

Lesson 20

Hosea 4:16–18

16 Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the LORD now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture? 17 Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone. 18 When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly love shame.

These verses show us three ways that the people had become completely hardened against God. They were stubborn (verse 16), they had an unbreakable attachment to their idols (verse 17), and they had completely given themselves over to sexual immorality and drunkenness (verse 18).

God wanted to lead them like a lamb to a broad pasture where he could feed them, but they would not have it. They were like a stubborn heifer that refused to go where its owner wanted to lead it.

The phrase “joined to idols” in verse 17 could be translated “spellbound of idols.” The Hebrew word can mean to fascinate or charm by means of spells. It means that the people had become bewitched by their false idols.

What that means is that the end of verse 17 (“leave him alone”) suggests that they could not be roused from that trance, and so no one should even try to awaken them.

Verse 18 tells us that the people drank until they ran out of liquor, and then they turned to prostitutes.

The last phrase in verse 18 (“their rulers dearly love shame”) is, the commentaries all tell us, difficult to translate from the Hebrew. The difficulty comes from the Hebrew word translated “rulers” in the ESV. That Hebrew word literally means “shields,” as the ESV explains in a footnote.

Most translations understand “shields” as the subject of the verb “love,” and they then understand those “shields” to be a metaphor for the “rulers” of the people – not that the shields love shame, but that the rulers love shame. And there is some support for that view in the Psalms.

Psalm 47:9 – The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!

But even so, it is not entirely clear that the people would have understood the shields in verse 18 to be a reference to their rulers. The immediate context of verse 18 is focused on the false idols of the people, not the rulers of the people.

Another view is that the shields in verse 18 refer to either some object associated with the false idols or perhaps to the false idols themselves. Elsewhere we see that same word applied to God (Psalm 3:3) and applied to

decorative objects (Song of Solomon 4:4). Perhaps the people were now using that same word “shield,” not as a reference to God, but as a reference to Baal.

If that view is correct, then verse 18 is telling us either that the false gods loved the shameful deeds that the people practiced, or more likely, that the people loved the shamefulness of their false gods.

And which view is correct? Are the shields the people’s rulers or the people’s false gods? We can’t say for sure, but the second view is a better fit with the immediate context. Either could be true – there was plenty of shame to go around!

Our next question is this: who or what is **Ephraim** in verse 17?

This is a very important question for us. Why? Because Ephraim is mentioned 37 times in the book of Hosea, almost as many times as Israel (44 times). And, perhaps interestingly, the first mention of Ephraim does not occur until verse 17 right here in Hosea 4. Israel is mentioned 12 times prior to this first mention of Ephraim. Where was Ephraim in the first three chapters? We will look at that question later. Our question for now is who or what is Ephraim?

Ephraim was the second son of Joseph (Genesis 41:52). But, as we see elsewhere in the Bible, this second son became greater than the first

son, Manasseh. We see that prophecy in Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons.

Genesis 48:15-19 – And he [Jacob] blessed Joseph and said, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”

And we also see the preeminence of Ephraim in Moses' blessing.

Deuteronomy 33:13-17 – And of Joseph he said, “Blessed by the LORD be his land, with the choicest gifts of heaven above, and of the deep that crouches beneath, with the choicest fruits of the sun and the rich yield of the months, with the finest produce of the ancient mountains and the abundance of the everlasting hills, with the best gifts of the earth and its fullness and the favor of him who dwells in the bush. May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the pate of him who is prince among his brothers. A firstborn bull – he has majesty, and his horns are the horns of a wild ox; with them he shall gore the peoples, all of them, to the ends of the earth; they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.”

And we soon see the initial fulfillment of those prophecies – Joshua and Samuel were both from the tribe of Ephraim (Numbers 13:8, 1 Samuel 1:1). Ephraim was the most prominent northern tribe.

The tribe of Ephraim was located in the center of Israel between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. It was just north of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Ephraim was known as the heartland of Israel because of its plentiful resources, its favorable topography, and its robust and fertile soil. It was a hilly region that received more rainfall than Judah. Many of the tribes had trouble taking or holding onto their land, but not so with Ephraim – likely because their hilly land was less populated when they received it.

The geography of Ephraim provided the region with defense as well as commercial benefits. Its cities, Shiloh, Gilgal, and Shechem, were religious and political centers. The tabernacle and the ark of the covenant were located in Shiloh during the period of the Judges. Samuel established Saul as king and gave his farewell address in the city of Gilgal.

The political and religious center of Israel shifted to Jerusalem after David became king. After the reign of Solomon, Ephraim – along with the other northern tribes – split from Judah and Benjamin.

