

# Hosea 11:1-7

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*The LORD announces that since Israel has refused His prophetic warning and will not repent, in spite of all the care and blessing God has provided them, Assyria will now conquer them. Assyria will be Israel's new king. Israel is God's firstborn whom He called out of Egypt. This passage is quoted in Matthew as a prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus's sojourn in Egypt.*

In this passage, the LORD looked back to Israel's initial days to explain how He brought him into existence and provided him with His tender care. God stated, *When Israel was a youth I loved him* (vs 1). The term translated as *youth* ("na'ar" in Hebrew) has a wide range of meanings. It can refer to a lad, as in Genesis 19:4 or Genesis 22:12. It can also refer to young men, as in Genesis 14:24 or 2 Samuel 18:5, 12. But here in Hosea the term is used figuratively to suggest that Israel was helpless and unable to carry the responsibilities of adulthood.

While *Israel* was in a state of dependence, the LORD *loved him*. He demonstrated His love and goodness for Israel by redeeming his life from slavery. To remind *Israel* of his former helpless condition and dependence, the LORD declared, *Out of Egypt I called My son* (vs 1).

Earlier in Hosea, God used "her" as a pronoun for Israel, fitting with the metaphor of the nation as a wayward wife committing adultery (Hosea 1:2, 3:1). Here *him* is used to fit the metaphor of Israel as a son. It can be considered that events that happen to Israel foreshadow events that will happen to Israel's Messiah. In this case, Hosea 11:1 is cited in Matthew as a prophecy concerning Jesus, when Joseph escaped from Herod's attempt to murder Jesus as a child:

"So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.'" (Matthew 2:14-15)

It can also be considered that all people are called out of Egypt, in the sense that Egypt represents a life of slavery and tyranny. Perhaps the Apostle Paul had this metaphor in mind when he wrote:

"Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" (Romans 6:16)

In the case of this passage from Romans 6, the audience is God's people, believers whose "faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). Paul desires for the Gentile believers in Rome to live in the freedom that comes from choosing life, which comes through obedience to God's word. His argument is that this choice is the reasonable one to make because

that is what is in our best interest. It is the same basic argument Hosea makes in his book, written centuries earlier.

For both Hosea and Romans, the audience for the message is God's people. God never rejects His people from being His people. But He does discipline those whom He loves (Hebrews 12:5).

In Exodus, Israel's condition while living in slavery in *Egypt* for about four hundred years was horrible after Joseph died and could no longer protect them (Exodus 1:8-11). There *Israel* was enslaved to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, experiencing oppression, shame, and humiliation (Exodus 1). But God sent a message to Pharaoh through Moses, saying:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, ‘Let My son go so that he may serve Me’; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I am going to kill your son, your firstborn.’”  
(Exodus 4:21–22)

In this passage from Exodus, God calls Israel His “firstborn.” The firstborn is the heir, the one with the right to rule the family. In this case, God is saying that Israel is the firstborn of the earth, with the right to rule over the earth. So when God called Jesus out of Egypt (Matthew 2:14-15) He was calling out His Firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15). When God's Firstborn (Jesus) lived faithfully, obeying His Father in all things, He was given the reward of reigning over the earth (Philippians 2:8-10, Matthew 28:18).

Now Jesus has invited all who believe in Him to follow His path, and promises to reward all those who overcome as He overcame, that they will share His reign (Philippians 2:5, Revelation 3:21). Gentiles who are born again of the Spirit are born into God's family as a free gift simply by believing (John 3:14-15). All who believe are grafted into the root of Israel, and are spiritually part of Israel (Romans 2:27-29, 11:17). New Testament believers can learn the patterns of cause-effect from these lessons written down about Israel (1 Corinthians 10:11).

For the nation Israel, God miraculously defeated Pharaoh and his army and redeemed Israel's life “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Exodus 6:6). God did all this to establish a covenant relationship with *Israel* (Exodus 14, Deuteronomy 7:6–8). He regarded *Israel* as His *son* and treated him with tender care.

Despite God's redemptive acts on behalf of the Israelites, they refused to accept Him as their savior, *The more they called them, the more they went from them* (vs 2). The pronoun *they* in the first part of the sentence likely refers to the prophets of God through whom He called His covenant people to faithfulness. That is, the more the prophets of God called the Israelites (the second *they*) to repentance, the more *they* rebelled and ran away to practice idolatry.

