

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

Michael J. Svigel

Go Deeper Excursus 22 The Old Testament and the Day of the Lord

In the following discussion, I assume the genuineness of the prophetic oracles, visions, and dreams. Thus, I am open to the possibility that the authors of these texts may not have fully understood the prophecies they recorded or that the prophetic words themselves could play double (or even triple) duty in predicting both near and far fulfillments. This, admittedly, is a theological reading of these texts. Therefore, I am not overly concerned with questions of intertextuality, who knew whose writings when, and how authors may have adopted or adapted previous texts for their own purposes. Not that such considerations are entirely absent from the following discussion; I do believe in the progress of revelation that prophecies were originally revealed to particular people at particular times with particular purposes and that the divine author intended to communicate *something* in a cultural-linguistic setting with its own familiar images and tropes.

In this light, I believe God himself intended to build meaning throughout the growing canon, one concept upon another, toward a fuller, broader, and deeper understanding. Thus, completely “flat” readings of these texts in which no consideration is given to the progress of revelation or to the centrality of key passages (the *sedes doctrinae*) should be avoided. Nevertheless, because the divine revealer of these prophecies knows the end from the beginning and speaks only truth, we must never read these texts in ways that limit the meaning, interpretations, or understandings merely to what an author or audience would have or could have known, nor do we shy away from the possibility that later revelations may genuinely illuminate the actual intended meaning of previous revelations even when no conscious literary dependence can be demonstrated.

Methodologically, then, I begin with passages for which internal indicators of dating particular prophecies are available, using as the core passages that directly address the Day of the Lord (יוֹם הַיְהוָה) as such, starting with the discernably earliest passages and continuing with those that can be dated subsequently in order. Then I will consider additional information provided by Day of the Lord passages whose dating are less evident. From here, we may summarize the basic language and imagery related to the Day of the Lord concept, arguing that the “Day” had quickly become a

technical term among the prophets of ancient Israel. Using the unique language, phraseology, and imagery drawn from these key passages, I will then expand my sources beyond the specific Day of the Lord passages to those which communicate obviously supplementary or complementary concepts.

With these basic presuppositional and methodological considerations in place, I will begin by examining the Day of the Lord passage in Amos—the earliest of the Old Testament Prophets who prophesied “in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel” (Amos 1:1; cf. 7:10). Uzziah reigned from 767–740 BC, while Jeroboam II reigned from 781–753 BC. If the first verse is intended to limit the time of the prophesying to the period during which these two reigns overlapped, we have a rough fifteen-year window between 767–753 BC.

Following our examination of Amos, we move on to Isaiah, who prophesied “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isa 1:1), that is, a potential span between 767–686 BC. However, most regard the commencement of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry—his “commissioning”—to have occurred “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1). If this is the case, then his prophetic ministry began at least by the year 740 BC, extending to the death of Sennacherib (681 BC) (Isa 37:38). It seems reasonable, then, to date the height of Isaiah’s prophesying and writing during a sixty-year period between about 740 and 680 BC.

Next, Zephaniah prophesied “in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah” (1:1), that is, in a fairly narrow window of about thirty years between 640–609 BC, in any case subsequent to the prophecies of Amos and Isaiah.

The imagery of the Day of the Lord in Jeremiah and Lamentations gives us insight into the state of the technical concept in the seventh-to-sixth centuries BC. Following this, Ezekiel’s prophecies are frequently dated relative to the time that had elapsed after the exile of Jehoiachin (597 BC). Thus, the earliest vision is dated “the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin,” that is, 593 BC. The particular passages themselves may sometimes be precisely dated, but the entire book seems to have been completed during the period between 593 and 573 BC—twenty years.

Obadiah’s prophecy is variously dated, but if the reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in verse 11 is a genuine past event (and not a prophecy expressed in the past tense), then the earliest date would be after 586 BC. The mention of the fall of Edom as not yet having been accomplished (verse 1) suggests that the book was written prior to 553. Thus, we will operate from an assumption of a range between 586 and 553 BC, or roughly 33 years.

Malachi has no clear date indicators, but the mention of conditions that seem to necessitate a functioning temple (Mal 1:10; 3:1, 8) suggests a date after its reconstruction during the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. Thus, a date roughly around 500–450 BC seems reasonable for our purposes.

The book of Joel, quite rich in Day of the Lord language and imagery, is difficult to date with any degree of confidence. However, it seems that a date after the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions and the resultant scattering of the tribes throughout the world is most likely (see Joel 3:2–3), though this could be looking forward to the reversal of a diaspora that had not yet come to pass. We will place our consideration of Joel’s Day of the Lord passages last, assuming a context

similar to that of Malachi, between about 550–400 BC, though open to the possibility of an earlier or later date. The problem is, it is possible Joel stands as a background even to the language of Amos; or that it stands far in the foreground of all these other writings, placing a capstone on their development of the Day of the Lord imagery. Placing it last in our examination should do little harm if we consider the various possible intertextual relationships these other books could have with Joel.

The Day of the Lord in Amos (c. 767–753)

The prophecy of Amos comes about 30–50 years before the Assyrian invasion of Israel and its fall in 722 BC during the latter part of the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 767–653 BC). In fact, in a brief narrative section, Amaziah the priest of Bethel reported to Jeroboam, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear his words” (Amos 7:10). Amaziah summed up the basic message of Amos as “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land” (7:11). Amos responded that God had called him to “prophesy to my people Israel” (7:15).

This scope of the prophecy and its general content as a warning of judgment against Israel agrees with the repeated statements throughout Amos limiting the focus of the prophecies and visions on Israel. The book describes itself as “The words of Amos...which he saw concerning Israel” (1:1). Yet the prophet first declares judgment against seven other kingdoms before settling on Israel: Damascus (1:3–5), Gaza (1:6–8), Tyre (1:9–10), Edom (1:11–12), the Ammonites (1:13–15), Moab (2:1–3), and Judah (2:4–5). For each of these, their wickedness will be punished when God sends fire upon them (1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5).

In Amos 2:6, the focus shifts to Israel, and there it remains. In response to their abiding wickedness and godlessness, God vows to level punishment (2:6–16). Chapter 3 begins, “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt” (3:1; cf. 2:10). God will punish Israel for all their iniquities (3:2). The certainty of disaster is emphasized by a series of rhetorical questions, the answers to which are only “yes,” culminating with, “Does disaster (רעה) come to a city, unless the Lord has done it?” This warning of coming judgment, however, is revealed through God’s prophets as a final warning, like a “trumpet blown in a city” (3:6, 7–8). God declares through Amos that an adversary (the Assyrians) will “surround the land and bring down your defenses from you and your strongholds shall be plundered” (3:11), and the great majority will be devoured by the army (3:12). God then declares, “On the day (ביום) I punish Israel for his transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel” (3:14). Though it is God who is punishing, he does so by means of the invading Assyrian army.

Because they exploit the poor and needy, “the days are coming (ימים באים)” upon Israel in which they are dragged into exile (4:2–3). Further, their sham worship at Bethel and Gilgal are

condemned, including their illicit sacrifices, tithes, and thanksgivings (4:4-5). In this false worship, they “multiply transgressions” (4:4). God then describes five distinct judgments he sent to Israel as warnings for the climactic coming judgment on the horizon: famine (4:6), drought (4:7-8), locusts (4:9), pestilence (4:10), and fire (4:11). Yet even in light of these warnings, they did not return to God (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11). On the basis of their wickedness and failure to respond in repentance to his warnings, Amos writes, “Therefore thus I will do to you O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (4:12). In this theophanic “coming,” God will “meet” Israel in judgment.

Chapter 5 portrays a disastrous situation for the house of Israel that has fallen, is forsaken, and is left with merely a tenth remaining (5:1-3). Yet even in the midst of this, God calls to them, “Seek me and live” (5:4-5). If they do not seek him, God will “break out like fire in the house of Joseph” (5:6)—language similar to the judgments of fire against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and Judah in chapters 1 and 2. God identifies himself as the one who “turns deep darkness (צלמות) into the morning and darkens (ךחך) the day into night” (5:8), he “makes destruction (ךש) flash forth against the strong, so that destruction (ךש) comes upon the fortress” (5:9). The oppressors of truth-tellers and the poor will themselves lose the lavish lifestyles they had established (5:10-12).

Complementing his exhortation to “seek the Lord and live” (Amos 5:4, 6), the prophet pronounces, “Seek good, and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said” (5:14). The hope of the people is that God would visit the nation in blessing. If they would “hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate,” then “the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (5:15). Though Israel had been dealt several preliminary blows of judgment, an opportunity for repentance and blessing from the presence of God is still available to them. Yet the hope of repentance and a visitation from Yahweh in blessing is dashed with the prophecy in verses 16-17. He will, in fact, be with them, but not in blessing: “In all the squares there shall be wailing, and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’ They shall call the farmers to mourning and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation, and in all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst.” On the heels of this stern warning and reversal of expectations at the coming of the Lord, we arrive at the central Day of the Lord passage in Amos: “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord?” (Amos 5:18).

Commentators have debated who was desiring the Day of the Lord and had a misunderstanding of its character. It seems the most likely explanation given the immediately preceding context is that many believed the days of trial were over (4:6-13), the worst had passed, and God would “be with” Israel and “be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (5:14-15). That is, the earnest desire and expectation was a theophanic visitation of God to mediate restoration and blessings to the nation. However, Amos makes it clear that though a visitation by Yahweh (a Day of the Lord) would occur, it would not be for blessing but for judgment. Here we see the startling characteristics

of this יום יהוה (ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου): “It is darkness (רשח, σκοτός), not light (אור, φῶς)” (5:18).¹ This repeats the earlier warning of a theophany in which Israel is told to “prepare to meet your God” (4:12), noting that the God of hosts is the one who “makes the morning darkness (עיפה)” (4:13) and later, he “darkens (רשח, συσκοτάζω) the day into night” (5:8). Thus, the coming Day of the Lord would be “darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it” (5:20). For those caught by the Day of the Lord, there would be no escape (5:19). Later God will swear, “And on that day (ביום ההוא)...I will make the sun go down at noon and darken (רשח) the earth in broad daylight” (8:9). This establishes a clear conceptual connection between the phrase יום יהוה (day of the Lord) and יום ההוא (that Day), when other Day of the Lord terms and images are present.

The reason for this darkness of judgment is given in 5:21–22—“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them” (5:21–22). This is a similar rebuke of their sham worship as in 4:4–5, repeated again in 8:10 as the basis for judgment on “that day” (יום ההוא): “I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation.” This further suggests “that day” is a reference to the Day of the Lord concept. Instead of the hypocritical singing and music, God desires them to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream” (5:24). Because of their spiritual rebellion and idolatry, their judgment was sure: “I will send you into exile beyond Damascus” (5:25).

The Day of the Lord prophecy continues into chapter six, with another “woe”—the first “woe” appearing against those who desire the Day of the Lord (5:18). In this second woe, God castigates “those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel comes” (6:1). These great ones of Judah in the south (Zion) as well as of Israel in the north are victims of a false sense of security. They forget the cities around them that had already fallen to the Assyrians (6:2). In their minds, they had “put far away the day of disaster (יום רע, ἡμέραν κακήν)” (6:3).

