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Introduction to Joel

WESTERN ECONOMIES, WHICH depend largely on manufacturing, service, and technology, react strongly to market fluctuations. The stock market plays a significant role by indicating the public face of economic health. Vacillations in it not only reflect but also affect the entire economy.

This is not the case in every society, however. For example, in more agriculturally based societies, such as in North America before the Industrial Revolution or in the ancient Near East during the period of the Old Testament, other factors play into economic fortune or failure. Events that affect crops or herds precipitate economic weal or woe. Timely, sufficient rainfall aid crop production, while blight or drought cripples it.

A disastrous event for agriculturalist and pastoralist alike is an infestation of locusts. When they hatch and swarm, they can be as dense as four to five thousand insects per square meter, and they strip all green foliage, destroying crops and trees.¹ This then depletes the next season's fodder for livestock as well as grain for the family larder. With no large-scale ability to stockpile supplies, such an event places nations in grave peril.

This is the situation driving Joel's prophecy. His hearers know and fear agricultural calamities. Such things also serve as the metaphorical vehicle to symbolize another rapacious catastrophe, an invading enemy army. The prophet plays off these two events in his prophecies. He likens the two events as both being catastrophic, but also as times in which Yahweh restores his people's fortunes.

This kind of hope in the face of catastrophe is not one that sits well with many Christians today. A "health and wealth gospel" understands blessing as flowing inevitably from a right relationship with God, while suffering indicates a breach in one's relationship with him. Joel gives a different take on this. He does not imply that blessing means elimination of obstacles and pain, but rather that God's presence, bringing one through these events, which are a natural concomitant to all human existence, is where blessing really resides.

1. For a sobering look at the number and power of such swarms, see the following website from the United Nations (<http://www.fao.org/NEWS/GLOBAL/LOCUSTS/Locuhome.htm>). See also J. A. Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect That Shaped the American Frontier* (New York: Basic, 2004).

Joel the Person

THE STATED WRITER of these prophecies is Joel, whose name means “Yah[weh] is God.” While a ringing affirmation of faith at any time, it is an especially appropriate name during a period when Baalism was making inroads into Israel, evidence for which is suggested by some.² Since religious syncretism was a constant threat to God’s people from the time of the Conquest to at least the time of Josiah (640–609 B.C.; 2 Kings 23:4–5) and possibly even until the postexilic period (Zech. 12:11), the name does not provide much interpretational help. It is used in the Old Testament during this entire time period.³ The only other identifying feature of Joel is his father’s name, Pethuel, which is otherwise unknown.

From internal evidence, Joel is a man of all the people. He announces suffering for all levels of society, from leader to common field laborer. All suffer, but also all will be blessed and restored. This extends not only throughout the various social strata, but also through divisions of age and sex (cf. 2:28–29). Joel’s announcements are tinged more with empathy than with condemnation. He lays little blame for the situation on God’s people (five times referring to them as “my people”: 2:26–27); rather, he offers them the hope arising from judgment against their oppressors.

Geopolitical Context

THE PROPHECIES OF JOEL are directed toward Judah (3:1, 6, 8, 18, 19, 20) and Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 6, 16, 17, 20). “Israel” is mentioned only three times, once indicating the northern kingdom that has already been exiled (3:2) and twice referring to the entire nation, including and perhaps being coterminous with Judah (2:27; 3:16). Holy sites such as the temple (“the house of the LORD,” 1:9, 14; cf. 2:17; “the house of your/our God,” 1:13, 16); and “Zion” (2:1, 15, 23, 32; 3:16, 17, 21) are frequent, while there is no reference to any strictly northern Israelite sites. Unlike other prophets such as Amos, where both Israel and Judah find a place, Joel reserves his comments for Judah.

