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THE "EVERLASTING COVENANT" AND THE "CITY OF CHAOS": INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND IRONY IN ISAIAH 24

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Isaiah 24-27 often referred to as Isaiah's "Apocalypse,"[1] brings to culmination the judgment oracles against the nations recorded in chaps. 13-23. In this Apocalypse the prophet describes God's devastating universal judgment which reverses creation and reduces the world to chaos. Ironically, he associates this judgment with the subduing of chaos and the establishment of God's kingdom on Mount Zion.

Isaiah 24 describes this coming judgment in particularly vivid detail. According to v 5, the earth's inhabitants have "disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes, and broken the everlasting covenant."[2] This "rebellion" (v 20) prompts God to implement against them the covenantal "curse" (v 6), which in typical fashion brings with it widespread infertility and sorrow (vv 4, 7-11).[3] The judgment, which is accompanied by a torrential downpour reminiscent of the Noahic flood and by an earthquake which rocks the earth to its very core (vv 18b-19), brings

[1] Scholars have debated the precise genre of these chapters, an issue which is beyond the scope of this study. For discussions of this subject, see, among others, W. R Millar, *Isaiah 24-27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic* (HSM 11; Missoula: Scholars, 1976) 1-9,114-15; J. N. Oswalt, "Recent Studies in Old Testament Eschatology and Apocalyptic," *JETS* 24 (1981) 294-98; and R Youngblood, "A Holistic Typology of Prophecy and Apocalyptic," *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 216-18.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

[3] Agricultural infertility appears in biblical covenantal curse lists (cf. Lev 26:20; Deut 28:17-18, 22-23, 38-42) and in ancient Near Eastern treaty curses. Examples of the latter include paragraph 64 of the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon and stele IA of the Aramaic Sefire treaty. See. J. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3d ed.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1969) 539, 660, respectively.

total (vv 1-3), inescapable (vv 17-18a), and final (v 20b) destruction. In conjunction with this judgment the prophet anticipates the downfall of an unidentified city (vv 10-12), which is contrasted with restored Zion (v 23). In short, this divine judgment at least partially reverses creation by reducing the earth to a marred (vv 1, 19) and virtually uninhabited (v 6) state approximating the unformed and unfilled condition which prevailed prior to God's creative work (cf. Gen 1:2).[4]

Two difficult questions face the interpreter of Isaiah 24: (1) What is the referent of "the everlasting covenant" mentioned in v 5? (2) What is the identity of the "city of chaos" (v 10, NASB) referred to as the object of God's judgment? This second question is complicated by the context. Each of the following chapters (cf. 25:2; 26:5-6;27:10) also mentions a city which is brought to ruin by divine judgment. Is the same city in view throughout these chapters, or is more than one referent to be understood? Scholars have offered a variety of answers to these questions. Realizing that this lack of unanimity might be a signal that the text is hopelessly opaque to the modern interpreter, I will nevertheless attempt to offer a solution for each of these problems. In the process I will suggest that recognizing the text's very ambiguity is the key to its proper interpretation and that Isaiah has utilized the literary devices of intentional ambiguity and irony for rhetorical purposes.

Proposed Answers to the Questions

The "Everlasting Covenant"

In response to the first question, many interpreters, pointing to the text's cosmic flavor, identify the "everlasting covenant" as the universal covenant supposedly made between God and humankind at creation,[5] or as the Noahic covenant of Genesis 9.[6] Emphasizing ele-

[4] In this regard, it is noteworthy that the city is called קִרְיַת־תֹּהוּ [*qiryat tohu*] (24:10), a phrase which may echo the description of the primeval state of the earth (cf. Gen 1:2 where the earth is said to be תֹּהוּ וָבֹהוּ [*tohu wabohu*], "unformed and unfilled"). Since Isaiah uses תֹּהוּ rather frequently of things (such as idols) which are empty and worthless (cf. BDB 1062), the word might characterize the city as rebellious. However, it is more likely in this context (which focuses on the results of God's intervention, cf. vv 7-13) that it refers to the devastated condition which overtakes the city following God's judgment (cf. the use of the word in Isa 34:11).

[5] See, for example, E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965-72) 2.158; W J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 74; and J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 446. While acknowledging that the Noahic covenant may be the specific referent here, Oswalt notes that the "broader reference is to the implicit covenant between Creator and creature, in which the Creator promises abundant life in return for the creature's living according to the norms laid down at Creation."

[6] See, for example, G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) 411; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39* (Philadelphia:

ments in the text which seem to point in direction of Israel, others see the Sinaitic covenant between God and Israel as the referent.[7]

Each of these proposals, while attractive in some ways, faces serious difficulties. Though one might naturally think of a universal covenant between God and humankind as originating at the time of creation, there is no biblical record of such a covenant.[8] On the surface, the Noahic covenant is an attractive option because it is universal in scope and is actually called a בְּרִית עוֹלָם (*berit 'olam*), everlasting covenant (Gen 9:16).[9] However, a structural analysis of Genesis 9 reveals that the covenant mentioned there is a seemingly unconditional divine promise which does not appear to be linked formally to the mandate issued at the beginning of the chapter

Westminster, 1974) 183; J. Vermeylin, *Du prophete Isaie a l'apocalyptique* (2 vols.; Paris: J. Cabalda, 1977) 1.353;J. D. W Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 318; W Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant* (2d ed; Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 1986) 32; and J. H. Hayes and S. A Irvine, *Isaiah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) 300-301.

[7] See, for example, W E. March, "A Study of Two Prophetic Compositions in Isaiah 24:1-27:1" (ThD. dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, NY, 1966) 29-32; D. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 77; and D. C. Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration: An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24-27* (JSOTSupp 61; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 27-29.

