

Reinhard Gregor Kratz / Joachim Schaper (eds.)

# Imperial Visions

The Prophet and the Book of Isaiah in an Age of Empires



# Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments

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Reinhard Gregor Kratz / Joachim Schaper (eds.): Imperial Visions

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## Preface

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”<sup>1</sup> Gramsci’s famous dictum was intended to express the situation in which his generation found itself during the transition from late European imperialism to a new, bipolar world order which he did not live to see. While we today, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, live in a world with only one remaining empire (one that does not want to be perceived as such), research into certain historical empires and concepts of imperialism are very much the order of the day. Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* was published in 1987 and can be considered as one of the triggers of the overwhelming interest in the subject in recent years. The field of modern history is now saturated with literature devoted to empires and imperialisms, with Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* and Priyamvada Gopal’s *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Universities offer full-scale programmes in what is referred to as “empire studies” (cf. the course of study leading towards a “Graduate Certificate in Empire Studies” at the University of Houston), and there is an online publication named the *Journal for Empire Studies*. Popular culture is equally affected by this phenomenon: to name just one example, a collection of real-time strategy computer games is called *Age of Empires* ...

To some degree, all of this may be seen as a revival of the intense interest which the works of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, contemporaries of Gramsci, generated in the twentieth century, in historical situations very different from our own age. But then—is our own situation really so very different? We too live in an age of transition characterized by insecurity and a lack of orientation which is reflected in Gramsci’s dictum, just as his own age was.

The interest in empire(s) which has emerged in Assyriology, Old Testament/Hebrew Bible Studies and in other areas of the study of the ancient world expresses the same concerns that drive the work of the modern historians mentioned earlier. There are collaborative research projects devoted to questions of empire and imperialism, like the Centre for Advanced Studies (*Kollegforschungsgruppe* 2615) at the Free University of Berlin, under the title *Rethinking Oriental Despotism: Strategies of Governance and Modes of Participation in the Ancient Near East*, and the Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires at the University of Helsinki. The volume of collected essays that sprang from a conference held in Auckland in 2011

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<sup>1</sup> A. Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. by Q. Hoare/G. N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276.



is another example of the significant interest with which the topic meets in the study of antiquity, in this case in Hebrew Bible studies.<sup>2</sup> Published under the title *Isaiah and Imperial Context*, the volume explores Isaiah with foci on postcolonial interpretation and the “imperial imagination” that permeates the book.

The present volume, containing essays which are the fruits of the fifth meeting of the Aberdeen Prophecy Network, entitled “Imperial Visions: The Prophet and the Book of Isaiah in an Age of Empires” and held at the *Lichtenberg-Kolleg* of the University of Göttingen from the 18th to the 21st of October 2015, takes a different perspective. It is inspired by the fact that the book of Isaiah enables us to follow the vagaries of a particular prophetic tradition through five centuries under three different empires. While there is one essay that approaches Trito-Isaiah in a manner inspired by “postcolonial” readings (i. e., Joachim Schaper’s “Land, freedom and the kingdom of Yahweh in Isaiah 56–66: Trito-Isaiah as an example of resistance literature”), the other contributions focus mainly on the history of composition of the constituent parts of the book of Isaiah as well as their correlations with the political and cultural histories of the empires under which they were produced.

The first part of the volume provides contributions dealing with texts from First Isaiah and the discourse on the Assyrian Empire.

This section starts with Hugh Williamson’s essay, “The Evil Empire: Assyria in Reality and as a Cipher in Isaiah”. Williamson surveys the great variety of references to Assyria in the book of Isaiah and concludes that “Assyria was not used by Isaiah as a cipher for oppression in general of the people of God” — “‘The Evil Empire’ is therefore not a concept which developed broadly from the historical particulars but was Isaiah’s own initial preference as a way of drawing out the wider principles which he sought to convey”. Yet the vast majority of references to Assyria in the book of Isaiah originate in the exilic and post-exilic periods. The historical prophet’s allusions to Assyria generated numerous glosses which tried to apply Isaiah’s pronouncements to specific historical events, giving succour to “the ... powerless people of God in a spiritual Zion, so that the prospect of a future universalist hope developed at the end of the process”.

The overall survey of the references to Assyria is followed by two essays dealing with relatively early texts of First Isaiah and their correlations with the political history and ideology of the Assyrian Empire. Matthijs de Jong’s “Assyria and the Beginnings of the Book of Isaiah: Isaiah 6+8 and 28–31 Revisited” throws light on the connection between the Isaiah tradition and Assyrian imperialism. Since Isaiah’s messages and their earliest literary development relate to events such as the destruction of Samaria, Judah’s revolt against Assyria, and Sennacherib’s campaign

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<sup>2</sup> A. T. Abernethy et al. (ed.), *Isaiah and Imperial Context: The Book of Isaiah in the Times of Empire* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

of 701 BCE, de Jong explores Isaiah's and the book of Isaiah's response to Assyrian imperialistic ideology.

In his contribution, "From Carchemish and Calno (Isa 10:9) to the Book of Isaiah: Paradigmatic Images of Imperial Hubris in Isa 10:5–15", Reinhard Müller takes Julius Wellhausen's observations regarding Ashur in Isaiah 10 as his starting-point. Wellhausen, in focusing on "the paradigmatic character of the Assyrian empire ... depicts the Assyrians as the first who built a world-wide *imperium*, followed by Chaldeans, Persians, Greeks, and Romans". Müller is particularly interested in the significance of the theological interpretation of Ashur as "a tool or weapon in Yhwh's hand" in Isa 10:5–15 and explores its history and ramifications.

