

III. Joel

A. Author and date.

The book takes its name from its author Joel the son of Pethuel (1:1). Nothing further is indicated about the personal histories of Joel or his father, either in this book or elsewhere in the OT.

The date of Joel's ministry can only be ascertained by indirect indications from the book. For this reason it is difficult to come to a conclusion that is generally agreed upon, and this can readily be seen from the divergent positions advocated by able and respectable scholars.

There are two basic positions:

1. A post-exilic date after the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah - 430 BC or even much later.
2. A pre-exilic date at the time of Joash - ca. 835 BC.

1. The Post-Exilic Date

Arguments

- a. It is said that verses such as 3:2b,3,5,6,17 could only have been written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and thus Joel prophesied after this event.

Because chapters 1, 2 presuppose the existence of the temple and the temple service, they must be later than the time of Haggai and Zechariah.

Comment

It is not so certain that chapter 3 presupposes that the events of 586 B.C. had already taken place. It should be noticed that there is nothing said of the destruction of the temple and the city. The presence of aliens in Jerusalem, the plundering of silver and gold and the taking of prisoners could have happened in connection with several such incidents mentioned in the OT (that of Shishak, 1 Kgs 14:25,26; or that of the Philistines and Arabs in the time of Jehoram, 2 Chron 21:16,17).

But more importantly, it is also possible (as, e.g., H. Freeman) to take the reference in 3:2b as a prophetic reference to the present day diaspora of Israel which began with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70.

- b. A number of arguments from silence are generally used. Among them are these.
- 1) The prophecy concerns Judah and Jerusalem (cf. 3:20) and contains no reference to the northern kingdom. It is said that if the northern kingdom was still in existence one would not expect this. Conclusion: the northern kingdom had already been destroyed. Where the term "Israel" is used it is to be understood as a reference to the kingdom of Judah (cf. 2:27, 3:2,16). But as Young (IOT, 256) points out, there "was in the prophecy no particular occasion for using the name of the northern kingdom, and the name of Israel belonged to the southern as well as the northern kingdom."
 - 2) There is no mention of the king, but the elders (<yn!q@Z+h^ are referred to in 1:2, 1:14, 2:16.

Comment

These arguments share the weaknesses of all such arguments from silence.

The pre-exilic prophecies of Nahum and Habbakuk also do not mention a king.

The references to the elders is common in all periods of Israel's history. In addition it is not entirely clear whether the references to "elders" in the book of Joel are references to the office or simply to older men in general (cf., esp. 2:16).

- c. The presence of so-called "apocalyptic sections" is pointed to by some (usually not by evangelical scholars) as evidence for a late date.

The term "apocalyptic" means disclosure or revelation. It is used in Rev. 1:1 and was borrowed and applied to a genre of Jewish literature. This genre flourished among the Jews from about 200 B.C. to 100 A.D. On the basis of genre classification any book containing this type of literature is considered by some scholars as necessarily late (including for example, Isaiah 24-27, The Isaiah Apocalypse).

Certain distinctions, however, must be made here between the biblical and the later non-biblical apocalyptic literature.

Harrison, IOT, 1132.

"The visionary material of Daniel has frequently been described in terms of 'apocalypticism,' which is popularly understood to have originated in Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia, and to comprise a dualistic, cosmic, and eschatological belief in two opposing cosmic powers, God and the evil one, and in two distinct ages, the present one, which is held to be under the power of evil and the future eternal age in which God will overthrow the power of evil and reign supreme with his elect under conditions of eternal righteousness. While this approach has elements in common with the thought of certain OT writers, it is important for a distinction to be drawn between Biblical and non-Biblical apocalyptic, and to avoid reading into the canonical Scriptures thought that either occurred in Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature of a subsequent period, or that was foreign to the thought of Judaism altogether. In this connection it should be noted that the prophets of Israel placed the final redemption of the elect in this world. While the new order to be established by the coming of the divine kingdom would be continuous with the present world sequences, it would be different in that suffering, violence and evil would be absent from the scene (Isa 11:6ff). This new era would be instituted by a divine visitation, and not by forces working immanently in history (Isa 26:21). The course that events would take might be revealed as part of a vision, as in Daniel and Revelation. In fact it is from the Greek word meaning disclosure that the term "apocalypse" has been derived. While developed apocalyptic writings generally contain the distinctive characteristics of dualism, determinism, pessimism about the conditions of the present age, and an ethical passivity on the part of the authors that precluded them from announcing divine judgments upon the people as did the prophets, caution should be urged in any approach to Biblical apocalyptic lest it be assumed that the visionary material in a book such as Daniel, or the non-visionary apocalyptic passage in Isaiah 24-27 is characteristic of oriental apocalypticism (underlining mine)."

