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The Kerygmatic Structure of the Book of Isaiah[1]

In his book *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55*, Roy Melugin concludes that, while Isaiah 40–55 is composed of originally independent discourses, they have not been arranged in a chance or haphazard manner. Rather, they have been put in this order because of the specific message that the author or editor wished to communicate.[2] Melugin uses the New Testament Greek term *kerygma* 'message' to define this organizing principle.

It is my conviction that this conclusion applies to the book as a whole, not merely to the portion often labeled Deutero-Isaiah. Whatever we may conclude about the date and authorship of the various parts of the book, it is not now in its present form because of chance or because of such mechanical matters as word similarities. Rather, the various components are in their present shape and organization because of the theological points that the author(s) and/or editor(s) were trying to communicate.

Fortunately, the older position that chapters 40–55 and 56–66 were composed as independent books without any necessary dependence on Isaianic writings preceding them has mostly faded away.[3] I say "fortunately"

1. This is a revised form of a chapter which first appeared in *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, eds. J. Coleson and V. H. Matthews (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 143–157, and appears here by permission

2. Roy F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah* 40–55, BZAW 141 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976) 175.

3. For an example of the older position, see Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction,* tr. P. R. Ackroyd (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965) 304, 332–46.

because such a position stems more from the early enthusiasm for source criticism, which sought to find independent sources behind every document, than it does from an attempt to understand the present book.[4]

An interim attempt to explain the phenomenon of the present book was the school hypothesis. This theory saw the present unit as the result of a school of prophets who were committed to studying and transmitting the Isaian corpus. Eventually, new books were written by members of the school, which, while still independent of First Isaiah (and later, Second Isaiah), nonetheless show the influence of the great eighth-century prophet's thought and outlook. Ultimately, other members of the school combined their colleagues' work with that of the master.[5] However, as Clements and others have recently noted, the existence of such a school is both unprecedented and unattested.[6] There is no evidence in support of the hypothesis except the present form of the book, which gave rise to the hypothesis in the first place and which can be better explained in other ways.

Recently, a number of studies showing the interdependence of the various sections of the book have appeared.[7] First Isaiah is not ignorant of Second Isaiah or even Third Isaiah. This observation is not new, but whereas it used to be said that these passages were insertions from the second or third Isaianic "sources," it is now argued that First Isaiah *in its present form* reflects a thoroughgoing impact of the ideas of the last twenty-seven chapters.[8] Furthermore, it is asserted that these last chapters were never meant to stand alone but were written in the full knowledge of the earlier work(s)

4. Eissfeldt dismisses the entire question of the origin of the present book in less than a page (ibid., 345–46).

5. William L. Holladay, *Isaiah, Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Pilgrim, 1987) 18. This book is an excellent example of the atomistic tendencies in critical studies that have reduced the book of Isaiah, and others, to collections of often artificially and accidentally collected phrases and sentences.

6. R. E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Int* 36 (1982) 119.

7. P. R. Ackroyd, "Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38–39." *SJT* 27 (1974) 329–52; Walter Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition," *JSOT* 29 (1984) 89–107; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 216–25; R. E. Clements, "Unity," 117–29; Clements, "Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah's Themes," *JSOT* 31 (1985) 95–113; Rolf Rendtorff, "Zur Komposition des Buches Jesaja," *VT* 34 (1984) 295–320; Christopher Seitz, "Isaiah 1–66; Making Sense of the Whole," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah,* ed. C. R. Seitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 105–26.

8. Seitz, "Isaiah 1–66," 113–14. See also H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) in which the author maintains that the present chapters 1–55 are largely the work of "Deutero-Isaiah," who was moved by the work of "Proto-Isaiah" to edit and supplement the work of that earlier prophet in the light of the exile.

and with the intent of bringing the ideas found there to their full development.[9] The implications of these findings for date and composition have been profound. Many now argue that the present book is the product of a thoroughgoing revision that took place sometime during the fifth century B.C.E. At that time the materials was ordered and reordered in such a way as to give a theological unity to the whole.[10] However one may receive this last suggestion, the new recognition of the wholeness of the book can only be greeted with enthusiasm. The dissection and fragmentation of one of the great pieces of world literature, not to mention one of the great pieces of theological reflection, has been nothing less than scandalous.

