

THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

THE MINOR PROPHETS:

THE PROPHECY OF JOEL, PT. 1

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As we begin our study on Joel's Prophecy, we will be reminded by two very important passages in the New Testament about the Old Testament Prophets:

ESV Hebrews 1:1-2: Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

God's Word to our fathers was through the prophets, and God has spoke to us in the New Testament era by His Son who is heir of all things. The prophets and God's Son spoke the same message of God's salvation and judgment, but the Son of God was the ultimate and climactic fulfillment of all the prophet's teachings (cf. Luke 24:24ff, 44-48).

ESV 2 Peter 1:20-21: knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Although the prophecies of the Old Covenant were preached and written by men, they were ultimately authored by the Holy Spirit as He inspired and led the men to speak God's Word infallibly (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-4:2).

In our consideration of the Book of Joel, we shall learn in our first sermon primarily about the form and literary structure of the prophecy. We shall also focus our attention on defining some literary concepts and genres to better understand Joel's prophecy specifically and to be able to interpret for ourselves the prophetic literature in general.

A summary of the message of Joel's Prophecy is that the Day of the LORD is imminent, there is great judgment from God coming for Covenant disobedience, and the people must repent in order to find salvation (1)

HISTORICAL DATE AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF JOEL

Considering the date and author of the Book of Joel, the interpreter searches in vain to find detailed information from within the book itself. The opening superscription of the book merely says:

"The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethnuel."

Author and Date of the Prophecy of Joel (2)

Throughout the history of the Church varying scholars have suggested different dates according to internal considerations from within the text, or the comparison of themes within the book and the other "twelve" or Latter Prophets (Minor Prophets in the Christian Canon), and other canonical considerations. Some scholars have suggested a pre-exilic date of the 9th century BC, during the reign of Joash of Judah ; others have suggested a pre-Exilic date in the 6th century BC ; other scholars have dated this book in the post-Exilic period (more recently, ca. 520-500 BC) or as one of the last prophetic books written .

The author is a person named Joel ("The LORD is God"), son of Pethuel [בְּרֵךְ-פְּתוּאֵל יוֹאֵל], and scholars have suggested that if the book should be dated in the 9th century, then Joel was probably a temple prophet of the Temple cult in Jerusalem. The arguments for each date and the person of the author are helpful, but the most important consideration of the book is its message, particularly the internal themes within the book itself.

This is the important message of God to his people in a particular time of redemptive history. Apart from the concerns of a specific date, *we know that Joel was a prophet who lived after the time of David and prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and the writing of the New Testament.*

A summary outline of the Book of Joel (3) (Using the Christian canon as a division into three chapters; the Hebrew Masoretic Text has four chapters):

(1) Superscription/ Introduction to the book (1:1); (2) Plague on the land/ Mourning for sins (1:2-12); (3) Joel's call of repentance to God's people (1:13-18); (4) Joel's lament to God for his people (1:19-20); (4) The greater and more destructive Day of the Lord as warrior of his wrathful army (2:1-11); (5) God as merciful judge of his people (2:12-17); (6) God's response to his people's repentance/ God's refreshing of the land (2:18-27); (7) The eschatological day of God's judgment and the salvation of his people (2:28-32); (8) God's judgment of the wicked/ Separation of the wicked from the land (3:1-16a); (9) God's dwelling with his people in the land permanently (3:16b-21).

When considering the epoch in which Joel prophesied, it should be remembered that Joel is known as a Latter Prophet in the Hebrew canon. In redemptive-history, the prophet Joel is an heir and interpreter of a progressive prophetic tradition. The prophet Moses is the fountainhead as covenant mediator and intercessor: "And by a prophet the LORD brought Israel up out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved." (Hos. 12:13; cf. Ex. 32:1-34; Num. 14:13-35; cf. John 1:14-18; 21:25; Heb. 3:1-6) (Interpreting, VanGemeren, 37). The prophet Samuel bridges the epoch between Moses and Joshua to David and Solomon. Elijah is closely connected to the Prophet Joel as the first "covenant prosecutor". Elijah shaped the course of the Latter Prophets and marked the end of one redemptive-historical era. One era was characterized by divine patience and the other was the beginning of an era characterized by *divine purification of his people*. Unlike Moses who interceded on behalf of Israel (Ex. 31-34), Elijah accused God's people of infidelity.

The days of God's patience were drawing to an end, and a new era was coming. Elijah and the Prophet Joel had prophetic ministries who charged God's people with breaking the covenant and pronounced God's judgment on them (1 Kings 18:21; cf. Joel 1-2; Micah 3:1-3; 4:-6) (Interpreting, VanGemeren, 37).

LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS IN THE BOOK OF JOEL

Important in our study of Joel is a consideration of the *literary devices* that were used in Hebrew prophetic and poetic books of the Bible. Considering the content (prophecy) as well as the form (structure of the prophecy) can be a complimentary exegetical exercise to aid in the interpretation of the passage.

In the Book of Joel, there are literary considerations to recognize in order to interpret Joel's message (4). ***Three main characteristics of Hebrew prophetic literature or poetry are parallelism, imagery and terseness*** (Ryken, Longman 86). There are elements of all three in the Book of Joel. In the verses to be considered in chapter two verses 3-5, consider the following example from each of the verses. Joel 2:3 says:

Parallelism (4a)- The use of identical or equivalent syntactic constructions in corresponding clauses or phrases.

[A] Before them a fire devours;
[B] ***behind them a flame burns.***
[A1] Before them the land is like the garden of Eden;
[B1] ***behind them a desolate wilderness.***
[Cpt] Nothing shall escape them.

In the first two cola (Hebrew lines), literary parallelism is noticed. The structure shows the author's concern for not only the content of his message, but the importance of his form to communicate the content. **James Kugel** has described Hebrew parallelism as "A, what's more B" and is found in many of the Psalms. **C. S. Lewis** has described parallelism as "saying the same thing twice in different words; ***the second part nuances the first part in some way***" (Ryken, Longman 83).

Line A- [Before them a fire devours;]
Line B- [behind them a flame burns.]
Line A1- [Before them the land is like the garden of Eden;]
Line B1- [behind them a desolate wilderness.]

The main thought of the Prophet Joel in these verses is that the powerful army that is coming is all-consuming both before and behind them. He begins lines A and A1 with the Hebrew phrase "before them" [לִפְנֵיהֶם], then lines B and B1 begins with "behind them" [וְאַחֲרֵיהֶם].

Not only does this structure give the text "movement" to describe the army that is coming, but it makes it plain that the imminent destruction at the hand of the LORD is

comprehensive and devastating. The parallelism and the propositional relation of the words in this verse should be interpreted this way:

Line A- "Before this great and powerful army (v.2) a fire devours."

Line B- ***"What's more, behind them a flame burns."***

Line A1- "Before this great and powerful army's destruction, the land is beautiful as the Garden of Eden."

Line B1- ***"What's more, after their movement through the land, it is like a desolate wilderness."***

Cpt- "As a result, nothing shall escape them."

The final phrase of v. 3 is the complimentary phrase "nothing shall escape them" to additionally add to the meaning that not only is the army's destruction comprehensive, but nothing shall escape their movement through the land- - nothing shall be saved.

Imagery (4b)- *The use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas. "Show me" in language.*

In chapter 2 verses 4 and 5, there is an example of Hebrew imagery used in prophetic and poetic literature. ***The Prophet Joel used imagery to stimulate the imagination by embodying multiple meanings in a concise form. This triggers thinking, but also an emotional response from the people to whom Joel preached*** (Ryken, Longman 83).

[v.4] Their appearance is ***like the appearance of horses***;
and ***like fast steeds*** they do run.

