

THE BOOK OF HOSEA
Lesson 22, Chapters 12 and 13

We left off at Hosea 12:10 last time (or 12:9 depending on your Bible version), when God was calling to remembrance just who He was and what His relationship was with Israel. This was clearly necessary because Ephraim/Israel's worship had become so confused and perverted over the centuries after the era when David and Solomon had ruled over a united Israelite kingdom; a kingdom that eventually fractured into two soon after Solomon's death: Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom).

Ephraim had come to look much more like Canaan than the Israel that fled Egypt. They had, at least by the 9th century, incorporated Baal into their worship although they maintained a supposed loyalty to Yehoveh. By the 8th century they had also added calf worship, with the calves of gold being molded at the order of King Jeroboam to supposedly represent Yehoveh. Ephraim had even gone so far as to regularly consult with and worship an angel called Bethel or the Angel of Bethel. In verse 10 God is making it clear that none of these were Israel's God... only the God whose name is Yehoveh is Israel's God. We would do well to remember that still at this point in history, Israel did not believe that Yehoveh was the only god. Rather, for them, Yehoveh was one of many, which is why the name of a god is so important, and it was no different for Israel then or for modern day Christians and Jews as well. Just like for humans a name is an identity, and an identity defines a being's attributes. As an aside: never fall for the rather common mantra within much of Christianity today that Allah of Islam and Yehoveh of the Bible are the same god just with different names. That is a dangerous and blasphemous falsehood that is repeated again and again. Allah is the NAME of the God of Islam, and this god's name and identity is totally different than the God of the Bible. Their chosen people are even different. The god of Islam's chosen people descend from Abraham's son Ishmael (who was rejected by Yehoveh and banished from Abraham's family) while the God of Bible's chosen people descend from Abraham's son Isaac.

When many centuries earlier Israel made a covenant with Yehoveh on Mt. Sinai that He would be their God and they would be His people, it was under the Hebrew mindset that He became their national god even though all other nations

also had their own gods. This is why in the 10 Commandments (the 10 Words) the first and second commandments deal with this reality as the condition for the covenant with Israel to exist. As a note, it is interesting that the Christian version of the 10 Commandments skips over the first biblical commandment, making what is actually the second commandment the first. Here is the entirety of those first two commandments:

CJB Exodus 20:1-6 *Then God said all these words: ² "I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the abode of slavery. ³ "You are to have no other gods before me. ⁴ You are not to make for yourselves a carved image or any kind of representation of anything in heaven above, on the earth beneath or in the water below the shoreline. ⁵ You are not to bow down to them or serve them; for I, ADONAI your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but displaying grace to the thousandth generation of those who love me and obey my mitzvot.*

The 3rd verse of Exodus 20 says that Israel is to have "no other gods before me". The word usually translated as "before" is **al** and it means "before" in the sense of a pecking order... a hierarchy. An easier and better way to understand it would be to use the English word "above". We don't find anywhere in the commandments that Yehoveh says that there are no other gods. Rather it is that for Israel none of those gods are to be held above Him in rank or worshipped in any manner, in the way Israel was to practice their religious faith. Further, since all the other gods are typically symbolized by their worshippers by images of humans and animals and thus little idols are carved to represent them, God orders that no such symbols are to be used for Himself. No human and no living creature should ever be used as an image of Him. Ephraim/Israel had violated every aspect of commandments 1 and 2. They had risen Baal up to be above (or at least on par with) Yehoveh. And later their king, Jeroboam, fashioned two calves (bulls actually) as representations of Yehoveh and proudly announced to his people: "here is your god that brought you out of Egypt".

Yehoveh was reminding Israel that the covenant they had agreed to with Him was an exclusive one. According to the terms of the Covenant of Moses the ONLY god they were allowed to worship was Him... regardless of whether Israel

believed there were many gods. They had broken that fundamental condition long ago and after an equally long time of warning them to repent and to honor the covenant, Israel only got off track all the further.

Let's re-read the final few verses of Hosea chapter 12.

