

“For I am God and not Human” (Hos 11:9): Implications for New Evangelization in Nigeria

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0. Introduction

The oracle of Hosea 11 on which the topic of this paper is based makes imperative a re-consideration of what we think we know of, and about God, the subject and object of all religious faith and proclamation in the past. It is an oracle that leaves no evangelizer unmoved as it challenges even the very foundations of doctrinal formulas. When understood in the proper context, it seeks to overturn what most religious teachers believe and teach about God's relations to obdurate sinners, indeed, those who fail to measure up to God's holiness. Here sinful and rebellious acts of human beings (the Israelites) are confronted with the true nature and characteristics of the covenant God of Israel. The ensuing questions are: How does God deal with his chosen and beloved people, Israel (vv. 1, 3a, 4), who manifestly show lack of faith in him and are rebellious and ungrateful (vv. 2, 3b, 5b, 7)? Will God let his people perish, abandoning them to their fate, or will he intervene to rescue them? Will he deal with them as a rebellious son, in accordance with the prescription of the law (Deut 21:18-21)?

This paper supposes that the answers to these questions are crucial to the evangelising mission of the Church today, since sin, punishment and forgiveness constitute integral parts of its overall theme; that the answers will shed more light on the task of re-evangelisation, particularly towards bringing the unfaithful back to faith. This is important, given that our relatively short period of Christianity is saddled with challenging setbacks, ranging from backsliding and double allegiance through full-blown idolatry, to ethical and moral deficiencies that tend to becloud Christian witnessing within the Church and in the larger society. Moreover, there appears to be no unanimous approach in dealing with issues of faith and morals among different religious groups. Some condone almost everything and give false hope that could easily lead people astray, while others predict doom at every instance, thus leaving the sinner hopeless, dejected and abandoned. The task of this paper is, therefore, to ascertain, through exegetical analysis of Hos 11:9 in its remote and immediate contexts, YHWH's way of dealing with those who are bent on turning away from him (v. 7a). The emphasis is that although a sinful person naturally deserves punishment, he or she also is privileged even more salvation / restoration.

1. Hosea 11 and its Structure

The unity of Hosea 11 has been often questioned because of some perceived incongruity in its sub-units. The first section, vv. 1-7, is seen as an isolated piece, without connection to the subsequent units, since the element of promise (vv. 8-11) disrupts the sequence of accusations before it. Rather than promises of restoration, one expects that the law of stoning would have been applied to a recalcitrant and rebellious son (cf. Deut 21:18-21).¹ In other words, it is inconceivable that a capital or mortal punishment should be mitigated and reversed for “mortal” sin. Obviously, the difficulty in comprehending this is genuine, but it is not enough to make 11:8-11 a “non Hoseanic piece”,² given that the literary style, vocabulary and themes are those of the prophet.

¹See W. R. Harper, *A critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1905) 372.

² According to James L. Mays (*Hosea* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969] 158-159), the authenticity of Hos 11:10, like a good number of other verses or parts of verses in Hosea, has been questioned. Hans W. Wolff (*Hosea*

Interestingly, the seeming incongruity in the thematic sequence has not changed the view that Hosea 11 is “a homogeneous unit, separate from the previous and following context”,³ or as Stuart supposes is “a distinct unity”.⁴ The chapter begins with a shift from the direct address to Israel in the previous unit (Hos 10:9-15) to YHWH’s first person speech (Hos 11:1-11). There is also a shift in content; the historical reflection on Israel’s past in the previous unit now changes into a historical retrospect on YHWH’s dealings with Israel (cf. 11:1, 3, 4). The chapter is clearly delimited in 12:1 (Eng 11:12) by a change of both subject (Ephraim/Israel/Judah) and theme of lies, deceit, etc., that are far from being logical with the preceding unit (vv. 10-11).

