

## **Dr. Gary Yates, Book of the 12, Session 15, Hosea, Israel's Spiritual Infidelity, Part 3**

© 2024 Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Book of the 12. This is lecture 15, Hosea, Israel's Spiritual Infidelity, Part 3.

The prophet Hosea sends a serious and a shocking message to the people of Israel that God views them and their behavior, their conduct within the covenant.

God views them as an unfaithful wife who has not kept her commitments and promises to her husband. In our last session, we were looking at some of the specific ways that the prophet charged Israel with being an unfaithful covenant partner toward Yahweh. Remember that the layout of this book is that the metaphor of the marriage between Hosea and Gomer is laid out for us in chapters one to three.

Then, a series of covenant lawsuits in chapters four to 14 spell out for the people of Israel: here are the specific ways, here are the charges, the indictments that God is bringing against you. This is why God views you as an unfaithful spouse and an unfaithful covenant partner. We looked last time at several of the specifics.

God is going to charge them with the fact that they have not practiced *hesed* toward him. The Lord within the covenant has maintained his *hesed*, his loyal love, and his faithfulness to the covenant. Israel has not done so as the proper reciprocal response to him.

The second charge, making this a little more focused and specific, they have not kept the covenant commandments. The issues of justice and violence and taking advantage of their neighbors and oppressing the needy that we see in the other eighth century prophets is reflected here in the book of Hosea as well. The third charge of unfaithfulness, and the one that we focused on extensively, and then I'd still like to talk about a little bit, is the problem of religious idolatry.

Remember, the prophet Amos, as he's preaching in the eighth century, will focus, I think, a little bit more fully on Israel's social sins and the problems of justice. Hosea has that theme as well, but he is going to focus more primarily on religious sins. Israel's idolatry specifically took two forms.

One of them involved the worship of Baal, the Canaanite god, and the Canaanite fertility goddesses and all of the rituals and practices that went along with that. So, the prophet Hosea is going to indict them and charge them with the worship of the Baals, which may include a number of other illicit gods and all the things that went along with the Canaanite religion. A second way that they practice idolatry, however,

is through their worship of the calf god, which is something that Jeroboam I instituted in the land of Israel.

It had been a source of contention between God and his people from the very beginning of the northern kingdom. All of the kings in the book of Kings who come from the northern kingdom, even Jehu, who has the responsibility of purging Baal worship from Israel, are labeled as kings who did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. A major reason for that is they continue in the sins of their father Jeroboam.

So, we're going to see this throughout Hosea, that the charges of idolatry are going to focus on their involvement in Canaanite worship practices. There's also going to be a condemnation of the calf gods of the northern kingdom of Israel. Going back to some of the passages that we looked at in the previous section, chapters 4, verses 13 and 14 say this, "...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." So, these illicit practices had become associated with all of the various sites, high places, and sanctuaries that were in the northern kingdom. Chapter 4, verse 17, Ephraim is joined to idols. "...leave him alone.

When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring. Their rulers dearly love shame. A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices." So, Israel, because of the culture that was around them, because of the influence of the Canaanites, were drawn into this worship of Baal because they believed that Baal was the god of fertility, the god of the storms, the god who brought the rain that produced their crops.

They worshipped the Canaanite fertility goddesses because the women in the land and the families in the land believed that this was a way that the gods would bless them with children. J. Glenn Taylor, in his commentary on the book of Hosea, says this, "...as long as Israel depended on rainfall in a hot climate and lived among neighbors who swore by the rain-making power of Baal, there was the inevitable temptation to find a way, any way at all, to give Baal his due." So, we definitely see that being reflected in Hosea chapter 4. But then the problem of the calf gods and the sanctuaries that were there in Israel and the syncretistic mix that had come along as a result of this were elements of Yahweh worship and the worship of the Canaanite gods and the worship of the golden calf going back to the apostasy of Aaron. All of that had become mixed and mingled together.

In chapter 8, verse 5, the Lord says, "...I have spurned your calf, O Samaria; my anger burns against them. How long will they be incapable of innocence? For it is from Israel; a craftsman made it; it is not God. The calf of Samaria shall be broken to

pieces." So they're worshiping a golden calf that is the product of their own hands rather than the one true creator, God.

It's fundamentally inconsistent with confessing faith in Yahweh as the one true God. Hosea chapter 10 verses 5 and 6 is also going to talk about the calf god. It says this, "...the inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-Avon." And here the name of the place where the sanctuary was located in the southern part of Israel, Bethel, the name of that has changed to Beth-Avon, the house of worthlessness.

