

Hosea 4:1-19

The Covenant Love of God and the Idolatry of His People

I. Introduction

- A. Review — Chapters 1-3 address Hosea, Gomer and their children. What were some of the major points that we need to walk away from that section with?
- B. As we step into chapters 4-14, we need keep in mind that at times it's easy to get lost staring at the details of a leaf, and forget to appreciate the clear picture of the forest. There will be times when we are wrestling through how to understand a verse or even a word, but don't let that frustrate you. The problem isn't the Bible, the problem is the people who translate/interpret/study the Bible — us! As we work through those details we need to step back to get the major theme that God is communicating in the passage.
- C. Structure of 4:1-14:9:¹
 - 1. **4:1-6:3** — Evidence of **ignorance** of God and statement of hope
 - 2. **6:4-11:11** — Evidence of **disloyalty** to God and statement of hope
 - 3. **11:12-14:9** — Evidence of **faithlessness** to God and statement of hope

II. 4:1-3 — Three accusations

What are the accusations that Yahweh is bringing against Israel? He explains three things that are absent and 5 sins that are present. What follows is the result of Israel's sin, the desolation of the land.

- 1. 1 — Three accusations about what is missing...
 - a) **Truth/faithfulness** — knowing the truth and living by it.² As Michael Barrett puts it, *“The absence of truth in the land, therefore, includes the notions of Israel’s unreliability and untrustworthiness with reference to the stipulations of the covenant. In simple terms, they could not be counted on to keep their word or meet their obligations; they could not be trusted.”*³
 - b) **Steadfast love** — This is the term *hesed* in Hebrew, and often refers to covenant keeping love. To help us understand what is meant here look at Hosea 6:6. “For I desire steadfast love [*hesed*] and not sacrifice.” In other words, this goes deeper than going through the religious motions — it's that and much more. It is expressed in their obedience, but is not temporary in nature (6:4). ***Hesed love means going beyond one's obligation.***⁴
 - c) **Knowledge** — We must understand that this is not just an intellectual understanding of some fact. Hosea will explain that they know the facts, for Yahweh has made it clear to them. This is an understanding of those facts plus a response in life to live in light of that knowledge. So their rejection of knowledge is a willingness to remain ignorant when the facts are evident before them. *Garrett says this, “Objectively, it is correct doctrine about God—for example, objective knowledge of God includes the fact that God abhors the cult of Baal and the fertility religion*

¹ Michael Barrett, 19.

² Garrett.

³ Barrett, 132.

⁴ See Garrett.

*that surrounds it. Subjectively, it is the personal relationship one has with God whereby one can honestly say, 'You are my God' (Hosea 2:23)."*⁵

2. 2 — 5 of the 10 commandments are clearly broken, and as Barrett writes, that's just as good as saying they have broken all 10 (James 2:10).
3. 3 — **What is the impact of Israel's sin? What does that tell us about the nature of sin?**

III.4:4-14

A. 4-10 — Accusations against the Priests

1. 4 — Yahweh directs the attention toward the Priests, the Spiritual leaders, the ones who should have been leading Israel to remain faithful to the covenant. There are differences in how this verse is translated because the Hebrew is difficult, but most understand that the priests are the subject.⁶
 - a) Garrett offers this paraphrased translation that I think is helpful, ***“Even though this nation is full of blasphemers, liars, murderers, thieves, and adulterers (v. 2), there is no point in one person accusing or pointing the finger of blame at another. When they accuse one another, your people are really bringing charges against a priest—they are evidence for what a poor job the priests have done.”***⁷
 - b) It's also helpful to keep in mind verse 6, which again demonstrates that the priests are receiving the rebuke in this section. They are the subject throughout the section.
 2. 5 — We need to remember that “mother” is in reference to all of Israel⁸ (“We have observed that the mother represents corporate Israel, while the children represent individuals in the nation.”⁹)
3. **What are the accusations against the priests in this section?**
- a) **6 — They have rejected knowledge.** In this verse Hosea explains that because of this lack of knowledge, Israel is destroyed. Knowledge in Hosea is very significant! A right understanding of knowledge will inevitably lead toward change. There was also a misunderstanding of truth in general. If the truth had been communicated clearly, they would have not been lead so easily into paganism. God's response — because they rejected knowledge, God is going to reject them.
 - b) **6 — They have forgotten the law of God.** This refers specifically to the Torah, which is God's revelation to them. This overlaps with their rejection of knowledge. That they forgot the Torah does not seem to be a passive but active, especially when it's seen in light of the previous accusation. God's response — because they forgot the law, God is going to forget them.
 - c) **7 — The more the increased, the more they sinned.** During Israel's period of prosperity, it may have been that there were more priests than usual. Instead of this increase leading people to Yahweh, it actually lead them into further sin.

