

Hosea 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hosea chapter 14. Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words, and return to the Lord. Say to him, Take away all iniquity, except what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, and we will say no more, Our God, to the work of our hands.

In you the orphan finds mercy. I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel. He shall blossom like the lily.

He shall take root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoot shall spread out. His beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the grain. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress. From me comes your fruit. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. The book of Hosea concludes in chapter 14.

Israel is here addressed in their situation of judgment, and then the heroes of the book across time are addressed more generally. Andrew Dearman remarks upon the degree to which the vocabulary of this chapter is found elsewhere in the book. The commonality of the language in this chapter with earlier parts of the book reflects its development and resolution of the book's broader themes.

[1 : 41] Joshua Moon observes that the one part of the chapter where the commonality of language with elsewhere in the book is least pronounced, in verses 5 to 7, makes sense when we recognise that it is one of the rare parts of Hosea's prophecy that speaks of the restoration and flourishing of Israel.

More particularly, chapter 14 reverses many of the themes of judgment of chapter 13. Moon summarises some of the verbal indicators of this motif of reversal. Iniquity, chapter 13 verse 12, is here taken away, chapter 14 verse 2. Concern for political might to save, chapter 13 verse 10, is now admitted as fruitless, chapter 14 verse 3. Repudiation of the work of their hands, chapter 13 verse 2 and 14 verse 3. Yahweh's anger, chapter 13 verse 11. Removed, chapter 14 verse 4.

And Israel standing as dew that dissipates, chapter 13 verse 3. Is replaced by Yahweh as dew that revives, chapter 14 verse 3. In short, the central prophetic message of Hosea stands in front of us as the last thing in our ears as the book comes to a perfectly fitting conclusion. The chapter opens with an invitation to return to the Lord and a description of how Israel might go about it. This is not the first time that Israel was presented with a call to return in the book. Earlier in chapter 6 verses 1 to 3.

Come, let us return to the Lord, for he has torn us, that he may heal us. He has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord, his going out as sure as the dawn. He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth. Perhaps the most astonishing thing is that, after all that Israel has done, after all of Israel's betrayal, infidelity, and iniquity, at the very time that it is in freefall, having stumbled over the precipice, descending headlong into the abyss of exile, it has still offered a path of return to the Lord.

Even as the nation is lowered into its grave, the people are not altogether forsaken. The prophecy of Hosea began with the prophetic sign of taking a wife of Hordom, and having children of Hordom. That prophetic act ended with Hosea in chapter 3, taking Gomer back to himself.

[4 : 01] In verses 4 and 5 of that chapter, the prophetic sign act was explained as follows. For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. Afterward, the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God,

and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days. Beyond the call to return to the Lord, Hosea offers Israel the words of confession with which it could make this return. At the heart of Israel's failure was its misplaced trust, the trust that it placed in its various lovers, the Baals, foreign powers, and even their own kings, rather than trusting in the Lord their God as their divine husband. Israel needed to confess its fault, the insufficiency of Assyria to save, and trust only in the Lord. The Lord alone should have been their source of confidence and security. They must be cleansed by him, and then perform true worship to him. After so many statements of judgment in the book, and the terrible sentence that the nation was now suffering, the word of the Lord in verses 4 to 7 is a word of restoration and healing. The Lord would repair what was broken, he would restore them from their apostasy.

Like the glory of the sunshine coming after a terrible storm, they would be bathed the new in his love. His anger has abated. As Meir Gruber observes, there is a stark contrast between the way that Israel is described after its restoration and the way it is described earlier in the book. In chapter 9 verse 16, Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit. In chapter 13 verse 15, 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. In chapter 6 verse 4, in chapter 13 verse 3, the imagery of dew was used of Ephraim. In both cases, it was the short-lasting character of the dew that was focused upon.

Ephraim's love is like the short-lasting dew in chapter 6 verse 4. In chapter 13 verse 3, we were told that they themselves would be like the morning mist, or like the dew that goes away early, like the chaff that swirls from the threshing floor, or like smoke from a window. Here, however, the language of dew reappears, but it's used in a positive sense. The Lord will be like the refreshment of the dew to Israel, causing Israel to blossom like the lily. While some commentators have disputed the reading, verses 5, 6, and 7 all make a reference to Lebanon at the end of them.

In verse 5, Israel will take root like the trees of Lebanon. The trees of Lebanon were famous for their grandeur and their quality. Israel would also put out new shoots. Not only would this eschatological Israel be more firmly embedded in the land, its life would spread out over the land. In addition to the majesty of the trees of Lebanon, in verse 6, in language redolent of the Song of Songs, it is the beauty and fragrance of Lebanon that is highlighted. Hans Walter Wolff quotes Herman Guth, In the regions where the mulberry, olive, and fig tree grow, the ground is covered with myrrh, thyme, lavender, sage, citros, styrax, with fragrant shrubs and herbs which fill the air with pleasant odours, particularly when the wanderer treads upon them. The language here, then, is language not just of strength and security, but also of delight and beauty. Commentators are divided on verse 7. Should we understand the opening statement here to refer to a return and dwelling under the lord's shadow or under Israel's shadow, considering the way elsewhere we have imagery similar to this used, with great trees representing kings and their rule, offering shade for those who take rest beneath them? It would not be entirely surprising if this were a reference to people coming under the shade of [7 : 46] Israel's restored boughs. In addition to its new security and fragrance and beauty, Israel would enjoy great fertility and fame. The fertility is described with reference to the grain and the vine, and their fame is associated with the wine of Lebanon. Somewhat ironically, this is the only reference that we have in scripture to this wine of Lebanon. The lesson that Israel was to learn from all of this was that its security, its provision, and its fruit all came not from idols, but from its divine husband, the Lord. As the book concludes, the hearer is more directly addressed. The words of the prophets are not just for their most immediate hearers and times. As Brother Charles has argued, to some extent, the words of the prophets are abstracted from their historical contexts. The word of the prophet Hosea does not cease to be relevant or to speak with urgency into people's situations after the northern kingdom of Israel has collapsed. Rather, its words can still address the modern hearer, who meditates upon them and learns wisdom by them.

A question to consider. The final verse of Hosea chapter 14 moves us from language that we associate more with prophecy to language of wisdom literature. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things.

Whoever is discerning, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them. How might this saying direct our hearing of the book?