

The Isaiah Memoir Reconsidered

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It is now considerably more than one hundred years since the German Old Testament scholar Karl Budde first put forward in outline form his theory concerning a part of the book of Isaiah which has become known as the Isaiah Memoir. This theory, which is also found more or less in the classic commentary on Isaiah by Bernhard Duhm of 1892, rapidly established itself as an assured result of critical biblical scholarship, and certainly since Budde returned to the subject in a full-scale monograph in 1928 it has been included as a given fact in virtually every commentary or other study on Isaiah to have appeared since.

In this lecture, I want to try to do two things. First, I have long been uneasy about certain crucial aspects of this theory, and in recent years I have become bolder about saying so because of the fact that one or two other scholars have also begun to question its validity. There can be few scholarly theories in Old Testament scholarship which have had such a long unchallenged innings as this one, but the time seems now to have come to take a serious critical look at it. So, after explaining the theory more fully, I shall suggest a number of arguments which have tended to be shoved under the carpet and suggest that we can no longer hold to the view in the form that Budde maintained.

But I do not want to be exclusively negative this afternoon, and so secondly I shall move on to suggest an alternative approach. In doing this, I shall seek to introduce you to some of the more recent approaches to the understanding of the prophetic books in general, approaches which perhaps contrast somewhat with those on which many of us were brought up and which still underlie many sermons and more popular books on the prophets — that is to say in such places where the Old Testament is still considered worthwhile material for preaching and teaching!

Let me begin, then, by explaining the theory more fully, with apologies to those of you who may already be familiar with it. The opening chapters of the book of Isaiah consist largely of prophetic sayings which are heavily critical of the people addressed, mainly, it would be agreed, the inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE. With chapter 6, however, there is a sudden and marked change. This is the famous chapter which begins ‘In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple’. We notice two things at once: from sayings of the prophet we move into a section of narrative description, and furthermore that narrative is in the first person singular, ‘I’. In both respects, this is a complete change from what has gone before. The chapter continues with a scene in the heavenly court which leads to Isaiah volunteering to go to the people with the distinctly discouraging message that they are to have their hearts dulled and their ears and eyes closed until such time as they have been judged to the point of destruction and desolation.

Chapter 7 continues in this narrative vein with an account of Isaiah’s dealings with king Ahaz not long after in the crisis events which have come to be known as the Syro-Ephraimite

invasion. Probably as part of their plan to frustrate the imperialistic expansion of Assyria, the rulers of Syria/Damascus and of Israel/Ephraim had entered into an alliance which they wanted Ahaz to join. Ahaz appears initially to have been unwilling, but now the coalition have a plan to replace him by force with a puppet-ruler of their own choosing, and Ahaz is possibly wavering. Isaiah, accompanied by his son Shear-Jashub, meets Ahaz to encourage him to stand firm against this threat. When he offers Ahaz a sign from God to reinforce his belief in the reality of divine protection, however, Ahaz equivocates, whereupon Isaiah declares that God himself will give him a sign — the famous Immanuel sign, whose precise interpretation is so disputed. Amidst much that is uncertain, however, it seems clear that Isaiah believes that one way or another the foreign threat will be lifted within a short space of time. The last part of the chapter comprises various prophetic sayings relating to the Assyrian threat. While some of these may indeed come from Isaiah, it is generally considered that they have been given their present setting at a later stage in the formation of the book, and I shall not deal with them further here. It is interesting to note, however, that some of these sayings pick up and develop striking phrases from earlier in the chapter and elsewhere in Isaiah, suggesting that they represent reflection on and interpretation of the earlier words of the prophet.

