

OpenTheo

August 19th: Joel 3 & John 16:1-15

August 18, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The Lord entering into judgment with the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. The Spirit convicting the world.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Joel chapter 3. I will return your payment on your own head swiftly and speedily. For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their own border.

Behold, I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will return your payment on your own head. I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabaeans, to a nation far away. For the Lord has spoken.

Proclaim this among the nations. Consecrate for war. Stir up the mighty men.

Let all the men of war draw near. Let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears.

Let the weak say, I am a warrior. Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O Lord.

Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat. For there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision.

For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord roars from Zion, and utters His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake.

But the Lord is a refuge to His people, a stronghold to the people of Israel. So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it.

And in that day the mountain shall drip sweet wine, and the hill shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water. And a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the valley of Shittim. Egypt shall become a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness.

For the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the Lord dwells in Zion.

The conclusion of the prophecy of Joel in chapter 3 continues the hopeful themes of the reversal of Judah's fortune and its restoration first introduced in chapter 2 verse 18. It follows from the events foretold in chapter 2 verse 28, where the spirit would be poured out upon the people. While the first two chapters focused upon the locust invasion, and the surrounding nations were not directly mentioned, they become central to the picture in this final chapter and are directly addressed.

As Judah is set right with the Lord once more, the Lord enters into judgement with their enemies. The coming of the day of the Lord was powerfully presented in the preceding two chapters, and once again the day of the Lord is an important element of this chapter. However, now the day of the Lord has a far more positive aspect and is something eagerly to be awaited.

It will be a day of judgement and vindication by which Judah will be established. The other nations will face the sort of devastation that Judah itself had earlier suffered in its rebellion. The Lord's judgement of his people's oppressors on his great day is also

mentioned as a feature of that day in places like Zephaniah chapter 3 verse 8. Therefore, wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day when I rise up to seize the prey, for my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger, for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.

As the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, he will assemble the nations together in the valley of Jehoshaphat, bringing them together for a greater size, judging them for the wrongs that they had committed against his people Israel. While Carl Keller is an example of someone who claims that Israel here refers to the Northern Kingdom. Like most commentators, I believe that this is better understood as a reference to the people more generally, as the Northern Kingdom had long since fallen and many of the wrongs that were being judged here were directed more against the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

At the time that the prophecy is written, or perhaps the time to which it refers, the people had been scattered among the nations and the land had come under the power of its neighbours and the larger power of what was most likely Babylon, although commentators who place the prophecy later in time might relate it to one of the other powers that followed Babylon. The gathering place would be the Valley of Jehoshaphat. The name Jehoshaphat clearly recalls the name of the Davidic King of Judah.

In King Jehoshaphat's day, in an event recorded in 2 Chronicles chapter 20, the Lord had accomplished a remarkable deliverance from a coalition of nations in the valley of Barakka as the Lord had set an ambush against them and turned them against each other so that the enemies of Judah ended up killing each other. The Valley of Jehoshaphat might be designed to recall this deliverance as the Lord would once again miraculously save his people. That said, the valley in question was some distance from Jerusalem so it's not the valley that is literally in question here.

In verse 14 the valley is called the Valley of Decision and it is likely that we are supposed to understand the Valley of Jehoshaphat figuratively, recalling both the deliverance in Jehoshaphat's day and also recognising the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat. Yahweh judges. Verse 12 seems to support the idea that the valley is called the Valley of Jehoshaphat chiefly on account of the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat.

The Valley of Jehoshaphat would later come to be associated with the Kidron Wadi or valley near Jerusalem, perhaps on the basis of other passages such as Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 40. The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron to the corner of the horse gate toward the east shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown any more forever.

Of course in scripture valleys like the Kidron Valley or valleys like the Valley of the Son of Hinnom could take on a deeper symbolic significance, representing things far beyond a mere geographical location. Elsewhere a symbolic valley is represented as a site of great

judgement, for instance in Isaiah chapter 22 with the Valley of Vision. Zechariah chapter 14, a text that is most likely later than Joel, develops the imagery of the Valley of the Lord's Judgement, describing the creation of a valley near Jerusalem and the Lord entering into judgement against his people's enemies there.

In verses 1 to 4 of that chapter, For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken, and the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on the day of battle.

On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward. Leslie Allen observes the resemblance between the gathering of the nations in this chapter in Joel and Jesus' teaching of the nations being gathered before him and separated like sheep from goats in Matthew chapter 25. The nations had cast lots for the people and lightly traded young Israelite slaves for a whore or for wine.

While they were not like the apex predator of Babylon that had brought Jerusalem down, Tyre, Sidon and the Philistines all played their part in picking clean the bones of the defeated city and its people. Like scavengers they had stripped the Lord's riches and brought them into their own temples. The Lord proclaimed similar judgments against these nations elsewhere in Scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel.

