

CHAPTER II

JOEL

THE STRUCTURE OF JOEL

THE DAY OF JEHOVAH

- A. To-Day—Chs. 1: 2-2: 17.**
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2—Ch. 2: 1-11. The Approaching Day.
3—Ch. 2: 12-17. Effective Penitence.
- B. The Future—Chs. 2: 18-3: 21.**
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2—Ch. 2: 28-32. Spiritual Blessing.
3—Ch. 3: 1-17. Judgment on the Nations.
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Author and Date.

NOTHING is known of Joel except his name and the obvious inference from his prophecy that he lived in Judaea. The order of the Minor Prophets gives the impression that the scribes responsible for it aimed at approximate chronological order, modified where necessary by spiritual considerations. This creates a presumption in favour of an early date for the Book of Joel. From the internal evidence of the book itself we are virtually tied down either to a date early in the reign of Joash of Judah (*i.e.* shortly after 835 B.C.), or to one after the Exile—anything from 500 to 200 B.C. has been suggested.¹

We do not consider either dating conclusively proved, and we here deal with Joel in his traditional position, for its message underlies all written Hebrew prophecy.

The Day of Jehovah.

The Day of Jehovah, or of the LORD, is a fundamental concept in the Old Testament, never really introduced or formally explained. The Hebrew saw that the world does not show the perfection of God's rule, and that the righteous man does not fully reap the reward of his righteousness. The Old Testament does not look for a redress of this world's

¹ For the early date see Kirkpatrick, p. 57 *seq.*, HDB, article Joel, ISBE, article Joel; for the late date Driver: Joel & Amos (C.B.) or LOT, p. 308 *seq.* Young, p. 255 and N.B.D., p. 639 leave it open, preferring the former, while Harrison, pp. 876-879 tends to the latter.

wrongs and sufferings in heaven, but expects God's intervention by which His sovereignty will be perfectly and forever established on earth. This intervention with its accompanying upheavals and judgments is called the Day of the Lord (see also Amos 5: 18ff; Isa. 2: 12; 13: 6, 9f; Zeph. 1: 14ff; Jer. 46: 10; Ezek. 30: 2f; Obad. 15; Zech. 14: 1; Mal. 4: 5).

Since any and every major divine intervention, especially when it involved judgment, not merely foreshadowed the final intervention and judgment, but also, for all that man could tell, might be its inauguration, the Day of the Lord is not used exclusively for the final intervention. This ambiguity has three main reasons, linguistic peculiarities in Hebrew, the real link between the foreshadowing and the fulfilment, and the revelation to the prophet of the nature of the Day of the Lord but not of its date in time.

The Swarm of Locusts.

The immediate cause of Joel's prophecy was an exceptionally severe invasion of locusts. Interpretations differ, some seeing here a description of the immediate past, others a prophecy of the future, but the most likely is that Joel speaks at the very height of the plague. After in ch. 1 describing the locusts and calling for a fast, for "the Day of the Lord is at hand," in 2: 1-11 he describes them in even more hyperbolic language, as they are seen against the lurid background of the Day of the Lord. So poetic and exaggerated does his language become, that many have found it impossible to believe that real locusts are here intended.

Allegorical interpretations of these chapters have been and still are popular; but quite apart from the complete lack of agreement as to how the allegory is to be interpreted, such an interpretation seems entirely unnecessary. The language, however exaggerated, can with few exceptions be suitably applied to locusts,¹ while the exceptions (2: 10f) are unsuited to human armies as well.

The prophet's lesson is that there are natural calamities so terrible and so surpassing the limits normally imposed by God, that they can only be explained as divine interventions in judgment. Whether or not such a calamity is inaugurating the final judgment is of little importance, for it is a guarantee that there is a final judgment.

The palmerworm, locust, cankerworm, caterpillar (1:4) are either different kinds of locusts, or more probably different stages in the development of the locust. Driver renders: shearer, swarmer, lapper, finisher,² cf. also R.S.V. and N.E.B.

¹ See Driver: Joel & Amos (C.B.) *ad loc.* and especially p. 84-93.

