Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Zephaniah

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Conclusion

To whom Zephaniah's prophecy relates, and in what manner

It will be observed that the prophecy of Zephaniah relates to the nations, and not to the Gentile empire (of which it says nothing at all); and that the relations of Israel, of which it speaks, are with Jehovah: their conduct towards the Messiah is not in view. It is Israel, Jerusalem, and Jehovah. Christ is only seen in this character. The special ways of God in the Gentile empire, in the mission of His Son, and in the state of the Jews, consequent upon His rejection, are quite left out, in order to dwell only on the judgment of Israel on account of her relationship with Jehovah her God. Christ appears only in a very general manner, and as Jehovah the king (Zeph. 3:15).

The necessity and effect of God's judgment of the nations

The judgment of all the nations and its moral effect, the absolute necessity of this judgment, since Israel among whom God dwelt would not hearken, are most plainly declared; and their object and their practical effect are pointed out with more precision than perhaps in any other prophecy, with the clear and distinct statement that it is when God executes judgment upon the gathered nations that they will learn the pure language and call on Him. The address to the remnant, and their character, and Jehovah's delight in them, are stated with exquisite beauty.

Introduction

The time and two subjects of the prophecy

Zephaniah sets before us the judgment of the Spirit of God with respect to the condition of the testimony rendered to the name of God in this world, at a moment when there was some outward restoration by means of a king who feared God.

God has granted this favour more than once to His people, even as He has endured with longsuffering their rebellion and revolt; and in both cases He would have us see the true moral condition of that which bore His name — the judgment which a spiritual heart would form, which His Spirit formed, with respect to that condition: a judgment which should be authenticated by that which God would execute upon His people and upon the Gentiles, when longsuffering should no longer be of any avail.

These two subjects constitute the two principal divisions of the prophecy: the announcement of God's purposes with respect to the judgment that He would execute, and the display of that condition which led to the judgment. This, as always, is accompanied by the revelation of His counsels in grace, and of the coming of the Messiah, in order to encourage and sustain the faith of the believing remnant of His people. The judgment of the nations involved in that of Israel Israel having been appointed the witness for God, when the nations had given themselves up to iniquity and idolatry, the general judgment of the world could be delayed, so long as (that testimony being maintained) the true character of God was