Apart from the divine speech running through the entire chapter, a couple of sub-units are also detectable in the internal structure of the chapter. For instance, Wolff identifies vv. 1-9 as a rhetorical unit, but separates vv. 1-7 from vv. 8-9 as distinctive units.⁵ The unit (vv. 1-7) is distinguished by the third person singular (vv. 1, 4, 5, 6) and plural (vv. 2-5, 7) references to Israel as opposed to the second person singular address, primarily to the alternative name, Ephraim in vv. 8-9. It is also marked off by the summary statement, “My people are bent on turning away from me” in v. 7a. With the shift in the subject in v. 8, and with a common focus on the unconditional restoration of Ephraim, it is possible to view the two sub-units as a single section (vv. 8-11).⁶ The return to the use of third person in vv. 10-11 signals a new initiative in line with the spirit of vv. 8-9. The distinction between the two sections, vv. 1-7 and vv. 8-11, is further buttressed by the sudden change in the tone of the oracle, from complaints and accusations (vv. 2, 3, 4, 7) and threat (vv. 5-6) against a rebellious child to YHWH’s (the plaintiff’s / judge’s) self-caution and promise of restoration to the offender (vv. 8-11).

With this we venture to structure the oracle in its two broad sections, A) vv. 1-7 and B) vv. 8-11 thus:

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| A | vv. 1-7 | Historical reflection on Israel’s past |
| | a. vv. 1-4 | Parent-child relationship |
| | b. vv. 5-6 | Threat (against rebellious child) |
| | c. v. 7 | Summary statement on Israel’s Unfaithfulness |
| B | vv. 8-11 | Eschatological points of Israel’s salvific history |
| | a. vv. 8-9 | Reversal of threat and promise of salvation - triumphs of love |
| | b. vv. 10-11 | Actualisation of the promise of salvation |

To account for the introduction of the theme of promise immediately after threat within the internal structure of the oracle, one must consider the form and, especially, the motif behind the unit. Twelve

[Philadelphia: Fortress, Press 1974] 195, 203) in his interpretation transposes verses 10 and 11 on the ground that v.10 is a “commentary on v.11”.

³ H. W. Wolff, *Hosea*, 193.

⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC, Vol. 31; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1998.

⁵ See Wolff, *Hosea*, 193-194.

⁶ Jörg Jeremias has vv. 7-11 for the second section, which according to him describes the “reversal of divine will”. See *Der Prophet Hosea* (ATD 24,1; Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 139, 144); also Joy Philip Kakkanattu, *God’s Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Hosea 11, 1-11* (FAT 2. Reihe 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 72.

of the sixteen verbs used in vv.8-11 are simple Qal imperfect verbs describing YHWH's or the people's future action. They point not to the present, but to a future/eschatological period, in which things will be as envisaged in the Parent-Child relationship, namely, that YHWH's parental love will override whatever disloyalty and ingratitude Israel showed the loving father. The most likely explanation is that 11:8-11 must have been a once separate oracle of Hosea, which was joined to 11:1-7 during the process of compilation. Two elements may have caused this: First, the catchwords that they share in common. Here Egypt and Assyria provide a strong link between 11:1-7 and 11:8-11. They are both agents of divine punishment (v. 5) and places from where the final movement towards restoration will be made (v.11). They are of thematic importance because they provide the past and future or eschatological points of the salvific history. The movement *to* and *from* Egypt forms a remarkable inclusio, thus:

miṣrayim (11:1), *'el-'ereṣ miṣrayim* (11:5), *miṣrayim* (11:11)

Further links are established through the verbs *šûb*(11:5, [9], 11) and *hālak*(11:2, 10). Israel *went away* from YHWH (v.2), but has to *return* to Egypt on account of rebellion and apostasy (v.5). He is expected under YHWH's own initiative to *go* after him (v.10) and so be reinstated (v. 11). Second is the rhetorical function and motif of 11:8-11 that seeks to establish further grounds for accusations in the following chapters, thus justifying the verdict that Israel is an "unwise son" (13:13).

Therefore, Chapter 11 is not an isolated oracle, either in its parts or as a whole. Rather its two major parts express the tension that exists today between sin/sinner and divine forgiveness/salvation. The motive clause, "For I am God and not human" (v. 9), a summary statement that defines who God is in relation to his people, is the high point and central message of the entire oracle. This paper seeks next to find out the link between verse 9 and other parts of the oracle in its context.

