

Hosea 9:1-4

“Exiled Israel Eating Unclean Things”

“Do not rejoice, O Israel, with exultation like the nations! For you have played the harlot, forsaking your God. You have loved *harlots'* earnings on every threshing floor. Threshing floor and wine press will not feed them, and the new wine will fail them. They will not remain in the LORD's land, but Ephraim will return to Egypt, and in Assyria they will eat unclean *food*. They will not pour out drink offerings of wine to the LORD, their sacrifices will not please Him. *Their bread will be like mourners' bread*; all who eat of it will be defiled, for their bread will be for themselves *alone*; it will not enter the house of the LORD.”

The material in the Book of Hosea was delivered principally to those of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim during the mid-to-late Eighth Century B.C.E., with the Assyrian Empire steadily encroaching upon both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel.¹ The prophetic word of Hosea 9:1-4, describing what the Northern Kingdom exiles would have to eat in their dispersion, needs to be considered in any Tanach discussion about kosher.

Given the opening word of, “Rejoice not, O Israel, as other peoples exult” (9:1, NJPS), various commentators have concluded that the prophetic declaration was originally issued during the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot*² (Leviticus 23:33-54; Deuteronomy 16:13-15). As Marvin A. Sweeney summarizes,

“The prophet's speech presupposes the Festival of Sukkot (Booths or Tabernacles) from the 15th to the 22nd day of the seventh month (Tishri, September/October; see Lev 23:39-42). The festival follows Rosh ha-Shanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). It marks the conclusion of the harvest season, particularly the harvest of fruit and olives, at the beginning of the rainy season. The people live in temporary dwellings or booths while bringing in the harvest, and drink offerings of wine and water are offered at the Temple. Although Sukkot celebrates God's role as Creator of the natural world and fertility, the oracle indicates that Succoth will be a time of punishment because of Israel's relationship with Assyria and Egypt.”³

The message of Hosea 9:1-4 and following is not at all a positive one, and it is easy to see how the Prophet Hosea issued some declarations that would have subverted what was generally intended to be a joyous occasion. Hosea's word for Israel **not to rejoice**, is the exact opposite of Psalm 122:1: “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD.’”

There are various commentators on Hosea who do not specify what festival was occurring in Hosea 9:1, as this could have actually been what the Torah-prescribed festival of *Sukkot* had developed, or devolved into, for those of the Northern Kingdom. Gary V. Smith suggests, “Apparently this festival changed over the years into a pagan celebration by adding activities common in Baal festivals, such as sacred prostitution at their fleshing floors. This paganization of Israel's faith (see 4:10-14) is an act of unfaithful prostitution against God.”⁴ More keen to be noted, for sure, is how the prophetic word of Hosea 9:1-4 could have been issued following the initial exile by Assyria of those of the Northern Kingdom in 733 B.C.E., but prior to the main bulk of the exile with the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.E. Douglas Stuart proposes the scene,

“People often find it hard to believe the worst about their own future, even when all signs point increasingly to danger. After the tentative withdrawal of the bulk of Assyrian forces from most of the North by 732 B.C., most people apparently adjusted to their new status and resumed their old

¹ For a summary of composition data on the Book of Hosea, consult the entry appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

² James Luther Mays, *Hosea: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 125; James Limburg, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp 31-32; Gale A. Yee, “The Book of Hosea,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 264.

³ Marvin A. Sweeney, “The Book of Hosea,” in *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1263-1264.

⁴ Gary V. Smith, *NIV Application Commentary: Hosea/Amos/Micah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 136.

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way of life. God in his common grace provided a bountiful fall harvest. Some Israelites attributed this bounty to Yahweh's renewed approval, some to Baal's, some to both, others to their own faithfulness to the rituals they presumed to guarantee the fertility of the land. Enjoying a fine time or religious celebration, who wanted to listen to the doomsaying of a narrow, negative prophet?"⁵

Apparently, words like "Israel is swallowed up; they are now among the nations like a vessel in which no one delights" (8:8), have not been taken too seriously—as it would not only describe the exile, but also being consumed in some way, certainly by many people dying, but also by many assimilating into the places where they would be exiled. Neither those of the Northern or Southern Kingdoms of Israel would apparently "get it" (8:14). Instead, those of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim would specifically be chastised for acting like a prostitute before God (9:1), they will be taken to the countries from which they sought political support (9:3), and in their places of exile they will eat unclean things (9:3b) and the bread of death (9:4)—among the other consequences issued because of their idolatry and insolence against the Lord (9:5-17). As S.M. Lehrman puts it,

"In this section, Hosea describes the remorse that will torture the people in captivity. They will live through in recollection the unrestrained celebrations which once marked their harvestings. They will eat their bread in an unclean land, and the prophets whom they had considered mad will now be regarded as men truly inspired by God."⁶

Among one of the most damning indictments issued by God to those of the Northern Kingdom, is the statement, "For even if they escape destruction, Egypt shall gather them, Memphis shall bury them" (9:6, NRSV). Peter C. Craigie makes light of the Egyptian city of Memphis possessing a huge cemetery,⁷ which will be sure to "bury" any of the Israelite exiles who escape Assyrian captivity and make it to Egypt.

