

Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 18

Structure and Content of Joel

B. Content of Joel

1. Relationship of Joel 1 to Joel 2: Freeman

When you get to the content of Joel an important question you have to resolve is the question of the relationship between chapter 1 and chapter 2. In Hobart Freeman's, *Introduction to Old Testament Prophets*, he talks about various approaches to the book centering around the interpretation of the relationship of the first two chapters. He gives three views listed here as a. b. and c.

a. Apocalyptic Interpretation

a. is the one that he adopts and I think a view that seems to fit the book better than the other views. He labels it "the apocalyptic interpretation." What that view gives is an understanding of chapter 1 as being literal and chapter 2 as being figurative, if you boil it down. As I say here in the handout, such an approach takes chapter 1 as a literal description of an actual locust plague that had recently devastated the land. Then Joel uses that description for apocalyptic imagery in chapter 2 where he is describing a future invasion of Judah by her enemies in the latter days. So chapter 1 would be literal and chapter 2 would be a figurative extension using the imagery of the locusts to describe an eschatological event.

b. Allegorical Interpretation

The second view b. takes both chapters figuratively. Freeman calls that "an allegorical" as opposed to "an apocalyptic" view. It takes both chapters figuratively and sees in them descriptions of a series of enemy attacks in their future history. The four types of locusts mentioned in 1:4, where you read, "What the locust swarm have left, the great locusts have eaten, what the great locusts have left, the young locusts have eaten what the young locusts have left, the other locusts have eaten." That is viewed as four

invasions of Israel. The four types of locusts representing Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome. Chapter 2 is descriptive of the end times and the establishment of the millennial kingdom, but both chapters are figurative.

c. Literal View

A third view c. would take both chapters as literal and that would be the “literal view.” Both chapter 1 and chapter 2 describe severe locusts plagues. The one in chapter 2 is more severe than chapter 1 as it is the one that will usher in the Day of the Lord in a future time.

So I think those are helpful categories both figurative, both literal, or a combination of figurative and literal. The latter being in Freeman’s designation “apocalyptic,” both figurative is “allegorical” and both literal, he calls, “literal.” Ridderbos sees both as literal. Chapter 1 the devastation of the countryside, chapter 2 entrance of the plague into the city. But in chapter 2 he feels there is a fusion of the locust plague and the Day of the LORD so that some of the references point beyond present disaster to a great future judgment. In other words, Ridderbos’ view would be sort of midway between the Freeman’s apocalyptic and literal view.

2. Bullock’s Approach

Look at the next page in your handout. You’ve already read Bullock on this. I mentioned there that Bullock categorizes methods of interpreting Joel differently. He gives three answers to the question of whether the locusts in 1:1-2:17 are to be viewed as historical. We’re going to come back to that way of dividing the book 1:1-2:17. He really takes 1:1-2:17 as a unit. He doesn’t take a break between chapter 1 and 2. He places the break in the middle of chapter 2. But he gives three answers to the question of whether the locusts are to be used in a literal way or not. 1. is the historical literal to describe the locust plague that occurred in Joel’s lifetime. 2. is allegorical—the locusts are an allegory of invading armies against Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The third is “apocalyptic.” He uses apocalyptic differently than Freeman does. In Bullock’s view

apocalyptic categories he says it is eschatological—not terrestrial invaders but extra-terrestrial invaders who usher in the Day of the LORD. I don't know where he gets that view. He says it's not widely held and he doesn't document who holds that view. I'm not sure who holds that view. He cites no one who advocates it. Just so you don't confuse these labels of Bullock and Freeman. I think Freeman's categories are more helpful than Bullock's. So that's one question before you really get to looking at the text. How do you see the relationship between chapter 1 and chapter 2?

