

An investigation into the use of Israel’s “historical traditions” in Joel 1:2-20¹

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Abstract

The text of Joel 1:2-20 presents the reader with a unique, albeit challenging, perspective on an unprecedented disaster – a locust plague (and a subsequent drought) as the harbinger of the *Yom YHWH* (Day of the LORD). In his own unique way the author of Joel portrays this calamity by appealing to the ancient community’s knowledge of their professed historical (and theological) traditions. In particular, he distinctly emphasizes four of these traditions namely Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and Promised Land. Approaching the text in this manner, from the perspective of Israel’s historical traditions (and thus drawing on the work done by Gerhard von Rad), it is explained that the emphasis falls on a twofold textual focus (explicitly and implicitly): primarily on divine judgement, but conversely also on YHWH’s saving blessings.

Keywords

The Book of Joel; Joel 1:2-20; locust plague – drought; Day of the LORD (Yom YHWH); Israel’s historical traditions; Heilsgeschichte; creation; Exodus; Sinai; The Promised Land; divine judgement – salvation

1. Introduction²

Living in the 21st century developed world, most people cannot begin to fathom the ferocity and devastation that a swarm of locusts can have on a field of crops and subsequently on a particular society. In a time before

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pesticides, these occurrences not only resulted in an economic disaster, but also threatened the very existence of a given community (cf. Allen 1976:36; Birch 1997:127). In this regard, the Book of Joel provides a unique – albeit challenging – perspective on the “natural disaster”. Prinsloo (1985:27) explains that such a plague affects everyone and everything – no sphere of life escapes this calamity. However, since there was such a close relation between agriculture and religion for these people, this specific event carried much more significance (cf. Prinsloo 1985:27; Baker 2006:61). For the prophet Joel, this event specifically points the way to the impending coming of the *Yom YHWH* (Prinsloo 1990:7). The unique portrayal of this calamity will take centre stage in this paper.

Approaching the text from the perspective of Israel’s historical traditions can yield fruitful insights into the particular community’s understanding of the events of their times. The “historical traditions” are paradigmatic theological views about YHWH’s acts of salvation, which have their foundation in the history of his people, Israel (cf. Von Rad 1985:106; Deist 1987:24; Snyman 1996:546).³ The use of these traditions in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as a whole affirms that pre-existing elements from the biblical author’s intellectual world have an influence on the content of a given text (cf. Steck 1998:122). Moreover, it emphasises that a text does not stand in isolation from other texts and/or textual units (cf. Snyman 1996:545-546). Drawing on the work done by Gerhard von Rad and the notion of *Heilsgeschichte* (cf. Deist 1987:24; Routledge 2008:35-37), Snyman (1996:546) point out that the interpreter will generally come to find one (or more) of the following traditions in the text: Creation, Patriarchs, Exodus, Wilderness, Sinai, Promised Land, David and Zion.⁴

3 The consulted literature refers to these ‘traditions’ in a variety of ways: “salvation history” (e.g. Deist 1987), “tradition material” (e.g. Snyman 1996), and/or “tradition history” (e.g. Steck 1998).

4 Unfortunately the scope of this article does not allow for a detailed discussion of Von Rad’s continued relevance. In brief, however, one can acknowledge that Von Rad’s emphasis on a particular understanding of history is what (still) makes him an important figure (cf. Labuschagne & Le Roux 2012:4-5). Perhaps most influential (sometimes implicitly so) is Von Rad’s views concerning “re-interpretation” and “actualisation” as it relates to the history of Ancient Israel and the modern interpreter’s understanding of said history (cf. Le Roux 2012:7-8).

In plotting the possible historical traditions utilized by the author of Joel 1:2-20, Prinsloo (1985:35ff) refers to the “tradition” of the Day of the LORD (הוהי מו). He argues that the mention of “fire” (אש) and “flame” (הבהל) in verses 19-20 serves to accentuate the concept. Accordingly, the aim is to use “standard images to proclaim judgement and destruction” (Prinsloo 1985:37). Contrary to Prinsloo, Snyman (2000:113) rightly points out that the *Yom YHWH* “cannot be considered as a tradition” in the historical sense of the word.⁵ Rather, the *Yom YHWH* must be seen as an important theme (a “geprägte Thema” as Snyman puts it).⁶ Even though it does not qualify as a historical tradition, the interpreter should nonetheless appreciate that no theme plays a bigger role in the Book of Joel (cf. Wolff 1977:12). Jeremias (2012:77), for example, notes “The one and only subject of the book of Joel is the ‘Day of the Lord.’” Stuart (1987: 230), in turn, explains, “...this concept is so prominent in Joel that it may be likened to an engine driving the prophecy.”

