CHAPTER FIVE

THE EXODUS MOTIF
AND THE JOURNEY THROUGH
THE WILDERNESS MOTIF

Introduction

Isa 40–55 contains imagery related to the traditions of the Exodus and to the journey through the wilderness. In the present context, the contention pertains to the interpretation of this imagery: does it point forward to a Second Exodus, and, if so, does that constitute an argument for a Babylonian setting of the text? A quick survey of the history of interpretation of Isa 40–55 shows that the Exodus imagery, more than any other literary motif in this text, has been regarded as evidence of a Babylonian setting of Isa 40–55. It is commonly held that this imagery serves as a prototype for describing the anticipated Second Exodus out of Babylon, and that this focus on a Second Exodus, in turn, suggests a Babylonian setting for the text as a whole. According to this line of thinking, the exiles portray themselves as returning captives led by God through a wilderness transformed into fertile land.

In this chapter, I shall focus on three issues. First, I shall demonstrate that the Exodus imagery in Isa 40–55 is not the central topic but one theme among many. Secondly, I shall argue that the occurrence of Exodus imagery does not always demand the motif of a literal Second Exodus. Rather, in most of the cases where it occurs, it is better understood figuratively, serving as a typology for the transition from slavery to freedom and from death to life, than as a description of the physical journey from Babylon to Judah. Finally, I shall challenge the assumption that the use of Exodus imagery constitutes an argument for a Babylonian setting of Isa 40–55. The chapter begins with a history of interpretation, followed by a detailed discussion of each of the individual passages.
The Exodus tradition is one of the most important and influential traditions in the Hebrew Bible. It tells how YHWH led the people out of bondage in Egypt through the water of the Red Sea and through the perils of the wilderness to safety in the land of Canaan. This tradition soon became universalized as a symbol for the transition from slavery to freedom and from death to life, and, as such, it came to dominate much of the thinking about YHWH as found in the Hebrew Bible. In this sense, the Exodus became the *mythos* of the origins of Israelite religious consciousness and nationhood, as well as the pivotal example of God’s care and provision for his people (cf. Amos 2:10; 3:1–2; Mic 6:3).¹ In Isa 40–55, the Exodus motif reflects four key theological ideas: (1) God’s act of grace as it preceded the covenant in the wilderness (e.g. Isa 43:4), (2) God’s acts on behalf of Israel in the eschatological future (e.g. Isa 51:3; 43:19–20), (3) God’s act of creation, emphasizing that Israel’s redeemer is the creator of the world (e.g. Isa 51:9–11) and (4) God’s kingship (e.g. Isa 41:21).²

Many interpreters do not stop here, however, but argue further that the Exodus motif in Isa 40–55 alludes to a *Second Exodus out of Babylon*, along the same lines as the first Exodus out of Egypt. Blenkinsopp is typical in this respect when he states that “the concrete historical situation of Israel in Babylon and the place of the exodus-theme in the tradition at that time would have made comparison with the original situation in Egypt inevitable”.³ Along the same lines, Propp maintains that the explicit aim of the wilderness theme was “to encourage people to return to Judah”.⁴ The theme of a Second Exodus, in turn, has often been understood to confirm the already assumed Babylonian setting of Isa 40–55. As pointed out by Lund, the commonly accepted practice

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