The third “woe”—connecting this entire passage with the first mention of the Day of the Lord (5:18)—begins in verse 4 against “those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sounds of the harp...who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the infest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph” (6:4–6). These people living in absolute luxury, though, will be “the first of those who go into exile” (6:7). The city would be delivered up and death and destruction would ensue (6:8–10). God himself decrees destruction against the great houses of Israel (6:11) because of their injustice and pride (6:12–13), which will manifest itself through the

¹ In many instances, I will provide both the original Hebrew as well as the Septuagint (LXX) version of these texts because ultimately the purpose of this lengthy excursus is to provide the OT background for the language and imagery that will be adopted in the NT, the writers of which depend almost entirely on the LXX version.

invasion of the Assyrians: “For behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel...and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of the Arabah” (6:14).

In this primary Day of the Lord lamentation against Israel, which extends from 5:1–6:14, we see terms and images repeated or emphasized that seem to constitute the concept of the Day of the Lord in the mind of the prophet. We can make the following observations regarding the Day of the Lord:

- It is a manifestation of God in judgment like fire (Amos 5:6, 17).
- It is characterized by darkness, not light (5:8, 18, 20).
- Its destruction is certain and inescapable (5:19).
- It comes as a result of religious unfaithfulness and social injustice (5:7, 10–11, 14–15; 21–24).
- It comes upon rulers who are at ease, believing they are untouchable (5:11; 6:1–6).
- It results in disaster to the city and its people by an invading nation (5:2–3; 6:3, 8–14).
- It results in exile from the land of Israel (5:5, 27; 6:7).

The Day of the Lord in Isaiah (c. 740–680)

Unlike the preceding treatment of Amos, it is not necessary for us to present a detailed survey of Isaiah’s entire sixty-six chapters. The key Day of the Lord passage occurs in Isaiah 13, and after examining this central text to discover how the phrase is used, we can then trace a few important terms, images, and ideas related to the Day of the Lord in Isaiah to establish a broader understanding of the concept.

Among non-confessional critical scholars, Isaiah 13 is understood as part of the earliest layers of the text, “proto-Isaiah” (chapters 1–39), from the seventh century.² It is not my intention to enter into pros and cons of the unity of Isaiah, the dating of proto-Isaiah (1–39), deuterio-Isaiah (40–55), and trito-Isaiah (56–66), or whether the three distinct sections were written by a single author, Isaiah, contemporary members of his prophetic circle, or a “school” of Isaianic followers over the course of centuries.³ However, it is interesting to note that the Day of the Lord passage in Isaiah 13 comes from a section of the book that serves as its thematic foundation.

In contrast to Amos’s declaration of the Day of the Lord oracle against Israel ultimately realized in the invasion by Assyria in 722 BC, Isaiah’s seventh-century oracle is “concerning Babylon” (Isa

² See J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 32.

³ Suffice it to say I approach Isaiah as a confessional Christian and hold to its inspired and canonical unity. Though I am not entirely opposed to theories of a community of writers within an “Isaianic group” with Isaiah at the center, I see no compelling reason to reject the view that the book in its entirety was written by the seventh century BC. See John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 113

13:1). Conveniently, chapter 13 begins a distinct oracle or revelation within which the Day of the Lord language may be discretely treated before tracing similar themes through Isaiah.

The prophetic message begins by God beckoning the enemies of Babylon to bring about their judgment: “I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger (ἦρα, θυμός)” (Isa 13:3). The result is a gathering of a great multitude, an “uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle” (13:4). Thus, the impending judgment against Babylon comes by means of human armies “from a distant land, from the end of the heavens” (13:5). Because they are but a means of carrying out God’s will to judge Babylon, mustered by the Lord of hosts for battle (13:4), these foreign invaders are called “the weapons of his indignation (ἄεζ), to destroy (בלח, καταφθείρω) the whole land” (13:5).

From this pronouncement of judgment against Babylon by means of invading armies executing God’s anger and indignation (ἦρα and ἄεζ), Isaiah’s oracle launches into the Day of the Lord description: “Wail, for the day of the Lord (יום יהוה, ἡμέρα Κυρίου) is near; as destruction (ἄψ, συντριβή) from the Almighty it will come!” (Isa 13:6). Already in this opening line we see language recalling themes from Amos’s Day of the Lord prophecy in Amos 5, where God identified himself as the one who “darkens the day into night” (5:8) and “makes destruction (ἄψ) flash forth against the strong, so that destruction (ἄψ) comes upon the fortress” (5:9).

Isaiah describes the human response to the Day of the Lord: “Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed: pangs and agony (צירים וחבליים, ὠδίνες) will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor (יחילון, τικτούσης). They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame” (Isa 13:7–8). Already we begin to hear language and imagery that will be picked up in later prophets as well as New Testament authors in connection with Day of the Lord discourse (cf. 1 Thess 5:3—“The day of the Lord [ἡμέρα κυρίου] will come like a thief in the night...then sudden destruction (ἄεθρος) will come upon them as labor pains (ὠδίν) come upon a pregnant woman”; Matt 24:8—“All these are but the beginning of the birth pains [ὠδίνων]”).

Isaiah continues: “Behold, the day of the Lord (יום יהוה, ἡμέρα Κυρίου) comes, cruel, with wrath (עברה, θυμοῦ) and fierce anger (ἦρα ὀρον, ὀργῆς), to make the land a desolation and to destroy (ישמיד, ἀπολέσαι) its sinners from it” (Isa 13:9). Isaiah then draws on “darkness” imagery, as seen in Amos 5:8, 18, 20—“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark (ἄψח, σκοτισθήσεται) at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (Isa 13:10).

With this Day of the Lord, the wicked of the world in all their pride and arrogance will be punished to such an extent that survivors will be “more rare than fine gold” (13:11–12). God will cause the skies and earth to quake “at the wrath of the Lord (בעברת יהוה, θυμὸν ὀργῆς Κυρίου) of hosts in the day of his fierce anger (ביום חרון אפו, τῆ ἡμέρα ἣ ἄν ἀπέλθῃ ὁ θυμὸς αὐτοῦ)” (13:13).

Though each will try to escape “to his own land” (13:14), they will be killed by the sword and suffer great calamities associated with warfare (13:15–16).

That this wrath and anger of the Day of the Lord is mediated through earthly means is clear in verse 17: “I am stirring up the Medes against them [Babylon], who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold” (13:17). They cannot be bribed or satiated. Instead, their barbarity will lead to the death of young men, women, and children (13:18). The result will be the destruction of the once-glorious Babylon to the extent that it will not be inhabited by anything other than wild animals (13:19–22).

In Isaiah’s Day of the Lord oracle against Babylon, which extends from 13:1–22, we see several things in common with his forerunner (Amos 5:1–6:14) as well as several additional complementary terms and images. We can make the following observations regarding the Day of the Lord in Isaiah:

- It is characterized by God executing his judgment through the means of the armies of surrounding nations (13:3–5).
- It is characterized by mournful destruction from God as punishment against sinners (13:6, 9, 11, 20–22).
- It is comparable to the pains of a woman in labor (13:8).
- It will be marked by darkness of the sun and moon (13:10).
- It comes as a result of pride and arrogance (13:11, 19).
- Both heaven and earth will tremble and quake (13:13).
- Suffering and death of the people will be great (13:12, 14–16, 18).

An Oracle concerning Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 2–4)

With this explicit **יום יהוה** passage as the standard, we can find a handful of other passages in Isaiah that do not use the specific phrase “Day of the Lord,” but they do use similar language and imagery, supplementing our central passage with additional details. One of these is Isaiah 2:6–22, a warning against Jacob for their religious infidelity and faithlessness to God, following after idols and riches (2:6–9). In response to the terrifying coming of the Lord, they are instructed to “enter into the rock and hide in the dust form before the terror (**דַּחַד, φόβου**) of the Lord, and from the splendor of his majesty” (2:10). As the proud and haughty are brought low by judgment, “the Lord alone will be exalted in that day (**בְּיוֹם הַהוּא, ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ**)” (2:11).

This emphasis on “that day” is underscored with similar definite “Day” language in the oracle of Isaiah 2–4 (see 2:12; 2:17; 2:20; 3:18; and 4:2).⁴ The “Lord...has a day” (**יום ליהוה**) in which he

⁴ That a distinct oracle extends from 2:1 to 4:6 is a fairly well established, long-standing consensus. Motyer notes, “The easiest explanation of this unexpected ‘heading’ [in 2:1] is that what we call chapters 2–4 once ‘circulated’ as a

will bring low the proud and lofty (Isa 2:12), “and the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day” (2:17). Both the language and imagery of this “day” correspond with that of the Day of the Lord passage proper in chapter 13, when God puts an end to the pomp and arrogance of Babylon (13:11). Though the objects of God’s mediated theophanic visitation are different—Judah and Jerusalem in 2:1–4:6 and Babylon in 13:1–22—the language and imagery of God’s orchestrated actions of judgment are similar.⁵ In response to “the terror of the Lord (פחד יהוה)” people “enter the caves of the rocks (LXX σπήλαια καὶ τὰς σχισμὰς τῶν πετρῶν) and the holes of the ground (LXX: τὰς τρώγλας τῆς γῆς)” (Isa 2:19).⁶ “In that day (ביום ההוא)” the idolatry of all people will cease as they enter the caves to escape the terror of the Lord (2:21). This very close repetition of 2:18–19 in 2:20–21 suggests that the יום indicated by phrases like “in that day” (ביום ההוא) in 2:11 and 2:20 and “the Lord...has a day (יום ליהוה) in 2:12 is a definite referent—“a Day,” not just “a day.” That is, even apart from the specific Day of the Lord (יום יהוה) terminology, the term “Day” (יום) in the context of earthly judgment and formulaic words and images is well on its way to becoming a technical concept.

Though this “Day” is figuratively portrayed as a theophanic event in which God’s wrath and judgment as well as his splendor and majesty are manifested to humanity, the continuation of the oracle in chapter 3 demonstrates that this is a mediated theophanic visitation. God is portrayed as the primary subject of the judgment, but as the subject he utilizes various earthly agents to carry out his will. In short, this is not God himself taking on a glorious form, stepping out of heaven, so to speak, and personally waging a heavenly war against the wicked. This is God himself orchestrating the events of earthly history in such a way that his will is accomplished, his just judgment manifested, and his glory revealed. Isaiah 3 begins, “For behold, the Lord God of hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and supply”—not only material goods necessary for living, but leadership necessary for addressing the crisis (Isa 3:1–7). This anarchy

separate ‘book’ or even as a ‘wall-newspaper’ (Motyer, *Isaiah*, 58). See Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 113; George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah, I–XXXIX*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner’s, 1912), 40–41.

⁵ The phrase “mediated theophanic visitation” refers to language and imagery in prophetic literature which portrays God arriving on the scene or acting in history on a glorious manifestation of power, which, when read carefully, is dramatic figurative language for God’s providential use of means to accomplish his will. A key passage to understand how this mediated theophanic visitation functions in prophetic literature is Isa 19:1–15. There the oracle begins with a dramatic theophany: “Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptian will melt within them” (19:1). However, this figure of God’s theophanic visitation is interpreted as portraying mediated acts of God’s judgment through civil war (19:2), international conflict (19:2), the rise of a harsh dictator (19:3–4), drought and famine (19:5–9), economic devastation (19:10), political corruption (19:11–15).

