5.1. Introduction

An important shift has arisen within scholarly research into the book of Isaiah in recent years. For a considerable time, the threefold subdivision proposed by Duhm as far back as 1892 (Proto-Isaiah: 1–39; Deutero-Isaiah: 40–55; Trito-Isaiah: 56–66) served as the immutable point of departure for every study of the book. The value of this approach for our historical understanding of the book of Isaiah remains to the present day. On the other hand, however, the said threefold subdivision created a tendency to presupposition with respect to the historical situation of the various individual texts within each of the three parts of the book and to the simplification of the origin and evolution of the book as a whole. Indeed, it ultimately led to a threefold division of the book, whereby researchers exhibited little if any interest in the present unity of the book of Isaiah. An important and necessary correction can be observed in the last twenty years in this regard. More than before, contemporary scholarly research into the book of Isaiah addresses the book according to its present unity.

The question remains nevertheless whether one should be looking for the unity of the book of Isaiah in a strictly determined total structure. The search for such a total structure has lead in practice to a variety of highly sophisticated analyses that often lack the capacity to convince. The danger of a degree of arbitrariness seems to be substantial in this regard. An example thereof can be found in the work of O’Connell who considers the book of Isaiah to be an extremely complex composition

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1 For a recent survey of the current state of affairs in Isaiah research see Becker 1999:1–37, 117–152 and Höffken 2004. The disadvantage of Becker’s descriptions and evaluations is to be found in the fact that he allows himself to be lead by the much disputed literary-critical and redaction-historical insights of Kaiser.

2 Cf. Sweeney 1993:141: “Studies of the component parts of Isaiah continue to appear, but the recent focus on the final form of the book has clearly established itself as the central issue of Isaiah studies.” See also § 1.2.
made up of seven asymmetric, concentric units, each supported by a complex framework of repetitions. The slightly more dated work of Watts might be less complex, but given its speculative character it is no less implausible. Watts characterises the book of Isaiah as a vision presented in the form of a drama in twelve acts, each of which is geared towards a new and different historical situation. Berges typifies the book of Isaiah as a sevenfold literary drama concerning the fate of Judah and Jerusalem in the midst of great misfortune. While this latter typification is attractive, and Berges is not pressed to introduce forced demarcations within the book of Isaiah as a whole, it is nevertheless necessary to bear in mind that every endeavour to search for a unifying literary total structure within a book that clearly exhibits the character of a redactional collection might perhaps be doomed to failure from the outset. The characterisation of the book of Isaiah as a drama maintained by Berges and others, for example, seems to work better for the second part of the book than for the first. The present author is nevertheless inclined to support the idea that the final redactors of the book of Isaiah probably allowed themselves to be guided more by religious motivations than by literary-aesthetical ones. The unity of the book of Isaiah appears more often in practice to be theological and lexicographic in nature rather than literary-aesthetical.

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6 Cf. Childs 2001:7: “...it is a modern anachronism to require a clear and rational reason for every structural division.” The designation of the book of Isaiah as a ‘collection’ is no longer burdened with negative connotations. Cf. Tate 1996:50: “The collection concept can accommodate the highly complex unity in Isaiah without having to assume a tight, precisely fitted macro-literary structure. A collection should not be regarded as simply a haphazard agglomeration of materials.”
8 Cf. Clements 1997:6: “It is then an exciting and stimulating advance of recent methodology to have begun the task of tracing carefully the basic motives and themes which give the book its essential unity.” Cf. also Clements 1982:126: “the factors which have led to the bringing together of its various sections of sayings were essentially thematic and religious rather than literary or biographical.”