

“Day” Phrases in the Prophetic Books

Notes. PS. Rev. 2021.

It was not clear to me how phrases like ‘on that day’ and ‘days are coming’ relate to the context, and whether they speak of different times in the future. Therefore I investigated their usage a bit. This was not enough to claim certainty, but some of the points that I take away from this small study are these:

- The events of the Day of the LORD extend over more than a day; יום ‘day’ and its plural often mean “time”.
- Grammatically, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא ‘on that day’ refers *back*, but temporally it refers to the *future*.
- In translation, the word “day” is problematic, because it might suggest a too narrow time frame to the reader. I do not attempt to present a golden solution here.

1. The “Day of the LORD”

יּוֹם יְהוָה ‘the day of the LORD / Yahweh’s day’.

While, in translation, it might be good to keep a literal rendering like “Day of the LORD” as a blanket name for the whole concept, translators should realize that “day” here does not refer to one single day (although outstanding events might happen in a certain day), but that a longer period is in view (at least in some texts). Readers should be helped with this understanding. This could happen in the book introduction to Joel, for instance. If such is not done, possibly a rendering like “When the LORD’s time comes” is preferable.

2. Other “day phrases”

- בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא ‘on that day’
- בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם ‘in those days’
The plural suggests an extended period (cf. Nogalski 22).
- יָמִים בָּאִים ‘days are coming’
The participle makes it imminent, especially if combined with הִנֵּה ‘behold’.
- בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים ‘at the end of the days’
The events introduced by this phrase seems to talk of a relatively distant future, with something else happening first.

While the above-mentioned accentuations in the various phrases might play a role, a precise difference in the meaning of these phrases is hard to established. They seem to build on some prophecy or event that precedes them, and then develop the picture of the future further. Probably, in one way or another, most of them relate to the time that is called יּוֹם יְהוָה ‘the day of the LORD / Yahweh’s day’.¹

Also note:

- בַּיָּמִים הַהֵם וּבְעֵת הַהִיא אֲשֶׁר ‘in those days and at that time when ...’

¹ I consulted several resources and did not find them making systematic distinctions.

These two phrases occur together in Joel 4:1 [English 3:1] and must be more or less synonymous.

3. Which day is “that day”?

“on that day” almost exclusively points to the future; the phrase thus functions differently than in narrative.

Under the heading “Eschatological-Day Phrases”, Nogalski² writes (pp. 22-23):

However, one syntactical item is often overlooked in these two eschatological formulas. Specifically, the relative pronoun (“that,” “those”) assumes an antecedent, and this assumption requires that the formulas relate to their literary context. For example, Amos 9:11 offers a promise that begins with “on that day.” In its context, this promise can refer only to the deliverance of the remnant in 9:7-10. Thus it assumes the deliverance of a remnant but extends that promise well beyond the idea of mere survival, when 9:11-12 announces restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Determining the nature of the antecedent becomes important in contexts where this phrase appears.

Bandstra, referring to Reichenbach, distinguishes **Event Time, Speech Time, and Reference Time.**³

4. For example, Joel 4:18 [English 3:18] / + Isaiah

This verse introduces the following section (NASB):

18 And in that day
The mountains will drip with sweet wine,
And the hills will flow with milk,
And all the brooks of Judah will flow with water;
And a spring will go out from the house of the Lord
To water the valley of Shittim.
19 Egypt will become a waste,
And Edom will become a desolate wilderness,
Because of the violence done to the sons of Judah,
In whose land they have shed innocent blood.
20 But Judah will be inhabited forever
And Jerusalem for all generations.
21 And I will avenge their blood which I have not avenged,
For the Lord dwells in Zion.

When will this happen? The last *setuma* (paragraph) ended with v. 8 (marked by ׀ *samekh*). Vv. 9-17 describe the war against the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat on the day of the LORD and, at the end, the LORD’s dwelling in Zion (v. 17).

