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INTRODUCTION TO JOEL

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Title

The book is universally called Joel after its author. The name means "Yahweh is God."

Author

Of the prophet Joel, we know nothing, except that he was the son of Pethuel (1:1), of whom nothing is known.

Date and Setting

It is debated whether Joel is one of the earliest prophets or the latest. Freeman summarizes well the critical arguments for a late date (Hobart Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, pp.147-48). The strongest arguments, however, favor an early date. Some of the strongest refer to the enemies of Israel enumerated in the book. These were the Phoenicians, Philistines, Greeks and Sabeans (3:4-8). No mention is made of the later Assyrians and Babylonians. E. B. Pusey also gives strong argument for an early date by the direct quotations taken from Joel in the later prophets. Joel 3:16 is quoted in Amos 1:2; Joel 3:18 is quoted in Amos 9:13; and Joel 1:15 is quoted word for word in Isaiah 13:6 (E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols., 1:143-46).

The absence of the mention of a king in Joel is not unusual since Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum and Habakkuk are pre- exilic and do not mention a king either. Further, there was a period in Judah's history when Queen Athaliah had usurped the throne (841-35 B.C.) after the death of her son, King Ahaziah. Joash was in seclusion for those years and, even after 835 B.C., was ruling under the regency of the high priest (2 Chron. 23). This may also help explain the prominence of the priests. Thus, we are on fairly safe ground, based on current information, to date the book at around 835 B.C.

It should also be noted as further evidence for an early date for the book that it is located in the Hebrew canon between Hosea and Amos. This indicates that Jewish tradition considered the book of early origin (Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, p. 377).

While Baal worship was outwardly defeated during the years when Jehoiada lived, the worship of the people was more outward and formal and did not originate from true heart repentance (cf. Joel 2:12, 13). This fact was made obvious years later after Jehoiada died, when the people turned again to the worship of Baal.

The immediate occasion for the message of Joel seems to have been a locust swarm which invaded Judah sometime before Joel wrote. This ominous and catastrophic event

provided the backdrop for Joel's call to repentance. Joel used this agricultural calamity as the picture of a yet future devastation which could be avoided by true repentance.

Problems

One of the major problems in the book concerns the description of the army in 2:2-11. Is Joel describing God's judgment in the form of another (most agree chapter one describes actual locusts) actual and literal locust plague? Or does he use locusts as a figure of a future invasion from the North?

In support of the literal view Freeman suggests the following arguments:

1. Locusts are an instrument of divine judgment (Deut. 28:38-39, 42; 1 Kings 8:37)
2. Joel's description fits the locust plague very well
3. The army destroys vegetation--like real locusts. There is no reference to death, plunder, or the destruction of cities and the taking of captives, like human armies do
4. The locusts are described as being like horses (2:4), chariots (2:5) and a mighty army (2:5), not vice versa. Thus, the description is of literal locusts
5. The "large and mighty army" (2:2) and "his army" (2:11) are in 2:25 identified with four kinds of literal locusts (Freeman, *Introd. to OT Prophets*, p. 153)

In support of the view that the locusts are a figure of a future invasion are the following considerations:

1. The imagery of this section goes far beyond a plague of locusts. Nations (pl.) are terrified (2:6). The assault includes the city and its houses, whereas locusts attack only vegetation (2:9). Locusts affect crops for one year; this army affects it for more than one year (2:25). This army does unprecedented damage, "such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come" (2:2)
2. The locusts of chapter one are used in chapter two as symbols and forerunners of a greater devastation at a later time. The prophet's use of symbolism explains how he can compare the locusts to a human army. Other Near Eastern parallels use locusts to compare with armies and vice versa (John A. Thompson, "Joel's Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 [January 1955]:52-55)
3. The invasion is from the North (2:20), but locusts always come from the South (Pusey, *Minor Prophets* p. 150). Further, the locusts are always driven in the direction of the wind, not in two different directions as this army will be (Pusey, *Minor Prophets*, p. 187). In this regard, the term translated "Northern" (NIV) is unsuitable to designate literal locusts (Freeman, *Introd. to OT Prophets*, p. 153)

In view of the above it seems probable that the actual historical occurrence of a locust plague (chap. 1) is the occasion for Joel's prophecy. In his prophecy he may perhaps refer to the Assyrians or even the Babylonians, who both approached Israel from the North. However, the law of double reference must here apply for Joel's main subject is to call the people to repentance in view of the impending "Day of Yahweh," in which Yahweh will sovereignly call His people to repentance during a time of unique astronomical signs (2:10, 30, 31). Ultimately the book of Joel will find its fulfillment in the Great

Tribulation, the time of Jacob's trouble, preceding the judgment of the nations (3:2) and the establishment of the millennial kingdom (3:10, 17-21).

