SYMBOLIC NAMES AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

JOHN T. WILLIS
Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX 79699

Introduction

In the past two decades, scholars have manifested an interest in examining the book of Isaiah as a whole to see if it contains a coherent theological and/or literary unity. Several scholars have pointed out religious themes which run through this prophetic book. (1) In 1993, Rolf Rendtorff argued that the divine title “The Holy One of Israel,” which occurs twenty-six times in the book of Isaiah, helps tie the three major sections of the book together. This divine epithet appears in oracles of doom and oracles of hope directed to Israel or to others nations, and in all three sections of the book (in Isa 1-39: eight times in oracles of doom—1:4; 5:19, 24; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; and four times in oracles of hope—10:20; 12:6; 29:19, 23; in Isa 40-55: twice in oracles of doom—45:11; 47:4; and ten times in oracles of hope—40:25; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; and in Isa 56-66: twice in oracles of hope—60:9, 14). This constant repetition tends to impress on the hearer or reader that Yahweh both punishes when human beings sin and delivers when they return to him. 2

1 See the remarks of J. Barton, “Ethics in the Book of Isaiah,” Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah (VTSup 70/1; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 67-68 (entire article 67-77); and U. Becker, “Jesajaforschung (Jes 1-39),” ThR 64/1 (1999): 3-24 (entire article 1-37), who says, “[in recent research on the book of Isaiah,] the question of the compositional, redactional or theological unity of the book moves to the center” (die Frage nach der kompositionellen, redaktionellen oder theologischen Einheit des Buches rückt in den Mittelpunkt, p. 4); and again, “the interest is focused much more on the book of Isaiah as a whole, on the accepted unity” (richtet sich das Interesse stärker auf das Jesajabuch als Ganzes, auf die gegebene Einheit, p. 7 [my translation]).

In 1985, Ronald E. Clements contended that one of two fundamental themes connecting Isa 40-55 to Isa 1-39 is Israel's blindness and deafness. In 1996, Gary Stansell, following Clements' lead, pointed out that the concept of Israel's blindness and deafness along with the assurance that Yahweh will open the eyes and ears of a remnant of his people appears throughout the book of Isaiah (in Isa 1-39: 6:9-10; 28:7-12, 23; 29:9-10, 18; 30:9-10, 20-21; 32:3; 33:15, 17, 20; 35:5; 38:14; in Isa 40-55: 40:26; 42:7, 16, 18-20; 43:8; 44:18; 48:6-8; 49:18; 50:4-5; 51:6, 52:8, 10, 15; 55:2-3; and in Isa 56-66: 56:10; 59:9-10; 60:4-5; 64:3 [English 64:4]; 65:12; 66:4, 8, 19]).

In 1991 and 1993 respectively, Willem A. M. Beuken and Rolf Rendtorff called attention to the frequent recurrence of "justice" (מהותא) and "righteousness" (תמהותא) (frequently together) in Isa 1-39. These two terms also appear several times in Isaiah 40-55 and in Isaiah 56-66. (See the discussion of the expression "Oaks of Righteousness" in Isa 61:3 below.) Hence, the theme of "justice" and "righteousness" illustrates a coherence in the book of Isaiah.

Several scholars, most recently Anthony J. Tomasino, David M. Carr, and Marvin A. Sweeney, have called attention to similarities and contrasts between Isa 1 and Isa 65-66. For example, in both sections the prophet distinguishes between the righteous and the unrighteous within God's people (1:27-28 and 65:1-10; 66:1-4), condemns abuses in the

his proclamation, clear proof of a line of tradition stretching from Isaiah of Jerusalem to the Isaiah of the exile. As other passages, too, show, the latter was well acquainted with First Isaiah's prophecy, and deliberately took over some of its elements. These statements indicate that Westermann is thinking of Proto-Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah as two separate prophets who produced two separate literary works, whereas the position Rendtorff and the present writer are advocating is that a single prophet or (more likely) prophetic school gave the entire [present] book of Isaiah its literary shape intentionally or deliberately with a view in mind of proclaiming a coherent theological message.

