The Day of the LORD in the Minor Prophets

Introduction

It seems the earliest use of “the day of the LORD” is found in Amos 5.18. The term had probably already been in popular use. Certainly, Amos had a particular historical context in mind as he prophesied and fully expected his hearers to understand his words. But the use of this and related phrases throughout Scripture indicate a widely held motif regarding the relationship of the Lord to his people, to the surrounding nations and to his eschatological purposes.

There were two main aspects to this day—judgment and blessing. By comparison considerably more weight is given to the judgment aspect in the Minor Prophets, but the promise of blessing is never too far from view. Of course, judgment and blessing immediately remind us of the covenantal structure under girding Scripture.

This paper will examine the use of “the day of the LORD” in the Minor Prophets to see how it gives focus to this covenantal structure and will draw on other portions of Scripture to fill out important related ideas.

1. The limits of the field for study

Robertson rightly contends that research into this theme should not be limited to the explicit form “the day of the LORD.” The concept can be seen in many closely related phrases such as, “in that day” (Zephaniah 1.9, 10), “a day of wrath” (Zephaniah 1.15), “a

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day is coming for the L ORD” (Zechariah 14.1), “on that day” (Zechariah 14.6, 8, 13), “the
day of his coming” (Malachi 3.2) and others. In order to better understand “the day of the
L ORD” we will need to expand the field to include these and similar phrases.

2. The origin of the Yom YHWH theme in Scripture

The question of the origin of this phrase has been much debated. Sigmund
Mowinckel traced it to a Babylonian celebration and associated “the day of the L ORD”
with the ritual of the New Year’s Festival, but this has been shown to rest on a faulty
analogy. More plausible is the connection between the day and the image of God as
heavenly warrior. This is the conclusion reached by Longman and Reid. They cite the
earlier work of Gerhard Von Rad and F.M. Cross that “the Day of Yahweh” is grounded
in the Holy War tradition and the military language that often accompanies it (cf.
Zechariah 14.1-2). Looking back to the song of Moses that followed the miracle at the
Red Sea, they pick up on the designation of the L ORD as a “man of war” and see it as the
motif that fits best with “the day of the L ORD” imagery (Exodus 15.3).

But another approach can be seen in Kaufmann’s association of the reference in
Deuteronomy 32.35-36 with “the day of YHWH.” “Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their
doom comes swiftly. For the L ORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his
servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free”

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3 Cited in Tremper Longman III and Daniel Reid, God is a Warrior, Zondervan, Grand
Rapids, 1995, p. 69.
4 Ibid, p. 70.
5 Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, University of Chicago Press, Chicago,
1960, p. 281.
(emphasis added). This points toward Robertson’s suggestion that it is in a covenantal framework that we can best understand “the day of the LORD.”

3. “The Day of the LORD” in Zephaniah

We will start with Zephaniah because he centers on “the day of the Lord” more consistently than any other prophet (with the possible exception of Joel). But even more importantly, the covenantal nature of this theme is most clearly portrayed in his prophecy.

Zephaniah helpfully tells us that he prophesied in the days of Josiah (1.1). Taking this on its face presents us with the important datum that Zephaniah’s word came following the reform movement instituted by the last good king of Judah. The Book of the Law had been rediscovered by the high priest Hilkiah who then had it delivered to the king (2 Kings 22). When Josiah read the book he was immediately convicted and repentant and began to make changes. But it was too little, too late. We may suppose that Zephaniah prophesied against the backdrop of the rediscovered Deuteronomic code. The parallels are remarkable. “The description of syncretism in Zephaniah 1 is very close to that in 2 Kings 23, and I have also found in it echoes of Deuteronomy 4.17-19.”

The prophets of Yahweh served a dual role as prosecutors of the Mosaic covenant and heralds of the blessings of the Abrahamic (new) covenant of grace. Recalling the covenantal nature of God’s relationship with his people, we note that the structure of covenant was widely understood in the ancient world. A great king would enter into an

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7 ESV Study Bible, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, p. 1729.
agreement with a lesser king according to a mutual understanding that required obedience to set obligations. If the vassal obeyed, he would enjoy the beneficence of the greater king. But if he rebelled and disobeyed the stipulations of the covenant, he would be warned and if there was no change, he would be judged/punished.  

