

I Don't Care by Pat Conover



PROPHETIC HOPE

Angel and Prophet

Alek Rapoport

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Hosea 1:1-11

The word of God came to Hosea, son of Beerī, during the reign of four kings in Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This was also during the reign of Jeroboam (II), son of Joash, who was king in Israel.

When Solomon was King he built his fabled temple and many other things as well. The kingdom was at the height of its power and stretched far to the North including what is now Lebanon. The standard Sunday School story is that Solomon was very wise. Perhaps.

Whatever else Solomon was, he was also ruthless and his kingdom was centered in Jerusalem, the City of David. He pressed many men of the Northern Tribes into forced labor to build fortifications and other works. They didn't like Solomon and Jeroboam the First led a successful revolution and the kingdom was split into two. Elisha the prophet had a hand in

making Jeroboam I the king and creating the revolution, justifying his activity with prophecies against what became Judah. But Jeroboam soon turned to Baal worship and built hill shrines to try to stop his ten tribes from going to worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

In addition to his religious apostasy, border tensions and war between the North and South brought prophetic critique against Jeroboam I. Both Israel and Judah quickly lost a lot of their empire and were squeezed back to the area of the twelve tribes. Assyria was a rising power, and over several centuries, after several skirmishes and wars, Israel was crushed and ten Northern tribes became known as the lost tribes of Israel. Jeroboam II led a small recovery of strength by Israel during the time of tension with Assyria. After the later final defeat of Israel the ten tribes were not entirely lost.

Some of the individuals and families went into captivity and some of those may have eventually returned. Some began the diaspora of Jews around the Mediterranean. Some held on, regrouped, and became the Samaria and Galilee of New Testament times, the areas where the ministries of John the Baptist, and then Jesus, unfolded. This area included areas of wilderness where the Zealots gathered. Zealots were terrorists, from the point of view of the leaders in Jerusalem, freedom fighters from the point of view of Jews who continued the centuries long tradition of Jewish unrest under the domination of Assyrians, Persians, Babylonians, Greeks, and then Romans.

Uzziah, Jotham, Ahab, and Hezekiah ruled Judah, the Southern part of the former kingdom of David and Solomon about 150 to 200 years after the death of Solomon. Jeroboam II was king of Israel, the Northern part of that Kingdom, the area of the ten tribes of Israel.

In the time of Hosea the fall of Israel to the Assyrians was threatening and the final fall of Judah was still hundred of

years in the future. Judah was soon to begin paying tribute to the Assyrians but held out against being captured for a couple of more centuries because they had the hill fortress of Jerusalem. The basic thing to keep in mind is that in the time of the original writer of Hosea Israel and Judah were not friendly and the sympathy of the writer was with Judah. With that in mind listen to the confusing first round of prophecy in the Book of Hosea. God begins speaking to Hosea by saying, "Go and take an unchaste woman to be your wife because this land is guilty of being unfaithful to me."

Hosea did what he was told. He married Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. Gomer became pregnant and gave Hosea a son. God said, "Call the boy Jezreel because soon I am going to punish the dynasty of Jehu for the blood shed in the valley of Jezreel. I am going to bring the Kingdom of Israel to an end. I am going to break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel." Jezreel was a valley that divided Galilee and Samaria. Jehu had fought a war in Jezreel and deposed the previous Northern king and Hosea is saying that he was wrong to do that, which is interesting because David did basically the same thing to take over from Saul. Anyhow, this part of the prophecy calls for the downfall of Jeroboam II because of the sin of his ancestors.

Next Gomer had a second child, a girl. God said, "Call the girl Lo-ruhamah because I am never going to love

Israel again. I shall never forgive them."

Wow! I've changed my name twice, but somebody really needs to talk to God about irresponsible names. The worst one I'd ever heard before reading Hosea was Minky Tweet. Yes, I know this is an allegory, and this is just the author's way of telling us that from Hosea's point of view the Northern Kingdom was lower than the New York Yankees.

And then we get the contrast of the two kingdoms.

"But I shall love and save Judah," says God. "I shall not save them by the bow or sword or by any other weapons of war. I won't save them by horses and horsemen. I'm going to save them directly by myself."

