

H.L. Rossier

Comments on the book of the Prophet Amos

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FOREWORD

Amos prophesied during the reigns of Uzziah (or Azariah) and Jeroboam II (2), the longest, save one, recorded in the annals of Judah and Israel. But a prolonged reign does not necessarily demonstrate God's approval: that of Manasseh, the longest of all, was a succession of iniquities. Uzziah's career was quite different from that of Jeroboam. The latter, though he accomplished great things in the eyes of men, did 'what was evil in the sight of the Lord'; yet God was pleased to use him to save Israel, for He 'had not said that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven' (2 Kings 14:27). From Jeroboam until the deportation of the ten tribes, the ruin of this royal house was complete.

Uzziah, king of Judah, unlike his contemporary Jeroboam, 'did what was right in the eyes of the Lord' (2 Kings 15:3), until the day when, his pride having led him to usurp the duties of the priests in the temple, he was struck with leprosy. His successors, Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah, walked in the ways of

the Lord, and the faithfulness of these few kings, true sons of David, postponed the judgement already hanging over Judah.

Since the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam overlapped for fourteen years, one might conclude that, like that of Hosea (*), Amos's prophecy spanned a long period. On the contrary, it was delivered during a very short period of these reigns, that is to say, 'two years before the earthquake'.

(*) See 'The Book of the Prophet Hosea', by H. R., pages 4, 5.

CHAPTER 1:1-2

The Lord roars

'The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake' (v. 1).

Amos was from Tekoa, a town in Judah, fortified like many others by Rehoboam at the time of the division of Solomon's kingdom (2 Chron. 11:6). Jehoshaphat had once won victory

over Moab, Edom and the Ammonites near the wilderness of Tekoa, and this memory may have come to mind for the prophet, who was called to pronounce judgement on these very peoples (1:11, 13; 2:1). Tekoa is situated 16 kilometres from Jerusalem and 8 kilometres south of Bethlehem, thus in the heart of the territory of Judah and Benjamin. We see in Jeremiah 6:1 that Tekoa—or rather Beth-Hakkeren, the mountain overlooking this locality—was one of the outposts which signalled, by fire, the approach of the enemy. Amos stands there, so to speak, watching in all directions for the enemies who have encroached upon Abraham’s inheritance and are besieging the borders of Israel; he foretells their fate, and it is from there that he is subsequently sent to Bethel to prophesy against Ephraim (7:14, 15).

Amos was ‘one of the shepherds of Tekoa’. We find, on several occasions in his prophecy, images drawn from his profession, his flocks, the shepherd’s struggles with wild beasts, and his daily life (1:2; 3, 4, 12; 4:1; 6:12, etc.). Amos’s calling is mentioned in just a few words, but the Spirit of God demonstrates His sovereignty in this choice. Just as he had taken David from

tending the sheep to establish him as the Leader of his people, and later poor fishermen who became his apostles, so he makes the shepherd Amos the prophet of Israel. This distinction nullifies human claims to serve God. Amos would later say: ‘I was not a prophet, nor was I the son of a prophet’ (7:14). He was neither by vocation nor by birth: since every order established by God had failed in Israel and Judah, the Lord Himself chose His instrument and was pleased to speak oracles through the mouth of a humble shepherd. Such a course of action is fitting for a time of ruin, when men like Amaziah (7:10–17) seek to intimidate the ‘seer’ through their false priestly authority. God then asserts the free action of his Spirit. The revelations of the Lord come through the mouth of this simple man: his ‘words’ he has ‘seen’; and his true visions, later on, he proclaims.

The main subject of Amos’s prophecy is Israel. This term refers first to the ten tribes (2:6), then to the entire people, including Judah (3:1, 2), and finally to the ten tribes, morally representing the whole people before God. Judah itself, the prophet’s own tribe, is also mentioned separately as an object of judgment, for, though possessing greater privileges than Ephraim, it

had committed the same acts of unfaithfulness (2:4); but it is for the ten tribes that the hour of punishment is at hand; it had already sounded in the prophet Hosea, Amos's contemporary and successor. In Amos, the judgement relates more to the moral state of the people than to specific transgressions; but when judgement falls upon the nations in the first two chapters—Judah and Israel being included—their transgressions are mentioned specifically.

The 'earthquake' is the memorable date of Amos's prophecy. We do not see that the prophet predicted that this earthquake would take place, but for him it is the symbol of the judgement that was soon to befall his people. This event therefore has a moral character, and so Amos abounds in images relating to this phenomenon. He depicts it as a chariot causing the ground to crack under the weight of the sheaves at harvest time. Even the most agile man cannot avoid it (2:13–16). The horns of the altar fall to the ground, houses and palaces are overturned, walls split apart, and men are hurled through their breaches; it is a subversion similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah (3:14, 15; 4:3, 11; 6:11). In this upheaval, the waters of the sea are

poured out upon the face of the earth (5:8; 9:6). In an instant the land trembles, as the waters of the Nile rise and fall in a season (8:8; 9:5) (*); the lintel of the door and its bases are shaken and fall upon the heads of men (9:1). But a day will come when all these ruins will be repaired (9:11).

(*) The Nile flood reaches nine-tenths of the river's usual volume.

The earthquake of Uzziah's reign is mentioned in Zechariah 14:5, which likens it to the great event of the last day, when the Mount of Olives will be split at the feet of the Lord to put to flight the oppressors of the captive Remnant in Jerusalem. The prophecy of Amos does not have this future significance, for it foretells the coming judgments that will befall the people. It should be noted, however, that in Zechariah, as in other passages, the mention of an earthquake does not signify, as in Amos, judgments without any element of deliverance, but judgments from which deliverance may emerge. Thus, in Matthew 27, the earthquake opens the tombs and delivers the saints; so too in Acts 16:26 it sets Paul and Silas free and brings about the conversion of the jailer; and we might say that

even in Amos, though it fills the book with its ruins, it is the harbinger of a final deliverance, presented in the last chapter.

‘And he said: “The Lord roars from Zion, and from Jerusalem he makes his voice heard; and the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the summit of Carmel is parched”’ (v. 2).

This expression: ‘The Lord roars from Zion’ is of great importance and characterises the whole of Amos’s prophecy. The Lord is portrayed here as the ‘lion of the tribe of Judah’ roaring because he has a prey (cf. 3:4) which he will devour; this Lion of Judah will reign over Jerusalem, the place where royal grace will be recognised in the end. Joel, speaking of the Day of the Lord in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, uses exactly the same terms: ‘The Lord will roar from Zion, and from Jerusalem He will make His voice heard, and the heavens and the earth will tremble’ (Joel 3:16); only Joel announces the future judgments that will usher in the millennial reign of the Son of David; Amos, as we have said, does not go so far—he announces judgments that are imminent; the Lion of Judah roars on the very day of his prophecy. Amos begins and Joel ends; the judg-

ments he announces upon the nations, and then upon Judah and Ephraim, are about to be carried out and are of a governmental nature. Yet God's righteous government is not the end of His dealings with the nations: there remains still His righteous judgement, the definitive national judgement, and it is of this latter that Joel speaks to us, as do so many other prophets who speak of the 'day of the Lord'. On the contrary, Amos's vision stops at the calamities that will befall the nations and the people of Israel in the very near future, and shows the specific causes that made them necessary. Thus, in Amos, Pharaoh, the Assyrian and Babylon are, in turn and at various intervals, the rod of the Lord to chastise all these peoples (*), whereas the final scene in Joel presents nothing of the sort, but shows the Lord in person, executing the final judgement, and definitively breaking the Assyrian after having used him as a rod against Israel.

(*) This in no way excludes the fact that all the nations surrounding Israel will be seen to rise again and play a part in the scenes of the end. This is what we see in Joel, where Tyre, Sidon, Philistia and Edom reappear for the judgement of the

great day in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Amos does not go that far.

What we have just said is of great importance to us. The judgments we see falling upon the earth today are not the judgments of the end. In Amos we are dealing with a prophecy now fulfilled; such is, save for the last chapter, the very special character of our prophet. We find in it warnings whose fulfilment foreshadows a future day and affirms in advance its terrible reality. The same is true for us today! If ‘the end is not yet’, what will it be for the unrighteous and the sinner?

In Joel, the heavens and the earth will tremble when the Lord makes his voice heard; in Amos, the earthquake of v. 1 alone characterises, as we have already noted, all the scenes unfolding before our eyes. Here the consequences of the roar are local: ‘The pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the summit of Carmel is parched’. This image corresponds to what the shepherd Amos saw before him. When God’s judgements are carried out, there are no more peaceful pursuits in which the simple-hearted find delight; farewell to the pastures of the wilderness of Judah, familiar to the shepherds of Tekoa, and those

of Carmel where the sheep graze in the shade of the forests. The wind of the Lord's wrath has swept over them, and has even dried up the shady Carmel. We encounter the same images in chapter 25 of the prophet Jeremiah. After announcing (vv. 15–29) the coming judgement, through Babylon, upon all the nations mentioned by Amos and upon others besides, he speaks of the roar of the Lord, of his holy dwelling, of the cries and wails of the shepherds, whose pastures are devastated and whose peaceful pastures are laid waste before the fierceness of the Lord's wrath (vv. 30–38). This passage therefore bears a close resemblance to the verses we have just considered.

CHAPTER 1:3 to ch. 2

Thus says the Lord

These two chapters are characterised by the words: 'Thus says the Lord'. When God has spoken, judgement must be carried out, even though we do not know when. Perhaps God's patience will wait a long time yet, until it is carried out, but it will come to pass nonetheless, for to the Lord time is of no account

and in no way alters the justice and holiness of his ways. In fact, most of these prophecies of Amos were not fulfilled until about a hundred years after they were spoken.

The words of the Lord are addressed first to the various nations that surround the people of Israel on all sides: Philistia to the west, Tyre to the north, Syria to the north-east, Ammon and Moab to the east, and Edom to the south. With the exception of Moab, all these nations are judged here according to the way they have treated God's people. We still see examples of this today. God's retributive justice is exercised upon nations that persecute His ancient people, however guilty they may be.

There is a just government of God in this world, in contrast to that of men. God sees all and forgets nothing (He forgets only the sins of those who have believed). All injustice finds its retribution sooner or later. God may wait patiently for the span of a man's life (even with regard to his own children, for his judgement begins at home) to repay, according to his rule, a wrong that has been done. Saul had long since died, yet God had not forgotten the iniquity of which he had been guilty in

causing the Gibeonites to die (2 Sam. 21). It was then necessary that his house of blood, save Mephibosheth who was spared by grace, should be exterminated. David, a man of God, had long since forgotten his crime against Uriah; but at God's appointed time the consequences of that sin began to unfold and pursued the king-prophet until the end of his life. The same was true during the census of the people, except that grace halted the judgement in its tracks (2 Sam. 24). How many of God's children have had similar experiences! Silence hung over a particular transgression of which no one, save the guilty party, was aware: suddenly the lion's roar is heard and the earth trembles. Until then, the sky had been so serene that it seemed to rule out even the thought of a storm. In a short space of time, everything is turned upside down, peace is lost, and the shelter of Carmel is parched.

