

“Aqueo-Isaiah: The Use of Water Imagery in the Book of Isaiah”  
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“Water is life's mater and matrix, mother and medium. There is no life without water.”  
-Albert Szent-Gyorgyi

Water imagery appears frequently throughout the book of Isaiah. The malleability of this literary medium allowed for rich and varied metaphorical use. K. Baltzer wrote, “Water is a highly important theme in Deutero-Isaiah, in its threatening character and as a gift that confers life.”<sup>1</sup> Baltzer specifically addresses Deutero-Isaiah, but his observation is applicable to the book in its entirety. The book of Isaiah contains water imagery that describes individuals, nations, hostile political powers, and even Yahweh. However, these uses were not all descriptive in nature; certain metaphorical uses had a higher function. The imagery of “chaos as water” in particular provides a conceptual link or “organizing metaphor” that served to tie together a number of separate themes.

One of the difficulties in categorizing the different uses of water imagery is determining whether that imagery is being used literally or metaphorically. The following are instances where the imagery is literal:

צֵא-נָא לִקְרַאת אֲחָז... אֶל-קִצֵּה הַתְּעָלָה הַבְּרִכָּה הָעֶלְיוֹנָה

Go to meet Ahaz...at the end of the conduit of the upper pool (Isa 7:3).

וַיַּעֲמֵד בַּתְּעָלָה הַבְּרִכָּה הָעֶלְיוֹנָה

And [Rabshakeh] stood by the conduit of the upper pool (Isa 36:2).

The latter is from a narrative section in Isaiah, while the former deals with technical instruction relating to how Isaiah was to deliver a prophecy. In non-narrative passages, it is much more difficult to determine if an oracle or prophecy is meant to be understood literally or metaphorically.

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 446.

Because oracles and prophecies are associated with divine messages and deal with divinity itself, a level of complexity is introduced in understanding the language used to convey such messages.<sup>2</sup> In order to better understand its function within Isaiah, this paper will examine passages that contain non-literal uses of water imagery.

## Metaphorical Uses of Water Imagery

H. Fabry notes that “the formless evanescence of water...invite[d] metaphorical usage.”<sup>3</sup> Because water appeared in every aspect of life, it could be used in a number of different- and even opposite- ways. The following are general categories where the author used some level of metaphor for the purpose of description:

### *Individuals*

In Isaiah, water imagery is applied to two mutually exclusive groups: the righteous and the wicked:

וְהָיְתָה אִישׁ כְּמַחְבֵּא־רוּחַ וְסִתְרֵם זָרִים כְּפִלְגֵי־מַיִם בְּצַיּוֹן

Every one of them [the righteous] will be like a refuge [from] the wind, a protection from heavy rain; like a canal of water in dry land (Isa 32:2).

וְהָיְתָה כְּגַן רְוָה וּכְמוֹצֵא מַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִכָּזֵבוּ

And you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of waters that will not fail (Isa 58:11).

וְהָרְשָׁעִים כִּי־ם נִגְרָשׁ כִּי תִשְׁקַט לֹא יוֹכֵל וַיִּגְרָשׁוּ מִיָּמָיו רֶפֶשׁ וְטִיט :

But the wicked are like the trouble sea that is not able to rest, and [whose] waters will toss up grime and mud (Isa 57:20).

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<sup>2</sup> P. Macky addresses this complexity with a chapter titled “When Metaphor is Necessary” in *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible*. He discusses both the literal and metaphorical descriptions of unobservable realities (such as the supernatural and the divine), and argues that the uses of literal speech in these cases are limited. He argues that in order to convey messages about such subjects, metaphor is generally used. Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, v. 19; Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 163-187.

<sup>3</sup> H. Fabry, “מַיִם,” in Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 8; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 279.

In these verses, both the righteous and the wicked are described using the same medium. Water imagery is ambivalent; authors must choose whether they draw upon the “threatening character” or water, or its ability to “give life.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Nations*

Nations are referred to both generally and specifically through water imagery in Isaiah. The following are passages where nations are addressed anonymously. Water imagery describes both the actions of the nations and the sound associated with their movement:

וְהָיָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים נִכּוֹן יְהוָה תֵּר בֵּית־יְהוָה בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשָּׂא מִגְבְּעוֹת  
וְנָהְרוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם:

In the days to come, the mountain of the house of Yahweh will be established in the top of the mountains and will be raised above the hills; and all nations will stream toward it (Isa 2:2).

וַיִּנְהָם עָלָיו בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כְּנִהְמַתַּיִם

And they will roar over it in that day, like the roar of the sea (Isa 5:30).

הוּי הַמּוֹן עַמִּים רַבִּים כְּהַמּוֹת יָמִים יְהַמּוֹן וְשִׁאֲוֹן לְאֻמִּים כְּשִׁאֲוֹן מַיִם כְּבִירִים  
יִשְׁאֲוֹן: לְאֻמִּים כְּשִׁאֲוֹן מַיִם רַבִּים יִשְׁאֲוֹן

Ah, the roar of many peoples; as the roar of the seas they roar; the noise of the nations [is] as the noise [that] the mighty waters sound; for the nations will sound like the noise of many waters (Isa 17:12-13).

