

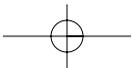
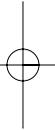
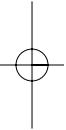
# TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 24

TOTC

HOSEA

For  
RUTH



# TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 24

GENERAL EDITOR: DONALD J. WISEMAN

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## HOSEA

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

DAVID ALLAN HUBBARD



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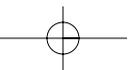
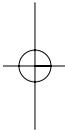
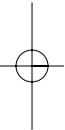
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## CONTENTS

General preface	7
Author's preface	9
Chief abbreviations	13
Select bibliography	17
<b>Introduction</b>	21
The prophecy of Hosea	21
Place in the canon	23
Date	24
Setting	26
Unity and composition	33
Literary forms	38
Message	42
<b>Analysis</b>	53
<b>Commentary</b>	57
<b>Additional notes</b>	
Fulfilment of Hosea's prophecies	76
The Baals	88
Possible historical backgrounds	127



## GENERAL PREFACE

The aim of this series of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, as it was in the companion volumes on the New Testament, is to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary on each book, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Major critical questions are discussed in the introductions and additional notes, while undue technicalities have been avoided.

In this series individual authors are, of course, free to make their own distinct contributions and express their own point of view on all debated issues. Within the necessary limits of space they frequently draw attention to interpretations which they themselves do not hold but which represent the stated conclusions of sincere fellow Christians.

Hosea, the prophet of love in the Old Testament, was also an outspoken critic of the religious apostasy and failure of his times which rejected God's love. The book is strongly coloured by the prophet's own experience which is interpreted with sensitivity by Dr David Hubbard, a teacher and pastor, in this detailed study. This will help readers to understand the varied and rich teaching of Hosea who offers also the hope for renewal through judgment and repentance, a message relevant in our day.

In the Old Testament in particular no single English translation is adequate to reflect the original text. The version on which this commentary is based is the Revised Standard Version, but other translations are frequently referred to as well, and on occasion the author supplies his own. Where necessary, words are transliterated

in order to help the reader who is unfamiliar with Hebrew to identify the precise word under discussion. It is assumed throughout that the reader will have ready access to one, or more, reliable renderings of the Bible in English.

Interest in the meaning and message of the Old Testament continues undiminished and it is hoped that this series will thus further the systematic study of the revelation of God and his will and ways as seen in these records. It is the prayer of the editor and publisher, as of the authors, that these books will help many to understand, and to respond to, the Word of God today.

D. J. Wiseman

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Living with Hosea has been an awesome privilege. For years his message has been a regular part of what I have pondered, read and taught. His remarkable role in human history and divine revelation has combined with an astounding literary skill to make an irreplaceable contribution to my life. I cannot imagine myself as a human being, let alone as a believing person, without the deposit of Hosea's political, moral and spiritual insights.

Not that I fully understand his book. Anyone who spends much time with Hosea and his fellow prophets will be frustrated as well as enriched. They lived in a culture whose contours are not easy to reconstruct. They spoke a language that will always remain foreign to us. Moreover, they dealt with a vision of God's grandeur in creation, sovereignty in history and compassion for his people, that is both massive and mysterious. But what we can grasp is infinitely worth the effort: so all-encompassing is their vision and so pertinent to human life and destiny are their words.

The work of other scholars both added to and eased my labours. The literature on Hosea produced during the past forty years (a period to which, in the main, I arbitrarily restricted myself) is voluminous. I could only scratch the surface. But it includes some of the finest biblical commentaries ever written. Writing with the works of Hans Walter Wolff, Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman, James Mays, Edmond Jacob and Jörg Jeremias by my side has prompted not only scholarly admiration but a deeper understanding of what is meant by 'the communion of saints'.

The present commentary has sought to balance a number of emphases in fulfilling the intent of the series. The structural and thematic unity of Hosea has been stressed, together with the variety of literary forms and stylistic techniques. The context and purpose of each passage have been examined as preparation for insights into the individual verses. The conviction that each part can be understood only in relationship to its larger setting in the flow of the prophet's work has dominated the approach. Theological implications have been sketched, and contributions to the rest of Scripture have been suggested.

