

Session 3: The Early Prophets

B. Hosea and the Politics of his Time

B1. Background: The Reign of Jeroboam II

Activity 3.3

Read 2 Kings 9 and 10

This is the biblical account of the revolt of Jehu in the northern kingdom of Israel in 842 B.C. For more background information, see the Time chart.

The narrator of the book of Kings makes no explicit judgement on the rights or wrongs of Jehu's actions until the rather ambiguous summary in 10:30-31. Would you say the narrator was in sympathy with Jehu or not? What would your own judgement be on his actions? What do you think is the implication of the involvement of Elisha and the prophetic party?

According to the promise recorded in 2 Kings 10:30, Jehu's dynasty was to last four generations. The king of Hosea's time, Jeroboam II, was the fourth in line from Jehu. During his 40-year reign (786-746 B.C.) Jeroboam seemed to be firmly in control. It was a time of great prosperity. We know from Hosea that worship at the local shrines was thriving, although much of this worship was offered to Canaanite gods rather than Yahweh. Hosea describes the abundance of grain, wine, flax and olive oil, the gold and silver lavished on the idol-gods, the festivals with the worshippers decked out in new clothes.

Hosea 2:8

She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal.

Hosea 2:13

I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the Lord.

But the prosperity of Israel masked considerable social injustice. Hosea's contemporary, Amos, was especially scathing in his descriptions of the way the rich enjoyed the fruits of the booming economy and ignored the plight of the poor or used their greater economic power to oppress and cheat them.

Amos 4:1

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria,
 who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
 who say to their husbands, 'Bring something to drink!'

Amos 6:1-6

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
 the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts!
 Cross over to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath the great;
 then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
 Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory,
 O you that put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence?
 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches,
 and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;
 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
 and like David improvise on instruments of music;
 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
 but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
 and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Amos 5:10-11

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.
 Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain,
 you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them;
 you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

In these quotations, we glimpse the lifestyle of the affluent and leisured classes: building houses of fine stone, filling them with fine furniture, planting vineyards, multiplying flocks and herds, with plenty to eat and drink, enjoying luxury items like finest oils. But Amos's concern is for the poor, who suffer not only poverty but injustice. He, and the other prophets like him, were concerned not only for the worship of Yahweh but for the maintenance of the Law of Moses, which enshrined values of justice and the duty placed on the wealthy and powerful to care for

the powerless, especially the widows and orphans, who otherwise would have no one to provide for them.

We know that, at the outset of his prophetic ministry, Hosea had foretold the downfall not just of the dynasty of Jehu but of the whole nation of Israel..

Hosea 1:4-5

And the Lord said to him, 'Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.'

These verses mention "the blood of Jezreel". Hosea's attitude seems to be that even though the original coup had the backing of the prophetic party, led by Elisha, its bloodthirstiness was culpable before God and the time had come for Yahweh to execute judgement. This prediction of the downfall of the kingdom runs alongside the condemnation of Israel's unfaithfulness in worship throughout the book. Whereas Amos predicted exile as a punishment for callousness and injustice, Hosea saw the coming disaster as punishment on the Jehu dynasty but also as Israel's chance to begin again with a new spirit of loyalty to Yahweh and his laws.