

CHAPTER V

HOSEA

THE STRUCTURE OF HOSEA

A. Hosea and his Faithless Wife—Chs. 1-3.

- 1—Ch. 1: 1-9. The Faithless Wife.
- 2—Chs. 1: 10-2: 23. Israel's Faithlessness.
- 3—Ch. 3. The Faithful Husband.

B. Jehovah and Faithless Israel—Chs. 4-14.

- 1—Chs. 4: 1-5: 7. Like Priest Like People.
- 2—Chs. 5: 8-6: 6. Fratricidal Strife.
- 3—Chs. 6: 7-7: 7. The Testimony of History.
- 4—Chs. 7: 8-8: 14. Israel's Political Unfaithfulness.
- 5—Ch. 9: 1-9. The Corruption of Nation Religion.
- 6—Ch. 9: 10-17. Original Sin.
- 7—Ch. 10. Three Pictures of Coming Punishment.
- 8—Ch. 11: 1-11. The Father's Love.
- 9—Chs. 11: 12-12: 14. Israel False and Faithless.
- 10—Ch. 13. Israel's utter Destruction.
- 11—Ch. 14. Love Triumphant.

The Author and His Book.

ALL that we know of Hosea the son of Beeri is gleaned from his book. His prophecies themselves substantiate the inference to be drawn from the heading (1: 1), viz. that he started prophesying after Amos but some years before Isaiah (740 B.C.). Like Amos his message was addressed mainly to the Northern Kingdom, to which he undoubtedly belonged.

There is no strict order, chronological, logical or spiritual to be discovered in the major portion (chs. 4-14) of Hosea; the order even within the smaller subdivisions is often hard to follow; the unusually high number of marginal notes in the R.V. testifies to difficulties in language and text; the change from third person in ch. 1 to first person in ch. 3 is hardly compatible with the unifying hand of the prophet himself. In brief, it is quite likely that Hosea met a violent death in the last dark, violent and desperate anarchical years before the capture of Samaria, and that the book represents the treasured memories of one or more of his devoted disciples. This may

also explain the relative absence of references to the major events of the time.

These factors make the book peculiarly difficult for closer study, but few of the prophets yield greater treasure—the use of the R.V. or other modern versions is virtually compulsory. No other prophet comes nearer to the New Testament revelation of the love of God. This is the best explanation of the place of the book among the Minor Prophets. The scribes did not think him the earliest in time, and it is not likely that they were influenced by the length of the book. Chronologically Amos must always come before Hosea, the revelation of God's justice before the revelation of His love. But spiritually Hosea gives a deeper and truer revelation than Amos. So it was a true understanding that put Hosea first in order.

The Background.

The general background of the book is much the same as that in Amos, except that the social collapse which the earlier prophet foretold is now an accomplished fact. In addition the long shadow of Assyria now falls dark across the doomed land.

When we come to the religious background that which was only implicit in Amos here becomes explicit and dominating. It would be difficult here to give a satisfactory outline of Canaanite religion, the more so as much detail is still uncertain, but fortunately it is not necessary; only a few main points need to be grasped for the understanding of Hosea's message.

When the Israelites entered Canaan, they will have been struck at once by certain aspects of the religion of those they conquered. While Jehovah was the God of the people of Israel, the gods of the Canaanites were rather the owners of the land, and the gods of the people mainly because they lived in the land. While the interests of Jehovah and His demands from the people were chiefly ethical, the gods of the Canaanites were fertility gods governing the growth of vegetation and the crops with mainly ritualistic demands on their worshippers. While Jehovah stood uniquely alone in the worship of Israel, the minimum for the Canaanite was three, the chief god (a sky god), his wife (an earth goddess) and their son.

The prophetic writers never give us details of this religion. All the male gods are normally lumped together under the general name of Baal. (pl. Baalim), which can be a proper name, but generally means lord or owner, cf. Baal-peor (Num. 25: 3, R.V. mg.), Baal-zebub (II Kings 1: 2), Baal-berith (Judges 8: 33) and a number of place-names compounded with Baal.

