

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE PROPHET JOEL.

THE prophet Joel, though not difficult to translate, is not quite easy to interpret. There is a certain want of circumstance and locality in the prophecy which has caused scholars to put very different constructions upon it. Some recent writers, indeed, have found the Book so vague and confused, that they have professed themselves unable to give any clear account of it. The points calling for attention are chiefly the following: (1) the general outline and contents of the prophecy; (2) its character, whether literal or allegorical; (3) the main religious ideas of the prophet; and (4), finally, the age or date at which he lived.

1. The Book consists of four chapters,—in the English version of three, the third chapter in Hebrew being reckoned part of the second. It falls into two general divisions at chap. ii. 18: “Then was the Lord jealous for His land.” All that precedes this point consists of words of the prophet, descriptions of plagues and exhortations to repentance; while all that follows is put into the mouth of the Lord, and consists of promises, partly of temporal and partly of spiritual blessings. The first division of the Book—the part spoken by the prophet—comprises two discourses, each of which, beginning with a graphic description of a plague, leads up to an exhortation to repentance. The first discourse occupies chap. i.; the second, chap. ii. 1–17. The prophet’s object in both is to move his countrymen to repentance, that the great judgments of God might be removed from them.

The words in which the prophet describes the calamity which was the occasion of his prophecy are something as follows:

“That which the shearer hath left, the swarmer hath eaten; and that which the swarmer hath left, the licker

hath eaten ; and that which the licker hath left, the consumer hath eaten."

The writer certainly refers to locusts. Whether he means to describe locusts in general by such names, mentioning four kinds to express universality, or whether he means to describe the same swarm of locusts according to the advancing stages of its growth, is not of much consequence to decide. The latter theory has been advocated, as by Credner in his *Commentary*, but has little probability. In another passage (ii. 25) the same names are used, but in a different order, and the plague is represented as continuing through several years. If the same swarm were spoken of in different stages it could not be said that what one stage had left another had eaten, because the swarm moves onward without returning upon its own track. The prophet uses the various names—all denoting locusts—not strictly to describe distinct classes, but to indicate that many and successive swarms have invaded the land ; and, put into prose, his language means, What one swarm hath left another hath eaten, and so on.

In his first discourse, chap. i., the prophet gives a graphic description of the calamity, to impress the minds of his hearers and carry them forward with him to that public humiliation and supplication to God which he desires to see. The country is desolate, and all sustenance for man and beast has disappeared. First, he begins with that luxurious use of God's benefits, which must now cease, but the cessation of which is the lowest form of calamity: "Awake, ye drunkards, and weep and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the new wine, for it is cut off from your mouth" (vv. 5-7). Then he passes to that which is a severer evil, to him and all religious men,—the interruption to the public service of God caused by the dearth and the devastations of the plague. This interruption of the fellowship between the land and Jehovah through the failure of

the sacrifices he throws into the figure of a young wife bereaved and in mourning. Addressing the land, he says, "Lament, like a virgin girdeth with sackcloth for the husband of her youth." The land is the virgin; the dreary, bleak aspect of it is the mourning which she wears. The bereavement lies in this: that through the cutting off of the meat offering and the drink offering the tokens of Jehovah's presence and favour, manifested in His acceptance of the offerings, have been removed; communications between the land and its God have been broken, and the land is bereaved (*vv.* 3-10). Finally, the third thing to which the prophet passes is the use of God's blessings for the sustenance of life, which now also must cease, and which is the sorest calamity of all: "Be ashamed, ye husbandmen, for the wheat and for the barley." The whole face of things is changed; the grains rot under the clods, the granaries are fallen down, the land is muffled in sackcloth, and the ruddy countenance of joy herself is become white—joy is withered away from the sons of men. And, having reached this climax, the prophet turns suddenly to the priests, bidding them consecrate a fast and cry unto the Lord, and himself dictating the words with which they are to go into God's presence: "Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand. Is not the meat cut off before our eyes? How do the beasts groan! The channels of waters are dried up, and fire has consumed the pasture-lands" (*vv.* 13-20).

