



Hosea - Chapter Five

II. Hosea 4:1-14:9 - Hosea Spells Out His Parable with Accusations, Warnings, and Promises (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

Although all the people of Israel have sinned it is the rulers of Israel have led the way into unfaithfulness. It is they who must bear responsibility for the coming judgement on the whole nation.

II.b Hosea 5:1-15 - Impending Judgement on Israel and Judah

See the chapter summary above.

- ¹ Hear this, O priests!
Give heed, O house of Israel!
Listen, O house of the king!
For the judgement pertains to you;
for you have been a snare at Mizpah,
and a net spread upon Tabor,
² and a pit dug deep in Shittim;
but I will punish all of them.

Hosea 5:1-2

Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel. Listen, O house of the king! It is both the royal and religious leadership who are directly addressed, for it will be they who are to be judged as the ones fully responsible for the sin of the nation.

When God saw the sinful state of the nation of Israel, he saw that it was because the leaders did not lead in a godly way. It would be tempting for the priests to blame the people, but it was really the fault of the spiritual leadership and political leadership of the nation.

This verse should not be used as an opportunity to blame all the ills of the church on the leadership. The whole point of church is that everyone is in it together and should accept responsibility for their own part in church life.

Mizpah in Gilead and Tabor, a mountain in the Valley of Jezreel, marked high points in Israel's past. Mizpah was the home of Jephthah (Judges 10:17), and Tabor was the scene of Barak's victory (Judges 4:14). Tabor is also the traditional site of the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8). These revered sites became a net spread upon Tabor. The image of a net, a device used for catching birds, depicts the Israelites as the prey of priests and royalty.



The Church of Transfiguration on Mount Tabor

A pit dug deep in Shittim. The real tragedy of Israel's sin was not so much that they stumbled. It was more so that they did not respond to God's rebuke when they did stumble. If a man knows how to humbly respond to God's correction, God can always work with him. This is also translated as 'have gone deep into slaughter', which may refer to child sacrifice: <<*They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood*>> (Psalm 106:36-38).

3 I know Ephraim,
and Israel is not hidden from me;
for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore;
Israel is defiled.

Hosea 5:3

Israel is not hidden from me is a subtle barb directed at idolatry where misdeeds are disregarded and concealed. The Lord knows Israel, even if Israel does not know the Lord (v.4). Jesus, too, knows the hearts of his people: <<*But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone*>> (John 2:24-25)

4 Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
For the spirit of whoredom is within them,
and they do not know the Lord.

Hosea 5:4

Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. Their own actions have taken them so far away from God that they do not even know how to repent and return to him. They are bent on self destruction: <<*The look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves*>> (Isaiah 3:9), and: <<*Your wickedness will punish you, and your apostasies will convict you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts*>> (Jeremiah 2:19).

5 Israel's pride testifies against him;
Ephraim stumbles in his guilt;
Judah also stumbles with them.

Hosea 5:5

Israel's pride testifies against him. Like all rebellion, Israel's rebellion was centred on pride. They arrogantly thought that what God said did not really matter compared to their own opinions and desires. Hosea states this again: <<*Israel's pride testifies against him; yet they do not return to the Lord their God, or seek him, for all this*>> (Hosea 7:10).

Israel and Judah have stumbled in guilt: <<*You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother*>> (Hosea 4:5), and: <<*Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity*>> (Hosea 14:1). To stumble is not a superficial mishap but a serious or even fatal accident. Presumably Israel had some role in leading Judah astray: <<*Though you play the whore, O Israel, do not let Judah become guilty. Do not enter into Gilgal, or go up to Beth-aven, and do not swear, 'As the Lord lives'*>> (Hosea 4:15).

⁶ With their flocks and herds they shall go
to seek the Lord,
but they will not find him;
he has withdrawn from them.

⁷ They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord;
for they have borne illegitimate children.

Now the new moon shall devour them along with their fields.

Hosea 5:6-7

With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord. Although they bring their sacrifices to places like Mizpah and Tabor (v.1), they will not find the Lord. When God promised to leave rebellious Israel alone in Hosea 4:17, it means that when they make superficial gestures of repentance, they will not find him. Their repentance was superficial because <<*their deeds do not permit them to return to their God*>> (v.4).

He has withdrawn from them is a reference to the worshippers, not these cult centres for he was never there: <<*Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me*>> (Proverbs 1:28), and: <<*When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood*>> (Isaiah 1:15). Thus they have borne alien children, i.e. alien to the Lord, illustrated by the last two children born to Gomer.

Sadly, the new moon festivals, celebrations for Israel to rejoice for an abundant harvest and now syncretised with the cults of the Canaanites, will devour the Israelites who participate in them. God no longer rejoiced in them either: <<*Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them*>> (Isaiah 1:14). They and their inheritance, i.e. their fields, will be swallowed up.

8 Blow the horn in Gibeah,
the trumpet in Ramah.
Sound the alarm at Beth-aven;
look behind you, Benjamin!

Hosea 5:8

The horn, Hebrew *Shophar*, originally meant a ram's horn, and is the most frequently mentioned musical instrument in the Bible; the trumpet is a bugle of beaten silver. Both were used to alert the community to danger and summon it to a religious festival. The trumpet will also announce the second coming of Christ: <<*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Both Gibeah and Ramah were in the path of destruction: <<*they have crossed over the pass, at Geba they lodge for the night; Ramah trembles, Gibeah of Saul has fled*>> (Isaiah 10:29).