The following three essays are focused on the Isaiah legends in Isa 36–39 which have a parallel in 2 Kings 18–20 and 2 Chron 32. Jacob Stromberg's "Figural History in the Book of Isaiah: The Prospective Significance of Hezekiah's Deliverance from Assyria and Death" is devoted to exploring "both the historiographical logic that governed the formation of this material as well as the literary strategies set in place to give that logic voice in the text" and concentrates on chapters 7 and 36–39. Stromberg sees them as exemplars of "a single strategy that has as its aim the framing of the larger Isaianic corpus in terms of a particular understanding of history". The Isaianic corpus can thus be perceived not just as an assemblage of prophecies but as a prophetic history which lays the foundations for a future that is grounded in that history.

Ronnie Goldstein's "Military Terminology in Rabshakeh's Message, Hebrew עָרָב, and Akkadian *urbi*" concentrates on a linguistic detail which is significant for the historical and cultural context in which the legends were produced. Goldstein explores Rabshakeh's message in 2 Kings 18:19–35//Isa 36:4–20 and supports the view that memories from 701 BCE may well have been preserved in the story told in that passage. Goldstein focuses on the meaning of הַתְּעָרָב in 2 Kings 18:23–24//Isa 36:8–9 and discusses the implications of his new interpretation for the understanding of the relationship between the passage in question and other biblical and extra-biblical texts.

Graeme Auld focuses his attention on the parallels in 2 Kings 18–20 and 2 Chronicles 32. In his "Chronicles—Isaiah—Kings", Auld follows up on his earlier study "Recovering the Oldest Prophetic Roles in Biblical Narrative". Since the *opinio communis* holds that Chronicles as a whole is a reworking of the books of Samuel and Kings, Chronicles is typically not adduced when the development of 2 Kings 18–20//Isa 36–39 is explored. The *Fortschreibung* approach to the longer version in Kings and Isaiah enables exegetes to reconsider the relationship with Chronicles 32. Since the Chronicles account may not have been based on the report in Kings and Isaiah as we know it but on an earlier stage in that report's development, Auld reconsiders the relationship between 2 Kings 18–20//Isa 36–39 and 2 Chron 32.

The second part of this volume presents contributions which deal with Babylon and Persia in the Book of Isaiah and texts from Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic times.

Uwe Becker's study "Isaiah 24–27 and Intertextuality" acts as a transition from the first to the second part of our collection of essays. Becker explores how the concept of "intertextuality" is used in current research on Isaiah 24–27 to produce readings which avoid any *Literarkritik* and redaction-critical differentiations. In his view, "[t]he book of Isaiah confounds such unified readings, precisely because it is not a book in the modern sense". However, with regard to Isaiah 24–27 and its very special place in the book of Isaiah and its history, and as a "seemingly relatively independent, but also to a certain extent puzzling, collection", those seemingly independent, unified chapters invite a reading that is, on the one hand, informed by the concept of intertextuality and, on the other hand, needs a diachronic perspective on intertextuality. Thus, Becker offers a proposal of his own for the literary stratigraphy of this complex text which never existed as an independent collection. According to this proposal, the literary core of Isa 24:1–20 originally bridged the oracles against the nations in Isa 13–23 and the Assyrian cycle in Isa 28–31 and was successively supplemented (*fortgeschrieben*) to reach its present form.

In her "Babylon Revisited: A New Look at Isa 13 and Its Literary Horizon", Anja Klein focuses on the links between the Babylon oracle and other prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible, especially with regard to the prophecies in Jeremiah 4–6 and 50–51. While the *opinio communis* argues for the dependence of Jeremiah 50–51 on Isaiah 13, Klein explores indications of the reverse direction of dependence. She sees the Babylon oracle in Isaiah 13 as part of a wider theological and literary development that helped to interpret the significance of Babylon in post-exilic prophecies.

Reinhard G. Kratz's study, "Isaiah and the Persians", focuses on the question of ancient Near Eastern and especially Persian influences on the formation and dating of the book of Isaiah, such as the significance of the person of Cyrus and of concepts of creation, monotheism, universalism and dualism. Kratz argues against the assumption that religio-historical analogies make literary-critical distinctions superfluous and draws attention to the fact that even "the conjecture of a separate corpus in Isa 40–66 is based on a literary and redaction-critical hypothesis, as is the postulate of a 'Second Isaiah'" and that it is typically "accepted implicitly". By contrast, Kratz discusses the Assyrian, Late Babylonian and Persian traces in Second Isaiah and asks what they can contribute to assessing the dating and the unity (or lack thereof) of the texts in question.

Joachim Schaper's contribution, "Land, Freedom and the Kingdom of Yahweh in Isaiah 56–66: Trito-Isaiah as an Example of Resistance Literature", sees Isaiah as a key to a better understanding of Judah under the rule of three successive empires, and of the Judahites' political and religious reactions towards those

empires. In that vein, he interprets Trito-Isaiah as a document of intellectual resistance against the Achaemenids and their imperialism, focusing on the desire for land and freedom expressed in Isa 56–66.

Alison Salvesen's essay, "LXX Isaiah as Prophecy? Supposed Historical Allusions in LXX Isaiah", invites the reader to explore passages that are sometimes thought to be examples of updated prophecy and of historical allusions in LXX Isaiah and concludes that they may be due to "non-exegetical factors such as an alternative *Vorlage*, non-masoretic vocalisations of the text, or expected translation equivalents". There are other passages in LXX Isaiah, however, that indicate "a minor degree of contemporisation" in the book, and "more striking renderings" are also in evidence, as in Isa 11:16. Salvesen discusses the various examples and their significance in the history of interpretation of the Hebrew and Greek texts of Isaiah in the Hellenistic period.