² See Driver *op. cit.* and HDB and ISBE, article Locust.

The Giving of the Spirit.

Evidently the call to repentance and fasting was followed, for there is an immediate promise of Divine blessing (note tenses in 2:18f, R.V., R.S.V., N.E.B.). These verses (2: 18-27) refer to Joel's own time rather than to the more distant future.

Then there comes the promise that even as the judgment of locusts was followed by spiritual turning to God, so in the judgments of the Day of the Lord (2: 30ff) there will be a tremendous outpouring of the Spirit. From the New Testament we know that this promise was fulfilled on the first Whit-Sunday (Acts. 2: 16). There is a tendency to suggest that this outpouring was not the fulfilment of Joel, but only a foreshadowing of the fulfilment in a day yet to come. This is not indicated by Peter, nor is it necessarily true. The coming of the Holy Spirit to found a body in which all barriers of birth, sex and social standing should be swept away, and in which the will and purposes of God should truly find expression is, in conjunction with the work of Christ, the supreme intervention of God in human affairs up to our time. The forty years that followed were the most catastrophic in their history for the Jewish people until perhaps our own time.

While the lack of perspective in the prophets' vision of the future is universally recognized, it is not sufficiently seen that the two comings of our Lord are inseparably connected, two phases of one great divine intervention. So the Day of the Lord looks not merely to our Lord's second coming, but to His first as well.

Unless, therefore, other evidence can be found, it would be dangerous to base any view of world-wide revival before the second coming of our Lord merely on this passage.

The Judgment of the Nations (3: 1-17).

For the average Israelite the Day of the Lord was first and foremost the day of divine vengeance on the enemies of Israel (cf. Amos 5: 18), therefore the prophets stress primarily the judgment on Israel (cf. I Pet. 4: 17), but the reality of the Divine judgment of the nations is never denied. It belongs to God's attributes as "Judge of all the earth."

The vision of judgment falls into two parts (vers. 1-8, 9-17), and the contrast between them is most instructive for our understanding of the prophetic picturing of the distant future. First Joel deals with nations known to him. Their treatment of God's people is to provide the ground of judgment, and as they have treated them, so will they be treated. Our Lord's teaching in Matt. 25: 31-46 lifts this to the highest plane and lays bare its underlying principles. Man's reaction to the

people of God illuminates his true character and shows his true reaction to Christ Himself.

But there are other nations unknown to the prophet and to Israel. Immediately the sharp-cut details of vers. 1-8 vanish, and we meet the typical vagueness and general terms of apocalyptic (see p. 115). The prophet does not know on what grounds these nations will be judged, but he knows the judgment is certain.

It is probable that the valley of Jehoshaphat (vers. 2, 12) belongs to the symbolic language of apocalyptic. There is no plausibility in its identification with the Kidron valley (though this is at least as early as the fourth century A.D.). Jehoshaphat means "Jehovah judges," and this is in all probability the reason behind the choice of name.

Final Blessing (3: 18-21).

All Old Testament prophecy sees in the final setting up of God's kingdom here on a transformed earth the goal of God's purposes; and this is echoed in Rev. 21, 22, where heaven is linked with earth but does not swallow it up or obliterate it.

There may be adequate reasons for anticipating an end of the material universe, and placing the eternal state in a purely spiritual "heaven," but they hardly justify the complete spiritualization of the Old Testament hope. The prophets' vision of a transformed earth was not merely the highest that they were capable of apprehending of God's purposes; it was also the vindication of God's wisdom and purposes in creation. There is no trace in the Bible of that depreciation of the material that came into Christianity from Greek philosophy and Eastern mysticism. While we must never forget that the unknown future can be pictured only in terms of the known present, we should yet hesitate to deny reality to the glowing visions of the prophets, and to affirm that this world is incapable of salvation and transformation in the cosmic stretch of the power of the Cross.

Joel's vision is limited to Judah and Jerusalem, not even the north of Palestine being included. It is quite understandable, then, that he sees only judgment and not blessing for the other peoples. This is one of the strong arguments for an early date for the prophecy.