The northern kingdom was led by Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, who established Shechem as its first capital. Ephraim was located directly north of

Judah, which meant that it was the site of many conflicts between the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom.

Eventually, the city of Samaria became the capital. Later, the entire region was captured by Assyria and became known as Samaria.

So, with that background, why is Ephraim mentioned in verse 17?

It is often claimed that Ephraim is frequently used in the Bible to describe the northern kingdom as a whole. That is, it is claimed that Ephraim is often used as a synonym for Israel. But is that true?

When we look for evidence, we do find a few verses such as this one:

2 Chronicles 25:7 – But a man of God came to him and said, “O king, do not let the army of Israel go with you, for the LORD is not with **Israel**, with all these **Ephraimites**.”

But is that verse really an example where Ephraim and Israel are synonyms? I’m not so sure. It looks more like a situation in which the army – or perhaps just the portion of the army being discussed in that verse – consisted largely of Ephraimites.

And for additional evidence, we are often shown verses right here in Hosea where both Israel and Ephraim are mentioned in the same verse. But if I use both words, is that evidence they are

synonyms – or evidence that they are not synonyms? I think it is the latter.

I don't think these verses in Hosea support their argument. In fact, I think we will see that these verses in Hosea refute the argument that Israel and Ephraim are synonyms. For example:

Hosea 5:5 – The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt; Judah also shall stumble with them.

That verse does not show Ephraim and Israel being used as synonyms. Instead, that verse shows Ephraim and Israel being used separately – they are referred to with the plural pronoun “them.” Judah shall stumble with them.

What is going on in that verse? Stay tuned until we get there!

But for now, let's just say that we should not automatically swallow the frequent claim that Ephraim and Israel are synonyms. I don't think there is much evidence for that claim.

But with that said, there was a period of time in which Israel and Ephraim were used as synonyms. When? After most of the rest of Israel was annexed by Assyria.

The time came eventually when just about all of Israel that was left was Ephraim, and so at that time it would make sense to refer to Israel as Ephraim. We will look more closely at that time period when we get to Chapter 5.

So, back to verse 17, what does it mean when it says that Ephraim is joined to idols? I think it means just what it says – that the tribe of Ephraim was given to idols. That would not mean that the other tribes were not also given to idols, but it could mean that the problem was particularly bad in Ephraim.

And that, in fact, is what we see with the history of Ephraim, beginning immediately after the division of the kingdom.

1 Kings 12:25-32 – Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, “Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.” So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” And he set one in Bethel [which is in Ephraim], and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.

One commentary describes Ephraim as “the ringleader in calf worship and other idolatries.” But Ephraim was not alone – 1 Kings 12 also

mention the tribe of Dan. Both of those tribes were steeped in idolatry.

I think we also see these facts about Ephraim and Dan in the New Testament.

But how can that be? Dan is not mentioned in the New Testament, and Ephraim is mentioned only once in passing (John 11:54). How can the New Testament confirm that Dan and Ephraim were steeped in idolatry?

The answer is that the New Testament indicts Dan and Ephraim for their idolatry, not by mentioning them, but by **not** mentioning them!

In Revelation 7:4-8, we find a beautiful description of the church as 144,000 sealed from "all the tribes of the children of Israel." Those verses then list twelve tribes, each of the twelve including 12,000 of those who are sealed.

Without going here into the meaning of all the beautiful symbols in those verses (which, for those interested, are discussed in detail in the notes on Revelation available at www.studyHosea.com), the point we need today comes from the names of the twelve tribes listed in Revelation 7.

We know that Jacob had twelve sons, but we also know that only eleven sons received a tribal inheritance. The tribe of Levi instead received 48 cities that were scattered among the other tribes. The tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes named for his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

So, when the tribes are listed in the Bible the list of twelve generally omits Levi and Joseph and includes Ephraim and Manasseh instead. But that is not what we find in Revelation 7. Instead, we find something very unusual.

In fact, the list in Revelation 7 is unusual in several respects. First, Judah rather than Reuben (the oldest son) heads the list. Why? That's easy. Christ is the Lion of Judah. Christ came from the tribe of Judah. The book of Revelation is all about Jesus, and so Judah rather than Reuben starts off the list in Revelation 7.

But, second, Manasseh and Joseph are both included in Revelation 7 even though Manasseh was Joseph's son.

And, third, Levi is included on this list even though Levi had no tribal inheritance.

But if this list of 12 includes Levi and Joseph, then two tribes must have been left off of this list. Who is left off the list in Revelation 7?