2. Hosea 11:9 and its Remote and Immediate Contexts

The divine self-revelation in verse 9 is so important and strategic in the oracle that everything YHWH says before it seems to lead to it, while whatever happens after it does so because of it. The oracle begins with a tension-laden parent-child relationship. In the preliminary verses (1-4), YHWH goes through a memory lane and in historical retrospect recalls all he has been to and done for Israel as a father;⁷ how out of love⁸ he calls Israel to sonship, brought him out of Egypt from slavery and lavishes all the parental care on him (v. 1).⁹ He patiently nurses¹⁰ Israel like a nursing mother and feeds and guards him like a baby-sitter (surrogate-mother) right from his tender age (v. 4b).¹¹ Instead of Israel reacting positively in gratitude to YHWH's acts of love, she chooses to forget, and to be rebellious and recalcitrant (v. 3). Israel responds negatively to YHWH's choice of him. He does not only show disloyalty by refusing to return but, instead, transfers loyalty to Baal as his

⁷ Other Old Testament passages that portray YHWH as father include Exod 4:22; Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16; Jer 3:4, 19; 31:9, 20; Mal 1:6; 2:10; cf. Deut 32:18; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:27; 103:13.

⁸ Love is clearly identified as the very basis for YHWH's call of Israel to sonship and nothing more. "When Israel was a child (*n'r*) I loved (*'hḇ*) him, and out of Egypt I called my son (*ben*). Stuart (*Hosea-Jonah*) rightly observes that the use of *'hḇ* here (11:1, 4; also 8, 9) "is closely connected with covenantal fidelity in Deuteronomy (6:5; 7:8, 13; 10:15; 23:6[5]), connoting both the idea of "deep affection" and being 'loyal to'.

⁹ The parent-child or "father-son" relationship here has its root in the exodus event. Cf. Exod 4:22-23.

¹⁰ The word *rph* (to heal) is used in v. 3 to depict YHWH's caring and saving act. Hosea severally portrays YHWH as a "healer" in other instances – 5:13; 6:1; 7:1; cf. Exod 15:26.

¹¹ To be recalled is that Hosea's maternal image for YHWH is also associated with the image of Israel as YHWH's son. Cf. 11:3-4, 8; Isa 66:13; also Isa 49:14-15.

master. This he demonstrates by offering sacrifices to this competing Canaanite deity with the same intensity and passion with which YHWH draws him to himself (v. 2, cf. v. 4a).

This situation gives rise to the complaint of an embittered and disappointed parent against an obdurate, apostate and backsliding child. The echo of YHWH's grievances against Israel's act of rebellion is heard in the statement: "*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them*" (v. 3). In vv. 5-6 YHWH goes beyond being a plaintiff to assuming the position of a judge. His verdict reads: "*They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king*" (v. 5). In other words, the people shall go back to slavery, symbolised by the name "Egypt",¹² while in effect the destination is Assyria.¹³ It has to be remarked that the strongest threat for punishment is that which tends to reverse the exodus and revoke Israel's election (cf. 8:13; 9:3). The motive clause *kî mē'ānû lāšûb* "because they have refused to return [to me]" states clearly the reason for the verdict. The disastrous nature of the punishment accompanying the verdict is also stated by the three verbs *hûl* (rage), *klh* (consume) and *'kl* (devour) in v. 6. They describe the action of the sword (*hrb*) on the people's cities and their city gates, and on the people themselves, respectively. Nothing short of total destruction of the physical structures and extermination of the inhabitants is envisaged here. Again, a fresh reason is offered for the punishment – *mimmō'āšôṭêhem* (*min* + *mō'ēšāh*) "on account of their machinations," i.e., their running to and depending on the super powers and not on YHWH. Evidently, Ephraim has reached a point of no return.

Verse 7 offers a transition into the immediate context of verse 9. It also offers reason for YHWH's statement of punishment (vv. 5-6), namely Israel's resolve to continually hang on turning away from YHWH (v. 7a). In fact having wounded the tender feeling of a loving parent, the weight of the law is expected to descend heavily on Ephraim as already specified in the punishment. Instead, a different motif emerges: YHWH's refusal to disown Ephraim. Even in their rebellion, backsliding, and the impending threat of punishment YHWH does not fail to regard Ephraim as "my people" (v. 7a). This makes the immediate context, v. 8 understandable. This verse narrates of YHWH's inner struggle between exterminating his people and sparing them. It is couched in a monologue, in which YHWH is depicted as uttering some self-soul-searching rhetorical questions in the process of arriving at a decision.

