

THE BOOK OF HOSEA

Lesson 02, Chapter 1

We'll open Hosea chapter 1 today, but before we do I'll advise you ahead of time that we're going to crawl through the first several verses at a snail's pace because much has to be explained for us to operate from the correct basis in understanding God's message through Hosea. It won't be like this throughout our entire study. Let's begin with summing up what we learned last week about the man, Hosea, and about the circumstances and conditions of his time that led Yehoveh to use this prophet in the way that He did.

Hosea lived and prophesied in the 700's B.C. At this time the former unified nation of Israel under Kings David and Solomon had long ago become split into two separate kingdoms due to a bloody civil war. One Kingdom was called Israel (also known as Ephraim) and the other was called Judah. The Kingdom called Israel occupied the northern tribal territories and so among Bible commentators garnered the designation as the Northern Kingdom. The Kingdom of Judah is known as the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom consisted of 10 tribes of Israel with Ephraim as the largest and most powerful. The Southern Kingdom consisted of 2 tribes with the tribe of Judah as the dominant. Hosea resided in, and prophesied about, the Northern Kingdom.

When Hosea first began to prophesy it was late in the reign of King Jeroboam II. During Jeroboam's reign Israel was prosperous and lived peaceably with their gentile neighbors. This geopolitical situation was due to Jeroboam's propensity to make treaties with the nations surrounding him, and encouraging social and religious syncretism of his people with theirs. Syncretism is a fancy word that means to combine elements of two or more dissimilar things to arrive at a condition that was noticeably different and less pure than before the combining began. So religiously speaking, Israel maintained some elements of their ancient Hebrew faith, but also added in elements of other nearby religious systems. Since nearly all of the surrounding nations worshipped Ba'al in one form or another, Israel began to do the same. They kept Yehoveh as their own national god, but many elements of the local pagan religious systems were willingly added to their religious practices including various gods and goddesses. Societally, Israel did the same. Intermarriage was encouraged and social

customs adopted. In the name of economic well-being, tolerance and security, Israel ruined their relationship with Yehoveh.

After Jeroboam's death (ending his family dynasty that had begun a century earlier with King Jehu), Zechariah took the throne. He was murdered in a few months, and 5 more kings ruled over Israel after him, each murdered. This all happened over the relatively short period of 30 years. Thus, upon Jeroboam's death the Northern Kingdom began a steady decline into chaos, a weakening economy, and more and more pressure from the superpower of the region, Assyria. Hosea witnessed it all; Israel's enviable pinnacle, their steep decline, and finally the deep valley of despair. He prophesied over a period of about 35 years. Because Hosea prophesied over such an extended period, then we see chapters of Ephraim/Israel's history played out in chronological order that reflects the different realities that came at various stages of Israel's decline.

We spent considerable time last week discussing just what exactly a prophet was according to biblical history. We discovered that one cannot put the duties or job description of a prophet into a nice neat form; it changed and evolved over the centuries from the time of the first person called prophet in the Bible: Abraham. We'll not review it all but I will mention that of the prophets that came before Hosea the one most similar to him has to be Elijah. The similarity is that both Elijah and Hosea prophesied that God's wrath was coming, and the religious situation for both involved a battle against Ba'al worship. Even so, Hosea is classified a bit different from Elijah in that Hosea belonged to a new breed called "writing prophets". That is, they (or some scribe) recorded and handed down their prophecies in written form, and those written forms became books of the Bible named for that prophet. The writing prophets are divided into 2 sub categories called the minor and the major prophets, with Hosea being classified among the minor prophets. "Minor" is Latin for less or fewer, and it doesn't apply to their status or importance but rather reflects only the length or the brevity of their writings. Hosea is the cut-off point of the minor prophets; that is, his writings are the longest among those classified as "minor".

In brief, Hosea prophesied the end of the Northern Kingdom and their expulsion from the Promised Land as God's punishment for their grave sins of idolatry and unfaithfulness. At the moment of their expulsion, it did NOT include the Southern

Kingdom of Judah; Judah's punishment and exile would come about 130 years later. As God tends to do, He would use another nation to bring about His wrath upon His chosen people. That nation would be Assyria.

