

Introduction to Joel

1. Author

Joel son of Pethuel is unknown to us outside of his prophecy. The name *Joel* means “Yahweh is God”; *Pethuel* means “the straightforwardness or sincerity of God.” Together these names emphasise the nature of the message of the book – that God is at the heart of everything that happens in the life of his people, and that he speaks directly and pointedly to his people.

2. Historical Setting of Joel

Since Joel is unknown outside of his prophecy, and since the prophecy does not make any explicit reference to external historical events, it is not possible to be certain about the historical setting. Arguments have been advanced for several different periods:

▪ **Before the exile**

(a) In the days of the minority of Joash, c. 830 BC

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

Joel and Amos use similar turns of phrase – one may have borrowed from the other. Gleason Archer makes the case for the latter taking a sermon text from the former. Since Amos ministered about 755 BC, this places Joel earlier than that date.

The enemies named as arrayed against Judah are the Phoenicians, the Philistines, the Egyptians and the Edomites; the Assyria and Babylonia are conspicuously absent. The Philistines and Edomites invaded Jerusalem in the days of Jehoshaphat (872-848 BC). Egypt was shattered as a major power by the rise of Babylon.

This view makes Joel contemporaneous with the latter years of Elisha’s ministry in Israel.

(b) During the ministry of Jeremiah

Some date Joel to after the death of Josiah (609 BC), making Joel a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah.

▪ **After the exile**

(c) Between the reconstruction of Jerusalem and before 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.

(d) 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 seem this is of no great importance” (*The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 2, p. xv). What is clear is that Joel’s ministry was exercised in the southern kingdom of Judah: more than passing mention is made of the Temple and the priesthood.

3. The Message and Outline of Joel

“A devastating infestation of locusts has hit the southern kingdom of Judah and stripped the fields bare. A drought has left the earth parched. The prophet Joel uses these events to declare a message from God: the people of Judah will be judged and punished for their sins; their only recourse is to turn in true heart repentance to the Lord; God will ultimately bring all nations to judgement and only those among the nations who have called ‘on the name of the LORD shall be saved’ (2:32).” (Gareth Crossley, *The Old Testament Explained and Applied*, p. 643).

Calvin observes four movements in the prophecy of Joel. First, Joel reproves the people for their stupidity in growing harder under the punishments that God had sent them. Second, Joel warns the people that far worse judgements are at hand. Thirdly, Joel calls the people to repentance, and he explains what this entails. Finally, Joel points the people to look forward beyond the present and impending judgements to the coming Kingdom of Christ.

Norman Geisler (*A Popular Survey of the Old Testament*, pp. 236-237) follows a similar outline:

A. Desolation from the Lord (1:1-2:17)

(a) The historical aspect (1:1-20)

1:1-4 A literal plague had swept the land.

1:5-18 The people are exhorted to humble themselves.

1:19-20 Joel prays to God on account of the plague.

(b) The prophetic aspect (2:1-17)

The literal plague of locusts is employed as a metaphor for a coming invasion from the north.

2:1-11 The destruction is described.

2:12-17 Contrition is commanded.

B. Deliverance of the Lord (2:18-3:21)

(a) The Promise of present blessing (2:18-27)

God promises to send a plentiful harvest: he will remove the northern enemy and restore the land.

(b) The promise of future blessing (2:28-3:21)

“And it shall come to pass afterwards...”

2:30-3:3 Judah will be restored.

3:4-8 Judah’s enemies will be condemned.

3:9-15 The nations are called to battle.

3:16-21 The Lord will save his people.

Joel 1:1-20

The Day of the LORD calls for mourning

1:1 The Source of the Message

The message is “the word of the LORD.” It is the divine commentary on the calamity that has struck Israel. It carries an absolute authority.

1:2-4 The Calamity

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. 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.

1:5-18 Joel Addresses the People to Attend to the Disaster

(a) Three Types of People are Addressed

- Drunkards and drinkers of wine – they are to wake up and wail.
- Tillers and vine dressers – they are to “dry up,” i.e. figuratively “be ashamed.”
- The priests and ministers of the altar – they are to put on sackcloth, lament and wail; they are to call for national repentance.

(b) 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 and important crops, such as 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.

We now feel the force of the lament in vv. 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. It is the hinge of the whole book.

(c) 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.

1:19-20 Joel Himself Prays to God

Joel turns to God – there is a sense in which this is a personal turning, apart from and 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.

