

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERARY MAKEUP OF HOSEA

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Hosea was an eight century B.C. prophet who proclaimed God's message to the covenant community. Along with Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, he reminded the people of their covenant responsibilities and of their drastic failure to comply with God's standards. While the messages of these prophets had a similar goal, Hosea's methodology was unique. In a distinctive manner, Hosea portrayed the religio-historical crises of his day in the context of his personal heartbreak over his unfaithful wife, Gomer. The purpose of this article is to delineate the historical and the literary contexts of the Book of Hosea in order to aid the reader in understanding the prophet's message.

Historical Context

The general historical background of the Book of Hosea is the eighth century B.C. This background is stated explicitly in the superscription:

The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and of Jeroboam son of Jehoash, king of Israel.¹

The kings of Judah mentioned above reigned collectively from ca. 783-700 B.C. The sole king of Israel mentioned, Jeroboam II, reigned from 786-746 B.C.² No reason is given for the failure to mention more than one king of Israel. However, when Jeroboam died in 746 B.C., he was succeeded by his son, Zechariah, who reigned only six months before falling victim to a coup d'état. The usurper was Menahem (745-737 B.C.). Menahem was succeeded by his son Pekahiah (737-736 B.C.), who was assassinated by an army officer named Pekah. Pekah reigned from ca. 737-732 B.C., but was himself murdered by Hoshea ben Elah, who had the dubious distinction of being Israel's last king. Apparently, the political turmoil that characterized the years after the death of Jeroboam raised the question of legitimacy with reference to the kings. Also, the focus on the kings of Judah may indicate that the book was completed after the fall of Samaria, ca. 721 B., for the readers in Judah. Several verses support the idea that time had run out for Israel and that Judah was being confronted with the decision to serve God (1:6-7; 11:12).

Apart from the superscription, no specific historical references occur in the Book of Hosea. However, several allusions to events aid the reader's understanding of the historical background as it relates to the message of the book. Four features of the historical background are discussed below.

Theological Context of History

The most obvious feature of the historical background is that Hosea presented the history of his day within the context of theology. The reader is introduced to the theological context of Israel's history in the opening verses of the first judgment passage (1:2-9). The naming of Hosea's children tied the turmoil of Hosea's personal life to the actions of God with Israel. By referring to the house of Jehu and the blood of Jezreel (1:4), the prophet reminded his people of the reason God had established the dynasty of Jehu. Jehu, prompted by the Lord through Elisha,

had purged the Northern Kingdom of idolatrous worship in the year 841 B.C. in the valley of Jezreel. In Hosea's time, idolatry was so rampant that God determined to punish the "house" (dynasty) of Jehu, of which Jeroboam II and Zechariah were a part. God also determined to put an end to the kingdom of Israel.

The naming of Hosea's second child demonstrates his theological understanding of history more markedly. The Hebrew name *Lo' ruhamah* literally means "not pitied." The terse explanation supplied with the same indicates that God had passed the point of bearing the burden of Israel's sin. When Gomer gave birth to a third child, God instructed the prophet to name the baby *Lo' ammi*, meaning "not my people." Taken together, the three names represented the promise of judgment, the cancellation of forgiveness, and the disavowment of the covenant relationship.

This theological explanation of the historical events tended to deemphasize the actual events themselves and to place the stress on the people's relationship with God. The reader is hardly aware of the ascension of Tiglath-pileser III and the emergence of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (745 B.C.). The important aspects of international events for Hosea were the theological causes that gave rise to those tumultuous situations.

Idolatry

A second feature of the historical background is the rampant idolatry during Hosea's time.³ The "calf of Beth-aven" mentioned in Hosea 10:5 is a reference to the calf set up at Bethel by Jeroboam I ca. 930 B.C. Originally intended to serve as a pedestal for God, the calf eventually was worshipped as the god itself. Hosea denounced the worship center by calling it "Beth-aven," "house of trouble," or "wickedness," instead of "Beth-El," "house of God."⁴ Hosea prophesied that the idol would be carried to Assyria as a tribute to "the great king," a common appellation for the kings of Assyria (10:6). Coupled with a strong resurgence of the worship of Baal, the worship of the calf at Bethel was regarded as spiritual adultery which, for Hosea, paralleled his personal experience with Gomer.

Political Intrigue Surrounding the King

A third significant feature of the historical background of Hosea is the emphasis upon the political intrigue surrounding the king. The monarchy in Israel was not characterized by the continuity of the Davidic dynasty in Judah. During the time of Hosea's ministry, the right to rule was determined by a violent coup on three occasions. Menahem killed Jeroboam's son Zechariah; Pekah killed Menahem's son Pekahiah; Hoshea killed Pekah.

