

HOSEA *to* MICAHA

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY



**PAULA
GOODER**

A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR EVERY DAY

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**For Ruth Charis,
companion of grace**

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PBC HOSEA TO MICAH: INTRODUCTION

Find that link

Have you ever played the game in which you have two or more objects and you have to decide what single factor connects them all? When we come to the collection of prophetic texts that run from Hosea to Micah (part of a larger group of twelve known as the ‘minor’ prophets, to differentiate them from the three ‘major’ prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), it is tempting to play this game with them. They make a distinctly odd collection. In the course of these six books we encounter many different types of texts: two well-known and serious texts of prophecy (Hosea and Amos), a light-hearted story of prophetic disaster (Jonah), texts that are less well-known but which contain some highly influential passages (Joel and Micah), and one book that most people would struggle to find and know hardly anything about (Obadiah). So what connects them? Well, prophecy, of course, but other than that it can be hard to see how they relate to each other.

When we begin to look at them in more detail, however, it becomes clear that there are some underlying themes, which run throughout these prophetic books. These texts come from different times, different places and different prophets but they all tell the same story. It is the story of the rollercoaster ride of God’s relationship with his people. It is a story of great highs (like the exodus and the people’s settling in the Promised Land) and great lows (God’s anger and punishment for the terrible things the people have done). It’s a story that looks backwards to God’s action in the past and forwards to God’s actions in the future in order to make sense of the present. Throughout it all, however, is the pulsing theme of God’s great and abiding love for his people: his compassion for them throughout history, his anger at their heartless deeds and his determination to punish them and then to win them back again. Woven into this in two texts (Obadiah and Jonah) is the suggestion that God is also concerned with other nations and how they relate to his plan for history.

An angry God?

Many people struggle to come to terms with the God of the Old Testament. He can appear to be angry and vindictive, only concerned to punish his people for their sins. It is certainly true that some passages, particularly in this collection of six prophecies, contain violent and angry language about God but the impression we get of God often comes from the way we read the prophetic texts. We tend to read them a chunk at a time, in isolation from what comes before and what comes after. When we do this, it is not surprising that we get an impression of a God who shouts and screams a lot and does not seem to care very much for his people.

If we trace the books through from beginning to end, a different picture emerges. In this picture we meet a God who has tried everything to bring his people back to himself. Every now and then, he breaks out in anger and grief at all the unspeakable things that they have done and are doing to each other, but then tries one more time to persuade them to return to him. Finally he recognizes that there is nothing more he can do and instead decides to punish the people in the hope that those who remain will return to him once more. The picture we get throughout these six books is of a God who tirelessly, relentlessly and lovingly calls his people back to himself. One of my major hopes in introducing you to these prophets is that you will begin to hear for yourself the sometimes soft, sometimes strident voice of God calling to his people, calling them back home and weeping with grief and anguish when they ignore him.

Uncomfortable reading

Alongside this powerful message of love is a harder, less comfortable message of challenge. One theme that arises over and over again in these six books is the theme of money and what we do with it. These ancient texts have a searingly contemporary tone to them. It is hard to read them without beginning to feel uncomfortable about what they are saying in today's world. As I was writing this commentary, I became more and more convinced that these texts speak clearly and profoundly into our present-day situation. The challenge for those of us who read them is to work out precisely what they are saying to us today. This is for each person to decide for themselves but it will be hard to get through to the end of Micah without asking yourself the question. In other words, it is impossible to read your way thought-

fully and prayerfully through these six books and remain the same. May your journey with these prophets be a challenging and enriching one.

A bit of history

Another feature that makes this collection a little incongruous is that it darts around chronologically. Three of the books were written around the same time. Hosea, Amos and Micah all speak into the eighth century BC and, together with Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah chapters 1—39), make up a sub-collection known as the eighth-century prophets. Hosea and Amos address those who live in the north, and Micah (like Isaiah of Jerusalem) addresses those who live in the south. Obadiah was written later than this and probably dates from the time when the southern kingdom of Judah went into exile, around 597BC. Joel and Jonah are harder to date because they give no clear indication of their context. The date of Joel is disputed but many accept that it was written in the early post-exilic period, when the people had just returned from Babylon. The book of Jonah poses even more difficulties and suggestions have ranged from 750 to 250BC. This collection, then, keeps us on our historical toes. We become very familiar with the situation in the eighth century BC but also need to be prepared to travel to the time of exile in Babylon and beyond.

