Isaiah 13:18

H. G. M. Williamson

University of Oxford

hugh.williamson@orinst.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

The first three words of Isa 13:18 have never been satisfactorily explained. The problems (especially semantic) that they raise are discussed before the proposal is made that their content fits much more closely with vv. 15–56. It is thus probable that they are some form of misplaced gloss or comment on those verses, now reworked (even if unsuccessfully) to try to make them fit their new setting.

Keywords

רַשָּׁעִים – victims of war – swords and bows – textual criticism

Isaiah 13 is a lengthy poem in two main parts. Verses 17–72 prophesy the downfall of Babylon, which the poem's heading in v. 1 indicates is the subject of the whole. Verses 2–26, on the other hand, comprise an extended description on an apparently more universal scale of the impact of the Day of the Lord. How these two parts relate to one another has long been debated, and need not be discussed further here.¹

Included in the last main section of the poem, the opening of v. 18 is textually and syntactically particularly difficult. The Masoretic Text and its rendering in the Revised Version are as follows:

1 I have summarized the main positions and advanced my own solution in “Decoding Isaiah 13”, in J. T. Hibbard and J. Stromberg (eds.), *The History of Isaiah: The Making of the Book and its Presentation in the Past* (FAT; Tübingen, forthcoming). I argue that the original poem comprised vv. 2–2, 6–6, 14–42, and that vv. 4–4 and 9–93 were added later.

וקשתות נערים תרטשנה
 ופרי-בטן לא ירחמו
 על-בנים לא-תחוס עינם

And their bows shall dash the young men in pieces;
 and they shall have no pity of the fruit of the womb;
 their eye shall not spare children.

The second and third lines as set out here give little cause for concern. There is a small variant in 1QIsa^a which is worth noting, though it has no impact on the problems raised by the first: for על-בנים ... ופרי the scroll reads בנים ... ועל פרי. The verb רחם is not usually followed by this preposition (limiting examples to the book of Isaiah, the verb occurs at 9:16; 14:1; 49:13, 15 with the object independently expressed; also frequently with an object suffix), though it can be (Ps 103:13 [twice]). Conversely חוס usually is. MT is therefore mostly in line with majority practice and should certainly be preferred also as the shorter reading in the second line. MT's stark על in the third line, however, is unexpected and probably inferior to the scroll's ועל; many masoretic manuscripts read ועל,² while the Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targum all include the conjunction at this point, and LXX's οὐδέ; may well imply it. It is possible that the scroll's longer reading in the first half derived originally from a marginal correction of על, indicating that it ought to be ועל, and that this was later incorporated by a subsequent copyist in the wrong place.³

The first line, by contrast, raises several questions, to which commentators have attempted various responses over the centuries. A list of such observations includes, for instance: (i) the word order (SOV) is unusual but not unparalleled.⁴ (ii) T וקשתותהון gives warrant for implying that we may add "their" in translation to help ease the sense (see too Kimchi⁵), as in several English translations (including the RV as given above). (iii) Bows could be made of bronze and so might be used as a sort of club when fighting at close quarters,

2 See M. H. Goshen-Gottstein (ed.), *The Book of Isaiah* (HUBP; Jerusalem, 1995), p. 51.

3 Differently, P. Pulikottil, *Transmission of Biblical Texts in Qumran: The Case of the Large Isaiah Scroll 1QIsa^a* (JSPSup 34; Sheffield, 2001), p. 45, though his comparison with 1QpHab 6:10–02 is certainly thought-provoking in view of the wider context of this whole verse.

4 See, for instance, GK §142f; A. Dillmann, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (KeHAT, 5th edn; Leipzig, 1890), p. 131.

5 Kimchi goes on to record the extraordinary interpretation that they used the נערים as arrows; see M. Cohen (ed.), *Mikra'ot Gedolot Haketer: Isaiah* (Ramat Gan, 1996), p. 100.

or alternatively arrows fired from these bows might be implied;⁶ cf. *V saggitis*, and Rashi. (iv) A passage in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic also speaks of weapons throwing down the enemy.⁷ (v) There is thought to be something of a parallel with this verse in Jer 50:42, so that attention to the use of the bow against the Babylonians is not unexpected. (vi) Though this looks like an unattached half-line, it is possible to argue that it could be taken as part of a tricolon. (vii) “Bows” might here stand for “bowmen, archers”;⁸ and so on. One or other of these possible responses might well be acceptable were the text sound (and it is not necessary here to choose between them), but the number of difficulties that previous scholars have observed is already enough to show that the text is problematic.

