

**COLLAPSE OF ISRAEL  
FAILURE TO REPENT**

**HOSEA 4-7**

Failure to observe the covenant

**<sup>1</sup>Hear the word of YHWH, O people of Israel; for YHWH has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.**

**There is no faithfulness or covenant love, and no knowledge of God in the land.**

**<sup>2</sup>Swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed.**

**<sup>3</sup>Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea are perishing.**

Verses 1-3 seem to be modelled on an announcement of judgment delivered by a judge after a court session at the city gate. Hosea's oracles frequently consist in an indictment followed by a sentence. YHWH is accusing the 'people of Israel', who should look to him and obey him as their lord, since it is he who has given them the land they inhabit (see 2:8).

The second part of verse 1 recalls the marriage commitment in which YHWH promised: 'I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you will know YHWH'(2:20). For 'covenant love' see 2:19.

This unfaithfulness is demonstrated by the way people treat their neighbour. 'Swearing' means using YHWH's name to call down a curse on another person – an example of 'making wrongful use of the the name of YHWH'(Deuteronomy 5:11; the second commandment of the decalogue). 'Lying' has a special reference to the law court: 'bearing false witness against one's neighbour'(Deuteronomy 5:20; the eighth commandment). For 'murder' see the fifth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:17); for 'stealing' see the seventh commandment (Deuteronomy 5:19); and for 'adultery' see the sixth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:18).

Does 'bloodshed follows bloodshed'(verse 2) refer to the assassinations that typified the years after the death of Jeroboam II (see page 11)?

According to Hosea, it is the people's failure to observe the covenant that is the cause of the drought (verse 5).

Verses 4-10 are uttered against a priest, probably a leading official in an important sanctuary. Hosea may have been speaking (as Amos often did) in the royal sanctuary at Bethel. The absence of any reference to political upheavals may point to these oracles belonging to the early period of Hosea's prophetic ministry, during the largely peaceful final years of the reign of Jeroboam II.

Hosea's threat against the priest's mother (verse 5) and children (verse 6) echoes Amos's threat against Amaziah (Amos 7:17). In verse 5 'the prophet' is included in YHWH's rejection (compare Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Hosea may be referring especially to the cult prophets who were part of the institution, and who were expected to say what the authorities wanted to hear.

The threatened punishment (verse 6) corresponds to the crime, which picks up verse 1: 'there is no knowledge of God in the land.' More precisely, 'you have forgotten the law (Torah) of your God' (compare 4:2).

In verse 7 Hosea moves from criticising a certain (anonymous) priest and addresses his words to those who exercise the priestly ministry ('they'). The key 'sin' of the priests was to exchange true worship of YHWH ('their glory') for the kinds of cult ('their shame') mentioned earlier (see 2:11, 13; see Deuteronomy 23:17-18). It is the priests who earn their living from the 'sin of the people'.

The expressions 'play the whore' and 'devote themselves to whoredom', if intended metaphorically, refer to the apostasy of worshipping gods other than YHWH. If intended literally, the reference is to the sexual rites performed in the hope of obtaining a good harvest from Baal (compare the commentary on 1:2).

**<sup>4</sup>Yet let not anyone contend, and let not anyone accuse, for my contention is with you, O priest.**

**<sup>5</sup>You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother.**

**<sup>6</sup>My people perish for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you as my priest. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.**

**<sup>7</sup>The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their glory for shame. <sup>8</sup>They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. <sup>9</sup>And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways, and repay them for their deeds.**

**<sup>10</sup>They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply; because they have forsaken YHWH to devote themselves to whoredom.**

The shame of priests and people

**<sup>11</sup>New wine takes away understanding from my people.**

**<sup>12</sup>They consult a piece of wood, and their divining rod gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have played the whore, forsaking their God. <sup>13</sup>They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains, and make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.**

**<sup>14</sup>I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for these men themselves go aside with whores, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes; thus a people without understanding comes to ruin.**

**<sup>15</sup>Though you play the whore, O Israel, do not let Judah become guilty. Do not enter into Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven, and do not swear, "As YHWH lives."**

**<sup>16</sup>Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can YHWH now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture? <sup>17</sup>Ephraim is joined to idols – let him alone. <sup>18</sup>When their drinking is ended, they indulge in sexual orgies; they love the dishonour of the shame.**

**<sup>19</sup>A spirit has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their altars.**

The word translated ‘understanding’ in verse 11 is the Hebrew **לֵב** (lēb; see also 2:11 where it is translated ‘heart’). It refers to our deepest centre where we think, decide and experience profound emotions. This failure of ‘understanding’ is exemplified in the irrational behaviour described in verse 12 (compare Deuteronomy 27:15). Instead of guiding the people to the Torah, the priests are complicit in their ‘playing the whore, forsaking their God’ (verse 12; see 1:2). Verse 13 describes the communion sacrifices that take place in the groves of the cult sites situated high in the mountains (compare Deuteronomy 12:2), as well as the sexual rites (see commentary on 1:2 and 4:10).

