

# Chapter One

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## *Misconceptions and Issues Regarding Isaiah 7:14*

### **I. Introduction: Justin Martyr and *Dialogues with Trypho***

Perhaps no other biblical passage has produced as much debate between Christians and Jews over the past 2,000 years as Isaiah 7:14, a verse that lies at the very heart of the Jewish-Christian debate regarding the identity and nature of Jesus Christ. From the traditional Christian perspective, this verse is seen as the scriptural foundation for the belief that the prophet Isaiah predicted the virgin birth of Christ over 700 years before it actually happened. From the Jewish perspective, though, this is not the case.

One of the earliest debates recorded concerning Isaiah 7:14 comes from Justin Martyr (110-165 CE). In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr debated with a certain Jewish man named Trypho over the identity of the Immanuel child and the meaning of the Isaiah 7:14 as a whole. While Trypho said that he and his fellow Jews had always understood Isaiah 7:14 as referring to Hezekiah,<sup>1</sup> Justin Martyr unequivocally denied this as a possibility,<sup>2</sup> and in turn stated that Christ “was born of a virgin, and that His birth of a virgin had been predicted by Isaiah.”<sup>3</sup> When Trypho then contended that a virgin birth was a completely pagan idea, as in the myths of Bacchus, Hercules, and Perseus, Justin

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<sup>1</sup> Justin to Trypho: “But since you and your teachers venture to affirm that in the prophecy of Isaiah it is not said, ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive,’ but, ‘Behold the young woman shall conceive and bear a son;’ and [since] you explain the prophecy as if [it referred] to Hezekiah, who was your king, I shall endeavor to discuss shortly this point in opposition to you, and to show that reference is made to Him who is acknowledged by us as Christ.” “Thus, for instance, they [i.e. Jewish teachers] have taught you that this Scripture which we are now discussing refers to Hezekiah, in which, as I promised, I shall show they are wrong.” *Dialogue with Trypho* (ANF 1:216, 233).

<sup>2</sup> “And Trypho answered, “The Scripture has not, ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son,’ but, ‘Behold, the young woman shall conceive, and bear a son,’ and so on, as you quoted. But the whole prophecy refers to Hezekiah, and it is proved that it was fulfilled in him, according to the terms of this prophecy.” *Dialogue with Trypho* (ANF 1: 232).

<sup>3</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* (ANF 1:231).

countered by claiming that the devil simply made these myths up in order to confuse people about Christ. He then went on to say, “These Scriptures are equally explicit in saying that those reputed to know the writings of the Scriptures, and who hear the prophecies, [i.e. Jews] have no understanding.”<sup>4</sup> Ever since that time, Christians have largely followed Justin Martyr’s lead and have seen the traditional Jewish explanation that Isaiah 7:14 originally referred to Hezekiah as a sinister attempt to obscure the plain prediction of the virgin birth of Christ. Yet when one analyzes the typical Christian understanding of Isaiah 7:14, one finds it characterized by three things: (a) no knowledge about the historical setting found in Isaiah 7, (b) a presupposition that Isaiah 7:14 is a *prediction* about the virgin birth of Jesus, and (c) a belief that Jews do not recognize Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy about the virgin birth of Jesus because they do not want to admit that Jesus is the messiah. The problem with this view, of course, is it is completely *a-historical* in its reading of Isaiah 7:14 and that it incorrectly equates *prophecy* with *prediction*. Furthermore, by dismissing the Jewish explanation out of hand as a deception, it shuts down any possibility of honest exegetical dialogue over Isaiah 7:14.

A fundamental question must be asked at the outset of this study: What if Trypho, instead of trying to “obscure” what was to Justin Martyr the obvious meaning of Isaiah 7:14, was honestly relating what he and his fellow Jews had always been taught about Isaiah 7:14? If this is the case, we must consider that perhaps Justin Martyr was at fault for not considering the original context of the verse, and that his assumption that “prophecy” meant “prediction” caused him to misunderstand Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 and to ignorantly dismiss any consideration of the original context of the many Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament as being “Jewish deceptions”.

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<sup>4</sup> *Dialogue with Trypho* (ANF 1:234).

When it comes to the exegesis of Isaiah 7:14, modern scholars are faced with the challenge of correcting the exegetical mistakes of Justin Martyr and the early Church Fathers. This involves (a) reading Isaiah 7:14 in its original Old Testament context, (b) articulating the true nature of biblical prophecy, and (c) understanding the way in which New Testament writers used the Old Testament. When it comes to this last point, we must realize that the New Testament writers did not view the Old Testament as simply a collection of predictions about Jesus (although there are many prophecies concerning the Davidic messiah). Instead, they saw the entire Old Testament story as the framework in which to understand the message and mission of Jesus. Consequently, it is imperative that one is familiar with that narrative if one is to fully understand what the gospel writers were saying about Jesus. Since Matthew claims that the birth of Jesus was a fulfillment of a prophecy found in the *Jewish scriptures*, we must take the original context of Isaiah 7:14 seriously and try to understand the connections between its original context and its reinterpretation in the first century BCE. It is a two step process: first, understanding the Old Testament context of a passage alluded to in the New Testament, and second, wrestling with how that original Old Testament context affects the meaning of the that particular New Testament passage. The focus of this thesis will be on the first step. It is the goal of this thesis to clearly articulate the Old Testament narrative framework from which Matthew was working. In other words, this thesis will (a) wrestle with the exegetical issues surrounding Isaiah 7:14 in regards to its original historical and literary contexts found in Proto-Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39), and (b) propose an exegetical explanation of Isaiah 7:14 that is not only faithful to its original context of Proto-Isaiah, but hopefully will also provide the foundation for further inquiry into Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14.

Yet what do we mean by “original context”? In truth we must understand that there are a number of different “contexts”: (a) the time when the Proto-Isaiah scroll was originally written and circulated, (b) the time when the book of Isaiah came into its final form in the Hebrew Scriptures, (c) the time of when the Septuagint was translated and read, and (d) the time of the first century BCE, when Matthew made reference to Isaiah 7:14. For the purposes of this thesis, we will focus our attention on how the original Jewish audience of Proto-Isaiah would have understood and interpreted Isaiah 7:14, the “pre-Christian” understanding of Isaiah 7:14, if you will. Our main argument is essentially this: although obviously later edited in exilic/post-exilic times to fit together with Isaiah 40-66, Proto-Isaiah, consisting of Isaiah 1-39, was originally put together during the reign of Manasseh, after the deaths of Hezekiah and Isaiah, in order to not only vindicate Isaiah’s vocation as a prophet of YHWH, but also to vindicate Hezekiah’s actions and decisions during Sennacherib’s invasion.<sup>5</sup> The way in which Proto-Isaiah does this is by focusing its narrative sections on the two major international crises during Ahaz and Hezekiah’s reigns: the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis under Ahaz (742-727 BCE) and the invasion of Sennacherib under Hezekiah (704-701 BCE). These two sections in Proto-Isaiah (chapters 7-12 and chapters 36-39) are set up as “literary bookends” that serve to highlight the reason for the beginning of Assyrian oppression (i.e. Ahaz’s unfaithfulness to YHWH) and the reason for Assyria’s humiliating defeat outside the walls of Jerusalem (i.e. Hezekiah’s faithfulness to YHWH). What links these two sections together is the figure of the Immanuel child of Isaiah 7:14. This thesis will argue that the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is a prophecy of Hezekiah’s birth and subsequent reign as king. This prophecy, borne out of a national crisis that was brought

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<sup>5</sup> The particulars of this historical reconstruction will be discussed later on in this thesis.

about because of Ahaz's unfaithfulness to YHWH, is fulfilled during another national crisis, the invasion of Sennacherib, because of Hezekiah's faithfulness to YHWH. Hence, what we see in these "literary bookends" of Isaiah 7-12 and 36-39 is a theme of prophecy and fulfillment that seeks to vindicate Isaiah as a true prophet and Hezekiah as the righteous Immanuel-king whose faithfulness to YHWH was the key in YHWH's salvation of Jerusalem. In the course of this thesis it will become abundantly clear that such a view affirms the traditional Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, as seen in the testimony of Trypho and later rabbinic sources, which viewed Immanuel as Hezekiah, thus showing a remarkable consistency of interpretation from the time of Isaiah to the time of Jesus.

