

The Oracles Against the Nations in the Book of Isaiah: Their Possible Value for the Study of the History of Jordan in the Iron Age

Attitudes in the Old Testament towards Moab and Moabites range from the assertion of the Moabite ancestry of the Davidic royal line, found in the Book of Ruth, to the picture drawn in Numbers 25 of Moabite women as ruthless seductresses leading the Israelites not only to adultery but also to idolatry. According to Goethe, the narrative of Ruth serves the noble purpose of providing an Israelite king with “decent and interesting ancestors”.¹ The incident related in Numbers 25, on the other hand, plays a prominent part in the structure of the wilderness narrative, illustrating the temptation of adultery as a threat to the holiness and integrity of the chosen people at a crucial point of transition before they enter the promised land. This perspective can be seen as culminating in the well-known statute of the Mosaic law which stipulates that no Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of Yahweh, even unto the tenth generation (Deut. 23:4). The Old Testament, then, in its presentation and construction of the Israelites and their past, shows itself to be highly aware of the reality and importance of the Moabites among the neighbours with whom the Israelites interact—for better or for worse. It will also appear that the Moabites may in different contexts fulfil quite diverse purposes in the Old Testament narrative and be assigned quite different roles in the theological or religious drama of the Biblical text.

This paper aims at presenting some observations on Isaiah 15-16, a textual unit that focuses on the fate of the kingdom of Moab. These chapters belong within the framework of a larger section of the biblical book containing so-called oracles against the nations. This section comprises all of chs. 13-23. The Isaianic collection of oracles against the nations is paralleled by chs. 46-51 in the Book of Jeremiah, and by chs. 25-32 in the Book of Ezekiel, and would seem to constitute a genre common to Old Testament prophetic literature. Basic features of this genre would be the arrangement of texts in immediate

succession, dealing with the various foreign nations, over which doom and destruction is proclaimed. Some interpreters of the Old Testament have argued that the oracles against the nations form part of a structure common to prophetic writings, the so-called “eschatological scheme”. Within this scheme, the oracles against the nations are seen to play an intermediary role between the proclamation of divine judgment upon Israel and the promise of future salvation. Yahweh’s judging the nations, it is argued, is a necessary stage leading to salvation for his own people. However, the fact that the oracles against the nations occupy different places within the structural frameworks of the various prophetic books should warn us against assigning a too rapidly conceived and too broadly or generally-phrased significance to all of these texts. Even though the oracles against the nations have a significant number of themes in common, the variability of their forms and contents ought not to be overlooked.

The textual unit with which we are here concerned has the heading “oracle of Moab” (*masa’ mo’ab*). From a formal point of view, the section has a rather complicated structure. 15:1-9 contains a lament over Moab, which has been struck by disaster. In the concluding verse (9), however, the lament ends in a divine oracle of doom. 16:1-5 is a prophecy, clothed in dialogue form, in which the Moabites are addressed, and summoned to turn to Mount Zion for help and support. Then, the word is given to the Moabites themselves. Here, Zion is addressed, and told to provide shelter for the Moabites, and finally, as an answer to this plea, reference is made to the peaceful era of the future righteous ruler in the tent of David. In 16:6-12, the perspective changes again. Here we have an accusation directed against Moab, which is charged with pride and arrogance, and a proclamation of its destruction that takes the form of a description and lamentation of the afflicted land. 16:13-14, finally, constitute a comment, affirming

¹ J. W. von Goethe, *Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des West-östlichen Divans, Hebräer. Goethe’s Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe letzter Hand*, Bd. 6, Stuttgart/Tübingen 1827,

7; quoted by S. Timm, *Moab zwischen den Mächten. Studien zu historischen Denkmälern und Texten* (Ägypten und Altes Testament, Bd. 17), Wiesbaden 1989, 1.

the fulfilment of what has been prophesised in the words of Yahweh against Moab within three years.

There are two unmistakable dividing lines within the section. The last two verses of ch. 16 stand out as a comment to the whole preceding text; and 16:6 marks a new beginning from the point of view of both form and contents. In 16:6 a first person plural appears, and the accusation of arrogance launched against Moab constitutes a new theme.

