

2015

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### Recommended Citation

Nessim, Daniel (2015) "Coming Kingdom and the Day of the Lord in Joel 2," *Journal of Messianic Jewish Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.biola.edu/jmjs/vol1/iss1/7>

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## The Coming Kingdom and the Day of the Lord in Joel 2

**Daniel Nessim**

### KEYWORDS

| Day of the Lord | Joel | Repentance | Locusts |  
| Eschatology | Rebellion–Judgement |

### ABSTRACT

The concept of the ‘Day of the Lord’ requires definition in regard to other ‘Days’ in the Hebrew Bible and has proven difficult for scholars to find an agreed approach to, let alone come to a consensus definition. The prophet Joel and its locust imagery provide a matrix for interpreting the term. The militarisation of the locust horde in Joel 2 compared to that of Joel 1 clarifies the author’s metaphorical intent. It also signals the actual, literal Day of the Lord that Joel wishes to signify. While eschatological in nature, this Day of the Lord can be averted by repentance. Thus Peter’s call for repentance in Acts 2, based on the text of Joel 2, can be seen to avert the Day of the Lord and its horrific judgment. In contrast the lack of repentance by the rebellious subjects of Revelation 9 leads to their judgement and the execution of the Day of the Lord upon them.



The death of the reformist Yorkshire MP William Wilberforce in 1833 along with a number of other ‘old leaders’ in Evangelicalism was a factor in a new, assertive tone for British Evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup> One facet of that new assertiveness was an increasing emphasis upon the literal and historical meaning of the Scriptures. This had significant implications as the ‘new’ method of interpretation linked the return of Christ to the salvation of the Jewish people and his subsequent millennial rule.<sup>2</sup> The new hermeneutic also required a reassessment of the *’ה יום*,<sup>3</sup> or the Day of the Lord (=DL). The DL, in Ladislav Černý’s view ‘the basic notion of eschatology’,<sup>4</sup> and as Yair Hoffmann puts it ‘inseparable from the overall problem of Biblical Eschatology’<sup>5</sup> is thus the subject of this paper. Joel 2 makes a particularly interesting study on account of the prophet Joel’s placement within the ‘Book of Twelve’ Minor Prophets; the general focus of Joel on the Day of the Lord; and the crucial role played by Joel 2 in describing that day. It is the purpose of this article, then, to evaluate Joel 2 from a historical and literary perspective to ascertain the author’s eschatological expectations.

1 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989), 75ff.

2 *Ibid.*, 88.

3 This paper represents the Tetragrammaton with *’ה* in Hebrew and Y’ or J’ in English.

4 Ladislav Černý, *The Day of Y’ and Some Relevant Problems*, *PráCe Z VědeckýCh Ústavů* (V Praze: University Karlovy, 1948), vii.

5 Yair Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature,” *ZAW* 93, no. 1 (1981): 37; See also Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, trans. David Muir Gibson Stalker, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 119.

THE ORIGIN OF  
THE DAY OF THE LORD

The origin of the phrase DL within the Hebrew Bible is a matter of ongoing interest. One viewpoint is that it originates in the concept of God's holy war. Another is that it is related to the occurrence of theophany. The two are in fact related. In 1958, while proposing that the DL was primarily related to God's 'final uprising against his foes'<sup>6</sup>, Gerhard von Rad began by noting that there 'is in fact something peculiar about the expectation of the Day of J', for wherever it occurs in prophecy, the statements culminate in an allusion to J's coming in person.<sup>7</sup> This observation would also be echoed by Weiss who rejected von Rad's basic idea of 'an ancient "HW [Holy War] tradition"' and concluded from a survey of the relevant passages that the 'DL motif-complex...has its roots in the ancient motif-complex of the theophany-descriptions.'<sup>8</sup> Based on his interpretation of the use of the term in texts that he takes to interpret past events, Joseph Everson concludes that the term 'Day of the Lord' 'is a concept that is used to interpret momentous events of war' and suggests that the prophets speak 'of the succession of momentous events as Days of Y'.<sup>9</sup> The question thus arises as to whether the DL refers to a singular event, a series of events or a constellation of events.

6 *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, 2, 124.

7 *Ibid.*, 119.

8 Meir Weiss, "The Origin of the "Day of the Lord" — Reconsidered," *HUCA* 37(1966): 60. Hoffmann betrays a reluctance to accept the possibility that DOL requires an actual appearance of God. He writes that 'It is hard to believe that during the period of the classical prophets there still existed among the masses expectations of a real, concrete appearance of God, such as the one depicted in Ex 14 17-18. ....Hence what we mean by theophany is a special and exceptional intervention in the current stream of events, which could be defined as a miracle.' Hoffmann, "The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature," 44.

