

Joel

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I THE PROPHET HIMSELF

Author

In some ways, Joel is a man of mystery! The only thing we are told about him is that he is Joel son of Pethuel (1:1). We don't know where he came from, where ministered, when he lived, or what social strata he was from.

Date

Attempts have been made to date the book, but there is no real consensus. Some place him as one of the earliest prophets, others say he is one of the very last! *Chisholm (The Bible Knowledge Commentary, 2000) summarizes three main views:*

1. An early preexilic date.

Those who support an early date (ninth century B.C.) for Joel point to its position in the Hebrew Old Testament (between Hosea and Amos) and its references to Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, and Edom as enemies (Joe 3:4,19). Hobart Freeman writes, "The very naming of these particular nations is strong evidence for a preexilic date for the book, inasmuch as they were the early preexilic enemies of Judah, not the later nations of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia" (An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, p. 148; see also Gleason L. Archer, Jr., A Survey of Old Testament Introduction. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974, p. 305).

Both of these arguments lack weight. The canonical position of the book is inconclusive, especially when one notes that the Septuagint places it differently in the canon. Even the Old Testament prophets in the Babylonian period delivered oracles against the nations mentioned (cf. Je 46-47; 49:7-22; Eze 27-30; Zep 2:4-7). One who contends for a late preexilic date could argue that Joe 2 pictures the Babylonians vividly enough to make formal identification unnecessary to a contemporary audience well aware of their ominous presence on the horizon.

Some seek to support an early date for Joel by appealing to the type of government reflected in the prophecy (elders, 1:2; 2:16; and priests ruling, 1:9,13; 2:17, in view of Joash's crowning at age seven) and to verbal parallels in other prophetic books (Archer, A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, pp. 304-5). The inconclusive nature of these arguments is apparent as they are also used by proponents of a late date.

Several details of the text (cf. esp. 3:2,6) seem to militate against an early date (in Joash's reign) for the prophecy (cf. S.R. Driver, The Books of Joel and Amos, pp. 14-15).

2. A late preexilic date.

The view that the book comes from the late preexilic period has much to commend it. If one dates the prophecy between 597 and 587 B.C. (with Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1971, pp. 24-8), Joe 3:2b (with its reference to scattering God's people and dividing the land) would refer to the Babylonian invasion of 597 B.C. when 10,000 of Judah's finest men were deported (cf. 2Ki 24:10-16). This would also account for Joel's references to the temple (Joe 1:9,13; 2:17), for it was not destroyed until 586 B.C. (cf. 2Ki 25:9). At that same time such a dating would mean that Joe 1:15 and 2:1-11 anticipated the final destruction of Jerusalem (which indeed came in 586 B.C.; cf. 2Ki 25:1-21).

Joel's prophecy would then fit nicely with several other passages which relate the "day of the LORD" (or "day of the LORD's wrath" or "day of the LORD's anger") to that event (cf. La 1:12; 2:1,21-22; Eze 7:19; 13:5; Zep 2:2-3). Joel's description (Joe 2:1-11) would also coincide with Jeremiah's description of the Babylonians (cf. Je 5:17). The reference in Joe 3:6 to slave trade between the Phoenicians and Greeks (or Ionians) harmonizes well with the late preexilic period. Ezekiel also referred to this economic arrangement (Eze 27:13). Arvid S. Kapelrud shows that Ionian trade flourished in the seventh and early sixth centuries B.C. (*Joel Studies*, pp. 154-8).

Despite the attractiveness of this view, problems arise in relation to Joe 2:18-19. This passage seems to record God's mercy to Joel's generation, implying they truly repented (see comments on those verses). If so, such a sequence of events is difficult to harmonize with the historical record of Judah's final days. 2Ki 23:26-27 indicates that even Josiah's revival did not cause the Lord to relent.

