

3

JOEL

Introduction

A number of factors suggest the second half of the fifth century as a likely context for Joel's proclaiming his message. The Babylonian Exile is spoken of as being in the past (see 3:1-3); the Greeks are active in the region (3:6); the temple is functioning (see 3:17); the community leaders are the priests and the old men (not a king). Joel speaks of Jerusalem as having walls (2:7, 9). These were restored under Nehemiah in the middle of the fifth century. Finally he relies on Obadiah, whose prophecy fits best sometime in the first half of the fifth century.

Joel takes the occasion of a catastrophic locust plague and a drought to urge his contemporaries to genuine repentance. He sees these as presaging the day of God's final judgment, which he declares to be imminent. Though the locust plague and drought witness to God's anger against them, Joel holds out the prospect of their avoiding God's judgment, if they, even now, repent, and turn in sorrow to their God. He assures them that the nations that oppress Judah will be judged. If the people repent, God's judgment on Judah will inaugurate a period of prosperity like the paradise that God always intended this world to be. Since God dwells in his temple in Jerusalem, they should know that all will be well.

Inspired by Joel?

The key focus of this scroll is on God's judgment. We cannot escape from the fact that we are accountable for the decisions we make. What we do matters.

Joel holds out the possibility of repentance (2:12-14). A change of mind, heart and behaviour will affect the judgment of God.

There is also the encouraging reassurance that God is in our midst (2:17).

We find the expression ‘the word of YHWH came to ...’ in Zechariah (see 1:1; 1:7; 4:8; 6:9; 7:1; 7:8) and in Jonah (see 1:1; 3:1). The prophet’s name, Joel, means ‘YHWH is God’.

In verses 2-4 Joel refers to a devastating plague of locusts that has crippled Judah. According to the understanding of the day, Joel sees the plague as willed by God as punishment for grave infidelity. His call is for a change in behaviour. Joel also wants his contemporaries to make sure the plague is never forgotten, lest they also forget the lesson needed to be learned, and a similar catastrophe be repeated.

In verses 5-7 he calls the people to weep and wail. The all-devouring locusts have cut off their supply of wine and figs. Notice how Joel speaks of the land as belonging to God (‘my land’, verse 6; ‘my vines’, ‘my fig trees’, verse 7).

In verses 8-10, he reiterates his call to ‘lament’, to cry out like a virgin who has lost the husband to whom she is betrothed before being able to enjoy their conjugal union. So disastrous is the plague that they can’t even find enough cereal and wine for the required temple offerings, which further jeopardises their relationship with YHWH. The priests, whose role it is to minister in the temple, are desperate (verse 9), as is the ground itself.

In verses 11-12, Joel calls on the farmers to ‘be dismayed’ and to ‘wail’, for the harvest has utterly failed.

¹The word of YHWH that came to Joel son of Pethuel: ²Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? ³Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. ⁴What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.

⁵Wake up, you drunkards, and weep; wail, all you wine-drinkers, over the sweet wine that is denied you. ⁶For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. ⁷It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it aside; their branches have turned white.

⁸Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth. ⁹The cereal offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of YHWH. The priests mourn, the ministers of YHWH. ¹⁰The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails.

¹¹Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. ¹²The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, date palm, and apple – all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people.

The priests are to lead the people in lamentation

¹³Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Cereal offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God.

¹⁴Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of YHWH your God, and cry out to YHWH.

¹⁵Alas for the day! For the day of YHWH is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

¹⁶Is not the food cut off before our eyes, joy and gladness from the house of our God? ¹⁷The seed shrivels under the clods, the storehouses are desolate; the granaries are ruined because the grain has failed.

¹⁸How the animals groan! The herds of cattle wander about because there is no pasture for them; even the flocks of sheep are dazed.

¹⁹To you, YHWH, I cry. For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and flames have burned all the trees of the field. ²⁰Even the wild animals cry to you because the watercourses are dried up, and fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness.

Joel has already spoken of the priests as mourning their inability to offer the prescribed sacrifices (verse 9).

They are to 'pass the night in sackcloth (verse 13)

They are to 'sanctify a fast', that is, to set aside an occasion for communal fasting. They are also to gather everyone to assemble in the temple to perform the customary ritual acts of repentance.

