

Joel 2:4-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/joel/joel-2/joel-24-11/>

The prophet describes details of the army which God will use to carry out His judgment on Judah, along with a description of the devastation it will impose.

This section describes the army God will use to judge His covenant people. According to Joel, the army would be great, mighty, and unique; they would spread over Judah's land "as the dawn is spread over the mountains" (v. 2). Joel states *their appearance is like the appearance of horses*. This could mean that the army is fierce, fleet, and numerous, like a formation of war horses. This could be because much of the invading army is mounted.

In the ancient world, *horses* were often used to form cavalries for purposes of war (Exodus 14:9; 1 Kings. 4:26). In the early periods of the world, they were used especially by kings and warriors, either mounted or harnessed to chariots (Exodus 14:9, 23). Horses were instrumental in battle due to their strength and speed (Jeremiah 12:5; Habakkuk 1:8). Because they were essential for success on the battlefield, they became a symbol of military power and national security (Psalm 20:7; 1 Kings 4:26). In this passage, the prophet stated that the members of the invading army would *run like war horses* to destroy Judah. This seems to refer to the speed at which the invaders would move to invade and destroy.

This invasion would be done in short order. It would be a terrifying experience for God's people because the army would come to Judah swiftly and mightily. Since the invaders will *run like war horses*, this might mean the people of Judah will not have time to flee. Joel also says of the invading army that *they will leap on the tops of the mountains with a noise as of chariots*. The word translated *mountains* means a high place. Since this invasion is in Judah, we should picture the *mountains* as hills. This might picture the army topping the hills suddenly, like a vast array of soldiers coming over the hill, striking terror into the heart of all who see it. As the army tops the hills, not only will the citizens of Judah see the approaching army, they will also hear them. Joel describes the accompanying sound of the approaching army in a couple of ways.

First, he describes the army as making a *noise of chariots*. This is likely because the army has a lot of chariots. We might expect the neighing and stomping of horses, and the squeaking and clanking of the chariot apparatus. It would also be *like the crackling of a flame of fire consuming the stubble*. The *stubble* of the *flame of fire* might be like kindling, which tends to pop and crack. Similarly, the footfalls, the drawing of weapons, the pounding of hooves of the approaching soldiers will pop and crack, like a fire just prior to beginning to rage.

The members of the army march *like a mighty people arranged for battle*. They set all their weapons and get ready to attack Judah. *Before them, the people are in anguish*. The word translated *anguish* is often used for a woman in labor (Isaiah 13:8; 54:1). It is used here to describe the pain of fear the people of Judah will experience as the army draws near to destroy them. The people will experience terror and panic. Indeed, *all faces* of the people of Judah will

turn pale in fear before this mighty army. The people of Judah will be in crisis. They will be filled with pain and agony (Isaiah 13:8).

The invading army will defeat Judah because they are powerful. *They run like mighty men, they climb the wall like soldiers.* The Hebrew term translated as *mighty men* is “gibbôr.” It refers to someone valiant, one whose strength surpasses ordinary strength. Likewise, the Hebrew term for *soldiers* means “men of war” or “warriors.” It describes the one who knows how to use the various weapons of war such as swords, spears, javelins, bows, and arrows in combat. The phrase *climb the wall like soldiers* likely refers to the invaders’ capacity to besiege Judah’s walled cities, and overrun the city’s defenses, perhaps using ladders and ropes.

The Old Testament is filled with *mighty men* or *soldiers* who were well-equipped for battle. One example is Goliath, the champion who represented the Philistines in their fight against Israel. In the book of 1 Samuel, we learn that Goliath was well prepared to fight against Israel, but the LORD defeated him. Goliath had a bronze helmet on his head and was clothed with scale-armor weighing “five thousand shekels of bronze” (1 Samuel 17:4–5). He also “had bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders” (v. 6). Likewise, Joel tells us that the invading army will be well-equipped as they make their way to Judah to capture the land.

According to Joel, the army is disciplined and unstoppable. *They each march in line; they do not deviate from their paths.* They are well drilled, and march ahead with precision. *They do not crowd each other,* meaning that the *soldiers* are disciplined and professional. There is no overlapping. Rather, *they march everyone in his path.* This is not a mob approaching. It is an experienced, well-drilled, professional army.