3. A postexilic date.

Four arguments are used to suggest a postexilic date:

- (1) Joe 3:1-2,17 refer, it is argued, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. In this case the references to the temple in 1:9,13; 2:17 apply to the second temple, completed by the returning exiles in 515 B.C.
- (2) The "elders" (cf. 1:2; 2:16), rather than the king, appear as the leaders of the community. This is more consistent with the postexilic period (cf. Eze 10:14).
- (3) Joel quotes other prophets, including Ezekiel (cf. Joe 2:3 with Eze 36:35; Joe 2:10 with Eze 32:7; Joe 2:27-28 with Eze 39:28-29).
- (4) The reference to Greek slave trade (Joe 3:6) reflects the postexilic period.

Against these arguments the following responses may be made:

- (1) Joe 3:1-2,17 could refer to the deportation of 597 B.C., not that of 586 B.C. (but as noted previously under "2. A late preexilic date," this view poses problems). Some attempt to explain the language of Joe 3:1-2,17 in light of the events recorded in 2Ch 21:16-17 (Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament*

Introduction, p. 305). However, the captivity of the royal sons and wives recorded there hardly satisfies the language of Joe 3:2.

- (2) Though the omission of any reference to the monarchy is curious, it can carry little weight for it is an argument from silence. Also elders were prominent in Judean society before the Exile (2Ki 23:1; Je 26:17; La 5:12,14; cf. Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, pp. 187-9).
- (3) In the case of literary parallels with other prophetic passages, it is often difficult to determine in any given case who quoted from whom.
- (4) Kapelrud has shown, as noted earlier, that Ionian slave trade flourished in the seventh century B.C.

In conclusion, it is impossible to be dogmatic about the date of the writing of Joel. The language of Joe 3:2b seems to favor a postexilic date. This verse suggests that nations in the future will be judged for having continued the policies of ancient Babylon in scattering the Israelites and dividing their land. Such a view is consistent with (but not proved by) several other observations (such as the reference to Phoenician-Ionian slave trade, the form of government implied in the book, and the literary parallels with other prophets). If one accepts a postexilic date, the references to the temple necessitate a date some time after 516 B.C. However, all this must remain tentative. Understandably, conservative scholars differ on the date of Joel.

Style

Joel writes with a powerful and ominous style, intended to shock his readers/hearers into action:

'Joel loads his clauses with the most leaden letters he can find and drops them in quick succession, repeating the same heavy word again and again, as if he would stun the careless people into some sense of the bare, brutal weight of the calamity....'

(George Adam Smith (II, p. 405), quoted in Hubbard's *Tyndale Commentary*)

Background

Because we don't know for certain when or where Joel lived and ministered, we have nothing to help us decide on what is the appropriate political and cultural background to consider, and than the most general context common to all the prophets.

Theme

The Day of the Lord and the Outpouring of the Spirit in the Last Days. This is the *age of the church in the power of the Spirit*.

II MESSAGE/OUTLINE (taken from Chisholm op cit)

I. Introduction (1:1)

II. The Locust Plague (1:2-20)

- A. An opening appeal (1:2-4)
- B. A call to mourn (1:5-13)
 - 1. Drunkards should mourn (1:5-7)
 - 2. The land should mourn (1:8-10)
 - 3. Farmers should mourn (1:11-12)
 - 4. Priests should mourn (1:13)
- C. A call to repentance (1:14)
- D. The significance of the plague (1:15-20)

III. The Coming Day of the Lord (2:1-11)

- A. The nearness of the Lord's army (2:1-2)
- B. The destructive power of the Lord's army (2:3-5)
- C. The relentless charge of the Lord's army (2:6-9)
- D. The invincibility of the Lord's army (2:10-11)

IV. A Renewed Call to Repentance (2:12-17)

- A. An appeal for a sincere change of heart (2:12-14)
 - 1. The appeal (2:12-13a)
 - 2. The motivation (2:13b-14)
- B. An appeal for national involvement (2:15-17)

V. Forgiveness and restoration (2:18-27)

- A. The Lord's gracious response described (2:18)
- B. The Lord's promise of restored agricultural blessing (2:19-27)

VI. Promises of a Glorious Future (2:28-3:21)

- A. Spiritual renewal and deliverance (2:28-32)
- B. The judgment of the nations (3:1-16)
 - 1. Judgment is announced (3:1-8)
 - 2. A call to war: Judgment is described (3:9-16)
- C. Israel's ultimate restoration (3:17-21)

