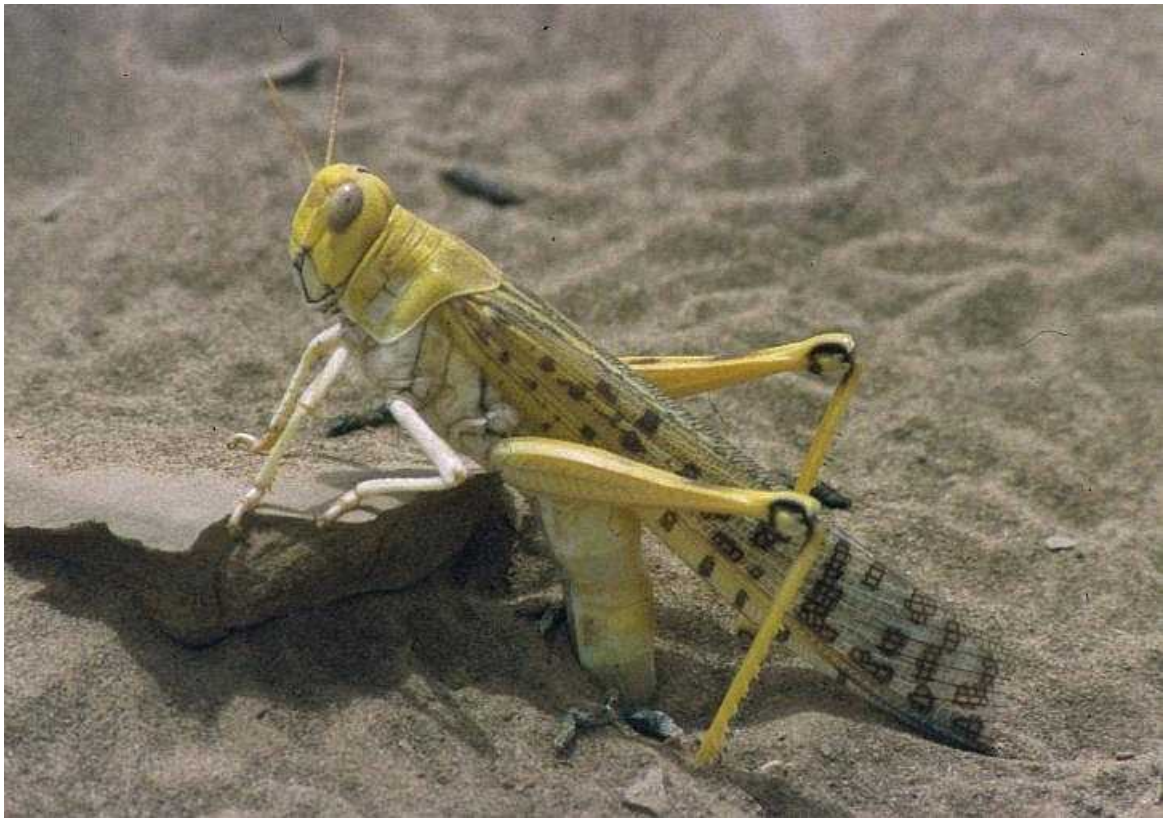
Joel: An Army of ‘Locusts’ or an ‘Army’ of Locusts?



The title is subtle (read it again if necessary), but in those few words, it nails a significant debate among interpreters of the prophet Joel. What are we to make of the language referring to locusts and to people, soldiers, and armies? What is literal here and what is metaphorical? Was Judah invaded by a literal army that is compared to locusts? Or was it invaded by a swarm of locusts that is compared to an invading army?

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Joel’s Structure

First, I need to clarify the structure of Joel so that we can focus on the part of the book where locust terminology plays a role. There are two ways to divide the book of Joel.

One is to split the book at its turning point in Joel 2:18, where God responds to the supplications and repentance of his people. Much of what follows from this point on is directly spoken by God himself in the I-form. Its content is mainly a promise of restoration, which includes judgement on the nations who have oppressed Israel.

It is also possible to see the main division in Joel 2:28. From here on, Joel zooms or telescopes into the distant future.

Virtually everything before 2:28 describes or predicts events immediately preceding and following the ministry of the prophet. The initial part of God's promise of restoration in Joel 2:19-27 concerns the near future as well, except for the phrase, appearing twice, "and my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2:26-27 ESV).

But starting in Joel 2:28, we read about things that did not happen until the New Testament era and in part are still future. In contrast to the first half of the book, this section contains *eschatological* prophecy (*eschatology* is the study of things related to the end). In part, it has an 'apocalyptic' feel to it, not in the sense that it would be an apocalyptic vision like Daniel or Revelation, but in the sense that it appears to announce a final, decisive, and complete intervention by God, accompanied by violent cosmic upheaval, to overthrow evil and to set things right once and for all.