כַּקְדַּח אֵשׁ הַמָּסִים מַיִם תִּבְעֶה־אֵשׁ לְהוֹרִיעַ שְׁמִיךְ לְצַרִּיךְ מִפְּנֵיךְ גּוֹיִם יִרְגְּזוּ:

As when fire kindles brushwood and [as] fire makes water boil, [when] your name is made known to your enemies, the nations tremble (Isa 64:1).

Specific hostile nations are described in Isaiah using water imagery. Assyria is described in these words:

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<sup>4</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 446.

וְלָכֵן הִנֵּה אֲדֹנָי מַעֲלָה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת־מֵי הַנָּהָר הַעֲצוּמִים וְהַרְבֵּים אֶת־מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר  
וְאֶת־כָּל־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְעָלָה עַל־כָּל־אֶפְיָקָיו וְהָלַךְ עַל־כָּל־גְּדוֹתָיו: וְחָלַף בִּיהוּדָה  
שֹׁטֶף וְעָבַר עַד־צִוְּאָר יִגִּיעַ

Therefore, Lord is bringing up against them the mighty flood waters of the river, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks; it will sweep into Judah as a flood, and, flooding over, it will reach up to the neck (Isa 8:7-8).

וְרוּחוֹ כִּנְחַל שׁוֹטֶף עַד־צִוְּאָר

And its wind is like a river valley, flooding over up to the neck (Isa 30:28).<sup>5</sup>

Babylon's fate is also expressed using water imagery:

וְשִׁמְתִיהָ לְמִזְרַח קַפָּד וְאֲנָמִי־מַיִם

And I will make it a possession for the thing that curls up and [as] a reed-pool (Isa 14:23).

The author described these two hostile entities using two different water metaphors: Assyria would be like a rapidly flowing river, whereas Babylon would be like a stagnant pool. Assyria was described as an active agent, and Babylon as a recipient of divine judgment.

### *God*

Yahweh is described in both positive and negative terms relating to water. On the one hand, he will provide water and safety for the righteous. On the other hand, he will unleash a torrent of judgments against the wicked:

הִנֵּה חֲזָק וְאַמִּץ לְאֲדֹנָי כְּזֶרֶם בָּרָד שֶׁעַר קָטָב כְּזֶרֶם מַיִם

[There is something] strong and mighty for the lord; like a heavy rain of hail, a storm bringing destruction; like a heavy rain of waters (Isa 28:2).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Isa 8:6. Because Israel refused Yahweh and his waters of Siloah that “flowed gently” (לְאֵט הַהֹלְכִים), he brought the rushing waters of Assyria against them.

<sup>6</sup> The ambivalent nature of water imagery is particularly apparent in Isa 4:6. Here, in contrast to Isa 28:2, Yahweh will provide “shelter from the rain.”

וַיֵּעָה בָּרֶדֶל מִחֶסֶה כְּזָב וְסִתֵּר מַיִם יִשְׁטָפוּ:

And hail will sweep away the refuge of falsehood and waters will flood over [their] hiding place (Isa 28:17).<sup>7</sup>

כִּי אִם-שָׁם אֲדִיר יִהְיֶה לָּנוּ מְקוֹם-נְהָרִים יְאֲרִים רַחֲבֵי יַדַּיִם

For there Yahweh will be magnificent for us, [like] a place of rivers [and] streams, broad on both sides (Isa 33:21).<sup>8</sup>

כִּי-יָבֹא כִנְהָרִל צָר רֵיחַ יִהְיֶה נִסְסָה בּוֹ:

For he will come like a pent-up stream [that] the wind of Yahweh drives on (Isa 59:19).

### Chaos as Water: An “Organizing” Metaphor

This paper has thus far examined individual uses of water imagery used in Isaiah where description seems to be the goal of the author. While cataloguing such uses can be beneficial to understanding the literary tendencies of the author(s), there are other uses that display a greater degree of complexity. P. Diamond and K. O’Connor, in analyzing Jeremiah 2-3, propose the existence of “organizing” metaphors that serve to assemble “a cascade of other metaphors and images, formal elements and characters into itself.”<sup>9</sup> E. K. Holt’s study on water imagery in Jeremiah argues that “a metaphor can belong to a certain semantic network, a cluster or ‘a pool of metaphors.’”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, not only can a particular metaphor serve as an organizing element for a passage, but a particular type of metaphor may attract similar language and imagery whenever that metaphor is used.

Holt goes on to state that in Jeremiah, the metaphor “God is water” attracts “a whole cluster of related metaphor, intentionally or unintentionally drawn from one and the same pool of metaphors.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, when an author uses a particular organizing metaphor, other imagery will

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to the waters, hail can also be considered a theophoric element in this passage. See Scott Noegel, “The Significance of the Seventh Plague,” *Biblica* 76 (1995), pp. 538-539.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jer 2:13 and 15:18 –Yahweh is both like the living water *and* a deceitful brook.

<sup>9</sup> A. R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2-3 (4.2),” in A. R. Diamond, Kathleen M. O’Connor, and Louis Stulman, eds., *Troubling Jeremiah* (JSOT 260; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> E. K. Holt, “Water Metaphors in Jeremiah,” in P. van Hecke, *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 187; Leuven: University Press, 2005), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Holt, “Water Metaphors in Jeremiah,” p. 106.

inevitably follow because of the pre-existing “semantic network.”<sup>12</sup> Each time an author employs a particular “organizing” metaphor, a similar range of imagery should appear near that passage.

