

THE PROPHET'S WATCHWORD: DAY OF THE LORD

RICHARD L. MAYHUE

The biblical phrase "Day of the Lord" is a key phrase in understanding God's revelation about the future. The NT writers' use of this phrase rested upon their understanding of the OT prophets. A survey of the OT indicates that it was used by the prophets when speaking of both near historical and future eschatological events. The NT writers picked up on the eschatological use and applied the phrase both to the judgment which will climax the Tribulation period and the judgment which will usher in the new earth.

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INTRODUCTION

THE phrase "Day of the Lord" (DOL) embodies one of the major strands woven throughout the fabric of biblical prophecy. Without a clear understanding of DOL, the pattern of God's plan for the future is obscure.

DOL appears in four uncontested NT passages (Acts 2:20, 1 Thess 5:2, 2 Thess 2:2, and 2 Pet 3:10). However, OT prophets actually wrote more about DOL. The OT provided the basis for whatever Peter and Paul understood about DOL. Beecher argued that,

All doctrines in regard to the millennium, the second coming of Christ, and the final judgment depend greatly on the passages in the New Testament that use the formulas, "the day of the Lord," "the day of our Lord," "that day," and the like; such passages, for example, as 2 Pet. iii:10, 1 Thess. v:2, 1 Cor. 1:8, v:5, 2 Cor. i:14, 2 Thess. i:10, 2 Tim. i:12, Matt. xxv:13, etc. The meaning of these passages is, in turn, greatly dependent on the relations that exist, both in ideas and in phraseology, between them and the texts in the Old Testament that speak of "the day of the Lord," that is, "the day of Jehovah." Necessarily, the study of these places in the Old Testament will be profitable, both in itself and for the light it throws on New Testament eschatology.¹

¹W. J. Beecher, "The Day of Jehovah in Joel," *The Homiletic Review* 18 (1889)

Accordingly, this study will first evaluate the OT data concerning DOL. The pattern that emerges will then be used as an aid in the interpretation of the NT uses of this phrase.

CHALLENGES

Many contrasts appear which at first seem to be contradictory. In various DOL texts contemporary history is in view (Isa 13:6, Joel 1:15), but in other texts there are predictions that clearly relate to the future (2 Thess 2:2, 2 Pet 3:10). Most passages speak of God's judgments, but some are tied closely to God's blessing (Zech 14:1-21). Sometimes DOL is used of a time when the nations will be punished (Obad 15), but at other times it is used of the punishment of Israel (Joel 1:15); yet it seemingly leads to Israel's restoration with the Messiah as her king (Zech 14:1-21). A survey of the literature written on DOL reveals a plethora of opinions on how to reconcile these diverse observations. These following examples illustrate some of the tensions.

Is the DOL fulfilled historically or eschatologically? Bess writes, "It must be made clear that the expression 'the day of Jehovah' is throughout Scripture an eschatological term. It may not be interpreted as predictive of a time in Israel's history future to the writer but now having had its historical fulfillment."² However, Payne argues that DOL is such a broad term that only context can determine its precise meaning in a given passage.³

Is DOL a twenty-four hour period or longer? Licht suggests that God will act suddenly and decisively in a single day.⁴ But Saucy concludes that, "The day of the Lord . . . represents the whole series of events beginning with the outpouring of God's judgment during the Great Tribulation and continuing until the final transformation with the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:10)."⁵

Does DOL involve judgment or blessing? Trotter demands that DOL always refers to the execution of judgment upon the earth,⁶ while Davidson affirms that the DOL is not primarily a day of judgment but a day of joy, even though judgment always accompanies it.⁷ Yet

²S. H. Bess, "The Book of Zephaniah, A Premillennial Interpretation" (unpublished Th.M. Thesis: Grace Theological Seminary, 1953) 37.

³J. B. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 465.

⁴J. Licht, "Day of the Lord," *EncJud* 5. 1388.

⁵R. L. Saucy, "The Eschatology of the Bible," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1. 107.

⁶W. Trotter, *Plain Papers on Prophetic and Other Subjects* (London: Pickering & Inglis, n.d.) 287.

⁷A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1907) 374-75.

Pentecost believes that the OT passages "reveal that the idea of judgment is paramount."⁸

Because of these and other questions, this work will examine the biblical meaning of DOL in order to discern whether (1) DOL is always used to refer to the same event or if it is used of several events and whether (2) DOL has already occurred, or if it will occur in the future, or if DOL is used of both past and future events. While this study of the *Dies Irae*⁹ does not answer all the questions, it is hoped that it will provide a stimulation for further research and thinking.