The opening verse takes us directly into a most dramatic situation. Two exactly parallel statements narrate the destruction of 'Ar Moab and Qir Moab. The problems that these names present from the viewpoint of historical topography are well known and need not be discussed here. Qir-Moab is, of course, almost universally identified with al-Karak, and is usually equated with Qir-Hareshet of 16:7 and Qir-harash of 16:11.² No similar agreement has been reached as to the identification of 'Ar-Moab, although ar-Rabba has been suggested since ancient times.³ What seems certain, though, is that two of the most important cities of the Moabite realm are envisaged. These Moabite cities were laid waste in the night when destruction took place, i.e. through an unexpected, sudden blow or attack.

The brief and concise opening narrative statement which tells us what has happened is followed by a description of the wailing cities of Moab. Dibon is mentioned along with Nebo and Madeba, all cities of northern Moab; the latter two are both mentioned in the Mesha inscription. The text goes on to depict the mourning rites practised everywhere in the cities, and the cry coming from Hesbon and Elale, a cry that is heard as far away as in Jahas. The description then reaches the highest degree of concentration; Moab is presented as a human person, wrought with distress. "Therefore the loins of Moab shiver, his soul is trembling."⁴

A new phase in the description is marked by the introduction of the first person singular. The "I"-person expresses his emotion caused by the fate of the Moabites, and then turns to the description of Moabite refugees fleeing to Zoar. The devastation of Moabite localities is described; central to the description is the notion that the grass and verdure of the country, both connoting fertility and prosperity, have gone. The inhabitants have therefore gathered what they have left, and are now carrying it away with them on their flight. The description is summed up in the statement that a cry has gone round the borders of Moab.

No formal transition marks the introduction of Yahweh as subject. The divine utterance is presented as the cause of the disaster depicted in the preceding text. The oracle proper opens with a new descriptive reference to the disaster of Moab. The waters of Dimon are full of blood. Dimon seems to be chosen here in stead of Dibon in order to make a pun with Hebrew *dam*, blood. The description is immediately followed by Yahweh's statement that he will add further calamity to that which has already befallen Dibon. The coming disaster is then presented in the shape of a lion, a metaphor implying dangerous destructive force as often in prophetic literature. "Yet I will bring upon Dimon even more, a lion for those of Moab who escape, the remnant of the land."

In ch. 16 the text turns directly to the Moabites, who are addressed in the imperative. In the Book of Isaiah fictive summonings of persons and groups are often employed as a means of creating dramatic effect. The Moabites are here told to send their tribute, "lambs for the ruler of the land", to Mount Zion. This obviously means recognizing the supremacy of the ruler in Jerusalem. The desperate situation of the Moabite cities is then described as part of the prophecy, and their plea to Zion is cited. It has the form of a plea for protection and support. "Like flattering birds, like scattered nestlings, so are the daughters of Moab. Give counsel, grant justice; make your shade at night like the height of noon; hide the outcasts, betray not the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a refuge for them from the destroyer." Then follows the answer given to the Moabite delegation, presumably by Zion itself or by its representatives. This answer points to a future situation characterized by the disappearance of oppression and violence. Then a righteous ruler will be enthroned in the tent of David. As pointed out by many exegetes of various times, there is a close kinship between this picture of a future peaceful era marked by the just rule of a king of Davidic descent, and the prophecy found in Isa. 9:1-6, a text often cited as one of the most important passages expressly voicing "Messianic" expectations and ideas within the Old Testament literature. Common to both passages are expressions like *kise'*, *mispat*, *sedaqa'*, *sedeq*. 16:5 speaks of the tent of David, 9:6 of the throne of David.

16:6 marks a new beginning, both formally and thematically. The introduction of "we" is new in the context, and so is the reference made here to the arrogance and boasting of Moab. "We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he was, of his arrogance, his pride, and his in-

² Cp. A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea. I. Topographischer Reisebericht*, Wien 1907, 58; N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan*, Cambridge, Mass. 1970, 15; A. Dearman (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (American School of Oriental Research/The Society of Biblical Literature. Archaeology and Biblical Studies 2), 28.