9 A. Joseph Everson, "The Days of Y'," *JBL* 93, no. 3 (1974): 336-37.



A key criterion for this discussion is the determination of which passages in particular should be considered part of the data by which to define the DL. While the precise term DL occurs 16 times in the prophets, related terms abound such as the Day of the Lord's sacrifice (יום זבח ה'), the Day of the Lord's vengeance (יום נקם ה'), the Lord has a Day (יום ל'), the Day of the Lord's wrath (יום עברת ה'), the Day of the Lord's anger (יום עף ה') and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

Daniella Ishai-Rosenboim questions the idea that study of the DL must begin with the 16 instances of the exact term, and takes the position that the above listed terms should be included. In her very title she asks 'Is יום ה' (the Day of the Lord) a Term in Biblical Language?'<sup>11</sup> and continues to argue that a 'term is one, specific and unchanged expression referring to one, specific and unchanged concept.'<sup>12</sup> On the basis of a grammatical analysis she concludes that the 'collocation' of the terms Day and Lord 'is not the key to the study of the concept called today 'The Day of the Lord''<sup>13</sup> In fact, Ishai-Rosenboim views the DL as 'so amorphous, that it is unreasonable that it should become a term.'<sup>14</sup> Thus a speaker's audience would only know what was meant by the DL by other clues in the speaker's address.

Ishai-Rosenboim's thesis is in response to Yair Hoffman who argued twenty five years previous that one must begin study of the concept of the DL with a study of the usage of the specific

10 Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament Using the Hebrew and Aramaic Text*, 2 ed. (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1989), 455. Isa 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 11; 3:4; 4:14; Amos 5:18 (twice), 20; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14 (twice), and Mal 3:23; Ishai-Rosenboim counts 16 occurrences, including Ezek 13:5: Daniella Ishai-Rosenboim, "Is יום ה' (the Day of the Lord) a Term in Biblical Language?," *Biblica* 87, no. 3 (2006): 398.

11 "Is יום ה' (the Day of the Lord) a Term in Biblical Language?."

12 *Ibid.*, 395.

13 *Ibid.*, 401.

14 *Ibid.*, 400.

phrase. Therefore, ‘only after a careful philological examination of the proper phrase can one proceed to evaluate the significance of the related phrases.’<sup>15</sup> Hoffman pointed out the contrast in methodology between those who examine the term and its usage in Scripture and those who do not, saying ‘Before we investigate the relationship between the phrase [ ]’ה יום and the other phrases, it is necessary to make primary definition of DOL [=Day of the Lord] on the basis of those passages that specifically use this phrase. Some studies have not been conducted according to this method, and a recent one by A. J. Everson [1974] is a prime example of the opposite.’<sup>16</sup>

His approach was an attempt to provide a reasonable starting point for the study that would provide reliable results since previous studies had demonstrated to him the folly of casting one’s net so wide that the concept eludes definition.<sup>17</sup> Both approaches show the difficulty in determining what the DL is and point towards the value of a closer look at the extended description of the DL in the key texts such as Joel 2.

The complexity of the discussion is reduced somewhat by the fact that, as Meir Weiss assures, ‘the DL does not figure in any form whatsoever, in extra-prophetic literature.’<sup>18</sup> The closest to be found is a reference to a festival as ‘the day of god’ in an Assyrian text.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the DL is a purely biblical term and the context in which it is used is limited to the prophetic corpus.

Within the prophets the earliest occurrence of the exact

15 Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature,” 38.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid. Hoffman particularly singles the following article out as an example; Everson, “The Days of Y’.”

18 Weiss, “The Origin of the “Day of the Lord” — Reconsidered,” 41.

19 Černý, *The Day of Y’ and Some Relevant Problems*, 15.



phrase DL is generally taken to be in Amos. Hoffmann himself began his study of the term with Amos 5:18-20.<sup>20</sup> Yet even with this starting point there is a lack of consensus. Hans Walter Wolff in his commentary weighed in to judge that ‘vRad is, however, right in claiming “that Amos 5:18 is not sufficiently unequivocal to be used as a suitable starting-point for an examination; it is advisable to begin with texts which convey a more unequivocal, and at the same time a broader conception of the Day of Y”<sup>21</sup> His point is well taken for Amos 5 raises the prospect of a DL that establishes justice, and far from being a war is in 5:18-20 a dark day to be apprehensive about. Amos does not describe the DL in detail other than to state the outcome that it will inaugurate. As Hoffman himself notes, ‘one may say as opposed to the *uncrystallized popular concept* regarding the appearance of God in an act of salvation ... Amos represents *another uncrystallized* approach: the appearance of God would be »darkness and not light«.<sup>22</sup>

In all probability the DL will continue to present dilemmas and controversy for the foreseeable future. Further study of the key texts in which the phrase appears has much to commend it and it is on the strength of that that Joel becomes a prophet of interest.

#### THE PROPHET JOEL

Reading Joel involves numerous uncertainties. Among these, there is little certainty as to Joel’s identity. He is described as the son of Pethuel (1:1) which gives rise to various theories as

20 Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature,” 39.