Then, after Lo-ruhamamah was weaned, Gomer got pregnant again and bore a son.

God said, "Call him Lo-ammi because you are not my people and I am not your God."

It isn't quite clear whether this prophecy of the third child is directed at Israel or Judah. Then we get the really confusing verse.

"The Israelites will be as countless as the sands of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted. Then it will be said of them, and they will be called, 'Children of the Living God.'"

The main content and direction of the prophecy attributed to Hosea completely changes between verses without any explanation. The only way to reasonably explain this switcheroo is that a later editor stepped in. Maybe the editor didn't like the way God was naming children. Maybe the editor lived in the Northern Kingdom. Then the editor shows his or her hand more clearly.

God speaking, "The people of Judah and Israel will be reunited and will choose for themselves one leader. They will spring up from the land for great will be day of Jezreel. By the way, you don't get the full point of this section of scripture if you just follow the lectionary and cut out the first and last verses.

Before you get a knot in your knickers about inconsistencies in the biblical text and the difficulty of just sitting down and reading through the Bible, consider this: both the original author and the later editor have a point.

The writer is expressing the point of view of a Judah that didn't like Israel and felt superior to Israel. You can see this same theme in the dislike of Samaritans by the temple authorities in Jerusalem in the day of Jesus. In contrast, Galilee was more subdued by the Romans, more integrated into recognizing Jerusalem and the temple, and therefore the legitimacy of the Herods, and therefore the legitimacy of Rome. Sepphoris, a significant Roman city, was just a few miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up and Jesus probably worked with his father Joseph in constructing buildings in Sepphoris.

John the Baptist preached in the wilderness and his creation of the sacrament of baptism provided life-long forgiveness and totally undercut the spiritual need to go to Jerusalem and sacrifice animals in the temple to propitiate God. He didn't worship Baal gods like Jeroboam II. In some ways he was worse from the point of view of the temple authorities. He was a heretical worshiper of Jahweh, a protester of centralized clerical authority.

Jesus followed the path of John. One Herod beheaded John. Another Herod participated in the process of killing Jesus on the cross. So part of understanding the story of Jesus is to understand the spiritual distance between North and South. In the story of the Samaritan woman, and in the story of the Samaritan who rescued the wounded Jew, Jesus made clear where his sympathies lay. It isn't surprising that some of the Zealots joined his ranks and became disciples. It isn't surprising that John and Jesus found their spiritual grounding in the wilderness rather than in

the temple.

The writer of Hosea is pointing out that the Northern kings did bad things and accurately predicted that they would be destroyed by the Assyrians. The editor, who knows how much later, is looking on a different landscape. The editor sees a

defeated people scattered in diaspora, a people that needs to come together and find itself. And the editor sees the need to reunite the Northern and Southern tribes, less a purely tribal matter by that time and more a matter of finding a true spiritual center. Perhaps the editor's hand is also present in the section of saying that Judah shall not be saved by the weapons of war but by the direct leadership of God. And we mustn't miss the little seed of democracy in the claim that the people will choose their next leader. And we must also credit the editor with the message of forgiveness that becomes the essential ingredient for understanding the Gospel of Mark.

In this one passage, read closely, we are given two of the primary lenses for seeing the work of God in the world around us: judgement and grace. We may like the editor's point of view better than the writer's, but the writer speaks with courage, albeit from a safe distance in contrast to Amos. Calling out the kings of Israel, starting with Jehu, is an example of seeing the things we don't want to see, don't want to hear. The idea that the people should hold their government morally accountable is a key foundation for the emergence of democracy.

[Pause]

It was kind of an interesting intellectual exercise to unravel this particular piece of convoluted prophecy. I like the tidy solution of holding the contributions of writer and editor in dialectic tension. I hope this contributes to a developmental grounding for your reading of scripture.

So, I asked myself, "Where is the spiritual challenge?" That was a pretty easy question. The answer is, "I should apply the lenses of judgement and grace to our current situation in the United States, or perhaps to understanding the situation in the Middle East." I know how to do that. That has been at the center of my day job for two decades. But before jumping into one or another of my prophetic rants I decided to pray a

little more.

So I searched my heart and said to myself, "I don't care."

