

**THE FOLLY OF SYNCRETISM IN THE BOOK OF PROPHET HOSEA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Book of Hosea portrays the dangers of the observance of religious ceremony without genuine devotion and commitment to the Lord, otherwise known as syncretism. This deviation took place in the forms of intermarriages, a fusion of religion, the worship of foreign gods, and the appointment of degenerate priests to serve in their shrines. All these too easily led to compromise, selfish ambition and lack of integrity in one's personal/social activities and dealings. Dishonesty and corruption became endemic. Such was the situation in which Prophet Hosea ministered. Nevertheless, Hosea's message was more than solemn warnings. It contained a note of hope in that with sincere repentance and asking God's forgiveness, accompanied by renewed commitment to God, people may find forgiveness and restoration to God's favour and blessings.

**KEYWORDS:** Syncretism, Fundamentalism, Interreligious, Cultural corruption, Baal, Asherah

**INTRODUCTION**

This article examines current debates surrounding the concept of syncretism and grapples with issues surrounding the concept from the perspective of the Book of Prophet Hosea. The comparative, historical and ethnographic data of most scholars find the concept of syncretism wanting. The concept of syncretism could be said to reflect a value-laden judgment ensconced in the ethnocentric typologies of Western Christian lenses. Syncretism is a contentious term often taken to imply in-authenticity or contamination, the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition, by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions. Syncretism is also a reconciliation of disparate or contradictory beliefs. S.B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (1988: 670) see it as "...the process of borrowing elements by one religion from another so much so that the receiving religion basic character will not be changed". Maroney (2006: 6) asserts that syncretism is when one religion adopts, or absorbs elements of another religion. Brandon (1970: 568) in *the Dictionary of Comparative Religion* asserts that it is a term used for fusion of religions, cults which occurred in the Graeco-Roman world which is now used in all places where there is contact among religions. Syncretism as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* is the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of beliefs. This is most evident in the areas of philosophy and religions, and usually results in a new teaching or belief system. Obviously, this cannot be reconciled in biblical Christianity.

Syncretism consists of an attempt to reconcile disparate or contradictory beliefs while melding practices of various schools of thought. It is also seen as an attempt to merge and analogize discrete traditions, especially in the theology and mythology of religion. The Oxford Dictionary first records the word syncretism in English in 1618, derived from modern Latin *syncretismus*, drawing on the Greek word *synkretismos*.

There are different types of syncretism, but religious syncretism is the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system or incorporating into a religious tradition, beliefs from unrelated traditions. Eric Maroney (2006: 6) opines that syncretism is simply borrowing of ideas and practices into a system that is alien to it. He also goes further to assert that syncretism occurs when one religion adopts, absorbs or otherwise accepts elements of another religion (cf. also Brandon, 1970: 568; Eliade, 1987: 220). He points out that this term involves exchange and transformation. It is the opposite of fundamentalism and embraces multiplicity. Maroney claims that this terminology is very complex in religion and has strange dynamics. He claims that the dictionary definition of the word implies “...*fusion or reconciliation of differing systems of belief in religion especially when the result is heterogeneous or incongruous*” (Maroney, 2006: 7). He suggests that although the three great Abrahamic monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism go against it, but none of them can claim exclusivity (Maroney, 2006: 16). Shaw and Stewart (1994) further assert that the different local versions of notionally standard world religions such as Christianity and Islām are often pointed to as prime examples of syncretism in this critical sense, when looking at the works of missionaries and theologians.

Syncretism is the fusion of different forms of practice or belief but becomes sin only when biblical truths and moral standards are involved. When vestiges of pagan religions and unbiblical beliefs and practices are mixed in and fused with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is not only syncretism, it is sinful syncretism. Sinful syncretism is subtle. It does not happen overnight. Changes usually occur slowly and insidiously. Little by little the culture drifts away from God and His standards. And this is exactly what happened in the 8th century BC, when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. The sinful syncretism that resulted is a lesson from history for contemporary Christianity. The meaning of the term is dynamic. S.B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (1988) trace the history of syncretism as it was used by Plutarch, which made reference to the ability of the Creten warring factions to unite against a common enemy. But in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was used by Geory Calixtns (1586-1650) to seek unity among Protestant denominations. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the term was adopted by the schools of the history of religion to describe any religion that was the result of fusing two or more religions. In this sense, syncretism in a broader sense will mean the process of borrowing elements by one religion from another in such a way as not to change the basic character of the receiving religion (cf. Ferguson and Wright, 1988: 670; Rahner and Vargimler 1965: 67). Hendrik Vroom (1989), argues that syncretism is a process in which beliefs and practices from one religion are adopted by certain people in another religion, and subsequently assimilated or repudiated. André Droogers (1989) maintains that “*it is a*

