

Hosea – Prophet of God’s Love

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1. Who was Hosea?

There is very little biographical detail about Hosea in the collection of his prophecies, apart from the material about his marriage. All we really know about him can be found in 1:1– which gives us his father’s name (**Beeri**) and the time of his ministry (the reign of Jeroboam II of Samaria/Israel), as well as the fact that the Lord spoke directly and personally to him. Where his home was or his age are details that we are not given. There is no doubt that his prophetic ministry occurred in the northern kingdom, although it had some reference to the southern kingdom of Judah. Perhaps some of the editing of this collection of his prophecies took place in the south.

2. What is a prophet?

A prophet is a man or woman who has been called by God to speak God’s Word. They are not ‘fore-tellers’ primarily, but ‘forth-tellers’, and speak God’s word which has come to them in a personal way. They may have predictive elements to their message, but these elements are all with a view to the exhortation and warning of the hearers. They come with a message of both help and judgment. The prophets must be understood in their particular historical setting and also in the light of God’s covenant relationship through history to His people.

3. The Life and Times of the Son of Beeri.

As we have seen, Hosea’s ministry occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel, and the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the southern kingdom. Jeroboam II died in 747/6 BC and so the prophet must have begun his ministry before this time. Quite likely his ministry continued until 722 BC, the time when the Northern kingdom fell to the invading Assyrians. Hosea was thus the prophet of the last years of the northern kingdom, and his prophecy addressed, in skillful and impassioned language, the troubles of these years.

The division of the kingdom of Israel into North and South followed the death of Solomon. His son and successor Rehoboam acted foolishly (see 1Kings 12:1–15) and Jeroboam I, who had been a rebel under Solomon was chosen by the ten tribes of the North to be ruler over them (1Kings 11:26–40; 12:2–3,16–20.) Obviously there were still deep tribal feelings despite the long reigns of David and Solomon, which easily opened into division under these conditions. Saul, who David had replaced as king had come from the northern tribes, and David had had to subdue them in assuming the throne (see 2Samuel 2:8–17, 3:1–5:5.)

Jeroboam I had realised that the centralised worship at the temple at Jerusalem was a threat to his power (1Kings 12:25–27), and so he had devised his own places of worship and

constructed some golden calves for worship there. One he placed at Bethel, an ancient place of worship in Israel, and which was on the road to Jerusalem; the other he placed in the north at Dan. He instituted his own priesthood, and festivals. In its telling, this is very reminiscent of the affair of the golden calf at Sinai – see 1Kings 12:28–33. Right at the beginning of this sin the word of the Lord came to him against this false worship and promised its destruction – 1Kings 13:10. The northern kingdom never shook off this idolatrous beginning, by its stubborn refusal to hear the Word of the Lord, and it is this persisting sin that lay at the heart of God’s dealings of judgment with them. It is this that lies at the heart of Hosea’s prophecy.

The Lord’s judgment of the northern kingdom was the outworking of his covenantal promises of blessing and cursing given in Deuteronomy 28. Covenant is not a contract, but a relationship that God establishes unilaterally with us, and which cannot be broken on God’s side, even though there may be attempts to destroy it on ours. This covenant relationship is maintained and worked out patiently and in deep love by God, who is not desirous that one sinner die in his or her sins, but who also is jealous for the sanctity of his Name. (See Exodus 34:6–7 for the exposition of the heart of our Lord of covenant grace.) The jealousy of the Lord is for the holiness of His name, but also for the responding love of His people, and the covenantal blessings and curses are the means by which we are drawn, forced by grace into that great response. Along with the blessings and curses, the Lord sends His Word to His people to call them back to Himself. A number of prophets were sent to the northern kingdom, but no repentance came from them. Finally the full outworking of the covenant had to come. It is of this that Hosea is the great prophet. We see in his prophesying that grace triumphs through judgment.

The reign of Jeroboam II is described in 2Kings 14:23–29. The writer’s summary of him (v. 24) is that ‘He did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit.’ Yet his reign was a long (41 years) and, for much of the time, a peaceful one. He restored some territory to Israel, and it is said of him that when the Lord saw the bitter suffering of Israel he saved them through this man’s reign. After his death, he was succeeded by his son Zechariah who was assassinated by Shallum after six months. (This ended the line of Jehu, who had assassinated Jehoram, king of Israel and Ahaziah, king of Judah some time before.) There then followed a quick succession of kings who often were assassinated, Pekah being the only one to rule for more than 10 years. 2Kings 17:7–23 spells out God’s verdict on the history and tells of the patient dealing of God with people of the northern kingdom.

4. Hosea Beyond Himself

Peter says in his first letter, ‘The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.’ (1Peter 1:10–12) In the Word of the Lord that came to Hosea, he had not only a message given, but an encounter with Him who is the Word who was with God and who was God.

In as much as Hosea had to live out the prophecy he was given, he became in himself a participator in the sufferings of Christ. It is impossible to prophesy without that prophecy bearing in upon the life of the prophet as much of those to whom he prophesies. Hosea not

only prophecies of the love of God for a people that spurn Him; he is brought into the full experience of that. And as this is the Word of God, we see that we are pointed to the Lord who suffers in love for his people, he who bore our sins in his body, he who was made sin for us so that in him we may become the righteousness of God.

Hosea 1:3

The book of Hosea is about judgment, grace and hope. Each major section of the book (there are three sections – chapters 1–3, 4–10, and 11–14) begins with the promise of the LORD’s judgment of Israel, shows the purpose of the God of all grace in the judgment, and ends with the promise of divine restoration.

