

Hosea 12:1-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hos/hos-12/hosea-121-6/>

Hosea calls Israel and Judah to learn from the life of Jacob to mature from manipulation and deceit, and instead persist in seeking God's blessing. This would allow them to return to the LORD and live righteously according to their covenant with Him, resulting in a community of neighborly love and kindness rather than the fruitless practice of deceit and violence.

This chapter is best to be considered to begin with Hosea 11:12 which says:

“Ephraim surrounds Me with lies
And the house of Israel with deceit;
Judah is also unruly against God,
Even against the Holy One who is faithful.”
(Hosea 11:12)

Verse 1 of chapter 12 continues with the theme of deceit, saying *Ephraim feeds on wind and pursues the east wind continually* (vs 1). The idea of chasing the wind or feeding on the wind is a picture of futility. Chasing the wind is a fruitless endeavor. It is equally unfruitful to live by lies, and perpetuate a culture of deceit (Hosea 10:13, 11:12). Such a culture breeds self-seeking, exploitation, and violence (Hosea 4:2). The prophet referred to the northern kingdom of Israel by the name of its largest tribe *Ephraim*, which means “doubly fruitful” as indicated in Genesis 41:52. This is an irony in that *Ephraim* is pursuing an unfruitful culture of deception, which is as futile and unfruitful as pursuing *the east wind continually*.

The term *wind* is used consistently in Scripture to refer to that which is meaningless (Ecclesiastes 1:14, 6:9, Isaiah 26:18). The *east wind* refers to the deadly “sirocco,” a hot *wind* blowing in across the land from the eastern Arabian Desert. Because such a *wind* could potentially destroy human endeavors and blight vegetation (Ezekiel 27:26, Psalm 48:7, Ezekiel 17:10), it became a metaphor for something damaging and worthless.

So, if pursuing the *wind* is meaningless, the pursuit of the *east wind* is the climax of absurdity. This was Ephraim's attitude in Hosea's days. He forsook the LORD to ally with Assyria or Egypt. But Ephraim's alliance with these foreign nations would prove futile because the LORD would use Assyria as His instrument to defeat him (2 Kings 17:4–6).

To bring the metaphor home, the prophet further stated regarding Ephraim/Israel, *He multiplies lies and violence*. He practiced that which was false and deceitful. During the days of Hosea, Israel's condition was horrible. The people of God practiced *violence* throughout their society (Hosea 4:2). In such a society, the strong exploit the weak.

After the death of Jeroboam II the situation became so bad that four of the last six Israelite kings were assassinated while the other two occupied the throne by assassination. Israel's society was thus characterized by *lies* and *violence*.

As the prophet continued his assessment on Israel/Ephraim's condition in his days, he said, *Moreover, he makes a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt* (vs 1). Instead of looking to the LORD for security and protection, *Ephraim* looked to Assyria and Egypt. To consolidate his relationship with these foreign nations, *Ephraim* "paid tribute" to Assyria (2 Kings 17:3). But apparently Israel practiced lies and deception in its foreign policy as well, and exported *oil to Egypt*. Thus Israel, in trying to create alliances with both Egypt and Assyria, was actually breaking its alliance with both.

We read in 2 Kings that the catalytic event that triggered the Assyrian invasion was the discovery by Assyria that it was being double-crossed by Israel, who had made a treaty with Egypt

"But the king of Assyria found conspiracy in Hoshea [king of Israel], who had sent messengers to So king of Egypt."
(2 Kings 17:4a)

As a result of this betrayal, Assyria sieged Israel for three years, then:

"In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria."
(2 Kings 17:6a)

This is an illustration of why living by lies and deception is like the futility of chasing the wind. We live the illusion that we are manipulating and controlling others, when we are actually practicing self-harm.

In ancient Israel, the production of olive *oil* was an important industry, accounting for much of the economic prosperity of the region. Israel broke its covenant with God by breaking their treaties.

God applied His command to not bear false witness to diplomacy (Exodus 20:16). During the reign of King David, God chastised Israel because it had broken its treaty with the Gibeonites under king Saul, even though Joshua had made the treaty over 400 years earlier (Joshua 9:15, 2 Samuel 21:1-2). Further, Israel was testing God by trusting in treaties rather than trusting in their Suzerain (ruler) God, who had brought them out of Egypt.

