

THE DAY OF THE LORD

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The fundamental Jewish belief rests in God, the Creator, Who is One, Who rules His universe with justice and compassion and Who is concerned with man and demands moral conduct from him. It led to a concept of history in which there is plan and purpose in events directed¹ to a messianic climax of Time. All the prophets envision a Kingdom of Heaven in which there would be a final redemption of Israel and universal peace, with all men acknowledging the Lord God of Israel.

It was also believed that the final redemption was to be preceded by "The Day of the Lord"—in the words of Shubert Spero, "a day of judgment in which the old and its incorrigible corruption must first be burned away."²

There is no mention of The Day of the Lord in any of the early prophetic literature. Neither is there any record of when there came to be a popular concept of such a day of judgment, in which the Lord would punish those who oppose Him and who oppressed His people Israel. After the first references by Hosea and Amos, it became a powerful influence on the visions and expectations of almost every biblical prophet down to Malachi, the last of them.

The political situations in which they lived, and their religious and moral aspirations, undoubtedly fashioned their vision of The Day of the Lord, so awesome a concept that the simple phrase *on that Day* individuated it. For some of the prophets, this Day would be one of punishment for Israel alone; for others, the gentiles would be the target of the Lord's wrath; for most, the judgment would come on Israel and gentiles alike. All prophets believed that this Day would lead to repentance and redemption.

I have selected six prophets whose pronouncements exemplify the purpose and implications of the coming of "The Day of the Lord."

JOEL: THE VALLEY OF JEHOSEPHAT

We know very little of the prophet Joel. There is controversy regarding the time he prophesied. The Mesora places him before Amos, in the eighth century BCE, but modern scholarship assigns his ministry to the fifth century.

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Beginning with a graphic description of a locust invasion sweeping over Judea, the prophet takes this event as an ill omen of an even greater ordeal to come: *Alas for the Day, for the Day of the Lord is at hand and a destruction from the Almighty shall it come* (1:15). Joel foresees The Day of the Lord as a day of blood and fire. The sun will turn into darkness followed by other cataclysmic upheavals of nature.

The Day of Judgment, he prophesies, will be directed against the nations who have oppressed Israel: [The Lord] *will gather all the nations into the Valley of Jehoshaphat* (4:2). In II Chronicles 20:26, there is a record of a major victory of King Jehoshaphat over an alliance of Moab and Ammon in a valley called *Berakhah* [blessing] *to this day*. It may be that Joel identifies this valley with the valley of Jehoshaphat for '*. . . there I [the Lord] will visit to judge all the nations roundabout* (4:12) in retribution for their cruelty exerted against Judea. Those nations are challenged to war against the Lord. In clear ironic reversal of Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3, they are taunted to *beat plowshares into swords* (4:10). The fate of the multitudes in this valley of decision will be their annihilation.

Though Judah will not be spared and its sinners will be punished for their own backsliding, after the punishment there will be salvation for a remnant of the people, those *who call upon the name of the Lord* (3:5). *'I will pour out My spirit [promises the Lord] upon all [your] flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy'* (3:1). Thus, upon a truly repentant remnant, the Lord will pour out His spirit. A glorious future for purified Judea is assured by the Lord.

AMOS: NOBLESSE OBLIGE

A crowd gathering for festivities at the royal shrine at Beth-El was shocked when Amos addressed them using the same formula as Joel: *Woe unto those who desire the Day of the Lord. Wherefore would you have a Day of the Lord, it is darkness and no light* (5:18)? In an earlier address, peoples surrounding Israel had been arraigned to stand trial: *For three transgressions . . . for four, I will not revoke* (1:3-2:8). S.M. Lehrman³ and Shmuel Leib Gordon (Shalag)⁴ note that a total eclipse of the sun occurred on June 15, 763 BCE. To the people of Israel, this event heralded a long-expected day on which God's punitive powers would be vented against their enemies.