## II. Two Fundamental Problems

### 1. *The Traditional Church Interpretation of Isaiah 7:14*

Unfortunately, the 2,000 year old debate over Isaiah 7:14 has muddied the exegetical waters and has made it almost impossible to come to a clear understanding of Isaiah 7:14. The first problem is that not only has the traditional Church interpretation of Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14 obscured any understanding of the original context of Isaiah 7:14 itself, it also calls into question the traditional understanding of Matthew 1:23. In other words, we must wonder if the traditional Church interpretation of Matthew 1:23 accurately reflects what Matthew himself was trying to convey when he related Isaiah 7:14 to Christ. The fact that the early Church Fathers seemed to play so fast and loose with the original context of Isaiah 7:14 should raise a number of exegetical red flags for modern scholars. Indeed it seems that the decidedly *a-historical* way in which the early Church Fathers interpreted Isaiah 7:14 has promoted considerable misunderstandings

regarding what Matthew was trying to convey when he quoted Isaiah 7:14. Adam Kamesar has written about the curious philological arguments made by the early Church Fathers.<sup>6</sup> One can see such a-historical arguments for Isaiah 7:14 by simply perusing the works of various early Church Fathers. This thesis will not focus on the early Church Fathers' interpretation of Matthew 1:23 or Matthew's use of Isaiah 7:14. It will focus on the more foundational issues of the historical and literary contexts of Isaiah 7:14.

## *2. The Historical and Literary Context of Isaiah 7:14*

The second problem surrounding Isaiah 7:14, often restricted to scholarly debate, is an issue of which most Christian laymen are completely ignorant: the question of the original historical and literary context of Isaiah 7:14. This verse must be seen in light of the larger prophecy that Isaiah uttered in response to King Ahaz's display of unfaithfulness to YHWH during the time of the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis (circa 745-730 BCE).<sup>7</sup> Given the historical setting put forth in Isaiah, the questions related to this problem are as follows: (a) Who is the Immanuel child?; (b) How does this prophecy relate to the historical situation of mid-eighth century BCE Judah?; (c) How does this prophecy fit in with the literary structure of Isaiah, or more specifically, Proto-Isaiah?

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Kamesar, "The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century," *JTS* 41 (1990): 51-75.

<sup>7</sup> This type of exegetical approach is a rather modern hermeneutical development. We must not assume that those who read the Hebrew Scriptures throughout Jewish history were completely ignorant of that history. It is clear that the early Church Fathers did not place much importance on the historical setting to many Old Testament verses. Unfortunately, this a-historical reading of Old Testament texts continued throughout Church history. It was not until the time of the Renaissance and Reformation and the emergence of modern biblical studies that people started to once again take into consideration the historical context of any given Old Testament passage. Yet we should not assume that the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures is resembles traditional Christian interpretation in this manner. The very fact that Trypho insisted that the Jews had always understood the Immanuel child of Isaiah 7:14 to be Hezekiah shows that they understood their Scriptures within their historical context.

Unfortunately, answers to these questions are about as numerous as the scholars who have wrestled with them. The reason for this is that there are so many exegetical problems related to the biblical accounts of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah<sup>8</sup> that biblical scholars find themselves walking in a virtual minefield whenever they attempt to come to any kind of conclusion about the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The first exegetical landmine regards the identity of the Immanuel child of Isaiah 7:14 and its relationship to the greater prophecy of Isaiah 7-12. Related to this is the 2,000 year old controversy concerning the word *עִלְמָה*, as well as a number of other variants found in Isaiah 7:14. The second exegetical landmine relates to the chronological difficulties in II Kings 16-20 concerning the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The third exegetical landmine concerns the relationship between Isaiah 36-39 and II Kings 18-20, and the question of priority—who borrowed from whom? Was this material originally in II Kings or Isaiah, or was it originally from an earlier source from which II Kings and Isaiah borrowed? The fourth exegetical landmine relates to the literary coherence and historical reliability of Isaiah 7-12 and Isaiah 36-39. If the historical events described in Isaiah 7-12 and 36-39 are deemed historically unreliable, then not only does that cast a long shadow of doubt over the trustworthiness of the author of Proto-Isaiah, it also calls into question a fundamental tenant of this thesis, namely that the events of 701 BCE are portrayed in Isaiah as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7-12. The fifth and final exegetical landmine deals with questions concerning the overall literary structure of Proto-Isaiah and the puzzle of Isaiah's growth.

In light of all these exegetical landmines, one is impelled to ask, “What is the reason for so much confusion regarding these passages?” The answer to that question is

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<sup>8</sup> These passages are Isaiah 7-12, Isaiah 36-39, II Kings 16-20, and II Chronicles 28-32.

that there are two fundamental flaws in the exegetical practices of modern historical-critical biblical studies. First, there is an unhealthy and overzealous suspicion of the historical reliability of the biblical texts; and second, there is a tendency in modern biblical scholarship to divide “historical concerns” from “literary concerns.” These two flaws in modern biblical scholarship are the root cause of the exegetical difficulties surrounding Isaiah 7:14. Yet before we elaborate on these two flaws, we must first give a brief overview of the way in which modern biblical studies has evolved.

### **III. An Overview of the Evolution of Modern Biblical Methodologies**

In his book, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, John Barton looks at the various methods of biblical study today.<sup>9</sup> After analyzing each method, Barton observes, “The reason why biblical scholars have so often become disillusioned with each of the methods they have committed themselves to is that they have asked too much of them, have become obsessed with correct method and with the desire to produce novel interpretations of the text.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Barton’s ultimate critique of all the past methods in biblical studies is not with the methods themselves, but with the belief various scholars have had that it is possible to find a “right method” that will hold the key to reading and understanding each and every biblical text. Simply put, each method provides valuable insights, but no single method can answer everything about a biblical text. The wise biblical scholar, therefore, will not hold tightly on to just one single method, but rather will gain whatever insights he can with any critical method that sheds

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<sup>9</sup> John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 244-245.



exegetical light on a given text. For the history of biblical studies has shown that to hold too tightly to one single critical method almost always results in faulty exegesis.

We see this tendency in the way scholars use form and source criticism. Despite the valuable insights that these criticisms have given on the historical background of many biblical texts, scholars often mistake the means for the end. They neglect the basic goal of exegesis, namely to bring out the meaning of the text as presented in the Bible, and get side-tracked in speculation about the various sources and forms of that text.<sup>11</sup>

Given this shortcoming of form and source criticism, the rise of redaction criticism was an attempt to get back to looking at the text as a whole. It attempted to explain how the redactor fashioned together the ancient sources into his own present work. While this method no doubt provides numerous insights on the formation of ancient biblical literature, it soon became apparent that it cannot, in and of itself, fully exegete a text, for explaining *how* a text is put together is not the same thing as explaining what the *meaning and message* of a text is.

The next step beyond redaction criticism, therefore, is that of canon criticism. Canon criticism, attempting not only to take seriously the final form of the text, but also its place within the canonized scriptures, argues that the meaning of a text has to be understood within the larger literary corpus of the biblical canon. Although the question of “Which canon?” is a thorn in the side of canon criticism, it nevertheless realizes that meaning is something more than simply identifying oral forms, original sources, historical settings, and the connecting stitches of a redactor’s needle. For the canon critic, although form, source, and redaction criticism are essential to understand the historical context of

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<sup>11</sup> V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 50. “One of the deficiencies of the form-critical approach is that it can tend to overlook the significance of the larger discourse unit.”

text, its meaning still comes from reading the text that is before us, attempting to understand it as a whole literary unit, and attempting to understand it within the overall context of the canon of which it is a part. In other words, canon criticism reminds us that the goal of biblical exegesis is to understand the meaning of the text that is before us, the work of literature in its final form.

This leads us to yet one more facet of biblical studies: narrative criticism. The reason why narrative criticism will have to be applied in this study is the simple fact that what we are dealing with is, in fact, *literature*. With its emphasis on reading the biblical text as a work of literature, narrative criticism has begun to demonstrate that much of the meaning within any given biblical text lies within the literary artistry of the text itself. Narrative criticism holds that the writer/final redactor of any given biblical text simply did not cut and paste various sources together. He arranged his narrative in a certain way; and the placement of certain events within the text, as well as how certain things are described and quoted, have a tremendous impact on the overall meaning of any given biblical text. They are, so to speak, literary brushstrokes that paint a theological portrait of Israel's history. The danger of narrative criticism, of course, is that if gone unchecked, it could very easily divorce itself from any historical concerns at all.

With this overview of the main exegetical methods within biblical studies, we come back to the main argument of Barton: there is no single method that can ever answer everything about a given biblical text. He correctly states, "...much harm has been done in biblical studies by insisting that there is, somewhere, a 'correct' method which, if only we could find it, would unlock the mysteries of the text."<sup>12</sup> It is precisely because the Bible is so multi-layered and multi-faceted that so many different critical

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<sup>12</sup> Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 5.

methods are needed for proper exegesis. Yet not only do different texts require different methods, but often times they require a *variety* of methods working together to give a full exegetical picture of a given text. Unfortunately, as Barton observes, this is precisely what many modern biblical scholars have failed to realize. In light of this, we can now look more closely at the shortcomings of modern historical-critical exegesis.