⁶ The same language and imagery will be picked in the Revelation of John, where the people of the earth “hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains (εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὄρεων)” because the day of the wrath (ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς) of God and the Lamb had come upon them (Rev 6:16–17). This demonstrates that at least by the late first century much of this language and imagery of the Day of the Lord and “Day of wrath” had developed into a technical eschatological concept. The question is how early these terms and images became stereotyped into a stable Day of the Lord theme.

comes as a result of the fall of Jerusalem and Judah, reducing them to a “heap of ruins” (Isa 3:6, 8). Through their open rebellion against God, they brought evil upon themselves (3:9); and though it will be will for the righteous, who will reap the fruit of their righteousness, the wicked will receive what they deserve (3:10–11). All this economic, political, and social devastation as a result of religious and moral apostasy is described as the Lord taking a stand to judge the people: “The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people” (Isa 3:13–15). The wanton luxury and materialism of the people will be replaced with destruction (3:16–26) characterized by rottenness, captivity, baldness, sackcloth, branding, sword, battle, lamentation, mourning, and emptiness (3:24–26).

Yet this particular “Day” oracle, extending from Isaiah 2:1–4:6, concludes not with wrath, but with blessing. The phrase “in that day” (ביום ההוא) signals God’s mediated theophanic visitation, as it does throughout the oracle, but this time it points to his actions in restoring the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel under “the branch of the Lord” in beauty and glory (Isa 4:2). This brief conclusion more fully explicates what had been only hinted at in 3:10—“Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds.” Now, in 4:2, “the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.” The remnant of Israel in Jerusalem will be holy after “the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning (ברוח) (משפט וברוח בער)” (Isa 4:4). Though the scene has decisively shifted from judgment and wrath to restoration and blessing, the preceding judgment of the Day is not far from sight. Yet this judgment is cast as God’s means of purification. This gives way to imagery of the literal theophany of the exodus: “a loud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night” (4:5). Whether this is to be understood as a literal divine theophany or some means established by God to provide protection from the elements is unclear (4:6); but the imagery of restoration, blessing, protection, and provision is obvious. Though we passed over it at the beginning, this glorious ending mirrors the introduction of the oracle, so restoration and blessing of Judah and Jerusalem form bookends. In Isaiah 2:2–5, during what the prophet calls “the latter days” (באחרית הימים, ἐν ταῖς ἔσχαταις ἡμέραις), the Lord will exalt Jerusalem above all the nations, people will come to the city for instruction in God’s ways, and Zion’s influence over the earth will be preeminent (2:2–3). God’s righteous judgment among the nations will result in unparalleled peace and security, described by the classic Isaianic imagery—“They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (2:4). This restoration, of course, is contingent upon—or at least coterminous with—the house of Jacob walking in the light of the Lord (2:5). This earthy restoration and glorification of Jerusalem and Judah under the theocratic rule of God, however, is only accomplished after God cleanses and purifies the nation through judgment and fire (4:4).

It seems that in the oracle of Isaiah 4–6 the references to the “Day” is nearing a technical concept. It does not refer to a single twenty-four-hour day but to a period during which God mediates his theophanic visitation of judgment primarily through warfare, in this specific case

through the enemies of Judah and Jerusalem. Added to the typical language of sword, battle, and fire, this oracle refers to people hiding themselves in caves of the earth to avoid judgment (2:10, 19, 21–22), shortage of food, water, and clothing (3:1, 7), and the promise of restoration, protection, and prosperity to the righteous remnant of God’s people—and through them a blessing to all the nations (2:2–5; 3:10; 4:2–6). However, those blessings of the “latter days” seem to be the result of the necessary period of purifying judgment and wrath contained in the technical concept of “the Day.”

An Oracle concerning Egypt (Isaiah 19:1–25)

Though missing the exact term “Day of the Lord,” the oracle against Egypt includes a similar pattern of God’s mediated theophanic visitation in judgment (19:1–15) followed by an unexpected and unprecedented restoration and blessing of Egypt along with Assyria and Israel (19:16–25). In the second half related to the conversion of a remnant of Egyptians to the God of Israel, the restoration and blessing are repeatedly said to take place “in that day” (ביום ההוא) (19:16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24). At first the “in that day” language refers to the fear the Egyptians experience because of the devastating judgments inflicted upon them. In language depicting a theophanic visitation, the prophet writes, “Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptian will melt within them” (19:1). This dramatic image of God’s theophanic visitation is interpreted as mediated acts of judgment which unfold in history as civil war—“I will stir Egyptians against Egyptians” (19:2), international conflict—“city against city, kingdom against kingdom” (19:2), the rise of a harsh dictator—“I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master and a fierce king will rule over them” (19:3–4), drought and famine—“And the waters of the sea will be dried up....The branches of Egypt’s Nile will diminish and dry up...All that is sown by the Nile will be parched....Fishermen will mourn and lament...Workers in combed flax will be in despair” (19:5–9), economic devastation—“All who work for pay will be grieved” (19:10), and political corruption—“Princes of Zoan are utterly foolish....Those who are the cornerstones of her tribes have made Egypt stagger....The Lord has mingled within her a spirit of confusion” (19:11–15).

As a result of this mediated judgment described in terms of a theophany, Egyptians will fear the Lord and the land of Judah (19:16–17). Several of the cities in Egypt will convert to the Lord of hosts (19:18). They will establish worship of the Lord in Egypt, and God will send them a deliverer and “the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day” (19:19–22). Finally, Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will be united under the Lord and all will be God’s people (19:23–25). These latter developments of redemption are tagged with the phrase “in that day.” In this case, although the epic “Day” thus described does not directly refer to the mediated judgments themselves but rather the resulting redemption, it still refers to a theophanic visitation directly connected to God’s visiting the earth in mediated judgment.

An Oracle concerning the Valley of Vision (Isaiah 22:1–14)

It is difficult to place the oracle in verses 1–14 in a particular historical setting, though many see it as referring to the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib in 701 BC.⁷ However, for our purposes in surveying language and imagery contributing to the growing Day of the Lord concept, it is not necessary to determine whether this passage refers to a past event, an imminent event, or a far future event.

In any case, the oracle begins by Isaiah rebuking the rejoicing and celebrating of the people of Jerusalem (Isa 22:1–4). They seem to be rejoicing over their immediate good fortune in having been delivered from a siege, but they overlook the fact that their dead—though not slain in battle—are still dead! They also fail to reckon with the fact that their leaders have abandoned them (22:3). Isaiah, though, who can see the future judgments against Jerusalem on the horizon, cannot help but “weep bitter tears” for “the destruction of the daughter of my people” (22:4).

Thus begins the ominous oracle with the phrase “For the Lord God of hosts has a day of tumult and trampling and confusion (יהוה) (כי יום מהומה ומבוסה ומבוכה לאדני יהוה)” (Isa 22:5). Whether this “day” refers to the crisis from which the city had just emerged or to a future crisis—or perhaps to both as the former serves as a type of the latter and the latter as an intensification of the former—is not vital here. It is sufficient to see the “day for the Lord YHWH” (יום...לאדני יהוה) is characterized by certain elements. We see destruction at the invasion of archers, chariots, cavalry, and infantry (22:5–8). In “that day” (ביום ההוא) Jerusalem focused on its physical fortifications against the siege rather than looking to God for protection (22:8–11); instead of repentance in mourning with sackcloth, they feasted with joy (22:12–13). For this sin the Lord would pay them back (22:14).

This passage is not a direct eschatological Day of the Lord warning, but a reflection on a missed opportunity for proper repentance when the enemies of Judah laid siege to Jerusalem. Even the terms “in that day” seem to be looking to the past—probably the siege during the days of Hezekiah. Yet this past experience in which the Lord “has a day” in which God providentially sends an invading army to carry out his will underscores an important facet of the Day of the Lord concept. God’s purpose in bringing the Day of the Lord is to stir his people to genuine repentance. Thus, any threat of a Day of the Lord could be avoided by turning from sin.

Minor References to the “Day” and Its Imagery in Isaiah

The time of eschatological judgment and restoration in Isaiah 24:1–25 is described with “day” language. God’s judgment of desolation puts an end to merry-making and mirth (24:1–13); inescapable judgment falls upon the sinners (24:17–20). And “on that day the Lord will punish the

⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 417.

host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth” (24:21). This is the first time the “Day” language extends beyond the earthly rulers to those in heaven, which seems to point to an ultimate eschatological judgment. It seems proper to connect this to the Day of the Lord concept because of the typical language of the darkness of judgment in verse 23: “Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed.”

“That day” language is also used in reference to the time of the judgment of the serpent, Leviathan and the dragon (27:1–2), yet this very brief mention of judgment and warfare by God’s great sword quickly gives way to “in that day” language referring to the glorious restoration of Jacob and Israel (27:2–6) and the gathering of his people from the nations back to Jerusalem (27:12–13). Here, “in that day” may be used more in the sense of “at that time,” though the eschatological overtones of the term are certainly present.

“Day” language is also used in reference to the time of vengeance against the nations (Isa 34:1–35:10). There “the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter” (34:3). This is standard Day of the Lord imagery. In fact, ultimate, eschatological language is used in connection with “Day” terminology: “For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion” (34:8). The destruction of the earth, however, gives way to the return of God’s people and their restoration (35:1–3). In fact, God’s faithful people should be encouraged by his coming in judgment: “Your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you” (35:4), with the result of glorious restoration of the nation (35:5–10).

Day of the Lord passages seem to have been only prominent in the first major section of Isaiah (chapters 1–39). The second section (40–55) is basically devoid of sustained treatments on coming judgment. The final section (56–66) does have a few brief references to the “day,” such as the “day of vengeance” (63:1–6), during which both vengeance and redemption occur (63:4). The image of labor pains returns in 66:7–8, followed by a brief and vivid description of the Lord coming in fire in fury and judgment (66:15–16). In 66:14–16, the final pronouncement of judgment in Isaiah, makes important verbal and visual connections with other common Day of the Lord language and imagery without using the actual term “Day”—The Lord “shall show his indignation against his enemies. For behold, the Lord will come in fire (יהוה באש יבוא, κύριος ὡς πῦρ ἦξει), and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury (בַּחֲמָה אָפוּ, ἐν θυμῷ ἐκδίκασιν αὐτοῦ) and his rebuke with flames of fire (בַּלְהֲבֵי־אֵשׁ, ἐν φλογὶ πυρός). For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many” (Isa 66:14–16).

The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah (c. 640–609)

The revelatory “word of the Lord” came to Zephaniah during the days of “Josiah...king of Judah” (Zeph 1:1), that is, sometime during the span of 640–609 BC. Perhaps a “median” year of about

625 BC is reasonable for our purposes.⁸ So, the Day of the Lord language and imagery of Zephaniah follow that of Isaiah by about fifty years or so. Its language, vivid and rich, employs both established Day of the Lord terminology while adding a few new thoughts. In fact, Greg King has argued persuasively for parallels with the eighth-century prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah that are “numerous and sometimes striking.”⁹ He thus concludes, “In light of these extensive parallels, the question as to whether the message of Zephaniah is largely an echo or a reformulation of the messages of earlier prophetic books must be answered in the affirmative.”¹⁰

The *יום יהוה* phrase itself appears three times in chapter 1, but given that the entire book constitutes a single oracle, we should view this first chapter as a preamble for the prophet’s sustained treatment of the Day of the Lord concept throughout its three chapters.¹¹ Thus, “on that day” and similar “day” language is more reasonably understood as referring back to the opening Day of the Lord description. O. Palmer Robertson justly surmises:

The “Day of Yahweh” may be seen as that theme which unifies the entirety of the book of Zephaniah. Certainly in the first chapter Yahweh’s Great Day binds together the message of the prophet. The destruction of the cosmos, judgment on God’s own people, the sacrificial feast of Yahweh, and the terrors of a finalizing theophany relate to “the Day.”¹²

While the phrase Day of the Lord proper occurs three times (once in 1:7, twice in 1:14), the phrase “that day” with clear reference to this same Day of the Lord occurs five times (1:9, 10, 15; 3:11; 16), and “day” alone or modified by a number of vivid descriptors occurs a dozen more times (1:8, 15 [5 times], 16, 18; 2:1, 2, 3; 3:8). The fulness and repetition of this phrase throughout the prophet’s three chapters provides valuable insight into the Day of the Lord concept as it developed in the century from Amos, through Isaiah, to Zephaniah.

