

THE PROPHECY OF JOEL: THE PROPHET'S MESSAGE, BELIEFS, AND PROPHETIC STYLE

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The Prophet Joel has a book in the Tanakh named for him and devoted exclusively to his prophecy. His prophecy is the major source for the annual supplemental reading (haftarah) in the synagogue service on the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Nevertheless, Joel remains virtually unknown by most people today. In an effort to help correct this situation, at least somewhat, this article will review Joel's message by focusing on three of its aspects: Joel's beliefs about the people of Judah as they face the crisis that prompted the prophecy; the connection of the prophecy to the covenant made at Mount Sinai between the Israelites and the Lord; and the unique prophetic style of Joel.

JOEL'S MESSAGE AND HIS UNDERLYING BELIEFS

Joel, like other biblical prophets, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah, offers a familiar message to his audience concerning their weakened relationship with the Lord. (Jer. 3:14-15, Ezek. 33:10-11, Zeph. 2:1-3). The theme of Joel's message is a familiar one, and here it is prompted by a locust attack combined with a drought. According to Joel, the Children of Israel need to strengthen their relationship with the Lord pursuant to the covenant they made with the Lord at Mount Sinai in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 19: 1-8). The covenant is a conditional agreement, structured in "if . . . then" terms. In brief, the Lord said to the Israelites, through Moses, *Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and will keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:5-6). When the people heard what the Lord had spoken to Moses about the covenant, together as one they said, *All that the Lord hath spoken we will do* (Ex. 19:8). Further details of the obligations of the Lord and of the Israelites, which are part of the conditional terms in the covenant, appear in Leviticus 26:1-13, Deuteronomy 7:12-26, Deuteronomy 8:1-20, Deuteronomy 10:12-22, and Deuteronomy 28:1-69.

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Surely Joel, as a prophet speaking the word of the Lord (1:1), is aware of the terms of the covenant when he begins his prophecy. The essential point of the prophecy is that Joel tells his audience to return to the Lord completely as the only means of surviving the awesome consequences of the locust attack and drought that are occurring in Judah (1:2). For Joel the locusts and the drought are examples of what the Lord can do when the people break the covenant (Lev. 26:14-45).

Joel is so confident about what he believes, sees, and says, that he feels he must direct the people to perform the traditional acts of repentance for having turned away from their covenant with the Lord. Also, Joel views the attacking locusts and the drought as the first signs that the feared Day of the Lord, a day of dreaded judgment, is near and coming soon (2:1). On the Day of the Lord, as announced by other prophets, the Lord will judge the nations of the world, including the Children of Israel (most notably in Amos 5:18, Isa. 13:6).

Despite the terrifying current conditions and the nearness of judgment day, Joel states that there still is time for the people to return to the Lord. He commands the people to mourn, weep, sanctify a time of fasting, call a solemn assembly of all inhabitants from young to old, sanctify the congregation, and rend their hearts. *Who knows?*, asks Joel, *whether the Lord will relent?* (2:14).

Then without any apparent transition in time after commanding a return to the Lord, Joel states that the Lord has relented and has had pity on His people because they have returned to Him (2:18). Through Joel the Lord promises a bright future with fresh crops and plentiful rainfall. There will still be judgment against those nations which had warred against His people, the Children of Israel. Judah will remain inhabited forever and the Lord will dwell in Zion because the covenant between the Lord and the House of Jacob now continues in force (4:16-21).

Joel's beliefs underpin the conclusion that the people need to return to the Lord. Joel does not directly proclaim his beliefs; rather, he implies them by what he says and does not say. Most importantly for his prophecy, Joel believes that the locusts and the drought are the public signs that the Lord is punishing the Israelites for not fulfilling their obligations under the covenant. Pursuant to the covenant the people are obligated to serve only the Lord and

to observe the Lord's laws (Lev. 26:1-2; 14-45). Joel also believes that the people already know that their behavior is a violation of the covenant in that the covenant is a fundamental part of their communal knowledge. Joel believes that his prophetic mission is to lead the people to a complete return to the Lord. Only a complete return to the Lord will be the way to escape the crisis posed by the combination of the locusts and the drought. Joel does not point out what the specific violations of the people are because he believes that there is no need to do so. Nor does he scold the people for their actions that have breached the covenant. Moreover, he does not even explicitly mention the covenant. Joel's pressing mission is to focus on convincing the people to return to the Lord before it is too late. He is confident that a return to the Lord is the only way not to perish, and he knows that the people want to survive. He announces that there is still time to return to the Lord (2:12). Despite a dire situation, Joel offers hope for survival.

