

ISAIAH 1:4-9 AS A POST-EXILIC REFLECTION¹

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ABSTRACT

Israel of the exilic/post-exilic period did not run away from its catastrophic history, but instead seized the political catastrophe as an opportunity to examine its past theologically. No era in Israel's history contributed more to theology than the exile. Furthermore, it is clear from the complex way in which the prophetic books have been compiled over a very long period of time that they were the subject of further reflection and adaptation long after the original prophet had died. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the book of the prophet Isaiah. The exilic/post-exilic reworking of the Isaianic tradition has been decisive for the character of First Isaiah and for the image of the prophet. This phase of reworking is characterised by the view that the disasters that befell Judah are to be seen as Yahweh's just punishment of the people's disobedience. This article will focus on Isaiah 1:4-9 as an example in order to indicate how the tradition of Isaiah's prophecies was reworked in order to show that they had received their fulfilment at the time when the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem reached their lowest ebb.

INTRODUCTION

In 587 B.C.E., several factors, including the destruction of Jerusalem, the cessation of the monarchy, and the experience of the exile, caused the start of a transformation of Israelite religion, which subsequently supplied the contours of the larger Judaic framework within which the various forms of Judaism, including the early Christian movement, developed (Scott 1997a:2). However, this viewpoint has not always been accepted unattested. Among the many historical-critical issues surrounding the study of the Hebrew Bible (HB) during the twentieth century, the different perspectives and even assessments of the Babylonian exile can be mentioned as one of the debates characterised by dramatic swings of opinion and perspectives (Smith-Christopher 1997:7).

Wellhausen's refinement of his "documentary hypothesis" was based on his

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interpretation of the exile. Barton (1995:328) interprets this insight as follows: “Wellhausen, it would be fair to say, discovered the exile”. His view of the exile, for example, helped him to provide the grounds for the late dating of the Priestly work (P) which was, of course, the major pillar in his refined version of the earlier documentary hypothesis.² Of course, people before him knew that it had happened; but as long as P was dated earlier, there was no reason at all to think that the exile had changed anything in the inner constitution and character of the Israelites and their religion (Wellhausen 2001:363-391).

It was Wellhausen who, for the first time, showed that it had also decisively affected the nation’s psyche and had made the Israelites turn in on themselves and ask questions about their religious identity (Barton 1995:328).³ The leading people among them had developed the blueprints for life in a restored community, where obedience to carefully devised rituals would replace the chaotic spontaneity which had encouraged the syncretistic tendencies now being punished by Yahweh.⁴ Israel would now become a confessional, rather than a

² Wellhausen (1921:167) remarks as follows: “... und so entstand im Exil aus dem Priesterstande eine Schule von Leuten, die das, was sie früher praktisch getrieben hatten, jetzt auf Schrift und in ein System brachten. Das war der Ursprung einer neuen Art von Thora, die sich mit der Agende der Priester befaßte. Ihr Endergebnis liegt im Priesterkodex des Pentateuchs vor. Den Priesterkodex hat Ezra zum Gesetz gemacht, allerdings nicht für sich, sondern als Bestandteil des Pentateuchs. Aber es war doch das Neue im Pentateuch und gab dem Ganzen das letzte Gepräge”. He continues: “Der Priesterkodex ... ist das Resultat der prophetischen Regulierung des Kultus, die unter Hizkia und Josias began, durch das Exil mächtig gefördert wurde, und nach dem Exil zum Siege gelangte” (Wellhausen 1921:170). Cf. also Wellhausen (2001:38, 363-364, 404).

³ Wellhausen (2001:403) remarks as follows: “Das Deuteronomium indessen war ein Programm für eine Reformation, nicht für eine Restauration. Es setzte das Bestehn des Kultus voraus und korrigirte ihn nur in gewissen allgemeinen Punkten”. Wellhausen continues: “... im Exil [wurde] das Kultusverfahren Gegenstand der Thora [...], wobei natürlich nebem dem restaurirenden den reformatorische Gesichtspunkt fortwirkte ... Nachdem der Tempel wieder hergestellt war, hielt sich doch der theoretische Eifer und bildete in Wechselwirkung mit der erneuerten Praxis das Ritual noch weiter aus ... Das letzte Resultat dieser langjährigen Arbeit ist der Priesterkodex” (pp. 403-404).

⁴ Cf. Wellhausen (1921:168-169): “Der Priesterkodex bringt das Recht die Stellung und die Gliederung der Priester zu Buch, ferner ihre Thora, enthaltend die Regelung der religiösen Formen des Privatlebens und der Anforderungen des Kultus an die

national community.⁵ The implications of Wellhausen's late dating of P have become quite firmly embedded in the study of the HB – accepted even by those who reject the underlying source analysis and dating. The sense that the exile marked a crucial change in Israel's history, as well as religious-historical development, is part of our intellectual furniture as biblical scholars.

