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The Lord's controversy with Israel and the priest. The true sons of Abraham.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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Transcript

Hosea chapter 4. The opening three chapters of Hosea concern the prophetic sign act of his taking a wife of Hordim as a symbol of the Lord's relationship with unfaithful Israel. In chapter 4 we enter the main body of the prophecies of the book, which opens with a powerful indictment upon the people. Joshua Moon describes the centrality of the land within this prophecy.

In part because of the condensed form, the text plays a role as virtually a paradigm of Hosea's message of judgment. And the central facet of that paradigm is the land. The accused are inhabitants in the land.

The failure of covenantal obligations happens in the land. In judgment, the land mourns. This manner of speaking trades on the ancient motif of a deity as sovereign over its land, with the people standing as tenants, who can be removed for violation of the deity's

terms.

By concentrating our focus on the land, echoes of eviction, exile, can be heard without any explicit mention being made. Hosea chapter 4 verses 1 to 3 introduce a controversy or confrontation with the people of the land, on account of their unfaithfulness. Verses 1 to 3 could be read as an introduction to the main body of the book's prophecies more generally.

It demands the people's attention, declares the fact that the Lord has a controversy with them, gives the content of the controversy, and speaks of the Lord's judgment that rests upon them. In particular, the people lack the essential qualities that the Lord would look for in a covenant partner, faithfulness, steadfast love, and the knowledge of Him. Instead, the Lord lists a litany of sins that fill the land, clear breaches of the Ten Commandments.

John Goldengate compares the indictment to the description of humanity prior to the flood. Although this prophecy was likely delivered during the reign of Jeroboam II, a period during which things were relatively stable, such a situation would not last for long. Verse 3 describes a languishing of the land and of its inhabitants, both man and beast, that corresponds with its spiritual languishing.

The exact way that we should translate verse 4 is something commentators are divided on. Moon, for instance, places the first half of the verse in quotation marks, as the words of an opponent of Hosea. Goldengate extends the words of the supposed opponent of Hosea to run to the end of verse 5. The words of the opponent pick up the language of the opening statement of verses 1 to 3 concerning the Lord's contention.

The response of the Lord through Hosea is to sharpen the charge, directing it at the priest more particularly. For with you is my contention, O priest. In the inquest concerning the spiritual failure of the people, the blame is largely placed at the feet of the religious leaders, the priest and the prophet.

They are unreliable guides who do not know the way, they themselves will stumble. The reference to the destruction of the priest's mother, as Andrew Dearman notes, recalls the symbolism of Goma earlier in the book. It might be a reference to the nation more generally, or to the capital city of Samaria.

The priest with whom the Lord is contending is held responsible for the people's lack of knowledge. They are destroyed on account of the ignorance of the priest, who has rejected knowledge, and so the Lord rejects the priest. The priest, who was charged to teach and uphold the law of the Lord among the people, has forgotten the law, so the Lord will forget his children.

Along with the destruction of the mother, the forgetting of the children also recalls the

opening chapters and Hosea's prophetic sign. Moon makes the important observation that, taken with the rejection of the priest himself, the rejection of the priest's mother and children represents the cutting off of all generations. We should also recognise the poetic justice that the Lord manifests in his judgement.

Rejecting knowledge leads to rejection from being priest. The priest's forgetting the law leads to the Lord's forgetting of the priest's children. The priesthood is supposed to address the guilt of the people.

However, the priesthood is currently exacerbating the people's sin. As a consequence, the Lord would strip them of the honour of their status. In the sacrificial system, the priests ate the sin offerings in order to seal atonement for the people.

The Lord plays upon this language in verse 8. The priests feed on the sin of the people. But really, rather than serving as part of the atonement for and disposal of the sins of the people, the priests are actually greedy for and sustained by the people's sins. The priests may fancy that their position of privilege grants them some immunity from the Lord's judgement, but they will find that they will be punished along with the people, receiving the recompense for their deeds.

As they have sought to feed on the people's sins, they will not be satisfied. As they engage in whoredom, they would be rendered fruitless. They have abandoned the Lord for the sake of their lusts and the insensibility of intoxication.