21 Weiss, “The Origin of the “Day of the Lord” — Reconsidered,” 39.

22 Hoffmann, “The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature,” 42.

to his identity, none of which are secure.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless these uncertainties are not decisive or essential in terms of interpreting the prophet's message. So it is that O. Palmer Robertson points out the silver lining of this cloudy picture, and suggests that the 'effect of this anonymity is to keep the reader's concentration focused on the message, not on the man.'<sup>24</sup>

A related and further ambiguity is expressed in the wide range of opinion as to the book's date. Elie Assis has recently made a persuasive argument for its composition during the exile between 587 and 538.<sup>25</sup> The most obvious question regarding this dating is that there is limited evidence for a significant Jewish population in Israel during this time. While it is possible that 'the land of Judah continued to be populated after the exile' Assis has to acknowledge that it was 'very small and in a depressed state'.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, an exilic dating does seem possible, even likely, and so Assis' dating provides a good starting point.

In Hebrew counting, there are twelve Minor Prophets, and the second of these is Joel. The placement directly after Hosea is not accidental. Deist has identified significant affinities between Hosea 2 and Joel 2 in which similar imagery of agricultural devastation and subsequent blessing and restoration by the Lord are present.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Joel 2:1, 15 clearly echo Hosea 5:8, which

23 In his midrash on Joel, Rashi identified him in the earliest era, as the prophet Samuel's son 'בן שמואל הנביא שפיתה לחל בתפילתו'. Matis Roberts and Yitzchok Stavsky, *The Later Prophets: The Twelve Prophets* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2014).

24 O. Palmer Robertson, *Prophet of the Coming Day of the Lord: The Message of Joel* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1995), 22.

25 Elie Assis, "The Date and Meaning of the Book of Joel," VT 61, no. 2 (2011). The promise that God will 'restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem' (3:1) as well as the reference to his people 'scattered among the nations' (3:2) argue against a pre-exilic date. The observation that there is no reference to idolatry suggests an exilic or post-exilic date. Yet if Joel was written during the exile, a consequent question to be answered is how this prophecy could have been located in the Land and refer to the Temple cult.

26 Ibid., 180-81.

27 Ferdinand E. Deist, "Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel: A





reads: ‘Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-aven; we follow you, O Benjamin!’ As Richard Coggins argues, ‘It is surely right here to see a deliberate literary link’.<sup>28</sup> When Joel writes he is not confronting the idolatry that faced Hosea, neither are Gibeah and Ramah any more part of the Northern Kingdom fearing invasion from the south. Now Zion is the focus and Joel applies the imagery of a previous generation to his current situation.

The placement just before Amos is likewise appropriate. The two prophets also have substantial affinities. In both, Tyre, Philistia and Edom are singled out (Joel 3:4, 19; Amos 1:8-9), and in both, the ‘Lord roars from Zion’ (Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2). Both warn of devouring locusts (Joel 1:24; 2:25 and Amos 4:9; 7:1-3) and both issue a call for repentance (Joel 1:13, 2:12 and Amos 5:4-6, 14-15). For both the DL is darkness (Joel 2:2, Amos 5:18). Wolff suggests that, ‘in all likelihood those who arranged the collection of the Twelve wished us to read Amos and the following prophets in the light of Joel’s proclamation.’<sup>29</sup> If this is true, it momentarily signifies that Joel is the lens through which the other descriptions of the DL were intended to be read.

## THE LOCUSTS OF JOEL

The book of Joel progresses in phases from its opening words ‘Hear this, you elders!’ The first chapter portrays four waves of

Theology of the Yom Y’??,” in *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham*, ed. W. Claassen, Jsotsup (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 70-71.

28 Richard James Coggins, *Joel and Amos*, ed. Ronald E. Clements, New Century Bible Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 38. See also Jer 6:1.

29 Hans Walter Wolff, *A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, trans. Hans Walter Wolff, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 3.

locusts devastating the Land, and subsequently calls the priests and elders to call the people to repentance in the face of this DL. Without identifying the locusts by name the second chapter repeats the picture of invasion and devastation in militaristic terms. This chapter also calls the people to repentance in the face of the DL (2:12-17) but progresses a step further. In 2:18-27 Joel promises the Lord's pity on the repentant inhabitants, once again mentioning the locusts by name. The third chapter (in English Bibles 2:28-32) does not mention the DL by name but introduces an apocalyptic depiction which persists to the end of the book and concludes 'The Lord dwells in Zion' (4:21). It is no surprise that with the careful arrangement of the book, its inter-textual references and parallels, that Ferdinand Deist concluded that Joel includes various 'theologies' of the DL which are 'arranged in such a manner that they may be read as reinterpretations of each other.'<sup>30</sup>

In reading Joel, the reader is immediately faced with the need to identify the locust army being described. Pablo Andiñach goes as far as to argue that, whenever the book of Joel was penned, its interpretation is 'dependent upon a decision about the identity of the locusts'.<sup>31</sup> Are the locusts literal or figurative? Are the armies literal or eschatological? And what is the relationship between these different possibilities?

Various arguments have been marshalled against the idea that Joel writes of a literal plague of locusts. On the basis that Exodus 10:14 promised that there would never be a plague of locusts like that which was inflicted upon the Egyptians some ancient rabbis argued that they are not literal.<sup>32</sup> Thus Cecil Roth

30 Deist, "Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel: A Theology of the Yom Y'?", 75.

31 Pablo R. Andiñach, "The Locusts in the Message of Joel," VT 42, no. 4 (1992): 433. John A. Thompson, "Joel's Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels," JNES 14, no. 1 (1955).

