

# Isaiah 30,7b

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## 1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Isaiah 30 is essentially a theological commentary on a political situation that the Kingdom of Judah had constantly to face. Located between two superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, and in strategic control of some of the main trading routes in the Near East, the Kingdom of Judah was often caught between the conflicting interests of these two powers, finding it hard to maintain independence. Consequently, it frequently tried to exploit various political coalitions in the region to preserve a modicum of national freedom. Unfortunately there was not much room for these political maneuvers, and they many times led to disastrous consequences.

It is difficult to set the exact time of the prophecies that were made in Isaiah 30. Still one could reasonably place them in the middle years of Hezekiah's rule, somewhere between 715 BCE and 705 BCE. The political allusions point to a period of struggle between supporters of Egypt and supporters of Assyria. Perhaps, the Assyrian faction in the royal court sided with subjugation to Assyrian imperialism and adoption of its universalism, and the other faction opted with a pact with Egypt against Assyria, rebellion, and unending war to preserve independence from Assyria.<sup>1</sup> In this split between Egypt and Assyria was lost, at least from Isaiah's perspective, the most viable option for Judah, that of reliance on God.

Isaiah 30 begins with a sharp criticism of those in Judah who seek help from Egypt and concludes with a promise that God would defeat Assyrian might. Judah has to trust in God and refrain from its overtures toward Egypt. Isaiah's position was that in the struggle between the two superpowers Judah should maintain neutrality and trust in God.<sup>2</sup> It is within this geo-political and theological context, in our opinion, that Isa 30,7 must be understood, and the famous crux Isa 30,7b deciphered.

About half a century ago Schunck wrote: "... eine ganze Reihe von offenbar nicht unversehrt gebliebenen Einheiten gibt, bei denen die Exegese bis heute nicht über die Erklärungsversuche der vorhergehenden Gelehrten-generation hinausgegangen ist; als ein eindrückliches Beispiel hierfür kann meines Erachtens der kurze Spruch Jes 30<sub>6-8</sub> dienen" (there exists a whole series of obviously not intact units, of explanation attempts by previous ge-

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<sup>1</sup> Yeivin, הרהורים 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> Hacham, ספר 327-328.

neration of scholars, to which exegetes till now have not gotten to; as an impressive example for that can serve in my opinion the short text of Isa 30,6-8 ).<sup>3</sup> This observation remains valid even these days, mainly because of the incomprehensibility of Isa 30,7b.

Isa 30,7 reads **וּמְצֹרֵם, הֶבֶל וְרִיק יַעֲזֹרוּ, לְכֵן קָרָאתִי לְזֹאת, רַהַב הֵם שָׁבַת**. The first hemistich is a clear statement about the futile hope for any military help from Egypt. The second hemistich, however, baffled commentators for generations. In particular, commentators were undecided regarding the following questions:

- a. Does **לכן** belong to the first hemistich or the second?
- b. To whom or what does **לזאת** refer?
- c. Is **רהב** an adjective, a verb, or a name (Egypt)?<sup>4</sup>
- d. To whom does **הם** refer? Is it in the right place? Has it been detached from another word?
- e. Why is there disagreement between the singular **זאת** and plural **הם**, and why is there disagreement in gender?
- f. What does **שבת** mean?
- g. In what sense is **קראתי** used here, as a proclamation, characterization, or appellation?

Given the enumerated difficulties in the relatively short text, it is not surprising that since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholars have tried to improve the reading of the MT by suggesting various textual emendations. It seems, however, that these efforts have not led to the resolution of the problems posed by Isa 30,7b. Disillusioned, several scholars have recently expressed a preference for retaining the MT despite all the inherent difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

De Waard raised the fundamental question of whether there is any utility in a debate about following a certain correction, or interpreting the uncorrected text, since from the translator's point of view the result may be the same. He felt that "Translators will in any case have to render the aphorism with its opposition between the meaning of Egypt's nick-name Rahab, 'assail' and the meaning of the noun **שָׁבַת**, 'inaction.'"<sup>6</sup> As will be shown neither De Waard's assumption nor his conclusion is warranted. Depending on how a translator chooses to answer the posed questions a large set of different interpretations are in principle possible, and some were suggested.

<sup>3</sup> Schunck, Jes 48.

<sup>4</sup> Fohrer, Buch 89. Fohrer says that **רהב** does not have a single meaning and therefore is hardly understandable.