[8] Note that Oswalt refers to this covenant as "implicit" (*Isaiah*, 446). Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation*, 11- 46, see especially 20-39) proposes that the first biblical reference to a covenant (Gen 6:18) presupposes an already existing covenant between God and humankind which originated at creation. Some have seen an allusion to this covenant in Hos 6:7 (cf. NIY; "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant"), but אָדָם [*'adam*] can just as easily be taken as a generic reference to humankind or, better yet, be understood (with a slight emendation of the preposition prefixed to the form in the Hebrew text) as a place name (note שָׁם [sam], "there," in the parallel line). See E. W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 180-81. Note also the reservations expressed by Dumbrell, 45-46.

[9] The phrase בְּרִית עוֹלָם has several referents in the OT, including: (1) God's promise to Noah that the earth would never again be destroyed by a flood (Gen 9:16); (2) God's promise to Abraham of numerous descendants and of the land of Canaan as an eternal possession (Gen 17:7, 19; cf. l Chr 16:16-17 and Ps 105:9-10); (3) circumcision as a perpetual obligation placed upon Abraham and his descendants to remind them of their relationship with God (Gen 17:13); (4) Sabbath observance as a perpetual obligation placed upon Israel (Exod 31:16); (5) the bread of the presence which Israel was perpetually obligated to place before the Lord on the Sabbath (Lev 24:8); (6) the priests' share of Israel's offerings (Num 18:19); (7) God's promise to Phinehas of a priestly dynasty (Num 25:13); (8) God's promise to David (2 Sam 23:5); and (9) God's eschatological covenant with Israel (Isa 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26). As this survey demonstrates, the phrase can refer to a promise or an obligation. This lexical range is consistent with the conclusion of E. Kutsch, who proposes that בְּרִית, rather than meaning "agreement" ("Bund"), refers to an obligation ("Verpflichtung") or obligations, whether taken upon oneself (as in a pledge or oath), imposed on another, bilaterally accepted, or imposed by a third party. See Verheissurlg und Gesetz (BZAW 131; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973) 1-27, and the helpful summary provided by Nicholson, *God and His People*, 89-93.

(Gen 9:1-7).[10] Furthermore, Isa 54:9 refers to this promise as a unilateral divine oath which God will not violate. Thus the Noahic covenant appears to be different in nature from the "everlasting covenant" of Isaiah 24, which is clearly an arrangement that can be broken by humankind and has a curse attached. Finally, the language of v 5 (cf. תּוֹרֹת [*torot*], "laws," and חֹק [*ḥoq*], "statute") might suggest the Sinaitic covenant is in view here.[11] However, this covenant is never specifically referred to as a בְּרִית עוֹלָם.[12] Furthermore, a reference to this covenant, which was an arrangement strictly between God and Israel, fits awkwardly in chap. 24, with its cosmic tone and language.[13] Even

[10] Gen 9:1-17 can be divided into two units. In vv 1-7, which are marked off by an inclusio (cf. the verbal similarities between vv 1 and 7), God delivers a mandate to Noah and his sons (and indirectly to their descendants) to reproduce themselves and populate the earth. He prohibits murder because it runs counter to the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and, worse yet, is a violation of the divine image present in all men. In vv 8-17 the Lord makes a perpetual covenant with Noah and his descendants. This "covenant" takes the form of a promise that God will never again destroy the earth by a flood. God establishes the rainbow as a sign, or guarantee, of the promise.

[11] See Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration*, 27. The plural תּוֹרֹת almost always refers to the stipulations of the Mosaic Law (cf. Exod 16:28; 18:16, 20; Lev 26:46; Ps 105:45; Ezek 43:11; 44:5, 24; Dan 9:10). One apparent exception is Gen 26:5, where the Lord states: "Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws." In the context of the Abrahamic narrative, the Lord's laws would be the various commands and obligations which he gave to the patriarch (cf. Gen 12:1; 17:1, 9-14; 22:2). Rhetorically speaking, it seems as if the author is trying to portray Abraham as a model for Israel, a lawkeeper par excellence, as it were. The singular חֹק (ḥoq), though sometimes referring to the Mosaic Law (see, for example, Ezra 7:10), has a much broader range of usage, being used of various human and divine decrees (see, for example, Gen 47:22,26; Exod 15:25; 1 Sam 30:25; Ps 2:7).

[12] In response to this objection Johnson (ibid.). points to four texts (Judg 2:1; Ps 111:5, 9; Exod 31:16) where, in his opinion, עוֹלָם is associated with the Mosaic covenant. However, it is not certain if Judg 2:1 and Psalm 111 are referring to the Mosaic covenant or to the Abrahamic promise of the land. In Judg 2:1, just prior to the statement "I will never break my covenant with you," the Lord recalls that he led his people into the land promised to the patriarchs. While the reference to the Lord's "precepts" in Ps 111:7 would seem to point in the direction of the Mosaic covenant, v 6, with its mention of the gift of the land, suggests that vv 5 and 9 may be alluding to the Abrahamic promise. Exod 31:16 specifically refers to the Sabbath as a perpetually binding "covenant" (or "obligation") which, as Johnson notes, seems to be a sign of God's relationship with Israel via the Mosaic covenant Cf. also F. J. Helfmeyer, "אוֹת," *TDOT* 1:181-83.