The second discourse, chap. ii. 1-17, follows the same lines as the first, consisting of a brilliant picture of the plague under which the land suffers, and ending as before with an earnest appeal to all classes to humble themselves, that if possible, even after things have gone so far (*ii.* 12), the judgments of God may be removed. While the first discourse, however, dwelt chiefly on the desolation of the land from the locusts and drought—two plagues that usually accompany one another—the second is mainly occupied

with a description of the attack of the locusts themselves. Their appearance is as the appearance of horses; their approach over the mountains sounds like the rattling of chariots, or the roar of a flame of fire, or the noise of a numerous people set in battle array. They run in the streets like mighty men, they keep their ranks like a disciplined host, they climb the wall like men of war, they go up into the houses and enter the windows like a thief. And the Lord uttereth His voice before His army, for His host is very great—for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible, and who can abide it? And having drawn this alarming picture, the prophet exhorts his hearers: "Yet even now, saith the Lord, turn ye unto Me with all your heart, with fasting and with weeping, and rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: who knoweth whether He will not turn and repent?" And continuing his appeal he bids them call a solemn assembly of all the people, the old men, the children, the bridegroom and the bride, and let the priests intercede for the land: "Spare Thy people, O Lord, and give not Thine heritage to reproach."

Such are the contents of the first half of the Book. Some modern writers find a great want of clearness in it, especially in the references to the day of the Lord, which they think is not kept distinct from the other calamity, the events and drought in chap. i., and the invading army in chap. ii. Now unquestionably the day of the Lord is connected by the prophet with the other plagues, but it is not confounded with them. These plagues are not the day of the Lord, they are but the heralds and omens of it. The day of the Lord is the moment when He grasps the reins, which He seems to have held slackly before, when the currents of His moral rule, which had been running sluggishly, receive a mysterious quickening, and the Lord's work upon the earth is at last fully performed. Such a

day of the Lord has of necessity two sides. To the sinners in Israel and to Israel's foes it is a day of darkness and terror; to them that look for Him it is eventually a day of gladness and deliverance, though to all the coming of Jehovah must have elements of terror. The advent of such a day was impressed on the hearts of men, but they were without knowledge of its time. They could only augur its approach from signs. Naturally any severe judgment or calamity awakened the thought of it, and it seemed the advanced post of the final terrors. Jehovah was near in the judgment, His goings might be heard, and speedily He would reveal Himself in His fulness. And therefore the prophet here connects the severe plagues under which the land lay in his time with that day: "Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is at hand!" So far in chap. i., at least, there is no confusion. Equally distinct are the day of the Lord and the tokens of its nearness in the beginning of chap. ii.: "Blow the trumpet in Zion, for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand" (ii. 1). But in chap. ii. 10 the plague and the day of the Lord seem brought immediately together; for, after describing the assault of the army upon the city, the prophet says: "The earth quaketh before them, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, . . . and the Lord uttereth His voice before His army; . . . for the day of the Lord is great and very terrible." Now this darkening of the sun and moon is not to be rationalised into the effects upon daylight produced by swarms of locusts in the sky, it is a sign of the near approach of the day of the Lord, though not identical with that day: "The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood *before* the great and terrible day of the Lord come" (ii. 31, Eng.). That the plague and the day of the Lord should be immediately connected is quite natural. For these hosts of locusts were the army of the Lord, as He Himself calls them, "My great army, which I

have sent upon you" (ii. 25), and He was at the head of the army, giving it command; and thus there was virtually that presence and manifestation of the Lord, at least in its beginnings, in which the day of the Lord was verified. It may not be easy to say, in regard to chap. ii., whether it be a prophecy of a new attack or an ideal account of a present one; for the description has many marks of poetical exaggeration. But in any case, seeing the invading host was the advanced post of the great day, it can readily be conceived how the prophet's imagination and presentiment should run out into a delineation of the day itself.

And thus we reach the second half of the Book, chap. ii. 18 to the end. This comprises a series of promises from the Lord, who is the speaker throughout. First, promises of temporal benefits, by which all the former calamities shall be reversed: "Behold, I will send you corn and oil and wine, and ye shall be satisfied therewith.¹ Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness do spring. Be glad, ye children of Zion, . . . the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil." And, secondly, a promise that afterward the Spirit shall be poured out on all flesh, when all shall share the prophetic gift and be taught of God. And then shall come the great and terrible day of the Lord, ushered in by signs in heaven and in earth, the issue of which shall be that in Zion shall remain those that have escaped.

