

Understanding the “Day of the Lord” in the Book of Joel

Kenneth J. Coughlan

August 1, 2021

Introduction

The Book of Joel, while brief, contains significant insights. It provides few details about its author (stating only “The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel” [Joel 1:1 (KJV)]) and even fewer about the location and date of its composition. Duane A. Garrett summarizes the range of scholarly opinion as extending from the early monarchy to the late postexilic period [Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 286]. However, one thing that is clear in the book is the emphasis Joel places upon the Day of the Lord.

Leslie C. Allen proposes that by the time Joel received his prophecy, his audience would have already had a general appreciation for what was entailed by the “Day of the Lord” [Allen, Leslie C. *The Book of Joel: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 36]. This understanding included not only judgment upon those who did not acknowledge God’s sovereignty (Jew and Gentile alike), but also blessing and vindication to those who were loyal to Him [Ibid.]. Garrett argues that the phrase does not need to refer to only one specific day but can be “at the same time one event and many events” [Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 306]. Any day that fits into this overall pattern may properly have been referred to as the “Day of the Lord” by one of God’s prophets.

Within his one book Joel uses the phrase both to refer to events that were contemporaneous with his writing as well as a future eschatological Day of the Lord. In regard to this latter use some authors, such as Henry Vosburgh, insist that Joel is referring to an extended period of time, not a concrete point [Vosburgh, Henry. “The Day of the Lord in the Book of Joel.” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 24, no. 69 (Autumn 2020): 163]. However,

nothing in Joel requires the conclusion that he is referring to an extended period and in fact several factors suggest otherwise.

Structure

Norman L. Geisler breaks down the Book of Joel into two main sections, each with two subheadings underneath [Geisler, Norman L., *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977), 236-37]. The first half of the book (up through 2:17) centers on “Desolation from the Lord,” with both a historical and prophetic aspect [Ibid., 236]. The historical portion (1:1–20) describes a plague of locusts that had swept through Israel bringing about mass devastation. Joel calls the people of Israel to repentance and pleads to God for deliverance (vv. 13-20). It is in this context that Joel first says that “the day of the Lord is at hand” [Joel 1:15 (KJV)]. In the prophetic segment, Joel uses the literal swarm of locusts as a picture of an army that will invade from the north in the very near future. Yet again, Joel describes this coming event as “the day of the Lord” [Joel 2:1 (KJV)].

Joel 2:18 brings a shift in focus to what Geisler calls the “Deliverance of the Lord,” including both a promise of a present blessing as well as one in the future [Geisler, Norman L., *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977), 237]. In regard to the present, God promises that the northern army will be driven out and the land will be restored. Verse 28, however, marks a significant shift to describing future events, which Geisler argues is apparent by Joel’s use of the word “afterwards” to introduce what follows [Ibid.]. In this section Joel looks forward to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the restoration of Judah, condemnation of Israel’s enemies, and the final battle resulting in God’s deliverance [Ibid.].

Here again, Joel uses the phrase “Day of the Lord,” this time in reference to an eschatological event in the future (2:31, 3:14).

In total, Joel refers to the Day of the Lord five times (1:15, 2:1, 11, 31, 3:14). The first refers to the locust plague, the next two to the invading northern army and the final two to an eschatological Day of the Lord in the future.

Exegesis

The first instance of “Day of the Lord” in Joel (1:15), in reference to the locust plague, begins to establish Joel’s understanding and use of the term. Specifically, J.J. Given explains that Joel’s use of the “Day of the Lord” in this context shows that it is a “day when [God] inflicts judgments on sinners” [Given, J.J. *The Book of Joel: The Pulpit Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 6]. The locusts were a judgment of God upon the people of Israel for their disobedience. Allen observes that even though swarming locusts were a common occurrence in Israel, Joel is clear that there is something unique about this particular swarm. This swarm came from God and was comparable to the deeds He brought about in former days [Allen, Leslie C. *The Book of Joel: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 60].

Garrett notes a possible discontinuity in Joel’s reference in that he refers to the Day as “near” even though the entire surrounding context is clearly speaking of a plague that had already come. [Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 328]. However, given that aforementioned context, Joel is clearly using the term to describe the locusts. Garrett proposes that the statement “‘the day of the Lord is near’ ... may have been a stock phrase among the prophets” [Ibid.].

When Joel shifts focus to the soon to be approaching army (2:1, 11), he continues to refer to the Day of the Lord. Karl Fredereich Keil and Franz Delitzsch observe that the Day of the Lord occurs “in each particular judgment: not, however, as fully manifested, but simply as being near or approaching, so far as its complete fulfilment is concerned” [Keil, Karl Fredereich and Franz Delitzsch. *Joel: Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Riverside, CA: The Ephesians Four Group, 2014), Joel 2:1, Kindle]. Just as the locust plague was indicative of the Day of the Lord as representing a judgment from God, so too will the northern invasion be a judgment from Him and therefore another Day of the Lord. However, none of these days fully capture the ultimate eschatological Day of the Lord that is to come and to which Joel will refer. Given believes this also provides an explanation for how Joel could at the same time state that the Day of the Lord has come while also saying that it is “at hand.” Each individual Day of the Lord is then present at the time of God’s particular judgment. Yet no one of these instances marks the complete fulfillment of the Day of the Lord, as that Day remains “at hand” [Given, J.J. *The Book of Joel: The Pulpit Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 18].