Hosea lays the blame for these rites, not on the women, but on the priests (‘these men’, verse 14). Deuteronomy, too, refers to ‘cult prostitutes’ (23:18). Once again we hear a lament over ‘a people without understanding’ (verse 14; see verse 6 and 11). The priests are to blame because of their negligence (verse 6) and bad example (verses 12-14).

‘Judah’ has been introduced into the text by a later scribe (as in 1:7). The second part of verse 15 appears to draw on Amos 4:4. Gilgal was the first camp established after the crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 4:19). Hosea also appears to be copying Amos (5:5) in calling Bethel, the royal sanctuary, ‘Beth-aven’ (‘house of wickedness’).

Hosea has tried to put the blame on the priests rather than the people (see verse 14). In these concluding remarks (verses 16-19), however, he speaks of Ephraim’s stubbornness as well as their preference for the dishonour of the shameful sexual rites’ (Bethel is in Ephraim).

The ‘spirit’ (רוּחַ, rūah), called earlier ‘the spirit of whoredom’ which ‘has led them astray’ (4:12), has seized them like a whirlwind. The people must suffer the shame they have brought on themselves.

Verse 1 opens with a summons to listen to divine instruction and to hear the sentence passed by God on the guilty parties: the priests, the clan chiefs ('house of Israel') and the royal court. The priests are responsible for the proclamation of divine instruction. The clan chiefs are responsible for local administration of justice at the city gate. The royal court is responsible for maintaining the peace, without which justice cannot flourish.

Instead of being instruments for freedom and justice, they have misled the people (see 4:6, 15-19): from Mizpah in the south of Israel (16kms north of Jerusalem), to Tabor in the northeastern edge of the Jezreel Valley, to Shittim, east of the Jordan.

YHWH intimately knows his people. It is his love that makes him punish them. Their leaders have trapped the people because of their advocating worship of false gods, with all that implies. Typically, Hosea calls such behaviour 'playing the whore' (compare 4:10, 18).

Hosea has come to the point of recognising that repentance is not possible. They have become so enamoured of 'the spirit of whoredom' (see 4:12) that 'they do not know YHWH' (see 4:6; contrast 2:20).

Their sin carries with it its own entrapment (compare 4:5). As in earlier texts (1:7; 4:15), the reference to Judah appears to be a later insert after Hosea's words had found their way south to Judah and were being re-applied to the situation there.

Not for the first time (see 4:8, 13) Hosea is unimpressed with the cult sacrifice of animals when it is a substitute for justice: they seek YHWH, but will not find him (compare 2:7)!

In verse 7 the analogy of the unfaithful wife continues. The people following bad leadership have broken faith with YHWH. This has issued in a way of life that is alien to the covenant they have with their God. The final sentence announces the punishment. The translation is an attempt to interpret the Hebrew text, which is obscure.

**<sup>1</sup>Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king! For you are responsible for passing just judgments.**

**Indeed, you have been a snare for Mizpah, a net spread upon Tabor, <sup>2</sup>a pit dug deep in Shittim. I will punish all of you.**

**<sup>3</sup>I know Ephraim, Israel is not hidden from me. Because you, O Ephraim, have played the whore, Israel is defiled.**

**<sup>4</sup>Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is at work in their midst, so that they do not know YHWH.**

**<sup>5</sup>Israel's pride testifies against him; Ephraim stumbles over his guilt. Judah also stumbles with them.**

**<sup>6</sup>With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek YHWH, but they will not find him. He has withdrawn from them.**

**<sup>7</sup>They have dealt faithlessly with YHWH; for they have borne illegitimate children.**

**The new moon will see their fields devoured.**

Israel is collapsing

**<sup>8</sup>Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-aven; look behind you, Benjamin! <sup>9</sup>Ephraim shall become a desolation in the day of punishment; among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure. <sup>10</sup>The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark; on them I will pour out my wrath like water.**

