OLOF BÄCKERSTEN

Isaiah's Political Message

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Isaiah's Political Message

An Appraisal of His Alleged Social Critique

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This study – a slightly revised version of a doctoral dissertation submitted to Lund University in October 2007[1] – is the result of a project that failed. Initially I wanted to explore the field of Old Testament ethics, and for various reasons, I believed that the prophets might be particularly interesting. My supervisor, Professor Fredrik Lindström, advised me to focus on Isaiah. He also suggested that, since it is difficult to avoid a substantial discussion of Isaiah's social critique in a study on the subject of ethics in Isaiah, a good way to start might be to take a closer look at the so-called woe-oracles in Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4. Since I considered Isaiah as an intriguing piece of prophetic literature, and since the prophetic social critique is an aspect of the theology of the OT that I can fully endorse, I was happy to take his advice.

I soon discovered that scholars tend to take it for granted that passages such as Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 express a social critique. I saw no reason to doubt that this is correct, but before continuing my investigation, I wanted to know why the passages in question must be understood in a social-critical fashion. Is this really the only conceivable option? At this point, I unintentionally became involved in a completely different project. Instead of exploring the topic of ethics in Isaiah, I found myself questioning whether there is any evidence for what scholars usually refer to as Isaiah's social critique. As my doubts about this aspect of Isaiah's ethics continued to grow, I found it difficult to conduct the interesting investigation that I had initially planned. On the other hand, I had found the solution to what had become a more acute problem, namely to identify a specific subject of investigation.

I am grateful to the editors of the series *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, Prof. Dr. Mark S. Smith, Prof. Dr. Bernd Janowski and Prof. Dr. Hermann Spieckermann, for accepting this work for publication.

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[1] The title of the dissertation was *Isaiah's Alleged Social Critique: A Foreign-Political Reading of Passages Such as Isaiah* 5:8–24 *and* 10:1–4. I am grateful to the editors of the series *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* for suggesting a better title.

I owe a depth of gratitude to my supervisor Professor Fredrik Lindström, who has not only offered valuable insights throughout the process of writing, but who has also stimulated me to complete my thesis with a careful blend of enthusiasm, sympathy, and impatience. My heartfelt thanks also go to Professor Emeritus Tryggve Mettinger, whose feedback on earlier drafts of this book has challenged me to clarify my thinking.

I am grateful for the many opportunities to discuss preliminary versions of various chapters of this study with the Old and New Testament Seminars at Lund. I would also like to thank the participants in the Old Testament Seminar at Göttingen, in the Old Testament Seminar at The Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology, and in the OTSEM network. This last mentioned network consisted until quite recently of Old Testament scholars from the universities of Aarhus, Göttingen, Helsinki, Lund, Oslo, and The Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology. Among all the scholars who have contributed in numerous ways, I would like to mention Professor Sten Hidal, Lund, Professor Terje Stordalen, Oslo, Professor Hermann Spieckermann, Göttingen, Professor Kirsten Nielsen, Aarhus, and Dr Göran Eidevall, Uppsala. I must also thank Bishop Erik Aurelius for his hospitality during my visit to Göttingen, which took place while he was still professor there. I should also mention that my work has profited from conversations with my dear friend Matthias Söderlund, who has shared his insights in theology, philosophy, and literary theory. I have received many helpful suggestions from my father, Dr Roland Persson, who has also shared my burden of proofreading. Sr. Gerd Swensson has checked and improved my English. Needless to say, I am fully responsible for any remaining errors myself.

My deepest gratitude is due to the light of my life, my wife Maria. I have often tried out my ideas on her, and her comments have been invaluable. It would not have been possible to write this book without her support.

Bleket, February 2008
Olof Bäckersten

Contents

Part One

Introduction

It seems ironic that a prophet named "YHWH saves" has come to be perceived of as a prophet of doom, especially since promises of salvation have a prominent place in the book that carries his name.[1] Even so, this is understandable in view of the equally striking announcements of judgment contained therein. This juxtaposition of judgment and salvation is a classic problem in the Isaiah research, and it deserves some attention even in the present study, but I will focus on one side of this coin, and a limited section of the book, namely on the passages in Isaiah 1–39 that presents Judah with the threat of destruction.

Leaving aside passages about the cult and illegitimate worship, scholars have traditionally identified two fundamental, and somewhat separate, discourses in the announcements of judgment directed against Judah in Isaiah 1–39. In what might be labelled the *social-critical* discourse, we supposedly encounter a prophet who condemns the Jerusalemite elite for their complacent attitudes and decadent life-style in general, and for their more or less systematic oppression of the less fortunate in particular. This lack of social justice, Isaiah emphasises, will indeed be punished by YHWH. In the discourse that might preferably be labelled *foreign-political*, scholars have found that the prophet repeatedly discourages Judahite participation in anti-Assyrian rebellions – some prefer other words: Isaiah opposes Judah's entering military alliances – since such strategies are offensive to YHWH and their plans will therefore come to nothing.[2]

This investigation sets out to question the existence of the social-critical discourse. The basic argument is that the alleged proof-texts, with surprisingly few although notable exceptions, might instead relate to the criticism of Judah's foreign policy.

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[1] Cf., however, the suggestion that "Jesaja war ein Heilsprophet" (U. Becker, *Jesaja*, 286).