The prophet Hosea then told his audience that the southern kingdom was not far behind the northern kingdom. Because of this culture of deception, and use of deception in diplomacy, *The LORD also has a dispute with Judah* (vs 2). The word translated as *dispute* here appears to be used in a manner that God has an accusation against *Judah*. God was not pleased with *Judah* because he had violated God's covenantal law against bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16).

Therefore, because of the lies and deception, and the breaking of his covenant, the prophet stated that the LORD would *punish Jacob according to his ways* (vs 2). *He would repay him according to his deeds* (vs 2). The term *Jacob* is used here to represent both the northern and southern tribes because *Jacob* was the father of the entire nation. It is also likely used because *Jacob* means

“supplanter” and carries the connotation of one who deceives. Jacob supplanted his older brother’s birthright, and secured the blessing of the firstborn through deception (Genesis 27:35).

Speaking about Jacob, Hosea stated, *In the womb he took his brother by the heel* (vs 3). This statement reminds the reader of Jacob’s birth story (Genesis 25:26). The grabbing of the heel is a picture of one who would supplant, which is exactly what transpired, as Jacob inherited the blessing of the firstborn (Genesis 27:35–36).

Jacob grabbed his brother’s heel while being birthed, wrested away his brother’s birthright by deception, then later *contended with God in his maturity* (vs 3). *Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed* (vs 4). Jacob was a deceiver (like Israel). But he matured, and learned to seek God’s blessing. Hosea urges Israel to follow Jacob’s example.

Jacob persisted in getting what he was after throughout. This is a strength, so long as what is being sought is the right thing.

Jesus displayed this characteristic, fighting through shame, rejection and death in order to accomplish His Father’s will (Hebrews 12:2). However, in the case of Israel at the time of Hosea, Jacob (the combined kingdoms of Israel and Judah) is exercising persistence in pursuing evil; they are supplanters and deceivers. But they can mature, and learn to seek God, even as Jacob did *in his maturity*.

The term translated as *God* in the phrase *he (Jacob) contended with God in his maturity* is “Elohim” in Hebrew, which can be applicable to any divine form. This even includes humanity, when seen as being created in the image of God (John 10:34-37). In these two lines, Hosea placed *God* and *the angel* in parallel to show his audience that Jacob *contended* with an angel (messenger) sent from God (Genesis 32:24).

Interestingly, the Genesis 32 passage says that a “man” wrestled with Jacob (Genesis 32:24) but Jacob interpreted that he had seen God (also “Elohim,” Genesis 32:30). This likely indicates that the person wrestling with Jacob was the pre-incarnate Son of God, who would not reveal His name at the time He contended with Jacob (Genesis 32:29), but would later reveal Himself as Jesus (“Yahweh is Salvation”).

As Jacob wrestled with the *angel*, he acknowledged God’s superiority. So, *he wept and sought His favor* (vs 4). And having begged for divine favor, Jacob received a blessing (Genesis 32:24–32). The term translated as *wept* here likely refers to Jacob’s persistence in being unwilling to let the angel/man go until the angel/man blessed him (Genesis 32:26). Persistence in seeking God is a good thing. Israel ought to shift from their infantile reliance on deception and mature by shifting to persistently seek after God.

Hosea also told his audience about Jacob’s encounter with God at Bethel: *He found Him at Bethel and there He spoke with us* (vs 4). The reference to *Bethel* here is striking for a number of reasons. First, the term *Bethel* is referred to numerous times in Hosea (often by other names, such as Beth-aven) because it was there (and Dan) that Jeroboam set up 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). So we have here the great irony that it was at Bethel that the true and living God spoke to Israel, and it is there that now Israel has supplanted the true God with an idol.

Further, the reference to *Bethel* blends two separate stories together. It is the location of Jacob's dream in which the Suzerain God reaffirmed His covenant promises with him (Genesis 28:10–22). It also is the place of Jacob's second encounter with God in which God "blessed him" and changed his name from Jacob ("Supplanter") to Israel ("Prince of God") (Genesis 35:9–15).

