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RELI212: Introduction to the Prophets

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Up to Jerusalem: Prophetic Visions of the Nations

Even a cursory reading of the Biblical prophetic books reveals repeated condemnation of the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. These nations are consistently called out for their oppression and their idolatry, and for fighting against God's chosen people. However, there are also times when the prophets praise other nations. In some of these instances, the prophets even foretell of a time when the nations will give up their idolatrous ways, turn to the God of Israel, and worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This universal worship of the God of Israel is an intriguing and powerful picture—a picture not only of the love of God for all of mankind, but of the unique relationship he has with his chosen people, Israel, and of how the nations can join with Israel in that relationship.

Micah and First Isaiah, both of whom ministered in the late 8th and early 7th centuries BCE, prophesied of this time when Gentiles would go up to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. The language in Isaiah 2:3-4 and Micah 4:1-5 is remarkably similar, leading to a debate among scholars over the original source of the text. The New American Commentary quotes no less than five different opinions about the source of the repeated passages, finally coming to the conclusion that “it is likely that both prophets were drawing on past traditions known to their audiences” (Smith, New American Commentary 127).

The longer of these two passages, Micah 4:1-5, serves as a great foundation to the current conversation, covering many of the themes found in other prophetic texts, including the

centrality of Jerusalem, the contrast of the “nations” and “peoples” as distinct from the people of Israel, and clear descriptions of how the nations will choose to engage the cultic practice of Israel.

¹And it will come about in the last days that the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and the peoples will stream to it. ²Many nations will come and say, “Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” For from Zion will go forth the law, even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³And He will judge between many peoples and render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war. ⁴Each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with no one to make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. ⁵Though all the peoples walk each in the name of his god, as for us, we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever. (*New American Standard Bible*)

Micah says “the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains.... and the peoples will stream to it” (Micah 4:1). This centrality of the city of Jerusalem is echoed by other prophets, such as in Jeremiah 3:17: “At that time they will call Jerusalem ‘The Throne of the LORD,’ and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem.” However, Micah and Isaiah go to pains to specifically call out not just Jerusalem, the city, but the Temple itself, which sits atop Mount Moriah and, through the cult practice, provides a connection between Israel and their God. The Gentile nations are presented as not just going “up to Jerusalem,” but “to the house of the God of Jacob.” Thus, the centrality of the city is not its political position as the capitol of the nation of Israel, but its religious position as the location of the “House” and the “Throne” of Israel’s God—the Temple.

The word “peoples” (אֲמִיּוֹת, *amim*), in Micah 4:1, and in other places in the prophets, refers to groups of people, (Harris, Archer and Walt 676)¹ while the word “nations” (גּוֹיִם, *goyim*) in verse 2 is the word commonly used when talking about political entities. It is interesting that

these two terms are used interchangeably in this context, showing that the draw to Jerusalem, the move to serve the God of Israel, is not limited only to small groups of people or only to governments, but that both people groups and entire nations will “stream” to the “mountain of the house of the LORD”.

The most interesting aspect of these prophetic passages is the emphasis on the nations not only going up to Jerusalem but actually engaging in ritual worship there. The peoples and nations seek out the God of Israel so “that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths” (v. 2). Some might say that this engagement in ritual practice is actually just a sign of Jewish proselytism, wherein Gentiles become Jews and lose their identity as “the nations.” In fact, historian Louis H. Feldman demonstrates well how Jewish proselytism grew during the Hellenistic period (Feldman 288-340), a time not far removed from the time of the prophets. However, I do not think that the idea being expressed in this and other prophetic passages reflects the concept of Jewish proselytism. Instead, the passage gives a picture of Gentiles, both individuals and entire nations, attaching themselves to the God of Israel and choosing to engage in ritual worship in the Temple *as Gentiles*.

Isaiah 56:7 offers a specific example of this concept: Gentiles are given assurance that “their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My [God’s] altar.” A “burnt offering” (עֹלָה, *olah*) is the most important kind of sacrifice in the Temple service, an animal sacrifice that is offered completely to God, with no portion eaten by the priest or the worshipper (Burnt Offering). The word for “sacrifice” here (זֶבַח, *zevakh*) is a general term for a sacrifice, often associated with thanksgiving or peace offerings but not used in the scriptures to refer to more specific offerings like the burnt offering, sin offering (חַטָּאת, *khatat*), or guilt offering (אֲשָׁם, *asham*). Isaiah 66:23 gives us another unique example of the concept: “And it shall be

from new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath, all mankind will come to bow down before Me,' says the LORD.”