The catastrophe of the locust plague is seen by Joel as a sign of the imminent coming of the 'day of YHWH'. Traditionally this was expected to be a day when their God would intervene to save his people. The prophet Amos (5:18-20) warned his contemporaries that the Day of YHWH was a day of judgment. Zephaniah picked this up (see Zephaniah 1), as did Isaiah (Isaiah 2:10-22) and Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 7). Joel is doing the same here. Verse 15 echoes Isaiah.

Wail, for the day of YHWH is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty!

– Isaiah 13:6

In verses 16-20 Joel describes the drought that followed the devastation brought about by the locust plague.

The prophet adds his own cry. Following on the locust plague, the drought is totally devastating.

In his dramatic picture of the 'day of YHWH' (already mentioned in 1:15), Joel employs the language of warfare. The devastation wrought by the army is described in terms of the devastation brought about by the locust plague (chapter 1).

Another set of images are taken from nature. The description in verse 2 echoes Zephaniah.

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

– Zephaniah 1:15

The imagery of fire and stubble in verse 5 echoes Obadiah verse 18. The 'anguish and pale faces of verse 6 echoes Nahum 2:10. Joel is declaring the imminent fulfilment of the words of earlier prophets.

Joel also calls upon imagery associated traditionally with a theophany (verse 10). Compare:

The stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light ... I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of YHWH of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

– Isaiah 13:10,13

¹Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of YHWH is coming, it is near – ²a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come.

³Fire devours in front of them, and behind them a flame burns. Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them. ⁴They have the appearance of horses, and like war-horses they charge. ⁵As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle.

⁶Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale. ⁷Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. Each keeps to its own course, they do not swerve from their paths. ⁸They do not jostle one another, each keeps to its own track; they burst through the weapons and are not halted. ⁹They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls; they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief.

¹⁰The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

¹¹YHWH utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless are those who obey his command.

Truly the day of YHWH is great; terrible indeed – who can endure it?

A call to repentance

¹²Yet even now, says YHWH, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to YHWH, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, long suffering, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

¹⁴Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a cereal offering and a drink offering for YHWH, your God?

¹⁵Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly. ¹⁶Assemble the people; sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy.

¹⁷Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of YHWH, weep. Let them say, "Spare your people, YHWH, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

Tearing one's clothes (verse 13) was a traditional gesture expressing intense grief (see, for example, Genesis 37:29, 34; Numbers 14:6; 2Samuel 3:31 and 1Kings 21:27). Nearer to Joel's time, see Ezra 9:3. Joel calls for a tearing of the heart (compare Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4) and a turning back to YHWH.

His call to 'return to YHWH' is founded on YHWH's nature. Verse 13 is a traditional creedal formula, summing up the essence of Israel's understanding of the nature of God (see the texts on the page opposite). 'Gracious' (חַנּוּן, ḥannûn) speaks of the many ways in which God shows his care. 'Merciful' (רַחֻם, raḥûm) speaks of God's tender love. 'Long suffering' (אֵרֶק אַפַּיִם, 'erek 'apayim) speaks of God's immense patience. 'Steadfast love' (חֶסֶד, ḥesed) speaks of God's faithful commitment to the covenant he has with his people.

Our repentance opens the way to our receiving God's forgiveness and a restoration of communion, but it is not magic. God's remains free (verse 14).

Verse 15 picks up the summons expressed earlier (see 1:14 and the commentary there). To 'sanctify' is to set aside for the Holy One.

Everyone is to be present at the penitential rite. No one is excused.

They are to appeal to God's pity ('spare'); to the covenant relationship ('your people'), and to what other nations will think if God does not bring about a reversal of Judah's lot.

For the reference to other nations in the communal lament see Psalm 44:13-14; Psalm 79:4, 10; Psalm 115:2 and Micah 7:10.

YHWH, YHWH, a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, long suffering and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

– Exodus 34:6-7

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?

He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing steadfast love.

He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot.

You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

– Micah 7:18-20

Although he causes grief, he will be tenderly compassionate according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

– Lamentations 3:32

YHWH your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.

– 2Chronicles 30:9

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and tenderly compassionate, long suffering and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

– Nehemiah 9:17

I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, long suffering, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

– Jonah 4:2

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments.

– Daniel 9:4

You, O Lord, are a God tenderly compassionate and gracious, long suffering and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

– Psalm 86:15 (see 111:4 and 145:8)

Psalm 103 is an extended reflection on the creed.