'êk 'eTTenkä 'epra'yim	How can I give you up, Ephraim?
'āmaGGenkä yiSrä 'ël	[How] can I hand you over, O Israel?
'êk 'eTTenkäkü 'admāh	How can I make you like Admah?
'āsîlṃkä Kicbō 'yim	[How] can I treat you like Zeboiim?
nehPak `ālay liBBî	My heart recoils within me;
ya ^o Had nikmürû niHûmāy	my compassion grows totally worn and tender

¹² Stuart (*Hosea-Jonah*) supposes that Egypt "stands as metonym for the land of the conquering enemy (cf. 7:13; 8:16; 9:3, 6)".

¹³ That YHWH would punish his people through oppression by other nations is a well-known motif among OT prophets. Cf. Amos 3:9–11; Isa 5:26–30.

The repetition of the interrogative particle *’ek* (how) at the beginning of the questions provides an adversative undertone, which may suggest that the utterance is a silent lament.¹⁴ This could be sensed in the sound of *k* at the end of seven words in v. 8, including *’ek* and the four-fold use of the second person singular suffix *k*. This indeed creates a pathetic motion as YHWH contemplates how his people could be surrendered into the hands of the enemy. YHWH’s self-questioning has little to do with regrets or remorse over his threat to punish a rebellious child in the previous verses; it has rather more to do with the struggle between the sense of justice and of love.¹⁵ In fact, what is at stake is not just destroying Israel like Admah and Zeboiim,¹⁶ but doing so through the agency of the adversary. The noun *niḥūm* (compassion¹⁷) and the *Niphal* verb *kmr*(to grow warm and tender¹⁸) give vent to this inner struggle. Jeremias sees *niḥūmîm* as “the energy that forbids the development of Yahweh’s wrath.”¹⁹ It is because such energy grows warm and tender that YHWH gets emotionally involved with Ephraim and in its plight (cf. Jer 31:20).

As YHWH’s inner struggle continues, two options are available, to get Israel/Ephraim delivered (*mgn*) to the enemy and totally annihilated on account of their infidelity or to spare them out of his compassion, tenderness and love. Each option has its own consequence. The first entails YHWH’s breaking his covenantal promises to Israel’s forefathers. Invariably YHWH chooses the second option, to accommodate Israel’s unfaithfulness. The choice would seem as if God were “unable to live without Israel”.²⁰ The reason for this unexpected resolve is given in verse 9, the *raison d’être* and *terminus ad quem* of the entire oracle.

3. Understanding Hos 11:9 vis-à-vis its Context

The verse is marked by a sharp and abrupt change in style. The lamenting and interrogative tone of the previous verses changes to a more sober and self-assuring declaration. But the uniqueness of the verse does not lie in this shift of mood, but in YHWH’s revelation of who he is. It is within the realm of God’s self-definition that the four decisive questions of YHWH in v. 8 find their answer. Before it the audience has wondered if YHWH would really surrender his people perpetually to the enemy for whatever reason. The verse in a four-fold negation with the particle *lō* reinforces YHWH’s previous threefold declaration of love (vv. 1, 3a, 4) as against Israel’s threefold rejection of YHWH’s love (vv. 2, 3b, 5, cf. 7).

<i>lō’ ’e ’éSeh Hárôn ’aPPî</i>	I will not execute my fierce anger;
<i>lō’ ’äšûb lüšaHët</i>	I will not again destroy Ephraim;

¹⁴ See Mic 2:4; Jer 48:38; Ezek 26:17; 2 Sam 1:19, 25, 27. Wolff, *Hosea*, 194.

¹⁵ See Kakkanattu, *God’s Enduring Love*, 81.

¹⁶ The two cities like Sodom and Gomorrah function as proverbial symbols of divine judgment. According to Carolyn J. Pressler, “The fate of all four cities is held out as a warning to Israel not to disobey the covenant (Deut 29:22—Eng 29:23)”. See “Admah” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)* 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 73; also Gen. 10:19; 19:24-25; Deut. 29:23; Wis 10:6.

