

Hosea 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hosea chapter 6. 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 is sure as the dawn. He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. Therefore I have hewn them by my prophets, I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. But like Adam they transgressed the covenant. There they dealt faithlessly with me. Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood.

As ravers lie in wait for a man, so the priests band together. They murder on the way to Shechem. They commit vilni. In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing. Ephraim's whoredom is there. Israel is defiled. For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed. When I restore the fortunes of my people. Hosea chapter 5 ended with a description of the sickness of Ephraim and Judah, a sickness which could not be healed by the king of Assyria. They had cut themselves off from the Lord by their sins, and the Lord was like a predatory lion to them, about to maul them. The hope of their deliverance was expressed in the final verse. I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me. Chapter 6 opens with a different voice, perhaps the voice of Israel, in response to the words of the Lord. However, sadly, these words are probably not the actual words of Israel itself, although some commentators have taken them that way, and the chapter divisions in our Bibles might lend themselves to that understanding.

Rather, these might be the words that the Lord is hoping to hear from his people, the words that would represent the acknowledgement of their guilt and the earnest seeking of the Lord referenced at the end of the preceding chapter. Another likely possibility is mentioned by Joshua Moon, that these are the words of the prophet himself, encouraging the people, as one of them himself, to return to the Lord. The Lord has turned back from them, so they must turn back to him.

[2 : 25] The Lord, as we have seen, is the real source of Israel's sickness, and consequently getting right with him is the real hope of their healing. No lesser power will be able to deliver or restore them.

The Lord could revive them in a short period of time, raising them up after two days, on the third day, enabling them to live before him once more. Alternatively, rather than seeing the after two days, and on the third day as two ways of speaking of the same thing, some commentators see this more as an example of the sort of numerical formula that we encounter elsewhere in the Old Testament, in statements such as, The connection of healing with deliverance from death here, especially as the raising up occurs on the third day, has unsurprisingly excited Christian readers of this text. Saint Augustine is just one of many examples of Christian theologians who heard this text as a prophecy of Christ and his resurrection. Indeed, the claim that Jesus was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, which we find in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 4, has been heard as an allusion to these verses in Hosea. While the story of Jonah has also been proposed as a background for 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 4, three days and three nights is a weaker connection than on the third day. Moon is likely correct in seeing Hosea chapter 6 verse 2 as the central text in Paul's reference to a more general theme in the Old Testament scriptures, connecting a broader motif of the third day as the day of deliverance after a period of testing with the specific event of resurrection. We might think of the third day provision of a substitute for Isaac

on Mount Moriah, the third day restoration of the chief cupbearer, the third day theophany of the Lord at Mount Sinai, the third day healing of King Hezekiah, or the third day appearance of Esther before King Ahasuerus. Moon assembles a fascinating array of Jewish texts that connect resurrection more generally with the third day. In Christ, the third day resurrection expected for the faithful more generally becomes focused on the one man who stands at their head, the condensed expression and anticipation of the destiny of the people as a whole, which will be achieved in and through him. The question of whether the raising up is a raising up from death or a raising up from sickness shouldn't be pressed too strongly. Andrew Dearman writes,

Likely the difference that modern readers assume between recovery from illness and resurrection from the dead was understood more synthetically by the ancients. Sickness could be the intrusion of the powers of death and recovery could be understood as a new gift of life. In verse 3, the Lord is compared to the dawn and the rains, the source of life and fertility within the land. He is the faithful provider and sustainer, and if Israel returns to him, he will be their restorer. However, while the Lord, as the source of healing, might be like the life-giving sun and rains, which consistently nourish and revive the land, Israel and Judah are fickle, their love like morning mist that soon vanishes. The Lord has prosecuted his covenant against them by his prophets, sending forth his judgments and calling them to account. His judgments are described as like the light going forth, piercing the darkness and revealing what has formerly been hidden. What the Lord desires from his people above all else is covenant loyalty and genuine knowledge of him. Sacrificial ritual, apart from such devotion, is empty and vain.

Sacrifice was always supposed to function as a sort of enacted prayer, and performance of sacrifice, apart from the genuine love of the Lord, was a form of people's drawing near to the Lord with their lips, while their hearts were far from him. This is a common theme in the message of the prophets and the Psalms. In 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 22, the prophet Samuel declares the Lord's judgment to the rejected king Saul. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

The Lord makes a similar point through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 1 verses 10 to 17. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who is required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them.