With chapter 8 we return to our first-person narrative. The opening account of the birth of the unfortunately named son of the prophet Maher-shalal-hash-baz is again associated with the anticipated overthrow of the threatening coalition in the near future, so that this passage clearly relates closely to the narrative in chapter 7, and could be thought to continue it. A difficult passage follows. The meaning of the Hebrew is far from clear, and there is disagreement about how much of it is from Isaiah and how much might have been added later. In general, however, it seems to say that if Judah associates with the northern coalition in order to avert the immediate threat, the result will be a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire, because the Assyrians will still come and wreak even greater devastation. Isaiah then tells how he was encouraged to stand firm despite the opposition which he encountered. Because of this opposition, he concludes:

Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

This paragraph seems rather clearly to mark the conclusion of a section in the book. It is the end of the first-person narrative, and its apparent reference to writing down what has been said during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis because the teaching has been rejected by the majority of the population rounds the narrative off in a tidy fashion. It is as though Isaiah plans to withdraw from the public arena and to await developments in the future which he believes will ultimately vindicate his stand.

From this brief summary of chapters 6-8 of Isaiah it is but a short step to Budde's theory. As with most influential theories, it has not been adopted into the scholarly mainstream in precisely the form that Budde proposed, so that it will be better here to concentrate on what has been accepted by nearly all commentators. Again, we should not suppose that everyone agrees about every single detail. What we confront here, rather, is an overriding idea which is accepted as a starting point, a given conclusion to which each interpreter may add his or her own individual variations. It is this overriding idea, therefore, that we need to try to get hold of.

That idea is that the core of this extended passage is an account committed to writing by Isaiah himself shortly after the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, that it initially circulated as an independent document, and that its present position in the book as a whole is somewhat anomalous, because it begins with Isaiah's call. It originally stood at the very beginning of the book, according to Budde: he noted that the title of the book in 1:1 is unusual for a prophecy, 'The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw...', and suggested that this led straight into the description of the great vision in chapter 6. It was moved to its present position later out of chronological considerations (because it relates primarily to Ahaz's reign, whereas 1:1 states that Isaiah also prophesied under Uzziah), and can be seen to be an insertion into its present setting by the fact that it interrupts the connection between the material which immediately precedes and follows it. As a consequence of this theory, we have an extended passage of writing by a major prophet more or less contemporary with the events he is describing, and this has, therefore, to be the starting point for the study both of the composition history of the book and for an understanding of Isaiah's own thought and theology. The theory is neat and attractive, readily understood and congenial to our modern *penchant* for solid historical ground beneath our feet. It is really no wonder that the theory should have caught on so quickly and been more or less unchallenged for a century.

But is it true? It seems to me that there are several awkward facts about this material which suggest that the theory's enticing simplicity may have clouded our judgment somewhat. Let us look more closely at each of these points in turn.

First, contrary to what the theory would lead us to expect, the narrative in chapter 7 is not in the first person, but in the third. This fact comes as a surprise to some people when it is first pointed out to them, which is perhaps a testimony to the strength of the prevailing hypothesis which demands that the whole of chapters 6-8 must originally have been in the first person. Budde and many other commentators since have advanced the simple expedient of changing chapter 7 so that it is in the first person singular as well. Although this sounds extremely radical, it in fact involves only slight changes to the Hebrew text of two verses (3 and 13), so that Budde was able to suggest that this was nothing more than a slip in the course of textual transmission. While this might, therefore, seem to be a plausible change, and no more extravagant than many which have to be proposed in order to make sense of other parts of the Hebrew Bible, it seems to me to be quite unwarranted in the present instance, and to be driven by no more than the demands of the theory in the first place, a clear case of circular reasoning. Not only is there no properly textual evidence whatsoever in favour of the change, but more positively there is good reason to resist it. If the text has correctly preserved the first person in chapters 6 and 8, there would have been every incentive for scribes to preserve it also in chapter 7 had it ever been present. It is not, therefore, a case of scribes assimilating a passage to what they might have expected, but rather of their resisting precisely that temptation. From a textual point of view, this is a standard case where one should prefer the more difficult reading, which in this context is clearly the third person form. The fact that this has been accepted even by some who still cling to the idea of an Isaiah Memoir only reinforces the point.

