

STUDIES IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
Anchorage Grace Church
2015

by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Joel

I. Introduction

A. *Date & Authorship*

Joel is perhaps the most difficult book in the Twelve to locate historically and chronologically. The book provides almost no information regarding the identity of its author apart from his name and lineage (1:1). His name is a combination of two names: Ya[hweh] + El[ohim], and means simply, "Yahweh is God." Nothing more is known of the man. His emphasis on temple and sacrificial activities has led some to suggest he was a priest,¹ while others proffer that he might have been a "temple-prophet" (a special cultic official whose livelihood was drawn from the temple revenues).² Both lack convincing evidence, though it could be said that Joel's prophetic ministry brought him into close proximity to the temple and its services. As Busenitz remarks,

The impression emanating from the whole prophecy is that Joel was a Judean who made his home either in Jerusalem or in the immediate vicinity. He speaks from the temple, bidding the priests to blow the trumpet in Zion (2:15) and gather the nation for a solemn assembly in the house of God (1:13-14; 2:15-17); he envisions the enemy besieging and entering Jerusalem (2:9); he addresses the people as the sons of Zion (2:23), Judah and Jerusalem (3:6). In all of these he speaks as one who is intimately related and personally acquainted with them. The tone of a stranger is absent.³

As to when he lived and prophesied, even more problems develop. The book's superscription provides no historical data. The book's contents lack any kind of temporal indicators, both external or internal. Only guesses can be made, and those guesses stand upon shaky evidential footing. Every remark with potential chronological implications can easily be

¹ Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 9.

² Raymond Bryan Dillard, "Joel," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edwin McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 239.

³ Irvin A. Busenitz, *Joel & Obadiah*, Mentor Commentary (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 13.

countered with evidence of a different perspective. The locust plague described at the book's outset is of no help, since such events were common. About the only certainty regarding the book's date is that it must have been written either before the Babylonian exile or after the rebuilding of the temple, for the prophet frequently references the temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. and not rebuilt until 516 B.C.

Two broad options have been offered by scholars for dating the book of Joel. One group dates the book sometime before the Babylonian Exile, while the other group places the book sometime in the 6th century B.C., after Judah's return to the land. The basic arguments made for these positions are as follows:

ARGUMENTS FOR CHRONOLOGY OF JOEL

Pre-Exilic Arguments	Post-Exilic Arguments
Canonical location in the Twelve	No mention of a king
Contents reflect earlier Israelite history	No mention of northern Israel
No mention of Israel's later enemies	No mention of syncretism
Parallels with Amos	Judah "scattered among nations"

Regardless of the evidence, every conservative scholar is quick to admit that much of the "evidence" posited ultimately is inconclusive. Granted this fact, the majority of scholars seem to prefer a post-exilic dating for the book. Even so, I am personally convinced by a pre-exilic date, though it's still difficult to locate where in Israel's pre-exilic history the book falls. Busenitz suggests that the book was written sometime in the mid-9th century B.C., sometime during the reign of Jehoshaphat and coinciding with the ministry of Elijah (860-850 B.C.).⁴ Henderson locates it during the time when Joash ruled in co-regency with the High Priest Jehoiada (835-796 B.C.).⁵ Patterson dates the book to the time of Hosea and Amos (775-725 B.C.).⁶

"Ultimately, however, it should be remembered that the importance of dating the book for the purpose of interpretation is minimal. Unlike the nature of other prophecies in which knowledge of the time and history is significantly related to its understanding, the message of Joel is timeless. It forms a doctrine that could be repeated and applied in any age." ~Irvin Busenitz

B. *Historical Background*

Since dating Joel's prophecies proves so inconclusive, it only follows that reconstructing the historical circumstances surrounding his message is equally difficult:

Spiritually, Joel identifies no specific sin that elicited his warnings. Absent are evidences of gross immorality, syncretistic paganism, or outright idolatry. Yet Joel calls the people to true, heart-felt repentance (2:13), implying that there must have been a general spiritual apathy in Judah.

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ Ebenezer Henderson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets: Translated from the Original Hebrew with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, Thornapple Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 [repr., 1858]), 89-90.

⁶ Richard D. Patterson, "Joel," in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 7:231-32.

