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Yahweh's Activity in History and Nature in the Book of Joel
(review)

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Hebrew Studies, Volume 35, 1994, pp. 220-222 (Review)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hbr.1994.0023>

**HEBREW
STUDIES**

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO
HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
Volume XXXV, 1994

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Published by the American Society of Professors of Hebrew
at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem
ISSN 0017-7145 (print) / ISSN 1744-5019 (online)

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YAHWEH'S ACTIVITY IN HISTORY AND NATURE IN THE BOOK OF JOEL. By Ronald A. Simkins. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies* 10. Pp. vi + 322. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991. Cloth, \$79.50.

This study is concerned with the relationship between history and nature in Israelite religion. According to Simkins:

...the religion of Israel usually has been characterized as a religion of history. That is, the God of Israel acts and reveals his purposes in human history. Nature, for its part is passive and inanimate, and at best serves only an ancillary function in human history. On the other hand, polytheistic religion, the religion of Israel's Near Eastern neighbors, has been characterized as a religion of nature. The gods are merely manifestations of the natural world. (p. v)

But this split between history and nature, says Simkins, "...is simply foreign to the thought world of the ancient Near East, including Israel." The thesis of the monograph is stated clearly:

According to the religion of Israel, Yahweh acts as the creator in the whole of creation, in both natural events and human affairs, in order to accomplish his purposes. (p. v)

The thesis is illustrated and supported with an examination of the book of Joel. This monograph is a revision of a doctoral dissertation done at Harvard University under the direction of Frank M. Cross, Paul D. Hanson, and Jo Ann Hackett.

The book falls into three major parts. Part 1, "History and Nature" (95 pp.) begins with a review of the understanding of these two topics in biblical scholarship. Hegel's philosophy provided the rationale for the dichotomy between the modern concepts of history and nature. Both Eliade and the Frankforts maintained that Israel found meaning and purpose in history rather than in nature, in contrast to her Near Eastern neighbors. Biblical scholars such as Eichrodt, Kaufmann, von Rad, Wright, and Anderson all operated with this dichotomy, understanding the Bible to depict history and not nature as the primary realm of God's activity.

The non-Israelite religions, Simkins argues, were not simply nature religions, but had a sense of the activity of their gods in history and in fact had a linear view of time. According to the Bible, human history and natural history are of a piece, and Yahweh is active in both.

The first part concludes with a survey of scholarship on the book of Joel, including discussion of the works of Duhm, Kapelrud, Ahlstrom, Wolff, Loretz, Bergler, and others. In almost all of these, the natural catastrophe

(the locusts) and the day of Yahweh are two distinct events. Informing this viewpoint is the conceptual dichotomy between history and nature which would not allow the equation of a natural catastrophe with the day of the Lord. But it is precisely this equation, says Simkins, which this study will seek to demonstrate.

Part 2, "The Day of the Locusts" (100 pp.), begins with a discussion of Joel 1:2-4 and includes a fascinating collection of material about "Locust Entomology and Ecology" in the Palestinian world. The culprit to which Joel refers is identified as the "desert locust." Joel 1:5-14 is a "call to lamentation" (Wolff) in view of the severity of the locust problem. The locusts here are real, not merely metaphors (Stuart). Joel 1:15-20 describes the consequences of the plague: the livestock suffered, the vines and trees failed to produce fruit, daily sacrifices at the temple ceased because of the food shortage. For Joel, all of these events were an indication of the presence of the day of Yahweh. With 2:1-11, the orientation shifts from the past to a locust assault which is in progress, probably the continuation of the previous year's locust plague. And now, according to Joel, the Lord and his armies are fighting against these locusts (2:11)! Simkins argues that the people had been put to shame by their neighbors because of Yahweh's failure to protect them and had thus begun to disassociate themselves from Yahweh; against this background, 2:12-17 is a call to return to their former allegiance. Finally, 2:18-27 promises that Yahweh's people will never be put to shame again (2:27).

Part 3, "The Day of Yahweh" (77 pp.), begins by arguing that chaps. 1-2 and 3-4 make up a unity, announcing a single day of Yahweh. 3:1-5 picks up after 2:12-17, announcing the outpouring of the spirit; 4:1-8 shifts the focus from Judah to the judgment of the nations; 4:9-17 summons the nations to war and announces the Lord's victory; and finally, 4:18-21 connects Yahweh's cosmic victory with the regeneration of the land, now dripping with wine and flowing with milk.

"The Day of Yahweh and the History of Creation" argues that Joel has used day of Yahweh traditions to help understand the locust plague. "The locusts and the nations, then, are like opposite sides of the same coin, two dimensions of the day of Yahweh" (p. 273). A final short chapter, "The Structure of the Day of Yahweh and the History of Creation," summarizes the conclusions of the study, reaffirming the thesis that Yahweh's activity in human history cannot be divorced from his participation in the history of nature. The book concludes with an appendix listing parallels between Joel and other biblical books, and an extensive bibliography.

I found this to be a carefully prepared, closely argued and persuasive monograph. Surely the author is right in declaring that the relationship between God and nature has been neglected in our God-who-acts (in history!) approach to OT theology. Simkins is also correct in arguing that the contrast between Israel's "history-religion" and the religions of her neighbors as "nature-religions" has often been overplayed and oversimplified. The Old Testament does describe Yahweh's activity in nature, and a variety of ancient Near Eastern texts reveal a belief that the gods of Israel's neighbors were active in history.

A few questions came to mind as I read through this work. How can the suffering of the animals be explained (1:18)? What does it mean when the prophet declares that "even the wild animals cry to you" (1:20)? In our own day, the phrase "act of God" is used to designate an event which cannot be explained, such as a flood or a natural catastrophe. Does the Bible help us in determining when a natural catastrophe is such an "act of God"?

In sum, I agree that one of the urgent tasks lying before biblical theologians is describing the relationship between God and nature. This monograph is a first-rate contribution to that task.

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IMAGINING THE CHILD IN MODERN JEWISH FICTION. By Naomi B. Sokoloff. Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies. Pp. xiv + 234. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. Cloth, \$29.95.

In this original and thought-provoking book Naomi Sokoloff examines the "discourse of childhood" in modern Jewish literature. She analyzes the works of six writers (Sholem Aleichem, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Henry Roth, Jerzy Kosinski, Aharon Appelfeld and David Grossman) and the ways in which they both conceptualize and articulate the experience of childhood.

In the first section Sokoloff lays out the theoretical basis for her discussion, building on the work of Bakhtin, Dorrit Cohn, and others. Sokoloff is well-versed in Jewish literature written in Yiddish, English, and Hebrew as well as the related scholarship. She shows a strong facility for working in a variety of relevant areas: contemporary literary theory, child psychology, language acquisition. Informed to a large extent by narratology, she weaves