

THE CITY OF CHAOS AND THE NEW JERUSALEM: ISAIAH 24–27 IN CONTEXT¹

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Ancient Near Eastern literature, including the Hebrew Bible, often personifies leading cities as grand dames of the realm, such as the prophetic personification of Jerusalem as mother/widow/harlot.² For example, the so-called Zion songs, Isaiah 47–66, together with two poems addressed to cities standing in rival or alter ego relationships to Zion, namely Babylon in Isaiah 47 and an unnamed city in Isaiah 57, function as a structural feature of the latter third of the book of Isaiah. Closer examination of these eight poems reveals a balanced bi-partite structure: an unflattering depiction of Lady Babylon, who must fall, followed by three encouraging songs addressed to Lady Jerusalem, who will be restored to honor, balanced by an unflattering depiction of an unnamed city, who must fall, followed by three encouraging songs addressed to Lady Jerusalem, who will

¹An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held in San Francisco, CA.

²Aspects of the phenomenon of the feminine personification of cities, especially Jerusalem, are treated in: M. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Canon in Comparative Perspective*, Scripture in Context IV, ed. B. Batto, W. Hallo and L. Younger (Lewiston NY: Mellen, 1991) 173–94; A. Fitzgerald, "The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the OT," *CBQ* 34 (1972): 403–16; idem, "BTWLT and BT as Titles for Capital Cities," *CBQ* 37 (1975): 170–80; J. Schmitt, "The Gender of Ancient Israel," *JSOT* 6 (1983): 115–25; idem, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *RB* 92 (1985): 557–69; idem, "The Wife of God in Hosea 2," *BR* 34 (1989): 5–18; idem, "Psalm 87: Zion, The City of God's Love," in *The Psalms and Other Studies on the Old Testament AV*, ed. Joseph I. Hunt, J. C. Knight, and L. A. Sinclair (Nashotah WI: Nashotah House Seminary, 1990) 34–44; O. H. Steck, "Zion als Gelände und Gestalt: Überlegungen zur Wahrnehmung Jerusalems als Stadt und Frau im Alten Testament," *ZTK* 86 (1989): 261–81 (with extensive bibliography); and J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS 130 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

ultimately be replaced by a New Jerusalem. An analysis of this structure has suggested that the unnamed city of Isaiah 57 should be identified as the sinful old Jerusalem, the alter ego of the glorious New Jerusalem.³

These eight poems, spanning the division between Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah, form a cohesive, if artificial, structure. Not only do the Zion songs in Trito-Isaiah constitute the second voice in an intricate counterpoint with the Zion songs in Deutero-Isaiah, but, as several scholars have pointed out, similar contrapuntal figures or allusions to earlier themes link the Zion material at the end of the book with earlier, more abbreviated, statements such as Isaiah 1–2.⁴

Is there an interior movement in this Jerusalem symphony? Several superficial features of Isaiah 24–27, the so-called Isaiah apocalypse, suggest that it plays a pivotal role in this Zion/city theme. Isaiah 24–27 focuses upon two cities, or two categories of cities, namely the city of chaos and Jerusalem. Could the same rival/alter ego phenomenon which governs the structure of the Zion songs in 47–66 be operative in the Isaiah apocalypse? Does the Apocalypse deal with two cities, an evil enemy city and Jerusalem, God's chosen, similar to the juxtaposition of Babylon (Isa 47) and Jerusalem (Isa 49; 51–52; 54)? Or does the anonymous city of chaos, whose identity has so vexed interpreters,⁵ parallel the anonymous city of Isaiah 57:6–13? Does it represent Jerusalem's evil alter ego, the old Jerusalem who must be made new in an apocalyptic cataclysm?

ISAIAH 24–27 IN RELATION TO ITS MACRO-CONTEXT

Closer examination of the structure, vocabulary, and poetics of the Apocalypse reveals two categories of somewhat contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, certain poignant, though limited, verbal links to the oracles against the nations collection, the Jerusalem collection in Isaiah 28–33, and the Zion songs seem to indicate that the current form of the Apocalypse results from an editorial process which sought to interconnect the city materials in the book of Isaiah. Similarly, an aspect of the structure of the macro-context suggests that the role of the unnamed city of the Apocalypse may be ambivalently analogous

³M. Biddle, "Lady Zion's Alter Egos: Isaiah 47:1–15 and 57:6–13 as Structural Counterparts," in *New Visions of the Book of Isaiah*, JSOTSup, ed. R. Melugin and M. Sweeney (Sheffield: JSOT, forthcoming).

