



Joel 2:17 and the Calamities of Joel 1:2-2:11

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Article abstract

The relationship between the calamities of Joel 1:2-2:11 remains an unsettled problem. This article contributes to discussion of the problem by attending to what the speakers in the text envision as the outcome of those calamities. Joel 2:17 is proposed as an interpretive aid, and suggestions that the wording there is ambiguous or polysemous are examined; a close analysis of syntax there and of the valence of transformative □□□□ affirms the reading of the ancient versions over against claims of in clarity or wordplay. Although the locust plague is juxtaposed and metaphorically intermingled with the invading army, the text's speakers at this point envision the outcome of the calamities not only as agricultural disaster but also as foreign domination. While in the text the agricultural disaster is a fait accompli, the second calamity may still be averted. The possibilities of agricultural restoration and foreign domination become literary goads; the addressees are spurred to act in their own self-interest, which is entangled with the deity's.

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וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחָדָם עַל-
הָעֵינַיִם הַגְּדוֹלִים אֲשֶׁר
יֵשׁ-בָּהֶם הַרְבֵּה מִמֶּנּוּ



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DOREN G. SNOEK

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JOEL 2:17 AND THE CALAMITIES OF JOEL 1:2–2:11*

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Joel 1:2–2:17 comprises a series of speeches depicting calamitous events interspersed with calls to fasting and prayer. The language in Joel 1 is thoroughly agricultural and depicts a locust plague consuming grain crops and vineyards alike (Joel 1:4–5). The result of this locust plague is a dearth of offerings for Yahweh (Joel 1:9, 13) and the cessation of ordinary cultic function. In Joel 2:1–11, the locust plague is juxtaposed with another calamity. Because Joel 2 partially recycles language and themes from Joel 1, the quality of the second calamity is not as clear. Like the locust horde, the host that appears in Joel 2 is mighty and numerous (Joel 1:6 **עֲצוֹם וְאֵין מִסְפֵּר**, Joel 2:2 **עַם רַב וְעֲצוֹם**). Just as the locusts leave nothing behind (Joel 1:4), so none escape from the second host (Joel 2:3). As the locusts leave the land desolate (Joel 1:10, 18), so the host of Joel 2 desolates (2:3). Unlike the locusts of Joel 1, though, explicitly military imagery is attached to the host of Joel 2:1–11. They look and move like warhorses or warriors (2:4), breaching defenses and entering houses (2:7). Whoever or whatever else they may be, they are Yahweh's own army (2:11), and before the onslaught of this army the only fitting response is fasting, weeping, and wailing (2:12).

Scholars have made sense of this imagistic array in several ways. Either there is a single event (locusts or a military incursion) and one of the chapters is a highly figurative elaboration on that event, or there are two separate events (locusts and a military incursion) depicted with similar figurative language. Usual descriptions of the relationship between chapters 1–2 are:

* The author thanks Simeon Chavel, David Harris, Justin Moses, Dennis Pardee, Emily Thomassen, and the anonymous reviewers for many constructive remarks; errors are mine alone.

1. locusts are in view throughout Joel 1:2–2:17,¹
2. locusts are evoked by Joel 1 and an army by Joel 2,² or
3. locusts are merely a metaphor for an army in chapter 1 and that army appears fully in chapter 2.³

Objections to these three positions are usually formulated with respect to the language describing the two calamities. Against the view that locusts are present in chapters 1–2, there is a) the presence of what appears to be “non-locust” material in 2:1–11 and b) the possible evocation of foreign rule later in the book.⁴

¹ E.g., Samuel R. Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, vol. 30–31 of *CBC* (1897; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 30–31; Bernhard Duhm, “Anmerkungen zu den Zwölf Propheten,” *ZAW* 31 (1911): 161–204, at 184–87; D. Ernst Sellin, *Das Zwölfprophetenbuch*, KAT 12 (Leipzig: Deichert, 1922), 150; John A. Thompson, “Joel’s Locusts in the Light of Near Eastern Parallels,” *JNES* 14 (1955): 52–55 seems to adopt this view (55) in light of the divine response in 2:18ff, even though he provides ancient Near Eastern parallels for the other positions; John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 26–27, 24; Ronald A. Simkins, “God, History, and the Natural World in the Book of Joel,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 435–52; Elie Assis, “The Structure and Meaning of the Locust Plague Oracles in Joel 1,2–2,17,” *ZAW* 122 (2010): 408–9; Ronald L. Troxel, “The Problem of Time in Joel,” *JBL* 132 (2013): 77–95, at 92.

² E.g., Brevard S. Childs, “The Enemy from the North and the Chaos Tradition,” *JBL* 78 (1959): 197–98; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, trans. Janzen Waldemar, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 42; James Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*, BZAW 218 (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1993), 2–4, may be placed here, though at pp. 8–12 he develops a nuanced portrait of the interrelationship of locusts and drought in Joel 1; James L. Crenshaw, *Joel*, vol. 24C of *AB* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 117, 130–31.

³ E.g., Graham S. Ogden, “Joel 4 and Prophetic Responses to National Laments,” *JSOT* 26 (1983): 105; Pablo R. Andiñach, “The Locusts in the Message of Joel,” *VT* 42 (1992): 433–41. One other organizational scheme is worth mentioning: both calamities are metaphorical or figurative language developed to evoke “the character of the day of the Lord;” see Ferdinand E. Deist, “Parallels and Reinterpretation in the Book of Joel: A Theology of the Yom Yahweh?,” in *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham*, ed. W. Claassen, JSOTSup 48 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1988), 63–79, quote at 64. On premodern approaches, see Ronald L. Troxel, *Joel: Scope, Genre(s), and Meaning*, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 6 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 15. Jörg Jeremias, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, vol. 3 of *ATD* 24 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 22–23, follows Wolff in suggesting that 2:1–11 represents only an increased/increasing threat in the day of the Lord, which is the tie between the calamity of Joel 1 (at 1:15–17) and Joel 2.

⁴ For instance, הַצְפוֹנִי (“the northerner”) in 2:20. Andiñach, “The Locusts in the Message of Joel,” 434, suggests that the invaders of Joel 2 perform actions typical of human soldiers. See too Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, 27; John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 47.

Further, locusts are never named outright in Joel 2:1–11.⁵ Against the view that Joel 1 has to do with locusts but Joel 2 with an army, Barton suggests that the “invading force in chapter 2 must be locusts, since they are compared to an army and so cannot be one.” Further, the locusts are associated with the day of the Lord already (1:15), and although the rhetoric is heightened by the invasion penetrating defensive fortifications (2:8–9), a new foe does not need to be introduced (2:1).⁶ Against the third view, if the locusts of chapter 1 are understood as an invading army, it is by virtue of juxtaposition with the chapter that follows and widespread similes between armies and locusts.⁷ Further, very little in Joel 2:1–11 cannot be explained as evoking a horde of locusts.⁸

Here, I argue that Joel 2:17, in which the speakers in summary prayer imagine the outcome of these calamities, places a control on readings of these calamities, especially Joel 2:1–11. The phrase *לְמַשְׁלֵבָם גּוֹיִם* in Joel 2:17b has been read with some uncertainty; this uncertainty has recently developed into a reading in which scholars take the phrase as intentionally polysemous.⁹ This article will suggest that the phrase is not uncertain and that the most plausible reading is with *לְמַשֵּׁל* as an infinitive meaning “to rule, to dominate.”¹⁰ The phrase means “so that nations rule over them,” and it summarizes the outcome of the second calamity. The summary-in-prayer stands as an interpretive control; the second calamity must result in foreign rule, and Joel 2:1–11 imagines the military force that might bring about this foreign rule. While the locusts are reasonably understood as juxtaposed and even partially blurred with this military force, in the poetics of Joel 2:17 they are subordinated to a vision of foreign domination which, in the speakers’ understanding, momentarily eclipses the problems of an ongoing agricultural disaster.

