

Bible Survey Conference

The Day of the Lord

Preface

The Day of the Lord is a topic which touches so many of the other themes and concepts of scripture that it easily expands to vast proportions. It is not the intention of this paper to do full justice to this topic, but rather to provide an opportunity for me to begin such a study. Because of limitations of time and space I have tried to address only the leading components of this topic. Thus my conclusions must be regarded as somewhat tentative.

The Day of the Lord

Like the prophet Elijah during the reign of King Ahab, the Day of the Lord appears out of nowhere in the writing prophets and exerts an abiding influence which continues to the end of the canon. In light of the prominence this theme displays from the prophets onward it is curious that there is no trace of it beforehand, but neither I nor anyone I have encountered can offer an explanation for this. However, it is present, at least obliquely, in all the writing prophets except Jonah and Daniel. Even in Jonah and Daniel, although the term “Day of the Lord” or even “that day” is absent, the essential meaning of the term is present in full force. This study will briefly examine the meaning of the Day of the Lord as it unfolds chronologically.

To accomplish this goal will require a commitment to a chronology of the books, a feat which is certain to invite challenges from all sides. To avoid a prolonged argument about this, we will simply consider the pre-exilic prophets as a group, then the exilic, and the post-exilic each as a group as well. The only difficulty may be with Joel, for which a late date is favored by Dillard and Longman¹. While their arguments are weighty, I am not convinced, and so, with other evangelical commentators, will consider Joel with the pre-exilic prophets.

Pre-Exilic Prophets

The term “Day of the Lord” (יְוֹם יְהוָה) only occurs three times in Isaiah², yet the book is full of references to “that day” and various other formulations denoting the same thing. In chapter 2, verse 12 it is a day of terror and the revelation of God’s glory (v. 10), when “the lofty looks of man shall be humbled”³ (v. 11). The Lord shall come upon everything – there will be no escape then – to destroy the idols and the haughtiness of man and to reveal His glory. Chapter 13 is still more graphic. It is a day of wailing, when God shall destroy the whole land (v. 6). “Behold, the day of the Lord comes, Cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, To lay the land desolate...” (v. 9) In the following verse He introduces the cosmic imagery which often will be part of the description of the Day of the Lord. “For the stars of the heaven and their constellations will not give their light; The sun will be darkened in its going forth, And the moon will not cause its light to shine.” In chapter 34 it is “the day of the Lord’s vengeance” against *all* the nations. It is a day of God’s fury, when his sword is drenched with blood. The heavens will be destroyed and the earth utterly wasted. But Isaiah is also interwoven with prophecies of the restoration of God’s people. This period

¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994) p. 367.

² Isaiah 58:13 does not contain *yom* in the Masoretic text.

³ All scripture quotes are from the New King James Bible unless otherwise indicated.

is never called “the Day of the Lord,” but the “latter days” (2:2) or “that day” (11:10, 11). So Isaiah’s Day of the Lord is a future event characterized by frightening judgment and destruction, but there is the hope of restoration afterwards.

Amos continues in a similar vein. To a people who were expecting God’s favor he said, “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light” (5:18). After Obadiah prophesies the destruction of Edom, he declares, “For the day of the Lord upon all the nations is near....they shall be as though they never had been” (1:15-16). Zephaniah also announces the imminence of the day and he adds the elements of clouds and trumpet. “The great day of the Lord is near; It is near and hastens quickly....That day is a day of wrath, A day of trouble and distress, A day of devastation and desolation, A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of trumpet and alarm...” (1:14-16). Joel seems to use all the images noted so far, and others to warn of an imminent judgment (2:1-11). Fear, fire, clouds, darkness, war, destruction, and cosmic upheaval are all part of this Day. Joel is unique, however, in using the Day of the Lord to denote a time of blessing (2:28-32). But there is a very significant difference to this Day of the Lord – it is not close at hand, but “afterward,” and as Peter showed, pointed to the New Covenant era.

