

# Lesson 34

## Hosea 10:1

1 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.

The book of Hosea has had nothing good to say about Israel for nine chapters, but now that we have reached chapter 10 it might seem like that has changed. Now, Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. That sounds almost like a compliment!

Yes, it may sound like a compliment, but it is not. I think what we will see is that Israel is described here as a destructive vine that produces fruit only for itself and for its false gods.

A vineyard is a common metaphor in the Bible for the people of God.

**Isaiah 5:7** – For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

**John 15:5** – I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

We will later find each of those verses very helpful in understanding the vine that we see here in Hosea 10:1.

But, in verse 1, Israel is said to be a “**luxuriant**” vine. What does that mean? This vine sounds great – it is luxuriant, and it is producing fruit! But we don’t have to read very far ahead to find out that this vine is not great at all. Why does verse 1 start off this way?

The answer is that verse 1 might not start off that way at all. Elsewhere in the Bible where we find that same Hebrew word it is translated, not as “luxuriant,” but as “empty” or “void.”

**Isaiah 24:1** – Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.

**Jeremiah 19:7** – And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem.

So why then does the ESV use the word “luxuriant”? Two reasons: the Greek Septuagint translation uses that word, and (I think) those ESV translators are unable to see how “empty” or “void” could ever be used to describe a vine.

As for the first reason, that argument just moves the question from the ESV to the Septuagint – they are both translations, and both could be wrong in their translation of this word.

As for the second reason, I suspect that the translators with that view of a vine have never

met a vine that is well known in the south – the kudzu vine!

That vine has been called “the vine that ate the South!” Wikipedia tells us that it “densely climbs over other plants and trees and grows so rapidly that it smothers and kills them by blocking most of the sunlight and taking root space.”

The Hebrew word meaning “empty” and “void” could easily be used to describe the problems created by such a vine. And, yes, perhaps that is what is meant by the word “luxuriant” – that the vine grows everywhere – but I think the word “destructive” is a better translation for a vine that leaves everything else empty and void. Also, given the context, I think we should expect to see a negative description of this vine rather than a positive description, and “luxuriant” could be mistaken as a positive description.

What does verse 1 tell us that this destructive vine is doing? The ESV says that it “yields its fruit,” but again there is a translation issue.

The Hebrew is better translated “yields fruit **for itself.**” And I think we can say that that view is at least *suggested* by the ESV (“**its** fruit”), but again the ESV could be a bit clearer on that point.

So what then do we have? What we have, as one commentary describes it, is “a destructive vine [that] takes up valuable soil, crowds out productive plants, and gives benefit only to

itself and not to its owner.” And that description suddenly sounds a lot like Israel!

**“The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars.”**

I think this second phrase in verse 1 confirms our view of the first phrase.

As we have said, the vine was growing and producing a lot of fruit – but the growth of that vine was a destructive growth, and the fruit from that vine was not being used for any good purpose.

Yes, this vine produced fruit, but the result was just more and more altars to their false gods.

And, yes, the land was producing, but the result of that production was just improved pillars set up for their false gods.

Nothing about this vine was pleasing to God.

Think again about our earlier example – the kudzu vine. From the perspective of the kudzu vine everything looks great – why? **Because the kudzu is growing everywhere!** But from the perspective of the owner of the land, everything looks terrible – why? **Because the kudzu is growing everywhere!**

Verse 1 is like that example. The people would have seen the description in verse 1 as a great thing, but that is not at all how God saw that same description. And if we are not seeing things as God sees them, then we are not seeing things

correctly. We could preach an entire sermon about this vine!

## Hosea 10:2

2 Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The LORD will break down their altars and destroy their pillars.

Verse 2 confirms what we concluded about the vine in verse 1 – it is being described in a negative way. Verse 2 is very clear on that issue: “Their heart is false.”

If we view the vine in verse 1 as a luxuriant vine that produces good fruit, then verse 2 doesn't make sense. But if we view the vine in verse 1 as a destructive vine that yields fruit only for itself and not for its owner, then verse 2 makes perfect sense – that destructive vine is a false vine that produces false fruit only for its false gods.

