



# Unveiling the depths of trauma and the profound impact of rape and shaming on the Babylonian women in Isaiah 13:16 – A trauma and resilience reading of the violent narrative in Isaiah 13:16

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## Abstract

The book of Isaiah is one of the world's oldest surviving resistance literature. Isaiah 13 describes God who collects an army for the battle against Babylon which will lead to Babylon's utter desolation and destruction. Isaiah 13:16 deeply shocks the reader when it states that the wives of the Babylonians shall be raped and ravished by the men of this marching army. A literary, contextual, and historical methodology will be applied. Integrated insights from trauma studies will be used as a multidisciplinary approach to engage with these texts. A trauma perspective helps the reader to look squarely at the violence that the Bible often advocates and it can only become comprehensible if understood as the reaction of a dominated people to their domination. The oracles against the nations express the hope of freedom and return to their land, but also the hope of a triumphant reversal of the role of oppressors and oppressed. Insights from trauma studies suggest that these features transform this oracle into a work of resistance, recovery and resilience.

**Keywords:** The book of Isaiah, Babylonia, Judah, rape, Trauma Theory

## Introduction

Isaiah 13:16 deeply shocks the modern-day reader: "And their babes shall be dashed to pieces in their sight, their homes shall be plundered, and their wives shall be raped" (JPS).<sup>1</sup> It is however not only the modern reader who feels uncomfortable with this text; even the Masoretes substituted שגל (rape, violate, ravish – i.e. the "F word")<sup>2</sup> with שכב (lay with), which clearly is meant to be an euphemism and a softer substitute for שגל which was considered too obscene and vulgar to keep in the text.<sup>3</sup> In this regard (Wildberger, 1991: 28) infers as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Watts (2005: 260) infers as follows: "שגל means 'sexual intercourse' (cf. Deut 28:30), but in the passive stems 'rape' (HAL; cf. Zech 13:2; Jer 3:2)." See also (Gravett, 2004: 289).

<sup>2</sup> Tull, 2010: 266.

<sup>3</sup> Wildberger, 1991: 9.



“The motif that describes the plundering of houses and the raping of wives brings this hideous description to a conclusion (both phrases have been used in Zech. 14:2 to furnish details about the destiny awaiting Jerusalem). שגל (violate, ravish) (see Deut 28:30) is the term used to describe the completion of the act of sexual intercourse. Naturally, the author chose this “gutter” term because of the connotation it conveys, which is the reason why the Masoretes consciously substituted another term.”

The oracle (אָמִינָה) concerning Babylon commences with a superscription (13:1)<sup>4</sup> and continues until chapter 14 verse 23.<sup>5</sup> Over and above Babylon, this chapter contains oracles about two other nations as well, namely Assyria (14:24-27) and Philistia (14:28-32). The first subsection within the book of Isaiah (First Isaiah), with its primary focus on Judah, ends at chapter 12 and thereafter the setting shifts to an international scene, namely to the Oracles about (concerning) the Nations (abbrv. OAN) in Isaiah 13-23 (Kim, 2016: 79). It may however be puzzling to the reader that the focus suddenly shifts towards Babylon, given the fact that the preceding twelve chapters situated Isaiah and Judah in the eighth century BCE under the shadow of the Assyrian Empire (Tull, 2010: 261).

Chapter 13 tells how YHWH (יהוה) will gather a great unnamed army for the battle against Babylon and it ends with a description of how Babylon will be desolated as it will lie in utter ruins as a result of being overthrown like Sodom and Gomorrah. Chapter 14 focusses briefly on Israel's future and from verse 4 onwards it continues with a taunt song directed at the fallen Babylonian king, containing vivid and graphic images which celebrate the demise of this arrogant worldly ruler (Tull, 2010: 261, 275).

A trauma and resilience<sup>6</sup> perspective can help the reader to confront the violence which is advocated in (some) biblical texts. Although causing discomfort as well as leaving the reader with discontent, it may become comprehensible if we can read these texts as the reaction of a dominated people to their domination. As the book of Isaiah can indeed be regarded as one of “the world's oldest surviving resistance literature” (Hays, 2013: 51), the intended effect of the call for violence is therefore far more important than the mere description of the violence we find in the text. The text should therefore be understood as a call for the “restructuring of the world,” as the text urges people to trust in God to restructure their damaged worlds and to be once again in a position to sustain life for themselves (Hays, 2013: 69–70).<sup>7</sup>

In this contribution we hypothesise that the rape of the Babylonian women in this text is a symbol for the “rape” of the dominant culture, which both chapters 13-14 demonstrate.<sup>8</sup> These two chapters express the hope of freedom from captivity as well as the return to the land; furthermore, they also express the hope of a glorious reversal of the role of the oppressor and the oppressed. Although the idea that captives one day may exercise control over the oppressor may cause uneasiness with the modern-day reader of these texts, we should acknowledge that these texts offered comfort to those who suffered, and the transforming

<sup>4</sup> “The oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw” (מִשָּׁא בְּבֵל אֲשֶׁר הִזָּה יְשַׁעְיָהוּ בֶן-אֲמוֹץ).