The pre-exilic prophets, then, foresaw a Day of the Lord which was imminent and terrible, a judgment of total destruction upon Israel and the other nations for their wickedness. The images commonly used: fire, clouds, darkness, war, destruction, and cosmic upheaval, harken back to God’s appearance on Mt. Sinai and indicate that the Day of the Lord is characterized by the arrival and presence of God. Israel could not approach God at Sinai without perishing (Ex. 19:12-13), and now when God returns in His power and glory she shall perish for her continual sins. The frequent and emphatic statements about the nearness of the Day, especially (as we shall see) in contrast to the absence of any such temporal reference after the exile, require us to see this Day as something that would happen within the current generation or the next. Clearly this Day of the Lord is the invasion of foreign armies, destruction of the nation, deportation, and exile.

Ezekiel also prophesies the Day of the Lord using the same images as the pre-exilic prophets, but only in the first half of his book. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple there is no further mention of the Day of the Lord. Instead he focuses on the blessings to come in the restoration.

Post-Exilic Prophets

“The Day of the Lord” occurs only twice in the post-exilic prophets, and then without any reference to a near arrival. Zechariah is full of references to “that day” in the context of future messianic blessings. ““Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst”, says the Lord of hosts. ‘Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people.’” (2:10-11a) He prophesies a Day in which the iniquity of the land will be removed (3:9) and there will be peace and prosperity. There will come a Day when God will remember His covenant and restore Israel. “The Lord their God will save them in that day, As the flock of His people.” (9:11-17) Chapter 14 opens with the declaration, “Behold, the day of the Lord is coming...” It is a tumultuous time and Israel will suffer, but “the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations” (v. 3) and make a way of escape for His people. “The Lord shall be King over all the earth” and “Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited.” (vv. 9, 11) Furthermore, God will strike Israel’s enemies with a terrible plague and deliver their booty to His own people (vv. 12-14).

The Old Testament climax of the Day of the Lord theme is found in Malachi. Malachi wrote to a people who had received the blessings promised in the earlier prophecies of restoration, at least some of them, but had become hardened and ungrateful. Like Amos’ audience, they purported to seek the Lord, but in reality their hearts were on the pursuit of personal gain. Apparently they talked much about desiring the

Lord to come, but were unaware that they could not “endure the day of his coming.” (3:2) Presumably they sought the Lord to destroy their enemies, but failed to grasp that *they* had become His enemies by their disobedience. The Old Testament proclamation of the Day of the Lord is delivered with crystal clarity in chapter 3. The previous images are pared down to just one (fire) and the focus is significantly sharpened. The Day of the Lord is when God comes to judge and purify the earth. This was always true. The Babylonian armies were God’s agents to purify Israel and produce a remnant ready to serve Him. When they came, God came. Malachi just drives right to the point. The Lord Himself comes to judge and purify, and to highlight this latter point, he introduces the metaphor of refining and laundering.

Then, in a final blaze of glory, the Day of the Lord is explicitly and comprehensively expounded in chapter four. It will be a “great and dreadful day.” (v. 5) God himself will come (v. 6) as a fire (v. 1) to burn up the wicked and save the righteous. The wicked shall be tormented (v. 3), but the righteous shall be blessed with abundance (v. 2).

It is important to note that many of the passages in the pre-exilic prophets that predict the Day of the Lord emphasize its proximity. Over and over again it is said to be near (קָרוֹב). However, none of the passages that were written after the fall of Jerusalem say the Day is near. They say it is coming without specifying a time, although Malachi does include the information about the messenger and the return of Elijah as preceding the Day. Clearly, then, the Day of the Lord in view after the exile must further off than before the exile. Before the exile, the Day had been predicted one or two generations before it came. To what does it refer in the post-exilic writings?