The answer is that Joseph's other son, Ephraim, and Dan are both left off the list in Revelation 7. Why? Why did the inspired text very deliberately omit Ephraim and Dan and replaced them with Joseph and Levi. One word: **idolatry**.

Both Ephraim and Dan were long associated with idolatry, and a key theme in the book of Revelation is the question: Caesar or Christ? Whom should we worship – Caesar or Christ? Whom should we serve – the false idols of this world

or the victorious resurrected Christ? That is the central question of Revelation.

Revelation 7 drives that theme home by deliberately omitting the two tribes that were most associated with idolatry – Ephraim and Dan. And so, the New Testament indicts those two tribes for their idolatry, not by naming them, but by **not** naming them!

Verse 17 here in Hosea 4 is also telling us that idolatry was particularly bad in Ephraim. So bad that they had been captured by its spell. Their idols had put them in a trance.

One final point about Ephraim comes from our introduction to Hosea.

Recall that for some time during the ministry of Hosea, the northern kingdom was divided into two parts – a pro-Assyrian faction led by Menahem (2 Kings 15:19), and an anti-Assyrian faction led by Pekah (2 Kings 15:29). From 2 Kings 15:25, we learn that Pekah was most likely based in Gilead, while Menahem and his son Pekahiah were based in Samaria.

Although we will have much more to say on this topic when we get to chapter 5, the evidence suggests that the pro-Assyrian faction based in Samaria was called Ephraim, while the anti-Assyrian faction based in Gilead was called Israel.

For example, Isaiah tells us that “the head of Ephraim is Samaria” (Isaiah 7:9), even though the

city of Samaria was located in the tribe of Manasseh.

We'll come back to this northern civil war in Hosea 5, but for now we can say this: not only was Ephraim playing the whore with false idols, but Ephraim was also playing the whore with foreign nations – and particularly with Assyria. In short, Ephraim was looking to everyone and everything but God and the word of God.

We have one more question to consider about verse 17 – “Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone.” To whom is that command addressed? Who is being told to leave Ephraim alone? We have a broad possibility and a narrow possibility.

The broad possibility is that the command applies to everyone else. That is, everyone else in Judah and Israel should just leave Ephraim alone because they are too far gone in their idolatry.

The narrow possibility is that the command applies only to the people of Judah, who were mentioned back in verse 15.

I don't think we need to choose between those possibilities. Even if Judah is the specific recipient of that command, Hosea was not speaking directly to Judah – instead, these words were being spoken to Israel to show how far they had all fallen. And, as we saw with the similar commands in verse 15, this command carries the same message whether it is directed to Judah or to Israel.

There is a certainly a warning in these verses that Judah should not follow in the ways of Israel – but that warning is a message for both Judah and Israel. Judah is being told not to follow Israel’s example, and Israel is being told that they are a very bad example for anyone to follow.

Hosea 4:19

19 A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

This is a difficult verse, but I think we can understand it if we keep the context in mind – it is directed to people who are joined to their idols and who love their whoring and their drinking.

Yes, that first phrase in verse 19 taken by itself out of its context could sound almost pleasant – “a wind has wrapped them in its wings” – how nice!

But we should not be looking here for a pleasant experience. This verse is directed to drunken, idolatrous whoremongers!

Literally, the first phrase in verse 19 is “a wind binds her in its wings,” which is how the KJV translates it: “The wind hath bound her up in her wings.”

That NIV translates the phrase to say “a whirlwind will sweep them away.” But the Hebrew word for “wind” in Hosea 4:19 (*ruah*) is not the

Hebrew word for “whirlwind” (*supa*). We can see both words in the very famous Hosea 8:7 – “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.” (I take back my earlier compliment to the NIV!)

I think the best way to see verse 19 is to see it in the context of verse 3. Recall that back in verse 3 we saw the effects of a terrible drought. I think verse 19 is circling back to that same description.

The word “bind” (*sarar*) in verse 19 is used elsewhere to describe the binding up of the waters.

Job 26:8 – He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them.

And we also see the “wind” associated with a drought.

Jeremiah 4:11 – At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, “A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of my people, not to winnow or cleanse.”

I think this wind in verse 19 is a hot wind binding the waters and bringing drought to the people. But, as we said back in verse 3, this drought is a metaphor for the actual punishment that was coming – the Assyrians. As with a drought, the Assyrians would leave the land destroyed, scorched, and useless.

And the result? “They shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.”

So have the Israelites finally seen the error of their ways? Are they now finally blushing with shame because of their past misdeeds? Has this hot wind finally caused them to repent? I think the answer is no.

The word translated “ashamed” in verse 19 can also mean “disappointed” or “confounded,” and I think that is what we are seeing here. The people had trusted in their false gods to save them, and those false gods had let them all down. As a result, the people were disappointed and confounded.

