

Hosea 4:15-19

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In the midst of leveling additional accusations against Israel for playing the harlot by following pagan ways that violate their covenant with God, the LORD through Hosea warned Judah not to follow Israel because she is headed to destruction.

The prophet Hosea briefly interrupted the flow of his accusation against Israel to warn Judah not to imitate Israel's bad example of physical and spiritual harlotry. At this point in history, Judah and Israel were separate kingdoms, having split after King Solomon's death (1 Kings 12:16-17). God sent prophets to both kingdoms, as they both inherited the covenant Israel had entered into (Exodus 19:8).

Hosea employed three negative commands to insert the interluding message to Judah. In the first, he said, *Though you, Israel, play the harlot, do not let Judah become guilty*. Judah was urged to stay away from Israel's idolatry in order not to be contaminated by her. Choices have consequences. Moral choices engage the cause-effect relationships God created just as certainly as physical choices engage the laws of nature. If Judah follows Israel in abandoning the self-governing ethic of love-your-neighbor and instead follows the pagan ways of exploitation and indulgence, then it will incur the same adverse effects as Israel. (Historically, Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC, while Judah did not fall until 586 BC).

In the second command, Hosea stated, *do not go to Gilgal or go up to Beth-aven*. The place named *Gilgal* was located near Jericho. ([See Map](#)) It was the first place where the Israelites encamped in Canaan after crossing the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19). It was there that Joshua set up the twelve stones taken from Jordan after crossing over into the land of Canaan (Joshua 4:19).

The term *Beth-aven* means "house of vanity" or "house of iniquity." It is a derogatory name used by the prophet to refer to Bethel, a term that means "house of god." Abraham camped near Bethel when he first entered Canaan (Genesis 12:8). Therefore the name likely referred to pagan gods. Hosea disparaged the Israelite shrine at Bethel because it was associated with the golden calf made by Jeroboam I of Israel (1 Kings 12:28-33). Bethel was a religious site located about ten miles north of Jerusalem. It had been a center for cultic activity since the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:8; Amos 5:5). It later became a major pagan shrine in Israel.

In the third command inserting Judah into Hosea's warning against Israel, Hosea asked the people of Judah not to *take the oath: As the LORD lives!* In Bible times, taking an oath had to do with someone swearing before a deity to declare his intentions to do something or to refrain from doing it (Genesis 14:22; 21:23). Hosea warned Judah against following Israel's bad example, of making oaths based on the pagan gods (Amos 8:14). It could also be that Hosea is warning Judah not to take an oath to Yahweh God, because they are not sincere. Scripture warns against making oaths, then not keeping them (Deuteronomy 23:23).

Since Israel had no intention of returning to their Suzerain God, Hosea urged Judah to stay away from them. To demonstrate how Israel had become corrupt, Hosea compared her to a *stubborn heifer*, a young cow. The word *stubborn* demonstrates Israel's unwillingness to return to the LORD. She was acting *like a stubborn heifer that willfully resists her master's orders*. As a result, *the LORD* would not *pasture* the people of Israel *like a lamb in a large field*. The comparison is clear: a *lamb* is dependent and harmless, but a *heifer* is headstrong and rebellious. Israel was being like the *heifer*. The LORD required obedience from His people. In order for them to experience the blessings of His covenant, they had to walk in the ways of the covenant—commands summed up as “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39-40). God wants His people to depend on Him, and walk in the shadow of His protection by walking in His ways. He is the Good Shepherd who can make them “lie down in green pastures” (Psalm 23).

So, because the people would not submit to His direction, the LORD would not *pasture* Israel, because she behaved *like a heifer*. God, of course, had the power to impose on Israel and force them to follow His ways. But in a great mystery beyond our comprehension, God has left it to humans to choose their own path; make their own decisions. It seems that God's desire is to fill the earth with love, and real love must be chosen.

Hosea continued his attack against Israel and declared, *Ephraim is joined to idols*. Throughout the Old Testament, the tribe of *Ephraim* is used to represent the northern kingdom of Israel because it was the leading tribe in those days (Hosea 11:1, 3). Since *Ephraim* was *joined to idols*, Hosea asked Judah to *let him alone* so that he (Israel) could perish alone, and not take Judah down with him. There is no benefit in following those who are headed to disaster.

The northern kingdom of Israel was stubborn and unrepentant. *Their liquor gone, they play the harlot continually*. That is, when their *liquor* was gone, the people rejected their covenant God and committed adultery against Him by seeking help from pagan gods. They acted this way because *their rulers dearly love shame*. The behaviors being practiced by the *rulers* in Israel are, in truth, shameful. But the rulers' perspectives are so warped by sin that they are actually proud of the things that ought to bring them shame. They *dearly love* these activities. The word translated *love* includes a level of intense devotion that suggests the *rulers* might be addicted to their shameful behaviors.

The term for *rulers* is literally “shields,” a word which would normally suggest protection. Thus, instead of providing protection for the rest of the nation, the leaders only practiced shameful deeds motivated by a love and passion for indulgent sensual activities condoned by pagan gods like Baal.

Consequently, as a result of their rebelliousness, the northern kingdom of Israel would fall under God's judgment. As Hosea concluded, *The wind wraps them in its wings, and they will be ashamed because of their sacrifices*. The *wind* here is the Hebrew word “ruwach” which can equally be translated as “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit.” Since the immediate context of the use of “ruwach” here is that “ruwach” *wraps* Israel *in its wings, and they will be ashamed*, the application of “ruwach” is be connected in some way to the rulers changing their pride in their shameful acts to instead actually being *ashamed*.

Since there doesn't seem to be any immediate prospect of repentance, it looks likely that "ruwach" represents a *wind* of destruction, like a tornado. Since the *wind* wrapped *them in its wings*, this indicates that the people of Israel would soon be swept away to destruction, as violent wind might envelop everything in its path, and blow it all away. Just as a massive wind might blow away items in its path, Israel would soon be blown away in exile by Assyria.

Israel would be *ashamed* because she would be defeated and driven into exile, as was prescribed as a remedy for her breaking her covenant vows with her husband, her Suzerain Ruler, Yahweh (I AM) God (Deuteronomy 28:49,64). As set forth in the prophecy of Amos, Israel's worship was meaningless and devoid of any significance, because it was not connected with the behavior God had prescribed. The point of worship was to focus on following God's ways—for God's people to love their neighbors, and treat one another in a just manner (Amos 5:21-24). God would judge them for such hypocritical worship.

The Israelites were the covenant people of God. They were chosen to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to the LORD their God (Exodus 19:4-6). However, because the priests and the people of Hosea's days rejected God as their Suzerain (ruler), and broke the covenant into which they had entered, they would now incur the curses they had agreed to for their choice. They chose the path of death, when they could have chosen life (Deuteronomy 30:15-18).

In rejecting God's covenant, they were also rejecting Him. However, God will never reject His people. Sin deprived the Israelites of their privileged status before the LORD. It robbed them of experiencing the blessing of their inheritance. But even though they reject God, God's love will never cease toward them (Hosea 14:4).

Biblical Text

**¹⁵ Though you, Israel, play the harlot,
Do not let Judah become guilty;
Also do not go to Gilgal,
Or go up to Beth-aven
And take the oath:
"As the Lord lives!"**

**¹⁶ Since Israel is stubborn
Like a stubborn heifer,
Can the Lord now pasture them
Like a lamb in a large field?**

**¹⁷ Ephraim is joined to idols;
Let him alone.**

**¹⁸ Their liquor gone,
They play the harlot continually;
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