

Hosea 10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 August 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 10. Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built. As his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false.

Now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars and destroy their pillars. For now they will say, We have no king. We do not fear the Lord. And a king, what could he do for us?

They utter mere words. With empty oaths they make covenants. So judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field. The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-Avon.

Its people mourn for it, and so do its idolatrous priests, those who rejoiced over it and over its glory, for it has departed from them. The thing itself shall be carried to Assyria as tribute to the great king. Ephraim shall be put to shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his idol.

Samaria's king shall perish like a twig on the face of the waters. The high places of Avon, the sin of Israel shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars, and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, Fall on us.

[1 : 1 0] From the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel. There they have continued. Shall not the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah? When I please, I will discipline them. A nation shall be gathered against them when they are bound up for their double iniquity. Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck. But I will put Ephraim to the yoke. Judah must plough, Jacob must harrow for himself. Sow for yourselves righteousness. Reap steadfast love. Break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

You have ploughed iniquity. You have reaped injustice. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you have trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors. Therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed.

As Shalman destroyed Beth-Arbel on the day of battle, mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, because of your great evil. At dawn the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off. Hosea chapter 10 begins with the image of Israel as a vine, an image familiar from places like Psalm 80 and Isaiah chapter 5. Translators and commentators differ over the type of vine it's being described as. For some, including the ESV, it is described as a luxuriant vine. Others, like John Goldingay, argue that it is a wasted or a ravaged vine.

Meagruber raises the intriguing possibility that it might be an autoantonym, a word like cleave or dust that can be used to mean its opposite. Cleave meaning to hold fast to something, but also to cut something off from something else. Or dust to remove dust, or dust in the sense of covering something with dust, like icing sugar on a cake. Such a play with double meaning here might capture something of Israel's contrariness. The more that it prospers, the more that its disease accelerates. As Israel's fruit multiplied, he multiplied his altars. As the country improved, he improved his pillars. The wealth and the prosperity of the land that the Lord has given it was channeled into its unfaithfulness. The consequence of this would soon come upon them.

The Lord would break down the altars and destroy the pillars, both of them signs of the people's unfaithfulness. In verse 3, Hosea represents the people as denying that they have a king. This might refer to a time when the king is taken away from them, as Hosea is removed by Shalmaneser V, for instance. Alternatively, the first reference to the king might also be a way of speaking about their rejection of the Lord, Hosea giving voice to the treacherous heart of the people. As he has done in preceding chapters, Hosea describes the people as treacherous and false.

[3 : 51] They do not keep their vows. They make covenants that they do not keep. They betray both their own kings and foreign suzerains. As a consequence, the judgments of the Lord afflict the land like poisonous weeds in a field. Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, had set up a golden calf in Bethel, which had caused Israel to sin. Now the calf of Bethel would be removed and the people and the priests would mourn its departure. Beth-Avon seems to be a disphemism. A disphemism is the opposite of a euphemism. A disphemism is a word that is used, instead of a neutral or a positive term, to communicate a derogatory or negative sense. Beth-Avon means house of God. Beth-Avon means house of wickedness or vanity. Israel would be stripped of this great idol, which would be sent to Assyria. Samaria's king would likewise be removed. The high places of Avon, in apposition with the sin of Israel, would be destroyed. They would be given over to thorn and thistle, symbolic of the curse. And what we should probably presume are the altars, would call to the mountains and the hills to cover and fall upon them. Jesus uses similar language to express the sentiment of people on the day of judgment, in Luke chapter 23 verse 30. We also see similar language in Revelation chapter 6 verses 15 to 17. One of the most dramatic and significant sins of Israel was at Gibeah. The actions of the men in Gibeah in Judges chapter 19 followed the pattern of the men of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19. The sin of Sodom had precipitated the annihilation of the cities of the plain. In the case of the city of Gibeah, it led to a sanguinary war in which the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out.

