

# Notes on Joel

2024 Edition  
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## Introduction

### TITLE AND WRITER

The title of this book is the name of its writer, as is probably true of all the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

We know little about Joel, whose name means "Yahweh is God." He was the son of Pethuel ("Persuaded of God"), who does not appear to have been an especially famous person. Eleven other individuals in the Old Testament bore the name Joel (1 Sam. 8:2; 1 Chron. 4:35; 5:4; 7:3; 11:38; 15:7; 26:22; 27:20; 2 Chron. 29:12; Ezra 10:43; Neh. 11:9).

### UNITY

All the extant Hebrew manuscripts and the ancient versions of Joel attest to the unity of the book. Critics who deny its unity and argue for two different writers do so on the basis of supposed literary and conceptual differences, usually between the first two chapters and the third. Specifically, they assign the historical passages to Joel and the apocalyptic ones to another writer. However, there is a consistent theme that ties the whole book together, which is one reason most conservative interpreters believe that Joel wrote all three chapters.

"... the book of Joel is not made up, as so many other Old Testament books are, of the scattered 'notes' of a long prophetic ministry extending over several years, but is rather occupied with a description of a single incident with its moral and spiritual application."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, pp. 31-32.

"It seems to be one remarkable utterance rather than notes of a ministry covering a long period."<sup>1</sup>

## DATE

The date of Joel is its largest introductory problem, as is the case with Obadiah.<sup>2</sup> There are four most likely possibilities. First, some scholars advocate *an early pre-exilic date* during the reign of King Jehoshaphat (872-848 B.C.), or possibly his grandson, King Joash (835-796 B.C.).<sup>3</sup> Arguments in favor of this period include the position of Joel in the Hebrew canon; it appears among other prophetic writings of this period. However, the order of the pre-exilic Minor Prophets is not strictly chronological, in both the Hebrew and the English versions. Also, the enemies of Israel that Joel named (Tyre, Sidon, Philistia [cf. 2 Chron. 21:16-17], Egypt [cf. 1 Kings 14:25-26], and Edom [cf. 2 Kings 8:20-22]; 3:2-7, 19) were enemies of Israel during this time. The prominence Joel gave to Judah's priests and elders rather than to her king—Joash was a boy king under the influence of Jehoiada, the high priest, early in his reign—is a further argument for this view. However, these conclusions are open to other interpretations. According to Walter Kaiser Jr., "Most conservative scholars date Joel ca. 830 B.C. ..." <sup>4</sup> I prefer the early pre-exilic date view.

Second, some authorities believe *a mid-pre-exilic date* of composition, probably during the reign of Joash's grandson, King Uzziah (792-740 B.C.), fits the evidence best.<sup>5</sup> Supporters of this view also claim the first two

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<sup>1</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 378.

<sup>2</sup>See Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 411-14.

<sup>3</sup>Advocates of this view include Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, p. 148; Gleason A. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 305; E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 271-72; C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:169-70; Robinson, pp. 39-43; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 2:3:85-87; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:657; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 188; Charles H. Dyer, *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 737; Warren W. Wiersbe, "Joel," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 333; Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, p. 268; J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 4:108; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, pp. 435-37.

<sup>4</sup>Kaiser, p. 188, footnote 11.

<sup>5</sup>Advocates include E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, 1:143, 147; Richard D. Patterson, "Joel," in *Daniel-Malachi*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 231-33.

arguments cited in favor of the early pre-exilic view above. They argue, in addition, that the absence of references to Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia make a later date, when these nations were the major ancient Near Eastern superpowers, unlikely. Joel's reference to Greece in 3:6 may fit this period since the Ionian Greeks were at this time expanding their commercial influence in Asia Minor. Joel's reference to the Sabeans in 3:8 is appropriate for this period as well. Internal references and linguistic characteristics may also reflect Uzziah's times, and are similar to the writings of the other eighth-century prophets (i.e., Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah). However, again, much of the same evidence can fit other periods of Judah's history.

Third, some interpreters opt for *a late pre-exilic date*.<sup>1</sup> Statements in Joel could fit this period, and some of his statements are similar to those of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and may reflect conditions before the destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps between 597 and 587 B.C. If true, Joel would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Yet Joel 2:18-19 seems to imply that God had been merciful to Joel's generation, suggesting that the people had repented, but there is no record of this happening during this period. A variation of this view is that Joel wrote either just before the Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C. or just before one of the Babylonian invasions: the 598 B.C. invasion, or the 588 B.C. invasion.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth view is that Joel wrote at *a postexilic date*, perhaps 515-500 B.C., or even as late as sometime in the 400s B.C.<sup>3</sup> Interpreters who see Joel 3:1-2 and 17 as references to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity take the references to the temple in 1:9, 13 and 2:17 as applying to the second, postexilic temple, which was completed in 515 B.C. Yet all these texts could apply to earlier periods. Generally, scholars who view apocalyptic writing as a late development in Judaism tend to date Joel quite late.

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<sup>1</sup>Advocates include Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, pp. 14-15; and Arvid S. Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, pp. 154-58.

<sup>2</sup>Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 224-26.

<sup>3</sup>Advocates include Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Joel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1410; idem, "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 387; idem, *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 368; idem, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets*, p. 51; George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets Commonly Called the Minor*, 2:375-88; Raymond B. Dillard, "Joel," in *The Minor Prophets*, pp. 240-42 (though see pp. 301-2); David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, p. 27; Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, p. 8; and John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 417.

As should be obvious from this brief survey, the dating of the book rests on interpretations of various verses that are not clear. No other Old Testament book mentions Joel. Consequently, dating the book amounts to guesswork, though some writers were quite dogmatic about their convictions. I prefer an early or mid-pre-exilic date, mainly because of Joel's position in the Hebrew canon among other writers of this period, which reflects Hebrew tradition. I think he was probably one of the earliest writing prophets. John Calvin's word of caution bears repeating:

"... as there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which [Joel] taught undecided; and, as we shall see, this is of no great importance."<sup>1</sup>

### **PLACE OF COMPOSITION AND AUDIENCE**

Joel's frequent references to Judah and Jerusalem suggest that he lived and ministered in the south of Canaan, possibly in the Southern Kingdom, if he wrote before 722 B.C. (cf. 1:9, 13-14, 16; 2:1, 9, 14-15, 17, 23, 32; 3:1-8, 12, 14, 17-21). Pusey saw evidence in these verses that Joel lived in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

"Joel was a man of vitality and spiritual maturity. A keen discerner of the times, he delivered God's message to the people of Judah in a vivid and impassioned style, with a precision and originality of thought that served as a veritable quarry out of which many subsequent prophetic building stones were to be hewn."<sup>3</sup>

### **PURPOSE**

Joel wrote to warn his audience about a coming day in which God would judge His people. He compared this devastating judgment to a terrible locust invasion that had fairly recently swept through the land. What he said about this coming judgment has only seen partial fulfillment; some of it still lies in the eschatological future (i.e., the eschaton or end times for

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, 2:xv.

<sup>2</sup>Pusey, 1:143.

<sup>3</sup>Patterson, p. 230.

planet earth). God would send blessing as well as judgment, however, and this too has only come partially on the Israelites so far. The prophet warned his hearers that unless they repented of their empty formalism in worship, and turned back to Yahweh wholeheartedly, devastating judgment would overtake them. If they repented, God would pardon them and restore His blessings to them abundantly.

## THEOLOGY

The sovereignty of God and the inevitability of divine punishment for covenant unfaithfulness are dominant themes in Joel.

"Joel's depiction of the absolute authority of Yahweh over all the peoples of the earth is among the strongest in the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup>

So is Yahweh's compassionate forgiveness in response to repentance. "The day of the LORD," both judgment and blessing aspects, is also a prominent theme (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14).<sup>2</sup> Thus the administration of God is a strong motif: how God exercises His sovereignty when His people sin. Another important theological contribution of Joel is his prediction of God pouring out the Holy Spirit in the last days (2:28-32).

"Like all the canonical prophets, Joel depended on the Mosaic covenant of the Pentateuch for the basic points of his message: the covenant's curses must come as a result of national disobedience; but after a period of chastisement, God will restore his people and bless them in ways they had not yet experienced."<sup>3</sup>

## STYLE AND TEXT

Joel's literary style, in the Hebrew text, is rich, vivid, classical, clear, and beautiful.

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<sup>1</sup>Stuart, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>See the four-part series of articles on "The Day of the LORD" by Craig A. Blaising in *Bibliotheca Sacra* beginning with 169:673 (January-March 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Stuart, p. 228.

"The chief characteristic of the Prophet's style is perhaps its simple vividness."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew text of Joel presents no serious interpretive problems and has been well preserved.

## OUTLINE

- I. Introduction 1:1
- II. A past day of the LORD: a locust invasion 1:2-20
  - A. An initial appeal 1:2-4
  - B. A call to mourn 1:5-13
  - C. A call to repent 1:14
  - D. The significance of the plague 1:15-20
- III. A near future day of the LORD: a human invasion 2:1-27
  - A. The invading army 2:1-11
    1. The nearness of the army 2:1-2
    2. The destructive power of the army 2:3-5
    3. The relentlessness of the army 2:6-9
    4. The invincibility of the army 2:10-11
  - B. A call to repentance 2:12-17
    1. An appeal for private repentance 2:12-14
    2. An appeal for public repentance 2:15-17
  - C. The possibility of forgiveness and restoration 2:18-27
    1. The LORD's gracious response 2:18
    2. The LORD's promise of blessing 2:19-27
- IV. A far future day of the LORD: another human invasion and deliverance 2:28—3:21
  - A. Israel's spiritual renewal and deliverance 2:28-32

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<sup>1</sup>Pusey, 1:155.

- B. God's judgment on Israel's enemy nations 3:1-17
  - 1. The announcement of judgment 3:1-8
  - 2. The description of judgment 3:9-17
- C. Israel's ultimate restoration 3:18-21

## MESSAGE

The Book of Joel contains a threefold vision. The first part of Joel's vision concerned a locust plague that had recently swept over the Promised Land. Joel prophesied about this plague because of the desolation that it had produced. The second part of his vision concerned a coming invasion from a foreign army in the fairly near future. He used the recent locust plague to illustrate the devastating effect of the coming military invasion. The third part of his vision concerned another coming invasion, in the far distant future, that would also be like the recent locust invasion, only worse.

