

Joel: an Ecological Crisis and the power of the Spirit for all flesh

Joel prophesied in Jerusalem, around 400 B.C., after the Exile (587-539), the reconstruction of the Temple (520-15 B.C.) and the walls (ca. 444 under Nehemiah 2:7).¹ If we accept a much earlier date (between 500-444), we would have to understand the reference to Jerusalem's "walls" (2:7) simply as a part of the metaphor of the locusts that invade like soldiers.

The book begins with a vivid description of a plague of locusts (1:2-9), accompanied by a drought (1:10-12, 19-20; cf. the locusts in Ex 10:1-20 and Rev 9:1-11). The prophet then describes the locusts metaphorically, as a great army that invades Jerusalem – an army of Yahweh that attacks his own nation, land and holy city (2:11, 25; cf. 2:20)! Joel never denounced any sin which might have provoked so much punishment to his nation, which leaves commentators perplexed. However, he urgently calls to the entire nation to meet for a solemn assembly in the Jerusalem Temple (2:12-17) and exhorts them to seek Yahweh ("return to" – not necessarily "repent" of any sin). The fact that the book supposes that all the people of Jerusalem and Judah could come together in the Temple indicates how reduced the population was.

Although certain prophets of the VIII-VII centuries had strongly criticized the cult and the priests (see Isaiah 1; Amos 5:21-24; Jeremiah 7), Joel has nothing against the religious leaders and even suggests that the liturgical Assembly in the Temple could be effective in transforming the situation and bringing blessings (2:14, "who knows whether...?"). In fact, after the Assembly, Yahweh shows compassion and promises to "compensate" for the years in which "this great army of locusts which I sent against you" devoured everything.

In an undefined future ("afterward"), God promises to pour out his spirit on all flesh (2:28-32). He also promises to judge the gentile oppressor nations (4:1-16) and liberate the oppressed Jews (4:1, 17-21). However, in the case of gentile oppressors, Joel specifically denounces their sins. He presents God's judgment against the oppressors of his nation under the image of the "Day of Yahweh" → Amos 5:18-20). Joel presents Yahweh as the Creator and Lord of history and interprets the plague of locusts as a part of creation (not of "nature" – a philosophical concept foreign to the Hebrew Bible). Yahweh sends out and then disperses the locust plague, without any causal explanation. Other biblical texts speak of God as the author only of good, not of evil, and attribute evil to demons (especially the Synoptic Gospels) or to Satan (Job; John). Joel had studied the previous prophets and in 22 verses uses 28 of their texts². See his rhetoric in 3:10, where he calls to the nations with irony: "Beat you ploughshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears," thus deconstructing the metaphors in earlier peace oracles (Micah 4:3 // Isaiah 2:4).

1 The Poor. David Pleins points out that the *diversity* of teachings in the Bible concerning the poor is reflected especially in the prophets: "Notably, the classic categories of the poor are entirely absent from Joel's vision. No reference is made to the alien, widow, orphan, or the poor as such. The writer is attempting to latch onto and shore up a political program that has not set the poor at the center of its agenda."³ However, although he supports priestly aims, Joel appears to have prophesied from a marginal social location (see Second Isaiah).⁴ The prophet denounces the violence and oppression against Judah by the gentile powers: Tyre, Sidon (Phoenician cities)

and Philistia (3:2-4). Joel also denounces Egypt and Edom for the “violent oppression” of “spilling innocent blood” in the war against Judah:

“Egypt will become a desolation
and Edom a desolate wilderness,
because of the violence (*chamas*) done to the people of Judah
in whose land they have shed innocent blood” (3:19).

