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# What Every Christian Should Know About Amos and Hosea

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# What Every Christian Should Know about Amos and Hosea

ROLF A. JACOBSON

**T**he North American church is mired in a crisis of biblical illiteracy. Every recent study and survey of which I am aware has driven that point home. In fact, the surveys reveal that, in spite of a growing awareness of the problem, things are not getting better. David Tiede, Bernard M. Christensen Professor of Religion and Vocation at Augsburg College, is fond of saying, “We congratulated ourselves so long on not being biblical literalists, that we didn’t realize we had become biblically illiterate.”

Church leaders should respond to this crisis. This journal of “theology for Christian ministry” is aimed normally at an audience of professional practitioners, containing essays that function at the level of reflective criticism and that address critical theological, biblical, or cultural issues. This essay is different. It constitutes rather a straightforward attempt to name the vital content of the books of Amos and Hosea that every Christian should know. It is (basic) content heavy and (reflective) criticism weak.

The purpose of such an article is, first, to challenge the reflective professional practitioners of the church to ask, “What do the people I serve need to know about this topic?” Not what do the professional ministers need to know, or the professional theologians need to know, but what do the laity need to know? This question is appropriate for an issue devoted, in part, to the witness of the prophet Hosea, be-

*To overcome the biblical illiteracy of the churches, leaders need to teach parishioners the basic content of the Bible. This essay offers a resource for that important task.*

cause Hosea condemned the professional religious practitioners of his day precisely for the sin of failing to equip the laity with basic knowledge of God and of God's ways: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hos 4:6).

Second, the present essay is intended to help professional ministers of the church to begin to equip the laity with basic knowledge about Amos and Hosea. The essay can be used directly by laity or read by pastors in preparation for a sermon series or Bible study series on these books. The material in these two ancient prophetic books can be challenging—both intellectually and morally. We all need assistance to understand their witness and to wrestle with their proclamation. But, as the book bearing Hosea's name ends, "Those who are wise understand these things" (14:9).

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Amos and Hosea (along with their fellow prophets Isaiah and Micah) were active in the eighth century B.C.E., during an era of the chosen people's history that is often called the period of the divided monarchy. During these years, the twelve tribes were divided into two kingdoms. The southern kingdom, known as Judah, was made up mostly of the tribe of the same name, as well as the house of Benjamin. Its capital was Jerusalem, where its worship life centered in the temple that

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Solomon had built for the Lord. It was governed by a line of kings that descended from King David and that would eventually produce Jesus of Nazareth. The northern kingdom, known as Israel, was made up of the remaining geographical tribes. The northern tribes had split from the Davidic monarchy about the year 922 B.C.E., following the reign of Solomon. Israel did not enjoy one, stable dynasty, as did its southern sister. Instead, because of a series of coups and murders, many different families established brief dynasties. One of the usurpers, King Omri, built the city of Samaria sometime around the year 870 B.C.E., which then served as Israel's capital until the kingdom's fall around 722 B.C.E. Descendants of the northern kingdom later became known as Samaritans, while descendants of Judah became known as Jews.

The eighth century was a time of relative peace and prosperity for the two sister kingdoms—especially for the northern kingdom, Israel, in which both Amos and Hosea prophesied. In the middle of this century, both kingdoms enjoyed long and stable kingly reigns. Jeroboam II ruled in Israel (c. 783–742 B.C.E.) and Uzziah ruled in Judah (c. 786–738 B.C.E.). Externally, the region's superpowers—Egypt to the southwest and Assyria to the northwest—were relatively dormant. Internally,

wealth and prosperity were growing, as a new set of wealthy people emerged within Israel.

In terms of the religious life of the people, there were two overriding problems. The first was a crisis presented by the pagan worship of Israel's Canaanite neighbors, especially worship of the Canaanite god of rain, Baal. In Israel, many who worshiped the Lord found no problem with also worshiping Baal and observing the worship rituals in Baal's honor. A second religious crisis of this time might be described as "mechanistic" faith. Many people approached faith by merely going through the motions—observing ceremonies ritualistically, but living day-to-day in a manner incompatible with a relationship with the Lord.

Summary:

- Amos and Hosea prophesied during the eighth century B.C.E., during the time of the divided monarchy.
- This was a time of relative stability and prosperity.
- Two crises were (1) worship of the pagan god Baal and (2) rote religious observation in which the Israelites did not live their faith out in daily life.

