The Rhetoric of Isaiah 1:2-20
An Exploration*

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Abstract

This essay explores the rhetoric of Isaiah 1:2-20. The discussion interacts with rather than ignores historical-critical approaches to the same text. Features of rhetoric and composition, indicia of author, audience, and communicative intent, and figures of composition receive attention. It is shown that Isa 1:2-20 forms a rhetorical unity. Its rhetoric is inscribed within structures spanning the whole.

1. Preliminaries

In a previous essay, I discussed the poetry and prosody of Isa 1:2-20. It was seen that Isa 1:2-20 forms a prosodic unity and displays a panoply of parallelisms throughout. Its poetry conforms to a text model of ancient Hebrew verse worked out over a large portion of the extant poetic corpus.1

Analysis of prosody and tropes forms a foundation for an analysis of more comprehensive questions. To these I now turn. Literary-critical and rhetorical-critical studies tend to bracket out questions regarding the history of composition of the texts examined. The opposite tack is taken here. The approaches are distinct, but one approach is capable of confirming or undermining the results of the other.

2. A Historical Critical Approach to the Book of Isaiah

A generation ago, Kaiser outlined a methodology for the interpretation of the book of Isaiah: “Given the fact that the scroll of Isaiah underwent revision into and as late as the Hellenistic Period, the challenge to take up is that of denying to the prophet any word on principle that is also explicable in terms of a subsequent age.”2 Kaiser went on to conclude that not one verse

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2 “Angesichts der Tatsache, daß bis in das hellenistische Zeitalter hinein an der Jesajarolle gearbeitet worden ist, muß die Forderung erhoben werden, dem Propheten grundsätzlich jedes Wort abzusprechen, daß auch aus einer anderen Zeit erklärt werden kann” (Otto
of Isaiah is to be attributed to a prophet of the 8th cent. BCE. If one takes a different path, such that, if a text seems explicable in terms of its “declared” or prima facie historical context, the attempt is made to make sense of it in terms of that context, one reaches conclusions of a different order. The bulk of Isa 1-39 is explicable in terms of the historical frame referred to in Isa 1:1, which functions as a superscription to it.

Scholars who concur on this point tend to reach broadly similar results. Attribution of components of Isa 1-5 to Isaiah or another exemplifies this. Of Isaiah according to Duhm, Clements, Wildberger, Sweeney, and Blenkinsopp: 1:2-3, 4-9, 10-17, 18, 21-26; 2:12-17; 3:1-9; 13-15, 16-17, 24; 5:1-7, 8-13, 17-24, 25-29. Not of Isaiah: 1:1, 27-28; 2:1, 5, 20-21; 4:2-6. Disputed: 1:19-20, 29-31; 2:2-4, 6-9, 10-11, 12-17, 18, 19, 22; 3:10-11, 18-26; 4:1; 5:14, 15-16, 30. The five agree on the attribution of 76 out of 115 verses in Isa 1-5.

The difficulties that attend a reconstruction of author, audience, and communicative intent within the timeframe indicated by the book’s superscription (Isa 1:1) are undeniable. But they are lighter than those that attend a reconstruction of author, audience, and communicative intent of the entire Isa 1-66 in the Persian period or later. The bulk of Isa 1-39 is directly relevant to situations that obtained in late monarchic Judah, but relevant to Persian period Judah by way of complex refuguration only.


In light of the above, it is not necessary to apologize for the decision to throw one’s hat into the hermeneutical ring traced by Ewald, Duhm, and scholarship thereafter intent on distinguishing the words of Isaiah from additions by subsequent writers. The challenge taken up here is the opposite of the one pursued by Kaiser: to ascribe to the prophet on principle any word explicable in terms of the age and circumstances he lived in and to which he might have responded.

3. Rhetoric and Composition

A prophetic speech begins in Isa 1:2. The question is where the unit that begins with 1:2 comes to an end. Conclusions of varying degrees of comprehensiveness are reached in 1:3, 1:9, 1:20, 1:31, and beyond. The question to be explored concerns the delimitation of a rhetorical unit that might have been delivered by a prophet on a specific occasion. In principle,

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the beginning and end of a prophetic speech are inferable from the location of discourse markers intrinsic to the genre in the textual continuum, from the “plot” created by transitions in the text, and from patterns of language and referentiality that crisscross the continuum and delimit, by the finitude of their reach, one speech from another. It is possible that there are no such units preserved in Isaiah, but an analysis of the textual data, as Gitay has shown, leads to the discovery of a sequence of apparent speeches each of which possesses rhetorical integrity. In Gitay’s view, 1:2-20 is a self-contained prophetic speech composed as such from the beginning. Roberts and Willis argue likewise. On this analysis, 1:21 begins another prophetic speech on a par with 1:2-20.