The Revised Standard Version has served as a basic text. Its readings are usually italicized. The other major English versions have been particularly helpful in Hosea where the Hebrew text abounds with words, forms and structures that continue to baffle scholars. As one of the baffled, I ask the indulgence of readers who feel that they have to comb through a tangle of textual and lexical discussion to catch the gist of the prophet's meaning. Biblical exegesis is like the first rule of golf: we have to play the ball where it lies. We have to take the text as it is and make the best of it. In parts of Hosea, there is no simple way to do that.

The opportunity to share parts of this material in public lectures needs acknowledging, since discussion with friends and colleagues improved markedly the quality of my work. Particularly helpful were the conversations that accompanied the Day-Higginbotham Lectures at Southwestern Theological Seminary, the annual Theological Lectureship at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, a seminar with the Academy of Homiletics, and the E. Y. Mullins Lectures at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Add to this list the names of countless students in dozens of classes whose questions and suggestions helped me see the issues more clearly.

Thanks are due to my office team, Vera Wils, Steven Pattie, Dr John McKenna, Elsie Evans and Shirley Coe who bore patiently with my compulsion to finish the book, carried faithfully the burden of its several drafts of assembly and typing, and managed gracefully to get their other work done along the way.

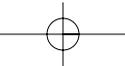
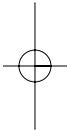
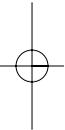
The dedication to my wife, Ruth, is a token of appreciation for the fact that she has lived with Hosea's work as long as I have. More than that, her steady encouragement for me to give the commentary

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

11

priority, alongside my normal administrative and teaching duties, is a chief reason for its completion. Together, we offer it with the prayers that its pages will be windows into the wonders of sovereign love and human responsibility – wonders which the prophets know from their encounter with God, and which their inspired words proclaim to their generation and the generations that have followed them for nearly three millennia.

David Allan Hubbard



## CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

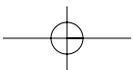
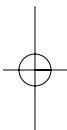
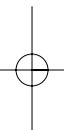
AB	The Anchor Bible.
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures</i> edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, <sup>2</sup> 1969).
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, <sup>3</sup> 1969).
ANVAO	Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo.
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament (Neukirchen-Vluyn).
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i> .
BA Rev	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i> .
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Oxford University Press, 1906).
Bib	<i>Biblica</i> .
BZAW	<i>Beibefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> .
CAT	Commentaire de l'ancien testament.
CB.OT	Coniectanea Biblica. Old Testament Series (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup).
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> .
CHALOT	W. L. Holladay, <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).
DOTT	<i>Documents from Old Testament Times</i> edited by D. Winton Thomas (Nelson, 1958).

- ETR* *Études Théologiques et Religieuses.*  
 E. T. English translation.  
*EvTh* *Evangelische Theologie.*  
 HAT Handbuch zum Alten Testament.  
*HTR* *Harvard Theological Review.*  
*IBD* *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1980).  
 ICC International Critical Commentary.  
*IDB* *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962).  
*IDB Supp.* Supplementary volume to *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976).  
*Int* *Interpretation.*  
*ISBE*, rev. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, fully revised (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–88).  
*JBL* *Journal of Biblical Literature.*  
*JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.*  
*JNES* *Journal of Near Eastern Studies.*  
*JSOT* *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament.*  
 KAT Kommentar zum Alten Testament.  
 KB L. Köhler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1951–53).  
 mg. margin.  
*NBC* rev. *New Bible Commentary*, revised (Leicester: IVP, 1970).  
 NICOT New International Commentary of the Old Testament.  
 OTL Old Testament Library.  
*OTS* *Oudtestamentische Studien.*  
*SBT* *Studies in Biblical Theology.*  
*TDNT* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946–76).  
*TDNT abr.* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* abridged by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).  
*TbZ* *Theologische Zeitschrift.*  
 TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentary  
 TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentary.  
 TRE *Theologische Realenzyklopädie.*  
*TynB* *Tyndale Bulletin.*

