

The Day of Yahweh in the Book of Joel. A Latin American Reading¹

Pablo R. Andiñach
Universidad del Centro Educativo Latinoamericano
(UCEL)

It is difficult to establish how it all began. Though the combination of a growing social awareness, popular struggle, revolutionary expectations and thousands of Christians involved in those processes produced in Latin America what would latter be called Theology of Liberation. It is not born as academic theology, nor does it originally nourish from the philosophical trends of the day. It finds its nourishment in social praxis and its needs. It seeks its raw material in the questions that emerge in the struggles for political liberation, in the defence of life, for human rights. Reality is what establishes the agenda, and then follows the theological reflection on this reality. This theology, as could be expected is born as a twin of a new way of reading the Bible. Social praxis questions our traditional scriptural reading method. The origin of Latin American hermeneutics is nothing more than the reading that men and women make of the Bible while they struggle for justice and equality in a context of poverty and in a society that despises life. A second step was to discover that the structures of oppression are not reduced to an economic expression, but rather are more complex than that and involve extensive aspects of life: this is how feminist, indigenous, ecological, and other hermeneutics came to be. Each one began from a particular area of society where some form of oppression could be perceived and sought to find illumination to overcome this situation and construct promised justice.

I. Preliminary Observations

1. In the strictest sense there is no Latin American method for reading the Bible. What does exist is a Latin American *reading*². For this reading what are used are the methods which were developed by biblical discipline and which continue to be used. What is particular is intuition. Readings which emerge from these lands suspects that every reading which justifies oppression is doubtful. If the reading does not unmask the unequal relation of white and indigenous, men over women, rich and poor, capital over people and nature, it can be presumed that something is not really right in the reading. There is no prejudice against academic research or against university sophistication. What is needed is to remain alert that those tools are not used against the poor and the marginalized. As a matter of fact Latin

¹ A longer version of this paper was presented in honor of my colleague David Petersen in Joel LeMom and Kent H. Richards (eds.), *Methods Matters, Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, (Atlanta, SBL, 2009) p. 423-441.

² There are many articles produced on this matter: J. Severino Croatto, "Las nuevas hermenéuticas de la lectura bíblica", in S. Croatto et al, *Nuevas hermenéuticas bíblicas* (Managua: Lascasiana, 1998), 15-36; Pablo Richards, "Interpretación latinoamericana de la Biblia. Realidad, método, prospectiva", in Armando Levoratti (ed.) *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano III* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2003), 11-18; Pablo R. Andiñach, "Liberation in the Latin American Biblical Hermeneutics", in *"The Future of the Biblical Past"*, Ronald Boer and Fernando F. Segovia (Semeia Studies, Atlanta: SBL, 2012); Hans De Wit, "It Should Be Burn and Forgotten, Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics Through the Eyes of Another", in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, A. Botta and P. Andiñach, SBL, 2009, 26-39.

American hermeneutics turn to historical-critical methods as well as synchronic readings such as linguistics, narrative and stylistics.

2. In Latin America two lines of work can be recognized, which happen to also exist in other parts of the world. One of these privileges a socio-political reading and makes intensive use of historical-critical methods. It seeks to reconstruct the production conditions of the text and then analyse it from four different perspectives: ideological, economic, political and social. It has been called the “the four sides reading” and had proved excellent results. The other privileges the text as such and turns to linguistics, rhetoric, literary analysis. The best production has been the one to seek the convergence of both currents.

3. Currently it is common in biblical studies and theologies to characterize the work produced in the South with the expression Post-colonialism. I would like to point out that this is not an expression of our political vocabulary in Latin America. The South American independence wars were early XIX century and most countries are close to celebrating the second centenary of independence in the next ten years. We do not feel the concept “post-colonialism” expresses anything important for our current political reality. Furthermore, the “us-them” structure mentioned by Sugirtharajah doesn’t really work for Latin America³. We never felt a difference with Spain, Portugal or Europe in cultural terms. We currently read Marx or Heidegger (or Barth or Pannenberg) as part of our culture, even when we understand that they are part of their own particular realities. We do not feel that there is a cultural distance between them and us, at least no more a distance than an American from the US can feel with a British person. We share the same language and the same Christian religion and a long history of intellectual relationship with Europe. In any case, the troubles – the same with the USA- are economic and political rather than cultural in the deep sense. Even though, there is an increasing challenge to this vision from the perspective of the Original People in Latin America, which probably in the not too distant future will modify this statement. But, for the moment, the concept of liberation looks more comprehensive in our understanding of the political process and as a tool to enter into dialogue with the biblical text.

