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THE MEANING OF "MOUNTAINS AND HILLS" IN ISA. 41:14–16

E. JOHN HAMLIN

This passage is to be understood as a single strophe in a larger poem (41:1–42:2). Its dependence on its context is seen in the repetition of key words and phrases found in previous and subsequent passages. The theme is in perfect continuity with verses 8–10 and 17–20, that is, the great reversal of Israel’s fortunes as a part of the great event that has begun to happen with the rise of Cyrus. Its literary form as well as terminology is that of an oracle of assurance from Yahweh to Israel exactly similar to the two previous strophes (vss. 8–10 and 11–13).

The strophe itself is divided into three parts, each marked by a change of meter. The first two lines (vs. 14), forming the introduction to the oracle, are in 3/2 meter. The next three (vss. 15–16a) are 3/3, while the closing and climactic line returns to 3/2 meter (reading b?wk. ~pas as a single accent). Climax and introduction are parallel, the one giving the help of Yahweh, and the other the response of Israel. The נב of the introduction is matched by the הנ of the conclusion, while in both places “Holy one of Israel” is the title of Yahweh.

The body of the oracle is introduced by the visionary “Behold” (cf. Jer. 4:23–26, 23:19, Isa. 30:27). In verse 11 this expression is used to introduce the vision of the frustration of Israel’s oppressors. Here there is a new note. The “puny worm” will become a “new threshing sledge.”

Before we can understand the new role Israel is to play, we must examine the strophe at some length. As threshing sledge, Israel will

thresh crush make as chaff winnow

thresh

the mountains and hills.

1 Cf. the writer’s unpublished essay, “A Critical Analysis and Interpretation of Isaiah 41:1–42:4” (Union Theological Seminary Library, New York). The original suggestion of this literary division came from James Mullenburg.


3 Cf. the vocabulary affinities noted in n. 2. Begrich has asserted that these and numerous other passages of Second Isaiah are conscious imitations of a liturgical form, “The Priestly Oracle of Salvation.” He points out the similarity in language between the prayers and petitions of some of the Psalms and the words of Yahweh in these passages of Second Isaiah. Although there are examples of such oracles from Near Eastern literature (cf. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, pp. 449–51), there is no survival of this form as such in Hebrew literature. That Second Isaiah was using oracular terminology is clear from passages like Gen. 26:24. But we may question whether the evidence adduced by Begrich allows us to conclude that this prophet was consciously or unconsciously borrowing a specific liturgical form. Cf. J. Begrich, “Das Priesterschiedliche Heilsorakel,” Beiträge zur Wissenschaft von Alten und Neuen Testament. ZAW, LII (1934), 81–92.

4 The expression נב is obscure. The obvious translation, “Men of Israel,” does not seem to express the meaning of the passage adequately. Many modern commentators accept the emendation נב instead of נב on the basis of a parallel use with נב in Isa. 14:14 and Job 25:6. G. R. Driver has found an Akkadian word mutu, meaning “louse,” which suggests that more light may be shed on the problem from further study of cognate languages. The Vulgate, qui mortui estis, attempts to relate the word to נב, “to die.” We follow the LXX suggestion, taking נב to mean “few” (ὅπερόνως). Gen. 34:30, Deut. 4:27, Jer. 44:28, and Ps. 105:12 all use the phrase נב to refer to the small size of Israel as compared with the other nations. The phrase נב is used in the same way in Deut. 26:5, 28:62. Especially significant are these two Deuteronomic references, where part of the curse of disobedience will be that “Yahweh will scatter you among the peoples and you shall be left a paltry few among the nations where Yahweh drives you.” We have interpreted the word as an elliptical expression and translated “puny Israel.”
This is followed by the action of the storm
wind which will
whirl them away,
scatter them.

The key to the understanding of the pas-
sage is first in the meaning of the “moun-
tains and hills.”

In the Old Testament we find moun-
tains to be the foundations of the earth
(Job 9:5, Ps. 90:2). In the literature of
the ancient Near East we also find this
view of the mountains. The land of the
world was surrounded by ocean and a
ridge of mountains which formed the joint
between heaven at their summit and the
nether world beneath their bosom. The
Gilgamesh Epic tells of the journey of the
hero in search of Utnapishtim by way of
Mount Bashu, one of the seven peaks of
the cosmic ridge:5

The name of the mountain is Mashu.
When he arrived at the mountain range of
Mashu,
Which daily keeps watch over sunrise and sun-
set,
Whose peaks reach the vault of heaven,
And whose breasts reach the nether world be-
low,
Scorpion men guard its gate,
Whose terror is awesome, whose glance is
deadh. . .