An unidentified army threatens Judah (2:1–11), while other peoples are explicitly identified in 3:4–8, raising the prophecies onto the world stage. The three enemies of Judah—Tyre, Sidon, and the “regions of Philistia” (3:4)—sell Judeans to the Ionians (Greeks, 3:6) and are themselves sold to the Sabaeans (3:8). Tyre is an island city on the Phoenician coast in what is now

2. J. L. Crenshaw, *Joel* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 46–47.

3. S. L. McKenzie, “Joel (PERSON),” *ABD*, 3:873.

Lebanon, about twenty-five miles south of Sidon. An ancient town, it is known from Egyptian, Assyrian, and Ugaritic sources as well as later, classical sources. It was connected to the mainland by a causeway under Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. In the tenth century B.C., its rulers befriended Israel (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:11; 1 Kings 5), but later the relationship degenerated (e.g., Amos 1:9–11), culminating with Tyrian celebration when Jerusalem fell to Babylon, and she was able to benefit from Judah's demise (Ezek. 26:1).

Sidon to the north is also an ancient coastal city mentioned in early extra-biblical sources, including some coins identifying it as the "mother of Tyre."⁴ It experienced conflict with Israel as early as the judges period (Judg. 10:12) and was taken by Babylon at the same time that Jerusalem fell (cf. Jer. 25:22; 27:3; 47:4). The last reference indicates that Tyre and the Philistines would fall at the same time.

The five cities of Philistia (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath) are situated further south on the Mediterranean coastline to the west of the Dead Sea. The settlers in the region apparently originated in the Aegean Sea area and arrived from the west and north at almost the same time as the Israelites moved into the land from the south and west. Conflict between the two peoples vying for the same territory was fierce, as reflected in Judges and throughout the life of David, who was able to subdue them (1 Sam. 17; 18:6–9, 25–27, 30; 19:8), though conflict was not eliminated (cf. 1 Kings 15:27; 16:15; 2 Chron. 21:16–17). Subdued by Assyria and Babylonia, the Philistines became a Persian colony, losing their own identity.⁵

The two other nations received exiles. Judeans and Jerusalemites ended up among the Ionians (3:6, "Greeks"; Heb. *yʿwānīm*). Mention is first made of the eponymous ancestor Javan (*yāwān*), a descendant of Japheth, in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10:2, 4; cf. 1 Chron. 1:5), but the nation itself is only mentioned in later biblical texts (Isa. 66:19; Ezek. 27:13, 19; Zech. 9:13; Dan. 8:21; 10:20; 11:2). Although it reached its greatest dominance over the region during the Hellenistic period (338–146 B.C.), Greece had contacts and influence in Israel from at least the seventh century B.C.⁶ Nothing of this Greek human trade receives mention elsewhere in Scripture, but slavery formed a noticeable part of the Greek economy.⁷

4. Philip C. Schmitz, "Sidon (Place)," *ABD*, 6:18.

5. H. J. Katzenstein, "Philistines," *ABD*, 5:326–28. The only remaining legacy of the Philistines is in the name "Palestine."

6. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 322, n. 33.

7. Crenshaw, *Joel*, 25 and n. 25.

Introduction to Joel

The nations exploiting Judah were themselves to be sold to the Sabaeans, "a nation far away" (3:8), whose eponymous ancestor is also first encountered in the Table of Nations as a descendant of Shem ("Sheba" in Gen. 10:28; cf. 1 Chron. 1:22). They are a south Arabian nation with diplomatic relations with Israel as early as the tenth century B.C., when their queen visited Solomon (1 Kings 10; 2 Chron. 9). Both the Greeks and the Sabaeans are far removed from the everyday life of Judah, so exile to these locations may be a way of saying that people end up in the back of beyond.

Finally, two nations, Egypt and Edom, suffer as a result of their violence against Judah (3:19). Egypt is one of the regional superpowers, gaining and losing control over Israel repeatedly.⁸ Israel lies on the natural land routes between Egypt and her neighbors to the north and east, so military campaigns from or against Egypt naturally proceeded through Israel, with accompanying depredations from most who stormed through. A backward look at previous Egypt–Israel relationships could look to many periods, while reference to the future destruction could refer to that done by Assyria in the late eighth century B.C., Babylonia in the late seventh–early sixth centuries, or Persia in the mid-sixth century.