As Israel took on the character of the Canaanites who had once inhabited the land, they suffered the fate of the Canaanites. Israel is warned of a similar judgment here. Their destruction would come not at the hand of their brothers, but at the hands of the nations that would be gathered against them. Some have seen the double iniquity referred to in verse 10 as a reference to the sin of the war against Gibeah, in addition to the sin of Gibeah that led to the war. Others have seen this as a possible reference to Israel being paid double for its sins. Both of these readings seem to be unlikely to me. A likelier explanation is that it refers to the two golden calves that were set up by Jeroboam I, one in Dan and another in Bethel. The golden calf of Bethel has already been referred to in verses 5 and 6, and the verses that follow also explore calf imagery.

Ephraim is compared to a trained calf. We see similar imagery in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 18. I have heard Ephraim grieving, you have disciplined me, and I was disciplined. Like an untrained calf, bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. The image here in Hosea is of a formerly cooperative and docile calf that has later become stubborn, uncooperative, and wayward.

Perhaps the love referred to here is Ephraim's former love of threshing, the work of the Lord that had been given to it. Alternatively, Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman argue that the love refers to God's love for Ephraim, not Ephraim's love for the threshing. The image of an animal given the task of working the land connects the people with the land that the Lord had entrusted to their care.

The threshing floor, where grain was prepared and chaff was removed, was also connected with the temple, which was built on the site of the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. Israel formerly hadn't needed any restraint. It was willing and responsive and enjoyed a corresponding freedom. However, as it matured in its rebellion, it would be put under a harness. The end of verse 11 brings together Ephraim, Judah, and Jacob, the father of both. Perhaps we are to envision two beasts yoked together working upon the land. Even after the division of the kingdom, Israel and Judah are still bound up together. The three successive related statements, I will put Ephraim to the yoke, Judah must plow, Jacob must harrow for himself, have a symmetry with the threefold statement of the beginning of the next verse. Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love, break up your fallow ground.

[7 : 49] Although farmers rather than their animals are in view in the second set of images, they share in common an underlying agricultural reference. Israel within the land is like a farmer working the land to bring forth those covenant virtues that the Lord desires. As they sow righteousness, they will reap steadfast love. Hosea gives the example of fallow ground that needs to be prepared for use. We see a similar image in Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 3. As Israel responds to the Lord's charge here, they will enjoy his rains of righteousness upon them. The fertility of the land is here compared with the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people. However, although Israel was charged to sow righteousness, to reap steadfast love and break up their fallow ground, in fact, as verse 13 tells us, they had ploughed iniquity, had reaped injustice and had eaten the fruit of lies. Rejecting the word of the Lord and his commandments, they had trusted instead in military might. This confidence, however, would be brought to nothing. The reference to the destruction of Shalman at Beth Arbel in verse 14 has provoked a lot of different theories among the commentators. Joshua Moon suggests that Shalman is a reference to Shalmaneser V and Beth Arbel is the site of an Assyrian atrocity. This, however, would require a very late date for the prophecy of Hosea here, likely in the last three or four years of the nation of Israel. Golden Gaze suggests it might be a reference to the town of Arbel in Galilee and one of the Assyrian kings called Shalmaneser, although we don't know which one. Alternatively, it might be a reference to a Moabite king, Salamanu, and a town across the Jordan. Andra Dearman also relates it to a northern Transjordanian city, including the possibility that it might have been an atrocity committed in the reign of Shalmaneser III over a century prior to the time of Hosea's prophecy. Hans Walter Wolfe mentions another conjecture, the killing of Zachariah by Shalman the usurper. Gruber raises the intriguing possibility that Shalman might not actually be the perpetrator of the atrocity in this verse, rather he might be its victim. Following Oded Tamas, he connects it with the rebellion against Shalmaneser III that had been in Arbelah, one of the key cultic centres of the nation of Assyria. The point of the prophet here then would be that the king is trusting in his army, and yet conflict would arise from his own people, his army would turn against him, and he would suffer the same fate as Shalmaneser III had suffered in Arbelah. However, all of these remain conjectures. We have no clear answer to the identity of Beth Arbel or of the character of Shalman here.

A question to consider. In more concrete terms, what might it involve to sow righteousness, to reap steadfast love, and to break up your fallow ground?