The consequences of this situation for the theory seem to me, however, to be very severely damaging. If chapter 7 is indeed a third-person report, it is most unlikely to have formed from the first an integral part of a narrative by Isaiah himself comprising chapters 6-8. On a common-sense approach, which appears to be entirely justified in the present instance, we should ascribe chapters 6 and 8 to Isaiah and chapter 7 to someone else of as yet

undetermined date. That means that on the one hand we can no longer speak of the whole section as an Isaiah Memoir at all, and on the other that an earlier Isaianic account has been interrupted by new material at some later stage in the composition of the book, for reasons and with consequences which we have yet to explore. A first conclusion, therefore, is that we can no longer interpret every part of this section with reference to every other part as reflecting the original intention of the prophet himself, as Budde proposed.

The second argument against Budde concerns his claim that the insertion of the memoir has interrupted the original connection between the material which now precedes and follows it. He implied that this showed that the memoir was a pre-existing booklet which had simply been inserted as a block into its present setting. On the face of it, this is a reasonable, indeed a standard, way to proceed in trying to determine the pre-existing blocks of material out of which an Old Testament book might have been assembled, and arguments of this kind can be found in most critical commentaries. The question, of course, is whether the facts in this particular case fit the theory which is built upon them.

In brief, the bulk of chapter 5, which comes immediately before the memoir, is a series of woe sayings. Six times the prophet pronounces a threat against some section of the population by the use of this distinctive form: 'Woe unto them that join house to house', and so on. Similarly, in the section following the memoir, there is another extended passage with a repeated element, this time a sort of refrain, which occurs four times between 9:8 and 10:4 — 'For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still'.

This tidy situation is apparently spoiled, however, by two factors. First, there is an example of the outstretched hand refrain near the end of chapter 5, so that it seems to be separated from its partners by the memoir. Secondly, there is an isolated woe-saying at the beginning of chapter 10, introducing the paragraph which concludes in verse 4 with the last occurrence of the refrain. Not surprisingly, many commentators believe that each of these two apparently misplaced items once belonged with the material with which in formal terms they seem to be related, so that for one reason or another there has been a sort of double cross-over.

At this point, things get extremely complicated, because there is no agreement as to exactly what has happened, or why. Each commentator has a different idea as to where exactly the misplaced material originally stood, and some think that the process was accidental while others think it was deliberate. Fortunately, we do not need to go into such detail for our present purposes. The only point that we need to observe is that even if we simply remove the memoir, we are not left with a smooth join between the end of chapter 5 and either 8:19 or 9:8, which is what we should initially expect if Budde were correct. This can be most easily realized from the fact that the refrain, which in chapter 9 always stands at the end of its paragraph, does not come at the end of chapter 5. Rather, it seems to have been joined to the cycle of woe-sayings in verse 25 and then to be followed in verses 26-30 with a short paragraph which certainly sounds like the kind of material which, had it stood in chapter 9, would have come before the refrain.

Budde, of course, realized this, and so suggested rather vaguely that this apparent disorder was an accident, something caused by mistake at the time that the memoir was inserted. But needless to say that is to appeal to the theory to support a pure conjecture in the interests of trying to establish the theory in the first place — another clear case of circular reasoning, just like in the case of the supposed original third-person narrative in chapter 7 which we looked

at before. So far, therefore, both arguments that are thought to establish the hypothesis in fact depend upon postulating it in the first place in order to work at all.

In fact, I believe that the curious situation at the end of chapter 5 is capable of a far more plausible explanation, which I have set out at length in a recent book, and so shall not elaborate upon here. Suffice it to say that I agree that the end of chapter 5 probably belonged originally with 9:7-10:4, but that it was moved deliberately to its new position by a much later editor for perfectly intelligible reasons of his own. If this is right, it obviously can tell us nothing at all about whether chapters 6-8 were inserted as a pre-existing block or not. This whole line of argument gets us nowhere as far as the question of a supposed original memoir is concerned.

The third argument we need to discuss concerns the nature of chapter 6, the account of Isaiah's great vision of God. Budde assumed that this was a description of Isaiah's initial call, and that it therefore must originally have stood at the beginning of his account, rather like the call visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel at the beginning of their books. (Incidentally, this rather overlooks the fact that Isaiah's near predecessor Amos seems to have his call visions in chapters 7-8 of his book, not at the beginning, but we can let that pass for the moment.) This shows, according to Budde, that the memoir must have once been an independent booklet, and that its present odd position is due to the fact that it was only incorporated later into the wider book of Isaiah as it was then developing.