This third chapter (ii. 28-32, Eng.) states the result briefly; but one episode, contained strictly in the day of the Lord, has to be drawn out in fuller detail, the judg-

¹ There is a promise that rain shall be given "moderately" (A.V.), "in just measure" (R.V.), or, marg., "for righteousness." The word *cedakah* is nowhere else used except in an ethical or religious sense. The meaning here is probably "for" (in token of) righteousness, *i.e.* right standing before God, now restored. Comp. Job xxxiii. 26, "He restoreth unto man his righteousness" (*i.e.* the man's renewed health is God's practical justification of him).

ment on the heathen. This judgment is represented in chap. iv. (iii., Eng.). They are brought together and judged in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, "Jehovah judges." The judgment is a reaping of a harvest, and a treading of the winepress, amidst manifestations of the day of the Lord. And the issue is again stated: Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness; but Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem to all generations.

2. In regard to the literary character of the Book there used to be only two opinions, but to these there has lately been added a third of some interest. The three views are briefly: (1) That the prophecy is to be interpreted literally. The locusts in chap. i. are locusts; and the invading host in chap. ii., though represented with much poetical and pictorial rhetoric under the figure of a well disciplined force attacking a city, is also a host of locusts. This view carries with it the conclusion that the plague referred to was not future but present and experienced, and was the occasion of the prophecy; only the day of the Lord was really future. (2) The view has been prevalent, especially in ancient times, that the Book is allegorical, by locusts being meant heathen enemies of God's people. The four swarms have been thought to refer to the four monarchies mentioned in Daniel, or at least to four great foes of the kingdom of God. On this theory the whole prophecy belongs to the future of the prophet. (3) A recent theory has been advanced that the Book is apocalyptic. This class of literature deals especially with the future destinies of the people of God, with the eschatology of the kingdom. Dealing with this, it enters many times a supernatural region, bringing agencies and forces into operation that hardly belong to the earth or the life of man, but are rather embodiments of spiritual powers, whether of good or evil. According to this view the locusts of chap. i. are certainly locusts, but they are not the orthoptera of the desert, warp-

ing on the eastern wind, and darkening the sky of our natural day, they are apocalyptic locusts, belonging to the wonders of the time of the end, and crowding the atmosphere of the terrible day of the Lord. And the warriors of chap. ii. are neither locusts idealized nor yet human men of war, they are apocalyptic warriors, neither of the flesh of man nor beast. They belong to the terrible creations or manifestations of the last times. The idea of them may have been suggested by the northern host of Gog and Magog; but while the soldiers of Gog, however terrible, belong to this earth, these belong to another world.

The last two theories agree in throwing the whole Book into the prophet's future, the plague of chap. i. and chap. ii. are alike yet to come in his view. There are several objections that occur to this opinion. It cuts off all occasion for the prophecy, and makes it a mere learned study or *midrash* on preceding prophetic literature. The general character of prophecy is so unlike this, that very good evidence would be required to sustain such a theory. Again, the impression produced by chap. i. is certainly that the calamity to which the prophet refers is one which those whom he addresses had experienced. He asks, "Has this been in your days, or in the days of your fathers?" and bids his hearers tell it to their children, and their children to another generation. And when, at the end of the chapter, he exhorts the priests to lie all night in the temple in supplication, and bids them say, "Is not the meat cut off before our eyes? the seed is rotten under the clods, how do the beasts groan! the streams of water are dried up," is it possible that the things spoken of are future or figurative? or when, in the end of the second address, he bids the people turn in penitence to the Lord, saying, Who knows whether He will repent and return? is it probable that he is addressing an imaginary audience, which shall live at some distant date?

