



An Introduction to the Book of Joel

Title and Author

'Joel son of Pethuel', whose name means 'Yahweh is God', gives the book its title. Little is known of Joel except what is learned from the book itself. His references to Judah and Jerusalem, along with his knowledge of the activities of priest and temple, suggest that he was from Judah or perhaps even Jerusalem. His address to priests and elders likely eliminates him as a member of either group.

Date

Estimates for dating the book of Joel range from the 9th to the 4th Centuries BC. While no consensus has been reached, most scholars hold to a date after the exile (586BC) for the following reasons:

1. The exile is treated as a past event.
2. The conquest of Jerusalem is mentioned.
3. No king is mentioned.
4. The temple plays a positive role, while there is no prophetic denunciation against the idolatry and syncretism mentioned in Hosea and Amos.
5. The anger expressed toward Edom is best explained by its treatment of Judæans during the Babylonian conquest (3:19 and Obadiah).

However, there is also a significant school of thought, especially in Judaism that the prophecy occurred in the aftermath of Judah's only ruling queen, Athaliah who died in 835BC. This would answer many of the issues raised above and would therefore make Joel one of the earliest writing prophets.

Theme

The day of the Lord is the dominant theme of the book of Joel. Both the nations (3:2-3) and Israel (1:15 and 2:1-2) experience this judgement. However, for the

repentant community, the day also holds out the hope of restoration (2:12-14). Ultimately, the Lord's covenant faithfulness is expressed in his promises of abundance and protection (2:23-26 and 3:1), which evidence his dwelling in the midst of his people (2:27 and 3:17). This is epitomised in the great promise of 'my Spirit' that would be poured out on 'all flesh' (2:28-29 and Acts 2:17-21).

Purpose

Joel calls all the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem to lament and return to the Lord during a time of national calamity. This crisis is precipitated in the first instance by a locust plague that has destroyed both wine and grain, and therefore threatens the ability of the people of God to present offerings in the temple. Given this background, Joel may have served as a lament in the ongoing life of God's people during other times of national tragedy.

Key Themes

1. *The Day of the Lord*. This is the major theme of Joel. The exact expression, *yom yhwh* is found five times in Joel, and 13 times in seven other prophetic books (Isaiah 13:6 and 13:9, Jeremiah 46:10, Ezekiel 13:5 and 30:3, Amos 5:18-20, Obadiah 15, Zephaniah 1:7 and 1:14, and Malachi 4:5). Other ways of referring to the day found throughout prophetic literature, e.g. 'a day', 'those days', 'that day', are used by Joel as well (Joel 2:2; 3:1 and 3:18). Within Joel, the day refers not only to a final day of judgement upon the nations (3:2) but also to God's ongoing judgement of Israel, both past and future, and instances of his intervention between Israel and the nations. In each case, the day of the Lord indicates a time when the presence of the Lord brings judgement and/or deliverance and blessing, depending on the circumstances. Therefore, although the day heralds destruction for the nations, it also functions as a time of salvation for God's people; the Lord remains a refuge amid the chaos of judgement (3:15-16).
2. *Repentance*. If the whole community would cry out to the Lord (1:13-20) and look to him, not merely with external actions but in sincerity with their whole persons (2:12-13), then judgement may be averted. However, the Lord is not bound by the acts of the community (2:14); it is his prerogative to send or withhold the destruction by the locusts (1:15), just as the army is his to command (2:11).
3. *The Lord in their midst*. It is, of course, crucial that the people have a living faith and repentance; however, the reason the Lord will turn from judgement to blessing is to express his covenant-keeping character (2:13, 2:18-26 and 3:18). His promise to dwell in the midst of his people is prominent not only in Joel (2:27, 3:17 and 3:21), but also throughout the OT, e.g. Numbers 35:34, Deuteronomy 6:15 and 7:21, Isaiah 12:6, Hosea 11:9, Zephaniah 3:15-17, Haggai 2:5, Zechariah 2:10-11 and 8:3. God's restoration of what the locusts

have destroyed (2:27), and his protection of Israel as the cosmos crumbles (3:16-17), both have the same goal: knowledge of his presence. This theme concludes the book (3:21), highlighting its importance for Joel.