This cosmic mountain was also the
mythological sanctuary of the gods, since
it reached the vault of heaven. This is why
mountains and hills were especially ap-
propriate for the worship of the gods. A
holy mountain was seen as a replica of the
cosmic mountain.6 The Babylonians had
no natural hills or mountains on their al-
luvial plans on which to construct their
temples. So they constructed their own

mountains, called ziggurat's, that is, temple towers, which were replicas of the
cosmic mountains.7 The base of the temple
tower was called the “bosom of the earth”
or “bosom of the underworld,” and the
peak was called the ziggurat, or, in Sumerian, kur or khursag, which means “pin-
nacle.”8 The greatest temple tower in
Mesopotamia was the famous Etemenan-
ki, “The House of the Foundation Plat-
form of Heaven and Earth,” in Babylon.
On this replica of the cosmic mountain,
the temple Esagila was built whose con-
struction is described in the Enûma elish.9

In the Old Testament we find sacred
mountains as the natural place to worship
Yahweh. He was first worshiped on Sinai,
according to the tradition of E and P, and
later on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, which
he chose for his abode. On the other hand,
the mountains and hills of the Canaanites
are sites of pagan cult practices which en-
ticed Israel to idolatry (cf. Hos. 4:13; Jer.
3:6, 21, 23; Isa. 57:7). These are four pos-
sible references to the ziggurat of Babylon
in the Old Testament. The first is the
story of the Tower of Babel in the Yah-

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5 Pritchard, op. cit., p. 88. The Babylonian idea of
geography is described by J. Levy in “The Origins
of the Week and the Oldest West Asiatic Calendar,”
H UCA, XVII (1942–43), 152 ff. Canaanite and Hit-
tite literature also pictures the cosmic mountain; cf.
Pritchard, op. cit., pp. 135, 358.

6 There was no intellectual problem for ancient
man here. Frankfort, Before Philosophy, pp. 30–31, has
pointed out how the primeval hillock on which crea-
tion took place in the Egyptian cosmology was identi-
fied with the holy of holies in every temple, as well as
with the royal tombs, where it was stylized as a pyra-
mid. He calls this way of thinking “coalescence in
space.”

7 Jack Finegan in his Light from the Ancient Past,
pp. 19–20, describes a ziggurat built about 4000 B.C.
It was “a vast mass of clay stamped down hard and
strengthened with layers of asphalt and unburned
brick. It measured 140 by 150 feet and stood about 30
feet high. On its summit was a shrine, 65 by 50 feet,
built about a long narrow court, 14 feet across.”

8 These terms have been found in the inscriptions
of Nebuchadnezzar's restoration of the temple tower
in Babylon. W. F. Albright in Archeology and the Re-
ligion of Israel, pp. 150–52, has pointed out the strik-
ing similarity between the terms for Ezekiel's altar
(43:10–17) and the ziggurat. The base of the altar is
called אָלֵל, and the summit אָלֵל, or אָלֵל. This is,
according to Albright, an Akkadian loan word from
arallu which means both “underworld” and
“mountain of the gods.”

9 Pritchard, op. cit., p. 69.
“Mountains and Hills” in Isa. 41:14–16

1.0 The vain plans of man to build “a tower whose top shall reach the heavens” are rebuked by Yahweh. In Jer. 51:25, Babylon is referred to as a “destroying mountain.” Here the writer seems to be using the great temple tower recently completed by Nebuchadnezzar as a symbol of the imperial power of Babylon. This would be reasonable, since the imperial god Marduk was supposed to live there.

The third reference to the Babylonian temple tower is found in the taunt song against the king of Babylon found in Isa. 14:12–16:

You said to yourself,
“The heavens will I scale;
Above the stars of God
will I set my throne;
I will sit on the Mount of Assembly,
in the recesses of the north;
I will scale the heights of the clouds,
I will match the Most High.”

But down to Sheol are you brought,
to the recesses of the Pit.

This appears to be a satirical reference to the liturgy of the Marduk cult in which the king mounted the steps of the temple tower to sit on the “Mount of Assembly” with the gods. The fourth reference is similar, in Jer. 51:53:

Though Babylon scale the heavens,
and fortify her stronghold on high,
Yet from me shall despoilers come unto her.

