

Notes on
Joel
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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

The title of this book is the name of its writer, as is true of all the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

We know little about Joel, whose name means "Yahweh is God." He was the son of Pethuel, who does not appear to have been a specially significant person. Eleven other individuals in the Old Testament bore the name Joel (1 Sam. 8:2; 1 Chron. 4:35; 5:4; 7:3; 11:38; 15:7; 26:22; 27:20; 2 Chron. 29:12; Ezra 10:43; Neh. 11:9).

UNITY

All the extant Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient versions of Joel attest to the unity of the book. Critics who deny its unity and argue for two different writers do so on the basis of supposed literary and conceptual differences, usually between the first two chapters and the third. Specifically they assign the historical passages to Joel and the apocalyptic ones to another writer. However there is a consistent theme that ties the whole book together, so most conservative interpreters believe that Joel wrote all three chapters.

DATE

The date of Joel is its largest introductory problem. There are four most likely possibilities. First, some scholars advocate *an early pre-exilic date* during the reign of King Jehoshaphat (872-848 B.C.) or possibly his grandson, King Joash (835-796 B.C.). Arguments in favor of this period include the position of Joel in the Hebrew canon. It appears among other prophetic writings of this period. Also the enemies of Israel that Joel named (Tyre, Sidon, Philistia [cf. 2 Chron. 21:16-17], Egypt [cf. 1 Kings 14:15-16], and Edom [cf. 2 Kings 8:20-22]; 3:2-7, 19) were enemies of Israel during this time. The prominence Joel gave to Judah's priests and elders rather than to her king—Joash was a boy king under the influence of Jehoiada, the high priest, early in his reign—is a further argument for this view. However, all these conclusions are open to other interpretations.¹

¹Advocates of this view include Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, p. 148; Gleason A. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 305; E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 271-72; C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:169-70; and Charles H. Dyer, *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 737.

Second, some authorities believe a *mid-pre-exilic date* of composition, probably during the reign of Joash's grandson, King Uzziah (792-740 B.C.), fits the evidence best. Supporters of this view also claim the first two arguments cited in favor of the early pre-exilic view above. They argue, also, that the absence of references to Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia make a later date, when these nations were the major ancient Near Eastern superpowers, unlikely. Joel's reference to Greece in 3:6 may fit this period since the Ionian Greeks were at this time expanding their commercial influence in Asia Minor. Joel's reference to the Sabeans in 3:8 is appropriate for this period as well. Internal references and linguistic characteristics may also reflect Uzziah's times and are similar to the writings of the other eighth-century prophets (i.e., Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah). However, again, much of the same evidence can fit other periods of Judah's history.²

Third, some interpreters opt for a *late pre-exilic date*. Statements in Joel could fit this period, and some of his statements are similar to those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and may reflect pre-captivity conditions, perhaps between 597 and 587 B.C. If true, Joel would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Yet Joel 2:18-19 seems to imply that God had been merciful to Joel's generation, suggesting that the people had repented, but there is no record of this happening during this period.³

The fourth view is that Joel wrote at a *postexilic date*, perhaps 515-500 B.C. or even as late as sometime in the 400s B.C. Interpreters who see Joel 3:1-2 and 17 as references to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity take the references to the temple in 1:9, 13 and 2:17 as applying to the second temple (completed in 515 B.C.). Yet all these texts could apply to earlier periods.⁴

As should be obvious from this brief review, the dating of the book rests on interpretations of various verses that are not clear. No other Old Testament book mentions Joel either. Consequently dating the book amounts to guesswork, though some writers were quite dogmatic about their convictions. I prefer an early or mid-pre-exilic date mainly because of Joel's position in the Hebrew text among other writers of this period. I think he was probably one of the earliest writing prophets.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION AND AUDIENCE

Joel's frequent references to Judah and Jerusalem suggest that he lived and ministered in the Southern Kingdom (cf. 1:2, 9, 13-14, 16, 23, 32; 2:1, 14-15, 17, 23; 3:1-8, 12, 14, 17-21).

²Advocates include Richard D. Patterson, "Joel," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 231-33.

³Advocates include Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, pp. 14-15; and Arvid S. Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, pp. 154-58.

⁴Advocates include Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Joel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1410; idem, "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 387. Generally scholars who view apocalyptic writing as a late development in Judaism tend to date Joel quite late.

"Joel was a man of vitality and spiritual maturity. A keen discerner of the times, he delivered God's message to the people of Judah in a vivid and impassioned style, with a precision and originality of thought that served as a veritable quarry out of which many subsequent prophetic building stones were to be hewn."⁵

PURPOSE

Joel wrote to warn his audience about a coming day in which God would judge His people. He compared this devastating judgment to a terrible locust invasion that had fairly recently swept through the land. What he said about this coming judgment has only seen partial fulfillment; some of it still lies in the eschatological future. God would send blessing as well as judgment, however, and this too has only come partially on the Israelites so far. The prophet warned his hearers that unless they repented of their empty formalism in worship and turned back to Yahweh wholeheartedly, devastating judgment would overtake them. If they repented, God would pardon them and restore His blessings to them abundantly.

THEOLOGY

The sovereignty of God and the inevitability of divine punishment for covenant unfaithfulness are dominant themes in Joel. Thus the administration of God is a strong motif—how God exercises His sovereignty when His people sin.

Another important theological contribution of Joel is his prediction of God pouring out the Holy Spirit on all humanity (2:28-32).

MESSAGE⁶

The Book of Joel contains a threefold vision.

The first part of Joel's vision concerned a locust plague that had recently swept over the Promised Land. Joel prophesied about this plague because of the desolation that it had produced. The second part of his vision concerned a coming invasion from a foreign army in the fairly near future. He used the recent locust plague to illustrate the devastating effect of the coming military invasion. The third part of his vision concerned another coming invasion in the far distant future that would also be like the recent locust invasion, only worse.

