

## Introducing Joel

The purpose of this chapter is to consider some background matters relevant to the book of Joel. Some of these matters, specifically relating to the date of Joel's ministry and the situation described in the book, are problematic and not easy to resolve. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive and detailed discussion of the various background matters, but rather to provide you with sufficient awareness of them that they may help you to appreciate better the book.

We shall explore the background matters under three main headings: Who? (Author); When? (Date and Situation); and What? (Nature of the Book, Structure, Theological Themes and Message).

### Who?

The book is associated with an individual named Joel.<sup>1</sup> However, we know very little indeed about the prophet Joel. The amount of information that we can glean about the prophet associated with a given book in the Old Testament does vary. In the case of Amos, for example, we know of his trade, where he lived and when he ministered. In the case of Isaiah we know about his family and when he ministered, but in the case of Joel we know very little.<sup>2</sup> In the opening verse (1:1) we learn of his father's name, Pethuel, though we are not much the wiser for knowing that! However, Joel's name is

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1. The name Joel is not uncommon in the Old Testament; we find individuals named Joel in the books of 1 Samuel, 1 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

2. It has been claimed, in the light of references in the book to the temple, to priests and to aspects of temple ritual (1:9; 1:13; 2:17) that Joel was either a priest or had close links with the official worship at Jerusalem. However, these references seem to be a rather tenuous basis for making any definite claims of the sort.

worth pondering. The name means ‘Yahweh is God’. Yahweh was the personal name of the God of Israel.<sup>3</sup> It is common, however, in English Bibles not to use Yahweh in the text, but to substitute it with LORD spelt with capital letters. This commentary will reflect that practice.

### When?

If we know little about Joel the man, we are also left scratching our heads somewhat regarding the date of Joel’s ministry and his situation. Quite often in the prophetic books of the Old Testament there is at least some information about the period of the ministry of the particular prophet. This can be given by referring to the reigning monarch at the time, as in the case of the opening verse of the book of Amos. However, there is no such reference in the book of Joel. Scholars have sought to draw conclusions about the date of Joel’s ministry based on the presence (or absence!) of various features in the book. Let us note two such features, by way of example. One is the absence of reference to a monarch, suggesting for many the period after the exile. By contrast, some have argued for a period in the ninth century, noting that for six years King Joash/Jehoash (c.837-800 B.C.), the eighth king of Judah, was hidden in the temple. However, the fact that no monarch is mentioned does not necessarily mean that there may not have been a monarch during the time of Joel’s ministry.

A second feature is the mention that is made of the temple, suggesting possibly a period either before the destruction of the temple, or after its reconstruction following the exile.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of establishing a date for Joel’s ministry has long been recognised. Calvin, in the preface to his commentary on Joel, noted that there was no certainty on the matter and considered that it was best to leave the matter undecided, noting that it was not important, “for the import of his [Joel] doctrine is evident, though his

3. See Exodus 3:13-15 and Exodus 6:2-3.

4. For a survey and evaluation of many of the features relevant to the dating of the ministry of Joel, see Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 365-67.

time be obscure and uncertain.”<sup>5</sup> Many scholars date Joel’s ministry to the post-exilic period, after the rebuilding of the temple in 515 B.C., though there is still a wide divergence of dates within that post-exilic period. It is not possible to be dogmatic about this. As one writer has put it, “we are dealing with a balance of probabilities rather than with certainties.”<sup>6</sup> On balance, however, the post-exilic, or possibly the exilic period (587/586-538 B.C.), seems to fit best the context for Joel’s ministry.<sup>7</sup>

We also need to consider briefly the situation or circumstances informing Joel’s ministry. This matter has been described as “the main issue” for the interpretation of Joel.<sup>8</sup> The issue revolves around the reference to the locusts in 1:4 and the descriptions of invasion, one in 1:5-12 and one in 2:1-11. Just as in the case of the dating of Joel’s ministry, this matter too has been much debated and again there is no consensus. There are various aspects to consider. One factor is the identity of the locusts. For some, actual locusts are in view, albeit portrayed at points like an invading army.<sup>9</sup> For others, the locusts represent armies, portrayed as locusts.<sup>10</sup> Another factor is the relationship between the two invasions. For some, both refer to historical events.<sup>11</sup> However, as Wolff argues, “we must recognize that the disaster which chap. 2 treats is neither the same

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5. John Calvin, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah* (vol. 2 of *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*; trans. J. Owen; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), xv. (Many other writers concur with Calvin’s view that ignorance about the date of Joel’s ministry does not hamper an understanding of his message.)

