Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Hosea

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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introduction

The time, subject and style of Hosea's prophecy

The prophet Hosea prophesied during the same period of time as Isaiah; but he is more occupied with the existing condition of the people, and especially of Israel, although he often speaks of Judah likewise. His prophecy is more simple in its character than that of Isaiah. His style on the contrary, is extremely energetic, and full of abrupt transitions. The reign of that king of Israel, which is given as a date to the prophecy, was outwardly a moment of prosperity to that portion of the land. The prophecy itself will inform us of its moral condition. The patience of God bore long with the rebellion of His people taking pity on their affliction (see 2 Kings 17), even as long as this patience could be a testimony to the real character of the God who exercised it, and did not deny holiness and righteousness, nor give a sanction to sin, so that it was still possible to bless the people, without sacrificing all true testimony (even in the eyes of the heathen) to what God is — in a word, "until there was no remedy."

The length of Hosea's witness to Israel

Jeroboam reigned during a period which commenced some years before the reigns of Uzziah, etc., kings of Judah. Uzziah began his reign fourteen years before the end of Jeroboam's reign. He reigned fifty-two years; Jotham reigned sixteen years; Ahaz, sixteen years; Hezekiah, twenty-nine years. So that Hosea prophesied over fifty years,* and perhaps longer; being a witness, during those long years, to Israel's rebellion against Jehovah, his heart grieved and broken by the iniquity of a people whom he loved, and whose happiness, as being the people of Jehovah, he had at heart. {* The reign of Jotham was as to some part, possibly the most of it, coincident with that of Uzziah, who was put aside as a leper.}

The twofold division of the prophecy

The prophecy of Hosea is divided into two parts: the revelation of God's purposes with respect to Israel; and the remonstrances which the prophet addresses to the people in the name of Jehovah. In this latter part he frequently speaks of Israel as a whole; frequently also he distinguishes between Israel or Ephraim and Judah. But I do not see that he addresses himself directly to Ephraim (that is, to the ten tribes). He speaks of Ephraim, but not to Ephraim. Moreover, this is the general character of his prophecy — a kind of prolonged lamentation, expressing his anguish at the people's condition, while unfolding all the dealings of God towards them, except chapter 14, in which he calls Israel to such a repentance as shall take place in the last days.

Chapter 1

Hosea's wife and children — signs of Israel's rebellion and God's judgment

The first three chapters compose the first part, or the revelations of God's purposes with respect to Israel. From the outset Israel is treated as being in a state of rebellion against God The prophet was to unite himself to a corrupt woman (a prophetic type, I doubt not), whose conduct was the expression of that of the people. The son to whom she gives birth is a sign, by means of the name which the prophet is to give him, of the judgment of God on the house of Jehu, and on the kingdom of Israel, which should cease to exist. In fact, after the extinction of Jehu's family, although there were several kings, all was confusion in the kingdom of Israel — the kingdom was lost. It is evident, that, although the zeal of Jehu was energetic in extirpating idolatry, so that in His outward government God could sanction and reward it (and, as testimony, must needs do so), yet the motives that governed him were far from pure. God, therefore, while in His public government blessing Jehu, shews here, where He reveals His thoughts and His real estimate of the work, that He judges righteously and holily; and that that which man brings in of ambition, of cruelty, and even of that false zeal which is but hypocrisy, concealing the gratification of its own will under the name of zeal for Jehovah — all, in a word, which is of self, is not hidden from His eyes, and meets with its just reward, and so much the more from its being masked under the great name of Jehovah.

Jezreel, formerly a witness of the execution of God's judgment on the house of Ahab, should be so now of the ruin of all Israel.

A daughter is afterwards born to the woman whom the prophet has taken. God commands the prophet to call her Lo-ruhamah (that is, "no more mercy"). Not only was judgment executed upon Israel, but apart from sovereign grace — the exercise of which was reserved for the last days — this judgment was final. There was no longer any room for the long-suffering of God towards the kingdom of Israel. Judah should yet be preserved by the power of God.

A second son is named Lo-ammi (that is, "not my people"), for now Jehovah no more acknowledged the people to be His. Judah, who for a time maintained this position, although the ten tribes were lost, has at length by her unfaithfulness plunged the whole nation under the terrible judgment of being no longer the people of God, and Jehovah being no longer their God.