<sup>5</sup> Blenkinsopp (2000: 276) infers as follows regarding the occurrence of Babylon in chapter 13: “Only the last stanza of the poem makes explicit allusion to the fall of Babylon. For the most part the author is working with the larger canvas of a projected cataclysm or singularity, a ‘Day of Yahveh,’ affecting the entire cosmos, somewhat in the manner of the poem in 2:6-22 but inspired by the prospect of the destruction of the evil empire of Babylon.”

<sup>6</sup> See also Esterhuizen & Groenewald (2023b: 287–90) for a discussion of resilience. See furthermore Esterhuizen & Groenewald (2023c: 687–689).

<sup>7</sup> We hereby acknowledge the fact that the book of Isaiah was written over many centuries by multiple authors. That might explain the fact that the book in its final composition can still be regarded as resistance literature.

<sup>8</sup> Poser (2021: 343) refers in this regard to Alice Keefe who indicates that “in these narratives, the woman's body, disrupted by sexual violence, functions as a metonymy for the social body, for the society devastated by war.” See also Keefe (1993: 79–97) and Thistlethwaite (1993: 59–75).



power of these texts lies in the fact that they give recognition to the fact that fortunes can shift (Tull, 2010: 277).

Insights from trauma and resilience studies suggest that these features transform this oracle into a work of resistance, recovery and resilience. Interpreting this passage, necessitates a paradigm shift, especially when viewed through a lens of trauma. Traditional readings often gloss over the implications of such violence and trauma, by focusing rather on the broader themes of divine judgement and prophecy. This paradigm shift through a trauma-informed reading, urges us to confront uncomfortable themes embedded in the text including inter-alia rape, violence and gender-based violence and to give better understanding of suffering and pain of the marginalised voices silenced by history.

### **Hermeneutical framework: A Trauma and Resilience Reading Lens**

An anonymous poet wrote the preponderant poem “Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them.” Even though the origin of the poem or the poet is unknown, the poem draws inspiration from the prophecies in Isaiah 13 which describe the Babylonians being defeated by Medes. The impact of this corpus in the text moved the unknown poet in such a way that through poetic artistry, one of the verses captures the essence of the text:

“The cry of anguish shall arise,  
And bitter tears shall freely flow,  
As Babylon with all its lies,  
Lies prostrate in its overthrow.  
Thus, shall the word of God be proved,  
And all His promises made good,  
As justice, by His hand removed,  
Restores the righteous to their blood.  
And though the wicked may deride,  
And scorn the truth cannot see,  
The Lord will surely turn the tide,  
And set the captives free.

The poem captures the violent and destructive traumatic imagery of the prophecy, but it also carries its message of divine judgement and call for justice. The poem reflects on the themes of trauma, reversal of fate and that good will eventually prevail. Through its vivid and powerful imagery, just as the text of Isaiah 13 and 14 does, but with reference to Isaiah 13:16, the poem captures the violence, humiliation, and destructive force of Isaiah’s prophecy with poetic poise. The skilful wordplay in the last lines of the poem underlines, as in the prophecy of Isaiah, a message of hope and resilience for the future.

Isaiah 13 and 14 creates in the mind’s eye a horrific scene that contains vivid and graphic descriptions of violence, destruction, and death. Even more so the text of Isaiah 13:16 where the humiliation and rape of the Babylonian women are explicitly imagined and several elements that are characteristic of trauma narratives, including physical and emotional pain, disruption of a sense of safety, loss and grief and a sense of powerlessness are depicted within the stark words of the text. These chapters, and especially Isaiah 13:16, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the traumatic experiences that the individual and the community suffered. While the imagery used may be disturbing, the sometimes-harsh metaphors are used to convey the gravity of the traumatic situation. The imagery and metaphors in a way becomes the figurative picture of collective trauma. Cooke (2022: 8) writes that in this sense “symbolism in trauma literature becomes the means through which a group can cope with a traumatic event that influences the collective.”

