

Hosea 4:10-14. Culpable Ignorance

During World War II a colonel and his driver headed back to their own lines in a jeep. They came to a fork in the road and there was an Allied soldier, guiding traffic. He told them to take the left fork. But after a few kilometres the driver sensed something was wrong. He stopped the jeep, and walked ahead in the gloom some twenty metres, only to find a yawning gap where the bridge should have been and a sheer drop of hundreds of metres. When they got back to the fork in the road, the colonel vented his rage at the soldier giving directions. The weary soldier answered, "I can't understand, sir. I've been sending traffic that way all night and you're the first to complain."

You'd think the colonel could have trusted that Allied soldier. You'd think the people of Hosea's time, back in the seventh century BC, could have trusted their leaders, the priests, to tell them which way to go. For, in addition to offering sacrifices, the priests were supposed to teach God's people the law or Torah of God - to teach them how to go the way God wanted them to go, how to live the way God wanted them to live. But look at verse 6: *"my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests, because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children."* The priests had ignored God's law, the Torah. Because they weren't teaching God's Word God's people were all going down the left fork to their destruction. The vast majority of people who live around you and work beside you, indeed, the vast majority of people in this world, are traveling down that left fork to disaster. They do it because that's the way they've been told to go by the various ones they've trusted. Tragically, not many come back from it to complain.

A Wrong-Headed Approach to Revelation

In verses 10-11 Yahweh addresses all the people, depicting their idolatry and its consequences. In the first place, *"They will eat but not have enough; they will engage in prostitution but not increase, because they have deserted the LORD to give themselves to prostitution, to old wine and new, which take away the understanding of my people. They consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood"*.

Understand what God means when he talks about his people being engaged in prostitution. In 2:5 God compares them all with an unfaithful mother who acts like a prostitute: *"Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.'"* You get the point? Prostitutes give their bodies in exchange for money or for payment in kind, food, drink and clothing. The people of Israel were worshiping gods that they believed would enable them to produce fertile crops and natural abundance that would supply their needs for food, drink, clothing and cooking materials. Before the Israelites entered the land of Canaan in which they lived the Canaanites had been practising these fertility cults for hundreds of years.

That's why in verse 13 we read: *"They sacrifice on the mountaintops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, where the shade is pleasant"* (v13a). This is a *nature religion*, in keeping with the fertility cult practised by the Canaanites and now taken up by the Israelites. The places where God's people worship their gods, including Yahweh himself, illustrate the extent to which their thinking revolved around the whole matter of fertility, material blessings and prosperity. Pure devotion to the Lord is now replaced by utilitarianism, a "what's in it for us" mentality

(or perhaps in a more individualistic society, "what's in it for me"). More than this God's people like this outdoorsy approach to worship, this "let's get back to nature", after all, it is very "pleasant" on a hot day to worship in the shade of a sacred tree, such as the "oak, poplar and terebinth."

In the 1980s in Uganda a former prostitute named Mwerinde claimed to have had a series of visions of the Virgin Mary, initially helping Mwerinde with her problem of being unable to conceive a child. Many women similarly struggling with infertility flocked to Mwerinde so that through her they might ask the Virgin Mary to help them bear children. By now Mwerinde claimed to be receiving revelations from the Virgin Mary about other matters and the group around her now called itself the *Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God*. Mwerinde even claimed that the Virgin Mary had told her the world would end on March 17, 2000. On that very day the world did end for Mwerinde and her followers when 500 of them burnt to death.

The people of Hosea's day were involved in a very different kind of religious movement, not to restore the ten commandments but to violate them: "*There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed*" (v2). But they had their equivalent of Mwerinde's "Virgin Mary", namely the foul sensual goddess Asherah or Astarte sometimes called "Lady Asherah of the Sea", bearing similarities to Guan Yin, sometimes called "Guan Yin of the Southern Ocean", a goddess worshiped by Chinese Buddhists and often treated as a fertility goddess capable of granting children. In most Chinese Buddhist temples you will observe that Chinese Buddhists treat Guan Yin with special attention and devotion. In Hosea's day God's people looked to Asherah and her son Baal to bless them with fertile crops, a well-watered land and pregnancies.

