

Hosea 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 11. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to the bales and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God, and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the Lord. He will roar like a lion.

When he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria. And I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord. Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit.

But Judah still walks with God, and is faithful to the Holy One. Hosea chapter 11 is one of the most poignant and well-known chapters in the book, not least because verse 1 is quoted in Matthew chapter 2 verse 15, in reference to Jesus' sojourn in Egypt with his parents as a child. The question of whether this section closely relates to the one preceding it will help us to determine whether we should render the first clause as temporal, when Israel was a child, or causal, for Israel was a child.

Although Joshua Moon argues for the latter casual understanding, most other commentators adopt the temporal understanding. Jerry Huang hears both senses. Judgment will come because Israel is the Lord's son, but the verse also recalls the specific time of the Exodus, and the love of the Lord for Israel his son demonstrated within it. The story of the Exodus is a story of the Lord's dealing with Israel, his firstborn son. Exodus chapter 4 verse 22. Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son.

The Lord brought his son out of the womb of Egypt in the Passover, and in the deliverance at the Red Sea. Israel was then swaddled, nursed, and led through the wilderness, being taught how to walk.

[2 : 45] Verse 2 is variously understood. Huang reads it as they, Israel, called to them, Egypt. Then they, Israel, went away from them, toward Assyria. This reading would recall chapter 7 verse 11, where we see the same pair of verbs used. Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria. John Goldingay reads it similarly. Hans Walter Wolf and Moon, however, read it as a reference to the call of the Lord to Israel that Israel rejects. However, although this is the reading of the Septuagint, it requires an argument for the corruption of the text at this point, as the pronouns are plural here, they and them, not he or I. Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman argue that if Israel was in view here, given the personification of Israel as a son in the first verse, we might expect singular third-person pronouns, but they are plural.

That said, both the subject and the object here are third-person plural. Anderson and Friedman translate the line, they called to them, they departed from me, suggesting that it might be a more general reference to surrounding peoples tempting Israel to apostasy, as in places like Numbers 25 and the rebellion with Baal of Peor. This might fit more with the second half of the verse, as Israel gave himself to persistent idolatry with the Baals. Recalling the tenderest years of his firstborn son, we are given a sense of the delight of the Lord in his beloved child and his concern for his growth and prospering. However, we also get a sense of the pain caused by the treachery of the ungrateful son, who rewards the care and compassion of his father with infidelity, rebellion and betrayal, utterly unmindful of all that his father did for him throughout his youth. The Lord taught Ephraim how to walk. In loving care and condescension, he took them up in his arms, granting them protection, deliverance and healing. Perhaps we should think of some more specific events or actions that might be evoked by these images or metaphors. For instance, teaching Ephraim to walk might make us think of the way that the Lord taught Israel the law, so that they might walk in freedom. The Lord saved Israel with his mighty arm and guided Israel in the wilderness. Elsewhere in places like Jeremiah chapter 2,

Hosea chapter 2 verses 14 to 15 and Ezekiel chapter 16, the same early years of Israel's time in the wilderness are recalled, although in those places Israel is characterized as the bride, not the son as he is here. Verse 4 shifts to a different metaphor of a farmer tending to his laboring animal, loosening the animal's yoke so that it could eat freely. However, despite all of the kindness that the Lord showed to Israel his son, they had refused to return to him. Considering that Hosea elsewhere speaks of Israel returning to Egypt, reading verse 5 as a statement that Israel will not return to the land of Egypt, as the ESV does for instance, raises questions of apparent contradiction. Moon reads it as a rhetorical question. Shall they not return to the land of Egypt? Andrew Deaman raises the possibility that where return to Egypt is mentioned elsewhere, it is not literally Egypt that is in view. Egypt rather stands for the state of bondage which they will experience under the yoke of Assyria. Their return to Egypt is contrasted with their refusal to return to the Lord, and also probably looks back to the beginning of the chapter where the Lord first called them from Egypt.

They would suffer the consequences of their own stubborn folly. Their own counsels would lead them to destruction, to war coming upon them, and their cities being violently overthrown. As they had rejected and turned away from the Lord, if they were to turn back to him in the time of their distress, the Lord would not raise them up again. At this point, however, the Lord breaks out in a statement of the greatest pathos. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I treat you like Zeboim? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. Is the Lord relenting from the judgment that he has declared in this chapter and elsewhere in the book? No, he isn't. But out of his deep love for Israel, as he sends them away from the land to the land of Assyria, it will not be their final end. It will not mark the conclusion of his dealings with them. His voice will still call to them while they are in exile. Adma and Zeboim were two of the less famous cities of the plain, along with Sodom and Gomorrah. While the nation of Israel would be overthrown, the Lord would not make a final destruction of them in the way that he did with the cities of the plain. He is bound to his people in deep compassion. Even as they are stubbornly and egregiously rebelling against him, his heart still yearns in compassion for his wayward son. On various other occasions in scripture where we see the Lord asserting his deity, it is in reference to the certainty and the power of his judgment. Here, however, the deity of God is demonstrated in his mercy and grace for his rebellious son.

Even the most loving human father would have given up on Israel long ago. Yet Israel's stubborn persistence in rebellion is only outmatched by the Lord's stubborn persistence in his mercy. Earlier in chapter 7 verse 11, Israel was described as like a silly dove going towards Egypt and Assyria.

[7 : 48] Now, however, when the Lord roars like a lion, his children will return to him from Egypt and Assyria like trembling birds. The trembling suggests that those that return will have finally learned to fear the Lord. The Lord would once more give those who returned a home within his land. Verse 12, the final verse of the chapter, should probably be read more with what follows. The second half of it does present problems. The term used is not usually used in a positive sense, and in a few verses time, Judah will be spoken of quite negatively. The claim that Judah still walks with God and is faithful to the Holy One might be something of a stretch. Moon suggests that we understand it as follows.

Judah still strives with God, with the Holy One, who is faithful. The faithfulness here is not Judah's, but the Lord's. A question to consider. Matthew quotes verse 1 of this chapter in chapter 2 verse 15 of his gospel. There he claims that the word of the prophet is fulfilled in Jesus coming from Egypt.

How might we connect Israel as God's son called from Egypt to the story of Christ as God's son in Matthew's gospel?