Now at this point I shall go out on a bit of a limb, so I had better warn you that not many scholars would agree with what I am going to say next. But I am afraid that that is not going to stop me. Many readers of Isaiah have puzzled over the question why Isaiah's call does not come first in the book, regardless of whether they have ever heard of the memoir theory, so clearly there is a problem to be faced here on any showing. At least, there is a problem if this describes Isaiah's initial call, but I should like to query whether this is necessarily so. After all, the passage is very different from the description of the call of Jeremiah or Amos, for instance, but that does not mean that it is entirely without precedent in the Old Testament. In fact there is one other account which is strikingly similar to it in some of its fundamental aspects, and that is the story of a prophet called Micaiah the son of Imlah, which is told in 1 Kings 22. The situation is that Ahab and Jehoshaphat, the kings of Israel and Judah, are planning to go to war against Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat wants divine sanction for this campaign, so Ahab obligingly provides 400 prophets to confirm that all will be well. Jehoshaphat is still not satisfied, however, and asks if there is not 'a prophet of the Lord' whom they can consult. Ahab admits that there is one, Micaiah, but he always says the opposite of what Ahab wants to hear. Nevertheless, he is summoned, and surprisingly he confirms the word of the other 400. Ahab smells a rat, however, and demands to hear the truth instead. Micaiah accordingly foretells a defeat. 'See, I told you so', retorts Ahab, whereupon Micaiah, without further invitation, explains the contradiction as follows:

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who shall entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner; and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said unto him, I will entice him. And the Lord said, wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt entice him, and shall prevail also: go forth and do so.

1 Kings 22:19-22

The close similarities with Isaiah 6 are obvious, and need no elaboration. The significant point for our present purposes, therefore, is to observe that this was clearly not Micaiah's initial call, but that it is an account of his presence in the divine court during the course of his ministry (as presupposed by some of the other prophets, though the details are not spelt out as fully as here) in order to receive a commission for some particular task. If there is validity to the argument from analogy, then we may suggest that the same is true of Isaiah 6. That does not, of course, mean that the book of Isaiah has been arranged on strictly chronological grounds (in fact, it certainly has not), but it does mean that we cannot argue from chapter 6 in support of the view that chapters 6-8 must once have formed an independent book. There are other possible ways of explaining the present position of chapter 6. For instance, an editor may have thought it appropriate that after collecting a series of woe oracles against the people in chapter 5 he should follow this with the prophet's 'woe is me' (6:5) once he stands in the presence of the divine majesty.

So far, we have allowed Budde's arguments in favour of the existence of an Isaiah memoir to determine our agenda, and have found them wanting. I want now to turn to three points about this material which will reinforce this negative conclusion, but which will also begin to point us in a more positive direction.

First, it is well known that 7:1 is more or less the same as 2 Kings 16:5, where it fits smoothly into the history's account of the reign of Ahaz. Unless we are to indulge in the gratuitously speculative suggestion that it has been added later to an original Isaiah memoir, it makes us wonder whether the third-person narrative of Isaiah 7 which it introduces has not in fact been drawn in its entirety from somewhere else altogether, somewhere much closer to the circles which produced what we know of as the Deuteronomic History, that great historical work which comprises all the books from Joshua to 2 Kings, which probably came out in a first edition late in the period of the monarchy and which was worked over into its present form at some point during the exile.

The second point reinforces this impression, for a number of scholars in recent years have observed that there are some striking points of connection and contrast between this account in chapter 7 and the stories about the later king Hezekiah in chapters 36-39. These points stretch all the way from the general and overarching to the specific and particular, and I cannot list them all here. Just to give a flavour, we may note that in both passages the king is confronted with an invading army which is threatening Jerusalem, that he is reduced to near panic, and that Isaiah offers him a reassuring 'fear not' oracle, backed up in each case by the offer of a 'sign'. A striking point of detail is the reference in both cases to the otherwise unknown 'conduit of the upper pool, in the highway of the fuller's field', which can hardly be coincidental. Alongside these similarities, however, there are marked contrasts between the ways in which the kings react, Ahaz, as we have seen, rejecting the way to deliverance offered by the prophet while Hezekiah follows the way of faith and is spectacularly delivered. On the basis of these and other such comparisons, we may agree with those who have concluded that there is a conscious attempt to contrast the responses of the two kings, one negative and the other positive.