#### **IV. The Shortcomings of Historical-Critical Methods**

Earlier we asked the question, “What is the reason for so much confusion surrounding the narratives of Ahaz and Hezekiah?” We stated that within modern biblical scholarship there is both an overzealous suspicion of the historical reliability of the biblical texts and a tendency to divide “historical concerns” from “literary concerns.” These two flaws are often intertwined in modern exegetical work. In terms of the exegetical landmines in Isaiah, the traditional historical-critical answer as to why there is so much confusion has been to assert that the final redactors of these texts are the ones responsible for the confusion and that their work is historically unreliable. Whether it was because these redactors were working long after the actual historical events themselves, or whether they had purposely placed own theological agendas over and against the actual facts of those historical events themselves, or whether both are true, historical-critical scholars claim that the confusion surrounding the narratives of Ahaz and Hezekiah has its roots in the decidedly *unhistorical* work of the final redactors of these texts. Therefore, they claim the “true” history lies somewhere behind the text.

Yet there is a distinct problem with this view. Although this has been the popular view in past years, one must question it at a fundamental level. Is it really possible that

the writers of Isaiah and II Kings were simply biased and incompetent redactors who had no clue regarding the actual historical events during the time of Ahaz and Hezekiah? After all, what we have in both Isaiah and II Kings are texts that certainly give the impression to be about real historical events. What basis, therefore, do scholars have to throw out the historical claims of these texts other than the fact that they do not understand the text as it stands? The answer is that there really is no other basis. Therefore, although it may sound rather odd, we should be very suspicious of modern scholarship's suspicion of the biblical text.

The second problem with modern biblical scholarship flows out of the first problem: its tendency to drive a wedge between historical-critical analysis and literary analysis. This unnatural division has had a devastating effect on biblical studies. Since many scholars today do not trust the biblical texts as presented in their final form, they tend to view the biblical texts, not as coherent literary works that faithfully reflect a theological understanding of historical events, but rather as haphazardly redacted works of literary propaganda that betray the biases, ideologies, and theological agenda of later writers who had no real concern for actual history. Therefore, modern biblical scholarship has essentially divided into two camps. First, there are the traditional historical-critical scholars who hold the prevailing belief that these texts must be thoroughly dissected in order to find out, in the phrase made famous by Leopold von Ranke, "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*" ("the way it really was"). They dismiss the *final* form of the text because of perceived theological and political agendas, and attempt to "dig up" what they believe to be the *older* sources and forms in order to uncover the "original meaning." Secondly, there are the literary scholars who hold the prevailing belief that the historical claims of a

given text are simply irrelevant, and what really matters is discovering the meaning of a text based on literary structures alone. Yet both camps prove themselves to be woefully inadequate when it comes to proper biblical exegesis. They are both guilty of the very thing Barton warns against: holding on to the naïve belief that one single method holds the key to exegesis.

Now it goes without saying that a critical eye is absolutely necessary in biblical exegesis; yet this thesis holds that modern biblical scholars tend to maintain an unhealthy suspicion of the biblical texts, and subsequently are overzealous in their attempts to dissect biblical texts in the belief that somehow such dissection is necessary in order to put forth a reconstructed version of “objective and neutral” biblical history. The modus operandi of modern historical-critical biblical scholars has been to smash the picture presented in biblical texts on the basis that they cannot be trusted because they are theologically biased works of propaganda. Then, given the shattered pieces on the floor, scholars isolate a handful of what they believe to be “original pieces” and then attempt to reconstruct and reconfigure these shattered pieces into a hypothetical picture of the past, without ever first considering the possibility that the original picture, as presented to us in the final form of the text, is both historically reliable and literarily stylized.

This attempt to completely divorce historical concerns from literary/theological concerns has brought about a kind of biblical scholarship that, ironically, is not biblical at all. Instead of exegetical illumination of the biblical text, what is put forth is rather hypothetical speculations on what the biblical texts simply do not tell us. In actuality, this unnatural division makes it almost impossible for true exegesis to be done, for every biblical text is not only a witness in some way to the history it describes, but is also a

work of literary and theological artistry that attempts to give meaning and understanding to that history. This division can be likened to a divorce between two parents in which the child suffers. Historical analysis accuses literary analysis of simply twisting the historical facts to suit its own theological agenda; literary analysis counters with the accusation that history is too distant to be knowable. Because these two parents refuse to work together in relationship to nurture their exegetical child, he will find himself lost, with a distorted understanding of the biblical world in which he finds himself.

Now it goes without saying that historical-critical methods have proven to be very profitable for biblical studies. There are, after all, legitimate historical-critical problems in many biblical texts that must be wrestled with. By the same token, recent advances in the literary analysis of the Bible have also helped resurrect an appreciation of the literary artistry of the various biblical authors. The problem is that whenever these two lenses of biblical analysis are used in isolation from each other, and when there is such an obvious unhealthy suspicion of the historical reliability and testimony of the biblical texts, the plain meaning of the text is often obscured, and one's exegetical vision lacks perception and depth. Each biblical account, therefore, must be read with one eye on the historical concerns surrounding the text and one eye on the literary/theological concerns of the text, and there must be a clear-headed understanding of the testimony of the biblical texts themselves. Simply put, not only are two eyes better than one, but sufficient light must shine on what is being analyzed.

Unfortunately, because the various historical-critical and literary methods have given us such a flat and fragmented vision of biblical history and literature, it is no wonder why Isaiah 7:14 cannot be clearly seen and understood by modern biblical

scholars. Not only has the influence of the early Church Fathers continued to cloud some scholars' ability to look at Isaiah 7:14 in its original context, but modern unhealthy suspicion of the historical reliability of biblical texts, along with the tendency to divorce historical and literary concerns from each other, has convinced many scholars that biblical exegesis is best done in the dark, using only one lens instead of both.

New light needs to be shed and a new prescription is needed to give us a clearer vision of Isaiah 7:14. This will first require the honest recognition that the *pre-critical* interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 by the early Church Fathers, when compared to modern exegetical criteria, is fundamentally unsound. Secondly, this will involve using the various historical and literary methods as compliments to one another. In doing so, this thesis will demonstrate just how useful a holistic/synchronic reading of Isaiah 7:14 can be. True biblical exegesis can only be done when there is a marriage between *historical* analysis and *literary* analysis. This thesis, therefore, will respect the biblical texts in their final forms and try to exegete them as historically reliable and literary coherent/artistic works. It will attempt to put together the various puzzle pieces that historical-critical methods have separated and let the actual literary and historical contexts given to us in Proto-Isaiah and II Kings determine the meaning of these various sections. If one is able to come to Isaiah 7:14 without being influenced by the interpretation of the early Church Fathers and with eyes for both historical and literary concerns, not only will one be able to see Isaiah 7:14 in a clearer light, but the various other exegetical difficulties in Proto-Isaiah will be begin to be answered as well.

## V. Provan, Long, and Longman: The Historical Reliability of the Bible

Modern biblical scholars have been all too content to allow a divorce between historical-critical concerns and literary concerns to stand. The result of such a divorce has been a host of historical-critical scholarly work that not only displays literary incompetence but also a complete disregard for the intelligence of the biblical writers. The writers it is assumed, not only had no regard for real history, but also lacked the skill and competence to write a coherent text. On the other hand, although recent literary scholars have helped point out the artistry and literary competency of the writers of the biblical text, there still is the assumption that these very gifted writers nevertheless displayed no regard for history and made very little effort, if at all, to present anything that could be remotely called “real history.”<sup>13</sup> In both cases there is displayed, by historical-critical and literary scholars alike, the assumption that biblical texts are completely unreliable in regards to history. Despite this awareness within biblical studies over recent years that biblical texts are works of ancient *literature*, a true marriage between historical and literary concerns has yet to happen on a wide scale.

