

EXCURSUS - INTERPRETATION OF JOEL'S LOCUST PLAGUE

- I. Some have supposed that the locusts of Joel 1.4 are not literal but allegorical.
- A. "The Targum at 2.25 paraphrased the list of four locust terms as 'peoples, languages, rulers, and kingdoms.'"¹
 - B. The margin of Codex Marchalianus (6th century A.D.) of the Septuagint more specifically interprets these types of locusts as "Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans."²
 - C. Also, the locusts are personified.
 - 1. They are as "a nation" (1.6).
 - 2. They are as "a people" (2.2).
 - 3. They are Yahweh's "army" (2.11, 15).
 - 4. They are charged with moral accountability (2.20).³
 - D. Other traits of Joel's locusts dismiss a literal interpretation.
 - 1. They are called "the northerner" (2.20), and "locust rarely come to Palestine from a northerly direction."⁴
 - 2. Joel 2.17 reflects a prayer for Israel's deliverance from heathen rule.
 - 3. The connection of locusts with "the day of the Lord" (2.1, 11) points to an invasion of Israel by hostile forces.⁵
 - 4. The extent of destruction by these locusts is much greater than that of real locusts.
- II. But arguments for a literal interpretation of the locust plague are more convincing.
- A. The prophet describes an actual calamity from which the land was suffering.⁶
 - 1. Joel appeals to the experience of the old men and their fathers (1.2).
 - 2. Joel charges his hearers to transfer the memory of this plague to future generations (1.3).

¹Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, general editor, R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 29.

²Ibid.

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

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., lv.

⁶A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Doctrine of the Prophets* (3rd ed.; London, UK: MacMillan, 1912), 53.

3. Joel describes the plague with detailed and graphic pictures.
 - a. “Joel’s language is not to be regarded as plain bare prose.”⁷
 - b. Joel uses poetical imagination and hyperbole, and his description of the locusts is intensified by two factors.
 - i. The locust plague was a divine visitation.
 - ii. The calamity was a prototype or a sign of the coming day of the Lord and its terrors.⁸
 - B. The mannerisms of the locusts as described by Joel accord perfectly with their natural tendencies.
 1. The damage which they inflict is wrought entirely on vegetation (1.10-12).⁹
 2. Their manner of entering the city by coming into houses through windows (2.9) depicts literal locusts rather than a victorious invader.
 - C. Further, the locusts are to be seen as literal by the fact that they are compared to an invading army (2.4-9). If the locusts allegorically represent an invading army, then Joel compares an army to itself.
 - D. Finally, the problems raised by 2.17 and 2.20 can be answered.
 1. The term “the northerner” (2.20) is vague at best and even if it does not refer to literal locusts that generally enter Palestine from the south or southeast, “it does not seem certain that they never came from the north.”¹⁰
 2. Joel 2.17 can be answered in one of two ways.
 - a. Either Joel attributes these human qualities to the insects, and such is not uncommon in Hebrew literature (cf. Job 39.7, 22; 40.23).¹¹
 - b. Or plausibly this passage has some present or future fulfillment.¹²
- III. The internal evidence seems to favor a literal interpretation for Joel’s locusts but cannot be claimed a certainty.

⁷Ibid., 54.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lv.

¹⁰Kirkpatrick, *Doctrine of the Prophets*, 54.

¹¹Wade, *Books of the Prophets*, lv.

¹²Carl Friedrich Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, translated by James Martin (reprint; Edinburgh, UK: T. & T. Clark, 1868), 172.