Note that, in all the cases cited throughout these two chapters, judgement falls not only on the authority that ordered the massacres, but on the nation held responsible for them. Undoubtedly the authorities are judged: the kings, those who hold the sceptre, the princes and the governors, are struck person-

ally, but the entire nation is too, for far from opposing the acts of the authorities, it supported them with its sympathies, its hatreds and its violence. In the case of the Gibeonites, the people are even struck first by three years of famine, and the judgement on Saul's family comes only afterwards, for the people should have cleansed themselves of the evil committed by their leader.

When a national iniquity is committed, as we see in these chapters, the human mind struggles to conceive that it is not immediately punished, but this is not the case: God's ways are not our ways. God allows—as we see continually in prophecy—that iniquity bears all the fruit hoped for by the one who committed it; God uses it to fulfil his purposes, but retribution comes nonetheless—it moves slowly, but it comes.

The Assyrian, whose actions are alluded to more than once in these chapters, is an instrument of wickedness, employed, first against the iniquity of Israel, then against that of the nations which had vented their fury upon God's people; but the rod of God's wrath, having accomplished its work, is itself broken, its

strength overthrown, and its fall is deeper than that of all the nations it has struck. Moreover, in our chapters, the Assyrian, who is not even named, is far from being the only agent whom God uses to execute his judgments. Numerous other agents contribute to this at various times, and their names are also passed over in silence by Amos. We may find them in other historical or prophetic accounts; the Spirit of God does not mention them here because, as we have said above, our prophet is concerned with the moral state that necessitates divine intervention, and not with the instruments God uses. The prophet describes this intervention without intermediaries—such as fire, a roar, or an earthquake—to make it clear that it emanates directly from God. This is not the case with other prophets. Thus, Isaiah 14:28–23 describes the judgement of these same nations by the Assyrians, following their conduct towards the ten tribes; Jeremiah 46–49 describes their judgement by Nebuchadnezzar, following their conduct towards Judah.

When we consider the prophecy as a whole, we therefore find various people carrying out the judgments, but also repetitions of the same sin which call for further vengeance from God

through these same agents. However, whether these instruments are in turn the Assyrians, or the Pharaoh, or the kings of the East, or Babylon, or Israel itself, the judgments of the nations in Amos are still merely God's customary ways in governing the world and not the judgments of the end times. All the nations mentioned in the first two chapters of Amos will have to reappear at the end of time after having been reconstituted, and undergo a national judgement far more severe than their past misfortunes, whilst all their deeds will be brought to account in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (Joel 3), after which we shall see the partial restoration of a Remnant of these nations (except, amongst others, that of Edom), as we read in Jeremiah. This national judgement must not be confused with the individual and personal judgement of the dead before the great white throne (*).

(*) In many cases, it is impossible to determine the exact period when the nations mentioned in these chapters invaded Israel and Judah. Their attacks were incessant and followed one another at more or less frequent intervals. The same was true of the instruments of their own downfall. So as not to burden our text, we shall summarise here, from a historical perspective,

their crimes against Israel and the various agents through whom their judgement came to pass.

Damascus, or rather its king Hazael, seized all the borders of Israel and Gilead because of the sins of Jehu and during his reign, that is to say, before Jeroboam II (2) and Uzziah (2 Kings 10:33). This attack has a historical connection with the prophecy of Amos (1:4). Under Ahaz, more than sixteen years after the death of Uzziah, the prophecy of Amos against Damascus was fulfilled. ‘The king of Assyria went up to Damascus, captured it, and deported its inhabitants to Kir’ (2 Kings 16:9; Isaiah 17:1–3). However, Amos is more explicit and speaks of the ‘people of Syria’. Later, in the final days of the kingdom of Judah, we find a similar prophecy against Damascus and its capture by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 49:23–27). There too the Lord kindles a fire within the walls of Damascus, and it consumes the palaces of Ben-Hadad.

Philistia invaded Judah and occupied its cities under Ahaz, many years after Uzziah (2 Chr. 28:18). Hezekiah fought against the Philistines (2 Kings 18:8). They were subsequently struck down by Pharaoh (Jer. 47), then destroyed by Nebuchad-

nezzar (Ezek. 25:15–17). On several occasions they had sold the entire captivity (I am tempted to believe that this term refers to Judah and the ten tribes) either to Greece (Joel 3:6) or to Edom (Amos 1:6). Evidently these events occurred frequently and are not recorded in connection with specific historical occasions. The destruction of Philistia is also mentioned in Jer. 47; this nation reappears at the end of time and its judgement has the same cause as in the past (Joel 3:4).

Tyrus acts towards Israel as the Philistines did. Several nations cooperated with Tyrus in the slave trade, the most lucrative trade of the time (Ezek. 27:13). Tyrus, which had delivered the entire captives to Edom, is delivered to Assyria, then to Nebuchadnezzar, following the defeat of the Philistines. We find Tyre alongside Sidon at the Last Judgement (Joel 3:4).

Edom. Its cruel vengeance against Judah is recounted in Ezek. 25:12–14. Its desire to conquer both nations, Israel and Judah, arouses the Lord's indignation (Ezek. 35:10). The mountain of Seir is destroyed; Nebuchadnezzar is the agent of this destruction. But Edom reappears in the prophetic history of the end

times; he is found in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (Joel 3:19). He leads the confederacy of the nations of the end times, alongside Moab, Ammon, Philistia and Tyre—a confederacy of which Assyria is a part. All seek to seize God’s dwelling places and take possession of them (Ps. 83). This is also the reason for its final defeat, as we see in Obadiah and at the end of Isaiah (63:1). The Lord Himself exacts vengeance on Edom on behalf of His people, and causes Israel to cooperate in this.

Ammon attacks Gilead in particular, the territory of the ten tribes, but also falls upon Judah, taking it captive (Ezek. 25:1–7). Its aim is to extend its borders at the expense of God’s people, an evil ambition which we see being exercised everywhere today at the expense of one’s neighbour. This cries out for vengeance! The Ishmaelites or ‘sons of the East’ (Ezek. 25:4, 10), and then Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 49:2), are the agents of Ammon’s destruction.

Moab is accused in Amos of a misdeed other than that of the nations mentioned previously. It is destroyed, then reappears at the end of time to be struck down by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 48).

We return to Moab in our text.

In all that we have just seen, Amos announces the coming judgement on these peoples, in accordance with the treatment they inflicted on the ten tribes, as well as on the kingdom of Judah. This judgement does not extend beyond historical times, as so many other passages in the prophets do, for the Book of Amos is concerned above all, as we have noted, with the moral characteristics of the evil that necessitates judgement, and tells us very little about the events of the end.

God's governmental ways of judgment are directed first and foremost at his own people, for God's judgment begins at home. Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom and Ammon are God's instruments for chastising his people, who have given themselves over to idolatry and have forsaken the Lord, spurning all the moral principles of his law. But, as we shall see, it so happens that these nations pursue their interests of greed or conquest and their plans for vengeance by committing atrocities. God allows this to happen. Iniquity piles upon iniquity until the measure overflows: 'For three transgressions... and for four,' says

the Lord, 'I will not revoke my decree.' This phrase is repeated on every new occasion. There is not a single one of these nations, including Judah and Ephraim, that has not reached the height of its transgressions. It is at this point that God strikes them. He will later take care of His people to restore them after striking them, for, beneath all His judgments, one senses that the merciful heart of the Lord does not change. Never does His people, however guilty they may be, depart from His memory. His counsels concerning them are eternal, unchanging; whilst some of these nations will be destroyed and a remnant of the others will be restored (Jer. 46:26; 48:47; 49:6, 39). Now He is dealing with those who have trampled Israel underfoot.

What once happened to Israel may be happening today to Christians in the battle of the nations. It is a necessary discipline for the children of God, yet entire populations bearing the name of Christ are being massacred by the eastern nations. God does not forget this: their turn will come. Stronger ones than they will enter the scene and turn their triumphs into mourning, their victories into defeats.

‘Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke my judgement; because they have threshed Gilead with iron sledges. And I will send a fire into the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the palaces of Ben-Hadad; and I will break the bar of Damascus, and from the valley of Aven I will cut off the inhabitant, and from Beth-Eden, the one who holds the sceptre; and the people of Syria shall go into captivity to Kir, says the Lord” (1:3–5).

We see in 2 Sam. 10:6–14 that, in the past, the Syrians had allied themselves with the Ammonites against David, after the latter had insulted the king’s envoys. The Ammonites were defeated and subjected to cruel reprisals by David (2 Sam. 12:31; 1 Chron. 20:3). This vengeance was legitimate, for it was willed by God, through His King. What assures us of this is the account given of this event in the Chronicles, where all of David’s faults, with two exceptions, are passed over in silence. From the outset, the Syrians had taken up the cause of the Ammonites, who were almost exterminated; they took their revenge by trampling Gilead with iron-shod chariots. The fact of this alliance further aggravates the judgement pronounced upon

Damascus, the capital of the Syrians. Undoubtedly God had used them as a rod against Israel and had entrusted this mission to Hazael, their king, through the ministry of Elisha (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:7–15). Now He breaks the rod that had accomplished His purposes, for there was no fear of God in Hazael's heart: he had been merciless in his attack, and God, who had employed him, judged him for his cruelty towards His people. Elisha had warned Hazael of all the evil he would do to Israel and had wept over it. He had even warned him that he would crush their little children and rip open the wombs of their pregnant women. It seems that the alliance between the Syrians and the Ammonites lasted well beyond the time of David, for what is attributed in Amos 1:13 to the latter is attributed to the Syrians in 2 Kings 8:12. God knew all these things; in having Hazael anointed to punish His people, He also knew that this man would usurp the kingship by murdering Ben-Hadad, the rightful king. He knew it; can we say that He willed it? Not at all, for, when the time came, He asserted the rights of His holiness and justice in the face of Damascus's transgressions.

‘I will break the bar of Damascus, and from the Valley of Aven I will cut off the inhabitant, and from Beth-Eden, the one who holds the sceptre’ (v. 5). Damascus, with the bars that shut its gates, will be defenceless before the enemy. Bikeah-Aven will be ‘the valley of nothingness’, just as, in Hosea 4:15; 5:8; 10:5, Bethel, the house of God, had become Beth-Aven, ‘the house of nothingness’. In contrast to this, Beth-Eden was in Syria the ‘house of delights’. This was what sinful men wished to make of the world, and which, alas, succeeded in captivating even the eyes of a believer like Lot (Gen. 13:10). Damascus was a Beth-Eden in the eyes of men, the whole of that region a Beth-Aven in the sight of God (*). The people of Syria, to whom Gilead had offered easy prey beyond the Jordan, ‘shall go into captivity to Kir, says the Lord’ (v. 5). The Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser, a few years after Amos’s prophecy, fulfilled this prediction (2 Kings 16:9; Jer. 49:23–27).

(*) Beth-Aven and Beth-Eden have not been identified by geographers.

“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have car-

ried away the whole captivity to deliver it to Edom; but I will send a fire into the walls of Gaza, and it shall devour her palaces; and I will cut off the inhabitant from Ashdod, and the ruler from Ashkelon; and I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish, says the Lord God” (vv. 6–8).

