ISAIAH I 1 AND II 1

by

JOHN GOLDINGAY

Pasadena

It is a commonplace of the study of Isaiah that the first verse of the book is an introduction to the whole book, or at least to chapters i-xxxix or to chapters i-xii. While in an earlier form the verse might have had a narrower reference, the form that we have has been adapted to fulfil this broader function. II 1 in turn is an introduction to chapters ii-iv or ii-xii.

This note suggests that in fact i 1 exactly as we have it is a superscription simply to the first chapter of the book and that ii 1 is a colophon to this chapter.

1. Isaiah i 1

The chief obstacle to the view that i 1 introduces the whole book, or at least a significant part of it, is that the verse describes what it introduces as a "vision" (hāzôn). This word regularly denotes a single purported revelation issuing from the experience of seeing something with the mind's eye which could not be seen by the physical eye. A. Jepsen especially emphasizes its verbal content (and its relating to a nocturnal experience), though this meaning is clearly not maintained throughout the Old Testament: more evident from the usage is the fact that the vision's content usually explicitly refers to events in the future (see e.g. Jer. xiv 14; xxiii 16; Ezek. vii 13; xii 22-27;

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1 This is argued most carefully by M.A. Sweeney (Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isianic Tradition [BZAW 171; Berlin/New York, 1988]), pp. 28-30; cf. O. Loretz, Der Prolog des Jesaja-buches (Altenberge, 1984), p. 43.


3 See his article on hāzôn in TWAT.
Mic. iii 6; Ps. lxxxix 20 [19]; Dan. viii 1-26; 1 Chr. xvii 15). The variants hāzāh, hāzā, hizzāyōn, and mahāzeh, and Aramaic hēzū, are used similarly, to refer to a single vision. The verb hāzāh is used more broadly, but one cannot necessarily read these broader connotations into the use of the nouns (any more than is the case with the English words “see” and “seer”).

The fact that the noun regularly refers to a single vision raises difficulties for a statement such as that of R.E. Clements that “the word has come to be used in a broad sense to cover not only visionary experiences, but prophetic revelations and messages of all kinds”, which in the case of the book called Isaiah will need to include stories about the prophet as well as reports of visions. M.A. Sweeney’s observation (p. 29) that “in addition to the collective or abstract meaning of hāzōn, it can also refer to an individual visionary event” gives a seriously distorted impression of the texts. It is the application of the word to an individual revelation that predominates. The question at issue is whether it can apply to a collection of revelatory texts.

BDB suggests the meaning “vision, as title for a book of prophecy”, for the occurrences of hāzōn in the opening verses of Obadiah and Nahum as well as Isaiah, and for 2 Chr. xxxii 32. In the case of Obadiah, the book comprises simply a one-chapter vision, so that the usual meaning of the word suffices. In the case of Nahum, the entire book could also be read as one vision; as a whole it is shorter than the one vision in Daniel x-xii, and not so much longer than Isa. i. In any case the expression in Nahum is sēper hāzōn, perhaps “the book of the vision”, perhaps “visionary book”. In neither case, then, need the usage point to an author or editor’s giving hāzōn anything other than its regular meaning. Nor could readers be expected to read it any other way. Nor does Obadiah or Nahum offer a parallel to the use of the simple expression “vision” to denote an extensive collection of material which might be understood as revelatory in a broad sense but is only partly visionary in character. On the other hand, these parallels could support the identification of Isa. i 1 as an introduction to Isa. 1 as a self-standing collection, which might then have become the first section in Isaiah as we know it.

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