

## EXCURSUS - THE DATE OF THE BOOK OF JOEL

- I. The book of Joel can be dated either very early (before 800 B.C.) or very late (after 500 B.C.).
  - A. “Joel mentions neither Assyria, which emerged upon the prophetic horizon about 760, nor the Babylonian Empire, which had fallen by 537. The presumption is that he wrote before 760 or after 537.”<sup>1</sup>
  - B. Many historical allusions found in Joel can be argued for either date.
    1. Egypt is mentioned (3.19).
      - a. This can be a reference to Shishak’s invasion of Palestine (ca. 925 B.C.<sup>2</sup>) by those who favor a pre-exilic date (cf. 1 Kings 14.25f).
      - b. But the Egyptians also invaded Israel in the time of Josiah (ca. 600 B.C.).
    2. Edom is condemned (3.19).
      - a. The Edomites revolted during the reign of Jehoram (851-843).<sup>3</sup>
      - b. But the Edomites also are denounced by other Old Testament prophets for having taken part in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.
    3. Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia are described as having taken away Yahweh’s silver and gold (3.4-5).
      - a. In conjunction with the Arabians, the Philistines invaded Judah and plundered Jerusalem of her treasures in the ninth century (2 Chronicles 21.16ff.).<sup>4</sup>
      - b. Although the Phoenicians (inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon), as far as the Old Testament record indicates, took no part in the attack, their active slave trade was abhorred and condemned (Amos 1.9).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Vol. II (rev. ed.; New York, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), 370.

<sup>2</sup>K. A. Kitchen, “Shishak,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, edited by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 1181.

<sup>3</sup>G. W. Wade, *The Books of the Prophets: Micah, Obadiah, Joel and Jonah*, Westminster Commentaries, edited by Walter Lock (London, UK: Methuen, 1925), lxiv.

<sup>4</sup>A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Doctrine of the Prophets* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; London, UK: MacMillan, 1912), 62.

<sup>5</sup>Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lxiii.

- c. The Philistines were a constant source of injury to the Israelites to the fifth (Nehemiah 4.7) and second centuries B.C. (1 Maccabees 3.41).<sup>6</sup>
- d. Prophecies against both Tyre and Sidon also occur in Isaiah 23, Jeremiah 25.22, and Zechariah 9.2-4 (exilic and post-exilic works).
4. The faraway Greeks are the buyers of Hebrew slaves (3.6).
  - a. The Jews were acquainted with the Ionian Greeks in the pre-exilic period.
    - i. “They are found mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions as early as the eighth century B.C.”<sup>7</sup>
    - ii. The context of 3.6 indicates the Greeks as a distant people, a reference that seems incompatible with a post-exilic date when the Greeks were the masters of the entire Persian Empire.<sup>8</sup>
  - b. But “no other Hebrew document before the Exile speaks of Greece, and in particular Amos does not when describing the Phoenicians as slave traders.”<sup>9</sup>
5. The “Valley of Jehoshaphat” is alluded to (3.12).
  - a. Possibly Jehoshaphat’s great victory over the allied forces of Moab, Ammon, and Edom here (2 Chronicles 20.26) was still fresh in Joel’s mind, since it occurred only a quarter century earlier if the pre-exilic date is presumed.<sup>10</sup>
  - b. But this allusion only proves that Joel was written later than Jehoshaphat’s reign, and this has never been questioned.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., lxiv.

<sup>7</sup>Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Literature* (rev. ed.; Chicago, IL: Moody, 1974), 305.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, *Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Vol. II, 373.

<sup>10</sup>Kirkpatrick, *Doctrine of the Prophets*, 63.

<sup>11</sup>Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lxiv.

- C. Likewise, the social and religious conditions of the people of Joel's day imply either date.
  - 1. Temple worship is a matter of deep concern (1.9, 16), but nothing in the prophecy implies either the first or second temple.
  - 2. A public fast is called (1.14), but public fasting "was a religious practice amongst the Hebrews in both early and late times (1 Samuel 7.6; 1 Kings 21.9; Nehemiah 9.1).<sup>12</sup>
  - 3. The prophet's great attention to sacrifice and ritual demands neither date, especially since Joel 2.13 is free of any ritual.<sup>13</sup>
  - 4. The lack of denunciation of specific sins of the people points to either age.
  - 5. No connection with the Northern Kingdom can be found.
    - a. Although "Israel" is mentioned in 2.27 and 3.2, it is used as a synonym for Judah.
    - b. This omission fits either date—pre-exilic since Joel's primary concern is Judah and post-exilic since at that time the kingdom of the ten tribes was no longer in existence.
  - 6. The absence of any contemporary king or of princes is also a point of contention and inconclusive.
- II. A reasonable date is during the "minority of King Joash, during the regency of Jehoiada, the high priest, about 830 B.C."<sup>14</sup>
  - A. Joash, a minor of only seven years of age at this time (2 Kings 11.21), could not control governmental affairs. The priests ruled Judah, and this harmonizes with what Joel writes.
    - 1. This accounts for the priestly emphasis in Joel.
    - 2. This also accounts for the lack of any reference to a king, because the only time when the "absence of all reference to the king is intelligible is this comparatively short interval in the ninth century."<sup>15</sup>
  - B. This date accounts for the historical allusions previously mentioned.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., lxxv.

<sup>13</sup>George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1926), 41.

<sup>14</sup>Archer, *Survey of Old Testament Literature*, 304.

<sup>15</sup>Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lxxv.

- C. “The probability of the early date of Joel is still further confirmed by the consideration of the relation of Amos to Joel.”<sup>16</sup>
  - 1. But the critics argue about who copied who.
  - 2. Yet, the possibility of literary independence remains strong.
- D. Also, “the position of Joel in the series of the Minor Prophets raises a presumption in favor of an early date.”<sup>17</sup>
- III. But many scholars argue for a date later than 500 B.C.
  - A. “It is alleged that the language of 3.1ff., 17 is decisive for a date after the destruction of Jerusalem in B.C. 586.”<sup>18</sup>
    - 1. But 3.1 does not necessarily indicate restoration from exile (cf. Amos 9.14; Hosea 6.11).
    - 2. Neither is the deportation of 3.2 a total exile of the entire nation, but the verse can refer to the sale of Hebrew captives as slaves to remote and distant lands (3.6, 7).<sup>19</sup>
  - B. It is also alleged that Joel quotes from earlier prophets and that his style and vocabulary indicate a late period.<sup>20</sup> But Joel’s “syntax is distinctive of good Hebrew”<sup>21</sup> and indicative of an early rather than a late date.
  - C. The greatest problem with the post-exilic date seems to be its lack of specificity.
    - 1. “To what precise epoch of the post-exilic period the book should be assigned is a much disputed point.”<sup>22</sup>
    - 2. Smith, an advocate of the post-exilic position, affirms that Joel is difficult and impossible to date.<sup>23</sup>
    - 3. Those who adopt the later date “regard Joel as a kind of compendium of Jewish eschatology and the forerunner of later apocalyptic literature.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Kirkpatrick, *Doctrine of the Prophets*, 63.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>20</sup>Smith, *Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Vol. II, 376ff.

<sup>21</sup>Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lxx.

<sup>22</sup>Kirkpatrick, *Doctrine of the Prophets*, 67.

<sup>23</sup>Smith, *Book of the Twelve Prophets*, Vol. II, 379.

<sup>24</sup>Kirkpatrick, *Doctrine of the Prophets*, 67.