**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**HOSEA-004. FRUIT WHICH IS DEATH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself: according to the multitude of his fruit he hath increased the altars; according to the goodness of his land they have made goodly images. 2. Their heart is divided; now shall they be found faulty: He shall break down their altars, He shall spoil their images. 3. For now they shall say, We have no king, because we feared not the Lord; what then should a king do to us? 4. They have spoken words, swearing falsely in making a covenant: thus judgment springeth up as hemlock in the furrows of the field. 5. The inhabitants of Samaria shall fear because of the calves of Beth-aven: for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and the priests thereof that rejoiced on it, for the glory thereof, because it is departed from it. 6. It shall be also carried unto Assyria for a present to king Jareb: Ephraim shall receive shame, and Israel shall be ashamed of his own counsel. 7. As for Samaria, her king is cut off as the foam upon the water. 8. The high places also of Aven, the sin of Israel, shall be destroyed: the thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars; and they shall say to the mountains, Cover us; and to the hills, Fall on us. 9. O Israel, thou hast sinned from the days of Gibeah: there they stood: the battle in Gibeah against the children of iniquity did not overtake them. 10. It is in my desire that I should chastise them; and the people shall be gathered against them, when they shall bind themselves in their two furrows. 11. And Ephraim is as an heifer that is taught, and loveth to tread out the corn; but I passed over upon her fair neck: I will make Ephraim to ride; Judah shall plow, and Jacob shall break his clods. 12. Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you. 13. Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies: because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men. 14. Therefore shall a tumult arise among thy people, and all thy fortresses shall be spoiled, as Shalman spoiled Beth-arbel in the day of battle: the mother was dashed in pieces upon her children. 15. So shall Beth-el do unto you because of your great wickedness: in a morning shall the king of Israel utterly be cut off."*

*Hosea 10:1-15*

The prophecy of this chapter has two themes--Israel's sin, and its punishment. These recur again and again. Reiteration, not progress of thought, characterises Hosea's fiery stream of inspired eloquence. Conviction of sin and prediction of judgment are his message. We trace a fourfold repetition of it here, and further note that in each case there is a double reference to Israel's sin as consisting in the rebellion which set up a king and in the schism which established the calf worship; while there is also a double phase of the punishment corresponding to these, in the annihilation of the kingdom and the destruction of the idols.

The first section may be taken to be verses 1-3. The image of a luxuriant vine laden with fruit is as old as Jacob's blessing of the tribes (Gen. 49:22), where it is applied to Joseph, whose descendants were the strength of the Northern Kingdom. Hosea has already used it, and here it is employed to set forth picturesquely the material prosperity of Israel. Probably the period referred to is the successful reign of Jeroboam II. But prosperity increased sin. The more fruit or material wealth, the more altars; the better the harvests, the more the obelisks or pillars to gods, falsely supposed to be the authors of the blessings. The words are as condensed as a proverb, and are as true to-day as ever. Israel had attributed its prosperity to Baal (Hosea 2:8). The misuse of worldly wealth and the tendency of success to draw us away from God, and to blind to the true source of all blessing, are as rife now as then.

The root of the evil was, as always, a heart divided--that is, between God and Baal--or, perhaps, smooth; that is, dissimulating and insincere. In reality, Baal alone possesses the heart which its owner would share between him and Jehovah. All in all, or not at all, is the law. Whether Baals or calves were set beside God, He was equally deposed.

Then, with a swift turn, Hosea proclaims the impending judgment, setting himself and the people as if already in the future. He hears the first peal of the storm, and echoes it in that abrupt now. The first burst of the judgment shatters dreams of innocence, and the cowering wretches see their sin by the lurid light. That discovery awaits every man whose heart has been divided. To the gazers and to himself masks drop, and the true character stands out with appalling clearness. What will that light show us to be? An unnamed hand overthrows altars and pillars. No need to say whose it is. One half of Israel's sin is crushed at a blow, and the destruction of the other follows immediately.