Scholars have identified several indications of the literary unity of the present book. Some of these relate to terms and concepts, such as, for instance, the even distribution of the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" throughout the book (twelve occurrences in chapters 1–39; thirteen in chapters 40–55).[11] Clements has also noted the recurrence of the theme of "deaf and blind," especially in relationship to Israel, in the various segments of the book (6:9–10; 35:5–6, 7; 42:18–20; 43:8; 50:4–5; 55:2–3; see also 63:17).[12] Rendtorff has pointed out the presence of "comfort," a leading idea in chapters 40–52, at such key junctures as 12:1 and 61:2.[13] The importance of redeemed Zion is another concept that is found throughout (1:27; 4:5; 12:6; 28:16; 29:8; 30:19; 33:20; 34:8; 35:10; 40:9; 46:13; 51:3, 11, 16; 52:1–2, 8; 59:20; 60:14; 61:3; 62:11; 66:8).[14] It has also been observed that the hymnic portions of 40–48 closely resemble the preexilic psalms (as do the similar portions of chapters 1–39).[15] Two other concepts worth mentioning are "wait" (8:17; 25:9; 26:8; 33:2; 40:31; 42:4; 49:23; 51:5; 59:9, 11; 60:9; 64:4) and rebellion (1:2, 20, 23, 28; 24:20; 30:1, 9; 36:5; 43:27; 44:22; 50:1, 5; 53:5, 8, 12; 57:4; 58:1; 59:12–13, 20; 63:10; 65:2; 66:24).

9. Rendtorff, "Komposition des Buches Jesaja," 320.

10. For example, see John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah* 1–33, WBC 24 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985).

11. J. J. M. Roberts, "Isaiah in Old Testament Theology," *Int* 36 (1982) 131–33; "The Holy One" with reference to God occurs a total of 35 times, 18 in 1–39 and 17 in 40–66. As noted above, 25 of these are "the Holy One of Israel," one is "the Holy One of Jacob," 3 times it occurs with a pronoun referring to Israel, and 6 times it stands alone (3 in 6:3).

12. Clements, "Unity of the Book of Isaiah," 125.

13. Rendtorff, "Komposition des Buches Jesaja," 298–99.

14. Ibid., 305–9.

15. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah* 40–66, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 56, 59.

But beneath and around these hints of the unity of the book is a conceptual unity that gives shape and substance to what must otherwise remain somewhat ephemeral. By this I mean that, lacking a central theological concern and purpose, the presence of these repeated terms and concepts proves little. But if such a concern can be identified, then these elements become confirmatory evidence and take their places as component parts of a larger whole.

Melugin's phrase *kerygmatic structure* is a happy one for Isaiah, I believe. For without question, Isaiah is a kerygmatic book. It might be urged that all of the prophets are kerygmatic in their strong emphasis upon proclamation of both judgment and salvation. But Isaiah is more so. From the opening verse to the last, the book resounds with calls to hear, to attend, to deal with, to take action. The prophet is depicted as proclaiming a message that demands response. Moreover, it is a message of good news, not only, as is especially the case, in chapters 40–55, but long before that. The message to Ahaz, though not received as such, was intended to be good news: "God is with us; we need not fear Rezin and Pekah" (7:4–10). But even before that, the announcement of salvation is clearly an integral part of the introduction (chapters 1–5), not only in chapter 1 (vv. 16–19, 26–27), but also in 2:1–5 and 4:2–6. Moreover, that note of hope caps each succeeding segment (chapters 6–12 end with chapters 11–12; chapters 13–24 are followed by chapters 25–27; chapters 28–35 close with chapters 32–35, etc.). All this is brought to a climax in chapters 60–66, which, without denying the people's inability to save themselves (63:1–65:7), nevertheless insist upon the absolute triumph of the grace of God.[16] Thus, if the message of any book has a claim to the term "kerygmatic," Isaiah's does.

But what precisely is the message of Isaiah? When we look to the first five chapters of the book, which most scholars, regardless of their convictions on authorship, believe were written to introduce the present book, two aspects are likely to catch the reader's eye. The first is the dramatic interchange between light and dark, judgment and hope. The judgment passages are almost unremittingly dark, from the bitter injunction to turn away from useless, dying humanity in 2:22, to the call for the howling winds of battle to destroy a nation so far gone as to call evil good (5:20, 26–30). Against this backdrop, the hope passages are almost unbelievably bright. They speak of a nation clean and pure, sheltering beneath a benevolent God (4:2–6), to whom all the nations will come to hear how the Creator intended them to

16. As one more element in all of this, remember that the prophet's name is *yešaʿyahû*—'Yahweh saves.'

live (2:1–5).[17] The sense of contrast between these emphases is heightened by the way in which they are alternated with each other. After chapter 1, which is largely judgmental, except for two brief rays of light (vv. 18–19, 26–27), comes hope in 2:1–5. But then we return to judgment in 2:6–4:1. This is followed by hope again (4:2–6), which gives way yet again to the judgment that closes the segment (5:1–30).