One issue that arises in such an examination is that of authorial intent. Why would an author use such “organizing” metaphors? B. Doyle discussed a proposed hierarchy of metaphors in the Hebrew Bible, the most significant being “profound metaphors.” These types of metaphors “invite the reader/listener to imaginatively explore the depths of an image, uniting their personal experience with a literary expression for which there is no adequate ‘more literal’ substitute.”<sup>13</sup> It is hard to imagine a medium more familiar to Isaiah’s audience than water. This familiar imagery would have allowed for a wide range of literary expression and served as a focus or organizing principle for literary units.

Fabry wrote, “The importance of water to human life and to the life of the entire created order, combined with the remarkable phenomena which often accompanied thunderstorms, downpours, and the power of the waves of the sea, enhanced the notion of water with rich cosmic significance.”<sup>14</sup> This incredible abundance of water both above and below “was explained by the story of the primordial battle between the hero-god and the dragon of chaos.”<sup>15</sup> Such imagery would have been familiar to the audience of Isaiah. Baltzer noted that “the terminology and concepts here reflect an encounter with the surrounding world of the ancient Near East.”<sup>16</sup> It could have evoked a series of mythical stories and images from any number of ancient Near Eastern traditions. Cosmologically, water “constitutes the limits of the world,”<sup>17</sup> both geographically and temporally. According to Baltzer, “slight references to these mythical traditions [in Isaiah] suffice; the wider context must have been familiar to the addressees. Otherwise they would not have been able to understand the text at all.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than being arcane, long-forgotten stories, the audiences of these writings would have been familiar with this language personifying chaos as water.

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<sup>12</sup> Holt, “Water Metaphors in Jeremiah,” p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> B. Doyle, “A Literary Analysis of Isaiah 25.10,” in J. Van Ruiten and M. Vervenne, eds., *Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1997), p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> Fabry, “גַּיִם,” p. 274.

<sup>15</sup> Alice C. Hudiberg, “Water,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1367.

<sup>16</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 356.

<sup>17</sup> H. Fabry, “גַּיִם,” p. 269.

<sup>18</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 356.

The first passage that prominently features this mythological “chaos as water” imagery is in Isaiah 27. This imagery appears in the chapter’s first verse:

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִפְקֹד יְהוָה בְּתוֹר בּוֹ הַקֶּשֶׁה וְהַגְּדוֹלָה וְהַחֲזָקָה עַל לְוִיָּתָן נָחֵשׁ בָּרֶחַ וְעַל לְוִיָּתָן נָחֵשׁ עַקְלָתוֹן וְהָרַג אֶת־הַתַּנִּין אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּם :

On that day Yahweh will afflict- with his hard and great and strong sword- Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the writhing serpent, and he will kill the Tannin that is in the sea (Isa 27:1).

The phrase “on that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) does not specify the time in which this prophecy will take (or has taken) place.<sup>19</sup> However, it is linked to both the previous and following prophecy by the use of the word “afflict” (פָּקַד). The end of chapter 26 proclaims a day where Yahweh will come “to afflict” (לְפָקֵד) those who sin (verse 21), which leads directly into chapter 27. The verses following liken Israel to a vineyard that Yahweh will watch so that no one will afflict (יִפְקֹד) it (verse 3).<sup>20</sup> The imagery moves from destruction to deliverance while passing through the watery medium of chaos.

This passage includes references to two mythical creatures: Leviathan and Tannin. The earliest references to these creatures are in Ugaritic texts.<sup>21</sup> The names of these mythical characters are found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and in those cases also evoke images of the mythic past where God battled the powers of chaos. B. Childs notes that “although the myth has been thoroughly demythologized...[these] continued to function as mythopoetic imagery.”<sup>22</sup> Childs further notes that this mythical language in Isa 27:1 demonstrates that “the imagery still carries a residual intensity” of that primeval battle.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This phrase forms an *inclusio* with Isa 26:1.

<sup>20</sup> M. Kline recognizes פָּקַד as a linguistic tie between Isa 26:21 and 27:1, but does not mention the occurrence of the same verb in Isa 27:3, which serves the same unifying purpose. Meredith G. Kline, “Death, Leviathan, and the Martyrs: Isaiah 24:1-27:1,” in Walter C. Kaiser and Ronald F. Youngblood, eds., *A Tribute to Gleason Archer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), p. 245, n. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Leviathan (*ltn*) appears in *CAT* 1.5 I:1, 27 where it is a monster who is crushed. Tannin (*tnn*) appears as either part of a personal name (*CAT* 4.35:13 and 4.103:42) or as a sea creature that is defeated by either Anat or Baal (*CAT* 1.3 III:40, 1.82:1, 1.83:8).

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 197.

<sup>23</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, p. 197.

