

Lesson 2

Where are we, when are we, and how did we get here?

Those are good questions to ask anytime we embark on a study of a book in the Bible, and especially a book of prophecy.

Why especially prophecy? Because there are two things that are vital to correctly understanding any prophecy in the Bible: context and time frame.

What is the context? What is the time frame? If we keep asking ourselves those two questions, then we can unravel any prophecy in the Bible be it the 70 weeks in Daniel or the whore of Babylon in Revelation.

But to answer those questions, it usually helps a lot to know when the book was written.

Was Daniel written in 500 BC or 300 BC? Was Revelation written before AD 70 or after AD 70? Those are questions we always consider when we study those two books. And if we get those questions wrong, we will probably get the books wrong.

Peter helped us with the chronology of some of the prophecies in Joel when he told us in Acts 2 that some of the prophecies in Joel were being fulfilled on that particular day. But what about the other prophecies? What is their time frame? What is their context?

It seems that all roads lead us back to the same question: when was Joel written?

That question sounds so simple – when was Joel written – but it is anything but simple. In fact, it is the one of the most difficult questions in the entire Bible!

Joel is not the only undated minor prophet. Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Malachi also present some dating challenges – but not like Joel. Joel is the most difficult minor prophet when it comes to the question of when it was written.

Unlike Hosea, Joel does not tell us the name of any king who was ruling when he wrote the book. And unlike Hosea, Joel does not provide us with any historical events that would firmly establish the date of his book.

Given the lack of a firm date in the text and the lack of any external evidence about Joel, all we can do is look for whatever internal evidence we can find in the book.

After looking at the evidence, I think what we will find is that the question of when Joel was written is impossible to answer with complete certainty. And I think we will also find that the question is still very difficult to answer even if all we want is a reasonable likelihood.

That is certainly where many others have ended up. Here is how some commentaries describe the question of when Joel was written:

[Nass] – “With this topic, we enter a quagmire of scholarly contention. Since there are no outside references to Joel, the dating of the book relies totally on internal evidence, and there are interminable debates on what that evidence suggests.”

[Garrett] – “Probably no book of the Bible has had a wider range of dates assigned to it.”

[McComiskey] – “But [with the date of Joel] we encounter a thicket of seemingly insoluble questions.”

[Delitzsch] – “The bringing down of Joel into the post exilic age ... is one of the most rotten fruits of the modern criticism.”

In researching this question of when Joel was written, I looked at 25 commentaries. And do you know what I found? I found 25 different opinions, ranging from the middle of the 9th century to the middle of the 2nd century BC – which is a range of 700 years!

You can see the great sweep of history covered by those opinions on the Handout for Lesson 1 – from the days of Elijah and Elisha up until the fall of Greece seven centuries later!

That would be like us today trying to date a locust invasion that occurred at some point in a window of time extending from our own day back to the 1300’s when the Black Death was sweeping across Europe!

In short, it is a very difficult assignment!

But does it matter?

Does it really matter if we don't know when Joel was written?

John Calvin answered no. He said it does not matter when Joel was written.

“As there is no certainty, it is better to leave the time in which he taught undecided; and, as we shall see, this is of no great importance.”

Was Calvin correct? He was wrong about most things, but did he get that one question right? Does it matter when the book was written?

On one hand, my answer is that I hope not! Why? Because we don't know for sure when the book was written! If we have to know with certainty when Joel was written to understand Joel, then we have a big problem.

But, on the other hand, I think we perhaps should be asking ourselves a different question – would it **help** to know when Joel was written? Would knowing that fact about Joel make it **easier** to understand the book?

And the answer to that question is most certainly yes. It would help – and sometimes it would help a lot.

And so I disagree with Calvin that the date of Joel is “of no great importance.”

If we knew the date, then our job of interpreting Joel would be much easier, and I think that fact alone makes the date important. Knowing the date of Joel would let us know more easily how Joel fits in with the other prophets, and that, too, makes the date important.

But if knowing the date is important, and we don't know the date, then what do we do? What is our game plan?

In short, our game plan is to **punt!**

I propose that we not come up with an answer prior to our study of Joel, but that instead we look for an answer as we study the book.

Perhaps we will have a date for the book after we finish, and perhaps not. We may have to be content with not knowing when the book was written.

But how do we study the book without knowing when it was written? How do we answer questions about what is being described in the book of Joel if we don't know whether the book was written in the 8th century or the 2nd century?

The answer is that we have to look for answers that fit with each of the possible dates for the book.

That is also how we can figure out when it was written. If we are unable to explain a verse in Joel under a particular view about when it was written, then we can likely say that view about the book's date is wrong.

