# How Important Is Isaiah 1 – 55 to Isaiah 56 – 66?

The question I seek to answer is “How important is Isaiah 1 – 55 to Isaiah 56 – 66?” The sense in which I intend the question is, How far does Isaiah 1 – 55 set the agenda for Isaiah 56 – 66? Bernhard Duhm was of key significance in establishing two principles of approach for the book of Isaiah. First, chapters 40 – 66 were of such separate origin from chapters 1 – 39 that they might have been attached to chapters 1 – 39 simply because they fitted on a scroll of convenient length. Second, within chapters 40 – 66, the last eleven chapters were also of separate origin from chapters 40 – 55. In reconsidering both these principles, over the past forty years much energy has gone into showing how the different parts of the book interrelate in the sense that lines or phrases or motifs from one part reappear in another part. In working with the second of the principles, much energy has gone into tracing the process whereby Isaiah 56 – 66 developed.

My own conviction regarding these two principles is as follows. The presupposition of the idea of a writer quoting from an earlier part of a book or reworking an earlier part, with deliberate precision or with deliberate modification, makes sense in the age of the codex or of the internet, but I continue to be troubled by the question whether it makes sense in the age of the scroll.[[1]](#footnote-1) But further, the passages that might evidence something like quotation comprise only a minute proportion of the book as a whole or of any part of it. Are they as important as we have been treating them? My students come to the study of the Prophets with the assumption that the really important things about them is the prophecies of the Messiah, and I point out that even if one grants a messianic understanding of all the passages they think are messianic, these comprise only a minute proportion of the prophetic books; they can hardly be the key to understanding the prophets. The same seems to be true of quotations and allusions.

With regard to the redactional development of Isaiah 56 – 66, I have read a dozen or more monographs that offer analyses of the process and of its historical and/or sociological background, and I am troubled by the fact that they are all plausible but all different. Aware of this difficulty, one recent study[[2]](#footnote-2) proceeds by beginning from the scholarly consensus view that Isaiah 60 – 62 is the oldest material in the chapters and is of distinct origin over against what stands on either side. The consensus view is based in part on theological tensions with the blocks of material on either side. Yet the eventual compiler of Isaiah 56 – 66 could evidently live with this tension, so why could a single author not have done so? The consensus view also bases itself on the assumption that the dependence of Isaiah 60 – 62 on Isaiah 40 – 55 means it is near to those chapters in date. Butut this simply does not follow: I believe that Daniel 7 is dependent on Daniel 2, but that they are centuries apart in date, and the Revelation to John is dependent on the Prophets, but they are centuries older.

The idea that Isaiah 60 - 62 is the oldest material in Isaiah 56 – 66 is indeed the consensus view.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the revolutions in the study of Isaiah and of the Pentateuch over the past half-century show the problem with consensus views. A consensus is all they are; today’s consensus is tomorrow’s out-of-date scholarship. Reviewers of monographs sometimes include a closing comment that the work in question will have to be taken account in future study of the issue it studies. Is that all? Is scholarly research on a subject like the origin of Isaiah merely an intertextual conversation among scholars that does not correspond to anything in the external world? Certainly it seems to be a conversation that is never going to reach conclusions.

In interpretation, everything depends on the interests, assumptions, and questions you bring to the text. In the study of Isaiah 56 – 66 to which I have referred, the interests, assumptions, and questions are historical ones. The scholarly interest lies in tracing the history of events and movements in the Second Temple period, its assumption is that we can establish when the chapters came into being, and its questions concern the nature of that process. I suggest that the history of scholarship over the past century and in particular over the last forty years shows that the assumption that we can establish how the chapters came into being is fallacious. The sociological turn in the study of the Second Temple period over the past forty years supports this view. Whereas we took the sociological turn in the hope that this could provide us with a way of circumventing some impasses of traditional historical study, it has simply led to the building of hypothesis upon hypothesis regarding a question such as the identity of the conflict that lies at the back of the material in Isaiah 56 – 66. The thesis that the conflict involved prophets over against priests and/or that it involved people who believe God is active in the present over against people who can only look for God’s action in the future has not carried conviction. The thesis has led to lively discussion, but that is all. And the reason is that it involves too speculative a construction on the basis of too small a collection of data, and furthermore a construction that has to ignore some of the data.

