

Joel

1. Introduction

1. Background

Joel son of Pethuel is unknown to us outside of his prophecy. The name *Joel* means “YHWH is God”. Since his prophecy does not make any explicit reference to external historical events, it is not possible to be certain about its historical setting. Arguments for different periods are as follows:

(a) Before the exile

- In the days of the minority of Joash, c. 830 BC

Joel makes no mention of a king, but he speaks to the elders and the priests.

Joel and Amos use similar turns of phrase – one may have borrowed from the other. A case can be made for Amos taking a sermon text from Joel. Since Amos ministered about 755 BC, this places Joel earlier than that date.

The enemies named are the Phoenicians, the Philistines, the Egyptians and the Edomites; Assyria and Babylonia are absent. The Philistines and Edomites invaded Jerusalem in the days of Jehoshaphat (872-848 BC). Egyptian power was broken by Babylon at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC.

This would make Joel contemporary with the latter years of Elisha’s ministry.

- During the ministry of Jeremiah

Some put Joel after the death of Josiah (609 BC), making him a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah (who also preached the Day of the LORD).

(b) After the exile

- Between reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Greek invasion, 440-350 BC

This view is based on the assumption that the mention of the Greeks (3:6) could not have been made before the exile. However, the Greeks are mentioned as a distant people and trade between them and the Phoenicians is compatible with pre-exilic conditions.

- After the life of Alexander the Great, c. 330 BC

Joel uses apocalyptic language, and some believe that this is characteristic only of the period of national despondency that followed the Greek conquest of Judah. However, there is no compelling reason to suppose that apocalyptic is exclusively the signature of late literature – Ezekiel and Daniel, for example, wrote apocalyptic literature in the 6th century BC.

John Calvin observes that “as there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which [Joel] taught undecided; and, as we shall see this is of no great importance” (*The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 2, p. xv). What is clear (from references to the Temple and the priesthood) is that Joel’s ministry was exercised in Judah/Judea.

2. Theme: The Coming of the Day of the LORD

Joel's message concerns "the coming of the Day of the LORD." He preaches this message with a view to reconciliation between the LORD and his people.

Joel isn't unique in speaking about the Day of the LORD. Other prophets, especially Amos and Zephaniah, proclaim it. But unlike them, Joel's whole message is built around a five-fold announcement that the Day is coming. Leslie Allen compares the message of Joel to "a literary tapestry covered with a host of repeated motifs...The whole composition has been constructed as an intricate mosaic with remarkable skill and care."

What is the Day of the LORD? It is the dramatic intervention of God in the affairs of the world, exercising his sovereign control to move history towards his foreordained purpose. This does not mean that there are events or periods or time of which God relinquishes control. Rather, God's dramatic actions (especially the death and resurrection of his incarnate Son) are "breakings in" of the final Day of the LORD, which illustrate and exemplify God's control and purpose in everything.

3. Structure and Content of Joel

The prophecy envisages four event horizons at increasing chronological distance from the period of Joel's ministry. The following structure places horizons 1-2 and 3-4 about a central section. The central section demonstrates Joel's reason for preaching his message – he aims at reconciliation between God and the people, so that God will be glorified and the people satisfied.

- 1:1 Superscription – this is a word from the LORD

Part 1 (Joel 1:2-2:11) *The coming of the Day of the LORD, Part 1*

- 1:2-20 Event horizon 1: the present. The Day of the LORD is presaged by a locust plague and crop failure.
- 2:1-11 Event horizon 2: the near future. The Day of the LORD is presaged by a military invasion depicted as a swarm of locusts.

Central exhortation (Joel 2:12-27) *Response to the message of Joel*

- 2:12-17 The people are called to repent and renew their faith/obedience
- 2:18-27 The LORD responds to the people's repentance and faith

Part 2 (Joel 2:28-3:21) *The coming of the Day of the LORD, Part 2*

- 2:28-32 Event horizon 3: the far future. The Day of the LORD and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.
- 3:1-21 Event horizon 4: the end of the age. The Day of the LORD, the final judgement and the new creation.

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2. The Day of the LORD Brings Sorrow and Trembling

1. Horizon 1: Locusts and Crop Failure ⇒ Sorrow (1:2-20)

(a) The calamity (1:2-4)

The calamity is so great (“Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?”) that it is to be remembered (“Tell your children of it...”).

