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THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: THREE INTERRELATED STUDIES

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II. THEOLOGY OF A TRADITION

At the conclusion of the first of these studies (King's Theological Review, IV/2, 53-63), we reached a point at which it could be said that the idea of a single, unified theology of the book as a whole was too simple: on any major theme which could properly be chosen as treated within the book, more than one element, more than one style of handling that theme could be detected. We also observed that, while an overall approach could be made, even at the risk of such simplification – and we saw such an example in the treatment of the Isaiah material in Ecclesiasticus – a consideration of the context in which interpretation was undertaken, before full-scale commentaries came to be written, suggested that part of the disunity of thought could be associated with the handling of this or that passage within the context of particular situations and in relation to particular needs. Such unity of treatment as could appear would derive from an overall understanding which might then influence the approach to individual sections; but the immediacy of comment, the demand for relevance to a specific situation, would be more likely to produce differences of level and of approach. Such piecemeal exegesis may be seen to continue in some measure in the practices of both synagogue and church.

One way of recognizing such a piecemeal view would be to note the degree of inconsistency in the handling of interpretative procedures generally in the Old Testament. Thus it may be observed that in the books of Samuel there has been a consistent removal of the unacceptable *ba'al* component of proper names and its replacement by the Hebrew word for 'shameful thing' *bosheth*: the name Ish-baal or Esh-baal becomes Ishbosheth. The number and occurrence of such names is not so great that this regularity appears unreasonable. But when we look a little further we observe differences of practice. Thus, in the case of the Gideon narrative of Judg. 6-8, the situation is complicated by the apparent occurrence of two traditions, one using the name Gideon and the other Jerubbaal. Whatever the relationship between these – and it need not here concern us – it is evident that the compiler has given an interpretation for the latter name which makes the divine title *ba'al* here refer to another deity – the name to mean 'Let *ba'al* plead' against Gideon – where it appears more natural to suppose that the name originally refers to Yahweh by the title *ba'al*. Elsewhere, in 1 Chronicles, the *ba'al* names are left intact, and the same applied to occasional appearances of *ba'al* names – even a name *Be'alyah*, meaning 'Yahweh is lord' – left untouched (1 Chron 12.5.). A modern editor would ask for consistency, perhaps observing that Hos. 2.16 (Hebrew 2.18) enjoins the replacement of the title *ba'al* by the acceptable alternative *'ish* with the same meaning; an ancient editor is working much more ad hoc. The same could be said for the removal of words from public reading which were felt to be blasphemous or obscene;[1] and the removal of phrases – or their modification – which were felt to be theologically dangerous, and some of these were noted by the later scribes as being the result of deliberate scribal correction (an example in 2 Sam 12.14 describes David as 'showing contempt for Yahweh', where the scribes have modified the text to read 'showing contempt for the enemies of Yahweh', which removes the objectionable sentiment but makes nonsense of the verse). However much of harmonising and smoothing of the text has gone on, many inconsistencies remain which reveal the piecemeal nature of the activity. In some respects it may be observed that the Samaritan text of the Pentateuch, clearly an alternative form to that which we know in the Hebrew, has attempted a higher degree of consistency by ironing out obvious discrepancies which might be felt to confuse the ordinary worshipper and believer.

These general reflections may serve to prepare for the recognition that when we move to a next stage of study of the book of Isaiah, we must expect to discover further indications of a rich and complex tradition, not all of one piece, and not showing straightforward and consistent signs of stages in its formation. If, indeed, we ask the question: How did the book of Isaiah come to have the shape it does? we can hardly expect to get more than very partial answers. In differing degrees but in a broadly similar way the same may be said of other prophetic books, though each book has its own particular problems of structure.

THREE VIEWS OF THE MAKING OF THE BOOK

The point may be clarified if a brief outline is given of three types of approach to the problem of the making of the book of Isaiah. It must be stressed that these are three *types* of approach, and that none of them necessarily corresponds with the precise views of any particular scholar or groups of scholars. The fact that I find them less than satisfying is not in itself an argument against them, though it may suggest that there is in them too great a degree of rigidity, too much of an attempt to solve the problems in a unified manner, too little account taken of the resolved issues which remain.