2. Problem-statement and methodology

given the discussion up to this point, the question remains whether there are discernible allusions to one or more of the abovementioned historical traditions in the text of Joel 1:2-20. In approaching this specific problem, the methodology followed firstly entails a focus on an overview of the structure and content of the text. Hereafter, the focus shifts to the particular *Gattung* and *Sitz im Leben* of the text, with the aim of placing the text within a meaningful socio-historical framework. This serves the purpose of familiarizing the modern reader and/or interpreter with the author’s contextual setting and that of his (possible) intended audience. Finally, the text is parsed for possible references (whether that be implicit or explicit) to the supposed historical traditions, and/or any sort of (re)interpretation

5 Here some scholars refer to the *Yom YHWH* as a “prophetic tradition”. To some extent this assertion is an accurate one, but the interpreter must still distinguish it from a “historical tradition”. While there are select instances where the prophets connect the *Yom YHWH* to events in the past (e.g. the Babylonian exile; cf. Snyman 2000:114), history is not the *sine qua non* of this “day”.

6 The interpreter can also distinguish ‘traditions’ and ‘themes’ from each other in terms of their pervasiveness. In other words, the use of historical traditions occurs throughout the whole of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, while the use of themes such as the *Yom YHWH* is more selective in nature.

of said traditions (cf. Von Rad 1985:106; Snyman 1996:546; Steck 1998:123-124; Routledge 2008:36).

Scouring a text or texts for the use of the “historical traditions” is, of course, by no means a new approach to the exegetical study of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, though this approach remains under-utilized when it comes to the Book of Joel. It is notable that only Prinsloo (1985) explicitly mentions the approach as part of his methodology. Others, in turn, scarcely treat the possible allusions to earlier historical events as more than mere intertextual notes.⁷ Breaking down the text into a number of textual units, Prinsloo (1985:12-38) presents the following analysis: (1) No notable allusions and/or references to traditions in the strophes that make up Joel 1:2-14. (2) In Joel 1:15-20 there is the “tradition” of the *Yom YHWH* and the notion of theophany, which serves to accentuate the tradition.⁸ In the present author’s view, however, it is possible to cast an even wider net to include more of the tradition-material, specifically the traditions of Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and the Promised Land.

3. A brief overview of the structure and content of the text

as a whole, the pericope of Joel 1:2-20 broadly divides into two units of 1:2-14 and 1:15-20 (Garrett 1997:310). Furthermore, the textual unit of 1:2-14 divides into two more subunits namely 1:2-4 and 1:5-14.

3.1. Joel 1:2-14

joel 1:2-4 commences with a “general call to attention” (cf. Crenshaw 1995:84; Finley 2003:24) directed at “the elders” (מִיִּנְקָזָה) as well as to “all those who dwell in the land” (כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי־הָאָרֶץ). Allen (1976:48) explains that the author “begins in typically prophetic style with imperative verbs of hearing” (וְנִזְאָרוּ, וְעָמְשׁוּ). Subsequently, the author employs rhetorical questions to create the desired effect in light of the current calamity (Allen

7 The notion of intertextuality proves to be a prominent one in the Book of Joel as a whole given the propensity of the book’s author to quote from/allude to earlier material. Marcus (1994:56) notes, “In this short book, which has only seventy-three verses, there are forty direct parallels of phraseology with twelve other biblical books.”

8 Concerning Prinsloo’s reference to the *Yom YHWH* as a “tradition”, see the discussion and evaluation in the Introduction of this paper.

1976:48; Ogden 1987:19). The prophet aims to convey the message that this event is unparalleled in its nature, which creates the expectancy that the people will tell of it to the generations that follow (1:3; cf. Finley 2003:24-25; Simundson 2005:127). The first subunit concludes in verse 4, where “the prophet comes to the substance of the matter” (Wolff, 1977:20) – the ferocity of the locust plague, and the all-encompassing effect it has had on the land.⁹

The subunit of Joel 1:5-14 consists of four strophes (Wolff 1977:20), which each addresses a particular group in society which (in some way or another) has felt the effects of the locust plague (Birch 1997:136; Hubbard 2009:46).