In the opening line of Zephaniah’s oracle of the Day of the Lord, YHWH makes a shocking pronouncement that sets the tone for the entire book: “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth (*פני האדמה*)” (Zeph 1:2). This expands the scope of the judgments beyond the land of Judah or any particular nation. The vastness of the judgment is further enlarged in verse 3: “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble of the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth” (1:3). Yet the oracle immediately zooms in to verse 4, with a threat of judgment against “Judah” and “the

⁸ Whether he prophesied prior to or after the discovery of the book of the covenant in 622 is not of consequence to the purpose of our study.

⁹ Greg A. King, “The Message of Zephaniah: An Urgent Echo,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32.2 (Autumn 1996): 213.

¹⁰ King, “Message of Zephaniah,” 221.

¹¹ David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 23b (Downers Grove: InverVarsity, 1988), 84; Arvid S. Kapelrud, *The Message of the Prophet Zephaniah: Morphology and Ideas* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), 80.

¹² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 306.

inhabitants of Jerusalem.” The purpose of God stretching out his hand of judgment is to “cut off from this place [Judah and Jerusalem] the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests” as well as those priests who try to serve both YHWH and Milcom (1:4–6).

With this background, the prophet introduces the specific Day of the Lord language in verse 7: “Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near (יהוה יום קרוב; ἔγγυς ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου).” The oracle likens the punishment of the officials and princes “and all who array themselves in foreign attire” to a sacrifice the Lord is offering up, having consecrated as guests the Babylonians (cf. Isa 13:3). This imagery of judgment as a sacrifice can be seen in Isaiah 34:6; Jeremiah 46:10; and Ezekiel 39:17.¹³ This suggests that the Day of the Lord anticipated by Zephaniah’s oracle was not some distant eschatological event at the end of time but a real threat to the people of Judah who engaged in idolatrous worship and the adoption of foreign customs and religion.

On that day (ביום ההוא) God will punish pagan rituals and wickedness (Zeph 1:9).¹⁴ That the scope of this Day of the Lord in Zephaniah’s prophecy relates specifically to Judah and Jerusalem is evident in verses 10–13. There Jerusalem is clearly in focus and the judgments mediated through a number of temporal catastrophes—a siege that results in plunder, destruction of homes, and ultimate exile from their land (1:13).

The prophecy reaches its crescendo in verses 14–16, where the “great day of the Lord (יום יהוה הגדול)” is modified by several vivid descriptions. It is, firstly, “near and hastening fast (קרוב ומהר, ἔγγυς καὶ ταχεῖα σφόδρα)” (1:14), an indication that Zephaniah has in view a near-fulfillment of this particular Day of the Lord. The sound of the Day of the Lord will be “bitter,” in which the valiant man cries in defeat. Verse 15–16 sets forth a litany of six images of this day: “a day of wrath is that day (היום ההוא עברה היום ההוא, ἡμέρα ὀργῆς, ἢ ἡμέρα ἐκείνη), a day of distress and anguish (יום צרה ומצוקה, ἡμέρα θλίψεως καὶ ἀνάγκης), a day of ruin and devastation (יום שאה ומשואה, ἡμέρα ἀωρίας καὶ ἀφανισμοῦ), a day of darkness and gloom (יום חשך ואפלה, ἡμέρα σκοτους καὶ γνόφου), a day of clouds and thick darkness (יום ענן וערפל, ἡμέρα νεφέλης καὶ ὀμίχλης), a day of trumpet blast and battle cry (יום שופר ותרועה, ἡμέρα σάλπιγγος καὶ κραυγῆς).”¹⁵

This passage is significant for a number of reasons. First, Zephaniah is expressly referring to the “Day of the Lord,” a term that has already been used in earlier prophets with a developing quasi-technical meaning as a mediated theophanic visitation. We are not dealing with a side issue or parallel concern; this is the prophet’s own description of the Day of the Lord. Second, Zephaniah draws together in one cluster the specific terms used to delimit this Day of the Lord as a technical concept. Thus, when we see these terms appear elsewhere with similar imagery and language, we

¹³ See Larry L. Walker, “Zephaniah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 666.

¹⁴ See Kenneth L. Barker, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 20 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 430–31.

¹⁵ De Backer notes the constant sounds “des trompes et des tambours” associated with the siege of an ancient city, which alone would shock and demoralize its inhabitants (Fabrice De Backer, *L’art du Siège Néo-Assyrien*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East, vol. 61, ed. M.H.E. Weippert, Thomas Schneider, et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2013], 282).

can more reasonably conclude that the author intends to refer to the technical concept even if the specific language of Day of the Lord (יום יהוה) is not used. Third, as New Testament authors receive the Old Testament Scriptures in the form of the Septuagint, the Greek vocabulary associated with the Day of the Lord in these passages helps us understand the connections New Testament authors are making with the Old Testament concept.

In Zephaniah 2:1–3, the prophet offers deliverance through repentance: the hope that the Day of the Lord may be averted—or escaped—if sinners gather in humility before the day of the Lord’s anger begins (2:1–2). Clearly, once the day comes, it will be too late, for then the “burning anger (הוה אף יהוה, ὀργήν Κυρίου) of the Lord” will come upon them, “the day of the anger of the Lord (הוה אף יום, ἡμέραν θυμοῦ Κυρίου)” (2:2). Verse 3 even inspires the humble law-keepers, who seek God in righteousness and humility, with the hope that they “may be hidden (רוסתרו, σκεπασθητε) on the day of the anger of the Lord” (2:3). This imagery is suspiciously similar to that of Isaiah 26:20–21—“Come, my people, enter your chambers (בחדרי, εἰς τὰ ταμεῖα), and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves (בחי, ἀποκρύβηθι) for a little while until the fury (עמז, ὀργή) has passed by. For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.”

We begin to see here glimmers of hope in the midst of the darkness and gloom of the Day of the Lord judgments. Righteousness will be rewarded. If the whole nation repents, the Day itself can be delayed or averted. Otherwise, the humble and penitent remnant, who seek God, may hope to be somehow protected from the burning wrath of the Day of the Lord. The term רוסתרו, “to be hidden,” is used in similar contexts in Isaiah, where the wicked have foolishly “taken shelter” in lies and falsehood from the “overwhelming whip” of divine judgment (Isa 29:14). And Psalm 27:5 holds out the general promise, “He will hide me (בסכה, ἐν σπηλαιῇ) in his shelter (בסכה, ἐν σπηλαιῇ) in the day of trouble (ביום רעה, ἐν ἡμέρα κακῶν); he will conceal me (בסתירי, ἐσκέπασέν) under the cover (בסתר, ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ) of his tent; he will lift me (בירוממי, ὑψώσέν) high upon a rock.” In this Psalm, David introduces themes that appear again in Isaiah’s hope of deliverance (Isa 26:20–21) and Zephaniah’s hope of sheltering (Zeph 2:3). In a similar vein, Job pleads with God, “Oh that you would hide me (בסתירי, ἐφύλαξας) in Sheol, that you would conceal me (בסתירי, ἐφύλαξας) until your wrath be past (שוב אפרך, παύσηται σου ἡ ὀργή), that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me” (Job 14:13). And in Proverbs we read, “The prudent sees danger and hides (בסתיר) himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it” (Prov 22:3; cf. 28:28). The general principle that God protects the prudent from danger, redeems the righteous from wrath, and hides those who seek him from the day of evil is woven throughout the Old Testament. Zephaniah’s brief respite of hope in 2:1–3 may feel a little out of place in the context of the Day of the Lord imagery, but it is in keeping with the constant reminder that the Day of the Lord will ultimately result in deliverance for the righteous remnant and restoration for his purified people. This theme will become central later in the book.

After the focused development of Day of the Lord imagery, the scope of the oracle zooms in on the desolation and destruction that will come upon the peoples around Judah (Zeph 2:4–15). Though once thriving cities and nations, the surrounding enemies of Judah will become pastures, meadows, fields for flocks, and haunts for wild animals (2:6, 13–15). They will be reduced to nettles and salt pits like Sodom and Gomorrah (2:9). The gods of the world will be destroyed, and the nations will bow down to the one true God (2:11). Yet in the midst of these pronouncements of judgment against the surrounding Gentile nations, God reminds his people that he will restore the “remnant of the house of Judah” and “restore their fortunes” (2:7). Also, “the remnant of my people shall plunder them [the nations], and the survivors of my nation shall possess them” (2:9).

Chapter 3 re-centers the prophet’s attention on Jerusalem, casting the city as “rebellious and defiled the oppressing city” (3:1), incorrigible, untrusting, and far from God (3:2). Though the political and religious leaders of Jerusalem are wicked, God himself is righteous, gracious, and good even in the midst of their wickedness (3:3–5). Though God had laid waste the surrounding nations in judgment as an example of the effects of his wrath (3:6), Jerusalem failed to take heed and accept God’s correction and pleas for repentance to avoid judgment (3:7).

Verse 8 shifts again to a wide scope and scale, perhaps even telescoping beyond the near judgment of 586 BC, through the intermediate judgment of AD 70, and onto a distant future judgment—the ultimate eschatological Day of the Lord.¹⁶ God begins, “Therefore, wait for me (כחול).” The shift to second person plural suggests a return to the Lord’s direct address of the “humble of the land” who “seek righteousness” (2:3), calling on the righteous remnant to wait on the Lord for deliverance and restoration through the coming large-scale judgment.¹⁷ In that future judgment, God will gather nations and kingdoms “to pour out upon them my indignation (עמתי), all my burning anger (אפי, ὀργήν θυμοῦ); for in the fire (שׂב, ἐν πυρί) of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed (לכח, καταναλωθήσεται)” (Zeph. 3:8).

At that time, though, God will bring about a universal conversion even of the nations, drawing all people to “call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord” (3:9). The humble remnant of the people of Judah will be restored, no longer engaged in injustice, lies, or deceit (3:11–13). This restoration results in great rejoicing (3:14), because the Lord will have taken away the judgments against them (3:15). Moreover, “the King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil” (3:15). This theophanic visitation of Yahweh ruling in the midst of Israel projects this oracle—at least its ultimate fulfillment—into the distant future, and a canonical-theological reading of this text points us to the incarnate God-Man Jesus, “the Lord your God...in your midst” (3:17). This divine King will be “a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (3:17). It is

¹⁶ Robertson notes, “The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 anticipated that great Day of Yahweh which shall consummate the Lord’s judgments, even as did the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Even as in Zephaniah’s prophecy, so also in Jesus’ prophecy, the judgment of God on Jerusalem inevitably anticipates the final devastation of the nations” (Robertson, *Naham, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 325).