Two major themes here are the outpouring of God's Spirit and the concept of a final battle, the climax of conflict in which God judges the oppressors of his people and thereby vindicates them. There can be no doubt that the armies in the second half of Joel are people, not locusts. I won't deal with this subject of the final battle here (but see "The War Is On: 'The Battle' and the Millennium I" for my take on the final battle); instead, my focus is on the first half of Joel, where the locusts appear.

The first half of the book clearly falls into two

parts as well: a description and an appeal in chapter 1 and a second description with another appeal in chapter 2 (leading into the promise of liberation and restoration that begins in Joel 2:18). Locust terminology only appears in the first two chapters.

Internal Evidence

At stake is what the two descriptions describe and whether they are about two different things or simply repeat using different words. It is not uncommon to argue that the first chapter does indeed describe a real, literal locust plague as witnessed by Joel but that this becomes an image for a coming military invasion (still future when Joel writes), presumably by the Assyrians or perhaps by the Babylonians (although it was only the Assyrian forces that were destroyed and removed from the land, in 701 BC).

One indication that fits this explanation is the reference to “the northerner” in Joel 2:20. Locust swarms normally have their origin in Africa and therefore tend to come from the south or the east, not from the north. But when it comes to Assyria and Babylon, the prophets would often announce them as coming from the north. Strictly speaking, both Assyria and Babylon were located to the east of Israel. Because of the Arabian desert that is in between, however, Mesopotamian armies would normally first travel northwest in order to come down, from the north, through Lebanon.

CSIRO. 31 July 2007. "Plague Locusts on the Move"
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But as I see it, nothing else points into this direction. This is even true for the continuation of Joel 2:20, where the invading 'army' is driven into the desert, the Mediterranean, and the Dead Sea to perish. It is easier to imagine this happening to locusts than to soldiers. Everything else in these two chapters points to locusts as well.

They first appear in Joel 1:4, where four different Hebrew words are used to refer to them. The exact same four words reappear in Joel 2:25, where they are also identified as God's "great army". However, what they have done to the land, both in 1:4 and in 2:25, is that they have eaten its vegetation and crops – not killed its inhabitants. Throughout chapter 1 and 2, they destroy the land as if a fire moved through, but they are never described as killing anyone. This is not an army of 'locusts'; it is an 'army' of locusts.

Joel 1:6 does refer to them as "a nation", but they have teeth like lions' teeth and they have stripped the bark of vines and fig trees (Joel 1:7). Again, the land and the harvest have been destroyed but the people are alive.

Has this changed in chapter 2? Joel 2:2 refers to them as “a great and powerful people” and in Joel 2:7-8, they attack “like soldiers” and move in good order like a well-trained army. However, this implies that they are not soldiers because one does not compare an army to an army. And again, it is the land that is destroyed, not its people, as it is transformed from Eden-like conditions to “a desolate wilderness” (Joel 2:3).

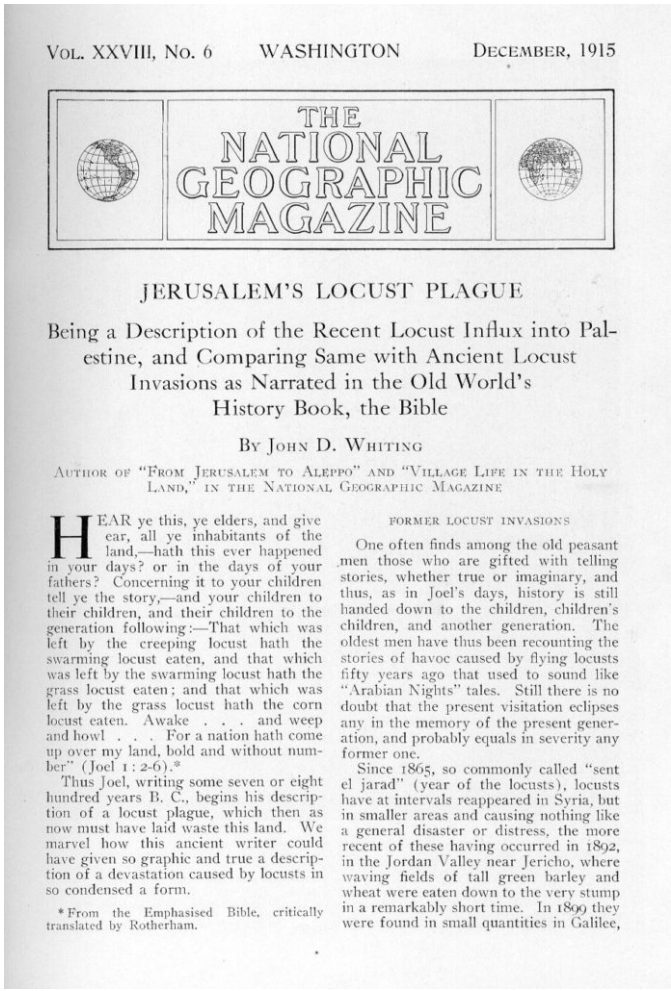
Interestingly, Joel never states that the attackers act *like locusts*; such a phrase is absent from the book – because they *are* locusts!