## AMOS

### *The prophet*

Although the book of Hosea comes before the book of Amos in the Old Testament, the prophet Amos came slightly before the prophet Hosea in history. The book of Amos begins, "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (1:1). From this introduction, three important things about Amos can be gleaned. First, he was a citizen of Judah, the southern kingdom, since Tekoa was part of Judah, but God sent him to preach his prophetic messages in the northern kingdom, Israel. One can imagine that this would have made him fairly unpopular in the northern kingdom. Just imagine, during the time of the American Civil War, if God had sent a preacher from the North down to deliver God's messages in the South—especially critical ones! We do not even have to imagine how he was received. Amos 7:10–17 contains the account of a confrontation between Amos and "Amaziah, the priest of Bethel" (one of the main spiritual centers of the northern kingdom), in which Amaziah tells Amos in so many words, "Go back to your own country if you want to earn a living as a prophet; you are not welcome here!"

A second conclusion that can be drawn from the opening verse of Amos is that the prophet was not trained as a professional prophet. He was "among the shepherds of Tekoa." This does not mean that he was poor, illiterate, or in other ways lowly. It might well be that he was a property owner, a member of a wealthier class. The real point is that God called him to serve as a prophet even though he was not a member of an official prophetic guild. To apply the standards of our own day,

he had not attended seminary, not been ordained, and was not on the payroll. This point is underscored in the account of Amos's confrontation with Amaziah, when the prophet retorted, in effect, "I am farmer, not a professional prophet. This is not about earning money. This is about God, who called me to deliver God's word, so that is exactly what I am doing" (see 7:14–15).

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A third aspect of Amos's career evident in the first verse of the book is that the prophet most likely had a very brief yet intense prophetic career. The text says that Amos spoke these words "two years before the earthquake." Some scholars have concluded that this means that his prophetic ministry lasted for only a year, following which he went back to farming. Given the cold welcome he received in the northern kingdom, who can blame him?

*Amos's message*

One characteristic passage from the book of Amos that every Christian should know is Amos 5:21–24.

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The "I" speaking in this passage is the Lord. As was the custom in the ancient days, the prophet would say something like, "Thus says the Lord," and then deliver God's message in the first person. Using stark and shocking language—"I hate, I despise... I will not accept... I will not look... I will not listen"—this message contrasts rote, ritual religious observation with intentional, daily faithful fulfillment. The "festivals" and "solemn assemblies" of which the prophet speaks refer to the highest and holiest days of the religious year—the ancient equivalents of the Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter. The prophet is not claiming that these have no value to God, but rather, the prophet is criticizing any religious faith that can drive a wedge between loving God and loving neighbor. The prophet's message is similar to the teaching of Jesus: loving God and loving neighbor go together. When God establishes a right relationship with us, God simultaneously demands that we turn to our neighbors and try to initiate right relationships with them.

The key demand that God makes of us is that "justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The two terms, justice and righteousness, mutually inform one another. Justice has to do with the situation in outward society, while righteousness has to do with the state of one’s interior life. Justice is the external state of affairs in which all life can thrive. Many people equate the concept of justice with “fairness.” But that is insufficient. When something is fair, everyone plays by the same rules. But, as anyone who has ever competed in a game knows, sometimes a strict enforcement of rules makes success impossible for one or more players. Sometimes, in order for as many people as possible to thrive, the application of rules needs to be tailored to specific situations. Fairness is indeed one part of justice, but it is *only one* part of justice. Because justice is about God’s preferred social order in which all life can thrive, it means that society must be more than merely fair. There must be special provision made for the disadvantaged, especially for those least able to compete on a level playing field. As a prophet who lived shortly after Amos announced, “Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17). “Righteousness,” on the other hand, is the measure of whether an individual person or a group of people are living in a manner consistent with the just society that God desires. In the Bible, a righteous scale measures weight accurately and a righteous promise-maker keeps promises. Similarly, a righteous person strives to make decisions and live personally in a way that contributes to creating a just society in which all life can flourish.

Summary:

- Amos was a citizen of the southern kingdom, whom God sent to prophesy to the northern kingdom.
- Amos was not a professional prophet, but a layperson whom God called to prophetic ministry for a short time.
- In a key passage from Amos 5, the prophet announces that the life of faith requires justice and righteousness, not merely rote religious observance.

