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Hosea: a Prophet to Northern Israel

Author(s): Ellis T. Rasmussen

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HOSEA

a Prophet to Northern Israel

Plead with your mother, plead: for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband: . . .

—Hosea 2:2.

Furtively, and with hardly a backward glance, Israel had slipped away. Like a faithless wife, she had turned from the virtuous life under the Law of the Lord and had gone over to the less austere, often openly sensual way of the Canaanite Baal-worshippers. It had been so from the first contact between Israel and Canaan. Or at least since the time of the first generation of Israelites born in Canaan, it had been a temptation for them to turn to the worship and ways of the Canaanites.¹ Doubtless, the success of the established Canaanite farmers whom Israel failed to displace²— the fertility of their flocks and fields, apparently elicited from the gods and goddesses of such things — attracted the Israelite farmers. The rites whereby these Baalim were supplicated were libertine, licentious, lewd, and immoral by all Israelite standards. But people may be attracted by that which should repel them.

Judges and prophets and a few righteous kings had from time to time called Israel back to right ways of life. But since the time when the northern ten tribes had broken away from the rule of Rehoboam, heir to the throne of David and Solomon, their moral, political, and religious state had deteriorated more rapidly than Judah's. Virtually

none of northern Israel's kings sponsored or even accepted the work of prophets in their land, for 150 years. The prophets who tried to convert the people, such as Elijah and Elisha, hardly gained a hearing. Now, in the days of decadence, the Lord made one last attempt to call His people back to his service before abandoning them to the Assyrian empire's approach. Between 760 B.C. and 722 B.C., therefore, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Hosea were among those appointed to issue the Lord's call. Hosea was particularly a prophet to northern Israel.

The first three chapters of his book are perhaps an allegory in which the prophet's own wife is shown to be to him as Israel is to God — faithless and untrue. Some of his children were named with God's messages: Lo-ruhama (No-mercy) and Lo-ammi (Not-my-people); for, said the Lord, “. . . I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away.”³ Israel had sown the wind and must reap the whirlwind.⁴

The evils of the time, rising conversely as faith and true religion diminished, are familiar enough to us. Hosea points them out: swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery, and violence upon violence.⁵ Whoredom and wine had debauched their society.⁶ The Lord had “. . . desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”⁷ For the worship that was performed was hypocritical. There was “. . . no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land.”⁸

No knowledge of God! Israel's call, inherited from Abraham, is to bear the knowledge and power of the living God unto other peoples, for the blessing of all nations of the earth.⁹ May the Lord never have to say of us today as He sadly said of former Israel, in Hosea's poignant words:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children.

And then he adds, summing it up:

*As they were increased, so they sinned against me: therefore will I change their glory into shame.*¹⁰

The Lord could no longer let mercy stave off the demands of justice. “. . . I will punish them for their ways,” He said, “and reward them their

doings.”¹¹ “. . . I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away.”¹²

Hosea is called “the prophet of love” by many commentaries, because he depicts the love of God in His willingness to forgive and show mercy. But he does not show us an indulgent Deity who tolerates all things and forgives.

On the other hand, he makes it clear that forgiveness is available when we qualify for God's mercy. Though Israel was utterly taken away, she was not given up forever.¹³ The Lord would again be their King: “. . . Where is any other that may save thee . . . ?” “. . . For there is no saviour beside me.”¹⁴ Indeed, the Lord is Saviour of all.¹⁵

Great will be the day which the prophet does foresee, when Israel's descendants shall come forth, and with those of Judah be gathered together under one head.¹⁶ Like the woman Hosea was told to love, who once had been sinful and wanton, but whom he “bought” and secluded until after many days she could be clean and prove faithful, so Israel would be redeemed of the Lord, and be “betrothed” to Him forever:

*. . . Yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord.*¹⁷

Not only shall the living in that day assemble to serve the Lord, but also the dead are seen to come forth by the prophet, who speaks of the return in terms of resurrection too:

*Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.*¹⁸

And then, lest some think this be figurative only, he adds in plain words later on:

*I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance [i. e., change of this edict] shall be hid from mine eyes.*¹⁹

Such are the messages of chastisement, correction, hope, and reassurance of Hosea, the prophet. He concludes with a good summation:

*Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.*²⁰

1 Judges 2:10-13, and verses following.

2 Judges 1:19-36; 2:1-3.

3 Hosea 1:6; see also 1:4 and 1:9.

4 Hosea 8:7.

5 Hosea 4:2.

6 Hosea 4:11.

7 Hosea 6:6.

8 Hosea 4:1.

9 Genesis 12:1-3; Abraham 2:6-11.

10 Hosea 4:6, 7.

11 Hosea 4:9.

12 Hosea 1:6.

13 Hosea 11:8, and verses following.

14 Hosea 13:10, 4.

15 1 Nephi 19:8-17.

