

THE BIBLE

in a nutshell

Hosea

—by Peter Hammond



“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” Hosea 4:6

The Book of Hosea is about God’s steadfast love for His people in spite of their continued unfaithfulness, vividly depicted by Hosea’s marital experience. The Holiness of God, the depravity of man, the seriousness of sin, the inevitability of judgement and the amazing grace of God are strikingly portrayed throughout Hosea.

The love of God

The Book of Hosea is not about Hosea. It is about God and His relationship to His Covenant peo-

ple. The uniqueness, holiness and sovereignty of Almighty God is emphasised. The fear of God, adoration, worship and wholehearted love of Him is our only proper response. “Love so amazing, so Divine demands my life, my soul, my all!”

The prodigal wife

Hosea married Gomer only to discover that she was unfaithful. Although separation followed, Hosea’s love for Gomer, like God’s love for His

tion as an image of the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is like marital unfaithfulness against the Lord. Harlotry (in Hebrew *Zanah*) refers to illicit sexual relationships. The Northern Kingdom of Israel is also frequently called Ephraim after its largest tribe.

Historic context

In the 8th Century, while Hosea was ministering in Israel, the great empires of Carthage and

The book of Hosea is about God and His relationship with His Covenant people. We learn about Israel’s unfaithfulness and the way the Lord pursued them to win them back.

own people, persisted, and reconciliation for the prodigal wife was eventually accomplished. Hosea’s life and ministry dramatically portrays God’s steadfast love for His Covenant people. In spite of Israel’s idolatry and immorality, the Lord seeks to restore His unfaithful bride. The story of Gomer, the wife of Hosea, can be summed up in three words, **sin**, **punishment** and **restoration**.

Idolatry and harlotry

The Old Testament frequently uses prostitu-

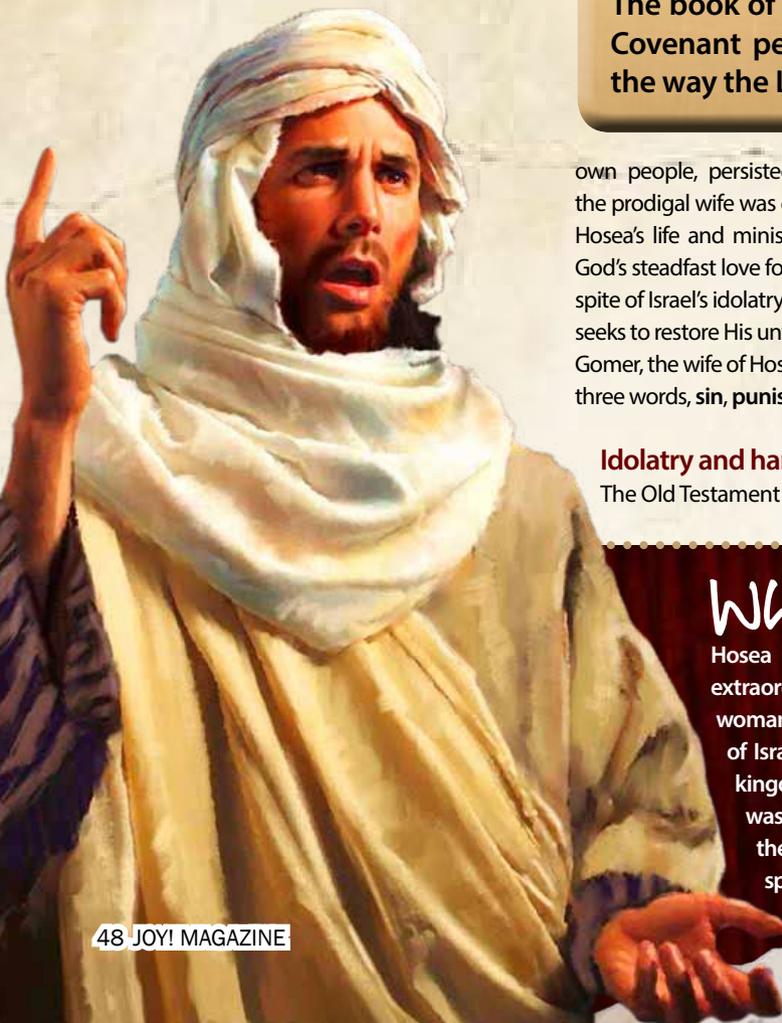
Rome were being established. The Olympic Games were beginning in Greece. In the East the Chinese and Indian civilisations were emerging. Israel was strategically placed at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe.