Sovereign grace to Israel and the Gentiles

God, having thus briefly but clearly pronounced the judgment of the people, immediately announces, with equal clearness, His sovereign grace towards them. "Nevertheless," saith He, by the mouth of the prophet, "the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered." But this grace opens the door to others besides the Jews. "In the place where it was said, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called the sons of the living God."* The application of this passage to the Gentiles is stated by the apostle in Romans 9: 24-26; where he quotes the end of chapter 2 in our prophet, as expressing grace towards the Jews, and the verse we are now considering towards the Gentiles: while Peter (1 Peter 2:10), who speaks only to converted Jews, quotes the end of chapter 2 only. There is no doubt that the Jews will come in, according to this principle in the last days; but the Holy Ghost expresses Himself here — as He has done in a multitude of passages quoted by the apostle — so as to adapt Himself to the admission of the Gentiles, when the time, foreseen of God, should

come. But here He goes farther, and announces the return of the children of Judah and of the ten tribes, reunited, and subject to one head, in the great day of the seed of God. It is said, "they shall come up out of the land"; and this has been supposed to mean their return from a foreign land; but I have an idea that it is rather that they all come up as one people in their solemn feasts. {* We may observe that it is not said, "they shall be my people" (an expression less suitable to Gentiles), but "the sons of the living God"; which is precisely the privilege bestowed by grace on those who are brought to know the Lord since the resurrection of Christ. This is the meaning of "Jezreel": or, more exactly, "God will sow."}

Thus the judgment of a corrupt and faithless people, and grace towards the Gentiles, and afterwards towards Israel as a nation, are very plainly announced, in words which, although but few, embrace the whole series of God's dealings.

Chapter 2

The remnant acknowledged in mercy as a people

Hosea 2 introduces some new elements of exceeding interest; and, at the same time, a magnificent revelation of the dealings of God in grace, towards Israel. The opening words of the chapter appear to me to recognise the principle of a remnant, acknowledged by the heart of God as a people, and an object of mercy, while the nation, as a body, is rejected by the Lord. But the thought of Israel's restoration, announced in the last verse of chapter 1, gives the remnant its value and its place, according to the counsels of God: "God has not cast off his people whom he foreknew." Nevertheless, Jehovah says by the Holy Ghost to the prophet, not "I have married thy mother, and I will not put her away," but "Say unto your brethren, Ammi (my people), and to your sisters, Ruhamah (received in mercy)"; that is to say, to those who, acted upon by the Spirit of God, really enter in heart into the mind of the prophet — those who possess the character which made Jesus say, These are my brethren and my sisters. Such a position, in the eyes of the prophet, have the people and the beloved of God. It is thus that Peter applies chapter 2:23 to the remnant, that Paul reasons in Romans 9, and that the Lord Himself can take the name of "the true vine."

Repentance: Jehovah's grace

The prophet, then (he alone could do it), was to acknowledge his brothers and sisters as in relation with God, according to the whole effect of the promise, although that effect was not yet accomplished. But, in fact, with respect to God's dealings, God had to plead with the mother — with Israel, looked at as a whole. God could not own her as married to Him: He would not be her husband. She must repent, if she would not be punished and made bare before the world. Neither would Jehovah have pity on her children, for they were born while she was going after false gods. Israel ascribed all the blessings that Jehovah had poured upon her to the favour of false gods. Therefore Jehovah had forcibly turned her back in her path. And since she knew not that it was Jehovah who filled her with this abundance, He would take it from her, and leave her naked and destitute, and visit upon her all the days of Baalim, during which Israel had served them and had forgotten Jehovah. But having brought this unfaithful

woman into the wilderness, where she must learn that these false gods could not enrich her, Jehovah Himself, having allured her into it, would speak to her heart in grace. There it should be, when she had understood where her sin had brought her and was alone with Jehovah in the wilderness to which He had allured her, that He would comfort her, and give her entrance through grace into the power of those blessings which He alone could bestow.