presented; for God is slow to anger. Accordingly He raised up prophets, beginning with Samuel, to remedy the wanderings and unfaithfulness of His people, when they themselves had failed. So long as this extraordinary testimony of grace, and the warnings and chastenings that accompanied it, served to maintain some glimmerings of truth and righteousness on the earth, Jehovah withheld His hand ready to destroy that which dishonoured God and oppressed man. We have seen elsewhere, in the transfer of sovereignty to the empire of the Gentiles, the introduction of a new system, as we find in the New Testament the establishment of the assembly. I do not dwell upon it here. As to the government of the world, in view of the testimony rendered to the name of Jehovah, when Israel — who maintained this testimony amid the nations that were apostate and rebellious against God — had so failed that there was no more remedy, then those nations also had to undergo the judgment they had long deserved. They will bring this judgment upon themselves by filling up the measure of their iniquity and rebellion against God, and by manifesting hatred to God's people, in the joy with which they come forward to accomplish the chastisements which that people had deserved: for God is longsuffering unto them also. He even sends the gospel — whether that of full grace, which we enjoy, or the announcement of His coming judgments — in order that all who have ears to hear may escape these judgments. But, in principle, the definitive failure of Israel's testimony left the nations exposed to the judgment their sinful state deserved, this judgment having been suspended, because a true testimony was rendered to God. This is the reason why we have constantly found in the prophets the definitive judgment of Israel. The establishment of the Gentile empire, represented by the image and the beasts, the introduction of Christianity, the apostasy which breaks out in its bosom, bring in other objects of the judgment of God, but do not alter the judgment to be executed upon the nations apart from these objects. The apostasy and the Gentile empire judged from heaven; the nations from Zion The judgment of the apostasy and of the Gentile empire comes immediately from heaven, whence flowed the authority of that empire, and the blessing of those who are become apostate; and against which they are in rebellion. The judgment of the nations, as such, has Zion for its starting-point — Zion, now under the judgment, but then delivered through the judgment executed upon the beast that oppressed her (see Psalm 110). The events spoken of in Daniel, the New Testament prophecies, and, in part, Zechariah, are omitted by those of the prophets who have for their subject the proper relations of the earthly people with God in Zion; and the judgment of Jerusalem and the Jews is connected in their prophecies with that of the nations — the judgment of the latter being involved in that of the people, who no longer rendered any testimony to Jehovah, but caused His name to be blasphemed. This judgment commenced, in regard to the Jews, with Nebuchadnezzar himself. Afterwards, on the decline (at the end of the age) of the empire which commenced originally with him as golden head, the nations, resuming their strength, use it against Israel, then connected with, and subject to, the apostate empire; a yet more terrible judgment. Thus all the nations will be gathered against Jerusalem, and filling up both the judgment of the people and their own iniquity, will occasion the intervention of the God of mercy in favour of His people, according to His promises and purposes of grace — the deliverance of Israel being accomplished in the judgment executed upon those who come up against them, and who, in coming against them, are against Jehovah and His Christ also. This will be the judgment that shall go forth from Zion, while the beast will have been destroyed by Him who came forth out of heaven. The times of the prophets The dates attached to the books of the prophets are connected with the different characters of this series of events. Isaiah and Micah, as well as Hosea and Amos (although the latter two less directly), are occupied with the

revelation of the Son of David, the Deliverer and Defender of His people in Jerusalem. Hezekiah, raised up after the miserable reign of Ahaz gave occasion for these revelations, which taught the faithful (while unveiling the iniquity and the real condition of the people), that they must look forward and rest only in God's thoughts, who had raised up this pious king for the temporary restoration of His people, and who would grant them a complete and eternal deliverance by the true Emmanuel. Isaiah (in the first three, as well as in the last, chapters of his prophecy) dwells on the connection, of which we have spoken, between the judgment of Israel and that of the nations. Josiah did not present in the same manner the coming Redeemer. Spared the sight of the ruin of Jerusalem on account of his piety, he falls himself by the hand of strangers. The glory and peace, the hope of Jerusalem for the time being, disappear with him, and its judgment succeeds. The time and circumstances of Zephaniah's prophecy Zephaniah prophesied under his reign. The prophet takes no notice of the temporary piety of the people, who (see Jer. 3) at heart were not changed. He takes the general ground of Israel's condition and consequent judgment, in connection with its effect on the nations. We have seen that Nebuchadnezzar is the first who executes this judgment; although both the judgment and the prophecy that speaks of it go much farther.

Chapter 1

The terrors of the great day of the Lord: the whole land judged

The prophet begins by declaring that the land should be reduced to complete desolation; afterwards, that Judah, Jerusalem, their false gods, and their priests, should be smitten by the hand of Jehovah. The idolaters, those who mingled the name of Jehovah with that of other gods, those who had turned back from Jehovah, those who had not sought Him, each one is called to hold his peace at the presence of the Lord Jehovah; for the day of Jehovah was at hand. He had prepared His sacrifice, He had invited His guests; and in the day of His sacrifice, the king, the prince, and the king's children should be visited by His hand. Violence and deceit should receive their just reward.

The day of Jehovah should cause a cry to be heard from the gates of Jerusalem. He would search Jerusalem as with candles, and make manifest the folly of those who denied His intervention either for good or for evil. The prophet then declares, in general but most forcible terms, the terrors of the day of Jehovah. The whole land should be devoured by the fire of His jealousy. We have here the whole land — Jerusalem and Judah — judged in the great day of God. This division of the prophecy ends here.

