

HOSEA JOEL AMOS



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Servants bringing their tribute to the Assyrian king

With this lesson we come to the first three books in a prophetic collection that Christians call the Minor Prophets. In the Jewish canon the twelve books in this group make up what is called the Book of the Twelve. In ancient times literary works were written on scrolls. Often a work was not long enough to fill up an average scroll. Therefore, several short works were written on the same scroll. All twelve of the shorter prophetic books were written on one scroll. Thus the Hebrews call this collection the Book of the Twelve. We base our Christian designation—the Minor Prophets—on the fact that these prophets' surviving works are much shorter than the works of the Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

We are not certain how the order for the twelve Minor Prophets was established. Today scholars assume that Amos was the first prophet from whom we have a book. However, in the Book of the Twelve Hosea comes first. From references within the book, we know his career spanned the final troubled days of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

HOSEA

During Hosea's career Israel's life was characterized by anarchy and constant political moves. During these years—from about 745 to 720 B.C.—the Assyrians overran most of the Near East. The Assyrians used a policy of exile and deportation to weaken their conquered lands.

After the last strong northern king died in about 746 B.C., one ruler followed another on the Israelite throne. One ruled for six months and was assassinated. His successor ruled for one month and was assassinated. His successor ruled for seven years, but his son was assassinated after two years. So, the murder of one ruler after another characterized this period. We need to view Hosea's prophetic career against the canvas of this larger political background.

We can easily divide the Book of Hosea into two main parts. The first part is Chapters 1 to 3, which are biographical and autobiographical. The second part, Chapters 4 to 14, contains the preachings and prophecies of Hosea.

Let us examine the first three chapters. In Chapter 1 God commands the prophet to marry a prostitute and to have children of prostitution. Read Hosea 1:2.

Hosea marries Gomer. She conceives and bears a son whom Hosea names *Jezreel* after the place where the reigning Israelite dynasty had taken over in a bloody massacre. The child's name is a prediction that God will punish the reigning house for the blood of Jezreel. Gomer next bears a daughter. The prophet names her *Not pitied*, saying that God will not pity Israel any longer. A second son is born—whom Hosea names *Not my people* to symbolize that Israel is no longer God's people.

As in most prophetic books the introduction to Hosea in 1:1 gives us some information about the prophet and his time. Read Hosea 1:1-3, and answer these questions.

a. During the reigns of which kings did Hosea prophesy?

b. By what figure does the book describe the problem of the land at that time?

HOSEA 2-14

In Chapter 2 Hosea compares Gomer to Israel and uses his marriage to illustrate the relationship between Israel and her God. Hosea sees God as the husband and Israel as the prostituting wife. As God's wife Israel has gone after other gods and worshiped Baal.

In Chapter 2 we encounter a basic emphasis in the Book of Hosea, namely, his preaching against the people's acceptance and practice of the Baal religion of the Canaanites. Baal worshipers closely associated the powers of nature and the seasons of the year with the gods. The Canaanites worshiped many deities, of which Baal and his consort were the most important. The worshipers related the fertility of the field, the flock, and the family to these deities.

Baal died in the spring with the coming of the dry, hot summer. After his death vegetation dried up and died. In the fall, with the coming of the rainy season, Baal returned to life. Life returned to the world of vegetation. The people thus regarded Baal as the giver of life and fertility. In Hosea, God speaks out strongly against this belief that it is Baal who gives the increase. Read Hosea 2:8.

Since the gods were sexual beings, and their sexual relations were part of the cycle of nature, the worshipers of Baal imitated the god in sexual rituals in their worship. Cultic prostitution and sexual activities were part of their religion. Gomer probably continued as a sacred prostitute in a temple even after marrying Hosea.

The prophet's opposition to this sexual

aspect that entered Israelite life through the Baal cult is an important emphasis in the book. The prophet tries to show the people that it is their God Yahweh, not the Canaanite god Baal, who is the source of life and fertility. For Hosea use of sexual rituals in worship was unnecessary and actually degraded worship.