The present volume thus navigates some of the key points of the history of Isaiah and the book named after him. We are glad now to present it to the academic public, in the hope that it may help further to elucidate the history of Judahite prophecy in an age of empires.

Göttingen and Aberdeen, September 2019  
Reinhard G. Kratz and Joachim Schaper



Part I: Texts from First Isaiah and  
the discourse on the Assyrian Empire



Hugh G. M. Williamson

## The Evil Empire: Assyria in Reality and as a Cipher in Isaiah

The name Assyria occurs 44 times in the Masoretic text of the book of Isaiah. Of these there is only one in the second half of the book, namely at 52:4,<sup>1</sup> where we are told that ואשור באפס עשקו, usually rendered “and Assyria oppressed them [my people] without cause”. This is part of a curiously disjointed passage whose position in the text is the source of disagreement. It might also be considered odd to find a reference in this part of the book to Assyrian oppression rather than, say, Babylonian. Be that as it may, given the immediately preceding reference to Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, it looks as though the author is here recording what he regarded as an element of his people’s earlier history. Although Assyria is therefore clearly the object of implied criticism, his reference is evidently to the historical Assyria of earlier times, so that to that extent his usage here is perfectly straightforward.

Within Isaiah 1–39 the majority of occurrences come in the third-person prose narratives—19 in chapters 36–38 and 3 in chapter 20—where there is no dispute that these are historical records relating to the historical Assyria. How historical these records are by modern standards may be discussed, but, as with 52:4, the author’s intended referent is not in question. I should associate the material in 7:1–17 with these other two passages in terms of composition history as well, but Assyria is not mentioned in the primary layer there, so that it is not necessary to defend that claim here against those who would see it rather as some part of an original Isaiah Memoir.<sup>2</sup> Assyria does come as the last word in that passage, however, in what is generally regarded as a later historicizing gloss (את-מלך אשור), and the same is proposed for the comparable occurrences at 7:20 and 8:7.<sup>3</sup>

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1 I can only dismiss as an ill-considered foible the suggestion that a reference to Assyria should be discovered by a change of vocalization at 43:4 to give “you are more precious to me than the Assyrians” (hardly a reassuring sentiment!); cf. K. Maalstad, “Einige Erwägungen zu Jes. xliii 4”, *VT* 16 (1966) 512–14, inexplicably followed by NEB and REB.

2 See provisionally my presentation in H. G. M. Williamson, “Deuteronomy and Isaiah”, in J. S. DeRouche/J. Gile/K. J. Turner (ed.), *For Our Good Always: Studies on the Message and Influence of Deuteronomy in Honor of Daniel O. Block* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013) 251–68, on pp. 257–61.

3 This is accepted by the large majority of commentators and others; see, for instance, J. Werlitz, *Studien zur literarkritischen Methode: Gericht und Heil in Jesaja 7,1–17 und 29,1–8* (BZAW 204; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 197–8; so correctly in this regard C. Balogh, “Historicizing Interpolations in the Isaiah-Memoir”, *VT* 64 (2014) 519–38, with references to some earlier literature, though I do not follow him in all his other proposals. For a broadly historical reading



This leaves us with 18 passages, of which some again seem to refer to the historical Assyria (e.g. 8:4, which is almost universally ascribed to the very earliest layer in the book) while others are equally widely regarded as very much later in composition, so that at best Assyria could refer only to the territory which Assyria had once occupied (e.g. 27:13) or perhaps even as a cipher for one of the later empires (whether Persian or Seleucid) which followed them (19:23–25, including no less than six occurrences).<sup>4</sup> All this leaves us with a relatively small number of passages where there is room for significant disagreement about dating and consequent interpretation in relation to the nature of the reference to Assyria. Needless to say, other material needs also to be drawn into the discussion where a later writer may have expanded on an earlier reference to Assyria.

An important step in the scholarly study of Isaiah was taken when H. Barth published his thesis with Assyria explicitly in his title: *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit: Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesajaüberlieferung*.<sup>5</sup> Starting from an analysis of chapter 10 – a cardinal passage in all these debates—he sought to demonstrate that a number of passages which were unlikely to belong to the work of Isaiah himself and which had been dated later (sometime in the post-exilic period) by most scholars should in fact be attributed to the days of Josiah when the Assyrian Empire was in terminal decline. One of the great attractions of this theory was that the references to Assyria could still, therefore, be taken at face historical value while avoiding the danger of retreating to an implausible eighth century date. The changed historical circumstances also gave a reasonable explanation for the changed nature of the prophecies, namely the anticipated fall of Assyria, whereas in earlier oracles it had been portrayed as God's instrument of judgment upon his people. The ideological clash could thus be accommodated and explained by this new theory.

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of all this material within the context of the study of empire, see M. J. Boda, "Walking in the Light of Yahweh: Zion and the Empires in the Book of Isaiah", in S. E. Porter/C. L. Westfall (ed.), *Empire in the New Testament* (McMaster New Testament Studies Series 10; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011) 54–89. For a variety of approaches to the subject in general, see A. T. Abernethy et al. (ed.), *Isaiah and Imperial Context: The Book of Isaiah in the Times of Empire* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

4 For a defence of the Persian identification, see, for instance, H. Wildberger, *Jesaja* (3 vol.; BKAT 10; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978 [English title: *Isaiah* (3 vol.; Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 2.279–81]), 2.743–6, and of the Seleucid option see, for instance, O. Kaiser, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (2 vol.; ATD 18; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973 [English title: *Isaiah: A Commentary* (2 vol.; OTL; London: SCM, 1974), 2.109–12]), 2.90–92. These and other views are surveyed by P. M. Cook, *A Sign and a Wonder: The Redactional Formation of Isaiah 18–20* (VTSup 147; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 118–22—and he is surely right to dismiss the assumption of an eighth-century origin for 19:23–25 by S. Dalley, "Recent Evidence from Assyrian Sources for Judaeon History from Uzziah to Manasseh", *JSOT* 28 (2004) 387–401.