Most of these books are written against the context of the world stage of the ancient Near East and refer to nations both immediately surrounding Israel and Judah, but also further afield. You might, therefore, find it valuable to have a good map of Israel and the ancient Near East to hand while you are reading your way through these six books. Many Bibles have maps in the back but if yours hasn't, look out for one (there are some helpful ones available free on the Internet) as this will help you in your journey through Hosea to Micah.

Bible versions

This commentary has been based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) and all quotations have been taken from it, but this does not mean you are restricted to that version. There are many good translations available and you should feel free to choose the one with which you feel most comfortable. People often find it helpful to pick two or three to work from (rather than just one) as this

can help you to understand the text better and to see what it is really trying to say. If you would like to do this, I suggest that you have a version that aims to be more literal (like the NRSV, the RSV or the NIV) alongside one that aims to be more clear (like the Good News Bible, the Living Bible or the Revised English Bible).

Above all, I hope you enjoy your journey through the first six minor prophets and find them to contain some rich treasure for your life today.

FOR FURTHER READING

In-depth commentaries

L.C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament), Eerdmans, 1994

J. Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998

J. Limburg, *Hosea to Micah* (Interpretation), Westminster John Knox Press, 1988

J.L. Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, SCM Press, 1999

R.L. Smith, *Micah to Malachi* (Word Biblical Commentary Series), Word Books, 1984

D. Stuart, *Hosea to Jonah* (Word Biblical Commentary Series), Word Books, 1987

Lighter commentaries

B.C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel and Amos* (Westminster Bible Companion), Westminster John Knox Press, 1997

H. Mowvley, *The Books of Amos and Hosea* (Epworth Commentary Series), Epworth, 1991

Old Testament guides

G. Auld, *Amos* (Old Testament Guides), Continuum International Publishing Group—Sheffield Academic Press, 1987

G.I. Davies, *Hosea* (Old Testament Guides), Continuum International Publishing Group—Sheffield Academic Press, 1993

R. Mason, *Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Joel* (Old Testament Guides), Continuum International Publishing Group—Sheffield Academic Press, 1994

R.B. Salters, *Jonah and Lamentations* (Old Testament Guides), Continuum International Publishing Group—Sheffield Academic Press, 1994

Books on some of the prophets

W. Doorly, *Prophet of Love: Understanding the Book of Hosea*, Paulist Press, 1991

W. Doorly, *Prophet of Justice: Understanding the Book of Amos*, Paulist Press, 1989

MEET HOSEA

Prophetic books rarely begin in a way that grabs the attention and Hosea is no exception. The first verse of the book tells us various facts about Hosea: he heard the word of the Lord and lived during the time of certain kings. Although uninspiring, however, these facts tell us something very valuable about this person. First and foremost we discover that he is a true prophet, in so much as he hears God's word and later (vv. 3ff.) acts upon it. We also discover when he lived and prophesied. This helps considerably as we try to understand his message. The times during which he lived paint a vital background against which we can understand the prophet and his writings.

The life and times of Hosea

The first thing we notice about Hosea is that his ministry spanned many years. The list of kings given in verse 1 tells us that he prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah in the south and Jeroboam II in the north (not to be confused with Jeroboam I, who was the first king of Israel and reigned about 922BC). Although we don't know precisely when he began and ended his prophetic role, it probably began about 745BC and ended about 721BC, a period of about 20–25 years. This period in the history of Israel and Judah was an important one. For much of the eighth century, the Assyrian empire, which had been greatly feared by Israel and Judah, was preoccupied with other matters, having lost a lot of its influence. This had a great impact on the nations of Israel and Judah. To a certain extent they regained their independence, a sense of national identity and a certain level of prosperity. At about the same time as Hosea began his prophetic ministry, however, a new king, Tiglath-Pileser III, came to the throne in Assyria and began to reassert Assyria's supremacy; eventually this led to the destruction of the very kingdom to which Hosea spoke. Hosea's prophecies, then, were given at a crucial moment in Israel's history. Things were about to change. It is this background and the looming tragic end of the northern kingdom that overshadows much of Hosea's message.

An unusual type of prophecy

If the first verse of Hosea is unremarkable, the next one (v. 2) makes up for it. Hosea is told by God to marry and start a family with someone who will not be faithful to him. This command is shocking. It seems beyond belief that Hosea should be commanded to go out of his way to seek unhappiness and heartache as part of his prophetic role, but this is, in fact, what God commands him to do. God calls Hosea to see the world through God's eyes. God, who is faithful and ever loving, feels like someone whose partner commits adultery over and over again. In order for Hosea to communicate this effectively to the people, he needs to understand how it feels. God calls him, therefore, to experience the effects of such infidelity, so that he can speak about it with feeling. The rest of the book bears witness to how effective Hosea is in fulfilling this calling.

