

A Trauma Reading of Isaiah 1–12 from the “Unity Movement” Perspective

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Abstract

In this contribution we focus firstly on the “unity movement” which has changed the face of Isaianic studies over the last 30 or more years, having been characterised by the Duhmian interpretation of three separate books for nearly 100 years. The unity movement focusses on the book of Isaiah as a literary unity, but it does not deny the historical growth of this literary masterpiece which took place over centuries. Secondly, we give a brief overview of the use of trauma theory as a reading lens in biblical studies and its implication for reading the book of Isaiah in this manner. In the third part we focus on three themes which are important from the perspective of the unity of the book of Isaiah (specifically in Isaiah 1–12 which is the first major subsection within the larger composition of the book of Isaiah). These three themes are important for a trauma reading of the book of Isaiah, as will be indicated in this contribution: the concept of the we-group (remnant), the woe oracles, and the theme of the “day of YHWH // this day.” These themes are briefly dealt with within Isaiah 1–12, although they have major implications for a more detailed study of the book of Isaiah (read as a literary unity) from a trauma theoretical perspective.

Keywords: Day of the Lord; Isaiah; remnant; resilience; trauma theory; unity movement; woe oracles

Introduction

The advent of modern exegesis put an end to the traditional understanding of the unity of the book of Isaiah as the traditional “one-prophet interpretation”¹ was replaced by Bernhard Duhm’s (1892) proposal of a “three-book interpretation.”² The “one-prophet interpretation” had indeed been the dominant mode of interpretation in ecclesiastical and theological circles for centuries. The dawn of modern Isaianic exegesis, as interpreted by Duhm in his commentary, gave rise to a new literary world in which a distinction was made between the three major sections of the book of Isaiah, namely Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah,³ which formed the foundation for all subsequent Isaianic research (see Berges 2012). These three parts were, however, read and interpreted separately from each other without considering the literary structure of the book as a whole or as a unit.

In recent years, however, a paradigm shift of a different nature has taken place in Isaianic scholarship, namely that scholars have started to ask why the book of Isaiah was presented as a unit on one scroll, and how this book can and should be read and interpreted as a literary unit (Clements 1982; Rendtorff 1996; see also Laato 1988). According to Gentry (2015, 227), in the last 30 years we “have witnessed a movement away from viewing this book as a patchwork of sources to considering the meaning of the entire work as a unity. This unity, however, is often perceived as only a *redactional* unity and not an *authorial-compositional* unity.” According to him (Gentry 2015, 227) the work of Ulrich Berges⁴ is instrumental in reversing the old trend and Berges (2012a) uses the concept of a “literary cathedral” in order to indicate that the book of Isaiah should be read as a literary unity.

Regarding the ascendancy of this movement, Tate (1966, 43) had already stated in 1996 that “the one-book approach constitutes a paradigm shift in Isaiah studies,” which indeed is one of the major developments in the post-Duhmian interpretation of the book of Isaiah—which had been the dominant mode of interpretation for 100 years. In the last 30–40 years the “one book of Isaiah” perspective has gained momentum with an increasing number of adherents, with its focus more on the literary features unifying the book than on the critical segmentation of the book. Although some earlier contributions

1 See Tate (1966) who gives a helpful summary of the “one-book” approach to Isaiah.

2 In this regard, Sweeney (2006, 234) infers as follows: “Bernhard Duhm’s commentary on the book of Isaiah, initially published in 1892 as part of the *Göttingener Handkommentar zum Alten Testament*, clearly constitutes the foundation of modern critical Isaiah research. In keeping with the historical-critical perspectives that dominated the field in the late nineteenth century, Duhm held that Isaiah contained three discrete prophetic collections, each based in the work of an individual prophet who wrote in relation to a distinct historical setting.”

3 Tate (1966) gives an overview of the “three-book” approach.

4 Gentry (2015, 227) infers: “Ulrich Berges’ 1998 monograph, entitled *Das Buch Jesaja: Komposition und Endgestalt*, belongs to this recent trend.” This monograph was translated and published with the following title: *The Book of Isaiah. Its Composition and Final Form*.

had paved the way for this approach, in Schulz's opinion (2015) it was specifically the publication of Roy Melugin's dissertation on Isa 40–55⁵ in 1976 which provided the necessary impetus for this new direction. The latter also played an important role in the establishment of the SBL's "Formation of the Book of Isaiah Group."⁶

We can indeed postulate that this new development of the last four decades has gained momentum and become the dominant approach in the analysis and exegesis of the book of Isaiah. The following section provides a summarised introduction to the implications of trauma theory for the analysis of biblical texts with a specific focus on Isaiah 1–12 from a trauma perspective.

Trauma Theory as a Reading Lens for Biblical Texts

In an innovative—even provocative—book titled *Holy Resilience. The Bible's Traumatic Origins*, David Carr (2014) provides an interpretation of the origins of the Old Testament⁷ in which he argues that Israel's holy writings arose from a trauma context and speak to human trauma in an ancient as well as modern context.