5 H. Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit: Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesajaüberlieferung* (WMANT 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977).

Barth's conclusions were comparable in some respects with those reached at around the same time by Vermeylen, who cites Barth's unpublished dissertation in his own work while at the same time criticizing it as being too narrow and restricted,<sup>6</sup> so that there are equally important differences between them that need to be acknowledged. Again with some (though fewer) differences, the theory was quickly and enthusiastically embraced in England by Clements,<sup>7</sup> through whom in the English-speaking world the theory came to be known more familiarly as the Josianic Redaction. Many others have adopted it since in one shape or another, among whom in the context of contributors to the present volume I note especially de Jong.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of what Barth ascribes to this redactor, whether by fresh composition or by expansion of inherited material, may be noted from his own summarizing chart on p. 299 (and note too the italicized material in the translation in the appendix on pp. 311–36): 5:30; a small part of 7:20; 8:9–10; 8:23b–9:6; 10:4b(?), 16–19; 14:5 with one element in 6, 20b–21, 24–27; 17:12–14; 28:23–29; 29:8; 30:27–33; 31:5, 8b–9; 32:1–5, 15–20.<sup>9</sup> Within this, there are explicit references to Assyria at 7:20, 14:25, and 30:31. Of these, however, he agrees that the reference to the King of Assyria in 7:20 should be ascribed to the same historicizing glossator as the others noted above,<sup>10</sup> so that it should not be ascribed to his redactor. That, therefore, leaves only two references to Assyria in the redactor's own material. Of those places where the name occurs which have survived my introductory screening, he seems to attribute 10:5, 12b, and 31:8a to Isaiah's own composition (I use that as a shorthand way of referring to the earliest layer in the book without necessarily engaging with the detailed question of whether Isaiah himself actually wrote it), so leaving 10:24 to the exilic period and 11:11, 16; 19:23 (x4), 24, 25, and 27:13 to the post-exilic period; he also regards 23:13 as later (see p. 7) though without, so far as I can see, specifying its date more precisely.

I have shown elsewhere that there are serious grounds for questioning whether the arguments in favour of identifying an *Assur-Redaktion* are cogent, and I do

6 J. Vermeylen, *Du prophète Isaïe à l'apocalyptique: Isaïe, I—XXXV, miroir d'un demi-millénaire d'expérience religieuse en Israël* (2 vol.; EB 3; Paris: Gabalda, 1977–1978), 1.25.

7 Among a number of his publications, we may here note especially R. E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem: A Study of the Interpretation of Prophecy in the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 13; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), and *Isaiah 1–39* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980).

8 M. J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (VTSup 117; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

9 For a broad survey of earlier research on many of these texts, see R. Kilian, *Jesaja 1–39* (Erträge der Forschung 200; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 40–106.

10 Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiaseit*, 198–200. He also ascribes the references in 7:18 and 8:4 to this glossator, though in these two cases I disagree; in my analysis, 7:18 is altogether later, whereas 8:4 is probably an original part of the composition.

not intend to revisit that discussion here.<sup>11</sup> In fact, however, it transpires from our rather tedious statistical survey that, despite the way the virtues of that theory have been lauded, it does not really make any major difference to the essential exegetical task of exploring why, how, and to what effect the name of Assyria came to be used in literature well after the demise of the historical empire. While I will sometimes refer in what follows to the reasons why I disagree with some of the details of Barth's analysis, it is clear that we need in any case to look elsewhere for an answer to our questions.

As we try to build up a picture of the early Judean perception of Assyria, the first curious feature to note is how infrequently it is in fact named. Probably only two passages would be generally recognized as early. At Isa 8:4 we find: "before the lad knows how to call 'Daddy' or 'Mummy', the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried off (and placed) before the king of Assyria."<sup>12</sup> It is true Barth wanted to include this final phrase in the verse among the group of generally agreed historicizing glosses, and there can be no doubt that the verse could be construed meaningfully without this phrase. It nevertheless seems more likely to be an original and integral part of the narrative; as Wildberger suggests, it may further imply a triumphal march before the victorious king. It seems more probable to conclude on balance that the glossator derived his wording from the present verse. Either way, the reference here is relatively neutral from an ideological standpoint. It is Syria and Israel who are the subject of defeat in this passage—presumably, therefore, a reassuring word to Judah, whom they were threatening—and the king of Assyria thus represents the source of Judah's security. Although the military arm of the empire will no doubt have been in mind in the background, it is merely the person of the king who here represents the victors. From Judah's point of view, the whole emphasis in the passage is on the defeat of her enemies, not the status of Assyria.

More significant by far is the reference to Assyria in 10:5: "Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger and the staff of my rage [it is in their hand]."<sup>13</sup> This introduces a

11 H. G. M. Williamson, "The Theory of a Josianic Edition of the First Part of the Book of Isaiah: A Critical Examination", in T. Wasserman/G. Andersson/D. Willgren (ed.), *Studies in Isaiah: History, Theology and Reception* (LHBOTS 654; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017) 3–21.

12 For the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine singular to express an indefinite subject, see GK § 144d; JM § 155d–e; J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar—Syntax* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 13; I have therefore rendered as a passive. With regard to the preposition לְפָנָיו, I am not aware that there is any justification for the rendering "be carried away by" (e.g. NRSV), as it is never used to introduce the agent. I prefer to appeal to the well-established idiom in which prepositions may imply an appropriate verb of motion; cf. GK § 119e: "one will carry off ... (and place) before".