OLD TESTAMENT DATA

The phrase "day of the Lord" appears nineteen times¹⁰ in the OT. The Hebrew phrases יום יהוה and יום ליהוה are both translated DOL. The LXX translates DOL as ἡμέρα κυρίου. The expression occurs only in six minor and two major prophets.¹¹

*Obadiah*¹²

Obadiah relates the family feud between Israel (Jacob) and Edom (Esau). Two important questions have been raised concerning Obadiah's use of DOL. First, was Obadiah written early (ca. 845 B.C.) or late (ca. 587 B.C.)? Second, does Obadiah deal only with the foreign plunder of Palestine or does the scope of the prophecy extend to a future eschatological end?

⁸J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 230.

⁹This term was used in the liturgy of the medieval church to describe the DOL. Thomas of Celano thus entitled his poem which depicts God's judgment. See W. Griffin, ed., *Endtime: The Doomsday Catalog* (New York: Collier, 1979) 187.

¹⁰Some erroneously conclude that there are twenty occurrences by adding Zech 14:7. A. J. Everson ("Days of Yahweh," *JBL* 93 [1974] 330) writes, "eighteen texts properly form the basic evidence." He then elaborates in n 6 the nineteen texts that this writer has cataloged. H. W. Robinson (*Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1963] 135) proposes twenty-eight texts. In n 1 he adds Isa 34:8, 58:5, 61:2, Jer 46:10; Lam 2:22; Ezek 7:19; Zeph 1:18; 2:2; and 2:3 to the nineteen basic texts. These, for the most part (excepting Isa 58:5), seem to refer to DOL but do not use that precise terminology. L. Cerny (*The Day of Yahweh and Some Relevant Problems* [Prague: n.p., 1948] 17-21) has written the classic study of DOL in the OT from a philological and historical vantage. He includes twenty-nine texts by adding Zeph 1:8 to Robinson's list.

¹¹The texts and writing dates are as follows: Obad 15 (ca. 845 B.C.), Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31 (Heb 3:4); 3:14 (Heb 4:14) (ca. 835 B.C.), Amos 5:18 (2 times), 20 (ca. 755 B.C.), Isa 2:12; 13:6, 9 (ca. 720 B.C.), Zeph 1:7, 14 (2 times) (ca. 630 B.C.), Ezek 13:5; 30:3 (ca. 580 B.C.), Zech 14:1 (ca. 520 B.C.), and Malachi 4:4 (Heb 3:23) (ca. 450 B.C.). The dates follow the chronology of H. E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1968).

¹²The writer will not treat the historical context and literary structure for each book. Only where these areas are particularly helpful in understanding a DOL text will they be mentioned.

Scholarly opinion is divided on the date of Obadiah. It must be insisted, however, that Obadiah was writing before the fact of judgment, not after it occurred. I believe that Obadiah was written early and contains the first mention of DOL in the OT.¹³ Later prophets who used DOL looked to Obadiah as the initial prophecy concerning DOL.¹⁴

Was the scope of the judgment envisioned in Obad 15 near future or far future? There are those who would posit that all of Obadiah was fulfilled in the near future no later than the time of Nebuchadnezzar. For example, Henderson suggests that Obadiah refers to the Babylonian conquest of Idumea.¹⁵ However, others would extend the fulfillment of v 15 beyond the 6th century B.C. Allen makes the general assertion that its scope goes beyond 587 B.C.¹⁶ Feinberg is more specific and suggests that the time will be just before the establishment of Messiah's kingdom.¹⁷

Obad 15 is the pivotal verse in this book whose theme is the DOL experienced first by Edom and second by the nations (15–16) who walked in Edom's way. The fact that the language of vv 1–14 is singularly applied to Edom warrants a near future fulfillment—in all likelihood Nebuchadnezzar's plunder. However, the language of vv 15–21 points to the far future and the establishment of God's kingdom. There are at least five indications of this. First, the text of vv 1–14 deals with Edom alone. There is an abrupt shift in vv 15–16 to include all of the nations. Second, Edom (vv 1–14) becomes the pattern for future nations (v 16). This is an expansion of the scope of the prophecy from a national to an international matter. Third, the destruction of the nations (v 16) is an eschatological event. Fourth, Israel's restoration to vitality (vv 17–21) will occur in the fullest sense before and during the millennium. Fifth, it is stated that the kingdom will be the Lord's (v 21). In one sense the kingdom is always the

¹³See also W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 47; C. F. Keil, *The Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 365; T. Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956) 203; and C. von Orelli, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Reprint; Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977) 82, 162. Kaiser notes that the other three options are: (1) during Ahaz's reign, 743–715 B.C.; (2) when Edom invaded Judah (2 Chron 28:16–18); or (3) during the fall of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:1–21; 2 Chron 36:15–20).

¹⁴Keil, *The Minor Prophets*, 365.

