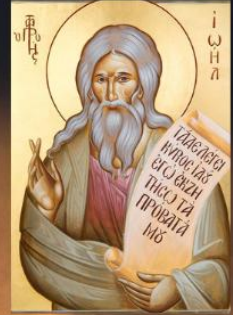


# The Book of Joel



## Dating Joel

While the title of this document might seem to be better suited for a teenage romance novel, the *Book of Joel* is a book in which the only agreement about the possible dating during which Joel lived and wrote, is that there is no agreement.

There are several factors that scholars use to place a book of Scripture on the biblical “timeline.” The most prominent of which is a clearly identifiable historical event such as the reign of a known king, a reference to a historical event, or some other concrete anchor in time. All these are lacking in Joel. The only possible event might be a particularly horrific locust invasion, but there was no record of such an historical event that might help us locate the author and his times.

One might consider the order where the book is placed in the Hebrew Canon of scripture. But even that has scholars divided. For example, are the so-called “Minor Prophets” simply a collection of prophetic works that are not as lengthy as Isaiah or Jeremiah? Are they individual books? Did the scribes who worked the available books into their final written order/form arrange the Minor Prophets not only individually but as one “collection” with a specific narrative purpose in mind? Perhaps rather than “Minor Prophets” we might call them “The Book of the Twelve” - which is an interesting title echoing the 12 tribes of Israel. Even with a revised collection title, that leaves open the schema for the order of the books within the “Book of the Twelve.” Was it message-driven? Date ordered? Some other schema, e.g. the degree to which a book is apocalyptic in its imagery?

No matter what order one considers, in all the lists, Hosea is the first book. Most scholars have Hosea placed first, not only because of the early date (mid-eighth century keyed to the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel), but also because of the length of his message and comprehensive treatment of the great prophetic themes of judgment and hope. But what about the other books? Perhaps largely chronological

but then not chronology alone since the Twelve are arranged in only rough chronological order, and Jonah, Obadiah and Joel are hard to fit into any historic framework.

It is also interesting to note that in the Hebrew canon, Joel is second, immediately following Hosea, and that has carried over to the modern-day Bible versions. But the LXX (Greek OT) Joel is in fourth place after Hosea, Amos and Micah. It makes one wonder what the 2nd century BC Alexandrian translators had in mind. The date for the ordering of the Hebrew canon may be as late as the 2nd century AD.

And what about Amos? As noted in an earlier study, the *Book of Amos*, leans heavily into the theme of the Day of the Lord and the coming divine judgment. It is only the final poem in Amos 9:14-15 that there is a message of hope

*<sup>14</sup> I will bring about the restoration of my people Israel; they shall rebuild and inhabit their ruined cities, Plant vineyards and drink the wine, set out gardens and eat the fruits.<sup>15</sup> I will plant them upon their own ground; never again shall they be plucked From the land I have given them, say I, the LORD, your God. say I, the LORD, your God.*

Joel seems to use Amos' view of the Day of Yahweh, both to reinforce his interpretation of the plague and to move beyond it to an understanding of the ultimate victories of the Day, which amplifies Amos' brief note on future prosperity. Does this imply that Joel was aware of Amos' writings or at least his message?

The shared emphasis on "the Day of the Lord" is noted by verbal correspondences between the two books. For example, Joel 4:16 and Amos 1:3

*The LORD roars from Zion, and from Jerusalem raises his voice (Joel 4:16)*

*The LORD will roar from Zion, and from Jerusalem raise his voice (Amos 1:2)*

And similarly

*The mountains shall drip with the juice of grapes, and all the hills shall run with it (Amos 9:13)*

*On that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills flow with milk (Joel 4:18)*

As well there are the parallels between Joel's announcements of doom to Tyre, Philistia and Edom and Amos' threats to the same nations. Perhaps that implies Joel was aware of Amos, but then the opposite could be true.

There is one train of thought that Joel is more "complete" in his idea of the "Day of the Lord" given his more pronounced movement from doom to hope, judgment to salvation. This might mean Joel became the template for the other minor prophets, or that he was aware of the corpus of all the other minor prophets and thus his work became more comprehensive as he incorporated their message/symbols into his own writing.

Dates proposed for Joel's ministry and the composition of his book range from the early ninth century BC to the Maccabean era, some seven hundred years later. The broad diversity of scholarly opinion is evidence of the scarcity of information in the book itself to help us pinpoint the date. The fact that the book's centerpiece, the locust invasion, has left no other tracks in biblical history compounds our problem. Happily, most of what Joel has to teach we can grasp without the precise knowledge of his times.