The second aspect that will impress the reader in these introductory chapters is the shocking abruptness with which these interchanges occur. There are no transitions whatsoever from judgment to hope, or back again—this in a book that is noted for such smooth transitions that scholars cannot agree in given cases whether the transitional statement is to be interpreted with the previous segment or with the following one.[18] Yet here there are no transitions, and we must ask why. Surely it will not do to posit a construction by mechanical means (e.g., similar words in two otherwise unrelated pieces) or by chance. This would be as if to say that one motif follows another in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony because both happen to have been written in the same key, or because the one happened to fall from a student's composition book at the moment the master was in need of another phrase. No, the abrupt juxtaposition of these kinds of ideas, whatever their ultimate source, not once, but twice, in these opening chapters, whether done by author or editor, must be seen as an indication of intent.[19] Furthermore, the inclusion of the prophet's call only after these introductory chapters must be taken into account

What does the structure and content of these chapters say about the kerygmatic intent of the book, about the way in which the author or editor wishes us to read the book? Without question it speaks about the inescapability of divine retribution. This is clear both by the way chapter 1 concludes and by the way chapter 5 concludes the introduction, Whatever the distant future may hold, it is *through* judgment, not around it, Whatever

17. Calling the Mountain of the Lord the highest mountain of the world is a figurative way of calling him the Creator.

18. Some of the debated transitional passages are 1:9; 2:5; 6:1–13; 9:1[2]; 17:9; 30:18; 32:5; 44:6–8; 45:23, etc.

19. While I insist that this kind of structuring is indicative of intent, I am cautious regarding hypotheses that depend on identifying elaborate structures, such as chiastic parallelism, extending over several chapters or even over the whole book. Too often these proposals seem to me to depend on misusing some of the data sooner or later. They also do not seem to take enough account of the way the motifs of the book appear and reappear. Thus, it is possible to create any number of these "structures," each one plausible and each one differing from the rest. An example in point is John Goldingay's "The Arrangement of Isaiah 41–45," *VT* 29 (1979) 289–99. On the other hand, see the proposal in chapter 13 below.

the ultimate destiny of Israel and Judah, their immediate destiny is one of destruction.

But against this bleak backdrop stands another certainty equally as real, one whose absolute nature is not mitigated in any sense by the certainty of destruction. This certainty is the realization of the Exodus promises: God's people will be holy, as he is, experiencing his continual guidance and protection (4:2–6; cf. Exod 19:3–6; Num 9:15–18). Whatever may come upon the nation in retribution for their rebellion (chapter 1), their pride (2:6–4:1), and their corruption of moral truth (5:1–30), God's promises will not fail.

But to what purpose are those promises? Was the covenant with Israel merely a fiat of divine love, one manifestation of that eternal Tao that reveals itself to other cultures in other ways? Hardly! The placement of 2:1–5 could not be more telling. The God of Israel is the *only* manifestation of the Tao, and his law was given to the Israelites so that it might be transmitted to the entire world. They cannot perform this function if they are filthy and blood-stained, but cleansing and holiness are not ends in themselves, either. Rather, they are necessary conditions if the ultimate end of the promises—worldwide acknowledgment of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—is to be attained.[20] Furthermore, this acknowledgment is expected to result in a rule of peace and equity (see also 9:5–6 [6–7]; 11:3–9; 25:6–9; 42:1–4).

Thus, the opening chapters of Isaiah tell us how we are intended to read the book. We are intended to see that as sure as destruction is apart from some radical and continuing change of moral direction (1:16–20), restoration is equally sure. But restoration is for a purpose, the purpose of revealing God to the world and drawing the world to him.

