



Martin Luther on Hosea

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Martin Luther sees Christ in Hosea. He sprinkles references to Christ—particularly to the coming of Christ and the kingdom of Christ—liberally throughout his Hosea commentary. Commenting on Luther’s lectures on the minor prophets, Martin Brecht observed that for Luther, “Prophecy was not independent soothsaying nor an apocalyptic declaration, but was closely related to the event of Christ.”¹ Luther hears Hosea directing his message of repentance, faith, and the kingdom of Christ both to his own contemporaries and to those to come. Luther even hears the prophet speaking clearly to sixteenth-century Germany.

Luther lectured at Wittenberg on the minor prophets between summer 1524 and summer 1526. These lectures came at a busy, challenging, and productive time in Luther’s life. During these years Luther was, among other things, beating back the enthusiast challenge led by Andreas Karlstadt, responding to the upheavals of the peasant war, engaging with Erasmus in a debate over the freedom and bondage of the will, and translating the Mass into German. On a political level, his prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, died in May 1525. In summer 1526 at the Diet of Speyer the princes refused to enforce the Edict of Worms. On a personal level, Luther married in June 1525. Amidst all of these events, Luther trudged onward through the minor prophets.

¹Martin Brecht, *Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, vol. 2 of *Martin Luther*, trans. James Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 246.

Martin Luther sees Christ in Hosea. Hosea’s message is one of judgment on idolatry and faith in the merciful God, embodied in the person of Christ. For Luther, Hosea anticipates a return to Christ and a kingdom of Christ.

Luther did not produce an actual text of his Hosea commentary; rather, what has been passed down to us are notes taken by students who attended his lectures. The commentary on Hosea published in Basel in 1526 was based on student notes. The version in the American works of Luther is based on Zwickau manuscripts described as “true student notebooks” (x).² The commentary is structured in a verse-by-verse style. Luther does not comment on every verse, and comments are generally short. In some places the commentary is difficult to understand. Luther’s commentary reflects his own struggle with the text of Hosea. Luther recognizes that the book is not a neat continuous work. Rather, it consists of several distinct parts; sometimes Luther calls these sermons. At the beginning of chapter five he notes, “The prophet did not write everything at the same time, nor did he preach all in the same year” (26). And at the beginning of chapter 13 he notes that the prophet “again begins a new sermon. He preached those sermons in different years and at different times” (69).

Several times Luther voices his own frustration with determining the meaning of certain passages. At the beginning of chapter seven he writes, “This is also an obscure chapter” (35), and at the beginning of chapter 10, “The meaning is obscure, although the words are not” (53). Repeatedly, Luther notes the nonliteral use of language. Commenting on 7:12, he notes, “All of these things have been spoken with figurative language” (39). And on 12:11, he states:

We must become accustomed to the state of mind and to the figurative language of the prophets. In their preaching the prophets relate everything to the coming Christ, etc. They do not seem to harmonize well, but we must consider their state of mind. (67)

Luther also indicates that he is aware of an exegetical tradition: commenting on 8:1, he complains, “What Jerome says is cold, distorted, violent” (42).³

Redactional issues, exegetical conundrums, and interacting with the history of interpretation are not the main themes of Luther’s discussion of Hosea. Rather, for him the book preaches repentance and faith. All of its themes—human idolatry, sin, wrath, promise, faith, the nature of God, and Christ—speak of the activity of God’s word. Luther finds that Hosea speaks directly to his (Luther’s) own situation, a situation beset by idolatry, false authority, and persecution.

HOSEA THE PROPHET

For Luther, Hosea’s person, internal consciousness, and personal conduct are not major themes. Rather, Luther focuses on Hosea’s message. At the beginning

²All page references are to the American edition of *Luther’s Works*, vol. 18, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia: 1975). Richard J. Dinda translated the “Lectures on Hosea,” 3–76.