The paradox lies in the role reversal where the prophecy predicts that the capturer will become the captive. An even greater paradox is the fact that hope and restoration await the victim, but



only through the ultimate suffering and humiliation in the role reversal. Herein lies the conundrum as Mittelman (2000: 917) postulates that “the act of capturing establishes a hierarchy between captor and the captive.” This hierarchy is not placing the capturer and the captive in opposition to one another, but rather creating a dichotomy of power. The trauma is perpetuated through suffering, violence, and utter humiliation. These trauma markers and traumatic experiences cannot be escaped by either the capturer or the captive as there are an embedded memory of traumatic scaring and atrocities.

While the text of Isaiah 13:16 is certainly violent and disturbing for the reader, it is important to understand it in its historical and cultural context. Ancient warfare was often brutal and merciless (Crouch, 2009: 38–48; Kelle, 2007: 23–26, 75–80; Wessels & Esterhuizen, 2020: 1–11; Wright, 2020: 40).<sup>9</sup> These brutalities and humiliation can be seen as trauma markers in the text. Some of the trauma markers include violent language and infanticide, with descriptions of infants being smashed to pieces and the brutal killing of innocent children. We can also think of Psalm 137 here (Gerstenberger, 2001: 393).<sup>10</sup> This type of violence can cause intense feelings of grief, anger, and helplessness in those who experienced or witnessed it, for example the humiliation caused by sexual violence.

The text of Isaiah 13:16 presents a plethora of trauma markers, which are language or experiences that indicate a traumatic event or its aftermath. Herman (2015: 33) notes that one trauma marker is the experience of “helplessness and terror” in the face of violence. The description of infants “dashed to pieces” and women being “ravished” is violent and brutal, indicating a traumatic event. The phrase “in their sight / before their eyes” (לְעֵינֵיהֶם) suggests that the people witnessing the violence are unable to stop it, underlining the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. The reference in the text to houses being plundered voicelessly shouts a loss of property and belongings, while the brutal allusion to the women being raped howls a loss of dignity and autonomy. Wilson and Landy (2013: 132) underpins this trauma marker as being compounded further as a sense of betrayal and victimisation that comes from the violence being perpetrated by others.

In his book *Body Keeps the Score*, Van der Kolk (2014) describes the way that traumatic memories are stored in the body, often resulting in physical symptoms and chronic pain. He notes that these trauma markers have a huge influence on the individual and presents markers of fear, anxiety, helplessness and emotional imbalance (Van der Kolk, 2014: 173–201). These markers are consistent with individuals and the collective communities who have lived through war, genocide and other forms of collective violence and trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014: 7–21).

For us, the reader today, the trauma described in verse 16 is known, relatable and sometimes feared as the world today experience these trauma markers in all communities. The atrocities are sometimes viewed from afar, sometimes in silent protest and not often enough in

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<sup>9</sup> See also Wessels and Esterhuizen (2020: 5): “War causes anxiety, fear, trauma, cruelty, injury, and loss of freedom and life.”

<sup>10</sup> Zenger (1996: 48) states that these verses in Psalm 137 are not “a ‘blessing’ on child-murderers; they are a passionate outcry of the powerless demanding justice! ... an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one’s own heart, by surrendering everything to God – a God whose word of judgment is presumed to be so universally just that even those who pray the psalm submit themselves to it.”

See also the following remark regarding this psalm by Brueggemann and Bellinger Jr (2014: 575): “The concluding verse reflects the warfare of that cultural setting and the practice of destroying the next generation of warriors. See 2 Kgs 8:12; Hos 10:14; 13:16; Na 3:10; and Isa 13:16 for references to the practice. The brutally honest conclusion of the psalm expresses an unrestrained faith in the justice of King YHWH.”



thundering revolt. Upon reading Isaiah 13:16, their collective trauma reverberates into our collective conscious trauma, something not to be taken lightly.<sup>11</sup>

The language used to describe the women being “raped” (ravished) is difficult to interpret (Roberts, 2015: 196, 198; Watts, 2005: 245, 250). The Babylonian women might be seen as being the symbolic representation of the city of Babylon<sup>12</sup> itself which is conquered and defeated by the Medes and Persians (13:17).<sup>13</sup> It might also serve as a metaphor for the complete humiliation and destruction of Babylon, as well as the transfer of the city from its previous rulers to the military victors.<sup>14</sup> The description of the wives being rape becomes a symbol of degradation and humiliation and can be seen as the ultimate traumatic experience that is everlasting and re-occurring for those who have suffered this type of brutality themselves.<sup>15</sup> The long-term effects are devastating and almost always, life altering.<sup>16</sup>

Another trauma marker is the possibility of a violent death. The description of young men being struck down by arrows is a traumatic experience that can trigger memories of loss and witnessing violent death can cause intense feelings of fear, anger, and sadness. Isaiah 13:18 reads as follows: “Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children” (NRSV). Sharp (2019: 205) fittingly states as follows: “Such rhetoric perpetuates a culture of brutality with pernicious effects....” and “I encourage you to consider how you might adopt a posture of resistance to this language, which is certainly the product of trauma but enacts new harm in its own way.”

