The Meaning of *Maśśāʾ* as a Prophetic Term in Isaiah

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The Hebrew word *maśśāʾ* is a noun that appears to be derived from the verbal root *nśʾ*, which basically means "lift" or "carry." In many cases the noun means just what this derivation would suggest, that is, "load," "burden," or something figuratively analogous. In certain other cases, however, what appears to be the same noun functions as a technical term relating to prophecy.[1] Scholarly opinion regarding the definition of *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic term has long gravitated around two opposing poles. Some argue that this use of *maśśāʾ* is a figurative extension of the word in its basic sense, describing a prophecy that is "burdensome" or "onerous" because it describes the catastrophic results of divine judgment. Others argue that when *maśśāʾ* is used in connection with prophecy it refers to prophetic speech in general, without necessarily connoting anything "burdensome," and thus may be translated more neutrally as "oracle" or "proclamation," and so forth. The use of *maśśāʾ* in this latter sense is often said to be based on the idiomatic expression *nśʾ qwl*, "to lift (one's) voice," as a reference to the speech that results when one "speaks up." The question is whether there is one word with two meanings, both derived from the same root, or whether there are two homonymous words which might not have been derived from the same root.[2]

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[1] 2 Kgs 9:25; Isa 13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; 30:6; Jer 23:33–40 (8x); Ezek 12:10; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1; Zech 9:1; 12:1; Mal 1:1; Lam 2:14; 2 Chr 24:27.

[2] For a review of previous scholarship, see the discussion and citations in M.J. Boda, "Freeing the Burden of Prophecy: *Maśśāʾ* and the Legitimacy of Prophecy in Zech 9–14," *Bib* 87 (2006), 338–57 (338–41). See also W. McKane, "משא in Jeremiah 23:33–40," in J.A. Emerton (ed.), *Prophecy: Essays Presented to Georg Fohrer on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, 6 September 1980* (BZAW, 150; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 35–54 (35–40 and passim).

1. PROLEGOMENA

1.1 THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

Both of these views of the prophetic *maśśāʾ* are problematic. The first explanation purports to define it in terms of the content of the passages that are labeled as such, but this misrepresents significant aspects of their content. As has been pointed out, not every passage that is called a *maśśāʾ* is altogether "burdensome."[3] Several contain prophecies of salvation in addition to prophecies of punishment. For example, although the Book of Nahum, which is called a *maśśāʾ* in its superscription, mostly contains prophecies of judgment against Assyria, it also includes a prophecy of salvation for Judah (2:1). Similarly, the *maśśāʾ* concerning Babylon in Isaiah (13:1–14:32) contains a prophecy of salvation for Judah (14:1–2).

While the first explanation is too narrow, the second is too broad. The vast majority of the utterances that entail "lifting (one's) voice" are not prophetic speech at all. Many sorts of utterances result from this mode of speaking. This attempt to explain *maśśāʾ* in terms of this idiomatic expression fails to capture what *maśśāʾ* might denote as a specifically prophetic term, and it further begs the question: What *kind* of "oracle"? Despite these problems, commentators continue to champion one view or the other, thus perpetuating this long-standing scholarly stalemate.

In a Willi-Plein has proposed an innovative variation on the etymological argument.[4] She rejects the proposition that *maśśāʾ* refers to prophecy that is "burdensome" because it is judgmental or negative, particularly with regard to foreign nations, as well as the proposition that it refers to a "proclamation" that results from "lifting the voice." She also notes, however, that all the other meanings that *maśśāʾ*—apart from whatever it may mean as a prophetic term— can have connotations related to the basic sense of *nśʾ*, that is, "carry" or "lift." She concludes that *maśśāʾ* in its prophetic sense should be no exception, and this leads her to focus—if I understand her correctly—on the fact that prophecy which takes the form of a written document becomes physically portable. A *maśśāʾ* is prophecy that has been put into writing so that it can be carried in material form to a reader, rather than a report of previously proclaimed prophetic speech. The prophetic message of a *maśśāʾ* is conceived, not as direct communication to a present audience, but as indirect communication to unidentified consumers at a distance. Although Willi-Plein views the *maśśāʾ* as a particular sort of prophetic text (*Textsorte*) rather

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[3] E.g., H.-P. Müller, "משא," *TDOT* 9:21, 23; Boda, "Freeing the Burden of Prophecy," 340.

[4] I. Willi-Plein, "Wort, Last oder Auftrag? Zur Bedeutung von משא in Überschriften prophetischer Texteinheiten," in F. Hartenstein, U. Neumann-Gorsolke, and M. Pietsch (eds.), *Davidshaus und Prophetie: Studien zum Nebiim* (Biblische-Theologische Studien, 127; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2012), 173–82.

than a prophetic genre, the distinction that she draws reminds me of one of the ways in which the epic is sometimes distinguished from the novel. The epic is a narrative delivered orally before a live audience, and even when it takes written form this rhetorical situation is implied. The novel, in contrast, is a narrative written by an author for a constituency of individual readers with whom he or she is in indirect touch only through the material medium of the printed book.[5]

This ingenious attempt to rescue the etymological argument leaves some major questions unanswered. For example, Willi-Plein applies the argument only to those books or sections of books that have *maśśaʾ* in their superscriptions (Nahum, Habakkuk, Malachi, Zech 9–11 and Zech 12–14). What about the *maśśaʾ* sections of Isaiah, with which this essay is concerned? If these sections of Isaiah are the sort of *Schriftprophetie* that she supposes the *maśśaʾ* to be, how have they become incorporated into this larger document that is apparently a prophetic text of a different sort? And if not, what does the *maśśaʾ* superscription mean for them? And can it be shown from the contents of the prophetic texts entitled a *maśśaʾ* that they are qualitatively different from other prophetic texts with respect to how they came to be written?

In my view, it is entirely conceivable that prophecy could originate as a written document as well as oral speech.[6] It is also probable that most if not all of the biblical *maśśaʾ* texts are scribal compositions of some sort. However, for reasons that will be explained below in the discussion of 2 Kgs 9:25, I do not think that their taking a written and thus portable form is what makes them *maśśaʾ* texts. It is time to move beyond the limitations of the etymological approach.

In a previous article I proposed that Richard D. Weis's way of defining *maśśaʾ* provides a breakthrough. Rather than rely on etymology, Weis analyzed the form and function of all the prophecies called a *maśśaʾ* and concluded that they constitute a prophetic genre, the main intention of which is to clarify a previous revelation. To this end such prophecies make claims about Yhwh's involvement in particular events or situations, and also spell out how the addressees are to think or act in the future. As a definition Weis proposed "prophetic reinterpretation of a previous revelation."[7] I have argued that this concept of *maśśaʾ* is evident in the overall composition of each prophetic book that is called a *maśśaʾ* in its superscription, that is,

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[5] E.g., Northrop Frye distinguishes genres partly in terms of their "radical of presentation" (*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957], 246–51).

[6] M.H. Floyd, " 'Write the Revelation!' (Hab 2:2): Reimagining the Cultural History of Prophecy," in E. Ben Zvi and M.H. Floyd (eds.), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (SymS, 10; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 103–43.

[7] R.D. Weis, "A Definition of the Genre *Maśśaʾ* in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1986; available from University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI-ProQuest).

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Malachi, and also evident in the way the two final sections of Zechariah (chs. 9–11 and 12–14), each of which is labeled a *maśśāʾ*, are related to the foregoing chapters of that book.[8]

Two different sorts of objections have been raised to Weis's approach. Wilhelm J. Wessels doubts whether this sort of analysis can be extended to apply to the passages in Isaiah that are designated as a *maśśāʾ* in their headings, and whether it can shed any light on the key text of Jer 23:33–40 which, although it is not a *maśśāʾ*, emphatically prohibits whatever sort of prophecy this term describes. Wessels undertakes a close reading of the latter passage, which helpfully relates it to the larger context in Jer 23:9–32 and its overarching theme of false prophecy, but his analysis does not advance our understanding of what a *maśśāʾ* is. In the end he falls back on the assumption that it is a prophecy of judgment—a "burden."[9] Mark J. Boda reviews Weis's analysis of the *maśśāʾ* texts and notes that several of them show "exceptions" to the generic pattern that Weis describes. Boda thus raises the more radical question of whether these texts constitute a genre at all. He concludes that the term simply denotes a prophetic revelation in general, not a particular kind of prophecy.[10] Taken together, the objections of Wessels and Boda put us back at the impasse between those who hold that *maśśāʾ* means a "burdensome" prophecy of punishment (Wessels) and those who hold that it simply refers to a prophetic oracle in general (Boda). In this article I will attempt to show that, contrary to Wessels's assertion, the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah basically fit Weis's definition of the *maśśāʾ* and, in the process, address Boda's question of whether the *maśśāʾ* texts constitute a genre category.[11] First, however, some obstacles to defining the *maśśāʾ* need to be cleared away.

1.2 Methodological Preliminaries

In the work of both Weis and some of his predecessors the definition of *maśśāʾ* became needlessly entangled with various other issues, including redaction-critical and tradition-critical questions, the oral-written distinction, and the difference between directly quoted speech of Yhwh versus the prophets' own speech. We take up these concerns in turn.

1.2.1 Redaction Criticism

Hypotheses about the meaning of *maśśāʾ* have frequently assumed particular theories about the redaction history of the texts in ques-

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[8] M.H. Floyd, "The משא (*Maśśāʾ*) as a Type of Prophetic Book," *JBL* 121 (2002), 401–22.

[9] W.J. Wessels, "I've Had It with You: Jeremiah 23:33–40 as Culmination of YHWH's Frustration," *OTE* 25 (2012), 761–76.

[10] Boda, "Freeing the Burden of Prophecy."

