

Hosea 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 11 August 2021

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[0 : 00] Hosea chapter 9. Rejoice not, O Israel, exult not like the peoples, for you have played the whore, forsaking your guard. You have loved a prostitute's wages on all threshing floors.

Threshing floor and wine vats shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them. They shall not remain in the land of the Lord, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria. They shall not pour out drink offerings of wine to the Lord, and their sacrifices shall not please him. It shall be like mourner's bread to them. All who eat of it shall be defiled, for their bread shall be for their hunger only. It shall not come to the house of the Lord. What will you do on the day of the appointed festival, and on the day of the feast of the Lord? For behold, they are going away from destruction, but Egypt shall gather them, Memphis shall bury them, nettles shall possess their precious things of silver, thorns shall be in their tents.

The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come, Israel shall know it. The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad, because of your great iniquity and great hatred. The prophet is the watchman of Ephraim with my guard, yet a foulless snare is on all his ways, and hatred in the house of his guard. They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah. He will remember their iniquity, he will punish their sins. Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel, like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal Peor, and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. Ephraim's glory shall fly away like a bird. No birth, no pregnancy, no conception.

Even if they bring up children, I will bereave them till none is left. Woe to them when I depart from them. Ephraim, as I have seen, was like a young palm planted in a meadow. But Ephraim must lead his children out to slaughter. Give them, O Lord, what will you give? Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts. 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. Ephraim is stricken. Their root is dried up. They shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will put their beloved children to death. My God will reject them, because they have not listened to him. They shall be wanderers among the nations. Hosea chapter 9 begins with words that seem to evoke a summons to a feast. However, rather than being summoned to celebrate a feast, Israel is being commanded not to do so. The feast in question seems to be a great harvest festival. Israel had turned to the Baals for its fertility, and the threshing floor was the site where they presumed that they received their payment. The threshing floor might also be a site associated with prostitution more generally.

[2 : 53] However, the source of the fertility of the land was always the Lord, and the Lord alone. As Israel had been unfaithful to the Lord, the land would become barren to them. The places where grain and grapes were gathered in and prepared would no longer provide for them. The blessing of new wine would be cut off, and in addition to the cutting off of the blessings of the land, Israel itself would be cut off from the land. As a nation, they had turned for support to Assyria and Egypt, and they would end up going to Assyria and Egypt, in exile, as they were expelled from the land of the Lord's promise.

Rather than eating the fruits of the Lord's land, they would eat unclean food in Assyria. Cut off from the place of the Lord's special blessing, they would be eating the food of the Gentiles. What is referred to here is not primarily non-kosher food, but the food eaten by those who are cut off from the fellowship of the people of God. This becomes clearer in verse 4. They won't be pouring out drink offerings of wine to the Lord. They won't be enjoying fellowship with the Lord in the eating of sacrificial meals. Rather, they will be like mourners, who, because of their association with the dead, are unclean and cannot enter into fellowship with the congregation. Their food might sustain them in their hunger, but they would enjoy neither fellowship with the Lord nor with his people as

they ate it. They will be cut off from the celebration of the feasts of the land. Maybe this is a reference in verse 5 to the feasts more generally, or perhaps it's a more narrow reference to the feast of tabernacles or in gathering. Rather than celebrating the feast of the land, they are fleeing the destruction that is coming upon the land and going into the hands of Egypt. They would end up dying in Egyptian cities. We might recall the curses of the covenant in places like Deuteronomy chapter 28, where the climax of the curses is their being returned to Egypt, the land from which the Lord had first delivered them. They are experiencing an anti-exodus, a reversal of the Lord's earlier deliverance. Their possessions and precious things, the things that they had once treasured, would be given over to thorns and to weeds. All of this would occur as the day of Israel's reckoning came upon it. The second half of verse 7 and verse 8 are very difficult to understand, and several competing interpretations have been advanced for them. Joshua Moon suggests that the words here are the words of Hosea's opponents. He paraphrases them as follows. This Hosea is a fool. He's mad, talking about the greatness of your sin and the greatness of your hatred. Ephraim stands a century with my God.