3. Structure of Joel and the Day of the Lord

There is a second question that is also important as a preliminary consideration and that is the chronological sequence in the flow of the material through the book. What are the temporal relationships of the events in the various sections of the book? Obscurity on this point is one of the factors that complicates understanding the structure of the book and in turn may affect one's interpretation of the book. Many interpreters, including Bullock, divide the book at 2:17 producing two major sections, 1:1-2:17 and 2:18 to the end, 3:21. The first part of the book is seen as a lamentation over locust plagues and divine judgment. The second part of the book is seen as descriptive of a change of fortune to future blessing that has resulted from repentance. Bullock and some others who understand this structure of the book, see a major dividing point between 2:17 and 2:18. The second part of the book is a change in fortune and future blessing as a result of an assumed repentance between 2:17 and 2:18. In my view, framing the structure of the book in this way obscures the relationship between three distinct units in the book.

Let me give you an alternative suggestion to what Bullock is suggesting as far as structure. It is my view that in analyzing the structure of the book it is important to notice that 2:10 and 11 and 2:31 and 3:15 give a similar sign for the Day of the Lord that is referred to in 2:1 as coming. Now let's look at those three texts. 2:10 and 11 says, "Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it

is dreadful. Who can endure it?” You have a reference here to the Day of the LORD. In connection with the coming of the Day of the LORD, you have these cosmic signs: the sun and moon are darkened and the stars no longer shine, the day of the LORD is great. That’s 2:10 and 11.

Look at 2:31, “ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” The day of the LORD comes with cosmic signs in 2:31. Joel 3:14b says, “For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem.” Once again the Day of the LORD is accompanied by the sun and moon being darkened. So in those three references scattered through the book of Joel, it seems like you have a reference to the same Day of the LORD. It’s the same words.

Now it seems to me that suggests that the Day of the LORD referred to in those three places is to be understood as the same day historically. If this is true that means there are three parallel accounts of this “day” in three different sections of the book. These three accounts of the coming Day of the LORD may be viewed as complementary to each other, emphasizing three different aspects of the same subject. It seems to me that is at the heart of the question: how is the book structured?

3. Vannoy’s Structure of Joel

a. Joel 1:1-20 Locust Plague

Look then at 3 on your outline there. The book divides into two sections and that division is not at 2:17 and 18, but it divides into two sections Roman numeral I, is chapter 1:1-20a—description of a contemporary locust plague. I take that as a literal locust plague that happened during the time of Joel’s ministry, and he interprets that as a judgment from the Lord and issues a call to repentance.

The second section of the book begins at 2:1 and goes to the end. What you find in the second section of the book is three descriptions of the coming Day of the LORD

and these three descriptions complement each other. They address different aspects of coming of the Day of the LORD.

b. Joel 2:1-27: Day of Lord using Locus Imagery

You have three, as it were, parallel descriptions of the Day of the LORD. In 2:1-27 the day of the LORD is described in the imagery of the present locusts and drought. In other words, Joel picks up the language of chapter 1 in which he has described a literal locust plague and uses that to speak of the eschatological Day of the LORD.

c. Joel 2:28-31 Holy Spirit and the Day of the Lord

In 2:28-32 which if you look in your Hebrew Bible you will find is a separate chapter. In the Masoretic Text it is chapter 3. In other words, in the Hebrew 2:28-32 is distinctly set apart from the earlier part 2:1-27. In 2:28-32 you have the promise of coming of the Holy Spirit which will precede the Day of the LORD. That's that well known passage quoted in the book of Acts 2, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" and that pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh is to precede the Day of the Lord. So here is a second description of the coming of the Day of the LORD that focuses on a different aspect of it.

d. Joel 3:1-21 Judgment on the Nations and Salvation of God's People: Day of Lord

Then a third description of the coming of the Day of the LORD is 3:1-21. In the Masoretic text it is also a separate chapter, it is chapter 4, which speaks of the judgment on the nations and the salvation of God's people in connection to the coming of the Day of the LORD.

e. Summary of Structure of Joel

So it seems to me in book of Joel structurally, you have chapter one: description of the locust plague. Then chapter 2 to the end is three parallel descriptions of the coming of the Day of the LORD. You arrive at that conclusion because of the language of 2:10 and

11, 2:31 and 3:15 all describing the coming of the Day of the LORD in the same language. We'll come back to structure when we get into content and look at 2:17 and 18 with those who want to divide the book into two sections at 2:17 and 18 which obscures this idea of three parallel descriptions of the coming Day of the LORD.

