

The Book of Isaiah: Patchwork of literary fragments versus predetermined literary structure? Part I

ABSTRACT

The rhetoric of the book of Isaiah is partially based on different forms of parallelism. The elementary form of this technique is well-known, namely the development of an idea by repeating it. Until recently studies dealing with this literary phenomenon were mostly restricted to the identification of parallelisms within phrases, sentences and short passages in the Old Testament. Presently however, examples of more extensive parallelisms, including comprehensive chiasmic (crosswise) and other patterns, are under investigation in the book. Apart from the identification of encompassing bifid structures, new possibilities include the identification of so-called triadic² and quadratic patterns which may span several passages. Reading the book as literature with a view to identifying overarching structures, it will hopefully become clear in this review that the techniques concerned and as operative in the book of Isaiah have been expanded beyond their basic forms, giving new impetus to this approach.

1. INTRODUCTION

Advancing recent approaches of reading the book of Isaiah as literature, some scholars have concluded that the book is dominated by particular literary structures which serve the rhetoric of the book. In the past, certain concepts bearing the same meaning and which appear throughout the book provided a basis for the view that the document comprises a literary unit written by a single author, namely Isaiah. Later, arguments which supported this view were dismissed in favour of those which purported that the book, generally speaking, consisted of the compilation of fragmentary prophetic utterances including some biographical material (see e.g. Allis 1951:39-50; Harrison 1977: 765-795).

However, it was pointed out recently that the arrangement and linking of comprehensive passages in Isaiah bearing the same or related content must be accepted as realistic and may be taken as a planned exercise by its author(s) (e.g. Broyles & Evans 1997:1-474; 477-691). Capitalising on these observations some scholars have concluded that the book was compiled at least partially by arranging passages parallel to each other under literary arches, serving rhetorical nuances in the book. Several scholars have indicated that these overall literary structures dominate the book to a great extent (e.g. Melugin & Sweeney 1996:12-29; 32-101; 124-139; 156-186; 188-218; 306-326). This was established, among other ways, by linking key passages in a particular manner using a special technique of bringing together shorter and longer passages in concentric units with a symmetrical and asymmetrical shape (O'Connell 1994:23-29). A spin-off from these studies led to the conclusion that the book represents a self-contained

1 Hennie Kruger is Senior Research Associate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

2 O'Connell (1994:24) probably borrowed this term from the Welsh form of literary composition with an arrangement in groups of three (Pearsall & Trumble 1996:1536).

literary entity, irrespective of whether it was written or compiled by one or more individuals.

O'Connell (1994:15-19) provided an overview of attempts at coming to grips with the growing interest in the literary unity of Isaiah. Most of the studies he refers to are concerned with finding a way to deal with the book in a comprehensive manner. This means that some scholars seem to be moving away from traditional approaches, among others, tradition and redaction criticism as well as the idea created by form-critical analysis, namely that the smallest possible units in a biblical book must be identified in advance before any interpretation can proceed on secure grounds (Sweeney & Ben Zvi 2003:46-64). Others are in the process of abandoning, although only to a certain extent, the traditional tripartite division of the book along the lines of historical development. However, the latter excludes the tripartite division of prophetic books based on their theological content (Ben Zvi 1993: 93-100). Thus, presently investigation regarding the literary composition of Isaiah proceeds on the basis that the book presents itself as a literary unit. In addition, and as part of this new exercise, the rhetorical ingredient of the book comes into play (e.g. Conrad 1991:1-168).

2. SCOPE

The study of Isaiah as a literary composition with special reference to parallelism is based upon at least three interrelated approaches. The following classification is for practical reasons only:

A first group of scholars identified certain strands running through the book which represent key concepts and/or themes with particular meanings and which confirm the unity of the book. Others rejected this conclusion by arguing that other concepts and themes found in different parts of the book have no relationship with each other (cf. e.g. Harrison 1977: 776-795 for an overview and discussion).

Others traced literary structures dealing with related subjects which seem to dominate the book in its entirety. Researchers also identified bifid structures which may involve the whole document. Others found a complex and encompassing compilation which seems to determine the structure of the book as a whole (e.g. Brownlee 1964:247-259; 1952:16-21; Evans 1988:129-147; Gileadi 1994; cf. Liebreich 1954:37-40; 1955-57:114-138; O'Connell 1994:236).

A third group concluded that the particular arrangement of the majority of passages and chapters in the book demonstrates an impressive and persuasive character inspired by its rhetoric which in turn leaves no doubt as to its overall literary cohesion (cf. Broyles & Evans 1997:1-474; 477-691; Melugin & Sweeney 1996; 2005:45-84; Conrad 1991:3-33; Seitz 1988:13-22; 105-126; 1990:229-247; Stansell 1996:68-103).