32 Roberts and Stavsky, *The Later Prophets: The Twelve Prophets*, 117.



has argued that the ancient view was that the locusts represented far more than a literal plague, although unfortunately he does not provide his sources.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Joel's description of a locust army in chapter 1 is so graphic and detailed that it leaves little room for an alternative.<sup>34</sup> The description of four waves, or possibly types of locusts in 1:4, 2:25 draw upon what seems to be common knowledge between the author and his readers. This is not unlikely. Israeli entomologist F.S. Bodenheimer wrote in 1950 that 'At intervals of 11 to 13 years, huge swarms have invaded the country, in the late winter or early spring, for from one to four consecutive years.'<sup>35</sup> Specific consequences such as the physical damage to vines and fig trees (1:7) and the cancellation of grain and drink offerings 'from the house of the Lord' due to lack of produce (1:9) are indicative of an historical event. Joel consistently speaks of the locusts as a past event the effects of which were presently being experienced. There is no hint of military forces or destruction in the description of Joel 1.

The army of Joel 2 has various features in common with the locust horde of chapter 1, but also some unique characteristics. It seems that on the basis of the literal locust invasion in Joel 1, the prophet expanded his message to forewarn of a yet coming invasion. The problem facing interpreters is that Joel 2:2-11

33 'In the view of the covenanters of Qumran (and the same was to be the case with other pious interpreters later on), it was obviously inconceivable that the store of inspiration conveyed by the Prophet should be devoted to something so transitory and so trivial as a plague of locusts.' Cecil Roth, "The Teacher of Righteousness and the Prophecy of Joel," VT 13, no. 1 (1963): 93.

34 Commentators who take the locusts as literal include such as Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 74; Elie Assis, *The Book of Joel: A Prophet between Calamity and Hope*, ed. Claudia V. Camp and Andrew Mein, vol. 581, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 34-35; Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, ed. R.K. Harrison, Nicot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 49-51.

35 F. S. (Shimon Fritz) Bodenheimer, "Note on Invasions of Palestine by Rare Locusts," *Israel Exploration Journal* 1, no. 3 (1950): 146. Bodenheimer identifies three different species of locusts known to invade Palestine.

describes an army so closely after the pattern of the locust army in Joel 1 that it is common for commentators to take them as being the same army. On the other hand, as Feinberg has put it, there does indeed appear to be a ‘sinister reality behind the locust plague’.<sup>36</sup>

### THE LOCUST PLAGUE

In Joel 1:6 the locust army is described as a mighty (עצומ) nation. In Joel 2 the same term (עצומ) is used of the invaders no less than three times: in 2:2, 5 as a mighty people and in 2:11 as a mighty army. In the face of the invasion Joel 1:1 asks ‘has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your fathers?’ whereas Joel 2:2 states ‘their like has never been before.’ In what forms the first part of an inclusio, Joel 1:4 describes the locusts with four of the ten different terms that are used of locusts in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>37</sup> In Joel 2:25 the inclusion is completed as the same four terms are repeated in the context of a reprise of Joel one’s agricultural imagery in the previous chapter.

Nevertheless, Joel also distinguishes the two armies. In chapter one the direction from which the locusts come is not mentioned, but his readers would have known that locusts typically invade from the south. In chapter two the army is described as coming from the north (2:20). This was the traditional direction from which foreign enemies were expected to invade the land (e.g. Jer 4:6, 6:1; Ezek 39:2).<sup>38</sup> While in chapter 1 the picture is that of four kinds of locusts, chapter 2:2 portrays a single army. Whereas

36 Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 75; Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, thus writes ‘...the plague in its literal sense does not exhaust the intent of the Lord.’ 74.

37 Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 64.

38 Brevard S. Childs, “The Enemy from the North and the Chaos Tradition,” *JBL* 78, no. 3 (1959).



chapter 1 compares the locusts to lions or lionesses which were native threats to the inhabitants of the land,<sup>39</sup> in military terminology chapter 2 compares the locusts to horses, cavalry, warriors and soldiers (2:5,7). In this he draws upon the literal visual comparison that can be made between the appearance of locusts and horses (apart from scale!). The comparison has been made in more cultures than just that of the prophet Joel. Feinberg makes the observation that just as the locusts are described like ‘horses’ in 2:4 so even in Italian (*cavaletta*) and German (*Haupferde*) there are terms for locusts derived from words for horses.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the primarily *agricultural* image of Joel 1 gives way to a military one in Joel 2. In terms of what these armies do, no longer is the issue one of agricultural destruction with new wine being snatched from the lips (1:5), vines laid waste and fig trees debarked (1:7), or crop destruction and drought (1:10,12). Rather now in Joel 2 the portrayal is that of walls being scaled (2:7), the breaching of defenses (2:8), the scaling of city walls and infiltration of homes (2:9). Perhaps most frighteningly, whereas the first invasion is described as a *mighty* army Joel makes it clear that the army of Joel 2 is the *Lord’s* army that obeys his command (2:11). There is an intensification as well as a reidentification of the army’s significance.

