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August 12th: Hosea 10 & John 12:1-19

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Israel stripped of its calf. The anointing of Jesus at Bethany.

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Transcript

Hosea chapter 10. So judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field. The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-Avon.

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. The thing itself shall be carried to Assyria as tribute to the great king. Ephraim shall be put to shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his idol.

Samaria's king shall perish like a twig on the face of the waters. The high places of Avon, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorn and thistle shall grow up on their altars, and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us, and to the hills, fall on us.

From the days of Gibeah you have sinned, O Israel. There they have continued. Shall not

the war against the unjust overtake them in Gibeah? When I please, I will discipline them.

A nation shall be gathered against them when they are bound up for their double iniquity. Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck. But I will put Ephraim to the yoke.

Judah must plough. Jacob must harrow for himself. Sow for yourselves righteousness.

Reap steadfast love. Break up your fallow ground. For it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

You have ploughed iniquity. You have reaped injustice. You have eaten the fruit of lies.

Because you have trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors. Therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed. As Shalman destroyed Beth Arbel on the day of battle, mothers were dashed in pieces with their children.

Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, because of your great evil. At dawn the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off. Hosea chapter 10 begins with the image of Israel as a vine, an image familiar from places like Psalm 80 and Isaiah chapter 5. Translators and commentators differ over the type of vine it's being described as.

For some, including the ESV, it is described as a luxuriant vine. Others, like John Goldengay, argue that it is a wasted or a ravaged vine. Meir Gruber raises the intriguing possibility that it might be an autoantonym, a word like cleave or dust that can be used to mean its opposite.

Cleave meaning to hold fast to something, but also to cut something off from something else. Or dust to remove dust. Or dust in the sense of covering something with dust, like icing sugar on a cake.

Such a play with double meaning here might capture something of Israel's contrariness. The more that it prospers, the more that its disease accelerates. As Israel's fruit multiplied, he multiplied his altars.

As the country improved, he improved his pillars. The wealth and the prosperity of the land that the Lord has given it was channeled into its unfaithfulness. The consequence of this would soon come upon them.

The Lord would break down the altars and destroy the pillars, both of them signs of the people's unfaithfulness. In verse 3, Hosea represents the people as denying that they have a king. This might refer to a time when the king is taken away from them, as Hosea is removed by Shalmaneser V, for instance.

Alternatively, the first reference to the king might also be a way of speaking about the rejection of the Lord, Hosea giving voice to the treacherous heart of the people. As he has done in preceding chapters, Hosea describes the people as treacherous and false. They do not keep their vows.

They make covenants that they do not keep. They betray both their own kings and foreign suzerains. As a consequence, the judgments of the Lord afflict the land like poisonous weeds in a field.

Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, had set up a golden calf in Bethel, which had caused Israel to sin. Now the calf of Bethel would be removed and the people and the priests would mourn its departure. Beth-Avon seems to be a disphemism.

A disphemism is the opposite of a euphemism. A disphemism is a word that is used, instead of a neutral or a positive term, to communicate a derogatory or negative sense. Bethel means house of God.

Beth-Avon means house of wickedness or vanity. Israel would be stripped of this great idol, which would be sent to Assyria. Samaria's king would likewise be removed.

The high places of Avon, in apposition with the sin of Israel, would be destroyed. They would be given over to Thorn and Thistle, symbolic of the curse. And what we should probably presume are the altars, would call to the mountains and the hills to cover and fall upon them.

Jesus uses similar language to express the sentiment of people on the Day of Judgment. In Luke chapter 23 verse 30. We also see similar language in Revelation chapter 6 verses 15 to 17.

One of the most dramatic and significant sins of Israel was at Gibeah. The actions of the men in Gibeah in Judges chapter 19 followed the pattern of the men of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19. The sin of Sodom had precipitated the annihilation of the cities of the plain.

In the case of the city of Gibeah, it led to a sanguinary war in which the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out. As Israel took on the character of the Canaanites who had once inhabited the land, they suffered the fate of the Canaanites. Israel is warned of a similar judgment here.

Their destruction would come not at the hand of their brothers but at the hands of the nations that would be gathered against them. Some have seen the double iniquity referred to in verse 10 as a reference to the sin of the war against Gibeah in addition to the sin of Gibeah that led to the war. Others have seen this as a possible reference to Israel being paid double for its sins.

