

The Prophetic Wisdom of Hosea

LESSON
ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO
HOSEA



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Lesson One

An Introduction to Hosea

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever known someone who just won't listen to wise counsel? They foolishly reject what others say and, as a result, they stumble again and again. In many ways, this is what happened during the ministry of the prophet Hosea. Hosea brought God's word to his people over several decades. And even though his prophecies proved to be true every step along the way, God's people suffered time and again because they refused to listen to him. Still, Hosea didn't give up. Toward the end of his life, the Holy Spirit led Hosea to create a collection of his prophecies that we now call the book of Hosea. He designed his book to give God's people wisdom for the challenges they faced in their day. And as a divinely inspired book, the book of Hosea also imparts wisdom to God's people in every age, including our own.

This is the first lesson in our series on *The Prophetic Wisdom of Hosea*, and we've entitled it, "An Introduction to Hosea." In this lesson, we'll explore a number of introductory issues related to Hosea's ministry and the book that now bears his name.

Our introduction to Hosea will divide into two main parts. We'll look first at the background of the prophet Hosea and his book. Then we'll introduce an overview of the basic content and structure of the book. Let's begin by exploring several dimensions of the background of Hosea.

BACKGROUND

Hosea's prophecies were inspired by the Holy Spirit, so they have unquestionable authority over God's people throughout history. But his prophecies *first* addressed ancient Israelites and the circumstances that they faced. As we'll see in this lesson, Hosea's ministry spanned several decades. So, the more we understand the background of Hosea's developing circumstances, the better we'll be able to grasp and apply his prophecies to our own day.

Before we approach these matters, we need to distinguish two interconnected historical settings, two "worlds" as it were. The first setting, which we'll call "that world," covers the decades of Hosea's prophetic ministry in which he received and delivered revelations from God. But the second historical setting, which we'll call "their world," takes place later in Hosea's life. In this second setting, Hosea selected and wrote down some of his prophecies to impact the lives of those who first received his book.

We'll approach this twofold background in two steps. First, we'll explore "that world," or the full range of the prophet Hosea's ministry. And second, we'll examine "their world," or the setting in which the book of Hosea was written. Let's begin with the ministry of the prophet Hosea.

PROPHET

Around the time of Hosea's prophetic ministry, a number of nations played important roles in the history of God's people. In 930 B.C., the united kingdom of David and Solomon divided into two kingdoms: the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. Both of these kingdoms figured prominently in Hosea's prophetic service. At that time, God's people also interacted with other nations like Syria and Egypt. But above all, Hosea focused his ministry on events involving the Assyrian Empire. In Hosea's day, Assyria became a powerful empire that extended its influence in every direction, including the lands of Israel and Judah. As we're about to see, Hosea's ministry began in the northern kingdom of Israel, nearly two hundred years after Israel had separated from Judah.

Living in northern Israel during this period of history was difficult for anyone who sought to be faithful to God. And this was especially true for a man like Hosea — a man God had called to be his prophet. Hosea witnessed firsthand how Israel's leaders had turned their kingdom away from the Lord and trusted in alliances with other nations and their false gods. The priests of Israel mixed the worship of God with drunken, lascivious fertility rituals associated with idolatry. The rich grew very rich, but the poor were so poor that they often had to devote their wives and daughters to temple prostitution just to earn enough to eat. And as Hosea faced these heartbreaking conditions in northern Israel, God called him to prophesy — to bring a message from Israel's divine King that very few wanted to hear. God was about to pour out curses on the kingdom of Israel through the Assyrian Empire.

As we consider the ministry of the prophet Hosea, we'll look at four interrelated issues: the time of his ministry, its location, Hosea's changing circumstances, and the purpose or goal of his prophetic ministry. Let's begin by focusing on the time when Hosea served as God's prophet.

Time

Similar to a number of other Old Testament prophetic books, Hosea's opening verse, in 1:1, introduces us to the time of Hosea's ministry. Listen to how the book begins:

The word of the Lord that came to Hosea, the son of Beer, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel (Hosea 1:1).

This list of kings gives us an orientation toward the beginning and the end of Hosea's ministry. On the one side, it tells us that Hosea's service began in the days of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam of Israel. This Jeroboam is usually referred to as Jeroboam II, in distinction from the earlier first king of northern Israel, Jeroboam I.

Uzziah — or Azariah as he was also called — ruled in Judah from around 792 to 740 B.C. And Jeroboam II reigned from approximately 793 until 753 B.C. Most

interpreters rightly suggest that the circumstances mentioned in Hosea's earliest prophecies reflect conditions in Israel during the last decade of Jeroboam II's reign. So, it's fair to say that Hosea's ministry began sometime near 760 B.C. This makes Hosea one of the earliest prophets, if not *the* earliest prophet, with a biblical book devoted to his ministry.

On the other side, the list of kings in 1:1 also gives us an orientation toward the end of Hosea's prophetic service. Hosea ministered throughout the reigns of Judah's kings Uzziah, Jotham and Ahaz, and he ended his ministry during the reign of Hezekiah.

After a period of co-regency with his father, Hezekiah was the sole regent of Judah from around 715 B.C. to 686 B.C. Now, we can't be sure how long Hosea lived into Hezekiah's reign, but if he began his ministry near 760 B.C. at 20 years old, then he would have been 94 years old in 686 B.C. So, it's likely that the end of Hosea's ministry occurred sometime before 686 B.C.

With this time of the prophet Hosea's ministry in mind, let's turn to the location where he served as God's prophet.

Location

The opening verse of Hosea gives us an important clue as to where our prophet ministered when it notes that Hosea served during the reign of Jeroboam II. The mention of Jeroboam II reveals two factors about Hosea's location. On the one side, it indicates that Hosea's ministry began in the kingdom of Israel, rather than in Judah.

We can tell that the prophet Hosea ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel through various ways and passages in the book itself. For instance, in the superscription of the book, in 1:1, we read the list of kings contemporary with Hosea when the word of the Lord came to him during their reigns. One of them was king Jeroboam the son of Joash, or Jeroboam II, who was one of the kings of Israel. This shows that the ministry of Hosea was associated with the kingdom of Israel. Also, throughout the book we see the Lord directly addressing Israel. He talks about the coming judgment against Israel, and exposes the deeds of the people of Israel because of their sins. For example, in 1:4, God said that he would put an end to the kingdom of Israel. So, the direct speech or message from the Lord to Israel, in addition to mentioning King Jeroboam, king of Israel, are indications to show that Hosea's ministry was associated with the northern kingdom of Israel.

— Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

This orientation toward the northern kingdom appears in many ways in the book of Hosea, but we should mention two important factors. First, the Hebrew dialect of our book strongly suggests that Hosea was a native of the northern kingdom. A number of

recent studies have noted similarities between the Hebrew grammar of Hosea and Phoenician — a west-Semitic dialect spoken primarily in the northern coastal regions.

Second, it's especially telling that the majority of prophecies in the book of Hosea focus on Israel rather than on Judah. The book explicitly refers to the northern kingdom around 81 times, using terms like "Israel," "the Israelites," — literally "sons of Israel" — and "Ephraim," a name Hosea often used to refer to the kingdom of Israel. By contrast, our book mentions Judah by name only 15 times. Hosea was especially concerned with events that took place in the northern kingdom.

On the other side, we can learn another feature of the location of Hosea's ministry when we note that 1:1 only mentions Jeroboam II and omits six other kings of northern Israel who reigned within Hosea's lifetime.

