

Who Was Joel the Prophet and What Did He Prophecy?

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In the Bible, Joel was one of several divinely appointed prophets called by God to deliver a message of warning and repentance to the southern kingdom of Judah after the nation was divided. Though little is known about Joel himself, there are a few key insights we can learn about his character through his ministry and message.

Who Was Joel?

Joel, whose name in Hebrew means “Yawheh is God,” was called by God to minister to the southern kingdom of Judah, we believe, around 835 B.C. when the then seven-year-old Joash sat on the throne. At the time, however, Jehoida the priest would have functioned as the real ruler of Judah until Joash came of age.

Some scholars, however, believe that Joel might have ministered and prophesied to the returning exiles from Babylon and Persia, almost four hundred years later. It is difficult to know for certain, however, there are a few key details in Joel’s writing that point more to the 835 B.C. date, than him ministering in 450 B.C. or later.

For one thing, Joel never mentions dominant world powers like Assyria, Babylon, and Persia that had already come and gone (or waned) by the time of the Jewish return to Jerusalem in the 5th century B.C.

Secondly, there are similarities in Joel’s style of writing to that of Hosea and Amos, biblical prophets who also ministered to Israel and Judah in the 8th century after Joel’s

ministry. In fact, the verbal parallels between [Joel 3:16](#) and [Amos 1:2](#), and [Joel 3:18](#) and [Amos 9:13](#) are of note.

For this reason, the 835 B.C. date – sometime during the reign of Joash – becomes most probable.

Also, if Joel prophesied during this time, he would have been a contemporary of the prophet Elisha, who ministered to the northern kingdom of Israel at the same time.

What Do We Actually Know about Joel?

Unfortunately, outside of his own writing, there's not much written about Joel either in the Bible or historical account.

Joel identifies himself as the son of Pethuel, a name mentioned nowhere else in the Old Testament ([Joel 1:1](#)).

Some believe Joel may have been a priest of the tribe of Levi, given his passion for temple sacrifices ([Joel 1:9](#); 2:13-16). However, his familiarity with pastoral and agricultural life ([Joel 1:13-14](#); 2:17) suggests he probably wasn't a Levite.

Beyond the Bible, some historical records hint that Joel might have been from the tribe of Reuben and lived in the town of Bethom (or Bethharam), north of the Dead Sea, but as [John MacArthur](#) notes in his commentary, the context of Joel's prophecy suggests he was from Judea and lived near or around Jerusalem, a city he seems familiar with.

However, what we ultimately know about Joel, who he was, and when he ministered, are probably less important than his actual ministry and message. According to MacArthur, "the message of Joel is timeless, forming doctrine which could be repeated and applied to any age." (983)

And though Joel is considered one of the "minor" prophets, there is nothing minor or insignificant about his ministry and message. This is a term used to classify smaller books like Joel and Amos (among others) from the longer writings of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Therefore, to understand a little more about Joel, it is necessary to explore what he actually had to say and what his book is really about.

Why Was Joel Called to Minister to Judah?

By the time Joel was called to minister to Judah, the Southern Kingdom had been in a state of disarray and decline for years, both economically and spiritually.

Rival nations and city states such as Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia had made frequent incursions into Israel, and a recent locust plague and drought had devastated Judah's economy ([Joel 1:4](#)). Needless to say, Judah was weak from the inside out. It was a time of national mourning, where, as Joel writes, "all the trees of the field dry up. Indeed, rejoicing dries up from the sons of men" ([Joel 1:12](#)).

Like many biblical prophets, Joel was sent by God to get the people's attention in a time of depression and decline. However, unlike many prophets, Joel does not address specific sin or idolatry on the part of the Judah. Rather, he uses the recent calamity of the locust plague to teach a prophetic lesson.

What was that lesson?

Speaking to the elders of Judah, Joel calls all members of society to take seriously the current locust plague. Why? Because as bad as this calamity was, it was nothing in comparison to what was to come from God if the people did not repent and turn back to Him.

Throughout the book of Joel, the theme of disaster is prevalent, if not dominant. Looking back at the economic hardship brought on by the locust plague was intended to encourage the people to look forward to the great and terrible Day of the Lord, a phrase mentioned nineteen times by eight different Old Testament prophets, including Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi, and Joel.

What Is the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord?

The theme of coming judgment is unmistakable in the book of Joel, who prophesied that a day would come when the sovereign God would judge the people and the nations who've rebelled against Him.

Joel shares how God often uses nature and events like famine, plague, violent weather, invading armies, and celestial phenomena to get our attention ([Joel 1:5](#)). Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. Desperation and national or even personal disaster or economic depression can either turn our hearts and focus back to God and His ways, or blind us from the truth and lead us further into despair.

The important thing is that God's people pay attention to physical events and contemplate how any form of physical calamity pales in comparison the judgment that awaits those who reject God and keep to their sinful ways.

However, Joel prophesies that judgment can be averted if people repent, fast, return to the Lord, and "rend your hearts and not your garments" ([Joel 2:13-17](#)).

Thus, we see in Joel's writing one who is a master of succinct phrasing to illustrate his main themes.

For example, Joel writes:

“Rend your hearts and not your garments” (2:13)

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (2:28)

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:32)

“Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears” (3:10)

“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision” (3:14)

“The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder in Jerusalem” (3:16)

Of course, we know from history that Joel's warning went largely unheeded.

As a result, the Day of the Lord in Scripture was partially fulfilled through the Babylonian conquest, invasion, destruction, and captivity of Judah. However, it is important to recognize that the Day of the Lord is also a day that is still come. “It is exclusively the day which unveils His (Christ's) character – mighty, powerful, and holy, thus terrifying His enemies” (MacArthur, 984).

That being said, within the promise of destruction, there is also a promise of hope, restoration, blessing, and prosperity for the righteous and those who “call on the name of the Lord” ([Joel 2:32](#)).

God's judgment will be poured out on sinners, but as a result of the Day of the Lord, there will also be physical blessings, fruitfulness, and prosperity for God's people. Deliverance is promised as well as restoration. “Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust” ([Joel 2:25](#)).

Furthermore, Joel prophesied the outpouring of the [Holy Spirit](#), when he wrote, “it will come about after this that I (the Lord) will pour out my Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” ([Joel 2:28-29](#)).

God's promise of restoration, therein, is threefold, as MacArthur summarizes:

1. Material restoration through the divine healing of the land ([Joel 2:21-27](#))
2. Spiritual restoration through the divine outpouring of His Spirit ([Joel 2:28-32](#))

3. National restoration through the divine judgment on the unrighteous ([Joel 3:1-21](#))

For God's people today, the promise of spiritual restoration through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as seen on the Day of [Pentecost \(Acts 2\)](#), is only a taste of the final glory and power of Christ's presence and kingdom that will be released after the Day of the Lord.

Joel promises that this day is coming. All should look to the physical signs and wonders of the earth as a reminder of God's sovereignty and coming judgment. However, for those who seek the Lord, turn from their sinful ways, and rend their hearts and not their garments, the Day of the Lord is a day to be anticipated with great joy, not terror.

As it is written, "do not fear, O land, rejoice and be glad, for the Lord has done great things" ([Joel 2:21](#)) and "rejoice, O sons of Zion, and be glad in the Lord your God; for He has given you the early rain for your vindication" ([Joel 2:23](#)).