

Lesson 10

Last week we started chapter 2, and we saw that it represents Israel in two different ways. First, Israel is a mother, and second, Israel is the children of that mother. The description of Israel as a mother is directed to the Israelite society that was totally opposed to the way of God. And the description of Israel as the children of that mother is directed to the ordinary people of Israel who had been born and raised in that evil society. Verse 5 continues the description of the mother that we saw last week.

Hosea 2:5

5 For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'

The doubts about the parentage of Hosea's children arise once again in verse 5. We are told that she who conceived them has acted shamefully. Does that mean they are not Hosea's children? And again, we aren't given a definitive answer.

Why does this issue keep coming up? I think the answer is that God is creating these doubts because he wants the people to have those same doubts about their own parentage. Are they children of God or are they children of Baal? Who is their real father?

And, again, the focus here is Israel, not Gomer. Gomer is just a sign or a living illustration. Hosea's message is directed to Israel, not to Gomer. Gomer has receded into the background and Israel has moved to the foreground.

The children are the people of Israel, and their mother is their own evil culture that was opposed to God and that gave birth to and reared the people of Israel.

The nation of Israel had played the whore. The nation of Israel had acted shamefully. The nation of Israel had gone after her lovers to get the dues of her trade – bread, water, wool, flax, oil, and drink.

In what way had Israel done these things?

There were two primary ways in which Israel played the whore, and I think we see both of them at play here in verse 5.

First, Israel played the whore with Baal.

We haven't said much about Baal yet, so let's take a closer look now at Baal and Baalism. The false god Baal is an evil thread that runs all through the Bible.

Baal was the Canaanite storm god and the bringer of rain. As the bringer of rain, Baal was also considered the god of fertility, and the followers of Baal performed sexual acts in their worship of Baal. Worship of Baal also involved child sacrifice.

Jeremiah 19:5 – And have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.

Hosea 2:5 includes a subtle reference to Baal even without mentioning Baal by name because in that verse we see both of the primary benefits that were believed to be provided by Baal – children and agriculture.

The worshippers of Baal believed that Baal was the source of fertility, and so the mother in verse 5 would have thanked Baal for her children and for the agricultural gifts she received from her lovers.

One commentary suggests that the phrase in verse 5 – “who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink” – may have been a fragment of a fertility cult hymn that the people sang in their worship of Baal. And keep in mind that it is possible that Gomer was a follower of Baal and had worked as a prostitute in a temple of Baal.

Baal was a part of the religion of almost every culture in the ancient Near East, and sometimes was referred to by other names.

It is possible that Hadad (meaning thunderer) was the proper name of Baal, although Baal is never called that name in the Bible (except maybe in Zechariah 12:11). But we do see a number of Aramean kings with the name Hadad, and they may have been named for their false god.

In addition to Baal, the Canaanite pantheon included El (the father of the gods), Asherah (El's wife), Ashtoreth (one of Baal's wives and the goddess of love), Anath (Baal's second wife, the goddess of war), and Dagon (the god of vegetation). Baal is sometimes called the son of El and sometimes called the son of Dagon.

It is important to note that the word "Baal" in the Bible does not always refer to the false god Baal. Sometimes the word is used as a verb meaning "to marry" or "to have dominion over."

Deuteronomy 24:1 – When a man hath taken a wife, and married her...

And sometimes the word "Baal" just means "husband."

Proverbs 12:4 – A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband...

And sometimes the word "Baal" is used as a synonym for "Lord," even in reference to God.

1 Chronicles 14:11 – Then David said, God hath broken in upon mine enemies by mine hand like the breaking forth of waters: therefore they called the name of that place Baalperazim [the Lord bursts out].

And we see the word "Baal" in the names of some of Saul's relatives, where the word is again referring to God.

1 Chronicles 8:33–34 – And Ner begat Kish, and Kish begat Saul, and Saul begat Jonathan, and Malchishua, and Abinadab, and Eshbaal [Man of

the Lord]. And the son of Jonathan was **Meribbaal** [the Lord contends].

It is interesting that Samuel gave us a different name for Saul's son, Eshbaal.

2 Samuel 2:8 – But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took **Ishbosheth** the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim.

Why the change from Ish-baal in 1 Chronicles to Ish-bosheth in 2 Samuel? I think 2 Samuel was making an editorial comment! The Hebrew word "bosheth" means shame! So 2 Samuel replaced Ish-baal (man of the Lord) with Ish-bosheth (man of shame).

What that tells us is that, although the word "baal" started off as a neutral term, it did not stay that way for very long. I think we may soon see some evidence for that same change of attitude here in Hosea 2.

Hosea 2:17 – For **I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth**, and they shall no more be remembered by their name.

From the conquest of Canaan up until the Babylonian captivity, the worship of Baal was a constant temptation to the people of Israel. The first recorded incident is found in Numbers 25.

Numbers 25:1-3 – While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. **So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor**. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.

And it happened again and again after that. In the book of Judges we see a cycle in which the people would reject God and turn to Baal instead, followed by oppression by some foreign power, leading to repentance, and liberation through a judge sent by God who steered the people away from Baal.

