



Baltzer, Klaus

Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55

Translated by Margaret Kohl

Edited by Peter Machinist

Hermeneia

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001. Pp. xxv + 597. Cloth.
\$78.00. ISBN 0800660390.

Benjamin D. Sommer
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60208-4050

More than a commentary in the typical sense, this work represents the most original contribution to the study of Isa 40–55 in the past half century. It moves decisively beyond the current scholarly consensus in three ways. Baltzer argues that Isa 40–55 is a liturgical drama, a text performed by actors with roles that can be reconstructed. Second, Baltzer maintains that these chapters were written in Jerusalem during the last half of the fifth century rather than in the Babylonian exile during the last part of the sixth. Finally, Baltzer suggests that the servant in Isa 42; 48; 50; and 53 (one of the main *dramatis personae*) is none other than Moses. These theses are exciting and creative. Unfortunately, none of them receives any serious support. Nevertheless, Baltzer's focus on dramatic elements in these chapters highlights the vivid nature of Deutero-Isaiah's rhetoric and the crucial role of dialogue in these speeches, and thus this commentary contributes to the literary analysis of these texts. At the same time, precisely because of the bold and speculative nature of Baltzer's proposals, this book raises central questions regarding what should count as evidence in biblical studies, which will constitute my main focus in this review essay.

Throughout the commentary, Baltzer assigns speeches to various actors and a chorus, and he finds hints regarding their movements on stage. The absence of any rubrics in our text identifying the speakers and these actions is not in itself surprising; after all, the oldest manuscripts of Greek drama do not specify which characters speak which lines. However, even though Baltzer devotes considerable energy to uncovering the identity of a given line's speaker, he does not make fully clear why we should think it likely the line has a particular speaker at all—in other words, why this is a drama rather than a poem

that occasionally represents more than one voice. Similarly, Baltzer divides the text into six acts, each of which has three scenes, but nowhere does Baltzer explain why the acts are important for the performance or interpretation of the play; the dramatic function of this literary subunit remains ill-defined. How would our understanding of Isa 40–55 differ if it consisted of an undifferentiated catena of scenes rather than six acts with three scenes each? Would the performance differ in any way? Baltzer does justify breaking the text into six major units by arguing that five of these six end with a hymn, by which he means a very brief text that contains a plural imperative such as “Sing!” or “Rejoice!” But why such a verb necessarily marks the end of a literary unit is never made clear. Further, one of these five (45:25) in fact lacks the plural imperative altogether, and Baltzer’s suggestion that this verse represents an “implicit” hymn rather than an “explicitly ‘performed’ ” one (251) is hardly convincing.

The nature of Baltzer’s reasoning in recovering a drama from these chapters may be clarified with an analogy. If one assumes that the main character of the book of Isaiah is Jesus of Nazareth and that the central point the book makes is to predict his arrival, then it is possible to find manifold christological references throughout the book. Indeed, for two millennia many scholars have done so in subtle, clever, learned, and often moving ways. The question, of course, is whether one wants to make that assumption to begin with. Similarly, once one reads the text as a drama, it is not terribly difficult to assign lines to various speakers and to provide scenic directions, and the results in some ways are suggestive. But what would lead a reader to make that assumption in the first place? It is this central question that Baltzer does not answer.

The closest Baltzer comes to buttressing his claim involves comparisons to other dramas in the ancient Near East and the Hellenistic world. The relevance of many of the comparisons he suggests is open to question. He points to the Babylonian Akitu festival as an example of a cultic drama in Mesopotamia (7–8). However, scholars have criticized the view that the Akitu involved a play anything like what Baltzer proposes for Isa 40–55, and in light of these criticisms Baltzer’s use of the Akitu as an analogy breaks down.¹ Even though Babylonian priests read certain texts aloud during the festival, they

