

Hosea 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 14 August 2021

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[0 : 00] Hosea chapter 12. Ephraim feeds on the wind and pursues the east wind all day long. They multiply falsehood and violence. They make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt. The Lord has an indictment against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways. He will repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God.

He strove with the angel and prevailed. He wept and sought his favour. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us. The Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord is his memorial name.

So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God. A merchant in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress. Ephraim has said, Ah, but I am rich. I have found wealth for myself. In all my labours they cannot find in me iniquity or sin. I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt. I will again make you dwell in tents, as in the days of the appointed feast. I spoke to the prophets. It was I who multiplied visions, and through the prophets gave parables. If there is iniquity in Gilead, they shall surely come to nothing. In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls. Their altars also are like stone heaps on the furrows of the field. Jacob fled to the land of Aram. There Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep. By a prophet the Lord brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was guarded.

Ephraim has given bitter provocation, so his Lord will leave his blood guilt on him, and will repay him for his disgraceful deeds. Hosea chapter 12 is a rich and densely elusive chapter. Challenging to understand, it draws extensively upon the story of the patriarchs and the exodus, a passage that uses a number of word plays. It provides Israel with the archetypal patriarchal narrative as an interpretive foil for its current situation. Ephraim has proved fickle and deceitful in its foreign alliances, and also in its own social and political life. It had vacillated between Assyria and Egypt, and would end up suffering on account of its treachery. Verse 2 introduces another controversy that the Lord has with Judah, or Jacob. The destiny and identity of the nation is seen to be contained in its forefather. In a moment of national crisis, it will be in part through looking at their forefather Jacob that they will get their bearings again. As Joshua Moon notes, the two events that are focused upon in verse 3 are the events in which Jacob received his names. In both of the cases, the text of Hosea puns upon the names. Taking by the heel, at the beginning of verse 3, plays upon the name Jacob, and at the beginning of verse 4, as Andrew Dearman notes, there is a wordplay on the word Israel with the verbal phrase that opens the verse. In the patriarchal narrative of Genesis, the names of Jacob are a very important part of the story. Throughout Jacob's life, he's seeking for a name and a blessing. Originally, he lacks the blessing as the second born, and the name that he first receives is an unflattering one that connects him with deception. It is in his struggle with the angel at the ford of the Jabbok, not coincidentally a place where the letters of Jacob's name are mixed up, that he finally receives a new name, and is blessed by the angel. In Genesis chapter 32 verse 28, he receives this name. Then he said,

Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed. Of the two events in verse 3, one relates to the time of his birth, and the other relates to a time when he was a grown man. Among commentators, there are many different readings of the clauses of verse 4. Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman translate verses 3 and 4 as follows.

[3 : 45] In the womb, he grabbed his brother's heel. In his vigour, he contended with God. He contended with God. He overcame the angel. He wept and implored him. In Anderson and Friedman's account, it seems as though the angel might be the one weeping and imploring Jacob. This presumably was the sign that Jacob had triumphed over the angel in the wrestling match. Hans Walter Wolfe reads it quite differently.

In the womb, he tricked his brother. In his wealth, he strove against God. But God, or the angel, proved himself lord and prevailed. He wept and made supplication to him. In Bethel he finds him, and there he speaks with him. John Goldingay sees the weeping and seeking for favour as a reference to Jacob seeking a blessing from the angel. Dwayne Garrett observes a chiasmic structure to these statements, and he also observes the ways that the two names are coded into the text. In the womb, he, Jacob, tripped up his brother. And in his manhood, he struggled with God. And he, Israel, struggled with the angel and prevailed. He wept and sought his favour. Read in such a chiasmic fashion, the second clause of verse 4 refers back to the first clause of verse 3. In the womb, he tripped up his brother relates to he wept and sought his favour. This then has in view Genesis chapter 33 verses 3 to 4 and 10 to 11, the account of Jacob's meeting with Esau. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

[5 : 17] Jacob said, No, please, if I have found favour in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.

Thus he urged him, and he took it. Connecting the second clause of verse 4 with the reunion of Jacob and Esau rounds off the rough account of the story of Jacob. Jacob is a man defined by struggling, but after wrestling with the Lord and prevailing, he is no longer wrestling with his brother Esau in the same way. They're reconciled. The prophecy now alludes to a further event in the life of Jacob, or perhaps two events, and then it relates it very powerfully to the experience of Israel in the present day. In Genesis chapter 28, Jacob met with the Lord at Bethel. He saw the vision of the ladder ascending to heaven, and marked the place out as the place of the Lord's dwelling.

The Lord had spoken to him there, and made a promise in Genesis chapter 28 verse 15. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. This is later referred to on the return journey in chapter 32 verses 9 to 10. And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good. I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love, and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant. For with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. These statements seem to be alluded to in verse 6.