Various features of Joel 2 therefore suggest that the prophet is warning of more than an approaching second invasion of locusts. In fact, Barton is so uncomfortable with the idea that Joel 2 might simply be referring to a further locust invasion that he wonders if 2:25, the latter part of our inclusio, ‘might be a later insertion.’<sup>41</sup>

39 Judges 14:5; 1 Sam 17:34-37.

40 Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 76. See also C.J. (ed.) Ellicott, *A New Testament Commentary for English Readers, by Various Writers*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (London: Cassell, Petter, Galpin and Co., 1884), 576.

41 John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary, The Old Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 90.

This is unsubstantiated, but serves to illustrate the tension and connection between the armies of Joel 1 and 2.

Such a comparison of locusts and armies is one found both within and without the Scriptures, suggesting the possibility that the simile was well known. Thus the invading Midianite hordes are described as ‘like locusts’ in Judges 6:5 and 7:12 as they and their camels devour everything the Israelites have. Also in the Ugaritic texts of *Keret* and *Anat* there is also an invading army, compared to a swarm of locusts. This army, ‘troops without number, soldiers uncountable’ is like locusts for ‘they occupy the field, like grasshoppers the corners of the desert.’<sup>42</sup>

This is of interest, because in all such examples like in Judges and *Keret* and *Anat* the armies are said to be like locusts, but in Joel, the locusts are said to be an army. The effect is thus to draw the reader’s attention from the known to the fearsome unknown. In view of these similarities and differences I take the view that Joel’s readers would have understood that in the second chapter he was describing a coming military invasion in terms of the locust invasion they had just experienced. Is this then what the DL is all about?

#### THE DAY OF THE LORD IN JOEL 2

The term DL (יִוֵם הַיּוֹם) occurs three times in Joel, each time in the context of a coming event. In Joel 1:15 the people have been enjoined to mourn in response to the agricultural disaster they are facing. It is a disaster that can only but remind them of the destructive DL which ‘is near’ (קָרוֹב) and ‘will come’ (יָבוֹא). In

42 Deist, “Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel: A Theology of the Yom Y’?”, 66, citing Krt 88-91, 103-05.



Joel 2:1 the DL is once again ‘coming’ (בא) and ‘near’ (קרוב). It is thus that Joel, with his call to ‘blow the trumpet (שופר) in Zion’ introduces two important pieces of information in his description of the DL.

The first is that of location: Zion, which is to be identified with the eastern ridge upon which Jerusalem was built and where the Temple stood.<sup>43</sup> There is a direct connection in Joel 2:1 between Zion and ‘my holy mountain’. This is the place where in the prophet’s day God was worshipped, even though it is highly likely that the Temple had not yet been rebuilt when Joel prophesied. The alarm being called for was on account of danger not just to the city of Jerusalem, but specifically this mountain where God was worshipped. The priesthood, who were as it was stakeholders in the events surrounding the DL, and are mentioned in 1:9, are thus put in context. It is clear (as might have been assumed) that their functions were performed on the Temple mount, still called the ‘house of the Lord’ despite their lack of the Solomonic structure. From this point on, in the words of James Crenshaw the ‘identity of the endangered city is made known’.<sup>44</sup> This locus is reaffirmed in 2:23; 3:5; 4:16, 17 and 21.

The second piece of information that Joel introduces in his description of the DL is regarding its nature. In 1:13 the prophet had not described the DL other than to say that it was ‘near’ and coming ‘as destruction from the Almighty’, the same two points that are made in Joel 2:1. From there he returned to a description of the devastation his readers had seen. Whereas the locust invasion of Joel 1 is a past event, the DL as described following Joel 2:1 is an ominously imminent and unremittingly dark prospect. It is something to tremble at. Here the wording is

43 Lewis Bayles Paton, “Jerusalem in Bible Times: V. Zion, Ophel, and Moriah,” *The Biblical World* 29, no. 5 (1907).

44 James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24c, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 117.

identical to that of Zeph 1:14-16: 'a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness'. Not only is it terrifying in this respect, but it is also reminiscent of his predecessor Isaiah's description of the DL as 'destruction from the Almighty' (Isaiah 13:6) and 'cruel, with wrath and fierce anger' (13:9). It is this darkness Amos describes, disaster upon disaster as when a man flees from a lion only to meet a bear (5:18-20).

