

Known Intimately
Loved Ultimately

*God's Pursuit of His People
Through the Twelve Prophets*

(Volume 1 – The Assyrian Period)

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Foreword

Bad decisions—we’ve all made them. Fortunately most of the **B**ones we make are known only to us and perhaps a few others (hopefully people who love us). Then there are those egregious errors of judgment made on the public stage that are impossible to contain. Rather than being quickly forgotten, they become part of history. Here are a few of them in no particular order:

- Decca Records turning down the Beatles,
- Napoleon invading Moscow at the onset of winter,
- Twelve publishers rejecting Harry Potter,
- Hitler invading Moscow during winter,
- The Boston Red Sox trading Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees,
- Blockbuster turning down the opportunity to purchase Netflix,
- NASA taping over the moon landing.

You can probably think of some other terrible decisions that belong on the list. I have one I’d like to add: changing the way we refer to the biblical books of Hosea through Malachi from “The Twelve” to “The Minor Prophets.”

We don’t know who is responsible for doing this. Augustine is commonly cited, but there is evidence of this designation existing prior to him. Whoever it was, his anonymity served

him well. (Maybe he's entered the mislabeling-the-books-of-the-Bible protection program).

The Twelve (as Israel and the early church referred to them), became known as “The Minor Prophets” solely because the length of their messages is less than that of the “Major Prophets” (i.e., Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah/Lamentations, and Daniel). However noble the intent of this designation might have been, it was not a good decision. Labeling something by its size is a questionable strategy to begin with, and using the word *minor* inevitably carries with it the connotation that these books are somehow less important. After all, would anyone dare to label the New Testament as the “Minor Testament” because it is shorter in length than the Old Testament?

Now that I've said all that, let's get to the real point—how these books are referred to is quite secondary to the much larger issue of the place they occupy in our lives. If we never take the time to read these prophets, that makes them less than minor and how we label them becomes irrelevant. The real way we show our respect is by reading them, taking their message to heart, and allowing our lives to be shaped by what we learn.

Known Intimately, Loved Ultimately is an entry-level look at The Twelve. It contains an overview of each of the prophets and their ministry, devotional pieces that explain and develop major themes (with questions to facilitate small group or class discussions), and an FAQ section. None of these is a replacement for reading the text. In fact, the way to get the most out of this book is to read each section in accompaniment with the writing of the particular prophet.

The Twelve are rich, profound, and challenging in their messages to us. They are anything but minor, and we neglect them to our poverty. May God bless you richly as you hear their voices today. If you have comments or questions, send them to me at brucewgreen@gmail.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Introduction

What follows is a brief historical sketch to provide you with some background concerning the times in which The Twelve ministered. More detail for each prophet will be given when we get to their individual writings.

What was the world like three thousand years ago? In the tenth century BC, there was Athens but no Rome. Iron and alphabets were trending up while powers like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon were down. This meant the smaller nations of the eastern Mediterranean were able to establish themselves. Twelve Hebrew tribes that migrated from Egypt a few centuries before formed a somewhat shaky coalition under the rule of a Benjamite named Saul. He was succeeded in the kingship by David (of Goliath fame), who was then followed by his son, Solomon, who oversaw construction of, by all accounts, a spectacular temple. Combined, these three ruled Israel for over a century.

Sometime around 930 BC, the uneasy union between the twelve tribes shattered when Solomon's son, Rehoboam, promised harsher, more oppressive policies than his father. The ten northern tribes departed and formed their own kingdom that was variously referred to as Israel, Ephraim, and Samaria (which became its capital under Omri—1 Kings 16:23-24). The tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to Rehoboam and were known as the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital.

