The Historical Background of Isaiah 1:4–9

It is widely believed that Isa. 1:4–9 can be related to events in the prophet’s lifetime, probably the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701. Recently, however, the Isaianic origin of all or part of the passage has been contested. The aim of the present article is to subject such arguments to a critical examination. Bjørndalen and Willis have defended Isaianic authorship, but they have not discussed all the arguments against it, and there is room for a further study.1

It is a pleasure to dedicate this essay to my friend Professor Abraham Malamat, whose publications have offered much help towards understanding the Hebrew Bible in its historical context.

Before the recent challenge to Isaianic authorship, it was rare for scholars to deny more than a few words of 1:4–9 to the prophet. Those that were considered secondary must be noted as part of the background to later study, but the old arguments need not be repeated here. It was widely and plausibly held that הוממטה ויהי in verse 4, and כעיר נצורה in 7 (and זרים was often emended to סדם), and כעיר נצורה in 8 were secondary, and, less plausibly, זירה in 9.

Marti went farther than some and argued plausibly that 4b is secondary and contains some Deuteronomistic words. Less plausibly, he argued against the originality of several words in 6, and Löhr went beyond Marti by maintaining that everything in that verse after חרב is secondary. Stade and Robertson also went farther than most. They emendedネットרה in 8 to עזרה and assigned it to the restored זירה in 7. Despite Robertson’s claim that confusion would be easy in the old script, there is a greater difference between the two words than is convenient for the theory. He also argued that 8 comes from ‘a much later age when the temple and walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins’ and ‘the Jerusalem citadel rises ragged and solitary’ above ‘heaps of debris’ (pp. 233–234; cp. 236). Against Robertson, בת ידבע probably does not stand only for the citadel, and it is unlikely that whatever he meant by the citadel remained standing when other buildings were in ruins. מזרה (probably a participle—so Budde), which Robertson arbitrarily emended, probably implies the survival of Jerusalem,

1 Professor H.G.M. Williamson has kindly commented on a draft of my article.
and the image of a hut surrounded by a vineyard or a field of cucumbers suggests something still standing up.

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Among the arguments advanced against the Isaianic origin of 1:4–9 is the charge that parts, at least, of the passage contain the words or ideas of a later age, or ones that are not characteristically Isaianic.

2.1 Alleged Dependence on Later Passages
First, Kaiser claims that verse 7 is dependent on Lev. 26:33 and Deut. 28:51, and Werner agrees about Lev. 26:33 (p. 122). However, the similarity in wording between 7 and Deut. 28:51 is not close enough to prove dependence, and even Kaiser claims no more than that there is an echo in subject matter. The taking by invaders of the produce of the soil was scarcely unusual in the ancient Near East; and a commonplace of experience is not a strong reason for postulating literary dependence. The similarity between Isa. 1:7 and Lev. 26:33 is greater, but even here the resemblance may be due to the fact that both verses refer to everyday experience in war and use obvious words to describe the disaster. Moreover, even if dependence were certain, Kaiser would need to show that it is Isa. 1:7 that is dependent, and not vice versa. Werner’s further comparison with Deut. 28:35 will be considered below.

Secondly, Kaiser thinks that the first part of verse 9 is dependent on Ps. 94:17 (cp. Vermeylen, p. 42), but the similarity does not amount to identity. Again, if there were dependence Kaiser would need to prove that Isa. 1:9 depends on the psalm, and not the psalm on Isaiah. Further, Vermeylen’s comparison (p. 52) of דָּמַע in Isaiah with דָּמַע in the psalm cannot prove literary dependence. Crüsemann (pp. 162–165) had earlier noted a similarity between Isa. 1:7 and Ps. 124:2. But the context of his discussion is the case for the view that the Danklied des Volkes never existed in Israel as a separate Gattung and that the use of לְזִבְּחָה in the psalm is relatively late. He does not appear to maintain that Isa. 1:9 is directly dependent on Ps. 124:2.

2.2 Vocabulary
Vermeylen points out that a number of words in Isa. 1:4–9 are not characteristically Isaianic and argues that some are later in date. On pp. 51–52 he considers three expressions in 8. Not only does the phrase מַעֲדִים not occur in any