Because I propose Joel 2:17 as an interpretive control, the argument stands or falls depending on whether Joel 1:2–2:17 can be read as a (complex) literary unit.¹¹ This article’s purpose

⁵ Assis, “Structure and Meaning,” 401.

⁶ Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 69. Troxel, *Joel*, 14–15, points out that Kimchi took a similar approach.

⁷ See Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 42–48.

⁸ Simkins, “God, History, and the Natural World,” 439–41.

⁹ Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, 28; David Yellin, “Paronomasia in the Bible / משנה־ההוראה בתנ״ך,” *Tarbiz* 5 (1933): 1–17, at 2; James R. Linville, “Letting the ‘Bi-Word’ ‘Rule’ in Joel 2:17,” *JHebS* 5 (2004): not paginated; Rebecca Poe Hays, “Divine Extortion and Mashal as a Polysemic Pivot: The Strategy of Complaint in Joel 2:12–17,” *PRSt* 42 (2015): 357–70. Elie Assis, *The Book of Joel: A Prophet between Calamity and Hope*, LHBOTS 581 (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 156–57, introduces ambiguity as a literary device that allows readers to contemplate their political situation, particularly the Babylonian destruction, in a roundabout manner.

¹⁰ With the versions and, among others, Jörg Jeremias, *Studien zum Dodekapropheten II: Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha und Nabum*, FAT 133 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 124.

¹¹ In addition to the features noted below, see Harm Van Grol,

is not to provide a full argument about the compositional history of Joel but to evaluate the relative merits for readings of Joel 2:17b. One must still acknowledge a long history of redaction-critical approaches, which point out many textual complexities and suggest that Joel 1–2 comprises two or several more editorial layers or supplements.¹² For two reasons, such redaction-critical approaches do not undermine the argument here. First, redaction-critical approaches to Joel 1–2 tend to treat the apparent distinctions in topic in a way that recapitulates the interpretive approaches to the calamities of Joel 1–2 described above (1—all locusts, 2—locusts in chapter 1 and an army in chapter 2, or 3—all an army).¹³ Such approaches transfer the

“Conflicting Structures in the Book of Joel and the Superficiality of the Book of the Twelve Prophets,” in *The Books of the Twelve Prophets: Minor Prophets – Major Theologies*, ed. Heinz-Josef Fabry, BETL 195 (Leuven; Paris; Bristol: Peeters, 2018), 329–50, at 336–46.

¹² See, for now, Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*; Jakob Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches: Entstehung und Komposition*, BZAW 360 (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2006), 391–435; Anselm C. Hagedorn, *Die Anderen im Spiegel: Israels Auseinandersetzung mit den Völkern in den Büchern Nabum, Zefanja, Obadja und Joel*, BZAW 414 (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2011), 245–80. For further bibliography and critical review, see Ronald L. Troxel, “The Fate of Joel in the Redaction of the Twelve,” *CurBR* 13 (2015): 152–74; idem, Joel, 25–50.

¹³ For instance, Hagedorn, *Die Anderen im Spiegel*, 235–66, understands Joel 1–2 as having two primary layers: a *Grundschrift* comprising most of Joel 1 (except 1:1, 6–7, 9, 15b, 17b), and a reinterpretation of this in Joel 1:15b, 2:1–14. Other minor expansions or editions are visible in shorter sections: 1:1 is separated as a title of the work, 1:6–7 and 1:17b are a separate extension of the locusts into a portrayal of foreign power, and 1:9 belongs with 2:15–17 as different expansion with cultic concerns. Taking the text this way is another form of position 2 above, that is, in some sense foreigners or foreign military power is in view in Joel 2, but only as a reinterpretation of the locust plague.

The primary criteria for separating these editorial layers are in most cases the apparent topic of each section and, to the degree they co-occur, features of grammar, syntax, and lexicon. So, for instance, 1:6–7 must refer to an army because of the use of גי, which Hagedorn argues cannot refer here to locusts because it never refers to the animal world elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (*Die Anderen im Spiegel*, 248). Hagedorn’s corroborating evidence for this point includes the presence of the first-person pronominal suffix. These verses are grouped with 1:17b because in the latter verse הִרָס appears, and elsewhere (in the Twelve Prophets) this term is associated with destruction by persons (Mic 1:10; Mal 1:4). But an argument based on such lexical assertions underestimates the context in which they appear. If the locust plague is so unprecedented that it will be recounted to subsequent generations (1:2–3), then the language describing it might also incorporate new turns of phrase. The presence of the first-person suffix only here in Joel 1 is somewhat more difficult to explain, but even if one postulates an editorial expansion here that is partly aligned with Joel 2, it is not so cleanly separable as Hagedorn suggests. (On גי in particular, the above is my observation but see the apt comment in Troxel, *Joel*, 67, n18.)

interpretive problem onto an editorial process, so that an explanation of origins replaces an account of the resulting text's meaning. Second, though it may be that Joel was composed as part of a complex process in the Book of the Twelve,¹⁴ redaction-critical approaches face some unresolved difficulties.¹⁵ So although scholarship has tended to divide Joel 1 from Joel 2 or to identify multiple editorial layers in these chapters,¹⁶ as much as Joel 1:2–2:17 yields to reading as a complex whole, Joel 2:17 stands as an interpretive control for what precedes.

Two considerations suggest we may indeed read Joel 1:2–2:17 as an integrated, if complex, whole. First, recognizing Joel's character as what Troxel has called a "composite" written work, one with an inherent capacity to integrate an array of imagery or allusions to other texts, lessens the need to press an account of its editorial history as the best explanation for these features.¹⁷ While allowing the possibility that some verses may

¹⁴ Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen*, 387–460. Wöhrle argues that Joel 2 has two editorial layers, a *Grundschrift* having to do with the day of the Lord and another in which it is compared to an army. He suggests that all the comparisons in Joel 2:1–11 are related to this second layer (2b, 4–5, 7–9, 11a). The material related to the day of the Lord cannot be secondary because, without it, there is nothing to ground the comparisons (ibid., 395–96). Regarding chapter 1, Wöhrle understands there to be two topics: a locust plague and a drought. Only vv. 4 and 6–7 refer to the locust plague. These verses belong with the same, secondary redactional layer as the army-comparative one in Joel 2, while the balance of Joel 1 belongs to the same base layer as Joel 2. At a formal level, this hypothesis groups together all the causal phrases introduced with ׀ in chapter 1 (5, 8–10, 11–12, 13) and tidily resolves the only doubled causal phrase (in vv. 5–7) by making it an editorial addition. Further, in Joel 2, vv. 15–17 respond to the disasters of drought and the day of the Lord (and indeed are verbally dependent on the *Grundschrift*, ibid. 401); 2:12–14 belong to a much later redaction.