The intrigue surround these political assassinations was probably the basis for Hosea's simile of the heated over in 7:4-7. Verse 7 is particularly poignant: "All of them are as hot as an oven, and they consume their rulers. All their kings fall; not one of them calls on me" (Hos. 7:7; CSB17). Hosea, representing the Lord, critiqued the political process of his day: "They have installed kings, but not through me. They have appointed leaders, but without my approval" (Hos. 8:4; CSB).

In the final analysis, however, God's sovereignty was realized with reference to the monarchy. Hosea wrote,

"I give you a king in my anger, and take away a king in my wrath" (13:11).

In addition to the assessment given in 13:11, the judgment passages of Hosea reveal the interrelatedness of king, people, and sin. In 10:7, the prophet used a simile of a piece of wood in the water to describe the hopeless situation of Israel's king. Like wood at the complete disposal of the currents, Israel's king would be washed away by the selling tide of the invading Assyrian army.⁵ Later in the same periscope, Hosea showed the interrelatedness of the king and people even more profoundly: "So it will be done to you, Bethel, because of your extreme evil. At dawn the king of Israel will be totally destroyed" (Hos. 10:15; CSB).

The name "Bethel" used in the New Revised Standard Version follows the Masoretic Text; however, the Septuagint has the name "Israel." Given Hosea's propensity for using the mocking name "Beth-aven" when referring to Bethel, the reader may want to follow the Greek rendering and apply the statement to all of Israel. Both approaches must be viewed in the light of other passages and the inclusive view is more satisfactory. The removal of the king would result in the exile of the people (11:5).

History of Alliances

A final important feature of the historical background of eighth century B.C. Israel was that nation's proclivity toward entering into alliances with other, stronger nations. Of major importance was the Neo-Assyrian Empire which was ruled in Hosea's time by Tiglath-pileser III, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, and Sennacherib successively.

Though Hosea did not focus upon the specific acts of political intrigue, he did chide the practice of alliances several times in his book.⁶ In 5:13, he repudiated the idea that the "great king," as the Assyrian ruler was known, could help the nation of Israel. Similar devaluations occur in 7:11; 8:9-10; and 12:1. Ultimately, the path to repentance would require an acknowledgment that dependence upon foreign powers was simply another manifestation of sin and that true hope rested with God alone (14:3). By understanding the historical background in the light of these features, the student of Hosea will be able to grasp better the relationship between historical setting and prophetic message.

Literary Context

Another aspect of the study of the prophetic message involves an analysis of how the prophet presented the content. The best evidence available to do such an analysis is the text itself, since ultimately the prophetic messages are extant only as written documents. Therefore, an analysis of the literary context will aid the reader in understanding the message of Hosea.

The Book of Hosea follows a clearly demarcated literary pattern that alternates between sin/judgment and invitation/renewal passages. This pattern enabled the writer to contrast God's will with Israel's ways. Also, the movement back and forth from sin to invitation served as a repeated literary appeal for God's people to return to him via covenant renewal. The book can be outlined as follows:

Outline of the Book of Hosea by Dr. Wayne VanHorn

1:1 Historical Superscription: The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and of Jeroboam son of Jehoash, king of Israel. (Hos. 1:1 CSB)			
Sin/Judgment Passages		Invitation/Renewal Passages	
1:2-9	Strained Relations	1:10-2:1	Promise of Blessing
2:2-13	Necessary Chastisement	2:14-3:5	Renewing the Relationship
4:1-5:15	The Lord's Indictment	6:1-3	Israel's Call for Revival
6:4-11:7	Israel's Sin	11:8-11	God's Refusal to Give Up
11:12-13-16	Habitual Sinfulness	14:1-8	Invitation to Return
14:9 Wisdom Postscript: Let whoever is wise understand these things, and whoever is insightful recognize them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them. (Hos. 14:9 CSB)			

The effectiveness of this arrangement is the ability to juxtapose the severity of Israel's sin and God's determination to restore His people. Each passage that outlines, catalogues, or describes Israel's apostasy is followed by a passage that calls for repentance or in some way explains God's actions of chastisement. At stake is the covenant relationship *with the Hebrews*.

