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# Three in One or One in Three: A Dipstick into the Isaianic Literature

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## Duhm and Gloom

It is just over one hundred years since Bernard Duhm's trend-setting Commentary on *Isaiah* appeared and thereafter much study of Isaiah and indeed of the prophetic literature as a whole has worked on two assumptions: first, that the books of the prophets are anthologies<sup>1</sup> and, secondly, that this anthological material contains much that has been added by 'later hands'—informed, ill-informed and quite simply mistaken—to whatever 'core material' the commentator allowed to the prophet concerned.<sup>2</sup> Has either of these assumptions ever been subjected to critical examination? Is it possible that, if Duhm had been blessed with a holistic rather than a fragmentarist turn of mind, things would now be very different? And do we still await someone who will set out to establish objective criteria for the study of prophetic texts?

## New Paths

Even in the best hands the conventional approach to the prophets could frequently leave much to be desired. For example—go to the very top—when he appraised the mammoth work of H. Wilderberger on *Isaiah*, J.D.W. Watts commented that in spite of

the invaluable worth of his commentary in summarizing and evaluating all the results of historical-critical research to date, it does not succeed in presenting an understandable interpretation of the book (nor) make the book come alive for the reader.<sup>3</sup>

Watts himself formulated a different objective for his own work: to

demonstrate a single purpose that shapes the book . . . a structure that supports and communicates that purpose . . . (a) movement and emphasis that develop that purpose-theme . . . [for] the artistic concept which shaped and guided the formation is the best proof of unity.<sup>4</sup>

In this formulation of the purpose of a commentary Watts is neither alone, nor an innovator. In 1969 J. Muilenberg coined the phrase 'rhetori-

cal criticism'<sup>5</sup> to introduce an emphasis on the use of individual components analyzed out of a text to display the artistry of the whole, and an increasing number are following up this lead.<sup>6</sup> P.R. House, introducing his work on Zephaniah, noted that 'there is still room for explorations of the anatomy of whole books' and, outside the sphere of the prophets altogether, Barry Webb describes his remarkable study of *Judges* as 'an exploration of the meaning of the book . . . considered as a whole'.

### **Gathering straw from a wider field**

Before attempting to apply this sort of treatment to the Isaianic Literature it will be helpful to look at other (and by reason of length, more manageable) prophetic books. The purpose of this brief review, taking in Malachi, Haggai, Amos and Zephaniah, is no more than to indicate a possibility that at least these books of the prophets can be displayed not only as a coherently developing theme but also as expressing that theme within an artistic literary frame.

#### **Malachi**

Is it too imaginative to read between the lines of the book of Malachi and to see an open-air preacher at work?—a sort of 'Speaker's Corner' ministry subject to constant and maybe hostile questioning from the crowd? Be this as it may, Malachi's book is entirely based on crowd-response, questions the prophet himself faced:

A<sup>1</sup> 1:2 Yahweh's love for his people: future proof promised: Contrasting fates.

B<sup>1</sup> 1:6, 7 A double question on a single topic: Despising Yahweh in offerings: the risk of the curse.

C<sup>1</sup> 2:14 Yahweh's holiness, the unconsidered factor in life.

C<sup>2</sup> 2:17 Yahweh's justice, the doubted factor in life.

B<sup>2</sup> 3:7,8 A double question on a single topic: Robbing Yahweh in offerings: the promise of the blessing.

A<sup>2</sup> 3:17 Yahweh's estimation of his people: future glory contrasting fates.

The artistic frame here is totally dictated by the material itself. Malachi finds it unnecessary to concern himself with dates and he does not suspend the record of his ministry on any chronology but lets the shape of his book be dictated by the content of his ministry. Yet what artistry this is, comprising not only the topical balance evident in A<sup>1</sup> and A<sup>2</sup>, C<sup>1</sup> and C<sup>2</sup>, but also the additional formal balance of the double questions of B<sup>1</sup> and B<sup>2</sup>. Thematic flow and artistic presentation are perfectly wedded.

#### **Haggai**

In contrast to Malachi, Haggai's ministry is presented in chronological order because the date is part of the significance of what he has to say. Yet at the same time there is also, as with Malachi, a coherently developing

theme and an artistic presentation deeper than a succession of dates.