¹⁵E. Henderson, *The Books of the Twelve Minor Prophets* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1845) 195. Kaiser (*Towards an Old Testament Theology*, 188) points to the Maccabean period.

¹⁶L. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 160–61.

¹⁷C. L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 128.

Lord's, so what does Obadiah mean? Evidently Obadiah refers to the time when the King himself, Jesus Christ, sits upon the throne of David in Jerusalem and rules internationally with a rod of righteousness and wrath. Kaiser notes,

As for the fulfillment of this prophecy, Obadiah combined in one picture what history split into different times and events. . . . Hence the day of the Lord ran throughout the history of the kingdom of God so that it occurred in each particular judgment as evidence of its complete fulfillment which was near and approaching . . . having near and distant events, or multiple fulfillments, all being part of the single truth-intention of the author with its more immediate victory over Edom and the distant total victory of the kingdom of God.¹⁸

To summarize, Obadiah makes several contributions to the biblical pattern. It combines the near view (with particular reference to Edom, vv 1-14) with the far view (involving all the nations, vv 15-21). It predicts judgment and destruction of all the godless (vv 15-16, 18). The restoration of Israel is involved in the far view (vv 17-21) but is not evident in the near. The near is a preview, taste, and guarantee of what the far will involve in a lesser to a greater logical flow. Finally, the establishment of God's kingdom is its end (v 21).

Joel

General Observations

DOZ is mentioned five times in Joel (1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, and 3:14). The details in each passage are similar, but enough differences occur to suggest that Joel begins with a very narrow historical sample (a locust plague) and expands it to include a universal, eschatological application. Unless the interpreter understands this logic and the generic nature of this prophecy, Joel is unintelligible. In 1898 Terry noted that,

The exposition of Joel has been confused and rendered unintelligible by some because of their dogmatic prepossession of the idea that "the day of Jehovah" can only mean one definite and formal act of judgment at the end of all human history. But a true prophet of Israel would see a great and terrible day of Jehovah both in a plague of locusts and a destructive invasion of hostile armies that spread the terror of conquest over land and cities.¹⁹

¹⁸Kaiser, *Towards an Old Testament Theology*, 188-89.

¹⁹M. S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1898) 173.

More recently George Eldon Ladd felt the same tension. He explained that, "It is practically impossible to determine where the description of the natural disaster ends and that of the eschatological enemies begins."²⁰

There are three basic interpretations of the scope of Joel's prophecy. In the first, which might be called the allegorical/eschatological, the locusts of Joel 1 and 2 are interpreted to be Israel's future enemies in general. Some particularize the four kinds of locusts.²¹ Second, in what might be called the historical/eschatological view, Joel 1:1-2:17 refers to locusts while 2:18-3:21 refers to future human invaders.²² The third view is more complex and could be described as the historical/near eschatological/far view. According to this approach, the locusts in Joel 1 are real. A near future invasion under the figure of locusts is the subject of Joel 2:1-17. Joel 2:18-27 serves as a transition from the near to the far. Joel 2:28-3:21 looks to an eschatological end.²³ I believe this third view is correct.

Themes used by Joel in his description of DOL are picked up by later prophets. The following may be noted:

Joel 1:15	Destruction	cf. Isa 13:6
Joel 2:2	Day of Darkness	cf. Zeph 1:15
Joel 2:2	Day of Clouds	cf. Zeph 1:15, Ezek 30:3
Joel 2:2	Thick Darkness	cf. Zeph 1:15
Joel 2:11, 3:4	Great	cf. Zeph 1:14, Mal 4:5
Joel 2:31, 3:3-4	Cosmic Disturbances	cf. Isa 13:10
Joel 3:4	Terrible	cf. Mal 4:5

Specific Passages

The locusts of Joel are real locusts or grasshoppers which had recently played havoc with Judah's countryside. The fields were ravaged and the harvest ruined.²⁴ This vivid evidence of destruction is the basis for Joel to warn the nation that repentance is needed lest the DOL soon come with even greater destruction (1:15). The message of Joel 1 is that natural disasters like locust plagues are mere harbingers of imminent divine destruction.

²⁰G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 68.

²¹E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets* (reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 146; and Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 248.

²²W. K. Price, *The Prophet Joel and the Day of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 38; and Otto Schmoller, *The Book of Joel*, in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, ed. J. P. Lange (reprint: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 7. 14.

²³H. Hosch ("The Concept of Prophetic Time in the Book of Joel," *JETS* 15 [1972] 32-33, 38) presents this threefold model. This writer's own thinking was confirmed by Hosch.

²⁴The similar havoc wrought on Egypt by locusts in Exod 10:14-15 should be noted.

