

Joel - Introduction & Background

Title

Like many other OT books, the Book of Joel derives its name from its central character. The Hebrew title of the book is *Yo'el*. Combining two of God's names, Yahweh and Elohim, forms Joel's name. Thus, the prophet's name means "Yahweh is God." Several reasons make "Yahweh is God" an appropriate name for the book. First, the title is appropriate since the book emphasizes God's sovereign work. Second, the title is appropriate because the phrase "you shall know that I am the Lord your God" recurs throughout the book (2:27; 3:17). Third, the title is appropriate since it affirms an important truth during a time of national apostasy. The LXX rendering of this title is *Ioel*. The Latin and English rendering of the title is *Joel*.

Authorship

The opening verse identifies Joel as the book's author. Eleven other biblical characters shared this name (1 Sam 8:2; 1 Chr 4:35; 5:4; 7:3; 11:38; 15:7; 26:22; 27:20; 2 Chr 29:12; Ezra 10:43; Neh 11:9). However, the Joel featured in the Book of Joel is not to be confused with these 11 other individuals. He only appears in this book and in Acts 2:17. Nothing is known of the prophet Joel except that he was the son of Pethuel, which means "persuaded by God." Joel's Godly name probably indicates that he was from a Godly home. The temple references found throughout his book (1:8-10,13-14, 2:17) have caused some to speculate that he was also a priest in addition to being a prophet. Furthermore, the book's multiple 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) indicate that he lived near Jerusalem.

Some challenge the unity of the book and instead teach that one author recorded the historical content of Joel 1 while another author recorded the apocalyptic content of the book's final two chapters. Proponents of this position maintain that there are supposedly too many literary and conceptual differences between the early and final chapters to attribute them to the work of a single author. However, Constable replies, "All the extant Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient versions of Joel attest to the unity of the book...there is a consistent theme that ties the whole book together, so most conservative interpreters believe that Joel wrote all three chapters."

Date

Because no overt chronological data is disclosed in the book, internal factors must be relied upon for dating purposes. In general, there are three proposals regarding when the Book of Joel was composed. Some contend for a late pre-exilic or exilic date (609–580 BC). This view relies upon several pieces of evidence. However, all of these pieces of

evidence seem refutable. First, because some parallels exist between Zephaniah (627 BC) and Joel (Zeph 1:14-16; 2:2-3; Joel; 1:15; 2:2; 2:11), it is believed that Joel borrowed from Zephaniah and therefore postdated him. The same argument is also made with respect to similarities between Joel's writings and other exilic writers (Lam 1:12; 2:1, 21-22; Ezek 7:19; 13:5). However, there is no way to determine who is borrowing from whom. Furthermore, both prophets could be borrowing from an unknown source. Also, it is possible that the Holy Spirit revealed identical concepts to two different people at different times. In addition, the Day of the Lord concept is taught very early in biblical history (Ex 32:34). Second, because there is no mention of the northern kingdom of Israel, it is likely that Joel was written after the northern kingdom was dispersed in 722 BC. However, this contention represents an argument from silence. At any rate, the direct recipients of the book were those in Judah and not Israel. Third, the book's mention of priests and not kings supposedly fits best with the exilic era. However, other pre-exilic books also fail to mention kings such as Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. Furthermore, the lack of a mention of a king may fit well with the pre-exilic situation in 841-835 BC when Joash ruled under the regency of Jehoahaz.

Fourth, it is argued that 3:2 describes events surrounding the Babylonian Captivity. However, this verse could also be describing the events of the future tribulation period (3:1). Fifth, because 3:6 mentions Greeks and because the Jews had no knowledge of the Greeks in pre-exilic times, the book must be assigned an exilic date. However, eighth century Assyrian records do mention Greeks. Sixth, the fact that the book fails to mention Assyria indicates that it was written at a time after that empire had declined. However, this contention again represents an argument from silence. It is also possible that the book was written before Assyria ascended to power. Moreover, Joel does mention many prominent pre-exilic nations such as Tyre, Phoenicia, Sidon, Philistia, Egypt, and Edom (3:2-7,19). We might also ask why Persia is not mentioned if the book was written late?

