



Introduction to the Book of Hosea

Setting the Scene

The book of Hosea is one of the twelve minor prophetic books. The major prophetic books are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They are called major, not because they are of more importance, but rather due to their length. The book of Hosea is the first of the twelve minor prophetic books.

Hosea lived in the eighth century B.C. in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. If we take a step back, the Jewish kingdom had already been a nation divided. After the reigns of David and Solomon, the nation was divided into two: The Kingdom of Israel with 10 tribes in the north and the Kingdom of Judah, with two tribes in the south.

Also, at this time, there was a political dispute, especially in the Northern Kingdom of Israel about with which nation the Jews should form an alliance: the Egyptians or the Assyrians. The Jews were forgetting that their most powerful ally was God, instead seeking to rely politically on idolatrous worldly powers of either the Egyptians or the Assyrians.

With division and political inconsistency came great corruption. The political leaders and kings became disobedient to God's law and scandalized the people. The courts of the kings were filled with flatterers and corrupt women. They lost compassion for the suffering people.

The priesthood at this time also became corrupt. The priests were supposed to teach people the law of God and uphold it, being themselves examples of faith and virtue, approaching the sanctuary with the fear of God when they offered sacrifices. Unfortunately, they forgot their mission, and were living the same sinful life as the rest of the people. The priests had become like laymen (Hosea 4:9).

Hosea prophesied for about 40 years during the reign of six different kings. At the start of Hosea's ministry, Israel had been enjoying relative political and economic prosperity under the reign of Jeroboam II. However, by the end of his ministry, Israel was on the verge of collapse, plagued by anarchy, war, economic weakness, and heavy taxation by the Assyrians, before they were finally taken captive.

Theme of the Book of Hosea

The fourteen chapters of the book of Hosea are divided into two sections: 1) the adulterous wife and the faithful husband (1:1 – 3:5), and 2) adulterous Israel and the faithful Lord (4:1 – 14:9).

The marriage relationship is used as an analogy to describe the love relationship between God and His covenant people. Hosea's family adventure would represent the state between God and His people.

The Adulterous Wife and the Faithful Husband

At the start of the book of Hosea, God instructs Hosea to marry a harlot named Gomer. Hosea took this woman as a spouse and he loved her very much. After some time, Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea. The names of the children that she bore reflect Israel's apostasy (their first son, Jezreel = God scatters; the first daughter, Lo-Ruhamah = not pitied; the second son, Lo-Ammi = not my people).

Despite her adultery, Hosea went after her and brought her back, demonstrating his continued love and compassion for her. The experience gave Hosea a taste of what God was experiencing with His adulterous people.

Adulterous Israel and the Faithful God

In the same way that Gomer was unfaithful, Israel was now unfaithful to God by chasing after idols and seeking political alliance with other nations. Just as Hosea continued to love Gomer, God continued to love Israel and called for her repentance. Although God brings strong accusations in His case against Israel, He offers them hope.

Lessons Learned

We learn three lessons from the Book of Hosea:

1. God hates sin because it separates us from Him. We need to take time each day to reflect on the ways we have been adulterous toward God and to pray for our repentance. Ask, "Which idols have we chased? What harmful relationships have I formed?" Let us put these sins before God in our prayers and in confession and ask for healing.
2. In spite of our sins, God continues to extend His love and compassion toward us, and desires our return. God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he return and love. The evidence of His love toward us is the cross. The cross gives us hope in the resurrection; that is, if we repent of our sins, we can be raised and lifted up.
3. In the same way that God is merciful toward us, we ought to be merciful toward one another. Even if we are betrayed or wronged, like God in the Book of Hosea, we ought to also extend love and compassion.

References:

1. Kantiotes, Augoustinos N., Gerostergios, Asterios (trans.). A Panoramic View of Holy Scripture: Orthodox Homilies Introducing All the Books of the Old Testament, Volume 1. Belmont, Massachusetts: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2001, pp. 181-186
2. Schultz, Samuel J. and Smith, Gary V. Exploring the Old Testament. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2001, pp. 156-159.
3. Grade 11 Sunday School Curriculum available at <http://www.suscopts.org> (Diocese of the Southern United States)