Instead of turning to God, the Israelites *kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols* (vs 2).

In ancient Israel, *incense* —a material used to produce a fragrant odor when burned—was an important element in worship because it was a sign of reverence to the LORD, upon whom the Israelites were to depend for sustenance and survival. So, *incense* was used to gain God’s favor.

The Israelites were supposed to attach themselves by faith to God, the divine deliverer and the one who *loved* them. They were to worship and serve God faithfully. But they instead gave allegiance to pagan deities, especially Baal—the Canaanite fertility god. They *kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols*, meaning that they worshiped graven images as their gods, instead of worshipping the true and living God (Exodus 20:4-6, Deuteronomy 5:7-9).

Naturally, when Israel adopted the pagan gods, and the pagan forms of worship (which included rampant sexual immorality, including with animals, and child sacrifice—Leviticus 18:23, 21), Israel also fell into the pagan culture of exploitation, deception and violence (Hosea 4:2). Instead of building a “love your neighbor” culture, as required by their covenant with the Living God, they descended into a culture of exploitation.

The culture of exploitation is also a culture of entitlement. Israel’s attitude toward God demonstrated his ingratitude because God redeemed Israel and sustained him. God also provided His covenant with them because it was in their best interest (Deuteronomy 10:13). Everything about God’s relationship with Israel was vastly for their benefit.

And yet Israel forsook God for dumb idols, idols that merely gave it a moral excuse to pursue debauchery and exploitation. But, God stated, even though Israel forsook Him, *Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms*. The pronoun *I* is emphatic in the Hebrew text, suggesting that it was God alone who trained *Ephraim*. The name *Ephraim*, meaning “doubly fruitful” (Genesis 41:52), is used here for the entire northern kingdom of Israel. *Ephraim* was the largest of the tribes, and the location of the capital city of Samaria.

In using *Ephraim*, the LORD contrasted His goodness (making Israel doubly fruitful) with Israel’s ignorance and rebellion (forsaking their benefactor), because He was the one who redeemed Israel from his helpless condition and *taught* Israel how to successfully navigate his way through the challenges of life and become fruitful. But Israel had become blind to this reality; they have rejected the good (Hosea 8:3).

The Suzerain God was Israel’s teacher, but the student was not listening (Hosea 8:1, 12). Like human teachers, the LORD taught the Israelites how *to walk* and did so with His most tender care as He *took them in His arms* when they experienced pain and suffering. But unlike human teachers, God has nothing to learn from His students. He is all-knowing. With God, teaching flows one way.

Indeed, God delivered the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt in a powerful and miraculous way (Exodus 6:6). He guided the people through their wilderness wandering and protected them in such a way that their “clothing did not wear out on” them, “nor did their foot swell on them these forty years” (Deuteronomy 8:4). The Israelites were to understand their deliverance from slavery as their healing. *But they did not know that God healed them* (vs 3). They did not admit the truth that the LORD was the one who redeemed them and protected them through their wilderness

experience. They chose Baal, choosing to believe a lie instead of believing the truth (Hosea 10:13).

Despite Israel's faithlessness, the LORD dealt with him with great love and tender care. God made it clear when He stated, *I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love, and I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws* (vs 4).

The Suzerain (ruler) God dealt kindly with Israel, like a farmer leading his plow-animal from work with a halter (*cords*), removing its *yoke* from its face and shoulders (*jaws*) then bringing it supplemental feed (*bent down and fed them*). In like manner, the LORD tenderly led Israel and provided for him in the wilderness. When the Israelites could not feed themselves, the Suzerain God *bent down and fed them* (vs 4) during their wilderness wandering, miraculously providing to them manna to eat (Numbers 11, Deuteronomy 8:3, 15, 16). Yet, the Israelites were not grateful to God.

Therefore, the Israelites would not escape God's judgment: *They will not return to the land of Egypt; But Assyria—he will be their king* (vs 5).

As in Hosea 8:13 and 9:3, *Egypt* is used here as a symbol of slavery and exile. Israel will return to the conditions they had in Egypt, being exiles in a foreign land. But Israel's exiled destination was not to return to *Egypt*, but rather to be ruled by *Assyria*.

The Israelites could not remain in the land. *Because they refused to return to the LORD*, they would *return* to slavery, now in Assyria. Israel had broken its covenant with God, and a condition of remaining in the land as God's priests to other nations was to follow the agreement Israel had entered into, to follow God's commands (Exodus 19:6, 8). God's covenant contract with Israel provided exile as a required remedy for breaking the contract if Israel failed to follow His commands.

