

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JOEL

### Author

- I. The book is attributed to “Joel, the son of Pethuel” (1.1).
  - A. The name is usually interpreted to mean “Jehovah is God” and is related to *Elijah* (“my God is Jehovah”).<sup>1</sup>
  - B. The name is not rare for it is the appellation of at least twelve other persons in the Old Testament.
- II. Nothing is known of the circumstances connected with the author’s life.
  - A. He cannot be identified with any other Joel mentioned elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>
  - B. Nor can the traditional legends, that Joel was of the tribe of Reuben, be proven.<sup>3</sup>
- III. However, a few facts about the author may be derived from the prophecy itself.<sup>4</sup>
  - A. “He must have been a Judean, for the temple, Jerusalem and Judah are the three concentric circles of his prophetic concern.”<sup>5</sup>
  - B. His home probably was in Jerusalem or the immediate vicinity, since he speaks repeatedly of *Zion* (2.1, 15, 32; 3.16, 17, 21) and *Judah* and *Jerusalem* (2.32; 3.1, 16, 17, 18, 20).<sup>6</sup>
  - C. He was familiar with the temple, its ritual, the priesthood and their duties (1.9, 13, 14, 16; 2.14, 17; 3.18).<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Kapelrud calls Joel a “temple-prophet.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wade, li.

<sup>2</sup>Kirkpatrick, 46.

<sup>3</sup>Keil, 169.

<sup>4</sup>Kirkpatrick, 46-47.

<sup>5</sup>Allen, 31.

<sup>6</sup>Kirkpatrick, 46.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>8</sup>Kapelrud, according to Thompson, 729.

### Interpretation of the Locust Plague

- I. Some have supposed that the locusts of Joel 1.4 are not literal but allegorical.
  - A. “The Targum at 2.25 paraphrased the list of four locust terms as ‘peoples, languages, rulers, and kingdoms.’”<sup>9</sup>
  - B. The margin of Codex Marchalianus (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) of the Septuagint more specifically interprets these types of locusts as “Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans.”<sup>10</sup>
  - C. Also, the locusts are personified.
    1. They are as “a nation” (1.6).
    2. They are as “a people” (2.2).
    3. They are Yahweh’s “army” (2.11, 15).
    4. They are charged with moral accountability (2.20).<sup>11</sup>
  - D. Other traits of Joel’s locusts dismiss a literal interpretation.
    1. They are called “the northerner” (2.20), and “locust rarely come to Palestine from a northerly direction.”<sup>12</sup>
    2. Joel 2.17 reflects a prayer for Israel’s deliverance from heathen rule.
    3. The connection of locusts with “the day of the Lord” (2.1, 11) points to an invasion of Israel by hostile forces.<sup>13</sup>
    4. The extent of destruction by these locusts is much greater than that of real locusts.
- II. But arguments for a literal interpretation of the locust plague are more convincing.
  - A. The prophet describes an actual calamity from which the land was suffering.<sup>14</sup>
    1. Joel appeals to the experience of the old men and their fathers (1.2).
    2. Joel charges his hearers to transfer the memory of this plague to future generations (1.3).

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<sup>9</sup>Allen, 29.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Wade, liv.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., lv.

<sup>14</sup>Kirkpatrick, 53.

3. Joel describes the plague with detailed and graphic pictures.
    - a. “Joel’s language is not to be regarded as plain bare prose.”<sup>15</sup>
    - b. Joel uses poetical imagination and hyperbole, and his description of the locusts is intensified by two factors.
      - i. The locust plague was a divine visitation.
      - ii. The calamity was a prototype or a sign of the coming day of the Lord and its terrors.<sup>16</sup>
  - B. The mannerisms of the locusts as described by Joel accord perfectly with their natural tendencies.
    1. The damage which they inflict is wrought entirely on vegetation (1.10-12).<sup>17</sup>
    2. Their manner of entering the city by coming into houses through windows (2.9) depicts literal locusts rather than a victorious invader.
  - C. Further, the locusts are to be seen as literal by the fact that they are compared to an invading army (2.4-9). If the locusts allegorically represent an invading army, then Joel compares an army to itself.
  - D. Finally, the problems raised by 2.17 and 2.20 can be answered.
    1. The term “the northerner” (2.20) is vague at best and even if it does not refer to literal locusts that generally enter Palestine from the south or southeast, “it does not seem certain that they never came from the north.”<sup>18</sup>
    2. Joel 2.17 can be answered in one of two ways.
      - a. Either Joel attributes these human qualities to the insects, and such is not uncommon in Hebrew literature (cf. Job 39.7, 22; 40.23).<sup>19</sup>
      - b. Or plausibly this passage has some present or future fulfillment.<sup>20</sup>
- III. The internal evidence seems to favor a literal interpretation for Joel’s locusts but cannot be claimed a certainty.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Wade, lv.