RE-READ HOSEA CHAPTER 12:11 – end

God affirms something that all Believers in the God of Israel and those who trust His Holy Scriptures must take to heart. What we read in the books of the Prophets are indeed God speaking to His people through those Prophets who are God's authorized agents. In fact, these Prophets are an integral and indispensable part of salvation history; they are at the core of God's saving will and plan. Thus, it pains me to hear again and again from modern Pastors that they are reluctant to teach the Prophets from the pulpit, from both the aspects that they think the Prophets are too complex (if not nearly unintelligible) to teach, and because the Prophets are too negative, judgmental and depressing in tone. Moses was called a Prophet because He heard directly from God, and then passed along to the people what God told him. So, the thing that sets Prophets apart from all others is that they hear from God in direct speech to them. Prophets are sometimes even given divine visions that concern what God is going to do... sometimes as a warning to repent, and other times (like in Hosea) to tell the people of Israel why they are going to be punished and that they had better get to preparing for what is coming.

Something that the ancient Hebrews understood, which gentile Christianity in general does not, is that these words from the Prophets (which come to them from God) contain actual power. These prophetic words are the catalyst to cause the actualization of God's speech to spring into physical, tangible reality. So, in the case of Hosea, his words are incredibly dynamic as they literally set into motion the judgment God has decided upon and is in process of heaping upon Israel. The words have the same power and authority today and in the future as they had in the past so we must heed them or bear the consequence. We must listen, repent and change, and we must also prepare for what God says is surely coming to the world because no one and nothing is going to stop it.

Bottom line: Israel has no excuse to lean upon and neither do we. God has laid it out for us and recorded it in writing. He has revealed His expectations of us (as His worshippers), just as He has told us the path that history is going to take. But after telling this information to Israel in verse 11, suddenly Hosea launches into a diatribe against Gilgal and Gilead. The evil that is being addressed is the idolatrous religious evil... Ephraim's religious cult activity... that has been occurring at those places. The difficulty in making sense of it is that whatever exactly was happening there in Hosea's day, which apparently was well-known in Ephraim/Israel, is mostly lost to history. What we can know is that whatever it was, it was drastically serious in God's eyes as the word chosen to describe it is **avon**... usually translated as iniquity. **Avon** is the Hebrew word for the worst of the worst sorts of evil in a hierarchy of evil behavior. Saying that in Gilgal bulls are sacrificed must have to do with the way they performed it, and whom they dedicated the bulls to, because certainly sacrificing bulls is called for in the Torah. Of course, my estimation is that what is also offensive to God is the place they made these sacrifices. Proper ritual sacrifice as prescribed in the Law of Moses could only occur at one place and upon one altar: the Temple altar in Jerusalem. Further it could only be performed by Levite priests. Therefore, by definition, to sacrifice anything to Yehoveh in Gilgal or Gilead was inherently wrong. Hosea says that these unauthorized altars and temples that Ephraim/Israel built in those places (and in other places as well, such as at Dan and at Bethel) will be reduced to rubble because they have no value and are deeply offense to God.

The Prophet Micah speaks of this as well.

CJB Micah 1:6-7 ***6 "So I will make Shomron (Samaria) a heap in the countryside, a place for planting vineyards; I will pour her stones down into the valley, laying bare her foundations. 7 All her carved images will be smashed to pieces, all she earned consumed by fire; and I will reduce her idols to rubble. She amassed them from a whore's wages, and as a whore's wages they will be spent again."***

The thing to understand about improper worship to God is that not only does God not accept it, He also punishes those who do it. It is a great sin against Him and He doesn't look the other way even though our intent was not to do evil. And yet, since we have the holy written Word that tells us what proper worship amounts to, if we ignore it and go our own way, then is that not intentional evil? This was

