

# The Forest

## Israel's Adultery and Prostitution

- A) Indictment of Israel (4:1-3)
- B) Coming Judgment (4:4-6)
- C) Condemnation and Warning (4:7-10)
- D) CENTER: Guilt of Israel's Prostitution (4:11-14)
- C') Condemnation and Warning (4:15-19)
- A') Indictment of Israel (5:1-4)
- B') Coming Judgment (5:5-7)

**MAIN POINT:** "Hosea's main point is that God will discipline the nation of Israel because the priests (and the people) do not truly know God (4: 6). A spirit of prostitution controls their hearts, which makes it difficult for them to acknowledge God as the Sovereign One who controls their future (5: 4).

## Indictment of Israel

<sup>1</sup> Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, **for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants** of the land. **There is no** faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; <sup>2</sup> **there is** swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. <sup>3</sup> **Therefore** the **land mourns**, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the **beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away**.

Yahweh has a quarrel ("controversy") with the inhabitants of the land. Compare this verse with Micah 6:2.

*"Hear what the Lord says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel."* (Micah 6:1–2, ESV)

In the Micah verse, the Lord calls the mountains and the foundations of the earth as witnesses to his indictment against Israel. This passage in Hosea has the same rhetorical structure, but something is odd about it.

## Who takes the place of the witnesses in v.1?

The children of Israel.

## Who is receiving the indictment?

The inhabitants of the land.

## Why might Hosea phrase it this way?

By doing so, he makes a distinction between "the children of Israel" and the "inhabitants of the land." The "children of Israel" occurs only two other times in Hosea, and both times it is in a context related to Israel's salvation. In other words, he is calling for a faithful remnant to

hear the grievances he has against the people, to reject the behavior of the “inhabitants of the land,” just as in Hosea 2:2 he calls upon the children to contend with their unfaithful mother.

Rhetorically, the message is - being descendants of Jacob and dwelling in the land do not constitute one as one of the “children of Israel.” Rather, by their behavior, these “children of Israel” have simply become “inhabitants of the land.”

### **What does the land lack that it should have?**

- There is no:
  - Faithfulness - the word speaks of integrity, truth. The people are living a lie, having no moral integrity.
  - Steadfast love - hesed, biblical love. It is doing mercy, showing grace, going above and beyond in acts of kindness. The people are cruel and selfish.
  - Knowledge of God - objectively, knowing right things about God; subjectively, a personal relationship with God. The people “have embraced false teaching about God and/or have no living connection to God.”

### **Together, what do these things constitute?**

The sum and purpose of the Christian faith. After all, what is it to be a Christian but to know God, to live lives of moral integrity, and to experience his steadfast love and reflect it to our neighbor? The absence of these things is a sure sign of an absence of spiritual life. Ultimately, the people of the land are held accountable for lacking these qualities.

### **What does the land have that it should lack?**

- Notice how these correlate with the ten commandments
- There is:
  - Swearing - 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment - the word means calling down a curse on someone in the name of a god
  - Lying - 9<sup>th</sup> commandment
  - Murder - 6<sup>th</sup> commandment
  - Stealing - 8<sup>th</sup> commandment
  - Committing Adultery - 7<sup>th</sup> commandment
  - Bloodshed after bloodshed

Similar to how the absence of faithfulness, love, and knowledge of God is a sign of spiritual death, so also the presence of these things is a sign of that as well.

### **What is the result of this?**

The land mourns and the inhabitants languish. They are experiencing the curses of the covenant promised in Deuteronomy.

### **What does the imagery of “[beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away](#)” seek to convey?**

An undoing of creation itself. As one commentator writes: “Hosea has presented all creation (earth, sky, and sea) as suffering the wrath of Yahweh. This is the familiar prophetic theme of the undoing of creation, and the language recalls Genesis 1. The wrath of God has a cosmic dimension; if the people of God are disobedient, the all creation suffers. As a type, this anticipates the final judgment on creation.”