Verses 5-7

The author first addresses the “drunkards” (מִירוֹכֵשׁ) and “drinkers of wine” (וַיִּיִּתְשֶׁלֶכְךָ). In turning his attention to this group, he strings together consecutive imperatives – “wake up!” (וַצִּיקָהּ), “weep!” (וַכְּבוּ), “wail!” (וַלְלִיהוּ) – to repeatedly emphasize the seriousness of the situation (Prinsloo 1985:21). This is, however, not a matter of alcoholism (or the judgement thereof), but the concern is rather a “paucity of produce” (Finley 2003:28; cf. Barton 2001:50). The reason for this “paucity” is elaborated on in verses 6-7, where the locust plague is first described as an invading army (1:6a) – “mighty and innumerable” (רַפְסָם וַיֵּאוּ מוֹצֵעַ) – and then equated with the ferocity of a lion and lioness in the wild (1:6b; cf. Achtemeier 1996:308). Finally, as verse 7 suggests, this “terrible force” has destroyed everything in its path, leaving nothing behind (cf. Crenshaw 1995:113) – “Joel saw that the locusts had left the land in a pathetic state” (Garrett 1997:319).

Verses 8-10

Next the focus turns to an unnamed feminine entity only addressed as a “virgin” (הַלֹּוֹתָב), which may be a reference to the city of Jerusalem (cf. Crenshaw 1995:97; Achtemeier 1996:308; Garrett 1997:320). Stuart (1987:243) explains that the prophet depicts this situation in such a way as to emphasize the “bitter disappointment” of the occasion. Instead of a time

9 This study follows the reading of a literal locust plague which the author portrays by way of synonymous parallelism to emphasize the vastness of the destruction wreaked on the land. Concerning the rhetorical purpose cf. Allen 1976:49-50; Barton 2001:42.

of joy, it will be a time of “sackcloth, lamentation, pathos, and tragedy” (Dillard 2009:261). This image extends to the priests who have been left to mourn being “cut-off” (תרכה) from YHWH (cf. Garrett 1997:320-321). To be certain, the prophet’s critique is not meant for the priests and the cult (cf. Prinsloo 1990:25; Achtemeier 1996:309), because the image runs deeper to include the “fields” (הדש) and the “ground” (המדא), which mourns the cessation of the sacrificial products (1:10). As the “virgin” mourns the death of a loved one, so Jerusalem mourns her own unparalleled loss (Watts 2008:19; cf. Ogden 1987:21; Patterson 2008:320).

Verses 11-12

Here the author turns his attention to the “farmers” (מירכא) and “vinedressers” (מימרכ). These verses focus primarily on the effects of the disaster on the agricultural economy (Garrett 1997:322; cf. Hays 2010:278). Now, however, the people seemingly also have to deal with a drought and its effects on the land (Stuart 1987:243). “Wheat” (הטח); “barley” (הרעש); “vine” (ופג); “fig tree” (הנאט); “pomegranate” (וומר); “palm tree” (רמת), “apple tree” (חופת), and essentially “all trees of the field” (הדשה יצע-לכ) suffer because of the current calamity (cf. Hubbard 2009:51). The joy that there should have been with the (anticipated) harvest, has given way to the shame and sorrow of failure (Wolff 1977:32; Finley 2003:31). As Achtemeier (1996:309) writes: “...like the crops, joy too is dried up.” This drought is, however, not an isolated event, but occurs in unison with the locust plague, so to intensify the “assault” on the land (cf. Simkins 1993:442).