1. **Blocks of material.**[2] The first could be described as the 'building blocks' view, though that would be less than fair to it. It works essentially on the assumption that blocks of material have been built up at different stages in the period between the lifetime of the prophet in Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C. and the postulated period of the virtual completion of the book. Thus a collection built around biographical or auto-biographical elements is seen in 6.1-9.7 (Hebrew 9.6); and this inserted into a double collection of woes and a poem with refrain found in 5.1-30 + 9.8-10.4. This double block is now to be found within the larger block of 1-12 in which the final chapter may be seen as a deliberate poetic conclusion to a particular collection. Such a sketch passes over many important details, but the outline may serve. Another block is to be found in 13-23, the collection of foreign nation oracles; itself extended and perhaps reinterpreted by the addition of another block, 24-27, often believed to be the latest collection in the book. A further block is to be found in 28-32, with supplements in 33 and perhaps 34-35. The evidently recognizable block of 36-39 is seen as an extract from 2 Kings and therefore indentifiable on that basis. It is often supposed – and in some measure such a supposition links with the third type of approach of which I shall speak – that these last chapters 36-39 were added to an already completed first book of Isaiah consisting of 1-35. Alongside this material and viewed in varying ways so far as any relationship to 1-39 is concerned, are two further blocks: 40-48 and 49-55, separable in some degree by the difference of their contents, but linked together as supposedly constituting the work of another prophet, known as the Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah, and to these was attached a final block in 56-66, variously understood as being a collection of another prophet, Third Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah, or as being the work of disciples of the Second Isaiah, and thus less unified, or as being a mixture of elements now collected

together. In such an analysis, while some attention may be given to linkages between the various blocks, greater stress inevitably rests upon the separate blocks themselves and each of them has been in varying degrees subjected to analysis with results regarded as more or less stabilised; among such results the supposition of a Second Isaiah stands out as the one most generally agreed to be sufficiently established. Indeed it often appears as if the one point on which almost all scholars agree is the self-contained and separable quality of 40-55, and the degree to which the unknown prophet of the exile, the Second Isaiah, can be described with reasonable precision as to his context and style of thought.[3]

2. **The School of Isaiah.**[4] The second approach not infrequently overlaps with this, but it argues for a greater coherence. It is a view which associates the origin of the book as we have it with what is known as the 'School of Isaiah'. It works in effect from three main ideas. The first is one general to the discussion of prophecy and the relation of prophet to prophetic book. The preservation of the words of the prophet can most naturally be associated with his followers, his disciples. The second is the more specific point that in the case of Isaiah there appears to be actual reference in 8.16 to the committal of the prophecies by the prophet to his disciples. The third is the recognition that there are so many links, verbal and of idea, between the various parts of the book – and some would say a structure which argues for coherence – that its degree of unity is sufficiently impressive to point to the existence of a school, or an 'Isaiah tradition', in which the disciples of the prophet and their disciples in their turn provide a context for the preservation and the re-use of older words, and for the addition of substantial amounts of new material, itself in part the product of an affinity with the earlier stages. Then the 'Second Isaiah' becomes not a totally independent prophet whose collected sayings have been added simply as a block to an already existing collection in 1-39, but as one who stands in the succession, so that his own collection could be seen as appropriate here and could not be envisaged as being placed at the end of some other prophetic scroll. There is no denying the degree of interlinkage between various elements in the book, but whether this particular theory does justice to these and other features must be less certain. It is true that some postulate of continuing use of prophetic words – some continuing exegetical activity – is essential for the understanding of most if not all the prophetic books. It is also true that we cannot understand the preservation of the prophetic message without some context for its use, though we may wonder whether the 'school' or 'disciple' idea is not rather rigid, and also whether there may not need to be greater place given to a context of worship and exposition there[5] – a projection back, it must be acknowledged, in some measure at least, from the evidence for later practice.

To this must be added that the text of 8.16, conventionally translated roughly as:

> Bind the testimony, seal the *torah* (instruction),
> among my disciples.

is uncertain. The Greek translators understood the final word quite differently as 'so that it be not taught' or 'studied': we wonder whether that particular interpretation owes something to later ideas of the hidden quality of the prophetic message, of the need for its secret preservation, as is indicated, for example, at the end of the book of Daniel which gives the angelic command to 'hide the words, and seal up the book until the end time' and the subsequent indication that it is the 'wise who will understand' (Dan. 12.5, 10). Quite apart from that, the grammatical construction in Isa. 8.16 is not entirely clear; the NEB renders 'with my teaching', relegating the disciples to the margin. Another proposal is to read 'in my children', as in v.18.