¹⁷ See Barker, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 484–85.

difficult not to hear in these lines echoes of Isaiah’s messianic prophecies of restoration, consolation, and jubilation: “Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes” (Zeph 3:19–20).

This exposition of the Day of the Lord theme in Zephaniah reveals both continuity and synthesis with preceding Day of the Lord prophetic traditions. With Zephaniah, then, we see the technical concept of the Day of the Lord coming into even sharper focus. Certain visual cues and verbal tropes have become stereotyped.¹⁸ Increasingly since its first introduction in Amos, the phrase Day of the Lord alone begins to carry a technical meaning of its own, even without elaborate modifiers and descriptions. The term is also flexible enough to accommodate a number of manifestations within history. Its referent is not to a single event—either near, intermediate, or remote—but to a certain type of event characterized by God’s mediated theophanic visitation, in either judgment or deliverance, and often both.

Thus, Zephaniah stands in strong continuity with the developing Day of the Lord *terminus technicus* in the prophetic tradition. Greg King rightly concludes:

In Zephaniah’s description of his central theme of the Day of the Lord, the prophet largely echoes his eighth-century predecessors. In Zephaniah’s portrayal of this day as a time of judgment in which Yahweh punishes the covenant nation, and certain especially wicked groups within it, through a military defeat, the prophet follows the contours of one or more of his predecessors. He also follows them in his indication that this punishment comes on account of their oppression of the poor and lack of social justice, their arrogance and human pride, and their idolatry. The parallels continue with Zephaniah’s announcement that the punishment overwhelms the entire world and in his ringing declaration that the day is near at hand.

And the parallels do not stop with the description of judgment, for Zephaniah also echoes his predecessors with his portrayal of a dramatic reversal of fortunes following the punishment.¹⁹

But why does Zephaniah “echo” the same language and themes of the Day of the Lord that had already been proclaimed and recorded by his predecessors? King suggests that Zephaniah may have simply believed that the Day of the Lord spoken by other eighth-century prophets “really was

¹⁸ The most prominent terms (or their related verbal forms) in the Septuagint of Zephaniah include: ἀφανισμός (1:15; 2:4, 15 [3:1]; 3:6); ἐγγύς (1:7, 14); θλίψις (1:15; cf. 1:17); θυμός (2:2; 3:8); ὀργή (1:15, 18; 2:2, 3; 3:8); πῦρ (1:18; 3:8); σκληρός (1:14); and σκότος (1:15).

¹⁹ King, “The Message of Zephaniah,” 220–21.

now imminent. The time was at hand, and judgment would no longer be delayed.”²⁰ This seems reasonable, given the fact that so many of the reasons for the imminent judgment expressed in Zephaniah relate to spiritual, political, and social conditions at the time. However, there is another way of looking at Zephaniah’s prophecy and taking seriously its urgency and imminence without suggesting that the previous prophets were wrong in their own urgency or that Zephaniah heralded an end that did not actually occur. A sustainable solution is found in the notion that the Day of the Lord is a technical concept pointing to various mediated theophanic visitations in judgment and restoration which finds numerous historical manifestations—judgments against Israel, Assyria, Judah, Babylon, etc. Thus, the Day of the Lord language and imagery echoed by the prophets in their particular historical circumstances lead to the biblical teaching that there are, in reality, numerous “days of the Lord” all manifesting the general technical concept of the Day of the Lord and pointing forward typologically toward the ultimate eschatological Day of the Lord at the end.

The Day of the Lord in Jeremiah (Seventh–Sixth Centuries BC)

Jeremiah has several “Day” passages that seem to draw from common Day of the Lord language and imagery. In a reference to the threat of Babylon “from the north” (Jer 4:6), Jeremiah prophesies, “Blow the trumpet through the land; cry aloud and say, ‘Assemble, and let us go into the fortified cities!’” (Jer 4:5). The mention of the “trumpet” (רֶפֶשׁ, σάλπιγξ) as an alarm of judgment (here as well as in 4:19, 21) echoes standard Day of the Lord imagery found in Zephaniah 1:16 and Joel 2:1. In Jeremiah 4:6, it is the Lord himself who brings disaster (רָעָה, κακά) and great destruction (רָבַח, συντριβήν) from the north—reflecting the mediated theophanic visitation in judgment typical of the Day of the Lord. The prophet likens Babylon to a lion; he is a destroyer of nations who will reduce the cities of Judah to ruin (Jer. 4:7). The people are urged to don sackcloth and to lament because “the first anger of the Lord (חַר־אֱלֹהִים, ὁ θυμὸς Κυρίου) has not turned back from us” (4:8). Verse 9 continues, “In that day (בְּיוֹם־הַהוּא)...courage shall fail both king and officials. The priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded” (4:9). In that Day, the Lord will bring a sword upon Judah (4:10), a sword of harsh judgment (4:11–12). Then the prophet paints a vivid word-picture of a theophany—the Lord coming on the clouds, in chariots like a whirlwind, horses like eagles, bringing ruin (4:13), yet even this theophany is fulfilled through the agency of “besiegers” who come “from a distant land” (4:16)—horsemen and archers (4:29). Beyond these common themes, we also see the earth reduced to chaos, darkness in the heavens (4:23, 28), the quaking of mountains and the destruction of land and cities (24–26), “before the Lord, before his fierce anger (הָרֶגֶז, ὀργῆς θυμοῦ αὐτοῦ)” (4:23–26). The turmoil endured by the “daughter of Zion” is likened to a “woman in labor,” crying out and gasping for breath (4:31). Yet in the midst of this warning the people are called to repentance—“O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that

²⁰ King, “The Message of Zephaniah,” 222.

you may be saved” (4:14)—and God promises that he “will not make a full end” (4:27), holding out promise of a future restoration.

Another passage that uses “Day” language to describe God’s mediated theophanic visitation is found in Jeremiah 30. The prophecy begins with a charge to Jeremiah to write down the words God had spoken to him (30:2), because “days are coming...when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah...and I will bring them back to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it” (30:3). In this instance the prophecy begins with the promise of restoration. Though harsh judgment comes upon them, God always preserves a remnant, which will later be restored according to God’s covenant faithfulness. Jeremiah then records an oracle spoken “concerning Israel and Judah” that brings the Day of the Lord themes of both judgment and restoration together: “Thus says the Lord: we have heard a cry of panic, of terror, and no peace” (30:5). The coming judgment is likened to the pain and panic of “a woman in labor” (30:6; cf. 4:31). Then the “Day” language is employed: “Alas! That day (הַיּוֹם הַהוּא, ἡ ἡμέρα ἐκεῖνη) is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress (עַת־צָרָה, χρόνος στενός) for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it” (Jer 30:7). Following this time of distress and deliverance, the Lord will raise up “David their king” (30:10), restore the people of Israel from captivity (30:10), and make an end to the nations where they had been scattered, but not make an end of Israel (30:11). The remainder of the oracle paints a vivid picture of glorious restoration and blessing of Jacob in the land (30:12–21), in which they shall be his people and he will be their God (30:22). Yet it concludes with standard Day of the Lord imagery: “Behold the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The fierce anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intentions of his mind. In the latter days you will understand this” (Jer 30:23–24).

These examples seem sufficient to show that “the Day” theme is well known and utilized in Jeremiah’s oracles. Besides the explicit reference to “that day,” of course, Jeremiah is filled with Day of the Lord imagery of sword, fire, judgment, wrath, and destruction—as well as preservation, purification, restoration, and deliverance for his people. A few more specific passages that draw on the pool of common Day of the Lord imagery, using “the Day” language itself, though, will complete our profile of Jeremiah’s reception and appropriation of the technical concept of the Day of the Lord. In an oracle “concerning the nations” (Jer 46:1), and in particular, “concerning the army of Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt” (46:2), the prophet describes the confusion and defeat of the army (46:3–5) when Babylon defeated Egypt near the Euphrates (46:6). The advance of Egypt’s army is likened to the river rising: “Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge” (46:8; cf. 47:2). Yet little do the nations know that they are the agents of God’s providential wrath and judgment, as Jeremiah 46:10 makes clear: “That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts (הַיּוֹם הַהוּא, לַאֲדָנִי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת), a day of vengeance (יּוֹם נִקְמָה, ἡμέρα ἐκδουλήσεως, cf. Isa 66:6), to avenge himself on his foes. The sword shall devour and be sated and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord God of hosts holds a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates.” Again, the Day of the Lord

is cast as a mediate theophanic visitation in judgment—this time judgment against Egypt by the agency of the Babylonians.

In the next chapter we see the same pattern in the pronouncement of judgment against the Philistines at the hand of the Babylonians. Here the coming of the armies from the north are likened to the rising of flood waters, “an overflowing torrent” that floods the land and the cities (Jer 47:2; cf. 46:8). This is a symbol for an army of horses and chariots (47:3). The prophet calls this “the day that is coming (יִּוֹם הַבָּא, τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς ἐπερχομένης)” to destroy the Philistines and the cities of Tyre and Sidon (47:4). However, in keeping with the notion of the Day of the Lord as mediated theophanic visitation, the verse concludes: “For the Lord is destroying the Philistines” (47:4) and verse 6 proclaims, “Ah, sword of the Lord!” (47:6). It is God who has appointed the sword of Babylon against the Philistines (47:7). Additional passages describing the “Day” of God’s vengeance against Babylon (50:27–31; 51:2), which also fit the pattern of mediated theophanic visitation in judgment.

The Day of the Lord in Lamentations (Sixth Century BC)

Lamentations 2:22 declares, “On the day of the anger of the Lord (בְּיוֹם אַף־יְהוָה), no one escaped or survived.” Variations of this phrase are found throughout the first two chapters of the book: “the days of her affliction (יְמֵי עֲנִיָּה) and wandering” (Lam 1:7); “the day of his [YHWH’s] fierce anger (בְּיוֹם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ)” (1:12); “the day you announced (יּוֹם־קִרְאתָ)” (1:21); “the day of his anger (בְּיוֹם אַפּוֹ)” (2:1); “the day we [enemies of Israel] longed for (הַיּוֹם שֶׁקִּוִּינוּהוּ)” (2:16); “the day of your anger (בְּיוֹם אַפְּךָ)” (2:21). In these cases, the prophet is looking back on the Babylonians’ destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

A number of terms and images come together to form the concept of the “Day of the anger of the Lord” in Lamentations: vex/affliction (עֲנִיָּה/יָגָה, ταπεινώσις/ταπεινάω) (1:4, 5, 7, 9, 12; 3:1, 19); wrath/[fierce] anger (אַפְּ [חֲרוֹן]/עַם, ὀργή [θυμοῦ]), (1:12, 2:1, 2, 3, 6, 21, 22; 3:43, 66; 4:11); sorrow (מַכְאֵב, ἄλγος) (1:12); fire/flame/burn (שָׂרַף/לָהֵב, πῦρ/φλόξ) (1:13, 2:3, 4; 4:11); distress/bring distress (מַצַּר/צָר, θλίβω/θλίψις) (1:3, 20); badness (רַעָה, κακός) (1:21); fury (עֲבָרָה/חַמָּה, θυμός) (2:4; 4:11); ruins/ruin/destruction/destroy (שָׁחַת/שָׁרַף, συντριβή/διαφθείρω) (2:5, 6, 8, 11, 13; 3:47–48); desolation/desolate (שָׁמָה, ἀφανίζω) (1:4, 16; 3:11; 5:18); darkness (חָשֶׁךְ, σκοτός) (3:2, 6).

