

Hosea 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 13. When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling. He was exalted in Israel, but he incurred guilt through Baal and died. And now they sin more and more, and make for themselves metal images, idols skilfully made of their silver, all of them the work of craftsmen. It is said of them, those who offer human sacrifice kiss calves. Therefore they shall be like the morning mist, or like the dew that goes early away, like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor, or like smoke from a window. But I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt. You know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour. It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought. But when they had grazed, they became full. They were filled, and their heart was lifted up.

Therefore they forgot me. So I am to them like a lion. Like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breast.

And there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rip them open. He destroys you, O Israel. For you are against me, against your helper. Where now is your king to save you in all your cities? Where are all your rulers, those of whom you said, Give me a king and princes?

I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath. The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up. His sin is kept in store. The pangs of childbirth come for him. But he is an unwise son, for at the right time he does not present himself at the opening of the womb. I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol. I shall redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes. Though he may flourish among his brothers, the east wind, the wind of the Lord, shall come, rising from the wilderness, and his fountain shall dry up. His spring shall be parched. It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.

Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God. They shall fall by the sword. Their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.

[2 : 1 2] The beginning of Hosea chapter 13 hearkens back to a time when Ephraim was elevated among his brothers. Ephraim, the second son of Joseph, who was raised above his brother Manasseh, was the son who most represented Joseph's part within the nation. If the power of the south was Judah, the power of the north was Joseph, and particularly Ephraim. However, this once great tribe brought destruction upon itself.

He incurred guilt through Baal and died. Joshua Moon suggests that the death in question here is the end of the house of Ahab, the destruction of the Umrises, who had particularly given themselves to the worship of the Baals. Alternatively, we might see in this the downfall of Hosea. However, even after such a downfall, they continued to compound their sin, making for themselves metal images. The metal images referred to here, which are made out of silver, are presumably not the same as the golden calf of Bethel set up by Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat. Rather, these might be gods for household shrines, or alternatively gods on high places. In a point typical of prophetic critique of idolatry, Hosea points out that these are all the work of craftsmen. These creations of human artisans are completely unfitting to represent the creator God who has created all things. Verse 1 speaks of Israel's death. In verse 3, they are compared to a morning mist or dew that vanishes early, or like the chaff from the threshing floor. They will not endure. As the sun rises or as the wind comes, they will disappear or be driven away. Although they have gone after strange gods, God reminds them in verses 4 and 5 of the relationship, the long-standing relationship that he had with them as his people. He was the God who brought them up out of Egypt and led them in the wilderness, providing for them there. At that time of their greatest weakness and dependency, he was the one providing for them. They know no other God in such a manner, no God who has guided, delivered, protected, and supported them as he has. It is precisely in this intimate knowledge that existed between the Lord and his people that the tragedy and the betrayal of their going after other gods is most clearly seen. The imagery at this point is imagery that is implicitly that

of shepherding. The Lord shepherded his people. He brought them like a flock out of Egypt and into the promised land, where he gave them good pasturage. However, when this flock had grazed and become full, they neglected and forgot the Lord who had brought them up. The warning of forgetting the Lord at the time of fullness and plenty is one that is familiar in various parts of the Bible, particularly in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 10 to 14. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take care lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today.

Lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, that your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. As they forget the Lord, however, the Lord, who was once their shepherd, becomes like their predator. Another description of the Lord as a predator is found earlier in the book of Hosea, in chapter 5 verse 14. For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away. I will carry off, and no one shall rescue. The final word of verse 7 in the Hebrew, translated as keep watch or lurk, or in Moon's translation as well trodden, is a play upon the word for Assyria. As in the preceding chapter, puns give a clue about certain connections. Here, the agency of the Lord's destruction will come upon his people through Assyria. The Lord is compared to a leopard or lion.