13 Despite the fact that the LXX goes its own way in this verse, it can be shown to presuppose a rendering close to, if not identical with, MT. T also paraphrases, but the other versions follow MT, while 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> and such fragments of 4QIsa<sup>c</sup> of this verse as survive also attest the same text.

poem which has certainly been expanded in later times by vv. 10–11 and 12.<sup>14</sup> Greater uncertainty concerns identifying the close of the poem. As we shall see later in an important step in the overall argument of the present analysis, vv. 16–19 should certainly be construed as a later development of the poem. The position of v. 15 is less clear, however. The first half of the verse uses rhetorical questions to reinforce the main “message” of the preceding passage while the second half consciously links this back to the wording and imagery of the opening v. 5. Many commentators find this a satisfying conclusion to the earliest layer of composition, and I am in agreement with them.

Others disagree. Some express themselves memorably but in a manner that is closer to a value judgment than an argument: “Dies weitschweifige, gegen die vorhergehenden Strophen so stark abfallende, jedenfalls sie nicht fortsetzende Gedicht kann nicht von Jes. sein” (Duhm). Vermeylen finds the use here of “rod” and “staff” differs from its use in v. 5 and so consigns the verse to a later hand; like Marti before him, he compares 29:16 and 45:9 as illustrative of the same sort of outlook. Opinions here may evidently differ, but it seems difficult to me to press such considerations as far as these commentators have done.

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There is thus no ancient evidence to support emendation (though many have been proposed). There have traditionally been three different ways to try to construe the text as it stands, but they all face difficulties: (i) everywhere else in this poem Assyria is taken as a singular, not a plural as in בָּדִים, and (ii) the obviously expected parallelism of מַטֵּה וְעֵמִיד and שֶׁבֶט אֲפִי is interrupted by הוּא בָּדִים. More recent attempts to circumvent these difficulties either by appeal to the enclitic *mem* or by postulating the AXB pattern of syntax (here, effectively a broken construct chain), are equally unconvincing. In my opinion, the most likely solution remains that which has been widely proposed, namely, without any change to the text, to bracket בָּדִים הוּא as a later explanatory gloss, added for good reasons which need not, however, detain us now; see, for instance, F. Hitzig, *Der Prophet Jesaja* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1833), who seems first to have proposed this; H. Ewald, *Jesaja mit den übrigen älteren Propheten* (Stuttgart: Krabbe, 1840), 281–3; B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HKAT 3/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892; <sup>4</sup>1922); K. Marti, *Das Buch Jesaja* (KHAT 10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1900); G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Isaiah, I–XXXIX* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912); J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters, XXXIX* (CBSC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897); A. Condamin, *Le livre d’Isaïe* (EB; Paris: Lecoffre, 1905); G. W. Wade, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, <sup>2</sup>1929); G. R. Driver, “Glosses in the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament”, *Orientalia et Biblica Lovaniensia* 1 (1957) 123–61, on p. 125; H. Donner, *Israel unter den Völkern* (VTSup 11; Leiden: Brill, 1964), 142; A. Schoors, *Jesaja* (De Boeken van het Oude Testament 9A; Roermond: Romen & Zonen, 1972); C. Hardmeier, *Texttheorie und biblische Exegese: zur rhetorischen Funktion der Trauermetaphorik in der Prophetie* (BevTh 79; Munich: Kaiser, 1978), 230; Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit*, 23; J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33* (WBC 24; Waco: Nelson, 1985; 2nd rev. edn, 2005); de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets*, 127.

14 In this I agree with many other commentators. For my own defence of this position against a few recent attempts to salvage some elements from these verses for the original poem, see my article H. G. M. Williamson, “Idols in Isaiah in the Light of Isaiah 10:10–11”, in R. I. Thelle/T. Stordalen/M. E. J. Richardson (ed.), *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History: Essays in Honour of Hans M. Barstad* (VTSup 168; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 17–28.

More important, because more evidence based, is the argument of Blenkinsopp, who takes v. 15 with what follows on the ground that the use of a rhetorical question followed by comment is a common feature of prophetic discourse and this comment Blenkinsopp finds in vv. 16–19, introduced by “therefore”. He lists some ten passages in support of this, but in fact not one of them includes “therefore”. In my opinion his correct observation of this technique is fully satisfied by v. 15 on its own, with the second half commenting appropriately on the questions in the first half (see also below on the use of “therefore” to introduce material which has been added later). On this basis, too, I do not share the view of some that merely the first half of the verse should be accepted as original.<sup>15</sup>

Nearly all commentators have agreed that the original poem should be ascribed to Isaiah. The sentiments expressed fit well with his outlook, as we shall see, and the allusions to the Northern Kingdom, as found in v. 6, are clearly his,<sup>16</sup> whereas there are no allusions apparent to later passages (contrast vv. 16–19). The apparent climax of the list of place names in v. 9 as well as the sense of immediacy that the verse exudes also fits best within Isaiah’s period.<sup>17</sup>

The opening verse is of crucial importance for our investigation. There are three differences in the usage of “woe” here from all those which have come previously in ch. 5 and at 10:1. First, unlike all these previous woes, this is directed against a foreign power, and is not internal to Judah or Israel; it is thus cast in the third person and not addressed directly to the object of the woe. The same considerations apply at 28:1–4, where again a “foreign” nation is in view and where again the woe is cast as third person; this shows both that this feature is not an argument against an early date and also that the author was sensitive to practical