Besides these oft-repeated terms, vivid images also emerge: God’s judgment is like stomping a winepress (Lam 1:15). He casts down the proud, wicked nation (1:7, 9; 2:1–3, 17). Judah has been defeated by the armies of enemy nations (1:5, 6, 7, 9–10, 14–17; 2:3, 7, 16, 17) and have gone into exile and captivity (1:3, 5, 18; 4:15–16, 20). The city has become like a widow (1:1; 5:3), a slave (1:1), and a filthy prostitute (1:8–9, 17).

Clearly Lamentations looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian armies and the ensuing aftermath. Men, women, and children died by sword and famine (Lam 1:20; 4:9). They were sent into captivity and exile. Yet this Babylonian invasion and destruction is

seen as an act of God—a mediated theophanic visitation in judgment: “In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old; my young women and my young men have fallen by the sword; you have killed them in the day of your anger, slaughtering without pity” (Lam 2:21). As in other Day of the Lord passages, God is seen as operating through agents—in this case the army of Babylon and the aftershocks of warfare.

The Day of the Lord in Ezekiel (c. 592)

The specific **יום יהוה** phrase occurs in Ezekiel only at 13:5 (but cf. Ezek 30:3, **יום ליהוה**). Taking the chronological indicators in Ezekiel seriously, this oracle came to the prophet following the vision of the temple abominations in the autumn of 592—“in the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifteenth day of the month” (Ezek 8:1).²¹ Whereas chapters 8 through 11 clearly contain the events of a single vision (cf. 8:1–3 and 11:24–25), it is unclear whether the following chapters are meant to be understood as arising from that same place and time.²² However, it is not necessary to precisely date the Day of the Lord prophecy in chapter 13. An approximate date immediately preceding the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon is sufficient.

Ezekiel’s oracle in chapter 13 addresses the “prophets of Israel...who prophesy from their own hearts” (13:2). This rebuke comes after the people of Israel have doubted that Ezekiel’s own prophecy relates to impending destruction, saying “the vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off” (12:27). Having rejected the imminence of Ezekiel’s prophecies, the false prophets of Israel had taken on the roles of soothsayers, assuring them that judgment would not come as Ezekiel had announced.

The deception of the false prophets led the people of Israel to fail to prepare for the coming judgment: “You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the Lord (**ביום יהוה**)” (Ezek 13:5). Whether Ezekiel means the nation had literally failed to take their military defenses seriously or—more likely—that they had failed to attend to their spiritual breaches of the covenant and breaking of the Law, the point is clear. Because of their dependence on false prophets and their failure to prepare, judgment was coming. This judgment is identified as the “Day of the Lord.” However, in the historical context of this message, it is evident that the imminent judgment intended by the phrase was the invasion of

²¹ This dating is reckoned by attention to Ezek 1:3, where the prophet notes that the first vision came “the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin,” that is, in 593 B.C. See Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Jeremiah–Ezekiel*, rev. ed., vol. 7, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 647–48.

²² Alexander may be correct when he suggests, “Since no new chronological notice is given, and since the speeches of chs. 12–19 are closely related thematically to the foregoing vision, it can be assumed that these messages are uttered shortly after Ezekiel’s explanation of the vision in chs. 8–11” (“Ezekiel,” 703).

Nebuchadnezzar. Alexander notes, “In this context ‘the day of the Lord’ does not imply future eschatological judgment, but rather the immediate judgment by Babylon.”²³

What is the character of this imminent Day of the Lord? Employing figurative language, the Lord God says, “I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath (בַּחַמַּתִּי, μετὰ θυμοῦ), and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger (בַּאֲפִי, ἐν ὀργῆ ἡ μου), and great hailstones in wrath (בַּחֲמָה, ἐν θυμῶ) to make a full end (לְכַלֵּל, εἰς συντέλειαν)” (Ezek 13:13). Yet even in the midst of this judgment in which God pours out his wrath upon the “wall” of false security and deception built by the deceitful prophets, the Lord promises deliverance for his righteous people from the lies of the false prophets: “Because you have disheartened the righteous falsely...I will deliver (וְהִצַּלְתִּי, ῥύσομαι) my people out of your hand” (Ezek 13:22-23).

Beyond these typical Day of the Lord images of wrath, fury, and destruction as well as the hope of deliverance for the righteous, the theme of the Day of the Lord in Ezekiel 13 is rather underdeveloped. However, we should recall that by this point the Day of the Lord language is well on its way to becoming a technical concept, bringing to the oracle in chapter 13 the general theme of God’s mediated theophanic visitation in judgment of the wicked and deliverance of the righteous. The language in verse 13 is, of course, entirely consistent with other Day of the Lord passages in the prophets. However, beyond this, Ezekiel himself may be able to use the bare phrase “Day of the Lord” in 13:5 because he had already treated it more extensively in Ezekiel 7.

Regarding the oracle of chapter 7, Allen notes:

Ezekiel is echoing a prophetic convention of judgment that, with Israel as target, went back to Amos (Amos 5:18–20) but that gradually took on overtones of judgment for neighboring nations (see Isa 2:6–21) and for the world at large (see Zeph 1:2–18). Other nations may already have been the sphere of reference for Amos’s audience (cf. Amos 1:3–2:16). The universal nature of the day of Yahweh will again be Ezekiel’s concern in one of his oracles against Egypt, in 30:2–9 (see esp. v 3). Yet the chosen corner of Israel would not be exempt from Yahweh’s general destruction of a wicked world in the coming cataclysm.²⁴

With this notion, Block concurs: “As a unit, the vocabulary and style of 7:1–27 have been heavily influenced by previous prophetic oracles concerning the ‘day of Yahweh’” and “Ezekiel’s portrayal of the day of Yahweh demonstrates that he was the heir not only of Amos but of others who had followed in his wake.”²⁵

²³ Alexander, “Ezekiel,” 710.

²⁴ Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 28, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. W. Watts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 107.

²⁵ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 244, 246.

The Day of the Lord theme is filled out with more vivid detail in verses 5–27. Allen notes that “the Day” in verses 7, 10, and 12 “is shorthand for the day of Yahweh.”²⁶ In fact, the Septuagint renders הנה היום (“Behold, the day!”) in verse 10 as ἰδοὺ ἡ ἡμέρα Κυρίου (“Behold, the Day of the Lord!”). Unless it translates a missing Hebrew variant, the gloss is not without justification, for throughout this passage we see standard language and imagery related to the established technical concept of the Day of the Lord: “Disaster after disaster”—their sure end—comes upon Israel (7:5–6). The language is ominous: “The time has come; the day is near (קרובה היום, ἤγγικεν ἡ ἡμέρα),²⁷ a day of tumult (מהומה), and not of joyful shouting on the mountains” (7:7). The Lord warns, “I will soon pour out my wrath (תמיח, תִּהְיֶה אַרְגִּימִי) upon you, and spend my anger (אפי, τὸν θυμόν μου) against you” (7:8). Over and over the prophet pronounces that the day has come (7:5, 7, 10, 12). This underscores the certainty of the impending judgment at the hands of God, who reveals himself through these judgments as “the Lord, who strikes (יהוה מכה)” (7:9). In this day of judgment, God justly punishes their pride, wickedness, and opulence (7:10–13).

The imagery of blowing a trumpet appears in verse 14: “They have blown the trumpet (תקעו בתקוע, σαλπίζατε ἐν σάλπιγγι) and made everything ready, but none goes to battle, for my wrath (חרוני) is upon all their multitude.” In the following verses, then, the prophet describes the agents God uses to mediate his theophanic visitation of judgment: sword, pestilence, and famine in the wake of foreign invaders (Ezek 7:15–22). Note the providence of God governing the acts of his human agents in carrying out his theophanic visitation in judgment: “I will bring the worst of the nations to take possession of their houses. I will put an end to the pride of the strong, and their holy places shall be profaned” (7:24). This judgment was fulfilled in the invasion of Babylon and the resulting destruction of the temple and exile of the people. Through these events, God confirmed his sovereignty as Lord over all the earth (7:27).

Firming up the confirmation that Ezekiel 7 has in mind common Day of the Lord imagery, almost the exact language is found in both Zephaniah’s undisputed יהוה יום passage and Ezekiel 7:

Zephaniah 1:18	Ezekiel 7:19
גם־כסףם גם־זהבם לא־יוכל להצילם ביום עברה יהוה	כסףם וזהבם לא־יוכל להצילם ביום עברה יהוה
Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord.	Their silver and gold are not able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord.

With this parallel, it appears beyond dispute that Ezekiel intends by his language and imagery in chapter 7 to make a deliberate connection to the explicit Day of the Lord motif of Zephaniah. This

²⁶ Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 107.

²⁷ Allen notes, “The nearness of the day is a traditional element in ‘day of the Yahweh’ passages (cf. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph 1:7, 14)” (Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19*, 107).

demonstrates that by the sixth century BC the *יום יהוה* was a well-established technical concept—a mediated theophanic visitation. This “day” refers to the period of time during which God would visit his people in judgment, yet these judgments would come through the mediation of earthly agents. In the case of Ezekiel 7, that agent was Nebuchadnezzar and the army of Babylon.

Having established that Ezekiel draws from a common pool of Day of the Lord language and imagery in Ezekiel 13, this opens the door for us to see other ways Ezekiel uses similar imagery based on the technical concept of the Day of the Lord. Thus, in Ezekiel 30 (perhaps written in 571 BC, cf. 29:17), we read: “Wail, ‘Alas for the day (*ליום*)!’ For the day is near (*קרוב יום*), the day of the Lord is near (*יום ליהוה*); it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations. A sword shall come upon Egypt, and anguish shall be in Cush, when the slain fall in Egypt, and her wealth is carried away, and her foundations are torn down. Cush, and Put, and Lud, and all Arabia, and Libya, and the people of the land that is in league shall fall with them by the sword” (Ezek 30:2–5). This time of judgment upon Egypt and its allies is viewed as God’s action: “I will put an end to the wealth of Egypt” (30:10), but only through the agency of an earthly army: “by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon” (30:10). God will be the one who brings the army of Babylon in “to destroy the land” (30:11), but “they shall draw their swords against Egypt” (30:11). Again, the Lord swears, “I will bring desolation upon the land and everything in it,” but this will be “by the hand of foreigners” (30:12). This invasion and destruction at the hand of the Babylonians is viewed as God pouring out his wrath on Egypt (30:15). The warfare results in fire, which then turns the day into darkness (30:16, 18).

Contributing to our developing understanding of the technical concept, the Day of the Lord is a repeated event of God’s mediated theophanic visitation. Note especially that though God is pouring out his wrath (30:15), he does so through the means of an invading army—in this case, the Babylonians.

The Day of the Lord in Obadiah (c. 583–553)

The short, twenty-one verse book of Obadiah provides our first glimpse of the Day of the Lord concept after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians,²⁸ viewed by the previous prophets as a judgment on Judah for breaking God’s covenant. The phrase *יום יהוה* itself appears only in verse 15, but as this is a single-chapter book with a solitary message, we would expect that established language and imagery associated with the Lord’s time of earthly judgment would be found throughout. This is, in fact, the case. Carl Armerding notes that one of the unifying themes of Obadiah is the “concept of the ‘day’ (*yôm*) of God’s judgment (vv. 8, 11 [2x], 12 [4x], 13 [3x],

²⁸ See Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 19B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 171–72.

