LET MY OUTCASTS, MOAB, FIND ASYLUM IN YOU: COMPASSION FOR FUGITIVES FROM DISASTER IN ISAIAH 15-16

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There are many touching biblical texts concerning the suffering of the Israelites, such as Psalms 137, *By the rivers of Babylon, there we wept*, concerning the Exile of the Judeans, and the Book of Lamentations, expressing the agony over the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Isaiah, among others, certainly gloats over disasters that befall Judah's neighbors, for example, mocking the howling ships of Tarshish who see the ruins of their cities in Isaiah 23. He does not even offer an elegy for the fate of the Ten Tribes and the permanent exile of the Northern Kingdom. Unusually, Isaiah 15-16 is a sorrowful cry over terrible events that have befallen the Moabites, a neighboring people who had, at best, a checkered relationship with the Judeans.

We should consider Isaiah's position and what the audience for this speech might have been. Scholarship has established Isaiah's "close relationship with the ruling house … reflecting both his conservative Judean background and his deep rootage in the Jerusalem cultus."[1] It is reasonable to picture this speech as imploring the Judean court to respond to the entreaties of and welcome the Moabite refugees.

Procksch often is cited as saying that Isaiah 15-16 is "the problem child of exegesis.'[2] If this poem is what I believe it to be, a sincere expression of agony over the situation of a neighboring, non-Israelite people, it deserves our attention[3] and should be brought into balance with all the emphasis placed on prophetic oracles against other nations.[4]

WHAT EVENT IS ISAIAH 15-16 ABOUT?

There are many questions concerning the interpretation of these chapters,[5] but the main debate in scholarship is over the event that is described. Theories about the historical context range over seven centuries, from the reign of Joash of Judah (836/835-797/796 BCE), well before Isaiah's era in the late eighth century and early seventh century all the way to the time of John Hyrcanus (135-104 BCE). König thought that the poem was written by a Judean prophet living in the last third of the ninth century (that is, not Isaiah) who describes a Bedouin attack on Moab.[6] Rudolph thought that the text was connected to Jeroboam II's attack on Moab, with the Judean prophet Isaiah expressing sympathy for the victims of the northern kingdom's attack,[7] but there is no hint in the two chapters that Israel is the attacker. Astour says that the attack is a Babylonian invasion in the 6th century.[8] Van Zyl claims that 15:1-9a and 16:6-11 are elements of a taunt song derived from Bedouin circles which was composed when they attacked Moab and then became known in Judah and was extended by Isaiah with the addition of 15:9-b-16:5 and 16:12.[9] Some

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of these theories are based on a sentence in an Assyrian text that may refer to a people called the Gidraya who attacked Edom in the last third of the eighth century, but this line raises as many questions as it answers.[10] Procksch states that Isaiah presents 15:1-16:5 as a Messianic prophecy of salvation for the Moabite refugees, and that 16:6-12 was later but still pre-exilic, perhaps written by Jeremiah.[11]

The variety of theories springs from the inability to connect this passage to a known historical event. If one thinks first about Assyrian invasions, such an important context for so many of Isaiah's prophecies, we do not have any record of the Assyrians invading Moab, and on the contrary, we have evidence of Moabite kings paying tribute to Assyrian kings. King Salmanu (745–727 BCE), who may be the Shalman in Hosea 10:14, is mentioned as an Assyrian vassal of Tiglath-pileser III.[12] In 701 BCE, Kemoš-Nadab of Moab submitted himself peacefully to Sennacherib.[13] Tribute by the Moabite king Musurri is mentioned during the reigns of Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE)[14] and Asshurbanipal (669-631 BCE).[15] Assyrian sources even refer to small-scale wars against nomadic tribes but say nothing about an attack on Moab. Power also excludes the Assyrians as the attackers in Isaiah 15-16 because they are not raiders who attack by night but empire builders who made Gilead on the northern border of Moab an Assyrian province in 733 BCE. As opposed to those who think the attack was from the north, Power sees the attack as an Edomite raid moving from south to north.[16] Even the direction of the attack is uncertain.