Introduction

KINGDOM:	ISRAEL	JUDAH
Also Known As:	Northern Kingdom Ephraim, Samaria	Southern Kingdom
Number of Tribes:	Ten	Two
Capital:	Samaria	Jerusalem
First King:	Jeroboam	Rehoboam

A man named Jeroboam became king of the ten northern tribes. God promised him that if he would “do what is right in My eyes by obeying My decrees and commands,” he and his descendants would rule over Israel (1 Kings 11:38ff). Despite these assurances, Jeroboam’s fear that the people would return to Jerusalem to worship at the temple drove him to set up centers of worship in Bethel and Dan with golden calves, false priests, and a faux festival (1 Kings 12:26ff). This led to the eradication of his house (13:34; 15:29ff).

The kings after Jeroboam continued in his ways, and Israel spiraled downward. God intervened through Elijah and Elisha in the ninth century and later through the writing prophets beginning around the middle of the eighth century: **Hosea**, **Joel**, **Amos**, **Jonah**, and a little later, Isaiah and **Micah**. (Those belonging to The Twelve are in bold print). However, the people were stubborn and unwilling to listen. Finally, God brought the Assyrians against them in a series of invasions.

During the reign of Menahem (752-742 BC), the two and a half tribes living on the east side of the Jordan were conquered and its people sent into exile (1 Chronicles 5:23ff). In the time of Pekah’s rule, Gilead, Galilee, and Naphtali were attacked and their inhabitants dispersed (2 Kings 15:29). Finally, there was a three-year siege of Samaria during Hoshea’s kingship that ended in 721 BC with most of the remaining population being exiled

(2 Kings 17:5-6). Although the deporting (and importing) of people would continue for another half-century (Ezra 4:2, 10/ Isaiah 7:8), Israel was without a king, a capital, and the vast majority of its people. A little more than two hundred years after its inception, the northern kingdom was effectively no more.

Judah lasted longer and fared better because unlike Israel, it did have a few good rulers (Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Josiah come to mind). Sadly though, they were the exception rather than the rule, and the people were generally unresponsive to them as well as the prophets of that time: Jeremiah, **Zephaniah**, **Nahum**, and **Habakkuk** (seventh century). Finally, God sent Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians who invaded the southern kingdom three times over the course of twenty years (605-586 BC), and Judah was sent into exile in Babylon. The prophet Daniel was part of the first exile in 605, and Ezekiel was part of the second in 597. In 586, Zedekiah was removed from the throne, Jerusalem destroyed, and the bulk of the remaining people deported.

Israel never returned from its exile as a national entity, but Judah did. Jeremiah predicted their return after seventy years (Jeremiah 29:1-14). Ezekiel, Daniel, and **Obadiah** spoke to these exiles and pointed to better days for the nation. In 538 BC, the people of Judah made the first of three recorded trips back to Jerusalem. This initial trip was approved by the Persian king, Cyrus, and led by Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-2). **Haggai** and **Zechariah** spoke to this group and encouraged them in the rebuilding of the temple and other matters. A second group returned in 458 BC during the rule of Artaxerxes and was led by Ezra (Ezra 7). The book of Esther fits in between the first and second trips, as it deals with events under the reign of Xerxes/Ahasuerus, father of Artaxerxes. Thirteen years after Ezra's group returned (445 BC), Nehemiah led a third group back (Nehemiah 2). **Malachi's** ministry probably began not long after Nehemiah's group arrived to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Introduction

Here's a chart that summarizes the ministry of The Twelve.

PERIOD	DATE	ISRAEL	JUDAH
Assyrian	782-700BC	Hosea, Amos Jonah	Joel Micah
Pre-Babylonian	640-606BC		Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk
Babylonian/Exile	605-539BC		Obadiah
Persian/Restoration	539-432BC		Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

A word about dates—biblical chronology on the whole is a less than exact science due to the multiple, complex issues involved in the determination of many ancient dates. What system of dating/calendar the writer is using, whether they are rounding up, or down, or being exact—these are the kinds of questions for which we often have no definitive answer. Therefore, establishing just about any ancient chronology (like the kings of Israel and Judah) involves making assumptions (some of which are more reasonable than others but still unprovable). With that in mind, here's a timeline that provides a broader context for The Twelve in terms of their place in biblical and world history.