The history of interaction between Judah and her eastern neighbor Edom is riddled with animosity, perhaps culminating at the destruction of Jerusalem, but by no means only starting there (see the commentary on Obadiah in this volume). This animosity continued until at least 553 B.C., when Babylon captured Edom.⁹ It may well have continued beyond this time among the remnants of the Edomites, but their history during the Persian and Hellenistic periods is not well known.¹⁰

Chronological Context

THERE IS NO direct evidence from the book itself to determine its historical setting conclusively, though circumstantial evidence has been mined for assistance. Its position toward the beginning of the Minor Prophets, between two prophets dated to the eighth century, has led some to place it early in the history of Israelite prophecy.¹¹ The LXX, however, associates Joel with the later Obadiah and Jonah, so chronology cannot be the deciding factor

8. See "Egypt, History of," esp. the section of A. Spalinger, "3rd Intermediate—Saite Period (Dyn. 21–26)," *ABD*, 2:356–67.

9. P.-A. Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556–539 B.C.* (YNER 10; New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 166.

10. J. R. Bartlett, "Edom," *ABD*, 2:293–94.

11. H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 3.

in both cases. The reasons for the relative position of books within the canon are unclear, so they provide no compelling proof. It is probable that matters of content rather than chronology (cf. the discussion of Joel 3:16, 18 and their ties to Amos 1:2; 9:13) led to Joel's placement before Amos.¹²

References to Judah (3:1, 6, 8, 18, 19) outnumber those to Israel (2:27; 3:2, 16). At least one reference to "Israel" (3:2) indicates that the northern nation of Israel was already exiled, placing the prophecies after the fall of Israel and its capital, Samaria, in 722 B.C. The term "Israel" can apply, however, to the entire nation, including Judah, as it seems to do in 2:27 and 3:16. If so, the prophecies concern either the period after the loss of territory and increased tribute to Assyria exacted in 701 B.C. (2 Kings 18:13–16), after the defeat and exile in 598/597 B.C. under the Neo-Babylonian Empire (2 Kings 24:10–16; 2 Chron. 36:6; Jer 36:30), or even after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 B.C.

Weighing against the latter interpretation is reference to an existing "house of the LORD" or the temple where people minister before him (1:9, 13, 14, 16; 2:17). This rules out the period from 586–516/515 B.C., between its destruction and rebuilding under the leadership of Zerubbabel (cf. Haggai, Zechariah). A preexilic period might be preferred, since the temple destruction is anticipated and prayed against (2:17) rather than remembered, as it would have been after 587, though there are undoubtedly such prayers also brought for the Second Temple, rebuilt under Ezra.

Crenshaw suggests a later date since "the reference to the captivity (4:2 [3:2]) and deportation of Jewish children (3:3 [3:3]) exclude a time before the fall of Jerusalem. Furthermore, the animosity toward Edom (3:19 [3:19]) is best explained in connection with the events of 586, when fleeing Judeans were turned over to the Babylonians by neighboring Edomites."¹³ Neither point is compelling for an exilic or postexilic date, though they do allow it. Capture and deportation were all too familiar to Judah from long experience, as already noted, and Edom's and Egypt's destruction is anticipated in 3:19 (see Obadiah, who also prophesies concerning Edom).

Joel looks back on Judah's mistreatment by several enemies: Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia (3:4), who sell captives to the Greeks (Ionians, 3:6) and themselves end up in the hands of the Sabaeans (3:8). No specific biblical reference is made to any of these events, so they do not help in determining the date of the events described. This is exacerbated since there is in each case a long history of animosity between Judah and these nations, and capture of prisoners for trade as slaves was a common element of ancient war.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. Crenshaw, *Joel*, 24.