God called Israel to show the world a better way to live, to build a culture based on mutual respect, truth, and loving one's neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). Such a self-governing culture would lead to mutual cooperation and human flourishing, and be an example to the nations (Exodus 19:6). This was particularly the case since Israel was located on the major world trade routes. But Israel had now failed to be a positive example, so would have its example removed; it would go into exile and its new *king* would be the king of *Assyria*.

2 Kings tells us the extent to which evil pagan practices had taken hold in Israel:

“Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, and practiced divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him.” (2 Kings 17:17)

The phrase “pass through the fire” refers to child sacrifice. It was this culture of exploitation and violence for which God originally judged the nations of Canaan (Deuteronomy 9:4). God had made it clear to Israel that if they fell into the same culture of pagan exploitation, that He would judge them as well (Deuteronomy 4:25-27).

Accordingly, given Israel's disobedience, now *the sword will whirl against Israel's cities and will demolish their gate bars and consume them* (vs 6). The *sword* represents military destruction. The Hebrew word translated *whirl* is variously rendered in other translations as:

- Abide – war will come to dwell among them
- Flash – the sword will become a common occurrence, as war will consume the *cities*
- Rage – war will rage in the *cities*
- Fall – the sword (war) will descend on the cities

The cities would be sieged and the walls would fall. The phrase *demolish their gate bars* raises an image of the city gates being overrun, and the sieging army busting through the gates. This occurred in 722 BC, Assyria sieged Samaria, defeated it and carried the people into exile (2 Kings 17:5-6). This would happen *because of their counsels* (vs 6), that is, because of the wrong choices they made. Israel trusted in themselves and the idols and occult powers they could manipulate (2 Kings 17:17). They chose an untrue perspective, trusting in their own diplomatic cunning with Egypt and Assyria as well as their military power, rather than recognizing their God as their only source of security (Hosea 7:11). They chose to believe lies (Hosea 10:13) instead of listening to God's word and following His ways (Hosea 8:12). This led to wickedness. The people fell into the pagan culture of exploitation and violence (Hosea 4:2). They even sunk to the point of sacrificing their own children (2 Kings 17:17). Their heart was hardened, and they refused to listen to the prophets and return to the LORD.

God concluded this section by saying, *So My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call them to the One on high, none at all exalts Him* (vs 7).

This means that the Israelites rejected the prophets whom God had sent to proclaim a message of repentance to them. They ignored the prophetic warnings. They wanted God to do their bidding (*call them to the One on high*) but they did not want to do God's will (*none at all exalts Him*). The people were self-focused. They only cared about getting their way. They sought to exploit idols, spirits, and other people (through deception and violence). They even sought to get God to do their bidding. But God is not an idol to be manipulated. God is the Creator God, who made cause-effect relationships. God knows what works, what brings human flourishing.

God gave to Israel a roadmap to flourish in His covenant (Deuteronomy 4:8). When people self-govern, and develop an external focus, a focus on serving others, they can create a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. Instead of deception and violence (Hosea 4:2), they will experience productivity and the enjoyment of vibrant communities (Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

But Israel had failed in its assigned role to serve as a priest to the nations, showing them a better way to live (Exodus 19:6). They had adopted the culture of the Canaanites and Egyptians (Leviticus 18). They now needed to be removed from the land, per the terms of their covenant agreement with God, whom they had sworn to obey (Exodus 19:8, Deuteronomy 4:26-27).

## Biblical Text

<sup>1</sup>When Israel *was* a youth I loved him,  
And out of Egypt I called My son.

<sup>2</sup>The more they called them,  
The more they went from them;  
They kept sacrificing to the Baals  
And burning incense to idols.

<sup>3</sup>Yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them in My arms;  
But they did not know that I healed them.

<sup>4</sup>I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,  
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws;  
And I bent down *and* fed them.

<sup>5</sup>They will not return to the land of Egypt;  
But Assyria—he will be their king  
Because they refused to return *to Me*.

<sup>6</sup>The sword will whirl against their cities,  
And will demolish their gate bars  
And consume *them* because of their counsels.

<sup>7</sup>So My people are bent on turning from Me.  
Though they call them to *the One* on high,  
None at all exalts *Him*.