Both of these readings seem to be unlikely to me. A likelier explanation is that it refers to

the two golden calves that were set up by Jeroboam I, one in Dan and another in Bethel. The golden calf of Bethel has already been referred to in verses 5 and 6 and the verses that follow also explore calf imagery.

Ephraim is compared to a trained calf. We see similar imagery in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 18. I have heard Ephraim grieving.

You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined. Like an untrained calf, bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the Lord my God. The image here in Hosea is of a formerly cooperative and docile calf that has later become stubborn, uncooperative, and wayward.

Perhaps the love referred to here is Ephraim's former love of threshing, the work of the Lord that had been given to it. Alternatively, Francis Anderson and David Noel Friedman argue that the love refers to God's love for Ephraim, not Ephraim's love for the threshing. The image of an animal given the task of working the land connects the people with the land that the Lord had entrusted to their care.

The threshing floor where grain was prepared and chaff was removed was also connected with the temple, which was built on the site of the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. Israel formerly hadn't needed any restraint. It was willing and responsive and enjoyed a corresponding freedom.

However, as it matured in its rebellion, it would be put under a harness. The end of verse 11 brings together Ephraim, Judah, and Jacob, the father of both. Perhaps we are to envision two beasts yoked together working upon the land.

Even after the division of the kingdom, Israel and Judah are still bound up together. The three successive related statements, I will put Ephraim to the yoke, Judah must plough, Jacob must harrow for himself, have a symmetry with the threefold statement of the beginning of the next verse, sow for yourselves righteousness, reap steadfast love, break up your fallow ground. Although farmers, rather than their animals, are in view in the second set of images, they share in common an underlying agricultural reference.

Israel within the land is like a farmer working the land to bring forth those covenant virtues that the Lord desires. As they sow righteousness, they will reap steadfast love. Hosea gives the example of fallow ground that needs to be prepared for use.

We see a similar image in Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 3. As Israel responds to the Lord's charge here, they will enjoy his reigns of righteousness upon them. The fertility of the land is here compared with the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people. However, although Israel was charged to sow righteousness, to reap steadfast love and break up their fallow ground, in fact, as verse 13 tells us, they had ploughed iniquity, had reaped injustice, and had eaten the fruit of lies.

Rejecting the word of the Lord and his commandments, they had trusted instead in military might. This confidence, however, would be brought to nothing. The reference to the destruction of Shalman at Beth Arbel in verse 14 has provoked a lot of different theories among the commentators.

Joshua Moon suggests that Shalman is a reference to Shalmaneser V, and Beth Arbel is the site of an Assyrian atrocity. This, however, would require a very late date for the prophecy of Hosea here, likely in the last three or four years of the nation of Israel. Golden Gaze suggests it might be a reference to the town of Arbella in Galilee, and one of the Assyrian kings called Shalmaneser, although we don't know which one.

Alternatively, it might be a reference to a Moabite king, and a town across the Jordan. Andrew Dearman also relates it to a northern Transjordanian city, including the possibility that it might have been an atrocity committed in the reign of Shalmaneser III over a century prior to the time of Hosea's prophecy. Hans Walter Wolff mentions another conjecture, the killing of Zachariah by Shalom the usurper.

Gruber raises the intriguing possibility that Shalman might not actually be the perpetrator of the atrocity in this verse, rather he might be its victim. Following Oded Tamas, he connects it with the rebellion against Shalmaneser III that had been in Arbella, one of the key cultic centers of the nation of Assyria. The point of the prophet here then would be that the king is trusting in his army, and yet conflict would arise from his own people.

His army would turn against him, and he would suffer the same fate as Shalmaneser III had suffered in Arbella. However, all of these remain conjectures. We have no clear answer to the identity of Beth Arbel, or of the character of Shalman here.

A question to consider, in more concrete terms, what might it involve to sow righteousness, to reap steadfast love, and to break up your fallow ground? John chapter 12 verses 1 to 19. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there.

Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Martha therefore took a pound of expensive ointment, made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples, he who was about to betray him, said, Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to the poor? He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel! And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to bear witness.

The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, You see that you are gaining nothing, look, the world has gone after him. In John chapter 12, the Passover has nearly arrived and Jesus goes to Bethany where there's a meal celebrated in his honor.