II. The Day of Yahweh in Joel. The language of resistance confronting imperial power

The tragedy described in the book must be bequeathed to future generations (1:3) with all its realism and truth, and at the same time in a language which will avoid time or memory –or conscious human will- to condemn it to grow old. Joel does not deliver a superficial version of events, a dry chronicle which we can dismiss as an antique inadequate for new situations. On the contrary, our book is interested in presenting and interpreting the facts it describes, and doing so in a way that establishes the connections of this invasion of the imperial army (Persian? Hellenic?⁴), with other oppressive situations, that the people may suffer in the future. The text from Joel will serve as an example of language built to resist imperial power and offer alternatives to the calling of an only though that is offered as the only cultural alternative.

³ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Charting the Aftermath. A Review of Postcolonial Criticism* (NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2002), passim, 27.

⁴ The identity of this particular empire is not a crucial aspect for our argument.

This profoundness is expressed in two semantic axis which are in tension in the whole book: one of them realizes the *language of the day of Yahweh*. Basically it indicates a transcendent dimension in the narrative and opens out to new references which may emerge in the horizon of history. The second axis sets the scene for *concrete nations and peoples*, in some cases explicitly mentioned. This second axis indicates the material history of the people. It likes to present nations in a way they can be geographically identified and recognized as political entities. To this extent this axis relates to the texts that present some degree of reference toward factual reality. Its function is to establish relationships between narration and true history of the people which surrounded Israel and were active players in its adversities. In this tension between the two axis, a powerful message emerges in which the transcendent dimension of the events narrated is linked to the human history of oppressions. At the same time the pain of a weak people subject to imperial powers is lifted up to show how its suffering will be valued by God at the time "when all nations are gathered" (3:2) and how this suffering is valued by God in judgement.

The Day of Yahweh

The theme of the Day of Yahweh has been studied in depth and continues to be an open ended issue⁵. Research has concentrated on trying to unveil the origin of this expression rather than its textual signification. Authors seem to agree that the expression goes back to the pre-exilic period, and gradually absorbed new meaning in the frame of Judean theology of the restoration period (539 BCE on). It has been pointed out that it expresses an act of power on Yahweh's part, who in one day conquers all enemies and liberates the people⁶. At the same time the theme complicates when we realize that all Yahweh's appearances clearly take place in prophetic writings⁷.

We will follow this expression all through Joel⁸, studying its contribution to the particular meaning of each passage and the semantic tension created with the parallel axis of the "historical". From our perspective, this dialogue between semantic axes is that which provides the clue for a reading that interprets the Day of Yahweh with the text of Joel.

1,15 Alas for the day!
 For the day of the Lord is near,
 and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

⁵ Gerhard Von Rad, "The origin of the concept of the Day of Yahweh", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4 (1959) 97-108; Frank Charles Fensham, "A possible origin of the concept of the Day of the Lord", *Biblical Essays* (Bepeck: Potchefstroom Herald, 1966), 90-97; M. Weiss, "The origin of the 'Day of the Lord' reconsidered", *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966) 28-60; Yair Hoffmann, "The day of the Lord as concept and a term in the prophetic literature", *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93 (1981) 37-50; M. Weinfeld, "They Fought from Heaven - Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East" [hebrew], *Eretz Israel* 14 (1978) 23-30.

⁶ Cf. D. Stuart, "The sovereign's day of conquest", in *BASOR - Essays in Honor of George Ernest Wright* 220/221 (1975/6) 59-164.

⁷ Sixteen times in seven collections: Is 13:6-9; Ez 30:2-3; Jo 1:15; 2:1.11; 2:31; 3:14; Am 5:18.20; Ab 15; Sf 1:4.14; Mi 3:23.

⁸ Cf. William Cannon, "The Day of the Lord in Joel", *Church Quarterly Review* 103 (1927) 32-63; Ferdinand Deist, "Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel - A Theology of the Yom Yahweh?", in Walter Claassen (editor), *Text and Context* (Sheffield, JSOT, 1988) 63-79; John Bourke, "Le Jour de Yahve dans Joel", *Revue Biblique* 56 (1959) 5-31, 191-212.