But, to keep things manageable, our plan will be to focus on three views about when the book was written.

Why only three? Because almost all of the various viewpoints from the 25 commentaries can be sorted into three buckets.

What are the three buckets? They are shown on the Handout for Lesson 1: the early view, the pre-exile view, and the post-exile view.

- Under the **early view**, Joel was written during the reign of King Joash toward the end of the 9th century BC.
- Under the **pre-exile view**, Joel was written in the 7th century, after the fall of Israel in 722 BC but before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.
- Under the **post-exile view**, Joel was written after the return from exile in 539 BC, after the temple was rebuilt in 515 BC, and after the wall was rebuilt following Nehemiah's return in 445 BC.

So, as we study the text, we will be trying to understand it under each of these three scenarios. If we are unable to make the text fit with one of the scenarios, then we will cast that scenario aside. But let's start our study of Joel by keeping our mind open to all three of them.

But with that said, I think it would be helpful to look briefly now at the evidence that we will need to explain later under each of the three proposed dates for the book. This evidence is highlighted on the Handout for Lesson 2.

What is the internal evidence about when the book of Joel was written?

I think we can find at least 20 pieces of internal evidence in the book of Joel about when the book was written.

Exhibit No. 1: Other than a reference to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, Joel never refers to a king either by name or by use of the word “king” without a name.

Does that mean there was no king? Or does it mean that the king was a child, such as with Joash? Or is there another reason Joel never refers to a reigning king?

Exhibit No. 2: The book of Joel never mentions idolatry or false gods or the high places.

Does that mean those practices were not a problem when Joel was written? Or is there perhaps another reason why Joel tells the people to repent but does not tell us the sins they had committed?

Exhibit No. 3: The book of Joel never mentions Assyria by name.

Does that mean the book was written before Assyria became a world power or after Assyria fell to Babylon? Or did Joel fail to mention Assyria for another reason?

We know that Amos was written in the same time frame as Hosea, during the height of Assyrian power, but Amos also never mentions Assyria by name.

Exhibit No. 4: The book of Joel never mentions Babylon by name.

Does that mean the book was written before Babylon became a world power or after Babylon fell to Persia? Or did Joel fail to mention Babylon for another reason?

Joel 1:2 seems to describe an invasion of locusts as being worse than anything that has happened in the people's memory. Does that mean the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions had not yet occurred? Or does it perhaps mean instead that those events had happened long ago? Or were the locusts really worse than the Assyrians and the Babylonians?

Exhibit No. 5: As shown on the Handout for Lesson 2 with blue highlights, there are many apparent parallels between Joel and other books or prophecy in the Bible.

For example:

Joel 3:16 – The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem...

Amos 1:2 – ...The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem...

and:

Joel 3:18 – And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk...

Amos 9:13 – ...the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.

and:

Joel 1:15 – Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Isaiah 13:6 – Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come!

Are any of those parallels quotations in Joel from that other book? Or are any of them quotations from Joel in that other book? In short, who is quoting whom?

Exhibit No. 6: In Joel 3:10, we read: “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears.”

That sure sounds familiar! We see something close to it in Isaiah.

Isaiah 2:4 – He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and **they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;** nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

But that phrase from Isaiah is not what Joel said, but instead is the opposite of what Joel said!

In Joel, the plowshares become swords, while in Isaiah, the swords become plowshares. One of them takes the other one and turns it completely around – but which one came first? (One of them was chosen for the entrance of the UN – but the other one was definitely not!)

Exhibit No. 7: Joel 2:32 arguably refers to and then cites Obadiah 1:17 (even though Obadiah is not named).

Joel 2:32 – And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. *For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said,* and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Obadiah 1:17 – *But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape, and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions.*

Unlike the other parallels, with this one it looks like Joel is the one who is doing the quoting, and it looks like Joel is quoting Obadiah. If both of those things are true, then Joel must be dated after Obadiah.

That sounds good, but there are at least two problems. First, Joel never mentions Obadiah, and so we can't say for sure whether he is quoting Obadiah. All we know for sure is that he is quoting God – “as the LORD has said.”

But second, even if we were to conclude that Joel is after Obadiah, that would not solve our problem. Why? Because we don't know the date of Obadiah either!

Some say Obadiah was written during the reign of King Jehoram in the 9th century BC, while others say Obadiah was written after Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC.

All we can say for sure about the timing of Obadiah is that it proclaims a judgment against Edom, but Edom had been a thorn in Judah's side for centuries. I think the later date is more likely for Obadiah (as shown on the Handout for Lesson 1), but we can't say for sure, and we can't say for sure whether Joel is quoting Obadiah.