Following Jeroboam II, kings Zechariah, Shallum, Menahem, Pekahiah, Pekah and Hoshea reigned in rapid succession until Israel's capital city of Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. It's likely that these kings were omitted from the opening verse of our book because Hosea migrated to Judah near the end of Jeroboam II's reign in 753 B.C. Of course, it's possible that Hosea travelled back at times to the northern kingdom to deliver some of his prophecies. It's also possible that Hosea's disciples or friends delivered his prophecies in the north on his behalf. But whatever the case, the lack of recognition for Israel's other kings in 1:1 supports the view that Hosea himself resided in northern Israel only until late in the reign of Jeroboam II. Then, either because of political upheavals or because of resistance to his prophecies, he took up a new residence in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Now that we've looked at the time and location of the prophet Hosea's ministry, we should touch on some of the circumstances that he addressed through the decades that he served as God's prophet.

Circumstances

Many students of Scripture are unfamiliar with the period of biblical history associated with Hosea's ministry. Of course, the historical books of Kings and Chronicles, prophetic books like Micah and Isaiah, and archeological discoveries tell us a great deal about this period. So, there are far too many events for us to mention them all here. But we can't move forward without a basic awareness of some of the more significant events that took place in Israel and Judah during the decades of Hosea's service.

Imagine for a moment that you are Hosea starting your ministry in the northern kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II. You trust in God, but everywhere you look, the king, the priests and the wealthy nobles of Israel have turned your nation into a nightmare. They worship the false gods of other nations. They fill the country with violence. They force the sons of the poor to serve their misguided military campaigns. And they pressure the wives and daughters of the poor to practice prostitution at their fertility worship centers. All the while, the leaders are still claiming to be faithful to God, and they point to their wealth and power as proof that God approves of all that they do.

Now, Hosea knew that long ago Moses had warned that God would not tolerate this kind of rebellion forever. He would send troubles to humble his people. Moses even warned that God would raise up cruel and wicked Gentile nations to discipline them. And God revealed to Hosea that this was precisely what he was about to do to Israel.

As troubling as it was for Hosea to learn these things about his homeland, later on he also faced similar circumstances in Judah. As the decades passed, the leaders of his adopted home in the southern kingdom fell into the same kind of rebellion as their northern neighbors. They formed alliances with other nations, treated others unjustly, compelled their young men to fight foolish wars, and encouraged idolatry, even in Jerusalem. And as Hosea witnessed these things, God revealed to him that the people of Judah would be brought to their knees as well.

Broadly speaking, we can refer to the troubles that Hosea predicted as the period of the “Assyrian judgment.” During this time, the primary instrument of God’s discipline was the Assyrian Empire. Assyria began to play this role in biblical history when the great emperor Tiglath-Pileser III rose to his throne in 744 B.C. And, in one way or another, the Assyrians remained a significant factor in the history of God’s people until Nineveh — Assyria’s capital city — fell to the Babylonians in 612 B.C.

Towards the end or just after Jeroboam II’s reign ... Tiglath-Pileser III became the king of Assyria. Now, Assyria was the superpower in those days that was threatening the existence of Judah and Israel and Syria, which was to the north of Israel. And so the prophecies in Hosea that prophesied cursings and subjugation to Israel because of its disobedience, Tiglath-Pileser III was the executor. And also after Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser was the next king, and these two men, Tiglath-Pileser III and Shalmaneser, became the rod of God's justice in which, or by which, he executed his punishments on Israel as he had promised he would do in Hosea.

— Dr. Larry Trotter

As we’ll see in this lesson, the content of Hosea’s book orients his prophetic ministry toward three major events that took place during the period of Assyrian judgment. The earliest prophecies in Hosea’s book are about the first event: Assyria’s rise to prominence when Tiglath-Pileser III became emperor in 744 B.C. Hosea also recorded prophecies about Assyria’s invasion of Israel in 732 B.C. And beyond this, Hosea included prophecies about Assyria’s invasion of Israel ten years later in 722 B.C., when the Assyrians utterly destroyed the kingdom of Israel. Let’s unpack the circumstances Hosea faced as he prophesied about all three of these events. We’ll start with the first phase of Hosea’s ministry when he received prophecies about Assyria’s rise to prominence in 744 B.C.

As we’ve just said, 744 B.C. was the year that Tiglath-Pileser III became king of Assyria and asserted his authority over Israel and Judah. Hosea lived in the northern kingdom of Israel prior to this time, and he witnessed how king Jeroboam II brought Israel to the zenith of its prosperity. But he also saw how the king, priests and other

leaders proved to be disloyal to God by promoting idolatry and injustice. And as a result, Hosea warned of curses from God that would come through the Assyrian Empire.

During this same period, according to the books of Kings and Chronicles, the kingdom of Judah also came under the rule of Tiglath-Pileser III. But, unlike Israel's leaders, Uzziah king of Judah ruled as a righteous king in one very important way. While many of the people in Judah practiced idolatry, Uzziah himself worshiped only the Lord and exclusively promoted the worship of the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. So, as far as we know, God revealed no accusations against Judah to Hosea at this time and gave no warnings of curses against Judah.

The next phase of Hosea's ministry focused on Assyria's invasion of Israel in 732 B.C. When Hosea delivered his earlier prophecies about this invasion, Tiglath-Pileser III continued to exert political control over the kingdom of Israel. Kings Menahem and Pekahiah promoted idolatry and injustice and relied on their alliance with Assyria for security. Now, like most political alliances in ancient times, this relationship also entailed acknowledging the gods of their Assyrian overlords. And as a result of these disloyalties to God, Hosea warned that God would pour out curses on Israel through the impending Assyrian aggression of 732 B.C.

The book of Kings tells us that at this time Uzziah and his son Jotham ruled Judah as righteous kings. Many people continued to worship other gods at the high places, but Uzziah and Jotham neither practiced nor endorsed idolatry. So, during this time, Hosea still offered no warnings of curses against Judah.

Now, when Hosea received his later prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C., conditions in Israel had only grown worse. King Pekah continued in idolatry and injustice. He submitted to Assyrian control, but when Tiglath-Pileser III was preoccupied with troubles elsewhere, Pekah tried to free himself from paying heavy tributes to Assyria. He formed an alliance with Syria and Syria's gods — an alliance often called the "Syrian-Israelite coalition." And Pekah and his Syrian counterpart invaded Judah in an attempt to force Judah to join their rebellion against Assyria. As you can imagine, Hosea prophesied that God would bring curses against Israel for this aggression. And a short time later, in 732 B.C., Tiglath-Pileser III destroyed the kingdom of Syria and subjugated the kingdom of Israel.

Sadly, as this invasion grew near, a critical change took place in Judah. Just before the Syrian-Israelite coalition attacked Judah, Ahaz rose to the throne. Unlike his grandfather and father, Ahaz rejected God and promoted idolatry and injustice. Judah endured attacks from the Syrian-Israelite coalition and from the Edomites and the Philistines. But rather than turning to the Lord for help, Ahaz sought protection by reaffirming Judah's alliance with the Assyrians and their gods. And because of Ahaz' rebellion against God, Hosea prophesied that God's curses were coming against Judah as well.

This brings us to the time in Hosea's ministry when he prophesied about Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. — the invasion that led to the fall of Israel's capital city of Samaria and the exile of most of the population of Israel. Hosea's earlier prophecies about 722 B.C. focused on events in Israel during the early reign of Hoshea, the king that Assyria had placed on Israel's throne. Hoshea perpetuated idolatry and injustice in Israel and was faithful to his alliance with the Assyrians and their gods for a time. In response,

Hosea warned that new curses were coming to Israel through a second major Assyrian invasion — the invasion in 722 B.C.

Meanwhile in Judah, Ahaz continued to violate God's covenant by promoting idolatry and injustice. He still refused to rely on the Lord, and sought safety from his enemies by trusting in his alliance with Assyria and Assyria's gods. And as a result, Hosea warned again that great curses from God were also coming against Judah.

