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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

**Shiur #04: Early Prophecies (IV)**

***Hoshea* chapter 2 – Ancient Prophecy[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Chapter 2 in *Hoshea* is the first prophecy ever[[2]](#footnote-2) to describe the bond between God and Israel as the connection between husband and wife – a connection that has been completely defiled owing to the harlotry of the wife, who has turned to Ba’al instead of the service of God. The worship of Ba’al is depicted here in full color, in an unparalleled, vibrant description of Canaanite idolatry. The Tanakh generally avoids descriptions of the rituals of those who stray to idolatry – and of pagan worship in general[[3]](#footnote-3) – because the commandment to eradicate idolatry includes avoiding giving them attention. An exception to this rule is the vivid and detailed depiction of the Egyptian view of Pharaoh as divine, in the encounters between Moshe and Pharaoh and in the plagues, but there too the biblical account conceals more than it reveals.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The style of the detailed description in *Hoshea* is reminiscent of the Phoenician epos in Ugaritic,[[5]](#footnote-5) except that, of course, the prophet takes the opposite position and condemns strongly the sexual abominations and harlotry involved in Ba’al-worship.

*Sefer Melakhim*[[6]](#footnote-6) describes in great detail how the rebellion of Yehu, son of Nimshi, was dispatched by the prophecy of Elisha and his disciple, during the reign of the house of Omri/Achav, and personally killed Yehoram ben Achav and commanded that Izevel be cast from the window; he then went on to destroy the entire royal house, and even its allies from Yehuda. Then we read how he eradicated the worship of Ba’al from Israel by staging a public ceremonial service, where Yehu himself, and Yehonadav ben Rechav, witnessed as eighty appointed men smote and killed all the worshippers of Ba’al, destroyed and burned the pillars of Ba’al, and turned the spot into a latrine. The account concludes with the words,

Thus Yehu destroyed Ba’al out of Israel. (*Melakhim* II 10:28)

The house of Yehu, which ruled in Shomron for around a hundred years, did not abandon the sins of Yarovam ben Nevat[[7]](#footnote-7) – “and there remained the Ashera also in Shomron”[[8]](#footnote-8) – but worship of Ba’al, which had been introduced by Izevel of Sidon to the house of Achav and Shomron, would never be reinstated.

There no evidence in Tanakh of a revival of the temple of Ba’al in Shomron, but the renewed emphasis on the golden calves and the sins of Yarovam proves that while Israel no longer served Ba’al, but rather served the Lord God of Israel,[[9]](#footnote-9) it was in the same corrupt way that had started with the golden calf in the wilderness, and had continued with greater prominence in the kingdom of Israel since the time of Yarovam ben Nevat.

By the time of Hoshea – the end of the reign of Yarovam ben Yoash in Shomron – almost a century had passed since the destruction of the temple of Ba’al and the eradication of the house of Achav. What point would there be in a prophet standing up to decry the harlotry of Izevel, and the Ba’al-worship that she had introduced to Shomron, a whole century after it was no longer an issue?

Anyone with any connection to the house of Yehu knew that it had been Yehu and his sons who had eliminated Ba’al from Israel, as commissioned by prophecy, and that it was in this merit that they had ruled in Shomron for four generations:

And the Lord said to Yehu: Since you have done well in doing that which is right in My eyes, and have done to the house of Achav according to all that was in My heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. (*Melakhim* II 10:30)

Hence we must conclude that this prophecy was actually uttered about a century prior to Hoshea, as a rebuke to the kingdom of Israel for having followed Ba’al in the days of Achav and his wife Izevel, the queen who came from Sidon. Hoshea utilized this ancient prophecy (chapter 2), which was seemingly well known and familiar to all.

But what reason could there possibly be for the prophet to speak out a century later against the institutionalized worship of Ba’al – “For their mother played the harlot; she that conceived them has acted shamefully, for she said: I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink”[[10]](#footnote-10) – to the point where he urges,[[11]](#footnote-11) “Plead with your mother, plead; for she is not My wife, neither am I her husband, and let her put away her harlotries from her face, and her adulteries from between her breasts”?