This is the first time the matter is mentioned in Joel. It is mentioned at the beginning of the unit 1:15-20, though evidencing a language and theme which are different, which have served as a base to postulate the lateness of that verse. But precisely that distinctive character is what makes the verse stand out from the rest of the text and reveals it as an interpretative element within the passage. This condition is shown in three elements: 1. What does it say about such a day? 2. Its relation with other passages on the same matter; 3. Its relation with 1: 16-20.

Verse 1:15 says the day of the Lord “is near” which is another way to indicate that the invasion close at hand is not that Day, but rather they must still wait somewhat. What must be clarified then is if the foreign invasion is a model or an omen of the Day of Yahweh. In the first case that future event will be understood a judgment against Israel itself – following the invasion paradigm, which at times is interpreted as God’s judgement on his people (2:12-17). In the second case the invasion that destroys the land directs us toward that the Day in which Yahweh will avenge all injustice and will destroy the enemy of the people. The answer to this dilemma can be found in the text itself when it indicates that the Day of Yahweh is a future even, further forward in history. Though the characteristics of this future event are describe in 2:17, where they detail God’s response to the violations suffered, where Yahweh *speaks* (2:19-27) and promises the restitution of all that was lost and judgement on oppressors. Our text particularly points to its companion texts 2:28-32 and 3:14-17 which describe Israel’s salvation and the definitive judgement of all enemies. Then the closeness of the Day of Yahweh is not announcing an eschatological vision of an invasion which destroys economic and religious life of Israel, quite the contrary: the realization of absent justice, salvation of the condemned of history, the return of liberated slaves (3:7). The text also affirms that that Day “as destruction from the Almighty it comes”. The Hebrew root for “destruction” means “devastation”, “ruin” and clearly includes material and human content which incorporates “oppression”, “exploitation” (cf. Is 16:4). Our text plays with words between Yahweh’s nickname and this root, suggesting that Yahweh’s action is related to –in this case in opposition- to the action of the people which have brought devastation on Judah, actions which are likewise material and human. The devastation of Yahweh can be confused in first instance with the action described against Judah. Yet after reading the complete book it is clear enough that Yahweh’s “destruction” refers to judgement which will be executed against those who oppressed Israel. The same phrase can be found in Is 13:6 applied against Babylon.

How to semantically link 1:15 with the other texts on the Day of Yahweh? In this sense our text is introductory. It draws our attention to the need to “read” in the text more that a mere historical description. It opens the interpretive horizon to new spaces which can be accessed from historical events though prolonging their signification. This effect allows transforming the account from a tragedy to a message of hope and justice, considering that from the very first moment foreign devastation is preannounced in God’s answer: oppression is not God’s final word for the people.

In an extremely crude and realistic text, 1:15 contributes the element which interprets the passage 1:16-20 balancing its historical sense with a dimension which exceeds that context. The passage anticipates the message which will be revealed further on, and works as an anticipation of God’s action, in such a way to

relativize the value of oppression, and strengthens the promise of liberation from injustice. The lack of food and the sadness in the temple will be compensated, even when the text does not present such an alternative till Yahweh's answer in 2:18ff. The destruction of land and the lack of water do not possess the destructive dimension which Yahweh's act will have the day of judgement –in not too distant times- of those responsible for such an aggression.

2,1-2a y 2,10-11

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
 Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near--
² a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!

(...)

¹⁰ The earth quakes before them,
 the heavens tremble.
 The sun and the moon are darkened,
 and the stars withdraw their shining.
¹¹ The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army;
 how vast is his host!
 Numberless are those who obey his command.
 Truly the day of the LORD is great;
 terrible indeed; who can endure it?

In this opportunity the complete unit is framed by our theme, in such a way that its thematic content is clearly signed by its presence. It is the theme of invasion (2:2-9) and the siege of the city by the foreign army. Similar to the previous case, these verses are clearly distinguished from the rest of the passage that they frame. The style difference and the theme reveal them as separate verses, and as such allow us to suspect a specific semantic function. In the following pages we are interested in exploring this specificity. For this reason we will subject the text to the same questions we addressed the previous verse.

