The Translation and Interpretation of Isaiah vi.13

The first volume of Erwin Rosenthal’s *Studia Semitica* brings together some of his publications on Jewish themes and reflects his scholarly interests over a period of many years. Eight articles are grouped under the general heading ‘The Hebrew Bible and its exegesis’, and they include several about medieval Jewish biblical scholars and their influence on Christian exegetes and translators of the Bible in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such studies are of interest for the light they shed on the history of biblical and Hebrew scholarship and of relations between Jews and Christians, and they can also be helpful to the twentieth-century exegete, whether he be Jew or Christian.

The present article will outline the principal ways in which Isa. vi.13 has been interpreted by Jewish and Christian scholars: how it was understood in the ancient versions, by several of the principal Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages, by some Christian commentators and translators in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by Jewish and Christian scholars since then, including those who have advanced theories on the basis of the A Scroll of Isaiah discovered in Cave 1 at Qumran in 1947. Any attempt to summarize in one article the work of two thousand years must leave out the contribution of innumerable writers and be open to the charge of superficiality. Nevertheless, there may also be an advantage in trying to see the picture as a whole.

The article has a further object. It will be asked whether any conclusions may be reached about the text and meaning of the verse. After all, the commentators of the past sought to clarify the meaning of the text, not to provide source material for the writing of the history of scholarship.

**The Text and its Problems**

A number of different translations will be examined later in the article, but we shall begin with the AV, the rendering that is best known in the English language:
But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a
teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their
leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.

The context in which this difficult verse is found is the end of the account of
Isaiah’s call to be a prophet. He is commanded in verses 9 and 10 to proclaim
a message that the people will not understand or accept. He therefore asks in
verse 11: ‘How long?’, and the answer is given in verses 11–13: until the land is
utterly desolate and without inhabitants; and the first part of verse 13 states
that, even if a tenth part survives for a time, it too will be destroyed. The first
three words of the verse (wĕōd bāh ʿāśirīyyā) are probably a circumstantial
clause, which may legitimately be rendered ‘And if there is still a tenth part
in it’. Some commentators have supposed that this clause and the next words
(wĕšābā wĕhāyētā lĕbāʿēr), taken with verses 11 and 12, imply that disaster will
come in two stages, the first being perhaps the fall of the Kingdom of Israel
and the second that of the smaller Kingdom of Judah. The AV’s ‘and it shall
return’ probably fails to represent correctly the sense of wĕšābā in this context
(though we shall see that it has been understood to refer to repentance even
by some translators in the twentieth century): here it is most likely used as an
auxiliary verb meaning ‘again’, or rather ‘in turn’. The tenth part, which has sur-
vived so far, will be subject to lĕbāʿēr in its turn. It is thus possible that disaster
in two stages is implied, but it is by no means certain that the intention is so
precise. The meaning may be no more than that, even if part of the population
at first survives, their survival will be merely temporary, without there being
two clear-cut and distinct major disasters separated from each other by many
years. In contrast to the unrelieved gloom of the first part of verse 13, the last
clause mentions ‘holy seed’, and it is usually thought to be an assurance that, in
spite of everything, a holy remnant will survive. There thus seems to be a con-
trast, or even a contradiction, between the total disaster of which the begin-
ing of the verse speaks and the hope that is implied at the end. Between the
prediction of disaster and the last part of the verse stands a comparison with
two trees, and it is disputed whether this comparison expresses disaster, like
the earlier part of the verse, or hope, like the last clause. The latter interpreta-
 tion is supported by the fact that the last clause identifies the maṣṣebet in the
comparison and thus sees it as a sign of hope. On the other hand, the former
interpretation is favoured by the fact that the comparison comes immediately
after the prediction of disaster, and no conjunction, let alone an adversative
particle, intervenes between the two; it is, therefore, natural to suppose that
the comparison belongs with the prediction of disaster.