Since the 1970s there has been an exponential increase in the interest biblical scholars have shown in the insights offered by different subject fields and the contribution they can make to theology, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. A number of biblical scholars have particularly been drawn towards trauma theory in terms of the contribution it makes towards an interpretation of different dimensions of human suffering and the ensuing trauma implications it has on the biblical population as well as the reader of the text (Frechette and Boase 2016).⁸ O'Connor especially uses trauma and disaster studies, as "they serve as an 'heuristic' or 'finding' device. They offer spectacles to 'find' what is hidden beneath the opaque surfaces of human suffering" (O'Connor 2010, 38; see also Groenewald 2018). A hermeneutics of trauma interrelates with the above-mentioned fields of study and inspires new understandings of individual, collective, and systemic dimensions of suffering and

5 See Melugin (1976, 177) who infers as follows: "The reason we could not reconstruct the history of the redaction of chapters 40–55 is connected to the nature of the relationships between these chapters and the book as a whole."

6 Nogalski (2018, 5) formulates the aims and goals of this new movement as follows: "Scholars now recognize thematic and lexical *inclusios* (literary bracketing devices framing and focusing the content for readers) linking chapters 65–66 with chapters 1–2 and 11. The beginning of the scroll has also been modified to anticipate the themes of the book as a whole. The creation of such links suggests that the scribes working on Isaiah recognised the developing corpus as a cohesive document in its own right. These links between older and newer material represent more than just artistic decoration. They reflect a conviction that the older material had relevance in new settings. The updates to the collection thus reflect ongoing theological engagements with their tradition by these prophetic tradents."

7 Carr (2014) also treats the New Testament from chapters nine to twelve onwards.

8 See also Smith-Christopher (2002) who made use of trauma and refugee studies to interpret the exile.

trauma (Frechette and Boase 2016). The integration of trauma theory into different theological discourses has since opened different possibilities for interdisciplinary research, not only for theology but for the humanities as well.⁹

Morrow's insights in trauma theory are particularly helpful as he defines trauma "as (violent) stress that is sudden, unexpected, or nonnormative, exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demands, and disrupts various psychological needs" (Morrow 2011, 281). The concept of "disruption" is very helpful to understand many biblical texts. Trauma has the ability to shatter and fragment the previously constructed sense of self; therefore, individuals and groups seeking recovery need to find new ways to control the internalised violence (trauma) because of their experiences of disintegration. Interpreted in this way, the concept of trauma indicates an experience of "severe dislocation," which causes the "constructed sense of self" to be fragmented and shattered (Morrow 2011, 281). Trauma, therefore, does not only disrupt the physical locality but also the mental, spiritual, and emotional sphere of individuals and communities.

Morrow's concept of disruption versus recovery can be linked to Janoff-Bulman's psychological concept of "rebuilding shattered assumptions" which she coined during the early 1990s (Janoff-Bulman 1999). She developed this concept to emphasise why it is important to understand the role which these fundamental assumptions play in the lives of human beings and to comprehend the coping mechanisms they use to cope with traumatic life events (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Traumatic life events challenge—we can actually say "shatter"—these basic beliefs or assumptions, and these fundamental assumptions, which guide human beings through life, suddenly appear totally inadequate in the face of the experience of a traumatic event (Janoff-Bulman 1999). This post-traumatic crisis calls for a renewal of these fundamental assumptions and this process is common in the aftermath of extreme life events (Janoff-Bulman 1999; see also Janoff-Bulman 1992). This process of rebuilding can be depicted with the term resilience, an important concept used in trauma theory (see, e.g., Carr 2014; Schreiter 2016; Ungar 2013; White and Cook 2020). To be resilient indicates the remarkable capacity of trauma survivors to survive and cope with extreme tragic experiences. To be resilient indicates the painful process of re-establishing some of the prior assumptions as well as a reappraisal of events in a positive, meaning-making way.¹⁰

9 Boynton and Capretto (2018, 1) infer as follows: "Within the humanities, specifically in the past decade, trauma theory has become a robust site of interdisciplinary work. Trauma resonates with scholars in and across disciplines and has become a trope with a distinctive significance."

10 Janoff-Bulman (1992, 140) infers as follows: "Yet the cognitive strategies used by trauma survivors attest to the possibility for some human choice even in the face of uncontrollable, unavoidable negative outcomes. These choices reside in the interpretations and reinterpretations, appraisals and reappraisals, evaluations and re-evaluations made of the traumatic experience and one's pain and suffering."

Resilience as a rebuilding strategy often shapes new opportunities and a shift of the locus.

Carr (2014) highlights the fact that ancient Israel often suffered as a result of different periods of crises. These crises and subsequent catastrophes over many decades and centuries not only caused individuals to suffer, but whole communities and tore their group identity apart. The prolonged exposure to trauma and traumatic events over these different periods of crisis remained firmly imbedded within the generations, highlighting and heightening inter-generational trauma. They furthermore shattered—to use Janoff-Bulman’s concept—the ancient Israelites’ assumptions and group identities and subsequently caused them to come to a totally new understanding of themselves. In Schreiter’s view (2016, 201), one can live from resilience, or to put it differently, resilience manifests itself in an act of identity affirmation and formation; in other words, “rebuilding shattered assumptions.” Texts are social creations and therefore form a part of the process of providing explanations for claimed experience(s). Therefore, text production aims to repair shattered world views in order to restore and create a new group cohesion (Janzen 2019). In the following section the focus is on the first subsection of the book of Isaiah and on three themes which contributed to this group cohesion within the Isaianic community. The question is whether a perspective from trauma studies can contribute to the understanding of Isaiah 1–12.

