

Joel

“Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision!

For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.” (JOEL 3:14)

Joel stands out in Israel’s prophetic tradition precisely because so little is known about him personally. His book identifies him only as Joel son of Pethuel, and no other biblical text mentions him. His name—meaning “YHWH is God”—signals covenant loyalty, but his life remains largely hidden.

The precise historical setting of Joel is difficult to discern since there is no direct historical information provided in the narrative. Joel son of Pethuel, and no other biblical text mentions him. His name—meaning “YHWH is God”—signals covenant loyalty, but his life remains largely hidden. What we do have is the historical texture suggested by the book itself. Some traditions place Joel in the 9th century BCE, during the regency of Jehoiada under King Joash, a period marked by political fragility and renewed temple worship. This dating aligns with the book’s focus on priests, liturgy, and active temple sacrifice, and with the absence of Assyrian or Babylonian references.

However, most modern scholars argue for a post-exilic setting, with a date in the 5th-4th century BCE most likely. Three reasons for this dating stand out:

- The important role of the temple in Joel’s ministry, which was rebuilt in 515 BCE);
- The mention of both Tyre (destroyed by Alexander in 332 BCE) and Sidon (destroyed by Artaxerxes II in 343 BCE) as cities to be punished (Joel 4:4); and,
- The lack of any monarchy (consistent with Persian rule), a date

This places Joel’s ministry during the middle or late Persian period, a time when the initial excitement over repatriation and the rebuilt temple had waned. Judah had entered a time of waiting for the fulfillment of the promised new age – typified by an eschatological longing. The narrative occasion for the beginning of Joel’s preaching was a plague of locusts combined with a devastating drought.

NARRATIVE UNITS in DANIEL	
1:1-2:17	Locusts and Lament • The Plague of Locusts • The Hyperbole of the attacking army • The Consequences of the Day of the Lord
2:18-3:21	Restoration • The End of the Plague • The Effects of YHWH’s Presence

Regardless of date, Joel’s ministry responds to a national crisis symbolized by a devastating locust plague, interpreted as divine judgment and a summons to repentance. His prophecy of

the outpouring of God's Spirit (Joel 2:28–29) later becomes central to Christian imagination, cited by Peter at Pentecost as fulfilled in the early church.

THEMATIC & LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

The Day of the Lord – Joel offers one of Scripture's most vivid visions of the Day of the Lord, a motif that moves from terror to hope. At first, the "day" is sheer devastation—"destruction from the Almighty" (Joel 1:15). Joel describes cosmic upheaval and earthly collapse: trembling lands, darkened skies, the sun turned to darkness, and the moon to blood (Joel 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14). These images reveal judgment that disrupts every sphere of life and exposes the fragility of human security.

The tone shifts when Joel announces YHWH's presence among his people. With repentance and divine intervention, the Day of the Lord becomes a moment of reversal. What began as terror becomes vindication for Israel and judgment for the nations (Joel 3:16–21). The same divine power that shakes creation now shelters the faithful, restores the land, and reestablishes justice.

The Plague of Locusts & Communal Lament– Joel opens with an agricultural catastrophe so severe that "every generation must remember it." Locusts strip the fields, drought scorches the land, animals suffer, and temple offerings cease. Joel interprets this not as mere disaster but as revelation of divine holiness and a summons to communal lament. Lament in the Old Testament is more than petition; it is the spontaneous cry of a community facing chaos, brokenness, and loss. In Joel, that cry becomes collective as the people confront both infestation and drought (Joel 1).

This devastation becomes a metaphor for the invading army and the approaching Day of the LORD (Joel 2:1–17). The physical ruin of the land mirrors the spiritual crisis of the nation, and the communal lament becomes the pathway to repentance, renewed worship, and restored hope.

A Reversal of Fortune & New Hope – Even as Israel reaches the nadir of its misery (Joel 2:18), YHWH intervenes, removing the disaster and "restoring the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem" (Joel 3:1). This reversal signals that God has not abandoned the people. After communal repentance, God promises to restore "the years the locusts have eaten," renewing land, animals, and hope. What was stripped bare by judgment becomes fertile again under divine mercy.

Joel's vision reaches its climax in the promise that God will pour out the Spirit on *all flesh*—sons and daughters, old and young, servants and free alike. This democratized gift of the Spirit marks a new era in Israel's life, where divine presence is no longer confined to temple or office but

shared across the whole community. Early Christians seized on this promise, seeing in Pentecost the fulfillment of Joel's hope and the beginning of God's renewed people.

TYPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

SELECTED USES OF JOEL IN THE IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Joel's voice echoes strongly in both the New Testament and the early church, becoming a wellspring for Christian reflection on judgment, renewal, and the Spirit's work. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 cites Joel 2:28–32 directly, treating Joel's promise that God will pour out the Spirit on *all flesh* as fulfilled in the church's birth. Joel becomes a theological anchor for Christian claims that the Spirit's gifts are universal, boundary-breaking, and eschatological. This theme remains central for early writers like Irenaeus, who sees Joel's prophecy as proof that the Spirit renews all creation in Christ.

New Testament apocalyptic passages—especially in 1 Thessalonians and Revelation—draw on Joel's imagery of cosmic upheaval, darkened skies, and divine judgment. Joel's movement from catastrophe to restoration shapes Christian expectation that judgment leads to renewal.

Joel's call to communal lament and heartfelt repentance resonates in early Christian preaching. Chrysostom uses Joel to urge sincere conversion, while Augustine highlights Joel's vision of God restoring “the years the locusts have eaten” as a metaphor for grace healing the wounds of sin. Across these traditions, Joel becomes a prophetic grammar for understanding the Spirit, judgment, renewal, and the church's life in the last days.

MORAL IMAGINATION

QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCOVER JOEL'S RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY READER

- How does Joel's call to collective lament challenge our tendency to treat suffering as private rather than communal?
- In what ways do modern crises—environmental, social, or spiritual—mirror Joel's locust plague and drought?
- Joel urges the people to “rend your hearts, not your garments.” What does authentic repentance look like in our parish life today?
- Where do we long for God to “restore the years the locusts have eaten” in our community or personal lives?
- How does Joel's movement from devastation to hope shape our understanding of divine judgment in the present?
- What does Joel teach us about living faithfully in the tension between accountability and renewal?
- How does Joel's promise of the Spirit poured out on all people expand our vision of ministry, vocation, and inclusion today?

- What biblical or non-biblical images/descriptions of blessing and curse are most poignant to you (see also REV 21-22)?

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