

## THE BOOK OF JOEL

### Message:

The message to Joel is fairly straightforward. Basically, it is that, “The Day of the Lord is coming to bring judgment for God’s enemies and restoration for God’s people.” Joel sets his message up by pointing to a literal locust plague which he poetically morphs into an eschatological Day of the Lord. Or as Finley puts it, “The prophecy of Joel can be compared to two wheels turning on an axle. The wheels are history and eschatology, while the axle is the day of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

### Author:

According to 1:1, the human author of the prophecy was Joel son of Pethuel. Joel means “Yahweh is God.” The name was fairly popular and there are eleven to fourteen men who bear this designation in the Old Testament depending on how you count them. The references to “Zion” and “the house of the Lord” (1:9, 13–14; 2:15–17, 23, 32; 3:1, 5–6, 16–17, 20–21) might indicate that the prophet was a resident of Jerusalem. References to the priesthood (1:13–14; 2:17) might indicate that Joel was a priest. Nothing is known about his father Pethuel.

### Recipients:

The identification of the original recipients is tied closely to the issue of dating. While most would hold that the oracle was written to Judah, dating affects whether we are referring to pre-exilic or exilic Judah. Since an early date seems more likely, the original recipients are likely pre-exilic Israel.

### Dating:

Perhaps the most contentious and difficult issue involved in the study of Joel is the issue of dating. Three basic suggestions have been offered: (1) early pre-exilic date (*ca.* 830 B.C.), (2) late pre-exilic date (597–587 B.C.), and (3) postexilic date (*ca.* 400 B.C.). We will approach this question by dealing with three types of evidence: historical evidence, canonical evidence, literary evidence.

#### *Historical Evidence*

At least three pieces of historical evidence are often brought into the discussion. First, it is noted that the prophet identifies Judah’s enemies as Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, and Edom (Joel 3:4, 19) not Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. The best explanation is that Joel is pre-exilic

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1990), 10.

since Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt were the enemies of Judah in the early pre-exilic era. A second piece of evidence is the type of government presupposed by Joel. There is no mention of a king but rather elders and priests. This could fit the period of king Joash who was crowned at age seven but whose kingdom was probably ruled in his stead till he was deemed mature enough to rule for himself. Third, one has to also account for passages such as 3:2b (which speaks of the scattering God's people and dividing the land). In the early dating view, 3:2 could easily be understood in light of the Babylonian invasions into Judah in 597 or 586 B.C. The references to the temple (1:9, 13; 2:17) would suggest a time before the destruction of the Temple in 586 (or some would argue after 515 when the temple was rebuilt. Overall, it seems that the historical evidence favors just slightly the pre-exilic option (*ca.* 830 B.C.).

### *Canonical Position*

Another piece of evidence that merits at least some consideration is the placement of Joel within the Minor Prophets. In the Hebrew listing it is found between Hosea and Amos, two pre-exilic prophets. If one can assume a basic chronological arrangement then it would seem to argue for a pre-exilic date for Joel. Others also argue that the order is slightly different in the Septuagint. This is true but the shift is slight from the second to the fourth position. And no listing has Joel listed in postexilic era. Admittedly, there is no census concerning the placement of the Minor Prophets in a chronological sequence.<sup>2</sup>

### *Literary Considerations*

There are at least two kinds of arguments made at the literary level. First, it appears that there is some literary dependence between Joel and Amos. Two examples will suffice. Both Joel 3:16 and Amos refers to the Yahweh roaring from Zion. Archer suggests that lexical evidence suggest that it is more likely that Amos is quoting from Joel rather than the other way around.<sup>3</sup> Since Amos is clearly pre-exilic this would suggest that Joel is also pre-exilic. Some argue that Joel is a classical prophet and that classical prophecy did not develop until the eighth century. But this argumentation appears to suffer from circularity, a circle that could just as easily be argued the other way.

### *Conclusion*

The issue of dating is admittedly a difficult one. Consequently, dogmatism appears to be unwarranted. Nonetheless, we prefer for the reasons indicated above to place Joel in the pre-exilic period around 830 B.C.

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<sup>2</sup> The arrangement of the Minor Prophets is a complicated issue. For a helpful examination of some of these issues see Barry Alan Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon*, SBL Dissertation Series 149, ed. Michael V. Fox (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Updated and Revised ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 339.

## Historical Setting:

If we are correct in dating Joel to the 830's B.C. then the prophet ministered during the time of Joash, the son of Ahaziah. Joash became the eighth king of Judah at the age of seven (2 Kgs 11:21). He ruled for forty years (2 Kgs 12:1). As a king he was both godly and ungodly. In Joash's early years he was under the godly tutelage of the High priest Jehoiada and he "did what was right in the eyes of the Yahweh" (2 Kgs 12:2). But when Jehoiada died the king turned to idolatry (2 Chr 24:17–19) and even murdered Jehoiada's son (2 Chr 24:21–22). Joash died at the hands of his own men while recovering from injuries suffered in a battle with the Arameans (2 Chr 24:25). Joel probably ministered in the early part of Joash's reign.

## Purpose:

The purpose of Joel is basically twofold. First, the book was written to the people of Judah to encourage them to return to Yahweh with repentant hearts. The Locust plague of chapter one is a "shot across the bow" as it were. Second, the book was written to the people of Judah to engender hope of divine deliverance and restoration.

## Contributions:

Joel's greatest contribution appears to be its contribution to the concept of the Day of the Lord. If our dating decisions are correct, Obadiah introduces the concept of the Day of the Lord, but Joel develops it.

