

H.L. Rossier

Comments on the book of the Prophet Hosea

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Rue du Château d'Or n°16/6

1180 Uccle (Brussels)

Belgium



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Introduction

The prophet Hosea addresses the ten tribes in particular, whilst mentioning the tribes of Judah and Benjamin on several occasions. To disregard this fact would add to the obscurity of this book's often difficult language. Thus, for Hosea, 'Israel' usually refers to the ten tribes, in contrast to the tribe of Judah (e.g. 1:6, 11; 3:1; 4:15). This same name also applies to the nine tribes in relation to Ephraim, who is their leader (4:3), but distinct from Judah and Benjamin (5:5). It is only occasionally that the past or future reunion of the twelve tribes is referred to as Israel (3:5; 9:10; 11:1). The name Ephraim is continually used to designate the ten tribes characterised by their dominant tribe. Judah, as we have said, stands in contrast to Israel and usually comprises Judah and Benjamin. Sometimes these two tribes are named separately. Jacob is the whole people under the leadership of Judah, his dominant tribe. — The very significant role played by the ten tribes in this book is evident from the fact that the name Israel (almost always referring to the ten tribes) is mentioned 43 times, the name Ephraim (with the

same meaning) 36 times, and finally the name Judah only 15 times.

Hosea is therefore essentially a prophet of Israel, a characteristic shared, albeit to a lesser degree, by the prophets Amos and Micah.

Hosea prophesied under the same kings of Judah as Isaiah and, consequently, under the succession of kings of Israel beginning with Jeroboam II and ending with King Hoshea, the last ruler of the ten tribes before their captivity. If we add up the years of the kings of Israel, from Jeroboam to Hosea, including the interregnum periods, we arrive at the enormous total of 82 years and 7 months as the duration of this prophecy; on the other hand, by adding the years of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and the six years of Hezekiah up to the captivity of the ten tribes, one would arrive at the even more considerable sum of 90 years. Such a calculation would be erroneous. On studying the prophecy of Hosea, one readily observes that the reign of Jeroboam II plays a very limited role in it; we must therefore deduct the greater part of the years of that reign here. Furthermore, the

content of the book leads us to the conclusion that our prophet did not witness the entirety of the years of his namesake, Hosea, king of Israel. Through these approximate calculations, we arrive at a duration for this prophecy that is still lengthy, yet one that is easily conceivable.

The content of the book provides us with numerous indications of the circumstances experienced by our prophet, or which became the immediate cause of his oracles. These circumstances are, on the one hand, the 11-year interregnum separating the long reign of Jeroboam from that of Zechariah, which was so short; on the other, the 9-year period of anarchy that preceded the accession of Hosea, the last king of Israel. These various events are mentioned by our prophet, either as having already taken place, or as about to take place, and as foreshadowing future prophetic events (3:4; 10:3). Hosea also alludes to a number of other circumstances: the violence and successive murders of the kings of Israel (4:1–3; 7:7; cf. 2 Kings 15:8, 16, 25, 30); the seeking of Assyria or Egypt as protectors (5:10, 13; 7:11; 8:9, 13; 10:6; 12:2; cf. 2 Kings 15:19, 20; 17:3, 4). Chapters 10:7, 15; 13:16, show us, on the other hand, that

whilst the prophet may have witnessed the beginning of Hoshea's reign, he did not live to see the days when the ten tribes were taken captive by the Assyrians. These numerous quotations also explain how the prophetic Spirit links the revelation of future events to present circumstances.

In these tragic days, when everything is hurtling towards a fatal outcome, the prophet's style is choppy, abrupt, and consequently obscure and lacking in transitions; it often seems as though he lacks the time to link his thoughts together. This haste becomes increasingly marked as we progress through the second part of the prophecy. Hosea moves, without warning us, from threats to promises; from a glimpse of blessing to a vision of carnage; from a picture of past favours to that of the birth pangs which will suddenly come upon Ephraim. For judgement is at the door. Everything becomes jumbled and confused for the prophet, in his haste to say it all. Ah! If only a word of grace or judgement might reach the ears of this people! Alas! They do not listen! And yet, even the obscure style ought to compel them to reflect! Woe to them! — But now, suddenly, God returns to His promises of old. At once the tone calms

down and finally settles, in the last chapter, on the picture of a repentant Israel regaining the enjoyment of divine favour. The wrath is no more; only the blessing remains, in perfect peace.

Thus, in the Word, God even adapts the style of his servants to the expression of his thoughts. We shall be compelled, because of the difficulties and the apparent disjointedness of this style, to offer a paraphrase at times, that is to say, an explanatory elaboration of the text. It is our sole desire that this method should not weary the reader, but should provide him with a clearer understanding of the inspired Word and in no way detract from edification, the sole purpose of these pages.

In studying Hosea, we must ourselves be gripped by the tumultuous anguish that fills the heart of this man of God: indignation at Israel's conduct towards its God and the announcement of coming judgments; love for this people whom he holds dear with every fibre of his heart, a heart that aches, bleeds, is indignant, cherishes, and hopes; that calls out, cries, roars, and pleads; that, from its high tower, signals the storm and falls back, overwhelmed, when its cry finds no echo; — but which,

amidst so many vain calls, has the supreme consolation of resting on grace, hoping unceasingly in the promises confirmed in Christ, and of which God will never repent.

One more word on the structure—which is, incidentally, very simple—of Hosea’s prophecy. It is divided into four parts of very unequal length, the subdivisions of which we shall indicate in due course:

- Chapters 1 to 3 present to us the moral state of Israel and God’s counsel towards it. Each of these three chapters concludes with the final restoration of the people as a whole.
- Chapters 4 to 10 contain the Lord’s dispute with Israel and the enumeration of his ways concerning the people. It is here above all that we witness the prophet’s anguish.
- The third section comprises chapters 11 to 13. Here the debate continues, but is interspersed with glimpses of God’s gracious purposes concerning Ephraim and Judah.

- The fourth section consists solely of chapter 14. It describes the definitive repentance in the last days and sets out the final restoration of Ephraim under the Messiah's millennial reign. The ten tribes thus regain the fellowship with the Lord which they had lost, and which becomes their portion for ever.

PART ONE: CHAPTERS 1–3:

The moral condition of Israel and God's counsel concerning it.

Chapter 1

God rejects Israel and accepts the nations.

(v. 1.) — ‘The word of the Lord that came to Hosea, son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel’.

Right from the first verse we encounter a difficulty. How is it that Hosea, a prophet of Ephraim, instead of listing the succession of kings of Israel under whom he prophesied, mentions only Jeroboam, the first of these kings, omits his six successors, and marks the duration of his prophecy by the kings of Judah? The history of the kings of Israel provides a solution to this puzzle, confirmed by the content of our first chapter.

Jehu, the executor of God's judgments against the ten tribes, had exterminated Joram, king of Israel, and the seventy sons of the wicked Ahab; but, filled with a fleshly zeal, he had overstepped God's commands by taking vengeance on Ahaziah, king of Judah, and his forty-two brothers. The Lord acknowledged Jehu's obedience, insofar as it had been exercised in His service, and said to him: 'Because you have done what was right in my eyes, and have dealt with the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons, to the fourth generation, shall sit on the throne of Israel' (2 Kings 10:30; 15:12). This is indeed what came to pass. At the urging of Jehoahaz, his father (the first generation of Jehu), Joash (the second generation) had been raised up as 'Saviour of Israel' (2

Kings 13:5). Jeroboam II, the third generation, though a wicked king, had also been honoured with the title of Saviour of the people (2 Kings 14:27). From then on, however, Israel was under judgement, yet the fourth generation of Jehu was still needed to fulfil the promise made to him by the Lord. Upon Jeroboam's death, the ten tribes went through a period of interregnum, traces of which are found in Hosea's prophecy. But what the Lord had promised was bound to come to pass. After eleven years of interregnum, Zechariah, the fourth descendant of Jehu, ascended the throne of Israel, but reigned for only six months and died a violent death (2 Kings 15:8–12). Thus were fulfilled both the word of the Lord to Jehu and the final judgement upon the ten tribes. Already, in the time of Jeroboam II, this judgement had been decreed by God. The five rulers who succeeded one another on the throne from Zechariah until the deportation of the ten tribes do not count for the prophet, despite the long reigns of two of them.

Hosea prophesies concerning Israel, whilst the people's fate has already been irrevocably determined by the Lord. He keeps His promise to Jehu, but passes final judgement on the house of

Israel, beginning with Jehu (1:4). For a time, Judah, under a few faithful kings, ‘still walks with its God and the true saints’, although, in fact, the ruin of the two tribes is already complete (12:1). Moreover, as we shall see, whenever Judah is mentioned, it is to show that, though its judgement is delayed, it is not far off and will surely overtake the house of David.

This, then, seems to us to explain why Hosea, the prophet of Ephraim, is presented to us as prophesying during the reign of the kings of Judah, and makes no mention of any of the kings of Israel except Jeroboam. The latter was still a ‘Saviour’. After him, all is nothing but disorder, murder and anarchy.

(vv. 2–5.) — At a time when the word of God no longer has power over the hearts of the people, to convince them and bring them back, the Lord accompanies it with visible, symbolic signs, designed to reach the conscience and whose meaning no one can escape. ‘The Lord said to Hosea: “Go, take for yourself a prostitute and children of prostitution; for the land has completely prostituted itself by forsaking the Lord.”’ The Lord’s prophet, the man who represents God himself before the

people, must enter into a dishonourable covenant. Will Israel not understand that prostitution is its present condition? It had forsaken the Lord, betrayed its commitments to its husband; and yet the relations of a legitimate covenant still remained. Was there anything more shameful for the prophet? But how much more so for the Lord himself! Moreover, not only was the prophet (or God) dishonoured, but the children born of this union could only be called children of prostitution. Defilement can never be improved, even when united with the most perfect purity. Whilst the prophet's holiness, under the guidance of the 'Spirit of God', remained in no way diminished, his wife's impurity was multiplied tenfold by the fact that she had shown no regard for that holiness; yet it was now impossible for God not to take note of it, for once the fact had been established, He could not renounce His own holiness. Judgement therefore became a necessity, unless God were to abandon His character.

This truth is timeless. After Israel, the Church, as the responsible Bride of Christ, has followed the same path, has committed fornication, and will fall under the same judgement, though far more terrible than that of Israel, since it will be proportionate to

the graces she has received. Israel failed under the law; the responsible Church has failed under grace. But Israel, after its defection under the economy of the law, will, under the new covenant, regain the grace it had never known; the Church will not regain it, for, after grace—the supreme manifestation of God’s character—it has no further recourse, nor any other way out, but judgement. The Church is on the way to becoming ‘the great harlot’, the mother of all the abominations of the earth, whose end will be this sentence: ‘She has fallen, she has fallen, Babylon the great!’ (Rev. 17:1, 5; 18:2.)

Hosea therefore takes Gomer as his wife, whose conduct mirrors that of the people. She is the daughter of Diblaim, which means ‘double embrace’. This name seems to be an allusion. From its very beginning, Israel had been subject to two opposing influences: that of the flesh and that of God’s holiness. Could a mixture—something neither wholly good nor wholly evil—be the result? Impossible! ‘Corruption does not inherit incorruptibility’.

Gomer's first son is Jezreel. 'Call,' says the Lord, 'his name Jezreel, for in a little while I will punish the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel; and it shall come to pass in that day that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel' (v. 4). This name recalls the murder, committed by Jehu, of Ahaziah, king of Judah, and his forty-two brothers (2 Kings 9–10). God had approved of Jehu for what he had done to the house of Ahab and had even granted him a reward for it. It is only some eighty years later that we learn what God thought of the murder of the sons of Judah.

This principle is very instructive regarding the ways of God. Insofar as he serves the fulfilment of God's counsels, a man may be approved by Him, whatever the secret motives of his heart, provided he does not oppose that fulfilment. But the secret motives that drove him to act, when he appeared to be working solely for God, will one day be brought to light, and the violence or hypocrisy hidden beneath the cloak of obedience will not escape on the day of judgement any more than they escape His gaze today. There comes a time when God's

patience comes to an end. The motives of Jehu's heart, which he knew so well how to hide from the eyes of the faithful Jonadab, by cloaking them in the name of 'zeal for the Lord' (2 Kings 10:15, 16), are now laid bare. The best of men might be deceived by them, but God is not deceived. Years pass, and the day and hour of retribution draw near, perhaps slowly, but with a sure and inevitable step. Was it not the same in the case of Saul and the Gibeonites? It seemed, after so many years, that God had forgotten what He had not even recorded. The three-year famine proved Israel wrong (2 Sam. 21).

The name Jezreel is synonymous here with breaking: the bow of Israel (its power) will be broken in the valley of Jezreel. With the house of Jehu, the kingdom of the ten tribes has virtually ceased to exist, and God no longer takes account of what remains.

But the kingship was not the only issue. What state was the nation itself in under Jehu's successors? Gomer bore a daughter, and God said: 'Call her name Lo-Ruhama (she has not obtained mercy), for I will no longer show mercy to the house of Israel

to forgive them again’ (v. 6). The cup was full; as far as Israel was concerned, there was no longer any room for repentance on the part of the Lord; yet He still wished to ‘show mercy to the house of Judah and save them’—which He had done in vain twice, as we have seen, with regard to the house of Israel—for the final judgement had not yet been pronounced upon the line of David.