It is for these reasons and within this above context that Joel begins his prophecy as he does, portraying the locusts and the drought with grim, frightening, and negative metaphors and similes (for example, the locusts have the teeth of lions (1:6), locusts sound like chariots coming to launch an attack (2:5), locusts can enter a house through a window like a thief (2:9), and locusts are a mighty army (2:11)). He portrays the current crisis in this way so as to convince the people that the locusts are overwhelming. As a result, it takes Joel almost half of his entire prophecy to build his case to a climax of repentance. Only when the people have performed the rituals of lamenting (that he already has directed them to perform) is Joel willing to twice command his audience to perform the ultimate act of repentance, a complete act of return to the Lord (2:12-13). He does not cast aside the traditional and public ways for expressing repentance. They are not mere and empty rituals but important public stabilizers. He recognizes their value in a time of crisis. Joel commands the people to rend their hearts so as to indicate internal evidence of inner change. Joel goes on to command the people to sanctify a holy assembly of all the people.

The remainder of Joel's prophecy deals with the future of Jerusalem and Judah. The prophecy declares that the Lord will provide rain for the field crops and fruit trees so as to provide food for both humans and animals. In the future the Lord will judge the nations that warred against His people and

did violence to them. No more shall the Children of Israel be ashamed of their Lord, who will pour out His spirit upon all flesh. Judah will be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem will prosper from generation to generation. Joel sends this overall optimistic message to his audience. What is more, Joel delivers his message via a particular prophetic style, and we turn now to that style.

THE THREE FEATURES THAT COMPRISE JOEL'S PROPHETIC STYLE

Joel's prophetic style centers on three features, which can be used separately or in combination. They are: commands; allusions (parallels) to other verses in the Tanakh; and two related figures of speech, metaphors and similes. To be sure, other features exist in the prophecy, but these three features comprise the dominant core of Joel's prophetic style and they are available to both the English and Hebrew reader. For example, Joel might issue a simple command, without combining that command with either of the other two features. Or, he might interweave that command with one or both of the other features.

COMMANDS

Let us use the second verse of Joel's prophecy as an example of Joel's prophetic style. In verse 1:2, Joel's first uttered word to the inhabitants of the land, *hear*, is a command. Joel calls to the elders of the community, saying, *Hear this, ye old men*. He follows immediately with a doublet, using a figure of speech, *And give ear all ye inhabitants of the land*. He does so pursuant to the traditional prophetic style of using linguistic parallelism¹ within a poetic verse. (Keep in mind that prophets expressed themselves in verse.) Thus, Joel opens this verse with two commands that are internally parallel. In addition, Joel's opening pair of back-to-back commands serves him simultaneously in two other ways. His two commands beginning with *Hear* and *Give ear* also constitute a parallel to the opening verse spoken by the revered prophet Isaiah. Isaiah says, *Hear O heavens, and give ear, O earth* (Isa. 1:2). Of all the 15 books of the prophets only those of Isaiah and Joel open their prophecies with these two commands. Joel's two commands also create an allusion to Moses in his farewell song to the Children of Israel just before the great Israelite leader dies. Moses says, *Give ear, ye heavens . . . And let the earth hear the words of my mouth* (Deut. 32:1).

With his prophetic style of intra-verse parallel commands that have external parallels of their own, Joel indicates that he will offer a traditional message that deserves to be heard even though he does not specify to what the word *this* refers at the start of the verse. Joel continues the verse by asking, *Hath this been in your days or in the days of your fathers?* Here, Joel implies that his audience should note the enormous number of locusts that have appeared. He also appears to be alluding to a prior locust attack when the Lord brought a plague of locusts to the land of Egypt. (Ex. 10:1-20). The best way to understand v.1:2, a potentially confusing verse, is to picture Joel standing before his audience, commanding the people's attention to hear something only identified as *this* while pointing down to something unspecified (also identified only as *this*) that Joel wants his audience to note. Thus, Joel uses the same pronoun *this* to signify two different things, the first being the intangible prophecy he is about to deliver and the second being some objects on the ground. In short, Joel follows his two commands with a question that also arguably alludes at his very start to a prior set of events described in Exodus. These commands and parallels highlight Joel's core stylistic features as they set the tone for the rest of his prophecy.

After his successful effort to gain the attention of the people in verse 1:2, Joel continues his commands. He issues 39 additional positive commands, including, *weep, awake, sound an alarm, return, rejoice, sanctify a fast, lament, and assemble the elders*. He also issues 2 negative (that is, not to do something) commands that tell the soil and the beasts of the field *not to fear the future* because there will be plenty of rain to provide food for everyone (2:21-22). These two negative commands of "not to fear" are not addressed to humans at all. The two commands constitute the complement of Joel's earlier concern for the soil and the animals (vv.1:16-20). All in all the 43 imperatives serve as an essential stylistic element of Joel's prophecy.