[2] These discourses remain distinguishable, but they are often seen as two sides of the same coin (Isaiah's opposition to the Judahite elite), see particularly Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk*, 169–189, but note also, e.g., Barton, "Book of Isaiah", 69, Gonçalves, *L'expédition*, 267–269, Roberts, "Blindfolding", 290, Williamson, "Isaiah and the wise", 140.

When making this distinction between social critique and foreign politics, I admittedly employ an awkward dichotomy, but in order to communicate the results of my investigation, these conventions of language in the Isaiah research nonetheless seem helpful. In the text analyses that follow, I will thus distinguish a social-critical line of interpretation from a foreign-political line, and in each case, I will indicate precisely how they differ from one another, and how these *lines of interpretation* are mutually exclusive.[3] As this way of putting the matter might have revealed, the issue concerns the interpretation of the preserved literature. I will largely leave open the question if and how this piece of literature reflects the preaching of the historical prophet.[4]

The limitation of the source material to Isaiah 1–39 should be taken as a tentative indication of the present focus of interest; it does not stem from any redaction-critical considerations, and it will not preclude occasional remarks on the book of Isaiah as a whole.[5] The background is this: My overall suggestion rests on the traditional identification of a foreign-political theme in the book of Isaiah, namely the discouragement of political rebellions. This particular theme happens to be absent from Isaiah 40–66, and thus appears to have its primary function within the multi-faceted reflection on the Assyrian crisis that seems integral to Isaiah 1–39 (cf., e.g., the description of Sennacherib's invasion in Isaiah 1 and Isaiah 36–39).[6] As far as this foreign-political theme is concerned, it seems inevitable that the discussion will evolve around Isaiah 1–39. This is not to deny that any investigation of a sub-section ultimately affects our conception of the book of Isaiah as a whole, but only to make it explicit that a full treatment of this vast subject exceeds the scope of the present study. The social-critical passages that do occur in Isaiah 40–66 will occasionally prove important for the line of argumentation, but since the

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[3] Dietrich, *Jesaja*, makes the elegant distinction between *Innen-* and *Außenpolitik*. Similarly, A. Davies, *Double Standards*, speaks of social ethics (focus on "interpersonal and social relationship structures within Israel", p. 59), political ethics (deals with "relationships between nations and empires on a global basis", p. 59 n. 1), and religious ethics (here he treats "matters such as the proper conduct of the cult, warnings against false prophecy and idolatry, instruction on the Sabbath …" p. 85). These terminologies are admittedly more elegant, but for my present purposes, I have found the somewhat clumsy distinction between social critique and foreign policy practically more suitable.

[4] On the present tendency to focus on the preserved literature (rather than on the historical prophet), cf., e.g., U. Becker, "Jesajaforschung", U. Becker, "Wiederentdeckung".

[5] The traditional distinction between a First, Second, and Third Isaiah is of course problematic, cf., e.g., Rendtorff, "Complex Unity", 35–39.

[6] On the view that Sennacherib's invasion is described in Isaiah 1, cf. p. 69 below.

very social-critical orientation seems irrefutable, they will not be analyzed in their own right here.

In the present study, I will thus argue that passages in Isaiah 1–39 that have hitherto been considered as social-critical tend to admit an alternative, foreign-political, line of interpretation. The purpose of making such an observation is of course that it might stimulate further discussion. A social-critical reading may remain possible, but if there is a genuine alternative available, the traditional view can no longer be taken for granted. While I consider this an important task, exploring whether the one option might be preferable to the other seems a natural additional undertaking. Consequently, and this may be considered the thesis of the present study, I will typically argue that the evidence speaks in favour of a foreign-political reading.

Since a few passages in which a social-critical emphasis is difficult to deny will remain untouched, it could be argued that this investigation will merely bring us back to the point of departure, i.e. to the traditional assumption that the announcements of judgment in Isaiah 1–39 usually belong to either a social-critical or to a foreign-political discourse. However, both discourses will appear in a slightly different light, for instance with regard to their significance and function in the literary composition, when the alleged social-critical passages have been re-evaluated. In this manner, I will make a small contribution to the discussion of a problem that tends to intrigue Isaiah researchers, namely why and how the multiplicity of topics/themes and the rather disparate positions have been integrated into the same prophetic book.

Having sketched the contours of the study, the remaining portion of this introductory Part One has a twofold structure. As a first step, I will specify the task (the problem, the mode of procedure, the relationship to previous research, and the methodological presuppositions). As a second step, I will clarify the approach, and make some observations that determine the subsequent discussion, in the form of an analysis of Isa 28:1–4.