1050-1010 – Saul’s reign

1010-970 – David’s reign

970-930 – Solomon’s reign

930 – Israel divides into northern and southern kingdoms

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Jonah

745 – Tiglath-Pileser III/Pul comes to power in Assyria and the empire begins to reassert itself

Micah

721 – Samaria is destroyed and its people exiled; the northern kingdom is no more

701 – Sennacherib invades Judah

Nahum

Zephaniah

612 – fall of Nineveh

Habakkuk

605 – Babylonian empire begins

605 – Nebuchadnezzar’s first visit to Jerusalem

597 – Nebuchadnezzar’s second visit to Jerusalem

586 – the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar

Obadiah

539 – Medo-Persian empire begins

538 – decree of Cyrus; return of exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua

Haggai

Zechariah

458 – return of exiles under Ezra

445 – return of exiles under Nehemiah

Malachi

432 – Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

330 – Greek empire begins under Alexander the Great

THE ASSYRIAN PERIOD

(782-700 BC)

HOSEA

▪

JOEL

▪

AMOS

▪

JONAH

▪

MICAH

HOSEA

Hosea was written

Probably sometime around the middle of the 8th century BC (with the inscription of 1:1 added later).

Hosea was written to

Primarily the northern kingdom of Israel.

Hosea's ministry

Went from the time of Jeroboam II to Hezekiah (1:1). Jeroboam II's last year was 753 BC, and Hezekiah's first year was 716 BC, so Hosea's ministry probably spanned forty years.

Hosea's contemporaries

Because his ministry covered such an extended period of time, Amos, Joel, Jonah, Isaiah and Micah all prophesied during his time.

Historical background from Kings and Chronicles

2 Kings 14:23–18:12; 2 Chronicles 26-31

Interesting fact

Since Hosea mentioned Hezekiah's reign (1:1), this means he lived to see the end of the northern kingdom.

HOSEA

Both Israel and Judah enjoyed peace and prosperity during the first part of the eighth century. God gave Israel victory over their nemesis, Syria (or Aram—depending on your translation), through Jehoash and later Jeroboam II, and they were able to regain much of the territory that had been lost (2 Kings 13). To the south, Uzziah led Judah to similar military success (2 Chronicles 26). With Egypt in a weakened state and Assyria preoccupied with internal issues until Tiglath-Pileser III came to power (745 BC), the two kingdoms were without a threat on the horizon.

Despite these blessings, Israel was not faithful. They failed to honor the covenant God made with them at Sinai (Hosea 6:7, 8:1). Their unfaithfulness was pictured in many ways: an oven hot with evil desires (7:4-7), a flighty dove (7:11-12), and a tree that doesn't bear fruit (9:10-16). But the prevailing picture was of an adulterous wife (chapters 1-3, 4:10-12, 5:3-4, 7, 9:1). It was this powerful image into which the prophet found himself personally drawn.

While Judah wasn't ignored by Hosea (they were mentioned 15 times), the nation of Israel occupied center stage in his message (with Israel/Ephraim referred to 82 times). The ways in which their unfaithfulness to Yahweh was manifested were almost limitless. They went after idols (2:13, 3:1, 4:12ff), engaged in sexual immorality (4:13-14) and drunkenness (4:11,18), trusted

in themselves (8:4, 10:13, 12:8), trusted in their alliances with Assyria and Egypt (5:13, 7:11, 8:10, 12:1), sought to appease God through ritual (5:6, 6:6, 8:13, 9:4), practiced violence and predatory behavior (4:8, 6:9, 12:1), and embraced a spirit of arrogance and rebellion (7:10, 10:3, 11:5, 7). As you go through the book, you'll notice these things (and more) being mentioned over and over. They remind us that Israel's infidelity was deep as well as extensive. The prophet summed it up in 9:9-10 where he wrote, "They have sunk deep into corruption . . . they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved."