<sup>5</sup> Donner, Israel 158-159; Kaiser, Isaiah 87; Snijders, Jesaja 300-301.

<sup>6</sup> De Waard, Handbook *ad loc.*

The purpose of this paper is to suggest and argue for the reading רהב המִשְׁכָּבֶת “Rahab (Egypt) that splinters,” which instead of amplifying the first hemistich adds an important *Sitz im Leben* element.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1 Early Efforts

One is impressed by the Versions’ inability to come up with a coherent translation that closely follows the Hebrew text. The Septuagint has “tell them, This your consolation is vain” (ἀπάγγειλον αὐτοῖς ὅτι ἡ ματαία παράκλησις ὑμῶν αὐτῆ). This interpretative paraphrase of the MT is neither contextually meaningful nor firmly anchored in the text. Indeed, the last word, which can be recognized in καθίσας, “sit down,” is at the beginning of verse 8. Though the Septuagint version is incomprehensible, it was apparently followed by the Peshitta, which translates: “therefore I have warned them, for this trust is in vain.”

The Targumist seems to have sensed here an invitation that turns into an occupation. He translates Isa 30,7b “so you called from them ready killers, they come upon them” (בכּן ערעית מנהון קטילין זמינין איתי עליהון). In this case the idea expressed is understandable, but the translation is completely unrelated to the MT. The only tenuous correspondences that can be established are לכּן → בכּן and קראתי → ערעית.

With some ‘fill-ins’ the Vulgate’s “therefore have I cried concerning this: It is pride only, sit still” (*ideo clamavi super hoc superbia tantum est quiesce*), would make good sense. It is possible to understand the Vulgate as saying: “therefore have I cried concerning this (seeking help from Egypt): It is pride (of Judahites that motivates their actions, or Egypt has pride) only, (Judah is better off to) sit still.” The Vulgate interprets the לּ in לזאת as על; does not take care of הם; and, seems to vocalize the last word as an imperative שׁבֹּת, reading *quiesce*, “be quiet.”

Classical Jewish exegetes also struggled with Isa 30,7b. Rashi says:

לזאת. למצרים: רהב הם. גסי הרוח: שבת. עם בטל ומתגאים חנם.

The prophet says to Egypt that they are vulgar, a nation of idlers who are unjustifiably haughty. His alternate translation for שבת is “cease,” and he seems to read הם = רהבהם. Rashi says, וּגְסוּתָם שְׁלֵהֶם רָאוּי, רַחֵם הֵם לְשׁוֹת (“and their vulgarity, it better stops”). Rashi’s focus on Egypt’s crude and vulgar behavior is not clear. One would expect a more political comment. The alternate explanation is perhaps the first implicit attempt to attach הם to another word in the hemistich. It should, however, be noted that already in IQ Isa<sup>a</sup> the last two words are separated, and the word division of

the MT is entirely supported by Symachus. Thus the separation of הם, if at all true, must have happened before the time of the Qumran sect.

Ibn Ezra says: לכן קראתי לזאת. ירושלם שינצח מי שישב בה ולא ירד (“that is why I called her Jerusalem, because victorious would be he who resides in her and would not leave”). Ibn Ezra exploits the name ירושלם to deduce that anyone who dwells in it would be protected. While Ibn Ezra must have been aware of the historical invalidity of this claim, he probably correctly expressed a sentiment that prevailed in Isaiah’s time among many Judahites. Unfortunately Ibn Ezra’s explanation of Isa 30,7b is almost completely detached from the MT. The only thing that we can deduce from it is that לזאת refers in his opinion to Jerusalem.

Kimchi also believes that לזאת refers to Jerusalem. However, his explanation treats also the other elements in the verse and follows the text much more closely. He says:

לכן קראתי לזאת. פרושו קראתי לזאת ירושלם: רהב הם שבת. החוזק שלהם הוא שבתם בעיר ירושלם ולא יוכלו לבקש עזר ממצרים כי לא יועילו להם. ורהב פרושו חוזק, כמו רהבם עמל ואון (Ps 90,10)

