

Hosea 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 8. Set the trumpet to your lips. One like a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have transgressed my covenant and rebelled against my law. To me they cry, My God, we, Israel, know you. Israel has spurned the good. The enemy shall pursue him. They made kings, but not through me. They set up princes, but I knew it not. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction. I have spurned your calf, O Samaria. My anger, burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? For it is from Israel, a craftsman made it. It is not God. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to pieces, for they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. The standing grain has no heads, it shall yield no flower. If it were to yield, strangers would devour it. Israel is swallowed up.

Already they are among the nations as a useless vessel, for they have gone up to Assyria. A wild donkey wandering alone. Ephraim has hired lovers. Though they hire allies among the nations, I will soon gather them up, and the king and princes shall soon writhe because of the tribute.

Because Ephraim has multiplied altars for sinning, they have become to him altars for sinning. Were I to write for him my laws by the ten thousands, they would be regarded as a strange thing.

As for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice meat and eat it. But the Lord does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins. They shall return to Egypt.

For Israel has forgotten his maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities. So I will set a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds.

[1 : 4 4] Hosea chapter 8 is a chapter in which Israel is trying, in all sorts of futile ways, to secure itself in uncertain times. The chapter opens with the blowing of an alarm.

The house of the Lord, here referring to the people of Israel, not specifically the temple, are under immediate threat. A great and powerful eagle, not a vulture as in some translations, is hovering over it. We should think here of an image similar to that of Ezekiel chapter 17, with the eagles of Babylon and Egypt coming to take from the land.

This mighty and irresistible force is nearly upon them, and yet they seem to be insensible to their danger, needing to be roused to action. The real threat, of course, is the Lord himself, who is bringing disaster upon them, because they have transgressed his covenant and rebelled against his law. However, they presumptuously assume that they know the Lord. They fancy that they are worshipping the Lord when they are worshipping their idols. Yet as they have spurned the good, they will be pursued by the enemy. The enemy here is presumably the Assyrians.

Given the most likely time of this prophecy, in the late 730s BC, around 732 or 731, the years leading up to this time had been filled with coups and overthrown kings.

The ruling house of Israel changed on a number of occasions, and it lurched from one sort of foreign policy to another. The kings of Israel weren't appointed by the Lord. They had rejected the Davidic king in the south, and just about all of their kings was a rebel against his predecessor.

[3 : 13] Beyond this string of traitors turned kings, Israel sought security in the worship of idols. With silver and gold, they fashioned idols for their high places, which they worshipped while abandoning the Lord to their own destruction. In 1 Kings chapter 12, after the split in the kingdom, Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, had set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan. Proclaiming these to be the gods that had brought Israel out of Egypt, he instructed the people to worship them, hoping that the people would not go south to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, worried that the pull of that cultic centre might compromise the loyalty of his subjects. When worshipping this calf, many of the people would have fancied that they were worshipping the Lord. Yet the Lord had utterly rejected the calf of Samaria.

It would be destroyed, broken into pieces. While Jeroboam I and his successors on the throne of Israel had proclaimed it to be the God of Israel, it was merely the work of a craftsman, and no God at all. They had turned to the Baals and other false gods for fertility. However, the result was that the land was becoming barren. They sowed the wind, casting forth from hands empty of seed, and they reaped the whirlwind. Destruction and devastation, even what would grow, would be fruitless, standing grain having no heads, and yielding no flower. Besides, even if it were to yield any fruit, what it yielded would be eaten by strangers. Israel is already a nun entity among the nations. For all of Israel's efforts to secure itself through foreign policy, through idolatry, or through the latest coup, it has all proved futile, and the nation is gradually dissolving. Like a wild and ornery beast, Israel has turned to the Assyrians for aid. They have paid large sums in tribute, hoping to gain some relief for themselves, not realising that their true enemy and opponent is the Lord himself. Until they come to terms with him, they will find no respite from a human source. Going up to Assyria like a wild donkey wandering alone probably refers to the foreign policy of Israel following Hoshea's assassination of his predecessor Pica. Israel would soon find itself handed over to the most burdensome of tribute. On account of its rebellion, Ephraim's entire cultic system was rotten and inoperative. They had multiplied altars for sinning, establishing many high places and cultic sites in the land contrary to the word of the Lord, all designed at least in theory to deal with sin, and yet these sites for dealing with sin had become further occasions for sin. They had become utterly alienated from the word of the Lord. If the Lord were to multiply his laws a thousand times over, intense repetition would still be insufficient to overcome the foreignness of the word of the Lord to this rebellious people. They offer and eat peace offerings, and yet the Lord does not accept them.

They fancy that they have communion with him, but what they have is not fellowship at all. What they fancy will lead to their sins being forgotten actually brings their sins to mind. The ultimate curse of the covenant would soon come upon them. Their sins would be brought to mind. They would be judged, removed from the land, and returned to Egypt from where they had been first taken. Israel and Judah also sought their security in building walled cities, fortifications, and strongholds. The Lord, however, would overthrow them all, setting a fire upon their cities and devouring their strongholds, leaving them as defenseless prey for the nations, stripped of their glory and of their strength.

A question to consider. At the beginning of this chapter, Israel insists that they know the Lord, yet we discover that they are offering peace offerings that are not accepted by the Lord. They are worshipping the Lord with idols in ways that brings them under his judgment. They are building altars for dealing with sin, and actually compounding their sin. While they fancy that they are worshipping the Lord, what they are doing is worse than vain. They are making their situation worse. How could they have undertaken the worship of the Lord in a manner in which they would be assured that they would be heard and accepted and accepted by the Lord?

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