Please notice something that we touched on last time. Regardless of their personal righteousness before God (that is, individual by individual) the entire population of Israel would be judged and therefore affected as a single entity. This punishment would be a corporate punishment; it would be enacted upon the whole of the population; no one would be spared just because he or she might be, in God's eyes, righteous. This is a good historical example of the principle of God judging us from the platform of 2 spheres: the personal individual sphere and the corporate or group sphere. Nothing has changed even in the 21st century. If today God determined to pour out His wrath on the USA as a whole, or the UK, or Australia, South Africa, Brazil, China or wherever you might live, even as a sincere Believer you will (on a physical level) be affected by it and not spared. On the other hand, from a spiritual level, you will be spared in the sense that God will welcome you into His Heaven should you perish, and He will be with you during whatever ordeal you and all your neighbors might suffer. But as a member of a group, your experience will be no different than anyone else's, wicked or righteous.

As a result of the exile of the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom, God promises to eventually bring those people back to the Land. But it would be future generations of Israelites that return and not those currently responsible for the sins of idolatry and unfaithfulness. This is the same principle and pattern of what happened to Israel when they left Egypt. They were delivered from Egypt, they were given God's commandments, He formed a covenant relationship with them (the Covenant of Moses), but they broke the covenant. Thus, God would not allow Israel into the Promised Land until the sinning generation completely died off in the wilderness and the next generation of Israel was born and brought to adulthood. The reality is that until fairly recently (the 21st century) Ephraim/Israel did not begin its return to the Promised Land, and now they are coming in increasing numbers, and with a remembrance of their ancient tribal affiliations. So, the wait from the punishment of their Assyrian exile to their return to the Land has been 2700 years.

In 745 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser III became the King of Assyria and he had empire building in mind. This ambitious ruler began gobbling up the few remaining independent nations that surrounded him, and then finally set his sights on the Northern Kingdom. Since tribute (taxes and wealth) was always at the core of the reason that aggressive kings attacked other nations, the kings of Israel at first agreed to pay Tiglath-Pileser's price in exchange for being a vassal state. This meant Israel was granted permission to keep their own Israelite king and government, but those kings had a king above them: the King of Assyria.

A head-strong young man killed Israel's sitting king and began an anti-Assyria movement. His name was Pekah. King Pekah rallied Ephraim/Israel to resist paying taxes to Assyria and this signaled the beginning of the end. Pekah was then murdered and replaced by Hoshea Ben Elah. He immediately reinstated paying tribute to Assyria and so Assyria relented. Some years later Tiglath-Pileser was succeeded by Shalmaneser V. King Hoshea saw this as a moment of Assyrian weakness and approached Egypt to be an ally against Assyria. He also stopped paying tribute. Shalmaneser attacked Israel because of this attempted alliance and their rebellion against paying taxes. Eventually in 723 B.C. Assyria captured Israel's capital, Samaria; that was the end of Ephraim/Israel as a nation. This King Hoshea (or Hosea) I'm speaking of was not the Prophet Hosea.

The Prophet Hosea stopped his prophesying shortly before the fall of Samaria; there is nothing in his book about that final battle or even the first wave or two of Assyrian attacks upon Israel that would lead to its fall. The belief among the traditions of Judaism is that Hosea escaped to the still independent Southern Kingdom of Judah before these final battles, where Hosea completed his writings. While that is speculation, it is also the most plausible and likely scenario.

The fall of Israel and their exile has led to the famous 10 Lost Tribes of Israel legend that we've all heard about. And, as it turns out, they are not so "lost" after all.

So, with that background, let's open the Book of Hosea.

READ HOSEA CHAPTER 1 all

The first verse gives us plenty to deal with. Notice that grammatically the voice is 3rd person. That is, it is she/he/it/they and not Hosea saying I/me. So clearly a scribe or an editor wrote this 1st verse and perhaps even the entire first 2 chapters because it speaks **about** Hosea, but it is not Hosea speaking.