Now, to Amos, this event was a portent of coming disasters: To his own people: *'And it shall come to pass on that day that I will turn your feasts into mourning'* (8:10). Why, in later addresses, is God's anger focused on Israel alone? *'You only have I known of all families of the earth, therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities'* (3:2). God had not chosen Israel for privileges but for responsibilities accruing from their being chosen. Thus, for Amos, contrary to the expectations of the people of Israel that The Day of the Lord is to be a day of redemption and joy, it will instead turn into a day of disaster. God will destroy the sinful kingdom and the sinners of His people will perish by the sword.

Some important differences can be noted in the visions of Joel and Amos on The Day of the Lord. To Joel, God's wrath is upon the nations who oppressed Israel. The sinners of Judah will not escape punishment either, but there will remain a faithful remnant on which God's spirit will be poured out. Purified, Israel will live safely in its land. To Amos, Israel is singled out by the Lord on that fateful day for severe punishment.

Nevertheless, Amos announces: *A time is coming declares the Lord . . . 'I will restore My people Israel . . . And I will plant them upon their soil, nevermore to be uprooted from the soil I have given them,' said the Lord your God* (9:13-15).

ISAIAH: *IN THAT DAY SHALL ISRAEL BE THE THIRD WITH EGYPT AND ASSYRIA, A BLESSING IN THE MIDST OF THE EARTH* (19:24).

Isaiah, whose prophetic ministry lasted about 740-700 BCE, lived in a time of growing trouble. The Assyrians were engaged in a policy of aggression and expansion, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel became its victim, falling in 722. Jerusalem was saved only by a miracle, when a mighty Assyrian expeditionary force besieging Jerusalem began a hasty unexplained retreat (II Kg. 19; Isa. 37).

It will, therefore, come as a surprise that in Chapters 13-23, in which the doom of various nations is predicted, Isaiah's first oracle is about Babylon: *Behold, the Day of the Lord cometh, cruel and full of wrath and fierce anger. To make the earth a desolation and to destroy the sinners out of it* (13:9).

Not troubled by the anachronistic prediction of Babylon's doom, rather than Assyria's, rabbinic tradition has it that the great Isaiah foresaw the coming

might of Babylonia, destined eventually to destroy Nineveh, capital of Assyria (612 BCE), and later on Jerusalem and the Temple.⁵ Now, whether the allusion is to Assyria or Babylonia, following The Day of the Lord and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and, when He has broken the "staff of the wicked," *the stranger shall join himself with them* (14:1). The redemption of Israel will come as a result of the Lord's compassion.

Chapters 24-27 are replete with apocalyptic visions. God's wrath will make the earth empty and waste, turning it upside down. On that day, He will slay Leviathan (Assyria?), the tortuous serpent (Babylon?) and the dragon of the sea (Egypt?). Yet, in Chapter 19 Isaiah declares:

In that day, shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth. For the Lord of Hosts has blessed him, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance' (19:24-25).

This Chapter is a glorious addition to Isaiah's messianic vision in Chapters 2 and 11, reaffirming that in The End of Days the world will acknowledge the Lord, to be followed by universal peace and harmony among nations.

EZEKIEL: GOG AND MAGOG

Ezekiel's ministry of prophecy, even more apocalyptic than Isaiah's, came in approximately 592-570 BCE. Unlike his great contemporary Jeremiah, who was entirely wrapped up in the catastrophic collapse of the Kingdom of Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, Ezekiel, the prophet of Exile, could view past tragic events from the perspective of distance, and the future from the power of prophecy. Yet, strangely, his fury is turned not against Babylon, but against Egypt: *For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near . . . and a sword shall come upon Egypt . . .* (30:3-4). Why Egypt? Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, blamed Egypt for her direct involvement in the death of the righteous King Josiah, but perhaps more so for her unreliability.

Already the Prophet Hosea had warned against the alliance of Israel with Egypt (Hos. 7:11). King Hoshea, seeking help from Egypt, provoked the King of Assyria, leading to the devastation of Samaria (II Kg. 17:4). Isaiah, cautioning King Hezekiah against alliance with Egypt warned: *Behold! You*

trust upon the staff of this bruised reed (Isa. 36:6), and Jeremiah had fought, albeit without success, with all his spiritual resources against alliance with Egypt.