14, 15) and by the principle of reversal that informs that judgment, stated throughout but most clearly in vv. 15–16.”²⁹

The oracle concerns Edom (Obad 1), against which the Lord has set his hand of judgment. He has summoned the surrounding nations to rise up against Edom to reduce the nation to insignificance (Obad 2–4). They are to be plundered by those they had once deemed allies (5–7). Thus, as we have seen in other prophecies regarding the coming Day of the Lord, Obadiah presents a mediated theophanic visitation in judgment—God’s hand of wrath against Edom mediated through the agency of its surrounding nations: “The Lord is the ultimate mover, but there is also an international political alliance motivated only by callous self-seeking....Even nations raised up by such base motives serve the overriding purposes of a God who sovereignly shapes human affairs through countless envoys of his own.”³⁰

In verse 8 the prophecy refers to “that day” on which the wise and mighty men of Edom will be dismayed and destroyed (8–9). This judgment comes because Edom—the descendants of Esau—failed to come to the aid of Judah when the Babylonians plundered them and dragged them into exile (10–11). The destruction of Jerusalem is called “the day of his misfortune,” “the day of their ruin,” “the day of their distress (הַצָּרָה, θλίψεως)” (12, 14), “the day of their calamity (מִדְּמֵי, πόνων)” and “the day of their destruction (יְדִימָה, ὀλέθρου)” (13). Though Edom gloated over the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah’s own experience of the Day of the Lord, the oracle makes it clear that Edom itself would experience their own Day. Here, between verses 8 and 14, we see that “day” of judgment is not a single eschatological event, never to be repeated. Rather, it may be applied to any historical events in which God exercises his judgments against his own people or other kingdoms through the agency of surrounding nations. David Baker notes, “A key word throughout is ‘day’. Edom can look forward to a ‘day’ in which she is judged (v. 8), since she stood by on the ‘day’ that her neighbour, Judah, was attacked (vv. 11, 12 [three times], 13 [three times], 14). Also, on a wider scale, there will be a ‘day’ which will involve all nations (v. 15) in either judgment or deliverance. All three sections are thus bound by their respective ‘days’.”³¹ In 8–9 the object of the day of destruction is Edom; in verses 11–14 the day of destruction recalls the judgment of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians.

Verses 15–18 present Obadiah’s vision of the Day of the Lord (יּוֹם יְהוָה, ἡμέρα Κυρίου) coming upon “all the nations” (15). As in Zephaniah (1:7, 14), this day for the wicked nations—including but surpassing Edom—is “near” (קָרוֹב, ἐγγύς). Because of the similarities in the use of קָרוֹב in connection with יוֹם elsewhere in the prophets used to convey imminence (see Isa 13:6; Ezek 30:3; Joel 1:15; 4:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7, 14), Ben Zvi concludes, “It is most reasonable to conclude that

²⁹ Carl E. Armerding, “Obadiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi*, rev. ed., vol. 8, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 425.

³⁰ Armerding, “Obadiah,” 432.

³¹ David W. Baker, “Obadiah,” in David W. Baker, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 26, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988; reprint, 2009), 25.

the expression *יְיָ קָרוֹב יוֹם־ה'* in Obad 15 points to the use of a stock form available to the writer/s of the text of Obad 15, and which was most likely recognized as such by the (trained) community/ies of (re)readers of the Book of Obadiah, and certainly by the intended audience of the book.³² He goes on: “Such a reference to *יְיָ קָרוֹב יוֹם־ה'* in this text indicates that *יְיָ קָרוֹב יוֹם־ה'* is a concept—or at the very least a code-word whose referent may vary only within certain limits insofar as it concerns the addressees of the speaker, the intended audience of the book, and as it stands to reason also the community/ies of (re)readers for which and within which the book was composed.”³³ In short, “Day of the Lord” in Obadiah bears the signs of a technical concept, the contours of which would have been well-known by the readers of the prophecy in the sixth century BC.

The Day of the Lord will be characterized by just retribution—what they had done to others will be done to them (Obad 15). Because of how they treated the holy mountain of God, they have brought destruction upon themselves (16). Though Judah had suffered its own day of destruction in the recent past (verses 11–14), and Edom would experience its judgment soon (8–9), the Day of the Lord in verse 15 appears to look into the distant future toward an ultimate manifestation of God’s wrath against all nations for their wickedness. Amerding notes that the Day of the Lord theme “gives final definition to the preceding references to a ‘day’ in Obadiah: Edom’s and Judah’s downfall both constitute elements in the pattern of this ‘great and dreadful day of the Lord’ (Joel 2:31).”³⁴

However, just as Zephaniah had foreseen not only judgments upon the wicked nations but also rescue of the righteousness remnant, so Obadiah portrays a similar scenario. Verse 17 says, “But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape (*פְּלִיטִים*, *σωτηρία*), and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.” Yet in this scenario, God’s people Israel will be the mediator of God’s theophanic judgment against Edom: “The house of Jacob shall be a fire (*אֵשׁ*, *πῦρ*), and the house of Joseph a flame” (18). Baker rightly notes, “*Fire and flame* represent God’s wrath (cf. Ps. 18:8; Lam. 1:13; Amos 1:4), here actualized through God’s people.”³⁵ Again, God’s mediated theophanic visitation in judgment—this time against the nations through the agency of his own people—is apparent. Also, this is a notable instance of the figurative use of “fire” to refer to God’s decisive mediated judgment.

The last three verses map out the extent of the territory that will be won by “saviors” who go up to (LXX: or “out of”) Mount Zion (21), to rule over Mount Esau and expand the borders of the restored nation (19–20). This newly restored nation will be the Lord’s (21). In any case, the oracle of Obadiah ends with a vindicated and restored nation of Israel blessed in the land in fulfillment of the Old Testament expectations. Baker aptly summarizes, “This salvation is better seen as

³² Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, BZAW, vol. 242, ed. Otto Kaiser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 163.

³³ Ben Zvi, *Obadiah*, 164.

³⁴ Amerding, “Obadiah,” 444–45.

³⁵ Baker, “Obadiah,” 45.

eschatological, when the messianic kingdom will be inaugurated and Israel will achieve universal dominion under its ideal King (Gen. 49:10; cf. Ezek. 21:25–27; Rev. 5:5–6).³⁶

The Day of the Lord in Malachi (c. 500–450)

Pin-pointing the date of the composition of Malachi is difficult. The general consensus among scholars is that the book was written in the post-exilic era, after the time of Haggai and Zechariah and after the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Mal 1:10).³⁷ For our purposes, precise dating with reference to post-exilic conditions surrounding the period of Ezra and Nehemiah is not necessary. A general fifty-year range between 500–450 BC is sufficient to establish the generation in which Malachi’s message concerning the Day of the Lord would be heard.

Because the specific יהוה יום language is used in 3:23 [4:5] amidst conventional Day of the Lord language and imagery, the earlier mention of the “day of the his coming (ביום בואו)” in 3:2 may be read in this connection.³⁸ In that earlier passage, the Lord responds to the charge that he has been unjust because the wicked go unpunished and appear to be a delight to the Lord (Mal 2:17). In response, God promises that he will first send his messenger: “He will prepare the way before me.” When the forerunner has prepared the way, then the Lord will indeed come and bring the longed-for justice.

Though it has been common to try to identify the specific fulfillment of this “messenger (מלאכי)” (3:1), it seems best to view this as reflecting the general pattern established by the prophets that prior to any historical instance of the Day of the Lord, God sends prophetic messengers. Thus, he will also do so prior to the next Day of the Lord. Malachi is one such messenger, as were the other prophets warning about the impending Day of the Lord. Here God is affirming the precedent that prior to his mediated theophanic visitation in judgment, he would send an official prophetic voice to sound the alarm.³⁹

After the messenger prepares the way, “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:1). The prophetic “messenger” who prepares the way is distinct from the “Lord” (האדון) who comes suddenly to his temple. And the context indicates that this very “Lord” is the one whose way is prepared. Because God declares, “My messenger...will prepare the way before me (לפני),” and the doubters were wondering, “Where is the God of justice?” it seems most reasonable that the “Lord whom you seek” who comes suddenly to “his temple” is God himself

³⁶ Baker, “Obadiah,” 48.

³⁷ See Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 156–60.

³⁸ Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 313.

³⁹ In the New Testament this “messenger” was John the Baptist, warning that a Day of the Lord judgment was coming upon the nation. Perhaps the Book of Revelation also presents the Two Witnesses (Rev 11) as fulfilling this same mission for the ultimate Day of the Lord.

coming in a theophanic visitation. But is “the messenger of the covenant” the same as the messenger who prepares the way for the Lord, the Lord who is coming to his temple, or some third person distinct from the two?⁴⁰ Traditionally Christian readers have applied both the “Lord” and “messenger of the covenant” to Jesus and the first messenger to John the Baptist. In any case, the prophecy is casting the sudden coming of the Lord in theophanic terms as the fulfillment of the scoffers’ desire for a show of justice. Thus, the coming of the Lord is described with language and imagery similar to the Day of the Lord motif in previous prophets.

Malachi 3:2 says, “Who can endure the day of his coming (יִוִּם בּוֹאֵוֹ), and who can stand when he appears?” That is, the doubters will suddenly discover the severity of the justice for which they long. Malachi then casts the coming of the Lord in terms of purification: “He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord” (3:2–3). The image of purifying “fire” is not new to the prophets (Isa 1:25; 48:10; Jer 6:2, 30; Ezek 22:17–22),⁴¹ and here it is directly connected to the Lord’s mediated theophanic visitation, which leads to the restoration of righteousness and faithfulness in Judah and Jerusalem “as in the days of old and as in former years” (3:4). Thus, the coming judgment is not merely retributive but also redemptive and restorative. Malachi 3:5 clarifies that the Lord’s drawing near in judgment comes as just action against all sorts of covenant-breaking sins—sorcery, adultery, lying, oppression, and mistreatment of foreigners.

From here we may leap forward to the Day of the Lord passage proper (3:16–24 [Hebrew]; 3:16–4:6 [English/LXX]). Once again, the Lord counters the cynical claims of scoffers who doubt the justice of God: “Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape” (3:15). In response, the prophet first highlights the response of “those who feared the Lord” (3:16). In contrast to the scoffers who spoke hard against God (3:13), the God-fearers “spoke with one another” (בְּדַבְּרוֹ יִרְאֵי יְהוָה אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ), literally, “those who fear the Lord spoke each man to the other”). The Septuagint loosely translates this as, “those who fear the Lord spoke against these things” (Ταῦτα κατελάλησαν οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον), that is, against the cynical remarks about God’s justice in verse 15. Whatever the intention, the prophet reports that the righteous “who feared the Lord and esteemed his name” were not, after all, forgotten as the scoffers claimed; rather, “a book of remembrance (סֵפֶר זְכוֹרוֹן) was written before him” (3:16) as a sign that God would never forget them. The phrase (סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹרוֹת) is used in Esther 6:1 to describe “the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles” that keep a record of important people and events. The figure in Malachi

⁴⁰ See discussion in Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 28, ed. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 334–335; Eugene H. Merrill, “Malachi,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi*, rev. ed., vol. 8, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 857–58.

⁴¹ See Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 28, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972), 265.