In these references we see the sacred mountain with its temple as the symbol of the pride and power of the nation.

In the warfare of that day defeated cities would be destroyed and left a hill of ruins. In this destruction the religious center and symbol of the enemy’s power would be purposely leveled. In the Nabonidus stele we read:

11 In the Old Testament cf. the destruction of Ai (Josh. 8:28), Rabbath Ammon (Jer. 49:2), Damascus (Isa. 17:1), Samaria (Mic. 1:6–7), Jerusalem (Mic. 3:12, Jer. 9:11, Ps. 79:1), and Babylon (Jer. 51:37). Frequent descriptions of destruction are found in Mesopotamian records. We cite two. From the annals of Nabopolassar: “The city they turned into ruin hills and heaps of debris” (Pritchard, op. cit., p. 305). Tiglath-pileser III reported how he made the districts of Samaria look “like hills of ruined cities over which the flood had swept” (ibid., p. 283).

12 Among others, G. E. Wright, Westminster Atlas, p. 24, identifies the “tower” of Genesis, chap. 11, with the temple-tower of Babylon. It was begun in the third millennium B.C. but was not completed until the time of Nebuchadnezzar.


14 Pritchard, op. cit., p. 284.

15 Amos 1:3. The word used, נְתַצַּקַה, is the same root as “sharp” (נְתַצַּקָה) in Isa. 41:15.
the King of Syria destroyed them and made them like dust of the threshing.”

These figures of speech not only are used to tell of historical events but also appear in religious language to describe the actions of the gods. The Tammuz liturgies of Mesopotamia begin with the invasion of the desert hordes into the temple area to capture the god and carry him off to the nether world. This invasion is described in terms of a desert storm. While Tammuz is in the nether world, he is at enmity with the upper world, and sends his “word” as a desert storm which destroys mountains, makes the heavens tremble and the earth quake, turns the cultivated land into chaff, overpowers the people, and leaves the cattle prostrate. That is to say, chaos threatens the world at this juncture of nature’s cycle.16

In Canaanite literature the annual return of winter takes the form of a struggle between Mot and Baal. The revenge of Anath on Mot after the death of Baal is expressed in terms of threshing and winnowing:17

[Mot challenges Baal]
Downfall upon thee may I see,
Winnowing with fan
 upon thee may I see!
Cleaving of sword
 upon thee may I see!
Sifting with the sieve
 upon thee may I see!

[Anath revenges Baal’s death]
She seizes godly Mot.
With sword she doth cleave him.
With fan she doth winnow him
With fire she doth burn him.
With handmill she doth grind him.
In the fields she doth sow him.

When similar terms appear in Hebrew religious terminology, they are not con-

nected with the annual struggle between forces of life and death in nature but rather with God’s activity in history. Yahweh’s anger is thus spoken of (Jer. 23:19; 30:23; cf. 18:19):

Behold! The storm of Yahweh has gone out in fury, a sweeping storm that will whirl on the head of the wicked. The anger of Yahweh will not turn back until he has fully accomplished the desires of his mind.

Isaiah of Jerusalem pictures the coming doom of Judah as a “threshing” (38:37), while an anonymous prophet calls Israel in exile “my threshed one” (Isa. 21:10). In Habakkuk (3:12) we see a picture of eschatological judgment:

Thou didst bestride the earth in fury,
Thou didst thresh the nations in anger!

As we have seen, the language used in Isa. 41:14–16 is taken from history and from myth. The reference to mountains indicates that the realm of myth is here dealt with. The nearest parallel comes from the Tammuz liturgy, where the “word” of Tammuz destroys mountains and turns the cultivated fields into fine chaff-like dust. But the parallel is not fully useful, for the idiom of Hebrew religion is taken from history, not nature. The state of enmity between Yahweh and the world is not occasioned by the cyclical changes in natural forces but by the rebellion of men and nations. It is this rebellion which is symbolized by the mountains, which were the central external feature of the imperial-nature religions of Mesopotamia.