³ Cp. W. Rudolph, "Jesaja xv-xvi", in: D. Winton Thomas/W.D.

McHardy (eds.), *Hebrew and Semitic Studies presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver*, Oxford 1963 (130-143), 133; H. Wildberger, *Jesaja. 2. teilband. Jesaja 13-27* (Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament, Band X/2), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 604.

⁴ The reading *halse* ("loins") should probably be preferred to the Masoretic vocalisation *haluse* ("armed men").

solence, his boasts are false." The accusation is followed by a proclamation of punishment, introduced by *laken* in the common style of prophetic oracles. What follows, however, is a new description of mourning Moab, bewailing its lost glory and prosperity. "Therefore let Moab wail, let everyone wail for Moab." The splendour of the past is depicted, a stylistic feature that recalls the conventional dirge. "For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmah, the lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reached to Jazer and strayed to the desert; its sprouts spread abroad and passed over the sea." The lament is continued in the first person singular; as in 15:5 the "I" of the prophet or poet participates in bewailing the mischief of Moab. A second description of the destroyed country where joyful work and songs have ceased in the vineyards precedes yet another expression of the emotion of the "I"-person on behalf of Moab; and the lament culminates in the portrait of Moab unable to pray despite its attempts.

This section differs thematically from the preceding section in presenting a theological reason for the disaster that has struck the realm of Moab. There are, however, important motifs which are common to both sections, such as the style of lament and the fact that the poet explicitly includes himself among those who mourn the fate of Moab. The loss of past prosperity is another common motif, and it should also be noted that the geographical perspective is basically the same. We could then, without too much hesitation, speak of a Messianic aspect of this prophecy. 16:4-5 is, at any rate, as "Messianic" a text as 9:1-6. The implication in this context would then seem to be that in the Messianic era, peace and justice shall apply not only to the kingdom of Judah but also—and in a positive sense—to the neighbouring regions. In other words, there would seem to be a complementary relationship between 15:1-16:5 and 16:6-12, which could hardly be accidental. Nevertheless, many modern interpreters are of the opinion that the Moab oracles in Isa. 15-16 have been composed by redactional compilation of originally separate units of diverse provenance. Thus, Hans Wildberger, in the most monumental of recent scholarly commentaries on the book of Isaiah, reconstructs a long and complicated history of composition and redaction behind the present textual unit, not only separating 15:1-16 from 16:6-12, but also sub-dividing these sections into smaller units, which are then partly assigned to different authors

and historical situations.⁵ This may be viewed as the culmination of a process initiated by early critics like Gesenius, who recognized in the concluding verses of Isa. 16 a comment reflecting upon the preceding text.⁶ This comment was commonly assigned to the historical prophet Isaiah, who was then believed to have cited or repeated an earlier piece of prophetic literature.⁷ Likewise, later interpreters have striven to establish "Isaianic authenticity" for at least certain parts of the present text.⁸ Wildberger does not attempt to claim that any part of this particular text is of Isaianic origin, but the exegetical method remains basically the same.

The Moab oracles in Isa. 15-16 are echoed and to a great extent repeated *verbatim* in Jer. 48. The vast majority of commentators agree that the text of Isa. 15-16 has been secondarily used in the Book of Jeremiah. This is obvious both from the point of view of the different structure of Isa. 15-16 and of Jer. 48, and from the fact that Jer. 48 would seem as a whole to be composed of literary material derived from various contexts. Thus, Jer. 48:45-47 contains a rephrasing of another prophecy against Moab, that of Num. 21:27-30. This would seem to concur with the general impression left by the Book of Jeremiah, which seems to a considerable extent to base itself upon literary material taken from other parts of Biblical tradition. Indeed, 19th century scholars of the so-called "conservative" school such as Caspari and Delitzsch argued that Jeremiah was acquainted with and literarily dependent on the Book of Isaiah in its entirety, a point of view that was never thoroughly analysed or challenged by scholars of the more "critical" persuasion, and which might well deserve a closer examination in the light of present-day research in the Old Testament field.⁹