Joel described each of these devastations as "the day of the Lord." The term itself refers to a time when God had been or would be controlling events for Israel in an unusually direct way. It was "His day" in the sense that at those times Yahweh was and would be especially prominent in what happened. Thus this term referred to a past "day," a near

⁵Patterson, p. 230. Joel's literary style is rich, vivid, classical, clear, and beautiful. The text of Joel presents no serious problems and is well preserved.

⁶Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:180-95.

future "day," and a far distant "day" from the prophet's perspective. "The day of the Lord" was the burden of his prophecy.

The Book of Joel has two preeminent timeless values. It illustrates the basic *principles* by which Yahweh governs, and it reveals the basic *plan* of Yahweh through the ages. It is important for us to grasp these basic principles and this basic plan because the other prophets reveal more about them. They expound them giving more detail. Again, as we saw with Obadiah (how God feels about pride and those who mistreat the Jews), God gave His people the simple, general lessons first. Then He gave more detailed information through the prophets that followed.

First, Joel illustrates the *principles* by which Yahweh governs. This book does not reveal them in the sense of explaining them fully. Isaiah explains them more fully. Joel illustrates these principles briefly.

Joel viewed Yahweh as enthroned in heaven controlling affairs on earth. Joel saw Him presiding patiently over all the situations through which His people pass. He saw Him pressing into His service all the processes of nature and human activity. He also saw Him achieving ultimate victory in "His day," "the day of the Lord." He had accomplished victory by judging His people with a locust invasion recently. He would accomplish victory by disciplining His people with an invasion from a foreign foe in the near future. And He would accomplish victory by restoring His people through a fresh outpouring of His Spirit in the distant future. So one major lesson of this book is that God is enthroned in heaven and that He is ruling over the affairs of humanity.

A second illustration of the principles by which Yahweh governs is Joel's emphasis on grace. Grace is at the heart of God's government. Grace is the inspiration of His government. We see this in God's appeal to the Israelites through Joel to repent, to "rend your hearts rather than your garments" (2:13a). The locust plague was a wake up call to repent. The Israelites' repentance would affect the imminent invasion they faced. God promised judgment, but He offered mercy if the people would repent (2:13b-14). Grace is also evident in the promise of a far distant future outpouring of God's Spirit in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people. God rules with grace. He is gracious to humanity in the way He governs people.

When the locust invasion swept through the land, the people bemoaned the tragedy. The locusts had so stripped the grapevines that even the drunkards could not find grapes to make wine. The people had so little grain that they could not bring offerings to the temple. They could hardly make bread for themselves to eat. They viewed the devastation as a natural disaster. Joel reminded them that the locust invasion had come by the will and hand of God. The people had forgotten God, but God wanted to get their attention, so He sent the plague. He had allowed this to happen so the people would think of Him and return to Him. When the invasion happened it was His "day." It was God who had done this (1:1-14).

Joel went on to remind the people that because they had forgotten about Him God was going to bring a worse devastation on them that would make the recent locust plague seem tame by comparison. If they turned back to Him, they could avoid this worse fate because God would be gracious to them (2:12-13). The coming invasion by humans rather than by locusts would also be a day in which the Lord acted prominently. Joel even said the Lord would lead this army of invaders (2:11).

Yet in spite of future devastating judgment, God would act again dramatically and definitely for His people (3:28-32). He would bring restoration and blessing to them even when they had suffered His chastening discipline. He would just as surely and personally do this for them as He would punish them. This, too, would be one of His "days." And it would be the ultimate illustration of His grace.

A second great timeless value of this book is its revelation of God's *plan* for His people Israel's future.

First, there would be coming judgment that the people could affect by their repentance (2:14). Had the Israelites repented the Captivities would not have overtaken them. When the Assyrians attacked Judah, the people did repent and the Lord delivered them. But when the Babylonians attacked Judah, they failed to repent and suffered defeat and deportation. Joel could honestly say for God, "Return to me with all your heart" (2:12). When the people failed to repent, judgment befell them.

Second, there would be even worse judgment in the distant future because the prophet foresaw that the people would continue to apostatize (3:1-17). This refers to the judgments on Israel during the Tribulation. Yet after that the Lord promised to restore and bless His people (2:18-32). These are millennial blessings. It is in this context of millennial blessings that the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit appears (3:28-29). That outpouring is still future from our position in history.

But what about what Peter said on the day of Pentecost? He said that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit then was what Joel prophesied (Acts 2:17-18). This has led many Bible students to conclude that God fulfilled His promises to Israel in the church. This is the viewpoint of amillennial and postmillennial interpreters. Others see a double or partial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost with the church, and a future fulfillment with Israel in the Millennium. This is the viewpoint of many premillennialists. A third view is that fulfillment will only be in the Millennium and that what Peter meant was that what happened on the day of Pentecost was *similar to* or *like* what Joel prophesied. I favor this interpretation, as do many other premillennialists. Peter did not say that what was happening fulfilled Joel's prophecy. What he said could just as easily mean that what happened then was in harmony with or analogous to what Joel had predicted would happen in the Millennium. The two events were similar but not identical. It should be clear that they were not the same because in the middle of the section of Joel's prophecy that Peter quoted (3:28-32a), Joel mentioned the sun turning into darkness and the moon to blood (Acts 2:20). That did not happen on the day of Pentecost. It will happen in the Tribulation just before God pours out His Spirit on all flesh in the Millennium. The New

Testament writers frequently spoke of fulfillment in an analogical sense (e.g., Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1).

Joel gave revelation about important aspects of God's plan for the future. He referred to the upcoming invasion by a foreign power, which took place shortly after he prophesied. He also talked about a far distant future time of judgment on Israel, the Tribulation. Then he revealed great blessing for all types of Israelites, from the most lowly to the most exalted, including the restoration of Israel during the Millennium. Sin, judgment, and restoration to privilege and power are what would mark Israel's future.

I would summarize the message of Joel this way. Though God will judge Israel for her apostasy with locust invasion-like devastation in the future, He will also later restore her to blessings greater than she has ever experienced illustrating that He governs the world graciously. Remember that "Israel" is not synonymous with the modern State of Israel.