[11] In a future article I intend to address the use of *maśśāʾ* in Jer 23:33–40.

tion. Weis's seminal work is no different in this regard. He considered the texts labeled *maśśāʾ* both separately as self-contained units and in relation to their surrounding literary contexts. As he undertook the latter step he interacted with the redaction-historical discussion. As will be discussed below, he also interpreted the results of this two-pronged analysis in terms of the oral-written dichotomy, drawing conclusions which he related to prophecy's transition from a primarily oral to a primarily written phenomenon.

Such historical questions are certainly legitimate, and the *maśśāʾ* texts may well be germane to them, but if theories about the development of the text and the evolution of prophecy are posited a priori as delimiting the terms in which the use of *maśśāʾ* can be read, we may well be imposing on the text concerns to which it does not actually speak—at least not directly. We should not ignore the fact that the text is a historically conditioned creation—as if that were even possible. Moreover, if the *maśśāʾ* is defined in terms of one prophecy reinterpreting another, as is proposed here, then some sort of historical consideration is inevitable because the reinterpreting prophecy is by definition chronologically subsequent to the reinterpreted prophecy. I am not advocating a purely literary, ahistorical analysis—quite the contrary. I am only arguing that it would be methodologically unproductive for our approach to Isaiah's *maśśāʾ* texts to be initially and primarily driven by redaction-critical concerns. We should first assess the meaning of the word within the text as it presently stands, attending to the historical dimension but without presupposing any particular theories of Isaiah's composition history.[12]

I propose that it is sufficient to reckon only with what is almost universally acknowledged about the historical production of Isaiah, namely, that the book is rooted in the life and times of the 8th century Judahite prophet for whom it is named, and that it is also the product of substantial rewriting that extended well into the Persian period. If we approach the *maśśāʾ* texts as they presently stand, recognizing that they generally reflect various points along this span of time, we can come to conclusions that are historically grounded but not unduly mired in more detailed historical hypotheses that are peripheral and inevitably speculative.

1.2.2 Tradition History and the Oral-Written Distinction

One of Weis's major goals was to reconstruct the tradition history of the prophetic *maśśāʾ*. He therefore asked whether any of the *maśśāʾ* texts had existed as such independently, prior to incorporation into their present literary contexts. He took a two-pronged approach to this question, one based on a redaction-critical determination of whether the thrust of particular texts stood in tension with the main thrust of the larger literary context; and the other based on a search

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[12] As proposed, e.g., by K.P. Hong, "Synchrony and Diachrony in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," *CBQ* 75 (2013), 521–39.

for evidence of oral-formulaic composition, which would show whether texts had been part of an oral tradition prior to their transcription and redaction. On the basis of either of these criteria, *maśśāʾ* texts that appeared to have been free-standing, prior to their incorporation into the text in its present form, could be differentiated from texts that assumed the shape of a *maśśāʾ* in the process of their incorporation into their present literary context. The particular examples of these two sorts of texts could then be located on the trajectory of the prophetic movement's transition from primarily oral prophetic to primarily written scribal transmission.[13]

As stated above, in order to focus on the definition of the genre itself the entanglements of redaction criticism will be avoided here. We will attempt to identify oracles that are subsequently reinterpreted by other oracles, in sequences that can be seen to reflect particular historical events, but we will otherwise forgo theorizing about the historical development of Isaiah's *maśśāʾ* texts. Similarly, we will avoid trying to identify which texts might have been orally transmitted prior to taking their present written forms. As we shall see below, in the discussion of 2 Kgs 9:25, it is plausible to suppose that the *maśśāʾ* existed in oral as well as written forms. Any attempt to make this distinction with regard to the Isaiah *maśśāʾ* texts is, however, highly problematic. Weis looked for evidence of oral-formulaic composition, but oral tradition is not limited to oral-formulaic poetry. He found little evidence of oral-formulaic composition, but this does not necessarily preclude the possibility that any of the oracles in the Isaiah *maśśāʾ* texts could have been oral to begin with.

The matter is more complicated than the oral-written alternatives posed by Weis. All permutations of oral and written are hypothetically possible: a) Both the reinterpreted and the reinterpreting prophecies could have originally been oral and could have been combined to form a *maśśāʾ* while still in their oral state. Or b) both could have originally been oral, could have subsequently been transcribed, and could have finally been combined in their written forms to produce a *maśśāʾ*. Or c) the reinterpreted prophecy could have originally been oral and subsequently transcribed, and the reinterpreting prophecy could then have been produced in written form to complement it and thereby produce a *maśśāʾ*. Or d) both the reinterpreted and the reinterpreting prophecies could have originally been written, and then combined to produce a *maśśāʾ*. Still more variations are perhaps possible, and it might be desirable to figure out which of all these possibilities was operable in the production of a particular *maśśāʾ* text, to whatever extent this might be possible. The results, however, will not fit neatly along a simple developmental trajectory from oral to written.[14]

In the final analysis, the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah have been bequeathed to us in written form by scribes, whether they were a)

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[13] Weis, "A Definition of the Genre *Maśśāʾ*," 277–351.
[14] Floyd, "Write the Revelation!" 122–30.

transcribing an already composed *maśśāʾ*, b) producing a *maśśāʾ* by combining prophecies already composed by others, c) producing a *maśśāʾ* by composing a prophecy to complement an already existing prophecy, or d) producing a *maśśāʾ* by composing all of the prophecies involved. The goal of the present study is not to describe the compositional process by which the Isaiah *maśśāʾ* texts were produced, but to identify the definitive elements of their generic form.

1.2.3 Speech of Yhwh versus Speech of the Prophet

Weis was dismayed by not being able to find any strongly defined pattern with regard to directly quoted speech of Yhwh versus the words of the prophet himself. With regard to oracular language, however, this difference is insignificant in the light of the underlying phenomenology of intermediation.[15] Of course Yhwh himself does not ever literally *say* anything. There is only a prophet speaking in Yhwh's name, and when he does so it matters little whether he speaks in the first person *as Yhwh*, as is often explicitly indicated by the use of the messenger formula (*kōh ʾāmar yhwh*) and the oracle formula (*nəʾum yhwh*), or in the third person *about Yhwh*. In either case the prophet is interpreting some psychic experience of his as a revelation from Yhwh. He serves as the intermediary for the communication of this revelation which enables him, in effect, to impersonate Yhwh. The boundary is blurred between the prophet's own sense of self and the phenomenon that he takes to be a manifestation of Yhwh, and this blurring is often reflected in an indiscriminate alternation between first-person speech of Yhwh and third-person speech about Yhwh—sometimes even within the same oracle (e.g., Isa 14:24–27 and 18:4–5). Thus, no differentiation can be made between earlier and later material on the basis of this alternation alone, and this distinction has no substantial bearing on the definition of *maśśāʾ*.

1.3 REFINING WEIS'S DEFINITION OF MAŚŚĀʾ

If we bracket the extraneous methodological concerns listed above, we can focus more clearly on what Weis identified as the definitive features of the *maśśāʾ*. Marvin A. Sweeney has attempted to appropriate Weis's work in this way. Among the definitive features identified by Weis, Sweeney has singled out the fact that the *maśśāʾ* characteristically explains events in human affairs as acts of Yhwh. He therefore defines the *maśśāʾ* as a "prophetic pronouncement" which gives such an explanation.[16] This is certainly true as far as it goes, but

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[15] In the sense proposed, e.g., by Robert R. Wilson (*Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980], 21–88) which includes but is not limited to spirit possession. More recently, see D.L. Petersen, "Defining Prophecy and Prophetic Literature," in M. Nissinen (ed.), *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives* (SymS, 13; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 33–44.

[16] M.A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*

it seems to me to miss the main point. There is nothing particularly distinctive about a prophecy that explains events as acts of Yhwh. Many if not most prophecies, of whatever sort, do just that. This view of the *maśśāʾ* amounts to little more than a reiteration of the long-standing definition of *maśśāʾ* as "oracle" or "proclamation," that is, as any kind of prophecy in general. Although Sweeney's view of *maśśāʾ* is ostensibly based on Weis's work, it does not take full advantage of Weis's most innovative insight, namely that the *maśśāʾ* reinterprets a previous revelation. It seems to me more promising to investigate further whether this reinterpretive aspect of the *maśśāʾ* is as definitive as Weis proposes.

1.4 WHAT CONSTITUTES A GENRE?

Before turning to the relevant texts, it remains for us to address the question that Boda has raised concerning the supposedly too numerous exceptions to Weis's proposal. Boda lists all the different ways in which *maśśāʾ* can figure phraseologically in the headings of the sections of Isa 13:1–23:18 and Isa 30:6, in the introductory passage at Ezek 12:10, and in the superscriptions to Nahum, Habakkuk, Zech 9–11, Zech 12–14, and Malachi. He notes that there is little consistency in the collocation of *maśśāʾ* with other sorts of prophetic terminology. Boda links this fact with Weis's occasional inability to pin down what the *maśśāʾ* texts have in common, with my admission that the prophetic books labeled *maśśāʾ* in their superscriptions have decidedly different shapes,[17] and also with Sweeney's admission that the *maśśāʾ* "has no fixed structure and may be composed of a number of diverse generic elements."[18] Boda concludes: "*Maśśāʾ* is no more a genre tag than are phrases like 'word of the Lord' or 'vision of X prophet'."[19]

If there were indeed a large percentage of *maśśāʾ* texts that do not fit Weis's definition, in the slightly modified form that will be proposed here, this would indeed call into question the existence of the *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic genre, as Boda claims. However, I believe that Boda's objection is based on an unwarranted presupposition about the nature of a genre. A detailed excursion into genre theory lies beyond the scope of this essay,[20] but we can address the main problem with Boda's criticism.

Because the *maśśāʾ* can have numerous variations, rather than a set formulaic structure, Boda has mistakenly concluded that it has no

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(FOTL, 16; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 212–311; idem, *Twelve Prophets*, vol. 2 (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 423, 459, 574, 657, 683, 717.