more often than not Israel's sin; fully thinking they were pleasing God but looking to the wrong sources to learn what it is that pleases and displeases Him. In the highly individualistic West of our era, Church doctrines have been created or modified to often allow (and encourage) great liberties to be taken in our worship practices, believing that in a sense each person has the right and authority to tailor worship to our own personal preferences. While I do think that there is a measure of flexibility in how we can appropriately worship and apply our faith to the many situations we encounter, there are also firm boundaries. The only place in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, where those boundaries are extensively and specifically laid out is the Torah. Further, as we learn in Hosea, how we imagine God to be... in attributes and in substance... can also be found primarily in the Torah. When Ephraim turned their collective backs to the Torah, they substituted the god they wanted for the God who is. They gave Yehoveh animal and human attributes, they assumed they could worship more than one god provided they also continued to worship Him, and they concluded that they could make images of Him that symbolized what they thought were representative of His person. For all this and more, Yehoveh was about to eject Ephraim from the Land of Promise and bring down horrific destruction and death upon them.

How do you imagine God? Where did you get your information from to form your conclusions? From your own imagination? Maybe from your Rabbi or your Pastor? From Christian books and movies? From your social circle of friends and family? Is it from your long-held church or synagogue traditions and doctrines? Or, is it from the Holy Bible, beginning with the Torah? If you haven't drawn your image of God that stays firmly within the well laid-out boundaries of the Torah, I can assure you that you have the wrong image in mind and this willfully wrong image is what God calls idolatry. Which means that if you reject the Torah you cannot possibly know God's attributes, laws and principles, and thus cannot properly worship Him as He demands to be worshipped. Improper worship brings on punishment. I know that might sound severe or harsh to some of you; but this is the essential core message of Hosea. Much earlier in Hosea we read this:

CJB Hosea 4:6 ⁶ *My people are destroyed for want of knowledge. Because you rejected knowledge, I will also reject you as cohen for me. Because you forgot the Torah of your God, I will also forget your children.*

Verses 13 and 14 work together as a unit in order to draw the history of Israel back into the subject matter by recalling the story of the Patriarch Jacob. First we're told of Jacob fleeing to Aram and then of Israel being a servant of sorts in exchange for a wife. Here both the terms Jacob and Israel mean a person... two names for the same person. The story of Jacob going north to find a wife is an often told one. He goes to his uncle Laban's house and spies his daughter Rachel (in other words, Rachel was Jacob's cousin), and wants to marry her. Since Jacob is poor and has nothing to offer as a bride price, he agrees to serve Laban for 7 years (as a kind of bondservant) in payment. Her father agrees to the arrangement but in the marriage ceremony Laban secretly switches out Rachel for her older sister Leah, and Jacob accidentally marries a wife he hadn't bargained for. Laban, having no conscience about the matter, says that Jacob can still marry Rachel, but this will require an additional 7 years of service to him.

The point and message that Hosea is presenting here is summarized in verse 14.

CJB Hosea 12:14 ***¹⁴ By a prophet ADONAI brought Isra'el up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was protected.***

So, the first part of this verse uses the term Israel to refer to the nation of Israel, but when the word "he" (meaning Israel) is used next ("he was protected") it points back to the founder of Israel, the person of Jacob having been the protected one. This gist is that just as Jacob acquired a wife in exchange for being a servant to her father Laban, and in the so-doing Jacob expected that Rachel's father would honor the deal, so does God expect to be treated with loyalty (as a just reward, so to speak) for having rescued Israel from Egypt through a Prophet (Moses), and ushering them through to the wilderness to a Land God set aside for them.

James Luther Mays has an interesting thought about the inclusion of the life of Jacob again at this point in the chapter. And while it is his speculation, it offers a likely explanation for this decision to once again bring up the Patriarch Jacob. I feel it is always best to search for a historical reason behind most biblically reported actions because without doubt there always is one. These decisions and events in the Bible didn't happen independently or in a vacuum; invariably

something concrete was going on in order for these Bible characters to think and decide to do what they did.