The 43 commands in the 73 total verses in the Book of Joel comprise a relatively high overall rate of use of imperatives, approximately three commands in every five verses. This rate constitutes a central, prominent stylistic feature of Joel's prophecy. The 43 imperatives arise from 28 different three-letter verbal roots, 18 of which do not repeat and 10 of which repeat once, twice, or three times. The most used root for a command is *k-d-sh*, translated as *make holy, sanctify, or solemnize*. This root appears four times (the origi-

nal use and three repeats) in Joel's prophecy for acts connected to religious rituals in the Temple in Jerusalem. Joel, because he believes that he knows what led to the locust attack and the drought, does not hesitate to command his audience to do what he believes will allow the people to escape from the destruction around them. That is to say, Joel commands the inhabitants of Judah to turn back to the Lord and to indicate their return by performing the specific acts of fasting, weeping, and lamenting.

It is not surprising that Joel ties his commands to the prophecy's central allusion, the covenant between the Lord and the Children of Israel. This is so even though the covenant is not mentioned explicitly. Nor is it surprising that Joel uses the *k-d-sh* root most of all in his imperatives, since that root is also prominent in the covenant between the Lord and the Children of Israel. Recall that the Lord says, when establishing the His covenant with the Children of Israel, that His people will become *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:6).

The claim that the covenant between the Lord and the Children of Israel is the underlying parallel in Joel's prophecy is supported by two additional and significant points. First we note that the majority of the verbs in chapters one and two of the prophecy deal with the act of repentance performed by the people after hearing Joel speak. Moreover, there exists no evidence in the prophecy that the people challenged or resisted Joel. The people obviously understood Joel's message to them even before he explicitly exhorted them to return to the Lord. They were clearly familiar with what Joel was alluding to. Second, we recognize the covenant as a parallel when we realize that the command *return to the Lord* only has meaning if there was a time when the people were indeed committed fully to the Lord. That time occurred at the very establishment of the covenant in the wilderness.² Thus, we arrive at the previously unmentioned covenant. It is only then that Joel's language falls into place. It is then that we discover Joel's underlying language base and motivation for his prophesying.

When we look at the full section on the covenant (Ex. 19:1-8), putting emphasis on the part of it that contains the Lord's words that are addressed to the people and the people's response to the Lord (Ex. 19:4, 5, 6, and 8), we find significant linguistic similarities to Joel's prophecy. Key nouns and key verbal roots appear in both Exodus and Joel. The common key nouns are: *peo-*

ple; nation, priest, and Children of Israel. The key verbs/verbal roots are: *hear, speak, and do*. Note that in the covenant the Lord uses the three-letter root of *k-d-sh* as an adjective to describe Israel as a holy nation. Thus, it is not surprising at all that Joel issues the commands with the *k-d-sh* root four times. Joel uses that root more than any other verbal root. In this way the connection between the covenant and Joel's prophecy is strong, and the covenant, though unmentioned explicitly, emerges as the major parallel in Joel's prophecy. The substance and the language of the covenant form the basis of the prophecy.

ALLUSIONS

The use of allusions is the second feature of Joel's prophetic style. In their efforts to date the appearance of Joel's prophecy, scholars have identified at least 40 parallels within the prophecy with other Tanakh verses or phrases.³ The recognition that Joel's prophecy contains so many parallels has led one commentator to state, "The most striking stylistic feature of the book is its anthological quality. It seems that Joel was thoroughly familiar with a wide range of sacred tradition, either oral floating traditions or written texts. His use of words and phrases from this rich repertoire resembles that of a learned scribe."⁴ Two other commentators call Joel a "learned prophet"⁵ and a "learned individual"⁶ based on his obvious familiarity with earlier sacred literature.

METAPHORS AND SIMILIES

The third feature of Joel's prophecy is the use of two common and readily noticed figures of speech, metaphors and similes, which serve as a way to make fruitful comparisons. Recall here that Joel uses metaphors and similes in his detailed description of the locusts, as mentioned earlier in the previous section. Here, we will only treat two further and excellent examples of Joel's prophetic style inasmuch as they are striking for their figures of speech and deserving of special attention. Joel says, *Lament like a virgin girded with sackcloth for the husband of her youth* (1:8). It is immediately obvious to the attentive reader that Joel combines a command with a simile to create a powerful image. That image conveys to the prophet's audience how the people should repent in this time of crisis. The image of a young woman mourning

for her dead husband or husband-to-be is filled with emotion. The sadness of the woman's loss of her anticipated future with her husband reaches out to us.