¹⁷ *BDB*, 637. Others also translate it as consolation and comfort.

¹⁸ *BDB*, 485.

¹⁹ Jörg Jeremias, *Die Reue Gottes (BThSt 31; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975)*, 54; *Der Prophet Hosea*, 145; also Kakkanattu, *God’s Enduring Love*, 82.

²⁰ Contrary to Dabhi’s proposition, Hosea presents YHWH as having another reason for refusing to destroy Israel. See Stephen M. Coleman’s review (*OTA* 35, 1 (2012) n. 644) of James B. Dahbi, “...vyaiê-*al*{w> ‘ykinOa’(laeÛ yKiä ... ‘...because God that I am and not human ...’ (Hos 11, 9b): An Exegetical Study of Hos 11, 1-9,” in *BibB* 32 (2006) 103-123.

<i>ʿeprä^oyim</i>	
<i>Kî ʿêl ʾä nökî wülö´-ʾîš</i>	for I am God and not human,
<i>BüqirBükä qädôš</i>	the Holy One in your midst,
<i>wülö´ ʾäbô´ Bü`îr</i>	and I will not come in wrath.

Hosea employs the word *ʾaph* (nose, nostrils, heavy breathing, etc.) in a conventional metaphor to express YHWH's anger. It acquires a new meaning when used with the verb *ḥrh* (to burn). The expression literally means: "The nose burns" but is understood as "anger burns" or "wrath is enkindled".²¹ The phrase *ḥrwn ʾphin* v. 9 literally means burning nostrils / nose; it is also rendered as "burning anger / wrath". This cliché is not found less than thirty other times in biblical poetry. YHWH's "fierce anger" usually stands for his judgement or punishment (cf. Jer 49:37; Zeph 3:8; also Hos 8:5; Exod 32:12; Num 25:4; 32:13-14).²² When YHWH's anger is kindled, he destroys. Hosea's choice of the *Piel* form of the verb *šḥt* "to ruin" (cf. 13:9) in the context expresses what the nature of the destruction would have been, which would have been comparable only to the action of wild animals (cf. Jer 5:6; Jer 15:3). But the radical message here is expressed in YHWH's three times declaration that his anger will not definitively define Israel's fate.

<i>lō´ ʿe ʾéSeh Hárôn ʾaPPî</i>	I will not execute my fierce anger;
<i>lō´ ʾäšûb lüšaHët</i>	I will not again destroy Ephraim;
<i>ʿeprä^oyim</i>	
<i>wülö´ ʾäbô´ Bü`îr</i>	and I will not come in wrath.

That YHWH refuses to execute his anger, can only be appreciated when one recalls the legal authority given by law to parents against a son who is insistently obstinate and rebellious against his parents (Deut 21:18-21). If therefore fierce divine wrath signifies divine punishment, refusing to execute it is tantamount to divine amnesty and forgiveness (cf. Hos 3:1). The prophet portrays YHWH tempering his anger against Israel with compassion and love (cf. Exod 32:12-14; Isa 54:7-8; Mic 7:18). That YHWH is said to restrain his anger and show mercy (cf. Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 103:8; Jonah 4:2) distinguishes him greatly from deities of other ancient cultures "whose raging often must be restrained (sometimes forcefully) by the intervention of other deities"²³ or/and through sacrifices. It all means that anger is not YHWH's permanent trait; it is only a product of necessity, which he would prefer to avoid altogether as in v. 9. In fact, he would rather wish to guard and protect than to destroy (Isa 27:2-3). As Lam 3:33 clearly puts it "he does not willingly afflict or grieve human beings."

To say the least, the unexpected shift in YHWH's attitude towards Israel, the rebellious son, "thwarts human logic."²⁴ Verse 9 states the reason for this reversal:

²¹ Cf. 8:5; Zech 10:3; Job 42:7 also Exod 22:23; 32:11; Deut 6:15; 7:4; 11:17; 31:17; Num 11:33; 2 Kgs 23:26; Job 32:3; Is 5:25; also Job 32:2; Hab 3:8.

²² See Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea* (ÄAT 41; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999) 47.