It's not the house of God; it's a house of worthlessness, and that's because it has become associated with syncretistic calf worship. "...its people mourn for it, and so do its idolatrous priests, those who rejoiced over it and over its glory, for it has departed from them." And so, they pray to this image that they believe represents God, but ultimately, the image is not going to save them. The image is going to take part in the exile itself, and it's ultimately going to be carried away by the Assyrians.

"...the thing itself shall be carried to Assyria as a tribute to the great king. Ephraim shall be put to shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his idol." So ultimately, this calf god is going to end up in the trophy case of the king of Assyria, and so there's no reason why Israel should be worshiping this. They have degraded the greatness of God by trying to represent him with this image.

We go to chapter 13 and we have a couple of other important references. Let me read one in chapter 11 first. In verse 1 and 2, "...when Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Israel, Egypt, I called my son.

The more they called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols." So, the Lord was the one God who brought them out of Egypt. The Lord was the God who had saved them, who had redeemed them, who had established a special relationship with them.

Yet they're giving their worship and their devotion to the Baals. Now we have an interesting reference to idol worship in chapter 13 verses 1 and 2. I'd like to work through a couple of details that are found in this particular passage. It says there, "...when Ephraim spoke, there was trembling.

He was exalted in Israel." So, at one point, the tribe of Ephraim had an exalted position. King Jeroboam had come from the tribe of Ephraim. Remember, Ephraim was one of Joseph's blessed sons.

But he incurred guilt through Baal and died. So, the tribe of Ephraim had an exalted past, the son of Joseph, the tribe that the first king of the northern kingdom had come from. But he incurred guilt by worshiping Baal, and the result of that was that he died.

In our last lesson we talked about the rhetoric of futility that's found in the book of Hosea. Hosea is constantly going to emphasize to them, ultimately your dependence on Baal is a bad strategy because Baal is not the one that can provide your needs. Baal is not the one who gives you fertility and rain and prosperity and good crops.

Ultimately, those are blessings that come from the Lord. He is the one that if they will trust in him will rain blessings down on them like the dew. He himself, his presence will become the refreshing rain for them.

If they will practice justice, the Lord will rain righteousness down upon them. So here again, we have this rhetoric of futility. Israel worshiped Baal, looking for life and blessing, and in the process, they died.

We also talked yesterday about the idea that Greg Beal has reflected as he talks about idolatry in the Old Testament. One of the problems of idolatry is that ultimately the people become like the gods that they worship. Idols are dumb, they are deaf, they can't speak, they can't hear.

Therefore, people who follow them become spiritually dull and unable to see the truth. When people give up their belief in the truth, it's not a problem that they will believe in nothing. They become gullible and will believe in anything.

When Israel worships a golden calf, they become like a stubborn heifer and they want to go their way and in their own direction. Rather than listening to God's correction, God is ultimately going to put a yoke on them through their exile and they will be brought to obedience that way. Here in this passage, Israel becomes like Baal because it says there that they incurred guilt by worshiping Baal and then they died.

Remember that one of the parts of the Canaanite epic was that Baal himself came under the influence of Moat. He was defeated by Moat. He was forced every year to go down into the underworld and to become subject to the power of death.

Well, when Israel gave their loyalty and gave their devotion and their worship to Baal, they ultimately became like him. As a result of that, in the same way that Baal came under the influence of Moat, Israel itself had come under the power of death. Instead of experiencing the life that they thought that Baal would bring them, they ended up experiencing death and destruction and all of the covenant curses.

It is a failed strategy to look to anything other than the Lord to be your source of protection, blessing, or security. Israel was learning that lesson in a painful way. Now it also says in verse 2, and now they sin more and more.

Idolatry always becomes a desperate thing because the God can't deliver what he promises and so you have to seek it in a more intense way. And they made for themselves metal images. Idols skillfully made of their silver, all of them the work of craftsmen.

Here's the closing statement that I'd like us to focus on. It is said of them, and here's the way this statement reads in the ESV, those who offer human sacrifice kiss the calves. What exactly is the meaning of that expression? Again, the ESV is going to read this, those who offer human sacrifice kiss the calves.

