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 A. A. Macintosh  
 Excerpt  
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## Introduction

Any attempt to interpret and to understand prophetic texts of the O.T. must take into account a number of factors which are so closely related to each other that it is difficult to determine their order of priority. The factors include: an estimate of the likely historical background of the text, the recognition of the literary forms which the prophet uses, the establishing of the exact meaning of his words and expressions, and the sifting of those words and expressions so as to recognize any secondary interpretations and additions either by the prophet or by those who transmitted his words.

It may seem correct to attempt first to establish the text and the meaning of its words and expressions. Yet considerable difficulties arise in the case of texts in which many words and phrases are ambiguous or obscure. For the attempt to resolve problems of meaning depends to some extent upon an estimate of the attitude of the prophet and of what he is likely to have said or to have written in a particular historical situation. Thus, if the prophet of Isa. xxi is, like that of Isa. xiii, concerned with the imminent fall of the Babylonian empire in 539 B.C., then it is possible that he gave expression in xxi 2 to the sentiment: 'Cause all her [*sc.* Babylon's] pride to cease';<sup>1</sup> for such sentiments were indeed expressed by prophets as they contemplated that fall (e.g. Isa. xiii 19). But from the philological point of view, 'pride' is but one possibility amongst several for the word אַנְחָה<sup>2</sup> and a different understanding of the historical background of the prophecy may at once render 'pride' unlikely and another possibility (on that assumption) probable.

Alternatively, it may seem appropriate from a preliminary

<sup>1</sup> So Eitan; see below. (For all citations by author alone, see *Principal Works Consulted*, pp. 144–50.)

<sup>2</sup> And some of these are equally suitable to the circumstances of the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.

study of the text to estimate what is its historical background and thereafter to interpret all the words and phrases of the text in the light of that estimate. Yet this procedure too may lead the interpreter astray: first, it may blind him to the possibility that the words of the text have been reinterpreted and redirected by those who transmitted them to situations and circumstances different from those in which originally they were uttered by the prophet himself; and, secondly, it may lead the commentator to overinterpret the text, to find detailed historical references where none exists. For, as it is generally agreed, prophets were not interested primarily in the events of history but in the interpretation of those events, and what they have given us are not purely historical records but religious pronouncements (cf. Otzen, pp. 36f).

What I have said of the relationship between estimates of the likely historical background and the meaning of the text is true also of the relationship between the meaning of the text and the literary forms employed by the prophets. For from the understanding of the words of the text is derived recognition of literary forms, and yet recognition of literary forms effects the illumination of words and phrases of the text. Thus, the obscure words and dialectal forms of the Dumah oracle (Isa. xxi 1 ff), by virtue of the words and forms that are apparently not obscure and dialectal, may be interpreted as appropriate to a watchman's dialogue with those who by night await entry to his city gate. In the light of that supposition an estimate is given of the meaning of the obscure words and phrases (so Lohmann; see below).

So to determine the context in which words are given precise meanings is, however, far from certainly reliable, as is clear from the existence of other treatments of the easier words of the Dumah oracle; for such alternative treatments in turn give rise to other estimates of the context and consequently to different meanings being given to the difficult words.

The recognition of such difficulties and the fact that they attend all attempts at interpreting prophetic texts serve as a warning to interpreters that guesswork and supposition form an integral part of their task and that consequently no interpretation is likely to be finally correct. Rather the grounds upon which our guesses and estimates are made must be continually

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reviewed in the light of the increase in our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern history as well as of the language and literature of the Old Testament.

The purpose of the present study is to conduct such a review in regard to Isa. xxi. To that end the text and language of the chapter will first be examined; the meaning of its words and phrases will be discussed in the light of interpretations of them made by the ancient versions, by medieval Jewish scholars and by modern commentators. In the light of this examination, consideration will be given to the historical background of the oracles of the chapter, their literary forms and their interpretation in the tradition of the bible itself as well as in later times.