Gomer has a second son. God says: ‘Call his name Lo-Ammi (not my people), for you are not my people and I will not be yours’ (v. 9). Thus every link with God is severed. Israel is rejected, and note that God no longer makes an exception in favour of Judah, as he did for Lo-Rukhama. The judgement here extends beyond Ephraim. At the very moment it is pronounced, the vital ties of the whole people are already severed. They will soon give way to the simple ways of God’s Providence, as we see in the Book of Esther, until the day of Israel’s restoration.

With this sentence: ‘You are not my people’, it seems that everything is definitively over. Undoubtedly, if God were not God, and if His glory were to be founded on His judgements

rather than established on His grace. God is a judge, and sinners are terribly guilty of disregarding this, but He is also the God of promises, and these promises are irrevocable. We see this clearly here, in v. 10, concerning Israel: ‘Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered.’ Remarkably, the prophet does not refer to the promises made to Jacob (Israel) at Bethel: ‘Your seed shall be like the dust of the earth’ (Gen. 28:14) — but to those he made to Abraham following the sacrifice of Isaac: ‘I will greatly multiply your offspring... like the sand on the seashore’ (Gen. 22:17), a promise which Jacob himself recalls to the Lord before crossing the ford of Jabbok: ‘You said: “Surely I will do you good, and I will make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted for its multitude”’ (Gen. 32:12). It is by virtue of Christ’s sacrifice that God’s grace will triumph in the end, and upon this sacrifice that the Lord establishes His unchanging promises. The Law, which came so much later, cannot annul them. The God of promises cannot lie, nor disown Christ, the resurrected Isaac, in whom they are all ‘Yes and Amen’.

But the prophet mentions yet another promise far more wonderful than that of the ‘sand of the sea’: ‘And it shall come to pass that in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people”, it shall be said to them, “Sons of the living God”. This passage refers to the nations and not to Israel, as the Spirit of God teaches us in Romans 9. Is it not remarkable that, without this teaching, we would never have discovered, in this verse, God’s purpose concerning the Gentiles? In Romans 9:24–26, the apostle quotes two passages from Hosea to show that God has called ‘vessels of mercy... namely us, not only from among the Jews, but also from among the nations’. The first of these passages is taken from Hosea 2:23: ‘I will call my people, who were not my people, and beloved, who were not beloved’. These words refer exclusively to Israel; the apostle Peter, addressing converted Jews, applies them to them: ‘You who once were not a people, but are now the people of God; you who had not received mercy, but have now received mercy’ (1 Peter 2:10). Peter shows these Christians who have come out of Judaism that what was promised for the future to their nation, they now possess; that they have the right to call themselves

the people of God, and have a relationship with God based on his free grace.

The second passage in Romans 9 is taken from Hosea 1:10. This is the one we are considering: ‘It shall come to pass,’ says the apostle, ‘that in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” there they shall be called “sons of the living God”.’ In the future, the sons of Israel will learn that God has raised up in their place a new people, bearing a new title: ‘Sons of the living God’. This name seems to me to have a very special significance. In the Old Testament, the name of the living God, the God of Israel who possesses life in himself, seems to stand in contrast to the lifeless gods, the idols of the nations. In the New Testament, Christ is the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16; Rom. 1:4), declared as such by his resurrection from the dead. By virtue of this resurrection and through the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Christian possesses the same relationship with God as his Lord and Saviour. He is a son of God, of the living God. Such, it seems to me, is the significance of this passage. It addresses the nations of which we are a part, and proclaims the new relationship into which they will

enter with God through the risen Christ. Admittedly, the prophet does not go so far as to speak of the mystery of the Church, unknown to the Old Testament, but we may say that this mystery is hidden here in these words: ‘the living God’, a title known to all the prophets, but revealed here for the future time when, upon him, the Lord will build his Assembly.

‘And the sons of Judah and the sons of Israel shall gather together, and appoint a leader for themselves, and go up from the land; for the day of Jezreel is great’ (v. 11). From the blessing of the nations, the prophet moves on to the future gathering of all Israel. Judah, with whom God was still being patient, was to be scattered after the ten tribes, but it will not always be so. Though the purpose of the cross—to gather together the scattered children of God—has failed as regards Israel, the time will come when this plan will be fulfilled. Judah and Israel (or the ten tribes) will establish a single leader; together they will acknowledge the lordship of Christ, whom Judah had rejected. Then these enemy brothers will live united with their Leader, High Priest and King upon his throne, who has now become their Guide. They ‘shall come up from the land’. The meaning

of this word seems to me to be that they will come up from the land of Canaan like an abundant harvest, for, as the prophet immediately adds, ‘the day of Jezreel is great’. Then Jezreel, the place of slaughter and retribution (v. 5), will receive its true meaning: ‘God sows’ (cf. 2:23). He sows and the harvest will spring up, but only after the judgement of the people has been completed. As soon as the day of Jezreel is brought in by God Himself, it can only be a blessing; where He has sown, the harvest can only be infinitely great. In former times, under Jehu, man had sown and reaped a storm; but when God sows, He will reap a people firmly united, the ripe fruit of His work, gathered under a divine Leader. Then it will indeed be possible to say: The day of Jezreel is great! (*)

(*) This, at least, is the explanation I propose for this passage, which has been subject to several interpretations. See, for the same meaning of the word ‘ascend’: chap. 10:8. To establish a leader and to ascend are not, in my view, linked in this passage.

We have thus found in this chapter an important summary of the past and future of Israel and Judah. The entire prophecy of

the Old Testament is condensed here into a few words: God's promises; the people under the Law forsaking the Lord; the judgement that follows; the severing of all relationship between God and the people; the cessation of His ways of mercy towards them; the legal covenant having been broken by Israel; — the nations entering into the blessings of the new covenant, as the fruit of the resurrection of Christ whom Israel had rejected, — but then the restoration of God's relationship with Israel, when the risen Christ becomes the Head of his people, gathers them together as one after their dispersion, and brings forth an abundant harvest upon the renewed earth.

Chapter 2

God rejects Israel and, through repentance, brings them into the millennial blessings.

The first verse of this chapter: 'Say to your brothers: Ammi! and to your sisters: Rukhama!' seems to refer to the hope given to Israel at the end of the first chapter. It is as if the prophet were saying: In the present day it is possible to recognise the character of a Remnant. But there will be, at some future, as

yet undetermined time, faithful ones who will recognise one another as being the people of God and as having obtained mercy. Only these faithful ones, united in the joyful awareness of belonging to the Lord and being in His favour, ‘will plead against their mother’ (v. 2), the harlot, apostate Israel, ‘who is not the Lord’s wife and of whom He is not the husband’. They are of God, since the Spirit of prophecy (the prophet) has begotten them, but, forced to acknowledge that idolatrous Israel is their mother, they enter into a lawsuit with her to claim their right to God’s holiness. One last time this poor people is summoned by its own children, who belong to the Lord, to turn from its evil ways; otherwise God will lay it bare, strip it of all the privileges He had granted it, and leave it in the horror of its prostitution, the object of a judgement without remission (v. 3). Her own children, insofar as they do not take on the character of the Remnant, will be Lo-Rukhama (I will not have mercy), for they are the fruit of her prostitution. Thus, among the descendants of Israel, there will be children born of prostitution and children born of God, those of whom it is said: ‘Come out from among her, be ye clean, ye that bear the vessels of the

Lord’, and ‘ye shall be to me as sons and daughters, saith the Lord, the Almighty’ (Isaiah 52:11; 2 Corinthians 6:18).

This abandonment of God is, in Israel, the fruit of an unbridled will that drives the heart towards its lusts and sets it in opposition to God: ‘I will go after my lovers who have given me my bread and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink’ (v. 5), as if these things belonged to the unfaithful people, by the generosity of the world from which they wished to receive them! — ‘I will go!’ How different this self-willed resolve is from the will of Rebekah, when questioned by her parents, who also replied to them: ‘I will go.’ What matter the fatigue, the privations, the desert without bread, without water, without oil and without wine. I will go! No advantage to compensate for those of her father’s house, nothing that meets the habits or aspirations of her heart; in this desert everything is against her, and yet she says: I will go! For she has before her a person in whom she has placed her trust, in whom she believes, though she does not see him, and whom she loves without seeing him: Isaac. To reach him, guided by the Holy Spirit who will not abandon her in the desert, she agrees to leave behind

her dearest affections, the family home, and to endure all manner of privations. She wishes to come to him as a pure and chaste virgin, a worthy object of his affection. Note, however, that it is not Rebekah who chooses Isaac as her husband. It is he who has chosen her and who, before she devoted herself entirely to him, gave her the pledge of his own love. Such is first love: the love of the Bridegroom seizing the Bride's heart to draw her before him. Israel had found this love at the beginning of its journey, when, having been redeemed from Egypt, it walked in the wilderness following the Lord (Jer. 2:1–3). It lost it by 'going after its lovers' (v. 5). It would only find it again later on the path of repentance (vv. 14–17).

How different Israel, the harlot, is from Rebekah! Israel says: 'I will go after my lovers', Assyria and Egypt. She gives herself to them for the earthly benefits she thinks she will gain from this union. She does not see that even these temporal benefits come from God: 'She does not know that it is I who have given her the grain, the wine, and the oil.' And, worse still, from the riches God gives her, she makes idols: 'I have also multiplied her silver and gold:—they have used it for Baal' (v. 8). But the

Creator will take back his gifts, and she will see whether they came from her lovers: ‘Therefore I will take back my grain in its season, and my wine in its time; and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness’. God takes away her earthly possessions (v. 9); she is humiliated in the sight of the nations (v. 10). The solemn feasts, all the outward forms of her worship, are taken from her (v. 11); the signs of the Lord’s favour, earthly joy and abundance, are taken from her; she becomes the prey of her enemies (v. 12). God will take vengeance for her idolatry, for ‘she has forgotten me,’ says the Lord! (v. 13).

This picture of Israel’s condition is also that of the present state of the Christian profession. We seek the world and its advantages, its riches and prosperity, the comforts of life it affords us, without inquiring after the God to whom these things belong, and we use them to satisfy our lusts, instead of forsaking all to follow Jesus.

Sometimes, the disillusioned soul, seeing that ‘her lovers’ no longer offer her what she desires, and after having pursued in

vain the things by which Satan has beguiled her, cries out: ‘I will go and return to my first husband; for then I was better off than I am now’ (v. 7). Let us make no mistake, this is not a description of what goes on in the heart of the prodigal son: ‘I will get up and go to my father’. Blessed are those who, under the weight of their disillusionment and misery, have finally realised that their only refuge lies in the arms of the Father whom they had dishonoured, and who return to him, repentant, saying: ‘I have sinned against heaven and before you!’ — But here we find no repentance. Weariness, discouragement, and the loathing of sin may drive souls towards religion and make them desire a change, but this can only be obtained through the path of repentance.

Here, the horror of idols does not yet fill the heart of Israel. It has no inkling of what a dreadful figure lurks behind the Baals. Outwardly, an idol is nothing; men seek to persuade themselves that it is quite indifferent to indulge their lusts, provided they do not belong to the category of degrading things, but do they suspect that demons are hidden behind every object of their desires? (1 Cor. 10:20).

As we have said: Israel's words in v. 7 are not truly repentance. The revulsion, the emptiness left by lusts—never satisfied by the possession of the desired things—the hope of finding something better by turning to God, the resolution to put an end to it all—these are not yet the true 'I will go' of the prodigal son. Like him, one must get up and go to one's father. Israel does not do this here; it simply says: 'I was better off than I am now'. The thought of having sinned against the Lord does not arise in its heart, and, in fact, what converts us is the conviction that we have offended God's love at the very moment when He had done everything for us. But there comes a time when God takes everything away, even the religious forms (v. 11) that Israel combined with the worship of demons and impurity. The same will be true of Christianity; these forms still exist there today, but will soon be swallowed up in the general apostasy, and from then on, the God whom we have so lightly turned our backs on will be nowhere to be found!