Now, this contributes to our wider consideration when it is recalled that the longer narrative in chapters 36-39 is also recounted in virtually identical terms in 2 Kings 18-20. I think myself that there can be little doubt that it has been taken over from Kings with generally only very slight changes and inserted in its present setting in the book of Isaiah by a later

editor. At the same time, however, there are a number of features of these chapters which distinguish them from most of the other material in Kings and which associate them what we may loosely call Isaianic circles. So we need to envisage two stages in the development of this section. Originally composed in a shape about which we can only speculate by these Isaianic circles, it was used as a source along with the many others at his disposal by the author of Kings. It was then further reused at a later date by an editor of the book of Isaiah.

The thematic and stylistic similarities which we have noted between this material and Isaiah 7 lead us to conclude that this chapter too was composed as part of the same work sometime between the lifetime of Isaiah and the composition of the book of Kings. It is thus very clearly to be distinguished from a first-person memoir by Isaiah himself, a conclusion which our earlier discussion already made clear, and in a moment we shall have to consider why it has therefore been placed where it is by some later editor.

Before we come to that, however, there is one further observation I should like to make about the material which Budde included in the Isaiah memoir, and that concerns the opening of chapter 9. This is the familiar 'Christmas' passage which includes 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light', and which finishes with the section, 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given', and so on. It may not have escaped your notice that although this was included in the memoir by Budde my introductory survey stopped short of it. I suggested rather that there was a clear conclusion from a literary point of view at 8:16-18, where the first-person account comes to an end and where the reference to the writing down of the prophet's teaching marks a natural break in the text. We need not, perhaps, delay to consider the reasons Budde advanced for his anomalous proposal; the real reason is clear enough. Because the refrain poem begins at 9:7, Budde had to include everything up to that point in order to maintain his opinion that the Isaiah memoir had simply been stuck in between the end of chapter 5 and 9:7. Without that hypothesis, we do not need to get into contortions to see that this is just another example of material having been put in its present position by the editor or compiler of the book of Isaiah, and there are rather clear traces of his having done so which I have examined elsewhere and will not bother you with just now. The result of this and similar observations that we have been making along the way is that a rather different picture of how this part of Isaiah came into existence is beginning to emerge. Whereas Budde tried to demonstrate that the whole thing is as it is for the simple reason that Isaiah himself wrote every word as it stands, we are finding rather that we have material from a variety of dates, some of it certainly by Isaiah, some recording his words but committed to writing by others, some written by someone else but relating to Isaiah's activity, and yet more which may not have originally been by or about Isaiah at all, such as the last part of chapter 7, as is nowadays agreed even by most of those who otherwise still hold to the memoir hypothesis.

At first, this sounds as though it is perversely making everything as complicated as possible, whereas Buude's theory had the great advantage of simplicity. Well, that may be true, but it is only partially true. After all, his theory too had complications, but his involved incompetent scribes and copyists who messed up clear literary connections between passages, who thoughtlessly changed a first-person narrative into the third person, who misunderstood the nature of chapter 6 by not putting it at the start of the book, and who simply proceeded by dumping an additional booklet that they happened to have at their disposal in some arbitrary place in the otherwise seamless book of Isaiah.

Now, I have admittedly expressed that rather provocatively, because I want to use this discussion of a particular passage to illustrate the considerable change which has come about in the whole way that prophetic books are read today, a change which can in fact be linked with a much wider trend in the humanities and social sciences generally, and in particular such disciplines as history, literary study, and archaeology.