(“The strength of Judah is sitting in Jerusalem. They could not ask for help from Egypt because it would be of no use to them. רהב means ‘strength’ as in Ps 90,10”). It seems that Kimchi understands לזאת = “to Jerusalem”; רהב = “strength”; and, הם = “to them” though the text does not have a ל. Luzzatto (1800-1865) comments: “Ibn Ezra, Kimchi, and Grotius (1583-1645) interpreted this as referring to Jerusalem, their strength is to stay in their city and not ask for help from foreign countries, according to this explanation the word הם would be a difficulty.”<sup>7</sup>

Abarbanel explained that Egypt has no valor; their interest is only to boast. They sit in their homeland and would not help others. He says,

רוצה לומר על כן קראתי למצרים רהב לפי שכל עניניהם הם גאווה ולא גבורה וענינם הוא לשבת בעירם ולא ללכת ולעזור ולהועיל לאחרים. אפשר שאמר לכן קראתי לזאת רהב ר"ל לשומרון כי היה גאה וגאון ודרך רע כמו שאמר הוי עטרת גאות שכורי אפרים (Isa 28,1) ואין ענינם להלחם עם האויבים כי עם לשבת בביתם וישלחו אל מצרים לעזרה שיבאו להלחם בעדם. והמפרשים פרושו לזאת יקרא רהב לירושלם. ומה שכתבתי לראשונה הוא היותר נכון אצלי.

Abarbanel understands לזאת = “to Egypt”; רהב = “arrogance”; and, הם = “to the Egyptians.” He also mentions that רהב could allude to Samaria. The Israelites in Samaria are not interested in combat. They prefer to sit still and

<sup>7</sup> Shlesinger / Hovev, Luzzatto’s 233.

hire for combat the Egyptians. Abarbanel notes that some exegetes took רהב as referring to Jerusalem, but in the end prefers his first explanation.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 Later Efforts

Biblical scholarship in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries witnesses a split between those who attempt to interpret the MT and those who emend it. The predominant tendency of the emendations is linking הֵם to שבת and giving the combined המשבת various vocalizations.

Vitringa (1669-1722.) and Gussetius (1635-1704) felt that the hemistich should be read? הֵם רהב “Do they have any strength?” שבת הֵם, “they are insignificant.” Schelling (1775-1854), Rosenmüller (1768-1835), and Gesenius (1786-1842) explained that Egyptians were רהב, i.e. arrogant, but now they are an idle nation sitting still. It is very difficult to see the relevance of this fact, even if true, to the situation in which Judah tries desperately to enlist Egypt’s help against Assyria.

Doederlein (1745-1792) and Lowth (1710-1787) suggested the emendation הִמְשַׁבֵּת, Michaelis (1717-1791) read רָהַב הַמְשַׁבֵּית (taking רָהַב as a past tense verb meaning “fled, escaped” and הַמְשַׁבֵּית as “the helper”), and Hensler (1760-1812) רהב הִמְשַׁבֵּת. These commentators note that Isaiah made use of the word רהב, because it alludes to Egypt (Isa 51,9; Ps 87,4.89,11).<sup>9</sup>

Luzzatto (1800-1865) devotes to Isa 30,7b considerable attention. He believes that Isaiah’s intent in 30,7b is not to mock Egypt but those that rely on its help. Indeed, one observes that the text up to Isa 30,7b does not say anything derogatory about Egypt, only that they would not help and would be of no use to Judah. Thus, Luzzatto finds it unreasonable to assume that שבת הֵם refers to Egypt. He also considers it a difficulty that the MT begins with זאת and finishes with הֵם.

Luzzatto takes זאת = “this thing,” and referring to the sending of emissaries to ask for help from Egypt; הֵם = “they,” the people of Judah who send the emissaries; רהב = “agility and urgency” (Isa 3,2), or “insistence and pressure” (Prov 6,3) (as Italian *pressa* “quickness and urgency” and *pressare* “urge and insist”); שבת = “idleness” (Ex 21,19); and, the phrase שבת רהב as a common saying, meaning “diligence and agility that is idleness” (cf. TB Pesachim 50b). Thus, in Luzzatto’s view Isa 30,7b means: “Regarding this act of sending emissaries to Egypt, I say to them as the saying goes “haste is idleness” (רהב שבת).

<sup>8</sup> Abarbanel, פרוש 48.

<sup>9</sup> Shlesinger / Hovev, Luzzatto’s 233.