The calamity is a plague of locusts and crop failure. The cutting, swarming, hopping, destroying locust has completely wasted the land. Locust swarms can be immense (up to 10 billion individuals covering hundreds of square miles), cover great distances (hundreds of miles), and be exceptionally dense (up to 120 million per square mile, riding high and blocking out sunlight). When they die, their decaying bodies give off a revolting stench and breed typhus.

(b) Joel addresses the people to attend to the disaster (1:5-18)

- Three types of people are addressed.
 - (i) Drunkards and drinkers of wine – wine makes merry and then puts to sleep – so they are to wake up and wail.
 - (ii) Tillers and vine dressers – they are to “be ashamed” – this is a play on words because the Hebrew for “dry up” and “be ashamed” sound similar.
 - (iii) The priests and ministers of the altar – they are to put on sackcloth, lament and wail; they are to take the lead in national repentance.

- The nature of the calamity is described.

Consider the force of the words: *cut off, laid waste, dried up, torn down; stripped, destroyed, withheld; ruined, devoured, burned; fails, languishes, withers, shrivels*. Both choice items (wine, oil and figs) and basic crops (wheat and barley) are gone.

Life’s basic necessities have failed. Domestic and wild animals are affected. The ordinary gladness of men is removed. The religious life of Judah is endangered (“Grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God,” 1:13).

We now feel the force of the lament in 1:15-16: “Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God?” The day of the LORD is Joel’s main message.

- The remedy is prescribed. The priests are to put on sackcloth and take up a lament. The people are to be gathered to the house of God in solemn assembly. The whole community is to fast and cry out to God.

(c) Joel himself prays to God (1:19-20)

Joel turns to God – there is a sense in which this is a personal turning – turning apart from, and as a rebuke to, the body of Judah. The picture is unremittingly

dark. The land has been stripped bare by the locusts; now drought and fire have devoured the pasture that was left. The chapter ends on a bass note.

2. Horizon 2: Locusts and Military Invasion ⇒ Trembling (2:1-11)

An invasion is described. The direction from which it comes is not given – unless 2:20 indicates an invasion from the north – in which case obvious candidates are the Assyrians and the Chaldeans – the Assyrians (Sennacherib) did not enter Jerusalem (see description of 2:9), while the Chaldeans (Nebuchadnezzar) did. Since neither of these nations is named, there is no point in being dogmatic.

Joel uses language borrowed from the appearance and movement of the locusts in order to make a deeper impression.

The structure of 2:1-11 emphasises the awful aspect of the Day of the LORD – it causes trembling (A and A') and anguish (C) – the punch line comes at the end of verse 11, i.e. “Who can endure it?”

- A The Day of the LORD is a day of darkness and trembling in the land (2:1-2). A host is advancing on the land – an unprecedented disaster (cf. 1:2-3).
- B The host advances on the land consuming everything in its path (2:3-5).
- C “Before them peoples are in anguish; all faces grow pale” (2:6).
- B' The host charges on the city, breaking into every building (2:7-9).
- A' The Day of the LORD is a day of darkness and trembling in the heavens (2:10-11). The LORD himself is at the head of the host – the Day in great, very awesome, and unendurable.

3. Applications

- The prophecy is meant to make us feel the awfulness of the Day of the LORD. Wailing, lamentation, mourning and groaning fill chapter 1. In chapter 2 the Day brings trembling, quaking and darkness – everyone is in anguish; all faces grow pale. “Alas for the day!... Who can endure it?” (1:15; 2:11).

The darkness of the coming Day ought to move us to serious self-examination, leading to repentance and renewed faith and obedience – and that is where Joel takes his message in 2:12-17.

- The prophecy impresses us with the imminence of the Day: “It is near, it will come...it is coming, it is near” (1:15; 2:1). The imminence of the Day is like the coming of the kingdom of God – there is an “already” aspect as a result of the incarnation of the Son of God; and there is a “not yet” aspect which awaits the second coming.

We live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”. In particular, the way in which we receive and respond to the “already” will determine how we stand when the “not yet” comes, i.e. only a response of faith and repentance NOW while the Day remains “future and unseen” will save us when the Day becomes “open and present”.