³Hilton Oswald notes in the introduction to *LW 18*: “In his exegesis Luther has here reached a new level of independence and maturity. He no longer follows but more often rejects the thoughts of commentators like Jerome and Lyra. He feels more free than before to fault the Vulgate text on the basis of references to the original Hebrew text. Thus he freed himself of patristic and scholastic shackles, and the old fourfold interpretations hardly come in for mention any longer. The prophets think and speak in the direction of the New Testament” (xii).

Luther comments that “people thought Hosea was mad” and that they considered him “a fool and a heretic” (3). But for Luther this speaks primarily not of Hosea but of the nature of the word:

This, however, is the nature of the Word, that it deals in apparent foolishness with the very wise. Another characteristic of the Word is the cross that he could not escape. It seems that he is fighting alone against all the prophets and even Moses. (3)

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For Luther, Hosea’s prophecy is about Christ and is “against the hypocrites of his time and against the wicked” (16). Hosea’s work is encouraged by the Spirit (42). The prophet does not doubt his own message. As Luther notes in chapter four, “the prophet begins to rebuke manifest sins....The prophet is certain that he is preaching the Word of the Lord” (19). Luther tries to place Hosea historically, noting, “He prophesied over a long period of time, 40 years or more” (26). Luther speculates, “The aged prophet seems to have been alive in the captivity that he foretold” (3).

As Hosea’s person is not important, so Luther does not dwell on the personal qualities of his wife and children. They too serve the greater purposes of the writing. Near the beginning Luther writes:

Do not take this to mean, then, that harlotry is charged to the wife, that is, do not take this in the active sense, but understand that the wife has allowed herself, her sons, and her husband to be so named because of the people and against the people, as if she were saying: “I am called a harlot and my husband is called a whoremonger because you are harlots and whoremongers.” Oh, how great a cross they suffered with those insulting names for the sake of the Word of God! (4)

Luther focuses on Hosea’s message; Hosea and other persons as well as the events of their time are instruments and backdrops for the work of the word of God.

HOSEA’S MESSAGE

Luther hears Hosea preaching repentance and faith. In his introductory comments on chapter one, Luther states, “God always announces repentance before His wrath comes” (3). At the beginning of chapter two, he continues, “I understand that the entire chapter is addressed to those who have obtained mercy.... [This] is the word of the Gospel” (8). Throughout, Luther hears Hosea preaching the word of repentance and faith, judgment and mercy—or, in other words, law and gospel. The word preached by Hosea functions within two time dimensions, the temporal and the eternal. Further, the temporal dimension encompasses both Hosea’s time and Luther’s own time.

Throughout his lectures, Luther contrasts human works—whether those works are explicitly idolatrous or works done with the mistaken intent of serving God—with God’s gospel, understood as God’s mercy and the faith and truth received from God. The prophet’s preaching of the law applies both in Hosea’s own time and in Luther’s time. Repeatedly, Luther makes clear that the underlying problem is unbelief or idolatry. Luther explains idolatry in his exposition of 1:2 (“For the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord” RSV):

The true seed that purifies our souls is the Word of God. When you depart from this, you commit harlotry. He transfers a simile of the flesh to the spiritual realm. Committing harlotry means practicing idolatry. Idolatry is the genuine trust in works; harlotry is to sin with unfaithfulness against the First Commandment. Properly, harlotry is to act against the First Commandment in the name of God, that is, to do without faith what you imagine you are doing to worship God. (4)

Luther returns many times to the theme of idolatry. Commenting on Hos 7:10, Luther notes, “The prophets did all things for the First Commandment and for faith, etc. The prophets note, as now, that the greatest sin is unbelief” (38). And on chapter 11, “The sense of this chapter is this: Idolatry is the chronic evil of that people; they were fashioned as sinners from the very womb, etc.” (59).