Luzzatto is aware that this leaves **הם** unaccounted for. He says, “And if you ask how the word **הם** did enter between **רהב** and **שבת**, when the two words are but a single phrase? Know that something similar is attested in Isaiah (56,7) **כי ביתי יקרא לכל העמים**, which means: **כי ביתי יקרא** **לכל העמים**.” Unfortunately, Luzzatto’s example is not convincing. While Isa (56,7) is a well formed and a clear literary expression having the meaning suggested by Luzzatto, **שבת הם רהב** is an awkward phrase in which **הם** unnaturally and in a non-meaningful manner breaks up a saying. Perhaps, Luzzatto had in mind another solution to the **הם** problem that he did not develop. He mentions finding in a manuscript of the book **בעל כנפים** that the words **הם רהב** should be one word, **רהבָהם**, which is the same as **רהבָם**. This would make **שבת רהבָם** an adaptation of the saying **רהב שבת**, and resolve his difficulty. The problem with Luzzatto’s explanation stems from the sense that he gives to **שבת** resulting in a saying that does not fit the context.

Mandelkern in his concordance mentions the opinion of R’ Joseph Halevi (R’ Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveichik 1820-1892) who reads **רהב המִשְׁבֶּת** “arrogance of inaction,” that they (Egypt) would not help their allies.<sup>10</sup> While the grammatical form **המִשְׁבֶּת**, similar to **המשפט**, is possible, the phrase “arrogance of inaction” is too abstruse to be a catchy saying or characterization.

### 2.3 Modern Scholarship

Biblical scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to be split between those who attempt to interpret the MT and those who emend it. Unfortunately neither of these interpretative efforts has led to satisfactory results. Obviously forced and contextually incongruous are such interpretations as Guthe’s “Rahab sind sie? Nein, Stillsitzen” (“Rahab are they? No. Sitting still”)<sup>11</sup>, König’s “Ein Ungetüm sind sie, das doch Untätigkeit ist” (“A confusion are they, that is however idleness”)<sup>12</sup>, Jensen’s “Rahab who sits still,” or the like.<sup>13</sup>

Tur-Sinai believes that the enigmatic **שבת הם רהב** should be resolved by comparing it with **שבת נגש שבתה מדהבה** (Isa 14,4b), which was said about Babylon. Already in 1779 Michaelis suggested the reading **מרהבה** for **מדהבה**, which was confirmed by IQ Isa<sup>a</sup>. This emendation, however, in Tur-

<sup>10</sup> Mandelkern, Testamenti 1078.

<sup>11</sup> Guthe, Buch 640.

<sup>12</sup> König, Buch 271.

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, Isaiah 234.

Sinai's view does not resolve yet all the problems, because Isa 14,4b should be structured to read *הם רהבה שבת נגש שבת* אך, thus clearly exhibiting its similarity to Isa 30,7b. Tur-Sinai argues that *הם* in both places should not be understood as "they" but rather a form derived from the root *המם*, as in *להמם ולאבדם והפיל פור הוא הגורל* (Est 9,24), where it has apparently a similar meaning to that of *אבד*.<sup>14</sup> He reads Isa 30,7b *שָׁבַת הֵם (הֵם) רָהַב הֵם* "the enemy and destroyer has ceased." Tur-Sinai adds, that even if the MT vocalization is preserved, *הֵם* should be understood in the sense of "noise, tumult" made by the enemy. Thus, *רהב הם שבת* is "the din of the enemy ceased."<sup>15</sup> Tur-Sinai splits Isa 30,7, linking the first hemistich with Isa 29,20 and considering the second hemistich a resumption of the prophecy regarding Babylon that was interrupted in Isa 14,4, i.e., Isa 30,7b is a restatement of Isa 14,4b. While the connection between Isa 14,4b and Isa 30,7b is clever, the splitting of verses and moving them around in the book needs more solid justification than Tur-Sinai provides. Moreover, even if Tur-Sinai's reconstruction of Isa 14,4b is assumed, the texts in Isa 14,4b and Isa 30,7b would be reversed, one reading well and the other being awkward. Finally, the meaning "enemy" for *רהב* is not attested in the HB.