But the importance of the exile and its impact on the life and faith of ancient Israel was certainly not universally agreed. Torrey wrote in 1910 that the exile “which was in reality a small and relatively insignificant affair, has been made, partly through mistake and partly by the compulsion of a theory, to play a very important part in the history of the Old Testament” (Torrey 1970:285). A de-emphasizing of the exile thus started which influenced the scholarly consensus about the exile. It is not that the exile was not mentioned as an event, but as a critically important event in the history and the development of the history and theology of the Judeans, the consensus appears clearly more sympathetic to Torrey than to Wellhausen.

Symptomatic of this absolute neglect is the fact that the comprehensive, six-volume *Anchor Bible dictionary*, which was published in 1992, contains no article on the topic “Exile”. However, it can be noted that Robert P. Carroll's article on “Israel, History of (Post-Monarchic Period)” does include a brief discussion on the concept of exile (1992:575). Even Herbert Donner, in his influential history of Israel, remarks that it is easy to overemphasize the drastic

Laien, und endlich vor allem ihre Praxis, nämlich das Ritual des Tempeldienstes ... Der Priesterkodex stellt den ganzen Kultus positiv dar; er nimmt alle Riten und Bräuche, öffentliche und private, in die Gesetzgebung auf und stempelt sie zu Baustein eines Systems der Theokratie ... Der Priesterkodex fordert nun aber nicht, wie die Theokratie sein soll, sondern er beschreibt, wie sie ist”.

⁵ In this regard he remarks as follows: “Der Priesterkodex befaßt sich ausschließlich mit dem Kultus. Er kennt kein Volk Israel mehr, sondern nur die Gemeinde der Stiftshütte, d.i. des Tempels. Die Gemeinde ist ein vorwiegend geistlicher Begriff, die Zugehörigkeit zu ihr ist weniger an das Blut als an die Religion geknüpft ... Die Theokratie is Hierokratie geworden und bedeutet die Herrschaft des Heiligen in der Gemeinde. Um den Ort, wo der Heilige wohnt, bildet die Gemeinde ein Lager in konzentrischen Kreisen von abgestufter Heiligkeit; zuerst kommen die Priester, dann die Leviten, dann die Laien ... Die ganze Gemeinde ist ein heiliges Volk und ein Reich von Priestern” (Wellhausen 1921:168).

and debilitating consequences of the fall of Jerusalem and the triumph of the Babylonian forces. Various aspects of life certainly were greatly modified, but Babylonian policy was not overly oppressive. The exiles were not forced to live in inhumane conditions and remained free and certainly should not be understood as slaves. They were under no overt pressure to assimilate and lose their identities (Donner 1995:416-417).⁶

Opinions also remained mixed for some time. We encounter this ambiguous assessment in the work of Ackroyd (1968) on the impact of the exile on biblical literature. Although he was writing in conscious awareness of the neglect of the exilic and post-exilic periods in biblical analysis,⁷ in his assessment of the conditions of the exiles in Babylon, for example, he writes that indications “are of reasonable freedom, of settlement in communities – perhaps engaged in work for the Babylonians, but possibly simply engaged in normal agricultural life – of the possibility of marriage, of the ordering of their affairs, of relative prosperity” (Ackroyd 1968:32). Yet, a few lines later he acknowledges that “the uncongenial nature of the situation should not, however, be understated. The heartfelt cry of Psalm 137 suggests real sensitivity to its oppressiveness; so, too, does the distress of Ezekiel”.

As recently as 1981 John Bright stated the following in his influential history of Israel: “Although we should not belittle the hardships and the humiliation that these exiles endured, their lot does not seem to have been unduly severe” (Bright 1981:345). Yet, two pages later he writes that “when one considers the magnitude of the calamity that overtook her, one marvels that

⁶ Cf. the following remark: “Man macht sich vielfach ein falsches Bild vom Leben der Exulanten in Babylonien. Durch Fehlinterpretation alt Nachrichten entstanden und aus jüdischer and christlicher Frömmigkeit genährt, halten sich romantische Vorstellungen, die schwer auszurotten sind. Man sieht die Deportierten in elenden Verhältnissen ... Nach des Tages Last und Mühe saßen sie, womöglich mit klirrenden Ketten, an den Wasserflüssen Babylons und weinten, wenn sie an Zion gedachten (Ps 137,1). Von alledem kann keine Rede sein. Gewiß fließen die Quellen nicht gerade stark, aber doch stark genug, um erkennen zu lassen, daß das herkömmliche Bild der *captivitas babylonica* unzutreffend ist. Die Leiden der Exulanten waren innerer Art und gründeten nicht in ihren Lebensverhältnissen ... Dort führten die Verbannten ein leidlich komfortables Leben” (Donner 1995:416).

⁷ Cf. “The exilic age” (Ackroyd 1968:1-16).

Israel was not sucked down into the vortex of history along with the other little nations of western Asia, to lose forever her identity as a people” (Bright 1981:347).

There were, however, also signs of different opinions along the way. In his *Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, Gottwald anticipates a change in attitude to the exile (1954:19):

In spite of the efforts of C.C. Torrey to prove otherwise, the events of the sixth century B.C. had a profound effect on Hebrew religion ... In the enduring memory of events and their impact upon succeeding generations is the major criterion of historical importance, then there can be no doubt that the sequence of happenings from 597 to 538 were among the most fateful in all Hebrew-Jewish history. It is far wide of the mark to recognize in the sixth century BC the severest test which Israel’s religion ever faced?