[13] Though אֶרֶץ [*'eres*] can sometimes refer to the land of Israel, it has in chap. 24 its more cosmic and universal sense of "earth" or "world; as the parallelism of vv 4 (where אֶרֶץ is parallel to תֵּבֵל [*tebel*]), 13 (// עַמִּים [*'ammim*], "peoples, nations"), and 18 (//מָרוֹם, "heaven") indicates. The word pair תֵּבֵל/אֶרֶץ clearly designates the earth/world in several texts (cf. 1 Sam 2:8; 1 Chr 16:30; Job 37:12; Pss 19:4; 24:1; 33:8; 89:11; 90:2; 96:13; 98:9; Prov 8:26, 31; Isa 14:16-17; 34:1; Jer 10:12; 51:15; Lam 4:12). While the context is not as obviously universal in the other passages where this word pair appears, such an interpretation still makes adequate, if not excellent, sense in all these texts (cf. Job 18:17-18; 34:13; Pss 77:18; 97:4; Isa 14:21; 18:3; 26:9, 18; Nah 1:5). Apart from its use with אֶרֶץ, תֵּבֵל also

though Israel's sin can serve as a catalyst or occasion for universal judgment (cf. Micah 1), the nations are not related to God through the Sinaitic covenant and cannot be judged on its basis.

The "City of Chaos"

Many scholars prefer to see the "city of chaos" in v 10 as symbolic, typical, or representative of world power, human society, or ancient city-state culture.[14] Others attempt to identify it with an historical city,[15] such as Jerusalem,[16] Babylon, or an unidentified Moabite city.

A *Typical or Symbolic City*. Several factors favor identifying the "city of chaos" as a type or symbol of all proud cities which oppose God's authority and become objects of his judgment. This unnamed city is described in general, even stereotypical, fashion (24:11-12). It contains houses, streets, and a gate and is characterized by revelry.[17] The city's downfall is closely associated with the universal judgment that reverses the creative order (cf. 24:4-13). In fact, the world's inhabitants seem to be the city's residents. In vv 10-12 the bicolon "all joy turns to gloom" // "all gaiety is banished from the earth" (v 11bc) appears between references to the city's demise (cf. vv 10-11a, 12). After the description of the city's fall, v 13 observes: "So it will be on the earth and among the nations:" Finally, following the oracles of chaps. 13-23, which anticipate the downfall of various specific cities, a reference to a typical or representative city would be appropriate here.

A Specific Foreign City. Despite this rather vague and general description of the city, certain features of chap. 24 and the following

refers to the world (Pss 9:8; 18:15; 50:12; 93:1; 96:10; 98:7; Isa 13:11; 27:6). According to L. Stadelmann, תֵּבֵל, though used synonymously with אֶרֶץ, more particularly designates "the habitable part of the world." See *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (AnBib 39; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970) 130.

[14] See, for example, Young, *Isaiah*, 2:163-64; Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39*, 181, 197; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 202; Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 319; Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 448; and M. G. Kline, "Death, Leviathan, and the Martyrs: Isaiah 24:1-27:1" (FS G. L Archer; Chicago: Moody, 1986) 240.

[15] For surveys of the various views see Millar, *Isaiah 24-27*, 15-21; and Vermeylin, *Isaie*, 351. As Millar observes, three of the proposals involving an historical city (a Moabite city, Babylon, and Jerusalem) merit special attention and will be discussed in the study which follows.

[16] In addition to the sources listed by Millar, see also W. H. Elder, "A Theological-Historical Study of Isaiah 24-27" (Ph.D. dissertation, Baylor University, 1974) 107-21; and Johnson (*From Chaos to Restoration*, 29-35, 59-61, 89-91, 98-99), who identifies the ruined city of 24:10-12 as Jerusalem, the hostile city of 25:2 and 26:5-6 as Babylon, and the desolate city of 27:10 as Israel/Samaria and Judah/Jerusalem. Recently Hayes and Irvine (*Isaiah*, 296) have proposed that the "city" is actually the Assyrian citadel in Jerusalem where Assyrian troops were garrisoned.

[17] In similar fashion the city is described somewhat generally and stereotypically in chaps. 25-27. It is fortified (25:2; 27:10) and lofty (26:5) and is characterized by oppression (26:6).

context suggest that a foreign power or city, such as Moab or Babylon, is in view.

Primarily on the basis of 25:10-12, some have suggested that Moabite pride and power are the reality behind the imagery. Employing terminology used elsewhere in chaps. 25-26 of the devastated city, v 12 speaks of Moab's "high fortified walls" (cf. מִבְצַר מִשְׂגַּב) [*mibsar misgab*; 25:12] with בְּצוּרָה [*besura*; 25:2] and נִשְׂגָּבָה [*nisgaba*; 26:5]) being brought down to the dust of the ground (cf. הֵשַׁח הִשְׁפִּיל הִגִּיעַ לָאָרֶץ עַד־עָפָר [*hesah hispil higgi^{a}' la'ares 'ad-'ad-'apar*; 25:12] with חֵשַׁח ... יַשְׁפִּילֶנָּה יַשְׁפִּילָה עַד־אֶרֶץ יַגִּיעֶנָּה עַד־עָפָר [*hesah. . . yaspilenna yaspila 'ad-'eres yaggi'enna 'ad-'apar*; 26:5]). There are also numerous verbal and thematic parallels between 24:7-12 and the earlier Moabite oracle (cf. 16:8-10), both of which describe the cessation of agricultural fertility and joy.

Others see the "city of chaos" as an allusion to Babylon. The wider Isaianic context, which emphasizes the fall of Babylon in conjunction with worldwide divine judgment, suggests Babylon may be in the background.[18] In fact, this section of the prophecy begins with an oracle against Babylon (cf. 13:1, 19) that includes a description of universal judgment (13:9-13).