Two other points, not previously noted, might be added to this list of peculiarities. First, and perhaps not too serious, the use of שׁוּר with an impersonal subject is unique; elsewhere, as in v. 16 immediately above, it always has a human subject. Second, on all other occasions, the verb has very young children as its object,⁹ usually in lists where other verbs are applied to young men or warriors. Thus at 2 Kgs 8:12, Hos 14:1, Nah 3:10, and at v. 16 of our present

6 F. Delitzsch, *Commentar über das Buch Jesaia* (4th edn; Leipzig, 1889), p. 206; ET, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Edinburgh, 1894), p. 300.

7 E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, 1965), vol. 1, p. 426; S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 13:2–24:23* (ConB, OT Series 4; Lund, 1970), p. 25; J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1–19* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 304–4 n. 8.

8 A. Knobel, *Der Prophet Jesaia* (KeHAT 5; Leipzig, 1843), p. 93.

9 Without discussion, this is noted by A. Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (FAT 37; Tübingen, 2003), p. 108. He does not observe that our verse is therefore out of kilter with regular usage, so that he includes young warriors among possible objects. He is followed by B. Obermayer, *Göttliche Gewalt im Buch Jesaja: Untersuchung zur Semantik und literarischen Funktion eines theologisch herausfordernden Aspekts im Gottesbild* (BBB 170; Göttingen, 2014), p. 104. Here and elsewhere, however, he then mistakenly interprets v. 18 as though it referred to children: “Wie in Jes 13,15 liest man abermals vom erbarmungslosen Zerschmettern (שׁוּר) der Kinder” (p. 106); the same applies to later iterations of the same material: see U. Berges and B. Obermayer, “Großer Friede nach dem letzten Krieg? Zur göttlichen Gewalt in prophetischer Eschatologie”, in I. Fischer (ed.), *Macht—Gewalt—Krieg im Alten Testament. Gesellschaftliche Problematik und das Problem ihrer Repräsentation* (Quaestiones Disputatae 254; Freiburg, 2013), pp. 352–27 (362–23), and “Divine Violence in the Book of Isaiah”, in N. Macdonald and K. Brown (eds.), *Monotheism in Late Prophetic and Early Apocalyptic Literature* (FAT 2.72; Tübingen, 2014), pp. 1–14 (see p. 9: “the merciless dashing ... of children”); see too previously U. Berges and B. Obermayer, “Gottes Gewalt gegen Kinder in den Büchern Jesaja und Klagelieder”, in N. C. Baumgart and M. Nitsche (eds.), *Gewalt im Spiegel alttestamentlicher Texte* (Erfurter theologische Schriften 43; Würzburg, 2012), pp. 53–35 (59–92).

chapter those who will be “dashed in pieces”¹⁰ are always עוללים.¹¹ The only exception to this is Hos 10:14, where we find the expression אִם-עַל-בָּנִים as the subject of the pu‘al רָטְשָׁה; however this should be understood in detail,¹² it is clear that the reference is to the brutal killing of a vulnerable mother with her children who are therefore presumably still dependent even if already possibly weaned in some cases. We may note further that in 2 Kgs 8:12 there is a list where in addition to the fate of the עוללים the בחורים will be killed by the sword and the pregnant women will be ripped up; that in Hos 14:1 an indefinite “they” will fall by the sword and, again, the pregnant women will be ripped up; and in Isa 13:15–56, just before our verse, “anyone who is found will be pierced through, and anyone caught¹³ will fall by the sword. And their children will be dashed in pieces before their very eyes, their houses will be plundered, and

10 For a proposal (against the standard lexica) that this should be linked with Akkadian *šarātu/šurruṭu* (with metathesis), “tear apart”, see H. Tawil, “Two Biblical and Akkadian Comparative Lexical Notes VIII”, *JSS* 47 (2002), pp. 209–94 (210–01).

11 For this lexeme, see M. Saebø, *ThWAT* v, pp. 1131–15 (ET, *TDOT* x, pp. 518–82).

12 The matter need not be decided for our present purposes. It may simply be an example of the relatively rare sense of על = “together with” (see BDB *sub* על 4.c). It is noteworthy, however, that exactly the same wording appears at Gen 32:12, while at Deut 22:6 it also appears, albeit with the definite article, this time in relation to birds. It is therefore possible that it became a proverbial expression (so GK §119aa n. 2) which developed from the picture of a mother desperately trying to protect her child from harm by shielding it with her own body.