However, amidst all these ruins, God has plans of grace for Israel, and we find them in verses 14 to 17. 'Therefore, behold, I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness, and speak ten-

derly to her; and there I will give her her vineyards, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; and there she shall sing as in the days of her youth, and as on the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord, that you shall call me ‘My Husband’, and you shall no longer call me ‘My Master’ (my Baal). And I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and their name shall be remembered no more.” — It will be like a renewal, a fresh start for the history of Israel (that is to say, the ten tribes who are specifically in view in this passage). First, God Himself will draw them after Him into the wilderness to bless them. The people will rediscover what they once had when the freshness of first love drew them, upon their exodus from Egypt, after their Husband into an uninhabited land (Jer. 2:1–3). Alas! That first love had been abandoned in pursuit of idols, the Baals whom Israel had made their masters. Was there, then, no hope of regaining it? None for the people as a whole, nor for the professing Church as a whole today. But a Remnant will be able to regain that first love, that blessed communion with the Bridegroom of Israel. ‘Though Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a

remnant shall return’. This Remnant will be tested, judged and purified in the wilderness, to rediscover the path to blessing and take possession of their land again (Isaiah 11:11–16; 27:12, 13; Ezekiel 20:10–38; Zechariah 10:7–12; Zeph. 3:10). In this trial, a great many of those who had set out with the Remnant will be judged and will never see the land of promise; this will be a repetition of the history of the people of old, whose bodies fell in the wilderness. But, just as in former times, a Remnant will be saved; ‘the Lord will speak to their hearts’. Ephraim will regain his vineyards (v. 15), but no longer as in days gone by when he sought his joy in drunkenness;—and how often is Ephraim’s drunkenness mentioned by the prophets? (Isaiah 28:1–4, etc.) — he will find his joy in fellowship with his God. ‘I will give him his vineyards,’ says the Lord; this restoration will be due entirely to grace; the Lord will use the sufferings of the wilderness to bring about this result. But, like any restoration, it cannot take place without a work of repentance. The first love that has been lost can only be regained by this path. It has been, it is, and it will always be so for every true conversion; thus we find here: ‘I will give him the Valley of Achor as

a gate of hope’. The Valley of Achor (Joshua 7:19–26), that is to say, the valley of trouble, the judgement of evil, was the place where Achan, who had brought trouble upon Israel through the forbidden things, was stoned and then burnt—he, his sons and daughters, all his livestock, as well as the forbidden things he had appropriated—in order to turn away from Israel the fierceness of the Lord’s wrath. This Valley of Trouble, whose solemnity strikes Ephraim’s conscience as he witnesses, during the journey, the Lord’s terrible judgement upon the people of whom he is a part, becomes for the Remnant a gateway of hope and opens the way to final deliverance. Then, and only then, will the hour of a second youth have come for the ten tribes. ‘She (the Bride) shall sing as in the days of her youth and as on the day she came up out of the land of Egypt.’ The Remnant of Israel will once again understand the sweetness of the bonds of love that unite them to the Lord, the sweetness of being able to call Him: ‘My Husband’, and no longer to call Him ‘My Master’, the name the ten tribes gave to the Baals, for Master and Baal are the same word. They had given themselves over to Baal, to the demon hidden behind the idol; now they

have even forgotten his name (v. 17). What grace! Just as the Lord, on that day, will no longer remember the iniquities of Israel, so Israel will no longer remember the name of its false gods! The past, the bondage to Satan, will have vanished to make way for the renewal of joyful relations with God, so long misunderstood, so long despised. This future of Ephraim is, for us Christians, the present. God Himself tells us that He will never again remember our sins or our iniquities, and, by virtue of the blood of Christ shed for us, we may come before Him with a clear conscience. These blessed certainties bind our hearts to Him to whom we owe our blessings. Knowing Him becomes the source of all our joys and all our activity. It is the first love. Have we lost it? Let us quickly recover it through voluntary repentance; otherwise, God, to help us recover it, will bring about this repentance in our hearts on the path of His judgments!

It is only after the work of repentance that the marvellous scene of the blessings of the millennial reign opens up before Israel (vv. 18–23). ‘On that day’ (v. 18), the Lord will pacify all the instruments of His judgments against His people: wild beasts,

birds of prey, venomous snakes; He will ‘put an end to the bow and the sword and war’, all the various enemies whom God had so often raised up to chastise this nation. Israel “shall rest in safety”. This people, who had turned a deaf ear to their Messiah when he came to say to them, “I will give you rest”, will at last find rest through repentance and through tribulation.

‘And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy; I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (vv. 19, 20). Israel now knows the Lord, for its betrothal depends entirely on His grace. Justice is now inseparable from mercy. The people enter into a relationship with God on the basis of justice founded on judgement, and mercy founded on love. This is what we, as Christians, have found at the cross of Christ; it will be Israel’s portion in a future day; it will be the foundation of Christ’s glorious reign on earth: ‘Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you’ (Ps. 89:14).

‘And I will betroth you to me in truth’ (v. 20). Israel’s repentance will bring it into a relationship with God, not only in righteousness and grace, but also in truth, that is to say, according to the character He will impart to His people so that they may enter into a relationship with Him. This character depends entirely on grace, for it is from grace alone that comes what we are before God, and what Israel will be before Him. And it is then that Israel will be able to say: ‘I know the Lord!’ (v. 20).

‘And it shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord, that I will answer, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain and the new wine and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel (God sows). And I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will show mercy to Lo-Ruhama, and I will say to Lo-Ammi: ‘You are my people,’ and he will say to me: ‘My God’” (vv. 21–23). Here we find the fullness of the blessings of the millennial earth. Let us note three things in this entire passage, from v. 18 onwards: 1. Evil, the external instrument of judgement, is removed; for, as we learn elsewhere, Satan, who brings it about, is bound for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–3). 2. Evil in the hearts of the people

is removed and replaced by a new heart and the knowledge of God. This is the new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks, founded entirely on grace (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:10–13). 3. Creation, once subject to the ‘bondage of corruption’, is set free to enjoy the freedom of the glory of the saints (Rom. 8:19–22).

There will be harmony between heaven and earth in sowing and in reaping. Jezreel will no longer be a place of murder and carnage, but will live up to its name: ‘God sows’. Yes, God will sow in what was once the scene of human violence and God’s judgments, and the seed falling on soil prepared by Him will bear fruit a hundredfold. The blessing of wheat, new wine and oil, which Israel had first sought from the nations (v. 5), and which God had then taken away from them (vv. 8, 9), they will regain under the reign of the Mediator, the true Melchizedek, who will bless the people on God’s behalf and God on the people’s behalf. Then Israel will have returned by faith to the blessings of Abraham; it will be sown by God and for God in its own land. Lo-Ammi will become: My people; Lo-Rukhama will become: Object of mercy. And Israel will say: My God! There will be mutual trust, mutual love, and overflowing joy in

communion with God. All these things will be the portion of a repentant and restored Israel. They belong today to Christians, by virtue of their relationship with the Son and with the Father, which is far more intimate and precious than that of Israel with its God (1 Peter 2:10).

Chapter 3

God rejects Israel and leads it, through conversion, to find Christ, its true King.

The prophet is called upon to perform a new symbolic act. He must love a woman who, though loved by a friend—the prophet, who here symbolises the Lord—is an adulteress, unfaithful to the binding ties that bind her to her friend. It had been the same for the children of Israel. The Lord had loved them, yet they had abandoned Him to follow other gods, and had ‘loved the cakes of raisins’ (v. 1), believing that adultery would provide them with this festive food and that the Lord would deny it to them. Yet it was David who had distributed them to the people, Solomon who gave them to his beloved, and the Word does not indicate that they were distributed by

anyone other than the King (2 Sam. 6:19; 1 Chron. 16:3; Song 2:5). It is true that the King, in accordance with God's counsel, also gave his people sustenance more substantial than this delicacy, but Israel took no notice of it. 'They love raisin cakes'; the Enemy had led them to believe that they would find a perpetual feast far from the God they were betraying. This error is timeless. The natural heart of man does not always seek satisfaction in coarse debauchery; it also desires refined nourishment, lofty intellectual joys, and seeks to make its life a feast of the intellect. To obtain these things, it turns to the world and abandons God, forgetting that true intellect and the only real joys are to be found only in communion with the Saviour.

The price at which the prophet buys the adulterous woman is, in fact, very small. The lethech of barley suggests that he must have haggled to have her sold to him at a paltry price. For indeed, having no value in herself, it was the love alone of the one who had acquired her that gave her worth. But, whatever the case, this woman belonged to him, because he had paid for her and thus had rights over her. He could, as he saw fit, determine her future on the basis of her past conduct: 'For many

days you shall wait for me; you shall not prostitute yourself, nor belong to any man; and I will do the same for you. For the children of Israel shall remain many days without a king, and without a prince, and without sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod or teraphim' (vv. 3, 4). This was what was to befall the ten tribes first. From the moment of their deportation, they were without a prince, without idols, and without a relationship with God. This was not the case with Judah, which, after the captivity, had not been without princes and governors, and had maintained some connection with God. The fate of Ephraim befell Judah after it had rejected and crucified the Lord's Anointed One; from then on, the condition of the two sections of the people was similar, if not identical. No more king, no more worship, no means of consulting the Lord; on the other hand, no more public or domestic idolatry, but a house swept clean and made ready, awaiting nothing more... than seven demons more wicked than the first (Matt. 12:44).

However, this state of desolation will come to an end:

‘Then the sons of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king, and shall turn in fear to the Lord and to his goodness, in the latter days’ (v. 5). Israel will be converted, return to God, and acknowledge Christ as King, the true David who was once rejected. Two things will prevail in the heart of the restored people: the fear of the Lord and the sense of his love, according to the prophet’s word: ‘With you is forgiveness, that you may be feared’ (Ps. 130:4).

In summarising these three chapters, is it not striking that Hosea, on the eve of the disappearance of the ten tribes, announces 1) their restoration to the land under a single Leader (when the interlude of the Church is over); 2. God renewing His relationship with them, under the New Covenant, in the Millennium; 3. their return, through conversion, under the sceptre of David, their true King, the Christ whom they had rejected?

PART TWO: CHAPTERS 4–10

The Lord's Debate with Israel.

Chapter 4

No hope left for Ephraim; a faint hope remains for Judah.

Verses 1 to 5 of this chapter describe the moral state of Israel, and verses 6 to 15 its religious state. The moral state of Ephraim was plain to the prophet Hosea: everywhere ‘cursing, and lying, and murder, and theft, and adultery; violence abounds and blood touches blood’. Zechariah, the last descendant of the murderer Jehu, is himself put to death by Shallum, who is struck down by Menahem; Menahem spreads murder and violence far and wide; the same is true of Pekahiah and Pekah, his successors, who die violent deaths. Mourning covers the land; God’s judgement, compelled to witness these abominations, extends from mankind to all the animal creation in the land of Israel. Nothing now corresponds to God’s thoughts; it is the absolute opposite of the restoration described in chapter 2. When the heart abandons God, love and truth—traits of the divine

character—immediately disappear, to be replaced by the fruits of man’s natural heart: violence, corruption and falsehood. It was these traits of Cain’s family that had necessitated God’s judgement upon the world of that time through the Flood, just as they necessitate here the sentence of death pronounced upon the land and upon all living creatures that dwell therein (v. 3).

‘Yet let no one contend, let no one rebuke; yet your people are like those who contend with the priest. And you shall stumble by day, and the prophet too shall stumble with you by night: and I will destroy your mother’ (v. 4, 5). This is now a call to cease rebuking this people and to stop contending with them. It is too late: their fate is sealed, for there is no longer any hope of seeing them return. “Your people,” says the Lord to the prophet, “are like those who contend with the priest.” What is the point of arguing with Israel and rebuking them, when they themselves argue with the only One who can offer the atoning sacrifice on their behalf? There is no time left: all divine help is to be withdrawn from the remnant of this people; the nation itself, their mother, will be destroyed (cf. 2:2). Such is the Lord’s judgement.

But with what sorrow does God now speak through the prophet's mouth! 'My people... my people,' he cries out in verses 6 and 12 on the eve of declaring Lo-Ammi! What is their condition in their relationship with God? Their apostasy is widespread; idolatry has taken over everything; Judah is as guilty as Ephraim. Even the details given in v. 13—sacrifices on the high places and under every green tree—characterise Judah even more than the ten tribes. However, the prophet makes some distinction between the two kingdoms: 'If you commit adultery, O Israel, let not Judah be guilty!' In times of revival, under Hezekiah—whose reign Hosea witnessed at its beginning—and later under Josiah, the abominations of Judah were destroyed and its high places torn down.

Be that as it may, God says: 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge... and I will cast you off, so that you may no longer serve as priests before me. For you have forgotten the law of God, and I will forget your sons' (v. 6). In the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord had declared to Israel that, if they kept the covenant of the law, they would be a kingdom of priests to Him (Ex. 19:5, 6). Since Israel had not kept it, the royal priesthood

was taken from them. How could they have served and worshipped, or been maintained in priestly duties before a God they did not know? ‘You have rejected knowledge,’ the Lord said to them; and it is ‘for lack of this knowledge’ that destruction overtakes them. Even more so, they had ‘forgotten the law of their God’. To forget it, as though it had never existed, after having known it—this just and holy law—was that not far worse than never having known it at all? Therefore God said: ‘I, too, will forget your sons’ (v. 6). Into what misery do disobedience and sin plunge mankind! What a fate, to be forgotten by God, when he could have stood before the Lord, who declared that He would forget only one thing: the sins and iniquities of His people!

Hosea, with the deliberate inconsistency that characterises his prophecy, moves from the people’s priesthood to the priests appointed over them (vv. 8 and 9). ‘They eat the sin of my people, and their soul craves their iniquity. And as the people are, so shall the priest be.’ I believe that ‘sin’ here, as on more than one occasion in Scripture, refers to the sin offering. The priests desire that the people’s iniquities should multiply so that

they might feed all the more abundantly on their sacrifices. Such was the state to which the priestly office had sunk; it was nothing more than a matter of material gain, a means of livelihood! Therefore God ‘punishes them for their ways’ (v. 9). As for drunkenness, leading to fornication, and so common in Ephraim, it robbed them of their senses and they had ceased to heed the Lord (v. 11). The most senseless superstitious practices had replaced the worship of the true God in Israel. The people ‘consulted their wooden idols, and their staff was their oracle’ (v. 12). Such superstitions are timeless, as the religion of the true God declines. Man, as he is constituted, needs an object, and if God is not that object for him, he degenerates morally and seeks counsel from his table and his staff. And this is God’s judgement on man’s impiety: He ‘delivers him to a spirit of delusion’.

Henceforth God will no longer hold back His judgement. Three solemn words show that God has taken an irrevocable decision regarding Ephraim: ‘Let no one dispute, let no one rebuke!’ ‘I will not punish your daughters’. ‘Ephraim has clung to idols: let him do so’ (vv. 4, 14, 17). These words are similar to those

in Revelation: ‘Let him who is defiled continue to be defiled!’ (Rev. 22:11).