Hosea sets traps for all Ephraim sets out to do. He brings hatred into God's household. John Goldengay, by contrast, sees the words here as the words of Hosea himself. Hosea sees himself as compelled to play the fool. He's driven mad by the people's unfaithfulness. In verse 8, he's describing his duty as a prophet in ways that might remind us of Ezekiel chapter 3 verse 17. Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. Golden Gaze suggests that Hosea's contemporaries might be speaking dismissively about his God, which might explain Hosea's reference to my God here. His task as the watchman is to warn the land of approaching danger. Coming from the Lord himself, the Lord is like a fowler who has set a snare for the people, and unless they respond in a way that will allow them to escape it, they will be trapped and destroyed. Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman talk about the way that these sorts of dismissive statements can be seen elsewhere in scripture, in places like Amos chapter 7 or in 2 Kings chapter 9 verse 11. There Jehu responds to a query about the prophet who had visited him. Is all well? Why did this mad fellow come to you? And he said to them, you know the fellow and his talk. Anderson and Friedman suggest that the fowler's snare is not the snare that the Lord has set for the people, but rather the snare that the people have set for Hosea. The corruption of the people is compared with the story of Gibeah. In the concluding chapters of the book of Judges, from chapter 19 onwards, the tragic story of Gibeah and its sin are told.

[6 : 51] That sin led to a deep breach in the people and the near extinction of the tribe of Benjamin. The sin itself was similar to the sin of Sodom, a sin that represented the extremes of wickedness of the people of the land. The rest of the verses of the chapter, from verse 10 to 17, probably represent a distinct section. Within these verses, the Lord recalls several episodes in the earlier history of the nation. In verse 10, we have a sense of the joy that the Lord once had over his people and the way that he nurtured them. However, his care and love for the people was responded to by an act of deep betrayal. Their fathers were like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, something that would have been greeted with joy as a promise of later fruitfulness. However, in the events described in Numbers chapter 25, Israel had played the whore and bound itself to Baal the Peor, forsaking the Lord and also intermarrying with pagan Moabite women. For their sin, they would face an utter end. Their glory would utterly forsake them, flying away like a bird. Israel would wither down into its very roots. There would be no birth, there would be no pregnancy that would yield a birth, and there would be no conception that would yield a pregnancy. Even if the judgment of verse 11 did not hang over them, and they did bring children to birth, they would swiftly be bereaved of those children until there would be none left. In verse 11, it spoke of the glory of Ephraim flying away like a bird. In verse 12, woe to them when I depart from them. The Lord is the glory of his people, and he's about to forsake

Israel. Ephraim's beginnings were auspicious, lovingly planted in a meadow in the very best conditions. But now the nation has fallen so far that its children will be led out to the slaughter. What could the Lord give to his people in such a situation? Perhaps the most that he can give them is a mitigation of the cruelty that they will face at the hand of the Assyrians. If only they had a miscarrying womb and dry breasts, they would not be bringing up children only to see them brutally slain before their eyes by the Assyrians. That, at least, would be a small mercy. The reason for the

reference to Gilgal in verse 15 is unclear. What exactly was it that caused the Lord to begin to hate them there? Gilgal was the place where Israel first entered the land in the story of Joshua. Perhaps the point is that from the very first entry to the land, they were engaged in the sort of unfaithfulness that was finally leading to their destruction at this point. Gilgal was also the site where Saul was made king, which might be another way in which it was associated with transgression. Anderson and Friedman note the contrast between the description of the evil of theirs being found in Gilgal and the Lord finding Israel like grapes in the wilderness in verse 10. While Meir Gruber and others focused upon the monarchy started with Saul, Anderson and Friedman, among others, focused upon the practice of Baal worship in Gilgal. They quote from the book of Amos, chapter 4 verse 4, Come to Bethel and transgress, to Gilgal and multiply transgression, or to Amos chapter 5 verses 4 to 5, But do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal, or cross over to Beersheba, for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. As in the message of Amos, Hosea declares that they are going to be expelled from the house of the Lord. The claim that all of their princes are rebels might refer not only to the ways that the princes have rebelled against the Lord, but also to the ways that the rulers of Israel had, one after another, rebelled against their predecessors. They were a bunch of assassins and revolutionaries, people who had staged coups, rather than legitimate and righteous rulers. Returning to the points of verse 11 and 12, in verse 16 the point is repeated, The root of Ephraim is dried up, and they will bear no fruit. As in verse 12, so in verse 16, Even if they were to give birth, the children would be put to death. On account of their rebellion and the rejection of the Lord, they would be cast out and made wanderers among the nations.

[10:40] A question to consider. Within this chapter, fruit or offspring play a number of different roles. They can be signs of blessing, or promise, or the objects of judgment. What are some of the ways that the metaphor of fruit can help us to understand the people's relationship to the Lord, the people's relationship to their works, and the Lord's relationship to their works?