⁴An excellent summary of this discussion can be found in G. Sheppard, "The Book of Isaiah: Competing Structures according to a Late Modern Description of Its Shape and Scope," in *SBLSP* 31 (1992): 549–82.

⁵See the survey of positions in W. Millar, *Isaiah 24–27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic*, HSM 11 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) 15–21.

to that of the alter ego/rival cities of Isaiah 47 and 57. On the other hand, the Apocalypse virtually strips of vitality certain motifs and vocabulary shared with other city texts. Relatedly, the Apocalypse does not personify either city, treating cities instead in an objective manner as habitable sites rather than as figures or personae.

A Common Vocabulary for Cities in Distress

Isaiah 24–27 lies between an extended collection of oracles against the nations (Isa 13–23) and a composition centered on the theme of the eschatological battle for Jerusalem (Isa 28–33). Form-critical criteria figure prominently in the demarcation of these three collections. The oracles against the nations identify themselves as “burdens” and Isaiah 28–33 are a series of “woes,” while Isaiah 24–27, although not marked by a consistent formal characteristic, is regularly considered apocalyptic on the basis of the tenor of the material. While a frontal assault on the apocalyptic classification of Isaiah 24–27 would be premature at this point, an examination of Isaiah 13–33 indicates that the three collections are not as distinct as accepted divisions may suggest. Instead, a common vocabulary of cities in distress characterizes Isaiah 13–33. Many of the motifs encountered in Isaiah 24–27 recur, sometimes almost verbatim, in other portions of Isaiah 13–33. In its final form, then, this section of Isaiah constitutes an extended discussion of the fate of cities.

In order of occurrence in Isaiah 24–27, such recurrent motifs include: (1) God’s wrath upon the whole “earth/land” (Isa 24:1, 3-6, 13, 17-20; 26:21; cf. 13:5, 9-13; 14:17, 26; 18:3-6; 28:22; 33:9; 34:1; see also 14:7) in the context of oracles addressed to Babylon, Jerusalem, and several unspecified addressees; (2) the languishing and withering of the world (15:1-5, 8; 16:7; 19:8-10; 22:12; 23:1, 6; 24:4; 29:1; 32:12; 33:9) depicted in oracles with a wide variety of addressees (Ar, Kir, Dibon, Moab, Egypt, Jerusalem, Tyre, Ariel/Jerusalem, and one unclear reference in 33:9), (3) the destruction of vineyards (24:4, 7, 9, 11; cf. 16:8-10; 18:4-6; 32:12; for the opposite image of the luxuriant vineyard as a symbol of prosperity, see 25:6; 27:2) in Heshbon, Jerusalem/Zion, and several unclear locales; (4) the cessation of joyous singing (24:9; 25:5; cf. the renewal of song in response to the end of a period of distress in 14:7; 23:15-16; 24:14, 16; 26:1; 30:29, and the ironic reference in 23:15-16) and the end of jubilation and exultation (24:8; cf. 22:2; 23:7, 12; 32:13; cf. also the inappropriate continuation of mirth in a situation calling for mourning in 22:13f.) in Babylon, Tyre, Zion/Jerusalem, Sidon, and anonymous entities; (5) drunken staggering under the blows of God’s wrath (24:20; cf. 19:14; 24:9; 28:1-4, 7-8; the addressees are Egypt, the unnamed city, and Ephraim); (6) leading cities (Babylon, Damascus, Tyre, Zion/Jerusalem, Edom, anonymous “cities”) lying desolate, in ruins, the habitation of wild animals (24:12; 25:2; cf. 13:19-22; 14:23; 17:1-3, 9; 23:13; 27:10-11; 32:14; 34:10-15); (7) the populations of