Exhibit No. 8: In the book of Joel, there is a functioning temple in Jerusalem.

Joel 1:9 – The grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from **the house of the**

LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD.

Joel 2:17 – Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, Where is their God?

It seems from those verses that the temple was standing and was functioning as a temple, at least before the locusts caused some of the offerings to temporarily stop.

That fact would seem to exclude the time period between 587 BC (when the temple was destroyed) and 515 BC (when the temple was rebuilt), although some commentaries even disagree with that!

Exhibit No. 9: Israel is mentioned three times in the book of Joel, but *arguably* only as a reference to the people of Judah and never as a reference to the northern kingdom.

Joel 2:27 – You shall know that I am in the midst of **Israel**, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Joel 3:2 – I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage **Israel**, because they have scattered them among the nations and have divided up my land.

Joel 3:16 – The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the LORD is a refuge

to his people, a stronghold to the people of **Israel**.

If Israel does not refer to the northern kingdom in those verses, then does that mean the northern kingdom had already fallen when Joel was written? Or is there perhaps another reason Israel is used that way?

Exhibit No. 10: The book of Joel describes a restoration of Judah, a scattering of Israel, and a division of the land.

Joel 3:1-2 - For behold, in those days and at that time, when I **restore** the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have **scattered** them among the nations and have **divided** up my land.

Is that describing the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria, the fall of the southern kingdom to Babylon, or something else?

If the restoration of Judah in Joel 3 is the return from Babylon, then what is the scattering?

But if the scattering in Joel 3 is the scattering of Israel, then what is the restoration of Judah?

Exhibit No. 11: The book of Joel includes a summons for **all** people to gather in the temple in Jerusalem.

Joel 1:14 - Gather the elders and **all the inhabitants of the land** to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

If all the people of the land could gather in temple, then does that mean the population was very small when Joel was written?

Exhibit No. 12: While Joel does not mention a king, Joel does refer to elders.

Joel 1:2 – Hear this, you **elders**; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers?

Were those elders the leaders of the people? And, if so, does that mean Joel was written after the exile when the elders were in charge and there was no king? Or are the elders mentioned in verse 2 for another reason?

Exhibit No. 13: When Joel was written, there was a wall around Jerusalem.

Joel 2:7 – Like warriors they charge; like soldiers they scale the **wall**.

Joel 2:9 – They leap upon the city, they run upon the **walls**...

Does that mean Joel was written before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the wall? Or does it instead mean that Joel was written after Nehemiah rebuilt the wall?

Exhibit No. 14: When Joel was written, there were granaries and storehouses in Judah.

Joel 1:17 – The seed shrivels under the clods; the **storehouses** are desolate; the **granaries** are torn down because the grain has dried up.

Does that mean Joel was written before Nebuchadnezzar invaded and destroyed such buildings?

Exhibit No. 15: Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia are mentioned in Joel 3:4.

Can we somehow use the mention of those traditional enemies of the Jews to date the book of Joel? Is it helpful to know that the Philistines are mentioned in Joel while the Assyrians and the Babylonians are not?

Exhibit No. 16: The Greeks are mentioned in Joel 3:6.

Does that help us date the book? Yes, we know the Greeks were a world power in the 4th century BC, but we also know that Greek traders were in Palestine at least as early as the 8th century BC.

Exhibit No. 17: The Sabeans are mentioned in Joel 3:8.

Does that help us date the book? We know that the Sabeans dominated the eastern trade routes in the 5th century BC.

Exhibit No. 18: Egypt and Edom are mentioned in Joel 3:19.

Does that help us date the book? As with Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia, we again see traditional enemies of the Jews. Egypt and Edom were long a thorn in Judah's side.

Obadiah is also directed against Edom, but when was Obadiah written? We know that Edom caused trouble for the Jews after Nebuchadnezzar invaded, but we know that was not the only time Edom caused them trouble.

Exhibit No. 19: The Valley of Jehoshaphat is mentioned in Joel 3:2 and Joel 3:12.

Where is that valley? If the location of that valley is not known, then does that mean Joel was likely written close to the time when Jehoshaphat was king in the 9th century?

Exhibit No. 20: The book of Joel is the second of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament.

Yes, the ordering of the minor prophets in the Bible seems to be at least roughly chronological, but how roughly?

And with that, we have now looked at the internal evidence in the book of Joel for when the book was written.