Yet as 2:14ff and 11:8ff make clear, Yahweh would not give up on them. The judgment He brought against them through the Assyrians (5:8ff, 9:3, 10:6, 11:5-6) was a radical effort to rescue them. It was a spiritual crash cart sent to resuscitate a nation at death's door (Psalm 119:71). God would do whatever needed to be done to reach them. Despite their faithlessness and the pain it brought to Him, He continued to pursue them (2 Timothy 2:13).

Hosea: God's love for His unfaithful wife

(Outline adapted from Dillard and Longman III/An Introduction to the Old Testament)

- Introduction (1:1)
- Hosea and Gomer, Yahweh and Israel: the pain of adultery (1:2-3:5)
 - ▶ Hosea and Gomer 1:2-2:1
 - ▶ Yahweh and Israel 2:2-23
 - ▶ Hosea and Gomer 3:1-5
- First prophetic cycle (4:1-11:11)
 - ▶ Yahweh's charge against Israel 4:1-5:7
 - ▶ Yahweh's judgment against Israel 5:8-15
 - ▶ Israel's failure to repent 6:1-7:16
 - ▶ Yahweh's judgment through Assyria 8:1-10:15
 - ▶ Yahweh's mercy in judgment 11:1-11
- Second prophetic cycle (11:12-14:8)
 - ▶ Israel's continued sin 11:12-12:14
 - ▶ God's judgment 13:1-16
 - ▶ Yahweh's call and promise 14:1-9

Stepping into the Story

"The word of the Lord that came to Hosea . . ."

(Hosea 1:1)

Hosea 1 is a microcosm of the book. In it we see the prophet told to take a promiscuous woman as his wife to reflect Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh (v. 2). Children are born and the names they are given have a prophetic significance (as well as a personal meaning which we'll discuss in the next piece). Prophetically, their names reflect the future status of Israel (the kingdom is coming to an end, there will be no more mercy, and they will no longer be His people). Then amazingly to us but characteristically for the prophets, the chapter ends with the promise that all of these things will be reversed: The nation will exist in abundance, they will once again be called God's people, and Judah and Israel will be reunited. In one chapter we have the prophet bearing the message of God through his marriage and family, Yahweh's judgment of His people for their faithlessness, and His promise of a glorious future.

Welcome to Hosea! Whatever else we make of this chapter, this is the way that Hosea and the rest of the prophets communicated. At times their writings seem cryptic, contradictory, outrageous, or all of the above. It can be difficult to follow intellectually and process emotionally. Often it sounds as if a prophet is speaking out of both sides of his mouth, and the truth is, he is—but not in the way we tend to think. He's not being duplicitous or deceitful; he often uses literal and figurative speech, speaks to the present

and the future, and at times it can be difficult to tell whether it is Yahweh or the prophet who is talking. It's no wonder we often feel overwhelmed as we work our way through their writings.

Yet if we'll have the patience and the heart to learn their language, it can open a new world to us. For Hosea and the rest of The Twelve had this in common—they wanted to merge God's world with ours. They wanted to crack open our comfortable existence and have us ponder the possibilities in a world where God rules from top to bottom, inside and out. They were committed to this task, even if at times they were absolutely overwhelmed by it.

It seems to me then that the least we can do is give these messengers of Yahweh a fair hearing. A few things can really help: using a modern speech translation like *The Message* (in addition to the translation you study from); understanding the historical context of the book; and having a basic outline of the message. The rest is simply allowing ourselves to become familiar with the prophet and his words. It takes time, but it's worth the investment.

QUESTIONS

1. What do we find in Hosea 1? What parts of it are most challenging to us?
2. In what ways do prophets like Hosea communicate differently than to what we're accustomed? What are some things we can do to enhance our understanding of their writings?