Joel continues in graphic terms, and his message is further clarified by what at first might seem to be mere poetry, but is revealed to be far more. As seen above, the prophet is now at pains to describe the DL in terms of the locusts that have so recently traumatised his readers. Again and again in 2:2-9 Joel describes the locusts as 'like' warriors, armies, or thieves and the effects of their activity as 'like' blackness, and 'like' fire. These locusts evidently must be distinguished from those in Joel 1. They have features that are neither merely agricultural nor military. Before them the 'earth quakes' and the 'heavens tremble' (2:10). As with the theme of darkness, Wolff associates this terminology with the theophany accounts of the 'Sinai tradition'.<sup>45</sup> On Sinai the Lord's presence was accompanied by smoke 'and the whole mountain trembled greatly'. (Ex 19:18). It is a sign of the presence of the Lord, and in keeping with that, just as at Sinai (Ex 19:19), the voice of the Lord is heard in the subsequent verse. It is a sign that the Lord is present in the midst of the army being described.

It is the presence of the Lord in the midst of all of this that lifts the events being portrayed out of the ordinary world of agricultural and military disasters. Thus von Rad was right to point out that Joel 2:2-11 describes the locust army in dramatic terms and 'equates the locusts with the armies of the Day of J' marching into battle,' enabling Joel 'to draw on the whole range

45 Wolff, *A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, 47.





of war concepts connected with the Day of J'.<sup>46</sup> This is what leads Barton to also argue that 'the problem envisaged in chapter 2 is not a locust plague but an enemy army, and not just any army but an "apocalyptic army"<sup>47</sup> In the face of this army, Joel emphasises that the DL is 'great' and 'very awesome'; so much so that the question has to be asked in advance: 'who can endure it?' (2:11).

#### JOEL'S APPEAL TO RETURN (שוב)

In the first chapter Joel had called upon the priests and ministers to put on sackcloth and mourn before God (1:13) on the basis of the locust invasion.<sup>48</sup> The priests were to declare a fast and sacred assembly (עצרה); summon the elders and the people to the House of the Lord; and cry out to the Lord (1:14). In some ways then the priests had a liturgical as well as a leadership function, leading the people of Israel in approaching God. This is a thread running through both chapter 1 and 2 as in both priests and sacrifice are mentioned (1:9,13; 2:17). Yet as James Linville points out, it is not the priests who are the centre of attention. In fact 'Joel employs a strategy which allows for the priests to be all but taken for granted.'<sup>49</sup> The focus is on an appeal to God by all sectors of society – the religious leadership, civil leadership

46 Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, 2, 121.

47 Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary*, 69; See also Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. David W. Cotter, Berit Olam: *Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 162.

48 Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, takes the 'ministers' to be the priests, its use in apposition to 'priests' being 'characteristic of postexilic writings', 53n.

49 James R. Linville, "The Day of Y' and the Mourning of the Priests in Joel," in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis, Jsotsup (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 99.

(elders), and the people.<sup>50</sup> All are enjoined to turn to God in the midst of their distress.

Unlike the pre-exilic prophets, Joel's focus is not on the sins of the people. The locust horde of chapter 1 is not used as proof of divine judgment (although this could be considered to be implicit, with a possible hint of this to be found in 1:13 where the prophet writes of 'my God' versus 'your God').<sup>51</sup> The tone is not one of denunciation. Rather, the focus of Joel's appeal is the DL. In Joel 1, after calling for all the deeds of lamentation, he clarifies that rather than the current or past locust plague, the reason to lament is that 'the day of the Lord is near' (1:15). In the face of all the current devastation, it is to the Lord that the prophet calls (1:19). As fits Assis' dating of Joel during the exile, it seems that the prophet is addressing an already chastised and humbled people and does not need to catalogue the sins for which they are already suffering.

Thus it is that when the reader of Joel 2:13 is faced with the imperative 'return (שוב) to me with all your heart' that the verb 'שוב' should be taken as a call to 'a renewed and heightened devotion to the deity'. As Linville saliently points out 'Joel's silence on the people's sins must not be drowned out by importing into its word-world the emphasis on guilt found in other literature and having this dominate our thinking about the book.'<sup>52</sup> Here is an opportunity for the people to avert the decree (2:14). The hearkening back to the theophany on Mount Sinai is continued with a description of God's character in accord with the 'thirteen attributes of mercy' revealed to Moses in Ex 34:6-7, the memorable phrase 'merciful and gracious' (רחום וְתַנּוּן) reversed in order and rendered by Joel as 'gracious and merciful' (תַּנּוּן וְרַחוּם).

50 The lack of nobles and a monarchy in Joel is another sign of its composition during the exilic period.

51 Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 74.

52 Linville, "The Day of Y" and the Mourning of the Priests in Joel," 101.



Demonstrating a common human motivation to pray for relief in the face of locust plagues, Victor Hurowitz has observed that the language of Joel regarding locusts is strikingly similar to a ‘text from Nineveh (K 3600 + DT 75) containing a partially preserved hymn to the goddess Nanaya concluding with a prayer on behalf of Sargon II, king of Assyria (721-705 BCE)’.<sup>53</sup> There one reads ‘The evil locust which destroys the crop/grain... may by your command it be turned to nothing.’<sup>54</sup> Hurowitz continues to observe that the literary similarities between Joel 1:4-20 and the hymn point to either a dependency of one upon the other or a reliance upon ‘common traditional language’.<sup>55</sup>

Joel, however, has taken the metaphor of a locust plague out of the ordinary and into the numinous. He is not just concerned about locusts. The picture of repentance and God’s ensuing mercy is appropriate enough to a locust army, but elements of it point to a future reality beyond any imminent invasion. Thus in contrast to some more contemporary translations, when Joel describes the Lord’s response to his people’s prayer in 2:18 the word ‘jealous’ or ‘zealous’ (אִנְיָ) should be translated as a future tense just as it is conjugated in the Hebrew, looking forward to a future time in accordance with the whole passage it introduces.<sup>56</sup> Present and future are conflated in his prophecy, and rather than that being a confusing matter, it is a tool of the prophet to bring the immanency of a future event to light for his readers.