**<sup>11</sup>Ephraim is oppressed, justice is crushed, because he was determined to go after vanity.**

**<sup>12</sup>Therefore I am like an infection to Ephraim, and like rotteness to the house of Judah.**

**<sup>13</sup>When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.**

**<sup>14</sup>For I am like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I myself will tear and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.**

**<sup>15</sup>I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favour.**

The danger is from the south. Gibeah is 5ks north of Jerusalem; Ramah a further 3ks, and Bethel ('Beth-aven', see 4:15) a further 8ks. All three towns are in Benjamin. In 734 Tiglath-Pileser III had conquered Philistia and the Mediterranean coastline of Israel. As noted in the Introduction (page 12), Israel entered into an alliance with Syria (Aram) and tried to force Judah to join. In 733 the Assyrians invaded and conquered Gilead, Galilee, and the Valley of Jezreel. Israel, reduced to the highlands of Ephraim and Manasseh, had to withdraw from Judah. What we witness in verse 8 appears to be Judah's counter-attack. Hosea is angry at Judah for taking advantage of Ephraim's weakness to attack across the southern border (verse 10). On the inviolability of 'landmarks' see Deuteronomy 19:14.

The 'vanity' mentioned in verse 11 could be a reference to Israel's foolish alliance with Syria. Meanwhile in Israel, Pekah has been assassinated and Hoshea, the new king, is paying tribute to Assyria ('went to Assyria', verse 13).

Verse 13 underscores the folly of Israel's turning to Assyria (something Judah had already done, against Isaiah's advice; see Isaiah 7-9). They should have turned to YHWH, who alone can 'heal your wound'.

It is clear from verse 14 that Hosea expects both Israel and Judah to be overrun by the Assyrian forces.

YHWH's withdrawal leaves Ephraim and Judah at the mercy of the Assyrian army. Tragically, it will take a disastrous invasion to bring them to realise their need for the protective covenant of YHWH, and beg for his blessing.

Verses 1-3 appear to be a response to 5:15. However, as verse 4 declares, their longing to 'return to YHWH', is a fickle one, lacking substance. They acknowledge that it is YHWH who has wounded them. They are confident that he will heal them (verse 1). Verse 2 is not speaking of resurrection from the dead, but revival from being in a stricken state. The expression 'on the third day' echoes the classical text that speaks of God's self-revelation at Sinai (see Exodus 19:11-16 where it is repeated four times). It speaks of a time when YHWH reveals himself as he is. Those singing this lament are confident that he will reveal himself as Saviour.

In verse 4 Hosea offers an insight into YHWH's ambivalent feelings in regard to his people. Their 'covenant love' (רַחֲמֵי, *hesed*) is fickle. YHWH keeps sending prophets, hoping that his word (his 'just judgment') will be enough to break their hearts and bring about genuine repentance. He wants 'covenant love', that is to say, loyal observance of the special covenant he has with his people. He wants them to 'know' him, that is to say, to enjoy the intimacy of divine communion. Instead they think they can keep YHWH on side by observance of the cult, while they make alliances with foreign nations (5:11,13), and fight among themselves (5:8, 10).

Verses 7-10 offer a catalogue of sins that demonstrate the inadequacy of the lament in verses 1-3. Adam is located at the meeting of the Jabbok and Jordan rivers. The crimes committed there and in Gilead are left unspecified. Hosea is not condemning the ancient site of Shechem, but murder committed on the road to Shechem by a band of priests. In the royal sanctuary (the 'house of Israel' at Bethel) is to be seen 'Ephraim's whoredom' (infidelity to the covenant, 5:3).

If verse 11 is from Hosea, he is recognising that Judah, too, is ripe for the sickle. However, it may also be a gloss in which a scribe from Judah applies the judgment against Israel to Judah in a later situation.