## I

## The Text and Its Meaning: A Preliminary Survey

## Verses 1–10

## Verse 1a, מִשָּׂא מְדַבְּרִים

The words are generally taken to be the title of the prophecy contained in verses 1–10. As is clearly the case in Isa. xxi 13 and in Isa. xxii 1 (cf. xxx 6), the title is derived from a keyword contained within the oracle itself. The main verb בא of this verse is followed immediately by the word ממדבר and it is this that was regarded as the keyword. All witnesses to the M.T. substantiate the reading מְדַבְּרִים except 1QIs<sup>a</sup> which reads דבר for מדבר and the LXX which, with τὸ ὄραμα τῆς ἐρήμου, appears to have read simply מדבר.<sup>1</sup>

By analogy with the other texts cited and on the evidence of the LXX, it may be presumed that משא (מ)מדבר is an older reading<sup>2</sup> and that the later reading מְדַבְּרִים (of which 1QIs<sup>a</sup>'s דבר is perhaps a corruption) arose either as a deliberate expansion of the original title or from a corruption of a word originally occurring as the first word of the main text of the oracle;<sup>3</sup> in either event the change gave the title a different significance from that of its earlier form.

If משא (מ)מדבר is indeed the original form of the title, then being a mere repetition of the word (מ)מדבר contained in the

1 For the view that the text of the LXX originally included the word θαλάσσης and that the word was subsequently omitted by a scribe who did not understand its meaning, see Rosenmüller.

2 It is possible that the preposition (מ) was originally prefixed to the word מדבר in the title (as it is in the text of the oracle) in the same way as ב occurs prefixed to the word ערב in the title of verse 13 as well as in the text. The Targum, quoted below, employs the preposition מן. On this view the first מ may have dropped out by haplography and the resulting מדבר was thought to be in need of an explanatory gloss; cf. Kaiser. On the other hand, the ב prefixed to חיון (xxii 5) is not found in the title of xxii 1.

3 So Cobb, Marti, Scott and G. R. Driver; for their views, see pp. 8ff.

text, no further interpretation of the words is necessary. But the reading **מִשָּׂא מַדְבָּר יָם**, however it arose, is clearly early and must be intended to furnish, or was seen to furnish, a title suitable to the contents of the prophecy over which it stands.

As the prophecy with which we are concerned culminates (verse 9) with the dramatic cry ‘Babylon is fallen’, it has long been customary to see in the title **מִדְבָּר יָם** a reference to that city. Thus, Theodoret (*c.* 393–*c.* 458, Bishop of Cyrus in Syria), comments: *ἐρημον θέλασσαν τὴν βαβυλῶνα καλεῖ*.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, ibn Ezra and Qimhi, for whom the prophecy as a whole concerns the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. at the hands of the Medes and Persians, suggest that Babylon is called **מִדְבָּר יָם** because it lies to the west of the Medes and Persians and because the word **יָם** is capable of that meaning (cf. B.D.B., p. 411a). For ibn Ezra it is called **מִדְבָּר** by prolepsis (i.e. Babylon is soon to become a desert), though in Qimhi’s opinion **מִדְבָּר** is used in order to indicate that the territory which lies between Persia and Babylon, and over which the imminent invasion is to come, is desert.

In fact, these comments are less appropriate to the title **מִדְבָּר יָם** than to the phrase **מִמְדְּבַר בָּא** within the prophecy itself, for they are concerned not so much with Babylon as with the mode and direction of the attack upon it. It may be suggested that Qimhi’s comment at least has been influenced by the interpretation of the Targum (which he quotes): **מִטְלֵן מִשְׂרֵין דִּאֲתִין מִן מְדְבְרָא** ‘The oracle (or *march*) of the armies which come from the wilderness’, and that this interpretation in turn is ultimately derived from the words **מִמְדְּבַר בָּא** within the oracle itself, whether or not the Targum actually read in the title (as is possible) **מִמְדְּבַר** (i.e. with preposition).<sup>2</sup>

Amongst modern scholars, Dillmann–Kittel and Fohrer follow these rabbinic commentators in the sense that they regard the phrase as indicating not Babylon but the desert of South Babylonia which lies on the Persian Gulf either south-east of Babylon between the city and Elam (D.K.), or west of the lower Euphrates (Fohrer); consequently the phrase indicates the direction of the attack on the city. This interpretation of the title (which both scholars regard as a later addition) may be

<sup>1</sup> For the text, see Möhle.

