

# THE CONCEPT OF PROPHETIC TIME IN THE BOOK OF JOEL

HAROLD HOSCH, M.A.\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most important Biblical books for our day, and yet one of the shortest of the Minor Prophets, is the book of Joel. With the emphasis on charismatic renewal on the one hand and eschatological expectation on the other, this work stands out as markedly significant.

But as its importance is recognized one also becomes aware of the variations of interpretation surrounding the book. Among conservative scholars it is generally agreed that chapters three and four (according to the Hebrew text) may be understood in an eschatological sense, although there is little harmony concerning the details. The first part of the book, however, suffers under considerable diversity of opinion. Chapter one has been treated as an allegory on the one hand, and as an historical event on the other. Modern scholarship generally agrees on the historical interpretation. The northern invaders of chapter two have proven to be a more perplexing problem.

Certain of the critical scholars have only added to the confusions of interpretation. Duhm and Bewer have argued for apocalyptic interpolations in chapters one and two and an editorial addition of most of chapters three and four.<sup>1</sup> Arvid Kapelrud favors the unity of the book yet without agreeing to its authorship by Joel: "Thus we do not denote Joel as the author of the Book of Joel. It is more correct to say that he was the originator of the sayings."<sup>2</sup>

It is this writer's contention, however, that Joel is indeed the author of this book and that, though the identity of the invaders of chapter two remain somewhat uncertain, there are indicators of time in this prophecy which help to place the events in their proper time period.

\*M.A., Wheaton Graduate School, presently teaching at The Association of Free Lutheran Schools, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

1. Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Obadiah and Joel in The International Critical Commentary*, p. 56. Bewer indicates the interpolations in Joel in the following manner: "(1) that Joel wrote chs. 1, 2 (except 1<sup>15</sup> 2<sup>1b-2.6</sup> 10-11.27) and also 3<sup>1-4a</sup> 4<sup>2a</sup> 9-14a; (2) that an editor wrote the remainder, connecting chs. 1, 2 with chs. 3, 4 by a series of interpolations which are characterized, as all his work is, by dependence on other prophecies; and (3) that 4<sup>4-8</sup> are a still later insertion."
2. Arvid Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, p. 176.

## II. THE THREE VIEWS OF TIME IN JOEL

There are three interpretations of time held in conjunction with the interpretation of Joel. They center around ones view of the locusts, whether they are to be literally or allegorically understood. But there are other indicators of time outside of ones view of the locusts themselves.

According to Hengstenberg, Pusey, Young and others Joel involves a single unit of time pointing to the future. Thus they interpret the locusts in an allegorical fashion. The four types of locusts may refer to Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Greek invasions, or to Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman invasions, or they may express Israel's enemies generally. Thus Pusey says: "The prophecy of Joel is altogether one. It extends from his own day to the end of time."<sup>3</sup> According to Pusey the key to understanding Joel 1:4 centers around its interpretation as a proverbial saying futuristic in intent. In his consideration of the same passage Hengstenberg says: "It is there, at the very threshold, intimated, that the heathenish invasion will be a four-fold one—that Israel shall become the prey of four successive extensive empires."<sup>4</sup> Young calls chapters one and two complete prophecies and says: "thus, they fit in well with the latter half of the book."<sup>5</sup>

In Keil, Driver, G. L. Robinson, W. Neil and other scholars a division of time into past and future (eschatology) is favored. According to these the book is divided equally at chapter two, verse seventeen, the first section being devoted to the subject of real locusts and the last section being eschatological in emphasis. Thus Robinson says in relation to the first section:

But by far the best interpretation is the historical or literal; according to which these prophecies, like those of most other prophetic books, spring out of the circumstances of the prophets own time.<sup>6</sup>

The late Derward Deere, in his work *The Twelve Speak*, also favors this position.<sup>7</sup> In this group, however, there are some who suggest that the locusts of chapter two point to the coming of a military invasion, perhaps in the eschatological time; or as Calvin, involving a time in Joel's relatively near future, such as the Assyrian invasion.<sup>8</sup>

The final view of time held by some, including the present writer, is that of a threefold division of time involving past, future (near future),

Furthermore, it is manifestly improbable that the prophet would describe an army of real soldiers as "like soldiers," or speak of real

3. E. B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 146.

4. E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, I, p. 298.

5. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 248.