And what will happen to such a vine? The answer to that question has never changed. Jesus answered that question for us.

**John 15:5-6** – I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. **If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.**

That's the same answer we see here. The people will bear their guilt, and God will destroy their evil works – their altars and their pillars. “The

branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

## **Hosea 10:3**

3 For now they will say: "We have no king, for we do not fear the LORD; and a king -- what could he do for us?"

What do we see in verse 3?

At first, what we see looks almost like repentance or regret – “We have no king for we do not fear the Lord.” But, when we read the next phrase (“what could he do for us?”), we very quickly see that there is no repentance or regret in verse 3.

What we see in verse 3 is not repentance or regret, but rather what we see in verse 3 is a rejection of authority.

“We have no king.” That is a common refrain from people who have a king but who either don’t like him as their king or don’t recognize him as their king. We still hear that phrase today – he’s not my president!

That phrase “we have no king” means today what it means in Hosea 10 – it is a rejection of authority.

Isaiah described this same time period, and he also described the people’s same rejection of authority.

**Isaiah 8:21** – They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry. And when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God, and turn their faces upward.

I think historically what we are seeing here in Hosea 10 is the time period after the death of Jeroboam II when the people had four kings and a civil war all within about a year's time. (That time frame may be a little earlier than what we see in Isaiah, but it is close.) The people likely became very cynical as a result of that turmoil, and they likely said, "we have no king!"

But God was their king, right? And perhaps Hosea himself had said that to them when he heard them say they had no king. And what did the people say in response? I think we see their response in verse 3 – "we do not fear the Lord!" Their rejection of human authority had led them to reject God's authority.

So what are we saying here? Are we really saying that a rejection of human authority leads to a rejection of God's authority? Yes, that is exactly what we are saying. And we are saying it because that is what God tells us about a rejection of authority.

**Romans 13:1-2** – Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

**1 Peter 2:13-14** – Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be

to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

A rejection of one authority leads to a rejection of other authorities. That is why we honor the authority of our parents; that is why we honor the authority of our earthly rulers; and that is why we honor the authority of our elders.

Yes, we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29), but part of obeying God is respecting the authorities that God has instituted.

Here, it seems that the people had rejected all authority. They rejected the authority of their earthly kings, and they rejected the authority of their heavenly king. They saw themselves as free from all higher authority. But God saw things otherwise – as would the king of Assyria!

And why? Why did they reject that authority? The text answers that question: “A king – what could he do for us?” They rejected authority because they did not see anything in it for themselves. And again, not much has changed in 2700 years!

## **Hosea 10:4**

4 They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.

That reading was from the ESV translation. Here is how the NIV translates that same verse.

**Hosea 10:4** (NIV) – They make many promises, take false oaths and make agreements; therefore



lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field.

If we read only the NIV we would have the impression that the big problem with the Israelites was that they were litigious! Lawsuit abuse! But I don't think that is right at all.

For starters, there is nothing in the context suggesting that lawsuits were a problem. And, in fact, the historical context of famine and warfare suggests that the time for solving things with lawsuits had likely passed by now.

Also, as for the underlying Hebrew text, one commentary says that the NIV's translation of "lawsuits" in verse 4 is "indefensible." The Hebrew word is singular, not plural. So unless we want to argue that Hosea had some specific lawsuit in mind, we need to look for another meaning in verse 4.

To figure out what the second half of verse 4 is talking about, let's start with the first half: "They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants."

What does that mean? We know what that means because we have already seen it over and over in the book of Hosea – these people were just going through the motions. They were saying the right things – but there was nothing in their hearts to back up what they were saying.

Their words were just that – words. And those "mere words" resulted in "empty oaths." And, yes, they made covenants – likely a renewal and a restatement of their covenant with God – but

those renewed and restated covenants were meaningless. They were not keeping their end of those covenants, and they had no intention of changing. It was all just talk. It was all just hot air.

Now, if that is what the first half of verse 4 is saying, let's look again at the second half of verse 4. And, of course, the first thing we see is that it has nothing to do with lawsuits. There is nothing at all in the first half of verse 4 that would cause us to expect a lawsuit in the second half.