Ever since the Enlightenment, and in particular the rise of modern historical-critical methods in biblical studies, much of what was once accepted as “historically true” concerning the ancient history of Israel has come under intense skepticism that many biblical scholars today who ascribe to the historical-critical method claim that the “ancient Israel” described in the Hebrew Bible is nothing more than an ideological fantasy, put forth by Deuteronomistic writers of the exilic or post-exilic period, that is completely unreliable when it comes to trying to objectively understand the true facts

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<sup>13</sup> V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 153. “The problem with some modern literary approaches to the Bible is that they tend to dismiss historical questions as either uninteresting or illegitimate.”



about the history of ancient Israel. At the same time, though, at the other end of the spectrum, along with the recent rise of literary and narrative criticism of the Hebrew Bible, many so-called literary critics also disregard the very relevance of history in the Hebrew Bible, preferring to instead focus solely on the literary structures they find in the text itself. Ironically, it seems that both those who solely cling to a traditional historical-critical approach to the Hebrew Bible, as well as those who devote themselves to a purely literary approach to the Hebrew Bible, both come to the same conclusion about the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible—there is none. The overwhelming bias is that if a particular text reads like a good story, the less likely it is to be history.

This skepticism against the historical reliability of the Bible has turned modern biblical exegesis into a quagmire of speculation and doubt about the biblical texts. Indeed, any discussion these days concerning the history of ancient Israel is bound to evoke controversy and debate. In their recent book, *A Biblical History of Israel*, Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III provide a lengthy discussion of this very issue.<sup>14</sup> They begin by addressing the supposed “death” of biblical history and challenging scholars like K.W. Whitelam, J.A. Soggin, J.M. Miller, and J. Hayes who have in some way or another declared that large portions of what is put forth in the Old Testament as “history” are really not history at all, but rather later creative projections of

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<sup>14</sup> Provan wrote two articles that began to outline his views that are further developed in *A Biblical History of Israel*. In response to the objections to his first article, “Ideologies, Literary and Critical,” Provan wrote a second article entitled “In the Stable with the Dwarves.” His title is a reference to the dwarves in C.S. Lewis’ last book in the Narnia Chronicles who, because they were initially fooled by a donkey who dressed up as Aslan, refused to come out of their dark stable to see the renewed Narnia that the real Aslan had made. Lest the connection not be readily seen, many biblical scholars, Provan states, are like the dwarves of Lewis’ tale. They are “against historical humbug, whether found in the Bible or among the Bible’s interpreters,” and display a “principled suspicion toward the Hebrew Bible” that prevents them from any objective and honest assessment of the Hebrew Bible. Iain Provan, “In the Stable with the Dwarves,” in *Congress Volume: Oslo1988*. (ed. A. Lemaire and M. Saebo; Boston: Brill, 2000), 282.

history by writers in the exilic or post-exilic period.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, what we find in modern biblical studies are two presuppositions: (a) since the biblical texts represent a “biased and ideological point of view,” they are disqualified from presenting “objective historical facts,” and (b) evidence of literary shaping and artistry points toward a much later date of composition and therefore is too far from the actual events themselves to be considered historically reliable. To such assumptions, Provan, Long, and Longman ask a fundamental question, “Given that Hebrew narrative is artistically constructed and ideologically shaped, is it somehow less worthy of consideration as source material for modern historiographers than other sorts of data from the past?”<sup>16</sup> The implied answer is “no.” Whitelam denies anything put forth in the Old Testament is actually historically reliable; Soggin chooses the reigns of David and Solomon as his starting point for actual historical reliability; Miller and Hayes target the period of the Judges as a tentative starting point for actual biblical history. Yet all of these scholars, as Provan, Long, and Longman point out, are completely arbitrary in their decisions. Soggin dismisses earlier biblical material as unhistorical because “they contain stories of heroes and heroines that redactors living many centuries after the events have transmitted.”<sup>17</sup> If this is so, though, then why are later biblical stories that involve heroes and heroines considered to be historically reliable? As Provan, Long, and Longman state:

“If the earlier traditions are problematic because redactors exercised their creative bent freely or capriciously in the choice and restructuring of the material that came down to them, then why...are the later traditions not equally problematic, or do we just ‘know’ in some undefined way that they are not? If the narrative art of

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<sup>15</sup> “The horizon of the final redactors is chiefly the exilic and postexilic period, and the problems with which they are concerned chiefly reflect the consequences of the exile in Babylon and the end of both political independence and the Davidic dynasty in Israel.” Iain Provan, V. Phillips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 14.

redactors is a serious problem for historians with regard to the earlier traditions, then why is that not a problem in regard to the later traditions as well?”<sup>18</sup>

Miller and Hayes, while acknowledging an overarching editorial scheme to Genesis-Judges, still choose to regard Judges as historically reliable, and Genesis-Joshua as not. To this rationale, Provan, Long, and Longman ask, “What basis exists, then, for the greater confidence displayed in the Judges material over against the Genesis-Joshua material?”<sup>19</sup> Again, the obvious answer to this question is, “There is no basis.”

After questioning modern biblical scholars like Whitelam, Soggin, Miller, and Hayes, Provan, Long, and Longman then give a brief history of historiography. According to them, the basic understanding of the purpose of history up to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be encapsulated in the words of Dionysius of Halicarnassus: “History is philosophy teaching by examples.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, history was seen as art “with close links to the ancient art of rhetoric. History’s purpose was to delight the reader and to teach morals through examples.”<sup>21</sup> It wasn’t until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science, that it came to be believed that if the past itself could be subject to scientific analysis, then it would reveal truths about human existence.<sup>22</sup> It was during this time that men like Leopold von Ranke began to study the “sources” of biblical texts, in hopes to find out *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*—“the way it really was.” Since that time, history has been seen more as a scientific endeavor to dig up historical facts embedded within stories, and less as “philosophy teaching by examples.” Stories of the past could no

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<sup>18</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 20.

longer be trusted on the basis that they were unreliable and ideological fictions; they had to be picked apart to find “the truth” of history, also known as, the facts. As Provan, Long, and Longman state:

“History and tradition were no longer assumed to be closely related to each other. Rather, history was assumed to lie *behind* tradition and to be more or less *distorted* by it. The point, then, was not to listen to tradition and to be guided by it in what it said about the past, but if possible, to see through tradition to the history that might (or indeed might not) exist behind it. The onus now fell on tradition to verify itself, rather than on the historian to falsify it.”<sup>23</sup>

The result of all this has been that modern historical-critical biblical studies have ironically degenerated into more and more *uncritical* skepticism of biblical history. As Provan, Long, and Longman show, many of today’s biblical scholars dismiss various parts of the biblical tradition, “not so much through argument as through intellectual intimidation.”<sup>24</sup> There is no coherent reason or evidence for their findings, but only their own biased ideology that assumes that if it is in the Bible, then it cannot be historical.

Given these presuppositions by many modern biblical scholars, namely that the biblical texts are unhistorical because (a) they are the testimony of writers with their own theological agendas, and (b) those writers wrote their works at a time much later than the actual events, Provan, Long, and Longman make the argument that (a) everything we know about the past comes primarily through the testimony of others and that (b) mere distance from the events does not necessarily mean that the writer of a particular biblical text has sacrificed presenting actual history for the sake of a fictional account fueled by his own ideological agenda.

Provan, Long, and Longman make their first point by arguing that the only way one can know *anything* about the past is because of the testimony of other people, and

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<sup>23</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 33.

that testimony will inevitably be biased in some way, for every person who tells about the past is doing so from his own particular perspective and point of view. Even though testimony inevitably “has its ideology or theology...its presuppositions and its point of view...its narrative structure...its narrative art...[and] its rhetoric,”<sup>25</sup> that does not mean it is, by *de facto*, historically unreliable.

In his book, *The Art of Biblical History*, V. Phillips Long correctly sees that, “the individual historian’s basic intellectual and spiritual commitments (‘how he or she sees the world’) exercise an inevitable, even ‘dominating,’ influence over which historical reconstructions will appear plausible to that historian.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the modern scholar, heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinking, brings to the biblical text a suspicion of the supernatural intervening in the world. He therefore plays down the historical reliability of the biblical text on the basis that since it is a “theological document” it cannot be historically true. This thinking, of course, is very biased and naïve. Long is correct when he states that this “naïve application of modern western logic and judgment to the interpretation of ancient Near Eastern sources, including biblical literature, has [often] led us into error.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, writes Long, “While the historical-critical method (as traditionally practiced) systematically and insistently excludes the notion of divine intervention, the method itself, if applied in the context of a theistic set of background beliefs, need not exclude talk of divine intervention.”<sup>28</sup>

The fact is that not only does *every writer*, whether ancient or modern, who writes about history has a distinct point of view, but *every writing of history* is a product of

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<sup>25</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 134.

