

## THE BOOK OF JOEL

NCTM study:

Second Term 2007

John D. Calvert

### STUDY ONE: 1:1-12 THE LOCUSTS ARE COMING

**Verse one** establishes a theocentric theme. The word of God came to Joel in the crises of plague locusts and every aspect of human life was targeted. The plague was not bad-luck but agents of the Creator, devastating judgment on a disobedient nation; the Day of the Lord, ie. the day on which God's judgment of evil, both persons and nations is executed and his righteousness established. The plague, the call to lament, instructions to return, restoration, and gift of the Spirit and the assurance of final victory are all God's acts. Yahweh's sovereignty over creation is emphasised for Yahweh is responsible both for the sending (2:11) and the withdrawing of his army (2:20). In both judgment and restoration Yahweh holds sway over the creation in such a way that the Hebrews can hold no view of nature as a set of laws or pattern that operate on their own, independent of the Lord's control. The whole creation is framed by Yahweh's word and shaped to achieve his purposes: Isaiah 10: 1-4; Ezekiel 7: 19; John 5: 27; Matthew 10: 15.

From the beginning, all of creation has been wrapped together. What touches one reaches the other. Yahweh's compassion in forgiveness is the only hope of recovery from the plague. The prophets had confidence that Yahweh's divine character was constant and this informed their message. Without assuming that Yahweh had to grant forgiveness, Joel's call to return to full loyalty to Yahweh and to the obedience of grace (2:12-17) is anchored in his understanding of Yahweh's covenant love (*hesed*, 2:13) which reveals divine wrath, expressed in grace and mercy and show Yahweh's compassion.

What caused the plague? Drunkenness and careless priests, who allowed pagan practices to dilute the purity of worship that should have centred in Yahweh's name alone and in his exclusive lordship over the people. To highlight these abuses, the plague attacked the nation and its temple in a way that jeopardized its very existence. Evil, resulting in the loss of fruit and crops has penetrated the entire economy including Temple worship. The answer to the threat was not to abandon worship but to respond to the calls of its repentant priesthood, to assemble at the temple, to speak the prescribed

liturgies of complaint, to seek an oracle of salvation, and wait for its promised blessings (2:14); **John 6: 39**.

Physical, material, corporate acts of worship have played a part in God's programme for his people at all stages of their history and will continue to do so into the eschatological future. Gathered, structured, patterned worship is implied in the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6), the experience of the early church (Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 11, 14), and the book of Revelation (chs. 4, 7, 11, 15). The biblical understandings of creation, history and community call for such expression and celebration. Both the terror and hope of the Day links the parts of Joel together like an unbreakable thread describing Israel's religious life. Joel saw the Day not as celebration or divine rescue but devastation. Yahweh's victims in holy war were not the Gentiles but the covenant people who surrounded the holy mountain (2:1). Israel's presumptions collapsed on the people by the prophetic word: celebration turned to woe; confidence to disaster.

When public worship misunderstood the Day and presumed on divine grace and blessing, worship was cut off. Where popular faith presumed on God's protection despite covenant disloyalty, Yahweh marched with enemy forces to teach his people the lessons of obedience. Whatever blocks covenant loyalty must be dealt with. Preservation and victory are possible only because judgment has done its work and the people have penitently responded.

**Verse 1**; the devastating locust plague described, what it means, and what the people must do. **Verses 2-4** Joel calls the entire nation to give attention. His descriptions are clear and he calls the people, whether 'drunkards' v. 5-7, the general populace v. 8-10, or 'farmers' v. 11-12 to lament. *Hear* includes both listening and remembering, as frequently in the Old Testament; **Isaiah 1:2 & 10**. *Elders*, their long experience with traditions of locust plagues enables them to give an accurate response to the question; **Exodus 10:6**. Locust swarms tend to move from place to place and successive stages do not develop on the same ground, and indicate successive waves of insect attack and the intensity of destruction. The first insect is a cutting (or shearing) locust capable of incredible devastation, **Amos 4:9**; swarming locust; the 'leaper' or 'hopper'; and 'destroyer' or 'finisher', **Deut. 28:38** describing their destructive activity.

Verses 5-14, Joel addresses various groups within the nation. He calls on the drunkards first to indicate that they would be the first to suffer because their happiness is dependent on the fruit of the vine. *Wake up*, from drunken stupor. *Wail*, **Hosea 7:14**, instead of the usual merriment which accompanies drinking. **Verses 6-7**, picture the numerical strength and destructive powers of the locusts, like a nation in number; **Proverbs 30:25-27**. Yahweh's sovereign ownership is being destroyed. **Verse 7** cf. Revelation 9.

**Verse 8**, contains the reasons for the awful anguish. Fellowship with God expressed in cereal and drink offerings has to cease. These offerings, rather than animal sacrifices, are mentioned because they would be more directly affected by the locusts. Israel could not suffer any greater calamity than the suspension of the daily sacrifice; for this was a practical suspension of the covenant relation, a sign that God had rejected His people. The priests without their daily duties are singled out as special victims: they mourn rather than rejoice before Yahweh.