Just prior to the monarchy, the people confessed to having worshiped Baal up until that point.

1 Samuel 7:3-4 – And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” **So the people of Israel put away the Baals** and the Ashtaroth, and they served the LORD only.

After the kingdom was divided, Baal became the national religion of Israel under King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, whose father was Eth-baal, the king of Sidon.

1 Kings 16:30-32 – And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria.

If you ever have any doubts about the great damage that only one person can do, study the life of Jezebel!

And, as Elijah described, the followers of Baal in Israel persecuted those who sought to follow God.

1 Kings 19:10 – He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

That Baal was the storm god supplies some important context for the severe drought announced by Elijah.

1 Kings 17:1 – Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

That pronouncement was not only an announcement of God’s superiority over Baal, but it was also an announcement of the death of Baal because, in their myths, the worshipers of Baal equated drought with the death of Baal. That fact explains the desperation we see from the followers of Baal on Mount Carmel.

1 Kings 18:27-29 – And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Although Baal was defeated on Mount Carmel, the worship of Baal did not end there. Ahab's son, Ahaziah, followed in the steps of his evil father.

2 Kings 1:1-2 – Now Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay sick; so he sent messengers, telling them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.”

Baalzebub means Lord of the Flies, and that title may have been intended as a mockery of the title Lord of the High Places or Exalted Lord. The only difference in Hebrew between “flies” and “exalted” is a single letter.

I mentioned earlier that Baal was an evil thread that ran throughout the Bible, and we see that thread even in the New Testament. The Jewish scribes said that Jesus was possessed by Baalzebub in Mark 3:22, and that unbelievably horrible statement was immediately followed by Jesus' description of the unforgivable sin in Mark 3:28-30.

As for the southern kingdom, Judah, the worship of Baal was introduced by Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, who married Jehoram, the son of King Jehoshaphat. Jehoram followed his wife in worshipping Baal, as did his son, Ahaziah.

2 Kings 8:18 – And he [Jehoram] walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as did the house of Ahab: for the daughter of Ahab was his wife: and he did evil in the sight of the LORD.

2 Kings 8:27 – And he [Ahaziah] walked in the way of the house of Ahab, and did evil in the sight of the LORD, as did the house of Ahab: for he was the son in law of the house of Ahab.

And, as we have seen, Ahaziah was shot and killed by Jehu at Jezreel, and his mother, Athaliah, almost wiped out the line of King David.

2 Kings 10:28 tells us that Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel, but (again) that did not last very long as we will see here in the book of Hosea.

And so the first way that Israel was playing the whore (as Hosea 2:5 tells us) was that Israel was playing the whore with Baal.

Second, Israel played the whore with foreign nations.

Hosea 7:11 – Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart: they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria.

We have already seen how Israel made alliances with foreign countries (such as Egypt and Assyria) and trusted in those foreign nations instead of trusting in God and viewed those foreign nations as the source of their blessings rather than God.

We will see more evidence of this misplaced trust – both as to Baal and to foreign alliances – as we continue through chapter 2.

Hosea 2:6–7

6 Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she

cannot find her paths. 7 She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them, and she shall seek them but shall not find them. Then she shall say, 'I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now.'

Starting in verse 5 and continuing in verses 6–7 we see a cycle that repeatedly occurs not only in Hosea but in the entire Bible: sin, punishment, and redemption.

We saw the **sin** in verse 5 – “I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink.”

We see the **punishment** in verses 6–7 – “I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her,” and “she shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them, and she shall seek them but shall not find them.”

And we see **redemption** in verse 7 – “I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now.”

And we won't have to wait very long to see this cycle repeated!

Later, in verse 8, we will again see the **sin**.

In verses 9–13, we will again see the **punishment**.

And in verses 14–23, we will again see the **redemption**.

Verse 7 does not promise redemption, but it does anticipate redemption. Verse 7 tells us that there will be a change of attitude in which the mother considers a return to her first husband.

Later in verse 16, this anticipated return will be repeated with more detail: “And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’”

In verses 7–8, the punishment is that she would be blocked from pursuing her lovers. She would be cut off from them by a hedge of thorns and by a wall.

And, of course, this punishment from God was done for her own good – to keep her from causing more harm to herself or to her children, and to cause her to reconsider her ways and return to her first husband.

As a result of this punishment, verse 7 tells us that she will pursue her lovers but not overtake them. The word translated “pursue” in verse 7 literally means to diligently hunt down. (She is not playing hard to get!) She is chasing them, but God has put a hedge and a wall in her way to slow her down in that pursuit.

And what is the result?

Look back at verse 5 – “I will go after my lovers...”

And now look at verse 7 – “I will go and return to my first husband...”

The Hebrew is more emphatic – literally, it reads, “Let me go,” or “I want to go.”

Verses 5 and 7 start off the same, but they do not end the same. In verse 5, the woman demands

to go to her lovers, but in verse 7 the woman demands to return to her husband.