⁵ Garrett, 110.

⁶ It is important to establish here that the ESV translation is wrong. Footnote 7 shows the right translation. What some translations have done is reject the MT in favor of the LXX and the Vulgate translations, which require emending the text to try and make sense of it. We may not fully understand the verse, but there isn't warrant to change it. See Garrett, 116.

⁷ Garrett, 116.

⁸ Some have a crazy idea that this is the priests literal mother.

⁹ McComiskey, 60.

- d) **8-9 — They feed on the sin of my people, they are greedy for their iniquity.** Stuart writes this, *“As the priests eat the ‘sin offering’ they are being nourished by the ‘sin’ of the people. The second half of the synonymous couplet makes this clear: they (the priests) live off the people’s iniquity.”*¹⁰ In other words, because the people sin, they are able to enjoy the benefits of the sacrifices that must be offered for that sin. God’s response — The consequences are that both priests and the people are going to feel the consequences for their actions.
- e) **10 — They have forsaken the Lord.** I like how Garrett puts it, *“In short, this summarizes all the misdeed of the priesthood in a single line: they are apostate. Their failure to give sound teaching, their greed, and their promotion of sin are all at root rejection of God.”*¹¹ Because of this apostasy they have fallen to, Yahweh is going to take away any of the blessings that they previous enjoyed (e.g. no satisfaction, and no multiplication). These enjoyments were given to them by Yahweh, and He can freely remove them.

B. 11-14 — The idolatry/prostitution of the people

1. 11 — What takes away the people’s understanding?

Verse 10 and 11 should be separated like the NASB has it. It seems best to see this verse as connected to the bottom of verse 14. Hubbard suggests this forms an inclusio.¹² It helps us make sense of it’s odd structure (monocolon rather than bicola).

2. 12-13a — We get a glimpse here of the reality of their pagan practices. There was clearly an appeal to the people to worship through these pagan means. It is interesting that Hosea calls them “My People” in this passage that leads into their pagan worship.
3. 14 — Yahweh next brings accusation against the women of Israel for their prostitution. Though they will certainly face some judgment for being part of Israel, they will not face special judgment because, as Hosea writes, “For the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes.” In other words, their husbands are the ones that lead them into this practice.

What we discover from this is that prostitution was taking place as part of the paganism of their culture. Prostitution was connected to the fertility gods.

In this short section we see the impact of the Priests failure on the people’s understanding.

C. 4:15-19 — Judah, the second hand beneficiary.

1. 15 — a plea to keep Judah away from the destructive trajectory of Israel.
- a) Gilgal was a spiritual center in Israel. This is where Joshua set up camp when they crossed the Jordan (Josh 4:19). It was a good city that had evidently become corrupt. Beth-Aven is Bethel, another spiritual center (where Jacob saw the stairway to heaven Gen. 28:11). That Hosea changed the name from “house of God” to “house of wickedness” is significant.
- b) “As the LORD lives” — Hosea’s point appears to be that Israel would make rash oaths and take lightly swearing by the name of Yahweh.

¹⁰ Stuart, 79.

¹¹ Garrett, 121.

¹² Hubbard, 113.

2. 16 — The picture formed in this verse is best summarized by Hubbard, “*Anybody who knows anything about animals must agree that a stubborn cow does not deserve the gentle treatment of a harmless lamb.*”¹³
3. 17-19 — Pictures Israel as a depressing, drunk, and pagan people. Israel was certainly not a positive example for Judah to follow. They pursue sin until it runs out, and then seek more sin. In the end they will experience shame because of the pagan (implied) sacrifices. That “the wind has wrapped them in its wings” may refer to them being caught up in the current of their leaders.¹⁴
4. Hosea’s conclusion for his listeners, “leave him [Israel] alone.”

IV. Conclusion

- A. Is knowledge as much of a problem for us today as it was for Israel? How does this then apply to our situation?
- B. What do we learn from the failure of the priests in Israel? Does this just apply to spiritual leaders in the church, or does this apply to others as well?
- C. How do we protect our church/families from turning away from knowledge?

¹³ Hubbard, 118.

¹⁴ McComiskey, 73.