It may seem strange that the first prophetic deed to which Hosea is called is not to proclaim God's message but to feel as God does. It can be easy to assume that the prophets were simply the mouthpiece of God, a little like a microphone, and that all they did was to relay the words that God wanted to speak to the world. This opening passage of Hosea indicates something very different. God's call to Hosea begins with a command not to speak but to understand the problem on an emotional level. This is important. We cannot hope to act for God within the world until we can begin to see even a little of what God sees. Speaking can come only after a deep understanding of the world and its relationship to God.

MEDITATION

Listen to the news on radio or TV, or glance through a newspaper, and spend some time trying to see the world through God's eyes and to feel some of the pain that God feels over what goes on. You may find that these words of Jesus help you to do this:

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23:37).

NOT MY PEOPLE

The result of God's command to Hosea is the birth of three children by a woman named Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. When we read this passage today it seems shocking and somehow distasteful that these births (two sons and a daughter), which should have been joyful events, were used to communicate such a terrible message. In fact, it is the shocking nature of this prophecy that makes it so powerful. Marriage and the birth of children should be joyful times, but when they go wrong the consequences can be devastating. This is what has happened between God and Israel. The relationship between them should have given birth to virtues such as justice, peace, mercy and kindness. Instead it has given birth to destruction, cruelty and oppression. Nothing other than the shocking content of a symbolic prophecy such as this can bring home the message of how far this relationship has gone wrong.

Hosea's children

The name of the firstborn son of Hosea and Gomer is harder to understand than the names of the other two. Jezreel (v. 4) means literally 'God sows' and, as such, seems to communicate a message of hope rather than gloom. However, the word is also the name of two places in Israel, and the phrasing of the text here suggests that it is these two places that are to be brought to mind by Hosea's firstborn son. The first Jezreel was a city in the northern kingdom where an appalling carnage took place at the start of Jehu's reign (841BC; see 2 Kings 9 and 10). Jehu, the first king of the dynasty from which Jeroboam II (the current king of Israel) was descended, came to power by massacring the whole of the previous dynasty. The first thing, therefore, that the birth of Hosea's son promises is a similar massacre, this time brought about by God on the current kingly family.

The destruction would not end there, however, for it is clear that verse 5 refers to a second Jezreel, the 'valley of Jezreel'. This was a valley in Israel where various famous battles took place. Its name would have had a similar resonance in Hosea's time to the name 'Waterloo' in ours. Both refer to battles where a decisive victory was

achieved for one side and defeat for the other. Its use here is powerful because a decisive battle is once again promised, though this time with God as the victor and Israel as the one defeated.

The names of the other two children are a little more straightforward to understand. Hosea's second-born is a daughter called Lo-ruhamah, which means literally 'no compassion' or 'not pitied'. The word *ruhamah* (v. 6) comes from the Hebrew word for 'womb' and refers to the tender, motherly love normally shown to the people of God. Hosea's third child, a son, is called Lo-ammi (v. 9) or 'not my people'. This third name is, perhaps, the most disturbing of all. The language that is used immediately reminds us of God's covenant promise to the people, which can be found throughout the Old Testament: 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' (see, for example, Jeremiah 7:23). The name Lo-ammi announces the end of the relationship between God and the people.

The names of Hosea's children develop God's message to the people. The name of his firstborn announces a massacre of the royal household and defeat of the nation. The second declares that there will be no pity for the nation, and the third that God has abandoned the covenant relationship with his people. Each step of this symbolic prophecy is worse than the one before. God's message is one of devastation and destruction. The birth and naming of these three children act as a preface to the whole book. The message declared here is expanded and elaborated upon in what follows, but we are left in no doubt what the tenor of the message will be. It is a stark, uncompromising proclamation to a people whose immediate future is dismal.

The difficulties we have with Hosea's negative message should not overshadow our understanding of God. The fact that God declares that he has no tender motherly love for the people, and that they are not his people, speaks even more loudly than elsewhere that the God whom we worship declares himself to be a God of overwhelming, merciful love and a God who constantly seeks to draw us into closer relationship with himself.

MEDITATION

Spend some time giving thanks to God for the ways in which you have experienced his love and care in your life.