Many interpreters subdivide Isa 1:2-20 into a number of smaller units whose fusion into a greater unity is attributed to any number of factors, original authorial intent, however, excluded. Wildberger’s conclusions are typical: Isa 1 consists of six originally self-contained prophetic speeches: 1:2-3, 4-9, 10-17, 18-20, 21-26 [to which 27-28 were added], and 29-31, now fitted together to form a higher unity. Delimitation of a large unit of discourse and assignment of it to a prophet who might have “performed” it goes against current consensus. The tendency has been to discern terse prophetic sayings, sometimes no more than a biblical verse or two in length, behind the compositional unities that the text as it stands presents to us, and to assign the former to the prophet and the latter to a later redactor. This

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9 *Jesaja 1*, 8. Wildberger ascribes the redactional unity of 1:2-20 to Isaiah and the unity of the whole to a disciple who lived in exilic or post-exilic times (67, 74).
10 Hermann Barth, Frank Crüsemann, Jacques Vermeylen, Otto Kaiser, and Wolfgang Werner’s attempts to discern a history of redaction behind 1:4-9 are exemplary in this respect. For an overview, see Rudolf Kilian, *Jesaja 1-39* (EdF 200; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983) 32-35. Shortcomings of these attempts are highlighted by John A. Emerton, “The Historical Background of Isaiah 1:4-9,” *Erls* 24 (1993) (= *Avraham Malamat Volume* (ed. Shmuel Ahituv and Baruch A. Levine; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society)) 34-40. An unexamined assumption of much redaction critical work is that of extreme brevity of original prophetic speeches. For an exposé of the
has been and is the standard way of understanding the compositional history of Isa 1:2-20.¹¹

That compositional unities are sometimes best attributed to a later redactor is undeniable. Isa 1:2-20 is part of a larger unity stretching to 1:31. In my view, this unity is the product of a Persian period author who added 1:27-31 to 1:21-26 and severed the latter from its original continuation preserved in 2:2-5. This conclusion is supported by an analysis of vocabulary and themes which cannot be rehearsed here.\(^\text{12}\) It is probably true that 2-20 is situated within a compositional unity of the Persian period, but it does not follow that 2-20 is a composition of the Persian period.

*Excursus on the Prophetic Literature as a Product of the Persian Period*

A cogent example of an approach that locates the production of prophetic literature as we know it in the Persian Period is offered by Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah* (FOTL 21B; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Ben Zvi argues that the rhetorical units in prophetic books tend not to be anchored in any particular circumstance, time, or place, but to have a departicularized cast. He attributes the departicularization to the work of Persian period literati (ibid., 80-82, 110-11, 122-23, 139-41, 151-52, 162-64, 181-82).

The argument fails on several grounds. On the level of discrete rhetorical units, it forgets the paradox of occasional speeches preserved from one generation to the next: texts with embedded interpretive cues sufficient for the audience and the occasion they originally addressed are decontextualized *by definition* as times and circumstances change. The interpretive cues embedded within a speech anchoring it to a particular occasion will be opaque to us without retrospective historical and cultural reconstruction. The apparently deracinated quality of prophetic literature is not in contradiction to its being a collection of texts originally meant for discrete occasions and circumstances.

Secondly, there are indications that constituent parts of a book like Micah or Isaiah were not departicularized but reparticularized by later redactional activity. Examples include Micah 3-5 and Isaiah 13:1-14:27: additions (Mic 4:10b; 5:14; Isaiah 13:1, 17-22; 14:1-4) to a core reparticularized the whole. The evidence

\(^{12}\) On 1:21-31 as a complex unity on a par with 1:2-20, see Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4*, 114-123; *idem, Isaiah 1-39*, 63-65. On 2:2-5 as the continuation of 1:21-31, see Gitay, *Isaiah and His Audience*, 35-49. On 1:27-31 as an addition by a Persian period author who hears 1:2-26 against the background of the situation reflected in Isaiah 56-66 and shapes the whole into a new speech announcing salvation to those who refrain from the religious and moral transgressions referred to in Isaiah 56-66, and perdition to those who do not, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, 187-88. The earlier 1:21-26 + 2:2-5 works out to be a 22 line unit. The later 1:21-31 works out to be an 19 line unit. In my view, 2:1 was added, along with 13:1, in consequence of the addition of 1:27-31 to 1:2-26, so as to subdivide Isa 1-35 into three sections. For a similar proposal, see Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5*, 163-65.
suggests that the *Fortschreibung* that contributed to the growth of prophetic literature entailed a concomitant process of respecification, not despecification.

