

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## JOEL.<sup>1</sup>

OUR subject is the Book of the Prophet Joel. You will very soon discover that it is remarkably different from the Book of Hosea. The study of Hosea's writing compelled us to realize all the political, social, religious life of a very great and splendid epoch in the history of Israel. The Book of Joel takes us very largely out of the secular life of men into a region of literary history, and opens up for us theological subjects of study. The book stands in a different order among the minor prophets in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament from the position it occupies in the earliest translation, the translation into Greek called the Septuagint. In the former the order of the first six minor prophets is as we have it in our English Bible; in the latter, it is Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah. These last three books have no statement as to date attached to them; and from the diversity in their position in the Hebrew and in the Greek it is evident that the learned men who put together the Old Testament in Hebrew and the learned men who arranged the Greek translation of it had different views as to the period when these three prophets lived and worked. That means there was no certain tradition about them. The editors had to read and study them, and to form their own conclusion where they should come in. The only thing you can say from the position of Joel in the Hebrew, and also in the Septuagint, is that the old editors apparently believed Joel to be one of the earliest prophets. On the other hand, scholars now-a-days are inclined to think

<sup>1</sup> A lecture.

that Joel was one of the very latest of them. It is quite possible that the position of the book in the collection of minor prophets does not tell us what the old editors thought as to the date of it. In several cases it looks as if they arranged the books, not so much in their chronological order, as in groups; *i.e.* they grouped the books together on account of certain affinities and relationships between those they placed in proximity.

We have, however, to take the book, read it, and form our own conclusion as to the point in Israel's history when Joel lived and prophesied and spoke for God. We know practically nothing about him. His name means "Jehovah is God." We are told the name of Joel's father, but not where Joel was born; nor is it stated when he lived. From his book we can gather with certainty that he prophesied at Jerusalem, and belonged to the Southern kingdom of Judah. From the prominence he gives to sacrifice, to the temple, and to the priest, some critics think he must have been a priest himself. I do not know that there is much in that. The fact is, that beyond his name and that he prophesied at Jerusalem, we know nothing about the man.

I should require to go pretty carefully through the writing, and to give an analysis of it, in order to make you comprehend the larger part of the beauties and significances that are so thickly strewn among its pages; because, if there is a book in the Bible that is a masterpiece of literary art, it is the Book of Joel. There are other prophets who write with greater passion and greater power, who rise to loftier altitudes of Divine revelation; but there is hardly a writer in the Old Testament who shows proof of so careful, and detailed, and exquisite pains to give his work literary polish, finish, and beauty.

As to the style of Joel, in the first half of the book its characteristic is that of a consummate literary artist or

word-painter. He makes pictures to stand out before you by graphic, vivid words, full of colour, full of imagery: pictures that *show* you the things that the man is describing. Then in the second half he suddenly changes his style in great part, and becomes the impassioned orator, rising into a world of wild, lurid imagery, as he pictures to us his conception of the last judgment.

So much for the style. I now go to the contents of the book. It falls into two great divisions. The first of these runs from the beginning on to the end of the seventeenth verse of the second chapter. The second division begins with the eighteenth verse of the second chapter, and travels on to the end of the book. The first half contains a terrible description of disasters, and a foreboding of worse calamities to come. The second half of the book passes on into glorious promises of God's goodness to Israel, and then rises up to a picture of the great judgment of the world.

I will run over the book and give you its subdivisions. For the first chapter you may take as a heading; Present Disasters; Calamities that have Actually Arrived. The second chapter consists of Future Forebodings. The first chapter again divides itself into subsections.

The calamities that have befallen Judæa are the visitation of swarm after swarm of locusts, that are eating up everything in the country. Here is the start. The first paragraph is from vers. 1 to 4. The first verse gives the superscription or the title of the book. Then we read: "Hear this, ye old men, and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land. Hath this been in your days, or in the days of your fathers?" Do you not feel the literary effect of this? He travels back through the bygone ages to find a parallel to this awful disaster that has fallen on the land, and he can find none in the past. Then he pictures the memory of it travelling down to generation after generation, a horror so terrible as never to be forgotten by mankind.