This proposal finds further support if one identifies the "city of chaos" with the hostile city described in chaps. 25-26 (called in 25:2 "the foreigners' stronghold" (אַרְמוֹן זָרִים ['armon zarim]. Johnson points out that the hostile city of 25:1-5 is "bitterly hated by the prophet," embodies "all the anti-godly powers which must be destroyed before the new age could dawn; and has worldwide influence. He concludes: "From Jewish perspective there was only one city which would fit this description: Babylon."[19]

Finally, chap. 24 may contain echoes of the Babel tradition,[20] which would point one in the direction of Babylon as well. Verse 1 warns that God will "scatter" (הֲפִיץ [*hepis*]) the earth's inhabitants, just as he did the residents of Babel (cf. Gen 11:4, 8-9). In Isa 24:1, 4 several verbs describing the earth's downfall contain "b" and "l" sounds in sequence (cf. וּבוֹלְקָהּ [*uboleqah*] "devastate" [v 1], אָבְלָה ['*abela*] "dries up" [v 4], and נָבְלָה [*nabela*] "withers" [twice in v 4]), echoing the judgment of Babel (cf. נָבְלָה [*nabela*] "confuse" [Gen 11:7], בָּבֶל [*babel*] "Babel" [Gen 11:9], and בָּלַל [*balal*] "confused" [Gen 11:9]). The reference in Isa 24:21 to a coalition between heavenly powers and earthly kings

[18] See B. Otzen, "Traditions and Structures of Isaiah XXIV-XXVII," *VT* 24 (1974) 206.

[19] *From Chaos to Restoration*, 59. On Johnson's view of the city in these chapters, see n. 16 above.

[20] See Vermeylin, *Isaie*, 355.

may also reflect the Babel tradition, which records how men arrogantly tried to build a tower reaching into the heavens (Gen 11:4). For the third time in Genesis 1-11, God was forced to thwart an unauthorized attempt to link earth and heaven.[21] If the "everlasting covenant" refers to the Noahic mandate (as will be argued below), this would also favor seeing the Babel tradition in the background, for the Babel incident epitomized humankind's attempt to disobey the mandate. God instructed humankind to multiply and fill the earth as his vice-regents. Instead they built a city and attempted to construct a tower reaching into the heavens so that they "might make a name" for themselves "and not be scattered over the face of the earth" (Gen 11:4).[22]

Jerusalem and/or Samaria. Despite the evidence indicating that the city is typical and/or foreign, other elements in the text seem to point toward an Israelite city, such as Samaria or Jerusalem. Johnson argues that the city of 24:10-12, rather than being the hostile city of chaps. 25-26, is Jerusalem. In support of his position he offers several arguments.[23] According to Johnson, the lament form of 24:7-12 makes better sense if the destruction of Jerusalem, rather than a foreign city, is in view. In chaps. 25-26 the downfall of the hostile city elicits praise, not lamentation, from the prophet and the covenant community (cf. 25:1-5; 26:1-6). Likewise, the prophet's statement in 24:16b, which indicates that the immediately preceding song of praise (cf. vv 14-16a) is inappropriate, is best understood if the surrounding context describes the fall of Jerusalem. Johnson also points to verbal and thematic elements which appear to favor his position. There are several verbal parallels between 24:8-9, which describes the cessation of the earth's revelry, and 5:11-14, which denounces the carousing of Judah's wealthy class. Several terms used in chap. 24 are typically or exclusively used in Isaiah 1-39 or prophetic literature of Israel/Judah, including אבל, אמלל, נבל, אנח, שׁמה, and מרום. Johnson also suggests that the phrases מְשׂוֹשׂ הָאָרֶץ [*mesos ha'ares*], "gaiety of the earth" (24:11, NASB), and בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ [*beqereb ha'ares*], "in the midst of the earth" (24:13, NASB), are examples of double entendre. In the parallel structure of v 11 (cf. שִׂמְחָה [*simḥa*], "joy," in the parallel line), גָּלָה מְשׂוֹשׂ הָאָרֶץ [*gala mesos ha'ares*], "The gaiety of the earth is banished" (NASB), appears to refer to the cessation of the earth's joy, but Johnson

[21] In Gen 3:5-6 the woman eats the forbidden fruit in an effort to become "like God," while Gen 6:1-3 tells how the "sons of God" takes wives from the "daughters of men."

[22] This is the second time in Genesis 1-11 where the building of a city runs counter to a divine decree. Gen 4:17 tells how Cain built a city in an effort to thwart the Lord's decree that he would be a restless wanderer (cf. v 12).

[23] *From Chaos to Restoration*, 29-35.

points out that the phrase מְשׂוֹשׂ (ל) כָּל הָאָרֶץ [*mesos(l) kol-ha'ares*], "the joy of the whole earth," is used elsewhere as an epithet for Jerusalem (cf. Lam 2:15; Ps 48:3). The phrase בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ in parallelism with בְּתוֹךְ הָעַמִּים [*betok ha'ammim*], "among the nations," may simply locate the sphere of judgment as being "on the earth" (cf. NIV). However, as Johnson points out, the phrase may refer to Jerusalem as the "midpoint of the peoples of the world" and the focal point of the judgment (cf. Ezek 5:5).

Many scholars also propose that an Israelite city is in view in Isa 27:10. This verse, which refers to a "fortified city" that has been reduced to ruins, is part of a short song (vv 7-11). As Redditt points out, the opening verses of the song "deal with Israel and Exile," v 9 "gives the conditions for God's full pardon of his people," and the following verses (12-13) "speak of the Diaspora." Redditt concludes: "It is most natural to assume then that vv 10-11 deal with Israel too."[24] While it is possible that the text refers to the fortified cities of Israel/Judah in general,[25] many see here an allusion to Samaria or Jerusalem.[26] Both Samaria and Jerusalem are described as fortified cities in the preceding judgment oracles (cf. 17:3 and 22:5, 8-11, respectively), and the language of 27:9 parallels that of 17:8 (cf. also 24:13 with 17:6).[27]

Intentional Ambiguity and Irony in Isaiah 24

As one can see from this survey of viewpoints on both questions, the text contains universal elements, as well as language which seems more restrictive and particularly applicable to Israel. Interpreters invariably move in one direction or the other in seeking a resolution to the problems. For example, Wildberger, observing that the Mosaic and Noahic covenants seem to be intertwined in the prophet's thinking, suggests that the prophet reapplied distinctly Israelite traditions to the nations.[28] Johnson, on the other hand, finds the Israelite elements to be determinative. He concludes that "any universalistic reinterpretation which is imposed on this material only destroys its intended particularity." He adds, "The signposts for Judah and Jerusa-

[24] See P: L. Redditt, "Once Again, the City in Isaiah 24-27," *HAR* 10 (1986) 332. For a dissenting opinion, see Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 497 (though he admits that "the possibility that Jerusalem is intended cannot be ruled out").

