

AN INTERPRETATION OF ZEPHANIAH 2:11 WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE PHRASE 'is̄^v mimqômô

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Abstract

Lingualistically and prophetically this expression can be interpreted in two ways: it could be understood in the sense that each nation will serve Yahweh in its own territory, or otherwise, that each nation will leave its own territory to go and serve Yahweh in Jerusalem. For several reasons the author opts for the first.

On the question put by German scholar W Stählin, as to whether the expression might possibly indicate that each nation would worship God according to its own natural identity ('in seiner schöpfungsmässigen Art'), the author maintains that the scope of the expression lies elsewhere.

Zephaniah 2:11, in its accentuation of the fact that the nations will serve Yahweh wherever they may be, is a profound message of salvation within a prophecy of divine judgement.

The book

Zephaniah prophesied during the second half of the seventh century BC. His prophecies were pre-eminently concerned with the **yôm Yhwh**, the day of Yahweh. The prophet declared that God's judgement was imminent both on Judah's idolatrous neighbours and on Judah and Jerusalem. But, beyond the impending doom, he pointed forward to the coming deliverance.

The structure of 2:1 - 3:7

There is good reason to accept 2:1-3:7 as a unit, as S R Driver and others do, for then one discovers an interesting structure which could help to underline the strategic position of 2:11 in this pericope.

- 2:1-3 Warning to Israel (Judah)
- 2:4-7 Judgement on Philistea in the west
- 2:8-10 Judgement on Moab Ammon in the east
- 2:11 **Judgement and salvation of all nations:**
 ('Yahwe will be awesome to them,
 for He will make lean all the gods of
 the earth.
 And to Him will bow down,
 each in its place,
 all the islands of the nations')
- 2:12 Judgement on Ethiopia in the south
- 2:13-15 Judgement on Ashur in the north
- 3:1-7 Warning to Israel (Jerusalem).

Instead of regarding 2:11 as a 'Fremdkörper,' in no way related to the verses preceding and following it, and regarding it, with verses 8-10, as an interpolation, as is done by Marti, Elliger and others, Zephania 2:11 actually appears from this structural outline to be a pivot on which 2:1-3:7 turns.

The first part of v.11 mentions the divine judgement of the nations of the world with their gods. *Nōra'* is a very strong word to indicate how the nations will experience Yahweh in his judgement of them. Note the various translations and commentaries: 'vreeswekkend': frightening (D Deden); horribilis (Vulgate); awesome (NIV); terrible (Luther; AV; J M P Smith; Segond; Laetsch); fearful (Keil); full of terror (JB).

From what is the Lord's awe-inspiring majesty regarding the nations apparent? From this: He 'makes thin' all the gods of the nations. The verb *rāzā* can be translated in this way. It is a prophetic perfect tense (J P J Olivier). What was still

in the future in the time of the prophet, is here stated by him as a certainty.

But **how** does the Lord strike the gods? By striking their worshippers (vide Ezk 30:13). There is a close bond between nations and their gods. 'Volkenstrijd is godenstrijd,' says G Smit ('The war of nations is the war of gods'). When nations perish, their gods also perish. The true intention here seems to be: Yahweh will reveal Himself wrathfully to the nations, so that they may realize the impotency of their own gods (Deden). Nations in the Umwelt of Israel thought the gods were entertained and fed by sacrifices (Dt 32:37-38). But through God's judgements on the nations, they will realize the folly of their idolatry. They will bow down before Yahweh in submission and pay Him the homage which is his due as King. The verb **šhh** can be translated: to bow down (e g JB; RSV), or: worships (e g NEB; NIV). It is a prophetic vision of Yahweh's acknowledged world-wide sovereignty. In this way He will defeat the gods through their own followers. They will no longer receive food and will waste away without sacrifices. God '...will reduce to beggary all the nations of the earth' (NEB); He '...will starve them out of their strongholds' (M Henry).

Thus the nations of the world will gain a new understanding. **'iyyîm** can indicate coastal countries as well as islands. In Genesis 10:5 the **'iyyîm** of the nations are the coastal countries and islands of the Mediterranean; in Isaiah the word indicates the whole world of nations outside Israel, even the most remote countries (Is 41:1, 5, 49:1). The same meaning is found here in Zephaniah. It is simply an expression for 'the whole of the heathen world' (C F Keil; vide S R Driver).

