

Lesson 28

Hosea 7:14

14 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.

When we ended last week, we were about to look at the second half of verse 14. In the first half, we saw people wailing on their beds, and we suggested that wailing was done as a part of their worship of the false fertility god Baal. One reason we reached that conclusion was the second half of the verse, which we will look at next.

“For grain and wine they gash themselves.”

The grain and the wine confirm that what we are seeing here are fertility rituals. The people are doing these things for a purpose – for grain and for wine.

And what are they doing? In the previous phrase they were wailing, and here they are gashing themselves. I think that this wailing and this gashing were both rituals done in their worship of Baal.

And as additional confirmation, we in fact see such wailing and such self-laceration in the worship of Baal in the great contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

1 Kings 18:27-28 – And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” And they **cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom** with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them.

I think we see those same two rituals here in verse 14. The people are not crying out to God or worshipping God, but they are instead crying out to Baal and worshipping Baal. They are rebelling against God.

Hosea 7:15

15 Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against me.

As we have seen, Ephraim first wanted to be a vassal state of Assyria, but later wanted to be a vassal state of Egypt instead. Here in verse 15, God is telling Ephraim what it really was – **a vassal state of God!**

And as the people would eventually rebel and devise evil against Assyria, so had they already rebelled and devised evil against God.

As a vassal state of God, God had trained them and strengthened them. God had given them their land; God had fought for them in that land; and God had taught them how to fight for themselves in that land.

Joshua 23:3 – And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for

your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you.

In short, God had done everything for the people that Assyria promised to do for its own vassal states.

And in return? Assyria demanded tribute and obedience and loyalty – as did God. God wanted their worship and their obedience and their loyalty.

Joshua 23:6-8 – Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day.

But did the people do that? God fought for them; did they respond by keeping the Law and by refusing to mix with the surrounding peoples and by clinging to God? No, they did not. Instead, they rebelled against God – just as they would also later rebel against Assyria.

And, as for the command in Joshua 23 not to mix with the surrounding nations, we have already seen what the people did instead: “Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples!” (Hosea 7:8)

Isaiah described the people the same way as we see here in Hosea.

Isaiah 30:1-2 – “Ah, stubborn children,” declares the LORD, “who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set

out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!"

Isaiah 30:9-11 – For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD; who say to the seers, "Do not see," and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."

They were rebels, they were liars, and they were traitors. They disobeyed God, and they were disloyal to God.

Hosea 7:16

16 They return, but not upward; 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.

"They return, but not upward."

There is a translation issue with this phrase. The Hebrew text reads, "they turn not upward," which, we are told, is an unusual expression in Hebrew, both in its word-order and in its meaning.

As for the unusual meaning, the final Hebrew word "al" is usually a preposition meaning "on" or "over" rather than a noun as it seems to be here (as in "they return, but not to the height.")

But anyone who has ever seen an airplane from Israel knows that sometimes “al” is used as a noun. The Israeli airline is named “El Al,” which means “to the height.” Also, we will see this same Hebrew phrase again later in Hosea 11:7 (“though they call him to the height.”). So, unusual or not, the Hebrew word is sometimes used as a noun.

But some modern translations (such as the RSV) assume that a copying error has occurred, and so they substitute a similar Hebrew phrase meaning “to Baal.” The RSV reads: “They turn **to Baal.**” But the “copyist error” explanation should be our very last resort – not our first. And here we certainly have no need to assume that any error has occurred during the copying of the text.

I think the ESV translation is okay (“they **return**, but not upward”) but I think the word “turn” is better than “return” because I think verse 16 is telling us that the people **turned** to Baal rather than to God.

The best translation I could find of this verse (and I checked 87 of them!) is the *Christian Standard Bible’s* translation: “**They turn, but not to what is above.**”

And, yes, the phrase “not upward” most likely means “not to God,” but again the goal of a good translation is not to remove all ambiguity. If there is some ambiguity in the original language, then that ambiguity should be carried over to the English translation. So I do **not** prefer the KJV

translation (“They return, but not to **the most High.**”)

“They are like a treacherous bow.”

We have seen some strange word pictures in this chapter, and here we see another one. The inedible cake, the silly bird, and now the flawed weapon.

A treacherous bow is a bow that is warped and unreliable. It is a bow that would fail you in a life or death situation when you needed it the most.