Hosea 1–3 details what happened ‘when the LORD first spoke through Hosea.’ It tells of the symbolical action required of the prophet so that the word of the LORD may come to His people. The account of this symbolic marriage is given in these first three chapters. The narrative of the marriage occurs in two parts (1:2–9 and 3:1–5), and is wrapped around a three-part oracle (1:10–2:1, 2:2–13, and 2:14–23). This gives a structure to the chapters of A B1 B A1

A is the announcement judgment, A1 is the announcement of hope; B is an oracle of judgment, the two B_i sections are oracles of hope. It is important to note that while Gomer’s waywardness is described before Israel’s sin, the LORD’s restoration of the covenant blessing is promised before Hosea is called to demonstrate that restoration in his marriage. When it comes to the exercise of grace, God is mentor to us all – we do not draw a picture of God’s grace from human action; rather, any graciousness on our part must flow from the prior action of God in grace.

1:2–9

As shocking to Hosea as the command to marry a wife of harlotries (plural not singular in Hebrew) may have been, we are not given any indication of his internal response to this command – what we see is quiet and immediate obedience to it. The command is given ‘...for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the LORD.’ This marriage is then to reflect the relationship between Israel and the LORD, a relationship which has been polluted by the idolatry of the people. In the analogy, Gomer stands for current Israel, Hosea for the Lord and the children for the generation to come.

The word harlotry has a double meaning – it describes literal acts of sexual immorality, often with financial gain involved, and it describes acts of religious infidelity, the abandoning of true worship for an object of devotion who is not the God of the covenant. It is a particularly fitting word to use in conjunction with the abandonment of the Lord for the Canaanite Baal religion, for that was an essentially sexual cult. Baalism worked on the principle that all fertility and prosperity was the result of a sacred marriage between Baal (the sky god) and the earth goddess (Asherah). Sexual aspects of worship were seen as necessary participation in the continuation of that flow of fertility.

The children that follow the marriage were fathered by Hosea (1:3), and he had the responsibility of naming them. (They were not fathered by the lovers of Gomer. God’s people do not shore up their future through idolatry – all is given to us by the Lord.) The names reflect the action of God towards rebellious Israel.

Jezreel is a pleasant name, (meaning ‘God plants’), And refers to a beautiful valley city in the Northern Kingdom, but it has unpleasant associations. At Jezreel Jehu had killed the kings of Israel and Judah. There Jezebel had died a cruel death. It was at Jezreel that Jehu had engineered the mass extermination of the Baal worshippers (see 2Kings 9–10). To call a child

‘Jezreel’ would be like calling a child today ‘Rwanda’ or ‘Auschwitz.’ The Lord’s intention is to punish the house of Jehu for the bloodthirstiness of Jehu, and also to end the northern kingdom of Israel (1:4–5).

Lo–Ruchamah is a pretty sounding name but it has a terrible meaning – it means ‘not pitied’, ‘not loved with motherly love.’ The rechem was the uterus or womb; it is as though the Lord is abandoning the one to whom He had given life. The northern kingdom is no longer to be spared, although His compassion still extends to Judah, whom He will rescue at the time of Israel’s demise through His own intervention, not by military might.

Lo–Ammi is perhaps the most devastating of the names – ‘Not my people’. The heart of the covenant was the call of God: ‘I shall be your God, and you shall be My people.’ A terrible progression is seen in the naming – Israel will live without a king, without access to the compassion of God, and without God Himself.

1:10–2:1

The purpose of the Lord in the severe judgment on Israel is shown in this oracle of hope. The abandoning of Israel is with the purpose that full number of Israel may come in to the kingdom. This judgment does not abrogate or annul the covenant promises made to Abraham (1:10). In fact, the covenant promises are enlarged and glorified, for ‘Not my people’ are now called ‘Sons of the living God!’ Israel is restored in this vision of the future – rejoined to Judah as one people under one head or king (1:11). The day on which this happens will be linked intrinsically to the day of Jezreel, to the day of judgment (1:11b). Apart from the day of judgment, this glorious future cannot come to pass.

2:2–13

This second oracle is an oracle of judgment on Israel. Hosea is called to speak to Israel in warning and rebuke. From the future look of the last few verses we are again drawn into the terrible realities of idolatrous Israel at the time. Yet the placing of the first oracle tells us that the call to Israel to repent is based entirely on the promises and action of God. The destiny of the people is not grounded on the response of Israel to the call to repentance.

This oracle would have been delivered early in Hosea’s ministry, during the reign of Jeroboam II, when the northern kingdom was enjoying a time of relative peace and prosperity. The prophecy warned of a coming stripping of all that Israel had from her if she did not abandon her idolatry and put aside all the trappings of idolatry.

2:5 spells out the heart of the problem in Israel. Firstly, Israel thought that what she has come from the false gods she had chosen to follow. She had adopted a prosperity/fertility religion and prosperity has come to her. Her error was in not recognising where the prosperity came from. And then having received these things, she saw them as hers. The word ‘my’ occurs seven times in this verse, as well as ‘I’ once and ‘me’ once. In many ways Israel here reminds us of the rich fool in Luke 12:13–21, who also is self-obsessed. Neither Israel nor the fool were ‘rich towards God.’

The Lord’s judgment is exercised firstly in frustrating her recourse to the idols. The first judgment on idolatry is to let idolatry be seen for all its tawdriness – to let its total inadequacy to the human spirit be tasted and known, and to show up its inability to do what it seems to

promise. For her to pursue her lovers and not overtake them, to seek them and not find them (2:7) is the parallel to the Lord taking away his grain and wine, wool and flax, leaving her uncovered, and ending her false festivity (2:9–13). In this we see that the not overtaking her lovers is equivalent to her persisting in idolatry but getting none of the return from idolatry that she thought she was getting. The semi–repentance of verse 7 indicates that she has not yet seen that even what she thought she received from the Baal worship was in fact given to her by the Lord of Israel. There is nothing that we have or that any human being has that is not gift from the LORD. And the Lord’s judgment on Israel’s refusal to honour Him in His giving was to remove the gifts.

