

A Prophet of Israel

HOSEA

"The Prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but Holy men of God, spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

Viewed from this distance of time, their ministry was manifestly Divine. They spake of things concerning the destinies of Israel and other nations in the far distant future, for which there is no parallel in other literature.

The inspired comment of the apostle Peter furnishes the only reasonable explanation.

Although different in matter and style, one feature is common to them all. They testified with inflexible purpose against the corruption and disobedience of the chosen people; to the ordinances of God which were given to them in unique circumstances at Mount Sinai centuries before.

In this respect the prophets are different from other authors, of ancient or of modern times.

The name Hosea signifies "Help" or "Saviour" and is similar to that of Joshua before it was altered, to signify that he was God's help or Saviour.

Like that of Amos, the mission of Hosea was mainly to the northern Kingdom of the ten tribes, headed by Ephraim, and belongs to the early prophetic period, being contemporary with Isaiah and Micah. He therefore saw both Israel and Judah in great vicissitudes of fortune. Under Uzziah and Jeroboam 2nd, they were prosperous and strong, but were afterwards in the deepest distress and humiliation on account of their departure from God, who had redeemed them from servitude in Egypt, and given them the land promised to their fathers.

However, we are not so much concerned with the historical setting of the Prophets, as with the spiritual import of their ministry, for which they are mainly commended to our study in the New Testament.

The book of Hosea opens in characteristic fashion. It is the word of Yahweh; not merely a literary composition. This word is not inherent in the prophet; he received it from God, and therefore spake as he was "moved by the Holy Spirit". Probably this also accounts for the somewhat abrupt manner common to all the prophets, as distinguished from the literary craftsmanship of ordinary men of letters. Hosea prophesied for more than fifty years, and his book is probably very much condensed, on the principle of John 21:25.

As usual, the human element is dismissed in a sentence. "Hosea the son of Beer," is all that is said of his personal history prior to his call to the prophetic office. Biographical details are omitted, and therefore we may depend they do not matter.

The Book consists of two main divisions. The first three chapters are taken up with God's charge to Hosea, whilst the remaining eleven chapters are mostly devoted to the prophet's addresses and exhortations to Israel and Judah.

In Chapter i., Hosea is told to take unto himself a wife and children of whoredoms, as a man of sign to Israel. "And the Lord said to Hosea, go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord."

The God-given names of his children are indicative of the taking away of Divine mercy, and His disowning of Israel as the people of Yahweh. A son is born: "and the Lord said unto him, call his name Jezreel. For yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel, upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease, the Kingdom of the House of Israel." Very possibly, Hosea saw the fulfillment of this, for he is said to have continued until the reign of Hoshea, when the Assyrian invader put an end to the Kingdom.

A daughter is next born. "And God said unto him, call her name Lo-ruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel . . ."

"But I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen."

This is doubtless a prophecy of the miraculous deliverance of Judah, and the destruction of the Assyrian host by the Angel of the Lord, as recorded in 2nd Kings 19:35.

A second son is born; "Then said God, call his name Lo-ammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God."

Nevertheless, this tragic rejection, is not for a moment to make void the immutable counsel and purpose of God, as enshrined in the promises to Abraham and David.

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea. which cannot be measured nor numbered: and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the Living God."

Of course, the allusion to this in 1st Peter 2:10, is by way of illustration, and does not affect its primary application to the final restoration of both Israel and Judah under one "Head" in the great "day of Jezreel".

Chapter 2 opens softly. Hosea is bidden to plead with his people as still related to God, and the subjects of Divine compassion.

Under the thin disguise of a wife's unlawful passion for many lovers, Israel's fondness for the idols and ways of their uncircumcised neighbors—strictly forbidden by the Law—is sadly referred to, together with the calamities which were bound to ensue, under Divine justice.

Her corn and wine, wool and flax, are to be taken away. Thus we have an insight into the extreme fruitfulness of the Land in, ancient times. Moses refers to this in Deut. 8: 8, "A land of wheat and barley, and vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey."