YHWH forgives all your guilt ...

and surrounds you with steadfast love and tender compassion ...

so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's ...

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

YHWH is tenderly compassionate and gracious,

long suffering and abounding in steadfast love.

He will accuse, but not always; he will be angry, but not forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our guilt ...

As a father has compassion for his children, so YHWH has compassion

for those who fear him. For he knows how we are; he remembers that we are dust ...

The steadfast love of YHWH always was and always will be for those who fear him,

and his righteousness passes on from children to grandchildren,

to whoever keeps his covenant and remembers to carry out his commandments.

– Psalm 103:3,4,5,7-10,13-14,17-18

18Then YHWH became zealous for his land, and had pity on his people.

19In response to his people YHWH said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; never again will I make you a mockery among the nations.

20I will remove the northern army far from you, and drive it into a parched and desolate land, its front into the eastern sea, and its rear into the western sea; its stench and foul smell will rise up, for he has acted reprehensively.

21Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for YHWH has done great things! **22**Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

23Citizens of Zion, be glad and rejoice in YHWH your God; for he has given the early rain for righteousness, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.

24The granaries are full of grain, the vats spill over with wine and oil. **25**I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

26You will eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of YHWH your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. **27**You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, YHWH, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

This is not so much God's response to the people's cry, as an assertion by Joel of God's purpose for his people, a purpose that God will carry out because God is faithful, even when his people are not. The initiative is always with God who is determined to reverse the necessary punishment (verses 18-19).

The 'northern army'(verse 20) is the mysterious foe that is God's instrument in punishing Judah and bringing the people to repentance. The army will be driven into the Dead Sea ('the eastern sea') and the Mediterranean ('the western sea').

In 1:9 the earth was mourning. Now it is being encouraged to rejoice (verse 21). In 1:18 the animals were moaning. They, too, need now have no fear. The fields are producing their harvest (verse 22).

The 'early rain'(autumn) and the 'late rain'(spring) are both assured. The rain is an expression of YHWH's 'righteousness'(verse 23).

All the catastrophes named in the early part of the scroll will be reversed (verses 24-25).

The nations will no longer be able to ask: 'Where is their God'(1:17). It will be obvious to all that God is in the midst of his people as their God: 'I, YHWH, am your God and there is no other'(verse 27).

The numbering of the verses here follows the Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint Version number this section as 3:1-5.

The gift of God's Spirit, God's powerful, life-giving Spirit, will be a sign that the Day of YHWH is imminent. It is an answer to Moses' prayer:

Would that all YHWH's people were prophets, and that YHWH would put his spirit on them all.

– Numbers 11:29

Everyone in Judah, even the slaves, will have immediate and direct communication with God. Joel's vision extends only to Judah. When this passage is quoted by Luke in his account of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21), it is no longer limited to Judah, but refers to the Spirit of the Messiah that is poured out over the whole world.

The dramatic imagery through which the power of the Day of YHWH is expressed includes signs in the heavens and on the earth (compare Amos 8:9). The 'blood and fire and columns of smoke' (verse 30) pick up something of the decisive clash between light and darkness, good and evil.

Those who will come through this final time of judgment will be those who 'call on the name of YHWH' (verse 32). These are the ones who turn to YHWH with all their heart (see 2:12).

In verse 32, Joel is quoting Obadiah:

On Mount Zion there will be those that escape.

– Obadiah verse 17

The final words indicate, once again, that the initiative is God's. Those who call on YHWH are responding to God's call.

²⁸Afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions.

²⁹Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

³⁰I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹The sun will be darkened, and the moon will be blood-red, before the great and terrible day of YHWH comes.

³²Then everyone who calls on the name of YHWH will be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as YHWH has said, and among the survivors will be those whom YHWH calls.

¹For in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ²I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on account of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations. They have divided my land, ³and cast lots for my people, and traded boys for the price of a prostitute, and sold girls for wine, only to drink it.

⁴What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily. ⁵For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. ⁶You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, removing them far from their own border. ⁷But now I will rouse them to leave the places to which you have sold them, and I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads. ⁸I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a nation far away; for YHWH has spoken.

The numbering of the verses in Chapter 3:1-21 follows the Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint Version number this and the following sections as Chapter 4 (not 3).