2:14–23

Again the judgment came in order to win back the people and to restore them to their senses. Israel’s response in 2:7 is similar to that of the prodigal son, who remembered that things were better before. It took his going to the depths of the pig pen to be brought to his senses. Judgment clarifies the mind!

This is an oracle of hope. The Lord here promises that the wilderness experience that will come from His judgment will be the time when He speaks most tenderly to Israel (2:14). In the wilderness the vineyards will be given – a miraculous provision, a sign of love! – and the Valley of Achor, a place of judgment (where Achan was stoned – see Joshua 7) shall become a place of hope. The important thing to see is that the hope is in the midst of the judgment and because of the judgment, not in spite of it. Through the judgment, Israel is restored to her freshness of innocency (2:15).

By the action of grace through judgment, Israel now calls upon the Lord truly. All she had she had from Him; now she properly ascribes this to Him rather than to Baal. The names of the Baals are removed from her lips (2:17). The blessing of Israel is universal in its outcome, bringing peace to the whole of creation (2:18). The Lord promises to bind Israel to himself through five exquisite actions – the actions of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness. In His acting thus, Israel and the creation is then caught up in the responsive actions of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness. The heart of the response is praise, worship, receipt and thanksgiving.

3:1–5

Hosea is now called to enact in his marriage what he has heard of the Lord’s relationship with Israel. Gomer has deserted him for an adulterous lover, but he is to go again and take her. This mirrors the Lord’s restoring of Israel despite her idolatry. Hosea bears the cost of her redemption himself. The proper response required of Gomer is that she now be faithful to Hosea.

In Hosea’s marriage we are given the history of Israel in symbol. Just as Israel through the judgment of God was to live many days without king, without worship, without idols, so they would be drawn to seek the Lord and to return to Him; likewise they will return to the Davidic kingship. This will be done in awe, and will be rewarded by the fulness of the Lord’s goodness to them.

Hosea 4:1–5:7

In this section there is a narrowing focus from the people as a whole, with whom the Lord has a sharp controversy, to the priests, especially the high priest, who have failed in their responsibility for the teaching of true holiness in worship to the people.

4:1–3

The words, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel...’ at the start of this section mark a new section, as does the fact that the narrative of the previous section is replaced by poetry, and the prophet is now speaking to the people from the Lord, rather than the Lord speaking to Hosea.

‘...the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.’ This quarrel is brought about by the failure of Israel to live in covenant faithfulness through idolatry. The parable of Hosea’s marriage is now being expounded in the light of Israel’s history and life. There are two elements to the controversy – firstly Israel has abandoned the heart of the covenant (v. 1b) and secondly she has broken covenant stipulations (v. 2). There is no faithfulness (emeth) – that is, consistency with the truth of the character and being of God Himself; there is no kindness (chesed) – that is, participation in God’s own covenant love to His people; there is no knowledge (da’ath) of God – that is, experiential and relational engagement with God. By the abandonment of true worship of the Lord for idolatry, the people no longer reflect His being and character in their communal life. This then exercises itself in the breaching of particular covenant stipulations. Where God is dishonoured, so are men and women – and so all manner of sin flourishes within Israel; there is no stop to it.

This has had its effect in the land – the judgment of God came in the form of a drought and loss of productivity in the land. ‘The land mourns...’ could also be translated, ‘The land dries up...’ The Promised Land which was a sort of ‘new Eden’ (see Numbers 13:21–27) was now part of the wilderness.

4:4–10

There was no place for anyone in Israel to separate themselves from this judgment. Particularly, the priests may have felt able to pass the blame onto the people (v. 4a). There was no avoiding of the fact that the focus of this contention was with the priests themselves. They were promised that they will be rejected from this important ministry and gift in Israel (v. 5). The failure of Israel to live in relational obedience to the Lord, their abandoning of the Lord for idolatry, stemmed from the neglect of the priests to perform their ministry (v. 6a). Instead of instructing Israel in the will of God, the priests had rejected that knowledge themselves, and had in fact tolerated sin (v. 6b). Their participation in the cult of the north was the major part of this failure.

The ‘they’ of vv. 7 and 8 refers to the priestly generations. It shows the continual and deliberate wickedness of these office-bearers. By the very fact that the number of priests increased – which was in line with the increasing prosperity of the northern kingdom – sin increased (v. 7a), for the worship of the Northern Kingdom was astray from the true worship of God. In fact, the priests derived their existence and prosperity from this false worship (v.

8a); and so they were greedy for the people of Israel to engage in this worship more and more (v. 8b).

Priests and people alike were to undergo judgment. Their religious status did not shield them from the judgment of God (vv. 9–10). They are as much idolaters as Israel, having forsaken the Lord of the covenant.

4:11–19

This section oscillates between the priests and the people who have been led astray willingly. It is a damning exposure of the corruption of the false worship of Israel. It also shows the necessity for false religion to always imitate what is true.

The worship of the north was a sensual and dramatic experience. Drunkenness was a part of the worship of Canaan (v. 11). The worship of the north left people senseless from wine. Drunkenness offers a kind of substitute ecstasy; a seeming sense of being taken outside of oneself. Paul urged the Christians at Ephesus (5:18), ‘Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.’ True ecstasy is being filled with Spirit, filled with the One who proceeds from the Father and Son to take us into Themselves in Their eternal self-giving. Drunkenness (in its various forms) is really a self-absorption, and a self-serving: this is debauchery.

The Israelites consulted some kind of wooden idol, and used either a rod or wooden dice to determine the will of the idol (v.12). Idolatry and even occult magic was involved here. This was a substitute for true prophecy.

The worship involved slaying and eating sacrifices at sites that had significance in the Canaanite Baal cult (v. 13). There is an attempt to substitute for Edenic bliss in this worship.

