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Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55

Translated by Margaret Kohl

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Commentary on the Bible

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Ever since historical research recognized the fact that Isa 40–66 could not have been from the prophet Isaiah (J. C. Döderlein, J. G. Eichhorn), scholars now speak of a “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah.” It was B. Duhm in his commentary of 1892 (2d ed. 1901; 3d ed. 1914, 4th ed. 1922) who limited Deutero-Isaiah to Isa 40–55, discovering in Isa 56–66 yet a “Third Isaiah” or Trito-Isaiah. Today the tendency is to stress the connectedness of the three parts within the framework of Isaiah as a whole (R. F. Melugin, R. Rendtorff, C. R. Seitz, M. Sweeney, among others), as is the case in F. Delitzsch’s commentary (4th ed. 1889). This development is thanks to the newer canonical approach, which is based on the real evidence—on the available final text of the Masoretes. In his commentary, which appeared in both English and German in 1999, Klaus Baltzer chose a third path. Along with Duhm and the majority of other exegetes, Baltzer—whom H. Koester and F. M. Cross recruited in 1962 for the commentary to Deutero-Isaiah and who began the work in Munich in 1968 (xix)—distinguishes Isa 40–55 from the remainder of the text. Like F. Delitzsch, J. Muilenburg and W. A. M. Beuken (xix) and many others, he restricts himself exclusively to that final text of the Masoretes encompassing Isa 40–55. The literary links to the book of Isaiah are briefly touched upon (1–2), though they are not followed up.

This self-limitation is justified, as Isa 40–55 contains enough riddles for the exegete. To solve them, present-day commentators will soon require more pages than Delitzsch or Duhm needed for all of Isaiah. The most difficult problem is the unity of Deutero-Isaiah,

which has led to its literary separation. The same-sounding language, the redundant style, and the many formal as well as thematic repetitions in the speech of the prophet strongly suggest literary unity. The reader enters a closed cosmos. On the other hand, this unity is highly complex. It consists of short or long individual speeches whose integrality is hardly manifest. It is not the easiest task to structurally map the composition, to discover the way it orders its cosmos. The unity is additionally muddled through the fact that the idiosyncrasies of Deutero-Isaiah can be found elsewhere, particularly in Isa 35; 60–62.

In his *De inspiratione prophetarum* from 1871 (as published by R. Smend in *Festschrift O. Kaiser* [BZAW 185, 1989], 217–30), B. Duhm asked whether Deutero-Isaiah was a prophet or a poet: *Deuterocesajas (qui vocatur) utrum propheta sit an poeta*. As in Duhm's commentary, the answer is not entirely clear. It remains an open question how the poetic unity of the prophetic book would have issued from the pell-mell and indiscriminate writings of the poet-prophet. Soon after Duhm, the form-critical aspects of the problem came to the fore and the *prophets*, the genre, and the *Sitz im Leben* of the prophetic speeches were of paramount concern (H. Gressmann, S. Mowinckel, W. Caspari, J. Begrich, E. von Waldow, K. Elliger, among others). Rhetorical criticism and the canonical approach assume the diametrically opposite tack and—on the basis of form criticism—strongly accredit the idea of *poets* and the harmony of the literary whole, the notion of a singular and unique genre of prophetic drama (H. Leene, W. A. M. Beuken). C. Westermann sought to combine these two schools by taking into consideration not only the genres of speech but the larger (literary) context—and failed in the attempt.

As a way out of this dilemma, recent research's use of redactional-historical analysis has proven successful. In concordance with form criticism, this recent research assumes that the prophet and the collector (or author and editor) were two different people (K. Elliger, H. J. Hermisson, J. van Orschoot). This strict separation, however, is hardly feasible because the prophet's speeches have been passed down in written form, and their collection is only comprehensible within their literary context. Therefore, the latest redactional analyses have gone on to study the relationship between the prophetic speeches and the prophetic book at the literary level, with the goal of explicating various independent literary layers, the original foundation, and those added-on layers not only in Deutero-Isaiah but in the entire book of Isaiah (J. Vermeylen, O. H. Steck, R. G. Kratz).

Klaus Baltzer does not follow this new school of research, which he even deals with in less than one of his 597 pages (4–5). Rather, he proposes a highly individual, not to say willful, approach that is a further attempt to set straight the relationship between “unity and diversity” (6) and to join the prophet with the poet.