²³ Gary A. Herion, "Wrath of God (OT)," in *ABD* 6, 995. For more details on the anger of deities in the ancient Near East, see *ANET*, 10-11; 14-17; 72ff; 104-106; 126-128; 129-131; etc. The wrath of the storm god Amadioha, for instance, is well known in Igbo mythology.

²⁴ See Kakkanattu, *God's Enduring Love*, 75.

Kî 'ēl 'ā|nōkî wülö'-'îš

BūqirBūkā qādōš

Because I am God and not human,

the Holy One in your midst,

The motive clause introduced by *kî* emphasises YHWH's divinity in two ways, by asserting who YHWH is, 'ēl God ("because God I am")²⁵ and by negating who he is not, *lō' 'îš* ("not human/mortal," cf. Num 23:19). This declaration is reinforced by the accompanying phrase in apposition, the "holy one in your midst," which gives one of the most defining characteristics of YHWH—his holiness (*qōdēš*). This divine quality brings out Hosea's insistence on YHWH's separateness from, supremacy over and incomparability with human beings (cf. Isa 55:8). In other words God, "the holy one" (Isa 12:6) is mysterious and immutable; he is above any rivals and is eternal (cf. Exod 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2; Isa 40:25; 57:15; Hab 1:12). Nevertheless, "the God, who is holy, is essentially love in his being and deeds."²⁶ Hence Hosea sees YHWH's holiness primarily as providing the foundation for his saving will and not for his judging will.²⁷

With the phrase *bāqirbākā* "in your midst", v. 9 seeks to bridge the gap between the transcendent and the immanent, the divine and the human, the holy and the sinner, the faithful and the unfaithful, distinctions that human disobedience necessitated. Thus YHWH's original intention and plan to be and remain with human beings (Gen 1-2; Isa 7:14) is restored, despite his "otherness". The key and challenging message of the oracle is summarised in this verse. YHWH could experience personal hurt caused by the disloyalty, faithlessness and betrayal of his chosen ones; he could also consequently threaten to vent his wrath; but in his deep compassion and love and faithfulness to his covenantal promises (Exod 32:13-14; cf. Deut 4:31; Ezek 20:17), he would, after punishment is over, bring or rather lead his rebellious and obdurate child home again (vv. 10-11; cf. Jer 31:16-20). This is simply because YHWH is God and not human. Unlike humans, he does not backslide; he is never unfaithful to the promises he made to save Israel right from the beginning of the saving history.

4. Challenging Issues in Current Approach to Evangelisation in Nigeria

The relatively short period of Christianity in Nigeria is saddled with challenging backslidings, bordering on double allegiance, full-blown idolatry, ethical and moral deficiencies that becloud Christian witnessing within the Church and in the larger society. Although there is manifest enthusiasm for religion in Nigeria, a good number of Christians still appear to be untouched by the Gospel message in their illicit Christian beliefs and practices. There is poor perception of the uniqueness of the God they are affiliated to, thus giving rise to the gap between faith and proper understanding of the demands of faith.²⁸ The Bishops of the then Eastern Nigeria in a joint Pastoral Letter to mark the first centenary of the Catholic Church in Igboland gave the hint that all was not well with the flourishing Christianity in Nigeria, even after a hundred years. It reads in part:

²⁵ Cf. Isa 45:22; 46:9; Gen 17:1; 35:11; 46:3; also Ps 46:11 (10); 50:7.

²⁶ Kakkanattu, *God's Enduring Love*, 89.

²⁷ Cf. Wolff, *Hosea*, 202.

²⁸ The episode of the destruction of the Ogwugwu-akpu Okija shrine in the heartland of the Christian Southeastern Nigeria, where prominent Christians, including Governors and leaders, were alleged to have patronised and even got initiated into the Ogwugwu-akpu cult is revealing. See Charles Okwumuo, "Eidōlōlatrīa in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and Ogwugwu-Akpu Okija in Nnewi Diocese, Anambara State." An unpublished Masters thesis at CIWA: Port Harcourt, 2006.

Christianity has made impact in our society, there has been real increase in numbers. Some desirable changes have been made in personalities of many people due to Christianity but the extent of such changes must not be exaggerated. There is abundant evidence to show the prevalence of superstitious native customs and beliefs as well as materialism under a thin veneer of Christianity among many of our Christians.

