

# Hosea 5:1-7

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*The LORD calls the nation Israel along with her priests and king to hear His indictment because they have played the harlot, breaking their marriage covenant with Him, and then refused to return to Him.*

This chapter begins like the previous one did with a call to attention (Hosea 4:1). Both chapters begin with the verb “to hear,” which means to obey or to pay close attention to the message (Deuteronomy 6:1; Amos 5:1). The use of the verb translated *Hear* here in Hosea 5 suggests that nothing had changed since God’s last prophetic warning. The LORD had pleaded with His people, asking them to repent and turn from their evil deeds. Despite all the warnings, the Israelites refused to listen to God. They continued to be unfaithful to God and disloyal/exploitive to their neighbors (Hosea 4:1-2).

Because nothing had changed, God intensified His actions in this chapter. Instead of using one verb to call the people to *hear* His warning, God used three synonymous verbs (*hear, give heed, and listen*). These verbs served to reinforce each other, adding more weight to the truth God was about to disclose to His people.

In a succinct way, God addressed all idolaters in Israel while singling out specific groups within the nation. He declared, *Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king!*

The phrase *house of Israel* likely refers to the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 5:1). The phrase *house of the king* refers to the royal family in Israel. Although there were some righteous individuals in Israel in Hosea’s days (Amos 5:11; 8:14), the nation as a whole was guilty and deserving of God’s judgment (Hosea 1:2; 4:11-19).

But the primary responsibility of the nation’s decline appears to have been due to the failure of her leaders. The religious and political leaders who were supposed to lead in all righteousness were no better than the people. In fact, the previous chapter tells us that the priests, who were assigned to provide spiritual leadership for the people, were the ones who instead led them astray (Hosea 4:4-10).

The priests led the people astray both by omission and commission. The priests neglected their responsibility to teach the people God’s ways (Deuteronomy 33:10; Hosea 4:6). And they provided a bad example for the people to follow of their own gluttonous and self-seeking actions (Hosea 4:8). For this reason, the LORD addressed everyone—from the common people to the *priests*, and from the *priests to the king*—to hear His accusation *for the judgment applied to them* (literally, “you”).

One important feature to observe in this verse is the syntactical order in which God addressed the various groups, placing the nation Israel between the priests and the king: *Hear this, O priests!*

*Give heed, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king!* By placing the nation (*house of Israel*) between two groups of leaders (*priests* and *house of the king*) perhaps the LORD showed that the common people were the real victims because they were led astray by their leaders. While the people were held accountable for following their leaders, the emphasis of God's judgment was on the leaders because they willfully deceived the people.

That the Israelite leaders were at the forefront of God's judgment more than the common people is asserted in the latter portion of the verse: *For you have been a snare at Mizpah and a net spread out on Tabor.* A *snare* is a device used to catch or trap birds (Amos 3:5). A *net* is also a device used to trap birds. Hunters or fowlers would normally use these devices to ensnare birds or other animals (Joshua 23:13; Psalm 69:22).

Jewish tradition holds that the Israelite kings placed sentries upon these two hills in order to prevent any of their subjects from pilgrimaging to Jerusalem for the feasts. The northern kings had (inappropriately) set up their own religious system (in violation of God's command) in order to dissuade their subjects from developing a loyalty to the kings of Judah (1 Kings 12:27-28). Perhaps the *snare* and *net* was set by the rulers in Israel against their own people.

The two specific locations mentioned here are *Mizpah* and *Tabor*. *Mizpah* could refer to a town in the vicinity of Benjamin, near Jerusalem, or a mountain in, east of the Jordan across from the Galilee. It was in Gilead that Jacob and Laban made a covenant and fashioned a heap of stones to mark the boundaries between their territories (Genesis 31:43-55). ([See Map](#))

*Tabor* was a mountain at the southern limit of lower Galilee, approximately 1700 feet above sea level and 1200 feet above the plain. Perhaps two mountains are listed here because they were among the forested heights in Israel where hunters might go to set their *snare*s or *net*s. The point could be that just as hunters would go to *Mizpah* and *Tabor* to set up snares to trap animals, the leaders in Israel misled the people through bad examples and neglect of their assigned responsibility to disciple the people (Deuteronomy 33:10).