Like the other nations, Philistia was guilty of previous transgressions, and the entire history of Israel shows us how great was the hatred of the Philistines towards this nation which had fought against them and then enslaved them when the monarchy was established over the people of God. The principal cities of Philistia—Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Ekron—are singled out for special condemnation. The fourth transgression surpassed all the others: the Philistines had sold all the captives of Judah and Israel into slavery, handing them over to Edom, their most cruel enemy. Thus judgement falls upon the one who holds the sceptre, the governor in charge; the inhabitants of Ashdod are massacred, the rest of the Philistines perish; none escape, and there is no sign that their captives will be restored in the last days. In Jer. 47, judgement falls upon them through

Pharaoh; then Assyria and Egypt vie for their cities, sometimes conquered by one, sometimes recaptured by the other, until nothing remains but ruins. We see in 2 Chron. 28:17–20 we see the Philistines’ attack on Judah under Ahaz, as well as that of the Edomites, their allies; in Isaiah 9:11, 12 the attack of the Syrians and Philistines against Israel; in Isaiah 14:29–32 that of the Assyrians against Philistia.

‘Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke it, because they delivered the whole captives to Edom, and did not remember the brotherly covenant; but I will send a fire into the walls of Tyre, and it shall devour her palaces’ (vv. 9, 10).

So far we have seen the judgement of two nations, entirely alien to God’s people. They had always been in open hostility towards him. We now enter new territory: first, that of fraternal ties; second, that of kinship with Israel—relationships which, even if they were merely fleshly, created obligations for Edom, Ammon and Moab, and ought to have curbed their antipathy and hatred. Here Tyre is at issue. This kingdom had known fa-

vourable and particularly blessed times, when Hiram, recognising the God of David and Solomon, had made a covenant with these two kings and had undertaken to cooperate in the building of the temple of the Lord. How had this affection and this fraternal alliance, over the years, given way to hatred? David's grace, Solomon's wisdom and power, but above all their faith, had once captivated Hiram's heart. He had understood that the Lord was the object of all his friends' thoughts; he had seen that their sole desire was to provide God, in the midst of His people, with a dwelling worthy of Him. Though the deeds of Hiram were unknown to his successors, God did not forget them and held the heirs of the king of Tyre accountable for having once enjoyed a kingdom linked to the blessings of the covenant. Even though this covenant had been but a passing and occasional one, Tyre, having enjoyed it, had become responsible for preserving it; yet the interests of this trading nation had swiftly turned it away from spiritual blessings; it had seen a source of profit in the alliance with Philistia to wage war against God's people and reduce them to captivity. It mattered little to them that he was sold to Edom, Israel's bitter

enemy; the thirst for gold overrode all other considerations. Later, these two allied nations repeated their sacrilegious act by selling the captives of Israel to Javan. But there was something else at play besides profit: their policy was to drive Israel from its borders (Joel 3:6), so as to seize territories to which they laid claim, forgetting that these territories belonged to the Lord. They forgot or were unaware that the Lord had chosen for Himself a special inheritance from among all the nations. Gilead was His, Manasseh was His, Ephraim was the strength of His head, Judah was His lawgiver (Ps. 108:8). Gaza and Tyre had been foolish enough to lay hands on, and audacious enough to appropriate, what belonged to God: ‘my silver and my gold’, and to carry into their temples ‘my beautiful and desirable things’ (Joel 3:5). Whilst He might see fit to chastise Israel through the hand of these enemy nations, He did not consider that any nation had the right to take advantage of the situation for its own gain.

Do not the present days offer similar examples? Nations ally themselves to take possession of territories that do not belong to them and to expand at the expense of their neighbours, de-

porting them and seizing their riches, without giving a moment's thought to the fact that 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it!' (Ps. 24:1).

'Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke it, because he pursued his brother with the sword, and stifled mercy, and his anger tore without end, and he kept his fury for ever. And I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the palaces of Bozrah' (vv. 11, 12).

With Edom, we turn to the peoples related to Israel. Their transgressions are no less serious than those of the foreign nations. Esau, Edom, is judged for his murderous and merciless hatred towards his brother Jacob. The preceding peoples are treated less severely than those that follow. The judgement on Edom is utterly without mercy. His savage hatred towards the people of the Lord (for the closer the ties, and this is characteristic of man, the more intense the hatred) compels God to say, at the very end of his history: 'I have hated Esau'. Thus he shall remain without offspring. (See Obadiah. Jer. 49:7–22): 'He is no more,' says Jeremiah (49:10), whilst even Moab and

Ammon, and subsequently Elam, see their captives restored (48:47; 49:6, 39). Edom's case is without remission, without forgiveness. It is the only one of these nations to be exterminated, or at least entirely subjugated; it will be the scene of the terrible carnage of the end (Isa. 63:1–6). But it is not hatred alone that characterises Edom; we have seen it make use of Philistia and Tyre, nations with which it had no kinship of origin, to enslave Israel, its brother according to the flesh. It thus expressed not only its deep-seated anger against Jacob, who had robbed it of its birthright, but also its contempt for God's decree: 'The greater shall serve the lesser' (Gen. 25:23). Having reduced his brother to slavery, he seized the whole of southern Palestine (Idumea) and annexed it to his territory, contrary to God's express will and the principles of His government, when He established the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel (Deut. 32:8) (*).

(*) The king of Edom is not named here. Edom had no king in the time of Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:1), nor in the time of Uzziah (2 Chron. 25:7).

‘Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of the sons of Ammon, and for four, I will not revoke it, because they ripped open the bellies of the pregnant women of Gilead, in order to enlarge their borders; and I will kindle a fire in the walls of Rabbah, and it shall devour her palaces, amidst the shouts on the day of battle, amidst the storm on the day of the whirlwind; and their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together, says the Lord’ (vv. 13–15).

Edom’s kinship with Israel dated back to Isaac; that of Ammon and Moab, through Lot, to Abraham. Although based on shameful events, it was older than the former. Among the sons of Ammon we find appalling cruelty towards the tribes beyond the Jordan, with the aim of exterminating their male descendants and taking permanent possession of the territory of Gilead. In this, like Edom, Ammon forgets that the Lord himself had dispossessed him in order to give an inheritance to his people. It was the Lord’s land and could not be alienated. Man’s plans fail in the face of the great truth that the cause of the Lord, against which none of man’s claims will prevail, will ultimately prevail. This kingdom of plunder, like that of Edom, will come

to an end ‘amidst the cries on the day of battle, amidst the storm on the day of the whirlwind’. Its ruin will be more terrible than all the others. The storm will break upon the whole people, but its leaders will go into captivity, king and princes alike, like the people of Syria. The prophet Elisha had wept over such crimes (2 Kings 8:12. See also Hosea 13:6). How, then, does the Lord permit them? Is He insensitive to such horrors? No doubt He knew in advance what would come from the heart of man, which had become His rod to chastise His people, but He shows—and this is the first thing He emphasises here—that He will break the rod He has used.

CHAPTER 2

‘Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke it, because he burnt the bones of the king of Edom to lime; and I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the palaces of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amidst the tumult, amidst the cries, to the sound of the trumpet, and I will cut off the judge from among them, and I will slay all his princes with him, says the Lord’ (2:1–3).

Moab's character stands in stark contrast to what we have seen so far. We are faced with a new principle. It is not merely that God's government scrupulously records the wrongs done to His guilty people by the nations, which have become His instruments for chastising them, but He also records the wrongs committed by these nations themselves against one another. Filled with an insatiable desire for vengeance that even takes its toll on the dead, Moab desecrated the tomb of the king of Edom. We do not know on what occasion, but in doing so he showed contempt for the established authority of God, however guilty it might be. Desecrating graves, removing the bones, and burning them was an act of vengeance belonging to God alone. In the case of Josiah, this act was intended to defile the altars of false gods (2 Kings 23:15–17), but it was not for men to take such action, except in obedience to God. Did a defiled man have the right to judge the dead, other men defiled like himself? Some have sought to interpret this act in the somewhat enigmatic account given to us in 2 Kings 23:15–17. We do not think so, and we see in the event recounted here rather a furious vengeance by Moab against Edom, which had once in-

vaded and humiliated it—a vengeance subsequent to the account in 2 Kings 3 and which, unable to be taken out on the living king, was satisfied by desecrating his tomb. The event recounted in our passage is of great moral significance regarding the ways of God’s government. Even though it concerns Edom, whose fury against God’s people and against God Himself was boundless, God punishes every breach of the rules He has established, every attack—even after death—on the authority He has instituted. It will be the same before the throne of judgement, but often such iniquity finds its retribution here on earth. God forgets nothing. What a description of Moab’s utter destruction amidst the turmoil of battle! Along with the ruler, all his princes are slain. Yet, in the last days, Moab, like the sons of Ammon, will see its captives restored (Jer. 48:17; 49:6), whilst nothing of the sort is told of Edom (Jer. 49:7–22).

By whom was the judgement of Moab carried out? We see in Ezek. 25:8–11 that it was by ‘the sons of the East’. In Isaiah 15 and 16, Moab’s fate is announced as imminent: ‘within three years, as the years of a hired soldier’ (v. 14). This prophecy may have been uttered during the reign of Uzziah or Hezekiah.

In Jeremiah, the destruction of Moab is brought about by the ‘devastator’, who appears to be Nebuchadnezzar. But Isaiah 25:10 tells us that the judgement of Moab will be consummated when this people, having been restored at the end of time, the Lord establishes his reign and death is swallowed up in victory. Similarly, in Zephaniah 2:10, 11, the prophetic remnant of Israel plunders Moab. We see again in Daniel 11:41 that Edom, Moab and the sons of Ammon escape from the hand of the future Assyrian (for they had not been spared by the historical Assyrian, or rather by Babylon) and are, as it were, set apart and reserved for a special judgement at the end of time.

Let us also note that the closer the relationship of these nations with God’s people, the more severe the judgement that falls upon them.

‘Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke it, because they have despised the law of the Lord and have not kept his statutes, and their lies, after which their fathers walked, have led them astray; and I will

send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem” (vv. 4, 5).

If God never renounces his promises, neither does he ever revoke his judgement, much less when it concerns his own people rather than those who oppress them. In relation to the nations, he is his people’s advocate and takes up their cause; but towards his own, his judgement is all the more severe because their closeness to God has been greater. The severity of this judgement is evident in the fact that God completely equates Israel with the nations, the objects of his irrevocable punishment. The ‘three and four transgressions’ are also laid to Judah’s charge. God gives him, and this is important to note, only one reason for his judgement: his relationship with the Lord. He punishes the nations according to their conduct towards his people; He punishes His people according to their conduct towards Him. Everything is contained in this simple question. Had they honoured or despised the word of God? Had they kept His precepts? God’s discipline towards us on earth (for this concerns God’s government and not eternal judgement) depends above all on the influence that the Word

exerts on our lives and our conduct. To neglect it makes us like the world. Do we give enough thought to the fact that keeping His Word (Rev. 3:8) earns us the Lord's approval, and that despising His law brings His judgement upon us? In what way had they despised it? In that, instead of keeping the statutes of the Lord, they had followed the idolatrous falsehoods which their fathers had pursued. The moment we neglect the Word of God, a void is created in our hearts, and the world is quick to fill it.

