

HOW THE BOOK OF JOEL WAS PRESERVED

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Introduction

The Bible doctrine of the preservation of Scripture falls within the larger issue of authority. If God's Words have been imperfectly preserved to any degree, they are lacking that much in authority. If God's authority is diminished, the vacuum that is left will eventually be filled by another authority, whether it be human or supernatural.

Contrary to certain men's opinions, the Bible does teach both the certainty and the means of Its own preservation (Luke 16:17; Psalm 12:6-7; Deuteronomy 17:18-19). Statements to the contrary betray either a willful ignorance on the part of the exegete, or a disingenuous bias, or both. Because the Bible has been preserved, it has as much authority today as it did on the days that each one of its words, verses, and books was inscripturated during the process of inspiration.

The entire ministry of the Old Testament (OT) prophet was based upon the authority of the Word of God. Time and again these ancient preachers validated their sermons to the nation of Israel on the basis of "thus saith the LORD."¹ The authority was not in the prophet himself nor was it in the office of prophet, for there existed prophets in Israel who held no true authority because they did not preach in accordance with God's Word.² In order for the prophet to have a true ministry, at least from the LORD's standpoint, he had to speak "according to this word."³

The prophet Joel was one such minister of the LORD whose authority was based on the Word of God, not on anything less authoritative. Remarkably, Joel provides for the ninth century B.C. listener and the A.D. twenty-first century reader the very means by which the authoritative Words of Jehovah came to him, and the manner in which these Words were to be preserved.

The book of the prophet Joel opens with an introduction that functions as a summation of how the Hebrew Scriptures were preserved for subsequent generations. This opening section includes the fact of the inspiration of Scripture as well as the role and responsibility of the nation Israel in the preservation of Scripture.

¹ This phrase occurs in the English Bible some 413 times.

² The LORD gave such a warning to Jeremiah, saying, "Also I spake to the priests and to all this people, saying, Thus saith the LORD; Hearken not to the words of your prophets that prophesy unto you, saying, Behold, the vessels of the LORD's house shall now shortly be brought again from Babylon: for they prophesy a lie unto you" (Jeremiah 27:16).

³ Cf. Isaiah 8:20.

Joel 1:1 – An Example of the Inspiration of the Old Testament

“The word of the LORD that came to Joel the son of Pethuel” (Joel 1:1).

Joel opens with a phrase that occurs five other times in the OT.⁴ The phrase contextualizes the author’s respective book within the OT canon. All of the *Tanak* is the Word of Jehovah; this book is the Word of Jehovah which came to Joel.

The phrase “the word of the LORD which came” employs two very common Hebrew words. The first is דָבָר (*dabar*), the noun which corresponds to the Greek λόγος (*logos*) and which signifies not an abstract idea or concept, but a word, expression, or matter. It first occurs in Genesis 11:1, where it is translated as “speech.”

The second word is הָיָה (*hayah*), which is the Hebrew “to be” verb. This book, then, is the Word of Jehovah which was (given) to the prophet Joel. This prophecy of Joel came not by his own will, but he spake as moved by the Holy Ghost.⁵

That the prophet here uses such a general word as “came” in referring to the inspiration of his book shows the divine and miraculous nature of verbal, plenary inspiration, and illustrates how the process cannot be perfectly understood by the finite mind of man. Despite all of the theories seeking to dissect exactly how inspiration took place, the Bible believer must ultimately receive the truth of it by faith. The prophet does not say how the Word of Jehovah came to him, but he does assure the reader that It did come to him.

Joel, like all of the OT prophets, never seeks to prove the inspiration of his book to the reader. He simply declares his writing to be “the word of the LORD.” In like manner, the NT apostles did not base their preaching on eloquence or logic, but simply on the declared and declarable Word of God.⁶

Joel 1:2-3 – An Example of the Preservation of the Old Testament

“Hear this, ye old men, and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land. Hath this been in your days, or even in the days of your fathers?” (Joel 1:2).

Joel begins his sermon with the imperative “hear this.”⁷ The demonstrative pronoun “this” ultimately extends to the entire book of Joel, which the prophet no doubt delivered as a series of sermons. The nation of Israel, beginning with the elders, was responsible to hear, that is, give ear⁸ to the Word of God. This hearing would, of course, first necessitate the declaring of the Word of God by the prophet. It seems, then, that the first step in the process of preservation involved the declaring

⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 14:1, 47:1, 49:34, Hosea 1:1, and Micah 1:1.