Hosea's later prophecies about the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. concentrated on Hoshea's continuing promotion of idolatry and injustice in Israel. Now, when Tiglath-Pileser III died, Hoshea saw a chance to be free of paying tributes to Assyria. But rather than turning to God for protection, he made an alliance with Egypt and Egypt's gods. Hosea predicted that these sins would soon bring God's curses. And, in fulfillment of these prophecies, Tiglath-Pileser's son, Shalmaneser V, took control of Samaria and forced Hoshea to pay heavy tributes. Just a few years later, in 722 B.C., the Assyrian king, Sargon II, brought about the complete destruction of Samaria and drove most of the population of Israel into exile.

During these years, in Judah kings Ahaz and Hezekiah were co-regents. Early on, Hezekiah continued his father's alliance with Assyria and its gods. But he soon broke with Assyria. Unfortunately, Hezekiah relied on the strength of his army, his fortified cities and an alliance with Egypt for protection against Assyria, rather than trusting in the Lord. And as a result, Hosea warned, once again, that God would bring curses on Judah, curses that came many years later through Assyrian aggression.

Unless you've spent a lot of time studying this period of biblical history, it's easy to be confused by all of these names and dates. But knowing that these events took place during Hosea's ministry is crucial to understanding the book of Hosea. So, as difficult as it may be, it's very important to distinguish Hosea's prophecies about Assyria's rise to prominence in 744 B.C., from prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C., as well as from prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. As we make these distinctions, we'll be able to see how Hosea spent decades of ministry addressing the challenges that God's people faced in each of these periods.

Having touched on the time, location and changing circumstances associated with the ministry of the prophet Hosea, we should consider Hosea's purpose. As a prophet, what did he try to accomplish by declaring God's revelations?

Purpose

We've looked at this question in more detail in other series, but in general terms, God called Hosea — just as he calls all of his people in every age — to do his part in spreading God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. And as Hosea knew, God administered the spread of his kingdom by the policies he established in his covenants. Hosea was well aware that God had already ratified his kingdom policies in five major covenants, beginning with all nations in Adam and Noah, and then in special covenants with Abraham, Moses and David. Each of these covenants had particular emphases, but every successive covenant incorporated and built on the policies of the previous covenants.

Like other prophets, Hosea had the special role of serving as God's emissary or ambassador who announced how God was going to implement these covenant policies.

All of God's covenants established three basic dynamics of God's interactions with his people that shaped the contours of Hosea's ministry. For our purposes here, we'll just give a brief overview. First, in one way or another all of God's covenants were initiated and sustained by divine benevolence, or displays of God's goodness and kindness. Second, all of God's covenants clarified the kinds of human loyalty that God required from his people in grateful response to his benevolence. And third, all divine covenants entailed two kinds of consequences that his people should expect: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

So, God wanted Israelites to remain faithful in the covenant with him. And he promised that if they would stay faithful in the covenant with God, things would go well with them. But if they violate his covenant, something wrong will happen to them. This is the same even in our lives. If we remain faithful to God's covenant, God will be with us, will lead us, and will continue to work in us.

— Pastor Micah Ngussa

As a prophetic emissary of God's covenants, Hosea received revelations of how God had determined to direct these covenant dynamics. Then he delivered these revelations to God's people. If we consider Hosea in terms of events that took place during his years of ministry, we could define his prophetic purpose in this way: Hosea's purpose was to declare how God intended to implement the covenant dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses in relation to Assyria's rise in 744 B.C., the Assyrian invasion of 732 B.C. and the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C.

Now that we've looked at the background of the *prophet* Hosea, we're ready to turn to the background of the *book* of Hosea.

BOOK

Hosea and his disciples may very well have written down a lot of his prophecies throughout the decades of his ministry. But it was near the end of his life, during Hezekiah's reign, when Hosea finally collected and arranged his prophecies into the book that we now call Hosea. When we keep this in view, we gain many insights into the book itself.

So far, we've concentrated on what we've called "that world" — the various times during the Assyrian judgment when Hosea received revelations from God for both Israel and Judah. At this point, we'll turn to "their world" — the time when Hosea chose and arranged these prophecies into the book of Hosea to provide Judah's leaders with wisdom for what was ahead.

This distinction between that world and their world is crucial for understanding the book of Hosea because Hosea actually composed his book *after* the kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 722 B.C. So, even though Hosea's book had important implications for the survivors of northern Israel, he primarily wrote it for the leaders of Judah. As we'll see, Hosea wrote down prophecies from throughout his ministry to give Hezekiah and Judah's other leaders a path of wisdom to follow as they faced the crisis of Assyria's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.

To see how this is true, we'll follow our previous discussion and look at four background features of the book of Hosea: the time of its composition, the location where it was written, the circumstances surrounding its composition, and the purpose of the book. Let's begin with the time when our book was written.

Time

From the outset, we should mention that critical scholars typically believe that the book of Hosea went through a number of major redactions that ended very late — either late into the Babylonian exile or even after the Babylonian exile. As a result, most critical interpreters believe that only some portions of our book actually came from Hosea himself. Instead, they argue that redactors or editors added much of their own material to the book long after Hosea's death. But we have to remember that critical interpreters come to these conclusions in large part because they deny that Hosea received supernatural revelations from God about the future.

By contrast, evangelicals believe in the supernatural inspiration of Hosea's prophecy. So, we affirm that the entire book of Hosea actually represents what Hosea himself received from God. And for this reason, evangelicals usually settle on a much earlier date for the book's completion.

From an evangelical point of view, 1:1 establishes the earliest possible date for the completion of our book when it mentions Hezekiah, king of Judah. It's obvious that Hezekiah would not have been included in this list of kings had he not already been king by the time our book was written. So, it's safe to say that the earliest possible date for the completion of the book of Hosea was sometime during Hezekiah's sole regency which began in 715 B.C. and ended in 686 B.C.

We can't be absolutely sure as to when Hosea finally composed his book, or brought it to its final form as we now have it in the Bible. But there is an event in Hosea's life, toward the end of his life, in fact, during the reign of the last king under whom he served, and that king's name was Hezekiah... Now, Hezekiah is known for all kinds of things, but in biblical history, perhaps the most important thing, or the most noted thing that he experienced, was the invasion of the Assyrian Sennacherib. Sennacherib literally destroyed Judah. People ran for their lives, and you can read about it in Micah 1, the devastation that he brought to the land of Judah. But he went further than that. He actually surrounded and laid siege to Jerusalem... The

invasion of Sennacherib in Judah and the surrounding of Jerusalem, laying siege to the city of God, the City of David, the capital of the world, was of such great importance that it brought everything to a climax in Judah's history at that moment. Everything was at stake. Was Jerusalem going to fall? Well, Isaiah prophesied during that time, and Hosea probably wrote his book during that time as well, because the last king that's mentioned in the book of Hosea, at the very first verse — 1:1 — is Hezekiah.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

We can also set the latest possible date for the final composition of Hosea before Hosea's death, most likely late in Hezekiah's reign. Now, critical interpreters are right to point out that Hosea probably employed his disciples to help compose his book. Here and there we find evidence that Hosea relied on his disciples, much like Jeremiah relied on his disciple Baruch in Jeremiah 36:4.

Consider, for instance, that Hosea 1:2-9 is biographical. It describes Hosea's actions in the third person: "*Hosea* said this." "*He* did that." But 3:1-3 is autobiographical. Hosea's actions are described in the first person: "*I* did this." "The Lord said to *me*." This shift from biography to autobiography probably reflects the fact that Hosea's disciples were involved in the composition of his book.

But contrary to what critical interpreters have assumed, there's no positive evidence in the Scriptures that disciples edited Hosea's words or added new materials after his death. And even if Hosea's disciples did, in fact, finish Hosea's book after his death, they didn't deviate from the revelations that God had actually given to Hosea. The title of the book, in 1:1, plainly states that the entire book contains, "The word of the Lord that came to Hosea."

