

THE BOOK OF JOEL - PART III

THE SALVATION OF ISRAEL

I. The Book of Joel then dramatically switches to a description of God's salvation of His people.

A. It begins with an anthropomorphism, describing God's being stirred to concern, as though the prayers of the people caused this concern. The prophets especially use this sort of language often, see, e.g., Ex. 20:5, 34:14; Ezek, 39:25, Zech. 1:14, 8:2.

- It is not that God was not concerned before, but rather than the prayers of the people tapped into this concern, or to use another translation, jealousy, for His people.

- Even the word concern, describing an emotion, is not literally true of God, at least not until the Incarnation. However, we come to understand God by analogy to things human, and so apply to God terms that we understand from human nature. Terms applied to humans beings can often be applied to God in a way that is neither univocal (i.e., meaning completely the same thing) nor equivocal (meaning completely different things), but rather analogously.

B. God then promises restoration to the people.

1. As the prophet had earlier spoken of the destruction of the grain, wine and oil, see Joel 1:10-12, so now they are restored. The grain, the wine and the oil was also a phrase used by other prophets for the success of agriculture, which also means the availability of materials for sacrifice, especially the cereal offering. See Jer. 31:12. Hosea 22:10, 24. Both Joel and the other prophets may be cross referencing the promises for fidelity made by Moses long before. See Duet. 11:14.

2. The second promise is that the Chosen People's reputation will be restored. The implication is that other nations looked down on Israel, a contempt probably increased by the claim to divine favor, which in time of disaster seemed to have failed.

3. The prophet refers to the locusts as "the northerner," for invading armies tended to come from the north, for that was the more fertile, livable land. See Jer. 1:14 The land directly to the west of the Jordan River, and to the south of the chosen

people's land was a desert.

- The reference to the stench of the invader going up, at one level refers to the dead locusts who have been driven back, presumably by a strong wind. It may also call up images of Sennacherib's army, which invaded Judah, and in fact arrived at Jerusalem, but was defeated by the angel of death, who killed 185,000 soldiers. See 2 Kings 18:35-36, Is. 37:36-37; see also Is. 34:3. It is likely that a plague broke out among the army, saving King Hezekiah from defeat.

C. As even nature joined in the suffering, so now Joel calls upon even the land and the beasts to join in the celebration.

1. The Psalms reflect this theme of all of creation celebrating God's providence, a theme that the Book of Revelation will also describe as a sign of the kingdom of heaven breaking into the world. See, e.g., Ps. 19:2-7, 148:7-10, 150:6; Is. 44:23; Rev. 5:13. Especially in Isaiah, this image of creation worshiping the true God stands in contrast with the idolatry, the worship of created things, that Isaiah condemns. Part of the idea is that, as humanity led nature in the Fall, so now humanity will lead nature in the worship of God. See Romans 8:19-22.

2. The promise begins with the fruitfulness of the earth, which more than overtakes the destruction of the locusts. Again, there is a reference to the grain, wine and oil.

- The descriptions of the locusts and possibly other plagues in verse 25 parallels that description in chapter 1, verse 4.

3. In the midst of these promises, Joel also introduces a promise for a "teacher of justice," which is often translated as simply "for justice" or "for vindication." The reference is not clear, although later non-Biblical apocalyptic literature, such as that in the Dead Sea Scrolls would take up this theme. There is perhaps a reference to the prophesy of Isaiah that God would show Himself as a Teacher in the midst of the prosperity He would send. See Is. 30:18-26. There may also be a reference to Solomon's dedication of the temple, during which he said that, if a drought came upon the land because of the peoples' guilt, they could repent and God will both teach them the way of righteousness and restore the rain. See 1 Kings 8:35-36, 2 Chr. 6:26-27.

C. Joel then takes the promises a step further and promises that the people will, in the midst of this prosperity worship God,

rather than fall away once again. Moses had warned right after his promises for rewards if the people were faithful against falling into idolatry. Joel here promises that the people will truly know God and have no other gods, thus especially keeping especially the First Commandment and the Shema, the controlling principal of all the Jewish law. See Ex. 20:2, Duet. 5:7, 6:4.

- Because the people of God will finally know God, they will be drawn to Him in such a way as never again to fall away. The idea is that true knowledge of God gives a glory and a joy that prevents sin. The prophets had spoken of an era in which people would at last really know God. Is. 11:9, Jer. 31:34; Ez. 39:28-29. But that true knowledge of God would be given finally only by Jesus. See Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22.

- For the whole Church, this passage is fulfilled because of God's presence in the Church, especially in the saints, the sacraments and all of her means of sanctification. Thus, while individuals on earth do not know God fully and can fall away, the Church as a whole cannot fall away and therefore cannot be put to shame. The Church is holy because her head, Jesus, is in heaven, because of Mary and all the saints in heaven, and because of the truth and the means of holiness God has given her. See Catechism 823-29, 867; cf. Eph. 4:1-16, 5:25; Col. 1:18. Thus, the gates of the netherworld cannot prevail against the Church. See Matt. 16:18.