But in 4:10 God says, "*They will eat but not have enough, they will engage in prostitution but not increase.*" It is God who determines whether the land is fertile or not, whether there are good crops, whether wives are blessed with pregnancies. Since the people are looking in the wrong place for these blessings God tells them he will ensure that the land is not fertile and that there is not healthy population growth. Indeed, the chapter begins describing how "the land mourns/dries up", precisely because of this abandonment of God's people "to prostitution", that is, idolatry. Since God is the "husband" of his people idolatry is akin to sexual perversion.

In verse 10 God comments that it is "*old wine and new wine which take away the understanding of my people.*" Elsewhere in the Old Testament God's people are clearly permitted to drink wine, so verse 10 is clearly talking about what happens when too much wine is drunk.

A man staggered into a pub through the front door, obviously drunk. With a belch he asks the bartender for a drink. The bartender politely tells him he's already had too much to drink. The drunk gets off his stool and staggers out through the front door. A few minutes later the same drunk stumbles in through a side door and asks the same bartender for a drink. Again the bartender politely tells him he's already had enough and the swaying drunk heads back out through the side door. But a few minutes later he's back again, this time through the back door. Again he asks for a drink. This time the bartender tells the drunk in no uncertain times, "Mate, you're not getting any

drinks. Either I call a cab or the police - your choice!" The surprised drunk looks at the bartender and in confused anguish cries out, "Mate! How many pubs do you work in?"

Fertility cult rituals evidently involved the consumption of copious quantities of alcohol and the result symbolized the state of God's people. Like drunks they were disoriented, confused, not knowing where they were, always driven back by their addiction to idolatry to the same wrong source. The real point God is making is that the worship of the Baals has made his people foolish, ignorant, lacking in perception.

Albert Einstein observed, "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former." You will nowhere find a more graphic example of the propensity of humans to be stupid than by watching these Israelites consulting a wooden idol. When they bow down in front of a fertility cult idol they are just bowing down in front of "a wooden idol." Diogenes was once observed begging before a stone statue. What, someone wondered, was he doing? His reply? "I am exercising the art of being rejected."

But these people were so stupid they weren't practising being rejected at all. They really thought these wooden objects could speak to them. Chinese Buddhists bow down before Guan Yin. They take shake a holder containing wooden incense sticks, all individually numbered. A stick falls out. The worshiper observes the number on the stick then goes to a numbered pigeon hole or hook and extracts a piece of paper representing Guan Yin's communication or revelation to the worshiper. The Israelites of Hosea's day were similarly consulting a piece of wood as a way of finding out from gods like Asherah and Baal how they live and act and what the god would do for them.

What is Yahweh's primary complaint against his people in this chapter as he speaks against their idolatry? It is their failure to "know" him, their "lack of knowledge", their ignorance of his Torah. Why do God's people worship the Baals and engage in the fertility cult? Yes, they do this for what they can get out of it, like prostitutes. But at the deepest level idolatry has to do with a wrong-headed approach to revelation. Note verse 10b carefully: "They **consult** a wooden idol and are **answered** by a stick of wood". This is said immediately after God notes how their idolatry has taken away their "understanding." The Israelites are looking to these false gods to say something to them. They want guidance, even if it is on their terms, even if it only ends up rubber-stamping what they are already doing or reassuring them that they would have good crops this harvest or that the wife would soon be pregnant.

Many years back when we lived in Pakistan we would occasionally go a major city like Lahore or Karachi. It was usually only in such cities that one would see a traffic policeman "conducting" the traffic at some intersection. More often than not, such traffic cops did not really conduct the traffic. Rather, they "confirmed" it. To a large extent this was also the way God's people viewed their idols.