For these reasons, we can rightly conclude that our book was composed during the reign of Hezekiah. And this means that the book of Hosea was likely completed sometime before 686 B.C. or so, when Hosea had almost certainly died.

Along with establishing this range of time for the book of Hosea's completion, we should also specify the location where it was written.

Location

As we've already mentioned, it's likely that Hosea migrated to Judah sometime near the end of Jeroboam II's reign. And knowing that he lived into the reign of Hezekiah, after the kingdom of Israel had fallen in 722 B.C., we can be confident that Hosea composed his book in Judah.

The book of Hosea itself acknowledges as much in 1:1. This verse lists Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah — kings of Judah — before it names Jeroboam II of the kingdom of Israel. By listing Judah's kings first, Hosea deliberately acknowledged that he wrote his book under the authority of David's dynasty in Judah. So, although Hosea's

prophecies focus primarily on the northern kingdom of Israel, Hosea wrote his *book* in the southern kingdom of Judah.

Now that we've looked at the time and location of the book of Hosea's composition, let's turn to the circumstances facing Hosea and those in Judah who first received his book.

Circumstances

As we mentioned earlier, when Hosea composed his book, his adopted homeland in the kingdom of Judah was dealing with its own threat from Assyria. In 701 B.C., during the reign of Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria invaded Judah. So, although most of Hosea's prophecies were about Assyrian judgment against northern Israel, Hosea devoted his *book* to guiding Judah as Assyrian judgment came upon them. For this reason, we need to be familiar with events surrounding Sennacherib's invasion.

The historical records of Kings and Chronicles, as well as the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah, form a complex picture of Hezekiah's reign. Early on, Hezekiah led reforms in Judah and also fortified Judah so that when Sennacherib, the new king of Assyria, took his throne, Hezekiah refused to pay tribute. But as the threat of Assyrian reprisal grew, Hezekiah failed to rely on God. Rather, he sought protection through an alliance with Egypt and Egypt's gods. But his efforts were in vain. Sennacherib invaded Judah, destroying many cities, towns and villages, and even laid siege to Jerusalem. But just when it seemed that Jerusalem would fall, Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, and the prophet Isaiah reassured him of God's deliverance. As we read in 2 Kings 19:33-34:

By the way that [Sennacherib] came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David (2 Kings 19:33-34).

Mercifully, Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled. God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from Sennacherib.

One of the most important historical events to happen in the history of Israel was when Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came to defeat Hezekiah, king of Judah... He comes against Judah, and he takes basically all of the cities of Judah. There's really one city left, and that's Jerusalem. And what he does is he basically says, "Your God is like every other god. I will take out the Lord God of Israel just like I took out all the other gods." He talks in a very arrogant way against the Lord God of Heaven, and God says, "I will show Sennacherib my power." And so, what he does is he supernaturally delivers Israel, and what he does is he smites the Assyrian army and 185,000 Assyrian troops will die. He will hear a report of, probably, a rebellion going on back in his land, and he'll have to go back to Assyria. And we know,

even from Assyrian annals, that they'll talk about caging up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage, but they never say they defeat him. Now remember, in Assyrian literature, it's pure propaganda. They never admit defeat at all, so by just saying they have him caged up like a bird, they are really admitting they did not defeat him. So, even the Assyrian records, they admit this.

— Dr. Russell T. Fuller

It would be difficult to overstate how much Jerusalem's deliverance demonstrated God's favor toward the kingdom of Judah. But as wonderful as it was, Hezekiah's troubles weren't over. After Sennacherib returned home, Hezekiah still feared further aggression from Assyria. Sadly, rather than relying on God, Hezekiah returned to his old ways and sought another alliance, not with Egypt, but with the rising kingdom of Babylon. Hezekiah's refusal to trust God after the great deliverance of Jerusalem displayed a profound disloyalty to God. And the prophet Isaiah immediately threatened that the royal treasures of Judah would be taken to Babylon. Listen to Isaiah's words in 2 Kings 20:17-18:

Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who shall be born to you, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon (2 Kings 20:17-18).

Unfortunately, when Hezekiah heard these words from Isaiah, he didn't repent of his disloyalty to God. Rather, he simply responded with relief that this judgment against Judah would not come in his own day.

Hezekiah's failures to be loyal to God before and after Jerusalem's deliverance in 701 B.C. were so momentous that they were likely to have motivated Hosea to compose his book. On the one side, it's possible that Hosea wrote his book sometime before Jerusalem's deliverance from Sennacherib. Sennacherib's attacks and his siege on Jerusalem witnessed a flurry of prophetic activity. And it's quite possible that God called Hosea to write his book during this time to address Hezekiah's failures as Sennacherib advanced and laid siege to Jerusalem.

On the other side, it's also possible that Hosea composed his book soon after Jerusalem's deliverance. As we mentioned, even though God had delivered Jerusalem, Hezekiah failed to remain faithful to God, and instead sought after an alliance with Babylon. And Hezekiah's disloyalty to God jeopardized the future of Judah. So, it's very likely that Hosea wrote his book either to address the crisis before or the crisis after Jerusalem's deliverance from Sennacherib.

With the time, location and circumstances of the final composition of the book of Hosea in mind, it's not difficult to understand the book's overarching purpose. Happily, we're not left to speculate because Hosea himself explicitly revealed the goal he had in mind.

Purpose

In Hosea 14:9, the last verse in our book, Hosea summarized his purpose in this way:

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are right; and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them (Hosea 14:9).

This verse stands apart from the verses that precede it, and it closes the entire book with final instructions for those who first received it. Hosea called for his original audience in Judah to become “wise” and “discerning” by believing that “the ways of the Lord are right.” In other words, Hosea hoped that Judah would gain wisdom from his collection of prophecies. He wanted them to view their circumstances in light of the fact that “the upright” — those who receive God’s blessings — walk in the Lord’s ways. But “transgressors” — those who receive God’s judgment — foolishly “stumble in them.”

Although elements of Israel’s wisdom traditions appear in the writings of other prophetic books, Hosea’s bold call to wisdom is unusual. But Hosea’s attention to wisdom fits well with the days of Hezekiah. We know from Scripture that Hezekiah associated himself with men who were well versed in Israel’s wisdom traditions. In fact, Proverbs 25:1 introduces chapters 25–29 of Proverbs as the “proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.” Apparently, these “men of Hezekiah” were a highly respected company of wise men associated with Hezekiah’s court. And it’s quite possible that Hosea’s closing call for wisdom appealed directly to Hezekiah and the wise men of his court. In this light, we can summarize the purpose of Hosea’s book in this way:

The book of Hosea called the leaders of Judah to gain wisdom from what God had revealed throughout Hosea’s ministry as they faced the challenges of Sennacherib’s invasion.

As this summary suggests, our book was not designed primarily to make specific predictions of future events. Rather, Hosea composed his book to call the leaders of Judah to follow the path of wisdom in Hezekiah’s day. Hezekiah and his court were to learn from what God had revealed throughout Hosea’s ministry and lead Judah through the challenges of Sennacherib’s invasion. Both before and just after Jerusalem’s deliverance from Sennacherib, the leaders of Judah desperately needed instruction in wisdom, and Hosea’s book provided it for them.

So far in our introduction to Hosea, we’ve looked at the background of the prophet and his book. Now, let’s turn to an overview of the content and structure of the book of Hosea.