They should have been guarding the people of the Lord, and as they have failed to do so, the people are given over to idolatry, pathetically looking to pieces of wood for guidance. The priests, in their failure faithfully to perform their duties, have encouraged the spirit of whoredom among the people, who pursue idolatry throughout the land in its various cultic sites. As a consequence of their failure to guard and guide the people of the Lord, the Lord would give the women of their households over to a spirit of whoredom, bringing shame and disgrace upon them, as their daughters became prostitutes and their wives cook-holded them.

What's more, the Lord would not punish their daughters or their wives for such sins. The husband's right to protest the sin of the women of their households and bringing shame upon them is greatly diminished by the fact that they have been bringing dishonor upon themselves. They have been engaging in idolatrous sexual rituals with cult prostitutes and also having relations with common whores.

They have no grounds for protest. We might recall Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38, where Judah was exposed as having no grounds upon which to cast judgment upon his daughter-in-law, as he was guilty of the very sin of which he accused her. Israel is so far gone that the Lord's one hope is that Judah not be infected by their infidelity.

Judah must be quarantined from the epidemic of idolatry that is destroying Israel, giving the sites and practices of Israel's idolatrous abominations ground zero for the infection, a very wide berth. Given Israel's stubborn rebellion, can the Lord gently tend the nation as a shepherd might provide for a docile lamb? Certainly not. Ephraim, another name for the northern nation of Israel after the leading northern tribe, must be kept at a distance, lest his idolatry and compulsive iniquity prove contagious.

Now a strong wind has arrived and will put them to shame as it carries them off in judgment. A question to consider. The priest is especially singled out as responsible here.

What insights do we have elsewhere in scripture for the cause of the weight of the responsibility that lies on the shoulders of the priest in such matters? John chapter 8 verses 31 to 59. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. They answered him, We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.

How is it that you say you will become free? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever. The son remains forever.

So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are the offspring of Abraham, yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my father, and you do what you have heard from your father.

They answered him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did. But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.

This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did. They said to him, We were not born of sexual immorality.

We have one father, even God. Jesus said to them, If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of

God.

The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God. The Jews answered him, Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon? Jesus answered, I do not have a demon, but I honour my father and you dishonour me. Yet I do not seek my own glory.

There is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. The Jews said to him, Now we know that you have a demon.

Abraham died, as did the prophets. Yet you say, If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died.

Who do you make yourself out to be? Jesus answered, If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my father who glorifies me, of whom you say, He is our God. But you have not known him.

I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I keep his word.

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad. So the Jews said to him, You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham? Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.

So they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. As in the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline Epistles, the question of the identity of the true sons of Abraham is prominent within the Gospel of John, and nowhere more so than in the second half of chapter 8. Jesus' argument about slaves and sons in the house of Abraham anticipates Paul's allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians chapter 4 for instance.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees as those who were akin to slaves in the house of Abraham. One day they would be removed. He also describes them as the children of the devil here.

They are seed of the serpent, or a brood of vipers. The question of who a person's true father is, the question that dominates this passage, is answered in the one that they take after, the closely related question of whether one is a slave or a son, is also revealed by people's actions. By their fruits you will know them.

The person who makes a practice of sin is a slave to sin. We might again observe similarities between Jesus' arguments in this passage and various arguments in John's first epistle, in places such as 1 John chapter 5 verse 1. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever

has been born of him. Or in chapter 3 verses 6 to 10.

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you.

Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God and who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

Likewise we find common themes of abiding in Jesus and his word. Looking through the Johannine literature, the Gospel of John, the epistles of John and the book of Revelation, we can see numerous points of contact and close resemblance. The description of Jesus' interlocutors in verse 31 as the Jews who had believed him, is surprising if they are the same persons as are trying to kill him in verse 40.

The reference to the Jews who believed in him connects this discourse with verse 30's reference to many who believed in him. However, perhaps the they of verse 33 refers to a different or a broader group, one that includes the religious officials who oppose him. Alternatively, other commentators have suggested that factions among Jesus' own followers or within the later church might be in view here.

As elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus speaks in ways that are misunderstood by the people to whom he is speaking. When he speaks of freedom, they think of freedom from slavery as a people. Their insistence that they, as the offspring of Abraham, have never been enslaved to anyone, seems to be at odds with the experience of Israel in Egypt and Babylon, if not also the Jews' current situation under Roman rule.