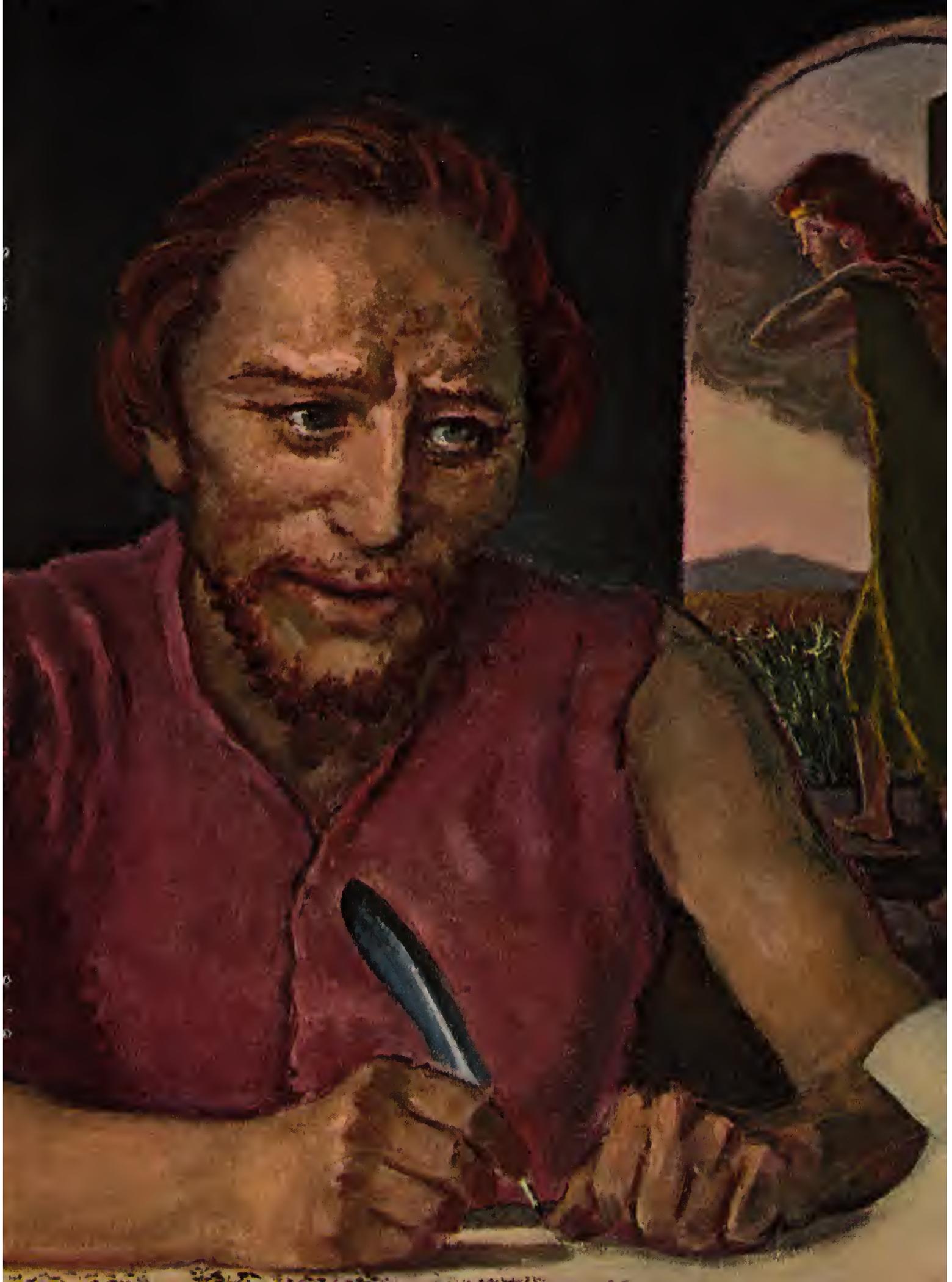
16 Hosea 1:10, 11.

17 Hosea 2:19, 20.

18 Hosea 6:1-3.

19 Hosea 13:14.

20 Hosea 14:9.



THE PICTURE

In this scene, the woman seems to be leaving behind the prophet's back — as the Israelites left the Lord, spurning His wisdom to follow foolish worldly ways.

Perhaps there is a lesson here for us: we cannot take lightly the messages of God without losing something. If we wish to be part of His celestial family after the final judgment, we should try our best to behave like His children now.

—*Virgil B. Smith.*