What do these verses tell us about the Day of Yahweh? In first place it is announced with an invitation “to blow the trumpet in Zion”, a sign used repeatedly in the Old Testament and in various senses⁹. If the trumpet sound may point to the fact that the city is in danger – in that case 2:1 addresses the imminent invasion of Jerusalem by a foreign army-, it is also used to announce war against other nations and in this case it would pre-announce the defeat of the enemy and the sound would make Yahweh remember his people and free them from oppression (Nm 10:9). We feel inclined towards the second possibility. Blowing the trumpet is motivated by the closeness of the Day of Yahweh and not because of military invasion, and from this literary point of view and semantic consequence can be appreciated: the sound of the trumpet can be heard as hope for the oppressed and judgment for the invaders. This way the sense of the Day can be outlined.

⁹ Cf. Am 3:6; Ez 33:3.6; Os 8:1; Sf 1:16 where its sound announces destruction; in Is 27:13 is a call to the nations, while in Nm 10:1-10 announces the war against the enemies.

It is the inhabitants of the country who are called to hear the message. We also find these words at the beginning of the book (1:2). It is clear that it refers to *all* who inhabit Judea¹⁰, though it is difficult to discern if this includes foreign residents or they should be considered directed only to the Israelites. During the Persian period Jerusalem was part of a rigorous administrative system directed by foreign civil servants, who at the same time acted as political representatives and imperial power militia¹¹. If the expression “inhabitants of the land” included them – which could explain the subtle ambiguity of the term- it would be then announcing a warning to the invaders and their local allies. If referring to the invading army it is said that “all inhabitants of the land tremble”, and it is understood that the reference in this case is to the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem, then our passage is setting a difference between one and another army. What is being announced is that faced with Yahweh’s imminent action all inhabitants without exception will tremble.

To link vs. 2a with darkness produced by the proximity of a cloud of locusts seems inadequate y impoverishes the sense of the text. In Zeph. 1:15 we find the same phrase in the context of the “Day of Yahweh” with no relation to the cloud of locusts. On the other hand, in Joel 3:4 darkness is again mentioned as a characteristic of the events described, without locusts being part of the narrative. The sense of darkness remits to deeper experiences and can be traced to creational stories. There darkness is a state which Yahweh modifies to the effects of creating an adequate environment for life of human beings¹². If light is a gift from God, the loss of it will refer to a moment in which creation coordinates will be lost, when Yahweh from a shapeless and dark placer, created a universe illumined and habitable for all people. The Day of Yahweh evokes unknown spaces, spheres which only the creator dominates. These concepts will be dealt with in depth in 2:10-11

In 2:10-11 we find the closing of the unit. The fear theme is repeated faced with the announcement that the day draws close (v. 10a). Through what follows (v 10b) we once again know that it refers to the day of Yahweh, which presents in opposition to the invading army (2:6). As 2:1, v 10a contributes to relativize the power of occupying forces and transcend the military event anticipating judgment.

The description of natural phenomena is considerably enlarged with respect to 2:2b. A shudder in heaven is announced, which is a way to insist in the difference between this event from God and the invasion. Then it is announced that sun, moon and stars will loose their brightness¹³. Once again we are before the allusion to creational time. In Gn 1:16 it speaks of the creation of “greater light and the lesser light” and “the stars” – take note that it is the same order – so as to separate light from darkness. Its brightness has not ceased till now, though its end will be reached in the day the approaches. In 2:3 we fin a reference to the vital force – where it says that with the army passing what looked like the “garden of Eden” is reduced to a “desolate desert”, a phrase which seems to describe and at the same time express irony on the destiny of the aggressor. What we had noted concerning 2:2a is now more clearly drawn: that Day will inaugurate a new era. The coordinates established at the beginning of creation will be deactivated and- as then – the only one who will have power to act and decide will be Yahweh.

¹⁰ Cf. Luís Alonso-Schökel and José Luís Sicre, *Profetas I-II* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1980), 932.

¹¹ Cf. I. Ephal, "Syria Palestine under Achaemetic Rule", in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 4 (1988) 139-164.

¹² The word “darkness” is mentioned four times in the primeval narrative of Gn 1,1-2,4.

¹³ Cf. Am 8:9; Sf 1:15; Is 13:10; Ez 32:7-8.