**<sup>1</sup>"Come, let us return to YHWH; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. <sup>2</sup>After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live in his presence. <sup>3</sup>Let us know, let us press on to know YHWH; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he is coming to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth."**

**<sup>4</sup>What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your covenant love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.**

**<sup>5</sup>Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my just judgment goes forth as the light.**

**<sup>6</sup>For I desire covenant love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

**<sup>7</sup>But they, at Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.**

**<sup>8</sup>Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. <sup>9</sup>As robbers lie in ambush, so does the band of priests. They murder on the road to Shechem, they commit a monstrous crime. <sup>10</sup>In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim's whoredom is there, Israel is defiled.**

**<sup>11</sup>For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed.**

Failure to repent

**6:11 Whenever I restored the fortunes of my people, <sup>7:1</sup> whenever I would heal Israel, the corruption of Ephraim is revealed, and the wicked deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely: the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside. <sup>2</sup> But they do not consider that I remember all their wickedness. Now their deeds surround them, they are before my face.**

**<sup>3</sup> By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the officials by their treachery.**

**<sup>4</sup> They are all adulterers; they are like a heated oven, whose baker does not need to stir the fire, from the kneading of the dough until it is leavened.**

**<sup>5</sup> On the day of our king the officials became sick with the heat of wine; he stretched out his hand with mockers. <sup>6</sup> For they are kindled like an oven, their heart burns within them; all night their anger smoulders; in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire. <sup>7</sup> All of them are hot as an oven, and they devour their rulers. All their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon me.**

**<sup>8</sup> Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples; Ephraim is a cake not turned.**

**<sup>9</sup> Foreigners devour his strength, but he does not know it; gray hairs have caught up with him, but he is unaware.**

The fickleness of Israel's gestures in the direction of repentance is declared here to be typical. It has always been thus. Samaria, the city-state in Ephraim that was the seat of the king of Israel, is unrepentant, mistakenly thinking YHWH has forgotten the long history of corruption and rebellion against his will.

Is verse 4 commenting on the assassination of King Pekah by Hoshea, and Hoshea's looking to Assyria rather than to YHWH? This required a replacement of the court officials who had supported Pekah's anti-Assyrian stance. The new regime are called 'adulterers' (verse 4) because they are unfaithful to the covenant.

The 'day of our king' could be the day of the assassin Hoshea's ascent to the throne of Israel. Enjoying the 'peace' that ensued upon Hoshea's swearing of allegiance to Assyria and his accepting to pay tribute, are the revellers mocking Hosea for his threatening of doom?

The death of Jeroboam II in 736 led to a period of instability. Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, ruled for six months and was assassinated by Shallum, who was in turn assassinated by Menahem (see 2Kings 15:13-22). Menahem reigned for ten years and was succeeded by his son, Pekahiah. Two years later Pekahiah was assassinated by Pekah, who was assassinated by Hoshea. Indeed 'they devour all their rulers' (verse 7).

Bread in the oven needs to be turned. Ephraim shows no signs of real conversion ('turning', verse 8). Even the 'gray hairs' caused by sudden fright have not brought them to their senses (verse 9).

In verse 10 we have a repeat of a statement made earlier by Hosea (see 5:5). Israel has brought the present catastrophe upon itself by its failure to live justly, by submitting to YHWH's will. Even the catastrophe has not brought them 'to return to YHWH their God, or seek him'.

Pekah looked to Egypt. Now Hoshea is looking to Assyria. Israel is too stupid to know where its real security lies. They flutter around heading first in one direction, then in the other. YHWH will catch them in his net. They will have to pay the price of their infidelity.

YHWH is grieving over Ephraim's infidelity. Their behaviour shows up their apparent lament (6:1-3) as 'lies'(verse 13).

They cry to YHWH, but only in the formal language of the cult, 'not from the heart'.

The loss of the Valley of Jezreel cut off Israel's main source of grain. They cry out in their distress but at the same time 'rebel against' YHWH.

Any strength Israel has is a gift from YHWH. This makes their rebellious behaviour all the more hurtful to the one who 'would redeem them'(verse 13).

Israel's earlier words to Egypt have been shown up as so much hot air. Egypt will join in the mocking of Israel when it becomes obvious that Israel's turning to Assyria brought them no advantage.

**<sup>10</sup>Israel's pride testifies against him; yet, for all this, they do not return to YHWH their God, or seek him.**

**<sup>11</sup>Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense; they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria.**

**<sup>12</sup>As they go, I will cast my net over them; I will bring them down like birds of the air; I will discipline them according to the report of their wickedness.**

**<sup>13</sup>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.**

**<sup>14</sup>They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; they gash themselves for grain and wine; they rebel against me.**

**<sup>15</sup>It was I who trained and strengthened their arms, yet they plot evil against me.**

**<sup>16</sup>They turn to that which does not profit; they have become like a defective bow; their officials shall fall by the sword because of the rage of their tongue. So much for their babbling in the land of Egypt.**