The process is a deceptively simple one. Themes, genres, and *Sitz im Leben* of the prophetic speeches become part and parcel of the literary composition's dramatic development and are then translated into concrete staging. What emerges is the libretto of a liturgical drama for which (outside of a few ill-chosen examples from the ancient Orient) are highlighted with analogies from Greek drama and comedy and—from the Jewish sphere—the *exagoge* of the tragedian Ezekiel from the Hellenistic age (77ff. and *passim*). The commentator's humanistic background is put to good use. Yet despite my own fondness for Greek tragedy and comedy, I doubt its relevance to deepening our understanding of Old Testament texts (14–15 n. 84) and particularly Isa 40–55. Deutero-Isaiah is neither a tragedy nor a comedy but joyful news of the dawning of God's kingdom on earth for Israel and the world. The great differences in form and content in comparison to the ancient oriental examples and to Attic drama are noted (11ff., 14) but are ignored in the practical work of exegesis. So, for example, the question as to the author's identity is not only a “modern question.” It touches upon one of the main differences to Greek drama (11) and is “no doubt ... one that presupposes a different understanding of individual artistic achievement within a society” (25). Yet that does not stop Baltzer from comparing not only Attic but modern theatrical works (cf. 7).

The hypothesis as such is not entirely new and has with moderate success already once been tested on Deutero-Isaiah (E. Hessler) as well as for all of Isaiah (J. D. W. Watts). New and thoroughly original, however, is the immense wealth of ideas on offer; from this capricious mix of traditional philological and historical findings Baltzer culls stage directions for the *mis-en-scène* of “Deutero-Isaiah.”

In this drama Baltzer envisions six acts divided by “hymns” at the end of each act—42:10–13; 44:21–23 (!); 45:25 (!); 49:13; 52:9 (!)—the whole being framed by a prologue (Isa 40) and epilogue (Isa 55). The acts have a few basic scenes that take place on earth or in the heavenly sphere or in the underworld. These are throne scenes, law-court scenes, battle scenes, (parodying) artisan scenes, marriage scenes, processions, pageantries as well as hymns with music, mime and dance (15ff.). “The division of the acts into individual scenes follows a triadic pattern that is maintained with astonishing strictness.... A reason can sometimes be found for exceptions to the rule” (15). Yet some aspects remain unsolved: “The question about the origin of the triadic pattern and its significance still requires investigation” (15 n. 87).

Baltzer draws his *dramatis personae*, dialogue, setting, props, and the story itself from the prophetic speeches and images and from the genre designations of the research. The performance date—the seven days of the Mazzot festival (22–23)—and the place of performance—the southeast slope of Jerusalem—are derived in a similar manner. Baltzer reflects briefly on the difference between imaginary and real scenes, but the general rule

with him is that both are possible (23). All the people and events that are to be found in the text—and sometimes those that are not, such as the women’s choir (67) or the ballet (230)—put in a stage appearance. Large groups of people such as are to be found in 42:10–13 are represented by the choir. Our commentator seems only to have certain difficulties with the many animals, mountains, hills, trees, desert, and ocean that here and elsewhere are invoked to sing God’s praises. We learn little about them (although see page 18 for “trees of the field” and their clapping hands in 55:12, for which “the greenery must first of all have had to [be] procured”).

So much for the basic approach of this commentary: understanding Deutero-Isaiah as a liturgical drama. Because no stage directions are included in the text itself (12) and because the prophetic speeches are not exactly crying out for theatrical dramatization, it is hard to check Baltzer’s thesis against the text. There are no indications of such in the texts we have today. Named as possible clues are the paragraphs in 1QIsa^a and the individual manuscripts of LXX, but, as is the case with much of this commentary, they are not then closely examined (2–3). These are mere “suppositions” (22) that evade final scholarly judgment.

It is no different with the exegesis of the individual texts. Apart from short remarks in the book’s introduction (2–4, 5–7) there is little new in the textual criticism or in the form and genre criticism—even in the specific commentaries—and the literary criticism (4–5) is empty of new information. With only a few exceptions, Baltzer’s work has apparently not kept pace with research done after the 1960s and 1970s. What is new and original in the book are the “suppositions” regarding the many possibilities of meaning that a genre, text, or single work may have beyond the traditional readings.

Form criticism is touched upon only as it concerns dramatic staging. The discussion of rhetorical questions with a hymnal content in 40:12–17 leads to the entry of a chorus, a double chorus (66), or a women’s chorus that intones the hymn. “Water, heavens, earth, mountains, hills” in the hymn are “indications of musical performance” and signal “the different height of tone in each case”—“the five tones of a pentatonic scale” (65). שֵׁשׁ in 40:12 not only means “a measure of capacity” but is also an instruction for musical performance (according to 1 Sam 18:6), and the same holds for the dual of בְּמִזְנוֹתַיִם (66). A conceivable genre is the category of “judgment speeches” in 41:1ff. and 21ff.; 43:8ff.; 43:22ff.; 44:6ff., which can easily be staged as a court scene. But also the prophetic messenger phrase—“Thus says Yahweh” in the “salvation oracle”—“offers an indication of the performance practice” (56).