[25] A possibility mentioned by Redditt, ibid.; and Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, 222.

[26] For a survey of these two views and their proponents, see Oswalt, *Isaiah* 496-97; and Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration*, 88.

[27] For a thorough discussion of the lexical support for the respective views, see Johnson (ibid., 88-91).

[28] See H. Wildberger, *Jesaja 13-27* (BKAT 10:2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 920-22, and Johnson's helpful summary and critique in *From Chaos to Restoration*, 43-44.

lem may not be forced to point to the entire cosmos."[29] While recognizing the presence of universal elements, he seems to reduce the cosmic language to the level of mere hyperbolic flavoring and mythical imagery.[30]

Is it possible to move beyond this impasse and satisfactorily harmonize the universal and particular elements present in the text? In approaching this problem, one must keep in mind Johnson's warning: "To be sure, this juxtaposition of the universal and the particular creates a tension that is not easily resolved. But the text resists resolution of the tension by the simple elimination of one of the two polarities,[31] While recognizing that reinterpretation is a common phenomenon in the OT[32] and that prophetic poetry is at times characterized by a hyperbolic and cosmic quality,[33] I prefer to give both the text's particular and universal elements their proper due. Could it be that the text is intentionally ambiguous in places so that one is supposed to see in its language, including the references to the violation of the everlasting covenant and to the demise of the city of chaos, the guilt and downfall of both the nations and God's covenant people? Though some will accuse me of wanting both to have and eat "my cake," I will attempt to show that recognizing the text's intentional ambiguity allows one to do justice to the data of the text and to accommodate more than one theory as to the identity of the everlasting covenant and the city of chaos.

The "Everlasting Covenant"

The Noahic Mandate. As noted above, the language of chap. 24 definitely suggests that the people of the world (not just Israel) have violated a covenant.[34] This universal indictment is consistent with and actually rounds out the preceding context (chaps. 13-23), which, after an introduction threatening universal destruction (13:1-13), announces judgment on several specific nations.

The covenant in view is patterned after the Mosaic Law and the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty. According to v 5, the people "have disobeyed the laws (עָבְרוּ תוֹרֹת [*'aberu torot*]), violated the statutes (חָלְפוּ חֹק [*halepu hoq*]) and broken the everlasting covenant (הֵפֵרוּ בְּרִית עוֹלָם [*heperu berit 'olam*])."[35] Because of their guilt (cf. וַיֶּאְשְׁמוּ [*wayye'semu*], v 6), a "curse" (אָלָה, ['*ala*], v 6) has come

[29] Ibid., 44.
[30] Ibid., 26, 44-47.
[31] Ibid., 44.
[32] See M Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1985).
[33] See R Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 137-62.
[34] See n. 13 above.
[35] The precise phrase "break an everlasting covenant" never appears elsewhere and some regard such a concept as nonsensical. Cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja* 13-27; 921-22; and

down upon them. The entire earth breaks apart under the weight of its people's "rebellion" (cf. פִּשְׁעָה, [*pis'ah*] v 20).

The rather general and stereotypical accusatory language fails to specify the world's crimes, but a parallel passage provides a clue as to the precise nature of the nations' rebellion. Isa 26:21, which concludes the preceding salvation oracle (vv 19-20) given in response to Israel's lament (vv 7-18), indicates that this worldwide judgment is due in part to the murderous, bloody deeds of the nations.[36] By correlating this passage with chap. 24, one sees that the earth's inhabitants are guilty of violating a perpetually binding, divinely imposed obligation by unjustly and violently shedding the blood of other human beings (the context of Isa 26:21 suggests violations against God's covenant people may be specifically in mind or at least primary in the author's thinking).[37] This interpretation also brings into sharper focus the reference to the earth being "defiled" (חָנְפָה [*hanepa*]) by its people (cf. 24:5). While this verb sometimes refers to the defilement caused by idolatry (viewed as spiritual adultery, Jer 3:2, 9), at other times it describes a land's being polluted by bloodshed (Num 35:33-34; Ps 106:38 [in this case, in conjunction with idolatrous worship]).

The only possible biblical referent for this universal, perpetually binding prohibition against bloodshed is the Noahic mandate

Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration*, 28. However, if one understands "covenant" in the sense of "obligation" (cf. n. 9 above) the problem can be resolved, for an obligation can be perpetually binding and yet violated at the same time. Gen 17:13 refers to the covenantal sign of circumcision as an ueverlasting covenant" (i.e., perpetually binding obligation), while v 14 warns that those who fail to observe the rite have "broken" God's covenant (ie., violated this divinely imposed obligation).

[36] Note especially וְגִלְתָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת־דָּמֶיהָ (*wegilleta ha'ares 'et-dameyha*), "the earth will disclose the blood shed upon her" (26:21), which seems to explain what the sin (עָוֹן [*'awon*]) mentioned in the previous line entails.