In verses 6 to 16, Israel—that is, the ten tribes, apart from Judah—is brought to the judgement of the nations. As we have said, the ten tribes form the specific subject of Amos's prophecy; consequently, the reasons for their punishment are described in far greater detail than those for Judah. The judgement pronounced upon Israel is just as inexorable as the others. God had recorded all the transgressions of Ephraim. His conduct was driven by a base greed that preyed upon the righteous, the poor, the weak, the meek, those upon whom God's favour rests at all times, those whom He had sent defenceless into this world, like lambs among wolves, and finally to those whom the

Lord declares blessed, for they shall inherit the earth on which the wickedness of men grants them no place.

If the condition of Judah is contempt for the Word, that of Israel can be summed up in a single word: a lack of fear of God. They had ‘sold the righteous for silver’. Later, Judah followed the same path by handing over, for thirty pieces of silver, the Righteous One par excellence into the hands of men. ‘And the poor man for a pair of sandals’, a common and worthless object, which one might acquire without even opening one’s purse. Such was their estimation of those whom God valued above all else. ‘They who long to see the dust of the earth upon the heads of the lowly’: They longed to see the wretched in mourning so that, stripped of everything, they might become their prey and they might take advantage of this to enslave them. “And who pervert the way of the meek”: The meek combine gentleness with kindness in their dealings with men. The Lord was meek and humble of heart; He imparts His character to His beloved, who, through the knowledge of Christ, are able to reflect His traits. ‘To pervert their way’ is to accuse them of acting in contradiction to their profession, in order to hinder

them from following the path they desire to walk for the glory of God and for the good of mankind. Such accusations always betray a hidden hatred of Christ, whose followers, amidst many acknowledged weaknesses and infirmities, seek to imitate his character. The hostile tendencies of men's hearts are not always laid bare, and are often disguised so as to deceive everyone as to the true motives behind their conduct, which is wholly devoted to the pursuit of their own interests. Sooner or later, however, the gains they have made by taking the poor man's property as security and fining their neighbour (v. 8) breed corruption and serve to fuel the most shameless practices. Even the respect due to the family, and the fear that parents ought to inspire in their children, are forgotten in order to satisfy the basest lusts (v. 7). In this state of greed, corruption and contempt for God's true people, these men 'lie down beside every altar', for the religion they profess is not that of the true, the only altar of God, but a religion that has only the appearance of the true. Such a picture differs not, morally, from that of the Christian world.

Yet what had not the Lord done for this people? Israel's past history proved the care God had shown them: He had exterminated the Canaanites before them, had destroyed the power of Satan opposing their possession of the Promised Land. Despite their stature as lofty as the proud cedars, despite their strength as mighty as the oaks, they had been unable to stand up to Israel; they had been exterminated, root and fruit (v. 9), and were no better than a withered tree trunk, destined for the fire.

‘And I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you through the wilderness for forty years, to take possession of the land of the Amorites’ (v. 10). God reminds them here how He ultimately secured their victory by accomplishing the work of salvation on their behalf. This work consists of two indispensable elements: 1. ‘I brought you up out of the land of Egypt’. This is the redemption that delivers us from the world and from Satan's bondage. 2. ‘I led you through the wilderness for forty years’. This is the discipline without which we could not reach our heavenly Canaan. Undoubtedly, redemption is sufficient to grant the believer immediate access to Paradise, but, as a redeemed person, he is here on earth the object of the continual

working of the Word, to purify and sanctify him, for without holiness no one will see the Lord. Thus, in Eph. 5, the Lord gave himself up for the Church, our redemption being the fruit of his love for us; then he sanctifies the Church by purifying it through the washing of water, through the Word, for he wishes to present it to himself spotless and wrinkle-free, holy and blameless, in glory. This is what Israel, as a type, ought to have known, but, in the face of so much grace and care, it had forsaken God and his law. Yet the Lord's patience towards them had not grown weary: He had raised up prophets from among their sons, and Nazirites from among their young men; prophets, bearers of His Word, to bring them back through repentance to the God from whom they had turned away, and to make them attentive to His judgments and His mercies—Nazarenes, whose example preached abstinence from the defilements of the world, the rejection of all that causes intoxication by satisfying the lusts of the flesh; in a word, a sanctified life. But, says the Lord, 'you made the Nazirites drink wine, and you commanded the prophets, saying, "Do not prophesy."' They, the 'drunkards of Ephraim', had dismissed the troublesome

witness of the Nazirites by forcing them to act like themselves; they had silenced the prophets. Out of enmity towards God, they had seduced or oppressed his servants.

This complete lack of fear of God is the cause of a judgement upon Israel, compared (v. 13) to a cart laden with sheaves on the day of harvest, which passes by, shaking the ground beneath the weight of its axles. When the harvest is gathered into the barns, they will be crushed beneath the wheels. A striking image of the judgement that was to befall Israel, of which the earthquake foretold by Amos was to be the harbinger! Verses 14–16 show the impossibility of escaping this cataclysm. Strength to withstand the coming judgement, power to overcome it, weapons to fight it, agility to escape it, courage to face it—man will lack all these on that day: having become the prey of judgement, he will flee naked before God.

Such is the irrevocable decree against the ten tribes; less than a hundred years later, it was carried out.

CHAPTERS 3 TO 5:17

Hear this word

In the first section of our prophet's book (chapters 1–2), we saw that the words 'Thus says the Lord' heralded a certain judgement, already decreed. The decree could not be revoked. Judah, and then the ten tribes, were not set apart from the surrounding nations. The only difference is that, being closer to the Lord and therefore more guilty than their idolatrous neighbours, the charges brought against them exceed the former in number and gravity. Israel, above all, had taken its iniquities to the extreme. Its moral state was even worse than its deeds. Whilst Judah was accused of disobedience, contempt for the divine word and idolatry, Israel was characterised by a complete lack of fear of God: such was their spiritual condition. Nations are judged for their conduct towards God's people, Israel in particular, for its conduct towards the Lord, in the person of those who represent Him on earth, the poor Remnant upon whom His eyes rest with favour. The same was true later of the tribe of Judah. In the days of Jesus, those who confessed their

sins—the ‘lowly of the earth’; the poor, the meek, the persecuted—were the special objects of His care. The Gospel was proclaimed to these poor of the flock; promises were made to them; they were declared blessed; consolations were for them when, like their Master, they were pursued, persecuted and put to death by the leaders of Judah. In this second section, a new summons, a supreme call, is addressed to Israel: ‘Hear this word!’

Let us not forget that, when Amos prophesied, the people of Israel under Uzziah, and particularly under Jeroboam II, having endured terrible but partial judgments, had once again reached the height of relative prosperity. Wealth, luxury, ease, the softening—or rather, the corruption—of morals, and a life of well-being unprecedented since Solomon’s time characterised this people. One might say that those times have more than one point of contact with our own. Never has the world seemed to have been more flourishing in terms of its material interests, whilst its forgetfulness of God and its moral corruption have reached their peak. Suddenly, God’s long patience comes to an end, at the very moment when the world least expected it and

seemed most prosperous. The Lord roars from Zion; the earthquake, foretold by the prophet, strikes Israel; the cataclysm of which it is the centre strikes it and spreads to all its neighbours!

From this third chapter onwards, the Lord addresses the whole people, without losing sight of his primary and most immediate purpose: the terrible judgement which, within a few years, would befall the ten tribes.

‘Hear this word which the Lord speaks against you, O sons of Israel, against the whole family whom I brought up out of the land of Egypt, saying: I have known you alone of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities’ (vv. 1, 2). God does not separate the whole family when He speaks of His past mercies. The division of the tribes was the result of their sins, and God had permitted it as a judgement upon them, not as a special favour. The time would come when the broken bond between Judah and Israel would be restored, and when these enemy brothers, reunited by grace, would once again dwell together in harmony. For the time being, God gathers them together in judgement; but it was as a ‘whole family’

that He had once redeemed them from Egypt. Redemption regarded them as forming a unity; regeneration will see them reunited as one. The same is true of the Church. Once Christ loved her and gave Himself up for her; today she is far more divided than the twelve tribes ever were. In the future the Lord will present her as one, His purified Bride, without spot or wrinkle, in glory. Today the Lord says to her: ‘Hear this word’. Since Israel was set apart from all the nations around it, a very grave responsibility ensued for it: ‘Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.’ We cannot meditate enough on this important principle. The greatness of our responsibility is measured by the greatness of our privilege. A Moses, the friend of God, is judged more severely for a single transgression than an ignorant person who does not enjoy this privilege, or has no share in it. The same applies to nations. Those who have been enlightened by the light of the Word are judged more severely than those who, being deprived of it, have lived in the darkness of ignorance. The most privileged of the Protestant nations despise those living in the darkness of Catholicism, forgetting that it is upon themselves that the most painful blows will fall. They

must give account to God and not boast of their privileges. It is with God that man is on his journey. ‘Can two men walk together unless they are in agreement?’ (v. 3). This truth applies as much to nations as to individuals. In Luke 12:54–59, men ought to have discerned the Lord’s time and understood that whilst grace was with them at that moment like a shower, the scorching judgement, the south wind, of which it is said, ‘It will be hot’, was about to blow. That being the case, did they not see that it was a matter of their escaping the day of judgement? ‘When you are going with your adversary before the magistrate, make every effort on the way to be released from him, lest he drag you before the judge; and the judge will hand you over to the bailiff, and the bailiff will throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last penny.’ For individuals as well as for nations, the only way to escape the judicial power is to strive to be delivered from it whilst one is on the way with it. How can this be done? By accepting in advance as just the judgement deserved, by acknowledging oneself guilty, and by appealing for mercy.

In our passage, the Spirit shows us instead that it is impossible to walk with God if we do not agree with Him. The world's claim to possess God's favour stands in stark contrast to what the Word presents to us here. The world is in no way in agreement with God regarding the necessity of its own condemnation. It speaks of its just cause, claims to fight for justice and righteousness, and fails to see that God accuses it of iniquity and injustice, that God is fundamentally at odds with it, and cannot take up its cause, since it is hopelessly lost. Yes, judgement is at the door: Israel did not realise it. The lion roared in the forest, having already caught its prey and ready to devour it. The lion cub, an instrument of lesser or partial judgements, had caught something. The net was set for the unwary bird that was about to fall into the trap. It was about to rise from the ground, holding captive in its meshes those it had lured in. Already the warnings had been heard, the trumpet had sounded in the city... had the people trembled? Had they recognised the hand of the Lord when evil had befallen some limited region of the land of Israel? (vv. 4–6). God had proclaimed the immin-

ence of the judgments; the forests, the fields, the towns of Israel bore witness to this; but where were ears to hear?