6. George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, p. 36.

7. Derward Deere, *The Twelve Speak*, I, p. 55.

8. John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Prophet Joel*, p. 37.

and eschatological. Thus the position that some hold in the second view merges or blends into this final view. For example, Robinson says:

horsemen "as horsemen" (2:4-9). Hence, we may conclude that he must be speaking of real warriors under the figure of real locusts.<sup>9</sup>

Freeman, in his work *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, makes a sharper distinction in time than does Robinson. He says this: "However, chapter 2 is held to be symbolic of a literal, future invasion by the enemies of Judah."<sup>10</sup> It must be understood, however, that Freeman interprets chapters two, verses three through eleven, as Armageddon, thus giving it an eschatological emphasis. To the present writer this seems to carry the interpretation of chapter two one step further in time than is necessary.

### III. AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF TIME IN JOEL

#### A. *The Element of Time in Respect to the Northerner*

It is possible to analyze the aspect of time in chapter two from several verses, but let us begin with verse twenty and the reference to the "northerner." The relevant part of the verse reads: "And the northerner I will remove far from you." Just what is meant by the word "northerner"?

In the view of those who consider the book of Joel to be a single unit of time, and those who consider verses one through eleven of chapter two to be eschatological while understanding chapter one to be historical, the "northerner" cannot mean locusts, but must refer to an army whose residence has been in the north yet were to move south with the invasion of Judah in view. Thus Freeman says:

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 symbolic of the enemies of Israel. In this connection it is also used to indicate the direction from which calamity and misfortune came upon Palestine.<sup>11</sup>

To those who retain the view that chapter two is a continued explanation of the locust plague, or within the view that chapter two verses one through eleven is future, the "northerner" may simply be a reference to the phenomenon of locust sweeping over the land from the north. In the latter view of time the plague would be viewed prophetically, while in the former concept of time the plague would be looked upon as a fuller explanation of the historical event. A northerly direction for such a plague would be rare, but not entirely unknown. Possibly its rarity is reason for the term being used in verse twenty. Driver favors a locust interpretation saying: "The reference, as seems evident from the context

9. Robinson, *Prophets*, p. 36 f.

10. Hobart Freeman, *Introduction*, p. 152.

11. Freeman, *Introduction*, p. 153.

and also from the words following (which exactly describe the fate of a swarm of locusts), can be only to the locusts: . . .<sup>12</sup>

Kapelrud argues from a mythological meaning of the word "northerner," claiming that such a meaning stems from the Ras Shamra texts. According to him these texts refer to deity as sitting on a mountain in the north, or it is from the north that chaos appears. He suggests that Israel was affected early in its history by this mythological concept. Kapelrud does say that Joel's starting point was locusts, but then he says:

The locusts stand in a greater concatenation, they are representatives of the powers of chaos from the north, *has-s'foni*, whom Yahweh will drive back. There can therefore be no doubt that Joel had the mythical element in mind when he chose the designation *has-s'foni*.<sup>13</sup>

There are specifications of time in Joel chapter two, however, which at least place the northerner in the proper perspective of time, though it does not settle the identification.

In Joel 2:1 two significant expressions are used in order to call attention to the event about to be described. The first expression is *tiq'u shofar*, "blow a horn," and the second is *w'hari'u* from the verb *ru'a*, "to raise a shout." According to Koehler-Baumgartner "shout a war cry" applies to Joel 2:1.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that blowing a *shofar* is used in conjunction with a religious exercise, but it is also used in terms of military activity. *Ru'a* is used as a shout of joy to honor a king or particular leader, to shout going into battle or in the face of danger. On the basis of the context in chapter two the shout and the blowing of a horn are at least designated to call attention to danger which is coming.

The point, however, is one of future event. That is, Joel can hardly be preparing the people for a danger already past. According to chapter one the locusts had already done their work of devastation. It would thus be too late to prepare the people for such a danger. A future interpretation of chapter two verses one through eleven is therefore required.

The second indication of time is pointed up in the apocalyptic language used by the prophet. In chapter one the entire picture presented by Joel fits into an observable scene of devastation. But in chapter two the very description of the northerner has futuristic overtones. Thus chapter two verses ten and eleven read:

The earth trembles before their presence; the heavens quake; the sun and the moon are dark, and the stars withdraw their brightness. And Yahweh utters his voice before his army; for his camp is very

12. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Joel and Amos in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, p. 60.