At the time when Budde was writing, and in fact for a considerable period after that, the study of history was dominated by a concern for great events of the past and the dominant personalities who were thought to have brought them about. In line with this, in the middle East at least, archaeologists concentrated their attention on the major administrative and military centres, with the hope of unearthing evidence for these significant events, such as a destruction brought about by war. Equally, a good deal of ancient literature, and the prophets not least, were studied for what they could tell us of these leading personalities and their impact on their times. The first duty of the biblical scholar, therefore, was to strip away whatever might have been added later in order to recover as accurately as possible the actual words and deeds of the prophet in question.

It is not difficult to see how smoothly Buude's theory fitted into this programme, and indeed it seems likely in retrospect that it was in fact driven by just such a concern in the first place. He seemed to have brought us in close touch with the very heartbeat of the great prophet himself.

More recently, and here of course I simplify to a considerable extent in the interests of clarity, two changes have come about. First, it has come to be appreciated that great people and movements are due to far wider considerations than the free exercise of will by particular leading individuals alone. The causes of particular events and the rise to prominence of specific individuals at such times are the outcome of many social, economic and environmental factors. Ideally these all need to be taken into consideration if we are to begin to understand the past, but much of our previous research strategy has not been designed to give us the kind of information that we need for this. Secondly, and in line with this first point, it has increasingly come to be realized that it is a strange kind of history which focusses so exclusively on only about 0.1% or less of the people of the past. For the majority of the population of ancient Israel, for instance, life was for most of the time affected far less by who was king or what battles he was fighting and far more by the slow development of improved agricultural techniques, by changes in climate, by the imperceptible changes in economic circumstances as trade increased or declined, and so on. The impact of these considerations on archaeological goals and methods in the middle east today has been extremely marked, as it has on the concerns of historians who work with the data which the archaeologists provide.

You are probably beginning to think that this has taken us rather far from Isaiah and the memoir, but not really. We need this jolt to help us appreciate to just what an extent our usual approach to the prophetic books has been shaped by these wider intellectual concerns of the past. The results of reading them primarily as an adjunct to the historical enterprise may be readily seen from the fact that some of the best known works on individual prophets in fact rearrange the sequence of the material in the book in order to make it fit with the commentator's view of the life of the prophet. Similarly, nearly all commentaries, as I have already said, strip away what they regard as material added later to the words of the prophet, and often give this so-called secondary material very little attention thereafter. These two procedures — rearranging and reducing — are clearly not study of the prophetic books

themselves but of something else which is thought to lie behind them, the prophet himself. Now, there need be no objection to this enterprise in itself, but it obviously must not be confused, as it so often has been, with a proper study of the books as artifacts in their own right, and neither must we allow a focus on the personalities of the prophets to lead us to downgrade the importance of those later writers, editors and others who gave us these books as they actually exist and who rarely, if ever, were the prophets themselves. In short, if a king is only of relatively greater interest than a peasant, then the same may be said of a prophet and his editor.

Admittedly, most of those now engaged in the study of the prophetic books do not articulate their concern in quite this way, but nevertheless whether consciously or not it is what seems to be going on behind the scenes. On the stage itself, to continue the metaphor, what we find is a concern to study these books as they are and in their own right; and often this literary concern is pressed in a strident manner against history altogether, whether that be the history of the prophet who stands behind the book or the history of how the book reached its present shape. In my opinion, this can go too far, and with deleterious consequences. As many would still agree, if it is apparent that there is what we might call historical depth to the text, something which we have begun to see in the case of our particular example in Isaiah, then the unravelling of that ought to help us to a better understanding of the finished product. To put it in another way, and one which sounds obvious as soon as it is said, if the book has grown up over a period of time, what we need to ask is what the later editor was doing when he added to or rearranged a passage, and what the effect of his activity is on the way that we now read even the older material. Earlier scholars, such as Budde, wanted to excavate back to the earliest form of the text and then go behind even that to the person of the prophet himself. Now, however, our interest moves in precisely the opposite direction, from the earliest material through the various stages in its growth to the point at which the present text emerges as the culminating point of the whole process, understanding of which is enhanced by such study over against a purely flat reading. For those of you who like such labels, you will realize that what I am trying to justify is redaction criticism. For the remaining part of this lecture, let us see, then, whether such an approach can help us with Isaiah 6-8, now that we may consider ourselves freed from the dominant memoir hypothesis.