C. Uehlinger states that “the Biblical texts clearly consider Yahweh’s mastering of Leviathan as an aspect of creational order.”<sup>24</sup> However, these biblical battles with Leviathan do not necessarily depict the original creation of the world.<sup>25</sup> These mythopoetic images of battle can result in many different types of creation. Just as “Yahweh’s victory [over the primeval powers of chaos] was a necessary prelude to his subsequent organization of the cosmos,”<sup>26</sup> so Yahweh will battle the enemies of Israel in order to preserve their organization as his chosen people.<sup>27</sup> In the passage above, Yahweh is depicted wielding a sword and engaging in combat. Immediately following the description of this battle, Israel is described as a “lovely vineyard” that Yahweh constantly waters (Isa 27:2-3). The conflict with watery chaos depicted in Isa 27:1 results in the creation of Israel as a nurtured community, pointing to the “universal significance” of this passage.<sup>28</sup>

This idea of a mythical battle involving the sea was applied conceptually to the present circumstances of Isaiah’s audience.<sup>29</sup> O. Kaiser writes, “As a symbol of a power hostile to God the sea could be associated, like the sea-dragon, with the earthly enemies of Yahweh, the empires of the earth.”<sup>30</sup> In Isa. 27:1, Leviathan “works as a metaphor for an historical-political entity...unnamed but identified with mere chaos.”<sup>31</sup> J. Day states that this “unnamed” entity “*most probably* denotes Egypt but it could be Babylon or Persia.”<sup>32</sup> Disagreeing with Day’s proposal of Leviathan’s Egyptian relation, C. Seitz argues that this creature “is *most likely* a

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<sup>24</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” in K. Van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 960.

<sup>25</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” p. 960.

<sup>26</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” p. 960.

<sup>27</sup> H. Niehr notes the eschatological tone of this battle when Isa 27:1 is read in light of its following verses. H. Niehr, “לִיָּתָן,” in Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 730.

<sup>28</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, “Textual Citations in Isaiah 24-27: Toward an Understanding of the Redactional Function of Chapters 24-27 in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 107 (1988), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Fabry notes that “there are indications that some of the more overtly mythological aspects of water as a cosmic force, personified as a monster or dragon, have been modified so as to minimize the element of mythological religious association” (Fabry, “גִּיָּתָן,” p. 274). This level of abstraction would have lent itself to audiences identifying these creatures with contemporary historical figures.

<sup>30</sup> Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), pp. 221-222..

<sup>31</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” p. 961. G. B. Caird explains that “the implication is that the primeval victory can be repeated over the contemporary dragons of political power which are still recalcitrant to the gracious purposes of God.” G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 227.

<sup>32</sup> John Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, no. 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 112, italics added.

cipher for Babylon.”<sup>33</sup> However, G. Smith departs from all of these suggestions and states that “one can *assume*” the audience would have identified this enemy as Assyria.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the Tannin has been related to political figures elsewhere. Ezekiel addresses the Egyptian pharaoh as Tannin in Ezek 29:3 and 32:2, and Jeremiah compares the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar to Tannin in Jer 51:34. In another instance, a proposed emendation to the text of Ps 44:20 yields yet another historical-political reference using Tannin. Again, the precise referent is difficult to determine. Day proposes that this Tannin may refer to Babylon, Egypt, *or* Assyria.<sup>35</sup>

Because it is difficult to correlate either Leviathan or Tannin in this passage with any specific “historical-political entity,” this demonstrates that the imagery of chaos as water was flexible enough to allow the author’s audience to apply significant religious lessons from the past to their present circumstances.<sup>36</sup> Smith writes that “since Isaiah does not identify that political power [associated with the mythical monsters], one can assume that his audience would have automatically connected it with the evil enemy of Judah at the time.”<sup>37</sup> The use of the chaotic water monsters was “part of a mythopoetic motif whose original purpose was to glorify the warrior God of Israel.”<sup>38</sup> The innovation in Isaiah was that “God’s victory over [the monstrous personifications of chaos] represents his ultimate victory at the end of days.”<sup>39</sup> The imagery of divine battle, punishment, and ultimate deliverance were all combined in this passage using the organizing metaphor of chaos as water.

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 198, italics added.

<sup>34</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2007), p. 456, italics added.

<sup>35</sup> Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> D. Johnson proposes that such passages were “attempts to assure the exiles that the one who created order out of chaos in primeval time is capable of doing it again in their own time.” Dan G. Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration: An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24-27* (JSOT Supplement Series 61; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 456.

<sup>38</sup> E. Lipinski, “לִיִּיתַן,” in Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 7; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 509.

<sup>39</sup> Lipinski, “לִיִּיתַן,” p. 509. N. Wyatt notes that the tradition of battling the chaotic waters is easily applied escatologically, “for it tells of the destruction of the world, and its subsequent renewal.” Nick Wyatt, *The Mythic Mind* (London: Equinox, 2005), p. 222.

The next passage that uses this mythical “chaos as water” imagery is Isaiah 44. Yahweh says the following:

מִקִּים דְּבַר עֲבָדָיו וְעֲצַת מְלֹאכָיו יִשְׁלֹם הָאֵמֶר לִירוּשָׁלַם תּוֹשֵׁב וְלְעָרֵי יְהוּדָה  
תִּבְנֶינָה וְחָרְבוֹתֶיהָ אֶקְוֶמָם: הָאֵמֶר לְצוּלָה חַרְבֵי וְנַהֲרֹתֶיהָ: אוֹבֵישׁ:

[I am] the one saying to Jerusalem, “It will be inhabited,” and to the cities of Judah, “They will be rebuilt, and I will raise up her ruins.” [I am] the one saying to the deep, “Be dry; I will dry up your rivers” (Isa 44: 26-27).