<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum.</i>
<i>VT Supp.</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum Supplements.</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary.
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament.
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft.</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins.</i>

### Texts and versions

AV	Authorized (King James) Version, 1611.
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> , 1967/77.
JB	Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
LXX	The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
Moffatt	J. Moffatt, <i>A New Translation of the Bible</i> , 1935.
MT	Massoretic Text.
NAB	New American Bible, 1970.
NASB	New American Standard Bible, 1960.
NEB	New English Bible, 1970.
NIV	New International Version, 1978.
RSV	Revised Standard Version, 1952.
Syr.	The Peshitta (Syriac version of the Old Testament).
Targ.	The Targum (Aramaic version of the Old Testament).
Vulg.	The Vulgate (the late fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome).



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## INTRODUCTION

### **1. The prophecy of Hosea**

It all began with a marriage. But the marriage of Hosea and Gomer was no ordinary nuptial. Initiated by the word of God, it was permeated with the purposes of revelation. A divine call was heard by Hosea that turned his life into a sanctuary where God's holy love was to be known. The tone of the book is set by God's mandate to take a wife who would become a harlot, have children who turned from God, and then know God's passion for his covenant people.

The story of the marriage is lean and spare. Of its moods, feelings, conversations, quarrels we are not told. Its blunt, bleak message overshadows all else about it: a wife and mother turning wayward, three children bearing ominous names. It is a story of judgment – a person gone wrong, just as her nation had done; children portraying doom, such as their nation deserved. It is also a story about the Lord, whose part is played by Hosea in the domestic phase of the drama. It is God who both choreographs the movement and narrates the meaning. Because he does, the story is heavy with tragedy and buoyant with

hope. The restoration of the broken marriage can take place because God commands Hosea and demonstrates his promises to Israel.

The prophet's experience accounts for the sharpness of his focus. Sins condemned by Amos – abuse of power, exploitation of the poor, presumption of covenant privileges – were prevalent. Hosea makes quick sallies into those territories. Yet he and Amos are as different from each other in emphasis as they are in experiences. The Baal-worship, over which Hosea wept, had dotted the hillsides of Israel while Amos was preaching but was little reflected in his messages. The prophets were not newspaper reporters required to write all sides of the story. Nor were they scholars preparing theses that investigated all angles of their topics. They were messengers, shaped by their calls, their experiences and their reception of Yahweh's word to speak to specific issues in specific ways.

Hosea's marriage, marked as it was by tragedy and recovery beyond the tragedy, both deepened his understanding of divine passion, and narrowed the scope of his message to the single point of Israel's relationship to the covenant Lord. It is that profound pathos, let loose towards Israel in speech after speech, irony after irony, metaphor after metaphor, question after question, which gives the book its fire. It is the fire of this passion and its message that confronts the reader with Israel's Lord.

The relationship signalled in that marriage was Hosea's dominant concern. He saw that relationship *inaugurated by Yahweh's grace* in Israel's distant past. Jacob, the patriarch, was not always a grateful recipient of it (ch. 12). Israel, the people, tasted it in the Exodus (2:15; 13:4), the wilderness (2:15; 9:10) and the settlement in the land (2:15). That grace viewed Israel as special to Yahweh, cared for by him and commissioned to serve him.

Hosea also saw the relationship *jeopardized from the beginning* by Israel's forgetfulness. Like a geography teacher Hosea took his hearers from place to place reminding them of their penchant to tax the relationship by their fickleness: 'Baal-peor – here you first dallied with Baal' (9:10); 'Gilgal – here you crowned Saul king and compromised Yahweh's sovereignty' (9:15); 'Bethel – here you desecrated Yahweh's name and Jacob's memory with the golden calf' (10:5–6); 'Gibeah – here your unbridled lust stained your history book with the gruesome tale of gang-rape' (9:9; 10:9–10).

Despite that sordid past, Hosea saw in his own times the relationship *sunk to its lowest point* in Israel's unrepentant history. The cult of the Baals, the instability of the monarchy and the naivety of foreign policies were its three chief expressions. Hosea's accusations were laced with metaphors that exposed Israel's rebellion: stubborn calf (4:16), loaf half-baked, yet mouldy (7:8–9), silly dove (7:11), baby too stupid to be born (13:13). And his announcements of judgment were conveyed in pictures of appropriate ferocity: God would be a lion, a leopard, a she-bear (13:7–8).

