

CLARIFYING  
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BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

NO MOON OF BLOOD  
IN JOEL 2:31 ( HEBREW 3:4)

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## XXIII

### NO MOON OF BLOOD IN JOEL 2:31 (HEBREW 3:4)

#### INTRODUCTION

הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לְחֹשֶׁךְ  
וְהַיָּרֵחַ לְדָם

לְפָנַי בּוֹא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא

The sun shall be turned to darkness,  
and the moon to blood,  
before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

(RSV, NRS)

In Joel 2:10 it is stated that שֶׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ קָדְרוּ וְכוֹכְבֵּים נִגְדָּהּם “the sun and the moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shining.” The same words appear again in 3:15 (Hebrew 4:15). But sandwiched between these statements which say the *moon will be darkened* is the statement that the moon will be turned to blood. This *cannot* mean it will become red *like* blood since the preposition prefixed to דָּם is לְ “to, into,” *not* כְּ “like.” The MT וְהַיָּרֵחַ לְדָם has to be taken as literally as הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לְחֹשֶׁךְ “the sun will turn *to* darkness.”<sup>1</sup> Wolff (1977: 68) commented on the difficulty of the text by suggesting: “That the moon turns ‘bloody’ indicates that the thought here is not, or at least not only, of ordinary eclipses of the sun and the moon, but at times of darkening to catastrophe.” But if that were the case, one would expect the text to say “the earth will turn to blood.”

Wolff and other commentators failed to indicate how the moon's becoming real blood—which could certainly present a red light in the sky—relates to darkness, *per se*. But the moon's turning literally into blood makes little sense since, with the moon being dark (2:10), it would not be visible anyway whatever its composition. These observations raise this twofold question: must דָּם mean “blood,” and if not what are the other lexical options for דָּם?

### דָּם MEANING “DARK”

It has long been recognized that monosyllabic hollow verbs often have by-forms in which a medial consonantal ה or ש appears in lieu of the vowel letters ו or ך, including:

בוּשׁ	בָּהַת	“shame” (Aramaic)
דוּר	דָּהַר	“long time, age” (Arabic)
לוּט	לָהַט	“secrecy” (Exo 7:11)
לוּט	לָאֵט	“secrecy” (Jud 4:21)
מוּל	מָדַל	“to circumcise”
מוּר	מָדַר	“to exchange”
נוּר	נָהַר	“a light” and “to shine”
רוּם	רָאֵם	“to rise” (Zech 14:10)
רוּץ	רָהַט	“run” (Aramaic, Syriac)

Out of this list דוּר and לוּט and נוּר are of special interest because they illustrate that, in addition to by-forms with a ה or an ש, there are monosyllabic nouns without the ה or the ש or a ו. (In the Bible דָּר “generation” appears thirty-seven

times, לָט “secrecy” occurs three times, and נֵר “lamp” occurs twenty-three times.)

The חָרַךְ in Joel 2:31 (MT 3:4) can be derived from the root חָרַךְ “to be dark” just as נֵר can be derived from נָהַר “to shine, to light.” The *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* of חָרַךְ, stem I, “to astonish” appears in Jer 14:9, נִדְרַךְ “to be astonished” (for which the Septuagint has ὑπνωῶν “asleep,” apparently from a *Vorlage* with נִדְרַךְ).

The Arabic cognate of חָרַךְ, stem II, is دَهَم (*dahama*) “he surprised, he took unawares” (BDB 187). But دَهَم, in forms 2 and 9, means “it blackened, it became black” and there are the derivative nouns دَهْمَةٌ (*duhmat*) “blackness,” الدَّهْمَانُ (*ad-dahmānu*) “the night,” الدَّهِيمُ (*’adduhaimu*) “dark trial, calamity,” and اَدْهَمُ (*’adhamu*) “black.” This last term is also used for “the twenty-ninth night of the [lunar] month because of its blackness,” just as اَلدَّهْمُ (*’adduhmu*) means “the three nights of the [lunar] month [during which is the change of the moon] because they are black” (Lane 1867: 925; Wehr 1979: 342).

In Gen 15:17 the הָיָה הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בְּאֶרֶץ הַיַּבֵּשׁ “when the sun had gone down and it was dark,” became in Walton’s *London Polyglot* (1657) فلما عابت الشمس وكانت الدهم (*fa-lammâ âbat aššamsu wakânat ’adduhma*), with the Hebrew עֲלָטָה “darkness” being rendered by دَهْم (*duhmu*).<sup>2</sup> In light of such evidence, I have also proposed in Chapter X above that Jos 10: 12b–13a actually means “*Sun, be dark over Gibeon! Moon over the valley of Aijalon! The sun became darkened, and the moon stayed concealed—whereupon the nation took vengeance upon its enemies. The sun concealed itself while in the middle of the sky and actually hasten to set as though it were a whole day!*”

## CONCLUSION

Since חָשׁוּךְ “dark” can be related to חָהָר as נֶהָר “light” is related to נֶהָר, there is no longer any compelling reason to read every occurrence of חָשׁוּךְ in the Hebrew Bible as חָשׁוּךְ “blood.” The interpretation of חָשׁוּךְ needs to be contextually sensible. Both occurrences of חָשׁוּךְ in Joel 2:30–31, in full agreement with 2:10 and 3:15, can easily be translated as “darkness” rather than “blood.” Subsequent direct or indirect quotations of Joel, as in the *Assumption of Moses* 10:6, which reads “the moon shall not give her light, and be turned wholly into blood,” reflect the same misunderstanding of חָשׁוּךְ “dark” as those in found in the Septuagint with its αἶμα and the Vulgate with its *sanaguinem*.<sup>3</sup>

Joel’s portents included earthly fires, the smoke of which would bring about such darkness that the sun, moon and stars will not be visible. He also used the language of lunar and solar eclipses with their diminished light.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Kapelrud’s (1948: 141) suggestion that the moon’s turning to blood was “probably above all her colour which is thought of, as in Ex. 7:20f., where Moses changes the water of the Nile into blood,” must be faulted for its indifference to the force of the preposition לְ.

2. Castell (1669: 659) also noted the use of دهم (*duhmu*) in Zech 6:2, 6, and Rev 6:5. In Akkadian the cognate of חָשׁוּךְ/חָהָר is *da’āmu*, as in *id-ḫI-im šamšum* “the sun darkened” and *[ūm]ūšu utekkilu šamu id-da[u-mu]* “the day darkened for him.” (*CAD* 3: 1).

3. See Charles 1973 II: 410, 422. As Charles pointed out, biblical texts dealing with the darkness of the sun and the moon include Ezek 32:7, Ecc 12:2, Isa 13:10, Matt 24:29, Mark 13:24, Luke 23:45, Acts 2:20, Rev 6:12, 9:2.

4. Aguirre (1999) noted:

Viewers of total solar eclipse of August 11, 1999 reported that they were impressed with the eclipse's fantastic display of colors. The sky was a stunning deep blue, trimmed at the horizon with a rich orange rim of dawn. The corona, which was visible for a little over 50 seconds, was pearly white and uniformly round.

Espenak (1999) noted "During the 50 century period -1999 to 3000 (i.e.: 2000 B.C. to 3000 A.D.), Earth experiences 11,897 solar eclipses as follows:

All Eclipses	=	11897	=	100.0 %
Partial (P)	=	4197	=	35.5 %
Annular (A)	=	3960	=	33.3 %
Total (T)	=	3190	=	26.8 %
Hybrid (H)	=	550	=	4.6 %

For a suggestion on which of these eclipses Joel had in mind, see Stephenson (1969: 224) and Ahlström's (1971: 73) response to Stephenson's proposal.