

Hosea 9:10-14

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Hosea tells Israel that although He was pleased with her in her youth, her disobedience and devotion to Baal worship and its attending culture of exploitation will cause her to go into exile. There she will experience harsh conditions that will result in barrenness and death of her offspring.

This section opens with a divine speech in which the Suzerain (ruler) God reflected upon Israel's early years as a nation. This reflection shows that Israel had not always appeared so repulsive to God. For, in the beginning of Israel's history, God saw in her prospects that were quite constructive: *I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season* (vs 10).

Grapes that grow *in the wilderness* or ripe figs in the early part of the summer (*first season*) give a sense of unexpected pleasure to a weary traveler. Such fruits were so delicate that they were often consumed immediately after picking (Isaiah 28:4, Nahum 3:12). Likewise, Israel was this precious and delicate in God's eyes in the beginning of her relationship with God. She was valued at first, but indeed was now a failure. So, God's attitude toward the Israelites changed drastically, because *they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved* (vs 10).

The reference to Israel going to *Baal-peor* recalls the time when Israel rebelled against the Suzerain (ruler) God while coming out of Egypt, even before the people got into the land of Canaan. The incident at *Baal-peor* is recorded in Numbers 25 and is worth citing here. Toward the end of the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites went to the borders of Moab. And while there, "the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:1-2). Consequently, all those who involved themselves in sexual sin and in idol worship with the daughters of Moab died by a plague; 24,000 in total. But those Israelites who remained loyal to God were preserved (Deuteronomy 4:4).

This event was used by Hosea to display Israel's sinful patterns. She had been unfaithful to God from her earliest history (Deuteronomy 9:7). Like in the days of Moses, Hosea's generation was defiled because the people devoted themselves to shameful Baal worship and attributed their fertility to involvement in the Baal cult. As at *Baal-peor* they were engaging in fertility practices with prostitutes (Hosea 9:1, 4:11-12). They also, naturally, have adopted the pagan mindset of exploitation, extraction, deception, and violence (Hosea 4:2).

Therefore, the Suzerain God would judge Israel severely, but appropriately. Since Israel trusted in the fertility god (Baal), the LORD would bring curses on her. God would cause Israel to become infertile: *As for Ephraim, their glory will fly away like a bird, no birth, no pregnancy and no conception* (vs 11). Israel's *glory* is a growing population.

No nation can prosper without a growing population, as a matter of economic reality. This is still true today, but was particularly true in an era when the strength of a nation was measured by the number of soldiers they could muster, and the ability of the nation to produce crops (which was mainly produced by human labor). It is likely that this loss of productivity will be precipitated by the violence and harsh conditions stemming from invasion, occupation, and exile.

Earlier in Hosea, Israel was compared to a “silly dove” fluttering back and forth between Egypt and Assyria, looking for the “best deal” to be protected (Hosea 7:11). Here, Israel’s *glory* or progeny would depart swiftly *like a bird* (Prov. 23:5). The people of God would thus lose their *glory* (that is, their numerous offspring/a growing population) and greatly diminish. There would be *no birth, no pregnancy and no conception*. Israel would be barren.

The name *Ephraim* is used specifically here (and in v. 13) likely to heighten the irony since it means “doubly fruitful” or “double fruitfulness” (Genesis 41:52). So, the irony of the situation is that *Ephraim*, the once doubly fruitful, would become infertile. The people of God would be made fruitless wanderers among the nations.

God would cause Ephraim/Israel to experience death: *Though they bring up their children, Yet I will bereave them until not a man is left* (vs 12). That means, if Israel were to give birth to any children and were to raise them up, none would survive. This could indicate harsh conditions Israel will encounter while in exile. To set the seal on the threat, the LORD added, *Yes, woe to them indeed when I depart from them!* (vs 12). God would withdraw His presence from Israel to cause her to experience all kinds of defeat.

This is the same way in which the “wrath of God” is said to be executed on sin in Romans 1; God removed His presence from sinners. He “gave them over” to their own lust, which leads to addiction and eventually to a depraved mind (Romans 1:24,26,28). We all have within us our own source of destruction (James 1:14-15). When God withdraws His hand of protection from Israel, the Assyrian nation in whom they trusted will fully exploit them (Hosea 7:11). Their conditions will be so harsh that they will become barren.

The terrible reversal in Israel’s fortunes is further amplified in the next verse, where Hosea contrasts Israel’s current prosperity with its looming desolation: *Ephraim, as I have seen, is planted in a pleasant meadow like Tyre* (vs 13). This assessment reminds the reader of the Phoenician city named “Tyre,” a city located on the Mediterranean coast north of Israel (modern-day Lebanon). It was a wealthy city in the early eighth century, allowing the Phoenicians to control most of the commercial activity in the Mediterranean (Ezekiel 28).

In Hosea’s days, Ephraim’s wealth was compared to that of Tyre. It was exceedingly prosperous. But that will not continue: *But Ephraim will bring out his children for slaughter* (vs 13). An invasion is looming, which will result in mass devastation. That is, Israel, by her sinful and wicked deeds, would leave her children unprotected. This verse seems to allude to the political turbulence of Israel, in which her leaders vacillated between allying with and opposing Assyria, thus leaving their families wide open to the cruelty of the Assyrian army (Hosea 7:11).

For all these reasons, Hosea lamented, *Give them, O LORD—what will You give?* (vs 14) Through this prayer, the prophet first asked God to *give* but then seems to express his hesitation, then asks *what will you give?* Next, the prophet resumed his request and said, *Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts* (vs 14). The women's womb would not hold children. Their breasts would be dry to prevent them from being able to nurse their children. The prophet seems to be saying that it would be an act of mercy to keep the women from bearing children, because of the brutality the nation was about to encounter at the hands of the Assyrians.

Biblical Text

¹⁰ **I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness;
I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first *season*.
But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame,
And they became as detestable as that which they loved.**

¹¹ **As for Ephraim, their glory will fly away like a bird—
No birth, no pregnancy and no conception!**

¹² **Though they bring up their children,
Yet I will bereave them until not a man is left.
Yes, woe to them indeed when I depart from them!**

¹³ **Ephraim, as I have seen,
Is planted in a pleasant meadow like Tyre;
But Ephraim will bring out his children for slaughter.**

¹⁴ **Give them, O Lord—what will You give?
Give them a miscarrying womb and dry breasts.**