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

**HOSEA-006. ISRAEL RETURNING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. 2. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. 3. Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy. 4. I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from Him. 5. I will be as the dew unto Israel: He shall grow as the lily, and cast forth His roots as Lebanon. 6. His branches shall spread, and His beauty shall be as the olive-tree, and His smell as Lebanon. 7. They that dwell under His shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. 8. Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard Him, and observed Him: I am like a green fir-tree. From me is thy fruit found. 9. Who is wise, and He shall understand these things? prudent, and He shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.."*

*Hosea 14:1-9*

Hosea is eminently the prophet of divine love and of human repentance. Both streams of thought are at their fullest in this great chapter. In verses 1 to 3 the very essence of true return to God is set forth in the prayer which Israel is exhorted to offer, while in verses 4 to 8 the forgiving love of God and its blessed results are portrayed with equal poetical beauty and spiritual force. Verse 9 closes the chapter and the book with a kind of epilogue.

**I. The summons to repentance.**

Israel, of course, here means the Northern Kingdom, with which Hosea's prophecies are chiefly occupied. Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity--that is the lesson taught by all its history, and in a deeper sense it is the lesson of all experience. Sin brings ruin for nations and individuals, and the plain teachings of each man's own life exhort each to return unto the Lord. We have all proved the vanity and misery of departing from Him; surely, if we are not drawn by His love, we might be driven by our own unrest, to go back to God.

The Prophet anticipates the clear accents of the New Testament call to repentance in his expansion of what he meant by returning. He has nothing to say about sacrifices, nor about self-reliant efforts at moral improvement. Take with you words, not the blood of bulls and goats. Confession is better than sacrifice. What words are they which will avail? Hosea teaches the penitent's prayer. It must begin with the petition for forgiveness, which implies recognition of the petitioner's sin. The cry, Take away all iniquity, does not specify sins, but masses the whole black catalogue into one word. However varied the forms of our transgressions, they are in principle one, and it is best to bind them all into one ugly heap, and lay it at God's feet. We have to confess not only sins, but sin, and the taking away of it includes divine cleansing from its power, as well as divine forgiveness of its guilt. Hosea bids Israel ask that God would take away all iniquity; John pointed to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. But beyond forgiveness and cleansing, the penitent heart will seek that God would accept the good in it, which springs up by His grace, when the evil has been washed from it, like flowers that burst from soil off which the matted under-growth of poisonous jungle has been cleared. Mere negative absence of evil is not all that we should desire or exhibit; there must be positive good; and however sinful may have been the past, we are not too bold when we ask and expect that we may be made able to produce good, which shall be fragrant as sweet incense to God.

Petitions are followed by vows. On the one hand, the experience of forgiveness and cleansing will put a new song in our mouths, and instead of animal sacrifices, we shall render the praise which is better than calves laid on the altar. Perhaps the Septuagint rendering of that difficult phrase the calves of our lips, which is given in Hebrews xiii. 15, the fruit of our lips, is preferable. In either case, the same thought appears--that the penitent's experience of forgiving and restoring love makes the tongue of the dumb sing, and it will bind men's hearts more closely to God than anything besides can do, so that their old inclinations to false reliances and idolatries drop away from them. The old fable tells us that the storm made the traveller wrap his cloak closer round him, but the sunshine made him throw it off. Judgments often make men cling more closely to their sins, but forgiving mercy makes them cast off the works of darkness. The men who had experienced that in God, the Israel, which by its sins had brought down the punishment of His repudiation of being its father (i. 9), had found mercy, would no longer feel temptation to turn to Assyria for help, nor to seek protection from Egypt's cavalry, nor to debase their manhood by calling stocks and stones, the work of their own hands, their gods. What earthly sweetness will tempt, or what earthly danger will affright, the heart that is feeling the bliss of union with God? Would Judas's thirty pieces of silver attract the disciple reclining on Jesus bosom? We are most firmly bound to God, not by our resolves, but by our experience of His all-sufficient mercy. Fill the heart with that wine of the kingdom, and bitter or poisonous draughts will find no entrance into the cup.

**II. God's welcoming answer.**

The very abruptness of its introduction, without any explanation as to the speaker, suggests how swiftly and joyfully the Father hastens to meet the returning prodigal while he is yet afar off. Like pent-up waters rushing forth as soon as a barrier is taken away, God's love pours itself out immediately. His answer ever gives more than the penitent asks--robe and ring and shoes, and a feast to him who dared not expect more than a place among the hired servants. He gives not by drops, but in floods, answering the prayer for the taking away of iniquity by the promise to heal backsliding, going beyond desires and hopes in the gift of love which asks for no recompense, is drawn forth by no desert, but wells up from the depths of God's heart, and strengthens the new, tremulous trust of the penitent by the assurance that every trace of anger is effaced from God's heart.