Finally, the argument overlooks the function of the superscriptions to prophetic books, which is to anchor interpretation of a book to a particular time and place. The superscriptions coexist in unresolved tension with the reparticularization of the text through subsequent expansions. The legitimacy of Ben Zvi’s focus on how prophetic literature might have been understood by readers in Persian period Judah, a project requiring historical and cultural reconstruction of Persian period Judah and of that period’s understanding and actualization of the history of Assyrian and Babylonian period Judah, is not thereby placed in doubt. But claims to the effect that interpretation ought to focus on the text in the form it came to have in the Persian Period are subject to the strictures not unlike those J. J. M. Roberts levels against approaches which privilege interpretation based on embedment within a larger corpus and the contours the text came to have in rabbinic Judaism of the Roman period (“Historical-Critical Method, Theology, and Contemporary Exegesis,” in *Biblical Theology: Problems and Perspectives in Honor of J. Christian Beker* [ed. Steven J. Krafchick, Charles D. Meyers, Jr., and Ben C. Ollenburger; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995] 131-141; repr. in idem, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Collected Essays* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002] 393-405; 401). Why should we accept a hermeneutical construct that allows the latest pre-Hellenistic revisions to control our reading of the whole? Why draw the line at the terminus of the Persian period, not before or after? The usefulness of a Persian period hermeneutical frame, like any other, is limited.

One might also compare the approach of Edgar Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); idem, “Reading Isaiah and the Twelve as Prophetic Books,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition* (ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans; 2 vols.; VTSup 79; Fiotl 1; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 13-18; idem, *Reading the Latter Prophets: Towards a New Canonical Criticism* (JSOTSup 376; London: T & T Clark, 2003) 182-242. In his last work, Conrad takes to task historical-critical scholars for their attempts to “return to the past” and understand the contents of the prophetic books in terms of reconstructed original settings (ibid., 25). But that, I submit, is precisely what the superscriptions to the prophetic books invite us to do. The difficulties inherent in accepting the invitation, and the consequences of the fact that neither narratives about the past nor narratives from the past provide us with unmediated access to the past, should not of course be underestimated.

Conrad interprets Isa 1-6, 7-35, and 36-66 in terms of three “timeframes,” the vision Isaiah had in the year that King Uzziah died, the vision he had at the time of the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis in the reign of King Ahaz, and the vision he had at the time of Sennacherib’s invasion in the reign of King Hezekiah, respectively (ibid., 196). Not only does this reconstruction lack *historical* plausibility, a point
Conrad would not deny, it also lacks literary plausibility, in the sense that it consistently misreads the cues the text itself provides. To read Isa 1-5 and not just 6 as if it represented a vision from the year that King Uzziah died, or anything beyond Isa 7-8 as representative of a vision received during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, or anything beyond the oracles contained in Isa 36-39 as representative of a vision received at the time of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah, is unfounded conjecture precisely from the literary point of view.

The traditional goal of interpretation is to produce a reconstruction of a text’s meaning against the background of the codes the text’s author used to communicate to an intended audience. The code to which our first attention must be given is that embedded in the text itself. The embedded code remands to realities beyond the text that are reconstructible on the basis of extra-textual cultural and historical data. A reconstruction is considered successful if it appears to assign a historically plausible intention, author, and audience to the text, and if it appears to respect the text from the point of view of structure and content. A return to the past, a consideration of implied original settings, and reconstruction of author, audience, and textual intention are of the essence of retrospective interpretation. We will fail to understand the editorial page of a year old newspaper, much less a text written down thousands of years ago, if we do not perform these retrospective tasks. The scholarship of Hermann Gunkel, James Muilenburg, and Umberto Eco, three from whom Conrad would rightly have us learn (ibid., 7-30), is characterized by retrospective interpretation in this sense. Conrad’s work pursues a different course.

As noted above, Isa 1:2-20 is often dissolved into smaller components. But the atomization of 1:2-20 creates more problems than it solves. 1:2-9 by itself lacks an ending and fails to exhibit a fully developed rhetorical intent. It is not a prophecy of doom, as Fishbane has it, but is chiefly retrospective in nature. More than anything else, it raises a question: where will you be hit the next time, given your continued defiance. This is the sense of 1:5, the rhetorical peak of 1:2-9.

The way out of the dilemma posed by 1:5 is found in 10-20. False solutions are first dismissed. Offerings and prayer (1:11-15) make matters

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worse rather than better. Only a decision to aid the widow and the orphan will avert a further catastrophe. This is the sense of 1:16-20, the rhetorical conclusion to the entire piece.

If 1:10-20 is an independent unit, it is not clear why the addressees are referred to as ‘notables of Sodom’ and ‘people of Gomorrah’ in 1:10. In the wake of 1:2-9, the sense is clear: because, as Sodom and Gomorrah did of yore, they paid a terrible price for disregard of God’s expectations of them. There is a break between 1:2-9 and 10-20, but 1:9 provides context for 1:10. The first mention of Sodom and Gomorrah is comforting. The second is sad and jarring. The sequence is rhetorically effective.¹⁵

The framing function of 1:2-3 and 18-20, insofar as the former calls upon heaven and earth to serve as witnesses and states a charge, and the latter calls for a settlement of the case, are naturally accounted for on the hypothesis that they are design elements of a rhetorical whole so intended from the start. The repeated structure at the core of the composition, whereby the people are twice called to attention by means of vocatives and accusatory epithets, twice posed an importunate question, and twice treated to a countering reply, first by the prophet, then by Yahweh himself (1:4-9 | 10-15), not to mention the other elements that tie 1:2-3, 4, 5-9, 10-17, 18-20 together, are most easily accounted for in the same way.¹⁶

¹⁵ As Fokkelman remarks, the poet wrong-foots his listeners here (Reading Biblical Poetry, 103). On hearing 1:10, the listeners’ sense of superiority vis-à-vis Sodom and Gomorrah is their undoing.

¹⁶ Features that bind 1:2-3, 4-9, 10-17, and 18-20 together are noted by Marvin Sweeney (Isaiah 1-39, 64-65). On the other hand, the inconsistencies Sweeney identifies (ibid., 67-68, 80, 82-83) vanish once one allows for the possibility that 1:2-20 derives from a time of relative peace following a devastating war to which the prophet retrospectively refers, and that the prophet composed 2-3 and 18-20 as the unit’s frame. The “either-or” conclusion in 1:19-20 is not so close to that of the speeches of the Deuteronomistic history as to require dependence on them. The rhetoric and language of 1:19-20 recall more closely Isa 7:9; 30:9, 15. Elsewhere (Isaiah 1-4, 120-121, 123-124) Sweeney argues, following Jacob Milgrom (“Did Isaiah Prophecy During the Reign of Uzziah?” VT 14 [1964] 164-182; 174), that the threat of being devoured by the sword in 1:20 is pointless when read together with 1:4-9. On the contrary, 1:5 ‘Where shall you be struck the next time? You continue to turn away!’ prepares the way for 1:20 ‘If you refuse and rebel, you will be eaten by the sword.’ Again following Milgrom (174-75), he finds a discrepancy in the fact that Zion is compared to Sodom and Gomorrah in 1:9 because of the latter’s baleful destruction, and in 1:10, on account of criminal behavior. But the turn in the point of comparison fits the context. The people were already tarred as heedless transgressors in the eyes of God (1:2-3, 4). The difficulties involved in arguing for the original independence of the subunits of 1:2-20 may be illustrated by the discussion of 1:2-9 found in Hugh Williamson’s recent commentary. He
Finally, 1:18-20 by itself is obscure, but 1:16-20 construed as a whole and as a conclusion to the preceding is cogent. A context-sensitive paraphrase might go like this: get your sorry offerings out of my face, cease harsh treatment of others, restrain the violent, defend orphan and widow; let’s get things right; though your sins be like scarlet robes, they will become, upon fulfillment of the above demands, as white as snow. If you acquiesce and obey, you will eat of the good of the land. If not, the sword will eat you.

