

From Psychodrama to a Theology of Hope: Preaching Hosea the Prophet

Of all the personal lives of the prophets, Hosea's has most shaped how modern readers interpret the book bearing his name. Who can resist the story of love gone terribly awry? The book's opening tale of a woe, of cuckoldry and estrangement and tentative reconciliation, triggers our deepest fears and fantasies, making this ancient work one of the Bible's best understood.

Or misunderstood. While the book seems at first glance to be about the life of one man in the mid-eighth century BCE, in truth it is more concerned with the story of God and Israel. Hosea's own marital woes serve merely as a parable for this larger story. The book as we have it opens a major collection of prophetic material, the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, which works together to form a story arc of sin, repentance, restoration, and the danger of further sin. The text invites its readers, ancient or modern, to enter into the narrative and to choose among several possible sets of values, beliefs, actions, and relationships in order to fashion one of several possible lives – some of which end in disaster.

To read Hosea as an overall work, we must know a few things about the book. To begin, it asks to be read through two overlapping frameworks. One is wisdom and the other is narrative. The end of the book offers the wisdom framework by saying,

Who is wise and understands these things, discerning and knows them?

Yes, Yhwh's ways are right, and the righteous walk in them,

But the iniquitous stumble in them (14:10 [ET 9]).

While recognizing that the complex arrangement of the book defies easy interpretation, especially the further one gets from the time described by it, this last line casts the entire work as a wisdom book. And reading such a work requires a level of intellectual and moral formation (see Proverbs 1-9) that can be acquired only through discipline, study with a teacher, and piety. So this is the first frame for understanding the work.

The second is the narrative substructure (as New Testament scholars often speak of such things) of Hosea. Put simply, the book tells a story, not so much about the prophet and his terrible marriage, but about Israel's story with God. This story has some key plot points:

- The exodus (11:1; 12:9; 13:4-6)
- Systematic worship of the Baals (2:13, 16; 4:12-13; 8:4-7; 11:2)
- Prophetic announcements of doom (9:8-9; most of the rest of the book)
- The defeat of the nation at Assyrian hands (5:8-15; 7:11-13; 8:7-10; 10:3-15; 13:15-16)
- Return to Yhwh and repudiation of the Baals (2:17-18)
- Hard-won reconciliation (11:7-11; 14:1-9; but see 7:1-7)

(There are also allusions to the stories of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs in 2:20 and 12:2b-4, but these do not seem to factor in the overall storyline in important ways.)

The overall storyline is much the same, then, as that in Deuteronomy-Kings or Amos, with the important difference that Hosea does not see the monarchy as a possible vehicle for God's grace. We will return to this point below.

For now, we should ask what happens when we think of these two frames as working together. Like Deuteronomy, which tried to create a culture of memory that would help shape Israel's obedience to Yhwh, Hosea laments the people's tendency to "forget," which means its unwillingness to think of its own history of salvation as determinative of its present situation. Forgetting God's saving deeds leads to a misunderstanding of the divine-human relationship, so that Israel comes to think of the divine world merely as the road to prosperity in this world. In such a view, sacrifice becomes a means for persuading the deity to give human beings the things they identify as most needed, irrespective of the basic moral commitments of the humans in question. Like his contemporary Amos, Hosea insists that such a view of the world simply won't stand up to scrutiny. Rather, there is a deeper story – hence a deeper identity – in play.

At the same time, however, there is a curious interplay between remembering and forgetting in this book, for Israel is repeatedly said to "forget" God (2:15 [ET 2:13]; 4:6; 8:14; 13:6), while God "remembers" their evildoing (8:13). By thinking of sin as a cognitive failure to recognize past relationships and obligations, Hosea notifies Israel that attention to its past experiences, both good and bad, should be an important occupation for both them and God. This is so because the past is never real gone – it lives on in the present in profound, often decisive ways.