The warning of impending disaster and the past experience of the locusts in Joel 1 are used in Joel 2 to describe the future destruction caused by an invading human army. This could refer specifically either to the Assyrians in 701 B.C. or the Babylonians in 605 B.C., or it could refer generally to both. Joel 2 supplies further details involving the uniqueness (2:2), destruction (2:3), and military emphasis (2:4-11) of DOL. These impending disasters were used by Joel as the basis of an appeal for repentance (2:12-17).

As Joel's prophecy proceeds it grows in its intensity and scope. Joel 2:18-27 functions as a transition from the near view to the far view. The events that Joel predicts in 2:28-32 will be spectacular. There will be an outpouring of God's Spirit upon all mankind (2:28-29). Cosmic disturbances will flash God's greatness from the skies (2:30-31). Repentance will be available to everyone (2:33, cf. Obad 17).

Most significant in 2:31 is the statement that the great cosmic signs will be a *prelude* to DOL ("before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes"). This seems to limit DOL in time to the very end of the eschatological tribulation period if Joel 3:15, Matt 24:29 and Rev 6:12 refer to the same event. The DOL experience at the end of the eschatological tribulation will contain unmistakable manifestations of God's greatness. There will be both physical disturbances (cf. 2 Pet 3:10) and spiritual revival. Judgment and repentance are the main themes which are stressed. It should additionally be mentioned that Peter referred to this prophecy in his great Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:16-21). Also Paul cites Joel 2:32 in Rom 10:13 as he emphasizes the way of salvation.

Joel 3:14-16 climaxes Joel's DOL prophecy as it describes an international judgment in the presence of God (3:2, 3:14). It seems to anticipate a number of NT passages, including Matt 13:41-43, 49-50; 24:37-41; 25:31-46; 2 Thess 1:9; and Rev 14:17-20. All that the locusts of Joel 1:1-14 previewed will come to its final, climactic end in the valley of Jehoshaphat (3:12), the valley of decision (3:14). Joel 3:18-20 outlines the results of DOL.

Summary

Like Obadiah, Joel is a *locus classicus* for the study of the DOL. Joel combines a near, narrow perspective relating to Judah (1:15; 2:1; 2:11) with a far, wider perspective relating to the nations (2:31; 3:14). According to Joel, DOL involves judgment and destruction of the godless (3:13). The restoration of Israel is anticipated in the far view (3:18-20) but is not evident in the near. The near (1:15) is a preview, taste, or guarantee of what the far will involve (3:2, 14). Finally, Joel views the establishment of God's kingdom as the goal of DOL (3:18-20).

Amos

The DOL prophecy of Amos 5:18, 20 needs to be understood in its historical setting. The prophet wrote to the northern ten tribes (7:10) and to King Jeroboam, predicting their future exile to Assyria (5:27; 6:14; 7:9; 7:17).

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, accused Amos of conspiracy (7:10) and attempted to send Amos back to Judah. Amos's message of judgment conflicted with Amaziah's message of peace and prosperity. It was to Amaziah and those like him that Amos addressed his words in 5:18, 20. The people were doing evil (5:12) but nevertheless believed that the Lord was with them (5:14). God was not accepting their hypocritical sacrifices and worship (5:22). God demanded righteousness and condemned this hypocrisy (5:21-24).

These self-righteous Israelites longed mistakenly for the day of Yahweh's return which in their view would bring them blessing and prosperity. Amos's description of DOL was diametrically opposed to this view (5:18-20). According to Amos, DOL is not a day of delight but of darkness—a day of gloom not gladness. On this point Ladd observed,

The prophets often anticipate a divine visitation in the immediate future; therefore, they speak of the Day of the Lord. Amos's contemporaries entertained bright hopes of political security and economic prosperity, which they called the Day of the Lord. Amos shattered this shallow nonreligious hope with the announcement that the future holds disaster rather than security. Judgment will fall upon Damascus and the neighboring peoples; but it will also fall upon Judah and Israel for their sins. Fire will destroy Jerusalem (Amos 2:5), and Assyria and Egypt will raze Israel (3:9-11). This will be a divine visitation (4:12). "The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem" (1:2). It is therefore the Day of the Lord (5:18-20). God has indeed visited Israel in Egypt; and for this very reason he must bring a corrective judgment upon them (3:2).²⁵

The day that Amos envisioned was the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17). Amos stresses the inevitability of this destruction (5:19-20). In Amos, DOL is not used to portray the eschatological expression of God's judgment. However, Amos does anticipate God's intervention on behalf of Israel to reestablish his kingdom (9:11-15). Amos emphasizes only the near expectation of DOL. Ezekiel seems to follow the same pattern, as will be noted later.

²⁵Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 66.