What is clear in the text, however, is that Joel's message was prompted by a national emergency. The land had been ravaged by locusts, leaving the nation devastated economically. Deprived of produce in the fields and vineyards, there was nothing to offer Yahweh as grain and drink offerings at the temple (1:8-10, 13), nor was there food for the people (1:16-17) and livestock (1:18). Accompanying the locust invasion was an ensuing drought that left the animals without water (1:20) and the land endangered by wildfires (1:19-20). Such events were fairly common in the region, making it impossible to connect this event with any particular event recorded in ANE records. Joel does, however, suggest that the severity of this event was unparalleled in his generation (1:2).

Yet the locusts were only one of the circumstances facing the nation. Judah had apparently suffered at the hands of foreign armies, particularly Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia (3:2-6). Yet, as Busenitz notes,

The political situation is ambiguous. The people certainly were not enjoying the stability that characterized the monarchy under David and Solomon. Rather, internal evidence suggests a certain vulnerability, possibly arising out of political weakness. Economic devastation such as is described by the prophet often leaves a nation open to attack. However, the information is too scanty to allow for firm conclusions. The atrocities which were committed against Judah (3:3-7 [4:3-7]) are not chronologically specific and could have occurred at any time prior to the events of 2:18-3:2 [2:18-4:2]).⁷

Yet, just as with the dating of the book, the thorough understanding of the historical setting is not necessary to understand its message. Its themes are timeless, and its message transcends all of the historical circumstances that faced his original hearers. Though the details of the text may not apply directly to a 21st century audience, it is but a small hop to understand the book's implications for today.

II. Major Themes

A. *The Day of Yahweh*

Joel's prophecy contains the longest and most thorough treatment of the Day of Yahweh of any book in the OT. In fact, all three chapters of the book focus on this one topic.

1. *Anticipating the Day of Yahweh*

The impetus for Joel's concern was the historical setting facing Israel, namely, the immediate effects of the locust invasion and subsequent drought. This natural disaster—apparently unrelated to any particular national sin—provided the prophet with a perfect launch point for the people to consider the broader perspectives of where history was heading and the necessity to turn from sin and reconcile with God before it was too late. Thus, the prophet describes the devastation caused by the swarming locusts and the economic, emotional, and religious effects it had on the nation (1:1-20). This innumerable army of insects were a perfect picture of a future day

"The prophecy of Joel can be compared to two wheels turning on an axle. The wheels are history and eschatology, while the axle is the day of the Lord."
~Thomas Finley

⁷ Busenitz, *Joel & Obadiah*, 36.

when God would intervene in the affairs of mankind and deals personally with sinners. Scholars debate whether 2:1-11 poetically describes the locusts using military language, or if the prophet actually begins to describe a real human army that is coming. The language is admittedly ambiguous. However one understands this section, there's no question that the prophet using highly poetic language, either to describe the locusts as a human army or a human army as locusts. The effect is the same: the locusts that swept the land point to something much greater and much more devastating—Yahweh is here to judge!

2. *Understanding the Day of Yahweh*

As a topic, the Day of Yahweh is a major theme in the OT, and perhaps the most important theme in OT eschatology. It has also been the subject of years of debate over the origin of the idea and what it represents. In general, it should be known that the "day" does not reference a 24-hour period of time, but rather an indefinite period. This day is one uniquely belonging to Yahweh, as the genitive relationship ("of Yahweh") establishes. The use of this name is important. It is not the "day of *Elohim* [God]" nor the "day of *Adonai* [Sovereign One]". Rather, the phrase employs God's covenant name—Yahweh:

The name brings together the two motifs of transcendence and immanence; He is both the God who possessed transcendent power and might (Exod 3:14; 20:2) and the God who is vitally operative in human events. Thus the Day of Yahweh must be viewed as having special significance and particular ramifications for the covenant people, Israel.⁸

Numerous aspects come together in this theme. Judgment is the most obvious concept which comes to mind. However, Joel and Obadiah clarify that blessing is an inherent part of the day as well. Yet judgment and blessing are not clear-cut. Israel is in the crosshairs of judgment just as much as they are under the streams of blessing. As Busenitz clarifies,

From its earliest occurrence in the Old Testament the Day of Yahweh concept embraces more than just the idea of blessing on Israel and judgment on the nations; rather, it adumbrates the fuller conception of judgment for sin and blessing/vindication for obedience and faith, regardless of national identity. This is elucidated by the fact that the judgment prophesied against the nations was announced in the context of specific sins and acts of wrongdoing, nor merely because they were Gentiles.

Thus, the overall concept of the Day of Yahweh concerns a time when Yahweh intervenes personally in the affairs of mankind and deals with human according to their relationship with him. Those wicked are judged, while the righteous who repent and trust in him will find refuge and will escape his wrath. For this reason, Joel urges the nation to repent so as to escape the day he knows is imminent (2:12-17).