The present study briefly explores the approach applied by the second group.

3. ANGLE OF INCIDENCE

For the purpose of this study, and generally speaking, one type of parallelism, namely the chiasmic pattern (see e.g. Makins 1995:280, 1131; Macey 2001:59; Welch 1981:50-168; 310-316; Welch & McKinlay 1999:77-115) takes pride of place. The latter usually describes the literary device of parallelism in reverse order, whereas parallelism as such is understood as concordant parallelism, that is, the second part of the parallelism, whether words, sentences, or passages represent the same idea(s) as in its first component. The latter may yield further ramifications like progressive parallelism (Du Preez 1979:16, 17, 69). However, these do not concern us for the moment. But it must be noted that the device of chiasmus is related to antithesis as well (Cuddon 1999:128, 637, 752).

Thus, generally speaking parallelism in the Old Testament deals with a literary technique which is characterised by different forms of balance created between phrases, sentences or passages of varying extent (Follis 1987:49-76; Petersen & Richards 1992:21-35; Watson 1986:114-159). Although there are numerous cases of parallelism in the Old Testament, including Isaiah (cf. Watson 1986:399), most of those identified to date belong to the basic category of the parallel position of two sentences or relatively short passages. More recently however, and to reiterate what was said above, scholars have pointed out that this technique may involve passages of relatively large dimensions (Sterk 2007:92-94).

4. PARALLELISM IN ISAIAH

The study of parallelism in Isaiah is complicated by the presence of passages arranged in parallel positions of different types or simply counterparts of each other. To indicate the diversity of these literary techniques a few examples taken at random will suffice. Carr (1996:188-218; cf. 1993:61-80) studied the relationship between Isaiah 1 and 65-66 and Tomasino (1993:81-98) Isaiah 1:1-2:4 and 63-66 indicating how these passages frame the whole book and thus confirm its literary unity. Biddle (1996:124-139) discussed two passages in Isaiah (47:1-15 and 57:6-13) as forming structural counterparts, and the well-known passages of Isaiah 6-8 and 36-39 serve to demonstrate the divergent manner of conduct by two kings reacting to God's instruction. Ahaz opts for a neutral position while Hezekiah relies on God's promises (Conrad 1991:34-46)

Chiastic patterns play a particular role in Isaiah. Watts (1985:15, 24, 33-34, 85, 138, 154-155, 185, 228-229, 233-234, 298-299, 380-381, 400, 412; 1987:7-8, 42, 88-89, 128-129, 144, 197, 211, 256, 272, 282) identified numerous chiasmic patterns in Isaiah which cover texts or passages of varying dimensions. One example will suffice. He outlined Isaiah chapter 1 in terms of a chiasmic pattern. However, it catches the eye that very little content seems to find a counterpart in the reverse side of the pattern. This doubt is shared by O'Connell (1994:48, footnote 1) who noted that the symmetrical palistrophe concerned seems to have less to justify it, either from correspondences of vocabulary or of the rhetorical function of its tiers, than does the schema proposed by himself regarding Isaiah 1 in which a complex framework arrangement of tiers is based mainly upon the function of its tiers within a covenant disputation (O'Connell 1994:44-48).

Although these patterns operate on a micro level, this does not prove that the literary device of parallelism dominates Isaiah on a macro level. But they do indicate that the book is sensitive to the way its material content is arranged, namely in an artistic manner. On the other hand, the identification of these patterns, albeit of limited measure, may point to literary patterns of greater expanse. Watts (1985:li) views the book of Isaiah as a drama in visionary mode consisting of twelve acts. Again, the presence of such acts, feasible or not, do not support or represent an indication of parallelism. The study of parallelism in Isaiah is further complicated by chiasmic patterns which sometimes not only straddle several passages, but overlap with each other as well (e.g. Watts 1985:15, 24).

5. A BIFID STRUCTURE

As was mentioned earlier, some scholars indicated that certain examples of parallelism in Isaiah may function on a larger scale in comparison to cases of more limited size as previously identified. Accordingly, some argued that the whole book of Isaiah, that is all its component parts taken together, thus as a single unit, may be dominated by a bifid pattern of parallelism,

that is, bisecting the document into two equal parts. According to this view, the two parts are subdivided into seven subsections each and placed in a mirror-like fashion over against each other.

6. BACKGROUND: DIVISION OF ISAIAH INTO CHAPTERS 1-39 AND 40-66

The observation of linguistic differences regarding among others the greater use of full suffixal forms and so-called “full” orthography in the second part of Isaiah over against the first part, served as proof that Isaiah should be divided into chapters 1-39 and 40-66 (e.g. Deist 1978:75). However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and particularly the Scroll of Isaiah (1QIsa^a) sparked a fresh debate regarding a possible division of the book.