According to the *Exegetical Summary* (214), commentators are divided between saying v. 18 points to the time of the judging of the nations, or the period that follows. Meißner (EditionC, 2000, p. 224) sees this as introducing more details on what the day of the LORD will look like. Holland (WSB, 1980) sees it as talking about a further consequence of the day of the LORD. Hubbard (TOTC, 1989) says on vv. 18-21: “The poem on prosperity, introduced by the eschatological formula

² James D. Nogalski. *Interpreting Prophetic Literature: Historical and Exegetical Tools for Reading the Prophets*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

³ Barry L. Bandstra. “Now” and “Then”: *Telling Time in Text and Translation*. Pp. 180-195 (here 182) in: *Ancient Texts and Modern Readers: Studies in Ancient Hebrew Linguistics and Bible Translation*. Gideon R. Kotzé, and Christian S. Locatell, and John A. Messarra (eds.). *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* vol. 71. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

in that day ... links this speech to the preceding one, ...". Similarly, Dillard (*The Minor Prophets*, McComiskey (ed.), 1992, p. 312) takes the temporal phrases in Joel 4:18 [English 3:18] as a link to those in 3:1 [2:28] and 4:1 [3:1]. That is, these texts build on each other. As for v. 18, looking at the immediately preceding v. 17, one can hardly think of a time different from when the LORD rules from Zion.

“On that day”, then, refers to an indeterminable future, but regarding textual cohesion it refers to the preceding paragraph.

As to the time frame, vv. 18ff. clearly describe **a state that lasts for some longer period**, not just one day.

Translation: The *Handbook* surveys the options well when it says:

In that day refers, of course, to the day of Yahweh. It is a traditional expression in prophetic books for introducing future expectations (see Isa 11.10, 11; Jer 30.8; Amos 8.9, 13; compare Joel 3.1). GNT “At that time” retains the function of the expression but loses the word **day**, which would relate it to the day of Yahweh. However, many languages cannot use “day” for a series of events that last for many days, so “time” may be preferred. REB and NJB have “When that day comes.” FRCL says “A time is coming,” and NBV has “Then, at that time.”

Note that translating this with “a time is coming” fails to connect the verse to the preceding section.

Note, also, that while using the word “day” keeps in line with the phrase “day of the LORD”, this does not work equally well in places where we have “days” in the plural (e.g. Amos 8:11). So it might not be worthwhile trying to stick to the word “day”.

The flexibility between the singular and plural can be seen in Amos 8, where v. 9 has “on that day”, v. 11 proceeds with “days are coming”, and v. 13 continues with “on that day” again.

Later remark on Isaiah: In tension to what was said above about the link to the preceding paragraph, we need to note that this does not always make sense.

Isaiah 4:2 begins the description of a glorious time and says “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious” (ESVUS16). However, the preceding verses describe the result of severe judgment. So the two sections cannot refer to the same day or period. Thus, **beginning 4:2 with “in that day” is misleading**, or nonsensical if taken literally. The *Handbook* says:

Here the phrase introduces a passage that speaks about restoration and blessing, not judgment. The prophet purposefully uses an ambiguous introduction that refers to some undefined point in time to come, and that echoes all of his other sayings about the future.

On 2:11:

In that day is a standard prophetic expression for a time in the future when Yahweh will act in judgment or salvation. It is repeated in verses 17 and 20 and elsewhere in Isaiah, as well as in other prophetic books. It is a very general reference to a certain period of time, not to one specific day or the daytime. The next verse names that time period “Yahweh’s day.” This expression is comparable to “in the latter days” in verse 2 (see the comments there). Most translators find it helpful to consistently use one phrase to render **in that day**. In many languages the word “day” can be used metaphorically to give the correct meaning. Another possibility is “at that time.” (CEV is unusual with “When the LORD comes,” which we do not recommend.)

