**Hourglass Bible Study**

**Hebrews, Fall 2020**

**Commentary on “the Day of the Lord” by Rev. Merrill Woolnough**

INTRODUCTION

This presentation is shaped around my preparation to teach this material to an ongoing Bible study class of older adults in a retirement community. Unlike you, they would not have read the material in Chapter 19 of Witness of the Word; and unlike you, many will be unable to read the Bible and will depend on others in the class to do so. Some are life-long students of the Scriptures; others are new to Bible study. I keep to principles of preparation in mind for the teaching task.

* I bring all the exegetical savvy, theological thinking and scholarship I can muster to prepare a faithful presentation of the materials.
* My purpose is to open the Word of God for the edification of the saints, to strengthen their faith and to equip them to live as people of God in this community.

You are, therefore, hearing the preparation that would go into my Bible study preparation rather than the Bible study itself.

SCOPE

The scope of my preparation is the prophetic witness to the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament. I want to identify some of its characteristics and by so doing, differentiate it from apocalyptic literature and New Testament writing on the Parousia and individual judgment. Focusing on national accountability in the Old Testament runs the risk of distancing the prophetic witness from our experiences today. There is the danger that, in the popular Christian mind at least, the Day of the Lord becomes God’s judgement against ancient and modern Jewry.

GOD AND HISTORY

Today we consider the Day of the Lord or, in Hebrew, jowm Yahweh. To elucidate our understanding of this term, we will consider three passages: Amos 5:18-25, Zephaniah 1:14-18, and Zechariah 14:1-9.

The Day of the Lord has two major ideas in it: “day” and “Lord”. Paul. S. Minear explains the two parts this way.

This phrase combines a strictly temporal reference to the day and a reference to the eternal (Lord). This combination, quite typical of the Bible, is an apparent contradiction that can be resolved either by giving priority to the temporal component (whether day or year)—thus imprisoning God within the slots on human calendars—or prioritizing the eternal component by thinking of this day as chosen by God to fulfill his purposes.

*Oxford Companion to the Bible* 157.

The Day of the Lord occurs in time (not necessarily a twenty-four-hour period), and so we may say that it occurs in history. There is a time before the Day of the Lord and a time after it. But the Day of the Lord also concerns God who is Lord of time, is eternal, is beyond time itself. God breaks into our time to act upon the earth and its inhabitants. This is important because the Day of the Lord does not deal with last things, that is, eschatology.

AMOS

Please read Amos 5:18-25.

This is the first mention of the Day of the Lord in the Bible. Amos preached at Bethel and Dan in the northern kingdom of Israel around 760 B. C. E. It is clear that an idea of the Day of the Lord is already circulating among the people. Can you tell what it is?

According to popular belief, the Day of the Lord is a sunny day, a safe day, a day when the nation of Israel has nothing to fear. God will give Israel’s enemies their just comeuppance. After all, they think, God is on their side, right?

The saying about the lion and the bear may be a later prose addition to Amos’s poetic utterance. I like to think Amos is describing God as the lion and the bear. Amos refers to God as a lion (Amos 2:8), and Hosea, who prophesied in Israel at the same time, likened God to an angry mother bear who has been robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8). In any case, no one wants to encounter a lion, a bear, or be bitten by a snake.

Why is the Day of the Lord going to be a day of terror for Israel and not a day of safety?

God is not opposed to sacrifice—God gives instructions about an altar for sacrifice right after the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:24)—but God was upset at how the Israelites conducted their worship and their lives. Hughey E. W. Fosbroke writes the following.

[W]hereas popular opinion held that this final coming of God in power would redound to the advantage of the nation in its overthrow of all its enemies and the decisive establishment of Israel’s pre-eminence and privilege, the prophet knew that the vindication of the majesty of the righteous God must mean the destruction of a people who were not only oblivious of the pervasive evil in the national life that cried out for punishment, but in their self-centeredness could conceive of the final manifestation of divine omnipotence in the terms of their own exaltation. For Amos, the day of the Lord was indeed God’s day; for Israel it was in fact simply their day, so far had they gone in taking God into possession.

*Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VI, 817.

Eugene H. Peterson puts it more simply.

The people talked of wanting God at the same time they rejected the word of the man of God, Amos. They wanted to deal directly with God, not with his rude prophet. Well, they would deal with Him all right—and find some surprises.

*Praying with the Prophets*, November 5.