3:16 emphasizes the fact that God will never forget those who fear him, even if for a season it may appear that wickedness and injustice have won.

With the fact of remembrance, then, comes the promise of deliverance: “They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make (ליום אשר אני עשה), cf. 3:21 [4:2]) up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him” (3:17). In contrast to the cynics’ claim that “it is vain to serve God” and that nothing is to be gained by “keeping his charge” (3:14), God assures them that a day is coming when he spares his spiritual children. Hill notes, “The righteous will not just escape God’s wrath in the coming day of judgment; they will be delivered or preserved as beloved children....Malachi echoes Joel 2:18, which relates the restoration of Israel’s fortunes in the Day of YHWH as a result of his compassionate reorientation to his people.”⁴² In that day of redemption, all question of God’s failure to distinguish between the righteous and wicked will be answered: “Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him” (Mal 3:18).

The “once more” or “again” (שובתם) reminds us that this distinction made between the righteous and the wicked during the seasons of divine judgment is not new. This has always been God’s *modus operandi*, and it always will be. With regard to the use of “again” in 3:18, Verhoef notes, “They will again see that which they have refused to observe, that the Lord has proclaimed the difference through the message of his prophets and the facts of his judgments in the course of their history (Exod. 11:7; Isa. 26:8, 9). In the past they could have seen it, but on the Day of the Lord they surely will see the difference.”⁴³ Perhaps we are meant to recall pivotal episodes in God’s visitation of his people to preserve them from his just judgment, e.g., Noah and his family at the time of the flood (Gen 6–8), Lot’s family in the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19), and Israel in Egypt at the judgment of the ten plagues (Exod 7–12). Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Lot in view of the destruction of Sodom is paradigmatic here when he says to the Lord, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?...Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:23, 25). This passage establishes the important theological principle that rather than the righteous being destroyed along with the wicked when the Day of the Lord comes, God will make a clear distinction. The day of wrath is not for the righteous. This seems to be the thought behind God’s promise of obvious distinction between the fate of the righteous and the fate of the wicked. The righteous will be made his treasured possession, and they will be spared in that day (Mal 3:17).

The fate of the wicked is described in the next three verses—Malachi 3:19–21 (Hebrew text; 4:1–3, English/LXX). The chapter break is misleading and unfortunate, as the כִּי (“for”) in 3:19 [4:1] logically connects the description of the Day of the Lord with the previous assertion that the

⁴² Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 355–56.

⁴³ Verhoef, *Haggai and Malachi*, 323.

distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be obvious in “the day” when God spares the righteous: “For behold, the day is coming (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, ἡμέρα ἔρχεται), burning like an oven, when all the arrogant (זָדִים) and all evildoers (עוֹשֵׂי רָשָׁע) will be stubble. The day that is coming (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, ἡ ἡμέρα ἐρχομένη) shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch” (3:19 [4:1]). This passage reaches back to the cynics’ complaint of God’s injustice, where the “arrogant (זָדִים)” are called blessed and “evildoers (עוֹשֵׂי רָשָׁע)” are blessed and escape judgment (3:15). In keeping with God’s long-established pattern to make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the righteous are promised deliverance from the Day of the Lord while the wicked are utterly destroyed. The image of burning is used here metaphorically, not literally, as the coming judgment is likened to an oven that burns up stubble, leaving neither root nor branch (3:19 [4:1]).

Returning to the lot of the righteous, the next verse promises, “But for you who fear my name [cf. 3:16], the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, one the day when I act (בְּיוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה, cf. 3:17), says the Lord of hosts” (3:20–21 [4:2–3]). Thus, the coming day promises preservation and reward for the righteous while threatening destruction for the wicked.

The passage concludes with an exhortation and a sign: “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (Mal 3:22 [4:4]) and “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes (בּוֹא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא, ἐλθεῖν ἡμέραν Κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ)” (3:23 [4:5]). This “Elijah” would call young and old alike to reconciliation and repentance, providing the opportunity for preventing or delaying the mediated theophanic visitation in judgment, in which God would strike the land “with a decree of utter destruction” (3:24 [4:6]).

The Day of the Lord in Joel (Date Uncertain)

Date ranges for the writing of Joel fall between as early as the ninth century BC to as late as the second century BC—a span of about seven centuries!⁴⁴ Fortunately, the other prophets can be more confidently dated, thus establishing a fairly clear picture of the development of the Day of the Lord concept. Rather than attempting to work the data from Joel into the historical development by forcing it onto a timeline in a place uncertain, I have decided to treat its contribution to the theme separate from the development. I personally suspect a date after the exile during the early days of the second temple.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 25, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1989), 23–25.

⁴⁵ With regard to similar Day of the Lord language and imagery between Obadiah and Joel (cf. Joel 4), Ehud Ben Zvi notes, “No convincing case can be made for a direct dependence of the Book of Obadiah on the text of the Book

The uncertainty of the date of Joel is unfortunate, because the entire book deals with the Day of the Lord theme in ways that contribute significantly to the Old Testament concept.⁴⁶ Its language and imagery are incorporated into several significant New Testament Day of the Lord texts.⁴⁷ Therefore, because this study of the Day of the Lord concept in the Old Testament is in the service of a broader biblical-canonical and ultimately theological treatment of the eschatological significance of the Day of the Lord, I am treating the contribution of Joel as a capstone to the Old Testament prophets.

The oracle of the Lord through Joel begins by addressing the “elders” and “inhabitants” of the land, warning them of unprecedented events in their day that they would pass on to succeeding generations (Joel 1:2–3). Wave after wave of a devastating locust plague had destroyed vines, trees, fruits, and grain, resulting in starvation of both people and animals (1:4–20). The reference to the locust invasion in verse 4 has overwhelmingly been interpreted literally by modern commentators. In this interpretation, the prophet uses the analogy of a human army to describe the invading force: “Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run” (2:4), and “as with the rumbling of chariots” and “like a powerful army drawn up for battle” and “like warriors they charge” and “like soldiers they scale the wall” (2:5–7). Such analogies make best sense if the army is not literally humans, but a swarm of locusts.⁴⁸

However, elsewhere language seems to point to the invasion of a foreign army as carrying out the work of the figurative locust plague. Joel 1:5 says, “For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number.” Verse 19 refers not to locusts destroying the produce of the land but “fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field” (1:19, 20). Consuming fires are more naturally the result of a military invasion rather than a locust swarm. In Joel 2:2, the text explicitly refers to the Day of the Lord marked by the coming of “a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations.” This language is similar to the opening words in 1:2–3—“Has such a thing

of Joel (or *vice versa*). In fact, the observed similarities do not require anything more than the existence of a shared reservoir of expressions and images” (Ben Zvi, *Obadiah*, 149). That is, the reason we see such similar language and imagery among these (and other) prophets is that the Day of the Lord had become a technical concept by the sixth-to-fifth centuries B.C., and these prophets were drawing upon that common apocalyptic vocabulary as they wrote to an audience familiar with the concept.

⁴⁶ See Willem S. Prinsloo, *The Theology of the Book of Joel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985), 35–36.

⁴⁷ See Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, 39. He writes, “Among the words, phrases, or motifs which have helped to shape the picture of the end-times are these: (1) the blast of the trumpet to signal the Day (2:1; cf. 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 8:6–11:19); (2) the use of *near* to express the imminence of the Day (1:15; 2:1; 3:14; cf. Matt. 24:32; Mark 13:29; Jas 5:8); (3) ‘You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied’ (2:26; cf. Luke 6:21 and the accounts of the feeding of the multitudes, Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14); (4) judgment of the Gentiles (3:1–14; cf. Matt. 25:31–46); (5) darkening of sun and stars as signs (2:30–31; 3:15; cf. Luke 21:25; Rev. 8:12); (6) shaking of earth and heaven (3:16; cf. Heb. 12:26); (7) ‘Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe’ (3:13; cf. Mark 4:29); (8) the locust army compared to horses (2:4–5; cf. Rev. 9:7, 9).”

⁴⁸ J. M. Powis Smith, William Hayes Ward, and Julius August Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 62.

happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation.” This language of the unprecedented nature of the Day of the Lord events lend support to the idea that the locust invasion mentioned in Joel 1:4 is a figure for the invasion of a great army mentioned in 1:5 and 2:2. In fact, with the invasion of this army “fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns” (2:3)—the same effects of the so-called locust invasion (1:19), resulting in the devastation to the vines, trees, fruits, and grains. And 2:11 says, “The Lord utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful.” In response to their repentance, God says, “I will remove the northerner far from you, and drive him into a parched and desolate land, his vanguard into the eastern sea, and his rear guard into the western sea” (2:20). The result of this defeat of the invading army will be a restoration of the grain, wine, oil, and other victims of the original invasion (3:19, 21–24). The idea of a swarm of locusts coming from the north would have been odd, as they came from the south and east. Yet the invasion of human armies from other nations is frequently associated with the north.

The language of Joel seems to require us to decide which image is figurative. Does the image of the locust represent an invasion of a human army? Or does the language of human invaders represent an invasion of locusts? Joel 2:25 seems to favor former: “I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.” It seems the final line identifies the referent of the symbol: “my great army,” that is, the army of the Assyrians or Babylonians, or even a future invading army, unleashed upon Israel to exercise judgment. It may also be that Joel’s description of an invading “army” of locusts is real, but the army itself was sent as an intentional sign and symbol of a future invasion of a human army—a type of an invasion that would decimate the land. This view, I think, is favored by the sharp eschatological turn that takes place in chapter 3: “For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land” (3:1–2). No doubt, by Joel 3 any thought of a locust invasion has been entirely left behind. The objects of God’s fury are Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, and Edom (3:4, 19).

Thus, I take the locust invasion as either a prophetic vision, a parable or, more likely, a current or near-at-hand historical event the prophet turns into a prophetic sign of past and future invasions by foreign nations. It could be that the then-present locust plague and drought—a near-fulfillment of the Day of the Lord—was a type of a future, greater Day of the Lord, as Patterson notes: “The terrible locust plague is a harbinger of awesome things to come.”⁴⁹ In this case, the primary means of God’s theophanic visitable in judgment is the invading armies from the north, not a swarming

⁴⁹ Richard D. Patterson, “Joel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 310.

army of locusts. The ultimate referent is not an immediate or near day of the Lord, but the ultimate eschatological Day of the Lord—especially in chapter 3.

Joel's Day of the Lord language and imagery echo a number of elements already seen in other prophets. Having explored those developed themes already, we can summarize them here as follows:

- The Day of the Lord is unprecedented, unable to be compared to what came before or what will come after (1:2–3; 2:2).
- It involves the invasion of a powerful nation and warfare among the nations (1:6; 2:2; 2:4–11; 2:20; 2:25; 3:9–14).
- It is characterized by desolation of the land and its natural resources (1:7–12, 16–20; 2:3).
- It's characterized by consuming fire and flame (1:19; 2:3, 30).
- It's marked by the blowing of a trumpet of alarm (2:1, 15).
- It's accompanied by darkness, gloom, earthquakes, darkening of sun, moon, and stars, heavenly signs and wonders (2:2, 10, 30–31; 3:15).
- It calls God's people to repentance and offers a way of deliverance (1:8, 13–14; 2:12–17, 32; 3:16).
- Deliverance from its wrath will lead to material and spiritual blessing for God's people and judgment upon the nations (2:18–32; 3:1–8, 16–21).