

CHAPTER VIII

ZEPHANIAH

THE STRUCTURE OF ZEPHANIAH

- A. **The Judgment of the Day of the Lord—Chs. 1: 1-3: 8.**
1—Chs. 1: 1-2: 3. **Universal Judgment focussed on Jerusalem.**
2—Ch. 2: 4-15. **Judgment on the Nations.**
3—Ch. 3: 1-8. **God's Judgment on Jerusalem.**
- B. **Universal Salvation—Ch. 3: 9-20.**

The Author.

THOUGH absolute certainty is unobtainable, there is a strong probability that the first of the true prophets of Jehovah to break silence after the reign of Manasseh was Zephaniah. There is virtual unanimity that 1: 4-9 must precede Josiah's reformation of 622 B.C. The only arguments against are based on "the remnant of Baal" (ver. 4) and "the king's sons" (ver. 8). But since the former may well mean "Baal worship to the last vestige," and the latter "the royal family" (the LXX actually has "the king's house", cf. N.E.B.), we need, hardly doubt the general impression made by this section of the prophecy.

There are grounds for thinking that it was the first tentative reforms of Josiah in 628 B.C. (II Chron. 34: 3; see p. 79) that were the external stimulus moving Jeremiah to prophesy, so it may well have been Zephaniah who a year or two earlier first stirred Josiah to his reforms.

Zephaniah, as is suggested by the local colour of his prophecy, obviously lived in Jerusalem, and he probably belonged to a family of some importance. This is suggested by his genealogy being carried back to his great-great-grandfather (1: 1). In no other prophetic book except Zechariah do we go further back than the prophet's father. On the other hand it seems gratuitous to assume, as is generally done, that his ancestor Hezekiah was the king of that name, but cf. Harrison, p. 939.

Universal Judgment focussed on Jerusalem (1: 2-2: 3).

For the conception of the Day of the Lord see ch. II. The contraction of the vision from a universal judgment to one on

Jerusalem in particular is not unnatural. The Day of the Lord, though universal, always centres around Israel. For the comparison of the judgment with a sacrifice cf. Isa. 34: 6.

The various religious offences mentioned are of great interest to the student of religions for the light they throw on the syncretistic religion that had grown up in Jerusalem in the days of Manasseh, but for detailed explanations a commentary must be consulted. We find the conditions under Manasseh reflected also in ver. 12. His policy of keeping on good terms with his Assyrian overlord, of which his religious syncretism was largely a result, will have created some measure of prosperity, while his flouting of the will of Jehovah and the message of the prophets passed without any very serious consequences for him or his people (but see II Chron. 33: 10-19—the history of Josiah's reign and passages like Jer. 15: 4 suggest that the repentance and reformation were very superficial). So, as always, the long-suffering of God produced the belief in some that God was indifferent as to how men acted (cf. II Pet. 3: 4, 9).

It is widely held that just as Joel's vision of the Day of the Lord was inspired by the invasion of the locust swarms, so Zephaniah's was by the invasion of the Scythians. If, however, the opinion expressed in ch. XI (p. 81) is correct, this becomes improbable. After all we are dealing with the typically vague language of eschatology, where everything is seen through a haze of dust (cf. pp. 51, 115).

The corruption had gone too far for Zephaniah to share Joel's vision of a spiritual revival. He can only see the small number of humble (2: 3; better than "meek," cf. Mic. 6: 8), Isaiah's remnant, escaping the coming wrath (cf. Isa. 26: 20).

Judgment on the Nations (2: 4-15).

Since in the case of two nations no mention is made of sins at all, and in a third (ver. 15) it is only done in passing, it seems best to look upon this passage as a typical example of the Hebrew love for the concrete. The generalized language of 1: 2f is replaced by the mention of the Philistines to the west of Judah, Moab and Ammon to the east, Assyria to the north and the Ethiopians to the south. Ethiopia is chosen rather than Egypt, for like Assyria it is far away. So we have combined far and near and all the points of the compass, *i.e.* universality.

God's Judgment on Jerusalem (3: 1-8).

We have here the explanation why in 1: 2-2: 3 social sin and wrongdoing are hardly mentioned. However grievous the corrupt worship of Jerusalem, for Zephaniah the social injustice was worse, so it is dealt with as the climax of the pro-

phesy of judgment. We find in ver. 6f an echo of the constant prophetic teaching that Jehovah is the God of all the earth; national calamity anywhere in the Near East should have been recognized in Judah as a sign that Jehovah was still reigning in righteousness.

Universal Salvation (3: 9-20).

Judgment on Israel is always linked, explicitly or implicitly, with ultimate restoration and blessing. This can only be denied by denying to a number of the prophets their promises of restoration (cf. p. 34). The judgment is never merely punitive, though it would be difficult to find Biblical support for the modern psychologists' objections to punitive justice. Here the principle is carried to its logical conclusion; also for the nations punishment has as its final purpose blessing.

While it is possible to justify both the R.V. text and mg. in ver. 10, neither is very convincing, especially as the prophecies of exile look normally to the North as the place of exile, and not Egypt. It is far more likely that there is a minor textual corruption, and that we should read with Ewald:

Beyond the rivers of Ethiopia they shall offer Me incense,
the daughter of Put shall bring Me an offering.

For Israel Ethiopia was at the ends of the earth; for Put cf. Nahum 3: 9.

There follows the picture of purified Israel (ver. 11ff). In ver. 12 "a humbled and weak people" best expresses the sense of the Hebrew.

The book ends with a picture of the redeemed people with the presence of Jehovah in their midst (vers. 14-20). The king of Israel is Jehovah himself (cf. Isa. 41: 21; Ezek. 34: 11). For the general picture cf. Isa. 12: 6; Ezek. 48: 35. Zephaniah must not be understood to be denying the reality of the Messianic king. It is hardly possible that any prophet conceived of Jehovah's direct presence except in the Shekinah glory, which had already been seen on Tabernacle and Temple (Exod. 40: 34; I Kings 8: 10f). Any more tangible presence implied a human representative, but not to mention him showed how perfectly he would represent Jehovah instead of obscuring Him as the earlier judges and kings had done.