Was there indeed ever a 'school of Isaiah'? If so, what are we to make of affinities between Isaiah and Amos, and more particularly between Isaiah and Micah? What too is the relation between this Isaiah school and the activities of those Deuteronomic compilers responsible for the books of Kings? And how do we fit into such a picture the existence of the 'Second Isaiah'; for if we accept the postulate of such a figure, and treat, as is commonly done, the whole section 40-55 as a direct product of his activity, is there not some danger that the scheme overbalances by reason of the very evident outstanding quality of that later disciple, poet and prophet as he is often described, whose words mark for many the high water mark of Old Testament poetry and prophecy? These are not necessarily unanswerable questions, but they do present some difficulty, particularly for any too simplified view of the 'school' or the 'tradition' or the 'succession'.

3. **Editorial activity.**[6] The third approach is more strictly editorial, though this must be allowed some breadth of understanding. It overlaps in some degree with both the preceding presentations. Indeed either of them may well involve the concept of an editor or editors at work, whether bringing together the separate blocks or shaping the deposits of the ongoing tradition. It may be argued that a first collection, shaped in part by editorial process, in 1-12, is editorially joined with a second collection found in 28-33, and the foreign nation oracles of 13-23 placed deliberately between them in what is thought to be a prophetic pattern – words of judgement, oracles on the nations, words of promise – though this does not very readily fit the actual content here.[7] A late editorial insertion of 24-27 is seen as a subsequent stage; but meantime, the first book of Isaiah has taken its shape by the editorial addition of the extract from 2 Kings in 36-39. A further editorial process adds the remaining sections, though often their addition is seen as the simple placing of the material at the end of the existing collection.

But this is only one aspect of an editorial approach, and a different line is to be seen when the attempt is made at identifying moments of editorial work. In more than one recent study, particular stages have been identified. The attempt has been made to show a whole series of such stages, spread over some four centuries, and tracing the evolution of the material through these stages in what has been described as the movement from prophecy to apocalyptic.[8] Or the attempt has been made to identify a particular moment, and only subsequently to fit it into a general pattern; a very skilful exposition of this kind has identified – and this was not in itself new – the process by which oracles concerned with the interpretation of the Assyrian power as the agent of divine judgement upon Israel and Judah in the last decades of the eighth century, were transformed by the reversal of their effect so that the instrument of judgement became itself the object of judgement – so in 10.5-15. Not only this, but the context of this reversal is then sought in the changed position of Assyria in the latter half of the seventh century, when its weakening power was challenged, especially by the growing might of an independent Babylon. Thus a stratum of editorial or, perhaps better exegetical, activity could be detected, in which the changed political situation provided a stimulus for a re-application of earlier sayings, a shift in the meaning associated with them.[9]

The general principle exemplified here is entirely proper; in the century following the period of Isaiah of Jerusalem's activity which extended roughly from around 740 to just after 700 B.C., the further extension of Assyrian power during the first years was followed by decline, and eventually led to total disruption and overthrow. What had been said of Assyria in relation to the last years of the life of the northern kingdom and said again and comparably in relation to the life of Judah under Hezehiah, could no

longer be read satisfactorily in relation to the Assyria which ceased to control the Palestinian area. The upsurge of national power under king Josiah in the period around 620, contemporary with the growing might of an independent Babylon which was within two decades to extend its sway over the whole of the western area, brought about a new situation. One level of reinterpretation could be seen in the glossing of the oracles which spoke of Assyria as the instrument of divine judgement, and this in part was done by the turning of the judgement theme against Assyria itself. Such glossing of the text can be detected at various points (so most clearly in chs. 13-14 and in 23.13. See below), though it must be doubted whether it is proper to think of an edition of a collection of prophecies, worked over with a view to presenting a consistent pattern of interpretation. For alongside such reinterpretation, we may detect other partly related and partly separate levels of understanding, and this wider range of material invites a fuller discussion of the ways in which this particular 'Assyrian' theme has been handled. It is thus from this third approach, sometimes too rigidly conceived, that we may move on to our next stage.