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15 Wildberger, *Jesaja*, 1.279–81; Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit*, 23; H. Liss, *Die unerhörte Prophetie: Kommunikative Strukturen prophetischer Rede im Buch Yesha’yahu* (Arbeiten zur Bibel und ihrer Geschichte 14; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003), 145; so correctly W. Dietrich, *Jesaja und die Politik* (BEvTh 74; Munich: Kaiser, 1976), 119; J. Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk bei Jesaja: eine Untersuchung zur biblischen Theologie* (AThDan 24; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 117; Kaiser, *Jesaja*; S. Mittmann, “‘Wehe! Assur, Stab meines Zorns’ (Jes 10,5–9.13ab–15)”, in V. Fritz/K.-F. Pohlmann/H.-C. Schmitt (ed.), *Prophet und Prophetenbuch: Festschrift für Otto Kaiser zum 65. Geburtstag* (BZAW 185; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989) 111–32.

16 There are close analogies for the wording at 8:1–4 and 9:16–18, and see also 5:25 and 28:18, for instance.

17 Only a few have disagreed with this assessment. U. Becker, *Jesaja—von der Botschaft zum Buch* (FRLANT 178; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 200–5, draws particular attention to some similarities with 36:18–20 and 37:12–13 (curiously, see also Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*), though of course it is difficult to be sure which way any dependence may lie (cf. A. Laato, “About Zion I will not be silent”: *The Book of Isaiah as an Ideological Unity* (ConB, OT Series 44; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1998), 104–5); furthermore the references to idol gods, at least, relate to the secondary material in vv. 10–11. His arguments have been examined in detail by Liss, *Die unerhörte Prophetie*, 166–71. For the few contrary opinions about Isaianic authorship in previous scholarship, see the list at Barth, *Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit*, 26 n. 50, and add Kaiser, *Jesaja*.

circumstances in relation to the intended target, not just writing in complete abstraction. Second, this is the only example of this type of prophecy in Isaiah 1–12 which is presented as divine speech rather than as a prophetic word.<sup>18</sup> Third, what immediately follows is not the source of the implied condemnation but rather a statement of God's purpose in the current circumstances. From one point of view, therefore, the immediate sequel is surprising indeed, since it is not the cause of woe against Assyria; that comes only with v. 7 and beyond.<sup>19</sup> The passage is thus quite distinctive within the Isaianic woe-cycles. The crucial point to derive from all this is that Assyria is God's chosen instrument of judgment on his people but at the same time is itself the subject of the woe. In addition, as the poem proceeds Assyria seems quickly to become embodied in the person of its king (see especially v. 8).

If these are the only two references to Assyria which could have been included in the earliest collection of Isaiah's sayings (see below on 10:12 and 31:8), then we should draw the obvious consequence that the threatened judgment which we find elsewhere was deliberately cast in a more generalized manner. Although no doubt most hearers or readers would have quickly thought of Assyria, the aim of the descriptions was not so much to pinpoint the agent of God's work as to develop a portrayal that would impress, if not intimidate, the first audience, presumably to provoke an appropriate response. We may look briefly at a few obvious examples.

Perhaps the clearest example comes in 5:26–29. I share the widespread (though not universally agreed) view that this passage has been moved to its present position for reasons that need not detain us now from its setting as the last stanza in the refrain poem in 9:7–20.<sup>20</sup> It thus describes the culmination of God's attempts to draw his people back to himself in repentance by way of a series of admonishing events. It implies an end of the process so that it cannot be followed,

18 De Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets*, 127; A. van der Kooij, "Nimrod, A Mighty Hunter before the Lord!": Assyrian Royal Ideology as Perceived in the Hebrew Bible", *Journal for Semitics* 21/1 (2012) 1–27, on p. 14; 1:24 is not a woe-oracle, of course.

19 Calvin suggested that "woe" had different meanings, including that it could be used simply as a call to attention, and that one should translate accordingly in varied contexts (see here the "O" and "Ho" of AV and RV respectively). In the present case, however, it seems unlikely that the word serves only as a summons (J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on The Prophecies of Isaiah* [repr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978; original publication in 2 vols: 1846–1847]), especially as (unlike at 1:24 and 17:6, to which K. Schmid, *Jesaja 1–23* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2011) appeals) the woe introduces the passage rather than coming within it and to that extent is difficult to put into a wholly different category from 10:1 and the series in chap. 5.

20 I have discussed this in H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1–5* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 400–3; see also the wider but equally relevant issues discussed in *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 125–43. As part of this redactional activity I have speculated that an originally singular "nation" has been made plural in its new context (v. 26) in order to align the verse with its partners in 11:12 and 49:22. The continuation with singular verbs strongly supports the view that "nation" was originally singular as well when it stood with the rest of the poem, but that is no reason to emend it here.

as the previous stanzas were, by the refrain that implies that there is still a way of escape. The image of the invader is vivid in the extreme but curiously lacking in localized specificity. He comes swiftly “from the ends of the earth” (see also, for instance, Deut 28:49; Isa 10:3, 30:27, etc.) but is tireless and immaculate. Weapons are at the ready and his chariots’ wheels are like the whirlwind. Indeed, he can be likened to a lion about to pounce on its prey. All this suggests that the description is consciously open; Assyria may well have been in mind at one level, but such a description can also equally legitimately be used of Babylon (as perhaps by the redactor who placed the material in its present position) and indeed of any of their later successors.