They themselves abjure their allegiance; for they have found out that their king is a king Log, and can do them no good. A king, set up in opposition to God's will, cannot save. The ruin of their projects teaches godless men at last that they have been fools to take their own way; for all defences, recourses, and protectors, chosen in defiance of God, prove powerless when the strain comes. The annihilation of one half of their sin sickens them of the other. The calves and the monarchy stood or fell together. It is a dismal thing to have to bear the brunt of chastisement for what we see to have been a blunder as well as a crime. But such is the fate of those who seek other gods and another king.

In verse 4 Hosea recurs to Israel's crime, and appends a description of the chastisement, substantially the same as before, but more detailed, which continues till verse 8. The sin now is contemplated in its effects on human relations. Before, it was regarded in relation to God. But men who are wrong with Him cannot be right with one another. Morality is rooted in religion, and if we lie to God, we shall not be true to our brother. Hence, passing over all other sins for the present, Hosea fixes upon one, the prevalence of which strikes at the very foundation of society. What can be done with a community in which lying has become a national characteristic, and that even in formal agreements? Honey-combed with falsehood, it is only fit for burning.

Sin is bound by an iron link to penalty. Therefore, says Hosea, God's judgment springs up, like a bitter plant (the precise name of which is unknown) in the furrows, where the farmer did not know that its seeds lay. They little dreamed what they were sowing when they scattered abroad their lies, but this is the fruit of these. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap; and whatever other crop we may hope to gather from our sins, we shall gather that bitter one which we did not expect. The inevitable connection of sin and judgment, the bitterness of its results, the unexpectedness of them, are all here, and to be laid to heart by us.

Then verses 5 and 6 dilate with keen irony on the fate of the first half of Israel's sin--the calf. It was thought a god, but its worshippers shall be in a fright for it. Calves, says Hosea, though there was but one at Beth-el; and he uses the feminine, as some think, depreciatingly. Beth-aven or the house of vanity, he says, instead of Beth-el, the house of God. A fine god whose worshippers had to be alarmed for its safety! Its people--what a contrast to the name they might have borne, My people! God disowns them, and says, They belong to it, not to Me. The idolatrous priests of the calf worship will tremble when that image, which had been shamefully their glory, is carried off to Assyria, and given as a present to king Jareb--a name for the king of Assyria meaning the fighting or quarrelsome king. The captivity of the god is the shame of the worshippers. To be ashamed of their own counsel is the certain fate of all who depart from God; for, sooner or later, experience will demonstrate to the blindest that their refuges of lies can neither save themselves nor those who trust in them. But shame is one thing and repentance another; and many a man will say, I have been a great fool, and my clever policy has all crumbled to pieces, who will only therefore change his idols, and not return to God.

Verse 7 recurs to the political punishment of the civil rebellion. The image for the disappearance of the king is striking, whether we render foam or chip, but the former has special beauty. In the one case we see the unsubstantial bubble,

A moment white, then melts for ever;

and in the other, the helpless twig swept down by the stream. Either brings vividly before us the powerlessness of Israel against the roaring torrent of Assyrian power; and the figure may be widened out to teach what is sure to become of all man-made and self-chosen refuges when the floods of God's judgments sweep over the world. The captivity of the idol and the burst bubble of the monarchy bid us all make Jehovah our God and King. The vacant shrine and empty throne are followed by utter and long-continued desolation. Thorns and thistles have time to grow on the altars, and no hand cuts them down. What of the men thus stripped of all in which they had trusted? Desperate, they implore the mountains to fall on them, as preferring to die, and the hills to cover them, as willing to be crushed, if only they may be hidden. That awful cry is heard again in our Lord's predictions of judgment, and in the Apocalypse. Therefore this prophecy foreshadows, in the destruction of Israel's confidences and in their shame and despair, a more dreadful coming day, in which we shall be concerned.