The mythological imagery in this passage is a bit more difficult to see when viewed in isolation. In the greater context of this passage, however, the mythological nature of the water is apparent. Verse 24 speaks of Yahweh as creator. He “made everything” (עָשָׂה כָּל), which included “stretch[ing] out the heavens” (נִטָּה שָׁמַיִם) and “spread[ing] out the earth” (רָקַע הָאָרֶץ). Furthermore, he did this “alone” (לְבַדִּי). These phrases point the audience’s mind to the mythic time of creation, during which Yahweh conquered the forces of chaos. Baltzer argues that the Ugaritic myth of Baal battling Yam was hinted at in this passage,<sup>40</sup> which would put this imagery in the same category as the scene depicted above in Isa 27:1.

One of the elements that evoke a mythical mindset is the personification of “the deep.” Here, Yahweh does not simply speak *about* “the deep” in verse 27, he *commands* it (using a feminine singular imperative). Another mythical element is the attribution of “the rivers” to “the deep.” This is reminiscent of the description of the Ugaritic El’s abode “at the source of the rivers, at the midst of the springs of the two deeps” (*mbk nhrm qrb ‘pq thmtm*).<sup>41</sup> While the language is evocative of Ugaritic mythical motifs involving water, Baltzer suggests that subduing of the chaotic sea at the command of a deity is closer to the Egyptian god Seth’s subjugation of this element by his own command.<sup>42</sup> In either case, the cosmic aspect of the water imagery would have served to instill upon the audience the vastness of Yahweh’s dominion.

In addition to this imagery of chaos as water, Yahweh’s power is described as extending over all creation; he fulfills (יִשְׁלֹם) all of his purposes (v. 26, 28). The same God whose power

<sup>40</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 218.

<sup>41</sup> *CAT* 1.4 IV 21-22.

<sup>42</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 218.

The historical actions of Yahweh could be interpreted generally or specifically. Some interpreted the metaphorical imagery of “the deep” as representing concrete historical entities. For instance, Targum Jonathan interprets the phrase “[I am] the one saying to the deep” (הָאֵמֵר לַצִּוּלָה הָרַבִּי) in Isa 44:27 as “Who says to Babylon it will be dried up” (דָּאֵמֵר עַל כְּבַל (תְּהָרוּב). Thus, “the deep” was interpreted by some as referring specifically to the nation of Babylon.

Given this precedent of Yahweh’s ability to create the world and subdue chaos (either generally in creation or specifically in regards to the nations), he can rightfully command Jerusalem and the cities of Judah to be reestablished. This sovereignty over creation in general and over Israel in particular allows Yahweh to address Israel as “your redeemer” (גֹּאֲלֶיךָ). Here, the water imagery also serves to connect the concepts of creation and redemption. This theme of creation and redemption evokes the same concepts present in both the Flood<sup>44</sup> and the Exodus<sup>45</sup> narratives, and appears in subsequent passages using the imagery of chaos as water.

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<sup>43</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Westermann (Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 157) and D. Gunn (David M. Gunn, “Deutero-Isaiah and the Flood,” *JBL* 94 [1975], pp. 497-498) suggest this allusion.

<sup>45</sup> Baltzer argues for this allusion on the basis of the word צוּלָה in verse 27 (Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 217, n. 68). He argues that this is an allusion to צָלַל in Ex 15:10, the context of which is Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Gunn makes a similar argument (Gunn, “Deutero-Isaiah and the Flood,” p. 498).

The next passage that uses the “chaos as water” imagery is Isaiah 51:

עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי לְבָשִׁי-עוֹ זְרוּעַ יְהוָה עוֹרֵי כַיָּמֵי קֶדֶם דְּרוֹת עוֹלָמִים הֲלֹא אֶת־הָיָא  
הַמְחַצֵּבֶת רַהַב מְחוֹלְלֶת תַּנִּין: הֲלֹא אֶת־הָיָא הַמְחַרְבֶּת יָם מִי תְהוֹם רַבָּה  
הַשְּׁמָה מְעַמְקֵי-יָם דְּרָדָּ לְעֶבֶר גְּאוּלָּיִם:

Awake! Awake, clothe yourself with strength, O arm of Yahweh! Awake as in days of old, of generations long ago! Was it not you who cut Rahab into pieces, [who] pierced Tannin? Was it not you who dried up Yam, the waters of the great deep?<sup>46</sup> [Who] made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross? (Isa 51:9-10).

As in Isa 27:1, Yahweh is depicted as a warrior with a strong “arm” (זְרוּעַ) in a battle against the watery forces of chaos.<sup>47</sup> The time frame of this passage is given by the phrases “days of old” (מִי קֶדֶם) and “generations long ago” (דְּרוֹת עוֹלָמִים). This passage mentions the mythical figures of Rahab, Tannin, and Yam, and employs the mythical watery language of Gen 1:2 (תְהוֹם). The proliferation of allusions to the embodiments of watery chaos would have made this passage stand out to its audience.<sup>48</sup> Following this passage, Yahweh addresses Israel as “your maker” (עֹשֶׂה), touching again upon Yahweh’s role as creator (v. 13). Further, it was he who made it possible for the redeemed (גְּאוּלָּיִם) of Israel to walk through the waters of chaos (v. 10).<sup>49</sup> The imagery moves from the creation of the world out of chaos to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the midst of chaotic waters.<sup>50</sup> The author, however, extends his vision

<sup>46</sup> There is a play on the name Rahab (רַהַב) using רַבָּה in the phrase “the waters of the great deep” (תְהוֹם רַבָּה) (מִי). This anagram is noted by Nicholas Wyatt, *Myths of Power: A Study of Royal Myth and Ideology in Ugaritic and Biblical Tradition* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), p. 89.