But why? Why does she want to return to her husband? Because of her great love for him? Or instead is verse 7 showing us only that she is still following her own self-interest, and now that she is blocked from her lovers, she sees her first husband as the next best option. Perhaps her only motive is to follow her reward – either a reward from her lovers or a reward from her husband.

But perhaps we should wait and see how this all turns out before making that judgment. After all, verse 7 reminds us a bit of the prodigal son who also returned home when he became hungry and who also returned home with the stated goal of improving his current position.

Before we leave these verses, I think we can see a warning for ourselves here. We, like the people in Hosea's day, need to be on our guard against religious syncretism.

What is religious syncretism? It is the mixing and merging of one religion with another.

If you had asked these people whether they believed in God, most or perhaps all of them would have quickly answered yes. But they also believed in Baal, and they had mixed the true worship of God with the false worship of Baal – and that mixing is called syncretism.

We see an example of syncretism on the handout for Lesson 10. At the top of the page, we see a

marker that was created to thank God “and his Asherah (Baal’s mother).” We see some something very similar in 2 Kings 21.

2 Kings 21:7 – And the carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to Solomon his son, “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.

The “he” in that verse was King Manasseh of Judah, but we know that the same syncretism also happened and was even more widespread in Israel.

And what was the cause of the syncretism? It was primarily the same thing that drive polytheism in the first place – superstition.

If one God is good, then many gods must be better! And why should we risk offending some god by not giving him his due? If we want the rain to come and the crops to grow, then why not seek that from every god we can find? Why not also look to this god of fertility? And, of course, we can also keep looking to God.

But that is not how God demands to be worshipped, and we can see that from the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 20:2–6 – I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation

of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Yes, syncretism is bad, but syncretism is just a problem for those poor deluded ancient Israelites, right? We don't need to guard against syncretism today, right? Wrong and wrong!

Although we may not be tempted today to bow down to an image of Baal, we are still tempted to have two masters. We still face temptations today to put our faith in God and in something or someone else – to hedge our bets so to speak.

- I have faith in God, but I also have faith in my bank account.
- I have faith in God, but I also have faith in science.
- I have faith in God, but I also have faith in worldly wisdom.
- I have faith in God, but I also have faith in someone or something else.

When we mix those things with God to the point that we have created a mixed religion, then we have become guilty of syncretism.

Matthew 4:10 – Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

Luke 16:13 – No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

But we would never do these things, right? We would never attribute the wonderful working of the universe to someone other than the creator of that wonderful universe, right? Ever hear of **Mother Nature**? Who is that?

Here is a pertinent quote from an 1885 commentary on Hosea:

It seems to us strange folly. They attributed to gods, who represented the functions of nature, the power to give what God alone gives. How is it different, when men now say, "nature does this, or that," or speak of "the operations of nature," or the laws of "nature," and ignore God Who appoints those laws, and worketh hitherto "those operations?"

Like Hosea's listeners, we also need to make sure we give credit where credit is due!

And there is another lesson here for our own society. What was almost certainly the primary reason why the worship of Baal quickly became so popular? What was the reason that the worship of Baal kept coming back after it had been removed from the land?

I think we can answer that question with one word – sex. Baalism was a fertility cult, and the temples of Baal were nothing more than brothels.

And what is the lesson there for us? It is this: **the surest sign of a man-made religion is a "special revelation" from God for its followers (and most often its leaders) to engage in sexual immorality.**

That is certainly true of this ancient fertility cult, but can we think of any more modern examples?

- How about Islam? Muhammad said that he had a dream in which he was instructed to marry the six year old daughter of his best friend.
- How about mormonism? In 1830, Joseph Smith claimed that God commanded him to take multiple wives, and Smith's first polygamous union was with the 16-year-old daughter of a neighboring Mormon family. Nine of Smith's first dozen wives were the spouses of his closest friends.
- How about David Koresh?

And we could go on and on, but we all know the truth on that subject.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 – Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

One more question about verse 8 – did this redemption actually occur? Yes and no.

No, the redemption in verse 8 did not occur in the immediate future of the people. It could have occurred; the door was open for it to occur; but it did not occur. Instead, the people persisted in their rebellion and idolatry, and Assyria defeated them and scattered them.

But yes, this redemption in verse 8 did occur later when the gospel was proclaimed to both Jew and Gentile, and the people of Israel (who in the first century had become Samaritans and were considered Gentiles) were offered salvation in Christ. We see the fulfillment of this promise in John 4 when Jesus speaks to the **Samaritan** woman at the well.

John 4:13-14 – Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

That promise of eternal life was spoken by Jesus to a descendant of the same people who were hearing the word of God from the prophet Hosea.

Sometimes when we read Old Testament promises to Israel we hear the argument that some promise must be a promise for the end of the world because the promise is so wonderful – but let me ask you this: could any promise be more wonderful than the promise of Christ in John 4? “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” And we know that that promise was a first century promise! It was the promise of the gospel which is still available today for all who will come and drink from that well! And if anyone today is waiting for a more wonderful promise than the gospel of Christ, they will have a very long wait because there could be no greater promise than that!