The allegorical theory considers the warriors of chap. ii. to be real soldiers, and the locusts of chap. i. to be a figure for heathen invaders of the kingdom of God. The apocalyptic theory holds that the locusts and warriors are both supernatural beings, but quite different from one another. Now as to the last point, the Book seems unmistakably to identify the plague of chap. i. with that of chap. ii. In ii. 11 it is said, "The Lord uttereth His voice before His army, for His host is very great"—that is, the warriors of chap. ii. But in ii. 25 it is said, "I will restore to you the years which the swarmer, the licker, the devourer, and the shearer have eaten, My great army which I sent among you." Here the locusts of chap. i. are expressly identified with the army of chap. ii. If then the army of chap. ii. be identical with the locusts of chap. i., and the prophet's two addresses be but rhetorical descriptions of the same plague, the question arises, Does he describe real warriors under the figure of locusts, or real locusts under the figure of warriors? If we do the prophet the justice of allowing him to speak for himself, the answer cannot be doubtful. He says of the army of the second chapter that their appearance is as the appearance of horses, and like horsemen so they run; they are as a numerous people set in battle array; they leap upon the city like mighty men, and enter in at the windows like a thief. No writer would tell us that horsemen were like horsemen, or thieves like thieves. And if these assailants are real soldiers, where is the blood which they shed, the captives they carry off, the flaming cities which they leave behind them? There is nothing of all this. The whole picture is merely the onward march of a host of insects, which nothing can resist, which rolls over fields and towns alike, crowding the streets and filling the houses—but doing nothing else. And when the Lord promises to restore the devastations inflicted by His great army, He does not engage to restore the captives whom they have carried off

or rebuild the cities which they have ruined—He promises to restore the years which His army has *eaten*. Of course if the invaders were apocalyptic warriors, the ghosts of the hordes of Gog and Magog, they might come and go, and leave little trace behind them; one hardly knows what effects to expect from them. And perhaps when they had come and disappeared, it could only be said of them with Macbeth, The earth hath bubbles as the water hath, and these are of them.

3. The religious thoughts of the prophet are common to him with other prophets. If the prophecy were very ancient it would be interesting as being a kind of prophetic chart, which subsequent writers followed. If it be late, as modern writers are inclined to conclude, though it still has its interest, it loses the novelty and originality which would otherwise belong to it.

The main thought of the prophecy is the idea of the day of the Lord, a point of a time in the history of the world at which the Lord Himself shall interpose, revealing Himself as all that He is, and bringing to an end openly all the work which in more hidden ways He has been performing from the beginning. The day of the Lord is a day of terror and of blessing, the day of vengeance and the year of His redeemed; its issue is the salvation of His people, and the destruction of all that disturb their peace. It is a sifting of His people and the judging of all their enemies round about. Most of the other thoughts of the prophecy arise out of this great conception; for example, the idea of a *pelētah*, an escaped remnant, which shall constitute the saved at last. This idea is common to most of the prophets; Isaiah in his first writing (chap. vi.) expresses it in the figure of a tree cut down, of which the stock remains with power to send forth new shoots. But each prophet, when predicting the destruction of the nation, predicts it with the reservation that the Lord will not wholly destroy His people—a

remnant shall return unto the Lord. Naturally in connexion with this the prophet gives prominence to the effective Divine call in salvation, saying, "And the residue are they whom the Lord shall call" (ii. 32); and he gives equal prominence to the faith of men on the other side, "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Again he predicts more explicitly than others the pouring out of the Spirit, saying, that the Spirit shall be poured out on all flesh, and all shall prophesy and know the Lord. This is not a prediction of the *event* of Pentecost, but of the new order of things, of which Pentecost was the first great example. And when he says "all flesh," though the expression is usual for mankind as a whole, his subsequent analysis of the phrase, "your sons and daughters," "your old men and young men," "the servants and handmaids," suggests that he merely meant to include all classes and ranks in Israel. The imagery of the prophet is common in other prophets, and has been imitated in the New Testament; thus, his delineation of the day of the Lord reappears in our Lord's last discourse (Matt. xxiv. 29), and in the terrors that follow the opening of the sixth seal (Rev. vi. 12). The figures of the harvest and the winepress are adopted in Rev. xiv. 14; that of the locusts in Rev. ix; and the image of the fountain going forth from the house of the Lord (Zech. xiii., Ezek. xlvi.) is reproduced in the river of the water of life (Rev. xxii. 4).