As Jacques Pons points out⁵, “violence” in Hebrew refers above all to “the spilling of innocent blood” and is the maximum expression of injustice and oppression. When someone spills blood to defend the oppressed (see Moses in Ex 2) this is an expression of power, but the Bible never refers to such an action as “violence”⁶. Therefore, though Joel does not speak explicitly of the “poor,” he denounces foreign oppression of the weak and violence against the innocents of Judah. Moreover, in his prophesy about the Spirit Joel shows how God empowers the weak and marginalized classes:

“Then afterward
I will pour out my spirit on *all flesh*:
Your sons and your *daughters* shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And your young men shall see visions,
Even on the *male and female slaves*,
In those days, I will pour out my spirit.

I will show portents in the heavens,
And on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke.
The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon to blood,
Before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.

Then everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh
shall be saved;
For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
There shall be those who escape,
As Yahweh has said,
And among the survivors shall be those whom Yahweh calls.

This text from Joel refers only to “all flesh” of the Jews of Jerusalem and Judah, gathered in the Temple for worship; however, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter includes the Jews of the Diaspora present in Jerusalem for the feast of the Pentecost⁷ (Acts 2:17-21). Thus we witness the fulfillment of Moses’ desire that all Israelites become prophets (Num 11:29). Paul then extends that promise to include the gentiles who invoke the name of God the Liberator (Rom 10:13; cf Gen 4:26). By applying to Jesus such texts from the Hebrew Bible that speak of Yahweh, Peter and Paul affirm a continuity between Israel and the Church, and between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, thus avoiding anti-Semitism. Since in the Hebrew Bible, “all flesh” could include animals (Gen 1, 6-9), theologians who demand justice for animals dispute the traditional anthropocentric interpretation and insist that we must apply the text also to

animals (see Gen 1:24-25, 29-31; 9:8; Psalms 36:6; Prov 31:8).⁸ If we accept Joel's promise as applicable to animals, we may better understand the transformation of carnivorous animals (vegetarian lions in Isaiah 11:6-9) and Paul's hope of the redemption of the Cosmos (Rom 8).

The Spirit's Mission. Meeting in Canberra, Australia in 1991, the World Council of Churches (WCC) took as its theme "Come Holy Spirit – Renew All of Creation," with special focus on feminism, ecology and indigenous spirituality (and with special reference to *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, by German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, London: SCM, 1992). In the conflictive historical context of that first war against Iraq, the Council could reach no consensus concerning several controversial subjects such as the "discernment of spirits" (1 Cor. 12.10), but affirmed the importance of respecting the Spirit's sovereign freedom (John 3.8) and of listening to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized groups, both within and without the church⁹.

2. Women. Beth Glazier-McDonald^{9b} points out that Joel includes women in his calls to liturgical assembly in the Temple:

Gather the people,
 Sanctify the congregation;
Assemble the aged
 Gather the children,
 Even the infants at the breast
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 And the bride her canopy (2.16; see also 1.14).

Newlyweds must interrupt their honeymoon in order to respond to the urgent call to the assembly to seek God—the kind of interruption that should never happen with newlyweds, even due to war (Deut. 24.5). Moreover, since women are included in the invitation to the liturgical assembly, they are also included in the promise to be prophets ("your daughters...female slaves") when God pours out his vital force over all flesh (for women as prophets in the Hebrew Bible, see Miriam, Ex. 15.20; Isaiah's woman, Isa. 8.3; Huldah, 2 Kings 22.14-20). Although Joel also speaks (metaphorically) about the married or engaged couple, the woman remains a widow (1.8). Thus, almost all the women Joel mentions are also examples of the poor and sexual minorities: unmarried daughters, female slaves, prostitutes, the metaphor of the virgin widow (see under **1. The Poor** and **3. Sexual Minorities**).

