

**ISRAEL'S FINAL YEARS
YHWH'S FAITHFUL LOVE**

HOSEA 12-14

^{11:12}Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit; but Judah still walks with God, and is faithful to the Holy One.

^{12:1}Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence. They make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.

²YHWH has an indictment against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways, and repay him according to his deeds. ³In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God, ⁴who proved himself lord and prevailed. He wept and sought his favour. He (God) met him (Jacob) at Bethel, and there he speaks with him.

⁵YHWH the God of hosts, YHWH is his name! ⁶But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to covenant love and just judgments, and wait continually upon your God.

The English verse numbering follows the Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew, followed by the Greek, numbers the opening verse here as 12:1 – which makes the English 12:1-14 the equivalent of the Hebrew 12:2-15.

Verse 11:12 is best understood as a complaint uttered by Hosea. The second part of the verse may be a later gloss from a scribe of Judah, or it may be that, having lost all hope for a conversion in Israel, Hosea is looking south to find fidelity.

The bulk of verse 1 (verse 2 in Hebrew) speaks of Ephraim's attempts to do anything Assyria ('the east wind') wants (see 2Kings 17:3). The last clause reveals attempts to get Egypt on side. This suggests the situation in the early years of Shalmaneser V, whose reign began in 727.

It is possible that 'Judah' in verse 2 was a later update. Hosea was more likely to have spoken of Israel in this context. In verse 3 Hosea reflects on the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau, which describes Jacob (the second twin) as emerging from the womb holding Esau's heel (Genesis 25:26). Hosea reads this as an attempt by Jacob to supplant his brother (something he eventually succeeded in doing).

He then draws on the story of Jacob's wrestling with God in his attempt to cross the Jabbok River and enter the Promised Land (Genesis 32:22-32). In Hosea's version the angel (manifestation of God) prevailed. In this context Hosea goes on to speak of the original purpose of the sanctuary at Bethel (see Genesis 28:10-32). He is also making the point that Israel should, like Jacob, submit to YHWH and should 'weep and seek God's favour' (verse 4; see Genesis 32:26).

After what appears to be a later insertion (verse 5), we have a plea from Hosea in verse 6 that Ephraim would 'return to your God, hold fast to covenant love (*hesed*) and just judgments (*mišpat*) and wait continually upon your God'.

Hosea's plea in verse 6 is made against the background of Israel's lack of justice and oppression of the poor (verse 7; compare 3:2). Because of the reputation Canaan had for itinerant merchants, 'Canaan' came to mean 'trader'. Hosea uses it here of Ephraim, which has taken on so much of the culture of Canaan. Ephraim denies any accusation of injustice (verse 8) and claims to be self-reliant (see Deuteronomy 8:12-17).

YHWH counters by reminding Israel that he is the God who redeemed them from oppression in Egypt. He expects them to join him in redeeming from oppression. Because they persist in oppressing the poor YHWH will remove them from the land. They will find themselves back in a wilderness, living in tents (verse 9) as they were when YHWH encountered them (compare 9:17).

Israel's guilt is reinforced by the fact that YHWH has constantly communicated his will to them through the prophets, to whom they obstinately refused to listen. YHWH is still speaking to them (notably through Hosea). They continue to ignore his warnings.

Once again the sacrificial system is criticised. It fails to meet the requirements of verse 5. Gilead is mentioned again (see 6:8), as is Gilgal (see 4:15; 9:15). Through their rejection of the word of God spoken through the prophet, the people have fallen prey to the deceitfulness of the pagan cult, as well as injustice in their commercial dealings (see verses 7-8; Deuteronomy 25:13-15). Their altars will be shattered (see 10:8).

Again (see verses 2-4) Hosea draws on the legends attached to Jacob (see Genesis 29:15-30). Hosea stresses two aspects of the story that he sees as relevant to what Israel is doing. Firstly, Jacob left YHWH's land and fled to Aram (seeking help from a foreign power). Secondly he did it 'for a wife'. We are back with the metaphor of YHWH's unfaithful spouse. The prophet of verse 13 is Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15-16). Hosea is carrying on this tradition. Verse 14 stresses, once again, the certainty of YHWH's impending judgment.

⁷Canaan, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress. ⁸But Ephraim says, "Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself; in all of my gain no offense has been found in me that would be sin."

⁸But I am YHWH your God from the land of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of meeting.

¹⁰I spoke to the prophets; it was I who multiplied visions, and through the prophets I will proclaim destruction.

¹¹In Gilead there is iniquity, they shall surely come to nothing. In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls, so their altars shall be like stone heaps on the furrows of the field.

¹²Jacob fled to the land of Aram, there Israel became a servant for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep.

¹³By a prophet YHWH brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was tended.

¹⁴Ephraim has given bitter offense, so his Lord will bring his crimes down on him and pay him back for his insults.

Rebellion leads to destruction

¹When Ephraim spoke, there was trembling; he was exalted in Israel; but he incurred guilt with the Baal and died. ²And now they keep on sinning and make a cast image for themselves, idols of silver made according to their understanding, all of them the work of artisans. "Sacrifice to these," they say. People are kissing calves! ³Therefore they shall be like the morning mist or like the dew that goes away early, like chaff that swirls from the threshing floor or like smoke from a window.

⁴Yet I have been YHWH your God ever since the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour. ⁵It was I who fed you in the wilderness, in the land of drought. ⁶When I fed them, they were satisfied; they were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me.

⁷So I became like a lion to them, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. ⁸I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild animal would mangle them.