- For individuals, the promise is filled in part on earth, in that the more we know God, the more we are drawn to His love and therefore, will not sin. But as long as life on earth continues, this knowledge is imperfect, see John 6:46; 1 Cor. 13:12, and therefore, failure is possible. But, because of the Beatific Vision, the saints know God directly and, therefore, cannot be tempted by sin again. See Catechism 2550; 1 John 3:2, 6.

II. The next passage then unfolds this promise by describing the pouring forth of the Spirit upon all mankind.

A. Moses had desired that the spirit of prophesy come to all God's people, but unfortunately the infidelity of the people prevented them from being close to God. See Num. 11:25-30. Isaiah Ezekiel likewise prophesied of a pouring forth of the Spirit that would inaugurate a new and everlasting covenant, which will make His people holy and do away with idolatry. See Ezek. 36:25-38, 37:12-28, 38:21-29; Is. 44:1-5; Zech. 12:10, 13:1.

B. The promise here is radical, that all flesh, that is all people who are still on this earth, see Gen. 6:12, Is. 40:6, will now have access to the fullness of the Spirit, which had hitherto been limited to select persons, such as prophets, judges, and kings, and for

the most part, only to the nation of Israel.

- The weakness of the flesh is contrasted with the strength of God, but here the flesh is strengthened by God. See Ps. 56:5, 78:39; Is. 40:5-8

C. It is this passage that Peter quotes after Pentecost, indicating that the long awaited day has come.

- The nature miracles of Jesus, e.g., the changing of water into wine at Cana and the multiplication of the loaves, can be seen as indications that the prosperity prophesied by Joel had begun to occur in preparation for this outpouring of the Spirit.

D. But the pouring forth of the Spirit will also occur in the midst of great calamities of cosmic proportions. The faithful people of God will be a secure center in the midst of the storm.

- Jesus and again the Book of revelation will take up the symbolism of the sun being darkened and the moon turned to blood in describing the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the end of all things on earth, as well as possibly catastrophes in general. See Matt. 24:29, Mark 13:24; Rev. 6:12, 9:2.

III. The book then develops the theme of judgment to apply it to the nations.

A. The nations will gather in the Valley of Jehosephat (Hebrew for "Yahweh judges"), which is most likely the Kidron Valley, the valley that is between the Mount of Olives and the Temple.

- Zechariah, a prophet of the late 6th century B.C. also spoke of a great battle in the Kidron Valley for the vindication of God's people. See Zech. 14:1-5.

- This valley was also used by Kings Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah to destroy instruments of pagan worship. See 1 Kings 15:13, 2 Chron. 29:16; 2 Kings 23:4-12.

B. The pagan nations, Assyria, Babylon, Tyre and Sidon in particular are condemned for their lack of respect for the Chosen People in general and for all human life. Later Egypt and Edom, also traditional enemies of Israel are added to the list. Even

though subjection to the pagan nations was a punishment for the Chosen People, the nations who committed these actions were still guilty.

C. There is almost a taunting of the nations, challenging them to come.

- Joel directly reverses the peaceful images of Isaiah and Micah and calls upon the people to beat plowshares into swords. See Is. 2:4, Micah 4:3. There are two possible meanings: (1) before the day of glory, the people of God must prepare for battle; or (2) the imagery applies to the pagan nations who reject the prophets, i.e. it is they who act in reversal of the prophesies.

D. Then, there is the final battle, in which the enemies of Israel are now multitudes as the locusts were before. But, God comes with a roar that shakes the very earth, and the voice of God defeats the enemies, as Jeremiah also prophesied see Jer. 25:30, 51:16. The creative voice of God, which is reflected in the creation accounts and the voice of prophesy, now judges the nations in thunder.

- This final passage seems to reflect the final judgement, although it may have other meanings, for Jerusalem, that is, the gathering of the people of God is now fully holy, and no more enemies oppress her. See Catechism 1040.

E. The scene then switches to an idyllic image of the new kingdom, seen in agricultural images of a prosperous land, and cleansing water flowing forth from the Temple making all the land fruitful. Such images were common in the prophets. See, e.g., Is. 30:23-37, 65:17-25, Ezek. 47:1-12; Amos 4:17-21. The Book of Revelations will pick up on this theme of the heavenly Jerusalem, in the midst of a new heavens and a new earth, with God Himself as the Temple. See Rev. 21:9-22:4.

F. Here, the nations surrounding Israel are presented in terms of lands to be judged. There are also prophesies of those lands are begin themselves purified and brought to the new Jerusalem. See, e.g., Ps. 87; Is. 66:18-21; see also Ps. 47:8-10. At Pentecost, there is a gathering of nations, including Egypt and Edom, who had been enemies of Israel. See Acts 1:7-11. The idea to be that there is a better and a worse side to each nation, and that, through the struggling and suffering that the Chosen People went through, each nation can also be brought to the new Jerusalem and into the new heavens and the new earth.