Isaiah 1–12

If one studies Isaiah 1–12 as a subsection within the book of Isaiah from a trauma perspective, one notices that this subsection moves between judgement and salvation (Berges 2012a; Hoppe 2012). This movement confirms traumatic disaster and despair on the one hand and on the other reverberates what could be depicted as resilience and hope (Esterhuizen 2016). It commences with an accusation against Jerusalem because of its disloyalty towards God (1:2–9) (Clements 2011; see also Groenewald 2016) and concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving for its future restoration (12:1–6) (Hoppe 2012; see also Clements 2011; Groenewald 2017).

The text of Isaiah 1–12 thus reflects the constant threat of war and chaos which was characteristic of the lives of the Judeans (Esterhuizen and Groenewald 2021a). On the one hand these twelve chapters contain harsh words of judgment for the city and its leaders because of their role in creating an unjust and corrupt society and on the other hand they contain inspiring texts in which a future for the city and its people is imagined beyond the judgment they will experience. Therefore, the reader often has the feeling of being swayed back and forth between these two opposite poles. The text not only

puts into words the harsh realities of a political and military crisis, but also visualises a future beyond trauma and disaster, namely a future beyond the immediate threats.¹¹

Thus, Isaiah has often been described as a prophet of judgment. The announcement of YHWH's judgment to the people and their leaders plays a prominent role in the message of the book and should be read against the background of the broken relationship with God. On the other hand, the book oscillates between the announcement of judgment and salvation and this tension characterises the book of Isaiah (Poulson 2015).¹²

Against this background, we focus on three themes which form an integral part of this tension (and movement) between judgment and salvation, or despair and hope. Furthermore, these three themes link to a trauma and resilience perspective within Isaiah 1–12. The three themes are:

- (1) the concept of the “we-group”;
- (2) the woe oracles;
- (3) the concept of “that day” / “the day of the Lord.”

The following discussion cannot be exhaustive, but it provides an orientation regarding these three themes within a larger analysis of the book of Isaiah.

The We-group

The first theme which connects to both judgment and salvation in the book of Isaiah, and therefore is relevant for a trauma reading perspective of this book, is the idea of the protection of a small righteous group called the “we-group” (Kim 2016).¹³ The “remnants,” who will remain, are first mentioned in Isaiah 1:9 (שְׁרִיד). Chapter one already contains harsh criticism of Zion's wickedness and indicates what should be done in order to bring about a change in the society. The choice is between one of two options: either to repent and “the red stains of sin will turn to white” (1:18), in other words have salvation or hope or, if not, face disaster and despair if they continue in the old pathways. Eventually it will cause a cleansing process which will lead to destruction. Chapter 1 is thus very straightforward that the transformation of Zion will cause a radical judgment of the disobedient and rebellious within society. In spite of the pain of the disaster being brought about by the destruction, one can assume that the positive side of this disastrous

11 Hoppe (2012, 11) infers that Isaiah “was certain that Jerusalem was to undergo a severe crisis that included political impotence and military defeat. Even more devastating would be the loss of and exile from the land that God promised to ancient Israel's ancestors. But beyond this judgment on Jerusalem was the promise of a new city ruled by a good king who led a people committed to justice.”

12 See also Dempsey (2018, 605) who infers as follows: “The test is the poetic vision that captures the drama of the life of a community living under peril and promise. The main character is Isaiah, whose dynamic proclamations are filled with passion as he warns, upbraids, instructs, and comforts his people either with words of woe or words of hope.”

13 Kim (2016, 18) also states that “whichever reconstruction theory holds true, during and after the exile, the ‘we’-group evidently signified the penitent followers of the righteous prophet as the servant's disciples and Zion's offspring—whether the remainees or the returnees.”

process will be that it will leave behind a righteous remnant (Hayyim 2009; see also Webb 1990).

Berges (2012a) emphasises that this is very important information which the reader receives here at the beginning of the book, consequently challenging the reader already here in chapter one to make the decision whether they want to belong to the group of the “remnant” (cf. 4:3;¹⁴ 7:22; 10:20–22; 11:11, 16), namely the one from within, with whom God will continue the history of God’s people. The concept of the remnant is noticeably prominent in the book of Isaiah, not only because of the sheer number of its occurrences, but also because the tension between judgment and salvation is taken up in this motif. In this regard King (2015, 146) infers as follows:

The significance of the motif as a literary feature. And while the positive aspects of the remnant in Isaiah are almost universally recognized, one neglected dimension is the use of the motif as a word of judgment itself. Here it functions not as evidence of YHWH’s mercy and blessing but rather as a picture of the severity of judgment. While the former may not be completely absent, the emphasis falls on the negative aspect of the motif in the latter.

The sudden appearance of a “we”(-group), within a context where a second person plural discourse dominates, discloses a situation in both the text and in life where the author(-audience) opposes the “other”-group within the community. This “we” is clearly in opposition to the plural “you” and the self-understanding of the “we”-group is defined as a group of a “few survivors” (שְׂרִיד בְּמִנְעֹט). The latter group clearly is a minority group within the larger group with whom it shares an experience of trauma and disaster (Conrad 1991; see also Groenewald 2011; Pfaff 1996). The common notion in trauma studies is usually that when trauma presents, an individual or a section of a community within the bigger framework of a population is affected and desolate. If this is the supposition, the “we” are possibly the remaining group of trauma survivors within the broader community which may include individuals but also the collective.

In Conrad’s opinion (1991), the audience here in the beginning of the book of Isaiah is a community of survivors with a clear minority status within the Judean society (cf. Isa 1:9). This community feels powerless, as indicated by the characterisation of their opponents as the corrupt and incompetent leaders of the society (e.g., Isa 1:10, 23, 26, 27). This community suffers trauma as it is threatened by murder and bloodshed (e.g.,

14 See Nogalski (2018, 7) who infers as follows: “The final thematic unit in Isaiah 1-4 addresses the remnants who survive Jerusalem’s destruction (4:2–6). This passage presupposes that the punishment anticipated in chapter 3 has been executed ... The fact that his passage addresses those in the aftermath of Jerusalem’s devastation has led a number of scholars to treat the text as a later reflection upon the consequences of Jerusalem’s destruction that also anticipates a time when YHWH’s glory will return to Jerusalem (4:5–6).” Webb (1990, 72) also comments as follows regarding chapter 4: “Here remnant terminology is introduced for the first time, making explicit what was implicit in chs. 1 and 2.”

Isa 1:21, 24). According to Smith-Christopher (2015, 44), one should always consider the impact suffering and traumatic events have on individuals as well as groups and specifically the effect trauma has on the “constructed sense of self” (see also Morrow 2011).

Regarding this constructed sense of the self, Morgan (2012, 660) infers that “the characteristics of the remnant motif in Isaiah 1–39 differ from those in Isaiah 40–66, largely due to issues regarding composition, audience and historical concerns. From the outset of the book, Daughter Zion has already suffered from war and brutality (Is 1:7–8), and the surviving community recognises that it is only due to Yahweh’s mercy that anyone from Judah is still alive (Is 1:9).” In the reconstruction of their self-identity the “remnants” are the hope of the future “who will play significant roles in the theological development throughout the book of Isaiah” (Kim 2016, 33).¹⁵

Although only a few would remain, this motif is an important contributing factor to the literary plotline of the whole book of Isaiah, and “the initial image regarding the remnant¹⁶ motif is that of a tenth of a people who survive divine judgment, and they serve as the ‘holy seed’ who will repopulate the land (Is 6:13)” (Morgan 2012, 660; see also Pfaff 1996). The historical drama of Isaiah 7 and 8 presents three children with significant names; the first to appear is *Shear-jashub* (שְׁאָרְיָשׁוּב “A-Remnant-Turns Back” or “A-Remnant-Will-Return”—Isa 7:3), the prophet’s son. The child is present to embody the message and functions as a sign to both king Ahaz and his father, namely that King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel will return to their countries as the “fire stumps” that are still smouldering (7:4). What is clear is that the enemies of the north will not survive but will be cut down. In this context the name *Shear-jashub* embodies hope, comfort, and resilience (see also Esterhuizen 2016). The dualism in the name implies that there is hope but that despair is also a breath away. Isaiah 10 offers a further development of *Shear-jashub* when it refers to Judah’s continued existence and this time is not in the context of Judah’s defeated enemies (Isa 7). When YHWH declares that a “remnant will return” (see also Esterhuizen 2016), it is a reference to the people who will survive (“remnant of Jacob”) the destruction which the southern kingdom will experience (Isa 10:20–23), first by the hand of the Neo-Assyrian armies and secondly by the hand of the Neo-Babylonian armies. Even though the remnant will be dispersed among the surrounding nations (Isa 11:11–12), YHWH will see to it that they will return to the land (Morgan 2012).

Seen from a trauma perspective the name *Shear-jashub* reiterates the message of hope which is possible for the remnants. In order to survive the trauma, there has to be hope

15 Cf. in this regard Nogalski (2018, 6) who infers as follows: “In short, virtually every motif appearing in the accusatory rhetoric of Isaiah 1 returns at the end of the book as part of promises for the remnant who will survive YHWH’s coming judgment.”

16 Righteous remnants: (שְׁאָרְיָת / שְׁאָרְיָת). In Isa 1–12 (singular noun): Isa 10:20, 21 (2x), 22; 11:11, 16. The rest of the book: Isa 14:22; 16:14; 28:5; 37:31, 32.

for a new and better outcome (see also Esterhuizen 2016). The hope for a new beginning is predicted by the prophet in Isaiah 11.¹⁷ A new righteous (צַדִּיק) leader shall emerge so that “there will be a highway for the remnants of His people” (Isa 11:16) to return. Although the remnants are not saved from trauma or judgment, there is the possibility of hope through resilience. Although they are threatened by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, they will return (Morgan 2012). The importance of the message of the remnants in the beginning of the book is to emphasise the choice they all have: either they listen to the word of YHWH, as the “we-group” do, or they can carry on in their sinful ways. The warning expressed in 1:19–20 is quite straightforward: “If, then, you agree and give heed, you will eat the good things of the earth; but if you refuse and disobey, you will be devoured by the sword. For it was the Lord (YHWH) who spoke” (Groenewald 2016; Stulac 2018).¹⁸

