

The Message of Joel

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Joel is one of the most important Prophets of the Tanach, not only being significant for what one understands regarding the Day of the LORD or *Yom ADONAI*, but also for what one expects in the Last Days regarding the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon God's people. Perhaps because of its shortness, being only three chapters, Messianics today really do not focus a great deal of attention to Joel and his message(s) for us. In too many cases, our encounters with Joel are with a quote here or a quote there, possibly only in a song we might sing, with us not understanding a larger context of his prophecies. As we enter into a time when the Prophets are restored to a position of prominence in our Messianic Bible reading and theological engagement, the Prophet Joel indeed has some great treasures to deliver to us.

One of the difficulties that does exist with interpreting the Book of Joel is that unlike some of the other prophetic books, which often mention contemporary events or perhaps even explicitly state the dates when various prophecies are delivered, Joel gives us no direct clues as to its composition. Everything we assume about the backdrop of Joel's prophecies has to be guessed. We know that Joel was the "son of Pethuel" (1:1),¹ and that he does have a message focused around Judah and Jerusalem (2:32; 3:1, 6, 8, 16-20). Some believe he was somehow associated with the Temple priesthood. But did Joel prophesy before or after the dispersion of the Northern Kingdom? Some believe that Joel is post-exilic. *This continues to remain a mystery and debate for many.* The Book of Joel is placed second after the Twelve Prophets in the Jewish book order of the Tanach,² but the Greek Septuagint places it fourth after the Book of Micah,³ possibly giving us a hint as to when Joel prophesied. It is probably safe to say that Joel is pre-exilic and that he prophesied sometime in the Seventh or Sixth Centuries B.C.E., but conservatives are not entirely agreed. Our appeal as interpreters is ultimately to the text and to what Joel says, regardless of when the Lord spoke through him.⁴

The Book of Joel does not exactly begin on the most positive note. He urges the elders and those who live in the Land of Israel (1:2), with the instruction to tell their children (1:3), "What the locust swam has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten" (1:4). This description of locusts is not necessarily to an ecological plague, but instead the drunkards (1:5) are told, "A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white" (1:6-7). A foreign invader has come to Israel and has left a distinct mark of destruction in its path.

The Prophet Joel says to "Mourn like a virgin in sackcloth grieving for the husband of her youth" (1:8). The offerings at the House of the Lord will be cut off with the priests mourning (1:9), and the fields and their produce will be dried up (1:11-12). Joel actually says "Surely the joy of mankind is withered away" (1:12). Making reference to *sason min-b'nei adam*, "rejoicing...from the sons of men" (NASU), is a good indication that this prophecy could include a warning that involves more than just Israel, or at the very least will have an effect beyond that of Israel.

No indication is thusfar stated in Joel's prophecy as to *why* these locusts come, but vs. 12-20 seem to imply that God uses these locusts to enact some kind of punishment or judgments. Joel cries, "Put on sackcloth, O priests and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God...Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD" (1:13, 14). A *qadeshu-tzom* and an *atzerah* are to be called "for that day! For the Day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty!" (1:15). These

¹ Rendered in the Greek Septuagint as "the son of Bathuel" (LXE).

² Rudolph Kittel, et. al., *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1977), pp 1009-1015; Aron Dotan, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), pp 813-817.

³ Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979), 2:519-524.

⁴ For a further discussion, consult "The Date of the Book of Joel," in Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1433.

statements may be too general here to immediately associate with an “end-time scenario”; the Prophet Joel’s declaration is simply that *Yom ADONAI* “shall come like havoc from Shaddai” (NJPS). Here in ch. 1, the Day of the LORD is depicted as God intervening in history.

The people have been blessed by their God, but now the blessings and their agricultural prosperity have been cut off (1:16-18). All Joel can do is, “To you, O LORD, I call” (1:19). He knows nothing else, as “Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the open pastures” (1:20). **It is certainly a time that demands sobriety from God’s people, entreating Him to act upon His righteousness.** But there is more to the Day of the LORD that must be considered.

Joel alerts the people to “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble. For the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—” (2:1). But this *Yom ADONAI* is no time to indiscriminately blow the *shofar* in some kind of rejoicing—it is a very serious time that demands one to pay attention! It is “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come” (2:2). This army will come with fire before it, being immensely powerful (2:3-4), and is said to “leap over the mountaintops” (2:5). It is an army that instills a great deal of fear in those who encounter it: “At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale... Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (2:6, 10-11).