At these sacred sites, perhaps at these sacred meals, the daughters and brides of Israel had intercourse with strangers (v. 13b). The worship of the Baalists was intensely sexual. Those who come under judgment for this atrocity are not the women, but rather the men – fathers and husbands – who participate in the sexual cult themselves (v. 14). (Possibly it is the priests who are singled out in this verse.) Those who should have instructed and protected the women in their care had abused them by their participation in this enslaving worship.

By all this, ‘a people without understanding shall come to ruin (v. 14b).’ God’s judgment on this false religion will come steadily and surely, and the people will not even realise the danger in which they stand. Their participation has blinded them and dulled them to the terrible situation in which they stand.

In verse 15 the Southern Kingdom is warned about following in the steps of the North. They are exhorted to not go up to Beth-Aven (‘house of evil’) which is now the name God has given Bethel (‘house of God’). The injunction to ‘swear not’ is a new element in the case against Israel – and refers to the light use of the name of the Lord in vows and promises which were easily broken.

Verses 16 to 19 then bring to an end the words of condemnation against the priests and the people they have led astray. Note that the fact of being led astray does not excuse the people – they are culpably gullible. Israel is stubborn and immovable in its idolatry; there is now no

option open to them but judgment. So, Ephraim (=Israel) is to be given over to idolatry and the judgment that comes. The ‘joining’ of the Ephraim and idols is almost saying that the joining of the Lord and the North has been put asunder. The judgment that is coming is for the restoring of the true marriage relationship and the ending of the adulterous relationship.

5:1–7

Again the Lord, through Hosea, is summarising what he has been saying, now with particular reference to the priests and leaders of the north. All are responsible for the decline of the land. Ephraim/Israel is still known by the Lord – that is, the judgment which is coming is the action of God who is still in covenant faithfulness with His people, though they have abandoned Him. Under the false leadership, Israel has come to such a state that they cannot repent and return. It is through the judgment that the Lord will enable repentance to come to them. The judgment will cleanse them of their defilement, release them from the spirit of harlotry, and humble their pride. Until this has happened, any attempts to find the Lord will be futile.

Hosea 5:8–7:16

The material in this section was addressed to Israel during the time of the war between Israel–Syria and Judah–Assyria. Certainly Israel and Judah had become involved in an altercation in which both are wrong. It seems best to surmise that Assyria were a threat to Israel, and so the northern kingdom had gone into league with the Syrian king, Rezin of Damascus. They together had looked to Egypt as a possible ally in their resistance of the Assyrian might. Between Syria/Israel lay Judah, which thus far had not been under threat from the Assyrians. Judah had to be made part of the Egyptian coalition for it to work properly – it was a main travel route to the north. Judah refused and so Pekah (king of Israel) and Rezin sought to march on Judah. Judah called on Assyria to help, and entered into vassalage. Assyria attacked the north, and while Pekah was engaged there, Judah sought to invade territory in the southern part of Pekah’s kingdom. Later, following an assassination to end the line of Pekah, Israel switched allegiance and tried to court the favour of the Assyrians, but to no avail. 25 years after the end of the rule of Jeroboam II, which had been so stable and prosperous, Israel was wiped from the map.

5:8–15

The three towns (5:8), Gibeah, Ramah and Beth–aven (Bethel) are close to, but progressively more distant, from Jerusalem. The war cry went up in them, signalling the invasion from the south. The events which will end in Israel’s destruction had begun (5:9). Judah was not excused in this – they were actually taken territory that belongs to brother tribes in the people of God – and so judgment is promised them also (5:10). Both houses stand under judgment, and the weakening of both kingdoms was the Lord’s own opposition to them (5:12).

Ephraim’s response to the judgment was to seek help from Assyria, rather than from the Lord (5:13). Such a political solution was futile, for it avoided the issues of judgment and repentance. The only one able to cure the wound of the people of God is God Himself, for it is He who inflicts the wound in His holy judgment (see Deut. 32:39; Psa. 64; 69:26; Jer. 14:13–22, etc.) Until He withdrew from His assault on them (5:14), until His judgments had run their course, there was no healing or easing of the wound. Those who seek to ease the wound of judgment with a bland and unholy declaration of grace only exacerbate the wound and delay its healing (Jer. 6:14, 8:11). Proverbs 20:30 provides the key to understanding the Lord’s wounding of His people: ‘Blows that wound cleanse away evil; strokes make clean the innermost parts.’ We know of Jesus, that in the action of the Cross, ‘...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:5).’

It is this end of repentance and cleansing that is served by the judgment. The Lord has withdrawn the exercise of His merciful presence in order that in the straits of their trouble, they call out to Him, acknowledging their guilt, and looking for Him like watchmen for the dawn (5:15).

6:1–6

In these verses all Israel firstly sang a penitential song to the Lord (6:1–3), and then the Lord responded to the song (6:4–6). The song of God’s people is in many ways a beautiful song to the Lord, and it picks up and speaks to the themes of judgment in the previous verses – but it

omits any acknowledgment of guilt (cf. 5:15). ‘They have faced their woundedness, but not their waywardness’ (Hubbard). In this way, the song stands in contrast to Hosea’s song of penitence at the end of the book in 14:1–3.

It is for this reason that the Lord responded with His sorrowful cry as He did in 6:4–6. The sorrow was for both Israel and Judah (6:4a). The repentance of the song was shallow and more linked to sorrow at the loss of prosperity that the Lord’s judgment had brought than at the estrangement from the Lord that their idolatry had brought. The professed love of the song disappeared quickly (6:4b), and the talk of pressing on to know the Lord in 6:3 proved cheap. There was a presumption of grace by the people without a deep appreciation of the cost of that grace to the Lord. And so the questioning of 6:4 discloses to us that there was no other way for God’s people to be brought to their right mind other than through the judgments to come (6:5, cf. 5:4).