Verses 13-14

Although the author previously mentioned the priests, in verse 9, Finley (2003:32) explains that this strophe focuses specifically on them as a group. He further notes that the command to “come at night in sackcloth” (ואב וניל מיקשב) again indicates the seriousness of the situation. By focussing on the priests, the author looks to the religious leaders to set the example for the rest of the nation (cf. Allen 1976:58; Achtemeier 1996:312). Consequently, the priests’ mourning practice should motivate them into national mourning and lamentation – “gather the elders and all those who dwell in the land” (1:14). In this regard, Crenshaw (1995:114) emphasizes the “...urgent insistence on a course of action...” Patterson (2008:323) aptly explains that, “The call for national fasting is... an extraordinary event. But

dreadful times call for decisive measures.” This communal lamentation prepares the way towards the recognition of the impending *Yom YHWH* (Wolff 1977:33), thus bridging the first and second units of Joel 1:2-14 and 1:15-20.

3.2. Joel 1:15-20

While the first unit of verses 2-14 serves as a call to lament to various groups in society, verses 15-20 essentially provide “a summary of the content of their cry” (Dillard 2009:266). The unit opens (1:15) with the interjection *אֵיִהוּ* (“alas!”) demonstrating a strong sense of “concern and woe” (Baker 2006:52) in light of the current calamity. This is followed by the repetition of “day” (*יוֹם*) and the double wordplay in the terms *כְּשֹׁד* (“and like destruction”) and *מִיִּדְּיָהוָה* (“from the Almighty”) (cf. Patterson 2008:323). True to the author’s own unique style of composition, this play on words stresses the dismay and seriousness associated with the coming of the *Yom YHWH* (cf. Allen 1976:30-61; Finley 2003:37; Baker 2006:52). Sweeney (2000:160) explains that the aim is to drive home “[the] point that YHWH is the source of the calamity.” Finally, Van der Merwe and Wendland (2010:120) explain that,

“The addressees are dismayed since they are actually witnessing the catastrophe, namely, the discourse active event of things being cut off, already mentioned in 1:5d and 1:9a.”

Verses 16-18 provide the content of the people’s cry and by way of rhetorical question (1:16), the author emphasizes what the *Yom YHWH* truly has in store for the people and the land (cf. Sweeney 2000:160; Braaten 2006:118). In doing so, the author paves the way towards the reiteration of the calamity and its effects (1:17-18). Not only are there consequences for the people of the land, the author also mentions that the animals are suffering as a consequence (1:18; cf. Allen 1976:62; Crenshaw 1995:109; Baker 2006:54-55). Verses 19-20 conclude the pericope of Joel 1:2-20 by adding the personal voice of the prophet to that of the community (Stuart 1987:245). Again, the animals are mentioned as the pericope comes full circle; “all the inhabitants of the land” (1:2, 14) – not only humans, but the animals as well – are longing for YHWH to change their situation.

4. The *gattung* and *sitz im leben* of Joel 1:2-20

4.1. *Gattung*

Apart from the general call to attention (1:2-4; see above), some commentators argue that the first part of the pericope may be identified as an *Aufruf zur Volksklage* (“call to communal lamentation”), while 1:15-20 contains different fragments and portions of lamentation (cf. Wolff 1977:20-22; Prinsloo 1985:25-26, 34; Redditt 2008:231). However, together with Stuart (1987:239-240) this study accepts the main (and overarching) *Gattung* of the entire pericope as a “call to communal lamentation.” According to Prinsloo (1985:25), this *Gattung* usually consist of imperatives, accompanied by vocatives and a substantiation of the *Aufruf* (usually through the ו' clause), all of which feature prominently in the pericope. In this regard, the *Aufruf zur Volksklage* may be divided into three parts: the details of the disaster (1:2-4), the call to specific groups in society (1:5-14) and the lament itself (1:15-20) (cf. Barton 2001:14).

The priests must call the people to assemble at the temple where they are to follow certain rituals associated with lamentation before YHWH (cf. Simundson 2005:121; Watson, 2012:114-115). Watson (2012:115) comments that such “cultic measures underscore the distress and affliction of the petitioners and make visible the pain and anguish...” Here the cult officials are expected to take the lead and provide an example that the people must follow as they “intercede with God on behalf of the people that are experiencing [the] calamity” (Redditt 2008:231). All these elements contribute to a strengthening of the liturgical character of the text and the book as a whole (cf. Watts 2008:12). Pertaining to its *Gattung*, some scholars would therefore argue for a penitential liturgy (cf. Crenshaw 1995:35), although this proves to be a complicated matter, as the text never mentions the sins of the people.