He is also compared to a she-bear robbed of her cubs. The image of the she-bear is not just an image of violence and predation. Rather, the she-bear is a violent beast that has been bereft of something most precious to her. In comparing the Lord with a she-bear, we might think of the way in which Israel has been taken from the Lord by her unfaithfulness and the Baals, as perhaps being akin to the cubs that have been taken from the she-bear. They've rejected the Lord and put their trust in their king and also in various foreign policies. However, one by one, their kings were overthrown by others, and their fickle foreign policy brought destruction upon their head as they vacillated between Egypt and Assyria. Verse 10 might speak to a time after Shalmaneser V removed Hosheav from the throne. The king has failed, the foreign policy has failed, the Baals have failed, and now they have to deal with the Lord, who is opposing them like a lion or a she-bear robbed of her cubs. In this context, of the loss of the king, rulers, and princes, the Lord recalls the initial sinful request of Israel to have a king like the nations. The Lord was Israel's king, but in 1 Samuel they rejected the

[6 : 59] Lord as their king and sought a man over them instead. Now the consequences of their sinful rebellion, in which they took their cues from the surrounding nations and sought a king like them, rather than trusting in the Lord as their king, has led to a point where the Lord who first gave them that king, has left them bereft of a king, and the surrounding nations are preying upon them.

The imagery of verse 12 might relate to a situation where evidence was gathered together in a bundle, ready for a trial. Ephraim will have to give an account for itself, and a sentence will be passed against it. Imagery of the pangs of childbirth are found elsewhere in scripture, in Isaiah chapter 26, verses 17 to 19.

Like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy, for your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

In Isaiah chapter 66, verses 7 to 9, Before she was in labor, she gave birth. Before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day?

[8 : 17] Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labor, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the point of birth, and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord. Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb, says your God.

Here the image seems to present Ephraim as the child that does not know the proper time. Ephraim is the child whose time has come to be born, and he does not present himself at the opening of the womb.

Perhaps he's stillborn, and the nation is going to miscarry. Birth pangs are elsewhere in scripture connected with times of suffering. At some points in scripture, such as in the story of the Exodus,

birth pangs herald a new birth.

At other points, however, labor pains arrive, but no child is born. Jeremiah also uses such imagery in his prophecy. As the judgment comes upon Jerusalem, she is like a woman in labor, but no child would be born from her pain.

Verse 14 is famously used by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. In its original context, however, it's far from clear that the meaning is positive. The majority of commentators seem to understand its statements as rhetorical questions.

[9 : 22] Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? The implied answer, in both cases, is no. The Lord is not going to deliver his people from these great enemies.

He's going to give them over to the power of death, as we see elsewhere in the prophecy. What's more, not only is God not going to save his people from these forces, he's going to summon these forces against them.

O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Is an invitation to death and Sheol to come on the scene, with all their terrors. They will be the executioners of Ephraim, enacting the dreadful sentence of the Lord upon his rebellious people.

Such a reading of the text here is certainly not universal. There are several commentators and translations that give the text here a more positive meaning. However, the final clause of the verse does make this difficult.

Compassion is hidden from my eyes. The people are condemned. The nation is going to be slain and buried in the lands of its exile. When Paul refers to this statement in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, it seems most likely to me that he's taking this statement, laden as it is with the darkest themes of judgment, and showing how the light of the Lord's redemption from slavery and the grave is fulfilled in the story of Christ's resurrection.

[10 : 33] He connects it with the text of Isaiah chapter 25 verse 8. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

For the Lord has spoken. The final text reads as follows in verses 54 to 57 of chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. Words that were once a summons to these powers, to slay a people that had broken the law, are now words of triumph over these powers, as they have been robbed of their mastery by Christ's resurrection.

Earlier in the chapter, the Lord had spoken of himself as the one who knew Israel in the wilderness. Here, however, at the end of the chapter, he talks about returning Israel and its land to the state of a wilderness.

The wilderness itself will pursue and overtake them in the east wind of the Lord. The final end of Samaria will be bitter. On account of its rebellion, it will experience the full cruelty of the Assyrians. Children will be dashed in pieces, and pregnant women ripped open. A question to consider. This chapter gives a very negative portrayal of Israel's history with its kings.

[12 : 03] I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath. However, the book of Deuteronomy seems to make provision for a time that would come when Israel would enjoy kings in the land. How should Israel have enjoyed its king in a way that did not lead it to rebel against the Lord?

How should Israel have enjoyed its king in a way that did not lead it to the Lord?