4. These themes: the day of the Lord, repentance, and God dwelling amid his people, converge in the promise of the future outpouring of the Spirit (2:28-32). This outpouring is associated with the day of the Lord in both its judgemental and its saving manifestations (2:30-32). It is related to repentance in that those who are saved are those who call 'on the name of the Lord'. Finally, the giving of the Spirit, crossing all boundaries of gender, generation, social class, or nationality (2:28-29), is the ultimate evidence of God in the midst of his people (Isaiah 63:11 and Haggai 2:5).

Interpretative Challenge: The Locust Invasion

The relationship between the locust plague and drought (1:1-20) and the onslaught of the Lord's army (2:1-11) provides a major challenge to readers. Scholars provide a number of options, as outlined in the following chart:

<u>If Chapter 1 ...</u>	<u>then Chapter 2 ...</u>
1. describes an actual locust infestation ...	presents a heightened description of the same invasion.
2. describes an actual locust infestation ...	issues a warning about a coming military offensive.
3. describes an actual locust infestation ... functioning as a prophetic forerunner	uses that imagery to portray a human army in terms of a decisive conflict on the day of the Lord.
4. describes a military attack in terms of ... the metaphor of a locust invasion	represents the coming of an enemy usually viewed as the Assyrians or Babylonians.

While there are serious arguments for each of these options, the third fits best with the overall context. Joel uses the imagery of a dramatic locust plague along with military imagery (2:4-9) to describe the coming of the Lord's army on his great day (2:11). The verbs of Chapter 1 are predominantly imperative and past-tense forms, calling the people to act based on past events. The verbs in Chapter 2 are in the imperfect and imperative forms, highlighting the fact that, although the judgement is approaching, a return to God is still possible. The lament of 1:15-20 is clearly concerned with the effects of the locusts, while the prayer of 2:17 focuses not upon the destruction of locusts but rather upon the depressed social status of the people of God threatened by foreign rule. Reference to the 'northerner' is a typical OT description of enemies but an unusual label if referring to a swarm of locusts. The judgement of the nations in 3:1-21 makes better sense

contextually if Chapter 2 portrays the threat of an army and a decisive conflict. These and other reasons support option 3.

History of Salvation Summary

God called his ancient people in love and mercy, he preserved them to be the vehicle through which he poured out his Spirit on all kinds of people (2:28-32), and he will preserve them against all who seek to destroy them (Chapter 3). In all of his care for them, he aims for torn hearts, and not just torn garments, from his people (2:12-14), that they might love him with their whole hearts.

The Setting of Joel (circa 500BC)

Although there is much debate about the date of Joel's prophecies, it is likely that they occurred during a national calamity sometime after Judah returned from exile in Babylon. However, an early time of writing in the 9th Century should be considered a possibility.



Regional Map

Literary Features

As a work of prophecy, the Book of Joel relies on the staples of the oracle of judgement and the oracle of salvation. Poetry counts for a lot in the Book of Joel, whose author is particularly adept at description. By the time Joel's imagination amplifies the killer locusts into more-than-literal creatures, the Book of Joel emerges as almost a horror story. The technique of apostrophe, i.e. direct address to entities that are literally absent but treated as though they can hear and respond, is prominent in the first two Chapters. Even though the writer is a prophet rather than a nature writer, there are so many pictures of nature in the book that it does rank as nature writing, in a prophetic mode.

The most striking literary feature of the book is the way in which Joel's imagination amplifies literal locusts into images of apocalyptic horror, pictures of God's judgement against human sinfulness. Of course Joel's images are a timeless and universal picture of punishment from God for human evil.

Outline

- I. The Judgement against Judah and the Day of the Lord (1:1-2:17)
 - a. Lament over the Ruin of the Country (1:1-12)
 - b. A Call to Repentance and Prayer (1:13-2:17)
- II. The Mercy of the Lord and Judgement against the Nations (2:18-3:21)
 - a. God's Response and Promise (2:18-27)
 - b. God's Spirit Poured Out (2:28-3:8)
 - c. Judgement in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:9-16)
 - d. The Glorious Future of Judah (3:17-21)