And yet God had not been content merely to speak through calamities or partial judgments. He had done nothing without prior warning: ‘For the Lord God will do nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets’ (v. 7). Such was the role of the prophets, whose numbers multiplied all the more in Israel as judgement drew nearer. God had revealed his secret to them: this fact is of paramount importance for all ages. The Scriptures now take the place of the prophet, for in Israel he was the messenger of God’s word and proclaimed the secret of the Lord. To know this secret, we can today consult the Word. It makes known to us, just as the prophet did in Israel, God’s judgement and the grace that rises above the judgement. We are today the keepers of this secret contained in the Scriptures. Let us pay close attention to it. Let us remain with the prophet and not with the world that refuses to heed the secret revealed to the servant of the Lord when the lion roared. Let us proclaim to mankind the only way to escape the Judge. Like the prophet who held God’s secret, our part is to be utterly separated from a

world ripe for judgement. Alas, just as with Israel, He commands us today, saying: ‘Do not prophesy!’ (2:12). Yet let nothing hinder us: ‘The lion has roared: who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken: who will not prophesy?’ Men may well sing to give themselves courage, exulting as they proclaim victory in advance: they are afraid! The cloud, streaked with lightning, descends ever lower upon their heads, looms over them, envelops them; they are afraid whilst singing hymns of triumph. They expend all their energy to overcome the storm; they cry out: ‘I stand firm, I shall succeed, my strength will overcome the fury of the elements’—yet deep in their souls they are afraid. They will never admit it, but whether they are on one side or the other, they are afraid. Can they do anything against the lion that has roared, against the Lord who has spoken, against the Ruler who already holds his prey? The believer’s task is to prophesy, for he holds the secret of God. Christians, let us not fail to do this; may our voice, may the word of God, be heard clearly amidst the raging elements, if only to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement,

if only to save from the fowler's snare some poor bird bewitched by the mirror over which a net has been stretched!

In v. 9 God calls upon Philistia (Ashdod) and Egypt to assemble on the mountains of Samaria to see 'the great confusion that is in her midst, and the oppressions that take place within her: and they do not know how to do what is right... they who amass violence and plunder in their palaces'. It is not that God exonerates these nations, for Philistia was identified in the first chapter as one of the objects of judgement, because of the oppression inflicted upon the captives of the ten tribes, and God calls these nations to bear witness to the iniquities of Ephraim, so that they may understand that, if He judges Israel through them, it is not because He regards them as innocent, but because He all the more asserts His character in the face of all evil, wherever His name is invoked. How little this truth is understood today! A nation that enslaves another believes that God is using it and approving of it because it is better than its defeated enemy. Let it meditate on these verses! God uses Philistia and Egypt to chastise, and not as a sign of favour towards these nations. 'The remnant of the Philistines shall perish'

(1:8), said the Lord. Let them therefore take heed! They will not be the objects of grace amidst the overthrow they have wrought, but from the midst of the people, crushed by judgment, the Lord will save a poor little remnant. ‘As a shepherd saves from the lion’s mouth two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the sons of Israel be saved who sit in Samaria on the corner of a bed, and on the damask of a couch’ (v. 12). There will remain some remnants who, however mutilated they may be, may be recognised by the shepherd to whom they belong. The Remnant of a people, doomed to destruction, will be gathered by the shepherd of the flock. One man alone, Christ, emerged unscathed from the lion’s mouth without being devoured. Exposed to the arrows of the archers, ‘his strength remained undiminished’; even in the very midst of death He was ‘the power of God’.

This small Remnant is the object of the Lord’s care. We see it reappear in chapter 5, verse 15: ‘Perhaps the Lord, the God of hosts, will show mercy to the remnant of Joseph’, if he returns to the right path. This same Remnant is again, in chapter 4, verse 11, described as ‘a brand plucked from the fire’. Simil-

arly, in chapter 9:8, speaking of the twelve tribes, He says: ‘Yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob’. Then comes the announcement of what the Lord will do in the last days, when He restores Israel (vv. 11–15). All God’s dealings with His people end in a song of triumph. His judgements are invariably followed by the outcome of His faithfulness to His promises—in a word, His grace!

‘Listen,’ says the Lord (v. 13). The prophets had made the enemies hear the rallying cry (v. 9). Here, these same prophets bear witness throughout Israel, for they alone are listening. Did the earthquake not serve as a warning to you? Destruction will come upon your false altars; the altar at Bethel will fall to the ground. Under Jeroboam I, the old prophet had prophesied against this very altar at Bethel. His curse was immediately fulfilled (1 Kings 13:2, 5) as a sign of what was to come. Josiah fulfilled this prophecy (2 Kings 23:15) some one hundred years after Amos’s words, for, as we have often said, the distinctive feature of this prophet is to announce impending judgements.

All the prosperity and wealth accumulated by the effeminate men of Samaria will vanish in the turmoil: ‘I will strike the winter house along with the summer house, and the ivory houses shall perish, and many houses shall cease to exist, says the Lord’ (v. 15).

The opulence of which the world boasts and which it pursues as its supreme goal is one of the distinctive features of this prophet (see 3:12, 15; 5:11; 6:1:4–6). All this is judged (*).

(*) A second charge that recurs frequently in this book is the oppression of the weak (see 2:7–8; 3:10; 4:1; 5:11; 8:5–6).

CHAPTER 4

Here we hear for the second time (v. 1; see 3:1): ‘Hear this word’. The prophet is no longer addressing the whole house of Israel, as in v. 1 of chapter 3, but the ten tribes and the hill country of Samaria. He descends, so to speak, from his high vantage point at Tekoa, enters the territory of Ephraim and prophesies at Bethel:

‘Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the weak, who crush the poor, who say to your masters: “Bring, that we may drink!” The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you when he will drag you away with fishhooks, and your offspring with fishing nets. And you shall go out through the breaches, each straight ahead, and you shall be hurled towards Hermon, says the Lord’ (vv. 1–3).

The first comparison is drawn from the imagery so common in Amos, inspired by herds. The ‘cows of Bashan’ are not, as some have thought, the women of Samaria, in contrast to the ‘bulls of Bashan’, an image of brute strength; but here they represent a select herd fattened on the lush pastures of the Bashan plateau, beyond the Jordan. Their sustenance is the oppression of the weak and the crushing of the poor. The masters who tend them, their kings, provide them with what is needed to satisfy their thirst for comfort. I believe that drunkenness, so often cited as one of Ephraim’s plagues, is not excluded from this image (see Hosea 2:8; 5:11; 6:6). This entire passage refers to the material prosperity of Samaria and the excesses that accom-

pany it, but this well-being is acquired at the expense of the weak and the poor whom it oppresses. In a nutshell, this history of Israel is a figure of the history of the world on the eve of its final ruin. Increasingly, the ambition of men and their rulers today is directed towards material prosperity. A government that satisfies this demand: ‘Bring, that we may drink’ is welcomed by its people. The rich themselves form ‘trusts’ to amass billions, ruining all small industries and preventing them from surviving. Nations are making immense and sustained efforts to gain industrial supremacy over other nations and to hinder their development. With material prosperity, excesses and immorality increase and multiply. Moral reform is, despite appearances, entirely alien to the minds of men, for ‘the fear of God is not before their eyes’. The Lord roars from Zion, and in an instant all this prosperity is struck down. God’s holiness could no longer bear all this injustice. Is this not a striking example of what is happening to us today? The days have come: terror falls upon the panicked flock, which pours out en masse through the breaches, in inexpressible confusion, not knowing where its path leads. Here another image arises, common in the prophets

to indicate the result of the enemy's invasions: the hooks to catch each fish and lead it to its death, the fishing nets (others translate this as 'snares') to bring them into captivity. 'Harmon' has not been identified and has given rise to much commentary; I believe it indicates the place to which the people of Samaria are to be taken.

'Come to Bethel and sin! At Gilgal, multiply your transgressions! Bring your sacrifices in the morning, your tithes every three days; and offer leavened bread as a sacrifice of thanksgiving; and make known your freewill offerings, proclaim them! For this is what you love to do, O sons of Israel, says the Lord God" (vv. 4, 5).

Alongside the gratification of their lusts, a second characteristic defines them: their religion. What makes it all the more detestable is that they have retained its outward form. Bethel, where God had revealed himself to Jacob, where Jacob, on the point of returning there, had buried all his family's idols (Gen. 35:1–5); Bethel, a place from which idolatry had been banished, had become the site of the calf set up by Jeroboam I, in

the name of the Lord! Is this spectacle not, to some extent, the one presented by Christianity? It has retained the outward appearance of the worship of God, whilst introducing its own idols. Gilgal, where the flesh had been judged and cut away, offered the same hybrid worship; there man brought his impurity and his transgressions! On fixed days he came to offer sacrifices and tithes to God, and caused leavened bread to be burnt, a worship of the flesh, instead of the unleavened bread of a holy life, consecrated to the Lord. He made voluntary offerings to gain a reputation for piety before the world, for he had no intention of offering them to God.

God's judgments were the consequence of this false religion; famine and drought afflicted one man whilst sparing his neighbour, clear proof that these plagues could not be attributed to chance, but to God Himself who inflicted them. The loss of their harvests, a plague like the plague of Egypt that had once fallen upon their enemies, a downfall like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, had befallen them; a brand saved from the fire, a wretched remnant, already half-consumed, was all that remained to them (vv. 4–11). 'And yet you have not re-

turned to me,' says the Lord! Five times this painful word of reproach is repeated. Nothing had been able to bring them to repentance. They had not heeded the call: 'Hear this word'; they had not understood that God was speaking to them through these events, and they had not turned back. Is the world today any better than Israel? Has Christendom heeded the many partial warnings that have been repeated over the years? Just as in days gone by, it has taken 'the lion's roar'. If the shepherd still snatches a few remnants from the enemy, if the rescuer still pulls a few embers from the fire, the nation as a whole does not return to God. What will be done to it, and what will be its fate? There is but one thing left for it: 'Prepare to meet your God. For behold, He who forms the mountains and creates the wind, who declares to man what His thoughts are, who turns the dawn into darkness, and who walks on the high places of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is His name!' (vv. 12, 13). What, at that moment, will be the fate of mankind? Had Israel, despite all its preparation, been able to endure the presence of God seated upon Sinai? (Ex. 19:11, 15). Terrified and trembling, they would have wished that the word had not been

addressed to them! As they prepare to meet Him, their sentence has already been pronounced in advance. God will judge them not only by their deeds, but by the state of their hearts, He who knows their intentions and who ‘reveals to man what is in his heart’; and when that day dawns for Israel, for mankind, it will be the dawn of eternal darkness (see Joel 2:2).

CHAPTER 5: 1–17

The first warning: ‘Hear this word’—was addressed to ‘the whole house’ of Israel, to whom the Lord had sent his prophets; but they had not listened to them. So the prophets were called upon to gather against them, and first of all against Samaria, Philistia and Egypt, and then to bear witness against their worldliness and idolatry (3:13–15).

The second warning: ‘Hear this word’ was now addressed solely to the mountain of Samaria, to its insatiable pursuit of material prosperity and to the abominable mixing of the worship of the Lord with that of false gods. All the calls had been in vain; the day was coming when they would meet God face to face.

But God does not grow weary; He says a third time: ‘Hear this word’ (v. 1). Three is the divine number; here, perfection in the warning. Whether He rewards, judges or warns, God does so in accordance with the perfection of His character.

This word is a lament over the house of Israel, which has not returned, after so many varied warnings. All that remains for it is war and defeat (vv. 1–3); and how apt this word is for the days we are living through! The virgin of Israel ‘has fallen, she will not rise again... she lies prostrate on her land; there is no one to raise her up’ (v. 2). She has lost almost all her warriors and can no longer defend herself against her enemies: ‘The city that went out to battle with a thousand shall have a hundred left; and the one that went out to battle with a hundred shall have ten left, for the house of Israel’ (v. 3). ‘Thus says the Lord God’: her fate is now sealed.

