

# Hosea 10:1-8

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*Hosea tells Israel that her idolatry and violation of the covenant she made with God will cause Him to bring catastrophic judgment on her—devastation and exile. Per the terms of Israel's covenant with God (Leviticus 26:14-43), He will use Assyria as His tool to carry the people, and Israel's idolatrous calf, away to exile. He will destroy Samaria's power to reign.*

This section focuses on the corrupt nature of Israel's cult that worships a golden calf, which will end in judgment. The prophet Hosea began by reminding his audience of Israel's current productivity and abundance: *Israel is a luxuriant vine* (vs 1).

The land of Israel was a land of vineyards. Even today one can still see abundant evidence of fruitful vines when traveling through the central hill country of Israel. Since the *vine* was characteristic of Israel's agricultural fertility, it served as a potent metaphor for the land itself (Isaiah 5:1-7). As such, it describes Israel's fertility and abundance (1 Kings 4:25).

The Suzerain God planted Israel as “a choice vine, a completely faithful seed” that was to yield wonderful fruits (Jeremiah 2:21). God took great pains to plant Israel and care for him (Ezekiel 17:5-6). But Israel's penchant for the worship of idols caused him to yield bad fruits; *he produces fruit for himself* (vs 1), but that did not produce gratitude toward God, the provider of all good things. Rather, it appears to have fueled a materialistic greed for more.

Hosea adds that *the more* Israel produced *fruit, the more altars he made* (vs 1). The *altars* were structures such as tables plated with precious metal on which people offered food and drink to their gods. Here in Hosea, the proliferation of *altars* refers to an expansion of pagan idol worship (Hosea 4:12-13). The luxurious life that the Israelites enjoyed in Hosea's days caused them to focus on themselves, expanding their own appetites rather than their devotion to God.

So, they multiplied their *altars* in accordance with their fruits. Along with the expansion of altars came an embrace of pagan cultic practices, including cultic prostitution (Hosea 9:1).

Continuing with the agricultural imagery to explain Israel's prosperity, the prophet said, *the richer his land, the better he made the sacred pillars* (vs 1). The phrase *sacred pillars* refer to stones (either cut or uncut) that represented a male deity (2 Kings 3:2). In Israel, archeology has discovered stone statues of phallic symbols (a large statue of a male penis)—perhaps that is in mind here.

The *sacred pillars* symbolize Israel's idolatrous practices. The Israelites followed in the footsteps of the Canaanites instead of doing what the LORD had commanded them to do—“tear down their altars and smash their *sacred pillars*” (Deuteronomy 7:5). Rather than being devoted to the true God, and following in the covenant they had made with Him, vowing to follow His self-governing ways of loving their neighbors, the Israelites built *altars* and *sacred pillars*. Along with adopting the self-indulgent pagan practices, they also adopted the exploit-your-neighbor culture (Hosea 4:2).

They did all this while continuing to claim to know the true God. However, the people's religious observance was hypocritical, *their heart was faithless* (vs 2). Israel was not following in obedience to the covenant vow made to God on Sinai (Exodus 19:8). Israel was not loving God and loving their neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:37-39). Rather, Israel was fulfilling appetites at the expense of their neighbors (Hosea 4:2).

Indeed, Israel's *heart* was slippery and deceitful, divided between the Suzerain God and pagan idols. Instead of being loyal to God, Israel practiced hypocrisy, offering sacrifices to God while attributing God's gifts to Baal. Now *they must bear their guilt* (vs 2). The people would be held accountable for their evil actions.

Appropriately, *the Lord* would *break down their altars and destroy their sacred pillars* (vs 2). With the destruction of such religious sites, Israel's false worship would come to an end. This declaration was consistent with the provision of Israel's covenant agreement with Israel. Israel had agreed to terms that included cursings for disobedience. As stated in the covenant book of Deuteronomy:

“Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things; and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you.”  
(Deuteronomy 28:47-48)

As a result of the upcoming destruction, Israel would be deprived of her political entity: *Surely now they will say, 'We have no king for we do not revere the LORD* (vs 3). The phrase *Surely now they will say* seems to indicate a hopefulness that Israel would finally come to its senses, and realize that the reason for losing its nation to a foreign invader is because they did not *revere the LORD*.

That they would fall to a foreign power if they refused to follow God's ways was clearly spelled out and agreed to in their covenant agreement with God (Deuteronomy 28:47-52). Israel was given ample warning through the prophets, but refused to listen (2 Kings 17:13-14). Now judgement would come upon them because of their unfaithfulness (2 Kings, 17:22-23, 1 Chronicles 9:1).

Israel claimed to know God (Hosea 8:2). Yet Israel's worship of God was not from the heart. It was characterized by mere outward conformity and empty formalism. Israel showed no respect for God because he lived in total disobedience to Him, filling the land with exploitation and violence (4:1-2). Therefore Israel would fall to Assyria, which occurred in 722 BC.

In addition to Israel coming to its senses, realizing that it has lost its king because of unfaithfulness, it seems Israel will come to an additional realization: *As for the king, what can he do for us?* (vs 3). This might be a recognition that in the face of a vastly superior invading military force, God now *says* surely Israel will come to recognize that no king would be sufficient to preserve it. Israel was always preserved by the power and favor of their covenant Ruler.