Joel described each of these devastations as "the day of the LORD." The term itself refers to a time when God had been or would be controlling events for Israel in an unusually direct way. It was "His day" in the sense that, at those times, Yahweh was and would be especially prominent in what happened. Thus this term, in Joel, referred to a past "day," a near future "day," and a far distant "day," from the prophet's perspective.

"The day of the LORD" was the burden of Joel's prophecy, not to be confused with "the Lord's Day" (Rev. 1:10), which is Sunday. (J. Vernon McGee wrote: "The difference is as great as between a chestnut horse and a horse chestnut!"<sup>1</sup>) God revealed His plans for the future simply at first through the writing prophets. God does not overload us with too much information all at once. In later prophetic books, we will get more detail. In all the prophetic books, "the day of the LORD" refers to a time of judgment and/or blessing.

The Book of Joel has two preeminent timeless values. It illustrates the basic *principles* by which Yahweh governs, and it reveals the basic *plan* of Yahweh through the ages. It is important for us to grasp these basic principles and this basic plan, because the other prophets reveal more about them.

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 3:666.

First, Joel illustrates the principles by which Yahweh governs. This book does not reveal them in the sense of explaining them fully. Isaiah explains them more fully. Joel illustrates these principles briefly.

Joel viewed Yahweh as enthroned in heaven, controlling affairs on earth. Joel saw Him presiding patiently over all the situations through which His people pass. He saw Him pressing into His service all the processes of nature and human activity. He also saw Him achieving ultimate victory in "His day": "the day of the LORD." He had accomplished victory by judging His people recently with a locust invasion. He would accomplish victory by disciplining His people with an invasion from a foreign foe in the near future. And He would accomplish victory by restoring His people through a fresh outpouring of His Spirit in the distant future. So one major lesson of this book is that God is enthroned in heaven, ruling over the affairs of humanity.

A second illustration of the principles by which Yahweh governs is Joel's emphasis on grace. Grace is at the heart of God's government. Grace is the inspiration of His government. We see this in God's appeal to the Israelites through Joel to repent, to "tear your hearts and not merely your garments" (2:13a).<sup>1</sup> The locust plague was a wake-up call to repent. The Israelites' repentance would affect the imminent invasion they faced. God promised judgment, but He offered mercy, if the people would repent (2:13b-14). Grace is also evident in the promise of a far-distant future outpouring of God's Spirit—in spite of the unfaithfulness of His people. God rules with grace. He is gracious to humanity in the way He governs people.<sup>2</sup>

When the locust invasion swept through the land, the people bemoaned the tragedy. The locusts had so stripped the grapevines that even the drunkards could not find grapes to make wine. The people had so little grain that they could not bring offerings to the temple. They could hardly make bread to eat. They viewed the devastation as a natural disaster. Joel reminded them that the locust invasion had come by the will and hand of their God. The people had forgotten God, but God wanted to get their attention, so He sent the plague. He had allowed this to happen so the people would think of Him, and return to Him. When the invasion happened, it was His "day." It was God who had done this (1:1-14).

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>On the problem of why God allows bad things to happen to good people, see the Book of Job.

Joel went on to remind the people that, because they had forgotten about Him, He was going to bring a worse devastation on them that would make the recent locust plague seem tame by comparison. If they turned back to Him, they could avoid this worse fate, because God would be gracious to them (2:12-13). The coming invasion, by humans rather than by locusts, would also be a day in which the LORD acted prominently. Joel even said that the LORD would lead this army of invaders (2:11). This was probably fulfilled in the Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.

Yet in spite of future devastating judgment, God would act again, dramatically and definitely, for His people (3:28-32). He would bring restoration and blessing to them, even after they had suffered His chastening discipline. He would just as surely and personally do this for them as He would punish them. This, too, would be one of His "days." And it would be the ultimate illustration of His grace.

A second great timeless value of this book is its revelation of God's plan for His people Israel's future.

First, there would be coming judgment that the people could affect by their repentance (2:14). Had the Israelites repented, the Assyrian and Babylonian Captivities would not have overtaken them. When the Assyrians attacked Judah, the people of Judah did repent, and the LORD delivered them. But when the Babylonians attacked Judah 115 years later, the Judeans failed to repent, and suffered defeat and deportation. Joel could honestly say for God, "Return to Me with all your heart" (2:12). When the people failed to repent, judgment befell them.

Second, there would be even worse judgment in the distant future, because the prophet foresaw that the people would continue to apostatize (i.e., renounce their former beliefs and turn from God; 3:1-17). This refers to the judgments on Israel during the Tribulation. Yet after that, the LORD promised to restore and bless His people (2:18-32). These are millennial blessings: blessings reserved for the future 1,000-year rule of Christ on earth. It is in this context of millennial blessings that the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit appears (3:28-29). That outpouring on Israel is still future from our position in history.

But what about what Peter said on the day of Pentecost? He said that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit then was what Joel prophesied (Acts 2:17-18). This has led many Bible students to conclude that God has fulfilled His

promises to Israel in the church (i.e., by fulfilling them in a spiritual rather than literal sense in the present church age). This is the viewpoint of amillennial and postmillennial interpreters who believe that God has no special future plans for Israel. Other interpreters see a double or partial fulfillment on the day of Pentecost with the church, and a future fulfillment with Israel in the Millennium. This is the viewpoint of many premillennialists (i.e., those who believe that Christ will return to the earth and then set up an earthly kingdom for 1,000 years). A third view is that fulfillment will only be in the Millennium, and that what Peter meant was that what happened on the day of Pentecost was similar to or like what Joel prophesied.

I favor the second interpretation, as do many other premillennialists. Why?

First, Peter did not say that what was happening fulfilled Joel's prophecy completely. What he said could just as easily mean that what happened then was in harmony with, or analogous to, what Joel had predicted would happen in the Millennium. The two events were similar but not identical. The New Testament writers frequently spoke of fulfillment in an analogical sense (e.g., Matt. 2:15; Hos. 11:1). I think what Peter meant was that what happened on the day of Pentecost was similar to what God had said, through Joel, that He would do in the Millennium.

Second, it should also be clear that these Pentecost and Millennium events were not the identical because in the middle of the section of Joel's prophecy, which Peter quoted (2:28-32a), Joel mentioned the sun turning into darkness and the moon to blood (Acts 2:20). That did not happen on the day of Pentecost. It will happen in the Tribulation, just before God pours out His Spirit on all flesh (i.e., believing Israelites) in the Millennium (cf. Matt. 24:29; Rev. 6:12; 8:12).

Third, the context of Joel's prediction is Israel in the future, not the church, which began on the day of Pentecost and was not revealed in the Old Testament (cf. Eph. 2—3). Joel predicted the future of Israel, not the future of the church. The context of this prophecy is the Millennium and the judgments immediately preceding it, in the Tribulation. A cardinal rule of biblical interpretation is to pay careful attention to the people in view in the passage. Here it is specifically the Jews, not just "God's people."

Fourth, other prophecies refer to an outpouring of God's Spirit on the Jews in the future (e.g., Isa. 32:15; 44:3-4; Ezek. 36:27-28; 37:14; 39:29; Zech. 12:10). This prophecy in Joel is one of them.

Joel gave revelation about important aspects of God's plan for the future. He referred to the upcoming invasion by a foreign power, which took place about 135 years after he prophesied, when Sennacherib invaded Judah in 701 B.C., during King Hezekiah's reign (2 Kings 18—19). Judah avoided being judged then by repenting, but the people apostatized again and fell prey to the Babylonians a century later. Joel also talked about a far-distant future time of judgment on Israel: the Tribulation. After that time, he revealed great blessing for all types of Israelites, from the most lowly to the most exalted, including the restoration of Israel during the Millennium. Sin, judgment, and restoration to privilege and power, respectively, are what would mark Israel's future.

I would summarize the message of Joel this way: Though God will judge Israel for her apostasy with locust invasion-like devastation in the future, He will also later restore her to blessings greater than she has ever experienced, illustrating that He governs the world graciously.

Remember that "Israel" is not synonymous with the modern State of Israel. "Israel," when used of God's chosen people in the Bible, refers to the physical descendants of Jacob: ethnic Jews.

When Joel wrote, it was man's day, not the day of the LORD. The LORD had acted in the locust invasion, and He would act in judgment and in blessing in the future. These would be His days. But when Joel prophesied, the people failed to see God at work because He was not active, as He was and will be on these great days, when His presence was and will be manifest.

We, too, live in man's day. Most people, including many Christians, conclude that God either does not exist or takes no active role in human affairs, because He is not *obviously* working. At least His working is not apparent to them, because what is happening can be explained as natural or chance phenomena. Thus we live in a day very similar to Joel's day.

Whether people recognize it or not, God is executing His plan for the world. He will break into human experience again in the future. Thus it is imperative that Christians sound the same warning that Joel did. Judgment is coming, but people can avoid God's judgment by repenting. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:32; Acts 2:21). Humanity as a whole will fail to repent, just as most of the apostate Israelites failed to repent (cf. 1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3).

In *that* day (the Tribulation), a far worse fate will befall the unrepentant. Yet, God's plans for His people include incredible blessing, even though they may fail Him. This evidence of God's grace should motivate God's people to repent and remain faithful to Him now. Thus, God's government of Israel and His plan for Israel serve as a paradigm for His dealings with all humanity.<sup>1</sup>

"God would ever have His children recognize His hand in all such visitations. For the believer, there are no second causes. The Lord has said, 'I Jehovah create peace, and create evil.' And He asks the question, 'Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?' (Isa. 45:7; Amos 3:6)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:181-95.

<sup>2</sup>Harry A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, p. 114.

## Exposition

### I. INTRODUCTION 1:1

Yahweh's word (message) came to Joel (lit. "Yahweh is God"), the son of Pethuel (lit. "Persuaded of God," "Openheartedness of God," or "Sincerity of God"). ("Elijah" also means "Yahweh is God.") Therefore, what follows demands careful attention and appropriate response. We do not know anything about Joel or Pethuel's personal backgrounds, not even when they lived. This title does not tell where they lived either, though references that follow suggest that Joel lived in Judah (v. 14; 2:1). Hosea, Micah, and Zephaniah introduced their prophecies similarly.

