

Joel

The book of Joel does not provide us with information to date the book, such as during a certain King's reign. However, there are some clues which help us guess at a date. First, the temple was written about as if in regular use, but it was in ruins from 586-516 BC. So we can eliminate this period. Also, referring to Judah as "Israel", as the book of Joel does, usually only happened after the northern tribes had been carried into exile in 722 BC.

(Joel 3:2)
implies Israel
has already
been exiled.

While this may give us a good guess, scholars have been unable to agree on a date, even a century, for the book.

We do not know who Joel was, but the brief introduction suggests he was well known to the people of Judah at the time.

Joel calls out to the people (Joel 1:5) who are drinking wine & enjoying all the good things of the land. Based on all Joel's warnings in this & the following verses, it appears Judah has been enjoying a time of prosperity. Israel was warned about this long ago before entering the land of Canaan (Deut 6:10-12).

Hebrew words are
the various stages of
life for locust, not
different species.

The problem the people are facing is a swarm of locust (Joel 1:4). This is apparently the worst swarm of locust Israel has ever faced (Joel 1:2) & is so severe Joel feels it is a cautionary tale worth passing down through the generations. (Joel 1:3).

What are locust & why are swarms rare & occur irregularly? Locust are actually grasshoppers. When moisture & temperature conditions favor a large hatch of the grasshopper eggs, the crowding, unceasing contact & jostling of the nymphs (immature insects) stimulates changes in coloration, physiology, metabolism & behavior. This causes the nymphs to make the transition from solitary behavior to the swarming gregarious (living in a flock) & migratory phases of the dreaded plague. Plagues continue as long as climate conditions favor the large hatches. Swarms can migrate great distances

Joel 1:6
army without
number

and have been observed as far as twelve hundred miles at sea.

Swarms are also capable of reaching enormous sizes. In 1889, a swarm across the Red Sea was estimated to cover 2,000 square miles. Swarms are dense, estimated to contain up to 120 million insects per square mile.

The impact of locust on a region is far reaching. First is the obvious problem—when the locust eat most of the food, there is little left for the people to eat.

The people, weakened from hunger, catch & spread diseases easier & faster. Trade from surplus food products is eliminated & the shortage of food causes inflation in the price of food products. Finally, when the swarm dies, the putrefaction (decaying) of millions of locust bodies breeds typhus & other diseases which spreads to humans & animals.

Why does Joel call out primarily to the drunkards & drinkers of wine?

One scholar suggests drunkards were those who ordinarily cared little for religion or for much else happening around them. During this time, this could include a large segment of Israel. Second, abundant wine symbolizes divine blessing. This can be seen at the end of the book (Joel 3:18) & again in the following book (Amos 9:13).

Harvest was a time of thankfulness, celebration & joy. Joel compares this to a wedding (Joel 1:8). The virgin is grieving for her betrothed because they never had a chance to be married. In Israel, betrothal was the span of time beginning when the groom had paid the bride price & lasting up until the consummation of marriage. This was a time of great anticipation & excitement, similar to the time leading up to harvest.

However, if the groom were to die before the consummation, all that had been eagerly anticipated would suddenly be snatched away. There is no longer anything to celebrate & the bride realizes she will not have the support, security & protection that comes with a husband. In the same way, the harvest has been snatched away from the people. Celebration will turn to mourning as they realize their food & financial security have been taken away from them.

The destruction of crops also eliminates offerings the people would have brought to God. (Joel 1:9) Joel then pleads for the priests & ministers to wail & mourn while wearing sackcloth (Joel 1:13). Similar calls to repentance & to seek out the Lord during times of trouble can be seen throughout the OT, such as Judges 20:26 & Lam. 2:10, 19. Joel seems to be concerned that the calamities which have robbed Israel of the resources to make sacrifices are signs of Israel's rupture of its covenant relationship with God.

