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"A Blessing in the Midst of the Earth" Traveling the Prophetic Highway in Isaiah

By Sigve Tonstad

Before heading down the prophetic highway in Isaiah, let me come clean on my own background and presuppositions. I do not believe that studying Isaiah needs an excuse, but if an excuse were needed for one who is not an Old Testament scholar, mine might be the notion of Isaiah as "the fifth Gospel," a book whose voice is pervasive in the New Testament and whose influence on Christian theology may be as great as any of the Gospels in the New Testament.[1] I say "might be" advisedly because the New Testament appropriation of Isaiah is not what has stirred my interest in his book. Isaiah entices me in his own Old Testament voice—his own voice beckons me—quite apart from his influence on the New Testament.

As to presuppositions, I will state two. First, I find unpersuasive the notion that most of this book should be read on the assumption that it addresses a specific historical situation contemporary to the author.[2] I do not deny that Isaiah is anchored to historical events that existed at the time of its composition. Often, however, the historical referents are elusive. Isaiah's imaginative vision reaches beyond emerging realities at the time of its author, at times levitating high above the troubled realities of history.[3]

Second, the question of authorship, dominant as it has been in Isaiah studies, will not be of much concern in the present context because the text and not its author will be our focus. Moreover, the theme of our text is featured in all three divisions that many scholars see in Isaiah (19:18–25; 49:6; 56:1–8). It is a moot point as to whether this affords evidence of the prophet Isaiah's own hand or of a series of exceptionally attentive students in a "school" that lasted several centuries, another resilient theory relative to this book, or of the ubiquitous redactor, yet another staple of compositional criticism. Existence of a school of Isaiah is of interest mainly by setting an impossibly high standard for those engaged in the field of education.

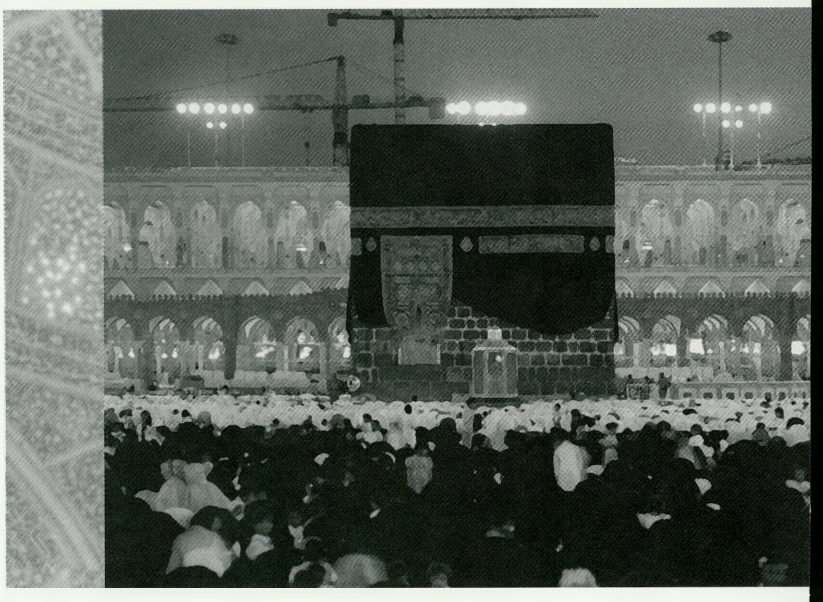
The Text

Let us begin, then, by reading the text:

> *On that day* there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.
>
> *On that day* there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them.
>
> The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord *on that day*, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. The Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.
>
> *On that day* there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.
>
> *On that day* Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage." (Isa. 19:18–25)

First Impressions

Imagining that most readers need a little time for the message to sink in, let us hear what some scholars have taken from the text by way of first impression. André Feuillet calls this passage "the summit of religion."[4] J. Wilson, working on how to turn this text into sermon material, is afraid that alien elements in the text will lead people to miss its exceptional message. "Will you believe me when I tell you that no more astounding words than these have ever been spoken or written?" he asks.[5] W. Vogels says that, although commentators differ widely with respect to many things in the text, they agree on one point: the text offers a perspective of reconciliation and inclusion unequaled in the Old Testament.[6]



Our own impressions will most likely confirm those of these scholars and initiates: The text does indeed seem to deconstruct fixtures of alienation and enmity. It rises above divisions long deemed irreconcilable. It offers a hitherto unimaginable prospect: the archenemy and arch-oppressor uniting with wayward Israel in worship of the one God, united, indeed, precisely on the point where division has been most insurmountable.

Close-up of the Text

When we take a closer look at the text, the details then emerging become even more intriguing. Let us consider point-by-point some of the most distinctive features.