Luther hears Hosea preaching not only judgment and repentance but also God’s mercy and faith. Luther comments on how different this “new doctrine” is while explicating Hos 6:1 (“Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up”):

This is where the kingdom of Christ begins. The Law does not teach this, but the knowledge of the new doctrine does. The Law does not teach one to turn to a God who strikes to flee an angry God, etc. (31)

Luther makes clear that the teaching of the gospel shows us the nature of God. His extended comment on Hos 11:9 (“I will not execute my fierce anger...for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath”) shows God’s mercy as stemming from the nature of God:

He is saying, as it were, “I strike down and I heal. Man wants to uproot everything, but not I.” This is a wonderful promise of the mercy of God: “I want My reputation for mercy to remain safe. I also want people to flee to Me for refuge.” Satan wants no one to remain a Christian. In the midst of death God promises mercy. “If I oppress you, you should flee for refuge to Me. Stay here.” (61)

For Luther, Hosea’s prophecy encompasses past, present, and future. Commenting on the story of Jacob wrestling with God in Hos 12, Luther writes, “In their preaching the prophets have the custom of teaching what happened in the past. From that they compose consolation or rebuke for present situations” (65). But Luther focuses less on the past and more on the present and future. For him, Hosea’s prophecy concerns both the temporal kingdom (whether of Hosea’s time or Luther’s time) and the eternal, spiritual kingdom of God. Luther makes this

clear already in chapter 1: “All the prophets look forward to the kingdom of Christ” (5). Luther hears Hosea prophesying “that the kingdom was going to be taken away because of the wicked kings” (5), noting that the kingdom of Israel was never restored but became one with the kingdom of Judah, the kingdom which “came to Christ forever” (5) and which was “transformed into a better one” (6). Hosea’s third child “connects the prophecy of the temporal kingdom with that of the eternal kingdom” (6). God speaks: “I will lift up another people. If My former people joins this one, it will be saved. If it does not, it will not be My people” (6).

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Hosea looks forward not simply to the political return of God’s people to their ancestral lands or even their spiritual return to worshipping the true God. Rather, “return” is first and foremost a return to Christ. This is clear, for example, in a comment on chapter 3, “The Jews will return to Christ. As Paul indicates, this took place through the Gospel” (16). While commenting on verse 3:5 (“Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king”), Luther maintains that this is about the “return, through the Gospel, to Christ, the Son of David” (17). Luther reads 11:7 (“My people are bent on turning away from me”) to refer not to the people’s return but to a spiritual return that is Christ’s return:

Take this to refer to a spiritual return. It began with Christ when the Gospel was sent throughout the world. That is, “they will be in suspense, they will be put off, until I shall have returned, etc.” (60)

The future is a return to the hearing of the word. Hosea brings past and future together in 12:9 (“I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of the appointed festival”). God’s word that once came in the law now comes in Christ. Luther explains:

These were the feast days appointed for preaching so that the people might hear the Law. This is looking toward the coming of Christ, just as we always consider the Last Day as if it were very present. This is the way the prophets considered the incarnation of Christ. This means: “There will come a time for you to again assemble and hear what you used to hear on feast days, namely, the Word of God.” (67)

Luther makes clear that Christ comes in and through the preaching of the gospel. Commenting on Hos 6:3 (“his appearance is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth”), Luther writes about God’s “appearance”:

He wants to say: “The knowledge of Him will rise up through the Gospel like a dawn which is not held back.” His coming, that is, Christ’s coming, is like the

dawn, which progresses. Its rising is established and directed. It is sure, and it makes headway. (32)

In his comment on “He will come to us like the showers,” Luther exclaims, “This is just too great! This happens through the handing down of the Gospel, by which we know God” (32).

While commenting on the spring rains, Luther continues:

We can understand this in no other way except about the preaching of the Gospel. The Word of the Gospel is the evening rain, because it is the Word of the cross. It is the morning shower because it is the Word of comfort and re-creation. (32)

He continues the same theme in his commentary on verse 4 (“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?”), noting: “It is as if he were saying: ‘I preach the gospel to you, otherwise you do not become godly. If I do not preach, you remain as you were, etc.’” (32).