⁹I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you?

Verse 1 remembers the time when Ephraim (which includes the royal city, Samaria) was the dominant power in the northern and southern kingdoms. The expression 'he died', and a number of other allusions in chapter 13, suggest a time after Hoshea had been taken captive by Shalmaneser V, and perhaps even after the beginning of the siege of Samaria. This suggests the year 724 for this oracle, at the end of Hosea's prophetic ministry.

Terrified, the people are making more and more statues of Baal which they kiss for protection (see 1Kings 19:18). As verse 3 insists, this does not prolong life (compare 6:4).

In verse 4 YHWH proclaims that he is Ephraim's only God and saviour. Israel is reminded of YHWH's care for them in the long wilderness journey (compare Deuteronomy 8:11-20; 6:12-19). Instead of relying on YHWH, however, they grew proud and forgot him (verse 6).

The picture painted in verses 7-8 is the most gruesome yet in declaring the inevitability of the fate awaiting Ephraim.

The Hebrew Bible shows two reactions to kingship. One sees it as YHWH's response to the people's request. The other is more critical, and sees kingship as a rejection of the lordship of YHWH (see 1Samuel 10:27; Judges 9). Hosea seems to be aligning himself with the second view (compare Deuteronomy 17:14-20). It is likely that the king whom YHWH 'took away in my wrath' (verse 11) is Hoshea, taken into captivity by Shalmaneser (see 2Kings 17:4).

Ephraim's iniquity is like documents that are 'bound up' for presentation as evidence in a court of law. It is too late now to have anything removed. God's judgment, likened here to the pangs of childbirth, is imminent. However Ephraim is too stupid to come forth from the womb. The pangs will not issue in life (verse 13).

The womb that was to give birth is a tomb from which there is no redemption. YHWH appears to be calling on Assyria, called here 'Death' and 'Sheol' (the underworld land of the dead), to do its worst. The time for 'compassion' is over. YHWH is handing Ephraim over to the death-dealing power ('plagues' and 'scourges') of Assyria.

In 725 King Hoshea had turned towards Egypt. This seemed to bring hope as Ephraim 'flourished among the reeds' (verse 15). However YHWH is behind the 'east wind' (Assyria) which is drying up all sources of life in Ephraim.

Hosea speaks now precisely of Samaria. This carries a special power if the three-year siege (see 2Kings 17:5) has already begun.

Verse 16 is numbered 14:1 in the Hebrew and in the Greek Version.

¹⁰Where now is your king, that he may save you? Where in all your cities are your rulers, of whom you said, "Give me a king and rulers"? ¹¹I gave you a king in my anger, and I took him away in my wrath.

¹²Ephraim's iniquity is bound up; his sin is kept in store. ¹³The pangs of childbirth come for him, but he is an unwise son; for at the proper time he does not present himself at the mouth of the womb.

¹⁴Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where are your scourges?

Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

¹⁵Indeed, though he may flourish among rushes, the east wind comes, a blast from YHWH, rising from the wilderness. His fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched. It shall strip his treasury of every precious thing.

¹⁶Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.

14:1Return, O Israel, to YHWH your God. For you have stumbled because of your iniquity.

2Take words with you and return to YHWH; say to him, "Will you not take away guilt? Accept the word. We offer the fruit of our lips. **3**Assyria will not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will no longer say 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy."

4I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.

5I will be as dew to Israel. He will blossom like the lily, strike root like the forests of Lebanon. **6**His shoots will spread out; his beauty will be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon. **7**They will again live beneath my shade, they will flourish as a garden; they will blossom like the vine, their fragrance will be like the wine of Lebanon.

8O Ephraim, what have you to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; your fruit comes from me.

9Who is so wise as to understand these things? so discerning as to know them? Indeed, the ways of YHWH are right. The upright walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.

The Hebrew (and Greek) verse numbering of this passage is 14:2-10.

Hosea has faithfully carried out his prophetic mission. His warnings have fallen on deaf ears. We have heard him grieving, and through his grieving we have heard YHWH lamenting. Since as a prophet Hosea's focus is primarily on YHWH, it is fitting that, when there is clearly no hope, he speaks of the unfailing love of YHWH.

Verse 1 announces the possibility of 'returning to YHWH'(compare 3:5). The fall of Ephraim is not because the Assyrian gods are more powerful than YHWH. It has come about as a result of their 'iniquity'. Returning is possible, because it is YHWH's will. When they open their lips in praise and in sorrow it must be to YHWH not to the false gods who have been unable to save them (verse 2). Nor must they look to Assyria or rely on their own military power(verse 3). Their condition is as pitiable as that of an orphan. They must remember that in YHWH 'the orphan finds mercy'(verse 3; see Deuteronomy 10:18).

They have turned away from YHWH. But YHWH's love is unconditional. They are suffering the consequences of their sin (consequences named as YHWH's 'anger'). YHWH assures them that now there will be only love for them (verse 4). The beautiful images of verses 6-7 are in sharp contrast to earlier images of lion, leopard and bear (see 5:14; 13:7-8).

In the new life that will come from Ephraim's communion with YHWH there will be no place for idols (see 4:17; 8:4; 13:2). YHWH promises to look after them constantly. He is for them the tree of life.

Verse 9 is a question asked and a response given by those responsible for this conclusion to the final edition of Hosea's words. They are offering this scroll for the edification of their contemporaries who will be wise if they learn from the mistakes of their forebears and heed the words of YHWH, spoken through his prophet, Hosea.