

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

JOEL

THEME

Title and Author

“Joel, the son of Pethuel,” whose name means “Yahweh is God,” gives the book its title. Little is known of Joel except what is learned from the book itself. His references to Judah (3:1, 6, 8, 18, 19, 20) and Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 6, 16, 17, 20), along with his knowledge of the activities of priest and temple (1:9, 13–14, 16; 2:14–17), suggest that he was from Judah or perhaps even Jerusalem. His address to priests (1:9, 13; 2:17) and elders (1:2, 14; 2:16) likely eliminates him as a member of either group.

Date

Estimates for dating the book of Joel range from the ninth to the fourth centuries B.C. While no consensus has been reached, most scholars hold to a date after the exile (586 B.C.) for the following reasons: (1) the exile is treated as a past event (3:2–3); (2) the conquest of Jerusalem is mentioned (3:17); (3) no king is mentioned; (4) the temple plays a positive role, while there is no prophetic denunciation against the idolatry and syncretism mentioned in Hosea and Amos; and (5) the anger expressed toward Edom is best explained by its treatment of Judeans during the Babylonian conquest (Joel 3:19; Obad. 1–21).

Theme

The “day of the Lord” is the dominant theme of the book of Joel. Both the nations (3:2–3) and Israel (1:15; 2:1–2) experience this judgment. However, for the repentant community, the “day” also holds out the hope of restoration (2:12–14). Ultimately, the Lord’s covenant faithfulness is expressed in his promises of abundance and protection (2:23–26; 3:1), which evidence his dwelling in the midst of his people (2:27; 3:17, 21). This is epitomized in the great promise of “my Spirit” that would be poured out on “all flesh” (2:28, 29; cf. Acts 2:17–21).

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Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Joel calls all the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem to lament and return to the Lord during a time of national calamity. This crisis is precipitated in the first instance by a locust plague that has destroyed both wine (1:5, 7, 12) and grain (1:10) and therefore threatens the ability of the people of God to present offerings in the temple (1:9, 13, 16). Given this background, Joel may have served as a lament in the ongoing life of God's people during other times of national tragedy.

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Key Themes

1. *Day of the Lord.* This is the major theme of Joel. The exact expression, *yom yhwah* (Hb., "day of the LORD"), is found five times in Joel (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14) and 13 times in seven other prophetic books (Isa. 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Amos 5:18–20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5; see note on Amos 5:18–20). Other ways of referring to the "day" found throughout prophetic literature (e.g., "a day," "those days," "that day") are used by Joel as well (Joel 2:2; 3:1, 18). Within Joel, the "day" refers not only to a final day of judgment upon the nations (3:2) but also to God's ongoing judgment of Israel, both past and future (1:15; 2:2, 11), and instances of his intervention between Israel and the nations (3:1–2, 12, 14, 16). In each case, the "day of the Lord" indicates a time when the presence of the Lord brings judgment and/or deliverance and blessing, depending on the circumstances (see note on 1:15). Therefore, although the "day" heralds destruction for the nations, it also functions as a time of salvation for God's people; the Lord remains a refuge amid the chaos of judgment (3:15–16).

2. *Repentance.* If the whole community would cry out to the Lord (1:13–20) and look to him—not merely with external actions but in sincerity with their whole persons (2:12–13)—then judgment may be averted. However, the Lord is not bound by the acts of the community (2:14); it is his prerogative to send or withhold the destruction by the locusts (1:15), just as the army is his to command (2:11).

3. *The Lord in their midst.* It is, of course, crucial that the people have a living faith and repentance; however, the reason the Lord will turn from judgment to blessing is to express his covenant-keeping character (2:13, 18–26; 3:18). His promise to dwell in the midst of his people is prominent not only in Joel (2:27; 3:17, 21) but also throughout the OT (Num. 35:34; Deut. 6:15; 7:21; Isa. 12:6; Hos. 11:9; Zeph. 3:15, 17; Hag. 2:5; Zech. 2:10–11; 8:3). God's restoration of what the locusts have destroyed (Joel 2:27) and his protection of Israel as the cosmos crumbles (3:16–17) both have the same goal: knowledge of his presence. This theme concludes the book (3:21), highlighting its importance for Joel.

