CHAPTER THREE
ISAIAH 56:1-8

A. INTRODUCTION

The structure, unity and coherence of this small unit are issues which have provoked a variety of responses from redaction critics and commentators. These responses have varied from an acceptance of the material’s original unity to redaction-critical schemes which divide these eight verses into as many as three, originally independent, fragments.

While most commentators agree that the structure of 56:1-8 is tripartite (vv. 1-2, 3-7, 8), many have been sceptical about the original unity of these verses. Because of their more general content, the change in metre, and the third person references to Yahweh in v. 3, vv. 1-2 are often separated off from vv. 3-7. Verse 8, because of the change it creates from the present and specific to the future and general, has also been a frequent casualty in the work of redaction-critics, and is often referred to as a “fragment” which had no original connection to vv. 3-7. Thus, Renker, Kraus, and Lescow all regard v. 8 as an addition to the original unit 56:1-7.2

Koenen describes v. 1 as an independent divine oracle which the redactor wrote at the opening of chs 56-66 as a general heading to the whole collection. In his opinion, v. 2 functions as a transition to vv. 3-8, and also (along with 57:1-2, 20-21) forms part of the framework for the first main section of chs 56-66 (56:2-57:21).3 Vermeylen ascribes vv. 1-2 and 5b to a redactor, who wrote them in order to connect vv. 3-7* to the preceding material (chs 40-55). Verse 8 was then added later by a redactor in order to round off the material in 40:1-56:8.4 According to Pauritsch, vv. 1-2 and 8 were originally independent pieces which a redactor used to form a

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1 One exception is W. Kessler, who divides the unit into vv. 1, 2-7, 8 (Gott geht es um das Ganze: Jesaja 56-66 und Jesaja 24-27 [BAT 19; Stuttgart, 1960], p. 21).
3 Ethik, pp. 11-27.
4 Du Prophète, pp. 454-458.
framework for vv. 3-7. Volz thinks that the connection between vv. 1-2 and 3-8 is very loose, so that vv. 1-2 are either a redactional framework for, or were written as a general introduction to, vv. 3-8. Westermann regards vv. 1-2 and 3-8 as independent entities which form, together with 66:18-24, a framework for the material in chs 56-66.

B. THE UNITY AND COHERENCE OF 56:1-8

Although many redaction critics have suggested breaking up these verses into separate, smaller components of varying age and provenance, there are good reasons for challenging any such divisions, and for stressing the original integrity and coherence of this unit.

First, the criteria employed by many redaction critics for dividing up 56:1-8 appear suspect. Koenen attempts to create a division between vv. 1 and 2 because the term יָדַל in v. 2 is not found in the mouth of Yahweh anywhere else in the Old Testament, so that v. 2 cannot be a direct continuation of the divine speech in v. 1. However, simply because this term does not occur elsewhere in the mouth of Yahweh does not mean that it could not occur here. The term יָדַל, although most common in the books of Psalms and Proverbs, does occur twice in Isaiah (30:18; 32:20), and nowhere else in the prophetic literature. If, as Meier notes, the voice of God is more dominant in the second part of the book of Isaiah (chs 40-66) and “the poet’s voice has become the voice of God in most of the text”, then it is not altogether surprising that phrasaeology which is characteristic of chs 1-39 should now find its way into the mouth of God in chs 40-66. While v. 2 may contain characteristic “wisdom” terminology (a trait which Koenen also claims to uncover in 57:1; 57:20-21), this is not a sufficient reason for separating it from the so-called genuine divine oracle in v. 1, since the whole Isaiah tradition is marked by the influence of the wisdom tradition. Further, as Whybray has noted, the term יָדַל may have derived from the intellectual tradition, but “the fact that the majority of its occurrences are in contexts of a quite different kind would render it useless as a criterion of the influence of that tradition”.  

5 Gemeinde, pp. 42-43.  
6 Jesaja II, pp. 202-204.  
7 Jesaja 40-66, pp. 244-245, 249.  
8 Ethik, pp. 12, 15.  
9 Speaking, p. 258.  
11 Ibid., p. 126; cf. also his comments on the use of the term יָדַל as an indicator of the influence of the wisdom tradition (ibid., p. 125).