P.T. Forsyth: It is not a world out of joint that makes our problem, but the shipwrecked soul in it. It is Hamlet, not his world, that is wrong. It is not the contradictions of life, and its anomalies, that make the real trouble, but the unfaith, the falsity of those who live. It is the soul's own civil war, the rebellion of man-soul, its sullen severance from God, its ostrich hope of escaping his law, its silly notions of making it up with him, its hate and dread of him, its sin, and the triviality of its sense of sin. *What we need is not new truth, new ideas, new theology*. What can any *truth*, new or old, do for sin? Sin is more than untruth, more than ignorance. What can ideas or theologies do for my wickedness? The truth about even God never convicted of sin. It was the coming of God. Christianity does not peddle ideas; it does things. Reality lies in action, and Christ has done the deed of history. *What we need is new power, new reality, and a new kind of it*, regeneration not a reform, a holy, costly Saviour, and not a blessed saint. What we need most is neither to feel nor to act differently, but power to be different, to be a new creature, and live in a new world. And our world is not like America—just the other side of the old. It is another order of things, values, and powers in the Cross.<sup>1</sup>

The produce of the Promised Land was the gift of God to His people, not the result of hard work and good farming techniques. The Lord controlled the locust and the seed in the ground and the fruit on the vine, and all must come to judgment. **Verse 12** cf. **Romans 5: 5**.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Grace of the Gospel as the Moral Authority in the Church*

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### STUDY TWO: 1: 13-20 THE DAY IS NEAR

The priests who minister before the altar are called by the prophet to join in national lament, and tie strips of sackcloth around their loins; cf. **verse 8**; **Isaiah 32:11**. The command to pass the night in sackcloth, in the temple indicates the seriousness of the situation; 2 Samuel 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27. No token penitence will do. The ingredients for daily sacrifices have been withheld and this is like the loss of loved ones and causes the same attitude of grief. Priestly mourning must lead to true repentance by all the people. Though no specific sins are named by the prophet, he regards the locust invasion as a visitation of God's judgment on the sins of the people. The hand of God is heavy upon the land. Solution, not cause, is the problem.

*Solemn/sacred* assembly is used here and in 2:15 and refers to stopping all hard work (Numbers 29:35) and then to a religious gathering (cf. Lev. 23:36; Isaiah 1:13). *Elders* or civic leaders, 'rulers' or 'officials' in contrast to verse 2 where the same word is translated *aged men*. The disaster affected the whole population in all its life, so repentance must be universal, embracing not only those in responsible positions but all the inhabitants of the land. The repetition of the two audiences (old people and inhabitants) links verses 2-14, the call to lament (complaint) and verses 15-20, the complaint itself. *Cry out to the Lord*, for mercy, forgiveness and deliverance. Yahweh is both the source of judgment and the hope of deliverance, here again theocentric.

**Verses 15-18**, *the day of the Lord is near*, so the prophet calls the people to repent and gives them direction for their prayer; **Hosea 14:1-3**. They are to recognize in this disaster something far more serious than a locust-plague: the righteous wrath of God's arm. Acknowledging that the Day of the Lord is near brings confession of sins which have brought on the Day. **Amos 5:18-20**; for the day is darkness not light, instability not security. See judgment on the nations; **Isaiah 13:6-13**.

**Verse 18**; unproductive ground, no crops, empty barns and famished flocks. The whole creation was sustained by Yahweh; Colossians **1: 15-20**.

The locust damage is compounded by fire which ravages pasture lands and trees; **Hosea 8:14; Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 14; 2:2, 5**. Fire affects the water, **verse 20**, possibly drought. Locust invasions are worse in unusually hot summers. The fire, then, must be either the intense heat of the sun producing a drought, or an actual fire in parched vegetation. The trees, stripped of their bark by the locusts, are scorched by the flaming heat of the drought. In verse 20 the wild beasts deprived of water and pasture, join in the lament and cry to Yahweh; **Psalms 42:1**. If wild animals call for Yahweh's help, how much more should his people who have been summoned to prayer.

P.T. Forsyth: It is our tendency to think that the way to reach a warm and steady revelation of God is to go deep into the interior of human nature, away from those infinities and sanctities that approach it so coldly from without. And so we say, 'Sink into yourself and rise redeemed.' Pierce the human and you will find the divine. Penetrate far enough into the human heart and you reach the real presence of a loving God. Make the most of human affection and you arrive at the love of God. Open the heart of a divine man and you will find the heart of a human God. It is an error which I may illustrate by another. It is a popular notion that the warmest part of this island must be in the centre of it, away from the cold waters and high gales of the inconstant sea. But the scientific fact is just the reverse. The sea has a benign and steadying influence upon the climate of the coast. The coldest place in England, according to the charts, is a spot at its very heart. So it is not by retreating into the interior of our humanity or culture that we find the benign and blessed God. The bustle of passion and energy at our human centre can be spiritually colder than where men face the realities that close us in. At the heart of man you will find divine symptoms, but not a divine salvation. There is a circumambient grace in the theologies despised by the humanities, a grace that comes to our shore and knocks, yea beats, and even lashes, there; and it has more of the changeless love of God in it than all the affections that sweeten the inlands of life, or the culture that adorns it. Sea and shore may indeed meet in storm. But our peace lies through storm. Our state is such that our salvation is where God and man meet in an historic crisis, where God's passion to reach us falls upon man's rock-bound will not to be found. Herein is love, not that we love, but that God loves and makes awful propitiation for us—

