

ISAIAH 24–27

STUDIES IN A COSMIC POLEMIC¹

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This study primarily aims to demonstrate that: (1) the background material for Isaiah 24–27 is Canaanite, as represented in the north Canaanite Ba'al tradition of Ugarit, (2) Isaiah 24–27 is not a series of isolated allusions to various segments of the Ba'al Myth, but a coherent framework and narrative progression that has been intentionally adopted from the Ba'al-Mot Myth, and (3) the function of Isaiah 24–27 is to describe the eternal and cosmic kingship of YHWH, while condemning Canaanite deities (i.e. El, Ba'al and his *rpum*, Mot, Litan, Shapash, and perhaps Asherah) and cult institutions (i.e. Ba'al worship, the *asherim* and the *marzēah*). This indicates that the message of Isaiah 24–27 is in keeping with the kingship and anti-idolatry themes present elsewhere in Isaiah. With this interpretation, there is a polemic continuity between Isaiah 7–13, Isaiah 14–23, and Isaiah 24–27. This interpretation also elucidates some of the connections between Isaiah 24–27 and 28.

This study begins by reviewing the recent history of interpretation of Isaiah 24–27. In Chapter two various interpretations of the Ba'al Myth are reviewed, and an alternative interpretation is proposed. Chapter three investigates the nature and functions of chthonic deities throughout the ancient Near East, and compares them to מַרְזֵאֵה in the Hebrew Bible, with particular reference to Isaiah 25:6-8. Chapter four begins with an exegetical analysis of Isaiah 25:6-8, which is followed by an inquiry into banqueting practices and banqueting in the mythic literature of the ancient Near East. Chapter five seeks to define the *marzēah* in Ugarit, and also distinguishes between the funerary *marzēah* and other types of *marzēah* gatherings. The ways in which Isaiah 25:6-8 is a condemnation and inversion of the funerary *marzēah*

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are specified. Chapter six argues that Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths influenced the Ugaritic conceptualisation of Litan, but that only these Ugaritic Litan traditions had a direct influence on the Hebrew Bible's conceptualisation of Leviathan. The chapter concludes that the destruction of Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1 is part of the polemic against Mot and the establishing of YHWH's cosmic kingship over every enemy, including Death and its allies. The Excursus observes that Egypt and Ugarit were engaged in a centuries-long, mutually beneficial, diplomatic and commercial relationship. Thus, it is historically plausible that these two political entities mutually influenced one another's religious traditions. Chapter seven is an analysis of the Ugaritic-Hebrew parallel word pairs in Isaiah 24–27. Chapter eight looks into additional evidence of the Ugaritic background in Isaiah 24–27. Chapter nine details the evidence of an Ugaritic background to Isaiah 28, and defines the connections between Isaiah 24–27 and 28, all of which contribute to the proclamation of YHWH's kingship and the condemnation of Canaanite deities and cult practices that is evident throughout Isaiah 24–28.

Chapter ten concludes not simply that there is an Ugaritic background to Isaiah 24–27, but that most of the Ugaritic background material exists in a single myth, narrated in fewer than three cuneiform tablets (KTU 1:4–1:6). The only Ugaritic material that forms background to Isaiah 24–27 and comes from outside the Ba'al-Mot Myth is related to kingship, death or the *marzēaḥ* cult. The idea of the cosmic battle, as it appears in Canaanite tradition, is transformed in the Yahwistic setting of Isaiah 24–27 into a presentation of cosmic judgement. Thus, Isaiah 24–27 (28) is a condemnation of Canaanite deities and idolatry, as well as a proclamation of YHWH's universal and eternal sovereignty. Consequently, a new epithet for the chapters is proposed: 'Isaiah's Cosmic Polemic'.