Verse 11 introduces a new element which can help outline that Day: Yahweh's army. The interpretation of this verse is in dispute. The general tendency is to see in this reference the same army whose invasion is mentioned in 2:3-9. This is sustained in relation to 2:25 in which Yahweh refers to the locusts as "my army", establishing a connection between locusts, destruction/invasion and Yahweh's army. This reflection is consistent with the classical understanding of Joel's composition process¹⁴, which considers the verses on "the Day of Yahweh" as later insertions to the primitive narrative of a natural locust plague. In this way the later author would have "re-read" the original narrative of a drought or locust plague in an eschatological or even apocalyptic clue, establishing a link between the action of locusts and its prolongation in a divine action including the armies of God. This interpretation is based on the contrast of the two texts to reveal their autonomy with respect to the units in which they are found, what the author was not able to read was the contrast in its semantic dimension. The oppositional relation between the Day of Yahweh which is described as from 2:18 and the invasion narrative which destroys the social and religious life of Jerusalem (1:1-2,17), do not allow both elements to be assimilated when we find them in the first part of the book. In other words, the texts resists to be read in a way that its another act of the history of oppression and subjection of a weak people, an act that implying deportations and death, humiliation and suffering would be considered a human paradigm of Yahweh's redeeming action, even when it is understood in an eschatological clue.

Verse 11 presents Yahweh's army in contrast to the army of 2: 3-9. This army comes to execute Yahweh's word, not to destroy Jerusalem and the life of its inhabitants. Its power comes from Yahweh who leads, in Yahweh's voice of command which directs the actions. Its immensity and its strength must be read in contrast with the army of 2:2b of which it is said "now will be again after them", and for which the human sphere is set as the temporal measure of comparison. The army of Yahweh will be more powerful and larger than the greatest human army in history.

The passage closes with a question "Who can endure it?". A rhetorical question which includes a degree of irony, particularly if one considers that it may have been addressed to those residents of Judea related to the invading power, whose security depended on the strength of the occupying army and its fame of being invincible.

Which is the function of these verses in the development of the semantic axis concerning the Day of Yahweh? The concept has been widened in as much as it provides more information on that event. If 1:15 presents the announced theme that it will be a day of devastation, it now specifies con the cosmic and re-creational character of Yahweh's actions. Once this dimension has been introduced no one is excluded from facing this day. It is not about Israel avenging against its oppressors, nor about the expectations to strengthen militarily to conquer its enemies and repair the injustices suffered. This would not make any sense within the social and political reality of the Persian Empire in which Judea is only a small portion of the satrapy called "beyond the river". What the reader of Joel now knows is that the Day of Yahweh will be a definitive time I which the action of God will oppose at root level the phenomena which is being narrated.

¹⁴ Bernhard Duhm and others considerer Joel as a combination of two texts: Joel 1-2, older and referring to a plague of locust; then Joel 3-4 later and apocalyptic.

We have already pointed out some of the aspects of the relation of 2:1-2a and 2:10-11 with the literary unit of which they are a part. We would like to be specific at this point because it is of great importance for the understanding of the internal sense of the text. To open and close a unit grants a position of privilege which the text does well in exploiting. In our case it plays with two different times which also signify different meanings. The Day of Yahweh is placed in future times, even though it is emphasized that the future is imminent by repeating the phrase "is near" (1:15, 2:1b). On the other hand, the central body of the passage is described as an action in the present and being developed, utilizing verbs in imperfect tense. This dynamic reflects the tension between two semantic axis that we have described: one presents the historical factual invasion and destruction; it is the cruel reality of a weak people; it is tragedy which cannot be avoided and which must be remembered as testimony and memory of oppression. The other one announces a specific signification for these events and that God's will which will no leave them unpunished. A transcendent dimension is proposed by which the power of the oppressor will cease to be and in which the God of the oppressed will be the one that judges. This message so far has been given as a word which counters the dominating axis of destruction. The reader of Joel must continue in the reading.