“Jacob,” Babylon, Philistia, Dibon, Damascus, and the anonymous city of Isaiah 24–27 reduced to a remnant, gleaned like the grape harvest (24:13; cf. esp. 17:4-6 and 32:10; 14:22, 30; 15:9; 16:14; 17:3; 18:5; cf. also the pruning of the total population of the earth in 18:5); (8) in an interesting fusion of architectural and mourning imagery, the portrayal of cities (unspecified Moabite cities, the unnamed city of Isaiah 24–27, and Ariel/Jerusalem) as torn down, brought low, lying in the dust (25:12; 26:5; cf. 29:4; cf. also the image of the grave in 14:9, 11, 15, 19; 28:15, 18); (9) the image of the woman in childbirth, common in the Zion songs later in the book, either as a simile for terror or for the childlessness/depopulation of figures such as Babylon, an unnamed subject, Tyre, and Zion/Jerusalem (26:17-18; cf. 13:6-8; 21:3-4; 23:4).

Three observations may be made at this point concerning this body of common motifs: First, Isaiah 13–33 utilizes these motifs indiscriminately with regard to the various cities treated. Jerusalem, Babylon, Tyre, Sidon, Dibon, Damascus, etc. can all be depicted in precisely the same language of destruction.⁶ Second, the catastrophe described in Isaiah 24–27, presumably total in scope and degree and thus frequently categorized as apocalyptic, very closely resembles, both in scope and degree, the various catastrophes described elsewhere in Isaiah 13–33. On the level of these motifs at least, the formal distinctions between this collection and the burden and woe collections which surround it do not seem to extend to a contrast between prophetic eschatology and apocalypticism. Third, this commonality merits the reconsideration of Isaiah 24–27 as part and parcel of the larger unit Isaiah 13–33, albeit as the result of a complicated history of formation.

Many of these same images reappear later in the other major concentration of materials dealing with the agonies of cities in the grip of demise or renewal, namely the city songs in Isaiah 47–66. The earlier portions of Isaiah announce mourning for various cities, even the whole earth, the Zion songs proclaim the end of Jerusalem’s period of mourning (Isa 60:20; 66:10). Conversely, the cessation of mirth and rejoicing which accompanies this mourning (24:8, 14; 26:19) mirrors the coming resumption of jubilation in Jerusalem (54:1; 52:8, 9; 60:15; 62:5). Jerusalem (51:21), like the earth in the Apocalypse (24:20; cf. 24:9), staggers drunkenly as a result of drinking the cup of wrath, not strong drink. Every house in the city of chaos is shut up to bar entry (24:10), people hide from coming catastrophe behind closed doors (26:20). Yet, God’s wrath is momentary (עָנַן, 26:20; cf. 47:9; 54:7, 8). One day,

⁶It should be noted that the book of Isaiah is not unique in this regard. The book of Jeremiah personifies not only Jerusalem (cf. M. Biddle, *A Redaction History of Jeremiah 2:1–4:2*, ATANT 77 [Zürich: TVZ, 1990] 47–82), but Heshbon (48:2), Damascus (49:24–27), etc. Similarly, the book of Ezekiel personifies Tyre (Ezek 27), for example, and almost all of Nahum is devoted to a denunciation of personified Lady Nineveh.

Jerusalem's gates will open never again to be closed (60:11; cf. 26:2 and 60:18). Yahweh will reestablish relationship with Jerusalem, the abandoned city, par excellence (27:10), once ruled by other lords (26:13), never again to abandon her (54:6, 7; 62:4, 12; cf. **בַּעַל**, 54:5; 62:4, 5). Moab's leading city (25:12) and Jerusalem alike (26:5; 52:2) lie in the dust, but Jerusalem, like the enigmatic "dwellers in the dust" (26:19), will arise (52:2). The foreign kings who once ruled over her will lick the dust from her feet (49:23). Perhaps the most potent contrast involves the concept of childbirth. The people of the ruinous city in the Apocalypse acknowledge that they have agonized like a woman in childbirth in the effort to produce children, but the pregnancy was false, they were able only to produce flatus (26:17). As depicted in the Zion Songs, on the other hand, Lady Jerusalem will have children she has not labored to bear (49:21; 54:1) or her children will be born before the onset of labor (66:7-9). One figure labors but bears no children; the other does not labor but has many children.

