

The Book of Joel: Anticipating a Post-Prophetic Age

Introduction

OF THE FIFTEEN “Latter Prophets”, Joel’s chronological setting is the most difficult to identify. Yet, the dating of the book potentially has significant implications for determining the overall purposes of Joel’s prophecies.

The book’s outline is simple enough. Chapters one and two are a description of and response to a devastating locust plague that occurred in Joel’s time. Chapters three and four are a prophecy of consolation predicting widespread prosperity, a major battle, and then ultimate peace and prosperity.¹ In this essay, we will consider the dating of the book of Joel, the book’s overall themes, and how Joel’s unique message fits into his likely chronological setting.²

Dating

Midrashim and later commentators often attempt to identify obscure figures by associating them with known figures or events. One Midrash quoted by Rashi identifies the prophet Joel with the son of Samuel (c. 1000 B.C.E.):

When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons judges over Israel. The name of his first-born son was Joel, and his second son’s name was Abijah; they sat as judges in Beer-sheba. But his sons did not follow in his ways; they were bent on gain, they accepted bribes, and they subverted justice. (1 Sam. 8:1-3)³

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Since Samuel's son was wicked, the Midrash explains that he must have repented in order to attain prophecy. Additionally, the Midrash needs to explain why the prophet Joel's father Pethuel in fact refers to Samuel:

Now the name of his firstborn was Joel; and the name of his second, Abijah (I Sam. 8:2), R. Judan explained in the name of R. Simeon that ultimately they repented. . . . For this reason they attained the privilege of divine inspiration; hence it is written, The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel (Joel 1:1) and Pethuel is Samuel. Why was he called by the name of Pethuel? Because he won over (*pittah*) the Holy One, blessed be He, by his prayer. (*Num. Rabbah* 10:5)⁴

However, there is no textual record of Samuel's son's repentance. Additionally, it is difficult to identify Samuel with Joel's father Pethuel at the level of *peshat*. Consequently, Ibn Ezra rejects this midrashic identification, and R. Yosef Kara and Radak do not even quote it.

One passage in the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 5a) associates Joel's locust plague with a seven-year famine in the time of Jehoram son of Ahab reported in II Kings 6:24-8:1 (851-842 B.C.E.). Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, and Radak cite this view as a possible dating of the book. Of course, there also was a drought in Elijah's time, and it is plausible that Joel is describing a different famine otherwise unattested in Tanakh. Additionally, the Kings narrative does not mention a locust plague. So while possible, this view has no textual evidence to support it.

A third possibility is raised in *Seder Olam Rabbah* 20⁵: Joel prophesied during the reign of the wicked King Manasseh (697-642 B.C.E.) along with Nahum and Habakkuk. According to this midrashic view, the anonymous prophets are unnamed in the book of Kings in association with Manasseh (II Kings 21:10-15) because Manasseh was so exceptionally wicked. Once again, however, this view is possible but has no textual evidence to support it.

Abarbanel rejects all three midrashic opinions since there is no convincing textual evidence to support them. Turning instead to the ordering of the Twelve Prophets, and noting that Hosea and Amos (who flank the book of Joel) both prophesied in the eighth century B.C.E., Abarbanel submits that Joel prophesied during the tenure of Hosea (who prophesied through Hezekiah's reign). Joel continued into the time of Manasseh, consistent with the *Seder Olam Rabbah* chronology. Joel's later prophecies—including those pertaining to the exile—derive from that time.

However, most commentators maintain that the Twelve Prophets are not arranged in chronological order. Rather, there are thematic and linguis-

tic links between Hosea-Joel-Amos.⁶ Insofar as the foregoing attempts at dating Joel adduce no compelling textual support, Ibn Ezra (on 1:1) concludes, “we have no means of knowing his generation.”

Although attempts at dating biblical books from internal evidence generally are speculative, there do appear to be some textual clues that may provide some guidance.⁷ Joel reports that the famine in the wake of the devastating locust plague had caused the Temple services to stop:

Offering and libation have ceased from the House of the Lord; the priests must mourn who minister to the Lord. (1:9; cf. 1:13, 16; 2:14)

This reference indicates that a Temple was standing. This means that Joel prophesied either before 586 B.C.E. when the First Temple was destroyed; or after 516 B.C.E. when the Second Temple was completed. R. Yosef Ibn Caspi (on 1:1; 3:1) already made this observation.