Zephaniah’s words clearly reflect this covenantal understanding—not only the covenant with Moses, but also those with Noah and Abraham.

God established a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9.9 ff.). He promised that never again would “all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood….” Before this terrible event occurred, He had said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens …” (6.7). This language is similar to Zephaniah 1.2-3: “‘I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,’ declares the LORD.” As Berlin noted (above), this seems to be very similar to Deuteronomy 4 where the people are warned against crafting idols “… in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth” (Deuteronomy 4.16 ff.).

In Genesis 15, Abraham was instructed to cut sacrificial animals lengthwise and walk between them as a self-maledictory statement. This cutting activity gives us the word for covenant. Then he fought off the birds of prey that came to feed on the

9 Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 27-44.
carcasses. The prophet uses similar language with regard to the day of the LORD (Zephaniah 1.7-8). There are other passages that associate feasting by birds to demonstrate the curse that follows failure to obey the terms of the covenant (cf. Jeremiah 7.33; 16.4; 19.7). Like Abraham, Rizpah’s efforts to prevent the birds from eating the exposed corpses of her sons (2 Samuel 21.10) demonstrate her devotion to them, for to allow them to be eaten by birds would be a further manifestation of curse. Ezekiel tells us God will summon birds of every sort to the great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel (Ezekiel 39.17 ff.). And this finds its counterpart in Revelation 19.17-18 at the final eschatological battle.

In addition to these allusions to the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants, Zephaniah announces that “The great day of the LORD is near … A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast …” (1.14-16a). This imagery immediately reminds us of Sinai (Deuteronomy 5.22; Exodus 19.9, 16-19; 20.18).

As Robertson sums up, “These references center on the coming day of the LORD that is declared by the prophet to be near (Zephaniah 1.7). God’s awesome presence that threatened judgment at the time of covenant inauguration in the past now anticipates the coming judgment of the great and awesome Day of the LORD.”\(^\text{10}\)

But in spite of this fearsome prospect, there is hope. Zephaniah 2.2 exhorts, “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his just commands, seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.” And 3.12 says, “But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek

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refuge in the name of the LORD.” This prompts the gracious and joyful announcement that “The Lord your God is in your midst … he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you with his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (3.17).

This also raises an important consideration concerning “the day of the Lord.” It has two aspects. It is a day of judgment for those who sin against God. But it is also a day of blessing for those who obey Him. And this squares with our understanding of the prophetic function. As prosecutors of the covenant lawsuit, the prophet presses the claims of Yahweh and threatens judgment for disobedience. But as heralds of the new covenant blessings, they announce peace to that remnant that follows God.

4. “The Day of the LORD” in Joel

Turning now to the other minor prophet who majors on “the day of the LORD,” Robertson is again helpful. He states that Joel contains a number of elements that tie this concept together. They are: 1) God’s judgment on God’s land and people; 2) God’s call to repent and return; 3) creation supernaturally restored by God’s grace; and 4) all nations of the world judged.11

The same dual purposes of judgment and blessing noted above are in view in this prophetic book.12 In the first of two parts, Joel 1.1-2.17 features “the day of the Lord” as a day of judgment and calls God’s people to repentance. In this section His judgment on His land and His people take the form of a locust plague. That this judgment relates to covenant sanctions is clear from the striking parallels found with the book of

Deuteronomy. For example, among the curses threatened for disobedience to the
covenant we find, “You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for
the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall
neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them…. The
 cricket shall possess all your trees and the fruit of your ground” (Deuteronomy 28.38-39,
42). Compare this with Joel 1.4: “What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has
eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping
locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.”

The language of Joel 2.1-2 further intensifies the connection with the covenant at
Sinai. “The day of the L ORD” is described as “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of
clouds and thick darkness,” once again reminding us of the time of covenant inauguration
designed to show the awesomeness of the Covenant L ORD.