[17] Floyd, "The מַשָּׂא (*Maśśāʾ*) as a Type of Prophetic Book."

[18] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 227.

[19] Boda, "Freeing the Burden of Prophecy," 350.

[20] For main points of genre theory, as they relate to defining the *maśśāʾ*, see Floyd, "The מַשָּׂא (*Maśśāʾ*) as a Type of Prophetic Book," 404–9.

formal integrity as a genre category. The fallacy operative in this con-clusion can be illustrated by way of comparison with the novel. It can take a wide variety of forms, but no one would conclude from this fact that it is not a genre, or that the term can apply indiscriminately to just any kind of narrative. As a generic class, novels have several definitive elements—plot, character, setting, point of view, symbolic dimension, and so forth—all of which are subject to immense variation, as is readily evident when one considers works as diverse as *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Crime and Punishment*. As these examples show, in order to have formal integrity it is not necessary for a genre to have a formulaic structure. Some genres do—modern as well as ancient—but in other cases genres are defined in terms of a cluster of formal elements that can combine in various ways to achieve a particular rhetorical effect. I would argue that the variations shown by the *maśśāʾ* texts are, like those that are characteristic of the novel, variations on a set of definitive elements that they all share.[21] If Weis did not manage to show this conclu-sively, it was because he was at the same time juggling so many pe-ripheral concerns—redaction history, tradition history, the oral-writ-ten distinction, and Yhwh speech versus prophetic speech, and so forth. If we bracket these distractions, as advocated above, and look at the texts themselves in their present form, it will become evident that Weis's main insights concerning the *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic genre remain viable.

2. THE EVIDENCE OF THE NARRATIVE TEXTS

The present study aims to test Weis's definition of the *maśśāʾ* with reference to the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah. This definition was based on his analyses of all the biblical *maśśāʾ* texts, but it does not depend solely on the inductive analysis of such texts. There are also some narrative descriptions of the *maśśāʾ*. These narrative descriptions have not been taken very seriously, perhaps because there are so few. There are only three references to the prophetic *maśśāʾ* in narrative contexts—2 Kgs 9:25, Ezek 12:10, and 2 Chr 24:27—and they have

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[21] Boda ("Freeing the Burden of Prophecy," 348–49 n. 28) similarly confuses the variations that I found in the composition of the prophetic books labeled *maśśāʾ* (Floyd, "The משא [*Maśśāʾ*] as a Type of Prophetic Book") with "inconsistency," but there is no inconsistency with regard to the definitive characteristics of the genre. All of the books have the same formal elements. They are only configured differently in each case. The same misunderstanding is evident in Boda's assessment of my critique of Jörg Jeremias's definition of *theophany:* "He [Jeremias] calls *theophany* a *Gattung* but defines it in terms of formulaic themes and motifs that tend to cluster in the context of various compositional forms, without ever consti-tuting an independent form of their own" (M.H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets, Part 2* [FOTL, 22; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], 547). My critique was not that a set of formal elements could take a variety of configurations, but rather that Jeremias's definition was based entirely on content rather than form, content that took no particular form.

literary contexts of very different sorts, but they nevertheless provide telling glimpses of the prophetic *maśśāʾ* in action. They therefore constitute primary evidence that corroborates Weis's approach.

2.1 2 KGS 9:25

The prophecy that is called a *maśśāʾ* in 2 Kgs 9:25 is uttered when Jehu kills King Joram of Israel in order to claim the throne for himself. After shooting Joram with an arrow, Jehu explains to his aide that this has happened "in accordance with the word of Yhwh." This harks back to what Elisha told Joram's father Ahab after he had killed Naboth and confiscated his vineyard. The prophet made two announcements to Ahab about the ignominious way he would die (1 Kgs 21:19, 24). When Ahab subsequently repented, Yhwh told Elisha that these prophecies would be fulfilled, not with respect to Ahab himself, but with respect to his son (1 Kgs 21:29). However, one part of what was prophesied nevertheless came to pass when Ahab died (1 Kgs 22:38), thus leaving the whole matter in doubt. In 2 Kgs 9:25 the Deuteronomistic narrative portrays Jehu as having remembered a prophecy dealing with this ambiguity, the origin of which is not identified, an oracle which claimed that the unfulfilled residue of Elisha's prophecies about the death of Ahab would be fulfilled in the death of his son Joram. This reinterpretation of Elisha's previous prophecies clarifies for Jehu how the body of Joram is to be disposed of.[22] It is this reinterpretive prophecy, applied in this explanatory way, that is explicitly called a *maśśāʾ*.

The case of 2 Kgs 9:25, which shows a *maśśāʾ* in a reinterpretive relationship with previous prophecies, is also germane to the question of the *maśśāʾ* and the oral-written distinction. On the one hand, the writer of the narrative portrays the *maśśāʾ* as an oral phenomenon. Jehu orally quotes to his aide a prophecy that, since it was "uttered by Yhwh," was presumably spoken by an unidentified prophet. This portrayal may of course be fictive and not altogether verisimilar, but it nevertheless shows the writer's familiarity with the *maśśāʾ* as a kind of customary verbal behavior or verbal social convention, which informs how the characters in the narrative speak and act. On the other hand, the same writer also uses the *maśśāʾ* for literary purposes. The Deuteronomistic narrative is shaped to a considerable extent by the theme of prophecy and fulfillment—or apparent non-fulfillment, as the case may be. This particular episode thus figures in the development of a larger theme, showing how questions about the fulfillment of some prophecies can be clarified by the use of a *maśśāʾ*. For Jehu, as a character in the narrative, the reinterpretive and explanatory force of the oracle that he quotes is evident to him because he and others are familiar with the complications arising from the preceding prophecies concerning Ahab and Joram. The *maśśāʾ* has practical consequences for Jehu and his followers, as it

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[22] For a more detailed description of this case, see Floyd, "The משׂא (*Maśśāʾ*) as a Type of Prophetic Book," 410–11.

not only tells how to dispose of Joram's body, but also tends to legitimate Jehu's seizure of the crown. For the reader of the text, the reinterpretive and explanatory force of the *maśśāʾ* is evident because of its narrative context, in which its relationship to previous prophecies is spelled out. This *maśśāʾ* provides the reader with a particular example in the writer's overall characterization of prophecy, throughout Israel's history, as a truthful but failed attempt to get the Israelites to maintain their covenant fidelity to Yhwh.

When the *maśśāʾ* as a type of prophetic speech is introduced into a literary composition, its rhetorical effect changes. But whether it serves in an oral situation as conventional language that influences the behavior of the people involved, or in a literary context as a narrative device that influences how the story is told and how characters are described, its reinterpretive function is much the same. In either case the *maśśāʾ* is a reinterpretive divinatory practice which affirms that a prophecy has been fulfilled despite complications that were not originally envisioned. Although it may turn out that most if not all of the *maśśāʾ* texts in the Hebrew Bible are—in one way or another—the products of written composition,[23] this episode from 2 Kings shows that this sort of prophecy may well have had oral roots. This does not necessarily mean, however, that any *maśśāʾ* now in written form previously existed in an oral form. In any case, because the *maśśāʾ* has much the same function in both its oral and written form, the oral-written distinction—contrary to the view of Willi-Plein[24]—does not make any significant difference in defining the *maśśāʾ*.

2.2 EZEK 12:10

The context of the second reference to a *maśśāʾ*, Ezek 12:10, is less complex. In this case the revelation that needs clarification is not a prophetic oracle that was previously spoken, but rather a prophetic sign that was previously enacted (Ezek 12:1–7). In accord with Yhwh's command Ezekiel has dramatically mimed the process of packing his bags and going into exile—dramatic action which entails digging his way through a wall, covering his face, and operating in the dark—in order to demonstrate to the "rebellious house" of Israel that this will be their fate. The unforeseen complication is that the spectators do not get the point (Ezek 12:8–9). They do not recognize what the present situation holds in store for them, because "they have eyes to see, but see not, and ears to hear, but hear not." The prophetic symbolic action was intended to subvert their imperceptiveness so that they can discern the fate that Yhwh is imposing upon them, but it did not work.

Thus the need for a *maśśāʾ* to make explicit what was implied but unrecognized in the sign enacted by the prophet (Ezek 12:10–16). The ensuing oracle restates the overall point of the symbolic

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[23] See above, 5–7.
[24] See above, 2–3.

action, that exile is coming, and then goes on to specify additional
details: No one will be exempt, not even the royal household and its
entourage, and some of the survivors will be dispersed from Babylon
to other nations. The underlying purpose of this announcement is
recognition on the part of those caught up in these events that Yhwh
is the instigator.

According to the Book of Ezekiel the prophetic activity that is
reported in 12:1–16 took place in Babylon. Ezekiel was part of the
first deportation in 597 and began to prophesy only after his arrival
there. Thus the exile is already underway and Ezekiel's compatriots
should be able to discern from the reality of their present situation
that the message which Ezekiel has signed to them—that the entire
house of Israel will be deported—is in the process of being fulfilled.
However, they do not yet grasp the full extent of the historical pro-
cess into which they have been thrust. Perhaps the fact that they still
have a king in Jerusalem keeps them from seeing that the totality of
exile is inevitable. Ezekiel's *maśśāʾ* aims to disabuse them of this false
hope, explicitly emphasizing that the royal household is about to be
deported also. Here the *maśśāʾ* reaffirms the fulfillment of a previous
revelation by countering the basis for the popular perception that it
is not being fulfilled. The implied directive is to get used to
exile/dispersion as a more or less permanent condition.