Luther picks up these themes at several points. Near the end, while commenting on the phrase “they shall blossom like the vine” in Hos 14: 7, Luther notes:

He takes this to mean the preaching of the Gospel. The wine must be the finest wine. My idea is that this is the Gospel. If you wish to relate this to the Sacrament of the Altar, you can. It is a beautiful promise about the kingdom and grace of Christ. (76)

CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION

Luther’s own situation permeates his commentary on Hosea. He uses his own context, especially aspects of Roman Catholic practice, to help explain Hosea to his students. He also uses Hosea to state and defend his own theological insights and to attack his opponents.

Luther connects the idolatry condemned by Hosea to idolatry in his own time. In his explanation of 2:8, he condemns those who become monks and claim to “serve God with vows and ceremonies” (9). Luther observes:

But who tells you that you thus are worshiping the true God, when He has not commanded these things? Therefore you have made up for yourself some god who wants these things, although there is no true God who requires this or who wants to give eternal life because of this. What then are you worshiping except an idol of your own heart, whom you think the righteousness of your works pleases? Those, therefore, who most of all maintain that they know the hand of the giver do not know it most of all. All Scripture urges this, that one truly know the true God. Where that knowing does not exist, there harlotry and false knowledge of God cannot but be. From this also comes outward idolatry. (9–10)

Continuing his explanation of 2:8, Luther writes of “Baal”: “Those worship Baal who dream that a life that serves God with faith and love is imperfect but a life that serves with chastity, poverty, and obedience is perfect” (10).

“Chastity, poverty, and obedience” are references to the three vows that monks made. Luther thus equates a monk’s life with a life of idolatry. Luther several times draws a parallel between monastic practice in his own time and idolatry in Hosea’s time. Commenting on the “idolatrous priests” of Hos 10:5, Luther notes: “The idolatrous priests were religious men, monks, who lived a more devoted and more restricted life in their worship, etc., than the rest” (55).

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In a humorous jibe, Luther uses competing monastic orders to elucidate Hos 12:11, remarking, “It seems that Gilead and Gilgal made comparisons between themselves, like Observants and Franciscans” (67).

Other aspects of Roman Catholicism also are used to elucidate Hosea, allowing Luther opportunity for criticism. Luther uses 7:11 (“Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense”) to fault Roman bishops and their claims of authority:

He is misled by false prophets and passes no judgment on their doctrines....In this way our bishops have taken away our sense. They have removed judgment from us and have kept it for themselves. (38)

At the beginning of chapter 10, Luther compares Israel to the bishop of Rome:

Although there may be those who seem to live otherwise and make a false pretense of repentance, they do not intend with true zeal to better themselves, etc.; they are like the bishop of Rome now. (53)

Roman Catholic clerics and practices are not Luther’s only contemporary references. One can hear at least an allusion to the enthusiasts, the “heavenly prophets” whom Luther criticized in other writings, in his description of false prophets in the introduction to chapter 7:

[W]hen the prophet has now reproved the king and the people and perhaps brought them to repentance, the false prophets come into the picture. They stir up the people against the good prophet. They cause the Word to be useless, as also happens now. (35)

Luther used references to his own situation both to clarify Hosea’s message for his (Luther’s) hearers and to show that Hosea’s prophecy rang true in Luther’s own time. The voice of Hosea thus became the voice of Luther, fearlessly condemning idolatry and proclaiming Christ.

Deeply concerned that all people, both clergy and lay, understand the biblical message, Martin Luther wrote prefaces to biblical books. In these he drew the reader’s attention to a book’s major themes and emphases. These prefaces were pub-

lished as part of Luther's translation of the Bible. In his brief preface to Hosea from 1532, Luther effectively summarized the message of Hosea on which he had lectured a few years earlier. Describing Hosea he says:

First, he preached vigorously against the idolatry of his time and bravely rebuked the people, together with the king and his princes and priests....Second he also prophesied powerfully and most comfortingly about Christ and his kingdom.⁴ ⊕

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⁴"Preface to the Prophet Hosea" (1532), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 317.