In Israelite literature the mountains of men’s pride are shattered by Yahweh (Isa. 2:14), and it is Yahweh himself who is against the “destroying mountain” (Jer. 51:25). It is he who shakes the mountains in the eschatological day (Hab. 3:6, 8, 10). The only analogy we can find to this situation where Israel is an active agent is from

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historical literature. Moses’ destruction of the golden bull (Deut. 9:21), his command to the Israelites to destroy the Canaanite sanctuaries with their altars and idols atop the high hills (Exod. 34:13, Deut. 12:2–3), and Josiah’s reforming attack on the pagan altars and images of Jerusalem (II Kings, chap. 23), all speak of grinding these pagan objects to fine dust, reminiscent of the “chaff” of our passage.

Perhaps this will aid us in understanding the significance of the role of Israel as a “new” threshing sledge. In the new Exodus that is part of the eschatological event brought in by Cyrus, Israel’s new role will be like that of the time of the conquest—destroying the sanctuaries, altars, images of the nations, reducing them to chaff-like dust which will be swept away by Yahweh’s wrath.

This is not the usual interpretation of the figure in this strophe. Skinner, Kissane, Bewer, Box, and Volz all see the mountains and hills as symbolizing the enemies of Israel. Torrey calls them the wicked of all races. Against this view is the fact that the enemies of Israel are nowhere else (so far as we know) described as “mountains and hills” (if we except Jer. 51:25, where Babylon is called a “destroying mountain”; the reference is probably to the temple tower). Furthermore, Israel is nowhere presented as a military conqueror by Second Isaiah. Furthermore, if the enemies of Israel were referred to here, this strophe would be nothing but a repetition of the preceding strophe, with no movement of thought.

Marti and Box find here the picture of the battle of the nations of the world against Jerusalem. In support of this view, we find that the mountains and cliffs are torn down by Yahweh (Ezek. 38:20), while Israel herself is called on to “thresh” and “crush” the nations who are gathered against her in the eschatological vision of Mic. 3:11–13. In Zech. 12:6 Judah is likened to a fire which destroys the peoples attacking Jerusalem in this climactic battle. However, none of these figures corresponds to the picture of verses 15–16 in its details. Israel may thresh the nations and burn the people arrayed against her, but she takes no action against the mountains themselves. We have already mentioned the fact that Second Isaiah never assigns to Israel the role of destroyer of the nations. In addition, the description of the final battle of nations against Jerusalem is lacking from other parts of Second Isaiah.

Muilenburg has detected a reference to the shaking of the foundations of the earth (i.e., the mountains) which is a common eschatological figure (cf. Ps. 46:2; Jer. 4:24; Hab. 3:6, 10; Nah. 1:5). The advantage of this view is that it takes the mythological significance of mountains seriously. It places this passage rightly in the context of the eschatological moment which includes judgment and restoration, which is so important in Second Isaiah (cf. 42:15, 55:12). The difficulty with this view is that it does not explain the role of Israel as the agent of Yahweh’s judgment. Perhaps we may find the clue in the double significance of the mountains as foundations of the earth and the dwelling place of the gods. In their former role they are part of eschatological imagery of judgment and restoration. In their latter role they are historical symbols of the idolatrous pride of nations. In this latter role we find the place of Israel as agent of Yahweh in the destruction of the pride of the nations in order to prepare the way for the turning of the nations to Yahweh (Isa. 45:22). It will be noted at the same time

18 Norman Snaith’s attempt (“The Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah” in Rowley, Studies in Old Testament Prophecy, pp. 187–200) to present the Servant as a conqueror is not convincing.
that the storm wind of Yahweh’s wrath is the real winnowing power. Israel is his agent.

Israel is to be a new threshing sledge. We have suggested that this is in keeping with the new event—the new Exodus and conquest—that is about to take place. In former times Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon had threshed Israel. Now it was to be reversed. The “puny worm” was to be made a mighty threshing sledge. But just as the kings of Assyria and Babylon and Egypt, and even Cyrus himself, were agents of Yahweh, so Israel is also the agent. But this is a new threshing sledge. No ordinary warfare is being described here. In the light of the final strophe of the poem (42:1–4), where it is said that the Servant will not break a “cracked reed” or extinguish a “smoking wick,” we are perhaps justified in identifying this destructive violence not with the nations themselves but with their gods and temples.

In short, the mountains and hills in this passage have a double significance—the foundations of earth and support of heaven and the dwelling place of the pagan gods. In this second meaning they stand in enmity to Yahweh. The historical symbol of this enmity was the temple towers of Mesopotamia. Israel’s role in the future is in close relation to mountains and hills in this aspect of their meaning.

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND