

Hosea

Chapter 4

The LORD Accuses Israel

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; 2 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. 3 Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away. 4 Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. 5 You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. 6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children. 7 The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. 8 They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. 9 And it shall be like people, like priest; I will punish them for their ways and repay them for their deeds. 10 They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply, because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish 11 whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding. 12 My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore. 13 They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. 14 I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin. 15 Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty. Enter not into Gilgal, nor go up to Beth-aven, and swear not, "As the LORD lives." 16 Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the LORD now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture? 17 Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone. 18 When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly love shame. 19 A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

4:1–14:9 Deals with Israel's involvement in Canaanite religion, her moral sins and her international intrigues. (CSB)

Ch 4 God still addresses Israel as part of His children but does so here within the context of a legal suit He brings against them. (TLSB)

4:1 *Hear the word.* See, e.g., Isa 1:10; Jer 2:4; Eze 6:3. (CSB)

faithfulness. Loyalty to the covenant Lord (Jos 24:14) and right dealing with men (Pr 3:3). (CSB)

These often appear together in descriptions of God (e.g., Ex 34:6; Ps 40:10–11; 86:15; Is 16:5). (TLSB)

no knowledge of God. Also translated "wisdom" or "discernment." Often refers to the revealed knowledge God imparts to His covenant people. (TLSB)

4:2 List of many of the sins forbidden by the Mosaic covenant (Ten Commandments). Adultery, a major theme in this Book, comes last for emphasis. (TLSB)

swearing... adultery. The sins detailed (paralleled in Jer 7:9) transgress the Ten Commandments (see Ex 20:13–16; Dt 5:17–20). (CSB)

bloodshed. Includes (1) murder (see 6:8–9), (2) the assassinations following the death of Jeroboam II when three kings reigned in one year (2Ki 15:10–14) and (3) human sacrifice (Ps 106:38; Eze 16:20–21; 23:37). Where God is not acknowledged (v. 1), moral uprightness disappears. (CSB)

4:3 Rather than finding natural and material abundance through her pursuit of Baal (2:5), Israel will find only hunger as the true Lord of creation removes His provision (2:9, 12). (TLSB)

land mourns. God's judgment on man's sin affects all living things in man's world (see, e.g., Isa 24:3–6; Jer 4:23–28). (CSB)

All creation witnesses against Israel and sorrows over her condemnation. Cf Gn 3:17–18; Is 24:3–6; Rm 8:20–22. (TLSB)

4:4–9 An indictment against the priests, whose duty it was to be guardians of God's law and to furnish religious instruction (see Dt 31:9–13; 33:10; 2Ch 17:8–9; Ezr 7:6, 10; Jer 18:18). Hosea warned the priests not to lodge charges against the people for bringing God's judgment down on the nation, for they themselves were guilty, and the people could also bring charges against them—as Hosea proceeded to do (see v. 9; Isa 28:7; Jer 2:26; 4:9; 23:11). (CSB)

no one contend ... accuse. God will not allow Israel's religious leaders, esp its priests, to challenge or otherwise address His court while He judges. Rather, they stand accused. (TLSB)

priest. Unnamed; he represents the whole of Israel's religious establishment. Ironically, he fulfills his duty as priest, since he stands to represent the many. Unfortunately, he is found incompetent and is not allowed to intercede. He can only listen while God speaks His righteous condemnation. Cf Am 7:10–17. (TLSB)

4:5 *stumble.* Action of one standing under God's judgment (cf 5:5). Significantly, this is the final verb of the entire Book (14:9). Nevertheless, those who stumble can still be restored (15:1–2). (TLSB)

prophet. See Mic 2:6, 11; 3:5–7. (CSB)

The prophets in Israel, except for the few true spokesmen of the Lord like Hosea and Amos, prophesy by Baal (cf. Jeremiah 2:8). Both the unfaithful priests and the false prophets are blind guides leading the blind. Instead of showing the people the Lord's straight path, they "stumble day and night." They constantly fail to give the people clear guidance concerning God's will and the good example of a God-fearing life. (PBC)

your mother. The nation (see 2:2, 5; Isa 50:1). (CSB)

Faithless Israel is here portrayed as the mother of the representative accused priest. (TLSB)

4:6 *my people.* Israel (see vv. 8, 12; 2:1, 23; 6:11; 11:7; Mic 6:3). (CSB)

destroyed from lack of knowledge. Partly because the priests had failed to teach God's word to the people. (CSB)

Because the priests failed to instruct and correct the people, all will perish together (cf v 1; 6:5). Instead of hearing God's Word from the divinely appointed priesthood, the people seek knowledge from idols (v 12). (TLSB)

rejected knowledge ... reject you. Punishment in kind. (CSB)

you. The individual priest being addressed embodies the entire nation's rejection of God, who deposes him. Hus: "No one does more injury in the church than he who acts perversely and yet has the name and order of sanctity (*The Church*, p 148). (TLSB)

law of your God. Israel's source of life (see Dt 32:47), which the priests should have been faithfully promoting. (CSB)

The Law is God's entire revelation and was to be taught day and night (Dt. 6:1-9). (TLSB)

4:7 *they increased* – This numerical growth only resulted in greater iniquity. (TLSB)

their Glory. God (see Ps 106:20). (CSB)

The idolatrous behaviors that were once the people's boast will soon become their condemnation. Cf Ps 106:20; Rm 1:21–23; Php 3:19. (TLSB)

4:8 *feed on the sins.* Priests devoured the sacrifices (1Sa 2:13–17), profiting from the continuation of the sin rather than helping to cure it (see 8:13). (CSB)

The priests both plant the seed of sin and feed on its harvest. Though Baal was thought to be the source of food (2:5), the people's idolatrous worship, led by the priests, yields only a harvest of increasing sin. Tragically, both priests and people are eager for this illicit fruit. This image ironically contrasts with Lv 6:26, where Israel's priests consume portions of the sacrifices offered to the Lord. (TLSB)

4:9 *Like people, like priests.* Without exception, all would be punished for their sins. (CSB)

Rather than leading, the priests are following the people into idolatry and so will receive a similar punishment. Cf 10:5. The kings and princes will not escape this judgment (13:9–11). (TLSB)

The people following their spiritual leaders in their hypocrisy and therefore both of them together sharing the punishment of the Lord following upon such wickedness. (Kretzmann)

4:10 *eat but not satisfied.* The punishment fit the sin. (CSB)

The Lord's judgment renders the people's gain unrewarding. Rather than growing, they shall waste away. Cf. 8:7; Dt 28:1-63) (TLSB)

whoredom. See vv. 12, 18; 2:4; 6:10; 9:1; Ps 106:39. Instead of giving themselves to the Lord, they gave themselves to prostitution. (CSB)

4:11 *new wine*. Hbr has two words for wine. “New wine,” *tirosh*, appears also in 7:14; 9:2. Inflamed by wine and urged on by the priests, the people engage in illicit sexual relations that rob them of their understanding (lit, “heart”) so that they lust after idols. Then, as now, substance abuse brings self-destructive sin. God’s people must clearly see how excess leads to destruction (Eph 5:17–18). (TLSB)

4:12 Having forsaken God and provoked His abandonment of them (v 6), the people seek spiritual knowledge through the created order rather than through the Creator. Cf Rm 1:25. (TLSB)

piece of wood. Either the wooden idol or a diviner’s rod (see Eze 21:21). (CSB)

Divination likely involved the casting of rods on the ground and the interpretation of the resultant pattern. Note the contrast of possessive pronouns here. Though the Lord speaks of “My people,” they are described as having left “their God” in favor of “their walking staff.” (TLSB)

spirit of whoredom. Hebrew idioms often describe inner tendencies in terms of “spirit.” (CSB)

4:13 *tops of mountain*. Places commonly chosen for pagan altars (see 10:8; Dt 12:2; 1Ki 14:23; 2Ki 17:10; Jer 2:20; 3:6). Clay tablets from Ugarit (see chart on “Ancient Texts Relating to the OT”) tell of fertility rites carried out by the Canaanites at the high places. (CSB)

They sacrifice ... shade is good. High places were common sites for the worship of idols (cf Dt 12:2; 1Ki 14:23; Jer 2:20). From tree wood they fashioned idols, and in the shade of the trees they found comfort. (TLSB)

oak ... terebinth. Trees noted for their shade. (CSB)

commit adultery. Canaanite fertility rites involved sexual activity (v. 14) that led to general erosion of morals. (CSB)

The pagan sacrifices likely included ritual prostitution. This fact adds further nuance to Hosea’s recurring imagery of Israel’s unfaithfulness to her husband, the Lord. (TLSB)

4:14 *not punish*. The men would punish their women for immorality, but God would have no part in their hypocrisy. (CSB)

God shows a degree of forbearance toward the women involved, especially the daughters, because the husbands and fathers are considered most responsible for this sexual abomination. This follows the logic of the Lord’s singling out the priests in vv 4-9, because they were also guilty of failure of leadership. (TLSB)

harlots. Common prostitutes (see Ge 34:31; Lev 21:14; Eze 16:31). (CSB)

cult prostitutes. Women of the sanctuaries who served as partners for men in cultic sexual activity (cf. Ge 38:21–22; Dt 23:18). (CSB)

Men had illicit sexual relations with women at the high places, believing Baal would then ensure the fertility of the land. Cf Gn 38:21–22. (TLSB)

4:15 *not enter*. The nation as a whole was addressed. (CSB)

Gilgal. A site near Jericho (see 9:15; 12:11; Jos 4:19–20; 1Sa 11:13–15) where the Israelites had established a religious shrine. (CSB)

The main shrines in Israel, just west of Jericho and north of Jerusalem. (TLSB)

Beth Aven. A sarcastic substitute name for Bethel (see 5:8), site of one of the cult centers established by Jeroboam I (1Ki 12:29). (CSB)

Means “house of wickedness.” Ironic pun on the name Bethel, “house of God.” (TLSB)

As the LORD lives. A form of solemn oath (see Jdg 8:19; Ru 3:13; 1Sa 14:39; 26:10, 16; Jer 4:2; 38:16). Though proper in itself—since it invoked the true God (see Dt 6:13; 10:20; Jos 23:7)—it was here forbidden because it was being used deceitfully, as though the Israelites were truly honoring the Lord (see Jer 5:2). (CSB)

This oath had a proper use (e.g., Jgs 8:19; Ru 3:13; 1Sm 14:39), but not in unfaithful worship of idols. That would violate the Second Commandment. (TLSB)

4:16 *stubborn*. See Ne 9:29; Zec 7:11. (CSB)

stubborn heifer. See 10:11; Jer 2:20; an apt figure for unruly Israel (see 11:4; Jer 31:18). (CSB)

Refusing to be led by its owner. Israel rebels against her Creator. Cf Am 4:1. (TLSB)

broad pasture. Often signifies a place of security (e.g., Ps 18:19; 31:8). A lamb might be counted on to remain near her shepherd in an open space. Israel, however, cannot be trusted to stay with the Lord because of her past unfaithfulness. (TLSB)

4:17 *Ephraim*. Israel, the northern kingdom. (CSB)

Strongest of the 10 northern tribes; stands as an embodiment of Israel. (TLSB)

idols. The golden calf (8:5; 13:2; 1Ki 12:28) and the cult of Baal (2:8, 13). (CSB)

leave him alone. Nothing could be done to help (see 2Sa 16:11; 2Ki 23:18). (CSB)

4:19 *A whirlwind will sweep them away*. Lit. “The wind will catch them up with its wings,” probably a metaphor from the threshing floor (see 13:3; Ps 1:4) for the sudden violence that would bring the exile. Since the Hebrew for the words “wind” and “spirit” is the same, there is a possible play on words with the “spirit of prostitution” (v. 12; 5:4). (CSB)

Hbr *ruach*. Also means “spirit” (cf v 12, where “spirit” impels the people into whoredom).

wrapped them in its wings. Just as wind drives the chaff into dispersion, so the coming exile will sweep away the people of Israel. Cf 8:7; 13:3, 15; Ps 1:4–5. (TLSB)

ashamed. By means of their sacrifices they hoped to flourish, but God’s punishment for their idolatry would bring them into disgrace among the nations (see 10:6). (CSB)

sacrifices. Hbr usually translated “altar,” but here refers to the sacrifices being made to Baal. (TLSB)

Ch 4 God’s judgment against Israel focuses on the priests and their failure of leadership, because they have permitted and even encouraged the people to engage in gross idolatry. Today we see similar failures in leadership, not only among the clergy and secular leaders, but also in parents. It is a great comfort, then, to know that the Church ultimately depends on Christ, the true Good Shepherd. The Resurrected One promises that He will never lose any of the sheep the Father has given Him but will keep them and raise them up on the Last Day. • Lord, preserve us from abuse and from abusing others. Direct us with Your wisdom , satisfy us with Your pasture, and lead us to worship You alone. Amen. (TLSB)