4. Comments on Content:

a. Joel 1:1-20 Description of Present Locust Plague

Four is some comments on content. a. is 1:1-20. That is Roman numeral I in the outline, "Description of the present Locust plague." What you find in chapter 1 is a description of a locust plague in the time of Joel but not just a locust plague. The locust plague was combined with drought and fire. Look at verse 12, "The vine is dried up and the fig tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree—all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away." Look at verse 20, "Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the open pastures." Verse 19 also says, "Fire has devoured the open pasture, flames have burned up all the trees of the field." So the description of this judgment is a combination of locust plague, yes, but also drought and fire. Fire often accompanies drought. You need to live in California to experience this. But it seems to me in 1:1-20 Joel is describing a real locust plague and drought, contrary to some who see merely symbolism and allegory. He interprets this as the judgment of God and as such it is a call to repentance and in that perspective it is a manifestation of the Day of the LORD. In verse 15, "Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near." The NIV says, "It will come like destruction from the Almighty." That can be translated in the present instead of the future. "It comes like destruction from the Almighty." This locust plague is a manifestation of the day.

It's that perspective that this judgment is a manifestation of the Day of the LORD that enables Joel to move from the present situation to the eschatological principle. God will come in judgment on all who do not repent and call on the name of the LORD. So it seems to me that is what is going on in the first chapter.

Four Terms for Locusts

Let's look at a few of the verses. Verse 4 is that verse that mentions four different kinds of locusts, "What the locust swarm has left, the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left, the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left, other locusts have eaten." Four different Hebrew words for locusts. What do you do with that? Some have suggested the reference is to stages in the locusts life. The problem with that is in 2:25 you have the same four terms used but they are used in a different order. In 2:25, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten—the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm—my great army that I sent among you." If it's stages of growth you would think the order would be the same. So I'm not inclined to think it is stages of growth.

The interesting thing is there are nine words in Hebrew for locusts. Hebrew has a rich vocabulary for locusts. English as far as I know only has one word. There's no equivalent in English for these distinctions in these Hebrew words. And exactly what the distinction is, I'm not sure. But I don't see in the four words here any basis for the allegorical view of seeing Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome or Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome.

Description of Devastation

Now let's look at verses 5, 9 and 13. Verse 5 says, "Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips." Verse 9, "Grain offerings and drink offerings are cut off from the house of the LORD." Verse 13, "Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God." Verses 5, 9, and 13 tell us the plague was so destructive there was not sufficient vegetation left for the meal and drink offerings of the temple. There was no new wine, the land was desolate.

In the December 1915 issue of the National Geographic there is a description of a

similar sort of locust plague that hit Palestine. There is an eyewitness description of what the writer of that article observed in the devastation of a locust plague in 1915. I won't read through it but the parallels are interesting. The amount of destruction of those swarms of locusts can cause to vegetation is amazing. So I think Joel's describing that sort of a plague.

Call to Repentance

In verses 13 and 14, in light of that judgment, Joel calls on the people to repent and cry out to God. Verse 13, "Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD." He calls for prayer and fasting, a return to the LORD. He understands that this disaster is an act of God. God acts in Israel's history not only in blessing but also in judgment. Here was the actualization of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28:38 and 42. Go back to Deuteronomy 28:38, "You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it." That's one of the covenant curses. When you turn away from the LORD you can expect certain things to happen. Verse 42, "Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land." So Joel is the realization of that covenant curse.

The interesting thing in Joel—go back to chapter 1 verse 3, "Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation." In other words, these mighty acts of God are not only acts of deliverance and salvation, such as at the time of the Exodus Passover when Israel was to remember that and tell children down through the generations. Here you are to remember the judgment of God and tell it to your children down through the generations.

Verse 15, which I already made a comment on, says, "Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty." Joel sees the

Day of the LORD as near. It seems he sees the Day of the LORD of consisting in a contemporary locust plague or perhaps a harbinger of its coming. Viewed in this way it is a provisional divine judgment that is intended to point forward to the great day that is to come. So, it seems to me that is what is going on in chapter one.

