

Hosea Models God's Love For May 31 2020

These are confusing times. Our normal routines have been broken. Our habits are frustrated. We miss and long for seeing, in person, the faces of our friends, extended families, colleagues, and our church family. Each day seems to too much like every other. We miss Sundays being Sunday. Time seems adrift. It is hard to remember even when it is, and what we should be doing.

So, I must admit to exhibiting this same problem! In preparing for last Sunday's Bible Study lesson from Jeremiah (for May 17), I confused the lesson on Jeremiah 21 with that of Jeremiah 22, and proceeded to discuss matters of history and the wider religious implications without a lot of specifics tied to our lesson book. Something was so pressing me for time and attention that I fell into this confusion. (But now I can't remember what that was!) I hurriedly prepared copies for mailing, then turned to notice, aha! We would next be studying Hosea. So, here I find myself, on the night of May 20, having been reading in and about Hosea for the past few hours. Then I referred back to the Lesson book: Wait! Hosea is for May 31! For May 24 we are still in Jeremiah! What shall I do!?

Maybe you've had a similar experience. I will sometimes walk into the kitchen and stop, staring into space blankly. I'm thinking, "Why am I here? What did I come in here to do?" Cindy thinks I'm a bit lost sometimes. She's right. And, here and now, so it is again; I've lost my way.

This is not an unusual situation, in a sense. We frail human beings, with limited attention spans, and difficulty seeing and planning for the future, often "stray from the path." We frequently need God's help in finding our way back to where we should be. At least that's true for me. Perhaps the same thing can be said for whole peoples or nations. Sometimes a temporary madness seems to overtake whole societies, as during the terrors of the French revolution, or other episodes in history when chaos seems to reign. In comparison to those times, the trials we are currently facing with this virus epidemic seem pretty mild.

There seems to be a certain similar confusion about things in Hosea's day. Hosea's ministry may have begun in the last days of King Jehu, and extended into and through the reign of Jeroboam II, and into the perilous days that followed. Backing up a bit, Jehu is first mentioned in the story of the great prophet Elijah. When Elijah fled to Mount Horeb to escape Jezebel and Ahab, God gave him three things to do. These were to anoint Hazael king of Syria (Aram), anoint Jehu king of Israel, and choose Elisha to succeed

him as a prophet. The only one of these that Elijah actually did himself was to choose Elisha. Syria was the bitterest enemy of Israel at the time. Hazael was anointed by Elisha, and was a cruel oppressor of Israel. Elisha sent one of his followers to anoint Jehu. Elisha instructing him, after he had anointed Jehu, to “then open the door and flee; do not linger.” Jehu was likely the most violent of all of the kings of Israel or Judah. He even drove his chariot “like a maniac”. At some point he formed an alliance with Assyria to help against Syria. A monument (stela) was found dedicated to that event in Nimrud, in what was once Assyria. It’s in the British Museum now.



[Jehu](#), bows before [Shalmaneser III](#).^[3] This is the only portrayal we have in ancient Near Eastern art of an Israelite or Judaeen monarch. (From Wikipedia, 20 May 2020)

There followed a period of time when Assyria was not making trouble for the Israelites, and the Syrians were having their own troubles. That was the time of Jeroboam II. We read about his time earlier this quarter in Amos. A year after Jeroboam II’s death in 746 B.C., Assyria became a threat again. A couple of decades later, the Kingdom of Israel would be no more (in 723 B.C.).

So, Hosea prophesied during a relatively brief time (on the larger scale) when Israel was not seriously threatened from without. That left the merchants and those in authority in position to profit from trade routes that met and crossed in Israel. These included the main route from Egypt to Mesopotamia that passed right by Megiddo and Jezreel, and the “King’s Way” through Gilead on the Eastern side of the Jordan, that connected to western Arabia.

The problem might be considered a difficulty in understanding what God expected. The “Deuteronomic” doctrine was that obedience to God’s covenant would be rewarded with wealth, fertility, and good things in general. Disobedience would be punished by disease, famine, and enemy conquest. The book of Deuteronomy lays all this out. The Israelites at Hosea’s time may not have had the text of Deuteronomy (found in the temple in Josiah’s time). But they clearly had either written or orally transmitted knowledge of God’s law. They looked at themselves, and reasoned, “I’m rich, therefore God must hold me as righteous.” It’s sort of the flip of the attitude we find in the gospels, where a

Pharisee might ask, “Did this man, or was it his father, who sinned, that he was born blind?” If someone had suffered the curse of blindness, surely it was a punishment for sin. Jesus contradicted this assumption. Hosea likewise contradicts this assumption that wealth indicates being in good with the gods, in effect saying, “Just being wealthy does not mean that you are righteous.”

Hosea knows the problem is much deeper, going back to very early in Israel’s history. It is idolatry. A breaking of the Covenant between the Israelites and God. When they moved into the “promised land”, the Canaanite culture remained, and was taken up by the Israelites when they settled down from being nomads and herders to being farmers and city-dwellers. The pagan religious system pretended to answer the needs of a settled society. Here’s how they saw it, and the Israelites followed along: You need rains to fall. You need fertility of the fields and of your flocks and herds. How do you get that? It’s a matter of begging, cajoling, or manipulating the various gods that control such things into doing what you want. The priests were the specialists in doing such things. They knew how to manipulate the “baals” to provide rain, fertility, and so on. (At least, they pretended to.)