When Joel wrote, it was man's day, not the day of the Lord. The Lord had acted in the locust invasion, and He would act in judgment and in blessing in the future. These would be His days. But when Joel prophesied, the people failed to see God at work because He was not active as He was and will be on these great days when His presence was and will be manifest. We too live in man's day. Most people, including many Christians, conclude that God either does not exist or takes no active role in human affairs because He is not obviously working. At least His working is not apparent to them because what is happening can be explained as natural or chance phenomena. Thus we live in a day very similar to Joel's day.

Whether people recognize it or not, God is executing His plan for the world. He will break into human experience again in the future. Thus it is imperative that we sound the same warning that Joel did. Judgment is coming, but people can avoid His judgment by repenting. "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered" (2:32; Acts 2:21). Humanity as a whole will fail to repent, just as the Israelites failed to repent (cf. 1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3). Then a far worse fate will befall them. Yet God's plans for His people include incredible blessing, even though we fail Him. This evidence of God's grace should motivate God's people to repent and remain faithful to Him now. Thus God's government of Israel and His plan for Israel serve as a paradigm for His dealings with all humanity.

OUTLINE

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Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION 1:1

Yahweh's word (message) came to Joel (lit. "Yahweh is God"), the son of Pethuel.⁷ Therefore what follows demands careful attention and appropriate response. We do not know anything about Joel or Pethuel's personal backgrounds, even when they lived. This title does not tell where they lived either, though references that follow suggest that Joel lived in Judah. Hosea, Micah, and Zephaniah introduced their prophecies similarly.

II. A PAST DAY OF THE LORD: A LOCUST INVASION 1:2-20

The rest of chapter 1 describes the effects of a severe locust plague that had recently destroyed the agriculture of the land.

A. AN INITIAL APPEAL 1:2-4

1:2-3 Joel called on everyone, from the most respected ruling elders of the land (cf. 1 Sam. 30:26-31; 2 Sam. 19:11-15; 2 Kings 23:1; Ezra 10:8; Prov. 31:23; Jer. 26:17; Lam. 5:12, 14) to the ordinary inhabitants, to pay attention to what he had to say. Nothing like what he was about to describe had happened in their lifetime nor in that of their recent ancestors. He urged them to retell the devastating news to their descendants for generations to come.

1:4 Several waves of locusts had consumed all the agricultural produce of the land. What one wave of these voracious insects had left uneaten, others had destroyed. The devastation of the land had been complete (cf. Amos 4:9). God had threatened locust plagues as punishment if His people proved unfaithful to Him (Deut. 28:41, 48-57, 64-68).

Four different words for "locusts" appear in this verse (and in 2:25), but a total of nine occur in the Old Testament. These words have led some interpreters to conclude that four types of locust are in view or that locusts in four stages of their maturity are.⁸ It seems better, however, to view the locusts as coming in waves, gnawing, swarming, creeping, and stripping as they devoured the vegetation.⁹ Four waves of invasion picture a thorough devastation (cf. Jer. 15:3; Ezek. 14:21).

⁷"Elijah" also means "Yahweh is God."

⁸E.g., J. A. Thompson, "Joel's Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1955):52-55; idem, "Translation of the Words for Locust," *Bible Translator* 25 (October 1974):405-11.

⁹See H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, pp. 27-28; Keil, 1:181-82. For eyewitness accounts of devastating locust plagues, see S. R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, pp. 40, 89-93; G. A. Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, 2:391-95; and John D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," *National Geographic*, December 1915, pp. 511-50.

B. A CALL TO MOURN 1:5-13

Joel called on four different entities to mourn the results of the locust invasion: drunkards (vv. 5-7), the land (vv. 8-10), farmers (vv. 11-12), and priests (v. 13). In each section there is a call to mourn followed by reasons to mourn.

1:5-7 Joel urged the drunkards of the land to weep because the locusts had destroyed all the grapevines. There would be no grapes to produce sweet (the most favored) wine for them to drink (cf. Isa. 5:11-12, 22; 22:13; 28:1, 7; 56:12; Hos. 4:11-19; 7:5, 13-14; Amos 2:6-8; 6:6; Mic. 2:11). Normally drunkards laugh, with no concern for what goes on around them, but now they should wail. The locusts had invaded the land like a hostile army. The teeth of these invaders were like lions' teeth in that they destroyed their prey. They had stripped the vines and fig trees so thoroughly that their branches stood bare. The vine and the fig tree were symbols of God's blessings on Israel and symbols of Israel itself, so Joel probably also meant that the locusts had left the whole nation bare.

"All that remained of shady, fruit-laden bowers were skeletonized wrecks of trees with their barkless branches gleaming white."¹⁰

1:8-10 The next entity called to mourn appears to be Jerusalem. The gender of "Wail" is feminine (singular), and Jerusalem is often compared to a virgin daughter in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kings 19:21; Lam. 1:15; cf. Joel 2:1, 15, 23, 32). This virgin (Heb. *bethulah*) was to weep in sackcloth, clothing appropriate for such an occasion, as though she had lost her bridegroom in death.¹¹ The reason for Jerusalem's mourning was the locusts' destruction of grain, wine, and oil, blessings from God and the products needed to worship Him in the temple daily burnt offerings (cf. Exod. 29:38-42; Lev. 2; 6:14-18; 9:16-17; 23:18, 37; Num. 15:5; 28:3-8). The grain offerings required flour and oil (Num. 28:5), and the drink offerings necessitated wine (Exod. 29:40; Num. 28:7).

"These offerings spoke of the very heart of the believer's daily walk before God: the burnt offering, of a complete dedication of life; the meal offering, of the believer's service that should naturally follow; and the drink offering, of the conscious joy in the heart of the believer whose life is poured out in consecrated service to his God."¹²

¹⁰Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, p. 52.

¹¹The Hebrew word suggests that this virgin was a presently unmarried woman who anticipated union with her betrothed.

