

JOEL

CHAPTER ONE

1. Who wrote this prophecy?

“The word of Jehovah that came to Joel the son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1). “Joel” means “Jehovah is God.” There were several others with this name in Scripture (1st Samuel 8:2; 1st Chronicles 5:4, 8; 7:3; 11:38; 15:7; 27:20), none of whom would have been conflated with *“the son of Pethuel.”* His father’s name is all that can be known of him as a person.

2. To whom is this prophecy addressed?

“Hear this, you elders, and give ear, all you inhabitants of the land!” (Joel 1:2). The “land” under consideration is Judah and Jerusalem (3:1, 6, 8, 16-17, 18-20).

3. When was this book written?

Most Old Testament prophets specified when their message came, but this one did not. Ten of the prophetic books were written *“in the days of [certain] kings”* (Isaiah 1:1; Jeremiah 1:1-3; Ezekiel 1:1; Daniel 1:1; Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). Two prophetic books did not specify a time, but addressed foreign nations (Obadiah; Nahum), which helps to narrow down the scope for their timeframes. Jonah the son of Amittai wrote the book bearing his name (Jonah 1:1) and he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (2nd Kings 14:23, 25). Habakkuk did not specify who was reigning when the prophecy came, but did foretell a destruction and occupation by the *“Chaldeans”* (Habakkuk 1:6), AKA Babylonians, which certainly provides a frame of reference as being near the end of Judah’s monarchy. Malachi, as well, did not indicate who was king when he prophesied, but

there was a “governor” (Malachi 1:8), which points to a post-monarchy time-period. Thus, the book of Joel is unusual among the ancient prophets for its vague timing.

There are some clues, though:

- 1) The very lack of reference to a king strongly suggests either a pre-monarchy or post-monarchy setting. If it is pre-monarchy, then it is altogether unique among the books of prophecy, but this possibility will be ruled out shortly. If it was during the reign of the usurper Athaliah (2nd Kings 11:1-15), then it would stand to reason that she would have been called on to repent, but nothing suggests that at all in the book of Joel.
- 2) Jerusalem had been previously subject to foreign invasion (Joel 3:17), so a post-exilic time is implied.
- 3) This book anticipates a return from captivity (Joel 3:1, 6), which actually has a spiritual application, but that might not have been immediately discernible to the initial readers. If they were aware of a physical captivity, though, then they could have been eager for release, even if the spiritual application would have occurred much later. This reference hints at a time period shortly before, during, or after the captivity.
- 4) “*The house of Jehovah*” was standing and useable (Joel 1:9, 13, 14, 16). The temple was built by Solomon (2nd Chronicles 2:1-7:11) in about 960 B.C. It was destroyed (2nd Kings 25:9) at the same time when the last king of Judah was killed (7) and the first post-monarchy governor was installed (22) in 586 B.C. It was rebuilt under the rule of Persian kings Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes (2nd Chronicles 36:2; Ezra 6:14-15) by Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Ezra 5:2) in 516 B.C.

- 5) The temple had been despoiled of gold and silver (Joel 3:5). This occurred at least seven times, so matching the occasion to Joel's time period could be challenging. First, during Rehoboam's reign, Shishak king of Egypt despoiled the temple in 924 B.C. (2nd Chronicles 12:9). Second, Asa entreated Ben-Hadad king of Syria for aid against Baasha of Israel using silver and gold from the temple in 875 B.C. (2nd Chronicles 16:1-2). Third, Joash stripped the temple to turn Hazael king of Syria away from Jerusalem before 814 B.C. (2nd Kings 12:17-18). Fourth, Joash king of Israel despoiled the temple in the reign of Amaziah around 795 B.C. (2nd Chronicles 25:23-24). Fifth, Ahaz paid off Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria after 735 B.C. (2nd Kings 16:7-8). Sixth, Hezekiah did likewise for Sennacherib king of Assyria in 714 B.C. (2nd Kings 18:13-16). Seventh, Nebuchadnezzar sacked the temple during Jehoiachin's reign around 597 B.C. (2nd Chronicles 36:9-10). The spoils Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple were returned by order of King Cyrus (Ezra 5:13-15) during the reign of Darius (Ezra 6:5). It is entirely possible that some time after this, the temple was again despoiled, this time at the hands of Tyre and Sidon.
- 6) Greeks are mentioned specifically as people who received Jewish slaves sold to them by Tyre and Sidon (Joel 3:4-6). For most of the Old Testament, Greeks were unmentioned until Daniel began prophesying that they would conquer the Persians who were ruling during most of Daniel's and Zechariah's prophetic ministries (Daniel 8:20-21; 10:20-11:4; cf. 2:39; Zechariah 9:13). The very mention of Greeks at all hints at a post-exilic period. Notice, though, they are not yet the dominating force that will conquer Persia, but merely a society buying slaves, and an apparently distant one at that.
- 7) The Greeks are mentioned in the context of punishing Tyre and Sidon for selling Jews into Greek slavery (Joel 3:4-6). Although Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would begin the overthrow of Tyre and Sidon with a siege from 586-573 B.C. (Ezekiel

26:7), the full extent of their destruction (Ezekiel 26:14) would not be accomplished until Alexander the Great's army built a causeway over the sea and leveled the city in 332 B.C. As of 520 B.C. (Zechariah 1:1), the desolation of Tyre and Sidon and the Philistines was still being foretold (Zechariah 9:1-8). The primary text even suggests the possibility of some cooperation between the Greeks and the Jews in the overthrow of Tyre and Sidon (Joel 3:7), which the historian Josephus confirmed: "So Alexander came into Syria, and took Damascus; and when he had obtained Sidon, he besieged Tyre, when he sent an epistle to the Jewish high priest, to send him some auxiliaries, and to supply his army with provisions" (Josephus 11.317).