[v.5] ***Like the noise of chariots*** on the tops of mountains, they do skip;
like the noise of a flame of fire devouring chaff,
like a strong army set in battle array.

The Prophet Joel describes their appearance in verse 4 "as the appearance of horses." Then he says "what's more, like fast steeds they do run." In verse 5 he says, "like the noise of chariots, on the mountain tops they do skip; what's more, like the noise of a flame of fire...like a strong army prepared in battle gear." This parallelism using descriptive imagery of the times is effective to show the devastating horror that is expected, anticipating the mighty army that is coming into Israel as the LORD's judgment.

The imagery is noticed by the way the Hebrew is written with the "like/ as" contrast, much like the "before/ behind" contrast in verse 3. For example, verse four begins literally "like the appearance of horses, is their appearance [בְּמַרְאֵהוֹם]; what's more, like fast steeds [וְכַפְרָשִׁים] they do run." In verse 5, the prophet uses the same contrast-structure to further describe the army. "Like the noise of chariots...[בְּקוֹל מְרָבּוֹת]; what's more, like the noise of a flame of fire burning chaff [בְּקוֹל לְהַב]; what's more, like a strong army (people) prepared for battle [בְּקוֹל לְהַב]."

Terseness (4c)- “Effectively concise”; Succinct, compact, neat, concentrated

Immediately, the structure and form should help to interpret the serious message which the Prophet Joel read to the people of Israel. The important literary devices used by Joel give a powerful and emotional movement to the text as it was understood by the people of Israel. Consider the propositional relations of the lines in verses 1-5 to understand and feel the message of the prophet in its context with a paraphrase of the verses:

[v.1] "Blow a trumpet in Zion!
what's more, sound an alarm in my holy mountain of Jerusalem.
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble;
Why? Because the Day of the LORD comes;
what's more, it is near."

[v.2] "What kind of day will the Day of the LORD be like?
A day of darkness and gloominess,
a day of clouds and thick darkness;
what's more as the dawn spread upon the mountains.
Why? Because a great and strong people are coming;
what's more, there has never been any people like them,
neither shall there be any more after them,
for many generations to come."

[v.3] "What are the people on the Day of the LORD like?
Before them, a fire devours;
what's more, behind them a flame burns.
Before them, the land is as the Garden of Eden;
what's more, behind them the land is a desolate wilderness.
As a result, nothing shall escape them."

[v.4] "Like the appearance of horses is their appearance;
what's more, like fast steeds they run."

[v.5] "Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains they skip;
what's more, like the noise of a flame of fire devouring stubble.
In addition, they are like a strong people (army) prepared for battle."

Locusts! Locusts! (5)- The “Attack of the Killer Locusts” *Coming Soon to a drive-in near you!*

The context of the Book of Joel took place after a historical locust plague had devastated the land. Joel uses the imagery of the great devastation of locusts to warn the people (Joel addresses the people as "Judah," "Jerusalem," and "Israel," 2:27; 3:16) and to describe "the army of the Lord" who is coming upon Israel, which will be God's hand of judgment.

Some scholars argue that the "army of the Lord" could be understood as a literal army or as archetypal language in Joel's use of the locust plague to describe the future (cf. Joel 1:4; 2:2,5,11,25, I do not think this is necessary; it seems that the army was a real historical army that God sent against Israel). Regardless of whether the use of "army" is a figurative or a real army, the LORD sent the devastation as a judgment for covenant disobedience, and God was "head of his army" as the Great and Divine Warrior who punishes the people and the land for covenant breaking, Joel 2:11,25 (the army is also referred to as a "nation", Joel 1:6 [גִּבְיָ]).

Apocalyptic Literature (6)- "Unveiling or revelation" literally. Apocalyptic writing is a branch of visionary writing that portrays the end of history and the eternity that succeeds that time.