Leadership Themes

One of the most important ways in which Hosea talks about the past that lives on is the book's discussion of kingship, an institution with which the prophet is most uncomfortable. The word "king" (Hebrew: *melek*) appears in the book quite a few times (1:1; 3:4; 5:13; 7:3; 8:10; 10:3, 15; 13:10-11). The book's basic attitude toward kingship has two layers: both its arrival and its departure are marks of divine disfavor. Or, as 13:11 puts it, "I gave you a king in my anger and took [him] away in my wrath." That is, far from being a token of divine protection, as the Psalms often imagine and as 1-2 Samuel more grudgingly concedes (see also Isaiah 32:1), Hosea sees nothing really positive in kingship at all, at least in most of the references to the institution in the book. Chapter 13 may not be referring to the story of Saul in particular – it may have in mind simply the succession of kings during and immediately prior to Hosea's time, which was one of political instability and violence. Just as 1:4-5 sees the coup d'état of Jehu as a bad thing (in contrast to 2 Kings 9-10, which sees it more or less as a good thing, though with reservations), the rest of the book has little good to say for Israel's kings. The twist appears in 3:4, which sees the *end* of kingship (or at least its suspension) as a problem, too (since the anarchy following the end of Israel gave way to the tyranny of Assyria). The past is a problem, then.

The same is true for other traditional institutions of leadership, according to Hosea. The priesthood (4:4, 9; 5:1; 6:9) and nobility (3:4; 8:10) also come under fire for their corruption and inattention to their religious and moral responsibilities.

Structure of the Book

Unlike its more linear cousin Amos, Hosea is difficult to outline and sometimes a bit hard to follow. In part, this is because the book seems to build its case through repetition of themes and images in order to create an overall effect. The German scholars Jörg Jeremias divides the book into three major sections

- A. The prophet and his family as a symbol of the godless people of God (1:1-3:5)
- B. A collection of prophetic oracles in a chronological sequence (4:1-11:12)
- C. The last words (12:1-14:10 [ET 14:9])

I think that this arrangement makes sense for the most part, though I'm not sure that the oracles in chapters 4-11 are in any sort of chronological order. Rather, I think the three sections make the same moves. Each section opens with a discussion of Israel's sin and moves to the possibility of redemption. So chapters 3, 11, and 14 are very similar. In the middle of the long central section, that is, in chapters 6 and 7, the book raises the possibility of a swift resolution of Israel's problems, but then rejects this idea to turn back to the theme of doom. Only after a long, hard-won discussion can the theme of salvation again appear in chapter 11. The other two sections make the same sort of move, though more briefly.

The overall effect of this structure is very powerful because it leaves the impression that redemption for Israel will be a hard-won, closely-run sort of undertaking. The problem does not lie with God's deep and abiding mercy, but with Israel's recalcitrant spirit. In other words, the very structure of the book conveys its primary message, the one that the last verse of the work tries to articulate as a choice between good and evil: humans may decide their course of action with all its consequences, while, meanwhile, God also remains free to choose and will choose mercy.

In addition, in using commentaries on Hosea, one should note that the Hebrew and English texts break units differently, as illustrated by this chart:

BHS versification	NRSV versification
1:1-2:3	1:1-11
2:4-25	2:1-23
3:1-5	3:1-5
4:1-19	4:1-19
5:1-15	5:1-15
6:1-11	6:1-11
7:1-16	7:1-16
8:1-14	8:1-14
9:1-17	9:1-17
10:1-15	10:1-15
11:1-12:1	11:1-12
12:2-15	12:1-14
13:1-15	13:1-16
14:1-10	14:1-9

Preaching Old Testament Prophecy

The prophets of Israel did not primarily engage in prediction of the long distant future. Rather, they spoke to their own era about its shortcomings and invited people to remember the majesty of their divine calling. The prophets were reformers and political thinkers (in the broad sense that they wanted to help people learn to live together in harmony and peace). But their political views, their call for social justice, depended on a particular view of God and God's majesty and holiness. That is, their social views were deeply grounded in their religious views, and so it is impossible to separate their views of people from their views of the Creator.