He continues stating that the destruction of Jerusalem, the loss of statehood, the deportation of the leaders, and the cessation of cultic religion marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. These events paved the way for the development of a religious tradition with its primary emphasis on law piety.

Rainer Albertz, in both his history of the religion of Israel (1992) and his publication “Israel in exile” (2001) finally turned this situation upside down. He infers that the exilic period, of all the eras in Israel’s history, represents the most profound caesura and the most radical change (Albertz 2001:11). Its significance for subsequent history can hardly be overstated. Here the religion of Israel underwent its most severe crisis, but the foundations were laid for its most sweeping renewal. During the exile began the dispersal of Israel among the nations, and thus also its often painful Diaspora existence. It is one of the great miracles of human history that the exile, the loss of Israel’s national and territorial integrity, did not spell the end of Israel’s history. This history continued, sustained by Israel’s relationship with God and constantly focused on the land from which portions of it have been, in part, exiled.

According to Carroll (1997:64) the HB is the book of exile: it is constituted

in and by narratives and discourses of expulsion, deportation and exile. From Genesis to Chronicles, that is, from the stories of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, to the moment when exiled Israel prepared to return from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, individuals, families, folk and the people of Judah existed in situations of varying degrees of deportation awaiting possible return. Deportation and Diaspora are thus constitutive of the Judean identity as it emerges and evolves in the biblical narrative.

Violent descriptions of invasion, devastation, massacre and deportation are highly characteristic of the discourses to be found in the prophetic literature of the HB (Carroll 1997:65). Thrown into existence in foreign lands, the dispersed people found enduring alienation in the Diaspora. This caused them to articulate and construct identity and story as given in and through the experience of Diaspora. In that alienation, however, was also to be found the beginnings of discourses which laid down foundations for communitarian values which would greatly shape their future.

THE EXILE AND ISAIAH

The complex way in which the prophetic books have been compiled over a very long period of time is indicative of the fact that they were the subject of further reflection and adaptation long after the original prophet had died. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the book ascribed to the prophet Isaiah (Clements 1980:421). Isaiah is the great scroll of Diaspora discourses in the prophetic collection in the HB (Carroll 1997:73). It is characterised by images of deportation and devastation, of fugitives driven from their homeland and of abandoned territory which testifies to a disrupted cultivation, with loss of the civic centre. With its central focalizing point Jerusalem – a universal centre to which all the nations shall flow (2:2-4) and to which the wealth of nations will be an overflowing stream (66:12) – deportation and Diaspora become staging points in the great return to the city and the renewal of the heavens and the earth (65:17; 66:22). As a sub-theme of the greater theme of the renewal of

everything, the topic of renewal of Jerusalem encompasses the notions of deportation and return and makes the existence of the Diaspora a temporary exile in the life of the holy city in the holy land.

Sweeney (1988:185) infers that the book of Isaiah as a whole demonstrates that it functions as an exhortation to re-establish and maintain the Judean community in the post-exilic period. It is therefore directed to the post-exilic Judean population in general and attempts to convince them that Yahweh is the God of all creation, that His covenant with them is still in effect, and that it is still necessary for them to adhere to Him as God and to fulfil His requirements. The book is structured to serve this purpose. It begins with a prologue in Chapter 1 which is a summary of the message of the book as a whole, i.e., Yahweh's offer of redemption to the people and thus serves as an exhortation to the people (Sweeney 1988:186; cf. also Fohrer 1962:251ff & Oswalt 1988:81). From Chapter 1, where everything is represented as having broken down to Chapter 66, where all the nations are represented as seeing Yahweh's glory (66:18), the scroll of Isaiah represents a comprehensive set of themes and topoi devoted to depicting a world of destruction restored through renewal (Carroll 1997:76). Such cycles of unmaking and remaking have a mythic quality which makes the scroll of Isaiah such a major production in the HB.

Whatever its origins or the processes of its composition, the scroll itself represents a magnificent panorama of alienation, deportation and homecoming undergirding so much of biblical discourse (Carroll 1997:76). Its flowing discourses weave in and out of themes of destruction and restoration, taking in various eventful moments in the nation's past and highlighting great expectations for a future of remaking that it would take a genuine poet to do justice to Isaiah's visions. No wonder that the scroll has as its virtual title "the vision of Isaiah ..." (1:1).⁸

⁸ With regard to the authorship of this prophetic book, compare Barthel (2003:125-126); Becker (2003:118-120); Berges (2010a:11-12); Berges (2010b:553-555, 567-569); Jeremias (1999:19-21); Köckert (2003:112-116); Meade (1986:22-26); Steck (1996:7); Van der Toorn (2007:28) and Van Wieringen (2006:109-132). We only possess the book, and only the book is the ground upon which we can pose our questions. A prophetic writing presents a literary image of a prophet, perhaps even

In this article I will limit myself to surveying one perspective on the exile from the book of Isaiah, as it would take a book-length treatment to map adequately the tropes and discourses of the exile contained in the whole of this prophetic book.