The scholars who speculate on an early date speak to the absence of mention of a king. In the period c.835-825 BC, Joash was too young to assume the throne and the leadership was held in regency (2 Kings

12:1-12). Of course an argument from silence is the weakest of all arguments. Otherwise, the most common arguments for this early date are these:

1. the place in the Hebrew Canon;
2. Joel's possible role in Judah's on-going struggle against the incursion of Baal worship (but then that was not only a 9th century BC problem
3. The table of enemies, condemned for their ill-treatment of Judah: Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, Ionians (Greeks), Egypt, Edom - and no mention of Assyria, Babylon or Persia, the dominant powers from the eighth through to the fifth centuries BC.

Those who advocate a late post-exilic date (c. 400–180 BC) have based their claims on a number of lines of evidence:

1. a two-stage composition of the book which assigns a late date to the apocalyptic outlook of 2:28–3:21, with its supernatural heavenly portents and its seemingly simplistic view of Judah's vindication and the subjugation of the neighbor nations;
2. the heavy use of what appear to be quotations from other books in addition to those from Amos cited above. The additional books possible quoted include: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, Nahum, Malachai, Obadiah, Micah and Psalm 79
3. mention of the wall of Jerusalem (2:7, 9), presumably rebuilt by Nehemiah (c. 445 BC);
4. reference to the Greeks in the list above, but now interpreted as evidence of a Hellenistic date (post 332 BC);
5. if the heavenly portents are eclipses of sun and moon (actual vs. symbolic), dates based on astronomical calculations would be after 357 or 336 BC.

The counter arguments to the later date note that even if the flow of quotations is one-way, with Joel as the recipient, none of them needs necessarily be later than 500 BC and several of them may reflect common use of a traditional saying rather than direct borrowing. Regarding Jerusalem's wall, prior to Nehemiah's reconstruction the wall does not seem to have been completely leveled; there could well have been substantial parts standing, as the brief rebuilding time (52 days, Neh. 6:15) may suggest. Also, the darkened sun (2:30–31) need not be understood literally as an eclipse but figuratively as a mark of theophany (cf. 2:10; 3:15; cf. Amos 8:9).

The only major data which may help to suggest a date are the descriptions of the havoc wrought against Judah by the nations (3:1–8): parceling out the land and giving it away, casting lots for the people, selling children into slavery for a pittance, stripping the people of their silver and gold, auctioning the citizens to the Ionians as slaves and thereby scattering them throughout the Mediterranean basin. The text sounds literal not hyperbolic and appears to leave us with only one period in Judah's history where all this could have happened on the scale that Joel implies: the exile, with its total disruption of life in Judah and Jerusalem.

The Old Testament clearly remembers how viciously opportunistic were the Edomites (3:19) at Jerusalem's fall (586 BC; Ps. 137:7; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 25:12–14; 36:5; Obad. 10–14) and how impotent at best and treacherous at worst were the Egyptians on whom Judah relied in her futile rebellion against Babylon (2 Kgs 24:1–7; Jer. 46:1–26). That the people of Tyre, Sidon and Philistia may also compound Judah's suffering both by direct involvement (Ezek. 25:15–26:7) or by buying slaves from Edom (cf. Edom's role in slave-trade; Amos 1:6, 9) will not surprise anyone acquainted with the vaunted cruelty and insatiable ambition which the Old Testament and other historical records attribute to them.

If Judah has been exiled, then we should not be surprised to have no king mentioned, Hence no king is summoned (cf. Hos. 5:1) by the prophet, only citizens and elders (1:2, 14; 2:15–16). Yet the temple ritual is in full operation as Joel states. This combination of inferences suggests a date for Joel roughly contemporary with Haggai and Zechariah but after the completion of the second temple, rebuilt by Zerubbabel at the urging of the two prophets and completed about 515 BC. Malachi's picture (c. 450 BC) of the abuses of public worship and his style of prophetic declaration, heavily influenced both by the catechetical techniques of the wisdom teachers and the *tôrâ* disputes of the priests and scribes, are sufficiently different in tone and content to suggest that Joel's work must have been some decades earlier. Worth noting here is that Joel (3:19) sees Edom's devastation as yet in the future, while Malachi (1:2–5) describes it as past. When all is said, a date for Joel in the vicinity of 500 BC may not be too wide of the mark.

But then again.... we simply do not know.

### Who are we “dating?”

One of the on-again, off-again topics of scholarship surrounding the *Book of Joel* is its authorship. While there are several variants, the main discussion is the book of the work of a prophet named Joel alone or the work of the same Joel plus a later author/compiler/editor.

Most scholars since the early 19th century have agreed that Joel addresses different subjects in the two main parts of the work, generally divided as Joel 1:1–2:27 and then Joel 2:28–3:21. For those who argue for “more than Joel” authorship, they see the first half of the book speaking of a Day of Yahweh that had already come and the second as one that was still to come. Different scholars, in agreement on this, have based their reasons on differences in language, focus, and message.