III APPLICATION

Message of Judgement

How we apply Joel's message of judgment depends crucially on how we interpret two key elements of the book: "army of the Lord" in chapter 2, and Joel's reference to the "Day of the Lord". Are they references to the past, present or future? Are the accounts literal, or pictorial? If pictorial, do they have a spiritual or tangible realisation? Bruce Vawter (p.371 Oxford Companion to the Bible) poses the dilemma we face in trying to interpret Joel:

"Is Joel a prophet of judgment (against Israel) or of salvation (of Israel in the face of its gentile enemies)? It is really difficult to say. Was the locust plague of the first verses an attempt to describe a real happening, as in Amos 7:1-3, or is it merely a literary device borrowed from the text of a prophetic predecessor? Is this plague a cloak for physical invasion of Israel or simply a symbol of national disintegration? Is the lifting of the plague potential or real? How much and to what extent is the repeated "Day of the Lord" intended to apply to Israel's future destiny and its relation to the gentile world? And by no means let us forget the outpouring of the spirit foretold by this prophet (2.28-323) and the fulfillment that was discerned by New Testament writers seeking religious continuity (Acts 2.16-19)."

Exercise in Interpretation:

There are three main interpretations of Joel's account of the locust plague, *Apocalyptic*, *Allegorical* and *Literary*. Which do you believe? Read Joel 2:1-14, the accounts below and think about the structure of the book to help you decide.

Apocalyptic

As J. Sidlow Baxter (Explore the Book, p.111) notes, "This explanation of the passage is called "apocalyptic," of course, from the Greek word, *apocalupsis*, which means an unveiling or revelation (and which is the title of the last book in our Bible because that book is an unveiling of the future). An example of the apocalyptic interpretation of this Joel passage is found in the Scofield Bible, which heads it: "THE HE INVADING HOST FROM THE NORTH PREPARATORY TO ARMAGEDDON." The footnote adds: " In Joel ii. the literal locusts are left behind, and the future day of Jehovah fills the scene." "The whole picture is of the endtime of this present age."

Baxter concludes, however, that, "...we cannot accept this theory; for besides other exegetical difficulties there is one fact outstandingly which decides against it. Can we really believe that the prophet, although purporting address and arouse his own generation, was not really addressing them at all, but a future generation nearly three millenniums away? Such an artificiality as that would be unworthy of the inspired Word. Surely, as clearly as language could make it, Joel here addresses his own contemporaries, and sounds an alarm which was imminent then and there. He certainly intends them to think this. If we read the passage with a really open mind we cannot escape this. Whatever latent significances may lie in his words, their genuine first sense has to do with Joel's own time; and we do not serve the best interests of our Bible when, with zeal for seeing prophetic meanings, we exalt the apocalyptic at the expense of the historical integrity of Scripture."

Allegorical

In the words of Baxter (Explore the Book, p.112), "... there is also the allegorical explanation. According to this, Joel was describing a coming crisis simply under the figure of a locust plague.

There had recently been actual locust ravages in the land (as chapter i. shows); and now the prophet imagines an even worse locust plague, and uses it as a figure of the fateful coming crisis which he calls "the day of Jehovah." In line with this, it is argued that while the description has its ground in a locust plague, the language is too ominous to be limited by it. These locusts of chapter ii. are really the "nations" of chapter iii. Certain features in the description, it is said, imply a human army. The invaders are said to be "a great people and a strong" (verse 2). They assault cities and terrify the people (verses 6, 7). They are to be destroyed in a way which is inapplicable to locusts (verse 20). The priests are urged to pray that the "nations" may not "rule over" Israel (verse 17). The scourge is from the north (verse 20), whereas locusts usually swarm Palestine from the south. All these things, it is argued, indicate something more than a locust plague. As to which event is here "allegorised," opinions ns by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Romans, of course, have been hit on; and there are those would also include a final apocalyptic reference to Armageddon. But the allegorical theory will not do. ... Joel says the invaders are like horsemen, and sound like chariots, and scale the wall like men of war. It has been aptly observed that Joel would never have compared a *real* army with itself. ...