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<sup>11</sup> Oswalt (1986: 307) states as follows: “The looting (v. 16) is bad enough, but worse than that are the rapine and the casual thirst for blood. A soldier can carry only so much loot; thus it soon becomes impossible to buy off any violent instinct which may be nourished in the campaign (v. 17).”

<sup>12</sup> In this regard Washington (1998: 198) infers as follows: “The Hebrew prophets develop this personification into an elaborate metaphorical picture where the objects of military attack (cities and land) are depicted as feminine, the attack itself is figured as sexual assault, and the soldiers in their military advance (in some cases along with God, the ultimate instigator of the punishing violence) are portrayed as rapists.” See also Gordon & Washington (1995: 309) who refer to the Vietnam War and infer that “Memoirs of the American Vietnam War era illustrate the soldiers’ habit of describing their attacks on land, villages and people with graphic language of the violation of the female body.” See also Poser (2021: 342).

<sup>13</sup> The women who are raped and whose children are killed, are voiceless in this text – as is often the case in Biblical narratives. Hens-Piazza (2021: 20–36) indicates that trauma should be addressed in order to move to resilience.

<sup>14</sup> Carol and Eric Meyers (1993: 414–15) states the following in their Zechariah commentary: “This interpretation seems to indicate that the treatment of women as the aftermath of war was not conceived of by the ancients as sexual abuse but rather as the transfer of the right of sexual activity with conquered women from their husbands to the military victors.” In this regard Poser (2021: 342) writes as follows: “In the Latter Prophets, wartime rape of women is referred to twice – in Isa 13:16 and Zech 14:2. Even the fact that these verses must be characterized as announcements of doom does not call into question that these announcements are experience based, as Lam 5:11 might indicate.”

<sup>15</sup> In this regard Niditch (1993: 107) infers as follows: “The motif of stealing or raping the women of another group is a very ancient one in traditional narrative, and speaks to one of the most basic dilemmas in human social relations – namely how to steer the proper course between endogamy and exogamy. This issue ultimately has to do with relations between those perceived as ‘us’ versus those perceived as ‘them’ and reduces to the basics of human interaction essential questions of war and peace.”

<sup>16</sup> Although Dube (2017: 41) discusses the more recent history of colonization, the following remark can also be applied to ancient contexts and the phenomenon of the rape of women: “In colonial contexts, the rape of colonized women becomes an act and a rhetorical discourse of desire and entitlement of the colonizer. Women’s bodies, which are equated to their lands, symbolize the coveted targeted colony. The taking of the bodies of colonized women is a colonizer’s script of articulating his desired entitlement to enter the foreign land, plant his seed, and possess the land as well. It is both the land and the women that are raped. The colonized woman’s body is thus imagined and constructed as available for taking.”



Isaiah 13:16 is a verse that describes a violent and tragic event, however Isaiah 13 and 14 contain elements of resilience, restoration and hope embedded within the layers of the text and symbolism of suffering. Firstly, there is resilience in the face of oppression. Even though the people of Israel had been oppressed by Babylon, the hopeful promises in Isaiah 13 and 14 remind the collective community that they are not alone in their suffering. Isaiah 13:14 reminds the people of Israel that Yahweh is with them and will bring justice for them. There are also glimmers of restoration because the prophecies of Isaiah 13 and 14 also contain promises of restoration for Yahweh's people. Isaiah 14:1-4 provides hope for the people of Israel, even in the midst of their suffering (Childs, 2001: 125–126; Kaiser, 1974: 23–27). The prophecies in Isaiah 13 and 14 also proclaims Yahweh's ultimate victory over the enemy. The text of Isaiah 14:24-27 provides hope and comfort to the people of Israel, who have suffered under the Babylonian oppression (Beuken, 2007: 100–105).

Secondly, the prophetic messages in Isaiah 13 and 14 also comprise of promises of the restoration of the creation. In Isaiah 13:10 it says "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (NRSV). While this verse describes a time of destruction, it also postulates to the hope of a new creation that Yahweh will bring about when the people of Israel are set free from the Babylonian bondage (Tull, 2010: 266; Watts, 2005: 249).

