

Session 1: The Prophet Hosea

E. The Background to Hosea's Message

What was Hosea's message, and why was his marriage an integral part of it?

To understand this, study the following background information:

Background to Hosea: Canaanite Religion

When the people of Israel entered Canaan, they settled among and partially displaced the peoples already existing in the land. Canaan already had a rich mixture of peoples and the Israelites added yet one more to the mixture. But for the invading Israelites, the move into Canaan meant a fundamental change in their way of life. It meant the adoption of a new, agricultural lifestyle and with it new religious practices.

The religion of Canaan was characterized by the worship of "the Baals and the Ashtoreths." Each local deity was an expression of the great Baal in the heavens and his consort Anath or Astarte, powerful members of the pantheon of gods which was worshipped with local variations from Egypt to Babylon.

Baal was the storm god and bringer of fertility. His name means "lord" or "owner" and he was thought of as the owner of the land and controller of its fertility. In Canaanite mythology, Baal was believed to have been attacked and killed by Mut, the god of barrenness of sterility, and brought back to life by the renewal of his sexual relationship with his consort and sister Anath. The death and resurrection of Baal was observed year by year in the barrenness of the dry season, which was brought to an end by the onset of the rains in October.

The fertility of the soil was dependent on the power and potency of Baal and the rituals of Canaanite religion were designed to ensure this potency and harness it for the next year's crop. These rituals included sympathetic magic, in which the myth of Baal's death and resurrection was re-enacted by means of sexual intercourse. Sacred prostitutes (in Hebrew the title also means "holy women") based at each of the local shrines played a part in the sexual rites by which the fertility of the ground was ensured.

When they entered the land and settled down to an agricultural lifestyle, Israel adopted the worship of the local gods of fertility. For one thing, these were the local gods, and to worship the same gods would be an important factor in helping to ensure peaceful co-existence with their neighbours. For another, they needed to know how to ensure the fertility of the soil. For a society in which religion and everyday life, were inextricably entwined, what could be more natural than to learn from the existing inhabitants, the correct rituals for successful farming. Thus the Old Testament records that on entering the land of Canaan, Israel adopted Canaanite practices, and that these remained a constant temptation (for example, Judges 2:11-15, 10:6; 1 Samuel 7:3; 1 Kings 11:1-6; 16:31-33).

There were two ways in which Israel's faith was likely to be affected by contact with the Canaanites. One was simply to adopt the worship of Baal alongside that of Yahweh or in place of him. This meant that they were no longer 100% faithful to the Lord, (or "Yahweh", the closest approximation to the way the name of Israel's god was pronounced) but were hedging their bets, perhaps looking to Yahweh for victory over their enemies and Baal for the fertility of their fields. The second was more insidious: to begin to think of Yahweh and worship him in ways more appropriate to Baal. The worship of Baal centred on appeasing the god by sacrifice and performance of the appropriate ritual in order to ensure his blessing on the harvest. The rituals of Canaanite religion, including sexual intercourse at the local shrines, were designed to harness and direct his potency. All this raises the questions: What kind of god is Yahweh? Is this the kind of worship he desires?

It is important to realize that few people would have seen anything wrong or unusual in this arrangement. Polytheism, the worship of more than one god, was common to the ancient near east. It was the exclusive worship of one god alone which was novel. With the change to an agricultural way of life, there was every reason for Israel to adopt the ways of her neighbours. Strict adherence to Yahweh would have separated Israel from her Canaanite neighbours and provoked a war to the death.

But one strand of Yahweh's worshippers advocated exactly that. For them, the adoption of Canaanite worship meant infidelity to Yahweh, who demanded exclusive loyalty from his people. These were the prophets, among whom Elijah is remembered as pre-eminent. Elijah came from Tishbe in Gilead, a wilderness area. His dress of skins rather than woven cloth emphasized his desert origins and his message was to call Israel back to the exclusive faithfulness of the days when they were wandering in the wilderness, before entering the land of Canaan. When Elijah bursts on to the scene in 1 Kings 17 Israel's worship of Yahweh was threatened by queen Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tyre, whose aim was to drive out Yahwism altogether and make the religion of Baal-Melkart, the Tyrian expression of Baal, pre-eminent. Elijah's response was to predict drought, a drought under the control of his word, as a demonstration that it is Yahweh and not Baal who controls the fertility of the land.

The eventual confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) came on Mount Carmel, which was the northernmost point of the worship of Yahweh up to that time. (see map 1) During the contest, Elijah rebuilt the altar of Yahweh, using undressed stones according to the instructions of Exodus 20:24-26. He built it of twelve stones, emphasizing the unity of the twelve tribes of Israel, which had been broken under the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. And he followed up his victory by the slaughter of the Baal prophets, reflecting the seriousness, in his mind, of their crime in leading Israel astray

The struggle between the concept of Yahweh as one god amongst many and as the one to whom Israel owed exclusive allegiance went on for several centuries. It is important to recognize that most of the Old Testament (although not all) was written from the point of view of the winning side: the prophets, whose point of view eventually prevailed. This should not blind us to the fact that for much of the Old Testament period, there was real doubt about which was the true point of view and which side would eventually win.

Activity 1.4

Read 1 Kings 17

In what ways were the following a challenge to the mythology and worship of Baal?

- A drought that could only be ended on the instructions of Yahweh's prophet
- The miraculous supply of grain and oil to a Sidonian widow
- The resurrection of a Sidonian widow's son.