Isaiah

Isa 2:12 is the first mention of DOL in Isaiah's prophecy. This chapter emphasizes the future establishment of God's kingdom (2:2-4), the present sinful state of Israel (2:5-9), and the future day of reckoning (2:10-22). The prophet appears to look beyond the near to the far future in the judgment emphasis of 2:10-22, just as he had looked to the eschatological kingdom in 2:1-4. There are several indicators of millennial conditions in 2:1-4 (cf. Rev. 20:1-6). Mt. Zion will be the world capital and all the nations will come to it (2:1-2) in order to seek God's word (2:3). God will judge between the nations and war will be no more (2:4-5). This eschatological emphasis in 2:2-4 makes it reasonable to conclude that eschatological judgment is in view in 2:10-22, rather than to God's chastisement of Judah by Assyria and Babylon.²⁶

DOL is described by Isaiah as a time of universal humiliation for all who are proud (2:11, 12, 17). In contrast, the splendor of God's majesty (2:10, 19, 21) will be displayed and the Lord *alone* will be exalted in that day (2:11, 17). Isaiah's portrayals of DOL here should be interpreted as referring to that time immediately preceding the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth. It is a day when God's majesty will be outwardly manifested (2:10, 19, 21), and the population will be driven in terror to caves for protection (2:21, cf. Rev 6:16-17).

The timing and terminology of Isa 2:21 are strikingly similar to the description of the sixth seal in Rev 6:16-17. If these passages are correlated, it can be concluded that the sixth seal is a part of DOL and occurs at the end of the Tribulation. The correlation also confirms that Isa 2:12 refers to the far future. As will be noted later, Zech 14:1 and Mal 4:5 also emphasize only the far eschatological implications of DOL.

Isaiah 13 is the next chapter to be considered. It is an oracle concerning Babylon. Isa 13:1-8 deals with God's use of Babylon as his instrument of indignation for the destruction of Israel (13:5-6). This reminds one of Habakkuk's dismay that God would do such a thing (Hab 1:2-4). The DOL was near in the mind of Isaiah (13:6), although it would not come for over one hundred years. It would be a day of destruction, terror, and pain (13:8). There is little doubt that this refers to the near eschatological event fulfilled by Babylon from 605-586 B.C.

However, there is good reason to believe that Isa 13:9-16 speaks of DOL implications for the far future. The near emphasis returns in

²⁶E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 1. 123, n 45 suggests that Isa 2:12 is eschatological.

13:17–22 where the end of Babylon is described. That the far future is described in 13:9–16 is shown by the cosmic disturbances (13:10, 13; cf. Matt 24:29; Rev 6:12–13; Joel 2:31) and the universal judgment of mankind (13:11; cf. 2:11–12). Ladd accurately describes the interplay of the near and far views:

These two visitations, the near and the far, or, as we may for convenience call them, the historical and the eschatological, are not differentiated in time. In fact, sometimes the two blend together as though they were one day. Isaiah 13 calls the day of the visitation of Babylon the Day of the Lord. The Lord is mustering a host for battle (13:4–6), he will stir up the Medes against Babylon (13:17). Therefore, men are to “wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!” (13:6). This historical Day of the Lord is painted against the backdrop of the eschatological Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will bring disaster to the earth and a disruption of the heavenly order (13:9–13). Judgment will fall both upon the world of nature and upon men (13:7) when God punishes the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity (13:11). Here is a picture of universal judgment. The Day of the Lord is the eschatological judgment of mankind; but the two are seen as though they were one day, one visitation of God.²⁷

Isa 13:6, 9 is therefore similar to other passages previously noted which portray the DOL in one context as both a near historical and a far eschatological happening.

Zephaniah

This seventh century B.C. prophet predicted God's judgment upon Judah (1:4). This DOL prophecy pictures Judah as the sacrifice (1:7) that is offered to God by the priest Babylon. Zephaniah begins with a broad, universal perspective (1:1–3), and then narrows his focus to the immediate situation of Judah (1:4–13). Finally he returns to the universal in 1:14–18. That 1:4–13 is limited to the near future judgment upon Judah is shown by the emphasis upon Jerusalem and Judah (1:4, 10–12) and by the lack of any broad, universalistic terminology. Yet 1:1–3 and 1:14–18 speak of a far, eschatological destruction of the whole earth (especially 1:2–3, 18). Thus it is clear that like Obadiah, Joel, and Isaiah who preceded him, Zephaniah also includes both the near and far eschatological views in one context.

In vivid terms, Zephaniah 1:14 portrays DOL as a day of wrath. He further describes it as characterized by trouble and distress,

²⁷Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 67.

destruction and desolation, darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness, and trumpet and battle cry. The five pairs effectively specify what is involved in DOL wrath. The sin of Judah is clearly shown to be the reason for this judgment (1:4-6, 9, 18).