Additionally, interweaved in the text are a number of different elements usually found in Hebrew poetry, all of which may be seen as contributing to the focus of the “call to communal lamentation.” Baker (2006:27) comments that, “Joel is written mainly in poetry... As such, it uses language carefully and for effect” (cf. Bullock 2007:391-393). The various poetic elements that the author makes use of include (among others): parallelism (e.g. 1:2), repetition (e.g. 1:4), metaphors and similes (e.g. 1:6, 8), and alliteration (the

Hebrew text of 1:15) (cf. Crenshaw 1995:37-38; Garrett 1997:294-295; Baker 2006:27).

Finally, in a discussion of the *Gattung* of this particular text, it may also be helpful to keep in mind the hortatory nature of the prophetic books. Clendenen (2003:388) asserts that a hortatory discourse consists of three semantic elements: (1) “the situation that needs to be changed”, (2) “the change being called for” and (3) “the arguments or factors used to motivate that change.” According to him, this element of motivation behind the hortatory discourse can be either positive or negative. Joel never mentions the situation that needs to change, but Clendenen (2003:395) is of the opinion that the author depends on Israel’s “knowledge of their tradition concerning repentance.” Within the framework of the *Aufruf zur Volksklage*, it may be that the purpose is to “shock” the people into changing their ways (cf. Clendenen 2003:387-388).

4.2. *Sitz im Leben*

There is little to no evidence to support a comfortable and confident reconstruction of the historical and social setting of the prophet Joel, with a number of factors that complicate the matter.

Firstly, Joel’s canonical position in the Hebrew Bible does not provide any significant insight to its historical and/or social setting. Earlier on, scholars often assumed that this placement puts Joel in a pre-exilic context (Garrett 1997:290; Barton 2001:4). However, such views prove to be problematic as there are different renderings to the order of the Twelve – Joel is second in the Masoretic text, but fourth in the LXX. Contemporary scholarship understands the Masoretic placement to be due to a thematic relationship with Amos and Hosea (cf. Rendtorff 2011:275-279). Consequently, Jeremias (2012:77) refers to Joel as “a kind of hermeneutical key to the Twelve.” However, it should be noted that this view focusses largely on Joel’s relationship with Amos, while the relationship with Hosea is not as evident (cf. Coggins 2003:90). The reader should not construe the book’s canonical placement in anyway as indicative of chronology (cf. Garrett 1997:290; Baker 2006:24-25).

Secondly and closely related to the first argument, pertaining to the dating of the text, Joel 1:1 merely states that what follows is the “word of the LORD

that came to Joel son of Pethuel” (NRSV). The name “Joel” means “YHWH is God” and he is the son of a Pethuel who remains unknown outside of the text (cf. Nogalski 2011:216). Other than this, the text provides no other significant details; not even the mention of a king or kings (Hays 2010:276; Nogalski 2011:216). This could possibly mean that the original recipients of the message were well familiar with the prophet and/or required no additional details on the matter (Kim 2012:212). These difficulties aside; there might be some internal references that contribute to a post-exilic dating of Joel (cf. Crenshaw 1995:23-28; Redditt 2008:229; Kim 2012:212-213).¹⁰ Situating the text somewhere in the historical timeframe of 515–343 BCE seems plausible (cf. Simundson 2005:123; Limburg 2011:58).

Finally, the silence on the sins of the people proves problematic for an understanding of the text’s *Sitz im Leben*. Assis (2011:164) explains that the significance of this matter for the study of the *Sitz im Leben* lies therein that, “What the prophet has to say is usually a reaction to specific realities of his times.” In the ancient world, there was the conviction that natural disasters signified divine judgement (cf. Simkins 1994:42-43; Watson 2012:125). This too seems to be the case in Joel 1:2-20, as the author relates the locust plague to the coming of the *Yom YHWH*. However, there is no call to penitence in Joel 1, only in Joel 2:12-13. Despite this call to repentance, the author refrains from mentioning any transgressions on the part of the people (cf. Simkins 1994:42; McConville 2002:156). Consequently, Simkins (1994:42-43) remarks,

“Evidently, it was sufficient for Joel’s purpose merely to call the people to return to Yahweh, and consequently, to offer the hope that the terrible catastrophe – the day of Yahweh – would be averted.

