

THE BOOK OF THE PROPHET JOEL - PART I

OVERVIEW AND THEMES

I. The Book of Joel is written in the context of a disaster, with a devastating plague of locusts apparently combined with a massive sandstorm, which Joel describes as a sign of God's purifying and devastating power, but a power that will become a force of glorious transformation.

A. It is not known when this work was written. The most likely theories are that it was written between about 750 and 850 or between about 425 and 350 B.C.

1. If it was written in the earlier period, then it was probably placed between Hosea and Amos because they were northern prophets from that era to complement them as a southern prophet.

- The references to Egypt and Edom as the central Israeli enemies may indicate an earlier time before the decline of those kingdoms.

- The connections to the Book of Amos, who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.) may indicate the earlier time. E.g., compare Joel 2:11, 4:16, 18 with Amos 5:18, 1:2, 9:13

2. If it was written in the later period, the plague was a grievous setback to the overall work of restoring the land after the exile. The prophet Joel would be drawing an analogy between the locusts and the invading armies that had devastated the land earlier, and may also invade again, but also promising a new and glorious reign.

- The lack of reference to a monarchy is evidence that it was written well after the monarchy ended in 586 B.C., and in fact at a time in which it was not considered particularly central. The priests and the sacrifices seem to be central, which would indicate that, if the book was not written before 586 B.C., it must also be from a time after 515 B.C. when the Temple was rebuilt.

- There is also no indication of a divided nation, nor of threats from Assyria or Babylon, which would indicate a time after those issues had vanished, i.e., during the post-exilic era.

- The references to Tyre, Sidon, and Seba in chapter 4 could be from most of the time between 900 and 343 B.C., when Sidon was conquered by the King Axertaxes III and Tyre by Alexander the Great a short time later. The reference to the Greeks could also be from anywhere in that time, but would more likely be from the later era when the Greeks were expanding.

- The fact that Joel seems to cross reference Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, see Joel 2:10, 3:1,4:10 may indicate that it was written after their time, which was shortly before and during the Exile.

3. The fact that, despite a brief reference to the Greeks in chapter 4, verse 6, there is no reference the conquest of Alexander the Great indicates that the work must have been written before the 330s.

4. It is possible that the prophesy was meant to describe several times in the history of the Chosen People, as the Book of Revelation seems to do.

B. In any case, the emphasis on the Temple and on Mount Zion clearly indicates that Joel was prophesying in the southern kingdom, which was all that was left after the exile.

C. The personality and history of Joel is unknown. Although the Old Testament does refer to other Joels, see 1 Chr. 4:35, 5:4, 7:2, 11:38, Ezra 10:43, Neh. 11:9, the genealogies attached to these people indicates that none of them is the prophet. His father Pethuel is also not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

D. The Book of Joel basically consists of two parts: (1) the lament over the plague and call to repentance lest a worse disaster come; and (2) the prophesy of the outpouring of the spirit and a glorious new era during which the Chosen People are preserved from their enemies. Chapter 2, verse 18 is the crossover point.

1. The first part has four sections, the first and third of which describe the disaster in dramatic terms, while the second and fourth call for repentance and trust in God. The disasters are seen as a warning by God so that His people will repent and avoid a worse disaster, possibly a real invasion of which the natural disaster is an image. Chapter 2, verses 12-14 give the central theme of true repentance and trust in God. It is now in the first reading for the Ash Wednesday Mass.

2. The second part describes God's compassion for His people and judgement upon her enemies. It begins by describing the end of the disaster, the return of prosperity, and the outpouring of the spirit upon the whole people. It then proceeds onto a prophesy of a great conflict and judgement upon the enemies of Israel, concluding with an eschatological image of a paradisaal chosen land, and a deserted land of Israel's enemies.

E. Some versions of the Book of have 32 verses in chapter 2, while other split off the last 5 verses into a separate chapter. The first method, resulting in three chapters for the book, combines the prophesies of prosperity and an outpouring of the Spirit together in a chapter, while the latter separates then into two different sections.