God calls the three classes—priests, people, and rulers—*revolters*. Some translations render *revolters* as “rebels.” All these had *gone deep in depravity*; literally, they had gone deep in “slaughter.” The Israelite leaders were so deeply involved in sin that they sponsored the slaughter of animals in connection with pagan or foreign cults. For this reason, God would *chastise all of them*, and His judgment would be severe.

The covenant God of Israel is all-knowing and ever-present. He is the one who searches the heart and tests the mind in order to deal with people according to their works (Jeremiah 17:10; Psalm 69:6). The Israelites, perhaps, thought that God was not aware of their sins or that He was not going to judge them since they were His covenant people.

But they would be wrong in that thinking, because God is impartial and all-knowing. God said, *I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me.* The tribe *Ephraim* is often used in Scriptures to refer to the entire northern kingdom of Israel because *Ephraim* was the leading tribe during those days (Joshua 17:15; Judges 3:27), and the capital, Samaria, was located in *Ephraim's* territory.

God said He knew *Ephraim*, meaning that He knew what the Israelites were doing. He searched the people's hearts and tested their minds. What God saw in them was simply iniquity. Their sinful deeds were as plain as day before the LORD because nothing can be hidden from Him (Psalm 139:7-12). God knew exactly what His people were doing and described their evil deeds in these terms: *For now, O Ephraim, you have played the harlot, Israel has defiled itself.*

The verb "to defile" literally means "to be unclean." It refers to that which is ritually or ceremonially impure (Leviticus 11:13-43). In Old Testament times, ritual impurity could be caused by such things as leprosy, discharges, contact with dead bodies, etc. Here in Hosea, Israel's uncleanness was due to their sinful behavior. Israel would be immersed in cultic immoral sexual practices as a part of their worship of false gods. God wanted His covenant people to consecrate themselves and remain pure. He desired that they follow His law, which required them to love and serve the best interest of their neighbors (Leviticus 19:18). Instead, they fell into the pagan practices of exploitation. As a result, Israel was filled with injustice and violence (Hosea 4:2).

God called Israel to be holy, or set apart for a special purpose, because He is holy (Leviticus 11:44). God's design for Israel was for them to be a positive example to the surrounding nations, to show them a better way to live—a way of love, service, and community, rather than exploitation and violence (Exodus 19:6). The self-governing culture of mutual respect and neighborly love would create a superior culture with great flourishing. But now Israel was being a bad example.

Israel had *defiled itself* by indulging in idolatry. They were breaking their covenant. They were failing at their assigned task. Therefore their bad witness would be removed.

Because of Israel's harlotry, sinking into pagan practices, God commissioned His prophet Hosea to preach a message of repentance to the people. Unfortunately, the Israelites had now gone too far in their idolatry. *Their deeds would not allow them to return to their God because a spirit of harlotry was within them, and they did not know the LORD.*

The *spirit of harlotry* that had led the people astray and caused them to play the harlot (4:12) now dwelt in their midst and prevented them from knowing God in a practical way. The word translated here as *spirit* is "ruach" which can also be translated as "breath" or "wind." It is used to describe God's Spirit. Instead of God's Spirit moving the people, now a spirit of harlotry possessed them. This could indicate that the people were now being led by occult/demonic powers that animate the pagan religions.

On top of this *spirit of harlotry*, Israel was filled with arrogance: *The pride of Israel testifies against him.* The Israelites depended on themselves instead of depending on the true God who had brought them into existence. Their confidence in themselves prevented them from returning to the Suzerain God. They would not listen to instruction, consider reproof, or yield to authority (Hosea 4:4). They were their own authority.

Their own arrogance served to bear witness against them: *Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity.* This was expected because the book of Proverbs states, "Pride goes before destruction,

and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Proverbs 16:18). Pride stemming from self-assurance is contrary to God’s will. Pride hinders us from seeking wisdom. It precludes listening to God.

A biblical contrast of living in pride can be found in the oft-quoted verse, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4b). Pride is faith in self, and leads us away from being aligned with God’s design for the world (ie, righteousness). In order to find our purpose and place in God’s creation, we must walk by faith, following His roadmap; we are not capable of finding it on our own.