The literary art with which he instantly makes a tremendous impression of the magnitude of the disaster that is before their eyes is extremely powerful. Here it is: "That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten; and that which the locust hath left hath the cankerworm eaten." Observe the reiteration: swarm after swarm eating the very heart out of the country until nothing is left.

Then come three pictures, three *tableaux* that rise up to a climax, delineating the ruin that has been wrought. The first idea is that the reign of luxury, of revelry, has come to an end in the land. "Awake, ye drunkards, and weep; and howl, all ye drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine; for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation is come up upon my land, strong, and without number; his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he hath the jaw-teeth of a great lion" (vers. 5, 6). Of course, it is poetical language descriptive of the tiny teeth of myriads and myriads of locust hordes. "He hath laid my vine waste, and barked my fig tree: he hath made it clean bare, and cast it away." That is, the locust has peeled the bark, and left fragments of it, which it has not swallowed, in a ring around the foot of the tree. "The branches thereof stand out white" (ver. 7): a powerful picture of the fruit tree stripped of all its leaves, stripped of its very bark, and standing with its ghastly white arms in the sunlight.

The next paragraph is from vers. 8 to 10, and may be headed: The Consolations of Religion Cut off. "Lament like a virgin"—or bride—"girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth." It is an exquisite idea; religious worship is depicted as a happy intercourse between God and the one He loves on earth, His chosen people. That is broken off, because the material for sacrifice cannot be found; and so, as it were, no holy breath of human affection goes up to God in heaven, nor answering love from

God comes down. "The meal offering and the drink offering is cut off from the house of the Lord; the priests, the Lord's ministers, mourn. The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted, the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth," *i.e.* withereth away.

The next paragraph (vers. 11, 12) may be headed: The Necessaries of Existence Cut off. That is the climax. Luxury—those who counted on that robbed of it; religion—those who comforted themselves with it robbed of it; then the food of the common people, the prosaic bread and fruit, the very necessities of life, gone! "Be ashamed"—or, be in confusion—"O ye husbandmen, howl, O ye vine-dressers, for the wheat and for the barley. . . . The vine is withered; . . . the pomegranate, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field are withered: for joy is withered away from the sons of men." All the land stripped white; leafless, stark, and naked; the whole face of the earth, the vineyards, the gardens, the farms withered. And then that blighted, withered whiteness spreads into the faces of the men who own those gardens and vineyards and farms: the desolation of the country is thus reflected back in the gaunt faces of starving men, until joy is vanished from the homes and haunts of human kind.

The next section (ver. 13 to the end of the chapter) may be headed: The Despair and Distress. "Gird yourselves and lament, ye priests; howl, ye ministers of the altar. . . . Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, . . . and cry unto the Lord, . . . for the day of the Lord is at hand. And as destruction from the Almighty shall it come. Is not the meat cut off before our eyes, yea, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seeds are rotting under the clods; the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down; for the corn is withered. How do the beasts groan! the herds of cattle are perplexed, because

they have no pasture; yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate. . . . The flame hath burned all the trees of the field. . . . The waterbrooks are dried up, and the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness." A tremendously powerful picture of a famine-stricken country, especially with that feature in it, *viz.* the beasts driven, in their thirst, into delirium, uttering their moans, gasping and groaning in their appeal to God!

We come to the second chapter—Foreboding of Further Ill. In the opening section (vers. 1-3) we first catch sight of the locusts. Once again he pictures the calamity to follow as a fresh invasion of locusts, but he states that as bringing in a day of judgment. God comes with His locust army. "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh"—the day of judgment,—“it is nigh at hand; . . . a day of cloud and thick darkness, like the dawn creeping over the top of the mountain; a great people and a strong, there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after them, even to the years of many generations. A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and none hath escaped them.”