Perhaps this was sufficient for the people, Joel’s original audience, as well. After all, in the midst of suffering the struggle for deliverance often overrides any need for justification.”

In this regard, the interpreter may consider two factors: (1) the book’s affinities with the Sinai covenant, and (2) its liturgical character. In terms

10 These internal references include, but are not limited to: the positive emphasis on the cult; allusions to atrocities committed during the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile; the presupposition of a functioning temple and temple services; the allusion to/quotation of earlier texts, etc.

of the text's relation to the covenant instituted at Mount Sinai, it creates the perception that YHWH was punishing his people for not adhering to the covenant stipulations (cf. Stuart 1987:228-229; Hays 2010:277). Such an assumption accords with the ancient view that natural disasters signified divine judgement. In addition to this notion there is an appreciation for the text's liturgical character (cf. Ogden 1987:8; Dillard 2009:243; Nogalski 2011:207-208). Taken together, the lack of rebuke might serve the purpose of presenting the prophet's audience with the room to understand their own experience within the greater scheme of things still to come (cf. Simkins 1994:44). It is possible that the people were in fact not guilty of any offences, though according to their own understanding of YHWH and the natural world, this would have been their interpretation of the situation. The best possible reaction in this regard would be to go to the temple in lamentation, and call out to YHWH for deliverance.

Considering all these various factors, it seems plausible to identify the *Sitz im Leben* of Joel 1:2-20 as an agricultural and cultic community in post-exilic Judah (somewhere in the historical timeframe of 515–343 BCE), after the rebuilding of the temple. Following their return from exile, these people now constitute a small part of the mighty Persian Empire, and stand under the rule of “theocratic leadership” (cf. Wolff 1977:5; Crenshaw 1995:28). Unfortunately for this community, the locust plague (and subsequent drought) that confronted them posed an all-encompassing threat. Patterson (2008:313) explains,

“Not only is the basic economy of the country disrupted, but all levels of society are deeply affected. Worst of all, the agricultural loss threatens the continuance of the sacrificial offerings, the central feature of the religious ceremony.”

Perpetually mending from the exile and the sense of ruin it entailed embedded in their collective memory, such an event no doubt would have been a traumatic one (cf. Ogden 1987:14).

5. Traces of Israel's “historical traditions” in Joel 1:2-20

In light of this socio-historical framework, the attention henceforth shifts to the implicit and/or explicit allusions to Israel's historical traditions found in the text. As mentioned in the introduction, this article identifies the use

of four specific historical traditions, namely Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and Promised Land.

5.1. Creation

When speaking of the Creation tradition in Joel 1:2-20, various factors may be considered. Firstly, the text refers to a great variety of “earthly” elements, which also includes mention of animals that suffer because of the calamity. Braaten (2006:116) explains that the author’s summons to the elders and “all inhabitants of the land” (לְכָל יְבוֹשֵׁי הָאָרֶץ; cf. 1:2, 14) may include the Earth and other non-human entities. Baker (2006:55) aptly explains this relationship when he writes: “There is no dichotomy in Israel between humanity and nature; all life suffers together.” Garrett (1997:331) concludes his commentary on the pericope by stating,

“This portrayal of starvation and drought gives the reader a sense that creation itself is dying. The ‘good’ order of seedtime and harvest (Gen 1:14-18; 8:22) has been disrupted; and the variety of plants, creeping things, and beasts is receding into a chaos of dust and death.”

Secondly and closely related to the first point, Baker (2006:48) explains that the cessation of the sacrificial products that affects the ground (*’adāmā*), the Earth, ultimately affects “the source of humanity itself” (cf. Gen 2:7). Joel portrays the relationship between humans and the land/ground as intimately related (cf. Finley 2003:32). In this regard, Crenshaw (1995:114) notes that the reference to the “sons of man” (בְּנֵי אָדָם) in verse 12 is “possibly echoing the ancient tradition that [humans] were fashioned from dust and eventually will return to the ground, *’adāmā*.” In doing so, Crenshaw (1995:102) explains that the author brings together “those who are interrelated, the ground and human beings [who] derive from it and depend on its gift for survival.”