2.3 2 CHRONICLES 24:27

Unlike the two previous examples, the third example in 2 Chr 24:27a
is not itself a *maśśāʾ* but rather makes reference to a *maśśāʾ*. This ref-
erence occurs in the context of the notice that concludes the account
of the reign of Joash, which is comparable to similar notices with
which the Chronicler concludes his accounts of the reigns of the
other Judahite kings. One purpose of these notices is to list sources
in which further information concerning the reign in question can
be found. The notice concerning Joash states that in "the *midraš* on
the Book of the Kings" there is more to be found concerning three
topics: "his sons," "his rededication of the house of God," and *wireb
hammaśśāʾ ʿālāyw*. Some see in this last phrase an occurrence of *maśśāʾ*
in its primary sense of "burden," referring metaphorically to the
many hard responsibilities that Joash had to bear. For example, KJV
translates it as "the greatness of the burdens laid upon him." How-
ever, when *maśśāʾ* is used to denote the official responsibilities that
go with a particular position, it usually describes the duty of actually
carrying something.[25] It is used in only two instances to describe
other sorts of figuratively "burdensome" leadership responsibilities,
namely, with respect to Moses (Num 11:11, 17; cf. Deut 12:1); and
Eliakim in one of the *maśśāʾ* texts considered here (Isa 22:25). In the
first case, it occurs in association with the metaphorical description
of Moses's "carrying" (*nśʾ*) the people as a nursemaid carries a child

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[25] E.g., the several references to the duties of the Levites in Num 4 and,
conversely, their being decommissioned from such carrying in 2 Chr 35:3.

(Num 11:12). In the second case, which will be discussed in greater detail below, there is metaphorical word play on the literal and figurative senses of the word, in which the heavy administrative "burden" borne by Eliakim is compared with a heavy "weight" hung on a peg. In both cases *maśśāʾ* can refer to the great responsibility of leadership only by virtue of a metaphorical context that creates this possibility. *Maśśāʾ* is never used to describe the responsibilities of kingship, and in the case of Joash there is no metaphorical description of him—like Moses as a nursemaid or Eliakim as a hanging weight—that would provide a context in which such usage might plausibly work.

It is more likely that we have here another occurrence of *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic term. The notice that concludes the reign of Abijah (2 Chr 13:22) also describes the source in which more information can be found as a *midraš* and identifies "the prophet Iddo" as its writer. These are the only two occurrences of *midraš* in the Hebrew Bible, where the word does not yet refer to the rabbinic technique of scriptural interpretation that it eventually came to denote. Here it can nevertheless be understood as a term describing the sort of textual interpretation that the Chronicler attributes to certain prophets who are also characterized as historiographers. The Chronicler assigned to this group of prophets the function of explaining past events so as to draw out their contemporary relevance, and this involved the reinterpretation of documents pertaining to those events, including records of previously promulgated prophecies.[26] In light of this pronounced tendency in Chronicles the phrase in question (*wireb hammaśśāʾ ʿālāyw*) can be understood as a reference to an extensive collection of prophecies concerning Joash that have either been reinterpreted as they were incorporated into "the *midraš* on the Book of the Kings" or reinterpreted as the Chronicler drew on them as a source of information for his evaluation of Joash's reign—or perhaps both.

In the latter case, the prophetic record concerning the reign of Joash might have needed reinterpretation because it would have been difficult to give any conclusive evaluation in terms of the Chronicler's theological criteria. On the one hand, Joash had a stellar record up to a point: "He did what was right in the eyes of Yhwh all the days of Jehoida the priest" (24:2), including a renovation and re-dedication of the temple (24:4–14)—quite a positive achievement in terms of the Chronicler's temple-centered ideology. On the other hand, after Jehoida's death Joash allowed a reversion to idolatry, "forsaking the house of Yhwh," and he ignored the prophets sent to warn him of the consequences (24:17–19). When Zechariah, the son of Jehoida, possessed by the spirit of Yhwh, prophesied against this infidelity—such spontaneous prophesying by those not actually

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[26] W.M. Schniedewind, *The Word of God in Transition: From Prophet to Exegete in the Second Temple Period* (JSOTSup, 197; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 218–19, 228–30.

called prophets is another distinctive feature of the Chronicler's narrative—Joash ordered him stoned (24:20–22). Consequently, Joash was defeated by the Syrians, assassinated by conspirators, and buried as a commoner (24:23–26). In terms of what has been called the Chronicler's "philosophy of retribution," such an outcome was only to be expected.[27] From the Chronicler's perspective the documentation of the positive aspects of Joash's reign would have to be reinterpreted in light of the documentation of the negative aspects, and vice versa.

In this case, the *maśśāʾ* texts in question would be prophecies that reinterpret previous prophecies about Joash. There may have been prophecies predicting that he would gain Yhwh's favor and have success because of his early achievements, which would have had to be explained in view of the way bad choices brought him to a bad end.

2.4 SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE FROM THE NARRATIVES

All three of the foregoing descriptions of the *maśśāʾ* lead to the same conclusion about its basic function: It serves to reinterpret previous revelation in light of ambiguities and/or unforeseen complications that might call it into question, modifying or complementing that revelation so as to show that it is being fulfilled with respect to its main thrust, even if not with respect to all of its details. This explicit evidence combined with Weis's preliminary results will provide the basis for a working hypothesis to be tested in relation to the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah.

2.5 A WORKING DEFINITION OF MAŚŚĀʾ

Based on the foregoing discussion, the *maśśāʾ* can be defined in terms of three basic elements: 1) First and foremost, a *maśśāʾ* reinterprets a previous revelation that is usually quoted but sometimes only alluded to. It is a type of prophetic discourse that functions in relation to other types, whether prophecies of punishment, vision reports, reports of oracular inquiry, or prophetic laments, and so forth. A *maśśāʾ* comes into play when the viability of some other prophecy becomes questionable, whether because of vagueness in the way it was first stated, a delay in the fulfillment of what it predicted, a turn of events that seems contrary to what it predicted, or a misunderstanding in the way it was received, and so forth. In such circumstances the *maśśāʾ* serves to clarify and reaffirm—perhaps in some modified way—what was previously prophesied. 2) Second, to this end the *maśśāʾ* identifies some historical development as evidence of Yhwh's involvement in the present course of events, which provides evidence of the ongoing vitality of the questionable prophecy. 3) Third, this claim regarding Yhwh's initiative becomes the basis for

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[27] S. Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 98–155.

directives concerning appropriate reactions or responses, or for insights into how Yhwh's initiative affects the future. Although these three elements can take various forms and be configured in different ways, they work together to the same rhetorical end, that is, reinterpretation. A *maśśāʾ* is, in effect, a "re-revelation."

3. THE *MAŚŚĀʾ* TEXTS IN ISAIAH

I will now investigate whether these definitive elements figure in the *maśśāʾ* texts from Isaiah. In conclusion we will come back to the question of whether there are exceptions to this proposed definition, and if so, whether they are extensive enough to call into question the generic status of the *maśśāʾ*.

Because Isa 13–23 is often described as a section of the book containing "oracles against the nations," comparable with similar sections of Jeremiah (chs. 46–51) and Ezekiel (chs. 25–32), analysis of the text has been consequently based on the successive differentiation of one nation from another and on how each nation is individually treated.[28] However, this practice fails to reckon with what is distinctive about the Isaiah collection of oracles against the nations, namely, the way the text is organized on the basis of its *maśśāʾ* superscriptions. In accord with the principle stated at the outset, that of reckoning with the text as it is, we will follow Sweeney's delimitation of the structure of Isa 13:1–23:18, which divides the text into nine units, each of which is headed by a superscription consisting of *maśśāʾ* in the construct state followed a geographical term.[29] This is the basic structural principle rather than the differentiation of one nation from another. (The recurrence of the term *maśśāʾ* in 14:28 does not indicate a separate section because there it is not part of a superscription.) In accord with the same principle, redaction-critical theories about material that may be due to "later addition" has no bearing on delineating the sections of the text.

Isa 30:6–7 differs from the *maśśāʾ* texts in chs. 13–23 because in this case the superscription heads a subsection of the passage that contains it rather than the entire passage (i.e., 30:1–33). Here too, however, consideration is given to the text as it stands, that is, to the passage as a whole. Because the *maśśāʾ*, as a "re-revelation," includes by definition both earlier and later material, such additions—even when that is what they actually are—are not to be arbitrarily excluded.

These *maśśāʾ* texts give rise to many interpretive questions which lie beyond the scope of this article and cannot be explored here. The following observations are limited to determining whether

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[28] P.C. Beentjes, "Oracles against the Nations: A Central Issue in the 'Latter Prophets'," *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 50 (1989), 203–9.

[29] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 212–17.

and how each text fits the definition of *maśśāʾ* proposed above, leaving aside for now even the question of whether and how they fit together in this particular section of Isaiah.[30]

3.1 BABYLON (ISA 13:1–14:32)

This text can be sub-divided into four major sections. First there is a prophecy of the downfall of Babylon in a violent reconfiguration of the international order (13:2–22), identifying the Medes as the agents through which Yhwh is bringing this about (13:17). Second, there is a prophecy of the restoration portended for Israel by Babylon's downfall (14:1–23), described in terms of an inversion in their status: As the captives become the captors (14:1–2), Israel will be in a position to taunt the Babylonians for such a drastic reversal in their fate (14:3–20a). This section concludes with a reiteration of Yhwh's determination to dispossess Babylon (14:20b–23). Third, there is a much less detailed prophecy of Assyria's downfall, also in the context of a reconfiguration of the international order (14:24–27). Fourth, there is a prophecy describing the upshot of this reconfiguration for Philistia (14:28–32), introduced by a brief narrative noting that it was promulgated "in the year that King Ahaz died" (14:28). Philistia will initially experience relief because of their oppressor's downfall, but this will be short-lived because another oppressor will soon appear to carry out Yhwh's judgment against them.