5. Amos

The *Handbook* on Amos addresses the issue well when it says:

2:16

In that day/On that day. TEV changes the order from the end of verse 16 to the beginning. It should be located where it is natural. However, this is not a way of expressing the simple idea that the events took place on the same day. **That day** in Amos (see also 8.3,9,13; compare: **the day** 3.14; **the evil day** 6.3) is **the Day of the LORD** (5.18,20) and always has a sound of danger and judgment, except in 9.11-15 where it is just the opposite.⁸⁶ Translation should show that this is a special day, and if possible the connection between these different references to the Day of the LORD should not be hidden by the wording. A way of translating this expression meaningfully might be “the day/time when the LORD/I will act/judge/punish.”

8:9

And on that day/The time is coming. This is again a reference to the **day of the LORD** (see 2.16; 5.18). If possible, the translation should not be so general as in TEV. It would be better to use the same expression as in 8.3 (**on that day**) or something like “when the day of my judgment comes” or “on that day when I will punish the people,” etc.

9:11

Here the meaning of **that day** changes from “the day when the LORD will punish” to “the day when the LORD/I will bless.”

Amos 9:11 is analogous to Joel 4:18 (see above). Hubbard (TOTC) says:

The eschatological formulas ‘in that day’ (v. 11) and ‘behold, the days are coming’ (v. 13) must mean ‘in that day when judgment has run its course’ and ‘the days are coming after the divine judgment has done its righteous work’. ... (236)

..., as if Yahweh says ‘there is more to the future than I have yet told you; ...’. (237)

The reader should be enabled to relate the time phrase to earlier parts of the book. Since God is speaking, perhaps “When my day comes” would also be an option.

6. בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים ‘at the end of the days’

References:

Gen. 49:1 (Jacob’s blessing); Num. 24:14 (Balaam’s prophecy)

Deut. 4:30 “in the latter days you will return to the Lord”

Deut. 31:29 “after my death you will act corruptly ...; and evil will befall you in the latter days,”

Isa. 2:2;

Jer. 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39 (in Jer. perhaps less distant future?)

Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 10:14; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1.

Literally “at the end of the days”.

SDBH on אַחֲרֵית: “= pertaining to being the last part of an event, close to its moment of completion – end; outcome; future”.

HALOT on אַחֲרֵית unhelpful.

NIDOTTE on אַחֲרֵית:

According to H. Seebass (*TDOT* 1:207), the word is best translated neutrally by “that which comes after,” and not by the derived meaning, end or result. ...

And about the above phrase:

..., the end of days, sometimes constitutes a technical expression for future time. According to some, the phrase connotes those “latter days” when God fulfills the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel, the judgment of the nations, and the establishment of the messianic kingdom.

English versions: At the end of the days / in (the) days to come / in the latter days / in the last days / in time to come (NRSV at Deut. 4:30) / in the end (NJPS at Deut. 4:30) / finally (GNTD at Deut. 4:30) / in the future (T4T at Deut. 31:29) ...

7. Appendix: אַחֲרֵי־כֵן ‘after this’

47 x.

BDB (p. 30, § 2b): “afterwards ... אַחֲרֵי־כֵן as a formula of transition chiefly in 2 S”.

HALOT: “after”.

In the prophets:

Isa. 1:26; Jer. 16:16; 21:7; 34:11; 46:26; 49:6; Joel 3:1 [English 2:28].

אַחֲרֵי־כֵן וְהָיָה אַחֲרֵי־כֵן only in Joel 3:1.

Regarding this phrase, Dillard (*The Minor Prophets*, McComiskey (ed.)) says:

אַחֲרֵי־כֵן (after these things; lit. after this) seems unambiguously to signify temporal sequence. [With further comments.]

Patterson (Cornerstone BC, 2008) comments on the same phrase (in his *Notes*):

Context alone must be sought in order to determine whether the predicted events will occur in the near future (Exod 11:1) or as late as the eschatological era (Isa 1:26).