"Jehovah Himself says: "I will restore unto you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm and the caterpillar and the palmerworm, My great army which I sent among you." Could language make it plainer, that the threatened further calamity, in chapter ii.1-11, was to be of the same kind – though in even severer degree – as that which had already taken place (as described in chapter i.) ?

Literal

Baxter's own view emerges as follows, "...Joel's locusts were neither " apocalyptic " nor " allegorical." the true interpretation is, indeed, that which takes the passage literally, as referring to real locusts. Read the passage carefully, once again, noting the seeming peculiarities, from that unusual expression in verse 2, about "the morning spread upon the mountain to verses 10 and 11, where we read even of the earth quaking". Baxter then urges his readers to consider quoted accounts from respected contemporary witnesses which demonstrate that Joel's description is literal and does not need to be taken as hyperbole or poetic licence.

Other authors who take a similar view also cite the many eyewitness accounts of the impact of locust swarms and their destructive powers. Hubbard (*Tyndale Commentary* on Joel), for example, refers to an account of a locust-swarm "covering 2,000 square miles and comprising an estimated 24,420 billion insects." A well documented horde attacked California in the mid twentieth century and was "described in the newspapers in terms reminiscent of Joel. In one county 200,000 acres were covered with insects 'over every inch and in some places stacked on top of each other'. A California agricultural official reported that 'what they (the grasshoppers) don't eat they cut off for entertainment.' He also noted that in of the insects, fields are left 'bare as the floor', apple trees are stripped of every leaf and rose bushes are consumed through the green bark. During the same attack, a farmer lamented that 100 acres of his bean field had been 'completely cleared' by the hoppers."

Hubbard cites also Kraft: "On proliferation, 'One female grasshopper that lays eggs in June ... may have 18 million living descendants by October'. On density, 'the concentrations were as high as 1000 per square yard'; 'swarming mobs ... ride high on the wind, sometimes blocking out the sun'. On devastation, 'last year, (one farmer) planted three successive crops of millet ... But the grasshoppers ate every one.'" (S. Kraft, ('Africa Girds for New War on Locusts', Los Angeles Times Oct. 13, 1986, pp. 1, 12))

So, Hubbard (p.45) also concludes that, "Joel's account is not hyperbolic but factual."

Message of Hope:

The highlight of the book is 2:28-32 which speaks of the Outpouring of the Spirit in the Last Days. Most significantly, this passage is quoted at length by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, suggesting that its literal fulfillment came in the coming of the Holy Spirit. Peter's declaration was so significant because it heralded a new age, a new era in Salvation History, an era that continues and will continue until Jesus returns. This is the *age of the church in the power of the Spirit*.

- OT: the Holy Spirit came “upon” individuals to supernaturally empower them to do extraordinary deeds
- NT: the Holy Spirit resides within, we are to be “filled” with the Spirit; he is in fact a deposit (cf engagement ring) guaranteeing our eternal inheritance.

- OT: Spirit came upon select individuals – one in a generation in fact.
- NT: Infilling of the Spirit available to all believers (“whoever is thirsty”). Gifts of the Spirit are available to all (“greater things will you do”)

- OT: Spirit manifests himself only as the power of God, equipping God's hero of the hour with a spiritual arsenal.
- NT: The Holy Spirit reveals his personhood; he can be grieved, offended, he empathizes and cries out to God on our behalf when we do not have the words to express our anguish, he is the Comforter and Counselor. Yes he is the mediator of God's supernatural arsenal to every believer, but his leading identifies our very identities as God's sons (“those who are led by the Spirit of God are Sons of God”).

Hymn in Honour of Joel

The First Joel

The book of Joel,
Speaks of locusts today,
Locusts tomorrow,
And Judgement Day.

*Oh well, Oh well,
Oh well, Oh well,
Apocalyptic or Allegory?
No one can tell.*

When he did live,
we are really not sure,
But repentance & fasting,
Were his timeless cure.

*Oh well, Oh well,
Oh well, Oh well,
Apocalyptic or Allegory?
No one can tell.*

The latter days,
Of outpouring are here,
A church ready for battle,
God's ecclesia.

*Oh well, Oh well,
Oh well, Oh well,
Apocalyptic or Allegory?
No one can tell.*