*The best of all we are and do*

*Just God forgive.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Grace of the Gospel as the Moral Authority in the Church*

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### STUDY 3. 2: 1-17 SOUND THE TRUMPET

The description of the plague continues and in poetic imagery the prophet compares the locusts to an invading army. This attack is so awful in its scope that it must in some way be connected with the Day of the Lord **verses 1&11**, already announced (1:15), an army of apocalyptic character; **Revelation 9: 1-11**. The locusts in Joel are real, not images and point to God's exercise of universal judgment. Blowing the ram's horn, **verse 1** was the signal by which a sentry, Yahweh himself, on the wall warned of enemy invasions and other calamities: **Hosea 8:1; Jeremiah 4:5; 6:1 Amos 3:6**. The account of the locust invasion is a precursor of the Day.

**Verse 2**, *darkness, gloom, clouds and darkness*, signify the divine presence in the midst of his people, obscuring all light so that their focus will be on him. The phrase *like dawn* alludes to the brightness of sunlight reflected from the locusts' wings. As dawn replaces darkness, so shafts of light break through the thick insect-cloud and create an awesome shimmer on the mountains around Jerusalem. The insects are compared to a people in Joel's description of devastation in 2:3-11 (cf verses 3, 6, 10). The noise of the insect swarm gorging itself on the mountain tops, as terrifying as their appearance, sounds like the rumbling of chariots and the crackling of flames lapping at stubble. The insects advance relentlessly and systematically, for no obstacle or adversary can halt their fierce charge. Not content with the produce of the field and orchards (2:3), they attack the cities.

The nouns in **verse 9**, *city, walls, houses, windows*, are placed before the verbs to emphasize that there is no adequate refuge. Systematically the locusts loot houses, gaining thief-like access through the open, lattice-work windows (cf. Ex. 10:6). Speed = *run*; as in verses 4, 7, 9: agility = *climb*; in verses 7, 9: and order verses 7 & 8) illustrate their military success.

**Verses 10 & 11**, the picture of the locust-plague merges with the description of the Day of the Lord (cf. 2:1—2). The *shaking earth, the sky trembles*: Amos 1:1, the darkened sun and moon and non-shining stars (cf. 3:15), are evidence that the Lord himself is coming with his locust army to execute

judgment. The language is similar to other descriptions of theophanies, **Isaiah 13:10 & 13; Jeremiah 10:10**. The locusts are performing God's judgment, and are his great army and his host as they execute his word. The concluding sentence: *The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?* **Verse 11**, asks a question which can be answered only in the negative: for no-one will be able to endure it or achieve their own victory. See also Matthew 24: 29-31: Zephaniah 1: 14-17: 2 Peter 3: 10.

The day of the Lord gradually became an expression for a time when the Lord would fight to restore the fortunes of Israel. The prophets believed that the people had a completely lopsided view of this day because they overlooked the consequences of their own sin. Thus the prophets insisted that the Lord would come in full fury against sin, whether it were sin of the nations or of the Israelites. The day would first of all be darkness, not light; judgement, not hope (eg.. Amos 5: 18-20). The prophets believed that the Israelites would only experience salvation after they had experienced judgement.<sup>3</sup>

## **2: 12-17 THE CALL TO REPENTANCE**

The same Lord takes the initiative for although judgment is present, it is not too late to repent. The same Lord who thunders before his destroying army (2:11) offers hope of deliverance. Repentance is a turning, with whole-hearted conviction. Outward manifestations there will be: *fasting, weeping, mourning*, for defection from God is death. **Verse 13**, the command *rend your hearts and not your garments* is the Hebrew way of saying that inward contrition is more important than an outward show of grief, which by itself could be an act. The rending of garments is a sign of despair as with Reuben and Jacob, Genesis 37:29, 34. *Rend your hearts* = change your whole attitude, as in the broken, contrite heart of Psalm 51:17 or the circumcised heart of Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4. But this return and this relationship are possible only because of the character of God, by grace. The description of grace follows the covenant formula.

What is described as God's repentance is based on the covenant: as in Amos 7: 3 & 6. God's openness to change his course of action and withhold judgment is one of his attributes, **Jonah 4:2**. Joel does not specify the people's sins for care not diagnosis is his concern. The divine invitation verse 12 is amplified by the prophet **verses 13-14**. Here is blessing which allows the temple offerings to be resumed for cereal and drink offering indicate that the ravages of the locusts previously cut off, Joel 1:9 & 13, are

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Strom, *Days Are Coming: exploring Biblical patterns* (Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney, 1989) 121.

renewed. The people's turning to God (2:12) will be matched by his turning to them. His course of judgment will issue in grace with the tangible blessing of his providence, the produce to express the restored relationship as the daily sacrifices are renewed. The lesson shows that the material provisions God gives his people are as much for his service as for their comfort.