It may be concluded that Zephaniah skillfully weaves two strands of prophecy—the near future and far eschatological. At times the strands appear as one, but careful study shows that they are distinguishable. Once again Ladd's summary may be noted:

Zephaniah describes the Day of the Lord (1:7, 14) as a historical disaster at the hands of some unnamed foe (1:10-12, 16-17; 2:5-15); but he also describes it in terms of a worldwide catastrophe in which all creatures are swept off the face of the earth (1:2-3) so that nothing remains (1:18). Yet out of universal conflagration emerges a redeemed remnant (2:3, 7, 9), and beyond judgment is salvation both for Israel (3:11-20) and for the Gentiles (3:9-10).²⁸

Ezekiel

Ezekiel wrote in the midst of the near DOL judgment (13:5). He was taken captive to Babylon in 597 B.C. when Jehoiachin was exiled (1:2). Ezekiel 13 was written in 592 B.C., six years after the second phase of a three phase deportation which was finalized in 586 B.C. Here Ezekiel prophesied against false prophets (1-16) and prophetesses (17-23). They had prophesied from their own hearts (13:2) and preached an imaginary 'peace' when in fact there was no peace (13:10). Ezekiel indicts them for being like foxes among ruins (13:4). Instead of fortifying the wall, they tunneled underneath it.²⁹ They plastered the wall with whitewash in order to give the wall the appearance of strength (13:10-15). Yet God's judgment (described as rain, hail, and wind) would tear down the wall (13:10-15). Ezekiel was the only prophet who wrote during his experience of the near DOL. Later Jeremiah looked back on Jerusalem after the near DOL and cried out in terms reminiscent of DOL prophecies (Lam 2:22). It seems best to understand DOL in Ezekiel 13 as a reference to the time from the beginning of Judah's deportation in 605 B.C. to Jerusalem's razing in 586 B.C. Ezekiel 13, like Amos, speaks only about the near (in this case, present) DOL.

Writing later on in 570 B.C. (29:17), Ezekiel noted a DOL with respect to Egypt's demise (29:19-20). It is strikingly similar to Obadiah's prophecy against Edom. The fall of Jerusalem served as the historical verification for the Egyptians that what Ezekiel wrote would come to pass. God's instrument was to be Nebuchadnezzar,

²⁸Ibid., 67.

²⁹Keil, *Minor Prophets*, 165.

king of Babylon (30:10, cf. Zeph 1:7-13) in 568 B.C. Not only Egypt, but also all of the nations aligned with her were to be toppled (30:4-6).

The far eschatological application to all nations is never explicitly made in Ezekiel as in Obad 15-21. Yet Feinberg suggests that such an application may be assumed. The day of God's judgment on Egypt may be identified in principle with that day when he will call all nations to account.³⁰ Jer 46:1-26 deals similarly, yet in greater detail, with the fall of Egypt.

Zechariah

Zechariah is the first post-exilic prophet to speak explicitly of DOL. Because the Assyrian and Babylonian judgments were history, Zechariah's entire prophecy deals with the far eschatological expectation. His subject in chap. 14 is DOL and its subsequent results. The chapter states that things will get worse (14:2, 5) before they get better (14:1, 14). God will then intervene against the nations and fight on Israel's behalf (14:3-5, 12-13). This pictures Christ's return at Armageddon (cf. Joel 3, Matthew 24, Revelation 19) to establish his millennial kingdom and to claim his rightful place on the throne of David. Zechariah 14 should be read in the light of Obad 15-21; Joel 2:28-3:21; Isa 2:12; 13:9; and Zeph 1:14.

Some have mistakenly interpreted Zechariah 14 in a non-eschatological manner. Leupold views it in a figurative continuous historical sense describing NT times.³¹ Laetsch believes that the passage is fulfilled in the Roman papacy.³² However, it must be insisted that nothing in history has yet come remotely close to fulfilling the cataclysmic and conclusive events which Zechariah predicts (14:6-11).

It is taught by some that DOL is a time of both judgment and blessing. The phrase 'that day' in Zechariah 14 is cited as evidence of this. The phrase appears seven times in Zechariah 14. In vv 4, 6, 13, and 21 it describes God's judgment, while in vv 8, 9, and 20 it does not really describe the blessings of DOL but rather events subsequent to DOL. In DOL contexts Joel 2:18-30 and 3:18-21 also speak of restoration and blessing for Israel. But such blessing is subsequent to DOL—not a part of it. Several observations support this view. First, every OT DOL passage speaks in a context of God's judgment upon sinful Israel. Second, the fulfillment of DOL in the near future sense never involved blessing. Third, not all of the passages that deal with

³⁰Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 173.

³¹H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971) 259.