[7 : 20] When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. Hosea chapter 6 verse 6 was, of course, a text that Jesus referenced on a couple of key occasions in his ministry recorded in Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew chapter 9 verse 13, Jesus answered the Pharisees who accused him of eating with tax collectors and sinners, saying that they needed to learn the meaning of this verse. He again accused the Pharisees of ignorance of the meaning of this statement in Matthew chapter 12 verse 7, after they had accused his disciples of breaking the Sabbath when the disciples had plucked and eaten the heads of grain. Later, in chapter 23 verse 23, he would challenge the scribes and Pharisees in similar terms.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. Above all other things, the Lord desires the hearts of his people.

No quantity of sacrifices can compensate for the absence of that. The law, whether the sacrificial regulations or the moral requirements of the Ten Commandments, was always to be fulfilled in and through love. Commentators differ over the meaning of the term Adam in verse 7. Some, observing the participle there later in the verse, argue that it must be a geographical reference relating to a sin committed at a place called Adam. In Joshua chapter 3 verse 16, in connection with the stopping of

the waters of the Jordan so that the children of Israel could enter the promised land, there is a place called Adam mentioned. Deaman observes the syntactically similar expression in Hosea chapter 10 verse 9.

From the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel. There they have continued. There the reference is clearly to a geographical location. Given the location of the city mentioned in Joshua chapter 3 as the likely site of a river crossing on the border between Ephraim and Gilead, this might make sense.

Like at Adam, they transgressed the covenant. If this is the case, then the reference is an obscure one. But as Deaman argues, it might relate to political intrigue associated with Gilead, such as the 50 men from Gilead that had assisted Pica in his treacherous murder of Pekahaya, breaking the bond that should have united the people and their ruler. The fact that Gilead is mentioned in the next verse adds strength to this reading. Another popular reading sees this as a reference back to Adam in the Garden of Eden, breaking the covenant of works. However, as Michael Shepard points out, despite the popularity of expansive uses of the term in both reformed, systematic and biblical theologies, the term covenant is not actually employed elsewhere in reference to the situation that existed prior to the fall. It is important to recognise that the term covenant within scripture is deployed much less broadly than it is within systems of so-called covenant theology. While this doesn't mean that we can't use the term covenant in a stipulated sense within our theologies and see the components of such a covenant so defined in Eden, it does mean that we need to be careful not to confuse the senses in which we are using this term. Moon defends the historically popular reading of Adam as a reference to man, whether our first father Adam in particular, or humanity more generally. There, might relate, he argues, not to a geographical location but to a rhetorical one. Adam is paradigmatic for covenant breaking, and later Jewish texts read Hosea chapter 6 verse 7 in this way. Much as we see in the case of Abraham's faithfulness being described as if a fulfilment of the law in Genesis chapter 26 verse 5, language of covenant could appropriately be read back into the story of Eden. John Goldingay offers something of a mediating reading of this text, suggesting that as the heroes were first listening through it, they might initially have thought of the story of Eden when they heard the name Adam, before it became clearer that it was the place

[11 : 30] Adam that was in view. He further notes that the association with Adam might recall the first crossing of the Jordan when they had entered the land and dedicated themselves to the Lord, a commitment that they had subsequently broken. While the term Adam might strictly denote the place called Adam then, that place was selected because it also evoked connotations with the solemn commitment to the Lord that they had made at their first entry into the land, and also to the treachery of Adam at the first fall of man. As scripture is a literary text, such connotations can also be aspects of its divinely intended meaning. An overly narrow focus upon revelation as declarative propositions can make us forgetful of this. The description of Gilead as a city of evildoers is possibly a figurative way of characterising that region of the Transjordan more generally. The priests lying in wait might also be a reference to their involvement in Pekah's treacherous assassination of Pekahiah and his rebellion more generally. The references here, as Moon emphasises, are general rather than particular, and perhaps we should be cautious of tying them too strongly to one historical event. Gilead's treachery was not merely displayed in that one act, but it had been functioning as a rival centre of power to Samaria for over a decade.

Israel has become defined by outrageous treachery, by disgraceful infidelity, and by shameful defilement and uncleanness. And if Judah thinks that it is innocent in comparison to its wicked brother to the north, it is informed that a harvest time is set for them too.

A question to consider, within the Old Testament law itself, how does the Lord show that steadfast love and knowledge of him is more important than sacrifice?