

Joel

Joel, as one of the shorter books of the prophets, was included among 11 others in the Hebrew canon of scripture as “The Book of The Twelve.” The prophets we have from Hosea to Malachi are all collected on one Hebrew scroll.

No one knows just when Joel was written, there are no definitive statements in the text. However, the mention of the “Valley of Jehoshaphat” in 3:1 suggests it was after his time (see the account in 2 Chronicles 20). Jehoshaphat reigned in the mid 9th century BC. References to the selling of Jews into slavery in 3:2-3 are similar to Obadiah 11, so perhaps Joel, like Obadiah and along with Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, prophesied at about the time of the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem, or perhaps it was during an earlier time of distress in the 8th or 7th centuries BC. The key messages of Joel for us are not rooted in the exact circumstances of his preaching.

One of Joel’s primary images of divine chastening is an invasion of locusts (1:4). Are these literally a plague of locusts, or are locusts symbolic of an invading army (1:6, 2:2b-11), perhaps Babylonian forces? We can’t be sure whether locusts are symbolic of a human army, or literal locusts are metaphorically described as an army, but the utter devastation of the invaders consuming everything in their path is clear enough, as well as it being a divine judgment for continued injustice and wickedness.

Incidentally, similar language is used of an invading horde from the bottomless pit in Revelation 9:1-11.

Joel describes severe drought as well as the invading destroyers, and links the disasters to wickedness among elders and citizens (1:2), including the priests (1:9, 13). Drunkenness is once again highlighted as a particular problem in the community (1:5). The only solution offered was repentance. The “day of the LORD” mentioned several times is a day of reckoning (1:15, 2:1-2, 2:11), disastrous for sinners.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the gloom of impending judgment, there is reassurance of divine mercy for those who will return to him (2:12-17) and ask for deliverance. For genuine repentance, God would certainly act, restoring the land, expelling the invaders, ending the drought, blessing man and animal in the land (2:18-27).

“Afterward” in v28-32, God promised a new beginning, blessing all of his people, “all flesh,” with his outpoured Spirit. Peter specifically cited this prophecy on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:16-21 as being fulfilled then and there, as attested by visible and audible signs, some of which occurred in the context of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus 7 weeks earlier. That day, as predicted in 2:32b there were those in Jerusalem who escaped (sin and death) by answering the LORD’s call.

The true restoration of Judah and Jerusalem (3:1) began, not with the exiles who returned from Babylon, but with the pouring out of God’s Holy Spirit. The grinding wheels of judgment began to turn that day, culminating in the gathering of the nations into the Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:1),

the Valley of Decision (v14). The name Jehoshaphat means “Jehovah has judged” and in 2 Chronicles 20 there is a story of a league of nations mounting a sneak attack against Jerusalem, which was overthrown by the LORD in valley southwest of Jerusalem, when the people of Judah prayed and particularly when they began to praise the LORD. God has a day of reckoning like that in store when the nations that oppose his people arrogantly follow wickedness into self destruction and divine condemnation.

Among the sins of the enemies of Judah enumerated here, their coastal neighbors also mentioned by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was gambling for God’s people as slaves, and selling boys for money to hire prostitutes and get drunk. God’s viewpoint of gambling, sexual immorality, slavery, and drunkenness is pretty obvious.

Joel’s message to the nations, 3:10, is the opposite of his message to the redeemed of his people, Isaiah 2:4. The swords and spears of 3:10 are the futile resistance of rebellious mankind against the Lord and his chosen ones, like Pharaoh’s army churning into the Red Sea.

Ezekiel 48 and Revelation 22 both speak of a fountain flowing from the throne of God, the same fountain mentioned in 3:18, for those who come to the new Jerusalem, those who participate in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Not everyone will come, some will stand before God with bloodguilt that will be avenged by God.