

Joel 2:18-20

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In response to Judah's genuine repentance, the LORD will have mercy on them and restore their agricultural products, which the locust plague devoured. The text infers that Judah repented, and God relented of the impending judgement.

In the previous section, the prophet Joel urged all the inhabitants of Judah to consecrate a fast and proclaim a solemn assembly in Zion. He commanded the priests to weep to implore God's favor, asking Him to remove the invaders from the land for His name's sake (vv. 15-17). In response to genuine repentance, Joel states that *the LORD will be zealous for His land and will have pity on His people*. It seems that Joel is predicting that repentance will occur, and God will *have pity on His people* and restore them to the land. However, it seems the passage indicates that this repentance will occur after the invasion, since God says in verse 19 that He will *never again make you a reproach among the nations*. This would indicate that Judah became a reproach. Therefore, this passage seems to predict a future repentance.

Examples of prayers of repentance after Judah was taken captive in the Babylonian exile can be found in Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 1, in each case by the person for whom the book is named.

At this point Joel seems to move from saying that if the people repent that the LORD might spare them, to speaking with confidence that if their repentance is national in scope, led by Judah's leaders, that God will spare them. This is likely because Judah will not be spared the invasion, but will be restored later, after their looming exile.

The verb *to be zealous* is “qan'a” in Hebrew, used here in the sense of showing ardent love or to express a strong attachment to a person or object. This is the way it is used in our context where Joel says God will be *zealous for His land*. God always seeks to preserve what belongs to Him (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). The inhabitants of Judah were God's covenant people. As such, He would discipline them but would never abandon them. He would always show passionate concern for His chosen people because He remains faithful to His covenant (Romans 11:29).

Removal from the Promised Land was specifically set forth as a contract provision in the covenant between God and Israel, and was a specific consequence put in place by God for non-compliance. This is stated overtly in Deuteronomy 29:14-28. God set forth calamity as a consequence of disobedience. God further predicted that the people of Israel would at some point have the attitude that God would not really administer the curse provision of the covenant, and allow Israel to suffer defeat to other nations, saying to themselves:

“It shall be when he hears the words of this curse, that he will boast, saying, ‘I have peace though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart in order to destroy the watered land with the dry.’”
(Deuteronomy 29:19)

Then when God did administer the curse, as He promised to do, observers would ask and answer as follows:

““Why has the LORD done thus to this land? Why this great outburst of anger?’ Then men will say, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt.’”
(Deuteronomy 29:24b-25)

When the Lord is *zealous for His land*, He will *have pity*. The verb *have pity* means to be moved with compassion or to have mercy. In this case God has mercy on *His land* and His people. Joel states that if the nation will repent (Joel 2:15-17) the LORD would switch His role from being an adversary (Joel 2:1-11) to restoring blessings to Judah (Joel 2:18-20). The forms of the verbs (to *be zealous* and to *have pity*) are in the future tense here. This is likely because the people were restored to the land after their exile from Judah, which began in 586 BC.

The looming invasion, which resulted in exile, is pictured as a massive locust invasion in chapter 1, then described in detail as a military invasion in the first part of chapter 2. When Babylon conquered Judah, they deported most of its inhabitants to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:15-21). But they returned to the land, which is likely a partial fulfillment of verses 18-19. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record the return of some of the exiles from Babylon. The complete fulfillment might not be until Jesus returns and sets up His kingdom on earth (Acts 1:6-7).

When the people cry out to God (such as the prayers of repentance recorded in Daniel 9 and Nehemiah 1), *the LORD will answer* His covenant people. This answer is the assurance that the Suzerain God would restore His people as well as their fortunes. It is likely this prediction has multiple fulfillments. The ultimate fulfillment was predicted by the apostle Paul. He asserted that in a time future to his day (the first century AD) “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26-27). In making this assertion, Paul quoted from Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah 59:20-21 which are in the context of God redeeming Israel from transgression. Like Joel, Isaiah prophesied prior to Babylon’s invasion of Judah, and its resulting exile to Babylon.

In 2:19, Joel began with the particle *behold* to reassure the people of such promises. Quoting God directly, Joel said, *Behold, I am going to send you grain, new wine, and oil*. These agricultural products symbolize abundance and blessings. God would restore the agricultural products the locusts/Babylonians had destroyed (1:4). He would send the Judeans prosperity in the form of bountiful crops to satisfy them. Then *you will be satisfied in full with them, and I will never again make you a reproach among the nations*.