In Chapter 3 we return to narrative about the prophet. This time the information is autobiographical rather than biographical as in Chapter 1. Here the prophet reports that he purchases a woman for fifteen shekels of silver, a homer of barley, and a measure of wine. Many scholars have questioned whether this woman was Gomer and under what conditions the purchase was made. Although we cannot prove any view, most persons understand this chapter as Hosea's purchase of Gomer from the temple. Although she is his wife, she was previously temple property.

After securing all rights to Gomer, Hosea isolates her so that she does not even function as his companion in marriage. He does this, as he says in Hosea 3:4, to symbolize the time when Israel (God's wife) will have to live without king or prince or religious establishment and practices. Read Hosea 3:3-4. Here Hosea is pointing to the time of Israel's coming destruction.

Chapters 4 to 14 of the book are a collection of Hosea's prophecies of judgment. They are not organized chronologically or according to subject matter, but represent an anthology of his preaching. Because of the order in which these prophecies appear, the book ends on a happy note with a prediction of a good time coming.

The following are themes and ideas in these chapters. First, Hosea condemns the people because they have forsaken their knowledge of God. This fault results in their living without faithfulness and kindness. Hosea blames the religious leaders—that is, the priests and prophets—for this fault. Read Hosea 4:1-3.

Second, Hosea condemns the religious practices where men associate with harlots and cult prostitutes. Third, he condemns the political events, royal assassinations, and kingship in general. Fourth, he pronounces the coming judgment of God—when God will devastate the people and the land. Hosea describes this as a “return to Egypt,” that is, to the time when the people of Israel did not exist.

The book ends on a very positive note, which speaks of the restoration of the people after the time of judgment. After the people confess that they no longer trust in worldly powers or military might, God responds with the promise that God will heal them and make their land productive. God will truly be Israel's husband and give her the fertility that Baal promised. Read Hosea 14:4-7.

Chapter 11 of Hosea describes the love of God for the rebellious nation. *Ephraim* is used here as a symbol for the whole kingdom. Read Hosea 11:1-9, and answer these questions.

- a. When did God love Israel, and how was God's love shown? (11:1)

- b. How is God's love described in verse 3?

- c. How is the inner feeling of God toward the rebellious nation described in verse 8?



Joel 1:4

d. Why does God not execute fierce anger? (11:9)

JOEL

Next we turn to the Book of Joel. We cannot date this little book of three chapters with any certainty. Notice that the first verse of the book does not try to place the prophet in any historical context. Joel 1:1 simply says, “The word of the LORD that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel.”

In the first chapter Joel presents a picture of the coming destruction, which takes the form of a locust plague. Joel mentions all types of locusts and describes all the destruction they do. In Chapter 2 Joel describes the judgment day of God or the day of the Lord. God calls upon the people to repent, to fast, to pray, and to return.

In Joel 2:19 the tone changes and God proclaims a blessing that sharply contrasts with the judgment of the locust plague. God tells the people that they will receive God’s spirit. Read Joel 2:28-29.

The early church believed this passage was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.

In the final verses of Chapter 2 and in

the opening verses of Chapter 3, the prophet again proclaims the coming time of trouble. However, Chapter 3 ends with words about salvation after and beyond the judgment and turmoil.

Read Joel 2:28-32, and answer the following questions.

a. On what will God’s spirit be poured out? (2:28)

b. What kind of signs will be given in the heavens and on the earth? (2:31)

c. How is the coming day of the Lord described? (2:31)

d. Who will be delivered on that day? (2:32)

AMOS 1-2

Finally, let us turn to the Book of Amos. This book opens—in Chapters 1 and 2—with speeches denouncing most of the neighboring states of Israel. These states include Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah.

The Lord, through Amos, condemns these foreign nations for their war atrocities and slave trade. This condemnation assumes a widely recognized standard of international behavior, which these countries had broken and for which they were judged.

