



First Isaiah

Isaiah 24-27: The So-Called Apocalypse

Of the various passages later inserted into Isaiah 1-39, the most notable is Isaiah 24-27, sometimes called “the Apocalypse of Isaiah.” These chapters do not strictly constitute an apocalypse, which is a distinctive literary form found in the books of Daniel and Revelation, and several non-canonical compositions such as the books of Enoch. These chapters do, however, resemble the apocalyptic books in their imagery of cosmic destruction, and that is why the label is sometimes used. These chapters differ from the surrounding chapters in Isaiah 1-39 insofar as they do not clearly refer to specific places, except for a reference to Moab (25:10), a couple of references to Jerusalem (24:23; 26:1), and an epilogue alluding to the restoration of the lost tribes. This lack of explicit and specific reference is typical of some of the later passages in the prophetic books, such as Zechariah 9-14. It is possible that these oracles originally referred to specific occasions that we can no longer identify. For example, when Isa 24:10 says that “the city of chaos is broken down,” the reference may well be to the destruction of Babylon in 482 BCE by the Persians, but the identification remains in doubt. Consequently, these chapters and others like them are read as referring to history as a whole, as predictions of a judgment that is cosmic rather than specific to any one nation.

Isaiah 24 provides an exceptionally vivid picture of the destruction of the physical world. Much of the imagery is drawn from old myths, that are known to us from Canaanite texts discovered at Ugarit in 1929. These myths describe a struggle for the kingship of the gods, between Baal, the fertility god who brings the rain, and Mot (Death). (Another myth describes a struggle between Baal and Yamm, the Sea). At one point in the myth, Death swallows Baal. When this happens, the earth dries up and withers, as it does in Isa 24:4. In Isaiah, the withering of the earth is ascribed to pollution by its inhabitants, who have broken “the eternal covenant.” This was the covenant with Noah in Gen 9:16, which involved all living creatures, not just Israel, which had not yet come into existence. There are also other allusions to the early chapters of Genesis. The “city of chaos” in 24:10 is described with the word *tohu*, which was used for the state of the earth before creation in Genesis 1. The windows of heaven are opened in Isa 24:18 as they were for the flood in Gen 7:11. God is said to scatter the inhabitants of the earth in 24:1 as he scattered the people of Babylon in the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Two passages allude to the old myths quite explicitly. Isa 27:1 says: “on that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the

twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.” Leviathan is one of the names for a mythical sea-monster. (The name appears as Lotan in Ugaritic). The Hebrew Bible never tells the story of the battle between God and the sea-monster, but it alludes to it several times, e.g. Job 26:12; Isa 51:9. (The monster is called Rahab in both cases). Usually this battle took place in the beginning, in the process of creation. In Isaiah 27 it is projected into the future, as the final resolution of chaos in the world. This is one of the motifs in Isaiah 24-27 that resembles the Book of Revelation.

The other allusion to Canaanite myth is especially poignant: “He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.” Yahweh will do to Death what Death did to Baal. This does not mean that the dead will be raised, but that death will be no more.

The most controversial passage in these chapters is in Isa 26:19. Other lords who have ruled over Judah (the Babylonians) have fallen and will not rise again. The dead do not live (26:14). But “your dead shall live, their corpses shall arise” (26:19). Some scholars think this is the first reference to individual resurrection in the Hebrew Bible. More probably, however, resurrection is being used here as a metaphor for the revival of the people, as it is in Ezekiel 37, the valley of the dry bones. Belief in individual resurrection is not clearly attested in the Hebrew Bible until the Book of Daniel, which was written about three hundred years after Isaiah 24-27.

Like the older oracles of Isaiah, chapters 24-27 attach special importance to Mount Zion and Jerusalem, although the Davidic king is nowhere in view. It is on Zion that the Lord of hosts will reign (24:23). These chapters, however, are not only concerned with the restoration of Zion but with the ultimate threat to human well-being, Death. Like the messianic oracle in chapter 11, they imagine a utopian world where evil and destruction will be no more.