Renewed interest in Isa. viii 23 presents a welcome opportunity to reinvestigate the historical and geographical implications of this verse.

J. A. Emerton, in an important discussion of the passage, concludes that sufficient linguistic grounds exist for considering J. Jahn’s proposal that the “former” in this verse refers to an Aramean king, while the “latter” is Tiglath-pileser III. Nevertheless, Emerton rejects this view because he cannot pinpoint any specific Aramean king suitable to the “former”, and, as he argues, the region in question, namely the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali, suffered from the exploits of numerous Aramean kings (p. 167). In this note I shall propose an historical explanation that would confirm Jahn’s proposal, and suggest that the specific king referred to as “the former” is Ben-hadad ben Tabrimmon ben Hezion, king of Damascus.

Isa. viii ends with a harsh prophecy of doom, couched in elevated language. It seems that v. 23, like other verses at the end of this chapter, was not divided correctly by the Masoretes. The words “for there is not any break of dawn for that land which is in straits” clearly belong to the doom oracle and to ch. viii. The second part, however, is more appropriate to the consolation prophecy in ch. ix. Although the Masoretic text joins the two parts of the verse, in the complete Isaiah scroll 1QIsa there is a slight space between the two parts of the verse. Furthermore, the LXX, the Peshitta and the quotation in Matt. iv 13-16 show that earlier generations understood the words “the former [king] treated lightly the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, while the latter one treated harshly the way of the sea, the other side of the Jordan and the Galilee of the nations” as belonging to the consolation prophecy.

This section of the verse has been the subject of many studies, which have discussed both its linguistic and historical-geographical aspects.

E. Forrer’s examination of the provinces in the Assyrian empire
has led most scholars to agree that the verse alludes to two campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III. First described is a campaign against northern Israel; the one that took place in 733 B.C.E., and which is mentioned in 2 Kings xv 29: “In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor-Gilead, Galilee, the entire region of Naphtali”. This campaign is also recorded in the annals of Tiglath-pileser:

...prisoners] of the town [...Ak]bara, 625 prisoners of the town A... of the town Hinatuna, 650 prisoners of the town Qu[...of the town...Y]atbiti, 650 prisoners of the town Sa[... all these] people together with their possessions [I brought away...]. the town Aruma, the town Marum. [The fortified towns of the land of the house of Omri which reside] on lofty mountains [I captured and razed to the ground].

The identifiable towns in this passage are located in Galilee: Merom, Akbara in upper Galilee; Hannaton, Jotbah and Aruma in lower Galilee.

The end of the verse—“the latter”, according to this view—alludes to a second campaign against Israel which took place in 732 B.C.E. As a result of this campaign, Tiglath-pileser III annexed most of the regions in Israel’s kingdom, incorporated them into the Assyrian empire, and set Hoshea ben Elah as king over the highlands of Ephraim alone. The latter part of the verse describes, in their opinion, the new Assyrian provinces which were established as a result of this campaign. “The Way of the Sea” in Isaiah designates the province of Dor, “the other side of the Jordan” is the province of Gilead, and “the Galilee of the nations” is the province whose capital was Megiddo.

As time went on, some of Forrer’s readings were improved, and that undermined the historical reconstructions based upon them. Recent research by I. Eph'al on the end of the Israelite kingdom and by A. F. Rainey on the meaning of the expression “the Way of the Sea”, may provide us with a key for a new way of understanding this verse. Eph'al has summarized the present state of scholarship on this topic as follows: “Available sources offer nothing explicit to substantiate the accepted view, following Forrer’s study, that Tiglath-pileser organized areas cut off from the kingdom of Israel as Assyrian Provinces, as he had with the whole