2:28-32

28 Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
 your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
 your old men shall dream dreams,
 and your young men shall see visions.
 29 Even on the male and female slaves, in those days,
 I will pour out my spirit.
 30 I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth,
 blood and fire and columns of smoke.
 31 The sun shall be turned to darkness,
 and the moon to blood,
 before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.
 32 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved;
 for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape,
 as the Lord has said,
 and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls

The delimitation of the unit is established in 2:28 with the formulation "then afterward", which serves as an introduction to a new section. We will find this formulation in the historical books (2 Sam 2:1; 8:1; 10:1; 12:1; 21:18; 2 Kings 6:24), though it is scarce in prophetic literature with exception of Jeremiah (16:12; 21:7; 49:6). Prophetic literature has preferred other structure formulations similar to the ones found scattered in different books¹⁵. Its temporal accent inaugurates a series of three units headed by temporal formulations (2:28; 3:1 "in those days"; 3: 18 "in that day"), which refer to the same time in the future. The closing of the unit is marked by the beginning of the next (3:1), that not only refers to the formulation already commented, but introduces a new theme. As in previous cases it is necessary to point out that the delimitation of the unit does not signify that this is a semantically isolated composition. There are many elements which point to its relation with the units that precede and follow. The first person of 2:27 continues speaking in 3:1, after a few introductory words. The same introductory formulation establishes a link with the unit 2:18-27 in which the temporal and semantic

¹⁵ Cf. Hans Kosmala, "At the End of the Days", *Annual of the Swedish Institute of Theology* 2 (1963) 27-37.

succession is placed, aspect which we will come back to. In 2:29 we read the same formulation (“in those days”) which are a heading for the following section (3:1ff), confirming the coincidence of referents.

There is only one textual criticism which deserves certain consideration. In the last line we find the expression “among the survivors”, which is not morphologically coherent. There have been various intents to reconstruct the original version, of which the version “the survivors of Jerusalem” seems to be the most convincing¹⁶. The word “survivor” is typical of historical literature; we find it in numerous narratives on acts of war¹⁷, signifying those who have survived devastation. In Is 1:9, the sense of the “rest”, the “remnant”. In this sense considering the darkness of the structure, we have the sense of the passage with enough precision: It refers to those who escape being murdered.

The literary structure is lineal and presents a natural linkage. After the introductory formulation it continues with the announcement in first person of the pouring of the Spirit on “all flesh”. It continues (2:28b-29) enumerating the beneficiaries of this pouring of the Spirit to close the circle repeating the first words “I will pour out my Spirit”, constituting a form of small chiasm. Verses 30-31 introduce the announcement of the cosmic phenomena and the Day of Yahweh. The final verse abandons the first person to introduce another speaker who talks in third person. This change also indicates a semantic folding; the text turns to 3: 1-4 to clarify the long reach of that event. We are at the climax of the unit. On the Day of Judgment those who call on the name of Yahweh will be rescued, making explicit towards the end that the final decision on this remnant remains in Yahweh’s hands. This announced salvation also take place physically: it will take place in Zion, in Jerusalem.

In 2:28-32 elements present in previous units converge. If the events described so far have been developed creating tension between a historical dimension and a transcendent one, in this new unit once again this tension is encountered though taken to a superlative form. The text is placed as a part of t Yahweh’s answer (2:19). The emphasis of 2:18-27 is set within the agricultural dimension of rewards –though we have seen it is not exclusively-; the announcement of fertility and peace conclude with the affirmation of Yahweh’s presence in the midst of the people (2:27). This unity (2:28-32) must be understood as from this affirmation: the accompaniment of Yahweh will direct to a new situation in the midst of the believing community in which the condition of being able to imagine a different reality to what they are living will be the attribute of many, and particularly the young, the elderly, male and female servants¹⁸. In the context of a military invasion, destruction of the land and deportation of youth, when impotence before the arrogance of the powerful is clearly felt, the announcement of the possibility of a different society, to the ears of Israelites sounds like a wonderful act of liberation. Though this liberation does not refer only to foreign powers, rather it refers to the internal situation: the undervalued sectors are the ones which will transmit the word of God. Women, servants, youth, elderly will be the vehicle through which it

¹⁶ Cf. textual variants in Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, p. 57 note z, and p. 68; A. Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, 142-143; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel, Amos, Obadja, Jona* (Stuttgart: Gütersloher Verlagshaus/Gerd Mohn, 1971) 70-71.

¹⁷ Cf. Nm 21:35; Dt 2:34; 3:3; Js 8:22; 10:20.28.30.33.37.39; 2 Re 10:11.