Finally, a third factor, explicated by Dillard (2009:258), notices that by using the images of “my land” (אֶרֶץ), “my vine” (כַּנֶּבֶשׂ), and “my fig tree” (אֵיל תְּנָאִת) (cf. 1:6-7), the author brings the reader “into the realm of paradise imagery.” Moreover, in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible these elements usually depict peace and prosperity, but now they are part of the uninviting association that comes with the calamity of the locust plague (cf. Allen 1976:52; Barton 2001:51; Finley 2003:29). Dillard (2009:258) continues,

“God had planted a garden in Eden, and he had also planted his vine in the land of Israel (Is 5:1-7; Ezek 15; 17); it was God who saw to the fertility of both. The locust plague represents the undoing of the paradisiacal abundance of God’s garden...”

5.2. Exodus

Following the Creation tradition, the locust plague in Joel 1 also shows a close affinity with the locust plague found in the Exodus-tradition (cf. Sweeney 2000:154). McConville (2002:155) notes that the particular phrasing of Joel 1:2 seem to mirror that of Exodus 10:6 and 10:14 “which refer to the locust-plague in Egypt leading up to the exodus” (cf. Dillard 2009:271; Hubbard 2009:44-45). Moreover, both authors use the word **הברא** to describe the locusts (see for example Ex 10:4; as in Joel 1:4). Accordingly, as is the case with Joel 1:6, Exodus 10:14 depicts the locust plague as immeasurable (cf. Crenshaw, 1995:96; Dillard 2009:258). In reference to this element of innumerability (**אינסוף**), the author of Joel adds the concept of unmatched strength (**מוצט**, cf. Crenshaw 1995:96). In a dramatic reinterpretation of the tradition, Judah and Jerusalem face the calamity sent by YHWH, and not the Egyptians from who they were once delivered – they are “the victims of YHWH’s actions” (cf. Sweeney 2000:154; Dillard 2009:271).

5.3. Sinai

The incorporation of the Sinai tradition is less conspicuous in Joel 1:2-20 given that the text does not explicitly mention the covenant, Sinai, and/or Moses. There are, however, a few implicit factors to consider. The first, and main, point of convergence between Joel 1:2-20 and the covenant lie in the prophet’s understanding of the locusts and drought. While Joel draws on the locust plague of Exodus, the locusts together with the drought also corresponds with the covenantal curses set out in the Pentateuch. In this regard, Brueggemann (1997:373) notes,

“The most complete catalogs of such curses, to which Israel has ostensibly agreed in its covenant oath at Sinai, are presented in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28...”

In reference to Leviticus 26, Hyman (2011:222) writes of the Joel text “the locusts and the drought are examples of what the Lord can do when the people break the covenant...” In turn, Clendenen (2003:395-396) draws on Deuteronomy 28 to explain why the prophet does not mention the people’s sins:

“Yahweh had taught Israel through Moses that failure to obey him and to follow his law would mean deprivation, barrenness, failure, ruin, loss, disease, drought, defeat, disappointment, frustration, death, sorrow, exile, shame, and locusts...”

Hays (2010:276-277) explains that the reason Joel does not explicitly mention the covenant is that he assumes his audience are well-aware that they have been disobedient, therefore “...Joel skips over listing many covenant violations and simply focuses on the resultant curse...” According to Hyman (2011:221), the underlying belief of the prophet is that the people needed “to strengthen their relationship with the Lord pursuant to the covenant they made with the Lord at Mount Sinai...” In this regard, Joel’s proclamation is similar to that of his prophetic counterparts, as Birch *et al.* (2005:305) notes: “[The prophets] challenge Israel to reflect upon their covenantal roots and to acknowledge the dire consequences of Israelite life lived apart from that theological grounding.”

The second point of convergence is to some extent related to the first. The concept of “theophany” in Joel’s portrayal of the impending *Yom YHWH* also links the text to the Sinai tradition, especially in the use of the familiar elements “fire” (אש) and “flame” (להבה) in verses 19-20 (cf. Wolff 1977:35; Prinsloo 1985:37; Dillard 2009:268-269). In the context of Joel 1:2-20 the theophany, God’s presence in the *Yom YHWH* (1:15), signifies His divine judgement on those who have violated the covenant stipulations (Stuart 1987:245; Dillard 2009:268-269). This in turn paves the way towards the call to repentance and a reminder of YHWH’s compassion, love, and mercy (2:13; cf. Ex. 34:6; Garrett 1997:305; Barton 2001:32). Therefore, amidst the calamity, one thing remains certain: they are still His chosen people and he will again restore them in line with his covenantal promises (cf. Stuart 1987:228; Garrett 1997:305).