Investigation of the placement and distinctive content of chapter 6 confirms this judgment. The central focus of this chapter is the revelation of God in his moral perfection and in his world-filling glory. God must be known, both in his own essential character and in his relationship to the world. But this revelation can only be destructive to sinful humanity. Thus, Isaiah's response to the experience is not that he is limited, or finite, or even

20. Controversy continues to rage over whether Isaiah is "truly" universalistic. See Harry M. Orlinsky, *Studies in the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah*, VTSup 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 97–117. But unless conjectural emendation is resorted to and offending parts are excised, it seems to me beyond any qualification that the present book teaches that the God of Jerusalem is the sole God of the world and that the whole world must eventually come to him in submission, either voluntary or coerced. (Along with this passage, see 19:23–25; 25:6–8; 45:5–6; 66:18–19.) Whether this end is envisioned as resulting from Jewish "missionary" activity or simply as a result of God's activity on behalf of his people may be argued. But I do not think that the nature of the expected outcome can be disputed. See chapters 8 and 9 below.

mortal, but that he is unclean and so cannot exist in God's presence. This parallels the judgment passages in chapters 1–5. Alongside the Holy One of Israel (1:4; 5:19, 24; cf. 6:3) the hubris of humanity (1:31; 2:7–8, 11, 17) that fuels our rebellions (1:2–4, 3:9) would be laughable if it were not so hideous.

It is very significant that it is his lips and the lips of his countrymen that the prophet recognizes to be unclean. What else can this signify but the sense that the glory of God demands to be declared, but cannot be, either by the prophet to his people, or by his people to the world, because of a fundamental uncleanness of their lives? Thus, the experience of cleansing—a gracious act on the part of God, both unbidden and undeserved—is immediately followed by the commission to speak. Cleansing is not for its own sake, but for the purpose of communication. But communication cannot take place until cleansing, a cleansing by fire (cf. 4:4), has taken place.

Thus chapter 6 is in its present place in the book to answer the questions raised by the shocking oscillations of chapters 1–5, As the reader careens back and forth between grimmest judgment and highest hope, he or she must ask, "But how can this Israel, proud, rebellious, corrupt, become that Israel, clean, holy, displaying the truth for which all hunger?" Chapter 6 provides the answer. When the nation of unclean lips has shared the experience of the man of unclean lips, they can declare to the world the glory he has declared to them. Thus, chapter 6 is not merely the call of the prophet; it is the call of the nation.

This equation (cleansing is for declaration) emerges with special clarity again in chapters 40–48. It is present in the intervening chapters, as will be seen below, but in more muted ways In chapters 40–48 Israel is in the position of Isaiah in 6:5. They are undone. Their fundamental uncleanness has delivered them over to destruction and they, like him, can see no other possible outcome than dissolution and disappearance. But completely unexpectedly, as unexpected as the seraph's words after the coal had seared Isaiah's lips, comes the announcement of forgiveness, cleansing, and commission (40:1–11).[21] The captive Judeans will be restored; far from being cast off, they are called God's chosen servants.[22] What will these servants do? In chapters 40–48 (with the exception of 42:1–9, on which see below), they do nothing. They are strictly recipients of the unmerited grace of God.

21. The MT makes it plain that Jerusalem is the messenger of good news, not the recipient, in 40:9. Note the similarities between chapter 6 and 40:1–11. But 40:1–11 is not an independent call narrative. It assumes chapter 6 and builds on it. See Seitz, "Isaiah 1–66," 109.

22. Almost certainly the sense of "servants" in these passages is that of performers of religious service. This is the equivalent of holy priesthood in Exod 19:6. See Pss 100:2; 102:23[22]; 134:1–2; 135:1–2.

But by receiving that grace they become the vehicle whereby God will demonstrate to the world that he alone, the deity of little, defeated Jerusalem, is deity of the whole world.

The point just made needs to be emphasized, and this can be accomplished by comparison with Ezekiel 34–48, There too the message of gracious, undeserved restoration is declared. But there, except for one brief though important passage (36:16–36), the stress is solely upon the return and its blessed character. Here in Isaiah the emphasis is quite different. Here the point of Ezekiel 36:16–36 is expanded to the entire section. Virtually all of chapters 40–48 is given over to a discussion of what the restoration of Israel will demonstrate to the nations about God. Israel, without doing anything but receiving God's cleansing grace (40:2; 41:10; 44:1–5; 46:12–13; 48:9–11), will not only be the evidence to prove that God alone is God (41:25–29; 43:8–13; 44:6–8; 48:14–15), but also the evidence to cause the nations to come to Jerusalem in acknowledgement of him (45:14, 22–25).