Mays writes this: ***In the Assyrian crisis some circles in the nation probably turned to the Jacob tradition with its promise of the land in perpetuity as a theology of last resort.***

That is, as Israel was faced with the dire prospect that they were going to lose their land and nation to Assyria, they began to believe that it wouldn't and couldn't happen because their founder (Jacob) was promised that this land would always belong to Jacob and his descendants due to Jacob's merit. Israel, then, was sort-of depending on Jacob as their rescuer. But in Mays' view Israel ought not to have seen themselves in light of their Patriarch Jacob, but instead in the identity that God gave them in their exodus from Egypt. An identity completely formed by the Mosaic Covenant and not by Jacob. It was Yehoveh who performed Israel's rescue from Egypt. It was Yehoveh who kept watch over Israel. So, while Jacob's life was determined by him acquiring a wife, Israel's life was determined by a Prophet (Moses). Hosea is urging Ephraim/Israel to understand that while the Jacob tradition is certainly true, and it is a wonderful story of their beginning as a nation, on the other hand their real identity and value lies not there but rather in their founding Prophet, Moses, and in their God Yehoveh, and most certainly not in those worthless cult centers of Gilead and Gilgal.

Unfortunately, as verse 15 sums it up, this isn't what happened. Instead, Israel and their political and religious leaders went their own way and angered Yehoveh. Not by one or two actions have they done this, but rather continuously and continually for decade after decade. Eventually God had little choice but to let Ephraim wallow in his guilt and suffer the devastating consequences he earned for his collective self. A punishment was due, and a punishment it will be because Ephraim/Israel forgot who they were; they shucked off their God-given identity (formed by the exodus and their wilderness experience) for another identity of their choosing. They abandoned the Covenant of Moses and the Torah where this identity and instruction that God gave to them was located, and now they have made themselves worthless because they refused to continue in their proper God-given identity, which is to carry out their divine purpose on earth and their intimate relationship with God in Heaven.

Let's move on to chapter 13.

READ HOSEA CHAPTER 13 all

In this chapter we see Israel's past and present combine to foretell their future. Because Israel refuses to stop sinning, even though God has patiently remained faithful, then their future destruction is assured. What is their sin? They have violated the first two of the 10 Commandments, which amounts to committing idolatry.

We've talked on a few occasions about the problem of humans dividing the Bible books into chapters and verses... something which didn't happen until around 1000 years ago. The problem is that by doing this chapter and verse numbering a new chapter can appear to be a break in the action from the previous chapter; or a verse can appear to not necessarily be connected the verse or verses before it. It happens often that this can confuse us. Such is the case with what is nearly always labeled as verse 1 of chapter 13. If one was inclined to make a chapter break, then this verse more belongs as the final verse of chapter 12 than the opening verse of chapter 13. Essentially, this verse is God's verdict in Israel's trial and so it belongs as the conclusion of the courtroom drama that plays out in chapter 12.

The key to understanding this verse is that in this rare case in the Book of Hosea the mention of Ephraim is of Ephraim as its own individual tribe... one of the 10 tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom... not as the entire nation of the Northern Kingdom. Ephraim was by far the largest and most influential of all the tribes. And thus, during the time when Ephraim spoke and acted in righteousness, the other tribes paid attention and followed suit. Ephraim was admired and envied because they were so large and powerful. However, when Ephraim turned to Baal worship, and used his position of power over the other northern tribes to join him, then in God's eyes Ephraim fell from their superior position that God had vaulted them into, and now has died. They aren't God's Ephraim any longer, so they are dead to Him.

Verse 2 speaks of Israel's continuing sin and then says what that sin is. It is that they have cast images of silver. This sentence is a little tricky to untangle but it

is important to do so. One of several ways this verse gets translated into English makes it seem that God is upset over two separate things: 1) Israel makes molten images, and 2) they make idols. In fact, that's not really what is said. There is only one activity mentioned as the sin, and not two. In Hebrew the word for anything molten is *maccekah*. This is followed up with another Hebrew word *asabbim* that literally means images. So, it is but one thing that God is upset with in this verse and it is with a molten image. This is verified by what comes next when it the verse continues with letting those who sacrifice kiss the calves. So, this is speaking of the calf images. Why the inclusion of the word "silver" when the calf images have always been gold is a mystery except that very possibly there were multiple calf images and some were made of silver and not gold.

