

Introduction to Joel

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Background

Prophet's Name

The name Joel is completely theophoric, that is, both parts of the name refer to God.

In English: Joel = Jo (*Yah*) + El (*God*)

In Hebrew: יוֹאֵל = יְהוָה (*Yah*, short for *Yahweh*) + אֱלֹהִים (*El*, *God*)

Meaning: "Yahweh is God"

Remember, *Yahweh* is the name of the God of the Bible. "God" (*El* or *Elohim*) is not a name but a simple noun meaning deity.

Identification

Very little is known about Joel. He apparently prophesied in Judah, probably Jerusalem, and was very likely a citizen of the Southern Kingdom (see 1:9, 13-14; 2:1, 15; 2:23-3:2; 3:6-8, 16-21). Since his father is mentioned, his family evidently had some importance (contrast Obadiah). A total of 13 Joels are mentioned in the Bible.

Date

A majority of conservative scholars, based on a variety of internal evidences, date the prophetic ministry of Joel about 830 B.C. during the minority of Joash (or Jehoash) and regency of Jehoiada, the high priest (see Archer, *SOTI*, pp. 304-307). This period is described in 2 Kings 11-12 and 2 Chronicles 22-24.

It is interesting to note that Joel displays familiarity with Obadiah's prophecy: compare Obadiah 17 with Joel 2:32, Obadiah 11 with Joel 3:3, and Obadiah 10 with Joel 3:19. Also, 27 of the 73 verses in Joel are either quoted or alluded to by later prophets. For example, Joel 3:16 and 18 are quoted in Amos 1:2 and 9:13, respectively. These facts argue for the early date of Obadiah, an

issue much debated by scholars (see the notes on Obadiah).

Basic Theme

The central theme is the "Day of Yahweh" (mentioned 9 times--1:15(2); 2:1, 2(2), 11, 31; 3:14, 18). See the notes on Obadiah for an introductory discussion of the Day of Yahweh.

In Joel another harbinger of the Day of Yahweh is described, this time a devastation of the land by locusts and the subsequent deliverance by the Lord: 1:1-2:17.

From this discussion of this preview of the Day of Yahweh, Joel proceeds to a discussion of the final, climactic manifestation of that Day: 2:28-3:21. The syntactical clue to this shift is the word "afterward" in 2:28.

Note: Both the harbinger and the final manifestation of the Day of Yahweh include both judgments and blessings.

Outline With Interpretive Comments

I. The locust plague and God's deliverance: a harbinger of the Day of Yahweh (1:1-2:27)

A. The description of the devastation (1:1-2:11)

Interpretive notes:

1. Verse 1:4 seems to mention 4 kinds of locusts. The root verbs at the base of each name mean, respectively, *to cut*, *to swarm*, *to hop*, and *to destroy*. There are three possible interpretations: (1) four different species of locust; (2) four stages of locust life; (3) four successive waves of locust invasion. I prefer the last. Joel simply uses the common word for locust followed by three poetic equivalents to describe four successive swarms (Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 72). A combination of (1) and (3) is also feasible.

2. "Locust plagues are a frequent threat in the Middle East. Swarms come quickly, darkening the sun; every green thing is devoured, until trees stand, white and bare, stripped even of their bark. One swarm is estimated to have numbered 24,420 billions of locusts! *National Geographic* (Volume XXVIII) December, 1915, contains the description of a severe locust

plague which occurred in Jerusalem in 1915" (Graybill, *The Biblical Expositor*, 2:290).

3. This section, 1:1-2:11, is a description of a present crisis in Joel's day. That fact is clear enough in 1:1-20. But the same is true in 2:1-11; both form a single description of the locust plague. The verbs in 2:1-11, which in the KJV are translated in the future tense, should be rendered in the present (they are imperfects in the Hebrew). Some interpreters take 2:1-11 to be a description of an invasion by a real army (possibly the Assyrians) because of the phrases "great people" in 2:2 and "army" in 2:11. But "nation" is used in 1:6, even though the locusts are clearly in view there. The fact is, therefore, that all these terms are figurative descriptions--personifications--of the locusts. Verse 2:25 clearly unites the entire section of 1:1-2:11 as a description of a single phenomenon and identifies the "great army" as the locusts. In this connection, also note the word "like" used throughout 2:4-7: the locusts are "like" (simile) a real army in several specified ways.