Joel's prophecy uses language and imagery found in other pieces of *apocalyptic literature*. One of the main characteristics of apocalyptic literature is "symbolism" which is found in much of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. *The use of apocalyptic language in prophecy concerning Eschatology or the end when God's judgment will occur, is to draw a sharp contrast between the characteristics of Joel's age with the age that is to come* (cf. Zeph. 1:2; 3:9-20) (Ladd, 153).

The language of Joel's locusts and the army which is to come, could be understood as an **"epiphor,"** a characteristic of metaphor which is a transference or movement from something well-known (locust plague/ army of the LORD) to something lesser known (the Day of God's judgment) (Ricoeur, 9-43).

Joel warns the people of Israel as the covenant prosecutor (VanGemeren 42ff), of the coming devastation upon the land and pleads with the people to "return to their God" so that God may be gracious and restore the land from its devastation.

The apocalyptic language of the locusts and the army of the LORD's judgment against the land, ultimately is God's accommodation to teach his people the consequences of breaking his covenant, sinful, cosmic rebellion against their King, and the results of a true and contrite repentance (a "turning back" to God) [שׁוּבוּ לַיהוָה], that will restore God's blessings on the people and the land (P. 51:6,16,17; cf. Is. 57:15; 65:2-7).

The graciousness and patience of God toward his people is a dominant theme throughout the whole of Scripture and particularly in these prophetic utterances (cf. Hos. 6:1; 12:6; 14:1; Joel 2:12; Zech. 1:3; 10:9; 2 Peter 3:9).

THEMES IN THE BOOK OF JOEL

The central message or overarching theme of the Book of Joel is the Day of the LORD - the Day of the LORD's righteous judgment is near-- and the need of repentance from the people (7) (Joel 1:15; 2:1,11,15,31; 3:14; cf. Ez. 30:2,3; Is. 13:6).

Odendaal says that "every historical coming of this day [the Day of the LORD] is always a type and promise of its final coming and forms an intrusion of the consummation (Interpreting, VanGemeren, 45).

One important theme related to the Day of the LORD in Joel's prophecy is that the Land of Israel is punished or receiving from God covenant curses for covenantal disobedience (which was what the great Prophet Moses told the people would happen in Deuteronomy 26-30). The Day of the LORD has dawned or appeared in the Land of Israel (although it was believed by many in that time, that God's judgment or Day of the LORD would come upon the sinful world. But God shows that judgment begins with the house (or land!) of God!

The Book of Joel begins with the historical occasion of the land of Israel being devastated by a great plague of locusts as we have seen (1:2-10). The prophet Joel "with the word of the LORD" (1:1), says "hear this" [שְׁמַעוּ-זאת] and "take account of" [סַפְּרוּ] God's judgment (cf. Hos. 6:5-7).

The prophet consecutively uses the imperative form of the verb at the beginning of his prophecy to emphasize to the people the seriousness of the word of the LORD: "Awake" [הִקְצִי]; "Cry" [וּבְכִי]; "Wail" [וְהִלְלוּ]; "Lament" [אֲלִי]; "Be Ashamed" [הִבְיִשׁוּ]; "Howl" [הִילְלוּ]; "Gird yourselves" [הִתְגַּדְּוּ]; "Consecrate a fast" [קַדְּשׁוּ-צוֹם]; "Call a sacred assembly" [קְרְאוּ אֶת-עֲצֻרְתִּי]; "Gather the elders" [אִסְפוּ זְקֵנִים]; Cry out to the LORD" [וּזַעְקוּ אֶל-יְהוָה], in response to God's judgment upon the land (1:5,8,10,13,14).

This prophecy is directed to all the people of the land: to the young and the old (1:3), the common people (drunkards, virgins, vinedressers or farmers, 1:5,8,11), and the priests of Israel (1:11-14). The reason why the people must repent in light of the devastation of the covenantal land is that the Day of the LORD is at hand; a day of destruction and wrath.

