Notes on Joel

Joel—background:

•Joel son of Pethuel/a minor prophet

•One of the first writing prophets

•Date of composition is unknown but there is evidence in 2 Kings 11-12 and 2 Chronicles 22-24 that Joel lived during the reign of King Joash (835-796) B.C.E.

•Audience: Judah

•Place: Jerusalem

•Resonates with the book of Job insofar as the prophet “offers no reason for the deity’s action” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 1275). Although, a safe assumption can be made that the people have strayed from the Lord because the text states clearly, if the people “return to [the Lord]” (Joel 2.12).

•The calamitous events Joel speaks of may not be metaphorical, but, rather, literal: the devastation of the land caused by locust invasion, famine, drought, and fire provide a “channel for the sovereign speech of God, expressed through [Joel’s] own personal experience” (Warner, “Notes on the Prophets”).

Joel—Overview: a series of poems that describe calamitous events that hit the nation of Judah; the word of the Lord comes to Joel and he encourages the people to mourn, fast, and pray; the Lord restores the land; return of prophecy to the people; references to the “ultimate” day of the Lord: Armageddon; God as eschatological judge.

Genre:

•a series of staccato-like poetry using metaphors, similes, repetition, and poetic devices

• “woe” oracle and oracles of a “return to prophecy”

•Joel is an exhortative text; it urges change of behavior

•Contains the following poetic device/formulaic line: “The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem (Joel 3.16) This poetic device would have helped the speaker to remember the text (Warner “Notes on the Prophets”) It is “formulaic” because it is used, word for word, in the book of Amos (Amos 1.2)

Concepts and terms:

•apocalypse/Armageddon: “a usually vast decisive conflict or confrontation; the site or time of a final and conclusive battle between the forces of good and evil” (Merriam-Webster).

•“day of the Lord”: symbolizes God’s theophanic and judging presence. “day of the Lord” is also a phrase that occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 2:12, 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Amos 5:8, 20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:5.

•eschatological: “relating to death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind”; from the Greek for “last” and “study”; “the study of ‘end things,’ the end of the age, the end of the world or the nature of the Kingdom of God, or of an individual life.”

•exhortation: call for a ritual response, urging a change of behavior

•female agency

•“if-then”

•oracle: the mouthpiece of God or gods, the place where advice or prophecy is sought, a message delivered by an oracle (Merriam-Webster)

•restoration and hope always apart of the prophet’s message (The Bible and its Influence)

•ritual lament and petition

•theophany: a manifestation of God or a god to man (OED)

Themes/Motifs:

•covenant/bilateral covenant: a mutual agreement between two or more agencies to do or refrain from certain acts: “on the condition that…” “on a mutual stipulation that…”

•divine control of history paired with Divine graciousness

•God’s severe judgment

•ritual lament and petition to the Lord

The text:

Joel 1.1Superscription: “The word of the Lord came to Joel son of Pethuel” (Joel 1.1). No “call” narrative present in Joel and no reluctance on the part of Joel to be a spokesperson for God.

Audience: “elders” and “all the inhabitants in the land” (Joel 1.2) “drunkards” (Joel 1.5); “priests” and “ministers of the Lord” (Joel 1.9); and “farmers and vinedressers” (Joel 1.11).

Joel 1.2: Opens with a rhetorical question: “Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors?”

Joel 1.4, an example of repetition, a poetic device used to help the speaker remember the text (“Notes on the Prophets” Warner):

“What the cutting locust left /

the swarming locust has eaten /

What the swarming locust left /

the hopping locust has eaten /

and what the hopping locust left /

the destroying locust has eaten.”

Joel 1.7 and 1.10: Joel uses imagery of agriculture “It [the invading nation] has laid waste ( … ) vines, splintered fig trees”; “the fields are devastated ( … ) the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails” (Joel 1.7 and 1.10). The prophet uses depictions of agriculture, because it is the heart of Israel’s livelihood.

Joel 1.6: Cosmic symbolism. God is speaking: “For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness.” This implies that God is not the force behind the destruction; a concept similar to the one found in the book of Job; the calamity that befalls Job is the work of the adversary, not of God, although God allows it. In the case of Joel, there is no explicit reference as to why such calamity has befallen Joel and his nation.

Exhortation: An urging to change behavior: what inference can be made from what Joel urges the people to do in response to this calamity? He urges them to “Wake up,” (1.5); “Rend your hearts”(2.13); and “Return to the Lord” (2.12). From Joel’s commands, I conclude that the people have forgotten their covenant with the God.