So sorry was the present that the near future could mean only a relationship *severed by invasion and exile*. Military intervention, with all the brutality for which the Assyrians were famous, and removal from the land, with all the pain of dislocation and deprivation – these were the necessary means of purging the nation.

Yet in the face of all of this, Hosea has a clear picture of the covenant relationship *restored at Israel's return to Yahweh*. Five times in the flow of the book, this reconciliation is intimated (1:10–2:1; 2:14–23; 3:1–5; 11:8–11; 14:1–7), conveying the overall intent of the book: the persistent presence of Yahweh's love despite his people's endemic waywardness. A new marriage awaits Israel in God's time and on God's terms. Because Hosea knew this, he had the courage to rebuild the relationship that Gomer had shattered, and to demonstrate both the reality and the cost of such reconciliation.

## 2. Place in the canon

It was a happy choice that placed Hosea at the head of The Book of the Twelve, the Jewish description of the collection of so-called Minor (i.e. shorter) Prophets. Chronologically, Hosea would follow Amos by a few years (see Date, below) but logically he deserves first place. His is the longest book. But more than that it is theologically the most complete. It embraces the great prophetic themes of covenant, judgment and hope. It describes the personal relationship between Yahweh and the prophet more amply than any of its eleven companions. Its biographical lessons prepare the way for Jonah, as its magnificent interplay of judgment and hope anticipates Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

The transition from spoken oracles to canonical book is not easy

to chart. In Hosea's case some reasonable assumptions may be made. First, since Hosea seems to have completed his ministry shortly before the fall of Samaria in 722/721 BC, that event itself would have confirmed his validity as a prophet and prompted the early recording of his words. Second, the oracles and stories were probably carried to Judah by refugees from the Northern Kingdom. Third, those who transmitted the prophetic words may well have been disciples of Hosea. That he had disciples may be inferred both from the brief mention of a prophet's disciples in Isaiah 8:16, as though the presence of Isaiah's disciples needed no explanation, and from the fact that such disciples are the obvious persons to preserve his words. Two bits of evidence must be noted: (1) the biographical (third person) form of the prophetic actions, which report his marriage to Gomer and the naming of three children (1:2-9), stands in contrast to the autobiographical form of chapter 3, which we interpret as his own report of the remarriage – persons thoroughly familiar with these actions must have framed them in the form we have them; and (2) the command, 'let Ephraim alone', voiced by the prophet, may be addressed to one of his followers (see Commentary at 4:17). Fourth, Hosea's words, confirmed by the exile of the northern populace, would have gained relevance for Judah as her history began to parallel Israel's. The corruption of the monarchy under Manasseh would have brought fresh meaning to Hosea's indictments of royalty. The reforms of Josiah may have found fuel in Hosea's condemnations of Baal worship. The threat of exile to Babylon could have gained sharpness from his announcements of judgment. Hosea's impact on Jeremiah, the dominant prophet of the Babylonian period, is well-documented (see Message, below). The fact that Hosea's words contained accusations of Judah at a few pivotal spots would have enhanced their use in the 7th and 6th centuries (cf. on 1:7; 5:10, 14; 8:14; 12:2). Hosea and Amos must have been recognized as canonical in their authority right from the beginning, so clearly do we see their use by the prophets who followed them.