In verses, 1:19-20, the prophet Joel laments on behalf of the people when he says: "

ESV Joel 1:19-20: To you, O LORD, I call. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flame has burned all the trees of the field.²⁰ Even the beasts of the field pant for you because the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

At the beginning of chapter two, Joel proclaims and warns the people of God's wrath to come in the Day of the LORD using apocalyptic imagery of the devastation of locusts. The prophet Joel is telling the people "if you thought the locust plague was comprehensively devastating (1:4,16,17), how much greater will be the comprehensive wrath and devastation of God's justice that is to come; if you thought the devastation of the land was great, how much greater will be the eschatological and devastating wrath of God upon the people of the land, and the entire creation" (2:1-11; specifically 2:10; cf. 2:30, 31; 3:15,16).

The army of the Lord is the imagery that Joel uses to describe this wrath to come-the Day of the LORD (2:3-5). This army is like the locusts that have devastated the land, but the

devastation will be greater when the army changes the land from an Edenic garden to a desolate wilderness (2:3).

In the latter half of chapter two, Joel calls the people to repentance (2:12-17: From infants and children, to the elders (2:16); from those to be wed, even to the priests 2:16,17). A central verse within the Book of Joel, which should be recognized as the turning point of the prophecy, is the LORD's call for a "return to the LORD your God" [שובו עִרְיָ - "Return to me"], which is exceedingly common in Old Testament prophetic literature (Is. 55:7 [וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־יְהוָה]; cf. Is. 44:22 [שׁוּבָה אֵלַי]; Jer. 3:12 [שׁוּבָה מִשָּׁבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל]; 18:11 [שׁוּבוּ נָא]; Ezek. 33:11 [שׁוּבוּ שׁוּבוּ]; Hosea 14:1 [דַּר יְהוָה] [שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל]).

The prophet Joel says in 2:13 (8), “...*And rend your hearts and not your garments.*” *Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.*”; (“and he relents from sending calamity,” NIV).

If the people will repent of their sins (“turn” from their sins to the LORD), the gracious God of the covenant people, promises to refresh the devastated land, return the covenantal blessings to his people, and even to the animals of the land. Ultimately, God promises to restore all creation as before the plagues (2:19-27; cf. Romans 8: 19-22).

All of creation is being affected by God’s judgment (all of creation)! It is interesting how the land in Joel's prophecy is given human qualities as it reacts to God's judgment.

The reaction of the land to God’s judgment is described when the prophet says, “the land mourns” (1:10 [אֲבָלָה אֲדָמָה] cf. Hos.4:3); the beasts groan (or pant) (1:18 [מִזֶּה־נִנְּחָה בְּהִמָּה] cf. Job 38:41; Ps.104:21; Rom. 8:20-22); “the earth quakes and the heavens tremble” (the whole creation reacts! The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw from shining- 2:10b; 3:15; cf. Is. 13:10; 34:4).

Although the Day of the LORD will come when God in his wrath will punish covenant breakers, the prophecy of Joel concludes with great promises for those who believe God’s promises!

God will save his people: He will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh (2:28); whoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered (2:32); He will gather the remnant, those the LORD has called (2:32b); He will subdue the nations and separate them from his people, permanently sending them out of the land (3:4-15); The LORD will be the ultimate and permanent refuge of his people (3:16; cf. Ps. 23:6b); He will bring restoration to the land and the people of the land, and the LORD will dwell with his people permanently in Zion (3:17-21). These are great promises and truths that this prophecy communicates in Scripture for all of God's people and his creation: “The LORD dwells in Zion” (Joel 3:21b): The LORD dwells in the midst of His people for eternity (cf. Rev. 21:1ff).

These great promises and blessings will happen also on the Day of the LORD. On the Day of the LORD, *there will be both blessings and curses*; covenantal blessings for God's people, and curses of wrathful judgment for the wicked (Blessings: Is. 35:8-10; Obad. 19-21; Zeph. 3:18-20; Zech. 14:10,11; curses: Is. 10:3; 63:4-6; Jer. 51:2; Ezek. 7:7; Hos. 1:9; Joel 2:2; Zeph. 2:2).