Seventh, the description in 2:1-11 seems consistent with how the Babylonians are described (Jer 5:17). Such consistency may even make formal identification of the Babylonians unnecessary in Joel's book. However, 2:18-19 indicates Judah's repentance which did not happen in 586 BC (2 Kings 23:26-27). It should also be noted that an exilic date is damaged upon recalling the book's references to a functioning temple and the existence of Zion (1:9,13-14; 2:15-17,23,32; 3:1,5-6,16-17,20-21).

Others contend for a post-exilic date (515-350 BC). This view relies upon some arguments already answered above such as the existence of the Greeks (3:6). Proponents also argue that the temple references (1:9,13; 2:17) could refer to the temple that was rebuilt in 515 BC. However, these verses could just as easily refer to the pre-exilic temple. They further contend that the prominence of elders (1:2; 2:16) rather than kings is applicable to the post-exilic world (Ezra 10:14). Yet "elders were prominent in Judean society before the

exile" (2 Kings 23:1; Jer 26:17; Lam 5:12,14). In addition, they maintain that 3:2 and 17 refer to the post-exilic Babylonian captivity. However, these verses might also be understood in terms of a pre-exilic prediction of national calamity resulting from covenant disloyalty or even the future Tribulation period.

Still others contend for an early pre-exilic date (835–830 BC). Proponents of this view include Freeman, Young, Keil and Delitzsch, and Dyer and Merrill. The arguments used to support this position seem the strongest. First, the designation "Valley of Jehoshaphat" (3:12) fits with a pre-exilic date since Jehoshaphat (872–848 BC) was the last good king of the southern kingdom of Judah before the reign of Joash. Second, the book mentions the pre-exilic enemies of Judah. Examples include Tyre, Sidon, Philistia (2 Chr 21:16–17), Egypt (1 Kings 14:15–16), Edom (2 Kings 8:20–22), and the Sabeans (Joel 3:2–8,19).

Third, the Book of Joel fails to mention Assyria, Babylon, and Persia probably because they had not yet ascended to power. Fourth, Joel seems to be quoted by other pre-exilic prophets (3:10; Is 2:4; Joel 3:16; Micah 4:3; Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13). Fifth, Joel's style bears greater resemblance to pre-exilic writers such as Amos and Hosea rather than post-exilic writers. Sixth, Joel is placed between the two eighth century prophets Hosea and Amos in the Hebrew canon. Seventh, because the Book of Joel fails to mention idolatry, it is likely that it was written after the purge of Baal worship and idolatry from Judah by Jehoida the priest during the initial part of King Joash's reign. Eighth, the emphasis upon priests (1:9,13; 2:17) and elders (1:2; 2:16) and the lack of a mention of a king may fit well with the pre-exilic situation in 841–835 BC when Joash ruled under the regency of Jehoida.

All things considered, the pre-exilic date of 835–830 BC seems appropriate. Thus, Joel was a contemporary of the northern prophet Elisha. However, the pre-exilic date should not be held too dogmatically since the arguments on all sides still seem rather evenly balanced. Furthermore, the interpretation of the book's message is not significantly impacted regardless of what date one holds.

Recipient(s) and Place of Writing

The numerous references to the southern kingdom dispersed throughout the Book of Joel (1:9,13–14,16,23,32; 2:1,14–15,17,23,32; 3:1,6,8,16–20) indicate that Judah was the probable recipient of the book. While at times Joel spoke to Judah's general population (1:2; 2:1), at other times he spoke to Judah's elders (1:2,14; 2:16), farmers (1:11), and priests (1:13; 2:17). The book's emphasis upon Judah also indicates that it represents the likely place where Joel composed his work.