Schunck considers Isa 30,6-8 a prophecy made against Egypt sometime between 714 BCE and 701 BCE. The word *רהב*, known only as a mythical monster at that time, is used by Isaiah here for the first time as a symbolic designation for Egypt. Schunck understands this section as "... ein visionär erschautes Ereignis der Zukunft mit einem symbolischen Namen belegt und in einer symbolischen Handlung aufgeschrieben wird. Wie Jes 8<sub>1-4</sub> ist deshalb meines Erachtens auch Jes 30<sub>6-8</sub> genauer der Gattung der Barichte über symbolische Handlungen der Propheten zuzuweisen" (... a future event perceived in a vision, supported with a symbolical name, and in a symbolic manner recorded. For the same reason as Isa 8,1-4 is, it seems to me, also Isa 30,6-8 more accurately should be assigned to the category of reports of symbolic treatments by the prophets).<sup>16</sup> He takes *שבת* as a form of the root *שוב* and makes the emendation *רהב הם שבת = רהב המִשְׁכַּת* "Die zurückgebrachte Rahab!" ("rahab led back"). The prophecy threatens Egypt with

<sup>14</sup> Tur-Sinai, הלשון 421-422. Tur-Sinai identifies a similar form in *וישע מהרב מפיהם ומידי חזק אביון (מפי + הם) ומידי חזק אביון* (Job 5,15), which he translates "he rescued from the sword, from the mouth of the enemy and from the hand of the powerful the weak."

<sup>15</sup> Tur-Sinai, הלשון 422. If *המם* = "noise, din, tumult," then Tur-Sinai suggest that Isa 14:4 should read *הם רהבה שבת נגש, שבת הם רהבה* אך, i.e., "how did subside the din of the enmity of the destroyer."

<sup>16</sup> Schunck, Jes 55.

chaos returning to it, and strange animals intermixing with people. It is of the same as Isa 20,1, 3-6, and Isa 17,1-3. One must be baffled by Isaiah's possible prediction of Rahab coming back and bringing chaos, when in all the biblical cases (Job 9,13.26,12; Ps 89,11; Isa 51,9) where this monster is mentioned it has been already subjugated.

Hacham understands לכן = על כן and לזאת = על זאת, where זאת refers to the pact between Judah and Egypt, and considers רהב הם שבת a moral proverb having the sense "The arrogant are idlers," which the prophet applies to Egypt. Thus, רהב = "pride and arrogance" (Isa 3,5) and שבת = "idleness" (בטלה) cf. Onq. Ex 12,15. He notes that according to the explanation that רהב is Egypt; the proverb would mean "The arrogant Egyptians who are idlers. Relying on them is useless."<sup>17</sup> While Isa 30-31 is replete with references to Egypt's inability to help Judah, nowhere is this inability explained in terms of inherent Egyptian idleness. Moreover, folklore has not causatively linked arrogance with inactivity. Isaiah's basic thesis is that Judah should rely on God rather than exploit the Assyria-Egypt split.

Recently, Blenkinsopp summed up the current understanding of רהב הם שבת saying that it is "a famous crux: even allowing for the slogan-like character of these sobriquets in sentence form, this does not make sense as it stands; attempts at a solution have been many and varied some of them colorful (e.g. "Rahab-la-chômeuse," i.e. "Rahab out of work")<sup>18</sup>, others cumbersome (e.g. "ein Ungeheuer das zu Untätigkeit verurteilt ist," i.e., "A monster condemned to inactivity")<sup>19</sup>." Blenkinsopp translates the hemistich "Rahab reduced to silence," which is contextually untenable.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators contend that רהב הם שבת is not the original text.<sup>21</sup> Of the numerous emendations that have been proposed for רהב הם שבת Kaiser lists רַהַב הַשְּׁמוֹת, "Rahab of the deserts," i.e. a water monster in a dry place; רַהַב הַמְּשַׁבֵּת, "the silenced monster"; רַהַבָּה מְשַׁבֵּת, "her noise ceases"; רַהַב הַמְּשַׁבֵּת hammušābet, "rahab led back"; רַהַב הַיּוֹשֵׁבֵת, "rahab which keeps silence"; and, בְּהַמּוֹת נֹגֵב, "hippopotamus of the south." Certainly, these emendations have hardly anything to commend themselves. One could easily empathize with Kaiser's dissatisfaction with these emendations. He advises, "In my view it is best to retain the received text like Delitzsch, and,

<sup>17</sup> Hacham, ישעיהו 316.

<sup>18</sup> Vermeylen, Prophète 411.

<sup>19</sup> Wilderberger, Jesaja 1157.

<sup>20</sup> Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 413.