Equally the goddesses are referred to by the name of the most popular, Ashtoreth or Ashtaroth (Babylonian Ishtar, Greek Astarte) or occasionally by that of Asherah (pl. Asherim or Asheroth—Asherah refers more commonly to the sacred pole in the Canaanite sanctuaries and is consistently mis-translated grove in the A.V.), cf. Judges 2: 11, 13; 3: 7.¹

The first sign of declension after the death of Joshua was probably the admitting to honour of the old gods of the land to secondary honour beside Jehovah. This will have been followed by the far more serious step of worshipping Jehovah, as though He were merely a super-Baal, with the character, interests and claims of a Baal. For the prophets the worshipping of one's own conception of Jehovah is the worshipping of a false god, and so no distinction is ever drawn between the worship of the local Baalim beside Jehovah and the worship of Jehovah as a Baal. We can seldom be certain which is meant, the more so as they will have gone hand in hand, but probably the majority of mentions of Baal worship in the earlier books are really the worship of a Canaanized Jehovah. So far as the people were concerned they were probably never conscious of having forsaken Jehovah (cf. Jer. 2: 23).

Samuel and his sons of the prophets were probably the men who broke this religious degeneration, but how far it had gone may be seen by the names given in the families of Saul and David, who were certainly never Baal worshippers: Eshbaal, Saul's son, and Meribbaal his grandson (I Chron. 8: 33f; 9: 39f, cf. also 8: 30), Beeliada, David's son (I Chron. 14: 7)—cf. also Baal-perazim (II Sam. 5: 20), where Baal must mean Jehovah. Later scribes transmogrified these names to avoid the name of Baal, but the less read genealogies of Chronicles have preserved them for us.

With the division of the kingdom, Canaanite influence increased in the North, especially during the attempt to introduce the worship of Melkart, the Baal of Tyre. Though this was defeated by Elijah and Elisha, it seems clear that the religion of the North became swamped by the Canaanite outlook. This is the background of Hosea, for while the worship of the Baalim he denounces probably included the worship of other gods, beyond a doubt it was primarily Baalized Jehovah worship, cf. 2: 16. As a result Jehovah was supposed to be primarily interested in sacrifice, not in conduct (see p. 31). Further, though the prophets never mention it for very shame, this Canaanized Jehovah must have been provided with a wife, and part of the worship will have been prostitution at

¹ An interesting picture of Canaanite religion has been given by the excavations at Ras Shamra, see Finegan, p. 147f., Kenyon, p. 158ff, and especially Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, ch. III.

the shrines, designed magically to increase the fertility of the land (cf. 4: 14, where harlot = *gedeshah*, a holy woman, cf. Gen. 38: 21f, Deut. 23: 17, both R.V. mg.; the sense is made clear in R.S.V., N.E.B.). This led in turn to wide-spread immorality (4: 14).¹

Hosea's Wife (Chs. 1, 3).

Hosea's call came through God's command about his marriage (the R.V. mg. is preferable in 1: 2) and therefore presumably when he was a young man just out of his teens. The apparently natural interpretation of 1: 2, that he was commanded to marry an immoral woman, perhaps a *gedeshah*, though supported by many, can hardly be sustained.

i. Had Hosea known that Gomer was an immoral woman, there would hardly have been surprise or heart-break, when she returned to her old life.

ii. An immoral woman could not have served as a picture of Israel, when she came out of Egypt (2: 15; 9: 10).

iii. Since "children of whoredom" looks to the future, for they were not yet born, "a wife of whoredom" should do so too.

