

# COMMENTARY

## I. SUPERScription: HOSEA 1:1

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The superscription locates Hosea within a particular period in the larger story of the people of God. Similar superscriptions with historical references are found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. Superscriptions in the Latter Prophets, perhaps provided by a final editor, function to authenticate and legitimate the message that is to follow as coming from Yahweh himself. Hosea, like other books that have superscriptions with historical references, identifies the prophet and makes reference to his ancestry, and locates the period of his ministry in relationship to the kings of Judah and Israel.

## IN THE TEXT

■ I Verse 1 introduces the content of the book as **the word of *Yahweh* that came to Hosea son of Beerī**. The superscription functions to authenticate and legitimate the material that is to follow; it also communicates the conviction that the prophet is a person who is entrusted with **the word [*dābār*] of *Yahweh***. The word that **came** (lit. *happened*) conveys the notion that this “word is not the product of human speculation or wisdom” but rather this word “happened as an event of revelation to a particular man, and his proclamation is reflex and expression of that event” (Mays 1969, 20).

The prophet’s name **Hosea** (*hōšēaʿ*) means “salvation”; it is derived from the verb *yāšaʿ*, which means “to save.” According to Num 13:8, 16, this was the original name of Joshua. It is also the name of the northern kingdom’s last king (2 Kgs 15:30). The significance of the name of the prophet, however, is never noted in the text, nor does the text ever appear to use the name as a pun. However, the prophet makes the declaration in ch 1 that *Yahweh* will *save* (*yāšaʿ*) Judah not by bow, sword, war, horses, or horsemen but **by *Yahweh* their God** (1:7). Similarly, toward the end of the book (13:4 NRSV, see also 13:10), *Yahweh* declares, “I have been ***Yahweh*** your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior” (*mōsīaʿ* derived from *yāšaʿ*). The prophet’s name seems to symbolize salvation for Israel as *Yahweh*’s ultimate plan for the nation, though it is now faced with the reality of his judgment. As to the name of Hosea’s father, **Beerī**, nothing is known.

Verse 1 places the ministry of Hosea during the reign of **Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah**, southern kingdom kings from 783 B.C. to 681 B.C. and during the reign of **Jeroboam II**, who ruled the northern kingdom from 786 B.C. to 746 B.C. Since Hosea carried out his ministry in northern Israel and since the text lacks reference to other northern kings, it is reasonable to assume that Hosea was active in the north sometime during the reign of Jeroboam II, a contemporary of the Judean king Uzziah (783-742 B.C.). Particularly, the oracles of the prophet reflect a concern over the house of Jehu; Jeroboam II was a great-grandson of Jehu. It is possible that the prophet fled to the south and continued his ministry in Judah soon after the death of Jeroboam II and prior to or during the revolt against the house of Jehu and the assassination of Zechariah, Jeroboam’s son. The reference to Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah seems to suggest a Judean ministry, but it is difficult to establish a precise date for the ministry of the prophet.

## FROM THE TEXT

The presence of the superscription should not be quickly dismissed as a mere formal factor of the prophetic book. It serves to locate not only the

prophet and the text but also the reader. The superscription locates the reader in a particular theological world, a sociohistorical world, as well as a creative-dynamic world of the prophetic word.

The book of Hosea in its final canonical form is located within the broader historical and theological tradition of Deuteronomy and Joshua—2 Kings (Deuteronomic theology and Deuteronomistic History). The Deuteronomic theological tradition is ultimately traced to Moses, the prophet par excellence (see Deut 34:10-12). This broader tradition of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) provides a significant context for intertextual reading of the book of Hosea as well as a valuable theological backdrop for the reading of the text.

The prophetic message does not speak into an empty world but into the concrete realities of human existence and into the situations in which God's people find themselves at any given moment in history. The superscription of Hosea invites readers of subsequent generations to be keenly aware of the fact that the prophet's message cannot be completely dislodged from the concrete world of the people of God in the eighth century B.C. The reference to Jeroboam, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah is a reminder of volatile and crumbling political, social, and religious realities for Israel and Judah. Verse 1 presents the coming of God's word as a historical reality in the midst of Israel's crisis-filled existence. The content of the book of Hosea shows that God speaks directly into the context of the crisis of his people—words not only of severe judgment but also of intense hope.

The superscription also serves to authenticate the message of the prophet as the word from Yahweh. The message of the prophet is directly linked to the creative and life-giving word of Yahweh. The reader or hearer of the text must keep in mind the ongoing creative-dynamic effect of this prophetic word from God as it is taught and proclaimed in contemporary settings. From a Christian perspective, as this word speaks into diverse contemporary settings, the Living Word, Jesus Christ, is made present among us; through him, and by the help of the Holy Spirit, the people of God experience the ongoing dynamic of divine creativity and newness conveyed by the word.