<sup>21</sup> So Duhm, Buch 87f.; Feldman, Buch 358; Procksch, Jesaja 388; Fisher, Buch 200; Eissfeldt, Einleitung 425; Fohrer, Buch 89; Donner, Israel 159; etc.



directly following H. Donner,<sup>22</sup> to attempt to get a meaning from it.”<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately this advice does not result in an acceptable solution. Kaiser translates רהב הם שבת “Are they Rahab?-Sitting still!”, which makes no sense.

Standard English translations rendered קראתי = “I cried” (KJV, Young, Webster), “I have called” (NKJV, ESV, NASB, RSV, ASV, HNV), “I call” (NLT, NIV, NJPS, JB, HCSB, NET), “have I named” (Darby); לזאת = “concerning this” (KJV, Young, Webster), “her” (NKJV, NLT, NIV, ESV, NASB, RSV, ASV, Darby, HNV, JB, HCSB, NET), “this” (NJPS); רהב הם שבת = “Their strength [is] to sit still” (KJV, Webster, Young), “Rahab Sits Idle” (NKJV), “Harmless Dragon” (NLT), “Rahab the Do-Nothing” (NIV, JB), “Rahab who sits still” (ESV, RSV, ASV, HNV), “Rahab who has been exterminated” (NASB), “Arrogance, that doeth nothing” (Darby), “They are a threat that has ceased” (NJPS), “Proud one who is silenced” (NET). This list shows that רהב has been translated “strength,” “Rahab,” “Dragon,” “Arrogance,” “threat,” and “pride.” The word שבת was rendered “sit still,” “sit idle,” “harmless,” “do-nothing,” “exterminated,” “ceased,” “silenced.” Only KJV seems to have made the emendation רהב הם → רַהֲבָהֶם; NJPS mentions the emendation שבת → בשת “disgrace and chagrin” (cf. v.5); and NET emends שַׁבֵּת הֵם לְשַׁבֵּת הֵם, a Hophal participle with prefixed definite article, meaning “the one who is made to cease,” i.e., “destroyed,” or “silenced” (cf. HALOT, 444-45, ישב). The sense given רהב הם שבת in these translations is neither an acceptable truism nor a historically apt description of Egypt.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The fact that Egypt features so prominently in Isa 30-31 strongly suggests that by using רהב Isaiah had in mind Egypt, though in the Hebrew Bible the support for רהב = “Egypt” is marginal (Ps 87,4).<sup>24</sup> It is also clear that giving שַׁבֵּת הֵם the sense of “inaction” or “unwillingness” is not supported by the text in Isa 30-31. Egypt might not be able to contain Assyrian advance against Judah, but it was certainly a superpower and its strategic interest was to do so. This political reality obviates such interpretations of

<sup>22</sup> Donner, *Israel* 158.

<sup>23</sup> Kaiser, *Isaiah* 287.

<sup>24</sup> Mandelkern, *Testamenti* 1078. Mandelkern says רהב that could refer to Egypt or Babylon. Many consider מצרים in Isa 30,7 an explanatory gloss for the עַם in the preceding verse (Schunck, *Jes* 51). Without Isa 30,7 only Ps 87,4 links רהב with a country and it is not clear that it is Egypt. Moreover, Ps 87 might be post-exilic. Still Isa 30,2 seems to indicate that the following verses deal with hope of help from Egypt that is not going to materialize. Thus, Isa 30,7 very likely refers to Egypt and it was so understood in the past.

הם נשבת as “sit still,” “sit idle,” “harmless,” “do-nothing,” “exterminated,” “ceased,” “silenced.” They cannot apply to Egypt in the political context of superpower competition at that time.

### 3. Proposal

We have already noted that it is difficult to set a time for the prophecies in Isa 30 and associate them with specific historic events.<sup>25</sup> Concurrently, the geo-political situation in the Near-East makes Egyptian involvement in the political affairs of the Kingdom of Judah inescapable. The MT bears witness to the enormous role that Egypt played for the Kingdom of Judah and in regional politics by its frequent references to Egypt. The geographic designation מצרים occurs about 48 times in Isa 1-39, כוש (Nubia) six times, צען (Tanis) three times, and חנם (Ahnas), פתרוס (Upper Egypt), נף (Memphis), each once. The title פרעה occurs six times. Indeed, the state of affairs could hardly be otherwise, when geo-politics relegated the Kingdom to the role of a buffer state between the two superpowers Egypt and Assyria.