The narrative introduction to the prophecy concerning Philistia (14:28) not only provides some historical information about when the prophecy was promulgated, but also labels this prophecy a *maśśāʾ*. This shows something about how the prophecy concerning Philistia functions as a *maśśāʾ* in relation to how the entire passage (13:2–14:32) functions as a *maśśāʾ*. The functioning of 14:29–32 as a *maśśāʾ* is associated with how it fits into the time frame reflected in the Book of Isaiah as a whole. Philistia's expectations of first being freed and then being conquered again are temporally located in relation to the Assyrian dominance that prevailed "in the year that King Ahaz died." Philistia's foreseeable future thus extends from a particular defeat of Assyria ("the breaking of the rod which smote you"), which is also foretold in 14:24–27, to either the return of the Assyrians or the coming of the Babylonians ("the smoke coming out of the north").[31] The repetition of this historical pattern regarding the success of Philistia's conquerors corresponds inversely to the repetition of the historical pattern regarding the defeat of Israel's conquerors. The functioning of the whole passage (13:2–14:32) as a *maśśāʾ* is thus informed by a typological comparison between the fall of

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[30] On this question, see, e.g., the article by H.C.P. Kim, "Isaiah 22: A Crux or a Clue in Isaiah 13–23?" in E.K. Holt, H.C.P. Kim, and A. Mein (eds.), *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (LHBOTS, 612; London: T&T Clark, 2015), 3–18.

[31] R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 147–50.

Assyria and the fall of Babylon, which is created by the juxtaposition of the four sections delineated above.

The first prophecy concerning Babylon (13:2–22) is the one that has been called into question by the actual course of events, and by implication also the second prophecy of Israel's restoration (14:1–23) has also been called into question because the fulfillment of the latter depends on the fulfillment of the former. It is questionable whether the rise of the Medes (13:17) actually portends Babylon's downfall. Babylon and Media had been allies in the fight against the Assyrians, but once Assyria was defeated they became rivals. How can it be realistically expected that Yhwh will enable the Medes to eventually prevail, and thus enable Israel to eventually be restored? This uncertainty is countered by citing two already fulfilled prophecies of similar eventualities. Just as it was once prophesied that Yhwh would bring down Assyria in the context of a violent reconfiguration of the international order (14:24–27), and this indeed came to pass, the prophecy that Yhwh will bring down Babylon in a reconfiguration of the international order (13:2–23) will similarly come to pass. And just as Yhwh prevented the downfall of Assyria from negatively affecting Israel, by containing their archetypal enemies the Philistines through subsequent developments (14:29–32), Yhwh will cause the downfall of Babylon to affect Israel positively by creating a context conducive to Israel's restoration (14:1–2).[32]

By reinforcing the expectation that just as Assyria has fallen so will Babylon, this typological comparison gives added force to the directives that are predicated on the latter. These plural commands (13:2, 6a; 14:21) are meant primarily for adherents of Yhwh, but they are addressed to any and all who might overhear them in the global context in which the action against Babylon is envisioned. The approaching enemy host is to welcomed (13:2), even though this entails also being prepared to lament (13:6a) because all will suffer in the process of getting rid of the tyrant. All are summoned to extend the elimination of the Babylonians to the second generation, to insure that they will never rise again (14:21).

The *maśśāʾ* concerning Babylon fits the proposed definition of the *maśśāʾ* because it reinterprets two still contingent prophecies (13:2–22 and 14:1–23) by means of juxtaposition with two already fulfilled prophecies (14:24–27 and 14:29–32) This juxtaposition creates a typological comparison which reaffirms the eventualities prophesied in 13:2–14:23 as realistic expectations due to the involvement of Yhwh in the course of human events, and also reinforces the directives describing how those affected are to orient themselves toward this evolving future.

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[32] "The prophetic message about Assyria provides the key for interpreting the course of events during the rise and fall of the Babylonian Empire" (J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB, 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000], 289). Similarly, B.S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 124.

3.2 MOAB (15:1–16:14)

This prophecy is basically an extended lament over the destruction of Moab (15:2–9; 16:6–12) interrupted by an exhortation that Moab seek Judah's protection (16:1–5). The serious damage done by an unidentified enemy provokes mourning not only on the part of the Moabites themselves (15:8) but also on the part of the prophetic bystander (15:5; 16:9, 12). Despite the prophet's (feigned?) empathy, expressed also in the exhortation to seek protection from Judah (6:1–5), he finally concludes that Moab's fate is deserved (16:6–7) and that their pleas for divine help will come to naught (16:12).[33] Yhwh is not explicitly identified as the author of Moab's fate, nor as the source of the prophet's message, but this is implied and subsequently made explicit.

This prophecy becomes a *maśśāʾ* by virtue of an appended annotation (16:13–14) which explicitly states the terms in which the prophecy is being reinterpreted. It is described as "the word which Yhwh spoke concerning Moab in the past" (16:13). Thus, the speaker of the lament brings a prophetic message from Yhwh and about Yhwh. Some doubt has apparently arisen about the efficacy of this prophecy because Moab's situation has taken a more fortunate turn.[34] The annotation goes on to place a specific time limit on a reversal: Within three years Yhwh will cause Moab to again suffer the kind of fate described in the foregoing lament (16:14). Thus, the directives previously given retain their forcefulness: "Let Moab wail, and let everyone wail for Moab" (16:17).[35]

The *maśśāʾ* concerning Moab fits the proposed definition of the *maśśāʾ* because it makes explicit certain facts that were only implicit in a previous prophecy, including the important fact that the destruction being visited on Moab is Yhwh's doing. In the process it is reaffirmed that the appropriate response to this divine initiative is empathetic mourning tempered by the sad realization that the Moabites brought this fate upon themselves.

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[33] This summary is generally consistent with the interpretation worked out in much greater detail by Brian C. Jones (*Howling over Moab: Irony and Rhetoric in Isaiah 15–16* [SBLDS, 157; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996]).

[34] "The editor who added the appendix in Isa 16:13–14 seems to have viewed the earlier poem as unfulfilled" (J.B. Couey, "Evoking and Evading: The Poetic Presentation of the Moabite Catastrophe in Isaiah 15–16," in E.K. Holt, H.C.P. Kim, and A. Mein [eds.], *Concerning the Nations: Essays on the Oracles against the Nations in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel* [LHBOTS, 612; London: T&T Clark, 2015], 19–31 [31]).

[35] With regard to the various possible historical settings for the developments within this scenario, see H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27: A Continental Commentary* (trans. T.H. Trapp; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 103–53. According to Brevard S. Childs (*Isaiah*, 132): "Probably the concluding verses succeed in bringing the oracle into the larger structure of the *maśśāʾ* collection of chapters 13–23."

3.3 DAMASCUS (17:1–18:7)

This text juxtaposes prophecies having to do with the disastrous alliance between Damascus and Israel (17:2–11) and prophecies having to do with a possible alliance between the people of Yhwh and Cush (17:12–18:7). The already evident fulfillment of the first set of prophecies, which pertain historically to Assyria's reaction to the Syro-Israelite attack on Judah (late 8th century; see Isa 7:1–17; 2 Kgs 15:5–9), reveals a typological pattern that is potentially evident in the second set of prophecies.

The primary prophecy in the first section (17:2–3) foretells the ruination of Damascus, and the corresponding ruination of Israel. Succeeding prophecies in the first section (17:4–11) spell out the long-term repercussions: Israel will be reduced to a tiny remnant (17:4–6), the tragic spectacle will impel the wider human community to recognize Yhwh as the true God (17:7–8), and there will be widespread desolation of the same sort that will befall Syria and Israel (17:9). Because Israel persists in their infidelity despite these developments, which should lead them to do otherwise, any and all of their initiatives will be nipped in the bud (17:10–12).

The primary prophecy in the second section (17:12–14) describes a typological pattern that is revealed when the prophecies in the first section are considered from a perspective in which it is evident that the prediction of Syria and Israel's fall (17:2–3) has been fulfilled, and that the predicted repercussions of this event (17:4–11) are also coming to pass.[36] Considered retrospectively, these events show that in the turbulent course of world history there will be powerful nations that terrorize Yhwh's people, but Yhwh is always in the process of turning back such outbreaks of international chaos just as he is always keeping cosmic chaos in check. In the long term those who despoil the people of Yhwh will themselves be despoiled (17:12–14). The moral of this story is to beware of unnecessary dangerous alliances like the one between Syria and Israel, or else you will suffer similar consequences.

Succeeding prophecies in the second section (18:1–7) exhort the prophet's hearers to consider whether they might not be caught up in a course of events similar to the one that led to the fall of Damascus and Samaria, with a potentially similar disastrous outcome. The context is a diplomatic overture made by the Cushites, in response to which the prophet urges an unidentified group—presumably the leaders of Judah—to send messengers to carefully investigate the situation (18:1–2).[37] The prophet then extends the context of this warning to include the worldwide human community, likewise urging them to attend on an international scale to any and

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[36] The prediction that human beings of all sorts will acknowledge the Holy One of Israel is no doubt a utopian ideal, but 2 Kgs 17:27–28 reports that the Assyrian conquerors mandated that foreigners deported to the cities of Samaria be incorporated into the cult of Yhwh.

[37] Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 209–10.

all military initiatives (18:3). Those who perceptively "look" and "listen" will see that the same pattern of Yhwh's involvement in human affairs, evident in what befell Damascus and Samaria, is being repeated in any alliances that similarly run counter to Yhwh's purposes. He will nip contrary initiatives in the bud and cause widespread desolation, making the despoiling imperial powers and those who seek to ally with them to be like hewn-off branches and like the prey of raptors left exposed as carrion. Thus, those who would involve Yhwh's people in disastrous alliances will be impelled to recognize his divine sovereignty (18:4–7).[38]

The *maśśāʾ* concerning Damascus fits the proposed definition of the *maśśāʾ* because a still unfulfilled prophecy concerning the futility of an alliance with Cush is reinforced by typological comparison with an already fulfilled prophecy concerning the futility of an alliance with Syria. What Yhwh evidently did then becomes the basis on which to see more clearly what Yhwh is claimed to be doing now. This similarity gives greater forcefulness to the directives to "look" and "listen" (18:3b) for signs that international alliances contrary to Yhwh's purposes may be in the making.

