

Triennial Torah Study – 3rd Year 29/09/2012 — — — —



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Num 21	Hosea 8-14	Romans 14-15
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Fiery Serpents Among the People (Numbers 21)

The rest of the trip toward the Promised Land would be hard and difficult. First, the king of the Canaanite city of Arad picks a fight, and carries some Israelites away captive. God empowers the Israelites to “utterly destroy” the Aradites in a place that became known as Hormah, meaning “Utter Destruction.” Interestingly, this first military victory against the Canaanites takes place in the same spot that, decades before, the Israelites had been defeated when they vainly tried to enter Canaan after God told them they would have to wait 40 years (compare 14:45).

Yet the victorious spirit does not carry them all the way. Going around Edom proves so difficult that the children of Israel become discouraged—which once again turns to bitter complaining. When their ingratitude leads them to declare that they detest the God-given manna sustaining them, calling it “worthless,” God sends them deadly fiery serpents. In terror and agony, the people quickly repent, asking for Moses’ prayers on their behalf. God’s instruction then is remarkable—He tells Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent and set it up on a pole and to instruct the people to look upon it to be healed. Biblically, the serpent is a symbol for Satan (compare Genesis 3; Revelation 12:9). Yet the New Testament tells us that this raised bronze serpent is a type of Jesus Christ, who was lifted up in crucifixion—and that looking to His sacrifice gives us life (John 3:14-15).

So how could a seemingly Satanic symbol represent Christ? The devil, remember, was the original sinner—and the instigator of sin among our first human parents, Adam and Eve. That being so, we may view the serpent as a symbol of sin, or the sinful nature mankind has acquired from Satan (compare Ephesians 2:2; Romans 8:7). In sacrificing Himself for us, Christ bore our sin and its penalties (Isaiah 53:4-6). Indeed, the Bible says that He became “sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). And as sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), Christ could not be in the Father’s perfect presence at the moment He bore our sins and endured its ultimate penalty of death (compare Matthew 27:46). Thus, in bearing our sin, Christ could properly be depicted with

the image of a raised serpent. When we look upon Christ's death by crucifixion for our sins and His resurrection from that death into new life, we can have the penalty for sin removed from us and also be granted new life (Romans 5:9-10).

In later years, the Israelites will view the bronze serpent as a holy relic of veneration and begin worshiping it. For this reason, it will wisely be destroyed by righteous King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4).

Verse 14 of Numbers 21 mentions the "Book of the Wars of the Lord." The Nelson Study Bible says this "refers to an early collection of songs and writings known today only from this citation. The fact that Numbers draws upon other early Hebrew writings shows that the ancient Hebrew peoples had other literature in addition to Scripture." This book is not in existence today.

"Israel Has Forgotten His Maker" (Hosea 8)

Here again we see the root cause of Israel's problems—their broken covenant with God (verse 1). This is a serious matter, and Hosea must proclaim the warning as if with a trumpet (Hebrew shofar, ram's horn), an analogy of sounding an alarm familiar to readers of Bible prophecy (Isaiah 58:1; Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 33:3-6; Joel 2:1,15; Amos 3:6; Zephaniah 1:16; Zechariah 9:14; Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). Continued disobedience has removed Israel farther and farther away from God—to a point where, Hosea says, "Israel has forgotten his Maker" (Hosea 8:14), which, in turn, has led to even greater disobedience.

As in other verses, the eagle of verse 1 is most likely a reference here to Assyrian invasion: "Just as an eagle swiftly swoops down and snatches its prey, so Assyria would invade Israel and take its people into captivity" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 1). And as a bird of prey rends and tears its prey, so would Assyria deal with Israel.

Israel setting up kings against God's will does not refer to the monarchy in general. Rather, "this phrase alludes to the political turmoil surrounding the throne of the northern kingdom during the eighth century b.c., when," as referred to earlier, "four kings were assassinated during a 20-year period (7:4-7)" (note on 8:4). Since so much of Hosea's prophecies apply in some degree to the end-time, perhaps there will be similar assassinations and coups in the future. How strange this concept seems in the context of modern Israel's stable democracies.

But much will change between now and the prophesied crisis at the close of this age.

The expression "your calf is rejected" (verse 5) literally means, in the original Hebrew, "your calf stinks." "Here again the golden calves of Bethel and Dan, which were so odious to God, are in view.... The rhetorical question at the close of the verse implies that there would never be a time when the idolatry of Israel would not be sinful" (Expositor's Bible Commentary, note on verse 5). In this sense, the calves are metaphorical for Israel's continuing idolatry in general. It's worth noting that the same Hebrew word is used for "rejected" in verse 3. In this case, the implication is that Israel thinks that God's way stinks.