He's hosted by Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, whom he raised in the preceding chapter. As at the end of Luke chapter 10, Martha is serving Jesus, the honored guest, while Mary is found at his feet. On this occasion, however, she's not listening to him teach, she's performing this dramatic symbolic act upon him, pouring out precious ointment upon him and drying his feet with her hair.

We find an account of a similar event in each of the synoptic gospels. In Matthew chapter 26, verses 6 to 13, in Mark chapter 14, verses 3 to 9, and in Luke chapter 7, verses 36 to 50. The accounts in Matthew and Mark are particularly similar to the account of John.

All occur at Bethany in the run-up to the Passover. Matthew and Mark both mention an alabaster flask. Mark and John both record the fact that the ointment could have been sold for 300 denarii and the fact that the ointment was pure nard.

Matthew, Mark and John all relate it to the coming burial of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and John all mention an objection to her actions, but John alone attributes the objection to Judas in particular. Matthew and Mark both relate the event to Judas's betrayal, which immediately follows it.

The woman in Luke's account is a sinful woman, and the issue is not the costliness of the ointment, but the fact that the woman was a sinner and Jesus, although he was supposedly a prophet, allowed this sinful woman to come near him and to perform this act upon him. Luke's account occurs in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It's likely an event that occurs much earlier in Galilee, rather than in Bethany in the days immediately

prior to the last Passover.

It provides the occasion for a parable about forgiveness. Luke's account seems to refer then to a different event, earlier in the ministry of Jesus. There are some similarities, but the differences are quite pronounced.

Matthew, Mark and John's accounts, however, clearly relate to the same event. But there are problems. Matthew and Mark's accounts seem to be dated two days before the Passover.

John's account, by contrast, appears to occur six days prior to the Passover. To harmonise these accounts, we could argue that one or more of the accounts are placed out of chronological sequence. Perhaps Matthew and Mark's account is out of sequence, designed to connect the occasion of Judas's decision to betray Jesus with the plotting of the Jewish leaders that surrounds both of their accounts.

Alternatively, we could argue that John's account has an unclear chronological sequence. Jesus came to Bethany six days before the Passover, but stayed there over the days prior to the crucifixion. While the meal occurred after the triumphal entry, John chooses to mention it at this point, in connection with Jesus's arrival in Bethany, perhaps in order to create a clearer narrative progression from the raising of Lazarus, which Mary's action looks back to, and the movement towards Jesus's own death as he enters Jerusalem.

Particularly important in the sequence of John's Gospel is the way that the action of Mary here anticipates Jesus's own act of washing his disciples' feet in the following chapter. There are other differences between John's account and the accounts in Matthew and Mark. Neither Matthew nor Mark mention that the woman who performed the action was Mary.

Reading both of their accounts, we might think that the woman was just a random person at the feast, not the hostess. That noted, however, Mary and Martha are not characters in Matthew or Mark, but only in Luke and John. Matthew and Mark also focus upon the woman's action in pouring the ointment on Jesus's head, not mentioning his feet.

For John, though, the action focuses upon his feet, and unlike the others, involves wiping his feet with her hair. In this regard, it has a strong similarity with the action of the woman in Luke chapter 7, who wept, wet Jesus's feet with her tears, wiped them with the hair of her head, kissed his feet, and anointed them then with the ointment. At least on the surface of things, Mary's action here in John seemingly makes less sense, as she seems to be wiping off the ointment with which she is anointing the feet.

The differences between these accounts can be harmonized. It's easy to imagine Mary anointing Jesus's head and anointing his feet too as a secondary action, anointing him

from head to toe. The chronological tensions between the accounts could also be resolved in a number of different ways.

However, this still leaves us with the challenge of accounting for why the gospel accounts of such incidents would have so many tensions between them, and why their different accounts would give hearers rather different impressions of what actually took place, impressions that are also rather at odds with the way that we might harmonize them. Here, I think it is very important to recognize that while the gospel writers were recording actual historical events, and their accounts can be harmonized, their accounts are doing much more than simply telling the readers what happened in blow-by-blow, eyewitness descriptions. Rather, each of the accounts have theological purposes, and the literary structure and setting and the framework of these different texts are designed to highlight theological connections.

