

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Hosea

Yesterday's Answers for Today's Questions



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It seems that everyone is talking about it: newspapers, magazines, the Internet—everyone is focusing on the difficult times that are engulfing the world. Suicide is dramatically on the rise worldwide, as people are overwhelmed with financial and moral issues that seem hopeless. As Bible believers, however, we know where to find answers to today's most difficult questions. Through the ancient prophets, the same God who spoke to Abraham and Moses face to face is speaking to us today. Their messages, delivered millennia ago, are meant to be a guide book for those of us who are living today in what many are calling “the birth pangs of the Messiah.”

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he encouraged his readers that “*the things that were written before*” (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures) were written in order to teach and guide those who would come later. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and Timothy is reminded by Paul that all Scripture (again referring to the Old Testament) was given by God (2 Tim. 3:16).

In other words, God's living and vital communications with the ancients had a dual purpose: (1) They were part of His very real relationship with them, and His words gave solid direction and articulated His love for them. (2) As the eternal expression of the living God, they were meant to nurture and sustain His people throughout all time...even unto the end of the age.

The Apostle Peter reminds us that the words of the holy prophets are trustworthy and should be adhered to, especially as the day of the Lord approaches (2 Pet. 3:2). Scoffers will come, he says, who reject the infallibility of the Bible and teach false doctrine. The only defense against these deceivers, Peter says, is to compare their words to those spoken by the prophets.

The Lord never raised up prophets when the present and/or the future looked bright for Israel. Called by God Himself to fill the role of prosecuting attorney, they commonly brought indictments against the nation, prophesying judgment and calling God's people to repentance. The Talmud (Jewish commentary) says that there were actually thousands of prophets alive throughout Israel's ancient history, more than the total number of Israelites that left Egypt during the Exodus, but most of them brought messages that were meant only for the day in which they lived and were therefore not recorded.

The role of the prophet was so important for the future of God's people, however, that scholars say 44 of the Bible's 66 books have authors who can be identified as prophets. Of those 44, 17 belong to the genre called the “Prophets” or *nevi'im* in Hebrew. Five are called the major prophets, while 12 are identified as minor prophets. It is important to remember that those terms refer to the length of the prophecy and not to its importance.

According to Jewish teaching, Moses was the greatest of all the prophets, and he is the standard by which the importance of other prophets is gauged. The sages say only one prophet stands out whose impact on ancient Israel (as well as on God's people until the end of the ages) is second to Moses himself—the prophet Hosea.

The Man

Hosea gives his readers very little information about himself, although viewed in the context of Jewish life in his day, we can get to know him a little better. First of all, we are told that he was the son of Be'eri. Virtually unknown in Christian teaching, Be'eri is actually a man of some renown in Judaism.

He is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 5:6 as the prince of the tribe of Reuven, and he was a prophet in his own right. He is credited with a very strong prophecy against the wizards who served as prophets to the Canaanites, but the message was so short, it had to be incorporated into another, longer prophecy. We find it in Isaiah 8:19–20. This tells us that Hosea was raised in a home where his father would have set an example of faithfulness to the one true God, His Word was spoken and obeyed, and idolatry was abhorred.

We are given a further hint about Hosea's family life in his father's choice of a name for his son. *Hosea* comes from the Hebrew root *yasha* (יָשָׁא), which refers to being saved or delivered. Others whose names are derived from the same root are Joshua son of Nun, Isaiah, and Yeshua (Jesus). Most Bible dictionaries define the name simply as "salvation." Only a godly man who believed that his son would play a significant role in the salvation of Israel would have given him such a name.

Finally, Hosea 1:2 gives even deeper insight. In the New King James Version, it reads, "*When the Lord began to speak by Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea...*" Other translations, however, render it, "*While Hosea was waiting, the word of the Lord came to him saying...*" In other words, some believe this wasn't the first time the Lord spoke to Hosea. He was already a man who waited on the Lord and was dedicated to hearing His voice and acting accordingly.