### 3. Date

Dates given by various scholars for Hosea's ministry cannot be compared without adjusting them to account for the differences in

the chronological systems used. One standard chronology dates Jeroboam II from 785–745 BC and sharply compresses the reign of Pekah to four years, in place of the twenty credited him in 2 Kings 15:27.<sup>1</sup> Dealing with the twenty years of Pekah has proved impossible to most modern scholars. In the other standard chronology, E. R. Thiele has handled this problem by suggesting that Pekah reigned first in Gilead, east of Jordan, beginning his reign at the time Menahem began his in Samaria (752 BC), and then took control of the entire state only in 740, after Pekahiah's two years on the throne.<sup>2</sup> Pekah continued in power until Hoshea's revolt in 732 BC, a date on which most chronologists agree. One result of the two ways of handling Pekah's dating is different dates for Jeroboam's death – 753 BC (Thiele), 745 BC (Miller and Hayes) or 747–746 BC (Wolff, p. xxi). The impact of this difference on suggested dates for Hosea is obvious, given the fact that the beginning of his ministry is linked to the closing of Jeroboam's regime. The majority of scholars, who hold to the later dates for Jeroboam's reign, would place the beginnings of our prophet's ministry from 752 BC (Wolff, p. xxi) to 750 BC (Blenkinsopp, p. 98); those who follow the earlier chronology would pose a beginning date of 755 BC (Andersen, p. 37) or a couple of years earlier.

The reference to Jeroboam II of Israel in the title fits the second prophetic action (1:4–5), where Jezreel's name signifies banishment of Jehu's dynasty. The sign was fulfilled with Shallum's murder of Zechariah, Jeroboam's son, who managed a reign of only six months (753 BC; 2 Kgs 15:8–12) and whose death ended Jehu's dynasty. Amos' ministry was so brief that it may have been completed before Hosea began his, but it is possible that the priest denounced in Hosea 4:4ff. was Amaziah of Bethel (Andersen, p. 38), Amos' opponent (Amos 7:10–17).

The royal names (1:1) suggest that Hosea's mission continued to the commencement of Hezekiah's reign (715 BC), a span of about forty years. Evidence from the book itself cannot carry us much

1. Miller and Hayes, pp. 220–229.

2. *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), pp. 46–51. Thiele's system will be followed in this commentary.

beyond 725 BC as the final date of its prophecies, since Samaria's fall (722/721 BC) seems yet future when the book closes. If we are right in relating the oracles of Hosea 5:7 – 7:16 to the Syro-Ephraimite war (see p. 127 for date) against Judah, and in connecting the passages of priestly conspiracy against the unnamed king with Pekah's murder of Pekahiah, then one possible cut-off for the material in Hosea would be about 732 BC, the date of Pekah's death. If, however, the oven simile in 7:3–7 speaks not of Pekahiah's death but of Pekah's at the hand of Hoshea, the closing date must be moved forward to about 730 or 728 BC. Beyond that, we may find in Hosea's last chapters an urgency about the collapse of Ephraim that points to the period when Shalmaneser V (727–722 BC) had come to the throne of Assyria, and was aggressively seeking to reduce Samaria to the status of an Assyrian province. Hosea's ministry must, then, have carried on to about 725 BC. In contrast, Andersen's (pp. 34–35) caution about the Syro-Ephraimite setting of 5:8 – 7:16 has led him to suggest the early date of 740 BC for the cut-off of the bulk of the prophecies.

Hosea's ministry began at or just before the time of his marriage when he was probably eighteen or twenty years of age. A forty year span would be entirely possible, though we would have to assume that it closed with a number of years of service in Judah during the reigns of Ahaz (735–715 BC) and Hezekiah.

#### 4. Setting

##### *a. Historical background*

The major factors that frame the background of Amos and Hosea are these: (1) Assyria's preoccupation with affairs close to her own borders, e.g. protection from the mountain peoples of Urartu and Media to her north and east, a preoccupation that precluded the systematic marches to Syro-Palestine that had been her earlier pattern throughout most of the 9th century BC; (2) Assyria's domination, at the end of the 9th century BC, of the kingdom of Aram-Damascus, which had harassed Israel, particularly Gilead, and at least once destroyed her armies (2 Kgs 13:1–7, 22); (3) Jeroboam's territorial expansion and consequent economic prosperity made possible by the temporary cessation of Assyrian incursion and the partial eclipse

