

The Date of the Book of Joel*

Damien Freeman

Any attempt to attribute a date to the Book of Joel remains largely speculative. The Jews have traditionally taken the view that it is a work of early composition. This is reflected by its position in the canon between Hosea and Amos. Modern scholarship however, has – with some notable exceptions - tended to argue that the book was most likely penned in the post-exilic period. While the matter remains contentious, it seems most likely that the book is an early post-exilic work, of which some portions may have undergone revision at a later date under the hand of a redactor. Thus we shall examine the various arguments put forward by modern scholars for a post-exilic date.

The date of the Book of Joel is one of the great mysteries facing the Old Testament scholar. No historical dates are given in the superscription. Furthermore, the nature of the prophecy is such that it provides few concrete clues as to its date of composition. If we are to make any headway, it is necessary to examine references – and the absence of references – to peoples and events which may provide some insight into the likely date of composition. Furthermore, some consideration of the book's place in the development of Hebrew religion and thought will assist us to assess the place of the work in the context of the other books of the Hebrew canon.

One of the significant clues in dating a book is the occurrence of other nations within the text. It is presumable that there will be some allusion to the major political powers of the time. Such references will allow us to place the book in the context of our broader understanding of Israelite history. To this end we should note the absence of any reference to both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Given the profound impact these nations had on the Hebrew kingdoms, it seems highly unlikely that no reference would have been made to them if the text were written during their respective ages of dominance. On the other hand, we must take careful note of the obvious reference made to the Greeks.

If we are to accept the absence of any reference to Assyria, this – together with no reference to the Babylonians – leads to a late dating. It has been suggested however that the reference to the “northern one” might be understood as the Assyrian army and that the locust plague might be an allegorical reference to the Assyrian invasion. This would seem to be unlikely however. We have reason to believe that the locust plague swept across Palestine from the north and so it is quite appropriate to assume that the plague is the “northern one”. Even more disturbing is the suggestion that the locusts constitute an extended metaphor for the Assyrians. The problem with such a thesis is that the locusts are themselves compared to horses and thieves. It would be most awkward if such references were to be understood as metaphors within metaphors, for in such a situation rather than simplifying meaning through a literary device, the author merely complicates the message.

Whereas there is no reference to the early empires of Assyria and Babylon, reference is made to the Greeks, who only became a significant force late in Israelite history. This is perhaps the most telling reference for those advocating a post-exilic date. Various nations are accused of having sold the Judeans and the inhabitants of Jerusalem into slavery under the Greeks in iv:6. This requires the scholar to resolve when such a slave trade flourished. Treves argues that this is most unlikely to have

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occurred during the classical age in Greece for although a few Hebrew slaves would presumably have been purchased by the Greeks, there are no records of significant numbers of such transactions and besides which, the Greeks had closer sources (Treves, p 152). At the same time, Treves maintains that such a reference would seem entirely appropriate if Joel were writing after 332 B.C. This is a common conclusion drawn by many including Eissfeldt (Eissfeldt, p 394).

Myers observes that while historical sources support Joel's reference to the Sabeans, this evidence suggests an early post exilic date (Myers, p 190). He argues this on the basis that while the Sabeans and Mineans controlled the South Arabian trade routes, we cannot go beyond the fifth century B.C. and thus he suggests the likelihood is that we are looking at the late sixth century or very early fifth century. This conclusion drawn from the reference to the Sabeans is in conflict with Treves' understanding of the reference to Egypt and Edom (iii:19). Treves provides evidence to suggest that the Egypt that must be meant here is surely that of the Ptolemaic period between 323 and 285 B.C. (Treves, p 155). Thus we see that while the references to foreign nations tend to suggest a post-exilic date, there remains dissent as to how late after the Exile the book was written.

Having considered what the author reveals about contemporary foreign affairs, let us now turn to his picture of the domestic situation. Rowley observes that the absence of any reference to the northern kingdom, suggests that the book was written after the captivity of Israel in 722 B.C. (Rowley, p 110). This is supported by the fact that references to Israel, e.g. ii:27, iii:2 and iii:16 suggest that Israel is treated as synonymous with Judah. Treves similarly notes that the prophet limits his attention to the immediate neighbourhood of the holy city (Treves, p 150), describing it as "my land" (i:6), "God's people", "his heritage" and "his land" (ii:1, 15, 23 etc). Treves also observes that the denotation of Zion as "my holy mountain" in ii:1 and ii:17 suggests a post-Deuteronomic date, after 621 B.C., for before Josiah's reforms many mountains were considered holy (ibid).

Many commentators also point to the presupposition in the text of the exile and dispersion of the Jews (iv:2). This gives strong impetus for a post-exilic date. Treves argues expressions such as "Bring back the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem" (iii:1) and "scattered among the nations" (iii:2) are compelling evidence that the text must have been composed after 586 B.C. (Treves, p 151). It should be noted however that both these expressions occur in the latter section of the work, which is assigned by some a date later than the initial section. An interesting insight Treves offers is the implication of iii:14. The call for the entire community to attend a solemn assembly in the Temple provides evidence of the pathetic size of the population. Treves suggests that this picture, inconsistent with the once numerous Israelite nation, fits beautifully the state of the dwindled population of the Persian and Ptolemaic periods.

The description of the state of the nation is also highly significant for what it fails to mention. Whereas the priests and the elders are addressed as the leaders of the community, it is notable that the author fails to make any reference to the king or the royal household. Such a breach of protocol would have been unthinkable during the monarchical period. At any rate, the right to summon an assembly was the king's prerogative during the monarchical period, thus Joel's called to the priests to do so suggests a later period. Similarly, in the Maccabean period it would have been equally inexcusable to fail to address the army and the Hasidim. Treves observes however that these problems are avoided and that it would have been appropriate for the gentile governor to be omitted if the prophet were writing in either the Persian or Greek periods as he was not required to repent with the Jews (Treves, p 151).