<sup>18</sup>Kirkpatrick, 54.

<sup>19</sup>Wade, lv.

<sup>20</sup>Keil, 172.

## Unity

- I. Many critics divide Joel into two major sections: (1) the locust plague and drought in chapters 1.2–2.27 (contemporary); and (2) the final day of the Lord in chapters 2.28–3.21 (eschatological).<sup>21</sup>
  - A. The first section was the original work of a pre-exilic author.
  - B. The latter portion was a supplement added by a post-exilic writer.
- II. Other interpreters deny the authenticity of 3.4-8 and regard it as a later insertion.<sup>22</sup>
- III. But unity of the prophecy should be maintained.
  - A. One author does not necessitate one continuous discourse.
    1. “Joel has probably combined addresses delivered on various occasions, and possibly supplemented them by additional prophecies not orally delivered.”<sup>23</sup>
    2. But, on the other hand, one continuous discourse is not impossible.
  - B. The internal considerations for retaining 3.4-8 as authentic outweigh the arguments against it.<sup>24</sup>
  - C. Thompson gives five fundamental reasons for the unity of Joel.<sup>25</sup>
    1. “All the extant Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions give Joel as a unit.”<sup>26</sup>
    2. The elaborate similarities between the locusts and the pagan enemies suggest that the book is a symmetrical whole.
    3. Several distinguishing stylistic features are noticeable in both sections of the book.
    4. “The repeated references to the day of the Lord in the first part (1.15; 2.1, 11) prepare for the climax of its final coming the second part.”<sup>27</sup>
    5. A uniform historical background can be seen throughout the entire book.

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<sup>21</sup>See Driver, 311.

<sup>22</sup>See Wade, lx-lxi.

<sup>23</sup>Kirkpatrick, 48-49.

<sup>24</sup>See Allen, 28.

<sup>25</sup>Thompson, 733.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

Date

- I. The book of Joel can be dated either very early (before 800 BC) or very late (after 500 BC).
  - A. “Joel mentions neither Assyria, which emerged upon the prophetic horizon about 760, nor the Babylonian Empire, which had fallen by 537. The presumption is that he wrote before 760 or after 537.”<sup>28</sup>
  - B. Many historical allusions found in Joel can be argued for either date.
    1. Egypt is mentioned (3.19).
      - a. This can be a reference to Shishak’s invasion of Palestine (ca. 925 BC<sup>29</sup>) by those who favor a pre-exilic date (cf. 1 Kings 14.25f).
      - b. But the Egyptians also invaded Israel in the time of Josiah (ca. 600 BC).
    2. Edom is condemned (3.19).
      - a. The Edomites revolted during the reign of Jehoram (851-843).<sup>30</sup>
      - b. But the Edomites also are denounced by other Old Testament prophets for having taken part in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC
    3. Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia are described as having taken away Yahweh’s silver and gold (3.4-5).
      - a. In conjunction with the Arabians, the Philistines invaded Judah and plundered Jerusalem of her treasures in the ninth century (2 Chronicles 21.16ff).<sup>31</sup>
      - b. Although the Phoenicians (inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon), as far as the Old Testament record indicates, took no part in the attack, their active slave trade was abhorred and condemned (Amos 1.9).<sup>32</sup>
      - c. The Philistines were a constant source of injury to the Israelites to the fifth (Nehemiah 4.7) and second centuries BC (1 Maccabees 3.41).<sup>33</sup>
      - d. Prophecies against both Tyre and Sidon also occur in Isaiah 23, Jeremiah 25.22, and Zechariah 9.2-4 (exilic and post-exilic works).

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<sup>28</sup>Smith, 370.

<sup>29</sup>Kitchen, 1181.

<sup>30</sup>Wade, lxiv.

<sup>31</sup>Kirkpatrick, 62.

<sup>32</sup>Wade, lxiii.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., lxiv.