In v. 4, this word of the Lord: ‘Thus says the Lord’ (cf. ch. 1 and 2), comes to Israel one last time. How solemn and moving it all is! It is a final door opened onto life and salvation: ‘Thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me, and you shall

live’. ‘Seek the Lord, and you shall live!’ (v. 4, 6). The death sentence has already been pronounced, but it is enough that you seek me, after having so stubbornly refused to return to me, for the execution of the sentence to be postponed. Do not seek Bethel, nor Gilgal, nor Beersheba, for all this false religion will come to nothing: Bethel will become Beth-Aven. It is not a religion that you need, but God: ‘The Lord is his name’ (v. 8). Israel’s fate is sealed for its ruin, but the fate of those who seek the Lord amidst the ruin is also sealed for eternal life. Therefore, it is not too late, but this is the final hour; take heed! The shadow of death can be turned into morning at a single sign from the Lord; but a single sign from Him can also turn the day into the darkness of night. In an instant, too, He can bring about such an upheaval that the sea pours out over the face of the earth (v. 8). These things will take place suddenly, just as, two years later, the earthquake took place.

Did they listen? Did they seek God? (vv. 10–12.) Alas! All their traits are listed in the few verses that follow: their hatred for the one who rebukes them at the gate, the place where justice is administered and proclaimed publicly before the elders; their ab-

horrence of the one who speaks the truth with a clear conscience and a pure heart; their oppression of the poor and the taxes they exact from them; their readiness to allow themselves to be bribed to pervert, before the judges, the rights of the poor: all this in order to feed their luxury and satisfy their lusts. What a statement this is: ‘They oppress the righteous!’ Has not the world invented this dreadful maxim: Might makes right? ‘They oppress the righteous!’ Did they not act in the same way towards Jesus?

‘That is why, in these times, the wise man will keep silent, for it is an evil time’ (v. 13). This truth is important for the present day. It is not for the wise man, for the one who knows the thoughts of God, to oppose evil: it is so great in the world that only judgement can respond to it. The current is too strong to break or stem. The wise man keeps silent and takes refuge in the sanctuary, far from all the turmoil around him; he does not protest, does not raise his voice, keeps his lips sealed, trusting in God to intervene, often not knowing what to ask for as is fitting, and confining himself to the inexpressible sighs of the Spirit within him. He waits for the moment when he may once

again open his mouth to celebrate the triumph, in righteousness, of the one Lord to whom victory belongs.

If the invitation to listen is repeated three times (3:1; 4:1; 5:1), so too is the call to ‘seek the Lord’ in order to live repeated three times (vv. 4, 6, 14). What care on God’s part! This divine number clearly expresses His ardent desire to see man escape death. The Lord makes the way easy for him! A single desire of the heart for Him, and the sinner finds life: ‘Seek me’, ‘Seek the Lord’. ‘Seek good, and not evil, that you may live.’ You will find me by seeking him; you will seek him by finding me! The knowledge of God always leads us to desire what is good and enables us to do it, for in seeking the Lord we find life, a life capable of hating evil and loving what is good (v. 15). The silence of the righteous is by no means indifference to evil, which he must hate, but he must above all seek a realm of love that lifts his head above the enemies who surround him (Ps. 27:5, 6).

Ah! If only the world would listen! ‘Perhaps,’ it is said, ‘the Lord, the God of hosts, will show mercy to the remnant of

Joseph' (v. 15). Alas! Alas! His condition is beyond remedy! Yet there is a remnant of Joseph: the oppressed whom the Lord cherishes and whose cause He takes up; a small Remnant, for the whole nation is irretrievably lost.

Note again the three instances of 'Thus says the Lord' in this chapter (vv. 3, 4, 16); once more the number of divine perfection. This same phrase was repeated eight times (Isaiah 10:4) in the first two chapters, in connection with the governance of the earth; here three times, in connection with the people of God. On the third occasion, the judgement is pronounced definitively and without appeal: 'I will pass through your midst, says the Lord'. We shall see in chapters 7:8 and 8:2 that there is no longer any deliverance for this people through the Passover lamb; here we see that all that remains for Israel is the memorable judgement executed against Egypt on the night when the Passover lamb was slaughtered: 'I will go out into the midst of Egypt,' had said the Lord; and again: 'I will pass through the land of Egypt that night' (Ex. 11:4; 12:12).

CHAPTER 5:18 to 6:

The two 'Woes'

'Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! What good will the day of the Lord do you? It will be darkness, not light' (v. 18). In these chapters the Lord pronounces two 'woes' upon Israel; in chapter 23 of Matthew He pronounces seven, the number of fullness, because the people and their leaders had reached the height of their iniquity by definitively rejecting their Messiah, who had come in grace among them. Poor people! Here they are counting on an era of prosperity, accompanying or rather following the day when God's vengeance would be brought upon the nations that oppressed them! Is this not what we hear from all sides in the days we are living through?

The day of the Lord they hoped for was the day when God's vengeance would fall upon them. Here the 'woe' is once again directed at all Israel, at the 'whole family' (see 3:1). They reckoned they had God on their side, yet He was against them, just as He was against Egypt. They relied on their religion, but

what was it to God? 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I will not accept the scent of your solemn assemblies; even if you offer me burnt offerings and your cake offerings, I will not accept them, and I will not look upon the peace offerings of your fattened cattle. 'Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the music of your harps' (vv. 21–23). Is this not what Isaiah says? (1:10–15). The Lord hates man's religion; it is the heart He seeks, and the conscience, not the forms. It is the same today. We may boast of having correct and scriptural forms of worship, thinking that they bring upon the people God's approval and the privilege of having God on their side; we cry out, 'God is with us', and we forget His judgments. The long-awaited day of light will be a day of darkness, the day of the Lord, the opposite of a day of deliverance (vv. 18, 20; 5:8). People flee from the devouring lion, but another judgement meets them to suffocate them; they think they have found a refuge, a house, a wall, on which to lean, and they lay their hand on the serpent that bites them, instead of finding God who protects them. God hates all outward forms of worship; sacrifices and hymns do not deceive God. Judgement is

here; nothing can stop it. 'Let judgement roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!' (v. 24). This is what awaits mankind. They want peace and light without seeking good instead of evil—God's protection, without the life that shelters from judgement. Is this not their entire history? Had it been any different from the moment they left Egypt, from whence they had brought their false gods? Was it to God that they had offered sacrifices and offerings for forty years in the wilderness? In days gone by God had borne with them, for there is no trace of such idolatry in the account of the Exodus, where God is busy showing them, through the sacrifices of the Law, the atonement for their sins through Christ—the only way for them to be reconciled with Him. But God had taken note of all these abominations, from the Kiun of their images and the star of their god, right up to the golden calf, the crowning glory of their transgressions; and when He had judged them, had they then, for forty years, abandoned their idolatry? Such is the primary cause of His final judgement. It was decreed, in the ways of God, that they would be carried beyond Damascus (v. 27). From the days of old, their rebellion against God had only

grown, until the final rejection of the Son of God. This is what Stephen said, announcing to them that Judah would be carried beyond Babylon (Acts 7:43). Such is still the condition of this people today. The God of hosts (v. 27) was no longer with the armies of Israel, nor, we might add, with any army, except to use them as an instrument of his judgments.

All this is addressed to the whole people, although, in Amos, the ten tribes are always in the foreground.

CHAPTER 6

In chapter 6:1, the second ‘woe’ falls once more upon the whole people and especially upon the prosperity they enjoyed. The great men, whom the house of Israel regarded as their protectors, sought to extend their borders. Jeroboam had warded off the day of disaster by seizing the enemy’s cities. He had recaptured Hamath, an important natural frontier of Israel (2 Kings 14:28), because God had raised him up as ‘Deliverer’ of his people, but what had become of Calneh and Gath? The Assyrians had recaptured them. Would Hamath remain in the hands of those who boasted of being ‘the first among the na-

tions’? We know what became of it (2 Kings 18:34; 19:13) and how it fell into the hands of the Assyrians. What had Jeroboam done with his conquests? Unprecedented prosperity had resulted for Israel; he had taken advantage of this violent conquest of territories to increase his luxury, to lie ‘on beds of ivory’, to stretch out languidly on his couches, to eat ‘the lambs of the flock and the fat calves of the stall’ (v. 4). David, the gentle psalmist of Israel, had invented musical instruments to celebrate the Lord with dignity; they, as skilled as the prophet-king, had invented them too, but for their own use (v. 5). The outward appearance was the same as in David’s day, but the motives had completely changed. Their aim was to settle comfortably on the earth, and differed not from that of Jubal, ‘the father of all who play the harp and the flute’ (Gen. 4:21). They had reverted to the principles upon which the world had been constituted after the Fall, placing, moreover, under the protection of the name of David, a man of God, that which fuelled their selfish passions and their covetousness. They drank the wine of their drunkenness from the sacrificial cups (see 1 Kings 7:40) intended for the Lord. Was God deceived by the

cups, forgetting the wine with which they were getting drunk? They anointed themselves ‘with the finest oil’ intended for the consecration of the priests; did the oil make them pleasing in the eyes of the Lord? They boasted of being the chosen race and did not grieve ‘over the breach of Joseph’ (v. 6), nor did they mourn the ruin of Ephraim, of which they were the cause. The breach of Joseph! That name of the beloved, upon whom, as far as the hills of eternity, rested his father’s blessings—they had exposed him to ruin and boasted of their civilisation! Can we not say the same today, concerning the name of Christ? ‘Therefore, now they shall go into captivity at the head of those who go into captivity, and the cries of those who lie at ease shall cease’ (v. 7). The more their worldly culture, covered with a veneer of religion, had been displayed, without any awareness of their moral ruin, the more terrible would their judgement be. Ephraim would be at the head and Judah would follow him.

In vv. 8–10, the prophet returns to the house of Jacob, represented by Judah. God ‘detests the pride of Jacob’ and hates his palaces, just as he had hated and despised the religion of Israel

(5:21). Pride is as abominable in his sight as the outward appearance of piety. The city (I believe this refers to Jerusalem) will be handed over to Babylon along with everything it contains. The houses will be filled with the dead; the ten who remained (cf. 5:3) will also perish. A relative of the dead comes to burn them, for they lack even a burial; the man charged with searching for corpses inside the house finds not a single survivor; there is no one left! Then he says: ‘Silence! for we cannot mention the name of the Lord’ (v. 10). The judgement is complete, carried out to the very last man. There is no longer any question of appealing to Him! (Zeph. 1:7; see also 8:3). That is why the wise man keeps silent in evil times (5:13). It is no longer a matter of interceding for the nation; God must be allowed to act. ‘The Lord has commanded’: the earthquake overturns the great house and the small house.

‘Will horses gallop on a rock, or will oxen plough there? For you have turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood; you who rejoice in what is nothing, you who say: “Have we not gained power through our own strength?”’ (vv. 12, 13).

