Joel

Scripture: Joel
Code: MSB29

Title

The Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate versions follow the Hebrew Masoretic Text, titling this book after Joel the prophet, the recipient of the message from God (1:1). The name means “the LORD is God” and refers to at least a dozen men in the OT. Joel is referred to only once in the NT (Acts 2:16–21).

Author and Date

The author identified himself only as “Joel the son of Pethuel” (1:1). The prophecy provides little else about the man. Even the name of his father is not mentioned elsewhere in the OT. Although he displayed a profound zeal for the temple sacrifices (1:9; 2:13–16), his familiarity with pastoral and agricultural life and his separation from the priests (1:13,14; 2:17) suggest he was not a Levite. Extrabiblical tradition records that he was from the tribe of Reuben, from the town of Bethom or Bethharam, located NE of the Dead Sea on the border of Reuben and Gad. The context of the prophecy, however, hints that he was a Judean from the Jerusalem vicinity, since the tone of a stranger is absent.

Dating the book relies solely on canonical position, historical allusions, and linguistic elements. Because of: 1) the lack of any mention of later world powers (Assyria, Babylon, or Persia); 2) the fact that Joel’s style is like that of Hosea and Amos rather than of the post-Exilic prophets; and 3) the verbal parallels with other early prophets (Joel 3:16/Amos 1:2; Joel 3:18/Amos 9:13), a late ninth century B.C. date, during the reign of Joash (ca. 835–796 B.C.), seems most convincing. Nevertheless, while the date of the book cannot be known with certainty, the impact on its interpretation is minimal. The message of Joel is timeless, forming doctrine which could be repeated and applied in any age.

Background and Setting

Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia had made frequent military incursions into Israel (3:2ff.). An extended drought and massive invasion of locusts had stripped every green thing from the Land and brought severe economic devastation (1:7–20), leaving the southern kingdom weak. This physical disaster gives Joel the illustration for God’s judgment. As the locusts were a judgment on sin, God’s future judgments during the Day of the Lord will far exceed them. In that day, God will judge His enemies and bless the faithful. No mention is made of specific sins, nor is Judah rebuked for idolatry. Yet, possibly due to a calloused indifference, the prophet calls them to a bona fide repentance, admonishing them to “rend your heart, and not your garments” (2:13).

Historical and Theological Themes

The theme of Joel is the Day of the Lord. It permeates all parts of Joel's message, making it the most sustained treatment in the entire OT (1:15; 2:1; 2:11; 2:31; 3:14). The phrase is employed 19 times by 8 different OT authors (Is. 2:12; 13:6,9; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18 [2x],20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7,14 [2x]; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5). The phrase does not have reference to a chronological time period, but to a general period of wrath and judgment uniquely belonging to the Lord. It is exclusively the day which unveils His character—mighty, powerful, and holy, thus terrifying His enemies. The Day of the Lord does not always refer to an eschatological event; on occasion it has a near historical fulfillment, as seen in Ezek. 13:5, where it speaks of the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Jerusalem. As is common in prophecy, the near fulfillment is an historic event upon which to comprehend the more distant, eschatological fulfillment.

The Day of the Lord is frequently associated with seismic disturbances (e.g., 2:1–11; 2:31; 3:16), violent weather (Ezek. 13:5ff.), clouds and thick darkness (e.g., 2:2; Zeph. 1:7ff.), cosmic upheaval (2:3,30), and as a "great and very terrible" (2:11) day that would "come as destruction from the Almighty" (1:15). The latter half of Joel depicts time subsequent to the Day of the Lord in terms of promise and hope. There will be a pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh, accompanied by prophetic utterances, dreams, visions (2:28,29), as well as the coming of Elijah, an epiphany bringing restoration and hope (Mal. 4:5,6). As a result of the Day of the Lord there will be physical blessings, fruitfulness, and prosperity (2:21ff.; 3:16–21). It is a day when judgment is poured out on sinners that subsequently leads to blessings on the penitent, and reaffirmation of God's covenant with His people. See note on 1 Thess. 5:2.

Interpretive Challenges

It is preferable to view chap. 1 as describing an actual invasion of locusts that devastated the Land. In chap. 2, a new level of description meets the interpreter. Here the prophet is projecting something beyond the locust plague of chap. 1, elevating the level of description to new heights, with increased intensity that is focused on the plague and the immediate necessity for true repentance. The prophet's choice of similes, such as "like the appearance of horses" (2:4) and "like mighty men" (2:7), suggests that he is still using the actual locusts to illustrate an invasion which can only be the massive overtaking of the final Day of the Lord.

A second issue confronting the interpreter is Peter's quotation from Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:16–21. Some have viewed the phenomena of Acts 2 and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as the fulfillment of the Joel passage, while others have reserved its fulfillment to the final Day of the Lord only—but clearly Joel is referring to the final terrible Day of the Lord. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not a fulfillment, but a preview and sample of the Spirit's power and work to be released fully and finally in the Messiah's kingdom after the Day of the Lord. See note on Acts 2:16–21.

Outline

Following 1:1, the contents of the book are arranged under 3 basic categories. In the first section (1:2–20) the prophet describes the contemporary Day of the Lord. The land is suffering massive devastation caused by a locust plague and drought. The details of the calamity (1:2–12) are followed by a summons to communal penitence and reformation (1:13–20).

The second section (2:1–17) provides a transition from the historical plague of locusts described in chap. 1 to the eschatological Day of the Lord in 2:18–3:21. Employing the contemporary infestation of locusts as a backdrop, the prophet, with an increased level of intensity, paints a vivid and forceful picture of the impending visitation of the Lord (2:1–11) and, with powerful and explicit terminology, tenaciously renews the appeal for repentance (2:12–17).

In the third section (2:18–3:21), the Lord speaks directly, assuring His people of His presence among them (2:27; 3:17,21). This portion of the book assumes that the repentance solicited (2:12–17) had occurred and describes the Lord's zealous response (2:18,19a) to their prayer. Joel 2:18–21 forms the transition in the message from lamentation and woe to divine assurances of God's presence and the reversal of the calamities, with 2:19b,20 introducing the essence and nature of that reversal. The Lord then gives 3 promises to assure the penitents of
His presence: material restoration through the divine healing of their land (2:21–27), spiritual restoration through the divine outpouring of His Spirit (2:28–32), and national restoration through the divine judgment on the unrighteous (3:1–21).

Outline

I. Day of the Lord Experienced: Historical (1:1–20)

A. Source of the Message (1:1)

B. Command to Contemplate the Devastation (1:2–4)

C. Completeness of the Devastation (1:5–12)

D. Call to Repent in Light of the Devastation (1:13–20)

II. Day of the Lord Illustrated: Transitional (2:1–17)

A. Alarm Sounds (2:1)

B. Army Invades (2:2–11)

C. Admonition to Repent (2:12–17)

III. Day of the Lord Described: Eschatological (2:18–3:21)

A. Introduction (2:18–20)

B. Material Restoration (2:21–27)

C. Spiritual Restoration (2:28–32)

D. National Restoration (3:1–21)

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