The prophet's point is that Jacob acted deceitfully at first but matured and came to his senses later in life. And having recognized his dependence on God, Jacob returned to Him and experienced transformation and blessings. This is an example Israel ought to follow.

Like Jacob, the Israelites needed to turn from their evil ways. So, Hosea issued an appeal for repentance and told the people that *the LORD is the God of hosts* (vs 5). The term *hosts* could be translated "armies." The *term God of hosts* means God is full of power—the ultimate power. God alone has the power to control everything because He is the creator of the entire universe.

The prophet added, *the LORD is His name* (vs 5). The Hebrew term translated as *name* is "zēker." It can also be rendered as "memorial name," as in Exodus 3:15. Hosea used this *name* to remind his audience that the Suzerain God is eternal and unchangeable (Hebrews 13:8). The *LORD* was the faithful God who showed His mighty power to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was also the one who redeemed Israel's life from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 9:16, 12:12).

It would seem that being geographically wedged between two great empires (Egypt and Assyria), each of which probably sees Israel as a juicy delicacy, it would be quite rational for Israel to seek refuge in the *LORD* who is the *God of hosts*, a deity with a mighty angelic army that can fight, and has fought for Israel. But Israel is not thinking rationally. They have sunk into the last stage of the natural consequence of sin, which is self-delusion (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). They think they can play these two great powers off of one another (Hosea 7:11). They engage in intrigue between the two (Hosea 12:1).

Israel/Jacob has come to prefer lies (Hosea 10:13, 11:12). Paul describes this final phase of the natural progression of sin having a "depraved mind" (Romans 1:28).

Therefore, the prophet urged the Israelites, saying, *Return to your God, observe kindness and justice, and wait for your God continually* (vs 6). Hosea urges Israel to mimic its ancient ancestor Jacob in his maturity, and seek *God continually*, to wrestle with Him until He blesses them. They can do this by choosing to leave behind deception, exploitation and violence, and replace it with *kindness* toward others, seeking *justice*. The term *justice* refers to aligning one's actions with God's design. Israel would seek *justice* by seeking to honor God and love their neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:37-39).

The Hebrew word for *kindness* here is "ḥesed." It is used here for brotherly love, the quality of life that God required from Israel. The term for *justice* is "mišpāt," and it refers to the right behavior or the proper treatment that each Israelite was to give to his brother. In sum, God wanted every Israelite to be concerned about his brother and to act kindly toward him; to love

them as themselves. Such a love would reflect God's own love for Israel. It also sets the path for the establishment of *justice* in the society.

This would change Israel's focus from themselves to others. It would alter their priority from pursuing their own appetites, and replace it with a pursuit of seeking the best for others.

Not only were the Israelites to practice *kindness and justice*, but they were also to *wait for* their *God continually* (vs 6). The word translated *wait* here includes the idea of waiting expectantly. This would imply an element of faith—believing that God will do what He promised to do.

Waiting on the LORD requires faith. It requires accepting the reality that we are creations and He is our creator. It requires the humility (willingness to accept reality) that we are dependent on Him. The Israelites were urged not to live the illusion that their destiny was in their own hands, which is how they were acting. They were urged to live in the reality that all human activities are futile if they are pursued independently of God (Psalm 127:1).

Israel was trying to exercise control and domination, exploitation of others, by practicing lies and deceit. Rather, Hosea urged them to rely on the LORD and stand on His unfailing promises. They were to practice persistence and focus on the lesson they could learn from their ancestor Jacob, and mature from manipulating others to doggedly seeking God's blessing.

Biblical Text

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And oil is carried to Egypt.**

²**The Lord also has a dispute with Judah,
And will punish Jacob according to his ways;
He will repay him according to his deeds.**

³**In the womb he took his brother by the heel,
And in his maturity he contended with God.**

⁴**Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed;
He wept and sought His favor.
He found Him at Bethel
And there He spoke with us,**

⁵**Even the Lord, the God of hosts,
The Lord is His name.**

⁶**Therefore, return to your God,
Observe kindness and justice,
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