

ISRAEL IS REJECTED

HOSEA 8:1 – 9:9

Samaria is rejected

¹Set the trumpet to your lips! One like a vulture is over the house of YHWH, because they have broken my covenant, and rebelled against my law.

²Israel cries to me, "My God, we—Israel—know you!" ³Israel rejects the good; the enemy shall pursue him.

⁴They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

⁵Your calf is rejected, O Samaria. My anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? ⁶They are from Israel!

An artisan made it; it is not God. The calf of Samaria will be broken to pieces.

⁷Indeed, they sow the wind, they shall reap the whirlwind.

The standing grain has no heads, it shall yield no meal; if it were to yield, foreigners would devour it.

The agitated summons in verse 1 echoes that of 5:8, except now the focus is entirely on the 'vulture', Assyria. Skirmishes with Judah are no longer the concern. The historical setting for chapter 8 is the same as for the previous section (5:8 - 7:16): the massive invasion of 733. The 'house of YHWH' refers to the land (YHWH's land, 2:8). Hosea immediately names the cause of the catastrophe: 'they have broken my covenant (see 6:7) and rebelled against my law' (verse 1; see 4:6). Salvation for Israel can come only from YHWH, and so through being faithful to the covenant.

Cries to YHWH in the cult (verse 2; see 6:1-3) are of no use when, at the same time, 'Israel rejects the good' (verse 3). In rejecting what is good Israel forfeits the blessings that come only from YHWH.

The looming catastrophe will not be avoided by revolution that assassinates one king, Pekah, and replaces him by another, Hoshea (verse 4; see 7:3-7). Not only do they make their own kings without regard to YHWH's will, they make their own gods!

The calf of Samaria (the idol set up in the royal sanctuary of Bethel, 1Kings 12:29) is highlighted because the second calf, that of Dan, has already been lost with the occupation of Galilee by the Assyrian army. Though, like the golden calf of the wilderness journey, it was worshipped in the cult as a god (see Exodus 32:4,8; 1Kings 12:28), Hosea declares that it is made by a craftsman: 'it is not God' (verse 6).

Verses 5-6 speak of YHWH's 'anger', but also, in a way that is typical of Hosea, of his profound sorrow: 'how long will they be incapable of innocence?' 'They are from Israel!' not from Canaan. Why are they behaving like this?

The calf of Samaria (the object of cult in the royal sanctuary of Bethel) will be broken to pieces (verse 6; see Deuteronomy 12:2-5)).

The results of their behaviour are about to sweep them away. The crop has withered. If it produces anything it will be enjoyed by foreigners, not by Israel (verse 7).

Already the north of Israel has been swallowed up. By ‘going up to Assyria’ (paying tribute; compare 7:11), the new king, Hoshea, has rendered Israel worthless. Its only value among the nations is as YHWH’s people, and they have forfeited that glory.

There is a pun in contrasting Ephraim (אֶפְרַיִם) with a wild ass (פֶּרֶד, pere’). Ephraim is not only playing the whore, she is paying for the privilege! YHWH will ‘gather up’ the sheaves, ready for the threshing. Verse 10 ends with a warning: the tribute that Hoshea has undertaken to pay to the king of Assyria (the ‘king of princes’) will be an insupportable burden. They won’t be able to keep it up, and so are giving Assyria a reason for further aggression.

In verse 11, Hosea returns to the hypocrisy of the cult. They think they are expiating sin, but they are adding to it.

YHWH is interested in the ‘multitude of his instructions’, not in the multitude of altars. Hosea appears to be familiar with a written form of Torah. Is this a comment on the first stages of what was to become the Book of Deuteronomy?

The ‘choice sacrifices’ mentioned in verse 13 are the communion sacrifices in which part of the animal was burnt in sacrifice and the rest was shared in a meal that was celebrated as a communion with God. YHWH will not accept them. They must face judgment, and ‘return to Egypt’ – a powerful symbol for a returning to slavery and a complete undoing of the history of salvation that began when YHWH liberated them from Egypt.

Not for the first time Hosea accuses Israel of forgetting their God (see 2:13; 4:6; also Deuteronomy 6:12). Foolishly Israel sought security in its palaces. Hosea sees Judah being caught up in the catastrophe. On the fortified cities of Judah compare Amos 2:5.

⁸Israel is swallowed up; now they are among the nations as a useless vessel. ⁹For they have gone up to Assyria.

A wild ass wanders alone; Ephraim has bargained for lovers. ¹⁰Though they bargain with the nations, I will now gather them up. They shall soon writhe under the burden of the king of princes.

¹¹Indeed Ephraim multiplied altars to expiate sin, they became to him altars for sinning.

¹²Though I write for him the multitude of my instructions, they are regarded as something alien.

¹³Though they offer choice sacrifices, though they eat flesh, YHWH does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity, and punish their sins; they will return to Egypt.

¹⁴Israel has forgotten his Maker, and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied fortified cities; but I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour his strongholds.

The folly of festivity

^{9:1}Do not rejoice, O Israel! Do not exult as other nations do; for you have played the whore, departing from your God. You have loved a prostitute's pay on every threshing floor.

²Threshing floor and oil press shall not feed them, and the new wine shall fail them. ³They shall not remain in the land of YHWH; but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and in Assyria they shall eat unclean food. ⁴They shall not pour drink offerings of wine to YHWH, and their sacrifices shall not please him. Such sacrifices shall be like mourners' bread; all who eat of it shall be defiled; for their bread shall be for their hunger only; it shall not come to the house of YHWH.

⁵What will you do on the day of appointed festival, and on the day of the festival of YHWH?

⁶For even if they escape destruction, Egypt shall gather them, Memphis shall bury them. Nettles shall possess their precious things of silver; thorns shall be in their tents.

⁷The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come; Israel cries, "The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad!" Because of your great iniquity, the hostility is great.

⁸The prophet is a sentinel for my God over Ephraim, yet a fowler's snare is on all his ways, and hostility in the house of his God.

⁹They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah; he will remember their iniquity, he will punish their sins.

The Assyrian army has left the highlands untouched, and, in spite of the dire threats coming from Hosea, the harvest, apparently, has been good. Relieved, the people are enjoying the festivities on the threshing floor. Hosea interrupts the riotous celebration. 'Playing the whore' may refer to worship of Baal. It may imply carefree sexual indulgence.

In verses 2-4 there is a shift from direct speech to speaking of 'them'. Is Hosea speaking to the organisers about the people? The harvest will prove deceptive, because those who are rejoicing now will undergo forced exile. They will 'return to Egypt'(verse 3; see 8:13), and be exiled in Assyria. Foreigners will enjoy the harvest, not they (see 8:7). The festivity witnessed by Hosea has nothing to do with YHWH. The people are satisfying themselves (verse 4).

Once more Hosea directly addresses the people. In exile they will not be able to celebrate 'the festival of YHWH'(verse 5; see Judges 21:19). Even if some of them escape the approaching catastrophe by fleeing to Egypt, they will be going to their death (verse 6).

The people respond by attacking Hosea. Is this the last time he is able to speak in public? He retaliates by declaring that the approaching doom is divine 'punishment' for crimes of their own making. Their 'hostility' towards Hosea is further evidence of their 'iniquity'(verse 7). Hosea defends his role as God's sentinel. He must warn the people. Yet he is confronted with hostility wherever he goes in YHWH's land ('the house of God'; see 8:1).

Mention of 'Gibeah' recalls the horrible treatment of the Levite recorded in Judges 19-21. Things are no better now, says Hosea. God cannot let their iniquity go unpunished.