13. Kapelrud, *Studies*, p. 108.

14. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, p. 882.

great, for he is strong who executes his word, for the day of Yahweh is great and very fearful, and who can bear it?

Keil maintains the position that this apocalyptic language is a reference to locusts, but Yahweh is in the lead of this creature army of His. He goes on to say of verse ten that there is something greater than storm clouds here, but a prediction of the wrath of God in judgment coming upon the whole earth (Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7).<sup>15</sup> Bewers refers to this language as an interpolation since the advance and attack of locusts does not meet the picture. He does say that the locusts of chapter two are agents of Yahweh's judgment, but verses ten and eleven do not describe a natural locust flight.<sup>16</sup> At a later point in his work he says: "Evidently the literal locusts are lost sight of here, and they are no longer heralds or precursors of Yahweh's day, but the agents of his will."<sup>17</sup> Kapelrud says of verses ten and eleven: "Almost imperceptibly the description in v. 10 and 11 has passed on to point to Yahweh's Day, the dread catastrophe announced by the arrival of the locusts."<sup>18</sup> Driver sees chapter two as future with the locusts described in somewhat idealized form, but not as idealized as is found in Revelation 9:3-11. He says:

The locusts of vv. 2-9, as was remarked on v. 1, are to a certain extent idealized, and pictured as more alarming and formidable than ordinary locusts; and in these two verses, other extraordinary, awe-inspiring concomitants of their approach are signalized.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the various interpretations of chapter two verses one through eleven in respect to time—past, future, or eschatological—the tendency of many scholars is to see the apocalyptic passage, verses ten and eleven for example, as futuristic. This merely strengthens the view that verses one through eleven should be understood in a futuristic sense.

This concept of future interpretation must be qualified, however, and thus understood in contrast to the eschatological interpretation. Freeman moves in the direction of the latter, outlining chapter two verses one through eleven as: "b. Advance and attack of the army (Armageddon)."<sup>20</sup>

Verse two of chapter two seems to contain a restrictive clause which would rule out an eschatological interpretation. It reads:

*Kamohu lo nihya min-olam w'aharaw lo yosef adh-sh'ne dor wadhor.* It is possible to understand *adh-sh'ne dor wadhor* as "forever," but it would appear that Joel is deliberately careful here not to say that. Derward Deere translates the above phrase: "for generation after generation

15. Carl Friedrich Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, I, in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 195.

16. Bewer, *Commentary on Obadiah and Joel*, p. 50.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

18. Kapelrud, *Studies*, p. 81.

19. Driver, *Joel and Amos*, p. 55.

20. Freeman, *Introduction*, p. 156.

to come" without comment,<sup>21</sup> and Keil translates it: "even to the years of generation and generation."<sup>22</sup> Pusey says this of the phrase: "The words *unto generation and generation* elsewhere means *for ever*; here the word 'years' may limit them to length of time."<sup>23</sup>

If this is a deliberate attempt on the part of the author to restrict in time the manifestation of such an event which he is about to describe, he then leaves the door open for an event of greater proportion to take place after the years of many generations. Nothing like this has happened from eternity, but as he views the event prophetically, nothing like it shall happen again for many generations. If this is an accurate evaluation of this passage, then an eschatological interpretation of chapter two must be ruled out.

### B. The "Before" and "Afterwards" of Chapters Two and Three

The final argument centering around prophetic times in Joel is expressed in verse twenty-three of chapter two, and verse one of chapter three. The former passage reads:

Rejoice, O sons of Zion, and be glad in Yahweh your God, for he has given to you the early rain for vindication; and he has caused to come down for you an abundance of rain, the early rain and the latter rain; in the beginning.

There are two basic areas of difficulty in this passage. First, how should *ham-more lis'dhaqa* be interpreted; and second, how is *barishon* to be understood.

As to the first expression it is grammatically possible to translate it either "teacher for righteousness," or "former rain for vindication." Pusey, Laetsch, Keil and Hengstenberg all agree that it should be translated "teacher for righteousness." On this basis they all require a Messianic interpretation with Keil understanding "teacher" to refer to all teachers of righteousness from the time of Moses to the Messiah, including Joel.<sup>24</sup>

Keil states that the translation "teacher for righteousness" is required on the basis of the article used with *more* and the ethical meaning of *lisp'haqa*.<sup>25</sup> But the use of the article with *more* does not seem to demand the translation "teacher" since this word does not have the article in any other passage where either "former rain" or "teacher" is required. The only other passage in which *more* is found with the article is in Judges 7:1, and there it is used as a proper name: "the hill of Moreh." As to the second argument, the point is made that there is no such thing as ethical rain. The text, however, does not require an ethical rain, but

21. Deere, *The Twelve*, p. 55.

22. Keil, *Prophets*, p. 190.

23. Pusey, *Minor Prophets*, p. 172.

24. Keil, *Prophets*, p. 207.

25. Keil, *Prophets*, p. 206.

rain based on the evaluation of the repentance described in verses twelve through seventeen, thus an ethical response manifested in the material blessing of rain.