### II. A PAST DAY OF THE LORD: A LOCUST INVASION 1:2-20

The rest of chapter 1 describes the effects of a severe locust plague that had recently destroyed the agriculture of the land. Some interpreters take this locust invasion as an allegory, but it seems better to take it as a literal invasion.<sup>1</sup>

#### A. AN INITIAL APPEAL 1:2-4

1:2-3 Joel called on everyone, from the most respected ruling elders of the land (cf. 1 Sam. 30:26-31; 2 Sam. 19:11-15; 2 Kings 23:1; Ezra 10:8; Prov. 31:23; Jer. 26:17; Lam. 5:12, 14) to the ordinary inhabitants, to pay attention to what he had to say. Nothing like what he was about to describe had happened in their lifetime or in that of their recent ancestors. He urged them to retell the devastating news to their descendants for generations to come (cf. Deut. 6:1-2).

"Thus, the book of Joel has a didactic [morally instructive] function."<sup>2</sup>

1:4 Several waves of locusts had consumed all the agricultural produce of the land. What one wave of these voracious insects

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<sup>1</sup>See Keil, 1:172-78; Robinson, pp. 35-37.

<sup>2</sup>Finley, p. 19.

had left uneaten, other subsequent waves had destroyed. The devastation of the land had been complete (cf. Amos 4:9). In the Mosaic Covenant, God had threatened locust plagues as punishment if His people proved unfaithful to Him (Deut. 28:38, 42).

"Joel's depiction of the locusts causes the reader to realize that the repeated nature of the plague was to make sure God's people did not ignore his judgments."<sup>1</sup>

Four different words for "locusts" appear in this verse (and in 2:25), but a total of nine occur in the Old Testament. These words have led some interpreters to conclude that four subspecies of locusts are in view,<sup>2</sup> or that locusts in four stages of maturity are meant.<sup>3</sup> It seems better, however, to view "these piranhas of the sky"<sup>4</sup> as coming in four waves: gnawing, swarming, creeping, and stripping—as they devoured the vegetation.<sup>5</sup>

Four waves of invasion picture a thorough devastation (cf. Jer. 15:3; Ezek. 14:21). Though the prophets sometimes used locusts as a figure for horses (e.g., Jer. 51:27), most interpreters have concluded that Joel described a real locust

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Writing Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Pusey, 1:159.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 116; Gaebelien, 2:3:97; J. A. Thompson, "Joel's Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1955):52-55; idem, "Translation of the Words for Locust," *Bible Translator* 25 (October 1974):405-11.

<sup>4</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 1041.

<sup>5</sup>See H. W. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, pp. 27-28; Keil, 1:181-82; Smith, 2:411; McGee, 3:660; Robinson, p. 33; Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 55. For eyewitness accounts of devastating locust plagues, see S. R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, pp. 40, 89-93; Smith, 2:398-403; Robinson, pp. 34-35; and John D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," *National Geographic*, December 1915, pp. 511-50. For more detailed discussions of locusts and locust plagues, see Stanley Baron, *The Desert Locust*; L. V. Bennett, "Development of a Locust Plague," *Nature* 256 (1975):486-87; Lev Fishelson, *Fauna Palestina: Insecta*. Vol. 3: *Orthoptera, Acridoidea*; Ovid R. Sellers, "Stages of Locust in Joel," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 52 (1935-36):81-85; and Z. Waloft and S. M. Green, "Regularities and Duration of Regional Locust Plagues," *Nature* 256 (1975):484-85.

invasion rather than a military invasion by soldiers on horses.<sup>1</sup> McGee saw a parallel between these four bands of locusts and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev. 6:1-8).<sup>2</sup>

"Nothing is more natural for us than this. In place of godly exercise, we may give way to self-pity, or hard, stony indifference; thus either fainting under the discipline of the Lord on the one hand, or despising it on the other. Blessing results from being 'exercised thereby.' This was what Judah was in danger of missing, as with many others before and since."<sup>3</sup>

"The weaker the instrument is that God employs the more is his power magnified."<sup>4</sup>

## **B. A CALL TO MOURN 1:5-13**

Joel called on four different entities to mourn the results of the locust invasion: drunkards (vv. 5-7), Jerusalemites (vv. 8-10), farmers (vv. 11-12), and priests (v. 13). In each section, there is a call to mourn followed by reasons to mourn. Interestingly, drunkenness and immorality are the only social sins that Joel charged the people with committing in this book (cf. 3:3).

1:5-7 Joel urged the drunkards of the land to weep because the locusts had destroyed all the grapevines. There would be no grapes to produce "sweet" (the most favored) wine for them to drink (cf. Isa. 5:11-12, 22; 22:13; 28:1, 7; 56:12; Hos. 4:11-19; 7:5, 13-14; Amos 2:6-8; 6:6; 9:13; Mic. 2:11; Acts 2:13, 15).

"*Sweet wine* ('*asis*) was made by drying the grapes in the sun for a short time and then

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<sup>1</sup>Stuart, pp. 241-42, 243, 245, believed they were figurative and represented invading Mesopotamian armies.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 3:660.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1123.

allowing the juice to ferment for five to seven days instead of the more usual nine."<sup>1</sup>

"We are frequently reminded that most of the accidents which take place on our highways are caused by some individual who is exercising his freedom and right to drink. Entire families have been killed on the highway while out on a holiday because some drunk driver has hit them head-on. I may be criticized for moving into the realm of politics but, my friend, I am studying the Word of God, and when it talks about drunkenness, I am going to talk about drunkenness. And when God's Word speaks about the king being a drunkard, then I will talk about drunkenness in my nation's capital. When we are told that there are dozens of cocktail parties every day in Washington, D.C., it is no wonder that some of the decisions which are being handed down look as if they were coming from men who are not in their right minds."<sup>2</sup>

Often drunkards laugh, with no concern for what goes on around them, but now, Joel said, they should wail. The locusts had invaded the land like a hostile army. The teeth of these invaders were like lions' teeth in that they destroyed their prey. They had stripped the vines and fig trees so thoroughly that their branches stood bare. The vine and the fig tree were symbols of God's blessings on Israel and symbols of Israel itself, so Joel probably also meant that the locusts had left the whole nation bare.

"All that remained of shady, fruit-laden bowers were skeletonized wrecks of trees with their barkless branches gleaming white."<sup>3</sup>

"Beyond this one case, the Prophet names neither sins nor sinners among his own people [but see

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<sup>1</sup>Hubbard, p. 44. Cf. Driver, p. 225.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 3:660-61.

<sup>3</sup>Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, p. 52.

3:3]. He foretells chastisement, and exhorts to repentance as the means of averting it, but does not specify any sins. His prophecy is one declaration of the displeasure of God against all sin, and of His judgments consequent thereon, one promise of pardon upon earnest repentance; and so, perhaps, what is individual has, for the most part been purposely suppressed."<sup>1</sup>

Joel proceeded to tell his audience several things that they should do, in verses 8 through 14.

1:8-10 The next entity called to mourn appears to be Jerusalem. The gender of "Wail" is feminine (singular), and Jerusalem is often compared to a virgin daughter in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Kings 19:21; Lam. 1:15; cf. Joel 2:1, 15, 23, 32). This "virgin" (Heb. *bethulah*) was to weep in "sackcloth," clothing appropriate for such an occasion, as though she had lost her "groom" in death. The Hebrew word suggests that this virgin was a presently unmarried woman who anticipated union with her betrothed. The reason for Jerusalem's mourning was the locusts' destruction of grain, wine, and oil: blessings from God and the products needed to worship Him in the daily temple burnt offerings (cf. Exod. 29:38-42; Lev. 2; 6:14-18; 9:16-17; 23:18, 37; Num. 15:5; 28:3-8).

Grain, wine, and oil represent the three major types of vegetation in Israel: grasses, shrubs, and trees. Used together, as they often are in the Old Testament, they stand for all agricultural products.<sup>2</sup> This appears to be a merism: a figure of speech in which selected prominent parts represent all parts—the whole. The grain offerings required flour and oil (Num. 28:5), and the drink offerings required wine (Exod. 29:40; Num. 28:7).

"These offerings spoke of the very heart of the believer's daily walk before God: the burnt offering, of a complete dedication of life; the meal

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<sup>1</sup>Pusey, 1:145.

<sup>2</sup>Dillard, p. 262.

offering, of the believer's service that should naturally follow; and the drink offering, of the conscious joy in the heart of the believer whose life is poured out in consecrated service to his God."<sup>1</sup>

The result of this deficiency was that the priests and the whole nation mourned. It was bad enough that the people did not have food and drink for their own enjoyment, but it was worse that they could not worship Yahweh.

1:11-12 Joel next turned from city-dwellers to country folk. He called for the farmers and vine growers, those most directly affected by the locust invasion, to despair—because the fruits of their labors had perished. These fruits included: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, dates, and apples (all the fruits of trees). These Israelites would not be able to rejoice in an abundant harvest, which every farmer and viticulturist (grape cultivator) anticipated (cf. Ps. 4:7). Not only the symbols of divine blessing, but also the joy of divine blessing, had departed.

1:13 The prophet turned again to the priests (cf. v. 9) and urged them to lament in "sackcloth," because the grain and wine used in their offerings were no longer available. Joel's second call to the priests underlines the tragedy of curtailed worship in Judah's life. Since there were no offerings to bring to the LORD, the nation could not approach Him—as He had directed—at the very time she needed Him most. The people could, of course, pray, but the priests could not offer sacrifices to Him.

The closing reference to priests in this section contrasts with the opening reference to drunkards (vv. 5-7), moving from the most ungodly to the most godly (ideally). This merism has the effect of including all the citizens of Judah in Joel's call. Joel's reference to "my God" and "your God" in this verse ties him closely to the priests; their concerns and their relationship to Yahweh were ideally the same.

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<sup>1</sup>Patterson, p. 240.

### C. A CALL TO REPENT 1:14

Joel called on the priests not only to mourn (v. 13), but also to assemble all the people at the temple for a "fast" and a "solemn assembly." Such fasts indicated national repentance in Israel's history (cf. 1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:1-2; Jer. 36:9; Jon. 3:5). Here, as usual, fasting is assumed to accompany praying to the LORD. The people would pray to Him for mercy and for renewed blessing, and would demonstrate their sincerity and earnestness by going without food while they prayed.

