

AGAINST THE NATIONS

ISAIAH 13-23

The Oracles against the nations

Isaiah's oracles were directed to his contemporaries at the time of Assyrian expansion. To understand the texts in this section we need to keep in mind the freedom that later editors felt to see in Isaiah's oracles models for grasping YHWH's intention in regard to later empires, especially the Babylonian. Sometimes they reshaped Isaiah's words in order to express what they understood YHWH was wanting to say to them and their contemporaries in their changed circumstances. Sometimes they created new prophecies out of old ones, always with the aim of discovering and giving expression to God's presence and action in their world as they found it in the inspired words of the great prophet.

The previous section was almost entirely devoted to Isaiah's critique of the rulers of Judah. For the most part this section is directed against foreign nations. In chapters 1-12, Assyria was summoned by YHWH as his instrument in punishing Israel (see 5:26-30; 7:17-25). There was also the promise that the oppression would come to an end (9:4-5; 10:24-27), and the assurance that Assyria would be punished for its crimes (10:12-19, 25-26). It is this last idea that is developed in this section, applying Isaiah's words to a series of hostile nations, beginning with Babylon, which in 605, as a result of a military victory over the combined armies of Assyria and Egypt, a century after Isaiah's time, succeeded Assyria as the dominant power in the region. Babylon was responsible for the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and its destruction in 586, along with the deportation of its leading citizens. Cyrus II of Persia made a triumphant entry into Babylon in 539.

The Fall of Babylon as an
example of Universal Judgment
(13:1-21)

This oracle seems to fit best the situation about 550 just before Cyrus conquered the Medes.

The term ‘oracle’(mašša’, literally a ‘lifting up’ – of the voice to proclaim a word from God) will recur throughout this section. See 1:1 for a comment on the significance of ‘saw’.

No city is named yet, for, as the final phrase in verse 5 makes clear, the text is meant to apply generally to any and every nation that arouses YHWH’s anger. Opposition to YHWH will not be tolerated.

Though this is the first time in the Isaiah scroll that we have met the expression ‘the day of YHWH’ (verse 6), the idea runs through Isaiah chapter two (see 2:12). ‘The Almighty’(verse 6) translates šaday – the only time this title for God appears in Isaiah. Its use here is possibly because of the similarity in sound to the word ‘destruction’(šādad).

Speaking in terms of cosmic cataclysm is typical of poetry that describes the day of YHWH’s judgment. The New Testament continues this tradition (see Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:11).

¹The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw.

²On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. ³I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones, to execute my anger. ⁴Listen, a tumult on the mountains as of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! YHWH of hosts is mustering an army for battle. ⁵They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, YHWH and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth.

⁶Wail, for the day of YHWH is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty! ⁷Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt, ⁸and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame.

⁹See, the day of YHWH comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it. ¹⁰For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. ¹¹I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants. ¹²I will make mortals more rare than fine gold, and humans than the gold of Ophir.

¹³Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of YHWH of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. ¹⁴Like a hunted gazelle, or like sheep with no one to gather them, all will turn to their own people, and all will flee to their own lands.

Babylon will fall

¹⁵Whoever is found will be thrust through, and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. ¹⁶Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished.

¹⁷See, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. ¹⁸Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children. ¹⁹And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. ²⁰It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; Arabs will not pitch their tents there, shepherds will not make their flocks lie down there. ²¹But wild animals will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will live, and there goat-demons will dance. ²²Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged.

^{14:1}But YHWH will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land; and aliens will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob. ²And the nations will take them and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess the nations as male and female slaves in YHWH's land; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them.

The general statement of God's universal judgment is now applied to Babylon. Just as God raised up Assyria to punish Israel, so God raises up the Medes to attack Babylon. It is this reference that suggests that this poem was composed about 550, at a time when Cyrus II of Persia was already proving victorious in parts of the crumbling Babylonian Empire, but before he had subdued the Medes.

Editorial Comment (14:1-2)

The anticipated fall of Babylon (13:22) will mean the end of subjection and exile. YHWH will have compassion (rāḥam) on his people, and will renew his choice of them (having rejected them as demonstrated by the catastrophe of 586).