CONTENT & STRUCTURE

Unfortunately, many evangelicals tend to overlook the historical setting in which Hosea first received his prophecies. They also tend to focus on smaller units of the book, as if they stand apart from each other. To be sure, these ahistorical and atomistic approaches have yielded many insights into the book of Hosea. But to add to these insights, we'll pursue a different strategy. We'll see that the historical settings of Hosea's ministry are crucial to understanding his prophecies. And rather than focusing on smaller units in isolation from each other, we'll explore the logical connections among larger units throughout Hosea's book. This strategy will help us to see more clearly how Hosea designed his book to give wisdom to those in Judah who first received it. And it will also help us to see how we are to learn wisdom from the book of Hosea today.

Put yourself in Hosea's place again. Unlike some other prophets who had relatively short ministries, Hosea received revelations from God for more than 60 years or so — from the last decade of Jeroboam II's reign to the reign of Hezekiah. Over these decades, God disclosed many things to him, probably much more than what appears in the fourteen short chapters of his book.

To understand how Hosea formed his book, we must keep in mind that God didn't reveal all of Hosea's prophecies at the same time. As we've already explained, God gave Hosea revelations as the kingdom of Israel faced Assyria's rise to power in 744 B.C., Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. and Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. If we fail to keep these different historical settings in mind, it will appear that Hosea contradicted himself on a number of occasions, especially in his prophecies about Judah. But in reality, we'll see that Hosea's prophetic outlooks changed over time because he addressed changing circumstances.

Now, as important as it is to recognize the chronological arrangement of the book of Hosea, we must also note that Hosea arranged his prophecies topically. We saw earlier in this lesson that 1:1 is the title of our book and was designed to introduce the full timeline of Hosea's ministry. And 14:9 ends our book with a closure that summarizes Hosea's overarching purpose of calling God's people to gain wisdom from his book. The content of these bookends indicates that they were created as Hosea put his book together around the time of Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C. But between these bookends, the main body of Hosea consists of three large divisions that have topical emphases.

The first division, in 1:2–3:5, emphasizes judgment and hope from God. These first chapters present the earliest prophecies that Hosea received during the reign of Jeroboam II — prophecies that addressed Assyria's rise in 744 B.C. Hosea carefully chose and arranged these early prophecies to present balanced outlooks of the curses God had determined to pour out on his people and the blessings they would receive in the future.

The second division, in 4:1–9:9, emphasizes unfolding judgment from God. Unlike the first division, these prophecies come from later stages of Hosea's ministry, when Hosea received revelations about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. and Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. These chapters focus exclusively on the topic of God's judgment. And they highlight how God's judgments increased in severity throughout these phases of Hosea's ministry.

The third division, in 9:10–14:8, focuses especially on unfolding hope from God. This last major division also consists of revelations that Hosea received in anticipation of Assyria’s invasion in 732 B.C. and Assyria’s invasion in 722 B.C. But this division gives special attention to the topic of hope, the hope that God revealed for the future of his people throughout these phases of Hosea’s ministry.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of these historical and topical arrangements for the interpretation of the book of Hosea. In many respects, they are like keys that unlock the wisdom Hosea sought to impart to those who first received his book during the reign of Hezekiah.

We’ll look more closely at Hosea’s wisdom in our next lesson, but for now it will be helpful to introduce the content and structure of each major division of our book. Let’s begin with the first division on judgment and hope from God in 1:2–3:5. These early chapters in our book carefully balance a focus on the curses coming to God’s people with the blessings of God that will follow.

JUDGMENT AND HOPE (1:2–3:5)

As we’ve already mentioned, these opening chapters represent Hosea’s ministry in the days of Jeroboam II, when Hosea received prophecies about Assyria’s rise to prominence in 744 B.C. But how do we know that this is when Hosea received these revelations? Well, 1:2 says as much when it tells us that these chapters represent the time “when the Lord first spoke through Hosea.”

Other content of this division also confirms this early historical setting. In the first place, Hosea drew attention to the fact that as Israel enjoyed a time of great prosperity, they had fallen into idolatry and injustice. He also indicated that God had determined to bring curses through Assyrian dominance over Israel. These facts are consistent with the earliest phase of Hosea’s ministry.

In the second place, Hosea’s attention to Judah in this division also confirms that he received these prophecies in the first phase of his ministry. You’ll recall that during this period, Uzziah ruled as a righteous king in Judah. So, as we would expect, these chapters threaten no curses against the southern kingdom. On the contrary, this first division speaks of Judah very positively several times. For instance, listen to 1:6-7, where God drew a sharp contrast between Israel and Judah. Here God said:

I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God (Hosea 1:6-7).

Although the northern kingdom was about to suffer at the hands of the Assyrians, this passage makes it clear that, at this time, God would have mercy and save Judah. Hosea also mentioned Judah positively in 1:11 when he said:

The children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head (Hosea 1:11).

Here Hosea indicated that, as Israel endured the Assyrian judgment, their hope for God's blessings came from reunion with Judah under one king. In a similar way, in 3:5, Hosea said:

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days (Hosea 3:5).

This direct reference to “David their king” clearly reflects a favorable view of Judah because Judah was ruled by David’s royal house. Hosea’s thoroughly positive outlooks on Judah in the first division of his book confirm that he received these prophecies at the beginning of his ministry, when Uzziah led Judah in the ways of God.

With this orientation toward the first division of Hosea in mind, let’s briefly illustrate how these chapters emphasize the topic of judgment and hope from God. Hosea arranged these chapters into three main sections. The first section describes his earlier family experiences in 1:2–2:1.

Earlier Family Experiences (1:2–2:1)

This section divides into two main parts. The first part, in 1:2-9, relates a family narrative. It begins with God commanding Hosea to marry a woman named Gomer who practiced worship prostitution. When their children were born, Hosea was told to give them names that symbolized God’s impending judgments against Israel. This narrative drew attention to the trials that were coming to Israel through Assyria.

But in balance with this focus on God’s judgment, Hosea added a second part consisting of his hopeful prophetic reflections in 1:10–2:1. As just one example, in 1:10, Hosea revealed this:

The number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea ... And in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Children of the living God” (Hosea 1:10).

Although God was about to begin a time of judgment against Israel, Hosea added that there was still going to be a future of blessings for the descendants of the tribes of Israel.

The second section of judgment and hope from God focuses on God’s first lawsuit in the book of Hosea, in 2:2-23.

God’s Lawsuit (2:2-23)

These verses shift attention away from Hosea’s family experiences on earth to an inspired account of legal proceedings in the court of heaven. Now, in the Old Testament,

God frequently revealed his plans for the future by granting his prophets knowledge of legal deliberations that took place in his heavenly court. We speak of some of these revelations as “lawsuits” because they give rather full descriptions of the proceedings of God’s court. They often portray God on his throne, describe his summons of participants to court, report accusations against and interactions with the guilty, and declare pronouncements of judgment.

A number of the prophetic judgment speeches could be said to take the form of a covenant lawsuit. The idea of a covenant lawsuit is based on international diplomacy, and our best exemplars of it are in Hittite diplomatic letters that we have, where a Hittite diplomat goes to the vassal nation and prosecutes the terms of the treaty that was signed unto by the vassal king but is now being violated. The prophet assumes that sort of role. And there is a number of key passages that have a fuller exemplification of those elements. In its fullness, those elements would include a summons to the defendants and witnesses... Then there would be an element that follows that gives a history of the covenant relationship between the suzerain, the great king, and the vassal king, followed by an indictment of the vassal for violating the treaty, which in turn would be followed by either a threat or a sentence for that violation of the treaty.

— Dr. Douglas Gropp

This first heavenly lawsuit in the book of Hosea begins in 2:2 with God’s summons of Israel to court using these words:

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her (Hosea 2:2, NIV).

To modern audiences, this may seem like an odd summons to court. But the word “rebuke” here translates the Hebrew verb “*rib*” (רִיב.) This term was often used in prophetic books for a “legal contention” or “lawsuit” in the court of heaven. The “mother” in view was Samaria, the capital of the kingdom of Israel where Israel’s leaders resided. So, in effect, God summoned the people of Israel to enter a heavenly lawsuit against their leaders living in Samaria — a lawsuit over which God himself would preside.