God promised to protect Israel, so long as Israel was faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 28:7). Israel had ceased following God's commands, which involved creating a culture of “love your neighbor.” They had instead adopted the pagan “exploit others before they exploit you” culture (Hosea 4:2). They had relied upon kings for protection; kings that were themselves assassins and exploiters (2 Kings 15:10, 14, 20, 25). Thus they had broken their covenant agreement with Yahweh God.

The people's failure to *revere the LORD* is illustrated in the next verse in which the prophet stated, *They speak mere words, with worthless oaths they make covenants* (vs 4). The covenants of which Hosea spoke likely refer to legal agreements established between fellow Israelites or between Israel and Assyria, or Israel and Egypt (v. 6, Hosea 7:11, 12:1). It seems that in making such covenants, the Israelites called on the name of the LORD with deceit since they broke the promises that they made.

This deceit and disloyalty can be seen in the fact that Israel was flitting back and forth between making agreements with Egypt and Assyria (Hosea 7:11). The indication is that Israel would break an agreement with one in order to make a “better deal” with the other. Predictably Israel would sow disloyalty and also reap disloyalty, as Egypt will not come to Israel's rescue from the Assyrian invasion. Deceit had become a part of the Israeli culture (Hosea 4:2). Israel had covenanted with God to tell the truth, to not bear false-witness (Exodus 20:16). This was one of many covenants Israel had broken—succumbing to the pagan culture of deception and exploitation, that is a natural by-product of pagan belief.

As a result of their *worthless oaths* and untrustworthy character, *judgment sprouts like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field* (vs 4). The picture is that instead of productive fruits and vegetables that will nourish Israel, the fields will produce *poisonous weeds*. The inference is that dishonesty leads to death. This makes practical sense, given that death is separation, and dishonesty creates division and destruction.

The Hebrew term translated as *poisonous weeds* is “rōsh.” It probably refers to the veined henbane occurring in plowed fields, particularly those near desert regions. Such *weeds* potentially hinder the growth of crops (Matthew 13:24–25). Because such plants were undesirable, Hosea used the term “rōsh” (*poisonous weeds*) in a figurative way to portray the severity of God’s judgment on the northern kingdom of Israel. The point of comparison is that God’s judgment would replace His abundant blessings, like a poisonous plant sprouting up in a field and choking out the crops. This was pursuant to the terms of Israel’s covenant agreement (see Deuteronomy 28:1-14 for blessings for keeping the covenant agreement and Deuteronomy 28:15-68 for cursings for violating the covenant).

God’s judgment would strike at the centerpiece of Israel’s idolatry, causing *the inhabitants of Samaria to fear for the calf of Beth-aven*, a reference to an idol which will be carried away by invaders (vs 5). One *calf* that Israel worshipped was placed at Bethel (1 Kings 12:29). 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 religious site located about ten miles north of Jerusalem, where Jeroboam had erected a calf for Israel to worship, saying “behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28).

Since Beth-el means “house of God” (Genesis 28:17, Amos 5:5), the prophet gave it an alternate name, calling it *Beth-aven* (“house of iniquity”) because King Jeroboam I of Israel made it a house for his idol (1 Kings 12:29). Instead of putting his trust in God, Jeroboam had reasoned that he needed to set up this false idol to prevent the people of Israel from traveling to Jerusalem for religious festivals, lest they return their loyalty to the lineage of David (1 Kings 12:26-28).

It is apparent that the people of Israel had adopted these idols, and began to trust in them, given their distress at seeing the idol be carried away.

According to Hosea, the people of Israel would panic over the loss of their idolatrous *calf* to the invading forces: *Indeed, its people will mourn for it and its idolatrous priests will cry out over it, over its glory, since it has departed from it* (vs 5). The invaders will carry away the idol, likely to melt it down and use the precious metal from it for their own purposes. And the *people* of Israel *will mourn for it* as though it were important. It seems from this that indeed the people of Israel had believed Jeroboam’s claim that it was the idols, rather than their Suzerain (ruler) God who had brought them out of Egypt (2 Kings 12:28:b).

Also, the *idolatrous priests will cry out* because of the loss of their precious calf-idol. The Hebrew term translated as *idolatrous priests* is “kemārīm” and is used elsewhere for pagan priests (2 Kings 23:5, Zephaniah 1:4). But here in Hosea, it appears to refer to idolatrous Israelite priests. These would be the same priests that would offer sacrifices to their covenant God, Yahweh (Hosea 8:11-13).

It seems the land of Israel was so corrupt that even the priests who worshipped Yahweh were also involved in idolatrous practices. But their calf-idol would not last long because it would *be carried to Assyria as tribute to King Jareb* (vs 6). This would cause the people to lament over its departure. *King Jareb* (“contentious”) possibly refers to Tiglath-pileser III, also called “Pul” with whom the people of God formed alliances (2 Kings 15:19, 20).