Chapter 1

The Task

Since the social critique allegedly preserved in Isaiah 1–39 is the subject of this investigation, it seems the natural strategy to explore the decisive textual basis, namely the passages commonly taken to announce a divine punishment for the unrighteous life-style of the elite (see further below). However, I will *not* analyse every passage that might possibly fall within this category. Instead, I will primarily discuss a classic set of proof-texts, namely the so-called woe-oracles preserved in Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4. This procedure has several advantages, the most important being that these passages provide the best available test case, for the following three reasons:

1. No other section expresses the assumed social critique more fully, in the sense that we here encounter the major elements, such as the seizing of property by the elite, their perversion of the course of justice, their excessive drinking, their arrogant and complacent attitudes, etc. Thematically, this section belongs to the core.
2. Among the alleged social-critical sections in the book of Isaiah, Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 is the one most often considered comparatively old, if not even authentic to the historical Isaiah. Hence, there is a certain probability that this section belongs to the chronological core, which is of some significance insofar as we have any interest in diachronic issues.
3. The ultimate task of exegesis is arguably to interpret the preserved literature, but due to the complex nature of the book of Isaiah, such a project runs the obvious risk of infinite expansion. However, since we may assume that Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 should primarily (but not exclusively) be interpreted in view of Isaiah 5–10, the section of the book enveloped by these so-called woe-oracles, the chosen procedure will make a discussion of the alleged social critique at the level of the literary composition a manageable project.

Someone wishing to question the existence of a social-critical discourse in Isaiah 1–39 will find a suitable test case in the so-called woe-oracles preserved in Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4. Having studied this section in some detail, a brief consideration of only a few additional passages will prove

sufficient for my present purposes. These additional passages, namely Isa 1:10–28; 3:13–4:1; 5:1–7; 24:5; 25:1–5; 26:1–11; 28:1–4,[1] 7–8; 29:17–21; 32:1–8; 33:13–16, include those immediately significant for the subject under debate.[2] In this connection, I will make some remarks about the potential significance of the social-critical sections preserved in Isaiah 40–66 (primarily Isaiah 58–59). As hinted above, I will also consider the immediate literary context of Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4, i.e. Isaiah 5–10.

The subject under debate here is not how the concept of social critique should be defined in theory, but the sense in which this concept might capture a fundamental aspect of passages such as Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4. Consequently, our point of departure will not be a theoretical definition, but the line of interpretation presupposed in the scholarly discussion of Isaiah's social critique. This line of interpretation, hereafter labelled social-critical, is characterized by the following three components:

1. The passages in question are directed against the Judahite, and even the Jerusalemite, elite. Though not decisive, this is a significant component of the traditional view, since the criticism would loose some of its perceived sharpness if the target had been the conditions in some foreign nation. To turn against one's own fellow citizens testifies to a certain moral stature.
2. These passages describe an obviously immoral activity and/or attitude at the level of the personal life of the elite and/or the social life of the nation. The rhetoric entails the public display of this kind of moral offences. Although the light occasionally falls on the general depravity of the upper class, a certain emphasis on their abuse of economic and juridical institutions, i.e. on the lack of social justice, is apparent in the discourse at large.
3. These moral offences are presented as the reason for an imminent judgment. This is a point on which scholars are agreed, although the nature of the judgment is understood either as a direct divine punishment[3] or as the (inevitable) result of the crime along the lines that

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[1] For the sake of clarity, 28:1–4 is discussed in the introductory Part One.

[2] I will not discuss the unclear Isa 3:9, where הכרת perhaps means partiality (cf., e.g., Williamson, *Isaiah* 1–5, 253). Note however that the literary context does not suggest that the legal system is in focus (incidentally, Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk*, 209–210, instead assumes that Judah's anti-Assyrian policy is criticized). The suggestion that Isa 30:12 refers to "oppression and the denial of rights to the defenceless in society" (Wong, "Faith", 245) has little support in Isa 30:1–17, where Judah's anti-Assyrian policy seems to be the topic (cf. Wong, "Faith", 244).

[3] Cf., e.g., Kraus, "Botschaft", 302–303, Deck, *Gerichtsbotschaft*, 213.

you reap what you sow.[4] As an additional aspect, some scholars emphasise the rhetorical function of accomplishing poetic justice.[5]

Do passages such as Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 really express a social critique in the sense indicated by the three points above? That is the question for the present study.

As an alternative to the social-critical reading, I will suggest that the target for the critique might be Judah's decision to rebel against Assyria. (I have not been able to find any additional option.) This alternative reading typically involves substantial modification of the three components listed above, which are characteristic of the traditional view, but the decisive divergence is the foreign-political orientation itself. If Judah's anti-Assyrian policy is in focus, these passages belong to a discourse in Isaiah 1–39 that scholars usually consider not as social-critical, but as foreign-political.[6]

Let me also clarify that, what I will call a social-critical reading is characterized by an *exclusive* focus on the internal affairs of a nation, i.e. on the abominable actions/attitudes of the elite. A foreign-political reading may still involve the condemnation of the elite, but in this case, the fundamental issue concerns (a) the relationship between nations in general and (b) Judah's position on the international arena in particular.

To the best of my knowledge, the assumption that Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 is essentially a social-critical discourse has not been questioned before,[7] although scholars have made suggestions that point in this direction.

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[4] Cf., to take an accessible instance, Wildberger, *BKAT* 10/1, 182 (cf. pp. 21–22) and of course Koch, "Entstehung", 255–256, Koch, *Profeten*, 133. An inevitable *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* (cf. Koch, "Vergeltungsdogma") is disputable, cf., e.g., Janowski, "Tat". Even so, as Tucker has reminded us, the prophetic literature does contain "cases in which the disaster is characterized as following from the action without reference to Yahweh's intervention" (Tucker, "Sin", quote on p. 383, where Isa 5:8–10 is mentioned as one example).