Allusions to the state of the Temple cult are also quite useful when attempting to date the book as we may observe periods in history corresponding to the descriptions given. Rowley observes references such as i:13f must at least imply the existence of the Temple – he assumes the Second Temple (Rowley, p 110). Eissfeldt points to i:9 and ii:14 as cases where the daily burnt-offering in the Temple is presupposed (Eissfeldt, p 394). Treves is even more specific taking the description of the Temple to rule out the periods of destruction and pagan usage during 586-515 B.C. and 167-164 B.C. (Treves, p 150).

There are some specific references which may indirectly give us some valuable insights into the date of composition. Of particular interest is the reference to the locusts running upon the wall in ii:9. Various scholars have concluded from this that this event would have to take place after Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, as described in Nehemiah vi:15. The basis for this is references to the destruction of the wall in Jeremiah lii:14, II Kings xxv:10 and II Chronicles xxxvi:19 which all employ the same verb suggesting the utter demolition of the wall to its foundations. This being the case, the wall would simply not have existed for the locusts to run upon.

Myers however suggests that this is an incorrect evaluation of the situation. He observes that Nehemiah vi:15 states both that the breaches in the wall were mended and that this was done in fifty-two days. This being the case, portions of the wall must have remained intact (else there could not be any breaches). Furthermore, it would have been impossible to rebuild the entire wall in a mere fifty-two days. Thus Myers concludes that the verse may have been written earlier in which case the locusts would have run upon the portions of the wall still standing (Myers, p 191).

Another equally specific point which has been used to defend a particular dating is the reference to the sun turning to darkness and the moon into blood in ii:31. This is commonly held to refer to both a solar and lunar eclipse. Stephenson, having done some detailed research into the problem has suggested that while lunar eclipses are fairly common, a complete solar eclipse is extremely rare. As such, through astronomical calculations he is able to establish the dates when such a phenomenon would have been witnessed.

Stephenson produces three possible dates for total solar eclipse visible from the proximity of Judah. These are – expressed in terms of the Julian Calendar - 18 January, 402 B.C., 29 February, 357 B.C., and 4 July, 336 B.C. Although he acknowledges that there are other dates (e.g. that which Amos alludes to), Stephenson maintains they would not have been as dramatic as that which Joel describes. As the track of the eclipse of 402 B.C. is unlikely to have reached farther south than Galilee, Stephenson concludes that in the period between 1130 B.C. and 310 B.C., the only dates that could coincide with such a phenomenon are 357 B.C. and 336 B.C., both of which support the thesis of scholars such as Eissfeldt and Pfeiffer advocating a late date.

A strong reason for maintaining a late date comes from the religious outlook of the prophet. He does not appear to show particular concern about the sins that the pre-exilic prophets denounced. Furthermore, his attitude is strongly suggestive of that adopted by post-exilic Judaism. Most notably, the attitude towards fasting and mourning as a form of repenting (ii:12) and the constant allusions to the meal and drink offerings (e.g. i:9,13 and ii:14). Thus we find the author is suited to the broad image we have of post-exilic culture and thought.

Literary and linguistic considerations provide further reasons to ascribe this book to the post-exilic period. We must observe the material in Joel which occurs in other texts. In such cases it is difficult to know which author borrowed the material. Treves however suggests a late date may be consistent with the common use of material. He argues that Joel exhibits “imitations and reminiscences” of his predecessors (Treves, p 152). In this way he explains parallels between Joel and Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah. Regarding the common material Joel shares with later authors such as Job, Obadiah and recent sections of Isaiah, these he maintains to also be imitations and reminiscences, but in these cases he understands Joel to be the original source. This association with the texts is also supported by the frequent employment of Aramaisms in the text.

Myers observes the particular ideological similarities between Joel and the prophets he believes to be his contemporaries, Haggai and Zachariah (Myers, p 193). He notes that each of these prophecies is brought forth from agricultural disaster. Haggai shares with Joel a concern for the apparent lethargy exhibited by Israel about the things that matter rather than being occupied with their affluence. Similarly, Joel, like Zechariah and his contemporaries, expresses an urgent need to repent, where the nation’s fortune may be altered only by a solemn ceremony. A further significant factor is the common theme of the judgement of the nations for their dealings with Israel. Joel’s thought is also seen by Myers to be quite distinct from the later developments of Malachi who he understands to stand in a closer relation, conceptually, to Ezra and Nehemiah (Myers, p 195).

Ultimately, we find overwhelming evidence for attributing the book to the post-exilic period. While each argument on its own might not seem terribly substantial, and indeed might be discounted, it would seem that all the evidence together suggests a cumulative probability against a pre-exilic date. This argument is embraced by Rowley though he cautions against any need to come down below the latter part of the fifth century B.C. (Rowley, pp 110-11). However as we have seen, there are also arguments for later date post-exilic dates. On the other hand, we have Kapelrud suggesting a pre-exilic date, more consistent with the traditional date. The problem with the traditional date is expressed most soundly by Eissfeldt when he explains “we cannot yet discover with certainty on what grounds this dating was determined” (Eissfeldt, p 395). The scholar must deal with evidence, of which there is presently little to support the traditional dating. While attempts may be made to argue for an early date of composition with later emendations and revisions, it rather seems that given the regularity of what would have to be revisions throughout the whole of the text (rather than one particular section), it is most sound to conclude that even the earliest draft must have been post-exilic.

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