But, as we have said, this final decree is not addressed to Judah. “Let Judah not be guilty!” says the Lord (v. 15). How important this word is for what remains of God’s people today. Already the evil that has overtaken the masses is rampant amongst those whom God still preserves as a testimony amidst general unfaithfulness. Soon, those who remain standing today will suffer the same fate as the nation as a whole. How can one guard against this contagion? How can one remain in the realm of blessing? Does God ask great things of Judah, already undermined on all sides by the final apostasy? No, when there is so little strength left, He asks only for a negative testimony, so to speak, as He says to Philadelphia: ‘You have not denied my name’ (Rev. 3:8). Refrain—that is the watchword. Keep away from that which, beneath a respectable exterior, or under august and sacred names, now conceals nothing but iniquity and abandonment of God. ‘Do not go to Gilgal, and do not go up to Beth-aven, and do not swear, “As the Lord lives!”’ (v. 15). These places, so well known in the history of God’s people,

had passed, by conquest, after the division of the kingdom, from the hands of Benjamin to those of Ephraim, and lay, by their position, within immediate reach of Judah, like a trap in its path. Gilgal, a memorial to the victory over death won by the Ark placed in the midst of the Jordan; an enduring monument to the entry of the twelve tribes into Canaan; Gilgal, the place of circumcision, of the cutting away of the flesh, of the judgement pronounced upon it, and without which one could not take possession of the Promised Land; Gilgal, the place to which Israel always returned to find the secret of victory, the gathering place of the faithful people, had become a place of profane altars and sacrifices for Ephraim, a place where transgression had multiplied (Hosea 9:15; 12:12; Amos 4:4; 5:5). Bethel, ‘house of God’, the place of the promises made to Jacob, the place where he had received his name Israel, and where the Almighty had, as it were, made himself known to him anew — Bethel had become the house of the golden calves, of their altar and of the false priesthood instituted by Jeroboam (1 Kings 12; Amos 3:14). How well it deserved the name Beth-Aven, ‘house of iniquity’, a name by which Hosea

denounced it three times! (4:15; 5:8; 10:5). In those places where Samuel, the prophet of the Lord, had once gone year after year, there was now nothing but idolatry and false prophets. Such was the worship of Ephraim. Judah was to abstain from it. Did he not have the place where the Lord had caused his name to dwell, in Jerusalem? And even if that very place had been dishonoured, was that a reason to return to the idolatry that had the audacity to adorn itself with the holy name of the Lord?

Did this urgent call not to be guilty touch the heart of Judah? The following chapter will answer that. And what will those in Christendom who receive the same call do today? Do not go to Gilgal and do not go up to Beth-Aven!

Chapters 5–6 v.3

No more hope for Judah and Benjamin. The people will find God again in the great tribulation. An urgent call to wake up.

Chapter 4:15 implored Judah not to make itself guilty. Perhaps there was still some hope on that side! Chapter 5 dispels that

hope. Judah and Benjamin are associated with the same apostasy and the same judgement as Israel.

(v. 1.) — Here the prophet addresses first the priests, then calls the attention of the whole nation and especially the king's house, which, I have no doubt, is the kingship of Judah, that of Israel having already been condemned in advance. 'It is against you,' adds the prophet, 'that the judgement is; for you have been a snare at Mizpah, and a net spread out on Tabor.' The people's gathering place, Mizpah (*), and Mount Tabor, the central mountain overlooking the territory of the ten tribes, had become snares for the people, as the priesthood had lent itself to the idolatrous practices carried out in those places. It was therefore the priesthood that the judgement was to strike first. The most guilty are those whose position brings them most directly into contact with God; they will be struck with the heaviest blows. As for Ephraim and Israel, their condition is not hidden from the God who knows them (v. 3), yet they do not know the Lord! What a crushing word! This people to whom God had revealed Himself, whom He had brought into fellowship with Himself, to whom He had made known His name and

His character as the Holy God—this people had preferred fornication and defilement to the intimacy of fellowship with God Himself. In the midst of their depravity, pride filled their hearts! ‘The pride of Israel testifies against him!’ (v. 5). What a picture of mankind! Degraded to the utmost degree and puffed up with pride! Thus ‘Israel and Ephraim shall fall by their iniquity’, but Judah, exhorted not to be guilty (4:15), ‘shall also fall with them’ (v. 5). When judgement overtakes them, they will all seek the Lord with their sacrifices. What is still possible today will then be of no avail. All their religious practices will be in vain: ‘He has withdrawn from them!’ (v. 6). A word all the more solemn, as the same fate will befall professing Christianity when, on the day of judgement, it comes to claim the privileges that had been granted to it. Yes, all the religious forms of professing Christianity do not bring it into relationship with God: the forms are there, God is not.

(*) I assume that this Mizpah is the one situated within the territory of Benjamin (Josh. 18:26 — 1 Kings 15:22; 2 Chron. 16:6; Neh. 3:7) and not the Mizpah beyond the Jordan, which had long since been abandoned. There are, moreover, six different Mizpahs mentioned in Scripture. — It is noteworthy that, with

the exception of Tabor, all the names Gilgal, Bethel, Gibeah, Ramah and Mizpah mentioned in these passages are, or were once, included within the territory of Benjamin.

‘Now,’ says Hosea, ‘a month shall devour them and their possessions’ (v. 7); perhaps an allusion to the end of the reign of Judah (2 Kings 25:3, 8).

Verses 8–12 describe the shared ruin of the entire people. It matters not whether judgement is imminent for some more than for others; it will overtake them all—Ephraim along with the nine tribes, Judah along with Benjamin. ‘Blow the horn at Gibeah, the trumpet at Ramah. Cry out at Beth-Aven: “Behind you, Benjamin!”’ All these places were part of, or had belonged to, the territory of Benjamin. Evil was about to overtake him and seize him unawares; the princes of Judah and Ephraim would suffer the same fate. Faced with the imminent danger, common to all, ‘Ephraim went to Assyria and sent to King Jareb, but he could not heal you and did not remove your wound’ (v. 13). This Jareb is not a proper name. It means: ‘He will contend’. He is an avenger whom Israel calls upon for help. He is Pul (2 Kings 15:19); or Tiglath-Pileser when it

comes to Judah (2 Kings 16:7). This Pul contends against Israel, or is hostile to it, at the very time when Israel takes him as a protector (see also 1 Chron. 5:26; see also Hosea 5:13; 7:11; 8:9).

But this chapter, like the first three, ends with a word of hope. The Lord will not forever be like a lion tearing its prey, as regards Ephraim and Judah. ‘I will go away,’ he says, ‘and return to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face’ (v. 15). Two inseparable things are necessary, whether it be to find God as a sinner, or to find him again when one has turned away from him: repentance and conversion. In the past they had thought they could meet God with their sheep and their oxen (v. 6), but without repentance they found only a desolate place. Later they ‘will acknowledge their guilt’, and Zechariah presents us with a moving picture of this (Zech. 12:10–14). Then, with a contrite heart, the people—finally humbled, stripped of their pride—will be converted and seek the face of the Lord. The prodigal son will rise and go to his father.

‘In their distress they will seek me early in the morning’ (v. 15). By what means will God bring about this blessed result? A great tribulation, the distress of Jacob, will come upon them; they will have to pass through the long night of God’s terrible judgments. Awoken by these judgments, instead of sleeping like the rest, they will wait for their Messiah, the Lord, ‘more than watchmen wait for the morning’, and will find him at the dawn of that millennial reign when a restored Israel will once again be: Ammi, the people of God.

The first three verses of chapter 6 are a continuation of the last verse of chapter 5. For a long time I believed they were to be put into the mouths of the people, but the structure of all these chapters has since convinced me that they are spoken by the prophet, and are for the moment merely an invitation to which the people do not respond. ‘Come,’ he says, ‘let us return to the Lord, for he has torn us to pieces and he will heal us; he has struck us and he will bind up our wounds.’ O marvellous call of grace, to these souls bowed down under the pain of tribulation and from whom God has taken away all resources. There is no mountain to which the poor bird, threatened by the fowler’s ar-

rows, can fly. That refuge, at least, would have offered some stability; it is gone. God hides his face, and the soul is terrified (Ps. 11:1; 30:7). There is no resource left but in Him; let us return to Him! Like a lion He has torn the kingdom apart because of our sins; He has struck us justly. Who can mend, bind up, and heal the wounds, if not the One who inflicted them? Here we sense the depth of humiliation, as only a man of God could feel it, yet with faith to sustain him. Faith alone, in such circumstances, drives us to draw near to God. But what a response it finds! Is it not good to have been afflicted in order to find such deliverance? ‘Before I was afflicted I went astray’ (Ps. 119:67).

The matter is expressed here only as a hope, but a hope realised by the prophet as a certainty: ‘In two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his presence; we shall know and seek to know the Lord’ (vv. 2, 3). Just as surely as God raised their Messiah from the dead—for I have no doubt that this passage alludes to the resurrection of Christ—so God will also raise up his people. This undoubtedly refers to their national resurrection, as described in chapter 37

of Ezekiel, which explains the two days needed to revive them and the third to set them on their feet. Likewise, in Ezekiel, the bones did not ‘stand on their feet’ by the power of the Holy Spirit until they had first been brought to life (Ezek. 37:10). This national resurrection, like our bodily resurrection as Christians, is therefore linked to that of Christ. If the waves and floods of judgement have passed over the Messiah, they will also pass over the Remnant of Israel, who will emerge from them just as Christ emerged, in resurrection. The third day is the day on which, according to the Spirit of holiness, God intervened in power to raise Jesus from the dead. This is to which the whole Old Testament bears witness. ‘Christ,’ says the apostle, ‘was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures’ (1 Cor. 15:4). Indeed, the Scriptures show us Isaac under the sentence of death until the third day, when he was raised up as a type. Jonah, a type of Christ, but also of the Remnant, cast into the sea whilst the ship of the nations continues on its course, swallowed up in Sheol, is cast back onto the land on the third day. Everywhere the resurrection of Christ is proclaimed as the necessary consequence of his death. In Psalm 16 he sees

no corruption and knows the way of life. In Psalm 110, he ascends in resurrection to the right hand of God, after the wicked man had put him to death in Psalm 109 (v. 16). In Psalm 8, he is crowned with glory and honour after having been made, through the suffering of death, a little lower than the angels. He went through all this for his heavenly people, but also for his earthly people. When, in Psalm 42, all the waves and floods of the Lord have passed over the soul of Christ and that of the Remnant, the latter can say: ‘He is the salvation of my face and my God!’

But there is more here than a national resurrection. The prophet says: ‘We shall live before his face, and we shall know, and we shall seek to know the Lord’ (vv. 2, 3). A spiritual resurrection is the fruit of grace, accompanying the new covenant made with Israel. It is the dawn of the millennial day. ‘His going forth is prepared like the dawn; and he will come to us like the rain, like the latter rain that waters the earth’ (v. 3). It will no longer be, as at Pentecost, the rain that accompanies the sowing, but the rain that precedes the blessed harvest of the age to

come. A new outpouring of the Holy Spirit will be the portion of this restored people.

This passage, dictated by the Spirit of God, is capable of imparting to the soul of Israel, but also to our own, something of its delightful freshness; for it speaks to us of Christ, of his death and resurrection, sure pledges of Israel's future and of our eternal share with the Lord!

Chapters 6:4 to 7

The debate intensifies and becomes more urgent.

As in the previous chapter, Ephraim and Judah are united here in the same condemnation: 'What shall I do with you, Ephraim? What shall I do with you, Judah? Your piety is like the morning cloud and like the dew that vanishes early' (v. 4). What shall I do with you? How this speaks to the conscience! Answer for yourself. Will you say: 'Your judgement is just'? Their piety had lasted only in the very earliest hours of their existence as a nation, then had vanished and disappeared like the dew at sunrise.

Having addressed the people of Israel, God extends his call to all mankind: ‘And my judgement goes forth like the light. For I have loved kindness (or grace), and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings; but they, like Adam, have transgressed the covenant; there they have acted treacherously towards me’ (v. 5–7). If his grace goes forth ‘like the dawn of day’ (v. 3), his judgement goes forth like the sun when it shines in its strength (v. 5). Certainly it is not God who desires judgement; it is the iniquity of his people that compels him to it. God desires goodness in man, not sacrifices. But his desire would remain unfulfilled if it depended on what man can offer. Where is goodness to be found in the heart of a man? Therefore, God does not confine himself to this requirement. He desires what is found in his own heart: goodness in the form of grace and mercy. The goodness He loves is grace towards the sinner, the grace that came through Jesus Christ. When God’s eyes rested upon this man, He could say: ‘I have loved goodness’. This goodness went as far as sacrifice, the only sacrifice God could accept, for He took no pleasure in any of the sacrifices of men (Ps. 40:6, 7). Thus the Lord could say: ‘For

this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life’ (John 10:17). The Lord quotes this passage from verse 6 twice in the Gospel of Matthew (9:13; 12:7): the first time to show that nothing can satisfy the Lord but his own grace; the second time to show that he cannot in any way rely on the goodness in the heart of man.

Likewise, all the burnt offerings that man could offer were not worth ‘the knowledge of God’ (v. 6). God has made himself known to us in the person and work of his Son. This is grace, salvation, eternal life. ‘But they, like Adam, have broken the covenant; there they have acted treacherously towards me’ (v. 7). Instead of beginning with the knowledge of grace, Judah and Ephraim had been put to the test under the covenant of the law, for they had to learn what was in their own hearts. In the beginning, Adam, placed, like Israel, under his own responsibility, had broken a covenant that had been imposed upon him; had Israel acted any better when God imposed the covenant of Sinai upon them? No, says the Lord, “there they acted treacherously towards me!”

In verses 8–10, the prophet returns to Ephraim. This back-and-forth between the two is deeply moving, revealing the anguish, the concern for Israel, and the indignation of the faithful prophet who sees his God so despised. ‘Gilead is a city of evil-doers, stained with blood. And just as bands of robbers lie in wait for a man, so the band of priests murders on the road to Shechem; for they commit abominations. I have seen horrible things in the house of Israel: there is the prostitution of Ephraim!’