Also, her new moons, sabbaths and solemn feasts are to cease, and she is to be stripped bare (see Ezek. 23: 29).

At verse 14, the theme again changes. The eventual return of God's favor to His erring people is reiterated in the tenderest terms. "Therefore behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak to her heart."

"And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth . . . when she came up out of the Land of Egypt." Her God will be to her, Ishi (my husband) (see Isaiah 54:5). She is to be betrothed to Him in righteousness, loving kindness and tender mercies, and that for ever. Her God will once more "hear the Heavens, and they shall hear the Earth, and the Earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and they shall hear Jezreel." There is here a play upon the name.

Jezreel means to scatter or sow (see Ch. 1:4); it is used as expressive of God's anger in the scattering of the House of Israel; but in Ch. 2: 22-23, it is used in the contrary sense. "I will hear the Heavens, and they shall hear the Earth; and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel, and I will sow her unto me in the earth, and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy." Of course, Paul's use of this in Rom. 9:25, opens up a wider aspect of the matter, as affecting Gentiles also. There is no mistaking the purport of verse 18. It is a glimpse of the Kingdom; "and in that day, will I make a covenant for them, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle, out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely."

The chapter concludes with a reference to the "final consolation," of Israel: "I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God." This is evidently a reference to the new covenant of Jer. 31:31, and Heb. 8:8, in which God's law will be written in their hearts, and their sins will be remembered no more.

In chapter 3 the prophet's marital experiences are again presented as typical of God's dealings with his unfaithful people, and their separation from all their defiling associations, and preservation for ultimate reconciliation and glory. "For the children of Israel shall abide many days without an image (pillar), and without an ephod, and without teraphim."

But "many days" does not mean "for ever" as some would have us believe. There is a "set time to favour Zion", and the appointed day draws on apace, when the children of Israel will "return, and seek the Lord their God, and David (the Beloved) their King; and shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days".

The deliverance of Jerusalem in A.D. 1917, from the Desolator, and the establishment of "a national home" for the Jewish people, in the Promised Land, is a certain indication that the day is not far distant, when "the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob". What this will mean for the saints who wait for "the consolation of Israel" is clearly indicated in Rom. 9:12-15 "Now if the fall of them (Israel) be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them, the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness? For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

This concludes the first division of the book, and is occupied mainly, with God's charge to Hosea, and with the Divine pronouncements regarding Israel's glorious destiny.

The remaining portion of the book is devoted to the direct message of the inspired prophet to Israel: First to the people, and then to their rulers.

It is a striking exemplification of the truth, that the natural mind has an innate antagonism to Divine things. As it is written: "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other" (Gal. 5:17).

Chapter 4 opens thus: "Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel: for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land." We see by this, the things with which God is well pleased, and can but marvel at the shallowness of human unbelief and opposition to eternal verities.

The great principles of "judgment, mercy and faith" were forgotten, and the charges of perjury, murder, theft and adultery, justify to the hilt, the righteous judgments of God against a people who bore His name, and were under His law, and occupied His land.

Their tenure of the land was contingent upon obedience; and therefore, Israel had forfeited their title to it, and abdicated their position as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation".

Verse 6 tells us the cause of this. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." They had utterly neglected the source of knowledge, and had reverted to the ignorance and idols of the nations around them. Let us not fail to profit by the lesson. In recent years, there has been a disposition to "water down" the Truth, and to minimize the difference between the household of faith, and the world in general. It is strange, but true, that there is less of that robust faith, zeal, and keen relish of the Truth, as the subject of daily converse, notwithstanding the gravity of the times, and accumulating signs of the return of Christ.

In verse 11 we read: "Whoredom and wine, and new wine, take away the heart". Hence the lives of saints exemplify the "narrow way" and "strait gate", in self-sacrifice and consecration to holiness in thought, word and deed.

In chapter 5 the priests, the house of Israel, and the house of the king, together with the house of Judah, are sternly addressed and rebuked for their pride, corruption and blood-shedding.