Throughout this lawsuit, God alluded to ways in which Israel behaved like Hosea’s wife Gomer. Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea and brought trials on her children. And the leaders of Israel were unfaithful to God and brought trials to the kingdom of Israel. But in this lawsuit, Hosea didn’t simply report that God sentenced the kingdom of Israel to suffer the curses of his covenant. He *also* reported that God would one day woo Israel back to himself. After a time of judgment, God would restore Israel to himself and have mercy on the northern tribes.

Following this account of the heavenly court, Hosea ended his focus on divine judgment and hope with a description of his later family experiences in 3:1-5.

Later Family Experiences (3:1-5)

In parallel with the account of his earlier family experiences, Hosea began with an autobiographical family narrative in 3:1-3. His wife had returned to her former way of life as a worship prostitute, but God commanded Hosea to show love to her again. So, Hosea purchased Gomer and brought her home.

This brief narrative is then followed by Hosea's second set of hopeful prophetic reflections in 3:4, 5. In these verses, Hosea explained that the kingdom of Israel would endure troubles from God for a period of time. But a day would come in the future when Israel's relationship with God would result in great blessings for Israel.

In this analogy, Hosea, a prophet honored among his people, represents God. Of course, God is much greater than Hosea, but it's a metaphor. On the other hand, the adulterous woman represents the people of Israel... They committed adultery by leaving the Lord and worshipping other gods. So, God asked Hosea to reflect his story — “Although the people of Israel were far from me, worshipping other gods, living in sin while they were in Egypt, yet I went to them and married them while they were still far away and living in adultery. I saved them while they were far away. It's not because they were good that I saved them, but because of my grace that I saved them.”

What is stranger is that God told Hosea that, after marrying this woman, she would go back to adultery. But he told Hosea to go and bring her back to him. This is exactly what our Lord did with the people of Israel. Not only did the Lord save the people of Israel and raise them up, although they were living in adultery in Egypt, but also, after the people were saved and entered into a covenant relationship with God, they returned back to commit adultery with other gods. And although God punished and disciplined the people, yet in his grace, just like Hosea restored his adulterous wife, God went to his “wife” — that is the people who had committed adultery after marriage — and restored them to himself.

— Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

On the whole then, by collecting and arranging some of the revelations he received in the earliest phase of his ministry, Hosea presented a carefully balanced point of view to Judah's leaders in Hezekiah's day.

At the time of our book, the judgment God threatened had already been fulfilled with the fall of the northern kingdom. But God's people weren't to lose hope. This time of judgment would lead to a future time when Israel would receive great blessings from God.

After the first division's balanced presentation of judgment and hope from God, the second division shifts attention to unfolding judgment from God in 4:1-9:9.

UNFOLDING JUDGMENT (4:1–9:9)

We've entitled this portion of Hosea "unfolding" because it contains revelations that Hosea received over a long period of time. And we speak of it as "judgment" because it focuses exclusively on the ways God directed his covenant curses against Israel and Judah during these decades of Hosea's ministry.

Broadly speaking, these chapters on unfolding judgment divide into two main parts: more of God's lawsuits, in 4:1–5:7, and then God's calls for alarm, in 5:8–9:9. Consider first God's lawsuits.

God's Lawsuits (4:1–5:7)

God's earlier lawsuit in this division appears in 4:1-19. Once again, God revealed his plans to Hosea by granting him knowledge of legal deliberations in the heavenly court. Listen to the summons in 4:1:

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring (Hosea 4:1).

As this opening verse indicates, God summoned Israel to court because he had "a charge to bring" against them. Here, the term "charge" translates the Hebrew term we learned earlier, "*rib*" (רִיב,) the technical term for a lawsuit.

The placement of this earlier lawsuit immediately after the first division, as well as its content, strongly suggests that it was one of Hosea's earlier prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. As you'll recall, during this period in Israel, Menahem and Pekahiah continued to promote idolatry and injustice. And when Menahem suffered a brief incursion from Assyria, instead of finding security in God, he and Pekahiah after him, reaffirmed their alliance with Assyria and Assyria's gods.

Throughout this lawsuit, God accused Israel precisely of these sorts of sins. And not surprisingly, God announced that he would bring curses on Israel in the form of severe Assyrian aggression — most likely referring to the invasion of 732 B.C. The strongest evidence for this historical setting is the one thing Hosea said about Judah in this earlier lawsuit. Listen to what Hosea wrote in 4:15:

Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty (Hosea 4:15).

As we can see here, at this time, God drew a sharp contrast between conditions in Israel and conditions in Judah. Israel was guilty of being unfaithful to God. But God merely warned Judah not to become like northern Israel. This contrast between Israel and Judah reminds us of the conditions in Judah when Uzziah and Jotham ruled as righteous kings. So, before the invasion of 732 B.C., God declared no curses against Judah.

This brings us to God's later lawsuit in 5:1-7. Here we see another scene of the heavenly court. Listen to the way 5:1 summons the accused to court:

Hear this, you priests! Pay attention, you Israelites! Listen, O royal house! This judgment is against you (Hosea 5:1, NIV).

Although this passage doesn't use the technical term "*rib*" (רִיב,) we see here that God summoned the guilty to court — the "priests," the "Israelites," and the "royal house" — and announced that the purpose of this summons was "judgment" — or *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט) in Hebrew. Like the word *rib* (רִיב,) this term refers to legal deliberations in the court of heaven.

The content of this later lawsuit indicates that it originated when Hosea received and delivered later prophecies as Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. grew closer. Hosea 5:1 points to this historical orientation when it mentions that Israel's nobles oppressed the people at "Mizpah and Tabor." This is important because archeological evidence indicates that these sites remained under Israel's control only until 732 B.C. when Tiglath-Pileser III invaded Israel and annexed them. It's also notable that, in 5:13, God accused Israel of vainly appealing for help from Tiglath-Pileser III, or "the great king," as he's called in this verse.

You'll remember that in Israel at this time, King Pekah continued in idolatry and injustice. He also formed an alliance with Syria — the Syrian-Israelite coalition — to resist paying tributes to Assyria. So, God's later lawsuit warned that curses against Israel were coming through a decimating Assyrian attack.

Once again, the most important evidence for this historical setting is Hosea's attention to Judah. As we mentioned earlier in this lesson, Ahaz became king of Judah just before the Syrian-Israelite coalition. But unlike his father and grandfather, Ahaz promoted idolatry and injustice in Judah. He also made an alliance with the Assyrians and their gods for protection against his foes. And as a result, in this later lawsuit, God threatened curses against Judah for the first time. Listen to the way 5:5 addresses Judah:

The Israelites ... stumble in their sin; Judah also stumbles with them (Hosea 5:5, NIV).

Notice the contrast here with God's earlier lawsuit. In 4:15, God simply warned Judah not to become sinful like Israel. But as this verse indicates, by the time of this later lawsuit, Judah had become guilty before God along with Israel because Ahaz had led them astray.

Syria and Israel, that coalition, actually attacked Judah in the days of Ahaz and tried to force Judah to join them in that coalition to resist Assyria. Now, the result of that was predictable. The Assyrians didn't like it, and as a result the Assyrians came in, just years later, and absolutely decimated Syria and brought Israel to its knees, and made them vassals that owed great tribute to the kingdom of Assyria. And in fact, the southern kingdom itself suffered because not only were they attacked by this coalition, but they submitted themselves for protection to the empire of Assyria. The prophet Isaiah had actually told Ahaz, "Don't do that. You seek help from the Lord, and he will

protect you from this great coalition that’s attacking you.” But Ahaz refused. He said, “No, I need help from something that I can see, and that’s the Assyrian Empire.” So at that time, then, Judah itself became a vassal nation of the empire of Assyria.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Following God’s lawsuits, Hosea’s prophecies about unfolding judgment turn to God’s calls for alarm in 5:8–9:9.