Between the harsh language, brutal imagery and humiliation of Isaiah 13:16 where children, women and men are violated in the most unspeakable terms, and where the rape of the women are the most shameful symbol of trauma, hope becomes a powerful motivator for resilience, as it encourages not only the people of Israel but also the reader, to face adversity and to place their trust in Yahweh for restoration to prevail.

The call to trust YHWH and have faith, is prevalent in the text of Isaiah 13:16 as it occurs within the subsection usually known as the Oracles about (concerning) the Nations, which are generally identified by their content, namely to announce defeat or destruction of a nation as an act of YHWH (Sweeney, 1996: 213). In the following section we will briefly discuss these oracles, but focusing mainly on the oracle concerning Babylon in Isaiah 13-14.

### **Unlocking the narrative thread: The role of oracles about the nations (OAN) in the violence against women and children in Isaiah 13:16**

The prophets were roaming the dusty streets and roads of the Israelite and Judean towns, cities, and countryside. As they were living in concrete geographical and historical eras they directed their messages to people of flesh and blood who had to manage real life challenges and problems.<sup>17</sup> The political and military pressures from their neighbouring national states, as well as from the imperial powers, had a huge impact on the economic and political realities of the two Israelite kingdoms. Although the national states in the eastern Mediterranean region, which included these two kingdoms, were always part of the political and economic struggle to control the region's commercial and agricultural resources, the imperial powers posed the biggest threat to the region (Albertz, 2003: 180). The aggressive and expansionist

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<sup>17</sup> In his classical book on the prophets, Heschel (2001: xxii) states the following: ".The prophet is a person, not a microphone. He is endowed with a mission with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness – but also with temperament, concern, character, and individuality ... The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he *is* a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response – not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the word, the subjective side of the message."



policies of the neo-Assyrian<sup>18</sup> and later in history the neo-Babylonian<sup>19</sup> empires caused for example the end of Israel (late 8<sup>th</sup> century) and Judah (6<sup>th</sup> century) as national states (Hoppe, 2012: 44).

Because ancient Israel experienced the other nations as a threat to its existence, the OAN give expression to the genuine belief that YHWH, the God of Israel, would never permit these nations to destroy Israel/Judah completely. Therefore, they called upon YHWH to protect and defend them from such threats. Although it's often the theological interpretation(s) in texts from the HB that God chose these nations to bring judgment upon these kingdoms for their failure to maintain a just and righteous society, the texts also indicate that God will judge these nations for their failures as well (see also Heiser 2012: 158; Oswalt 2012: 287–88). Israel irrevocably hold onto the believe that God's judgment of the nations will mean salvation for them (Hoppe, 2012: 45). This conviction is inter alia formulated in Isaiah 13:6, 9. The Day of the Lord (יְהוָה יוֹם) <sup>20</sup> according to the Isaianic perspective, will cause nations, specifically the imperial powers and tyrants (עַרְיָצִים – v. 11), to be filled with fear and anxiety. On the one hand the day of the Lord will cause destruction and make the earth desolate, but on the other hand on this day the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel (14:1).<sup>21</sup>

The second subsection (Isaiah 13-23) of the book of Isaiah broadens Isaiah's perspective to also include the nations and thus has an international focus. The poems in this subsection recall times of warfare which Israel and Judah had experienced by the hands of various other nations. The book of Isaiah does not only claim that YHWH is Lord over Israel and Judah, but it also claims that YHWH determines the destiny as well as the judgment the other nations will experience (Everson, 2019: 59). Brueggeman (1998: 112) adds to this when he states that the "primary theme of these chapters is the non-negotiable, demanding, insistent rule of Yahweh before which every power must submit."

Isaiah 13-14 contains words of judgment directed towards Babylon, but also include judgement for Assyria (14:24-27) and Philistia (14:28-31). The superscription links this oracle to the eighth century prophet. Although Assyria was the dominant world power during Isaiah's

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<sup>18</sup> According to Hays and Machinist (2016: 31) "The Assyrians loom large in any discussion of the world around the Old Testament. They controlled by far the most extensive empire the ancient Near East had seen up to that point, they had an enormous impact on both Israel and Judah, and their culture is better documented than any other from the period."