The Woe Oracles

The second prominent trauma perspective of judgment in the subsection Isaiah 1–12 relates to the “woe oracles.”¹⁹ This subsection contains numerous woe oracles which in the textual perspective are all related to YHWH’s judgment against the (sinful) behaviour of the Judean people and their leaders; these oracles subject the human misconduct to harsh criticism (Zobel 1978). In all of these instances the interjectory particle הוֹי (“woe”) introduces these oracles and is mostly followed by a noun or participle which indicates the ones to whom the oracle is directed (Tull 2010; Williamson 2006). Whenever the woe oracles (with the particle הוֹי) occur in prophetic oracles, they colour these oracles with a bleak and austere atmosphere of condemnation, threat, inescapable judgment, and a prediction of death (Groenewald 2011; see also Berges 2001; Williamson 2006). As the odour of death hangs heavily in the air we link these oracles to a trauma perspective which is inherent within these textual layers. This sense of prediction of death disrupts everyone, resulting in everyone becoming

17 According to Morgan (2012, 660), “the chief contribution that Isaiah evinces for the remnant motif is its depiction in terms of agrarian and horticultural imagery.” Consequently we see that the concept of the remnant is often associated with the “root” (11:1, 10—שֹׁרֶשׁ), “shoot” (11:1—נֶצֶר and גֹּזֵז) and “branch” (4:2 and 11:1—צֶמַח and חֹטֶר) of a tree.

18 Cf. Carr (2009). In this regard Groenewald (2016, 4) infers as follows: “The audience, after having received this command, is offered in 1:18–20 the same two choices with which the chapter concludes as well Isaiah 1:2–31 can be summarised as follows: there is an overall movement from the people being accused (1:2–9) to a call to repentance (1:10–17). The rationale for this call is defined in the two subsections following (1:18–20 and 1:21–31), which both outline the outcome a choice for or against repentance has for the specific group or for the people. Within this literary context, one can understand the purging judgement in Jerusalem (1:21–26) as a description of the process of cleansing Zion from those who are doing evil, while—in contrast—those who repent will enjoy the purified city of Zion.”

19 Cf., for example, the following: Isa 1:4; 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22; 10:1, 5. We here do not refer to the occurrences in the rest of the book of Isaiah, as well as Isa 1:24 where the הוֹי is regarded as an independent interjection (Williamson 2006; Zobel 1978).

fragmented and indeed shattered; also the previously constructed sense of the self is under threat.

According to Gerstenberger (1962), the woe oracle (הוֹי) was a common form of speech²⁰ which was used to express indictments and accusations in the prophetic literature. The woes occur predominantly in a series (e.g., Isa 5:8ff.) and are restricted to the prophetic literature (with the exception of 1 Kings 13:30; Jeremiah 22:18 [הוֹי occurs 4 times]; 34:5; and Amos 5:16 where the הוֹי is used in a lament for the dead) (Beuken 2003; Clifford 1966; Groenewald 2011; Janzen 1972; Westermann 1991). Janzen (1972) states that the הוֹי is mostly used in prophetic announcements which introduce impending punishment and calamity, thus calling to the readers' mind terrible images of trauma and traumatic experiences and leading to severe dislocation.

In the preaching of the prophets the woe oracles clearly have the rhetorical function of attracting the hearers' attention. Isa 1:4—in its present literary context—contains a harsh condemnation of Israel for irresponsible actions and builds further upon the condemnation of failure as outlined in 1:2–3 (Williamson 2006; see also Groenewald 2011). In this verse they are described as a “sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly.” Israel's rebellion is now detailed in more graphic language in v. 4 than in v. 2, where we for the first time encountered this theme. Whereas v. 2 only states that they have rebelled against the Lord, v. 4 explicates their rebellion as an act of despising the Holy One of Israel and turning their backs on him.

The enormity and the ongoing character of their rebellion is underscored by the striking and shocking description of their rebellious behaviour in 1:4 (Roberts 2015). The traumatic impact of these events is clear to the reader of this text, as their rebellion has already caused them to be severely punished, as is evident from the graphic description in the subsequent verses (1:5–6). The catastrophe has already taken place, but still they have not learnt their lesson and are on track to be destroyed, with the exception of a few survivors who will remain (1:7–9) (Beuken 2003; Williamson 2006). Although the description in verses 5–6 seems to indicate only a battered and bruised individual (e.g., “head” and “heart” are singular nouns), the rhetorical question in v. 5 is addressed to a plural audience (Blenkinsopp 2000). The severe punishment inflicted on the nation calls to mind images of a person being whipped or flogged for an act of transgression (Kaiser 1983), and these images call for a comparison of this text with the fourth servant-song in Isaiah 53 (cf. also Isa 17:11; 30:26; 33:24) (Berges 2012b; Beuken 2003). נכה (“to be hit / be struck down”) is an important concept in this passage, as well as in the rest of

20 Claus Westermann (1991) gives an overview of this form of speech. This book had originally been published in 1960 with the following title: *Grundformen prophetischer Rede* (cf. Westermann [1978] for an overview of the woe oracles in the German publication). See furthermore also Clifford (1966); Horine (1989); March (1974); Toffelmire (2012); Tull (2010); and Wanke (1966). See also Zobel (1978) for an overview of the debate.

the book of Isaiah in which it is theologically an important concept indicating God's punishment of both Israel (e.g., 5:25; 9:12; 10:20; 27:7; 53:4; 57:17; 60:10), but also of their enemies (11:4, 15; 30:31) (Beuken 2003). In the perspective of this verse Israel's judgment is a lesson which it had not taken seriously, whether in the past or the present. Within the compositional history of the book of Isaiah, this verse can indeed be applied to the different historical periods in which the book of Isaiah was written, edited, and in the final stages of its compositional history. The realisation of the experience of trauma cannot only be restricted to one specific historical period, as successive generations would have been able to identify with the impact of the shattered realities of life-threatening circumstances and the aftermath of traumatic events.

Isaiah 5:8–30 contains six woe oracles against the people (vv. 8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22). In these oracles the people are accused of sinful behaviour and Yahweh's condemnation of the people is announced. Verses 8–30 are to be read in conjunction with the Song of the Vineyard (5:1–7) as this section of woe oracles repeats words and themes from the Song of the Vineyard (Smith 2007). These verses provide a detailed outline of the consequences of the sour rotten grapes (בְּאֲשֵׁימָ) which only lead to bloodshed (מִשְׁפָּחַ) and cries of anguish and help (צַעֲקָה), although justice (מִשְׁפָּט) and righteousness (צְדָקָה) were expected of Israel and Judah (Isa 5:7). Although v. 25 lacks the particle הוּי, it is linked not only to the last woe oracle (vv. 22–24), but to the whole preceding section (vv. 8–24) by means of “therefore” (עַל־כֵּן) in v. 25 (“therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still”). The function of the woe oracles in this text is to indicate the prophet's announcement of Yahweh's condemnation of those who enrich themselves at the cost of the poor, who get drunk in the morning, who are wicked, who are followers of iniquity, and who call evil good (Isa 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) (see also Krašovec 2022).

According to v. 25, God is portrayed as the one who stretches out his hand against the people in order to strike (נָכַח) them down (see v. 5 which has already elaborated on this experience). The effect of this judgment is graphically outlined in v. 25 which states that this will cause the mountains to tremble, and the people's corpses will be lying around like refuse in the streets. This description of the panic the people experience leads to trauma as the people will “perceive themselves or another as threatened with annihilation, a force which they are helpless to resist and overwhelms their capacity to cope” (Jones 2001, 116). Subsequently the Isaianic text uses the woe oracles as a prediction (or interpretation) of the deep suffering the people will experience because of God's judgment related to their wickedness, as this is the textual justification for the Assyrian threat²¹ (see Bäckersten 2008).

21 The post-exilic audience of the book of Isaiah surely would have read and interpreted the woe oracles as a prediction of the suffering they would have endured at the hands of the Babylonians.

In this regard Sweeney (2014, 678–79) states that “in the ‘woe’ oracles Isaiah speaks on YHWH’s behalf and charges the people with a series of crimes that illustrate their refusal to follow Torah (5:24).” Bäckersten (2008) argues that *Torah* in this context refers to the divine guidance as mediated by the prophet Isaiah. When 5:24b states that the Judeans have rejected the תּוֹרָה of YHWH, it in all probably refers to the revelation mediated by the prophet Isaiah, and namely that an anti-Assyrian rebellion is doomed to fail. He furthermore infers that “the ultimate mistake of the Judahites is neither their anti-Assyrian rebellion *per se*, nor that they hold parties etc., but that they have failed to follow the divinely inspired advice of the prophet” (Bäckersten 2008, 131; see also Groenewald 2011a). The text underscores self-blame and subsequently interprets the deep traumatic suffering people have experienced as a result of their refusal to be obedient.²²

The sub-unit 5:26–30 concludes this chapter by announcing YHWH’s judgment of the people by portraying the threat posed by the approaching Assyrian army in vivid poetic images. This threat is outlined in graphic and terrifying descriptions. God will raise a signal for the Assyrians and will whistle for them to come swiftly and speedily in order to punish the people for their wickedness (v. 26). This image of God whistling (indicated with the stem שָׁרַק) occurs only twice in the book of Isaiah (5:26; 7:18), stating as follows: “On that day the Lord will whistle (שָׁרַק) for the fly that is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria.” Here God’s whistling is a metaphor which

describes the danger these foreign nations pose to Judah, as well as the fact that YHWH will command—whistle to them—and they will come. For Smith (2007:217) these utterances are a symbolic metaphor to create an overwhelming and powerful picture of the millions of swarming insects that would make life intolerable for the inhabitants of the land. Judgment and despair are thus strong nuances inherent in these metaphors. (Esterhuizen and Groenewald 2021b, 4–5)

The Assyrian military threat to the nation and the subsequent destruction of the land will bring to fulfilment the prediction of the Song (vv. 5–6) as well as the woes (cf. vv. 13–17, 24–25). These last verses of chapter 5 describe the destruction and the plundering of the land caused by an overwhelming military machine as an inevitable

22 See, for example, in this regard Bäckersten (2008, 73) who infers as follows: “In the absence of explicit indications that any moral offence is highlighted, the decisive question is the following: Does the rhetoric really *suggest* that the construction of new houses and fields has left the underprivileged destitute? The situation rather seems the opposite. When the Jerusalemites were able to build large and beautiful houses, and to increase the arable area, the natural assumption is *not* that conditions in Jerusalem has deteriorated, but that the Jerusalemites were in a fortunate position. The same holds for their ability to live in the land. Since there is thus no indication that any moral offence is referred to, it seems difficult to understand the rhetorical pattern along the lines of ‘sin and punishment.’ We may thus prefer the available alternative, namely the rhetorical figure where the present activity is futile in view of the expected disaster (cf., e.g. Amos 5:18–20).”

fact (Smith 2007). The anxiety and tension which the imminent Assyrian invasion will bring to the land and the people indeed would have caused intense pre-migration trauma, as indicated by Esterhuizen and Groenewald (2021a). This becomes evident in 5:30 where images of despair are envisioned as the text describes to the reader the darkness and distress which would have befallen the land and the people when the disaster strikes.