What are we talking about? Well, it's first of all interesting just to note that in this passage in chapter 13, verses 1 and 2, we have a reference to Baal in verse 1 and a reference to the calf God in verse 2. These syncretistic elements are being brought together. One of the practices of Canaanite religion and one of the things that the Lord deplored is that there was this practice of child sacrifice. And so, the ESV, as it translates verse 2, actually makes a reference to child sacrifice here and sees this as being practiced in the northern kingdom.

Now, if we look at this practice and this concept in the larger story of the Old Testament, Leviticus chapter 20 verses 2 to 5 is going to talk about child sacrifice. It is particularly going to be associated with a God by the name of Molech. The name of that God means he's a king.

He is the God of the Ammonites. But in Jeremiah chapter 32 verse 35, the sacrifice of children again is connected with Molech, but that's also associated in some way with Baal worship, who himself was viewed as a king in the Canaanite pantheon. We do not have direct evidence of child sacrifice in the northern kingdom of Israel unless we have this verse here.

But in 2 Kings chapter 16 and in 2 Kings chapter 23, we have statements about two of the kings of Judah who actually burned their children as sacrifices in the fire. One of them was King Ahaz who introduced a number of pagan and syncretistic elements into the worship of the Lord in the southern kingdom. The other king who does this, who causes his sons to pass through the fire, is Manasseh, the king of Judah, who the king is going to say was the most wicked king that Judah ever had.

He reigned for 55 years. He did more wickedness in the land than even the Amorite kings before him. So, there is evidence in the southern kingdom that even some of the kings of Judah were involved in the sacrifice of children.

One of the reforms that Josiah carried out was to defile the Tophet, which was in the Valley of Hinnom, that was associated with these child sacrifices so that they could not be practiced. So, what do we have going on here? Is there another reference to child sacrifice here in Hosea chapter 13? One of the more interesting examples of

child sacrifice in the Old Testament is the vow of Jephthah that is given to us in the book of Judges. In making an arrangement with God or a deal with God, Jephthah says, Lord, if you give me success in battle, I will give whatever comes out of my door as a sacrifice to you.

When I return home, his daughter is the one who comes out of the door. Because at that point in Israel's history they had become paganized in their outlook and in their theology, Jephthah feels the obligation to carry through on that promise that he's made to God, even though God throughout the Old Testament says that child sacrifice is something that I abhor. Before Israel had gone into the land, Deuteronomy chapter 12, verses 30 and 31 are going to say this.

Here's the Lord's estimation of child sacrifice. When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you do not be ensnared to follow them. After they have been destroyed before you, you do not inquire about their God, saying, how did these nations serve their gods? I don't want you to do the things that these people did as religious practices and as expressions of devotion to their gods.

You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way for every abominable thing that the Lord hates that they have done for their gods. For they even burned their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. And so, in the period of the Judges, Jephthah, and the Israelites have largely become so Canaanite in their perspective, so paganized in their outlook and their theology, that Jephthah believes that offering his daughter as a sacrifice to God is something that would please him.

Now, the evidence for child sacrifice among the Canaanites is rather limited, but there is some evidence outside of the Old Testament to suggest this practice among the Canaanites. John Barton talks about some of this. In the city of Tyre, dating from the eighth century to the sixth century, there is evidence there of a tophet, which is a word that refers to a sacred cemetery.

And this tophet, this cemetery, had urns there that contained the remains of children or the bones of animals. There are stela or statues or inscriptions there that indicate that the remains in these urns had been offered to the Canaanite gods. After the Old Testament era, there is also a tophet that archaeologists have found at the Phoenician colony of Carthage in northern Africa.

And that tophet also, they found urns and grave sites that contained the bones of children and lambs. And there are stela there that indicate that these children that are in these cemetery urns were devoted to either the Canaanite goddess, Tannit, or to Baal-Hamon. Now the Romans also make references in their writings to the practice at Carthage of children being burned with fire as a sacrifice to the gods.

So, there is evidence to support that. Is that what Hosea is talking about here in chapter 13, verse 2? In the Hebrew here, we have literally a statement that says, sacrificers of men kiss the calves. When we have a relationship between two nouns like this, that relationship can be understood in a number of ways.

The second word in that of relationship, as we analyze this syntactically, is viewed as the genitive case. So there are a number of ways that we could read or at least two or three main ways that we could read this idea, sacrificers of men. If this is what we would refer to as a subjective genitive, the men would be carrying out the action of sacrificing.