1. A disaster has struck Judah; it is so great that the people are to remember it to the “third and fourth generation.” What is the disaster (v. 4)? How is the calamity described (vv. 7-12)?
2. The disaster has fallen on several important aspects of life in Judah. What are they (vv. 9, 10, 12)?
3. Three groups of people are addressed with commands. Who are they and what are they told to do (vv. 9, 11, 13)?
4. Grain offerings and drink offerings were made twice daily by the priests to accompany the morning and evening sacrifice of a lamb (Numbers 28:1-8). These daily offerings were a regular reinforcement of the covenant. How does this help us understand vv. 13-14?
5. “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world” (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*). What response did God want from his people?
6. How are we to interpret natural disasters (see Isa. 45:5-7)? What about the difficulties that we face in our own daily lives? Where do they come from? What is their purpose?
7. How should we respond to difficulties (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Rom. 8:26-27; John 16:20, 22)?

Joel 2:1-17

The Day of the LORD calls for repentance

2:1-11 The Day of the LORD

“This chapter contains serious exhortations, mixed with threatenings; but the Prophet threatens for the purpose of correcting the indifference of the people. The design of the Prophet...is to make the people sensible, that it was now no time for taking rest; for the Lord, having long tolerated their wickedness, was now resolved to pour upon them in full torrent his whole fury” (Calvin).

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

- A. The day of the LORD, a day of darkness and trembling in the land, vv.1-2. A great host is marching upon the land.
- B. The host consumes everything, v. 3
- C. War is upon the land; the host is swift, devouring and powerful, vv.4-5.
- B. The host cannot be resisted, vv. 6-9
- A. The day of the LORD, a day of darkness and trembling in the heavens, vv. 10-11. The LORD himself is at the head of the host.

2:12-14 A Call to Return

“The Prophet, having proclaimed the dreadful judgement...now shows that he did not intend to terrify the people without reason, but, one 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).

- A. How to return, vv. 12-13a, (a) wholeheartedly; (b) brokenheartedly
- B. Who to Return to – the LORD your God, v. 13b (cf. Ex. 34:6-7)
- C. Hope that the LORD will also return, v. 14

2:15-17 National Humility

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

- A. The responsibilities of the people – eight pithy imperatives, vv. 15-16
 - (a) 1) Blow the trumpet in order to 2) consecrate a fast and 3) call a solemn assembly.
 - (b) 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.
- B. The responsibilities of the priests, the ministers of the LORD, v. 17
 - (a) Their position – between the altar and the porch of the temple
 - (b) Their disposition – weeping
 - (c) Their petition – “Spare you people, O LORD...” (cf. Ex. 33:13; Num. 14:13-21)

1. What are verses 1-11 about? (See vv. 1b and 11c.)
2. What impression does the description of “the day of the LORD” leave?
3. When is “the day of the LORD”?
4. Is judgement inevitable (vv. 12-14)?
5. What response does God look for (vv. 12-14)? See also Mark 1:15; Acts 17:30-31; 1 Cor. 1:8; 3:13.
6. Why will God forgive (v. 13)? See also Ex. 34:6-7.
7. What is our strongest petition before God (v. 17)? See also Num. 14:13-20.

Joel 2:18-32

The Day of the LORD is the Day of Salvation

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

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.”

Key Words and Phrases

- (a) *The jealousy and pity of the LORD, v. 18* God is jealous for his own honour (Ex. 34:14) and for his people (Zech. 1:14). The word for pity means to spare.
- (b) *Land and people* The covenants made throughout the Old Testament, from the days of Adam, comprised three elements: land, children and salvation.
- (c) *Satisfaction* The Hebrew spelling of “satisfy” is reverse of the spelling of “dry up.” Shame caused by the locusts is reversed: God promises satisfaction.
- (d) *Shame* Shame was a keynote in chapter 1. Now God expressly promises twice, “my people shall never again be put to shame”.
- (e) *The locusts* Joel repeats the fourfold designation of the locusts. This underscores the magnitude of God’s restoration of his land and people.

Outline

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

2:28-32 Blessing that will be poured out afterwards

These verses provide a bridge between the restoration promised in vv. 18-27 and the final restoration that will be at the consummation of all things (chapter 3). Peter said that we live in the days of their fulfilment (Acts. 2:16-21,39).