¹Some scholars have indeed suggested that the Akitu included elements of drama (e.g., some argue that the procession on the eighth day of Nisan and Marduk’s residence at the Akitu house from the eighth to the eleventh of Nisan included a reenactment of scenes from *Enuma Elish*), but their reasoning has been thoroughly critiqued. Against the view that the Akitu contains dramatic presentation, see Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 438; Karl van der Toorn, “The Babylonian New Year Festival,” in *Congress Volume: Leuven, 1989* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 43; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 337–38; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Ina šulmi irub: Die kulttopographie und ideologische Programmatik der akītu-Prozession in Babylonien und Assyrien im I. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1994), 74–75; Mark Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1993), 404. Oddly, Baltzer

generally did so in private chapels, not in the presence of the public. There is no evidence, for example, that any audience (other than Marduk) heard the high priest of Etuša recite *Enuma Elish* on the fourth day of Nisan. On the fifth day the high priest removed the king's crown and scepter and slapped him on the cheek before the cult statue of Marduk, but again our Akkadian texts make no reference to the presence of any human audience for these surprising deeds. Thus the texts recited and the actions undertaken in the Akitu had ritual significance but were not a performance of the sort known from Attic drama or from Isa 40–55 as understood by Baltzer.² Similarly, Baltzer refers to an Aramaic text in demotic characters from Persian-era Egypt as another ritual drama roughly contemporaneous with Deutero-Isaiah (8). This text preserves the liturgy of a New Year's festival, but there is not the slightest hint that it was a drama, if by *drama* we mean a composition in which actors depict some events before an audience.³ (To be sure, similarities exist between religious ceremonies and plays. Consequently one might want to maintain that the Catholic mass or the reading of the Torah in a synagogue or the recitation of the grace after meals by an individual is a drama, and in that case one could classify the Akitu as a drama as well. But doing so would reflect a desire to define *drama* broadly more than it would contribute to our understanding of the mass, the Torah reading, or the grace after meals.) Neither the Akitu nor the Aramaic text belongs to a genre remotely similar to that of works written by Aeschylus, Aristophanes, or Arthur Miller. Even if Deutero-Isaiah's work is somehow analogous to the Akitu program or the Aramaic text in question, we would have no reason to think that Deutero-Isaiah's work is a drama or that comparisons with real dramas (such as Attic ones) would significantly illuminate Isa 40–55.

In any event, having classified Isa 40–55 as a drama, Baltzer asks when the drama was performed. He surmises that the performance took place during a pilgrimage festival on the basis of texts such as 40:31; 49:7-9; and 55:1-5 (22). At first glance, the reference to these verses in connection with a pilgrimage festival seems a non sequitur. At second glance, one can see how, for example, the motif of pilgrimage might have a link to some of the vocabulary in 40:31 (“But those who hope for Yahweh renew (their) strength: They let great wings grow [יעלו אבר] like eagles, they run and do not grow faint, they walk and do not become weary” [Baltzer's translation]). The verbs “go” and “run” in

cites both Pongratz-Leisten and Cohen, even though their work argues against the view that the activities associated with the Akitu house had a dramatic function.

²The procession of Marduk's cult statue back to Babylon from the Akitu house on the eleventh of Nisan was a grand public spectacle, but the correct term for this event is not cultic drama but cultic parade.

³See Richard Steiner's description of the text in *JAOS* 111 (1991): 362–63, and Steiner's translation of the text in William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (vol. 1 of *The Context of Scripture*; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 309–27. Baltzer cites this description and translation, apparently in support of his thesis, even though Steiner never suggests that the Aramaic text is a drama.