Evidence for the age of the prophet is very uncertain, as Calvin felt, who remarked, "Quia nihil certi constat satius est tempus quo docuit in medio relinquere." On the other hand, Delitzsch has quite recently declared that the great antiquity of the prophecy is a "certainty." The difference of opinion that has prevailed on the subject is extraordinary. There is scarcely a point in the history, from the tenth century down to the year 400, at which the prophecy has

not been dated. And even more curious are the fluctuations of opinion observable in the same mind. In his Introduction Kuenen adhered to the opinion of Ewald, and placed the Book about the middle of the ninth century. In his *History of the Religion of Israel*, he threw Joel out of the list of witnesses who might be cited for the eighth century. In the later work, *The Prophets of Israel*, he dates the prophecy in the beginning of the sixth century, a few years before the exile; while his latest judgment is that the author was contemporary with Malachi.

It is agreed among scholars that Joel must either be a very early or a very late prophet. Credner and Ewald placed him about 860, and the view was followed by many. It was observed that Joel makes no allusions to Assyria nor to the Syrians, both referred to by Amos; and the inference was drawn that he lived before Assyria became formidable, and at a time when Syria and Israel had not lately been in collision. Further he makes no mention of a king, representing the government as in the hands of the priests and elders. These two facts were supposed to point to the time of the minority of king Joash, who, as a child of seven years, was placed on the throne under the tutelage of the high priest Jehoiada, about 877. The weakness of the argument, however, is apparent. It derives any strength which it has from the assumption that Joel is an early prophet, and must be placed somewhere high up in the history, and here is a niche suitable. But it is easy to turn the argument round. If Assyria and Chaldæa are not mentioned, it may equally well be because they have passed off the stage of history as because they have not yet entered upon it. If no king of Israel is referred to, it is more likely to be because there was no king, and the government was really in the hands of the priestly nobles and the elders, as it was after the return from exile. Ewald relies upon the purity of the prophet's style as an

evidence of antiquity ; but the style is rather cultured and polished than powerful and original, and Reuss, who still adheres to the early date, confesses that the style is the only thing that suggests a later date to him.

The only arguments available are some general considerations, the preponderating weight of which, however, is in favour of a late date.

The prophet makes no allusion to Northern Israel, the people of God is Israel which dwells in Jerusalem. If the kingdom of the North had existed in Joel's day we should have expected allusions to it, as in all the prophets who are known to be early. Further, the prophet makes no reference to the conflict between the true, spiritual worship of Jehovah and false worship ; he mentions neither Baal, nor high places, nor idols, the work of men's hands ; although this conflict is just what fills the pages of all the earlier and even later prophets from Amos to Jeremiah. It would appear that in his day the opposition to the worship of Jehovah alone had been overcome in Judah. The prophet signalizes no great sins, such as idolatry, on the people's part ; they are sinful and need repentance, above all, there is need of the outpouring of the Spirit of God, but the grosser sins attacked by earlier prophets do not seem to have been prevalent. It is doubtful if such a state of things existed at any time prior to the restoration from exile.

And with this later date agrees the great devotion which the prophet shows to the ritual. At whatever time the ritual law was given to the people, it did not succeed in mastering their life till after the return. Joel regards the cessation of the ritual service as equivalent to a break in the union between the land and Jehovah. This is very unlike the way in which all other prophets down to Jeremiah speak of the sacrificial service.

The earlier prophets all play the game of high politics.

The occasion of their prophecies is something going on in the great world around, the menacing attitude of some foreign power, or the dangerous complications into which the State is bringing herself by alliances, or the hopes of freedom awakened by the combinations that are forming against some powerful oppressor such as Babylon. But the enemies of Israel alluded to by Joel are the petty tribes about, who do not threaten the existence or independence of the people, but make cruel raids upon their borders in order to recruit the slave market. The earlier prophets read the purposes of God, the nature of His Being, and the lessons of His providence in the great book of the history of the nations and their connexions with Israel; Joel has no such book before him, for Israel is no longer a nation, and he turns to the life of the community and its experiences under natural calamities, as drought and locusts, and reads lessons equally impressive there.

Though the people appears long restored, the restoration was still very incomplete; but the people shall yet be gathered to their former home, and though the great day of the Lord shall try them, "in mount Zion and Jerusalem shall be those that escape." And the day of Israel's redemption shall be the day when their enemies shall perish. In the earlier prophets it is some individual nation that is the foe of Israel, and on whom the vengeance of God is threatened, and thus the antithesis between Israel and the heathen is concrete and particular; but in this prophet the antagonism is generalized, it is between Israel and the world—"all nations" are gathered together to be judged in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

A. B. DAVIDSON.