The book has an A-B-B-A formation, as follows:

- A<sup>1</sup> (1:1–11) A pair of oracles on the same date (vv. 1, 3), the ill-consequences of the unbuilt house:  
a<sup>1</sup> (vv. 1, 2) Zerubbabel and Joshua addressed:  
Popular refusal to build the house.  
b<sup>1</sup> (vv. 3–11) The People addressed:  
The neglected house, cause of bane.  
This oracle is based on a double call to 'take it to heart' (vv. 5, 7), looking back and looking forward.
- B<sup>1</sup> (1:12–15a) 'I am with you' (v. 13): the Lord's presence, energizing present work.
- B<sup>2</sup> (1:15b–2:9) 'I am with you' (v. 4): the Lord's presence, guaranteeing coming glory.
- A<sup>2</sup> (2:10–23) A pair of oracles on the same date (vv. 110, 20), the blessed consequences of the restored house:  
a<sup>2</sup> (vv. 10–19) The people addressed:  
the restored house, cause of blessing.  
This oracle is based on a double call to 'take it to heart' (vv. 15, 18), looking back and looking forward.  
b<sup>2</sup> (vv. 20–23) Zerubbabel addressed:  
The Lord will restore David's house.

Interestingly, the 'shape' of the book of Haggai<sup>7</sup> parallels that of Nathan's prophecy to David in 2 Samuel, beginning (A<sup>1</sup>, 2 Samuel 7:1–3) with the human task of building the Lord's house and ending (A<sup>2</sup>, 2 Samuel 7:11ff.) with the Lord's promise to build David's house. Within this overall movement we need only pause to notice that, within the A-sections, b<sup>1</sup> and b<sup>2</sup> are held together by their double 'calls' to 'take it to heart' and the central B-sections focus on the common theme of the Lord's presence, 'I am with you'.

### Amos

The Book of Amos presents us with a different task from that faced in Malachi or Haggai. Unlike Malachi, there is no obvious sectioning of the message comparable to the question-and-answer structure and, unlike Haggai, Amos offers no dates other than the information about the undated earthquake in 1:1. On examination, however, the book of Amos<sup>8</sup> can be displayed as three 'cycles' of oracles each contained within its own *inclusio*: that is to say each cycle ends on the same note that it began.

- A The Lion's roar: Universal judgment and its grounds (1:2–3:8).  
a<sup>1</sup> The Lion's roar: the Lord's voice (1:2).  
b<sup>1</sup> Against the peoples (1:3–2:3).  
b<sup>2</sup> Against the people (2:4–3:2).  
a<sup>2</sup> The Lion's roar: the prophetic word.

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- B The Enemy around the Land: the Lord's anger applied and explained (3:9–6:14).
  - a<sup>1</sup> The shattered kingdom, the surrounding foe (3:9–15).
    - b<sup>1</sup> Leading women, indulgent, socially careless (4:1–3).
      - c The central failure (4:4–5:27).
        - c<sup>1</sup> Religion without repentance (4:11–13).
        - c<sup>2</sup> Religion without reformation (5:1–27).
      - b<sup>2</sup> Leading men, indulgent, socially careless (6:1–7).
    - a<sup>2</sup> The shattered kingdom, the surrounding foe (6:8–14).
- C The Lord God: Judgment and hope in the Lord's sovereign plan (7:1–9:15).
  - a<sup>1</sup> The destruction that will not be (7:1–6).
    - b<sup>1</sup> Discriminating judgment (7:7–9).
      - c<sup>1</sup> The inescapable word (7:10–17).
        - d 'In that Day' (8:1–14).
      - c<sup>2</sup> The inescapable judgment (9:1–6).
    - b<sup>2</sup> Discriminating judgment (9:7–10).
  - a<sup>2</sup> The hope that will be (9:11–15).

The first *inclusio* is the single word 'roar', the pouncing roar of the lion, the first (1:2) looking forward to the contents of 1:2–3:8 and the second (3:8) looking back on the successive 'roars' (1:3, 6, *etc.*), that have been heard. The second *inclusio* is referential: the 'enemy all round' of 3:9–11 matched by the 'enemy all over' of 6:14. The third *inclusio* is a contrast between the obliterating judgment which will not happen (7:1–6) and the all-embracing glory that is yet to be. In all this the developing theme—and the intrusiveness of divine logic—is plain. The first cycle announces judgment, the second indicates that the arena will be world history and the agent historical forces but the third, where human logic would expect a description of just and irretrievable overthrow, is animated by the logic of divine purposes and promises, refusing annihilation, pledging glory.

We must, however, give a tiny thought to the fact that the artistic *schema* of Amos enfolds into the unity of the book a passage (9:11–15) which commentators widely attribute to a later editor on the ground that Amos presents himself as a prophet with only a message of doom. Since, however, the passage of time and the continuance of the community of the Lord's people after the exile showed that the doom was not total and the covenant was not at an end, the book of Amos was 'adapted' to the new situation by editing in a concluding affirmation of hope. A little thought will expose the unlikelihood of such a procedure and the fallacy at its heart: a prophet cannot be 'adapted' by contradicting what he stood for; a contradiction does not 'adjust' him to a new situation but rather exposes him as a false prophet! A parallel, intended not facetiously but seriously, may help. A church today, where the minister espouses something less than a biblical and traditional doctrine of the Incarnation, faces the celebration of Christmas with some inevitable ambivalence. Sentiment is too strong to be ignored and, without a doubt, many will want to sing 'Lo, within the

manger lies / He who built the starry skies'. But time has moved on and ancient traditions must be 'adapted' to new truth. Consequently, leaving the carol unaltered, a final verse is added: 'Lo, within the manger see / One with our humanity / Mary's son—and Joseph's too / Much the same as me and you!' Is this adaptation or contradiction? And would it not be the same with Amos if indeed he were to be that biblically monstrous thing—a prophet without hope? But the artistry of his book refutes the hypothesis.