ISAIAH 1:4-9

Introduction

This unit is a prophetic admonition with the primary purpose to dissuade the people from their current course of behaviour, the continued rejection of Yahweh. This passage begins with a woe-formula (וָהִי) which often introduces prophetic oracles. Verse 10 contains another call to attention which introduces a new passage so that the present passage comprises verses 4-9.⁹ In the preceding passage (Isa 1:2-3) Isaiah calls upon eternal witnesses, the heaven and earth, and presents them with a case for judgement. Yahweh raised children, but they have rebelled against him. In fact, argues Isaiah, Israel has behaved contrary to the law of nature: even an ox and an ass know their owner and obey him, but God's own nation ignores him (Gitay 1991:14; Sweeney 1988:104).

In the following literary unit (1:4-9)¹⁰ Isaiah points to the sinful nation,

in constitutive association with a series of prophetic writings. Isaiah ben Amoz can therefore not be regarded as the author, but rather the visionary who stands behind the divine experience recorded in this text. This is in accordance with the spirit of the time, as authors were unknown in biblical Israel of that time. Anonymity was the rule in the literary production of the ancient Near East. This anonymity was not merely an omission of names; it is evidence of a particular notion of authorship. The author was seen as a source of authority. Like Moses, who is considered to be the discourse founder of priestly scholarliness, Isaiah is regarded as a prophetic discourse founder and his words were being interpreted in a continuous manner in the circles of the prophetic tradents, who, by putting these words into the mouth of Isaiah as their discourse founder, imbued themselves with legitimacy by means of prophetic authority in competition with Moses. They therefore also functioned as revelation mediators of the divine word.

⁹ Blenkinsopp (2000:182); Kaiser (1981:33); Niditch (1980:516); Sweeney (1988:104; 1996:75-78); Wildberger (1972:20).

¹⁰ Werner (1981:61) remarks as follows: "Die Geschichtsreflexion Jes 1,4-9 bildet formal und inhaltlich eine Einheit".

arguing that the people have forsaken God and rejected the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah portrays an absurd situation: the people are smitten for their deeds, yet continue to offend God. They suffer, their land is deserted, foreigners invade their country until “Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut/shelter in a cucumber field” (1:8). Had not God saved them, they would be demolished like Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9).

On closer investigation Isaiah 1:4-9 can be subdivided as follows: verses 4; 5-6; 7-9.

Verse 4

From a purely formal point of view the introductory “woe” (הוי) is an indication that this is the start of a new literary unit, even though the use of “people” (עם) and “children” (בָּנִים) in this verse indicates a close association with the preceding passage (1:2-3) (Berges 1998:60-61; Blenkinsopp 2000:182). Originally, the term “woe” formed the opening marker of a funerary lament from which it derived the connotation of prevailing death and the mourner’s sense of sympathy for the deceased person (1 Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18; 34:5; Am 5:16). It is a conventional term in the prophetic books, not only at the level of the speech genre of accusation, but also at the level of the literary redaction of larger textual units, as can be seen from its occurrence in series. Woe-oracles occur quite frequently in the book of Isaiah, and in every one of these instances הוי (“woe”) stands at the beginning of such a section (e.g., Isa 5:8, 11, 18, 20ff.; Hab 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19). It colours the prophetic oracles with the suggestion of death as the inevitable consequence of immoral behaviour (Berges 2001:56).¹¹ In the preaching of the prophets, the use of “woe” functioned rhetorically as a strong device for attracting the hearer’s attention. In the present literary context, its juxtaposition with 1:2-3 expresses the inevitable judgement that must follow from Israel’s culpable failure to understand the required response to Yahweh’s paternal care for his people; a failure which the second half of verse 4 will spell out in more prosaic terms (Williamson 2006:41).

¹¹ Isa 1:24; 10:1; 17:12; 18:1; 45:9f.; Jer 4:13, 31; 22:13; 23:1; 48:1, 46; Ezek 13:3, 18; 34:2; Hos 7:13; Am 6:1; Mi 2:1; Nah 3:1; Zeph 2:5; 3:1; Zech 11:17.

The judgement implied in the use of the “woe” is progressively narrowed, and hence sharpened: first, as a nation like any other (גוי); then a large-scale kinship group (people: עַם); then a familial unit (seed/offspring: זֶרַע); and finally coming back to the “children” of Yahweh’s household castigated in the first literary unit (בְּנֵי־יְהוָה). It can be an indication that the same group is intended as in 1:2-3, whence we also learn that they are named Israel. They are characterized as a “sinning nation”, “people heavy with guilt”, “wicked seed” and “corrupt children”. They are chastised for doing evil, abandoning Yahweh and treating him with contempt. In contrast, the last three clauses of the verse are more matter-of-fact in tone. They supply a general justification for the judgement pronounced (Williamson 2006:38).