**When was Chapter 1 of *Hoshea* uttered?**

Prof. Yechezkel Kaufman[[12]](#footnote-12) arrives at the far-reaching conclusion that all of the first three chapters of Hoshea, with their unusual and unique style, should be attributed to an ancient prophet who spoke about the kingdom of Israel during the time of the house of Achav, a century before the appearance of Hoshea ben Be’eri.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This conclusion is intended to resolve the difficulty that we discussed above – but the question then reappears in the opposite form: why were these chapters, belonging to the ancient prophet, joined to the prophecies of Hoshea, despite the vastly different style and the gap of a century in between?

The greatest difficulty with Kaufman’s proposed reading relates to the central verse in chapter 1, upon which he bases his hypothesis:

Name him Yizre’el, for in a little while I will visit the blood of Yizre’el upon the house of Yehu, and will cause the kingdom of the house of Israel to cease. (*Hoshea* 1:4)

Kaufman proposes an emended textual version,[[14]](#footnote-14) replacing "the house of Yehu" with "the house of Yehoram," thereby shifting the verse – and the chapter as a whole – around a century backwards.

This creates a different problem: the eradication of the house of Achav did not put an end to the kingdom of Israel. The house of Yehu arose and ruled in Shomron for approximately a hundred years – twice the duration of the reign of the house of Achav. With the fall of the house of Yehu, on the other hand, the kingdom of Israel did in fact collapse, within a single generation.

In addition, it is important to note that there was never a "house of Yehoram." Yehoram did not establish a dynasty, nor was he such an important king that the "house" came to be named for him – unlike his illustrious ancestors Omri[[15]](#footnote-15) and Achav. The "house of Achav" is mentioned several times in the text, but nowhere do we find any reference to the "house of Yehoram."

The Septuagint likewise introduces a change to the Masoretic text,[[16]](#footnote-16) replacing "the house of Yehu" with "the house of Yehuda." However, as Kaufman points out, there is no reason to visit the blood of Yizre'el on the house of Yehuda, especially not where the purpose is to bring the kingdom of Israel to an end.

**The ancient prophecy – only Chapter 2**

Kaufman is well aware of the difficulties arising from his proposal to move the first three chapters of Hoshea backwards in time, and he therefore returns to the main point that led him to the idea of an ancient prophecy. He writes:[[17]](#footnote-17)

Now, one might of course argue… that each of the two parts of the Book (*Hoshea* 1-3 and 4-14) reflects the mood of the prophet at a different period of his life. Likewise, one might say… that Chapters 1-3 belong to the genre of narrative prophetic literature,[[18]](#footnote-18) while Chapters 4-14 are purely prophetic vision. However, there is one element that cannot be explained in this way, and that is Ba'al-worship. In Chapters 1-3 this sin is a current, pressing problem, while we know from *Sefer Melakhim* that Yehu eradicated Ba'al from Israel, and this form of idolatry was not reinstated under any other king. Amos, Yeshayahu, and Mikha make no mention of Ba'al whatsoever, and in *Hoshea* 4-14 it is mentioned only as a sin of the past. This leads us inexorably to the conclusion that the two parts of *Sefer Hoshea* reflect two different time periods… For how is possible that a prophet who prophesized in the days of Yarovam ben Yoash would rebuke Israel for public worship of Ba'al and the celebration of Ba'al's holidays bedecked in "earrings and jewels" (*Hoshea* 2:15)?

A careful reading reveals that the description of Ba'al-worship and the celebration of its pagan holidays appears only in Chapter 2. Had Kaufman limited the scope of his brilliant suggestion concerning an ancient prophecy to Chapter 2 alone, he would not have been forced to emend the text and invent a baseless verse about "the house of Yehoram" that contradicts the continuation of the prophecy concerning the breaking of the kingdom after the "house of Yehu." Kaufman holds the golden key to solving the riddle of *Hoshea*, but it is of no use to him because he views the first three chapters as a single unit, not perceiving the complexity. I will offer an alternate exegetical proposal, along with some historical background.