<sup>47</sup> H. Barstad refers to this passage as “a holy war text.” Hans M. Barstad, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Book of Isaiah: “Exilic” Judah and the Provenance of Isaiah 40-55* (Oslo: Novus forlag, 1997), p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> Baltzer suggests that four separate “monsters” are referred to in this passage and cites the four beasts coming up from the sea in the vision of Daniel (Dan 7:2-3) in support of this statement (Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 357). This association is plausible because “scholars have long noted that Daniel 7 employs motifs of ancient Near Eastern creation myths which depict the young god’s victory over chaos or sea” (Susan Niditch, *Chaos to Cosmos: Studies in Biblical Patterns of Creation* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 74. Both sets of creatures in Isaiah and Daniel are “linked by their association with the waters of chaos.” Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 357.

<sup>49</sup> There is also a reflection of this division of water in the phrase “הֲלֹא אֶת־הָיָא הַמְחַרְבֶּת יָם מִי תְהוֹם רַבָּה.” The words מִי and יָם occur side by side and are mirror images of each other. Baltzer states that this was intentional on the part of the scribe, suggesting that in addition to the conceptual dividing of the waters, “the water is [also] optically divided.” Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 358, n. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Niehr notes that “the act of creation is described in the context of this defeat of chaos,” but does not discuss the role that water imagery plays in connecting the two concepts. H. Niehr, “תַּנִּין,” p. 729.

Similar to Isa 27:1, this passage contains the names of a number of mythical creatures associated with or embodying the sea. The first three (Rahab, Tannin, and Yam) “appear as chaotic beings...belonging to the sea, whose chaotic power they symbolize.”<sup>52</sup> Of the four terms evoking the chaotic powers of water (Rahab, Tannin, Yam, and “the deep,”), only the first, Rahab, does not appear in the Ugaritic texts,<sup>53</sup> and does not have any cognates in Ugaritic or Phoenician/Punic.<sup>54</sup> However, it is closely related to Leviathan, and appears to be “a late exilic adaptation of the former”<sup>55</sup> that “may be rooted in Babylonian mythology.”<sup>56</sup>

U. Rütterswörden argues that Rahab (רַהַב) is related to the Akkadian *ra'ābu* (“become angry, furious”),<sup>57</sup> *rūbu* (“anger, wrath”),<sup>58</sup> and *rubbu* (“billows, waves”).<sup>59</sup> The most convincing of these relations is *rūbu*. In the Akkadian “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” Marduk is described in these words: “In his fury not to be withstood, his rage the deluge; Merciful in his feelings, his emotions relenting.”<sup>60</sup> Significant to this discussion is the phrase “his rage the deluge” (*abūbu ru-ub-šū*). Here, the word *rūbu* (“rage”) is tied to *abūbu*, here translated as “deluge.” This word’s semantic range is not limited to a “devastating flood,” but includes “the Deluge as cosmic event,” “the Deluge personified as the ultimate of wrath, aggressiveness, and destructiveness,” and “the Deluge mythologized as a monster with definite

<sup>51</sup> H. Ringgren, “יָם,” in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 6; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> E. J. Waschke, “תַּהוֹמוֹת,” in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 579.

<sup>53</sup> U. Rütterswörden suggests that “this absence probably cannot be ascribed to the accidents of textual transmission, since we have a list that includes a significant number of monsters, many of which do not reappear in later traditions.” U. Rütterswörden, “רַהַב,” in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Hienz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Vol. 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 354.

<sup>54</sup> Rütterswörden, “רַהַב,” p. 352.

<sup>55</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, p. 957.

<sup>56</sup> Waschke, “תַּהוֹמוֹת,” p. 579.

<sup>57</sup> CAD R 1, s. v. *ra'ābu* A.

<sup>58</sup> CAD R 400, s. v. *rūbu* A.

<sup>59</sup> CAD R 393, s. v. *rubbu*.

<sup>60</sup> William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture* (Vol. 1; Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997), p. 486.

Tannin, as mentioned above, has strong ties to Ugaritic mythology, as does Yam. If Rahab, whose name may come from Mesopotamian mythological tradition, is set in parallel with Tannin (whose name comes from a Canaanite mythology), then this could again point to the timeless nature of Yahweh’s struggle against chaos. He has dealt with the Canaanite-related chaos in the past,<sup>62</sup> and will similarly deal with the chaos of Mesopotamia in the near future.<sup>63</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, according to N. Tromp, the term “the deep” (תְּהוֹם) “never entirely renounced its mythical past.”<sup>64</sup> In contrast to the other names used to personify chaos, תְּהוֹם “originally denoted the sea as an unpersonified entity...and indicates a mythological dimension.”<sup>65</sup> While the mythological imagery of passages using this word is apparent, “nowhere does [תְּהוֹם] represent an independent power hostile to God.”<sup>66</sup> This word “denotes chaotic waters, both at the time of the creation and after it.”<sup>67</sup> In Isa 51:10, תְּהוֹם serves both of these purposes; it reminds the audience of Yahweh’s power over all creation in the past, as well as his capability of defeating hostile powers in the present.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the word תְּהוֹם “displays features of power and cosmic range.”<sup>69</sup> It is this range provided by the imagery of chaotic water that allowed the author to merge the imagery of timelessness, combat, creation, and redemption into a single, theologically charged passage.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>61</sup> CAD A 77, s. v. *abūbu*.