YHWH will settle them once again in the Promised Land. Foreigners who were his instruments in emptying them out of the land will be his instruments in taking them back to their home. Some of these will be present in the land as slaves (no longer as masters). Some will even want to join them and belong to God's chosen people. According to Ezra this will require that they reject all forms of idolatry (see Ezra 6:21). According to the Priestly School, it will require circumcision (see Exodus 12:48-49).

The King of Babylon in the
Underworld (14:3-23)

The introductory lines (14:3-4) and the concluding ones (14:22-23) apply the poem to Babylon.

'Hard service' (verse 3) is an expression used in relation to the condition of the slaves in Egypt (see Exodus 1:14; 6:9; Deuteronomy 26:6), thus linking the exile experience with the experience of their ancestors. YHWH who defeated the Pharaoh and so led his people to the Promised Land is repeating his saving intervention for the exiles in Babylon. 'Taunt' (verse 3) translates the Hebrew *māšāl*. The rhythm of the poem is that of a lament or dirge (the *qînâ*).

The only companions of this once powerful king are the shades (*r'pā'îm*) of the Underworld. His only throne is maggots and he is clothed in worms.

The 'daystar' (*hêlêl*, verse 12) is the planet Venus whose brilliant light vanishes when challenged by the rising sun. *Hêlêl* was translated in the Latin Vulgate as Lucifer. The author is drawing on the myth of the fall of rebellious gods. The New Testament draws upon the same mythical imagery when speaking of the fallen angels:

I watched Satan fall from heaven
like a flash of lightning

– Luke 10:18 (also 2Peter 2:4)

³When YHWH has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, ⁴you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:

How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! ⁵YHWH has broken the staff of the wicked, the sceptre of rulers, ⁶that struck down the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution.

⁷The whole earth is at rest and quiet; they break forth into singing. ⁸The cypresses exult over you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, "Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down."

⁹Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; it rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations. ¹⁰All of them will speak and say to you: "You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!" ¹¹Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your harps; maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering.

¹²How you are fallen from heaven, O Daystar, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!

How the mighty have fallen

¹³You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; ¹⁴I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High." ¹⁵But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit.

¹⁶Those who see you will stare at you, and ponder over you: "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, ¹⁷who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who would not let his prisoners go home?"

¹⁸All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; ¹⁹but you are cast out, away from your grave, like loathsome carrion, clothed with the dead, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the Pit, like a corpse trampled underfoot.

²⁰You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have killed your people.

²⁰May the descendants of evildoers nevermore be named! ²¹Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their father. Let them never rise to possess the earth or cover the face of the world with cities.

²²I will rise up against them, says YHWH of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity, says YHWH. ²³And I will make it a possession of the hedgehog, and swamps, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says YHWH of hosts.

In his pride the king of Babylon thought to challenge the high god ('ēl 'elyôn, verse 14) on the mythical north mountain (šāpôn, verse 13) where the gods assembled. He has been cast down to the Underworld.

Denial of proper burial is the final humiliation and disgrace.

His death is the end of his family line. No descendants will survive him. His name will be eternally obliterated.

The end of Imperial Assyria (14:24-27)

This short passage is from Isaiah. The editors of the Isaiah scroll include it here because the word of God spoken here through Isaiah in the context of Assyrian domination (see already Isaiah 10:12-27) applies also to Babylon (as events leading up to 539 demonstrate).

The prophet-scribes want to go further, for YHWH's plans 'concern the whole earth' and 'all nations' (verse 26), and it is YHWH's designs that will prevail. Any power attempting dominion without regard for YHWH's will for justice is doomed to come to the same end as Assyria and Babylon (13:1 - 14:23).

On YHWH's plans and designs see already 5:12, 19. On the yoke of imperial oppression, see already 9:4; 10:27. On YHWH's hand outstretched to save or to punish, see already the refrain 5:25; 9:7 - 10:4.

Philistia (14:28-32)

Verse 28 refers to 'the year that King Ahaz died' (727). The compilers of the scroll want to move on to the reign of Hezekiah.

The 'fiery serpent' is the *šārāp* – a reference to the fiery serpents that attacked the Israelites during their wilderness journey (see Numbers 21:4-9).