53 Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, “Joel’s Locust Plague in Light of Sargon II’s Hymn to Nanaya,” *JBL* 112, no. 4 (1993): 598.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, 603.

56 Some render the mood as jussive: ‘May the Lord be jealous...’ Assis suggests Joel is portraying the Lord’s response to the people’s prayer. *The Book of Joel: A Prophet between Calamity and Hope*, 581, 164.

## THE COMING DAY

Is the DL an eschatological event? Marco Treves found ‘nothing eschatological in the book of Joel’.<sup>57</sup> Relegating it to the fourth century BCE via eighteen dubious arguments he dated it to the days of the Ptolemy Soter and thus merely useful as a historical document.<sup>58</sup> This minimalist approach has little to commend it in reality, and jars with the book’s intertextual relationship to the other prophets and the general assessment of not only Christian but Jewish scholarship.<sup>59</sup> Elie Assis has carefully and effectively countered most of Treves’ eighteen arguments.<sup>60</sup>

It may well be that Joel 2:10 (also 4:14 / 3:15) does not refer to the ultimate end of the universe as both Wolff and Weiss have estimated.<sup>61</sup> Eschatology must be distinguished from Apocalyptic.

If that were so, why the call for repentance in order to avert the decree, and why the promise to restore the years that the ‘locust has eaten’ (2:25)? The context of Joel 2, the entire book and the DL in the Book of the Twelve Prophets would not suggest that. Joel uses poetic language, but this does not allow one to avoid the eschatological force of his arguments.

In Joel 2:10 the prophet declares ‘The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.’ His language clearly hearkens back to that of Amos 5:18 with its description of the DL as ‘darkness, and not light.’ Regardless of how literally these

57 Marco Treves, “The Date of Joel,” *VT* 7, no. 2 (1957): 150.

58 *Ibid.*, 156.

59 In rabbinic literature, Joel is dated between Ahab, king of Israel and Manasseh king of Judah (i.e. c. 870-640 BCE). Roberts and Stavsky, *The Later Prophets: The Twelve Prophets*, 116.

60 Assis, “The Date and Meaning of the Book of Joel.”

61 Weiss, “The Origin of the “Day of the Lord” — Reconsidered,” 59; Wolff, *A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*.



phenomena are to be taken, the point is that the DL is coming, and it is a Day when he ‘executes his word’ (2:11). Joel is portraying a literal, future event.

Joel expects that Judah will experience the DL in some way. The good news for Joel’s readers is that, as Barton puts it, ‘The “day of Y’ “ predicted in chapter 2, just like that in chapter 1, is an occasion when Y’ judges the people decisively; but beyond it lies the possibility of a restoration of the normal conditions of life, with sacrifices restored to the Temple (2:14), the locust plague removed (2:20), and the effects of the devastation made good in the future.’<sup>62</sup> Thus the Lord promises that he will ‘restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten’ (2:25). Joel 2, which began with the call of the trumpet thus ends with a promise (2:26), ‘And my people shall never again be put to shame.’ It is yet an unfulfilled promise to the inhabitants of the land. It is also an important promise, for just as Joel has repeated the call to ‘blow the trumpet in Zion’ (2:1, 15), and repeated his warning about the DL (2:1,11), so he now repeats the phrase verbatim in 2:27: ‘And my people shall never again be put to shame.’<sup>63</sup> The trumpet has been blown in Zion, and the children of Zion can rejoice (2:23).

#### THE DAY OF THE LORD IN ACTS AND REVELATION

As we have seen, Joel spoke of both a future eschatological DL and made a call for repentance. Almost 600 years after the

<sup>62</sup> Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary*, 70.

<sup>63</sup> John Strazicich, *Joel’s Use of Scripture and the Scripture’s Use of Joel: Appropriation and Resignification in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Ellen van Wolde, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 200. Strazicich notes that ‘Both Dahmen and Crenshaw suggest that Joel’s allusion to the Scham statement stems from Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 45:17b:....’

prophet Joel, Peter proclaimed that Joel's DL had arrived (Acts 2:17-21). Taking his cue from the fact that his companions were filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking in other languages (Acts 2:4), Peter associated that with Joel 3:1-2, which twice states 'I will pour out my Spirit'. The connection led Peter to conclude that this was a sign of the DL. He was assisted in making the connection by his understanding of the significance of his location in Jerusalem. Thus he addressed the 'Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem' (Acts 2:14). This echoed Joel's location – 'Blow the trumpet in Zion' (Joel 2:1,15) and 'in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape' (Joel 3:5). Presumably understanding the figurative nature of Joel's reference to the DL as 'darkness and not light' Peter was able to confirm that the day had come when the Lord would 'show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below' (Acts 2:19 = Joel 2:4).

