

Hosea 4:11-14

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hos/hos-4/hosea-411-14/>

The LORD describes in great detail Israel's involvement in the Canaanite fertility rites of Baal worship. He threatens to judge them accordingly.

Having confronted the priests for their failure to keep the laws and for being irresponsible in their priestly duties (vv. 4-10), the LORD turned His attention to the people of Israel and described their engagement in the pagan fertility rites. The people stood guilty for following their apostate and fleshly leaders.

Speaking about the Israelites, the LORD stated, *Harlotry, wine and new wine take away the understanding*. The word for *understanding* is literally “heart”; it describes the seat of intellect, including intent (Genesis 20:5) and thoughtful consideration (Deuteronomy 4:20, 39). Taken together, the verse means that debauchery occupied Israel's mind. It became her passion and destroyed her spiritual commitment to God. The people of Israel became insensitive to God and His laws as they gave themselves to *harlotry, wine and new wine*.

This approach goes together with the materialistic mentality described in the prior section, “they will eat, but not have enough” (Hosea 4:10). When someone chooses a perspective that happiness is found in the pursuit of fulfilling appetites, they put themselves on a hamster wheel of futility. No matter how much pleasure is gained, the only possible satisfaction lies in having “more.”

There is never enough of *harlotry* or *wine* to satisfy when such things are sought as a means of happiness. No one ever says, “That was all I needed, I will never need more” if they give themselves to pursue happiness through sensuality. This pursuit of the flesh instead leads to a loss of being able to think straight. It leads to a lack of *understanding*.

This same idea is found in the New Testament, in the book of Romans. There, Paul states that God's wrath is poured out on unrighteousness by giving people over to their own desires (Romans 1:24,26,28). The end of that progression is a “depraved mind” (Romans 1:28).

Israel's insensitivity to God's laws also caused her to fall into the sin of divination. God made it clear when He said, *My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand informs them*. The word translated as *wooden idol* is literally “tree.” It was a common cultic practice in Canaan to place the shrines (religious objects) on hills and under green *trees* (Deuteronomy 12:2). The Israelites copied this practice later during their times of apostasy (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 16:4).

Generally speaking, adherence to idol worship went along with adopting the morality of the pagan religion. Rather than embracing the “love your neighbor as yourself” standard of their covenant with Yahweh God, paganism provided moral justification for sexual immorality and exploitation of their neighbor. The ultimate exploitation endorsed by pagan religions was child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21).

The second part of the sentence that begins with *My people consult their wooden idol* tells us that God's people used *their diviner's wand* ("stick" or "rod) to seek or ascertain the will of the gods. This method of divination involves drawing a circle on the ground and dividing it into several sections. Then, an answer would be assigned to each section and a stick would be placed upright in the middle of the circle. As the stick is released, it would supposedly fall into the section of the circle that represented the god's answer.

The Israelites had fallen so low *because a spirit of harlotry has led them astray*. The spirit of harlotry acted like a powerful wind, which causes severe damage when blowing with great intensity and pressure. That *spirit of harlotry* dragged the Israelites away from God, *and they have played the harlot, departing from their God*. Thus, instead of trusting God to provide answers to their questions and problems, they turned to idolatry. They fell into the sin of divination because of their lack of faith in the true and living God.

Besides falling into the sin of divination, the Israelites engaged in cultic prostitution, a practice they also copied from the Canaanites. Such activities took place *on the tops of the mountains and on the hills*. These high places and mountaintops were long associated with divine worship (1 Samuel 9:12). These places were designed to serve as centers to worship the true God, but later became the epicenter of Israel's idolatry. The idolatrous worship included practices of sexual immorality, and in some instances, child sacrifice. The Israelites *offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountain and burn incense on the hills*, indicating that they are indulging in pagan worship practices.

These cultic centers were populated by *oak, poplar and terebinth* trees. These were three types of trees which provided good or *pleasant shade* for the ancient Israelites. The people thought they could promote fertility in the land by performing such rituals, but they were wrong. Yahweh, not Baal, is the sole creator and sustainer of everything (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 33:6). He is "the Maker of all" (Jeremiah 10:16).

Israel failed to understand this truth. She gave herself to idolatry as she sought satisfaction in the Canaanite gods. In Hosea's day, corruption was rampant and was passed on from the older generation to the younger. As a result of the wicked lifestyle of the fathers, their *daughters played the harlot and their brides committed adultery*. That means, young women of Israel engaged in sexual rites; they engaged in illicit sexual intercourse as a part of the cultic practices.

However, the women were not the only participants in this cultic prostitution. In fact, their actions only showed the corruption of the society because the elders were doing the same thing. God made this plain when He stated, *I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot or your brides when they commit adultery*. This statement does not mean that the daughters were not wrong in their sinful actions. Rather, it likely means that they were being exploited by those who ought to have been caring for and protecting them. The fathers and husbands should have protected them, but *the men themselves go apart with harlots and offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes*. The men led the women into these corrupt practices for their own pleasure.

The *daughters and brides* engaged in sexual intercourse with male cult prostitutes with the intent of promoting fertility. The men who were supposed to lead their families in all truth went apart

with harlots and offered *sacrifices* with temple prostitutes. Hence, all levels of family life were corrupt. The nation was headed for destruction. As the LORD said, *The people without understanding are ruined*. Lack of knowledge and lack of wisdom always lead to destruction.

The northern kingdom of Israel was about to be destroyed because the people rejected the knowledge of God, and had broken their covenant agreement with their Suzerain Ruler, and spiritual Husband, Yahweh (I AM).

Biblical Text

¹¹ Harlotry, wine and new wine take away the understanding.

¹² My people consult their wooden idol, and their *diviner's* wand informs them;

For a spirit of harlotry has led *them* astray,

And they have played the harlot, *departing* from their God.

¹³ They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains

And burn incense on the hills,

Under oak, poplar and terebinth,

Because their shade is pleasant.

Therefore your daughters play the harlot

And your brides commit adultery.

¹⁴ I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot

Or your brides when they commit adultery,

For *the men* themselves go apart with harlots

And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes;

So the people without understanding are ruined.