CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEPTUAGINT OF ISAIAH 23 AS A VISION

The central issue of this chapter is the question of why the Old Greek version of Isa. 23, considering its own form and contents, has been produced. This question concerns basically the genre of the text, and the way in which the genre of our text (oracle/vision) was understood at the time LXX Isaiah was written. It will be argued that "the vision of Tyre", just as with other prophetic passages in LXX Isaiah, reflects the interest of the time, namely, the interest in prophecies as predictions. Before dealing with LXX Isa. 23 from this point of view, we will first give some examples of the great interest in prophecies in learned circles of the Jewish people in the Hellenistic period, both in Palestine and in Egypt.

A Prophecy as prediction

In particular since the second century B.C., presumably because of the threat of their own national and religious identity in the first part of that century, a growing interest in both the Law and the Prophets is apparent among Jewish priests and scribes of the time. In one way or another the ancient prophecies were considered to be a source of hope, which was based on a reading and interpretation of these prophecies as referring to events of the age in which the readers/interpreters were living.¹

One of the earliest passages that reflects this attitude and interest is Ben Sira 36:13-20. This text reads as follows in translation:

Gather all the tribes of Jacob,
that they may inherit the land as in days of old.
Show mercy to the people called by your name:
Israel, whom you named your firstborn.
Take pity on your holy city,
Jerusalem, the foundation for your throne.
Fill Zion with your majesty,
your temple with your glory.
Give evidence of your deeds of old;
fulfil the prophecies spoken in your name,

reward those who have hoped in you, 
and let your prophets be proved true.²

This part of the prayer (36:1-22) contains motifs well known from the prophetical literature: the return of the tribes of Jacob to the promised land, and the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple.³ The author urgently pleads with God to rescue his people by fulfilling (Hebrew קדש) the prophecies, or visions (the Hebrew text reads קדש). It is clear from the passage cited that the ancient prophecies in question are seen as predictions which have not yet been fulfilled, although the hope is given expression that the time of their fulfilment may be close at hand. All this implies that the prophecies are envisaged as being still to be trusted as predictive revelations, though one gets the impression that this belief was disputed at that time. This may explain the phrase of vs 20b: “and let your prophets be proved true” ( Heb הָבְלָי אֶלְמָנִי).⁴

Another passage that offers a clear illustration of the interest in the oracles of salvation of the prophets is Tobit 14:3-5 (according to the longer version as attested by manuscript S⁵). The text reads in translation as follows:

(3) When he [Tobit] was dying, he sent for his son Tobias and gave him these instructions:

“My son, you must take your children (4) and be off to Media with all haste, for I believe God’s word spoken against Nineveh by Nahum. It will all come true; everything will happen to Assur and Nineveh that was spoken by the prophets of Israel who were sent by God. Not a word of it will fall short; all will take place in due time. It will be safer in Media than in Assyria and Babylon. I know, I am convinced, that all God’s words will be fulfilled. It will be so; not one of them will fail. Our countrymen who live in Israel will all be scattered and carried off into captivity out of that good land. The whole of Israel’s territory with Samaria and Jerusalem will lie waste; and for a time the house of God will be in mourning, burnt to the ground.

(5) But God will have mercy on them again and will bring them back to

³ The question as to whether Sir. 36 is an addition or not can be left out of consideration here. See M. Gilbert, “Siracide” in DBS XII/71 (Paris, 1996), col. 1404.
⁴ For the view that the book of Qohelet attests a critical position in this regard see D. Michel, Qohelet (Darmstadt, 1988), pp. 73f.
⁵ The fragments (in Aramaic, and Hebrew) of Tobit found at Qumran agree with the longer version. See M.O. Wise, “A note on 4Q196 (papTob ar-a) and Tobit i 22”, VT 43 (1993), pp. 566-570. For the remains of Tob 14:2-6 in 4QTob ar see now DJD XIX, pp. 57-59.