[5] Cf. Barton, "Isaiah of Jerusalem", 9–10 (this observation does not alter his conclusion that Isaiah is "trying to convince his hearers … that their actions are evil and will bring down the wrath of God", p. 1), cf. Barton, "Natural", 39–44 and, e.g., Chisholm, "Structure", 53–54.

[6] Judah's anti-Assyrian policy seems to be a theme in Isaiah 28–31, and a few sections in Isaiah 13–23 should presumably be understood against this background (e.g., 14:28–32; 18; 19:1–15; 20; 22:15–18). Not surprisingly, this topic seems to be absent from the so-called Isaiah Apocalypse (Isaiah 24–27). The possible evidence in Isaiah 1–12 will be considered below. Note that this understanding of a literary theme does *not* require that the passages in question were written during the eighth century (cf. below).

[7] A convenient history of research on the prophets' social critique (up until the 1980s) is provided by Dearman, *Property*, 2–16. On the subsequent discussion (related to the societal development) see Nurmi, *Ethik*, 26–45. On the present state of the Isaiah research

First, the authenticity of the social-critical passages, such as Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4, has been disputed.[8] This redaction-critical conclusion does not affect the traditional line of interpretation, but the implication is that we cannot assume that the book of Isaiah is rooted in a prophetic social critique.[9]

Secondly, Sweeney has suggested that Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 relate to the Syro-Ephraimite war, and that the criticism is directed against the northern kingdom. He argues that "land appropriation and perversion of truth and justice were … at issue in Israel's invasion of Judah" and that "prophets commonly refer to international events in terms of localized crimes …". Sweeney thus opts for a decidedly foreign-political line of interpretation, but he abstains from expressing any explicit doubts about the traditional view, probably because "the vague language and present setting of this text … allows for an understanding that sees both Israel and Judah as the objects of YHWH's wrath".[10]

Thirdly, although passages such as Isa 5:8–10, 23 and 10:1–4 are usually understood in a social-critical fashion, the understanding of Isa 5:11–22 varies. Some scholars seem to assume that Isa 5:11–22 belongs to a social-critical discourse,[11] others consider the (assumed) condemnations of drunkenness, pride, and similar things, as something of a separate theme,[12]

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at large, see U. Becker, "Jesajaforschung", U. Becker, "Wiederentdeckung", and Höffken, *Diskussion*.

[8] Cf. Porath, *Sozialkritik* (he still believes that decisive sections such as 5:8–10 and 10:1–2 are authentic), and especially U. Becker, *Jesaja*. A remark on the latter's proposal is appropriate here: Picking up the suggestion that the historical Isaiah was familiar with Amos' preaching (Fey, *Amos*, cf. more recently Blum, "Jesaja"), U. Becker, *Jesaja*, 134–145, argues that Isa 5:8–24 is *literarily* dependent on the book of Amos and hence composed in postexilic times (on other grounds, Isa 10:1–4 is assigned to the same date on pp. 155–159). The supposed dependence on Amos is however problematic, cf. E. W. Davies, *Prophecy*, 36–38, 86–87, 107–109, and Hardmeier, *Texttheorie*, 20–21 (n. 14).

[9] Two comparatively recent suggestions on Amos and Hosea seem worth mentioning here. First, Levin, "Amosbuch", 432–433, argues that the social-critical passages in Amos (apart from the "Verkehrung des Rechts" in Amos 5:7) are secondary. We might also note that Amos' criticism is directed against a foreign nation (perhaps we should even assume that the historical Amos was active in Judah in the period ca. 734–722, cf. Levin, "Amos"). Secondly, in an essay on Hosea, Kratz, "Erkenntnis", concludes that the criticism in the oldest layer concerns (a) Israel's attempts to escape the Assyrian threat via assistance from the "Weltmächten" (pp. 4–5) and (b) the murder of kings etc. "im Dienst der Außen- und Bündnispolitik" (pp. 5–6, quote on p. 6).

[10] Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 130–131 (on 5:8–24, quotes on p. 131), cf. pp. 191–192, 195–196 (on 10:1–4), cf. the unclear discussion of Isa 10:1–4 in Hayes and Irvine, *Isaiah*, 190–194 (cf. Irvine, *Isaiah*, 244–250). Scholars seem to have been reluctant to accept Sweeney's somewhat figurative interpretation of 5:8–24, and in my view, this is understandable.

[11] Cf., e.g., Childs, *Isaiah*, 47–48.

[12] Cf., e.g., Deck, *Gerichtsbotschaft*, 187, 234–251, Porath, *Sozialkritik*, 101.

whereas others still find a direct connection to Isaiah's opposition to Judah's anti-Assyrian policy.[13]

Fourthly, Høgenhaven finds not only a direct critique of Judah's anti-Assyrian policy in 5:11–22, but also indications that Isa 5:8–10 and 10:1–4 belong to this same foreign-political discourse.[14] He concludes:

> In der hemmungslosen Akkumulation von Grundbesitz, welche die judäischen Aristokraten ohne Rücksicht auf die ärmeren Landesleute betreiben, in der sorglosen Trinkerei des Jerusalemer Hofes, in der schamlosen Bestechlichkeit und der Vergewaltigung von dem Recht der Wehrlosen durch die Mächtigen … sieht der Prophet die Auswirkungen desselben Hochmuts und derselben Unverantwortlichkeit, die zu der Aufstandspolitik geführt haben.[15]

Høgenhaven seems to argue that Isaiah's opposition to Judah's anti-Assyrian policy explains why this prophet also formulated a social critique, and that these two discourses must be seen as two sides of the same coin. However, his point is *not* that the traditional, social-critical, reading of passages such as Isa 5:8–10, 23; 10:1–4 is questionable *per se*.[16]

To sum up, (1) scholars have made observations that indicate a possible need to contemplate whether Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 primarily belong to a social-critical or to a foreign-political discourse. (2) The assumption that a social-critical emphasis is apparent in these so-called woe-oracles has not been systematically questioned.