Although in the details it differs from Hagedorn's analysis, Wöhrle, too, grapples with the imagistic array in Joel 1–2 (and within Joel 1, between locusts and drought) by resolving it into distinct editorial layers. The locusts are truly marginal to Joel 1 (although their early placement, in 1:4, 6–7, would then perhaps govern how the subsequent ׀ phrases are interpreted). Joel 2:15–17 is a climactic call to assembly and prayer before the crisis—the drought and day of the Lord (without any foreigners at all)—are resolved in 2:18–27.

¹⁵ See *in extenso* Troxel, "The Fate of Joel in the Redaction of the Twelve," with detailed critique of redactional approaches over the last three decades. Troxel points out difficulties such as understated or misdirected theory, criteria that are underdeveloped or inconsistently applied, and overreliance on differences in vocabulary, grammar, or topic to differentiate editorial layers in a text. Such approaches also tend to presume that there is a recoverable, "parsimonious" text (or texts) lurking behind the received one; see Troxel, *Joel*, 30–33.

¹⁶ On how the chapters interact, see, e.g., Wolff, *Hosea*, 41. See Assis, "Structure and Meaning," 401–2 for further review and bibliography.

¹⁷ This understanding is predicated on recognizing Joel as scribal prophecy. See Troxel, *Joel*, 41–50, and note especially Siegfried Ber-

be secondary¹⁸ or that Joel may rely on literary antecedents,¹⁹ this approach allows one to direct attention towards a reading of the whole. Second, as Elie Assis has pointed out, there is a system of syntactical and semantic features that remains largely consistent across Joel 1:2–2:17 and structure the discourse.

The character of the book of Joel as scribal prophecy or composite text implies an allowance for complexity of imagery, concepts, and literary character. In keeping with this complexity, Troxel cogently argues that the text signals an unprecedented, even fantastical event (or events).²⁰ By emphasizing the unprecedented nature of the calamities (Joel 1:2b–4; 2:2), Joel “creates a gulf between his audience... and what he recounts: these events supersede any in their lifetime or recounted by their ancestors. If this claim is taken seriously, Joel thereby marks his story as unreal, utilizing a literary genre that has been dubbed ‘the fantastic.’”²¹ That is, when one accounts for the text’s explicit remarks on the extraordinary nature of events, a certain degree of ambiguity, incongruity, or marvelousness might be expected.²²

The text comports with such a characterization across Joel 1:2–2:17, invoking throughout both the incomparability and universal effects of the calamities. The calamity of Joel 1 is a generational disaster (1:2–3). The locusts are not only named but descriptions of their variety and the totality of their consumption are piled up (1:4; 1:7). The severity of the agricultural disaster is repeatedly emphasized and its consequences extended to a range of persons: drunkards (1:5), priests and temple personnel (1:9, 13), agricultural laborers (1:11), animals (1:18), and even a first-person speaker (1:19), evoking through this wide range of references the sense of an inescapable disaster. The disaster of Joel 2:1–11 has a similar scope, constructed in the opposite direction. It names up front “all who inhabit the land” (2:1) as affected by the disaster, and the responses of

gler, *Joel als Schriftinterpret*, BEATAJ 16 (New York; Bern: Lang, 1987).

¹⁸ E.g., 1:6–7, in the voice of Yahweh as the first person but without an introduction of the speaker; see above nn. 13–14.

¹⁹ Troxel, “The Fate of Joel in the Redaction of the Twelve,” 34, cites the case of the relationship between Gilgamesh in its Akkadian and Sumerian versions. The possibility that Joel is a later composition integrating motifs from other biblical texts is noted by Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen*, who observed many parallels between Joel and others of the twelve prophets. He suggests two possibilities for the composition of Joel. Either Joel entered the Book of the Twelve late, as a pastiche of citations or motifs from other texts, or some part of Joel was included in the Book of the Twelve early and it was gradually supplemented as that collection was expanded. Wöhrle’s terminology for the kind of composition that Joel would be in the former case (“nicht mehr als ein Motiv-Cluster”) precludes reading it as the “composite narrative” Troxel imagines.

²⁰ Troxel, *Joel*, 59–62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 62, with reservations about the extent to which Troxel then suggests that locusts, drought, and an army are melded; on this see the remainder of the argument below.

²² *Ibid.*, 59–67.

specific parties are only later invoked (2:12–17). In Joel 2 one also finds the incomparability of the agents of disaster (2:2b) and extensive characterizations: the agents of disaster are like a thunderstorm (2:5), and their appearance alone is cause for anguish (2:3, 4, 6). Explicitly and in their mode of description, characterization, and comparison, both chapters portray the calamity or calamities as of fantastic severity. Both chapters point towards the calamities' universal effects.

We may also draw on Elie Assis's argument about the structure of Joel 1:2–2:17. He argues that the text has internally consistent syntactical and semantic features, such as vocatives, imperatives, and thematic elements that bind it together,²³ and further, that its sections exhibit many interdependencies. Assis aptly proposes a scheme of four speeches: 1:2–12, 13–20, 2:1–14, and 2:15–17. Each of these speeches opens in a similar fashion. The imperative (+ vocative in several cases) calls "various audiences to pay heed, to listen, to relate, to mourn, to fast or to pray to God."²⁴ Despite the variety of the addressees for the vocatives, the opening calls share linguistic and thematic similarities.²⁵ Assis further points out that the speeches are incomplete when read in isolation from one another. For example, the fourth speech opens in 2:15 with a call to alarm (תקעו שופר בציון קדשו צום קראו עצרה), but this does not follow a description of a calamity that would trigger such a call. It follows the suggestion that Yahweh may not bring about the threat described in 2:1–11. This chain of dependence—of the call to prayer in 2:15–17 on the possibility of divine mercy and of divine mercy as a possibility in the face of calamity—runs back from Joel 2:17 to the beginning of the chapter. The prayer depends on what precedes to establish its necessity and to contextualize its urgency—for it is voiced with weeping (יבכו הכהנים).²⁶

Dependencies in Joel 1:2–2:17 also obtain as key details are repeatedly withheld from the reader. Early in chapter two, it is not clear what is being compared to an army (Assis thinks it is locusts), and so Joel 2:1–14 seems dependent on the preceding chapter.²⁷ There is a call to listen in 1:2–12, but no "appeal to the people to return to God or to pray to Him."²⁸ That call comes in Joel 1:13. Since the various segments appear to be incomplete, Assis proposes that "the four oracles were combined together in a rhetorical structure in which each one re-

²³ Assis, "Structure and Meaning." See also Troxel, "The Problem of Time in Joel", 80 n8–9, where Troxel discusses Wöhrle's redactional layers in Joel 2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 46–50, also argues that Joel 2:1–19 is all interlinked.