How relevant these words are today! The hearts of the peoples are a rock upon which all the Lord's efforts are spent to no avail. What do they speak of their right and their just cause, which are in truth nothing but poison and wormwood? They rely on the power they have acquired to uphold these lies. 'We are strong,' they say, 'and we shall win the victory.' God looks down from on high and says: 'You... you rejoice in what is nothing!' All the armies, all the munitions, all the fleets of the world, are in God's eyes less than a speck of dust stirred up by the wind. All that man asserts is nothing; all that he relies upon is, if possible, even less. When the time comes, God intervenes: 'Behold, O house of Israel,' says the Lord, the God of hosts, 'I am raising up a nation against you, and they shall oppress you from the entrance of Hamath to the River of the Plain' (v. 14). God raises up the Assyrians, for it is they who are referred to here, and this nation, after stripping them of what they had seized by their strength and power, will oppress them from the entrance of Hamath—which they had made a bulwark against the incursions of the enemy from the north—as far as the Jordan (the river of the plain), their natural border, and will

seize the territory they possessed east of that boundary. Everything they had boasted of conquering by their strength is taken from them. Thus have God's ways been constantly renewed since the days of Israel, and thus the history of all conquering nations presents the same spectacle.

So far, we see in Amos only prophecy in the process of being fulfilled, and nothing yet speaks to us of the end times. Today, as in the past, events are repeated, if not with the same details, at least with the same moral characteristics that bring about the same consequences.

CHAPTERS 7–9: 6

The Visions

CHAPTER 7

We have seen above the role that the number 'three'—the number of divine perfection—plays in Amos from chapter 3 onwards. There we find three instances of: 'Hear this word', three instances of: 'Seek me', and three instances of: 'Thus says the

Lord’. Chapters 5 and 6 contain only two ‘Woes’, the series not yet being complete, as it will be in Revelation 9–11 with the three trumpets of woe.

In our chapter 7:1–9 we first find three visions, no doubt corresponding to the three Assyrian invasions: Pul, Tiglath-Pileser and Shalmaneser.

The first vision is that of the locusts, a well-known image of the Assyrians (*). We know how Menahem, king of Israel, personally emerged unscathed from this attack whilst bringing ruin upon his people, a fact alluded to by the words: ‘the after-growth after the king’s mowing’ (2 Kings 15:19–21). Once the judgement is complete, the prophet intercedes and implores the Lord’s forgiveness. His intercession alone (for us, that of Christ) is capable of halting the plague. He pleads for all Israel: ‘How shall Jacob rise again? For he is small.’ He affirms the opposite of what the leaders of the people proclaimed when they said: ‘Have we not gained strength through our own power?’ (6:13). To confess before God one’s smallness, one’s inability to withstand judgement, is to speak according to

God's thoughts, and this alone leads the Lord to repent, that is, to change His mind concerning His people: 'It shall not be,' says the Lord (v. 3). The destruction is momentarily halted.

(*) See 'The Book of the Prophet Joel', by H. R.

The second vision is that of the fire which, after devouring the great abyss (in symbolic language, the sea, or the confused mass of peoples), attacks the inheritance, that is to say, the land of Israel. This is Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kings 15:27–29; 1 Chron. 5:6, 26; 2 Chron. 28:20). The prophet pleads in the same way, and God answers again: 'This too shall not come to pass' (vv. 4–6).

In the third vision, 'Behold, the Lord stood upon a plumb line, and a plumb line was in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" And I said, "A plumb line." And the Lord said: 'Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will no longer pass over them. And the high places of Isaac shall be laid waste, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be devastated, and I will rise up with the sword against the house of Jeroboam'" (vv. 7–9).

This time God acts directly and definitively. He stands upon a wall built with a plumb line; nothing can shake him, yet he also displays his justice, and nothing will cause him to deviate from it. The plumb line in his hand marks the definitive levelling of the guilty land. There is no longer any question of intercession; judgement has reached its conclusion. Israel will be destroyed. This is the deportation of the ten tribes by Shalmaneser (2 Kings 17:6). What a word this is: ‘I will no longer pass over him’. This new allusion to the Passover follows that in chapter 5:17, where the Lord announced that he would treat Israel as he had treated Egypt; but it is even more solemn than the first. There is no longer for the people that which, in the past, was the sign of their redemption—that which, through the shedding of the lamb’s blood applied to the lintels of the doors, had turned away from them the judgement of the Lord!

Verses 10 to 17 of this chapter form a sort of interlude, serving as a parenthesis and separating the first three visions—which are complete in themselves—from the visions that follow in chapter 8. Amos went down to Bethel to prophesy there. Amasia, the priest of Bethel (not a priest of the Lord), opposes the

prophet. This is the role that the priesthood according to man has always played towards the men of God who, by the Spirit, bring the word of God. Amaziah wants to drive the prophet out of the territory of the ten tribes, over which he claims spiritual authority, and accuses Amos before Jeroboam with false testimony, in order to have him condemned by the secular authorities; but he is eager to rid himself of the prophet, whose presence, despite everything, troubles his conscience: ‘Go, get out of here; flee to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but do not prophesy any more at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary and the royal residence’ (vv. 12, 13). He sends him back to his fellow believers, forgetting that God does not allow Himself to be confined by human sects and does not recognise any authority other than His own! For him, the important thing is that Amos, by proclaiming the truth to Israel, does not bring the entire religious system invented by Jeroboam, son of Nebat, to nothing. The truth is despised, first and foremost by the spiritual leaders of the people, whose position it undermines; they do not shy away from lies to combat it, and if necessary they resort to coercion through the hand of author-

ity. The same is true of any truth that condemns the kingdoms of men. Rather, they drive out those who bear it, accusing them of conspiring against the king and of being a burden on the land.

How much nobler was the heart of Hezekiah when Micah the Morashite prophesied against Judah and Jerusalem (Jer. 25:16–24). The king implored the Lord, who relented from the evil he had pronounced. Later, under Jehoiakim, the same scene was repeated, through Uriah, son of Shemaiah, and through the prophet Jeremiah. Uriah fled to Egypt, and his lack of trust in the protection of God, who had sent him, was the cause of his death. Jeremiah, under the same king, and later under Zedekiah (Jer. 27:28), was spared, for he trusted in the word of the Lord, who had said to him: ‘I will make you a fortified wall of bronze against this people; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you to save you and to deliver you, says the Lord; and I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the hand of the violent’ (Jer. 15:20, 21).

With the same assurance, Amos replies to Amaziah: ‘I was not a prophet, nor was I the son of a prophet; but I tended sheep and gathered the fruit of the sycamore trees; and the Lord took me whilst I was following the flock, and the Lord said to me: “Go, prophesy to my people Israel”’ (vv. 14, 15). For his part, he made no claims. He held no official position in Judah, and he acknowledges that his teaching did not come from the schools of the prophets; but the Lord had taken him, spoken to him, and sent him. That was enough. This is how God speaks in a time of rain, but in the same way He loves to choose, at all times, the instruments He sends into His harvest. To bring to nothing all the wisdom of men, He chooses the foolish and despised things of the world. A simple shepherd can become a prophet, a simple fisherman an apostle. It depends on the Lord, who distributes His gifts as He pleases. It was otherwise, and in a far more marvellous way, with Christ. He was not only the Son of God, but the Son of Man, and having become such, he was sent into this world to be a servant and a prophet, the two missions entrusted to him in the Gospel of Mark. But when men said of him, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us’ (Luke

7:16), he, preferring to retain his place as a willing slave, said: 'I am not a prophet' (Zech. 13:5); not: I have no right to be one; but this is what I have chosen: 'I am a man who tills the soil; for man acquired me as a slave from my youth'; I have come to bear here on earth, to save mankind, the condition of humiliation into which sin has placed them, and I have made myself a slave to man to accomplish my work. He acquired me, from my youth, as a slave. I have given him rights over me, so that I might deliver him! This is what Amos could not do. God had raised him from his humble position to the dignity of a prophet. Jesus humbled himself from his supreme glory to the lowly condition of a slave. He 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave'; therefore God exalted him supremely, after he had been obedient unto death on the cross. Amos was raised from his status as a shepherd to that of a prophet; Christ, from the position of a slave (though He was Messiah, King, prophet, and sovereign Shepherd, by His own divine right) to the right hand of the Majesty on high, all things being put under His feet. But He, having been raised from the dead and clothed with this supreme honour, wishes to retain His servant-like character in

love. Prophecy comes to an end, but love never does, and that is why he says: ‘I am not a prophet’.

Amos gathered the fruit of the sycamore trees, a tree that grows in the desert pastures, and whose fruit, having first undergone a long preparation to be fit for food, is useful only to the poor and the weak who live on little. God was thus preparing him for a life of deprivation amidst a people who rejected his ministry. He had nothing on his way but what God gave him; likewise John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets, had only locusts and wild honey, the food of the desert. The Lord, for his part, did not even have such resources. After 40 days of fasting, the desert offered him only stones instead of bread. The Creator of all things was hungry and thirsty, and, a thousand times more than these two prophets, depended entirely on God to provide for him.

Instead of being intimidated by Amaziah’s threats and Jeroboam’s wrath, Amos prophesies against the priest who would have him killed. His wife becomes a prostitute, his sons are killed, his inheritance is taken from him, and he himself dies in

an unclean land. Such is the fate of those who ‘have not received the love of the truth so as to be saved’. The individual judgement on Amaziah and his family in no way alters the general judgement pronounced on the nation: ‘And Israel shall surely be carried away from its land’ (v. 17).

CHAPTER 8

The interlude in chapter 7:10–17 is followed by a new vision, that of the summer fruits, which serves as a conclusion to the first three (7:1–9). The ripe summer fruits are gathered into a basket: the harvest is complete. It is the end. ‘The end has come for my people Israel.’ The Lord repeats the solemn words of chapter 7:8: ‘I will no longer pass over him.’ Truly, there is no hope left! Israel stands before God with its iniquities, no longer having the blood of the Passover lamb to cover them and shield the people from judgement. ‘And on that day, the songs of the palace shall be wailing, says the Lord God. The dead bodies shall be in great numbers; in every place they shall be cast out... Silence!’ (v. 3). The joy of former days has died away; the songs, accompanied by the instruments of David,

have ceased; wailing takes their place. What a contrast! The joy of life gives way to horror, to an agony of pain and dread. Death reigns; the corpses are no longer even piously sought out to be burned, as in chapter 6:10; they are cast out. Silence! A terrible word repeated on this day of the end. God has spoken, has had the final say; the pleas of the supplicants are no longer heard; let no one raise their voice henceforth! Oh, how agonising is the silence that accompanies or follows God's judgments! Do we not experience this, albeit to a limited extent, in the days of calamity we are currently enduring? Though grace still reigns, inviting us to intercede on behalf of poor lost sinners, the nature of current events is such that we fall silent before the execution of God's judgments. The corpses are numerous; they are cast out everywhere, and we can only remain silent, knowing that the pride and unbelief of men have brought about these disasters. The matter is decreed; but let us never forget that we are still in the age of grace and that, whilst we merely witness the unfolding of God's ways, we can still pray from the depths of our hearts for the salvation of sinners.

