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Prophets and Kings: Amos and Hosea

Amos, Hosea; Hosea 14:1-8

The prophet Elisha was growing old, but he had one more task to complete. Drawing the curtain on King Ahab's dynasty, which had made Baal the official god of Israel, Elisha sent one of the Sons of the Prophets with a flask of olive oil to anoint a new king: Jehu, one of Ahab's generals, who was a devout follower of the God of Israel. But there was a catch. Ahab was dead, but his son was on the throne, and Queen Jezebel was still alive. This wasn't a problem to Jehu, though. He murdered Ahab's son himself, then had Jezebel's servants throw her from a palace tower and leave her for the dogs, then had the rest of Ahab's family destroyed. Finally, Jehu sent out a summons to all the worshipers of Baal in the land, claiming that he was going to have a huge festival to Baal. When he had all the worshipers of Baal in one place, he blocked the doors and had his soldiers slaughter them all, all to show his faithfulness to the Lord.

Yeah, I know. It's interesting that 2 Kings, which is normally pretty open about its editorial bias, is oddly neutral about Jehu's bloodthirsty holocaust for the glory of God. It's as if scripture is asking us to decide for ourselves how we feel. And I can't help feeling that this is important today, as political figures and national pundits are beginning to talk openly about changing our Constitution to make us exclusively a "Christian" nation, and as so-called Christian Nationalists are arming themselves in preparation for Civil War. All I will say is that if you can imagine Jesus of Nazareth approving of Jehu's methods, you probably get the Christian Nationalists, too.

Anyway, Ahab's dynasty was erased, and the northern kingdom of Israel actually had a few decades of relative peace and prosperity. For some, anyway. The constant wars with Syria had faded, and during the peaceful reign of Jehu's grandson, King Jeroboam II, a wealthy upper class built mansions around the capital city, Samaria. True, there were reports of a new empire stirring in the far north – the Assyrians – but that was a long way away. Nothing to do with Israel. It was in this time of apparent prosperity that a farmer with a southern Judean accent appeared in Israel, claiming that God had sent him. His name was Amos.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus and for four, I will not revoke their punishment! Because the city of Damascus has threshed the cities of Gilead with an iron sledge and left thousands orphaned, widowed, and homeless, I will send fire on the land of Damascus! (1:3-5)

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Moab and for four, I will not revoke their punishment! Because of their cruelty and violence against Edom, I will send fire upon the strongholds of Moab! (2:1-3)

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah and for four, I will not revoke their punishment! Because they have not kept the statutes of their Lord, I shall send fire on Judah, which shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem! (2:4-5)

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke punishment! . . . (2:6) Yes, you. What? Did you think you Israelites were exempt from God's wrath? Did you think that because God chose you from the peoples of earth, you were safe? Did

you think because God delivered you from slavery in Egypt, you got a free pass? Don't be stupid. Yes, God chose you! Therefore, God expects more from you. (3:2) Yes, God made a covenant with you in the law of Moses. Therefore, God expects you to obey that law!

What does the law say? The law says, "You shall not wrong or oppress the immigrant among you! You shall not wrong an orphan or a widow. You shall not take advantage of the poor or the helpless in your midst!" (Exod. 22:21-24) But what do I see? I see Israel trading the lives of the poor for profit. You ignore the claims of the helpless, then go shoe shopping! When they cry out for justice, you push them aside – then buy a treat for yourself with the interest you've charged the weak, the poor, the helpless, the widow, the homeless, the orphan, the immigrant. (2:6-9) Did you really think you would escape punishment?

Hear this, you fat cows! You wealthy women who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, and then whine to your husbands, "Be a lamb and bring me a drink, dahling!" (4:1) Woe to you who live in comfort in the hillside neighborhoods, looking down on the shacks of the poor! Woe to you who lie on beds of ivory, lounging on your couches, eating fine foods, amusing yourself with your musicians, drinking wine from bowls! (6:4-6) You who loll about in comfort will be the first to be dragged off when Assyria comes, dragged off with fishhooks! (4:2)

And then fattened by what you've squeezed from the wretched lives of the poor, you come to God's sanctuary to celebrate a holy day! How dare you? Thus says the Lord: Though you bring me your sacrifices, I will not accept them! Though you offer the finest of your flock, I won't look at them. Take away from me the noise of your songs and the melody of your lyres! I can't bear their twanging! I don't want your worship! I want justice! Put away your shallow praise! Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream! (5:21-24).

Amos of Tekoa was, er, blunt. Before long a priest named Amaziah sent for him. Amaziah served at the shrine of Bethel – remember that one? It had been built by the first King Jeroboam, complete with a golden calf. "Amos, Amos, Amos," he said. "Why are you stirring things up? Your words are distressing the people, and I'm afraid I had no choice but to report them to King Jeroboam. The king regards them as treason. Now, I flatter myself that I have some influence with him. I believe I can save your life, but you must stop all this careless talk. You should go back to Judah. The land of Israel cannot bear all your words. You must understand that all this gloomy talk is just not coming at a good time. Go prophesy in Judah if you must, but we don't need another prophet in Israel." (7:10-13)

Amos replied, "Don't call me that. I'm not a prophet. I'm not a priest or a wise man or one of the Sons of the Prophets or anybody. I'm a shepherd. A farmer. I'm just a man. (7:14-15) But when God speaks, I cannot be silent. (3:8)

"Nevertheless, I'll go. You will hear my voice no more. But know this, Amaziah, the days are coming when you will long to hear from the Lord but you will not. There is a famine coming on the land of Israel, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Israel shall wander from sea to sea, from north to east, shall run to and fro, seeking some hint, some whisper from the Lord, but they shall not find it." (8:11-12)

Amos returned to Judah. He was an angry man, and as often happens, the God he proclaimed in wrath seemed angry as well. But he was not the only prophet in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, and as we have heard from Amos, we should hear from Hosea.