In chapter 4, Joel appears to describe the return of the exiles of Judah and Jerusalem:

For lo! In those days and in that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem. . . . (4:1)

Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom a desolate waste, because of the outrage to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed the blood of the innocent. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem throughout the ages. (4:19-20)

These references most likely point to a period following the destruction and exile in 586, after Jehoiakhin’s exile in 597, or at least following the decree of destruction in Manasseh’s time (697-642) when the impending exile was known to the prophets (II Kings 21:10-15).⁸

Additionally, Edom was permanently devastated by Malachi’s time:

I have made his hills a desolation, his territory a home for beasts of the desert. (Mal. 1:3)

Therefore, Joel—who predicts Edom’s demise in 4:19—likely preceded Malachi.

In light of the foregoing evidence, it appears that the most likely times for Joel to have prophesied are:

1. After Jehoiakhin’s exile but before the destruction of the First Temple (597-586).
2. During or after Manasseh’s time (697-642), when the decree of destruction and exile was known to the prophets.

3. At the beginning of the Second Temple period (post-516), before Edom was destroyed (pre-Malachi).

It also is important to note that Joel did not have to prophesy all four chapters on the same day. Perhaps the locust plague struck prior to the destruction of the First Temple in 586, and Joel prophesied chapters 3-4 after the destruction and exile. We will bear these issues of dating in mind as we analyze several textual elements in the book of Joel.

Chapters 1-2

Listen to this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land. Has the like of this happened in your days or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children about it, and let your children tell theirs, and their children the next generation! What the cutter has left, the locust has devoured; what the locust has left, the grub has devoured; and what the grub has left, the hopper has devoured. (1:2-4)

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim argue that Joel is predicting a plague that has not yet occurred. Joel's implied message is that the people should repent before the plague strikes.

In contrast, Amos Hakham maintains that Joel is describing a plague that has already occurred.⁹ Joel is using this plague as an opportunity to call for repentance and to learn from calamity (1:13-14, 19; 2:12-17). Joel indicates that people can see the damage for themselves:

For food is cut off before our very eyes, and joy and gladness from the House of our God. (1:16)

It therefore appears more likely that Hakham's view is correct, and all the people were able to see what Joel saw.

Rabbi Shalom Carmy (Yeshiva University) has observed that the book of Joel is unique in prophetic literature in not identifying any sin as cause for a specific disaster nor as impetus for repentance. Following the teachings of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Rabbi Carmy explains that there are two types of repentance: response for sins, and introspection as the result of adversity. When tragedy strikes, we must examine ourselves and try to come closer to God, even if we cannot ascertain any specific sins of which we are guilty.¹⁰

This point can be pushed further. Joel did not need to be a prophet in order to speak to the people as he did. Everyone witnessed the plague. Joel is calling for a fast and repentance, which any religious leader can do with or without prophecy. Indeed, the Sages of the Talmud used Joel's prayer as a model for their own prayers during public fast days:

What is the order [of service] for fast days? . . . The elder among them addresses them with words of admonition [to repentance]: thus, our brethren, Scripture does not say of the people of Nineveh, and God saw their sackcloth and their fasting, but, as God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way (Jon. 3:10); and in the prophets it is said, And rend your heart and not your garments. . . . (Joel 2:13). (Mishnah *Ta'anit* 15a)

Returning to our discussion about the dating of the book of Joel, this observation would be particularly meaningful if Joel prophesied at the end of the First Temple period or the beginning of the Second Temple period. Several Midrashim and later commentaries explain that the destruction of the First Temple crippled the existence of prophecy, even if it continued briefly into the Second Temple period with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.¹¹ Additionally, several commentators posit that the last prophets were conscious of the fact that the age of prophecy was coming to a close.¹² Perhaps they received prophecies informing them of the coming end, or perhaps they observed the scarcity of prophets in their time. If this is the case regarding Joel (though we have no means of knowing this textually), Joel might be anticipating the cessation of prophecy and teaching people how to respond to crisis when there is no prophecy.

This hypothesis is supported further by Joel's increased appeal to earlier sacred texts—a hallmark of the post-prophetic age. Of the 73 verses in the Book of Joel, 25 are strikingly similar to other verses elsewhere in Tanakh. It is more likely that Joel borrowed or anthologized from many others, rather than influencing so many different writers.¹³

Chapters 3-4

After that, I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. I will even pour out My spirit upon male and female slaves in those days. (3:1-2)

Many commentators maintain that chapters 3-4 pertain to the messianic redemption.¹⁴ In light of our previous discussion of Joel's chronological setting, the emphasis on the restoration of prophecy in chapter 3 might take on additional meaning if Joel was prophetically anticipating the end of prophecy. Joel may also have observed a decline in prophecy in his time.

Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.

Let even the weakling say, "I am strong." (4:10)

Amos Hakham considers this verse a likely parody of the utopian visions of Isaiah and Micah (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).¹⁵ Assuming that Joel prophesied after those eighth century prophets, he intimates that in the future the world will be perfected as nations beat their swords into plowshares. However, that ideal age will be preceded by a terrible war that will require people to beat farm implements into weapons. Additionally, Joel blends agricultural imagery and wars in this prophecy, thereby connecting the two halves of the book. Joel uses agricultural terminology when describing the downfall of Israel's enemies:

Swing the sickle, for the crop is ripe; come and tread, for the winepress is full, the vats are overflowing! For great is their wickedness. (4:13)

Joel also describes the locusts using military imagery, so the two halves of his book are joined in both directions:

They have the appearance of horses, they gallop just like steeds. With a clatter as of chariots they bound on the hilltops, with a noise like a blazing fire consuming straw; like an enormous horde arrayed for battle. . . . They rush like warriors, they scale a wall like fighters. And each keeps to his own track. (2:4-7)

The conclusion of the book also promises agricultural prosperity in addition to peace from the military invaders:

And in that day, the mountains shall drip with wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the watercourses of Judah shall flow with water; a spring shall issue from the House of the Lord and shall water the Wadi of the Acacias. (4:18)

Amos Hakham similarly addresses the connections between the two halves of the book. In 2:18-27, God emphasizes that after the locust plague would end, Israel no longer would be degraded by other nations (2:19, 27). Even when Israel had food, however, they still were oppressed and mocked during the destruction of the Temple and ensuing exile. Joel therefore emphasizes that the end of locust plague will be followed by a permanent salvation from enemy nations. As locusts swarmed in Israel causing damage and desolation, nations will invade Israel and cause damage and desolation. As the locusts were completely destroyed, so will Israel's enemies.¹⁶

As noted earlier, Joel sounds a lot more like a precursor to the Sages than a conventional prophet. He teaches people how to respond to crisis, does not specify the sin behind the locust plague, and frequently quotes ear-

lier biblical texts. If Joel prophesied at the end of the First Temple period or the beginning of the Second Temple period, he was part of a new era that soon would lose prophecy. Therefore, he taught people how to respond religiously to crises without having prophets in their midst. He also began his prophecy of redemption by envisioning a future time when everyone would prophesy.

Similarly, Malbim understand the closing verses of the book of Malachi as a self-conscious expression that prophecy was about to end:

Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction (Mal. 3:22-24).

Malbim explains that Malachi was aware that prophecy would stop with him and the word of God would heretofore be available only through the written word of the Torah. He also links the exhortation to observe the Torah to the prediction of Elijah's coming. With the end of prophecy, the Torah alone would sustain the people of Israel until the messianic era, at which point prophecy will resume.

The "Son" of Samuel

We may return to the midrashic identification of the prophet Joel with the son of Samuel (*Num. Rabbah* 10:5) cited at the outset of this essay. While this identification is not viable at the level of *peshat*, it may be understood in a conceptual-*derash* manner. Joel's role and envisioned utopian era is similar to that of Samuel who lived some 500 years earlier. Samuel was born at a time when prophecy was scarce:

Young Samuel was in the service of the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; prophecy was not widespread. (I Sam. 3:1)

Over the course of his lifetime, Samuel trained others to be prophets to the point where those approaching him attained some degree of inspiration:

Saul sent messengers to seize David. They saw a band of prophets speaking in ecstasy, with Samuel standing by as their leader; and the spirit of God came upon Saul's messengers and they too began to speak in ecstasy. . . . He was on his way there, to Naioth in Ramah, when the spirit of God came upon him too; and he walked on, speaking in ecstasy, until

he reached Naioth in Ramah. Then he too stripped off his clothes and he too spoke in ecstasy before Samuel; and he lay naked all that day and all night. That is why people say, "Is Saul too among the prophets?" (I Sam. 19:20-24; cf. I Sam. 10:5, 10-12)

In a midrashic sense, then, Joel is conceptually the "son" of Samuel, teaching people how to live without prophecy, but envisioning the future return and widespread prevalence of revelation.

Tying further to this Midrash, there is a connection to Samuel as Pethuel, "because he won over (*pittah*) the Holy One, blessed be He, by his prayer." Joel teaches his audience and subsequent generations how to pray and react to crisis. Samuel is similarly famed for his effective prayers. He prays for the defeat of the Philistines and is immediately answered (I Sam. 7:5-11); and God similarly responds when Samuel wants a storm to prove that Israel's request of kingship was sinful (I Sam. 12:16-19). Later biblical writers hail Samuel as one of the most effective pray-ers ever:

The Lord said to me, "Even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede with Me, I would not be won over to that people. Dismiss them from My presence, and let them go forth! (Jer. 15:1)

Moses and Aaron among His priests, Samuel, among those who call on His name—when they called to the Lord, He answered them. (Psa. 99:6)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik similarly viewed prayer as the natural heir to prophecy:

When prophecy ceased, Men of Great Assembly refused to allow dialogue between God and Man to cease. "If God had stopped calling man, they urged, let man call God. So the covenantal colloquy was shifted from the level of prophecy to that of prayer."¹⁷

Living around the time of the destruction of the First Temple or the beginning of the Second Temple period, Joel began to build a bridge between the age of prophecy and post-prophecy. He used a contemporaneous locust plague to teach people how to respond religiously to crisis with prayer and repentance. He frequently quoted earlier sacred texts. Simultaneously, his prophecy of consolation features the widespread prevalence of prophecy during the ultimate redemption. In this manner, Joel paved the way for a continued dialogue between God and Israel even after prophecy ceased.

NOTES

1. R. Eliezer of Beaugency and Abarbanel insist that chapters 1-2 are a parable that describes enemy invaders, and chapters 3-4 are the true meaning of that parable. In this essay, we will follow the majority opinion that Joel is describing a real locust plague. For evaluation of the textual evidence in support of an actual locust plague, see Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar, Joel* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), introduction, p. 4.
2. This essay is based on a lecture given at the seventh annual *Yemei Iyun* in *Tanakh* of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (June 2009).
3. Translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).
4. Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah are taken from Soncino.
5. In Radak and Abarbanel's version of that Midrash. Rashi cites this view in the name of Behag, rather than *Seder Olam Rabbah*.
6. Amos Hakham (*Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar, Joel*, introduction p. 3) notes the thematic connections to Amos: see Joel 4:16-18 – Amos 1:2, 9:13. The blessing described at the end of Joel is similar to Hosea 14:8.
7. See also James L. Crenshaw, *Anchor Bible 24C: Joel* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 22-29; Mordechai Cogan, *Mikra LeYisrael: Joel* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1994), introduction, pp. 5-6.
8. Zephaniah similarly assumes that there will be an exile though he prophesied before it, during Josiah's reign (640-609 B.C.E., see Zeph. 2:7).
9. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar, Joel*, p. 6.
10. From one of his student's notes from his lectures at Yeshiva College (1996), and this phrasing is confirmed by R. Carmy. See also R. Aharon Lichtenstein's formulation of R. Joseph Soloveitchik's position: "I presume we are inclined to acknowledge the justice enunciated by the Rav, zt"l [i.e., R. Soloveitchik], that Judaism has not confronted suffering primarily as a speculative matter. Rather, it has related to it as an existential and experiential reality, to be dealt with pragmatically and normatively. Response, not explanation, is focal. Its message, in sum, is: 'Don't waste your passionate experiences; utilize them; exploit them; let every passionate experience become a point of departure for a higher and nobler life.'" From "The Duties of the Heart and Response to Suffering," in *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), pp. 22-23.
For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "The Uncertainty Principle of Repentance in the Books of Jonah and Joel," in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2009), pp. 148-161.
11. For more on the destruction of the First Temple playing a role in the cessation of prophecy, see e.g., Lam. 2:9; *Yoma* 21b; *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana* 13; Radak on Ezek. 9:3.
12. See e.g., Abarbanel and Malbim on Zech. 1:5-6; Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel on Mal. 1:1; R. Yosef Kara and Malbim on Mal. 3:22.
13. Cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Anchor Bible 24C: Joel*, pp. 27-28, 36.
14. For example, Rashi, R. Yosef Kara, Radak, Abarbanel, and Malbim. Ibn Ezra

quotes R. Moshe Ibn Gikatilah who maintains that Joel's prophecy in chapters 3-4 was fulfilled during the reign of Jehoshaphat (876-852 B.C.E.).

15. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar, Joel*, p. 23.
16. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Trei Asar, Joel*, introduction, pp. 4-5; cf. Mordechai Cogan, *Mikra LeYisrael: Joel*, introduction, pp. 5-6.
17. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 57-58.