No doubt Amos’s preaching against these foreign nations got him an audience. However, he moves from condemning for-



Amos's vision of a plumb line (7:7)

eign nations to condemning Israel in the remainder of the book (Amos 2:6–9:15). Here we can only summarize the main themes of his preaching of judgment. He condemns the people for their lack of social justice. They abuse the poor, misuse those standing for righteousness, sell second-rate products, pervert justice, and are falsely religious.

Amos preached at a time when Israel and Judah had reached the summit of their prosperity. The leaders of the people were devoted to pleasure. Read Amos 2:6-8, and summarize in short sentences the transgressions of Israel.

a. (2:6)

b. (2:7)

c. (2:7)

d. (2:8)

e. (2:8)

AMOS 3-9

Amos describes the upper classes as living in luxury—drinking wine from silver bowls, sleeping in ivory beds, and anointing themselves with fine oil. They eat from the fat of the land and with no concern for the poor. They have no desire to see justice done in the land.

For their sins the prophet pronounces the coming judgment when God will destroy the cities and scatter the people. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 relate Amos's visions of the coming judgment. Amos describes his intercession on behalf of the people, but God finally has had enough and says that judgment must come.

The Book of Amos—like Hosea and Joel—ends with the promise of a good future. God will restore the land and cities. The land will become so fertile and productive that one crop cannot be harvested before planting time for the next.

The closing chapters of Amos contain five visions of the prophet. Read the verses listed here, and describe in a brief phrase the content of each vision.

a. (7:1-2)

b. (7:4)

c. (7:7)

d. (8:1)

e. (9:1)

SUMMARY

With the books of Hosea, Joel, and Amos we begin our study of the twelve Minor Prophets. Remember the following highlights of these three prophetic books.

- (1) Hosea's marriage to Gomer, which points to God's relationship to Israel (Hosea 1-3)
- (2) Hosea's condemnation of Israel's religious and political practices (Hosea 4-14)
- (3) Joel's prediction of the locust plague symbolizing the destruction of the people (Joel 1)
- (4) Amos's speeches against the foreign nations (Amos 1-2)
- (5) Amos's concern for social justice (Amos 3-9)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Hosea's marriage to Gomer is a prophetic symbol of God's relationship to Israel. God is the husband and Israel is the adulterous wife. What qualities help assure a good marriage? What qualities threaten a marriage relationship? Discuss the ways in which a religious commitment is like a marriage vow.

2. Hosea was the first prophet to use marriage imagery to depict Israel's relationship to God. Hosea was a northerner, speaking to the Kingdom of Israel before it fell to the Assyrians.

Hosea's words must have been carried south to Judah when Israel was taken into exile. There they survived, and apparently Jeremiah read them. Read Jeremiah 3:1-10. Discuss the probable connection between these words of Jeremiah and the prophecy of Hosea. Hosea was active about 740 B.C. Jeremiah's ministry was near 600 B.C. How do these prophecies affect our understanding of prophetic inspiration?

3. The vision of Joel 2:28-32 foresees a day of great spiritual power. Discuss the images. What do they represent? What might this mean now? Review also Acts 2:1-23. How are Joel's words used and interpreted in that Pentecost experience?

4. Amos 5:21-27 shows that the people's sin lay in their belief that God would look favorably on the nation—in spite of sin—if the people continued their religious rituals. However, Amos was more concerned with right living than with formal worship. How do we relate these two aspects of religious expression—right living and worship—in the church today? How can worship contribute to right living? right living to worship? What does 5:23-24 mean in today's world?

DAILY READINGS FOR OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, NAHUM, AND HABAKKUK

- Day 1: Obadiah 1-21
- Day 2: Jonah 2:1-10
- Day 3: Jonah 4:1-11
- Day 4: Micah 5:1-15
- Day 5: Micah 6:1-8
- Day 6: Nahum 1:1-15
- Day 7: Habakkuk 1:1-11