<sup>2</sup> That the Targum also read **יָם** is clear from the next phrase in it: **כְּמִי יָמָא**.

regarded as plausible only if the contents of verse 1 do in fact refer to armies advancing on Babylon from the desert. But that view rests upon an interpretation of verse 1 which is far from certain.

Other geographical allusions to Babylon or its environs are seen by modern scholars. Thus Delitzsch<sup>1</sup> considers that מדבר denotes the great plain on which Babylon stood and which in the south was so intersected by marshes and lakes, as well as by the Euphrates, that it floated, as it were, in the sea and indeed was called θάλασσα by Abydenus (*apud* Eusebius, *Præparatio Evangelica* ix 41). Further, such natural features of Babylon are taken by the prophet, fond as he is of symbolical names, to refer to its ultimate fate. Thus, Jeremiah (li 13), who according to Delitzsch (1) knew this oracle, 'was acquainted with its true significance'.

Secondly, attention is drawn to the Akkadian phrase *māt tâmti* 'the land of the sea' (see Schrader, p. 353) used by the Assyrians to describe South Babylonia (i.e. the land nearest the Persian Gulf) and it is suggested that מדבר ים is the Hebrew equivalent of it.<sup>2</sup> Against this view, however, may be set the arguments advanced by Dillmann–Kittel: if South Babylonia is called θάλασσα/*māt tâmti* then it is unlikely that upper Babylonia and the city itself should be so called. Further, that מדבר ים is a Hebrew equivalent of *māt tâmti* is far from clear; for why should *māt* 'land' be translated 'desert'? Dhorme's argument that the presumably accurate equivalent ארץ ים would have given rise to a bald contradiction in terms and that it was therefore modified to מדבר ים 'steppe of the sea' is scarcely convincing, for even if it does not merely replace one contradiction in terms by another, the word מדבר is not elsewhere used to denote tracts of land covered with lakes and marshes.<sup>3</sup>

1 His views appear to be dependent upon a number of earlier scholars; see Michaelis and Vitringa.

2 So Cheyne, *P.I.*, and more recently P. Dhorme in *R.B.* 31 (1922), pp. 403ff, followed by Erlandsson.

3 Dhorme, followed tentatively by Erlandsson, further suggests that there is in the title מדבר ים a deliberate reference to *māt tâmti*, Merodach-baladan's abode in South Babylonia which was also called *Bit Yakin* (Merodach-baladan was called 'son of Yakin'). Apart from the fact that the suggestion rests on a number of questionable textual assumptions (as has been shown above), it is also unlikely on the grounds that no further reference to South Babylonia is discernible in the prophecy.

In conclusion, I accept the view that the original title of the oracle read **משא (מ)מדבר**<sup>1</sup> and that the later reading **משא מדבר** **ים** has been subsequently interpreted in one way or another as being an appropriate reference to some aspect of the contents of the prophecy.

Verse 1b, **כְּסוּפּוֹת בְּנֶגֶב לְחִלוּף מִמְדָּבָר בָּא מֵאֶרֶץ נוֹרָאָה**

The sentence appears to consist of a main verb (**בא**), apparently without an expressed subject. Whoever or whatever ‘comes’ (or ‘has come’)<sup>2</sup> does so from the desert (**ממדבר**) which is further defined as a ‘terrible land’ (**ארץ נוראה**).<sup>3</sup> The manner of his or its coming is described by a simile, **כספות בנגב לחלוף** ‘like whirlwinds sweeping along in the Negeb’.

The ancient versions witness to a text which differs little (if at all) from the M.T., though the LXX and Peshitta appear to have understood the whirlwind as a singular ( $\omega\varsigma \kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\gamma\iota\varsigma/\text{ע}^{\iota\iota}$ ) and to have divided the phrases of the sentence rather differently. The LXX’s feminine  $\xi\rho\chi\omicron\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta$  (cf. Pesh.:  $wt^{\iota}$ ), which corresponds to the M.T.’s **בא**, may be held to indicate that this version (so the Pesh.)<sup>4</sup> took the whirlwind to be the subject of **בא** as well as of the gerundial infinitive construct **לחלוף**. The Targum, with **כמי ימא דנגדין** (‘like the waters of the sea which sweep along’), appears to have interpreted the **ים** of the M.T.’s title as part of the simile;<sup>5</sup> its main verb **ואתן** which answers to the M.T.’s **בא** is predicated of the armies (**משרין**) which it has supplied as a subject.

