ISAIAH 11:15: A NEW INTERPRETATION BASED ON THE
GENESIS APOCRYPHON*

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A variety of explanations have been suggested for the *hapax legomenon* מְיַלָּן, found in Isa. 11:15. After surveying the interpretations put forth by the ancient translations, medieval commentaries, and modern scholars, this paper proposes a new understanding of this difficult passage based on the appearance of a similar term in the *Genesis Apocryphon*, as well as a possible emendation of the verse.

Isaiah 11:15–16, part of a prophecy aimed at the future returnees to Zion, reads as follows:

וַיְרַדוּ הָיוֹת אֶת לְשׁוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעָקְשָׁנָה יִרְאְזוּ עָלֵיהֶם הַשֵּׁבָעָה נַחֲלַת הָרוֹדֶךְ
וַיַּזֶּהַ בִּלְדַד לְאֶזְרָא יָאֵר וְאֵשָּׁר מֵאָזְרָא מֵאָזְרָא וַיַּזֶּהַ לְאֶזְרָא בֵּית לְאִזְרָא בְּשֵׁלָה מֶעָרָה.

A slightly different version of verse 15 is documented in 1QIsa:

וַיִּרְאְזוּ לְאֶזְרָא יָאֵר וְאֵשָּׁר מֵאָזְרָא וַיַּזֶּהַ לְאֶזְרָא בֵּית לְאִזְרָא בְּשֵׁלָה מֶעָרָה;

The ancient translations largely reflect an understanding of מְיַלָּן as related to strength or power. LXX translates מְיַלָּן as βιαῖς, from the adjective βιαῖς, meaning ‘strong’, rendering מְיַלָּן יִרְאָת as ‘to a violent spirit’. The Vulgate reflects a similar understanding of the phrase מְיַלָּן יִרְאָת, which it translates *in fortitudine spiritus sui*, ‘in the strength of his spirit’. In the *Peshitta* we find: ‘בַּעֲשָׂרֵה יִרְאָת רָאוֹדַה ‘with the power of his wind’. The *Isaiah Targum* has an innovative translation, however: ‘by his prophets’ command’.

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* This article is dedicated to Professor John Strugnell in appreciation of his scholarship and collegiality.
1 See *The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa)*: A New Edition (eds D.W. Parry and E. Qimron; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 22-23. According to the editors, the *taw* in לְשׁוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל was perhaps corrected to a *he*.
Of the medieval commentators, Rashi and Ibn Ezra also provide interpretations based on an understanding of מָעָשֵׁה as related to ‘strength’. First noting that it is a hapax, Rashi then gives a contextual explanation: מָעָשֵׁה בְּעֵת מִלְחָמָה ‘by the strength of his spirit/wind’. Ibn Ezra provides a grammatical explanation: "מָעָשֵׁה הָאֹזְנָה. הָאֹזְנָה is part of the root. The meaning of the word is, ‘with strength.’ Those that compare it with מִלְחָמָה בְּעֵת מִלְחָמָה (Isa. xxi. 12) have no knowledge in grammar’. David Kimhi (RaDaK)’s explanation differs somewhat. After noting that מָעָשֵׁה is a hapax, like Rashi he suggests a contextual explanation, which he attributes to his brother Moses Kimhi: “[He] explained מָעָשֵׁה according to מָעָשֵׁה בְּעֵת מִלְחָמָה ‘a heap in the field’ (Mic. 1:6), explaining מָעָשֵׁה like מָעָשֵׁה מִלְחָמָה, namely, God will wave his hand and spirit over the waves of the sea and the river to still and dry them.”

Modern commentators also note the difficulty of this verse, suggesting various etymologies for the word מָעָשֵׁה. Among them we must note the popular tendency to emend מָעָשֵׁה to מָעָשֵׁה מְלֵא, based on the LXX, as well as on the MT to Exod. 14:21: מְלֵא הַנַּחַל אֲחָז בְּעֵת מִלְחָמָה: ‘and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all night’. Nevertheless, none of these interpretations or emendations has proven satisfactory.

I suggest a new interpretation for Isa. 11:15, in which מָעָשֵׁה is understood as a construct form linked to the preceding word מְלֵא, rather than to the following word מִלְחָמָה. Underlying this proposal is my understanding of מָעָשֵׁה as a toponym referring to the Euphrates River.

The context of Isa. 11:15 is God’s redemption of his people “from Assyria—as also from Egypt, Pathros, Nubia, Shinar, and the coastlands” (v. 11). At the end of this prophecy, we read: “Thus there shall be a highway for the other part of His people out of Assyria, such as there was for Israel when it left the land of Egypt” (v. 16). Early and modern commentators alike recognized verse 15’s

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2 מָעָשֵׁה means both ‘heap’ and ‘wave’.
5 Wildberger, Isaiah 1–12, 488.