

Hosea 4:1-3

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Hosea summons the Israelites to hear the LORD's indictment against them because they have abandoned their covenant God and given themselves to apostasy.

After speaking about Israel's redemption that will take place "in the last days" (Hosea 3:5), Hosea went back to his own days, the current time when the northern kingdom of Israel was committing spiritual adultery against the LORD their God. The prophet began with a call to attention, saying, *listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel*. The verb *to listen* is "shema" in Hebrew. It can also be translated as "to hear" (Deuteronomy 6:1). The verb means more than "to listen." It means to listen or to hear with a willingness to obey what is said (James 1:22). The prophet Hosea used the verb to invite Israel to stop for a moment and pay close attention to the *word* or the revelation he was about to deliver to them. That *word* came from *the LORD*, Israel's Suzerain (ruler) God.

The rationale for Hosea's call to attention was because *the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land*. The noun translated as *case* literally means "charge," "contention," or "conflict." Hosea used the term to call upon *the sons of Israel* (perhaps a remnant) to hear God's quarrel *against the inhabitants of the land*. God's charge against the Israelites recalls the reason why He commissioned Hosea to speak to the people in the first place: "For the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the LORD" (Hosea 1:2).

This *case against* the inhabitants of Israel can be viewed as a lawsuit. Israel entered into a covenant or contract with God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:8). The Israelites agreed to abide by the terms of the contract. They were now in breach of that contract. God is laying out the terms of the breach of their agreement. The agreement contained adverse consequences for violating the terms of the agreement, called "cursings" (Deuteronomy 28:15). A curse is simply wishing upon someone an adverse consequence (may this bad thing occur to you.).

The idea was "If you breach this agreement, may these things come to pass." In God's case, He is the Lord of all, and can (and will) cause them to come to pass. But His preference is that Israel repent, and return to the ways of His covenant, which is nothing less than a list of behaviors that are for their good and that lead to their flourishing (Deuteronomy 10:13). If they treat one another with good will and cooperation, their communities will prosper. But instead, they are treating one another in an exploitative manner.

In this passage, the reason given for God's charge *against the inhabitants of the land* was specifically *because there was no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land*.

Three important qualities were lacking in Israel in Hosea's days. The lack of these positive qualities shows how harlotry had enticed Israel away from her basic covenantal agreements and responsibilities. The lack of these three qualities had led to an indulgent society where the strong exploited the weak, and justice was for sale.

The first quality lacking in Israel was *faithfulness*, which translates the Hebrew word “‘ēmet.” The term means “trust,” “trustworthiness,” or “firmness,” and is often used to describe a person with integrity (Exodus 18:21; Nehemiah 7:2). Thus, the absence of *faithfulness* in the *land* was a lack of integrity demonstrated in both words and deeds. This resulted in infidelity, lies, and deception. In this covenant, Israel had agreed to tell the truth to one another, and act toward one another in good faith (Exodus 19:8, 20:16-17). God was giving Israel notice and opportunity to cure their breach of contract, because they were not dealing with one another in *faithfulness*. This will lead to violence and bloodshed (Hosea 4:2).

The second quality that was missing in *the land* was *kindness*. The Hebrew term for *kindness* here is “ḥesed.” This term can denote (1) the love of God for His covenant people, as in Psalm 103:8, (2) the love of man to God as in Hosea 6:4, and (3) brotherly love. The context suggests the last option. God’s point is that the Israelites did not show loyalty and love to their neighbors. As Jesus stated, the covenant law between God and Israel could be summed up in two statements: Love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. Israel was doing neither, which meant they were in gross violation of their agreement with God. Again, this internal lack of goodness would lead to violence and bloodshed (Hosea 4:2).

The third quality that was absent *in the land* was *the knowledge of God*. Knowing God entails more than knowing His requirements. It entails living by His precepts and pleasing Him in every regard. Knowing God is seeking to have a deeper relationship with Him, to care for what He cares. Knowing God is having an intimacy with Him and acknowledging Him as Lord in our lives. This is the foundation for keeping God’s covenant law. As God commanded centuries earlier when Israel was preparing to enter the Promised Land:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”
(Deuteronomy 6:5)

The previous verse in Deuteronomy also begins with “shema” as in Hosea 4:1. Just as God says to Israel through Hosea *listen to the word of the LORD* (vv. 1), He said through Moses, “Hear, O Israel!” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The Israelites failed to acknowledge the authority of the LORD as their Suzerain (or Ruler) God. They did not know Him or His commands. Instead they followed the pagan god Baal and attributed God’s gifts to him (Hosea 2:8).

The body of teaching, through His covenant law, that God gave to His covenant people was completely ignored. Thus, instead of seeking to know God’s will, and practicing faithfulness and kindness toward one another, the Israelites exhibited bad characteristics that their God detests: *swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery*. Israel had abandoned God’s ways, ways that lead to a society based on mutual respect, love, and service toward one another. Israel instead chose the pagan path of sensual indulgence and exploitation of others.

A society in which there is no faithfulness, kindness, or knowledge of God is expected to fall into all types of sins, including those that Hosea lists.