³²1

DOL in the far eschatological realm mention blessing (cf. Isa 2:12; Isa 13:9; Zeph 14:1). Finally, DOL is always described as a day of God's anger and wrath, not a day of God's blessing. Thus it may be concluded that DOL is the time when God intervenes as the righteous judge to impose and execute his decreed punishment. After the eschatological DOL fulfills God's judgments, God will reign on earth and bless his people. The blessings which are an attendant feature of DOL are chronologically consequent to it, not inherent within it.

Malachi

The great and terrible day of Mal 4:5 (cf. Joel 2:11, 31; Zeph 1:14) is described in 4:1-3. It is clearly a day of judgment, as the references to furnaces, fire, chaff and ash clearly show. It points to the end of the eschatological tribulation period when the wrath of the Lamb and Almighty God will poured out (cf. Rev 6:16-17, 16:14).

CONCLUSION

Summary

God's servants the prophets spoke of DOL as both near historical and far eschatological events. In many passages there is a movement from the near to the far DOL. This relationship between near and far can be seen in Obadiah, Joel, Isaiah and Zephaniah. Beecher commented, "the prophets thought of the day of Yahweh as generic, not occasions which would occur once for all, but one which might be repeated as circumstances called for it."³³ Kaiser, who has been influenced by Beecher, similarly explains that, "that final time would be climactic and the sum of all the rest. Though the events of their own times fitted the pattern of God's future judgment, that final day was nevertheless immeasurably larger and more permanent in its salvific and judgmental effects."³⁴

DOL prophecies were fulfilled in various ways. These included (1) the Assyrian deportment of Israel ca. 722 B.C. (Amos 5:18, 20), (2) the Assyrian invasion of Judah ca. 701 B.C. (Joel 1:15; 2:1; 2:11), (3) the Babylonian exile of Judah ca. 605-586 B.C. (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 13:6; Zeph 1:7; Ezek 13:5), (4) the Babylonian defeat of Egypt ca. 568 B.C. (Ezek 30:3), (5) the demise of Edom (Obad 1-14), and (6) the eschatological judgments of the tribulation period (Obad 15; Joel 2:31; 3:14; Isa 2:12; 13:9; Zech 14:1; Mal 4:5).

Specific fulfillments of DOL prophecies are detailed in Scripture. But the question arises whether there are DOL events which are not

³³Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*, 311.

³⁴Kaiser, *Towards an Old Testament Theology*, 191.

specifically named as such in Scripture. This is a difficult question because God has certainly intervened in human affairs on more occasions than the prophets specifically outline. The Genesis flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would seem to be cases in point. On the other hand, some seem to view every disaster in history as a DOL event. The solution to the question is to understand that the prophets were calling for present repentance in light of both a near historical judgment and an ultimate eschatological judgment. Feinberg provides a biblically balanced approach to this problem: "Some have interpreted the significant phrase [DOL] to mean any time in which God's judgments are experienced on earth. Although such an interpretation will allow for all the references to be included under it, nevertheless it empties the words of their well-known eschatological force."³⁵

The prominent theme of every DOL prophecy is God's judgment of sin. The blessings of God's reign are subsequent to and a result of the DOL, but they are not a part of it.

Imminency often characterizes DOL. In Joel 1:15; 2:1; Isa 13:6; Zeph 1:7; and Ezek 30:3, near historical fulfillments are prominent. The far event is described as "near" in Obad 15; Joel 3:14; and Zeph 1:14. In the prophets' minds, the event was certainly coming and would one day occur in the indeterminate future. DOL judgments are poured out on individual nations, such as Edom, Egypt and its allies, and Israel. Yet such judgments will one day be inflicted upon all of the nations according to Obad 15 and Zech 14:1. Tasker has written this lucid summary:

The expression "the day of the Lord" at the time of the rise of the great prophets of Israel denoted an event to which the Israelites were looking forward as the day of Jehovah's final vindication of the *righteousness of His people* against their enemies. One of the tasks of the prophets was to insist that in fact "the day of the Lord" would be a day on which God would vindicate "*His own righteousness*" not only against the enemies of Israel, but also against Israel itself. This "day of the Lord" throughout Old Testament prophecy remains a future reality, though there were events within the history covered by the Old Testament story which were indeed days of judgment both upon Israel and upon the surrounding nations which had oppressed her.³⁶

Ladd has eloquently stated the historical-eschatological tension which pressed and pulled at the prophet. His comments are worth noting:

³⁵Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 172.

³⁶R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale, 1951) 45.