Numerous attempts have been made over the years to establish a connection between the Moabite oracles of the Book of Isaiah and historical events in Iron Age Jordan and Palestine. Thus, many interpreters are of the opinion that the disaster described in ch. 15 refers to a particular historical situation. There is, however, no agreement as to which situation is addressed. Thus, several scholars have argued that the oracles reflect an attack on the kingdom of Moab by a Judaeen king. Candidates have been Joash and, notably, Jeroboam II.¹⁰ This would mean that the historical events behind the text are to be placed in the late ninth or early eighth century; and it is possible to quote passages in the narrative literature of the Old Testa-

⁵ H. Wildberger, *Jesaja. 2. Teilband. Jesaja 13-27* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament, Band X/2), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978, 598-632.

⁶ W. Gesenius, *Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Commentar über den Jesaja*, Leipzig 1821, 507-511.

⁷ This viewpoint is upheld by S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon. A Study of Isaiah 13:2-14:23* (Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series 4), Lund 1970, 69. Cp. Rudolph, "Isaiah xv-xvi", 141-142; G. F. Haseel, *The Remnant. The History and Theology of the Rem-*

nant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah (Andrews University Monographs 5), Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1972, 366-368.

⁸ Notably O. Procksch, *Jesaja I* (Kommentar zum Alten Testament, Band IX), Leipzig 1930, 219.

⁹ F. Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar über den Prophet Jesaja* (Biblischer Commentar über das Alte Testament. Dritter Teil: Prophetische Bücher. Erster Band: Der Prophet Jesaja), Leipzig 1866, 22.

¹⁰ This identification is supported by Rudolph, "Jesaja xv-xvi", 141-142.

ment to match either suggestion. Alternative proposals locate the historical situation in the late eighth century, and see the text as reflecting the Assyrian threat to the smaller states of West Asia, while other scholars hold the opinion that the event reflected in the oracles is an attack on Moab by bedouin tribes, possibly in the fifth century, or, alternatively, by Nabataeans in the second century. As far as the final redaction of this textual unit is concerned, dates from the time of the supposed time of the historical prophet Isaiah in the eighth century to the time of Alexander Jannaeus or of John Hyrcan have been suggested.¹¹

Common to these interpretations is the assumption that a factual historical event must have formed the background for the composition of at least the narrative of 15:1-9. From a methodological point of view, however, this assumption may indeed be viewed as problematic. The fact that the text uses narrative descriptive style to depict the disaster of Moab cannot in itself be taken to prove that historical events are reflected. By analogy, few would today claim that the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 preserves the memory of actual events, or that the narrative of Joshua's conquest of Jericho and Ai reflects historical facts, even though we are here dealing with place names that can be located in history. The narrative form or style of a text is no sign of the text having an external historical reference. Nevertheless, scholarly research on the Old Testament has for a very long period been influenced by the notion that a nice and neat distinction could be made between "true prophecy", which, from the point of view of the ancient author, would deal with future events, and for which the basic characteristic was the fact that their predictions remained unfulfilled, and *vaticinia ex eventu*, a genre that would immediately prompt a search for details or features of more or less remote similarity to those described in Biblical narratives, in ancient sources outside the Bible or in archaeological findings.

As a matter of fact, nothing prevents us from understanding 15,1-9 as a prophecy envisaging future events described in a vivid and dramatic style by means of narrative as well as descriptive expression.

Furthermore, even if it is accepted that the text of Isaiah might reflect a particular historical event, the problem remains that this event can hardly be reconstructed with any degree of certainty due to the lack of references to it in alternative sources. None of the scholars that have proposed historical identifications for the disastrous events described in 15,1-9 have in fact been able to cite texts from antiquity in support of their proposed iden-

tification.