Chapter 2

The remnant distinguished, called to gather together and seek Jehovah

Zephaniah 2, while revealing the character of the nation, addresses itself to her, in order that all those at least who fear Jehovah may be hidden in the day of His anger. They are called to gather themselves together, and to seek Jehovah, before the decree of judgment should have brought forth, and His fierce anger should overtake them. Thus the remnant are distinguished; the meek who have wrought

righteousness are called on to seek meekness and righteousness, in order that they may be hidden, although the testimony is addressed to the whole nation. For, after all, God remembered the counsels of His grace. His dealings in this respect are developed in a remarkable manner in the rest of the prophecy. The judgment should be upon the whole territory of Israel, occupied in many parts by strangers hostile to the people.

The land left free for Israel: the judgment of the nations

The effect of the consequent desolation should be (for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance) to leave the whole land free for the possession of Israel. For Jehovah would visit them, and would bring again His captives; and the remnant of His people should possess it. Jehovah would judge and famish all the gods of the earth; and all men should worship Him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the nations.

Ethiopia, Nineveh, all the mighty ones of the nations, should fall and be made desolate.

This is the judgment of the nations of which we have spoken, of which Nebuchadnezzar was the first instrument, but which is here introduced in view of the last days, when the power established by God shall be in its last rebellion against Him.

Chapter 3

The remnant exhorted to wait on Jehovah till He rises up in judgment

Amid this judgment of the nation Jerusalem holds the chief place. In Zephaniah 3, the Spirit of God, while laying open the iniquity which occasioned it, turns towards the remnant, and exhorts them to wait upon Jehovah, since all hope was gone. He enlightens them with respect to His dealings, and reveals to them in what manner these will result in blessing to Israel.

God had been in the midst of the holy city, now polluted, but she would not draw near to Him nor obey Him. Her princes were the violent of the earth, her judges were rapacious, her prophets vain and treacherous, her priests polluted the sanctuary. Jehovah was there to shew them their sins and His judgment; but the wicked were shameless in their iniquity. Doubtless Jehovah had cut off the nations and made them desolate; but surely Israel, however chastised, would receive instruction — Jehovah would not be compelled to cut them off. But they had diligently corrupted all their doing. Because they would not hearken to Jehovah, who had shewn them such lovingkindness, who had been so near unto them, Israel, unnamed, sinks to the level of the nations, who are the objects of the just judgment of God, and the remnant is called (v. 8) to wait upon Jehovah alone, who is about to execute this judgment, to await the moment (since nothing touched the hardened hearts of the people) when Jehovah should rise up to the prey. Until that moment nothing could be done. Israel would not hearken. Judgment did not belong to the remnant. And this judgment alone could put an end to their distress. God would assemble all the nations to pour His fierce anger upon them — the solemn and universal testimony of the prophets. But then would He turn to them* a pure language, that they should call upon the name of

Jehovah to serve Him with one consent. He would also gather together all the dispersed of Israel from the most distant lands. {* This is a very clear testimony, when it is that the nations of the earth learn righteousness.}

Israel gathered together for blessing: a song of praise indited and taught to Zion

Jerusalem should no longer remember her shame; her transgressions should be entirely blotted out. The proud should be taken away from among her: a humble and despised people should be in the midst of her, whose refuge should be Jehovah alone; the little remnant should do no iniquity, neither should they speak lies. They should feed and lie down in safety; none should make them afraid. Verses 14-17 contain a song of praise, which the Spirit indites and teaches to Zion whom He calls on to sing it with thanksgivings to Jehovah — who has put away her condemnation for ever — who is in the midst of her — who rejoices in His love towards her. All those who had grieved for the reproach of Zion, and who had sighed for her solemn assemblies, should be gathered together; her enemies should be destroyed, and her children should have praise and fame in every place where they had been despised and reproached. Israel should be a subject of praise among all the nations of the earth.