*contested interreligious interpenetration; and an aspect of the reciprocating influence between religious traditions*". It is also the incorporation of incompatible beliefs from one religion by another. It is adopting of beliefs which are incompatible with beliefs that are 'logically' basic to a belief-system. Religious syncretism often takes place when foreign beliefs are introduced to an indigenous belief system and the teachings are blended. The new, heterogeneous religion then takes a shape of its own. This has been seen most clearly in many contemporary African Independent Churches. Contemporary Christians can by this process readily accommodate to the world views of its age. Such accommodation is also called syncretism. Thus, syncretism is the reshaping of beliefs and practices through cultural accommodation so that they consciously or unconsciously blend with those of the dominant culture. It is the blending of beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that people necessarily lose their distinctive nature and speak with a voice reflective of its culture. Biblical illustrations of syncretism in Hosea are therefore the focus in this study.

## **Historical Context of Syncretism in the Book of Prophet Hosea**

Out of Israel depravity emerged the young prophet Hosea. He was a man of integrity, well-educated from the cultural class of Israelite society. All that is known about Hosea is recorded in the book bearing his name. His father's name was Beeri, but no reliable information is given on his tribal identity/birthplace, early life or occupation. His name means "Salvation" or "Deliverance" and is derived from the Hebrew noun that forms the name Joshua, Isaiah, and Jesus. He was a contemporary of Amos, Isaiah and Micah. Like these men, he was raised up by the Lord to rebuke Israel and call the nation to repentance and reconciliation with God.

Hosea prophesied in the days of Uzzaiah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, king of Israel. Scholars differ on the exact date that Hosea began his ministry. He probably started around 750 BC and concluded sometime during the reign of Hezekiah (712-686 BC).

The opening words of Hosea's prophecy place his ministry in the context of the eighth century B.C. The recording of four eighth century kings of Judah provides information as to the length of Hosea's prophetic ministry, while the mention of just one Northern Kingdom, King Jeroboam II, indicates something of the prophet's particular focus. This becomes apparent when we note that names for the Northern Kingdom such as Ephraim, Israel, and Jacob occur some seven dozen times, while that of Judah a mere fifteen times and that always in connection with one or more of the names for the Northern Kingdom.

The mention of the Southern Kingdom kings from Uzziah to Hezekiah assures us that Hosea's ministry lasted through a great portion of the period. For Uzziah reigned some 52 years (c. 792-740 B.C.), while the reigns of his three successors lasted throughout the rest of the eighth century B.C. Jeroboam II of the Northern Kingdom likewise enjoyed a long reign (c. 792-752 B.C.), but the six unmentioned kings who succeeded him often vied with each other for power throughout a period of growing political

friction and weakness which culminated in the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 B.C. Robert B. Chisholm (1990: 21) suggests that “*the six Israelite rulers who followed Jeroboam II may have been omitted from this list because of their relative insignificance*”. More probably Hosea viewed all six as somewhat illegitimate in that none of them had an unclouded claim to the throne. In that case, rightful succession to the throne of Israel ended with Zechariah, the fifth and last king of the house of Jehu (Hos. 1:4). Furthermore, each king in a sense was a usurper who only further fragmented the Northern Kingdom. Since Hosea does not mention this event and because the prophet’s focus is on the reign of Jeroboam II, a date for Hosea’s prophecies from c. 760-725 B.C. (shortly after the beginning of the independent reign of Hezekiah in Judah in 729 B.C.) would appear to be reasonable. Duane A. Garrett (1997: 22) is probably correct in remarking that the length of Hosea’s ministry suggests “*that he became a prophet at a reasonably young age*”. Garrett, however, concludes that his ministry may have lasted until about 710 B.C.

This was an era of dramatic change for the twin kingdoms of Israel and Judah as well as for the surrounding nations of the ancient Near East. Externally, after the death of the powerful Assyrian king Adad-nirai III (783 B.C.), who claimed to have extended Assyrian influence as far as the Mediterranean Sea, Assyria was ruled by a series of weak kings who were unable to do much more than preserve the Assyrian homeland (783-745 B.C.). Therefore, Assyrian domination in the west waned. For Israel and Judah it was an era of unparalleled prosperity for both kingdoms, economically and politically. Together they could claim much the same territorial dimensions as in the days of Solomon before them. As for Jeroboam, Kaiser (1998: 352) remarks that “*In less than twenty-five years Jeroboam II was able to take a nation that was just about ready to die and turn it into one of the great powers of his day*” (cf also Pitard, 1994: 222).