Next, Joel calls for all the people of Israel to meet at the house of the Lord (Joel 1:14). During this time, they are to have a holy fast. During a holy fast, all normal activities are stopped. This includes eating & drinking, work, & sex. During this time, the people were supposed to be crying out to God in supplication for forgiveness & for God to turn aside His wrath.

It appears God sent a drought to Israel to follow up the plague of locust (Joel 1:16-18). This serves to multiply the severity of their punishment. A locust plague leaves the region with very little food & waiting desperately for the next harvest. It isn't going to come, though, because there is no rain for the crops to grow.

There are multiple clues in the following verses to support the idea of a drought. First, Joel tells us the seeds are shrivled (Joel 1:17). Next, he cries out to the Lord concerning the fires which have burned up the pastures (Joel 1:19). This seems to indicate the land is dry. Finally, he tells of the wild animals panting & the streams of water drying up (Joel 1:20).

The next chapter begins by returning to the description of the invading locust (Joel 2:1-11). The locust are described as a mighty army of the Lord. Not only are they so numerous as to cover entire mountains, but they are efficient & devastating. Nothing is able to stop them & nothing is left once they pass through.

In verses 10-11, Joel describes the violent reaction nature will have to the coming of the army. However, it is not the locust causing these reactions. Instead, it is the Lord thundering at the head of His army.

Verse 12 begins a transition from the coming calamity to a call for repentance. The common practice of the time for mourning & repentance was to rend one's clothing, put ashes on one's head, put on sackcloth, etc. These were all a matter of outward appearance. Joel tells us to not rend our clothes, but our heart. Changing our outward appearance does not change our relationship with God. Only a change of heart can do that.

Joel once again calls for Zion to blow the trumpet in verse 15. This time, rather than being an alarm for impending attack, it is a call to summon all the people together for a holy fast & repentance. Joel's wording tells us that no one is exempted from this call. (Joel 2:15-16). Hebrew law provided that newlywed & betrothed men be exempted from military duty. However, not even a bride or groom would be exempted from Joel's call.

Next, in verse 17, Joel instructs the priests to weep & cry out to the Lord. Joel is referencing scripture from the time of Solomon completing the temple (1 Kings 8:35-40, 2 Chron 7:11-16). Therefore, if Israel will respond & cry out to God, He may turn away from His wrath.

It appears that Israel has repented & returned to the Lord. Verse 18 is the transition to the second half of the book. After their change of heart, God takes pity ~~off~~ on Israel. (Joel 2:18-20). This is the first of 2 divine responses, a promise of relief from the current crisis. Before, Joel was concerned the lack of

resources for grain offerings & libations for the temple was a sign of the broken covenant between Israel & God. But with this new turn of events, the new grain, wine & oil is foreshadowing of blessings to come, which is the 2nd divine response.

While writing about the plague & its impact, Joel writes about the effects on people, wild animals & the land. In verses 21 & 22, each of these 3 are listed specifically in the reversal of the plague. We see in verses 23 & 24 that God will send abundant rain to make their grain storage full & their wine vats overflowing.

Here, God speaks about the future instead of Joel (Joel 2:25-27). Now that Israel has repented & returned to God, His concern is that His people are taken care of, "plenty to eat", rather than enough for sacrifices in the temple. He says what is important is for us to make Him our God & turn away from idolatry.

God then describes the things that will occur leading up to the day of the Lord (Joel 2:28-32). This is the effect of the Holy Spirit acting inside people. We can see this early on during the time of Moses (Numbers 11:10-17, 24-29). This scripture is referenced later to explain the behavior of followers of Jesus (Acts 2:5-21).

Finally, the book is concluded by a promise of judgement. This judgement is not for the Israelites, however, but for the nations that abused & oppressed them. Next is a list of sins the nations have committed against God & His people. God declares He will cause the same deeds to be committed against these nations. Joel then instructs the people to summon the other nations to war. When the warriors arrive, they will not be fighting a human army, but a heavenly one (Joel 3:11).