God will have commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim (the name is not likely to have any allegorical meaning). As the tragedy ran its course, Hosea will have realized God's purpose in His command and His foreknowledge of its consequence. So 1: 2 is the prophetic interpretation of God's command won through experience. The older view based on Jewish tradition was that the story is merely an allegory, but it has few advocates to-day.²

We cannot say how many, if any, of Hosea's children were legitimate, but the time came when Gomer left him for her lover. Either in sheer love or at God's command he did not divorce her—if he had, on the basis of Deut. 24: 1–4 (cf. Jer. 3: 1) he could not have taken her back. Then came the time (3: 1f) when he looked her up again and found her treated as a slave, perhaps sold by her paramour, who had tired of her. Hosea bought her back for one-and-a-half homers of barley, in value fifteen shekels of silver (translate in 3: 2, ". . . even an homer of barley . . ."), i.e. half price as damaged goods (cf. Exod. 21: 32).

Though the prophet's message is God's word and he speaks for God, yet in ways we cannot grasp the message must first

¹ An interesting picture of debased popular religion has been given by the Elephantine Papyri, Finegan, p. 201, Kenyon, pp. 229, 275, New Clarendon Bible, O.T. IV, pp. 281ff.

² Young's advocacy of the allegorical view (p. 245f) seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the view set out above. For further details see HDB, article Hosea, ISBE, article Hosea, C.B. Hosea, Harrison, pp. 861–868.

become part of the prophet (cf. p. 101). Nowhere in the Old Testament is the love of God more clearly and tenderly expressed than in Hosea, and that will be because no prophet experienced the heart-break of unrequited and faithless love as Hosea did. Hosea, like all God's messengers, had to experience his message before he could give it to others.

Hosea's Message.

Five points may be especially disentangled from Hosea.

i. The immorality of Israel, using the word in the widest sense. It is clear that matters had become worse than in the time of Amos. Priests (4: 8; 6: 9), princes and king (5: 1; 7: 3) were among the ringleaders.

ii. The corruption of true religion especially as shown in the calf images (8: 5f; 10: 5f) and in the conception of Jehovah as a Baal.

iii. Lack of trust in Jehovah as seen in Israel's foreign policy (5: 13; 7: 11; 8: 9f; 12: 1; 14: 3). To seek foreign aid implied seeking the aid of foreign gods.

iv. For Hosea the very existence of the Northern kingdom was sin (8: 4; 13: 11). While it is true that God chose Jeroboam as a punishment for Solomon's sins (I Kings 11: 26-40), a careful reading of I Kings 12 will suggest a deeper hostility to the Davidic line than can be explained merely by high taxation; 12: 2f, suggest premeditated rebellion. Hosea looks forward to re-union under a Davidic king (1: 11; 3: 5).

v. The heart of Hosea's message revolves around the word *chesed*. This is found 247 times in the Old Testament, and is translated in A.V. by mercy, kindness, loving kindness and eight other words of similar meaning. Though in many cases close enough, none of these terms really expresses the meaning of *chesed*, which is a covenant word, implying the loyalty and behaviour that may be expected from one with whom one stands in covenant relationship. Applied to God it means mercy and love, but it is always loyal love and covenanted mercies.¹ R.S.V. uses loyalty when used of men, steadfast law of God.

Hosea's marriage was a covenant in which he had shown Gomer *chesed*, loyal love, but he was not shown the *chesed* by his wife which he had a right to expect. Even so Jehovah had made a covenant with Israel, had taken her as His wife, had shown her *chesed*, faithfulness and loving mercy; but Israel had not kept her side of the agreement. So He speaks through the prophet (6: 4) ". . . your *chesed* is as the morning cloud, and as the dew that goeth away early"; and then (6: 6):

¹ See further Snaith: *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, Ch. V.

For I desire *chesed* and not sacrifice:
And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

It is immaterial whether we render by love, dutiful love (Cheyne), leal love (G. A. Smith), the meaning is clear; the love of God to man will only be satisfied by the response of man's love. R.S.V. renders steadfast love.

Hosea does not merely use *chesed* of God's love to man (2: 19) and of the love that God asks of man, he also uses it of the love He expects man to show his fellow-man (4: 1; 12: 6; perhaps 10: 12). Since all Israelites were linked to God in the one covenant, they were linked to one another too, and part of the covenant keeping is loyalty between all who stand within it.