someone who has chosen particular bits and pieces to highlight and to use in order to make a particular point. Simply put, every historical account written throughout history is written from a distinct point of view. It is therefore “biased” in some way. No account of history is ever “just the facts.” If we are to throw out the historical claims of Bible simply on the charge that the writers of the Bible were “biased” and had some sort of theological point of view, then we would have to throw out all writing of history, for everyone is biased to a degree, and everyone picks and chooses certain bits and pieces of history to help shape their particular point of view and understanding of that history. Because testimony is nothing more than an interpretation of certain historical events, interpretation is inevitable. Consequently, according to Provan, Long, and Longman, “What is commonly referred to as ‘*knowledge of the past*’ is more accurately described as ‘*faith in the testimony*,’ in the interpretations of the past, offered by other people.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, when modern biblical scholars who are working out of a nineteenth-century scientific approach to biblical history declare that “science” has proven certain events in the Bible did not happen, and that they now “objectively know” what really happened, these scholars are caught in a delusion. What they have essentially done is discounted the testimony of the Bible in favor of the testimony of archeological finds, earlier scholars, and their own imagination. In the words of Provan, Long, and Longman:

“The hope of notable nineteenth-century historians and their successors—that by embracing an empirical and critical approach to historical knowledge they might achieve a purely objective reconstruction of the past, whether in the Rankean or the positivist manner—has thus turned out to be an impossible dream.”<sup>30</sup>

Simply put, an “objective” view of history is impossible, for all facts and data must be interpreted; and the ones doing the interpreting are human beings, who have their own

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<sup>29</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 42.

fundamental philosophical outlooks of life, their own biases, and their own points of view. “Philosophy and tradition necessarily set the parameters for all thinking about the world with which human being engage.”<sup>31</sup> To think that one can “do history” without philosophy and tradition is fool’s errand. The question is not whether or not one can “do history” without philosophy and tradition, but rather *which* philosophy and tradition will one work from when one evaluates history. To blindly accept the scientific model of the nineteenth-century is to accept a method that is deeply flawed and has been misused to promote a denial of virtually all biblical history simply because it is found in the Bible. The fact is that modern scholars who have done this very thing, although they try to pass themselves off as “critical scholars,” are really no such thing. As Provan, Long, and Longman state, “The ‘scientific’ historian will not write history, but rather a fantasy spun out of his own theorizing imagination.”<sup>32</sup>

We must remember that all testimony about historical events is inevitably biased to a certain degree, with a particular theological or ideological worldview. History is past; we cannot relive it to see for ourselves. Hence, we must rely on the testimony and stories of others. In the case of the historical events recorded in the Bible, we must, as *biblical* scholars, attempt to understand and exegete the ways in which the *biblical writers themselves* interpreted and presented those events, and not try to reconstruct that history according to our own imaginations, no matter how tempting it may be for us to pass off our own biases and agendas as “objective, critical, and scientific.” Granted, we must be intellectually honest and do everything we can to insure that the testimony before us is historically reliable, whether that means considering archeological evidence or other

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<sup>31</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 46.

Ancient Near Eastern texts that record the same event; but it would be intellectually foolish to simply discount biblical testimony, simply because it was biblical.

“The fact is that we either respect and appropriate the testimony of the past, allowing it to challenge us even while thinking hard about it, or we are doomed—even while thinking that we alone have ‘objectivity’ and can start afresh on the historical quest—to create individualistic fantasies about the past out of the desperate poverty of our own very limited experience and imagination.”<sup>33</sup>

The second point Provan, Long, and Longman makes is that mere distance from the actual events does not mean that a given biblical text is necessarily unhistorical. Mere chronological distance from the actual events is ultimately irrelevant when it comes to historical reliability: “It remains the case, nevertheless, that one simply could never argue logically from the mere *distance* of a text from the events it describes directly to its *usefulness* as historiography or otherwise.”<sup>34</sup> Often times, a writer’s close proximity to a given event might actually cloud his judgment, thereby making it harder to be objective. Consequently, as Peter Ackroyd points out, “the historian who writes at some distance from the events may be in a better position to give a true appraisal than the one who is so involved as to see only a part of what makes up the whole.”<sup>35</sup> James Axtell further notes that it is the task of the historian to present “the larger patterns, structures and meanings behind particular events and facts which contemporaries were not able to see.”<sup>36</sup> It is therefore puzzling to scholars such as Provan when the historical reliability of the biblical text is dismissed out of hand, simply because it has been determined that a good deal of it was not actually written during the time it presents.

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<sup>33</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Iain W Provan, “Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel,” *JBL* 114:4 (1995): 22.

<sup>35</sup> Peter R. Ackroyd, “Historians and Prophets,” *SEA* 33 (1968): 21.

<sup>36</sup> James Axtell, “History as Imagination,” *The Historian: A Journey of History* 49 (1987): 457.



Lest it be misunderstood, Provan, Long, and Longman do not argue for a blind acceptance of the historical reliability of the Bible. They readily acknowledge that there are a vast number of historical questions and problems within the biblical text that must be wrestled with. What they argue for is that we read and respect biblical texts as ancient testimony to historical events, in the same way we read and respect the testimony of any other ancient text that purports to tell us about historical events. No one doubts that much in the Hebrew Bible is problematic; what is being questioned here is simply the cavalier way in which the Hebrew Bible is dismissed when scholars cannot “verify” biblical events with non-biblical sources. In fact, this notion of “verification” is ultimately untenable, for “verification lies in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>37</sup> Does an archeological artifact “prove” a text is historically true? Does another account “prove” a text is historically true? Provan’s answer is a resounding “No”: “One person’s sufficiency of data is another’s insufficiency, or even another’s forgery.”<sup>38</sup> Instead of practicing this verification principle, Provan suggests that scholars practice a “falsification principle”:

“Why should not ancient historical texts rather be given the benefit of the doubt in regard to their statements about the past unless good reasons exist to consider them unreliable in these statements and with due regard (of course) to their literary and ideological features? In short, why should we adopt a verification rather than a falsification principle? Why should the onus be on the texts to ‘prove’ themselves valuable in respect of history, rather than on those who question their value to ‘prove’ them false?”<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Provan simply argues that historians should apply the same “falsification principle” that is used to evaluate so many other ancient texts to the Hebrew Bible as well, for the fact is that those who employ this “verification principle” do so selectively. If this “verification principle” was consistently applied, Provan points out

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<sup>37</sup> Provan, “Stable,” 13.

<sup>38</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 55.

that we would know very little indeed about history. “The more consistently the method is applied, the more it collapses in upon itself, until the point is reached where it is realized that nothing can be truly known at all.”<sup>40</sup> Simply put, the Hebrew Bible cannot be disqualified as a potential historical text simply because it is “the Bible.”

## **VI. Provan, Long, and Longman: The Bible as Literature**

Although Provan, Long, and Longman go to great lengths to argue for the necessity of honestly treating the Bible as a historical text, they also point out that the Bible is also literature. In fact, there has been an increasing interest in literary approaches to the Bible over the past few years. Provan, Long, and Longman argue that “historians, though constrained by such ‘facts’ as can be discovered, do exercise judgment and creativity in several respects. First, they exercise judgment in weighing the available evidence and in catching a ‘vision of the past.’ They then must make creative choices in seeking to present this vision to their target audiences.”<sup>41</sup> The fundamental question in the realm of biblical studies today, of course, is how will today’s scholars be able to work within both spheres of “the Bible as history” and “the Bible as literature”? Provan, Long, and Longman state that the verdict is still out on this issue. Will literary approaches to the Bible “devolve into dehistoricized, purely literary readings that treat the Bible...as little more than an elaborate novel” or will they “lead to sharpened perceptions of the full range of the Bible’s testimony, including its historical testimony?”<sup>42</sup> Although Provan, Long, and Longman correctly state that at the very least many scholars are already in the process driving a wedge between literary and historical studies, the fact is that no matter

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<sup>40</sup> Provan, “Stable,” 15.

<sup>41</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 80.

how artistic and literary various biblical texts are, they “were not composed as ‘pure’ literature (i.e., art for art’s sake), but as ‘applied’ literature (history, liturgy, laws, preaching, and the like).”<sup>43</sup> They were written as reflections on the history of Israel that attempted to teach and exhort its readers about how to live as the people of God. Because of this realization, it becomes obvious that such an attempted divorce between historical and literary concerns cannot be allowed to take place, for “literary understanding is a necessary condition of historical understanding, and both literary and historical understanding are necessary conditions of biblical interpretation.”<sup>44</sup> Robert Alter echoes this sentiment when he says, “In all biblical narrative and in a good deal of biblical poetry as well, the domain in which literary invention and religious imagination are joined is history, for all these narratives, with the possible exceptions of Job and possibly Jonah, purport to be true accounts of things that have occurred in historical time.”<sup>45</sup> As was previously stated in the early part of this introductory chapter, and as is echoed here, to divorce historical concerns and literary concerns in one’s study of the Bible is to guarantee that one’s biblical exegesis will be extremely faulty and wanting.