[37] Johnson objects to correlating 26:21 with 24:5 (*From Chaos to Restoration*, 82-83). He argues that 26:21 is part of a new section which begins at 24:21, points out that the phrase יֹשֵׁב־הָאָרֶץ (*yoseb-ha'ares*), "people of the earth" (26:21), need not have the same referent as the group of people referred to in chap. 24 (his illustration of this point is the use of יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵל [*yoseb tebel*] in 26:9, 18), and contends that the bloodshed mentioned in 26:21 (which refers to the slaughter of Israelites by the nations) does not relate to the violation of the covenant referred to in 24:5. However, even when one makes allowances for the text's structure and acknowledges that words and phrases can indeed have different referents (whether this is the case with יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵל in 26:9, 18 is highly uncertain), Johnson's arguments are unconvincing. As noted previously (cf. n. 13 above), the parallelism between אֶרֶץ and תֵּבֵל in 24:4 gives the former a universalistic nuance, as in 26:21. Furthermore the verbal and thematic parallels between 26:21 and 24:1-6 are striking: (1) cf. יֹשֵׁב הָאָרֶץ (26:21) with יֹשְׁבֶיהָ (*ha'ares... yosebeyha*; 24:1), יֹשְׁבֶיהָ ... הָאָרֶץ (24:5), יֹשְׁבֵי ... אֶרֶץ (24:6), and יֹשְׁבֵי אֶרֶץ (24:6), (2) cf. עון (26:21) with 24:5. Finally, even if 26:21 does refer to the slaughter of Israelites, this hardly means that it cannot relate to the crimes referred to in 24:5. One of the ways in which the nations violated the prohibition against bloodshed was in their mistreatment of Israel.

recorded in Gen 9:1-7. This mandate contains two main elements. First, God commands Noah and his sons to be fruitful and fill the earth in the role of vice-regents over his creation (vv 1-3, 7; cf. Gen 1:26-30). Second, because each human being is in God's image and rules on his behalf, God prohibits the shedding of human blood and warns that violations of this principle must be punished by death (vv 5-6). Murder runs counter to the mandate to fill the earth and constitutes an attack against the sovereign authority of the divine owner of the earth. According to Isaiah 24 (and 26:21), the entire world was guilty of violating this mandate and must be punished.

However, if the Noahic mandate is in view in Isaiah 24, why is it called the "everlasting covenant"? As noted earlier, Gen 9:16 applies this phrase to the divine promise appended to, but not formally linked with, the mandate of Gen 9:1- 7. It is here that Isaiah's penchant for irony must be recognized. It would seem that the prophet transfers the phrase from the promise to the mandate in order to emphasize that the promise, no matter how unconditional, does not exempt humankind from fulfilling the mandate or provide immunity from divine judgment if those obligations are neglected or perverted. In other words, the obligation inherent in the mandate is just as perpetually binding on humankind as the promise is on God. Furthermore, the prophet may also be suggesting that humankind, by violating the mandate, has, for all intents and purposes, made the promise ineffectual. Even though the promise guarantees that God will never again devastate the world to the degree that he did in Noah's day, God is not beyond severely judging his rebellious world in a way that resembles the Flood. In short, by giving the phrase "the everlasting covenant" a new twist, Isaiah is saying that the mandate is every bit as important as the promise and that violation of the mandate emasculates the promise of its practical value for humankind.[38]

Within this interpretive framework, the statement in Isa 24:18b (אֲרֻבּוֹת מִמָּרוֹם נִפְתָּחוּ *['arubbot mimmarom niptaḥu*], "The floodgates of the heavens are opened") takes on special significance. As many commentators have observed, the language reflects the Noahic flood tradition, especially Gen 7:11 (cf. וַאֲרֻבֹּת הַשָּׁמַיִם נִפְתָּחוּ [*wa'arubbot hassamayim niptaḥu*], "and the floodgates of the heavens were

[38] A brief note on the use of תּוֹרת and חֹק (cf. 24:5) is in order. The latter's range of use is so varied that it can easily be applied to the Noahic mandate. תּוֹרת, while certainly reminding one of the Mosaic Law (cf. n. 11 above), refers here to the individual commands and directives included in the Noahic mandate, just as Gen 26:5 alludes to the specific divine commands revealed to Abraham.

opened"). The prophet anticipates a judgment which will, to a degree at least, rival the Flood in its devastating effects.[39]

The Mosaic Law as an Extension of the Noahic Mandate. According to chaps. 13-23, God's judgment would fall on Israel (cf. 17:3-11) and Judah/Jerusalem (cf. 22:1-14), as well as the surrounding nations. Consequently one expects Israel/Judah to be included within the scope of the accusations and culminating universal judgment of chap. 24. As noted earlier, one can see the references to laws, statutes, and the everlasting covenant as pointing to the Mosaic Law. Though never specifically called an "everlasting covenant," the Mosaic covenant was viewed as a perpetually binding set of obligations, and the terms חֹק and especially תּוֹרַת refer to it elsewhere.[40] Therefore, in Israel's/Judah's case, the language of v 5 seems to point more specifically to the Mosaic Law rather than the universal Noahic mandate.

Of course, one must not overemphasize the distinctions between the Mosaic Law and the Noahic mandate. While the Law contained a variety of regulations pertaining to covenantal life, it also included prohibitions against murder and bloodshed (Exod 20:13; Num 35:6-34). For Israel, then, this specific legislation was an extension of the earlier universal mandate.