## Coming Judgment

<sup>4</sup> Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. <sup>5</sup> You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. <sup>6</sup> My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

There is a translation difficulty in verse 4, which can be demonstrated by comparing two translations:

NASB: “Yet let no one find fault, and let none offer reproof; For your people are like those who contend with the priest.” (Hosea 4:4, NASB95)

ESV: “Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest.” (Hosea 4:4, ESV)

The translation the NASB gives represents the Hebrew text as we currently have it; the ESV translation represents an adjustment of a couple letters, as proposed by many biblical scholars today, with the explanation that other reading doesn't make sense either grammatically or in context.

### **Who does Yahweh appear to be addressing in this passage?**

Regardless of which way it is translated, the meaning of the overall passage seems clear - Yahweh is holding the the religious leadership accountable for behavior of the people. Either addressing the priests directly, as we see in the ESV, or in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person as we see in the NASB, either way the message seems to be that rather than accusing one another and bringing a charge against each other, the people's behavior is evidence against the priests themselves.

### **What is the significance of stumbling? What does this mean for the people?**

The metaphor of stumbling carries with it the idea of consequence for sins - stumbling day and night, or all the time. If they are stumbling during the day, that would imply drunkenness (as in the wine of v.11) or even drinking in the wrath of God. The point along with the follow-up statement “I will destroy your mother,” seems to be that the institutions of Israel will be brought down and destroyed. The power and religious authority structures will be judged and removed.

### **Why are the people destroyed?**

They are destroyed for lack of knowledge. They are presented as the victim here (still guilty by their willing cooperation), but the biggest blame falls on those responsible for teaching them. The false teaching of the religious leadership is the greatest offense, because that person not only bears guilt for their own sin but also for the sins of those they lead astray. The group of people Jesus was most severe with were the leaders and religious authorities of his day.

We also see in this passage a reversal of Exodus 19:6 - “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Although we've surmised that the ones being addressed are the rulers, they are also representatives of the people and in that sense the rejection applies to the whole people.

### **What is the knowledge they have rejected?**

They have rejected, or “forgotten,” the law of God. They have abandoned the knowledge of God’s will as he has revealed it in Scripture. This is the template for false teachers of all time - setting aside the will of God as revealed in Scripture and replacing it with their own systems or teaching.

### **Condemnation and Warning**

<sup>7</sup> The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. <sup>8</sup> They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. <sup>9</sup> And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. <sup>10</sup> They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the Lord to cherish

### **What happened as the priesthood grew in number?**

They became even more sinful.

### **Why is that ironic?**

One would expect an increase in the religious class to indicate a spiritual vitality among the people. Instead, as they grew the worse they got.

### **What is Yahweh’s response?**

He will turn the inherent glory of the priesthood into shame. As one commentator writes, “The judgment is that someday God will bring the priests into disgrace in that he will cause the people to recognize them for the frauds they are and to despise them.”

### **How do the priests benefit from the sinfulness of the people?**

The more they sin, the more they have to sacrifice and the more the priests gain since they are the recipients of the sacrificial offering. Furthermore, the guilt of the people grants power to the clergy to manipulate and control.

There is a further angle here as well - the pagan practices and idolatry that had been brought into Israel also brought with it the practice of cultic prostitution - where there would be temple prostitutes who engage in sex for the purposes of ensuring fertility and prosperity for the land. The result was literal acts of wickedness by the people resulting in profit for the priests (or “pimps”, in this case).

### **What is this reminiscent of in the Christian era?**

The practice of indulgences in the Catholic church (which has actually been reinstated in recent years), is a striking modern parallel to the guilt for profit model. The religious institutions profit by the sinfulness and penance of the people.

### **What is Yahweh’s response?**

Similar to previous pronouncements, he will frustrate their plans and bring their own deeds upon their heads. All of their actions, the failure to teach the knowledge of God, the greed,

and the promotion of sin, are a result of rejecting the LORD.

### **What's the lesson to be learned about the outcome of false teaching?**

False teaching inevitably leads to a corruption of worship and incurs the judgment of God. This is true just as much today as it was in Hosea's day. The prevailing religious and cultural norms of the day influence and consume the true worship of God.