### D. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAGUE 1:15-20

"This section moves much closer to the form of the descriptive lament found in the lamenting psalms than did the descriptions earlier in the chapter."<sup>1</sup>

We move, then, from a summonses to lament, to a lament itself.

1:15 The locust plague had destroyed (Heb. *shadad*) the fields and fruits of Judah, but Joel announced that things would get worse. Another day of destruction (Heb. *shod*) would come from the LORD, "the Almighty" (Heb. *shadday*). A locust plague was not only an evidence of God's judgment (cf. Deut. 28), but in the past it had been a harbinger of future worse destruction. A locust plague had preceded the plagues of darkness and death in Egypt (cf. Exod. 10—11). Thus, rather than seeing the locust plague as the end of the people's troubles, Joel saw it as a prelude to something worse.

"The day of the LORD" is a term that appears frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets.<sup>2</sup> It refers to a day (period of time) in which the LORD is working obviously, in contrast to other days, the day of man, in which man works without any apparent divine intervention. Specifically, it is a day in which the LORD intervenes to judge His enemies and/or bless His people. Gerhard von Rad argued that this term was

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 229-32.

originally associated with the Israelite concept of holy war,<sup>1</sup> but other scholars have disputed this etymology. Most agree, however, that it had early associations with battles and conquest.

Here the day of the LORD is obviously one of destruction, though elsewhere it also refers to a day of blessing. The eschatological day of the LORD that the prophets anticipated includes both judgment (in the Tribulation) and blessing (in the Millennium and beyond). Here Joel spoke of an imminent day of the LORD; it was coming on Judah relatively soon (cf. Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:2-3; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:7-13).

The term "the day of the LORD " occurs prominently here in the prophetic writings, and it is a major theme of prophetic revelation (cf. Amos, Zephaniah). When used *generally*, this term refers to any period of time in which God is dealing with people in dramatic, direct ways. It usually describes God's dealings with Israel, but it is also used of His dealings with other nations: Edom (in Obadiah), Assyria, and Babylonia (in Isaiah, for example). It is always associated with judgment and/or blessing. It may refer to the past, the immediate future, or the distant (eschatological) future.

The *technical* sense of the term is more common in the Prophets. As a technical term, it refers to Israel's eschatological future that will include both judgment and blessing. Many "day of the LORD " passages refer to the future Tribulation.<sup>2</sup> The Jews thought the period of judgment would precede Messiah's coming. It did precede His first coming, but it will precede His second coming as well. We know this by comparing what the prophets said with what was fulfilled at Jesus' first coming and what has yet to be fulfilled at His second coming (e.g., in Rev.).

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<sup>1</sup>Gerhard von Rad, "The Origin of the Concept of the Day of the Lord," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 4 (1959):97-108.

<sup>2</sup>See J. Randall Price, "Old Testament Tribulation Terms," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 60-63.

"In like manner are Christians exhorted to walk now in view of the day of Christ, when all our works shall be examined at His judgment-seat."<sup>1</sup>

1:16-18 Joel described the effects of the recent locust plague to encourage his hearers to gather for prayer and fasting. He suggested that similar conditions would accompany the day of the LORD that he had just predicted. The people's food supply, and therefore their occasion for rejoicing, had disappeared (cf. Deut. 12:7). Drought had followed the denuding of the land by the locusts. Seeds were not germinating due to the lack of moisture. Barns and silos had become empty and had fallen into disrepair, and domesticated animals were starving. Grazing cattle wandered aimlessly looking for vegetation, and even the sheep, which require less grass than the cattle, were going hungry.

1:19-20 Joel cried out to Yahweh in prayer in the distress that he shared with his countrymen. Fire had burned the dried pastures and trees, or perhaps severe drought (like a fire) had done so. The brooks were dry, and even the wild animals panted for water. Joel could say they panted for Yahweh because the LORD was the provider of the water that these animals sought (cf. Ps. 42:1). By panting for Yahweh, these animals were setting a good example for the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

### III. A NEAR FUTURE DAY OF THE LORD: A HUMAN INVASION 2:1-27

Joel had spoken briefly of a coming day of the LORD in 1:15, but now he said more about it.

The term "the day of the LORD " seems to have arisen from the popular concept, in the ancient Near East, that a really great warrior king could consummate an entire military campaign in one single day.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as the Israelites used the term in relation to Yahweh, it reflected His greatness and pointed to His swift and effective dispatch of His enemies on a given

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<sup>1</sup>Ironside, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>See Douglas Stuart, "The Sovereign's Day of Conquest," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 220/21 (December 1975, February 1976):159-64.

occasion. Sometimes the term refers to such a judgment in the near past or future, and sometimes it refers to one in the distant future (eschaton).<sup>1</sup>

### A. THE INVADING ARMY 2:1-11

The LORD revealed that an army of human beings, rather than locusts, would soon assail Jerusalem. He described this army at length in order to stress the danger that His people faced, and to motivate them to repent.

Thomas Finley believed that this section is an extended metaphor describing the literal past locust invasion referred to in chapter 1.<sup>2</sup> I side with those interpreters who interpret the Hebrew imperfect verbs as describing something in the future. Some in this second group view both chapters 2 and 3 as eschatological.<sup>3</sup> Others, including myself, believe that chapter 2 describes a near threat, and chapter 3 an eschatological (far distant) threat.

#### 1. The nearness of the army 2:1-2

The prophet ordered a trumpet (Heb. *shophar*, ram's horn) to be blown in Zion (Jerusalem), specifically on the temple mount, to sound an alarm (cf. Jer. 4:5-6; Ezek. 33:2-6).

"It is the work of ministers to give warning from the word of God of the fatal consequences of sin."<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes "Zion" refers to Jerusalem in the eschaton, but other times it is simply a poetic synonym for Jerusalem. Joel probably used it in the latter sense here. This shophar was the ancient equivalent of an air raid siren. The day of the LORD was coming, and all the inhabitants of the city should tremble. That day would be a time of foreboding evil, symbolized by a very overcast sky. It is interesting that a plague of darkness followed a locust plague in Egypt (Exod. 10). "Darkness" and "clouds" are common figures for judgment and destruction in the Old Testament (e.g., Jer. 13:16; Ezek. 30:3, 18; 32:7-8; 34:12; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph. 1:15). They are often

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<sup>1</sup>See Chisholm, "Joel," pp. 1412-13; or Patterson, p. 256, for good, brief discussions of the term and its uses.

<sup>2</sup>Finley, pp. 33-34. See also Keil, 1:189.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 1124.

associated with Yahweh in His role of mighty, victorious warrior (cf. Deut. 4:11; 5:22-23; Ps. 18:9, 11; 97:2).

Joel could envision a gigantic army spread over the horizon like the "dawn." (Was the attack coming from the east, the direction of the dawn?) He said there never had been "anything like" this "day," nor would there be after it—not even the plagues in Egypt. This may be hyperbole, or this day may refer to the Great Tribulation, when the Jews will experience their worst ever attack. Joel said this attack was near, either in the near future in his day, or relatively near from his perspective as a prophet (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8).

Many scholars take this passage as predicting an invasion of Jerusalem by some ancient enemy of Israel, such as Assyria or Babylonia, in the relatively near future.<sup>1</sup> Feinberg and Patterson argued for the army being that of Assyria.<sup>2</sup> In favor of such a view is the reference to the invasion being "near" (v. 1). Against it is the statement of its uniqueness in all of history (v. 2). Other interpreters view 2:1-11 as a further description of the locust plague that Joel described in chapter 1.<sup>3</sup> This seems unlikely since the locust plague of chapter 1 was past, but the attack in 2:1-11 was future. I think verses 1-2 probably refer to an attack by some enemy in Joel's day, in view of what follows.

## **2. The destructive power of the army 2:3-5**

2:3 Joel saw a huge army that advanced like a forest fire, consuming everything in its path (cf. 1:19). Before the devastation, conditions were idyllic, but after it, there was nothing but a scorched-earth wilderness. Nothing escaped the advancing desolation (cf. Exod. 10:5, 15).

"Joel is quite interested in 'before and after' descriptions, and they form a motif throughout the book."<sup>4</sup>

2:4-5 Joel compared this advancing army to "war horses" and "chariots," which were the war machines of his day. He heard

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Wolff, p. 42; Chisholm, "Joel," pp. 1411-12; Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Lee Feinberg, *Joel, Amos, and Obadiah*, p. 19; Patterson, pp. 245-46.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Allen, pp. 29, 64-76; Driver, p. 28; Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup>Finley, pp. 44-45.

the familiar sound of chariots in battle, which he likened to the crackling of fire as it rages up a mountainside, swiftly consuming everything in its path. The huge army that Joel saw appeared unstoppable.

It is interesting that locusts look like tiny armored horses, and they behave like them as well (cf. Job 39:19-20; Rev. 9:7). The Italian word for locust means "little horse," and the German word means "hay horse."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the correspondence between the army of locusts that had recently swept through the land swiftly, and this future invading army, is unmistakable. Even their sounds were similar. However, the point of the comparison is probably that the horse is a symbol of power and might (cf. Isa. 31:1-3; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:10; Hag. 2:22; Zech. 9:10; 12:4; Rev. 9:7).<sup>2</sup>

### **3. The relentlessness of the army 2:6-9**

2:6 As this army advanced, all the people in and around Jerusalem felt terrified and turned pale with fear (cf. Isa. 26:17; Jer. 4:31; Mic. 4:10).

2:7-9 The enemy soldiers ran with great stamina and climbed over walls, as locusts do. They were very disciplined in their attack, each one staying in his proper position and not crowding his fellow soldiers (cf. Josh. 6:5). Even when they broke through an obstacle they did not break ranks. They rushed on the city of Jerusalem, ran along its walls, and climbed into its houses like so many thieves. Again, the comparison with locusts is striking (cf. Exod. 10:5-6).

### **4. The invincibility of the army 2:10-11**

2:10 The earth trembles as this army advances. The heavens also tremble. The sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars fade from view. Cosmic disturbances like these are common in biblical descriptions of Yahweh waging war (cf. 3:16; Judg. 5:4;

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Wolff, p. 45, n. 46; Driver, p. 52; Feinberg, p. 20; Keil, 1:192; et al.

<sup>2</sup>Dillard, p. 274.

Ps. 18:7; 77:18; Isa. 13:10, 13; Ezek. 32:7; Zech. 14:6-7; Rev. 6—18).

2:11 It now becomes clear that Yahweh is leading this army against Jerusalem. Normally the LORD fought *for* His people, but here Joel saw Him leading an army *against* them. He is the One who is directing the soldiers with His voice. His host is both numerous and strong. The day of this attack, the day of the LORD, is great and awesome, and no one can withstand it (cf. Mal. 3:2; 4:5).

"Here we find one of the great principles of God's dealing with man throughout his history: God only inflicts punishment after great provocation, and when He does so, it is meant to draw man back from further and more severe visitations of the wrath of God."<sup>1</sup>

"God brings us into straits, that he may bring us to repentance and so bring us to himself."<sup>2</sup>

Some interpreters regard the description of the locust plague in 2:1-11 as simply another description of the same locust plague as the one described in chapter 1, or another locust plague in Israel's past history. Others take this description as an allegory picturing Israel's traditional enemies. Still others view it as picturing the eschatological day of the LORD, in which the LORD Almighty Himself will come with His heavenly army in holy war against evil.<sup>3</sup> Many amillennialists take this last view. The view that seems best to me, and to many other interpreters, is that it is a metaphor based on the past locust plague. In other words, Joel used the past locust invasion as a harbinger of an impending human invasion by an undesignated foreign foe.

### **B. A CALL TO REPENTANCE 2:12-17**

Such an awesome prospect of invasion led Joel to appeal to the people of Jerusalem to repent. This would hopefully turn away God's judgment. He voiced two appeals, but, unusually, he did not say what the sins of the

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<sup>1</sup>Feinberg, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, p. 1124.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Dillard, p. 278.

people were—at least here. Evidently they were known well enough at the time.

### 1. An appeal for private repentance 2:12-14

2:12-13a Speaking for the LORD, Joel urged his hearers even now—even though judgment was threatened—to repent. However, he clarified that their repentance needed to be wholehearted, not just external. Fasting, weeping, and mourning would give evidence of the people's sincerity, but they had to tear their hearts, not merely their garments, as was customary in mourning. They needed to return to Yahweh their God (cf. 2 Chron. 7:14). This was a call to return to obedience to the Mosaic Covenant.

2:13b-14 If they did, they could count on Yahweh being gracious, compassionate, patient, loyal to them, and willing to withhold punishment (cf. Exod. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8; 143:8; Isa. 28:21; Jon. 4:2). Their genuine repentance might—Yahweh is still sovereign—move Him to turn from His previously intended course of action and bless them, rather than curse them (cf. Mal. 3:7).

"Human repentance does not control God. People cannot force God to show them his forgiveness. They can only appeal to him for mercy in not meting out against them what they very well deserve. They may hope for his compassion, but they cannot command it (Zeph 2:3; Lam 3:29)."<sup>1</sup>

Agricultural blessings would signal a reversal of God's judgment in the recent locust invasion, and they would then be able to offer grain and wine to the LORD again (cf. 1:9, 13).

"Some dismiss biblical references to God 'relenting' from judgment as anthropomorphic, arguing that an unchangeable God would never change his mind once he has announced his intentions. While it is true that God will not deviate

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<sup>1</sup>Stuart, *Hoses-Jonah*, p. 252.

from an announced course of action once he has issued a formal, unconditional decree (see Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4), he is often depicted as 'changing his mind' in contexts where he has given only a warning or made a conditional statement about what he will do. Since Joel 2:13 lists God's capacity to 'change his mind' as one of his fundamental attributes (see also Jon. 4:2), one cannot dismiss this characteristic as anthropomorphic."<sup>1</sup>

God's graciousness is seen in His willingness to respond, even when people do not deserve it.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. An appeal for public repentance 2:15-17

Joel went beyond calling for personal heart-felt repentance, to urging the people to assemble for a corporate expression of their sincere contrition.

2:15-16 The prophet urged the blowing of the shophar in Zion again, but this time, to call a public assembly and a fast, rather than to announce the coming invader (v. 1; cf. 1:14). Fasting involved sacrificially going without food in order to devote oneself to a higher spiritual purpose. God's people needed to gather together and re-consecrate themselves to Him as a special and holy people.

Everyone without exception, in the entire "congregation," should participate, from the oldest ("elders") to the youngest ("nursing infants"). The "elders," in this context, probably refers to the leaders of the nation. Even newlyweds ("groom" and "bride"), who sometimes received a special exemption for being newly married (Deut. 24:5), needed to attend this meeting.

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<sup>1</sup>Chisholm, *Handbook of ...*, p. 372. See also idem, "Does God Change His Mind?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (October-December 1995):387-99; and Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 147-48.

<sup>2</sup>Finley, p. 54.

It is interesting that the Jews will assemble in the Promised Land, having received encouragement from the Antichrist, during the first half of the Tribulation. Then the invader will descend on their land and the terrible prospect envisioned in verses 1-11 will take place, in the second half of the Tribulation. Antichrist will persecute them (cf. Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:20). They will not assemble then in repentance, however.

2:17 The priests should take the lead in this public expression of repentance. They should weep and pray for God to have mercy on His people, because they were His special inheritance, for the glory of His name.

"Thus the priests are directed to take their stand on the temple-side of the altar, as representing a people who, although in failure, are yet the redeemed of the Lord (vers. 16, 17)."<sup>1</sup>

The pagans might conclude that the LORD was unable or unwilling to defend His chosen people from their enemy, if He allowed the invader to succeed.

"They cannot hope that Yahweh will forget all about the invasion by ignoring the enforcing of his covenant. Their punishment is a foregone conclusion; they can only hope that his mercy will restore them soon (Deut 32:36, 43; Lam 3:31-32, 40-50)."<sup>2</sup>

### C. THE POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATION 2:18-27

Joel next revealed the LORD's response and comforting words in view of the people's private and public repentance. It is unclear whether he meant that the LORD had responded or would respond. The problem is the Hebrew perfect tense verbs, which can be rendered in English with either past or future tense verbs. Several English translations interpreted the LORD's response as being conditioned on the people's repentance, and they

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<sup>1</sup>Ironside, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 253.

translated the verbs in the future tense. It is equally possible that Joel meant that God had already responded positively because the people had repented, which the prophet did not record. Thus, the verbs in verses 18 and 19a would be translated in the past tense.<sup>1</sup>

I view this section as what God promised to do *if* the people responded to Joel's call to repentance. Sometime before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., God told the Israelites that they had passed the point of no return and that captivity was inevitable (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12). Since repentance was still possible for the Israelites when Joel wrote, this prophecy evidently does not deal with that time.

"Laments in the OT are sometimes followed by a divine oracle in which Yahweh, through a prophet, assures his people that their prayers will be answered (or sometimes rejected)."<sup>2</sup>

### **1. The LORD's gracious response 2:18**

If the Israelites repented sincerely, Yahweh would be zealous to protect His chosen land from foreign invaders and have pity on His chosen people. This was His essential response.

"Beginning in Joel 2:18, Israel ceases to be the object of God's judgment and becomes instead the object of His blessing. In a similar reversal the hordes (locust and human) cease to be the instruments of God's judgment on Israel and become instead the objects of God's judgment. This reversal was originally foretold by God through Moses in Deuteronomy 30:1-9."<sup>3</sup>

"Between verses 17 and 18, we should presume that the invitation and commands of verses 12-17 have been accepted and obeyed."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Allen, p. 85. See 2 Chr. 20; Ps. 12:5; 60:6-8; Isa. 33:10-13; Jer. 4:1-2 (cf. 3:21-25); Hos. 14:4-7; Mic. 7:11-13.

<sup>3</sup>Dyer, p. 742.

<sup>4</sup>Hubbard, p. 61.

## 2. The LORD's promise of blessing 2:19-27

Having given His essential response to the people's repentance, the LORD now explained what He would do in more detail. This section is chiasmic (has a crossing structure), with the focus of emphasis on verses 21-24. Verses 19 and 26-27 promise a restoration of crops and a cessation of shame. Verses 20 and 25 promise the elimination of enemies, and verses 21-24 urge courage and encourage rejoicing.

2:19 Joel had interpreted the LORD's response (v. 18), and now he relayed His instructions (vv. 19-27). Yahweh would restore all that the locusts had eaten: grain, wine, and oil (cf. 1:10). The people would enjoy plenty of these products in the future (cf. Deut. 6:10-11; 8:7-10; 11:13-15). Yahweh would also never again allow the nations to disparage His people, assuming that they would not apostatize again (cf. vv. 26-27).<sup>1</sup>

Another view, less acceptable from my viewpoint, is that this promise is unconditional and refers to Israel's eschatological future. The problem with this view is that the Jews will experience some antagonism at the very end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:7-10).

2:20 The prophet now revealed that this invader would come from the north. Both Assyria and Babylon, as well as all other eastern invaders, entered Israel from the north because of the impassability of the Arabian Desert to Israel's east. This is probably the strongest verse in support of the view that a literal army is in view in chapter 2.<sup>2</sup>

"If 'the northerner' is yet future (eschatological), the army is possibly the army in Joel 3:9, 12; Daniel 11:40; and Zechariah 14:2."<sup>3</sup>

Instead of leading this army against Jerusalem (v. 11), the LORD would drive it from Judah. He would drive these enemy soldiers "into a dry and desolate land" (Arabia?), and into "the eastern (Dead) sea," and into "the western (Mediterranean) sea" (cf.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Finley, p. 62. Cf. Feinberg, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>Chisholm, "Joel," p. 1419.

Dan. 11:45). In other words, He would turn against them rather than leading them, and scatter them rather than uniting them against Jerusalem.

The "stench" and "odor" of the dead carcasses of the many soldiers would fill the air because they had done many "great things" (possibly meaning that they had arrogantly invaded the Holy Land—unprovoked—causing vast destruction and much death). In short, they had tried to overthrow God's people (cf. the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea). Masses of dead locusts also smell terrible, especially after dying in the sea and then being washed ashore.<sup>1</sup>

2:21-24 Joel called on the land, personified to represent its people, to rejoice because the LORD had done great things (in contrast to the enemy army, v. 20; cf. v. 1). The NIV interpreted the last line of verse 20 as referring to the LORD, but it probably refers to the invading army, as the NASB, AV, and RSV translated it.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, He had delivered His people from a much larger and more powerful enemy invasion, assuming the Judahites' repentance. The animals, too, could stop fearing because God's blessing had returned to the land.

Green pastures had replaced brown, and trees and vines had again become abundantly fruitful, rather than dry and lifeless (cf. 1:7, 10-12, 19). Fall and spring rains, signs of divine blessing (cf. Deut. 11:14), had replaced drought, so the LORD's people could again rejoice rather than grieve (cf. 1:5, 8, 11, 13, 20). The threshing floors would be full of grain and the vats would overflow with new wine and oil (cf. 1:17).

A possible translation of verse 23 is "the teacher for righteousness" instead of "the early [autumn or former] rain."

"Normally the Hebrew word *hammoreh* means 'the teacher,' but here and in Ps 84:7 it refers to 'early rains.' Elsewhere the word for 'early rains' is *yoreh*."

<sup>1</sup>Driver, pp. 62-63; Smith, 2:420.

<sup>2</sup>NIV refers to *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, AV refers to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*, and RSV refers to *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*.

The phrase here *hammoreh litsdaqah* is similar to the expression 'teacher of righteousness' (Heb. *moreh hatsedeq*) found in the Dead Sea Scrolls referring to a particular charismatic leader, although the Qumran community seems not to have invoked this text in support of that notion."<sup>1</sup>

2:25 The LORD further promised that He would make up to His people what they had suffered because of the locust invasion (cf. 1:4; Exod. 22:1; 2 Kings 4:7). The "years that the swarming locust has eaten" refers to the yield or produce of those years. Sin had resulted in covenant curses, but repentance would result in covenant blessings (cf. Deut. 28—29).

2:26-27 The people would have plenty to eat and would feel satisfied physically. They would also be full spiritually and praise Yahweh their God for working wonders for them (cf. Exod. 3:15; 15:11; 34:10; Josh. 3:5; Jud. 6:13; Ps. 77:14). Then they would never be put to shame, again assuming that they continued in their attitude of humble trust and obedience (cf. v. 19).

God's blessings would be evidence of His presence among them, increasing the intimacy of their fellowship with Him (cf. Num. 11:20; 14:14; Deut. 7:21). They would realize in their experience that He is the only true God (cf. Exod. 6:7; 16:12; Deut. 4:35, 39), and they would abide in that shameless condition (as long as they remained faithful to Him).

"... just as God's warnings of judgment are often conditional and can be averted by repentance, so his promises of prosperity are often contingent on their recipients remaining loyal to God (see Jer. 18:7-10)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The NET2 Bible* note on 2:23. *The NET2 Bible* refers to *The NET2 (New English Translation) Bible*, 2019 ed. See Michael A. Rydelnik, "The Teacher of Righteousness: A Messianic Interpretation of Joel 2:23," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 176:702 (April-June 2019):164-73.

<sup>2</sup>Chisholm, *Handbook on ...*, p. 373.

#### **IV. A FAR FUTURE DAY OF THE LORD: ANOTHER HUMAN INVASION AND DELIVERANCE 2:28—3:21**

The preceding promises foreshadowed even greater deliverance and blessing for the Israelites in their far distant future. The clues to a leap to the distant future in the prophet's perspective are the words: "after this" (2:28), "in those days" (2:29), "the great and awesome day of the LORD" (2:31; cf. 2:11), "in those days and at that time" (3:1), and "on that day" (3:18).

Alva McClain organized and expounded the Old Testament revelation concerning this distant day of the LORD fairly concisely.<sup>1</sup> He divided the events chronologically, according to the four periods of a normal 24-hour day, from the viewpoint of the Israelites—with the day beginning at sunset (darkness followed by light). Some of the predictions describe what will happen before the darkness sets in. Others describe what will happen during the period of darkness. Then there are events that will take place in the twilight period: just before the period of daylight begins. Finally, there are events during the light of that great day. His outline is as follows:

1. Preparatory events—before the day of the LORD
  - a. A court of judgment will be set in heaven.
  - b. The voice of a prophetic messenger will be heard on earth.
  - c. Internecine warfare and chaos will sweep the world.
  - d. A blasphemous political ruler will rise to world power.
  - e. There will be great geological and cosmic disturbances.
2. Penal events—during the darkness of the day of the LORD
  - a. Wrath will fall upon a great northern power.
  - b. Wrath will fall upon the nation of Israel.
  - c. Wrath will fall also on all the Gentile nations.
3. Transitional events—at the dawn of the day of the LORD
  - a. The glorious arrival of the Mediatorial King
  - b. The destruction of the hostile armies

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<sup>1</sup>Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, ch. 16: "The Establishment of the Prophetic Kingdom," pp. 178-205. For more extended discussions, see John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 256-334; and Pentecost, pp. 229-32.

- c. The doom of the blasphemous "Little Horn"
4. Constitutive events—during the light of the day of the LORD
- a. There will be a resurrection.
  - b. There will be a repentance of Israelites in the land.
  - c. There will be a regathering of dispersed Israelites.
  - d. There will be a judgment of living Israelites.
  - e. There will also be a judgment of living Gentile nations.

#### A. ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL RENEWAL AND DELIVERANCE 2:28-32

2:28-29 "After this," namely, after the deliverance from the northern invader just described, God promised to pour out His Spirit on all the Israelites—without gender, age, class, or position distinctions. In other words, He would pour out His Spirit on all classes of Israelites. Other similar promises identify the Israelites as the recipients of the Spirit (e.g., Ezek. 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Zech. 12:10), and here "your sons and your daughters" (i.e., Israelites) are the object of this blessing. God never gave His Spirit to unbelievers, so believing Israelites are in view.<sup>1</sup>

Amillennialists typically believe that "all flesh" means all believers, namely, all believing Jews and Gentiles, which they believe constitute one great people of God called the church.<sup>2</sup> Premillennialist Walter Kaiser believed that "all flesh" means "all mankind," because the gift of the Spirit extends to slaves, and the Israelites had Gentile slaves (Deut. 20:10-14; cf. 1 Chron. 2:34-35).<sup>3</sup> But the Israelites also had Israelite slaves (Exod. 21:1-11; cf. 2 Kings 4:1).

In Old Testament times, God gave His Spirit only to select individuals (cf. Num. 11:24-29; 1 Sam. 10:10-11; 19:20-24), but in the future, everyone (i.e., all Jewish believers) would prophesy and receive revelations from the LORD. Prophesying

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, 2:428.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Dillard, p. 295. Cf. Hubbard, p. 73; Keil, 1:210; J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 2:538.

<sup>3</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, p. 97.

often describes praising God in the Bible (cf. 1 Chron. 25:1-3), so that may be in view here. Prophesying usually involved proclaiming messages from God. "Dreams" and "visions" were God's customary ways of giving special revelations to people in Old Testament times (cf. Num. 12:6).

Normally, the absence of prophetic revelation indicated sin and divine judgment, but the presence of such revelation reflected divine blessing (cf. 1 Sam. 3:1; Amos 8:11). So a universal bestowal of the "Spirit" on Jewish believers indicates a future time of unprecedented divine blessing. This would be the fulfillment of Moses' desire: "If only all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!" (Num. 11:29; cf. Isa. 32:15; 44:3-4; Ezek. 36:27-28; 37:14; 39:29; Zech. 12:10).

"When Joel speaks of those who prophesy, dream dreams, and see visions, the language must mean more than simply that, as Walter Price says, 'everyone would be his own prophet. All would have a direct revelation from God.'<sup>1</sup> Rather, it denotes a new era of revelation with the Israelites preaching to each other or, perhaps, even to the entire world."<sup>2</sup>

"The expression ... (*bayyamim hahemma*, 'in those days') is another way the prophets indicate the end times when the Lord will intervene in history to deliver His people and set up His kingdom (cf. Jer. 33:15, 16; Zech. 8:23). Particularly important is the variety of terms Joel uses, as well as the way he gradually makes the time notices more explicit: 'after this' (2:28 [MT 3:1;]) 'in those days' (2:29 [MT 3:2;]) 'before the day of Yahweh, the great and awesome day' (2:31 [MT 3:4;]) 'in those days and at that time when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem' (3:1

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<sup>1</sup>"Walter K. Price, *The Prophet Joel and the Day of the Lord*, p. 74."

<sup>2</sup>Finley, pp. 72-73.

[MT 4:1;]) 'the day of Yahweh is near' (3:14 [MT 4:14; and]) 'in that day' (3:18 [MT 4:18.])<sup>1</sup>

2:30-31 The LORD also promised awesome displays of celestial phenomena before this great and terrible day of the LORD arrived. Awe-inspiring miracles ("wonders") would occur "in the sky" as well as "on the earth." The appearance of "blood, fire, and columns of smoke" suggests warfare, with God's hand at work behind the scenes (cf. Exod. 19:9, 16-18; Rev. 6:12-17). "The sun" would become dark and "the moon" would turn red ("blood"). These are probably descriptions of how these heavenly bodies will look (the language of appearance), not what will become of them, in view of other similar descriptions (e.g., vv. 2, 10; 3:15; Jer. 4:23-24; Ezek. 32:6-8; Amos 5:18-20; 8:9; Zeph. 1:15; Rev. 6:12-13).

"The synonymous parallelism of the initial couplet ... (sun ... darkness, moon ... blood) does not focus on the sun and moon separately, as if there were to be daytime and nighttime signs in the sky, but merely pairs moon with sun, the sign being darkness during the daytime (cf. 1:2; Josh 10:12-14)."<sup>2</sup>

This sign will precede the great and awesome day of the LORD—still future (cf. Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25-28).

2:32 The promise continued: that whoever would call on the name of Yahweh would be delivered ("saved").

"To 'call on the name of Yahweh' ... means not merely to pray to him, but to worship him consistently and presumably exclusively (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 1 Kgs 18:24; Ps 116:17; Zeph 3:9); the expression can also indicate open acknowledgement of one's faith in the midst of a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 261.

hostile environment (Ps 105:1; Isa 12:4; Zech 13:9)."<sup>1</sup>

The day of the LORD described earlier in this chapter involved God judging the enemies of His people, and this eschatological day of the LORD also involves divine judgment. Therefore, the deliverance in view must be from divine judgment (cf. Rom. 11:26). Specifically, there will be people on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem who escape, even among the survivors of previous distresses whom Yahweh has chosen for deliverance (cf. Isa. 51:3; Zech. 13:8).

The Apostle Paul quoted this verse and applied it to spiritual salvation (Rom. 10:13). His usage does not fulfill what God promised here, namely, physical deliverance in the coming day of the LORD. Paul meant that, just as God will deliver all who call on Him in that future day of the LORD, so He will deliver all who call on Him for salvation from sin. *They* will avoid the terrible day when all unbelievers will suffer condemnation by their Judge (Rev. 20:11-15).

There are nine different New Testament contexts in which these important promises appear (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25; Acts 2:17-21, 39; 21:9; 22:16; Rom. 10:13; Titus 3:6; Rev. 6:12).

The Apostle Peter also quoted this passage (vv. 28-32) in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36). He said that what the people of Jerusalem were witnessing, which they mistook for drunkenness, was what Joel had spoken of (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Acts 10:45). Many interpreters believe that Peter meant that Joel's prophecy was completely fulfilled on the day of Pentecost.<sup>2</sup> This can hardly be what he meant, however, because much of what Joel predicted in this passage did not occur on the day of Pentecost, specifically the celestial phenomena. The day of Pentecost was not the "day of the LORD" that Joel predicted.

A second interpretation is that the outpouring of the Spirit occurred on the day of Pentecost and continues throughout the whole of the Christian era.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Dillard, p. 295.

The day of Pentecost was the beginning of the ongoing fulfillment of this prophecy.<sup>1</sup> The problem with this view is that it interprets the day of the LORD as the entire Church Age.

"There is, however, no Scriptural foundation for the statement that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit commenced on Pentecost must continue throughout this present age. The Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost. He was poured out once, and nowhere in the New Testament is there a continued or repeated outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised. The difficulty with interpreting this great prophecy of Joel of having been fulfilled on Pentecost and being fulfilled throughout this age is that which follows in the next two verses."<sup>2</sup>

A third interpretation of Peter's meaning is that part of what Joel predicted was fulfilled on Pentecost, and the rest awaits fulfillment in the future day of the LORD.<sup>3</sup> God poured out His Spirit on the church on the day of Pentecost, but He will also pour out the Spirit on Israel in the eschatological future. The problem with this view, is that the promises of the outpouring of the Spirit and the other miracles are so intertwined, that separating them by thousands of years seems unnatural. Moreover, Peter quoted the whole passage in Joel, not just the promise of the Spirit's outpouring. In contrast, Jesus only quoted part of Isaiah 61:1-3 when He said that that prophecy was fulfilled when He read it in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:18-21).

A fourth possible interpretation is that Peter meant that what happened on Pentecost was similar to what Joel had prophesied that God would do in the future day of the LORD.<sup>4</sup> He drew a comparison and pointed out an analogy, but he did not claim fulfillment. Similarly, Jesus said, "This is my body," in the Upper Room. Both expressions are metaphors, according to this view. This view sees the entire fulfillment of Joel's prophecy in the eschatological future. The outpouring on the day of Pentecost was simply a foreview of what the LORD will do in the future (cf. Gal. 3:28). J. Sidlow

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<sup>1</sup>Keil, 1:216-17; Robinson, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, 2:3:106-7.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Darby, 2:533, footnote 1; Ironside, pp. 121, 131; Chisholm, *Handbook on ...*, p. 374; Finley, p. 79; Kaiser, *The Uses ...*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Feinberg, pp. 26-29; McGee, 3:674.

Baxter called it a sign that the kingdom was drawing near.<sup>1</sup> The day of Pentecost was not the day of the LORD that the prophets spoke of here and elsewhere.

"Peter's words call the attention to the fact that something like that which took place on the day of Pentecost had been predicted by Joel, but his words do not claim that Joel's prophecy was there and then fulfilled. Nor does He hint at a continued fulfilment or coming fulfilment during this present age. The chief purpose of the quotation of that prophecy on the day of Pentecost was to point out to the Jews, many of whom were scoffing, that the miraculous thing which had happened so suddenly in their midst was fully confirmed by what Joel had foretold would be the effect of the outpouring of the Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit had taken place, but not in the full sense as given in the Prophecy of Joel."<sup>2</sup>

There is not much practical difference between views three and four. View three sees the outpouring on Pentecost as a partial fulfillment, and view four sees it as a foreview of the fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>

"When Peter saw the outpouring of the Spirit, he reasoned correctly that the eschatological program prophesied by Joel was being set in motion. However, Jewish unbelief resulted in the suspension of the prophecy's complete fulfillment. The full realization of Joel's vision awaits a future day when, following the salvation of God's chosen ones among the Gentiles, Israel turns back to the Lord (Rom. 11:25-28)."<sup>4</sup>

"Peter quoted this passage in Acts 2 because (a) it related to the outpouring of God's Spirit (2:4, 15-16), (b) it stressed his theme of repentance (2:21, 37-39), and (c) it fit with his understanding that the Jews were about to enter the Day of

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<sup>1</sup>Baxter, 4:124.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, 2:3:108. See also 2:3:109.

<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion of the views regarding Peter's use of this prophecy, see my notes on Acts 2:16-21.

<sup>4</sup>Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 64.

the Lord, leading up to the return of Israel's Messiah, Jesus (1:6-8; 2:36; 3:19-21)."<sup>1</sup>

The day of the LORD that Joel predicted here begins with the Tribulation (cf. Dan. 9:24-27; Rev. 6—18), continues through the return of Christ and the Millennium (cf. Rev. 19—20), and culminates in the Eternal State (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21—22). The signs in view picture what the Book of Revelation describes further as occurring in the Tribulation, and the pouring out of the Spirit will occur at the beginning of the Millennium. Then all believers will possess the Spirit and will have the ability to receive fresh revelations from the LORD. Forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are two of four great blessings of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-30).

"Joel envisioned the outpouring of the Spirit as being confined to Jews, but in the progress of revelation and history, we discover that Gentiles are included as well, for they too are incorporated into the new covenant community."<sup>2</sup>

"Just as the death of Christ provides salvation for the church today and will one day be experienced by Israel, so the outpouring of the Holy Spirit provides for the life of the church today. The church now enjoys the benefits of Christ's death and of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Israel has yet to experience both the benefits of Christ's death (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1; Romans 11:25-27) and also the renewing work of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:23-29). The complete fulfillment of Joel 2 is yet future, but believers today experience the benefits of Christ's death and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that still await Israel at the day of the Lord."<sup>3</sup>

#### **B. GOD'S JUDGMENT ON ISRAEL'S ENEMY NATIONS 3:1-17**

God's judgment on unbelievers would accompany the spiritual renewal and deliverance of His own in the future day of the LORD. As God promised to wipe out the locusts for despoiling Judah, now He promised to do the same

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<sup>1</sup>Dyer, p. 743. Cf. Wiersbe, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup>Chisholm, *Handbook on ...*, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup>Hanna, p. 439.

to the nations that had despoiled Judah (cf. Zeph. 3:8; Ezek. 38—39; Matt. 25:31-46).

"Like a photographer, Joel has used a wide-angle lens for the overall picture in 2:30-32. Then he zooms in for a close look at the Day of the Lord, with its mixture of judgment and grace, in chapter three."<sup>1</sup>

"No prophet of the Old Testament has a more important revelation of the end times than the one now before us in the third chapter."<sup>2</sup>

"Joel 3:1-21 ... became the classic passage for the rest of the OT on God's final judgment on all nations. It also became the classic statement of the blessed result for the people of God. They would possess an exceedingly fertile land enriched with fountains of running water and dripping with wine and milk. And to climax it all, Yahweh would personally dwell in Zion."<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The announcement of judgment 3:1-8

3:1-3 "The Prophet by the word, *for*, shews [*sic*] that he is about to explain in detail, what he had before spoken of, in sum."<sup>4</sup>

When God would "restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem" in that future day (cf. Deut. 30:3), He would gather the other nations to "the Valley of Jehoshaphat" (lit. "Yahweh Judges"). If this is a geographical location, this is the only passage in Scripture that names the site of this judgment (cf. Zech. 14:2-5). Its exact location is debatable, since no valley by this name appears elsewhere in Scripture (cf. vv. 12, 14). Many interpreters believe it is the valley of Megiddo, just north and east of the Mt. Carmel range. Others believe that it must be a site near Jerusalem, perhaps the Kidron Valley.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hubbard, pp. 73-74.

<sup>2</sup>Feinberg, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Kaiser, *Toward an ...*, pp. 190-91.

<sup>4</sup>Pusey, 1:200.

<sup>5</sup>Keil, 1:220; Pusey, 1:201; Smith, 2:432; Gaebelein, 2:3:111; Feinberg, p. 32.

"Close to this monument [i.e., Absalom's tomb in the Kidron Valley], on the northeast, is the reputed tomb of Jehoshaphat, and from it the valley may have taken this name."<sup>1</sup>

Another view is that Joel was referring, in a more general sense, to the place where God will judge the nations.<sup>2</sup> That is, the name is symbolic. In this case, "the Valley of Jehoshaphat" would mean the place where Yahweh judges, without reference to a specific geographical site. The following clause ("Then I will enter into judgment with them there") seems to support this view.

Valleys were often preferred locations for battles in biblical times, so "valley" is an appropriate word to use to describe the place where God will judge (defeat) Israel's enemies. I think Joel probably called the Kidron Valley the Valley of Jehoshaphat because of its double association with Jehoshaphat: the king's burial place, and the meaning of his name, "Yahweh judges."

Later, Joel referred to this place as the "valley of decision" (v. 14).<sup>3</sup> There, God would judge the nations for scattering His covenant people, His inheritance, and for dividing up His land (cf. Lam. 5:2). They had thought so little of the Hebrews that they gambled for them. They had valued them no higher than the price of a prostitute or the cost of a drink. (Compare the Nazis' treatment of the Jews in the concentration camps.)

"In vers. 2 and 3 Joel is speaking not of events belonging to his own time, or to the most recent past, but of that dispersion of the whole of the ancient covenant nation among the heathen, which was only completely effected on the conquest of Palestine and destruction of

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<sup>1</sup>W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 2:482-83.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 787; Hubbard, p. 74; Finley, p. 84; Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. also "the valley of vision" (Isa. 22:1, 5).