Israel has sown nothing but “wind” (verse 7), representing, as it does in Ecclesiastes, vanity and emptiness. “Morally speaking, Israel had planted wind, symbolizing its moral bankruptcy, and would reap a whirlwind, symbolizing the coming judgment” (Nelson, note on verse 7). “Wind is one of the most powerful forces of nature.... It is no surprise, then, that the O[ld] T[estament] uses the imagery of a powerful windstorm to picture calamity and irresistible divine judgment” (“Whirlwind,” Dictionary of Bible Imagery, p. 943). The whirlwind mentioned here refers to a high wind such as a tornado. Other Bible passages also refer to the whirlwind as one of God’s methods of judgment against evil (Jeremiah 23:19; 30:23; Ezekiel 13:11, 13, Amos 1:14; Zechariah 7:14; Proverbs 10:25; Job 21:18).

Israel cannot win against God’s wrath. The crop will be so damaged that it cannot produce grain—and what little it might produce will be consumed by foreign powers. The warning is just as much for today as for the time of Hosea. No matter how great and powerful the nations of modern-day Israel have been, they will be swallowed up. Even going to other nations such as Assyria for help (going to Europe for help in our time) will not ultimately profit. Indeed, hiring “lovers,” or allies, will backfire, bringing Israel under the increasing yoke of the “king of princes” (Hosea 8:9-10)—i.e., the Assyrian emperor. The Assyrian emperor of the end time, who seems to be the primary reference here, will apparently be a dictator over a united Europe. In the book of Revelation he is called “the beast.”

Israel’s “altars for sin,” where sins are supposed to be atoned for through sacrifices, have become “altars for sinning” (verse 11). Religion itself, instead of being a means of worship and seeking God, becomes a means of sin—rejected by God. God’s law is spurned by the Israelites as “strange”—unfamiliar and unwelcome (verse 12). He had given specific instructions about how He was to be worshiped, but Jeroboam had set up his own altars in Bethel and Dan. Likewise, the nations of modern-day Israel have followed false Christianity’s numerous changes of God’s method of worship, replacing His commanded worship on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week (Exodus 20:8-11), with worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, and replacing God’s Holy Days (Leviticus 23) with ancient, pre-Christian pagan festivals such as Easter and Christmas. In its entry on “Easter,” Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words states: “pascha... mistranslated ‘Easter’ in Acts 12:4, kJV, denotes the Passover (rv).... The term Easter is not of Christian origin. It is another form of Astarte, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven.... From this Pasch the Pagan festival of ‘Easter’ was quite distinct and was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt Pagan festivals to Christianity” (New Testament Section). And all this despite God’s clear instruction that we not incorporate pagan worship practices into our worship of Him (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Because Israel’s worship places, considered places for seeking divine forgiveness, are actually places where teachings and practices contrary to God are promoted and participated in, God will not forgive and forget the Israelites’ sins through them. Instead, He will “remember their iniquity and puni their sins” (Hosea 8:13). God is so unhappy with Israel as to send the Israelites

back into the captivity they came out of when they left Egypt. We should realize that what God desires of people is all for our own good. He's unhappy with the Israelites harming themselves and knows in His wisdom that the extreme measure of captivity is necessary to bring them to repentance.

While verse 13 seems to say that Israel will actually go to Egypt, 9:3 makes it clear that Egypt is being used metaphorically of exile and slavery—and that the actual location of captivity will be Assyria, parallel with Amos' warning of "captivity beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). However, as explained in tomorrow's highlights, a number of Israelites will apparently end up in Egypt as well.

While certainly a warning of ancient invasion and deportation, this is also a warning of calamity that is yet future. Indeed, the warning of coming fire on the cities of Israel and Judah that will devour palaces was also directly given, practically word for word, by Amos as a reference to, primarily, end-time destruction (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5).

Days of Punishment and Recompense (Hosea 9)

Hosea 9 continues with God's warning of impending punishment. This is not a time of celebration. God's warning is too serious. "This was spiritual idolatry.... The mention of threshing floors probably carries through the figure of prostitution, for the Canaanites frequently used threshing floors and winepresses [because of their association with the harvest] as places for carrying out their fertility rites. In v. 2 the implication is that, because of insufficient rainfall, the threshing floors and winepresses would fail to produce enough food for the people" (Expositor's Bible Commentary, note on verses 1-2).

For their sin, the Israelites would be evicted from the land in which God had permitted them to dwell, and they would be left to suffer in Assyria (verse 3). They would be deprived of any freedoms and their uncleanness there would render them unfit to participate in true worship. Indeed, where they were going, they wouldn't be able to sacrifice to God or keep His Holy Days, even if they wanted to.