3.4 EGYPT (19:1–20:6)

All of this *maśśāʾ* is concerned with action that Yhwh is taking vis-à-vis Egypt. First there is an extensive prophecy about Yhwh's action in the short term (19:1–15), followed by a series of brief prophecies about Yhwh's action in the long term (19:16–25). These prophecies are juxtaposed with a report of a prophetic sign enacted by Isaiah concerning the defeat of Egypt by Assyria (20:1–6).

In the short term, according to 19:1–5, Yhwh will cause internal dissent and confusion among the Egyptians, which will enable control to be taken by "a hard master" and "a fierce king" (19:1b–4). As a result, Egypt will suffer ecological disaster and economic recession (19:5–10), as well as a severe dysfunction in the local leadership (19:11–15). In the long term, according to 19:16–25, as a result of their experience of catastrophe, the Egyptians will become open to a radical transformation of the international order in which the religious and political differences between the Israelites and the imperial superpowers that have oppressed them—Egypt and Assyria—will

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[38] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 254. Marta H. Lavik, in her exhaustive analysis of 18:1–7 (*A People Tall and Smooth-Skinned: The Rhetoric of Isaiah 18* [VTSup, 112; Leiden: Brill, 2007]), finds in this passage a "rhetoric of entrapment." The description of catastrophic consequences, which initially seems to be a warning directed against Cush, is reversed so that it becomes a warning directed against Judah. In light of the larger context including ch. 17, in which a parallel is drawn between the earlier disastrous outcome of the Syro-Israelite alliance and the prospective alliance between Cush and Judah, it becomes evident that there are catastrophic consequences for the entangling foreign ally also.

be effaced as these three peoples are integrated into a transnational people of Yhwh.

In addition to the extremely utopian aspect of these prophecies, what makes them dubious is their failure to specify who Yhwh's agent will be. This vagueness is dispelled by the subsequent report of Isaiah's symbolic action (20:1–6). Yhwh instructed the prophet to publicly go naked and barefoot for three years to indicate the fate of the Egyptians at the hands of the Assyrians. This coincided with the Assyrian conquest of Ashdod, which was successful because the city did not receive any support from their Egyptian allies. The apparent powerlessness of the Egyptians before the Assyrian onslaught gave credence to the claim that Yhwh would use the Assyrians to punish the Egyptians. The nations along the eastern Mediterranean coast, caught in the struggle between the two superpowers, were left with the realization that any alliance with Egypt would be a futile defense against the Assyrian advance.

The *maśśaʾ* concerning Egypt fits the proposed definition of the *maśśaʾ* because of the way in which the prophecy in 20:1–6 reinterprets those in 19:1–25. The prophetic report in 20:1–6, sequenced in relation to the prophecies concerning Yhwh's long- and short-term actions vis-à-vis Egypt (19:1–25), makes them less vague by specifically identifying the Assyrians as Yhwh's agents. Also, the coincidence of Isaiah's symbolic action with the fall of Ashdod to the Assyrians makes their eventual conquest of Egypt realistically plausible. The prophetic claim that Yhwh will cause Egypt to be defeated, and in the process use Egypt for his own purposes, is thereby reinforced. The directives that are characteristic of the *maśśaʾ* are often expressed directly in the form of imperatives, but in this case the directive is expressed indirectly in the form of a rhetorical question: "How shall we escape?" The implication is that there is no escape from the course of events in which Yhwh is working out his purpose, and that Yhwh's people should adapt themselves to the historical process through which he "smites and then heals" (19:22).

3.5 THE WILDERNESS OF THE SEA (21:1–10)

The phrase "wilderness of the sea" is obscure, but it appears to be an indirect way of referring to Babylon, directly mentioned in v. 9. Whether or not this *maśśaʾ* is in effect named after Babylon it concerns Babylon, which makes it the second *maśśaʾ* with this focus in this series. The difference is that from the perspective of the first one (13:1–14:32) the fall of Babylon is prophesied but yet to come, whereas from the perspective of this one (21:1–10) the fall of Babylon is both prophesied and accomplished. For present purposes this text can be divided into two sections, a prophetic vision report (21:1b–5) and a report of the measures taken to confirm what is prophesied in this vision report (21:6–10).

The context of the vision is metaphorically described in terms of an approaching whirlwind. Stormy events are about to happen (21:1b). Then comes a brief description of the visionary experience

itself (21:2). What the prophet sees is the approach of a "plunderer"/"destroyer." What the prophet hears is a message from Yhwh. Elam and Media are first addressed with a command to mobilize in the face of the oncoming threat (v. 2a). Then follows an announcement that Yhwh is putting an end to "sighing" (v. 2b)—an expression emblematic of the violence and suffering that the situation entails. The prophet reacts very strongly (21:3–4) to this "hard vision" (21:2aα) in contrast with those to whom the call is addressed, who are taking it easy and feasting (21:5a). He therefore urges the leaders to "arise!" and prepare for battle (21:5b).

The prophet next receives a revelation instructing him to post a sentinel to watch and listen day and night for travelers bringing reports of events from afar (2:6–7). Eventually the sentinel sees horsemen riding forth with the news that the Babylonians, along with their false gods, have fallen (21:8–9). This message is then relayed to the prophet's hearers, figuratively described as those who have been "threshed and winnowed" in the turbulent course of events (21:10).

A prophet can sometimes be metaphorically described as a sentinel. For example, Yhwh commands Ezekiel to play the role of a sentinel (Ezek 33:7) and Habakkuk describes his conduct of an oracular inquiry as if he were a sentinel positioning himself on a watchtower (Hab 2:1). Here, however, Yhwh commands the prophet, not to metaphorically play the role of a sentinel himself, but to deploy someone else as a real sentinel (21:6–7). The report of this person's activity describes, not prophetic activity in metaphorical terms, but the kinds of things a sentinel might really do: He sees travelers arriving and publicizes the news they bring (21:8–9). In summarizing the import of this news, the prophet describes it as a revelation from Yhwh (21:10). What a sentinel has done to find out that Babylon has fallen is presented as if it were Yhwh's response to an oracular inquiry. Thus, the kind of inquiry that would be undertaken to find out from witnesses what is really happening in world affairs is treated as a revelatory practice, because it serves to confirm the prophecy of Babylon's fall in 21:2b.

The historical background of these prophecies covers the late 7th to mid-6th centuries, after the Medes and Babylonians had been allies in the successful effort to overthrow Assyria. In the ensuing reformation of the international order Elam was absorbed by Media, and the Medes and Babylonians became rivals. From a Judahite perspective, to keep the Babylonians from extending their territory on the western front it was advantageous for Media and its allies to keep pressuring Babylon on the eastern front. The vision report in 2:1b–5 invites its audience to see Media's acting in this capacity as the beginning of a historical process that would eventually bring Babylon down. This outcome was far from inevitable, however, and for decades Babylon seemed unstoppable. It would eventually take the

might of Persia, aided by Media, to bring about what was foreseen in the vision (21:2b).[39]

In this *maśśaʾ* there is, on the one hand, a questionable prophecy predicting that the mobilization of the Medes would bring down the superpower threatening to destroy and plunder Judah. On the other hand, this prophecy is reinterpreted by the report of much later prophetic activity identifying this superpower as Babylon and showing that this prediction has actually been fulfilled.[40] This confirmation of fulfillment is identified as a revelation from Yhwh, and thus becomes a divinely sanctioned model of how the "threshed and winnowed" folk, to whom the *maśśaʾ* is addressed, are to regard prophecies similar to the vision reported in 21:2. When confronted with prophetic claims about Yhwh's activity in the international arena, they are to diligently watch and listen—as a sentinel would—for signs of fulfillment in the unfolding course of events. The *maśśaʾ* concerning the Wilderness of the Sea fits the proposed definition of the *maśśaʾ* because it features the three basic elements of the genre: a prophecy reinterpreted, an identification of Yhwh's involvement in human events, and a directive concerning an appropriate response.

3.6 DUMAH (21:11–12)

If this short and cryptic passage is considered by itself, there is little that can be definitely said about it. When considered in relation to the preceding *maśśaʾ*, however, it can be seen to reflect much the same prophetic verification practice described in 21:6–10. The text begins with the report of a voice calling to the prophet from Seir (21:6a). Whatever else this might mean, it locates the discourse in the context of some international situation relating to Edom. The voice addresses the prophet as a sentinel and asks about the night—the sort of question that might actually be put to a sentinel, as darkness can often seem threatening.[41] The sentinel/prophet replies that

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[39] There is considerable uncertainty and disagreement about the historical setting of 20:1–10 (Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 310–14; Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, 176–77). Some scholars are more or less in agreement with the scenario proposed here (e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 326; S. Erlandsson, *The Burden of Babylon: A Study of Isaiah 12:2–14:23* [Lund: Gleerup, 1970], 85–92). Among other theories the most prominent option envisions historical circumstances about a century earlier (e.g., Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 279–83). In either case, the temporal sequencing within this passage remains relatively the same, and the re-interpretive function of the conclusion in relation to the initial prophetic vision/audition report (21:1b–5) also remains the same (Childs, *Isaiah*, 150–51).

[40] Andrew A. Macintosh (*Isaiah XXI: A Palimpsest* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960], 103–30) gives a similar reading of 21:1–10 overall, but wants to ascribe every other verse or part of a verse to the earlier and later situations, respectively.