God’s Calls for Alarm (5:8–9:9)

In ancient Israel, armies were often called into battle by blowing a hollowed ram’s horn — *shophar* (שׁוֹפָר) in Hebrew — or a silver trumpet — *chatsotsrah* (חֲצֹצְרָה) in Hebrew. And on a number of occasions, God himself announced or recalled battles by referring to this practice. In this section, we find two such calls.

First Call for Alarm (5:8–7:16). The first call for alarm appears in 5:8–7:16. It begins in 5:8 with the words: “Blow the horn” — *shophar* (שׁוֹפָר) — “in Gibeah, the trumpet” — *chatsotsrah* (חֲצֹצְרָה) — “in Ramah.” When we examine the content of this first call for alarm, it appears that it originated with Hosea’s earlier prophecies about Assyria’s invasion in 722 B.C. As evidence, two passages allude to Assyria’s previous invasion in 732 B.C. Hosea 5:11 mentions how the Assyrians had already “oppressed” and “crushed” Israel. Hosea 6:1 notes that Israel had been “torn” and “struck.” In addition, in 7:11 God accused Israel of “calling to Egypt, going to Assyria” — a reference to Israel’s shifting international alliances at this time.

As we know, the Assyrians had established Hoshea as the king of Israel after their victory over Israel in 732 B.C. Hoshea continued in idolatry and injustice and, for a period of time, he enthusiastically maintained his alliance with Assyria. But he later sought freedom from Assyrian domination by turning to Egypt for protection. Hosea exposed the dire consequences of these sins by warning that more curses were coming from God — curses that arrived in the form of Assyria’s devastating invasion in 722 B.C.

The historical setting is also supported by the special attention these chapters give to the kingdom of Judah. At this time, Ahaz ruled in Judah and led Judah into idolatry and injustice. And, rather than trusting in God, Ahaz sought protection from his foes through an alliance with Assyria and its gods. As a result, these chapters give a lot of attention to God’s curses against Judah. Listen to 5:10-14 where Hosea delivered these words:

The princes of Judah have become like those who move the landmark; upon them I will pour out my wrath like water... I am ... like dry rot to the house of Judah... Judah [will see] his wound ... I will be ... like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue (Hosea 5:10-14).

And in 6:4, God expressed his frustration with Ahaz and Judah saying:

What shall I do with you, O Judah? (Hosea 6:4).

And then in verse 11, God exclaimed:

For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed (Hosea 6:11).

Here God declared that a harvest had been appointed for Judah along with the kingdom of Israel. Now, we should note that the second half of this verse speaks of the restoration of God's people. But as a number of interpreters, and some modern translations have indicated, the second half of verse 11 actually belongs with the prophecy that follows in 7:1. So, in this view, the appointed "harvest" was Judah's devastation at the hands of Assyria.

Second Call for Alarm (8:1–9:9). God's second call for alarm appears in 8:1–9:9. It begins in 8:1 with the command to "set the trumpet" — or shophar (שׁוֹפָר) — "to your lips!" The content of this second call for alarm strongly suggests that it was among the later prophecies Hosea delivered as Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. drew near. At this time, King Hoshea of Israel continued to promote idolatry and injustice. He also continued to rely on his alliance with Egypt. And as a result, Hosea warned of God's impending curses. He announced in 9:3 that, "they shall eat unclean food in Assyria." Soon after, Shalmaneser V subjugated Samaria. And in 722 B.C., Assyria's new king, Sargon II, destroyed Samaria and brought an end to the kingdom of Israel.

One question that can leave many people perplexed is, "How is it that God would allow his own people to fall into the hands of pagans like the Assyrians?" Well, Hosea means to respond to this question by showing that the judgments were deserved. God had warned his people time and again. God had sent prophets. God had told them that there would be consequences for their disobedience, for their unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, they didn't want to repent of their unfaithfulness to the covenant, as Hosea shows graphically in his book. So Hosea writes to tell them that, "You all who are suffering, it was well earned. God warned you and you did not want to repent." So there was no other remedy than to carry out the judgment that God had warned about much earlier.

— Dr. David Correa, translation

This historical setting is also confirmed by what this passage says about Judah. During these last years of Israel's existence, Ahaz and Hezekiah were co-regents in Judah. Hezekiah began to turn Judah away from Ahaz' idolatry and injustice. And in this regard, he was a true reformer. But Hezekiah also trusted in his own strength to resist Assyria by fortifying Judah against attack. And he sought an alliance with Egypt and

Egypt's gods, rather than turning to God. These actions led God to announce that Judah was going to face even more curses through Assyria. As God put it in 8:14:

Judah has multiplied fortified cities; so I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds (Hosea 8:14).

This prophecy was fulfilled approximately two decades later in 701 B.C. when Sennacherib invaded Judah, destroying most of its cities and laying siege to Jerusalem.

As you can imagine, all of these prophecies of judgment had many implications for Israel and Judah when Hosea first received them. At every step, they warned of approaching judgment and called for repentance. But later on, when Hosea formed these prophecies into the second division of his book, these threats of judgment had already been fulfilled. Israel had fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C., and Assyria had attacked and destroyed much of Judah during Hezekiah's reign. Still, these prophecies had an abundance of wisdom to teach Judah's leaders in Hezekiah's day. They not only explained in some detail why God had destroyed the kingdom of Israel, but they also explained why God had sent Assyria with such devastating force against Judah as well.

Now that we've seen how the structure and content of the first division of Hosea focuses on judgment and hope from God, and how the second division deals with God's unfolding judgment, we should turn to the third major division of our book: Hosea's prophecies about unfolding hope from God in 9:10–14:8.

UNFOLDING HOPE (9:10–14:8)

We speak of this division as “unfolding” because Hosea drew, once again, from prophecies he'd received over many years. And we speak of it as “hope” because it emphasizes how God's people could continue to have hope for God's blessings even after they'd suffered so severely under his judgment.

In the second division of his book, Hosea dealt almost exclusively with God's judgment against Israel and Judah. If Hosea had stopped his book there, crucial questions would have gone unanswered. Did the troubles Israel and Judah faced mean that God would no longer bless his people in the future? Were God's people to be lost forever? Hosea wrote the third division of his book to answer these kinds of questions. Here, he revealed to Judah's leaders in the days of Hezekiah why they should still hope for God's blessings in the future.

The third division of Hosea is the most complex portion of our book because Hosea combined a number of prophecies, and even snippets of prophecies, together. But on a large scale, we can say with confidence that it divides into five main sections, each of which is introduced by a comparison God made with Israel.

God compared Israel with fruit in 9:10-12; with a planted palm in 9:13-17; with a luxuriant vine in 10:1-10; with a trained calf in 10:11-15; and finally with a beloved child or son in 11:1–14:8. These sections elaborate on these comparisons in multiple ways, and we'll look into these elaborations more in our next lesson. But in this introductory lesson, time will only allow us to point out a simple pattern of hope that appears at the beginning of each section.

As we approach this division of Hosea, it's important to identify, as much as possible, *when* Hosea first received the revelations of each of these sections. Some of these historical contexts are more easily identified than others. But on the whole, Hosea retraced the same historical periods that he covered in the second division of his book. As we've seen, Hosea focused the second division on God's judgments during Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. and Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. But in the third division of our book, rather than focusing on judgment, this section represents God's words of hope over the same stretch of time.

Let's see how this is true by turning first to God's comparison of Israel to fruit in 9:10-12.