II. The great theme of Joel is the coming "day of the Lord" with all of its catastrophic and glorious implications.

A. At first the "day of the Lord" is a dark day indicating God's wrath upon His people. See Joel 1:15, 2:2, 11. The sins that the people have committed are not described, but the plague, whether locusts, a storm, or an invading army that is the analogy for them, are clearly from the Lord. See Joel 1:15, 2:11.

- Part of the idea seems to be that, as the Lord comes closer, the sins that seemed acceptable are no longer so. At their better moments, the Chosen People intuitively understood that God's holiness was so great that His approach would be catastrophic for anyone who has any sin or even who is unprepared. See, e.g., Ex. 19:9-25, 20:18-26; Judges 6:22, 13:22; Is. 6:5; Luke 5:8.

- The response to this aspect of the day of the Lord is a call to repentance, and prayer. The prophet calls for common fasting and prayer, see chapter 1, verse 14, chapter 2 verses 15-17, and a deep change of heart, rather than merely emotional repentance, see chapter 3, verse 13.

B. But then, in the midst of this terrible destruction, there is salvation for those who call upon the name of the Lord. They are protected in the midst of their enemies who are destroyed by the wrath of God. See Joel 3:2, 4:14.

- There is still great judgment, but the people of God have a safe harbor within it.

- Not only are the faithful remnant protected from the great destruction, but a glorious era of the Spirit, of prosperity, and of purity will arise in the midst of this day. See Joel 3:1-3, 4:17-18.

C. Other prophets spoke of a day of the Lord, which would be one of great judgment and wrath. See Amos 5:18-27; Obadiah 15-21; Zeph. 1:14-18; Mal 3:1, 23-24. There was generally a theme afterwards, or as part of the same vision of a glorious restoration.

D. Here, the order is: (1) the day of the Lord comes as a purifying vengeance on the people of God; (2) God then restores His people and pours out His spirit upon them; (3) the nations then gather for war against the people of God, but the people of God are triumphant and God expels the enemies forever.

III. There is also, in the midst of this day of the Lord, the great theme of the pouring out of the spirit upon all mankind. Joel 3:1-5.

A. Moses had long ago wished that the spirit be given to all God's people. See Ex. 11:29. Isaiah and Ezekiel spoke of a time in which there would be a new spirit given to God's people, allowing them to know God more perfectly. See Is. 44:3-5, 59:20-22; Ez. 36:26-27, 29:25-29.

B. Now Joel speaks in even more dramatic terms of this spirit being poured out in the form of prophecies, dreams and visions for all peoples in the midst of the day of judgment. The special presence of God given only to the few is now to be poured out on all the faithful, including the servants and handmaids. It is still limited, but only by people's fidelity, not by God's plan.

C. This prophecy would be fulfilled at Pentecost and is still being fulfilled in all of the faithful, especially as lived out in the sacrament of Confirmation. Thus, this passage is one of the optional readings for the vigil of Pentecost and for Confirmation. See also Catechism 1287.

IV. The New Testament would pick up on the themes of judgment and of the spirit being poured forth upon humanity.

A. Jesus quotes Joel's prophecy of judgement in His parable of the seed's mysterious growth as an analogy to the growth of the kingdom of God. See Mark 4:29. He also refers to Joel's prophecy of darkness in both in the natural disaster of Israel and in the great battle at the end, as well as Isaiah and Ezekiel's prophecies along similar lines, when speaking of the great tribulation to come. See Joel 2:10, 4:15; Matt. 24:29, Mark 13:24, Luke 21:25.

- The Book of Revelation also seems to take the plague of locusts described in Joel as the inspiration for the plague of

locusts at the sixth trumpet. Rev. 9:7-12.

B. Peter quotes Joel in his famous Pentecost speech, in which he describes the event as the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy of the outpouring of the Spirit. See Acts 2:17-21. The idea is that Israel's history is being fulfilled and the Gospel will now be proclaimed by all the faithful to all nations.

C. Likewise, St. Paul quotes Joel in describing the universality of God's call to holiness. Romans 10:12-13.