When God's people consulted these idols they were "answered." God is not saying that they receive absolutely no answer because a stick of wood can't talk. No! Verse 5 indicates there were cultic prophets who claimed to be mouthpieces for the gods. In their credulity the people believed these gods were real beings capable of communication. When the prophets, in a trance-like state, spoke in the name of such a god God's people took this as being an 'answer' to their 'consultation'. Of course,

the reality is that there is only one true and living God and these gods have no reality or substance whatsoever. Consequently, in actuality God's people were consulting something made out of wood and were in turn "answered by a stick of wood."

Why such arrant stupidity? *"A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God"* (v12b). They are led astray not by their priests, who like the traffic policemen just mentioned, failed to provide much leadership at all. No! Rather they are led astray by "a spirit of prostitution."

What is meant by "a spirit of prostitution"; that the hearts of God's people were incorrigibly inclined towards idolatry? The addiction of their hearts for idolatry has been emphasized in Hosea. The symbolism of Hosea's marriage to the sexually promiscuous Gomer is illustrative of this. But this is *not* the point being made at 4:12.

Remember the fundamental problem with idolatry is that it is concerned with a false way of getting divine communication. When it is said that the people "consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood" the idea is not that they are met with silence. They are "answered" and it is precisely this point that is now being taken up when we read that a "spirit of prostitution leads them astray."

Back in 1 Kings 22 Micaiah declared how *"the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours"* (v23). God permitted "a spirit" to become a "lying spirit" to entice Ahab to his death. Hosea 4:12 makes the same point. God's idolatrous people **do** get an answer. Prophets possessed by lying spirits speak to them and lead them astray. The "spirit" which speaks through the cult-prophet is a "spirit of prostitution", encouraging God's people to seek for what they want from sources other than the true source, Yahweh. The entire system of religious 'revelation' shaped and reinforced an anti-God worldview, not in the guise of not rejecting Yahweh *per se*, but of supplementing him.

Hosea 4:12 indicates the gods of the fertility cult do not really exist - it's like expecting a reply from "a stick of wood." Yet there are 'spirits' associated with idolatrous worship. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, *"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one."* But in 10:19 he asks, *"Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything?"* It's a rhetorical question, so he gives the obvious answer: "No, but..." It's that word "but" we must note. Paul explains, *"No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons"* (v20). The "spirit of prostitution" of Hosea 4:12 is a demonic spirit.

Christians usually say idolatry is about what you give your heart to; that an idol is something that takes the place of God - your sporty-looking car, that huge LCD TV, your reputation, even putting your family before God. This is second-tier idolatry. In the Bible idolatry is not primarily concerned with an emotional devotion or attachment. Hosea 4 teaches that idolatry is fundamentally concerned with a false experience of revelation. Do we take seriously God's revelation of himself and his will seriously or not? That's the central issue. The moment we base our decisions about the direction of our lives on something other than God's Word we demonstrate the truth of what Calvin said about our mind, that it is a "factory of idols." To talk about the boat

or a hobby or a relationship as an idol really misses the key point. What really matters in coming to grips with our incorrigibly idolatrous hearts is who and what we are depending on *for our understanding of how we should live.*

Think about your own life. What thinking and principles lie behind the way you relate with your spouse, your kids, your work associates, the people you come into contact with? What thinking and principles lie behind the way you make important decisions about the boys or girls you go out with, how you spend your free time, including computer use - which these days exposes to different and insidious worldviews, the movies and TV programs you watch and how you process that input, your attitude to your rights and freedoms, the books you read, how you will respond to your parents' advice when you don't like it, whether you'll join a growth group, what your involvement in church will be, what career path you'll take and many other things you might add yourself? How thoroughly have you tried to ensure that in everything you do and think and say you are living in accord with what the Lord has revealed about himself and his will?

Here remember that "the Word became flesh"; God has revealed himself supremely in our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who modeled for us how we should live when he described himself as the Son of Man who came "not be to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 10:28). To avoid idolatry devote yourself to becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus. If you do this then, unlike the fertility cult practitioners, your life will not be a matter of "What's in it for me?" but how can I, emulating Jesus, give my life to serve others and contribute to them being freed to know and love him.