The blessings consequent on the gift of God's love are described in lovely imagery, drawn, like Hosea's other abundant similes, from nature, and especially from trees and flowers. The source of all fruitfulness is a divine influence, which comes silently and refreshing as the dew, or, rather, as the night mist, a phenomenon occurring in Palestine in summer, and being, accurately, rolling masses of vapour brought from the Mediterranean, which counteract the dry heat and keep vegetation alive. The influences which refresh and fructify our souls must fall in many a silent hour of meditation and communion. They will effloresce into manifold shapes of beauty and fruitfulness, of which the Prophet signalises three. The lily may stand for beauty of purity, though botanists differ as to the particular flower meant. Christians should present to the world whatsoever things are lovely, and see to it that their goodness is attractive. But the fragrant, pure lily has but shallow roots, and beauty is not all that a character needs in this world of struggle and effort. So there are to be both the lily's blossom and roots like Lebanon. The image may refer to the firm buttresses of the widespread foot-hills, from which the sovereign summits of the great mountain range rise, or, as is rather suggested by the accompanying similes from the vegetable world, it may refer to the cedars growing there. Their roots are anchored deep and stretch far underground; therefore they rear towering heads, and spread broad shelves of dark foliage, safe from any blast. Our lives must be deep rooted in God if they are to be strong. Boots generally spread beneath the soil about as far as branches extend above it. There should be at least as much underground, hid with Christ in God, as is visible to the world.

But beauty and strength are not all. So Hosea thinks of yet another of the characteristic growths of Palestine, the olive, which is not strikingly beautiful in form, with its strangely gnarled, contorted stem, its feeble branches, and its small, pointed, pale leaves, but has the beauty of fruitfulriess, and is green when other trees are bare. Such beauty should be ours, and will be if the dew falls on us.

In verse 7 there are difficulties, both as to the application of the his, and as to the reading and rendering of some of the words. But the general drift is clear. It prolongs the tones of the foregoing verses, keeping to the same class of images, and expressing fruitfulness, abundant as the corn and precious as the grape, and fragrance like the bouquet of the choicest wine.

Verse 8 offers great difficulties on any interpretation. The supplement shall say is questionable, and it is doubtful whether Ephraim is the speaker at all, and whether, if so, he speaks all the four clauses, and who speaks any or all of them, if not he. To the present writer, it seems best to take the supplement as right, and possible to regard the whole verse as spoken by Ephraim, though perhaps the last clause is meant to be God's utterance. The meaning will then come out as follows. The penitent Israel again speaks, after the gracious promises preceding. The tribal name is, as usual in Hosea, equivalent to Israel, whose penitent cry we heard at the beginning of the passage. Now we hear his glad response to God's abundant answer. What have I to do any more with idols? He had vowed (verse 3) to have no more to do with them, and the resolve is deepened by the rich grace held forth to him. Hosea had lamented Ephraim's mad adherence to his idols (iv. 17), but now the union is dissolved, and by penitence and reception of God's grace, he is joined to the Lord, and parted from them. His renunciation of idolatry is based, in the second clause, on his experience of what God can do, and on his having heard God's gracious voice of pardon and promise. If a man hears God, he will not be drawn to worship at any idol's shrine.

Further, in the third clause, Ephraim is joyfully conscious of the change that has passed on him, in accordance with the great promises just spoken, and with grateful astonishment that such verdure should have burst out from the dry and rotten stump of his own sinful nature, exclaims, I am like a green fir-tree. That is another reason why he will have no more to do with idols. They could never have made his sapless nature break into leafage. But what of the fourth clause--From Me is thy fruit found? Can we understand that to mean that Ephraim still speaks, keeping up the image of the previous clause, and declaring that all the new fruitfulness which he finds in himself he recognises to be God's, both in the sense that, in reality, it is produced by Him, and that it belongs to Him? He comes seeking fruit, and He finds it. All our good is His, and we shall be happy, productive, and wise, in proportion as we offer all our works to Him, and feel that, after all, they are not ours, but the works of that Spirit which dwells in penitent and believing hearts. Some have thought that this last clause must be taken as spoken by God; but, even if so taken, it conveys substantially the same thought as to the divine origin of man's fruitfulness.

The last verse is rather a general reflection summing up the whole than an integral part of this wonderful representation of penitence, pardon, and fruitfulness. It declares the great truth that the knowledge of the pardoning mercy of God, and of the ways by which He weans men from sin and makes them fruitful of good, makes us truly wise. That knowledge is more than intellectual apprehension; it is experience. Providence has its mysteries, but they who keep near to God, and are just because they do, will find the opportunity of free, unfettered activity in God's ways, and transgressors will stumble therein. Therefore wisdom and safety lie in penitence and confession, which will ever be met by gracious pardon and showers of blessing that will cause our hearts, which sin has made desert, to rejoice and blossom like the rose.