

IN THE COURTROOM WITH GOD

Hosea 4-14

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. – September 21, 2003

We live in a land of litigation. The courts are jammed and there is a backlog of cases waiting to be heard. In the news, we hear of lawsuits, charges filed, indictments, trials, verdicts, decisions, and appeals. It is not difficult to decry our judicial system and to depict it as a mess. But let's be honest. If we *had* to go to court—if we were taken to court—where in the world would we want that court to be? I would want it to be in America. Our judicial system is not perfect, but I'd rather take my chances with it than any other system in the world. After all, if we are charged with a crime, we want a fair trial; we want to be presumed innocent until proven guilty; we want to be acquitted if there is a reasonable doubt. If we are a victim of a crime, we want justice and we want restitution.

But what would it be like if God charged us with our sins and took us to court? What would it be like to be in the courtroom with God? With God acting not only as the judge and jury, but being the prosecutor as well? What would it be like to be in the courtroom with God?

Two weeks ago, on September 7, we began a study of the eighth-century-B.C. prophet Hosea. The first time GOD spoke to Hosea he said:

“Find a whore and marry her.

Make this whore the mother of your children.

And here's why: This whole country

has become a whorehouse, unfaithful to me, GOD”

(Hos 1:2, *The Message*).

The shocking scandal of Hosea's message is what it says about the nature of God.

Yahweh's demand that Hosea covenant himself to a whoring woman pales in comparison with Yahweh's decision to covenant Himself to an adulterous nation. *The real scandal of Hosea is that of a heartbroken God who absolutely refuses to stop loving a heartless people.* Look with me once again at chapter 11, verses 8 and 9. (My translation.)

“O Ephraim, how can I give you up? O Israel, how can I hand you over? How can I treat you like Admah or surrender you to the fate of Zeboiim? My heart is torn within me; my compassion is aroused. No, I refuse to act in angry wrath and I will not change my mind and destroy Ephraim. For I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come in fury.”

God declares that because He is God, He will *not* do to His people what they deserve to have done to them.

Since, then, God cannot win Israel back by divine love, He will attempt to wake them up with divine law. This brings us to chapters 4-14—an extended covenant lawsuit in which Yahweh charges Israel with breaking the covenant. Let’s begin reading with verse 1 of chapter 4.

¹Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel! The LORD has filed a lawsuit against you, saying: “There is no faithfulness, no kindness, no knowledge of God in your land. ²You curse and lie and kill and steal and commit adultery. There is violence everywhere, with one murder after another. ³That is why your land is not producing. It is filled with sadness, and all living things are becoming sick and dying. Even the animals, birds, and fish have begun to disappear.

⁴“Don’t point your finger at someone else and try to pass the blame! Look, you priests, my complaint is with you! ⁵As a sentence for your crimes, you will stumble in broad daylight, just as you might at night, and so will your false prophets. And I will destroy your mother, Israel. ⁶My people are being destroyed because they don’t know me. It is your fault, you priests, for you yourselves refuse to know me. Now I refuse to recognize you as my priests. Since you have forgotten the laws of your God, I will forget to bless your children. ⁷The more priests there are, the more they sin against me. They have exchanged the glory of God for the disgrace of idols.

⁸“The priests get fed when the people sin and bring their sin offerings to them. So the priests are glad when the people sin! ⁹‘Like priests, like people’—since the priests are wicked, the people are wicked, too. So now I will punish both priests and people for all their wicked deeds. ¹⁰They will eat and still be hungry. Though they do a big business as prostitutes, they will have no children, for they have deserted the LORD to worship other gods” (NLT).

The crime with which Israel is charged is that they do not know God.¹ The Hebrew verb *yada* does not always mean simply “to know” in the sense of “to be acquainted with.” In most Semitic languages it signifies sexual intimacy as well as mental and spiritual activity. “Now Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain . . .”

¹*yada* (“to know”) is used with striking frequency by Hosea and he coins the expression *daath elohim* (“knowledge of God”). See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper/Colophon, 1962), 57-60.

(Gen 4:1). I can remember that as a youngster in Bible School I wanted to “know” what all this “knowing” meant. After all, when Bible folks “knew” each other, a baby was born! In Hebrew, *yada*—“to know”—means more than the facts that are your head; it includes a feeling that is in your heart. And so sometimes, but not always, this knowing involves an engagement, a dedication, an attachment to a person. It also means to have sympathy, pity, or affection for someone.