Hosea and His Faithless Wife (Chs. 1-3).

The meaning of this section is made more difficult by faulty chapter division in English and by a natural tendency to regard ch. 2 as one connected prophecy.

Chapter 1: 2-9 is the story of Hosea's marriage up to the point where it breaks down; ver. 7 is purely parenthetic. Then the story is applied to Israel (1: 10-2: 23). Before the apparently inevitable story of doom is unrolled it is preceded by an almost incredible promise of restoration (1: 10-2: 1) with no close link with what precedes or what follows. In ver. 10 "Yet . . ." is misleading; it is the simple "And it shall come to pass that . . ." Then in ch. 3 we are shown from Hosea's own action how God will carry out His promise.

The mention of pillar and teraphim in 3: 4, objects both condemned by the Law (Exod. 23: 24; Deut. 16: 22; I Sam. 15: 23) does not imply the prophet's approval of them; he is saying that every form of civil and religious organization, good or bad, will vanish.

Jehovah and Faithless Israel (Chs. 4-14).

A foremost place is given to the priests' disregard of the law of which they were made custodians (4: 6), as a result of which "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Instead of restraining the iniquity of the people, they welcomed it for the sake of the resultant sin offerings—this is the meaning of sin in 4:8; Hebrew used the same word for sin and sin-offering, cf. II Cor. 5: 21, Rom. 8: 3. When we remember that the priests were also judges, we can understand better how terrible was their leadership in highway robbery (6: 9).

A very old Jewish tradition maintains that the original reading in 4: 7—changed by the scribes themselves out of

motives of reverence—was, "They have exchanged My glory for shame," *i.e.* for Baal worship.

Beth-aven (4: 15; 5: 8; 10: 5, 8) was a village near Beth-el (Joshua 7: 2, I Sam. 13: 5). Hosea transfers its name, meaning House-of-vanity, or House-of-iniquity, to Beth-el, which had ceased to be the House-of-God.

There are two references to contemporary happenings which we cannot now interpret. Harper (I.C.C.) gives no fewer than eleven interpretations of king Jareb of Assyria (5: 13; 10: 6) none of which carry real conviction—R.S.V., N.E.B. are almost certainly correct in rendering with a different division of consonants, "the great king," *i.e.* the king of Assyria. There is also no certainty whether Shalman (10: 14) is short for Shalmaneser IV (782–773 B.C.) or even Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.), or whether he was an Assyrian king at all; cf. N.B.D. p. 1169 nor do we know where Beth-arbel was. It is references like these that remind us that we possess no more than the barest outline of Israelite history.

One of the most tragic features of Israel's history is her frequent superficial repentance. 6: 1–3 gives us a picture of one example. This section (5: 8–6: 6) is taken from the time of Israel's attack on Judah (Isa. 7: 1, 2; II Kings 16: 5).

Though he does not develop the thought, it would seem that Hosea's conception of Israel's history is much the same as that in Ezek. 20 (see p. 109), for he stresses that Israel's corruption began already in the wilderness at Baal-peor (9: 10, Num. 25) to continue from then on.

Even as in Hosea's own life love triumphed over sin and degradation, so his prophecy closes with the picture of Jehovah's love triumphant over Israel's sin (ch. 14). Few chapters in the Bible suffer more from the lack of inverted commas, for there are three speakers in it:

Hosea	vers. 1, 2	7	-	9
Israel	vers. 3	8a	8c	
Jehovah	vers. 4–6	8b	8d	

The division of ver. 8 is doubtful and difficult. If the above is correct, then "Ephraim" merely indicates the speaker of the following words, and "shall say" should be omitted.

How far this hope has been or will be fulfilled we cannot say (see p. 112f), but Paul quotes Hos. 2: 23; 1: 10 as one of his proofs of the triumph of the grace of God (Rom. 9: 25f) and goes on to the vision of the day, when "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11: 26).

For a much fuller treatment and a consideration of some of the textual difficulties see my *The Prophets of Israel*, chs. XI–XIII.