The second major problem in the book concerns the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32 (3:1-5 in the Hebrew Bible). Peter quotes this passage (Acts 2), and the question concerns the relationship of Joel's passage to the day of Pentecost. There are several views:

1. Joel's passage was fulfilled partially in his own day and was terminated at the day of Pentecost. This view was held by Grotius and some Jewish commentators but is largely rejected because the context of Joel is clearly eschatological (Freeman, *Introd. to the OT Prophets*, p. 154)
2. The Joel passage found fulfillment in Acts 2. E.J. Young is representative of this view. It should be rejected because the context of Joel is millennial, and the Spirit simply was not poured out on all flesh as Young assumes (Freeman, *Introd. to the OT Prophets*, p. 154)
3. The Joel passage is not fulfilled in Acts 2. Ryrie says concerning the Acts 2 passage, the fulfillment of this prophecy will be in the last days, immediately preceding the return of Christ, when all the particulars (e.g., [Joel 2:31] and Rev. 6:12) of the prophecy will come to pass. Peter reminded his hearers that knowing Joel's prophecy, they should have recognized what they were seeing as a work of the Spirit, not a result of drunkenness (*Ryrie Study Bible* note at Acts 2:16-21).

Elsewhere Ryrie has said that Peter used Joel 2 as a homiletical device to draw people's attention to the fact that the Holy Spirit, not drunkenness, explained what they had seen and to urge people to call on the name of the Lord (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21) (Charles Ryrie, "The Significance of Pentecost," *Bib. Sac.* 112 [October-December 1955]:334). In a similar vein Applewhite goes a bit further and says that Peter's use of Joel was theological (Barry Applewhite, "Chronological Problems of Joel" [Th.M. thesis, DTS, 1976], p.45).

In support of this view it has been pointed out that Peter does not use the normal fulfillment formula like he did in Acts 1:16. The "This is that" (KJV) or "This is what was spoken" (NIV) could mean that the same Holy Spirit was at work in the outpouring on Pentecost. Further, it has been pointed out that the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was His baptizing act to usher in the church age while the fulfillment of Joel 2 will be to usher in the millennium. Finally, it should be noted that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Joel will be fulfilled after Israel's national repentance. This view is correct as far as it goes but does not adequately explain the relationship between the day of Pentecost and Peter's use of Joel 2. The fourth view seems to solve this problem

4. Peter's use of Joel 2 is an illustration of the law of double reference. Peter in Acts 2 used Joel 2:28-32 as a proof that the advent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was the fulfillment of prophecy anticipated in Joel. This parallels Ezekiel 36:25-27, where the prophet prophesied the future ministry of the Spirit in promoting obedience to the decrees of God. This fulfillment actually fulfills the eschatological significance of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Similarly, Passover

was fulfilled in the death of Christ. Thus, both the death of Christ and the advent of the Spirit fulfilled their respective antecedent feasts. They are not to be repeated. Both are fulfilled.

The second reference, however, refers to the experiential benefits or blessings that would follow national repentance. This fulfillment of Joel 2, in its larger context, will take place at a later time at the end of the Tribulation and will usher in the millennium and be accompanied by the signs in the heavens as seen in the seven bowls of the wrath of God (Rev. 16) just preceding the Second Advent of Christ.

Thus, it can be said that Peter used Joel to prove that the advent of the Spirit was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and that "this" day of Pentecost was the fulfillment of the predicted "day of Pentecost" (Acts 2:1; Lev. 23:15-22). Peter also used the Joel passage to urge his hearers to repentance (Joel 2:32 and Acts 2:21, 38-41). Peter does not deal with the final fulfillment of Joel 2 in the coming day of national repentance following the signs in the heavens (Joel 2:30-31). These anticipated blessings of this event are dealt with in Joel 3 (chap. 4 in Heb.)

Theme and Purpose

Joel was written because of a locust plague (described in chap. 1) in order to call Israel to repentance (1:13-20; 2:12-17). The locust plague was only a forerunner of much greater judgment in the coming day of Yahweh. This judgment would take the form of an invading army (2:1-11) and devastating signs in the heavens (2:10, 30-31) followed by divine judgment in the nations (3:2, 12-16) and blessing for Israel (3:16-21).

Contribution to the Bible

Joel provides a framework for later prophetic development of the theme "day of Yahweh" (the LORD). All of the prophets build upon common themes of the call to repentance, judgment of the nations and eventual blessing for Israel.

Christ in Joel

Christ can be seen in His relation to the coming messianic blessing. It is possible, indeed probable, that 2:23 should be translated, "for he has given you a teacher for righteousness." If so, this is a reference to Messiah. The context clearly calls for Messiah's presence (2:26-27 and 2:32-3:2).