Egypt as a world power will collapse. The instrument of her downfall, by Divine decree, will be Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. After the day of reckoning, all Israel, both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, united under the rulership of the seed of David, will be restored to her former glory. Idols will be swept away and the sovereignty of the Lord will be fully manifested. The symbol of Israel's regeneration is the great vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones (Chap. 37).

However, the calm of Israel's peace and security is slated to be only temporary, for a mighty confederation under Gog and Magog will invade Jerusalem. There is controversy as to what "Gog and Magog" means, but unquestionably it will be an event projected for The End of Days: Gog and many peoples *shall come up against My people Israel, as a cloud to cover the land, it shall be in the End of Days . . .* (38:16). God's fury aroused, He will intercede for His people with cataclysmic upheaval even more destructive than the Flood. It will include the fish of the sea as well as the birds of heaven and all creeping things on the earth. Mountains will crash, followed by pestilence. This day will mark the full vindication of the Lord: *Thus will I magnify Myself and sanctify Myself and will make Myself known in the eyes of many nations* (38:23).

Isaiah and Ezekiel differ in their perception of The Day of the Lord in its relation to the End of Days, the *aharit ha-yamim*. To Isaiah, these are two separate events, while to Ezekiel the second Day of the Lord coincides with the Final Days. To both, the Final Days will mark the end of the time of our current reality and usher in the hoped-for messianic era. To Isaiah, all nations will stream to the mountains to be taught the way of the Lord, and all people will live in universal peace. To Ezekiel, in this apocalyptic event, God's power will overwhelm His opposing nations to the extent that they will acknowledge His undisputed sovereignty over the whole world.

ZEPHANIAH: *IN THE DAY OF THE LORD'S WRATH . . . HE WILL MAKE AN END, YEA, A TERRIBLE END, OF ALL THEM THAT DWELL IN THE EARTH* (1:18).

Zephaniah, most likely a descendant of the royal family of Judah, prophesied during the period of the righteous King Josiah (639-608 BCE), at a time of looming political unrest: the waning power of Assyria, the growing power of Babylonia; the threat of a Scythian invasion, coupled by inroads made into Judah by neighboring nations. To this must be added the religious deterioration during the reign of King Manasseh, before the reformations of Josiah. All this trouble is the prelude to the *Great Day of the Lord* [which] *is near* (1:14). God's anger is turned against princes, judges, and false prophets who mislead the people, and He threatens a cosmic conflagration in which

'I will utterly destroy all things from the face of the earth' (1:2). That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness (1:15).

Special attention is promised to those nations who have turned against Judah: *The Lord will be terrible unto them for He will famish [starve-out] all the gods of the earth . . . (2:11)*. The term "famish" needs some interpretation. It is based on the heathen concept of sacrifices which are needed to feed their false deities. Since cities will be devastated, there would be insufficient sacrifices to sustain their idols. This, in turn, will bring about the purification of these nations. *For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language that they may call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent (3:9)*.

It is mostly religious sins that are the cause of God's wrath which threatened punitive actions against Israelite idolatrous priests who worship Baal and the host of a pagan heaven. It is the hypocrisy of *those who worship that swear to the Lord and swear by Malcam (1:5)* and those who say in their hearts *The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil (1:12)*, which denies the belief in the interference of God in the affairs of man.

To the question whether the frightful events of The Day of the Lord can be averted, Zephaniah warns: *Gather yourselves together, yea gather together O shameless nation . . . before the fierce anger of the Lord come upon you . . . (2:1-2)*. If Judeans truly repent, the faithful ones will escape the Lord's fury. Indeed, Zion will return to God's favor: *'At that time . . . for I will make you to be a name and a praise among all the peoples of the earth . . . (3:20)*.

