CHAPTER TWO

THE ZION TEXT OF ISAIAH 28:16 IN THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS

2.1. Introduction

If one accepts the hypothesis that every new study of the Bible or a part thereof rests on the shoulders of its predecessors, then it makes sense to explore the way in which Isa. 28:16 has been explained in the course of history before endeavouring our own exegesis of the text in question. The reception history of a biblical text also has a place among the exegete’s areas of interest since it raises the questions and hypotheses necessary to enter into dialogue with the various religious reading traditions and thereby provides the foundations for one’s own exegetical perspective. The importance of such a dialogue is aptly expressed by Talstra: “The exegesis of the Old Testament is not about trying to explain a recently discovered work from the ancient past. Academic institutions are not likely to do themselves much of a service should they pretend that such is indeed the case. Exegesis, rather, is about explaining texts that have been ascribed a fundamental value as they passed through the hands of many generations up to and including the contemporary faith community.”\(^1\)

In order to obtain an adequate picture of the history of exegesis, one is obliged to focus one’s attention on a cross-section thereof, taking a number of standard benchmarks as one’s point of departure. Given the necessary limits of space, the said benchmarks have to be chosen with care in order to avoid any potential misrepresentation or distortion. The most appropriate point of departure with respect to the text of Isaiah is the Septuagint, bearing in mind that every translation already contains an element of exegesis.\(^2\) The Greek translation of the

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\(^1\) Talstra 2002:73.

\(^2\) I am aware of the difficulties surrounding the idea of ‘the’ Septuagint, as if the latter can be understood as a unified translation, while in fact it is more of a collection of Greek translations stemming from a variety of different places and dates. I will maintain the use of the term, nevertheless, for the sake of ease and because it has long been the convention to do so.
Old Testament might even be considered as one of the earliest witnesses in the history of exegesis. This is certainly the case with respect to the Greek translation of the book of Isaiah, which is well-known for its relatively free rendition. Furthermore, the Septuagint extends backwards into pre-Christian times and is of major significance from a variety of perspectives for the way in which the New Testament dealt with the Old Testament in terms of both text and content. A second benchmark in our exploration of the history of exegesis can be found in the New Testament’s interpretation of the Isaiah text. New Testament allusions to the Zion text of Isa. 28:16 are to be found in the Letter of Paul to the Romans (Rom. 9:32b–33; 10:11) and in the First Letter of Peter (1 Pet. 2:6). Prior to continuing the line of Christian exegesis from the New Testament to the early church, however, it makes sense to include Jewish exegesis of the Isaiah text in our survey, beginning with the function of the Zion text within the community of Qumran and further discussing the information found in the Targum and the Talmud.

A third benchmark in our exploratory survey has its roots in the early church (2nd to 5th century). After a brief intermezzo in the Middle Ages, in which we will focus on the Glossa Ordinaria and Thomas Aquinas, we will turn our attention to the period of the Reformation (16th century). Influenced by the Renaissance and by Humanism, the Reformation was determined to return to the original sources. Luther and Calvin will serve as our representatives of the exegesis characteristic of the Reformation and their explanation of Isa. 28:16 as the fourth benchmark in our historical survey. Our fifth and final benchmark consists of the highly diverse contributions of modern biblical research. Our discussion of the latter will be thematic and summarising in character, given that the contributions in question cannot strictly speaking be considered a part of the reception history of Isa. 28:16. With a view to our own exegesis of the text, however, and within the framework of the present chapter, we consider it relevant to offer a brief overview of the various interpretations of the Zion text of Isa. 28:16 provided by modern biblical research.

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3 See Jobes/Silva 2000:146: “... the LXX may be regarded as the earliest surviving interpretation of the Bible, and the exegesis of the translators, even when wrong, can be very valuable in our own exegetical process.” (cf. p. 89)

4 Cf. Jobes/Silva 2000:23: “The Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible, was the primary theological and literary context within which the writers of the New Testament and most early Christians worked.”