The people wanted easy intimacy with their God and forgot how their dread God had defeated the Egyptians at the Reed Sea and cared for them when they were totally dependent on God for everything in the wilderness. Because they no longer were faithful to God’s covenant, the Day of the Lord would mean Assyria’s destruction of the nation and deportation from the land God had promised Abraham and Sarah and into which God had led their ancestors.

Note that one dimension of the Day of the Lord is God’s judgement of the national faithfulness to the covenantal relationship. Note also that this judgement is of the nation, not individuals. God’s judgement is carried out by the political and economic forces of that time in history.

ZEPHANIAH

The prophet Zephaniah was active in Judah during the reign of Josiah. His oracles are dated around 625 B.C.E. before the Deuteronomic reforms beginning in 621 B.C.E. The international political scene was chaotic. With the death of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, in 627 B.C.E., unrest escalated. Outlying states, such as Judah under Josiah, were free to rebel without fear. The long domination of Judah by Assyria had put political pressure on Judah to worship Assyrian gods; corruption was rampant at all levels of society. Zephaniah did not see the weakening of Assyria’s grasp of its vassals and its eminent collapse as a day of joy. The state of affairs on the international and domestic fronts called for the day of God’s wraith, *dies irae*, the name of a famous Latin hymn.

Let’s read Zephaniah 1:14-18.

What can we learn about the Day of the Lord from this passage? The Day of the Lord Zephaniah sees comes upon all the inhabitants of the earth. Neither fortified cities nor bribes nor mercenaries can save the people who are described as sinners from destruction. The theme of darkness that we saw in Amos is repeated. Remember that the Judean sky is cloudless during half the year.

Here God is portrayed as the divine warrior. The concept of the day of the Lord has its roots in Israel’s tribal league (1220-1000 B.C.E.), when it was believed that God, the divine warrior, fought for Israel against its enemies. On that Day, the Israelites expected God to defeat all their enemies and to exalt Israel. The prophets upset this popular idea by declaring that the imminent Day would bring God’s judgment on the wicked in Israel as well, leaving only a faithful remnant (see Amos 5:18-20; Isa. 2:6-22; Ezek. 7:5-27; Joel 1:15; 2:1-11; Mal. 4:5). Thus the Day would be for Israel, too, a day of battle, wrath, darkness, and destructio. (*Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 743).

Later, Zephaniah will speak of this remnant. Here we see the old tradition of God, the mighty warrior, in the center of the fray. The description of God’s majesty and power praised in Psalm 97:2-5 may give a feel for how Zephaniah understood God as warrior; it brings to mind the words of the Battle Hymn of the Republic: “He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword.” God requires undivided allegiance—the first commandment (Exodus 20:2-6; Deuteronomy 5:6-10). The Day of the Lord is near and it will take place in history.

ZECHARIAH

My “Day of the Lord” handout from Dr. Bornemann’s Old Testament 201 class from the fall of 1993 dates Zechariah 14:1-9 to 250 B.C.E. We know nothing about the author of Zechariah 12-14 or the historical situation to which the prophet refers. We do know that Palestine was a pawn in the power struggles between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires. domination.

Let’s read Zechariah 14:1-9.

As fanciful as reshaping topography and re-ordering nature may sound, the prophet is telling of prophesies that will be fulfilled. Isaiah/Micah saw Mount Zion towering over its neighboring mountains (Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1). Second Isaiah’s saw God’s royal highway across the level plain (Isaiah 40:3). Ezekiel saw water flowing from the temple into the Dead Sea basin (Ezekiel 47:1). III Zechariah does him one better by having the water flow both east to the Dead Sea and west to the Mediterranean and even Deborah sang: “The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel” (Judges 5:5).

God preserves a faithful remnant. From the throne in the temple, God reigns over the whole earth. All peoples worship God alone (Deuteronomy 6:4) as God’s covenant requires. In a dry and often barren land, the promise of eternal spring must have seemed to be good news indeed.

CONCLUSION

Although our study today of the Day of the Lord has not been exhaustive, we can draw several conclusions about it:

* It is a day when God judges the nation’s faithfulness to God’s covenant with the nation. Individual judgement is not involved. Faithfulness is faithfulness to God and dealing justly with others.
* The Day of the Lord takes place in time, that is to say, history. Although even natural laws may be changed, the temporal universe continues to exist after the Day of the Lord.
* Through judgement or warfare, God establishes dominion and exercises sovereign rule over all the earth, changing the fundamental relationship between God and creation.
* The Day of the Lord is when God chooses to act either to condemn God’s people and the nations of the earth or to save them. God is not subject to history; God makes it in surprising ways.