

# **QUESTION**

*Trace the development through the Old Testament and Intertestamental writings of **the day of the Lord**.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

*The day of the Lord* has various equivalents, such as '*the day*', '*in that day*' etc. It is the day of vindication sorely longed for, especially by the oppressed. This notion becomes very important in apocalyptic eschatology. It figures in prophetic eschatology in the Old Testament too, and particularly in Amos, Joel and Zephaniah, and as well as in Malachi. In this account, I would try to trace the development on the day of the Lord by explaining one after the other, what seems to me as the major prophesy about it in some of the Old Testament books as well as in some Intertestamental writings.

Throughout the Old Testament and intertestamental writings, there is a forward look. By this more is meant than the prophetic announcement of the issue of men's deeds and of the policies of the state in the ills that were so commonly foretold. Israel believed that while there was a brief period of innocence and bliss at the opening of history, the real climax and crown of history lay in the future. She had a firm assurance that *the best is yet to be*, though that assurance, like every aspect of her faith, was rooted and grounded in God and not the mere expression of human optimism. It is increasingly recognised that this element was found in her thought from an early age.

For example, in the earliest traceable form of the tradition, in the stories about Abraham, we find this theme already developed. Genesis 17:1-8 tells how God made a solemn agreement with Abraham. The Sinaitic covenant is

eloquent in its implications. 'You shall be my people and I will be your God'. The Israelites saw those implications worked out in their lives, in the vividly conceived presence of Yahweh in the ark, and later in the temple, in the communication of the spirit to certain inspired warriors and holy men, in the successful occupation and extension of their territory, and in the mystique that attached itself to the figure of David.

However, Israel's history was riddled with her failure to keep her side of the covenant. The Israelites fatal tendencies to resist God, to go contrary to His will, and to grab short-sightedly at the nearest human expedients, with disregard for God's announced guidance and instruction. Thus, the 'Day of the Lord' was 'a coming day' when Yahweh actively intervenes to punish sin that has come to a climax. In fact, the day of the Lord is often announced as 'coming'. That verb denotes movement, but not a movement of Israel toward a date on the calendar, but rather movement of God toward his people in order to call them to account. Where rebellion flourishes, prophets announce God's imminent coming to lay bare the secrets of hearts (Ezek. 30; Is. 2:12; 3:18). Where loyalty flourishes in the midst of suffering, they provide consolation and courage by promising speedy intervention by the Most High (Isa. 11:12). Both deep darkness and the shining of the dawn would thus mark the approach of the day.

This punishment according to the prophets, may come through an invasion (Amos. 5-6; Is. 13; Ezek. 13:5), or through some natural disaster, such as a locust invasion (Joel 1-2), lightning, thunder, earthquake, tidal waves tumults among nations, all intended to express how terrible it is to fall into the hands of the living God (Isaiah. 13; 22; Jer. 46:10; Lamentation 2). Sodom and

Gomorrah become stock examples of destruction (Genesis 13:10). It is impossible to organise or harmonise all pictures of God's wrath (Joel 2).

### **SOME OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS**

Amos prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the mid-eighth century BC. His message is primarily one of doom. Although Israel's neighbours do not escape his attention, his threats are directed primarily against Israel, which he contends, has defected from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of Canaanite gods. This element of judgement belongs essentially to the thought of the Day of the Lord. He also pronounces judgement on the rich for self-indulgence and oppression of the poor, on those who pervert justice, and on those who desire the Day of Yahweh on which God will reveal his power, punish the wicked, and renew the righteous.

Further more, it is clear that in the popular hopes of the time of Amos the 'Day of Yahweh' was such a term. Men believed that this was the day on which God would arise to scatter all his foes and save Israel in a signal way. But Amos turned the phrase into the symbol of the coming judgement on Israel (Amos 5:18f). 'That Day', Amos warned, will be a day of darkness for Israel because of its defection from Yahweh. However, the book ends unexpectedly (9:8-15) with a promise of restoration for Israel. Because these verses so radically differ from the threatening nature of the rest of the book, many scholars believe them to be a later addition.

The book of Joel written in Palestine about 795-755BC, presents this aspect of the Day of the Lord, which it too describes as ‘a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thundercloud. But it makes it clear that beyond the judgement in which all that was alien to God’s will, should be consumed there would be a new glory and light. (Joel 1:15; 2:1; 2:11; 2:31; 3:14). The books of Obadiah and Joel use occasions in the historical experience of Edom and Judah to introduce and enlarge on ‘the coming Day of Yahweh’ when the nations will be judged. Obadiah 1-15 is an oracle of judgment against Edom because of its failure to aid Judah against the Neo-Babylonians in 586 and its actual participation in looting the land and seizing fugitive Judahites. Parallel to this is Jeremiah 49:7-22.