In verse 6, Egypt is again used symbolically of captivity, and the statement that "Memphis," an ancient capital of Egypt famed as a necropolis of cemeteries and tombs, would bury the Israelites signifies that they would die in captivity. Indeed, as we earlier read in Amos 5:3, only one tenth of those taken into captivity would ultimately survive. Yet it should also be noted that, in the end time, many Israelites will apparently end up in literal Egypt and other Arab nations through the coming slave trade prophesied in the Bible (compare Revelation 18:11-13)—as Israel's captives are ultimately seen returning from Assyria and Egypt in a great second exodus (Isaiah 11:11-12; Hosea 11:11). Consider also that since the forces of the end-time "Assyrian" ruler, apparently the European dictator called the "king of the North" in Daniel 11:40, are prophesied to invade and take over Egypt and surrounding territories (verses 42-43), they will undoubtedly set up military posts in these lands to which Israelite captives may be shipped to

serve as laborers. So perhaps some latter-day Israelites truly will die in Memphis, which is in the vicinity of modern Cairo.

Behind them, the Israelites' homeland is left rather desolate: "The fine estates or villas which they had purchased by their money, being now neglected and uninhabited, are covered with nettles; and even in their tabernacles, thorns and brambles of different kinds grow" (Adam Clarke's Commentary, note on 9:6).

Raising a trumpet of warning again, Hosea announces, "The days of punishment have come; the days of recompense have come" (verse 7). While the days of Israel's ancient captivity fulfilled this in part, the message is mainly for the end time. Speaking of the coming Great Tribulation, Jesus Christ stated: "For these are the days of vengeance.... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations" (Luke 21:22-24). But Israel will not accept this message. Indeed, God's servants, who proclaim such warnings, are viewed by sinful Israel as raving lunatics (Hosea 9:7).

The Israelites have become utterly corrupt, "as in the days of Gibeah" (verse 9). "The reference here is to the rape and murder of a young woman by the men of Gibeah, an event that started a civil war (see Judg. 19). Those who witnessed this violent deed remarked that it was the worst crime committed in Israel's history until that time (see Judg. 19:30). However, the sins of Hosea's generation rivaled the infamous Gibeah murder" (Nelson Study Bible, note on Hosea 9:9)—as do the sins of the generation on which God's stern correction of the end time will come.

When Israel was a young nation, they were unusually delightful to God, like grapes in the desert (verse 10), but the delight didn't last long. Even before they entered the Promised Land, they were participating in Baal worship at Peor in Moab with its insidious fertility rites. Now, Israel had returned to such vile promotion of fertility through its return to Baal worship. As punishment, God would take away fertility, causing the population to dwindle through barrenness of womb. And the children that were born would be killed in the coming invasion (verses 11-14).

The Jewish Tanakh translates the first part of verse 15 as, "All their misfortunes (began) at Gilgal, for there I disowned them." Gilgal was the place from which Israel had conquered Canaan (Joshua 4:19-5:12) and where the monarchy was later instituted (1 Samuel 11:15). Yet it had now become a center of false worship (Hosea 4:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4; 5:4-5). "It also served as a resort area for the wealthy who oppressed the poor in Israel. As a center noted for its false religion and social oppression, 'Gilgal' probably serves here as a metaphor for the nation" (Bible Reader's Companion, note on Hosea 9:15). The language of verse 15, it should be noted, implies divorce: "The Lord would reject (hate) His unfaithful wife (see Deut. 22:13; 24:3), drive her from His house (the land), and remove His protective care (love) from her" (Nelson, note on verse 15).

The final verse of chapter 9 summarizes Israel's situation. They have consistently failed to listen to God's warnings—now they will wander among the nations.

“Break Up Your Fallow Ground” (Hosea 10)

God isn’t finished with Israel yet. Chapter 10 continues the correction, giving even more detail of the people’s sins and impending captivity.

It starts with another reference to Israel’s early history and its prosperity, which actually led to more and more sin and idolatry. Notice this paraphrase of verse 1 in the Living Bible: “How prosperous Israel is—a luxuriant vine all filled with fruit! But the more wealth I give her, the more she pours it on the altars of her heathen gods; the richer the harvests I give her, the more beautiful the statues and idols she erects.”