In the description of the wiping of Jesus' feet while he is sitting at table, with expensive nard, for instance, the attentive hearer who knows the Hebrew scriptures might observe an allusion back to Song of Solomon, chapter 1, verse 12, While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. This allusion would present Jesus as the king and the bridegroom of his people, themes that are important elsewhere in the Gospel of John. The fact that Mary is identified here, and the action that she performs is associated with Jesus' feet rather than his head, might also draw to mind the way that Mary is associated more generally with Jesus' feet.

In the preceding chapter, she falls at Jesus' feet weeping after he visits following the death of Lazarus. In Luke chapter 10, she is learning at Jesus' feet, and now she is anointing Jesus' feet. The person who knows the story of Luke chapter 7 and the sinful woman who weeps and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and then anointing the feet with oil, might recognize that Mary is now performing this action in two different stages.

In chapter 11, she wept at his feet, and now she is anointing his feet. The way that the event is presented also creates a connection between the death and the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus' coming death and burial. In her action, Mary is expressing her deep gratitude for Jesus' raising of her brother Lazarus.

She is also anticipating Jesus' own death and coming burial. Why focus on the feet in particular? We've already observed the connection between Mary and the feet of Jesus. Beyond this, in the chapter that follows, Jesus washes his own disciples' feet and wipes them with a towel.

If, as in Matthew and Mark's Gospel, the action of the woman only focused upon anointing Jesus' head, and his feet were absent from the picture, no strong connection would be formed between the woman's anointing of Jesus' feet and Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet. However, by focusing upon what Mary does to Jesus' feet, John can invite

reflection upon the parallels between what Mary does and what Jesus does. We might also contrast the fear of the stench of the body of the dead Lazarus in the preceding chapter and the glorious smell of the anointed body of Jesus in this one.

The stench of Lazarus' dead body is now replaced with the fragrant oil that's placed over a living person, but a living person in anticipation of his death. The house is described as having been filled with the fragrance. We might see a possible reference to places like Isaiah chapter 6 verse 4, where the smoke of the incense fills the temple.

Alternatively, we might think of the way that the spirit of the Lord, represented by the cloud, fills the temple. Mary of Bethany, in both Luke's Gospel and in John's, seems to have a very strong connection with Jesus' presence. In the preceding chapter, she came across as a woman who felt some sort of betrayal at Jesus' absence and distance at the time of her loss.

Now, however, she expresses her gratitude with this remarkable act performed upon his body, expressing the immense value that she places upon his presence. Her extravagant act is contrasted with Judas' betrayal and wickedness. Judas' love and fixation upon money contrasts with the extravagant gift of someone who truly recognizes a value beyond price.

The oil in question would have cost an immense amount of money, more than many women would have inherited. This was a remarkable act to perform. Jesus sees it as a preparation for his death, but it also has overtones of coronation.

It's an anointing, and in the resurrection, these two themes can be reconciled. In John's Gospel, Jesus' movement towards death and burial is not just a movement down. It's a movement towards being glorified.

In the rest of the chapter, there are various references to Jesus being glorified by the Father. At this point, it is not just Jesus who is drawing the attention of the crowds, but Lazarus too. It is a remarkable thing to see a man who has been raised from the dead, and the Jews are concerned to stop the attention that Lazarus is drawing towards Jesus.

Their attempt to kill a man who has been raised from the dead shows the way that they are siding with death. Resurrection itself is a threat to their power, and the power of death is part of the means by which they sustain their rule. Here we also see the way that the servant becomes like the master.

The disciple Lazarus, as he manifests something of the power and the life of Christ, is persecuted on account of Jesus. The next day, Jesus is surrounded by a great crowd that take branches from palm trees and go out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel. This is a great welcome to the city, as a returning king or a military deliverer.

We might even see this as an image of God returning to his people. John points the attention of the heroes of the gospel to the prophecy of Zechariah at this point. In Zechariah 9, verse 9, Fear not, daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

The other gospel accounts give a lot of attention to the finding of the donkeys. Here, however, there is more attention to the witness of the crowd, the way that they declare Jesus to be the King of Israel, the one who has come in the name of the Lord. He is the Messiah, and the crowd are described as bearing witness to him.

Witness language is very prominent and important throughout the gospel of John, so it is not surprising that it should be highlighted at this point. A question to consider, beyond the fact that Judas was a thief who wanted the money for himself, why might his argument that the ointment should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor be an inappropriate one to make?