Something of the Northern Kingdom’s reinvigorated economy may be attested in the well-known Samaria Ostraca (cf. Hoerth, 1998: 329-30; Prichard, *ANET*: 321). This included Israelite thrusts into Transjordan and a possible joint Israelite-Judahite campaign into Syria (2 Kings 14:25, 28; Haran, 1967: 296). Montgomery (1967: 446) suggests that in 2 Kings 14-28 Judah should be read as Yaudi, a city in northern Syria known in the Assyrian inscriptions as Samal (Beyerlin, 1975: 260; Gordon, 1965: 219).

During Uzziah’s long 52-year reign the Southern Kingdom enjoyed economic prosperity and political power. Uzziah (or Azariah) improved Judah’s military strength, which included the fortifying of Jerusalem (2 Chr. 26:11-15) and launched successful campaigns against his neighbours to the west, east, and south (2 Chr. 26:6-8). Unfortunately, this high water mark of prosperity for the twin kingdoms would not long endure. In the north, with the death of Jeroboam II in 752 B.C. kings of lesser ability, who often vied with one another for local, if not for national supremacy, ruled the kingdom. Jeroboam’s son Zechariah reigned only six months before being assassinated by Shallum, who in turn reigned but one month before being killed by Menahem. The latter’s ten year reign (752-742 B.C.) was characterized by spiritual weakness and renewed subservience to the rising power of Assyria.

In Assyria a usurper now occupied the throne as Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 16:6), also called Pulu or Pul (2 Kings 15:19). Babylon was always an important administrative center, hence allowed to have its own Assyrian monarch. Here Tiglath-pileser was called Pulu. Shalmaneser V and Esarhaddon would later be known by special names in Babylon (see *CAH*, 2008: 3:32). His reign (745-727 B.C.) marked the beginning of a new day in the ancient Near East, when Assyrian resurgence would blossom into the mighty Neo-Assyrian Empire (745-612 B.C.). Tiglath-pileser's armies soon ravaged much of Syria, Menahem and Israel paid him a heavy tribute to keep him from engulfing the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 15:19-20; Prichard, *ANET*: 283). T. R. Hobbs (1985: 198-200) suggests that Tiglath-pileser was coming to the aid of Menahem against a third party. Whether the 743 B.C. invasion is reflected in Hosea 8:7-10 or refers to Tiglath-pileser's later invasion (734-732 B.C.) is uncertain.

Internal squabbling compounded Israel's difficulties in the face of Assyrian aggression. Although Menahem ruled from Tirzah, a strong rival named Pekah ruled in Gilead. Pekah's strength was such that after Menahem's death, he was able to overthrow Pekahiah, Menahem's son and successor claimed sole rulership of all Israel (740-732 B.C.). Pekah's independent rule was faced with a growing Assyrian menace. Tiglath-pileser III began a second western campaign in 734 B.C. to break-up a western anti-Assyrian coalition. Among the chief dissidents were the Aramean king Rezin and Pekah of Israel. By 732 B.C. the Assyrian thrusts not only brought about the surrender of Damascus but also reduced the entire west to vassalage. Tiglath-pileser claims that with the overthrow of Pekah he placed Hoshea on the throne as his client king (see *ANET*, 284).

If Israel's position was extremely tenuous by 732 B.C., Judah was scarcely in a stronger position. While prosperity had continued somewhat during the reign of Azariah's son Jotham, so that he could turn his attention to the internal needs of the country, with the accession of Jotham's son Ahaz, Judah was also caught up in the swift current of Assyrian expansion. Although Ahaz wisely resisted joining a western anti-Assyrian coalition led by the Aramean king Rezin and Pekah of Israel, in order to gain relief from their attack against him (2 Chr. 28:5-8; Isa. 7:1-6), he stripped the temple of its gold and silver and petitioned Tiglath-pileser for help (2 Kings 16:7-9). Ahaz also faced a threat from the Edomites on his eastern border (2 Chr. 28:17) and the Philistines on the west (2 Chr. 28:18) at this time. Ahaz's request was honoured and Tiglath-pileser launched the aforementioned second western campaign, which eventually brought the surrender of Damascus. Ahaz and Judah were also brought under Assyrian vassalage. Tiglath-pileser III records Ahaz's submission (see *ANET*, 1969: 282).