I touched on this matter earlier in our lesson. It is this: before King Jeroboam ordered the calf images to be made, Ephraim/Israel was already worshipping Baal along with all the associated idols. It seems by the time we reach the later parts of Hosea's career that Baal worship had been largely subdued, with Israel changing their focus to the calf images. The mindset seems logical. Without doubt Baal was a different god than Yehoveh; it was never argued that Baal and Yehoveh were the same god. And so, when Jeroboam was coming into power he seems to have instituted a religious reform agenda that included putting a lid on Baal worship. However, because the people were so used to and enamored with worshipping images, he allowed that practice to continue by creating a new and different image to worship... a calf... and then declaring that it was NOT Baal, but rather it was Yehoveh the God who led Israel out of Egypt.

Admittedly some of this is speculation because what I suggested isn't necessarily specifically called out in the scripture record. However, earlier in Hosea Baal was front and center and now, many years later, it's the calf gods. The shift from Baal idols to the calf gods as the chapters fly-by in Hosea is pretty obvious when we parse the Hebrew such that the words are properly and literally translated and then we can see the evolution and understand the difference. I take the time to point this out because Judaism and Christianity have, over time, also evolved in our symbols and icons thinking that the newer ought to please God more than the older. And yet, as I caution time and again, symbols and icons are dicey things to deal with. We all have our rationalizations why our preferred ones are OK but others are not; but the issue should not be what we prefer but rather

what God finds acceptable or offensive. Generally speaking, we find in the Bible that symbols and icons for God's people are played down and often advised against even though their use is not necessarily always an outright sin. Symbols are treated somewhat like the issue of vow making, which, according to Christ, can be dicey as well, so He recommended rather than vowing to do or not to do something, we are better off to simply make our yes, yes and our no, no. Why is that? By avoiding symbols and vows we can avoid the sins of an offensive symbol and breaking a vow. Just as God expects us to keep a vow because by definition all vows by His worshippers invoke Him as the guarantor of the vow (and so it is a serious sin if we don't keep a vow), some symbols can be deeply offensive to God (but we're never quite certain which ones are and aren't) so it's probably better to mostly avoid them as they are not something God asks us to use in our worship of Him. We have a modern-day proverb that reflects the same logic: discretion is the better part of valor.

Besides, as is pointed out by this verse, any and every symbol is merely the work of a human craftsman. How could human hands possibly create something of a material nature that God welcomes or needs or is in some way representative of Him? As far as God is concerned (as the final words of verse 2 make clear), despite any insistence from the people that they do **not** think the calf images are actually God, but only representative of Him, He nevertheless sees their sacrifices before these calf images as sacrifices to the images and not to Him.

Verse 3 introduces the punishment that is commensurate to Israel's sin, as it is spelled out in the Covenant of Moses. The punishment is that Israel is going to disappear... that is, they will cease being a recognized set-apart people in their own nation. Four different figures of speech are used to get the message across as to the nature of what is going to happen to Israel. They will be like 1) a morning cloud, 2) like dew that forms early in the day, 3) like the chaff that is driven away from the threshing floor, and 4) like smoke that comes from a chimney. In each case the item is there for a while but vanishes as quickly as it appeared. All evidence of the existence of a morning cloud, the early dew, the chaff and the smoke are gone. The disappearance is total; there is nothing left. That is Ephraim/Israel's destiny.

We should notice that at verse 4 the narrative changes from Hosea speaking, to God speaking an oracle. He begins with something that is being hammered away at for the last many verses in Hosea's prophecy: His identity. "I am Yehoveh your God, from the land of Egypt". This reality is generally obscured in English Bibles because invariably they do NOT say "Yehoveh" they say "Lord". The point is not that God is God; the point is that Israel's God is named Yehoveh; so, Israel going to any god by any other name is to go to a god that isn't their God. And to further connect Himself to the exodus and to the Covenant of Moses He says He is the God from the land of Egypt.