Whilst Israel and Judah had sacrificial worship (Israel’s invalid, Judah’s valid), this was not the heart of Israel’s faith. The penitential song of 6:1–3 had picked up the heart of Israel’s faith when it said, ‘...that we may live before him.’ What the Lord desired was not sacrifice but *chesed* – steadfast, covenantal love; love which responded to and flowed out of His own steadfast, covenantal love for His people. The Lord desired knowledge (*da’ath*) of Him, that is relational and obedient intimacy with Him, not the discharging of religious obligations in a way that treated God like a manageable deity and so kept Him at arm’s length. The purpose of the sacrificial system was to sustain God’s people in holiness, not simply to clear them of their guilt. Both *chesed* and *da’ath* had a practical outworking in life.

Jesus quoted Hos. 6:6 on two occasions – Matt. 9:13 and 12:7. At both times he quoted it in rebuke of the Pharisees. Firstly, when the Pharisees complained of his eating with sinners and tax collectors, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.’ Secondly, the Pharisees were critical when Jesus’ disciples picked grain in the fields on the Sabbath. The Pharisees show two misunderstandings in their complaints. In one, they imply that religion is the carrying out of religious actions without contamination; in the other that religion is the fulfilling of legal requirements. Both approaches have forgotten the God who is at the heart of Israel’s religion.

‘When religion becomes preoccupied with the niceties of liturgy, the nuances of language, the novelties of music, art and architecture, but forgets the neighbour, then religion has been reduced to cultic correctness.... Or when religion is conceived only in terms of church attendance, general decency, and doing what is expected, then religion may have been reduced to the satisfying of regulations....’ (Limburg).

6:7–7:16

These verses trace the fact that Israel’s sin is longstanding (6:7–11a). At Adam (and from then on) they transgressed the covenant. Adam here could be either the man at creation, where the creational covenant was breached; or it could refer to a small town where Israel entered Canaan under Joshua (Josh. 3:16). This latter reference would mean that Israel has been wayward as long he has been in the land; the former that humanity has been wayward from the sin of Adam onwards.

In 6:11b–7:7 the Lord laments that His movements of mercy to the people (6:11b–7:1a) are met only with scorn. The people act as though God were not the living God who judges the earth (7:2), but persist in their sin. This persistence in sin makes them like a heated oven (7:4–7); it has been left unattended and so is now not ready for its true action. It is smouldering, but

open it to the air and they are quickly inflamed to sin and rebellion. This leads to the murderous last days of the northern kingdom (7:7).

In 7:8–16 the northern kingdom’s relationship with the nations is examined. Israel’s political manoeuvres with Egypt, Assyria, Judah and Syria are put under the spotlight. Israel is like a cake not turned (7:8) – that is, burnt on one side and uncooked on the other – a cake which is thrown away. Through their political manoeuvres Israel has been sapped of strength (7:9) and so destruction is on the way. In spite of the crises in the nation, they will not return to the Lord (7:10). With regard to the ‘super-powers’ (Egypt and Assyria) Israel has flitted between the two like a dove, on a short-term pragmatism (7:11). Yet whatever political course they take, the Lord has netted the bird; his judgment is coming with dread certainty (7:12–13). In the national turmoil, there is great remorse, but no real repentance. They have refused this and persist in their idolatry (7:14–16).

Hosea 8:1–9:17

This is the third of four sets of speeches which comprise the message of 4:1–11:11. It divides into two similar parts, on the basis of the chapters. Both parts begin with warnings and commands, both expose disloyalty to the Lord, both close with the announcing of judgment, both make the perversion of the worship their central complaint, and its destruction their primary threat, and both contain the summary announcement of judgment, ‘...he will remember their iniquity, and punish their sins...’ (8:13, 9:9).

8:1–3

The vulture hovering over the house of the Lord indicates that death is very near. Judgment is impending for the breaking of the covenant and the transgressing of the law. The worst aspect is that Israel has rationalised this terrible sinning as covenant loyalty (8:2)! The deceit of sin is such that we can think our sinning is faithfulness. Isaiah spoke of those who ‘...draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote...’ The judgment will come in the form of invasion (hence, the blowing of trumpet.)

8:4–6

The process of assassination and claiming of kingship in Israel is exposed here (8:4). Saul and then David both were appointed by the prophetic word; neither of them seized power: kingship was always meant to be the gift of God. Here the people are indicted for their acceptance of the political situation. They did not look at all to the Lord’s purposes for His people, but rather their own immediate expediency.

As well as this political mess, the flourishing of idolatry is shown to end only in Israel’s destruction. For as the Lord spurns the idol, so he spurns the people – his anger burns against them (8:5). And this is for the purpose of the purifying of the people of God. The idols are exposed in many places for their futility. ‘A workman made it; it is not God.’ Cf. Isa. 44:9–20.

8:7–10

The sin of Israel may seem to them to be a little thing, but by their course of action a destruction far greater than they could have imagined is descending on their heads. Famine and invasion are promised as judgment (far from the prosperity and peace promised by Baalism!) Even now it should be obvious that no fruitfulness is to come from their idolatry. The end of their national life is coming, regardless of the political arrangements they adopt. Yet his end is for ‘a little while’, hinting at the coming again of true kingship to Israel.

8:11–14

Israel has ‘multiplied altars for sinning’ – that is altars for dealing with sin. Yet his multiplicity has simply multiplies the very sin of idolatry itself! Rather than freeing Israel from condemnation, they cement the condemnation even more. The religious enthusiasm of Israel has nothing to do with obedient covenant love to the Lord. If the law was to be written

in multiple copies, there would be no understanding of it. The sacrifices have become an end in themselves, a party rather than worship. Given all this, the sacrifices do not propitiate; the sin of the people is remembered and they are promised judgment in returning to Egypt, the place of bondage. In Corinth, a similar situation arose where the communion meal was turned into a self-indulgent party by some. This meal, given to remember and celebrate the forgiveness of sins won by the Lord’s death and resurrection, had thus become the point of judgment in the church (1Cor. 11:17–32). Judah too has abandoned the Lord, trusting her own military might rather than Him. Judgment will sweep away this false trust.