Warning signs

God would have been justified in divorcing His apostate people out of hand. However, God hates divorce and He sent prophets to warn them and seek to win them back to Himself

Who was Hosea?

Hosea is the first of the twelve minor prophets. God prepared Hosea for his extraordinary ministry, as he went through the trauma of a marriage to an unfaithful woman. Hosea, like his contemporary Amos, prophesied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the same time Isaiah and Micah were ministering to the Southern kingdom of Judah. When Hosea began his ministry (2 Kings 14:23-17:41), it was during the reign of King Jeroboam II (782-753). 2 Chronicles 26-32 record the historical background of Hosea’s ministry which spanned fifty years and the last six kings of Israel.



The Downward Slide

The history of Israel in 1 and 2 Kings reveals that the average length of the reigns of the Northern kings was three years. Many of these kings were assassinated and there were numerous coups. During the early years of Hosea's ministry the Northern kings of Israel enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity. This was largely because Assyria, the superpower of the day, had been deeply affected by the prophet Jonah's ministry to its capital Nineveh. Their repentance postponed the threat to Israel for over a generation. However, during this time of great prosperity and peace, greed and materialism fuelled bribery, corruption, scandals and injustice. Drunkenness and immorality rotted the society and the people of Israel became bored with the dry rituals performed mechanically by the priests. There was a resurgence of interest in New Age cults and Eastern religions. God's people, who were meant to be a royal priesthood and a holy nation, became just like everybody else. Immorality and idolatry flourished amongst inter-faith worship and degenerate music.



again. As Israel persisted in her rebellion, God sent natural disasters, crop failures, droughts, diseases, famines, plagues, storms, earthquakes and wildfires to wake Israel up to its self-destructive and suicidal path. Enemy tribes raided their livestock and life and property became insecure. The economy collapsed.

Catastrophe in Israel

Yet none of this seemed to bring the people of

Their first child born, Jezreel ('God sows it'), was a rebellious, unruly child who needed discipline. The second child, a girl, Lo-Ruhamah ('Not pitied'), was a deprived child, who did not receive love from her mother. The third child was a boy, Lo-Ammi ('Not My People'). Hosea was not the father and this boy was disowned. These children's names summarised how God was dealing with the people of Israel. Disciplined, deprived, and disowned.

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Israel to their senses. Eventually God allowed them to be invaded. The Northern kingdom of Israel was subjugated and the people exiled from the land. Amos and Hosea were the last-chance prophets sent to warn Israel of the dreadful consequences of their disastrous disobedience. Hosea was God's last prophet to the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel before their exile.

A response to love

Love is not true love unless it is loyal, exclusive and faithful. The English word 'betrothed' seeks to encapsulate the Hebrew word used in Hosea to describe **Covenant Faithful Love**. God rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He provided for them, protected them and blessed them. In response, Israel was required to joyfully respond to God's commands, delighting in His Law and worshipping Him in grateful devotion.

Disciplined, deprived, disowned

Hosea and Gomer had three children.

Half-baked and half-hearted

In chapter seven, Hosea uses a variety of images to describe the character of Israel. Their evil passions were like a heated oven. They were like an upturned cake getting burned on one side, inedible. Ruined and rotten. Israel flutters like a dove trapped in a net, turning to Egypt one moment and to Assyria the next, but never to God. Israel keeps faith with no one.