## Joel and the New Testament:

Joel's contribution to New Testament thought is rich and significant. For example, Joel provides a significant proof text for Peter's Pentecost Day sermon (Acts 2:14–41; cf. Joel 2:28–32). Joel 2:32 is quoted by Paul in Romans 10:13. The Book of Joel also provides a number of eschatological words and phrases. As Hubbard has noted,

Among the words, phrases, or motifs which have helped to shape *the picture of the end-times* are these: (1) the blast of the trumpet to signal the Day (2:1; cf. 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16; Rev. 8:6 – 11:19); (2) the use of *near* to express the imminence of the Day (1:15; 2:1; 3:14; cf. Mt. 24:32; Mk. 13:29; Jas. 5:8); (3) 'You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied' (2:26; cf. Lk. 6:21 and the accounts of the feeding of the multitudes, Mt. 14:13–21; Mk. 6:32–44; Lk. 9:10–17; Jn. 6:1–14); (4) judgment of the Gentiles (3:1–14; cf. Mt. 25:31–46); (5) darkening of sun and stars as signs (2:30–31; 3:15; cf. Lk. 21:25; Rev. 8:12); (6) shaking of earth and heaven (3:16; cf. Heb. 12:26); (7) 'Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe' (3:13; cf. Mk. 4:29); (8) the locust army compared to horses (2:4–5; cf. Rev. 9:7, 9).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 38.

## Literary Features:

The Book of Joel is often noted for its rich poetic<sup>5</sup> imagery. Patterson for one states that, “He wrote with a pure classical yet logical style, distinguished by its clarity, flow of thought, and beauty of expression.”<sup>6</sup> Crenshaw highlights Joel’s “anthological quality,” almost limitless use of “prophetic themes,” use of repetition, simile and metaphor, rhetorical devices, and imperatives.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is not strictly a literary feature it might be helpful to note that the Hebrew text is divided slightly differently than English texts. The Hebrew text has divided the material into four chapters. The Hebrew has 2:28–32 as chapter three and the English chapter three as chapter four.

## Structure:

### Outline

- I. The Day of the Locust (1:1–20)
  - A. The Superscription (v. 1)
  - B. The Spotlight on a Recent Locust Plague (vv. 2–4)
  - C. The Suffering of the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 5–14)
  - D. The Significance of the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 15–18)
  - E. The Supplication for the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 19–20)
- II. The Day of the Lord (2:1–3:21)
  - A. A Imminent Day of the Lord (2:1–27)
  - B. A Eschatological Day of the Lord (2:28–3:21)

### Chart

The Day of the Locust: 1:1–20					The Day of the Lord: 2:1–3:21	
Superscription	The Spotlight on a Recent Locust Plague	The Suffering of the Recent Locust Plague	The Significance of the Recent Locust Plague	The Supplication for the Recent Locust Plague	A Imminent Day of the Lord	A Eschatological Day of the Lord
1	2–4	5–14	15–18	19–20	2:1–27	2:28–3:21

<sup>5</sup> Only 1:1 and 3:4–8 are prose in form. Everything else is poetic in form.

<sup>6</sup> Richard D. Patterson, “Joel,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 233.

<sup>7</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24c, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 36–9.

**Expositional Outline of Joel:****I. THE DAY OF THE LOCUST (1:1–20)**

- A. The Superscription (v. 1)
- B. The Spotlight on a Recent Locust Plague (vv. 2–4)

OPTIONS FOR INTERPRETING THE LOCUST WORDING		
The wording represents different kinds of locusts	The wording represents different stages of locust development	The wording is solely for rhetorical effect
Literal	Literal	Semi-Literal

- C. The Suffering of the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 5–14)

Devastation	Implication
Wheat and barley	Complete and utter devastation ↓ “the joy of mankind is withered away”
The harvest of the field	
Vine	
Fig tree	
Pomegranate tree	
Apple tree	
All the trees of the field	

- D. The Significance of the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 15–18)
- E. The Supplication for the Recent Locust Plague (vv. 19–20)

## II. THE DAY OF THE LORD (2:1–3:21)

### A. A Imminent Day of the LORD (2:1–27)

1. A call to recognize the Day of the LORD (2:1–11)
2. A call to respond to the Day of the LORD (2:12–17) –

Reasons to Repent	
God is . . .	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• gracious</li> <li>• compassionate</li> <li>• slow to anger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• abounding in love</li> <li>• and One who relents from sending calamity</li> </ul>

3. A call of restoration in the Day of the LORD (2:18–27)

### B. A Eschatological Day of the LORD (2:28–3:21)

1. Divine Renewal Through the Spirit (2:28–32)
2. Divine Retribution Against the Nations (3:1–16)

Valleys Associated with Prophetic Judgments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The “Valley of Ben Hinnom” becomes the “Valley of Slaughter” (Jer 7:30–34; 19:1–7)</li> <li>• The “Valley of Vision” (Isa 22:1–13)</li> <li>• The “Valley of Hamon Gog” (Ezek 39:11)</li> <li>• The “Valley of Jehoshaphat” (Joel 3:2, 12)</li> <li>• Unnamed valley near the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:3–5)</li> </ul>

3. Divine Restoration of Judah (3:17–21)

A	Egypt and Edom will be <i>uninhabited</i> (v. 19a)
B	Egypt and Edom shed <b>innocent blood</b> in Judah (v. 19b)
A'	Judah will be <i>inhabited</i> forever (v. 20)
B'	God will avenge <b>innocent blood</b> (v. 21a)
A'	God will <i>inhabit</i> Zion (v. 21b) <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 397.