The reader of any prophetic book should recognize that it consists of a series of short oracles woven together like a patchwork quilt. Each oracle is self-contained message, but it gains further meaning by its proximity to other oracles. Also, recognize that most oracles are poems, meaning that the suggestions for reading poetry still apply. In addition, in examining these oracles, you might try the following questions:

1. What view of God is in play here? What are the limits of such a view, and what are its strengths?
2. What elements of the oracle are rhetorically loaded? For example, the prophet, like any preacher, may resort to word play or understatement or exaggeration to make a serious point.
3. What view of human community lies beneath the oracle? What assumptions about the world of the audience is the prophet making?
4. Does the personal experience of the prophet bleed through? Does the absence of obvious personal experience have significance?
5. How do the oracles adjoining the one you are examining impinge on its meaning? Since the prophetic books are fairly carefully constructed, we should pay attention to how a particular oracle fits into the whole book.

In reading prophetic oracles, it is important to recognize how they work as literature. Some oracles look like decrees from on high (often beginning with "thus says Yahweh" or "an oracle of Yahweh"), and they leave little room for negotiation. Others are prophet's internal dialogue and self-talk, as with the laments in the book of Jeremiah. And still others call for the audience to reflect on a set of options each of which has something to commend it. Sometimes these more open-ended oracles take the form of divine self-talk or soliloquy (as in Hosea), or as parable or some other form of wisdom text. Preaching that understands literary genres and how they work must consider the subtle and not so subtle differences among these literary forms.

Preachers of prophetic texts do well to take a few key steps:

- ✚ **Enter into the artistry of the book.** Notice the repetition of words, the use of odd vocabulary, the twist of images that are unexpected.
- ✚ **Enter into the theology of the book.** Discover what the book wishes to say (not what we want it to say).

- ✚ **Live out the prophetic vision in my own life.** This move requires the preacher to self-identify as someone under judgment but called to hope, and so is a very demanding thing to undertake.
- ✚ **Recognize that prophecy is dialogical and not monological.** The preacher undertakes a conversation between God and the hearers of the text.

The prophets assume a basic social ethic in which humans respect each other, do not hoard their resources, and pay attention to the needs of the vulnerable. They recognize the ability of the powerful to take over religious language for their own ends, and they call upon the people of God to speak truth to power. Prophetic preaching inevitably calls us to protest the injustices of the world and to work to make them right. The prophets identify otherworldliness as complicity with evil. And they invite us to a deeper vision of God and thus of ourselves. Prophetic preaching thus becomes more than preaching about the prophets; it is about being prophets to a world in desperate need of healing.

Dangers confront the preacher of biblical narrative, mostly arising from our desire to rub off the rough edges of the text. We live in a sitcom world, in which all problems must be neatly solved in 30 minutes. The sitcom mentality has infected preaching. The major dangers are:

- ✚ **Moralizing.** Although the biblical texts raise profound moral issues, they are never moralizing. They never offer pat answers. They never paint in black and white, but in myriad shades of gray. In that sense, they resemble life itself.
- ✚ **Over-theologizing.** Some biblical narratives are conspicuous for their apparent absence of God. We should not pretend this absence away, but should note in our preaching that God often seems absent.
- ✚ **Under-theologizing.** Preaching is a theological act. We draw hearers back into the confession of the church. Sermons must do this. But they must do this in different ways.
- ✚ **Jumping too soon to Jesus.** “Jesus is the answer” is true, of course, but often it comes too soon in our sermons, so that it is not an answer, but a way of sweeping the problem under the rug. Timing is everything. We need to recognize that human life did not suddenly become less messy on the Sunday morning of the Resurrection.
- ✚ **Failing to appreciate the ruggedness of human life.** The biblical stories unflinchingly look at human life. Sermons, by contrast, often fail to acknowledge the real suffering of people and therefore the real triumphs of people. We need a grittier preaching.

Preaching for Days to Come

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Preaching isn't what it used to be. Probably, it never was.

Recently, I had the assignment of giving lectures to pastors on the nature of prophetic preaching, focusing on the case of the book of Amos. Seminary professors routinely do such things in the hope, however illusory, that our efforts at connecting biblical scholarship with the life of the parish will help somehow. Perhaps it does.