¹²Patterson, p. 240.

The result was that the priests and the whole nation mourned. It was bad enough that the people did not have food and drink for their own enjoyment, but it was worse that they could not worship Yahweh.

- 1:11-12 Joel next turned from city dwellers to country folk. He called the farmers and vine growers, those most directly affected by the locust invasion, to despair because the fruits of their labors had perished. These fruits included wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, dates, apples, even all the fruits of trees. These Israelites would not be able to rejoice in an abundant harvest, which every farmer and viticulturist anticipated (cf. Ps. 4:7). Not only the symbols of divine blessing but also the joy of divine blessing had departed.
- 1:13 The prophet turned again to the priests and urged them to lament in sackcloth because the grain and wine used in their offerings were no longer available. Joel's second call to the priests underlines the tragedy of curtailed worship in Judah's life. Since there were no offerings to bring to the Lord, the nation could not approach Him at the very time she needed Him most. This closing reference to priests in this section contrasts with the opening reference to drunkards (vv. 5-7), from the most ungodly to the most godly (ideally). This merism has the effect of including all the citizens of Judah in Joel's call.¹³ Joel's reference to "my God" and "your God" in this verse ties him closely to the priests; their concerns and their relationship to Yahweh were ideally the same.

C. A CALL TO REPENT 1:14

Joel called on the priests not only to mourn (v. 13) but also to assemble all the people at the temple for a solemn fast. Such fasts indicated national repentance in Israel's history (cf. 1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-2; Jer. 36:9; Jon. 3:5). Here, as usual, fasting combined with praying to the Lord. The people would pray to Him for mercy and for renewed blessing and would demonstrate their sincerity and urgency by going without food while they prayed.

D. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAGUE 1:15-20

"This section moves much closer to the form of the descriptive lament found in the lamenting psalms than did the descriptions earlier in the chapter."¹⁴

- 1:15 The locust plague had destroyed (Heb. *shadad*) the fields and fruits of Judah, but Joel announced that things would get worse. Another day of destruction (Heb. *shod*) would come from the Lord, the Almighty (Heb.

¹³A merism is a figure of speech in which two extremes represent the whole (e.g., heaven and earth equals everything in space).

¹⁴Allen, p. 59.

shadday). A locust plague was not only an evidence of God's judgment (cf. Deut. 28), but it had been a harbinger of future worse destruction in the past. A locust plague had preceded the plagues of darkness and death in Egypt (cf. Exod. 10—11). Thus rather than seeing the locust plague as the end of the people's troubles, Joel saw it as anticipating something worse.

The day of the Lord is a term that appears frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets. It refers to a day in which the Lord is working obviously, in contrast to other days, the day of man, in which man works without any apparent divine intervention.¹⁵ Here the day of the Lord is obviously one of destruction, though elsewhere it also refers to a day of blessing. The eschatological day of the Lord that the prophets anticipated includes both judgment (in the Tribulation) and blessing (in the Millennium and beyond). Here Joel spoke of an imminent day of the Lord; it was coming on Judah relatively soon (cf. Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:2-3; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:7-13).

1:16-18 Joel described the effects of the recent locust plague to encourage his hearers to gather for prayer and fasting. He suggested that similar conditions would accompany the day of the Lord that he had just predicted. The people's food supply and, therefore, their occasion for rejoicing, had disappeared (cf. Deut. 12:7). Drought had followed the denuding of the land by the locusts. Seeds were not germinating due to the lack of moisture. Barns and silos had become empty and had fallen into disrepair, and domesticated animals were starving. Grazing cattle wandered aimlessly looking for vegetation, and even the sheep, which require less grass, were going hungry.

1:19-20 Joel cried out to Yahweh in prayer in the distress that he shared with his countrymen. Fire had burned the dried pastures and trees, or perhaps drought like a fire had done so. The brooks were dry, and even the wild animals panted for water. Joel could say they panted for Yahweh because the Lord was the provider of the water these animals sought (cf. Ps. 42:1). By panting for Yahweh these animals set a good example for the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

III. A NEAR FUTURE DAY OF THE LORD: A HUMAN INVASION 2:1-27

Joel had spoken briefly of a coming day of the Lord in 1:15, but now he said more about it.

¹⁵Gerhard von Rad, "The Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4 (1959):97-108, argued that this term was originally associated with the Israelite concept of holy war, but other scholars have disputed this aetiology. Most agree, however, that it had early associations with battles and conquest.

The term "the day of the Lord" seems to have arisen from the popular concept, in the ancient Near East, that a really great warrior king could consummate an entire military campaign in one single day.¹⁶ Thus, as the Israelites used the term in relation to Yahweh, it reflected His greatness and pointed to His swift and effective dispatch of His enemies on a given occasion. Sometimes the term refers to such a judgment in the near past or future, and sometimes it refers to one in the distant future (eschaton).¹⁷

A. THE INVADING ARMY 2:1-11

The Lord revealed that an army of human beings rather than locusts would soon assail Jerusalem. He described this army at length to stress the danger that His people faced and to motivate them to repent.

1. The nearness of the army 2:1-2

The prophet ordered a trumpet (Heb. *shophar*, ram's horn) to be blown in Zion (Jerusalem), specifically on the temple mount, to sound an alarm (cf. Jer. 4:5-6; Ezek. 33:2-6).¹⁸ This shophar was the ancient equivalent of an air raid siren. The day of the Lord was coming, and all the inhabitants of the city should tremble. That day would be a time of foreboding evil, symbolized by a very overcast sky. It is interesting that a plague of darkness followed a locust plague in Egypt (Exod. 10). Darkness and clouds are a common figure for judgment and destruction in the Old Testament (e.g., Jer. 13:16; Ezek. 30:3, 18; 32:7-8; 34:12; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:15). They are often associated with Yahweh in His role of mighty, victorious warrior (cf. Deut. 4:11; 5:22-23; Ps. 18:9, 11; 97:2). Joel could see a gigantic army spread over the horizon like the dawn. (Was the attack coming from the East, the direction of the dawn?). He said there never had been anything like this day nor would there be after it, even the plagues in Egypt. This may be hyperbole, or this day may refer to the Great Tribulation, when the Jews will experience their worst ever attack. Joel said this attack was near, either in the near future in his day or relatively near from his perspective as a prophet (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8).