One of the difficult things that all Bible students that go beyond the surface must face and deal with is that for centuries much of what we find written down now as our treasured Bible, was at first transmitted by oral traditions passed down generation to generation. When writing began to replace oral transmission of the traditions, it was common for ancient people to employ paid scribes because scribes were among the few who were highly trained in the art of writing. That doesn't mean that people were illiterate or couldn't write at all, but their writing abilities were relatively rudimentary and certainly only a very few could construct a complex message in a written format, and do it in a coherent way using proper grammar, spelling, structure, etc. By way of illustration, you, I and most people can add, subtract, multiply and divide to some basic level. We can balance a check book, add up bills, etc. But that hardly makes us mathematicians. There is a specialist occupation of people who are highly trained in advanced mathematical skills that are employed to deal with complex calculations that the vast majority of us could never hope to master. It was similar for writing in the ancient times, and more so the further back in time that we go. Hence the need for scribes.

More than likely Hosea employed a scribe that he explained much to; a scribe that helped him order and construct his work (and apparently actually wrote some it). And, as with chapter 1, the scribe provided an introduction and background as a proper literary starting point. Or, as we might think it as a sort of extended title for the book. In fact, much like a true biblical Jewish Parable (as with those told by Jesus), which had a specific structure and form that identifies it as a Parable (as opposed to the words being mere allegory, illustration or metaphor), the opening words of Hosea also form an identifiable structure. In Hebrew, the opening words of Hosea read: ***Dabbar Yehoveh asher haya'el***. It means, "the word of Yehoveh which was unto...". We find this same precise word formula to open the books of the prophets Joel, Micah, and Zephaniah. Without going deeply into ancient biblical Hebrew, what this means for us is there was a recognized format devised and in use for recording the prophecies of biblical

prophets, and it constituted what was considered as a proper opening to their works in that era. This reality lends all the more evidence to my contention that indeed a scribe was involved in Hosea's and in each of these prophetic works that I just mentioned.

From a spiritual standpoint something extremely important is being imparted with those opening words: a theological declaration is being made. What the reader is about to study is, on the whole, a message from God. Hosea is only passing it along and in Hosea's case it is mostly in the form of recounting a very strange life-drama that unfolded in order for Yehoveh to create a visual aid for people around Hosea to see. In the shorter written form of his name, Hosea means "he has delivered". In longer written form it means "Yehoveh has delivered".

Before we go any farther I'll explain to you that while it is most common to say that in Hebrew God's formal name is vocalized as Yah-way, I don't think that's correct. I think it is a 3-syllable word, not 2, and that it is vocalized something like Yeh-ho-vay. The vowel sounds could be slightly different because the ancient Hebrew didn't use vowels in their alphabet so some guess work is involved. And no doubt different Hebrew dialects (and there were several) might have pronounced it slightly differently over the ages. Nonetheless, in my estimation the early Latinized form of God's name that is common in very old Christian Bibles and among the Church, which is Jehovah, is further evidence that God's name was spoken as 3 syllables and not 2. We can agree to disagree about it, but Yehoveh is how you'll usually hear it out of my mouth throughout this study of the Book of Hosea.

Only in the opening 2 verses of Hosea is the prophet ever identified. Other than he's the son of a man named Beerli (whom we have no idea who that is), we have no other identification. We don't know what tribe he was part of, nor exactly where he lived in the Northern Kingdom.

The term used to characterize what God gave to Hosea is in Hebrew *dabbar*; in English, word. This Hebrew term is more a complex concept than how in modern times we use the term "word". As an example: in ancient Hebrew culture the term Wisdom didn't only mean knowledge or common sense or something like

that, but rather Wisdom was also seen as a living entity. By living I don't mean that allegorically but rather for real. Wisdom was even assigned a female gender so we'll sometimes see it spoken of as Lady Wisdom. Wisdom was envisioned as a divine entity and a manifestation (of sorts) of the living God. The term **dabbar**...word... is similar. **Dabbar** was seen as something of divine substance coming from Heaven. It had, of itself, power and a living nature to it. Think for a minute about one of the most famous and memorized quotes of the New Testament:

^{CJB} **John 1:1** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

In context the Apostle John was speaking about Yeshua of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, being a sort of fleshly embodiment of The Word for His 30 or so years on earth. What did this mean to the Jewish God worshippers of the 1st century? I can tell you for sure what it did NOT mean. To modern Christians the term "word of God" or "God's Word" or "the Word" nearly always means the Holy Scriptures... the Bible. So, Believers often take John 1:1 as meaning that in some strange way Jesus is equivalent to the Bible. Or that He's the embodiment of the Scriptures. Or that in the beginning was the Bible (or at least the concept of the Bible already existed in some ethereal way that would eventually become the physical Bible that can be both spoken and written). And if it's not that, then what does The Word mean? For the ancient Hebrews and for the Jews of Christ's day, it did NOT mean the Scriptures nor the narrative texts that would form it. The Word was a divine, though mysterious, entity. It was a mystical and powerful element of God. It was a special manifestation of the God of Israel called The Word. The Word is a term that speaks of an actual presence of Yehoveh and not merely literature written on a piece of parchment, no matter how profound and true those words might be.

Let me say this another way because this is so far from how it has been typically understood. For the Hebrews since the term The Word didn't equate to the Holy Scriptures it also didn't equate to that for the Apostle John. Therefore, when we extend that special manifestation of God in the form of The Word to mean what was given to Hosea, it did **not** mean a whole lot of sentences strung together. Rather it meant that Hosea was having a special divine encounter with a living

agent sent by Yehoveh... something that bears God's nature (similar to the way the Church often thinks of the Holy Spirit). The Word, **Dabbar**, was Hosea's Burning Bush experience. It was similar in essence to the fearful cloud that filled the Temple when Solomon completed it and was consecrating it into use, as a declaration that God found it acceptable. In Christian Trinity doctrine language, one could say that the ancients... right up through Yeshua's day... thought of The Word as a person of God, the same way Christians speak of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as "persons" to attempt to describe and contemplate the unknowable substance of Yehoveh.

So, it is with that kind of enormous gravitas and awe that those opening words of Hosea speak. He was being visited by God, in the form of The Word. Another revelation for us is that we are to understand that The Word came to Hosea at a specific time and place. It is a historical marker in time that this encounter is recorded and that Israel, especially, could relate to then and for centuries afterward. It is also fascinating that the list of kings this prophet of the Northern Kingdom gives us is actually a list of kings of the Southern Kingdom. Hosea was in no way cut off from the world around him or from having intimate knowledge of what was going on with the Hebrew sister kingdom of Judah. The only king of the North that Hosea mentions is Jeroboam II. When we look at the separate lists of the kings of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms side by side we see that the first Judean king he mentions is Uzziah, and the only king of Israel that he mentions, Jeroboam II, came into power within a year of one another. His list is historically accurate and the names properly line up.

Verse 2 has been interpreted in several different ways, but most literally (and ignoring English grammatic format) it reads something like "the beginning of Yehoveh speaking through Hosea". We must take this statement in light of what I just taught you about the 1st verse and the actual sense of term The Word as it meant when Hosea was written. The Word is **dabbar** in Hebrew; but here in verse 2 the term "speaking" uses a different form of the same root word that is **dibber**. **Dibber** means speech or talking. So, the particular manifestation of God's presence involved in this venture between God and Hosea is called The Word, and the work of The Word is to impart speech... Yehoveh's message... to Hosea. So, what Hosea receives is speech; and He receives it from a divine entity called The Word. It's not a dream and it's not a vision. It is audible speech in

some form; perhaps he hears it or perhaps it is as thoughts formed inside of Hosea's mind.