## **VII. Michael Fishbane: Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel**

Another scholar whose view must be considered is Michael Fishbane. No other biblical scholar has so thoroughly and thoughtfully analyzed the phenomenon of biblical interpretation within the Hebrew Bible itself as Michael Fishbane. While Provan and Long address the issues of the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible and the literary composition of the Hebrew Bible, Fishbane, in his book *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient*

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<sup>43</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Alter, “Introduction” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 17.

*Israel*, focuses on the very process of scribal exegesis in ancient Israel that inherited certain authoritative texts and then refashioned them to emphasize certain theological truths, thus eventually producing the Hebrew Bible that we have today. If Provan and Long argue that the Hebrew Bible should be regarded as historically reliable at its foundational roots unless proven to be otherwise, Fishbane describes the exegetical process that took those foundational stories within the history of Israel and refashioned them to speak to later generations until they came into their final form.

In his attempt to describe this exegetical practice within ancient Israel, Fishbane uses three interchangeable terms: aggadic exegesis, inner-biblical exegesis, and scribal exegesis. Closely related to these is the concept of intertextuality. Fishbane employs all of these terms while referring to the process in which ancient Israelite scribes received previous authoritative texts (what he calls *traditum*), then creatively reinterpreted and reapplied them in light of their present situation in order to preserve and pass on what they believed to be God's revealed Word to his people (what he calls *traditio*). The reason why latter biblical authors reworked their received, authorized *traditums* into their own new *traditios* is quite simple: they were attempting to recontextualize and reapply the authorized *traditums* to speak to their present historical situations. Since the *traditums* revealed God's Word, and since the latter biblical writers found themselves in very different situations than the ones in which the *traditums* originally spoke to, they were impelled to re-think and re-interpret those *traditums*; for if they did not do so, those *traditums* would become irrelevant. Consequently, as Fishbane points out, the "dominant thrust" of the *traditios* of the later biblical writers "is their proclamation that they have fulfilled or superseded the ancient Israelite *traditum*. Theirs is an innovative *traditio*,

continuous with the Hebrew Bible, but decidedly something new.”<sup>46</sup> Ironically, “the older *traditum* is dependent upon the *tradio* for its ongoing life.”<sup>47</sup> The result of such scribal exegesis throughout the history of Israel can be found in our Hebrew Bibles today. The various narratives, prophecy, poetry and laws found in the Hebrew Bible are the end products of hundreds of years of such on-going scribal exegesis, and therefore are a combination of original texts (*traditum*) and amended reinterpretations and reapplication of those original authoritative texts (*tradio*).

Fishbane disagrees with most scholars over the importance of glosses. In contrast to the fact that “modern textual analysis has been principally concerned to establish the ‘original’ text, which is deemed ‘authentic’, and to weed out the scribal addenda and annotations, which are considered secondary and therefore ‘inauthentic,’”<sup>48</sup> Fishbane holds that scribal glosses should *not* be cast aside; they should be seen as shedding light on the text itself. He argues that “scribal exegesis derives from the *traditum*, articulates and underscores its content, and ultimately shares in its composition. From this perspective, the *tradio* of scribal exegesis simply brings obscure or problematic dimensions of the *traditum* to the level of textuality. It neither alters nor rivals the centrality and authority of the textual artifact.”<sup>49</sup>

This idea of authority is central to both Fishbane’s explanation of scribal exegesis, as well as this thesis’ understanding of the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible. Fishbane views the various scribal reinterpretations (*tradio*s) that were reworked within

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 87.

the *traditum* itself as being “subservient to its authority.”<sup>50</sup> Simply put, the authority of a given *traditum* lives on within the lives of the believing community precisely because of the work of the scribal exegetes who reapplied it to their present situation by virtue of their *traditio*, which in turn becomes the authoritative *traditum* for the next generation.

In light of this, Fishbane articulates the various ways in which scribal *traditio* “reactualizes” the received authoritative *traditum*. First, it can emphasize a radical newness of the *traditio* and the obsolescence of the *traditum*, thus envisaging “new religio-cultural realities in the New (post-exilic) Age.”<sup>51</sup> Second, it can emphasize a fundamental continuity between the older *traditum* and contemporary *traditio*, where the *traditio* “is regarded as a reactualization of the *traditum*, and not its replacement; the *traditum* does not serve as the backdrop and foil for a discontinuous *traditio*, but is rather the screen upon which national hope and renewal is contextualized, even imagined.”<sup>52</sup> An example of this would be Deutero-Isaiah setting the restoration against the backdrop of the exodus, and describing the restoration as a “new exodus.” And third, it can emphasize the reformation of historical memories themselves. Fishbane points to the Chronicler as such an example, where the Chronicler has “taken over older historical traditions and reformulated them in light of contemporary emphases, values, and ideals.”<sup>53</sup> However they are used, though, Fishbane emphasizes that those involved in scribal exegesis “are not concerned to reproduce the *traditum*, but to reactualize it in a new setting and a new way. Their aim is not to present the *traditum*, but rather to represent it—and this is

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<sup>50</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 412.

<sup>52</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 413.

<sup>53</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 413.

*traditio*.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the *traditio* of a latter biblical author is a reinterpretation of the inherited *traditum* that at the same time has both continuity and discontinuity with the original text to which it refers and re-interprets. The scribal exegetes, Fishbane states,

“...presumably knew himself to be a latecomer on the stage of Israelite culture—for he is the recipient of tradition before he is the maker or transmitter of it. Being such a latecomer means, first of all, that one’s creative freedom is conditioned, since it is a freedom to live within the ideologies of the theological *traditum* and its literary fund, to shape it and to redirect it, to utilize and to grow with it.”<sup>55</sup>

Simply put, Fishbane argues that even though later biblical writers (scribal exegetes) had the freedom to creatively revise and reapply their inherited authoritative texts, that did not mean that they had the freedom to make the texts say whatever they wanted the text to say. Quite the contrary was true. The *traditums* provided “the imaginative matrix for evaluating the present, for conceiving of the future, [and] for organizing reality,”<sup>56</sup> and therefore any reinterpretation and reapplication of such *traditums*, by virtue of the scribal *traditio*, was rooted within and shaped by the original understanding of the *traditum*.

Fishbane’s explanation of scribal exegesis in ancient Israel is vitally important to understand because it challenges the assumption of many biblical scholars that not only do scribal glosses and reinterpretations somehow obscure the meaning of the biblical text, but that it is even possible to get back to the “original text” at all. In contrast to this modern view, Fishbane argues that not only is the work of scribal exegetes crucial in our understanding of the biblical text, but that the *traditum* and *traditio* are so entwined and inextricable, that to attempt to tear the two apart would inevitably mean the destruction of the text itself. Scholars who attempt to do so simply are no longer doing biblical exegesis, for they destroy the very text they are supposed to exegete.

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<sup>54</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 416-417.

<sup>55</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 435.

<sup>56</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 435.

## VIII. The Bible: History, Literature, and Prophecy

Provan, Long, Longman, and Fishbane provide a solid foundation upon which this thesis can build. Not only do Provan, Long, and Longman make a convincing case for the general historical reliability of the biblical text, they also articulate the vital role literary analysis has within biblical studies. Fishbane, demonstrating how the phenomenon of scribal exegesis must be seen as an integral part of the development of the Hebrew Bible, argues that the literary shaping and theological perspectives of later scribal exegetes must be accepted as part of the authoritative text. This thesis thus seeks to build off of the views of these scholars. As we come to Isaiah 7:14, we must remember that the book of Isaiah is not only a theological and literary work, but a historical work as well. Therefore, biblical exegesis cannot neglect the literary artistry of a text, disregard the theological perspectives of a text, or ignore the historical concerns surrounding that text. V. Phillips Long echoes this sentiment when he argues that one must seriously consider three impulses found in the writing of any biblical text: “The *historical* impulse implies constraint by the subject, the *theological* impulse implies point of view, and the *literary* impulse implies aesthetic choices.”<sup>57</sup> We need to acknowledge the fact that the writer of any given biblical text was not simply “doing theology,” or “writing literature,” completely devoid of historical concerns. Rather, he was interpreting *historical events* through the *theological lens* of ancient Judaism, and presenting those views in a *literary* genre, be it narrative, poetry, or prophecy. Consequently, if one is to try to truly exegete a given biblical text, one must take all three impulses into consideration. To do anything less would mean that one’s exegesis would be severely lacking. It should be quite obvious

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<sup>57</sup> Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 71.



that although the biblical writers of the historical narratives were not writing history in the way in which we in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century understand it (they were not attempting to objectively give “just the facts”), they were still writing history. They simply couched their presentations of the history of Israel within various literary genres. Hence, books like Isaiah are presented as *both* history *and* literature, or more precisely, a history *within* the genre of literature.