So, it really wouldn't say anything about human sacrifice. If it is an objective genitive, we could be talking about the men or humans being the object of the sacrifice. Sometimes, the of relationship in these types of constructions, the second word after the word of, could simply be talking about the broader group or the species or the larger category of which the first word is a part.

I think here probably the ESV has mistranslated this. Rather than being a reference to human sacrifice, it is merely talking about the men who offer sacrifices in Israel. The species of men, those who are sacrificers, the people of the northern kingdom as they worship God, as they are doing this, they kiss the calves.

So rather than being a specific reference to child sacrifice in the northern kingdom, which was a part of Canaanite worship, here again we have a reference simply to the homage and the devotion that they give to the golden calf. Now the image here is they kiss the calves. And we know that bowing at the feet of a human king, the way that Jehu does, for example, in the Black Obelisk when he bows before the Assyrian king and gives him tribute, it is a way of expressing honor and devotion.

And so when we talk about kissing calves here, it talks about the worship and the honor and the devotion that they are giving to the calf gods that are at their sanctuary in Dan or Bethel. All right, now think about that image of humans kissing calves. And Bob Chisholm, in his Handbook on the Prophets, makes a comment here about the degrading nature of idolatry.

I think it's a good statement. He says this, Imagine the absurdity of human beings made in the image of God kissing the images of calves made by their own hands. And so I think we have a reminder here of the degrading nature of idolatry.

Worshiping God as we do that as humans, it exalts us, it lifts us up to the thing that we were created and made to do. Humans themselves in Genesis 1:26 to 28 are described as the images of God. We were made like little gods, like statues who are designed to be vice regents of God.

By worshiping him and living under his rule, we are lifted up to an exalted status. The fact that every human being on the face of the earth represents the image of God is the most exalted thing about human nature that we could possibly say. But when Adam fell, he introduced idolatry to the human race.

As a result of that, instead of living out our destiny and our vocation as the image of God, we turned that around and, in an attempt to worship ourselves, actually ended up degrading ourselves. And instead of reflecting the glory and the greatness of God, Romans says that we perverted that and we began to worship the creation rather than the creator. And so, I think there's a reflection of all of that and the degrading nature of idolatry in this picture of the worshipers in the northern kingdom of Israel, bowing down and kissing calves.

This is a far cry from what God designed worship to be. So, there is an idea throughout the book of Hosea, and I think it's really kind of the prevailing idea that Israel has committed spiritual adultery. They have whored after these other gods, and that's the reason for God's judgment and God's anger that's going to come against them.

One last verse says this, chapter 13, verse 9, he destroys you, O Israel, for you are against me, against your helper. The one that God had designed for Israel to trust in, the king that had promised to protect them was the Lord. He was their helper.

He was the one that in the midst of this crisis, he was the one who could help them out. If they would turn from their sin, the Lord would be their helper and he would bless them. If they would renounce their trust in false gods and in idols and in the calf gods and turn in repentance and faith to the Lord and trust in him exclusively, the Lord had the power to deliver them from their enemies.

But the problem is they have turned against their helper. We have the rhetoric of futility here again. Instead of looking to the one who had the solution to their problems, they were trying to create their own solution.

They were trusting in their own strategies. They were trusting in their own designs. They were trusting in the gods that were made with human hands and ultimately none of this was going to work.

I think we understand, as we read the book of Hosea, the seriousness of idol worship and the problem that idol worship presented for the people of Israel. But as we talked about in the last lesson, one of the problems for us sometimes is as we come to think about this for contemporary application or if I'm a pastor and I'm preaching through the Old Testament prophets, how do I make the issues of idolatry real to people today? Now Calvin said that the human heart is an idol-making factory. I think he's exactly right.



John understands that as he writes to the churches that are under his care, and he says, guard your heart against idolatry. But there is a tendency for us as we read the Old Testament to say, I don't get it. I don't understand the Israelites.

I don't understand how they could be led into worshipping things that obviously were so patently false. We don't bow down to images. We don't make stone gods.

We don't have metal images. So, does that mean that we do not struggle with idolatry? If you are going to preach and teach the Old Testament effectively, you're going to have to find a way as you preach these texts and really as you preach the various parts of the Old Testament to understand or to help the people in your congregation understand how does the idolatry of Israel in the ancient Near East apply and connect to our lives today? One of the books that has helped me to think through the biblical theology of this is Greg Beal's book, *We Become What We Worship*. And we've talked about that.