"On that day"

Five times in this text we find the phrase "in that day." This phrase, as well as many specifics in the text, is quite damning to interpretations that attempt to anchor the content to emerging political realities at some point after the Exile. The repeated use of this phrase, heralding ever more surprising reconfigurations, makes it plain that "the prophet sees these events occurring in the end times, or at least at the point where God takes decisive action in world events."[7] Not only is the perspective eschatological, it also draws up a vision so contrary to convention and expectation that it presupposes a dramatic, supernatural intervention. In this sense, "on

that day" is "the Day of God"; the day when God's purpose is revealed and made a reality.[8]

Strange Things in the Land of Egypt

Strange things are said to happen in Egypt "on that day": "five cities in the land of Egypt...speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts" (19:18); "there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt" (19:19); "the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians" (19:21); the Egyptians "will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them" (19:22).

Surely this is a scenario that stretches our mental capacity to the limit, entirely unexpected and without precedent. Historically, Egypt is the oppressor of Israel. Egypt is the prototype enemy, the epitome of oppression and arrogance. In Jewish self-understanding, existence is predicated on the decisive deliverance from Egypt. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," God says at the founding occasion at Sinai (Exod. 20:2).

Again and again in the Old Testament, mention of the land of Egypt comes with the qualification of Egypt as "the house of slavery" (Exod. 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh. 24:17; Judg. 6:8; Jer. 34:13; Micah 6:4). Egypt is a stable reference point as Israel's polar opposite, the perennial enemy of God and the good. This view of Egypt does not relate only to the past. In the book of Isaiah itself, Egypt is a present menace, nowhere more so than in the verses immediately preceding the text considered here (Isa. 19:1–15).

Indeed, hostility to Egypt is said to be such a characteristic feature of Isaiah that the great Isaiah scholar Hans Wildberger takes the dramatic turn of heart toward Egypt found in this text as evidence that Isaiah could not be the author.[9]

And yet, from the very first intimation, cracks appear in notions forged by injury and fortified by memory: "there will be five cities in Egypt that speak the language of Canaan" (19:18). These five cities are not five Israeli settlements, diaspora Jews, as many commentators would have us believe, reflecting their presuppositions as to the time of its composition.[10] It would not be much of a feat for the five cities to speak "the language of Canaan" if their inhabitants were Jewish in the first place.

However, something greater is stirring in the land if the cities are genuine Egyptian cities and the people who speak the language of Canaan are Egyptian.[11] Coming together on the level of language, speaking the same language, as it were, signals a giant leap forward in the direction of reconciliation and mutual understanding. The fact that the language spoken is the cultic language of Israel enhances the sense of a new bond.

John Calvin takes this common language to prove that "by such a language must be meant agreement in religion."[12] Still more amazing, if J. Alec Motyer is correct, is the observation that the expression "the lip of Canaan" "reflects the beginning of a return to the state where 'the whole earth was one lip'" (Gen 11:1).[13]

Sensing a paradigm shift from the beginning, we can see that it does not matter whether agreement exists as to whether the number five is small, significant, or symbolic. Any number—even the smallest—means that the impasse is broken and that something unprecedented is happening.

When we weigh the options more carefully, the prophet most likely is beginning to tell us that the leading city in Egypt is part of the five, because in the very next verse he proceeds to say "there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt" (19:19). If five is a small number, a mere five "is able to accomplish great things," and if symbolic, it serves to convey "the radical nature of the turn."[14]

Egypt and the Metaphor of Israel's Exodus Experience

The text becomes stranger still when we tune our ears to hear the echoes of textual antecedents in Isaiah's vision. Lo and behold, do we not hear Israel's exodus experience recapitulated?[15] Only this time, Egypt, the erstwhile oppressor, is cast in the role of the oppressed.

Echoes of Exodus ring insistently. When the Egyptians "cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend them" (19:20c; compare Exod. 6:6; 3:8). A new Moses arrives on the scene, but this time he is commissioned to lead the Egyptians to freedom.

"Just as Israel was saved through a mediator, Moses," says Vogels, "so he will likewise send to Egypt a liberator, a kind of new Moses."[16] "What is remarkable is that now the God of Israel will respond to Egypt's cry of deliverance and will send a savior to rescue as he once had done for the oppressed Israelite slaves," writes Brevard Childs.[17]

The Egyptians have also been oppressed. They also need deliverance. To Egypt comes the promise that "the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord on

that day" (Isa. 19:21a), just as it was said to Israel that "you shall know the Lord" (Exod. 6:7) at the time of the original Exodus.