4. The faraway Greeks are the buyers of Hebrew slaves (3.6).
  - a. The Jews were acquainted with the Ionian Greeks in the pre-exilic period.
    - i. “They are found mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions as early as the eighth century BC”<sup>34</sup>
    - ii. The context of 3.6 indicates the Greeks as a distant people, a reference that seems incompatible with a post-exilic date when the Greeks were the masters of the entire Persian Empire.<sup>35</sup>
  - b. But “no other Hebrew document before the Exile speaks of Greece, and in particular Amos does not when describing the Phoenicians as slave traders.”<sup>36</sup>
5. The “Valley of Jehoshaphat” is alluded to (3.12).
  - a. Possibly Jehoshaphat’s great victory over the allied forces of Moab, Ammon, and Edom here (2 Chronicles 20.26) was still fresh in Joel’s mind, since it occurred only a quarter century earlier if the pre-exilic date is presumed.<sup>37</sup>
  - b. But this allusion only proves that Joel was written later than Jehoshaphat’s reign, and this has never been questioned.<sup>38</sup>
- C. Likewise, the social and religious conditions of the people of Joel’s day imply either date.
  1. Temple worship is a matter of deep concern (1.9, 16), but nothing in the prophecy implies either the first or second temple.
  2. A public fast is called (1.14), but public fasting “was a religious practice amongst the Hebrews in both early and late times (1 Samuel 7.6; 1 Kings 21.9; Nehemiah 9.1).<sup>39</sup>
  3. The prophet’s great attention to sacrifice and ritual demands neither date, especially since Joel 2.13 is free of any ritual.<sup>40</sup>
  4. The lack of denunciation of specific sins of the people points to either age.

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<sup>34</sup>Archer, 305.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Smith, 373.

<sup>37</sup>Kirkpatrick, 63.

<sup>38</sup>Wade, lxiv.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., lxv.

<sup>40</sup>Robinson, 41.

5. No connection with the Northern Kingdom can be found.
    - a. Although “Israel” is mentioned in 2.27 and 3.2, it is used as a synonym for Judah.
    - b. This omission fits either date—pre-exilic since Joel’s primary concern is Judah and post-exilic since at that time the kingdom of the ten tribes was no longer in existence.
  6. The absence of any contemporary king or of princes is also a point of contention and inconclusive.
- II. A reasonable date is during the “minority of King Joash, during the regency of Jehoiada, the high priest, about 830 BC”<sup>41</sup>
- A. Joash, a minor of only seven years of age at this time (2 Kings 11.21), could not control governmental affairs. The priests ruled Judah, and this harmonizes with what Joel writes.
    1. This accounts for the priestly emphasis in Joel.
    2. This also accounts for the lack of any reference to a king, because the only time when the “absence of all reference to the king is intelligible is this comparatively short interval in the ninth century.”<sup>42</sup>
  - B. This date accounts for the historical allusions previously mentioned.
  - C. “The probability of the early date of Joel is still further confirmed by the consideration of the relation of Amos to Joel.”<sup>43</sup>
    1. But the critics argue about who copied who.
    2. Yet, the possibility of literary independence remains strong.
  - D. Also, “the position of Joel in the series of the Minor Prophets raises a presumption in favor of an early date.”<sup>44</sup>
- III. But many scholars argue for a date later than 500 BC
- A. “It is alleged that the language of 3.1 ff., 17 is decisive for a date after the destruction of Jerusalem in BC 586.”<sup>45</sup>
    1. But 3.1 does not necessarily indicate restoration from exile (cf. Amos 9.14; Hosea 6.11).
    2. Neither is the deportation of 3.2 a total exile of the entire nation, but the verse can refer to the sale of Hebrew captives as slaves to remote and distant lands (3.6, 7).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Archer, 304.

<sup>42</sup>Wade, lxv.

<sup>43</sup>Kirkpatrick, 63.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 68.

- B. It is also alleged that Joel quotes from earlier prophets and that his style and vocabulary indicate a late period.<sup>47</sup> But Joel's "syntax is distinctive of good Hebrew"<sup>48</sup> and indicative of an early rather than a late date.
- C. The greatest problem with the post-exilic date seems to be its lack of specificity.
  - 1. "To what precise epoch of the post-exilic period the book should be assigned is a much disputed point."<sup>49</sup>
  - 2. Smith, an advocate of the post-exilic position, affirms that Joel is difficult and impossible to date.<sup>50</sup>
  - 3. Those who adopt the later date "regard Joel as a kind of compendium of Jewish eschatology and the forerunner of later apocalyptic literature."<sup>51</sup>

Conclusion - Affirming both the unity and literal interpretation of the locust plague in Joel, a date of about 830 BC is most probable.

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<sup>47</sup>Smith, 376ff.

<sup>48</sup>Wade, lxx.

<sup>49</sup>Kirkpatrick, 67.

<sup>50</sup>Smith, 379.

<sup>51</sup>Kirkpatrick, 67.



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