ON "VISITS" AND "VISIONS" IN ISAIAH XXIX 6-7

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One of the chief problems in Isa xxix 1-8 concerns the relationship between verses 1-4, which appear to contain a threat by Yahweh against "Ariel" (i.e. Zion)\(^1\) and verses 5-8, which are generally understood as announcing Yahweh’s deliverance of Zion from the threat of "a throng of nations". While many regard both threat and deliverance as part of the same unit, others regard the announcement of deliverance (verses 5-7) as a secondary addition, inspired by the fact that Jerusalem was not physically destroyed in 701 BC. All, however, agree that the verses, as they now stand, portray a change from a threat against Zion to a threat against the nations. What remains disputed is whether that change occurs at the beginning of verse 5 (Vermeylen, p. 402; Gonçalves, p. 303; Clements, pp. 235-6) or only with the phrase "and it shall happen suddenly, in an instant" in verse 5b\(^2\) (Wildberger, p. 1108; Barth, p. 188). This common assumption of a change from threat to deliverance requires understanding verse 6 in a sense favourable for Zion. But this understanding must be questioned.

The main issue concerns the verb \(pqd\) in verse 6. No one disputes that it can denote both a favourable (cp. Jer. xv 15, xxix 10; Ps. lxv 10, cvi 4) and an unfavourable "visitation" of Yhwh (cf. Isa x 12; Jer. vi 15, xlix 8; Ps. lxxxix 33). Childs (p. 55) observes that the favourable sense is never in the Old Testament associated with the passive form of the verb,\(^2\) but this, while correct, is, in my opinion, not a decisive factor. The so-called unfavourable sense occurs in the passive forms in only three passages, twice in the Niphal (Prov. xix 23; Isa xxiv 22) and once in the Hophal (Jer. vi 6). In

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\(^{1}\) The meaning of \(h\)\(\nu\)\(t\)\(\varphi\)\(\ell\) remains disputed, though there is no doubt that it serves here as a designation for Zion (cp. verse 1 where Ariel is described as "the city where David camped"); see also verse 8).

\(^{2}\) Kaiser (p. 268, n.\(^ b \)= German, p. 213, n. 18) cites Sir. xlix 15 (which, incidentally, is a text not without some translational difficulty) for the use of the Niphal in a friendly sense.
fact, the predominant sense of the passive verb is neither a favourable nor an unfavourable visitation. The verb in the Niphal most frequently denotes the idea of ‘‘to be missed, lacking’’ (1 Sam. xx 18, 25, 27; Jer. xxiii 4), and the Hophal most often denotes the idea of ‘‘being made an overseer’’ (2 Kings xii 12, xxii 5, 9; 2 Chron. xxxiv 10, 12, 17). The fact that the ‘‘visitation’’ here is explicitly defined in terms of ‘‘thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest (šèšarak), and the flame of a devouring fire (yèš ṭōkēlā), must, however, immediately suggest an ‘‘unfavourable’’ visitation. Thus, as is the case here, the ‘‘visitations’’ in Jer. xxi 14, 1 31-2 and Hos. viii 13-14 are accompanied by a ‘‘fire’’ (yèš) that ‘‘devours’’ (yēkēlā).³ I am aware of no passage which speaks of a favourable ‘‘visitation’’ of Yahweh that is accompanied by these ominous elements,⁴ and therefore find it hard to agree with those who understand a favourable visitation here.⁵ Nor is it clear to me that the verb was deliberately chosen in order to create ambiguity and thus ease the transition from threat to deliverance (pace Wildberger, p. 1101; Exum, p. 344). While the verb itself may be ambiguous without a context, it seems to me that its association here with thunder, earthquake and devouring fire demands an ominous interpretation. In short, the meaning of the verb here is not ambiguous. Had the writer wanted to create ambiguity, he might have simply left out the accompanying elements which define the ‘‘visitation’’ and dramatically have written or said, ‘‘She will be visited by Yahweh of Hosts’’. For a similar reason, it is also difficult to agree with those who say that the verb was intended to convey both a favourable (for Zion) and unfavourable (for her enemies) connotation at one and the same

³ cp. also Jer. xxx 23 where mention is made of a tempest (săhurat yhwh) which is possibly to be understood as descriptive of Yahweh’s unfavourable ‘‘visit’’ on oppressors in Jer. xxx 20.
⁴ Yahweh’s descent on Mount Sinai (Ex. xix 18ff; Deut. v 22) does not employ the verb pqd. In addition, the description of his appearing does not use the same elements as in Isa. xxix 5, except for the very general words qēl (but lacking the adjective ḡādōl in Ex. xix 19) and yèš (but without the threatening adjective ṭōkēlā in both Ex. xix and Deut. v). For a critique of attempts to secure a favourable interpretation in verse 6 by seeing the traditional elements of theophany here, see Werlitz, pp. 284-5. The theopaneic elements occur in unfavourable contexts also (cf. Isa. xxx 30).
⁵ These include Kissane, p. 325; Gonçalves, p. 304 ‘‘at least in its present setting’’; Skinner, p. 219; Barth, p. 188; Kaiser, p. 268 = German, p. 213; Oswalt, p. 525, n. 5: Scharbert, pp. 215, 223, n. 76.