9:1–9

Israel is to abandon the festivities of its false worship. There is nothing of God’s salvation in what they are doing (cf. Isa. 25:9, 66:10; Matt. 5:12). Mourning rather than joy is the proper response to their plight. Despite the brief respite that their political arrangements with Assyria have brought them, judgment is sure and the kingdom is doomed. Their whole sacrificial system is to be discontinued (9:4) and their lavish worship-parties will be replaced with simple bread to barely stave their hunger. The pilgrimages to the calf at Beth-aven will be replaced by the march of captivity to Assyria and Egypt as they are tossed to and from in the political turbulence that will engulf them. The paraphernalia that they used in worship will be abandoned on the way – cups and tent-shrines becoming swallowed by the nettles and thorns.

So certain and impending is the judgment that Hosea moves into the present tense: ‘the days ... have come. (9:7)’ Yet to Israel, deceived by idolatry, all seems well, and so the accusation comes that Hosea is a fool, is mad (9:7b). In this mocking of the prophet we see that the prophetic word of the prophet has unmasked the deep sin and the deep hatred of the people. This hatred is firstly towards the Lord, and then secondarily towards the messenger of the Lord (cf. Luke 6:22–23, 27–31; 21:13–19). Yet in his prophesying, Hosea has acted as the watchman of Ephraim – by the revelation of the Lord he has seen the impending disaster and sounded the warning. He speaks to and for the ‘people of my God’ – that is, he is not separated from nor in judgment over against the people. Despite all this, he has to watch how he steps, for there are many traps set for him. In their opposition to the word of the Lord, the people have deepened their corruption. It is as the days of Gibeah – see Judges 19–21. There is no place left for forgiveness, only judgment.

9:10–17

Israel is now compared to grapes found in the wilderness, to the first-fruit on the fig tree. This recalls the promise that was in Israel when the Lord bound them to Himself in covenant grace. Particularly in mind here is the Lord’s saving relationship with Israel in the wilderness on the way to Canaan from Egypt. Yet the reward for His kindness was the rebellion of Baal-peor (Num. 25). They set themselves apart for Baal – i.e. entered a quasi-covenant with this detestable thing. Idolatry then made them in the image of the image they worshipped.

The judgment that comes on this is ‘no birth, no pregnancy, no conception. (9:11).’ The future of the nation is jeopardised. The continuation of the nation, the new generation is seen as the nation’s glory. Baalism was a fertility cult; the judgment of the Lord was to take away His gift of the continuation of the nation. This stands in sharp contrast to the covenant promises of progeny (Exod. 23:26, Deut. 7:14). (Children are always the gift of God – see Psalm 127 especially – and we do well to pay attention to th¹Zis, rather than thinking it is simply a matter of biology.) More than that, He would hunt down the children by the judgment. The

prophet is caught up in the purposes of God as he prays for the people: all he can pray for is that the judgment of the loss of fecundity will come. But he prays knowing that God is the God of the barren, the childless (Psa. 113:9, Isa. 54:1). In fact Israel comes from barren origins, with Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel all knowing the Lord's kindness in their barrenness, as also did Manoah's wife and Hannah. In the judgment, the Lord calls Israel back to his beginnings.

Hosea 10:1–10

‘Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit.’ So begins Hosea in this new section of his prophecies, again using an image to describe the people of God. Here, the image refers to Israel in her recent prosperous past under Jeroboam II, but it is an image used in a number of places of Israel (see Psa. 80:8–16, Isa. 5:1–7, Jer. 2:21). Earlier in Hosea 9:10 we saw Israel compared to a bunch of grapes in the wilderness – this grape bunch has now become a vine which has spread into the whole land. A time of national prosperity is clearly referred to here.

‘The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved he improved his pillars.’ The altars and pillars were the furniture for the worship in the Northern Kingdom. In the earliest days of the patriarchs, before the gift of worship at the Tabernacle and then the centralising of worship at Jerusalem, it had been proper to mark an encounter with the Lord by building such a place of worship. In fact Bethel had been the place where Jacob had set up a pillar to commemorate his vision of the ladder reaching to heaven (Gen. 28:10–22). After the settling of the Promised Land by the people rescued from Egypt, it was forbidden to set up pillars because of their association with the Baalism present in the land.

The problem here is that ‘their heart is false. (10:2)’ The word for false here means ‘smooth, slippery’ – that is, what is offered is not what is really meant: the worship of the Lord is presented, but another worship is intended. The falseness, the smoothness of the worship is seen in verse 4. Their smooth-talking of God is exposed by the fact that they speak such empty words of promise to one another. Such false worship, as busy, bustling and impressive as it may be, is not pleasing to God at all, and comes under his condemnation. The Lord promises to break down their worship places (10:2) so that they are not rebuilt (10:8), the calf at Beth-aven will itself be taken hostage to Assyria (10:5–6) and their king is killed with no successor and with no one to help them in their plight (10:3,7). The Northern Kingdom will wish itself dead (10:8b).

As we have seen, Gibeah marks the entry to the Promised Land – and from that point on Israel has been rebellious (10:9). The Lord promises that he will come in judgment on such waywardness through invasion by other nations (10:10). His judgment has been patiently waiting, but now is coming inexorably. The purpose of the judging invasion is to chastise the people; that is, to make them true (chaste) again in their affection and loyalty to the Lord, so that they are no longer slippery in their dealings with Him. They will then be freed from their double iniquity – forsaking the Lord and turning to idols (cf. Jer. 2:12–13). It was in the wilderness that Gomer rediscovered her love for Hosea (2:14–17). The invasion the Northern Kingdom is not the story of God’s abandoning of His people, but is rather the story of His rescue of them. The judgments that come are the judgments of mercy, and they save us from the final judgment.

