I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT ON ALL FLESH

(JOEL 3:1)

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In a way, like Deutero-Isaiah,[1] Joel is a mysterious prophet, except for the fact that we know his name. There is absolutely no agreement as to when he lived and prophesied. He has been shifted around by the traditional Jewish sources and by modern scholars from 800 BCE to 500 BCE and even later. He is sandwiched in the "Twelve Prophets" between Hosea and Amos, which would make him one of the early prophets, yet he seems unconnected to a particular time or place. As such, he is somewhat lost in the shuffle and does not receive enough attention.[2] His main vision has to do with a plague of four different kinds of locust that invade the land and cause total devastation. It is not clear whether he is referring to an actual plague or is using symbolic language to describe the enemies of Israel. In four short chapters, Joel alludes to the prophecies of several of his colleagues, as when he reverses Isaiah's words in the vision of the end of days about beating swords into ploughshares (Isa. 2:4, Joel 4:10), or when he uses Amos's image of God roaring like a lion (Amos 1:2, Joel 4:16). Like other literary prophets, he has his own vision of the Day of Adonai,[3] which includes the following prediction that deserves a very close reading: *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* (Joel 3:1-2).

This passage is paraphrased in the New Testament (Acts 2:17) and the words *I will pour out my spirit* have become well-known and commonly used among Christians, but less so among Jews. Most traditional Jewish commentators, notably Rashi, Radak, and Metzudot, relegate them to the messianic era and offer vague explanations as to what "pouring out My spirit" and *your sons and daughters will prophesy* mean. They base their view on the words "in those days," which they link to the words "the end of days," ergo, the messianic age.[4]

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The pouring of the spirit of God on all flesh and the subsequent prophetic movement that would emerge, a rather momentous event, have largely been ignored by Jewish sages and scholars.

Those, like Ibn Ezra, who place this prophecy in the ninth century BCE, remind us how, during that time, prophecy was a popular movement which gave rise to "schools of prophets" who roamed the countryside looking for inspiration with the aid of musical instruments, dance, and other physical means to induce a trance, in the hope of invoking the spirit of God and hearing God's message. This movement continued for some 200 years through the time of the prophets Elijah and his disciple Elisha; but as the age of the literary prophets dawned, with prophets like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, it seemed to have subsided or perhaps even ended altogether.

It is rather unlikely for a prophet to refer to the past while speaking in the future tense. It is quite possible that the era of the schools of prophets inspired Joel to utter those words, but he certainly goes a step further when he uses the phrase "all flesh," which is the Bible's way of saying "all mankind" (see Genesis 6:12). Joel is referring to a future time when the spirit of prophecy will rest on all people, including the least and the lowliest.

When is such a time to occur?

The Book of Joel is focused on a time called "the Day of Adonai." That day will presumably arrive when the scattered *children of Judah* (4:19) return to their land and *Judah will dwell forever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation* (4:20). These words strongly suggest that Joel is post-exilic, and should be dated no earlier than the fifth century BCE. Why, particularly at the end of the prophetic period, does Joel anticipate a time when the spirit of prophecy will be shared by all flesh?

It is not clear whether "the Day of Adonai" is to be understood as a specific point in historical time or has eschatological implications. Here we may raise again the corollary question as to the meaning of *I will pour out My spirit on all flesh*. Why does the prophet make a universalistic rather than a particularist statement about the future advent of prophecy? (Ibn Ezra maintains that the spirit of prophecy will only rest on those in the Land of Israel, contrary to the plain universal meaning of the verse.)

To answer these questions we need to examine the rabbinic view of prophecy.

THE RABBINIC VIEW OF PROPHECY

The classical rabbinic view is that prophecy came to an end after the Babylonian Exile.[5] In the Talmud we read: "Said Rabbi Johanan: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken away from the prophets and given to fools and little children" (TB *Bava Batra* 12b). This is a rather harsh statement, and it should be understood in the context of its time. R. Johanan lived around 200 CE, at a time when the books of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible had long been canonized.[6] Nothing could be added or removed. The words of the prophets which appear in the canon became sacrosanct. The holiest part of Scripture is the Torah, which contains the divine commandments. The second part comprises the Prophets, and the third the Writings. Together they form the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. A statement from the Torah carries more weight than one from the Prophets, and a statement from the Prophets carries more weight than one from the Writings. A similar process seems to take place in all the world religions. They all have their prophetic figures that cannot be surpassed or replaced. They all have their scriptures, which are set for all time. They all resist changing this set order, which is considered eternally valid.