The Intentional Anonymity of the City of Chaos

All of these verbal linkages and allusions suggest that the final form of Isaiah 24–27 should not be regarded as a discrete, self-contained composition. If, as this phenomenon suggests, Isaiah 24–27 plays some role in the overall discussion of cities in the book of Isaiah, attention should be re-focused at this point on the anonymity of the city of chaos. Students of the Apocalypse have typically sought to identify this city by situating the events associated with it in the history of the ancient Mediterranean world,⁷ an effort doomed to failure by the apparently purposive ambiguity and generality of the text. In the absence of historical indicators, do features of the macro-structure of the book of Isaiah offer any clues as to the identity of the city of chaos?

As mentioned above, another negative portrayal of an anonymous city in Isaiah 57, probably Lady Zion, parallels the equally negative portrayal of Lady Babylon in Isaiah 47. Together, these two anti-cities contrast with the supremely optimistic portrayals of the restored/recreated Jerusalem in Isaiah 49–66. In effect, a sequence of eight city poems offer two polar models. Isaiah 47, 49, 51–52, and 54 juxtapose evil Lady Babylon with restored Lady Zion. The former must fall in order for the latter to be restored to her glorious status. Isaiah 57, 60, 62, and 66 juxtapose the evil Lady Zion with the new Lady Zion. The former must be destroyed in the recreation of the latter.⁸ Surprisingly, Isaiah 24–27 can be read in analogy to both of these models. Read as the conclusion of the oracles against the nations collection which precedes it, the anonymous city of chaos, described in language already employed to describe

⁷Cf. Millar, *Isaiah 24–27*, 15–21.

⁸Cf. Biddle, "Alter Egos."

God's judgment upon foreign cities, seems to be an abstract, essential paradigm of the enemy city (oracles against the nations // city of chaos // Isaiah 47). Read as the prologue to the Jerusalem-oriented collection which follows it, the anonymous city of chaos, described in language employed to describe God's judgment upon Jerusalem in 28–33 and 40–66, seems to be an incarnation of Jerusalem in her sinful persona (city of chaos // Ariel // Isaiah 57). Isaiah 24–27 occupies a pivotal position between collections devoted to Zion's two polar opposites/alter egos. Ultimately, the ambiguity may be intentionally unresolvable; Isaiah 24–27 is open in both directions.

FEATURES UNIQUE TO ISAIAH 24–27

To a degree, the preceding observations, focused on phenomena stretching across a wide scope of Isaianic material, obscure definite contrasts between related individual texts and may seem to suggest that the city materials in Isaiah, including Isaiah 24–27, are entirely uniform. As has been demonstrated, the customary formal classification of Isaiah 24–27, apocalyptic, should not be permitted to suggest that Isaiah 24–27 is entirely discrete from its surroundings, but the formal evaluation of the passage does correctly recognize that Isaiah 24–27 manifests certain peculiarities of tone.

Two specifics of the manifestation of these themes in Isaiah 24–27 merit particular mention. Several of the city-in-crisis motifs common to Isaiah 24–27 and its larger context seem less vital, organic, forceful, direct in their manifestations in Isaiah 24–27. The childbirth motif represents perhaps the clearest example of this difference in tone. In the book of Isaiah, childbirth functions either comparatively, as an expression of pain or futility, or metaphorically, as an expression of loss or restoration. It is perhaps most familiar as a positive governing metaphor in the Jerusalem texts in the latter half of the book. Mother Jerusalem, bereft of children by the Babylonians, will once again welcome home her children, whom, wondrously, she has not labored to bear (49:21; 51:18; 54:1; 66:7-9). In a similar, but negative usage, Tyre also describes her downfall as the loss of her children (Isa 23:4).