### **What are some examples of false philosophies and ideas from our culture that have crept into our modern worship?**

e.g. Pragmatism

### **Guilt of Israel's Prostitution**

<sup>11</sup> whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding. <sup>12</sup> My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore. <sup>13</sup> They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. <sup>14</sup> I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.

Verse 11 is often connected to the end of verse 10 and made subordinate to it. However, it is most likely to be taken as the first line of a standalone proverb, with the second line coming in verse 14. Combined, the proverb would read:

Prostitution, wine, and new wine take away the understanding,  
And a people without understanding shall come to ruin.

The word prostitution actually appears to be an addition by Hosea, as it disrupts the meter of the saying, but is the primary subject of the next couple verses. The verses in the middle are a recounting of how the people shall fulfill this proverb. The prostitution in this case is both literal and spiritual prostitution.

### **What is depicted in verses 12-13?**

This is the their idolatry at work - they inquire of sacred objects for omens and signs. The dullness of their minds is apparent in the fact that they look for spiritual wisdom from inanimate wood objects. The statement that "their shade is good" when speaking of the trees under which these activities are performed speaks to the appealing scene that has been created and attracts the people. There is an element of recreation and pleasure in these religious rites that appeals to the average person. The sacrifices they make are eaten and enjoyed by the participants, and the gross idolatry taking place looks more like a hippie picnic under the shade on a hill (complete with food and immorality) than a dark, evil act.

### **Why might the "daughters and brides" in this passage not be punished for their actions?**

While the "not punish" is likely rhetorical (since they are judged along with the nation), the point is clear - these women are subject to a system that makes it virtually inevitable that they will engage in immorality. The men insist upon it. The double standard in this society is

strong - the women are held in contempt for their prostitution, but it is acceptable behavior for the men. The Greek historian, Herodotus, recounts what this cult prostitution looks like in the ancient world. This account is from 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Babylon, but likely not too far off from the kinds of things that went on in Northern Israel, and it ca:

“The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger once in her life. Many women who are rich and proud and disdain to mingle with the rest, drive to the temple in covered carriages drawn by teams, and stand there with a great retinue of attendants. [2] But most sit down in the sacred plot of Aphrodite, with crowns of cord on their heads; there is a great multitude of women coming and going; passages marked by line run every way through the crowd, by which the men pass and make their choice. [3] Once a woman has taken her place there, she does not go away to her home before some stranger has cast money into her lap, and had intercourse with her outside the temple; but while he casts the money, he must say, “I invite you in the name of Mylitta” (that is the Assyrian name for Aphrodite). [4] It does not matter what sum the money is; the woman will never refuse, for that would be a sin, the money being by this act made sacred. So she follows the first man who casts it and rejects no one. After their intercourse, having discharged her sacred duty to the goddess, she goes away to her home; and thereafter there is no bribe however great that will get her. [5] So then the women that are fair and tall are soon free to depart, but the uncomely have long to wait because they cannot fulfill the law; for some of them remain for three years, or four.”

**Does this view of women and culture of immorality have any applicability for our day?**

### **More Condemnation**

<sup>15</sup> Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-aven, and swear not, "As the Lord lives." <sup>16</sup> Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture? <sup>17</sup> Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone. <sup>18</sup> When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly love shame. <sup>19</sup> A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

This next passage is either a warning to Judah to avoid the sin of Israel, or an ironic call to Israel, drawing on her sister Judah in the sense of "Israel, you are so wicked that even Judah must stay away to avoid your guilt.

### **What does Hosea not want Judah to do?**

Enter into Israel, specific towns listed are Gilgal and Beth-aven, near the border of the north and south. Here Hosea is actually drawing on a similar passage from his contemporary Amos:

*"For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing." Seek the Lord and live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,"* (Amos 5:4–6, ESV)

### **What's significant about Gilgal?**

This is a site of much historical significance in Israel:

- Joshua's first base of operations in Canaan (Josh 4:19)
- Place of first passover in new land (Josh 5:7-12)
- Many of the events of Samuel and Saul took place here (1 Sam 11:14-15)

It was a sacred place, but in the time of Hosea and Amos had become a place of apostasy.