Another reason for considering Hebrew prophecy an exclusive phenomenon of biblical times, which came to an end after the return from the Babylonian Exile, was the profound change that took place when the exiles returned under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah in the fifth century BCE. The role of the prophets during the time of the monarchy was to bring the people back to their God and to the teachings of the Torah. During the four centuries of the monarchy, the tribes of Israel were ridden with pagan practices and moral decay. The prophets were unable to change this state of affairs during their lifetimes; but they did bequeath a legacy that the people carried with them into exile, and when the exiles of Zion returned, they became a changed people. For the most part, they no longer practiced heathen rituals and committed themselves to living by the laws of the Torah.[7] The work of the prophets was fundamentally complete, and they were replaced by the Sages, the scholars and later the rabbis who were the interpreters and guardians of the Law. There was no longer a need for signs and wonders or for miracles, now that

the word of God had been set for all time and had become an object of ongoing explication and interpretation.

One could argue that the firm stand taken by rabbinical authorities like R. Johanan against the acceptance of new prophets or prophecies was a reaction to the new faith that began to emerge at that time among Jews, namely, Christianity. There were always some Jews of the post-biblical era who continued to believe that new prophets were appearing among them. The best known examples, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, were in any case Jews. However, this possible interpretation of R. Johanan's statement is not compelling. Christianity, at the time of the Hebrew Bible's canonization, was as yet a small movement which did not appear as threatening to Judaism as it would later on. Its so-called prophets were not the only ones challenging post-biblical Judaism. They were part of a phenomenon rooted mainly in folk religion that had to be dealt with in order for the rabbinical Oral Law, as represented by sages like Johanan, to become Judaism's established norm and authority. The Sages endeavored to build a strong "fence around the Law" to protect it from unwanted views and beliefs, such as new prophets.

Another reason for taking such a strong stand against the emergence of new prophets and new prophecies was the developing faith in messianism. During the era of the biblical prophets, Israel's messiah was viewed as a human king, one descended from the House of David. However, a shift occurred just prior to the time of R. Johanan: the old concept was now transformed into belief in a supernatural redeemer. R. Johanan's major rabbinical predecessor, Rabbi Akiva, was tempted to proclaim the military leader, Bar Kokhba, a messianic figure who would save his people. Bar Kokhba's uprising against the Romans only brought a short period of independence; its suppression by Emperor Hadrian resulted in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews, ending dreams of Jewish independence for the next eighteen centuries. What happened at this point in time was that the two concepts of prophet and messiah become interrelated. The messiah was now viewed as a prophetic figure, a messenger of God, who comes to redeem his people. After the Bar Kokhba rebellion (132-136 CE), which followed the earlier uprising against Rome in 70 CE that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple, the rabbis realized that the time for messianic and prophetic fervor was past. Such hopes must be consigned to the distant future in order for the remnants

of the people to survive.[8] Theirs was no longer the time for heroic action, but for turning inwardly and "giving to Caesar what is Caesar's" while "giving to God what is God's."

Jews to this day believe that while history has brought forth visionary personalities, sages possessing *ru'ah ha-kodesh* (divine inspiration), prophecy in the biblical sense of someone who brings God's message to mortals is confined to the pages of the Bible. Even so, Joel's words, taken in their broadest context, lead us beyond this assertion and demand some further thought. If we get closer to deciphering the words of the prophet, we may well gain an entirely new understanding of the nature of Hebrew prophecy.

WHAT EXACTLY DID JOEL HAVE IN MIND?