**Why does Hoshea make use of an ancient prophecy?**

The prophet Hoshea ben Be'eri, active during the period of Yarovam ben Yoash, knows of an ancient prophecy from the time of the house of Achav, condemning the religious harlotry of Ba'al-worship and its harsh consequences, and he cites it as part of his own prophecy to his own generation. It is almost certain that many people in Shomron were familiar with this ancient prophecy and identified with its message, because they viewed themselves as being on the "right side" – i.e., on the side of Yehu, destroyer of Ba'al in Israel, the revolutionary who removed the abomination and cleansed the kingdom. The aristocracy of Shomron at the time of Hoshea, the elite of the house of Yehu, viewed themselves as the "fruit of the revolution" and missed no opportunity to revel in the harsh but true prophecies of the previous generation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This answers the question we posed: what does Hoshea, living in the time of Yarovam ben Yoash, have to do with a prophecy from a hundred years previously? Hoshea cites the ancient prophecy for the specific purpose of censuring his complacent listeners and telling them that they are no better than the people they love to hate. They are so enamored with the prophecies and stories critical of the house of Achav that they are incapable of taking a good look at themselves and seeing that they are no less smug and corrupt than the vilified house of Achav.

**Who is the "wife of harlotry”?**

The prophet's main purpose[[20]](#footnote-20) is easy to discern from the details of the prophetic metaphor in Chapter 1, and especially from the second adulterous woman in Chapter 3. To clarify, let us address the following questions:

Who is the "wife of harlotry" in the context of Shomron? Who are her children, the "children of harlotry"?

Why is the prophet required to take a wife of harlotry?

Why is the prophet then required to take another such wife?

There was no one in Shomron who did not realize that the "wife of harlotry" was Izevel of Sidon, wife of Achav, who controlled him and introduced Ba'al to Shomron. When Yehu came to kill King Yehoram, son of Achav, in Yizre'el, he said,

What peace, so long as the harlotries of your mother, Izevel, and her witchcrafts, are so many? (*Melakhim* II 9:22)

Everyone in Shomron knew this and passed the lesson on to his children, so long as the house of Yehu reigned.

Achav and Izevel had two sons and a daughter: Yehoram and Achazia, and Atalia. Yehoram was killed in Yizre'el on account of the blood of Navot the Yizre'eli and his sons. Achazia sent messengers to consult the gods of Ekron concerning an injury.[[21]](#footnote-21) Atalia entered into a political marriage (as was the custom) with the house of David,[[22]](#footnote-22) and in anguish at the death of her son, gave vent to her deranged cruelty and destroyed "all the royal seed"[[23]](#footnote-23) – meaning, anyone who could have ascended the throne of David. Ultimately, she herself was killed in the rebellion of Yehoyada the *kohen*.[[24]](#footnote-24)

All of this was well known to everyone in Shomron. Everyone could immediately identify the "wife of harlotry" as Izevel. Likewise, "Yizre'el" (*Hoshea* 1:4) was obviously a reference to her son, Yehoram, who was killed in Yizre'el, and "Lo-Ami" (“Not-My-People,” ibid. 9) to Achazia, who had consulted with foreign gods. "Lo-Ruchama" (“No-Mercy,” ibid. 6) clearly symbolized Atalia, the ruthless killer who had had no mercy and ultimately was executed like her mother.[[25]](#footnote-25)

It is precisely on the basis of this familiarity that Hoshea chooses to convey his message in such shocking terms:

… for in a little while, I will visit the blood of Yizre'el upon the house of Yehu, and will cause the kingdom of the house of Israel to cease. (*Hoshea* 1:4)

Hoshea's message to his listeners is: You are just as bad as those sinners, and even worse. God will also call to account the blood that Yehu spilled in Yizre'el, inspired by the prophets of his time, because the house of Yehu, which views itself as the fruit of the revolution, is no better than the house of Achav, which Yehu smote and destroyed.

**What is "the blood of Yizre'el"?**

Here we come to the difficult question (which led to the proposed emendations to this verse): surely the "blood of Yizre'el" (i.e., of Navot and his sons) should be visited on the house of Achav, and not on the house of Yehu?

After all, Eliyahu had told Achav:

So says the Lord: In the place where dogs licked the blood of Navot [the Yizre'eli], there the dogs shall lick your blood, too. (*Melakhim* I 21:19)

Had this prophecy not been echoed by Elisha's disciple, sent to anoint Yehu?[[26]](#footnote-26) Yehu himself reiterated this prophecy when he killed Yehoram ben Achav and cast his body into the portion of Navot the Yizre'eli:

Surely I saw yesterday the blood of Navot, and the blood of his sons, says the Lord; and I will repay you in this plot, says the Lord. (*Melakhim* II 9:26)?