Travellers and old classic books describe a cloud of locusts, a great, mighty mass of them, as the wind sweeps it along. The sunlight on their yellow wings makes a strange effect through the refraction of light. It is a striking image that Joel gives us—the first glimmer of the early dawn which crosses the tops of the mountains, the gray yellow light in the darkness. To us Londoners the extraordinary effect may be compared to that of a yellow fog. One has described it as “a fall of yellow snow.” Here you note first the appearance of the locusts in the

distance, next their nearer approach, and then the onset. Each paragraph begins with the image of the locusts, the impression they made on men's minds, and ends with the effect actually done by them. In one paragraph the cloud of locusts is as a fire burning before and behind, the country in front like a garden of Eden, and behind a desolate wilderness. The next paragraph describes their nearer approach, as the sound of chariots rattling over the mountain tops—"a strong people set in battle array." At the presence and sight of them the people are "in anguish": all faces grow pale.

You can feel the power of that image—the *sound* of them. You have heard fire in a house, eating, gnawing the timber. The people, at the sight of them, hear that awful, gnawing, devouring sound. Then here, again, it is the effect, of course, on the owners of the country: every face grows white.

The third paragraph, descriptive of their actual onset on the town, is considered one of the finest passages in literature. "They run like mighty men; like warriors they climb the wall; they march every one on his way; they break not their ranks, neither doth one thrust another. . . . They leap upon the city; they run upon the wall; they climb up into the houses; they enter in at the windows like a thief. The earth quaketh before them; the heavens tremble; the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining; and the Lord uttereth His voice before His army; for His camp is very great; for He is strong that executeth His word: for the day of the Lord is very great and very terrible; and who can abide it?"

Irresistibly you feel that this is a description of a real locust invasion, with its awful horrors. And yet, at the end of it, behind it, with it, in it, Joel confronts God and the moral judgment of our world.

Then follows the paragraph in which the prophet declares



the possibility of forgiveness (vers. 12-14). "Yet even now, saith the Lord, turn ye unto Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God." Observe the tremendous strength of that declaration of God's eagerness to forgive and not punish.

Then comes a paragraph in which the prophet appeals to the people to unite in national contrition (vers. 15, 17).

Now I arrive at the second division, from the 18th verse of the second chapter to the end of the book. Here are the subdivisions of it. First of all (chap. ii. 18-27), Restoration of Prosperity, *i.e.* of material prosperity. Ver. 18 should read, not, "Then *will* the Lord be jealous for the land," *et seq.*, as it is in our old Bible, but "Then *was* the Lord," *et seq.*, as you find it in the R.V.: for it is an historical statement. "Then was the Lord jealous for His land, and had pity on His people. And the Lord answered and said unto His people, Behold, I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith: and I will no more make you a taunt among the nations, but will remove the invading army of locusts, and drive them into the sea. . . . Ye shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and shall praise the name of the Lord your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and My people shall never be put to shame. And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else: and My people shall never be put to shame." Mark the termination of that glowing description of mere earthly, bodily plenty and enjoyment.

The next section (vers. 28-32) relates to the outpouring of God's Spirit and the advent of judgment. "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young

men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit." That was an extraordinary declaration. Hebrew thought recognised that no slave could be God's prophet, because God's prophet must be absolutely at God's disposal; and therefore that a prophet must be his own owner, a free man. The meaning of that declaration is, that God's Spirit, the full plenitude and Divine revelation of grace and goodness to Israel, shall obliterate all distinctions; old and young, men and women, children, and slaves even, bond as well as free, shall be filled with God's Spirit. What is the result of that? "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered: for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those that escape, as the Lord hath said, and among the remnant those whom the Lord doth call."