That there was a temple, but probably not a king of Judah, while the Greeks were a concern but not a powerhouse, could indicate Joel may have been writing during the Second Temple era.

Another perspective is that Joel prophesied in the time of Joash/Jehoash, about 835 B.C. When his father King Ahaziah was killed in battle, his grandmother slew his brothers and usurped the throne, but he was hidden in the temple for six years (2nd Kings 11:1-3). When Joash was seven years old, Jehoiada the priest had Joash rightfully crowned (2nd Kings 11:4-12) and Athaliah executed (2nd Kings 11:13-21). The reign of Athaliah, about 841-835 B.C., was a period when the temple stood and there was no king, so the theory has potential. The difficulties with this approach are that Judah had not yet been taken captive (Joel 3:1) and Israel had not been scattered (Joel 3:2). While the temple was despoiled during this period, it was while Joash was reigning, not Athaliah, so there was a king.

The post-exilic, Second Temple period seems the most likely fit.

4. Why were Joel's readers to ponder the past and what were they to do in the future?

“Has anything like this happened in your days, or even in the days of your fathers? Tell your children about it, let your children tell their children, and their children another generation” (Joel 1:2-3). They were expected to compare current events to history in order to recognize what was happening was unprecedented for Judah. What was occurring would still be spoken of for generations to come, even. God expects His people to diligently instruct subsequent generations about His statutes (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:7; 11:19; 31:13) and about His accomplishments (Joshua 4:1-7).

5. Identify the four devourers.

“What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten” (Joel 1:4).

The KJV calls these insects: palmerworm, locust, cankerworm, and caterpillar. Regardless of what specific variety of insects are under consideration, there is a reminder of the eighth plague God brought down upon Egypt (Exodus 10:12-15; Psalm 105:34-35).

6. What had befallen the drunkards, the priests, the vinedressers, and the farmers?

The wine was gone for the drunks (Joel 1:5), the grain and drink offerings were gone for the priests (9-10), and the vines and trees were all dried up for the vinedressers and farmers (11-12). All the food was gone for everybody. Whether they were blatantly immoral or feigning righteousness, or even the providers of food, there was nothing left to eat for anybody.

7. Was this a literal plague of locusts?

“For a nation has come up against My land, strong, and without number; his teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he has the fangs of a fierce lion. He has laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree; he has stripped it bare and thrown it away; its branches are made white” (Joel 1:6-7).

The answer is ambiguous from the first chapter as the swarm is presented as an invading “nation.” These are comparable to the swarm that emerged from the bottomless pit in another prophecy of judgment (Revelation 9:1-12), whose role was to torment men (Revelation 9:4-6), and who also had the teeth of lions (Revelation 9:8) and who also resembled horses (Revelation 9:7; Joel 2:4).

It becomes clearer in the next chapter, though, that the locusts are literal. They are *“like a strong people set in battle array”* (Joel 2:5), *“they run like mighty men”* (7), *“they climb the wall like men of war”* (7). If it was a foreign nation presented allegorically as a locust swarm, then the insects would not be compared to an army in this way.

8. Whose land, whose vine, and whose fig tree were being ruined?

“A nation has come up against My land... he had laid waste My vine, and ruined My fig tree” (Joel 1:6-7). God allowed the destruction notwithstanding His personal claim on all that was being destroyed. This is what discipline really is; it hurts the disciplinarian, not only the rebel.

9. What were the priests called to do in their wailing and lamentations?

“Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of Jehovah

your God, and cry out to Jehovah” (Joel 1:13-14). Proper mourning included wearing sackcloth, fasting, and assembling the people to cry to God together.

10. What was “at hand” that they were to cry about?

“Alas for the day! For the day of Jehovah is at hand; it shall come as destruction from the Almighty” (Joel 1:15).

“The day of Jehovah,” or Day of the Lord, refers to any particular time of judgment God brought down on a people. It does not always refer to the great and final day of judgment, although that is also one such judgment.

11. Which of the curses that Jehovah warned Israel about before entering the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 28:15-68) are upon them in the primary text?

- 1) Locusts destroy crops (Joel 1:4; Deuteronomy 28:38, 42).
- 2) Grapes and wine destroyed (Joel 1:5, 7; Deuteronomy 28:30, 39).
- 3) Invaded by a foreign army (Joel 1:6; 2:1-11, 25; Deuteronomy 28:22, 25, 33, 47-51).
- 4) Grain ruined (Joel 1:9-11, 13, 17; Deuteronomy 28:17-18).
- 5) Olives destroyed (Joel 1:10; Deuteronomy 28:40).
- 6) Livestock suffer (Joel 1:18-19; Deuteronomy 28:31).
- 7) Land laid waste (Joel 1:10-12, 17-20; 2:3; Deuteronomy 28:18, 23; 29:22-23).
- 8) Drought (Joel 2:23; Deuteronomy 28:24).
- 9) Enemy dreaded (Joel 2:6; Deuteronomy 28:25).
- 10) Country and city dwellers affected (Joel 1:11; 2:9; Deuteronomy 28:16).
- 11) Nation reproached (Joel 2:17; Deuteronomy 28:37).
- 12) Posterity affected (Joel 1:3; Deuteronomy 28:46).