²⁴ Assis, "Structure and Meaning," 403.

²⁵ Ibid., 403–5. See also Jeremias, *Die Propheten Joel, Obadja, Jona, Micha*, 11 for observations on some such features in Joel 1:5–14.

²⁶ Ibid., 407–8, Assis points out that scholars have implicitly accepted this dependence of the prayer on earlier parts of the chapter.

²⁷ Ibid., 408.

²⁸ Ibid., 409.

veals a little more than the one preceding it. The purpose of the composition is to progress step by step until the subject is fully articulated in the fourth oracle...²⁹

Together, the evidence surveyed here suggests that Joel 1:2–2:17 may be read as an integrated, if complex, text. It is marked as “fantastical,” diminishing the importance of apparent changes in topic. Besides this explicit marking, the two chapters each pile up stunning description of the calamities and demonstrate their universal extent. Further, there is evidence of a unifying discourse structure, identified by Assis. Finally, the calamities of Joel 1–2 are subordinated to a single, larger event, the *יום יהוה* (1:15; 2:1, 11; see further below). The presence of all these features allows an attempt to read Joel 1:2–2:17 together.

In such a reading, the quality of the second threat depends on how one understands Joel 2:17b, which extends the fourth speech’s call for a solemn gathering (2:15–16). The speaker suggests that the people are to assemble with their leaders; in this call to action, cultic personnel are differentiated by weeping (*בכה*, once in this speech) and in that the speaker imagines their utterance, specifically (2:17b). They are to plead that Yahweh relent from some part of the calamities hitherto described. What should these priests plead with Yahweh to prevent? Joel 2:17b reads as follows: *וַיֹּאמְרוּ חוּסָה יְהוָה עַל עַמּוֹךְ וְאַל תִּתֵּן נַחֲלֶתְךָ לְחִרְפָּה לְמִשְׁלַל־בָּם גּוֹיִם לְמָה יֹאמְרוּ בְעַמִּים אִי־הָאֱלֹהִים בְּמִשְׁלַל בָּם גּוֹיִם*. When translating this plea, the early versions understood the phrase *למשל בם גוים* to express foreign domination.³⁰ An alternative reading takes *למשל* not as an infinitive but reads instead the noun *מִשְׁלַל* “proverb, saying, byword” (by cleaving the Masoretic link between it and *בָּם*). Translators who prefer this option employ language like “and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations” or treat *למשל* as a closely related verb (e.g., “dass Heiden über sie spotten.”)³¹ To be

²⁹ Ibid. This subject, to which I will return below, is in Assis’s view a call to prayer in the face of political threat. In his view, its full articulation is withheld because it would be ineffective if the prophet immediately advocated for prayer. The rhetorical aim of the passage will be more fully considered after considering the relationship between the calamities.

³⁰ LXX (*κατάρχω*), Vulgate (*dominor*), and Targum Jonathan (*למשלט*); cf. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 39, and on *κατάρχω* see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed., with a revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 910; T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, revised ed. (Leuven; Walpole: Peeters, 2009), 382.

The historical short vowel /u/ is reflected as *qamets khatuf*, as in Gen 42:7 (*לִשְׁבֹר־אֶכְלֵל*); see Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des alten Testaments* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1922), §43c.

³¹ See, for example, the translations in NRSV and NET; the verbal translation is that of Adalbert Merx, *Die Prophetie des Joel und ihre Ausleger* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1879), 91. Similar readings are adopted by Karl Wilhelm Justi, *Joel* (Leipzig: Barth, 1820), 123; Theodore H.

relevant in this prayer, one of these outcomes—mockery or domination—must result from one or both of the calamities. On the scheme proposed above in which 1:2–2:17 is an appropriate unit for analysis, the following holds: if the request is that Yahweh should not allow foreigners to dominate his people, it is more likely that a military threat is in view in Joel 2:1–11. But if the request is that Israel should not be mocked by its neighbors, then Joel 2:1–11 might plausibly be a literary recasting of the locust plague—which would surely cause great suffering—*notwithstanding* the objections reviewed above.

Joel 2:17 and the phrase **למשל במ גוים** have not easily yielded to interpretation. Deciding whether **למשל** expresses the verbal noun “to dominate, rule” or the noun “byword, saying” has proven difficult enough that some scholars choose not to decide.³² A historical pronouncement on the intractable nature of the phrase was made already by Samuel Driver: “in ii. 17, the words rendered *rule over them* admit equally of the rendering *make proverbs of them*.”³³ David Yellin similarly remarks:³⁴

לְמִשָּׁל אֲפֶשֶׁר לְבֹאֵר בְּהוֹרָאתָ: מִמֶּשֶׁל הָיָה וְשִׁלְטוֹן, שְׁלֹא יִשְׁלְטוּ
בְּמִשְׁלֵי הַגּוֹיִם, אִם בְּהוֹרָאתָ: מִשָּׁל, שְׁלֹא יִהְיוּ לְגוֹיִם לְמִשְׁלָם וּלְשִׁנְיָנָה,
כְּעֵדוּת, “לְחִרְפָּה” שֶׁלְפָנֵי מַלְאָכָיו, וְהַמְאִמֵּר הַבֵּא אֶחָד: לְמֵה
יֹאמְרוּ בְעַמִּים אֵימָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם.

In a modern revival of this view, some scholars hold that the phrase should be understood as intentionally conveying both meanings. James Linville, for instance, has argued that the phrase **למשל במ גוים** is polysemous; it means both “so that the nations should rule over them” and (understood with the verb **גתן**) “to turn Israel into a byword among the nations.”³⁵

Robinson, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*, HAT 14 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1938), 62, with some reservations about whether to take **למשל** as a noun or a verb; Arvid S. Kapelrud, *Joel Studies*, UUA 1948:4 (Uppsala: Lundquist, 1948), 88; Crenshaw, *Joel*, 133; Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 82; Anna Karen Müller, *Gottes Zukunft: die Möglichkeit der Rettung am Tag JHWHs nach dem Joelbuch*, WMANT 119 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), 101; Christopher R. Seitz, *Joel*, ITC (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 168.

³² E.g., Robinson, *Die zwölf kleinen Propheten*, 62.

³³ Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, 28 (italics original).

³⁴ Yellin, “Paronomasia in the Bible / משנה־ההוראה בתנ״ך,” (at p. 2) **לְמִשָּׁל** may be explained in this way: as rule and dominion, i.e., that the nations not rule over them. Or, it may be explained in this way: that they will not be a parable and a taunt for the nations, as the words ‘into a disgrace’ before this one suggest and as suggested by those that follow, “why should it be said among the peoples, ‘where is their god?’”