Another pastoral work that has dealt with this issue is Tim Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods*. In his preaching, as he has dealt with this issue and talks about idolatry in the city of New York, he helps to identify some of the idols today that we have in our lives that may correspond to what Israel was doing when they worshiped the Baals and the calf gods. Remember, they are drawn to this ideology because it's the prevailing belief of their culture.

We are drawn to particular idols because of the prevailing mindset and beliefs of our culture that are fundamentally opposed to God but saturate our minds through the media, through the people that we live with, and even, at times, through our own families. And so, we are drawn to these particular idolatries because we believe that it is an effective strategy for living our lives in the same way that the Israelites in Hosea's day believed that worshipping the storm god would provide them with agricultural blessing. So, I'd like to work through a list of some of the things that Keller has talked about in terms of idolatry.

He refers to power idolatry. Life only has meaning, or I only have worth if I have power and influence over others. And when John talks about the things of the world having to do with the pride of life, there's power involved in that.

Approval idolatry: life only has meaning if I am loved and respected by other people. Comfort idolatry, life only has meaning or I only have worth if I have this kind of pleasure experience and a particular quality of life. Many Christians, because of that particular idol, and it's something that I struggle with in my own life, are resistant to the biblical message, which says if you're going to be a follower of Jesus, then you need to take up your cross and follow after him.

Image idolatry, again, I think related to the pride of life. Life only has meaning if I have a particular kind of look or body image. Control idolatry, life only has meaning if I'm able to get mastery over my life in a particular area.

Helping idolatry, life only has meaning or I only have worth if people are dependent on me and need me. Dependence idolatry, life only has meaning if someone is there to protect me and keep me safe. Independence idolatry, life only has meaning if I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone.

Work idolatry and many people make a god out of their job or give devotion to their job in a way that should only be given to the Lord. Life only has meaning if I'm highly productive and getting good things done or advancing in my career. Achievement idolatry: life has meaning if I am recognized for my accomplishments and if I'm excelling in my career.

Materialism idolatry, life only has meaning, I only have worth if I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and a certain amount of possessions. Religion idolatry can become a temptation for us as believers. Life only has meaning if I'm adhering to my religion's moral codes and accomplished in its activities.

I want people to recognize what a religious person I am. Individual idolatry, life only has meaning or I only have worth if this one person in my life is happy or is happy with me. Irreligious idolatry, which is a quality of our society.

Life only has meaning if I feel totally independent of organized religion and have my own self-made morality. We see our culture doing that with the way that we're revising the rules and laws about marriage and our understanding of what that involves. Racial or cultural idolatry, life only has meaning if my race and my culture is ascended and recognized as superior.

Inner ring idolatry, life only has meaning if a particular social group or professional group lets me into their circle. Family idolatry, even our families and our relationships, yeah, they can become idols that we trust in. Life only has meaning if I or my children or my parents are happy with me.

Relationship idolatry: I minister to college and seminary students and many people as they're facing marriage struggles with this. Many other people think that marriage is the solution to this idol and it isn't. Life only has meaning if Mr. or Ms. Right is in love with me.

Suffering idolatry, life only has meaning if I'm hurting by a problem, and only then do I feel noble or worthy of love or I'm able to deal with the guilt that's in my heart. Ideology idolatry, life only has meaning, I only have power if my political or social cause or party is making progress and ascending in power or influence. So I think as

teachers, as pastors, those of us that are involved in pastoral ministry and roles to others, as we teach the word of God, it's very important for us not to just teach the Old Testament as a history lesson, not just to say, look, the people of Israel had problems with these gods, we don't know what they were, we don't know what they're like, but to understand the root causes of that idolatry and then to show how that applies to today.

I think if we could do that, in many ways, people would begin to understand the importance of the Old Testament prophets as something that's relevant to our lives. We've talked about this already, but I think the more that we read the prophets, the more that we recognize that they are foretellers who are preaching forth to the people, far more than they are foretellers predicting what is going to happen in the future. We begin to find out that the issues and the problems and the struggles that were there for the people in their relationship with the Lord and the lived-in covenant and relationship with him are very similar to the things that are going on in my life as well.

So, the Israelites are not struggling with a problem that is foreign to us. Remember, Calvin tells us the human heart, whether it's in ancient Israel or in the United States in the 21st century, we struggle with idolatry. There are a couple of passages in the Old Testament that have particularly helped me to understand this.