## Zephaniah

There is no Hebrew in the Old Testament closer to that of Isaiah in style, literary skill and 'feel' than that of Zephaniah. Even for this reason it is appropriate to include it in the wider field from which we are gathering straw for our bricks. But also *Zephaniah*<sup>9</sup> presents another set of problems to the would-be literary analyst. It has no thematic markers like Malachi's questions, no dates like Haggai nor *inclusios* shouting for recognition like Amos. It has a plain, dominating theme, the Day of the Lord: the end of the World, but beyond that the student can only list the contents and ask if there is anything like the developing theme and artistic patterning evident in the other books we have considered.

1. The End of the World: Is there any Hope? (1:2–2:3).
  - A<sup>1</sup> 1:2–6 The End.
    - a<sup>1</sup> The World (vv. 2, 3a).
    - b<sup>1</sup> Judah (vv. 3b–6).
  - B 1:7–18 The Day.
    - b<sup>2</sup> Judah: The Imminent Day (vv. 7–14a).
    - a<sup>2</sup> The World: The Bitter Day (vv. 14b–18).
  - A<sup>2</sup> 2:1–3 The end: A Probation-time.
    - b<sup>3</sup> Judah (v. 1).
    - c<sup>1</sup> The critical time (v. 2).
    - a<sup>3</sup> The World (v. 3).
2. Judgment and Hope: An Enigma (2:4–3:8).
  - A 2:4–15 The surrounding World: its overthrow, Israel's possession.
    1. West: Philistia (vv:4–7):  
Its disappearance (4–6), Judah's possession (7).
    2. East: Moab/Ammon (vv. 8–11):  
Judgment by the God of Israel (8, 9c).  
Israel's possession (9d, 10).  
The World's worship (11).
    3. South: Cush (v. 2): Slain by the Lord's sword.
    4. North: Asshur (vv. 13–15): Its disappearance.
  - B 3:1–5 The failure of Judah.
  - C 3:6–8 Hopeful waiting for a day of wrath!
    - a<sup>4</sup> The World (v. 6).
    - b<sup>4</sup> Judah (vv. 7–8a).
    - a<sup>5</sup> The World (v. 8b).
3. The End of the World: Hope in all its Glory. (3:9–20).
  - A vv. 9–13 The Enigma solved:

- a<sup>5</sup> The Uniting of the World: Babel Reversed (vv. 9, 10).
- b<sup>5</sup> The Purging of the People: Jerusalem purified (vv. 11–13c).
- c<sup>2</sup> The time of Peace: Eden Restored (v. 13d).
- B vv. 14–17 Oneness of Joy, the People and the Lord.
- C vv. 18–20 The Lord's People, the praise of all the earth.
- b<sup>6</sup> The perfected people (vv. 18–19).
- a<sup>6</sup> The attracted world (v. 20).

The question has to be faced whether such a detailed and integrated presentation of *Zephaniah* as this is 'really' there in the material itself or whether it is a product of structural enthusiasm on the part of a commentator. The answer can only be reached, so to speak, on the ground—by detailed study of the text to see if these particular sections and sub-sections can be isolated, by noting parallelisms and identities of vocabulary associating section with section and so on, but, in theory, the existence of such inherent artistry should be assumed rather than questioned. After the first performance of his symphony 'From the New World', Dvořák wrote to a friend in Europe about the symphony and the way it had been received and commented additionally that another friend whom he named was at that moment 'working on an analysis of my symphony'. In other words, at the level of musical inspiration there is more to a work of art than the composer holds consciously in his mind. How much more may this be the case when one faces the gigantic human capacities of the Old Testament prophets and beyond, behind and through it all the inspiration of the Divine Spirit Himself.

### **The 'Mosaic' Principle**

How, then, are we to account for books like *Zephaniah*—or *Malachi* and *Amos* and indeed any prophet who departs from the chronological principle followed through in *Haggai*?