The Day in Which He Lived

In ministry for about 60 years, Hosea would see both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel go from peace and prosperity to great turmoil and extreme poverty. Both kingdoms would become vassal states, forsaking the God of their fathers and living in moral depravity and idol worship. In chapter four, Hosea tells us that the Children of Israel were living without truth, mercy, or knowledge of God.

They were swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery.

Verse nine describes the priesthood in very negative terms, and the Talmud tells us that these so-called spiritual leaders were actually encouraging the people to sin, so that they could make a profit from the many sacrifices they would bring to the temple. Chapter five tells us that the princes of Judah had become like common thieves, who would steal land by moving the boundary stones.

From the highest of its leadership to the lowliest of its citizens, Israel was bent on self-gratification, fleeing from the Lord and seeking freedom from His standards of conduct. Rather than depending on Him for political stability, they formed alliances with surrounding pagan nations, an effort that the Lord said was futile and without sense.

His Assignment

It is in the midst of this social and political milieu that the Lord speaks to Hosea. The instructions, however, had to be shocking even to a man who had dedicated his life to hearing and interpreting what the Lord was saying to a wayward nation. Hosea must have known that being a prophet had some occupational hazards. God never hesitated to place his spokesmen in difficult and even humiliating situations if it helped to illustrate the message He wanted conveyed to His people. This time, though, it may have seemed to some that He had gone too far—marry a prostitute?! Not Hosea, however. Scripture records his unquestioning obedience, but the Talmud adds background to the story.

