

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19)
Luke 11:1-13

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

Hosea 1: 2 - 10

When the Israelites conquered the Promised Land, they did not commit an ethnic cleansing of the people who inhabited the land, nor did they eradicate their religion. Our only information about the predominant religion of the area came from the Old Testament which was written from an opposing viewpoint. Scholars have learned a great deal about the religion of the Canaanites in recent years, primarily from a large cache of cuneiform tablets known as the Ugaritic Documents.

These documents, found in Ugarit, Turkey, revealed a great deal about this religion which was the predominant religion of an area that included modern Turkey - where it originated - and moved around the Mediterranean into Egypt. Space does not suffice in this message to fully develop this faith, which included deities such as Baal and Asherah, but for our purposes it is important to note that this faith had both male and female prostitutes at its high places, or sacred precincts. Far from being an illegal occupation with a social stigma attached, serving as a Temple prostitute was an honored position. Although the state religion of Israel was the worship of Yahweh, archaeological excavations reveal that the common people of both Judah and Israel venerated many gods in addition to Yahweh and worshiped at the temples of Baal and Asherah. Gomer, the woman that Hosea was instructed to marry, was a prostitute at such a temple.

The reference to Jezreel in verse 4 is to the military base of that name overlooking the Jezreel Valley. It was here that Jehu, after being anointed by Elisha, conducted a coup d'état by killing Joram who had followed his father Ahab on the throne of Israel. It was also here that Jehu had Jezebel thrown down to her death. (See 2 Kings 9: 1 - 37). However, although he was anointed by Elisha to be king and began a period of religious reformation, "Jehu was not careful to follow the law of the LORD the God of Israel with all his heart; he did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam, which he caused Israel to commit." (2 Kings 10:31). He was therefore condemned by Hosea.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Luke 11: 1 - 13

Anyone who has experienced Middle Eastern hospitality can confirm that it is unequalled anywhere. This hospitality is deeply ingrained into the culture and into the very nature of the people of the region. Someone who is a guest in one's home must be offered food and shelter. Failure to do so is one of the most shameful actions that one can commit. It is so heinous that not only does it bring dishonor on the one who has failed this duty but it brings great shame upon every person in the village in which he dwells.

It is also important to remember that people of the Middle East to this very day enjoy talking with each other and sharing their joys as well as their problems. Information passes from person to person with amazing speed. Several years ago I led a mission trip to a village outside of Bethlehem. On the morning of our first day we were looked upon with curiosity and perhaps even a touch of suspicion but by the end of that day, we were greeted enthusiastically on the streets and in the shops of the village. Everyone in town knew who we were and why we were there.

With those two thoughts as background, let us look more closely at the parable in verses 5 - 8. The word that appears as "Suppose" in verse 5 may not be the best rendering from the original Greek. A more accurate translation would be "Can you imagine"; used in a manner that anticipates a negative response. (This phrase is also used in Luke 14:28, 15:4, and 17:7. In every case, the same negative reply is anticipated.) "Can you imagine going to a friend when you need help offering hospitality and they refuse?" The only possible answer is, "No, we cannot imagine such an unthinkable thing!"

The excuse given in verse 7 requires some explanation. Houses in first century Galilee were communal where several nuclear families, in

which the fathers were all related by blood, lived in the same structure. There was a central courtyard around which were a number of sleeping chambers. (Such a sleeping chamber from first century Bethsaida is shown in the photograph at right.) Each nuclear family would sleep in one of those chambers with the father on the outside end, the mother by the entrance, and their children sleeping between them. The average family of that period had 6 - 8 surviving children. In other words, to get out of bed and answer the door, the father would have to wake up his entire family in order to get out of the room.



Nonetheless, this excuse is unacceptable and would not even be given. (Remember, Jesus asked, "Can you imagine such a thing happening?" with the expected answer to be a resounding, "No!") The man knocking is a friend and one does not want one's friend to be disgraced. Even more, if the friend had not gotten the bread he needed at the first house, he would not have given up. He still had to put bread before his guests. No, he would have gone on to other houses to fulfill the need and he would have no doubt informed them of the refusal he received at the first house he visited. By dawn everyone in that village would have known that the man awakened at midnight had failed to help a friend in need show hospitality and had risked bringing shame upon all of them.

There is another word in most translations of Luke 11 that could be translated in a more complete way. Notice that in verse 8, the word, "he", "his", and "him" appear seven times. The effect is confusing. We generally focus on the "persistence" of the man knocking. However, the

root word from which we get the translation of “persistence” also means “avoidance of shame”. With all the masculine pronouns in this verse, it is not entirely clear to which man this word is being applied yet if the alternative translation is used; the parable makes much more sense culturally as well as spiritually. If the parable means that we should pray for something until God gives in, then where does “Thy will be done” fit in?

On the other hand, the parable may be saying that even if people will do things that they may not want to do because it is their duty, how much more will God respond to his children that he loves so much? As parents, we may not want to change a diaper, give a bath, deal with a sick child, or enforce a curfew. Yet we do these things - and many more - because we love our children and it is our responsibility to do them. How much more, then, will God respond to us? Therefore, approach him joyfully and receive the Holy Spirit into our lives.