### **What's significant about Beth-aven (Bethel)?**

- The place where Abraham camped
- The place where Jacob saw his vision of the stairway
- The place where God revealed himself to Jacob

Jeroboam I turned this place into a competitor to Solomon's temple and ended the pilgrimages to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:29-13). The name Hosea uses to refer to the town means "House of Deception." The "House of God" had become a place of idolatry and religious fraud.

### **What is the conclusion drawn about Israel in verse 16-19?**

Israel is corrupt and beyond restoration:

- "Stubborn"
- Joined to Idols, Leave him alone
- Habitually drunk and immoral

### **What is Judah warned will happen to Israel?**

They will be caught up in judgment. This metaphor likely speaks to either a whirlwind or the winds that bring draught. Picture a small bird trying to flutter in the midst of a tornado and you get the idea.

### **More Indictment of Israel**

<sup>1</sup> Hear this, O priests! Pay attention, O house of Israel! Give ear, O house of the king! For the judgment is for you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. <sup>2</sup> And the revolvers have gone deep into slaughter, but I will discipline all of them. <sup>3</sup> I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from me; for now, O Ephraim, you have played the whore; Israel is defiled. <sup>4</sup> Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the Lord.

### **Who is the subject of this indictment?**

- Priests and religious leaders
- Land owners in Israel (“house of Israel”)
- The royal house

### **What is the judgement against them?**

- Snare at Mizpah
- Net spread upon Tabor
- Revolvers have gone deep into slaughter (or, cf. NRSV, etc - “Pit dug deep in Shittim” - Hebrew here obscure, this fits the parallelism better)

Each of the locations mentioned had likely become centers of idolatry and apostasy, and hence a “snare” to the people.

### **What does he promise to do?**

Discipline all of them. Literally, it reads, “I am fetters for all of them.” The irony here is that the leaders of Israel have laid snares for the people and now Yahweh has become a snare for them. The idea of fetters closely connects with the idea of captivity (i.e. Exile).

### **He says, “their deeds do not permit them to return to God.” What might that mean?**

### **What does this passage reveal about the dangers of structural evil? About the possibility to be hardened beyond repentance?**

### **What does this passage highlight about the importance and responsibility of leadership?**

God holds leaders accountable, and we see that bad leaders can bring a whole nation down, while good leaders can bring a people to repentance and restoration. Bad leaders are often themselves a judgement on a people.

<sup>5</sup> The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt; Judah also shall stumble with them. <sup>6</sup> With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord,



but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them. <sup>7</sup> They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord; for they have borne alien children. Now the new moon shall devour them with their fields.

**What does it mean that the “pride of Israel testifies to his face?”**

The pride spoken here is of the nation’s leaders, whose arrogance had led them into abandoning Yahweh. The sense seems to be that when the collapse of the nation collapses, it will be clear the cause of it. Their pride clearly came before their fall.

**What is said about Judah?**

This statement about Judah stands out boldly here because it breaks the typical two line symmetry, almost as a add-on thought. It’s a progression from earlier verses where the hope was for Judah to remain clean, but here Judah is headed down the same path of stumbling.

**Does this passage say that even if Israel repents, they will not find the Lord?**

The statement “with their flocks and herds they shall go seek the Lord” is likely referring to acts of religious worship, sacrifice, and so on. “Going to church” will get them nowhere and will not bring them to Yahweh. He has removed his presence from their worship. He is essentially saying, “your sacrifices and offerings mean nothing to me.”

**What is the result of “dealing faithlessly with the Lord?”**

Bearing alien children. This harks back to the “children of whoredom” in earlier verses. The nation has dealt faithlessly, and as a result has borne illegitimate children.

**What is symbolized by the new moon here?**

The new moon is a lunar eclipse, and hence blackness and darkness. Darkness shall envelope the lands and devour the people. There is also a sense that the new moons hints at the religious festivals which have become their downfall.