ON THE UNITY AND PARALLEL STRUCTURE OF ISAIAH

by

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Recently B. S. Childs has underscored the importance of seeing the book of Isaiah as a theological unity.¹ According to him, First Isaiah, the pre-exilic prophet of judgement, when read apart from Second (the exilic prophet of consolation) and Third Isaiah (post-exilic prophet of promise), loses its theological context. The final editor has deliberately excised the original historical context of Second and Third Isaiah and has placed these oracles into the historical context of the 8th-century prophet.² But this editorial work is not fortuitous. The editor has rearranged many of the oracles placing material from First Isaiah into Second Isaiah and vice versa,³ and thus has been able to create a timeless theological theme, to quote Childs: "Sinful Israel would always be the object of divine terror; repentant Israel would receive his promise of forgiveness."⁴


² Pp. 325-6. For a history of scholarship concerned with the growth and formation of Isaiah and the Isaianic tradition see Sweeney, pp. 4-54.

³ Childs (p. 331) describes the editorial process as a "skilful intertwining of traditions". J. M. Ward (Amos & Isaiah: Prophets of the Word of God [New York, 1969], p. 146) adds: "The grouping of oracles and the alternation of threatening and promising sections imply that the book was used liturgically in the later Jewish community".

As Childs sees it, the content and arrangement of the book of Isaiah may be roughly described as follows: Isa. i functions as a summary of the whole book and contains material from Second (and possibly Third) Isaiah. Isa. ii-xi constitutes the major judgment section, and it is within this context that we find, of course, Isaiah's commission of judgement (ch. vi). Ch. xii is a litany of praise which "anticipates the promise of the coming of salvation" (p. 332). The oracles against the nations (chs. xiii-xxiii) are followed by a section (chs. xxiv-xxvii) that broadens their perspective by applying them against the whole world, as a sort of prelude to Israel's redemption. Chs. xxviii-xxxv form another block of judgment material. Childs agrees with P. R. Ackroyd that chs. xxxvi-xxxix (the prophet's ministry in the court of Hezekiah) have been deliberately inserted between First and Second Isaiah: "They are edited in such a way as to anticipate the Babylonian exile".

Second and Third Isaiah, in their present canonical context (i.e., joined to First Isaiah), become the all-important second part of the theology of judgement and redemption. Now the word of redemption is to be understood as having been announced earlier and more forcefully, that is, at the time Isaiah had originally announced the word of judgement. This theology is epitomized in Isa. lv 10-11a (RSV): "For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and return not thither but water the earth...so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty". God had spoken. His word has not failed (cf. xl 8). The prophet

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6 O. Kaiser (*Der Prophet Jesaja: Kapitel 13-39* [Göttingen, 1976], pp. 279-80) has stated that the Apocalypse of chs. xxiv xxvii was placed after chs. xiii-xxiii "um den Blick von dem Einzelgeschöhen auf das ganze, schliesslich Heil für Israel bedeutende, Drama zu richten".  
7 Childs, p. 332. It is doubtful, however, that these chapters constitute a unified block. More will be said on this below.  
8 Childs, pp. 332-3. Sweeney concludes (p. 111) that "chapters 36-39 form a bridge or transition between chapters 2-35 and 40-66. Chapters 2-35 look forward to a judgment of Judah by means of Assyria and her subsequent restoration. Chapters 40-66 presuppose that the judgement has already taken place and restoration is imminent. Chapters 36-39 explain the delay in the judgement and the change of agent from Assyria to Babylon as due to the piety of King Hezekiah" (see also p. 426).  
9 In reference to this passage Childs (p. 328) avers: "The canonical context of Second Isaiah affirms this history of the word".