5.4. The Promised Land

Finally, in verses 10, 11-12 the author's extensive list of "corn/grain" (דגן); "olive oil" (רהצי); "wheat" (הטח); "barley" (הרעש); "vine" (פג), and "fig tree" (הנאת) serves as an allusion to the Promised Land. Sweeney (2000:159) notes that the author here offers a similar description to that of "the spies that Moses sent into the land of Canaan" (cf. Num 13:23). There is also the text's correspondence to the representation of Canaan in Deuteronomy 8:8 (NRSV), "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey..." These texts deal with the "beauty" and "goodness" of Canaan (cf. Von Rad 1985:367). Von Rad (1985:367) explains that the "beauty" of the Promised Land is often associated with, and characteristic of YHWH's "saving blessings" (cf. Wolff, 1977:31-32). However, the blessings of beauty and abundance are solely for YHWH's "loyal subjects" (cf. Crenshaw 1995:101). In the context of Joel 1:2-20, YHWH withdraws these blessings because of the people's indiscretions (cf. Wolff 1977:32; Prinsloo 1985:19; Stuart 1987:243).

6. Concluding remarks

in conclusion, it has to be reiterated that the role that YHWH's saving acts plays in the history of Ancient Israel, and all subsequent development and thought, cannot, and should not be underestimated. Routledge (2008:35f.) remarks with regard to the work of Gerhard von Rad (whose work this article utilizes as foundation), that the view is not so much on "actual history," but rather *Heilsgeschichte*: "the story of salvation as viewed through the eyes of Israel's faith..." According to Routledge (2008:36), it concerns "An elusive, but real, historical event [that] results in a tradition modified through time to meet different theological needs." In Joel 1:2-20 this notion of *Heilsgeschichte* becomes self-evident as the author delves into, restates, and relies on the post-exilic community's knowledge of their professed historical traditions to convey his message in a time of national crisis. In the portrayal of this unprecedented calamity he specifically emphasizes four traditions, namely Creation, Exodus, Sinai, and Promised Land.

In his own distinctive way, the author (re)interprets these four well-known traditions, and their theological implications, in such a fashion that each carries a twofold message. On the one hand, and primarily, he

focuses the attention on YHWH's judgement because of the people's sins. In their collective suffering, all the inhabitants of the land (including the non-human beings; cf. 1:2, 14) witness a seeming reversal of Creation as YHWH removes his blessing from the Earth. But also as YHWH removes everything they once associated with the Promise of Land – all the goodness, all the beauty, and abundance. The reversal-motif continues (and intensifies) in the allusion to the locust plague of the Exodus tradition. Akin to the Egyptians of old, YHWH's people face his wrath in a locust plague that even surpasses the one sent against the Pharaoh. This locust plague ultimately proves to be no mere natural disaster, but rather a harbinger of the *Yom YHWH*. YHWH's presence in this calamity is the culmination of his judgement on his people.

While these traditions may generally be associated with YHWH's saving acts they now portray his divine judgement. The author uses this implicit "tension" to the benefit of his message in outlining the way forward for the people. The situation remains salvageable and amidst this calamity, the "call to communal lamentation" (*Aufruf zur Volksklage*) then becomes that much clearer – only YHWH can change their circumstances (cf. Wolff 1977:36; Birch 1997:127; Limburg 2011:64). Or, as Crenshaw (1995:39-40) puts it, "Above all else, Joel thinks of YHWH as the sole means of escaping the full consequences" of the current crisis. When read in relation to the larger textual unit of Joel 1:2-2:27 the focus ultimately returns to the saving blessings of YHWH (cf. 2:18-27).¹¹ This intervention, however, is conditional on the people's return to their God (2:13) and the hope that the Deity will change his mind (2:14).

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11 Joel 1:2-20, and the subsequent pericope of Joel 2:1-11, is best understood when read in a theological framework which places the text(s) in relation to Joel 2:12-17 as well as Joel 2:18-27. Cf. Redelinghuys 2014:88-93.

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