But what does it mean? "So judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field."

I think we can get some help from Isaiah on that question. Back in verse 1, when we first saw this vine, we read a very similar verse from Isaiah 5. Let's read that verse again.

**Isaiah 5:7** – For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for **justice**, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

He looked for **justice**. The Hebrew word translated "justice" in Isaiah 5:7 is the same Hebrew word translated "judgment" in Hosea 10:4, and I think the translation should be "justice" in both verses.

If that is correct, then what is Hosea saying here? Hosea is saying the same thing that Isaiah said – God planted a vineyard, and God wanted to

get a certain crop (justice and righteousness), but God instead got a crop that he did not want (bloodshed and an outcry).

And, as usual, what Isaiah says in 100 words, Hosea says in 10 words. Here, Hosea says that justice springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.

If the Hebrew text had quotation marks, I think we would see them around the word “justice” in verse 4. I think Hosea is being a bit sarcastic here. Maybe he even used air quotes when he said it!

Hosea assumes that the people are already familiar with the metaphor of the vineyard. He assumes that they understand that they are that vineyard and that God was expecting to reap justice and righteousness. Isaiah had said that, as had likely most or all of the other prophets sent by God.

And so the people would quickly get the message when Hosea described them as a vine and then used the word “justice” to describe what had been produced by that vineyard – “poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.”

**Isaiah** said: “He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”

**Hosea** said: “They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so [justice] [*in air quotes*] springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.” The “justice” they

produced was not the justice God wanted – instead, it was false justice produced by their false vine.

I think the message is the same in both Isaiah and Hosea – the people are a destructive, deceptive vine that serves only itself and that yields the false fruit of impiety, hypocrisy, and paganism.

God, as the farmer, goes out to his field to reap a good crop from what he has planted, but instead he finds only poisonous plants growing there.

And, once again, there is something very sad in that description of Israel.

In Deuteronomy 32, we find the beautiful song of Moses that he gave to the people shortly before his death. And one thing that Moses described in that song was the sad state of those who were the enemies of God's people.

**Deuteronomy 32:31–33** – For their rock is not as our Rock; **our enemies are by themselves**. For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomorrah; **their grapes are grapes of poison**; their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents and the cruel venom of asps.

“Our enemies are by themselves” – what was true of the enemies of Israel was now true of Israel! God had rejected them and thrown them out of the promised land.

“Their grapes are grapes of poison” – again, what was true of the enemies of Israel was now true of

Israel! That is what Hosea tells us here in verse 4.

The description that Moses gave of the enemies of God's people had become instead a description of God's people! They had experienced a great reversal!

## **Hosea 10:5–6**

5 The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-aven. 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. 6 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.

The calf in verse 5 is the same calf that we talked about in Lesson 29 when we looked at Hosea 8:5–6 (“I have spurned your calf, O Samaria”). And we saw an example of such a calf on the Handout for Lesson 28.

And we are once again immediately reminded of a very shameful event in Israel's history – when Aaron made a golden calf, and the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:1–4)

And we also recall how the the northern kingdom began. In 1 Kings 12, Jeroboam made two golden calves and placed them in Bethel and Dan to keep the people from traveling to Jerusalem. And Jeroboam said, “Behold your gods, O Israel, who

brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” (1 Kings 12:26–29)

And, if we fast-forward from the days of Moses and from the days of Jeroboam I to the days of King Jehu (whose dynasty had recently ended with Zechariah as prophesied of Hosea 1:4), we see in 2 Kings 10:27–29 that, even after destroying the temples of Baal, Jehu still did not remove those golden calves from Bethel and Dan.

So what does that tell us? What it tells us is that the people of the north had worshipped golden calves from the very beginning of their history. And what it tells us is that in the days of Jehu, almost 1000 years after Moses, the people were still worshipping golden calves!

That golden calf in Bethel is called “the calf of Beth-aven” in verse 5. And we recall that *Beth-aven* means house of emptiness or wickedness, which Hosea sarcastically uses as the name for the city rather than its actual name *Bethel*, which means house of God.