Many scholars take this passage as predicting an invasion of Jerusalem by some ancient enemy of Israel such as Assyria or Babylonia in the relatively near future.¹⁹ In favor of this view is the reference to the invasion being near (v. 1). Against it is the statement of its uniqueness in all of history (v. 2). Others view 2:1-11 as a further description of the locust plague that Joel described in chapter 1.²⁰ This seems unlikely since the locust plague of chapter 1 was past, but the attack in 2:1-11 was future. I think it probably refers to an attack by some enemy in Joel's day in view of what follows.

¹⁶See Douglas Stuart, "The Sovereign's Day of Conquest," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 220/21 (December 1975, February 1976):159-64.

¹⁷See Chisholm, pp. 1412-13; or Patterson, p. 256, for good, brief discussions of the term and its uses.

¹⁸Sometimes "Zion" refers to Jerusalem in the eschaton, but other times it is simply a poetic synonym for Jerusalem.

¹⁹E.g., Wolff, p. 42; Chisholm, pp. 1411-12. Patterson, pp. 245-46, argued for the army being that of Assyria.

²⁰E.g., Allen, pp. 29, 64-76; Driver, p. 28.

2. The destructive power of the army 2:3-5

2:3 This huge army advanced like a forest fire consuming everything in its path (cf. 1:19). Before the devastation conditions were idyllic, but after it there was nothing but a scorched earth wilderness. Nothing escaped the advancing judgment (cf. Exod. 10:5, 15).

2:4-5 Joel compared this advancing army to war horses and chariots, the war machines of his day. He heard the familiar sound of chariots in battle, which he likened to the crackling of fire as it rages up a mountainside swiftly consuming everything in its path. The huge army that Joel saw appeared unstoppable.

It is interesting that locusts look like tiny armored horses, and they behave like them as well (cf. Job 39:19-20; Rev. 9:7). The Italian word for locust means "little horse," and the German word means "hay horse."²¹ Thus the correspondence between the army of locusts that had recently swept through the land swiftly and this future invading army is unmistakable. Even their sounds were similar.

3. The relentlessness of the army 2:6-9

2:6 As this army advanced, all the people in and around Jerusalem felt terrified and turned pale with fear (cf. Isa. 26:17; Jer. 4:31; Mic. 4:10).

2:7-9 The enemy soldiers ran with great stamina and climbed over walls, as locusts do. They were very disciplined in their attack, each one staying in his proper position and not crowding his fellow soldiers (cf. Josh. 6:5). Even when they broke through an obstacle they did not break ranks. They rushed on the city of Jerusalem, ran along its walls, climbed into its houses like so many thieves. Again the comparison with locusts is striking.

4. The invincibility of the army 2:10-11

2:10 The earth trembles as this army advances. The heavens also tremble. The sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars fade from view. Cosmic disturbances like these are common in biblical descriptions of Yahweh waging war (cf. 3:16; Judg. 5:4; Ps. 18:7; 77:18; Isa. 13:10, 13; Ezek. 32:7; Zech. 14:6-7; Rev. 6—18).

2:11 It now becomes clear that Yahweh is leading this army against Jerusalem. Normally the Lord fought *for* His people, but here Joel saw Him leading an army *against* them. He is the one who is directing the soldiers with His voice. His host is both numerous and strong. The day of this attack, the

²¹Wolff, p. 45, n. 46; Driver, p. 52.

day of the Lord, is great and awesome, and no one can withstand it (cf. Mal. 3:2; 4:5).

B. A CALL TO REPENTANCE 2:12-17

Such an awesome prospect of invasion led Joel to appeal to the people of Jerusalem to repent. This would hopefully turn away God's judgment. He voiced two appeals, but, unusually, he did not say what the sins of the people were. Evidently they were known well enough at the time.

1. An appeal for private repentance 2:12-14

2:12-13a Speaking for the Lord, Joel urged his hearers even now—even though judgment was threatened—to repent. However, he clarified that their repentance needed to be wholehearted, not just external. Fasting, weeping, and mourning would give evidence of the people's sincerity, but they had to rend their hearts, not just their garments, as was customary in mourning. They needed to return to Yahweh their God.

2:13b-14 If they did, they could count on His being gracious, compassionate, patient, loyal to them, and willing not to punish them (cf. Exod. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; 143:8; Jon. 4:2). Their genuine repentance might—Yahweh is still sovereign—move Him to turn from His previously intended course of action and bless, rather than curse, them (cf. Mal. 3:7).²² Agricultural blessings would signal a reversal of His judgment in the recent locust invasion, and they would then be able to offer grain and wine to the Lord again (cf. 1:9, 13).

2. An appeal for public repentance 2:15-17

Joel went beyond calling for personal heart-felt repentance to urging the people to assemble for a corporate expression of their sincere contrition.

2:15-16 The prophet urged the blowing of the shophar in Zion again, but this time to call a public assembly and a fast rather than to announce the coming invader (v. 1; cf. 1:14). Fasting involved sacrificially going without food to devote oneself to a higher spiritual purpose. God's people needed to gather together and re-consecrate themselves to Him as a people. Everyone without exception should participate, from the oldest to the youngest. Even newlyweds, who sometimes received a special exemption for being newly wed (Deut. 24:5), needed to attend this meeting.

It is interesting that the Jews will assemble in the Promised Land, having received encouragement from the Antichrist, during the first half of the

²²See Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 147-48, for a brief explanation of God changing His mind.

Tribulation. Then the invader will descend on their land and the terrible prospect envisioned in verses 1-11 will take place, in the second half of the Tribulation. Antichrist will persecute them. They will not assemble then in repentance, however.