Those who argue for a unity of authorship think that there is no distinction between two Days of Yahweh. In the first half the locusts were forerunners of the coming Day which is the subject of the second half. This group of scholars hold that, as a natural development, following up an interpretation of the locusts as precursors of the Day with a description of the destruction associated with the Day. From this viewpoint, the differences of style between the two halves can be explained as follows: in the first half Joel speaks as an animated eyewitness, while in the second he deals with more traditional material.

And yes, there is even one prominent scholar who argues for three authors. Current scholarship seems to have settled in the camp of unified authorship.

### An Overview

If you have read this far, you might be thinking... “OK, interesting, but why all the details?” It is such details that give context to how one “reads” Joel and his understanding of the “Day of the Lord.” People seem most familiar with one passage in the book: “*Sun and moon are darkened, and the stars withhold their brightness.*” (Joel 4:15) - very end times/apocalyptic in sound. In Amos 7:1–3 a locust plague is certainly a symbol of coming destruction, and Rev. 9:3, 7–9 actually applies this language to an apocalyptic event. But is that Joel's intention?

Most current scholars interpret the locusts in both chapters in strictly contemporary terms, and this is the most natural way of construing the material. Joel 1:2–4 speaks of the locusts as a present threat to Joel's generation and the occasion of his summons to lamentation. Joel 1:16 (“*from our very eyes*”) speaks to the direct experience of the ravages of real locusts. The past-tense verbs of 2:18-19 categorize Yahweh's response to the locust crisis and the people's penitential cries as having already occurred. It is significant

that the locusts behave in a literal manner: they ravage fields, trees, and fruit, but do not kill or plunder, or take prisoners of war. They are indeed described metaphorically as an attacking army and are compared with soldiers. This is an easier choice than to make the locusts as metaphors for real soldiers. Besides, the restoration promised by Yahweh in 2:18–27 concerns the material damage associated with an actual locust attack.

From the perspective of a single, unified authorship and a post-exilic dating, the following is a succinct summary of the *Book of Joel*. Inadequate winter rains and a spring locust infestation have devastated Judah's grain fields, vineyards, and orchards. Because the people carry on with business as usual, unaware that this crisis is the work of the Lord in their midst, Joel fears that the Lord may soon deliver a death blow by withholding the rains that normally fall in the late autumn. However, Joel's efforts to avert this crisis are successful. The first speech ends with Joel's assurance that at the end of the next agricultural year the people will enjoy a superabundant harvest.

The second speech begins with a summary description (chap. 3) of the prophet's hope that Judah's God will one day destroy its enemies and make Jerusalem secure once and for all. This divine intervention will create a more inclusive community, cutting across boundaries of gender, class, and age. In Peter's first public speech at Pentecost ([Acts 2:16–21](#)), the author uses Joel 3:1–5 to announce the formation of such a community among Christians in Jerusalem and the proximity of the day of the Lord. The rest of Joel's second speech (chap. 4) uses the imagery of drought and locusts from the first speech and introduces the metaphor of a grape harvest and wine making to describe the attack of the Lord's heavenly army on Judah's enemies. In the renewal of Judah's hillsides by the winter rains, the prophet sees the revitalization of the people because the Lord dwells with them.

Yet, Joel is no mere reporter, but a prophet and an interpreter of a current event in terms of its divine import. As Amos interpreted a locust plague and drought as Yahweh's means of chastising a sinful nation (4:7–9), so Joel views a series of destructive plagues and associated drought as signs that God is punishing his covenant people

But his message goes far beyond this. Amos and later prophets had spoken of the Day of Yahweh as Yahweh's intervention in signal catastrophe against his enemies. Joel sees in the locusts the dawn of the Day. Joel had received a complex tradition of the Day of Yahweh. It was composed of a number of elements; and as Amos' audience apparently already knew, it was associated with blessing for God's people and doom for other nations. Amos had taught Israel that it spelled doom for them, too, as a sinful people, and later prophets confirmed this connotation.

But if the Day was averted for Joel's generation, there remained the other ingredients of the prophetic tradition to be fulfilled. Accordingly, after revealing the immediate blessing, which Yahweh is to bestow on the locust-ravaged land, Joel naturally reverts to the theme of the Day. He considers its threat for the nations in reprisal for their involvement in the 587 B.C. debacle, and gives reassurance of the security and prospect of further blessing in store for the people of Judah. By their repentance they had won a reprieve from the Day: its terrors could no more appall them. Thus the first and second parts essentially hang together. It was Joel's experience of the awful plagues [of locusts] that gave him his intrinsic conviction that the great and terrible Day was near and impelled him to write about it.