Looking at Hosea's list of violations, it is evident that the Israelites directly violated at least five of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:1-17 or Deuteronomy 5:6-21. The point of God's covenant was for Israel to be self-governing, and care for and support one another. Just the opposite was occurring. Therefore, Israel had fully breached her contract with its Suzerain Ruler, Yahweh God:

1. The first violation in Hosea's list is *swearing*. *Swearing* has to do with someone uttering an oath to curse someone else if they don't do a certain thing (1 Samuel 14:24; Job 31:30). This displays an attitude that others are objects to be controlled and extracted from. This violates the spirit of the Ten Commandments, particularly the last command to not envy, which is an attitude that "others are for me to exploit" (Exodus 20:19). This breaks the entire notion of God's covenant law with Israel, which would lead them to view their fellow Israelites as having equal value to themselves (Leviticus 19:18).
2. The second violation is *deception*. It relates to the Ninth Commandment, which prohibits bearing false witness against another (Exodus 20:16). The term *deception* has to do with denying or disavowing something (Genesis 18:15). It includes lying deception, as when someone tries to cheat his/her neighbor. False testimony is prohibited in the Bible because it disrespects the dignity of another person, and can lead to their harm. It deprives one of what belongs to him (Deuteronomy 5:20; Matthew 19:16-18). *Deception* is manipulating others to achieve whatever end you have decided for yourself. This now moves from wishing harm to doing harm. There is direct exploitation being perpetrated.
3. The third violation that was widespread in Hosea's day was *murder*, a violation of the Sixth Commandment (Deuteronomy 5:17). *Murder* is at the center of this list, likely because it is a chiasmic list, where the main point is at the center, indicating that *murder* is the pinnacle of abusive behaviors toward others. *Murder* is the natural culmination of a chosen perspective that "I have a right to exploit others." In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the point that murder begins in the heart, with anger toward a brother (Matthew 5:21-26).
4. The fourth violation listed by Hosea is *stealing*, the act of taking someone's goods and possessions, with or without the owner's knowledge (Genesis 31:30; Leviticus 19:11). This is a violation of the Eighth Commandment. The Suzerain (Ruler) God wanted His vassals to be satisfied with what He had given them, commanding them not to steal someone else's belongings. But in Hosea's day, the people of Israel only seemed to care about things that satisfied their own appetites. *Stealing* follows naturally from the attitudes of *swearing* and *deception*.
5. The last violation is *adultery*, the Seventh Commandment. Adultery in Old Testament times had to do with sexual intercourse of a man and a married woman that was not his wife, according to Leviticus 20:10 and Ezekiel 16:32. God's intention for marriage was and is always that a man be joined to his wife so that the two might become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-5). Each man is called to show respect for another man's wife because marriage is a sacred act. As Jesus declared, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6). When men fail to respect God's design for marriage, they violate God's commandment. *Adultery* also follows naturally from exploitative attitudes; it involves destroying a marriage and wrecking a family in order to extract sensual pleasure for oneself.

These violations were prevalent in Hosea's days. In fact, the prophet continued to say that the Israelites were so wicked that they *employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed*. The verb translated *employ* means to break the boundaries that God had established. The word for bloodshed here is plural, suggesting abundant bloodshed that consistently flows. That means the people of God persisted in committing crime after crime. There was no fear of the LORD in the land. Injustice and unrighteousness reigned. It seems the people were completely ignoring the covenant agreement they had entered into with their divine ruler, Yahweh God (Exodus 19:8).

Therefore, as a consequence of the violations of vv. 1–2, God implemented the covenant provisions for disobedience, including drought, a prolonged period of low rainfall, causing a shortage of water (Deuteronomy 28:24). As the text says, *The land mourns, and everyone who lives in it languishes along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, and also the fish of the sea disappear*.

The word for *mourns* is a funeral term. Because of the absence of truth, faithfulness, and the knowledge of God, the land of Israel would experience death (separation). The connections that create mutual benefit will be severed. Circumstances will be so dire that *everyone who lives in the land languishes*. Not only the humans, but also the *beasts* and *birds*. This would indicate a lack of food supplies all around.

The land of Israel would become miserable; it would become dry and would be unable to support its living creatures. The people of the land would fade away along with the animals and the *birds*. Even the *fish of the sea* would die as a result of God's judgment. The entire life-producing structure of the earth would collapse because of the disobedience of its inhabitants. The entire creation would thus suffer from the wrath of the LORD in Israel.

It is noteworthy to say that this curse of drought was clearly outlined in the book of Deuteronomy as a consequence Israel would choose if they decided to break their agreement to keep God's laws (Exodus 19:8). Moses said to the people that disobedience to God's covenantal laws would bring drought on their land: "The Lord will make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed" (Deuteronomy 28:24). The Israelites did not listen to God's instructions, so they fell under His judgment.

This passage makes a distinction between what was going on in Israel in Hosea's days and what the LORD expected from His covenant people. The people were breaking their covenantal agreement with God to honor Him and love their neighbors. They indulged in swearing, deception, murder, stealing, and adultery. The Suzerain (ruler) God expected complete obedience from His vassals, His servants. They had agreed to listen to God's word, and follow His ways. God sought for His people to live in an integrity that demonstrated loyalty to God and to one another, in both words and deeds.

God desired a people that thrived and dwelt in the knowledge of God and His word. It is such an obedient life that leads to intimacy with God, which is a direct path to our greatest flourishing (John 17:3). Sadly, rather than choosing the road of obedience that led to life, the people chose the road of disobedience that led to death (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Biblical Text

**¹Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel,
For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land,
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness
Or knowledge of God in the land.**

**²*There is* swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery.
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.**

**³Therefore the land mourns,
And everyone who lives in it languishes
Along with the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky,
And also the fish of the sea disappear.**