Roberts observes: “Still, Nubia and its Egyptian vassals were not done meddling in Palestinian affairs. The shocking death of Sargon in 705 B.C.E. provided the new opportunity for Nubian intervention for which Shabataka had apparently been waiting and planning. This time Isaiah was unable to stem the enthusiasm for revolt in the Judahite court. It is clear from both the archaeological evidence and Isa 22,8-11 that Hezekiah was preparing for revolt against Assyria. Isaiah 39,1-8 indicates that he received an embassy from Merodach-baladan of Babylon, Assyria’s archenemy, and the most likely explanation for this is that Merodach-baladan was trying to get Hezekiah to join Babylon in a common revolt against Assyria. The identity of these people and their reason for being in Jerusalem had apparently been kept secret from Isaiah, a point reflected in his complaints about Judah’s leaders making plans without consulting Yahweh (29,15.30,1-2). If Hezekiah were plotting revolt against Assyria, and if in pursuing this policy he were willing to entertain a treaty with Babylon, it would be very odd if he did not also look for support from Egypt, the traditional counterbalance to Assyria in southern Palestine. Isaiah 30,1-7 and 31,1-3 specifically mention an appeal to Egypt, and the reference to the treaty with death in 28,15 probably alludes to a treaty with Egypt, Hoffmeier<sup>26</sup> denies that Isa 30,1-7

<sup>25</sup> For an interesting discussion of this historical period see: Hoffmeier, *Egypt’s* 219-289; Younger, *Involvement* 219-289; Roberts, *Egypt* 219-289; Hoffmeier, *Egypt’s* 219-289.

<sup>26</sup> Hoffmeier, *Egypt’s* 233-234. Hoffmeier believes that the “oracles in Isaiah 30 and 31 are directed at Hoshea of Samaria, who sent envoys to ‘So’ (Osorkon IV)

and 31,1-3 date to the time of Hezekiah, but his argument is unconvincing. The oracle about the treaty with death is clearly addressed to the rulers of Jerusalem (28, 14), not Samaria, and the continuation of 31,1-3 in 31,4-5 suggests that this anti-Egyptian oracle was likewise directed to the royal court in Jerusalem.”<sup>27</sup>

It is against this historical background of Egyptian political interference and influence on international relations of the kingdom of Judah that we believe Isa 30,7b should be deciphered. Egypt’s political intervention was polarizing; it created splinter groups in the royal house. Egypt’s proximity, size, strength, and mutual history were the underlying causes of its attraction. Yet, Assyria, despite its imperialism had its charm. Mazar observes, “We speak about a very special time in the history of the ancient Near-East in general and Israel in particular, which has no parallel in any period, this is principally the period of Sargon the great. This is a period of universalism and imperialism that cannot be compared to any other historical period. In general, Sargon’s policies are one of the most marvelous things. All of his politics, which was completely antithetical to those that preceded him, and certainly to those that followed him, was of imperialism but also of universalism, and the concept of universalism stood then at the center of Assyrian thought. It is interesting to note that in Israel too a special situation was created, because the time Hezekiah is a time of greatness for Judah unmatched at any other period.”<sup>28</sup>

It is easy to understand the prophet’s position *vis-à-vis* this factional split. In the Near East at that time ‘trust in the deity’ was usually a decisive factor in determining a course of action. An inherent religious or theological flavor permeates all ancient Near Eastern history writing.<sup>29</sup> Yet, Isaiah was dismayed to see a fixation with reliance on others, not God. In political terms, the splintering effect of Egypt’s intervention removed neutrality as an option. No wonder Isaiah lashed out against Egypt with לכן קראתי לזאת רהב הם שבת. What did he mean?

I suggest the following emendation המשבבת → המשבת → הם שבת (“she that splinters”) where המשבבת is the Piel Participle (feminine) of שבב. המשבבת is of the same form as המיילדת (Gen 35,17 + 2t), or מקללת (Lev 21,9). The first step in the emendation is generally accepted by scholarship and may have some support in Isa 14,4 and examples of the Ketib / Qere

king of Egypt for help, as reported in 2Kgs 17:4, and have no bearing on the events of Hezekiah’s day.” The possibility that Isaiah addresses here the Kingdom of Israel was already mentioned by Luzzatto and rejected.

<sup>27</sup> Roberts, Egypt 282-283.