A recent attempt states that we cannot connect this passage to history because it was a prophecy that never came true.[17] Couey asks: If Moab were destroyed in Isaiah's time, why does Jeremiah 48:11 say that Moab has *been at ease* and has *never gone into exile*? Couey infers that Isaiah 15-16 was a prophecy that was never fulfilled.[18] In principle, I am not opposed to this theory; there are other prophecies that did not come true. In Isaiah 14:4b-21, the prophet incorrectly predicts that God will destroy Assyria in Judah.[19] What happens a few years later in 701 BCE is a matter of debate, based on the biblical texts themselves,[20] but whatever the case, Assyria hardly was destroyed as Isaiah had prophesied.

Couey and others also are correct to study the relationship between Isaiah 15-16 and Jeremiah 48.[21] It is clear to all commentators that Isaiah 15-16 is primary and that parts of it are used in the longer and very different Jeremiah 48. When we contrast the two, we see that Jeremiah 48 has elements that the author did not find in Isaiah 15-16, which then points to what the latter does not contain. The tone is very different; there is much less triumphalism and punishing rhetoric in the earlier poem. Instead, there is sympathy for the plight of the refugees.

My suggestion here is that in Isaiah's time, a calamity affected Moab, but that it did not result in exile as such, and as widespread as it was, was not as bad, in historical terms, as it seemed at the time. Moab regrouped and had been living in relative peace and security for a century by Jeremiah's time. In a way, this makes Isaiah's sadness even more touch-

ing, because it was not about a political disaster but an event that caused deep sorrow for many Moabites.

To deny that this text is a reaction to contemporary events, however, is to privilege our ignorance over the clear power and nature of the text, almost dismissing the reader and what he/she can see and feel. Simply look at the detail: would a prophecy provide so much geographical information with so much specificity? If this were an oracle, a general prediction, would we be given all these names: Ar, Kir, Dibon, Nebo, Medeba, Heshbon (twice), Elealeh (twice), Jahaz, Zoar, Eglath-shelishiyah, Luhith, Horonaim (twice), the waters of Nimrim, the Wadi of Willows, Eglaim, Beer-elim, Dimon, the fords of the Arnon, Kir-hareseth (twice), Heshbon (twice), Sibmah (twice), Baale-goiim, Jazer (twice)?

What if, instead, historians cannot place an invasion because there was no invasion? Perhaps, on a second look, we should not be so sure that the text indicates a military conquest.

Couey says the text evades saying what the problem is, but Isaiah 15-16 is very specific about the impact on Moab's environment. As opposed to the translations and commentaries, Isaiah 15-16 may refer to a disastrous natural event of some kind. If we postulate a natural event rather than a military invasion, certain passages now emerge with new importance:

Ah, the waters of Nimrim, Are become a desolation, *The grass is sear, The herbage is gone*, *Vegetation is vanished* (Isa. 15:6). Isaiah evokes the Waters of Nimrim (Isa. 15:6; cf. Jer. 48:34) and associates these waters with Zoar and Horonaim, both of which are located on the south end of the Dead Sea. The Waters of Nimrim may be identified with the once fertile land southeast of the Sea, the modern Wadi Nemirah.

Therefore, The gains they have made, and their store, They carry to the Wadi of Willows (Isa. 15:7).[21] Are the refugees taking their produce from a once fertile area to a place that still is?

The vineyards of Heshbon are withered, and the vines of Sibmah, *Whose tendrils spread*, *To Baale-goiim*, *And strayed to the desert*, *Whose shoots spread it*, *And crossed the sea* (Isa. 16:8). The whole area was once known for its fertility and beauty, like the Garden in Eden from which the Rivers of Paradise emerged and watered the earth (Gen. 2:10-14). We are reminded of a more geographically relevant passage in Genesis: "Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah)" (Gen. 13:10). Genesis 18-19 tells the famous story of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that turned "the garden of the LORD" into a wasteland.