Isaiah 26:17-18 most closely resembles Isaiah 13:6-16. Not only does the childbirth motif function in a simile, but the context describes the all-encompassing scope of the cataclysmic effects of God's wrath: The inhabitants of the world will suffer pain and anguish *like* the pain of a woman in childbirth. Isaiah 21:3-4 occupies something of an intermediate position between metaphor and simile. The difficult first person singular address form recalls the personifications of Tyre and Jerusalem, but the childbirth motif itself occurs in a comparison describing, once again, the pain and anguish of those experiencing God's judgment. Yet Babylon is subsequently personified (vv 9-10).

Although Isaiah 26:17-18 compares the experience of God's people (referred to with third masculine plural and later first common plural forms) with a woman in labor, it uniquely depicts the futility of those who have striven to give birth when apparently they were infertile. Clearly, this image reflects an awareness of the Zion songs in the latter portion of the book, especially Isaiah 54 (cf. 26:15 and 54:2; also 66:12), but it describes the disappointment of those who strive in vain, not the exultation of a mother rejoicing in the sudden, pain-free, expansion of her family. The tone is almost bitter. Thus, the contrast involves more than a mere distinction between metaphor and simile; Isaiah 24:17-18 seems in some ways to be a response to later announcements of instant, painless, labor-free procreation. Can a more discouraging situation be envisioned?

A second, related, shift in tone involves the striking absence of personified cities in Isaiah 24-27. Surrounded by treatments of Mother Zion, Lady Babylon, Harlot Tyre, the city or cities of Isaiah 24-27 only appear as impersonal, prosaic entities; in Isaiah 24-27 "city" is solely an architectural or geographical concept, it is an aggregate of habitable structures. This shift in tone participates in the generalization already noted in Isaiah 24-27, a historical a-contextualization in service of literary contextualization. Taken as one element in the book of Isaiah's treatment of cities, Isaiah 24-27 manifests the movement toward the representative. The book discusses specific, named, even personified, cities (13-23, 29-33, 49-66), it depicts a given enemy city (Babylon, Isaiah 47) as the representative of enemy cities in general, and now it portrays the "city of chaos" as an archetype.

CONCLUSION

What archetype, however, does the "city of chaos" represent? Who is this city? Cities in the book of Isaiah stand in a triadic or parallel diadic relationship to one another. Sinful Jerusalem falls to enemy cities, quintessentially represented by Lady Babylon, who in turn must abdicate pride of place to renewed Jerusalem. But the final phase of this transition is far from assured. Mother Jerusalem, in fact, has two enemies. She competes with foreign enemies and with her old self. Analyses of the language of city texts in Isaiah 13-33 and 47-66 show that the language associated with the city of chaos in Isaiah 24-27 describes both of Mother Zion's counterparts. Indeed, macro-structurally, Isaiah 24-27 lies strategically between treatments of these two rivals, foreign enemy cities, on the one hand (13-23), and sinful Jerusalem, on the other (28-33, esp. 29), further obscuring the question of the precise identity of the "city of chaos." This obscurity tends to convert the entire discussion of cities in Isaiah into a comprehensive eschatology. The successive rise and fall

of cities will ultimately result in the establishment of New Jerusalem, the antithesis of all historical incarnations of the city of chaos.

Isaiah 24–27 consists of an aggregate of conventional motifs concerning cities in distress which are not themselves definitive of apocalyptic. Why, then, have Isaiah 24–27 been identified as the Isaiah Apocalypse? One could respond that the universality of the material marks it as apocalyptic. If so, the evil city/good city argumentation which spans the entire book, thanks in part to Isaiah 24–27, has contributed to making the entire book Apocalyptic.⁹ Any discussion of the fate of any city in the book of Isaiah must be read in light of the paradigmatic treatment of Isaiah 24–27.

⁹The nascent apocalypticism of the city theme in the book of Isaiah, taken as a whole, was clearly recognized by the author of the New Testament book of Revelation. Revelation develops several Isaianic city motifs such as the new Jerusalem, the city of chaos, and the harlot Babylon (cf. the recent intertextual study by J.T.A.G.M. van Ruiten, *Een Begin Zonder Einde: De doorwerking van Jesaja 65:17 in de intertestamentaire literatuur en het Nieuwe Testament* [Sliedrecht: Merweboek, 1990]).



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