



Over the course of the “Scripture One Book at a Time” program we have steadily move along Israel’s timeline covering the books of the patriarchs, kings and prophets:

- Abraham and Sarah in *Genesis*, as well as Jacob and his 12 sons (*Genesis*)
- Moses and the people on the way to the promised land (*Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*)’
- Early life in the Promised Land (*Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Ruth*)
- The Kings of Judah and Israel (*Kings and Chronicles*) plus books associated with that age (e.g. *Psalms*)
- The Prophets (*Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel*)

The “storyline” moved steadily forward past the age of Kings into the Babylonian Exile - and in *Daniel* even into the 2nd century BC.

The program now moves into a group of books sometimes called “the minor prophets.” The moniker does speak to the importance of their message, only to the fact that they are considerably shorter in length than the books of *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah*.

With the *Book of Hosea* we also have to “reset” the timeline. Hosea was a prophet of the Northern Kingdom (also called Israel, Jacob and sometimes, Ephraim - and in NT times, Samaria). Hosea began his ministry in the last years of prosperity, stability and peace in the north. It was a time in which the Empire of Assyria began to again assert its dominance over the surrounding countries. Hosea began his ministry in 750 BC and seems to have ended with the Fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC.

The only information the text provides us about the life of Hosea concerns his marriage. Even if we cannot reconstruct what happened exactly, the text as it now stands speaks of three moments in the relationship: first love, separation, reunion. This marriage is a symbol of the covenant between the Lord and Israel. Hosea speaks about the first love, the short period of Israel’s loyalty in the desert, which was then followed by a long history of unfaithfulness lasting until his day. Hosea accuses Israel of three crimes

in particular. Instead of putting their trust in the Lord alone, the people break the covenant: (1) by counting on their own military strength, (2) by making treaties with foreign powers (Assyria and Egypt), and (3) by running after the Baals, the gods of fertility. Israel thus forgets that the Lord is its strength, its covenant partner, and giver of fertility. This unfaithful behavior will lead to Israel's destruction by Assyria, but God's love will have the last word. The back and forth movement from doom to salvation is typical of the Book of Hosea.

Hosea was a contemporary of the Prophet Amos. Both prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:23–29). Hosea's text reflects the chaotic, mad, and finally destructive years after Jeroboam II's death. Hosea was a citizen of the north who (unlike other prophets) stressed the intimate love of God for Israel. Where his contemporary Amos is remembered as the prophet of divine justice — justice in the strict modern sense of punishment equal to the seriousness of the crime — Hosea is known as the prophet of divine love, love ever willing to suffer in order to win back one's beloved. Yet, no justice is fiercer than tender love that has been betrayed and attacked, and so Hosea ends up far more certain and definitive about the destruction of Israel: *"I will attack them like a bear robbed of its young, and tear their hearts from their breasts"* (13:8). *"Where are your plagues, O death! ... My eyes are closed to compassion"* (13:14).

The core of Hosea's soul and writings can be traced back to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel in the days of Moses. Hosea even stresses the two outstanding qualities of this covenant: bonding in love and sturdy trustworthiness. These are the two words that Yahweh pronounced with dramatic compassion as Moses stood atop Mount Sinai with the two stone tablets of the law in his arms (Exod 34:6–9). Through the heartrending experience of his broken and healed marriage, Hosea transforms the somewhat legal framework of the Mosaic covenant into the intimately personal and loving contract of marriage. While the covenant enables Hosea to suffuse the note of compassion, it also provides a straightforward way to brush aside flimsy excuses and to call sin by its honest name — swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery.

Mosaic traditions are not only present in an impressive way, but ancient customs and inspired attitudes (about five hundred years old by now) were seen as a living, motivating force. Unlike Amos, who talked about the Exodus as a point of comparison with the present moment (see Amos 2:9–12; 3:1–2; 9:7), Hosea sees it happening right now. Israel's sins bring the people back to Egypt (8:13; 9:3; 11:5), not geographically, because they either remained in the Holy Land or were taken eastward into exile; nor politically, because Egypt pretended to be a friendly state and a place of asylum; but typologically, because Egypt was a symbol or type of sin and bondage. In this regard we note the frequent use of the word "now" in Hosea's preaching (4:16; 5:3, 7; 7:2; 8:8).

One final aspect of Hosea's theology cannot be passed over. Hosea could not refer to God simply and generally as God; at least forty-five times he uses the sacred name Yahweh (Exod 3:11–15), and if he refers to God as Elohim or El, it is almost always as "your God" or "my God" (2:25; 3:5; 4:6; 12).