For example, Exod 3:7 reads: “Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I *know* their sufferings . . .” God declares that He has sympathy for the Israelites, that He is affected by and moved to action by the suffering of His people. God’s knowing is more than simply an awareness of the facts; He feels His people’s pain. Another example is Exod 1:8: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not *know* Joseph.” Of course the new king did not know Joseph personally, too many years have past. To suggest that the new king did not know about Joseph doesn’t make sense. How could it be that he’d never heard the story of the Hebrew who saved the world! What is probably meant is that the new king did not care for Joseph; he disliked Joseph—and so he proceeds to mistreat Joseph’s people. One final example that is very similar to Hosea is that of the sons of Eli. Eli was the high priest at the central sanctuary of Shiloh and judge over Israel. Yet, according to 1 Sam 2:12, “the sons of Eli were scoundrels [wicked men]; they did not *know* the LORD.” The boys were not lacking in information about God; they lacked any feelings for God.

Through the prophet Hosea, God charges Israel with heartless harlotry. The people could not have cared less for God. They had become loveless and therefore unlovely. “There is no loyalty, no love, and no knowledge of God in the land”—the indictment of 4:1. Compare this with chapter 5, verse 4:

Their [Israel’s] deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.
For the spirit of whoredom [prostitution] is within them,
and they do not *know* the LORD.

In verse 6 of chapter 6, God states what it is that He wants from Israel:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the *knowledge of God* rather than burnt offerings.

But all is not well in God's courtroom. There is a problem, and the problem is God! *God who takes Israel to court is Himself often in contempt of court!* God as judge cannot control His emotions! The court of God is interrupted with emotional outbursts, and those outbursts come from the bench—from the judge Himself! How would you feel if you were the judge of your own unfaithful spouse? And the imagery shifts from that of husband and wife to that of parent and child. How would you feel if you were the judge of your own rebellious child? We come to chapter 11, beginning at verse 1:

¹“When Israel was a child, I loved him as a son, and I called my son out of Egypt. ²But the more I called to him, the more he rebelled, offering sacrifices to the images of Baal and burning incense to idols. ³It was I who taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him. ⁴I led Israel along with my ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I myself stooped to feed him.

⁵“But since my people refuse to return to me, they will go back to Egypt and will be forced to serve Assyria. ⁶War will swirl through their cities; their enemies will crash through their gates and destroy them, trapping them in their own evil plans. ⁷For my people are determined to desert me. They call me the Most High, but they don't truly honor me” (NLT).

And now comes the emotional outburst (my translation):

“O Ephraim, how can I give you up? O Israel, how can I hand you over? How can I treat you like Admah or surrender you to the fate of Zeboiim? My heart is torn within me; my compassion is aroused. No, I refuse to act in angry wrath and I will not change my mind and destroy Ephraim. For I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come in fury.”

The words that we find in the Book of Hosea were spoken by the prophet sometime between 750 and 723 B.C. to the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel. In 721 B.C., the ten northern tribes were overtaken by the Assyrians—the population of northern Israel was deported and disappeared from history. . . . But not all of Israel was destroyed. Look again at chapter 11, verses 10-11:

¹⁰“For someday the people will follow the LORD. I will roar like a lion, and my people will return trembling from the west. ¹¹Like a flock of birds, they will come from Egypt. Flying like doves, they will return from Assyria. And I will bring them home again,” says the LORD (NLT).

And did this day of salvation ever come? If so, when? To answer, we turn to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 14-15:

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,
¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been

spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (NRSV).

God’s love is so scandalous because we are such scoundrels. And the interplay between His love and His law are the two sides of a single coin, showing us a God who uses every means at His disposal to win our love. God never fails to love, although—at times—His love fails. It fails to win our hearts, for we do not *know* God. God’s love is tender and it is tough; it is merciful and it is just; it is our salvation or our damnation.

I hope, this morning, that some how and in some way, we can all be woo-ed by God’s love and respond with love for Him. But if that should not happen, then be forewarned: you will find yourself in the courtroom with God. I want to settle out of court. What about you?