The Philistines made inroads into Judah's territory during the reign of Ahaz (see 2Chronicles 28:18).

Imagine how verse 32 would have been read by those who returned to Judah from exile in Babylon.

²⁴YHWH of hosts has sworn: As I have designed, so shall it be; and as I have planned, so shall it come to pass: ²⁵I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him under foot; his yoke shall be removed from them, and his burden from their shoulders. ²⁶This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. ²⁷For YHWH of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

²⁸In the year that King Ahaz died this oracle came: ²⁹Do not rejoice, all you Philistines, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the root of the snake will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent.

³⁰The poor will graze their flocks in my pastures, and the needy lie down in safety; but I will make your root die of famine, and your remnant I will kill. ³¹Wail, O gate; cry, O city; melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you! For smoke comes out of the north, and there is no straggler in its ranks. ³²What will one answer the messengers of the nation? "YHWH has founded Zion, and the needy among his people will find refuge in her."

15:1 An oracle concerning Moab.

Because Ar is laid waste in a night, Moab is undone; because Qir is laid waste in a night, Moab is undone.

²Dibon has gone up to the temple, to the high places to weep; over Nebo and over Medeba Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn; ³in the streets they bind on sackcloth; on the housetops and in the squares everyone wails and melts in tears. ⁴Heshbon and Elealeh cry out, their voices are heard as far as Jahaz; therefore the loins of Moab quiver; his soul trembles. ⁵My heart cries out for Moab; his fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglath-shelishiyah. For at the ascent of Luhith they go up weeping; on the road to Horonaim they raise a cry of destruction; ⁶the waters of Nimrim are a desolation; the grass is withered, the new growth fails, the verdure is no more. ⁷Therefore the abundance they have gained and what they have laid up they carry away over the Wadi of the Willows.

⁸For a cry has gone around the land of Moab; the wailing reaches to Eglaim, the wailing reaches to Beer-elim. ⁹For the waters of Dibon are full of blood; yet I will bring upon Dibon even more – a lion for those of Moab who escape, for the remnant of the land.

^{16:1}Send lambs to the ruler of the land, from Sela, by way of the desert, to the mount of daughter Zion. ²Like fluttering birds, like scattered nestlings, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon. ³“Give counsel, grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; hide the outcasts, do not betray the fugitive; ⁴let the outcasts of Moab settle among you; be a refuge to them from the destroyer.”

⁴When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and marauders have vanished from the land, ⁵then a throne shall be established in steadfast love in the tent of David, and on it shall sit in faithfulness a ruler who seeks justice and is swift to do what is right.

Moab (15:1 – 16:14)

If ‘Ar’ is read as ‘îr (‘city’) the reference may be to Dibon (15:2), the capital city of Moab. Qir (qîr) means ‘wall’, and so perhaps has the same reference. This lament may be referring to a devastating earthquake and the refugees resulting from it.

Verse nine ends the lament with a threat of worse things to come (see 16:6-11).

First insert (16:1-4)

The text is damaged. It seems to be referring to a Moabite mission to Judah requesting asylum for refugees from Moab.

Second insert (16:4-5)

This seems not to relate to the context, but to be an expression of hope that Judah’s dynasty will be restored.

Proud Moab is devastated
(16:6-11)

⁶We have heard of the pride of Moab – how proud he is! – of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; his boasts are false. ⁷Therefore let Moab wail, let everyone wail for Moab. Mourn, utterly stricken, for the raisin-cakes of Kir-hareseth. ⁸For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vines of Sibmah, whose clusters once made drunk the lords of the nations, reached to Jazer and strayed to the desert; their shoots once spread abroad and crossed over the sea.

⁹Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jazer for the vines of Sibmah; I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Elealeh; for the shout over your fruit harvest and your grain harvest has ceased. ¹⁰Joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field; and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no shouts are raised; no treader treads out wine in the presses; the vintage-shout is hushed. ¹¹Therefore my heart throbs like a harp for Moab, and my very soul for Kirheres.