They had taken his people and sold them overseas to the Greeks, far from their own land. However the Lord would bring their sin back upon their own heads. The very nation that they had sold would sell them.

While they had sold the Judeans to the Greeks in the west, they would be sold to the Sabeans in the east, far away in the other direction. As Allen notes, these nations were reduced to slavery and servitude in the mid-4th century BC. The summons to the valley of Jehoshaphat is first of all a summons to battle.

The nations, unwitting that they are the intended victims, are called out to war, coming up against the city of Jerusalem, where the Lord himself would deal with them. This great battle is one for which as many weapons as possible must be forged. Famously Isaiah chapter 2 verse 4 prophesied a coming time of peace.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Here that statement is reversed. Farmers must become warriors, and agricultural tools

must be repurposed as weapons. Everyone, small and great, weak and strong, must be assembled for this great climactic battle against the Lord and his people.

They do not, of course, realise that they are hastening towards the site of their own judgment and destruction, where the Lord will enact his sentence against them. The image of the nations gathered against Jerusalem, presumably about to overwhelm it, when they are decisively judged by the Lord, is an image that occurs on a number of occasions in scripture. We might think, for instance, of the conclusion of the thousand years in Revelation chapter 20 verses 7 to 10.

The day of the Lord has various different expressions in history and prophecy, but they do tend to rhyme. The outcome of this great judgment and deliverance is described in the verses that conclude the chapter. The nations will experience the full force of the day of the Lord.

The book of Joel began with devastated fields and empty wine presses due to the locust plague. Now, however, a great harvest is ripe, the wine press is full and the vats are overflowing. The valley where all will be decided and the sentence passed is full, teeming with an innumerable horde, ready to be harvested and trodden underfoot, like grain to be cut or grapes to be trodden.

Imagery of judgment as a harvest is found elsewhere in scripture, in both positive and negative forms. For instance, Revelation chapter 14 draws upon the imagery of Joel chapter 3, as angels are instructed to put in their sickles to harvest the grain and the grapes of the earth. The imagery of the day of the Lord of chapter 2 verses 10 to 11, with the sun and the moon being darkened and the stars withdrawing their shining, reappears in verses 15 to 16.

Once again, the heavens and the earth shake as the Lord utters his voice from Zion. There is a replay of the day of the Lord, but now Israel is being delivered. The Lord will be his people's refuge and defender, no longer the unstoppable adversary against them.

It is worth observing at this point that the description of the Lord roaring from Zion in verse 16 is also found at the very beginning of the book of Amos, the prophet that follows in the ordering of the book of the Twelve, in chapter 1 verse 2 of that prophecy. This is one of the thematic and literary connections between books to which many commentators draw attention. Through his judgment upon the nations, the Lord would prove his great name, showing that he had set apart Jerusalem as the place of his special dwelling, and that he would not permit it to be defiled.

The book of Joel began with a threat to the fertility and produce of the land. In verse 18, the fruitfulness of the land is bountifully restored. While the fruitfulness and fertility of the land could include the natural blessings of rain and plentiful crops, the image here, as in the opening chapters, is likely symbolic of the blessings of the land in fellowship

with the Lord in a broader sense.

The description here is hyperbolic, with wine flowing down the mountainsides, milk down the hills, and none of the stream beds being dry. This restoration of the life and joy-giving fluids of the land ultimately comes from the renewed presence of the Lord in the midst of his people to bless them, particularly seen in the fountain that comes out from the sanctuary. The locusts in the first two chapters had taken places like Eden and reduced them to desolate wilderness, but now a new Eden is being formed.

The sanctuary of the temple is like a new Eden, and just as in the case of the original Eden, a river is going to flow out of it to water the lands. Of course, much as the valley of Jehoshaphat, this is not a literal river from the house of the Lord, but it is still a real, albeit symbolic one, anticipating the river of the water of life that flows from the new Jerusalem, giving healing to the nations. In Ezekiel chapter 47, Ezekiel describes the river that will flow out of his visionary temple, bringing fruitfulness to the land, watering the dry places, and turning the salt water sweet.

Here we find a similar image. The Lord would avenge his people on their enemies. Egypt and Edom, which had both preyed upon them, would be judged, while Judah and Jerusalem would be established forever.

A question to consider. In verse 19, the prophet refers to Edom being made a desolate wilderness for the violence done to the people of Judah, shedding innocent blood in their land. Considering other statements in scripture, particularly in the prophets, to what historical events do you think that this sin might refer? I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, Where are you going? But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away.