[41] This passage shares with its predecessor (21:1–10) the theme of the sentinel, but the terminology is different. In 21:6 the word is *məṣappeh* and in 21:11–12 the word is *šōmēr*.

morning is on its way, and then it will again be night, implying that nothing ominous is afoot tonight but this might not be the case tomorrow night. He invites the inquiring voice to come back then and ask again. The kind of inquiry that might be addressed to a prophet concerning the international situation is thus conflated with the kind of inquiry that might be addressed to a sentinel concerning public safety during the night hours.[42] This conflation implies that whatever a prophet might claim about Yhwh's involvement in human events is to be verified by the kind of diligent observation with which a sentinel would assess whether there is really any threat lurking under the cover of darkness.

This text does not fully fit the proposed definition of *maśśāʾ* because it does not deal with the reinterpretation of a particular prophecy concerning Edom. However, it does address in general the same issue of reinterpretation that the other *maśśāʾ* texts in this series address in relation to particular prophecies, namely, in what ways can revelations whose fulfillment is uncertain be authenticated.

3.7 ARABIA (21:13–17)

This passage begins with a twofold exhortation addressed to peoples from two regions of Arabia. The Dedanites, who appear to be fugitives displaced by war, are urged to get themselves to a safe stopping place, and the inhabitants of the land of Tema are urged to provide them with food and water (21:13b–15). There is no explicit indication that the exhortation is prophetic discourse, but this becomes evident in light of what follows. The next section is a prophecy, emphatically identified as a revelation from Yhwh, that foresees the decline of another Arabian people, the Kedarites. It states that their military might will be eclipsed within a year (21:16–17), which means that the flood of fugitives and the need to provide for them will then cease. This prophecy reinterprets the foregoing exhortation by specifying who the previously unnamed aggressors are (i.e., the Kedarites) and how long the aforementioned obligation to assist the refugees will last (i.e., a year).

The *maśśāʾ* concerning Arabia fits the proposed definition of *maśśāʾ* because a second prophecy (21:16–17) clarifies a previous prophecy (21:13b–15) whose efficacy is initially dubious because of its vagueness. The reinterpreting prophecy identifies an eventuality

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[42] John B. Geyer ("The Night of Dumah [Isaiah xxi 11–12]," *VT* 42 [1992], 317–39) proposes that "night" and "day" be understood in mythic terms, connoting light/darkness, life/death, etc., as an alternative to the kind of historical interpretation that tries to fit this vague oracle into some specific historical situation. Such historical interpretations have indeed proved elusive, and the dialogue between the watchman and the prophet may well have mythic connotations, but the basic frame of reference involves a comparison of the way a real-world watchman works with the way a real-world prophet authenticates a revelation.

to be brought about by Yhwh, and thereby limits the duration of the directives imposed in v. 14a, making compliance more likely.

3.8 THE VALLEY OF VISION (22:1–25)

In the first major section of this passage (22:1b–14) Judah is reprimanded for the way they have reacted to near catastrophe. The people were in effect but not actually slain; the leaders were in effect but not actually captured (22:2b–3). Enemy troops were deployed so as to expose the vulnerability of Judah, dominating the surrounding area but not actually penetrating Jerusalem's gates (22:5–8a). The people have reacted with hedonistic rejoicing (22:1b–2a, 13), based on the self-deluded assumption that their defensive measures were effective (22:8b–11a). They have not responded with the sorrow and lamentation that Yhwh would prefer (22:4, 11). He long ago planned for them to narrowly escape (22:11b) to show them their dependence on him. Theirs is a fatal misreading of what has happened, which puts Judah on a self-destructive course (22:14).

In the second major section (22:15–25) Yhwh sends the prophet to reprimand the royal steward Shebna for making his funeral plans, as if the situation were going to remain stable long enough for them to take effect (22:15–16). This is also a fatal misreading of the situation. Through violent circumstances brought about by Yhwh Shebna will be deposed and die, and the armaments he has secured for the royal household will be good for nothing (22:17–19). Yhwh will cause Eliakim to be appointed in Shebna's place, and he will ostensibly be much more effective (22:20–24). In the end, however, Eliakim's achievements will also come to nothing, and the power structure that he represents will collapse (22:25).

This passage reflects the late 8th century Assyrian incursions into Palestine, culminating in the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. The Assyrians all but destroyed Judah, but because they abandoned the siege without taking the city it may have seemed like a triumph for Judah. These prophecies aim to disabuse the Judahites of this misperception, and to get them to see that these events call instead for mournful self-reflection. It may seem that the Assyrian retreat offers them the space in which to create a functional independent state, but this is a delusion. In reality these events contain within themselves the seeds of Judah's eventual destruction.[43]

The initial prophecy (22:1b–14) deals with conflicting interpretations of events, asserting on Yhwh's authority that Jerusalem's last-minute escape—however fortunate it may be in the short term—is a negative rather than a positive sign. Yhwh has brought about their deliverance, but in order to show them the dire straits they are in, not to make them think that they are immune to disaster. The second

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[43] Wildberger, *Isaiah 13–27*, 347–77; G.M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1–39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* 6:195–96; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13–39* (trans. R.A. Wilson; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 139.

prophecy (22:15–25) reinterprets this message concerning the destiny of Judah as a whole in terms of a message concerning the future of particular royal officials. It emphasizes that whatever governmental effectiveness they manage to achieve will in time be rendered futile by Yhwh. The appropriate response is to join in the mourning and lamentation that Yhwh originally called for but Judah refused to undertake (22:4, 12).[44]

The passage concerning the Valley of Vision thus fits the proposed definition of *maśśāʾ* because it features the three definitive elements: one prophecy reinterpreting another, identification of action taken by Yhwh in the course of events, and specification of an apt response. Also, *maśśāʾ* is used here (22:25b) in word play that reflects this sense of the term. Eliakim is figuratively described as the "peg" (*yātēd*) on which the "weight" (*kābôd*) of his administrative responsibility hangs (22:24). When the peg gives way and his ostensibly competent governance is exposed as ineffective, all that previously hung on it is described as *maśśāʾ*. This plays upon the double meaning of the word. On the one hand it figuratively refers to the heavy responsibilities of leadership, as it can in a text like Num 11:11–17, where the dominant metaphor—in this case Moses "carrying" the Israelites like a nursemaid carries a child—makes such usage contextually appropriate.[45] Here the dominant metaphor of the peg which bears the weight of government similarly provides a metaphorical context in which *maśśāʾ* can have this meaning. On the other hand, the word also refers to the kind of reinterpretation that has been shown above to be the definitive element of *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic term. When the peg collapses and all that once hung on it is "cut off" (*krt*), the governmental structure that it symbolizes is exposed as having been fragile and flimsy all along, no matter how sturdy it seemed at the time. This entire passage (22:1b–25) is a *maśśāʾ* in the sense that it prophetically reinterprets the popular perception of Judah's place within the international order, showing that they do not actually have the security that seemed to prevail in the wake of the Assyrian retreat. Similarly, Eliakim's administrative measures are called a *maśśāʾ* because they will not turn out to be the solid achievements that they once appeared to be.

3.9 TYRE (23:1–18)

This passage begins with an extensive call to lament the fall of Tyre, addressed to its sister city Sidon, to its trading partner Tarshish, and to Cyprus where there were Phoenician colonies (23:1b–14). The downfall of the once prosperous city is explicitly attributed to Yhwh (23:8–9a), whose general purpose is to dishonor the honored of the earth (23:9b) and whose particular goal is to destroy the strongholds of Canaan (23:11b). Because the analysis of the syntax of 23:13 is

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[44] Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 289–90.
[45] See above, 12–13.

contested, it is not clear what power was acting as Yhwh's agent.[46] This verse is variously taken to indicate that it was Assyria rather than Babylon, or that it was Babylon rather than Assyria, or that Assyria displaced Babylon as the aggressor, and so forth.[47] In any case, 23:1b–14 expresses the great loss felt by the entire region because of Tyre's overthrow.

The next section is a prophecy of Tyre's restoration (23:15–18). After being forgotten for seventy years the city will once again become the prosperous commercial center that it once was, but this time its profits will be dedicated to Yhwh for the common good. This transformation is likened to the change undergone by a prostitute who becomes a renowned singer (23:15b–6).[48]

The *maśśāʾ* concerning Tyre fits the proposed definition of *maśśāʾ* because a prophecy that predicts the end of the city (23:1–14) is reinterpreted by another prophecy that views the fall of Tyre as but the prelude to its restoration (23:15–18). Both the destruction and the restoration are identified as actions of Yhwh. The indirectly addressed audience of this passage is invited to acknowledge the widespread grief of those who are directly addressed, to nevertheless agree that this fate is in accord with Yhwh's just purpose, and to vicariously join in singing the "sweet melody" (23:6) that prophetically anticipates the transition from Tyre's being forgotten to its being restored.

3.10 THE BEASTS OF THE NEGEV (30:6–7 WITHIN 30:1–33)

This example differs from the others in Isa 13:1–23:18 in that the formulaic superscription, "the *maśśāʾ* of the beasts of the Negev," heads only a subsection (30:6–7) of a larger passage (30:1–33) rather than the larger passage as a whole.[49] This is somewhat similar to

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[46] Childs, *Isaiah*, 166.

[47] Ronald E. Clements (*Isaiah 1–39*, 191–92) surveys the four main theories regarding the historical background of this prophecy.

[48] I find much to agree with in R. Reed Lessing's thorough and incisive treatment of Isa 23 (*Interpreting Discontinuity: Isaiah's Tyre Oracle* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004]), particularly his demonstration of the superiority of rhetorical criticism over redaction criticism as a lens through which the historical significance and setting of the text can best be viewed. However, even in terms of his own approach, which argues that the entire chapter comprises a single oracle in the form of a satirical city-lament, I do not find his analysis of the rhetorical shift at v. 15 to be adequate. He describes vv. 15–18 as the "epilogue" that serves to reinforce the main message in vv. 1–14 (pp. 221–23), but I do not see how a promise of the city's restoration, which has completely abandoned the hortatory language of vv. 1–14, is all-of-a-piece with satirical mourning over its fall. Also arguing on rhetorical rather than redaction-critical grounds, I would maintain that vv. 15–18 are subsequent to and serve a reinterpretive function vis-à-vis vv. 1–14. The text falls into earlier and later sections for rhetorical rather than redaction-critical reasons because this is the rhetorical design of the *maśśāʾ*.