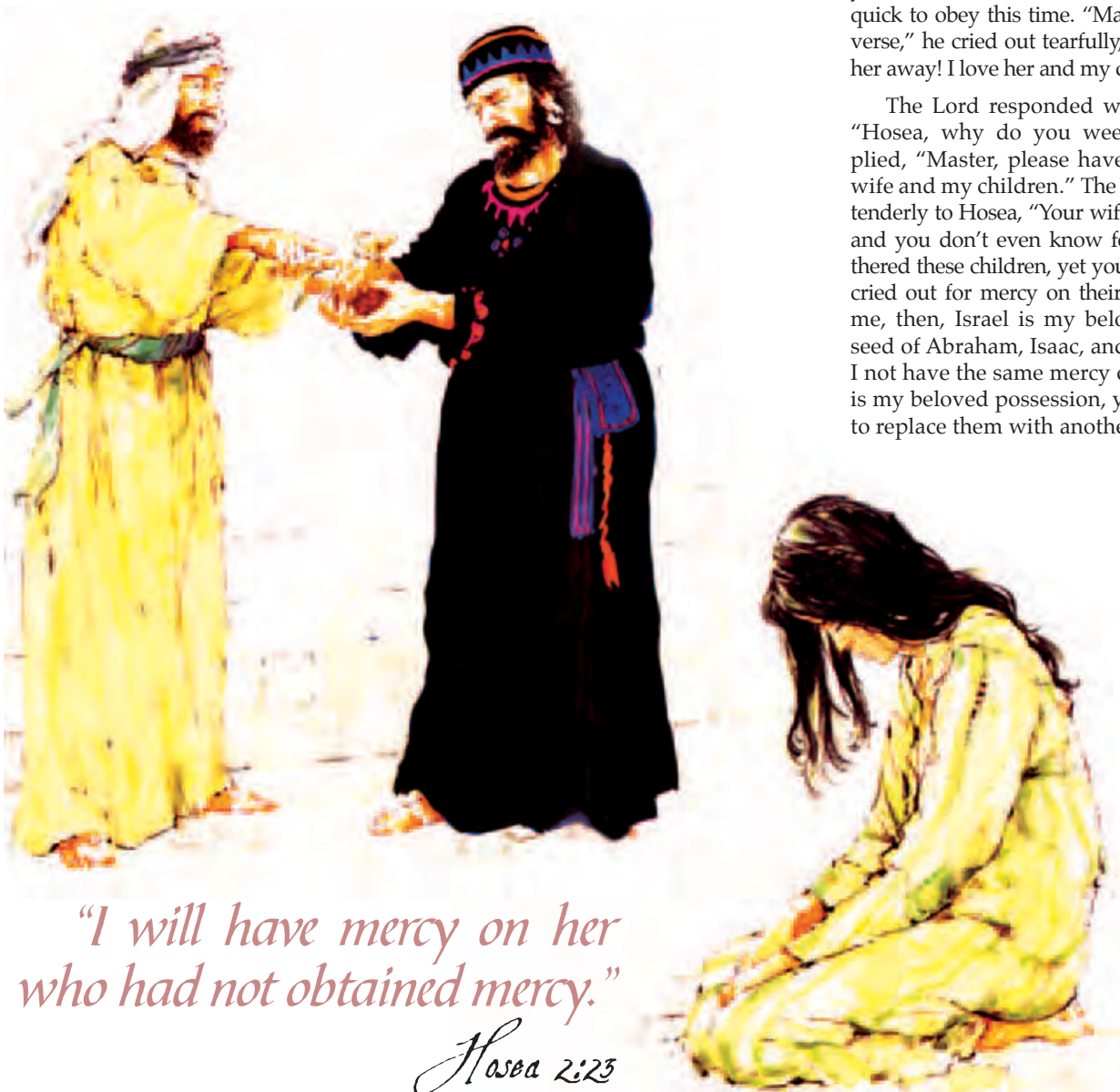


The rabbis tell a lovely story to illustrate the vital importance of Hosea's obedience to God's unusual instructions. God suggested that Hosea pray for the nation of Israel and intercede on their behalf, expecting that Hosea would ask for divine mercy and remind Him that these were the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, beloved because of the covenant. But at this point, Hosea was as disgusted with Israel as God was. Rather than interceding for them, he replied, "Master of the Universe, the whole world is yours. Obliterate this stiff-necked people and take another nation in exchange." God then asked, "What shall I do with this elder? I will command him to marry a harlot and beget children of harlotry, and then I will tell him to send her and the children away. If he does, then I too will send Israel away."

In obedience, Hosea married Gomer, a prostitute and daughter of a prostitute, and they had three children. The first was a son named Jezreel, the second a son named Lo-ammi ("you are not My people") and the third a daughter named Lo-ruhamah ("without mercy or compassion"). Even though Gomer's lifestyle was questionable and, the sages say, Hosea couldn't be sure these children were actually his, he loved her and was devoted to his family.

When Gomer went back to her former profession, Hosea willingly bought her back, paying a high price to redeem her from her sin. Finally, the story goes, the Lord told Hosea to send Gomer and the children away once and for all. "Like Moses who for a time parted from his wife, you too must separate yourself from her." But Hosea was not so quick to obey this time. "Master of the Universe," he cried out tearfully, "I cannot send her away! I love her and my children."

The Lord responded with a question. "Hosea, why do you weep?" Hosea replied, "Master, please have mercy on my wife and my children." The Lord responded tenderly to Hosea, "Your wife is a prostitute, and you don't even know for sure who fathered these children, yet you love them and cried out for mercy on their behalf. As for me, then, Israel is my beloved child, the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Should I not have the same mercy on them? Israel is my beloved possession, yet you told me to replace them with another nation?"



*"I will have mercy on her
who had not obtained mercy."
Hosea 2:23*



Finally, Hosea realized the depth of his sin in rejecting Israel and telling God to abandon her. His marriage relationship taught him very graphically of the kind of compassion and commitment necessary for a prophet to bear the burden of God's heart toward His children. Recognizing the depth of the Lord's love, Hosea pleads for mercy and begins to speak blessing for Israel. The story, whether fact or fiction, illustrates Hosea's transformation from being God's mouthpiece to Israel to becoming intercessor for her as well.

The Message of Covenant Love

The lessons learned from Hosea's relationship with Gomer are evident as each affliction that he prophesies is accompanied by a solution. The Stone Chumash has this to say:

... the names of [Israel's] children will be changed from their negative connotations to Ammi, My People, and Ruhama, Object of Mercy. From terrifying predictions of Israel's degradation if they continue in their disloyal ways of harlotry, the prophet shifts to inspiring prophecies of Israel's future security and spiritual greatness. The message ends with the stirring promise that God will take Israel to Himself in love, righteousness and faith—for all time.