ASPECTS OF RE-INTERPRETATION

1. We may observe in the narrative passages which appear in 2 Kings 18-20 as also in a variant form in Isa.36-39 another aspect of such reinterpretation. In part this is linked to the interpretation of the period which is here being described, the period of the Assyrian onslaught on Judah in 701, its siege and capture of Lachish depicted so vividly on reliefs to be seen in the British Museum, its capture, according to the Assyrian account, of 46 fortified cities of Judah, its siege of Jerusalem where, again according to the Assyrian account, King Hezekiah was 'shut up like a bird in a cage' – a siege which is not directly indicated in the biblical account, though it is in fact implicit in the text (2 Kings 18.17 = Isa. 36.2). This period remains a complex one to describe and interpret, almost because we have too much and sometimes irreconcilable material;[10] more too because in the event Jerusalem was not captured, the Assyrians withdrew for some reason not entirely clear to us, though they did not thereby relinquish their claim to rule over Judah and to include that area within their imperial domain. Hezekiah and his successor Manasseh remained subject kings of Assyria, and this position was unchanged until some years into the reign of Josiah. And the Assyrian failure to capture Jerusalem – or perhaps we should simply say the fact that Jerusalem was not subjected to the prolonged siege, capture and aftermath which can be so clearly seen for Lachish, for the Assyrians certainly did not lack the technical capacity nor the military power to effect such a capture – appears to have become the subject of reinterpretation in the light of the understanding of Jerusalem and its holy place as the chosen dwelling-place of the God Yahweh.[11] Themes of a theological and indeed mythological kind could see Jerusalem as impregnable by reason of the presence of the deity. Psalms such as Pss.2 and 46 could depict the onslaught of the nations against Jerusalem, against the anointed Davidic king chosen by God, against the deity himself; and the overthrow of those enemies could become part of the deeper understanding of the power of God and of the expression of his just will against all who set themselves up in opposition to him. It was to have its echoes down the centuries, in such vivid declarations of the might of God as are found in Ezek. 38-39, in Zech. 14, and in Isa. 24. It was to become associated with the theme of the universal acceptance of Yahweh, God of Israel, as universal sovereign, so that – as in Ezek. 39 – the nations could become witnesses of his saving power for Israel, and thus themselves involved in acknowledging him, or – as in Zech. 14 – be joined together with the Jewish community in a great act of worship from which only those unwilling to go to Jerusalem are excluded and thereby bring disaster upon themselves.[12]

The account in 2 Kings 18-19, Isa. 36-37 has absorbed elements of this style of interpretation: while the narratives purport to give an account, or in all probability two interwoven accounts, of the events of 701 B.C., in reality they offer an interpretation of those events, in which the figure of Hezekiah is portrayed as the king of faith, consulting with the prophet Isaiah, laying before God the Assyrian demands, assured by the prophet of the divine answer to his prayer. The deliverance of Jerusalem is no longer simply an aspect of a complex political situation; it is part of a wider declaration of who Yahweh is. Incorporated in this material is a poetic passage (37.22-29) which offers a further element of interpretation. This is a taunt song against the Assyrian ruler who in his pride has set himself up against God. The passage uses a style reminiscent of that of royal inscriptions glorifying the activities of rulers, their military and civil achievements. It turns the proud boasts of the rulers into arrogant claims to do that which only God can do; and affirms that the whole series of events in which the alien rulers state themselves to be the initiators of action is in reality under the direct and deliberate plan of God. It reaches its climax in doom on the boastful enemy of Judah and of God.

There are two points to observe here in relation to this present discussion. One is the recognition that this reversal of the claims of the Assyrian conqueror has contacts with the same exegetical procedure which can be seen, for example, in Isa. 10. The claim is there made by the Assyrian that it is by his own power that he has brought doom upon the nations he has conquered; the claim is answered by the affirmation that he is like the implement, axe or saw or stick, which would suppose that it can wield the one who holds and uses it. The relationship shows that the development and interpretation of the Assyrian oracles is connected with a similar but not identical exegetical process by which the narratives also are being transformed. The other point is the recognition that the theme, expressed in Isa. 37.26, as

> Have you not heard from afar?
> This thing I did.
> From ancient times even I shaped it,
> Now I have brought it to pass.

is used in similar forms in chapters of the book of Isaiah recognised to belong to the exilic period in the sixth century, as in 40.21; 41.22, pointing to a further extension of the exegetical tradition here expressed. Indeed the development especially in chapters 40-45 of the claim for the absolute control and fore-knowledge of God contrasted with the total powerlessness of all idols, elaborates this particular theme, exemplifying it with the stress on God who, having already done what he had decreed, is about to bring new things to pass, new things themselves already planned by him long ago.

