

Hosea 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hosea chapter 7. When I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria, for they deal falsely. The thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside.

But they do not consider that I remember all their evil. Now their deeds surround them. They are before my face. By their evil they make the king glad, and the princes by their treachery.

They are all adulterers. They are like a heated oven whose baker ceases to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened. On the day of our king the princes became sick with the heat of wine. He stretched out his hand with mockers, for with hearts like an oven they approach their intrigue. All night their anger smoulders. In the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.

All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen, and none of them calls upon me. Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples. Ephraim is a cake not turned. Strangers devour his strength, and he knows it not. Gray hairs are sprinkled upon him, and he knows it not. The pride of Israel testifies to his face. Yet they do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek him for all this. Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria. As they go, I will spread over them my net. I will bring them down like birds of the heavens. I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation.

Woe to them, for they have strayed from me. Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me. I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me. They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds. For grain and wine they gash themselves. They rebel against me. Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against me. They return, but not upward.

[1 : 5 2] They are like a treacherous bow. Their princes shall fall by the sword because of the insolence of their tongue. This shall be their derision in the land of Egypt. The first verse of Hosea chapter 7 should be read as continuing the final line of the preceding chapter. This gives us, When I restore the fortunes of my people, when I would heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and the evil deeds of Samaria. There is, as Andrew Dearman argues, a clear parallelism to be observed.

When I restore the fortunes of my people goes with, the iniquity of Ephraim is revealed, and when I would heal Israel goes with, and the evil deeds of Samaria. The Lord would heal his people.

However, as he turns to restore them, they manifest the fact that they have not, and will not, turn back to him. Their rebellion merely flares up again, rebellion most signally evident in the capital of Samaria. Indeed, it seems that the Lord's turning to them provokes the disease. They are a land of bandits raiding outside, and thieves plundering inside. They are unmindful that the Lord remembers all of their evil that is before him. It is not forgotten, and they will be brought to account for what they have done. Their iniquity is before the Lord's face, and they cannot escape its recompense. Verses 3 to 7 are very difficult to interpret, and several understandings of these verses have been advanced by commentators. Perhaps what is in view is a drunken royal banquet employed by conspirators as an occasion for an assassination. There were a few assassinations in the northern kingdom in the course of Hosea's ministry, to which this could possibly refer.

These verses contain a series of related metaphors drawn from baking. Baking would be done in a cylindrical clay oven, fed with its fuel at the bottom, with an opening at the top where bread and other items could be put in against the sides. While one would typically be concerned that a fire not die down, such an oven could easily overheat if unattended, and be unsuitable for baking as a result.

The baker is supposed to guard the oven, but in his negligence he allowed things to get dangerously out of hand. In their commentary on the book, Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman raised the possibility that the baker might refer to the king, or alternatively to someone close to the king, who was responsible for his safety, but who aided the traitors or assassins. The oven and the bread, for their part, may function as mixed metaphors, both relating to the conspirators in different ways.

[4 : 20] The image is one of a consuming power, the devouring passions of Israel and the traitors at its heart, a power that has been dangerously untended. As Hans Walter Wolf comments, Israel had four kings overthrown within the period of twelve years leading up to 733 BC, yet despite this extreme instability, they still didn't call upon the Lord. Metaphors of baking seem to continue in verse 8.

Ephraim is mixed with the peoples, like the mixing of dough or ingredients into dough. Likewise, Ephraim is an unturned cake, not having turned to the Lord, and about to burn in consequence.

Ephraim's strength, vitality and youthful vigour is sapped by Arameans and Assyrians. Repeating the words of chapter 5 verse 5, Israel's pride is said to serve as evidence against them before the Lord.

They are recalcitrant and impenitent in their rebellion, not turning to seek the Lord's face. In their foreign policy, they are dangerously naive, at one moment calling to Egypt and at another fluttering to Assyria for aid, like a silly dove. We will return to this image in chapter 11 verse 11.

Some see in verse 11 here a possible reference point from which we could date the events being referred to, although it might be referring more generally to imprudent shifts in Israel's foreign policy over many years, as it flitted between the great northern and the great southern powers dominating the region. Wolf suggests that it best fits the period of 733 BC. Like a silly bird, however, Israel would be snared by the Lord. The second half of verse 12 is unclear. Perhaps it refers to a prophetic word of judgment that was delivered before the assembly of the people.

[6 : 01] In verse 13, the prophetic message breaks out in a statement of woe on account of the hastening desolation of Israel due to its rebellion and its refusal to turn. The problem is not on the Lord's side. He would readily redeem them, but they bear false witness about him. Perhaps their lies are that the Lord won't bring them to account, that he is unmindful of their sins. In their trouble and for their provision, they turn not to the Lord but to the baals. They cut themselves like pagans, seeking grain and wine from false gods of fertility, but do not call out to the Lord. The Lord had given Israel its strength, raising him as his son, but Israel had turned its strength against the Lord.

Israel is treacherous and dangerously so, like an unreliable bow. However, their sins would come back upon their own heads. Perhaps their treachery, displayed in the breaking of a treaty with the suzerain, would be the occasion of the judgment described here. The chapter ends with the derision of Egypt. Israel had been delivered from Egypt in the Exodus, but now they would either be returned to Egypt in judgment or would be ridiculed by them. A question to consider. In this chapter we see the moral corruption and treachery in Israel's heart, shown in its behaviour before the Lord, but also expressed in its internal life as a nation and in its foreign policy. What are some of the dynamics by which a rebellious posture towards the Lord can also play itself out in treachery towards our neighbours?