<sup>19</sup> Arnold (2012: 56–57) infers as follows: "The historical and political realities of the Iron Age led several Israelite prophets to characterize Babylon as the quintessential place of religious hubris and idolatry, which was considered tantamount to a refusal to worship or acknowledge the rightful place of deity. Characteristic of most of these texts is a pejorative tone typical of references elsewhere in the Bible ..." See also Vanderhooft (2016: 109) who states as follows: "While Babylon's antiquity was assumed in ancient Israel and Judah, the dominant concern of the Hebrew Bible is with Babylon as the seat of hostile kings or as a real or threatened place of deportation for Judeans ... Quite obviously, then, texts of the Hebrew Bible are much less concerned with Babylon's origins and early history than they are with the dangers posed by the Babylonian kingdom under Nebuchadnezzar and his successors and the consequences of Babylonian depredations in the Mediterranean littoral."

<sup>20</sup> See also Esterhuizen and Groenewald (2023: 14–15) for a discussion of the יְהוָה יוֹם in Isaiah 1-12.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson (Williamson, 2020: 231) gives an overview of the Day of the Lord in the Book of Isaiah and infers as follows: "I conclude this quick survey of the day of the Lord in Isaiah by noting that it is used in three main ways and that we can readily understand how they developed over time. First was the sense of God's attack on pride and hubris by way of reversal of the early popular notion that God would fight for his people against their enemies. Second, near the end of the exilic period, it was turned in a way which was not historically fulfilled at the time to predict the overwhelming defeat and destruction of Babylon. And third, in the much later post-exilic period, an interpretation was invited which elevated the whole image on to a universal and even cosmic scale, so encouraging a hermeneutic which enabled readers to take the Babylonian references not only in chs. 13-14 but also in 40-48 as paradigmatic of God's deliverance from any form of unjustified oppression."



life-time, the superscription in 13:1 wants to confirm that Isaiah's vision (יִרְדָּן – 1:1) was still authoritative long after his death and the people therefore knew that his vision had implications for both Assyria as well as for Babylon (see also Roberts 2015: 197; Tull 2010: 261). We have already read in Isaiah chapter 10 that a word of judgment for arrogant Assyria was announced and now we find a similar word of judgment which comes for the arrogant empire Babylon (Everson, 2019: 60). It is appropriate that the first of the OAN has Babylon as its subject, as both the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (587/6 BCE) as well as the fall of Babylon less than fifty years later, were among the major world events which led to the production of the biggest part of the Hebrew Bible as we have it in its present form; this includes the scroll of Isaiah. The latter event gave Judah hope for the future restoration of Jerusalem and its temple (Hoppe, 2012: 46).

The poem begins by describing the city's watchmen sounding the alarm as an unnamed army, which was gathered by God, is approaching the city. As they marches towards the city it "sounds like the rumble of thunder on a distant mountain as the storm gathers strength and begins its approach" (Hoppe, 2012: 46). The terror and the dreadful fear this attack causes are described in stylized poetical language: "As the battle commences, images reel: from sky, where sun, moon, and stars are darkened, to earth, which is shaken from its place, to humans, raped and slaughtered" (Tull, 2010: 261). Judah's God is directing a military attack against Babylon who will experience the horrors of war. The Medes will turn Babylon into a wasteland, as had been done to Sodom and Gomorrah (13:19). The Medes, who are God's chosen instruments of judgment, will thus be responsible for the complete destruction and devastation of Babylon (Hoppe, 2012: 47).

The description of Babylon's destruction is followed by a brief prose section highlighting the reversal of Israel's and Judah's fortunes (14:1-2). The situation will dramatically change and they will not be slaves anymore, but foreign nations will be brought to Jerusalem to serve them (Hoppe, 2012: 48). This text indeed highlights the hope expressed by people who were suffering a lot, that circumstances may change and that fortunes may shift. According to Everson (2019: 65) this text reminds modern-day readers that this poetry expresses people's feelings of rage, anger and frustration. Slavery, oppression, war and brutality were at the order of the day in the ancient times; and even today in some parts of the world some people may be victims experiencing these phenomena, example the ongoing war and oppression of minority groups in Sudan and the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, for readers to whom they do not belong to their lived reality, it may be impossible to understand the bitterness the authors are expressing in this text. He furthermore emphasises that the authors are clearly writing from a marginal position but they vividly express the dream that one day there will be a reversal of the roles; as is currently the state of affairs.

This prose section is followed by a taunt song (14:3-23) which the audience can sing against the king of Babylon. This song extends through most of the chapter and according to Tull (2010: 277) this is indeed one of the most haunting poems in the Hebrew Bible. It proclaims and celebrates the fall of a tyrant who was responsible for the oppression of many nations. This passage depicts his arrogance in superhuman and mythological terms. Although he was striving for the heavens, the song is triumphantly describing his fall as being cast down into the netherworld (לִיָּאֵשׁ), where tyrants of the past welcome him to their realm. The taunt thus indicate the humiliation, namely the total annihilation of the Babylonian king (Prinsloo, 2018: 682). This song is followed by three shorter passages which focus on Assyria, Philistia and Zion (14:32) (Tull, 2010: 275).