The book of Zephaniah written in Palestine about 670-648 BC, consists of a series of independent sayings, many of which are rightly attributed to Zephaniah. The dominant theme of the book is the ‘Day of the Lord’, which the prophet sees approaching as a consequence of the sins of Judah. Zephaniah thought of it as a day of more general judgement. ‘The great day of Yahweh is near, it is near and coming swiftly... That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thunder-cloud, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements, and the sequel makes it clear that the desolation was to be widespread amongst all the nations of the world. A remnant will be saved *the humble and lowly* through purification by judgement. It is not clear whether the day of Judgement is conceived of as historical or eschatological. In any case, Amos and Isaiah originally developed the conception, and Zephaniah’s resumption of the theme may have influenced his younger contemporary Jeremiah.

Malachi the prophet – one of three prophets after the exile, others being Haggai, and Zechariah. According to the book of Malachi, the Lord will come on this day to right all wrongs, punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous. ‘The Lord will suddenly come to His temple’ (Mal. 3:1). ‘But who can endure the day of His coming...?’ (Mal. 3:2). Like a refiner’s fire He will refine and purify the Levites (Mal. 3:2-3), and judge the sorcerers, adulterers, false witness, and oppressors of the poor - in short, all who do not fear God (Mal. 3:5). But the day is not all darkness and fire. Malachi alone informs us that the Lord has a *book of remembrance* in which are written the names of those who do fear Him. ‘They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act’ (Mal. 3:17). The distinction will be made between the *righteous* and the *wicked*, between one who serves God and one who does not (Mal. 3:18). The day comes burning like an oven, ‘but for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings’ (Mal. 4:2).

Already in the pre-exilic age we find Zephaniah saying ‘For then will I give to the peoples pure lips, that they may all call upon the name of Yahweh, to serve him with one consent. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suplicants, widely scattered, shall bring me an offering’. His contemporary Jeremiah similarly prophesies of the day when the Gentiles shall flock to the God of Israel and acknowledge him. ‘O Yahweh, my strength and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, unto thee shall the nations come from the ends of the earth, and shall say, only lies have our fathers inherited, even vanity and worthless things... And they shall know that my name is Yahweh (Jer. 16:19,21).

In the immediately post exilic age we find Zechariah saying ‘Many peoples and mighty nations shall come to seek Yahweh of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of Yahweh...In those days it shall come to pass that ten men of all the tongues of the Gentiles shall lay hold of the cloak of a Jew, saying ‘We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’. In the Psalms we find this thought reflected. ‘All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to Yahweh: and all the families of the nations shall worship before him (Psalm 22:7). All this implies that the faith of Israel is not for her alone, but that men of other nations and races, who will join themselves to the Lord, may share it. In other word, the term ‘the Day of the Lord’ is universal. This same pattern is found in the book of Daniel, where the thought of a general judgement on the nations introduces the promise of the inauguration of the enduring kingdom of the saints of the Most High (Daniel 7:10).

Further more, in some passages the Day of the Lord was conceived of as *nigh* at hand (Isah. 13:6; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:5, 2:1, 3:14; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:14), all think of it as the time of divine braking into history in spectacular fashion. While God was believed to be always active in the plane of history, using nature and men to fulfil his ends, the Day of the Lord was thought of as a day of more direct and clearly manifest action. Concluding on this, we see that most of the predictions of the prophets were of the issue of the conditions of their day. These passages, on the contrary, were of a future not causally linked with the present but of the time when it should be God’s pleasure to consume all that is evil and to bring in the age of bliss.

## SOME INTERTESTAMENTAL WRITINGS

As seen in Nehemiah that the Old Testament leaves the people of Israel as a small remnant group that has just returned to the land after the exile, a new type of religious writing called *apocalyptic* appeared. Nehemiah records the last events in the Old Testament, and therefore, these other Jews religious books that were written in the period between the end of Nehemiah's records and the beginning of the New Testament events are referred to as *Intertestamental writings*. It covers a period of time that the Jewish religion as well as their political life undergone significant changes and so it was described as a *literature of the oppressed*.

Russell in his book, - *The Method and Message of Apocalyptic*, argues that the writers of Intertestamental writings took up the prophetic teaching concerning the future hope (*Apocalyptic eschatology*) as expressed in *the Day of the Lord*, enlarging it out of the store of their own religious insight and experience. For instance, the prophets told of a day, which would take place in history, but the Intertestamental, literature develops a strong hint from the book of Daniel that the intervention of God is to be expected from beyond history, and a heavenly kingdom is to be anticipated.

Further more, and contrary to the prophets, the Intertestamental writers expected the kingdom is to appear soon, but in several works it is stated that the great day would be hastened still further by repentance. For example, 'on the day on which Israel repents, the kingdom of the enemy will be brought to an end' (*Testament of Daniel 6:4*). Also in (*Assumption of Moses 1:18*) the last day is called 'the day of repentance in the visitation which the Lord will make in the consummation of the end of the last days'. Concluding this, I want to say

that the way in which the ideas developed in the Intertestament period has help me to understand that there is a move towards a *universalistic* view of the Day of the Lord and to understand the New Testament writings better.