CHAPTER TWO

THE NATIONS ORACLES IN ISAIAH 13–23

1. Introduction

The previous chapter surveyed the two main approaches to the formation of Isa 13–23 that have characterized most critical interpretations of Isaiah. Some argue that a collection of מַשָּׂא oracles was added to those texts that lack the superscription, while others posit that the collection of מַשָּׂא oracles came first, with the non-מַשָּׂא texts being subsequently interspersed among them. Proponents of both positions usually assume that the מַשָּׂא texts constitute a complete corpus of literary material that was added to the book at some point.

However, several factors challenge the underlying notion of an independent collection of מַשָּׂא oracles. First, while other prophetic books feature collections of foreign nations oracles (Jer 46–51; Ezek 25–32; Amos 1–2; Zeph 2:4–15), there are no other מַשָּׂא collections in the Hebrew Bible, such as is supposed to have been added to the book of Isaiah. מַשָּׂא is used elsewhere as a prophetic superscription at Isa 30:6; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1, but these superscriptions occur individually, they often introduce larger textual units,¹ and they are not uniform.

Another argument against the insertion of a complete collection of מַשָּׂא oracles can be raised from the diversity of the מַשָּׂא oracles in Isa 13–23. As the following discussion will show, scholars have been unable to identify any common formal elements among those texts that are introduced by מַשָּׂא. Also, even considering the likelihood that many of the oracles have received additional expansion, the present forms range considerably in length from the two verses of the Dumah oracle (21:11–12) to the two chapters of the Moab oracle (15–16). In addition, some oracles appear to address the fall of Babylon, presumably at the end of the exilic period (13:1–14:23; 21:1–10), while others

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may plausibly relate to the eighth century B.C.E. (e.g., 17:1–6; 22:1–8). As the previous chapter noted, this has caused difficulty for tracing the development of such an independent collection and for dating its subsequent incorporation into the book of Isaiah.

Finally, even the מַשָּׂא superscriptions themselves in Isa 13–23 are diverse, as will be discussed in greater detail shortly. For the moment, we may observe that most of the oracles have a ‘מַשָּׂא GN’ title, but the heading at 14:28 uses מַשָּׂא in a unique way. In addition, the title at 13:1 is of the ‘מַשָּׂא GN’ variety, but it has been modified to parallel the introduction at 2:1. Thus, while the מַשָּׂא title is presumably the key unifying component for the purported collection, there is some variance in how it appears in Isa 13–23, and to a greater degree, elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

Because מַשָּׂא is a common feature of much of the material in Isa 13–23, it presumably plays a key role in the development of these chapters. In light of the difficulties with the notion of an independent מַשָּׂא collection, however, a different approach must be taken toward the formation of Isa 13–23. The following discussion advances the proposal that מַשָּׂא titles were applied to oracles from the earliest stage in the development of a collection of nations oracles within the literary context of the book of Isaiah. In addition, this chapter will distinguish two main movements in the development of the מַשָּׂא material. This approach is a more plausible alternative to the usual assumption of the incorporation of a comprehensive collection of מַשָּׂא oracles. The incremental application of the מַשָּׂא superscriptions seeks to resolve apparent conflicts concerning מַשָּׂא material that can be plausibly dated either to the eighth century B.C.E. or to later periods, while maintaining that the collection has developed within the literary context of the book of Isaiah. Following a survey of current discussion concerning מַשָּׂא oracles, we will offer a fresh proposal for the formation of Isa 13–23.

2. The מַשָּׂא Oracles in Isaiah 13–23

The word מַשָּׂא appears ten times as an introductory element in Isa 13–23, and a similar occurrence can also be found at Isa 30:6. Nearly

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