10:11–15

Ephraim is now compared to a heifer. In the past, she had been a good cow, who loved the work given to her, and so had not had to bear the heavy yoke, willingly and gladly doing the task given and enjoying the blessing of God in such obedience. The people had been ‘gentled’ – that is, their spirits had been made responsive to the Lord by His conquering grace. But all that is now in the past – God has had to put the heavy harness on the people – and this is because of their stubbornness in rebellion.

In verse 12 Israel is reminded of the command of the Lord – that she sow the seed of righteousness that a harvest may be reaped of steadfast love. God is true to His covenant relationship with His people, and if they will live in faithfulness, then the goodness of God will flow to them. This command is a reminder of what was originally given to Israel, but is also a promise of the fruit of repentance in their current situation. ‘For it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain salvation upon you.’ And so they are called to break up the fallow ground – to start to work what had been left unworked.

But verse 13 shows what in fact has been happening – iniquity, injustice, and the fruit of lies are what Israel has produced. The abandonment of their God has seen the abandonment of true relating as the people of God. And the abandoning of the Lord has led to trust not in His deliverance but in military and political strength. This is all coming under judgment.

11:1–11

This section moves through four parts. In verses 1 to 4 the Lord declares the action of His love to His people in the past. His loved Israel when the nation was a child – so it was free and gracious, not grounded in Israel’s maturity. This love of the Lord exercised itself in redemption. All that the people can respond with is indifference and idolatrous rebellion. Note the great emphasis throughout these verses on the action of God (‘I’ occurs 8 times in the four verses.) The kindness of the Lord comes from His freedom and in the face of rejection. It is not discontinued by Israel’s failure to recognise its source. So, the Lord shows Himself still to be the One who makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust.

The focus shifts now from the action of God to the people, and spells out the judgment of God on the people (11:5–7). Having rescued Israel from Egypt, the people are now destined to return there, and also to come under Assyrian domination. Their refusing of the Lord has led to His refusing of them. Since they will not repent, return to Him, they shall return to the one from the Lord rescued them. It is this that is the yoke that was alluded to in 10:11.

In all this we need to know the Lord’s relationship with His people, and so the ‘I’ of the first four verses returns (11:8–9). The Lord here is not repenting of the coming judgment – he is not squeamish about the judgment to come – but rather He speaks of the deep purposes of the judgment. In giving them up to Egypt and Assyria, the Lord is in fact saving His people to Himself. Admah and Zeboiim were cities destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah; the Lord’s purpose is not the destruction of His people, and so He will not execute the same complete judgment on them. ‘For I am God not man, the Holy One in your midst...’ warns us about sentimentalising this deep expression of the love of God for His people. We cannot compare this love to any other love; it is not like ‘human love’. It issues from the holiness of God Himself and is incomparable.

In the last two verses of this section (11:10–11) we are given a glimpse of the distant future, when the people of God are rescued back home. Through the judgment, the people will become those respond when they hear the Lord call. They will know that they cannot trivialise His Word, for he speaks with the roar of the lion, and so their response will be full of awe and trembling fear. But it is the fear that loves, for it is the irresistible voice of love. Birds would normally fly from the lion; these are those who hear in His holy roar, the redeeming call of the Father to children whom He has redeemed.

Hosea 11:12–14:9

Hosea may well have ended his book at 11:11 with the powerful image of the Lion calling home His quivering family of birds. But the Lord who gave Hosea his prophesy has more to unfold of the nature of Israel’s sin, the intensity of his passionate judgment, and the glory of reconciliation. So again, Hosea traces the dealing of God with Israel from punishment to restoration. We see again the exposure of the nature of sin (11:12–12:14), the thorough judgment that such sin must undergo (13:1–16), and the great wonder that the judgment of the sin is the liberating act through which the people are brought back to their God who has never in all His dealings with them stopped loving them (14:1–9).

11:12–12:14

The section begins with two verses that set the scene for the rest of the chapter. Ephraim, the house of Israel, and Judah are mentioned here. Ephraim and the house of Israel are interchangeable terms for the Northern Kingdom, whilst Judah is the Southern Kingdom. What we see is that both stand under the same condemnation, though Ephraim’s sin is under more immediate judgment.

To ‘encompass the Lord with lies and deceit’ is to offer idolatrous worship in the name of the Lord, but also then to act deceitfully and to lie in dealing with others (cf. 12:7). The third commandment is ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...’ – that is, you shall not apply the Lord’s name to a vanity – ‘...for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.’ Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms were guilty of doing this. Given 12:2, it is best to read 11:12b as ‘Judah roams with God...’ rather than ‘Judah is still known by God...’ ‘God’ then is not the Lord of Israel, but rather El of the Canaanites, and Judah is not faithful to the Holy One, but rather the holy ones of Canaan.

The herding of the wind and pursuit of the east wind we have seen as the futile efforts of the North to shore up its position politically. This verse (12:1) shows the stupidity of the people in trying to court two nations who were enemies.

In 12:2–6, the Lord sets out His charge against the two nations. The faithlessness of both Judah and Israel is seen as the continuation of the character of their common ancestor, Jacob. And there is a call back to the heart of that ancestral heritage. Even before Jacob was born, he was grasping, taking Esau by the heel; as an adult he wrestled with God (at Peniel) where he received the grace of the Lord. He met God at Bethel and there the Lord spoke with him. Jacob was a proud, stubborn, grasping and presumptuous man, and yet the Lord met him, spoke with him and changed him. The encounter at Peniel (Gen. 32:22–32), though it came after the revelation at Bethel, is mentioned here first for it is the crucial encounter. There Jacob’s grasping prevailed, and the angel could not shake him without blessing him, yet the angel defeated him, touching his thigh and dislocating his leg. It was at this point – with pride defeated – that Jacob was able to be blessed. Through this strange encounter, Jacob (=deceiver) became Israel (=strives with God). Hosea’s word tells Israel that they again need to be defeated, that they need to return to clasping to the Lord and to the way of the Lord (hold fast to love and justice and wait continually for your God – 12:6). (See also Revelation 3:4–5, Song of Songs 2:4–5.)

