CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DATING AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ISAIAH

56-66

On the basis of the foregoing analyses, a new starting-point can also be presented for the investigation of the dating of Isa. 56-66. The unit 65:1-66:17 contains in 66:1-2 a reference to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, which began in c. 520 B.C. and was completed in c. 515 B.C. This allows us to date the poem 65:1-66:17 to these years (520-515 B.C.). From this point, we can work backwards, in order to suggest a broad chronological context for the remaining units in chs 56-66.

The four units 56:1-8; 56:9-57:21; 58:1-59:20; 65:1-66:17 are most likely the work of a single author, and reflect a developing situation of moral and religious disintegration and division within the early post-exilic community in Jerusalem and Judea. 56:1-8 is probably the earliest unit in the group, presenting no indication of a division within the community, but setting the promises of salvation of DI and TI within a conditional framework (56:1-2). 58:1-59:20 is addressed to the whole people and assumes no definite division within the people (as does 65:1-66:17 by means of its contrast of servants and apostates), but does anticipate the possibility that one might be created when Yahweh intervenes (59:20). Thus, the people as a whole are offered another chance to change their ways, upon which will depend their fate when Yahweh comes to judge. The criteria that are used to judge the people are the same as those of 56:1-8, so that the people's salvation and vindication are dependent upon their justice and righteousness.

In the two units 56:9-57:21 and 65:1-66:17 the situation appears to have developed further, with a deep split forming within the community itself. The promise of salvation and the threat of judgment announced to two groups within the community, who are set off against each other (cf. 57:3 and 65:11), suggest that the situation was becoming ever more hostile and vitriolic. There are, however, two main reasons why 65:1-66:17 should be dated as the later of these two units. First, as has already been suggested, 56:9-57:21, while its tone is very vitriolic, makes no irrevocable division between groups who will have contrasting fates. On the other hand, 65:1-66:17 is dominated by the contrast between a definite group of faithful people, the "servants", in opposition to the apostate Jews (65:1-7) and the
Jews who wish to expel the servants (66:5). Thus, there has now crystallized a definite group for whom the promises of salvation made by DI and TI are reinterpreted (cf. 57:14-21; 65:16b-25; 66:7-14), and whose opponents are condemned. Second, as Beuken has suggested, 65:1-66:14 functions to conclude the theme of the servants of Yahweh. It is here that the question of the identity of the servants, begun in 52:13-53:12 and 56:1-8, is now resolved, and a final, and apparently irrevocable, division is created within the people.

We can, therefore, establish 515 B.C. as a terminus ante quem for the work of TI2, and, since he was dependent upon the work of TI, it follows that the material in 60:1-63:6 comes from the period prior to the work of TI2. If the beginning of the return from exile is the terminus post quem, then the work of TI and TI2 can be dated between 538 B.C. and 515 B.C. Given that the lament in 63:7-64:11 is probably an exilic composition, only 66:18-24 remains for brief comment.

As has already been suggested, the majority of commentators regard 66:18-24 as a later addition to the existing material in chs 65-66. A number of factors within the text may point in this direction. The use of the term יהושע (v. 24), which appears only otherwise at Dan. 12:2 in the Old Testament, may suggest a later date. Further, the concept of eternal punishment also creates affinities with Dan. 12:2. However, even if vv. 23-24 are separated from vv. 18-22 (possibly suggested by the appearance of the phrase מַעְרָא, vv. 18-22 show signs of a later dating. Thus, the term מַעְרָא (v. 20; cf. Lev. 10:10; 14:57) and the division between Priests and Levites in v. 21 seem to betray the influence of the Priestly document in the Pentateuch.

Thus, 66:18-24 probably dates from at least the mid-fifth century B.C. If vv. 23-24 are separated from vv. 18-22, we might suggest that vv. 18-22 were written in the mid-fifth century B.C. and vv. 23-24 in the early Hellenistic period. It is noteworthy that Sekine attributes 66:18-24 to a redactor working in the mid-fifth century, and that Koenen attributes vv. 18-22 to a redactor working in the same period. This is not to deny that these verses may perform a framing or concluding function in relation to the material in Isa. 56-66, and possibly also in chs 40-66, and even the book of Isaiah as a whole, but it does mean that 66:18-24 should not be placed in the same literary stratum as 56:1-8.

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1 "Isaiah LXV-LXVI", pp. 205-207.
2 Cf. above, p. 44, n. 101.
3 Cf. Duhm, Jesaia, p. 489.
4 Sammlung, p. 56.
5 Ethik, pp. 212-214.