“the crucial question, which

is prior to questions of method and sets the context for them, is that of

purpose and goal. To put it simply, *how we use the Bible depends on why*

*we use the Bible*. In practice, many of the disagreements about how are,

in effect, disagreements about why, and failure to recognize this leads to

endless confusion.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

I share the conviction that it would aid interpretation if we could trace the history of the development of Isaiah 56 – 66 and I wish we could do so, but we cannot, and we will never be able to do so unless as the result of some archeological findings more spectacular than those of Qumran. It is no use asking historical questions of this material. There is, of course, a reason. The people who compiled the book of Isaiah were not interested in historical questions. Our focus on historical questions means we have to read against the grain of the text’s interests. We are like people who study Shakespeare in order to discover the history of Henry VIII or in order to trace the process whereby John Fletcher may have collaborated in writing the play or may have revised it. In the case of Isaiah 56 – 66, at least, the work does not cooperate with us by answering our historical questions. As such questions do not deliver the goods in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s play, neither do they in the interpretation of Isaiah.

I draw the analogy with Shakespeare in order to make clear that I am not making an argument for a canonical interpretation of Isaiah in the sense that the argument has something to do with Isaiah being a scriptural text (and the fact that Shakespeare is part of the literary canon does not affect the point). It is to do with the propriety or wisdom of interpreting a work in light of its own nature. Isaiah is a religious, ethical, and theological text. It talks about the way people relate to God, about what they think it is right and wrong to do, and about how they think of God and of the relationships between God, Israel, and other peoples. If we are to be “competent readers” of Isaiah, if we are to be the readers it “implies,”[[5]](#footnote-5) we need to adopt the position of people interested in religion, ethics, and theology. Occasionally the book of Isaiah refers explicitly to historical figures and events, because its questions about religion, ethics, and theology are formulated in various kinds of connection with such figures. But it is those questions that are its concern and those questions that competent readers of the book need to focus on. But Isaiah 56 – 66 in particular refers to no such figures and events, and this omission is significant both as part of the explanation for the difficulty involved in interpreting it by reference to history and as a clue to its actual concern. Our problem in the study of Isaiah 56 – 66 is actually that our study is not historical or critical. If our study were historical it would work with the nature of the document it seeks to study. If it were critical it would analyze and critique its own presuppositions and assumptions.

In asking after the importance of Isaiah 1 – 55 for Isaiah 56 – 66, then, I start from the work that we have and I ask no historical questions except ones that the material directly raises. The only events and people that Isaiah 1 – 39 mentions are ones that belong to the eighth century. Isaiah 40 – 55 then refers to the Persian king Cyrus in the context of his taking over hegemony in the Middle East from Babylon. Isaiah 56 – 66 includes no concrete historical references.

Brevard Childs argued that the compilers of Isaiah 40 – 55 employed the material available to them in such a way as to “eliminate almost entirely” the concrete features that indicated a link with a particular historical situation and to “subordinate the original message to a new role within the canon.” He then drew a contrast with the concrete historical references in Amos.[[6]](#footnote-6) Actually, the only difference between Isaiah 40 – 55 and Amos or other prophetic books is that Isaiah 40 – 55 has no superscription, a difference that relates to its being linked to the preceding material. Its message is not subordinated to a new role within the canon; it is subordinate to a role within the larger book of Isaiah, because of its links with the material that appears earlier in the book. But Childs’s comment would be more apposite in connection with Isaiah 56 – 66. Here indeed there are no concrete historical references; hence the unresolved debate about the period(s) to which the chapters belong.

A further difference between chapters 40 – 55 and 56 – 66 is that the Isaiah 40 – 55 takes the form of a linear argument, while Isaiah 56 – 66 takes the form of a chiasm. In both cases the literary form links with the statement the section makes. Isaiah 40 – 55 makes a linear argument; it is going somewhere. Isaiah 56 – 66 initially looks as if it is going somewhere, but in the end goes nowhere but curves back on itself. This structure with its related statement is the way it fulfills its function in connection with chapters 1 – 55. Rolf Rendtorff put us on the track of this point in his paper on Isaiah 56:1.[[7]](#footnote-7) He suggested that Isaiah 56:1 is a key to the composition or formation of the book of Isaiah, and this may be so, but my concern here is with the verse’s significance in connection with the statement made by the book as we have it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