3. Sexual Minorities. Although it was common for the priests to marry, only three of the canonical prophets indicate that they were married: Isaiah had sons with a prophetess who were as signs of his message (8.3-4, 18); Ezekiel refers to the death of his spouse in the moment of the fall of Jerusalem (24.15-18); and Hosea says that God commanded him to marry a prostitute (Hos 1.2-3). → Jeremiah indicates that God explicitly prohibited him from marrying (Jer 16.1-4), that he had his scribe, Baruch as his most intimate companion (Jer 45) and was rescued from a well by a friendly black eunuch, Ebedmelech (Jer. 38.7-13; 39.15-18). As David Pleins points out, in general, the prophets seem a great deal like the shamanic figures of other cultures, spiritual leaders that were usually unmarried and many times lived with another man.¹⁰ In the Deuteronomistic history, the itinerant prophets, Elijah (1 Kings 17-19, 21; 2 Kings 1-2) and Elisha

(2 Kings 2-9), with their prophetic fraternity, did not have wives. Elijah chose Elisha as his colleague/successor (1 Kings 19), and Elisha had Gehazi as his servant (2 Kings 5.20-27). Joel, like the other “minor” prophets (except Hosea), appears to exemplify this type of shaman, a sexual minority, unmarried. And thus as Jesus awaited the day when everyone would be “like the angels” (without spouses, Mark 12.25), Joel awaited the day when all flesh would be prophets, like himself (3.1-5).

According to many translations, in 1.8 Joel speaks also of “virgins” (*betulah*), young widows, as an example of sorrow:

Lament [my people], like a virgin dressed in sackcloth
For the husband of her youth.

The Hebrew word *betulah* means a young woman, sexually mature, but not necessarily virgin (see Isa 7.14 and Matthew 1.23). Joel appears to call the whole population of Jerusalem to grieve, utilizing the figure of the young woman (virgin?), whose fiancée/husband had died before the consummation of the marriage (see Deut. 22.24; 20.7)¹¹. In this way the bachelor prophet hopes that all people will attain solidarity with the prophets and the virgin widows as a manifestation of repentance. Crenshaw considers possible but not probable the interpretation of the text as a reference to the goddess Anat grieving for her brother Baal¹².

In addition, Joel denounces the men of the gentile nations for their oppression and violence during the conquest of Judah, when they treated the people like merchandise, selling boys as slaves in order to pay for a prostitute, and the young girls to buy wine to get drunk:

“And cast lots for my people,
and traded boys for prostitutes,
and sold girls for wine, and drank it down” (3.3; see 1.5).

Joel does not denounce the prostitutes themselves, but the gentile males who sold Jewish boys as slaves to be able to pay for a prostitute (like Paul in Cor. 6.12-20). Crenshaw points out that the Hebrew syntax could indicate that the boys were sold explicitly for sexual use.¹ At any rate, young boy and girl slaves commonly suffered sexual abuse also. In the same way, 1 Timothy links the “slave traders” with men that sexually abuse youths, slaves and prostitutes (“male prostitutes/sodomites”, *arsenokoitai*; → 1 Tim. 1.10; cf. 1 Cor. 6.9).

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- ¹ Crenshaw in NISB 1271; cf 1995:23; Hans Walter Wolff, “between 400-350”, 1977:4-6; also JSB 1166.
- ² Joel cites the previous prophets in: 1.15; 2.2, 3b, 6, 13, 14, 17, 21, 27, 28, 31, 32; 3.1, 2, 4, 8, 10^a, 16, 17, 18 (Crenshaw 1995:26-28; see notes in JB, HCSB, NISB and JSB).
- ³ J. David Pleins 2000:368
- ⁴ Pleins 2001:368; Crenshaw 1995:40n.63, 146; Paul L. Redditt 1986; Theodore Hiebert 1992:878
- ⁵ Jacques Pons 1981:27-52
- ⁶ Hanks 1982/83; 2000
- ⁷ Crenshaw 1995: vii, 163-172
- ⁸ Andrew Linzey 1994; 1998:38
- ⁹ Kirsteen Kim 2000?: 172-179
- 9b 1992/98:204.**
- ¹⁰ Stephen Murray 2000:65, 170-171, 216-217, 236-238, 314-355, 349, 420
- ¹¹ Crenshaw 1995:97
- ¹² 1995:98; cp. Marie-Theres Wacker 1998:317-318
- ¹³ 1995:176-177

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