The fact that all of this is abundantly clear intensifies the question: in what way was Yehu responsible for the "blood of Yizre'el"? The blood of the house of Achav had been shed by Yehu in his revolution, which had been waged on the basis of a prophecy!

Yonatan ben Uziel, in his Aramaic translation of *Hoshea* 1:4, proposes an astounding resolution to the problem, which is adopted by both Rashi and Radak. He understands "the blood of Yizre'el" as indeed referring to blood that Yehu had spilled in his revolution against the house of Achav, even though he had acted in accordance with the prophetic condemnation of the abominations of Achav and Izevel. However, the house of Yehu was now mired in its own abominations (the golden calves and the guilt of Shomron), and therefore Hoshea declares in God's Name:

“I shall visit the blood of Yizre'el on the house of Yehu” – In relation to them [the house of Yehu], I view the blood of the house of Achav as innocent blood. (Rashi on *Hoshea* 1:4)

Radak offers proof from the prophecy of Yehu ben Chanani concerning the house of Basha, in which he accused Basha of perpetuating the sins of Yarovam ben Nevat after killing off the entire house of Yarovam. God later promised, "… because of all the evil that he did… in being like the house of Yarovam, and because he smote him."[[27]](#footnote-27) Once Basha continued in the evil path set forth by Yarovam, the blood spilled in the revolution against Yarovam came to be viewed as innocent blood!

The kings of the house of Yehu did not take heed of the prophecy of Yehu ben Chanani (which had come at least 50 years previously), according to which "the blood of Yizre'el" (from Yehu's revolution) was hanging over their heads and could come to be viewed as innocent blood, owing to their own sins and corruption.

The boldness of this interpretation lies in the idea that even with someone who had acted on the basis of prophecy, who had been told, "You have done to the house of Achav according to all that was in My heart,"[[28]](#footnote-28) and who had received a promise that his sons would reign over Israel for four generations – a later prophecy could still look back and conclude retroactively that his revolution against the previous evil regime was now considered ghastly bloodshed against innocent people, because the avengers themselves were guilty of similar sins.

This sort of prophetic retrospective weakens the self-confidence of anyone who is inspired by a prophet to take drastic and far-reaching action. Any future digression from the straight and narrow path (even on the part of descendants, in the generations to come) can negate the prophetic and moral legitimacy of those who are zealous in God’s Name. It is specifically the zealots who are subject to close scrutiny, not only in the present but also later, in retrospect: did they have the moral right to be zealous for God? Prophecy may ultimately conclude that the zealots (Yehu and his sons) were no better and no worthier of the kingdom than the clan of harlotry against whom they rose up in rebellion, and their revolution might come to be regarded, in retrospect, as a massacre of innocents.

It is not difficult to imagine the shocked response to the prophet’s provocation: “How dare he compare [Yehu to Achav]?!” And indeed, this is precisely the purpose of the prophet’s shock tactics: “You are no better!” It is to this end that he invokes the ancient prophecy concerning the house of Achav. Further on, we see that this is also the secret of the two women: the “wife of harlotry” is described exactly as Izevel, and this description is reinforced by the ancient prophecy (Chapter 2). The Israelite society of the prophet’s own generation is the second adulterous woman (Chapter 3), and what awaits them is a long period with no form of government in Israel:

For the children of Israel shall remain for many days without king, and without prince, and without sacrifice, and without pillar, and without ephod or teraphim. (*Hoshea* 3:4)[[29]](#footnote-29)

Along comes Chapter 4 and describes the moral and religious situation in the days of Yarovam ben Yoash,[[30]](#footnote-30) explaining why all this leads not to a new revolution, but rather to complete collapse and dissolution.