## HOSEA

### *The prophet*

Like Amos, the prophet Hosea was sent by God to deliver messages to the northern kingdom, Israel. Unlike Amos, Hosea was originally from the northern kingdom, was very likely a member of a prophet guild (or held an officially recognized role as a prophet), and had a prophetic career that spanned a great deal of time. Most likely, Hosea’s prophetic career lasted from around 750 B.C.E. until after 722 B.C.E.—the year when the northern kingdom was defeated and destroyed by the Assyrian empire. So, while Amos’s intense career took place entirely during a time of peace and stability, Hosea’s ministry began in the midst of security, but ended amid the ash heap of Samaria’s destruction.

### *Hosea's message*

One aspect of Hosea's witness that every Christian should know is the message that he embodied through the living parable of his family life. Hosea took a wife, named Gomer, in order to announce to the people God's anger and judgment because of their sins:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." (Hos 1:2)

As one can easily imagine, there has been a great deal of debate about who Gomer was and what the text means when it says she was "a wife of whoredom." Was she a prostitute? If so, was she a cultic prostitute or a common prostitute?<sup>1</sup> Was she simply a promiscuous woman? If she was either a prostitute or a promiscuous woman, was she so before Hosea married her or did she later become such? Was she none of the above, but just a symbolic representation of the people's infidelity? One final question: Is the report of Hosea's marriage a parable or did Hosea actually marry a "woman of harlotry" (no matter how we define this term)?

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Answers to all of these questions vary, but the gist of the message that the report of Hosea's marriage is intended to deliver is clear: just as Hosea had married an unfaithful spouse, so God had initiated a relationship with an unfaithful people. The point is that, in the same way husbands and wives are expected to be faithful to one another, God's people are to be faithful to God. Hosea's message was a clear condemnation: the people had not been faithful to God.

Hosea also communicated this message through the names of the three children that Gomer bore. The first child, a boy, was named Jezreel, "for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel" (1:4). Jezreel was a place in which the kings of Israel—referred to here as "the house of Jehu," who was King Jeroboam II's ancestor—had shed innocent blood (see 1 Kings 21; 2 Kings 9–10). The second child, a daughter, was named Not-Shown-Mercy (Hebrew: *Lo-Ruhamah*), "for I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel or forgive them"

<sup>1</sup>The term "cultic prostitute" designates the belief that as part of the Canaanite worship of Baal, temple women engaged in sexual acts with male worshipers in order to bring about natural fertility. According to one scholar: "The believer thought of the land as the wife which the god fertilized with rain. The cult was based on sympathetic magic. To anticipate, induce, and participate in Baal's intercourse with earth, sexual rites were used, the *hieros gamos* [holy marriage/coupling] celebrated in the cult by representative protagonists"; James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 25. Many scholars insist that there is no evidence that cultic prostitutes ever existed in Canaanite religion. Still other scholars believe that temple prostitutes did exist in Canaanite religion, but argue that there was no religious symbolism to the sexual actions they performed, and that they served only physical (that is sexual) needs.

(1:6). Another boy was born and named Not-My-People (Hebrew: *Lo-Ammi*), “for you are not my people and I am not your God” (1:9).

As part of living out this drama of communicating God’s judgment, the prophet divorced his wife Gomer: “She is not my wife, and I am not her husband” (2:2).

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***“God’s anger is not the opposite of God’s love, but a part of God’s love. Precisely because God loves all people and all of creation, God is provoked to anger when a person or persons causes others to suffer.”***

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A theological issue that Hosea’s message raises is the issue of God’s anger. Many people today shy away from the concept of God’s anger, because they consider God’s anger the opposite of God’s love. Some people have even mistakenly believed that the New Testament God of Jesus is a “God of love,” while the Old Testament God was a “God of anger.” Very early on, the Christian church condemned this view as a false teaching. The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are *the same God*. Furthermore, God’s anger is not the opposite of God’s love, but *a part of God’s love*. Precisely because God loves all people and all of creation, God is provoked to anger when a person or persons causes others to suffer. It is impossible to conceive of a loving God without also conceiving of a God who grows angry when people whom God loves are caused to suffer. As one Old Testament interpreter has written, “Divine sympathy for the victims of human cruelty is the motive of anger. Indeed, what is God’s sense of outrage at the mistreatment of the fatherless if not a sense of justice enhanced by compassion?”<sup>2</sup>

The example of parental love is insightful. As a parent, I love both my children. But that love does not preclude the emotion of anger. At times, the behavior of one of my children sparks my anger. In fact, the behavior that will most quickly provoke me to anger is when one child does something to hurt the other one. Precisely because I love both my children, I get angry when they hurt each other, just as my own parents grew angry with me when I hurt one of my siblings.

