distract his people from recognizing the seriousness of the circumstances in which they find



Living the Scriptures

- **Hosea criticized his contemporaries because they did not serve the LORD alone. Living the Christian life without compromise is no simple matter. Consider the areas of your life in which compromise is a temptation and consider what decisions you can make to insure that you are living according to the ideals of the gospel.**

themselves. What kept Israel from this recognition was its public worship. The people and their leaders talked themselves into believing that their well-attended liturgies would be their salvation in the grave political crises that they faced.

There were royal sanctuaries at Dan in the north, Samaria in the central area, and Bethel in the south of the Kingdom of Israel.

Hosea did not speak to people who neglected worship. In fact, from Hosea's perspective they had too many shrines and made too many pilgrimages (10:1-2, 8; 12:11). The people frequented the shrines of their kingdom and participated enthusiastically in worship (8:13), but their belief that this activity would save them was misplaced (6:6). The prophet saw two fatal flaws in Israelite religious activity.



did not know that it was the LORD who made the land fertile (2:8-9). They thought that the land's fertility was the gift of Baal, the Canaanite storm god, who was credited with bringing rain. At harvest time, the people celebrated what they believed was Baal's beneficence (2:13) while it was the LORD who gave Israel "the grain, the wine, and the oil" that they brought as sacrificial gifts for Baal. To the prophet this was not simply religious syncretism but the rejection of the LORD, who gave Israel every good gift, in favor of Baal, who gave Israel nothing (4:17; 8:4; 10:5; 11:2; 13:1-3; 14:8).

False Gods

What made Canaanite religion and the worship of Baal so attractive? Israel's survival depended on rain. It lacked a river system like those in Egypt and Mesopotamia that could be exploited for irrigation. Without adequate rainfall, agricultural shortages and even famine were the result. Since Baal was a storm god, it seemed logical to seek his help. The LORD came from the arid south (see Hab 3:3). From the time of Ahab (875-854 B.C.), the royal family promoted the worship of Baal (1 Kgs 16:31-32). Ahab was married to Jezebel, a Sidonian princess who supported hundreds of Baal's prophets. Their son Ahaziah continued the promotion of Canaanite religion in Israel (1 Kgs 22:53). The royal absolutism with

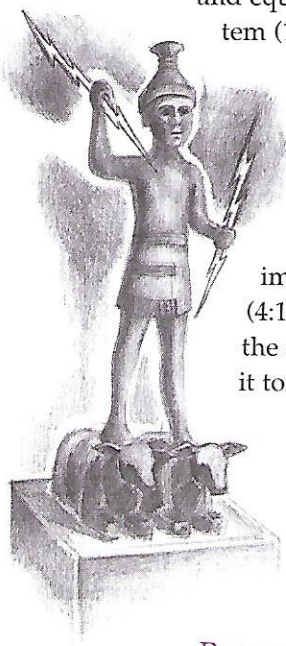
Empty Ritual

Hosea asserted that Israel's worship merely compounded its problems because the liturgy as practiced in the Northern Kingdom did not honor the LORD alone. Canaanite religious rituals became part of the liturgy at Israelite shrines (4:15-5:7). The priests of these shrines failed in their responsibilities (4:4-6) so the people

which Israel's kings sought to rule was supported by Baalism. Yahwism, however, saw Israel as a community of equals whose rights must be respected.

The story of Naboth's vineyard illustrates the contrast between the Israelite and Canaanite view of monarchy. Finally, Jeroboam I made an unfortunate choice when he set up calves in the royal sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (see 1 Kgs 12:28). These probably served the same purpose as did the cherubim in the Jerusalem Temple, i.e., as supporting the footstool of the invisible Yahweh, but they probably only confused most people by merging elements of the cult of Baal and that of Yahweh (Baal was often depicted standing on the back of a bull). Hosea considered these calves as idolatrous deviations from authentic worship of Yahweh (8:5-6; 13:1). He brooked no compromise—even an unintentional one—with worship of the LORD alone.

The prophet also had a problem with the fact that Israel's religious activity was not accompanied by a commitment to social justice. On the contrary, it served to free people from the responsibility to maintain a just



and equitable social and economic system (12:7-8). The prophet does not paint a flattering portrait of the wealthy. He characterizes them as people who consumed more than their share of the agricultural bounty with an arrogance that implied that all this was their due (4:1-5:7). The prophet looked at the moral fabric of society and saw it torn into shreds. He saw a complete breakdown of the social order (4:1-3). This, coupled with Israel's service of Baal, will bring divine judgment upon Israel (4:1; 5:1).

Response to the Prophet

What was Hosea's advice to his people? "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love . . . it is time to seek the LORD . . . (10:12). What was the people's response to Hosea's message? They thought he was crazy: "The prophet is a fool; the man of the spirit is mad!" (9:7). It was only after the Northern Kingdom disappeared into the pages of history that some people—probably from the Southern Kingdom (Judah)—realized that Hosea was not so crazy after all. They preserved his words and handed them down so that later generations of believers could profit from them.

Though Hosea proclaimed God's judgment on Israel, he did not believe that judgment was God's last word to the people. God's last word to Israel is a word of love and mercy: "I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy" (2:19). Hosea's experience taught him how the bonds of love are stronger than the infidelity that threatened to undo them. He was confident that God's love and mercy were more powerful than Israel's unfaithfulness. Still, Israel's salvation was not going to be a matter of cheap grace. The prophet was certain that Israel would experience a very long night, but he urged his people: "Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; for [the LORD's] appearing is as sure as the dawn" (6:3). ■

Father Leslie Hoppe teaches at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. In addition to his teaching and research in Old Testament interpretation, he also has an abiding interest in biblical archaeology

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Talking About Scripture

- **Hosea had a keen insight into the social, economic and political realities of his day. What does this say about the role of Christians in society?**
- **The prophet believed that judgment was not God's last word to Israel. What, then, is the place of optimism in the Christian life?**



Reading About Scripture

- **Brueggemann, Walter. *Tradition for Crisis: A Study in Hosea*. Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1968.**
- **Doorly, William J. *Prophet of Love: Understanding the Book of Hosea*. NY: Paulist, 1991.**
- **Mays, James L. *Hosea. Old Testament Library*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969.**