Although the oracles about the nations (OAN)<sup>22</sup> have been neglected for quite a while in scholarship, they have received more scholarly attention lately (Kim, 2020: 59–78; Mein et al.,

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<sup>22</sup> O'Brien (2009: 130) infers that "[d]espite various attempts to discern a specific literary form of the OAN, most scholars now agree that thematic rather than structural similarities link these materials. Their





2015; Van Wieringen, 2020).<sup>23</sup> OAN are a prominent feature in several prophetic books and scholars have recognised that the following texts fit this category: Isaiah 13-23, Amos 1:3-2:16; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32; Obadiah, Nahum and Zephaniah 2:4-15 (O'Brien, 2009: 130; Sweeney, 1996: 528–529; Van Wieringen, 2020: 205–206).<sup>24</sup> It can even be interpreted that the whole of the book of Nahum constitutes an oracle against Assyria (Esterhuizen & Wessels, 2023: 1–10; O'Brien, 2009: 130–131; Wessels, 1998: 626; Wessels & Esterhuizen, 2020: 1–6).<sup>25</sup>

According to Cahill (1991: 121–122) the reason why the OAN may have been neglected for some time, is because of the negative effect they have on the readers of these texts. The lack of a positive impression can furthermore be attributed to the excellent literary character and the powerful nature of the poetry (mostly) in which these oracles were written. Therefore, most modern-day readers solve this problem by simply ignoring these texts and by treating them as add-ons.<sup>26</sup> Most people therefore do not know how to integrate them in the theology of the prophetic books and their teachings at all. Cahill (1991: 122) emphasises that each one of these OAN need to be taken into consideration, not only because of its individual editorial history, but also given the specific literary context of the particular prophetic collection in which it is found.

Kim (2020: 59, 67) also stresses that these oracles should be read within the book of Isaiah as a whole and he summarises the key message of the OAN within the composition of the book of Isaiah in a number of points. These texts outline YHWH's judgment upon the other nations as a just punishment for oppressing and abusing Israel/Judah. Punishment for the enemies implies salvation for Israel/Judah. Consequently, the oppressor's misfortune is theologically interpreted as fortune for the oppressed. Whereas Israel and Judah are under the divine (sometimes severe) judgment in the synchronic flow of the book of Isaiah chapters 1-12, most of the texts in chapters 13-23 contain oracles *against (about)* the nations; specifically, for those who are/were directly or indirectly involved in the hardships Israel and Judah had to endure. Israel and Judah were often the underdog and were bullied by the dominant neighbouring nations, for example Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.

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distinguishing characteristic is their announcement and/or envisioning of the destruction of a nation other than Judah or Israel at the hands of Yahweh, God of Israel. Most of the texts describe the reason for this destruction in general terms. Occasionally lambasted for their treatment of Israel and/or Judah, more often the nations are accused of non-specific pride."

<sup>23</sup> In this foreword to the volume edited by Else Holt, Paul Kim and Andrew Mein, Sweeney (Sweeney, 2015: xvii) lauds the renewed interest in the OAN: "The present volume constitutes a welcome attempt at stimulating research on the Oracles concerning the Nations in the Prophetic literature. Research on the Oracles concerning the Nations has unfortunately received less attention in the study of the prophetic literature, particularly in relation to work on the prophetic oracles of punishment, the prophetic oracles of restoration, and narrative literature concerning the prophets."

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the possible collections Albertz (2003: 180–181) infers as follows: "Despite all the formal differences, however, the tradents of the prophetic books quite clearly considered the oracles against the nations a well-defined textual group: the overwhelming majority appear together in the prophetic books as collections or composites (Isa 13-23\*; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Joel 4 (3); Amos 1:2-2:16\*; Obad; Zeph 2:5-15; Nah 2-3; Zech 9:1-8)."