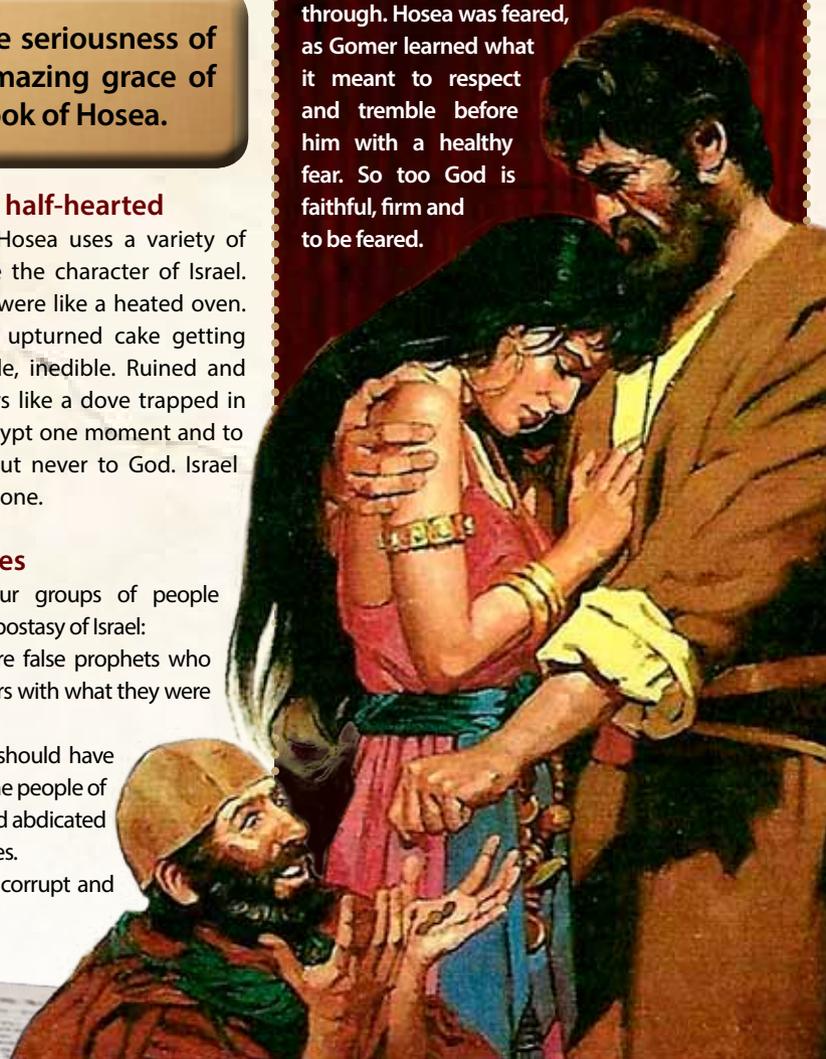
The guilty parties

Hosea identifies four groups of people responsible for the apostasy of Israel:

1. The **prophets** were false prophets who tickled peoples ears with what they were itching to hear.
2. The **priests**, who should have been reminding the people of the Law of God had abdicated their responsibilities.
3. The **princes** were corrupt and irresponsible. »

Rebuked, redeemed, restored

Hosea's wife was rebuked, redeemed and restored. Hosea was faithful to his wife, even when she was faithless to him. He was firm with her, bringing her back home, but not sharing the bed with her, representing the period of discipline in the Exile, that God was going to put the Israelites through. Hosea was feared, as Gomer learned what it meant to respect and tremble before him with a healthy fear. So too God is faithful, firm and to be feared.



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Seven Deadly Sins

1. **Ignorance** – “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” The people chose to remain ignorant.
2. **Ingratitude** – Despite all God’s gracious provisions they remained unthankful.
3. **Immorality** – Pursuing fertility cults, consorting with prostitutes and indulging in drunken orgies, Israel chose to copy the immorality of the surrounding nations.
4. **Idolatry** – The fertility cults, materialism and idols of the Canaanites were integrated into the daily life of the people of Israel.
5. **Infidelity** – The people had become unfaithful in their marriages, as well as to their God.
6. **Independence** – “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” and the people had chosen their own leaders and rejected God’s rule.
7. **Intrigue** – Gossip, alliances with pagan nations and disloyalty towards one another.



4. The **profiteers** were making money out of exploiting the poor, manipulating markets, and charging interest.

Barrenness, bloodshed, banishment

God warns that the consequences of disobedience and rebellion would be **barrenness, bloodshed** and **banishment**. There would be many miscarriages and much infertility. Their numbers would decline. Foreigners would attack and kill many of them. They would be banished and exiled from the land.

Gomer degenerated into immoral behaviour after the wedding. Just as God rescued Israel out of Egypt, and she later backslid from the Lord, so Hosea experienced the heartbreak of his wife’s violation of the marriage covenant. “...For she is not my wife, nor am I her husband! Let her put away her harlotries...” Hosea 2:2.

Love in spite of rejection

Gomer is symbolic of ungrateful and faithless Israel who, after being rescued from slavery in Egypt, turned their back on God and ran

The marital heartbreak of Hosea over his disloyal wife, Gomer, provides the rich metaphor which clarifies the themes of the Book: sin, judgement and God’s merciful restoring love.

Broken home, broken heart

Hosea was instructed by God to marry Gomer and his traumatic experience of her unfaithfulness was used to dramatise the unfaithfulness of Israel to the Lord. The marital heartbreak of Hosea over his disloyal wife, Gomer, provides the rich metaphor which clarifies the themes of the Book: **Sin, Judgement** and **God’s Merciful Restoring Love**.

