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"Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophecy"

BY DOUG HURLEY

The day of Pentecost must have been a day of excitement and wonder for all involved. The followers of Jesus, once discouraged by the death of Jesus, had seen the risen Lord and were in Jerusalem waiting to be clothed with power from on high. It was Christ himself who had instructed them that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations beginning in Jerusalem and that they would receive the Holy Spirit. As they waited, the promised Holy Spirit descended with power upon them. "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2).¹ Jews from every nation who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost gathered around. Amazement seized each of them as they heard Galileans speaking in their own respective languages. Some wondered what it all meant, and

others made fun of the spectacle, claiming the disciples were simply drunk. Surely, it must have appeared so.

Peter, outspoken among the disciples, stepped forward to explain publicly the miraculous occurrence that the Lord, on that first Easter, had said would occur (Acts 2:14–21). He explained to his fellow Jews that what they were witnessing was actually the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, not drunken carousing.

Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my

servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy . . ." (Acts 2:14b–18)

What exactly did Peter have in mind by quoting the book of Joel? How did he view this day, and how did he see Joel's words fitting into the occurrences of the start of the Christian church? Did Peter suddenly envision an egalitarian world where men and women were equal partners in ministry, specifically in prophecy? Furthermore, toward what did Joel's prophecy point? In this examination of Joel 2 and its use in Acts 2, we seek to gain some insight into the meaning of God's pouring out his Spirit upon all people, both men and women, who in turn will prophesy.

As noted above, the context for Peter's quotation of Joel 2 was the gathering of "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" who heard in amaze-

ment the Galilean disciples speaking in their own language.² C. K. Barrett is hesitant to see the listing of the home nations of the Jews as representing the gathering of the Gentiles to Mount Zion, which would anticipate the End.³ He suggests that 2:39 really means that the promise is for you (Palestinian Jews) and for those who are far off (Diaspora Jews). Countering this view, Van de Sant feels that the Jews from the Diaspora "seem to be central to this pericope and to act as representatives of the world population."⁴ The list then represents the world population that was potentially present at the day of Pentecost. Certainly, it would appear that the multiethnic crowd serves as a precursor to Jesus' claim that the apostles' preaching would begin at Jerusalem but end up going out to all nations.

Peter began by saying that Joel had prophesied "in the last days" God would pour out his Spirit. Clearly, Peter conveyed a sense of urgency and fervor in this Pentecost setting. The New Testament elsewhere attests to the early Christian community's sense that they lived in the final age, or last days (2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2; Jas 5:3). Furthermore, Isaiah had brought this concept to bear in a similar situation when he prophesied that in the last days all nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord's temple: "Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we

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may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa 2:2-3). Peter recognized that time was indeed short as he warned and pleaded with his listeners to save themselves from a corrupt generation (Acts 2:40).

The Outpouring of the Spirit

In the last days, Joel had prophesied, God was going to pour out his Spirit on all flesh. The context of Joel suggests a likening of the outpouring of the Spirit to rain that refreshes and renews the land.⁵ God promised through Joel that after the devastation of the vegetation and the crops by the terrible plague of locusts, he would restore what he had taken away. "Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. . . . Be not afraid, O wild animals. . . . Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness" (Joel 2:21-23). The next section in Joel then begins, "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit" (2:28) — providing a link between the down-pouring of the rain and the outpouring of the Spirit. Just as God would send the rain to renew and refresh the land, he would in like

manner also send the Spirit.⁶

It is the Spirit of God, targeting the beneficiaries, that is emphasized strongly in Joel 2:28-29. This can be seen in the chiasmic structure of these two verses, where "I will pour out my Spirit" acts as an *inclusio*:

A	I will pour out my Spirit
B	On all flesh
C	Your sons and
	daughters will prophesy (old will
	dream, young see visions)
C	All the male servants
	and the female servants in those
	days
B	On them
A	I will pour out my Spirit

Although these verses closely parallel Ezekiel's message (Ezek 36:26; 39:29), only the Joel passage stresses that it is the Spirit of God, not the man or the woman, that is the source of the prophetic activity.⁷

The Hebrew *r_ah* appears in different contexts and is rendered with several different words: wind, which represents an invisible and powerful force (Gen 8:1; Exod 10:13); breath, which gives life and vitality to people (Ps 31:5; Eccl 3:19); and divine power, a supernatural force by which people are possessed (Num 24:2; Judg 3:10). Indeed, the word carries "a spectrum of meaning where the different senses merge into each other."⁸ Schweizer adds that God's Spirit is active and powerful. The Spirit induces ecstasy (Num 11:25), lifts up and takes away (1 Kgs 18:12; Ezek 3:14), and grants qualities of kingship (Isa 11:2).⁹ And of course

in Joel, the Spirit of God is seen as "impelling prophets to utter instruction or warning."¹⁰ Concerning the Spirit's ability to inspire prophetic speech, Micah proclaims, "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin" (Mic 3:8).