As a result, the Egyptians "will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering" (Isa. 19:21b), recalling that Israel's exodus, too, centered on the right to worship and offer sacrifices (Exod. 3:18). Thus, the reconfiguration that sets up a new role for Egypt does so according to the pattern of the elect people of God. Isaiah predicts an exodus experience for the Egyptians, too.[18]

And the vision has not yet reached its zenith. "On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians" (19:23). The text has not mentioned Assyria until now, but its mention at this point only adds quantity to what is already qualitatively in place.

Assyria, too, the other great enemy of Israel in the Old Testament, is included in the reconfiguration. Perhaps the most frightening and cruel of all the conquerors that ravaged the Near East, Assyria belongs as a full partner in the new worshiping fellowship.[19] The highway in view drives home the point, because a highway "is a favorite metaphor in the book for the removal of alienation and separation (Isa. 11:16; 33:8; 35:8; 40:3; 49:11; 62:10)."[19]

Reconfiguring the Elect

Language that used to be exclusive for Israel, the chosen people, is now extended to Israel's sworn enemies. "On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'" (Isa. 19:24, 25).

God's people, reconfigured and reunited along the prophetic highway, will be "a blessing in the midst of the earth" (19:24)! This is the ultimate goal of the vision. The other nations do not become Israel; but they have the same status in a trinity of equals. Unity is not achieved at the expense of diversity, as though diversity in itself precludes a meeting of minds and hearts. Importantly, the other nations "are not to be subjects of Israel, and in virtue of so being, objects of Yahweh's regard," writes George Buchanan Gray, "they are to be as directly related to Yahweh as Israel itself."[20]

However, unity is no loss to Israel because its recognition was never the main point. Israel was called

to become a blessing in the earth, a conduit of God's redemptive intervention (Gen. 12:2). This commission has now been fulfilled in a spectacular manner even though Israel must acknowledge that Egypt and Assyria, former enemies, are partners in her vocation.

Although this possibility may seem unsettling to one accustomed to occupy the limelight alone, comfort can be taken in the thought that God is not eclipsed. "For although from this time forward there is to be no essential differences between the nations in their relation to God, it is still the God of Israel who obtains this universal recognition...."[21]

Obstacles

This message contrasts so much with expectations that it was and is bound to run into obstacles. Indeed, on a par with the miracle that these ideas were ever conceived is the wonder that our ancestors preserved them for posterity. If Augustine had prevailed in his discussion with Jerome as to which version of the Old

Testament should be the Bible of the Church—Augustine defending the Greek version, Jerome the Hebrew text—the most amazing part of the text might have been lost in our Bible.

The translators of the Septuagint could not swallow the notion that God's mercy included the enemies of Israel in this way and on a level indistinguishable from the elect people of God. So we read in the Septuagint (LXX) a quite different text and with a quite different message. There, God's solicitous care works for the exclusive benefit of Israel, reducing Egypt and Assyria to mere geographic locations that house a smattering of diaspora Jews.

That is, all the three parts of the threesome are ethnic Israelites. "In that day shall Israel be a third among the Assyrians and among the Egyptians, blessed in the land which the Lord of hosts (hath) blessed, saying Blessed is my people that is in Egypt, and among the Assyrians, and the land of mine inheritance, Israel" (19:24, 25, LXX).

The words *with* Egypt and *with* Assyria in the Hebrew text, thus joined together in worship of the one God, have become *among* the Assyrians and *among* the Egyptians in the LXX, and the blessing rests only on the Israelites *in* Egypt *among* the Assyrians.[22] If ever a translation also proved itself as an interpretation, this text could be Exhibit A. The LXX text certainly deserves to be seen as a "tendentious revision," more likely intentional than accidental and probably justified on the assumption that Isaiah could not have meant what he actually says.[23]

Application of the Text

What shall we do with this text today? How shall we read it? Does it have any meaning in our time and in our context? Does Isaiah's prophetic highway offer hope that divisions may be overcome despite diversity—even despite hostility—or does it set up parameters that make us, too, uneasy, looking for a way to restore the blueprint to its traditional shape—as did the translators of the Septuagint?

Read as predictive prophecy expecting a literal fulfillment, this vision never materialized. The enmity between these nations continued unabated until their end. In fact, so little has changed that the enmity continues today virtually in literal terms. There is no highway from Cairo to Mosul that courses through Jerusalem, only a huge concrete wall arising in the immediate vicinity of the Holy City as a telling metaphor for entrenched alienation, insecurity, and fear.