13 הַנִּסְפָּה LXX στυγερῶς may simply indicate a reading with a final פ instead of ה. Alternatively, the translator may have linked the word with אָסַף, perhaps on the basis that with some weak verbs the translator worked on a biliteral basis of root identification; see E. Tov, “Biliteral Exegesis of Hebrew Roots in the Septuagint?”, in R. Rezetko, T. H. Lim, and W. B. Aucker (eds.), *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (VTSup 113; Leiden, 2007), pp. 459–92 (473); S. L. Byun, *The Influence of Post-Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic on the Translator of Septuagint Isaiah* (LHBOTS 635; London, 2017), pp. 187–78. P *wkl dnttwsp* is closely comparable, though it is uncertain whether this is by direct influence or whether the translator arrived at his rendering by a similar route. By contrast the relatively rare יִדְקֶר is rendered here only as ἡτταρηθησεται, which looks like no more than an intelligent guess by way of a “slot word” (see Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon*, p. 24; R. L. Troxel, *LXX-Isaiah as Translation and Interpretation: The Strategies of the Translator of the Septuagint of Isaiah* [JSJSup 124; Leiden, 2008], p. 78, *contra* R. R. Ottley, *The Book of Isaiah According to the Septuagint* (Codex Alexandrinus) [Cambridge, 1906], 11, p. 175, who thinks it may represent a misreading as יִדְרֶךְ in the niph‘al). I see no necessity to emend to הַנִּסְפָּה, as suggested by H. Graetz, *Emendationes in Plerosque Sacrae Scripturae Veteris Testamenti Libros* (ed. G. Bacher; Breslau, 1893), p. 7, followed by K. Budde, “Jesaja 13”, in W. Frankenberg and F. Küchler (eds.), *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft Wolf Wilhelm Grafen von Baudissin zum 26. September 1917 überreicht von Freunden und Schülern* (BZAW 33; Giessen, 1918), p. 68, or to הַנִּסְפָּה, as proposed by A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel*, 4: *Jesaja, Jeremia* (Leipzig, 1912), p. 52.

their wives will be ravished". It is thus clear that רטש usually applies to dependent young children in contexts of war atrocities where women also suffer barbaric treatment and where warriors are killed by the sword. In Isa 13:18, therefore, the verb is unsuitable in relation to נערים and if anything would be more suitably applied to those referred to in the rest of the verse.

At this point there are two possible counter-arguments that might be raised, but in my opinion neither is persuasive. The first is that the number of occurrences of the verb is too few to allow any consequences to be drawn. This, of course, raises interesting questions of method, but unfortunately the one thing that cannot be done is to increase the number of passages to some unstated number that would allow the conclusion to be regarded as secure. We are obliged to work with the evidence that is available to us, and that shows that Isa 13:18 is the only place out of a total of six where the verb is not used in relation to very young children, probably before they are weaned. The burden of proof therefore lies on the shoulders of the objector to explain why this verse is so exceptional, not on me to disregard such evidence as we have which is univocal.

Second, then, it might be suggested that the verse is not exceptional because נערים here means very young children.¹⁴ The only examples of this usage of which I am aware are Exod 2:6 (the three-month old infant Moses, also here called a ילד), 1 Sam. 1:22 (Samuel, explicitly not yet weaned) and Isa 7:16 and 8:4 (a child who has not yet learned to say mummy or daddy). In each of these cases, however, it is noteworthy that the context spells out their condition, as if an unexplained use of נער would not naturally be so understood, but there is no such gloss added in our present verse. Conversely, among the wide range of meanings which נער covers, that of military mercenaries or retainers is common. Given that here the word is preceded by קשתות as somehow indicative of how they will be killed (like the בחורים in 2 Kgs 8:12), it is this commoner military sense which suggests itself most naturally to the reader. I therefore conclude that the problem remains of the first line of v. 18 attesting an unparalleled use of the verb רטש.

As the consonantal text is well attested, including 1QIsa^a, it should be respected if at all possible. Nevertheless, the way the Masoretes have taken it combines too many unusual features to command confidence, despite assertions to the contrary by a considerable number of commentators.¹⁵

14 For a useful survey of the semantic range of נער, with bibliography of earlier and sometimes even fuller studies, see H. F. Fuhs, *ThWAT* v, pp. 507–78 (ET, *TDOT* ix, pp. 474–45).

