

Resource: Study Notes - Book Intros (Tyndale)

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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When disaster strikes, we usually respond in one of two ways. We either turn to God and enter a renewed relationship with him shaped by a fuller understanding of his nature and character, or we turn away from God and blame him or others for our troubles. Some even deny God's existence. The people of ancient Israel experienced disaster and were faced with this same decision. Would they turn away from God in their time of trouble or turn to him and seek his blessings?

Setting

Joel prophesied to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in the midst of a catastrophe that threatened their very existence. A locust plague of unprecedented proportions had struck the land. Millions of voracious insects arrived in wave after wave to consume every green plant—vegetable gardens, grain crops, grapevines, fruit trees, and even the grass upon which their sheep and goats grazed. In the face of such a disaster, all human and animal life was at risk. In the ancient world, there were no insecticides to kill the locusts, no stocks of nonperishable food for emergencies, and no relief agencies to bring in food supplies. Such a plague brought with it the specter of death for thousands upon thousands, especially the very young and the very old.

During such a perilous time, it was only natural that the people of Judah and Jerusalem would ask hard questions about the justice and mercy of God. *Is God truly in charge of heaven and earth? Is he good?* They also looked inward at their own sin and moral responsibility for the plague. *Has God sent the locust plague to punish us for our failure to live in right relationship with him? Will God be merciful to us? Do we have a future?* In response to such questions, the prophet Joel delivered the word of the Lord to his people.

Summary

The book of Joel consists of two nearly equal parts. In the first section ([1:1-2:17](#)), the prophet describes the devastating locust plague that afflicted Judah and Jerusalem. The plague was so severe that it laid waste to the entire land, destroying grains, vines, and trees. The effects of the plague were further compounded by a drought that left the land parched and burned. As a result, both humans and animals groaned with hunger, and the people had nothing left to bring to the Temple as an offering to the Lord. Therefore, in [2:12-17](#), Joel calls on the people to repent and throw themselves on the mercy of their compassionate God. (Other commentators have understood this passage as an apocalyptic description of the coming day of the Lord, using the language of a locust plague to describe an invading human army.)

In the second part of the book ([2:18-3:21](#)), the Lord promises to take pity on his people and restore their land following the locust plague. In [2:18-27](#), Joel describes how God will restore their material lives in the immediate future, replenishing their fields, orchards, vineyards, and flocks. In [2:28-3:21](#), Joel turns his attention to the more distant future when God will restore their spiritual lives. At that time, God will pour out his Spirit on all people who respond to him in faith. God will also render judgment on the peoples and nations that refuse to acknowledge his lordship.

Date of Writing

We do not know when the prophet Joel lived and prophesied. Joel does not list the kings under whom he ministered (cp., e.g., [Amos 1:1](#); [Mic 1:1](#)), nor does he provide any other clear historical information. For this reason, scholars have proposed many different dates for Joel.

In the Hebrew and English Bibles, Joel is placed between Hosea and Amos, who prophesied during the 700s BC. This has led some to propose that Joel

was an early prophet who may have lived even before Amos and Hosea. Because the book makes no mention of a king and regards the priesthood favorably, these interpreters believe that Joel prophesied while Joash (835–796 BC) was still a child, when the kingdom was under the oversight of Jehoiada the priest (see [Joel 2:17](#); see also [2 Kgs 12:1–21](#)).

On the other hand, several considerations seem to point to a much later date for Joel. Joel never refers to the northern kingdom of Israel or to its capital city, Samaria, suggesting that the prophet lived after their destruction in 722 BC. Likewise, Joel never mentions Assyria or Babylon, Israel's great enemies from the 700s to 500s BC, leading many to argue that these two empires were already long past for Joel. Because the monarchy ended with the Exile in 586 BC, many scholars locate Joel in the postexilic period, after the Jewish people began returning to their own land in 538 BC.

Finally, there are numerous passages in which Joel could be seen as drawing upon or directly quoting the words and ideas of prophets such as Amos, Zephaniah, Obadiah, and Ezekiel. Although it is possible that Joel ministered before these prophets and that they were borrowing from him, it is also possible that Joel adapted the earlier prophetic words to speak God's word to people who faced an entirely new situation.

These observations do not prove that Joel lived and prophesied after the Exile, but they are convincing enough that the majority of biblical scholars accept a postexilic date. Fortunately, knowing the exact time in history that Joel prophesied is less important in his case than it is for other prophets. Joel's message concerns issues that are relevant to every age.

Meaning and Message

Throughout the book of Joel, we clearly see God's sovereignty over all creation. He is Lord of both the natural world and human civilization. The locust plague was not merely a natural event; the army of insects came at God's command ([2:11](#)). The Lord controls rain and drought, fertility and famine, blessing and destruction. All peoples, both Israelites and non-Israelites, are subject to his sovereign judgment, but divine sovereignty does not negate human responsibility.

Because human sin has so negatively affected the natural world, Joel calls the people of Judah and Jerusalem to repentance. Joel can offer the

Israelites the opportunity to repent because he knows that God is merciful and compassionate. It is God's nature to forgive those who repent rather than to judge them, to restore rather than to destroy. Quoting an ancient text ([Exod 34:6–7](#)), Joel extends God's gracious invitation to the Israelites: "Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love" ([Joel 2:13](#)).

For Joel, the proper way to express repentance was through the official Temple worship presided over by the priests. This may seem surprising because several other prophets denounce the official worship because of widespread corruption among the priests and leaders (see [Isa 1:10–18](#); [Amos 5:21–24](#)), but Joel recognized the value in worship when it is performed with a sincere heart that is fully open to God (an attitude characteristic of postexilic prophets—see Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). In worship, invisible eternal realities are represented by physical objects and actions. However, the prophet reminds the Israelites that religion is much more than outward display; true worship is founded on inward transformation ([Joel 2:13](#)). The solution to corrupt worship is not to abandon worship, but to worship God in spirit and in truth (see [John 4:23–24](#)).

To a people who faced disaster, Joel brought the message that their God was fully in control of the future. He assured them that on the day of the Lord, God would intervene in the world to judge the wicked and to establish peace and justice ([Joel 1:15](#); [2:1](#)). Then he will pour out his Spirit on people of every class, gender, and age, making it possible for his people to live in accord with his law. The wrongs that all too often dominate our fallen world will only be righted when God fully and finally comes into his creation ([Joel 2:28–3:21](#); see [Matt 16:27](#); [Acts 2:16–40](#); [Col 2:13–22](#); [Rev 21–22](#)).