Yet in this case, the more I probed the question, the more difficult it seemed. The available models seemed too politicized, too enmeshed in the assumptions of regnant Christendom, in short, too "Sixties" to be convincing to a younger audience. Here I am, preparing lectures on Amos and prophetic preaching, unsure of both my audience and my subject, facing more questions than the certitudes one expects of prophecy. What makes preaching prophetic? How can pastors find time to be prophetic amid their labors of raising funds, chairing committees, visiting hospital beds and funeral homes, and competing for a place in the universe of meaning-making, not only with philosophers and psychiatrists, but with such upstarts as wedding planners and life trainers? Even if one believes, like that wild-eyed rancher cum prophet, Amos of Tekoa, that God has roared like a lion a message of indictment and hope, still, finding the nerve and stamina and necessary external support of a friend or two requires an effort of will and a streak of independence. Yet, these are precisely the qualities that seem in short supply, or rather, sequestered somewhere in the church crypt.

What shall I say about prophetic preaching?

Perhaps we should begin with a definition or two, a surefire professorial place to start. By prophetic preaching, one might mean an encounter with the texts of the biblical prophets, the tangled together words of hope and doom that those who remembered the prophetic oracles created out of what survived the calamity of Babylonian invasion and deportations. The definition is correct, but inadequate, because a talented enough preacher can domesticate even the most hair-raising text.

Another attempt: prophetic preaching challenges the most cherished assumptions of the listeners, forcing them to question even, or rather especially, whether their theology has become a narcotizing drug masking the pain in the world. Again, a correct answer, but not sufficient. If the biblical prophets, at least as remembered by their disciples, offer any model, it is one that juxtaposes indictment with hope, posing the hearers a choice between self-indulgence in fear and hatred and other-indulgence in the good news that God seeks the well-being of all.

What then is prophetic preaching? It has, I think, four elements. The first is the willingness to call into question cherished assumptions. Second, however, prophetic preaching offers alternative visions of reality, in which justice rolls down like waters, but the waters do not drown the unwitting while bringing life to the lucky. Third, these views of reality have an explicitly religious cast, or rather, they seek their grounding in the dignity of finite creatures in communion with an infinite God. And, fourth, prophetic preaching

shapes the preacher, and her church, in ways that allow them to be an alternative community. Let me unfold these ideas a little.

Challenging cherished ideas and practices is a delicate business. The first challenge is to decide whose ideas we interrogate, since omni-criticism may leave nothing unscathed. The best place to start is with whatever severs ties between human beings as participants in divine shalom. Sometimes these sources of evil coincide neatly with the structures of power, and sometimes they do not, since individual human beings do not follow the scripts predicted by the social scientists, except in the aggregate. Curiously and maddeningly, our most insightful analyses of the human condition can become tools of oppressors, as we make the sources of evil the other (the gays, the patriarchal establishment, the Communists, late capitalism, and so on, according to one's lights), forgetting that ultimately there are no others, just us.

The prophetic preacher can draw on the postmodern highlighting of a discovery of the modern period: all ideas have histories and social locations. Thus we can deploy analytical categories such as class and gender construction in an effort to understand. Sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we merely put ever more recondite labels on complex behaviors as a substitute for understanding them. Sometimes, tragically, we even reinforce the abuse of power by insisting that, since all ideas have histories, we cannot ultimately choose which ideas are better than others. Fear of our location in history crimps our ability to make a commitment except to indiscriminate mockery, the last resort of the ineffectual.

But mostly we learn what St. Paul had already learned from the biblical prophets: "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God," and for that matter of the intended glory of human beings. Knowing this about ourselves requires us, like an Amos, to work and pray for the healing of all, even the oppressors. As Amos put it, "Who of Jacob can stand – he is so small."

Social analysis that leads to indictment is tricky business in a society that has seen everything, that consumes everything, including lives and experiences, and that is, it seems, outraged most fully only by those who question its self-proclaimed goodness. We are tempted to think that perhaps preaching can no longer engage in the business at all, and we must leave social criticism to the proliferating Christian hard rock bands and still independent movie makers. Still, it seems a shame to do so, since a dose of stiff criticism of ourselves might save us from narcissism. Hence statements in Scripture such as, "Ah sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord.... Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel?" (Isaiah 1:4-5). Or this: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21, 24). Or this: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry" (Luke 4:24-25). Pick a page, any page. It is there again and again.