6. Rex Mason, *Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Joel* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 116.

7. The case for an exilic context, based not so much on historical evidence as on aspects of the prophet’s message, has recently been made by Elie Assis, “The Date and Meaning of the Book of Joel,” *VT* 61 (2011): 163-83.

8. Gordon McConville, *Prophets* (vol. 4 of *Exploring the Old Testament*; London: SPCK, 2002), 154.

9. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 29.

10. For this view, see Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco: Word, 1987), 232-34.

11. For Allen (*Joel*, 29) locust plagues, whilst for Stuart (*Hosea-Jonah*, 233) an enemy invasion, be that the Assyrians or the Babylonians.

as nor even similar to the one portrayed in chap. 1.”<sup>12</sup> The disaster described in chapter 1 refers to a contemporary disaster brought about by a plague of locusts, whilst the second refers to an eschatological event, that is, an event belonging to the ‘end times’. The locusts are “a prototype of the eschatological army of devastation which is to move up and against Jerusalem, led by Yahweh himself on his ‘Day’...”<sup>13</sup>

The invasions in view are expressions of divine judgement, though the specific reasons for that judgement are not actually spelt out in the book.<sup>14</sup>

## What?

### *Nature of the Book*

The book of Joel is part of the second of the three major divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely the Prophets.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it is one of a group of books that are known collectively as ‘The Twelve’, otherwise known as the Minor Prophets.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in Christian Bibles, the book of Joel is also part of the collection of Minor Prophets.

The prophetic task is sometimes summarised as consisting of two complementary elements, namely ‘forthtelling’ and ‘foretelling’. The former term refers to a proclamation of the word of the LORD, often by encouragements and warnings in light of a particular situation, thus giving a divine perspective

12. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; trans. W. Janzen, S. D. McBride and C. A. Muenchow; Philadelphia, Fortress, 1977), 6. Wolff provides supporting arguments for his contention. See also pages 41-42.

13. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 13.

14. For a brief survey of circumstances which may have given rise to these acts of judgement, see Assis, “Date and Meaning of Joel,” 172.

15. The other two divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, are the Law and the Writings.

16. ‘The Twelve’ consist of the following: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The term ‘minor prophets’ designates those prophetic books that are shorter than the longer books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and as such it is not suggesting that they are ‘minor’ in terms of their importance. As can be seen, Joel is second in the collection of ‘The Twelve’, coming after Hosea and before Amos. Both of the latter prophets ministered during the eighth century B.C. However, this location for the book of Joel does not necessarily imply, as we have seen, that the prophet was ministering during this period.

or interpretation. The latter term refers to predictive elements in the prophetic word.<sup>17</sup>

The book consists of different types of writing, such as lament (1:19-20), call to return to the LORD (2:12-14), warning (2:15), salvation oracle (2:18-27) and apocalyptic vision (3:9-21).<sup>18</sup>

### *Structure*

Various proposals have been made for the structure to the book. I have chosen to view the structure of the book as outlined here:

- 1:1      A Privileged Person
- 1:2-20    Mourning on account of a Disaster
  - 1:2-3      Pay Attention!
  - 1:4        A Calamity Announced
  - 1:5-14     A Time to Mourn
  - 1:15-18    A Woe for an Ominous Day
  - 1:19-20    The Prophet who Pleads
- 2:1-17    Repentance in light of a Disaster
  - 2:1-11     A Time to Sound the Alarm
  - 2:12-14    A Time to (Re)turn
  - 2:15-17    A Time to Sound a Call
- 2:18-32   Reversed Prospects
  - 2:18-20    The LORD Responds
  - 2:21-27    Joy Renewed
  - 2:28-32    The LORD Restores
- 3:1-21    Restoration and Retribution
  - 3:1-3      A Day of Reckoning
  - 3:4-8      'Pay-back' Time
  - 3:9-17     Strife and Safety
  - 3:18-21    Transformation

17. For a helpful treatment of the role of prophets in the Old Testament, see J. A. Motyer, "Prophecy, Prophets," *IBD* 3:1276-84.