Did God actually instruct Hosea to marry a prostitute?

It is probable that Gomer was chaste at the time of her marriage to Hosea. The words: “Take yourself a wife of harlotry” (1:2), can be understood prophetically, looking to what she became in the future.

after the idols and lusts of the world. God commands Hosea: “Go again, love...just like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who took to other gods...” 3:1.

Inter-faith syncretism

Israel was mixing their worship of the Lord with the idolatry of the surrounding peoples. This religious syncretism demanded God’s judgement. Using the analogies of marital and parental love, Hosea describes how the people of Israel had become polluted by the fertility cults of the Canaanites.

Baal worship included pornographic Ashera poles and idols, immorality, drunken orgies, prostitution and child sacrifice. “I will punish her for the days of the Baals to which she burned incense. She decked herself with her earrings and jewellery, and went after her lovers; but Me she forgot, says the Lord!” Hosea 2:13.

Hardened hearts

Through corruption, greed, lust and perversion, their hearts had hardened. They were neglecting to instruct their children in the true Faith and were now tolerating, and even promoting, synchronistic religion with all its idolatry and

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Hosea 4:6

immorality. *“They are deeply corrupted...He will remember their iniquity; He will punish their sins.”* Hosea 9:9.

Prostituted people

God tolerates no rivals. God hates idolatry. Idolatry is described as harlotry. When God's people commit idolatry, they behave like prostitutes and they deserve to be divorced, rejected and punished. The prophet Hosea calls backslidden Israel to return to the Lord and re-establish the intimate relationship she had

I did not acknowledge them...they made idols for themselves...My anger is aroused against them – how long will they attain to innocence? ...they sow the wind and reap the whirlwind...For Israel has forgotten his Maker...” Hosea 8:2-14.

Syncretism condemned

The prophet Hosea repeatedly condemns the mixture of true and false religion. The attempt by Israel to wed the worship of the Covenant God to Canaanite immorality and idolatry is as abominable as being married to a prostitute.

God's people are called to wholehearted intimacy, loyalty and obedience of the Lord in the same way that a wife should be devoted to her husband.

earlier experienced with Him in the wilderness, after having been delivered from slavery in Egypt. God's people are called to wholehearted intimacy, loyalty and obedience of the Lord in the same way that a wife should be devoted to her husband.

Head and heart

The Book of Hosea teaches that true knowledge of God is not merely doctrinal accuracy and understanding of correct information. To know the Lord is to have a personal relationship of faithful intimacy evidenced in worship, lifestyle and loyalty to the Covenant of God and the Word of God.

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the Law of your God, I also will forget your children.” Hosea 4:6.

The deceitfulness of sin

Sin can delude people into thinking that they know and understand God, when they are, in fact, far from Him. *“Israel will cry to Me, ‘my God, we know You!’ Israel has rejected the good...they set up kings but not by Me, they made princes, but*

Sin corrupts character. “Hear the Word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land; there is no truth and mercy and knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint with bloodshed upon bloodshed.” Hosea 4:1-2.

Pagan children

“...They shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find Him; He has withdrawn Himself from them. They have dealt treacherously with the Lord, for they have begotten pagan children. Now a New Moon shall devour them and their heritage.” Hosea 5:6-7

Treachery and lewdness

The religious rituals of Israel are condemned: *“For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings... they transgressed the Covenant...they dealt treacherously with Me. Gilead is a city of evildoers and defiled with blood. As bands of robbers lie in wait for a man, so the company of priests murder...surely they commit lewdness. I have seen a horrible thing in the »*

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house of Israel...Israel is defiled." Hosea 6:6-10.

Consequences for sin

In spite of the faithfulness of the Lord, Israel has become unfaithful. In spite of God's revelations, Israel is worshipping idols. In spite of Israel being led free from captivity in Egypt, they have chosen to go back to copying the idolatrous ways of Egypt. Because of the severity of their crimes against Almighty God, their punishment will be swift, terrible and relentless.

Lion and leopard

God is described in Hosea as a Lion: *"For I will be like a Lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear them and go away; I will take them away, and no one shall rescue."* Hosea 5:14. Powerful and terrifying to the wicked,

God will bring swift judgement to those who despise His Law and break His Covenant (Hosea 11:10). As silent, stealthy and deadly as a leopard. As powerful as a bear (Hosea 13:7-8). God describes His anger at the insensitivity, immorality and unfaithfulness of His people on whom He had lavished so much kindness, grace, mercy, protection, provision and blessing.