With this pattern in mind, the reader will not be disturbed by the seemingly abrupt movement from God's disavowal of the covenant relationship in 1:9 to the renewal of the promise of proliferation and renewal of the relationship in 1:10. Similarly, the shift from the positive promise of renewal in 1:10-2:1 to the somber tone of 2:2-13 is readily understandable. Working through the book in this fashion will enable the reader to understand the purpose of the book, which was to call Israel (and Judah) to repentance and to promise judgment if she refused.

By reading all of the judgment passages together, the reader will get a good idea of the manifold sins that Hosea confronted. Similarly, God's appeal for repentance can be seen easily in the context of the covenant relationship when all of the renewal passages are read together. Once the reader understands these two interrelated aspects of the message of Hosea, the alternating pattern of the book will have added strength.

An Example of a Judgment Passage (Hosea 11:12–13:16)

Considering that Hosea was speaking about the people of God, the reader is shocked to hear how he described them in the concluding judgment passage of the book. One would expect such terms as faithful, righteous, trustworthy, or caring. Instead the best that Hosea could say was that they surrounded God with lies (11:12), they loved to oppress (12:7), they gave bitter offense (12:14), they practiced idolatry (13:1-2), and they rebelled against God (13:16).

The end result of such rebellious living is disastrous. The Lord responds in judgment. He who has loved the people of Israel (3:1) now becomes a lion or leopard who stalks them and falls upon them, like a bear robber of her cubs, to devour them (13:7-8). The prophet skillfully balanced the never ending love of God for His people with His determination that they live righteously. Failure to comply results in judgment that God does not want (11:8-9) and that the people cannot endure (13:15-16).

An Example of a Renewal Passage (Hosea 14:1-8)

The determination that God’s people live righteously is expressed in the invitation/renewal passages in the book. Hosea’s final appeal for Israel to repent is found in 14:1-8. Twice the word “return” is used (14:1-2; CSB). The corresponding Hebrew word is *shuv*, meaning “to repent” in this context. Both occurrences are in the imperative mode reflecting the urgency of the appeal.

In an interesting pun the prophet declared the Lord’s response in the event the people return to Him, He would heal their disloyalty (14:4). The word “disloyalty” also is derived from the Hebrew term *shuv*. Originally, the people had turned from the Lord (disloyalty), now God asked them to turn back (repent).

The results of repentance are portrayed as graphically in 14:4-8 as the results of prolonged disobedience were portrayed in 13:7-16. The listener (reader) has to decide whether to continue in sin and face the judgment of God or to repent and enjoy the benefits of renewed relationship. The final verse summarized the two alternatives in a concise manner.

Wisdom Postscript (14:9)

The final verse of the book utilizes the alternating literary pattern to prompt loyalty to Yahweh:

Let whoever is wise understand these things, and whoever is insightful recognize them.
For the ways of the Lord are right, and the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious
stumble in them.⁷

In a style typical of wisdom literature, the ways of the upright and of the wicked are set in sharp contrast. Following the ways of the Lord enables one to walk. Rebelling against his ways causes one to stumble. By juxtaposing these two approaches to life, conformity to God’s ways or rebellion against them, the literary pattern of the book is brought into clear focus.

The attendant results of each lifestyle, walking or stumbling, present the reader with a vibrant choice of how to live. The norm by which all of life is measured is the way of the Lord.

Conclusion

Hosea viewed the political turmoil and the international intrigue of his day as definite signs of God's judgment upon the rebellious nation of Israel. Comparing the covenant relationship between Israel and God to his own marriage relationship, Hosea presented a prophetic explanation of God's actions during the concluding years of the Northern Kingdom's existence. Hosea knew his marriage could be restored if he was patient and if Gomer conformed to the prescription for renewal. Even so, God's patience afforded Israel the opportunity to submit and to return to Him. The message of Hosea has lasting value for the community of faith in every generation because the same options, conformity or rebellion, confront God's people. As the postscript of the book states, "Let whoever is wise understand these things" (14:9).

Endnotes

¹Hosea 1:1; CSB.

²For a detailed analysis of the chronology of the period the reader is referred to John H. Hayes and Paul K. Hooker, *A New Chronology for the Kings of Israel and Judah and Its Implications for Biblical History and Literature* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 53-70.

³For further elaboration on the theme of idolatry, the reader should consult the article by R. Dennis Cole in this issue, p. 63.

⁴James L. Mays, *Hosea, Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 118, 141-42.

⁵Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea, Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 176.

⁶Verses that contain a derision of alliances in Hosea are 5:13; 7:11; 8:9-10; 12:1; and 14:3.

⁷Hosea 14:9; CSB.