The theme of rebellion, announced in verses 2-3, is now explicated in great detail. The holiness of God is repudiated by a people whose entire life reflects the opposite character (Ps 78:40ff.). The term “sin” (חַטָּאָה) does not only indicate a deviation from some ideal norm, or simply missing the mark, but in this context is directly related to rebellion against God by Israel’s action (Brueggemann 1998:15; Childs 2001:18). This produces the condition of a people “laden with iniquity” (עֲוֹן). The two terms חַטָּאָה (“sinful”) and עֲוֹן (“iniquity”), together with מַרְדָּן (“rebel”) in verse 2, form the primary triad for sin in the HB.

Chapter 1 functions as the prologue of the entire book in its present form and it offers us the programme of the whole book (Beuken 2000:72; Fohrer 1962:258; Jones 1964:464; Rendtorff 1984:304).¹² This also applies to the theme of “sin” which occurs in this verse.¹³ In verses 2-3, as well as here in

¹² Beuken (1991:217-221) infers that Isaiah 1 has many terms in common with Isaiah 65-66. The lexical correspondence between chapters 1 and 65-66 is due, for a large part, to the fact that both text complexes contain the same prophetic literary genres: accusation, admonition, announcement of judgement and a salvation oracle. Within these genres the same themes occur: Israel’s sinning, cultic abuses, God’s listening to his people and Israel’s listening to him, the separation of the just and the wicked, and a new name.

¹³ Fohrer (1962:253) infers as follows: “Inhaltlich bilden diese fünf Worte der Sammlung einen gedanklich fortschreitenden Zusammenhang, der nacheinander die Themen der Sünde, des darum eintretenden Gerichts, der möglichen Rettung vor dem Verderben und einer möglichen Verwirklichung solcher Rettung berührt”.

verse 4, Israel is accused of being a sinful nation; in verse 27-28 it is stated that those who repent will be redeemed by righteousness, but the rebels and sinners will be destroyed altogether. In the development of the book it becomes clear that God will abolish sin, clear Jerusalem from sin and finally judge it. In 40:2 it is said that Jerusalem has served her term and that her penalty is paid; she has received from Yahweh's hand double for all her sins (Berges 1998:61). Finally Yahweh will judge those who still sin (Isa 65:7, 11, 20, 25).

The important divine title "the Holy One of Israel" (קָדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל) is well-known to be a title characteristic of the book of Isaiah in most of its major divisions. It occurs 25 times in the whole of the book, and there are a further four virtually identical uses (Williamson 2001:24). Taking these altogether, the distribution is 14 times in chapters 1-39; 13 times in chapters 40-55; and twice in 56-66 (Williamson 2006:43). This phrase is a poignant one (Brueggemann 1998:16). It acknowledges at the same time that (a) Yahweh is indeed linked closely to Israel, but (b) that Yahweh is holy, that is, overwhelming, unapproachable, and not to be taken for granted. The phrase is kind of inconsistent, witnessing to the dangerous freedom of Yahweh and to the disastrous future Israel generates for itself by its Yahweh mocking conduct. The children of Israel have become strangers anew to Yahweh (נָזְרוּ אֶחָדֶּר). The people have, of their own free will, set aside the relationship with Yahweh, and that is in fact something almost unbelievable (Rignell 1957:144). Here one can compare the expression concerning the judgement on Israel in Deuteronomy 32:5: they are "no longer his children" (לֹא בְנָיו). In that situation Israel had to bear the curses that follow the apostasy from Yahweh.

Whereas the author of 1:2-3 formulated this passage in the form of an address of Yahweh, a change in perspective takes place in 1:4 onwards. The author ("we"-group), who is covered in the prophetic cloak, confirms Yahweh's position (Berges 1998:61). The accusation, namely that the addressee has "forsaken/rejected Yahweh, and despised the Holy One of Israel", is reminiscent of Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic language, specifically within the context of the polemic against the foreign gods (Werner 1981:65). However, the absence of the formula "and they have forsaken/rejected the covenant", in spite

of this relative closeness in language, is conspicuous: the issue at hand is thus not the breaking of the covenant by Israel, but the fact that Yahweh is upholding the *berit* with the remnants in the community (Lohfink 1994:46). The accusation “they have forsaken/rejected Yahweh” here does not refer anymore to the veneration of the foreign gods, as is the case in Deuteronomic/deuteronomistic language, but to the failure to accomplish the ethical and cultic obligations as set out by the Yahweh-religion – as is known from texts from the Chronicler (1 Chr 28:9; 2 Chr 12:5; 13:11; 24:20). This is an important observation for the dating of Isaiah 1:4-9.¹⁴

The characteristics of the post-exilic situation, as sketched in Chapter 1, show analogies to the situation in chapters 56-59 and 63-66: There is no lack of sacrifice and cultic activities (1:10-20; cf. Isa 58), but a lack of practised justice (Berges 1998:61). The solution to the problem is quite similar, though expressed in different terms: in chapters 1-4 the “we”-group is concerned with the development and instruction of the community of remnants, whereas in 65-66 the separation of the faithful (“servants”) and the wicked is at stake!