In the north, Israel remained under Assyrian vassalage. When Tiglath-pileser died in 727 B.C., however Hoshea found opportunity to forego sending tribute to Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) and sought help from So, King of Egypt (2 Kings 17:3-4). Although several theories as to the identity of So have been proposed, he is probably to be equated with the twenty-fifth Egyptian dynasty Pharaoh (Piankhy, 2003: 196-97). The plan backfired and soon Samaria was attacked and after a three-year siege, the Israelite capital fell and its citizens were deported (2 Kings 17:5-6). The Babylonian

chronicles credit Shalmaneser with the capture of Samaria; however, Shalmaneser's successor Sargon II claims the capture of the city (Grayson, 1975: 73)..

Attempts to correlate Hosea's prophecies with specific political events, however, have proven to be elusive at best. As Douglas Stuart (1987: 9) observes there appears to be a basic (if not total) chronological arrangement of Hosea's prophecies in the book. Some prophecies appear to be related to the earlier part of his ministry such as the predicted judgment of the line of Jehu (1:4). Since Zechariah was assassinated in 752 B.C., six months into his reign, this prophecy must have been given during the later period of Jeroboam's reign. Likewise, the charges against Israel in the first section of the book (chs. 1-3) seem best related to the reign of Jeroboam II. This was, as we have seen, a period marked by great economic and political success but growing spiritual apostasy. The subsequent chapters of Hosea's prophecies tend to reflect the growing crises in the affairs of the Northern Kingdom both externally with Assyria and internally during the years of hostility between bitter political rivals vying for power in the Northern Kingdom. By the end of the book the demise of Israel appears to be imminent (cf. Sweeney, 2000: 5-6).

Regarding authorship of the book, the author identifies himself as "Hosea, son of Beeri" (1:1). Unfortunately, nothing else is known positively as to the identity of the man. A Jewish tradition suggested that Beeri is to be equated with a Reubenite leader who was taken captive by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III. Thus, the genealogical record contained in 1 Chronicles 5:6 tells of a certain Beerah, whom king Tiglath-pileser carried into exile. Beerah was the tribal leader of Reuben. Another Jewish tradition held that Beeri was a prophet. Assumedly, it is his prophecy that is preserved in Isaiah 8:19-22 (cf. Freedman and Simon, 1939: 4, 86). According to Laetsch (1956: 9) an ancient Christian tradition held that he belonged to the tribe of Issachar. Harrison (1969: 859) observes that from the reference in Hosea 7:4ff. it has been assumed that he worked as a baker. From the various agricultural allusions in the book it could be maintained with equal seriousness that Hosea was a farmer. However, a peasant origin seems improbable in the light of his knowledge of history, his grasp of political affairs, and the eloquent, well-chosen imagery with which his style abounds (Harrison, 1969: 859). Other than these hints, all that we know of Hosea comes from his prophecy. There we learn that he was married to a woman named Gomer and had three children (ch. 1).

Hosea was God's man for a difficult era spiritually. Prosperity had brought an unprecedented degree of cultural corruption. The much-sought-after political power had opened Israel to foreign cultural influence, including the demoralizing influence of Canaanite Baal worship (2:7, 17; 11:2) with its fertility cults and bacchanalian orgies (4:10-13; Van Gemeren, 1990: 106). This notwithstanding Hosea was a man of deep spiritual conviction who throughout his long ministry became progressively concerned both for the Lord's person and testimony as well as his troubled people. Hosea's heartfelt concern over Israel's spiritual complacency, religious syncretism, and critical position in relation to the major powers of the ancient Near East may be felt in the advancing flow of his messages. As Pusey (1953) opines that corruption had spread throughout the whole land; even to places once sacred through

God's revelation or other mercies to their forefathers, Bethel, Gilgal, Gilead, Mizpah, Shechem were especial scenes of corruption or of sin. Every holy memory was effaced by present corruption. Indeed things really became worse. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to God and his calling throughout his ministry. The exact time of his death is unknown, although it seems likely that he did not live to see the fall of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. A Jewish legend states that Hosea died in Babylon and that his body was buried at Safed, northwest of the Sea of Galilee, on the highest point in that region. According to another tradition he was a native of Gilead and was buried there. To this day the grave of Nebi Osha is shown near es-Salt, Ramoth-Gilead, south of the Jabbok River (Laetsch, 1956: 10).

Generally, the religious setting then was the best time. Jeroboam II (782 – 753 B.C) had enjoyed a period of military success, restoring the border of Israel from around Harmath unto the Sea of Arabah (Dead Sea). On the other hand, it was the worst times. With prosperity came a major decline in the religious, moral and social orders of life. Seeds of discord were sown when Jeroboam I (931-910 BC) rebuked against the rule of king Rehoboam of Judah (931-913 B.C), declaring himself king over ten tribes that became known as the Northern kingdom of Israel, by building temples at Bethel and Dan, to divert the people from going to Jerusalem to worship.

