

Joel 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joel chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel. Hear this, you elders, give ear all inhabitants of the land. Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten. And what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten. Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth. For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number. Its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.

It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it down. Their branches are made white. Lament like a virgin wearing sackcloth for the bridegroom of her youth.

The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the Lord. The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord. The fields are destroyed, the ground mourns, because the grain is destroyed. The wine dries up, the oil languishes. Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil. Wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dries up, the fig tree languishes, pomegranate, palm, and apple. All the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man. Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests. Wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God, because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate fast. Call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord. Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? The seed shrivels under the clods, the storehouses are desolate, the granaries are torn down because the grain has dried up. How the beasts groan! The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them. Even the flocks of sheep suffer. To you, O Lord, I call, for fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.

Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness. The book of Joel, the second prophet within the book of the twelve, is a difficult book upon which to get a handle. Whether we are trying to determine who Joel was, the time and the context of his ministry, or the character of the historical events concerning which he prophesied, we will most likely achieve little more than informed speculations, although at points these may feel tantalizingly close to giving us some sense of the prophet and his times.

Numerous dates have been suggested for the book, from the first half of the ninth to around the fourth centuries BC. Within this wide range of potential dates, we have early, between 870 and 860 BC, and later pre-exilic dates down to fairly late post-exilic dates, down to the first half of the fourth century. Positions on the question of dating the book also don't neatly divide scholars along a conservative versus liberal fault line. The dating of the book tends to depend upon how we account for specific details within it. Allusions to other nations and places such as Egypt, Edon, Philistia, Greece, the Sabaeans, and Sidon all need to be explained. The destruction of Sidon in 345 BC means that chapter 3 verse 4 must almost certainly be dated before that. A very early reference to the Greeks would also be surprising, although not as surprising as some earlier commentators have suggested.

[3 : 53] Late references to the surrounding nations as threatening independent states would also be unexpected. The interpreter must further explain the violence committed by Egypt and Edom against Judah that is referred to in chapter 3 verse 19. The reference to Judah as Israel in chapter 3 verse 2 has been taken as evidence for a later date, as such a reference might be less likely prior to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. However, Carl Keller is an example of a commentator who sees this reference to Israel as looking back upon the downfall of the northern kingdom, so perhaps not much can be rested upon this particular detail. There are several references to priests and to acts of worship in Jerusalem, but no references to a king, which has been taken by many as giving weight to the case for a post-exilic dating. The extent to which the temple was still standing and operative has also been questioned, as there is limited reference to the temple save as a vestibule and a site of sacrifice. In Jeremiah chapter 41 we see that even after the fall of Jerusalem, the temple was still operating in some sense as a site of sacrifice. The apparent reference to the wall in chapter 2 verse 7 is another possible constraint for dating, albeit a weak one, especially when we consider that the wall was never completely destroyed and that the reference in that verse might be figurative. The books on either side of Joel in the book of the 12, Hosea and Amos, are dated relatively early, but there are different orderings of the book of the 12 where it is placed later.

The placing of prophets within the larger book of the 12 has more to do with thematic ordering than chronological ordering. Determining relationships between prophets in the form of intertextual allusions will also help us in dating the text. Chapter 2 verse 32 is likely dependent upon Obediah verse 17, so presumably Joel must be dated after Obediah, which is most likely exilic or post-exilic.

In some cases, supposed lines of dependence between prophets may reverse, depending on our judgments concerning their dating. In this case, however, Joel seems to be referring to a previous prophecy, writing as the Lord has said, so Obediah was almost certainly the earlier of the two prophecies.

Several of the many connections with other prophecies are mentioned by Christopher Seitz, who remarks upon the extensive pattern of mutual influence in the book of the 12 for which Joel is a prominent culminating exemplar. As if they weren't complicated enough, questions of dating can be further entangled with the consideration of the possibility that the book contains material from two distinct periods.

For some, this is a matter of the book coming from different hands, with the book being of weak integrity. Another possibility is that the same figure, Joel the son of Pethuel, had a ministry spanning distinct periods, from the very late pre-exilic period to the beginning of the exilic period, for instance.