18. The term apocalyptic is used to refer to passages where "the eschatological future is envisaged in terms of direct divine intervention, a universal judgment of the nations and a new age of salvation, in which the cosmos will be radically transformed" (R. J. Bauckham, "Apocalyptic," *IBD* 1:73).

2:17-18 can be viewed as the pivotal point of the book in that the judgement and threat to Judah, which dominate the text up to that point, give way to expressions of hope and blessing for Judah. Another way of putting this is to view the book as having a movement from problem (the problem of invasion) to solution: deliverance by God, thereby reflecting a pattern seen in other prophetic writing.<sup>19</sup>

### *Theological Themes*

Having outlined the basic structure of the book we shall consider some of the key theological themes that emerge from the content of the book. However, before doing so, it is worth drawing attention to particular elements that are *absent* from the book when compared with other prophetic writing. The elements in question are the lack of explicit identification of sins that gave rise to the judgement and threat for Judah and the absence of rebuke and condemnation of specific sins. Typically, the prophets indicted their hearers in light of their sins, be those moral or religious. Here is one such example from the prophet Hosea: "Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed" (Hosea 4:1-2).<sup>20</sup> Many writers note the absence of this feature in Joel.<sup>21</sup> We shall comment briefly on the absence of explicit identification of sins at the close of this chapter when considering the message of the book, but for now we need to consider some of the key theological themes which *are* present in the book.

In terms of key theological themes in the book, I have chosen to identify three: i) The Day of the LORD; ii) The LORD – the Powerful Sovereign; and iii) The Spirit of the LORD.

19. McConville, *Prophets*, 154.

20. Other, similar examples would include Amos 2:6-8 and Isaiah 1:2-4.

21. William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 378. Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 367. Assis, "Date and Meaning of Joel," 167.

### i) The Day of the LORD

The phrase the 'Day of the LORD' occurs five times in the book (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14). Whilst Joel was not alone amongst Old Testament prophets in referring to the Day of the LORD,<sup>22</sup> many writers see the concept of the Day of the LORD as being particularly significant in Joel.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Douglas Stuart's description of the Day of the LORD as "an engine driving the prophecy" would not be an overstatement.<sup>24</sup> As Stuart notes, the phrase is distributed throughout the short book: "In this way the concept of the Day of Yahweh permeates the book, leaving the hearer / reader with little doubt as to its significance for Joel's message."<sup>25</sup>

The phrase 'Day of the LORD' was typically used by the prophets to refer to a future time when "Yahweh would finally intervene in the world to establish his sovereignty."<sup>26</sup> It is frequently portrayed in the Old Testament as an ominous event; a time of judgement: "The Day of the Lord is ... the occasion when Yahweh actively intervenes to punish sin that has come to a climax."<sup>27</sup> It is generally accepted that the first reference to the Day of the LORD in the Bible is to be found in the book of the prophet Amos, who ministered during the eighth century.<sup>28</sup> However, it is clear from Amos, that the concept of the Day of the LORD was already known amongst the people. The people of Amos's day, it would appear, fondly thought of the Day of the LORD in hopeful terms, to

22. Examples of the occurrence of the phrase in other prophetic writing include Isaiah 2:12; Amos 5:18; and Zephaniah 1:7.

23. Two representative examples from different theological perspectives are Allen, *Joel*, 36, and Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 12-14.

24. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 230.

25. *Ibid.*, 231.

26. Allen, *Joel*, 36. Indeed, though the phrase 'Day of the LORD' uses the singular word 'day', we should not understand this too narrowly: "It can be safely concluded ... that the term 'Day of the Lord' ... does not refer literally to a 'day' per se but rather to a 'time' or 'period'..." (Shalom M. Paul, *A Commentary on the Book of Amos* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991], 184). Note also other, related phrases, such as 'on that day', 'in those days', 'at the end of the days', which can be used interchangeably with 'Day of the LORD'.