In Ezekiel chapter 14, when Ezekiel talks about the idolatry of the people of Judah and the leaders, he says, the problem with those people is that they have erected or they have built idols in their hearts. So, other parts of Ezekiel's message are going to talk about the fact that God is appalled. He is angry.

He is going to break out in wrath against the people because they have placed idols and images of animals and every sort of detestable thing in the temple. That was despicable. It was abominable.

It was displeasing to God. But the larger issue was not just constructing an idol and an image. The larger issue is what was actually in the heart of the people of Israel.

Another passage that's helped me to understand the relevance of Old Testament idolatry to our lives today is found for us in Job chapter 31. And remember that Job 31 is a passage where Job is protesting his innocence before God. And I'm a man of integrity.

I'm a man of godliness. I've been devoted to you. And I think Job is trying to say, Lord, I haven't done anything that deserves the kind of punishment and suffering that I'm going through.

But in the midst of all of these things, where he talks about his integrity, he talks about the kind of life that he lives. He makes this statement in verse 24, if I have made gold my trust or called fine gold my confidence, if I have rejoiced because my wealth was abundant or because my hand had found much. So, Job says, hey, one of the things that shows my integrity is that I have not put my trust in gold or my wealth or my possessions. And we know from the book of Job that Job was a wealthy man.

This would have been a temptation for him. Then, after he mentions this, if I have rejoiced in my wealth because it was abundant, verse 25, notice what he connects this to in verse 26. He says, if I had looked at the sun when it shone or the moon moving in splendor and my heart has been secretly enticed and my mouth has kissed my hand, this would have been an iniquity to be punished by the judges.

For I would have been false to God above. What Job is talking about when he talks about looking to the sun, looking to the moon, and seeing it in the sky, those objects were often worshipped and recognized as gods in the ancient Near East. So, when Job talks about, if my mouth had kissed my hand, we have, just like in Hosea 13.2, the idea of kissing toward the sun or the moon being given as an expression of devotion to these astral deities.

Job says, if I had done that if I had engaged in that type of pagan worship, I would have been unfaithful to God. But what's interesting in this passage is that we look at the last part of this, kissing toward the sun or the moon, as an abhorrent pagan practice. But it is connected in Job's mind with trusting in gold and rejoicing in his wealth.

For him, trusting in wealth was as much an act of disloyalty toward God as worshipping the astral deities. So, idolatry is not just about images and idols and the pagan religious beliefs of the ancient Near East. It's about putting your trust in things other than God.

To be honest, the primary idol of the Western world, the primary struggle that we're going to have in our relationship with God on a daily basis is going to be with prosperity and wealth because it's such a pervasive part of our culture. The prevailing belief of our culture is that your worth, your security, and your value as a human being is dependent on your possessions and what you have and possess. In many ways, the church has bought into the lie of that culture.

I read a blog the other day that talked about how the church, in many ways, had become like a cruise ship. The analogy is a pretty effective one. It reflects how even ministry and what the role and the function of the church is about often is not to serve people who are lost and without Christ or people who are in need.

It is often simply to entertain and take care of the people that are within the church because we've bought the lie of our culture. I remember a writer once talking about what will it be like for Christians who lived in America, in the South in America in the 18th and the 19th century, and they answer to God for their practice of slavery. What if they were to stand before God and simply make the statement? Well, I did that because that's what our culture believed in.

It was accepted by the people of our day. That is not going to be an acceptable answer before God. When Christians who live in America today in the 20th to the 21st century, we stand before God, and when we give an accounting of our lives maybe if we can imagine the Lord dialoguing with us and saying, why did you put such a trust in your possessions and in your wealth? Why did you not use that wealth either for kingdom causes or to meet the needs of other people? Our response is that we were simply doing what the culture says is not going to be any more acceptable to God than Christians from the 18th or 19th centuries who use the prevailing beliefs of the culture at large to defend their slavery.

So, I think it's very important for us to teach the Old Testament in a way that helps people to understand its relevance and its practicality. I love teaching the Old Testament in seminary because I know that often I get the opportunity to impress upon students who are going to go out and serve and minister to others, the Old Testament needs to be a part of your ministry. When you see students come to understand that, or maybe as you watch these videos and begin to get a grasp of that yourself, I really believe that one of the things that God has called me to do is to help people to understand that.