So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God. This connection drawn between the current nation of Israel and their historical forebear, a namesake, Israel or Jacob, is first explicitly presented at the end of verse 4.

He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us. Verse 5 also seems to bring in an allusion to Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. There the Lord declared his covenant name to Moses, and here it is the covenant or the memorial name of God that is highlighted. Already we could probably think of a number of ways in which these allusions might connect with the current life of Israel. Israel in the book of Hosea is defined by deception and deceit, much as the earlier life of Jacob. The site of Bethel has also been prominent throughout the book of Hosea as a site of idolatry, the place where Jeroboam the son of Nebat set up the golden calf that caused Israel to sin. This central site of idolatry, however, was the place where the Lord first met with Jacob. Furthermore, in Genesis chapter 35, Jacob was called back to Bethel, where he rededicated himself and his household to the Lord, and they put away their foreign gods. There the Lord also reiterated the changing of Jacob's name to Israel. A further play on a word is seen in verse 7, where Israel is described as a merchant. That word for merchant derives from the word Canaan.

[8 : 21] Israel, it is being suggested, has become like the Canaanites that they once dispossessed. Ephraim, however, is boastful in his wealth. He wrongly fancies that no one can prove any guilt against him. The word that is used for wealth here is the same word that is used of Jacob's manhood back in verse 3. Other translations of that verse translate it as vigor or wealth. Perhaps we might hear behind this the story of Jacob, who prospered while serving under Laban in Haran, and whose wealth was there closely scrutinized for theft and false dealing. The Israel of Hosea's day presumed that like their forefather, they would not be found guilty of false dealing, even while it was engaging in theft, deception, and oppression. The Lord's history with Israel had extended over

many years. He had spoken throughout their history by the prophets, giving them visions and messages for his people. He had brought them out of Egypt, an event commemorated in the Feast of Tabernacles, where they would dwell in tents. The Lord could return them to tents once more. There was another wilderness, the wilderness of exile, awaiting them. Verse 11 refers to Gilead and Gilgal again. Gilead was mentioned earlier in chapter 6 verse 8. Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. And then Gilgal was mentioned in chapter 9 verse 15. Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal. There I began to hate them. Because of the wickedness of their deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no more. All their princes are rebels. One of the events in the story of Jacob that might have had particular resonance in the days of Hosea would be the story of chapter 31. As Jacob fled from Laban, Laban pursued him and overtook him at

Gilead. There Jacob and his house were inspected for the stolen household gods, and more importantly, a treaty was made between Jacob and Laban. A treaty of peace witnessed to by a pile of stones. However, Israel and the Arameans had been at war for much of the past century. Gilgal was also the site of a pile of stones, set up by Joshua in Joshua chapter 4, as a testimony to the Lord's bringing of Israel across the Jordan. However, now as these places, Gilead and Gilgal, had, like Bethel, become sites synonymous with sin and rebellion, the curses of the covenant would come down upon them. In speaking of their altars at these sites like stone heaps, the Lord is probably alluding to these earlier heaps of stones that bore testimony against the people when they broke the covenant. He might also be suggesting that the altars will be torn down.

Such unfaithful altars are little more than impediments. They are like large stones in a field that a farmer is trying to plough. A further connection with the story of Jacob is brought out in verses 12 and 13. There the Lord relates Jacob's sojourn in the land of Aram with Laban, with the exodus from Egypt. There are numerous parallels between these stories to be observed. In both cases, a group prospers as they are reduced to a state of servitude. In both cases, they leave and are pursued.

In both cases, an exceedingly significant event occurs at the crossing of the waters. In the story of the exodus, the deliverance at the Red Sea. In the story of Jacob, the wrestling at the Jabbok, where he receives a new name and a blessing. The parallel here foregrounds the figure of the prophet, obviously drawing our minds back to verse 10.

I spoke to the prophets. It was I who multiplied visions and through the prophets gave parables. The Lord deals with his people through the prophets. The prophetic office represents a continual thread of God addressing and guiding his people. The parallels between the two statements should be observed. Jacob, after fleeing to Aram, labored for a wife and guarded sheep for a wife.

[11 : 50] The Lord, through the agency of his prophet Moses, brought Israel up from Egypt and guarded Israel. Perhaps what the Lord is doing here is drawing a parallel between Jacob, who labored for his wife, for Laban, and his own labor for Israel in Egypt. Israel is supposed to be the bride of the Lord.

She owes him her faithfulness. In verse 14, we have the final indictment. Ephraim is found guilty. Its blood guilt will not be removed from it. It will suffer the consequence of its sins.

A question to consider. Can you think of other occasions in scripture where people are encouraged to look back on previous narratives and to interpret their own experience against the foil of those stories?