Those phenomena in nature, those portents to presage the judgment, may not be at all supernatural. Pillars of smoke, great clouds of the black smoke of burning cities in the land, darkening the heavens, the sun and moon shining blood-red through the canopy of smoke—these portents may be merely accompaniments of great human convulsions, terrible devastations of invading armies. But I rather think Joel means more than that; *viz.* that nature will be moved to its very centre when God treads on it for judgment.

We come now to the third and last chapter—The Guilt of the Heathen (vers. 1–8). Judgment is come. In it penitent Israel is safe. But what of the heathen nations? "Behold, in those days, and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will

gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat"—meaning "Jehovah-Judge," the valley where Jehovah sits as judge. "And if ye recompense Me, swiftly and speedily will I return your recompense upon your own head." You know how they took the children of Israel and sold them into distant slavery, because a slave was ever so much more valuable when taken so far away from home that escape was out of the question. That is the Guilt of the Heathen.

Now comes the Judgment of the Heathen (vers. 9-17) in a very powerful passage. "Proclaim ye this among the nations; prepare war: stir up the warriors; let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. . . . Put ye up the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, tread ye; for the winepress is full, the fats overflow; for their wickedness is great." The blood of the grapes gushing out of the winepress is the standing image of carnage and the battle-field. "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! for the day of judgment is near in the valley of decision. . . . The heavens and the earth shall shake: but the Lord will be . . . a stronghold to the children of Israel. . . . Then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more."

Then, on to the end of the book, we have a picture of the Final Consummation; God's kingdom established, His people dwelling in peace and happiness, and all His enemies discomfited.

There are a number of questions about the prophecy of Joel. Some people think that the book is entirely a prophecy of things future, that from beginning to end it pictures what is going to happen. But the vivid, impassioned feeling with which the prophet describes the devastations of the locusts convinces us that he sees it before him; he lives

in it. There is another idea which ruled in the minds of king James's translators of the Bible; and that is, that the whole of this book of Joel runs on one piece, and the second half simply states the people's desire that God would speak thus comfortably. The objection to that is, that it makes the book one of the weakest and most puerile productions. No Hebrew prophet, in such majestic language and thought, would ascribe to God what he wants Him to say: he knows what God has said, and he declares it in God's name.

Unquestionably the situation pictured in the book is this. The land has been scourged with terrible plagues of locusts, heat, drought, and famine. Joel thinks that worse is coming. Standing there, in the midst of the desolation around him, he sees the threatening future, passes on to the conception of the last judgment, appeals to his own generation to repent, succeeds, and then tells them the changed character of God's intentions to them, now contrite and conformable to the Divine will.

Another group of questions comes up in connexion with locusts. Who can read that book, and not feel that the prophet is describing real locusts? But there are a great many scholars who cannot be content with that idea. They say that these locusts are described as doing things which it is utterly beyond the power of locusts to do, just because they are described by an inspired poet and orator, whose heart and imagination is aroused to preternatural excitement by the horror of his time. But, more than that, they say these locusts represent the devastations of hostile armies. They cannot be symbolical of armies, or else how comes it that, in the second chapter, the poetical description of locusts chooses the *imagery* of an invading army, describing how they assault the wall, spring upon it, and force themselves in anyhow, each marching on his own path? If locusts are symbolical of armies, then how ridiculous to describe a simile in imagery taken from the original!

Another idea is that the locusts are not natural locusts, nor symbols for soldiers of invading armies, but that the whole book is an apocalypse, like the Book of the Revelation in the New Testament, and that "locusts" represent some weird imagery grown out of the morbid mind of an over-excited seer or prophet. But Joel describes what he sees. The locusts are real. Hence that last theory is the most impossible of all.

Let us try to imagine Joel's position, and so travel along the train of thought that produced his splendid prophecy of the coming judgment. First of all, I am confronted with this difficulty, that we who live in this country have no conception of the horror and magnitude of the calamity involved in a locust invasion.