Where All Life Begins

*When the LORD began to speak through Hosea,
the LORD said to him,
“Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her.”
(Hosea 1:2)*

Eugene Peterson offers this in his introduction to Hosea in *The Message*:

We live in a world awash in love stories. Most of them are lies. They are not love stories at all—they are lust stories, sex-fantasy stories, domination stories. From the cradle we are fed lies about love.

This would be bad enough if it only messed up human relationships—man and woman, parent and child, friend and friend—but it also messes up God relationships. The huge, mountainous reality of all existence is that God is love, that God loves the world. Each single detail of the real world that we face and deal with day after day is permeated by this love.

But when our minds and imaginations are crippled with lies about love, we have a hard time understanding this fundamental ingredient of daily living, “love,” either as a noun or as a verb. And if the basic orienting phrase, “God is love,” is plastered over with cultural graffiti that obscure and deface the truth of the way the world is, we are not going to get very far in living well. We require true stories of love if we are to live truly.

There’s no truer story of love than that of God’s relentless, transforming love for Israel. Hosea becomes an illustration of this as he is told in 1:2 to marry “a promiscuous woman” (NIV), “a wife of whoredom” (ESV), “a wife of harlotry” (NASB). Some

commentators assure us we're to understand this to mean that Hosea marries a woman who has a promiscuous spirit or is an idolater rather than someone who is a practicing prostitute. We're told this would mirror God's experience with Israel who at least started out well (2:15; Jeremiah 2:1-3). Furthermore, it's argued that if Hosea marries a woman who is already a prostitute, then his disappointment in her subsequent unfaithfulness to him wouldn't be the same—he would have seen it coming and almost expected it.

I suppose all of this is a relatively minor point, but what is it that makes us want to clean things up so Hosea at least starts off with a “pure” wife (if she has a promiscuous spirit or is an idolater, how pure is she anyway)? Was Jacob/Israel blameless when God chose him? Was the nation in fine moral shape when He rescued them from Egypt? And, who's to say Gomer wasn't initially faithful to Hosea?

From all appearances, that's exactly the case. Their first child was named Jezreel, meaning “God sows” (2:22-23). Although this had prophetic reference to Israel's future (that they will be sown among the nations by the Assyrians), it also implied something about the paternity of the child. This was Hosea's son through Gomer. He has questions about the daughter who was subsequently born (“no mercy”—1:6, 2:4-5, ESV), and was sure the next child was not his (“not my people”—v. 8-9). In connection with this it's notable that the phrase “bore him a son,” is used only in reference to his first child (compare v. 3 with v. 6 and 8).

I see no reason then, not to take the text as is—Hosea marries a prostitute! This not only reflects God's love for unfaithful Israel as they are in Hosea's time (which seems to me to be the point of the marriage), it also reflects His love for us. After all, haven't all of us at one time or another sold ourselves for something (to fit in, to get ahead, to remain in our comfort zones, etc.)? Despite what we might have done to harm ourselves and hurt our Father, He loves us. Even when we've made a toxic waste of our lives, He

pursues us. Let's face it—God desires relationship with people that most sane people would run away from.

Think about that the next time you feel you've blown it and are no longer worthy to be a child of the King. The truth is, you never were—you just understand it better and see it more clearly at such times. Get back on your feet by reminding yourself that with God's help you can live in a way that is worthy of your calling (Ephesians 4:1). There's no reason to stay down.

More to the point, think about this the next time you come across someone whose life seems so repugnant, so badly in disarray that you can't possibly conceive how he can change or even be reached by God. God majors in messes and has the power to transform something hazardous to something holy and wonderfully helpful to others. His love is a staggering concept to embrace and a revolutionary practice to adopt.

It's where all life begins.

QUESTIONS

1. What does Peterson say is the problem with so many of the love stories we hear about? How does this impact us?
2. What truths about God's love do we learn from Hosea's marriage to Gomer? In what ways is it radical?
3. How should this affect our lives? How should it affect our outreach to others?