9:1-2 It is decreed, "Rejoice not, Israel, like the exultation of the peoples, for you have strayed from your God; you have loved a harlot's fee on all the threshing floors of grain" (v. 1, ATS). V. 1 may be said to be exact opposite of Joel 2:23-24:

"So rejoice, O sons of Zion, and be glad in the LORD your God; for He has given you the early rain for *your* vindication. And He has poured down for you the rain, the early and latter rain as before. The threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with the new wine and oil."

Unfaithfulness against God is a theme witnessed in the Book of Hosea (1:2; 2:2-5), actually being depicted via the marriage of Hosea to Gomer. In v. 1 the indictment is that Israel has "acted promiscuously" (HCSB) or "played the whore" (NRSV), the verb *zanah* (זָנָה) appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), mainly relating "to become involved with another man, to **commit fornication** (as wife, betrothed)," or "to **be unfaithful** in a relationship with God" (*HALOT*).⁸ This is why some Jewish versions render *zanah* with "you have strayed" (NJPS, ATS, Keter Crown Bible) or "thou hast gone lewdly astray" (Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Given the thrust of Hosea 2:12, however—"And then I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one will rescue her out of My hand"—and how *etan* (עֵתָן), "gift, spec. harlot's pay" (*CHALOT*),⁹ is in view, that the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim had indeed "gone whoring" (CJB), is shameful to contemplate.

While it can easily be missed on modern readers, the scene of the threshing floor is to be noted as having been a common place in the Ancient Near East, where a variety of sexual encounters with prostitutes and temple prostitutes often occurred:

⁵ Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, Vol. 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 147.

⁶ S.M. Lehrman, "Hosea: Introduction and Commentary," in Abraham Cohen, ed., *Soncino Books of the Bible: The Twelve Prophets* (London: Soncino Press, 1969), 32.

⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *Daily Study Bible Series: Twelve Prophets, Volume 1—Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 59.

⁸ *HALOT*, 1:275.

⁹ *CHALOT*, 32.

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"Israel is enjoined to rejoice no longer since the people have demonstrated their infidelity by expressing their faith in Baal's ability to provide their abundance (see Hos 2:7-8). Apparently common prostitutes as well as cult prostitutes frequented the areas where harvest and shearing festivals took place...Thus Israel plays the prostitute amidst the grain, taking her hire from those gods she credited with the harvest rather than acknowledging Yahweh's role" (IVPBBC).¹⁰

Duane A. Garrett makes the further, useful point, "The 'wages of a prostitute at every threshing floor' [NIV] probably carries a double meaning. It is literally the immoral acts that often accompanied the party atmosphere at harvest, but it is also figuratively the large harvest that the fertility cult was intended to insure. The supposed benefits of the cult were both sexual license and agricultural prosperity."¹¹ Indeed, as decreed, "The threshing floor and wine pit will not provide food for them, and wine will betray them" (v. 2, ATS). Whatever wages of produce were to be procured at the apparently joyful activities depicted in v. 1, are only going to backfire on the people who sought them.

9:3-4 The very Promised Land which would have been providing sustenance and wine for the people, is something which explicitly belongs to God (Leviticus 25:23; Jeremiah 2:7; Ezekiel 38:16; Joel 1:6). It is specifically stated of the Northern Kingdom, "They shall not dwell in the LORD's land, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and shall eat unclean things in Assyria" (v. 3, NKJV). Frequently in Hosea, Egypt and Assyria often appear in some kind of parallel (7:11; 8:9-13; 11:5, 11; 12:2). The two countries, where Israel sought support, would actually become places of exile, with some kind of a wordplay probably intended by the statement *lo yeshvu b'erezt ADONAI v'shav Efraim* (לֹא יֵשְׁבוּ בְאֶרֶץ יְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ אֶפְרַיִם), the terms "remain" and "return" highlighted. Ultimately, while Egypt and Assyria were specific countries that were intertwined in the foreign affairs of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel, they are to be both viewed as a metaphor of any of the pagan nations "out there" to which the exiles would be banished.

