

Hosea 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Hosea chapter 5. Hear this, O priests. Pay attention, O house of Israel. Give ear, O house of the king. For the judgment is for you, for you have been a snare at Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor.

And the revolvers have gone deep into slaughter, but I will discipline all of them. I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me. For now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore. Israel is defiled. Their deeds do not permit them to return to their guard. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the Lord. The pride of Israel testifies to his face. Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt. Judah also shall stumble with them. With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find him. He has withdrawn from them. They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord, for they have born alien children. Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.

Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-Avon. We follow you, O Benjamin. Ephraim shall become a desolation in the day of punishment. Among the tribes of Israel I make known what is sure. The princes of Judah have become like those who moved the landmark. Upon them I will pour out my wrath like water. Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgment, because he was determined to go after filth. But I am like a moth to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah.

When Ephraim saw his sickness and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound. 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. I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, and in their distress earnestly seek me. Hosea chapter 5 continues the controversy or contention the Lord had with Israel that began in the preceding chapter. That chapter had focused especially upon the leaders, but in this chapter the prophecy expands its address to challenge the people more generally. Once again the people are summoned to attention to the word of the Lord. The priests, the house of Israel, and the royal house are all addressed. While the leaders are especially responsible, they are not responsible to the exclusion of the people more broadly. Joshua Moon suggests that verse 1's claim concerning the leaders that the judgment is theirs should be heard as a double entendre. The task of judgment belongs to the leaders, but theirs is also the indictment that is to follow. The first half of verse 2 is difficult to translate. Andrew Dearman, for instance, adopts an amended reading of the text that yields a line that continues the sentence of the preceding verse, giving, You have been a snare at Mizpah, a spread net on Tabor, a pit at Shittim they dug deep.

[2 : 55] Moon differs from this rendering on two key counts. First, he argues that Mizpah and Tabor are presented as victims of the traps, not perpetrators of them. Second, he argues that the point of the second verse is that the leaders are knee-deep in the blood of those they were supposed to lead.

Most scholars argue that the snares, nets, and pits in view are likely sites of pagan cultic worship at the locations in question, with the places not presented principally as victims or as perpetrators, but more as sites of traps that have been laid for the people.

The Lord knows the hearts and the actions of his people. They cannot hide their sin from his sight. Their adultery and defilement is not a secret, but is known to their divine husband, and their deeds prevent them from returning to him. They have cut themselves off from his presence and blessing. Their ignorance of the Lord and their devotion to a spirit of whoredom establish enmity between them and God, marking them out for judgment. Israel's brazen pride is self-incriminating, evidencing their stubborn impenitence and incorrigibility. Their sins bring their own accompanying traps that

Israel readily stumbles into, but which will also snare his brother Judah.

People's sins can greatly complicate life for them, and have consequences that serve as their own natural punishments. This is the case for Israel and Ephraim. Verse 4 declared that the deeds of Israel prevented them from returning to God. Verse 6 describes their futile quest to find him.

[4 : 22] They will try to pursue the Lord and his favour with great sacrifices of flocks and herds, but they will find that he has withdrawn from them and will not heed them. No amount of religious ritual will succeed in restoring their relationship with the Lord when they are so alienated from him in their behaviour and affections. Returning to the metaphor of marital infidelity that frames the book of Hosea, they have begotten bastard children through their consorting with idols. Cultic practices, divinely ordained and pagan, were often associated with new moon festivals, seeking fertility. However, now the new moon would herald the devouring of them and their fields, becoming its opposite. Alternatively, as that proposed meaning of the second half of verse 7 is obscure, Hans Walter Wolff suggests an alternative version of the text, which gives the statement, now the locusts shall devour their fields. The prophecy to this point has mostly focused on Israel, with only a secondary reference to Judah in verse 5. Now, however, Benjamin, the southern tribe whose territory was the borderland of the kingdom of Judah, between Judah and Israel, comes into view. What exactly verse 8 refers to is unclear. Many read it as a reference to the Syro-Ephraimite war, as the Syrians and Israel went south to attack Judah, approaching Jerusalem itself around 735 BC. The verse, some argue, speaks to the northern kingdom, which has at this point taken the territory of Benjamin, warning them that they are about to face its loss. This, however, as Moon argues, presents problems as an interpretation. It would suggest that in taking Benjamin, Judah was like a party moving a landmark, rather than merely recovering its own land. Also, verse 13 seems to refer to an appeal to the king of Syria coming from Ephraim, the northern kingdom, not from Judah, as it did during the Syro-Ephraimite war. This said, however, there are other ways of reading the statement of verse 13 that would be more consistent with a setting during the Syro-Ephraimite war, when Judah sought aid from the Assyrians against Israel and the

Syrians. It could refer to Israel's sending of tribute to Assyria after Hosea's coup against Pekah, and his hope that that might secure peace. The prophecy speaks of devastation falling on both kingdoms. Moon writes, Hosea points to the destruction of the north, verse 9, and the south, verse 10, and it is Benjamin's location between the two condemned regions that lends desperation to the summons to battle. Where will Benjamin turn if destruction presses from both sides? Both northern and southern kingdom face desolation on account of their own commitments to iniquity. The Lord's word is sure. Judah has been land grabbing, not honoring the boundaries of their brother to the north, and will also face judgment as a result. The Lord himself is like a sickness or a rot that clings to Ephraim and Judah, consuming them and wasting them away. Israel seeks deliverance from its wound from Assyria, most likely as Hosea turned to Assyria, becoming their vassal, after he had conspired against Pekah and brought him down, replacing him as king of Israel. However, Israel's wound was far deeper than Assyria could help with. The Lord himself was the sickness that afflicted his unfaithful people.

He, not Assyria, was the predator that was going to tear them to pieces. No one could deliver them from his clutches. Only if they were to confess their fault and truly turn back to him could they be delivered, but there is currently no sign that they are about to do that. A question to consider, after the division of the kingdom, what are some of the different ways in which the kingdoms of Judah and Israel relate to each other in their respective sins and states of judgment?