⁵ Cf. II Peter 1:21. The Holy Spirit was intimately involved in the preaching and inscripturating of what would become the book of Joel.

⁶ Paul told the church at Corinth, “And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God” (I Corinthians 2:1).

⁷ This is the Qal imperative שְׁמַעוּ, which doubtless would have reminded the Jewish audience of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.”

⁸ The NT is replete with examples of the Lord Jesus Christ giving command to those who have ears or an ear to hear what He or the Holy Spirit has to say.

of the inspired Word of God by one person to another. In this case it was the prophet Joel declaring the Word of God to the old men and inhabitants of the land.⁹

The phrase, “in your days, or even in the days of your fathers,” is a literary device which Joel uses to draw his listeners’ attention back in history. Joel is challenging his listeners to recall the darkest day which they have in their memories or have ever heard of, and to realize that it cannot compare to the day of the LORD which is to come.

“Tell ye your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.” (Joel 1:3).

Joel follows up the first command to hear with a second command to tell. This is an intensive¹⁰ imperative from סָפַר (*sahfar*), used in the sense of accurate recounting. From this Hebrew root comes the word “book.”¹¹ The prophet told the Jews to “book it.”¹² Joel’s use of this verb was no doubt instruction to his listeners to write down his words to insure their accurate transmission to subsequent generations.¹³ This is another expansive statement in Joel for literary purposes.¹⁴

Practically speaking, Joel has made reference to five generations; two in the past (“your days,” “days of your fathers”) and three in the future (“your children,” “their children,” “another generation”). The implication is that Joel’s audience, comprised of the elders of Israel but including all the inhabitants of the land, was given the responsibility, both here and now, to transmit accurately Joel’s words to at least the following three¹⁵ generations of Israelites.

Conclusion

The transmission of the text of OT Scripture, specifically the book of Joel, is clearly seen in Joel 1:1-3. The Words of Jehovah, forever settled in heaven,¹⁶ came to the prophet Joel through the process of inspiration. He faithfully proclaimed the Words to the LORD’s people, the nation of Israel, instructing the people first to hear the Words, and secondly to record the Words¹⁷ for their subsequent generations. By adhering to this practice, the Jewish nation would have preserved, in an intact form, accurate copies of the *Tanak* for each generation, and consequently the prophets such as Joel would speak with as much authority as they did on the day they first preached.

The Apostle Paul, affirming that “unto them (Israel) were committed the oracles (λόγια) of God” (Romans 3:2), may have had passages such as Joel 1:1-3 in mind, for it perfectly illustrates his above assertion to the Roman churches. This OT example in the book of Joel is one illustration of how God perfectly preserved His text of Scripture through the instrument of His ordained institution. In

⁹ The definite noun אֶרֶץ is referring to the promised land, the borders of which are delineated in Genesis 15:18.

¹⁰ This is the *Piel* stem, which signifies intensified action.

¹¹ The NT book of Matthew begins with the word “book.”

¹² The word order is, “of it to your children tell, and your children their children, and their children the generation after.”

¹³ The first book mentioned in the OT is Adam’s book of his generations in Genesis 5:1. By inscripturating material which subsequent writers, such as Moses, could make use of, Adam became the first man to take part in the process of preservation.

¹⁴ The Lord Jesus Christ used a similar expansive statement to His NT church in Matthew 10:27 where He said, “What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.”

¹⁵ The use of three generations here may speak of completion or fullness.

¹⁶ Cf. Psalm 119:89. The exegete will recognize that the ׀ preposition does not necessarily need to be taken in a locative sense, but can be taken instrumentally. The LORD’s Word is settled both in heaven and by heaven.

¹⁷ As the verb סָפַר implies, this accurate recording necessitated writing, eventually becoming a book.

the OT, Israel held the responsibility. In the NT, the local church has been given the commission to teach immersed disciples “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”¹⁸

Though God omnisciently oversees the preservation of His Words, He has given the responsibility to His people, that He might be glorified through their obedience. If the LORD were writing a book about your church, could He say that the members of it are faithfully hearing and telling all of the Words of God?

¹⁸ The “Great Commission or local church-planting commission of Matthew 28:18-20, includes the responsibility to preserve the Words of the OT and the NT.