4. Rhetorical Traditions and Textual Interrelationships

Controversy surrounds the question of genre or genres represented by 1:2-20. In my view, the greatest stumbling block to understanding is created by the false expectation that prophetic speech will adhere to any conventions beyond its own in a sustained and predictable fashion. To the contrary, prophetic discourse exploits whatever genres and topoi serve its purposes without reproducing them in full or slavishly following them. In 1:2-20, notions of a deity calling on heaven and earth to witness a grievance against a client nation; of a relationship of privilege and obligation established by a deity on a nation’s behalf, whereby he is understood as father and they as sons; of procedures a parent might follow when faced with a wayward and defiant son; of priestly instruction regarding ritual slaughter; and of conceivable resolutions to a quarrel between two parties, are all exploited for rhetorical ends. In terms of deployment of topoi and themes, Isa 1:2-20 compares well, if not in every detail, with Deut 32:1-43, Hos 4:1-19, and Mic 6:1-16. Its affinities with Mic 1:2 – 3:12, Amos 5:18-27, and Ps 50 deserve note. It also shares language and themes with texts now integral to Lev 26 and Deut 28.

notes a series of links between 1:2-3, 4, and 5-9, but he ascribes the links to the skill of a redactor (Isaiah 1-5, 23, 37-38, 40, 54, and 61 [where 1:5’s links with 1:2 and 4 are overlooked]). In my view, the connections between 1:2-3, 4, and 5-9 are more simply ascribed to the skill of an author who composed the subunits of 2-9 with a view to their place in the whole.


A rhetorical tradition to which all of the above texts were tributary is a plausible explanation for the affinities the texts share. In the case of Deut 32 alone, direct influence on Isa 1:2-20 is probable.¹⁹

Isa 1:2-9 echoes Deut 32:1-35 measure for measure. First comes the call to heaven and earth to witness the indictment of Israel on charges of disloyalty; then, the playing off of Yahweh’s love for the people, the love of a father for his children, against the people’s insensate disobedience (32:1, 4-20; cf. Isa 1:2-4). Identification of an enemy attack as punishment for defection follows (32:21-25; cf. Isa 1:5-7). Yahweh’s decision not to blot the people out entirely, despite the defection, is then recounted (32:26-35; cf. Isa 1:8-9).²⁰

Thereafter the texts go their separate ways in accord with divergent rhetorical ends. Deut 32 continues with an account of Yahweh’s plan to defeat Israel’s enemies, capped by a call for all the gods to acclaim Yahweh for deeds on behalf of his people (36-43). Isa 1:2-20 proceeds with a speech in which Yahweh rejects the people’s worship and demands the defense of the vulnerable, capped by an enunciation of alternatives (10-20). An “either-

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¹⁹ Tigay makes a case for the priority of Deut 32:1-43 relative to its literary context and to texts from the prophets and the psalms with which it shares phraseology and themes (Deuteronomy, 510-13). Disloyalty is described as covenant-breaking in 32’s frame (31:19-21, 24-30) but not in 32 itself (ibid., 295, 299, 509-10). The difference turns on construing the elective bond Yahweh establishes with Israel in terms of a relationship between a father and the sons he acquires (per Deut 32; cf. 14:1-2) rather than in terms of a covenant established by a superior on behalf an inferior (per Deut 31:19-21, 24-30). The two construals are compatible but distinct. Heaven and earth function as witnesses to a warning per Deut 4:26 and as witnesses to an indictment per 32:1-6. In both cases, they are called as witnesses because they are interested parties, with a stake in any breakup that might take place between Yahweh and his client nation.

²⁰ A key word comparison points in the same direction. See Ronald Bergey, “The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32.1-43) and Isaianic Prophecies: A Case of Early Intertextuality?” JSOT 28 (2003) 33-54; 39-41, 50.
or” conclusion to a parenetic unit (19-20, after 2-18) fits a pattern observable in various types of ancient Hebrew literature.21

Hos 4:1-19 and Mic 6:1-16 deploy a set of rhetorical strategies and themes which recur in Isa 1:2-20. In all three texts, Yahweh’s relationship with Israel is at issue. In-your-face accusation of unbefitting behavior (Hos 4:1-3, 11-14; Mic 6:1-5, 10-12; Isa 1:2-4), expression of Yahweh’s displeasure with cultic acts from those who ignore his counsel (Hos 4:15; Mic 6:6-9; Isa 1:11-15), and a warning of dire consequences should the breach of relationship go unhealed (Hos 4:4-10, 19; Mic 6:16; Isa 1:20), co-occur. Reconstructions which dissolve these sequences into constituent parts and assign the parts to different settings and authors are suspect.