Could there have been a natural disaster in this geologically perilous area? In his flight from the catastrophe that was to befall Sodom, Lot first goes to Zoar. The toponym Zoar is a place of refuge in the Genesis story and a place of refuge in our passage: *My heart*

cries out for Moab, His fugitives flee down to Zoar (Isa. 15:5). Fugitives who flee to Zoar seems to be an echo of Lot's flight.[22]

We begin to get the sense of another reading of this poem where the primary disaster is a natural one of some kind, an earthquake in what is tectonically one of the most perilous areas on the earth, or some sudden climate change that causes a severe famine or a drought.

The usual assumption is that 16:7-11 is "an extended metaphor in which Moab is compared to a luxurious grapevine which had spread out over the whole region but now is trampled down."[23] Yet if there were a military invasion, how would the Moabites have such complete freedom of movement, to go to their temple or outdoor shrines (15:2), to mourn in the streets and on the rooftops (15:3), to flee to Zoar, Eglath-shelishah, Luhoth and Horonaim? If there were a military invasion, why were the latter places all spared? If there were a military invasion from the north, attacking Heshbon and Elealeh and sending refuges to the south, why was Jahaz, nearby to the north, spared? If it were a quick raid, and the marauders already have left, why not stay in Moab? If it were a conquest, why so incomplete? There is no resistance to the attack, no military response of any kind. Did Moab have no army at all?

THE ASSUMED ALLUSIONS TO MILITARY INVASIONS

There are three verses in this poem that seem to be about military invasions: the *sacking* of Ar and Kir in 15:1, the *shock troops of Moab* in 15:4 and *the despoiler* and *marauders* in 16:4.

Ah, in the night Ar was sacked, Moab was ruined. Ah, in the night Kir was sacked, Moab was ruined (Isa. 15:1). While this translation would seem to be clear, there are two problems. One of them is that we are not sure what Ar and Kir are. As Schottroff points out, Ar-Moab in Deuteronomy 2:18 refers to the country of Moab in general.[24] Could these names be general references to the area, like *ha-kikkar* which was the name for the area that once had a large population and extensive agricultural lands (also referred to as 'the Jordan Disk')?[25] Kaiser translates: *Yes, in the night in which Ar was destroyed, Moab was wiped out.*[26] Couey states that *šuddad*[27] indicates military destruction as in Isaiah 21:2, Jeremiah 6:26, Nehemiah 3:7,[28] but he does not mention Joel 1:10, a verse in Joel 1:1–2:17, a lament over a great locust plague and a severe drought. The effects of these events on agriculture, farmers, and on the supply of agricultural offerings for the Temple in Jerusalem are interspersed with a call to national lament (1:1–20). Joel 1:10 uses *šuddad* twice, as Isaiah 15:1 does: *The field is ruined, The land mourns; The field is wasted, the land is ruined. The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the olive oil fails*. It is possible that *šuddad* does not mean sacked, that Ar and Kir are not cities and that this verse is about the destruction of an area of Moab.

Isaiah 15:4: *The shock troops of Moab shout* may be "the loins of Moab are trembling," according to Ginsberg's note in the NJV and others including Kaiser, Wildberger and Childs. A quick look at the necessary parallelism will show which is preferable: *The shock troops of Moab shout*, *His body is convulsed*. Change of vocalization, without even consonantal emendation, yields: *The loins of Moab are trembling*, *His body is convulsed.* Clearly the alternative is preferable.

Here is the third possible reference to a military attack, in Isaiah 16:4: *Let My outcasts, Moab, Find asylum in you; Be a shelter for them, Against the despoiler. For violence has vanished, Rapine is ended, And marauders have perished from this land.* A reference to despoilers and marauders, as opposed to armies, could indicate just that, marauders who followed the natural event and preyed on the vulnerable inhabitants of Moab. If it were marauders, who rampaged through fields and stole crops, the crops could grow again, whereas the poem sees the environment as changed.

