

Cat.7 # 4 The heathen, God, the prophets and Israel all understand and act upon the concept

The 'gods of the nations', as presented in OT and NT, organised according to the five categories of relevance introduced in "The Nations Called," paragraph 4.4.4.

For an overview of this topic and its actual relevance, see (in Dutch): "GODEN DER VOLKEN". The five categories of relevance are

- The heathens understand and act upon the concept
- God acts upon the concept
- The prophets understand and act upon the concept
- The Israelites understand and act upon the concept
- There is even the concept of 'comparing gods'!

§ A

The heathens understand and act upon the concept of 'gods of the nations'.

* The Philistine priests' and diviners' advice is: 'Make models of the tumours and of the rats that are destroying the country and pay honour to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land.' (1Sam 6:5)

* The officials of the king of Aram advise: 'Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.' (1Kin 20:23).

* Naaman said: 'Please let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the LORD. But may the LORD forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also--when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD forgive your servant for this' 2Kin 5:17-18 Naaman grasps that God is Elohim, and that this God must be worshiped even in his own country. Still he brings along 'some territory' to worship Elohim 'on his own turf,' thus still clinging to the concept of territorial gods.

* 'It was reported to the king of Assyria: 'The people you deported and resettled in the towns of Samaria do not know what the god of that country requires. .He has sent lions among them' (2Kin 17:26).

* Senacherib boasts about he and his father's conquering the nations despite their gods; 'They spoke about the God of Jerusalem as they did about the gods of the other peoples of the world--the work of men's hands' 2Chr 32:19; vs 21: before his own god (!) he was assassinated. The same account we read in Isa 36. It is moving to read the response to this mocking: not the king responses, nor the prophet, but Miss Jerusalem herself: 'The Virgin Daughter Zion despises and mocks you. The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee. Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel!', against my bridegroom Yahweh! (Isa 37:22-23)

* 'The disaster that will come over the city of Jerusalem will be understood by the surrounding peoples as the consequence of not recognizing 'Yahweh, their (own) Elohim" (Jer. 22:8-9).

* 'This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah (Ezra 1:2-3).

* 'May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence' (Ezra 6:12).

Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold... as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem' (Ezra 7:15-16).

* But Jonah ran away from the LORD... and sailed for Tarshish to flee from Yahweh... He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.' This terrified them... they cried to Yahweh, O Yahweh, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Yahweh, have done as you pleased (Jonah 1:3-14,2:8).

* 'When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!'... The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them' (Acts 14:11,13).

* (The Ephesians) 'were furious and began shouting: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' Soon the whole city was in an uproar... they all shouted in unison for about two hours... The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: 'Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven?' Remarkable is that only the confirmation by the authority on earth of the authority in heaven could stop the uproar (Acts 19: 28-35).Index

§ B

God acts upon the concept of 'gods of the nations'.

* 'On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn--both men and animals--and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD' (Exod. 12:12; likewise, Numb 33:4).

* 'I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars and pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols, and I will abhor you' (Lev 26:30), the curse sanction, repeated 43 times, in case of covenanting to false gods. It is especially emphasized in the books of Kings, 15 times between 1Kin 3:2 and 2Kin 23:13.

* 'Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you' (Deut. 6:14).

* 'Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods... burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods' (Deut. 12:2-3, id.:29-30)

* 'If you hear it said... 'Let us go and worship other gods' (gods you have not known), then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. Destroy it completely' (Deut. 13:12-15, id 17:2-3).

* 'The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone' (Deut. 28:36, part of curse sanction).

* 'It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers... They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them' (Deut. 29:25-26; likewise, 31:16; Judges 2:1b-3; 1Sam 8:8).

* 'He will say: 'Now where are their gods, the rock they took refuge in, the gods who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offerings? Let them rise up to help you! Let them give you shelter!' (Deut. 32:37-38; likewise, Jer. 2:27-28).

* 'I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me' (Judges 6:10 also :5,6,7).

* 'But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!' But the Israelites said to the LORD, 'We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.' Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD' (Judges 10:13-16).

* 'When the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites, he commanded them: 'Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them, serve them or sacrifice to them'' (2Kin 17:35).

* Ps 82, extensively treated in par 4.4.3.

* 'They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves' (Ps 106:34-39).