Another passage that fits this same pattern, in my opinion, is 1:7–8, which refers to “aliens” and “foreigners” again in circumstances which can be easily related to the events of 701 BCE, with Judah completely overrun, many of its cities destroyed, and Jerusalem blockaded, but which is equally open to alternative, or rather complementary, applications. Indeed, its setting within the first chapter of the book, which seems to have been assembled in some way as an introduction to the whole, suggests that early on it was already being reapplied to the later Babylonian invasion.

Now, it is true that there are other ways of referring rather clearly to Assyria without the use of the name itself, and twice in what I regard as early material we find references to “the River”.

At 8:7, in contrast with “the waters of Shiloah which flow gently and joyfully”,<sup>21</sup> we find a reference to “the mighty and many waters of the River”. The imagery of the River for the Assyrian invading forces is clear enough, and indeed the Assyrians themselves could use flood-like imagery to describe the defeat of their enemies. In addition, several of the following descriptive terms can be used equally for rivers or for troops, and certainly the language of the second half of the verse and the first half of v. 8 is more obviously suitable for a group than an individual. Thus the word for “mighty” (עצום), according to Lohfink,<sup>22</sup> “oscillates between ‘numerous, many’ and ‘mighty, powerful’”. Both aspects are always present, with only the context determining which is uppermost in each case. Furthermore, since the same oscillation applies to רב, “many”, their use in combination, here as elsewhere, does not pre-determine that only the numerical element is in mind. In this connection, Wildberger, *Jesaja*, cites the following passages as referring “mighty” specifically to armed forces: Deut 4:38, 7:1, 9:1, 11:23; Josh 23:9; Joel 1:6, 2.2, 5, 11. In these passages the word is collocated both with “great” (גדול) and with

21 For discussion of this admittedly difficult text and an attempt to justify the rendering above, see H. G. M. Williamson, “The Waters of Shiloah (Isaiah 8:5–8)”, in I. Finkelstein/N. Naʿaman (ed.), *The Fire Signals of Lachish: Studies in the Archaeology and History of Israel in the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Persian Period in Honor of David Ussishkin* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 331–43.

22 N. Lohfink, *ThWAT* vi., 313–14 = *TDOT* xi, 292–3.

“many” (and once with “without number”). It is thus likely that, despite the fact that the adjectives here strictly speaking qualify the waters, the words have been chosen as a pair to invoke invincible power through numerical strength rather than that the words “many waters” have been chosen in isolation as a recollection of the primeval chaotic waters, as has occasionally been suggested;<sup>23</sup> contrast 17:12–13, where the phrase certainly occurs with the threatening nations more generally in view. This imagery of the river continues directly in the last part of the verse (so that the slightly different interpretation in terms of the king of Assyria is clearly interruptive, confirming the opinion expressed above that it is one of the series of historicizing glosses). The picture of an overflowing river as a destructive agent of judgment occurs elsewhere as well; cf. Jer 47:2 (the possibility of literary dependence does not seem to have been raised before, but there are several noteworthy coincidences of vocabulary between this verse and Isa 8:7–8). While “channels” (אֲפִיקִים) is used elsewhere quite often as a general word for streams or watercourses, its association here with the Euphrates has sometimes been thought to recall in particular the way in which that river is divided into canals and the like around major cities. This seems improbable as an allusion, however, especially in view of the parallel with “overflow(ing)...its banks”. More likely the description simply reflects the experience (in Palestine as much as in Mesopotamia) of overflowing rivers at times of heavy rain or with melting snow; cf. 28:2. Finally, the first part of v. 8 indicates even more clearly that imagery rather than physical reality is the dominant feature of this passage as it depicts the flood waters reaching into and, indeed, overwhelming, Judah. It is true that only here is “sweep on” (הִלֵּךְ) used of flood waters, but its use elsewhere with reference to a storm wind (21:1; Hab 1:11) makes its sense here clear enough. The remaining vocabulary is common.<sup>24</sup> Thus, without in any way denying that the reference to

23 Reference is generally made to H.G. May, “Some Cosmic Connotations of *māyīm rabbīm*, ‘Many Waters’”, *JBL* 74 (1955) 9–21, though he mentions our passage only in passing (p. 18 n. 37).

24 Of particular interest in this regard are the significant parallels in ch. 28. There, in a passage usually associated with the background to the 701 BCE events, though occasionally linked with the earlier Syro-Ephraimite affair (for a survey of opinions, see J. Dekker, *Zion’s Rock-Solid Foundations: An Exegetical Study of the Zion Text in Isaiah 28:16* (OTS 54; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 86–9), the prophet represents the Jerusalem leaders of the people as saying *inter alia*, “when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us” (שֵׁשׁ שׁוֹטֵף כִּי עָבַר לֹא יִבְאוּנָהּ, v. 15), to which the prophet’s response is, “when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then you will be trodden down by it” (v. 18). While there are some significant textual issues in these verses which would have a bearing on our issue, MT seems to combine two images to describe the threat, that of scourge (itself perhaps picked up by the later 10:26) and of an overflowing river. In addition, the imagery is also exploited in v. 17: “the hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters will overflow (מִיַּם יִשְׁפּוּ) the hiding place”. It seems that the leaders are portrayed as rejecting Isaiah’s previous warning but that he reaffirms it (note in addition that the language in 28:18 about being “trodden down” may echo the earlier 28:3; since one cannot be literally “trodden down” by an overflowing scourge, the mixing of images is again suggestive of their dependence



Assyria is in view, it is noteworthy that its introduction by way of a reference to the River is primarily determined by the need for a contrast with the waters of Shiloh and the desire to introduce an image which could be exploited for purposes of the depiction of judgment by colourful and resonant language.

The case of 7:20 is less straightforward:

<sup>20</sup>On that day the Lord will shave  
with a razor hired<sup>25</sup> in the regions beyond the river, even the king of Assyria,  
the head and the hair of the feet,  
and it will also sweep away the beard.