Prose additions (16:12-14)

Verse twelve states that Moabite cult is without value. Verse thirteen identifies YHWH as the one who is behind Moab's devastation. Verse fourteen appears to come from the final edition of the scroll, composed at a time when Moab is once again prospering and when relations between post-exilic Judah and Moab are not good. The author adds a prediction that the situation will not stay that way for long.

¹²When Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself upon the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail. ¹³This was the word that YHWH spoke concerning Moab in the past. ¹⁴But now YHWH says, In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all its great multitude; and those who survive will be very few and feeble.

¹An oracle concerning Damascus.

See, Damascus will cease to be a city, and will become a heap of ruins. ²Her towns will be deserted forever; they will be places for flocks, which will lie down, and no one will make them afraid. ³The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus; and the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the children of Israel, says YHWH of hosts.

⁴On that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. ⁵And it shall be as when reapers gather standing grain and their arms harvest the ears, and as when one gleans the ears of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. ⁶Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten – two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, says YHWH God of Israel.

⁷On that day people will regard their Maker, and their eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel; ⁸they will not have regard for the altars, the work of their hands, and they will not look to what their own fingers have made, either the sacred poles or the altars of incense. ⁹On that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

Syria (17:1-3)

The linking of Syria and Israel points to the situation in 732 when they combined to try to force Judah to join the anti-Assyrian alliance. This piece could come from sayings of Isaiah at that time. Those responsible for compiling the Isaiah scroll may have placed it here rather than in chapters 7-9 to reinforce the point that what Isaiah was inspired to say at that time functions as a paradigm to understand God's intentions in subsequent situations.

In the second century BC, the oracle against Syria (17:1-3) would have been read as a coded message referring to the Seleucid forces that oppressed Judah, and would have been heard as a call to fidelity to YHWH.

Israel (17:4-6)

Note the repetition of the words 'on that day' in verses four, seven and nine. The word 'glory' (kābôd) is the link between this and the previous oracle. Like Syria, Israel will be devastated. Does this saying come from the period between the annexing of Galilee and Gilead in 733 and the fall of Samaria in 722?

Further comments (17:7-11)

Isaiah claims that Israel was punished because of idolatry.

Just as in the beginning Israel devastated the cities of the Hivites and Amorites in Canaan, so, in their turn, the cities of Israel will be devastated (by the Assyrian army).

Verses ten to eleven appear to be a late addition. They highlight the sin of idolatry, and are addressed to the devotees of non-Yahwist cults, probably including that to the vegetation god, Adonis (Na'aman, the 'pleasant one', verse 10) – a cult that found its way into Greece and Rome. Those who indulge in this cult will be like the flowers at the cult shrine. They will quickly wither.

Judah's enemies will not prevail
(17:12-14)

In the middle of this section that speaks of Judah's enemies comes this profound cry of faith, that, no matter who tries to oppress God's people, they will fail. The general nature of the imagery makes it impossible to locate it in any specific situation, and there is no need to attempt to do so. It is a cry that anyone could make at any time, for it is, in the final analysis, a cry of faith in YHWH, and it transcends any historical situation.

¹⁰For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and set out slips of an alien god, ¹¹though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow; yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.

¹²Ah, the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters! ¹³The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. ¹⁴At evening time, lo, terror! Before morning, they are no more. This is the fate of those who despoil us, and the lot of those who plunder us.

¹Ah, land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Nubia, ²sending ambassadors by the Nile in vessels of papyrus on the waters! Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide.

³All you inhabitants of the world, you who live on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, listen!

⁴For thus YHWH said to me: I will quietly look from my dwelling like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest. ⁵For before the harvest, when the blossom is over and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches he will hew away. ⁶They shall all be left to the birds of prey of the mountains and to the wild animals. And the birds of prey will feed on them in summer, and all the wild animals in winter.

⁷At that time gifts will be brought to YHWH of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of YHWH of hosts.

Against an alliance with Egypt (18:1-6)
At the close of the eighth century BC the Pharaoh of Egypt was from Nubia (kûš, 18:1), an area centred on Upper (southern) Egypt and including Ethiopia and northern Sudan.

