THE NIGHT OF DUMAH (ISAIAH XXI 11-12)

by

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This article is offered as the third in a series of three. In the first a broad survey was given of the oracles against the nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These oracles, which will be referred to as ON-IJE in this article, were found to have a common form and an affinity with ancient near eastern mythology particularly where that referred to the conflict between chaos and cosmos at creation. In the second article a study was made of the root hbl as it occurs in Isa. xiii 5 and 8, and it was suggested that in view of known mythological references the sense of "twist" may underlie the use of that word even though it must be otherwise translated to make sense in English.

The present article is concerned with the Oracle of Dumah in Isa. xxi 11-12 which will be referred to as OD. The oracle is too short to represent the Form that has been demonstrated for other oracles in ON-IJE. But since it forms part of the same collection its obscurities might be illuminated to some extent by reference to the same mythological themes.

1 J.B. Geyer, "Mythology and culture in the oracles against the nations", VT 36 (1986), pp. 129-45. The present article was the subject of study during a Sabbatical term spent at New College, Edinburgh, and I wish to thank the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Edinburgh for the friendship and encouragement given me during that time, and especially Professor J.C.L. Gibson and Dr A. Graeme Auld for their comments on this work. Also I am most grateful to Professor David J.A. Clines of the University of Sheffield, who read an earlier form of this article and made very helpful comments. Finally, I am indebted to Professor J.A. Emerton who, in spite of enduring prolonged surgical treatment, has found time to make suggestions which improve the original script and to edit it for the press. Any errors are my own.

Previous scholarship has generally avoided any reference to mythology and has concentrated on historical interpretations that result in notorious difficulties. Many will sympathize with Archbishop W.C. Magee’s view that “for all practical purposes, for any use it could have been to the Jews, or to anyone since their time, it might as well, apparently, have been unspoken”.

A review of previous theories has been admirably executed by A.A. Macintosh and need not be repeated here, though it is necessary to give some indication of the problems that have arisen through trying to give a historical reference to the terms Night and Morning in this oracle.

K. Marti, for example, paraphrases the text as: “Isn’t the night already past, the night of oppression and need (Not) and isn’t the hour of freedom and prosperity (Glück) sounding?” He then concludes that Night, which is the cause of the present difficulty, disappears but there may be another night. O. Procksch admits that this night is not to be understood as the natural night-time and calls it “die geschichtliche, genaue eschatologische Nacht”, whatever that might be. He understands it to mean a dark time for both Edom and Judah. By the following morning the time of waiting will still not have passed. There must still be many nights and many mornings. But the night is eschatological after which no new nights are expected. S. Aalen, in his only reference to Isa. xxi 11-12 in his work “Licht” und “Finsternis” rejects A. Bentzen’s view that in this oracle Day and Night fight each other and adopts the view that the terms refer to oppression and release, noting that Procksch speaks of “eschatological night” but not of “eschatological day”.

These difficulties increase when attempts are made to interpret the verb ḫātā. Although it is accepted that this is the perfect of a verb

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3 The only suggestion about a mythological background to Isa. xxi 11-12 that I have come across is made by A. Bentzen (bibliographical details will be found along with all works referred to by the name of the author only in the list of commentaries at the end of this article). Bentzen refers to the fight between night and day. S. Aalen, Die Begriffe “Licht” und “Finsternis” im Alten Testament, im Spätjudentum und im Rabbinismus (Oslo, 1951), p. 34, refers to Bentzen’s view and rejects it. This is the only reference Aalen makes to Isa. xxi 11-12 in a long dissertation on light and darkness.