

AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
THE OLD
TESTAMENT

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Hosea

Familiarity with the book of Hosea is usually limited to the first three chapters. In those chapters, Hosea confronts his readers with the striking analogy between his failed marriage and Israel's relationship with God. While we are left with some profound issues of interpretation in these chapters, Hosea's message of God's judgment and love toward Israel is generally clear and indisputably striking.

In contrast, the remaining chapters (4–14) are among the most difficult in the entire Bible. Andersen and Freedman's comment (66) that Hosea "competes with Job for the distinction of containing more unintelligible passages than any other book of the Hebrew Bible" certainly is true for this section of the book.

These difficulties have kept many from delving into this part of the canon. We do not deny the persistent problems, but to avoid studying Hosea because of them is regrettable, for some of the most moving language about God and his relationship to his people may be found in this book.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Date and Authorship

At first sight the date and authorship of Hosea seem straightforward. The superscription names the author as "Hosea son of Beeri" and gives the date with a typical formula naming the kings who ruled during his ministry: "the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" and "the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel" (1:1).

Problems arise once we convert these statements into our own chronological system. While it is true that the superscription places Hosea's life and work solidly in the eighth century B.C., there are some apparent tensions and issues when we try to be more precise.

For example, disagreements exist about the end of the reign of Jeroboam II (Hubbard 1989, 22-23) due to some confusion over how to handle the length of Pekah's reign (i.e., how much of his reign was over the entirety of the northern kingdom and how much of it was a co-regency). In any case, the suggested dates for the end of Jeroboam II's reign range from 753 to 746 B.C.

The reigns of the kings who are listed from the southern kingdom of Judah are more secure. The beginning of Uzziah's rule is 791 (Jeroboam II assumed the throne of the north around 793) and Hezekiah died in 687/6. Of course, Hosea could not have served as a prophet for nearly a hundred years, and so it is assumed; and it is indirectly supported by internal considerations, that he began his work late in Jeroboam's reign and completed his work early in Hezekiah's (which began in 715).

Thus, the superscription may be interpreted as informing the reader that Hosea was active in the period between ca. 750 and 715 B.C. He was thus one of the earliest (along with Amos and Micah) of the minor prophets. Isaiah completes the list of eighth-century prophets.

Issues and Alternative Viewpoints

Before presenting the historical background that informs a reading of the book of Hosea, we need to consider some objections to the biblical picture of its composition.

Indications of a composite authorship begin, according to some, with the superscription itself. Hosea, as we will see, is clearly a prophet of the north, and his prophecy is in the main directed toward the north. This observation raises the question of the long