- (a) The repeated pouring out of the Spirit (vv. 28a and 29) parallels the repeated satisfaction of vv. 19 and 26, and the pouring rain of v. 23.
- (b) The indiscriminate pouring out of the Spirit fulfils Moses’ prayer (Num. 11:29).
- (c) Blood, fire and smoke are reminiscent of the judgements on Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Hence the coming of Christ means judgement.
- (d) There is grace as well as judgement – everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. But the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

1. Verse 18 is the turning point in Joel's prophecy. How does verse 18 answer the taunt of the nations, "Where is their God?" (verse 17)? Is our relationship with God secure?

2. What will be the end of those who plunder God's people (v. 20)?

3. "Satisfied" is a key word in this passage (vv. 19 and 26). In what way does God promise to "satisfy" his people? What does this mean to us today?

4. Who sent the locusts (v. 25)? What is the nature of the restoration he promises (vv. 26-27)? What does this mean for us?

5. Verses 28-32 describe the Gospel Age. What was necessary for the outpouring of the Spirit to be achieved (John 7:37-29)?

6. Grace and judgement are woven together in verses 30-32. What Old Testament event do the words about fire and blood and billows of smoke remind you of? What has the believer been saved from; where is the unbeliever left?

Joel 3:1-21

The Day of the LORD will be Final

3:1-8 The Valley of Jehoshaphat: judgement on Tyre, Sidon & Philistia

The section opens with a time marker: “in those days and at that time.” This links it with the bridge provided by 2:28-32. History since the Advent has been one of judgement on the nations. Joel gives a concrete example: the destruction of Tyre, Sidon and Philistia. The coastal nations – characterised in terms of arrogant luxury (Tyre and Sidon), and violent cruelty (Philistia) – had plundered Judah and sold her people over the sea to the Greeks. So they too would be destroyed and exported over the desert as slaves. Alexander did just this in 322 BC.

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

In this section “the day of the LORD is near.” The prospect is widened out to “all the surrounding nations.” The theme is judgement which comes to a climax as God sits as judge and the sickle is put in!

- A. The nations are called to war. No one is exempt: strong and weak, warrior and farmer – all must come to war. Harvest tools are to be converted into weapons of war. (vv. 9-10)
- B. The nations are to gather in the valley of Jehoshaphat. (vv. 11-12)
- C. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe, cf. Rev. 14:15. Harvest tools will be used, but not by the nations and not in war against God or his people. The evil of the nations is full, cf. Gen. 15:16. (v. 13)
- B. Multitudes, multitudes (the doubling implies a vast multitude) in the valley of decision. “The word translated *multitudes* has the connotation of panic and hubbub; it is a very noisy and confused gathering, with perhaps a hint of the din caused by billions of locusts.” (vv. 14-15)
- A. The LORD roars from Zion (a call to war?). History comes to an end, but God’s people are safe, cf. 2:32. (v. 16)

This scheme places the emphasis on the judgement of the nations; the following places the emphasis on the blessing of God’s people. Hence, the motif of “grace and judgement” comes to its climax.

3:17-21 The LORD Dwells in Zion

“In that day” (v. 18) – “the day” has arrived, and it is a day of unparalleled blessing, the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. 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, v. 17.
- B. Unparalleled blessing flows to the land from the house of the LORD, v. 18.
- B. The enemies of God’s people shall be desolate, but God’s people shall never fail, vv. 19-20.
- A. The LORD dwells in Zion, v. 21.

1. Jehoshaphat means “the LORD has judged.” Joel 3:1-8 describes God’s judgement of the nations in the course of history since the coming of Christ. What is the yardstick for judgement (vv. 2-3, 5-6)? What is the yardstick for judgement described by Christ (Matt. 25:41-43)?

2. Verses 9-12 seem to suggest that the nations will be very active, e.g. the mighty men and the nations are to stir themselves up! But who really is the active agent in vv. 9-16? Who orders the course of history?

3. What is the thrust of vv. 9-16? What is the action like? Where is it on the scale from placid to tumultuous; from bright to dark; from joyful to terrifying; from normal to cataclysmic?

4. Read Gen. 15:16 and compare it to Joel 3:13. Why has judgement come? Why is judgement necessary? Remember that judgement and grace are often paired in Scripture, and remember that “mercy triumphs over wrath”!

5. Are God’s people safe (v. 16)?

6. If vv. 9-16 describe judgement, then vv. 17-21 describe grace. What will it be like?