SUMMARY OUTLINE OF JOEL

I.	The locust plague--calling for repentance	1:1-20
II.	The invader from the North--calling for repentance	2:1-27
III.	The day of Yahweh revealed	2:28-3:21

OUTLINE OF JOEL

I. The locust plague--calling for repentance	1:1-20
A. The introduction	1:1
B. The invasion of locusts	1:2-4
C. The call to repentance	1:5-14
1. The appeal to the drunkards	1:5-7
2. The appeal to the people	1:8-12
3. The appeal to the priests	1:13
4. The appeal to the elders	1:14
D. The announcement of the day of Yahweh	1:15-20
II. The invader from the North--calling for repentance	2:1-27
A. The invasion described	2:1-11
1. The warning concerning the day of Yahweh	2:1-2
2. The destruction of that day	2:3
3. The description of the invader	2:4-9
4. The circumstances of invasion	2:10-11
B. The call to repentance	2:12-17
C. Yahweh's answer	2:18-27
1. Blessing for Israel	2:18-19
2. Removal of the invaders	2:20
3. Restoration of blessings	2:21-27
III. The day of Yahweh revealed (Heb text: 3:1-4:21)	2:28-3:21
A. The advent of the Spirit	2:29
B. The signs in the heavens	2:30-31
C. The regathering of Israel to the land	2:32
D. The judgment and the blessing	3:1-21
1. Judgment on the nations	3:1-16a
a. Judgment declared	3:1-2
b. The reason for judgment	3:3-8
c. The proclamation of judgment	3:9-12
d. The execution of judgment	3:13-16a
2. Blessing upon Israel	3:16b-21
a. Israel's protection	3:16b-17
b. Israel's blessings	3:18
c. Israel's enemies	3:19
d. Israel's permanence	3:20
e. Israel's pardon	3:21a
f. Yahweh's presence	3:21b

ARGUMENT OF JOEL

Joel opened his message with a statement that the desolation of the locust plague was unforgettable (1:1-3). The successive waves of locusts totally destroyed all vegetation (1:4). This set the stage for an appeal to the drunkards, who had no wine (1:5-7). The land was not productive (1:8-10); rather, drought conditions prevailed (1:11-12). The priests were urged to lead the nation (1:13) in fasting and calling the elders of the people to repentance and supplication to Yahweh (1:14).

If Israel did not repent, there would come a day in which Yahweh would deal very severely with His people (1:15-20). There would be no food; joy and gladness would depart; crops would not grow; granaries would be unused; the livestock would suffer from lack of pasture; range fires would devastate; and there would be no water in the empty stream beds.

The past locust plague provided the background for the future invader (2:1-11) from the North (2:20). This desolation has a double reference, not only to a future Assyrian or Babylonian invasion, but most especially to the climactic invasion during the campaign of Armageddon in the distant future. This day of Yahweh will be one of darkness, gloom and cloudy blackness (2:2). The earth will shake. The sun and moon will be darkened and the stars no longer shine (2:10). Yahweh is sovereign and will use this army to accomplish His awesome purpose (2:11).

Therefore, now is the time for repentance (2:12-17). In that great day when God intervenes for His people, He will send prosperity to Israel, and no longer will Israel be an object of scorn to the nations (2:18-19). This invading army from the North will be driven out, part into the Dead Sea and part into the Mediterranean Sea, resulting in their total destruction (2:20).

Israel need not fear, for Yahweh will do great things for His people (2:20b). Rain will once again fall on the land; a Teacher of Righteousness (the Messiah) will accompany the prosperity. (It is also possible to render the phrase "in righteousness the autumn rains" for better parallelism.) Israel will live in prosperity and never again be shamed (2:27).

After all the desolation of the foreign invader, Yahweh will respond on behalf of His people by sending His Spirit (2:28-29). This again has a double reference. First, it applied to the day of Pentecost, which was completely fulfilled in Acts 2. Second, it refers to the time at the beginning of the millennium when the Spirit will be poured out on the entire believing remnant who has survived the Tribulation. It is this remnant who will see the accompanying signs in the heavens (2:30-31) during those climactic days before the return of Messiah. At that time everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (2:32). Israel will be restored in that great day, and all nations will be summoned for judgment (3:1-2; cf. Matt. 25:31-46). Meanwhile, Israel's enemies will be called to account for their treatment of Israel in the day of the prophet (3:4-8).

Judgment is to be proclaimed among the nations. They should beat the implements of agriculture into weapons of warfare and assemble in the valley of Jehoshaphat to stand accountable for their treatment of Israel and for their wickedness before God (3:9-13; cf.

Rev. 19). They will be judged (3:14-16a) but Israel will be secure (3:16b). Jerusalem will be holy (3:17), and prosperity will once again flow into the barren land of Israel (3:18; Ezek. 47). Israel's enemies will be punished (3:19), but Judah will be inhabited forever, a forgiven people (3:20-21). In that day the shout of worship will resound through the whole earth, "Yahweh dwells in Zion!"