We may start by noticing that the general shape of Isaiah 6-8 is not unparalleled in the prophetic literature. About eight years ago I wrote an article on Amos 7-8, and it was only much later when I began to turn my attention to Isaiah that I realized how close the similarities with Isaiah 6-8 are. In view of the fact that links of various kinds between these two prophets have long been recognized, it is somewhat surprising that this particular connection has generally been overlooked by the commentators, a fact which probably has something to do with the strength of the prevailing memoir hypothesis.

In these chapters of Amos, we again have the prophet's own account of a series of visions, and again the narrative is interrupted by a story about Amos in the third person. The way in which Amos's four visions are written up using the same identical formulae clearly shows that they once all belonged together. The interruption comes between the third and the fourth visions. The third vision indicates that God is about to test his people in some way, while the fourth states clearly that there is now no hope for the future — 'the end is come upon my people Israel'. The narrative which interrupts this sequence of visions is the famous one about the confrontation of Amos with Amaziah the priest at the sanctuary in Bethel, in which Amaziah sends Amos packing back to his native Judah. Amos protests by pronouncing that both Amaziah and indeed Israel as a whole will themselves be sent packing — into exile.

The most probable explanation for the inclusion of this story at this point, in my view, is to demonstrate that it is the rejection of the prophetic warning which is the final straw which will lead to the inevitability of final judgment as announced by the fourth vision which now follows. This was very much the viewpoint of the historians responsible for the history in the books of Kings, and it seems probable that it was circles closely associated with them which placed this story in its present setting in Amos in order to explain his visions in line with their theology.

Just before we look to see how close this is to the situation in Isaiah, we may note in passing that there is a further, though more remote, parallel situation at the start of the book of Hosea. Here, three different sorts of material have been brought together, a third person account about the birth of Hosea's three symbolically-named children following his surprising marriage in chapter 1, some poetic oracles in chapter 2 which combine references to the names of the children with a description of God's or the prophet's pursuit of his faithless wife, and a first-person account by Hosea about how he either marries or takes back Gomer in chapter 3. The shape of this extended passage is somewhat different from the two we are mainly concerned with, but it is interesting because it too combines first- and third-person narrative and is generally agreed to be the result of an editor assembling originally independent material in order to give an account of Hosea's troubled family life. It thus gives support to the view that an important part of the editorial process which has given rise to the prophetic books as we have them is the arrangement of earlier material. Even if every word of these passages is by the prophet in question or an accurate historical description of what he did, it is clear that a later interpretation can be put upon such material simply by means of the order in which this material is presented.

Returning now to Isaiah 6-8, the suggestion may be advanced that a similar process is responsible for what we have found here. If we look at the first-person material in chapters 6 and 8 on their own (and assume for the sake of the argument that Isaiah wrote them), we find a concern for the nation as a whole, characterized in each chapter by the title 'this people'. This expression comes twice in the difficult hardening saying in chapter 6:

And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed.

This phrase, which does not feature at all in chapter 7, comes three times in chapter 8, so that we may naturally assume that Isaiah wrote that chapter in part to indicate how, despite the promise contained in the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz at the start of the chapter, 'this people' sealed their own fate because they preferred political intrigue to the way of God as indicated by the prophet; they heard, but did not understand. The judgment determined by God would fall, though it is clear from the way that Isaiah continues that he did not expect it to take the form of a total end of the nation, more a sort of purging.