What about the practice of syncretism that was going on in ancient Israel, and how might that be relevant to us today? Now, I've had the opportunity to visit countries in South America where there are very clear syncretistic practices. There were religions like Santeria that brought together spiritism and Catholicism. On the street corners in some of the major cities in South America that I visited, you'll often see offerings down on the street that might have an image of the Virgin Mary and offerings that have been given to these spirits.

Christianity and the worship of spirits and animism have been brought together in this kind of dangerous syncretistic mix. It was often a way of facilitating conversion to Christianity. So again, we look at this as Americans and say we don't have these struggles.

I went to seminary. I obviously don't believe in syncretism. I've read systematic theologies.

But are we as Americans drawn into syncretistic practices in the same way that Israel was? There are some interesting archaeological examples of syncretism in ancient

Israel. Some of these are from the north and some of these are from the south. At a place called Kuntillet Ajrud in the southern part of Judah, in the wilderness there, a number of the objects were found that contained images and inscriptions on them.

These came from the people of Israel and maybe an aberrant group here, but they were Israelites. They were people from Judah who professed faith in the Lord. One of the inscriptions, I believe that's been found on a jar that was at Kuntillet Ajrud has this.

It says, may you be blessed by Yahweh and his Asherah. And so, the people who have made that inscription are Israelites who believe in Yahweh, but they have bought into the Canaanite idea that the Lord had a female consort or a female sex partner the way that El and Baal did. Beside that there is an image of a calf god, a god by the name of Bel.

He's portrayed as a calf. He is nude from the waist down. There's been some discussion about is this the way that this particular image is designed to represent Yahweh as this calf god? There is a woman sitting in a chair playing a musical instrument beside that.

So, does this calf god represent Yahweh and his Asherah? We're not entirely clear about that, but the inscription itself reflects the syncretism that is there. In another image also found at Kuntillet Ajrud, there are a group of worshippers with their hands raised before the Lord. It says this, may you be blessed by Yahweh and his Asherah.

Yahweh bless you and keep you and be with you. The thing that impacts me as I read that inscription is that they have taken the priestly blessing from the Pentateuch, from the Torah, and they've incorporated that into a very pagan understanding about God. That's syncretism.

These worshipers may not have even realized that they were doing something that was displeasing to God. I think in ancient Israel and in ancient Judah, a huge issue and a huge problem was that this was a typical standard understanding of God. There is a cult stand that was discovered at Tanak near Megiddo from the 10th century BC.

Again, we have a clear reflection of syncretism in this. It was used for Israelite worship. There are four columns in this cult stand.

The bottom one has an image of a nude female fertility goddess, the Asherah. The second level has two horned like creatures in an invisible space, probably representing the invisible Yahweh enthroned above the cherubim. The third level has the tree of life and probably is a cultic representation for the Asherah.

Then on the fourth level, you have a calf with a sun on its back and probably a representation again of Yahweh, one of the calves of Dan and Bethel, and then the Lord perhaps represented by the sun there. Those images, a female fertility goddess, Yahweh, the invisible God enthroned above the cherubim, Yahweh as a golden calf, all of that has been brought together. J. Glenn Taylor, again in his commentary on Hosea, is going to talk about this syncretism.

He says this, despite the sharp distinction that biblical writers make between the worship of Yahweh and other gods such as Baal, the idol worshipers themselves likely saw their practices overlapping or even coinciding with Yahweh worship. He says rationalization that leads to religious compromise is not new. In effect, the Israelites found a way to reconcile the worship of Baal, Asherah, and other deities with Yahweh worship.

And again, we would say, well, we don't have elements like that in our worship. But when we merge together belief in the Lord and Christian faith, and the idea of the culture that prosperity makes us successful and blessed in the eyes of God, when we adopt that into a syncretistic mix of prosperity theology, in a sense, we are engaging in the same type of syncretism that the ancient Israelites did. When we endorse nationalism and bring nationalism and Christian faith together throughout the history of the church, there are examples of why that can be a very dangerous thing.

So this idea of idolatry in the book of Hosea is still a real issue today. This book is relevant and applicable to us. There is one final issue that Hosea is going to bring up that reflects specifically how the people of Israel had committed adultery and infidelity toward the Lord.

The thing that is going to come up as this final issue is that the prophet is going to say that Israel has also committed infidelity against Yahweh by the way that they have made alliances with foreign nations. And so, there's a number of passages that talk about this. Hosea chapter 5 verses 13 and 14, when Ephraim saw his sickness and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria and sent to the great king, but he is not able to cure you or heal your wound.