These passages show Gentile nations, and even the entirety of mankind, worshipping the God of Israel in accordance with the requirements of the Torah in the midst of the Jewish people while still being seen and engaged as Gentiles. This idea goes back to the Torah itself, where God requires that all animals, even those provided by a Gentile, have to be without blemish to be offered in the Temple (Lev. 22:25), and is also expressed well in the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:41-43, when he asks God to hear and respond to the prayers of “the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name's sake.”

Of all of the passages that express a picture of the nations worshipping the God of Israel in Jerusalem, Zechariah 14:16-21 is certainly the most interesting. The scholarly consensus, as explained quite well in Hervé Gonzalez's excellent overview of the topic, is that Zechariah 9-14 was not written by Zechariah himself and most likely comes from a much later time. This consensus is bolstered by a variety of differences in content, style, and literary genre. Gonzalez points out specifically the very positive view of the Judean community in chapters 1-8, with Joshua and Zerubbabel leading the people and staying true to God, compared with the very negative view of the Judean community in chapters 9-14, complete with divine judgments and severe criticisms against both Israel and the nations (5-7).

However, despite these criticisms and judgments, the book concludes with the divine intervention of God himself, who will reign as king over the entire world, will send judgment against the nations that went to war against Jerusalem, and will require all the nations of the earth to come up to Jerusalem to worship Him. In a vein similar to Isaiah 66:23, where the nations worship the God of Israel on the Sabbaths and the New Moons, Zechariah describes the nations

making the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Sukkot (חג הסוכות, *Chag HaSukkot*). Also known as Tabernacles, Sukkot is one of three festivals defined in Deuteronomy 16:16 as a pilgrimage festival, when all Israelite males were required to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate. It seems fitting that God would choose to have the nations of the earth make a pilgrimage up to Jerusalem at the same time as his own nation.

Buy why Sukkot and not one of the other pilgrimage festivals? The Bible Background Commentary associates the requirement in Zechariah 14 with enthronement festivals such as the one described in the *Enuma Elish* (Walton, Matthews and Chaval 761). However, I think the requirement in Zechariah connects more with Deuteronomy 31:10-12, where Moses instructs the people to read the Torah to the entire nation, including men, women, and children, “so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law.” As we saw above, the nations themselves express the desire that God will “teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.”

Undoubtedly as a result of this prophecy in Zechariah, Sukkot has become unique among the Jewish holidays for its connections to the other nations. In the Babylonian Talmud, Sukkot 55b, we find the following discussion on the topic of the 70 bulls offered in the Temple during the week of Sukkot:

Said R. Eleazar, “What do these seventy bullocks stand for? “They stand for the seventy nations.”... Said R. Yohanan, “It’s too bad for the idolators who suffer loss and don’t know what they have lost. When the house of the sanctuary [i.e., the Temple] was standing, the altar would make atonement for them. And now who makes atonement for them?” (Neusner 231)

Zechariah also offers additional descriptions of the state of the ritual practices in Jerusalem in this time of peace and tranquility, including the radical assertions that the bells on the horses will have the same inscription as is found on the headband worn by the high priest

(קֹדֶשׁ לִי, cf. Ex. 28:36-38), that even the common cooking pots will be as holy as those used for the most sacred temple purposes, and that everyone will be able to eat from them throughout all of Jerusalem and Judah, not just in the Temple itself.

This prophetic picture of the nations and their engagement with the God of Israel is of great importance to Gentile Christians today. We often forget the fact that we are believers in the Jewish Messiah, and that the last days (אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים, *acharit hayamim*, Micah 4:1), when the Messiah will reign as king over the entire world from the New Jerusalem, is described by the prophets as a time when everyone will worship the God of Israel within the context of His covenant with that special nation. I disagree strongly with Paul Nadim Tarazi's assertion that "An approach whereby Israel—old or new, understood as referring to the Jews or to the fundamentalists, in its totality or partly—is at the center of God's plan is not allowed." (Tarazi 188) Instead, I see these prophetic passages upholding and even better clarifying how much at the center of God's plan Israel truly is. The nations go up to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel "shoulder to shoulder" with His people (Zeph. 3:9-10), to stand alongside the nation that will always stand before God (Jer. 31:36), and to partake of the fruits of the everlasting covenant between God and His chosen people. Thus, Israel *is* at the center of God's plan.

Note

1. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament defines the difference in this way:

Although there is some overlapping in meaning with its two main synonyms *gôy* and *le'ôm* [עַמָּוּת], (see synonyms under *gôy*), the unique emphasis of *'am* lies in its reference to a group of “people as viewed by one of themselves,” or to “people in general.”... The term *'am* is often used in a general sense in the OT to refer to a group of people, larger than a tribe or clan, but less numerous than a race (*le'ôm*).

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