A cloud appears one morning on the horizon. Men's eyes are attracted towards it. All the country around them is a smiling paradise of oliveyards, vineyards, corn crops, rich gardens; the pastures filled with sheep and cattle; men, women, and children fat, ruddy, and well-fed. The cloud draws nearer. It darkens the very skies, spreading out over illimitable space. Presently a terrible yellow glimmer begins to radiate through the sunlight. The inhabitants have all crowded to the ramparts of the town. They look with strained eyes and horror. A whisper begins to go round: It is the locusts, the dreaded locusts. The dark cloud comes on, like a great army swept on by the wind, veering hither and thither as the current changes, not guiding itself, but with that horrible suggestion of being a weapon held by some mysterious hand, controlled by the great power that is behind the elements, the forces, the winds, and the power of nature. For this was the most terrible thing of all in the locust visitation—the sense that they did not choose where they were to go, but were driven by the winds, by God. And so, almost more than anything, more than an invading army launched against the country

by the ambition of a Persian monarch, the locusts were felt to be God's own army of vengeance. Onward the awful horde sweeps, dropping to the ground as it passes on, covering everything, gnawing grass, gnawing the bark of the trees, sweeping branches bare with tremendous rapidity—a slow, unceasing, steady, onward march of that frightful agent of utter consumption, of gnawing desolation, right over the country. Sometimes, when it is a comparatively small horde, it passes over a land, leaving a great riband of desolation, sharp-cut as our London fogs at the edge where the locusts were driven on by the wind, on either side smiling gardens and vineyards.

An additional horror about locusts was this. Nothing could stop them; nothing could destroy them. Ditches might be dug and filled with them; still on they come, on they come, out of the hot wilderness of Arabia, swarm after swarm. Not merely food in its season, but young corn just springing is also destroyed; the seed for next year is destroyed; sheep, cattle, horses are deprived of their sustenance and perish of hunger. Into the gardens the invading hosts make their way. Everything they eat up, even the food stored for the winter. A visitation of locusts is not like a blight of fly that comes and destroys part of our flowers, or part of our turnip crop, or potatoes. It means famine; gaunt, horrible, cruel famine, gnawing at the very vitals of men. It means men and women going about with blue lips, holding in their laps their dying children; the animals emaciated, mad with agony, dropping to die everywhere. The locusts after a time die too, creating a horrible stench; and that coming upon depreciated health and an emaciated population, produces pestilence. A descent of locusts on a whole country, repeated month after month, threatens its people with actual extermination.

Who can resist the conviction that Joel stood in a land that had been scourged in that fashion? The very power

with which he pictures the horrors of such a situation carries conviction. All sounds of revelry, the merry song of the drunkards, the laughter, and jests, and huzzas in the houses, dead and gone; silence all over the land; at the very temple, no longer the smoke of the sacrifice is seen curling up to God in heaven—the very breath of communication between heaven and men stopped; the land lying under a religious ban, severed and cut off from God; the necessaries of existence reduced to the last degree of attenuation; actual hunger, deathly starvation, confronting men; beasts, men, women, everywhere perishing for want of food, for want of water; and a horrible heat adding its horrors to the hunger and the desolation.

Remember the supernatural way in which God makes men prophets. It stands true to human experience that calamity like that stirs the depths of man's nature. Your materialist is shaken out of his materialism. Confronted with these uncontrollable, awful powers of nature, wielded so strangely—with the horrors, the reproaches, the accusations of an evil conscience backing up the dark forebodings and dreads, men begin to think of that world that lies behind and beneath this outer earth of ours. They recognise the moral forces—the forces of justice; the forces of goodness; the forces of evil; the forces of righteousness, of retribution; the great God over our world controlling it. When an awful flood occurs, as when a great reservoir bursts, or a mighty river overflows its banks, that is always felt to be a visitation of God; or an earthquake, when the solid earth heaves and trembles beneath their feet, then men feel that this world is in the hand of Almighty God.