³⁵ Linville, “Letting the ‘Bi-Word’ ‘Rule’”; this view was already present in commentaries, e.g., Crenshaw, *Joel*, 143 though less fully expressed; see also Ronald A. Simkins, *Yahweh’s Activity in History and Nature in the Book of Joel*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 10 (Lewiston: Mellen, 1991), 173–74 n6, “perhaps Joel has used **למשל במ גוים** in an intentional word play.” Linville is followed by Rebecca Poe Hays, “Divine Extortion and Mashal as a Polysemic Pivot: The Strategy of Complaint in Joel 2:12–17,” *PRSt* 42 (2015): 357–70, and Mi-

To claim that the phrase is polysemous, Linville contextualizes each reading. He points first to the fact that **למשל ב** “to rule over” in around 50 cases.³⁶ Although the contextual concerns of those scholars who think locusts alone are represented in chapter 2 make this reading difficult (how would locusts rule?), Linville suggests that the “rule over” interpretation continues a metaphor in which the locusts are an army. The locust plague can “dominate” because it is *like* an overwhelming army. In support of the “byword” reading, Linville demonstrates what he calls a “humiliation formula.” This formula utilizes **ל** נתן in series with, for example, **חרפה** and **משל**. The prime example is Jer 24:9, **ונתתים [לזעוה] לרעה לכל ממלכות, הארץ לחרפה ולמשל לשנינה ולקללה בכל המקמות אשר אדיחם שם**, which Linville translates, “I will make them a terror, an evil thing to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a vilification in every place I banish them.”³⁷ Several features are shared by this verse, several others, and Joel 2:17.³⁸ The parallels in Joel, he argues, include the

chael Lawrence Haney, “Reading Joel as a Rhetorical-Therapeutic Response to Trauma” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2019), 50. Douglas William Watson, “Let the Priests Lament: A Study of the Composition of the Book of Joel” (Emory University, PhD diss., 2013), 79–80 n212 adopts the single reading “byword” in translation, while accepting Linville’s characterization of the phrase as part of a humiliation formula. Watson states that polysemy is unlikely because the meaning “byword” best suits the context. Joel Barker, “One Good ‘Turn’ Deserves Another?,” in *Why?... How Long?: Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda, LHBOTS 552 (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 127–28 n45, records but does not adopt Linville’s reading, suggesting on the grounds of the parallelism between **למשל** and **לחרפה** that the two are here synonymous.

³⁶ See Gen 1:18, 3:16, 4:7, 24:2, 37:8, 45:8, 45:26; Deut 15:6; Josh 12:4–5; Judg 8:22, 23, 9:2, 14:4, 15:11; 2 Sam 23:3; 1 Kgs 5:1; Isa 3:4, 12, 19:4, 63:19; Jer 22:30 (**ומשל עוד ביהודה**); Mic 5:1; Hab 1:14, Ps 8:7, 19:14, 22:9, 59:14, 66:7, 89:10, 103:19, 105:21, 106:41; Prov 16:32, 17:2, 19:10; Eccl 9:17; Lam 5:8, Dan 11:39, 43; Neh 9:37; 1 Chr 29:12; 2 Chr 7:18, 9:26, 20:6, 23:20; compiled on the basis of Solomon Mandelkern, *Concordance to the Tanakh*, revised ed., 2 vols (New York: Shulsinger Brothers, 1955), and Accordance Bible Software. On these grounds, primarily, and in keeping with the translations of LXX and the Vulgate, Wöhrle, *Die frühen Sammlungen*, 399, argues that the phrase must be read as “herrschen über.” Since Linville’s argument, this reasoning is no longer sufficient on its own.

³⁷ Linville, “Letting the ‘Bi-Word’ ‘Rule.’”

³⁸ Deut 28:37; 1 Kgs 9:7; Jer 29:18b; 42:18; 44:8; 49:13. Linville reasonably establishes the humiliation formula, aptly noting that its major features are (see *ibid.*):

- (a) **משל**, **חרפה**, and/or related terms which appear in a series.
- (b) These terms are prefixed by the preposition **ל**.
- (c) The terms are objects of a verb which casts the ridiculed party as objects of insults or, metaphorically, as the insult itself.
- (d) A locative **ב** construction identifying where or among whom

bet-locative and the meaning of *למשל* with transformative *נתן* of the humiliation formula as “into a byword.”

In Linville’s argument, indecidability (left as such by Driver and Yellin) implies polysemy. There is evidence for and against *למשל* being understood as an infinitive from *משל* “to rule;” there is also evidence for and against understanding it in the transformative sense *נתן למשל* “to turn into/become a byword.” He summarizes: “since both readings can be defended, it is best to regard Joel 2:17 as embracing a double reading, or better, two of them simultaneously.”³⁹ However, from a demonstration that two readings cannot be adjudicated it does not follow that one should embrace a polysemous reading. Neither uncertainty nor positive evidence that two or more readings are defensible alone imply polysemy—granting, of course, that polysemy and paronomasia occur in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts.⁴⁰

Even if one were to accept the fallacious reasoning, in this case an argument for polysemy falters on the evidence. In Joel 2:17b, we do not have an undecidable case; the evidence for each reading is not of equal weight, as Driver, Yellin, or Linville suggest. To suggest indecidability requires one to overlook substantial difficulties with the syntax in which *משל* is understood as the noun “byword.” The readers must also choose to momentarily ignore parts of the phrase. For instance, when reading *למשל* as a poetic “pivot” where *משל* means “byword,” the reader must ignore the words *בם גוים*. Yet these words are simultaneously understood as belonging with the interpretation of *משל* as “to rule over.”⁴¹ Note that this requires that a reader simultaneously follow and reject the vocalization *לְמִשְׁלֵבָם*, which, as pointed by the Masoretes with *qamets kbatuf*, is the infinitive, and to overturn the evidence of the versions.⁴² While the early translations and Masoretic pointing could be mistaken, this will be shown to be unlikely given the syntax that appears with transformative *נתן* in other cases. Further, even if the Masoretes might have been mistaken, this would not aid a claim for polysemy here (if such claims require more support than evidence that there is more than one plausible reading).

In the first place, taking the third person plural suffix with preposition *ב* as proleptic is difficult because it seems to diverge from other cases of prolepsis in Hebrew and to cut against principles that seem to operate in other cases of prolep-

the humiliation will take place, typically foreign nations.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See above all Scott B. Noegel, “*Wordplay*” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ANEM 26 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021). Rigorous criteria by which to positively identify individual cases of polysemy remain a desideratum, but there has been some progress towards developing such criteria. See Naphtali S. Meshel, “Too Much in the Sun: Intentional Ambiguity in the Samson Narrative,” *HS* 62 (2021): 55–72, esp. 59–63.

⁴¹ Linville, “Letting the ‘Bi-Word’ ‘Rule.’”