The call to repentance (Joel 2.12 ff.) is in keeping with the prophet’s role which is
to urge God’s covenant people to honor their covenant responsibilities. The fear
associated with “the day of the L ORD” is intended to encourage sincere contrition (2.13)
because, “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind
…” (2.14). Such encouragement is warranted because the L ORD “… is gracious and
merciful, slow to anger and abounding in chesed …” (2.13; cf. Exodus 34.6—God’s own
comment on His covenant name).

The second half of the book presents the blessing of a restored creation (2.18-27)
and a universal anointing, as the L ORD pours out His Spirit on all flesh. And everyone
who calls on the name of the L ORD will be saved! (2.28-32; cf. Acts 2.16-21). This
anointing requires that there be an Anointed One, a Messiah. So, a gospel message is proclaimed to all nations.

But for those who will not repent, Joel points to a future day of judgment, an eschatological day of the LORD. On this day Joel announces that God will gather all the nations to the Valley of Jehoshaphat in order to enter into judgment with them (3.2). He will do this in conjunction with His goal to restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, His people. Thus we see that an essential part of blessing His people involves judging their enemies.

King Jehoshaphat, facing the threat of a combined enemy force, sought the Lord and proclaimed a fast (note the repeated calls in Joel to consecrate a fast, Joel 1.14; 2.15). God supernaturally delivered His people by routing the enemy who had assembled in a valley for battle (2 Chronicles 20). Joel, likely recalling this, indicates that God will again judge the nations that oppose His covenant people. “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the Day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision” (Joel 3.14). This anticipates another day spoken of in Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 16 and other places when there is a great and final judgment “day of the LORD.”

5. Amos and “the Day of the LORD”

What is distinctive of Amos’ use of this expression is that it seems that the people of Israel, to whom he prophesied, were looking forward to this day. Apparently they saw it as a time when God would come and judge Israel’s enemies, which is true. But Amos strongly rebukes such a shortsighted understanding. “Woe to you who desire the day of
the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD?” (Amos 5.18). It is not only a day of judgment for God’s enemies, for judgment begins at the house of God.

Amos prophesied to Israel during a time of prosperity. Religious formalism cloaked an underlying decadent culture. The prophet pronounced three ‘woes’ upon them for 1) carrying on a show of religious activity without regard for justice; 2) complacency and 3) self-indulgence.¹³

In addition, Amos brings a message of certain exile.¹⁴ This threatened judgment takes its point from the language of Deuteronomy (28.64 ff.) reminding us again that “the day of the LORD” is bound up with the covenant. In verses 18 and 20 Amos further informs his hearers that “the day of the LORD” would bring darkness and gloom. “The motif of darkness, literally (8.9) and figuratively (see Isaiah 9.1) becomes a vivid part of the ‘Day of the Lord’ in prophetic literature. Here the contrasting ‘darkness, not light,’ comes to emphasize the doom and calamity in store for Israel.”¹⁵

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins” (Amos 3.1-2). Such punishment is disciplinary for God’s people, not a sign of total rejection. So, though almost the entirety of Amos speaks of judgment, there is a spark of hope at the end. The booth of David that is fallen, God will raise up in that day. This is so that “they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the Lord who does this” (Amos 9.12, emphasis added). The allusion to “possessing the remnant of Edom” will be picked up by Obadiah in the next canonical book. But the idea here is that God will restore Israel and not only Israel

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¹³ ESV Study Bible, op. cit., p. 1668.
¹⁴ Robertson, The Christ of the Prophets, op. cit., p. 207.
but all those Gentiles who belong to God. This is the passage quoted by James in Acts 15 understood as granting legitimacy to the gospel mission to the Gentiles.

6. “The Day of the LORD” in Obadiah

This shortest of the prophetic books seems almost wholly concerned with Edom, Israel’s brother and neighbor to the East. Because of its pride (verse 3) and its actions toward Israel (10) judgment is pronounced. Verse 15 provides the core of this book:16 “The day of the Lord is near upon all the nations.” The remainder of this verse sets out the *lex talionis* principle of Leviticus. Two things to note in this are: 1) that the day is near upon all the nations, not just Edom. Edom and her sins are illustrative of all the nations that reject the Lord in pride and oppress His people; 2) the day is near. This is a point frequently made by other prophets, as well (Joel 1.15; 3.14; Zephaniah 1.7, 14; Isaiah 13.6; Ezekiel 30.3). This warning of imminence adds a sense of urgency to these prophecies. There is no place for complacency in the face of impending judgment.

