Idols in Isaiah in the Light of Isaiah 10:10–11

H.G.M. Williamson

Isaiah 10:5–15 is an anti-Assyrian woe saying in which God first states that he will use Assyria to punish a godless nation. He then goes on to draw attention to Assyria’s overbearing hubris which has led it to exceed his commission so that, as implied by the introductory woe, Assyria will herself become subject to divine judgment. Assuming v. 15 is an integral part of the passage, it uses a wisdom saying to round off the passage by reverting in a different style to the implications of the initial woe.

Although there has been some dispute about the identity of the “godless nation,” the majority of commentators rightly identifies it as Israel/Samaria, for the following reasons. (1) The use of the same vocabulary in 9:16 and 18 indicates that the “godless nation” is Ephraim/Israel and that it is they who have incurred God’s fury. (2) 10:6 continues with a clear reference back to 8:1–4, where it is Samaria whose spoil will be carried away. (3) In 28:3 “the crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trampled under foot.” Thus all four clauses in 10:6 have close parallels elsewhere in the early material in Isaiah that refers explicitly to Ephraim, Israel or Samaria. (4) Finally, the sequence of cities conquered by the Assyrian as listed in v. 9 reaches its climax with Samaria. Now, it may well be that, rather as in the case of the sequence in 7:8–9a, the reader is meant tacitly to conclude from this that the same could apply by extension to Jerusalem, but that is not the same thing as saying that Jerusalem is directly mentioned here. The whole structure of the passage leads up to, and should therefore be referred to, Samaria.

Within the straightforward presentation of 10:5–15, there are some elements which do not fit very comfortably. The opinion of most scholars that v. 12 is a later addition is to be accepted. It is clearly prose, and the suggestion that a poetic fragment can be salvaged from the second half of the verse is unconvincing.1 It starts, at least, with reference to both God and the Assyrian.

1 While it is possible to read the second half as a long line followed by a short one, with “I will punish” governing two paralleled objects, this hardly makes it poetry: the rhythm is not persuasive and the convoluted construct chain in the first half is most unpoetic. There does not, therefore, seem to be any realistic chance of salvaging a line of original Isaianic material here, contra B.S. Childs, Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis (SBT, 2nd series 3; London: SCM, 1967), 43; H. Barth, Die Jesaja-Worte in der Josiazeit: Israel und Assur als Thema einer produktiven Neuinterpretation der Jesajaüberlieferung (WMANT 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener
king in the third person, which does not fit the prevailing context of direct speech by them both. It also differs from the wider context by referring to the Assyrian in this manner and by introducing Mount Zion. In fact, a reference to Jerusalem is altogether out of place in a poem which is dealing primarily with the Assyrian’s punishment of Samaria on God’s behalf, but that argument would not hold if vv. 10–11 (or v. 11 alone) were original; I shall turn to that next. But even without this last point it seems impossible to defend v. 12 as part of the original poem. While there is room to discuss what v. 13 most naturally follows, it is certainly not v. 12.

Turning next, then, to vv. 10–11, opinions differ between those who think that both are secondary and those who think that v. 11 could be original. The syntax of the two verses is not clear, but in my opinion it seems best to treat them as two parts of a single sentence.

As the text stands,2 v. 10 cannot sensibly be construed as a complete sentence (“As I have struck... so their images...”); the second line must therefore be a compressed circumstantial clause.3 Verse 11 must therefore be the apodosis of v. 10, with the comparative element (ךָשְׁפִּיטָא) repeated in order to add greater specificity: “as my hand has struck out against the idol kingdoms—in fact, as I have acted specifically against Samaria—so I will act against Jerusalem.” The construction is complicated, however, by the fact that the apodosis adds ָּכָּא at the beginning, so that the resumptive element is not identical, as would normally be expected. In addition, v. 11 could be construed very well as an independent sentence. The flow between the two verses is thus far from obviously smooth. One solution4 is to resort to paraphrase by way of a slight expansion


3 See עק §133; B.K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 265; and J.C.L. Gibson, Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar—Syntax (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 46, who supply other examples of the pregnant use of ָּכָּא, in which contextual common sense has to suggest what appropriate verb or adjective should be supplied; hence here “more numerous” or “stronger” would each be possible.

4 E.J. Young’s suggestion, The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 363, that v. 11 is a second protasis with v. 10 and that v. 12 is the apodosis, does not seem possible; the כָּא of v. 11b must be syntactically decisive.