The people’s divided heart (verse 2) appears to refer to insincerity—a heart that says one thing and does another or wants to serve God and mammon or the true God and Baal. The Hebrew word can be used for “dividing,” in the sense of dividing land into shares or allotments. But it is also occasionally translated as “flattering” or “smooth” (insincere) and, in this verse, as “deceitful” (NIV), “false” (NRSV) and “fickle” (New Living Translation). Here are people who claim to serve God, but in reality serve Baal. They are in some respects like the people who assembled at Mount Carmel in the time of Elijah, when he asked: “How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

But this case is even worse. Notice this paraphrase of verse 3: “Then they will say, ‘We deserted the Lord and he took away our king. But what’s the difference? We don’t need one anyway!’” (Living Bible). Thus, more than mere apathy toward God, the people express defiance. Their real worry is over protecting their false religious ideology, which has allowed them to follow the whims of their human nature—contrary to the law of God. Yet the center of this false worship, represented in verse 5 by the calves of Beth Aven (“House of Evil”), referring to Bethel and national worship in general, will be given over to the ruler of Assyria. In ultimate fulfillment of these verses, much of the wealth and adornment of America and Britain’s false religious institutions—that is, whatever is not destroyed in future disasters and invasion—will go into the coffers of end-time Assyria and its dictator. Yet so much will suffer destruction. Just as ancient Bethel was to be destroyed, so too will be the great cathedrals and churches of the modern nations of Israel (verse 8). The obliteration of these national shrines will accompany mass destruction of cities. It will be so fierce that people will seek refuge in caves beneath the mountains (verse 8; Isaiah 2:19-21). Indeed, Jesus Christ quoted Hosea in this regard concerning the coming Tribulation (Luke 23:30).

(See our free booklet The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy for proof of the Israelite identity of these modern nations and further information regarding what the Bible says will happen to them in the years ahead.)

Hosea emphasizes the Israelites’ sins by once again referring to the sin of the men of Gibeah (Hosea 10:9). The last clause of this verse is apparently mistranslated in the New King James Version. There should be an “it” between “did” and “not” and a question mark at the end of the

sentence, because the battle did indeed overtake the Gibeahites (Judges 20). Notice the NIV rendering of the end of Hosea 10:9: “Did not war overtake the evildoers in Gibeah?” The point is that just as punishment overtook the Gibeahites, so would punishment from God eventually overtake the Israelites, who now followed in the sinful footsteps of the Gibeahites.

Verse 10 says the punishment will be for “two transgressions.” The New Bible Commentary: Revised explains this as “their idolatry and their reliance on outside help. av [Authorized Version, i.e., the King James Version] follows Targum [early Aramaic paraphrase], ‘bind themselves in their two furrows.’ In the [Middle] East ploughing together means acting in concord as friends (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14). Here the reference may be to their union with Baal and the nations” (note on Hosea 10:10).

In verse 11, God describes Israel as a cow that, though domesticated, prefers to be unrestrained or at the most engaged in only very light work, able to simply lean down and eat grain. As Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary explains, threshing was for a cow “a far easier and more self-indulgent work than ploughing. In treading corn [i.e., grain], cattle were not bound together under a yoke, but either trod it singly with their feet, or drew a threshing sledge over it (Isa. 28:27, 28); they were free to eat some of the [grain] from time to time, as the law required they should be unmuzzled (Deut. 25:4), so that they grew fat in this work. [This provides] an image of Israel’s freedom, prosperity, and self-indulgence heretofore” (note on Hosea 11:11). But Israel’s rebellious spirit demands that God employ harsh methods—putting a yoke on Israel and Judah and forcing them to engage in hard labor. Israel’s ancient service in Egypt was a forerunner of this bondage and hard labor—as were the Nazi labor camps in which the Jews were made to suffer terribly at the hands of cruel oppressors (for while many Jews were immediately killed, many others were forced into hard work until death or until their physical stamina gave out, and then they were killed.)

In verse 12, Hosea calls on the people to repent. If they would sow righteousness, that is, commit to obeying God (see Psalm 119:172), then they would reap mercy from Him. “Break up your fallow ground,” the prophet instructs. The analogy speaks to the need to have the natural hardheadedness of every human being loosened up and made receptive to the seed of God’s Word. This is vital to true repentance. “Plowing and planting are the necessary preliminary steps to growing a crop, which eventually sprouts when the rain falls in season. In the same way, repentance would set the stage for restored blessing, which God would eventually rain down on His people” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 12). But verse 13 describes the awful reality. Instead of righteousness, the people had “plowed wickedness”—lived a life of sin and rebellion—and would suffer the consequences, some automatic and some directly from God. The spiritual principle of reaping what we sow was later stated by the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:7-9.