It was probably rather insulting for many to hear the Prophet Hosea declare *v'shav Efraim Mitzrayim u'b'Ashur tamei yokeilu* (וְשָׁבוּ אֶפְרַיִם מִצְרַיִם וּבְאַשּׁוּר טְמֵאִים יֹאכְלוּ), "and-he-will-return Ephraim Egypt and-in-Assyria unclean they-will-eat" (Kohlenberger).¹² One will find "food" often added to an English translation, although *tamei* is best left as "an unclean thing" (YLT). Eating meats that would be considered unclean from the lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, in the exile, is a guaranteed and obvious part of this judgment. Leon J. Wood notes, "The food they were to eat there would be 'unclean' because it would not be selected and prepared according to the Mosaic Law or sanctified by presenting its firstfruits (cf. Exod 22:29; Lev 23:10-12)."¹³ What was even grown in pagan countries like Egypt or Assyria would perhaps be widely "unclean," to some degree or another, as much agricultural produce was intended for various deities. Charles L. Feinberg further describes the nature of what this decree would mean:

"Israel has done this in her own land, contrary to God's will, by eating in the idol feasts. Now through necessity or compulsion she would have to eat such in a foreign land for her sustenance. That which she had done willingly in transgressing the Law of God, she would be compelled to do habitually in a manner which placed her on a plane with the heathen nations surrounding her."¹⁴

David Alan Hubbard notes that the eating of unclean things, by the exiles among the general population, is only one of a number of places where uncleanness—either relating to their idolatry, sexual immorality, or political intrigue—would be a means of condemnation and shame:

"Previously, Israel was branded *unclean* for her sexual promiscuity and political treachery (5:3; 6:10). Now the theme of *eating* introduced in 8:13 is expanded, and the whore finds herself condemned to live where no law of food selection and preparation is possible. For the priests, who

¹⁰ Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, 757.

¹¹ Duane A. Garrett, *New American Commentary: Hosea, Joel*, Vol 19a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 191.

¹² Kohlenberger, 492.

¹³ Leon J. Wood, "Hosea," in *EXP*, 7:204.

¹⁴ Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 45.

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sought to maintain the distinctions between the sacred and profane (Lv. 10:8-11), even when they had violated the covenant (cf. 4:4-6; 6:7-10), a diet of unclean food was a fate tantamount to death (cf. Am. 7:17).¹⁵

It is further decreed of what the Northern Kingdom exiles would eat, "It shall be for them like the food of mourners, all who partake of which are defiled. They will offer no libations of wine to the LORD, and no sacrifices of theirs will be pleasing to Him; but their food will be only for their hunger, it shall not come into the House of the LORD" (v. 4, NJPS). The main staple that awaits the exiles is *lechem 'onim* (לֶחֶם אוֹנִים) or "mourners' bread" (NRSV). This evokes how those who come in contact with a household that has experienced a death, become ritually unclean, *including* whatever is eaten (Numbers 19:14; Deuteronomy 26:14). And not only will what is eaten in the exile be both non-kosher and deathly-unclean—there will not be any offerings of any kind able to be presented at the *beit ADONAI* (בֵּית יְהוָה) or House of the Lord in Jerusalem (*or* even at the substitute places of worship established by Jeroboam [1 Kings 12:28-33]), due to the deportation. As Gale A. Yee has to observe, "Unacceptable for God's cult, such food is useful only in satisfying one's hunger."¹⁶ Charles F. Kraft similarly says,

"God's punishment will be exile to **Egypt** or **Assyria**...to live on a starvation diet. The food, like that ceremonially contaminated by a death in the house (cf. Num. 19:14-15; Deut. 26:14), will be **unclean** because devoted to a foreign god (vs. 4; cf. Amos 7:17)."¹⁷

Hosea 9:1-4 application When the Prophet Hosea decreed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, "they shall eat unclean things" (v. 4, LITV), issues of unclean or non-kosher, were also caught up together with death, mourning, and utter despair. And while specifically directed to people who would be soon facing the main bulk of the Assyrian exile with the impending fall of Samaria—the expectation of eating unclean things in the exile was something that those of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which would experience its own exile at the hands of Babylon two centuries later, would doubtlessly also experience.

Presumably there were some who heard the Prophet Hosea's original decree in the Eighth Century B.C.E., and individually recommitted themselves to a course of obedience to God, making sure that all of the sins which were targeted were not present in their lives. For those of us reading today, while violation of the kosher dietary laws has never borne any capital penalties in Scripture—violation of the kosher dietary laws can be witnessed to be connected to those who go after other objects of worship. The adherence of any kosher-friendly Messianic people, to the dietary laws of the Torah, is rooted in a motivation of wanting to be obedient and faithful to the ways of the Lord, *unlike* those of the Northern Kingdom depicted in Hosea 9:1-4.

¹⁵ David Alan Hubbard, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Hosea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 157.

¹⁶ Yee, in *NIB*, 7:265.

¹⁷ Charles F. Kraft, "The Book of Hosea," in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 457.