A settled spiritual allegiance is not yet a realised fact in the Christian life of our many so-called converts. Most of our Catholics do not find any incompatibility in plural belonging....²⁹

A few years after this Pastoral Letter, Mbefo re-echoes the statement of the Bishops; he affirms that Catholics “betray equivocations and imbalance in crisis situations. Many consult the fortune-tellers when they want to embark on a project... Some find no contradiction in practising both traditional religion and Christianity.”³⁰ This he further elucidates in another work where Christians themselves admit that Christianity has not succeeded in assuring them security simply because they find the Christian God too far. Hence “they resort to charms and talisman, which they see and handle for their protection.”³¹ In other words, the religious attitude of some Nigerian Christians indicates that although people have, in principle, embraced the faith and cast away idols, they easily revert to them in times of trials. Therefore, with Ihenacho, one can say that double affiliation is a poignant reality in Africa.³²

However, it will only be a quest in futility to suppose that all the ills associated with backsliding among Christians in Nigeria must be imputed to the deficiencies in the method and process of evangelisation of early foreign missionaries. In fact, double allegiance has not only to do with the natural inclination of the people to their religious roots, which affects their relationship with God/Supreme Being and invariably with all other facets of their socio-political and economic life, but also with the contemporary approach to evangelisation and faith education.³³ It is one thing to observe that the gospel message, for some reasons, appears not to have permeated, or rather been sown into, the lives and practices of many Christians; it is a different thing altogether to identify how to deal with the relapsed and backsliding Christians, and how to revitalise and strengthen their faith.

At this stage rethinking the process of evangelisation has become imperative. At one time we have adopted the “Gideon approach” of the early missionaries, i.e., of clearing evil forests, cutting down trees and burning down shrines³⁴ and figurines to no avail. This is not surprising because the approach did not even make Gideon himself less syncretistic.³⁵ We have also

²⁹ Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province Joint Pastoral, “*Put Out into Deep Water*”, (Onitsha: Tabansi Press, 1985) 11-12.

³⁰ L. Mbefo, “Pressures on the Missionary Church”, *Bigard Theological Studies* 9,1(1989) 74-86.

³¹ Cf. L. Mbefo, *Towards a mature African Christianity* (Enugu: Spiritan Publications, 1989) 34.

³² David A. Ihenacho devotes a good portion of his book, *African Christianity Rises Vol. I: A Critical Study of the Catholicism of the Igbo People of Nigeria* (Powell’s Books, 2004) to discussing some of the basic problems of Christianity in Africa.

³³ See Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, “Coping with Double Allegiance among African Christians: Insights from the Biblical Tradition”, in *JIT* 6,2 (2004) 189-217.

³⁴ Here the destruction of the Ogwugwu-akpu Okija shrine comes readily to mind. It recalls in a way Elijah’s throwing down the altar of Baal (1 Kgs 18:20-40; cf. 19:10, 14).

³⁵ Gideon changed from being the one who destroys the altar of Baal and the grove of the Asherah (Judg 6:25-32; cf. Ezek 16:39), replacing it with the altar of the Lord, to one who set out to make an image at Ophrah, which led Israel to idolatry (Judg 8:22-27).

expended much energy trying to forge a covenantal relationship between Christians and their God through catechesis/homilies, yet the image of God remains that of a taskmaster for many. For there is always the tendency to adopt a negative approach which takes on a condemnatory attitude rather than engage people in learning to appreciate the love and mercy of the God they profess and worship. Often high-handed punishments/penalties/penances are given to Christians, sometimes publicly, for whatever failings, perhaps because aspects of God's love is minimised in our catechesis. The result is that many Christians are left hopeless, dejected and abandoned. Some end up considering themselves unredeemable. Often too God's omnipresence has been interpreted to mean spying out the sinner in order to cast him/her into hell fire. This is understandable; for instead of the best, humans tend to think of God in terms of the worst in them—the tyrannical, proud, cruel,³⁶ thus losing sight of the corrective nature of divine punishment. There is therefore the need to opt for a new approach in evangelising or rather re-evangelising the ill-informed Christian faithful today. The oracle of Hosea 11 offers a balanced approach to this “new” evangelisation. It shows that evil must be pointed out, underlined and condemned. At the same time the concept of God as a loving parent, whose compassion for his people does not let him destroy even the most recalcitrant sinner, must also be emphasised and celebrated.