The scribe says that the first few words that The Word imparted to Hosea were just the "beginning" all he would eventually be told. It would continue for some undefined amount of time. If Hosea had a calendar on his wall and wore a wristwatch, he could have circled a day and recorded a time when the entire episode began. One can only imagine what Hosea was thinking when it started. Did he immediately understand what was happening? Was he just a regular guy, with an occupation or tradecraft, and suddenly God is talking to him? Or had he been a prophet for some years before this startling event? Can you imagine this happening in our time to yourself? Would you and others around you perhaps question your sanity? In modern times, no doubt, few would ever believe they were hearing directly from God (in the way Hosea was), and even fewer would dare to speak of it to others, because in the modern world that has been so infected by the atheistic European Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th century, anything mystical is usually dismissed as someone's fruitful imagination. But in Hosea's day, it would have been easier for him to accept it, and for those to whom he took God's message to believe it happened. So, if you wonder why prophets like Hosea don't seem to exist in our time or even in the last few centuries, maybe it's exactly for this reason. The more sophisticated we get the less we accept the mysterious because it is dubbed "not scientific". This, therefore, necessarily limits what God can tell us and who will listen.

The opening words of verse 2 were not so much information as instruction. The instruction is yet another controversial one that is less about how to translate the Hebrew to English, and more about how to understand what it means to impart.

CJB Hosea 1:2 *"Go, marry a whore, and have children with this whore; for the land is engaged in flagrant whoring, whoring away from ADONAI."*

If you have particularly delicate ears, Hosea is going to be a challenge for you. Sexual references and sexual relations are front and center, and no punches are pulled. Just remember that what you're reading and hearing is from God and not from some Hollywood script writer. It's tough. It's harsh. It's indelicate. But, it's how it was and so we're going to plow through it and not wince (too much).

The immediate question that is fiercely debated by Bible scholars is this: did God really tell Hosea to go and marry a whore? To literally search for a prostitute and marry her? The Hebrew word that is most often translated as whore, harlot, or prostitute is **zonah**. In the Old Testament, we find a few mentions of Israelites as prostitutes or committing prostitution. This is more often an expression or a metaphor, and is not meant literally. It is meant to accuse and indicate how immoral and unfaithful certain Israelites, or Israel as a whole, is behaving towards God. In this sense **zonah**, whore, is a metaphor to describe the unfaithful. Let's take a little detour to discuss this.

From the 30,000-foot view, we must understand that everything we read in Hosea about Israel and their illicit behavior and what God likens it to is based on a contract "signed" between God and Israel centuries earlier at Mt. Sinai. There, just a few weeks after delivering (redeeming) Israel from Egypt, God offered His redeemed people a covenant. At the core of it is what is called The Law or The Law of Moses or the Covenant of Moses or the Mt. Sinai Covenant (and a few more names that all point to the same transaction). At the foot of Mt. Sinai, the entire nation of the 12 tribes of Israel that exited Egypt together, along with a mixed multitude of gentile tag-alongs, were given the opportunity to enter into a special, one-of-a-kind relationship with The Creator of the Universe. God offered it to Moses, and Moses (as a Mediator) offered it to the people who responded:

CJB Exodus 19:8 *All the people answered as one, "Everything ADONAI has said, we will do." Moshe reported the words of the people to ADONAI.*

At that moment the covenant was agreed to by all parties and sealed up. The Covenant of Moses is much like a marriage contract, mainly because it is the joining of two parties together in a close and exclusive relationship. In fact, from the Exodus forward to the end of Revelation, God's relationship with His worshippers is likened to marriage whereby He is the husband and we are the wife. The Scriptures are full of metaphors, illustrations, figurative words and terms, parables, poetry that exaggerates for effect, and so on. So, hear this: we as God's Believers do NOT have a Hebrew marriage contract with God. Rather, the covenant we have with God (based on the Covenant of Moses) is LIKE a marriage contract in some ways. It has similarities worth exploring and sharing terms. And because marriage contracts and husbands and wives are tangible

visible things, we have a means to relate to them and then carry that over to a better understanding of our expected relationship with Yehoveh. However; a marriage contract and our covenant with God are not identical nor exhaustively the same things.

