ISAIAH 8:23–9:6 AND ITS GREEK TRANSLATION

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The prophecy of Isaiah, “unto us a child is born” (9:5), is firmly embedded in traditional Christian understanding as a prophecy of the messiah, if not specifically of Christ, courtesy of Handel’s messiah and the Christmas liturgy. Modern critical scholarship, in contrast, has generally rejected a messianic interpretation.1 Some scholars, to be sure, think the reference is to an ideal king, and the idealizing character of the prophecy cannot be denied: in the words of Paul Wegner, “his name appears to go beyond human capabilities.”2 Brevard Childs goes so far as to say that “the description of his reign makes it absolutely clear that his role is messianic.”3 Some scholars, such as Otto Kaiser, locate it after the exile, when it could only refer to an ideal future.4 As Hugh Williamson has observed, however, “the predominant thought of the passage neither demands, nor is even particularly suitable to, a postexilic date.”5 Any appreciation of the passage must begin with its literary and historical context.

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1 Thus, emphatically, J. A. Fitzmyer, He That is to Come (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 36–38.
2 P. Wegner, An Examination of Kingship and Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 1–35 (Lewis-
3 B. S. Childs, Isaiah (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001), 81.
Since the work of Karl Budde, this oracle has often been regarded as the conclusion of an Isaianic “memoir,” or *Denkschrift.* Many scholars, however, see Isa 8:16–22 (the passage beginning “Bind up the testimony”) as the end of the *Denkschrift.* Marvin Sweeney proposes a complex structural unity, encompassing 8:16–9:6, but even he admits that 8:16–18 appear to be the conclusion of 8:1–15: “The 1st person perspective of vv. 16–18, the references to the torah and testimony in v. 16, and Isaiah’s children as signs and portents in v. 18, all indicate that these verses originally formed the conclusion to 8:1–15…”

The prophecy in Isa 8:23–9:6 is attached to the preceding oracle by the motifs of darkness and anguish. Isa 8:23 is a prose introduction to the following oracle. The birth of the son picks up a motif from chapter 7, and all this material is set against the background of the Assyrian crisis of the 730’s. But it is best to consider 8:23–9:6 as a distinct unit. Whether it is an authentic prophecy of Isaiah is not certain, but as Williamson remarks, “its present redactional setting in the aftermath of the Syro-Ephremite crisis is by no means unreasonable.”

The historical setting of the passage is suggested by the geographical references in Isa 8:23: “In the former time he brought into contempt...”

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8 M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39* (FOTL 16; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 176. Wegner, *An Examination of Kingship*, 72, is uncertain whether 7:16–18 “provide a conclusion merely to the preceding oracle or were intended to conclude the whole ‘Isaianic memoir.’”

9 Isa 8:23a is recognized by most scholars as a redactional addition. See Wegner, *An Examination of Kingship*, 161.

10 It is regarded as poetry by some scholars: A. Alt, “Jesaja 8,23–9,6: Befreiungsnacht und Krönungstag,” in idem, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Munich: Beck, 1953) 2:206–25 (209); J. Hogenhaven, “On the Structure and Meaning of Isa VIII, 23b,” *VT* 37 (1987): 218–20. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 387–88, allows that an original poetic structure may have been corrupted, but also thinks that the poetic oracle may have been furnished from the beginning with a prose introduction.