3. *Describing the Day of Yahweh*

Joel provides numerous descriptors for understanding what the Day of Yahweh will be like:

⁸ Ibid., 40.

a) Imminence

Joel and the other prophets repeatedly describe the day as "near" (Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14;), as "coming" (2:1). The swiftness of the devastation caused by the sudden locust invasion typified the swiftness of the day in the future. It could come at any moment without warning, and so the hearers/readers must repent *now* before it's too late.

b) Seismic/Celestial/Atmospheric Phenomena

Joel's description of the day parallels other prophets who note unusual seismic and astronomical activity. The earth will quake (Joel 2:1-11; 3:14; cf. Isa 13:6ff; Zech 14:1ff) and the heavenly bodies will become dark (Joel 2:10, 31; 3:14; cf. Isa 13:10; Amos 5:18-20; 8:9; Zech 14:6).

c) Atmospheric Phenomena

Also accompanying this time will be unusual atmospheric activity described in words such as "clouds," "thick darkness," and "gloom" (Joel 2:1-11; cf. Zeph 1:7ff; Ezek 30:3ff). This theologically charged language harkens back to earlier historical events where God physically appeared to Israel (Exod 16:10; 19:16; 24:16; 34:5; Deut 4:11), and indicates that the Day of Yahweh is a time when God *personally* visits mankind.

d) Destruction

The prophet describes the day as "destruction from the Almighty" (1:15). He notes that the land will be left as "a desolate wilderness" (2:3). It is a time that no one can escape, and he rhetorically asks, "Who can endure it?" (2:11).

e) Blessing and hope

Yet Joel also describes the day as a rich time of blessing for believers. In fact, it is an all-encompassing blessing for the entirety of life. There will be material restoration. The effects of divine judgment will be reversed, and the land will experience untold fruitfulness and productivity (2:18, 21-27). There will be spiritual restoration, as Yahweh's Spirit is poured out on all believers, regardless of age, sex, or social condition (2:28-29). There will also be spiritual and physical deliverance for all those who repent and call on God's name (2:32). And national restoration will come as Yahweh's presence returns among his people and he deals with Judah's enemies in judgment (3:1-21).

B. *Genuine Repentance*

The thrust of Joel's message goes beyond a simple explanation of the Day of Yahweh. It is a *warning* of that day and a call to repentance. His description of the current disaster (1:2-20) led to a warning of the imminence of a greater disaster (2:1-11a) that ends with a statement followed by a question: "The day of Yahweh is indeed great and very awesome. And who can endure it?" (2:11b).

That question is the culmination of the thrust of Joel's warning and it leads him to an urgent call for national repentance. The prophet calls the people to "return" to Yahweh (2:12, 13). Yet they must return with "all [their] heart," and must "rend their heart and not

their garment," (2:13), indicating that this must be a genuine repentance reflecting a true love for Yahweh that corresponds to their covenant obligation to him (cf. Deut 6:5). Nevertheless, their in return should be reflected outwardly in familiar cultural expressions such as "fasting, weeping, and mourning," (2:12).

The prophet also calls the people to repent formally at a national level. He instructs the elders to assemble the people, to blow a trumpet, to cleanse the congregation (2:15-16). And he instructs the priests to intercede for the nation (2:17-18).

The result of their repentance will be mercy. He assures that Yahweh is by nature "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in loyal love and relenting of calamity" (2:13). He concedes that in God's sovereignty, he may just choose to relent of disaster and "leave a blessing behind him" in the form of a grain and drink offering (2:14). Yet the language is clear that Joel leaves that decision up to God—it is his choice whether he chooses to relent or carry out his judgment. All the people can and must do is repent.

III. Purpose

Judah is urged to repent in light of the divine judgment that will visit them and the nations in the coming Day of Yahweh.

IV. Literary Structure

Joel provides a rather straight-forward structure and divides easily into three major sections. The first section concerns itself with calling Judah's attention to the devastation caused by the locust invasion and alerting them that Yahweh was behind it. The second section serves to transition into the greater topic of the coming Day of Yahweh and the need for the nation to repent. The third section describes God's promise to his people should they repent.

JOEL

Introduction	The Contemporary Day of Yahweh	The Impending Day of Yahweh		The Eschatological Day of Yahweh		
Prophet [No Date]	Locust Invasion	Army Invasion	Call to Repent	Material Restoration	Spiritual Restoration	National Restoration
1:1	1:2	2:1	2:12	2:18	2:28	3:1