40:31 might be related to the journey of pilgrims, and of course the verb עלה (“rise, go up, grow”) often refers to the ascent to Jerusalem, though it is not used that way in this verse. But because the connection between these verses and pilgrimage festivals is at best tenuous, it can hardly be used as a foundation for an argument. Baltzer further asks which festival hosted the performance. He draws our attention to 40:6–8 (“All flesh is grass, and all its goodness like the flower of the field. The grass is withered, the flower faded...” [Baltzer’s translation]). According to Baltzer, this passage suggests that the festival took place in the spring, when vegetation begins to dry up in the Levant; hence, we must be speaking of the Mazzot festival. Now, there are many ways to understand the timeless metaphor in 40:6–8 (which draws on a widespread poetic motif also found in Pss 37:2; 90:5; 103:15). The suggestion that the metaphor reflects the month of the text’s recitation is not one of the more compelling ones. (These verses provide the words for second movement of Brahms’s *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. Does this mean that Brahms intended it to be performed at the beginning of Germany’s dry season?) We are told (22–23) that references to rain, snow, trees bursting into leaf, and abundant milk in 55:1–13 all point to the spring. In fact, none of these motifs relate to any particular season. The trees in 55:13, for example, are not bursting into leaf but springing up *de novo* to replace desert scrubs as the Judeans return through the desert to their homeland. (Further, the trees referred to—ברוש [cypress or, more likely, juniper] and הדס [myrtle]—are evergreens. They sprout new leaves throughout the year whenever necessary, not only or especially in the spring.) The rain in 55:10, Baltzer tells us, must be late rain that precedes Mazzot in the spring. But why could it not be the early rain that follows Sukkot in the fall? And why must these verses be understood as reflecting the timing of the text’s recitation at all? By building on one of the least-persuasive understandings of these poetic passages, Baltzer simply produces an unpersuasive thesis.

Similar problems undermine the attempt to identify Moses as the servant of YHWH. Baltzer argues that references to the Mosaic Torah in the Servant Songs point in this direction, but the Servant Songs are exceedingly rich in literary allusions, a circumstance that weakens the significance of the connection with Moses. For example, Isa 53 borrows from Jer 10 and 11; Isa 1, 6, and 11; and Ps 91. The servant in Isa 53 is typologically linked with the prophet Jeremiah (cf. 53:7–8 with Jer 11:19), the nation Israel (cf. 53:1–12 with Jer 10:19–25; and 52:13 with Isa 6:9), the prophet Isaiah (cf. 53:4–7 with Isa 6:5–10), the Davidic monarch (cf. 53:1–13 with Isa 11), and perhaps even YHWH himself (cf. 52:13 with Isa 6:1). In light of the extraordinary density of typological allusions in the Servant Songs, any connection between the songs and texts known from the Pentateuch—even if we assume that Deutero-Isaiah regarded the pentateuchal texts as Mosaic—does not mean the servant *is* Moses any more than other allusions mean the servant *is* Jeremiah or Isaiah or YHWH. Moreover, many of the connections between the Servant Songs and Moses turn out to be rather weak. According to Baltzer, the phrase, “The Lord YHWH has sent me” (שחלני) in 48:16 “is a carefully crafted reflection of

Exodus 3, especially 3:13–15,” where the phrase, “The God of your fathers has sent me” (שַׁחֲלֵנִי) occurs (293). On the basis of the single shared vocabulary item, however, one could just as easily argue that Isa 48:16 alludes to Isa 6:8 or Ezek 2:2–3; indeed, the latter presents a stronger parallel, since it shares with Isa 48:16 an additional word (רַחֵם) not found in Exod 3. Even more likely, all these texts utilize vocabulary associated with the call genre, in which case there is no special relationship between Exod 3 and Isa 48 at all. A parallel of one word does not a literary allusion make. (Given Baltzer’s frequent reference to the reworking of older texts in Isa 40–55, it is unfortunate that he does not attend to the methodological discussions of innerbiblical allusion and exegesis found in the work of scholars such as Michael Fishbane, Richard Hays, and Yair Zakovitch.⁴)