<sup>62</sup> A double-allusion may be present in the use of Tannin. Niehr argues that the application of the word Tannin to Pharaoh in Ezek 29:3 and the exodus imagery in Isa 51:9-10 suggests that this battle represents “Yahweh put[ting] an end to Pharaoh and his hubris” (H. Niehr, “תַּנִּינִי,” p. 730). There is no reason why this symbolic language could not allude to both Ugaritic mythological imagery *and* imagery associated with Pharaoh’s defeat.

<sup>63</sup> Rütterswörden proposes an alternative: “Mesopotamian and Canaanite materials converge in the figure of Rahab.” Rütterswörden, “רַהַב,” p. 354.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Waschke, “תְּהוֹם,” p. 575.

<sup>66</sup> Waschke, “תְּהוֹם,” p. 579.

<sup>67</sup> Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament*, p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> Gunn reminds us that “where there is allusion there is also the possibility of *multiple* allusion.” Gunn, “Deutero-Isaiah and the Flood,” p. 495.

<sup>69</sup> Fabry, “גַּיִם,” p. 275.

<sup>70</sup> Baltzer notes that in this passage “creation, the miracle at the Reed Sea, and liberation are linked in a new way,” but does not discuss how the imagery of chaos as water facilitates this linking (Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 355). Similarly, Day notes that “in this passage...we have the blending of God’s victory over chaos at the creation, at the

“Chaos as water” imagery next appears in Isaiah 54, but in a slightly different way:

כִּי־מִי נִחַ זְאֵת לִי אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מֵעַבְרַי מִי־נִחַ עוֹד עַל־הָאָרֶץ כִּן נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי מִקְצֶרֶת  
עָלֶיךָ וּמִנְעַר־בְּךָ:

For this is to me like the waters of Noah; [just as] I swore [that] the waters of Noah would not further flood the earth, so I swear [that I will not] be angry with you or rebuke you (Isa 54:9).

This chapter begins with a marriage metaphor. Israel is likened to a wife who has been cast off, but Yahweh promises to take Israel back. In the line immediately preceding this verse, Yahweh addresses Israel as “your redeemer” (נֹאֲלֵךְ). In a previous verse (v. 5), he addresses them as “your maker” (עֹשֵׂיךָ). The beginning of verse 9 points the mind of the audience to the remote past when Yahweh flooded the earth. Here, an ambiguity may link a reference to antiquity with water imagery. Beltzer observes that “the sounds or consonants do not permit a definite decision as to whether this is a reminder of the ‘days of Noah’ or of ‘the waters of Noah.’ But the ambiguity may very well be intentional.”<sup>71</sup>

The reference to the story of Noah would have evoked the water imagery of that narrative, including the phrase “the deep” (תְּהוֹמוֹת, in Gen 7:11 and 8:2), which appeals to a mythical mindset (see above). According to Fabry, “the most striking of the [Hebrew Bible] narratives which reflect the cosmic range and threatening power of water is that of the Flood.”<sup>72</sup> This “cosmic range” of the chaotic water imagery allowed the author to organize a number of other images. C. Westermann wrote that in this passage “a whole range of motifs is here fused into something quite new...[and] are made into a unified whole.”<sup>73</sup>

Just as he vowed to never flood the earth, Yahweh “swears” (נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי -used twice) that he will never again forsake Israel. This oath is expressed in verse 10 as the covenant of “my peace” (שְׁלוֹמִי). Here, water imagery is used to transition from the imagery of a failed marriage (and its associated chaos) to the imagery of redemption and covenant with Yahweh.

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Exodus, and in the coming deliverance from the Babylonian exile.” Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, pp.91- 92.

<sup>71</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 446.

<sup>72</sup> Fabry, “מים,” p. 275.

<sup>73</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40-6*, p. 270. Once again, a commentator neglects to notice the role that the imagery of chaos as water plays in facilitating such a unification of disparate themes.

The final use of “chaos as water” imagery is in Isaiah 63:

וַיִּזְכֹּר יְמֵי-עוֹלָם מִשָּׁה עִמּוֹ אֵינְהוּ הַמַּעַלְלִים מַיִם אֶת רֵעֵי צֹאֲנוֹ אֵינְהוּ הַשָּׁם  
בְּקִרְבּוֹ אֶת-רוּחַ קְדָשׁוֹ: מוֹלִיךְ לַיְמִין מִשָּׁה זְרוּעַ תַּפְאֲרָתוֹ בְּוִקְעַ מַיִם  
מִפְּנֵיהֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת לוֹ שֵׁם עוֹלָם: מוֹלִיכֶם בְּתַהֲמוֹת כְּסוּס בַּמִּדְבָּר לֹא  
יִכְשְׁלוּ:

Then he remembered the days of long ago, Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up from the sea, the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in their midst his holy spirit? His glorious arm he made march at the right hand of Moses, cleaving the waters before them, to make for himself an eternal name; Making them march through the deeps,<sup>74</sup> as a horse in the desert, they did not stumble (Isa 63:10-13).