This relatively straightforward situation has been elaborated at a later stage, however, by the addition of chapter 7. Here, the focus is rather different, for it is no longer the people as a whole, but the king himself who is individually confronted by the prophet, and indeed a number of indications in the text make it clear that it is not the future of the nation so much as that of the Davidic dynasty which is at stake. The general shape of the events is certainly comparable with what we find in chapter 8, since here too Isaiah offers Ahaz a promised way

of deliverance, it is clearly rejected by the king, and in then delivering the Immanuel prophecy Isaiah seems to combine a rejection of the present ruling house with the expectation that hope may arise from a different quarter. So it is not the underlying theology which is different; rather, it is targetted on a different audience. Just as in the case of the story about Amos, so too here the fate of the nation is seen to be bound up much more in the decisions that its leaders take with regard to the prophetic word. And once again, this is very similar to the outlook of the historians responsible for the books of Kings. It is thus no surprise to find that, as we noted earlier, the opening of Isaiah 7 is more or less identical with a version of the same story in 2 Kings 16. In addition, we have already seen that Isaiah 7 has significant parallels with the stories about Hezekiah which are independently preserved both in Kings and later on in Isaiah, parallels which suggest that Hezekiah is presented as succeeding at the very points where Ahaz failed. Thus we may conclude that by his placing of Isaiah 7 where it now is our editor has used a much wider concern which developed later on in Isaiah's ministry and for some considerable time thereafter in order to add a further dimension to the interpretation of the difficult hardening saying of Isaiah.

This does not, I should interject before drawing towards a conclusion, necessarily mean that Isaiah 7 was invented from scratch by this editor. Indeed, there are a number of features in the text which strongly suggest that they are based on elements which go back to the time of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion itself. But as we all know, it is possible for the same event to be written up in many different ways and with very differing emphases, and it seems that the result of later editorial placement of material has resulted in two such emphases being juxtaposed now in Isaiah 7 and 8.

In this case, I should certainly agree that Isaiah's and his editor's general outlook was rather more similar than in the case of Amos, so that Isaiah 7 does not strike us with such a jolt as does the story in Amos 7. Nevertheless, the literary structure and the shift in perspective is so similar in both cases that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that similar processes have been at work in the formation of the two passages.

Now, there is no doubt that these observations could, and should, be further developed and refined. But I think I have said more than enough to enable me to draw the conclusion towards which we have been heading all along. Contrary to what so many of us have been taught for so long, it has become clear that reconstruction of the life and times of the great prophetic figures in the Old Testament, Isaiah pre-eminent among them, is not enough to enable us properly to read the books which are collected under their names. Indeed, we have seen in the case of the Isaiah memoir that a preoccupation with that kind of approach can be positively harmful, because it shuts our eyes to the literary character of the material under study. It is obvious from a moment's thought that there is an inevitable gap between the historical figure of the prophet and the literature which embodies his teaching, and this is only emphasized if we are right to conclude that even the order in which the material is presented exercises a considerable influence, of which we are not always as aware as we should be, on the interpretation of the material. Whereas earlier generations sought to cut through this later interpretative layer to the authentic voice of the historical figure himself, there is now a much greater awareness that this is often a hopeless quest, for this kind of reasons I have tried to exemplify in the case of what has long been regarded as one the parade examples. So scholarship has had painfully to learn to come to terms with this situation, and to direct its attention increasingly to the text which we now have and not just to the hypothetically reconstructed history which may lie behind it.

The result is, in my opinion, wholly beneficial. These texts are the product of a long process of growth and reflection, and we do them no justice if we discount everything which can be identified of this process as 'inauthentic'. The community is as much responsible for this process as the great figures who triggered it, and by careful study we can recapture some of the thought-processes of this community as they first heard, then recorded and finally in the light of subsequent experience sought to reapply the word first given through Isaiah or whoever else. In one of the most dramatic turnarounds in the history of these studies, it is now widely accepted that it is no longer proper even to separate the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem from that of the anonymous authors responsible for the second half of the book. They too show themselves to have been building on the work of the earlier prophet so that remarkably it is again possible to speak of the unity of Isaiah, not as a single author but as a single book. While my time is now more than exhausted, we should find were we to enter into this broad field that the chapters which have been the main focus of our attention this afternoon have played a significant role even in this much wider conclusion. What seems to have been the study of a rather limited portion of the Old Testament has ramifications which broaden out into a renewed appreciation of one of the most loved and familiar of all the prophetic books.

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