(9) To summarize the overarching structure of the Book of Joel: (1) Covenant Land Rebuked (Creation Cursed); (2) Covenant Land Reacts (Creation Cries); (3) Covenant Land Repents (Creation Corrects); (4) Covenant Land Refreshed (Creation Cleaned); (5) Covenant Land Restored (Creation Consummated).

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL DAY OF THE LORD IN THE LAND (10)

To interpret Joel's prophecy in light of the whole of redemptive-history, it must be remembered that the New Testament was written by "Old Testament men" inspired by the Spirit of God whom Joel prophesied would be poured out on God's people (Joel 2:28ff; Acts 2:37ff). Therefore, being intimate with the Old Testament apocalyptic language, the New Testament writers, living in the last days were excellent interpreters of such Old Testament themes as the "Day of the LORD."

The Day of the LORD's wrath is described in New Testament passages by these inspired men such as 1 Thessalonians 1:10 as "the wrath to come"; Romans 2:5 as "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God"; 1 Thessalonians 4:15 as "the coming of the Lord"; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7 as "the day of judgment"; 2 Peter 3:10 as "the day of the LORD"; 2 Peter 3:12 as "the coming day of God".

With the coming of Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Day of the LORD does not immediately come, but is graciously postponed as repentance and salvation is held out to all so that they might avoid the coming wrath. In fact, when John the Baptist comes he says that the axe is at the root of the tree (judgment is imminent) but there is time to bring forth fruits of repentance (Luke 3:1ff).

Jesus the Messiah does come with winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff through the preaching of His Word, and he comes to with the Holy Spirit and fire, but although judgment in the Day of the LORD is imminent in Jesus, it is nevertheless delayed.

Although many in the Old Covenant era thought that the judgment of God's wrath or the Day of the LORD would be immediate with the coming of Messiah, Jesus reveals that there is a time in between (cf. Isaiah 61:1ff; Luke 4:18ff). Yes, the wrath of God is being revealed now in the present, but now also is the Day of Salvation for both Jew and Gentile to turn to Jesus Christ and be saved. The wrath of God will come fully when Christ returns.

Ultimately, the fire that devours before the LORD's wrath as Joel prophecies concerning Israel shall not merely consume the land, but consume the earth, destroying ungodly men, and melting the elements with fervent heat (2 Peter 3:7,12). The flaming fire of God's

wrath will render vengeance to them that know not God (both Jew and Gentile), and to them that obey not the gospel of the Lord Jesus; they shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thess. 1:8,9).

On this great and terrible day of the LORD's wrath, the land will be cleansed of the wicked, and the righteous will inherit the land eternally because of Jesus Christ, when his Kingdom shall be set up eternally (Mt. 5:3-12; cf. Hosea 2:19-23; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:14,15; Obadiah 17-21; Micah 7:18-20; Habakkuk 3:18; Zeph. 3:17-20; Zech. 14:20,21). Outside of the land, the kingdom of God and his Christ, shall be the wicked and unbelieving (Mt. 22:11-14; 1 Cor. 9,10; Eph. 5:3-5; Rev. 19:21; 21:8; 22:15).

In light of this reality, Jesus says: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit (not merely the land), but the earth." Jesus Christ has come to save his people from the wrath to come prophesied in images by Joel in the Old Covenant. Like the Old Covenant Israelites to whom Joel prophesied, the locust plague (the great army) was nothing compared to the punishment of God to be revealed!

Jesus Christ saves his people from this coming wrath by taking God's wrath upon himself. On the cross we see an intrusion of God's Last Day wrath (or the wrath like the Day of the LORD) upon Jesus Christ. In Him we find shelter from the wrath to come and a sacrifice that satisfies God's judgment against sin.

Thanks be to God for his Christ!

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