That being said, there is one more aspect to understanding a book like Isaiah. While it is no doubt a historical work, a literary work, and a theological work, we must keep in mind that within the Hebrew Bible it is presented, first and foremost, as a *prophetic* work. The book of Isaiah, along with I and II Kings, I and II Samuel, and a host of other books, is classified under the heading *Prophets*. This classification is something that cannot be overlooked, for it has a tremendous impact on how we are to understand the function of the book of Isaiah. In fact, as this thesis has already shown, it was precisely a misunderstanding of what prophecy is that led to early Church Fathers like Justin Martyr to misinterpret Isaiah 7:14. Therefore, we must ask a fundamental question: what does it mean to say that the book of Isaiah is a *prophetic* work?

In their book, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out that although most people mistakenly think that prophecy essentially dealt with far-off predictions about either the messiah or the New Covenant age, that less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic, less than 5% of Old Testament prophecy describes the New Covenant age, and less than 1% deals with events yet to come.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, the main function of the prophets was to speak for God to their own

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglass Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 166.

contemporaries.<sup>59</sup> The judgment and salvation about which they prophesied took place “in the immediate future of Israel, not in our own future.”<sup>60</sup> Desmond Tutu echoes this when he says, “[The prophets] were not glorified crystal ball gazers whose chief activity was to predict the future. They were fundamentally God’s spokespersons.”<sup>61</sup> By extension we need to see that this is equally true of not only the original prophets themselves, but also of those scribal exegetes who later compiled and shaped the prophetic books that we have in our Hebrew Bibles today. Just as the original prophets uttered their prophecies to their original audiences and spoke God’s word to the “here and now” of their contemporaries, so too did the scribal exegetes who put the prophetic books into their final form strive to speak to the “here and now” of *their* contemporaries. As stated by Fishbane earlier, the scribal *traditio*, while remaining under the authority of and remaining faithful to, their inherited *traditum*, was able to further speak God’s word to its contemporary culture. Simply put, if a prophet spoke a prophecy of judgment against an unfaithful king of Judah, that original prophecy would have been heard by the original audience. Whether or not that prophecy was truly of God, though, would only be determined when and if that prophecy was fulfilled. Yet when it was, a later scribal exegete, when fashioning together the prophecies of that earlier prophet, would strive to show that the prophecy had indeed been fulfilled. His *traditio* would not only vindicate the early prophet as a true prophet of YHWH, but it would also serve as a “prophetic history lesson” for his contemporaries. Granted, the scribal exegete’s interpretation of that earlier event and prophecy was just

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<sup>59</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 166.

<sup>60</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 181.

<sup>61</sup> Desmond Tutu, forward to *The Hebrew Prophets: Visionaries of the Ancient World*, by Lawrence Boadt (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 7.

that: an interpretation. Yet it would have been understood to be a *prophetic* interpretation working under and deriving its authority from the authority of the earlier prophet.

We must attempt, therefore, to exegete Proto-Isaiah, or more precisely Isaiah 7:14 and its surrounding context, in light of its prophetic purpose: to provide a prophetic interpretation of certain historical events that both vindicates Isaiah as a true prophet of YHWH and teaches its readers about YHWH's purposes within those historical events. Since much of the prophetic writing in the Bible is in the genre of narrative, it is inevitable that literary story-telling techniques are used in relating those historical events. Therefore we should understand the biblical narratives found in the *Prophets* as being prophetic interpretations of historical events presented in the form of literary narratives. At the same time, since there is a considerable amount of prophetic material in the *Prophets* that comes to us in the form of poetry, we should expect to find poetic techniques and language throughout these sections. We should also remember that these poetic sections in the *Prophets* are still prophetic declarations concerning historical events presented in the form of poetry. Consequently, any "gloss" one might identify should not be seen as something that obscures what really happened, but rather as something that helps the reader interpret and understand that history in clearer focus.

## **IX. An Understanding of the Historical Reliability of Biblical Texts**

The task set before biblical scholars today is to ascertain the original meaning of a given text as it has come to us, now in its final form. This entails attempting to explain how the original readers of the final form of the text would have understood it in their own time. This necessitates not only an understanding of the literary and theological structures that scribal exegetes used in the transmission and reactualization of the

received *traditum* into the *traditio* that is preserved for us today, but also an appreciation of the prophetic voice of the narratives found within the prophetic books. This does not mean, though, that such an appreciation for the literary and theological shaping of a given biblical text requires a naïve assumption that it is so far removed from the historical event it claims to be relating that it cannot be considered historically reliable at all. Without convincing evidence to prove otherwise, dismissing biblical texts as historically unreliable, simply because they (a) are far removed from the events themselves, (b) display obvious markings of literary shaping, and (c) put forth a clear theological understanding of that history, is exegetically unsound and intellectually dishonest.

Provan argues that all texts are “biased” in some fashion, therefore a text cannot be deemed historically unreliable simply because it is pushing for a certain understanding of that historical event. Therefore, the only intellectually honest thing to do would be to adopt a “falsification principle,” in which a text which claims to be a report on historical events is presumed to be reliable unless it is proven false. Long further points out that the Bible is not simply a theological document; it is both a literary document as well as a historical document. Proper exegesis, therefore, requires (a) an understanding of the literary artistry of a biblical text, (b) an understanding of the theological outlook of the biblical writer, (c) an understanding of the historical audience who originally interpreted the text, and in the case of the relevant texts to this thesis, (d) an understanding that these texts provide a prophetic interpretation of actual historical events.

This does not mean that every single detail in a biblical historical text is actually “historically factual”—there must be an appreciation for the literary artistry and creativity of the biblical author. We do not have to believe, for example, that Hezekiah’s prayer in

Isaiah 38:10-20 is a word for word account of what Hezekiah prayed at that specific time, or that the Rabshakeh uttered those exact words in Isaiah 36-37, or that Isaiah's prophecies in chapters 7-12 are chronologically accurate, word for word accounts. What this does mean is that, unless faced with historical evidence to the contrary, we can be confident that the historical events put forth in the biblical texts are, at their historical roots, historically reliable. We can reasonably assume that when faced with Sennacherib's threat outside Jerusalem in 701 BCE, Hezekiah offered many prayers to YHWH for deliverance, and that somehow Jerusalem did, in fact, not fall to Sennacherib. We can reasonably assume that during that siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE that threats and taunts were hurled at Hezekiah and those living in Jerusalem by certain officials in the Assyrian army. We can reasonably assume that Isaiah confronted Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis, that Ahaz's actions during that crisis were seen as displaying unfaithfulness to YHWH, and that what is recorded in Isaiah 7-12 contains the core of Isaiah's prophecies at that time. How these historical events were interpreted and understood undoubtedly varied over the course of time in ancient Israel; yet although these events were interpreted and understood in various ways throughout the life of ancient Israel, they remained actual historical events at their core.

Having said all of this, it must be acknowledged that in the process of copying, reinterpreting, and reapplying the various *traditums* into later *traditios*, scribal errors undoubtedly crept into the text from time to time. Therefore, it is the challenge of the biblical scholar, when faced with a given peculiarity in the text, to determine whether such a peculiarity is either a genuine scribal error or rather the intentional work of the scribal exegete to highlight a certain theological perspective or literary structure. Such a

determination is admittedly speculative at best, and its veracity can only be determined in light of the overall exegesis of the given passage. In other words, if a scholar claims a certain part of the text is a scribal error, not only must there be textual evidence that lends itself to the belief of a genuine scribal error, but it also must “make sense” within the overall interpretation of that given text. Although it can never be definitively “proven” to be a scribal error, there must be enough evidence to support the *probability* that it is so.

The issue of historical reliability is essential to this thesis, but so is the issue of literary competence, for this thesis asserts that the biblical accounts surrounding king Ahaz and Hezekiah are, in fact, put forth as not only *artistic literary narratives*, but also as *prophetic* interpretations of *actual historical accounts*. The two cannot easily be separated, nor should they be, for what we find in the Hebrew Bible is, in fact, a *prophetic* marriage of both literature and history. Robert Alter calls this phenomenon “fictionalized history” or “historicized fiction.” By making such a characterization, though, he does not mean to downplay or deny the historicity of the Hebrew Bible:

“In giving such weight to fictionality, I do not mean to discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all the God of history: the working out of his purposes in history is a process that compels the attention of the Hebrew imagination, which is thus led to the most vital interest in the concrete and differential character of historical events. The point is that fiction was the principal means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.”<sup>62</sup>

Whether we call it “fictionalized history” or “historicized fiction,”<sup>63</sup> we must remember that the biblical texts relevant to this thesis were also considered prophetic. What we find in the Hebrew Bible is that such prophetic biblical narratives truly are “one flesh”—both

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (United States of America: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 32.