⁴² On which see above, n. 30.

sis.⁴³ In Linville's reading, one must take the pronominal suffix in למשל בם גוים as a proleptic 3ms suffix, anticipating גוים. While there are numerous examples of this construction with independent pronouns, as well as suffixed forms of nouns and verbs, Joel 2:17 is unusual. Hebrew syntax does not require that the preposition occurring with a proleptic pronominal suffix be repeated with the following noun, unless the coordination between two nominal elements is marked. Such a marked coordination occurs with many cases of prolepsis.⁴⁴ In Joel 2:17, the suffix of בם and the noun are not marked as coordinated. There are further problems. First, the examples cited in support of this construction do not support it. Only Williams' *Syntax* is mentioned; there, all three of the examples (Ex 2:6; Ezek 10:3; 1 Kgs 21:13) consist of the proleptic suffix affixed to a finite verb or verbal noun.⁴⁵ (The relevant portions are underlined.)

ותפתח ותראהו את הילד והנה נער בכה ותחמל עליו
ותאמר מילדי העברים זה

Exod 2:6

והכרבים עמדים מימין לבית בבאו האיש והענן מלא את
החצר הפנימית

Ezek 10:3

⁴³ It is worth mentioning one other solution only to immediately dismiss it. *bet-mem* in the phrase under discussion might instead be read as the preposition *bet* + enclitic *mem*, paralleling Ugaritic *bm*. To my knowledge, this has not been proposed elsewhere. It seems very unlikely, though, given the relative scarcity of enclitic *mem* in the Hebrew Bible and the plausibility of a more straightforward reading (on which see below), but if it were accepted, then the debate over how to read למשל בם גוים is moot: the phrase would then be part of a typical humiliation formula. For recent reviews of enclitic *mem* in biblical Hebrew and in northwest Semitic, see Gregorio del Olmo Lete, "The Postpositions in Semitic: The Case of Enclitic -m (with Special Attention to NWS)," *AuOr* 26 (2008): 25–59, with a comment at p. 34 about the "restricted use/survival [of enclitic mem] in Biblical Hebrew prose... with some remains in wisdom and postbiblical Hebrew"; J. A. Emerton, "Are There Examples of Enclitic Mem in the Hebrew Bible?" in *Studies on the Language and Literature of the Bible: Selected Works of J.A. Emerton*, ed. Graham Davies and Robert Gordon, VTSup 165 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), 117–35, points out that enclitic *mem* was overidentified, especially during the mid-20th century.

⁴⁴ See Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006) §131i, with suitable examples from both Classical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew texts which demonstrate the continuity of the phenomenon. See also Sonja Noll, "Rereading Samuel's Silence in 1 Samuel 7:8," *VT* 66 (2016): 404 n. 40, for several probative examples of proleptic pronominal suffixes where the preposition is subsequently repeated with the pronoun's referent.

⁴⁵ Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2nd ed. (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto, 1976), 15–16.

ויבאו שני האנשים בני בליעל וישבו נגדו ויעדהו אנשי
 הבליעל את נבות נגד העם לאמר ברוך נבות אלהים ומלך
 ויצאהו מחוץ לעיר ויסקלהו באבנים וימת

1 Kgs 21:13

Further, in each case, the referent for the proleptic pronominal suffix has already appeared in the preceding discourse; in Joel 2:17, the referent for the pronominal suffix has not yet appeared. Even if one expands the search to other reference grammars seeking similar phenomena, the referent is similarly available in the preceding discourse or the syntax differs from that of Joel 2:17.⁴⁶ Na'ama Pat-El notes that prolepsis is a subset of extraposition, for which there is often an expectation of readerly familiarity with the extraposed terms.⁴⁷ This expectation of readerly familiarity is why, in the numerous cases of prolepsis identified by the grammars, the referent of a proleptic pronoun is very often available in the preceding discourse. While prolepsis without readerly familiarity can occur, it is commonly in Joel and elsewhere a discursive strategy employed

⁴⁶ Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 12.4a suggest Lev 13:57 as an example of one such pronominal suffix in apposition to a noun; they take **תשרפנו את אשר בו הנגע** as “You must burn it (the garment), that which is in it, the plague. (You must burn the plague in it.)” The phrase in parentheses is not what the passage means; in context the pronominal suffix must refer to the items in which malignant molds occur. That is, the syntax is the definite direct object marker + object, in which the object is the whole relative clause. It is this relative clause that is in apposition to the pronominal suffix, and one may translate “you will burn it, namely, whatever the mold is in.” Compare Lev 13:52aβ, 13:54bβ, and note the comments of Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16, AB 3* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 812–13, that the antecedent of the suffix in **בו** must be the entire garment.

Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, 2nd English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §131n, also gathers potentially helpful examples. However, again, none of these match the syntax of Joel 2:17. Ezek 42:14 is infinitive + 3.m.p., Prov 13:4 is noun + 3.m.s., Ezek 3:13 is noun + 3.m.s. but not proleptic; Eccl. 4:10 is not proleptic in the same way as **בם** in Joel 2:17, because the referent is mentioned already in the preceding verse. Many other examples are, similarly, not germane because the referent appears in the preceding verse. This is the case in, for example: Num 32:33; Jer 51:56, Ezek 9:1, 42:5; Dan 11:11; 1 Chron 4:42 and 2 Chron 26:14.

⁴⁷ Na'ama Pat-El, *Studies in the Historical Syntax of Aramaic*, Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Languages 1 (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2012), 104: “extraposition is used throughout Semitic for several functions, some of them discourse-oriented... and some to mark saliency and individuation. The latter function stems from the fact that extraposed items usually carry ‘assumed familiarity’ (Khan 1988:51); that is, the text is constructed under the understanding that the reader is familiar with the concept, whether due to the immediate context or previous knowledge.” The work cited is Geoffrey Khan, *Studies in Semitic Syntax*, London Oriental Series 38 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

to heighten suspense.⁴⁸ Building suspense is unnecessary in Joel's humiliation formula, though, because it is embedded in the call to prayer, which is the very means of escaping the horrifying calamities of Joel 1:1–2:11—not of heightening suspense, because suspense is competently induced by the speeches vividly describing the calamities. For all these reasons, it is not likely that the pronominal suffix in the phrase לְמִשְׁלֵבָם is proleptic and refers to גוֹיִם.

Further, reading Joel 2:17 with למשל as *lamed* + noun disguises differences between it and other instances of Linville's humiliation formula. In other instances of the humiliation formula, the place(s) or person(s) referenced in the *bet*-locative portion of the formula are not abbreviated as a pronominal suffix. They are stated in full.

והיית לשמה למשל ולשנינה בכל העמים אשר ינהגך יהוה
שמה

Deut 28:37

והיה ישראל למשל ולשנינה בכל העמים

1 Kgs 9:7b⁴⁹

לחרפה ולמשל לשנינה ולקללה בכל המקמות אשר
אדיחם שם

Jer 24:9b

ונתתם לזעוה⁵⁰ לכל ממלכות הארץ לאלה ולשמה
ולשרקה ולחרפה בכל הגוים אשר הדחתים שם

Jer 29:18b

כי הנה קטן נתתיך בגוים בזוי באדם

Jer 49:15

ואתננו למשל ולשנינה בכל העמים

2 Chr 7:20b

One might also adduce Ps 44:15a: תשימנו משל בגוים. Reading Joel 2:17 with למשל במ גוים as “into a byword among the nations” therefore diverges from these other cases.⁵¹

While one hesitates to claim that reading למשל במ גוים as “into a byword among the nations” is ungrammatical, the ac-

⁴⁸ Note the phrase לא אשיבנו in Amos 1:2 and following. See also Troxel, “The Problem of Time in Joel,” 71.