ISRAEL AND MOAB

If this approach is plausible, it may be asked, how should we read 16:6 (echoed and strengthened in Jer. 48:29)? *We have heard of Moab's pride, Most haughty is he – Of his pride and haughtiness and arrogance, And of the iniquity in him.*

Elitzur may be correct to illustrate this haughtiness in saying that the background for this denunciation of Moabite arrogance is the Mesha stele where the Moabite king boasts of his victories over God and the Israelites.[29] One should quickly explain that the relationship between this prophecy and the Mesha stele, and the Mesha stele and II Kings 3, and the relationship between all these texts and historical fact, are an intriguing and confusing subject.

It is clear is that the prophet sees the disaster that has devastated Moab to be punishment for its pride and its dependence on their deity Chemosh. Still, one can see the disaster as fitting punishment and at the same time have compassion on the victims of the devastation. Condemnation does not exclude compassion, no more than it does when a prophet like Jeremiah will warn and condemn the Israelites and then console them once the punishment has come.

Isaiah's plea for the Moabite refugees should be seen not only in its historical context but in the framework of the complex interrelationship of Israel and Moab (as opposed to the consistent hostility against Edom in Biblical texts). Hints of this relationship can be found in such Biblical texts as the saga and genealogy of Abraham where Lot is the patriarch's presumed heir (Gen. 12:5, 13:1). Genesis 13 shows the attempt to avoid strife between Abraham the father of the Israelites and Lot the father of the Moabites. And yet the saga also presents the story of Genesis 19:30-38, where Lot fathers the eponymous ancestors of Ammon and Moab out of incest with his daughters, a tale that, even if it had mythical antecedents of origin stories[30], I take to be polemical. Still, Genesis 19:30-38 is never

referred to again in the Hebrew Bible, not even in negative restrictions against Moabites and Ammonites (Deut. 23:4; Ezra 9; Neh. 13), or in negative prophetic statements (Amos 2:1-3; Isa. 25:10; Ezek. 25:8-11; Zeph. 2:8-11).

According to Deuteronomy, the Moabites are given their land, the fertile highlands east of the Dead Sea, by God (after expelling an aboriginal or mythical people called the Emim; Deuteronomy 2:9-11). Yet the very ancient poem cited in Numbers 21:27-30 glorifies how the Amorite king, Sihon of Heshbon drives the Moabites south of the Arnon (Num. 21:13; Jud. 11:18). While the Israelites do not pass through the land of the Moabites (Jud. 11:18), reflecting some sense of kinship, the seer Balaam is asked to curse the Israelites by Balak, the King of Moab in Numbers 22. Instead, Balaam prophesies, *A star rises from Jacob, A scepter comes forth from Israel; It smashes the brow of Moab, The foundation of all children of Seth …* (Num. 24:17**).**

The violent story of Ehud ben Gera (Jud. 3:12-30), who assassinates the Moabite king Eglon and leads an Israelite army against the Moabites at a ford of the Jordan river, may reflect a historical conflict between the tribe of Benjamin and the Moabites. And yet David sends his parents to the protection of the king of Moab, when fearing for their safety from the wrath of King Saul (I Sam. 22:3-4). On the other hand, David fights the Moabites and subjects them to be a tributary (II Sam. 8:2; I Chron. 18:2). Moab seems to have been absorbed into the northern realm after the division of the United Kingdom and was a vassal until the death of Ahab in 853 BCE. The Moabites refused to pay tribute and asserted their independence, making war upon the kingdom of Judah (II Chron. 22:1). They rebelled against Jehoram of Israel, an ally of Jehoshaphat of Judah. The prophet Elisha directed the Israelites to a victory at Ziz, near En Gedi (II Kg. 3; II Chron. 20).[31] Later, the Moabites invaded Israel (II Kg. 13:20) and later aided Nebuchadnezzar in his expedition against Jehoiakim (II Kg. 24:2).