According to Tov (1997:510; cf. 2002:139-166) there is no indication in any of the Qumran Scrolls to prove or disprove that the book can be divided into two segments, namely Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah. Tov believes that the scrolls come from a time which is too late to provide any evidence of this kind. The possibility that two different authors may have copied the two different segments, something which may be inferred from the differences in style between the two manuscripts (cf. Abegg 2002:222-224), can likewise not be concluded since this may have been for the sake of convenience alone. Tov (1997:501, 510) does point out that a gap may be discerned between chapter 34 and 35, thus a division which separates 1-34 and 35-66. However, there seems to be some confusion in Tov’s argument as to the exact point where the gap appears.

The possibility of a comprehensive framework in the book of Isaiah was probably initiated among other factors by the observation that the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah has a striking gap of three lines in the *middle* of the book, namely between chapter 33 and 34 (not between chapter 34 and 35 as Tov indicated), or for that matter, between columns XXVII and XXVIII (Brownlee 1964:247, 252). The latter is noticeable since the whole manuscript consists of 54 columns. This observation led some to believe that the book consists of two parts equal in length.

Brownlee (1964:250-253) confirmed that in ancient cultures scrolls were divided into two volumes (contra Tov). In support of his view Brownlee (1986:xxxviii-xxxix, 1) noted that the balanced structuring of the prophetic book of Ezekiel supports a bisection like that of Isaiah (Ezek. 1-24 and 25-48). Again, the type of palaeography used in the different parts, engaging an expanded orthography, an increased number of gutturals and special writers’ markers, form part of the issue raised in connection with the question of whether the book of Isaiah consists of two parts or not. This raises more questions, namely whether the differences between the two parts were unintentionally and whether the copiers perhaps noticed that the second part of the scroll (from chapter 34 onward) engages a more universal accent regarding the nations (Flint 2002:236, 246).

Cook (1992:7-24) presented an overview of studies dealing with the dichotomy of 1QIsa^a. He confirms the role attributed to orthography in establishing the reality of the gap between chapters 33 and 34, but cautions against premature conclusions on the matter (cf. Richards 1965:257-258; Giese 1988:61-70).

It should be noted that those who consider the book of Isaiah as a bifid document, do not base their arguments solely on the presence of a gap between the two parts of the book, but on the observation that the same material content allegedly appears in the two main parts of the book. However, these scholars will probably not deny that the presence of the gap have impacted on their views.

7. BIFID STRUCTURE: THE PROTOTYPE

Perhaps guided by these comments and/or based on the identification of the particular characteristics mentioned above, some scholars considered the possibility that the book may not only consist of two equal parts and that these two parts represent a mirror-like image of each other. It was also suggested that the two parts may consist of *seven* subdivisions each of which corresponds with its counterpart (Brownlee 1964: 247-259; Sweeney 1996: 39-41; cf. Harrison 1977: 787-788).

Brownlee (1952:16-21; 1964:247-249) proposed the prototype for this model. His layout is as follows:

I The Ruin and Restoration of Judah (1-5)	Paradise Lost and Regained (34-35)
II Biography (6-8)	Biography (36-40)
III Agents of Divine Blessing and Judgment (9-12)	Agents of Deliverance and Judgment (41-45)
IV Anti-foreign Oracles (13-23)	Anti-Babylonian Oracles (46-48)
V Universal Judgment and Deliverance of God's People (24-27)	Universal Redemption through God's Servant, also the Glorification of Israel (49-54) ¹
VI Ethical Sermons, Indicting Israel and Judah (28-31)	Ethical Sermons, Ethical Conditions for Israel's Redemption (56-59)
VII The Restoration of Judah and the Davidic Kingdom (32-33)	Paradise Regained: The Glories of the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens/New Earth (60-66)

The explications of the BIFID structural synthesis as set forth by Brownlee represent condensations of an earlier study in this connection³:

I Ruin and Renascence, Chapters 1-5; 34-35.

II Biographical Material, Chapters 6-8; 36-40.

III Agents of Divine Deliverance and Judgment, Chapters 9-12; 41-46.

IV Oracles against Foreign Powers, Chapters 13-23; 47

V Suffering and Salvation, Chapters 24-27; 48-54.

VI Sermons on Loyalty and Disloyalty, Chapters 28-31; 55-59.

VII Dispossession of the Wicked, Inheritance by the Righteous, Chapters 32-33; 60-66.