* 'If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. 9 'Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and {swear by false gods}, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'--safe to do all these detestable things?' (Jer. 7:6-10; likewise, Jer. 44:3)

* 'So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour.'... O LORD, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in time of distress, to you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, 'Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good. Do men make their own gods? * Yes, but they are not gods!' (Jer. 16:13,19-20)

* 'And I said to them 'Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God'' (Ezek. 20:7)

* The verses Hos. 2:15; 9:10; 11:1; 13:4-5 refer to the covenant Yahweh made with the people of Israel in the desert. Loewen points out that when they entered the Promised Land, changing from nomads to sedentary agriculturalists, 'they seemed to be afraid to trust Yahweh for fertility [and turned to worship] the local agricultural-fertility deities. Yahweh complains that Israel did not recognize that it was he who gave them rich

produce' (Hos. 2:8; 10:1-2; 11:1-2). Yahweh even suggests 'alluring' her back to the desert, to 'speak to her heart tenderly.' (Hos. 2:14). This is another suggestion: God allows his people to comprehend his rule as localized, since their inheritance, their land, is a finite territory.

* 'This is what the LORD says: 'For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back [my wrath]. Because they have rejected the law of the LORD and have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods, the gods their ancestors followed' (Amos 2:4, likewise 5:25-26).

* 'All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever' (Mic 4:5). This final verse of this section is a clear statement to the other gods with their territories as opposed to Yahweh-Elohim of Israel.

§ C

The prophets understand and act upon the concept of 'gods of the nations'.

* 'Woe to you, O Moab! You are destroyed, O people of Chemosh! He has given up his sons as fugitives and his daughters as captives to Sihon king of the Amorites' (Numb 21:29; likewise, Jer. 46:25).

* 'The LORD alone led him; no foreign god was with him... They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols' (Deut. 12:12,16).

* 'If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.' But the people said to Joshua, 'No! We will serve the LORD' (Josh 24:20-21).

* 'The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs' (Judges 3:7; likewise, and including a repentance: 10:6,16 and 1 Sam 7:3-4).

* 'An oracle concerning Egypt: See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him' (Isa 19:1).

* 'You went to Molech with olive oil and increased your perfumes. You sent your ambassadors (or: idols) far away; you descended to the grave itself! ...When you cry out for help, let your collection [of idols] save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away' (Isa 57:13)

* 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!' (Isa 21:9b; likewise, Jer. 50:2).

* 'In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below' (Isa 24:21). This verse refers to the relation of visible kings and invisible rulers or local gods (likewise 34:1-4; Jer. 48:46).

* Isa 41-48 describes a 'divine lawsuit' between Yahweh-Elohim and the gods of the nations. Among all the details we see four main threads woven through this lawsuit. 1) Elohim challenges the nations to come forth for the lawsuit (Isa 41:21; 43:9; 45:20-22). 2) Elohim challenges and ridicules the gods of the nations, for instance 'tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear' (Isa 41:23), determined to 'not yield his glory to another' (Isa 41:23,28-29; 42:8,17; 44:8-9; 48:11). 3) Elohim wants to bring forth completely new things (Isa 43:19; 48:6-7). 4) On the international scene Yahweh will cause breakthroughs (Isa 41:5; 45:4-5,15; 46:1, 47). All four threads lead up to this final verdict: 'There is no peace' says Yahweh, 'for the wicked' (Isa 48:22). A similar scene of challenging the gods of the nations we find in Jer. 51 (:1, :11-13, :25, :33-35, :44-48).

* 'Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols' (Jer. 2:11). This verse states clearly the concept of local gods as being un-exchangeable attached to a certain people. Likewise, Jer. 49:1. Remarkable is that Jer. 48:7 and 49:3, 13 suggest that local gods can go 'in exile... together with his priests and officials', in other words: they are connected to the peoples, dwelling in the hearts of the people, and when a people is led into exile, the gods have to follow.