Verses 5-6

The woe-oracle in verse 4 is followed by a rhetorical question in verse 5: why do you continue in rebellion, that you may still be smitten? The woe-oracle gives the impression that it does not refer to a future event, but to a catastrophe which has already taken place (Beuken 2003:73). Although the opening rhetorical question is addressed to a plurality – the “sons” (בְּנֵי) – the description is that of a battered and bruised individual (Blenkinsopp 2000:183).

The question (v. 5a) and the answer (vv. 5b-6) are determined by the metaphor of a wounded person who is not taken care of by anybody. The question adds another dimension to the metaphor: although Israel is responsible for its situation, it does not intend to change its behaviour. It is clear that

¹⁴ Werner (1981:65) infers as follows: “Die Beobachtung, daß der Chronist die Wendung *Jahwe verlassen* häufiger im Sinne von ‘die Gebote übertreten’ oder ‘im kultischen Bereich versagen’ unterlegt, ist für eine Datierung von Jes 1,4-9 nicht uninteressant”.

apostasy from Yahweh automatically leads to a series of punishments. In these two verses the state of the people is compared with that of a son who is flogged because of persistent rebelliousness (Kaiser 1981:35). The corporal punishment inflicted on this rebellious son is severe; one can even suggest comparison with the last of the so-called “servant-songs” in Isaiah 53.¹⁵

The key concept in this passage is “be hit/be struck down” (נכה): in the book of Isaiah this is a theological concept for God’s punishment of Israel (5:25; 9:12; 10:20; 27:7; 53:4; 57:17; 60:10) and of their enemies (11:4, 15; 30:31). From a diachronic perspective this verse does not reflect the pre-exilic period, but the post-exilic time following this traumatic event in the history of Judah (Beuken 2000:73). The judgement, however, is interpreted as a lesson which Israel did not take seriously.

Verses 7-9

Isaiah 1:7-9 pictures a ruined country in which only a few survivors remain. At the centre of this picture is “Daughter Zion” who has been left looking like a garden hut (1:8). The metaphor of the nation as a beaten und untended person is now explained in verses 7 and 8. From the metaphor the passage turns to reality: in verse 7 the language changes from the descriptive language of verses 5b-6 to the second plural address (Sweeney 1988:105; Williamson 2006:63). The desolation of the land is discussed in verse 7: the desolation of the land includes both land and cities (7a). Verse 7b, with its introductory statement that “your land is before you”, deals with the people’s failure to avert their land’s destruction by foreigners. This provides a parallel to the untreated sickness of vv. 5b-6. The countryside and its settlements have been devastated, and Jerusalem is left isolated.¹⁶ The recognition of the terrible effects in Palestine, as

¹⁵ Cf. in this regard Berges (1998:62): “Über diese Entsprechungen hinaus ist eine innerjesajanischer Bezug zum 4. Ejl in Jes 53 herauszustellen ... Doch liegt keine direkte Beeinflussung, in welcher Richtung auch immer, vor, sondern beide Texte profitieren von der Vorstellung Zions als einem Menschen, den JHWHs Schläge treffen ...”

¹⁶ In this regard Beuken (2003:73) infers as follows: “Im Grunde genommen bedeutet dies, dass nach dem Propheten Jesaja die alte Verheißung des sicheren Wohnens im fruchtbaren Land nicht länger Geltung hat”.

well as in the ancient Near East, of the wars of the imperial powers is everywhere to be seen. The picture of the desolation in the land is the first in the book of Isaiah, but the same theme and the idea will reappear frequently in the rest of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is an interpretation of that era and an exhortation to the people who survive to recognize God's intervention in the restoration (Watts 2005:29).

Verse 8 returns to descriptive language focussing on Jerusalem's ("daughter Zion")¹⁷ isolation with the use of three similes. The first two express Jerusalem's isolation in agricultural terms, comparing the city to the temporary shelters used by the farmers in their fields, and the third simile relates the actual situation, that Jerusalem was a besieged city (Sweeney 1988:105; Watts 2005:29). The watchman's booth is a familiar Near Eastern sight. Ripening fruit cannot be left unguarded against human theft or the invasion of animals or birds. The guard needs protection against the sun. A booth of branches is therefore made for him, which is elevated to enhance his field of vision. It will only last a season, but often remains long after the watchman is no longer needed. Now the country has been overrun, and Jerusalem itself is like one of those isolated huts in a vineyard, or shelter for the night in a cucumber field.

Nevertheless, a last hand added the comforting, yet demanding, notion that survival itself is a sign of the grace of Yahweh (cf. Ps 94:17). According to those who passed on Isaiah's oracles, the prophet had also announced that Yahweh was resolute in his intention to remain faithful to Zion. For this reason, they expected that after the fall of Jerusalem, God would bring about new salvation (Beuken 2000:9). Verse 9 concentrates on the small remnant of the people, most probably those who survived the desolation of the land by the foreigners. This verse employs first person plural language which refers to both the speaker and the audience which it addresses, i.e., the survivors of the people who are left in Jerusalem. The speaker thus includes himself as one of those addressed and in this way he gains the sympathy of the audience for his viewpoint (Sweeney 1988:106).