⁴⁹ The editors of BHS note that LXX may support לשמה in the place of משל, but this is not salient for the argument here.

⁵⁰ This text follows the *qere*.

⁵¹ A text-critical remedy involving the corruption of בגוים or בכל הגוים to בם גוים is highly speculative and therefore unconvincing. It would also dispose of the grounds for a polysemous reading. See already Justi, *Joel*, 123, who briefly considers reading למשל בגוים but does not adopt this emendation.

cumulated evidence does not show much support for this reading. It is not the case, as Driver suggested, that “the words rendered *rule over them* admit equally of the rendering *make proverbs of them*.”⁵² For the latter reading, one must overturn the Masoretic pointing and the evidence of the earliest translations, suggest an unusual prolepsis, and admit a further innovation (abbreviation) in Joel of the humiliation formula’s ordinary construction (with a *bet* locative and full identification of the location). In short, such a reading faces several obstacles.

In contrast, there is positive evidence for understanding the phrase **לְמַשְׁלֵבָם גּוֹיִם** as an infinitival adjunct to transformative **נָתַן**. On this reading, the phrase is not problematic. Transformative **נָתַן** appears with two objects, one of which is the thing transformed and one of which is the result of the transformation.⁵³ The latter is commonly marked with *lamed*. Isaiah 49:6b suggests that an infinitival adjunct, introduced with *lamed*, may appear with transformative **נָתַן**: **וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם לְהַיּוֹת**: **נָתַן** **יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד קֶצֶה הָאָרֶץ**. Here, the infinitive of **הָיָה** is commonly taken as a purpose clause. Various commentators adopt renderings similar to NRSV, “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”⁵⁴ Other Hebrew texts are also suggestive of transformative **נָתַן** appearing with two objects and an adjunct. For instance, an adjunct marked with **ל** appears to accompany transformative **נָתַן** in Jer 26:6: **וְנָתַתִּיךָ לְקָלְלָה לְכָל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ** (“I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.”)⁵⁵ If an adjunct like this can appear with transformative **נָתַן**, then it is not problematic to understand the phrase **לְמַשְׁלֵבָם גּוֹיִם** as an adjunct to transformative **נָתַן** comprising an infinitive with its subject, **גּוֹיִם**, and an indirect object, **בָּם**. Indeed, Joüon and Muraoka note as examples of ordinary infinitival syntax—in which the infinitive is separated from its subject by its object or other comple-

⁵² Driver, *The Books of Joel and Amos*, 28 (underline added).

⁵³ Femke Siebesma-Mannens, “Double Object Constructions in DSS Hebrew: The Case of *Ntn*,” *DSD* 27 (2020): 372–91, 381ff. Siebesma-Mannens provides an excellent overview of the various uses of **נָתַן** in Biblical Hebrew and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

⁵⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 104:

“I appoint you a light to the nations
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Jesaja*, vol. 2 of *KAT* 10 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 387:

“So werde ich dich zu einem ‚Licht von Völkern‘ [Völker-Licht?] machen,
dass meine Hilfe bis ans Ende der Erde reicht.”

Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, *Deuterojesaja*, vol. 2 of *BKAT* 11 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), 316:

“So mache ich dich zum Licht der Völker
daß mein Heil sei
bis ans Ende der Erden.”

⁵⁵ Siebesma-Mannens, “Double Object Constructions in DSS Hebrew,” esp. 386–387.

ment—both this phrase in Joel 2:17 and another in Gen 4:15 (לְבַלְתִּי הַכּוֹת־אֹתוֹ כָּל־מִצְאָו).⁵⁶

Because the two readings for לְמַשֵּׁל בָּם גּוֹיִם are not equally defensible, as Driver, Yellin, or Linville suggest, and because the reasoning by which the phrase would be polysemous even if the two readings were equally defensible is flawed, it is better in this case to select a single reading that does the most justice to the syntax—even if Joel 2:17 turns out to be unlike other humiliation formulae. With the Masoretes, it is better to understand לְמַשֵּׁל בָּם גּוֹיִם as the G infinitive of מָשַׁל “to rule” + בַּ adversative (or locative) with third person suffix (for indirect object) + subject. As in Isa 49:6 and Jer 26:6, the *lamed* marks a further adjunct to transformative נָתַן. As in Isa 49:6b, the *lamed* plausibly indicates purpose or result; alternatively, one might read it as epexegetical. With the versions, Joel 2:17 may be translated in a fashion that reflects these possibilities, for example as

They say:

“Relent, O Lord, concerning your people.


Do not turn your inheritance into a disgrace,
that nations rule over them.

Why should they say among the peoples,

‘Where is their God?’”⁵⁷

The literary artistry here lies not in polysemy or ambiguity but in an innovative and associative development of the humiliation formula from (the expected) verbalized derision to foreign rule. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp describes the associative nature and paratactic features of Hebrew lyric poetry, which allows for substantial flexibility even in the constitutive parts of poetic works of the same genre.⁵⁸ This is the case, too, with the humiliation formula, which in Joel is reassociated not with verbal degradation but with the militaristic imagery of the calamity in Joel 2. Its result is at last understood here as foreign rule. Together, this reassociation, the (itself poetic) juxtaposition of the two calamities, and the literary precedents for locusts and armies as metaphors for each other⁵⁹ set in motion the debate

⁵⁶ Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §124g.

⁵⁷ This is my translation, but cf. Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 39, 52. See above n. 30 and cp. Tg. Ps.-J. and Peshitta (לְמַשֵּׁל בָּהוֹן עַמִּיּוֹא) and , text per Stephen A. Kaufman et al., *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* [<https://cal.huc.edu>], Mar 27, 2023), and LXX (καὶ μὴ δῶς τὴν κληρονομίαν σου εἰς ὄνειδος τοῦ κατάρξαι αὐτῶν ἔθνη), text per Joseph Ziegler, *Duodecim Prophetæ*, vol. 13 of *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1943]).

⁵⁸ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 189–202.

⁵⁹ Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 43-4: CTA 14.103-11; Judg 6:5; Jer 51:14. Assis, “Structure and Meaning,” 401 mentions further Judg 7:12 and Nah 3:15, 17. In the second text from Nahum, especially,

over the nature of the calamities. But the plea of the priests that the deity relent from disgracing his people **למשל בם גוים** in Joel 2:17b is a plea which, by that phrase, summarizes the circumstance that might cause the disgrace: Yahweh should relent from the disgracing his people in a way that would result from foreigners ruling them—here a poetic equivalent of the disgraced inheritance⁶⁰ and a poetic reversal of Deut 15:6bβ.⁶¹ Because foreign rule is the cause of the disgrace, a calamity that does not result in foreign rule (a locust plague) cannot be what the priests respond to. Rather, the **עם רב ועצום** of Joel 2:1 threatens invasion and foreign rule. Escape from it is integral to the plea in 2:17.