The final section, chapters 60–66, confirms this understanding of the *kerygma* of the book. Although it is not as widely agreed that this section was written as a conclusion to the book as it is that chapters 1–5 were written as an introduction,[23] nevertheless, there is something of a concluding emphasis. The opening verses (60:1–3) make the point and set the tone. The glory of God has risen on Israel and its brightness will draw all nations to that dawning.[24] Thus, the promises of chapters 1–5 are realized. It is sometimes urged that the picture here is not of co-religionists or converts but of captives.[25] Surely this element is present (e.g., 60:11–12, 14; 61:5; 63:6; 64:2), but it is by no means the only or even the dominant note. The light to the nations concept not only opens the segment, as just pointed out, but also closes it (66:18–19, 23). Jews will travel the world over to proclaim the glory (cf. 6:3; 40:5–6) of God with the result that the dispersed Jews will be sent home in triumph as an offering to the Lord, and all will join in worshiping him. Nor is this emphasis merely confined to the opening and closing of the section, important as that is. It also appears within the segment at 61:9, 11 and 62:2. The point of these verses is, to be sure, not that the Jews

23. The uncertainty largely stems from the failure of these chapters to summarize the themes of the preceding chapters quite as completely as one might expect in a purposefully written conclusion. Also, it seems to introduce a certain amount of new material (especially in 63:1—65:7).

24. For those who believe that this is more than empty rhetoric, the coming of Christ, in whom the glory of God dwelt bodily (John 1:14) and because of whom all the nations have come to Jerusalem, fulfills the meaning of this passage precisely.

25. So Orlinsky, *Second Part*, 36. For a comprehensive treatment of this question, see chapters 8 and 9 below.

will proselytize the nations. But what they will do is entirely consistent with 2:1–5 and 43:8–13; the nations will be moved to acknowledge God's lordship and saviorhood when they see how he has redeemed and purified his people.

In the light of the foregoing observations, a strong case can be made that the kerygmatic message of the book centers on Israel's servanthood. To be sure, this actual terminology is only prominent in chapters 40–55. But as I have tried to show, the sense in which servanthood is used there, especially in 40–48, is precisely the same as the sense of chapters 1–6 and 60–66. It is as the chosen are graciously redeemed from their just judgment that the world will come to acknowledge God. It is as Israel accepts its role as servant of God that this goal, elucidated at the beginning of the book, reemphasized in the middle, and reiterated at the end, could be achieved.

With this realization in mind, we can now look at the rest of the book and see to what extent other sections complement and develop this theme. In chapters 7–39 the nations, and Israel's relation to them, is the special focus. The great question is: will Israel trust the nations to insure its future, or will it trust God? The historical sections, chapters 7–12 and 36–39, stand at either end as mirror images of each other.

In chapters 7–12 Israel refuses to trust God in the face of Rezin's and Pekah's threats. Instead of being a light to the nations, demonstrating to them God's trustworthiness, Israel turns for its hope to the very kingdoms of humanity it was to have led to God. As a result, Isaiah has to tell Ahaz that Assyria (whom Ahaz has trusted in place of God) will turn on him and destroy Israel. But the true test of God's trustworthiness, Isaiah then says, is that in spite of all this rebellion, God will graciously reestablish the house of David, restore his people from captivity, and establish his universal kingdom. It is when the people will have reaped the just results of their foolish choices and yet have received God's totally unmerited deliverance that they will be able to cry, "I will trust and not be afraid" (12:2). Furthermore, it is out of this deliverance that they will declare to the nations the exalted name and glorious deeds of the Holy One of Israel (12:4–6).

Chapters 36–39 move in the opposite direction, At the outset, the response is one of trust. The predicted outcome of Ahaz's choice is at hand—the Assyrian lion is clawing the door, the flood is up to the chin. Should Hezekiah surrender? God's answer through Isaiah is, "No, trust me" (37:6–7, 22–35). Hezekiah does trust God and the army of the mightiest nation in the world is destroyed. In place of the lack of trust in chapters 7 and 8, here is a clear manifestation of a lesson learned and of the validity of that lesson, But whereas the lack of trust and consequent destruction in 7:1–10:4 became a basis for a proclamation of eventual salvation in 10:5—11:16, here the

movement is in the opposite direction. Chapter 39 concludes with a prophecy of destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. What is happening? Two significant points need to be made. First, chapters 38 and 39, which detail Hezekiah's mortality and fallibility, make it painfully clear that he is not the promised Messiah of 9:5–6 [6–7] and 11:1–5. The miraculous deliverance might make it appear so, but he is not. For the ultimate confirmation of the truth that God is with us (7:14), that he is trustworthy, we must look to another. Our trust is in God, not in any expression of human perfectibility.