The phrase **'îš mimqômô**

The nations will serve the Lord **'îš mimqômô**: 'each in its own place' (NAB). Linguistically and prophetically this expression can be interpreted in two ways: it could be understood in the sense that each nation will serve the Lord in its own territory (Elliger; Smith; Van der Woude); or otherwise, that each nation will leave its own territory to go and serve the Lord in Jerusalem (e g Keil). Regarding the first interpretation: **min** can indicate, inter alia, the place where something is found, e g **miyyāmim**, on the right-hand side (Koehler-Baumgartner). In the case of 2:11 this would imply the worship of each nation in the specific place where it lives. (The same idea is found in Is 19:18-26 and Ml 1:11). With regard

to the second interpretation: *min* can imply an initial movement from a specific location (vide again Koehler-Baumgartner). In the case of Zephaniah 2:11 this would imply the movement of nations from their own territories to Jerusalem in order to worship the Lord there. This would be in accordance with other prophetic utterances such as Isaiah 2:2-4, Micah 4:1-4 and Zachariah 14:16 (vide Zph 3:10). Along with many interpreters and translations it seems best, however, to persist with the first interpretation: every nation serves the Lord where it lives. The reason for this is twofold: v.11 does not specifically mention a departure for Jerusalem, and a beautiful parallel to the idea of worship in own territory is found in Malachi 1:11 (again cf Is 19:18-25): 'My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations' (NIV). Some interpreters believe that *māqôm* acquires the meaning 'sanctuary' in a specific cultic context (cf the Arabic *maqām* for sanctuary). Probable examples are found in Genesis 12:6 and Deuteronomy 12:5. F E Deist (referred to in Olivier) gives preference to the translation 'sanctuary' in Zephaniah 2:11. Should this be correct, it could serve as further confirmation of the view that v.11 prophesies that each nation will worship the Lord in its own territory. But even within a specific cultic context, the meaning of the word need not necessarily be restricted to 'sanctuary.' *Māqôm* usually simply means 'place' or 'environment,' and this meaning is equally appropriate in v.11, as is evident from various translations: all the nations will worship the Lord, 'each on its own soil' (JB); 'each in its place' (RSV); 'everyone in its own land' (NIV; cf TEV and GN).

The exact meaning?

Some interpreters ask what exactly this phrase means. The German theologian, W Stählin, describes it as 'nicht ganz klar' (not quite clear). He asks whether it might possibly hint that each nation should worship God according to its own natural identity ('in seiner schöpfungsmässigen Art'). If this were the case, according to Stählin, it would have great significance for the missionary task of the Church: the glorification of one Lord, not under the constraint of a cultic colonialism according to which all nations adhere to the same pattern of worship, but a glorification of God which is truly part of India, Japan and every other country, a glorification of God by each nation in its own milieu. If by this Stählin means that the Kingdom of God leaves space for cultural diversity (e.g. worship in one's own language) one

must acknowledge that he is right. Cultural diversity should not, however, be understood as though it inevitably implied spatial division between different ethnic or racial groups. In this connection the draft confession of the NG Sendingkerk (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) states '...that because of the Atonement the diversity of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, offers opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God' (translated from the Afrikaans text).

Zephaniah 2:11 is not concerned with the meaning of ethnicity in the Kingdom of God, least of all with the preservation of a nation's 'natural' identity. The scope of the words under discussion lies elsewhere. The mere fact that the prophets alternate the worship of every nation in its own territory with the worship of all nations in Zion (Ps 87; Is 2; Mi 4) should already make one more cautious of the possible temptation to use Zephaniah 2:11 to apply ecclesiastic segregation to any given situation. The two series of prophecies basically mean the same: that the whole world must serve God. In the context of the Old Testament the temple at Zion in Jerusalem was to be the centre of worship for all nations. But in the context of the New Testament, this sanctuary of Zion expands over the entire earth in order to include the faithful of all nations (Jews and non-Jews alike) wherever they live and work (vide Jn 4:20-24). Zephaniah 2:11 clearly intimates this, and a passage such as Malachi 1:11 underscores it.

John Calvin succinctly states the intention of Zephaniah: No matter how remote the various nations were, '...the distance would be no hindrance to God's Name being celebrated when his power became known to remote lands.'

Zephaniah 2:11, in its accentuation of the fact that the nations will serve Yahweh wherever they may be, is a profound message of salvation within a prophecy of divine judgement.

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Translations

AV	= The Authorized Version
GN	= Die Bibel (Die Gute Nachricht in heutigem Deutsch), 1982
JB	= The Jerusalem Bible, 1966
Luther	= Die Bibel (nach der deutschen Uebersetzung D Martin Luthers). Stuttgart, 1951
NAB	= The New Afrikaans Bible, 1983
NEB	= The New English Bible, 1970
NIV	= Holy Bible (New International Version), 1979
RSV	= The Holy Bible (Revised Standard Version), 1963
Segond	= La Sainte Bible (par Louis Segond), 1959
TEV	= Good News for modern man (Today's English Version), 1976.
Vulgate	= Biblia Vulgate (R P A Colunga et L Turrado), 1946.