Spiritual conditions worsened when Ahab (874-852 B.C) married Jezebel. With this marriage, Baal worship was introduced in the land and was immediately adopted by Israel. Such practices as religious prostitution, fertility rites, and the building of high places for image worship flooded Israel. The people became victims of two false religions, namely, Calf worship introduced by Jeroboam I at Bethel and Dan, and Baal worship established by Ahab and Jezebel.

The message of Hosea was the challenge and rebuke in Hosea chapter 5:5. The people whom God had blessed had rebelled against their maker and redeemer: "*When I feed them, they were satisfied, when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me*". This theme is dramatically depicted in the marriage analogy of Hosea and his children. The symbolic significance of Gomer's unfaithfulness to Hosea was parody of Israel unfaithfulness to the only true God by mixing true worship with idolatry such as the Canaanite's fertility cults. And this became syncretism of the highest order. Israel rejected unmerited grace and covenant, and her unique relationship with Yahweh by a wayward way of life. She learnt from foreign nations that everything had a price. She exchanged her loyalty to Yahweh for the gods of prosperity, power and sex. Israel chose an alternate lifestyle that encouraged greed, passion, riches, the fast pace of life, embraced a strange disregard for human beings and complacency with God. Israel no longer had the distinctive character of a counter-culture shaped by divine relationship.

Israel proliferated the religious sites and readily made their offerings to appease the deities, "*though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning*" (Hosea 8:11). They were intoxicated with their religiosity, and religion became the cause of their fall. But the ultimate aim

of the prophet was to turn the people from idol worshipping to the only true God. This was a call for repentance.

The theme of syncretism occurs so frequently in scripture that it is like a thread interwoven through the fabric of scripture's kingdom narrative. In a very real sense, the Ten Commandments are injunctions against syncretism. The first three commandments charge the Israelites to follow Yahweh exclusively, to distinctively stand before God without reliance on any other gods (Exodus 20:1-7). The oft-quoted and memorized Shema likewise exhorts Israel to hear that Yahweh is one and to love Him with all her heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:4-5). Moses exhorted the Israelites not to listen to the animistic practitioners prevalent in the land of Canaan but listen to the prophet like Moses, whom God would raise up (Deut. 18:9-15). In other words, Israel was to live distinctively, not fusing the way of God with that of the surrounding nations. These they had done, by breaking the covenant they had abandoned God by serving other gods. And that was why Hosea is lamenting on their sins.

### **The Folly of the Sin of Syncretism in the Book of Prophet Hosea**

The background to syncretism in Hosea spanned nearly two hundred years. Israel had been divided into two nations. During the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, Ten tribes of Israel rebelled and became a rival political and religious power to the house of David which ruled from Jerusalem. But this new nation was confronted with the hostilities of Syria. The stress of this power struggle kept Hosea's homeland in constant turmoil. Leaders ruled with a heavy hand and often died violent death. To blunt the spiritual appeal of worshipping at Jerusalem, these Northern kings compromised with polytheism by worshipping the Baals at Bethel and Dan as Israel's worshipping centre.

The Canaanite's religion came in like a flood under the sponsorship of Jezebel. The chief gods were Baals and Asherah, as the most popular of many nature deities. The worship of these two deities was believed by their devotees to ensure good crops and numerous calves and lamb. Their worshippers used magic, divination, and sex worship at shrines and festivals to ensure reproductive blessings. The boiling of children as sacrifices was also offered by these people in time of crisis. Hosea felt that Israel did not understand God. That lack of knowledge of God resulted in all forms of wickedness, perjury, lying and murder, stealing, debauchery, burglary, bloodshed as is recorded in Hosea 4:1-2. Hosea proclaims that the real iniquity of the nation commenced with the creating of covenant or agreement that by nature needed to be upheld by both parties involved. For him the essence of this covenant was the relationship that was forged at Sinai between God and Israel. This was a clear illustration of wanton apostate of Israel in its historic relationship with God and showed the enduring fidelity of the Almighty God. Because of this, Israel had become tainted by the corruption of idolatry, immorality, and materialism. God was compelled to leave the nation to her own devices until she gave clear proof that she no longer coveted the old idolatrous ways of life.

In Hosea 2:2-13, God himself makes that heart-wrenching confession about his relationship with Israel. God is the husband who has chosen Israel to be his bride. God through Hosea says in 2:13 that "*She*



*(Israel) went after her lovers and forgot me*". This agonized, climactic statement comes at the end of a section that expresses the wounded heart of God. It is a mixture of grief, frustration, and anger mingled with a yearning that reaches out to bring back his wayward wife, Israel. Remember how our story began in chapter 1 verse 2 when the Lord called Hosea to take a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry, "*for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord*". The account of Hosea's marriage and family continues on in chapter 2 as the vehicle for the pathos of God's great pain over the nation's spiritual adultery.