In the New Testament, God's Spirit is associated with life (1 Cor 15:45), freedom (2 Cor 3:17), and wisdom (Acts 6:3). Those who are spiritual (*pneumatikoi*) in Galatians 6 are told to restore the one caught in sin—meaning that they have some sort of "righteous authority" to gently persuade the erring one. Being filled with the Spirit in Acts denotes power, zeal, and authority. In Acts 6:8 Stephen is "a man full of God's grace and power"; in 7:55 he is "full of the Holy Spirit."¹¹ Not only does the outpouring of the Spirit bestow upon its recipients power and boldness, it stands in contrast to the world (1 Cor 2:12; Eph 2:2; 1 Tim 4:1), to flesh (John 3:6; Rom 8:4; Gal 3:3), and to the written law (Rom 2:29; 7:6; 2 Cor 3:6).¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, commenting on Peter's use of the Joel prophecy, describes the characteristics of both the Spirit and the believer in whom the Spirit dwells: "The new community of believers living in the 'force field' of the resurrected Lord is understood here in prophetic terms as the messianic community."¹³ Indeed, a brief survey of the Bible reveals a wide variety of people involved in Spirit-inspired prophetic activity. The first mention of a

prophet in the Bible is Abraham (Gen 20:7), and it is Moses who is credited with being an exemplary prophet (Deut 34:10–12). Besides these great patriarchs of Jewish and Christian faith, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah as well as Nathan, Ezekiel, and Amos stand at the forefront of Old Testament prophecy. In the New Testament, John the Baptist (Matt 11:9) and Jesus (Matt 14:5; Luke 7:16; John 4:19) are likewise named as prophets. Women also are found among the prophets of scripture: in the Old Testament, Miriam (Exodus 15; Numbers 12), Deborah (Judges 4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22). New Testament women in prophetic roles include

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Anna (Luke 2:36–38), who prophesied in the temple concerning the Christ child; Philip's daughters (Acts 21:8–9); and, of course, the women named by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. Enumerating these examples of women prophets helps the reader to conclude that prophecy by women, while not as common as prophecy by men, was not considered unusual by the biblical writers.

The Spirit is the great equalizer, and the general Christian

community is the recipient of what God has poured out on all flesh (Rom 5:5). When Peter and his fellow apostles were confronted in Acts 5 after having miraculously escaped from prison, Peter explained that they were witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection, "and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." Paul says of spiritual "gifts" that even though there are different manifestations, "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:13). The New Testament makes it clear that, as Willimon states, "the Spirit, once the exotic possession of a prophetic few, is now offered to all."¹⁴ So it would seem that the Acts 2 passage is stressing the universality of the outpouring of God's empowering presence to humankind in general—even the Gentiles. Bruce concurs by saying that the giving of the Spirit is "an adumbration of the worldwide Gentile mission."¹⁵ Similarly, Marshall claims that the Spirit is granted to *all kinds* of people, not just prophets, kings, and priests as in the Old Testament.¹⁶ It apparently took a while for this idea to become clear, as later, in Acts 10, Peter was criticized by the other apostles for eating with uncircumcised men. After he explained that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon them too, the brothers praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

The Setting of Joel

Since the Joel prophecy stresses the outpouring of God's Spirit as a universal gift to all, it is important to understand the situation about which Joel himself was prophesying in an effort to develop more fully the meaning of the emphasis on sons and daughters and men and women servants. Scholars have not come to any meaningful consensus on the date of Joel,¹⁷ and the arguments are complex and beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, we will assume that Joel was written after the Babylon exile, sometime in the mid-fifth to fourth century B.C.E. Both Wolff and Crenshaw, although they cite different evidence and offer slightly different reasons, conclude that Joel was indeed written later and is not a preexilic or exilic writing. Among the reasons cited are the assumption that the (second) temple is standing in Joel 2:17 ("LORD's house" in 1:16 and 3:18); the mention of a city wall in 2:7, 9 (rebuilt by Nehemiah); and a functioning cult in 1:9, 13; 2:14, 17.¹⁸ Also, there is no mention of the king. Furthermore, Joel directs the priests to ask God in the temple to spare his people and not make them an object of scorn among the nations (again). After he commands the blowing of the trumpet (an alarm for battle or a call to celebrate, to worship, or to listen)¹⁹ in Zion and calls for a sacred fast, he poses the exilic question, "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" (Ps 79:10), as if to say, "We don't want to return to exile; let's

return to our God." According to Redditt, Joel did not stand at the middle of the power structure of Israelite worship. He might have had some access to the temple priests, but his message marks him and his followers as ones on the periphery of society--outsiders looking in. Joel took issue with the abandoning of leadership by the priests and elders. "It was a simple step, then, for Joel's group to conclude that the cultus was too narrowly constituted and to envision a future in which all sorts of persons might communicate directly with God."²⁰