15 In addition to those already noted above, the text has also been left as it is in relatively recent times by, for instance, J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters i–xxxix*

LXX rendered τοξέματα νεανίσκων συντριψουσιν, evidently taking the first word as a noun in the construct rather than the absolute state (וְקִשְׁתּוֹת) but then apparently reading or translating the verb as though it had a masculine plural subject: יִרְטְשׁוּ. While this latter point is widely agreed to be secondary, many, starting with the Peshitta, have concluded that the construal of the first two words is correct (see *BHS*), and have then also followed the lead of Pesh., *ntbtrn*, in taking the verb as a pu'al, not a pi'el: תִּרְטְשְׁנָה, hence “the bows of the young men will be smashed”.¹⁶

While this appears to make easier sense, it does not explain why the Masoretes should not themselves have vocalized it like this. I assume they took their lead from the following line, where “the fruit of the womb” and “children” are the objects of oppression, and so they wanted “young men” to stand in the same position.¹⁷ While their solution may not be satisfying, their instinct was a sound one insofar as they realized that this half line does not really fit its context at all well. If it were the first member of a tricolon, it ought to relate closely to the two following members. But in fact, if it indeed refers to the destruction of weapons, it is quite isolated.

In the absence of any other evidence, conjectural emendations have been suggested, but none immediately strikes me, at least, as self-authenticatingly convincing, e.g., “und den Bogen der Schützen wird freies Spiel gelassen”,¹⁸ “und den Gürtel der Mädchen zerreißen sie”,²⁰ and most recently the even more radical proposal by Schwartz, which also includes v. 17a (he leaves 17b and 18b as they are, so I have not reproduced them here):

(CBSC; Cambridge, 1897), p. 109; F. Feldmann, *Das Buch Isaias* (EHAT 14; Münster, 1925–5926), 1, p. 166; E. König, *Das Buch Jesaja* (Gütersloh, 1926), p. 178; P. Auvray, *Isaïe 1–19* (SB; Paris, 1972), p. 156; B. Gosse, *Isaïe 13,1–14,23 dans la tradition littéraire du livre d'Isaïe et dans la tradition des oracles contre les nations* (OBO 78; Freiburg and Göttingen, 1988), pp. 158 and 280; W. A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 13–37* (HThKAT; Freiburg, 2007), p. 44; G. V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–19* (NAC 15A; Nashville, 2007), pp. 303–3. In line with this it is noteworthy that there is no entry for this verse in D. Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, 2: *Isaïe, Jérémie, Lamentations* (OBO 50/2; Freiburg and Göttingen, 1986).

16 E.g., H. Wildberger, *Jesaja*, 2: *Jesaja 13–37* (BKAT x/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978), p. 504; ET, *Isaiah 13–37: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 9, followed by J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 2015), p. 196.

17 J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester, 1993), p. 140.

18 Ehrlich, *Randglossen*, p. 52.

19 Budde, “Jesaja 13”, p. 68.

20 D. A. Bruno, *Jesaja: eine rhythmische und textkritische Untersuchung* (Stockholm, 1953), 270 with 89; Bruno does not actually supply a Hebrew version of his emended text, but I have reconstructed what I think must have been his intention (he seems to render the passive verb as implying an indefinite subject).

הנני מעיר עליהם את מדי בחרבות וקשתות

... ..

נערים תרטשנה ונערות תנטשנה

... ..²¹

Alternatively, some suggest quite simply that half a line was lost early in the course of the text's transmission (e.g. Wildberger) or that there has been both loss and confusion in the part that remains (e.g., וקשתות belonged with the first part of the missing line, which may have been similar to Jer 50:42, and the next two words may be a remnant of [pu'al] תרטשנה ונערות תנטשנה).²² This latter seems the more plausible, since several of the difficulties with MT remain even if something extra were added. Finally, a few give up and just delete the half line altogether;²³ that, of course, gets rid of the problem but only raises the new one of where, in that case, it came from; Fischer, for instance, suggested that it arose as a later glossator's attempt to bind her first two compositional layers together.