<sup>25</sup> In her commentary on Nahum, O'Brien (2009: 130–131) indicates how the book of Nahum is intertwined with other books that also fall under the category of the OAN: "Nahum follows the same general structure as Isaiah 13, which turns to the destruction of the other and to salvation for Jacob only after a general theophany; both Nahum and Isaiah also address a male antagonist (the king of Assyria for Nahum, and the Day Star for Isa. 14). Similarly, Nahum joins with Ezekiel 25-31 in painting scenes of battle and siege (Ezek. 26.8-14; Nahum 2 and 3), in expressing concern with those who gaze at the enemy city's humiliation (Ezek. 27.35; 28.17-19; Nah. 3.5-7), and in raising a mock lamentation over the city's fall (Ezek. 32.16; Nah. 3.1)."

<sup>26</sup> Kim (2020: 60) aptly states: "... because of the disturbingly judgmental overtones and the seemingly disjointed composition."



According to Albertz (2003: 185) the “use of these oracles to announce implicit salvation for Israel is probably a development of the exilic period, representing a radical shift from their preexilic function.” Especially during the exilic period the Judeans felt immensely disillusioned and the OAN became a “medium of retaliation against a superior opponent, invulnerable in the political arena” (Albertz, 2003: 188). Therefore, the downfall of the major empires, first Assyria and subsequently Babylon, would have been a source of jubilation for Israel/Judah. What applies to Israel/Judah, also applies to the other nations: “The fundamental Torah rule (cf. 1:10; 2:3) applies to all the nations in the world: justice (and consequence) first, and mercy afterward” (Kim, 2020: 67).

The OAN also stress the idea that YHWH is the true King of all nations and therefore he controls the course of history (Kim, 2020: 68). Isaiah 13:17 emphasises the concept of YHWH’s sovereignty and kingship as it is stated: “See, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold” (NRSV). Therefore, YHWH is the One whose plans will be fulfilled, even with regard to all the other nations, who are all under his reign. We have already seen in the first subsection of Isaiah that Assyria is depicted as a tool in God’s hands to punish Judah (10:5-6, 15). Verse 5 states explicitly that Assyria is the rod of God’s anger and the club in the Assyrians’ hands is God’s fury (Isaiah 10:5).<sup>27</sup> God thus controls the ebb and flow of world affairs and even the major empires are merely used as instruments in his hands to fulfil his will for the world. We can thus refer to the two-sidedness of YHWH, as he is the one who punishes the abusers of Jerusalem, but he is also the one who restores Jerusalem and takes the side of the poor, needy, and the righteous upright (Beuken, 2005: 57; Kim, 2020: 68).

The OAN develop the theme of hubris or pride, in as far as it describes the nations’ and/or the empires’ overconfidence in their own power over and against the power and authority of YHWH (Crouch, 2011: 479; Kim, 2020: 70). These texts criticise the vanity of the glory and the splendour of the empires and their kings. Isaiah 14:11-14 formulates the hubris of the Babylonian king: “Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your harps; maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms are your covering. How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High’” (NRSV). In Isaiah’s OAN we can clearly identify two main rivals: YHWH versus Babylon, as well as Zion versus Babylon. Isaiah’s OAN explicitly names the Babylonian empire as the main opposition, and just as YHWH condemns Assyria’s arrogance (10:12), Babylon now hears of its own downfall (13:11). Whereas the taunt of the king of Assyria mocks his arrogance (10:8-11, 13-14; cf. 14:24-27; 37:22-29), the OAN contain an even severer taunt song against the king of Babylon (14:4-21) (Kim, 2020: 70). Blenkinsopp (1996: 105) observes that “one of the most durable legacies of Israelite prophecy ... [is its] critique of imperial ideology.” Isaiah indeed repeatedly subverted the rhetoric of neighbouring imperial nations. From a trauma and resilience perspective the OAN represent the curses of the voiceless and the trampled. Their cry becomes a cry of resistance which can empower them and give them resilience in the face of being disempowered.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this text provides a comprehensive consideration of the traumatic and extreme violent passages in Isaiah 13-14, with specific focus on Isaiah 13:16. In this text, the authors explored the significance of Isaiah 13:16, which describes violence and humiliation against Babylonian women, within the context of trauma and resilience within the broader context of the oracles against Babylon. The traumatic imagery in Isaiah 13-14, can be interpreted through

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<sup>27</sup> One can possibly think of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem under king Sennacherib at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE (see Isaiah 36-39).



a trauma and resilience lens within the broader spectrum of trauma hermeneutics. The interpretation of these passages, taking into cognisance, the historical background and the OAN within the larger prophetic tradition, and the reversal of roles, underline the negative impact these oracles can have on readers. While the text is indeed disturbing, conjuring up a plethora of feelings and emotions, it underpins the resilience of the oppressed that justice will prevail. The text serves as a reminder of the enduring human capacity to find hope and resilience, even in the face of profound suffering and trauma.

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