It was only with the death of Sargon II in 605, and the military defeat at Carchemish that the Pharaoh showed interest in an anti-Assyrian alliance. Not surprisingly Isaiah continues to advise Judah not to get involved (compare his words to Ahaz in 732). As it turned out Hezekiah ignored his advice with the disastrous result that when the Assyrian army defeated Egypt, it also devastated Judah (701). Only Jerusalem was spared, probably because Hezekiah surrendered and agreed to a massive tribute (though the Bible record offers other 'explanations' as well). It appears that Judah is sending a delegation to the Pharaoh. Isaiah is being sarcastic. His point is that Egypt is a weak reed on which to lean.

The court in Judah should listen rather to YHWH who is telling them that Egypt will be a carcass for birds of prey and the wild animals.

Comment (18:7)

A later editor picks up the language of verse 2 to speak of a time when people from Nubia will come to Jerusalem bringing gifts (compare 2:3; 14:1). This universalist theme recurs throughout the Isaiah scroll.

Egypt (19:1-15)

Similar anti-Egyptian oracles are found in Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29-32.

The imagery in verse 1 is borrowed from that used of Baal the Canaanite storm god, and recurs in the psalms (68:4;18:10; 104:3). The Egyptian gods lose heart, and so do the people.

The description in verse 2 fits well the situation during Isaiah's lifetime when civil war between Upper (south) and Lower (north) Egypt led to the establishment of the 25th (Nubian) dynasty.

Verses 5-7 describe the effects of a failure of the flooding of the Nile.

Verses 11-15 recall the failure of Pharaoh's 'wise men' in their confrontation with Moses (see Exodus 7:8 – 11:10). 'Zoan' (verse 11, Greek 'Tanis'), is in the northeast delta. 'Memphis' (verse 13, Hebrew *nōp*) is the capital of Lower Egypt (near today's Cairo). It is typical of the thinking of the Older Testament to conclude that, if people are unwise, this must be something that God is determining for his own purposes.

¹An oracle concerning Egypt.

See, YHWH is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

²I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, one against the other, neighbour against neighbour, city against city, kingdom against kingdom;

³the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their plans; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead and the ghosts and the familiar spirits; ⁴I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master; a fierce king will rule over them, says the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts.

⁵The waters of the Nile will be dried up, and the river will be parched and dry; ⁶its canals will become foul, and the branches of Egypt's Nile will diminish and dry up, reeds and rushes will rot away. ⁷There will be bare places by the Nile, on the brink of the Nile; and all that is sown by the Nile will dry up, be driven away, and be no more.

⁸Those who fish will mourn; all who cast hooks in the Nile will lament, and those who spread nets on the water will languish. ⁹The workers in flax will be in despair, and the carders and those at the loom will grow pale. ¹⁰Its weavers will be dismayed, and all who work for wages will be grieved.

¹¹The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish; the wise counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. How can you say to Pharaoh, "I am one of the sages, a descendant of ancient kings"? ¹²Where now are your sages? Let them tell you and make known what YHWH of hosts has planned against Egypt.

¹³The princes of Zoan have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded; those who are the cornerstones of its tribes have led Egypt astray.

¹⁴YHWH has poured into them a spirit of confusion; and they have made Egypt stagger in all its doings as a drunkard staggers around in vomit. ¹⁵Neither head nor tail, palm branch or reed, will be able to do anything for Egypt.

¹⁶On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that YHWH of hosts raises against them. ¹⁷And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the plan that YHWH of hosts is planning against them.

¹⁸On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to YHWH of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

¹⁹On that day there will be an altar to YHWH in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to YHWH at its border. ²⁰It will be a sign and a witness to YHWH of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to YHWH because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them. ²¹YHWH will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know YHWH on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to YHWH and perform them. ²²YHWH will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to YHWH, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

²³On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

Five added comments (19:16-25)

The language here is close to that of 19:1-15, and this prose comment may have originally been composed as a conclusion to this section. The only element connecting the following comments is that they all refer to Egypt.