In verse 9a the condition is negatively stated that Yahweh had allowed a

¹⁷ Cf. Berges (2001:57-58; 2002:55-58) for a discussion of "daughter Zion".

small remnant to remain and in verse 9b the results of this condition, which had not been met, follow in two parts, that the people would have been like Sodom and resembled Gomorrah.¹⁸ Verse 9 thus connects the Isaianic idea of the “remnant” with the tradition of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁹ Such a comparison brings home two points: (1) the near extinction of the people, like Sodom and Gomorrah, and (2) the wickedness of the people, like Sodom and Gomorrah. The complete destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – as is recorded in Genesis 18-19 – was evidently more or less proverbial in ancient Israel, as the number of allusions in other books makes clear (Loader 1990:58-59). It thus seems a *tertium comparationis* for the complete nature of the destruction.

Conspicuous is this awkward change of person and number in verse 9, the first person plural interruption of an essentially second person plural form of address (cf. Oesch 1994:444). Who are the “we” in this verse? According to Conrad (1991:89) the sudden appearance of the “we” in the surrounding second person plural discourse indicates that the author-audience identifies itself over against another group in the community. The “we” understands itself to be distinct from a plural “you”. The “we” understands itself as a group of a “few survivors”, what might be described as a minority party in a larger group with whom it has shared an experience of disaster. According to Clements (1980:425) the purpose of verse 9 is clearly to offer some element of alleviation of the preceding threat (vv. 5-8), and to suggest the idea of a remnant through whom the future would be secured (cf. Isa 4:3). This comment can most plausibly be ascribed to the post-587 redaction of the collection.

The employment of the stem יָרָה with regard to “daughter Zion” (1:8) and the “we”-group (1:9) is essential for the whole book of Isaiah: The focus is on

¹⁸ According to Berges (1998:64) “es ist diese Wir-Gruppe, durch die JHWH das Gottesvolk in letzter Minute davor bewahrt hat, wie Sodom und Gomorra unterzugehen.”

¹⁹ According to Loader (1990:46-47) the function of this text (Gen 18-19) is “to argue that God punishes wickedness, but that he also respects individual innocence in the midst of mass guilt, so that it is even possible that the guilty may be saved because of the innocent. Mass as well as individual guilt is punished, but not at the price of justice. So God is vindicated in the face of doubt about his righteousness when he intervenes in the affairs of humans.”

Jerusalem, as remnant of the pre-exilic Israel, and on those who have the go-ahead to live on Zion (Beuken 2003:74; Berges 1998:65; Childs 2001:19). It is therefore not surprising when the two passages of salvation (2:2-4 and 4:2-6) have one of these aspects respectively as their theme: Zion and the Zion population.

Concluding remarks

There can be little doubt that, working sometime in the post-exilic period, the chapter's compiler will have had the thought of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians uppermost in his mind (Clements 1980:425; Williamson 2006:55). The function of this unit within the developing thought of the chapter is relatively clear and straightforward (Williamson 2006:55). Following the severe indictment and grounding of judgement in the opening verses, the passage goes on to observe that the country has already suffered heavily, though in God's goodness the destruction has not been complete. The condition is perilous, however, and becomes the source which effectively serves as an impassioned plea for a change of direction, which alone might save them. This final ray of hope will then be taken up again later in this chapter.

DATING

Intensive efforts have been made to identify the historical period to which Isaiah 1:4-9 apply. These verses were usually regarded as Isaianic and believed to be connected with the situation of 701 B.C.E. (Emerton 1993:34-40; Willis 1985:162-164). This viewpoint can be challenged by arguing for a post-exilic dating of this passage. Werner (1981:69) has argued convincingly that "in Jes 1,8f. wird die Belagerung Jerusalems im Jahre 701 zum Paradigma, das auch die spätere Zeit deutet" (cf. also Ben Zvi 1991:98-111; Wischnowsky 2001:147).²⁰

²⁰ With regard to the dating of Isaiah 1:1-2:5 Becker (1997:197) infers as follows: "Darüber hinaus ist diese Rede *literarisch* aus einem Guß und gehört zeitlich in die fortgeschrittene nachexilische Epoche: Sie ist neue Einleitung eines Jes-Buches

The terminology used in 1:4-9, such as שָׁחָה (*hi.* – “deal corruptly”) in 1:4 and בַּת־צִיּוֹן (“daughter Zion”) in 1:8 indicates a post-Isaianic date (although this alone is not decisive). To this can be added that the main concepts of 1:4-9 are Israel’s sin (1:4) and utter destruction as their punishment (1:6) occur elsewhere particularly in contexts dealing with the disasters brought about by the Babylonians (De Jong 2007:158). This closely resembles the literary reworking of Isaiah 6-8 and Isaiah 28-32 (Beuken 2000:8).

