

Hosea 13.12-16: The Stillbirth of Ephraim and the Rebirth of the Elect

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These five verses depict Israel at the threshold of new life, and the stillbirth that the nation suffers for refusing to trust in God for their redemption. Ephraim and Samaria together are depicted as representatives of Israel. Their destruction described in history, and the memory of this destruction and the Israel's willful complicity in its own death are reminders for generations. They are a warning to every man, woman, and child that their continued rebellion against God will result in death. By refusing to be born into righteousness by God's assistance, all men doom themselves to death and eternal damnation. These verses are a case study of God's discriminate compassion that falls on some and is removed from others. In this instance, allowing Israel to be destroyed by the Assyrian invaders, God bestows no immediate compassion upon Israel. This historical, temporal judgment hints at a final resolution. In the same stroke of judgement, God affirms that He alone wields power over death and delivers from its bowels those elect whom He has given to Christ for new birth and righteous life.

The return to Ephraim as the subject of Hosea's prophecy is the first indication that a new unit has begun. The prophet may have named "Ephraim", rather than "Israel", in this unit to maintain the poetic balance, introduced in v. 1, between "Israel" in v. 9 and "Ephraim" in v. 12 (Anderson and Freedman 637). The unity of vv. 12-16 is supported by their poetic structure. The count of the lines in the four stanzas follows a 6 + 5 + 6 + 5 pattern, with each line having three metrical feet. The lines of the fourth stanza have two metrical feet, which reinforces the terrible, mournful tone of the elegy (Harper 401). These verses cannot be completely separated from the preceding verses in this chapter. The subject is the same, though most of the book shares this subject (Harper 401; Wolff 223). More importantly, while v. 12 switches to the third person, the first person statements in following verse parallel vv. 4-11, and the scornful questions in v. 13 match the tone and content of v. 10 (Wolff 223). These four verses are best treated as a unit within a unit, a focused lens of judgement beneath an overarching verdict.

Some historical context is necessary to understand how Ephraim can be representative of Israel. Direct references to Israel in this passage are self-explanatory, remembering that Samaria was the capital of Israel at the time of the Assyrian invasion. The man, Ephraim, is first mentioned in the book of Genesis in the narrative on Joseph's promotion in Egypt to overseer of the land during its fourteen years of plenty and scarcity (Gen. 41.45-57). In the seventh year of plenty, Joseph had two sons (41.50). He named the first son, Manasseh, and the second son he named, Ephraim, saying, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction" (41.51-2). The second son's name, אֶפְרַיִם, is descended from the Qal verb, פָּרַח, which is translated, "he bears fruit" (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 68, 826). This verb is seen in the description of God in its Hiphil form where it is translated "he makes fruitful". Thus, Joseph named his son as a testimony to the many blessings which God had and continued to bestow on him and his household. Ephraim is again the subject of the book of Genesis in the narrative about Israel's blessing on Manasseh and Ephraim (48). These two first sons of Joseph were adopted by Jacob to be reckoned along side of Joseph's brothers (48.5). In their father's place, they would be two of Israel's twelve households (48.6; Jos. 14.4). Jacob elevated Ephraim, blessing him before his older brother, saying, "His offspring shall become a multitude of nations" (48.20). Indeed, already by the time of the Exodus, Moses spoke that the people of Ephraim's tribe were numbered in the "ten thousands" (Deu. 33.17). Hence, Ephraim would be fruitful in the way his father was made fruitful.

The name, Ephraim, eventually became tied to the geographical region that the man's descendants inherited. Following his blessing on Joseph's sons, Jacob presented Joseph "one mountain slope that [Jacob] took from the hand of the Amorites" (Gen. 48.22). The word for "mountain slope", שָׁכֶם, is spelled and pronounced the same way as the name of a Canaanite prince and his principality, the town and district of Shechem, which is located in the hill country that the Manassites and Ephraimites eventually settled (34.2; 37.12). The mountain from which this land extended was likely Mt. Gerizim, which overlooks Shechem (Miller and Miller 670).

Abraham had built an altar in this land after God promised it to his descendants. His grandson, Jacob, originally purchased some land near Shechem from the prince of Hamor the Canaanite for hundred *qesitah* (Gen. 33.19; Miller and Miller 670). However, when the prince stole away and raped Leah's daughter, Dinah, Jacob and his sons slew Hamor and his sons (Gen. 34.2, 25-9), capturing their land in the process. For this reason, Jacob could say that he took the land with his sword and bow (48.22). Later, when Joshua was portioning the Promise Land, Shechem fell above the southern boundary of the territory given to Manasseh (Rasmussen 98; cf. Jos. 17.7). In this way, the district of Shechem was representative of the greater portion land that would be presented to Joseph's sons. The city of Samaria was also situated near the southern border of the hill country of Manasseh, at its border with Ephraim, about the same latitude as Shechem (Rasmussen 38, 98). Now, some Ephraimites settled in "towns that were set apart for the people of Ephraim within the inheritance of the Manassites", and some of these towns may have been near Shechem and Samaria, seeing as these were adjacent to the border (Jos. 16.9; cf. Rasmussen 96-8). Perhaps because of this migration, the Manassites would not keep control their portion of Joseph's inheritance. When Solomon began taxing his kingdom to keep food on his table, he divided up the united kingdom into twelve administrative districts (1Ki. 4.7). An officer of the court, Ben-hur, was placed over Ephraim, which by this time had come to include all the hill country given to Joseph's sons (4.8; Rasmussen 122). When the ten tribes revolted against Rehoboam, Ephraim became preeminent in the Kingdom of Israel, with three of Israel's four capital cities were located within its borders (Gen. 12.16-24; Rasmussen 125; Miller and Miller 292). The first capital city of Israel was Shechem, but Samaria was the last and greatest capital city, the jewel in Israel's crown (1Ki. 12.1; 2Ch. 10.1; 1Ki. 16.23-4). To be sure, God said to Ahaz, "Samaria is at the head of Ephraim" (Isa. 7.9). As a result of Ephraim's preeminence and its containment of Samaria, the name is sometimes used synonymously with Samaria to refer to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, especially in poetry. The names, "Ephraim" and "Samaria", take on an even greater significance in light of the events preceding this prophecy, namely the reduction

of Israel's borders to the district of Ephraim.

Stuart highlights the fact that at the time of Hosea's prophecy, Samaria was "the only major reminder of the once successful, influential Northern Kingdom" (208). The kingdom of Israel had been decimated by Assyrian invasions over the prior decade. The historical events which the prophet Hosea foretells in vv. 12-16 actually transpired between 723 and 721 BCE (Finegan 250). However, the story begins in 733-2 BCE, when the Assyrian king Tiglathpileser I defeated the Aramean kingdom of Damascus, and took several cities of Israel in the process, but chose not to invade Samaria (Kraeling 296-7; 2Ki. 15.29). In that same year, Hoshea son of Elah assassinated Pekah, taking his place as Israel's king (297; cf. 2Ki. 15.30). The Israel he inherited was a fragment of its former size and power, "reduced to the city of Samaria and the Ephraimite country south of it" (297). When Tiglathpileser's son, Shalmaneser V, ascended to the Assyrian throne, he decided to expand his kingdom further and subjugate Israel (Pfeiffer 50; cf. 2Ki. 17.3). Israel's king became Shalmaneser's vassal and paid him tribute, but Hoshea soon resisted and turned to Egypt for help (2Ki. 17.4). The Assyrians captured the king and threw him into prison, but the city of Samaria supported the resistance, and the hand of Shalmaneser was forced (Kraeling 297). The fall of Samaria to the Assyrians by siege, foretold in v. 16, occurred in 722 BCE (Pfeiffer 50). This total destruction of Israel was the punishment for the kingdom's sin of rebellion.

The text of v. 12 is a "special application of Deu. 32.34 to the ten tribes" of Israel (Keil 158-9). The binding/storing picture in v. 12 reflects the storing/sealing in Deu. 32.34 and the sealing/covering in Job 14.17. In Deu. 31.29, Moses prophesies that "in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD". Couched in metaphor, the song that follows describes the iniquity of Israel (32.28-33). That iniquity has been "laid up in store" with God, and is "sealed up" in his treasuries (32.34). Likewise, according to one interpretation of v. 12, Israel's sin is bound up like a precious bundle, or an infant in a blanket, and hidden away for its protection, to ensure that it is not lost (Keil 159). The language might also

imply that the sin has been bound in an irreversible legal judgement and hidden in storage to protect it from being tampered or stolen by the convicted party, though this is the least likely variation (Wolff 228). Anderson and Freedman propose that the text conveys the “practice of wrapping up precious manuscripts and putting them in storage”, supporting their hypothesis by pointing to this procedure discovered in the caves of Qumran and elsewhere (637). This practice is described in Jer. 32.14, when the prophet took the title to the field at Anathoth and stored it in an earthenware jar, to protect it for “a long time.” The deed would be safe until it needed to be retrieved “to establish ownership” (Anderson and Freedman 637). A fourth possible nuance comes from comparison to Job, suggesting that the iniquity is tied up like coins in money bags and placed into a vault for their protection (Harper 402). This interpretation is supported by a parallel Hos. 12.7-8, which tells that Ephraim’s sin is the result of his acquiring riches through disreputable business (Keck, ed. 291). Furthermore, in Job’s reply to Zophar, mentioning that God is storing up the iniquity of wicked men’s children, he implores Him to “pay it out to them, that they may know it” (21.20). Whether it is suggestive of wad, writ, writing, or wealth, the significance of this language is that God is aware of Israel’s sin, and that until it is punished, it would neither be forgotten nor forgiven (Stuart 206). God has accumulated every bit of Israel’s sin, and not a single portion of it will be overlooked on judgement day, because it is secure and looked after (Harper 402). This treasury of sin is the reason for the punishment that Moses foretold, which had already begun to be fulfilled when Hosea commenced speaking.

The metaphor introduced in v. 13 borrows the agony of Ephraim’s improper birth to describe the coming transition in Israel. Ancient peoples did not have the benefits of modern medical treatments, and childbirth was far more dangerous than it is now since there was safe surgical option, like the cesarean section, to save a child in a bad presentation. If the child failed to present correctly for birth, he would die. If the deceased child could not be removed from the womb in short order, the mother would also die. This picture of Ephraim’s birth invokes the perspective of the child, rather than the typical perspective of the mother (cf. Isa. 13.8). The mother

is only suggested by the description of the “pangs of childbirth”, but immediately the lens moves to the unborn child. The time of his birth is upon Ephraim, but he is not turned the right way to be brought out of the womb. This is a new variation of the metaphor that King Hezekiah sent his messenger to tell Isaiah; the word picture describes Judah’s situation as a disgraceful day on which there is no strength to push out children at the point of birth (2Ki. 19.3). The description of the child’s willful involvement determining his physical position in his mother’s womb is not intended to be a technical description, but rather to convict Ephraim of his complicity in his own death. The child has neither knowledge of his responsibility at the present hour nor awareness of the consequences of his resistance. Both the child and the mother are representative of Israel (Keil 159). The mother is the old Israel, who is wicked and struggling under the torturous decree of divine punishment (Stuart 206). The child is new Israel, who has the opportunity for new life. A wise man would know that the time is at hand, but the foolish child that he is, Israel refuses to be born in righteousness (Wolff 228). Like in the previous verse, there is no opportunity in v. 13 for repentance or atonement, no promising indication (Stuart 207). Therefore, the potentially righteous Israel would die with the wicked Israel.

Anderson and Freedman report that v. 14 is “perhaps one of the most disputed verses” in Hosea. The dispute centers around the question of whether the intent of the interrogative statements is one of consolation or commination, whether the tone is positive or negative. Depending on the way the verse is interpreted, God is either the “life-giver” or “death-dealer” of the nation that resists being born into righteousness (Keck, ed. 291). Literally, these are positive, confident, and forceful statements of God’s purpose to ransom and redeem Israel (Keck, ed. 291; cf. NASV). This appears to conflict with their context in this unit of prophecy (Keck, ed. 291). Wolff argues that God is offering, by demonstration of His power over Sheol and death, to act as Ephraim’s “midwife” to guide him through his precarious labor (228). In this sense, the sting of death is absent. On the other hand, Keck would read the first two statements in v.14 with a subjunctive connotation, as if they are expecting a negative answer, and the following two questions

he interprets as a summons of punishment on Ephraim's apostasy (291). Calvin insists it is unnecessary to change the tense of the verbs from future, "I will", to subjunctive, "I would", in order to preserve the prophets original meaning (476). Instead, these statements of God's future work of salvation must be read with their corresponding condition. They are not unconditional declarations of pardon, but God's promised response if Israel turns and repents. The following chapter in Hosea is a plea for Israel to return to God's ways, and embrace the salvation that God can provide. Contrarily, ransom and redemption surely do not wait for Israel, because the nation would not return, but continue to rebel against its God (cf. Hos. 13.16). Immediately following these four lines, God reminds Ephraim that He "will have no compassion" on him. With either Keck, Wolff, or Calvin's interpretation, this line removes from Ephraim's mind any doubt about his fate. Anderson and Freedman insist that this verse's multiplicity of meanings should be affirmed, "since all of these possibilities are in some way true" (292). This conclusion downplays the original intentions of the real person of Hosea. When the prophet spoke these words, Stuart points out, they "were probably unambiguous in light of the inflections in Hosea's delivery" (207). His audience, Israel's king and his court, would have clearly understood the tone and meaning of these statements as they applied to Israel (Dooley 72). As a result, the modern reader must try to come to the best conclusion possible about the prophet's original meaning.

The clever, poetic language of v. 15 is less controversial than the preceding verse, though no less intriguing. There are several puns and word pictures to indict Ephraim of his transgressions. Preparing to declare judgement, God withholds his compassion, even though Ephraim bears fruit in his brothers' midst. The verb, translated "he bears fruit", is the Hiphil stem of the same Qal verb, פָּרַח, that gives Ephraim his name (Keck, ed. 292). Literally, this is an affirmation of Jacob's blessing on Ephraim, that he would become a multitude (cf. Gen. 48). However, this statement should not be read as a concessive compliment, but as further condemnation on Ephraim. Some commentators believe the word, אֶרְבָּי, often translated in v. 15 as "brothers", may be subtly referring to אֶרְבָּי which is a "loan word" from Egyptian that means "reeds" (Holla-

day 9; Wolff 229; Ben Zvi 276-7). If this is the case, the word's dual meaning may be alluding to when Israel's puppet-king, Hoshea, made allies among the heathen nations, aligning with So, the king of Egypt, to escape dependence on Assyria (Wolff 229; Kraeling 298; cf. Hos. 8.10; 2Ki. 17.4). Earlier in Hosea, Ephraim is convicted of being like a lustful wild donkey and a whore with many lovers (8.9). The word, אָרֶב, translated "wild ass", is similar to Ephraim's name, and figurative of willfulness (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 825). The first word of v. 15, אֵל, also supports the poetic duality of this line, since it can connect Ephraim's fruitfulness to the previous verse with either a causal or concessive voice. Any acknowledgement of Ephraim's fruitfulness is therefore a play on Israel giving itself willfully over to fornication among the nations.

Despite or because of Ephraim's "fruitfulness", God shall raise up an east wind from the wilderness, and this wind shall destroy the land and exhaust Israel's treasure. This east wind is the whirlwind that Israel reaped from the crop he sowed (Hos. 8.7). It is the breath of God that withers men like dry grass, and shrivels the branches and fruit of a strong kingdom (Isa. 40.7; Eze. 19.12). This wind brought Israel's forefathers meat and bread from heaven, but now it would bring God's anger (Psa. 78.23-8, 31). The east wind clearly also points to the Assyrian invasion, which was mounted from the wilderness from the northeast across the Euphrates (Aharoni and Avi-Yonah 96). The wind of God is the movement in the destruction of Israel, and Assyria is the agent He moves. The last two couplets in v. 15 describe the two-fold destruction wrought by the Assyrian army in conjunction with God's climatic judgement. The image of the failing spring and dry well indicate that the land would be barren because of drought (Stuart 208). Israel had drunk abundantly from the streams God made to come out of a rock, but there would soon come a time when the deep wellspring would dry up for the Ephraimites (Psa. 78.20). The image of drought also points to the dire condition of the people in Israel's capital, who were besieged by Shalmeneser V until they starved (Kraeling 297). Furthermore, the poverty in the storehouses described in the second couplet parallels the drought in the land. The treasury of God's blessings on a righteous Israel is stripped by the judgement on an Israel that

“has forgotten his Maker” (Hos. 8.14). The nation’s treasury of wealth would also be emptied by the Assyrian invaders. Indeed, the cities of Israel would be emptied even of their inhabitants, and repopulated. Following the practice of the Assyrians who would resettle their defeated enemies in order to foreclose new resistance, Shalmeneser V and Sargon II captured as many as 27,290 people, carrying them north to the cities of the Medes (Finegan 250-1; Kraeling 297-8; Pfeiffer 154; cf. 2Ki. 18.11). The fulfillment of this prophecy left the land fruitless and the kingdom depleted.

The spotlight of judgement swivels to the city of Samaria in v. 16, the final verse in this unit. This verse depicts the horrors of the covenant punishment that Israel brought upon itself for breaking covenant with God. It graphically describes the carnage that the Assyrian soldiers would unleash on rebellious Samaria. Speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God pledged blessings for Israel in return for their faithful obedience, and vowed to curse the nation when they did not obey (Lev. 26.3-4, 14-6; cf. Deu. 28.1-2, 15). The starvation and slaughter at the hands of the Assyrians was the materialization of the disciplinary plan which God had promised to enact should Israel not keep His covenant (Lev. 26.14-6). The people of Israel, even their kings, had made idols for themselves to bow down before, and God would not tolerate this apostasy (Hos. 13.1-2; cf. Lev. 26.1). In response to their continued defiance, God felled Israel with a sword, executing the covenant’s repayment, and He delivered Samaria into the hands of its enemy (25). The armies of Shalmaneser encamped around the capital city and cut off the supply lines, fulfilling God’s promise to break Israel’s supply of bread (26). In their hunger, the people of the city must have resorted to despicable acts of desperation (Stuart 208). God declared that the people under covenant judgement would slay their sons and daughters and eat their flesh, even the newborn babies (Lev. 26.29; Deu. 52.53-5). Pregnant women would have been slit across the belly by the Assyrian soldiers, for this was a usual procedure for punishing rebellion, and was therefore a fitting punishment for Israel’s rebellion against God (Stuart 209; cf. 2Ki. 15.16; Amos 1.13). The total destruction of the nation of Israel, specifically its capital city, is a fitting end to

this historical judgement.

Like Ephraim, every man has a treasury of sin stored up with God, and that treasury binds him to death (cf. Hos. 13.12). Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, laments, “There is not a righteous man on earth who [continually] does good and never sins” (7.20). In Psalm 53, his father, David, describes God looking down from heaven at the foolish men of Earth, all of whom are practical atheists committing abominable sins, with not a single human being seeking after God (1-3). The apostle Paul echoes this sentiment, contrasting man’s wickedness with God’s righteousness, reminding the Romans that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (3.23). Paul explained to his audience in Asia Minor, that the sin of every man binds him, because he obeys the passions of his mortal body, presenting himself obediently to sin (Eph. 2.3; 6.12, 16). Obedience to sin leads to death, and since they are obedient thus, the lifelong, natural state of all men is death (Eph. 2.1; Heb. 2.15). “Truly, truly,” Jesus explained, “Everyone who commits sin is a bondservant to sin” (John 8.34). The laborers deserve their wage, even those who labor for sin, and the wage these bondservants earn is death (Luke 10.7; Rom. 6.23). Theirs is not only a temporal death, such as Israel received by the swords of the Assyrians, but an eternal death. Every person who dies while dead in sin will, “be thrown into hell ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9.47-8; cf. Isa. 66.24). In this eternal death, the sinner has no rest and “the smoke of their torment goes forever” (Rev. 14.11). The people and cities of Ephraim were bound to destruction for their rebellion against God. Death and eternal torment are the fate of every man who dies while under the bondage of a treasury of sin, but there is hope yet for the elect.

Jesus Christ has crucified the elect with himself, delivering all who are properly born again from the consequences of their burden in God’s storehouse. All men, like Ephraim, are improperly born (cf. Hos. 13.13). Sin and death are inherited from father to son, from “Adam to Moses” to all the children of man (Eze. 31.14; Rom. 5.12, 14). While condemned to death, no thing any man does can please God (Rom. 8.8). Escape from this cycle of death and damnation is

a new birth (John 3.3). A man's new birth is not one of flesh by natural processes, but of the man's soul by the work of the Spirit of God (5). For Ephraim to be born into new life, the mother, Israel, must die. Likewise, for man to be born again into righteousness, the old body of sin and flesh must perish. In both cases, God is the midwife who assists the birth. With Israel, God allowed the nation to resist. However, God steps in to shift the elect into a birthing position, wherein they will not resist the proper birth. To satisfy this requirement, God united the elect with Christ in His death on the cross, that we should be united with Him in new life (Rom. 6.5-8). Those who have been crucified with Christ are no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit (8.9). They are no longer under the condemnation of sin, nor the dominion of sin (8.1; 6.9). All men, like Ephraim, rest at the threshold of this new birth, needing only to take one willful step into new life, but all but those God has mercifully drawn resist the rebirth that is necessary to shed the old body of sin and take on the new body of righteousness.

The elect were chosen by God before the beginning of time according His Wisdom and purpose. Without regard to man's merits, He predetermined who would be ransomed from death, and who would received His compassion (cf. Hos. 13.14). God chooses to show mercy to some and withhold it from others (Exo. 33.19; Rom. 9.15). The compassionate mercy of God is unsearchable and inexplicable, and is moved only by His own will (Eph. 1.11; Rom. 9.15; Job 38). The will of His mercy is not swayed by the perceived righteousness of man, but was established before time itself (Eph. 1.4). According to His mercy alone, God made some men "to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1Pe. 1.3-4). These were delivered to be crucified according to God's definite plan (Acts 2.23). The number of those to be redeemed was determined by the Father, and this number was given to the Son, that he might intercede for them with the Father (John 12.1-2). Those whom God has given to Christ for redemption will not be lost or cast aside, but every one will be remembered on the last day (John 6.37; 10.28-9). God chose to withhold compassion from Ephraim for their sins, but did choose some men, even among those in Israel, to deliver from death, by the unsearchable counsel of His

will. This is a comfort for the elect, that even the assurance of judgement reminds those in Christ that they no longer face destruction.

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