

ZEPHANIAH and the pure speech

Our next prophet tells us he lived in the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Judah, and therefore shortly before the Babylonian captivity. Zephaniah's message is directed to the people of Jerusalem, the capital. He prophesies of a 'Day of the Lord' that will fall upon them for their irreligious ways.

We can see from chapter 1:5-6 how his people varied in their attitudes to God, and can recognise the same trends in our own society. There were some, v5, who openly worshipped the stars. We also have people convinced that astrology can help them through the week. There were some, v5, who worshipped the Lord, but also worshipped Molech, the god of the Ammonites who demanded the sacrifice of children. They were two-timers, trying to keep a foot in both camps. We also have those who go to church at Christmas, but the rest of the year worship Mammon, the greedy god of money. Their children suffer too, because they have no time left to spend with their family. There were others, v6, who had turned back from the Lord. They had once been enthusiastic believers, but had now given up believing altogether. We have plenty of them. And there was a large majority who, v6, had not even sought the Lord or enquired of Him. It was a sad picture of a nation once devoted to God. The prophet's message was sharp upon the money grabbers. "Do not think your money will deliver you", he warned, "in the day of the Lord's wrath", 1:18. We have seen, too, how flimsy a security stocks and shares and house prices can prove once the economy begins to slide. As Jesus says, the only bank balance that is future-proof is the treasure we accumulate in heaven, working for God.

In his third chapter Zephaniah attacks the rulers. Princes, judges, prophets and priests, he said, had failed in their leadership, v3. It is the same today. Without a clear moral example from those at the top, the country slides into ruin. But God had determined He

would bring a day of judgment, not just on Israel but all nations, that would clean things up. And after that He would teach all the nations of the earth to worship Him together.

"For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.

For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord" 3:8, 9.

Verse 9 is intriguing. There are many other prophecies of the Kingdom of God in which all nations combine in worship for the first time, abandoning their false gods. But this verse suggests that a key factor in getting this to work will be the adoption of a common language. The previous verse contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Is this a clue that the ancient language of the Bible may be taught again in schools all over the world, providing a common medium for worshipping the Lord?

The prophecy closes with a picture of a humbled Israel, restored and cleansed by a merciful God:

"On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.

But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall graze and lie down, and none shall make them afraid." Zephaniah 3:11-13