Suppose one were asked to edit the collected sermons of a notable preacher, there would be two ways of going about the task. One would be to follow date order, noting editorially where he served his assistantships, his pastorates and his retirement, noting in each case the circumstances, private and public, in which he ministered and reproducing the sermons in their original contexts—the 'Haggai' principle. On the other hand, one could look back over the course of this notable preaching and seek a common thread, a major emphasis or set of emphases that dominate and, having defined the theme, then use the sermons to display its development and the major and minor sub-themes inherent within the grand design. In this case, dates become largely unimportant; pieces from the early ministry can lie beside pieces from retirement just as stones cut and shaped in different quarries at different times can be brought together into a new integration. Each *tessera* has its own pre-history but to isolate it now in order to tell its individual story would be to destroy the mosaic of which it is now (and is intended to be) a part.

This basic view of prophetic literature animates the whole enterprise of 'integrated reading'<sup>10</sup> and can be applied with confidence to *Isaiah*. As a case in point we may allude to the 'problem' of relating the poetic material at the end of *Isaiah* 5 to its counterpart, the long poem in 9:8–10:4. That all this material was originally one poem cannot be doubted even though no agreement has been reached on how the now separated sections were once united.<sup>11</sup> Faced with this situation, the *New English Bible* (1970) adopted the expedient of moving 5:24, 25 to follow 10:4—an unhappy course of action in two ways: first, it does not move enough from chapter 5 to satisfy the poetic needs of 9:8–10:4 and, secondly, it mars alike the intensity of the climax of chapter 5 and the intended flow of 9:8–10:4 into a new climax in 10:5–15. It is a typical product of 'anthological' thinking and of failure to study thematic development and artistic presentation. Rather, like *tesserae* in a mosaic, the two parts of the original poem have been detached from their primary 'quarries' and have become 'at home' in a new design<sup>12</sup> from which they ought not be separated.

### **Isaiah: the broad picture and some details**

The Mosaic principle proves exceedingly fruitful in application to the Isaianic Literature. In 6–37 many of the individual oracles are reasonably plain to date and indeed the whole complex can be seen in an historical framing:

- a<sup>1</sup> (chs. 6–12) In the days of Ahaz: the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis: history-based oracles with visions of the Davidic future.
  - b<sup>1</sup> (chs. 13–27) Confirmatory Oracles: the Lord's Davidic, Zion-centred world-purpose.
- a<sup>2</sup> (chs. 28–35) In the days of Hezekiah: the Egyptian Crisis; history-based oracles with visions of the Davidic future.
  - b<sup>2</sup> (chs. 36–37) Confirmatory Events: the Lord's demonstrated power to do what He will with world-empires in the interests of David.

As in the case of Haggai, theme and chronology are at one, but there is need for a presentation of this material that explores it more deeply at a thematic level. This (once more as in Haggai) does not violate the chronology but runs along with it as the theme is announced and then supported by a crescendo of confirmations:

- a. (chs. 6–12) The Theme announced: The Lord's Zion-centred, world-wide Davidic purposes.  
The coming king and his rule.
- b. (chs. 13–37) The Theme Confirmed:
  - b<sup>1</sup> (chs. 13–27) First Confirmation: the subservience of all nations, typically, Assyria and Egypt, to the Lord's world-purpose.
  - b<sup>2</sup> (chs. 28–35) Second Confirmation: Assyria and Egypt



in their contemporary reality subservient to the Lord's sway;

b<sup>3</sup> (chs. 36–37) Third Confirmation: An illustrative proof of the actual subservience of Assyria and Egypt to the Lord: He is Lord of all.

The two other major sections of the Isaianic Literature (40–55, 56–66) evidence a developing theme within an artistic and balanced form<sup>13</sup> but it may add variety to illustrate the Mosaic procedure in relation to the personages who dominate these sections. The Servant of the Lord, in 40–55, is presented and presents himself in a series of four 'songs' embedded comfortably in their contexts. But in 56–66 another personage emerges, one with whom the Lord Jesus identified himself at the very outset of his ministry (Luke 4:16–21; Isaiah 61:1–2a). The Servant is endowed with the Spirit for the work of suffering and sin-bearing; the one whom we may call 'the Conqueror' is endowed with the Spirit for the work of salvation and vengeance:

<b>The Servant</b>			
42.1–4	49.1–6	50:4–9	52:12–13
Biography	Autobiography	Autobiography	Biography
Topic:			
Task	Task	Commitment	Completion
Endowed with Spirit & Word	Word	Word	
	Experiencing Despondency	Suffering	Suffering
(Tailpiece: 42:5–9)	(Tailpiece: 49:7–13)	(Tailpiece: 50:10–11)	(Tailpiece: 54:1–55:13)
<b>The Anointed Conqueror</b>			
59:21	61:1–3	61:10–62:7	63:1–6
Biography	Autobiography	Autobiography	Autobiography
Topic:			
Task	Task	Commitment	Completion
Endowed with Spirit & Word	Spirit & Word	Word	
	Effecting Vengeance & Salvation	Vengeance & Salvation	Vengeance & Salvation
(Tailpiece: 60:1–22)	(Tailpiece: 61:4–9)	(Tailpiece: 62:8–12)	(?Tailpiece: 63:7–66:24)

The portrait in each case is offered in four 'songs', each with a following 'tailpiece' elaborating on it. Each set of songs is faithful to its own theme, whether suffering or avenging, but the formal balance between them is remarkable—indeed it should be noticed that while the fourth song in the Conqueror-sequence is described here as 'autobiography' it is more accurately 'a personal response within a biographical setting'.