A dreadful thing! Even the cities of refuge themselves—Gilead (or, I believe, Ramoth-gilead) beyond the Jordan, and Shechem in Ephraim, assigned to the Levites—had become places of banditry. The priests themselves were murdering those who went to Shechem, no doubt under the pretext of being avengers of blood. They were plundering the innocent, cloaking their murders in the mantle of the law! It was in the territory of Ephraim, leader of the ten tribes, that the worst atrocities were being committed! But now the prophet, as was his custom, moves without any transition from Israel to Judah, to whom he had just said: ‘What shall I do to you, Judah?’ and casts a compas-

sionate glance upon him: ‘For you too, Judah, a harvest is appointed, when I restore the captives of my people’ (v. 11). Does it not seem that the Lord ought to say: ‘For you too, Judah, judgement will take place’? No! ‘God loves kindness’; and turns away from judgement to consider what will follow it. Undoubtedly, Judah will go into captivity like Ephraim, but this captivity will come to an end. Here we find the phrase so often used in the prophets, translated literally: ‘I will turn the captivity’, that is to say, I will bring it to an end to bring about the restoration of my people. It is like a foretaste of the Gospel: God announces his grace to guilty Judah. ‘A harvest is appointed for you’, not that terrible harvest where the Son of Man will bring his sharp sickle upon the earth to reap it (Rev. 14:16), but a joyful harvest, belonging to Judah, to the captives of Zion, when they will say: ‘O Lord, restore our captives like streams in the south’, and they will be answered: ‘Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy’ (Ps. 126:4, 5).

What a heart our God has! He never finds rest in His judgments. No sooner has He announced the calamities that will befall the wicked people and the inhabitants of the earth, than He

pauses and finds His rest in the outpouring of His grace! Leaving the raven of the flood to feast on some corpse tossed about by the waves, the dove flies to his ark, to his place of rest, carrying in its beak the emblem of the peace that will follow the shipwreck!

In chapter 7, the images of the avenging prophet become increasingly turbulent in their fitful nature, like a jet of water rushing to escape the narrow spout of a fountain. Once again, the focus is on Ephraim. For judgement is at the door. There is not a moment to lose if one is to escape it! ‘When I sought to heal Israel, the iniquity of Ephraim was revealed, and the wickedness of Samaria; for they have practised deceit, and the thief breaks in, and the band of robbers attacks from without. And they did not say in their hearts, “I remember all their wickedness.” Now their misdeeds surround them; they are before my face” (vv. 1, 2). Ephraim had been a band of thieves and robbers (6:9); now the thief was entering his house and the robbers were attacking him from outside. Syria, Egypt, Assyria were about to fall, were already falling, upon the guilty nation. It stood before God’s face with its misdeeds, and to think that it

might have stood there with its repentance (6:2) to obtain deliverance and salvation!

As we have said, the images come thick and fast, merging together; it is indignation against evil, but it is also a final appeal to Ephraim.

‘They all commit adultery, like an oven lit by the baker, who ceases to stoke it from the moment he begins to knead the dough until it has risen’ (v. 4). Here he speaks of the religion of the ten tribes, of the mingling of idolatry with the worship of the Lord. Those who lead them are fully aware of what they are doing and do it with care. They put the leaven into the dough and knead it until it has risen. This is an image similar to that in Matt. 13:33, where the Lord describes the doctrinal evil introduced into Christianity. Next, this leavened bread must be baked to perfection so that it becomes acceptable food. Those who apply themselves to this task carefully avoid the overheated oven; they think they can escape judgement by still maintaining the ‘form of godliness’; like the baker, they cease

to stoke the fire so that their bread may come out of the oven and find many consumers.

But religious corruption breeds moral corruption, leads to mockery of sacred things, and culminates in violence. ‘On the day of our King, the princes made themselves sick with the heat of wine; he stretched out his hand to the mockers. For they set their hearts like an oven to their snares: all night long their baker sleeps; in the morning, it burns like a blazing fire’ (vv. 5, 6). Here the oven is a metaphor for their own hearts. Their baker, their conscience, has slept all night. In the morning, when they reach the goal of their desires and lusts, the fire, whose flames have grown whilst they slept, devours them without their being able to escape.

‘They are all hot as an oven, and they devour their judges: all their kings have fallen; none of them calls upon me’ (v. 7). Here it is they themselves who, like an oven, devour their judges and their kings. This literally happened to Ephraim and marks the date of this prophecy against the kings who, from Zechariah, the last of the line of Jehu, succeeded one another

up to King Hoshea on the throne of Israel. We read the details of this period in 2 Kings 15:10, 14, 25, 30; 17:1.

‘Ephraim has mingled with the nations; Ephraim is a cake that has not been turned. Foreigners have devoured his strength, and he does not know it’ (vv. 8, 9). Here the image of leavened dough continues to haunt the prophet. Ephraim should have been an unleavened cake for the Lord; mixed with the leaven of the nations, he allied himself with Egypt and Assyria. But these nations have become the oven that has consumed Ephraim, this cake ‘that has not been turned over’, which has not repented, whose attitude towards God has not changed. So all its strength has vanished, has been consumed, and it does not know it!

A serious word! Like Ephraim, does today’s Christianity—mixed with the leaven of the world that has caused the whole dough to rise—know any better? Has it turned back to God? It thinks it is improving the world, proclaims that good company will improve bad morals, and does not realise that it is the world that is devouring it. Whether one boasts of being Protest-

ant or Catholic, or of belonging to one of the countless sects of Christendom, this mindset betrays a complete ignorance of the weakness into which our alliance with the world plunges us: ‘He does not know it,’ says the prophet. ‘Grey hairs are also strewn upon him, and he does not know it!’ (v. 9). Decline has come; the grey hairs strewn upon Ephraim are also strewn upon Christianity today. Its old age is already leaning towards the grave, and it does not know it! This ignorance of their own condition ought to convict the consciences of those to whom God has revealed Himself! Are we like the prophet, whose heart was weighed down by this ignorance? And what is even worse is that it is mixed with pride. “The pride of Israel testifies against him, and they do not turn to the Lord their God, nor do they seek him despite all this” (v. 10). We think so little of God that we still hold our religion in high regard even as the fire of judgement is already prepared. If the heart turns to God, it quickly abandons its religious pride to draw near to Him, humble and repentant—the only fitting attitude for one who is convicted of sin.

But pride goes hand in hand with foolishness. ‘Ephraim has become like a foolish dove, without understanding; they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria.’ The kings of Ephraim fancied themselves to be shrewd politicians by leaning alternately on one or the other of these enemy nations. ‘The net has fallen upon them.’ This came to pass literally under Hoshea, the last king of Israel, and under his predecessors (2 Kings 17:4; 15:19, 20).

We see, in verses 13 to 16, what God’s care for Israel had been and what His purpose was towards them. ‘And I wanted to redeem them.’ Such is always, at all times, His first thought towards man, who through sin has become a slave to Satan. Then, because of their wickedness, He was compelled to chastise them; subsequently, slowing the course of His judgments, He ‘strengthened their arms’, and they used His favour to ‘devise evil against Him’ (v. 15). Here, in a few words, is an account of what God encountered in this stubborn people: They had fled far from Him, had rebelled, had uttered lies against Him; they howled in pain on their beds and did not think to cry out to God and implore Him; their material interests brought them together (a characteristic of all human associations), but

they felt no need whatsoever to draw near to Him: ‘They have withdrawn from me’. Instead of returning to the Most High, they turned like a treacherous bow to fight against Him. However much God searched their hearts to find or, through His grace, produce some fruit there, He met on every side with indifference, falsehood, rebellion and open warfare.

Thus (v. 16) their ruin and that of their insolent princes was inevitable. They had turned to Egypt and were becoming ‘a laughing stock’ to it. Those who once knew God and walked, perhaps for a long time, in His ways and under His law, always meet with the world’s contempt when, having become unfaithful to their former beliefs, they have sought its friendship. The world, instead of welcoming them favourably, mocks them, in proportion to how remarkable their witness had previously been. They have forsaken God and his people, as Ephraim did, yet without finding the esteem of the world, which turns them to mockery. A bow that fails is cast aside; the world does not want it, and can God desire it?

Chapters 8 to 10

They have sown the wind, they reap the whirlwind.

CHAPTER 8

In chapter 8, Israel, or the ten tribes, is regarded as acting in the manner of the nations: ‘They have set up kings, but not by me; they have appointed princes, and I knew nothing of it’ (v. 4). This is, in fact, what happened, and what is confirmed, as we have seen, by the first verse of chapter 1. From Jeroboam II, king of Israel, Hosea deliberately ignores all the kings who succeeded him. Their history (2 Kings 15–17) shows that the Lord no longer recognises them, and how could the prophet recognise them? These kings were established neither by royal descent, as in Judah, nor by God’s direct command, as with the descendants of Jehu: rebellion and murder brought them to power or caused them to fall. Moreover, Israel, with its silver and gold, had made idols, and this act called for punishment and vengeance: ‘My anger has flared up against them’ (v. 5). Thus the Assyrian would swoop down upon the ten tribes like a vulture. In his talons they will cry out: ‘My God, we know you,

we, Israel!’ This knowledge, which was compatible with the calves of Bethel and Dan, will be of no use to them (vv. 1, 2). It will be the same in the future tribulation of the people. They will say: ‘We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.’ And he will say: ‘I tell you, I do not know you, nor do I know where you are from; depart from me, all you workers of iniquity’ (Luke 13:26, 27). It will be the same, too, when professing Christians, lifeless and without the Spirit, come knocking at the door and say: ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But in reply, he will say: ‘Truly, I do not know you’ (Matt. 25:11, 12). — Indeed, despite its cry: ‘We know you’, Israel was without God. Well then! Even its idol rejected it: ‘Your calf has rejected you, Samaria’, since the Assyrians were sweeping victoriously over it; and, in turn, that very idol would be smashed to pieces (v. 6). How grave it is, when one has received the revelation of the true God, to turn away from Him! ‘Those who sow the wind reap the whirlwind.’ Such was the fate of this poor people under the prophet Hosea, but this remains true at all times. Christianity enjoys immense privileges. As in days of old with Israel, the oracles of God have been entrusted to it, and the

Spirit of God interprets them within it. It does far worse than ‘breaking the covenant and rebelling against the law’ (v. 1), for it rejects God’s promises and despises His grace. What will it reap, if not judgement without remission, unless it repents?

Judgement by the Assyrian falls ‘upon the house of the Lord’ (v. 1). This is how the prophet refers to the ten tribes, and we see what this house had become. Like Christianity today, Israel was a great house where all manner of iniquities had taken up residence.

As we have seen, in the prophet Hosea, one image gives rise to another. It is not the broad and majestic river of Isaiah, who prophesied at the same time as him, but a rushing torrent that surges forth, bubbling under the impulse of the prophetic Spirit. Just as he speaks of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind, the very image of the harvest compels him to ask whether there is any fruit for God in Ephraim: ‘It has not a stalk of grain; even if it were to sprout, it would not yield flour; and even if it did, strangers would devour it’ (v. 7). No fruit! Nothing that sprouts, giving any hope for the future! Nothing

that can serve as food! What Israel might produce is devoured by the nations in whom it trusts. Now, with the food exhausted, it remains among the nations like an empty vessel that is of no use to anyone!

(vv. 9, 10.) — Since Ephraim had no trust in God, its particular sin was to have sought the support of the Assyrians. Later, Hezekiah showed that Judah was not guilty of Ephraim's sin. Hosea alludes to Menahem, king of Israel, who, in the time of Azariah, had given a thousand talents of silver to Pul, king of Assyria, 'that his hand might be with him, to strengthen the kingdom in his hand' (2 Kings 15:19); but, says the prophet, 'now I will gather them together, and they shall begin to be diminished under the burden of the King of princes' (v. 10).

However, idolatry (vv. 11–14) was Ephraim's chief sin, and as punishment for this, 'they would return to Egypt' (v. 13). It should be noted here that 'returning to Egypt' is presented as a moral matter and not as a physical return to Egypt. Israel had sought the support of that country; it would fall back into the bondage from which the people had once been delivered. The

same is true in chapter 9:3: ‘Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and eat what is unclean in Assyria’. The return to Egypt is nothing other than captivity under the yoke of the Assyrians, brought about by the search for help from Egypt. Hosea, as we have seen, is accustomed to such jarring images and abrupt transitions. The image leads to a new fact related to it. Thus, in chapter 9:6, we are told that ‘Egypt will gather them, and Moph will bury them’. This was the case with Judah, as we see in the prophet Jeremiah (chapters 41–44, chapter 46, verses 13–19), whilst Hosea tells us explicitly, in chapter 11:5, that Ephraim ‘shall not return to the land of Egypt, but the Assyrian shall be his king’. — The distinction between the fate of Israel and that of Judah is introduced in v. 14 of chapter 8: ‘But Israel has forgotten the One who made him; and he builds palaces, and Judah multiplies the fortified cities; but I will send a fire into their cities, and it shall devour their palaces’. This explains the apparent confusion found in chapter 9. Whilst constantly distinguishing between them, the prophet sometimes equates the two kingdoms in certain respects, such as in bringing God’s judgement upon them.