Achor the door of hope: blessing on the ground of God's grace and His faithfulness

The circumstance by which God expresses this return to grace is of touching interest. The valley of Achor should be her door of hope. There, where the judgment of God began to fall on the unfaithful people after their entrance into the land, when God acted according to the responsibility of the people — there would He now shew that grace abounded over all their sin. The joy of their first deliverance and redemption should be restored to them. It should be a recommencement of their history in grace, only it should be an assured blessing. The principle of the relationship of Israel with Jehovah should be changed. He would not be as a Master (Baal) to whom she was responsible, but as a Husband who had espoused her.. The Baalim should be entirely forgotten. He would take every kind of enemy out of their land, whether wild beast or wicked man, and He would betroth her unto Him in righteousness and in judgment, in lovingkindness, in mercies, and in faithfulness. She should know that it was Jehovah. Israel being thus betrothed in faithfulness to Jehovah, and such being the assured principles of His relationship with her, the chain of blessing between Jehovah and His people on earth should be secured and uninterrupted. Jehovah should be in connection with the heavens, the heavens with the earth, the earth should yield her blessings, and these should meet all the wants of Israel, the seed of God. And He would sow Israel unto Himself in the earth, and her name should be Ruhamah (that is, received in mercy or grace), Ammi (that is, my people); and Israel should say, "Thou art my God." In a word, there should be an entire restoration of blessing, but on the ground of grace and of the faithfulness of God.

Chapter 3

Desolate and helpless, Israel shall later seek thir king

Hosea 3 reveals another detail of the people's history during the time of their rejection, a rejection followed by their return to God. Israel should remain for a long time apart to wait for their God. They should have neither true God nor false god, neither king, nor priest, nor sacrifice; but afterwards they should return, and should seek Jehovah their God, and David their king. That is to say, all Israel should seek the true royalty originally bestowed by God, of which Christ is the fulfilment. They should bow their heart before Jehovah and His goodness in the latter days.

Chapters 4 and 5

The sins of priests, people and king specified; Judah warned from Israel's judgment

In Hosea 4 we see that the prophet addresses the whole people together. In verse 15 he distinguishes Judah from Israel, warning the former not to follow the apostasy of the latter. He dwells upon the sins (v. 2) of which the people were guilty. Israel is rejected from being a nation of priests unto Jehovah — a glory which had been promised them (Ex. 19). This introduces the judgments of the priests, properly so called, who took pleasure in the sins of the people, that they might enrich themselves with their sacrifices. The proverb, "Like people, like priest," was exemplified in them. Whoredom and wine took all sound judgment from the heart; and the people of God asked counsel of their stocks and of their staff, sacrificed in the high places, and committed whoredom there. God would give them up to the fruits of their iniquity.

It is then that God exhorts Judah not to follow this course. Nevertheless, the Spirit of the Lord, in unfolding all the iniquity of Ephraim committed in His sight, shews that Judah also was guilty before Him (v. 10, 13).

Priests, people, king, all are addressed as objects of the judgment; all had given themselves up to violence. Although God had rebuked them, they would not return to Him. Afterwards they should seek Him and not find Him. He would have withdrawn Himself from them. Another sin is imputed to them both. Ephraim had perceived his weakness, the consequence of his sin, and Judah his wound; but they had gone too far from Jehovah to have recourse unto Him; they had sought help from the Assyrian. Could he deliver the sinful people from the judgment of Jehovah? Surely not. God would be to them as a lion that rends its prey; and then He would go and return to His place, until they should acknowledge their offence. In their affliction they would diligently seek Him.

Chapters 6 and 7

The prophet's entreaty to return to Jehovah: His readiness to meet His people

Hosea 6 calls forth a touching address from the prophet, in which he entreats the people to return to Jehovah. Faith has always this resource, because it sees the hand of God, its God, in the chastisement, and can appeal to the mercy of a well-known God. In verse 4 the Spirit expresses the lovingkindness of God towards His rebellious children, and His readiness to meet the smallest movement in their heart towards good. Therefore had God sent unto them the testimony of the prophets — an extraordinary means, as we have seen, for maintaining in grace the relationship of the people with God, and that morally and in reality. In the heart and mind of God it was not a question of outward forms; the moral relationship with God had failed. He had raised up prophets, as a means of relationship with Himself, to bring back the hearts of the people. But, as Adam* did in the garden of Eden, they had broken the covenant on which the enjoyment of the blessings God had heaped upon them depended. They had acted treacherously towards Him. Jehovah their God was ready to raise them up from their ruin; but if