**Verses 15 – 16**, in this word of hope, the prophet sounds the orders for the leaders and priests to gather the congregation. The call to assemble for the fast and to prepare for the siege is both sounded by the trumpet. *Sanctify the congregation*, verse 16 means 'hold a sacred religious meeting' in terms specified by law and tradition. In the theocracy, church and state were not separate for political, economic and social problems were treated as religious issues. Everyone had to be there, even the bridegroom, who was exempt from certain duties to see that his bride conceived a child to carry on his name (Deut. 20:7; 24:5); and the unweaned babies, who corporately shared the people's guilt without directly contributing to it, cf. the judgment on Achan's family for his sin, Joshua 7: 24 & 25; Exodus 34: 6 & 7.

The priests were to face the temple with the congregation gathered behind them in the court. To *weep* is reminiscent of an episode of national weeping early in Israel's history, Judges 2:4. God, whose grace has taken the entire initiative in restoration, now supplies the text for their prayer, used in times of national calamity like invasion, famine or plague. Refusal by Yahweh to intervene on behalf of his people would be seen as failure by Israel's neighbours (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13-16; Deut. 9:28). Their taunt to deride Israel: *Where is their God?* (cf. Psalms 42:10 & 79:10; Micah 7:10). Their shame becomes Yahweh's shame. Here is the offer of hope. The whole section has moved to a climax in prayer, based not only on the terror of the plague but on the glory of God's name.



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### STUDY FOUR: 2: 18-27 THE LORD'S ANSWER

The focus on the Lord continues with **verse 18** a significant turning point following lament and prayer from verse 17. The offer of grace in 2:12-17 marks a transition from judgment to restoration, both immediate and future. God's commands of verses 12-17 have been obeyed; cf. Hosea 14:1-8. God is acting on behalf of his land and his people, with both mentioned at the outset of restoration within the covenant relationship. The message is what the Lord will do, **Deut. 4:23 & 24; 32:21; Isaiah 42:8**. This basic principle is in **Exodus 20:5-6**, God's jealousy. In the present passage God's jealousy is his zeal to care for his land and people. God's love continued always for his people, but as they turned from him it was revealed in wrath.

**Verse 19**, are the Lord's words in response to his people's complaint. The Lord's answer, is highlighted as descriptions of the plague did earlier. The restoration of the plague-damage is promised in expressions that runs through to verse 27 and step by step reverses the damage described in 1:4-2:11. *I am sending*, = immediate fulfilment of the promise. Grain, wine and oil are specified both as the staple crops and as assurance that all the damage described in 1:10 will be reversed. *Satisfy you fully* = restoration in abundant measure cf. **verses 24 & 26**. Their prayer has been heard and in **verse 27** assurance is given that their reproach and shame before the nations will be removed. Prayer is not a shopping list submitted for approval and provision.

Her produce restored, Judah's next need is to rid her land of the gnawing devastators, **verse 20**. *Northern army* can mean destructive enemy, **Jeremiah 1:13-15; 4:6**. But the context means the locusts: the verses before and after deal with the restoration of plague-damage. The picture describes the stench of a destroyed army; **Amos 4:10**. Locusts drowned at sea and washed ashore are infamous for the foul odour which their putrid carcasses discharge. If the picture of judgment swings from historical to apocalyptic, it is because the invasion itself was signaled the Day of the Lord. The locusts are held accountable for their acts, for they unwittingly accomplished God's purposes, similar to God's treatment of invading armies, like Assyrian, Isaiah 10:5-19 or Babylonian, Habakkuk 2:6-19. Joel addresses three groups which have suffered in the plague: land **verse 21**, animals **verse 22**, the

inhabitants of Jerusalem **verse 23**. These verses convey assurance to those who have prayed to Yahweh for relief, **Psalm 118:5& 23; Isaiah 41:14-16**. The land had mourned and is now commanded by the prophet to exchange its fear for rejoicing: for the opposite, **Hosea 9:1**. *Fear not* is a familiar call in salvation promises, Isaiah 10:24; 41:10, 14; Luke 2:10. The reason = *for the Lord has done great things* cf. Psalm 126:2&3. Verse 22, The animals are told, *be not afraid*. **1 Corinthians 3: 6-9**.

Fertility reverses the damage, the suffering of the animals; devastation of the fields, fig trees and grape vines, trees and pastures. Yahweh empowers the trees to fight back, and their produce overpowers the destruction of the locust army. The personification of land and beast is both a graphic way of expressing the impact of disaster and deliverance and a solemn reminder of the closeness of all creation. Distinctions between animate and inanimate or between animal, vegetable and mineral were not always made by the Hebrews, who viewed all of reality as the gift of God, charged with his power and sustained by his presence. The reason for their rejoicing is abundance of rain which is perfect tense = God's promise is certain. *A teacher of righteousness* = 'in righteousness the autumn rains': eg. **Genesis 3: 15, 12: 3; John 6: 63; 1 Corinthians 1: 30; Hebrews 9: 15**.

