

Session 3: The Early Prophets

B. Hosea and the Politics of his Time

B2. The Syro-Ephraimite War and the Destruction of Israel

Jeroboam II died in 746 B.C. to be succeeded by his son Zechariah. Zechariah did not last long. He was assassinated by Shallum, who took the throne, only to be assassinated in his turn by Menahem. The details are in 2 Kings 15 (and see the Time chart). Thus began a series of short and violent reigns. Menahem reigned eight years with the support of the powerful Assyrian empire, but his son Pekahiah was assassinated in his turn by Pekah, leader of the anti-Assyrian party.

On his accession in 736, Pekah began to put together a coalition to oppose the Assyrians. Rezin, king of Syria, the nation to the north of Israel, agreed to join, but Ahaz, the new king of Judah refused (see Map 2). Israel and Syria joined forces to invade Judah with the aim of replacing Ahaz by their own candidate. The situation in Judah, where Isaiah counselled Ahaz to stand firm against the invaders, is described in Isaiah chapter 7. Instead of taking Isaiah's advice and relying on Yahweh, Ahaz decided to rely on Assyria. He appealed to the emperor Tilgath-Pileser, who promptly invaded, destroyed the kingdom of Syria and reduced Israel to a rump of territory around the city of Samaria. Final disaster was only averted when Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea, who took the throne and submitted to Assyria.

Before long, however, Hoshea in his turn began scheming to free himself from Assyrian domination, this time by joining forces with Egypt. In retaliation, the Assyrian emperor Shalmaneser invaded, destroyed Samaria, carried off its remaining people and scattered them throughout the empire. Thus the kingdom of Israel was finally destroyed, leaving only Judah in the south surviving.

As a prophet, Hosea's task was to bring the word of the Lord to the political situation of his nation. In several of his oracles, this is exactly what we see him doing.

Hosea 5:8-14

Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah.

Sound the alarm at Beth-aven; look behind you, Benjamin!

Ephraim shall become a desolation on the day of punishment;

among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure.

The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark;

on them I will pour out my wrath like water.

Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgement, because he was determined to go after vanity.

Therefore I am like maggots to Ephraim, and like rotteness to the house of Judah.

When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound,

then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king.

But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.
For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I myself will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.

The towns mentioned in verse 8 are in the south of Israel, just north of the Judean border (see Map 6) Benjamin is the tribal territory in the same area. Hosea is warning Israel of the Judean counterattack about to begin. By annexing the territory of her sister nation Judah is "moving an ancient boundary stone". In other words, Hosea sees this as treachery rather than the legitimate spoils of war. Neither nation is seeking the Lord and he is against them both. In fact, by appealing to Assyria, Ahaz for help and Hoshea to avert disaster, both are embracing their executioner. In the end, though, it will not be the lion of Assyria who tears them, but the Lord himself.

Hosea's commentary on contemporary political events continues.

Hosea 7:3-7

By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the officials by their treachery.
They are all adulterers; they are like a heated oven,
whose baker does not need to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is
leavened.
On the day of our king the officials became sick with the heat of wine;
he stretched out his hand with mockers.
For they are kindled like an oven, their heart burns within them;
all night their anger smoulders; in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.
All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers.
All their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon me.

This is Hosea's oracle on Hoshea's coronation in 732. By that point, four kings had been assassinated in the past 12 years. The king is joyful because of the evil of his courtiers, which has brought him to power. But Hosea sees them as "adulterers", treacherous, covenant-breakers. Then he introduces the image of an oven, not needing the baker to stoke it because it is hot enough already. The ashes remain hot overnight and blaze up again in the morning. In the same way, the replacement of one king by another assuages their anger for a while, but when he fails to deliver, it is time to get rid of him in his turn. "Hot as an oven", they "devour their rulers".

Hosea 7:8-12

Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples; Ephraim is a cake not turned.
Foreigners devour his strength, but he does not know it;
grey hairs are sprinkled upon him, but he does not know it.

Israel's pride testifies against him; yet they do not return to the Lord their God,
or seek him, for all this.

Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense;
they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria.

As they go, I will cast my net over them;

I will bring them down like birds of the air;

I will discipline them according to the report made to their assembly.

The image of the oven gives way to the loaves baked in it as Hosea criticizes the policy of vacillating alliances, first with Assyria and then with Egypt. Israel, or Ephraim, is mixed in with the nations, no longer the Lord's special people. Her policy is "half-baked", cooked on only one side. They are like an old man with grey hairs beginning to show: old age, the end of the kingdom, is coming. They are like a dove, flitting about between Assyria and Egypt, but Yahweh the bird-catcher is coming, and will take them in his net.

Hosea 13:9-11

I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you?

Where now is your king, that he may save you?

Where in all your cities are your rulers,
of whom you said, 'Give me a king and rulers'?

I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.

The last days of Samaria are described in 2 Kings 17:1-6. The siege lasted three years before the city was finally taken. Here Hosea predicts the city's final defeat. Israel's help should have come from the Lord (Psalm 121:2) but instead of their help, he is now their destroyer. The next verse refers back to 1 Samuel 8, in which the people of Israel asked Samuel to provide them with a king like all the other nations. Well, says Hosea, Yahweh has given them kings and they have turned out to be useless. He has given them kings and taken them away again. Perhaps they should never have asked at all.

Hosea 13:14-16

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?

O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction?

Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

Although he may flourish among rushes, the east wind shall come, a blast from the Lord,
rising from the wilderness; and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched.

It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.

Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God;
they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces,
and their pregnant women ripped open.

Probably this is Hosea's final oracle. The siege is at its height, Israel cannot survive much longer, and Yahweh asks himself, should he even now rescue them and deliver them from death. Should he redeem them, as Hosea had redeemed Gomer? But the answer is, No. He will have no pity, as the name of Hosea's daughter, Lo-Ruhamah, foresees. Samaria will bear her guilt. The siege will succeed and the city will suffer the usual consequence of resistance: atrocities designed to prevent a new generation from re-establishing the city and nation.