For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

Concerning sin, because they do not believe in me. Concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer. Concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears, He will speak.

And He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.

Therefore I said that He will take what is mine and declare it to you. In John chapter 16, we move to a greater focus upon the Spirit in Jesus' farewell discourse to His disciples. Chapter 14 particularly emphasized the Father.

Chapter 15 particularly emphasized the Son. And in this chapter, the accent is upon the Spirit. Jesus had just been warning His disciples that they would be hated by the world for His sake.

And He had been teaching them these things because He did not want them to fall away when the time came. They should be forewarned about what was going to happen so that they would be prepared when it did. He proceeds to elaborate upon the persecution in verses 2 and 3. He teaches that the disciples would be excommunicated from synagogues, much as the man in chapter 9 who was healed of his blindness.

This also suggests a sort of legal context. The rulers of the people and the religious leaders would be casting them out of the assembly. But there is a sort of ironic reversal here.

Although the disciples will be on trial by the religious leaders, through the work of the Spirit in and through them, it will be the world that will ultimately be on trial. In John's Gospel, the work of the Spirit as the helper or the advocate is primarily legal in character. Once again, Jesus underlines the reason why He is teaching these things to His disciples.

When this persecution starts to befall them, He does not want them to be without warning or without guidance when these situations arise. A few chapters earlier, the disciples had asked where He was going, but they had been silent for quite some time. It would have been natural for them to repeat their question, given a number of the statements that Jesus had made since.

However, they are clearly subdued, and as Jesus notes, it's because sorrow has filled their heart. Wherever Jesus is going, the hammer blow for them is that He is going. This is a crisis that makes them feel that they're going to be left alone.

However, as Jesus teaches them, His going away is for their advantage. Precisely in going away, the Spirit can come to them. As He ascends to the right hand of the Father and receives the Holy Spirit, He will pour out the Spirit's anointing upon the church, equipping it to act in His name and by His power.

Were He not to go away, and if He just continued His ministry with them in the form that He had been to this point, the intensified work that the Spirit would bring would never actually arrive. Jesus declares that when the Spirit does come, He will perform three key acts. He will convict the earth concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me. Concerning righteousness, because I

go to the Father and you will see Me no longer. Concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

The work of God, as Jesus has declared earlier in the Gospel, is to believe in the One that He has sent. Conversely, sin is the rejection of the One that He has sent. Sin in its most fundamental character is relational.

It is rejection of the Father and of the Son that He has sent. The Son is the One in whom the Father is known, and so those who reject the Son are rejecting the Father in His fullest revelation of Himself. Sin is not primarily just the breaking of abstract commandments.

It is the rejection of the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. The Spirit will convict the world of righteousness. This will occur as Christ goes to the Father and He will be seen no longer.

Earlier in the Gospel, some of Jesus' hearers took offense at His statement that He came down from heaven. However, as He ascended back up to the Father, He would be vindicated in His statement concerning His origin, that He came down from the Father in the first place. His ascent to the Father would also reveal the true character of His mission.

As Saul of Tarsus saw the glorified Christ, for instance, he knew from his vision that Jesus of Nazareth was vindicated in his claims concerning His mission. Finally, the Spirit will convict the world concerning judgment, because Satan is condemned. There is a decisive judgment against Satan performed at the cross, and the Spirit declares that fact to the world.

Just as Jesus did not act on His own authority but on His Father's, so the Spirit does not act on His own authority. The Spirit will guide the Church, and the Apostles most particularly, into all truth, not least through inspiring the witness of the New Testament. This will be through taking what belongs to Jesus and giving it to the disciples.

All that the Father has is Christ's. The Spirit will take what belongs to Christ and give it to the Church. Once again, we're getting at the heart of Trinitarian truths here.

We're seeing something about just how inseparable the persons of the Trinity are within John's understanding. Just as the Son does nothing of Himself but always acts from the Father, so the Spirit does not act of His own authority, but rather He acts in the authority of Christ. The three persons are bound together in an indivisible unity.

Furthermore, through the promised gift of the Spirit, the Church and the disciples of Christ will participate much more fully in what the Father has given to the Son. Beyond Jesus merely acting on His authority for them, they will be acting in His authority within the world more generally, as the Spirit anointed them to continue Christ's mission. This is

even indicated by the beginning of the book of Acts, which, speaking of the things that Jesus began both to do and teach, also gestures toward what He will continue to do as He ascends into heaven, gives the gift of His Spirit, and continues to act, now as the Ascended Lord, through the Spirit in His Church and world.

A question to consider. Jesus does not come, according to His teaching in John, to judge the world, but yet the Spirit is here associated with the condemnation of the world and the coming of judgment. How are we best to understand the relationship between the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the Spirit in these respects?