The second point that these chapters make relates directly to what we are identifying as a dominant motif of the book. According to 39:1, the reason the Babylonian envoys visited Jerusalem was because they had heard of Hezekiah's recovery from his illness. In other words, this was the time to perform the task of 12:1–6: to declare to the world the wondrous name and the glorious deeds of God, to announce absolute and unreserved trust of him. In fact, Hezekiah failed to do so. Instead of magnifying God, he magnified himself (cf. Num 20:10–12). Trust is a way of life, not a one-time or a two-time declaration, and Hezekiah typifies the short-term trust of the nation that would eventually result in its own destruction. Thus, we may argue that both chapters 7–12 and 36–39 are governed by the concerns we have already identified: the witness of redeemed servant Israel, both pivoting around the theme of trusting the nations or trusting God. Chapters 7–12 move from negative to positive while chapters 36–39 move from positive to negative. In so doing each sets the stage for what is to follow.[26]

Chapters 7–12, with their promise that God will deliver from the nations, raise the question of whether he can really do this. Chapters 13–35 insist that he can and use several literary structures to make the point. Chapters 13–23 consist of oracles against the nations which assert that all nations, not only Israel, are accountable to God. When God desires to restore his people, he can be trusted to do so, for no nation can stand in his way. Chapters 24–27 insist that all history, not merely Israel's, is under the dominion of God.[27] Chapters 28–33 use the examples of contemporary history to show the folly of the alliances a craven and corrupt court is advocating and conclude with the promise that the True King who will give right counsel is coming. Finally, the entire section is concluded by chapters

26. Chapters 36–39 are also a fitting conclusion to chapters 7–39 because they confirm what Isaiah had prophesied and show that he was right when he declared that God could be trusted. For further discussion of these points see my *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters* 1–39, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 627–98.

27. As noted above, it is in 25:6–8 that the redemption of all people on "this mountain" (cf. 2:2–3; 66:20) is declared. History will culminate in redemption for all who will submit.

34–35, which sum up the options in graphic form: turning the world into a desert if we refuse to trust God (chapter 34); and having God turn our desert into a garden if we will turn back to him and trust him in the end (chapter 35).

Thus we can say that, within the larger movement of the book, chapters 7–39 establish the basis for servanthood. That basis is trust in the sovereign grace of the only God. Unless one can trust ones master, servanthood can only be compelled and will always fall short of what it might be. Furthermore, the division also illustrates the fundamental problem that was first exposed in chapters 1–5: the idolatrous tendency of human pride to deify human glory and accomplishment, putting our trust in what is temporal, mortal, and fallible, instead of in the transcendent Creator to whom Israel's eventual deliverance would bear witness.

Chapters 36–39, while concluding the earlier division, also point the way to what follows. This is not merely in the more superficial sense of predicting the coming exile, but on a deeper, more ideological level.[28] Again, a question is raised that falls to the next section to answer, That question is, "Who is the Deliverer?" If indeed Hezekiah is representative of his people in the short-term nature of his trust, who will be the ideal king of chapters 9 and 11? If Hezekiah is not Immanuel, then who is?

Furthermore, these chapters raise another question that calls for an answer in this book. Isaiah has insisted in the most absolute of terms that this God is God of the whole world, able to deliver any who trust in him from any threat. This had certainly seemed true in the case of Assyria. But now the prophet says that God will not deliver Jerusalem from Babylon. Does this not call into question the whole theme of the book? How can the people of God testify to the world about the complete trustworthiness and absolute incomparability of Yahweh of Jerusalem if they are captives in Babylon? As chapters 1–39 are now structured, it is impossible for chapter 39 to be the conclusion of the book. It would not be a conclusion, but a negation of all that the book claimed.