The ESV translation of verse 5 leaves us with the impression that the people were in a panic because their golden calf had been carried off – but I suspect that when Assyria showed up, the people would have much more immediate concerns!

I think a better view is that the end of verse 5 (“for it has departed from them”) should instead be part of verse 6. And I think the beginning of verse 5 is not describing the reaction of the people to the calf being carried off, but is

instead describing the false worship of that golden calf.

“The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-aven. Its people mourn for it, and so do its idolatrous priests -- those who rejoiced over it and over its glory.”

The key words in that verse are “tremble,” “mourn,” and “rejoice.” And that was all part of the worship of the golden calf.

But I thought the people were worshipping Baal – why do we instead see them worshipping this calf? Here is how one commentary answers that question.

“In Canaanite religion, the bull represented El, the supreme god, as well as Baal, the storm god. Most powerful of all domesticated animals, bull Baal came to rule over his brothers. His consort was Anat, symbolized by the heifer. She conceived a new bull calf by Baal. According to the myth, when Baal annually succumbed to Death (the god Mot) in the drought of summer, Baal descended and remained in Death’s clutches until Anat, the goddess of war, defeated Death and gave birth to the young bull calf, in whom Baal is reborn.”

So, when we see the people worshipping a golden calf, they were worshipping Baal.

Verse 5 tells us that the people and their idolatrous priests once rejoiced over Baal, but now they were trembling and mourning for Baal. Why? What caused the rejoicing to become trembling and mourning?

I think the answer is the famine. We have already seen that famine was part of God’s judgment against the people, and we know that drought and

famine were equated with the death of Baal, who was the storm god and the fertility god.

In fact, that view of Baal explains the reaction from the prophets of Baal that we find in 1 Kings 18 in response to a drought and a famine.

**1 Kings 18:28-29** – And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

I think we see the same reaction here in response to the same thing. As in 1 Kings 18, there is drought and famine. And, as in 1 Kings 18, there is a frenzied response – trembling and mourning.

But that famine and that drought are not the end of the story. That is what verse 6 tells us. Assyria was coming, and Assyria would carry them all away, along with their golden calf.

I think the end of verse 5 is better translated: “Surely it shall go into exile from them.”

And then we have verse 6: “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.”

That verse tells us what happened to the golden calf in Bethel – it was carried off to Assyria as a tribute to the king of Assyria. And I think Hosea 8:6 told us earlier that it would be chopped into pieces, which tells us that



(surprise!) the Assyrian king just wanted the gold.

And how would Ephraim and Israel react to that? Verse 6 tells us they would be ashamed. (And recall that if the civil war is over by this time, as seems almost certain, then the designations of Ephraim and Israel are now describing the same people. All that was left of Israel was now Ephraim.)

And why are they ashamed? It is not because they realize that they have failed God, but it is because they realize that their religion has failed them.

They had placed their faith in Baal, and Baal had let them down. That is what the text tells us: "Israel shall be ashamed of his idol." That is not repentance; that is realization. They now understand that they had placed their trust in a god that was powerless to save them – or to even save itself from being chopped up and carted off!

We have one more question before we leave verses 5–6: **what happened to Dan?**

Jeroboam I set the golden calves in both Bethel and Dan, and Jehu allowed the golden calves to remain in both Bethel and Dan – but now all we hear about is Bethel. What happened to the golden calf in Dan?

The answer is that the city of Dan had already been carried off into exile by the Assyrians. That happened during the reign of Pekah (2 Kings 15:29), who was then killed by Hoshea, the final

king of Israel (2 Kings 15:30). The remainder of the northern tribes were then carried off under Hoshea's reign (2 Kings 17:6) after he switched his allegiance to Egypt (2 Kings 17:4).

You can see the locations of Bethel and Dan on the Handout for Lesson 34 – one is far to the north, and the other is far to the south. Jeroboam wanted his false worship to be both false and convenient! And isn't that always the case!

And recall that Dan was located in the north only because that tribe had fled north after they were unable to keep their portion of the promised land (Joshua 19:47 and Judges 18).

Earlier we said that the civil war was almost certainly over by this time – why do we say that? One reason is because Dan is not mentioned here, and Dan was carried off after the civil war had already ended.