Under the striking figures of a "moth," "rottenness," and a destroying "lion," Divine judgment is pronounced upon them, concurrently with the withdrawal of God's presence and protection, until a humbled people should once more "look at the Rock from whence they were hewn" and seek unto the God of their fathers.

"I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early."

Chapter 6 opens with a beautiful passage in the form of a response: "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."

This, no doubt, has reference to the time spoken of in Zech. 12: 10. "I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications; and they shall look upon me, whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son."

"After two days he will revive us: in the third day, he will raise us up." This is interesting in a twofold sense. Jesus was in the grave two whole days, and came forth on the third day. So Israel nationally are being revived, and will ultimately be raised to the "first dominion" in this third day of 1,000 years, since the destruction of the kingdom under Zedekiah, and the departure of "the glory" from Zion.

The sixth verse of this chapter is profound in its significance. "I desired mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God, more than burnt offerings." This is quoted by the Lord Jesus in Matt. 9:13, and is set against the soulless formalism and ceaseless faultfinding of the self-righteous Scribes and Pharisees.

The lesson is equally important in the 20th Century. No amount of education, culture, and profession of Divine service, can compensate for the lack of mercy, and of the knowledge of God, as revealed in "the word of His grace".

In chapter 7 the sad theme of Israel's manifold transgressions seems unbroken. They turn either to Egypt or Assyria in their troubles, instead of "to the most High". As we read in Jeremiah, 2nd chapter, "my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

The general theme of judgment upon Israel for their sins, occupies almost the whole of chapters 8, 9 and 10, with scarcely a break.

The prophet is bidden to blow the trumpet, that is to bring the invader and avenger into the very Sanctuary itself. They had set up kings, and made princes, without the least regard for their fitness in the sight of God. "They have sown the wind, and shall reap the whirlwind." Two thousand five hundred years of history bears tragic testimony to the truth of the prophecy. This is one of many isolated passages of Scripture that have become proverbial, and are quoted with great effect in matters far removed from the context.

In verse 12 we read, "I have written to him, the great things of my Law, but they were counted to him as a strange thing "; and in verse 14 we read, "Israel hath forgotten his Maker, and buildeth temples".

In this connection, the history of Israel as a whole, exhibits the strange contrariety of human nature. While as yet, they were in the enjoyment of their land, and had considerable political power, the great things of God's law were disregarded, and they multiplied idolatrous temples, to which they devoted their offerings of silver and gold.

Subsequently, when a humbled remnant returned from captivity, shorn of all power as a nation, and quite cured of idol worship, they went to the other extreme, and gradually assumed a self-righteous exclusiveness, and developed a soulless and mechanical regard for the letter of the law, almost to the exclusion of "judgment, mercy and faith"; the great underlying principles of God's law in all ages.

This latter portion of Hosea is notable for the free use of metaphors, based upon the daily occupations of Israel. For example, in chapter 10:4: "They have spoken words, swearing falsely in making a covenant, therefore judgment springeth up as hemlock in the furrows of the field." We are here reminded of the words of Paul (Gal. 6: 8): "He that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption."

In verse 11 the theme is resumed. "Ephraim is as an heifer that is taught, and loveth to tread out the corn: but I passed over upon her fair neck. I will make Ephraim to ride; Judah shall plow, and Jacob shall break his clods. Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you; ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies: because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men."

Chapter 11 recalls the events of the Exodus, and the deliverance of Israel in their national childhood, from the servitude of Egypt. "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt. I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms: but they knew not that I healed them. I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them."

The first verse of this chapter is interesting, as having a double meaning, and an unsuspected application to the child Jesus, as we learn from Matt. 2:15. This illustrates once again the value of the New Testament, as the Divine elucidation of the Old. Both Old and New

Testaments are complementary to each other. Jews reject the one, whilst Gentiles practically reject the other. Thus, are they all concluded in unbelief, as we are reminded in Rom. 11:32, that eventually He might have mercy upon all.