> They leap upon the city,
>
> they run upon the walls,
>
> they climb up into the houses,
>
> they enter through the windows like a thief. (Joel 2:9 ESV)

True, it is possible to interpret this as hyperbole, describing an army storming a city. But when locusts are on the move and a city is in their way, this quite literally describes how locusts will behave – especially if they are a new generation recently hatched, not yet fully developed, and therefore not yet able to fly.

In that case, chapter 1 and 2 do indeed describe distinct things rather than repeat the same in different words, namely two successive stages of a locust plague. The first wave came in airborne, devastated the land, and left its eggs behind. Once these hatched, the second wave started out on foot, destroying the reviving vegetation, until they were ready to become airborne once again, literally darkening the sun and the moon, as stated in Joel 2:10.

External Confirmation: *National Geographic* 1915



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JERUSALEM'S LOCUST PLAGUE

Being a Description of the Recent Locust Influx into Palestine, and Comparing Same with Ancient Locust Invasions as Narrated in the Old World's History Book, the Bible

BY JOHN D. WHITING

AUTHOR OF "FROM JERUSALEM TO ALEPPO" AND "VILLAGE LIFE IN THE HOLY LAND," IN THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE

HEAR ye this, ye elders, and give ear, all ye inhabitants of the land,—hath this ever happened in your days? or in the days of your fathers? Concerning it to your children tell ye the story,—and your children to their children, and their children to the generation following:—That which was left by the creeping locust hath the swarming locust eaten, and that which was left by the swarming locust hath the grass locust eaten; and that which was left by the grass locust hath the corn locust eaten. Awake . . . and weep and howl . . . For a nation hath come up over my land, bold and without number" (Joel 1: 2-6).*

Thus Joel, writing some seven or eight hundred years B. C., begins his description of a locust plague, which then as now must have laid waste this land. We marvel how this ancient writer could have given so graphic and true a description of a devastation caused by locusts in so condensed a form.

* From the Emphasised Bible, critically translated by Rotherham.

FORMER LOCUST INVASIONS

One often finds among the old peasant men those who are gifted with telling stories, whether true or imaginary, and thus, as in Joel's days, history is still handed down to the children, children's children, and another generation. The oldest men have thus been recounting the stories of havoc caused by flying locusts fifty years ago that used to sound like "Arabian Nights" tales. Still there is no doubt that the present visitation eclipses any in the memory of the present generation, and probably equals in severity any former one.

Since 1865, so commonly called "sent el jarad" (year of the locusts), locusts have at intervals reappeared in Syria, but in smaller areas and causing nothing like a general disaster or distress, the more recent of these having occurred in 1892, in the Jordan Valley near Jericho, where waving fields of tall green barley and wheat were eaten down to the very stump in a remarkably short time. In 1899 they were found in small quantities in Galilee,

That this is the right way to read Joel finds a fascinating confirmation in an article by John D. Whiting that appeared in *National Geographic Magazine* in December 1915. Below is a link to a Google Drive folder that includes scanned images of the article. It describes a locust plague that devastated Palestine earlier that year. It matches the description in Joel in amazing detail, including the surprising observation that this swarm came into Palestine from the north-east, not from the south.

Soon after arriving, the locusts laid eggs in the soil and died. The article describes how the eggs hatched and the locusts, initially wingless, started on their march, clearing the fields of everything green. Just as in Joel, they were not stopped by walls or other hindrances: “Disastrous as they were in the country, equally obnoxious they became about the homes, crawling up upon the walls and, squeezing in through cracks of closed doors or windows, entering the very dwelling rooms” (Whiting 1915: 533).

After some weeks, the locusts went through their final metamorphosis and afterwards were able to fly. Eventually, the west wind carried them off into the desert and into the Dead Sea, where many perished. The resulting stench was horrific.

Conclusion

Clearly, then, there is a better explanation for the relationship between Joel 1 and Joel 2 than first a locust plague, then an army. Both chapters describe a locust plague, but there is progression. The two chapters describe two distinct stages in the development of such a plague.

Joel does not describe an army of ‘locusts’ but an ‘army’ of locusts.

More

The National Geographic article is accessible in this Google Drive folder; each
page is a separate scanned image (JPEG-format):

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1koGBlissraf6bHcGbxHoOF7oVYxJrLZ3

In case you are interested: these short videoclips with BBC footage show and explain the emergence of a locust swarm:

https://youtu.be/1YNy2R3hg2Q

https://youtu.be/6bx5JUGVahk

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Kooyman, Christiaan. 1994. “Desert locust (Schistocerca gregaria) laying eggs during the 1994 locust outbreak in Mauritani” (Public Domain)

References

All
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