Verses 9 to 11 again give the sin and its punishment. The days of Gibeah recall the hideous story of lust and crime which was the low-water mark of the lawless days of old. That crime had been avenged by merciless war. But its taint had lived on, and the Israel of Hosea's day stood, obstinately persistent, just where the Benjamites had been then, and set themselves in dogged resistance, as these had done, that the battle against the children of unrighteousness might not touch them.

Stiff-necked setting oneself against God's merciful fighting with evil lasts for a little while, but verse 10 tells how soon and easily it is annihilated. God's desire brushes away all defences, and the obstinate sinners are like children, who are whipped when their father wills, let them struggle as they may. The instruments of chastisement are foreign armies, and the chastisement itself is described with a striking figure as binding them to their two transgressions; that is, the double sin which is the keynote of the chapter. Punishment is yoking men to their sins, and making them drag the burden like bullocks in harness. What sort of load are we getting together for ourselves? When we have to drag the consequences of our doings behind us, how shall we feel?

The figure sets the Prophet's imagination going, and he turns it another way, comparing Israel to a heifer, broken in, and liking the easy work of threshing, in which the unmuzzled ox could eat its fill, but now set to harder tasks in the fields. Judah, too, is to share in the punishment. If men will not serve God in and because of prosperous ease, He will try what toil and privation will do. Abused blessings are withdrawn, and the abundance of the threshing-floor is changed for dragging a heavy plough or harrow.

Verse 12 still deals with the figure suggested in the close of the previous verse. It is the only break in the clouds in this chapter. It is a call to amendment, accompanied by a promise of acceptance. If we sow for righteousness--that is, if our efforts are directed to embodying it in our lives--we shall reap according to mercy. That is true universally, whether it is taken to mean God's mercy to us, or ours to others. The aim after righteousness ever secures the divine favour, and usually ensures the measure which we mete being measured to us again.

But sowing is not all; thorns must be grubbed up. We must not only turn over a new leaf, but tear out the old one. The old man must be slain if the new man is to live. The call to amend finds its warrant in the assurance that there is still time to seek the Lord, and that, for all His threatenings, He is ready to rain blessings upon the seekers. The unwearying patience of God, the possibility of the worst sinner's repentance, the conditional nature of the threatenings, the possibility of breaking the bond between sin and sorrow, the yet deeper thought that righteousness must come from above, are all condensed in this brief gospel before the Gospel.

But that bright gleam passes, and the old theme recurs. Once more we have sin and punishment exhibited in their organic connection in verses 13 and 14. Israel's past had been just the opposite of sowing righteousness and reaping mercy. Wickedness ploughed in, iniquity will surely be its fruit. Sin begets sin, and is its own punishment. What fruit have we of doing wrong? Lies; that is, unfulfilled expectations of unrealised satisfaction. No man gets the good that he aimed at in sinning, or he gets something more that spoils it. At last the deceitfulness of sin will be found out, but we may be sure of it now. The root of all Israel's sin was the root of ours; namely, trust in self, and consequent neglect of God. The first half of verse 13 is an exhaustive analysis of the experience of every sinful life; the second, a penetrating disclosure of the foundation of it.

Then the whole closes with the repeated threatening, dual as before, and illustrated by the forgotten horrors of some dreadful siege, one of the unhappy, far-off things, fallen silent now. A significant variation occurs in the final threatening, in which Beth-el is set forth as the cause, rather than as the object, of the destruction. They were the ruin of him and of all Israel. Our vices are made the whips to scourge us. Our idols bring us no help, but are the causes of our misery.

The Prophet ends with the same double reference which prevails throughout, when he once more declares the annihilation of the monarchy, which, rather than a particular person, is meant by the king. In the morning is enigmatical. It may mean prematurely, or suddenly, or in a time of apparent prosperity, or, more probably, the Prophet stands in vision in that future day of the Lord, and points to the king as the first victim. The force of the prophecy does not depend on the meaning of this detail. The teaching of the whole is the certainty that suffering dogs sin, but yet does so by no iron, impersonal law, but according to the will of God, who will rain righteousness even on the sinner, being penitent, and will endow with righteousness from above every lowly soul that seeks for it.