CHAPTER 9

Verses 1–4 of chapter 9 connect with verses 11–14 of the previous chapter. Everything that Israel, the ten tribes, and Ephraim, their representative and leader, had supposedly sacrificed to God, they had offered to themselves

‘Their bread is for themselves’ (v. 4). When they offered a sacrifice (8:13), they offered only meat to eat. The wheat and wine they grew for themselves would be taken from them (v. 2); instead, they would eat the unclean things of Assyria, the land of their captivity (v. 3). Everything they offered to the Lord would be defiled; God would not accept it, and they would defile themselves with the very product of their own defilement. It was a vicious circle, starting with themselves and returning to themselves; nothing but defilement, nothing for God. ‘Their bread would not enter’ as showbread ‘into the house of the Lord’ (v. 4). This principle is timeless. However fine the appearance of the religious works of sinful men may be, they do them to be pleased with themselves and not to please a God they do not know. It is defiled bread that has no access to the house of God.

From Ephraim, the prophet moves without transition to Judah (vv. 5–10). It was Judah, in fact, that fled to Egypt and found its tomb at Noph (Moph, Memphis), apart from a few survivors. The rest of the possessions that the Jews had taken with them were swallowed up in this disaster. Hosea foretells, concerning the deportation of Israel that took place shortly afterwards, the destruction of the remnants of Judah that occurred about a century and a half later. The evil was such that the prophet was as if seized by madness when he detailed the magnitude of the iniquity of God's people: 'The prophet is a fool, the inspired man is mad, because of the magnitude of your iniquity and the magnitude of your hostility' (v. 7), a passage to bear in mind when explaining the apparent inconsistency of the prophet Hosea. — Indeed, the evil was so great that he compares it to the 'days of Gibeah' (for in these verses he is on the territory of the two tribes), alluding to the crime of Benjamin (Judges 19), which had once necessitated its almost complete extermination.

In vv. 10–17, God speaks of his people as a whole, as God had beheld them in the wilderness: what beauty there was in that Is-

rael; what refreshment for God's heart, which found in them his joy and delight, 'like grapes in the wilderness!' We find, on the other hand, in Jer. 2:1–3, what were the feelings of Israel itself, drawn by first love in the footsteps of her husband and her shepherd. Alas! Soon the people had gone after Baal-Peor, the god of the daughters of Moab (v. 10; Num. 21).

With what sorrow does the prophet now return to Ephraim, his constant concern. God had seen him as a rich and flourishing city, a Tyre, surrounded by a marvellous countryside. What had become of him? Had he fared better than the whole people at Shittim? No; he had in no way met his husband's expectations.

Like a barren woman, it had never conceived, never borne fruit, never produced any offspring upon whom its husband's love might rest; 'no childbearing' for God! For Ephraim had sons of its prostitution, and, under God's judgement, it would be compelled to 'lead them out to the murderer', to that Jareb, the exterminator of Israel.

And once again (vv. 14–17), the prophet begins to address the nine tribes as a whole on the one hand, and Ephraim on the

other. Israel, no more than Ephraim, had produced nothing for God. He “gives them a womb that miscarries and withered breasts”; he strikes them with barrenness—his judgement upon them. “All their wickedness,” he says, “is at Gilgal,” the very place where the flesh had been cut away and where the reproach of Egypt had been rolled off the people. The flesh is revealed there in all its ugliness, defying God’s holiness; therefore they shall be ‘driven from his house; he will no longer love them!’ ‘All their princes are rebels. Ephraim has been struck down; their root has withered; they shall bear no fruit’ (v. 16); the final curse pronounced later by the Lord upon Judah, then upon mankind, upon the fruitless fig tree. ‘Let no one ever eat fruit from you again... And they saw the fig tree withered from the roots’ (Mark 11:14, 20). The only miracle of the Lord that is not a miracle of love is mentioned in these vengeful pages. In Ephraim, in mankind, there was no child-bearing (v. 11), but, ‘even if they bear children, God will cause the precious fruit of their womb to die’ (v. 16). The ten tribes will not multiply, and this remains the case to this day; they have vanished without a trace, whilst those of Judah (for this

chapter deals alternately with one and the other) ‘shall wander among the nations’ (v. 17), and so they remain.

CHAPTER 10

Chapter 10 continues, without interruption, the same subject. Verses 1–3 present what Israel was now, in contrast to what it had been in the beginning (9:10). ‘Israel is a fruitful vine; it bears fruit for itself.’ God had once taken delight in Israel as in grapes in the wilderness, though they had, no doubt, very quickly forsaken the living God for Baal-Peor (9:10); but here Israel (he is speaking in particular of the ten tribes) had become a spreading vine, beautiful in its growth, appearing to be full of strength, power and vitality, yet bearing no fruit for God. All its fruit it had borne for itself (cf. 9:4). Christianity presents the same spectacle as this spreading vine. It is shown to us in the figure of a great tree grown from a small seed, powerful enough to provide shelter for the birds of the air and shade for the beasts of the field, but where is its fruit for God? (Matthew 13:32). Ephraim had used all his material prosperity to multiply his altars. Planted in a pleasant countryside (9:13), to what end did he use ‘the beauty of his land? To make his idols beautiful!’

(v. 1). Therefore God, in his indignation, will tear down all this apparatus of idolatry, ‘and now’, at the very moment the prophet speaks, ‘they will say: we have no king’. We know, indeed, that before the reign of Hosea, their last king, a period of anarchy ensued, during which the guilty people, seeing themselves abandoned by God, said: ‘A king—what could he do for us?’ (v. 3).

(vv. 4–6.) — ‘They utter words, they swear falsely, and they make a covenant.’ This literally happened to their last king, Hosea. Whilst making a covenant with Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, to whom he swore a false oath, he treacherously sought the support of So, king of Egypt (2 Kings 17:4–6). A similar scene was repeated much later under Zedekiah, king of Judah, with regard to the king of Babylon (2 Chron. 36:13). — Thus judgement, like a ‘poisonous plant’, will grow in the furrows of his fields, destroying all hope of a harvest. Shallum took revenge for Hosea’s betrayal, marched against the ten tribes and laid siege to Samaria, their capital. What does the people of Samaria do in the face of the judgement falling upon them? They tremble ‘for their calf’, for the idol of Bethel, a

place which, in his indignation, the prophet calls Beth-Aven (as in 4:15; 5:8; 10:8), a house of vanity or iniquity. A Beth-Aven did, in fact, exist in the time of Joshua. Within the rather limited boundaries of Benjamin, it is mentioned as a desolate place not far from Bethel (Joshua 18:12, 13). But the prophet uses this term, which can also be translated as ‘house of idols’, to describe what Bethel, the house of God, had become. It was at Dan and Bethel that Jeroboam I had set up the golden calves (1 Kings 12:29). Bethel was now a veritable wasteland, a house of idols, a vanity, an abomination to the God who had made it his house and there solemnly confirmed his promises of grace to Jacob (Gen. 28:19; 35:15). The golden calf had its Camarim, its priests who trembled for it. As later, during the riot over the great Diana of the Ephesians, if the golden calf were to disappear, all hope of their gain would be destroyed. The monetary value of the idol also played a part in the people’s grief. Their treasure, the witness to their material prosperity, along with their god, was taken from them to be carried to Shalmaneser, the King Jareb of that day, the enemy of Ephraim.

‘Samaria is destroyed, its king has perished, like a straw on the surface of the waters; and the high places of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed. Thorns and briers shall grow upon their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall upon us!’” (vv. 7, 8). These verses correspond to 2 Kings 17:4–6. The prophet tells us that Hosea was to perish after being imprisoned and bound in chains by Shalmaneser. All this was near, yet still to come in the prophet’s day. The idolatry of Ephraim was to vanish from under the face of heaven; thorns and briers were to cover its altars, and Bethel was to become the wilderness of Beth-Aven once more. It is still so today.

However, as always, the prophecy does not stop at an immediate interpretation, but takes us forward to a future time, when, no longer as a result of idolatry, but after the rejection of Christ, judgement will come upon this guilty people. This is what the Lord announced to the daughters of Jerusalem as he made his way to Calvary: ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; but weep for yourselves and for your children; for behold, the days are coming when they will say: “Blessed

are the barren, and the wombs that have not borne, and the breasts that have not nursed” (cf. Hosea 9:11, 14). Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us’; for if they do these things to the green wood, what will be done to the dry wood?’ (Luke 23:28–31). Such will also be the cry of men, from kings to slaves, under the sixth seal of Revelation, when they hide from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:16, 17).

In verses 9 to 15, the prophet once again includes Judah with Israel in the same judgement. Gibeah, as we saw earlier (9:9), speaks of Benjamin’s sin, but the prophet emphasises that ‘the war against the sons of iniquity’ had not reached those in Israel at Gibeah who set themselves up as champions of justice (v. 9). Thus a time would come when God would punish those who had been the instruments of Benjamin’s punishment. Judah and the ten tribes would be ‘bound for their two iniquities’. Both, the prophet tells us, will be subjugated to the yoke of the nations: ‘Ephraim is a trained heifer, who loves to thresh grain; and I have passed over her fair neck: I will have Ephraim draw the cart; Judah shall plough, and Jacob shall harrow.’ They

shall be slaves, each in different circumstances and at different times, to bring forth and make the harvests of foreigners flourish!

Ah! Is it not yet time to sow in righteousness so as to reap in godliness, to break new ground, to begin life anew—the fruit of a new birth—and to seek the Lord? (v. 12). As soon as Israel follows this path, the Lord will come, like the rain, to bring justice to the ground thus prepared (cf. 6:3). But it is impossible for such a blessing to come about without repentance and conversion ‘that seeks the Lord’.

Why and for whom had Ephraim and Judah been labouring up to that point? ‘You have ploughed wickedness, reaped iniquity, eaten the fruit of lies’ (v. 13). Thus, as always in Hosea, the images give rise, so to speak, to the thoughts, and we see the ploughing signifying at once the yoke of the nations, the iniquity of the people, and the turning of the heart to the Lord.

But soon all the strongholds of Ephraim will be destroyed “as Shalman destroyed Beth-Arbel on the day of battle”, that is to say, as Shalmaneser, whose army laid siege to Samaria, un-

doubtedly destroyed, in a terrible manner, Beth-Arbel, one of those strongholds mentioned only in this passage.

Finally, this chapter ends with these prophetic words: ‘By the break of day, the king of Israel will have ceased to exist entirely’ (v. 15). With King Hoshea, the kingship over the ten tribes will come to an end, fade into nothingness, and will never be spoken of again.

PART THREE: CHAPTERS 11–13

Judgements mingled with hope.

Chapter 11:

The New Israel and Mercy After Judgements.

Chapters 11 to 13 are distinctive in that, like the first three chapters, they add to the discourse of chapters 4 to 10 words of comfort, glimmers of hope, allusions to a future Deliverer, the memory of past graces, and the hope of future deliverance. These chapters prepare the way for the final chapter, the full

restoration of Israel on the path of repentance. In all the preceding chapters, only one passage—and even that is presented as an exhortation in the prophet’s words (6:1–3)—could be likened to those we are about to encounter. Here, we have largely finished with the scenes of such fiery indignation, with the such unexpected images that we have often been forced to paraphrase the text, verse by verse, to make the meaning clear. In chapter 11 the storm is already receding, but has not ceased completely. Here and there a rumble of thunder, a flash of lightning, shows that all is not over. But already, from time to time, a ray of sunshine pierces the dark clouds; the wind no longer howls in unexpected gusts; a gentler breeze heralds that the new season is not far off.

(vv. 1–7.) — Having mentioned the total destruction of Ephraim and its king, the prophet returns to the past history of Israel and tells us how, in its youth, God took pleasure in it. He had adopted it, had called it out of Egypt to lead it into Canaan, just as He had called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans. God had done all this; Israel, in itself, had no other attraction for Him than its defenceless youth and the yoke of slavery that

weighed upon it. Of His own free will God had loved it and placed it in intimate relationship with Himself. Could there be greater intimacy than that of a son with his father? The prophet had already alluded, in chapter 9:10, to the value the Lord attached to the possession of Israel. What had the people made of all these privileges? They turned away when the prophets came to speak to them; and, most appallingly, ‘they sacrificed to the Baals and burnt incense to carved images’ (v. 2). This behaviour had not exhausted God’s patience. Taking into account the extreme youth of his people, as a tender father would do with a small child, he had taught them to walk (here we find Ephraim alone), had carried them in his arms, like a weary child—what love, what tender care! — but Ephraim had been completely unaware of all God’s care for them: ‘they did not know that I was healing them’. God still excused them. As they grew, His care for them grew too, and adapted to their age. Like an attentive guide to a traveller, God bound them with cords of love to draw them after Him. They were prevented from feeding freely by the yoke that weighed upon their jaws; how many times had God loosened the yoke to gently give

them food! This whole picture of God's tenderness towards them is designed to touch the hearts and reach the consciences of His people. But it was all in vain. How often during their journey through the wilderness had their hearts turned back to Egypt; how often, since their entry into Canaan, had they looked towards that land of slavery when difficulties arose, the fruit of their unfaithfulness. In those days of decline, Ephraim had been particularly characterised by seeking help from Egypt, as we have seen in the preceding chapters and in its history. From now on, says the Lord, 'he shall not return to the land of Egypt, but the Assyrian shall be his king'. All his instincts and desires drew him there; he paid no heed to the fact that God had called him out of Egypt—but, says the prophet, he will not make that return and will be carried off to distant lands by the Assyrian who will rule over him. Judah's fate was different; rebelling against Jeremiah's word, he persisted in taking refuge in Egypt to flee the yoke of Babylon, and could not escape its destruction.

