

Joel

“Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is at hand;
It shall come as destruction from the Almighty” (Joel 1:15)

The moment that God created the nation of Israel and constituted them as his unique people with specific, and demanding, covenant responsibilities there also came into being the need for a way of dealing with covenant violations so that the nation’s mandate would be realized. Such a need was provided for in Israel’s covenanted relationship to the Promised Land. If they obeyed they would be blessed in the land and if they disobeyed they would be cursed (Deut 28). This curse began with the affliction of the land itself and moved to removal from the land altogether. Locust plagues were one of God’s instruments of cursing Israel for their disobedience. Locusts could also be used metaphorically to describe a devastating army in its effect upon a country. This becomes the unique strategy by which the prophet Joel is instructed to communicate God’s method of remedial judgment for His people culminating in the eschatological judgment. The name for this is the Day of the Lord and it is the theme of Joel.

Authorship

Almost nothing is known about the person who is said to have received this word from the Lord. His name means “Yahweh is God,” perhaps emphasizing the sovereign control that Israel’s God held over His people and the nations.

Date

There are no specific chronological indicators by which to date this book. External evidence has lead scholars to suggests dates ranging from 835 to 400 B.C. The absence of certain things seems to be the main criteria for dating. For example, there is no mention of a king—the book is addressed to elders, inhabitants, farmers, and priests. This has lead some to suggest a time early in the reign of the boy king Joash, ca. 835 to 830 B.C.¹ Other use this absence of a king to argue for a post-exilic date.² The fact that Joel did not date the book emphasizes the fact that the Day of the Lord is a dynamic concept, applicable throughout Israel’s history and culminating in the great apocalypse.

¹ This is the view followed by Dyer and Merrill (Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 737-38).

² For arguments see C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 328-30.

Historical Setting

No historical setting can be ascertained. The Day of the Lord has application to any historical period during which Israel is in the land or being disciplined by dispersion from it.

Original Readers

Internal evidence indicates that Joel was from Judah and was probably writing to Judah. If an early date is accepted for the book, the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. would become a graphic illustration of the Day of the Lord.

Occasion

No occasion is given other than the recollection of an actual locust plague in the land of Canaan. The theological occasion centers on Israel's continual need for being reminded of their covenant obligations and of the penalties for disobedience of those stipulations.

Special Issues

The Interpretation of Metaphor. Joel's key communicative technique of Joel is the use of the phenomenon of the locust plague. In chapter one the actual effects of locusts on the earth is consistently portrayed, even though it is described as a "nation" (1:6). Were Joel referring to an army of men it is doubtful that only agricultural destruction would be mentioned. In chapter two a "people great and strong" are said to be coming and are then described using locust-like swarming imagery. This technique allows the prophet to depict the effect of Yahweh's judgment of Israel by other nations without limiting such action to any given time. As such it remains a dynamic concept, repeatable in pattern, yet pointed ultimately to Israel's final crisis.

Theme Statement

The Day of the Lord will bring God's climactic judgment on Israel resulting in their complete restoration to Him as well as their exaltation to the head of the nations.

Outline

- I. The Day of the Lord in Retrospect: A plague of locusts had brought God's judgment upon the land in order to arouse Israel to repentance.....1:1–20
 - A. The messenger of devastation receives Yahweh's word.1:1
 - B. The message of devastation reviews Yahweh's work.1:2-20
 1. Israel is charged to hear and tell the message of devastation.1:2-3
 2. Israel is called to consider the means of devastation.1:4-7
 3. Israel is challenged to consider the meaning of the devastation. ..1:8-12
 - a. It has caused worship to cease.....1:8-9
 - b. It has brought joy to an end.1:10-12