The social-critical interpretation (my terminology) of Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 appears to be ancient. In the Jewish tradition, the commonplace assumption that violations of the Torah have caused the past sufferings of the nation seems to have facilitated the conclusion that Isaiah here

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[13] Cf., e.g., McKane, *Prophets*, 65–67, and Fichtner, "Jesaja", 77–80 (both these scholars are discussing Isa 5:18–19, 21), Dietrich, *Jesaja*, 181–182, 168–170 (on 5:11–13, 18–19), Williamson, *Isaiah* 1–5, 380–387 (on Isa 5:18–19 and in the present literary context also Isa 5:20–21, he even suspects a remote connection in 5:8–10, cf. pp. 350, 353).

[14] Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk*, 169–189 (esp. pp. 169–177). Similarly de Jong, *Isaiah*, 126, 243, 245–247.

[15] Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk*, 187.

[16] Cf. Høgenhaven, *Gott und Volk*, 234 (his summary), "der Stellung Jesajas zu der judäischen Außenpolitik wurde eine primäre Bedeutung für die jeweilige Ausrichtung seiner Verkündigung zugeschrieben. Dabei wurden die sozialen und ethischen Aussagen des Propheten als von seiner politischen Stellungnahme abgeleitet verstanden" (de Jong, *Isaiah*, 243, 245–247, seems to make the same suggestion). Høgenhaven's main point appears to be that Isaiah's social critique should *not* be assigned to a date in Isaiah's *Frühzeit* (cf. pp. 168, 176–177), which would complicate his view that the historical Isaiah supported Ahaz' pro-Assyrian policy (see p. 233).

condemns such offences.[17] In the Christian tradition, the early interpreters seem to have found that the Lord criticizes the rich and powerful, thus siding with the meek and the poor.[18]

Since traditional views have often been questioned in critical research, it may seem surprising that the basic social-critical orientation has remained undisputed, but the reason is probably that there has been little impetus for doubt. For scholars who found the heart of the prophets' message in ethical monotheism,[19] and/or in the covenant,[20] there was plenty of room for Isaiah to denounce moral offences. When subsequent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the disparate nature of the OT theology, it seems that the passion for social justice became the typical feature ascribed to the prophets, probably because Amos was considered the natural point of departure (contrast, e.g., Hosea and Nahum). Maybe the general emphasis on the moral dimension of religion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the fact that the prophet's social critique is of enduring relevance, provide additional reasons why in scholarly conception, Isaiah has remained a social critic.[21] We are less inclined to question the lines of interpretation that make apparent sense, and which we are personally capable of endorsing (here I speak from previous personal experience). It is therefore not surprising that the perception of a prophet like Isaiah remained a spokesman for the poor and destitute post 1968.[22] The fact that this notion is undisputed by scholars inspired by liberation theology seems equally natural.[23]

The undisputed nature of the traditional line of interpretation is apparent in the discussion of Isaiah's social critique, or his ethics. For instance, E. W. Davies, *Prophecy*, discusses the tradition-historical *background* to Isaiah's ethics, the primary candidates

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[17] For a convenient overview, cf. Rosenberg, *Isaiah*, 44–51, 93–94.

[18] To take just one example, in a discussion that takes its point of departure in Luke 6:20, Tertullian, "Against Marcion", 366, states: "And by Isaiah how He inveighs against the oppressors of the needy! 'What mean ye that ye set fire to my vineyard, and that the spoil of the poor is in your houses? Wherefore do ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the face of the needy?' [Isa 3:14–15] And again: 'Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees; for in their decrees they decree wickedness, turning aside the needy from judgment, and taking away their rights from the poor of my people' [Isa 10:1–2]" (editor's remarks within brackets as in the original). Similarly Luther, "Lectures", 61–66, 107.

[19] On this conception cf., e.g., Dearman, *Property*, 2–3.

[20] On this conception cf., e.g., E. W. Davies, *Prophecy*, 17–20.

[21] On the contemporary relevance, cf., e.g., Hoppe, *Poor*, 102–103 (cf. pp. 72–75), W. J. Houston, *Contending*, 226–230 (cf. pp. 77–79), Malchow, *Social Justice* (pp. xi–xv, cf. pp. 31–49).

[22] We sense the spirit of the time in, e.g., Koch, "Entstehung" (p. 236, but cf. p. 257), and Dietrich, *Jesaja* (e.g., p. 15, including n. 7).