4. Note that locust plagues are among the promised chastisements in Deut. 28:38; cf. Exod. 10:12-20.

B. The call to repentance, apparently heeded by the people (2:12-17)

C. The Lord's response (2:18-27)

Interpretive notes:

1. Some of the verbs in 2:18-19 are also mistranslated in the KJV. There are seven altogether: the first four are waw imperfects and thus should be rendered in the past tense. A correct translation would be something like this:

"Then [in response to the people's repentance] Yahweh was [or, became] jealous for his land, and had pity on his people. Yahweh answered and said to his people, 'Behold, I will send you grain, and wine, and oil . . . ' "

Therefore, 2:18-27 describes the removal of the locusts and the revitalization of the devastated land. Joel is still describing his own time period; he is still describing the harbinger by which the Day of Yahweh was "near" (2:1) and "at hand" (1:15). Note, therefore, the Day of Yahweh includes both judgment and blessing. Both are also seen in the

eschatological section of 2:28-3:21.

2. The "former" and "latter rain" (2:23):

"In Palestine the early rains come in October and November, breaking the long summer drought. Then the farmer plows the land and sows the seed. The latter rains, which occur in March and April, are much desired, for they guarantee a rich harvest" (Graybill, p. 293).

II. The future climactic manifestation of the Day of Yahweh (2:28-3:21)

A. The promise of the Holy Spirit (2:28-32)

Interpretive notes:

1. In the Masoretic text (the standard Hebrew Old Testament text used today), verses 28-32 form a separate chapter. This demonstrates the fact that the Masoretes considered the prophecy of extreme importance. Indeed, it describes one of the key features of the eschatological Day of Yahweh.

2. The Hebrew of 2:28 is quite definite that Joel with clear intention is shifting his thought to the future, final, eschatological "Day":

וְהָיָה אַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֲשַׁפּוּד אֶת־רוּחִי עַל־כָּל־בָּשָׂר

flesh all on my Spirit I will afterwards It shall be
pour out

Note the word "afterwards." After what things? This locust plague which has just occurred, of course. In other words, Joel is now beginning to describe a future manifestation of the Day of Yahweh. From the content of the description, it may be concluded that this future manifestation will not be another harbinger but the final, climactic manifestation in God's total culmination of history.

B. The restoration of Israel (3:1-3)

Interpretive notes:

1. "The words presuppose as facts that have already occurred, both the dispersion of the whole nation of Israel in exile among the heathen, and the conquest and capture of the whole

land by heathen nations, and that in the extent to which they took place under the Chaldeans and Romans alone. In vers. 2 and 3 Joel is speaking not of events belonging to his own time, or to the most recent past, but of that dispersion of the whole of the ancient covenant nation among the heathen, which was only completely effected in the conquest of Palestine and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and which continues to this day. . . . For since Moses had already foretold that Israel would one day be driven out among the heathen (Lev. xxvi. 33 sqq.; Deut. xxviii. 36 sqq.), Joel might assume that this judgment was a truth well known in Israel, even though he had not expressed it in his threatening of punishment in ch. i and ii. Ver. 3 depicts the ignominious treatment of Israel in connection with this catastrophe. The prisoners of war are distributed by lot among the conquerors, and disposed of by them to slave-dealers at ridiculous prices,--a boy for a harlot, a girl for a drink of wine. . . . This was not done till the time of the Romans" (Keil and Delitzsch, 10:221).

2. "We know of no valley called by the name of Jehoshaphat. Joel probably chose this designation, which means 'The Lord has judged,' as symbolic of the event. 'The valley of decision' (3:14), a synonymous expression, lends support to this idea" (Graybill, *The Biblical Expositor*, p. 297).

C. A contemporary aside (3:4-8)

Interpretive notes:

1. "Joel had no doubt the plundering of Judah and Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians in the time of Jehoram in his mind (see 2 Chron. xxi. 17). The share of the Phoenicians in this crime was confined to the fact, that they had purchased from the Philistines the Judaeans who had been taken prisoners by them, and sold them again as slaves to the sons of Javan, i.e., to the Ionians or Greeks of Asia Minor" (Keil and Delitzsch, 10:223-224).

2. See Keil and Delitzsch, 10:224, for a discussion of the fulfillment of this threat. It occurred partly with the defeat of the Philistines by Uzziah (2 Chr. 26:6-7) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:8), but principally with the conquest by Alexander the Great.