So also, however, are words of hope and longing for something better. Previous generations of biblical scholars often tried to distinguish between the, allegedly authentic, criticisms of an Amos or his contemporary Isaiah of Jerusalem and the softening of their

stark message of moral rectitude by words of hope from later disciples. Such a procedure rests on the assumption that indictment and hope are incompatible, and perhaps that the latter inevitably tends toward self-congratulation and complacency.

Nowadays, such an approach seems less convincing. There is no question but that the biblical books as we have them came together in a long, not well understood, process of editing and augmentation. But it is also clear that this process responded to a real need to make already old words relevant to new situations, or rather, able to address ongoing human realities. The creators of the prophetic books recognized a dialectical relationship between doom and hope, such that indictment always presupposes superior alternatives, while promises of relief assume that we need to be relieved of something. Yes and no always converse together.

Thus we read the startling promise at the end of Amos (9:11-15), which follows hard on some of the most searing and frightening revelations of divine indignation at human injustice, "In that day, I shall erect again the fallen hut of David." Not a palace or dynasty this time, just a hut, a booth, thus a token of impermanence and dependence on God. "Days are coming, says Yhwh, when the plow will overtake the reaper, the vintner the sower of seed. Yes, mountains will drip oil, and all the hills will flow with it." At one level, these words appeal to an audience of hungry people robbed of dignity by the powerful elites who have subverted even religion so that they can sleep peacefully at night with no longer living consciences.

At a more profound level, however, the visionary language of this text and those of the Second Isaiah and whoever gave us Jeremiah 30-33 work at the edge of what can be said. They point us to a transcendental vision that cannot easily be realized. They skate dangerously close to the edge of utopianism, as the final editors of Isaiah realized when they added the book's final chapters to distance Second Isaiah's stunningly hopeful prose from over-identification with an emerging political system, the Persian Empire. Yet in choosing language that cannot be reduced easily to political programs or ideology, they help us recognize that dreams of human wholeness function best as a standing challenge. Theological programs that try to secularize and thereby manage words of God as though they were merely human words risk, as Walker Percy put it so trenchantly, making theological proposals that "sound like a set of resolutions passed at the P.T.A." (*The Message in the Bottle*, 114). Radical chic becomes no less Victorian and primly stultifying than Elmer Gantry.

So, what gives life to a preacher or listeners willing to hew to a dialectic of judgment and hope? For Christians, of course, the answer is clear enough. Faith in God.

Here, things become sticky in a hurry. Some may assume that a call for faith in God means taking the easy way out, seeking refuge in obfuscatory feel-good language that makes meaningful change impossible. This assumption would prove that one simply did not know what the words mean, for faith in God is as demanding and rare today as it was when Luther fought indulgences as a means of grace or Wesley tried to make an aristocratic church responsible to the needs of spiritually starved Christians. Or, for that matter, when Amos pled with God to forgive a nation that was "too small," while Israel, for its part, shouted down his doomsaying and commenced deportation proceedings against

him. Faith is hard, and preaching that calls to faith calls us to something at once impossible and absolutely essential.

Faith in God is hard precisely because it calls upon us to imagine things we cannot see. Much of our preaching has become domesticated, our preachers afraid to challenge our too comfortable assumptions about ourselves and our most cherished symbols, national, economic, or religious. (And who can tell the difference, anyhow?) The televangelists promise that God will give you want you want, even if what you want shows no more imagination than a gold MasterCard. Preachers who would not be caught dead in the company of such slick operators often preach to congregations who need not ask for more, since we have quite enough already. In all of us, the ability to imagine a different world in which our wants conform to God's is severely attenuated.

Puzzlingly, it has even proven possible to separate a Christian commitment to justice from faith, as though justice were the highest Christian virtue, or even its sum total. Thus a seminary struggling for funds justifies its perhaps quite reasonable merger with a nearby secular college by saying, "Well, after all, we're both interested in social justice," as though the church espoused no particularly transcendent values, as though we were an all-purpose reform network of do-gooders, as though sin and redemption and love and faith were mere matters of human programs and policies.