The Targum’s interpretation of the main verb **בא**, viz. that an invading army must be understood as its subject, is followed by ibn Ezra and Qimhi (cf. Rashi) who again refer to the expedition of Medes and Persians against Babylon which arrives from the desert between the city and Persian Sea. The inter-

1 So, essentially, Duhm, Marti, Gray, Procksch, Kaiser, Wildberger, etc.

2 So Wildberger, on the grounds that **הגיד** in the following verse is perfect.

3 On the ‘terrible land’, see further below.

4 In the case of the Peshitta, it is not immediately clear what is the subject of the feminine verb(s). However, the noun  $\text{ע}^{\iota\iota}$  is the only feminine noun in the verse, and for this reason the judgement is made that, as in the LXX, the whirlwind is the subject.

5 Though not to the exclusion of the whirlwinds which are also included in the strange phrase **כמי ימא דנגדין בעלעילין אתן** ‘like the waters of the sea which sweep along in whirlwinds do they (sc. the armies) come’.

pretation is adopted by a number of modern commentators, and, like the Targum, they seem to assume it from the context (see Rosenmüller; Delitzsch; Cheyne, *P.I.*; D.K., and Kaiser).

Amongst the rabbinic commentators, Saadya alone does not follow the interpretation of the Targum. The words **ממדבר בא** are rendered by him (in Arabic) **אמר כאלוזאבע...יאתי מן אלבר** ('Un événement, semblable aux tourbillons...arrivera du desert').

It may be assumed that he wished to reproduce more literally the sense of the M.T. with its unexpressed subject, though it is interesting to note that in his translation he appears to feel the need to supply some indication of how the verb is to be understood. From what follows in verse 2 of his translation, viz. that the inhabitants of the terrible land say that they have been told a hard prophecy, it appears that he understands (the news of) the terrible event (**אמר**) to be the subject of the verb **בא**. In any case this is an alternative explanation of the verb **בא** which is adopted by those moderns who, like Saadya, do not follow the Targum's understanding of it (so e.g. Duhm, Gray, Marti and Procksch). For them the (unexpressed) subject of **בא** is understood as the terrible import of the vision described in verse 2, later (verse 9) precisely defined as the fall of Babylon. For these commentators the desert from which the news comes is the Syrian desert which lies between Babylon and the (Palestinian) dwelling place of the prophet.

As I have observed in my comments on the (M.T.) title of the oracle, some modern scholars have seen in **י** a corruption of the initial word of this prophecy. In part, attempts to restore this supposed first word are designed also to alleviate the problem of the unexpressed subject of the verb **בא**. Marti<sup>1</sup> suggests that **י** is a corruption of an original **הַמְיָה** 'a roaring as of storms which sweep on in the Negeb! It comes etc.' By making the simile clearly attach to the word **המיה** he frees **בא** to be read more closely with what follows in verse 2. The construction, however, remains somewhat awkward and the emendation purely conjectural.

Secondly, R. B. Y. Scott,<sup>2</sup> on the basis of the reading of

<sup>1</sup> He rightly rejects Cobb's earlier suggestion that **י** is the perfect of a lost **י** with the same sense.

<sup>2</sup> In *V.T.* 2 (1952), 278ff.



1QIs<sup>a</sup>, suggests that the beginning of verse 1 is corrupted by haplography from an original *מִשָּׂא מְדַבֵּר דְּבָרִים כְּסוּפּוֹת* etc. and he suggests that the main verb *בָּא* was originally *בָּאִים*. The meaning of the text of the oracle so restored is: 'Words are coming like storm winds which sweep on in the Negeb.' Against such a restoration and consequent emendation of the text are the telling arguments of Kaiser, who urges that *בָּא* when predicated of *דְּבַר* means 'fulfil, come to pass' and never denotes the initial reception of a revelation.