Verses 8 and 9 illustrate the abounding mercy of God towards Israel and serve to remind us again that the thoughts and ways of God are as high as the heavens are above the earth, as contrasted with human ways and thoughts. Israel owe their preservation to the immutability of God; "I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim, for I am God, and not man: 'The Holy One in the midst of thee'."

Chapter 12 is notable for its historical allusions; firstly to the circumstances of Jacob's birth, and then to his successful wrestling with the Angel. "He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he had power with God; yea, he had power over the Angel, and prevailed: he wept and made supplication unto him; he found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us, even the Lord God (Yahweh Elohim) of hosts; The Lord (Yahweh) is his memorial."

Reading this language of the Spirit one can scarcely help thinking of one greater than Jacob, who wrestled, and with strong crying and tears, made supplication unto him, that was able to save him from death, and (like Jacob) was heard in that he feared. Hosea xii. 6 continues with the exhortation: "Therefore turn thou to thy God; (Elohim) keep mercy and judgment and wait on thy God continually." Now here is a question for the skeptic and unbeliever, who claims that his position is according to "reason." The facts are against him, and "it is hard to kick against the pricks."

How is it that in all the Scriptures we are exhorted to manifest truth, mercy, judgment, faith, righteousness and, in short, everything that is calculated to truly enrich and ennoble our minds and characters? Were these exalted principles characteristic of the world in ancient times? No, they were not, neither are they a feature of our own times. Is it not for the lack of these things that the very existence of civilization is threatened? and does not this apply both to the domestic situation in every country and to world affairs also? Unquestionably it does. Until the unbeliever can shew that the lofty principles of the Bible are the natural manifestations of the human heart and mind his claim to a monopoly of reason is a grotesque conceit.

Returning to Hosea 12:9 we see the immutable purpose of God once more expressed: "I, that am the Lord thy God from the land of Egypt, will yet make thee to dwell in tabernacles, as in the days of the solemn feast."

The patience of God has been truly divine: "I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similitudes by the ministry of the prophets." Then follows another interesting reference to the history of Jacob: "And Jacob fled into the country of Syria, and Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he kept sheep." In some respects, this is suggestive of Christ Jesus, who, like Jacob, was persecuted by his brethren, and in a "far country" has "served for a wife." The day is fast approaching when the Bridegroom will return and "shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied."

In chapter 13 the general subject of Israel's apostasy is continued. "When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended in Baal, he died."

Molten images and idols are made, "according to their own understanding". So, we see the natural trend of human "reason". Again, how vivid are the illustrations used. They, who were founded upon "the Rock of Ages" and should have been as a lion among the nations, are as "the morning cloud" and "the early dew", soon to evaporate; the "chaff driven by the wind", and as "smoke out of the chimney". And again, the declaration comes like a solemn refrain: "I am the Lord thy God, from the land of Egypt. Thou shalt know no God but me: for there is no Saviour beside me." And in verses 9 and 10, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thine help"; and in verse 14, we have the gracious promise that embraces far more than Israel's national resurrection: "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." The reader will do well to compare this passage with Ezek. 37.

Paul's reference in 1 Cor. 15:54-55, shews another and greater aspect, in the final victory of the accepted saints over death and the grave. The two ideas are beautifully connected

in Rom. xi. 15: " For if the casting away of them (Israel) be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

The brief 14th chapter affords a fitting conclusion. First, there is the Spirit's entreaty: "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God. . . Say unto him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously, so will we render the calves (sacrifices) of our lips.

"Ashur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy."

To this expression of repentance, there follows a truly divine response, re-echoed a hundred times in the writings of the prophets: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him."

"I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall blossom as the lily and strike forth his roots as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow, shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon."

Ephraim shall say, "What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found."

There is no doubt about the meaning of these beautiful metaphors. They speak eloquently of the Deity's purpose, to restore Israel to the land of their fathers, and save them "with an everlasting salvation". This "Hope of Israel" being incorporate in the "good news" preached by Christ and the apostles, it is of the utmost importance to be numbered among those alluded to in the last verse: "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."

Bournemouth.

B. A. Warrender.