Prophetic preaching must do more than call us to social justice. It must call us to God.

This brings me to the fourth, and the most difficult, aspect of prophetic preaching. For the church to exercise a prophetic voice, we must call and sustain prophetic preachers. Seminaries can do many wonderful things, but they cannot create prophets. No course or field education unit can instill courage, insight, and a radical commitment to building communities of hope. The most those of us who teach in seminaries can do is to point to models, ideas, and texts and build networks of support. The church as a whole must refocus some of its energies toward the creation of women and men who will help us articulate a vision of humankind made whole.

The character of the prophet deserves more attention than we have given it. Previous generations of biblical scholarship, influenced by German idealism, saw the prophets as singular geniuses of moral insight. Most of us have gotten away from such an emphasis on the great actors of history, focusing instead on the prophetic books as community productions or on the social location of prophecy. Perhaps we are also nervous about an overly close attention to the personal lives of the prophets, since some, like all of us, have skeletons in their closet. Then again, "character education" has gotten a bad name because some of what passes for it seems based on an overly individualistic, overly conservative notion of what a human being of integrity should be.

However, the inattention to character, broadly conceived, dissociates the action from the actor, underestimating the importance of vigorous leadership in the shaping of communities. Thus we are left with restless masses vulnerable to the machinations of entertainers and demagogues or, more likely, simply prone to leave sharp moral questioning to others more resolute.

Again, however, the biblical prophetic books offer us a way forward because they create a character that we may call "the prophet," who may or may not be much like the

historical person of the same name. This person is an artist, a singer who sees past human illusions into the realities of the divine realm. He or she has stood in the council of Yahweh. As Margaret Atwood put it her poem "The Poets Hang On,"

They know something, though.
They do know something,
something they're whispering,
something we can't quite hear.
Is it about sex?
Is it about dust?
Is it about fear?

Such an experience stimulates reflection and alters a person's existence. Discontentment with the powers that be coupled with an energetic hope for an alternative world of justice and peace shapes the prophet's words, relationships, and actions. The prophet becomes a pioneer of the new world he or she proclaims.

And, since character does not exist in some hidden part of the soul – or at least not just there – but in the social life with others, the prophetic preacher must help foster, and draw strength from, the prophetic church. The need is not merely for brave denominational bureaucracies – a true miracle, if ever there was one – but for congregations that take risks of faith and service, not just to take care of a designated group ("the poor," "the marginalized") to whom we assign labels and thus make them into the other, but to welcome others into the church as it pioneers the in-breaking Kingdom. Pastors who can lead the way will preach differently.

Finally, ruminations about prophetic preaching are one thing, and the preaching is another. To do the latter, we can begin to see what has gone unseen, to hear those who have been unheard, to ask what has seemed answered long ago. We can change our language, for when we ask, "what shall the church do for the poor," all is lost. The church must be the poor, not a paternalistic benefactor of "them." Prophetic preaching requires identification.

And to do it well, we must anticipate rejection, or rather bewilderment. The recent, briefly but luridly discussed, case of Reverend Wright is instructive. His critics focused on his most outrageous statements, though one hears more silly and outrageous things on talk radio every day. The difference is that his critics appeal to our pride and our fears, while he dared challenge our overly comfortable assumptions about ourselves and asks questions we have grown unaccustomed to hearing.

But perhaps still a deeper truth lies here. A society that believes it has everything lacks reason for hope. It dies slowly in its own luxuries, because it cannot dream of something grander still. So, as Margaret Atwood has put it with regard to poets, we say to prophets,

Go away, we say –
and take your boring sadness.
You're not wanted here.
You've forgotten how to tell us
how sublime we are.

How love is the answer;
we always liked that one.
You've forgotten how to kiss up.
You're not wise any more.
You've lost your splendour.¹

Yet this desperate action is not the only option. We may choose to hope.

So, what to say about prophetic preaching for the next audience that asks for a talk on Amos or Isaiah? Just this: the days are coming, the days are coming. And so they are.

¹ Margaret Atwood, "The Poets Hang On," in eadem, *The Door* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 35-37.

For Further Reading

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