Leon J. Wood; in his work, *The prophets of Israel*. (1981:276) noted calf worship at Bethel and Dan as really a continuing form of Baal worship (2:8, 11:2 and 13:1), no doubt, because, many of the offensive features of Baal worship were still carried on at these centers. He further stated that the sacred prostitution, for instance, was common in the fertility rites of the Baal cults (4:10-18). Also, people still built "high places" and set-up images and Asherah poles "in every high hill and under every green tree". Also, Mary Evans in her book *Prophet of the law* (1992:79) pointed out that the charge against Israel is that although, they continue to live in the land and to expect the benefits of the covenant they are no longer keeping their part of it, no longer meeting God's requirement. There is no faithfulness, no love, and no acknowledgment of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery. They break all bounds and bloodshed follow bloodshed (4:20). In fact, rejection of God and disobedience to him is so universal that the surprising thing about Hosea's message is his proclaiming God's thoroughly deserved judgments on them.

Williams A. Van Gemeren in his book *Interpreting the Prophetic Word*, (1990:106) lamented by saying; the people whom the Lord had blessed, had rebelled against their maker and Redeemer. Thus, "*When I fed them, they were satisfied, when they are satisfied, they became proud; then they forget Me* (13:6, cf. 5:7-10). In reaction to this, God's people had adopted the ways of the nations. They had lost their peculiarity, the identity and the sense of belonging to the only true God. Materialism had encroached into them that they were enticed by the material achievements of the nations and aimed at putting Israel on the map by over-production, export, import, political alliance and cultural exchanges. No wonder that Hosea said in chapter 8:9 that "*For they have gone up to Assyria like a wild donkey wandering alone. Ephraim, has sold herself to lovers*". They have turned to be like sheep without a shepherd.

Reading between the lines of chapter 2, it seems that Gomer has now left Hosea and had three children for other lovers, and had become totally immersed in cult prostitution and Baal worship. Hosea is left to raise his children alone. According to the Levitical law Hosea would have been justified in divorcing his wife; He could have called for her execution under the law for adultery. But it really is his love that is at work throughout this book; it is not the law that somehow has to deal with Gomer. Now the prophet Hosea really feels his heart more and more beating at one with the Lord's as the Lord responds to the spiritual adultery of the nation. So with the pain of his relationship with Gomer piercing his own heart, once again Hosea speaks the word of the Lord to Israel. Perhaps we can feel a little sympathetic

to Israel when we consider how this could have happened. When the Israelites settled among the Canaanite people, they were not good farmers. They were nomad herdsmen who did not plant crops, so they had to learn from the Canaanites. And in adopting the Canaanite way of life, they observed that the people depended on their gods, particularly the god Baal and his wife Asherah.

David Alland Hubbard in his book, *With Bands of Love* (1968:38), remarked that when the people had some special request to make, particularly when they wanted God to send a good harvest, they held ceremonies of wailing and weeping, something like professional mourners. The prophet says: "*They do not cry to me from their hearts, but they wait upon their beds; for grains and wine they gnash themselves, they rebel against me*". Actually, the people had lost their relationship with God. They had broken the covenant and nominally, God was no longer with them since they cannot meet his requirement. Little did they know that even when they are in need wailing and weeping cannot bring God close to them. They had backslided and how can they cry to God and be expecting favourable answers.

Baal was the storm god, the god of life-giving rain. They depended on Baal for produce from the land and reproduction in the herds. So the Israelites began to ask, "*What harm could there be in worshipping Baal along with Yahweh, to ensure prosperity and reproduction?*" They began to build shrines to Baal in each one of their fields as their neighbours did. And gradually the people of Israel were drawn into the deeper mysteries of this sensual fertility cult, with the hope that they could even manipulate the gods for their own reproduction of healthy, strong babies. As the years went by Baal worship became more and more entrenched. They depended more and more on the Baals and less and less on *Yahweh*. This problem of syncretism continued throughout Israel's history.

This passage stresses God's absolute condemnation of Baal worship. It also stresses his absolute power over all the forces at work in nature and life. In Psalm 147 God says that he has absolute, unchanging power to speak and act. He responds to people who are willing to wait for him to act and not look around for other sources of provision. There is a progression in our passage of God having to assert his rightful place in the life of the nation, confront them with their syncretism, and take away things that they take for granted and assume that they have a right to physically and relationally, before he is able to give back to them in blessing.