[23] Cf., e.g., Dobberahn, "Jesaja".

being the law, the wisdom tradition, and the prophetic tradition (i.e. Amos). Barton has investigated the *basis* of Isaiah's moral teaching (his ethical system).[24] Porath, *Sozialkritik*, performs a redaction-critical analysis in order to identify social-critical passages that might be authentic to the historical Isaiah. More recently, A. Davies, *Double Standards*, has argued that "At the heart of Isaiah's ethical code, there is … a double standard – one rule for the human, another for the divine – which sends a double message to the people of Israel …", and in this connection, the social-critical passages in Isaiah 1–39 serve to illustrate the "rule for the human".[25] Finally, Isaiah has of course been brought into the discussion of the social changes that supposedly explain why a prophetic movement of protest arose precisely during the eighth century.[26]

Some Methodological Presuppositions

Methodologically, this study contains nothing new. As indicated above, I will pose some very basic questions as to what a few passages in Isaiah 1–39 "are about" and, since exegetes habitually pose these kinds of questions, suitable methods are available. The discussion will therefore proceed along conventional lines. I will attempt a close reading of a few passages crucial to the subject of social critique in Isaiah 1–39. The analysis will involve considerations of the rhetorical strategy,[27] the sometimes obscure

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[24] Barton, "Isaiah of Jerusalem", similarly Barton, "Book of Isaiah".

[25] A. Davies, *Double Standards*, quote on p. 121, cf. pp. 34–58 (esp. pp. 40–45). On the monistic theology by which he seeks to explain this phenomenon (pp. 191–193), cf. Lindström, *God* (Davies' objections on pp. 170–171 are unpersuasive).

[26] Recently Nurmi, *Ethik*. The traditional view is expressed well by Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte I*, 248–253, note the problems mentioned by W. Houston, "Social Crisis", and Zwickel, "Wirtschaftsreform", 356–363. W. Houston, "Social Crisis", 146–147, concludes that the "rise of Assyrian power … demanded both higher expenditure on defence and … an outflow of precious metal and other valuables in tribute … The resources had to be extracted from … the wretched cultivators of the soil" (p. 146, cf., e.g., Bosshard-Nepustil, *Rezeptionen*, 246–247). Houston correctly notes, however, that "Such conditions certainly recurred on more than one later occasion, and were perhaps even more severe in the fifth century; hence we cannot date any specific text in these [the prophetic] books to the eighth century simply on the grounds of its [social-critical] subject matter" (pp. 146–147). This almost brings us back to Wellhausen, *Geschichte*, 107: "Nicht die Sünde des Volkes, and der es ja nie fehlt …, veranlaßt sie [the prophets] zu reden, sondern der Umstand, daß Jahve etwas tun will, daß große Ereignisse bevorstehen".

[27] In the sense "a method which investigates the art and techniques of effective speech" (Gitay, *Isaiah*, 5). On the understanding of rhetoric as "the art of composition" and/or as "the art of persuasion", cf., e.g., Høyland Lavik, *People*, 23–29 (quotes on pp. 23, 25). Valuable modifications of Gitay's approach are suggested by Patrick, *Rhetoric*, 123–126 (for example, the rhetorical analysis of the *written* text should focus on the readers/hearers of the book).

imagery,[28] the implications of the literary context/composition, the potential significance of the historical and tradition-historical background,[29] etc. In the following few respects, however, the approach here adopted might require some clarification.

It seems inevitable that an element of historical reconstruction is involved in the interpretation of the book of Isaiah.[30] For instance, when this book mentions nations that once existed in history, such as Assyria, it presupposes a reader/hearer with some knowledge of the historical circumstances. Similarly, prophetic literature, and prophetic speech, is a thing of the past, and therefore something that we can only contemplate in historical categories. Without implying that this is the only dimension of the preserved literature worth exploring, it thus seems justifiable to adopt a historical approach.[31]

When it comes to analysing the literary exposition, I will not heed the occasional call to focus on the present shape of the text.[32] The reasons are as follows: Although I agree that exegesis is a discipline devoted primarily to the literature that has actually been preserved, there is, theoretically speaking, no such thing as "the present shape of the text", since the OT is only available in a number of differing versions. If we are prepared to engage in textual criticism in order to reconstruct a reading more original than those preserved, it seems inconsistent to reject, as a matter of principle, the potentially helpful move to reconstruct the literary growth.[33] It goes without saying that such reconstructions are hypothetical, but this is an element inherent in any act of interpretation.[34] Since it seems rather obvious that the book of Isaiah *is* a result of extensive editorial activity,

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[28] I will use the model for interpreting metaphors developed by Eidevall, *Grapes* (see further the below remarks on terminology).

[29] On Isaiah's dependence on the wisdom tradition, cf. Williamson, "Isaiah and the wise". His conclusion that Isaiah's social critique is related to the wisdom tradition (p. 138, cf. pp. 138–141) is of course invalid in the event that the passages in question fail to express a social critique to begin with.

[30] Cf., e.g., Barr, "Synchronic". Even scholars who are sceptical towards traditional historical-critical research often agree that *some* historical reconstruction is unavoidable (cf., e.g., Melugin, "Figurative", 284, and even Conrad, "Prophet", 311–317).

[31] On the need for a historical-critical approach, cf., e.g., Becking, "Grapes" (esp. pp. 124–126).

[32] Cf., e.g., Conrad, "Prophet", 324 ("we need to read Isaiah as literature, as it is, divorced from uncertain notions of prophets or redactors and their intent, and from our dubious understanding of historical background").