Yehoveh reminds Israel of the 10 Commandments by saying that they were told that they were to "know" no other God but Him. To "know" means to have a relationship of allegiance and dependence. He was to be their exclusive God. And since He is their only God then there can be no other helper, deliverer, or redeemer for them. This extends to verse 5, which is essentially an example of when He saved and rescued Israel. He was with them in the wilderness and watched over them. When God says "I knew you", to "know" has more or less the same meaning I mentioned a moment ago; God is saying that He was devoted and in relationship with Israel because a mutual devotion and relationship is the point of the covenant He made with them. In fact, God cared for Israel in a miraculous way because in the wilderness they were in a land of drought where there was no water, or it was scarce. When we recall that the number of Israelites marching through that desert was probably around 3 million, then the idea of providing water in a hot, barren desert for all those people and their herds and flocks was something that only a God of immense power could do.

As the oracle continues in verse 6, God says that despite providing Israel with water where there was none, and providing them enormous quantities of food as well, that when He gave them such an abundance of food and they were no longer hungry, they became self-satisfied. Their self-satisfaction led to pride; and their pride led to Israel forgetting Yehoveh. It is all too common among humans to be grateful and thankful when we are in dire need and somehow provision is made for us; but later as we're full, or out of danger, or healed and no longer in great need, we go back to our old ways and forget the ones who helped us. I've seen it countless times among Believers... and am sorry to say I've done it myself... that in times of trouble we plead for God's help and rescue,

and in His limitless mercy He helps us, but once our feet are back on the ground and the wind has again filled our sails, we lose interest. Whoever helped us (in Israel's case it was Yehoveh) has effectively fulfilled their purpose and is no longer needed. I think this is what God is saying about Israel's attitude towards Him.

But now in verses 7 and 8 God says He is going to act in such a furious way towards Israel for their incorrigibly unfaithful behaviors that even included thanking Baal for what God had provided to them, He uses vivid metaphors of wild and fierce predators attacking their prey. God was not merely going to lift His hand of protection over Israel, He was going to set-upon Israel to harm them. In a way He goes from being Israel protector and Savior to their worst enemy. And while the attack upon Israel will not be supernatural, but rather the instrument of their terror will be Assyria, the attack will be deliberate. God doesn't tell Israel exactly when this will happen; rather it is likened to a lion laying in wait for an unsuspecting prey to fall into his trap. Further the Lion and the Leopard usually carry their prey off to devour them at a time and place of their leisure, extending the suffering all the more. The furious and vengeful attack of a female bear who has lost her cubs is also used to describe God's rage. Bears will rip their victims to shreds with such power and ferocity that nothing can stop them, and when the revenge is complete the scene is gruesome to behold. The Lion, Leopard and Bear are at the top of the food chain; they are the alpha predators. Nothing threatens them and so nothing stops them.

In verse 9 God is blunt: Israel, this is your fault; you brought this upon yourselves. The problem is that Israel's only helper, Yehoveh, is the one who is doing the attacking and destroying. Therefore, there is no possibility of rescue or salvation. Israel has run to Egypt, then to Assyria, then back to Egypt and again to Assyria looking for deliverance. Completely blind to their predicament, and the cause of it, no doubt they have also pled with Yehoveh, with the attitude that any Savior will do. What God is doing is carrying out a covenant curse upon Israel for their atrocity.

CJB Deuteronomy 32:36-42 ³⁶ ***"Yes, ADONAI will judge his people, taking pity on his servants, when he sees that their strength is gone, that no one is left, slave or free.*** ³⁷ ***Then he will ask, 'Where are their gods, the rock in whom they trusted?***

38 Who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let him get up and help you, let him protect you! 39 See now that I, yes, I, am he; and there is no god beside me. I put to death, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; no one saves anyone from my hand! 40 "For I lift up my hand to heaven and swear, "As surely as I am alive forever, 41 if I sharpen my flashing sword and set my hand to judgment, I will render vengeance to my foes, repay those who hate me. 42 I will make my arrows drunk with blood, my sword will devour flesh- the blood of the slain and the captives, flesh from the wild-haired heads of the enemy."

We'll stop here, finish up chapter 13 next time and move into the final...the 14th... chapter of Hosea.