From chapter five we move a few chapters forward before we encounter the next woe oracle. The particle *הוִי* introduces 10:1, which belongs to the sub-unit 10:1–4. This unit contains a poem which formulates the kernel of the Isaianic vision as we have seen from 1:2 onwards. This poem focusses on the poor, the needy, the widows and their well-being and simultaneously it condemns the judges in harsh language as they are responsible for unjust and unfair laws punishing the vulnerable in society the most (Everson 2019). The text makes it clear that nobody—not even the judges and leaders—will escape the disaster which will strike the land. The woe oracle in 10:1 also introduces a gloomy and ominous picture of the disaster which is about to happen: “they will be brutally treated like all the other prisoners and killed like all the others who will be slaughtered in war. Why? The anger of God that destroyed Israel is the same power that will move the outstretched hand of God to destroy Judah (10:4b)” (Smith 2007, 252). The people of Judah knew and permanently had to live with pre-migration stress and the constant fear of falling victim to the whims of the powerful nations.

In Isaiah 1–12 we encounter the last occurrence of the particle *הוִי* in 10:5, which is now directed against Assyria which is mentioned for the first time in the poetic sections, although it is mentioned a few times in the narrative sections (7:17, 18, 20; 8:4, 7). The rest of chapter 10 is devoted to Assyria and a careful theological message is developed in this chapter. Although Assyria is used by God to humiliate and punish his own people, its arrogance and boasting will also come to an end and eventually the empire will be destroyed (Tull 2010). A number of themes which occur in this chapter have already occurred in some of the previous chapters, thus strengthening the intra-Isaianic reading and connections with other sections. Although each context should be interpreted in its own right, these references have already provided us with a pre-understanding of these themes and have indeed supported our reading of the unity within the book of Isaiah (Smith 2007).²³ This chapter indeed provides the reader of Isaiah with a definite portrait of the book’s understanding of a world empire (Everson 2019). The mighty tree which is Assyria will also be chopped down and its pride and haughtiness will also come to an end (10:33). Although Assyria calls to mind images of despair, the dark days will change

23 Smith (2007, 253) provided us with a helpful summary and indication of the interlinking connections with previous chapters: “(a) the unidentified enemy in 5:26–30 and the Assyrians’ desolation of Judah in 7:17–25 is the rod in God’s hand that executes his anger on Judah in 10:5–6; (b) God’s condemnation of Assyria’s pride in 10:12 and his opposition to pride in 2:9–17; 3:16; 5:15 and 9:9; (c) the burning of thorns and briars in 9:18 appears again in 10:17; (d) the return of the remnant is found in both 8:3–4 and 10:20–23; and (e) there is an encouragement not to fear in 8:13 and 10:24.”

into light and light will overcome darkness when Assyria is brought to its knees, which provides the people with the longing that a day of hope will also arrive.

“That Day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) / “The Day of the Lord” (יוֹם יְהוָה)

The next trauma marker we can refer to in the book of Isaiah is the idea of “that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא). The high number of occurrences of “in that day” in the book of Isaiah is conspicuous: of the 45 references, 18 occur in Isaiah 1–12 and 22 in Isaiah 13–27 (Berges 2012b). We encounter the first reference to “that day” already in Isaiah 2:11.²⁴ The references to “that day” have multiple connotations within the first section of the book of Isaiah. Firstly, it refers to the judgment of the wicked people on “that day,” because they compromised YHWH’s holiness. Secondly, it is a reference to the reestablishment of YHWH’s divine glory in Zion, together with the remnants referred to as the “we-”group. Finally, further references to “that day” are aimed at the worship in Jerusalem and at those that threaten that worship.

The book of Isaiah contains several references to the concept the “Day of Lord” with the phrase יוֹם יְהוָה and its variations (Barker 2012). Sweeney (1996) infers that the phrase this “day of YHWH” (יוֹם יְהוָה) and its variations appear often within chapters 1–33, and are also related to the formula “in that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא). In Isaiah 2:12 we have a reference to the “day for the Lord of Hosts” (יוֹם לַיהוָה צְבָאוֹת), which gives expression to the fact that YHWH’s sovereignty over the nations and their idols is clearly established. The picture of the “day of YHWH” (יוֹם יְהוָה) calls to the readers mind a picture of terror and panic because YHWH’s judgment is directed towards everybody who does not acknowledge YHWH. Isaiah 2:20–21 explicitly refers to the nations who will leave their idols when YHWH’s divine presence is evidently inescapable (Barker 2012).²⁵

Hoppe (2012) infers that the motif “day of YHWH” (יוֹם יְהוָה) is quite common in the prophetic tradition (cf., e.g., Isa 2:12; 13:6; Amos 5:18–20; Jer 17:16–18; Ezek 30:3; Joel 1:15). This day will speak about YHWH’s victory over all the enemies, but even Israel will not be saved from YHWH’s judgment because of the injustices the poor are suffering. People will abandon the other deities in favour of exclusive service to YHWH. When Isaiah describes the terrors people will experience on this day, he declares three times that people will need to hide themselves among the caves and the rocks in order to escape the unavoidable judgment of YHWH (2:10, 19, 21) (Hoppe 2012).