**Verses 24-27**: God's vindication is lavish and areas emptied by the plague are full to overflowing which in **3:13**, is a figure of readiness for judgment. God's deliverance is to restore or repay = literally 'pay back', a legal term for compensation of damages. The plural suggests that the locust invasions were spread over more than one year. God leaves no doubt as to his responsibility for sending judgment, and in so doing issues a warning that his grace in restoration must not be presumed upon. Because the restoration of food to the hungry is based on God's grace, the people's only response can be praise, literally, 'sing psalms of praise', the appropriate counter to the previous cries of complaint. Since God's name or reputation was in danger of being slandered by Judah's enemies, it is his name that must be praised for deliverance. With that name fully vindicated, his people can put behind them any fear of losing face ('be put to shame') before their foes. Good crops, brimming vats, full stomachs are not ends in themselves but signs that God, who had seemed to abandon his people to the misery of their disaster and the mocking of their enemies, has now intervened on their behalf.

*We must allow a great many books to go unread, and a great many social visits unpaid, in order that we may concentrate on Christ.* PTF: Lk 10:41,42.

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### STUDY FIVE: 2: 28-32 I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT

The Lord's answer in **2:19** directs the people beyond their recovery from the locust plague to times of greater blessing. *Afterward* = chronological sequence between two stages of blessing. First: restoration of old damage, second: inauguration of a new era in God's dealings with his people. No distinction between material and spiritual blessings for material blessings are signs of spiritual renewal and evidence of true repentance. Life and land were bound together so whatever affected one affected the other, cf. **Isaiah 32: 1-5** the Kingdom of Righteousness, then **9-20**, failure and the Spirit, justice and righteousness.

**Verse 28**, lavish and extensive riches; *pour out*. God is not miserly; the same spirit that moved at creation to bring order from chaos, Genesis 1:2. Samson was *empowered by the spirit to kill a lion with his bare hands*, Judges 14:6, and Bezalel *endowed with skill and perception and knowledge for every kind of craft*, Exodus 35:31. Joel's emphasises fellowship with God, communication of his word, *on all people* for the entire people of Israel will participate. The gift of God's spirit had been restricted to chosen leaders like Gideon, Judges 6:34, kings, Saul and David 1 Samuel 10:6; 16:13, and the prophet Micah, in 3:8. Now all God's people will become prophets, and Moses' wish will be fulfilled: *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them*, Numbers 11:29. *All people = Sons and daughters, old people, young men and servants*. No exclusion will be made on the basis of gender, age or social position, **Galatians 3:26 - 29**. The gift of the Spirit initiates oneness and superficial distinctions are set aside. God's grace shows itself in prophetic activity. Ecstatic experience like falling, writhing, dancing, babbling, chanting is not foreign to the Old Testament prophets, but the emphasis here is a deeper knowledge of God, and rich relationship, cf. **Jeremiah 31:33-34**. The abuses by false prophets of these modes of revelation, especially dreams, cf. **Jeremiah 23:25; 27:9; 29:8&9** does not prohibit their use even before Pentecost; **Matthew 1:20; 2:12**. The basic difference between dream and vision is that the dreamer is usually asleep, while the visionary is awake during the reception of the revelation. It is not various means of revelation

that are emphasised but true knowledge of God **verse 27** and sharing that knowledge.

Yahweh's initiative in sending his own spirit is the central theme, used by Peter **Acts 2:14-21**. Note that Micah 2:30 - 3:2 is poetry not prose. The blessings of the spirit are accompanied by powerful signs, omens certain to be fulfilled, clear-cut indicators that God is at work. Their cosmic scope of heavens . . . earth, are highlighted. Blood, and fire and billows like an erupting volcano of smoke serves several purposes: God's actions where Egypt's judgment meant Israel's liberation Exodus 7:17, the Nile is turned to blood; Exodus 9:24, hail and fire smite the land; Exodus 19:18, Sinai is shrouded in smoke from the fire of the Lord's presence. It pictures God's judgment as a world-wide sacrifice to his holiness, as the nations which played loose with his glory became burnt offerings whose blood, fire and smoke are grim testimony to their tragic mistake cf. **Isaiah 34:6**, in the context of verses 1-17. The darkened sun and the blood-coloured moon are similar effects to the locust clouds, 2:10. But the context here points to the end times: *afterward* in 2:28, *in those days*, 2:29, and *in those days and at that time*, 3:1. Prophetic passages like this one from Joel and **Isaiah 13:10**, see verses 6-13, have made a distinct contribution to the language with which Christ's second coming (appearance) is described in texts like **Mark 13:24** and **Revelation 6:12-14**. The promise of rescue ends as it began with call, for it is God who does the calling. The two uses forcefully express the connection between God's election of his people in love and grace and their response to him in worship and obedience: those *who call on the name of the Lord* are those who have been called, 'appointed' or 'elected' by him.

When Peter quoted this passage, **2:28-32** at Pentecost, he used not only the portions about the outpouring of God's spirit but also those that describe the wonders in heaven and earth, Acts 2:17-21. Peter sketches the sweep of *those days* which Joel saw coming and finds their fulfilment in the outpouring of the Spirit which constituted the church and demonstrated its unique qualities as God's people. Pentecost triggers a series of powerful events which begin with the empowering of the church, where *all flesh*, i.e. all Israel, is given a larger meaning, viz, all believers who become part of the new Israel, whether Jew or Gentile: **Romans 1:16; 10:12; Galatians 3:6-9; 6:16; Ephesians 2:11-22**. Joel 2:32, *all who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered*, is a key for Peter's invitation to the Jews at Pentecost, Acts 2:21: *And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*.