[33] Contrast, e.g., A. Davies, *Double Standards*, 7–8 (including n. 22).

[34] Cf. the convincing discussion in Melugin, "Book" (esp. pp. 46–48).

this process remains a plausible candidate when it comes to explaining otherwise puzzling phenomena in the literary exposition.[35]

Even if a reconstruction of the literary growth of the book of Isaiah would be potentially helpful, the complexity of the problems involved prevents a full treatment here. Hence, redaction-critical and similar problems will often be left unresolved.[36] To mention the most important example, whatever date the so-called woe-oracles in Isaiah 5–10 have been assigned to previously, the premise has been a social-critical reading that I will find questionable. If my proposal is accepted, a date during the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or even Roman, era would be possible (cf. below). An attempt to decide the matter would therefore require a broader textual basis, and consequently a study in its own right.

Despite my focus on the literary exposition, I will occasionally relate to the discussion about the historical Isaiah. The background is this: Scholars tend to discuss the social critique of the historical prophet, since the core of passages such as Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 is often considered authentic. In my view, this assumption is uncertain. At the very least, the traditional suggestion that we may assume that a passage is authentic until there is evidence to the contrary, seems simplistic.[37] Nonetheless, I will occasionally accept the possibility that the passages in question are authentic for the sake of the argument that even on the basis of this premise, we have reason to doubt their alleged social-critical implications.

Turning to a form-critical observation, there is little reason to assume that the rhetoric of a so-called woe-oracle (a) highlights a moral offence and (b) announces the punishment.[38] This is certainly the natural option in some cases (e.g., Mic 2:1–3), but in other instances, scholars usually reach a slightly different conclusion about the rhetorical strategy. To take a striking example, few would imagine that Amos 5:18–20 implies that the Israelites will be punished because they commit the offence of longing for

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[35] Cf. the convincing defence for a redaction-critical approach in, e.g., U. Becker, "Wiederentdeckung", 42–45, Kratz, "Redaktion", 12–16. Note however that insofar as it really is "possible to conceive of the book as a composite created from diverse materials at a particular point in time rather than as a document evolving through time" (Conrad, "Isaiah and the Twelve", 4), I will do so here.

[36] On the present state of redaction-critical research on the book of Isaiah, cf. U. Becker, "Jesajaforschung", 3–37, 117–132, U. Becker, "Wiederentdeckung", 34–40, Höffken, *Diskussion*.

[37] As Nissinen, "Literature", 168, puts it, "the burden of proof concerns every date". See further, e.g., Barthel, *Prophetenwort*, 27, U. Becker, "Wiederentdeckung", 36–40, Kratz, "Redaktion" (esp. pp. 16–17), Nissinen, "Literature".

[38] Contrast, e.g., Westermann, *Grundformen*, 137 (cf. p. 139), who simply states that "das hoj leitet immer die *Anklage* ein, auf die dann die Ankündigung folgt" (emphasis mine), similarly (more recently) de Jong, *Isaiah*, 90.

the day of YHWH (to long for a divine intervention, *per se*, is presumably a good thing indeed). Rather, Amos, at least in his capacity as the implied speaker, knows that the future is pitch-black, and therefore the Israelites' longing for the day of YHWH is futile.[39] Incidentally, quite a few of the so-called woe-oracles display a rhetorical pattern that is difficult to summarise as "sin and punishment".[40] I thus make the methodological observation that the rhetorical strategy must be determined on the evidence adducible in each individual case, and not on the basis of some alleged genre-typical pattern.

A few further remarks on the form-critical problems are appropriate at this point. Prophetic passages introduced by the interjection הוי, traditionally translated as "woe" but here henceforth as "ah", have been assigned to a genre labelled woe-oracle. Since this interjection occurs in the context of lamentation, scholars have concluded that this is the genre's original *Sitz im Leben*.[41] However, since the passages in question primarily have only an interjection in common and otherwise display notable variation, it has been suggested that we are dealing with a *Stilelement* characteristic of rites of lamentation rather than a fixed *Gattung*.[42] While this seems to be an improvement, the alleged connection to rites of lamentation remains problematic. In the context of mourning, we encounter expressions like "ah, my brother" (1 Kgs 13:30, cf. Jer 22:18). Since this is not strikingly similar to a prophetic passage such as "ah, those who rise early in the morning to pursue beer" (Isa 5:11), we are forced to assume that the interjection itself has the style of lamentation. This assumption is however impeded by the occurrence of the interjection הוי, "ah", also in other contexts (e.g., Isa 55:1). Hence, it might be preferable to use Isa 55:1, "ah, you who are thirsty, come and drink" (similarly Zech 2:10–11), as a starting point and to reach the following conclusion: In the so-called woe-oracles, we encounter, not a genre, but a group of passages

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[39] Cf. Hardmeier, *Texttheorie*, 269–271, but note that he primarily argues that Amos 5:18–20 should be considered, not as a *begründetes Unheilswort*, but as a *Disputationswort* (cf. pp. 269–275). Cf. also, e.g., Clifford, "Use", 460.

[40] The alternative pattern varies from case to case, cf., e.g., Isa 10:5–34 (note that vv. 5–6 is not an accusation); 17:12–14; 18:1–7; 28:1–4 (see below), and the peculiar 29:1–8. Cf. also on Amos 6:1–7 below.

