THE HUNTING IMAGERY IN ISAIAH LI 20A

by

ABRAHAM TERIAN

Berrien Springs, Michigan

Because of the ill-defined metrical hypothesis in the study of biblical poetry, the tricolon of Isa. li 20a has been variously emended over the years. The lines in question read as follows, following the Massoretic accentuation:

\begin{align*}
\text{bnyk} & \quad \text{clpw} & \quad \text{skbw} \\
\text{br}^{3} & \quad \text{kl-hwswt} \\
\text{ktw}^{2} & \quad \text{mkmr}
\end{align*}

Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net.

(Revised Standard Version)

It has been frequently observed that the various elements of the verse do not fit together coherently from the point of view of meter or sense. To give the correct sense, some have opted for a couplet by omitting the second line, noting its possible derivaton from Lam. ii 19 or iv 1.¹ Others have maintained a couplet by omitting the third line.² Others still, noting the similarities with Lamentations, have with some justification taken the dominant meter of the irregularly divided chapter to be the appropriate three-two meter of a lament or qinâ indicating an agony which is “deep but controlled”.³ The emerging trend in the study of classical Hebrew poetry, however, shows a shift from elusive metrical considerations (and unwarranted emendations) to greater attention to poetic tech-


² See E. J. Kissane, The Book of Isaiah 2 (Dublin, 1943), p. 16; he rejects both of these views and instead favors a new sentence beginning with the third phrase.

niques seen in the balance of clause length through the use of repetitive parallelism in various forms.\(^4\) This realization has led to renewed appreciation of the integrity of the MT, which in the case of Isaiah is well attested by IQIs\(^6\). Moreover, the Isaiah Targum ("Your sons will be dashed to pieces, thrown at the head of all the streets like those cast in nets") and the curiously strange reading of the LXX ("Your sons are the perplexed ones, that sleep at the top of every street as a half-boiled beet") clearly account for the Hebrew lines as a tricolon with parallel patterns (A/B/C).

Even with these textual and literary considerations, the intense meaning of this strophic unit in a lament over Jerusalem is sensed but in part. To facilitate a clearer understanding, we must draw upon regional archaeology where recent and not-so-recent discoveries may be seen to illuminate the poetic imagery.

Around the close of World War I, Royal Air Force pilots flying the Cairo-Baghdad route began to notice and comment on remnants of long walls in the semi-arid land east of the Jordan, also known as the Black Desert. The first to publish his observations on these geometrical patterns constructed of volcanic rocks mainly in the vast basalt area east of Amman was Flight-Lieutenant R. A. Maitland, who spoke of "little collections of some circles and long lines of stones".\(^5\) Some of these formations he interpreted as defences against man, and others even 3 to 5 kilometers long and inter-connecting hill-top camps he thought of as barriers to assist cattle herding (pp. 200-2). Two years later another officer, Group-Captain L. W. B. Rees, wrote more specifically of these formations which came to be known as "desert kites", on account of their long tails. He described the "kites" as having a roughly hexagonal head or enclosure, with two long arms reaching out from an opening in the enclosure wall. The long arms spread increasingly far apart as