The phrase *never again* can also be translated “no more.” This likely means that the complete fulfillment of this restoration still lies in the future. Judah was restored to its land after the Babylonian exile, but still dealt with three more invaders. It was not until 1948 that Judah began to return from its exile from the land at the hand of Rome.

Within the covenantal context, the Suzerain God always asked His people to remain loyal to Him to enjoy the special privileges of the covenant—that was the “deal” between God and His people (Exodus 19:4-6). Much of this blessing is the practical impact that comes from having a self-

governing culture where people love others like they wish to be loved; a culture based on mutual service and respect. God would bless His people beyond measure and would no longer make them a disgrace (reproach) if they would trust and obey Him. Unfortunately, Judah (and Israel) failed to enjoy such fellowship to its fullest because they constantly rebelled against their Suzerain God. Yet, God still loves them because He remains faithful to His promises (Romans 11:29).

God's planned blessings for Judah included more than agricultural prosperity. They also included Judah's victory over the invading army. Through the prophet, God stated, *But I will remove the northern army far from you. I will drive it into a parched and desolate land.*

Adversaries usually entered Jerusalem from the north because of the major trade routes there, which generally followed flat terrain and ready access to water. Thus a *northern army* would be an army invading the land of Israel and Judah. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were bordered on the south by desert (and Egypt), west by sea, and east by rough and arid terrain, while its northern border was marked by lush coastal plains. Correspondingly, the phrase *northern army* or an army from the north has become a recurrent theme in the prophetic books to describe God's destructive judgment. In the book of Ezekiel, for example, the turbulent whirlwind comes from the north, revealing the LORD and a message of destruction to the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:4). Also, in the book of Jeremiah, the LORD declared, "Out of the north the evil will be unleashed on all the inhabitants of the land" (Jeremiah 1:14; 4:6; 6:1; 10:22). Thus, although locusts usually invaded Palestine from the south, the text refers to them as a *northern army*.

God stated that He would *remove the northern army* from His people. This means God would defeat and remove the would-be invader. He would drive the army into the desert and destroy them. He would throw *its vanguard into the eastern sea and its rear guard into the western sea. And its stench will arise and its foul smell will come up.*

The *eastern sea* would be the Dead Sea that served as a border on the east side of the land, while the *western sea* refers to the Mediterranean Sea (Zechariah 14:8). In the Bible, the term *sea* is often used in the Bible as a symbol of chaos, evil, and death. Thus, the *eastern sea* and the *western sea* portend the inevitable fate awaiting the invading army. Indeed, there would be no escape for it. God would drive the *northern army* into these seas.

This fulfillment likely refers to the end times, when Israel's invaders are completely dispensed with, and Israel is restored. Babylon (the first of four locusts predicted by Joel in 1:4) was not expelled from the land. Babylon was conquered by the Medes and Persians, who then assumed governance of Judah (Daniel 5). The fourth invading locust likely represents Rome, who is still pictured as the kingdom of this world. This kingdom will be replaced by the kingdom of God, which will crush the worldly kingdom (Daniel 2:44-45).

Thus, Joel predicts a season where Judah will deal with a series of invading nations, but will ultimately be delivered. The looming invasion by the Babylonians will begin an era where Judah/Israel is no longer a kingdom. But the Messiah, Jesus, will ultimately restore the land, and set up a kingdom without end.

When the invading armies are driven into the sea, a *stench will arise*. The word *stench* describes a strong and unpleasant smell that would come from the invading armies' corpses. Then having been driven into the sea and dying, they would emit a foul odor. Revelation 19 has a similar image, where birds and beasts are invited to feast on the carcasses of the defeated armies of the earth (Revelation 19:17-21.)

Verse 20 ends with the phrase *For it has done great things*. Other major translations render this verse "For He has done great things." In either case, this seems to refer to God's intervention on behalf of Israel, to remove its oppressors. If the best translation is *it has done great things*, perhaps the *it* would refer to the force God raises up to conquer Israel's invaders. This also could point to the prophesy of the end times, when the armies of the earth will be crushed by the armies of heaven (Revelation 19:17-21).

Biblical Text

¹⁸ Then the Lord will be zealous for His land

And will have pity on His people.

¹⁹ The Lord will answer and say to His people,

"Behold, I am going to send you grain, new wine and oil,

And you will be satisfied *in full* with them;

And I will never again make you a reproach among the nations.

²⁰ "But I will remove the northern *army* far from you,

And I will drive it into a parched and desolate land,

And its vanguard into the eastern sea,

And its rear guard into the western sea.

And its stench will arise and its foul smell will come up,

For it has done great things.