27. J. S. Wright, "Day of the Lord," *IBD* 1:369.

28. The fact that the book of Joel is located before Amos in the Bible does not mean, as has already been noted, that Joel ministered before Amos. The reference to the Day of the LORD in Amos comes in 5:18.

which Amos had to state categorically: “It is darkness, not light” (Amos 5:18).

In Joel, the coming of the Day of the LORD is also an ominous prospect, as is clear from the way the phrase is first introduced in the book: “Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near” (1:15). The subsequent occurrences of the phrase (2:1, 11, 31; 3:14) paint an equally bleak prospect. However, whereas the first four references to the Day of the LORD have in view dire consequences for Judah, the final occurrence of the phrase refers to God’s actions against Judah’s enemies, and in that sense the Day of the LORD holds out a better prospect for Judah.<sup>29</sup> Thus it is possible to argue that Joel has a twofold view of the Day of the LORD.<sup>30</sup>

#### ii) The LORD – the Powerful Sovereign

No reader of Joel could be in any doubt that Judah’s God was anything but powerful. One indication of that is in connection with the Day of the LORD that we have just considered. The Day of the LORD is associated in Joel with destruction (1:15), military invasion (2:11) and judgement (3:14), and the LORD Himself is directly associated with these happenings. It is quite clear that the LORD is powerful. In fact, in 1:15 He is entitled *šadday*, a Hebrew term usually rendered in English as ‘Almighty’.<sup>31</sup> His power extends both to the human realm and the natural realm; He is sovereign over the affairs of the world. The sovereignty of God in the natural realm is seen at several points in Joel, both in relation to God’s destructive power, as in the opening chapter, as well as in connection with fruitfulness, such as in chapter 2, verses 23 and 24. This sovereignty of God in the natural realm is also clearly set forth in the books of the Law, be that in terms of fruitfulness or destruction. Two examples will suffice:

I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.

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29. The prophet Obadiah (vv. 15-21) also sees the Day of the LORD as an occasion when God acts against the nations and explicitly on behalf of His people.

30. “Essentially the Day is a two-sided phenomenon” (Allen, *Joel*, 36).

31. For a fuller discussion of this term see the commentary on 1:15.

Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land (Lev. 26:4-5).

The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you from the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish (Deut. 28:21-22).

A number of writers consider Joel to have a particular viewpoint to contribute, as regards this whole issue of the natural realm, though they differ in the way they understand this. McConville, for example, states that "Joel's depiction of Yahweh's control over natural forces is one of his key contributions to the theology of the prophets."<sup>32</sup> Theodore Hiebert suggests that Joel's contribution is of "a vision of the integrity of creation – the interrelatedness between human society and its environment – in biblical religion."<sup>33</sup> Such a view on the significance of the 'integrity of creation' is echoed in the following statement: "This sense of the coherence and interrelatedness within creation means that judgment for human sin takes its toll on nature, while repentance and restoration bring not only forgiveness but prosperity and fertility..."<sup>34</sup> In fact, Chris Wright has persuasively argued that there was a triangular relationship in ancient Israel between God, Israel and the land and that each one of these could impact the other two.<sup>35</sup> This triangular relationship was a reflection of God's covenant relationship with Israel. The covenant relationship was the basis of God's dealings with the nation of Israel and her land, be that for good or ill. The extracts quoted above from Leviticus and Deuteronomy are examples of what are commonly known by scholars as covenant blessings and covenant curses.

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32. McConville, *Prophets*, 158.

33. Theodore Hiebert, "Joel," *ABD* 3:876.

34. LaSor, Hubbard and Bush, *Survey*, 379.

35. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983). See especially pages 19-20 and 63-64 where the argument mentioned above is summarised, albeit briefly.

The sovereignty of God in the affairs of the nations is also very prominent in Joel, both in its positive and negative aspects. For example, in the final chapter of the book there is reference on the one hand to ‘restoring the fortunes’ of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1) and also to ‘paying back’ Tyre, Sidon and Philistia (3:4).<sup>36</sup>

God’s sovereignty is ultimately the basis of hope for Judah: “You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel...” (2:27); “I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem” (3:1); “But the LORD is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel” (3:16).

