

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 1: God's lawsuit against his people

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Hosea 4 pronounces the Lord's complaint against Israel. Hosea's personal story now yields to the Lord's confrontation of his errant people. The Lord's grievance is that Israel abandoned him for another god.

Israel had a committed special relationship with the Lord—the covenant. Israel broke this relationship just as Gomer, Hosea's wife, had broken her marital vows and pursued infidelity. Unfaithful Israel practiced spiritual adultery, pursuing spiritual relations with other gods.

Hosea's message in chapter 4 develops similarly to a civil lawsuit. The message has four basic sections: Verses 1-3 deliver the Lord's complaint against Israel; verses 4-9 describe the people's guilt, similar to opening arguments in a trial; verses 10-13 display evidence supporting the Lord's complaint by describing Israel's character; the message closes with God judgment—the people will be consumed in their lifestyles (vv. 14-19).

Verse 1 calls the people to listen. The Lord refers to Israel, who "lives in the land." This is a reminder that occupation of the Promised Land was contingent upon obedience to the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:40). A three-fold indictment is pronounced charging that Israel has abandoned her covenant relationship with God. Israel is not faithful to the Lord, but has pursued other gods. Further, Israel does not love her Lord. All activity under the covenant is summarized by Moses' command in Deuteronomy 6:5 to love the Lord. Love is the high level action that subsumes all covenant

requirements. Israel was not to carry out the Lord's commands woodenly. She was to express her love for her Lord through obedience. But this love was absent from Israel's life. Finally, the Lord states that even the mere acknowledgement of God was missing from Israel.

This was Peter's temporary error as he unwittingly denied Jesus. Peter recovered from his denial to grandly acknowledge his Lord. Israel was headed in a different direction. The connection of acknowledging the Lord and loving him is also made in Psalm 91:14. Acknowledgement of the Lord involves the acknowledgement of sin (Psalm 32:5), with the blessed result of receiving the Lord's forgiveness.

Verse 2 lists five extreme actions that replace the missing three elements of verse 1. The five items correspond in reverse order to the three elements: cursing replaces acknowledgement of the Lord; lying and murder replace love of the Lord; and stealing and adultery replace faithfulness to the Lord. One only can marvel at how secular societies all across the globe could be elevated and improved if these five extreme crimes could be replaced by actions that derive from a genuine relationship with the Lord.

Cursing may seem out of place in this list. The word does not refer to profanity, but to calling upon the Lord, or another god, to bring a curse upon someone. Cursing seeks to manipulate God and to counter the Lord's stated desire to bless all the people (Genesis 12:3). By engaging in cursing, a person refuses to acknowledge God's rightful place as Lord and Judge.

Verse 4 opens the Lord's proof of Israel's guilt. The rhetoric of the verse is influenced by Deuteronomy 17:12: bringing charges against the priesthood indicates rebellion against authority. Israel's corruption led the people to charge each other with infractions of which all were guilty. God alone could make such indictments. All others were guilty. The situation was so dire the people and their prophets stumbled in sinfulness.

Verse 5 uses the word “prophet” (*nabi*), a special word indicating Israel’s true prophets, including Hosea. The corrupting influence of Israel was so great many true prophets also had become corrupt.

God’s first statement of judgment arrives in verse 6. The “mother” to be destroyed is Israel who has birthed and nurtured Israel’s religious mess. A mother’s duty is to teach her children, but Israel has not taught her people about the Lord. They will be destroyed in their lack of knowledge of the Lord.

The duty of the priests, like mothers, was to teach the people about the Lord: his covenant, his ways, his character, his law, etc. But the religious condition of Israel was so wicked, even the priests chose to trade away God’s glory for gains taken from disgraceful conduct. The word “glory” refers to God’s presence. Astoundingly, the priests abandoned God’s presence to exploit people’s sins (v. 8).

The Lord’s main indictment against Israel, unfaithfulness, is spelled out in verses 10-13. Israel’s unfaithfulness led to prostitution, alcoholism and consulting wooden idols. This people without understanding sought understanding from a dead object without understanding. Israel’s alcoholism, like her prostitution, was so compelling the people consumed old wine (potent) and new wine (less potent).

The worship of Baal and other fertility deities was practiced on mountain tops (v. 13) and under prominent tall trees (v. 13). Such worship was accompanied by ritual prostitution, which harnessed human sexual energy to shackle people to their idol.

Verses 14-19 declares the Lord’s sentence for Israel. God will not punish the people with imprisonment. Instead he will abandon the people to their sinful pursuits (vv. 14, 17). The people will be weakened and ruined by their own sinful pursuits (vv. 14, 19). This principle of judgment is echoed

in Romans 1:24, 26 & 28. In fact, Romans 1:18-32 closely parallels Hosea 4:14-19.

The Lord's indictment against Israel is strong, the evidence is unmistakable and his sentence is devastating. Israel cannot last long under the weight of her own sins. The implied response is to repent and be transformed. Such action is enjoined in Hosea 5:15-6:3.