THE INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH VII 14-25

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I do not address myself in this paper to the much discussed questions of the identity of ba'almâ and Immanuel 1), although my argument has some bearing on these matters and they cannot be excluded entirely from the discussion.

I remark at the outset that I can give no convincing reason why I should begin with v. 14 and define the section as vv. 14-25. This makes sense only because it is an indication of the particular issues which interest me and the questions which I want to raise, although I recognize that in enquiring after the sense of vv. 14-17 exegetes have been influenced by v. 9 and especially v. 13, and I take some account of this in my paper.

First of all then concerning the coherence of vv. 14-17. There is an argument well represented in the history of the interpretation of this passage that in view of v. 9b, v. 13 and the 'therefore' of v. 14 it is axiomatic that vv. 14-17 indicate threat and disaster 2). This


2) S. Blank, 'Immanuel and which Isaiah?', JNES xiii (1954), pp. 83-86, thinks it necessary to delete vv. 9b, 13 or to transfer them to the context of vv. 17-25 in order to establish that the Immanuel prophecy is unclouded promise. E. G. Kraeling, 'The Immanuel Prophecy' JBL 50 (1931), pp. 292 f., suggests that vv. 10-16 are additional midrashic material and that the warning in v. 9b should be followed immediately by the threat of disaster in v. 17. E. J. Kissane, The Book of Isaiah (1941) urges, on the basis of his exegesis of v. 13, that the sign granted by Yahweh must indicate disaster for Ahaz and his dynasty. J. J. Stamm, 'Die Immanuel-Weissagung; ein Gespräch mit E. Hammershaimb', VT IV (1954),
argument focuses particularly on läken at the beginning of v. 14 and here three points are made. The first is the least sophisticated but, in my judgement, the most weighty. The sign is given in vv. 14 f. as a consequence of Ahaz’s refusal to ask for a sign and following immediately on a statement by the prophet that the House of David has wearied God. This creates a strong presumption that läken, if it is stringently consequential as we should expect, introduces a threat 1).

The second argument is the literary-critical one advanced by STAMM 2). It rests on a distinction between ‘genuine’ Isaianic passages and those of disputed authenticity. In those which are unquestionably ‘genuine’ (i 24; v 13, 14, 24; viii 7; x 16; xxviii 14, 16; xxix 14; xxx 7) läken always introduces threat, whereas only in the possibly ‘non-genuine’ passages (x 24; xxix 22; xxx 18) does it introduce promise.

The third argument is form-critical and asserts that läken typically introduces threat 3). That this is not always so has been argued by GRAY 4), KRAELING 5), HAMMERSHAIMP 6) and LINDBLOM 7) and is implied by the form of STAMM’s argument. Neither of these two latter arguments, the literary-critical and the form-critical, should be allowed too much weight. It would be unwise to surrender unconditionally at the start of a discussion to either a literary-critical or a form-critical tyranny.

The most that I would be prepared to concede is that v. 13 followed by the ‘therefore’ of v. 14 creates a presumption in favour of the threatening aspect of vv. 14-17. This, however, must not be permitted to foreclose consideration of the meaning of vv. 14-17. If the contents of vv. 14-17 point decisively to promise and salvation, then we should be prepared to allow an element of paradox or inconsequence in the läken of v. 14 8). There are elements of promise and pp. 20-33, asserts that HAMMERSHAIMP, who interprets vv. 14-17 as promise (op cit., p. 137), offers a weakened paraphrase of vv. 13-14a (p. 22).

2) op. cit., p. 31.
5) E. G. KRAELING, op. cit., p. 284.
6) E. HAMMERSHAIMP, op. cit., p. 134.
7) J. LINDBLOM, op. cit., p. 16