

Hosea 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 4. Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel. For the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away. Yet let no one contend, and let no one accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. You shall stumble by day. The prophet also shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because you have rejected knowledge.

I reject you from being a priest to me, and since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. The more they increased, the more they sinned against me. I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of my people. They are greedy for their iniquity, and it shall be like people, like priest. I will punish them for their ways, and repay them for their deeds. They shall eat, but not be satisfied. They shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the Lord to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.

My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles, for a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore. They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains, and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery. For the men themselves go aside with prostitutes, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin. Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty.

Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-Avon, and swear not, as the Lord lives. Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn. Can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?

Ephraim is joined to idols. Leave him alone. When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring. Their rulers dearly love shame. A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices. The opening three chapters of Hosea concern the prophetic sign act of his taking a wife of whoredom as a symbol of the Lord's relationship with unfaithful Israel.

[2 : 3 8] In chapter 4 we enter the main body of the prophecies of the book, which opens with a powerful indictment upon the people. Joshua Moon describes the centrality of the land within this prophecy.

In part because of the condensed form, the text plays a role as virtually a paradigm of Hosea's message of judgment, and the central facet of that paradigm is the land. The accused are inhabitants in the land. The failure of covenantal obligations happens in the land. In judgment, the land mourns.

This manner of speaking trades on the ancient motif of a deity as sovereign over its land, with the people standing as tenants, who can be removed for violation of the deity's terms.

By concentrating our focus on the land, echoes of eviction, exile, can be heard without any explicit mention being made. Hosea chapter 4 verses 1 to 3 introduce a controversy or confrontation with the people of the land, on account of their unfaithfulness. Verses 1 to 3 could be read as an introduction to the main body of the book's prophecies more generally. It demands the people's attention, declares the fact that the Lord has a controversy with them, gives the content of the controversy, and speaks of the Lord's judgment that rests upon them. In particular, the people lack the essential qualities that the Lord would look for in a covenant partner, faithfulness, steadfast love, and the knowledge of him. Instead, the Lord lists a litany of sins that fill the land, clear breaches of the Ten Commandments. John Goldingay compares the indictment to the description of humanity prior to the flood. Although this prophecy was likely delivered during the reign of Jeroboam II, a period during which things were relatively stable, such a situation would not last for long. Verse 3 describes a languishing of the land and of its inhabitants, both man and beast, that corresponds with its spiritual languishing. The exact way that we should translate verse 4 is something commentators are divided on. Moon, for instance, places the first half of the verse in quotation marks as the words of an opponent of Hosea. Goldingay extends the words of the supposed opponent of Hosea to run to the end of verse 5. The words of the opponent pick up the language of the opening statement of verses 1 to 3 concerning the Lord's contention. The response of the Lord through

Hosea is to sharpen the charge, directing it at the priest more particularly. For with you is my contention, O priest. In the inquest concerning the spiritual failure of the people, the blame is largely placed at the feet of the religious leaders, the priest and the prophet. They are unreliable guides who do not know the way. They themselves will stumble. The reference to the destruction of the priest's mother, as Andrew Dearman notes, recalls the symbolism of Goma earlier in the book. It might be a reference to the nation more generally, or to the capital city of Samaria. The priest with whom the Lord is contending is held responsible for the people's lack of knowledge. They are destroyed on account of the ignorance of the priest, who has rejected knowledge, and so the Lord rejects the priest. The priest, who was charged to teach and uphold the law of the Lord among the people, has forgotten the law, so the Lord will forget his children. Along with the destruction of the mother, the forgetting of the children also recalls the opening chapters and Hosea's prophetic sign.

[5 : 56] Moon makes the important observation that, taken with the rejection of the priest himself, the rejection of the priest's mother and children represents the cutting off of all generations. We should also recognize the poetic justice that the Lord manifests in his judgment.

Rejecting knowledge leads to rejection from being priest. The priest's forgetting the law leads to the Lord's forgetting of the priest's children. The priesthood is supposed to address the guilt of the people. However, the priesthood is currently exacerbating the people's sin.

As a consequence, the Lord would strip them of the honor of their status. In the sacrificial system, the priests ate the sin offerings in order to seal atonement for the people. The Lord plays upon this language in verse 8.

The priests feed on the sin of the people, but really, rather than serving as part of the atonement for and disposal of the sins of the people, the priests are actually greedy for and sustained by the people's sins. The priests may fancy that their position of privilege grants them some immunity from the Lord's judgment, but they will find that they will be punished along with the people, receiving the recompense for their deeds. As they have sought to feed on the people's sins, they will not be satisfied. As they engage in whoredom, they would be rendered fruitless.

They have abandoned the Lord for the sake of their lusts and the insensibility of intoxication. They should have been guarding the people of the Lord, and as they have failed to do so, the people are given over to idolatry, pathetically looking to pieces of wood for guidance.

[7 : 25] The priests, in their failure faithfully to perform their duties, have encouraged the spirit of whoredom among the people, who pursue idolatry throughout the land in its various cultic sites. As a consequence of their failure to guard and guide the people of the Lord, the Lord would give the women of their households over to a spirit of whoredom, bringing shame and disgrace upon them, as their daughters became prostitutes and their wives cuckolded them. What's more, the Lord would not punish their daughters or their wives for such sins.

The husband's right to protest the sin of the women of their households and bringing shame upon them is greatly diminished by the fact that they have been bringing dishonour upon themselves. They have been engaging in idolatrous sexual rituals with cult prostitutes, and also having relations with common whores. They have no grounds for protest.

We might recall Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38, where Judah was exposed as having no grounds upon which to cast judgment upon his daughter-in-law, as he was guilty of the very sin of which he accused her. Israel is so far gone that the Lord's one hope is that Judah not be infected by their infidelity. Judah must be quarantined from the epidemic of idolatry that is destroying Israel, giving the sights and practices of Israel's idolatrous abominations, ground zero for the infection, a very wide berth. Given Israel's stubborn rebellion, can the Lord gently tend the nation as a shepherd might provide for a docile lamb? Certainly not. Ephraim, another name for the northern nation of Israel, after the leading northern tribe, must be kept at a distance, lest his idolatry and compulsive iniquity prove contagious. Now a strong wind has arrived, and will put them to shame as it carries them off in judgment. A question to consider. The priest is especially singled out as responsible here. What insights do we have elsewhere in scripture for the cause of the weight of the responsibility that lies on the shoulders of the priest in such matters?