

Hosea 12:7-11

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The LORD exposes Israel's wickedness, where a pagan culture of deception and violence had taken the place of God's command to love and respect their neighbors. Israel had great materialistic pride, and arrogantly practiced religious worship to God while blatantly disobeying His commands. For their disobedience, God will send His people to exile and destroy their altars because they have failed to listen to His prophets and repent of their wicked ways.

Following Hosea's call to the children of Jacob (both the northern nation of Israel and southern nation of Judah) to practice kindness and justice among their fellow citizens, as was required in their covenant obligation with the LORD, God then spoke to expose the reality that Israel's culture had become corrupt. Deceit had entered the commercial marketplace, apparently becoming the norm.

Israel's obligation under its covenant agreement with God was to be a priestly nation, to show a better way to their neighbors (Exodus 19:6,8). They were to demonstrate that a self-governing people who treated their neighbors with dignity and honesty would lead to a thriving society. Israel had utterly failed. Rather than honesty and integrity in Israel, the LORD described its actual state, *A merchant, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress* (vs 7). Deceit (*false balances*) leads to oppression. The merchant is using his knowledge to extract from his unsuspecting customers by overcharging. The *false balances* could under-weigh the produce, meaning people paid for less than they bargained. Or the *false balances* could under-weigh the customer's payment, meaning they paid more than was agreed upon.

This is the opposite of "love your neighbor as yourself"—which is the culture Israel was to create under its covenant agreement with God (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:37-39). To use power or knowledge to exploit another is to *oppress*. Israel was to create a culture of mutual love and help, which was its service to its covenant God (Matthew 22:37-39). Instead Israel had sunk into the oppressive exploitation of paganism, adopting the culture of the surrounding nations.

The Hebrew term translated as *merchant* (who is oppressing others by his *false balances*) is "kēna'an," which means "Canaan." This wordplay likely evokes the idea of Canaanite influence. That is, the Israelite merchants reproduced the immoral practices of the Canaanites as they carried *false balances* in their hands (Amos 4:1). So rather than being a priestly nation, showing their neighbors a better way, Israel was copying its neighbors, thereby breaking its covenant agreement.

Apparently the Israelite merchants in Hosea's day cheated in the marketplace by using dishonest scales in their commercial transactions while hypocritically retaining an outward façade to devotion to the Suzerain (or Ruler) God (Hosea 6:6, 7:14,). Amos, a contemporary of Hosea, condemned such fraudulent practices also (Amos 5:21-24, 8:5). Hypocritical religious practice does not make up for cheating people in business. It is not only an injustice against the buyer but

is also an abomination to the LORD (Proverbs 11:1). This is because service to the LORD is demonstrated by loving others (Mathew 22:37-39).

Not only did the northern kingdom of Israel practice dishonesty and oppression in their commercial transactions, but they also oppressed the poor. To *oppress* someone is to exploit. The Israelites took advantage of the poor by taking what little they had without taking into account their suffering, that they could be starving (Amos 4:1, 5:11).

Worse yet, the elite Israelites of Hosea's day boasted of their wealth, which was acquired at the expense of the poor. To expose such an arrogance, the LORD quoted Ephraim's words directly, thus adding much weight to the claim. *Ephraim said, Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself* (vs 8).

Ephraim/Israel congratulated himself on his riches. But to the extent *Ephraim* had acquired riches through exploitation, it was illegitimate. And to the extent his gain was legitimate, it was the LORD his God who made him prosperous. As in the previous chapters, the largest tribe of *Ephraim* is chosen to stand for the entire nation, perhaps because it means "doubly fruitful" (Genesis 41:52).

Such a complacent arrogance prompted Israel to declare, *In all my labors they will find in me no iniquity, which would be sin* (vs 8). As Israel practiced deceit, exploitation, and oppression, he practiced an ongoing campaign of self-rationalization. While cheating people with *false balances*, the Israelites simultaneously claimed *they will find in me no iniquity*. They were corrupt, but righteous in their own eyes. This is, again, evidence that Israel had sunk to the third level of judgement in the progression of sin: a "depraved mind" (Romans 1:28).

Israel's pride caused him to become insensitive to his sins. He claimed to have acquired his wealth honestly when, in fact, he had practiced fraud, using dishonest scales to deceive his buyers. He thus completely forgot what the LORD had done for him. Israel had become his own god in his own eyes. But God reminded Israel of the true reality, saying, *But I have been the Lord your God since the land of Egypt* (vs 9).

Israel was disconnected from reality. This might have begun with Israel's first king, Jeroboam, who set up cultic worship centers in Dan and Bethel, and provided them with calves. Of these calves, Jeroboam said "Behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28b). It seems a natural progression from "this idol we manufactured brought us out of Egypt" to "we did it ourselves." This is apparently a human tendency, as Jeroboam's statement is much the same as Aaron's proclamation to Israel when he fashioned the golden calf (Exodus 32:4).

The pronoun *I* in the phrase *I have been the Lord your God* is emphatic in the Hebrew text, suggesting that God alone was Israel's *Lord* and *God* since Israel was in slavery in Egypt. This divine declaration depicts God as Israel's only deliverer. The LORD alone brought Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:2) to the land of Canaan, "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:17).