¹⁸ But see a different approach in Marvin Sweeney, *Berit Olam - Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry - The twelve Prophets I* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

will be possible to outline a new world according to God's will. From a sociological perspective one can suspect that this "democratization" of the prophetic gift supposes a critique of the distribution of power, particularly concerning the political projection of the temple related circles¹⁹. It is probable that behind our text there exists a conflict situation in the midst of power in Jerusalem²⁰. Though even opening up interesting perspectives of understanding this passage, this particular rapprochement demands from our part a high degree of caution because it is a difficult indirect way to justify the text itself. On the other hand Joel, who is so apt to classify the inhabitants of Judah in sectors, this time avoids sectorial divisions to trace a line which runs through them, distinguishing within them the undervalued, possibly in opposition to those inhabitants considered important: chiefs ("elders" 1:2), priests (1:8.13; 2:17); small scale farmers (1:11).

Verse 28 begins announcing the pouring of the Spirit on "all flesh"²¹. This is a universalist affirmation which will be limited in the following lines, yet which remains open to future re-readings. The early Christian community will realize how to capture this unfinished message and will take advantage to interpret its own pentecostal experience (Acts 2). The use of the verb "to pour" is also significant²². It is used for water (Ex 4:9) and blood (Gen 9:6), as for other liquids. It is related to the pouring out of feelings (Ps 62:9) and Lam 2:19, as for the relief of one's soul (1 Sam 1:15, Ps 42:5). We must reach Ezekiel 39:29 to find another reference to "pouring" of the Spirit, a text to which Joel seems to be fulfilling. The choice of the verb suggest the novelty of the event, and at the same time it plays with the image of water which is poured without container, or the same range as that of rain which fall on all things and everybody without limitation.

Male and female slaves will be part of Yahweh's chosen. The ancient laws had taken care of the fate of slaves²³, but in this new situation a special value is afforded in the terms of God's plan which they had never had before. They will not only be definitively free, but they will also speak in God's name, a privilege that not all masters had enjoyed. This seems to affirm the sign of the justice which will burst in that day, and at the same time is reference to the existence of hebrew slaves in Judah, who were by definition excluded from the circle of the chosen by Yahweh. If the differences of age and gender would be overcome in this new time, so would be the social and age categories. What is outstanding is that this declaration of dignity and liberation of slaves emerges as a consequence of a new experience of exploitation and pain of all the people of Judah. This is a repeated theme of the Old Testament: memory of ancestors' slavery (Dt 6:10-13) – and in this case this memory brings alive the direct action of a foreign force acting in their midst and destroying their land – and this sensitizes them to the fate of the poorest and excluded.

Verses 30-31 announce in detail cosmic phenomena which will be produced due to the Day of Yahweh. They are an extension of what had been announced in 2:2 and

¹⁹ Cf. the roll of Levites during the Second Temple period in David Petersen, *Late Israelite Prophecy - Studies in Deutero-Prophetic Literature and in Chronicles* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 55-87.

²⁰ Cf. Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); Osvaldo D. Vena, "Visionarios vs. Establishment en la comunidad judea post-exílica", in *Cuadernos de Teología IX* (1988) 85-98.

²¹ Is 31:3 contrasts "soul" with "flesh" in parallel with "human" against "divine". In Joel is the presence of God who gives life to the community.

²² Cf. Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 65-66; Luis Alonso Schökel and José Luis Sicre, *Profetas II*, 943-944.

²³ Cf. Ex 21:2-4.7.20.26.32.

2:10-11. It will be a theophany in which Yahweh will appear producing a marvellous set of event in heaven and on earth. Primary elements are invoked: "blood, fire, columns of smoke", "the sun" and "the moon" will alter their appearance due to the coming of the Day of Yahweh. But these signs should not be confused with their signification. The "great and terrible" is the Day itself and not the phenomena that announce it²⁴. The word "signs" is charged with enormous meaning which forces this translation opportunity to inevitably be poor and incapable of transmitting the essence of its full meaning. In the hebrew language we have another word which means "sign" in its dry and prosaic form without denoting any special attribute. But "signs" remits us to Yahweh's acts at the time of liberation from Egypt²⁵. It is in this sense they are "signs", though with a specific content: they announce Yahweh's acts in favour of God's people. This lexicographic option of the author is not naïve and is aligned with a whole series of allusions to the founding acts in the history of the people of Israel and their traditions (creation, exodus, the gift of the Spirit –Nm 11-, the Day of Yahweh). The signs of liberation from Egypt will again be seen on that day in which Yahweh call the people to judgment.