In 12:7–9 we see the empty boast of the Northern Kingdom. So recently they had boasted of their wealth and security, but it had all been falsely based and all came crashing down. The riches had come through deceitful and dishonest trading (12:7). The end – increased wealth – seemed to justify the means, but ‘...all his riches can never offset the guilt he has incurred.’ The Lord was the One who had rescued them from Egypt. It is He who governs the destiny of His people; faithfulness to Him is the deciding issue. Through the judgment Israel was again to dwell in tents – that is the judgment would be a new exodus for them, a rescue this time from the slavery of idolatry.

The Lord spoke to His people through the prophets. There was a rich overflow of His word to them (12:10). This coming judgment was not out of the blue – there had been consistent warning and preparation for it. 12:11–13 may well be instances of the particular words or parables that the Lord gave through the prophets. Note that Jacob is mentioned again in verse 12 – and the implication is that just as Jacob was in an ‘exile’ in Aram and in ‘slavery’ to receive his wife, so Israel will be taken into exile and suffer slavery there in order to return to the true Husband, the Lord. Whilst the people have rejected Hosea (9:7–9) it has constantly been the way of the Lord to lead His people through the prophet; the prophetic word has been their rescue and their preservation (12:13). Through the rejection of this constant overflowing word from the Lord, there has been bitter provocation, and there is nothing left to be done now but the fullness of judgment (12:14).

13:1–16

The tragic state of the Northern Kingdom is stated again in 13:1–3. Ephraim had been a great brother in the family of Israel, having authority and glory. This was lost through the fall into idolatry. Rather than repent though, there had been an escalation in the idolatry, and the once great tribe was destined to disappear like the morning mist, the dew of the morning, chaff on the threshing floor, smoke from a window. This parallels the inconstancy of the people’s love (6:4).

The Lord remains ‘their God’, and, despite their idolatry, they know no God but Him, there is no saviour but Him (13:4). The Lord has been with them for better or worse, in sickness and in health (13:5), but in their prosperity and satiation, the people have forgotten Him (13:6). The Lord will now turn on His people like a fierce leopard or lion, a mother bear robbed of her cubs (13:7–8). Their idolatry has robbed the Lord of His children.

The futility of their political arrangements is shown up (13:9–11). Since the Lord has determined to destroy them, no one can stand in the way. All kings and powers are given their authority by the Lord. The kings came initially as a judgment on the rebellious people (who wanted to be like the other nations with visible power structures, rather than live by faith in the Lord) and now they were to be taken as judgment.

13:12–14 summarises the nature of the sin of Ephraim and the Lord’s judgment. Ephraim treasured his sinning – carefully wrapping it and storing it up (rather like a woman might store away her wedding dress.) But here what is stored up is unfaithfulness and idolatry. The image then changes to that of a woman with child. Ephraim is the child in the womb. Unlike Jacob who had rushed to get out first and to receive the blessing from the Lord, Ephraim does not notice the contractions of judgment which have come on his persistent sinning. Despite the warnings and the beginnings of the judgment, the people have refused to repent. The

questions then at the beginning of verse 14 demands the answer, ‘No!’ There is no other way for the people to live again than to die through judgment.

The questions in the second half of the verse bear the implication, ‘O Death, bring on your plagues; O Grave, bring on your destruction.’ These terrible powers are being summoned by the Lord for the purpose of judgment. As they stand, in the form of questions, they are echoed by Paul in 1Corinthians 15:55. Yet Paul sees these powers not as being summoned, but rather dismissed. Yet they can only be dismissed because they have had their day in Christ at the Cross. There the sin of the world was fully borne, the judgment of the Lord was fully expended, the sword of the Lord had its full slaughter. Evil and sin were fully dealt with. The command implied in the questions at the end of 13:14 was fulfilled in Christ.

The Lord says, ‘Compassion is hid from my eyes (13:14c)’ He will not spare the people from the judgment– an yet the mystery is that this is the outworking of His deep and unshakeable and compassionate love for His people (cf. 11:8–9). It is a fierce and shocking judgment, and the full cruelty of the Assyrian army comes against the people, but all with the purpose of the restoration of the people (13:15–16).

14:1–9

This chapter comes as a promise to those who have undergone the judgment. They are words that can be heard only because of the judgment. It is the judgment which gives the listening ears to this word of love from the Lord. It is in this way that the judgment saves them.

The section begins with a call to the people to return to the Lord. Compared to the weak song of remorse in 6:1–3, this call includes an acknowledgement of sin and recognises that only the Lord can deal with the issue. It calls the people to repudiate all other so-called saviours. It is a song of true repentance. It is a song which has come to see the heart of the Lord – ‘In you the orphan finds mercy.’

The Lord then speaks of His response to the people. The call comes to the One who has promised forgiveness and healing, free, gracious love. The heat of His judgments will be replaced with the coolness of dew. Israel will enjoy and Edenic reconciliation with the Lord – becoming garden-like in the Promised Land. Reconciliation is never simply just being taken out from the anger of the Lord – it is being brought to His heart and to intimacy with Him.

The people are urged to never confuse the Lord with the false gods (much as John ends his first letter!) The two are incomparable – ‘What possible comparison could you make between the two?’ is the implication of the question in verse 8. Only the Lord is the living God; apart from Him we have no good thing. We are called to understand these things and to know them – that is true wisdom and discernment. Such knowledge and understanding requires relational obedience and true living. Aside from that, we too are destined for stumbling.