Shalman (verse 14) could be Salamanu, King of Moab and tributary of Tiglath-Pileser, who invaded Gilead around 740 B.C. It is also possible that the name refers to Shalmaneser V of Assyria (2 Kings 17:3-6). Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary favors this view, stating: “Shalmaneser, a compound name, in which the part common to it and the names of three other

Assyrian kings, is omitted; Tiglath-pileser, Esar-haddon, Shar-ezer. Arbel was situated in Naphtali in Galilee, on the border nearest Assyria. Against it Shalmaneser, at his first invasion of Israel (II Kings 17:3), vented his chief rage" (note on Hosea 10:14). However, this is an assumption, since neither the identity of Shalman nor the location of Beth Arbel is clear. The city is "identified in Eusebius Onom. 14.18 as Arbela in the region of Pella in Transjordan, and now generally as Irbid (Irbil), 20 mi. (32 km.) NW of Amman" ("Beth-Arbel," International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1979). If Shalmaneser V is meant, then this part of Hosea's prophecy would seem to have been written following the Assyrian invasion of Israel, since the destruction is referred to as an event that is well-known to the people. Of course, it is possible that it had not yet occurred. God knew the event was coming even if the people didn't. And perhaps the intended audience in this case was exclusively readers of the end time. That is, Hosea was perhaps specifically telling us that just as ancient Israel was plundered, so will endtime Israel be plundered with like ruthlessness.

"How Can I Give You Up, Ephraim?" (Hosea 11:1-11)

Chapter 11 begins the description of Israel's restoration as a result of God's immense love for His people. God had specially chosen Israel as his son (Hosea 11:1; Exodus 4:22-23; Genesis 12:2-3). Hosea 11:1 also had a dual fulfillment, as it foretold Jesus, God's literal son, returning from a period of exile with his family in Egypt as a child (Matthew 2:13-15).

The first few verses of Hosea 11 show the sadness of Israel's behavior. It is God who has consistently taught them, been kind to them and fed them, but they were too blind to recognize His love.

Lifting the yoke off their neck is a reference to lifting the yoke "away from the face of an ox so that it might eat more comfortably.... 'Bent down to feed them' presents a beautiful picture of God's gracious condescension in his loving provision for his undeserving people" (Expositor's Bible Commentary, note on verse 4).

Verse 5 appears to contain another mistranslation in the New King James Version. Rather than stating that Israel shall not return to Egypt, the verse, it seems, should be a question, since we see Israel returning from Assyria and Egypt in verse 11. Verse 5 is apparently correct in the New International Version: "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?" (A number of other translations convey the same sense.) Thus, Israel's failure to respond to God's great love would result in their captivity by Assyria, with some of them going to Egypt. Therefore, their plans for survival wouldn't be of any benefit.

Yet, in His great love for Israel, God asks, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" He asks Himself if He can make Israel like Admah and Zeboiim (v. 8), cities overthrown with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 10:19; 14:2, 8; Deuteronomy 29:23). The answer, as we saw also in Amos 9:8, is, thankfully, no (v. 9). Notice this from The Dictionary of Bible Imagery:

"Perhaps the most striking use of heart in the Bible is in reference to God (Gen 6:6; 8:21). The usage is similar to that applied to humankind and should be a reminder that we are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). God, after all, is a personal being who thinks, feels, desires and chooses. One of the most intriguing passages in this connection is found in Hosea 11. The prophet quotes God as saying that, while he will indeed punish Israel for their rebellion, he will not completely destroy them. The decision to refrain from their utter destruction was not easy; it was the result of God's inner turmoil: 'My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused; I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again.' (Hos 11:8-9 NIV) In the verse that follows, God justifies his change of mind on the basis of his divinity. Humankind, when angered, is naturally inclined toward a course of destruction of those who offend. But God is divine, not human, so his grace wins out" ("Heart," p. 369).

Though God will tear them as a lion (Hosea 13:7-8), punishing them in order to bring them to their senses, His final roar will not be to destroy them. Rather, He, in the person of Jesus Christ, the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5), will roar with an earthshaking sound to summon His people back to their land (Hosea 11:10). Included in their physical return is their spiritual return to their duty to God under His covenant. "These verses," says The Expositor's Bible Commentary, "are like a window into the heart of God. They show that his love for his people is a love that will never let them go. Like the beautiful final chapter of the book, these verses look forward, beyond the chastisement of the immediate future, to the time, still distant, when Israel will truly return to her God and he will bless her once more. Ultimately it must be the millennial kingdom that is finally in view here. No other period in Israel's history, past or prospective, fits the picture" (note on verse 8).