The non-biblical apocalyptic arose in a time (200 BC-100 AD) when God's people were dominated by heathen rulers. This literature supposedly explained the reason for the prevalence of evil, and promised the imminent coming of the kingdom.

L. Morris points out that the apocalyptic literature is professedly revelatory, pseudonymous (that is published under assumed names) and contains much symbolism. He also notes that it is

characterized by: a) dualism, b) pessimism, c) determinism, and d) ethical passivity.

a) Dualism

An eschatological dualism involving a sharp contrast between the present age and the age to come. The present and future were seen as quite unrelated. The problem: Israel has received and kept God's law. Why then are they suffering. It can't be God's doing. The only answer is that God's ways are inscrutable. He will rectify this. But the final redemptive act has no bearing on the present. The present age is under the power of the evil one.

b) Pessimism

Pessimistic about history. God has abandoned this age to suffering and evil. That is the only possible explanation for the Jews' plight.

c) Determinism

There is little emphasis on a sovereign God who is acting in history to carry out his purposes. Rather, God Himself is awaiting the passing of the times that he has decreed.

d.) Ethical passivity

As the apocalyptic writers saw it the problem in their day was not the need for national repentance. Ethical exhortation is lacking because there is a loss of a sense of sinfulness. The problem of the apocalyptists is that Israel does keep the law and therefore is righteous, and yet is permitted to suffer. In contrast, the prophets continually appealed to Israel to repent and turn from sin to God.

See bibliography, p. 14.

Comment

There is no basis to classify Joel as apocalyptic literature of the sort that would justify using this literary type as a basis for a late date. All that can be said is that the eschatological element is prominent in the book of Joel. That in itself is no reason to date it late, particularly for those who accept the Isaianic authenticity of the "Isaiah's Little Apocalypse" (Isa 24-27) that is to be dated in the late 8th century B.C.

2. The Pre-exilic date.

The pre-exilic date is usually placed during the rule of Joash at about 835 B.C.

(J. B. Payne suggests about 735 shortly after the accession of the weak king Ahaz, but before the Assyrian advance and initial deportation of the N.K. in 733.)

Arguments:

- a. In chapter 3 the nations mentioned as enemies fit pre-exilic time better than post exilic time. Assyria and Babylon are not mentioned. This may mean it was written when they were not yet a threat. Those who are mentioned are the Phoenicians, Philistines, Egyptians and Edomites. These were the early pre-exilic enemies of Judah.
- b. The absence of any reference to a king and the prominence of the priests may point to the time when Joash as a young boy ruled under the regency of the high priest (ca 835 B.C. ff.).
- c. The position of the book in the order of the minor prophets is more in keeping with a pre-exilic date, although no decisive importance can be given to this.
- d. Sometimes the argument of parallel passages in other prophets is used for dating purposes. As said before such parallels are extremely difficult to use this way. Driver (Intro. to Lit. of OT, 312) says: "Nothing is more difficult (except under specially favorable circumstances) than from a mere comparison of parallel passages to determine on which side the priority lies." Cf. Harrison, 877.

3. Conclusion

There is no decisive basis for fixing the date of Joel. Certainly there is no urgent reason to place the book in late post-exilic time. It seems to fit in the pre-exilic time suggested, but cannot be proven with absolute certainty.