ZECHARIAH: ON THAT DAY SHALL THE LORD BE ONE AND HIS NAME ONE

The prophecies of Zechariah summarize the apocalyptic events of The Day of the Lord, containing all the major features of such a day of judgment. *'Behold, a day of the Lord comes For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle . . .'* (14:1-2). On that fateful day, the city will be conquered and half its inhabitants will go into captivity. But, at this critical juncture, the Lord with all the holy ones will intercede amidst apocalyptic conflagration. In contrast to the visions of other prophets, these stormy events will not lead to devastation. On the contrary, they will be beneficial to Israel: *And it shall pass in that day that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem* (14:8), fructifying all lands east and west. *In That Day, shall the Lord be One and His name One* (14:9), a vision incorporated into the *Alenu* prayer recited three times a day.

All nations, proclaims Zechariah, devastated by plagues *shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles* (14:16). How did Zechariah come to this conclusion? As an early post-exilic prophet, he was profoundly concerned with the rebuilding of the destroyed Temple. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the magnificent speech delivered by King Solomon at the inauguration of the Temple as recorded in I Kings 8. Solomon had called a holy convocation of the elders of Israel *at the Feast [hag] in the month Ethanim which is the seventh month [Tishrei]* (I Kg. 8:2). Now the term *hag* stands for the festival of Tabernacles [Sukkot] (Lev. 23:39). In his speech, Solomon invited foreigners to worship at the Temple: *'Moreover concerning the stranger that is not of Thy people Israel, when he shall come out of a far country for Thy name's sake . . . and pray toward this house'* (I Kg. 8:41-42). Indeed, *the Lord will smite the nations that go not up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles* (14:18).

The events described by Solomon in I Kings chapter 8 contained all the elements to inspire Zechariah's vision of the significance of the *hag*. This vision contained the hope for the completion of the Temple together with the dawn of the messianic day. It is known that in the days of the Second Temple "Fearers of the Lord [*yirei Hashem*]" went up to Jerusalem to celebrate Sukkot (Josephus, *Antiquities* 14). Later, the rabbis interpreted the 70 bullocks offered as sacrifices in the Temple as referring to the "70" nations of the world (T.B. Sukkah 55b) and these offerings served as an atonement for them.

Thus, That Day, the feast of Sukkot in the rebuilt Temple would become the symbol of the universal acknowledgment of the Lord.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While the term "messiah" in the sense of eschatology does not appear in any of the prophetic writings, there are nevertheless two eras of time in the minds and lives of the prophets. The Day of the Lord inexorably, will move to the ideal End of Days. The *aharit ha-yamim* of Isaiah (2:2), of Micah (4:1), and Daniel (12:13) are visions of a glorious time of universal peace. Daniel, though not included in the Prophets, even prophesied the resurrection of the dead of the righteous: *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence* (12:2). In the prophetic vision, it would seem that The Day of the Lord would usher in a new and ideal era in history.

As much as prophetic expectations of such an ideal era differ, they are in agreement on three points. It is the Lord's power that will move all the nations toward this ideal era; at that time the whole world will acknowledge the Lord; the faithful remnant of Israel will live in peace and harmony in the land of Israel.

NOTES

1. The biblical record, starting with Abraham's theophany at the *Brit bein ha-Betarim* [the Covenant Between the Parts] is a perfect example of this kind of providential history. It took over 400 years before the prophecy of Israel's ultimate deliverance from enslavement was fulfilled. Although all the heroes act freely, in the end every action and event meshes to bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy.
2. Shubert Spero, *Holocaust and Return to Zion* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2000) p. 85.
3. S.M. Lehrman, *The Twelve Prophets* (London: Soncino Press, 1948) p. 81.
4. Shmuel Leib Gordon (SHALAG) *Commentary on Tanakh*.
5. Yehezkiel Kaufman, as quoted in Gordon's commentary on Isaiah, maintains that this particular prophecy was indeed about Assyria.
6. According to the commentary of the Vilna Gaon on *Seder Olam*, Daniel was endowed with prophetic vision.