Then, notice: "His sons shall come trembling from the west... from Egypt... [and] Assyria" (verses 10-11). While Egypt is located to the southwest of the land of Israel, Assyria was located to the northeast. And yet Assyria is the primary place of captivity. How do we explain this? The answer must be that this is a reference to Israel's return from end-time captivity. Indeed, the northern kingdom of Israel never returned to dwell in the Holy Land in the past. Yet they will in the future—this time from the land of modern Assyria, which (as we will delve more into when we later read Isaiah 10) apparently lies in the heart of Europe, to the northwest of the land of Israel. The Israelites, then, will indeed return from the west, from both Europe and Egypt. Also, as explained in the next highlight on Hosea, modern Israelites may today be found in, among a few other places, North America and Northwest Europe, including the British Isles. And, putting Jeremiah 31:8 (KJV) together with other verses (see Isaiah 41:1, 8-9; 49:1, 3, 12), it appears that some Israelites will also return from these homelands at this time—i.e., those who will have managed to avoid deportation, yet will have nonetheless suffered along with the rest of the modern descendants of Israel under European invasion and occupation. These come from the west also. And, from all of these places, "trembling like a bird" following their horrendous ordeal (Hosea 11:11), the children of Israel will at last be humbled and ready to serve and obey their great God, finally able to experience the fullness of His graciousness, love and generosity.

God's Charge Against Israel and Judah (Hosea 11:12-12:14)

Hosea 11:12 is connected to the start of chapter 12. The prophecy now reverts to the previous theme of Israel's sins.

At this time, it appears that Judah was still following God, which may indicate that this part of the prophecy was written during the revival under Judah's faithful king, Hezekiah. In any case, Hosea apparently uses this as a contrast to Israel's unfaithfulness. However, it should be noted that the meaning of verse 12 is not entirely certain. While most translations agree with the New King James Version that Judah here walks "with" God, the New International Version translates it as "against" God, presumably because God has a "charge against Judah" in 12:2. Yet it may simply be that God knew Judah's faithfulness would be short-lived, just as it always had been.

In any event, we are immediately informed that Ephraim—again, the leading tribe of Israel and representative of the entire northern kingdom—"feeds on the wind" (verse 1). "Ecclesiastes offers one of the most memorable series of wind images, as the Preacher pronounces one after another sphere of human activity meaningless, a mere 'chasing after the wind.' The image, used repeatedly in a kind of refrain (Eccl 1:14, 17 NIV, etc.), expresses the monotonous futility of going after something and finding it to be nothing at all—like trying to capture the wind in one's hands. What does any human being gain, the Preacher asks, 'since he toils for the wind?' (Eccl. 4:15 NIV)" ("Wind," Dictionary of Bible Imagery, p. 951).

We are also told that Ephraim "pursues the east wind" (Hosea 12:1). Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary says this refers to "the simoon, blowing from the desert east of Palestine" (note on Hosea 12:1). Indeed, an east wind comes from the east and blows west. And yet when did Ephraim, or the rest of the northern tribes, go west? Their captivity carried them east. Since this prophecy is apparently for our day, these words would seem to be a clue from God to help us in locating the modern descendants of Israel. From other historical sources, it is evident that sometime after Israel's Assyrian captivity, they finally broke free of their slavery and began migrating west into Europe—eventually reaching Northwest Europe. As surprising as it may sound to many, the people of Britain, the United States and other democracies of Northwest Europe constitute many of the modern descendants of Israel (see our free booklet The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy to learn more).

Hosea 12:3 refers to contrasting actions of Jacob. Jacob struggled with his twin brother Esau in the womb (Genesis 25:26), signifying the greedy, manipulative character he would demonstrate later in life. And yet later, after years of trial and learning the error of his ways, Jacob finally came to wrestle with God, recognizing his total dependence on God's blessing, thus being renamed Israel (32:25-29). The nation of Israel should likewise have been striving with God to live up to its name and be blessed instead of chasing the wind. It was at Bethel (verse 4) that God confirmed the blessing already promised (35:1-15). Indeed, Bethel is where the true God spoke, not the false gods later worshiped here by a rebellious people. And the same true God would again

bless the nation of Israel if it would only have the properly directed tenacity of Jacob. This idea is further expanded in verse 12 with the reference to Jacob's endurance in waiting for Rachel.

Hosea instructs Israel, "Observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually." Micah, writing around this same time, says basically the same thing: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). And, much later, Jesus Christ referred to these essential qualities of character as the "weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Thus, true faith constitutes waiting on God and walking humbly with Him.

Yet God views Israel as a "Canaanite" because of his sins (Hosea 12:7). But Israel says, "Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they shall find in me no iniquity that is sin" (verse 8). This is a very dangerous attitude. And yet, incredible though it is, many even in God's true Church are pictured as adopting the same basic philosophy at the end of the age, saying, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," unaware that, spiritually, they are actually "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). May we all ask God for the discernment to see ourselves as He sees us—and repent accordingly.

Darkest Before the Dawn (Hosea 13-14)

The reference to Ephraim in Hosea 13:1 appears to refer specifically to the tribe of Ephraim rather than being representative of the whole nation. Even in modern times, Ephraim (the United Kingdom and the British-descended nations of the Commonwealth) has exerted a powerful influence over other nations, but Hosea prophesied that this would cease.