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3. *The Day of the LORD Brings Judgement and Grace*

Judgement and grace were present in the events of horizon 1 (locusts) and horizon 2 (invasion), e.g. God punished his people for covenant faithlessness (judgement) but he maintained his covenant relationship with them and restored them (grace). However, these expressions of judgement and grace were provisional. The judgement and grace of horizons 3 and 4 are stable and final.

1. **Horizon 3: Judgement and grace break into history (2:28-32)**

Peter quotes 2:28-32 at the start of his sermon on the Day of Pentecost.

He changes the “afterwards” of v. 28 into “in the last days”. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the demonstration that we are living “in the last days” – but v. 31 (Acts 2:20) locates this period of history “before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” This is a unique period of time – sandwiched between Pentecost (Christ’s return to glory) and the Parousia (Christ’s return in glory).

Peter’s interpretation of 2:28-32 is provided by the person and work of “Jesus of Nazareth” (Peter’s first words of interpretation in Acts 2:22).

(a) *Final judgement broke into history at the Cross*

2:30-31 speak of “wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood.” These phenomena were associated with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt when God executed judgement on the gods of Egypt (e.g. Exodus 12:12). Here a similar deliverance is envisaged – from bondage to freedom.

Unnatural darkness from noon to 3 PM, and an earthquake occurred during the crucifixion (Matt. 27:45,51) – God was executing the judgement of the Day of the LORD on his incarnate Son.

(b) *Final grace broke into history at the empty tomb*

The Day of the LORD is a day of salvation (2:32). This can be so only because the vindication of the Day broke into history when God raised his Son. Jesus was put to death for our sins (judgement) and raised for our justification (grace), Romans 4:25.

The resurrection of Jesus laid the foundation of the new creation. To be “in Christ” is to be a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and to belong to the new creation (Col 3:3-4).

(c) *Final judgement and grace are evidenced by the presence of the Spirit*

The Spirit is the agent of the new creation. He brings us into contact with it so that the Church is the sphere in which the grace of the Day is experienced (2:32b).

However, the Spirit’s presence in the Church also means that the final judgement is also near at hand – think of the severity of the language used by the apostles when confronted by unyielding opponents (Acts 5:1-11; 13:46; Gal. 1:8-9).

2. Horizon 4: Judgement and grace at the end of history (3:1-21)

The theme of “judgement and grace” comes to its climax with the Second Coming.

Jehoshaphat mean “the LORD has judged”. God says, “Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations” (3:12).

(a) The Valley of Jehoshaphat: judgement on Tyre, Sidon and Philistia (3:1-8)

Joel gives a concrete example of judgement on Tyre, Sidon and Philistia. The coastal nations (characterised by the arrogance of Tyre and Sidon, and the cruelty of Philistia) had plundered Judah and sold her people to the Greeks. So they too would be destroyed and enslaved. Alexander the Great did this in 322 BC.

(b) The Valley of Jehoshaphat: judgement on the multitudes (3:9-16)

The prospect is widen out to “all the surrounding nations.”

A A proclamation among the nations (3:9-10).

B The nations are gathered in the valley of Jehoshaphat (3:11-12).

C Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe (3:13).

B´ Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision (3:14-15).

A´ The LORD roars from Zion, utters his voice from Jerusalem (3:16)

The emphasis is on final judgement (C). But grace is expressed in 3:16b.

(c) The LORD Dwells in Zion (3:17-21)

“In that day” (3:18) – “the day” has arrived, and it is a day of unparalleled blessing. The sum and substance of it – its beginning (I am the LORD your God who dwells in Zion), middle (the fountain that rises in the house of the LORD) and end (the LORD dwells in Zion) – is the presence of God among his people.

A “I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion” (3:17).

B Unparalleled blessing flows from the house of the LORD (3:18).

B´ The enemies are desolate; but God’s people never fail (3:19-20).

A´ The LORD dwells in Zion (3:21).

3. Applications

- The offer of the gospel is far more than “come to Jesus and have your sins forgiven.” It is an offer to enter right now into the vindication of the final Day (forgiveness and justification), and the inheritance of the new creation.
- The gift of the Spirit is the possession of all Christians and his role is to give us a foretaste of, and guarantee our possession of, the age to come (3:18).
- To reject the gospel is therefore a terrible decision: it consigns the person who rejects it to eternal death (3:19a).