Joel 1.8: calls for ritual lament and petition of the Lord, “Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth.” (this image hearkens back to Jephthah’s daughter)

Joel 1.11: “Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vinedressers.”

Joel 1.13: “Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar.”

Joel 1.14: In addition to ritual lament and mourning, the people are called to fast, for example, “Sanctify a fast.”

Lamenting, mourning and fasting are all ways to “cry out to the Lord” (Joel 1.14).

Moreover, binary oppositions of being sober/drunk and awake/asleep are used to describe the spiritual state of the people of Judah.

“If-then” concept and motif of bilateral covenant laid out in Deuteronomy 28.37-38: “You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you. You shall carry much seed into the field but shall gather little in, **for the locust shall consume it**”; and “I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper.” (Lev 26.19)

Joel’s message contains hope for the people of Judah. It seems the people listen to Joel and carry out what he says to do, for:

“**In response** to his people the Lord said:

‘I am sending you /

grain, wine, oil,

and you will be satisfied.’” (Joel 2.19)

“Alas for the day!” Joel 1.15 is an example of a “woe” oracle, for it begins with the word, “Alas” (Warner, “Notes on the Prophets”). The word “alas” is an interjection, used to express pity, unhappiness or concern (Merriam-Webster).

“For the day of the Lord is near!” (Joel 1.15) This phrase symbolizes “God’s theophanic and judging presence” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 1277). The “day of the Lord” is used to describe famine, fire, and drought that have ravaged the land (Joel 1.16-1.20). The day of the Lord is characterized as a “day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness” (Joel 2.2). Domestic animals “wander about because there is no pasture for them” and “wild animals cry to [the Lord].” The depiction of domestic as well as wild animals suffering sends a message that “all life” is affected by this calamity.

Chapter 2 characterizes an invading army, some have interpreted this as the imminent invasion of the Assyrian army but according to The New Oxford Annotated Bible, it is a development of imagery of the locust invasion that is mentioned in chapter 1. They use verse 7 to bolster their argument, for example, “Like warriors, they charge.” If this is truly an invading army of men, the text would not use the simile, “like warriors” to describe literal warriors. But, this simile works beautifully to describe locusts.

Use of metaphor: The prophet describes the locusts in the following way, “They have the appearance of horses, and like war-horses they charge” (Joel 2.4). This verse resonates with an image of locusts described in the book of Revelation, for example, “In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle” (Rev. 9.7).

Contrast is used in Joel 2.3, for example, it says, “Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness.”

More images of theophany: “the earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble.” Cosmic symbolism: Astral objects are darkened: “the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining” (Joel 2.10).

Chapter 2.12: urging a change of behavior, ritual lament and petition

“Yet even now, says the Lord /

return to me with all your heart /

with fasting, with weeping, and with /

mourning /

rend your hearts and not your clothing.”

The concept of “the state of one’s heart” echoes with the “hardening of pharaoh’s heart” in (Ex 8.32). It is also seen in Wisdom literature in the following hymn: “a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51.17).

images of hope and restoration (always a part of a prophet’s message):

“Who knows whether he [God] will not turn /

and relent /

and leave a blessing behind him” (Joel 2.14)

Also part of “restoration” is an oracle concerning a “return of prophecy,” i.e., “what had been limited to the house of David or the prophets is now available to all Israel” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible 1279).

Joel 2.28: an example of early apocalyptic/late prophetic text:

“‘I will pour out my spirit on all flesh /

your sons and daughters shall /

prophesy’”

Moreover, this is an example of female agency because the gift of prophecy is available to men as well as women.

Joel 2.31: Doomsday; Armageddon; the ultimate “day of the Lord;” eschatological battle; cosmic symbolism:

“‘I [God] will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.” The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.’”

Chapter 3: Doomsday/the ultimate “day of the Lord”

All nations called to account (Joel 3.2)

Eschatological tradition that God is judge: ‘I will enter into judgment’ (Joel 3.2).

Concept of social justice: the nations of Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia judged on charges of enslavement, “you have the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks” (Joel 3.4).

Joel 3.17-18: After “the day”: restoration and blessing and preternatural fertility “And Jerusalem shall be holy / and strangers shall never again pass through it;” (Joel 3.17)

“In that day /

the mountains shall drip sweet wine /

the hills shall flow with milk” (Joel 3.18)