In fact, chapters 40–66 are a necessary part of the message that was introduced in chapters 1–6. They show that the new situation after 586 B.C. will not negate what was said in chapters 7–39. God is so far from being overcome by the new historical situation that he can use the new situation to do something previously unheard of—deliver a captive people from exile. The new situation will provide an even better platform for demonstrating to the nations that the God worshiped on Mt. Zion is indeed their God, the

28. See Ackroyd, "Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile," for additional reflection on this topic.

only God. Furthermore, it is in this context that the completely unmerited grace of God can provide motivation for service. The stunning word that the Babylonian captivity did not mean abandonment by God was exactly what was needed to move the Judeans to put into actual practice the trust that had been so clearly taught in chapters 7–39.

But what about the deliverer? If not Hezekiah, then who? Is Cyrus the promised Messiah? Beyond this, chapters 40–48 raise their own question. How can sinful Israel become servant Israel? How can the nation of unclean lips be made the bearer of God's truth? Is it merely the fires of judgment that will take care of the problem? Or is something more at stake? Here we must consider the role of the "suffering servant." Undoubtedly, this is the single most controversial issue in the book. Literally hundreds of books and articles have been written on the topic in the last century alone. Thus, it is impossible even to offer a complete review of the alternatives here, much less solve the problem. We can only ask readers to consider again the evidence that two different servants are discussed between 41:8 and 54:17. The identity of the one servant is quite unmistakable: it is the nation of Israel. In all those instances where the nation is unquestionably referred to, the servant is described as being insensitive and fearful but encouraged with the promised benefits of servanthood. His role is to be a witness to grace.

But there are other references in which the identity of the servant is not obvious, and in these (42:1–9; 49:1–12; 50:4–11; 52:13—53:12) the servant's vocation is to bring justice and salvation to the earth (42:1–4; 49:6), light to the nations (42:6; 49:6; 50:10–11), and deliverance to the people, i.e., Jacob (42:6; 49:5–6; 53:4–9). The dominant characteristics of this servant are humility, uncertainty, being misunderstood, and pain (42:2; 49:4, 7; 50:4–6; 53:1–9). All of this is so enigmatic that Duhm proposed that these so-called "Servant Songs" were not a part of the original chapters 40–55.[29] Although this judgment was initially widely accepted, it has held less and less sway in recent years. In part this is so because there has been no unanimity about the origin of the songs or their function, either in their original format or after having been edited into the present structure.[30] The figures most often identified as this "suffering servant"—the nation, Cyrus, the prophet himself, or some other figure—all have one or more problems in the above descriptions that must be explained away.

29. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia*, HAT 3/1(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892) 311–13.

30. James Muilenburg, "Isaiah, Chapters 40–66," in *IB,* vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956) 406–8, argued that the "Servant Songs" were an integral part of chapters 40–55. T. N. D. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Axiom* (Lund: Gleerup, 1983), has argued forcefully for the same conclusion.

The point that I would like to make here is that an examination of the material in chapters 49–55, where three of these four passages occur, shows a major emphasis on the means and the fact of deliverance (note the repetition of "the arm of the Lord": 51:5, 9; 52:1; 53:1; cf. also 59:1). Gone are the disputations with the gods of 40–48 in which the possibility of deliverance from Babylon was established. Here the issue revolves around Israel's sin and God's willingness to deliver in spite of that previous condition. Two different atmospheres can be identified. In chapters 49–52, deliverance is being anticipated and Jerusalem is being encouraged to believe it can happen. In chapters 54–55, there is a lyrical call to participate in a deliverance proleptically seen as having already occurred. It can hardly be accidental that the segment that falls between these two is 52:13—53:12. What all of this indicates is that whoever this servant is, he is equated with the means by which Israel's servanthood is made possible. In chapters 40–48, the means is Cyrus, except in 42:1–9, where the servant is described in terms like those ascribed to the Messiah in chapter 11. The servant described in chapters 49–53 does not resemble Cyrus in any degree. This suggests that the deliverance the Israelites require is more than simply from Babylonian captivity. That the problem is Israel's sin is intimated in 50:1 and 51:1–3, 7. This is confirmed by the repeated references to suffering for sin, iniquity, and transgression in 53:5–12.

In sum, I would argue that chapters 49–55 deal with the deliverance from captivity to the *nations* and from what prompted that captivity, as was first predicted in 4:2–6 and followed up on in 11:10–16. Israel's witness to the nations depended on the evidence of God's power and his faithfulness. The identity of Cyrus is perfectly clear, but the identity of the other deliverer seems almost purposely enigmatic. Nevertheless, the *function* of this person seems clear: he offers himself in order to deliver from that which Cyrus cannot. It seems a telling comment that chapter 55, just prior to its mention of the nation's being a witness to the peoples and calling the nations together because of God's glory given to them (vv. 4–5) refers to the everlasting covenant with David. Is this an identification of the suffering servant with the Davidic Messiah? So it would seem. Thus chapters 49–55 tell us that the ultimate means of Israel's servanthood is the self-giving of the servant who is the ideal Israel (49:3).