9 Ephraim shall become a desolation
on the day of punishment;
among the tribes of Israel
I declare what is sure.

Hosea 5:9

Ephraim shall become a desolation on the day of punishment. Because God has withdrawn himself from them, they will find no help or refuge when the Assyrian army attacks. They will be made desolate.

Among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure. No one should ever doubt that God means what he says. When he promises blessings upon his faithful people, they will receive blessings. When he announces that the unfaithful are heading for self-destruction, that too will come to pass: <<*I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfil my intention'*>> (Isaiah 46:9b-10), <<*But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your ancestors? So they repented and said, 'The Lord of hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he planned to do'*>> (Zechariah 1:6).

10 The princes of Judah have become
like those who remove the landmark;
on them I will pour out
my wrath like water.

Hosea 5:10

The princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark. To move a neighbour's boundary marker is expressly forbidden; it brings with it a curse: <<*You must not move your neighbour's boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess*>> (Deuteronomy 19:14), and: <<*'Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour's boundary marker.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'*>> (Deuteronomy 27:17). Land-grabbing violates the divine intention that all of God's people are to enjoy their inheritance, and creates a wealthy, callous, power-abusing class. This statement means that some of the political leaders of Judah were also corrupt. They were the kind of men who would change property boundaries to their advantage if they thought they could get away with it. This is a reminder that while Judah may have been better than Israel, they still had to repent of their own sin.

My wrath like water. The word for wrath, Hebrew *'ebrah*, carries the image of overflowing fury: <<*The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the sceptre of rulers, that struck down the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution*>> (Isaiah 14:5-6), and: <<*Soon now I will pour out my wrath upon you; I will spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your ways, and punish you for all your abominations*>> (Ezekiel 7:8).

11 Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgement,
because he was determined to go after vanity.

Hosea 5:11

Ephraim is oppressed, crushed in judgement, because he was determined to go after vanity. The fate of the whole nation is sealed because of their own pride and the course of action they have decided upon. Their vanity was idol worship: <<*For you have kept the statutes of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you have followed their counsels. Therefore I will make you a desolation, and your inhabitants an object of hissing; so you shall bear the scorn of my people*>> (Micah 6:16). They knew of God's ways from the stories passed on from their ancestors but they chose a path of self destruction.

12 Therefore I am like maggots to Ephraim,
and like rottenness to the house of Judah.

Hosea 5:12

I am like maggots, and like rottenness. These are unusual similes for the Lord often translated moth and dry rot respectively; they emphasise his power to make the people waste away: <<*One wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten*>> (Job 13:28), and: <<*You chastise mortals in punishment for sin, consuming like a moth what is dear to them; surely everyone is a mere breath*>> (Psalm 39:11). God will be the one who eats away and corrodes what Israel and Judah have. They will not be blessed, and they will not increase.

Jesus teaches how to overcome this: <<*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*>> (Matthew 6:19-21).

13 When Ephraim saw his sickness,
and Judah his wound,
then Ephraim went to Assyria,
and sent to the great king.
But he is not able to cure you
or heal your wound.

Hosea 5:13

When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound. The use of physical infirmities to describe spiritual corruption is common to the OT prophets. Notice how frequently the prophet puts Israel/Ephraim and Judah together in Hosea 1:11, 4:15, 5:12-14, 6:4, 8:14, 10:11, and 11:12. Suggestions as to specifics include Menahem paying heavy tribute to Assyria in 2 Kings 15:19 after pacifying Assyria by assassinating Shallum (2 Kings 15:13-15), and Ahaz's frantic appeal for military aid in 2 Kings 16:5-9.

The great king is probably Tiglath-pileser III, also called Pul in the OT (745-727 BC). This formidable leader headed the neo-Assyrian Empire that ruthlessly subjugated the ancient Near East for over a century.

But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound. No human king, or anyone else, will be able to heal the sickness that had fallen upon this corrupt generation. Only the Lord can do that and that would require them to repent.

14 For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
and like a young lion to the house of Judah.
I myself will tear and go away;
I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.

Hosea 5:14

I will be like a lion, like a young lion. God's judgement would come against Israel and Judah in subtle ways (like maggots, like rottenness). But it would also come in obvious, unmistakable ways. Both a maggot and a lion bring destruction, they just do so in different ways.

The repetition of the first person, I myself reminds the audience that it is solely the Lord who controls the nation's fate and not the 'great king' who is commonly depicted as a lion. Wounded Israel and Judah are vulnerable to a far superior menace, the unleashed fury of the Lord.

There is a King who can save them and he too is described as a lion: <<*Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'*>> (Revelation 5:5).

15 I will return again to my place
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.
In their distress they will beg my favour:

Hosea 5:15

I will return again to my place alludes to the immediately preceding figure of the lion returning to its den; it is the Lord speaking, and until they acknowledge their guilt in their distress declares what he expects of his people. The wilderness generation, who frequently contended with Moses, realised that they needed to confess their sins in order to take away their punishment: <<*The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.'* So Moses prayed for the people>> (Numbers 21:7).

Seek my face, they will beg my favour. This was the goal of God's judgement against Israel. The goal was not destruction, but restoration. Sadly, it is often only in affliction that people earnestly seek the Lord. The prophet made just such a petition: <<*Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people*>> (Isaiah 64:9).