To summarize, then, we conclude that Joel was a peripheral, postexilic prophet who was used by God to rattle the people from complacency in their relationship with him. He warned of a terrible plague of locusts—beyond number—that would advance "as dawn spreading across the mountains . . . a fire devours in front of them and after them a flame scorches." "As a sound from chariots upon the tops of the mountains, they dance as the sound of a flame of fire consuming stubble as a mighty people prepared for battle." A great and terrible day was coming—the day of Yahweh. Wolff demonstrates how the "Day of the Lord" is not a certain time frame, "but rather a definite event. . . . Yahweh is not the one to whom something happens, but the one who by his appearance and acting is in complete control of the temporal event."²¹ Examples of this usage are the "day of the wrath of Yahweh" (Zeph 1:15), the "day of the anger of

Yahweh" (Ezek 7:19), and the "day of Yahweh's vengeance" (Isa 34:8). Joel envisioned a new day for God's people, a day in which all would participate in and be receivers of God's renewing Spirit, which would fuel prophecy, dreams, and visions—a day in which anyone calling on the name of Yahweh would receive salvation. In Acts 2 Peter speaks of the day of Yahweh, not as "great and terrible," but as "great and glorious." Again, we do not have a specific time that is being stressed, but an event in which no one is in charge but Yahweh—the outpouring of his Spirit.

We can begin to see a continuity of what God was doing among the people after they had returned from exile and what he was doing on the day of Pentecost and in the book of Acts in general. God might have used Joel to tell his people, "It's not enough to just show up"—that is, just return home after being in exile. Now that the people were back in the land, they were settling in and failing to worship, failing to give themselves wholly to Yahweh. Ward claims that "the clearest and strongest note sounded in the book of Joel is the affirmation of worship as the key to the relationship between Israel and God."²² God wanted to give his people a new vision of their community if they would get together, repent, and call out to him. If Joel was indeed a postexilic, peripheral prophet, it may be legitimate to liken him and those who heard his prophecy to the apostles, who were certainly on the periphery of

Judaism. Like Joel, they called for repentance and a return to God (Joel 2:12–13, 15, 17; Acts 2:37–39; 3:19; 8:22; 26:20); as Joel prophesied, they had visions (Acts 9:10–12; 11:5; 12:9; 16:9–10) and worked wonders (Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8).

It is easy to see why Peter chose the Joel 2 passage to explain to the perplexed crowd the nature of the Pentecost happenings, as there are similarities in the way God was reaching out to his children. Joel proclaimed that it was coming; Peter proclaimed that it was here. But what exactly was the nature of the prophecy, and toward what did it point? These are the questions to which we now turn.

Joel's Eschatological Vision

The idea of the outpouring of God's Spirit extending to even the "manservants and maidservants" suggests the all-inclusiveness of the people of God (Exod 20:10, 17). Joel's vision certainly longed for a day when all people would be partakers of God's gracious gift and would use that gift to build up others. When Moses was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp and that he should go stop them, he retorted, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11:29). Moses also longed for a time when the leaders among the people would not be just certain key individuals, but when all could partake in the ministry of prophecy. In Joel, "an age is

anticipated in which the Spirit will endow not just designated individuals but the entire community."²³

In a leadership crisis with apathetic people, Joel called upon everyone to come together,

Joel proclaimed that it was coming; Peter proclaimed that it was here. But what exactly was the nature of the prophecy, and toward what did it point?

repent, and call out to God with fasting and weeping. "Although the language about a total assembly is highly rhetorical . . . it accords with the leveling of all distinctions in society based on age, gender, or status."²⁴ *Everyone* was to be involved in the communal crying out to God (even the newlyweds! Joel 2:16). When God saw the entire community turning toward him, he would have pity and send grain, new wine, and oil; trees would bear fruit as abundant showers fell. In a similar fashion, Yahweh would pour out his Spirit on all, "without ethnic or gender restrictions."²⁵ This is such a radical, new idea that Wolff sees an element of social revolution involved. "Before the wealth of such an outpouring, all distinctions of sex and age recede completely, indeed even the contrasts of social position. Such is the future toward which Israel

moves."²⁶ Joel proclaimed the message spoken also through Ezekiel—that God wanted to share abundantly his presence with all Israel: "When I have brought them back from the nations and have gathered them from the countries of their enemies, I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations . . . for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD" (Ezek 39:27–29). Ward sees that the main goal of Joel's eschatological prophecy was to "herald God's creation of a new society in the future."²⁷