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear and go away. I will carry off, and no one shall rescue.

And so, their reflex response when there was trouble was to try to find a political solution to what was going on. Chapter 7 verses 8 and 11, Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples. Ephraim is a cake not turned.

Here's what Hosea thinks of their political alliances. Israel is like a pancake burnt on one side and raw on the other. Her half-guided policies will not save her.

She's tried to mix herself with the other peoples. She's trusted in these nations. The reason that these alliances represent a form of spiritual infidelity is that, again, they are trusting in something other than God.

The proper application of this is not that this is a reminder that the U.S. should not join the UN or NATO or that nations today should not make political alliances. The application is that the people of God must ultimately put their trust in the Lord as their sole source of security and protection. And so even as Christians, when we tend to want to look to political solutions or to look to political leaders to be the answers for our problems, when we put our trust in the military security of the United States and our military and our government, we're ultimately trusting in something that is finally and in some level and in some way and at some point in history is going to majorly disappoint us.

Chapter 7, verse 11, Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria, and as they go, I will spread over them my net. I will bring them down like the birds of heaven. I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation.

And so, Israel is like a silly dove, flitting and flying about. They go here, they go there, they go to Egypt, they go to Assyria. They're trying whatever they can to try politically and militarily to solve their problem.

Their problem isn't political; their problem is spiritual, and they need to turn back to God. If they do not, then ultimately, they're going to be destroyed. Chapter 8, verses 9 and 10, for they have gone up to Assyria, a wild donkey wandering alone.

Ephraim has hired lovers, though they hire allies among the nations, I will soon gather them up and the kings and the princes shall soon writhe because of the tribute. These strategies they're not going to save them. Chapter 8, verse 14, Israel has forgotten his maker, and they're trusting in something other than the Lord.

In Hosea chapter 12, verse 1, Ephraim feeds on the wind and pursues the east wind all day. How full are you going to be when you're fed on the wind? It's not a really satisfying meal. Are you ever going to be able to catch the east wind? No, they're not going to be able to do it.

That's why they multiply falsehood, they multiply violence, they make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt, and none of these alliances are ever going to save them. There is a reminder throughout the Old Testament prophets that political alliances are ultimately not what is going to save Israel. The prophet Isaiah, in the Assyrian crisis, talking to the leaders of the south, to the leaders of Judah, is going to make the same message.



He's going to say woe to those who have put their trust in Egypt. They believe that an alliance with Egypt would enable them to play the Egyptians against the Assyrians. Isaiah says that is not going to save you.

And in sort of a sarcastic way in Isaiah 28, the prophet says, the leaders of Judah claim, we have made a covenant with death. They really hadn't made a covenant with death, and they had made a covenant with Egypt that they thought was going to protect them. Isaiah says, what you've really done is you made a covenant with death, and it's going to lead to your destruction.

Woe to those who trust in Egypt because they put their trust in men and horses. They do not put their trust in the Lord. Psalm 20 says this to the people of Israel: some trust in horses and some trust in chariots, but we will trust in the Lord our God.

And that's the thing that the people of Israel and Judah both forgot in the eighth century. I want to review for us and remind us, here are the specific ways that Hosea 4-14 establishes for us that the people of Israel have committed spiritual infidelity against the Lord. Number one, they have abandoned covenant hesed, faithfulness to the Lord.

Number two, they have not kept God's commands. Number three, they have practiced idolatry, and that involved both the worship of the Baals and the Canaanite gods and goddesses and their syncretistic worship of the calf God. And then fourth and finally, they had become involved in alliances with other nations where they were putting their trust in the nations rather than God.

God's message is that, ultimately, all of those things would fail them. Anything that we trust in and any strategy that we look to, to ultimately be the ultimate thing or to be the most important thing in our life, anything that we trust, devote, serve, love more than the Lord or that we put in the place of the Lord is ultimately going to disappoint us. There is a message, I think, that Hosea communicated to eighth-century Israel that is very relevant today as people struggle with their strategies, their idols, and the false beliefs of the culture that's around us.

God has given us the light and the insight, wisdom, and the understanding to know what real life is about and to know that real life is found in a relationship with Christ. That's a message that we can share with the culture around us that is just as idolatrous today as the culture that Israel interacted with in the eighth century BC.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Book of the 12. This is lecture 15, Hosea, Israel's Spiritual Infidelity, Part 3.