of Aramaean aggression (2 Kgs 14:23–29);<sup>3</sup> (4) the resurgence of Baal worship after Jehu's partial purge (2 Kgs 10); (5) the dynastic instability that plagued Israel after Jeroboam's death and saw six kings toppled in thirty years, three of whom ruled two years or less and four of whom were assassinated (2 Kgs 15; Hos. 7:7; 8:4; 10:3; 13:9–11), while the fifth was deposed (2 Kgs 17:4–5); (6) the resurgence of Assyrian power under Tiglath-pileser III (called Pul; 745–727 BC) and Shalmaneser V, who resumed the annual westward marches of their predecessors and reduced much of Syro-Palestine to vassal status (2 Kgs 15:19–20, 29; 16:7–20; 17:1–6); and (7) an altercation between Judah and Israel who, in alliance with the Damascans under their king Rezin, sought to coerce Ahaz of Judah to conspire with them against Tiglath-pileser (734–33 BC; 2 Kgs 16:5–9; cf. Isa. 7–10; Hos. 5:8–13; for a more detailed discussion of this Syro-Ephraimite conspiracy, see 'Possible historical backgrounds', p. 127 in Commentary at 5:8–7:16).

The first three of these historical factors shed light on the words of Amos and the beginnings of Hosea's prophecy, especially chapter 1. The last four are apposite to the oracles of judgment and hope in Hosea 4:1–14:9.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Recent archaeological investigations seem to indicate that Jeroboam II was heir to rather than instigator of the impressive building projects of Samaria. The palaces and fortresses assailed by Amos (3:15; 5:11; 6:8) and Hosea (8:14; 10:14) were more likely to have been the products of the ambitious greed and regal arrogance of Omri (885–874 BC), Ahab (874–853 BC) and their successors, including Jehu (841–814 BC) who founded the dynasty in power when the two prophets began their preaching. The crime of Jeroboam, apparently, was to continue to support such self-serving affluence even when the cost was higher than the citizenry could bear. Cf. J. K. de Geus, 'Die Gesellschaftskritik der Propheten und die Archäologie', *ZDPV* 98, 1982, pp. 50–57.
  4. For discussion of what is here outlined only, cf. the standard histories: F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 53–67; M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (E. T., London: Adam and Charles Black, 1965), pp. 238–262; Donner, pp. 408–434; Bright, pp. 253–276; Herrmann, pp. 226–254; Miller and Hayes, pp. 289–339.

### Summary chart

King	Dates BC	Significance	References
Jeroboam II	793–753	Supported shrine at Bethel Contributed to exploitation of the poor by sponsoring high standard of living	2 Kings 14:23–29 Amos 1:1; 5:7–11 Hosea 1:1
Zechariah	753	Death fulfilled prophecies of Amos and Hosea	2 Kings 15:8–12 Amos 7:9; Hosea 1:4–5
Shallum	752	Murderer of Zechariah Example of chaotic political life	2 Kings 15:13–15 Hosea 7:7; 8:10; 13:11
Menahem	752–742	Murderer of Shallum Oppressor of his enemies Paid tribute to Tiglath-pileser of Assyria	2 Kings 15:14–23 Hosea 7:11; 12:1
Pekahiah	742–740	Example of Israel's chaotic political life Son of Menahem Slain by Pekah	2 Kings 15:23–26 Hosea 6:7–9; 7:3–7
Pekah	740–732 (as sole ruler; may have ruled beginning in 752)	Murderer of Pekahiah Conspired with Rezin against Assyria Key figure in Syro-Ephraimite attack on Judah Became vassal to Assyria Probably most prominent king	2 Kings 15:25–31 2 Kings 16:1–9 Hosea 5:8–7:16
in Hosea			
Hoshea	732–723	Murderer of Pekah Rebelled against Assyria Deposed and imprisoned by Shalmaneser V Last king of Israel	2 Kings 15:30 2 Kings 17:1–6 Hosea 10:3–8, 13–15; 13:9–16

#### *b. Personal background*

Of Hosea's own circumstances, we are told only the name of his father, Beeri (1:1) and the slimmest details about his marriage and his

children (1:2–9; 3:1–3). However we interpret the marriage, it is surely the single most important element in shaping the person and message of the prophet. It was both the centre of his proclamation (or demonstration) of the divine word and the source of his understanding of the divine experience of being rejected, having to judge and discipline, and then effecting reconciliation. What the commissioning visions did for Isaiah (ch. 6), Jeremiah (ch. 1), and Ezekiel (chs. 1–3), Hosea's marriage did for him. Hosea's obedient behaviour as he received the series of commands to prophetic action in 1:2–9 and 3:1–3 suggests that he was already a prophet at the time. None of the language of recruitment, objection and re-assurance found in most prophetic calls is present. It is likely, therefore, that the commands served to confirm a call already received in circumstances of which we are not informed.