[49] On the delimitation of 30:1–33 as a textual entity, see Sweeney, *Isaiah*

14:28–32 which is also a subsection of a larger passage (13:1–14:32) with a heading that labels it a *maśśāʾ*. The heading in 14:28 is a narrative introduction rather than a superscription of the formulaic sort that is typical of the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah, and 30:1–33 has no heading at all. Despite these differences, 30:6–7 functions in relation to 30:1–33 much as 14:28–32 functions in relation to 13:1–14:32, configuring the passage as a whole into a *maśśāʾ*.

The opening prophecy (30:1–5) is a condemnation of Yhwh's people as "rebellious children" because they inadvisably seek an alliance with the Egyptians, an alliance that will prove futile. The next section (30:6–7) reinterprets this initial prophecy in two particular respects. First, 30:6 further describes seeking a pact with Egypt in terms of a dangerous and conflicted journey, on which "beasts of the Negev"—such as serpents and lions—are to be encountered. It also entails paying tribute—a very bad investment! Second, 30:7 further describes Egypt, already characterized as an unreliable ally, with the epithet *rahab hēm šābet*. The phraseology is obscure, but in any case it combines a reference to the mythic figure Rahab with attributes implying inaction or powerlessness.[50] Rahab—alias Tannin and Leviathan—was the chaos monster that Yhwh defeated or tamed in order to create the world, thereby endowing creation with the blessing of fertility.[51] Thus Egypt is cast in the role of the evil empire which threatens to undo the order of creation, but which Yhwh has rendered impotent in order to keep the earth fertile.

This characterization of Egypt provides the conceptual underlay for the rest of the passage. First, because Yhwh has made Egypt powerless Judah will have to pay the price of refusing to heed the prophetic warning about Yhwh's policy of neutrality. They will suffer the consequences of Egypt's inability to protect them (30:9–17). Second, because Yhwh's neutralization of the threat of chaos establishes a world order characterized by justice, mercy, and fertility, a chastened Judah can expect to be the beneficiary of these blessings. Yhwh will enable them to be once again attentive to prophetic instruction and will once again endow them with plenty (30:23–26). And third, because Yhwh has shown himself to be in control of the cosmic forces affecting human affairs he will destroy the Assyrians, the enemies against whom the Egyptians proved ineffective (30:27–33).

The reinterpretation in 30:6–7 of the original prophecy in 30:1–5 thus provides the basis for the expansion of the revelation in 30:8–33. In this arrangement two of the three definitive characteristics of

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1–39, 386–92.

[50] H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 28–39: A Continental Commentary* (trans. T.H. Trapp; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 132.

[51] Isa 27:1; 51:8–9; Ezek 29:3; 32:3; Ps 89:11; Job 26:12. The fertility motif is explicit in Pss 74:13–14 and 104:5–30. Cf. Gen 1:21; Ps 148:7; Job 3:8; 7:12; 40:25.

the *maśśāʾ* are evident: a prophecy reinterpreted and the identification of Yhwh's activity in the course of events. The third definitive element, a directive prescribing an appropriate response, is evident in the command to produce a written record of what befalls Judah as the envisioned trajectory of events unfolds (30:8). Future generations will therefore have prophetic instruction from which they can learn the consequences of not heeding prophetic instruction. Because of the way 30:1–33 is composed, in relation to the subsection that is explicitly designated a *maśśāʾ* (30:5–6), the whole passage fits the proposed definition of a *maśśāʾ*.

4. CONCLUSION

Isaiah's *maśśāʾ* texts generally fit the genre definition proposed above. And, as hypothesized, there is extensive variation in the configuration of the genre's definitive elements. In one case, there is an annotation (16:13–14) that explicitly reinterprets the foregoing prophecy (15:1b–16:12). In most of the other *maśśāʾ* texts, the reinterpretation results from the way in which several prophecies are juxtaposed. In one case, the reinterpretive function of one prophecy (14:28–32) vis-à-vis the others in the same configuration (13:1–14:27) is made explicit by its identification as a *maśśāʾ* (14:28)—a *maśśāʾ* within a *maśśāʾ*, as it were. In other cases, the reinterpretation is the effect of the way in which the prophecies in the *maśśāʾ* passage are listed.[52] Of the ten *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah only one, the *maśśāʾ* concerning Dumah (21:11–12), does not fully fit the proposed definition of the *maśśāʾ* genre. Because this text is problematic in so many respects it is difficult to weigh the significance of this single deviation from the norm. However, because the text reflects the reinterpretive concern that is definitive for the *maśśāʾ*, I conclude that it is not enough of an exception to call into question the status of the *maśśāʾ* as a genre category.

4.1 THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE MAŚŚĀʾ

There is a growing recognition that the genius of prophetic literature is the reinterpretation of oracles that were addressed to particular historical situations in relation to other historical situations.[53] If so, one might ask what is distinctive about the kind of reinterpretation

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[52] With regard to the phenomenon of oracle listing, see M.H. Floyd, "New Form Criticism and Beyond: The Historicity of Prophetic Literature Revisited," in M.J. Boda, M.H. Floyd, and C.M. Toffelmire (eds.), *The Book of the Twelve and the New Form Criticism* (ANEM, 10; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 17–36 (25–31).

[53] Armin Lange, e.g, designates biblical prophetic texts as not merely "written prophecy," but "literary prophecy" ("Literary Prophecy and Oracle Collection: A Comparison between Judah and Greece in Persian Times," in M.H. Floyd and R.D. Haak [eds.], *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism* [LHBOTS, 427; New York: T&T Clark, 2006], 248–75).

done by the *maśśāʾ*. As we have seen, the *maśśāʾ* deals specifically with prophecies whose accuracy has, for various reasons, become questionable. The kind of reinterpretation that is perhaps most common in prophetic literature is the application of a prophecy intended for a particular situation to another situation. In many cases, prophecies have this reapplicability precisely because they have been fulfilled. Because they have proved true in one situation they become models of what could prove true in another similar situation.[54] The *maśśāʾ*, in contrast, attempts to show that a dubious prophecy is being fulfilled—by comparing it with analogous prophecies that have been fulfilled (13:1–14:32), by specifying a time limit (15:1–16:4 and 21:13–17), or by turning a prophecy of destruction into the prelude to a prophecy of restoration (23:1–18), and so forth. In one of the Isaiah *maśśāʾ* texts (21:1–10), one prophecy is subsequently confirmed by the outcome of the next, but in this case, too, the point is that the initial prophecy is dubious. Is it possible that a particular text could be, in effect, a *maśśāʾ* without being explicitly labeled as such? That remains to be seen. It would first be necessary to clarify the definition of *maśśāʾ*, and that is the main concern here.

4.2 THE ETYMOLOGICAL QUESTION

If *maśśāʾ* in its prophetic sense is to be defined as proposed here, what about its etymology? There are two main possibilities. On the one hand, the word that eventually became *maśśāʾ* in its prophetic sense was originally derived from *nśʾ* but its meaning evolved, through one metaphorical extension after another, until it left the semantic field of this root entirely. Without documentation, the stages of such a process cannot be traced. Or, on the other hand, although *maśśāʾ* in the prophetic sense appears to have been derived from *nśʾ*, it originally was not. Phonetic changes have coincidentally caused the original word, derived from some other root, to take the same form as *maśśāʾ* derived from *nśʾ*, Such possibilities are not linguistically uncommon.[55] For example, the English word *toast* has three apparently unrelated meanings. It can refer to bread that has been browned over some source of heat, a drink ceremoniously announced in someone's honor, and a long narrative folk-poem. And then there's the current slang expression, "to be toast," meaning that someone is finished, defunct or in serious trouble. The first meaning supposedly evolved into the second because it was once customary to submerge toasted spiced bread in a drink of wine to flavor it (ugh!), but not even such a fanciful explanation has been

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[54] As I have argued in "New Form Criticism and Beyond," 25–31 and also in "Was Prophetic Hope Born of Disappointment? The Case of Zechariah," in E. ben Zvi (ed.), *Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature* (Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society, 92: Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 168–96.

[55] A. Liberman, *Word Origins . . . and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 205–16.

advanced to explain how *toast* came to have its other meanings.[56] It is quite possible that the various meanings of this word were not all actually derived from the same root as the word in its first sense, despite the identical forms. In any case, such disparate meanings of "the same" word open up the possibility for word play, of the sort that is found in the Shebna/Eliakim episode at the conclusion of the Valley of Vision *maśśāʾ* (Isa 22:25).

The question of how to translate *maśśāʾ* in its prophetic sense is not easily answered. One possibility is "reinterpreted prophecy" but, as noted above, there are various sorts of reinterpreted prophecies throughout the prophetic literature. This translation would not capture what is distinctive about the *maśśāʾ*. Another already mentioned possibility is "re-revelation," which has the virtue of implying that the reinterpretation is as revelatory as the prophecy being reinterpreted. Another possibility is to just leave *maśśāʾ* untranslated and let it eventually become an English word in much the same way that "midrash" has become an English word.

4.3 IN SUM

At the outset we posed the question of whether the *maśśāʾ* texts in Isaiah fit Weis's definition of the *maśśāʾ* as a prophetic genre. This study has shown that if the methodology is simplified, so that the main issue can be more clearly and directly addressed, they do. Thus, Weis's basic insights regarding the nature of the *maśśāʾ* genre remain worthy of consideration.

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[56] "Toast," *Oxford English Dictionary*, ad loc.