According to Gileadi (1994:10-17, 37) a closer scrutiny of Brownlee's model confirms his theory of a twofold division of Isaiah, but invites a revision of the proposed seven categories as follows:

I Ruin and Rebirth - chapters 1-5; 34-35

II Rebellion and Compliance - chapters 6-8; 36-40

III Punishment and Deliverance - chapters 9-12; 41:1-46:13b

IV Humiliation and Exaltation - chapters 13-23; 46:13c-47:15

V Suffering and Salvation - chapters 24-27; 48-54

VI Disloyalty and Loyalty - chapters 28-31; 55-59

VII. Disinheritance and Inheritance - chapters 32-33; 60-66

³ Brownlee, WH 1981. *A holistic structure of the book of Isaiah*. Ph.D. dissertation. See Gileadi (1982:171-173 footnotes 1 and 2).

Gileadi (1994:10-17) also claimed that the book of Isaiah may have inherited other different ancient Near Eastern literary structures. He identified five structures, some of which were superimposed one upon another. These include firstly a set pattern of trouble at home, exile abroad, and happy homecoming (cf. *the Egyptian story of Sinuhe*). A complementary idea permeating the book consists of a progression of thought from nationalism to universalism to individualism. A second Near Eastern pattern comes from the Ugaritic myth of Baal and Anath. The fourfold theme of threat, war, victory, and feast dominates the Baal myth. One cycle of these themes encompasses the entire book of Isaiah. It forms the basis of Isaiah's four prophetic themes of apostasy (chapters 1-9), judgment (10-34), restoration (35-59), and salvation (60-66). A third governing structure consists of the associated ideas of destruction of the wicked (chapters 1-39) and the deliverance of the righteous (chaps. 40-66) at the presence of a righteous Davidic king (37-38). Moreover, virtually every time the name "Zion" appears in Isaiah, these three ideas are present in individual passages as well. According to a fourth governing structure the book of Isaiah may be divided into two broad categories. Thus, on the basis of the Lord's covenant with his people, the book is divided into covenantal malediction (1-39) and covenantal benediction (40-66). This sequence reverses the order of the Sinai covenant as set out by Moses (first covenant benedictions, then covenant curses).

This diversity of structures superimposed one upon another, created layers in the book which make the book heavily encoded. The multilayered structure explains why the material may read unevenly, often changing context without warning. Time appears irrelevant as sequences of events crisscross and overlap. Scenes are described one after another without any apparent connection between them. Overarching literary structures govern these scenes (Gileadi 1994:10-15). A fifth governing structure pervading Isaiah is the so-called bifid structure.

Evans (1988:129-147) endorsed the idea of a bifid structure according to which the content of the book of Isaiah was organised. His comments refined the concept in certain respects, adding more information. Dillard & Longman (1994:281-282) discussed the attempt of Brownlee, providing an apt summary of the contents of the different sections. They also noted the contribution made by Evans (1988:145-147). They agree that although not all sections have strong parallels in language and concepts, the parallels in sections 2, 3, and 4 appear strong (see Evans 1988:145).

In his discussion of the bisection of 1QIsa^a, O'Connell (1994:15-19) evaluated attempts of scholars who endorse the bifid scheme.⁴ According to him however, what one sees in these bifid models of the structure of Isaiah is not so much the result of close analysis of literary patterning as that of thematic summarizations over broad sections of the book. He pointed out that despite the citation of key word collocations between allegedly parallel sections their structural divisions are much too broad to represent a pattern verifiable from vocabulary repetitions alone. O'Connell (1994:18) also criticized the attempt which arranges the material of Isaiah, indeed, of the whole Bible, according to concentric schemata and reckons that this proposal must be regarded as of limited value because its methodology did not establish sufficient criteria for assessing the probability that these proposed concentric patterns were the result of the author's deliberate design.

8. CONCLUSION

In the past studies of Isaiah produced several examples of literary parallelism. These cases were restricted to a few verses or shorter passages. However, recent studies claim to have identified

⁴ See Callaway (1968:403-407); Harrison (1977:787-789); Evans (1988:129-147); Gileadi (1981:172).

samples of greater extent. These differ from previously isolated examples in that they span a number of passages or even several chapters of the book.

Applying this approach to the whole book, some scholars claim that the entire book of Isaiah may be divided into two major sections, of equal length. While some rejected this view, others accepted the possibility, but adjusted the proposal. Others found different, but related traits in the book.

The debate and studies around this issue continue. In Part II the matter will be taken further.

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KEY WORDS

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Tweevoudige struktuur

Drie-/viervoudige modelle

Prof Hennie A J Kruger

29 Woltemade Ave

Die Boord

Stellenbosch

7600

South Africa

Cell +27-82-215-2121

Tel/Fax +27-21-886-8699