After warning in Hosea 1:6 that "I will no longer have mercy on the house of Israel,"

God promises, "I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy" (2:23). The ominous statement, "For you are not My people" found in 1:9 becomes, "You are My people" in 2:23. "For she is not My wife" in 2:2 is replaced with "You will call Me my husband" in 2:16. After threatening in 2:3 that He will make Israel like a wilderness, God promises to lead her through it in 2:14. The harsh indictment in 7:10, "They do not return to the LORD their God," is tempered with the invitation, "O Israel, return to the LORD your God" (14:2).

These prophecies and their striking contrasts are proof that even when God is angry with Israel, His love for her still overshadows everything. Just as Hosea continued to love and be devoted to Gomer despite her infidelity, the Lord's tender mercies will always be extended to His chosen ones.

The Talmud tells the parable of a king who became angry with his wife and declared, "I will divorce her and have no pity for her children. She is no longer my wife and I am not her husband!" The king then went to the market and purchased beautiful, hand-crafted gold ornaments to be delivered to her. Her neighbors were confused by the king's behavior, but his servant explained to them, "Do you think he actually ceased to love her because he was angry with her? She did not stop being his wife because he said such things in the heat of the moment."

Hosea's prophecy carries the same message. Even when the Lord is provoked by Israel, His love for her is without limit, and, the sages say, if His affection for His people is such when He is angry with them, how boundless and beautiful it will be at the end of days when true harmony exists between them.

*"Then I will say
to those who were
not My people,
'You are My people!'
And they shall say,
'You are my God!'"*

Hosea 2:23



A Picture of Mercy

The book of Hosea relies heavily on word pictures to get its meaning across. The metaphor of Gomer, her harlotry, and Hosea's unconditional love are tangible representations of God's message. However, in chapter 14, some of the most beautiful imagery in the entire Bible is used to bring Hosea's prophecy to its culmination.

Although God has accused Israel of infidelity and made a case for her punishment in the most graphic of terms, He has also made it clear that, in the end, she will be restored. He will welcome her back as the wife of His youth: *"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him, I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall grow like the lily, and lengthen his roots like Lebanon, his branches shall spread his beauty shall be like an olive tree, and his fragrance like Lebanon"* (vv. 4-6). Like Hosea's marriage to Gomer, each of these images was hand picked by the God of the universe because of its unique ability to portray His message

Further, the rabbis tell us, the rain is dependent on human behavior. Many times in Scripture the rains were withheld because of disobedience, and the amount of rain received was commensurate with the behavior of the people. The Talmud points out that when the shepherds of Lot and Abraham fought over pasture land, the men decided to separate. Lot chose the easy way, the well-watered plains of the Jordan River; Abraham chose Canaan, a land dependent on rainfall, forever linking the people to the Lord in a land whose sustenance depended on obedience.

Dew, however, is not dependent on behavior. It is always there, a constant and gentle blessing from the Lord. Even Elijah, when declaring a drought on the land because of the immoral behavior of the people, was able to stop the rain, but not the dew. Not contingent on our actions, the dew represents God's unconditional love, His unmerited favor, His covenant *chesed* (mercy).

-The Dew

His promise to be as the dew to Israel comes in response to Hosea's plea in chapter six that He come to Israel as the rain.

Both dew and rain are considered great divine blessings, but of the two, the dew is considered the greater. The rain, although necessary and a boon to the land, is not constant. At times there are droughts, or at worst, the rain comes accompanied by thunder, lightning, and floods, causing more damage than blessing. The dew, however, is constant, consistent, and dependable. Every morning it is there.

-The Lily

The lilies of the Middle East appear in a variety of colors, mostly white or dark red. The hillsides of the Judean wilderness can be stark and barren for years on end until the plentiful rains come. Overnight, those same hillsides come alive with the vibrant color of the lily whose roots have lain dormant, seemingly dead, waiting for the rain.