Peter's audience was not going to see military deliverance, though that may be what they hoped for. After all, his sermon was delivered to devout Jewish audience,<sup>64</sup> who were acutely aware of Israel's indignities under an oppressive Roman regime. It is doubtful that they failed to infer what could not be explicitly preached – that the Roman legions were to be likened to the locust armies of Joel. They, as the locusts, were exemplars of the judgment of God. When Peter reminded them that 'everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21 = Joel 3:5) it is reasonable to say that the salvation envisaged by his audience was tinged by expectations of deliverance from a military foe.<sup>65</sup> In other words, they were hoping for the DL to

64 These are represented in Acts as residents of Jerusalem and Judea but their geographical origins suggests that their number also includes pilgrims on account of the festival, one of the שלש רגלים, the three annual festivals when Jews congregated in Jerusalem.

65 Gary Gilbert, "The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response," *JBL* 121, no. 3 (2002). has shown that 'Acts has adapted the



arrive in its fullness in the imminent future.

The thrust of Joel's message, that the DL calls for *שובה*, repentance, came through clearly. Just as Joel used the DL as a pretext to call for repentance, so Peter called for repentance on the same basis (Acts 2:21 = Joel 3:5) and appealed for them to do the same (Acts 2:38). Peter interpreted Joel's message for them, related it to what they were observing in the hearing of various languages, and connected that to the recent events of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is this context which helps to explain his hearer's reaction to his message and the outcome that they were 'cut to the heart' (Acts 2:37). Military deliverance would remain to be fulfilled, as would the fulfilment of the prophet's twice repeated words 'And my people shall never again be put to shame' (2:26-27), but for the present, repentance was the appropriate response.

One cannot conclude without taking into account the locust army described in Rev 9:7-11. The portrayal there is even more alarming than that of Joel. In John's account the locusts are:

In appearance... like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. (ESV)

Significant similarities can be seen between these locusts and those of the book of Joel, but also key differences.<sup>66</sup> Firstly as

well-known form of Roman propaganda in order to create a map of contested terrain and reinforce the claim that all the nations of the earth now rest under the dominion not of Caesar but of God and his son, Jesus.' p. 529.

66 Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse*

has been seen, Joel's military image of locusts is far from unique either in the Scripture or in contemporary literature. This is the imagery that John uses in Revelation, but as Joseph Mangina puts it 'In John's vision this image is taken up and transformed into something even more awful'.<sup>67</sup> Secondly, unlike Joel's locusts who are the Lord's army, these locusts have a king who comes from the bottomless pit. In Revelation the Lamb does precipitate the advent of the locust army as he opens the seals (Rev 8:1), but this does not correlate clearly enough with Joel's forthright identification of the locusts as specifically the Lord's army. Thus the case for a direct identification of the locusts in Joel and Revelation is not entirely clear-cut.

A key similarity cannot be passed by however. Just as Joel did, John informs us that the appropriate response to this locust army should be repentance. Despite the fact that Rev 9 depicts a day of the judgement, a DL, Rev 9:20 notes that in this instance such repentance does not come. Thus judgement proceeds unrelentingly. Revelation backs up the message of Acts 2 and that of Joel. Future judgement can be averted by a repentant response. In this respect the DL is both coming and yet demanding immediate repentance in each of these three cases. Repentance can 'avert the decree' in the words of the Jewish Day of Atonement liturgy. It can bring restoration of the 'years that the locust has eaten' in the words of Joel. But for those who do not repent the DL remains a future gloomy and dark prospect. Thus there is still a future aspect to the DL and prophetic aspects of the DL and the locust army in Joel 2 remain to be fulfilled.

*Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), identifies the locusts with demons and draws strong parallels to the locusts of Joel, pp. 2014-26.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 2010), 122.





## CONCLUSION

Joel is very much a tapestry, and in Craig Blaising's words presents an 'aggregate' view of the DL.<sup>68</sup> This survey of Joel and in particular Joel 2 shows the need for a literal, historical and grammatical foundation in the interpretation of his prophecy. It is this 'literal' approach that inexorably draws us to an understanding of what will be 'literal' eschatological events, rooted in the past and coming to fruit in the future.

Joel issued a message to repent for the DL was near. Both John the Baptist and Jesus called for repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven is near (Matt 3:2, 4:17). In this respect Joel's message has a timeless quality and may be considered to speak even today in the face of environmental, geopolitical and military disasters.



68 Craig A. Blaising, "The Day of the Lord," Dallas Theological Seminary, [http://www.dts.edu/media/play/the-day-of-the-lord-blaising-craig-a/?adsourc=TUBE\\_chapel](http://www.dts.edu/media/play/the-day-of-the-lord-blaising-craig-a/?adsourc=TUBE_chapel).