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4. *The Preaching of the Day of the LORD Aims at Reconciliation*

Joel preached for reconciliation between God and his people. This is most clearly seen in the central section of the book, 2:12-27, in which the “covenantal correlative” (“I will be your God and you shall be my people”) is reflected several times (e.g. “your God” in 2:13,14,17, and “my/his people” in 2:18,26,27).

Reconciliation requires (a) the repentance of the offenders, and (b) that the offended party forgive the offenders. These two aspects of reconciliation are depicted in the two sections of 2:12-27. Veiled reference is made in 2:30-32 to how forgiveness is possible (i.e. the atoning death of the incarnate Son of God).

1. **The people are called to repentance (2:12-17)**

(a) *A call to return* (2:12-14)

“The Prophet, having proclaimed the dreadful judgement [of the Day of the LORD]...now shows that he did not intend to terrify the people without reason, but, on the contrary, to encourage them to repentance; which he could not do without offering to them the hope of pardon...Hence the Prophet now represents God as propitious and merciful, that he might thus kindly allure the people to repentance” (Calvin).

- How to return: wholeheartedly (v. 12a); brokenheartedly (vv. 12b-13a).
- Who to return to: the LORD your God (v. 13b) – every word is significant, cf. Exodus 34:6-7.
- Hope that the LORD will also return (v. 14).

(b) *National humility* (2:15-17)

These verses demand a national response to the call issued in vv. 12-14.

- The responsibilities of the people: eight instructions (vv. 15-16).
 - (i) [1] Blow the trumpet in order to [2] consecrate a fast and [3] call a solemn assembly. Notice that Joel is not against religious observance.
 - (ii) [4] Gather the people and [5] consecrate the congregation. Nobody is exempt, so, [6] assemble the elders, [7] gather the children; even [8] the bridegroom and bride must leave their chamber. Everyone is involved.
- The responsibilities of the priests, the ministers of the LORD (v. 17).
 - (i) Position: between the altar and the porch of the temple, i.e. towards God on behalf of the people.
 - (ii) Disposition: weeping
 - (iii) Their prayer: “Spare you people, O LORD” (cf. Ex. 33:13; Num. 14:13-21). Verse 17 is a brilliant and bold prayer which blends the taunt of the nations with the covenantal correlative to form the strongest petition.

2. The LORD responds to the people's repentance (2:18-27)

(a) Blessing that will be poured out now (2:18-27)

The LORD responds to the national day of prayer. God reassures his people that the covenant is secure. The taunt of the nations in v. 17 ("Where is their God?") is answered in v. 18 ("Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people."). The blessings of the covenant are spoken of; the land will flow with goodness. The crowning blessing is promised in v. 27: "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else."

(b) Key words and phrases

- *The jealousy and pity of the LORD* God is jealous for his own honour (Exodus 34:14) and for his people (Zechariah 1:14). The word for pity means to spare.
- *Land and people* The covenants made throughout the Old Testament, from the days of Adam, comprised three elements: land, children and salvation.
- *Satisfaction* Satisfaction is a rich idea – the meeting of deepest needs (e.g. Ps. 16:11; 103:5; 145:16) – attainment of one's purpose ("to glorify God and enjoy him forever").
- *Shame* Shame was a keynote in chapter 1. Now God expressly promises twice, "my people shall never again be put to shame" (vv. 26,27).
- *The locusts* Joel repeats the fourfold designation of the locusts. This underscores the magnitude of God's restoration of his land and people.

(c) Outline

- A vv. 18-19, God speaks to his people and promises (i) satisfaction and (ii) to remove their reproach. The satisfaction will bring blessing on the land.
- B v. 20, God enlarges on (ii) the removal of the invader from the north.
- C vv. 21-27, God enlarges on (i) the satisfaction of the land (vv. 21-22) and the people (vv. 23-27).
- B' vv. 24-25, God enlarges on (ii) restoration of years eaten by the locusts.
- A' vv. 26-27, God promises (i) to satisfy his people, (ii) that his people will never again put to shame, and (iii) to dwell among his people.

3. Applications

- We must never think that God is indifferent to the salvation of people or the sanctification of believers. He is "jealous" over us and his purpose for us is greater than we can imagine – he wants our company (2:27a; 3:17a,21b).
- God's passionate interest in us ought to be reflected in our passionate interest in him – the call to repentance ought to stir in our hearts sorrow and hope.
- If we feel the message of Joel aright we will also be deeply exercised to see other people reconciled to God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:11,14-15,18-20).