The rhetorical macrostructures of Isa 1:2-20 correspond, in miniature, to those of Mic 1:2 – 3:12. In Mic 1:2-16, the nation is accused before the world (cf. Isa 1:2-3); then, in 2:1-11, by means of a hôy-cry initiated direct address (cf. Isa 1:4-9); then in 3:1-12, more directly still, by means of a ‘hear!’ initiated unit addressed in primis to the ruling class (cf. Isa 1:10-20).

Amos 5:18-27 has affinities with Isa 1:2-20. Like Isa 1:4-9, Amos 5:18-20 contains a hôy-cry, followed by a question which challenges those the hôy-cry addresses, followed by the prophet’s countering reply drawing out implications hidden in the question itself. Yahweh goes on to declare his hatred of their worship, demands its cessation, and pursuit of justice (5:21-25; cf. Isa 1:10-17). Predictions of a dire end conclude the unit (5:26-27).22 An equally dire end is predicted at the conclusion of Isa 1:2-20, should disobedience continue (1:20).

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Ps 50 shares themes and rhetorical strategies with Isa 1:2-20. Assuming a change in vocalization (רֶשָׁע ‘wickedness’ for רָשָׁע ‘the wicked one’ in 50:16), the addressee throughout is ‘my people’, ‘Israel,’ (50:7; cf. Isa 1:3). God summons heaven and earth to the trial of his people (50:4; cf. Isa 1:2), arraigns the latter for breach of covenant (50:5, 7-8, 16-21; cf. Isa 1:18), and threatens dire consequences (50:3, 22; cf. Isa 1:5, 20). The people are reproved, not for sacrifices per se (50:8), but for wickedness (50:16-20). The text concludes with alternatives from the deity: ‘Mark this, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, with none to deliver! He who sacrifices a thank-offering honors me, but he who is blameless of way [reading שָׂם for שָׁם] – him I will show the salvation of God’ (50:22-23; cf. Isa 1:19-20). Isa 1:2-20 is not directly modeled on Ps 50, but may owe features of its basic outline to the cultic genre of which the latter is our only exemplar.

It might be objected that Isa 1:2-3 and 11-20, minus the quotation formulae in 1:2, 11, and 20, are self-contained divine speeches with a rhetorical integrity all their own. This is true, but does not change the fact that prophetic discourse as handed down to us deploys divine oracles within a matrix of argumentation that extends beyond the limits of the directly quoted divine speech it contains. The assumption that such does not represent an original state of affairs, that instead, a prophet stood up, recited a two or three line divine oracle, and sat down, is, so far as I can tell, entirely without foundation.

In short, themes and rhetorical strategies found in Isa 1:2-20 recur in other prophetic discourses in the same order (Hos 4:1-19, Mic 6:1-16, Mic 1:2 – 3:12; and Amos 5:18-27). Themes and language attested in one place elsewhere (Deut 32, Lev 26, Deut 28, and Ps 50) punctuate its length. These facts lack an explanation on the view that 1:2-20 is a pieced together collection of originally independent units.

5. Emotional Logic

If Isa 1:2-20 is broken up into pieces, its emotional logic is also shattered. 1:2-3 is plaintive and accusatory in tone, from the standpoint of an abandoned father. 1:4 brings the accusation to a climax with an apostrophe from the standpoint of a “third” party, the prophet, followed by a direct address with a leading question and exclamation (1:5a) that recall by way of context (1:2) and choice of terminology the status of the addressees as punished and disobedient children. The tone is one of exasperation. 1:5b-6 describes the nation’s malaise as though the nation were an injured and
uncared-for body, with the implication that, if not for estrangement, it would be cared for by the one committed to do so. The tone is accusatory and plaintive at the same time, a return to the text’s emotional point of departure. 1:7-8 dwells on the desolation of land and city, first by staccato description, then by complex simile. Zion is described as a solitary hut in a vineyard destroyed by a flood, left over but surrounded by devastation. The accusatory tone is abandoned, displaced if only briefly by pure plaint. 1:9 brings the emotional sequence to closure. The prophet no longer presents himself as a third party, but aligns himself with the people whom Yahweh has spared. The tone is one of gratitude for not quite comparing to Sodom and Gomorrah in terms of degree of desolation.