He came in, His presence brought to light that iniquity which formed a moral barrier to this restoration. Thereupon the heart of the prophet overflows anew in lamentation over their iniquity. The prophecy of Hosea is important in this respect, that it furnishes us with the moral picture of the people whom God has judged, the condition of this people which made the judgment inevitable. There is nothing more affecting than this mixture, on God's part, of reproaches, of lovingkindness, of appeal, of reference to happier moments. But all was in vain. He must needs judge, and have recourse to His sovereign grace, which would bring Israel back to repentance and to Him. {* It should be read, "But they, like Adam, have transgressed the covenant." Adam, in Hebrew, is a proper name and a generic name; but the latter generally with the article, The Adam, as in Genesis 1:27. It is to this passage Paul refers in Romans 5: 14.}

They encouraged the king and the princes in their wickedness. Already the fruit of Israel's iniquity was seen in the weakness of the people; strangers also devoured them; yet, for all this they did not return to Jehovah. If at times, under the sense of their misery, they howled upon their beds, they did not cry unto God. What a picture of man under the effect of sin, who will not turn to the Lord!

Chapter 8

Swift and devoted judgment: unfaithfulness of heart

In Hosea 8 it is especially the daring and continual violation of the law of their God, with which Israel is openly reproached, and which would bring judgment, with eagle swiftness, upon them. Observe here,. that the devastation with which Israel is threatened reaches even to the temple of Jehovah. Israel had forsaken the Lord to make altars of their own, and Judah had leant upon an arm of flesh. We may remark here, that the prophecy presents Ephraim, as having entirely forsaken God, and as being plunged in iniquity, and under impending judgment; Judah, as being yet faithful outwardly, although at heart unfaithful too (see Hosea 6:11; 8:14; 11:12). Judgment should fall upon them both.

Chapters 9 to 11

The affection and judgment marking Hosea

In Hosea 9 we have here that touching mixture of affection and judgment which we find again and again in this prophet. Ephraim should not remain in the land which was Jehovah's, for God would not abandon His rights; whatever might be the iniquity of the people. They should go into captivity, and come no more into the house of Jehovah. The prophet and the spiritual man should no longer be a link between them and Jehovah. God would confound them by means of that which should have enlightened and guided them. The prophet should even be a snare to their soul, although formerly a watchman from God. The corruption of Ephraim was as deep as in the days of Gibeah, the history of which is related at the end of the book of Judges; and they should be visited. God had chosen Israel from among the nations to be His delight, and they had gone after Baal-peor, even before they came into the land. If God is longsuffering, He yet takes knowledge of everything. Ephraim should now be a wanderer among

the nations.

Captivity and its place announced

At the end of Hosea 9 and in Hosea 10 the Spirit reproaches Israel with their altars and their golden calves. They should be carried into captivity. Judah should also bear the yoke. The Assyrian should carry away these calves in — which Israel had trusted. After all (Hosea 11) God still remembers His early love for Jacob; He puts them in mind of all His lovingkindness, His goodness, His care for them. They should not return to their former condition in Egypt; Assyria should be the place of their captivity. But, however great the sin of Israel, the heart of their God cannot forsake His people: He will not destroy them; He is God, and not man; and, finally, He will place the people, trembling now and submissive, once more in their dwellings.

Chapter 12

Israel reminded of Jacob's history and his supplication

Hosea 12. The Spirit presents another aspect of the relationship of Israel with God. He would punish Ephraim, and the sins of Judah should be remembered. But He reminds them, that there was a time when Jacob could wrestle with his God, and make supplication to Him, and prevail; that afterwards He found him in Bethel, and there God, even Jehovah, spake to him, and revealed to him His name, which, in fact, He had not done in Peniel. Take notice here of the way in which God enters into all the details of His moral relationship with Israel, in order that the force, the meaning, and the righteousness of the "Lo-ruhamah," which He pronounces on His people, may be understood. His love for them at first, His tender care, the manner in which He had already been requited at Baal-peor, the horrible iniquity of Gibeah now renewed, their corruption, their idolatry, their refusal to hearken, all is recounted; and finally, the way in which Jacob had formerly succeeded in turning away wrath, and how God had then revealed Himself to him. Now, the name which He had proclaimed on that occasion was His memorial for ever. Let them then return unto God, and wait on Him continually. But no; all is corruption, and Ephraim will not even confess his sin. He who had brought them up out of Egypt would make them dwell again in tents without a country. God had constantly spoken to them by His prophets, but the iniquity was there. Israel had already been poor — a fugitive and a wanderer. And God had interposed in sovereignty by a messenger of deliverance, when there was no covenant in force on which the people could reckon to deliver them.