### iii) The Spirit of the LORD

The spirit is only mentioned twice in the book (2:28-29) and in both cases with reference to people.<sup>37</sup> Typically in the Old Testament, the spirit of God is described as coming upon particular people for specific roles or tasks. Consider the following examples: Bezalel, the craftsman (Exod. 31:3); Gideon, the judge (Judg. 6:34); Saul, the king (1 Sam. 10:6); the Servant of the LORD (Isa. 42:1); Ezekiel, the prophet (Ezek. 11:5). However, through Joel, the LORD is indicating that a new era will dawn when the spirit will be distributed on “all flesh”, which in the context refers to various categories of people who are a part of the community of the people of God: sons and daughters, old men and young men, as well as to servants. Thus, McConville comments: “...his [Joel] prophecy is important because he sees the giving of the spirit to all God’s people without distinction.”<sup>38</sup> This is described by Stuart as the ‘democratization’ of the spirit.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, the spirit in Joel 2:28-29 is associated with prophetic activity: prophecy, dreams and visions and this leads McConville to suggest that Joel is like Jeremiah (Jer. 31:34) who foretells of

36. This view of God as being sovereign over the nations is not unique to Joel. It occurs in other prophets; see Isaiah, chapter 13 and Amos, chapters 1 and 2.

37. In using a lower case ‘s’ for ‘spirit’, I am reflecting the usage of the NRSV, the base English translation which I have used for this commentary. In doing so, I am not denying that the ‘spirit’ can be identified with the third person of the Trinity in Christian theology.

38. McConville, *Prophets*, 158.

39. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 229.

a New Covenant “where there will be no need for teachers, because all will know the LORD...”<sup>40</sup>

### *Message*

Finally, as we draw this introduction to the book of Joel to a close, we need to consider the possible message and purpose of the book. To do that, we must take into account the theological themes that we have just considered.

As we have seen, arguably the most important aspect of Joel’s message is the reality of the Day of the LORD which, though primarily a fearful time, also held the prospect of hope for Judah. However, any prospect of hope was contingent upon a return to God. Thus, in chapter 2 verses 12-13, the people are called upon more than once, to ‘return’ to the LORD. The Hebrew verb rendered as ‘return’ (*šûb*) is often used in the Old Testament with respect to the response required of God’s people in light of their failure, disobedience and breach of the covenant bond, whether that involves turning back to God (1 Kings 8:33), or forsaking their evil ways (1 Kings 8:35). Thus it can convey repentance, as it does here in Joel, despite the absence of any explicit identification of sins which gave rise to the judgement and threat for Judah, nor any rebuke and condemnation of specific sins.<sup>41</sup> Joel, therefore, is alerting the people, in the light of the covenant bond between them and their LORD, that the LORD is prepared to deal severely with them, on account of their failures. Equally, however, because they are the covenant people of God, they may return to Him and find Him to be compassionate; He will execute justice on behalf of His people against their enemies. Thus, there is indeed a message of reassurance given by the prophet.<sup>42</sup>

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40. McConville, *Prophets*, 159.

41. I do not think that the term *šûb* in Joel is devoid of any notion of repentance as claimed by Assis (“Date and Meaning of Joel,” 175): “the meaning of the prophet’s demand is not to repent, but to renew the bond with God.” Such a view seems difficult to maintain in the light, for example, of Joel 2:13 where there is an echo of Exodus 34:6 whose message is that God is compassionate, despite reason for ‘anger’ and ‘punishment’.

42. “His [Joel] basic purpose is first to challenge and then to reassure his contemporaries...” Allen, *Joel*, 37-8 n. 37. It seems to me that whilst Assis’ thesis about the primacy of the note of reassurance in Joel’s message is overdone, it is undoubtedly the case that the element of reassurance is both present and important.

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With that, our introduction to the book of Joel is complete. We now turn to consider the words of the prophet himself. As we do so, I need to note that my comments on the text of Joel are the result of engagement with the underlying Hebrew text. However, as a base English text I have used the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Therefore, all quotations of the biblical text are from the NRSV, unless stated otherwise.