2. The developing interpretative tradition of the older oracles may be exemplified in yet other ways, and it is convenient to take further the Assyrian theme which is developed in other directions too. This is apparent implicitly in the chapters we have been considering, Isa. 36-37, in the light of their sequel in 38-39.[13] The overthrow of the Assyrians, depicted in vivid legend in the last verses of ch. 37, is underlined yet again in the promises to Hezekiah in ch. 38 of a new lease of life and of deliverance of king and city from Assyrian power (38.5); but the deeper significance of this is drawn out in a psalm which appears in this chapter though not in the parallel text in 2 Kings 20.1-11. The psalm expresses distress in a wide range of metaphors only partly linked with the

theme of illness and recovery which they are set to illuminate; the metaphors extend into the area of death and deliverance from death – a related theme; they extend still further into the themes of the pit, or Sheol, the realm of the dead. Metaphors of this kind find their extension in poetic descriptions of the experience of exile, as for example in Ps.107.17-22, and in the use of prison themes, in the same psalm in 107.10-16 and in passages like Isa. 61. We may observe a parallel theme in the motif of the captive king of Judah, Jehoiachin, released from prison years later (2 Kings 25.27-30), a motif which appears to form one element in the interpretation of the community's experience in exile and the prospect of a glorious release, particularly in the language of Isa. 53, where themes of distress and suffering, like those of psalms of lament, are combined with themes of prison and death, and answered in promises of coming vindication.

The sequel in the narratives is found in Isa. 39; and here the full intention becomes plain. The promise of life and of protection for Hezekiah in ch. 38 is balanced by the prophetic action of Hezekiah in relation to Babylonian envoys, explicated by Isaiah as pointing to the coming carrying away of all Judah and Babylon. This passage, as it stands in the book of Isaiah which is here our concern, fulfils two functions. First, it underlines the point that for the later generation of recipients of the prophetic message, the victory of God over Assyria is to be seen against the dark background of the conquest of Judah by Babylon; it is not now Assyria but Babylon which constitutes the threat. (It has been argued[14] – cogently but not I believe completely convincingly – that the reference here is to the situation between the first fall of the city in 597, with the emphasis on taking into exile, and the second fall in 587 when destruction of city and temple is the theme. But the stress on the totality of the loss of Judah is more like the understanding of the exile as leaving a completely empty land of Judah, almost implicit at the end of 2 Kings, but precisely stated at the end of 2 Chronicles, and belonging to a somewhat later stage of interpretation in which stress lies on the exiles in Babylon rather than on the remaining population in Judah – a theme to be found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel too, and perhaps there also pointing to aspects of the conflicts within the Judaean community in the early years of Persian rule.) Second, it provides the basis for the material of the following chapters in which the theme of Babylonian conquest lies in the past – thus showing the fulfilment of the pronouncement of Isaiah in ch. 39 – and the prospect lies beyond that in the hope of a speedy restoration. While it may properly be recognized[15] that the narratives of chs. 36-39 serve to contrast the deliverance of Jerusalem and Judah from the Assyrians with the certainty of the total conquest by Babylon, and thereby the apparently inconsistent policy of God in the two periods is faced and given a rationale, there is also implicit in the affirmation of deliverance from the Assyrians the sure prospect of eventual deliverance from the Babylonians, and the sequel explicates this.

3. This latter point is also brought out both by a series of detailed modifications of the text in the opening chapters of the book – pointers to the interpretation of earlier prophecies concerned with the Assyrian threat viewed as divine judgement in terms of a now experienced disaster at the hands of the Babylonians as the divine agent; and also by quite specific updating to be seen in the probable replacement of Assyrian references by Babylonian in Isa. 13-14 and by the precise replacement of Assyria by Babylon in Isa. 23.[16] We may note that in such instances as these, there is sometimes clear statement – and this is most evident in 23.13:

> Now see, the land of the Chaldeans (Babylonians):
> that is the people, it was not Assyria.

