CHAPTER FOUR

THE DAY OF YAHWEH

The locusts in Joel (1:4, 2:25) represent a real catastrophe which, perhaps, has been the propelling power for the message and composition of the book.1 From 2:25 it is seen that the locusts are to be understood as a historical phenomenon.2 This verse tells us that Yahweh will restore to the people that which the locusts have destroyed.3 Perhaps the prolonged disaster caused by the locusts was the reason Joel examined why it had happened, and his conclusion —after examining the religion—was that the cult had not been of the right kind. He sees the locusts as the “messengers” of the terrible day of Yahweh which will follow them. In 2:11 he calls them the army of Yahweh.4 Thus, after mentioning the locusts as his starting point, he continues his description of what the day of Yahweh will look like by using common terminology concerning the destruction caused by enemies. The categories best fitted for this purpose are mythological ones, and especially those common in lamentations.5 However, it should be noted here that in lamentations locusts are not usually a part of the structure.

---

1 Cf. H. Birkeland, Zum hebräischen Traditionsweisen, 1938, pp. 64 f.
3 Cf. Mal. 3:11, which also mentions a disaster caused by locusts which Yahweh promises to rebuke.
It has been maintained that the disaster mentioned in Ch. 2 is not of the same kind as that described in the first chapter, and neither can the army of Ch. 2 be the same as the destruction-causing force, the locusts, in Joel 1. The reason for this distinction is said to be the fact that in Ch. 2 it is Yahweh himself that leads the army, v. 11. Therefore the army mentioned in Ch. 2 has been characterized as "ein apokalyptisches Heer".¹ It is right that Yahweh is the one who leads the army, but it should also be recognized that what is described in this chapter is not only a plague of locusts, but also the consequences issuing from a wrong cult. Because of the "wrong" kind of worship the locusts are coming as an announcement of the impending day of Yahweh. In 2:25, Yahweh calls the locusts "my army", לוהי, which means that there is a great possibility of seeing the locusts and the people of the North, צדים, 2:20, as expressions for one and the same idea, namely, that the army has been sent against Yahweh's own people according to the will of their god, cf. also 1:6. The book of Joel, which uses cultic motifs and liturgical language in so many instances, is in this case in accord with the dramatic actions and ideas of the annual festival, in which Yahweh "created" the right order, blessings and righteousness. The "enemies" may "work" for a time, but the deity himself comes and puts an end to their dominion and work of destruction. With this in mind one cannot deny the possibility that the יְסִנ of 2:17 belong to the same category as the locusts—that they are enemies too. This does not mean that they have to be identical with the locusts. On the other hand, the יְסִנ-motif of 2:2 is an expression for the same thing that the locusts stand for.

Thus in Ch. 2, when the prophet calls upon the people to be prepared for the day of Yahweh and calls for a cultic fast, he does this in expressions and motifs that are proper in this connection—namely, religious phraseology, the aim of which was best to describe the coming day of Yahweh.² Taken together these phrases and motifs may be seen therefore as indications for this day as an old cultic day.

Much has been written about the day of Yahweh, הָיְהַ יָוָן, and it would seem unnecessary to discuss it again. However, because of the different viewpoints advocated concerning this theme, it is necessary to deal with it at some length in connection with Joel. It

¹ So Wolff, Joel, pp. 48 ff. Every futurist aspect in a prophetic book cannot be understood as apocalyptic, cf. below.