Baltzer spends much time explaining the varied semantics of Hebrew words. The most important reference works are *TDOT* (*TWAT*) and *TLOT* (*THAT*; see 542ff.). For

individual words or expressions, the various meanings covered in the Old Testament are taken into consideration and, if they somehow fit, are held as possibilities. It seems to be that the free association of exegetes knows no bounds. In this way, Baltzer discovers main and subsidiary meanings and most of all the deeper meanings in the Deutero-Isaiah texts. “My people” of 40:1 evokes not only the covenant formula and all corresponding prophetic passages but the “sociomorpheme” גאל “redeem” (49–51), “originally a term in family law” (51) that carried over to the legal relationship of a master to his disagreeable slave (see 104 on 41:14; 158–59 on 43:3). The ambiguity of של י״ש in 40:12 (66) has already been mentioned; one must only ask oneself why the third meaning, “the warrior in the chariot,” has not also been rolled out. In 40:26 the single predicate is “who brings out.” Baltzer concludes therefrom: “In the hymn this predicate is developed in connection with the stars, but it could at the same time be the motto of the whole: the one who led the people out of Egypt is the very one who leads them out of exile” (80). יעלו in 40:31 can be both Qal and Hiphil, “[b]ut in the context this is probably once again an intentional ambiguity, not an alternative” (84). In 42:16 “both aspects come together in Yahweh’s resolve: solicitude for the blind, which leads to their liberation, and accusation against the blindness of his people” (146, in connection with 42:7 on the one hand and 42:18ff. on the other). In 41:1 a single word (when combined with Ps 115:17) is sufficient in surmising the place: “The divine speech begins without any introduction, but the very first word offers one indication of place: ‘Silence, (come) to me...!’ The action is therefore happening at a place where there is silence. This catchword itself places the scene: it is the underworld” (88). Things get really adventurous in 50:1–2 (335–37).

So as to enrich our understanding, even grammatical and text-critical difficulties need not be explained but simply taken into account. In 40:13–14 contemporaries could attend Deutero-Isaiah’s questions and hear “a general glorification of Yahweh” (68). At the same time “we found it useful in response to the first question to follow up a possible general interpretation by a search for a concrete answer (even if this answer was again veiled, in the context of the dramatic situation)” (69). One simply has to adjust the personal suffixes and one finds in verse 13 (with L. G. Rignell) the “veiled” announcement of Cyrus and in verse 14 the “veiled” announcement of God’s servant. The text in 43:15 is a mess, “[b]ut perhaps the different readings and interpretive possibilities are also intentional” (169). If dramatic headway is required, then Baltzer can also decide among several possibilities—and even in opposition to MT (240 on 45:14). In especially grave cases he assumes that the text has been worked over (66) or that the given material has been spliced together (91, 148–49, 319) “because the literary and conceptual adaptation to the particular context is not always smooth” (148). However, “at the same time, it is these sections especially that establish the link with both the immediate and the wider context of DtIsa’s book” (94) There is neither conceptual consistency nor

stringency in the dramatic progression (see 188). “DtIsa loves to oscillate between different interpretations” (149; see also 173 on 43:18–19a).

Especially fertile ground for “different interpretations” is the Servant of God texts. In this commentary they comprise not only the usual 42:1–4, 5–9; 49:1–6, 7–13; 50:4–9, 10–11; and 53:13–53, 12—but more. The second text begins already in 48:16 and extends to 49:12. The third text begins with the appearance of the servant on the empty stage in 50:2–3 and extends not only to 50:4–11 but even to 51:16. Here the “possibilities” game is played for all it is worth. The name of the servant is withheld so as to heighten the dramatic tension and to tempt the (in-the-know) reader to venture a few guesses of his or her own. “This could explain the covert allusions and ambiguities of the text. But it also makes it difficult for any exegesis to arrive at a secure result: the game is still going on, as it were” (126). So that there is no doubling of 41:8–16 and so that there remain “continuous, uninterrupted action,” 42:1–9 must concern a second “servant” besides Jacob-Israel (125). With reference to the Babylonian Talmud and E. Sellin, Baltzer identifies him as Moses, whose name was struck from God’s book based on Exod 32:31–32 (125). The main reason for this identification is “that it is strange that Moses should not be mentioned at all in a work whose theme is preeminently the exodus” (20).

