

A Study of the Minor Prophets
Week 1 – Joel
Chapters 1

I. Introduction: The book of Joel reveals a turning to God following a time of national calamity in ancient Israel—a severe locust plague. Israel’s history could have looked much different had the kind of response to the prophetic word that is modeled in Joel 2 been more frequent.

II. Date of writing: There is much debate about this. The fact that the temple is standing and operational (see 1:9, 13–14, 16; 2:17) also precludes a date from 586–516 BC, between its destruction and rebuilding. Joel speaks in 3:2–3 of the Dispersion of Jews into foreign lands as having already occurred, which seems to require a date for the book no earlier than after the fall of Samaria and the northern kingdom in 722 BC. Many date the book just prior to the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 605 BC or the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. They understand Joel’s warnings of the coming “Day of the Lord” (see 1:15; 2:1) as referring to the coming of the Babylonian army. Zephaniah also warns that “the Day of the Lord is near” in connection with the Babylonian crisis (see Zeph 1:14–18).

Other evidence more specifically suggests, even if not conclusively proving, a postexilic setting for the book. Joel lacks a reference to the king or monarchy and offers no polemic against idol worship. There are more than a dozen intertextual references to other prophetic texts in Joel, but use of this evidence for dating purposes is problematic because of the difficulty in determining the direction of influence. Baker’s Commentary notes, however, that the quotation of Obadiah 17 in Joel 2:32, with the additional “as the Lord promised,” would seem to indicate that Joel followed Obadiah, who likely writes in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem.

The enemies of Judah mentioned in the book—Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia (3:4) as well as Egypt and Edom (3:19)—are not of great help in dating the book because all of these nations had long histories of conflict with Israel and Judah. The lack of any reference to Assyria and Babylon is more difficult to explain in a preexilic context. A date for Joel’s ministry of about 500 BC or shortly thereafter seems the most plausible option. The temple is in operation, but enough time has passed since its dedication that the leaders and people have once again slipped in their commitment to the Lord.

III. Structure of Joel: Joel reflects a two-part structure. The first section (1:1–2:17) contains the prophet’s call for lament and repentance. This section further divides into the call for lament in response to the recent locust invasion in chapter one and the second appeal for a sacred assembly in light of the imminent threat of further judgment in 2:1–17. The introduction of a positive word of hope in 2:18 clearly divides the two halves of the book, and this second section provides the Lord’s response to the people and the promise of restoration.

A Study of the Minor Prophets
Week 1 – Joel
Chapters 1

Locusts

Locusts are large grasshoppers that live on almost every continent of the world and are known for their propensity to gather in large, destructive swarms. However, locusts often live for several generations, spanning decades, in the solitary, sedentary style that's characteristic of other species of grasshoppers. It's when locusts come together that their behavior changes.

Locusts are able to sense when their population density begins to increase, said Hojun Song, an entomologist at Texas A&M University. And in response, "they become gregarious, attracted to each other. They eat more [and] develop faster," he said. But the conditions must be just right for locusts to join forces. Sudden rainfall, for example, could help feed a growing population and cause flooding. That corrals locusts together and attract more locusts to join. What starts as a small group can turn into a thrumming swarm of thousands, millions or even billions of locusts. As part of this transformation, locusts may change color, Song said.

Some species of locusts become migratory, flying long distances across borders in search of food. The most devastating, best-known, and most frequently studied example is the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*).

"Unlike other pests, which are localized, desert locusts can swarm and fly, and an entire region can be wiped out of crops," as the locusts come through and chow down, said Esther Ngumbi, an entomologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who studies agricultural pests and food insecurity. The enormous swarms of desert locusts can be utterly devastating for farmers whose livelihoods depend solely on those crops, she said. There are about 20 species of locusts, and they all undergo a dramatic transformation when there are many other locusts of the same species nearby. The locusts shift from what scientists call the solitarious, or solitary phase when the locust is alone, to the gregarious phase when they swarm together.

The specific signal that instigates the phase shift varies from species to species, Song said. For example, although both species react to the sight and smell of other locusts in a laboratory setting, the desert locust can shift into the gregarious phase when they swarm together.