Brief as this survey has been, it shows that the whole Isaianic Literature has a common theme expressed in three messianic portraits, the King, the Servant and the Conqueror. In each case thematic development is encased in a balanced and highly artistic presentation. This artistry extends also to smaller divisions of the material as the following diagram regarding chapters 13–27 shows:

Babylon (13:1–14:27)	The Wilderness of the Sea (Babylon) (21:1–10)	The City of Emptiness (24:1–20)
<i>Political Overthrow</i>	<i>Religious Overthrow</i>	<i>Broken laws (v. 5)</i> <i>Broken gates (v. 12)</i>
Philistia (14:28–32)	Silence (Edom) (21:11–12)	Zion's King (24:21–23)
<i>A Davidic king will yet reign in Zion</i>	<i>Indefinite continuance of things as they are</i>	<i>'After many days'</i>
Moab (15:1–16:14)	Evening (Arabia) (21:13–17)	The Great Banquet (25:1–12)
<i>Moab in need, but through pride refuses shelter in Zion</i>	<i>Desert tribes in need: no ultimate refuge in mutual security</i>	<i>All nations feasted in Zion save Moab, excluded by pride.</i>
Damascus/Ephraim (17:1–18:7)	The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem) (22:1–25)	The City of God (26:1–20)
<i>Strong cities forsaken (v. 9); the forgotten rock (v. 10)</i>	<i>The city torn down (v. 10)</i>	<i>The strong city (v. 1); the ever-lasting rock (v. 4)</i>
Egypt (19:1–20:6)	Tyre (23:1–18)	The Final Gathering (27:1–13)
<i>Co-equal membership: Egypt, Assyria and</i>	<i>Holiness to the Lord (23:18)</i>	<i>The harvest from Egypt and .....</i>
.....		

These chapters constitute at first sight one of the most puzzling sections of Isaiah and yet, through structural analysis, they yield both form and meaning. Chapters 13–23 provide their own analysis with, first, five straightforward headings (13:1; 14:28; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1) and then with five 'cryptic' headings (21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1). Further examination shows that in each case the first section touches on Babylon and the fourth on the people of God, Israel and Judah. Moving into chapters 24–27, the reference to Moab's pride in 25:10 (*cf.*, 16:6) begins to offer the possibility that a deliberate link is being forged with what preceded. Detailed work shows that 24–27 also contains five sections matching those of the earlier two sequences. Babylon has now become 'the city of meaninglessness' (24:10), the Philistia-theme of a Davidide who will yet reign (14:28ff.) leads (*via* the sombre picture of continuing darkness (21:11) to the Lord's reign in Zion (24:21ff.), the Moab who through pride refused sanctuary in Zion (16:6) is, through pride, excluded from the eschatological Zion (25:10), the

people of God who tried and found wanting both the way of alliances (17) and the way of self-sufficiency (22) rest at last by faith in the strong city (26), and Egypt, coming amazingly to co-equal membership in the Lord's people (19:23ff.) partakes in the final jubilee gathering (27:12, 13).

A feature we noted in Amos is found here also—that a section often confidently refused to Isaiah (chapters 24–27) is in fact schematically integrated within the literature. Much damage has been done to these chapters by the description now almost commonplace, 'the Isaiah Apocalypse'. They are, in theme, wording and content almost wholly devoid of typical apocalyptic marks. They are eschatological but that is a different issue. But the very name 'apocalypse', is taken to involve lateness whereas W.R. Millar<sup>14</sup> concluded from his examination of their prose style, thematic patterns and possible historical settings that they are 'influenced by second Isaiah', a sixth century date is not unreasonable and the author a disciple of Isaiah. Of course, Millar assumed the existence and standard dates of 'second Isaiah'. His conclusions, however, remain if it transpires that 'second Isaiah' was Isaiah of Jerusalem.