This army described by the Prophet Joel is led by none other than the Lord Himself. While ch. 1 depicts a scene contemporary to Ancient Judah, ch. 2 depicts a scene contemporary with the Millennial Kingdom and/or the eschaton. Yeshua the Messiah’s words in Matthew 24:29 regarding His return include a direct allusion to Joel 2:10: “Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’” **Yeshua’s Second Coming and the judgment that ensues directly pertain to what YOM ADONAI or the Day of the LORD is in the Tanach Scriptures.**

Even though the Day of the LORD is a time of intense pain and sorrow, He says “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing!” (2:12-14a). With the Day of the LORD imminent, the Prophet Joel says once again to “declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly” (2:15b-16a). Elders, children, infants, bridegrooms and brides, and priests are to all come before Him (2:16b-17a)—specifically so that the nations’ word for them is not “Where is their God?” (2:17).

When God’s people come before Him in total humility, “Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people” (2:18). He promises to “never again... make you an object of scorn to the nations” (2:19). The army coming from the north will be driven away by Him and defeated (2:20), and as Joel says “Surely he has done great things. Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things” (2:21). Zion and its produce will be fruitful once again (2:22-24) as God restores what the locusts have taken away (2:25-26). And as a result, His people “will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed” (2:27). There is strong reason to believe that what Joel has just detailed involves the Battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19:15-19), and the ensuing restoration of the Land of Israel during the Millennium.

The interesting thing about prophecies in the Tanach is that they are often not delivered in any sequential order—hence the multiple and varied interpretations of them that we all encounter in our Biblical Studies! Joel 2:28-32 is one of the most important sections of Joel’s prophecies, beginning with the enigmatic clause *v’hayah acharei-ken*, “And afterward” (NIV) or “After that” (NJPS). It would seem that “afterward” is best taken as a trajectory reference pointing

to the End of Days (however long such a period might be), as opposed to it occurring only after the Land of Israel is fruitful again, because surely as His people cry out to Him in prayer and fasting, what God plans to do will be accomplished:

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls” (2:28-31).

There are considerable angles with which interpreters have viewed this critical prophecy, but most important is that God’s Spirit will be poured out upon *kol basar* or “all flesh” (RSV). There is no discrimination here when it comes to God’s Spirit being dispensed upon people; it **includes both men and women**. *True revelation will come forth from this*. This massive outpouring of the Spirit will consummate in *Yom ADONAI* and terrible judgment upon the Earth—but also in a great salvation where people look to HaShem for their salvation! We should not be surprised by any means why the Apostle Peter applied this prophecy to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21), although his reference to “the last days” some 2,000 years ago might give us cause to consider for a moment *how long* such a period really is in God’s eyes from His perspective sitting outside of time and space.⁵

The Last Days will surely consummate with the Lord restoring “the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem” (3:1), and as Joel says He “will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land” (3:2). The nations who did harm to God’s people will be judged for their great sins against them (3:3), with some specific nations targeted: Tyre and Sidon, Philistia, Greeks, and Sabaeans (3:4-8). The nations’ warriors will be arisen for war, being told “Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears...Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!” (3:9, 12-13). Revelation 14:20 gives us more information on the judgment that is to befall:

“They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.”

The Day of the LORD or *Yom ADONAI* will not be a pleasant time, but one when “The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel” (3:16). God’s righteousness will at last vindicate His people, saving them from their enemies, but there will be massive casualties and significant blood shed to acquire that vindication.

The Prophet Joel’s perspective is specifically one as a servant to the Southern Kingdom, and no one should dispute that the enemies of the Jewish people—and all of the terrible harm done to them—will be punished by God. As He concludes through His Prophet, “Then you will know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her...But Egypt will be desolate, Edom a desert waste, because of violence done to the people of Judah,⁶ in whose land they shed innocent blood. Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem throughout all generations. Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon.’ The LORD dwells in Zion!” (3:17, 19-21). Some of the sinful crimes judged by God may be future evils we have yet to see, but the promise of Jerusalem’s restoration remains key. As both Joel and as we should declare: *ADONAI shoken b’Tzion!* “HASHEM dwells in Zion” (ATS).

⁵ Consult the editor’s article “What Happened to Our Eschatology?”

⁶ Heb. *b’nei Yehudah*.

While it is a relatively short text, the Book of Joel has many things that should cause any Believer to pause and consider the judgment of our God. Joel is traditionally considered on *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath occurring between *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. I personally believe that Yeshua's return and the gathering of the saints into the clouds to meet Him will be on *Rosh HaShanah*, followed by a culmination with the final battle on *Yom Kippur*. Knowing this, Joel is something that one should consider at least once a year, never being ignored.

Whether you read through Joel at this time of year or at some other time, the Day of the LORD forces each of us to think about the inevitable return of Messiah Yeshua, a great battle between the armies of Heaven and the armies of Earth, and most importantly God's righteousness triumphing over sin. The Book of Joel should force us to our knees to pray for Planet Earth, so that our family, friends, and loved ones **never stand before God in condemnation**. Even if *we* may have personal redemption in Yeshua, it is still our responsibility to intercede for *others*. That great and terrible Day of the LORD will enact severe retribution and have eternal consequences for those engulfed by it!

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