If the political landscape reveals a world split apart, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn described it in his speech to graduating Harvard University students in 1987, it is no less divided now even though the fault lines in the geopolitical crust shifted after the fall of communism. Moreover, if ethnic and political divisions remain, religious fault lines dwarf them. More than any other factor, religion seems to be the generative force of conflict in the world. Religion stands out as the most fissile material of our time, ready to blow up in our faces at a moment's notice, the element about which there will be no compromise and no common ground.

This reality, too, flies in the face of our text because it envisions longstanding enemies united precisely in worship, in their perception of, in their devotion to, and in their appreciation for the one God. "Together they form a *single* new and permanent people of God," says Otto Kaiser of the three peoples in Isaiah's vision.[24] Thus constituted, united on the level of religious belief and practice, this trinity is to be a blessing in the midst of the earth. Whatever we hear the text saying or make it say, it envisions religion as a blessing to humanity; it does seem to know of a brand of religion that has the capacity to bring reconciliation in the place of hatred and conflict.

Absent a literal fulfillment of this prophecy in the past and absent the prospect of a political fulfillment in the present, we should nevertheless hesitate before we dismiss the vision as pure utopia. What we have before us should not be read as a political prophecy—or even a religious prophecy—but as an inspired spiritual perception, a joining together of what has been wrongfully put asunder.

Here are a few concrete suggestions for appropriating the text in our time.

The Need for a New Paradigm

First, the text proposes a new paradigm. The entity long seen as an enemy and an oppressor also belongs to the elect. According to the view from the prophetic highway, the enemy has also been oppressed and needs deliverance. It is not off target to claim that Isaiah's vision theologically anticipates Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).[25]

For this option to open up, it must first be imagined, paradigmatically; it must be envisioned as a real option, then the privilege must be extended without

reserve to those appearing to belong to the opposite side. The stereotype of otherness and enmity must be surrendered when, in God's view of things, there is an exodus planned for the enemy, too, and its exodus is configured along the same lines as for those seeing themselves as more naturally entitled to the privilege.

Moving from a new perception of God's intention, the reader is called to see the other side in a new light. Importantly, the new conception demands a new rhetoric. New terms must be adopted and old terminology abandoned if what used to be seen as the evil empire and the axis of evil is actually the elect of God. What is seen as possible from God's point of view, then, must also in some way or other become our intention.

The question may be asked whether human participation is expected for this vision to become a reality. Here the answer depends on how one perceives the prophetic ministry. If we see the prophet's role mostly as a person who predicts and informs concerning matters of the future, human participation need not concern us. However, if the prophet is a person who seeks to influence and persuade, sharing a point of view to see others adopt it, then the aim of his ministry is precisely to enlist human participation. To those who have experienced the Exodus comes the call to make the exodus experience available to others equally in need.

It is not well-known that this text already has introduced a partial paradigm shift in Seventh-day Adventist understanding of mission, especially in the area of Adventist-Muslim relations. The late Robert Darnell, probably the foremost Adventist scholar in Islamic Studies to date, found in this text the theological rationale for a new approach to Muslims.

Darnell spent many years as a missionary in the Middle East, while also completing a doctoral degree in Islamic Studies. By first-hand acquaintance with Muslims, he sensed that the traditional paradigm of confrontation was failing, and by acquainting himself with neglected strains of Islam he concluded that the traditional view was untenable. In short, Darnell advocated a contextualized approach to Muslims, seeing Muslims come to a new understanding of God from within their own context. In doing so, he did not see himself representing a fixed point around which other entities moved.

Rather, Darnell's point was moving, too, particularly in the sense that he saw his witness located within an impregnable Fortress Christianity. The witness advocated by Darnell and his small circle of associates in the Middle East was the witness of the itinerant believer, a

pilgrim living in tents, joined in dialogue with other believers actual and potential across the lines that divide, whether this divide be ethnic, political, or religious.

An attempt to implement this paradigm is taking place against great odds under the leadership of Darnell's protégé, Jerald Whitehouse. My point in the present context is not to speak for or against the validity of Darnell's inference and application of this text. I intend merely to observe that the text in Isaiah represents a dramatic realignment, a new paradigm.

A contextualized approach to Islam represents a paradigm shift of similar magnitude, whether or not our text provides the warrant. I shall not hide the fact, however, that the text leaped into my view of the world as a shocking discovery when, many years ago, I heard Darnell in person invoke it in defence of his project, facing profound misgivings in the

Christian community within which he served.

Redirecting attention to another group traditionally seen as an adversary in Seventh-day Adventist tradition, what shall we make of Ellen G. White's counsel, "We should not go out of our way to make hard thrusts at the Catholics"?[27] Did she, too, on a lesser scale than Isaiah, see the need for a new perception of things? Although Isaiah saw the Egyptians and the Assyrians actually coming together in worship of the one God, it is possible that his vision contributes to the creation of conditions for the vision to become a reality.