In conclusion, it would seem obvious that in Peter's mind the new society had come. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is "the beginning of the age of the Spirit . . . [and] marks a new period in the life of the church."²⁸ This is unquestionably, as Luke stresses it, the operation of the Spirit that is guiding, leading, directing, and prompting throughout Acts (4:8, 31; 8:29, 39; 10:19; 11:12, 28; 13:2, 4; 20:22–23). The people in Acts seem almost secondary as the Spirit takes center stage working wonders, strengthening God's people, and increasing the size of the church (9:31). Indeed, Acts is a picture of Joel's prophecy fulfilled. At the church's inception, Peter seized the opportunity to preach Jesus crucified, raised, and at the Father's right hand pouring out the Holy Spirit (2:33). If the crowd would repent and be baptized, they too would be participants in this gift, since the promise is for "all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39). The gift

that only a few leaders had possessed was now going to be poured out abundantly on all.

Implications

"Where the Church after Christ believes herself able to recognize the goal of salvation history in legalistic piety and in hierarchical-liturgical activity, she is therefore in need of the same awakening as Israel."²⁹ Often the rebuke and admonishment of the Old Testament prophets toward Israel centered on the issues Wolff mentions. Today's church likewise struggles with similar issues. Christians who "just go to church," are complacent, or rely on their ancestry or church affiliation as their righteousness before God need once again the stern warning of God's spokespersons. Could it be that such spokespersons include women as well as men? When looking at the texts concerning God's gift of the Spirit, one cannot help but conclude that they do. "The Spirit is the source of prophetic activity,"³⁰ not a man or a woman. But the vision expressed by Joel and fulfilled in Acts is not about whether a woman can say a prayer or pass a communion tray. Too often, we focus on what the "women's role" is "in church." Joel provided a much fuller picture—of a new day when God's word would come through many people, not just a handful of leaders. Men and women who possess the Spirit in equal measure are simply vessels of the word of God. As Paul says in 1 Cor 12:6, "there are varieties of working,

but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one" (RSV). And again in 12:11 he states, "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit." The church needs men and women who will "rattle the cages" when there are people who need to be called to turn back to God in repentance. Hopefully, in our day we will realize Joel's vision of all God's people prophesying, dreaming, and receiving directives from the Lord that can be passed on in encouragement and exhortation to brothers and sisters who will accept them with eager hearts. As Amos said, "The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken—who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8).

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New International Version (NIV).

² The Greek *dialektos* means the language of a nation or region. Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 185. The point is that the disciples were understood; they were not just speaking "in tongues." Even more miraculously, Peter addressed the whole crowd.

³ C. K. Barrett, "The Gentile Mission as an Eschatological Phenomenon," in *Eschatology and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of George R. Beasley-Murray* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), 72.

⁴ Huub Van de Sant, "The Fate of the Gentiles in Acts," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 66 (1990): 56–77.

⁵ Bauer et al. (BAGD), 247.

⁶ Wolff comments that the verb *sh_pak* is used for the pouring out of water. Hans Wolff,

Joel and Amos, Hermeneia, trans. Hans Wolff (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 65. Allen calls the pouring out of the Spirit "a spiritual counterpart to the rain." Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 98.

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1983), 229.

⁸ *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1980), 1962.

⁹ E. Schweizer, "pneuma, pneumatakos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 389–455.

¹⁰ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 925.

¹¹ Cf. Acts 1:8; 4:31; 9:31; 11:24.

¹² BAGD, 677.

¹³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 185.

¹⁴ William Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 35.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 61.

¹⁶ Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 73.

¹⁷ For a helpful summary of many of the leading positions, see John Thompson, "The Date of Joel," in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 453–64.

¹⁸ Wolff, 4–6; James Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 24C (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 21–28. See also Paul Redditt, "The Book of Joel and Peripheral Prophecy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 225–40. Redditt lists five themes that "dominate the eschatology of postexilic prophecy" and shows how four of them are mentioned in Joel (237).

¹⁹ Exod 19:16–19; Lev 25:9; Josh 6:16–20; 2 Sam 20:1.

²⁰ Redditt, 236.

²¹ Wolff, 33.

²² James Ward, *Thus Says the Lord: The Message of the Prophets* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 243.

²³ Blenkinsopp, 229.

²⁴ Crenshaw, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

(Notes continued on p. 216)