Psalm 78:56–57 – Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; **they twisted like a deceitful bow.**

The really interesting thing here, though, is the one who was planning on using this bow – God! The people are God’s weapon, and God has found them to be unreliable. Like this bow, they fail God at the point where God needs them the most!

What does that mean? When did God need them? After all, Acts 17:25 tells us that God is not “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”

God did not need the people in the sense of Acts 17:25, but God did need the people in the sense that God wanted to use them to bless the entire world through Christ. God wanted to use the people to fulfill his great promise to Abraham.

But the people were a treacherous bow. They were not the weapon that God needed to carry out his plans. They let God down just like a bow that turned out to be warped so that it could not shoot straight.

And what did God do? What God did was look elsewhere.

God looked to Judah in the south. And although Judah also had its own problems and weaknesses, God was able to use the people of Judah after their return from Babylonian exile to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple and to prepare the way for the Messiah.

We need to pray every day that we – **spiritual** Israel, the church – will never fail God as **physical** Israel did. We must also strive to be useful to God, and not useless to God as the people here in verse 16. God wants us to be a useful weapon in his hand!

“Their princes shall fall by the sword because of the insolence of their tongue.”

It is truly amazing how many of our troubles and our problems can be traced back to our tongues.

James 3:5-6 – So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

Here we see kings falling because of what they said. (And, of course, that still happens today!)

And what did those kings say? How were they insolent? They were insolent to God; they were insolent to their friends and to their advisors; they were insolent to their rivals; they were insolent to their own people; and they were insolent to foreign leaders.

And so they fell. As we have said, of the six men who reigned in the final thirty years of Israel's history, only one died in his own bed. Most of them arrived through assassination, left through assassination, or both.

"This shall be their derision in the land of Egypt."

As we have seen, Israel's final downfall happened very quickly, and it started with a behind-the-scenes appeal to Egypt.

2 Kings 17:4 – But the king of Assyria found treachery in Hoshea, for he had sent messengers to So, king of Egypt, and offered no tribute to the king of Assyria, as he had done year by year. Therefore the king of Assyria shut him up and bound him in prison.

And how do we suppose Egypt reacted to that outcome?

I suspect that the final fall of Israel gave Egypt a big laugh! You can be very sure that if it happened today, Egypt would react that same way – and I don't think much has changed with

Israel, Egypt, and modern-day Assyria in the last 3000 years!

What we see here in verse 16 are leaders of Israel who talk a big game, but who have nothing with which to back up their big talk.

With their insolent talk, they acted like a big power – they acted as if they were equals to Egypt and Assyria – but, of course, they were not. And so Egypt laughed when Assyria invaded.

Introduction to Hosea 8–13

From Chapter 8 to almost near the end of the book, we find lamentations over Israel's sin. Sometimes God speaks in the first person, and sometimes Hosea speaks about God in the third person.

Hosea 8:2 [*First Person*] – To me they cry, “My God, we – Israel – know you.”

Hosea 12:2 [*Third Person*] – The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds.

That pattern parallels what we saw in the first three chapters. In Chapter 1, we saw a description of Hosea's marriage in the third person. But later in Chapter 3, we saw a description of Hosea's marriage in the first person.

Hosea 1:3 [*Third Person*] – So **he** went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore **him** a son.

Hosea 3:2 [*First Person*] – So **I** bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.

In each case, the aggrieved husband (either Hosea or God) tells his own story in the first person but also has his story told in the third person by the other aggrieved husband.

What is the purpose of that unusual structure? We can't say for sure, but I think we can say that it does serve to firmly link what happened between Hosea and Gomer with what was happening between God and Israel. And we know that linkage was the reason why Hosea was told to marry Gomer in the first place.

A recurring theme in these final chapters is the historical perspective that is provided by God's (often fond) recollections of Israel's former (and often better) days, especially during the exodus from Egypt. And, in response, Hosea likewise recalls some historical events from the life of Jacob.

And why do we see that history in these final chapters?

First, that history adds to the sadness of these lamentations by recalling happier times between the husband (God) and his wife (Israel). Those happy days were now long gone.

And second, that history reminds us that what was happening now was not new. Instead, we saw

evidence of Israel's bad character from the very beginning. The question was always whether Israel would rise above it and be faithful to her husband – and we now have the sad answer to that question.