Preceding this passage, Israel forgets and forsakes the ways of Yahweh. Consequently, in verse 10, Yahweh becomes the enemy of Israel and is depicted as a warrior who “made war” (נִלְחַם) against them. Verse 11 places the following verses in the remote past by using the phrase “the days of long ago” (יְמֵי-עוֹלָם).<sup>75</sup> However, the scene does not explicitly deal with Yahweh’s battle against the waters of chaos. Instead, the actions of the Exodus are rehearsed. The right hand of Moses is accompanied into battle by the militaristic “arm” (זְרוּעַ) of Yahweh.

In addition to leading a military strike, Moses acts as a “shepherd of his flock” (רֵעֵי צֹאֲנוֹ), Israel. Moses is described as “cleaving the waters” (בְּוִקְעַ מַיִם). Westmann suggests that “this may be the last echo of the cleaving of the chaos dragon of mythology.”<sup>76</sup> This view becomes more plausible in light of the following verse. Moses leads Israel “through the deeps” (בְּתַהֲמוֹת), which again invokes the imagery of creation’s chaotic waters.<sup>77</sup> Israel is then lead triumphantly through the water, and shortly thereafter, Yahweh is addressed as “our redeemer” (נֹצֵרֵנוּ) in verse 16.<sup>78</sup> The water imagery serves to move the audience from the theme of Yahweh’s battle against Israel to themes of the Exodus (while simultaneously invoking the

<sup>74</sup> תהוֹם only appears with a definite article in the Hebrew Bible in Isa 63:13 and Ps 106:9.

<sup>75</sup> This exact phrase is also used two verses earlier (Isa 63:9), drawing even more attention to the ancient setting of the following water imagery.

<sup>76</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 389.

<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting that the water imagery in Isa 63:11-13 (ים, מים, and תהוֹם) follow the same order that those elements are mentioned in Isa 51:10.

<sup>78</sup> The entire phrase is “our redeemer from of old” (נֹצֵרֵנוּ מֵעוֹלָם), which forms an *inclusio* with verse 11.

As demonstrated above, the passages that deal with “chaos as water” in the mythological sense have many items in common. The following chart compares the imagery associated with the “chaos as water” metaphor in Isaiah.

	27	44	51	54	63
Passage begins with a reference to time (יְמֵי־עוֹלָם (?), כִּי־מִי נֶחַ, יְמֵי קָדְם, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא)	x		x	?	x
Yahweh as a warrior (לַחֵם, מוֹלִיךְ, [play on חֶרֶב], הַמַּחְרַבֶּת, חָלַל, חָרַב)	x		x		x
Creation (עֲשָׂה)		x	x	x	
Redemption (גָּאֵל)		x	x	x	x
Mention of Leviathan (לְוִיָּתָן)	x				
Mention of Tannin (תַּנִּינִין)	x		x		
Mention of Rahab (רַהַב)			x		
Mention of “the deep” (צוֹלָח) / (תְּהוֹם)			x		x
Completeness/ Fulfillment (שָׁלֵם)		x		x	
Shepherd imagery (רֹעֶה)		x			x

## Conclusion

Water imagery appears throughout the book of Isaiah. While this imagery was most commonly used descriptively, it surfaced with even greater literary force when used to describe chaos. Because the theme of chaos as water hearkened to a mythical age, this literary device could give a passage “timeless validity.”<sup>79</sup> In demonstrating Yahweh’s power over the waters of chaos in the remote past, the author affirms his power over Israel’s chaotic opposition in the immediate future, wherein the primeval battle “contain[ed] an echo of the prologue.”<sup>80</sup> This primeval battle was “appealed to in times of stress”<sup>81</sup> in order to express the hope of deliverance.

<sup>79</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 357.

<sup>80</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 243.

<sup>81</sup> C. Uehlinger, “Leviathan,” p. 960. Day writes, “The dragon mythology was well-known in pre-exilic Israel, since the fact that it could be appealed to in the hour of need during the exile implies that it was deeply rooted in the people’s consciousness.” Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea*, p. 92.

The watery imagery of chaos “reveals an attempt to use language to cope with a period of collective suffering by demonizing the suffering and the enemies who have brought it about.”<sup>82</sup> If the original context of such a “battle between the storm god and the sea [was] a king’s seizure of power,”<sup>83</sup> then the recitation of this type of event would have appealed to the concept that Yahweh was the universal sovereign who would conquer Israel’s current captors. In the midst of traumatic historical circumstances, the author(s) of these passages were able to use water imagery to tie together a number of concepts that would comfort Israel.

“Chaos as water” imagery carried with it a number of associated images: creation, deliverance, and redemption, to name a few. While these are recurring themes in the book of Isaiah, “chaos as water” imagery was used to connect these themes together and emphasize the power of Yahweh. For its ancient (as well as the modern) audience, this use of water imagery in Isaiah “adds simultaneously to the unity of the text and to its internal theological discussion,”<sup>84</sup> demonstrating Yahweh’s omnipotence over all creation; even over the chaos of water.

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<sup>82</sup> Niehr, “תנין,” p. 729-730.

<sup>83</sup> Niehr, “תנין,” p. 727.

<sup>84</sup> Holt, “Water Metaphors in Jeremiah,” p. 117.

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