This underlines Paul's argument about the centrality of faith, not law, in the reception of salvation Romans 10:13.

Joel's prophecy and Pentecost are not ends in themselves for the cross is essential to Pentecost. **Ephesians 1: 7, 10 – 14**.

PTF on Philippians 3: 12. *One of our problems is that while we have a perfect Word we ourselves are imperfect. How can the Word and the man be made to coincide? ... The minister of the Gospel is not a man of problems first of all, but a man of power. He should know the greatness of the world within more thoroughly than the greatness of the problems about him: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. Paul was much more sure of the Gospel's grasp of him than of his grasp of the gospel. In your ministry you must trust not in what you bring with you from your books, but him whom you bring with you to your books, and to everything else in life... There was nothing Paul was so sure of as the grace of Christ. He was not so much concerned about his own experience as about him who brought that experience.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> P.T.Forsyth, Manuscript Address to Students

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### STUDY SIX: 3: 1-8 PROMISE OF JUDGMENT

The majority of this chapter deals with the promised judgment on the nations; cf. 2:30-31. While in **3: 1-3**, the Lord speaks of judgment and a time of reckoning for their enemies; cf. Amos 1 - 2; Obadiah; Nahum; Habakkuk 2 – 3; it depicts the rescue of God's people. *In those days and at that time*, links events with a future period in 2:28-29. The Lord will not only pour out his spirit on Israel and rescue her in the midst of cosmic signs and wonders, 2:30-32, *when I restore her fortunes*, restoration to wholeness; but the recipients of judgment include all the nations: Tyre, Sidon, Philistia in **3:4**; Egypt and Edom in **3:19**. Judah's neighbours who harassed them throughout their history are included, for without their punishment Judah's salvation is not complete. Joel uses cosmic language; cf. the nations as *Gentiles*, **verse 6** or *nations/heathen* in **verses 9&12**, a universal application.

The place of judgment geographically cannot be identified. **Verse 12**, Jehoshaphat was the name of a Hebrew king, but here; Valley of Jehoshaphat = 'Yahweh has judged'. Also *valley of decision*, **verse 14** confirms this. The emphasis is on the legal character of the judgment not on the geographical site. The verbs are instructive: **verse 12**, *gather/roused*, often used in contexts of divine judgment: Isaiah 66:18; Hosea 8:10; 9:6; Micah 4:12; bring down, **verse 11**, to 'prostrate', 'topple' or 'humiliate', e.g. Psalm 56:7; Isaiah 10:13; Amos 3:11. The Lord himself will both bring an indictment as prosecutor and render his decision as judge. Several prophets mention valleys, suitable areas both for large numbers and for military conflict, verses 9-14, where judgment will occur, but with no unanimity of description. Coupled with judgment is justice for the exploiters and oppressors of the world would be haunted by their deeds against the sovereign Lord and His people.

He argues his case strongly when he describes the slave trade which used his people as pawns. People are treated like property by the casting of lots, cf. Obadiah 11; Nahum 3:10. At prices ridiculously low, persons are bartered like goods, cf. Amos 2:6; 8:6, for a moment

of pleasure; an evening with a harlot Hosea 4:14 or a skin of wine Amos 4:1. Though the victims in this passage are Judah's children, the same principle of inhumanity, of depersonalization, is scathingly denounced in Amos 1 - 2 where foreign nations are the ones humiliated. In **verses 4-6**, the prophet turns his attention to Tyre, Jeremiah 47:4; Ezekiel 28:1-12: Sidon, Isaiah 23:4; Ezekiel 28:20-23 and the regions of Philistia with its five great cities; Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, Ekron.

Amos and other prophets show how deep and long standing the hostility was **Amos 1:6 & 9**. The conduct of these Gentile city states was so cruel that Yahweh asks them if they are trying to settle a grudge to pay him back for some prior misdeed. The language is sarcastic or ironic, but the meaning is clear: if it is retribution they are after, they need to beware, because they are dealing with a master of retribution. *What have you against me?* Verse 4, in this context means something like 'What have I done to you that you dare treat me this way?'

The indictment suggests two main crimes: looting of treasures, **Hosea 2:8 and 9:6**, and the selling of slaves. In **Verses 7-8**, the accusation of sin is followed by an announcement of punishment, which frequently describes Yahweh's special intervention. *Sabeans* in verse 8 are from the same country as the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1-13), in South Arabia where their desert life would be most unpleasant to people raised on the coast, but their involvement in caravan trading meant that slaves sold to them could be sent from the Indian Ocean to the East Coast of Africa. The retribution is definite: the Hebrews, who had no love for the sea, were sold to sea-peoples; the sea-going people of Phoenicia and Philistia, will be sold to the desert people, Sabeans. The cutting irony sees the Jews, not the Philistines or Phoenicians, as trading agents. The oracle of salvation concludes with a formula of divine certification to endorse its authority: *the Lord has spoken*, cf. Isaiah 1:2; 22:25; 25:8. The invasions of Artaxerxes III led to Sidon's enslavement (343 BC), and Alexander sealed the fate of Tyre and Gaza (332 BC).