Isa 24:5, rather than denouncing general disobedience to the Mosaic Law, probably refers more specifically to Israel's/Judah's violations of these Mosaic prohibitions against murder (cf. Exod 20:13; Num 35:6-34). At least two factors favor this more restricted referent. First, as noted earlier, a comparison of 24:5 (note especially the use of חנף [hnp], "defile") with 26:21 suggests that bloodshed was the primary way in which the nations violated the Noahic mandate. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Mosaic Law (Num 35:33-34), like Isa 24:5/26:21, views bloodshed as defiling the land. Second, the early chapters of Isaiah denounce the murderous deeds of God's covenant people.[41] In 1:15 the Lord refuses to accept the prayers of his hypocritical people because their hands "are full of blood" (דָּמִים [*damim*], a reference to their unjust and oppressive deeds, cf. vv 16-17). In 1:21 the prophet laments that Jerusalem, once a center for justice, is now filled with "murderers" (מְרַצְּחִים [*merassehim*]). In 4:4 the Lord announces that he will "cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem (דְּמֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם [*deme yerusalayim*]) by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire."

[39] In similar fashion Zephaniah describes the judgment of the Lord's day in terms reminiscent of the Noahic flood (cf. Zeph 1:2-3 with Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23).

[40] See nn. 11-12 above.

[41] M. A Sweeney has established that there are several verbal/thematic parallels between the early chapters of the book and the Apocalypse. See "Textual Citations in Isaiah 24-27: Toward an Understanding of the Redactional Functions of Chapters 24-27 in the Book of Isaiah," *JBL* 107 (1988) 42-43, 45-50.

Summary. The language of Isa 24:5, including the reference to the "everlasting covenant," is intentionally ambiguous and flexible enough to accommodate a dual referent. In the universal context of chaps. 13-24, the language refers to the nations' violation of the Noahic mandate, which is ironically called the "everlasting covenant" (the label applied in Gen 9:16 to the Noahic promise appended to the mandate) in order to emphasize its perpetually binding status and the severe consequences of disobeying it. At the same time, the universal judgment portrayed in these chapters includes Israel and Judah. For Isaiah's Israelite/Judahite audience the language of 24:5 points more specifically to the covenant community's violations of Mosaic prohibitions against bloodshed, legislation which can be viewed as an extension of the Noahic mandate.[42]

The "City of Chaos"

Our earlier survey of evidence and views (cf. pp. 241-44 above) would seem to preclude a consistent identification of the city in Isaiah 24-27. While the description of the seemingly representative world city in 24:10-12 is stereotypical and general, certain features of the chapter remind one of Babylon (or at least Babel) and Jerusalem. The hostile city of 25:2 and 26:5-6 is clearly foreign (being specifically associated with Moab and reminding one of Babylon in many ways), while the fortified city of 27:10 appears to represent Israelite/Judahite cities in general or a specific city such as Samaria or Jerusalem.

The most satisfactory way to harmonize this seemingly confused picture is to recognize once again Isaiah's use of intentional ambiguity. Isaiah has purposefully described the "city of chaos" in chap. 24 in general, stereotypical terms so that it might function in a representative or symbolic sense and, at the same time, encompass its various specific manifestations (cf. chaps. 13-23). For reasons stated above (cf. p. 241), the city of 24:10-12 must be recognized as typical or representative of all world cities that oppose God. Since Babel was the first such rebellious city in biblical history, the echoes of the Babel tradition in chap. 24 (cf. pp. 242-43 above) come as no surprise. In the wider context of the book of Isaiah, the allusions to Babel naturally make one think of

[42] Isaiah's use of ambiguous covenantal terminology in 24:5 is similar to Amos's use of the term **פֶּשַׁע** [*ps'*], "rebellious deed," in his oracles against the nations (chaps. 1-2). Amos uses the term to describe each nation's covenantal violations, even though different covenants are in view. The six foreign nations broke an unspecified universal covenant, while Judah and Israel violated the Mosaic Law. (An analysis of the foreign nations' crimes suggests that the Noahic mandate is the broken covenant. The nations' sins, which include murder, slave trade, and desecration of a royal tomb, all violate the mandate, literally or in principle, by showing disrespect for human life and for God's image in other human beings.)

the Babylonian empire, the demise of which is prophesied in this section of the book (cf. chaps. 13-14, 21) and in chaps. 40ff. Certain features 9f the text also suggest Jerusalem may be in the background (cf. pp. 243-44 above). Ironically Zion, the dwelling place of God, had become one of the rebellious cities of the world and would be subjected, like ancient Babel and its contemporary counterpart (Babylon), to divine judgment.

The portrayal of the city in chaps. 25-27, rather than confusing the issue, is an outgrowth of the way it is depicted in chap. 24. In 25:2 and 26:5-6 specific foreign manifestations of the typically rebellious city (viz. Moab and probably Babylon as well, cf. pp. 242-43 above) come to the forefront, while specific Israelite/Judahite manifestations of the city come into focus in 27:10 (cf. pp. 243-44 above).

To summarize, Isaiah utilizes intentional ambiguity in his description of the "city of chaos." The universal, generalized language draws attention to the common character of the destiny of the rebellious cities/powers of the world, while at the same time making it possible to see behind the imagery any number of specific cities that epitomize such rebellion. The description of the city is accompanied in chap. 24 by allusions to specific cities and is more directly associated in chaps. 25-27 with tangible historical manifestations of this city. Recognizing Isaiah's use of ambiguity allows one to harmonize the various passages referring to a city while preserving differences in emphasis and focus.

Because Johnson builds such an impressive, well-reasoned case for Jerusalem being the exclusive referent of the "city of chaos" in 24:10-12 (cf. pp. 243-44 above), a critique of his arguments is in order. In my opinion Johnson has demonstrated that Jerusalem is alluded to in chap. 24 and stands behind the prophet's imagery. (This should come as no surprise, given the prophet's denunciation of the city in the earlier chapters of the book and his love of irony.) However, the evidence does not demand that it be the sole referent.