More plausible is the solution proposed by G. R. Driver<sup>1</sup> and adopted by the N.E.B. For Driver *יָם* is read *יָוִם* (יום) and taken to mean '(stormy) weather' after the meaning 'stormy weather, storm demon' attested for the Accadian cognate word *ūmu*. Driver suggests that the word *יָוִם* bears this meaning also in Judg. xix 11, and it may be noted that K.B.<sup>(3)</sup> (p. 384) suggest the similar meaning 'wind' for *יָוִם* in Song of Songs ii 17 and iv 6<sup>2</sup> and 'storms' in Zeph. ii 2.<sup>3</sup> The translation offered by Driver runs: '(Stormy) weather, like tempests in the South in their passing, comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land.'<sup>4</sup>

Driver's treatment and interpretation of the text have the great merit that they furnish *בָּא* with a subject and afford a clear and straightforward construction for the verse which as a whole becomes a simile or parable. For Driver the parable alludes to the westward sweep of the Elamites and Medes whose armies come across the intervening desert to overrun Babylon.

However, it is more natural to suppose that the storm is a parable of (or is coincident with) the coming to the prophet of his 'harsh vision'<sup>5</sup> (verse 2) rather than of invading armies. For while the desert is not further defined in the prophecy, the simile within the verse itself ('like whirlwinds') refers to the

1 P. 46.

2 For a different view, see W. Rudolph, *K.A.T.* xvii, following D. W. Thomas in *Expository Times* 47 (1935-6), 431f.

3 It is not possible here to examine in detail the theory of Driver and Baumgartner other than in relation to Isa. xxi 1. It is possible to argue, however, that the usual translation 'day' makes good sense in Judg. xix 11 and Zeph. ii 2 and that it is possible in the passages from Song of Songs.

4 Procksch, commenting on *בָּא*, similarly suggested that what comes is the (ghostly) storm; for him, however, that meaning is discernible by carrying over the sense of an initial *יָוִם* (*sic*, after Marti).

5 So, with a different understanding of the text, Marti, Procksch, Gray, Duhm.

Negeb, i.e. the desert of southern Palestine,<sup>1</sup> a place of sudden swift-moving storms (cf. Ps. xxix) which are alluded to elsewhere in the O.T. as a symbol of Yahweh's impending intervention in the affairs of his people (Judg. v 4, Hab. iii 3, Zech. ix 14). On this view, the imagery of the verse indicates that Yahweh has revealed to the prophet his 'harsh vision' (verse 2), and that he is the author of the awesome events which are proclaimed by it.<sup>2</sup>

נורא ארץ 'a terrible land'. The phrase is most likely to be construed as in apposition to מדבר and as referring to the same desert; cf. Deut. i 19 and viii 15 (so Rashi).

In 1QIs<sup>a</sup> נורא is found superimposed upon the word רחוקה which has been deleted. The Peshitta, too, implies the reading רחוקה (ר<sup>3</sup> rhyqt<sup>3</sup>) and these facts suggest a textual tradition at variance with the M.T. If this is the case then memory of it may have survived also to the time of Qimhi who, commenting on נורא ארץ, states that the land of the Medes and Persians is meant 'for they are far from Babylon'. He continues: הרחוק ירא הרחוק 'the far-off is terrible because men fear it'.

On the other hand, the evidence of 1QIs<sup>a</sup> and of the Peshitta may be taken to indicate a very early interpretation of נורא which subsequently found its way into some textual traditions. If the form-critical observations on the prophecy set out below (chapter 3) are correct, then the word רחוקה is a later interpretation of the word נורא.

The Targum interprets the phrase מארעא דאתעבידא בה חסינן 'from the land where terrible things are wrought' and this too may reflect the interpretation of the 'terrible land' as that of the Medes and Persians. Certainly ibn Ezra and Qimhi (the latter quoting the Targum) take this view.<sup>3</sup>

לחלף. For an infinitive construct with ל to describe attendant circumstances or to define more precisely, see G.K. 1140. The word depicts 'the swift passage of the storms' (Driver).

1 The argument that נב here means the (Arabian) desert south of Babylon (Delitzsch followed by D.K.) is most unlikely, for the word נב is not elsewhere attested as referring to any other specific geographical area than that to the south of Judah.

2 Wildberger similarly finds such an allusion in the phrase.

3 They are followed by Delitzsch, and tentatively by D.K. For Duhm, Babylon, the scene of terrifying events, is meant.