In Isa. 13-14 it is implicit for the most part, though explicit at some points – thus the comment on Babylon in 14.22-23 links together a preceding and a following passage, the former of which in 14.4b-21 makes no reference to any specific land, but is introduced by a reference to Babylon in 14.4a, while the latter in 14.24-27 is precisely referred to Assyria and has indeed some echoes in terms of reinterpretation of the poem against Israel which appears now apparently broken into two parts in 5.25-30 and 9.8-21 (Hebrew 7-20). We may here again observe that while some degree of consistency in reinterpretation and reapplication of earlier material may be observed – though hardly sufficient for the supposition that there is a precise 'edition' produced at a given moment – there is also observable some degree of haphazardness in the reinterpretationn; the expositors were not, it would appear, working through all the available material with a view to giving a consistent up-dating; rather is there evidence of a process of reapplication of individual passages, and this at several different stages, with emphases which are not necessarily to be fitted into a rigid pattern.

4. There is a further consideration to be taken into account by way of pointing to other possible indications of re-use. This is to be seen as partly indicated by elements added to or modifying earlier texts, elements designed to bring out a new meaning for a new situation; but also, and more elusively, in a re-reading which provides a new meaning for such texts because of the context in which they are being used. There is here an underlying point about the nature of any literary work, though clearly in some respects we cannot fully apply the principles of modern literary understanding to ancient texts about whose origin and structure we are much less informed. I noted a parallel example in a theatrical context late in 1980. We went to see the show entitled 'Tom-foolery' in London, a show based on the songs of Tom Lehrer, an American academic who made a name for himself with satirical songs in the 1960s. Among these was one which had a number of comments on political life, including some reference to well-known figures of the period who from being actors of one kind or another had become involved in politics. The song included brief reference to Ronald Reagan. We knew that song from its original context; hearing it in the autumn of 1980, at the time of the American Presidential election, the allusion came to life because of the particular status of Reagan as a Presidential candidate. Now we knew – we could check with the original recording – that the reference was in the original text; we had a strong suspicion that many of the younger members of the audience heard it as an up-dating of that text to fit the immediate situation. This was a reasonable supposition, because the songs that evening did include a number of extra stanzas or modified lines, partly to clarify allusions which might now be lost, partly to bring in similar points now applicable. But in fact this reference took on a new significance simply from its present context.

The analogy may serve as a reminder that you do not necessarily have to modify a text to make it immediately relevant to a new situation; the new reader or hearer may so understand it because of his context. A great work of literature has an impact on its contemporaries, who may perhaps be aware of the precise situation to which its author was referring; though even they, at one remove from the author, will not simply hear it as he meant it. Some years or centuries later, it may be necessary to offer a commentary to illuminate how the original text sounded to the author's contemporaries; but no such commentary will be needed for it to make some immediate impact on those who now hear it or read it.

A recent study of Isa. 21 has illuminated this with a detailed discussion of the problems of one of the most difficult passages in the book.[17] On the basis of very careful analysis, the author of the study has set out what he sees to be the different levels of the text: its

original eighth century context, as he believes he can trace it, and its new sixth century context, the former in the period of Isaiah, the latter in the period of Babylonian supremacy. In making this analysis, the author brings out two distinguishable elements: there are sections of the material where he finds it possible to separate the two levels, to assign some words and phrases to one period, and some to the other; but he also observes that once the two-level view is accepted, it becomes clear that at numerous points in the chapter the same words are capable of being read at the two levels. If we can project ourselves into the eighth century situation, we can see what kind of impact they would have; but having learnt also that the material as it now stands reflects a later situation too, we can read the words in the light of that context and detect their impact there.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRADITION AND THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