The ancient prophecy (Chapter 2) reaches back a hundred years to the days of the house of Achav, while Chapter 4 describes the period of Hoshea, in the early days of his prophecy. Each is juxtaposed to a chapter that presents a parable: the “wife of harlotry” and her children (Chapter 1) come to cast the “blood of Yizre’el” in the faces of the leadership of Shomron, whose corruption makes them no better than the house of Achav, while the “woman beloved of a friend, and an adulteress” (Chapter 3) refers to the leadership of Shomron in the time of the prophet Hoshea.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The idea presented here is raised and discussed by Y. Kaufman, but he broadens it to include all of the first three chapters of *Hoshea*. This forces him to propose an amended reading for Chapter 1, at the same time making it impossible to understand Chapter 3 and the great drama that it conveys. See the detailed discussion below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Its ground-breaking nature will be discussed at length below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. With the exception of disdainful descriptions of pagan worship, as in the story of Eliyahu at Mount Carmel (*Melakhim* I 18) or the prophet’s ridiculing the idea of worshipping and praying to the very same wood that is used for kindling, to bake bread, and to cook meat (*Yeshayahu* 44). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The reader with no background knowledge about the Egyptian sun god cannot properly understand the significance of the final plagues (hail – locusts – darkness – death of the firstborn at midnight) and the “religious” confrontation with Pharaoh, who declares, “So may the Lord be with you, as I will let you go, and your little ones; [but] see that evil is before your face” (*Shemot* 10:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ugarit was a Canaanite-Phoenician town located on what is today the north-eastern coast of Syria. Fragments of Canaanite tablets inscribed with stories and poems were discovered at the site. In one famous fragment, Ba’al implores Anat (Canaanite-Phoenician goddess of war) to cease hostility and to “pour peace into the chasms of the land.”

Countering this pagan poetry, Hoshea declares in God’s Name, “I will remove the names of the *Ba’alim* from her mouth, and they shall no more be mentioned by their name. And in that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field… and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the land, and will cause them to lie down safely... And it shall be on that day that I will respond, says the Lord; I will respond to the heavens, and they shall respond to the earth…” (*Hoshea* 2:19-20, 23-25). In other words, God alone will put an end to war and cause the fields to produce abundantly. God’s repeated use of the verb “respond” (*a’aneh*) is meant to counter the goddess “Anat.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Melakhim* II Chapters 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. 29,31; 13:2,6; 13:11; 14:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. 13:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Yehuda Halevi (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, I 97) argues that the worshippers of the golden calf served God in an improper manner. Statues have been discovered of gods positioned on the backs of oxen or calves, such that the calf was the basis for the invisible entity riding on it, that illustrate what he means. (An example is on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Hoshea* 2:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. v. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit*, vol. III, pp. 93-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See the first *shiur* in this series, which presents a model of the ascents and descents of the kingdoms of Yehuda and Israel during the First Temple period. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Textual emendations are a last resort when scholars despair of any possibility of understanding the text as we have it, and try to invent, based on logic and hypotheses, an alternate “Bible.” The aim is then no longer to understand the biblical text, but rather to understand their own invention. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The kingdom of Israel is referred to by the Assyrians as the “land of the house of Omri” even during the time of the house of Yehu, who annihilated the house of Omri/Achav entirely. See M. Kogan, *Asufat Ketovot Historiot me-Ashur u-Bavel* (Jerusalem, 5764), pp. 16, 18, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. One of many instances where the Septuagint follows not the traditional text but rather logical conjecture and hypothesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Y. Kaufman, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisraelit*, vol. III, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Such as the chapters about Yeshayahu and Chizkiyahu in *Sefer Melakhim* (*Melakhim* II Chapters 18-20), paralleling *Yeshayahu* Chapters 36-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Like the veteran Communist revolutionaries who never tired of telling stories of their struggle against the corrupt reactionaries of the Czar in Russia, but whose actions were even more terrible. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See at length in the previous *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Melakhim* II Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 8:18, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. 11:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. 11:13-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. 9:32-33 / 11:14-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Melakhim* II 9:7-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Melakhim* I 16:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Melakhim* II 10:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The *efod* and *terafim* were regularly used to “inquire” of God. Hoshea’s prophecy parallels the words of Shmuel to Shaul, once God has despaired of the latter’s reign: “Does the Lord take as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the Lord?... For rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is like idolatry and *terafim*. Since you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king.” (*Shmuel* I 15:22-23) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. There is no question that Chapter 4 reflects the period of Yarovam ben Yoash: there is no mention of Ashur (Assyria); popular religious ritual is carried out everywhere and economic affluence is apparent. Corruption is spread throughout society rather than being focused in the royal house, of which no mention is made. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)