Mention is made of Israel's religious practices growing worse and worse (verse 2). Therefore, "God's judgment would sweep Ephraim away quickly, just as the sun dispels fog and dries up the dew, or as the wind blows away chaff and smoke" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 3).

Though God mercifully led and dealt with the Israelites, they forgot Him (verse 6), thus making an enemy of Him—a consequence He had warned them about so many times before (see Deuteronomy 8:19; Psalm 50:22; compare 1 Samuel 28:16). "The Lord's relationship with Israel would change drastically from caring Shepherd to ravaging Predator. Ironically and tragically, Israel's rebellion had turned its Helper into a Destroyer" (Nelson, note on Hosea 13:6-9). The imagery is terrifying—and intended to provoke fear. But even in this extreme to which the Israelites have driven Him, God's desire is for their good—to waken them out of their spiritual lethargy and rebellion. God is a Father to Israel, seeking not to punish for punishment's sake, but rather to steer His children through punishment to repentance and spiritual restoration.

Only with God as its King, not by any human ruler, would Israel be able to find deliverance from its enemies (verses 9-10). Hosea reminds them that the only reason they had a human king in the first place was because they rejected God's direct rule, for which He had been angry with them (see 1 Samuel 8). God gave them Saul when they wanted to be like the nations around

them. But just as He gave them a king, He could take the king away. Indeed, Hosea 13:11 says, “I...took him away in My wrath.” Since this is past tense, it may refer to God’s removal of Saul. However, it may also refer to Israel’s king of Hosea’s time. If so, then this part of Hosea was either written after the Assyrian invasion or written before it with the past tense signifying that God saw it as already done. It could also refer to the end-time ruler over Ephraim, the reigning monarch of the British royal family (see “The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future” at www.ucg.org/brp/materials)—again describing an event as past even before it occurs. If so, perhaps the prophecy is specifically addressing Israelites in the Great Tribulation, when this will have already happened. Notice that verse 9 also uses the past tense: “O Israel, you are destroyed.” Of course, this should serve as a dire warning to everyone who reads or hears this prophecy before the catastrophic events actually come to pass.

Verse 13 is another analogy that emphasizes God’s final punishment for Israel. Mention is made of the pain of childbirth and then the pain of a son being born without “wisdom”—which seems to refer to the infant not being turned the right way to come out of the womb properly, especially given the next reference regarding the child remaining too long in the womb or birth canal (see NIV, NRSV, Living Bible). This makes delivery all the more difficult and painful—and all the more dangerous, perhaps even fatal. God’s discipline, it might seem, had been to no avail. Yet once again (verse 14), we see God’s intervention for Israel, His love for His people and His desire to not see them totally destroyed. God ransoms and redeems His people! This, we know, comes through the death of Jesus Christ for sin. Eventually, that ultimate sacrifice will be applied to Israel—and, indeed, to all mankind. In anticipation of that fact, God announces triumph over death and the grave: “Death has no power over God’s redeemed. This great affirmation has many applications. In context, it is an encouragement to turn to God and live. In the N[ew] T[estament] it is a reminder [quoted by the apostle Paul] of God’s final victory over physical death, won through Christ’s resurrection, to be experienced by us at our own resurrection (1 Cor. 15:55)” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on Hosea 13:14).

Yet before then, prior to Israel’s repentance, there will be horrendous devastation from Assyrian forces invading from the east to induce the humility and dependence on God required for true repentance (verse 15). (It should be noted that modern Assyria, in the heart of Europe, is also located to the east of the Israelite nations of Northwest Europe and North America.) Then, just when things seem darkest, with Israel languishing under its severest punishment ever, we arrive at chapter 14.

Hosea 14, notes the Harper Study Bible, “is different from the rest of the book. All that precedes it contains rebukes for sins and threats of the outpouring of the wrath of God. Now God exhorted his people to repent, promising them mercy if they would do so. In judgment he would wound them so that when they repented he would be able to heal them. It contains a refrain found everywhere in the writings of the prophets: ‘For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them,’ (v. 9)” (note on verse 1).

The prophecy thus turns to repentance. “The imagery of returning can also carry a profound spiritual meaning. To return is to repent from sin, thereby returning to a state of favor with God.... The imagery of returning is thus more than a physical motion. The Biblical authors, notably the prophets, use the imagery of return to expound further on the nature of turning of a human heart. It is the return of a wayward covenant people back to their covenant Lord (Is 44:22; Jer 3:10-11, 14; 4:1; 24:7; Lam 4:40; Hos 6:1). Repentance, therefore, is a very important aspect of the image of return. The connection between repentance and returning to God is well illustrated in Hosea 14:1-2. The return imagery implies a wholehearted turning from reliance on one’s own strengths and virtues and firm resting on the covenant character and promises of God (see also Joel 2:12-13). It is a fundamental redirection away from the path of sin and self-reliance and a subsequent return to a place of restored fellowship and peace. The image therefore illustrates vividly the dual nature of biblical repentance: turning away from sin and returning to God” (“Return,” Dictionary of Bible Imagery, p. 712).