<sup>63</sup> V. Philips Long, while agreeing with Alter, believes that a term like “artistry” should be preferred over the term “fiction,” and that we should “reserve the term fiction for the nonfactual genre of that name.” Long, *Biblical History*, 63.

history and literature—and that to separate them would, in fact, bring about their death. Therefore, in the course of this exegetical study, we will attempt to always be mindful of this marriage of literature and history within these prophetic texts. The underlying presupposition of this study is two-fold: (1) the biblical accounts will be given the benefit of the doubt when it comes to historical reliability, unless there is a reasonable and logical reason to question them, and (2) the biblical accounts are literary narratives that were purposely shaped by scribal exegetes who attempted to give a coherent prophetic theological understanding to actual historical events.

## **X. The Main Arguments of this Thesis**

With that said, it must be stated up front what this thesis' position is on each one of the exegetical issues stated above. Since each issue must be dealt with in turn, one must be willing to suspend final judgment until each issue is dealt with and presented within the overall argument of this thesis.

### *X.1. Isaiah 7:14 is a Prophecy about Hezekiah*

As for the first exegetical landmine, this thesis will argue that the traditional Jewish understanding that equates Hezekiah with Immanuel is correct. It will argue that the immediate context of not only Isaiah 7, but also of the literary unit of Isaiah 7-12, points toward this identification.

### *X. 2. A Revised Chronology of II Kings 16-20*

As for the second exegetical landmine—the chronological objections put forth by many scholars regarding the identification of Hezekiah with Immanuel—this thesis will argue that the chronological difficulties found in II Kings 16-20 and Isaiah 36-39 can be

traced back to probable scribal errors in the text, and that the correction of these errors helps resolve various other exegetical problems.

### *X. 3. The Primacy of Isaiah 36-39 over II Kings 18-20*

As for the third exegetical landmine, this thesis will argue that although it is certainly possible that both II Kings 18-20 and Isaiah 36-39 both borrowed from an earlier source, it seems more probable that II Kings borrowed from Proto-Isaiah, and that the events recorded in Isaiah 36-39 are a vital part of the literary structure of Proto-Isaiah, whereas there is no clear discernable literary structure within II Kings.

### *X. 4. The Historical Reliability and Literary Coherence of Isaiah 36-39*

As for the fourth exegetical landmine, this thesis will argue that the depiction of the historical events in Isaiah 36-39 is not only historically reliable, but also a single coherent literary unit, and not the product of a careless redactor who threw various sources together.

### *X. 5. The Bookend Structure of Proto-Isaiah and the Historical Impetus for its Writing*

As for the fifth exegetical landmine, this thesis will argue that Isaiah 7-12 and Isaiah 36-39 form two literary “bookends” to Proto-Isaiah that highlight a number of features regarding the prophetic interpretation of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. The ultimate purpose of Proto-Isaiah was to vindicate Isaiah as a true prophet of YHWH and vindicate Hezekiah as a righteous and faithful king. The twin issues regarding the credibility of Isaiah and Hezekiah would have been hotly debated issues shortly after Sennacherib’s invasion and Hezekiah’s subsequent death. The antagonistic stance Manasseh took against Isaiah and against YHWH, the God of Israel, points to the



probability of a major theological/political crisis within early seventh century Judah: how should the events of Sennacherib's invasion be interpreted? Was it a victory and vindication for Hezekiah and Isaiah, who remained faithful to YHWH alone, or was it a devastating defeat for Hezekiah and Isaiah, who had gotten rid of the foreign gods in Jerusalem, and had thus incurred their wrath? This thesis holds that in light of such theological/political turmoil early on in Manasseh's reign, the priests and scribes who were faithful to YHWH and who had supported Hezekiah and Isaiah assembled Isaiah's prophecies and recorded the major events during his lifetime in order to present a counter-argument to the theological/political message that was being put forth by Manasseh. This work became what we now call Proto-Isaiah.

It must be pointed out, though, that this proposed historical reconstruction of the events surrounding the writing of Isaiah 36-39 and the compilation of Proto-Isaiah is borne out of an honest exegetical analysis of the literary bookend structure of Proto-Isaiah. Given the clear, discernable bookend structure, centered upon the connection between Immanuel and Hezekiah, this thesis is arguing for, the question, "To what historical situation would such a message most likely have been addressed?" finds its most logical answer in the time shortly after Hezekiah's death, when Manasseh had begun to attempt to reverse Hezekiah's reforms and antagonize the true worshippers of YHWH in Judah.

## **XI. Looking Forward: The Chapters of this Thesis**

Now that the basic exegetical questions have been put forward and the basic argument has been stated, it is now time to preview the content of the following chapters.

*XI. 1. Chapter Two: The Exegetical Issues Surrounding Isaiah 7:14*

In chapter two we will analyze the historical and modern arguments regarding the exegesis of Isaiah 7:14 and focus on the basic four variants found within Isaiah 7:14. We will first analyze the various exegetical issues surrounding Isaiah 7:14 by surveying the various arguments that have been made throughout the past two centuries. Once we point out both the strengths and weaknesses of these arguments, we will then argue that the Immanuel of Isaiah 7:14 is none other than Hezekiah. Both the immediate context of Isaiah 7, as well as the overall context of Isaiah 7-12 supports this view.

*X.2. Chapter Three: The Chronological Problems of II Kings 16-20*

Chapter three will tackle the chronological problems that arise in II Kings 16-20. In order to argue that the Immanuel child of Isaiah 7:14 is Hezekiah, one must first deal with the obvious chronological difficulties in II Kings surrounding the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah. There is no point in arguing that Hezekiah was the prophesied Immanuel child if at the most basic historical level it was found to be an impossibility. This chapter will include a detailed explanation of the problem, an analysis of how various scholars have attempted to resolve the various chronological problems surrounding the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah, and a proposed solution to that problem. In the course of this chapter we will also address the issue of the parallel accounts found in Isaiah 36-39 and II Kings 18-20 and come to the conclusion that Isaiah 36-39 is, in fact, the original account, and that the writer of II Kings borrowed his material from Isaiah. Ultimately, this thesis will argue that the key to resolving the chronological problems of II Kings 16-20 is to identify the scribal errors that are obviously in the text. The resolution of these problems will show that the birth of Hezekiah does indeed fall within the time frame of the Syro-

Ephraimite Crisis, and therefore there is a distinct possibility that Hezekiah would have been the initial referent to the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

*X. 3. Chapter Four: Historical Reliability/Literary Coherence of Isaiah 36-39*

Chapter four will focus on the question of the historical reliability and literary coherence of Isaiah 36-39. This thesis will first argue that the writer of II Kings took his material in II Kings 18-20 from Isaiah 36-39, and that Isaiah 36-39 contains the original account. Secondly, this thesis will argue that Proto-Isaiah's account of the life of Hezekiah, most particularly the invasion of Sennacherib, Hezekiah's illness, and the visit of the envoys from Babylon, must not only be taken as a historically reliable text, but also as a literary coherent and artistic text within Proto-Isaiah.

*X. 4. Chapter Five: The Bookend Structure of Proto-Isaiah*

Chapter five will focus on the literary connections between Isaiah 7-12 and 36-39, and the greater overall context and literary structure of Proto-Isaiah. It will be argued that these two sections have been set up as literary "bookends" that highlight the similar circumstances, yet completely contrary characters, of Ahaz and Hezekiah. Not only will chapter five further establish the probability that Hezekiah is the Immanuel child of Isaiah 7:14, it will also establish the overarching literary structure of Proto-Isaiah.

*X. 5. Appendixes: Chronological Charts, Parallel Texts, Thematic Strands of Emphasis*

There are three appendixes at the end of this thesis. Appendix A compliments chapter three and contains chronological charts that show the chronological problems within II Kings 16-20 as well as the proposed revisions put forth in this thesis. Appendix B compliments chapter four and contains a chart showing the parallel texts of Isaiah 36-

37 and II Kings 18-19 and highlighting the textual differences between the two texts. Appendix C compliments chapter five and contains an extensive chart that shows the three thematic strands of emphasis and how they unfold throughout the entirety of Proto-Isaiah.