They did not repent. They did not return to God. How do we know? Because we know that the Assyrians showed up and killed or carried them all off.

Hosea later circles back to this same description.

Hosea 13:15 – Though he be fruitful among his brethren, an east wind shall come, the wind of the LORD shall come up from the wilderness, and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up: he shall spoil the treasure of all pleasant vessels.

The Hebrew word translated “dry” in Hosea 13:15 is the same word translated “ashamed” in Hosea 4:19 (the Hebrew word *bus*). I think that later verse from Hosea provides confirmation that we are seeing a drought and the effects of that drought here in Hosea 4:19.

Hosea 5:1-2

1 Hear this, O priests! Pay attention, O house of Israel! Give ear, O house of the king! For the judgment is for you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. 2 And the revolvers have gone deep into slaughter, but I will discipline all of them.

Although we have started a new chapter, we are still in the same section that began with Hosea 4:15 and that continues through the end of Hosea 5.

With verse 1, the attention turns back to the leaders of the people who had failed to lead as they should. Rather than leading the people toward God, they were leading the people away from God.

By now we are not surprised at all to find a three-fold call in verse 1. Three groups are told to hear, to pay attention, and to give ear.

They had been ignoring God for a long time, and they likely thought they could continue ignoring God forever – but they were wrong. No one can ignore God forever. God will always have the last word.

Who are these three groups?

The first one is easy – it is the priests. It is the religious leaders that we saw back in chapter 4. God had a word for them earlier, and God wants them to listen again because he is not through with them.

The third group is also pretty easy to identify – the house of the king. But which king?

One of the kings of Israel at this time was identified back in the first verse of the book – Jeroboam II. But Jeroboam was not the only king of Israel in the days of Hosea. As we discussed in our historical overview, when Jeroboam II died, he was followed by six other kings who all reigned prior to the fall of Israel in 722 BC.

- Zechariah reigned 6 months, and his death marked the end of the house of Jehu.
- Shallum then reigned for 1 month.
- After the death of Shallum, there were two kings who reigned at the same time: Menahem and Pekah.
- Pekahiah reigned for 2 years after the death of his father Menahem, and then Pekah became king over all of Israel. Pekah reigned for 20 years – 12 years over part of Israel followed by 8 years over all of Israel.
- Hoshea was the final king of Israel, and he reigned for 9 years.

So which king or kings were reigning when Hosea 5:1 was first spoken by Hosea?

We don't know for sure, and, in a sense, it doesn't matter because all of these kings after Jeroboam II were much alike – they were all evil, cut-throat, and disposable. Jeroboam was also evil, but at least he had reigned over a long period of peace and prosperity. But that had all changed quickly after his death.

So which king is it? I think Hosea 5:1 is after the death of Jeroboam because these judgments and pronouncements sound as if the days of peace and prosperity have turned into the days of fighting and bloodshed. And we know that the prophecy in Hosea 1:4 was written prior to the death of Zechariah, but I think that here in Hosea 5 we are now some time after that event.

There is a potential clue in verse 2 – note the word “revolter.”

That word can also be translated “rebel.” If that word is referring to one side of the civil war, then we must be in the 12 year period in which the house of Menahem reigned alongside Pekah. The rebels in that conflict would most likely refer to the pro-Assyrian group (called Ephraim) led by Menahem and his son.

Because the text says that they “have” gone into slaughter, we might be in the period after Pekah became the sole ruler – although that language could be an example of prophetic past tense in which the certainty of the prophecy is reinforced by referring to it as having already happened.

Let’s keep our eyes open for other clues about the time frame, but I think the best choice at this point for the king in verse 1 is Pekah, who began to reign a year after Jeroboam’s death and then reigned for 20 years.

So far we have identified two of the three groups in verse 1 – the priests and the king. We have

saved the most difficult identification for last
– who is the house of Israel?

The house of Israel might refer to the people of Israel, but the focus here seems to be on the leaders of the people rather than on the people themselves.

These three groups will soon be said to have spread a net and a snare, which sounds more like what leaders might do rather than what the people might do. The people might be caught in that snare and in that net, but they would likely not be the ones spreading that snare and that net.

So if the house of Israel is not the people of Israel, then who is the house of Israel? I think the best view is that the house of Israel is not all the people of Israel – but is rather some of the people of Israel.

I think the house of Israel likely refers to the wealthy landed-owning people who were *de facto* leaders of the people because of their prominence, influence, and wealth. As one commentary explains:

“They were not the political or religious elite, but neither were they the impoverished peasants and landless laborers.”