That struck me as odd, considering how many years I have spent as a prophet challenging one injustice after another. But I had an excuse. I was doing this praying when I was tired. I had just finished a heavy work-out at the YMCA and was drowsing toward a two hour nap. I didn't care about anything. As I drifted off toward sleep I said to myself, "Of course this is why a whole lot of low-income and otherwise oppressed people do not rally to their own self-interest. They are tired. and need peaceful rest.

I woke up later and I said to myself, "I don't care." And I didn't. Some days I can't even read the front page of the Washington Post and I turn directly to the sports section to read about the Cleveland Indians. I don't want to try to open my heart to yet another tragedy. I don't want to feel bad about ducking another fight. I don't want another push to work late or to call and talk with a colleague to encourage them in their work. "I'm tired," I said, just a different kind of tired. I've been doing the prophetic work too long. I'm turning toward other callings. And that's true, but it still boils down to, "I don't care."

"But of course I care," I said to myself. "Look at all I am doing to express my caring about a whole lot of issues. I'm working three days a week on the farm bill and a host of other issues. That's part of the reason I'm tired so often, especially tired of prophetic impulses. I've done this work too long and I'm ready to re-retire. Somebody younger, with more energy, needs to be in the position I hold, and it looks like we will have that person by September. It's time to pass the torch."

"All true," I said to myself. But it is also all

rationalization to get yourself off the hook of guilt. You could do more and you could do it better."

"Oh, I know that voice," I said to myself. "That is my perfectionist voice. If I was into Enneagrams I would name it as the danger of being a One. But, it is really the voice of a devil. It is the assumption that

winning the moral wars, the political wars, is up to me. That's idolizing my very self as a god rather than a creature."

"So," I said to myself, but only momentarily, "I just need to focus on being faithful in my work and let God take care of how it all works out."

"Oh, I know that voice," I said to myself. "That is my cop out voice. Another devil, another half truth to distract me and comfort me. If I felt real solidarity with the farmers and the hungry people in the United States and around the world, I wouldn't feel so worn out by my advocacy on the farm bill. I'm just too emotionally distant and spiritually distant from those who need good work from me on the farm bill." In other words, "I don't care," or, at least, "I don't care enough." I felt stuck, stuck for writing this sermon, and sort of generally seized by frustration and malaise. I muttered to myself about being uninspired, probably was blaming God for not coming through on time according to my schedule.

And it finally came to me that I wasn't sufficiently appreciating the gift of the feeling, "I don't care." So I decided to unpack the gift a little more carefully.

I've long known that my liberal heritage is an insufficient spiritual grounding for following my call to prophetic work. I've seen a lot of burned out liberals in my day. It came to me that my inner voice saying "I don't care," was not merely a weary voice; it was also a rebellious voice. I was measuring myself against several standards that are guaranteed to lead

to frustration, resentment, alienation, decentering, and depression. I want to win and prophets mostly lose. I want to help make things better but my small contributions often seem to just fade away. When I do feel solidarity with low-income and oppressed people I connect to a lot of frustration, anger, and resentment. And there are plenty of voices reminding me of my privilege, with the usually unspoken implication that my contributions are somehow tainted, and that I can never do enough to be in real solidarity.

There is no point, I reminded myself, in trying to blow up that liberal balloon by trying harder, giving more, sacrificing till it hurts. The vision of ending oppression, creating justice, healing old wounds, being a peace-maker, are all wonderful, but that vision cannot last for long if my ego, my striving, is in the middle of it. And so two things are necessary: repentance and giving thanks.

So my friends, one more time, I repent and I ask for your forgiveness. Repenting doesn't mean I'm going to try harder. It also doesn't mean I am going to try to rest more. Nor does it mean that I am going to try to become more focused or more efficient. It doesn't mean I'm going to switch from organizing to intercessory prayer. I might do any or all of those things. When I say, I repent; I think it means that I'm going to keep on breathing and trying to live well. I'll give what I have to give, and care as much as I am able to care, and I'll escape into yard work and watching the Cleveland Indians when that feels right.

I'm thankful for the landmarks offered by the writer and editor of Hosea. I'm thankful for the saints down the years and the ones I have known who create and are the sovereign reality. And I thank you for the witness you bear, the good things you do, and your caring for me. Let us stumble along together.