There are, of course, a number of texts from the Assyrian period that mention the kingdom of Moab in contexts related to the expansion of the Assyrian empire. None of these texts, however, give any hint as to a major catastrophe taking place on Moabite ground.

It is a well-known fact that Moab is mentioned in a number of cuneiform texts from the Assyrian period. A list of tributaries from the time of Tiglathpiieser III mentions Salaman, king of Moab (or Ma'abu), along with numerous other kings including Joahahaz, king of Judah. During the reign of Sargon II Moab is mentioned in an account of an Assyrian campaign aimed at crushing a rebellion in Ashdod. Moab appears among other states of the region as a potential supporter of the rebellion. Likewise, Sennacherib, Asarhaddon, and Assurbanipal count Moab among their tributaries in their respective inscriptions. Moabite kings mentioned in this context are Kamosnabdi and Musuri. And in the annals of Assurbanipal the defeat of a king of Qedar by the Moabite king Kamshalti, acting in the interest of his Assyrian suzerain, is related. When viewed as a whole, these sources would seem to indicate that the Moabite kingdom shared the fate of its neighbouring states in becoming dependent on the Assyrian empire. In the Assyrian royal inscriptions, the Moabite kings are generally presented as loyal vassals.¹²

When we are examining the possibility of extracting information about the history of Iron Age Jordan from the Isaianic oracles concerning Moab, it must be borne in mind that we do not have any exact knowledge regarding the date of composition of these texts. This is true of the final redaction of the book as well as of its single parts and chapters. The oldest extant manuscripts, those of the Qumran collection, give us a *terminus ante quem*, certainly indicating a final date of composition no later than the second century BC, but between this date and the period with which the texts of the Book of Isaiah are explicitly dealing, i.e. the eighth and the sixth centuries there is a long span of time, comprising several centuries, all of which have in fact been claimed as the actual date for larger and smaller sections of the book. Even though it may indeed be possible to establish a relative chronological sequence for the composition of the various prophetic books or for some of them, at any rate—of the Old Testament, it must be acknowledged that we do not have a well-established date for the Book of Isaiah itself or for the Moab texts in Isa. 15-16. This means that the oracles cannot be viewed as a contemporary primary source for historical events or conditions of the iron Age. Accordingly, no direct historical information about Iron Age Jor-

¹¹ References to the various datings proposed may be found in Wildberger, *op. cit.*, 604-605.

¹² The relevant texts are studied in S. Timm, *Moab zwischen den Mächten*, 303-399. See also A. Dearman (ed.), *Studies in the Me-*

sha Inscription and Moab (American School of Oriental Research/The Society of Biblical Literature. Archaeological and Biblical Studies 2), Atlanta 1989.

dan can be obtained from these texts independently of other sources. In other words, we should not attempt to reconstruct the history of the area in the period in question, by basing ourselves on these texts alone.

This does not imply, however, that the texts of Isa. 15-16 are without any interest from a historical point of view. Notably, the perspective in which events, whether in some sense "historical" or purely fictive, regarding the neighbouring kingdom of Moab are viewed and presented in this piece of Old Testament prophecy deserves consideration. The Moab oracles of the Book of Isaiah have often been singled out for their apparent element of sympathy with the afflicted Moabites and their country. This sympathy, expressed in the text in the form of statements of emotion on behalf of the prophet or poet, and common to both main parts of the text, would indeed

seem to place Isa. 15-16 closer to the outlook of the Book of Ruth than to that of Numbers 25. Behind this apparent sympathy we may detect a certain awareness that the fate of the kingdom of Moab is in an important sense parallel to that of the kingdom of Judah. Whilst this does not necessarily tell us anything about the way the relationship between these neighbouring states was perceived during the actual Iron Age, it certainly does show us an interesting feature of the presentation and construction of this past period within the Biblical literary tradition. Incidentally, this would seem to concur rather well with the overall picture to be gained from the texts dealing with Moab which have reached us from the very period in question, the eighth century, a period marked by a considerable amount of change and upheaval for the political entities which then existed on both sides of the River Jordan.