

special; therefore, God will always bless us and never harm us. Amos says they are dead wrong. Yes, God chose them (3:1), but that means higher expectations, not entitlements. Their chosen status also means “the day of the LORD” for which they long and hope, is not going to be a great day of even more blessing (as they think), but a day of judgment and punishment (5:18–20). The Israelites are confused, but they can’t see it. God has tried so many times to get them to return to him, but they won’t come back (4:6–11). Now, all Amos knows to say is, “Prepare to meet your God, Israel!” (4:12).

They love to go to Bethel and present their sacrifices, especially when their friends are there to see them (4:4–5). They love to go to their religious festivals and sing their praise songs (5:21–23). They love the life of ease, listening to music that their God has given them—because they are chosen, because they are so good, or just because (4:1, 6:3–6). But they can’t see that God hates all of these things. Nor can they see what God wants.

Seek me and live.
But don’t seek Bethel. . . .
Seek the LORD and live. (5:4–6)

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of heavenly forces,
will be with you just as you have said.
Hate evil, love good,
and establish justice in the city gate.
Perhaps the LORD God of heavenly forces
will be gracious to what is left of Joseph. (5:14–15)

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:24)

They are blind and cannot see their own need to change; they cannot see any problems with their lives or their society. And because of this, they are destined for punishment: 2:13–16; 3:2, 11, 12–15; 4:2–3, 12; 5:1–3, 7–9, 16–20, 26–27; 6:3–7, 9–11, 14; 7:7–9, 16–17; 8:1–3, 7–14; 9:1–6, 8–10. So many words, so many warnings—and the tragedy is not that it will happen, but that it doesn’t have to happen.

Fourth Prophet: Hosea

Hosea, unlike Amos, is from the north—so what is happening has to do with *his* people and *his* family and evokes deep passions within him. If he were called to testify against Israel, we should expect his testimony to be interrupted frequently by tears, times when he will need to compose himself before we can continue.

Hosea chapters 1–3 create widespread disagreement among interpreters as to how we are to understand what is happening (or not happening). Does Hosea go look for and marry a prostitute (Gomer)? Was Hosea married to Gomer and she became unfaithful? Or are these chapters

just a parable, so the events did not really happen? (And how does chapter 3 relate to chapters 1–2?) However we answer these questions (I lean toward Hosea marrying a prostitute), these opening chapters establish the primary field of images for the book: marriage and family. In chapters 1–3, Hosea's marriage represents God's marriage to Israel. God is Israel's husband and

The Message of the Old Testament

Nine dynasties, nineteen kings, seven assassinations. Two hundred years. Prophets here and there, one from the south on a spring break campaign, another prophet running about doing incredible things as if auditioning for Ripley's *Believe it or Not*. What are we supposed to see in all this? What do we see?

Perspective. The LORD will turn Israel over to Assyria and her war machine and the devastation will be thorough and lasting. But too often, people of faith read Israel's story as if looking through a telescope. They see everything that happens all at once, including the LORD's punishment. So these readers make the assumption that all these events took place in a short period of time, and conclude that Israel never had a chance. From the start, Israel was up against an angry God with unreasonable demands, eager to whack his people should they break the least little law. A corrected perspective: the text covers two hundred years of prophets, hope, and disappointment.

Determination. The LORD refuses to give up on Israel, but is determined to do everything he can to bring them back into their covenant relationship. The LORD sends passionate prophets like Hosea and miracle-workers like Elisha to convince Israel that Baal is a fraud. The LORD is determined to save his people, but the people are more determined to reject the LORD in favor of other gods. And despite the heartbreak their action brings, the LORD refuses to revoke Israel's right to decide for herself.

One and Two. The more we read and reread Israel's story, the more we become aware that only one thing really matters. All of the laws, every one of them, come down to just one idea: love—love as a decision of singular commitment and faithfulness, love for the LORD. And within this decision is a second love—love for the other. These are the principles standing behind the first four commandments and the principles upholding the final six commandments, utterly impossible to separate from one another. From a Christian perspective, we affirm the answer Jesus gave to the question, "What is the most important commandment?" Love the LORD your God with all your heart (Deut 6:5), and the second is a vital part of the first: love your neighbor (and immigrant) as yourself (Lev 19:18, 34).

Simple. I suppose we tend to make things more complex than they are, and far more complicated than they need be. But for the DH and the prophets that connect into this history, once we get past the cultural boundaries and past the *long ago and far away* nature of the text, what we see is not all that complicated. Perhaps—just perhaps—what is most difficult for us is the simple. What do you see?