Fruit (9:10-12)

It's most likely that this first section was revealed to Hosea along with other earlier prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. The best evidence for this historical setting appears in 9:11. Because Israel's kings had turned from God, we read that "Ephraim's glory" — literally "their glory," or *kevodam* (כְּבוֹדָם) in Hebrew — "shall fly away like a bird." God was about to remove Israel's glory. The only other time in Hosea's book that God predicted this was in God's earlier lawsuit in 4:1-19 — a section associated with Hosea's earlier prophecies about the 732 B.C. invasion. In 4:7 God said, "I will change their glory into shame." This link strongly suggests that Hosea began the third division of his book as he began the second, with one of his earlier prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C.

This setting is confirmed by the fact that these verses make no reference to Judah. As you'll recall, Uzziah and Jotham ruled as righteous kings and God pronounced no curses on Judah during this time. With this historical orientation in mind, listen to what God said in 9:10:

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved (Hosea 9:10).

Clearly, God spoke of Israel's sins in this verse. But it's important to note that God *began* with a positive comparison of Israel with grapes and figs. So, even as God determined to bring judgment against Israel in 732 B.C., he still remembered Israel fondly as one remembers sweet fruits. And God's positive memory reassured God's people that there was still hope for them to return to his blessings in the future.

The second section, in 9:13-17, focuses on Israel as a planted palm and follows a similar pattern.

Planted Palm (9:13-17)

We can't be sure when Hosea first received this revelation. But on the whole, Hosea's description of Israel fits well with the conditions of Israel when Hosea received

prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. This historical orientation is supported by the fact that this passage does not mention Judah. So, it most likely came to Hosea before Ahaz turned Judah away from God. Listen to the opening of this section in 9:13:

**Ephraim, as I have seen, was like a young palm planted in a meadow;
but Ephraim must lead his children out to slaughter (Hosea 9:13).**

Here God threatened Israel with the slaughter of their children as they went out to battle against Assyrian invaders. But as terrible as this judgment was, in the first half of this verse God remembered how he cherished Israel "like a young palm planted in a meadow." God's fond memory of them revealed that there was still hope for God's blessings to come to Israel in the future.

After focusing on Israel as a planted palm, Hosea compared the kingdom of Israel to a luxuriant vine in 10:1-10.

Luxuriant Vine (10:1-10)

In all likelihood, this section also originated when Hosea received prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 732 B.C. Hosea 10:6 threatens that the wealth of Israel's worship centers will be carried off as "tribute to the great king" — the same king mentioned in 5:13. This "great king" was Tiglath-Pileser III who led the devastating invasion of 732 B.C. But it's important to note that Judah is not mentioned in this section. So, this may indicate that Ahaz had not yet led Judah into corruption. In this light, listen to what God said in 10:1:

Israel is a luxuriant vine ... The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built (Hosea 10:1).

Notice here that Hosea's prophecy focused again on judgment against Israel because the more they prospered, "the more altars [they] built." Israel had filled their tribal territories with altars to other gods, and they would suffer God's judgment for this rebellion. But, as before, Hosea introduced this threat of judgment with the fact that God remembered Israel as a delightful, luxuriant vine. This comparison offered hope for God's blessings on Israel in the future.

After likening Israel to a luxuriant vine, Hosea wrote about God's comparison of the kingdom of Israel to a trained calf in 10:11-15.

Trained Calf (10:11-15)

This section may have originated when Hosea received his earlier prophecies about Assyria's invasion in 722 B.C. As we've seen, during this time, king Hoshea led Israel into idolatry and injustice. And early on, he relied on his alliance with Assyria and

its gods for his security instead of God. Because of this, God warned that curses were coming to Israel.

The most notable evidence for the historical setting of this section is that it mentions the sins of Judah. As we know, Ahaz, the king of Judah, had promoted idolatry and injustice throughout Judah. He also persisted in seeking help from his alliance with Assyria rather than from God. So, in 10:11, 12, God briefly threatened curses against Judah and announced that “Judah must plow [and] sow ... righteousness.” This entire section begins in 10:11 with these words:

Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck; but I will put Ephraim to the yoke (Hosea 10:11).

We see here that God threatened to put Ephraim to the yoke, a metaphor for the judgment of oppression by Assyria. But despite the judgment that was coming, God still remembered Israel fondly as “a trained calf that loved to thresh.” And God’s positive remembrance of Israel served as the basis of hope for the future.

This brings us to the last comparison in this division on unfolding hope from God, by far the longest section in the third division. In 11:1–14:8, God compared his people to something even more precious than a well-trained calf — a beloved child or son.

Beloved Child (11:1–14:8)

This lengthy section represents revelations Hosea received when he delivered his prophecies about Assyria’s invasion in 722 B.C. At this time, King Hoshea continued to lead Israel in idolatry and injustice. But later, he attempted to break free of Assyria by foolishly seeking an alliance with Egypt. God specifically addressed this alliance in 11:5 where he said that Israel will “not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king.”

This historical context is confirmed by the fact that in 11:12 and 12:2-6, Hosea also prophesied against Judah. As we read in 12:2, “The Lord has an indictment against Judah.” Despite the reforms that Hezekiah was able to achieve, Hezekiah relied on his own strength and turned to an alliance with Egypt rather than turning to the Lord. So, Judah suffered the judgment of God through Sennacherib’s invasion in 701 B.C. Now, listen to the opening of this section in 11:1-2:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols (Hosea 11:1-2).

These opening verses present Hosea’s pattern once again. Israel had sinned against God. Time and again, God called to them, but “they went away” and worshipped Baals and idols. And as a result, judgment was coming. But even as God pronounced judgment, verse 1 indicates that God still thought of Israel as his beloved son. And his love for his child, Israel, was the basis of hope for Israel’s future blessings.

Hosea 11:1 speaks of how God called Israel out of Egypt. The verses go on to say that God bent down and lovingly fed them and provided for his people. And yet, the more he called to his people through his servants the prophets, the further that they went from him. And so, God declares that he's going to send them away, only this time not to Egypt, but Assyria will be their king. But then the chapter goes on with God's voice breaking with his love for his people, and God declaring, "I will not execute my fierce judgment on Israel. I will call, and my sons will come trembling like birds from the land of Egypt, like doves from the land of Assyria. I will gather them again to this land, and I will again be their God and they will again be my people."

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Now, there's much more to the third division of Hosea than our brief introduction reveals. And we'll look more closely at this part of our book in our next lesson. Still, we've seen enough to grasp the heart of the matter. Hosea composed this last division of his book to impart wisdom to Judah's leaders after Israel had fallen to Assyria and most of its citizens had been carried off into exile. And in these last chapters of his book, Hosea drew from prophecies he'd given throughout his ministry to strengthen Judah's hopes for what God had promised. Judgment was not the end of Israel's story because God had never forgotten how much he cherished them. The leaders of Judah could gain wisdom and hold firmly to the hope of blessings to come.

CONCLUSION

In this introduction to Hosea, we've explored the background of Hosea by distinguishing between the time, location, circumstances and purpose of the prophet's ministry and his book. We've also surveyed the content and structure of the book of Hosea by noting how the prophet gave those who first received his book wisdom by focusing on judgment and hope, unfolding judgment, and unfolding hope from God.

The book of Hosea was written to teach wisdom when Israel and Judah faced one of the most difficult times in their history — the crisis of Assyrian judgment. And his book gives insights that God's people need in every age, including our own as we look toward the future. Like Israel and Judah in the days of Hosea, followers of Christ must heed Hosea's call to pursue wisdom as we face the trials of this world. From his book we can see that no matter what difficulties we face, even when all seems lost, we can hold firmly to the hope for the future that we have in Christ. And we can be confident that one day God will pour out immeasurable blessings on his people when Christ returns in glory.

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