However, they seem to have in view their pride in being sons of Abraham and believe that the nation, even when under foreign rule, was internally free and destined for freedom. Jesus clearly has in view a different sort of freedom than the Jews to whom he is speaking. The real slavery that should concern them is not bondage to a foreign nation, but bondage to sin.

The slave does not have a permanent place in the household, while the son does. Jesus, as the son, is able to bring people into the freedom characteristic of sonship. When the Jews insist that their father is Abraham, Jesus underlines the contrast between them and Abraham, the man that they wrongly claim to be their father.

They are trying to kill Jesus, even though he told them the truth, completely out of keeping with the behaviour of Abraham, who had welcomed the messengers who came

to him. Their violent hatred and murderous intent towards Jesus is characteristic of their father the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning. The intent of the devil is to kill and destroy, to take and to diminish life wherever it is.

Being only a creature himself, he can never create, only destroy. In particular, humanity created in the image of God is something he will always seek to attack. The devil, in addition to being a murderer from the beginning, is also a liar and the father of lies, who speaks lies out of his own character.

We might of course recall the temptation of Eve in the garden and the deceptions of the serpent on that occasion. Jesus is tracing a line back from actions through character to origins. Those who practice sin are in bondage to sin and are the children of the devil himself.

While the Jews may insist that they are the children of Abraham, their behaviour belies their claims. Jesus presents a powerful indictment against the Jews here. If they truly were of God, they would receive the words of the man that God sent.

They haven't made any demonstrable charge against Jesus. Instead, they reject him, not merely despite his telling the truth, but because he does so. Somewhat surprisingly, the Jews answer him by saying that he is a Samaritan and he has a demon.

Presumably these two charges go together. Earlier in chapter 7 verse 20, people were speculating that Christ had a demon. The connection between his being a Samaritan and having a demon perhaps suggests that they believe that the worship of the Samaritans is a worship of demons.

It's possible that they are insinuating here that Jesus is the bastard son of a Samaritan. When it came to the question of being heirs and descendants of the patriarchs, the Samaritans were in competition and opposition to the Jews. The Samaritans challenged the Jews' claim to be exclusive descendants of Abraham.

However, the Samaritans had earlier received Jesus and so their charge against Christ sets up an unfavourable contrast between them and the Samaritans who received him. Christ had earlier spoken about the fact that those who received his word definitively passed from death to life. When he makes a similar claim here the Jews regard this as proof positive that he is possessed by a demon.

Abraham and the prophets have already died. Is Christ suggesting that he is greater than them? Of course Jesus is the greatest son of Abraham. He is the true heir.

He goes on to declare that Abraham, their supposed father, rejoiced to see his day and he saw it and was glad. Perhaps he here has in mind the encounter that Abraham had with the angel of the Lord in Genesis chapters 18 and 22. In John's Gospel there are several occasions where appearances of God to his people in the Old Testament are

regarded as anticipations of the coming of Christ.

Christ is the glorious vision of the Lord that Isaiah saw in the temple in chapter 6. Christ is the great I Am. He is the one who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai. He is connected with the vision of the ladder given to Jacob at Bethel.

The one who had been active throughout Israel's history is now unveiled and made flesh, walking among us revealing his true identity as Jesus. The crowd wonder why he is making these claims. He is not yet 50 years of age and yet he is claiming to have seen Abraham.

It seems strange that they would choose the figure 50 given that Jesus is only around 30 years of age. Perhaps this should be seen as one of John's Gospel's allusions to Jubilee themes. Jesus remarkable claim in response, Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am, is one in which he identifies himself with God, applying the name for God, I am, to himself.

He is not just claiming some sort of angelic status or some sort of pre-existence or the power of some lower deity. He is identifying himself with God himself. God has come and visited his people.

In its current form, beginning with the Nun and Jokhanine text of the woman caught in adultery, John chapter 8 begins and ends with failed stoning attempts. Once again they are unsuccessful in taking Jesus' life because his hour has not yet come. A question to consider, reading this chapter alongside Romans chapter 4, how does the Apostle Paul expand upon the logic of Jesus' argument here in addressing the question of believing Gentiles within the family of Abraham?