The Jeremiah scroll speaks of five centres of Jewish population in Egypt. Two are in the delta: Tahpanhes (Jeremiah 2:16; 43:7; 44:1), and Migdol (Jeremiah 44:1; 46:14). Two are in Lower Egypt: Memphis (Jeremiah 44:1; see Isaiah 19:13) and Heliopolis (Jeremiah 43:13; the ‘city of the sun’ in our present text). When the high priest, Onias IV, was banished from Jerusalem c.160BC he built a temple at Heliopolis. The fifth, Pathros, is located in Upper Egypt (Jeremiah 44:1, 15). We know that there was a strong Jewish community also on the island of Elephantine (in Upper Egypt) with a temple constructed before 525BC.

The author of verse eighteen is contemplating the spread throughout Egypt of the Jewish diaspora and their language (called here ‘the language of Canaan’), and so of their cult of YHWH. Yet another example of the universalist theme in the Isaiah scroll.

Verses 19-23 speak of a time when Egypt was weak. The reference may be late and refer to the defeat of the Ptolemies by the Seleucids in 198BC. The missionary and universalist perspective is illustrated in the vision of YHWH hearing the cry of oppressed Egypt and sending a saviour to deliver them. This is the language of Exodus when speaking of the delivering of God’s people *from* Egypt.

It is interesting to ponder how verse 23 would have been read during the period of Greek control. Were they hoping that Judah would be the centre of YHWH worship, joining Assyria (read the Seleucids) and Egypt (read the Ptolemies)?

The claim of verses 24-25 is so extraordinary that we find it ‘watered down’ in the Greek and Aramaic Versions.

Greek [LXX: Septuagint] concludes with:

Blessed be my people who are in Egypt, and who are in Assyria, and Israel my heritage.

Aramaic Targum

Blessed be my people whom I brought out of Egypt. Because they sinned before me I carried them into exile to Assyria, but now that they have repented, they shall be called My People, and My Inheritance, even Israel.

Against the forming of an anti-Assyrian alliance (20:1-6)

This is yet another account of Isaiah attempting to persuade the decision-makers in Jerusalem not to get caught up in alliances. This time it involves Isaiah parading as a prisoner of war. Examples of this kind of ‘street theatre’ are found also in Jeremiah 27:1 – 28:17, and especially in Ezekiel (see 4:1-17; 5:1-4 and 12:1-7). In spite of the fact that Assyria had already in 711 put down a rebellion organised by the ruler of Ashdod, there were still rumblings about the forming of an anti-Assyrian alliance which included Egypt and Nubia (kûš). Once again Isaiah’s advice went unheeded. In 705 Hezekiah played a leading role in getting together an anti-Assyrian alliance. Assyria attacked and defeated Egypt and in the process devastated Judah.

²⁴On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵whom YHWH of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

^{20:1}In the year that the commander-in-chief, who was sent by King Sargon of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and took it – ²at that time YHWH had spoken to Isaiah son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,” and he had done so, walking naked and barefoot. ³Then YHWH said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Nubia, ⁴so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Nubians as exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. ⁵And they shall be dismayed and confounded because of Ethiopia their hope and of Egypt their boast. ⁶In that day the inhabitants of this coastland will say, ‘See, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?’”

¹The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the desert, from a terrible land.

²A stern vision is told to me; the betrayer betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam, lay siege, O Media; all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end.

³Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor; I am bowed down so that I cannot hear, I am dismayed so that I cannot see. ⁴My mind reels, horror has appalled me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.

⁵They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Rise up, commanders, oil the shield! ⁶For thus the Lord said to me: "Go, post a lookout, let him announce what he sees. ⁷When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently."

⁸Then the watchman called out: "Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed throughout the night. ⁹Look, there they come, riders, horsemen in pairs!"

Then he responded, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods lie shattered on the ground." ¹⁰O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you.

The Fall of Babylon (21:1-10) 'Wilderness of the sea' (verse 1) seems to be a reference to the marshy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Mesopotamia. It is likely that there were soldiers from Elam and Media taking part in Cyrus's occupation of Babylon in 539.

Twilight is expected to bring a pleasant evening breeze, and relief from the heat.

The Babylonians are pictured as feasting, with no idea of the impending doom.

In verse 10, the terrible end of Babylon arouses the sympathy of the poet. Either that, or he switches focus and his heart goes out to his own people who have suffered so much at Babylon's hands.