No solid inferences may be drawn from the prophet's prolific use of literary imagery (see *Literary forms*, below). His knowledge of agriculture, flora and fauna and hunting, though put to superb use in describing Israel's sins and Yahweh's punishments, do not require a specialist's knowledge to account for them.<sup>5</sup> Any well-informed Israelite would have been familiar with the range of activities and experiences that underlie them. It is the poetic adroitness not the technical information that is remarkable.

### *c. Spiritual background*

If there is any area of knowledge that marks Hosea as outstanding, it is his grasp of the nature, content and language of the cult. He gives evidence of knowing it inside and out – its practices, its purposes, its perversions. He sees its theology as wrong – giving credit to the Baals for what are gifts of Yahweh, who alone has the power to spark fertility (2:5, 8–9). He brands its sacrifices as futile, offered to the wrong gods in the wrong places for the wrong reasons (4:19; 5:7). He rejects its means of revelation as lifeless instruments that can discern neither the will nor word of God (4:12). He deplores its

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5. Buber, p. 120, summarizes what many have proposed, perhaps with more certainty than is warranted: 'he is so expert in field and village life, that there is no doubt about his being a farmer.'

sexual acts, brazen blends of lust and magic (4:13–14). He denounces its leaders – priest, prophet and king (4:4–5; 5:1). He mocks its hollowness – people kissing calves (13:2), adoring the products of their own craftsmen (8:6). He decries its savagery – the vicious sacrificing of little children (5:2).<sup>6</sup>

For all this he holds no-one but his own people responsible. No mention is made of Canaanite corruption; no blame is placed on foreign enticement.<sup>7</sup> Both prophet and people had ample background in their covenant traditions to know that the cult was wrong.

Hosea was certainly knowledgeable about those traditions. His references to history and geography in the judgment speeches of 9:10 – 11:8 and 11:12 – 13:16 speak for themselves. So do his citations of the law (4:1–2), his stress on the ‘knowledge of God’, which seems to be a technical term for covenant understanding and obedience (see on 4:1, 6; 6:6), his use of the exodus events as expressions of the beginning of Yahweh’s gracious relationship with his people (2:14–15; 9:10; 11:1; 12:9; 13:4–5), the self-disclosure formulas in which Yahweh introduces himself as God, the only God, of his people (12:9; 13:4), and his emphasis on the term *bērit* as the technical description of the covenant (6:7; 8:1).<sup>8</sup> In none of these passages

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6. For details of Baal worship and its impact on Israel and Judah, see Commentary at 2:13 and 13:1. Further evidence of syncretism between Yahweh worship and the cult of Baal may be forthcoming from Kuntillat ‘Arjud in northern Sinai, where a 9th to 8th century BC shrine contained evidence that Yahweh was attached to a consort named Asherah (cf. 1 Kgs 15:13; 2 Kgs 21:7). For preliminary reports of these findings, see Z. Meshel and C. Meyers, ‘The Name of God in the Wilderness of Zin’, *BA* 39, 1976, pp. 6–10; Z. Meshel, ‘Did Yahweh Have a Consort?’, *BA Rev* 5/2, 1979, pp. 24–35.
  7. Koch (p. 85); cf. J. Crenshaw, pp. 232–233: ‘one searches in vain for a single confirmation that prostitution lay at the center of Canaanite religion.’ If continued investigation of Ugaritic texts bears out this conclusion, then Hosea’s ire and Israel’s guilt are all the more understandable.
  8. See M. J. Buss, pp. 81–115, for other examples of Hosea’s cultic and covenantal language, including close corollaries to the Psalms.