The unities that pervade the Isaianic Literature go beyond the fact that large tracts of it yield a unified structure and that the whole is a messianic triptych. There is, for example, the feature which may be called the 'doublet', the same ground covered twice but from different viewpoints. The first is found in chapters 7–11 where 7:1–9:7 (from the point of view of Judah) and 9:8–11:16 (from the point of view of Israel) consist of four matching sections climaxing (9:1–7; 11:1–16) in the glory of the coming Davidic King.<sup>15</sup> Chapters 28–35 consist of six sections introduced by 'Woe', these too are a doublet, the first three and the second three precisely balancing each other and expressing respectively principle and application.<sup>16</sup> Or again, a doublet occurs in 42:18–43:21 balanced with 43:22–44:23, with, again, four matching sub-sections.<sup>17</sup> The mightiest exercise in this genre is the 'triplet' outlined above in 13–27 but the most subtle doublet is the step by step parallel in the presentation respectively of Cyrus, the redeemer from Babylon, and the Servant, the Redeemer from sin.<sup>18</sup>

Space does not allow us to detail more minute identities which stamp a mark of unity on this great literature. The Hebrew is the most majestic, rhythmical and effortlessly stylish in the whole Bible, characterized throughout by features like rhyme,<sup>19</sup> assonance,<sup>20</sup> a fondness for lists<sup>21</sup> and palindromic passages and sayings.<sup>22</sup> It is not, of course, that these things are absent elsewhere but, for example, that there is far more use of rhyme in the Isaianic Literature than in any other single part of the Old Testament—and the same is undoubtedly true of assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and the use of palindromes.

### **Three in One or One in Three?**

It is as a result of this view of Isaiah that the title of this article poses a question: the question is how we are to explain this unity—for even to the

extent that we have outlined it here there is a unity demanding explanation. Is it the (well-nigh miraculous) result of three (or more) authors contributing to one book or can it be the work of one author resulting in a threefold book?

### **Prophecy**

The challenge to unity of authorship began over the issue of predictive prophecy. The rationalistic climate of the last century in which the ground rules of Isaiah-study were laid forbade anything so 'miraculous' as foretelling the future and the prophets became highly sophisticated commentators speaking out of and into their own times. Consequently the presence of 'Isaiah' in chapters purporting to deal with Babylon and the exile must stem from an exilic and exiled prophet. The passage of time has produced an altered climate of thought and a rephrasing of the question: admitting (up to a point) the existence of prediction, it is now more usual to ask, not 'Could a prophet have so predicted?' but 'Would a prophet have so predicted?' For it is surely the coldest of comfort and the height of unrealism for Isaiah of Jerusalem to say in effect to his contemporaries 'It's all very sad but take comfort because everything will be all right in two hundred or so years!'

The matter, however, does not rest there for the 'two hundred years' is our contribution, by hindsight, to the scenario. Isaiah built no time factor into his message. According to chapters 38–39, the advent of an embassy from Merodach-Baladan faced Hezekiah with a choice: to trust the Lord's promises or to follow Merodach-Baladan into rebellion against Assyria. It was a straightforward either/or. The Lord had promised Hezekiah recovery from a terminal illness and added the gratuitous promise of delivering king and city from Assyria (38:55, 56). When Hezekiah responded to the ambassadors (39:1, 2) by taking them on tour of the wealth and armed strength of his kingdom the fatal choice had been made and the way of faith in the promise abandoned. 'Where did they come from?' asked Isaiah. 'From Babylon' replied the infatuated king. And there it was: the name handed to him. Babylon they had chosen and to Babylon they must go—and for all any contemporary political commentator could say, that departure might well be imminent, for Merodach-Baladan was no small time freedom fighter but a rebel of stature, capable of challenging and overthrowing Assyrian dominance in Mesopotamia. In predicting a Babylonian captivity Isaiah was speaking out of and to his own situation.

### **Babylon**

The separation of Isaiah 40–55 from Isaiah of Jerusalem is, however, urged additionally on the ground that, stepping into these chapters, we find ourselves within Babylonian history and society in such a way that the author's residence in Babylon must be assumed. On examination of the chapters, this is found not to be the case. Lods, writing in 1937,<sup>23</sup> noted

that when 'Deutero-Isaiah' wanted to portray an idolater he saw him going out to the forest to fell a tree—thus ruling out 'Chaldea where there are no trees fit for carving'. Furthermore the landscapes of which the prophet writes are those of West Palestine—mountains, forests, sea, land watered by rainfall not by irrigation, Lebanon. Lods, himself rejecting predictive prophecy, could only explain this topography by making the author a post-exilic Palestinian.