And yet, in spite of the weight of the material pointing to judgment, there is still hope. For Obadiah concludes with a hint at salvation for a remnant of Edom. Recall Amos 9.12 “… that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name…” Similar language is found in Obadiah 19, “Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau, and those of the Shephelah shall possess the land of the Philistines; they shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria, and Benjamin

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shall possess Gilead.” Thus the remnant from Edom is among those called by the Lord’s name.¹⁷

7. Post-exilic Prophets and “That Day”

Moving to the period after the exile, the phrase, “on that day” occurs in Zechariah fourteen times in the last three chapters. In Malachi the question is asked, “Who can endure the day of His coming and who can stand when He appears?” (Malachi 3.2) “For behold, the day is coming … the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (Malachi 4.1, 5). Again we see the connection of “the day” with the covenant at Sinai as Malachi exhorts, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (Malachi 4.4). Their obedience is still required.

But judgment for covenant breaking has already taken place. The exile is in the past and a feeble remnant has returned by the time of Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. Now the day of the Lord takes on a more eschatological character. This can be seen in the many messianic prophecies found in the late chapters of Zechariah and Malachi 3 and 4. For example, “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn” (Zechariah 12.10). This obvious reference to the crucifixion (cf. John 19.37), looks forward further still (Revelation 1.7) when Jesus will come with the clouds, “… and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail because of him. Even so. Amen.”

¹⁷ Robertson, The Christ of the Prophets, op. cit., p. 249.
Certainly the connection between “that day” and so many predictions of our Lord’s coming in Zechariah chapters 12-14 point to the significance of the gospel. It is through this message that the Gentiles are clearly seen as full participants in the promises of God (cf. Acts 11.8; 15.14-18; Ephesians 2.11-22; 3.6 et al.). It is through this gospel message that sins are forgiven and Jews and Gentiles who heed the call to repent and believe are added to the church of God as His one people. But a further fulfillment of “that day” is in view.

In Malachi the people are told that a messenger will prepare the way of the LORD in anticipation of “the day of the LORD” (Malachi 3.1-20). This reference to John the Baptist and Jesus the LORD to whom John pointed, indicates that with the coming of Jesus “the day” has come. But not in its fullness. Not in its final eschatological sense. The New Testament writings point to a day when Christ will return in power to fully and finally consummate all things, bringing righteous judgment to the unrepentant. But also, to His people, He will bring full deliverance and salvation from the world, the flesh and the devil. New Testament references to “that day” include such phrases as, “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 1.8); “the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2.9); “the day of the Lord” (2 Peter 3.10) and many others.

8. Concluding thoughts

“And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘You men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven,
will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1.9-11). “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him …” (Revelation 1.7). The glory cloud that enveloped the mountain (Exodus 24.15-16), that in the form of a pillar led the Israelites (Exodus 40.34-38), that filled the tabernacle and the temple (2 Chronicles 7.2), that was present as the son of man was given dominion (Daniel 7.13), that overshadowed Mt. Transfiguration (Matthew 17.5), that same cloud will accompany our Lord Jesus Christ in his triumphal return on the great and terrible day of the LORD (Revelation 1.7).

What was intimated in the Garden when God prophesied that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3.15) was given greater form and clarity in the life and words of Moses and the prophets that followed. And then, when the fullness of the times had come (Galatians 4.4), God sent forth the seed of the woman to deal the decisive, though not final blow to the head of the serpent. But on that great day, yet future, the final eschatological day of the Lord’s return in the glory cloud, judgment will fully and finally be executed on all who oppose God and blessing and total deliverance will come to all who hope in the coming of our blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Even so, come Lord Jesus!
Bibliography


4. ESV Study Bible, Crossway, Wheaton, IL.


