



The Book of the Twelve Hosea

Warning: This study guide features prominent discussion of domestic abuse.

Hosea Introduction

In Hosea, things get very strange, very quickly. Prophetic texts are no strangers to metaphor, but this book takes things to another level, using lived experiences that function as object metaphors in a way that implicates not just the prophet's body, but the bodies of a woman and children. As the woman has some sort of connection to sexual immorality or improper behavior, this whole construct functions as an elaborate metaphor for the religious infidelity of Israel towards YHWH. This book, and the language used by God towards Israel, is very troubling, and has often proved very problematic for later communities reading it.

Marriage as metaphor in the Hebrew Bible

The image of the marriage metaphor is common throughout the Hebrew Bible, where YHWH functions as the groom, and Israel as his wife. More often than not, Israel is also described as unfaithful, specifically likening their worship of other gods to the sexual infidelity of a wife. However, this instance is particularly extreme – in commanding Hosea to take Gomer as his wife, and to bear three children, this real-world example of the metaphor implicates (whether historical, or even imagined) real bodies.

Chapter 2 of Hosea deals with the ways in which God will treat and deal with the infidelity of Israel as his wife. Dr Zahn describes Hosea's words here as the "language of domestic abuse" – indeed, it is a clear, paradigmatic, archetypal depiction of domestic abuse, despite being nearly 3,000 years removed from our modern context. The fact that this is "canonical," that it is biblical, is deeply troubling – we can condemn this text as much as we want to, but it is still here, and has even functioned as a model text for communities of faith throughout history in how to treat unfaithful wives specifically. Naturally, this brings up a slew of questions about how we should read this text, and what we should do with it.

Divine Abuse

It is difficult to know how to proceed with this text, in which God is depicted as a justified abuser. We can say that this is a text that comes from a patriarchal time, and thus reflects patriarchal ideals that

we no longer hold to today; in which women do not have control of their sexual agency, they do not to make decisions about their bodies, in which men can control and prevent women's bodies by taking away freedom, and still expect a sexual relationship with them. But such an acknowledgement might still run the risk of apologizing for the text, and implying that at that time, everyone would have been okay with treating women in such a fashion – women included. We could skip it entirely, but that doesn't actually help, especially as this book is still considered to be part of the biblical canon – it is scripture.

This book is a piece of ancient literature, and as such, we should expect it to differ from the kinds of texts we would read or write in our contemporary contexts. However, even this does not answer the burning question posed by this text, and others like it: what do contemporary reading communities do with this? Historically it *has* been used as a prescriptive text, even if just through reading, for the ways in which men and women relate to one another. As scripture, many communities have read this text, seen God as the one doing it, and determined that such behavior must be okay, must be permissible. Especially for those who have experienced domestic abuse, particularly women, this text often feels impossible to reckon with.

Hosea starkly highlights the ways in which communities need to think about these questions and understand the ways in which these texts might affect their members, rather than simply sweeping these difficult texts under the rug. How do we understand a text like this intellectually, while condemning it ethically? Even a text we think of as scripture must be wrestled with ethically, and even called out where necessary, to say that this type of behavior and these values are not ones that can be accepted by anybody.

Ultimately, there is no one prescribed way for a group of readers to handle this kind of text. It can only ever be up to individual communities to answer these questions, and to decide together how to read the text, and how to answer the difficult questions it poses.

Traditions in Hosea

As part of the exercise to acknowledge the complexities of a text like Hosea, but still engage with the material we find within, it is also important to talk about the development of traditions within Hosea. There is a deep historical sense in the text, with allusions to traditions familiar to us such as the Exodus and figures like Jacob. Hosea is primarily based in the northern kingdom, and the text seems to demonstrate an awareness of these early traditions that biblical scholars think originated in that region. The presence of these stories doesn't indicate that Hosea was reading the book of Exodus as we know it, for example, but it does suggest an early understanding of the traditions that will become the Book of Exodus; an understanding of Israel as a people in relation to their God, who came from Egypt, and so on.

What is particularly fascinating is the clear sense throughout Hosea that Israel's existence, or at least the origin of their relationship with YHWH, begins in Egypt – not in Canaan, or with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This seems to be a separate origin story at this point in time, part of a growing set of traditions about a people group enslaved in Egypt who were rescued by a deity that came and found them, beginning their intertwined relationship. However, as is evident from 12:2-4, the text also seems to know at least part of the Jacob story. All of these independent traditions are like nuggets of

the final form we know from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, not yet a fully-fledged story as we might understand it.

Hosea, then, becomes an important locus for thinking about Israelite traditions, how they get used and sewn together, and how prophets transfer stories into a message for their contemporary communities.