

THE BOOK OF JOEL

A. ORIENTING DATA FOR JOEL

- Content: a devastating locust plague sets the stage for a twofold summons to repentance, to which God responds with a promise of mercy and an outpouring of his Spirit, with a day of judgment on the nations
- Prophet: Joel, who is otherwise unknown; his concern for Judah and Jerusalem (2:23, 32; 3:1) suggests that he was from the southern kingdom
- Date of prophetic activity: uncertain; perhaps ca. 590 B.C., but possibly after 500 B.C.
- Emphases: the impending day of Yahweh—a day of judgment and salvation; Yahweh chastens those he loves, and his chastening calls his people to repentance; Israel's God keeps covenant by showing mercy to his people; Yahweh is sovereign over all the nations and will judge those who have shown no mercy to his people

B. OVERVIEW OF JOEL

Joel centers much of his message in the concept of “the day of the LORD.” Four scenes depict this decisive day, each scene having two parts. Chapter 1 describes the immediate disaster—a devastating locust plague (1:2–12)—which leads to a call for national repentance and prayer because of the severity of the plague (vv. 13–20).

In the second scene (2:1–17), all of this is repeated, but now the plague is likened to—or perhaps implicitly identified as—an army with Yahweh at their head, accompanied by cosmic signs (vv. 10–11), and the summons to repentance is based on Yahweh's character (vv. 12–17). This extended metaphor takes the picture in scene 1 a dimension further and probably refers to God's impending future judgments on Israel and the nations. It may be in fact that “locusts” serves as a kind of code word for the Babylonian armies that invaded Judah in 598 B.C.

The third scene (2:18–32) offers God's response—first to the immediate issue of the locust plague, by restoring “the years the locusts have eaten” (v. 25) through the return of agricultural bounty (vv. 18–27); and second with a special promise of the new age of the Spirit, thus pointing to a glorious future for God's people (vv. 28–32).

The final scene (ch. 3) depicts God's second response by bringing judgment against the nations (vv. 1–16) in the form of a great battle (in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, whose name means “Yahweh judges/has judged”). This scene ends with a picture of God's extraordinary blessings on his forgiven, purified people (vv. 17–21).

C. SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JOEL

Joel offers us neither date nor specific, identifiable historical markers. This makes the reading of Joel a bit more difficult than in other cases, since understanding a prophet's times is so helpful in understanding his message (see the introduction to the Prophets, pp. 172–73). The “northern army” (2:20, lit., “the northerner”) probably refers to the locusts in its first instance, but then metaphorically to the well-known dread of invading armies from the north (Jer 4:6 [referring to Babylon]; cf. Ezek 38:15; 39:2), but nothing more is made of it. Even more striking is the fact that, in a book where calls to repentance hold such a central place (Joel 1:13–14; 2:13–17), there is scarcely a mention of the sins that are responsible for the immediate or coming disasters. To be sure, the nations will be judged for their dividing up Yahweh's land and dealing treacherously with his people (3:2–3, 6), but the sins of Judah and Jerusalem seem primarily to be sins of complacency, and the summons takes the form of a wake-up call to the “drinkers of wine” (1:2, 5). The prophet seems to assume that the people know well where they have broken covenant with their God, but we later readers can only guess.

At the heart of Joel's message is “the day of the LORD,” a concept that had been used by the prophets for some time before Joel came on the scene (see Amos 5:18–20; Isa 2:12–18; 3:7, 18; 11:10–11; Jer 30:7–8; Zeph 1:7–2:2). Its earliest mention in Amos indicates that Israel had a sanguine view of this day—that it was a day in their future when God would come to their aid because they were his. But Amos turned that understanding on its head, because Israel's covenant disloyalty has placed them at enmity with Yahweh, and Amos is followed in this by all the other prophets, including especially Zephaniah. Isaiah and Jeremiah further explain it as cutting both ways—a day of judgment on those whose sins deserve such, but followed by a day of salvation for God's gathered remnant. As you read Joel, you will see that he fits into this pattern of describing it. For him, the locust plague has set God's day in motion as judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, but its consummation clearly lies in a great future eschatological event of judgment on the nations and ultimately the restoration of God's people.

You should also note as you read that, even though Joel does not mention it as such, he presupposes Yahweh's covenant relationship with his people at every turn. Locusts and drought are part of the curses for disobedience to the covenant (Deut 28:22, 38–42), as is Israel's being scattered among the nations (Joel 3:2; see Deut 28:64); the call for repentance as the pathway to future restoration is deeply covenantal, as is the idea of God's chastening the people he loves (Deut 30:1–10; cf. Joel's “rend your heart and not your garments” [2:13] with Deut 30:2, 6). Note also that the appeal to God's character in Joel 2:13 is a replay of the language of Exod 34:6, a covenant-renewal moment; God's engagement in the holy war (Joel 2:10–11; 3:9–11) is also part of this motif.¹

lit. literally

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 217–219.