

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF HOSEA

(M. Daniel Carroll)

The book of Hosea provides little specific information of a personal nature about the prophet. He is from the northern kingdom (his hometown is not mentioned) and is said to be the son of Beeri (1:1), of whom nothing is known. The opening chapter describes his marriage to Gomer, but the meaning of these verses is debated. There is also a question as to whether the woman of ch. 3 is Gomer or someone else.

The sociopolitical setting for Hosea's ministry is equally difficult to pinpoint with precision. The superscription lists four Judean kings and Israel's Jeroboam II, a time span that potentially covers almost the entire eighth century BC. The conjunction of social injustice, political chaos, and looming military defeat, however, strongly suggests that Hosea began to prophesy in the latter part of Jeroboam's reign (ca. 790-753 BC). After this king's death the northern monarchy was plagued by a series of assassinations and coups. Within thirty years Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and its territory assimilated as a province of the empire.

Jeroboam's son Zechariah was on the throne for only a short time before he was killed by Shallum, who in turn was eliminated by Menahem one month later (2Ki 15:8-16). Menahem's rule lasted a decade (752-742 BC). During this period Assyria regained prominence under Tiglath-pileser III (also known as Pul or Pulu; 745-727 BC) and began to reassert its presence to the west. The Bible records Menahem's paying tribute to Tiglath-pileser III in order to maintain his hold on the throne (2Ki 15:17-22).

Pekahiah, Menahem's son, succeeded him as king, but two years later he was killed by Pekah, one of his commanders (739 BC; 2Ki 15:23-26). In contrast to Menahem and Pekahiah, Pekah pursued an anti-Assyrian policy. Along with Rein of Aram-Damascus and other neighboring states, he formed a coalition to resist the empires expansion. In what is now called the Syro-Ephraimite War (734-732 BC), they tried to force Ahaz, the king of Judah, to join the rebellion. He refused and, in fact, appealed to Tiglath-pileser III for help, in the process reducing the southern kingdom to the status of Assyrian vassalage (2K1 16:5-10; 2Ch 28; cf. Isa 7- 10). The Assyrian forces quickly crushed the coalition, and only Hoshea's assassination of Pekah spared Israel from annihilation (732 BC; 2K1 15:29-30).

For several years a diminished Israel was subservient to the Assyrians, but eventually Hoshea too conspired against them. He stopped paying tribute and turned to Egypt for support. The nation's fate was sealed. The king of Assyria, Shalmaneser V, attacked Israel and besieged the capital city of Samaria for three years and took it in the summer of 722 BC. Thousands of Israelites were sent into exile, and peoples from different parts of the empire were brought in to take their place, thus exacerbating the syncretism of the region (2K1 17:1-6, 24-41). Two years later rebellion flared up again, and Shalmaneser's successor Sargon II returned, defeated the rebels, and exiled even more of the population. The changing policies toward Assyria and the political intrigues of the last years of Israel's existence may well be represented in the descriptions of Hosea 5-7 and other passages scattered throughout the book.

In light of the fact that the superscription mentions Hezekiah, whose reign extended decades beyond Israel's defeat, the prophet may have witnessed his nation's fall. That his words survived Israel's demise suggests that his message (and maybe even Hosea himself) made its way to Judah, although it is impossible to know when. Whether his words were recorded in some written form before their appearance in the southern kingdom or were penned afterward remains speculation.