Smart,<sup>24</sup> again an adherent of a post-exilic date for the chapters, notes that 'when we search for evidence of the prophet's residence in Babylon we are surprised how hard it is to find any that is convincing'. These authors cannot be accused of any dogmatic fixation on Isaiah of Jerusalem and neither can the more recent commentary of Whybray<sup>25</sup> yet he too admits that in chapters 40–55 we do not find attention given to problems within the exiled community. In reality, however, it would be a truer conclusion to say that when these chapters refer to the circumstances of the exiles (for example, 42:22; 51:14) they bear no relation to the situations in Babylon as described in Jeremiah 29 or throughout Ezekiel. The prophet says things no eye-witness could possibly have said: he is in fact using *motifs* of captivity and not descriptions of the captive exiles. In the same way his description (chapters 46, 47) of the fall of Babylon are not reportage but conventional stereotypical *motifs*.

In a famous *dictum*, G.E. Wright<sup>26</sup> stated: 'A prophecy is earlier than what it predicts and later than or contemporary with what it presupposes'. This is so well said that one is inclined to agree with it without further thought. But does it bear examination? What if a prophet, well within the possibilities of prediction Wright allows, forecasts a Babylonian captivity, does not that prediction immediately become one of his presuppositions? Can he now view the future in any other way? And if this new presupposition jeopardizes all that he has previously promised in the name of the Lord must he not perforce seek from God those consequent truths which will rehabilitate and restate the immutable promises?

## Cyrus

But there is one piece of hard-edged portrayal in chapters 40–55, the personal name of Cyrus the conqueror of Babylon.<sup>27</sup> Does not this stretch the possibilities of prediction too far and therefore require a prophet somewhere within the parameters of Cyrus' career?

As is often the case in the Isaianic Literature great events are heralded by almost surreptitious beginnings<sup>28</sup> and the Cyrus-prophecies are no exception. He first surfaces as the unnamed conqueror of chapter 41. The two significant sections (41:1–7, 21–29) both stress the Lord's action 'from the beginning' and claim that not just the career but the arising of the conqueror was a matter of prediction, made known to Zion before the sequence of events began. In addition to this, in chapters 40–48, fulfilled prediction is the supreme Isaianic apologetic for the claim that the God of Israel is the only

God. Indeed, so powerful is this argument seen to be that 45:1–7 is confident that it puts Cyrus in possession of sufficient evidence for him to know and acknowledge the Lord.<sup>29</sup> We must therefore ask the question: if Cyrus takes power in Babylon and finds the God of Israel in principle no different from Marduk and all the other gods in being only ‘wise after the event’—rushing to acclaim a conqueror whose conquests are already under way—what is there to persuade him that this god is any different from the rest?

The rigour of the argument from prediction and fulfilment requires a forecast of Cyrus antedating his appearance on the historical scene. But, none the less, is a prediction of a personal name possible?

In respect of Old Testament prophecy, the Old Testament is a source document and as such its testimony is inviolable. We may, of course, choose at the end to disbelieve what it attests but, as with all source documents, we are not at liberty to alter, or diminish the extent of, its claims. Within these claims there is the evidence of 1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:7, the prediction of the name of Josiah. If prediction is allowed as a feature of the prophet’s work, who are we to set limits to its exercise?

### **Doing things with style**

It is thus possible to move barrier after barrier out of the way of affirming one author behind the great threefold work traditionally ascribed to Isaiah of Jerusalem but the fact remains—and it is incontestable—that chapters 40–55 read differently, sound different and have a different feel to them from the rest of the Isaianic Literature. This is a deliberate exaggeration in order to make the point that the dominant style of 40–55 contrasts with that of 1–39 and 56–66. But the evidence rather is that this high poetic style has already been heralded in chapters 2, 4, 12, 25, and 35 and will reappear in chapters 60–63. It is not a stark contrast between sections but an interesting question whether one author is permitted different literary abilities—and, of course, put like that it is immediately obvious that the stylistic argument for diversity of authorship is a non-runner. Did Tolkien write *all* ‘The Lord of the Rings’ or do we need to posit a Deutero-Tolkien (possibly lurking in the shadowy figure of Celebrant?) to account for the poetry? Can the majestic periods of ‘Paradise Lost’ and the happy lilt of ‘L’Allegro’ or ‘An Ode on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ or the solemn prose of ‘Areopagitica’ possibly stem from one author?<sup>30</sup> To ask the question is to answer it and to expose the wooden unimaginativeness of the stylistic argument against the Isaianic origin of chapters 40–55. The fact of the matter is that one has only to start reading Isaiah, even in the solemn sermonic style of chapter 1, to realize that here is a writer of distinct and towering command of language, so strikingly different from the pedestrian Hebrew of Jeremiah or the fidgety style of Ezekiel, so effortless in dignity, subtle in phrasing, with an incomparable sense of the right word in the right place. No literary possibilities are beyond such a man or should be denied him.