[41] Cf., e.g., J. G. Williams, "Alas-Oracles" (esp. pp. 82, 86), Janzen, *Mourning* (note p. 39), Krause, "Leichenklage", Vermeylen, *Prophète*, 2:603–631, Zobel, ThWAT II. Since the interjection הוי is not attested in such contexts, it is difficult to argue that the genre originated as a curse (Westermann, *Grundformen*, 139–142, cf., e.g., Clements, *Isaiah*, 60–61) or in the wisdom tradition (cf., e.g., Gerstenberger, "Woe-Oracles", Whedbee, *Isaiah*, 83–110).

[42] Hardmeier, *Texttheorie* (e.g. pp. 258–260, 375). More precisely, he argues that the passages introduced by הוי belong to *different Gattungen* (cf. pp. 269–275).

introduced by an interjection, and this interjection implies little more than a call for attention.[43] This position is attractive, but the matter might be more complicated. Not only does this interjection occur in the context of lamentation, but we also encounter expressions like "ah *over* them" (Jer 50:27), and in such cases, the interjection must have some genuine meaning (similarly Jer 48:1, Ezek 13:3, 18). In the final analysis, and despite the above objections, it seems *possible* that the interjection in question typically implies the mood of lamentation, in which case the lamentation would occasionally be ironical (cf., e.g., the "lamentation" over Assyria in Isa 10:5–34).[44]

In view of the above considerations, I have made the following two decisions: First, I will abstain from building my case on form-critical observations since it is uncertain whether or not we are dealing with a fixed genre. Secondly, I will assume that the interjection הוי, "ah", implies little more than a call for attention since it is far from certain that it has any specific genuine meaning. This seems a permissible move since the alternative option, i.e. that this interjection has the ring of lamentation, would not ruin my overall suggestion. For my present purposes, the decisive conclusion is negative: Just as the assumed genre does not need to imply rhetoric along the lines of "sin and punishment" (cf. above), there is no evidence that the interjection הוי, "ah", does imply an accusation.

It is commonly acknowledged that the interpretation of ancient literature occasionally benefits from historical methods, and the usefulness of literary approaches is even less disputed – we are after all dealing with literature. For my present purposes, however, the literary methodology does not need to exceed the boundaries of exegetical common sense. Nonetheless, it seems advisable to offer some thoughts on the methodological commonplace that the literary context may help us to clarify obscure passages, since this is a fundamental premise for the present study.

As any reader of prophetic literature has probably noted, prophetic discourse is occasionally what one might call under-specified, in the sense that the pieces of explicit information is insufficient for anyone to grasp the full implications. In such cases, exegetes usually contemplate whether the literary context provides some theme or notion that the passage in question might silently presuppose. My overall suggestion rests on the premise that such a manoeuvre is methodologically sound, since I intend to show that the so-called woe-oracles in Isa 5:8–24 and 10:1–4 are essentially under-specified. I will therefore *assume* that the literary context makes

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[43] Cf., e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah*, 212, Roberts, *Nahum*, 118, Sweeney, *Isaiah*, 543.
[44] Cf., e.g., Weisman, *Political Satire*, 83–100.

both a social-critical and a foreign-political reading possible. Is this assumption justifiable? In the next few pages, I will argue that from a methodological point of view, an affirmative answer is possible.

In order to make this decisive issue absolutely clear, let us consider Amos 6:1–7, incidentally couched in the so-called woe-oracle.[45] Accepting the rendering of the NRSV in order to avoid a number of problems that need not concern us here, the passage, here set in prose for the sake of saving space, reads:

> (1) Alas (הוי) for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts! (2) Cross over to Calneh, and see; from there go to Hamath the great; then go down to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Or is your territory greater than their territory, (3) O you that put far away the evil day, and bring near a reign of violence?
>
> (4) Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; (5) who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; (6) who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
>
> (7) Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Amos 6:1–7 is under-specified in the sense that although the text gives the impression that a serious charge is made, the outburst seems insufficiently explained by the explicit accusations. The critique is directed against those who feel secure on Zion and in Samaria, and who mistakenly assume that they are greater than other nations and thus in a better position (vv. 1–3, cf. v. 6b and v. 7). Here, the pride that occasionally goes before a fall seems to be the problem, or at least part thereof. In an OT perspective, it is however hardly an abomination to make the assumption that "God is with us" but not with other nations (cf., e.g., Psalm 46). Similarly, when vv. 4–6a inform us that these people lie on beds of ivory, use bowls as they drink wine, anoint themselves with the finest oil etc., none of the activities seem particularly offensive. Hence, the wording of this limited section permits the conclusion that the elite of Jerusalem and Samaria mistakenly assume that they are secure and thus carry on their "leisure as usual", but why, as the reader might ask, this should be such a serious offence, is difficult to determine. Consequently, although we may conclude that it is the attitude

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[45] Amos 6:1–7 is integrated by the concluding v. 7; the sarcastic "first" in v. 7a connects to vv. 1–3, and the outstretching in v. 7b to vv. 4–6. The extent to which vv. 1–3 and vv. 4–6 should be taken as two rhetorical units, and how one should understand the awkward v. 3, largely depends on text-critical and literary-critical (in the sense of *Literarkritik*) decisions better avoided here (cf. BHSapp).