The lament form of 24:7-13 does not necessarily mean the destruction of Jerusalem is in view, for in chaps. 15-16 Isaiah dramatically laments the fall of Moab. In 15:5 he declares, "My heart cries out over Moab," while in 16:9a, 11 the prophet, identifying with God (cf. v 10), states: "So I weep, as Jazer weeps, for the vines of Sibmah. O Heshbon, O Elealeh, I drench you with tears! . . . My heart laments for Moab like a harp, my inmost being for Kir Hareseth."[43] The change in the prophet's attitude exhibited in 25:1-5, rather than re-

[43] Similarly in 21:3-4 the vision of Babylon's fall has a severe emotional and physical effect on the prophet.

flecting a change in the referent of the city (from Jerusalem to Babylon), is better explained in light of 24:23, which tells how the terrifying universal judgment lamented in 24:1-22 gives way to God's rule from Mount Zion. Once the ultimate purpose of divine punishment is realized and the smoke of judgment has cleared, the prophet can cease lamenting and declare God's praise.

The sequence in 24:14-16 can be explained along similar lines. In response to the news of divine judgment (24:1-13), an unspecified group sings out in praise of God (24:14-16a). However, the prophet does not yet share their enthusiasm and positive outlook, for he knows that conditions on the earth necessitate a reversal of creation and return to chaos (24:16b-20).[44]

The antecedent of the pronoun הֵמָּה (*hemma* [24:14]) is unclear. Perhaps the speakers are mere *dramatis personae*, whose function is to serve as a foil to the prophet and thereby highlight the severity of the judgment.[45] A time will come for the world to celebrate the coming of God's kingdom (cf. 25:6-9), but before that time arrives and the devastating judgment is concluded, such celebration is inappropriate and premature. More specifically, the referent could be the remnant of the nations which survives the first wave of judgment (24:13b compares this remnant to the grapes left on the vine after the harvest). In this case the prophet makes the point that such celebration is premature because almost total destruction is still to come and no one is yet "out of the woods." If Israelites are included within this group, then the prophet's response, in combination with the allusions to Jerusalem in the chapter, is a reminder to the covenant community that they should not rejoice over the fall of the nations for they too will experience divine judgment.

The linguistic evidence cited by Johnson does not limit the referent to Jerusalem, though it certainly hints it is in the background. While the six terms listed by Johnson are characteristically used of Israel/Judah, three of them do appear in the preceding oracles against the nations (cf. אֵמְלָל [*'umlal*] in 16:8; אבל [*'bl*] in 19:8 and שַׁמָּה [*samma*] in 13:9). The cluster of verbal parallels between 5:11-14 and 24:8-9 is striking, but the cessation of revelry theme also appears in the preceding Moab (cf. 16:8-10, which uses אֵמְלָל [cf. 24:7], גֶּפֶן [*gepen*; cf. 24:7], שִׂמְחָה [*simha*; cf.24:11], יַיִן [*yayin*; cf.24:9, 11], and שָׁבַת [*sabat*; cf. 24:8]) and Tyre (cf. עַלִּיזָה ['*alliza*], "revelry," in 23:7 with עַלִּיזִים ['*allizim*], "revelers," in 24:8) oracles. Furthermore, if one extends the lexical survey to include the surrounding verses, numerous verbal/

[44] See Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 450, 452.
[45] For a similar view, see ibid., 450.

thematic parallels between 24:7-12 and the preceding foreign oracles are apparent (in addition to the parallels with 16:8-10 and 23:7 cited above, cf. חֻצוֹת [*husot*], "streets," in 24:11 and 15:3; שַׁמָּה, "ruins," in 24:12 and 13:9; and שָׁעַר [*sa'ar*], "gate: in 24:12 and 14:31).

Finally, Johnson's recognition of double entendre in certain phrases is consistent with the thesis of this article (that Isaiah's use of intentional ambiguity makes it possible for one to accommodate various interpretive options and do justice to both the text's universal tone and particularity).

Conclusion

Two major questions face the interpreter of Isaiah 24: (1) What is the referent of the "everlasting covenant" (24:5)? (2) What is the identity of the "city of chaos" (24:10)? Scholars have proposed a variety of answers to both questions with no consensus emerging in either case. Some emphasize the text's universal setting and language, while others point to features of the text which seem to reflect a more particular Israelite context. The former tend to see the covenant as being universal in scope (the supposed creation covenant or the Noahic covenant) and the city as typical or foreign. The latter tend to see the Mosaic covenant and the city of Jerusalem as the referents of the enigmatic expressions.

Recognizing the text's very ambiguity (reflected in the variety of interpretive alternatives that have emerged) is the key to its proper interpretation and the only way to do justice to its diversity. Isaiah intentionally employed ambiguous terminology in order to accommodate both the text's universal and particular emphases. That chap. 24 should include both the nations and Israel within its frame of reference is to be expected, given its canonical location and function. The preceding chapters (13-23) contain oracles against foreign nations and Israel/Judah.

From the perspective of the nations, the "everlasting covenant" is the Noahic mandate recorded in Gen 9:1-7. Through their bloody deeds the nations had violated this mandate which promotes population growth and prohibits murder. Ironically Isaiah transfers the phrase from the unconditional promise of Gen 9:16 to the mandate, thereby stressing the enduring importance of the mandate and the severe consequences of its being violated. For Israel, which was also guilty of bloodshed, the "everlasting covenant" would refer primarily to the Mosaic Law and, more specifically, its legislation prohibiting murder, which was an extension of the Noahic mandate.

In the universal context of chap. 24, the "city of chaos" represents all the nations and cities of the world which, like Babel of old and the

powers/cities mentioned in chaps. 13-23, rebel against God's authority. Behind the generalized and stereotypical language and imagery, one can see specific manifestations of, this symbolic city, including Babylon, Moab, and Jerusalem, all of which are alluded to or referred to in chaps. 24-27.