One thinks of two famous fugitives/immigrants connected with Moab, Lot, mentioned above, and Ruth. Abraham has a close genealogical relationship with Lot in Genesis 11-12 and peacefully parts from him in Genesis 13. Lot chooses Sodom, the quintessential evil city, but maintains his righteousness (Gen. 19). Lot gets caught up in the war of Genesis 14, where he is a prisoner of war saved by the Israelite hero, and he is rescued from the cataclysm of Genesis 18-19 because of the intervention of the Israelite hero. He is more acted upon than acting. He becomes a refugee.

The Book of Ruth is a story of a family from Bethlehem in Judah who go to Moab during a time of famine. We see the ease of immigration and emigration between the two countries. The book may have been written in the post-Exilic period in a debate against the exclusiveness of Ezra and Nehemiah, but it may at least be based on an older story that connects David and Moab. The ancestress of David, a loving, loyal, and righteous Moabitess, is brought into a Judahite clan.

Is this very different from Isaiah's plea? While I do not find any inter-textual allusions to Lot or Ruth in Isaiah 15-16, Isaiah does refer to Ruth's famous descendant King David, connecting his plea with the Davidic throne. *And a throne shall be established in goodness, In the tent of David* . . . (Isa. 16:5).

Does this mean that Isaiah calls on the throne of David to rule once again over Moab? For all his sorrow, the nationalistic, religiously particularistic Isaiah is consistent. The powerlessness of praying to the Moabite gods in their temples or shrines is emphasized, with the implication that worshipping the Israelite God would be efficacious: *He went up to the table to weep, Dibon went to the outdoor shrines* (Isa. 15:2). *And when it has become apparent that Moab has gained nothing in the outdoor shrine, he shall come to pray in his temple – but to no avail* (Isa. 16:12).

Given the history of the relationship between Judah and Moab, could Isaiah have seen an opportunity in this disaster? Welcome the refugees; perhaps they will find our God and their land will be ours. This may sound like an ulterior motive, but sympathy for refugees, and an opportunity for Judah and for Israelite religion, were not mutually exclusive. Isaiah tells the fugitives to entreat the Judaean king: *Dispatch a messenger, The ruler of the land, From Sela to the wilderness, To the mount of Fair Zion* (Isa.16:1).

And with Ginsberg's brilliant move, we connect the verse at the end of the previous chapter (14:32), which makes no sense at all there, and place it here: *And what will he answer the messengers of any nation? That Zion has been established by the LORD: In it, the needy of His people shall find shelter, The first-born of the poor shall graze, And the destitute lie down secure.*

Picture Isaiah, standing before the throne, pleading for the poor and the destitute. Procksch may have been right in describing Isaiah 15-16 as a Messianic vision, if the Messianic era is defined in this way: *And a throne shall be established in goodness*, *In the tent of David, And on it shall be sit in faithfulness, A ruler devoted to justice, And zealous for equity* (Isa. 16:5). Justice and equity must be for all, the Israelite, and the non-Israelite.

Let My outcasts, Moab, find asylum in you (Isa. 16:4). Isaiah's plea for the Moabite refugees is a plea for human beings, all of whom are God's people, to care for those who run from both human-made and natural disasters and seek security and peace.

NOTES

1. John S. Holladay Jr., "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel," *HTR* 63 (1970), p. 35.

2. Otto Procksch, *Jesaia I*, KAT IX/1 (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1930), p. 208; cited by Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-39: A Commentary* (trans. R. A. Wilson; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 60; Brian C. Jones, *Howling over Moab: Irony and Rhetoric in Isaiah 15-16* (SBLDS 157; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 1. See also George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah I-XXVII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912), p. 271.

3. It is not mentioned in the very sensitive treatment of James Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2009).

4. See, for example, the articles and bibliography in Else K. Holt, Hyun Chul Paul Kim and Andrew Mein, C*oncerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

5. Childs and others emphasize the difficulty in the poem's structure and cannot find coherence in what they say are the literary units: 15:1-9, a lament after an attack on Moab; 16:1-5, a proposal to Moab to seek refuge in Judah; 16:6-11, a criticism of Moab's pride and 16:12-13, two later conclusions about the future of Moab (Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001), pp. 131-33.