Themes of goddess worship and the invalidity of the concept of sin were pervasive throughout. Canaanite religious influences still threaten the purity of biblical faith, but each one also struggles with syncretism personally and privately. This situation promoted private and public seductive false gods. This false god produced Israel's syncretistic worship of Baal in anything or anyone besides God that they depended on for their meaning as persons. In other words, it is this *baal* that they needed to add to *Yahweh* for their lives to be complete. In this way, they believed in God and at the same time added worship at any number of other shrines, vocation, marriage and family, prosperity, health and fitness,

pleasure, prestige, or relationships. But these became their passion, and so robbed them of total dependence on God.

The essence of Baal worship was bartered devotion for desired provision, whether it was prosperity or fertility. Another problem was not just worshipping false gods, but treating Yahweh the same way that they related to the Baals, so that he becomes a means of accomplishing their ends. Campbell Morgan in his book *Hosea: The Heart and Holiness of God* (1948: 31) observes that Israel had taken the lower level in making calves representing God. They had rejected the true knowledge, with the result that they were filthy and polluted with sins which were animal in their natures. The indictment is all the more telling in that it starts with what God pre-eminently looks for. He is weighing Israel in the balance against faithfulness, kindness and the knowledge of God, only to find her wanting at every point, utterly light on all the things that matter.

In other words, they have relegated the only true God to the lowest level. How on earth could the people God brought out of the land of bondage, fed in the wilderness, and fought for them in all their battles, and drove out for them their enemies, inherited for them land that was not their own, garden and fruits that did not belong to them; after having all these, they relegated God to the background. And now they believe it is the Baal that is appropriate for them to worship. Without missing a word, if they do not repent, they needed no prophet to tell them that they have been cursed. They have polluted themselves with idolatry and sacrifice to a lesser god instead to the true God.

They bartered for blessings while maintaining control of their own lives. In reality they became the false gods of their own lives, so their wills stubbornly resisted surrender and their own brand of spiritual adultery began in hardened hearts that refused to be a throne for the absolute reign of God. But whatever their false god was, whether it was blatant and obvious or very secret and subtle, the Lord was a jealous God, and with decisive judgment he exposed their distorted allegiances that stand in the way of his sovereignty.

The book of Hoshea takes the form of a painful conversation that God has with the adulterous Israel as he tries to expose the syncretism that drives her. The book may seem harsh and severe, but we must understand that Israel's primary relationship with God was at stake. We must also remember the depths of degradation to which Israel had fallen. God's patience had been tried and his exasperation was acute. But he will not go back on his marriage vows to be Israel's God and to keep her as his bride. Again, the judgment is meant to lead to reconciliation.

It is ironic that God has provided all Israel's resources, and yet Israel did not acknowledge him as the source of everything. She used his gifts as tools of resistance against him. She did not know it was he, and yet this was not an innocent ignorance, because this statement is an accusation that triggers terrible consequences in the verses that follow. Israel is willfully turning from what she should have known. Yahweh had given her everything in great abundance, but she had made two tragic errors in

judgment: She considered the Baals, not *Yahweh*, to be the source of fertility and the basic necessities of life; and she failed to recognize that God owned everything. Israel had no understanding of the spiritual reality that God really is the Creator and the Sustainer, the very source of life.

Now the threats of judgment come faster and stronger as this book builds. This entire book is a challenging confrontation for each one personally. It examines the tragic transition in their lives from adoration to apostasy, the abandonment of former loyalties. The stages are painfully clear. The transition began with ingratitude, with the loss of praise and thanksgiving to God alone as the source of sustenance and everything they had. We see here very dangerous trends in getting confused about what should be of basic conviction, that everything they had, everything they were to become, and everything they desired for themselves in the future, are all gifts from God.

The Bible says that when we start thinking in terms of what we have accomplished; that is sinful pride. And yet it is easy to use a gift from God such as our intelligence and somehow believe that we are responsible for the understanding we gain with it. We can become proud of some unique talent or ability that God has given us, thinking that somehow, we have acquired it ourselves. The same applies to the privileges, special opportunities, and accumulation of material possessions that God allows into life.