Notice what follows from **Matthew 11: 1-19**, the *woes* of judgment in **20-24**, the eternal consequences for some of the cities that rejected Jesus is voiced by Him. **Matthew 18: 7** and the seven *woes* of

**Matthew 23: 13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29** and **37-39**: cf. the six *woes* in **Luke 11: 42-52**. The expression *woe* occurs twelve times in Matthew, fifteen times in Luke, fourteen occasions in Revelation and four times elsewhere in the NT. A strong expression of regret for the punishment that sinners inevitably bring on themselves, then followed by the reason for the *woe*.

*Woe* here is a verdict and expresses sorrowful pity and anger for Jesus was treated with indifference and neglect, the sin of inaction. The sections are linked for the chapter forms a unit. Miracles described as *mighty works*, mostly works of healing which were signs that God was at work in their midst, had been performed in those cities but the people had refused His word and action. Even the notorious Old Testament cities known for their evil, will be better off on Judgment Day than the cities that failed to respond. Jesus was not looking for admiration or publicity but for repentance and it was ignored. The irony of **Matthew 11: 23** is pointed for Capernaum expected to be exalted, but *Hades* was their judgment. Both here and in Joel and throughout Scripture, repentance affects the whole life in total direction away from sin and toward God. The orientation of one's entire life is involved not simply being sorry for this or that sinful act. Only the rejection of forgiveness is unforgivable, cf. **Luke 23: 34**.

P.T. Forsyth: The non-theological christ is popular; he wins votes; but he is not mighty; he does not win souls; he does not break men into small pieces and create them anew.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace', from *PTF and the cure of souls*, p. 39.



## THE BOOK OF JOEL

NCTM study:

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### STUDY SEVEN: 3: 9-21 PROMISE AND BLESSINGS

This final section reminds us again of the *theocentricity* of the prophet's message. The promise of judgment (last study) continues in dramatic poetry with elements of surprise. The prophet's words are a summons to a holy war with ironic twists. Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4: 3 had spoken of an age when nations would convert war instruments into implements of peace, but in this battle-call the Lord reverses the wording where weapons of war are forged into tools, now tools are forged into weapons.

**Verses 9-14** issue a call to execute the judgment prophesied in verses 1-8. When the nations assemble with their weapons for battle they will be confronted with the Judge of all the nations, and their hands will hold the incriminating evidence of their own history of violence. The irony of Joel's words reveal that only in judgment and repentance declared in the cross is there forgiveness. The Lord himself issues the imperative summons of **verse 9**, *Proclaim*, = call, cry out; cf. Isaiah 40:6 & Amos 3:9, possibly using unnamed (angelic) messengers to utter a call to battle among the nations cf. Jeremiah 46:3-6, 9-10. The nations, verses 11&12, maybe lands named earlier in the chapter — Tyre, Sidon, Philistia, verse 4; as well as Edom and Egypt verse 19. The eschatological emphasis of the passage warns against attempts to define nations too specifically. Total justice for the nations and total security for Israel is Yahweh's intent.

*Prepare for war*, is literally 'sanctify' cf. 1:14 & 2:15, the words, *for war* for ancient peoples was a religious enterprise, prepared for with prayer and sacrifice cf. 1 Samuel 7:8&9. The warriors (locusts in 2:7) are called to duty with verbs: *stir up* = *rouse*, *draw near*, *come quickly*, *assemble*; military preparation for battle, countries summoned to total mobilization. Since David's day, iron had been plentiful in the Middle East for all but the poorest farmers to possess iron tools. The mobilization is so total, and the reversal of normal patterns so complete, that even people who lack the nerve or physique for battle (the weak) volunteer as warriors, **verse 10b**.

The line is deliberately humorous; since the root of warrior means to be 'strong' or 'mighty', cf. **Hosea 10:13**.

In **Verses 11-12**: the divine messengers carry out their mission commanding the Gentile nations to battle. *There* = the valley of Jehoshaphat, **3:2 & 12**. The last line of verse 11, *Bring down your warriors, O Lord!* is a signal from the messengers that the troops of the nations are being readied for battle and that the Lord should now assemble his own forces to meet the enemy. He who rallied locusts to do his bidding 2:11 will not lack warriors 2:7 to fill his ranks and match the warriors of his foes. The Lord responds in **verse 12** by repeating the invitation to battle cf. verse 9 and declaring the real purpose of the encounter: **judgment**. The nations may be marshalling their troops for war, but the sovereign God is not threatened. He knows who is in charge, and he plans to sit in judgment on the enemies, ie. the posture of judges, **Exodus 18:13 & 14**.

**Verse 13**, the figure changes again, for Yahweh is neither warrior nor judge; he is a farmer, or grape-grower; sickle may be a knife; shouting instructions for harvest (cf. 1:11, where the shout depicted the impossibility of harvest). The command to tread the grapes in the full wine press, whose vats are already overflowing, deliberately mimics the picture of prosperity in 2:24. The final line explains the metaphor. The wickedness, cf. **Hosea 7:1-3; 9:15; 10:15** of the nations is so great that they are as ripe, i.e. ready to be used; cf. **Genesis 40:10**, for judgment as grapes would be for harvest at the peak of their seasons. For harvest as a metaphor for judgment, **Matthew 13:36-43; & Revelation 14:14-20**, a passage that draws heavily upon this scene in Joel. For the idea that sin may reach a level when judgment becomes unavoidable, cf. the line in Genesis 15:16: *for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete*.