Such is the end of Ephraim's story, but, by infinite grace, it is not the end of God's story. We are told, in Matt. 2:15, that

Joseph took the infant Jesus and withdrew to Egypt, ‘so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Such was (who would have thought it?) the purpose of Hosea’s prophecy; it was fulfilled in this event. God had another, a second Israel, the object of his eternal counsels; this one was to glorify him and meet all the demands of his holiness, his justice and his love. The vine of Israel which the Lord had planted had produced for God only wild grapes (Isa. 5); the ‘branchy vine’ had borne fruit for itself (10:1). So its fences were broken down and the beasts of the field devoured it. But the Lord will look down from heaven and, in due course, visit this vine which his right hand had planted and this vineyard which he had strengthened for himself; that is to say, he will restore Israel. But how? ‘By laying his hand upon the man at his right hand, upon the son of man whom he has strengthened for himself’. Israel will be raised up and brought back into blessing by the true Son at God’s right hand (Ps. 80), by the true vine (John 15) who alone can bear the branches of Israel for the Lord. Yet the true vine does not wait for his future glory as Messiah to bear fruit for

God. He bears it now on earth, and all the branches from among the nations who are today in living communion with him here will form his heavenly Bride in glory, whilst Israel, united to its Messiah, will reappear in the millennial kingdom as the Lord's vine.

(vv. 8–11.) — In chapter 6:4, God had asked: 'What shall I do with you, Ephraim?', showing that there was no longer any judgement severe enough for him and for Judah. Here he cries out: 'What shall I do with you, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?' Christ, the true Israel, having been called out of Egypt, a way had been found to bring grace into play. Would God do to Israel what He had done to the kings of Canaan, the kings of Admah and Zeboiim, in the days of Abraham? (Gen. 14:2). No, he says, 'My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is stirred. I will not give full vent to my fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again; for I am God, and not a man—the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come in wrath' (vv. 8, 9). A day will come when his ways will change towards his people, when he will give free rein to his compassion; he is God, and wrath is not part of his Being, though he

was compelled to manifest his justice in judgement—but he is love. He is, no doubt, Holy in the midst of his people, and they must know this and experience it, but he is above all a God moved by compassion. Was not Jesus this very thing, he the Son of God called out of Egypt? Having come as God, as Immanuel, to Israel, was it to judge it? Was not his life, from beginning to end, a life of compassion? (Read Matt. 9:36; 14:14, 18, 27; 20:34; Mark 6:34; 9:22; Luke 10:33; 15:20). He came to reveal to this wretched people and to all mankind what was in his heart, in God's heart for them. Thus the apostle Paul, summarising all that he had just revealed concerning God's thoughts towards man, could say: 'I urge you, brothers, by the mercies of God' (Rom. 12:1). It was the coming of the Son at his right hand, the true Benjamin, firstborn though last-born, that opened the floodgates of God's compassion, whereas the holy God, in governing his people, after having opened the floodgates of his judgments, should have allowed them to run their course until they were exhausted.

What a change took place with the coming of Christ! The history of Israel began anew with Him, to the glory of God, whom

His former people had brought to shame. This new Israel, a young child, was the One of whom God had said: ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’ (Ps. 2). He called him out of Egypt, to bring him in as King in Canaan over his earthly people; He also called him out of Egypt, out of the world, to bring him, and all his redeemed with Him, into the delights of the heavenly Canaan!

Then, says the prophet, ‘they shall walk after the Lord’ (v. 10). The Lion of Judah need only let out his roar, and ‘the sons’ will rush to him from all sides. He will no longer roar against them, but against the nations that have enslaved them; they will trust in that roar. They will come from the West (Judah), from Assyria (Israel). They will flee Egypt at full speed, just as in days gone by when the Lord called them to come out of it.

Are we not right to say that such a chapter breathes compassion even more than judgement, the hope of Israel more than its destruction? For the little child, the second Adam, is about to appear, and already the prophet announces him in mysterious words!

The return of the ten tribes will take place only ‘after the glory’; the national return of Judah will take place beforehand, in unbelief, when the ‘swift ships’ bring this people back to Palestine, but ‘when their number is as the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved’ (Rom. 9:27). God will recognise as his people only those whom he has sealed, with Judah at the head, the tribe of the great King, and Benjamin in the rear guard, the tribe of the Son at his right hand (Rev. 7:5–8).

Chapter 12

Threats and Promises.

Chapter 11 dealt primarily with mercy towards the ten tribes and the introduction of the new Israel; Chapter 12 eventually turns to Judah and speaks of the restoration, in the last days, of the entire people. The prophet begins by contrasting the condition of Ephraim with that of Judah at the very moment his prophecy is uttered. ‘Ephraim surrounds me with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit; but Judah still walks with God and with the true saints’ (v. 1). This sentence is important for understanding the whole of Hosea’s prophecy. It has often been

translated as: ‘Judah is still unrestrained in regard to God and the true Saint’. This is not a matter of grammar, but of spiritual understanding, and for our part, we are convinced that the second version would rob this chapter of its true character. The thought that Judah ‘still walks with God’ corresponds strikingly to what is told to us in 2 Chron. 12:12 and 19:3. Whilst Ephraim, who had sown the wind (8:6), revelled in it, fed on vain hopes, and acted with deceit, seeking to win over these two irreconcilable enemies, Assyria and Egypt (v. 2), Judah still walked with his God. How long did this last? A little over a century, until the Babylonian captivity, but God was still holding back judgement in the days of Hosea. There were still true saints and the fear of God amidst Judah’s so manifest decline. God’s eyes rested with favour upon Uzziah, upon Jotham, upon Hezekiah and, later, upon Josiah, whose reign flourished after the deportation of the ten tribes. But would Judah persevere? What was the state of the people as a whole, even under these blessed reigns? The prophet, as well as history, tells us. ‘The Lord,’ we are told, ‘has a case against Judah, and He will pun-

ish Jacob according to his ways, and repay him according to his deeds' (v. 3) (*).

(*) As we said in the Introduction, Jacob here represents the whole people in relation to Judah, their leader, just as Israel represents the ten tribes in relation to their leader Ephraim.

But will Jacob return to God? Yes, for though from the very beginning he supplanted his brother by trickery, there will come a time when he will meet God and have to wrestle with Him. 'In the womb he seized his brother by the heel, and by his strength he wrestled with God; yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed: he wept and pleaded with him' (vv. 4, 5). He wrestled with God by his strength; then the angel touched the socket of his hip and he had to experience his weakness. Yet he prevailed. What, then, is the way to prevail in the struggle with God? Here it is: he wept and pleaded. Jacob must be the victor in order to inherit the blessing, and the way to overcome and obtain it is through repentance and prayer. Yet Jacob, though he might say, 'My life is saved' (Gen. 32:30), had not yet regained fellowship with God. The angel refuses to tell him his name, and the patriarch does not meet God until at Bethel: 'At Bethel

he found him’ (v. 5). The first time, whilst fleeing his father’s house, he had met the Lord at Bethel, but in a dream (Gen. 28:13–22). The second time, at Mahanaim (Gen. 32:24–32), he met him ‘face to face’, but without the angel revealing his name to him. A third time, finally, at Bethel, he truly found Him, after purifying himself and burying his idols (Gen. 35:11). — “There He spoke with us” (v. 5). When he rediscovered the presence of the Lord in his house at Bethel, Jacob entered into communion with Him, heard, understood, and delighted in His word. ‘And the Lord, the God of hosts—the Lord is his memorial’ (v. 6). His memorial is His very name, the Lord, as He revealed it to Israel (Exodus 3:15). Previously (Exodus 6:3), He had revealed Himself as the Almighty to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but when He reveals Himself to Israel through the mouth of Moses, His name: the Lord is “His name for ever, and that is His memorial from generation to generation”. Now, to restore this blessed relationship with God, Israel must turn to Him as the patriarch did: ‘And you, return to your God; keep faithfulness and justice, and wait for your God continually’ (v. 7).

In short, the meaning of this entire passage, which appears so enigmatic, is this: Israel can only restore its relationship with its God and communion with him through a sense of its own powerlessness, through humiliation and repentance, by abandoning its idols to seek the face of its God. It is through true conversion that he will be able to ‘maintain piety’, to preserve these blessed relations with God, — ‘judgement’, — the discernment necessary to separate oneself from evil, — and finally ‘the continual waiting upon his God’, that is to say, dependence.

(vv. 8–15.) — Having dealt with the return, the humiliation and the repentance of Judah and of all the people, the prophet returns to Ephraim and does not leave him until the end of his prophecy. In the same abrupt style and without transitions, as always, he expresses God’s thoughts regarding the ten tribes: ‘He is a merchant; a false balance is in his hand; he loves to extort’ (v. 8). But this accusation does not strike a chord with Ephraim’s conscience; he says: ‘Yet I have grown rich, I have acquired wealth. In all my labour no iniquity has been found against me that is sin.’ What self-satisfaction with himself and

his work! What ignorance of his own heart! One cannot help but think of Laodicea, uttering the same words on the eve of being spewed out of the Lord's mouth: 'You say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"; and you do not know that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked' (Rev. 3:17). Thus the end of Christendom will be characterised by the same blindness as that of Israel. It is enough for Ephraim that a human investigation has found no reprehensible acts in him that would bring him under the sentence of the law. Not to mention the idols of which, astonishingly, he is unaware here. But does the world of today know its idols? Now, as then, the thought of a God who searches out man and knows him is completely ignored. And as for Israel, Jacob's customary deceit still characterises it.

In the face of such a hardening of conscience, the Lord will surely turn His back on this wretched people for good! It is precisely because we expect this that we are taken aback to hear the Lord speak thus in v. 10: 'And I, the Lord your God, from the land of Egypt, will make you dwell in tents again, as in the days of the solemn feast.' What unexpected grace! There shall

be for you, wretched Ephraim, a glorious rest after the crossing of the wilderness into which I shall drive you once more. There will be for you a Feast of Tabernacles following the harvest and the grape-gathering. Though you have forgotten me, I have not forgotten that, from the very redemption wrought on your behalf when I brought you out of Egypt, I had the intention of letting you celebrate this final rest.

Immediately God resumes the course of bitter reproaches (vv. 11–15). Had Ephraim ever listened to Him who spoke to him through the inspiration of the prophets, through their visions and parables? No, he had offered sacrifices that God could not accept, so their altars would be like heaps of stones in the furrows of the fields! Judgement had already fallen upon Gilead, the two and a half tribes beyond the Jordan (2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chron. 5:26), but what would it be like when it fell upon Ephraim?

(v. 12). O Ephraim, do you not wish to revisit the story of Jacob, the story of Israel? Is it not a vision and a prophetic parable addressed to you? Did Jacob not have to flee to the plain

of Syria because he had deceived his brother? Was Jacob not held in bondage, and did that bondage not continue until his union with the woman he loved? Yet Israel was delivered at the end of its long captivity: ‘Through a prophet (Moses), the Lord brought Israel up out of Egypt’; by that same prophet ‘he was kept’ until the end of the days in the wilderness. So it shall be with Israel: The word of God (the spirit of prophecy, the testimony of Jesus, Rev. 19:10; 22:7), a word they despised when the Lord multiplied His prophets for them, this word will bring them back in the end. But as for Ephraim (v. 15), for the moment God’s wrath remains upon him.

Thus threats, supplications, judgments, hopes and promises are interwoven in this marvellous prophecy. Ah! If only, today, Christendom would listen! Its fate will be far more terrible than that of Israel, for Israel will be restored, and Christendom, having become the great Babylon, will be destroyed forever!

Chapter 13

Final Outbursts. Dawn of Deliverance.

In chapter 13, the storm raised against unfaithful Ephraim makes its mighty voice heard once more. A final whirlwind of wrath seems to shatter everything in its path. Then there is a great silence, the silence of death. Then, from the very bosom of death, a liberating voice rises (v. 14). One last gust of wind from the East, a clamour of terror and carnage. The destruction of Ephraim is complete (vv. 15, 16). Then at last comes the hour of awakening under the glorious reign of the Messiah (chap. 14).

(v. 1) — ‘When Ephraim spoke, it was a terror; he rose up in Israel: but he made himself guilty through Baal, and died.’

The prophet continues to describe Ephraim’s condition. This tribe had authority from God, a prominent place in Israel. It had lost everything through the idolatry of Baal and the calves of Bethel. What will be its fate? What will remain of it? “They shall be like the morning cloud and like the early dew that van-

ishes, like chaff driven by the whirlwind from the threshing floor, and like smoke rising through the lattice” (v. 3). Seek Ephraim; where will you find it? It is as futile as trying to find the morning cloud, the dew, or the smoke. Such is the state of the ten tribes to this very day!

In v. 4, the Lord returns to the past testimonies of his grace (note how many times since he ‘called his Son out of Egypt’ in chapter 11:1); he returns, I say, to what he was for Israel from the land of Egypt. ‘And I am the Lord your God, from the land of Egypt; and you have known no other God but me, and there is no Saviour apart from me. I knew you in the wilderness, in a barren land’ (vv. 4, 5). Ah! How far gone are the days when the bride followed her husband into the wilderness, when the Shepherd of Israel fed and watered his sheep there, so that each might say: ‘I shall lack nothing’! But Ephraim had become arrogant, so that the Lord had to roar against him like a devouring lion, instead of roaring in his favour (cf. 11:10), as he will do in the end. A terrible fate! Ephraim was to be attacked, devoured by all the wild beasts, symbols of the hostile and merciless nations that rose up against this people. ‘I will be like a

lion to them; like a leopard, I will lie in wait for them on the path. I will attack them like a bear robbed of her cubs; I will tear open their hearts, and I will devour them there, like a lioness; the beasts of the field will tear them to pieces!’ (vv. 7, 8).