In the end, *Ephraim will be seized with shame and Israel will be ashamed of its own counsel* (vs 6). The sort of *counsel* that might be in mind here is the original *counsel* taken by Jeroboam:

“So the king [Jeroboam] consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.’”  
(1 Kings 12:28)

This is the sort of counsel that leads to a behavior based on self-centric rationalizations. Once Israel chose to believe the lie that a fashioned object had divine power they could manipulate, it is a short distance to rationalizing any sort of behavior.

Israel's *own counsel* might refer to its rationalizing behavior when applied to diplomacy. Israel had flitted back and forth between trusting in Egypt and Assyria, like a "silly dove" (Hosea 7:11). This behavior appears to have been foolish on a number of fronts. First, it antagonized two superpowers on each side of Israel (Assyria to the north and Egypt to the south).

Second, it violated God's covenant command against bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16). For example, God disciplined Israel when Saul violated Joshua's covenant agreement with the Gibeonites, some 400 years afterwards (Joshua 9:14-15, 2 Samuel 21:1-2). But apparently Israel was oblivious to their folly, having developed an advanced ability to live in an illusion of their own making.

Further, Israel would become *ashamed of its own counsel*, for it had trusted in its own cleverness and alliances with foreign powers, rather than keeping its covenant with its covenant God Yahweh. Israel's unwise decision to reject God and embrace Assyria would lead to shame and humiliation because she would soon be defeated by Assyria (2 Kings 17:6).

When Israel is soundly defeated, *Samaria*, the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, would *be cut off with her king like a stick on the surface of the water* (vs 7). That means, Israel along with her king would be destroyed and carried away like a chip of wood floating on the wave of an ocean. Such a *stick* that is floating on *the surface of the water* will simply go wherever the tide goes. A *stick* floating on the water has no agency, no independent mobility. Likewise, *Samaria* will go from ruling and deciding, to following orders.

Then, Hosea prophesies, *the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, will be destroyed* (vs 8).

In the early era of Israel's existence, numerous *high places* served as sanctuaries for Israel and Judah. Equipped with altars, stone pillars, and groves of trees, these *high places* were where the people legitimately performed their religious rituals. For example, Samuel offered a sacrifice on a high place the day before he anointed Saul as king (1 Samuel 9:19, 1 Chronicles 16:39-40.)

However, after the death of King Solomon, these *high places* were associated with idolatry. Jeroboam I of Israel (931-910 BC) made two golden calves for Israel to worship: one in Bethel and the other in Dan (1 Kings 12:28-29). In addition to these places of idolatrous worship, Jeroboam also "made houses on high places, and made priests from among all the people who were not of the sons of Levi" (1 Kings 12:31). That there were priests "not of the sons of Levi" further indicates that Israel instituted idolatrous practices. The Levites were the priest tribe, no other tribes were to serve in the role of priest.

These idolatrous practices continued even up to the time of Hosea, who ministered around 760 BC. Therefore, the prophet spoke negatively of the *high places of Aven* (that is, Bethel, see commentary on vs 5) and said that they would be *destroyed. Thorn and thistle will grow on their altars.*

Hosea gives a word picture that *thorn and thistle will grow on their altars*. This indicates that the *altars* will be abandoned, and be untended, just like their tents (Hosea 9:6). The picture is one of devastation and exile (Hosea 8:14, Amos 6:9). Israel's population will shrink substantially, and its former civilization will go to ruin. This destruction and exile is in keeping with the enforcement provision for violating Israel's covenant with God (Deuteronomy 28:36, 52). Israel broke the covenant contract and had ample warning from the prophets to repent, but they persisted in their covenant violation. Now the judgement is near.

This destruction would prompt the people to *say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' And to the hills, 'Fall on us!'* because they would be unable to stand God's judgment. This is the same thing the "kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man" will say at the end of the age, when Jesus

returns to bring judgement upon the rulers of the world (Revelation 6:15-16). The tables will ultimately be turned, and those who unjustly inflicted wrath will themselves be judged.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>1</sup>Israel is a luxuriant vine;  
He produces fruit for himself.  
The more his fruit,  
The more altars he made;  
The richer his land,  
The better he made the *sacred* pillars.

<sup>2</sup>Their heart is faithless;  
Now they must bear their guilt.  
The Lord will break down their altars  
And destroy their *sacred* pillars.

<sup>3</sup>Surely now they will say, "We have no king,  
For we do not revere the Lord.  
As for the king, what can he do for us?"

<sup>4</sup>They speak *mere* words,  
With worthless oaths they make covenants;  
And judgment sprouts like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.

<sup>5</sup>The inhabitants of Samaria will fear  
For the calf of Beth-aven.  
Indeed, its people will mourn for it,  
And its idolatrous priests will cry out over it,  
Over its glory, since it has departed from it.

<sup>6</sup>The thing itself will be carried to Assyria  
As tribute to King Jareb;  
Ephraim will be seized with shame  
And Israel will be ashamed of its own counsel.

<sup>7</sup>Samaria will be cut off *with* her king  
Like a stick on the surface of the water.

<sup>8</sup>Also the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, will be destroyed;  
Thorn and thistle will grow on their altars;  
Then they will say to the mountains,  
"Cover us!" And to the hills, "Fall on us!"