‘Hear this, you who are relentless towards the poor, seeking to drive the meek from the land...’ (v. 4). In the silence that has fallen, the voice of God must be heard. It is no longer a matter of listening to learn how one might escape judgement (5:1–17), but of hearing the sentence pronounced. All the wickedness of those who oppress the meek (this same character will be found in the last days) is laid bare: their love of gain, their indifference to the Sabbath, their lack of mercy and conscience, their spirit of deceit, their petty selfishness. These same traits are already mentioned in 2:6, 7, for it is the ten tribes that are specifically addressed here. The Lord never forgets any of their deeds;—He swears by the glory He bestowed upon Jacob, that is to say, upon His entire people (v. 7). What a memory the Supreme Judge has! Many things may escape the memory of the best judge among men; he may excuse or not condemn certain acts whose motives he does not know; but nothing escapes the scrutinising eye that probes hearts and minds. ‘For this reason, will not the land tremble? And will not every one of its inhabitants mourn? And it shall rise up wholly like the Nile, and swell its waters, and subside like the river of Egypt’ (v. 8). The ter-

rible upheaval that must accompany the judgement had already struck the people during the earthquake that followed Amos's prophecy, of which he gives a vivid description: The land will tremble, the earth will swell and subside in an instant like the Nile, a picture of the final upheaval that will shake the whole earth. Israel has not listened, and so it is destined for a subversion more terrible than all these partial calamities.

It will be a subversion akin to the Day of the Lord spoken of by the prophets Joel and Zechariah and later by the Lord himself (Matt. 24). 'It shall come to pass in that day, says the Lord God, that I will make the sun go down at noon, and I will bring darkness upon the earth in broad daylight... and I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end will be like a day of bitterness' (vv. 9, 10). For the first time, Amos, in speaking of coming events, considers in advance those of the end times. It will be a day of universal mourning and lamentation, like the night of the judgment of the firstborn in Egypt, for to the words: 'I will no longer pass over him' in chapters 7:8 and 8:2, he now adds (v. 10) 'the mourning for an only son'. This is not a reference to the day of repentance of the people seen in

Zechariah 12:10, lamenting over the Messiah ‘as one laments over an only son’. It will be the day of bitterness for the first-born of Egypt, even worse, for the Egyptians could still hold out hope for future generations. Here, nothing remains. It is the end of the ten tribes, the day of bitterness.

Then a time of trouble will come upon Israel: ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord God, ‘when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north to the east; they shall run to and fro seeking the word of the Lord, and they shall not find it’ (vv. 11, 12). There will be no further opportunity in the land to hear the words of the Lord; the scattered people will wander from sea to sea and will not find them, however much they may desire them. Silence! God will no longer speak to them. Ah! how they would then wish to know his thoughts, but they will be hidden from them. This passage describes the scattering of Israel. Like the rich man in Hades, they will thirst, with no means of quenching it. The young, in their beauty and strength, will fail, for one can live only by the word of the Lord. All that will re-

main to them are their false gods by whom they have sworn. This, I have no doubt, is the present condition of the ten tribes.

CHAPTER 9: 1-6

Here we have the final vision. Amos sees ‘the Lord standing upon the altar’ (*). This posture is most remarkable. The altar at Bethel has been shaken and has fallen to the ground (3:14), just as in days of old, when it was erected, the Lord had pronounced judgement against it under Jeroboam, son of Nebat (1 Kings 13:3). The altar of the Lord remains standing, the sole foundation of security, the place of sacrifice, but also, when the Lord has been despised and rejected, the place from which judgement will proceed. God had already said: ‘They shall never rise again’ (8:14). Now it is no longer the announcement, but the execution of the sentence. Here we do not see, as in Isaiah 6, the Lord seated on His throne, between the cherubim, in the temple, nor the manifestation of His glory which cannot endure evil or defilement, nor the foundations of the temple thresholds shaken at the voice of the seraphim. This scene is quite different. There we see the person of the Lord of glory,

having, in the fire of the altar, the means to purify his prophet; here, the person of the judge. He is not in the temple; only the altar is in view. The Lord stands upon what would have been for Israel the basis of its reconciliation, but has become that of its judgement, for it had despised the altar at Jerusalem and preferred those at Bethel, Gilgal, Dan and Beersheba.

(*) Not ‘near the altar’ as many translations render it.

The scene unfolding here is not, as we have said, that of the temple, but that of the night in Egypt: ‘Strike the lintel, so that the doorposts may be shaken, and shatter the heads of them all’ (v. 1). It corresponds to the solemn words of ch. 5:17; 7:9; 8:2. On the day of the Passover, the blood of the lamb had been applied to the lintel and the two doorposts; guilty Israel had neglected to apply it there, and no longer had the Passover blood to avert God’s wrath. The destroying angel passes by, the lintel is struck, the thresholds are shaken, the house collapses and crushes their heads. This image from Amos thus speaks both of the destruction of the firstborn and of the earthquake of Uzziah: ‘The Lord, the Lord of hosts, he is the one who touches the land, and it melts; and all who dwell in it will mourn; and it

will rise up as the Nile, and it will sink down like the river of Egypt. It is he who builds his steps in the heavens, and who has laid the foundations of the earth; who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the face of the earth; the Lord is his name' (vv. 5, 6; see 5:8; 9:5). If any soul remains after this upheaval, calamity will overtake it: 'If they were to go down to Sheol, my hand would take them from there; if they were to ascend to the heavens, I would bring them down; if they were to hide on the summit of Carmel, I would seek them out there and take them from there; and if they were hidden from my sight in the depths of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it will bite them; and if they were taken captive before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it will kill them; and I will set my eyes upon them for evil and not for good" (vv. 2–4). How reminiscent of Psalm 139! But there, man finds salvation by experiencing that he cannot escape God; here, wishing to escape Him, he encounters judgement. There, God searches the man for good and not for evil, and the sinner finds that the Lord has loved him 'from his mother's womb'; here he meets him 'for evil and not for good'. All this concerns God's

governing ways towards Israel, and not His final judgement. When they are hidden ‘in the depths of the sea’, amidst the confusion of the nations, they will fall prey to Satan.

CHAPTER 9: 7–15

God's providence and the final restoration of Israel

‘Are you not to me like the sons of the Ethiopians, O sons of Israel?’ says the Lord. ‘Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?’ (v. 7). It is as though the thought here echoes that expressed in the first two chapters of the prophet. God’s providence had brought these nations up from Caphtor and Kir (cf. 1:5), so that they might prosper in more favourable places. God had done the same for Israel by bringing them up out of Egypt to lead them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Instead of acknowledging the Lord’s care by serving him with reverence, these peoples, with Israel at their head, had become sinful kingdoms. Therefore, God’s eyes were upon each of

them to destroy them, all the more so when it came to his former people.

Yet there remains hope for Israel. Though the Lord is a judge, He is also the God of promises and will never deny His character: 'Yet I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,' says the Lord. 'For behold, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all the nations, as one sifts in a sieve, yet not a grain shall fall to the ground' (vv. 8, 9). The scattering of the people among the nations is foretold here, and we see it before our eyes today. But it is He who holds the winnowing fork in His hand; the chaff may fly away, but not a single grain of wheat falls to the ground. At the appointed time God will show that He has kept all His elect and has lost none of them. When Satan asked to have the disciples to sift them like wheat, he succeeded only in delivering Peter from his self-confidence. So it will be with the future tribulation of God's people. Not a single one of His own shall perish in those days of trial when it shall seem that no flesh can be saved. The fate of the sinners of this people shall be quite different: 'By the sword... shall all

the sinners of my people die, who say: “No harm shall come upon us, nor shall it reach us” (v. 10).

The transition from the coming events to those of the end (vv. 7–10) leads us to the millennial blessing, the culmination of Amos's prophecy: ‘On that day I will restore the fallen tabernacle of David; I will repair its breaches, and restore its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old’ (v. 11). The house (the tabernacle) of David, the kingship of Him to whom God had assured His favour, will be restored, as in the days of old under the reign of Solomon, after having seemingly fallen forever in the upheaval that shook the earth. No more division in Israel! It shall possess ‘the remnant of Edom’, for Edom shall not, like other nations, see the restoration of its captives (Jer. 48–49); but Israel shall also possess all the nations upon whom the name of the Lord is invoked (v. 12). Such will be the last, the only true universal kingdom, under the sceptre of the Messiah, the true head of the house of David. James, before the Council of Jerusalem, quotes this passage as altered by the Septuagint version, but solely to prove that the nations were entitled to the blessings which the Jews denied them, since the name of the

Lord who did all these things was invoked upon them (Acts 15:16).

1 'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when the ploughman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; and the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will restore the captives of my people Israel, and they shall build the ruined cities and dwell in them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. And I will plant them on their land, and they shall no longer be uprooted from the land I have given them, says the Lord your God' (vv. 13–15).

Here we enter, at full sail, into the desired harbour. The prophet Joel paints the same picture of material prosperity under the millennial reign: 'The threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with new wine and oil'. 'The mountains shall drip with new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streams of Judah shall flow with water' (Joel 2:24; 3:18). The description here is, if possible, even more vivid and

more universal, whereas Joel's applies only to Judah. What was promised conditionally in Leviticus 26:5: 'The time of treading grapes will extend to the harvest, and the harvest will extend to the sowing' had never been fulfilled, because of the people's unfaithfulness. Now everything has changed: the blessing no longer depends on man's obedience, but on God's faithfulness to his promises, referred to in 2 Peter 1:1 as 'the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ'. This can never fail. This magnificent abundance of creation gladdens our hearts in advance, when we consider that now it groans and is in labour, all of it, in the hope of sharing, too, in the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

But it will not be only creation (vv. 14, 15); the people themselves, far dearer to God's heart, will be restored. The captivity will be restored, that is to say, it will be brought to an end to bring about the final restoration. Then the people will rebuild, dwell, plant, and enjoy the fruit. They themselves will be planted in their land and will never again be uprooted, 'says the Lord your God'.

What a contrast between the earlier chapters and this one, between ‘Thus says the Lord’ for judgement and ‘Thus says the Lord’ for blessing. It is upon the latter that God places the final seal for ever. Judgements are never the last word for Him. Only eternal glory is fully worthy of Him. His joy, O people of believers, is to give it to you, to let you enjoy it, and to call Himself ‘your God!’ (v. 15).

CONCLUSION

We have seen, in the book of Amos, the exposition of God's customary and unchanging ways towards His people and towards the nations, and we have observed what makes them necessary. Except in his final words, Amos does not reveal future things to us, but things that are at hand. This is what makes this book so important for the present day. The manifestations of sin mentioned here are timeless and can be observed among believers as well as non-believers; Amos reveals to us the retribution in both cases. But, however bitter the punishment may be, the man of faith, under the weight of present judgments, turns inward, examines himself, humbles himself and repents—and

tribulation directs his thoughts towards the scene of future blessings. Having reached this point, they rest in hope, as we see in the last chapter of our prophet, and do not allow themselves to be led astray in the labyrinth of events that agitate mankind. God's government, whether of His house or of the world, is always holy, just and unchanging. It is like a locomotive whose direction cannot be altered. The intervention of a single person sounding the alarm can suddenly halt the train in its tracks when a disaster is foreseen. The driver applies the brakes. He says, as in Amos: 'This shall not be.' But, once the event has occurred, the locomotive resumes its unchanging course. Nothing causes it to deviate from its final destination; but, thank God, though it crushes every obstacle in its path, it does not lead those who trust in it into the abyss, but to the desired destination.