This is what the Lord told me to do. He said, "Hosea, I want you to marry a whore."

I said, "Lord?"

He said, "A prostitute. A harlot."

So I did. I married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. I had known her before and had always thought how she was . . . well, she was beautiful. And she said yes, and she left her old life, and gave herself to me, and we had a son. The Lord said, "Name him Jezreel, a reminder of the innocent blood that the king of Israel poured out in the Valley of Jezreel." When Jezreel was weaned, Gomer conceived again and we had a daughter. The Lord said, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah, No Pity." And I did. And when another son came, the Lord said, "Name him Lo-Ammi, Not My People." And I did. And we formed a family, the five of us. (1:1-9)

And then I came home one day, and my wife was gone. I ran to the neighbors, who stared at their feet and said nothing until finally one said, "She's back on the streets, Hosea. Once a whore, always a whore."

Then God spoke to me. "Do you understand, my child? Do you know how I feel now, my prophet? Israel was my bride, my love, and she has gone and given herself to others, to the Baals, the Asherim, to Anath, to the Bull El. I was her husband and master, but she turned away. Therefore, I will punish her in Jezreel. I will have No Pity, for they are Not My People! I will strip her naked in the streets and expose her because she has played the whore. She has gone to her lovers, the idols, saying, "These are the ones who gave me my bread and oil and new wine and flax and grain." So I will let her go. I will let her chase her other gods, bare herself for other lovers; she will find no satisfaction there." (2:1-7)

And I said, "You're right, God. Crush her! Let her rot in her whoredom! I hope she dies! No pity, God! No pity!"

But then God said, "How can I have no pity, my child, my prophet? She doesn't understand. She doesn't know that I was the one who gave her the new wine and new oil, who lavished all these gifts on her. Even when she took my gifts and made idols of them, even when she made ornaments from them so as to sell herself to others, they were still my gifts. I will try again. I will speak tenderly to her. I will take her back to the desert, where we made covenant before. There I will betroth her to me again, and she will no longer call me my husband and my master, she will call me my lover. Then I will make Jezreel fruitful; I will have pity where there was no pity; they who were not my people will be my people. I will again be their God." (2:8, 13-16, 19-23)

And so the book of the prophet Hosea goes, as a sort of circular dialogue between the prophet and God. From his own pain, Hosea cries out for vengeance on unfaithful Israel, while the Lord wavers between anger and love. At one point, the people themselves join the conversation, crying out, "Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn us, but he will heal us. He has wounded us, but he will bind us up. He will revive us after two days and raise us up on the third day, that we may live before him."

But God replies sadly, "What am I supposed to do with you, O Ephraim? How am I supposed to believe you, Israel? Your love is like a morning mist, like the dew, there for a second, then gone. Show me. Show me your love. It's all I ever wanted. I never wanted your

sacrifices, only your love.” (6:4-6)

Then the prophet cries out, “Don’t believe them, Lord. Once a whore, always a whore. Spread your net over them and drag them off to Assyria! (7:11-12) Let Assyria fall on them like an eagle! You’ve forgiven them enough, blessed them enough! The more you’ve blessed them, the more they’ve sinned. The more you multiplied gifts, the more they’ve multiplied altars for Baal and Anath and El! They have sown the wind, so let them reap the whirlwind!” (8:1-7, 11)

But God replies, “When Israel was a child, I loved him. I carried him in my arms out of Egypt. I held his hands and taught him to walk. I led them through the desert with the instructions of love. I took the yoke from their shoulders. I bent down and fed them. Can I turn away now? Leave them to destruction? How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, Israel? How can I destroy you utterly? My heart is broken! It is turned over within me! Every fiber of my love is kindled. I can’t! I can’t do it! I will not come in anger, I will not destroy you forever. I am not like you, and my love is not like your love! *I am God, not man!* I am the Holy One in your midst, and I will not leave you. Not ever.” (11:1-9)

The argument continues, but God has the final word. In the last chapter of Hosea, God speaks again to Israel, in a glorious poem filled with echoes of the Song of Solomon – a wedding song. God, whose love is stronger than his anger, calls his unfaithful bride back to covenant. We conclude with Hosea 14, verses 1-8.

14 *Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.*

² *Take words with you and return to the Lord;
say to him, ‘Take away all guilt;
accept that which is good,
and we will offer the sacrifice of our lips.*

³ *Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride upon horses;
we will say no more, “Our God”,
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy.’*

⁴ *I will heal their disloyalty;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.*

⁵ *I will be like the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom like the lily,
he shall strike root like Lebanon.*

⁶ *His shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive tree,
and his fragrance like frankincense.*

⁷ *They shall again live beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom like the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.*

*⁸ O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
I am your Anath and your Asherah!
I am like an evergreen cypress;
your fruitfulness comes from me.*

Blessing: There can be some whiplash reading the words of these two contemporaries, Amos and Hosea. Which God is it? Amos's God of wrath or Hosea's God of heartbroken forgiveness? I would note one thing: Hosea talks about how the people have betrayed God, and how God is willing to forgive and start over. Amos talks more about how the people have betrayed the weak, the poor, and the helpless, and God is less tolerant of that. But as we leave today, and as we look toward the dawn that arrived with Christ's birth, let us go back to Hosea. God has the final word, and God's final word is love. Amen.