5. Hosea 11:9 and Re-evangelising the “Unfaithful”

One of the major tasks facing pastoral agents and theologians in this year of faith is giving hope to those who are dispirited or have lost faith because of their frailty and sinful condition. Like disobedient Israel of Hosea's time, some Christians have abandoned their loyalty to God because of whatever importunacy, and joined forces with other “principalities” in search for answers. The oracle of Hosea 11, particularly v. 9, insinuates a fresh orientation on how to deal with such vulnerable group in the Church. It also offers what it takes to have a balanced catechesis and faith-education.

The starting point for this envisaged orientation is the fact that amidst Israel's faithlessness and unfaithfulness against YHWH, the sense of sin does not dominate the entire oracle. God remains passionate in his love for Israel. As a result he refuses to do that which according to legalistic human logic he ought—annihilate his people. It is true that punishment for disloyalty and disobedience is inevitable; but it must not be mortal. For YHWH makes provision for the return of his people from exile, their resettlement in peace after punishment (vv. 10-11). This singular act of YHWH restores Israel's hope. The people's expected readiness to follow YHWH's voice in those two last verses of the oracle has both religious and political consequences. It reverses Israel's obdurate refusal to return to YHWH (v. 5) and their persistent apostasy (vv. 2, 7). It also implies a renunciation of allegiance to the Baals (cf. 2:7, 9, 15; 5:11) and dependence on foreign powers for help (v. 5; cf. also 5:13; 7:11). In fact, it means total allegiance and obedience to YHWH, thereby, demonstrating the triumph of YHWH's love (vv. 1, 3, 4), which refuses to annihilate his people (vv. 8-9).

The oracle summarises perfectly Hosea's theological schema, that lasting restoration comes from divine initiative and can be received only as YHWH's gift. Through his figurative language, Hosea communicates here that with YHWH the chance for conversion is always open to all; that repentance and divine restoration have an open end; that love and not punishment is the basic

³⁶ See J. Mauchline, “Hosea”, in *Interpreter's Bible* VI. (eds. G. A. Buttrick *et al.*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956).

ingredient in restoration (v. 1; cf. 3:1).³⁷ To be emphasised is that YHWH's option not to destroy his people does not mean simply to keep them in existence. Rather it means to bring about their salvation and, thus, restore their fortune.

6. Conclusion

The oracle of Hosea 11 has demonstrated that sin is real even among God's chosen; that God desires absolute loyalty of his beloved and chosen ones; that his people realise and appreciate his parental care and love; and that failure to do so is viewed by him as act of disobedience and disloyalty, a breach in relationship that is punishable. Nevertheless, our interpretation of this oracle, particularly v. 9 has offered some clue to the question of how God deals with his sinful but chosen people. It has shown that the last word of Hosea's God is not annihilation; for God's compassion and love would not let him exterminate his chosen, in spite of their continuous failure to realise the need to turn back. This is because God is totally committed to his covenantal promises. As James B. Dahbi succinctly remarks, God's commitment to Israel in Hos 11:1-9 ultimately reflects God's commitment to humanity as a whole.³⁸ In other words, God's call to Christian faith, like the election of Israel, confers on a Christian great and honourable status but not without great responsibility. Consequently, God's choice and love, which constitute the basis for the call to Christian faith, should also define the schema of New Evangelisation and the *raison d'être* for a positive faith response. It is hoped that this Year of Faith would offer a fresh impetus to more visible commitment to Christian faith in our time.

³⁷ See Nwaoru, *Imagery*, 179; also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC n. 219) teaches: "His (YHWH's) love for his people is stronger than a mother's for her children. God loves his people more than a bridegroom his beloved; his love will be victorious over even the worst infidelities and will extend to his most precious gift: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16; cf. Isa 49:14-15; 62:4-5; Ezek 16)'".

³⁸ See Stephen M. Coleman's review *OTA* 35, 1 (2012) n. 644.