[6 : 44] A further question that will weigh in our considerations of dating is our interpretation of the locust plague that is a central feature of the book. Is the plague an actual plague of locusts, a figurative reference to an invading army, or some other form of reference to the destruction of the people at the hands of the Babylonians?

Another possible reading is that there is a literal plague of locusts in chapter 1, anticipating a figurative use of locusts in chapter 2. Our interpretation of this plague will be another factor weighing in our determination of the dating and occasion of the prophecy.

Seitz, speaking as a representative of canonical criticism, makes the point that Joel must, irrespective of his original historical context, be read, first and foremost, in his context in the canon, as the second of the book of the Twelve, without merely being ambivalent to questions such as the dating of the book.

This is not, in fact, the most important interpretative matter. It is far more important, for instance, that within the context of the book of the Twelve, Joel serves to introduce the theme of the day of the Lord that will be at the heart of much that follows within the collection, perhaps coming to its climactic expression in the book of Zephaniah, in common with the prophetic witness of scripture more generally, but in a more pronounced manner.

In the canon, the writings of the prophet Joel are drawn into a body of literature that is partly abstracted from the immediacy of its own historical context. The words of this prophecy speak beyond the immediacy of its historical occasion, helping the faithful and attentive hearer to discern something of the shape of God's work, character, and the manner of the great day of his coming.

[8 : 19] We hardly know anything about the prophet Joel. He seems to have been a Judean, and his message focuses upon Jerusalem, and particularly upon its worship. In contrast to many other prophets, nothing is said about kings, and other national leaders are more noticeable by their absence.

In Joel, the theme of the day of the Lord first becomes prominent in the book of the Twelve. The prophecy itself begins with a summons to attention, first addressed to the elders, and then to all the inhabitants of the land.

A disaster of such magnitude is happening in their own days, that the shock waves of the news of it would pass down through coming generations. The disaster is described as a plague of locusts, with four different waves of them coming in succession, each eating anything left behind by the swarm that preceded it.

We are, of course, familiar with the plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10, the eighth of the plagues that befell the land of Egypt by the hand of the Lord through his servant Moses. However, locusts were also associated with divine judgment elsewhere.

For instance, in the earlier prophecy of Amos chapter 7 verses 1 to 3, this is what the Lord God showed me. Behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout.

[9 : 30] And behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings. When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, O Lord God, please forgive. How can Jacob stand? He is so small.

The Lord relented concerning this. It shall not be, says the Lord. There the locusts seem to be a symbol of some judgment. Here the locusts are described as an invading force coming upon the nation to ravage its land.

Commentators are divided about whether to understand the locust plague of this chapter as a literal locust plague or as a figurative plague of locusts. Elsewhere in scripture, invading armies or devouring forces are described like locusts.

The Midianites and Amalekites are described as coming upon the land like locusts in Judges chapter 6 verse 5 and 7 verse 12, covering the land and consuming its produce.

In Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 14, the overwhelming of Judah by Babylon and its forces is described as akin to a locust invasion. The Lord of hosts has sworn by himself, Surely I will fill you with men, as many as locusts, and they shall raise the shout of victory over you.

[10 : 35] And in verse 27 of that chapter, Set up a standard on the earth. Blow the trumpet among the nations. Prepare the nations for war against her. Summon against her the kingdoms. Ararat, Minai, and Ashkenaz.

Appoint a marshal against her. Bring up horses like bristling locusts. In Jeremiah, the actions of this invading force are spoken of in a manner that evoke the attack of a devouring locust swarm.

In chapter 5 verses 15 to 17, Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord. It is an enduring nation. It is an ancient nation.

A nation whose language you do not know. Nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food.

They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds. They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees. Your fortified cities in which you trust.

[11 : 33] They shall beat down with the sword. Locusts serve as a symbol of an apocalyptic judgment later in scripture in Revelation chapter 9 verses 3 to 11. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.

They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them.

And their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold. Their faces were like human faces. Their hair like women's hair.

And their teeth like lion's teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron. And the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions.

[12 : 34] And their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. They have as a king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon. And in Greek he is called Apollyon.

On the one hand, reading Joel, the actions of the locusts seem to correspond more closely to the actions of a locust swarm than to the actions of an invading army. They are devouring all of the crops and the produce of the land.