“Yhwh has said this,” the chapters begin. “Observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*, because my *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The imperative phrases “observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*” sum up the thrust of Isaiah 1 – 39. The declaration “My *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself” sums up the thrust of Isaiah 40 – 55.[[10]](#footnote-10) When these two pairs of expressions are juxtaposed, they make more evident a question that is also raised by the material they summarize. What is the relationship between the imperatives and the declarations? Isaiah 1 – 39 implies that Jerusalem’s failure to observe *mišpāṭ* and do *ṣĕdāqâ* means it does not experience *yĕšû’â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*. Isaiah 40 – 55 implies that Yhwh will bring about its *yĕšû’â* and will manifest *ṣĕdāqâ* irrespective of the people’s action. At first sight it might seem that interposing the conjunction “because” in between the imperatives and the declarations resolves the tension between these two stances, but it does not do so. The new statement could mean “Observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*, because such action is necessary if I am to fulfill my promise, so that my *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself.” Obedience to the command is a condition of the fulfillment of the promise. Or it could mean “Observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*, because that is the only appropriate response to the fact that my *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, my *ṣĕdāqâ* to revealing itself.” If we have to choose, then the second understanding seems more plausible; but there is indeed some ambiguity about the relationship between the imperatives and the declarations.

The way Isaiah 56 – 66 then unfolds underlines the ambiguity of its opening rather than resolving it. The whole of Isaiah 56:2 – 59:15a is dominated by critique of the community and by the laying down of expectations, closing with a prayer that constitutes an acknowledgment to Yhwh that this critique is fair. The expectations relate both to religious life and to ethical life. You could say that they are the outworking of what it means to observe *mišpāṭ* and do *ṣĕdāqâ*. The whole of Isaiah 59:15b – 63:6 then constitutes promises that Yhwh intends to take action against his enemies, who are also Jerusalem’s enemies, and to restore Jerusalem and make it the world’s focus. When we reach 63:6, we might conclude that the ambiguity about the relationship of the imperatives and the declarations is solved. First put your life right; then the promises will be fulfilled. But it transpires that 63:6 is not the end of the book or of the section begun at 56:1, because there follows a further prayer that constitutes an acknowledgment that the critique is fair (though it goes on to ask Yhwh to have mercy), and then the two final chapters dominated by further critique of the community and by the laying down of expectations. Thus 63:7 – 66:24 as a whole balances 56:2 – 59:15a, and dissolves any sense that the ambiguity of 56:1 has been resolved. The first and last major parts of Isaiah 56 – 66 stand in irresolvable tension with the central part. The first and last parts correspond to the thrust of Isaiah 1 – 39; the central part corresponds to the thrust of Isaiah 40 – 55.

The chiastic structure of Isaiah 56 – 66 thus makes a theological point. The material’s omission to resolve the tension at issue is not a failure but a recognition of a question that cannot be resolved. To put it in terms of a familiar antinomy, it is not possible to say that Jerusalem’s deliverance is conditional on its obedience or that Yahweh is unconditionally committed to its deliverance. The legal or contractual framework for understanding the relationship does not work. A more illuminating model for understanding the relationship implied by the book of Isaiah is that of marriage, at least as often understood in the West. When people marry, they do not do so on the basis that each person makes a commitment to the other *on condition that* the other makes the same commitment; if the couple think in terms of conditional commitment, they need to postpone the wedding to give them time to talk things through with a therapist. The mutuality of commitment is a kind of logical necessity or a definitional necessity rather than a legal necessity.

In general terms, then, Isaiah 56 – 66 serves to articulate the inherent tension between Isaiah 1 – 39 and Isaiah 40 – 55, and not to resolve it. I go on to consider more specifically the relationship between the agenda of the first two parts of the book and that of the last part.

First, how does Isaiah 1 – 39 spell out the nature of observing *mišpāṭ* and doing *ṣĕdāqâ*? In outlining its priorities, an obvious place to start is Isaiah 5, where the prophet explicitly speaks of *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ*. This hendiadys denotes the exercise of authority in a way that is expressive of faithfulness, which is the opposite of the shedding of blood and the encouraging or ignoring of cries of distress. The context suggests that the prophet refers to the way successful people accumulate land and enlarge their homes, engage in bribery and the fixing of court cases in this connection, indulge themselves in the excess of their eating and drinking, and behave on the assumption that they can retain their position of importance and ignore the possibility that Yhwh will do anything. Related passages refer to the associated ignoring of the needs of needy people such as orphans and widows (e.g., 1:11-23; 10:1-4), and to other forms of self-indulgence (e.g., 3:16 – 4:1; 28:1-8).

A second major emphasis in Isaiah 1 – 39 is trust in Yhwh rather than in one’s own importance or capacities or political resources (1:6-22; 7:1-17; 9:7-9 [8-10]; 28:14-22; 30:1-17; 31:1-3; 36:1 – 37:20). To judge from Isaiah 28:17, operating on the basis of trust in Yhwh rather than in political alliances is a second expression of *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ*. The motif is one concern underlying the prophecies about other nations in Isaiah 13 – 23. A third but much lesser emphasis in Isaiah 1 – 39 is worship of Yhwh alone, worship of a kind that avoids certain traditional and foreign forms of worship (e.g., 1:29; 2:6-8, 22; 8:19-22; 31:6-7).

