CHAPTER 10

The Nations in Zephaniah

The book of Zephaniah may present the fates of Israel/Judah and the nations as more closely interrelated than any other book in the Twelve, since the nations (or part of them) appear in connection with both Judah and its remnant in past, present, and future settings. When to this is added the fact that the nations and Judah alike are associated with both judgment and deliverance, and that at least one passage (Zeph 3:9) describes a religious transformation of non-Israelites that is almost without parallel within the collection of the Twelve, it becomes clear that the nations theme is inseparable from the most central themes of the book.

10.1 Terminology

10.1.1 Proper Nouns

In Zephaniah, specific terms referring to nations and ethnic groups are clustered in the oracles against the nations (2:4–15), with the possible exception of 'people of Canaan' (which may be better translated as 'merchants,' 1:11).1 The following are attested: Gaza (2:4); Ashkelon (2:4, 7); Ashdod (2:4); Ekron (2:4); nation of the Cherethites (2:5); Canaan, land of the Philistines (2:5); Moab (2:8, 9); Ammon (2:8, 9); Sodom (2:9), in a comparison with Moab; Gomorrah (2:9) in a comparison with Ammon; Ethiopians (2:12; Ethiopia is only locative in 3:10); Assyria (2:13); and Nineveh (2:13, termed ‘the exultant city’ in 2:15). This list is notable for including nations far and near, ranging as far as Cush to the southwest and Assyria to the northeast.

10.1.2 שמי-Language, גוי-Language, and Related Terms

Language for people groups is relatively abundant in Zephaniah. The plural גוי is used several times for the class of non-Israelite nations, with the term in construct with ‘coastlands’ in 2:11 (כל איים הגוים). In the one case in which ‘kingdoms’ (ממלכות) is used it is at least partially co-referential, and in parallel, with גוי (3:8). The only use of the singular גוי for a nation other than

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1 As noted by J.J.M. Roberts, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 175, ‘merchants’ better suits the parallelism, although several ancient versions translated the term with ‘Canaan.’
Israel is unambiguous since it is in construct with a proper noun: ‘nation of the Cherethites’ (גוי כרתים, 2:5).

Much like גויים, the plural עמים (anarthrous) is also used for (some of) the non-Israelite nations in 3:9, and occurs in the comprehensive וכל עמי הארץ in 3:20. Notably, the singular forms גוי and עם, with and without pronominal suffixes that link them to YHWH, and sometimes in construct with remnant language (שארית, יתר), both in 2:9), are used for Judah at various points in Zephaniah (1:11; 2:1, 8, 9, 10). Thus while Judah is not part of the ‘nations,’ little light is shed on the nations-theme by vocabulary in the semantic field of people/nation.

10.1.3 Other Language

The language that Zephaniah uses to refer to different regions, and occasionally to the whole world, is not as varied as the wide range of people groups to which the book refers with proper nouns. The regions named are generally in close proximity to Judah and of relatively modest extent: the Levantine ‘coast’ (2:7), inhabited by the Cherethites (2:5), and the ‘north’ (2:13), which is in parallel with, and likely refers to, Assyria, mentioned in the same verse.

A few expressions reflect the global perspective that predominates in most of the book. This is particularly clear in the opening verses, which are indebted at a number of points to biblical descriptions of the flood. When drawn upon in the seventh century, these statements effectively circumvent and perhaps undo smaller classifications, including national ones. The phrase ‘from on the face of the ground’ found in 1:2 is shared with Gen 6:7; 7:4; 8:8, but occurs only rarely elsewhere (Exod 32:12; Deut 6:15; 1 Kgs 9:7; 13:34; Amos 9:8; Jer 28:16). The subsequent allusions to the same primordial context argue strongly for seeing this as the first of several references to a global judgment. In 1:3, the order of created animate life (humanity, animals, birds, fish) is a precise reversal of the same elements in Genesis 1. Similarly, the dissolution of sinful humanity as their flesh is poured out ‘like dust’ (1:17) reverses the formation of Adam from the dust (Gen 2:7). Finally, the term נבשה in the phrase ‘from the face of the ground’ in 1:2, 3 also forms an inclusion with הארץ in 1:18 (bis), which is accordingly best translated as ‘earth’.

In 1:8 it is noted almost in passing that some in Jerusalem (probably members of the court) dress in foreign (נכרית) clothing, an interesting case of one

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2 Pace M. De Roche, “Zephaniah 1,2–3: The ‘Sweeping’ of Creation,” VT 30 (1980): 104–109 (107–08), there is no reason to restrict the scope of 1:2–3 to Israel, and there is thus no reason to deny the authenticity of 1:3b.

3 This sense is quite common in Zephaniah. The noun הארץ is often used absolutely for ‘earth’ as the extent of God’s actions, 2:11 (parallel with ‘all the coastlands’), 3:8, 19, 20 (with ‘all’).