Israel's worship of other gods is like adultery or prostitution, which breaks God's heart. God is eager to take Israel back to the wilderness and relive their first romantic days when God had rescued her from Egypt (2:14–15), to renew their wedding vows (2:16–20), and change the names of their children (2:21–23). God is desperate to find and bring Israel back home, to the point that God will do anything to bring his wife back to him (3:1–5).

Without question, Hosea's greatest concern for Israel is her idolatry (5:11, 8:4, 13:1) and all the practices that go with the worship of other gods. Israel builds more and more altars to take away their sin, but these altars to idols only increase their sin (8:11, 10:1). Hosea refers to the golden calf at Bethel (8:5–6), but he prefers to call it the calf of Beth-aven (4:15; 5:8; 10:5, 8)—deftly changing Bethel (“house of god”) into Beth-aven (“house of sin”). He also slips into sarcasm toward other practices: the people “take advice from a piece of wood” (4:12), and God's people are “kissing calves” (13:2). Israel is so caught up in the worship of other gods she cannot see her folly or remember that the LORD has always been her God (8:14, 13:4–6).

Breaking the first commandment means far more than just worshipping at a different place or just worshipping a different god. Who or what a person worships has real-life implications. For example, because Israel no longer relies on the LORD, the nation flies back and forth between alliances with Egypt and Assyria (5:13, 7:11–12, 8:9–10, 12:1). Their fickle foreign policy feeds the energy behind all the assassinations of one king and dynasty after another (7:7, 8:4). Without a steady, reliable, strong ally to depend on, the nation is a silly bird flying from one place to another (7:11–12).

Judgment is coming, another major theme in the book (5:8–11; 7:13; 9:5–7, 10–17; 10:2–4, 8–10, 13–15; 11:6–7; 13:7–16). God will be a moth (5:12), a lion (5:14, 13:7), a leopard (13:7), a bear robbed of her cubs (13:8), and a hunter (7:12, 9:8), and Israel will be destroyed. Hosea, however, sees more. Israel will not only be decimated by invading armies, Israel will also return to Egypt (8:13, 9:3, 11:5, 12:9), a way of saying the nation will go into exile (9:3, 17; 10:6, 7; 11:5). And yet the LORD is deeply conflicted regarding what to do about Israel. The LORD is Israel's husband, and no matter what she has done or does, he still loves her (chs. 1–3). Or to change the metaphor, God is Israel's mother:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
 and out of Egypt I called my son.
 The more I called them,
 the further they went from me;
 they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
 and they burned incense to idols.
 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
 I took them up in my arms,
 but they did not know that I healed them.
 I led them
 with bands of human kindness,
 with cords of love.

I treated them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks;
I bent down to them and fed them. (11:1–4)

So yes, they deserve punishment for breaking their vows and breaking the LORD's heart. But that's the troublesome thing; the LORD still loves the people.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart winces within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender. (11:8–9)

All God wants—for his people, his wife, his children—is for them to acknowledge that he alone is their God (6:1–3, 10:12, 12:6, 14:1–3). The LORD wants their love, and the intimate relationship of “knowing” a person.

I desire faithful love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God instead of entirely burned offerings. (6:6)

At present, “My people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge” (4:6a). If only they will return, the LORD is waiting like a parent to “heal their faithlessness” and to love them freely (14:4).

Conclusion

The jury is out for your deliberation: if you were in ancient Israel, you would be in the city gate with other city leaders to debate and decide the fate of the accused. The LORD exercised patient love from the beginning of northern Israel. For the next two hundred years, while the nation continued to turn to more and more gods and built its society on the backs of the poor and helpless, the LORD continued to exercise patient love. After two hundred years, the nation was far from the heart of God. And yet, Hosea reports that the LORD is still deeply conflicted about what to do with them; despite what they have done to the LORD, they are God's wife, God's children, God's people—and so God's heart *winces* (11:8 CEB), *recoils* (RSV), or *is torn* (NLT) about what to do in response. Those who want to throw the case out because they think the God of the Old Testament is an angry tyrant who walks around killing anyone who crosses his path cannot possibly have read this material, which offers two hundred years of opposing evidence.

Nonetheless, the verdict is unavoidable: they are guilty. And this time, drastic punishment follows. The Assyrians conquer and then exile the Israelites, scattering them throughout the Assyrian empire (2 Kgs 17:18–23). Then Assyria resettles depleted northern Israel with people taken captive from other conquests (17:24–25). Some from the north will escape to the south, bringing their stories and experiences with them. And some from the north will intermarry with the people brought from distant lands—the beginnings of what will later be known as the Samaritans.