But God’s anger, as both Hosea and indeed the entire Old Testament teach, is momentary. It is short-term. God’s “anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime” (Ps 30:5). God’s anger is sparked by human cruelty and sin and exists for the purpose of changing human behavior. When the behavior and sin that motivated God’s anger are eliminated, then God’s anger abates. Or, when those who caused others to suffer in turn become the victims of human cruelty, God’s mercy is sparked.

That is the second part of Hosea’s message: God’s mercy, love, and faithful-

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001) 370.



ness are enduring. On the other side of God's anger, God still loves and is still faithful to the chosen people.

As noted above, Hosea's prophetic ministry spanned decades. Hosea was still active as a prophet sometime around the year 722 B.C.E.—when the nation of Israel, its monarchy, and its capital city Samaria fell at the hands of the Assyrians. At some point in Hosea's ministry—perhaps near the end of the northern kingdom, perhaps shortly after its destruction—God sent a new message for the prophet to deliver: a message of divine mercy, faithfulness, and forgiveness. It is not clear exactly when this happened, because the messages of Hosea collected in the book that bears his name do not necessarily occur in chronological order. Yet this much is clear: at some point, Hosea sang a new song of hope and faithfulness, because God changed the tune.

As part of this new song, the prophet reinterpreted the meaning of his first child's name and flat out changed the names of his other two children. The prophet announced: "Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea...and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God'" (1:10). In this proclamation, Hosea was announcing that God was remaining faithful to the ancient promise to Abraham and Sarah: "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen 22:17).

To communicate God's faithfulness, Hosea reinterpreted Jezreel's name. Yes, Jezreel was a place where the kings of Israel had shed blood, but the Hebrew name itself means "God-Plants." So Hosea built on the positive image of God planting or sowing seeds, and he proclaimed, "great shall be the day of God's planting" (1:11; my translation). Similarly, Hosea renamed his second two children. Speaking to God-Plants, the older child, he said, "Say to your brother, My-People [Hebrew: *Ammi*], and to your sister, Shown-Mercy [Hebrew: *Ruhamah*]" (2:1; my translation).

Furthermore, the prophet remained faithful to his promiscuous or prostituting wife: "I will take you as my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord" (2:19–20). The key theological terms and climactic final words of this verse emphasize the point of the prophetic drama that the prophet was enacting: The Lord will be faithful in spite of the people's infidelity.

In a passage of from Hos 11 that can be interpreted as a commentary on the prophetic drama that the prophet enacted in his family life, Hosea employs the language of parent and child to preach God's faithfulness and mercy. The passage is one of the most tender, most touching passages in the entire Bible:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;

they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim? [Note: two cities that were destroyed]  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath. (11:1–4, 8–9)

The theological issue that is raised by the altered message that Hosea enacted in his family and by the poignant message of Hos 11 is the issue of God's faithfulness. Hosea's message, which is consistent with the message of the entire Bible, is that God's faithfulness is stronger, longer, and deeper than God's anger. Whereas God's anger is momentary and exists in order to bring about a change in human behavior, God's faithfulness is permanent. It is a part of who God is. As Ps 103:8

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*“whereas God’s anger is momentary and exists in order to bring about a change in human behavior, God’s faithfulness is permanent”*

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says, “The Lord merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Similarly, in Exod 34:6–7, God's anger is described as enduring to the “third and the fourth generation,” but God's mercy “for the thousandth generation.” The point of this contrast is not to suggest that God literally punishes for three or four generations, but to underscore by means of the vast difference between “the fourth” and “the thousandth” the radical difference between God's brief anger and God's enduring fidelity. God's anger is the way God has to be sometimes, just because God loves all creation. God's faithfulness and mercy are who God is forever.

Summary:

- Hosea served as the Lord's prophet to Israel over three decades, during which the northern kingdom Israel declined and was destroyed.

- Hosea lived out the message of God's anger by taking an unfaithful wife and giving symbolic names to his children.
- At some point, near or after the end of the northern kingdom, Hosea proclaimed the enduring faithfulness and mercy of God. ⊕

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