Perhaps even more striking and potent is a triply combined example of Joel's prophetic style. The combination appears right after Joel's first command to the people to return to the Lord *with all your heart* (2:12). In the very next verse Joel says, *Rend your heart and not your garments* (2:13). The *rend* command intertwines with the other two signature aspects of Joel's prophetic style to yield a command within a metaphor that is parallel to other biblical texts. Joel's verse appears initially to run counter to an age-old tradition of tearing an outer garment to publicly express grief or extreme distress. Reuben, Jacob's oldest child, is the first person in the Tanakh to rend a garment. He does so upon realizing that his brother Joseph is not in the pit from which he planned to rescue him (Gen. 37:18-30). This combination of all three features is also parallel to a related metaphor used by Moses. Moses says that when the Lord brings the Children of Israel into the Land of Israel, the Lord will circumcise *thy heart, and the heart of thy seed to love thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul that thou mayest live* (Deut. 30:6.).

In addition, Joel's triple combination of the features reminds us that the heart in biblical Hebrew is the center of thinking and feeling. The triple combination of the features of Joel's prophetic style clarifies what Joel wants his audience to do and to feel as the people return to the Lord. With it Joel sets a high standard for what will constitute an acceptable repentance when returning to the Lord. For Joel only a sincere, full, and wholehearted return to the Lord will lead to survival. This metaphor of rending a heart strikes us as we read the prophecy even though the previous verse (2:12) mentions that people should return to the Lord with all their heart. Furthermore, it reminds us that the Lord Himself says elsewhere *Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart* (I Sam. 16:7).

What is more, Joel's command about rending the heart does not contradict the tradition of rending an outer garment when a person feels grief or distress over the loss of a loved one. Joel, the traditionalist that he is, says only that the rending of a garment is not a sufficient sign of a return to the Lord. To return to the Lord a person must present an inward sign, which accords with the inward sign that the Lord looks at, as mentioned just above. Thus, with this metaphor, which reinforces the previous verse and is sandwiched be-

tween his two commands to return to the Lord, Joel succeeds in offering an apt and memorable metaphor-command. It enriches his prophecy about repentance along with a return to the spirit of the Mount Sinai covenant; it encapsulates in only four Hebrew words Joel's prophetic style. With this metaphor, interwoven with a command that recalls the first occurrence of rending in the Tanakh and the words of Moses as well, Joel creates a high standard for people when dealing with the Lord. Joel does not reject the tradition of people rending outer garments when they are bereaved. Rather, he sets an even higher standard for his audience to meet as its members return to the Lord.

COMMENT AND CONCLUSION

This article contends that the covenant between the Children of Israel and the Lord that was established at Mount Sinai is the major theme, indeed the basis, of Joel's prophecy, even though the covenant is unmentioned by the prophet as such. The support for that position comes from two sources, the age-old tradition in biblical studies that Joel calls for a return to the Lord and the linguistic similarities between the covenant as recorded in Exodus 19:1-8 and Joel's prophecy. This article also presents the case that the core features of Joel's prophecy, the numerous commands, parallels, and metaphors/similes used separately or in combination, together constitute a unique prophetic style.

Finally, in light of Joel's message and prophetic style, as highlighted in this article, I encourage people to examine, study, and somewhat enlarge the haftarah for the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I encourage everyone to incorporate into the haftarah for the Sabbath of Repentance the three verses in Joel's prophecy that contain the two commands to return to the Lord as well as Joel's beautiful metaphor of rending one's heart. That is, I encourage people to begin that haftarah with verse 2:12 rather than 2:15. Perhaps this will lead people to become more acquainted with the strength and beauty of Joel's prophecy.

NOTES

This article uses the 1917 translation of the Jewish Publication Society

1. Parallelism is the equivalence or contrast of words, phrases, or parts of verses. For further explication of this topic in this journal, see my article on "Amos 5:24" *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30 (2002) pp. 227-234.
2. For two different perspectives on the covenant established at Mount Sinai see M. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949) and M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
3. Readers seeking lists of the existing parallels will find the most accessible lists in J. Crenshaw, *Joel: Anchor Bible*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995) p. 26; and J. Thompson, *The Book of Joel: The Interpreter's Bible, Volume vi* (New York, 1956) p. 731. The original, basic list, which is generally not accessible and is what these two sources build on is: G. B. Gray, "Parallel Passages in Joel in Their Bearing on the Question of Date," *The Expositor*, Fourth Series, .8, (1893) pp.208-225.
4. Crenshaw, p.36.
5. H. Marks, "The Twelve Prophets" *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by R. Alter and F. Kermode, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987) p. 230.
6. E. Ben Zvi, "Joel," *The Jewish Study Bible*, edited by A. Berlin and M. Zvi Brettler, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004) p. 1166.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ 2011

October	Numbers	5 – 33
November	Numbers	34 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 25
December	Deuteronomy	26 – 34
	Joshua	1 – 19

2012

January	Joshua	20 – 24
	Judges	1 – 21
	I Samuel	1 – 2
February	I Samuel	3 – 31