Again, turning to Ellen G. White's revised paradigm, "We may have less to say in some lines, in regard to the Roman power and the papacy, but we should call attention to what the prophets and apostles have written under the Spirit of God."[28]

Yes, as a church we have called attention to what the prophets have said, but has Isaiah been part of the prophetic repertoire? Have we heard and presented this particular prophecy and pondered its implications?

The Need for A New Theology

As a second point in terms of application, the text proposes a new theology. If anyone seeks to scale back the task, the inclination should be resisted. That is to say, what Isaiah envisions is theologically driven. It is fully and entirely a scenario that represents God's character and God's point of view, inviting, in turn, the believer to take another look at God's character.

"In that day," the text repeats again and again, and "that day" is God's day, revealing what God intends and what God represents no matter how incurable our divisions or how dismally entrenched our alienation. The text does not describe what *is* but what God *wants*; the original and ultimate and undeviating purpose of God's mind and heart.

The prophetic highway does not end in Isaiah 19 as a project boldly conceived but quickly abandoned. The highway continues throughout the book, as in the stunning vision of inclusion in Isaiah 56, "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered" (Isa. 56:8).

Here, too, the action described is merely an extension of God's character. Whether in joining Israel with her enemies, Egypt and Assyria, as "a blessing in the midst of the earth," (19:24) or in the gathering of the outcasts into "a house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7), we see God as a persistent gatherer, reaching out to all God's alienated sons and daughters. In this sense, as Walter Brueggemann observes with respect to the latter text, gathering "is Yahweh's most defining verb, Yahweh's most characteristic activity."[29]

A profound and pervasive overhaul of theology is needed for religion to become the remedy by which to overcome hatred and division. As to contemporary evidence to prove this need, there is no want of examples. One will suffice: the incident on Orthodox Easter, 1993, when Metropolitan Nikolaj, the highest-ranking Serb Orthodox Church official in Bosnia, spoke glowingly of the leadership of Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic, leaders now sought for the crime of genocide, as examples of "following the hard road of Christ."[30]

Needless to say, such a view of the road of Christ, expressed by a leading clergyman in our time, lies far from the prophetic highway in Isaiah.

The Need for a Vision of Healing

Finally, as a third aspect awaiting appropriation and application, there is in Isaiah's vision an idea rarely noticed, or at least not given as much emphasis as it deserves. Here, as at numerous decisive junctures in the book, Isaiah resorts to the language of sickness and healing to describe what is wrong and what can be done to make it right. The Egyptians "will return to the Lord," he says, "and he will listen to their supplications and heal them" (19:22; compare 6:10; 30:26; 53:5; 57:18, 19).

This language is not the traditional and favored terminology of orthodox theology. To state it more categorically, this is not the legal language of sin and punishment that dominates theological discourse; it is the medical language of sickness and healing. Isaiah often views the human predicament in medical terms, as here in his view of Egypt. Taking this into everyday language, we, too, can see a difference between sick people and bad people.

We will most likely relate to them differently, looking at the sick person with compassion and at the bad person with fear, if not contempt. The bad person goes to jail for punishment, whereas the sick person goes to the hospital to be healed. Intriguingly, Isaiah casts the Egyptians in the ailing category, assuring us that there is a God who will heal them.

Pondering what is to be "on that day," we find in the text a reconfigured conception of the world, a new theology, and a vision of healing. These are preliminary obser-

vations. To the extent that we, too, long to be part of God's diverse blessing in the midst of the earth, it is well to hear the prophet speak. Traveling the prophetic highway on this occasion has not taken us to its destination, but it is my hope it will not leave us unmoved.

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4. André Feuillet, "Un Sommet Religieux de l'Ancien Testament. L'oracle d'Isaïe, XIX (vv. 16-25) sur la conversion de l'Égypte," *RSR* 39 (1951): 65–87.

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8. Wilson, "In That Day," 69.

9. Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja* 13–27 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 730–31.

10. Compare Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39*, 105; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 317.

11. Vogels, "L'Egypte mon people," 500; Sawyer, "Blessed be My People Egypt," 59; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 376–78.

12. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 69.

13. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 168.

14. The textual Vorlage is divided as to whether the named city is *ir ha-heres*, "city of destruction," or *ir ha-cheres*, "city of the sun." 1QIs has *ha-cheres*, "city of the sun," and this is one example where the Qumran discoveries show their influence on modern translations of the Bible. In regard to the number five, see Vogels, "L'Egypte mon people," 501; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, 377.

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24. Wilson, "In That Day," 83.

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29. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 165.

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