Oracles about the Arab Peoples
(21:11-17)

'Dumah' (dûmâ) may refer to Edom ('êdôm), which is how the Septuagint translates it. However, dûmâ also means 'silence', so it may be a poetic allusion to the silence of the deserts of Arabia. 'Seir' is a mountainous region of Edom, southeast of the Dead Sea.

The 'desert plain' is Arabia. Dedan and Tema in northern Arabia were the main centres on the trade route linking the Mediterranean with the Persian Gulf. It appears that these centres are being ransacked by the neighbouring Bedouin tribes of Kedar.

There are obvious links between this editorial comment and that in 16:13-14.

¹¹The oracle concerning Dumah.

One is calling to me from Seir, "Sentinel, what of the night? Sentinel, what of the night?"

¹²The sentinel says: "Morning comes, but it is still night. If you will inquire, inquire; come back again."

¹³The oracle concerning the desert plain. In the scrub of the desert plain you will lodge, O caravans of Dedanites. ¹⁴Bring water to the thirsty, meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Tema. ¹⁵For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the stress of battle.

¹⁶For thus the Lord said to me: Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end; ¹⁷and the remaining bows of Kedar's warriors will be few; for YHWH, the God of Israel, has spoken.

¹The oracle concerning the valley of vision. What do you mean that you have gone up, all of you, to the housetops, ²you that are full of shoutings, tumultuous city, exultant town? Your slain are not slain by the sword, nor are they dead in battle. ³Your rulers have all fled together; they were captured without the use of a bow. All of you who were found were captured, though they had fled far away.

⁴Therefore I said: Look away from me, let me weep bitter tears; do not try to comfort me for the destruction of my beloved people.

⁵For the Lord YHWH of hosts has a day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision, a battering down of walls and a cry for help to the mountains.

⁶Elam bore the quiver with chariots and cavalry, and Qir uncovered the shield. ⁷Your choicest valleys were full of chariots, and the cavalry took their stand at the gates. ⁸He has taken away the covering of Judah.

⁸On that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest, ⁹and you saw that there were many breaches in the city of David, and you collected the waters of the lower pool. ¹⁰You counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall. ¹¹You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool.

¹¹But you did not look to him who did it, or have regard for him who planned it long ago.

¹²In that day the Lord YHWH of hosts called to weeping and mourning, to baldness and putting on sackcloth; ¹³but instead there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

¹⁴YHWH of hosts has revealed himself in my ears: Surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die, says the Lord YHWH of hosts.

Lament over Jerusalem
(22:1-14)

This lament is directed to Jerusalem. The editorial title 'the valley of vision', is taken from verse five. The most likely setting for this oracle is Sennacherib's devastation of Judah in 701. He claims to have destroyed 46 towns and deported over 200,000 people. Jerusalem somehow survived. Because poems like this were re-used in later circumstances, some of the verses may have been updated to refer to the siege of Jerusalem in 598 and its destruction in 587.

The Babylonians used soldiers from Elam for their skill as archers. 'Qir' is probably in southern Mesopotamia (see Amos 1:5; 9:7; 2Kings 16:9). Jerusalem's plight is explained by YHWH withdrawing his protection and leaving it to its deserved fate.

Hezekiah was responsible for the strengthening of Jerusalem's defences. The 'House of the Forest' was so called because of its cedar supports (1Kings 7:2-5; 10:17). He walled in the western hill (2Chronicles 32:5). The refugees from Israel in 721 had considerably swelled the population of Jerusalem. The Siloam tunnel diverted the water from the Spring of Gihon under the wall and into the city (2Kings 20:20; 2Chronicles 32:3-4, 30). All this preparation was done, but they failed to 'look to YHWH' (verses 11-14).

Shebna, Eliakim and a third person, Joah, not mentioned here, were sent as a delegation to the Assyrian camp during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 (see 2Kings 18:18, 26, 37 = Isaiah 36:3, 11, 32). They were also sent to talk with Isaiah (2Kings 19:2 = Isaiah 37:2). Isaiah opposed their pro-Egyptian policy and the rebellion which led to the devastation of Judah in 701.