does Hosea reveal the need to explain his terms or justify his right to use them. Especially is this true with the key term *covenant*.<sup>9</sup>

Given the intimacy of Hosea's knowledge of the tradition and the cogency with which he treats it, it may be that he brought to the task the expertise of an official of some sort. H. W. Wolff (pp. xxii–xxiii) suggests that Hosea belonged to a *Levitic* circle in Israel, was acquainted closely with the true, yet neglected, duties of a priest (4:6; 6:6; 8:12), and had a ready audience for speeches *about* Israel but not *to* them (9:10 – 10:8; 11:1–11; 14:1–8). While Wolff has supported his theory with additional lines of evidence, e.g. the mention of the Levite Moses as a prophet (12:13), the ties in language and thought between Deuteronomy and Hosea (see Message, below), and the use of Gibeah with its story of the Levite's concubine as part of Israel's 'sin-history' (9:9; 10:9), the theory founders on a formidable reef: our lack of clear understanding of the priesthood in early Israel and particularly of the levitical expressions of it (see Blenkinsopp, pp. 99–100).<sup>10</sup>

The same lack of evidence applies to theories that would identify Hosea as a *covenant-mediator*, modelled after Moses (cf. 12:13), responsible to speak the law of God within a cultic setting: 'Whether such a covenant-mediator ever existed, and what precisely his functions may have been, is far from being clearly attested in the Old Testament'.<sup>11</sup>

What can we say about Hosea's spiritual background? First, he was familiar with and committed to Israel's historic relationship to Yahweh as his people and to the binding implications of that relationship. Second, such intimacy may have been the product of his devout family or of training received in a priestly or prophetic group of whose form and shape we have no knowledge, though it is clear that he viewed himself as a *prophet*, an heir to the ministries of Moses and Samuel (cf. on 12:10, 13). Third, Yahweh's

9. Nicholson, p. 188. Cf. also Hanson, p. 158.

10. Cf. also D. A. Hubbard, 'Priests and Levites', *IDB* III, pp. 1266–1273.

11. Clements, p. 14. For the arguments that seek to reconstruct an office of covenant-mediator, see H. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel* (E. T., Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 101–112.

commands to marry, have children and call them by significant names led him into an experience in which all that he had known from his past was set in fresh light and filled with new import. Fourth, the meanings of the covenant imparted to him from Israel's traditions were retranslated by him into the language of family love: he saw Yahweh as an aggrieved but constant Husband, as an offended but faithful Father. The family with its rich lexicon of loyalties and tensions became the milieu in which he reread the covenant and transmitted it to the people.

No-one before had spoken so repeatedly of God's love (*'bb*) for his people, and no-one had cast divine grace in the vocabulary of marital intimacy. Neither the realm of international treaties nor of mercantile contracts gave adequate depth, breadth, length and height to the love of God.<sup>12</sup> Only the realm of the family, which Hosea knew at its worst in his marriage and sensed at its best in his understanding of God's constancy, could do that. Hosea's use of a marital metaphor seems all the more shocking when set against the backdrop of the fertility cult. To call Yahweh Husband and, therefore, procreator meant that Baal was not. Hosea's answer to the harlotry with the Baals was not a prudish rejection of the love relationship but an absolute claim to it. It was not the *love* that was wrong, nor the symbolic marriage to deity; it was the ritual prostitution in which the relationship was expressed. Worse still, the union was contracted with a no-god, not one who is true and living (1:10; 2:7). In making the love-language dominant, Yahweh played Baal on his own court and demonstrated who was the more faithful, the truly loving Lover. Nothing less than the combination of Hosea's background steeped in covenant truth, of the tragic marital experience which put him in touch with Yahweh's own heart, and of his recognition that Yahweh not Baal was the source of all power and love, could have produced this book which by its story and oracles transposed Israel's knowledge of God into the real intimacy of a true marriage.

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12. See Clements, pp. 14–23, for a review and rejection of the theory that Yahweh's covenant with Israel was patterned after the Suzerain-Vassal treaties of the ancient Middle East.