Hosea tells Israel to “take words” with them and even gives them the words to say. We should heed the instructions here too. “God does not ask us to bring gifts or sacrifices. Rather He asks us to bring words when we come to Him. Three kinds of words are identified: words of confession (‘forgive all our sins’), words of praise (‘the fruit of our lips’), and words of commitment (‘we will’). When [we]...come to God today, these three kinds of words [when they are truly heartfelt] are still the most important things we can bring to the Lord” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on Hosea 14:2).

God promises to restore Israel. What magnificent love God has for His people. No matter how unfaithful they have been, He has not returned the same to them. What a wonderful example to Hosea himself, who had to experience the unfaithfulness of an adulterous wife in his own life—and yet gained strength to deal with her in love and mercy through the wonderful example of the God He served—of the God we all serve.

The people of Israel should not take God’s mercy for granted. They still need to repent and the only way this will happen is through immense trial and punishment. But it is out of love for them and the desire to see them turn around that God deals out His discipline.

In the end, repentant and renewed, Israel will at last be restored and wonderfully blessed by God. “The new Israel will have the beauty of the lily (cf. Mt. 6:28, 29) and the noble strength and stability of the poplar (lit. ‘Lebanon’). The olive was noted for its shade and its fruit and Lebanon for the aroma of its coniferous forests. Christians [likewise] are to be attractive, stable, useful” (New Bible Commentary: Revised, notes on Hosea 14:5-6).

The book concludes with a deeply profound statement that all Christians should heed today. Notice this paraphrase of verses 8-9 from the Contemporary English Version:

“Israel, give up your idols! I will answer your prayers and take care of you. I am that glorious tree, the source of your fruit. If you are wise, you will know and understand what I mean. I am the

Lord, and I lead you along the right path. If you obey me, we will walk together, but if you are wicked, you will stumble."

Romans 14

Don't be critical of those who are weak in their belief and criticize their thoughts on things. Some people will think it all right to eat both meats and vegetables, and others believe they must eat only vegetables. If you are the vegetarian, don't criticize the meat eater and if you are a meat eater, don't criticize the vegetarian. These things are only preferences for a time for each. God accepts both of them. You are a servant of Yehovah and so is your neighbor in the assembly, and each of you serve Yehovah. Because your neighbor in the assembly is the servant of Elohim and not your servant, you are in no position to judge his servance... only Elohim is and Elohim will cause him to stand or fall.

One says "I pray this way, or at this time for this reason." The other says, "well I pray at another time for this reason." Because you don't pray at the time I pray, then you are wrong. This should not be! Every person is on their walk with the King of the Universe and in their own relationship. Each relationship is different and at different moments. The relationship is one on one. There are only two entities in the relationship and that is Elohim and the brother or sister. To interject yourself into that one on one relationship and begin judging another's walk Paul states is inappropriate. For here is what Yehovah says, "As I live, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to Elohim."

Each of us will give an account of ourselves only.

If you DO desire to do something in the walk or relationship of your brother or sister.... Do this: not to put a stumbling block in your brother's way!

If your brother believes something to be common, then it is common to him. This is not your concern. However, if you are eating something or doing something that is causing your brother grief and you know that it is and you continue doing it... you are now out of love for one another. If you love your brother, you will stop what grieves him out of love for him and for his sake.

The kingdom of heaven is not about food and drink, but about righteousness and peace and joy... in the spirit. So pursue peace and pursue building up one another. To place wedges in the body over food destroys the work of Elohim. These things cause sin, they don't prevent it.

Romans 15

Always bear with the failings of the weak. Messiah did this, and therefore set the standard and example for us. The scriptures that were given to the circumcised nation encouraged them and gave them endurance until Messiah came. He was their servant and He is the Praise of the Gentiles. So that both circumcised and uncircumcised should come together as ONE in the thanks and praise to all the works of the Son of the Most High.

What did Isaiah prophesy? "There shall be a root of Jesse, ad He who shall rise to reign over the GENTILES, on Him the GENTILES shall set their expectation." So all these things were prophesied and shall be fulfilled.

So, having great expectation, love, the set apart spirit, and the completeness of all knowledge... we have all we need to admonish one another, whether Jew or Gentile. Primarily though, we are to be as Priests to proclaim the Good News, and to be servants to one another. If we do this... the gifts of all peoples in Faith WILL BECOME set-apart and acceptable, IF we continue in love.