24 Cf. Isa 2:11, 17, 20; 3:7, 18; 4:1, 2; 5:30; 7:18, 20, 21, 23; 10:20, 27; 11:10, 11; 12:1, 4.

25 Dempsey (2014, 659) infers as follows: “Many prophetic proclamations were words of judgment. Amos inaugurated the concept of the Day of the Lord, which was a time of judgment and condemnation (5:18–20) for a people guilty of many social injustices (2:4–5, 6–8; 4:1–3; 5:7–12).” See also Eidevall (2017, 162–66) for a discussion of Amos 5:18–20 regarding the “Day of YHWH.”

In Isaiah 7 we find two narrative reports (7:1–9, 10–17) which are meant to be read together. These two reports are followed by a series of four “on that day” sayings which are made regarding future attacks from Egypt and Assyria (Nogalski 2018). According to Esterhuizen and Groenewald (2021b), the subsequent section (7:18–25) consists of four shorter passages (7:18–19, 20, 21–22, 23–25) and each of these four passages commences with the introductory phrase “on that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא). These four passages expand the warnings which had been made in the preceding narrative report concerning the king of Assyria (7:17), who will be the vehicle causing the day of judgment and disaster to take place. This will be a dim event for Judah as terror will take hold of the land and its inhabitants (see also Everson 2019; Kim 2016; Tull 2010). The first two “on that day” (בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) sayings describe what YHWH will do to the people and the land of Judah, and the last two statements specify the impact of YHWH’s actions on the people who are still living in Judah, specifically the agricultural devastation of the land (Nogalski 2018).

In Isaiah 11 the prophet spells out what it will be like for the remnants to return to Judah and Jerusalem. On “that day” a righteous rod from the stem of Jesse (Isa 11:1, 10) shall come forth and “from that day on the earth shall be full of knowledge of the Lord” (Isa 11:9). The forgotten remnant will return on a highway of his people from Assyria (11:16) and a new dawn of hope will replace the trauma which had been experienced.

At the end of the first subsection we have a short hymn of thanksgiving (12:1–6) for Jerusalem’s deliverance from despair, as well as praising God for the hope and salvation that is to follow. In this song of thanksgiving the prophet praises YHWH for the promise of hope after the disaster and experience of trauma. The thrice repeated occurrence of the noun יְשׁוּעָה (“salvation”) emphasises a crucial point here, namely the prophet expresses the hope expressed that “in that day” (1a) “the comprehensive salvation accomplished by YHWH will cause the trauma to come to an end” (see Groenewald 2017).

This song of thanksgiving concludes the first major subsection of the book of Isaiah and indeed functions as a meaning-making text when read against the background of trauma and disaster described in this first major subsection. This song transcends the trauma and anticipates survival and resilience, as the we-group hopes that God will do something notable to them. We have read of confrontation, warning, and promise and this community is now invited to become part of this story of salvation, hope, and resilience (Groenewald 2017). In other words, this is part of a process which has been described as “rebuilding shattered assumptions.” The rebuilding concept denotes the sway of the equilibrium from trauma to resilience and growth, and the forever glimmer of hope that lies in the intrinsic fibre of belief and hope.

Conclusion

In this contribution the focus was first of all on the movement which has changed the face of the studies of the book of Isaiah, namely the “unity movement” with its focus on the text of Isaiah as a literary unity—without denying the historical growth of the book of Isaiah taking place over many centuries. Secondly, the focus shifted to a brief overview of trauma theory—which has been used as a reading lens in biblical studies in the last two to three decades—with the implication of a trauma reading for the book of Isaiah. In the last part attention was paid to three important themes, namely the concept of the we-group (remnant), the woe oracles, and the theme of the day of YHWH and “this day.” These themes were briefly dealt with (only within Isaiah 1–12) as they have major implications for a more detailed study of the book of Isaiah—read as a literary unity—from a trauma perspective.

The prophecy of Isaiah as judgment and salvation oracles also represents the notions of despair and hope²⁶ as possible tension and trauma tendencies. The themes of the remnant, the woe oracles, and the day of the Lord are embedded in intergenerational memories and historical collective trauma. The reader is drawn into the imagined looming threat, but also out of the nothingness of despair.

The theologising, in other words, reinvention of the remnant-group is part of the process of rebuilding which can be described with the term resilience. This group has remarkably established itself to survive and to cope with the current life-experiences. However, the group has not only engaged in a reappraisal of events, but has also re-established itself in a positive and meaning-making way. We have seen that their resilience, as a rebuilding strategy, has shaped new opportunities with a shift of the locus. The book of Isaiah—when read as a literary unit—creates hope and grace that YHWH will give this group of remnants if they believe, and by extension, for all humanity.

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26 This correlates with hope theory as reflected in positive psychology. Cf. Scheffler (2022).

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