Baltzer recognizes that a major impediment to the identification of Moses as servant is the absence of his name anywhere in Isa 40–55. He finds the solution to this crux in Isa 48:19, where God states that if the people had not sinned, “his name would not have been wiped out and not destroyed from before me” (Baltzer’s translation). Whose name? For Baltzer, it must be the surprisingly absent name of Moses: “If there is any name that is consistently blotted out in DtIsa it is the name of Moses” (299). Of course, if one has not been convinced that a main character of these chapters is Moses, then one has no reason to think that Moses’ name is missing. In any event, Baltzer deduces that Moses’ name was blotted out on the basis of Exod 32:32, where Moses asks that his name be blotted out if God does not forgive Israel for fashioning the golden calf. In light of this verse, Baltzer writes, “The blotting out of Moses’ name in DtIsa would have to be understood as a sign that the people continued to sin” (300). But this misrepresents Exod 32:32. In that verse Moses demands that his name be removed not if the Israelites continue to sin but if God decides not to forgive them, and few themes are clearer in Isa 40–55 than God’s decision to accept the nation’s suffering as more than enough payment for its sins (40:2).

Alas, the arguments regarding the fifth-century dating fare no better. Baltzer notes several thematic parallels between Isa 40–55 and the book of Ezra-Nehemiah (30–31). The similarities are real, but they do not show that the two books must have been written at the same time. To comment on just two of Baltzer’s examples, both books emphasize the concept of human beings as God’s servants. So do Jeremiah (1:8; 25:9; 27:6; 30:10–11), Sumerian royal inscriptions, and the Atrahasis Epic, but this does not mean that they were all written in the fifth century. As Baltzer notes, both Deutero-Isaiah and Nehemiah

⁴See especially Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 10–19, 285, and passim; Zakovitch, *An Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation* (Even-Yehuda: Reches, 1992), passim; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32 and passim. Given Baltzer’s thesis, another relevant source for information regarding literary allusion might have been Richard Garner, *From Homer to Tragedy: The Art of Allusion in Greek Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1990).

emphasize building the walls of Jerusalem (Isa 49:16–19; 54:11–14; Neh 2:1–4:17; 6:15–16). As long as the walls were not in fact in good condition, those who love Jerusalem were likely to be concerned with this issue, whatever century they lived in. Thus this parallel shows that the two authors shared a concern, not that they lived at the same time. Moreover, Baltzer fails to address predictions that seem unlikely to have been written after the reign of Cyrus. If, as Baltzer (among others) argues, Isa 44:14 is addressed to the character Cyrus, then this verse (along with 43:3–4, in all likelihood) predicts that Cyrus will conquer Egypt. But Cyrus never conquered Egypt; his son and successor, Cambyses, did so. Coming from the pen of a writer in the 530s, this erroneous prediction is understandable; coming from a writer after Cyrus's death, it would be baffling. Similarly, passages in which the prophet urges the people to flee from Babylon (48:20) or assures the people that God has not in fact rejected the nation (41:8) are most naturally read in the exile, not after it.

The evidence Baltzer adduces to support his bold theses does not support them. Yet his proposals remain intriguing, whether or not they reflect the intentions of the prophetic author or the way Isa 40–55 was actually read in antiquity. Even though we cannot characterize the genre of these chapters as a play, Baltzer's proposal is nevertheless a genuine contribution because it draws our attention to a neglected attribute of their rhetoric. These chapters are full of sudden shifts of voice, references to movement, vivid questions, challenges, and responses. (Incidentally, this is true of most of 56–66 as well.) In short, they are dramatic, though not a drama. One might compare these chapters with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton's epic poem is not a drama; that is, it was not written to be performed by a cast of actors, unlike, say, the same author's *Comus*. But *Paradise Lost* is dramatic in quality, since so much of it consists of dialogue spoken by five or six characters.⁵ Consequently, one could easily adapt *Paradise Lost* to be a spoken drama or (better) an opera. While Baltzer did not convince me that Isa 40–55 were written as a drama, he does show that they could be staged as one. The result would probably be quite exciting. One hopes Baltzer will attempt to produce the play he claims to have found in these chapters. Deutero-Isaiah would be surprised at the result, but he might also be pleased.

⁵The dialogue of Isa 40–55 is less clear than that of *Paradise Lost*, of course, and in this respect the former is less dramatic than the latter. On the other hand, Deutero-Isaiah's poetry is much more vivid in its sudden shifts and its sense of movement, and in this particular respect Isa 40–55 seems the more dramatic of the two works.