### To stand beside the Son of God

There are something over twenty references to Isaiah by name in the New Testament. Some of them use the personal name as a formal way of referring to a part of the Old Testament—such, for example, is Mark 1:2 where ‘Isaiah the Prophet’ is more likely than not used as a description of the Canon of the ‘Later Prophets’ (just as ‘Psalms’ is used in Luke 24:44 of the Canon of ‘The Writings’). But the majority of references to Isaiah cannot be understood in this way: they are best satisfied as naming an individual. Isaiah is viewed as a speaker (Matthew 3:3) and an author (Luke 3:4). The Lord Jesus himself said simply ‘Isaiah . . . prophesied’ (Matthew 15:7). It should surely require a most unusual force of argument to prize us away from the dignity of identifying with the Son of God in all things.<sup>31</sup>

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### NOTES

- 1 For example, C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, SCM, 1960; J.L. Mays, *Amos*, SCM, 1969.
- 2 For all their immense value in other ways, the whole range of ICC Prophets suffered from this approach; for another example, H. Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah*, SCM, 1960.
- 3 H. Wilderberger, *Jesaja*, BKAT. Neukirchner Verlag, 1972; J.W.D. Watts, *Isaiah*, Word Books, 1985, 1987, p. xxiii.
- 4 Watts, *op. cit.*, p. xlii.
- 5 J. Muilenberg, *Form Criticism and Beyond*, JBL 88/1, 1969.
- 6 For example, P.R. House, *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama*, JSOTS, 69, 1988; *The Unity of the Twelve*, JSOTS, 97, 1990; B. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading*, JSOTS, 46, 1987; L.R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, JSOTS, 68, 1988; D.G. Johnson, *From Chaos to Restoration, An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24:–27*, JSOTS, 61, 1988.
- 7 See my forthcoming (1994) commentary on *Haggai*, in T.E. McComiskey (Ed), *The Minor Prophets*, Vol. 3, Baker Book House.
- 8 See J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos* (The Bible Speaks Today), IVP, 1973; *Amos*, in *The New Bible Dictionary* (new ed., 1994), IVP.
- 9 See my forthcoming commentary on *Zephaniah*, Baker, as above.
- 10 See above how Webb subtitles his book ‘An Integrated Reading’. Johnson uses the word ‘integrative’. House also uses the expression ‘a close reading of the text’.
- 11 See J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, 1993, *in loc.*
- 12 L. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT, Hodder and Stoughton, 1976. On Mic. 4:6–8, Dr. Allen remarks that it is a passage in two sections in which ‘possibly the second was originally a separate oracle . . . added to form a new literary unit.’
- 13 Motyer, *Isaiah*, as above pp. 289, 461.
- 14 W.R. Millar, *Isaiah 24–27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic*, Scholars’ Press, 1976.
- 15 Motyer, *Isaiah*, p. 74.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- 19 *E.g.*, Isaiah 1:13; 5:27; 33:22; 41:17; 49:10; 53:6; 57:6; 60:3.
- 20 *E.g.*, Isaiah 1:21; 13:6; 24:1; 27:7; 32:19; 50:4; 53:10; 59:7; 61:10.

- 21 *E.g.*, Isaiah 1:17, 18 (8 imperatives); 10:9 (76 place names), 15:1–9 (17 place names); 24:7–12 (13 items of sorrow); 41:11, 12 (4 statements of overthrow); 44:24–28 (13 attributive clauses); 65:11–16 (5 contrasts)
- 22 The word ‘palindrome’ derives from Delitzsch’s commentary and is a useful description of sentences, verses or paragraphs which return at the end of the word with which they began. For example, Isaiah 1:7; 1:21 . . . 26; 7:23; 11:13; 14:25; 24:21, 22; 30:18; 35:5; 40:19; 53:6; 57:1.
- 23 A. Lods, *The Prophets of Israel*, Kegan Paul, 1937, p. 238.
- 24 J.D. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah*, Epworth, 1965, p. 20.
- 25 R.N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, Oliphants, 1975, p. 196.
- 26 G.E. Wright, *The Book of Isaiah*, John Knox Press, 1964.
- 27 Isaiah 44:24–28; 45:1–7. See Motyer, *Isaiah*.
- 28 *E.g.*, the easily overlooked beginning of the ‘King’-theme, 1:26; or of the ‘Conqueror’-theme, 59:20.
- 29 The passage does not promise that Cyrus had ever been or would become a believer. It notes facts and possibilities. See Motyer, *Isaiah*.
- 30 An illustration nearer home is a comparison between the Hymns of Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith and the kind letter I received recently from him. Which of these, if the argument from style is sound, is Deutero-Timothy? Or perhaps ‘Timothy’, ‘Dudley’ and ‘Smith’ are really three people?
- 31 This article began as a lecture to the Oxford meeting of the Theological Students Fellowship, in November 1993. It has been developed and extended in the light of the positive and perceptive discussion at that meeting.