Message

Joel uses a present calamity to teach Judah the spiritual lesson that such a disaster can be avoided and instead replaced by blessings both now and in the future Day of the Lord if

God's people replace their covenant disobedience with covenant loyalty. In the future Day of the Lord, such repentance will be manifested thereby leading to national restoration.

Purposes

Joel had at least two purposes in mind when he wrote his book. First, like most of the other prophets, he wanted God's covenant people to repent so that the covenant curses could be repealed and the covenant blessings could be introduced. Joel sought to accomplish this purpose by speaking of the curses associated with the retrospective and prospective Day of the Lord. Second, in the midst of the curses associated with the present Day of the Lord, Joel wanted to comfort Judah by providing her with a message of her ultimate restoration (2:2–3:21).

Historical Background

If the late exilic or exilic date is followed, then the locust swarms serve as a warning for the greater judgment that would be introduced with the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. However, as previously explained, the early date scenario is more credible. Thus, the background for the Book of Joel can be found in 2 Kings 11:4–12:21. There Jehu killed King Ahaziah in 841 BC (2 Kings 9:27–29) thereby allowing Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother and daughter of Ahab (2 Kings 18:18,26; 2 Chr 21:6), to seize the throne.

However, Athaliah sought to have all of the legitimate Davidic heirs killed since she was not from the line of David and therefore was an illegitimate usurper (2 Kings 11:1).

Consequently, Davidic heir baby Joash was rescued and hidden in the temple for six years (2 Kings 11:2–3). High priest Jehoida eventually organized a palace coup thereby allowing him to place Joash upon the Davidic throne (835–796 BC) when Joash reached the age of seven (2 Kings 11:4–12:1). Jehoida then purged Athaliah's Baalism and idolatry from the land of Judah (2 Chr 23:16–17).

Jehoiada and Joash continued to rule in sort of a co-regency form of government (2 Kings 11:15–12:3; 2 Chr 23:9–24:3) until Jehoida's death (2 Chr 23:16), which allowed Joash to finally become the sole ruler. Although Jehoiada had exerted a positive influence upon Joash, when Joash became sole ruler after Jehoida's death, Joash became an idolater. Joash even killed Jehoida's son Zechariah for condemning idolatry and predicting future judgment. It is these events that brought forth the covenant curses in the form of locusts spoken of in Joel's first two chapters.

Theological Themes

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Joel. First, the prophet focuses upon the Day of the Lord (1:5; 2:1–2,11,31; 3:14,18). The Day of the Lord is a concept that appears in the OT (Is 2:12,17–20; 3:7–18; 4:1–2; 13:6–9; Zeph 1:7; Jer 30:8; 46:10; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Amos 5:18–20; Obadiah 15; Zeph 1:7; Zech 14:1; Mal 4:5) as well as the NT (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:1–2; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Peter 3:10–13). Although some say that the concept of the Day of the Lord originated with Yahweh's enthronement festival, covenant curses, or

theophany, it is likely that the notion has its roots in Yahweh war associated with the Canaan conquest (Ex 14:14; 15:3; Deut 1:30; 3:22; Joshua 5:13-15; 6:2).

The Day of the Lord can refer to both a past (Is 22:1-14; Jer 46:2-12; Lam 1-2; Ezek 7:19; 13:1-19; Amos 5:18) as well as a future event. Thus, the Day of the Lord is a non-technical concept referring to anytime God intervenes in history in order to manifest His holiness and covenant purposes. Just as a day has both a night and daylight portion, the Day of the Lord can encompass either or both judgment and restoration. Eschatologically, the Day of the Lord refers to the Tribulation, Second Advent, millennial kingdom, Satan's final revolt, Great White Throne judgment, purging of the earth, and establishment of the new heavens and earth (Rev 6-22).