* The prophets see a clear connection between idol worship, corporate sin and real gods: Ezek. 6:6; 16:36. In Ezek. 23 the covenant breaking of Samaria and Jerusalem is portrayed in an extensive metaphor as adultery with other gods, 'handsome young men' (Ezek. 23:12-15,23,30)

* Ezekiel and Daniel speak very realistically about local gods, as if they were the (visible) kings. About the 'king of Tyre': 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you' (Ezek. 28:12-13). The 'Pharaoh of Egypt' is called a great monster, lying among the streams of the river Nile (Ezek. 29:3). In Ezek. 30:13, the prince in Egypt is mentioned among the idols and images of Memphis. Also: 'I will destroy the idols and put an end to the images in Memphis. No longer will there be a prince in Egypt, and I will spread fear throughout the land' (Ezek. 30:13). In Ezek. .31:18, Assyria is compared to a beautiful tree in the Garden of Eden, with all the nations living in its shade. Ezek. .32:1-2 calls Pharaoh with his hordes a monster in the seas,

thrashing about in its streams. About the 'princes' of Persia and Greece: 'but the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia... So he said, 'Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come' (Dan 10:13, 20)

* Daniel goes on to speak in this way of a 'king of the North': 'The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods... He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers... nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. Instead of them, he will honour a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his fathers he will honour with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god...' (Dan 11:36-39, italics added). Is this an earthly king, blaspheming the God of gods, exalting himself above the gods and ruling with the help of the god of fortresses, or is he a spirit being in a vision?

* In John 12:31, 14:30, 16:10 Satan is referred to by Jesus as the 'Prince of this world'. In Rev 2:13 Satan is referred to as enthroned in Pergamum.

* The most striking reference to the gods of the nations is Zeph. 2:11: 'In the end all the gods of the nations will be destroyed by Yahweh, and then the nations themselves will, each in their own territory, worship Yahweh.' This is parallel to 'The LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear' (Isa 2:17b-18). As Satan is, since the cross, no longer is the Prince of this world, there must indeed come a time that his subjects, the gods of the nations, recognise the new Prince, the prince of Peace, to whom has been given a Name above every name (Phil 2:9), Yahweh, who will rule out of Zion.

§D

The Israelites understand and act upon the concept of 'gods of the nations'.

* Jacob understands that Yahweh is not just his local elohim, but The Elohim. He is encouraged and says: 'If this elohim will be with me and will watch over me on this journey... then Yahweh will be my Elohim' (Gen 28:20-21).

* Joshua 22 is a special chapter in this respect. When the two and a half tribe who planned to live east of the Jordan river built an altar at the Jordan, they were accused of turning from Yahweh. Their objective was the opposite: they wanted to emphasise that Yahweh reigns also across the Jordan river: 'The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD (2x Elohim, El, Yahweh)! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the LORD, do not spare us this day... No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, 'What do you have to do with the LORD, the God of Israel across that river? The LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you--you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the LORD.' So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the LORD' (Josh. 22:22-25). When the argument is settled, the conclusion is: 'A Witness Between Us that the Lord is God, that Yahweh is Elohim!' (vs 34).

* The threat that his son Gideon might be killed brings father Joash to some realism about the local Baal: 'The men of the town demanded of Joash, 'Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.' But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, 'Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him?... If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.' (Judges 6:30-31)

* In the book of Ruth, we see how the bitter Naomi, the Moabitess Ruth and the righteous Israelite Boaz act upon the reality of the local gods: "Look," said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.' But Ruth replied, 'Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God' (Ruth 1:15-16). 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner?' Boaz replied, 'I've been told [how you] came to live with a people you did not know before... May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.' (Ruth 2:10b-12).

* 'Now let my lord the king listen to his servant's words. If the LORD has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, men have done it, may they be cursed before the LORD! They have now driven me from my share in the LORD's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods.' (1Sam 26:19).

* 'How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?' (Ps 137:4)Index

§E

There is even the concept of 'comparing gods'!

* 'Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those [gods] who had treated Israel arrogantly' (Ex 18:11)

* 'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way Yahweh our Elohim is near us...?' (Deut. 4:7). 'Has any other people heard the voice of God, speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testing, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other' (Deut. 4:32-35).

* Joshua challenges the people of Israel to choose between Yahweh on the one hand and the foreign gods on the other. 'But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.' Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!... 'If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.' 'Now then,' said Joshua, 'throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel' (Josh 24:15,16, 20, 23).

* 'And who is like your people Israel--the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt?' (2Sam 7:23)

* 'For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens' (1Chr 16:25-26, italics added).

* 'Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord; no deeds can compare with yours' (Ps 86:8, likewise Ps 86:8,9; 95:3,7; 97:6-9; 115:3-4; 135:5,13-15 and many more places).

* 'Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple-- all made by skilled workers. But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. 'Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens'' (Jer. 10:7-11, italics added).

Striking in this last paragraph are the two references, italicised, that state the main issue in this debate: Not the gods but Yahweh made the heaven and the earth