The first part of Habakkuk 2:4 is, “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him...” The contrast with living as a “proud one” is to live righteously, to live by “faith.” To live righteously (in harmony with God’s design) is to live in “faith”—believing that God’s path is for our best (Deuteronomy 10:13; 30:19-20). To live as a “proud one” is to follow our own path, based on our own experience, apart from the direction and instruction of the One who created us, as well as the world we live in.

*Israel and Ephraim* (or the northern kingdom) were not alone in their wicked deeds and self-righteousness. The southern kingdom of *Judah also has stumbled with them*. In the previous chapter, Judah was warned not to join Israel in its sinful ways, but she apparently did not listen (Hosea 4:15). Like Israel, Judah lived in pride rather than faith, and did what was right in her own eyes, ignoring God and His covenantal precepts.

Consequently, both kingdoms would experience God’s judgment. *They would go with their flocks and herds to seek the LORD, but they would not find Him*. That might mean Israel and Judah would bring sacrifices to God as a way of seeking reconciliation with Him, but this would be done to no avail because God will have *withdrawn from them*. They had passed the window of repentance. This is a sobering warning that is a pattern repeated in scripture.

For example, after the first generation who left Egypt refused to enter the Promised Land, God declared they would die in the wilderness. When they tried to repent, God told them it was too late; they had squandered many opportunities, and now their consequence was fixed (Numbers 14:40-45). The New Testament similarly warns that for those who willingly rebel against God, their window of time to repent can close (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Finally, *the LORD* declared that His people had *dealt treacherously against Him*. To deal treacherously against God is to break faith with Him, to be disloyal or to betray Him. The Israelites failed to honor the terms of their covenant relationship with the LORD. They agreed to abide by it (Exodus 19:8). But they broke faith with Him *for they had borne illegitimate children*.

The *illegitimate children* here might be to say that they conceived their children through sexual relations with foreigners in the pagan cult. But the word translated here as *illegitimate* occurs in three other verses in Hosea, and in each case it is translated as “strangers” or “strange.” So it could refer to the consequences of following the exploitative cultic culture.

The strange *children* could be the resulting consequence of living with an exploitative perspective toward others. The *children* or consequences would include exploitive and violent

behaviors such as swearing, deception, murder, stealing, and adultery (Hosea 4:2). The outcome expected from following God's commands would be the opposite; it would be well-wishing, truth-telling, generosity, and faithfulness of one to another.

Such faithless dealings of deception and violence on the part of Israel, rather than loving their neighbors as they were commanded, would not be left unpunished: *the new moon would devour them with their land.*

The *new moon* refers to the first day of the lunar month. There were often festivals on new moons. For example, Tishri (September/October) was mandated by Moses in Leviticus 23:23-24. It was to be a joyful celebration (Numbers 10:10). However, this *new moon* is spoken of ominously, as being something that would *devour the land*. So perhaps the *new moon* being addressed is a pagan festival that indicates the "spirit of of harlotry" (vs 4). It would be the behavior of exploitation and violence stemming from adopting a pagan worldview that would lead to the land being devoured.

This passage tells us that a false worldview that leads us to pursue exploiting others will drag us away from God, causing us to lose important blessings. We need to adopt a true worldview that sees God's ways as being for our best. If we do not address this, it can become a spiritual malady that affects every aspect of our lives. God wants us to be aware of our sinful condition, and repent so that we might draw near to Him. It is when we walk in His ways that we gain the greatest possible benefit, which is what God desires for His children.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup>Hear this, O priests!  
Give heed, O house of Israel!  
Listen, O house of the king!  
For the judgment applies to you,  
For you have been a snare at Mizpah  
And a net spread out on Tabor.  
<sup>2</sup>The revolvers have gone deep in depravity,  
But I will chastise all of them.  
<sup>3</sup>I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me;  
For now, O Ephraim, you have played the harlot,  
Israel has defiled itself.  
<sup>4</sup>Their deeds will not allow them  
To return to their God.  
For a spirit of harlotry is within them,  
And they do not know the Lord.  
<sup>5</sup>Moreover, the pride of Israel testifies against him,  
And Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity;  
Judah also has stumbled with them.  
<sup>6</sup>They will go with their flocks and herds  
To seek the Lord, but they will not find *Him*;  
He has withdrawn from them.**

**<sup>7</sup>They have dealt treacherously against the Lord,  
For they have borne illegitimate children.  
Now the new moon will devour them with their land.**