The Christian Scriptures tell us that the lily "toils not" for its beauty but is cared for by God Himself (Matt. 6:28). God *will* again draw Israel to repentance with cords of tender love (Hosea 11:4), and *He* will provide sustenance for those who need not toil for it. When He does, Israel, whom the nations often view as lifeless and without value, will spring to life and flourish like the lily, illuminating the world with her beauty.



Photo by Kathy De Gagne

רוחמה
Object of Mercy *Ruhamah*



—The Cedars of Lebanon

The lily can lie dormant for long periods of time because it has a very short root, but the cedars of Lebanon are just the opposite. Some of the tallest trees in the world, their root systems go nearly as deep as they are tall. Those same roots are so strong that they become firmly implanted in the mountainous hillsides. The trees are remarkably stable, able to withstand whatever winds or tempests might come. Though they lack the brilliant beauty of the lily, they are majestic and immovable. They are also famed for their magnificent aroma, used for millennia to line closets and chests for storage.

—The Olive Tree

The olive with its delicate silver-toned leaves is one of the most beautiful of all trees. It is also known for its longevity—one of the three longest-lived trees on earth—and for its indestructibility. Its roots are so strong that the tree is virtually impossible to destroy.

Each of these images adds a layer of clarity to God's loving intentions for Israel, then *and now*. In the end of chapter one, Hosea foretells the re-gathering of the Jewish people to their Land with the northern and southern kingdoms united as one and alludes to the coming of the Messiah. In chapter three, he again speaks of the dispersion and then the re-gathering, this time clearly anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Israel will fear the Lord and dwell in His goodness in the latter days, he tells us, and we are witnessing the fulfillment of these prophecies today.

The Prophet's Word for Today

Although Hosea's words were aimed directly at the people of his day, bringing a frightful warning as well as the promise of redemption, his prophecies were addressed to generations to come as well. They are as relevant today as they were when they were first spoken.

*“...his branches
shall spread;
his beauty shall be
like an olive tree...”*

Hosea 14:6

■ International Headquarters
P.O. Box 1093
Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

■ Australia
P.O. Box 1785, Buderim
Queensland 4556
Tel: 07-5479-4229
adinaust@bridgesforpeace.com.au

■ Canada
P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2
Tel: 204-489-3697, bfp@mts.net

■ Japan
Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku
Tokyo 130 0012
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfpj.org

■ New Zealand
P.O. Box 768
Whangarei 0110
Tel: 09-430-2943
bfpnz@orcon.net.nz

■ South Africa
P.O. Box 1848
Durbanville 7551
Tel: 021-975-1941
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

■ United Kingdom
18 Heol Ty Gwyn Industrial Estate
Maesteg, Wales CF34 0BQ
Tel: 01656-739494
ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com

■ United States
P.O. Box 410037
Melbourne, FL 32941-0037
Tel: 800-566-1998
Product orders: 888-669-8800
postmaster@bfpusa.org



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Hosea was looking at the entire vista of history and all that it would mean for the nation of Israel. His world was much like ours, filled with evil and violence, lacking knowledge of the Lord with true goodness and mercy hard to find. His warning to Israel rings true for us today, even as Christians: if we are called by His name, Hosea's plea for repentance and obedience should convict us as it did the ancients.

In these latter days, God is calling His people to a relationship of deep intimacy and trust with complete dependence on Him, hearing His voice, walking with Him in the cool of the evening, and comparing every teaching or word of prophecy to the proven Word He has already given us.

We are not to trust in governments, rely on our own strength, fall victim to idol worship, or even depend on the rain. We are to trust Him and Him alone. And to prove His faithfulness, we are to watch as Israel rises from the dust of history, nurtured by the dew of His love, radiant in her beauty, and impervious to the world that would try to destroy her. Hosea prophesied it, and if we are wise, we will understand it. Then, like the thick branches of the green cypress tree, the ways of Lord will shield us, and our fruit will be found in Him.

By Cheryl Hauer,
International Development Director

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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*"Let us pursue the
knowledge of the
LORD...He will come
to us like the rain..."*
Hosea 6:3