One of the literary devices that I left out of that short laundry list of devices I just mentioned is symbolism. Biblical symbolism can be a dicey thing to deal with. Some things in the Bible are deemed symbolic only because they are too difficult to deal with if taken literally; and other things that are intended as symbolic are instead taken literally and from that supposed literalness all kinds of strange doctrines are created. How do we tell which is which? There's no clearcut answer. It can be subjective and symbolism can usually only be identified by context. However; the necessary context that is invariably passed over, and thus causes us the greatest difficulties in interpretation, is the historical Jewish and Hebrew context... religious and cultural... that explains what certain words and actions meant to the people that were alive in the eras when it was spoken or written. This is all the more challenging to approach because the totality of the Bible was written over a span of around 1500 years. Hebrew society changed massively...and continually... during that long span of centuries. Even the Hebrew language evolved and so then did the use and meaning of certain words. Expressions were born, only to die off later. Idioms were created, and over time their meanings might be lost. Evolving societal realities gave the biblical authors new and different ways to express themselves; different from their even more ancient predecessors. The Bible (in original language and form) is given to us in the everyday language and background of the people who were alive at the time. Those who spoke those thoughts and those who wrote them down, didn't do so with the thought of far future eras and a planet full of people practicing hundreds of future cultures. Therefore, it is up to us to research, to dig, and to study just what those inspired words meant to the people who uttered them and were the first who heard them. And then apply the spirit and the intent to the 21st century (or even beyond, should God tarry) and to our particular culture... whatever culture that might be.

With that understanding, here's the bottom line: symbolism is at the heart of what Hosea is being told to do. But symbolism doesn't mean that something is not also tangibly done. Most things in the Scriptures that are symbolic also have

a strongly literal side to them. Often times the literal acting out was for the present, while the symbolic meaning of it was for a later time (although the people who wrote it had no idea that would be the case). Hosea was instructed to literally marry, and to have children with this woman, and to give these children specified names. But, the language and the symbolic meaning of what he was instructed to do is the point; not the fact that he also actually did these strange things.

So, knowing now that marriage and marriage terms are commonly used metaphors throughout the Bible to best illustrate the covenant relationship between God and His people, then faithfulness to one another (and thereby faithfulness to the covenant terms) is the core dynamic of marriage. Vows are undertaken... just as Israel vowed at Mt. Sinai before the Creator to do all that He said to do (meaning all that the Law of Moses instructed). Obligations are set down; blessings for complying with the terms, and curses for breaking the terms. The parties are NOT necessarily equal in standing or placed in equivalent roles. Marriage is a strong bond with actual legal standing in every society on earth or in history. Thus, we can call this legal bond of human-to-human marriage a covenant between man and wife; male to female. Commitment and exclusivity are the foundation stones of marriage; prostitution is the very opposite. Prostitution is no commitment. Prostitution is immoral promiscuousness and involves nothing one could call a relationship. But should prostitution occur within marriage, then it means that unfaithfulness has entered in and the bond is weakened or broken. A female prostitute (and that is really all the Bible envisions because that's how it was in those times) ... a **zonah**... was the definition of false-hearted and untrustworthy. She bore no loyalty to anyone, and for a price was willing to share her affections with everyone. Most of the time in the Old Testament that we run across the term **zonah**, it is meant metaphorically and not literally... but sometimes it is literal. It is with this symbolic and metaphorical meaning of **zonah**...whore... that we need to understand what Hosea was told to do and what the symbolism of the term prostitute was meant to communicate.

The last words of verse 2 confirms this understanding that I'm asking you to accept about the Book of Hosea as a whole.

CJB Hosea 1:2 ...for the land is engaged in flagrant whoring, whoring away from ADONAI."

So, there we have it. Hosea marrying a prostituting woman is to be symbolically equated to what Ephraim/Israel as a corporate community has been doing in their relationship with Adonai... God. The Northern Kingdom as a whole is, in God's eyes, behaving as an unfaithful wife to Him; a wife who has entered herself into prostitution. They have broken the covenant. So now the question comes: was this woman that Hosea is to marry actually a practicing prostitute before he married her? Or might not only had she **been** a prostitute but **continued** in her profession even after the marriage? I will tell you up front that while we will confront this issue, it's not as important as some Bible scholars make it out to be. No matter which scenario this might have intended doesn't have any real effect on the meaning or the direction of God's message to Hosea, and Hosea's to Israel.

This is the subject we'll open with next time.