Joel 2:1-3:21 3 Descriptions of the Day of the LORD

We move to the second section of the book, which is 2:1 to 3:21, in which you have these three parallel descriptions of the coming of the Day of the LORD—the eschatological Day of the LORD as contrasted to this provisional divine judgment in chapter 1.

Joel 2:1-27 Day of the Lord using Locust Imagery

And the first of those three descriptions is in 2:1-27, which is the bulk of chapter 2 with the exception of verses 28-32, which as I already mentioned is a separate chapter in the Hebrew Bible. So Joel 2:1-27 the Day of the LORD described in the imagery of the present locust plague of chapter 1. That's that question of the relationship of chapter 1 and chapter 2 which fits with the apocalyptic interpretation where you move from literal to figurative or symbolic language in chapter 2.

Verses 1-11. In chapter 1 the locust plague imagery is described as something that has already occurred. In chapter 2 the description is of something in process. The perfect tenses of the verbs in chapter 1 are replaced for the most part, especially in 2:3-9 by imperfects in chapter 2. Chapter 2 thus speaks of something that either will happen or is in the process of happening. There is a change of the tense of the verbs. In chapter 2 the locusts seem to have become eschatological symbols representing human invaders.

Freeman examines the expression “the invader from the north” in verse 20 in connection with this. In 2:20 you read, “I will drive the northern army far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land, with its front columns going into the eastern sea and those in the rear into the western sea. And its stench will go up; its smell will

rise.” Freeman’s comments, “The ‘north’ is a technical term in the Old Testament which often appears in passages of an apocalyptic nature and in such contexts is always symbol of the enemies of Israel. In this connection it is also used to indicate the direction from which calamity and misfortunes come upon Palestine. Assyria and Babylon came out of the north against the Hebrew nation and appear in Scripture not only as contemporary enemies of Israel, but also typical of her end times foe who was to come out of the north, that is, the eschatological ‘northerner.’” And there are a number of references there. That eschatological northerner is mentioned in Zechariah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zephaniah. I won’t take the time to look up all those references.

Northern Enemy

I’ve included a paragraph from Allen’s NICOT commentary on page 37 of your citations because I think he makes an interesting analogy between this language and another well-known piece of literature. He says, “The locusts are referred to collectively as ‘the northerner.’ The insects usually attack Judah from the south or southeast, borne by the prevailing wind, but cases are known of approach from the north. The plague that hit Jerusalem in 1915,” that’s the one that was in National Geographic, “came from the northeast. Presumably in Joel’s time the onset came from the north; the ensuing references to geographical features in the other three directions support this inference. But as in 2:1-11 the locusts were seen through psychic spectacles, so here the present term has a numinous dimension superimposed upon the natural. Earlier prophets had given dreaded descriptions of the ‘enemy from the north.’” Now Allen, who dates Joel late, so he’s saying those other prophets, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah that spoke of this northern enemy earlier. “The earlier prophets had given dread description of the ‘enemy from the north.’ The phrase has something of the flavor of Tolkien’s grim hosts of Mordor. In Ezekiel 38:15; 39:2 the apocalyptic hordes of Gog come from the farthest north to destroy Judah, only to be smashed by Yahweh’s counterattack.” Now it seems to me, Joel is talking about the same thing as Ezekiel 38-39. “Even before Ezekiel’s time, Jeremiah had made the theme his own, using it repeatedly to describe the uncanny forces

of evil that Yahweh would employ as his agents to punish a sinful Judah.” I won’t read the next paragraph. But you get the reference to this northern army that the Lord will drive away in verse 20.

Judgment of God in Locust Imagery

I haven’t read the earlier part of the chapter. Let me read a few verses of it to get the flavor of the text. Let’s look at the first seven verses of chapter 2, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste—nothing escapes them.”

So, this is the imagery of the locusts. “They have the appearance of horses, they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other.” Then verse 9, “They rush upon the city.” So there’s this picture of this devastation this judgment of God in the imagery of locusts coming on the land.

Joel 2:12-17 Call to Repentance

Verses 12-17 is a call to repentance. Verse 12 says, “‘Even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.’ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare

a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly, bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, “Where is their God?”’” So there is a very strongly worded call to repentance, “rend your hearts not your garments.”