Joel, to whom God was a reality; Joel, a man whose conscience, whose soul, had been rent with pain and agony because of the recreant worldliness of Israel, living in sensuality and self-indulgence;—Joel looks on this visitation, blow after blow struck, and feels in it the hand

of God. It is not locusts we have now to do with: it is God Himself. Then there is this strange instinct in human nature. We feel that all God's judgment on earth grows out of one element, one attribute of the Divine character; it is all of a piece. Every blow struck against the world's evil, every disaster launched by the Almighty hand against sinful men, is but the first blow of the great final judgment. In every great pestilence, in every great famine, in ages when the world has been convulsed by great wars, men have always been stirred by the tremendous thought of the last judgment. And so Joel, looking out, and seeing still more terrible swarms of locusts coming, carrying with them utter, final destruction, has his soul stirred within him; he hears God's voice, hears Jehovah marching at the head of the host of retributive ministers, and sees at the very threshold of his age the advent of final judgment.

And then, like every Hebrew prophet who feels that, bad as God's people may be, and utterly foolish, yet for an absolute certainty God has lived, wrought, and achieved great things among them—who knows that God has given them a revelation that might be the world's blessing, that God has laid the foundation stones of a heavenly kingdom on earth—Joel, with all that faith in his soul, knows the judgment must be averted, that God cannot mean the annihilation of His people, the thwarting and breaking of His own Divine purposes. And so, suddenly, Joel turns to the people, terrified by his awful, lurid pictures of the coming doom; and he declares to them, "Yet God is ready to forgive."

Ah! when judgment is actually begun, He will still draw back; He will pardon to the uttermost, if men will but repent, and obey Him. It is a striking doctrine, that. God repent! God change! Is not God eternal, sovereign, immutable in His will? Yes, so He is. But



the law, as the Bible teaches us, from the first page to the last, is that God changes every instrument towards us, as our attitude changes towards Him. Until the mercy of Omnipotence is exhausted, God will not suffer any creature He made to be lost: nothing but hopeless, persistent, irreclaimable impenitence can bring final judgment.

Another thing about the law of Old Testament prophecy is that prophecy is conditional, unless it be expressly stated to be absolute. Up to this point Joel has come. Suddenly, when the people repent, he says, "It is all gone." There is a fine remark made by Jerome: "It does not follow, because a prophet has foretold a calamity, that therefore that calamity shall come to pass; for God's prophets do not foretell calamity in order that it may come to pass, but *in order* that God may be able to withhold it." That is the gospel conception of prophecy.

The people are penitent. Instantly Joel declares to them that God's attitude to them is altered; and when they do repent, the first thing promised them is a superabundance of earthly and material prosperity. There are men who say that this is a degrading thing in Joel's prophecy, and they make a similar charge in regard to other parts of the Old Testament. Degrading? Not a bit of it. I call it a fine thing that those Old Testament prophets did believe, with a tremendous conviction, that all earthly mercies come from the love of God. This is the doctrine we need to have preached if we really desire to have the love of God in our religion, in our real life, and not in unreal life, *i.e.* life artificially put on when we get into an ecclesiastical building. It would have been a degrading thing if Joel had begun with earthly prosperity and ended with earthly prosperity.

But what is the crowning climax and joy in that restored prosperity? It is the proof to Israel that God is with them once again. With them again, for what? To pet, and

spoil, and pamper them? No; to make them able to do their duty. That is a grand thing. What does material prosperity do to you? Does it make you selfish, indolent? To Joel and to the penitent people that were at his back, that outpouring of prosperity woke them to a sense of neglected duty. Ah! they understood God's design in Israel was not merely to have them surfeited with food and drink. God has an ethical, a religious purpose in view; for His people shall be made fit to accomplish His Divine purpose in the world's history. But Joel and the people felt that Israel needed something grander than that penitence of theirs in order to fulfil in this world all that was in God's heart. Israel must be transformed, sanctified, made perfectly conformable to the heart, and mind, and will of God. That, Israel could never do for itself; that must come down from heaven; that must be the gift of God. And so the prophet passes on to declare how, after Israel is restored, God will pour out His Spirit, fill every man and woman in the land with His own desires, His own impulses, His righteousness, His holiness, His truth, His goodness, His longings for the kingdom of heaven on earth.