How does this set of concerns compare with those of Isaiah 56 – 66? In the last section of the book, the critique of the community’s leadership and their self-indulgence (56:9 – 57:2) and of people’s twisting of judicial procedures in way that leads to the death of the innocent (59:1-15a) compares with that in Isaiah 1 – 39. Its critique of fasting (58:1-12) compares with the critique of worship at the beginning of the book (1:10-20); both relate to the community’s failure to live by *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* (58:2). On the other hand, Isaiah 56 – 66 does not take up the motif of trust that is important in Isaiah 1 – 39. It manifests a distinctive stress on openness to individual foreigners and eunuchs, and on the Sabbath (56:2-8; 58:13-15), and places much greater emphasis than Isaiah 1 – 39 on the wickedness of certain traditional worship practices and of the worship of other deities (57:3-13; 65:1-12; 66:1-4, 17).

The agenda of Isaiah 56 – 66 as it spells out ”observe *mišpāṭ*, do *ṣĕdāqâ*” overlaps with the agenda of Isaiah 1 – 39 but only in part and not in a way that distinguishes the relationship of Isaiah 56 – 66 to Isaiah 1 – 39 compared with its relationship to (say) Jeremiah or Zechariah.[[11]](#footnote-11) Perhaps it is indeed the parallels of specific phrases and lines between Isaiah 1 – 39 and Isaiah 56 – 66 that form the link between the first and last parts of the book rather than any distinctive theological link, though even these parallels do not radically distinguish the connection between these two sections over against a connection link with Jeremiah.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So much by way of comparing the agenda of Isaiah 1 – 39 and that of Isaiah 56 – 66. How does the agenda of Isaiah 40 – 55 compare with that of Isaiah 56 – 66? In summarizing the agenda of Isaiah 1 – 39, I ignored its concern with *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* when these words are used in connection with divine actions, though the usage does occasionally appear (1:27; 5:16; 9:6 [7]; 32:16; 33:5). The actual hendiadys *mišpāṭ* *ûṣĕdāqâ* does not appear in Isaiah 40 – 55 (51:5-6 does have *mišpāṭ* and *ṣedeq*), though the chapters do use the two words separately with reference to divine action. The combination of *yĕšû’â* or related words and *ṣĕdāqâ* or *ṣedeq* is more characteristic of Isaiah 40 – 55 (45.8; 46:12-13; 51:5, 6, 8; cf. also 45:22-24). It is this combination that appears in 56:1; in other words, that opening verse of Isaiah 56 – 66 makes a good link with what precedes. The combination reappears in the central section of Isaiah 56 – 66, the section that focuses on Yhwh’s promises concerning Jerusalem’s future (59:9, 14, 16, 17; 61:10; 62:1; 63:1). There are other ways in which these declarations compare with Isaiah 40 – 55. They portray Yhwh the warrior at last stirring himself in order to take violent action against his foes, and thus acting in *qin’â* (59:17) in order to effect *nāqām* (59:17; 61:2; 63:4), acting as Zion’s *gō’ēl* (59:20; 60:16).[[13]](#footnote-13) They speak of Yhwh’s exercise of *mišpāṭ*, sometimes in association with *ṣĕdāqâ* (59:9, 11, 14, 15). They describe at great length the restoration and transformation of Zion, the wondrous return of its peoples from all over the world, and its recognition by the world’s peoples, whose attitude to Zion is thus reversed from what it had been when Zion had been the nations’ victim. The image of Yhwh as creator is of key importance in Isaiah 40 – 55 and appears briefly in Isaiah 56 – 66 (57:19; 65:17-18). The understanding of the prophet’s own role in Isaiah 61:1-9 compares with that of the prophet’s role in Isaiah 49:1-6; 50:4-9, as does the absence of any concern with a future Davidic ruler.