It is clear that the recognition of such levels has its consequences for the understanding of biblical interpretation. The biblical text, standing as it does in the long centuries of Jewish and Christian use, has a capacity to speak to new generations, though we must be ware of either too simple an updated reading or too naive a reading into the text of the things we wish to hear. The presuppositions of our own situation, socially and theologically, affect our understanding, and they may easily dull our hearing. For the understanding of the theology of the tradition within the book of Isaiah this recognition of the continued vitality of the text enables us to detect with greater or less precision some of the points at which earllier words were newly understood. Crucial to this, and to that extent pivotal in our understanding of the evolution of the tradition, must be the major events which we can see in the Babylonian conquest and the period known to us as the time of the exile. The impact of those experiences may be detected. But, in view of the gaps in our knowledge of the political and social situations, particularly during the years after the destruction of Jerusalem and before the advent of Persian rule, we must beware of finding ourselves writing the story of the period from the interpretation of the texts which we are reading in the light of that particular historical context. That this major moment has contributed much, we need not doubt; it is detectable in so many other Old Testament writings too. But we should be cautious of assuming that our perspective of Old Testament life and experience is entirely just to what those who lived through the events actually felt. There is always the possibility that what appears to us, on the basis of available evidence, to be of minimal importance, was of major significance to some in the community; and what is unknown to us – the gaps in our information, because neither the biblical text nor any non-biblical evidence gives us any information – was not in reality a gap, but was filled with experiences again not so necessarily insignificant as we might now be tempted to believe. But with that kind of caution, we may see that a reading of the text with the developing interpretative tradition in mind opens up a variety of thought, a variety of theological emphasis, which fits in with and further illuminates the themes which we looked at in the first of these studes.

There are further consequences in this for our understanding of the nature of biblical interpretation, further factors in the process of reinterpretation within the biblical text which point to wider principles. These can illuminate both the biblical situation itself – the nature of the theological positions held by those who reinterpreted older material – and also the perennial question of what constitutes the relationship of a later religious community to the text. Three lines of thought may be suggested as examples.

1. One of the dilemmas of prophetic experience and hence also of the handling of prophetic material is that of the equivocal relationship between what is said and what happens. We may see a number of aspects of this. The doom prophecies of Amos and Hosea directed to the northern kingdom of Israel from about the middle of the eighth centry could be seen to be validated in the disaster to that kingdom in the decades that followed, down to the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. One aspect of the preservation of such prophetic teaching may therefore be the confirmation of its truth, the underlining of its authoritative quality. Its continued use, however, depends on more than this, and here we may see the possibility that a confirmed prophetic word can be regarded as having continuing validity, seen therefore as more than a momentary utterance, understood rather as a declaration of the divine will and nature which continues to be true. But there is also bound up with this a further possibility, for even in such confirmed cases there may well be details which do not find confirmation in the events that follow; the way is then open either for these details being dropped from the tradition as of less significance or for them being held as it were in suspense. The validation of the prophetic word may be accompanied by a qualifying of it so that it not only continues to be regarded as authoritative but is also held to point to a further stage of fulfilment and of validation. There can then be an interplay between the status which a prophet acquires by reason of the validation of his words and the status which he enjoys by virtue of his official position in the religious life of the community – a subject about which there is still much debate. The matter becomes then more acute when it appears that a prophetic word is unfulfilled, and we may observe that the question of prophetic authority becomes a delicate one.[18] The relationship then – and this is a theme to which I shall return in the last of these studies – between the figure of the prophet and the tradition associated with him becomes a two-way process. The tradition has its authority because of its association with the prophet: the status and authority of the prophet is enhanced by the continuing validation of the tradition. But such a position is not easily reached, and the concern with prophetic authority which may be seen especially in Jeremiah and Deuteronomy is an indication of its problematic nature. The process of reinterpretation is itself part of a reckoning with this problem.

2. New experiences have to be assimilated by any kind of community, and not least by a religious community. This must be particularly the case where the new experiences are of a shattering kind, such as a total disruption of political life or a radical change in the social order. Such experiences introduce an element of discontinuity into the life of the community, and both in religious terms and in political terms a community needs continuity if it is to exist. The integration of moments of discontinuity into the life of the community is therefore a process by which it comes to terms with the new and the disturbing;[19] it is also, as must be clear, a process by which at one and the same time there is confirmation of the truth of the tradition, and also a modification, often imperceptible, of that tradition. No community, whether defined in political or religious terms, comes through a new experience without some degree of modification; a refusal to accept this must result in fossilisation.