Zechariah 14 is more complex than Malachi and it is not possible to consider all the material there. My best judgment is that it refers to the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The mention of war in Jerusalem (v. 2-3), the Palestinian geography (v. 4-5), the people suffering and fleeing (v. 5), the living waters flowing from Jerusalem to the nations (v. 8), the universal rule of the Lord (v. 9), the destruction of God’s enemies (v. 12-15), the nations coming to worship the King (v. 16), and the holiness of the people (v. 20-21) all seem to indicate Christ’s decisive triumph over apostate Judaism and the permanent opening of the church to the Gentiles that occurred when the temple was destroyed. Malachi, however, is simpler, and benefits from explicit New Testament interpretation. Mark 1:2 identifies John the Baptist as the messenger of Malachi 3:1, which points to Jesus as the Lord coming in judgment. To the dismay of the Jews, Jesus came as the Messenger of the Covenant (Mt. 5:17-20) who convicted them of sin (John 5:45). He came suddenly to the temple and purified it, but the people could not endure His coming. Consequently, He smote them with a curse (Mark 11:12-14, 20-24), yet He saved his own. There can be no doubt; the Day of the Lord in Malachi is the coming of Christ.

The Old Testament prophets predicted two distinct events called the Day of the Lord: the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, and the ministry of Christ. The essence of both was the arrival of God in power and glory to judge and purify the earth. Both were terrifying because no man can endure the presence of the Lord. Both involved the destruction of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous. In both cases the righteous emerged as a remnant of Israel and added the nations to their number. The essential difference is the greater glory of the latter Day. In the former God came in ordinary human agents, in the latter He came in His own extraordinary human body. The purifying effects of the first, while real, were far less efficacious than the sanctifying work of Christ. The Jews incorporated proselytes from all over the world, but nothing like the ingrafting of the Gentiles in Christ. The blessings of the first pale in comparison to those of the second.

New Testament

Moving to the New Testament, the Gospels unfold the fulfilment of the prophecies in Malachi, but

it is not until Acts and the day of Pentecost that Joel's prophecy is fulfilled. This raises the question as to precisely when the Day of the Lord spoken of with regard to Christ took place: the life of Christ, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, or Pentecost. A compelling case could be made for each; indeed, they all are necessary parts of the work of Christ. It seems best, therefore, to consider the Day of the Lord realized by Christ as a package of all these.

But after Pentecost had passed, we still find an expectation of the Day of the Lord. In most instances it is mentioned almost in passing in connection with a comment on the sanctification of Paul's readers (1 Cor. 1:8, 5:5; 2 Cor. 2: 1:14; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16). Even these brief notices make clear, however, that judgment is part of the Day of the Lord, in that the concern for sanctification is in reference to the state of the readers on that Day. Furthermore, since Christ has been revealed as the Lord, this Day just as easily may be designated the Day of Christ. But other passages provide more detail. In Thessalonians the coming of Christ is portrayed with a trumpet and clouds. 2 Peter 3 describes a Day of fire and cosmic collapse, and Revelation 16:14 mentions the Day of God in the context of the battle against his enemies. All three books include judgment, destruction of God's enemies, and the salvation of His people as components of the Day of the Lord thus exhibiting continuity with the Old Testament Day of the Lord. The actual event must be different, however, for the Day foretold in the Old Testament had already passed. It is also notable that there is no indication that this New Testament Day is near. 2 Thessalonians emphasizes that the Day has not passed yet (thus unambiguously distinguishing it from the Day fulfilled in Christ) and reminds the reader that a great apostasy will occur and the "man of lawlessness" will appear before that Day. 1 Thessalonians urges us to be vigilant and always ready for the coming of Christ, but offers no suggestion as to when he might arrive. Perhaps it is this exhortation to preparedness along with the discussion of our meeting Christ in chapter 4 which has led many to think Paul believed Christ would come within his lifetime, but the text will not bear such a conclusion. These passages (with the possible exception of 2 Peter 3) have to be interpreted in conjunction with others dealing with the final return of Christ at the end of time and the judgment then (e.g. Mt. 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15), as the church always has.

