

Joel

Authorship and Dating

The book of Joel was written by the Son of Pethuel (1:1). Other than his apparent understanding of farming little is known concerning this prophet.¹

The most debated introductory issue concerning Joel is the book's date. Both conservative and liberal scholars provide internal evidence for dates ranging from mid 800's B.C. to late 500's B.C. Two of the most common are presented below in the footnotes.² Thankfully, the book's message is not hampered by this lack of understanding.

Recipients

Since particular date is difficult to determine so is a specific context. However, we can draw several conclusions about the recipients. Joel addressed the southern Kingdom during a time of great famine (1:2-13). He notes that the judgment has resulted in the destruction of their fields impacting their ability to give sacrifices to the Lord (1:12; 2:13, 14). His instructions are given in order to bring about immediate repentance (2:15-17) for their hypocritical worship (2:12-13) with the expectation of restoration (2:18ff).

Purpose

Like other prophets Joel is encouraging Israel to recognize their sin and repent according to the covenant which the Lord had made with the Hebrew nation. A common call of the prophets is for the people to "repent" or "return" (שׁוּבוּ...pronounced "Shub"). Joel is no exception. In 2:12-13 Joel calls on Judah to return to the Lord. In the last part of the book, however, Joel promises the Hebrew Nation

¹ Paul N. Benware, *The Essential Bible Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003)

² The first position is for a mid 9th century B.C.. "Both military conquest and famine were, of course, rather regular sources of disaster for Israel and Judah, but their juxtaposition as described by Joel could not have been common. One such sequence can be found in the years of Elisha's ministry. It will be recalled that the prophet had interceded before King Joram in behalf of a woman who had fled to Philistia to escape the ravages of a seven-year famine... It will also be recalled that Shalmaneser III had fought a coalition of Aramean and Palestinian kings to a stalemate at Qarqar in 853... In 841, however, he managed to besiege Hazael of Damascus and exacted heavy tribute from Jehu in his very first year as king of Israel. There is no reason whatsoever that Shalmaneser could not have continued on past Samaria all the way to Jerusalem.... In our view, Joel describes precisely these events and writes of them at some point between the beginning of the famine (ca. 852) and the Assyrian invasion (841)." Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests a History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 382-83. The second position of a date for Joel is forward thus: "The thorny question of date traditionally has been solved either by assigning the book to the period of the minority of Jehoash (Joash; ca. 835-796) or by dating the prophet long after the return from exile, near the end of the fifth century or even later. More recently, arguments have been posed for a date just before or shortly after the Exile. They tend to be based on (1) absence of mention of a king, (2) parallels to the works of Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Obadiah, (3) prominence of the "Day of the Lord," (4) havoc wrought against Judah and total disruption of life that is best explained by a recent exile, (pictures of the activity of the temple, whose rebuilding was completed in 515 B.C.... Happily, Joel's message does not hinge on the date. The prophet's words are salient despite our current inability to reconstruct his historical background with accuracy." David Allan Hubbard William Sanford LaSor, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996) 376.

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ultimate victory over the gentile nations (2:18-3:21). Thus, Joel not only called the nation to repentance but also encouraged the people toward faithfulness with covenant practices.

Message

Following an introduction (1:1) seven sections occur in an “a-b-c-d-a-b-c” pattern³ and thus form three major divisions with the center division (d) becoming the book’s focal point. As such the center section becomes the book’s focus. The first division (1:2-2:11) describes Judah’s present judgment and as noted previously is divided into three sections (a-b-c). In this first section Joel recognizes that God’s judgment has arrived through the devouring locust (1:2-14). He describes several species which leave the land barren. The statements made by Joel served to remind the covenant nation of God’s promise of judgment for disobedience (Deut 28:15ff). Next he describes the creature’s physical suffering (1:15-20) including man, cattle, beast and sheep. Lastly Joel describes God’s judgment as an invading army demonstrating no mercy (2:1-11). The second of the three divisions is a call to repentance and is short and to the point demonstrating book’s focus (2:12-17). In this division the author calls Judah to true repentance and worship. He calls on them “rend your hearts and not your garments.” The tone in this section is clear and strong as it forms the symmetrical center of Joel. With parallel similarities the third division moves the book away from judgment and toward a promised restoration (2:18-21). In the first section God promises to restore what the locust had destroyed (2:18-27). In the second section he replaces the physical suffering with spiritual blessing (2:28-32). In the last section, God promises to exalt Judah above the nations (3:21). The book as a whole moves from judgment to restoration with a focus on needed repentance.

Theme

A Solemn Warning of Judgment

³ David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament a Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Raids: Baker Academic, 1999), 273-76.

Outline of Joel

I. Introduction (1:1)

II. Judah's Judgment 1:2-2:11

- A. The Lord Sends Locusts to Devour the Land (1:2-14)
- B. The Lord Sends Physical Judgment (1:15-20)
- C. The Lord will bring Judah to Humiliation (2:1-11)

III. Judah is Called to Repentance (2:12-17)

IV. Judah's Restoration (2:18-3:21)

- A. The Lord will Remove the Locust and Restore the Land (2:18-27)
- B. The Lord will Send Spiritual Blessing (2:28-32)
- C. The Lord will bring Judah to Exaltation (3:1-21)

Questions from Joel

1. Describe the setting of Joel.
2. Describe the sin which Joel addressed.
3. Summarize the purpose of Joel.
4. Do the pestilences in chapter 1 have any reference within covenant?
5. How is the “Day of the Lord” used in Joel?
6. How is the “Day of the Lord” used in other parts of the scripture?
7. What is the context of 2:28-32 and how is it used in Acts 2:16ff?
8. Discuss 2:32 and Paul’s use of this verse in Romans.
9. Discuss 3:2 and its relationship to other similar verses within the Old and New Testament.
10. Describe the coming event as mentioned in 3:18.

Bibliography

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