To put these verses in the proper context, we first need to reexamine the concept of prophecy in the biblical narrative. In checking every reference to prophets and prophecy throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, one learns that in biblical times the term "prophet" (*navi*) had several meanings and the prophet's divine authority was often questioned. Beginning with Abraham (Gen. 20:7), the title is bestowed on individuals who seem to have little to do with actual prophecy, such as Aaron (Ex. 7:1), as well as Miriam (15:20) and Deborah (Judg 4:4), who are both called "the prophetess." Not one of them is recorded as having prophesied in the recognized biblical sense. What we do have in the Bible is an overabundance of "false prophets" together with a few righteous seers who (to quote the *Haftarah* blessings) have become known as "prophets of truth and justice."

In Joel, as in Malachi, we have what amounts to a recapitulation of all biblical prophecy, with an anticipation of the future of the Jewish people and mankind. Perhaps the first clue to Joel's *I will pour out My spirit on all flesh* is found in the words of Moses: *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit upon them!* (Num. 11:29). Here we may have the first glimpse of what the task of the prophet is, namely, to imbue the people he is being sent to with the spirit of prophecy or, perhaps, to awaken that spirit lying dormant within them so that they may "walk in His way." We should bear in mind that Moses' words are a response to the young man who informs him that Eldad and Medad are prophesying, an act that seems to usurp Moses' authority. In reply, Moses declares that he only

wishes all of Israel might be imbued with the spirit of prophecy, implying that they would then be following the word of God. Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:45), explains that the first level of prophecy is *ru'ah Hashem*, the spirit of God. This is described as inspiration emanating from the Lord, without any precise message, but rather a general motivation to do good.

Here we may be able to comprehend what our prophet means when he says, *Then afterwards, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy*, etc. He is informing us that true prophecy is latent in every human being, Jew and non-Jew alike. This should not be taken to mean clairvoyance or even the ability to relate messages from God. It actually means the divine inspiration which leads one to an enlightened and uplifted state. Only when the prophetic spirit takes hold of the entire community, from the highest to the lowest, can the spirit of God prevail. One is reminded of the Latin saying, *Vox populi vox Dei* – "the voice of the people is the voice of God." Examples to this effect abound throughout history and even in modern times.[9] There are today social protests that have begun to effect profound changes in certain countries and which will probably have their impact on the rest of the world. This, indeed, may be the ultimate meaning of "the Day of Adonai," a time when the divine spirit is awakened among people, inducing them to take action and thus "perfect the world through the sovereignty of God" (*le-takken olam be-malkhut Shaddai*).

NOTES

1. See my article, "The Real 'Suffering Servant," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009).
2. See Ronald T. Hyman, "The Prophecy of Joel," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:4 (2011).
3. The concept of "The Day of Adonai" seems to vary in meaning with each different prophet. See Shimon Bakon, "The Day of the Lord," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38:3 (2010).
4. Ibn Ezra suggests a different view, according to which Joel refers to the time of the reign of the Judean King Jehoshaphat, in the ninth century, since there is reference to this king's name in the next chapter and "there were many prophets in his time."
5. However, non-rabbinic sources did not necessarily share this approach. See Rebecca Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine: The Evidence From Josephus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
6. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1991) p. 57. According to Schiffman, "Later rabbinic tradition asserts that prophecy ceased with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. In effect, this meant that books composed thereafter were not to be included in the prophetic canon, the second

of the Hebrew Bible's three parts. This view can be substantiated by the absence of later debate about the canonicity of the prophets, the lack of Greek words in the prophetic books, and the inclusion of Daniel and Chronicles in the Writings rather than in the Prophets. It must be the case, therefore, that the Prophets were canonized late in the Persian period, probably by the start of the fourth century."

7. The destruction of the impulse to perform idolatry is attributed to Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly in TB *Sanhedrin* 64a.

8. The Talmud consequently refers to Bar Kokhba as Bar Koziva, signifying "false messiah" (lit. "liar"). In his "Epistle to Yemen" (*Iggeret Teiman*), Maimonides deals with the highly ambiguous attitude of the Talmudic sages to messianism in consequence of the rebellion.

9. There seem to be "prophetic" moments in history when people are moved by something greater than themselves to do away with injustice and tyranny. I would cite the American and French Revolutions and also what some have called the Zionist Revolution, which led to the rebirth of the Jewish nation as "a free people in their own land." I would also add the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi in India, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Martin Luther King in the U.S., all of whom might be regarded as prophetic figures who have changed the world.