But there is another aspect to the Day of the Lord in the New Testament. Having noticed that the essential character of the Day of the Lord is His coming in judgment, we are alerted to the New Testament use of *parousia*. This word was used for the arrival of ordinary people (e.g. 1 Cor. 16:17, etc.) but had a special application for royalty. "From the Ptolemaic period to the second century A.D. there is clear evidence that the term was used for the arrival of a ruler, king or emperor."⁴ "Josephus uses the term *parousia* for the divine appearances in the Old Testament theophanies."⁵ Four specific incidences of the use of *parousia* stand out: Mt. 24:37; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Thess. 2:1; and 2 Peter 3:12; for in these cases *parousia* is linked with the Day of the Lord. The latter three passages have already been discussed, but Mt. 24 sheds new light on this topic.

The theme of this Olivet Discourse is the *parousia* of Christ, in response to the question of the disciples about when it would occur. Many of the images of the Day of the Lord are here: warfare, destruction of God's enemies, the salvation of His people, cosmic upheaval, clouds, and trumpet blast. Then in verse 36 Jesus refers to his coming as a Day. By its character, by the meaning of *parousia*, and by association of *parousia* with the Day terminology, we are led to see this as the Day of the Lord even though that term is not used in this passage. Here, however, there *is* a temporal marker – several, in fact. There will be

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) p. 150.

⁵ Ibid. p. 151.

particularly terrible tribulations and desolations, yet the Gospel will go all over the empire.⁶ (vv. 6-14) The “abomination of desolation” will stand in the holy place and false christs will arise (vv. 15-28). There will be political and social turmoil (the customary meaning of cosmic upheaval imagery) (vv. 29-30), clouds (v. 30), and a trumpet blast (v. 31), all which will signal the arrival of Christ. But the most striking marker is the assertion that all this will take place within the current generation (v. 34). Here again there are some complex issues which are outside the scope of this paper, as some reasonably interpret the Olivet Discourse as mainly distant future, some as partly distant future and partly close at hand, and others as truly being fulfilled within the current generation.⁷ My inclination is toward the latter, especially because of the sharp contrast with the lack of temporal markers in the other New Testament passages on the Day of the Lord, and the striking similarity with the Day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament as soon to come. If this is the case, we are led to ask what event in the first century would satisfy the specifications of the text. The obvious choice is the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Conclusion

If the foregoing analysis of the Day of the Lord is correct, we can draw some further conclusions. In both the Old and the New Covenant there was a fairly brief period of time in which the Day of the Lord was prophesied. In both covenants there was an imminent Day in which God came through the agency of human armies, and a distant Day in which God came/will come in his own human body. The first coming was more physically devastating, but the second was by far more radical. The imminent Day raised and broke open dead Israel to live in holiness and to incorporate the nations,⁸ the distant Day created/will create a new home for God’s people.⁹ There appears to be a symmetry as God unfolds His redemptive plan in the Old and New Covenants.

What shall we conclude about the Day of the Lord? First, it is evidently not a single day, and not even a single event, but an action of God. VanGemenen says it is “an era of judgment and liberation, condemnation and justification, vindication and salvation, destruction and renewal.”¹⁰ It is the personal arrival and presence of God to judge and purify the earth, destroy His enemies, and save His people. Four specific instances in redemptive history can be identified as the Day of the Lord: the exile under Nebuchadnezzar, the ministry of Christ, the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and the final coming of Christ at the consummation of all things. The Day of the Lord thus is not just any exercise of His providential power, but is generally linked to an epochal shift in the administration of His covenant.

⁶ Empire seems to me a better translation of *oikoumene* than world. Allowed but not selected by B.A.G., p. 561.

⁷ Russell is one of several scholars who take this view. J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990) pp 66-114.

⁸ I.e. the exile and restoration period saw an increase in proselytes, and the destruction of the temple put an end to the Judaizing tendency in the early church.

⁹ I.e. the distant Day prophesied in the Old Covenant provided the church as a new home for God’s people, while the distant Day prophesied in the New Covenant will provide the new earth for us to inhabit.

¹⁰ Willem VanGemenen, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 451.

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C. David Green
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