Some commentators, such as Keil and Delitzsch, dispute that Joel refers to an actual army and instead believe the entire opening half of his prophecy refers to the locust plague [Keil, Karl Fredereich and Franz Delitzsch. *Joel: Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Riverside, CA: The Ephesians Four Group, 2014), Introduction, Kindle]. However, they appear to be arguing for all or nothing, i.e., either the entire first half refers to locusts or it refers to an invading army. Garrett, in contrast, believes that while Joel begins by discussing an actual plague of locusts, his language and parallels found with other prophetic texts point to a shift to a human army beginning in 2:1 [Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*.

(Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 343]. Thus, even before delving into the eschatological use, Joel has already referred to two separate incidents as the Day of the Lord. Garrett goes on to argue that preoccupation with whether Joel had a human army in mind misses his point. “His real concern was not with locusts, or enemy soldiers, or even with the last judgment: *the real subject matter of the Book of Joel is the day of the Lord*” [Ibid., emphasis in original]. Joel wants his readers to understand that no one can withstand that Day, but at the same time God will use it to bring “new life and a new world into being” [Ibid.].

Starting in verse 28, Joel shifts focus again to a time in the future, indicated by his use of the term “afterward.” Joel begins by saying that God 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” [Joel 2:28 (KJV)]. Peter, in his sermon in Acts 2, directly quotes from this passage but changes the word “afterward” to “in the last days” [Acts 2:17 (KJV)]. Peter draws a direct parallel between Joel’s reference to the pouring out of the spirit and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In other words, the future time to which Joel referred had begun.

However, not all of the events recounted by Joel took place on Pentecost. Some have yet to come to pass. Thus, they could not all have been included in the eschatological Day of the Lord. For instance, 2:31 says that the “sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, *before* the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” [Joel 2:31 (KJV); emphasis added]. The Day of the Lord to which Joel refers in the latter portion of his book is the point in time at which Christ returns.

Henry Vosburgh does not agree. He argues that the Hebrew word for “day” can be either singular or plural. In fact, elsewhere in the book Joel uses the same word to clearly refer to a period of time that is longer than 24 hours [Vosburgh, Henry. “The Day of the Lord in the Book

of Joel.” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 24, no. 69 (Autumn 2020): 163]. For example, in 1:2 Joel mentions “your days” and “the days of your fathers” [Ibid.].

However, the mere fact that the word can be either singular or plural does not mean that it *must* be interpreted as plural. It is true that Joel prophesied many events that could not all happen at one time. As Garrett explains,

It would do little good for God to give the gift of the Spirit and the power to prophesy if on the very same day he brought the world to an end. The very fact that people would “dream dreams” implies some passage of time and not an instant or simultaneous fulfillment of the entire prophecy.

[Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 373]. However, Joel never states that all the events of his prophecy occur during the Day of the Lord. In fact, he explicitly states the opposite. As mentioned above, in 2:31 Joel states that the darkened sun and blood moon will occur “before” the Day of the Lord [Joel 2:31 (KJV)].

Further, Garrett states that our understanding of Joel’s prophecy should be illuminated by all Scripture, including the further revelation that comes with the New Testament. He argues that “the disciples, following the preaching of John the Baptist, expected the messianic era to be accompanied by two great events: the gift of the Spirit and a great day of judgment” [Garrett, Duane A. *Joel: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997), 372]. The gift of the Spirit, prophesied by Joel, occurred at Pentecost. Joel’s references to the subsequent Day of the Lord, however, coincide with the “great day of judgment.”

While the Day of the Lord is fearsome, it need not be so for those who are faithful to God. God does not only promise judgment on that Day, but also deliverance. Immediately after describing the darkened sun and the blood red moon that will precede the “terrible day of the Lord,” Joel goes on to convey God’s promise that “whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered” [Joel 2:31-32 (KJV)]. Luke 21:28 says “when these things begin to come to

pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.” [Luke 21:28 (KJV)]. Just as with the preceding instances of the Day of the Lord, even in the eschatological sense Joel continues to follow a pattern of a declaration of judgment, a call to repentance, and ultimately deliverance for those who belong to God.

Conclusion

Joel’s use of the phrase “the Day of the Lord” does not always refer to the same event. At the start of his book, he speaks of a plague of locusts. He then warns of an impending invasion by a foreign army. Finally, he looks to a future eschatological Day of the Lord. The earlier references are not complete fulfillments of all that the Day of the Lord entails. Rather, they refer to present realities while also pointing to the future day of Christ’s return. These Days have much in common. They involve God’s judgment, a call to repentance as well as God’s deliverance of His people.

In regard to the eschatological Day of the Lord, commentators disagree as to whether it is an individual day or an extended period of time. While Joel certainly describes events that do not all occur in a single day, he also never claims that all these prophesied events are part of the Day of the Lord. Thus, the mere fact that he narrates events that occur over an extended period of time does not support the conclusion that the Day of the Lord must therefore extend over a period of time. Rather, reading Joel’s prophecy in light of God’s revelation elsewhere in Scripture, particularly the additional light provided in the New Testament, demonstrates that the Day of the Lord refers to an individual event, the return of Christ prior to His Millennial kingdom.

Bibliography

- Allen, Leslie C. *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, edited by R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976.
- Garrett, Duane A. *Joel*. The New American Commentary, edited by E. Ray Clendenen. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1997.
- Geisler, Norman L. *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1977.
- Given, J.J. *The Book of Joel*. The Pulpit Commentary, edited by H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950.
- Keil, Karl Fredereich and Franz Delitzsch. *Joel*. Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament. Riverside, CA: The Ephesians Four Group, 2014. Kindle.
- Vosburgh, Henry. "The Day of the Lord in the Book of Joel." *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 24, no. 69 (Autumn 2020): 161-78.