## CONCLUSION

In essence, syncretism officially started when Jeroboam I led a rebellion of ten tribes against Solomon's son Rehoboam as earlier mentioned. Jeroboam had set up two golden calves, one at Dan in the North, and one at Bethel in the south, shrines that were set up to worship idols but not God. Thereupon Jeroboam had proclaimed, "*Behold thy gods, Oh Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt*" despite the insistence of the priests and prophets of *Yahweh* that it was no other than *Yahweh* who had brought his people up out of Egypt. As a result of this event, they became spiritually starved as they now lack that knowledge of God. The people were paying lip service to the worship of *Yahweh* and relegated his covenant to the background by paying loyalty to the baals. They thronged the shrines in large numbers with lavish sacrifices; the worship of *Yahweh* which in pure forms was no longer the order of the day. The nature of syncretism remained in the nature of the sin of the marriage with Gomer. This shaped his presentation of the subject. Hosea dealt upon the sin which Israel as a nation has committed against *Yahweh*. His indictment of Israel reads that there is no truth, i.e. faithfulness, no loving kindness, no knowledge of God in the land (4:1). By saying no truth, he implies that, Israel had gone far absolutely from the truth. There is no more regard for known truth. In other words, they have no conscience, no uprightness.

There was no knowledge of God in the land such that the people lacked any true knowledge of God of any sort, whether of life or faith or understanding of love. They refused to do that which God commanded them to do by pleasing their minds. They choose to do that which displeased God. Israel's sin is also positively described as treachery (5:7; 6:7; 7:13). Their wickedness of conduct was a denial

of that special claim of obedience to God (8:12). After the Israelites had lost their good relationship with God, by going into idolatry full of pride, there was no knowledge of God etc. despite the fact that God loved them dearly in Egypt and in the wilderness, and planted them in the land with great expectations. Thus, Israel disappointed God by not meeting the demands of God by falling into apostasy. Then God decided to reduce Israel's national, social, religious and economic life to nothingness. God planned Israel's judgment in exile, bloodshed, and oppression because she resisted Yahweh's love. She too would experience abandonment. Also, the reason or the warning to show no mercy on her children harkens back to Hosea 1:6. The reason for God's shuffling off this mercy is immediately given. They are children of whoredom. This means since Israel is corrupt and follows corrupt ways her children who learn will likewise be corrupt. This is the inevitable result of Israel's ignoring the lesson of Deut. 6:4-9; and as a result of their violation of the covenant standard, God vowed that He will exchange their national glory for shame. They are to fall from the heights of economic prosperity to a position of subservience, as they bow to their captors and leave their homes for the humiliation of captivity.

From the contents of the book of Hoshea, syncretism leads to captivity. Second Kings 17:17-23 explains why God allowed the downfall and captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel. Thus, instead of getting rid of all the pagan practices that had infiltrated the land given to them by the Lord, Israel adopted the idols, pagan rituals, and false gods of the Canaanite religions. They broke all the commandments of the Mosaic covenant. They 'sold themselves' to the worship of golden calves (17:16). They became involved in astrology, sorcery and other occult practices. They even practiced the horrible pagan ritual of sacrificing their children 'in the fire' to pagan gods (17:17).

In His grace, God sent warnings to His people to forsake their evil ways. He allowed foreign powers to plunder and afflict them. He sent prophets to speak His message and plead with His people to repent, forsake their false gods, and turn back to Him. But they "persisted in all the sins...and did not turn away from them...so the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria" (22-23). Rebellion against God leads to captivity.

Syncretism is the fusion of different forms of belief or practice and as such a rebellion against God. In 2 Kings 17:24-41 we read that the Assyrians not only took some of the people of Israel away to Assyria as captives, but they re-populated the land with peoples from other areas of the Assyrian Empire. Intermarriage took place, and this mixed race became known as the 'Samaritans' This was the origin of the Samaritan people, who are mentioned in the New Testament at the time of Christ and the apostles, and who are still in existence today in north central Israel.

The fusion that took place between the people of Israel and the foreign settlers was not just the physical fusion of intermarriage. A fusion of religion took place as well. The Jewish people who were left in Israel should have returned to the Lord and taught the Law of God to the new residents. Instead, they joined in the worship of the foreign gods that the new settlers brought to the land. Because of Israel's

worship of false gods, the Lord allowed lions to come down from the hills and kill some of the new residents of Samaria. When the king of Assyria heard this, he decided to placate the ‘god of the land’ by ordering that one of the priests who had been taken captive be sent back to teach the people what ‘the god of the land requires’ (17:27). Unfortunately, this ‘priest’ had most likely been a priest who had served at the golden calf shrine established by Jeroboam 1 at Bethel, and thus was neither willing nor able to teach anyone what the Law of God required. As a result of this religious syncretism, they took to the worship of the Lord, but they also appointed all sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests in the shrines of the high places. They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods (17:32-33) in direct violation of the First Commandment, “*Thou shalt have no other gods before me*”.

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