

In the history of redemption it has been said that if the gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest story in the world, then surely Hosea is the second greatest. The foundation of Hosea's story is the concept expressed by the Hebrew word Hesed, which means loyalty, covenant, love, or faithfulness to the covenant. Hosea's central message to Israel was that severe judgment was soon coming against her because of her great sin, the sin of unfaithfulness to the Lord, the husband of her youth (cf. Jeremiah 3). Although Hosea mentions many other sins (cursing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, etc.), these are seen as consequences of unfaithfulness to the covenant (therefore lack of hesed), the central provision of which was that the people should know the Lord (4:6; 6:6; here "mercy" (NIV) is hesed).

Israel's repentance (6:1-4) was facile and insincere (6:5), and the judgment of exile was therefore sure to come (4:1-5:14; 6:4-11; 7:1-11:7). The cry of the Lord (11:8 ff), however, shows what Hosea had learned in his own life (chapter 3): because God is loving there is hope for the future based on that love (1:10-2:1; 2:14-23; 3:5; 11:8-11). Hosea, then, gives us an illustration and demonstration of the gospel hundreds of years before the time of Christ.

Some interesting questions will include the problem of the meaning of "an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness (NIV)". Is this to be interpreted as historical or allegorical? Does "again" in 3:1 refer to Gomer? If so, how does this correlate with Deuteronomy 24:1-4? Is 11:1-11 a passage of hope or of hopelessness? Was Hosea a northern prophet of a southern prophet gone north?

In the area of archaeology pieces of broken pottery with writing on them (ostraca) containing many Hebrew names have been found in Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom. They are receipts for shipments of grain and oil probably dating from the eighth century BC, perhaps from the reign of Menachem. Hebrew personal names were usually sentences of one or two words beginning or ending with the name of God (e.g. Joshua=Jehoshu'a=Yahweh saves). The names on these ostraca often contain not the name of the Lord, but Baal, the name of the Canaanite storm-god. This interchange of divine names may underlie Hosea 2:16-17.

A phrase in 5:13, once translated "King Jareb", is now correctly rendered "the great king." Its presence may demonstrate Hosea's awareness of the future role of the Assyrian king as the suzerain or great king who had authority over Israel. The term often is used in covenantal contexts to indicate the superiority of the two parties making the covenant.

Thanks to tablets found at Ras Shamra (Ugarit), much more is now known of Canaanite religion. Some of the imagery in 6:1-3 seems to reflect its characteristics: dying and being raised, the Lord coming like the rain. Hosea is not here becoming Canaanite; he is using ideas in his cultural milieu to communicate more effectively with his people.

Keys to the better understanding of Hosea include the naming and explanation of Hosea's children (1:2-9), juxtaposed with the promise of 1:10-2:1, is the thrust of the book of Hosea. Verses 5:4-7 again encapsulate the theme of unfaithfulness. Hosea 6:6 may be the heart of Hosea's concern for his people; surely 11:1-4 is the Lord's. Chapter 14 offers a beautiful picture of repentance, restoration, and revival.

Study tips: Read Hosea through at one sitting! Read its historical background in 2 Kings 14:23-20:21, then read Hosea again, noting