Furthermore, this army is well trained for battle: *When they burst through the defenses, they do not break ranks.* They maintain solidarity. The invaders are professional and press the attack according to plan. There is no breaking ranks to begin looting and pillaging. The soldiers maintain discipline, and finish their job. When they break through Judah’s defenses, *they rush on the city.* Once they have breached the cities’ defenses, they know exactly what to do; *they run on the wall; they climb into the houses, and they enter through the windows like a thief.* They are professional in every way. They will not be resisted. The *wall* of the city likely has a walk, where defenders can defend the wall. When the invaders breach the *wall*, they *run on the wall*, perhaps to clear the wall of defenders. Having cleared the wall, now the invaders go into the city, to eliminate any remaining defense, and *climb into the houses* by entering *through the windows like a thief.*

A *thief* breaks into a house in a manner such that he is not resisted. In the same way, the invaders would enter Judah’s houses and walls swiftly, before an effective defense can be mounted. They would overcome all obstacles and accomplish their mission. They will not stop until there is complete devastation.

Before them the earth quakes, the heavens tremble. This could mean that the army is so powerful that it is like a cosmic disturbance. It could also mean the Lord is intervening on behalf of Judah’s enemies, since *The LORD utters His voice before His army.* The shaking of *heaven and earth* could indicate that the Lord will add to the terror of the approaching army earthquakes, and

cosmic disturbances such as seeing *the sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness*. This could also refer to the thickness of the arrows and artillery being propelled at those being invaded. They are so thick that they block out the sun and stars.

This could also refer to a future Day of the Lord at the end of the age, in which a number of cosmic disturbances are predicted (Matthew 24:29-30; 2 Peter 3:10; Revelation 8). It could be that Jesus quoted Joel 2:10 in this passage from Matthew, which refers to a time future to Jesus:

“But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory.”
(Matthew 24:29-30)

In this passage in Matthew, Jesus is answering the second question asked by His disciples, who asked what would be the sign of His coming. In this case, the invading army is led by Jesus, and He will be invading the earth to judge sin, and cleanse it of unrighteousness. God is about to use the unrighteous army of Babylon as an instrument of judgement on Judah. It appears to be a picture of a future judgment in which Jesus will invade the earth with a heavenly army, to judge the earth of sin.

This invading army is special because it is a chosen instrument; the LORD is the ultimate Commander-in-Chief. This will be true both of the Babylonian army, whom God will shortly use as His instrument, as well as the heavenly army Jesus will lead Himself when He returns to earth (Revelation 19:11-21).

Whether we consider the awe of the army’s power or the natural phenomena such as the earthquake, the trembling of the heavens, the darkening of the moon—all were divinely ordered. *The LORD utters His voice before His army*. When He utters His thunderous war cry, nobody can resist Him (Psalm 18:13). Even the cosmos is disturbed by His voice. *Surely His camp is very great. For strong is he who carries out His word*. The pronoun *he* refers to the coming army, which was pictured in chapter 1 as a locust plague. The invading soldiers will march at God’s orders. They will do exactly what God commands them to do. And because God is at the head of the army, the invasion constitutes the *day of the LORD*, the time in which He would intervene in Judah’s affairs to judge their wicked deeds. There will be other days of judgement, culminating in the ultimate Day of the Lord at the end of the ages (2 Peter 3:10).

Therefore, the prophet asked a final rhetorical question: *the day of the LORD is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?* The unspoken answer to the question is “Nobody.” No one can endure or escape God’s judgment. Because nobody can overcome or escape God’s judgment, Joel issued a call to “blow a trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm” on God’s holy mountain in order to warn the entire nation of their inevitable and impending doom.

Biblical Text

**⁴ Their appearance is like the appearance of horses;
And like war horses, so they run.**

**⁵ With a noise as of chariots
They leap on the tops of the mountains,
Like the crackling of a flame of fire consuming the stubble,
Like a mighty people arranged for battle.**

**⁶ Before them the people are in anguish;
All faces turn pale.**

**⁷ They run like mighty men,
They climb the wall like soldiers;
And they each march in line,
Nor do they deviate from their paths.**

**⁸ They do not crowd each other,
They march everyone in his path;
When they burst through the defenses,
They do not break ranks.**

**⁹ They rush on the city,
They run on the wall;
They climb into the houses,
They enter through the windows like a thief.**

**¹⁰ Before them the earthquakes,
The heavens tremble,
The sun and the moon grow dark
And the stars lose their brightness.**

**¹¹ The Lord utters His voice before His army;
Surely His camp is very great,
For strong is he who carries out His word.
The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome,
And who can endure it?**