- 2:17 The priests should take the lead in this public expression of repentance. They should weep and pray for God to have mercy on His people because they were His special inheritance and for the glory of His name. The pagans might conclude that He was unable or unwilling to defend His chosen people from their enemy if He allowed the invader to succeed.

C THE POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATION 2:18-27

Joel next revealed the Lord's response and comforting words in view of the people's private and public repentance. It is unclear whether he meant that the Lord had responded or would respond. The problem is the Hebrew perfect verbs, which can be rendered in English with either past for future verbs. Several English translations (NASB, NIV, AV) interpreted the Lord's response as being conditioned on the people's repentance and translated the verbs in the future tense. It is equally possible that Joel meant that God had already responded positively because the people had repented, which the prophet did not record. I prefer to view this section as what God promised to do if the people responded to Joel's call to repentance.

"Laments in the OT are sometimes followed by a divine oracle in which Yahweh, through a prophet, assures his people that their prayers will be answered (or sometimes rejected)."²³

1. The Lord's gracious response 2:18

If the Israelites repented sincerely, Yahweh would be zealous to protect His chosen land from foreign invaders and have pity on His chosen people. This was His essential response.

"Beginning in Joel 2:18, Israel ceases to be the object of God's judgment and becomes instead the object of His blessing. In a similar reversal the hordes (locust and human) cease to be the instruments of God's judgment on Israel and become instead the objects of God's judgment. This reversal was originally foretold by God through Moses in Deuteronomy 30:1-9."²⁴

2. The Lord's promise of blessing 2:19-27

Having given His essential response to the people's repentance, the Lord now explained what He would do in more detail. This section is chiasmic with the focus of emphasis on

²³Allen, p. 85. See 2 Chr. 20; Ps. 12:5; 60:6-8; Isa. 33:10-13; Jer. 4:1-2 (cf. 3:21-25); Hos. 14:4-7; Mic. 7:11-13.

²⁴Dyer, p. 742.

verses 21-24. Verses 19 and 26-27 promise a restoration of crops and a cessation of shame. Verses 20 and 25 promise the elimination of enemies, and verses 21-24 urge courage and encourage rejoicing.

2:19 Having interpreted the Lord's response (v. 18), Joel now relayed His instructions (vv. 19-27). Yahweh would restore all that the locusts had eaten: grain, wine, and oil (cf. 1:10). The people would enjoy plenty of these products in the future (cf. Deut. 6:10-11; 8:7-10; 11:13-15). Yahweh would also never again allow the nations to disparage His people, assuming that they would not apostatize again (cf. vv. 26-27). Another view, less acceptable from my viewpoint, is that this promise is unconditional and refers to Israel's eschatological future. The problem with this view is that the Jews will experience some antagonism at the very end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:7-10).

2:20 The prophet now revealed that this invader would come from the North. Both Assyria and Babylon, as well as all other eastern invaders, entered Israel from the north because of the impassability of the Arabian Desert to Israel's east.

"If 'the northerner' is yet future (eschatological), the army is possibly the army in Joel 3:9, 12; Daniel 11:40; and Zechariah 14:2."²⁵

Instead of leading this army against Jerusalem (v. 11), the Lord would drive it from Judah. He would drive its soldiers into a parched and desolate land (Arabia?) and into the eastern (Dead) sea and the western (Mediterranean) sea (cf. Dan. 11:45). In other words, He would turn against them rather than leading them and scatter them rather than uniting them against Jerusalem. The dead carcasses of the many soldiers would fill the air because they had done many great things. In short, they had tried to overthrow God's people (cf. the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea). Masses of dead locusts also smell terrible, especially after dying in the sea and then being washed ashore.²⁶

2:21-24 Joel called on the land, personified to represent its people, to rejoice because the Lord had done great things (in contrast to the enemy army, v. 20).²⁷ Specifically, he had delivered His people from a much larger and more powerful enemy invasion, assuming the Judahites' repentance. The animals too could stop fearing because God's blessing had returned to the land. Green pastures had replace brown, and trees and vines had again become abundantly fruitful rather than dry and lifeless (cf. 1:7, 10-12, 19).

²⁵Chisholm, p. 1419.

²⁶Driver, pp. 62-63; Smith, 2:441.

²⁷The NIV interpreted the last line of verse 20 as referring to the Lord, but it probably refers to the invading army, as the NASB, AV, and RSV translated it.

Fall and spring rains, signs of divine blessing (cf. Deut. 11:14), had replaced drought, so the Lord's people could again rejoice rather than grieving (cf. 1:5, 8, 11, 13, 20).²⁸ The threshing floors would be full of grain and the vats would overflow with new wine and oil (cf. 1:17).

2:25 The Lord further promised that He would make up to His people for what they had suffered because of the locust invasion (cf. 1:4; Exod. 22:1; 2 Kings 4:7). Sin had resulted in covenant curses, but repentance would result in covenant blessings (cf. Deut. 28—29).

2:26-27 The people would have plenty to eat and would feel satisfied physically. They would also be full spiritually and praise Yahweh their God for working wonders for them (cf. Exod. 3:15; 15:11; 34:10; Josh. 3:5; Jud. 6:13; Ps. 77:14). They would never be put to shame, again assuming that they continued in their attitude of humble trust and obedience (cf. v. 19). God's blessings would evidence His presence among them and the intimacy of their fellowship with Him (cf. Num. 11:20; 14:14; Deut. 7:21). They would realize in their experience that He is the only true God (cf. Exod. 6:7; 16:12; Deut. 4:35, 39), and they would abide in that shameless condition (as long as they remained faithful to Him).

IV. A FAR FUTURE DAY OF THE LORD: ANOTHER HUMAN INVASION AND DELIVERANCE 2:28—3:21

The preceding promises foreshadowed even greater deliverance and blessing for the Israelites in their far distant future. The clues to a leap to the distant future in the prophet's perspective are the words "after this" (2:28), "in those days" (2:29), "the great and awesome day of the Lord" (2:31; cf. 2:11), "in those days and at that time" (3:1), and "in that day" (3:18).

A. ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL AND DELIVERANCE 2:28-32

2:28-29 After this, namely, after the deliverance from the northern invader just described, God promised to pour out His Spirit on all mankind without gender, age, class, or position distinction.²⁹ In Old Testament times God gave His Spirit only to select individuals (cf. Num. 11:24-29; 1 Sam. 10:10-11; 19:20-24), but in the future everyone (i.e., all believers) would prophesy and receive revelations from the Lord. Visions and dreams were God's customary ways of giving special revelations to people in Old Testament times (cf. Num. 12:6). Normally the absence of prophetic revelation indicated sin and divine judgment, but the presence of such

²⁸The NIV translation "a teacher of righteousness" (v. 23) is better rendered "the autumn rains for your righteousness." See Kapelrud, p. 116; or Patterson, p. 254.

²⁹Other similar promises identify the Israelites as the recipients of the Spirit (e.g., Ezek. 36:27; 39:29; Zech. 12:10), but here all humanity (i.e., all believers) is the object of this blessing. God never gave His Spirit to unbelievers.

revelation reflected divine blessing (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1). So a universal bestowal of the Spirit indicates a time of unprecedented divine blessing.

2:30-31 The Lord also promised awesome displays of celestial phenomena before this great and terrible day of the Lord arrived. Awe-inspiring miracles would occur in the sky as well as on the earth. The appearance of blood, fire, and columns of smoke suggests warfare, with God's hand at work behind the scenes (cf. Exod. 19:9, 16-18; Rev. 6:12-17). The sun would become dark and the moon would turn red. These are probably descriptions of how these heavenly bodies will look (language of appearance), not what will become of them, in view of other similar descriptions (e.g., vv. 10, 15; 3:15; Jer. 4:23-24; Ezek. 32:6-8; Amos 5:18-20; 8:9; Zeph. 1:15; Rev. 6:12-13). These signs will precede the great and awesome day of the Lord still future (cf. Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28).

2:32 The promise continued that whoever would call on the name of Yahweh would be delivered. The day of the Lord described earlier in this chapter involved God judging the enemies of His people, and this eschatological day of the Lord also involves divine judgment. Therefore the deliverance in view must be from divine judgment (cf. Rom. 11:26). Specifically there will be people on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem who escape, even among the survivors of previous distresses whom Yahweh has elected for deliverance (cf. Isa. 51:2; Zech. 13:8).

The Apostle Paul quoted this verse and applied it to spiritual salvation (Rom. 10:13). His usage does not fulfill what God promised here, namely, physical deliverance before the coming day of the Lord. Paul meant that just as God will deliver all who call on Him in that future day of the Lord, so He will deliver all who call on Him for salvation from sin. They will avoid the terrible day in which all unbelievers will be condemned by their Judge (Rev. 20:11-15).

The Apostle Peter also quoted this passage (vv. 28-32) in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36). He said that what the people of Jerusalem were witnessing, which they mistook for drunkenness, was what Joel had spoken of (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Acts 10:45). Many interpreters believe that Peter meant that Joel's prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. This can hardly be what he meant, however, because much of what Joel predicted in this passage did not occur on the day of Pentecost. The day of Pentecost was not the day of the Lord.

Another interpretation of Peter's meaning is that part of what Joel predicted was fulfilled on Pentecost, and the rest awaits fulfillment in the future day of the Lord. The problem with this view is that the promises of the outpouring of the Spirit and the other miracles are so intertwined that separating them by thousands of years seems unnatural. Moreover, Peter quoted the whole passage in Joel, not just the promise of the Spirit's outpouring.

A third possible interpretation is that Peter meant that what happened on Pentecost was similar to what Joel had prophesied God would do in the future day of the Lord. He drew a comparison and pointed out an analogy, but he did not claim fulfillment. This view sees the entire fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in the eschatological future. This view makes the most sense to me. The outpouring on the day of Pentecost was a foreview of what the Lord will do in the future (cf. Gal. 3:28).³⁰

"Peter quoted this passage in Acts 2 because (a) it related to the outpouring of God's Spirit (2:4, 15-16), (b) it stressed his theme of repentance (2:21, 37-39), and (c) it fit with his understanding that the Jews were about to enter the Day of the Lord, leading up to the return of Israel's Messiah, Jesus (1:6-8; 2:36; 3:19-21)."³¹

The day of the Lord in view here begins with the Tribulation (cf. Dan. 9:24-27; Rev. 6—18), continues through the return of Christ and the Millennium (cf. Rev. 19—20), and culminates in the eternal state (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21—22). The signs in view picture what the Book of Revelation describes further as occurring in the Tribulation, and the pouring out of the Spirit will occur in the Millennium. Then all believers will possess the Spirit and will have the ability to receive fresh revelations from the Lord. Forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are two of four great blessings of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-30).

B. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL'S ENEMY NATIONS 3:1-17

God's judgment on unbelievers would accompany the spiritual renewal and deliverance of His own in the future day of the Lord. As God promised to wipe out the locusts for despoiling Judah, now He promised to do the same to the nations that had despoiled Judah (cf. Zeph. 3:8; Ezek. 38—39; Matt. 25:31-46).

1. The announcement of judgment 3:1-8

3:1-3 When God would restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem in that future day (cf. Deut. 30:3), He would gather the other nations to the valley of Jehoshaphat (lit. "Yahweh judges"). This is the only passage in Scripture that names the site of this judgment (cf. Zech. 14:3-5). Its exact location is debatable since no valley by this name appears elsewhere in Scripture (cf. vv. 12, 14).³² There He would judge them for scattering His covenant people, God's inheritance, and for dividing up His land (cf. Lam. 5:2). They had thought so little of the Hebrews that they gambled for them. They had valued them no higher than the hire of a prostitute or the cost of a drink.

