THE LITERARY STRUCTURE AND CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROPHECIES IN IS. XL-XLVIII *

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The first nine chapters of Second Isaiah (xl-xlviii) constitute a division of their own. If we ignore, for the moment, the ironic lament over Babylon which occurs within this division and which belongs to a distinct type (xlvii), a sequence of prophecies uniform in content and in character emerges. They constitute remarkable evidence, superlatively tempestuous and impressionistic, of one of the great moments of Israelite history. We shall see that all of them were the product of one short period, at an historic turning point, when the anonymous prophet had just been seized by an eschatological awakening, which was never to let go of him till his end. At the same time, this division of prophecies serves as an introduction to the specific world of the prophet himself, containing the key to the delimitation of the correct chronological framework of his compositions.

I. THE PROBLEM OF LITERARY UNITS

The first problem which every one seeking to understand this division of prophecies must settle is that of the scope of the literary units (the single prophecies). Clearly the nine chapters xl-xlviii do not constitute one single uninterrupted prophecy. What we have here is rather a series of similar prophecies, the boundaries among

which are blurred by the uniformity of the theme and style and by the specific pattern of the material. Near the end of the division a special prophecy, the ironic lament over the fall of Babylon, separates the seven chapters that precede it (xl-xlvi) from the one that follows (xlviii); and it stands to reason that just as the last chapter, xlviii, cannot be regarded as a continuation of the first seven, though it resembles them in general character, so in the first seven chapters we actually have a number of consecutive literary units stitched together. But to distinguish among them is no simple matter.

In the rest of the prophetic books, the analysis of the material into its literary units is not particularly difficult, though even there the views of scholars are, for the most part, divided. Nevertheless, internal and external indications facilitate the work of separation, in spite of the complex literary character of the prophecies themselves. In the prophecies of the Second Isaiah the problem of isolating the separate units is apt to involve special difficulties, but becomes particularly perplexing in this first division. Not only are formal headings lacking here, but the literary form is very loose, characterised by abrupt transitions, elusive overtones and associative leaps—a sort of medley of overlapping sounds. From the beginning of chap. xl to the end of xlvi it is difficult for the reader, at first glance, to discern just where the prophet’s flow of words comes to a halt; or else, the reader may, at his pleasure, discover a pause at the end of every little bundle of verses.

For the prophecies in this division are constructed in an extended chain of short sections, each one of which opens with a new call or expresses a new idea, poetic figure, or utterance emanating from the stormy vision of the prophet. These sections are never less than a single verse, and mostly do not exceed the compass of ten verses. In chapter xl, for instance, we find at least seven such sections (vv. 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-11, 12-16, 17-26, 27-31) which follow vaguely one after the other. The same applies to all the chapters further on. In actual fact, these short sections are not complete units by themselves, but paragraphs of larger prophecies, that is, strophes of more comprehensive literary wholes. Some of them are introduced explicitly by words connecting them with the preceding, e.g. „But you” (xli, 8), „But now” (xliii, 1 ; xlv, 1), „For thus says the Lord” (xlv, 18), „Remember these things” (xliv, 21), „Remember this” (xlvi, 8). See also the section xlviii, 1-2, which cannot be anything other than a heading to the section that follows. However, even those sections