The outpouring of the Spirit, what shall follow that? Judgment. The outpouring of the Spirit is the precursor of judgment. Is that not a startling transition? Not at all. As soon as God's people have been divinely fitted to accomplish their task, as soon as God's servants are prepared completely to achieve His kingdom on earth, then the end of all things is at hand. The plenitude of the Spirit put into the Church means the *finale* of our world's history. In the *dénouement*, those who call on the name of Jehovah, and those whom Jehovah calls to be His own, pass through it unscathed and saved. The terrors, the retributive forces of judgment, fall now upon those who have remained persistently hostile to God and to God's kingdom.

That last chapter has in it some things that jar upon

our Christian instincts. There is a certain vengeful delight in the thought of the destruction of Philistia, Phœnicia, and those other nations that have so harried Israel in the olden time. What of that? Why, that just means that the Old Testament has not in it the perfect sweetness, the fulness of Divine love revealed in Jesus Christ. And have we Christians got it?

I grant you this: a mechanical, an artificial, dead doctrine of Bible inspiration makes that into a difficulty; but a real, living recognition of the inspiring Spirit of God in those old prophets, in those actual messages of theirs, involves no difficulty whatever. But to the men who raise difficulties of that sort, who bring such reproaches against Old Testament prophets, I will make answer thus: Never mind the mixture of personal anger in it. Mark what Joel believed and comprehended! Mark the grandeur of that belief! To him this world was not a great congress of physical forces, of vegetable life, of animal life, where the nations were left to welter in their hostilities and ambitions, where every man had nothing higher to do than to grasp as much as he could of earth for his own selfish advantage. To Joel this world is a great drama; the history of humanity is a tragedy; this world is ruled and controlled by a holy, righteous God; this world exists for the production of ethical, religious, eternal character; this world is being sculptured into a kingdom of holiness, righteousness, truth, goodness, and love. I do not care how many defects and ignorances there are, I do not care how much of weak personal feeling mingles in Joel's declaration of that faith; but I tell you what it is: All that is grand, and great, and heroic, and good in our world has grown out of faith in man's soul, often dark and obscure and ignorant—faith that this world belongs to God, is ruled by God, and shall at last be judged by God. Oh! a faith like that in a real God, a God that cares whether

we serve Him, or whether we do not; a God that will take the trouble to reckon with us, and with our age, and with all the ages, and with this world of ours at last—that is a faith that lifts a man above himself, up above the world, and that stirs him to chivalrous and glorious achievements; a faith that builds up the great realm of ethical glory and grandeur, of religious aspiration, and hope, and love; the finest outcome of our world's struggle, and trial, and battle.

W. G. ELMSLIE.

## A SURVEY OF THE SYNOPTIC QUESTION.

### II. POINTS PROVED OR PROBABLE.

ONE respected critic assures us that there is no such thing as a "Synoptic theory," only "a Synoptic craze."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps; but at any rate the epidemic is so widespread that those who are bitten by it can keep each other in countenance. We saw last month how four (or rather five) independent inquirers, approaching the subject under very different conditions, all after study more or less close, and some after study very close indeed, not only shared the belief that there is a Synoptic theory, but agreed in adopting what in its main outlines is virtually the same theory. They agreed in postulating two fundamental documents as the groundwork of the common matter in the three Gospels.

I said however that the theory thus framed fell into several distinct parts, and I undertook to attempt to define the extent to which each of these parts might be considered

<sup>1</sup> Rev. E. S. Ffoulkes, in a collection of four sermons, entitled, *The New Criticism*, p. 14. (London, 1890.)