In 1:10, the text makes a pivot. Roughly the same emotional ground is covered a second time. A tone of accusation returns with the onset of parenthesis (10). An accusatory peak follows (11-15), then a parenetic peak (16-17). Finally, there is a fusion of perspective. Yahweh forms a “we” with the ones he has accused, and holds out promise and threat (18-20). In the poem’s conclusion, the accusatory tone is abandoned, replaced by an air that is first conciliatory and then threatening. The terminology chosen joins the end of the poem to the language and themes of the poem’s preceding parts.

6. Figures of Composition

If Isa 1:2-20 represents a unitary composition, we would expect it to contain figures of composition typical of intentional wholes attested elsewhere in ancient Hebrew literature. To paraphrase Meynet, two figures are characteristic of the macrostructure of biblical compositions: simplex parallelism, with elements recurring in the same order, and chiastic parallelism, with elements recurring in reversed order, with or without an unrepeated center. As Meynet points out, elements that introduce difference also tend to occur.23

The primary figure of composition instantiated by Isa 1:2-20 is an example of ABC A'B'C' parallelism. A = accusation, highlighted by an importunate question (1:2-5a, 10-11a); B = description of a situation, highlighted by means of nominal clauses (1:5b-8, 11b-15); C = fusion of perspective, signaled by “we” (1:9, 18). The element that introduces

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23 Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric* (JSOTSup 256; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 209. Rhetorical analysis as practiced by Meynet focuses on figures of composition characteristic of macrounits of biblical literature, not, as here, on rhetoric in the sense of the art of persuasion.
difference is that of parenesis. Absent in 2-9, it dominates 10-20. Attested minor figures of composition include inclusios (‘for Yahweh has spoken’ [1:2, 20]; ‘Hear!’ and ‘If you hear’ [1:10, 20]), a simplex parallelism across macrounit boundaries (‘Sodom … Gomorrah’ [1:9, 10]), and a long-distance echo in which the ‘bringing of offerings’ is subsumed under the category of ‘turning away’: ‘You continue to turn away’ and ‘Do not continue to bring offerings’ (1:5, 13).

7. **Historical Context**

The implied historical setting of 1:2-20 is provided by indicia in the text. At a point in time in which the desolation of town and country and the deliverance of Jerusalem in extremis was still fresh in all minds (7-9), at a location, perhaps, not far from the entrance to the temple courts (12), the prophet accuses the people of unrelenting defiance of their God (2-4) even as they heap a multitude of sacrifices upon the altar and redouble their dedication to the requirements of the religious calendar (10-15). In the relative calm following a cessation of hostilities, with destruction all around, awareness of having suffered and survived a terrible loss triggered an outpouring of attention upon the deity among those who were spared. Even so, a revival of piety did not translate into cessation of harsh treatment of others, or pursuit of justice, or defense of orphan and widow (16-17), whose numbers would have burgeoned following the loss of life and taking of captives in war. A malaise afflicted the nation (5-6). The devastation of town and country and ongoing usufruct of agricultural land by foreigners (7) had failed to chasten the nation into a mending of ways.

Failure to turn post-destruction is the implied occasion of Isa 1:2-20. Said occasion corresponds to one historical situation in particular: the aftermath of Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701, perhaps a year or so hence. To be sure, the implied occasion of a text is a rhetorical construct which may not correspond to the occasion for which it was composed. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the actual occasion of Isa 1:2-20 is identical to the implied one involves the least unproven premises.24

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24 The case for understanding 1:7-9 as a description of the results of Sennacherib’s campaign in 701 is argued by Sweeney, Isaiah 1-39, 77, and Williamson, Isaiah 1-5, 63-67; the case against, by Ehud Ben Zvi, “Isaiah 1:4-9, Isaiah, and the Events of 701 B.C.E. in Judah,” JSOT 57 (1993) 61-80. Christopher Seitz dates all of Isa 1 to the immediate post-701 period, and more precisely, to the early years of Manasseh (Isaiah 1-39 [Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1993] 31-38). Uwe Becker dates the composition of Is 1:2-20 to the
8. Isa 1:2-20: A Rhetorical Unity

A summary of results is in order. The rhetorical plot and substance of Isa 1:2-20 are consistent with the view that it reproduces a speech delivered by a prophet we may, following tradition, refer to as Isaiah. There is no reason why the parts of 1:2-20 could not have formed a whole from the start.