D. Judgment upon the nations (3:9-17)

"The great sin of the nations--all will be involved in it in the

time of Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7)--is that against Israel. Little do the nations realize how they incur the wrath of God when they lay violent hands upon His heritage and the plant of His choosing. He will not suffer it always. Joel shows the day of reckoning has come because Israel was scattered among the nations; their land was divided; they were sold to indulge the vilest passions--a night of revelry or debauchery. Josephus, the historian, tells us (see *The Wars of the Jews*, Book VI, chap. 9, par. 2; also his *Antiquities*, Book XII, chap. 7, par. 3; and 1 Mac. 8:11, 25) that in the Roman wars the enemy chose out of the Jews 'the tallest and most beautiful, and reserved them for the triumph; and as for the rest of the multitude that were above seventeen years old, he put them into bonds; and sent them to the Egyptian mines . . . those that were under seventeen years of age were sold for slaves.' Such indignities and worse have been perpetrated upon God's people in our own generation, and the end is not yet. Will God visit with judgment for these? Be certain that He will" (Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, pp. 82-83).

E. Blessing for Israel (3:18-21)

Important Passages and Problems

Further Discussion on the Relationship between the Events in a Prophet's Own Time and Those in the Eschatological Future

1. In the notes on Obadiah, a definition of the phrase "Day of Yahweh" was given: the time of God's climactic work in history just before and as he ushers in the reign of Messiah and Messianic kingdom on earth; a day of both judgment as well as salvation affecting (1) men, (2) nations, and (3) nature.
2. Yet many events that took place during the time of the prophets are said to be part of this Day of Yahweh. How can this be?
3. The "Day of Yahweh" must be understood as a corporate or collective term. Its comprehensive yet single meaning at once incorporates into one collective concept all the antecedent visitations of judgment and salvation in history, together with the final, climactic work of God in the culmination of history as he ushers in the Messianic (or millennial) kingdom. Whenever God steps into history in an act of judgment/salvation, he is giving a preview, downpayment, and guarantee for his final visitation in and around the second advent of Christ. Thus it is an appearance of the Day of Yahweh, albeit in harbinger form. This is not "double reference,"

"double fulfillment," "multiple meaning," or "multiple sense." "Day of Yahweh" has a single meaning: it refers to God's work of judgment/salvation in history as a single, collective event, continually converging in its multiple manifestations toward an apex or climax, as was illustrated by the chart in the notes to Obadiah. Neither was the prophet chronologically confused in his perception of the immediate event of which he spoke and the climactic event at the end of the age of which he also often spoke. He knew the correct sequence.

4. In the notes on Obadiah, the concept of *genus* was also used to picture the relationship between the historical antecedents and the final, climactic manifestation of the Day of Yahweh. The single, collective concept incorporating this series of visitations was considered a generic wholeness, each member being so intimately or vitally related to the others that nothing less than generic identity unites them all under the umbrella of one phenomenon: that is, the manifestation of one member or event was the same phenomenon as the manifestation of another. But each separate manifestation showed that history was progressing toward a final, climactic display of the judgment and salvation of God.

Peter's Quotation of Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:15-21

1. "This is that": Was Joel's prophecy fulfilled at Pentecost? Here are some views (see Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, pp. 154-55):

- a. *Termination at Pentecost* (e.g., Grotius): the prophecy was fulfilled by certain events in Joel's day as well as by Pentecost which is seen as the termination of the prophecy.
- b. *Fulfillment at Pentecost* (e.g., E. J. Young): the prophecy was completely fulfilled at Pentecost; this view involves some spiritualization.
- c. *Eschatological view* (e.g., A. C. Gaebelin, common dispensational view): no part of the prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost.
- d. *Typical view* (e.g., Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown): the prophecy was fulfilled "in earnest" at Pentecost; putting this in the language used in these notes, this view would make Pentecost another harbinger of the Day of Yahweh, another in the series of historical antecedents, with the climactic fulfillment again occurring just prior to the second advent..

e. *Continuous fulfillment* (e.g., R. A. Torrey, Freeman): the fulfillment of the prophecy began at Pentecost and will have continuous fulfillment throughout the interadvent period as God pours out his Spirit on all those whom he saves during this period. The signs and wonders in the heavens above will be fulfilled just prior to the second advent, completing the fulfillment of the prophecy.