Joel portrays God's final judgment as taking place in 'the valley of Jehoshaphat (a symbolic name meaning 'YHWH judges'). The Aramaic Targum picks this up when it translates: 'the valley of judgment'. In Joel's portrait of the final judgment, Judah is restored, and the nations that have acted against Judah are condemned for scattering God's people among the nations, and for having occupied God's land that belongs to Judah (verse 2; see Obadiah verses 11 and 13). They have maltreated their Jewish slaves (verse 3). The expression 'cast lots for my people' echoes Obadiah verse 11.

Verses 4-8 refer to the slave trade that Tyre, Sidon and the city-states of Philistia carried on with Greece from the fifth century on (verse 6). We know that Sidon was destroyed by the Persian Artaxerxes III in 343, and Tyre was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332. These verses must have been composed prior to 343.

Besides selling Jews into slavery, they also plundered the temple to enrich their own shrines (verse 5).

All this will be reversed when YHWH sees that his people return home, and the nations responsible for the above crimes will suffer the same fate that they inflicted upon Judah. S^cba is part of modern day Yemen in the extreme south of the Arabian peninsula.

Verses 9-12 portray the final judgment as a battle. The nations are advised to bring to the battle everything they have. To ‘sanctify a battle’ is to call on their gods to bring victory.

Verse 10 is a deliberate reversal of Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3.

They can do all this, but they will be no match for the warrior God, YHWH, and his angelic host (verse 11).

In verse 13, YHWH’s mighty army is summoned to cut down the enemy as one uses a sickle to harvest the grain, or to tread them underfoot as one treads down the grapes to harvest the juice. So great is the evil that the vats overflow. In verse 14 what was formerly called the ‘valley of Jehoshaphat (3:2) is now called the ‘valley of decision’. Joel is warning the people to decide for YHWH, ‘for the day of YHWH is near’.

Once again (see 2:10) the heavens are plunged into darkness (verse 15). YHWH ‘roars from Zion’, that is, from his temple (this is a quote from Amos 1:2), and at the sound ‘the heavens and the earth shake’(verse 16).

Joel assures the people of Judah (called ‘Israel’ here and 2:27; 3:2) that they need not fear the judgment. YHWH is a refuge for them and a protection. He dwells among them in his temple. No enemy will ever defile Jerusalem again, for the city will be holy with the holiness of God.

⁹Proclaim this among the nations: Sanctify a battle, stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up. ¹⁰Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling boast, “I am a warrior.”

¹¹Come quickly, all you nations all around, gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, YHWH.

¹²Let the nations rouse themselves, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.

¹³Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. ¹⁴Tumult, tumult, in the valley of decision! For the day of YHWH is near in the valley of decision.

¹⁵The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. ¹⁶YHWH roars from Zion, and raises his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shake.

But YHWH is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

¹⁷So you shall know that I, YHWH your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it.

Judah, a paradise

¹⁸In that day the mountains will drip sweet wine, the hills will flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah will flow with water; a fountain will come forth from the house of YHWH and water the Wadi Shittim.

¹⁹Egypt will become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of the violence done to the people of Judah, in whose land they have shed innocent blood.

²⁰But Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations.

²¹I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for YHWH dwells in Zion.

The day of YHWH will issue in a paradise for his faithful people (compare Amos 9:13). In the opening passages of the scroll Judah was enduring harsh conditions. The wine was cut off (1:5). There was no pasture and so no milk (1:18). There was drought (1:17-20). At the judgment all this will be reversed. Borrowing from earlier prophetic writings Joel speaks of a fountain rising from the temple (see Ezekiel 47:1-12; Psalm 46:4; Zechariah 14:8).

The Wadi Shittim may, like the Valley of Jehoshaphat (3:2, 12) be symbolic. Shittim means 'acacias'. Joel may want to assert that there will be so much water around that acacias will be abundant wherever the water flows.

Egypt prides itself on its abundant water. It has the Nile and does not depend on rain. While Judah flourishes, its ancient enemy Egypt 'will become a desolation', as will Edom (compare Obadiah). YHWH will punish them for the way they have treated his people.

Verse 20 is a fitting conclusion to Joel's prophecy.

Joel adds verse 21, perhaps because his contemporaries were in a situation of oppression. He does not deny their experience. Rather, he assures them that YHWH is just. Those who oppress his people will have to answer for what they do. Most of all he wants the people never to forget that 'YHWH dwells in Zion'.