

IV. Christianity

Theological themes from the book of Joel provided a foundation for the apostolic testimony concerning the Holy Spirit's work in the church. Furthermore, Christian authors saw in the book a prefiguration of the universalization of God's redemption in Jesus Christ. From the patristic age to today, the book has provided an occasion to reflect upon the experiences of loss, destruction, and injustice and the associated longing for divinely orchestrated justice, peace, and prosperity (cf. Joel 2:19–27). Throughout Christian history, the book has also been drawn upon when making theological arguments for raising the status of women in the church.

Joel's despairing account of the destruction of the locusts and invading army (whether figurative or realistic) was a point of reference for many church fathers. Theodore of Cyrus lamented the raping of women and pillaging of an Alexandrian church by villains. Even at the altar, these impious men had "perpetrated the very things that, as Joel had prophesied, were never heard of and had never happened before in the days of our fathers" (*Hist. eccl.* 4.19; cf. Joel 1:2). For Gregory the Great, however, the returning swarms of locusts are to be understood as "carnal thoughts" that overtake one another with ever greater degrees of corruption (*Moral.* 6.33.65; cf. Joel 1:4; so also Chrysostom). Like many patristic sources, Gregory saw the "day of the Lord" (2:1) as a prophecy of Jesus Christ's second coming "in judgment" (*ibid.*, 3.17.54).

Peter's reference to Joel's prophecy, that God would pour out the Spirit "on all flesh" (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28; here and following, emphasis mine) for

"everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32), and Paul's verbatim citation of the same verse at Rom 10:13, in the context of his argument that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him" (Rom 10:12), provided a foundation for much of the patristic reception of Joel and echoed into the later Christian reception. To Joel 2:28 ("I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh"), Cyril of Jerusalem taught that "the Holy Spirit is no respecter of persons, for he seeks no dignities but piety of soul. Let neither the rich be puffed up nor the poor be dejected, but only let each prepare himself for reception of the heavenly gift" (*Catechetical Lecture* 27.19). With Cyril the passage is thus read as opposing divisions between people that have been caused by their economic standings. In another regard, it was drawn upon to overcome established conception of women and their exclusion from ministry in the church. Indeed, this passage from Joel is perhaps one of the most important passages from the Old Testament which has been drawn upon by women and men as they theologically challenged the exclusion of women from ministry. The Montanists drew upon Joel to criticize various aspects of the church of their day. They saw the church as overlooking the Spirit's work in their time and failing to acknowledge that the Spirit was working with "women no less than men" (Trevett: 195).

Among many other annotations at Joel 2:28–32 in the very influential medieval collection of glosses (*Glossa Ordinaria*), cross-reference is made to Gal. 3:28 and the universal nature of salvation (*omnes qui credunt unum sunt in christo*, "all who believe are one in Christ"). The centrality of the book to the Christian church was also emphasized by Martin Luther. In his widely read *Preface to Joel* (*Vorrede auf den Propheten Joel*) he claimed, with reference to the Petrine reception, that Joel "gave the first sermon" in the Christian church.

The Anabaptists (such as Melchior Hoffman) often referred to Joel 2:28–29 ("your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ... I will pour out my Spirit on the male and female servants") in their arguments for raising the status of women in the church (Snyder/Hecht: 279). In German Pietism, with August Hermann Francke and Philipp Jacob Spener, the same verses provided a central theological foundation for a new focus on dreams, visions, and prophecy. This line of interpretation is carried forward with the later Pentecostal reception of Joel. The Pentecostal girl evangelist Uldine Utley, for example, drew upon this passage from Joel in the 1920s as she provided a defense of her ministry (Robinson/Ruff: 41).

The early modern emphasis on the *sensus literalis* comes to expression in Matthew Poole's *Annotations* (vol. 2, 1685). In line with John Calvin's literal and

historical reading, here the “latter rain” (Joel 2:23) is literal rain, “needful to bring forward and ripen the fruits planted or sown.” The “swords” in “beat your plowshares into swords” (Joel 3:10) are simply “a prediction of war” and Joel’s “let the weak say I am strong” (3:10) means, according to Poole, “let none be absent from this war.” By contrast, with John Cassian (with reference to Heb 10:36), the “swords” are “that patience of which it is said, ‘Patience is necessary for you so that you may do the will of God and receive a reward’” (*Conferences* 7.5).

With other prophets (including Zachariah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel, and Isaiah), Joel is featured in the Sistine Chapel. He was placed across from the Delphic Sibyl who symbolizes the prophetic witness to Christian redemption history in pagan literature. While the “trumpet of Zion” (Joel 2:1) is a favorite theme in sacred music, a survey of contemporary sermon preparation literature (e.g., the German *Predigtstudie*, the *Göttinger Predigtmeditationen*, or the popular online-resource “Sermon Central”) shows that Joel offers Christian preachers an opportunity to expound upon the work of the Spirit in the church, God’s faithfulness and justice, the need for human repentance, the equality of men and women and the universality of Jesus Christ’s salvific work.

Bibliography: ■ Ferreiro, A. (ed.), *The Twelve Prophets* (ACCSOT 14; Downers Grove, Ill. 2003). [Esp.57–82] ■ *Biblia latina cum glossa ordinaria*, vol. 3 (ed. A. Rusch; Strasbourg 1480). ■ Trevett, C., *Montanism* (Cambridge 1995). ■ Robinson, T. A./L. D. Ruff, *Out of the Mouths of Babes: Girl Evangelists in the Flapper Era* (Oxford 2012). ■ Snyder, C. A./L. A. Huebert Hecht (eds.), *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, Ont. 1996).

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