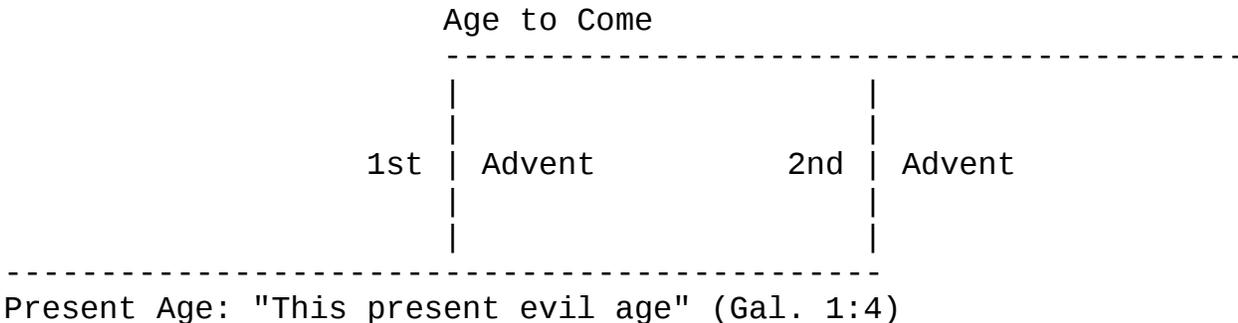
2. I prefer the fifth view. The development of the argument for this last view is as follows:

a. The eschatological "last days" indeed began with the events, including Pentecost, surrounding the first advent.

- (1) Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17: "This is that . . . it shall come to pass in the last days . . ."
- (2) Heb. 1:2
- (3) John 7:37-39: a brand new ministry of the Holy Spirit started at Pentecost

Thus, Pentecost cannot be considered another harbinger of an eschatological time.

b. The New Testament seems to speak of two "ages," the present age and the age to come (see Matt. 12:32; 28:20). But there is an overlap: this age has not ended and yet we are already "tasting" of the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5). Note how Peter interprets Joel's "afterward" in Joel 2:28 to mean "the last days" in Acts 2:17. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, he seems to identify the beginning of "the last days" with the events surrounding the first advent, and they surely must extend to the second advent. Therefore, this overlap is called the "last days," and it covers the period between the two advents:



c. There is no indication in Joel 2:28-32 or Acts 2:15-21 that

once the eschatological "last days" had begun and the Holy Spirit accordingly "poured out" that the other events of those days must immediately follow. Therefore, there is no spiritualization in this view: in particular, the celestial signs will yet be fulfilled. The initial outpouring of the Spirit, of course, occurred on the day of Pentecost. But every time someone is saved in this interadvent period, he becomes an immediate partaker of this new ministry of the Holy Spirit begun at Pentecost. To spread the eschatological fulfillment of this prophecy over the entire range of "last days"--which to date includes over 2000 years!--does no violence to a grammatico-historical interpretation of the text of Joel or Acts.

d. What is the relationship between the "last days" and the "Day of Yahweh"? According to Joel 2:31, the celestial signs, which conclude the "last days", come just "before" the "Day of Yahweh" begins. Thus we see that the Day of Yahweh must refer to the second advent and the judgments and blessings that immediately attend it: the battle of Armageddon, the resurrection of the righteous dead, the subjugation of the earth under Messiah's reign from the city of Jerusalem, the "great white throne" judgment, and the introduction of the "new heaven" and "new earth" (1 Cor. 15:23-28; 1 Thess. 5:1-5; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; 2 Pet. 3:3-13; Rev. 19:11-21:8). Thus, most of the individual judgments of the tribulation period described in Matt. 24 and Rev. 4-19 precede the Day of Yahweh. These include the celestial signs of Joel (2:30-31; cf. Rev. 6:12-17; 8:12) and simply point to the immediate inauguration of that great, climactic "Day" at the second advent of Jesus (Joel 3:14-16; Matt. 24:29-31).

The Order of Events in Chapter 3

Note the order of events laid out in the text:

1. The regathering of scattered Israel back into the land: 3:1-3
2. Nations assemble to fight Israel (at Armageddon): 3:9-13
3. The celestial signs of Joel 2:30-31 conclude the last days and usher in the Day of Yahweh: 3:14-15
4. Yahweh himself defeats the nations (Messiah returns and wins the battle of Armageddon): 3:16
5. Kingdom blessings for Jerusalem and Israel as Yahweh himself in the person of Messiah dwells in Zion: 3:17-21

This order of events has a name in theology: it is called ***premillennialism***. The same order is seen in many prophets (e.g., Zech. 14) as well as in the New Testament (Matt. 24, and Rev. 4-21).

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