In all of these prophecies, history and eschatology are so blended together as to be practically indistinguishable. Sometimes, however, the eschatological Day stands in the background on the distant horizon.³⁷

The prophets viewed the immediate historical future against the background of the final eschatological consummation, for the same God who was acting in history would finally establish his Kingdom. Therefore, the Day of the Lord was near because God was about to act; and the historical event was in a real sense an anticipation of the final eschatological deed, for it was the working of the same God for the same redemptive purpose. The historical imminence of the Day of the Lord did not include all that the Day of the Lord meant; history and eschatology were held in a dynamic tension, for both *were the Day of the Lord*. This bond was broken in the apocalypses. Eschatology stood in the future, unrelated to present historical events. The God of eschatology was no longer the God of history.³⁸

Proposed Pattern

The DOL is a biblical phrase used by God's prophets to describe either the immediate future or the ultimate eschatological consummation.³⁹ It is not a technical term in the sense that it always refers only to one event in God's plan.

It may designate a divinely-sent locust plague (Joel 1:15) or the providential fall of Babylon (Isa 13:6) or of Jerusalem (Zeph 1:14-15, 18; 2:1); and in one given context it may describe first a judgment and then a corresponding deliverance (compare with the above prophecies Joel 3:14, 18 and Zeph 3:8, 11, 16; cf. also Obad 15, 17; Zech 14:1, 9-11).⁴⁰

DOL is used to describe several events and is limited only by its mention in biblical revelation. Each appearance of DOL must be interpreted in its context to determine whether the prophet expected the immediate historical act of God or Yahweh's ultimate eschatological visitation.⁴¹ DOL is not bound to a definite time duration. It could last only for hours or it could continue for days. Only context can determine DOL longevity, and even then only general approximation can be made.

³⁷Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 68.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 320.

³⁹Beecher (*The Prophets and the Promise*, 130) defines a generic prophecy as one which "regards an event as occurring in a series of parts, separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language that may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter part, or to the whole - in other words, a prediction which, in applying to the whole of a complex event, also applies to some of its parts."

⁴⁰Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ*, 60.

⁴¹Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 74.

Contribution to NT Studies

Theology is a descriptive term applied to a systematization of biblical data. Therefore, it should be continually subject to change and sharpening where Scripture warrants. DOL is one aspect of theology which needs meaningful review and rethinking. A refined understanding of the OT DOL data bears fruit for NT studies.

As a result of this study of DOL in OT, I suggest that there are two periods of DOL yet to be fulfilled on earth: (1) the judgment which climaxes the tribulation period (2 Thess 2:2; Rev 16–18), and (2) the consummating judgment of this earth which ushers in the new earth (2 Pet 3:10–13; Rev 20:7–21:1). I would also suggest that DOL will occur only at the end of the tribulation period, not throughout its duration, and that DOL will occur only at the end of the millennium, not throughout its duration.

This study concludes where an attendant study should begin. That study would examine DOL in the NT in the light of what has been learned from the OT. In my view, the traditional dispensational definition of DOL beginning at the pretribulation rapture and extending throughout the millennium⁴² or beginning with Christ's second coming and extending through the millennium⁴³ needs to be modified. The insight gained from the OT use of DOL provides a basis for a more accurate interpretation of Acts 2:20, 1 Thess 5:2, 2 Thess 2:2 and 2 Pet 3:10 and a stronger defense of both premillennialism and pretribulationism.⁴⁴

⁴²D. E. Hiebert (*The Thessalonian Epistles* [Chicago: Moody, 1971] 211) states that "the day of the Lord is inaugurated with the rapture of the church as described in 4:13–18, covers the time of the great tribulation, and involves His return to earth and the establishment of His messianic reign." Also E. Schuyler English, ed. (*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1372) has a note which says "It will begin with the translation of the church and will terminate with the cleaning of the heavens and the earth preparatory to the bringing into being of the new heavens and the new earth."

⁴³C. I. Scofield (ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909] 1349) believed that "The day of Jehovah (called, also, "that day" and "the great day") is that lengthened period of time beginning with the return of the Lord in glory, and ending with the purgation of the heavens and the earth by fire preparatory to the new heavens and the new earth (Isa 65:17–19; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1)." See also L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948) 4. 398 and V. R. Edmond, "The Coming Day of the Lord," in *Hastening the Day of God*, ed. by John Bradbury (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1953) 233. For other notable examples see G. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957) 410 and H. C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 507.

⁴⁴I concur with the words of C. E. Mason, Jr. (*Prophetic Problems and Alternate Solutions*, [Chicago: Moody, 1973] 325): "The writer is a great believer in free discussion among those of the premillennial, dispensational viewpoint and is of the conviction that much of our thrust has been blunted by arbitrary and stylized distinctions which are not a valid part of the view. In addition, there seems to be a hesitancy to debate such matters lest one be thought suspect in the house of his friends, if the result of his study should lead to the sacrifice of a sacred cow."