Not destroying cities, killing and taking captive. In chapter 2 their movements are compared to those of soldiers in an army. It would be strange to have a locust swarm symbolizing the invasion of the Babylonian army itself compared to an army.

This would make for a rather convoluted metaphor. On the other hand, while the locust plague could be devastating, the severity of what Joel describes seems to be greater than even a terrible locust plague could account for.

And what the prophecy doesn't describe also seems notable. There is no extensive description of famine conditions in the land. Rather, the focus is upon drunkards having their wine cut off, and the priests having the tribute offering cut off.

[13 : 36] There aren't descriptions of people wasting away with hunger. The locust invasion then seems to afflict the animals and the worship of the house of the Lord the most. It is the grain, the wine, other fruits of the land, and the flocks and herds, all associated with feasts and sacrifice that are especially struck, leaving the nation without the material that it needs to worship.

Perhaps we ought to see this as a symbol of a divine devastation of Israel's feasts and worship, leaving them unable to celebrate. My judgment is that the locust plague is most likely a symbol representing the historical events associated with the overthrow of Judah by Babylon, the various waves of attack and deportation, for instance.

However, the locust plague is a symbol of a divine invasion. The locust plague is like the divine war cloud. In its appearance, it's reminiscent of the dark cloud that descended upon Sinai, but it's a living cloud of devouring judgment that will descend upon the land and strip everything bare.

While on the visible historical plane, this is taking place through the agency of the Babylonians, this is not the day of Babylon, but the day of the Lord and of his judgment cloud.

The leaders of the people are like a group of drunkards, who are suddenly to be brought to their senses as the wine is removed from their lips by the advent of the locusts. The locusts are compared to beasts of prey, to lions, which perhaps lends weight to the idea that we aren't dealing with typical locusts here.

[14 : 58] The locust swarm is stripping the Lord's vine and fig tree, both symbols for his people. Alongside the leaders of the people are the priests, who are also particularly struck by this plague.

They are charged to lament with all of the anguish of a betrothed virgin, bereaved of her husband. The locust invasion cuts off the tribute offerings, causing the priests and the land to mourn.

The people lose the means by which they would offer to the Lord. The land, the people and the temple can be depicted agriculturally. The nation is often compared to a field, to a land, to a tree, to growing crops or something similar.

It can be harvested like a field or burned or felled in judgment like a great forest. It can be watered and flourish or it can experience drought and wither away. Joel is very much working within such a symbolic frame of reference.

Within such a frame of reference, the temple is the chief place of gathering. The temple was quite literally built upon a threshing floor and it retains much of the symbolism associated with that.

[15 : 58] The great threshing floor of the land, where all of the first fruits and fine produce would be prepared, is left empty by divine judgment. The figures here represented as tillers and vinedressers are likely other leaders among the people, who had failed adequately to guard the people of the Lord's special planting.

The priests are charged not just to lament the disaster that has befallen them, but to direct their mourning towards the Lord. They are to recognize the Lord's hand in what has happened, call a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people together and summon them to call out to the Lord for deliverance.

He, not the Babylonians or some other force, is the one who has ultimately struck them and it is to him that they must look to for deliverance. The language of verse 15 is similar to that which we see in Isaiah chapter 13 verse 6.

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come. And also in Ezekiel chapter 30 verses 2 to 3. Wail, alas for the day, for the day is near, the day of the Lord is near.

It will be a day of clouds, a day of doom for the nations. The land is being stripped of its fruit and rendered barren. The herds and the flocks, which might represent the people more generally, now have nowhere left to graze.

[17 : 11] In addition to the image of the locust invasion, there is the additional image of a fire in verses 19 to 20, a fire that devours the pasture land and the forests. In addition to the consuming force of the locusts and the fires burning up the land, there is the further crisis of a drought, leaving the land parched and the animals of the land thirsty.

The Lord is the one who gives fertility and fruitfulness to the land. He gives it its rains and its seasons. When he cuts off his good gifts, everything will start to perish. The only hope in such a time is to turn back in repentance to him and seek his face once more.

A question to consider. Can you think of any other places in scripture where agricultural imagery is used symbolically to represent the Lord's judgment upon his people?