Jerusalem by the Romans, and which continues to this day ..."<sup>1</sup>

Another view is that this prophecy was fulfilled to a limited extent by the conquests of Antiochus Epiphanes and Alexander the Great, in the fourth century B.C., but final fulfillment awaits the future.<sup>2</sup>

Ironside distinguished four "days" in Scripture, though not all dispensationalists agree with him:

"Four dispensational days are brought before us in Scripture. The present is called 'man's day' (1 Cor. 4:3, margin). The manifestation at the judgment-seat of Christ is in 'the day of Christ' (Phil. 1:6, 10). ('The day of Christ' in 2 Thess. 2:2 [(KJV, NKJV)] should be 'the day of the Lord,' as a glance at any reputable critical version will show.) Then follows 'the day of the Lord,' which is the entire period during which the once-rejected Lord asserts and makes good His title to the earth. 'The day of God' is the eternal state, and is only mentioned in 2 Peter 3:12."<sup>3</sup>

- 3:4 The LORD addressed the Phoenicians and Philistines directly. They had no special relationship to Yahweh, as Israel did, and they had not been just in dealing with the Israelites. The LORD promised to repay them for their sins. Probably these nations are representative of all of Israel's enemies, since God later said that He would judge "all" of them (v. 12).<sup>4</sup>
- 3:5-6 Specifically, these Gentile nations had robbed God and had sold the children of His chosen people as slaves to the Greeks. These nations had stolen from the Israelites. Amos also referred to the Phoenician and Philistine slave trade (Amos 1:6, 9; cf. Ezek. 27:13, 19).

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<sup>1</sup>Keil, 1:221.

<sup>2</sup>Chisholm, *Interpreting the ...*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup>Chisholm, "Joel," p. 1422.

3:7-8 To pay back these nations, the LORD said He would revive the Israelites in the remote places to which they had been sold. The Israelites would grow strong there and would sell the descendants of these Phoenicians and Philistines to the Sabeans (cf. Ezek. 27:22-23). Thus He would pay them back in kind, which is His customary method of retribution (Gal. 6:7).

This may have been fulfilled in the fourth century B.C., or the fulfillment may still be future. Allen saw Antiochus III's enslavement of the people of Sidon, in 345 B.C., and Alexander the Great's enslavement of the citizens of Tyre and Gaza, in 332 B.C., as a partial fulfillment, assuming Jews were involved in these transactions.<sup>1</sup>

Probably the fulfillment lies in the future, specifically toward the end of the Tribulation, since this whole section of Joel deals with what God will do in *that* "day of the LORD." Again, Phoenicia and Philistia probably represent all the enemies of Israel (cf. Isa. 25:10-12; Obad.) over whom Israel will eventually gain ascendancy.

## 2. The description of judgment 3:9-17

This pericope (section of text) contains a call to the nations to prepare for war (vv. 9-11), a statement by the LORD (vv. 12-13), and a description of the battle site (vv. 14-16).

3:9-11 The LORD issued a call to war. The nations will evidently believe that God is calling them to do battle, but, ironically, it is really to hear His sentence of judgment against them. The nations should prepare for a great battle by beating their plowshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears. At a later time, in the Millennium, they would do the reverse, because Messiah will end war (cf. Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). The weak should "psych" themselves up in preparation.

"In the coming great war of judgment, even the weakling ... will have to declare himself a soldier

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<sup>1</sup>Allen, p. 114.

... This synecdochic formulation is a way of saying that all the enemy population will be judged."<sup>1</sup>

The nations should hurry and assemble (cf. Zech. 12:9). Joel also called on Yahweh to bring down His mighty army of angelic warriors to engage the enemy of His people (cf. Deut. 33:2-3; 2 Kings 6:17; Ps. 68:17; 103:19-20; Zech. 14:5).

"But, when the nations were assembled in the valley, fully equipped for battle, they would receive a shock; they would find there the Judge of all the nations, and in their hands they would be holding the incriminating evidence of their own history of violence."<sup>2</sup>

3:12-13 The LORD urged the nations to rouse themselves and to assemble in the valley of Jehoshaphat (cf. v. 2) because it was there that He would sit in judgment on them. He compared this judgment to harvesting grain with a sickle and to treading grapes in a vat (cf. Isa. 17:5; 63:1-6; Rev. 14:14-20). As grapes squirt juice when trodden, so the nations will give up the wickedness with which they have been full (cf. 2:24).

This scene of divine warfare corresponds to the battle of Armageddon at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Rev. 14:14-20; 16:16; 19:11-21). The judgment of the nations following Christ's second coming (Matt. 25:31-46) will not involve warfare.

3:14-16 The prophet viewed many multitudes in the valley, which he now referred to as "the valley of decision" because there God will make a decision concerning their fate.

Like the reference to "the Valley of Jehoshaphat" (v. 2), "the valley of decision" involves wordplay in Hebrew. The Hebrew word *harus* ("decision") sounds like *haras*, which means "to render judgment" or "moat" (cf. Dan. 9:25).

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<sup>1</sup>Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 269. Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which the use of a whole represents a part, or the use of a part represents the whole.

<sup>2</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, p. 116.

"Their [the many multitudes] gathering against God shall be a token of His coming to judge them."<sup>1</sup>

"Many preachers have appealed to verse 14 for an evangelistic thrust; their audiences are addressed as 'multitudes in the Valley of Decision' who must decide their fate. There is a problem with that use of this passage: in Joel the hordes do not gather to make a decision, but to hear one; they will not be deciding their fate, for God has already decreed it. The time for decisions is now past."<sup>2</sup>

"It is the day of the Judge's decisions; not a time when men are being called upon to decide for Christ."<sup>3</sup>

This "day of the LORD " was "near" from *His* perspective, which for the prophets was often deceiving due to their foreshortened view of the future. He saw the celestial phenomena again that signaled doom (cf. 2:10, 31).

"The ancient hearer/speaker would not tend to think because of this language that the night would be unusually dark, too, but would see the whole verse [i.e., v. 15] as stressing the total darkness of the fateful day. On such darkness as curse fulfillment, see Deut 28:29."<sup>4</sup>

Lion-like, Yahweh roared from Zion announcing His attack on the nations, and everything trembled (cf. 2:10-11; Rev. 16:16, 18). For His own people, however, He proved to be a refuge and a stronghold.

3:17 Yahweh's victory will demonstrate to His people that He is indeed Israel's covenant God, and that His special place of abode is Mt. Zion (cf. 2:27). After this battle, Jerusalem will

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<sup>1</sup>Pusey, 1:210.

<sup>2</sup>Dillard, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup>Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, p. 269.

truly be the holy city, set apart entirely for God's people and no longer defiled by pagan invaders.

### C. ISRAEL'S ULTIMATE RESTORATION 3:18-21

3:18 Joel continued describing the future day of the LORD, but now he passed from the judgments of the Tribulation to the blessings of the Millennium. "The mountains" of Israel would be so full of grapevines that they could be described as dripping "with sweet wine" (cf. 1:5). There will be so many milk-yielding animals feeding on the luxuriant hills, that "the hills" could be said to "flow with milk."

Instead of the wadis that have water in them only a few days each year, "all the brooks of Judah" would "flow with" abundant, life-giving "water." All these descriptions recall conditions in paradise (cf. 1:5, 18, 20). A spring will flow out from the millennial temple that will water the valley of acacia trees ("Shittim"), evidently between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea (cf. Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8).

Feinberg believed this valley lay on the border between Moab and Israel and was known for its dryness.<sup>1</sup> Finley believed "the Valley of Shittim" refers to the lower stretch of the Kidron Valley.<sup>2</sup> The "spring" will also be a visual reminder that Yahweh is the source of all provisions and fruitfulness.

"Jerusalem is the only city of antiquity that wasn't built near a great river. Rome had the Tiber; Nineveh was built near the Tigris and Babylon on the Euphrates; and the great Egyptian cities were built near the Nile. But in the kingdom, Jerusalem will have a river that proceeds from the temple of God."<sup>3</sup>

3:19-20 "Egypt" and "Edom," probably representative of Israel's enemies, will become deserts because they "shed innocent

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<sup>1</sup>Feinberg, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Finley, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, p. 340.

blood," presumably the blood of God's people ("sons of Judah"). But "Judah" and "Jerusalem" would be inhabited forever, for all generations (cf. Ezek. 37:25; Amos 9:15; Zech. 14:11).

"Egypt and Edom represent each a different class of enemies of the people of God [the Gentile oppressor and the Semitic antagonist], and both together exhibit the lot of all."<sup>1</sup>

3:21 God's final promise through Joel was that He would "avenge" the "blood" shed by these enemies of Israel, which He had "not" yet "avenged" in the prophet's day. He promised to do this because He dwelt "in Zion," that is, He had a special covenant relationship with Israel (cf. Ezek. 43:1-12; Zech. 2:10-13).

"Joel 3:1-21 [4:1-21] became the classic passage for the rest of the OT on God's final judgment on all nations. It also became the classic statement for the blessed result for the people of God."<sup>2</sup>

The prophecy of Joel unfolds in chronological sequence. It begins with reference to a severe locust invasion that had come as a judgment on the Judahites for their covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh (1:2-20). Even though it is impossible to date this plague, it happened in the fairly recent past from Joel's perspective.

The LORD used this severe locust judgment to call His people, through His prophet, to anticipate an even worse devastation coming in the near future, not from insects but from foreign invaders (2:1-27). He called on the Jews to repent, and promised that if they did, He would forgive them and save them from this invasion. This would be a day of deliverance in which they would learn that He was at work for them.

This was what happened when the Assyrians under Sennacherib's leadership attacked Jerusalem unsuccessfully in 701 B.C. (cf. 2 Kings 18—

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<sup>1</sup>Pusey, 1:214.

<sup>2</sup>Kaiser, *Toward an ...*, p. 190. The reference in brackets in this quotation appears in Kaiser's book and represents the versification in the Hebrew (Masoretic) text, in which there are four chapters in Joel: 1:1-20; 2:1-27; 3:1-5; and 4:1-21.

19; Isa. 36—37). If that was the near invasion that Joel predicted, he must have written in the early pre-exilic period (ninth century B.C.).

Yet another, similar day, would be coming much further in the future (2:28—3:21), in which the Jews would again experience an invasion by foreigners who hated them (in the Tribulation). Nevertheless, Yahweh promised to deliver them in that day and to restore them to unprecedented blessing (in the Millennium)—because He was, and will always be, their covenant-keeping God.

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