The section of the book remaining to be discussed is chapters 56–59. Here we are reminded again that deliverance from Babylonian captivity does not automatically constitute one a servant of God. Unless there has also been a deliverance from sin to righteousness, from transgression to faithfulness, one is no better than a foreigner or a eunuch. In fact, foreigners and eunuchs can be very effective servants of God, if they will live in ways that

are consistent with God's character (56:3–8). Birthright and physical characteristics no longer define acceptability, Behavior is now the only criterion (57:3–4, 11–13). Thus, there is here an indication that the outreach to the nations that was forecast in 2:1–5 is already at work in the community. The segment closes with the admission by the prophet on behalf of the people that they are unable to do right or to bring justice in and of themselves (59:9–15a). Unless God delivers them by himself and imparts his spirit to them, they will be unable to speak the message of judgment and deliverance (59:15b–21).[31]

I have argued that the single most dominating theme of the present book of Isaiah, the one that gives shape to the message of the book and thus to the book itself, is that of servanthood. But it is a particular approach to servanthood. Israel is called to be the means whereby the understanding of God that it has received—that the God of Jerusalem is the sole Lord of History, the only Judge and only Savior—should become known to the whole world. This is only possible by means of an accurate knowledge of God and a life that is an accurate reflection of his character. Chapters 1–6 lay down these basic ideas. Chapters 7–39 reveal to the servants the essential trustworthiness of Yahweh and show that there is nothing and no one else who is worthy of such trust. They also reinforce the ideas of God's absolute sovereignty and his utter righteousness. The glory of humanity, as seen in the great nations of the earth, is as nothing in comparison to the Lord's. If Israel is to fulfill its function of servanthood, learning the lesson of God's trustworthiness is essential.

Chapters 40–48 demonstrate God's election of the Israelites and explain how their deliverance from political oppression will be the evidence of God's uniqueness. These evidences of underserved love will provide the motivation for servanthood. Chapters 49–55 address the problem of the means of servanthood. There is a deeper obstruction to servanthood than bondage or oppression. What shall be done about the sin that put them into bondage in the first place? Here it is the servant who becomes the Arm of the Lord to set them free.

31. In Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, 461–65, I argue that chapters 56–66 are arranged chiastically with 61:1–3 being the climax. See also chapter 13 below. Thus the point of chapters 56–59 is the same as that of 63–66, but in reverse order: Yahweh's purpose is that all peoples, whether foreigners or eunuchs (56:1–8) should "see his glory" (66:19) and "worship before" him" (66:23). But his light cannot shine out of Israel to the world because of their unrighteous lives (56:9–59:15a; 63:7–65:16). In order for that to change the Divine Warrior (59:15a–21; 63:1–6) must come and defeat their sin. Who is that Divine Warrior? He is none other than the One anointed by the Spirit to preach Good News, delivering them from their captivity (61:1–3).

It might be expected that Isaiah's message is completed with the great hymn of salvation in chapter 55. But it is precisely because of the nature of the message that the book cannot end there. The Judeans must not be permitted to believe that their servanthood is carried out merely because they have experienced the hand of salvation from the bondage of the past. Their mission to the nations will fail if there are no clear evidences of God's unique character in the changed lives of his servants. Thus, one of the recurring themes of chapters 56–66 is the inability of humans to live the life of God, but the divine ability to do in them what they cannot do in themselves. God will make of them a light to the nations. If chapters 49–55 deal with the work of God *for* his servants, these chapters focus upon his work *in* his servants, all to the end that, because of his glory (6:3; 35:2; 60:1, 9, 19; 66:18–19) shining in them, the whole world might come to recognize God as the only God (60:3; 60:19).

The book of Isaiah, in a way almost unparalleled in any other biblical book, reveals a complete picture of God: sovereignty, creativity, purposefulness, trustworthiness, faithfulness, justice, grace, holiness, glory, and patience. Surely the book's purpose is to declare Yahweh's uniqueness and to call people in every age to experience his deliverance and to share in the task of demonstrating his uniqueness to the watching world.