Qua speech, the text conserves an oral style. The rapid changes of scene and vantage point and concomitant shifts of voice and person need not mislead. Along with staccato exclamation, invocation, plural command, and rhetorical questions, said shifts are constitutive of prophetic poetry, as Rosenberg points out.

Isa 1:2-20 presents itself as a record of a prophet’s evocation of a deity standing in judgment of his own people. The depiction is textured and poignant. Respect for the text as poetry adds suppleness and precision to a reading of it, regardless of whether the goal of interpretation is to reconstruct
the meaning the text had at an earlier or later point in time or actualize it for a present day context to which the reader is now attached.

Isa 1:2-20 evokes a series of text-internal and text-external frames of reference through its use of culturally pregnant language and its deployment of traditional topoi. The capacity of poetic language to evoke entire worlds is harnessed in order to bear witness to a particular situation, saturate it with significance, and call for its transformation. The text’s poetry offers what Harshav calls “double-decker reference” in cardinal richness. Qua poetry the composition seeks to reveal things for what they are; qua rhetoric, it prevails upon its listeners to effect a change of course.

Isa 1:2-20 stands over against its implied audience with promise and threat. The promise is conditional upon the hearers placing acts of justice before acts of piety, and accepting forgiveness for past failure to do so. The threat is a source of consternation and a prod to action.

Why are promise and threat in poetry? Because, as Ben Jonson remarked, poetry is the “most prevailing eloquence.” Long after Isa 1:2-20 was composed, its eloquence endures.

[Last revised February 22, 2007]


28 Ben Jonson, Timber, Or, Discoveries made upon Men and Matter (ed. Felix Emanuel Schelling; Boston: Ginn, 1892 [1640]) s. v. De Poetica.

Isaiah 1:2-20: Scansion with Notes on Text, Prosody, and Tropes

Like MT, but not always in accordance with it, words dominated by a single main stress are conjoined with a *maqqeph* (*).\(^\text{30}\) Prosodic variants vis-à-vis MT are noted.

Symbols

- A strophe made up of three lines, 1:(1:1) in structure
- \(\text{®} \) concludes a strophe; \(\text{®} \) a sub-stanza; \(\text{®} \) a stanza; \(\text{®} \) a section
- \(\text{2:(2:2)}\) A line consisting of three versets of two stress units each; the last two form a pair.
- \(\circ\) Reference to a location within the text.
- MT, if preserved, would violate the general rule or the length rule.
- \(-m\) or \(-m\) The addition or subtraction of a *maqqeph* vis-à-vis MT.
- vd, ld Change in verset division, or line division, vis-à-vis MT.
- s₁d, s₂d, or s₃d Change in strophe, stanza, or section division vis-à-vis MT.
- cv Change in vocalization vis-à-vis MT; MT following.
- cj 4QIsa 2 Conjecture based on witness; MT following.
- ce 4QIsa 1 Conjectural emendation vis-à-vis MT; MT following.
- 4/9/24 A stanza consisting of 4 lines, 9 versets, and 24 stress units.
- 40/90/216 17/6/2/1 A poetic composition made up of 40 lines, 90 versets, and 216 stress units, with a total of 17 strophes, 6 stanzas, and 2 sections.
- \(p\) (or \(h\))=0.5 (20/40) Cases of ssm (semantic-syntactic-morphological) parallelism (or hypotaxis) per verset, averaged over 40 versets.
- \(a₁b₁\ldots c₁d₁\text{ occurs (hence the j); the second line begins with a pair of elements in chiastic ssm parallelism with the second pair of elements of the first line (hence the x); it concludes with another pair of elements that match up with elements a and b in the first line, but in reverse order (hence the x); enjambment occurs (hence the j).}
- \(a₁b₁\ldots c₂d₂\text{ The first verset’s a is not paralleled in the second, but is gapped (hence the g); b²’s match with b₁ is concomitant with a mismatch in one or more fundamental ssm dimensions}\)

インターネット
ישעיהו  א

10 שמשgerät בהוה
11 האנשים תוה אולמות
12 הכה על רבנייכם
13 שמעו על צללים
14 למד פרימ
15 לא תפיסת
16 לא הורף
17 לא ק сотрудник
18 לא חכמת קאר מكا
19 אוג תועיכים שיאנה נפשי
20 לא תועיכים נלא ATTACK אטר
22/50/116 9/3/1
18/40/100+22/50/116 = 40/90/216

p = 3 (150/50) h = 0.2 (9/50)
8/3/1+9/3/1 = 17/6/1