3. A third aspect which joins closely with this is the process by which both older and newer material may be given a broader context in relation to already existing lines of tradition,[20] with a resulting fuller comprehension for what is now integrated, and a modification which at the same time can be seen to be in continuity with the past. A specific example may here make the point clearer. There are marked indications that that great religious tradition, to be found in so much Old Testament material, which sees the Exodus from Egypt as the central moment in the understanding of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh, occupies no place in the thought of Isaiah; the traditions which converge in him appear rather to be those of Jerusalem and of the royal house. We may, however, observe that the tradition which offers reappraisal of the earlier Isaianic material integrates that material with the Exodus line of thought; thus in Isa. 4, 11 and 12, and with some frequency in the chapters from 40 on, Exodus

themes provide a context within which the Jerusalem and Davidic themes are re-presented. A similar convergence may be seen in the Jeremiah material, and to a lesser extent in Ezekiel; it may also be seen to play its part in the Deuteronomic writings, and beyond. The result is an enrichment of understanding in that a wider range of religious traditions is drawn together so that they illuminate one another; a too simplified interpretation of divine action in relation to events is broadened by the context of continuity which the other traditions supply, and similarly a too imprecise appraisal in cultic terms is applied to the specific moments of historic experience. Each can feed the other. The result is a great richness of imagery and thought, and also a more profound understanding of the nature of the theological affirmations which are made.

The book of Isaiah offers such a rich interplay of material, and a consequent illumination of experience which continues to operate effectively. The questions already raised about prophetic authority and status point forward to a consideration of the prophet and of the ways in which he is portrayed. What kind of prophet can we perceive within and behind the book?

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The third and last of these studies: 'Theology of a Prophet' will appear in the next issue of the Review. The three studies were first given as the Annual Theological Lectures in the Queen's University of Belfast in February 1981.

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1. Cf. Ullendorff, 'The Bawdy Bible'. *BSOAS* 42 (1979), 425-56, see esp. p.426, 440ff.

2. Cf. e.g. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: and Introduction* (London, 1965), 303-46, both for his own separate treatment of 1-39, 40-55, 56-66 and for discussion of the possible construction of 1-39 from already existing smaller collections (see pp.306-8).

3. A number of recent studies raise serious questions about this. Cf. my survey article in *ET* 93 (1981-82), 136-9, see pp.136f.

4. Cf. e.g. Eissfeldt, op.cit., p.346; J.H. Eaton, 'The Origin of the Book of Isaiah', *VT* 9 (1959), 138-57, and references there. For criticisms, cf. below and e.g. my 'Isaiah i-xii: Presentation of a Prophet', *VTS* 29 (1977), 16-48, see pp.27-9; R.E. Clements, 'The Prophecies of Isaiah and the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.', *VT* 30 (1980), 421-36, see p.436.

5. Cf. H.E. van Waldow, 'The Message of Deutero-Isaiah, Interpr. 22 (1968), 259-87, see pp.268f., and also his *Anlass und Hintergrund der Ve Verkundigung des Deuterojesaja* (Diss. Bonn, 1953).

6. Cf. e.g. O. Kaiser, *Das Buch des Propheten Jesaja, Kap. 1-12* (revised edition. ATD, 17, Gottingen, 1981): the text differs radically from that of the earlier edition translated in the SCM Press OTL Series: a revised translation is being prepared; J. Vermeylen, *Du Prophete Isaie a l'Apocalyptique. Isaie, I-XXXV, miroir d'un demi-millenaire d'experience religieuse en Israel.* 2 vols. (Paris, 1977-78); to some extent also R.E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (New Century Bible, London, 1980).

7. Cf. my article (n.4), pp.19f.

8. So Vermeylen (n.6).

9. H. Barth, *Die Jesaja-worte in der Josiazeit. Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesaja uberlieferung* (WMANT, 48, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1977); see also Clements (n.6) for use of this approach.

10. B.S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT, II, 3, 1967).

11. A valuable discussion by R.E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (JSOT Sup. 13, 1980).

12. Clements' evaluation differs from this (n.11).

13. For chs. 38-39, cf. my 'An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: a Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39', *SJT* 27 (1974), 329-52.

14. Clements (n.11), esp. pp. 66f.

15. Clements (n.11), esp. pp.63ff.

15. Clements (n.4), see pp.428f.

16. Clements (n.4), see pp.428f.

17. A.A. Macintosh, *Isaiah xxi – A Palimpsest* (Cambridge, 1980).

18. R.P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* (London, 1979).

19. Cf. my 'Continuity and Discontinuity: Rehabilitation and Authentication' in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* ed. D.A. Knight (Philadelphia, 1977), 215-34.

20. On 'lines of tradition', cf. O.H. Steck, 'Theological Streams of Tradition' in *Tradition and Theology* (see n.19), 183-214.