The word “Baal” is the name of the Canaanite fertility/storm god (who fertilized the clouds and thus caused rain). As “baal” or “baals” the same word was a generic word for gods in general. Similarly, the name “El” was the name of the elder god in the Canaanite pantheon, but as “el” was a word for “god” in general. Many Israelites of the earlier era had “baal” names. Even Saul’s son has the name “Ishbaal” in one place, and in another place his name was “cleaned up” (perhaps by later editing) to “Ishbosheth”. It seems that “baal” came to mean in particular heathen gods, while “el” came to mean “god” in an acceptable sense. “El” is found in Hebrew names quite often, and even in Arabic names of our day, to denote a connection to God.

Hosea sees, in Israelite worship of “baals,” betrayal of the Covenant. In general, the covenant was understood similar to the sense of a marriage alliance – a uniting of two families, or of someone into the family of somebody of greater power. At Sinai the Israelites covenanted to be God’s family. The prophets testified that the Israelites had broken this covenant, and there would be consequences. The lesson book puts an emphasis on issues of justice and oppression. That is indeed an important component of righteousness. Amos’s emphasis is that Israel had failed to fulfil God’s requirements for righteousness under the covenant. It’s a matter of disobedience. Hosea goes beyond that. He too is concerned with behavior: issues of justice and behavior toward the weak and powerless. The lesson book focuses on that. But he casts the issue as breaking the bond of covenant in the sense of Israel being an unfaithful bride of a loving God. This is a remarkable and powerful understanding. It’s interesting how Hosea presents it.

For, you see, Hosea lived out this metaphor. Read Chapters 1-3. As Hosea lived out his life with an unfaithful wife, he prophesied how, similarly, Israel has turned away from the LORD. But God continued, and continues, to call, out of love, for his people. Hosea looks forward to the day that Israel will return. The Hebrew word for God's love is "hesed", which means a kind of zealous covenant love characterized as steadfast and patient. It's the kind of love of Ruth's "kinsman-redeemer" Boaz shows in the Book of Ruth. A love that reaches out and seeks return. The other chapters of Hosea that follow, 4-14, are extended versions of the core message of chapters 1-3. Hosea's metaphor may seem oblique to us today, but in his time it was very real given the practices of the pagan fertility cults. Those practices endured even well past Hosea's time in the Kingdom of Judah. Indeed, one of Josiah's reforms was to break down the houses of the prostitutes that were in the very "House of the LORD," the temple (mentioned in II Kings 23:7). Just as later in Paul's day, in Corinth and elsewhere, pagan temples employed prostitutes, whose services were interpreted as a part of worship, a form of "divine fellowship," acted out. Or, often, a pretext for activity better not done, but profitable to the temple establishment.

As things started to fall apart after Jeroboam II, the Israelites seemed to lose faith in not only the kingship, but also in God. They continued to cynically practice the pagan rites while thinking (or pretending) God was pleased with them, since they remained wealthy. At least for the moment in time. They did not return to God as Hosea had hoped. Judgment befell them. After the Assyrian conquest, the Northern "tribes" disappeared. The Bible mentions the places to which they were exiled. Unlike the Jews, later, the Israelites (the northern 10 tribes) ceased to exist as a people. We don't know, though, what they might have taken of God into their exile. The Bible is silent about that. Might the ideas of God have survived to help lead people to God later? We don't know. But, there's a sign. In the gospel of Luke, when the infant Jesus is taken to the temple to be presented to the LORD, there is a prophet there named Anna, of the tribe of, of all things, Asher! Asher was perhaps the most obscure of those Northern tribes, having hardly any mention in the Bible after Judges (just a few names early in Kings and Chronicles). Here's a representative of the greater Israel present at the Advent of Jesus Christ, our Savior. I think of that as a sign that God's redeeming love is reaching out through time and history to his people, whether we can see it or not, even to the lost of Israel, just as Hosea prophesied.

The Lesson book makes mention of a "prosperity gospel" that is a misunderstanding of God's will comparable of that in Hosea's day. I would not have thought such a flawed doctrine possible! But, I witnessed it first hand myself. While on a business trip to Monterey, I was staying over the weekend, and looked for a local

church to attend. There was one within walking distance, so I went. The pastor preached about Elisha and the widow who had only a very little bit of oil left in the midst of a famine (2 Kings 4 1-7). His message was that God's intent was to make the widow rich, and that her lack of faith in not collecting more jars for oil limited God's blessing to her. She could have arranged for a more continuous flow of jars into which to pour the miraculous oil! To put it in different terms, her greed was insufficient. What an appalling twisting of God's word! In the sermon on the mount, Jesus condemns those who call good evil, and evil good. We continue to see good called evil, and evil things called good, in our day.

Jesus showed us God's love lived out, not as a rich conquering prince, the expected Messiah, but as a man humble enough to accept death on a cross for our sake. God reaches out to us, not just as Hosea describes, but by even more extreme sacrifice, to show his love for us. Accepting that love means following Jesus's example of caring for others. As Micah put it early in our study of the prophets (6:8), **“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”**