Chapter 13

Necessary, inevitable judgment: God's own thoughts of grace

Hosea 13 is the perpetual conflict of the affections and the judgment of God. The thought of their sin calls forth the announcement of the necessary and inevitable judgment. As soon as the judgment is

pronounced, the heart of God returns to His own thoughts of grace (see v. 1-4, 7, 9, 12, 14, and the last two of the chapter). Nothing can be finer than this intermingling of the moral necessity for judgment, the just indignation of God at such sin, pleading to induce Israel to forsake their evil ways and seek Jehovah, who would assuredly have compassion; then God's recurrence to the eternal counsels of His own grace, to secure unto the people whom He loved that of which their iniquity deprived them; and, at the same time, the touching remembrance of former relationship with His beloved people. What condescension, and what grace, on the part of their God! Well had Israel deserved the sentence, "I will no more have mercy," painful and terrible as it was, in exact proportion to all that God had shewn Himself to be for Israel. Well can the Lord Jesus say, "How often would I have gathered thy children, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and thou wouldest not."

The manner also in which God deduces the history of Israel's iniquity, ever since they came into the wilderness, and presents the means they had enjoyed for returning to Him; the way in which He sets forth His dealings when He had to resist the unfaithful Jacob, yet had blessed him when he wrestled in faith — He who never changes, and who was still the same for Israel; the whole behaviour of Israel being marked by God, borne in mind, and brought forward for the instruction of the people, if by any means it might be possible to spare them: — the whole of this picture, in a word, drawn by God Himself, ministers profound instruction to us, teaching us to cleave closely to Him who, however great His patience may be, takes knowledge of all our ways, and has ordained that we should reap that which we have sown.

The patience of God's love; His counsels

Nothing also exhibits more fully the prolonged and marvellous patience of the love of God. It is the special object of this prophecy to set forth the moral condition of the people which led to the sentence of Lo-ruhamah, and then to that of Lo-ammi, unfolded in the summary of God's ways with the people given in chapters 1 to 3 — the relationship that exists between the moral dealings of God and His unchangeable counsels — the connection between these counsels and the affections according to which God accomplishes them — the ingratitude of man in his behaviour with respect to these affections — the longsuffering which the love of God causes Him to exercise towards His ungrateful people — at last, that withdrawal on God's part which left His people a prey to their own corruption, and to the snares of the enemy. The result is, that the condition of His people obliges God to bring the Judgment upon them which their sin called for, when all the warnings of God by His messengers had been unavailing. But this gives place to the accomplishment of the counsels of God, who brings His people to repentance, after having long given them up to the fruits of their own doings, and thus enables them to enjoy the effects of His counsels.

Chapter 14

Israel's joyful acknowledgment of iniquity; refuge; consciousness of blessing

Hosea 14. It is this last work that we find in chapter 14 of the prophet. Israel, returning to Jehovah, acknowledges his iniquity, and addresses himself to the grace of his God. Thus only could he render Him acceptable worship. His heart, instructed now and cleansed, refuses the help of Asshur, whom he had sought in his unbelief, when he rejected his God who searched his ways; he will no longer lean upon an arm of flesh, nor on carnal strength, and he casts off the false gods to whom he had bowed the knee. His refuge should be with Him in whom the fatherless find mercy. God, therefore, who only waited for the return of His people (a return which He had wrought in their hearts by His grace, when the chastisement, necessary to His moral glory, and to the good of the people, was ended) — God Himself would heal their backsliding; He would love them freely. His anger was turned away from His people. His blessing and grace should be as the dew unto them. Divine fertility and beauty should again be seen in Israel, His people.

Verse 8 I would read thus: "Ephraim [shall say] What have I to do with idols?" Jehovah says, "I have heard him and observed him." Then Ephraim, "I am like a green fir-tree." And Jehovah answers, "From me is thy fruit found. There is repentance, which Jehovah acknowledges; and the joyful consciousness of blessing, which God causes to be felt, proceeds from Himself, who both secures and augments it. The last verse teaches us that which we have already endeavoured to point out, namely, that this history makes known the ways of God, which the wise — divinely taught in heart — will readily understand. "For the ways of Jehovah are right." His path of action is straight onwards, however great His mercy may be. The just, sustained and helped by the strength of God, can walk there; but the transgressors, through the very power that is present, shall fall therein.

There is indeed no prophet who gives the dealings of God, as a whole, so completely as Hosea.