First, my arguments that it is an original fragment of an Isaianic saying will by no means be universally agreed, but I summarize them here as making what I regard as a strong case: (i) Unlike all the other verses in 7:18–25, this is the only one which does not include a strong collection of citations, reinterpretations, or reapplications of earlier Isaianic material. (ii) It starts with *ביום ההוא*, that is to say without a conjunction and without the *והיה* which precedes the phrase at the start of each of the other sections; (iii) it alludes to Assyria alone as the threat to Judah, which suits the eighth century satisfactorily; (iv) it makes use of a colourful image that is not paralleled elsewhere in Isaiah; and (v) it uses the divine title *אדני*, “Lord”, in contrast with the commoner *יהוה* in v. 18; this was characteristic of Isaiah’s language in ch. 6. There is thus much to be said for concluding that v. 20 may have been added to 7:1–17 at an early stage, perhaps when that passage was edited and added into its present location; the inclusion of the gloss *במלך אשר* might come

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on usage elsewhere). In further support of this general position, we may note also that at 30:28 there is another probable echo of our verse, thus pointing to it once again as the source from which these later passages drew (“And his breath/wind is as an overflowing stream [*נחל שטף*], that reaches even to the neck [*עד צואר*]”). We may conclude that the significance of our passage was recognized early and exploited more than once. For broader reflections, though without specific reference to the connections I have suggested here, see R. G. Kratz, “Rewriting Isaiah: The Case of Isaiah 28–31”, in J. Day (ed.), *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (LHBOTS 531; New York: T & T Clark, 2010) 245–66.

<sup>25</sup> *תער* is usually masculine. Apparently assuming that to be the case here too, the Masoretes have vocalized as construct before *שכירה* as an (feminine for) abstract noun (“an object for hire”?). This would be awkward in itself (though cf. Wildberger, *Jesaja*), but more significantly *תספה* at the end of the verse seems to confirm that *תער* here is feminine. (There is, in fact, quite a large number of nouns which may be of either gender; see K. Albrecht, “Das Geschlecht der hebräischen Hauptwörter”, *ZAW* 15 (1895) 313–25 and 16 (1896) 41–121; M. Zehnder, “Variation in Grammatical Gender in Biblical Hebrew: A Study on the Variable Gender Agreements of *הָדָר*, ‘Way’”, *JSS* 49 (2004) 21–45, with further bibliography. A. J. Koller, *The Semantic Field of Cutting Tools in Biblical Hebrew: The Interface of Philological, Semantic, and Archaeological Evidence* (CBQMS 49; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2012), 220, speculates that the feminine form might have been preferred here because the word is being used metaphorically.) We should thus vocalize with the definite article (*בַּתְּעָר*), as Hebrew idiom requires (against normal English usage; cf. GK § 126q–t), and take *השכירה* as an adjective in agreement.

from the same hand, comparable with *את מלך אשור* in v. 17. Where the saying would have been preserved in the early Isaianic corpus cannot now be known. It could well have been pronounced in connection with Isaiah's opposition to Hezekiah's policy in the years running up to 701 BCE.

Second, even if early, the saying is now so fragmentary that we should need to be cautious about drawing any far-reaching consequences from it. While it is usually interpreted as reflecting the Assyrian threat against Judah, the possibility that it originally referred to the threat against either Aram<sup>26</sup> or Israel<sup>27</sup> should not be discounted. If the latter were the case, it would come much closer in conception to 8:4.

Third, while, as already indicated, the reference is usually thought to be to Assyria, this is not entirely clear. The wording used, *בעברי נהר*, is noteworthy: the plural of *עבר* is rare, and *נהר* without the definite article in such a position is also unusual. While *he* and *yod* were more alike in Palaeo-Hebrew than in the square script, so that the suggestion to read *בעבר הנהר* is not impossible,<sup>28</sup> it is not clear that we should emend just to avoid the unusual,<sup>29</sup> especially if the unusual elements can, in fact, be paralleled elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> While the suggestion to emend to the singular form is perfectly possible, of course, I tentatively leave MT unchanged and suggest that it is consciously less specific than the glossator supposed. Even on the usual view the verse expresses itself in the lightest possible way, downplaying Assyria's own might by way of referring to it as merely a hired tool. While not as strong as 10:5, the implication is clear that there is a specific job to be done and no more; there is nothing in the image used to suggest that Assyria will be a permanent foreign oppressor.

Finally, as with 8:7, the glossator evidently felt that the reference needed greater specification, so that in both the two verses we have just considered we have comparable glosses referring to the king of Assyria. It has rarely been asked why the glossator felt the need to intervene here and elsewhere in the way that he did but it may be that our survey of the relevant material as a whole suggests a solution. For the most part, the passages of Isaiah which most probably refer to the threat as envisaged by the eighth century prophet are deliberately expressed in general

26 So M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (FOTL 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 157–8; for discussion of this and other uncertainties, see especially G. Eidevall, *Prophecy and Propaganda: Images of Enemies in the Book of Isaiah* (ConB, OT Series 56; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 32–6.

27 See Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk bei Jesaja*, 99.

28 LXX *πέραν τοῦ ποταμοῦ* renders more or less as it was bound to do, and so is weak evidence for emending to *בעבר הנהר*, *contra* Gray, *Isaiah*, 141.

29 Cf. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja*; A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel* (7 vol.; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1912), 4.30–1.

30 For “plurals of local extension”, see GK § 124*b*, and for the absolute use of *נהר* see Jer 2:18; Mic 7:12; Zech 9:10; Ps 72:8.