4. Israel is counseled to repent over the cause of the devastation.1:13-20
 - a. The devastation warrants repentance and confession.1:13-14
 - b. The devastation is the Day of the Lord.1:15-20
- II. The Day of the Lord in Prospect: A plague of warriors will bring God's judgment upon the land as a prelude to Israel's restoration and the nations' judgment.2:1-3:21
 - A. For Israel the Day of the Lord will result in blessing.2:1-32
 1. The immanency of the Day of the Lord is declared.2:1
 2. The character of the Day of the Lord is described.2:2-11
 - a. It will come as a day of darkness.2:2
 - b. It will come as a flame of destruction.2:3-5
 - c. It will come as swarming army.2:6-9
 - d. It will come under Yahweh's direction.2:10-11
 3. The purpose for the Day of the Lord is delineated.2:12-17
 - a. It will be to provoke repentance for their sin.2:12-14
 - b. It will be to promote petition for their deliverance.2:15-17
 4. The prospect of the Day of the Lord is detailed.2:18-32
 - a. The persecuting army will be removed.2:18-20
 - b. The land will be physically renewed and replenished.2:21-27
 - c. The remnant will be spiritually renewed and delivered.2:28-32
 - B. For the nations the Day of the Lord will result in judgment.3:1-21
 1. They will be judged for the way they treated Israel.3:1-8
 2. They will be judged by the Lord Himself.3:9-16
 - C. For Israel the Day of the Lord will result in exaltation.3:17-21
 1. They will know Yahweh.3:17a
 2. They will dwell securely.3:17b
 3. They will experience the abundance of the land.3:18
 4. They will abide forever, acquitted of all guilt.3:19-21

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Theme Development

The unifying theme of Joel is the Day of the Lord, which combines prophecies of devastation for sin with restoration after judgment. The book looks back to an actual locust plague as an illustration of God's remedial discipline on the land in accordance with the curses of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Deut 28:1-14) and forward to a judgment culminating in Israel's restoration and elevation above all nations.

I. The Day of the Lord in Retrospect: A plague of locusts had brought God's judgment upon the land in order to arouse Israel to repentance (1:1–20).

Israel is called upon to consider the meaning of a complete devastation of their land by a plague of locusts, a plague that had probably taken place in their life-time. It had been against the land itself, which was the first stage of God's disciplinary action when the nation would begin to disobey Him (cf. Deut 28:15-19). Nationally, it meant that Israel could not fulfill their mandate as a kingdom of priests since there was no means of sacrifice (1:8-9) and personally it had meant an end to joy (1:10-12). In light of this devastation Israel is counseled to repent so that Yahweh might relent in His judgment (1:13-20). Thus, the Day of the Lord is defined as a time of God's affliction of Israel for the purpose of renewing them to repentance so that He might restore to them an experience of blessing.

II. The Day of the Lord in Prospect: A plague of warriors will bring God's judgment upon the land as a prelude to Israel's restoration and the nations' judgment (2:1–3:21).

Not only had the Day of the Lord come as a plague of locusts affecting the land, it was also going to come as a plague of armies that devours its enemies (2:1-2). It would seem like a darkness descending upon the land (cf. Isa 9:1-2) and a raging fire devouring all in its path (2:3-5). This unstoppable army would be unlike anything that Israel had ever experienced (2:6-9). Furthermore, its effect would be enhanced by Yahweh Himself (2:10-11). As with the plague of locusts, the plague of armies was designed to evoke repentance and move Israel back to faith in Yahweh on the basis of their covenant relationship (2:12-17), which was clearly called for by covenant violation curses (cf. Deut 28:33-63). For the northern nation of Israel the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. would be like the Day of the Lord. The eschatological prospect for Judah, however, was restoration through the removal of the persecuting army (2:18-20), the renewal and replenishment of the land (2:21-27—notice that the overturning of the curses occurs in reverse order), and the spiritual renewal and deliverance of the people (2:28-32; cf. Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-31).

For the nations the Day of the Lord would mean final judgment (3:1-21). Even though Assyria (and others) would be used by the Lord in the disciplining of His people, they would be held accountable for the cruel manner in which they had carried out their "mission" (3:1-8); and their judgment will be directly at the hands of Yahweh (3:9-16).

At that time Israel will be exalted to the head of the nations according to covenant intent (Deut 28:13) and will experience the fulfillment of the kingdom promises made to David and his descendants (3:17-21). This will be Israel's perpetual condition (3:20).

Conclusion

Joel's contribution to Israel's Scriptures lies in having a pattern for the Day of the Lord as a means of determining the cause of their affliction and the way of deliverance from it. Presently Assyria would manifest this pattern as they devastated Samaria in 722 B.C. and carried the northern kingdom into captivity (assuming an early pre-exilic date for the book). Judah would continue to have that as an example of God's pattern for dealing with his wayward people.

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