Joel 2:18-27 The Lord’s Response

Verses 18-27 describe the response of the LORD. There is a translation issue in verse 18. You notice in your handout I’ve given the translations of five English language versions. The King James says, “The LORD will be jealous,” it’s future. The New Scofield, “Then the LORD was jealous,” past. The NIV, “The LORD will be jealous,” future. The New American Standard, “Then the LORD will be jealous.” New Revised Standard Version, “Then the LORD became jealous,” that’s past. Now the question here, is verse 18 telling you about something that will happen or something that had already happened. I might add to those translations. The English Standard Version “it came” just like the NRSV. The New Living is future “Then the LORD will pity his people and jealousy guard of his land.” So 18 and following “The LORD’s response.”

Many think this is not a prophecy but an account of what happened. If you understand it that way you translate it as past. The verbs are translated in the sense of a completed action. In such cases a pause is assumed between verses 17 and 18 in which one supposes that the day of repentance that Joel called for was held. Because 17 was a call for repentance, the assumption is that offer of repentance was something that was observed, and then in 18 and following you have the LORD’s response. It’s a description of a change in the LORD’s relationship to his people as a result of the already-manifested repentance. This then becomes the major dividing point in the entire book, as interpreted by Bullock and others.

The problem with this, in my view, is there is no mention of the presumably held

day of repentance. It's called for but there is no description of it having actually taken place. And much of what is contained in the remainder of the passage is difficult to interpret as having already occurred, even if the chapter refers only to a contemporary locust plague. What I mean by that is, look at verse 19 in the aftermath in the LORD's response. The LORD says in verse 19, "I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations." The NIV says, "Never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations." Verse 20 says, "I will drive the northern army from you, and remove the invader from the north." Verse 25 says, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten." But most importantly look at verse 26b and 27a. 26b says, "Never again will my people be shamed. And 27b says the same thing, "Never again will my people be shamed." If one understands Joel to be describing a locust plague and a call for repentance which was observed between verses 17, and 18 and then 18 is the response of the LORD and you translate that in a past tense, "The LORD was jealous for his land, he took deep pity on his people," how can you in the remaining flow of that response make the statement "never again will my people be shamed"? After the time of Joel Israel was shamed repeatedly.

Joel 2:18 and the Prophetic Perfect

So that brings us back to the translation issue in verse 18. If you look at the Hebrew text there is a *waw* consecutive with the imperfect. "And the LORD" you would normally translate that "was jealous for his land." That *waw* consecutive throws the imperfect tense into completed action normally. And the second phrase "and pity his people" uses the same form, a *waw* consecutive with the imperfect. However, you look in this discussion at Ridderbos, for example, as well as others, argues the form that is the *waw* consecutive with the imperfect does not exclude the possibility of translating the verbs as future. "But then the LORD will be jealous for his land." That's the way the NIV translates it. If you look up in the grammars, Jouon in *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, which is considered one of the best Hebrew Grammars, paragraph 112h in his discussion of the 'prophetic perfect' says, "This notion of prophetic perfect is extended

by Ibn Ezra,” an early Jewish scholar, “even to cases of *wayyiqtol* as in Joel 2:18, see his commentary.” In other words, the argument is you have a prophetic perfect for completed action of the perfect tense can be considered future as far as its idea is concerned. That is equally true of the *waw* consecutive with the imperfect which really creates the same concept. So here you get into an interpretive issue that is not determined strictly by or only by the form of the Hebrew verb. As for the prophetic perfect you have to look at context and make a judgment. Now we’ve look at that with Obadiah, “I will make you small among the nations,” talking about Edom. Is that talking about the future or is it “I have made you small”? You have to wrestle with that in the context. The verbal form will allow you to go either way.

You can take an imperfect with the *waw* consecutive as a prophetic perfect. I think that is probably the best thing to do with it. If you do that then verses 17 and 18 don’t become a major dividing point in the book of Joel. Then chapter 2 is following on from verse 1 through verse 27.

We’ll stop here and pick this up next time and spend a little more time in Joel, particularly on Joel 2:28-32, where you have the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh and the quotation in Acts. Then we’ll start our discussion of Jonah.

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