Like Isaiah 1 – 39, however, Isaiah 40 – 55 has other agenda that is not picked up by Isaiah 56 – 66, even as the latter expounds its declaration that Yhwh’s *yĕšû’â* is near to coming, its *ṣĕdāqâ* near to arriving. Isaiah 56 – 66 is often said to be preoccupied with an awareness that Yhwh’s promises have not been fulfilled; it is concerned to explain why this is so and to declare that the promises will be fulfilled. If this is so, the theme is implicit rather than explicit. In contrast, an overt theme in Isaiah 40 – 55 is the need to convince the community that Yhwh really is going to restore Jerusalem, indeed that Yhwh is in the midst of doing so, and that the fall of one superpower and the rise of another is Yhwh’s means of bringing about that restoration. Much of its argument is overtly concerned to confront the community’s disbelief and its resistance to the prophet’s understanding of Yhwh’s activity, and to encourage it not to be afraid. These concerns do not feature overtly in Isaiah 56 – 66. The assertion that Yhwh alone is God, the argument that Yhwh’s speaking and then acting is evidence of that fact, and the associated polemic against images of Yhwh or of other gods and the polemic against the significance of other gods are missing from Isaiah 56 – 66. So are the image of Israel as Yhwh’s servant and the developed account of the servant in 52:13 – 53:12.

How important, then, is Isaiah 1 – 55 to Isaiah 56 – 66? Isaiah 1 - 55 provide Isaiah 56 – 66 with a theological framework, a stress on Yhwh as Israel’s Holy One, a stress on the importance of Zion, a stress on *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* and on *yĕšû’â* and *ṣĕdāqâ*. But Isaiah 56 – 66 is not merely an exposition of the statement expressed earlier in the book any more than it is an exposition of actual texts from earlier in the book. I would not call it a “strong (re)reading” of Isaiah 1 – 55,[[14]](#footnote-14) maybe not even a rereading. It is a partial reading and an expansive reading and a reading that reflects on the issues that the earlier chapters raise.

To put it another way, the relationship between Isaiah 1 – 55 and Isaiah 56 – 66 resembles the one a Christian might perceive in the relationship between the two Testaments. The New Testament has a generally similar understanding of God and of humanity to that of the earlier Scriptures and it occasionally quotes them, but more broadly it disregards much of the agenda of the earlier Scriptures and has an agenda of its own arising out of its own context, one that is not incompatible with the agenda of the earlier Scriptures but is distinctive over against them. The relationship of Isaiah 56 – 66 to Isaiah 1 – 55 is comparable.

1. I suspect this question needs further study analogous to that surveyed in respect of Paul’s reading of Romans in J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul ‘In Concert’ in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2002), pp. 20-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jacob Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. But Anneli Aejmelaeus has argued that it is an insertion into an earlier form of the collection (“Der Prophet als Klageliedsänger: Zur Funktion des Psalms Jes 63,7 - 64,11 in Tritojesaja.” *ZAW* 107 [1995], pp. 31-50 [pp. 36-37]). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walter Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 2.\*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. \*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress/London: SCM, 1979), p. 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Jesaja 56,1 als Schlüssel für die Komposition des Buches Jesaja,” in Rendtorff, *Kanon und Theologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1991), pp. 172-79; ET “Isaiah 56:1 as a Key to the Formation of the Book of Isaiah,” in Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1993), pp. 181-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A neat comparison can be made with a point about the significance of chapters 60 – 62 within Isaiah 56 – 66 as a whole. Claus Westermann saw those chapters as key to the internal composition of Isaiah 56 – 66, and Childs argued against the point because he wanted to remove the interpretive focus from questions about the material’s development (see Claus Westermann, *Das Buch Jesaja Kapitel 40—66* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1966], pp. 236-46 [ET *Isaiah 40—66* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), pp. 296-308]; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* [Louisville: WJK, 2001], pp. 448-49). But in the context of the chiasm that comprises Isaiah 56 – 66 as a whole, chapters 60 – 62 indeed occupy a strategic place, at the center. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I leave the words *mišpāṭ* and *ṣĕdāqâ* untranslated both because we do not have English words to translate them without being misleading and because the effect of the passage depends in part on its making use of two significances of *ṣĕdāqâ.* “Deliverance” is a perfectly adequate translation of *yēšû‘â*, but as I am not translating the first two Hebrew nouns, it seems natural to leave this one untranslated*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the use of the two pairs of words in Isaiah, see Gregory J. Polan, “Still More Signs of Unity in the Book of Isaiah: The Significance of Third Isaiah,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), pp. 224-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Benjamin D. Sommer, “The Scroll of Isaiah as Jewish Scripture’, in *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), pp. 225-42 (pp. 228-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. So Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40 – 66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. These Hebrew words, too, I leave untranslated because we do not have close equivalents in English and/or because the conventional equivalents are misleading. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Harold Bloom’s term in *The Anxiety of Influence* (revised ed., Oxford/New York: OUP, 1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)