What folly it is to be an enemy of God, the only One who can save us! Is this not the condition of people today, just as it was of people in those days? We prefer to be sated with the goods of this world, as it says here (v. 6), rather than turn to the Saviour. But however much we try to delude ourselves, if we are not for Him, we are against Him. If we are for the world and for the things that are in the world, we are enemies of God. Is it not the fatal delusion of the professing Christian to think they can be a friend of both the world and God at the same time? May souls take heed, lest they find God like a lion in their path! There is no Saviour but Him, and Israel had been ‘against Him, against His help’ (v. 9). And when at last judgement drew near, they sought salvation by leaning on the arm of the flesh. ‘Where then is your king, that he may save you in all your cities? Where are your judges, of whom you said, “Give me a king and princes”?’ The Lord reminds the ten tribes of what the

kings and princes they had asked for had been, for this is not a reference to Saul, as I once thought, much less to David and Solomon, nor even to Jeroboam I, raised up by God in judgement against Judah. ‘I gave you a king in my anger,’ says God to Ephraim, ‘and I took him away in my wrath’ (v. 11). The whole prophecy of Hosea directs our thoughts to Jehu, the executor of God’s wrath against the house of Ahab, and to his last successor, Zechariah, who met a violent death after six months of reign. As we saw in the first chapter, God takes no account of Zechariah’s successors; yet the words, ‘I took him away in my fury’, apply to almost all of them, for right down to the last, Hosea, they all die a violent death.

(vv. 12, 13.) — ‘Ephraim’s iniquity is bound up; his sin is stored up. The pangs of a woman in labour shall come upon him. He is a foolish son, for at the time of the children’s birth he was not there.’ When the Assyrian had come before Jerusalem, the godly Hezekiah had turned to the prophet Isaiah, saying to him: ‘This day is a day of distress, and of chastisement, and of reproach; for the children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth... ‘Therefore,

offer a prayer for the remnant that is left’ (Isa. 37:3, 4), and God had answered the king of Judah—whilst the sin of Ephraim was held in reserve.

But now, despite all that the Lord was about to do against Ephraim, He announces, without any transition as always: ‘I will deliver them from the hand of Sheol; I will redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Repentance is hidden from my eyes’ (v. 14). Yes, although Ephraim did not repent, the Lord intended to accomplish His work of deliverance for them. This is another allusion to Christ’s liberating work, as we have already seen in chapter 6:2. God will accomplish this work for the earthly deliverance of Israel, by virtue of the death and resurrection of the Saviour. Then what is foretold in Isaiah 25:8 will come to pass: ‘He will swallow up death in victory... and will wipe away the reproach of his people from the whole earth’.

But this work, accomplished for the earthly deliverance of Israel, will be accomplished for us, Christians, on a far vaster scale. The resurrection of Christ is the prelude to the resurrec-

tion of the sleeping saints and the transformation of the living saints. This deliverance of the saints and the Church has heaven in view, and not the earth. Then, too, will this marvellous promise be fulfilled for us, in an absolute and definitive manner: ‘Death will be swallowed up in victory.’ It will be so for ever, before being abolished for all time. Until that moment, death has an apparent victory over the redeemed, since, as regards their bodies, they may die and be laid in the grave. One man, Christ, is now and forever beyond its power, for he has conquered it through his resurrection. And we already have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is given to us and belongs to us, having been given to the second Adam, the head of God’s family, and consequently to all who are part of that family (1 Cor. 15:54–57). In this passage, death is likened to a scorpion whose sting, sin, introduces its destructive principle into man. The power of the sting, of sin, is the law; its venom makes death a torment for man, showing him the fate he deserves and the impossibility of escaping it. This deliverance from death and all that accompanies it, we possess in Christ.

Thus the future deliverance of Israel has, like ours, the same origin: a risen Christ. It will bring that people into a land cleansed of sin; but we, as Christians, into heaven, delivered forever from the presence of sin and death.

In verses 15 and 16, the prophet returns to the present judgment of Ephraim. It is the final rumble of thunder. Judah, which is not mentioned here, will suffer the same fate at the hand of Babylon as Ephraim did at the hand of the Assyrians. But the enemy who, in his atrocious hatred, has brought men down by the sword, crushed little children, and ripped open the wombs of pregnant women, will find his retribution after having been God's rod against Israel and against Judah. This passage may be compared with the prophetic word concerning Edom, placed in the mouth of the Remnant of Judah who hung their harps upon the willows of Babylon: 'O daughter of Babylon, who is to be destroyed, blessed is he who repays you as you have done to us! Blessed is he who seizes your little children and dashes them against the rocks!' (Ps. 137:8,9).

PART FOUR: Chapter 14

Repentance and Restoration of Israel.

In this chapter we witness the happy outcome of all God's dealings with His people. The torrent of reproaches has dried up, the voice of judgement has fallen silent; the call to repentance finally finds an echo in the heart of Israel. On the day when the prophet exhorted them to repentance and conversion and announced to them the blessings that would result (6:1–3), they had paid no heed. Now that their distress had reached its height (cf. 5:15), their ears were at last open to hear the voice of the Lord: 'Israel, return to the Lord your God, for you have fallen because of your iniquity. Take words with you, and return to the Lord; say to him: "Forgive all iniquity, and accept what is good, and we will offer you the sacrifices of our lips"' (vv. 1, 2).

Israel returns; it brings words which we so often find expressed in the Psalms (Ps. 103:2; 130:3; Ps. 51:1–17; 69:30, etc.), and which now flow from mouths without deceit. Complete forgiveness, forgiveness of all iniquity—this is what the heart,

convinced of sin and drawn by grace, asks for. God can ‘accept what is good’, that which is according to Him and His thoughts: the repentance of a people who come to Him confessing their sins. Thus the Lord associated Himself with ‘the excellent of the earth’ who came to the baptism of repentance. But in receiving them thus, God accepted what was good, a state in which sin no longer had any part, the fruit of Christ’s atoning work, accomplished on the cross, and which God accepts as fully justifying us. If this is so, His people may sing His praise. For Israel, it is no longer a matter of the blood of bulls and goats, which can neither take away their sin nor make it acceptable to God, but of the ‘sacrifices (or bulls) of their lips’. The fruit of lips that bless his name, the sacrifice of praise, is the only offering to be presented to him henceforth, for the atoning sacrifice was offered once, and has satisfied the demands of divine holiness for ever.

‘Assyria will not save us; we will not ride on horses.’ Israel no longer seeks protection from a hostile world, nor does it rely on the power of nature to escape evil or to stand up to it. ‘We will no longer say, “Our God, the work of our hands”; for with you

the orphan finds mercy' (v. 3). How could the calves of Bethel still be the idols of the heart? Deprived of all support, of all human aid, this afflicted people, with no bond to bind them to God—this orphan, this Lo-Ammi and this Lo-Rukhama—met Him, and the treasures of His heart for those who had nothing: a Father instead of a judge, mercy instead of judgement. The past is gone; only love remains.

This entire passage is truly the work of grace in the heart, the story of every human soul, of every sinner, returning to God through repentance, whether in the present day, in days of old, or in a time to come.

Without delay (vv. 4–7), God shows what He will be to them when they have taken words with them to return to Him: 'I will heal their abandonment of me; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them. I will be to Israel like the dew; he shall blossom like the lily, and he shall put forth his roots like Lebanon' (vv. 4, 5). God will remove all the consequences of their turning away from Him and replace their misery with the blessings of a new life. He will be able to 'love

them freely'. This love had always existed in His heart, for it is the very essence of God, but had been hindered in its expression by their unfaithfulness, their hardness of heart, and the terrible judgments He had been compelled to inflict upon them. God will be to Israel like the dew, a heavenly refreshment whose source will be the blessed person of Christ. His people will flourish like the lily, the emblem of grace and beauty, the glorious adornment of the earth. 'He will put forth his roots like Lebanon'.

Note the role of Lebanon in this whole scene. It is the symbol of the stability of Christ's reign. Just as the majestic cedars that cover this mountain, so Israel will spread its roots so as never again to be cut down; so its shoots will spread and its descendants will occupy the earth. But its fragrance will also, like Lebanon, be perfectly pleasing to the King, her Beloved (Song 4:10, 11). At last their renown will be like the wine of Lebanon, a source of joy for the whole world, a joy founded on a reign established for ever (vv. 5, 6, 7). They will again, in this new scene, possess 'the splendour of the olive tree'. Grafted once more onto its own trunk, Israel will appear in the original

beauty of its kingship and priesthood (Zech. 4:3; Rev. 11:4); a symbol of peace for the renewed earth, just as the leaf brought by Noah's dove after the Flood (Gen. 8:11). Thus, 'people will return to dwell in its shade' (v. 7), and seek from it the protection offered to all. 'They will bring forth wheat and blossom like the vine.' There will be an abundance of fruit (cf. 2:22), and a new blossoming of the Messiah's vine, exuding the fragrance of renewal (*).

(*) Note the presence here of three trees, symbols of Israel, introduced in the millennial blessings. These are the cedar, the olive tree and the vine.

The cedar. Mount Lebanon is, as we have said, the symbol of the stability of Christ's reign; the cedars that cover it are a figure of Israel, once destroyed by the nations (Isa. 37:24) but now restored to its power and glory. This same Israel will form an integral part of the house of the Lord (see the temple and the house of Lebanon under Solomon).

The olive tree is a figure of the Remnant of Israel, grafted anew onto the trunk of the Promises, received by the election of

grace and restored after the fall of the nations. This Remnant will form the whole people under the sceptre of the Messiah, after the destruction of the apostate Jews.

The vine is the image of Israel restored by virtue of its vital union with Christ, the true vine; and capable, after having once been destroyed like a barren vine, of henceforth bearing fruit for God.

A notable detail: the fig tree, so often mentioned in Scripture as a symbol of the Jewish nation, is passed over here in silence, the final judgement having been pronounced upon this people: ‘May no fruit ever come from you again’ (Matt. 21:19). This does not prevent the fig tree from being, in the same way as the vine, an emblem of rest and millennial prosperity (Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10; 1 Kings 4:25).

Such will be the blessings that will last for a thousand years, brought about by Israel’s repentance.

Verse 8 presents us with a delightful exchange of thoughts between the Lord and Ephraim, the sort of conversation often

found in certain Psalms, which I have elsewhere called the Psalms of communion, and which reveals perfect harmony between the speakers.

‘Ephraim will say: “What further have I to do with idols?”’ Israel has found Christ, its Saviour and King; false gods no longer play any part, neither in its heart nor in its life. It is always so when the soul has found an object that has taken hold of it and to which it attaches greater value than to the wretched vanities of this world.

‘I,’ says the Lord, ‘will answer him and look upon him.’ He will be the God with whom Ephraim has to do, his true God. ‘I will grant,’ he says, ‘all his requests; I will shine upon him with the light of my face, according to his desire: “Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord!” (Ps. 4:6).

Under this gaze, Ephraim will say: ‘I am like a green cypress.’ The cypress, whose foliage never withers, grows in Lebanon alongside the cedar, and together with the latter forms the adornment of the temple of the Lord (1 Kings 5:8, 10; 6:15; 2 Chron. 2:8). Stability, unbroken witness, holiness, the incor-

ruptible adornment of the sanctuary, nearness to the Lord; what blessed thoughts this single name evokes!

And the Messiah replies: ‘From me comes your fruit.’ What a sweet, ineffable final word! How fitting it is for his own heart and for that of restored Israel! Christ wishes to have the last word; he rejoices in seeing the fruit of his grace among his people. ‘He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied’ (Isa. 53:11). All this blessing has no other source. Nothing comes from man; everything comes from God! Ah! how the hearts of his beloved ones will be able to respond in silent adoration: ‘All my springs are in you!’ (Ps. 87:7).

Verse 9 concludes and summarises the entire prophecy of Hosea. ‘Who is wise? Let him understand these things; and who is discerning? Let him know them; for the ways of the Lord are upright, and the righteous shall walk in them, but the transgressors shall fall in them.’ Is this not the conclusion of the book? To understand it requires wisdom and understanding given from on high, which God does not withhold from His own, whilst the wise of this world regard this very prophet as

incomprehensible and foolish. Yet the summary is as simple and as basic as possible. These are the ways of God. They are upright; they are the path of the righteous and their safeguard. They are the downfall and ruin of the transgressors, of those who refuse to submit to the will of God.

Conclusion

Such is this marvellous book. In its fervour, it unexpectedly assails souls to strike them and convince them. If it overflows in rushing streams to reveal evil, it is in order to reach consciences. A broad breath of love flows through these indignant verses. The revelation of the person and work of Christ flows through it, like a peaceful, underground river, tending towards the same goal as the tumultuous waves on the surface. It is in this river that God waters the roots of future blessings, but contempt for this living water renders the Judge's sentence irrevocable.

It is impossible, as we said at the outset, to study Hosea without paraphrasing him, so seemingly distant and alien are

the thoughts from one another; but the Holy Spirit reveals their connections to us, and the discoveries we make under His guidance further enhance the interest of these admirable chapters. Undoubtedly, to put it this way, they lack the vast and majestic flow that characterises Isaiah more than any other prophet, although both have Assyria in their sights; the subject, as we have seen, is here more limited. The nations Hosea brings to the fore are solely Egypt and Assyria; the people bear the character of Ephraim far more often than that of Judah. This is because the hour of retribution has struck for the ten tribes, and more than a century will still pass before the death knell announcing the end of the house of David. After the violence of the storm, interspersed here and there with a few rays of sunshine, the eye finally rests on the peaceful scene in which the people, restored by grace, will have regained communion with their God, under the sceptre of the Messiah.