<sup>28</sup> Luria, עיונים 36. Comments made by Mazar in the discussion.

<sup>29</sup> Olley, Lord 59-77.

system.<sup>30</sup> The second step is a simple haplographic error. Our understanding of *הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת* as “she that splinters” is supported by Hos 8,6 where we find *שְׁמֵרֹן יִהְיֶה עֵגֶל שְׁמֵרֹן* “The calf of Samaria will become fragments.”<sup>31</sup> However, *שבב* is a *hepax legomenon* and the root I. *שבב* “splinter” does not occur in the Hebrew Bible. The verb occurs in the Talmud with the sense “to chip, to chisel.”<sup>32</sup> In Aramaic *שְׂבָא* is “splinter.”<sup>33</sup> Because the root *שבב* is so rare in the Hebrew Bible it is possible that at some time the original *הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת* was not anymore meaningful. A scribe might have reasoned that the text contains an extra *ב*, introduced by dittography, and two words were not separated. His corrections resulted in the MT, which made more sense to him than the original.

This understanding of the text allows an adequate response to each of the questions that were posed in the introduction of this paper. Specifically,

- a. Does *לכן* belong to the first hemistich or the second? *It belongs to the second hemistich, and establishes a causative relation between the two parts of the verse.*
- b. To whom or what does *לזאת* refer? *It refers to Egypt. Implied in the word מְצָרִים is the feminine ארץ.*
- c. Is *רהב* an adjective, a verb, or a name (Egypt)? *Rahab is a symbolic name for Egypt.*
- d. To whom does *הם* refer? Is it in the right place? Has it been detached from another word? *The word הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת has been improperly divided into two words because its meaning was not clear.*
- e. Why is there disagreement between the singular *זאת* and plural *הם*, and why is there disagreement in gender? *After the emendation there is no disagreement.*
- f. What does *שבת* mean? *As a stand alone its meaning “sit” makes no sense.*
- g. In what sense is *קראתי* used here, as a proclamation, characterization, or appellation? *It is used here in the sense of name calling.*

Isaiah originally said: *לכן קראתי לזאת רהב הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת*. He called Egypt “she that splinters” because of its meddling in Judah’s politics, making promises

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Jud 16,25 *כי טוב* (K) but *כטוב* (Q); 1Sam 9,1 *מבני-ימין* (K) but *מבני-מין* (Q); 1Sam 24,8 *מן המערה* (K) but *מהמערה* (Q); Isa 44,24 *מי אחי* (K) but *מאחי* (Q); Lam 1,6 *בן בת* (K) but *מבת* (Q); 2Chr 34,6 *בהר בחיהם* (K) but *בחרבתיהם* (Q); Lam 4,3 *כי ענים* (K) but *כי עניים* (Q); etc.

<sup>31</sup> Andersen / Freedman, Hosea 481.

<sup>32</sup> Jastrow, Dictionary 1510.

<sup>33</sup> Brown et al, Brown-Driver-Briggs 985.

that she cannot fulfill, and fragmenting Judah's political stance by creating a countervailing faction. The theological consequence of the split was neglect of faith and its practical manifestation – political neutrality.

### Summary

Isaiah 30,7b is a long standing crux. Attempts to find any sense in *שָׁבַת רַבָּה מֶה* that is grammatically acceptable and contextually fitting have been so far unsuccessful. The emendation *רַבָּה הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת* "Rahab (Egypt) that splinters" is proposed for Isa 30,7b. Instead of amplifying the first hemistich it adds an important *Sitz im Leben* element to the political situation and an insight into Isaiah's theological thinking.

### Zusammenfassung

Jesaja 30,7b stellt eine seit langem ungelöste Krux dar. Versuche, in *שָׁבַת רַבָּה מֶה* – einer grammatisch an sich möglichen Formulierung, die auch in den Kontext passen könnte – irgendeinen Sinn zu finden, sind bisher erfolglos geblieben. Für Isa 30,7b wird die Emendation zu *רַבָּה הַמְשַׁבֶּכֶת* „Rahab (Ägypten), das zerschlägt“ vorgeschlagen. Es geht nicht darum, den ersten Halbvers weiterzuentwickeln, viel mehr wird ein bedeutender Aspekt für den „Sitz im Leben“ der politischen Situation hinzugefügt und gleichzeitig ein Einblick in das theologische Denken Jesajas geboten.

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