**Verse 14**, the repetition of multitudes = the largest possible gathering of multitudes. The word also has the idea of tumults in confusion, the uproar that would sound forth from a huge crowd in the grip of panic. The prophets used it as description of enemies summoned to judgment cf. **Ezekiel 39: 7-13; Isaiah 17:12-14; 29:5-10, and 13:1-11**, which has a great similarity to Joel 3:9-14 in conscripting the nations to do battle with God. The day of the Lord takes us back to **2:31** where God's massive intervention in grace and judgment was pictured, an

intervention of which the locust plague was a preliminary expression, see 1:15; 2:1, 11. The *decision* which gives the valley its name is the Lord's decision. The nations have already decided against him, now He does the deciding. *Valley of decision* and *valley of Jehoshaphat* (3:2, 12) mean essentially the same: the place where Yahweh will carry out his devastating judgment, cf. 1 Kings 20:40; Isaiah 10:22-23, where 'decide', has a destructive meaning. **Is there such a place?**

**Verses 15-17**, the darkened skies (cf. 2:10 where the locusts are the cause and 2:31 where the darkening forebodes the coming Day of deliverance) again point to the staggering intensity and the cosmic scope of divine activity. The fact of judgment is crucial to the prophet's theme; the details are not. In verse 16 the emphasis shifts from visible to audible evidence of Yahweh's intervention. The lion-like roar from Zion is the note with which Amos' prophecy begins, Amos 1:2. The voice which spoke the universe into existence at creation has the power to rattle it (as his locusts did the land in 2:10) in judgment and restoration. The divine Lion is roaring words of assurance to his own, **Hosea 11: 9-11** more than threats of disaster to the outsiders. Neither the darkened skies nor the quaking universe are menaces to God's people. Yahweh himself will provide them with his stronghold as protection, his *refuge*: Psalms 14: 6; 46: 1&2; 61: 3&4; 62: 5-8; 71:7; 73:28; 91:2 & 9; 94:22; 142:5.

These encounters of Yahweh with his people are his self-disclosures as the Covenant Lord of Israel, both to his people, and the Gentile nations. In 3:17 and 2:27 the self-revelation is followed by an assurance of God's presence and protection: Jerusalem's holiness (i.e. complete freedom from corruption or intrusion) is guaranteed by God. The picture of protection and prosperity in the salvation promise with which Joel concludes is centred in Judah's sacred capital, the earthly dwelling of Yahweh, cf. **Zechariah 14:20-21**. The geographical-covenantal significance of Jerusalem/Zion at the end of the book complements its central role throughout Joel. The assurance that Yahweh dwells in Zion is the answer to the complaints when no offerings were available in the temple, 1:8-10 & 13. Anguish for Zion marks the beginnings of Joel's message; assurance to Zion marks the ending. For a people to whom the land has been given as a gift in Joshua's day, to whom Jerusalem and its temple had been bequeathed under David and Solomon, from whom all of this had been snatched

in the judgment of Exile, there could be no stronger promise that all would be well than for the prophet to describe the Lord and his people dwelling in peace in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

**Verses 18-21**, the song of future restoration heads to a climax in a poetic description of fertility that reverses the locusts' devastation, a prophetic announcement of judgment against ancient enemies: Egypt and Edom, a promise of continuity for Judah and Jerusalem, and a repetition of the crowning assurance that Yahweh, zealous to give the guilty nations their due, is dwelling in Zion. Joel is declaring an end to Palestine's constant battle against drought and infertility, and announcing that the specific damage inflicted by the locusts has been undone: the lavish supply of wine replaces what was cut off when the vines withered; the flow of milk means that herds of cattle are no longer perplexed for want of pasture; abundant water replenished the dried-up brooks.<sup>7</sup>

Only the Lord can provide such blessing. *A fountain* (Psalm 46:4-5) *will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias* (*Shittim*, essential wood in fashioning the tabernacle with its ark and altars Exodus 25:10 & 23; 26:15; 27:1; 30:1. Ezekiel's description of this eschatological fresh stream on the Salt Sea, **Ezekiel 47:8-9**. The vision of the Holy City, whose continued fertility is watered by a river that flows from the throne of God, **Revelation 22:1-3**. Here is the revelation of God's righteousness and his saving power on behalf of his covenant people.

**Verse 20**, 'will remain' rather than *be inhabited*, cf Psalm 121. Yahweh preserves his dwelling place and redeems his people from their enemies as well as their sins; cf. God's presence in the Exodus and wilderness; Exodus 25: 8; 29: 45; Numbers 35: 34; cf. John's description of Christ's incarnation as 'tabernacling', **John 1:14**. The ultimate characteristic of Yahweh's Day is not his warfare with his enemies in the valley of decision, nor his refreshment of his people in the valley of acacias, but his renewed, restored and permanent presence with them. Ezekiel saw that and renamed the Holy City; *The Lord is there*, Ezekiel 48:35; **John 1:14; Revelation 21:3**.

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<sup>6</sup> David Hubbard, *Tyndale Commentary*, p81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*