³⁰There is not much practical difference between views two and three. View two sees the outpouring on Pentecost as a partial fulfillment, and view three sees it as a foreview of the fulfillment.

³¹Dyer, p. 743.

³²Many interpreters believe it is the valley of Jezreel just east of the Mt. Carmel range.

- 3:4 The Lord addressed the Phoenicians and Philistines directly. They had no special relationship to Yahweh, as Israel did, and they had not been just in dealing with the Israelites. The Lord promised to repay them for their sins. Probably these nations are representative of all Israel's enemies since God said later that He would judge all of them (v. 12).
- 3:5-6 Specifically these Gentile nations had robbed God and had sold the children of His chosen people as slaves to the Greeks. These nations had stolen from the Israelites. Amos also referred to the Phoenician and Philistine slave trade (Amos 1:6, 9; cf. Ezek. 27:13, 19).
- 3:7-8 To pay back these nations, the Lord said He would revive the Israelites in the remote places to which they had been sold. The Israelites would grow strong there and would sell the descendants of these Phoenicians and Philistines to the Sabeans (cf. Ezek. 27:22-23). Thus He would pay them back in kind, which is His customary method of retribution (Gal. 6:7). This may have been fulfilled in the fourth century B.C., or the fulfillment may still be future.³³ Probably the fulfillment lies in the future, specifically the end of the Tribulation, since this whole section of Joel deals with what God will do in that day of the Lord. Again, Phoenicia and Philistia probably represent all the enemies of Israel (cf. Isa. 25:10-12; Obad.) over whom Israel will eventually gain ascendancy.

2. The description of judgment 3:9-17

This pericope contains a call to the nations to prepare for war (vv. 9-11), a statement by the Lord (vv. 12-13), and a description of the battle site (vv. 14-16).

- 3:9-11 The Lord issued a call to war. The nations should prepare for a great battle by beating their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears.³⁴ The weak should "psych" themselves up in preparation. The nations should hurry and assemble (cf. Zech. 12:9). Joel also called on Yahweh to bring down His mighty army of angelic warriors to engage the enemy of His people (cf. Deut. 33:2-3; 2 Kings 6:17; Ps. 68:17; 103:19-20; Zech. 14:5).
- 3:12-13 The Lord urged the nations to rouse themselves and to assemble in the valley of Jehoshaphat (cf. v. 2) because it was there that He would sit in judgment on them. He compared this judgment to harvesting grain with a sickle and to treading grapes in a vat (cf. Isa. 17:5; 63:1-6; Rev. 14:14-20).

³³Allen, p. 114, saw Antiochus III's enslavement of the people of Sidon in 345 B.C. and Alexander the Great's enslavement of the citizens of Tyre and Gaza in 332 B.C. as a partial fulfillment, assuming Jews were involved in these transactions.

³⁴At a later time, in the Millennium, they would do the reverse because Messiah will end war (cf. Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).

As grapes squirt juice when trodden, so the nations will give up the wickedness with which they have been full (cf. 2:24).

This scene of divine warfare must correspond to the battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Rev. 14:14-20; 16:16; 19:11-21). The judgment of the nations following Christ's second coming (Matt. 25:31-46) will not involve warfare.

- 3:14-16 The prophet viewed many multitudes in the valley, which he now referred to as the valley of decision because there God will make a decision concerning their fate. This day of the Lord was near from his perspective, which for the prophets was often deceiving due to their foreshortened view of the future. He saw the celestial phenomena again that signaled doom (cf. 2:10, 31). Lion-like Yahweh roared from Zion announcing His attack on the nations, and everything trembled (cf. 2:10-11; Rev. 16:16, 18). For His own people, however, He proved to be a refuge and a stronghold.
- 3:17 Yahweh's victory will demonstrate to His people that He is indeed Israel's covenant God and that His special place of abode is Mt. Zion (cf. 2:27). After this battle Jerusalem will be the holy city, set apart entirely for God's people and no longer defiled by foreign invaders.

C. ISRAEL'S ULTIMATE RESTORATION 3:18-21

- 3:18 Joel continued to describe the future day of the Lord, but now he passed from the judgments of the Tribulation to the blessings of the Millennium. The mountains of Israel would be so full of grapevines that they could be described as dripping with wine. There will be so many milk-yielding animals feeding on the luxuriant hills that the hills could be said to flow with milk. Instead of the wadis that have water in them only a few days each year, the streams of Judah would flow with abundant, life-giving water. All these descriptions recall conditions in paradise (cf. 1:5, 18, 20). A spring will flow out from the millennial temple that will water the valley of acacia trees, evidently between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea (cf. Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8). This will also be a visual reminder that Yahweh is the source of all provisions and fruitfulness.
- 3:19-20 Egypt and Edom, probably representative of Israel's enemies, will become deserts because they shed innocent blood, presumably the blood of God's people. But Judah and Jerusalem would be full of people for all generations to come (cf. Ezek. 37:25; Amos 9:15; Zech. 14:11).
- 3:21 God's final promise through Joel was that He would avenge the blood shed by these enemies of Israel, which He had not yet avenged in the prophet's day. He promised to do this because He dwelt in Zion, that is, He had a

special covenant relationship with Israel (cf. Ezek. 43:1-12; Zech. 2:10-13).

The prophecy of Joel unfolds in chronological sequence. It begins with reference to a severe locust invasion that came as a judgment on the Judahites for their covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh (1:2-20). Even though it is impossible to date this plague, it happened in the recent past from Joel's perspective. The Lord used this severe judgment to call His people, through His prophet, to anticipate an even worse devastation coming in the near future, not from insects but from foreign invaders. He called on the Jews to repent and promised that if they did He would forgive them and spare them from this invasion. This would be a day of deliverance in which they would learn that He was at work for them. Yet another similar day was coming farther in the future in which they would again experience an invasion by foreigners who hated them. Nevertheless Yahweh promised to deliver them in that day and to restore them to unprecedented blessing because He was their covenant God.

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