Second, the Book of Joel focuses upon eschatology. God's plan for Israel and the nations, the sequence of Armageddon events (3:1-17), the future for the Jewish remnant (2:28-32), and the millennial kingdom (3:17-21) are all emphasized in Joel. Third, Joel focuses upon God's covenant program. For example, the book emphasizes the Mosaic covenant's blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience. The unconditional Abrahamic Covenant is similarly emphasized through Joel's predictions of eventual national restoration despite Israel's present disobedience. The outworking of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:3) is also seen through the judgment to be manifested upon the nation's that have come against Israel (3:1-17).

Fourth, Joel also emphasizes both natural (1) and political (2:1-11) disasters. Among them are locusts, plagues, famine, fires, armies, and cosmological disturbances. Fifth, Joel makes a pneumatological contribution by explaining the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon national Israel. Sixth, Joel contributes material toward better understanding God's nature. For example, Joel shows that God is sovereign over both nature and nations. God even sovereignly chooses to use these instruments to discipline His people. The book also portrays God as unique (2:13), gracious and merciful (2:13,17), loving and patient (2:13), and just and righteous (1:15; 2:23; 3:1-8). Sixth, Joel emphasizes genuine (2:32) rather than mere ritualistic (2:13,18-19,23,26-27,32) worship.

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Joel boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, like Obadiah, the Book of Joel is difficult to date since it gives no explicit chronological references. Because of this dating ambiguity, the historical circumstances surrounding the book are similarly ambiguous. Second, although earlier biblical material introduced the Day of the Lord motif (Ex 32:34; Obadiah 15), Joel is the first writer to furnish a more in depth development of this concept.

Third, the book is characterized by vividness. Fourth, the book is unique in how it uses a present event as a basis for the book's overall content. Fifth, the Book of Joel represents "the most polished literary work among the prophets." Sixth, the book is unique in

predicting the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit (2:28-32). Seventh, Joel is one of the Minor Prophets whose material provides the foundation for numerous NT themes (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:10,31; 3:15; Matt 24:29; Joel 2:32; Rom 10:12-13).

Structure

The Book of Joel contains information about a historical invasion of locusts in the present Day of the Lord (1) as well as information about an invading army in the future Day of the Lord (2:1-17). This second section is most probably futuristic because of the way v2 describes how the Day of the Lord will be unique in all of human history. Other scripture ascribes similar uniqueness to the future tribulation period (Dan 12:2; Matt 24:21; Jer 30:7). Both sections interject an opportunity to repent so judgment can be avoided and covenant blessing can be experienced. The opportunity for relief from the locust judgment is given in 2:18-27 and the opportunity for relief from the future judgment is given in 2:28—3:21. The mention of the locusts (2:25) seems to indicate that 2:18-27 is in the past. Moreover, 2:28—3:21 is future since it begins a new chapter in the Hebrew Bible, speaks of the time when Judah's fortunes are reversed at the conclusion of the "times of the Gentiles" (3:1), and deals with events involving the judgment of the nations and Israel's restoration that are yet to occur in history.

Christ in Joel

Christ is present in Joel as "the One who will judge the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat" (3:1-17). Christ is also the one who will pour out the Spirit upon Israel toward the end of the Tribulation (2:28-32).

Outline

I. Present day of the Lord (Joel 1:1-20)

- (1) Report of the present day of the Lord (1:1-4)
 - (A) Joel as the recipient of the report (1:1)
 - (B) Uniqueness of the report (1:2-3)
 - (a) Incomparable with past generations (1:2)
 - (b) Necessity of communicating report to subsequent generations (1:3)
 - (C) Content of the report (1:4)
 - (a) Gnawing locusts (1:4a)
 - (b) Swarming locusts (1:4b)
 - (c) Creeping locusts (1:4c)
 - (d) Stripping locusts (1:4d)
- (2) Call to mourning and repentance (1:5-20)
 - (A) Drunkards (1:5-7)
 - (a) Call to repentance (1:5)
 - (b) Reason: to avert covenant curses (1:6-7)
 - (B) Priests (1:8-9,13)