Most of those clues are highlighted on the Handout for Lesson 2, and we will discuss them in more detail as when get to them. We will also consider how each piece of evidence relates to the various viewpoints about the date of Joel.

And whatever viewpoint we consider or adopt regarding the date of Joel, that viewpoint will have to explain all of this internal evidence.

Now why did I say that only **most** of the internal evidence was highlighted on the handout? Because some of the internal evidence depends on arguments from silence.

That is, some of the evidence points not to something Joel wrote but rather to something Joel did not write. And because (by definition) we will never see such

evidence in our study of the text of Joel, we should likely consider those arguments from silence now.

Let's list those arguments again: No reigning king is mentioned; Assyria is not mentioned; Babylon is not mentioned; idolatry is not mentioned; the northern kingdom is not mentioned.

Does the lack of a king mean there was no king? Does the lack of Assyria and Babylon mean that they were not yet or no longer world powers? Does the lack of idolatry mean that idolatry was not a problem? Does the lack of clear references to the northern kingdom mean there was no northern kingdom?

How do we explain all of that? I think the explanation is pretty easy – Joel is a very short book! It is only three chapters long! There are only 73 verses in Joel!

In short, there are a lot of things that are not mentioned in the book of Joel. I don't think any argument from silence should move the needle very much when it comes to when the book was written.

We may have some more to say about such evidence from silence, but my plan is to focus more on the evidence for which Joel was not silent.

Now, let's pause for one more point about the three viewpoints we are going to consider, and particularly about the third one – the **post-exile** viewpoint.

Some of those who adopt that third viewpoint do so for a bad motive. They believe that the Law of Moses was not written during the days of Moses but was instead

written in Babylon during the exile. We talked about that theory in our study of Ezra, and we showed why that theory is completely wrong.

But, for those who believe that wrong theory, they cannot date Joel prior to the exile. Why not? Because Joel refers to the grain offerings and drink offerings detailed in the Law of Moses. If that system was created during the exile, then Joel must be dated after the exile. And so, for some, their false belief about the dating of the Law of Moses determines their viewpoint about the date of Joel.

That bad motive explains one of the quotes we saw earlier.

[Delitzsch] - "The bringing down of Joel into the post exilic age ... is one of the most rotten fruits of the modern criticism."

But that bad motive is not true of everyone who holds that third viewpoint, and so we cannot reject that third view just because some have adopted it for the wrong reason.

We may determine that we should adopt it for a right reason! We need to just consider the evidence and set motives aside - which is always a good plan when it comes to studying the Bible!

Why is Joel undated?

As we have seen, it is a very tough job - and possibly an impossible job - to determine when Joel was written.

Is there a reason for that? Is there a reason why Joel does not tell us when it was written?

Yes, there is some evidence in the book, but that evidence seemingly supports possible dates for the book that are up to 700 years apart! Was that intentional?

My initial inclination is to answer yes. Otherwise, we may have to explain how something in the inspired word of God was not intentional! Remember what we know about the written word of God.

Matthew 5:18 – For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

If I were to think something about the Bible was not intentional, it might be the placement of a dot – but if I thought that, I would be wrong!

But here we are not looking at a dot that was placed in the text – instead we are looking at what was left out of the text – clear evidence of the date.

Was that evidence left out of Joel for a reason? And, if so, what could that reason be?

One possible reason is that perhaps the book of Joel is undated because the prophecies in the book are applicable to more than one historical event.

Are there other possible reasons? Let's keep that question in mind as we work through the text.

What are the other big issues in Joel?

We just looked at perhaps the biggest issue when it comes to Joel – when was it written – but that is not the only issue when it comes to Joel.

There are controversies about every book in the Bible. What are the controversies about Joel?

Although I suspect we will find some others, here are some big issues that I am sure we will see.

One big controversy involves the locust invasion that is described in Joel.

Are we seeing actual locusts, or are the locusts just a metaphor? And if we are seeing actual locusts, is that all we see? Or do we see both an army of locusts and an army of human warriors? And if the latter, which army do we see?

Another big controversy about Joel involves the timing of the blessings that we see in the second half of the book.

Were those blessings confined to Joel's day? Or were they first century blessings under Christ? Or are they blessings for God's people at the end of time?

A third big controversy involves the role of the Holy Spirit, both in Joel 2 and in Acts 2, where Peter quotes Joel 2.

What is the promise? For whom is the promise? When will be or when was the promise received? Peter said

that “this is that” – but what is “this,” and what is “that”?

Again, I am sure we will discuss each of those issues in our study of Joel, and, for now, a good homework exercise would be to think about these questions as we read the short book of Joel each week and to also look for other questions.