The immediate context also enters the picture. Driver, who demands the translation "former rain for prosperity," says this: "But the context, which from v. 22 to v. 26 speaks solely of the gifts of the earth, is much opposed to this explanation; the spiritual gifts follow in vv. 28, 29."<sup>26</sup> Thus, excluding a Messianic interpretation of this passage, one may therefore rule out an eschatological interpretation.

But there is more in this verse. How is one to understand *barishon*? The translation "in the first month" appears to be irrelevant here since the time of the former and latter rains would be familiar to the people of Judah. This translation is therefore unsatisfactory to many scholars (Driver, Laetsch, Pusey, Keil, etc.). It appears then that the translation "in the beginning," with the idea of first, ought to be the one used. This corresponds to *ahare-khen* of chapter three verse one. Keil says this:

*First of all* the pouring out of a plentiful rain (an individualizing expression for all kinds of earthly blessings, chosen here with reference to the opposite of blessing occasioned by the drought); and *after that*, the pouring out of the spiritual blessing (ch. ii.28-iii.21).<sup>27</sup>

Thompson, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, understands it "as before" the drought,<sup>28</sup> but this does not seem to grasp the full meaning.

As one looks at verse twenty-three *ham-more lis'dhaqa* becomes the central expression for all types of earthly blessings that Yahweh promised, and *barishon* places such blessings into the period of covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh (Deut. 11:13-15). Joel is therefore speaking of promised blessing as yet in the future from his perspective, but a future yet within the framework of the Mosaic covenant. Thus the eschatological interpretation of chapter two must be ruled out, but a futuristic interpretation is required.

The concept of prophetic time in Joel moves to a new era beginning at chapter three verse one. Whereas blessing was described in earthly and material concepts in the latter part of chapter two, blessing is now described in terms of spiritual gifts. Thus *barishon* stands in contrast to *ahare-khen*, and this contrast is intensified if the *waw* of *w'haya* at the outset of verse one is translated "but." This reference to time introduces the eschatological era, but the central blessing of this era is the outpouring of the Spirit described in the first two verses of chapter three.

It appears then that chapters three and four of Joel may be interpreted as the eschatological period. The two further references to time

26. Driver, *Joel and Amos*, p. 63.

27. Keil, *Prophets*, p. 208.

28. John A. Thompson and Norman F. Langford, "The Book of Joel," VI, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 751.

in these chapters simply continue to express the eschatological events. Thus in verse two of chapter three the expression *bay-yamim ha-hemma*, "in those days" refers to the days of the outpouring of the Spirit.

The second reference to time, found in verse one of chapter four, reading *ki hinne bay-yamim ha-hemma uva'eth ha-hi*, "for look, in those days and at that time," also points backward to the previous section. This means then that the events about to be described in chapter four must be related to the events of chapter three, with the central event being the outpouring of the Spirit. Driver's reference to chapter four verse one, "The time referred to is that of Israel's deliverance. . ."<sup>29</sup>, is probably too restrictive if such an interpretation rules out the time of the outpouring of the Spirit. Thus the eschatological day is the day of the Spirit and the events described in chapters three and four take place in that day.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

What then is the conclusion of this matter? On the basis of the above discussion it is the writer's conclusion that there are three specific areas of time in Joel: past, chapter one; future, chapter two; and eschatological, chapters three and four. In chapter two verses one through eleven the event described by Joel is futuristic, but not eschatological. The identification of the invaders described in the event is not certain. In verses twenty-two through twenty-seven the type of blessing is contrasted with that described in chapter three verses one following. In chapter three and four there are brief indicators of time aside from the basic reference in chapter three verse one. The basic reference points to the time of the Spirit which is eschatological, and the minor references simply describe a continuation of events in that eschatological day.

29. Driver, *Joel and Amos*, p. 70.