We may now return to Assis's proposal that the fourth oracle, at last, fully reveals the concerns of the text. Assis suggests that the military/political problem remains veiled and is finally addressed in the call to prayer.⁶² Indeed, there appears to be little historical specificity. The semiregular nature of locust plagues and the language of the second chapter, in which the events remain unactualized and apparently contingent, mean that we cannot place either of these calamities historically—at least, not with any precision. We know that locust plagues were semiregular in the ancient Near East because some entered the historical record in, for example, Egyptian and Assyrian texts and iconography.⁶³ Such plagues were well enough known that readers would need little additional to understand the threat they posed.⁶⁴ Similarly, the military invasion does not seem closely tied to any historically identifiable event.

Despite this lack of specificity, there is a further distinction between the two calamities. The distinction is best understood by examining how the text portrays their consequences. Both the agricultural disaster and the threatening army are subordinated to the **יום יהוה** (Joel 1:14; 2:1, 11); in this imminent and even unfolding event the whole speech of Joel 1:2–2:17 stands in an interlude. The locust plague—with the accompanying loss of crops and cessation of offerings—is taken as a *fait accompli* by all the speakers in the text.⁶⁵ Precisely because it

the metaphor develops to that of cowardly officials who flee, and not the abundance of locusts and armies and the destruction they cause.

⁶⁰ My thanks to Emily Thomassen for this point.

⁶¹ Note the verbal parallels: **ומשלת בגוים רבים ובך לא ימשלו**.

⁶² See above, n. 29. Note also that Joel 2:17 may allude to Ps 79, which contemplates the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; see John Strazicich, *Joel's Use of Scripture and Scripture's Use of Joel: Appropriation and Resignification in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*, *BibInt* 82 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 158–59.

⁶³ Thompson, "Joel's Locusts," 54 n18; Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "Joel's Locust Plague in Light of Sargon II's Hymn to Nanaya," *JBL* 112 (1993): 597–603.

⁶⁴ Such knowledge of locust plagues must be assumed, for example, of the implied readers of Exod 10:1–20.

⁶⁵ Indeed, Joel 2:18–27 assumes the consequences of the locust plague but does not appear to assume in the same way the consequences of Joel 2:1–11, i.e., that there has been an armed conflict with

cannot be prevented, no speaker asks that the agricultural disaster be prevented. For these speakers, the first calamity has come to pass (גַּמְנַע מִבַּיִת אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִנְחָה וְנֶסֶד, Joel 1:13b). In this moment there is a unique potential, implied in the question מִי יוֹדֵעַ (“who knows?”).⁶⁶ That is, given Yahweh’s positive characteristics, pleading with him may well yield a positive result such that the יוֹם יְהוָה does not proceed any further than it already has. The potential for an agricultural and cultic restoration (2:14) is imagined as the marvelous outcome of Yahweh’s graciousness (2:13) precisely because the consequences of the agricultural calamity have obtained. A military victory is not imagined by the speakers of 2:12–17 because the military threat might still be avoided. While the locust plague and its consequences have already come about, the menacing army exists only in a state of disquieted irrealis, a menacing potential.⁶⁷

The contingency of the military threat in Joel 2 serves an overriding concern of the text. Assis understands 2:1–11 as dealing with locusts, which he says allows the author to

insinuate indirectly to the listener the opening of the option of prayer also for their political situation... Even though 2:17 is interpreted by scholars... to relate to the problem of the locusts, the actual wording refers to a political situation. The author uses a metaphor because through it he is able to speak about the political situation openly, even though figuratively he is alluding to the subject of the locusts. In this way the prophet manages to get over his message indirectly and not frontally.⁶⁸

Assis here describes how what he understands as the locust plague of Joel 2 allows the prophet to indirectly confront a political situation. For Assis, Joel 1–2 addresses abstention from prayer and the destruction of the temple: the people resist prayer because they feel distant from Yahweh, and the prophet’s argument is that the temple’s site is still an appropriate place to pray.⁶⁹ While intriguing, I propose that this solution departs to some degree from the concerns of the text. The locust plague is a problem for the livelihood of people and animals alike, but it is the cessation of regular cultic activity that is mentioned again and again throughout Joel 1 (1:9, 13, 16). In

resulting foreign rule. This text does not exhibit the same chain of dependencies as Joel 1:1–2:17 and may have been added by a later hand. See Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 9.

⁶⁶ See further James L. Crenshaw, “The Expression *Mi Yōdea* in the Hebrew Bible,” *VTS* 36 (1986): 274–88.

⁶⁷ See Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 76–7. Similarly, Troxel, “The Problem of Time in Joel” provides a basis by which the *yiqtol* and *qatal* verbal forms in Joel 2 can be comprehended in a manner consistent with such a reading. Simkins, “God, History, and the Natural World,” 442–43, has pointed out that there is a shift from predominantly perfective verbs in Joel 1 to predominantly imperfective verbs in Joel 2. See also Wolff, *Hosea*, 41–2.

⁶⁸ Assis, “Structure and Meaning,” 415.

⁶⁹ Assis, “Structure and Meaning,” 411–15.

the restoration envisioned in Joel 2:12–17, the goods consumed by the locusts are mentioned only as offerings for Yahweh (2:14), who is the immediate or most important beneficiary of an agricultural restoration. Prayer, then, would benefit not only the people to whom the speaker appeals but Yahweh, the one whom they need to relent. The wellbeing of each is dependent on the other.

If the locust plague is a calamity portrayed as already effectual, in some sense, and the military invasion as a further possibility, the second is a kind of literary goad. As if the locust plague would not be enough, the speaker further develops the possibility of a foreign invasion before evoking prayer. Inasmuch as it is imagined as unprecedented and universally destructive, the locust plague is portrayed as fantastical, and because it remains speculated, the military threat can also be fantastical. Amidst this two-fold disaster, the possibility of agricultural restoration becomes a carrot and the possibility of an overpowering invasion a stick. By deploying both, the speaker might elicit prayer that will, perhaps, affect Yahweh; he may prove self-interested enough to prevent the invasion and to provide relief for the agricultural disaster; the net effect will be the restoration of normal cultic function and, especially offerings made to him. In this scheme, the addressees are moved to prayer out of concern that they might be subjugated and out of hope that their agricultural fortunes might be restored—but deliverance from both is a byproduct of Yahweh's own self-interest.

Joel 2:17b is a difficult text to resolve, innovating a humiliation formula to speak forthrightly of foreign domination. It guides how one reads the calamity described in Joel 2:1–11, where the possibility of an invading army is juxtaposed with the locust plague presented in the chapter before. While the speaker vividly portrays both calamities, they have different modalities. The first is a *fait accompli* and the second remains a possibility. Although the second calamity is therefore veiled, its vividness and persuasive power do not suffer. Evoking the specter of foreign domination and the possibility of agricultural restoration, the speaker goads the hearers to plead with a self-interested God for rescue from disgrace—his, and thereby, their own: למה יאמרו בעמים איה אלהיהם.

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