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4. These themes—the day of the Lord, repentance, and God dwelling amid his people—converge in *the promise of the future outpouring of the Spirit* (2:28–32). This outpouring is associated with the day of the Lord (2:31) in both its judgmental (2:30–31; cf. 2:10; 3:15) and its saving (2:32) manifestations. It is related to repentance in that those who are saved are those who call “on the name of the LORD” (2:32). Finally, the giving of the Spirit, crossing all boundaries of gender, generation, social class, or nationality (2:28–29), is the ultimate evidence of God “in the midst of them” (Isa. 63:11; see Hag. 2:5).

Interpretative Challenge: The Locust Invasion

The relationship between the locust plague and drought (1:1–20) and the onslaught of the Lord’s army (2:1–11) provides a major challenge to readers. Scholars provide a number of options, as outlined in the following chart:

If chapter 1 ...	then chapter 2 ...
1. describes an actual locust infestation ...	presents a heightened description of the same invasion.
2. describes an actual locust infestation ...	issues a warning about a coming military offensive.
3. describes an actual locust infestation functioning as a prophetic forerunner ...	uses that imagery to portray a human army in terms of a decisive conflict on the day of the Lord.
4. describes a military attack in terms of the metaphor of a locust invasion ...	represents the coming of an enemy usually viewed as the Assyrians or Babylonians.

While there are serious arguments for each of these options, the third fits best with the overall context. Joel uses the imagery of a dramatic locust plague along with military imagery (2:4–9) to describe the coming of the Lord’s army on his great day (2:11). The verbs of chapter 1 are predominantly imperative and past-tense forms, calling the people to act based on past events. The verbs in chapter 2 are in the imperfect and imperative forms, highlighting the fact that, though the judgment is approaching, a return to God is still possible. The lament of 1:15–20 is clearly concerned with the effects of the locusts, while the prayer of 2:17 focuses not upon the destruction of locusts but rather upon the depressed social status of the people of God threatened by foreign rule. Reference to the “northerner” is a typical OT description of enemies (see note on 2:20) but an unusual label if referring to a swarm of locusts.

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The judgment of the nations in [3:1–21](#) makes better sense contextually if [chapter 2](#) portrays the threat of an army and a decisive conflict. These and other reasons support option 3.

History of Salvation Summary

God called his ancient people in love and mercy, he preserved them to be the vehicle through which he poured out his Spirit on all kinds of people ([2:28–32](#)), and he will preserve them against all who seek to destroy them ([ch. 3](#)). In all of his care for them, he aims for “torn” hearts, and not just torn garments, from his people ([2:12–14](#)), that they might love him with their whole hearts. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

Literary Features

As a work of prophecy, the book of Joel relies on the staples of the oracle of judgment and the oracle of salvation. Poetry counts for a lot in the book of Joel, whose author is particularly adept at description. By the time Joel’s imagination amplifies the killer locusts into more-than-literal creatures, the book of Joel emerges as almost a horror story. The technique of apostrophe (direct address to entities that are literally absent but treated as though they can hear and respond) is prominent in the first two chapters. Even though the writer is a prophet rather than a nature writer, there are so many pictures of nature in the book that it does rank as nature writing, in a prophetic mode.

The most striking literary feature of the book is the way in which Joel’s imagination amplifies literal locusts into images of apocalyptic horror—pictures of God’s judgment against human sinfulness. Of course Joel’s images are a timeless and universal picture of punishment from God for human evil.

The Setting of Joel

c. 500 B.C.?

Though there is much debate about the date of Joel’s prophecies, it is likely that they occurred during a national calamity sometime after Judah returned from exile in Babylon.

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Outline

- I. The Judgment against Judah and the Day of the Lord (1:1–2:17)
 - A. Locust invasion: forerunner of the day of the Lord (1:1–20)
 - B. Army invasion: the arrival of the day of the Lord (2:1–17)
- II. The Mercy of the Lord and Judgment against the Nations (2:18–3:21)

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- A. Mercy: the Lord responds by restoring his people (2:18–32)
- B. Judgment: the Lord's judgment against the nations and his dwelling with his people (3:1–21)¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 1643-1645). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.