False hopes condemned

They are trusting in their burnt offerings. They are trusting in kings of their own choosing. They are trusting in foreign alliances. They are trusting in man-made idols. Therefore their treasures will be taken away to Assyria

have stumbled because of your iniquity...return to the Lord. Say to Him, 'Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices of our lips. Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, nor will we say anymore to the work of our hands, 'you are our gods.' For in You the fatherless find mercy!" Hosea 14:1-3.

Christ in Hosea

Hosea pictures the relationship between a faithful husband (God) and an unfaithful wife (Israel). Christ permeates the Book of Hosea as the Redeemer of His people. *"Yet I am the Lord your God ever since the land of Egypt, and you shall know no God but Me; for there is no Saviour besides Me."* Hosea 13:4.

The book of Hosea ends with words of hope and love. Hosea looks forward to the day when sin is forsaken, when backsliding is healed and when love triumphs.

and Egypt. They will become barren and bereaved of children. Their idols shall be carried away and their fortresses shall be destroyed. They have forfeited the love of God and will experience His wrath.

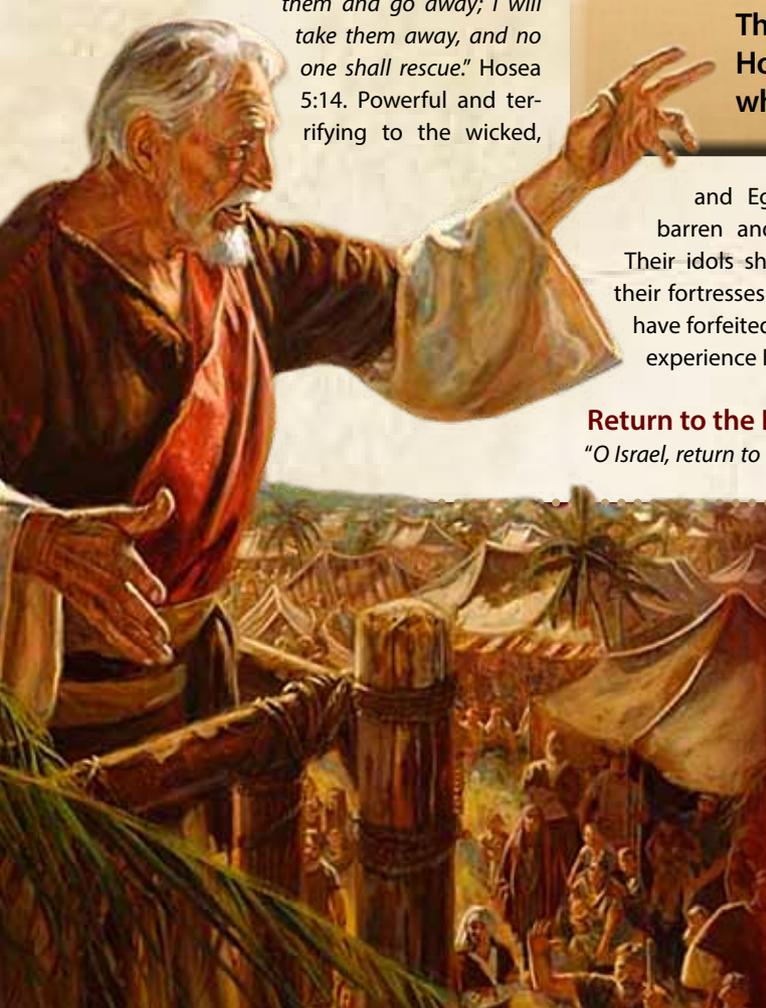
Return to the Lord

"O Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you

A door of hope

"Therefore, behold, I will...speak comfort to her. I will give her...a door of hope...Then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' and they shall say, 'You are my God!" Hosea 2:14-23. ■

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Healing The Backsliding

The Book of Hosea ends with words of hope and love: *"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely...They shall be revived... Who is wise? Let him understand these things. Who is prudent? Let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, But transgressors stumble in them."* Hosea 14:4-9.

Hosea looks forward to the day when sin is forsaken, when backsliding is healed and when love triumphs.

Sin is Intolerable: God is Holy

Sin shall be punished: God is just.

The Repentant shall be restored: God is love.