These arguments can be strengthened by the following consideration of 1:8: “Daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a hut/shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city”. It seems that the point of the simile is not that Jerusalem has been spared, but the parallels to Lamentations 2:6 indicate that the ravaging of the enemy left the city in ruins (Berges 2002:141; Dobbs-Allsopp 1993:146). The once fortified city has now been made into something akin to a frail garden hut, useless and deteriorating after the harvest. Parallel expressions from city laments make clear that the image of Jerusalem as a “booth” and a “shelter” does not indicate its survival, but is downfall. In the lamentation for Ur (LU), for instance, the destruction of the sanctuary is described as follows: “My house established by a faithful man, like a garden hut indeed was thrust on its side (LU 122-123) ... My faithful house (...) like a tent, like a pulled-up harvest shed, like a pulled-up harvest shed indeed was exposed to wind and rain” (LU 125-129) (Falkenstein & Von Soden 1953:198; cf. also Dobbs-Allsopp 1993:69). The garden hut and harvest shed are temporary structures used during harvest time. The destroyed sanctuary is thus compared to dilapidated structures, which are abandoned after the harvest. Jerusalem, once a proud and strong city, has become something “akin to a frail garden hut, useless and deteriorating after the harvest” (Dobbs-Allsopp 1993:146). After the siege, to be understood as Yahweh’s punishment, the city is ruined and

konzipiert worden, das seinerseits schon nachexilisch anzusetzen ist (vgl. z.B. die Aufnahme von Jes 6,9-11 in 1,7). Sie ist in ihrem theologischen Profil von eher späteren Texten aus dem Dtn (man könnte auch vereinfachen sagen: bundestheologisch) beeinflusst, und sie ist literarisch von der jeremianischen Spruchüberlieferung und vom Am-Buch abhängig”.

abandoned like a garden hut after the harvest.²¹

This interpretation of 1:8 is supported by the use of the term “daughter Zion” (בַּת־צִיּוֹן), particularly at home in the book of Lamentations (Berges 2002:55-58).²² A final argument for connecting 1:4-9 with the destructive events of the sixth century, is the fact that the motif שָׁמָמָה (“waste/desolate/desolation”) which, throughout the book of Isaiah, refers to the destruction brought about by the Babylonians (Berges 1998:62-63). One also has to consider that 1:7 is connected with 6:9-11: the hardening of the people, announced in 6:9-10, will come to an end only after the destruction of the land and the people has been completed (6:11, 1:7). If one considers the post-exilic superscription, it becomes possible that these verses are addressed to one or even to the entire faithful Yahweh community (“we”) in post-exilic Jerusalem; they are the virtual addressees (Oesch 1994:446).²³ Presumably the final editors were also the first readers of the text (Seitz 1993:20). To conclude: 1:4-9 theologically reflects the disastrous events of the early sixth century.

CONCLUSION

My main contention in this article was to illustrate that it was in the process of prophetic re-interpretation and development that the events which befell Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. provided a pivotal point. It is of lasting importance that Israel of the exilic/post-exilic period did not run away from its catastrophic

²¹ Robertson (1934:234) has already remarked in the 1930s that verses 8 and 9 are the fruit of a much later age when the temple and the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins. Accordingly, “the whole nation, the voice of the glossator exclaims, would have been wiped out like Sodom and Gomorrah had not Yahweh permitted a remnant to survive. That it is the voice of a glossator is confirmed by the change from the second person in vv. 5ff. to the first person in v. 9.”

²² Lamentations 1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 18; 4:22.

²³ In this regard Oesch (1994:446) infers as follows: “So zeigt sich aus der Analyse von Jes 1,8f, daß der Textabschnitt Jes 1,1-31 bzw. 1,1-2,4(5) nicht nur mit der Überschrift, sondern auch an einer konkreten Stelle des Textes zu erkennen gibt, daß er mit seinen Jesajaworten in eine neue Adressatensituation sprechen will und daß diese Situation historisch als die der (oder eine) nachexilischen JHWH-Gruppe-Gemeinde in Jerusalem bestimmt werden kann”.

history, but instead seized the political catastrophe as an opportunity to examine its past theologically. This was a painful experience, extending over two or three generations (Albertz 2001:325). No era in Israel's history contributed more to theology than the exile. Vital elements that were to leave their mark on later Judaism or Christianity were reshaped or discovered in the exilic period: their heightened sense of sin and moral seriousness, their geographical spread and universality, and their sometimes utopian character. Never before had Israel experienced more profoundly the extraordinary range of action and depth of being of its God; never before had its God been the source of more painful suffering and enthusiastic joy than in the seventy-seven long years of the exilic period (597-520 B.C.E.): destructive in wrath, productive in mercy, upright judge, purposeful guide of history, Lord over all nations – in short, the only God (Albertz 2001:324).

The exilic/post-exilic reworking of the Isaianic tradition has been decisive for the character of First Isaiah and for the image of the prophet presented in these chapters (De Jong 2007:160). This phase of reworking is characterised by the view that the disasters that befell Judah are to be seen as Yahweh's just punishment of the people's disobedience. The originating figure of this message was the unrivalled prophetic master, Isaiah of Jerusalem, the son of Amoz (Clements 1980:436). Yet what he had said needed to be applied and re-interpreted to fit the situations as they had developed, not only during his lifetime, but beyond this into the following centuries and more. Therefore we find incorporated into the book extraordinary series of words by ancient scribes and scholars to understand their world, and their situation, in the light of the words which the prophet was believed to have received from God himself.

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