CHAPTER XX

PUNISHMENT OF THE NATIONS AND DELIVERANCE OF ISRAEL
IN THE APOCALYPSE OF ISAIAH

The “Great Apocalypse” (chaps. 24–27) and the “Little Apocalypse” (chaps. 34–35) of Isaiah play an important part in the scheme of Isaiah’s prophecies. Chapters 24–27 sum up the great themes of the preceding chapters 13–23, and chapters 34–35 bring to a close the collection of prophecies in chapters 28–33. The function of both of these texts is to set forth, from an eschatological point of view, the ultimate fate of the nations and God’s future purpose for his people Israel. The great central theme is that of the punishment of oppressors and the deliverance of God’s faithful people. The two passages display many striking resemblances to the characteristic features of Isaiah’s general prophecies, and, as such, they can be thought of as the climax or finale of what precedes them.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the “apocalypses” are not original to Isaiah. First, because the general political and social conditions reflected in them seem to indicate the post-Exilic period rather than that of the eighth century; and second, because the elaborate eschatological ideas, as well as the distinctive imagery and style make it plain that these passages constitute self-contained entities. Accordingly, they should be studied separately.

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1 See the statement by F. Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah (trans. from the German; CFTHL IV/14; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1875), 423: “What the finale should do in a piece of music—namely, gather up the scattered changes into a grand impressive whole—is done here by this closing cycle.”

2 These and other reasons have led most critical scholars to the conclusion that many other passages within the collections of Isaianic prophecies also contain editorial additions that were composed gradually over a long period of time until the final form of the book of Isaiah emerged.


There are many different views regarding the origin, historical setting, and literary categories represented in the various sections of chapters 24–27. Nevertheless, commentators agree that these chapters display a basic thematic unity: the contrast between the forces of evil and the overwhelming majesty of God. They are best investigated in two parts: 24:1–26:6 and 26:7–27:13.4

The first unit of the first part comprises 24:1–13. The passage begins with the announcement of a universal judgment: “Behold (hinneḥ), the Lord is emptying the earth (bōqēq hā’āres) and making it waste (ūbōlēgāḥ), and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants” (v. 1). The emphatic demonstrative interjection hinnēḥ obviously refers to a future event and implies that it is imminent and sure to happen.5 A striking literary feature of this verse is the use of the paronomasia bōqēq ... ʿōbōlēgāḥ; such Hebrew assonances cannot be echoed in translation.6

Verse 2 presents one of the clearest examples of multiple merism in the Hebrew Bible. The text reads:

> And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest;  
> as with the slave, so with his master;  
> as with the maid, so with her mistress;  
> as with the buyer, so with the seller;  
> as with the lender, so with the borrower;  
> as with the creditor, so with the debtor.

In the present context, even one of the six antitheses would have been enough to express the universal dimension of the coming judgment; the hammer blows of repetition make it all the more evident that the emphasis is on the universality of God’s punishment. The poet is not concerned with the individual meanings of his nouns, but with the contrasts that make it

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