Verse 32 closes the unit introducing a geographic element which seems not to fit in the picture being described. The reference to "Mount Zion and Jerusalem" seems out of place in an event which has acquired cosmological dimensions and which seems to want to escape the human reality coordinates. Nevertheless once again we are in the presence of a tension which covers the whole book between the elements that connote transcendence and those others that emphasize the concrete and factual events. The Day may be toward the future, in an uncertain time, but Mount Zion and Jerusalem are there to testify to the reality of the promise. If this calling was to blow the trumpet on Mount Zion (2:1,15) there they will gather to await the appointed time: Jerusalem is placed at the cross-road of the coordinates between an indefinite time and factual space. At the same time one cannot ignore that this same scenario in which they are suffering the invasion and the dishonour of foreign humiliation, will be the witness of the act of salvation and dignity of the people. All this refers to how concrete and real is the understanding which the text has of the events which are expected for that Day of Yahweh. The eschatological is not something indefinite or which cannot be named, but rather it is conceived as an extension of the reality in which we find the marks that orient us in the understanding of what will happen. That which is new does not consist of dissociating from human reality but in resolving its conflicts in a just way.

It will be those who "call" on the name of Yahweh who will reach salvation. It is the acceptance of God's project that makes the difference between one and another, and not simply an oral declamation. What other name can be called on that Day? Surely in the mind of the biblical author there is no other possible name than Yahweh, what does exist are the different practices before that Day arrives, which define the profession of faith.

The unity 2:28-32 has contributed a magnificent description of the Day of Yahweh as an answer to the reality of oppression to which Israel has been subject to. The symbolic language invites to read that future event in a semantic relation with current events – the foreign invasion- yet transcending it to all the forms of

²⁴ Cf. Hans Muller, "Prophetie und Apokalyptik bei Joel", *Theologia Viatorum* 10 (1965) 231-252.

²⁵ Cf. Ex 7:3; Dt 6:22; Jer 32:20; Neh 9:10; also John Holladay, "The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968) 187-198; Hans W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 68.

oppression which it has suffered in history as a weak people who have been subject to the imperial powers.

3:14-17

¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!

For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.

¹⁵ The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

¹⁶ The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

¹⁷ So you shall know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it.

Towards the end of the book we find the last mention of the Day of Yahweh. It is no mere concluding formulation, nor an elegant literary closure. This last part of the trip of the semantic axis completes the message and clarifies it, even considering the ambiguity inherent in the symbolic language which prevails in these texts.

What does it say about the Day of Yahweh? In accordance with the complete unit 3:1-17, of which it is part, it is explicit that there will be “multitudes” that are called. This speaks to us on the all embracing character of the event which is not limited to revenge due to the invasion which originated the text in the first place. The expression “multitudes” could be interpreted as an allusion to the invading army, referring to its size and grandeur. Yet, within the “Day of Yahweh” axis, in which the eschatological space predominates as a final referent, the text is clearer if we understand it as referring to all those who have oppressed and attacked Israel both in the past as to possible future aggressions. It is the symbolic element of the message in which a historic experience overflows in its significance and can illumine the experiences of the past and of the future.

Verse 17 announces that “strangers shall never again pass through it”, as a way to testify to the presence and protection of God for God’s people. In this case the word “strangers” is clear, pointing to those who have committed the crimes described in the whole book. The expression “shall never pass” means that “they will not govern” over Israel. But this new situation in which Israel will not be subject to a foreign power is not presented by the text as a product of the arrival of a new eon, or of the new coordinates fit for an eschatological time. Take note of the emphasis in v. 17 in being geographically precise, which once again reveals the recurring intention in Joel to counterbalance the eschatological with elements of historical reality. It is a play of senses between the eschatological and the factually historical, which in our text –of eschatological dimensions- functions as reassurance facing the risk of a spiritualizing understanding of God’s action, in which justice exercised by Yahweh could be considered distances from historical injustices.

This last one has determined the wrath of God as well as it has stressed the Yahweh’s option for God’s people. Those who have suffered oppression at different times in history, and on that day will receive protection and justice. With this certainty, far from putting them to sleep, it moves the people to seek for it today.