Yet there are reasons contained in the text. Apart from the Torah in 42:4 (see 42ff.), these include the word **צא** “to move out,” in Hiphil “to lead out” in 42:1, which reminds Baltzer of the exodus from Egypt (127–28), or **ל** “not” repeated seven times and reminding him of the Decalogue, thus simultaneously confirming the identification through a series of negatives: **ל** **צעק** “he will not cry” = not Isaac; **ל** **ישא** “he will not lift up his voice” = not Isaiah; **ל** **ישמיע** “he will not let it be heard” = not Samuel but Moses (137). The verb **שלח** “to send” in 48:16 specifies Moses’ mission in Exod 3 (293), the **ל** **מראש** “not from the beginning” is an allusion to God’s manifestation “on the top” of Mount Sinai (Exod 19:20) and implies a “wrestling with the Sinai tradition” (295). In 50:4 the “familiarity” of the pupil with Yahweh as the teacher allows associations with the “prophet,” “the teacher,” and “the Servant of Yahweh” in Deuteronomy (340–41); in 52:13 the **רום** “he will rise” also expressed with “he will ascend,” is “a first signal pointing to Deuteronomy 34,” the ascent to Mount Nebo (**עלה**) as well as to Mount Sinai (395).

Because the “servant” has not only a prophetic but a political function that consists above all in freeing the captives (42:5–7; 49:8ff.), he has a rival in Cyrus. But this is intentional: “Cyrus is expected, but it is the Servant who comes.... When prisoners are kept in prison because of their debts, only ‘Moses’ and his commandments are required for them to be set free. That is in itself political enough” (135). Finally, in 42:7 and 49:9 the word **צא** is likewise used to remind us of Moses and Exodus (see 362). However, Baltzer does not

explain why the drama even needs Cyrus. Odd in this connection is his interpretation of the hand-grasping, which, relevant to Moses in 42:6, he suggests is an act of investiture, whereas with regard to Cyrus in 45:1 it relates to Exodus. It is, incidentally, a fixed term for a king's divine anointment.

On the other hand, Moses, who has resurrected from his unknown grave in Deut 34 and who appears as a spirit on the stage in 52:2–3 and does not himself rightly know how he got there (335ff., cf. 135ff., 316–17, 396), seems not “political enough.” Again it is the tensions in the text, this time in 49:7ff., that allow for comprehension on at least three levels: the servant is not only a servant and Moses but at the same time Nehemiah (314–15). Baltzer arrives at this latter conclusion via the word *בוזה* “to despise” in 49:7, which reminds him of Nehemiah's conflict with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem in Neh 2:19 and 3:36–37 and Nehemiah's self-designation as “Servant of Yahweh” in Neh 1 (315). He also discerns the names of Nehemiah's three friends in hidden semantic allusions in 49:17–19: *מהרסיך* indicates the Ammonite Tobiah (in Neh 3:35), *מהרביך* denotes the Arab Geshem (in Neh 4:1 and 2:19 and 6:1), and *מבלעיך* recalls the governor Sanballat (324–25). Further indications are the social measures in 49:8–9. Never discussed is the tricky question of whether the servant or Yahweh is subject of the infinitive, although it is essential to determining if the redistribution of the hereditary lands and the return of the captives “fits” better Moses or Nehemiah—or neither (316 and see 363 on 51:13–14). Never considered is the possibility that the text in 49:3 refers to Israel and would also be congruent with 49:7 and 49:8(ff.). The “main difficulty of exegesis” is resolved in the following manner: “‘the Servant Moses’ is citing a divine oracle about the Servant Israel” (308).

Echoes from the book of Nehemiah in the texts on the servant of God and in many other places, particularly concerning the building of the city in 49:14ff. and 54, are finally important in another way. Baltzer regards as plausible the usual dating of Deutero-Isaiah from the sixth century B.C., but he believes to have good reasons for a later dating (30ff.). The “exegesis of individual passages” along with “a number of general considerations” (30) lead him to place it in the second half of the fifth century B.C.—the golden age of Greek drama and comedy! Of prime importance in the “exegesis of individual passages” are the connections to Nehemiah, which Baltzer finds in the texts on the building of the city and the servant of Yahweh. In many places where Trito-Isaiah is already announced (40:9 and 44:26 and 45:14 and 49:8ff. or 54:11ff.) this may well be the case. Yet before making exceptions the rule and then dating all of Deutero-Isaiah accordingly, we should perhaps check whether they all belong to the book's original scope. And it remains a mystery to me what the concept of the “indissolubility of the ‘marriage’ between Yahweh and Zion/Jerusalem” has to do with the dissolution of mixed marriages under Nehemiah (30).

Most of the exegesis in this commentary is of a similarly baffling nature and thus hard to evaluate, for instance Baltzer's staging of Deutero-Isaiah as a liturgical drama, which frustrates any scholarly dating or interpretation of individual texts. "The game is still going on" —that is the basic principle of this commentary. If you want to learn something new about the text corpus of Isa 40–55, then you would perhaps do better to look elsewhere. On the other hand, if you want to learn about Klaus Baltzer's ideas regarding Old Testament texts and his theories of exegesis, then do read this commentary.