6. E. König, *Das Buch Jesaja eingeleitet, übersetzt und erklärt* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1926), p. 190.

7. W. Rudolph, "Jessaja 15-16," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to G. R. Driver*, ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford and New York, 1963), pp. 141ff.

8. Michael Astour, "Zoar," *ABD VI*, p. 1107; Childs, *Isaiah*, pp. 132-33.

9. H. Van Zyl, *The Moabites*, *POS* 3 (1960), pp. 20ff.

10. A balanced account is found in Wildberger, *Isaiah 13-27*, pp. 115-116.

11. This would be interesting in terms of the development of these texts, because it would mean that the Jeremian text borrows from Isaiah and the Isaiah text was changed by Jeremiah.

12. *AR* I p. 801.

13. *AOT* p. 348 text II R 67, line 10.

14. *AR* II p. 690.

15. *ANET* p. 294.

16. E. Power, "The Prophecy of Isaias Against Moab," (Is. 15, 1-16, 5)," *Biblica* 13 (1932), pp. 435–51.

17. J. Blake Couey, "Evoking and Evading: The Poetic Presentation of the Moabite Catastrophe in Isaiah 15-16," pp. 19-31 in *Concerning the Nations*.

18. Before him, Kaiser had suggested that this passage was possibly eschatological but hedges in his conclusion (Kaiser, *Isaiah*, pp. 74-75).

19. It was composed after the defeat of the Assyrian king Sargon in 705. Sargon the father and predecessor of Sennacherib was killed hundreds of miles northeast of Judah, so the prediction does not come true. Isaiah adds to but does not change his prophecy to fit the fact that Sargon does not die in Judah (Is. 14:24-27); he still sees the prophecy as coming true, despite the incorrect geography of Sargon's death, because he is not concerned with the accuracy of his words; it is God's intervention in history that is important.

20. Among others, Ewald thought that Isaiah adapted an earlier prophecy that was then also used by Jeremiah (H. Ewald, *Die Propheten des Alten Bundes I* (Stuttgart, 1840), pp. 229f.

21. One of the rivers which flow to the south of the Arnon from the highlands down to the Dead Sea is called Wadi Sufsaf, i.e., willow-brook.

22. In Genesis 19, this part of the story does not make any sense; if Sodom was destroyed but Zoar was not, why should Lot and his daughters leave Zoar, especially after asking for it to be spared? And if there are living inhabitants of Zoar, why do Lot's daughters think that they are the last people on earth? One wonders if this interpolation is not an attempt to include a local legend about the survival and prosperity of the Zoar oasis. Why was it spared in a region that was destroyed by a natural calamity?

23. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 345.

24. W. Schottroff, "Horonaim, Nimrim, Luhith und der Westrand des 'Landes Ataroth': Ein Beitrag zur historischen Topographie des Landes Moab," *ZDPV* 82 (1966), pp. 180f.

25. Steven Collins, "Where Is Sodom? The Case for Tall el-Hammam," https://www.baslibrary.org/authors/steven-collins*BAR* 39 (2013), pp. 33ff.

26. Kaiser, *Isaiah*, p. 66.

27. LXX of Jer. 48:8, clearly based on Is. 15:1, has "destruction" instead of "destroyer" and does not have the second "city".

28. Couey, "Evoking and Evading," p. 21.

29. "Massa Moav v'Jetovet Mesha (Isaiah 15-16 and Jeremiah 48)" in *Yisrael v'ha-Mikra* (Ramat Gan, 2000): 175-182.

30. One example of this interesting discussion is J. R Porter, "The Daughters of Lot," *Folklore* 89 (1978), pp. 127–41.

31. According to Mesha's inscription on the Moabite Stone, however, he was completely victorious and re-gained all the territory of which Israel had deprived him.

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