We will see two major images in Chapters 8–10.

First, we will see how Israel had depended, not on God, but on their fertility cults and on their own military power for prosperity and security.

And second, we will see how both of those things on which they depended were proving to be hollow. Israel's military would soon be overwhelmed and defeated, and the fertility cults would soon be proved powerless by a famine.

Hosea 8:1

1 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.

Our view of verse 1 depends entirely on the translation of a single word. Here are the two options:

(KJV) “Set the trumpet to thy mouth. He shall come as an eagle against the house of the LORD...”

(ESV) “Set the trumpet to your lips! One like a vulture is over the house of the LORD...”

The Hebrew word *nešer* can refer to either a vulture or an eagle, so we must determine the

correct bird from the context. But that is easier said than done! In fact, either bird can make sense in this context (although I favor the translation of “eagle” for the reasons we are about to consider).

What does verse 1 mean if the bird is a vulture?

If the bird in verse 1 is a vulture, then the “house of the Lord” in verse 1 likely refers to the temple.

And the thought of verse 1 would be that the enemy is coming like a vulture and so one should blow the trumpet (Hebrew *shofar*) as vigorously as a priest would have blown a horn if a vulture (a notoriously unclean bird) had lighted on the roof of the temple.

Such an event would not only have been unclean, but it would have been seen as a very bad omen, and so we can be sure that the priests would have made every noise they could to scare the vulture away from the temple. That is how frantically the trumpet should be blown now that Assyria is coming.

What does verse 1 mean if the bird is an eagle?

Right from the start, we can perhaps say that the translation of an “eagle” may be more likely than that of a “vulture.” Why? Because the eagle is a predatory bird that travels alone while the vulture is a carrion eater that travels in a group – and we see only one bird in verse 1.

Another point in favor of an “eagle” is that it fits nicely with the image that was used much

earlier to describe the exodus – which is an event we will see often in these final chapters.

Exodus 19:4 – You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Deuteronomy 32:11-12 – Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him.

If that is why we see an eagle here in verse 1, then Hosea is describing a great reversal. During the exodus, God protected the people like an eagle – but now, God is coming as an eagle or perhaps sending Assyria an eagle against the same people.

And, in that regard, it is interesting that this same reversal is listed among the curses in Deuteronomy 28 that would come if the people were disobedient.

Deuteronomy 28:49 – The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand.

In fact, that verse may be more than just interesting – as we say in the legal business, that verse may be dispositive. That is, Hosea 8:1 may be specifically referring back to that curse in Deuteronomy 28, where the bird “swooping down” is certainly an eagle. Vultures flutter down; they do not swoop down.

If the bird in verse 1 is an eagle (which I think is a better choice than “vulture”), then the “house of the Lord” in verse 1 likely refers, not to the temple, but to the people and to the land of Israel. They are the “house of God” that God previously protected like an eagle protecting its nest, but that now God was about to swoop down upon like an attacking eagle.

And why is that happening? The end of verse 1 answers that question: “because they have transgressed my covenant and rebelled against my law.”

These two sins are the umbrella that includes every sin that the people had committed. Their root problem was that they had broken their covenant with God and they had disobeyed the law of God.

And once again, we are brought right back to the list of curses in Deuteronomy 28. What was it that would cause the people to experience those curses? The same two things we see here in verse 1 – disobeying the law and breaking the covenant.

Deuteronomy 28:45 – All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you.

Deuteronomy 29:9 – Therefore keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.

So, again, I think “eagle” is the correct translation because I think Hosea 8:1 is bringing

us all the way back to the warnings that God gave the people in Deuteronomy 28 at the beginning of their history.

And now, at the end of their history, we see the fulfillment of those warnings. The people disobeyed the law and broke the covenant, and so the promised curses are now coming upon them.

As we will be told just a few verses from now, the people had sown the wind, and they were now reaping the whirlwind. The Psalmist described them very well.

Psalm 78:9-11 – The Ephraimites, armed with the bow, turned back on the day of battle. They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them.

Why did they break the covenant? Why did they disobey the law? The Psalmist just told us – because “they forgot his works.” And Hosea has repeatedly given us the same answer as the Psalmist just did – it was because they did not know God.

But they sure thought they knew God! Keep reading...