And since the LORD alone redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness, He reserved the right to judge them when they moved away from Him. That is why, He declared, *I will make you live in tents again as in the days of the appointed festival* (vs 9). The idea here is that Israel will be removed from the land and again wander. This was consistent with the provisions of Israel's covenant with God (Deuteronomy 28:64-65).

The mention of *tents* and *the appointed festival* reminds the reader of Israel's annual festival called "the Feast of Booths," a seven-day festival that began after the completion of the fall harvest (Lev. 23:44). During this joyful celebration, the people of God were to give Him thanks for the harvest and for His past provisions, and to remember God's protection during their wilderness wandering.

As part of the requirements of the Feast of Booths, the Israelites would leave their homes for a week to dwell in temporary booths or *tents* that were made from the branches of trees (Leviticus 23:42). Hosea uses this remembrance to tell Israel that they are about to embark on another form of wandering: exile.

Here in Hosea, the reference to Israel living *in tents* indicates a reversal of God's blessings. As part of God's judgment, He would drive Israel from his home in the Promised Land and make him dwell *in tents* in a pagan land. In this case, Israel's life in the *tents* would no longer be a joyful celebration but rather a curse, bringing suffering and shame to the people for their disobedience and ingratitude, consistent with the terms of their covenant agreement (Deuteronomy 5:26-27).

The LORD then changed His focus from Israel's slavery in Egypt and their wilderness experience to the activity of the prophets. In so doing, He contrasted Israel's faithless actions to those of His faithful prophets. He declared, *I have also spoken to the prophets and I gave numerous visions and through the prophets I gave parables* (vs 10).

The term *visions* is a technical term used for one form of revelation in which God displayed a visual representation of His will (Amos 7-9). But sometimes the term is used in a broad sense to refer to the contents of a prophecy (Isaiah 1:1, Obadiah 1, Nahum 1:1). In Hosea, the term seems to be used in the latter sense, that is, as a prophetic word. The term translated as *parables* is "damah" in Hebrew. It implies similitudes or illustrations.

The Suzerain God sent His obedient *prophets* through *visions* to warn His covenant people of sin and its consequences. The *prophets* boldly proclaimed the truth of God, which they received through *visions and parables*. They faithfully encouraged the people to seek God and seek good so that they might continue to live and enjoy God's blessings (Amos 5:6).

But the people of Israel refused to listen to the prophetic warnings (Hosea 2:11-12). Though the Suzerain (Ruler) God had continuously warned His people of sin and its consequences, they had been rebellious to Him. Since Israel would not repent, God would invoke the disciplinary provisions of their covenant with God (Deuteronomy 5:26-27).

Following the contrast between the faithful prophets and faithless Israel, the LORD asked a rhetorical question with an implied answer of “Yes”: *Is there iniquity in Gilead?* (vs 11). The place named *Gilead* is in the region east of the Jordan River (Deuteronomy 3:15). It is the northern part of the current country of Jordan. During the days of Hosea, *Gilead* became a “city of wrongdoers tracked with bloody footprints” (Hosea 6:8). Apparently the people shed innocent blood there without restraint (Hosea 6:8).

But God gave His own evaluation of the inhabitants of *Gilead*, and said, *Surely they are worthless* (vs 11).

Like *Gilead*, *Gilgal* was also a place where the Israelites in Hosea’s days practiced iniquity. The idea seems to be that no matter where you went in Israel, there you would find iniquity.

There *in Gilgal they sacrifice bulls* (vs 11). *Gilgal* was located near Jericho, It was the first place where the Israelites encamped in Canaan after crossing the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19). However, in Hosea’s days it had apparently become a place where the people practiced wickedness while offering hypocritical *sacrifice* of male *bulls* to God. As indicated in Hosea 4:15, the sacrifices to God were not accompanied with obedient behavior, so it was *worthless* (also see Amos 4:4, 9:15).

Religious worship without behavior in keeping with God’s commands made *their altars* to be *like the stone heaps beside the furrows of the field* (vs 11). The word picture painted seems to be of *stone heaps* from piles of rocks cleared out of a plowed field. Such a rock pile is just a worthless pile of trash rocks. The picture seems to indicate the worthless nature of sacrifice that is not attended with obedient behavior. Instead of following God’s command to love their neighbor as themselves, Israel was practicing violence, exploitation, and wickedness. Therefore their religious practice was of no benefit.

There is a wordplay here in that the Hebrew term translated as *stone heaps* is “gallim,” which shares two similar elements (“g” and “l”) with *Gilgal*. Through this wordplay, the LORD made it clear that the *altars* of *Gilgal* were like worthless “gallim” (stone heaps) in a plowed field. Israel’s unwise strategy to practice wickedness while offering hypocritical worship to the LORD would only lead to futility and destruction.

Biblical Text

**⁷ A merchant, in whose hands are false balances,
He loves to oppress.**

**⁸ And Ephraim said, “Surely I have become rich,
I have found wealth for myself;
In all my labors they will find in me
No iniquity, which *would be* sin.”**

**⁹ But I *have been* the Lord your God since the land of Egypt;
I will make you live in tents again,
As in the days of the appointed festival.**

¹⁰ I have also spoken to the prophets,

And I gave numerous visions,
And through the prophets I gave parables.
¹¹ Is there iniquity *in* Gilead?
Surely they are worthless.
In Gilgal they sacrifice bulls,
Yes, their altars are like the stone heaps
Beside the furrows of the field.