- (a) Call to repentance (1:8,9b,13a)
- (b) Reason: to avert covenant curses (1:9a,13b)
- (C) Farmers (1:10-12)
 - (a) Call to repentance (1:11a)
 - (b) Reason: to avert covenant curses (1:10,11b,12)
- (D) People (1:14-18)
 - (a) Call to repentance (1:14)
 - (b) Reason to avert covenant curses (1:15-18)
- (E) By Joel (1:19-20)
 - (a) Call to repentance (1:19a)
 - (b) Reason: to avert covenant curses (1:19b-20)

II. Future day of the Lord (Joel 2:1-17)

- (1) Report (2:1-11)
 - (A) Alarm (2:1-2)
 - (a) Sounded (2:1a)
 - (b) Reason for the alarm (2:1b-2)
 - (i) General description of the day of the Lord (2:1b-2a)
 - (ii) The day of the Lord's uniqueness (2:2b)
 - (B) Specific description of the day of the Lord (2:3-11)
 - (a) Destruction (2:3)
 - (b) Appearance (2:4a)
 - (c) Velocity (2:4b)
 - (d) Sound (2:5)
 - (e) The response it invokes (2:6)
 - (f) Its orderliness (2:7-8)
 - (g) What it targets (2:9)
 - (h) Cosmological phenomenon (2:10)
 - (i) The Lord is the commander (2:11a)
 - (j) Its uniqueness (2:11b)
- (2) Call to repentance (2:12-17)
 - (A) God tells the people to repent (2:12-13)
 - (B) God promises the judgment will relent if they repent (2:14)
 - (C) National repentance described (2:15-17)
 - (a) Nation assembles (2:15-16)
 - (b) What the priests pray (2:17)

III. Deliverance in the present day of the Lord (2:18-27)

- (1) Covenant curses repealed (2:18-20)
 - (A) Reproach removed (2:18-19)

- (B) Northern enemy defeated (2:20)
- (2) Land restored (2:21-27)
 - (A) Agricultural productivity restored (2:21-22)
 - (B) Drought removed (2:23)
 - (C) Famine to conclude (2:24)
 - (D) Consequences created by the locusts to be removed or undone (2:25-26)
 - (E) Knowledge of the Lord to be revealed (2:27)

IV. Deliverance in the future day of the Lord (Joel 2:28—3:21)

- (1) Covenant curses repealed (2:28—3:17)
 - (A) Restoring of Israel (2:28-32)
 - (a) Time of the restoration (2:28a)
 - (b) Pneumatological restoration (2:28b-29)
 - (c) Cosmological signs associated with the restoration (2:30-31)
 - (d) Salvation for Israel in the day of the Lord (2:32)
 - (B) Condemnation of the nations (3:1-17)
 - (a) Time of the judgment (3:1)
 - (b) Place of judgment: Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:2a)
 - (c) Purpose of the judgment (3:2b)
 - (d) Basis of the judgment: Genesis 12:3 (3:2c-6)
 - (e) Results of the judgment (3:7-8)
 - (f) Sequence of the judgment (3:9-17)
 - (i) Armies are gathered (3:9-11)
 - (ii) Armies are judged (3:12-14)
 - (a) Place of judgment: Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:12)
 - (b) Reason for judgment: wickedness (3:13)
 - (c) Extent of judgment: multitudes (3:14)
 - (iii) God comes (3:15-17)
 - (a) Cosmological disturbances (3:15)
 - (b) God speaks (3:16a)
 - (c) God saves Israel (3:16b)
 - (d) Conclusion of the times of the Gentiles (3:17)
 - (2) Restoration of the land (3:18-21)
 - (A) Agricultural productivity (3:18a)
 - (B) Flowing Springs (3:18b)
 - (C) Desolation of Israel's armies: Egypt and Edom (3:19)
 - (D) Permanency of Israel's restoration (3:20)
 - (E) Divine justice (3:21a)
 - (F) Zion as the Lord's residence (3:21b)