Shebna is using his position to build an expensive tomb in the Kidron Valley. Isaiah is telling him that he will be demoted and will die in a foreign land. So much for the tomb. Now Eliakim's investiture is described in all its splendour. His position in the administration of Jerusalem and Judah compares with that of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39:41-44).

Verse 22 is quoted in the New Testament Book of Revelation 3:7. Eliakim's dignity and power, too, will come to nothing

¹⁵Thus says the Lord YHWH of hosts: Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is master of the household, and say to him: ¹⁶What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here, that you have cut out a tomb here for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height, and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock? ¹⁷YHWH is about to hurl you away violently, my fellow. He will seize firm hold on you, ¹⁸whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there your splendid chariots shall lie, O you disgrace to your master's house! ¹⁹I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post. .

²⁰On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, ²¹and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²²I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. ²³I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his ancestral house. ²⁴And they will hang on him the whole weight of his ancestral house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.

²⁵On that day, says YHWH of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way; it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will perish, for YHWH has spoken.

¹The oracle concerning Tyre. Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for your fortified harbour is destroyed. When they came in from Cyprus they learned of it. ²Be still, O inhabitants of the coast, O merchants of Sidon, your messengers crossed over the sea ³and were on the mighty waters; your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile; you were the merchant of the nations. ⁴Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken, the fortress of the sea, saying: "I have neither laboured nor given birth, I have neither reared young men nor brought up young women."

⁵When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre. ⁶Cross over to Tarshish— wail, O inhabitants of the coast! ⁷Is this your exultant city whose origin is from days of old, whose feet carried her to settle far away? ⁸Who has planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honoured of the earth? ⁹YHWH of hosts has planned it – to defile the pride of all glory, to shame all the honoured of the earth.

¹⁰Cross over to your own land, O ships of Tarshish; this is a harbour no more. ¹¹He has stretched out his hand over the sea, he has shaken the kingdoms; YHWH has given command concerning Canaan to destroy its fortresses.

¹²He said: You will exult no longer, O oppressed virgin daughter Sidon; rise, cross over to Cyprus – even there you will have no rest.

¹³Look at the land of the Chaldeans! This is the people; it was not Assyria.

They destined Tyre for wild animals. They erected their siege towers, they tore down her palaces, they made her a ruin.

¹⁴Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for your fortress is destroyed.

Joy at the humiliation of Tyre and Sidon (23:1-18)

Tyre is on the Phoenician coast, half way between Acco and Sidon. In ancient times it was an island, a factor that gave it added security. For centuries it dominated sea trade between the countries of the Mediterranean and Phoenicia. Large vessels capable of sailing the open Mediterranean (ships of Tarshish) brought goods from Egypt (Sihor, 23:3), Carthage, Spain and the countries bordering the Aegean to Tyre, and returned loaded with merchandise from Arabia, Afghanistan, India, Assyria, and Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar's protracted siege (585-573) failed. It was only Alexander the Great in 332 who was able to conquer the island port (it was restored by Ptolemy II in 274). In the light of the way oracles were re-used and re-applied it is possible that both these sieges played a part in the development of the text.

Typically, pride and arrogance (verse 9) are seen as the reason for YHWH's action.

The text of verse 13 is damaged. Chaldeans is the name for the inhabitants of Babylon. Is the poet referring to the siege of Tyre by Nebuchadrezzar?

Verses fifteen to eighteen are a later addition and comment (compare 16:13-14 and 21:16-17).

‘Seventy years’ (verse 15) is, of course, symbolic (‘in the fullness of time’), not chronological. Wealth produced by sea-trade is likened to prostitution. Perhaps it was the fact that Nebuchadrezzar’s siege eventually failed that led to this comment. Verse eighteen dreams of Tyre as providing wealth for a restored Judah.

¹⁵From that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the lifetime of one king. At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute: ¹⁶Take a harp, go about the city, you forgotten prostitute! Make sweet melody, sing many songs, that you may be remembered.

¹⁷At the end of seventy years, YHWH will visit Tyre, and she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. ¹⁸Her merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to YHWH; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of YHWH.