No solution is thus free of difficulty, and we may agree with the usually very cautious Dillmann, who, without making any positive proposal, concludes that "[e]s scheint ein alter Fehler im Text zu sein". The following points weigh with me in moving towards a conclusion:

- (i) I suspect it is too much of a coincidence that the rare verb רטש occurs twice in the same passage, once (v. 16) in a regular manner and once (the present verse) in a manner which, as we have seen, has no parallel and which seems, indeed, to be semantically questionable.
- (ii) In vv. 15–56 we have an indication of some of the effects of warfare: "Anyone who is found will be pierced through, and anyone snatched away will fall by the sword. And their children will be dashed in pieces before their

²¹ G. Schwartz, "Jesaja 13,17.18—Eine Emendation", *BN* 9 (1979), pp. 20–01.

²² K. Marti, *Das Buch Jesaja* (KHAT 10; Tübingen, 1900), p. 121, partially following B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HKAT 3/1; Göttingen, 1892; 4th edn, 1922), p. 115; see too similarly T. K. Cheyne, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text* (SBOT 10; Leipzig, 1899), p. 124. Duhm's reconstruction is rejected by G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXVII* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1912), p. 243; he agrees that some words have been lost and that what we now have is corrupt, but he forebears to offer any positive conjecture; likewise A. Condamin, *Le livre d'Isaïe* (EB; Paris, 1905), p. 102.

²³ E.g., O. Procksch, *Jesaja I* (KAT 9/1; Leipzig, 1930), p. 189; B. M. Zapff, *Schriftgelehrte Prophetie—Jes 13 und die Komposition des Jesajabuches: ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der Redaktionsgeschichte des Jesajabuches* (FzB 74; Würzburg, 1995), pp. 172–25; C. Fischer, *Die Fremdvölkersprüche bei Amos und Jesaja: Studien zur Eigenart und Intention in Am 1,3–3,3.4f. und Jes 13,1–16,14* (BBB 136; Berlin, 2002), pp. 86–67; NEB.

very eyes, their houses will be plundered and their wives will be ravished". As in the other lists summarized above, we find here first the impact on the soldiers and then on innocent civilians. The reference to falling by the sword at the very end of v. 15 makes a natural link with the bows of the present verse. Since "sword" and "bow" occur together quite a number of times elsewhere either in juxtaposition (e.g. Gen 48:22; Josh 24:12; 1 Sam 18:4; 2 Kgs 6:22; Hos 1:7; 2:20; Neh 4:7) or in parallel (e.g. 21:15; 41:2; 2 Sam 1:22; Ps 7:13; 37:15; 44:7; 76:4), it would be understandable if the same had once been the case here.

- (iii) In addition, the "young men" of our verse belong more naturally with the list of types of people in vv. 15–56 than with the continuation of the present verse.
- (iv) Without the first three words in v. 18 the third person plural verb *לֹא יִרְחֲמוּ* follows smoothly on from the third person plural verbs in v. 17b whereas in the text as it currently stands the first three words of v. 18 intrude awkwardly, and leave the second half of the verse dangling.²⁴

Since each of the first three words of v. 18 thus either repeats something from vv. 15–56 or fits better there than here, and since also v. 18b follows v. 17 more naturally than it does v. 18a, I propose that v. 18a represents a garbled and misplaced part of/marginal correction of/comment on that earlier passage. For what it is worth, the rhythmic pattern of v. 16 is irregular, its two lines both being much shorter than is found in the immediately preceding verses; the possibility that the verse has suffered some loss or textual confusion at its start is thus possible. I acknowledge, of course, that this does not amount to a full explanation of every aspect of the history of the text we have received, because the precise original form is far beyond our recall. Little would be gained by trying to reconstruct what it might have been, however, and that has not been my intention. For the purposes of textual reconstruction, what matters is that the words have no place at all in v. 18 and that without them vv. 17–78 read smoothly together.

24 The links between vv. 16 and 18 were noted especially by E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah, Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text with Commentary*, 1: i-xxxix (Dublin, 1941), pp. 157–79, 163–34 (partly followed by Bruno, *Jesaja*, p. 270), but his suggestion to reorder the material as 18b, 18a, 16 seems less likely in view of the close association of v. 16 with its present context. It is also difficult to explain how a complete verse could be misplaced. At least he is not as extreme in this latter regard as W. Popper, *Parallelism in Isaiah: Chapters 1–15 and 37.22–25* (Berkeley, 1923), p. 43*, whose reordering and rewriting of this whole passage defies description!