Daniel J. Stulac

_History and Hope: The Agrarian Wisdom of Isaiah 28–35_

Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 24


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The main title of this book, _History and Hope_, well applicable to a study of the book of Isaiah, does not betray its specific judiciousness before the end. The subtitle, _Agrarian Wisdom_, elicits curiosity but also suspicion: Does it present another approach to the biblical text that easily bypasses existing ways of interpretation? Fortunately, it does not. At its conclusion, one discovers that it is based on profound knowledge not only of the book of Isaiah but also of its contemporary, both diachronic and synchronic, research. Interacting with this scholarship, Daniel Stulac guides readers on a surprisingly innovative path of explanation. The introduction to the monograph situates his work in the research field. The successive chapters clarify his procedure and the results.

Chapter 1, “Understanding Agrarian Hermeneutics” (7–52), starts from the ground-breaking work of E. Davis, _Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible_ (2009), and from studies by other scholars in that area. It explains the agrarian epistemology as an attitude of theory and practice that takes humans’ relationship with the earth and the cosmos as determining a prosperous way of life in technical, economical, and ethical senses. The reasoning proceeds by means of three standards of knowledge: (1) the creaturely body, (2) localness, and (3) the necessity of adjusted action. Stulac employs the theorem for a hermeneutics of reading the Scriptures. Foundational is the argument that the agrarian worldview has dominated the cultures of the ancient Near East and the entity Israel from antiquity down to the Persian era, so much so that the distinction
between (pre)exilic and (post)exilic discourses makes limited sense. Reading the Hebrew Bible against its literary-historical background should be complemented by taking the agrarian mindset into account. It reveals the Bible’s layered significance for addressees on various levels of understanding, even for a present-day audience. In addition, the contemporary world population at large shares a basic agrarian view on well-being and values, in contrast to the “Cartesian mindset,” which considers cultural nativeness as harmful for the objective thought process. In short, the introductory chapter shows that the study relies on thorough knowledge of modern philosophy and literary theory and on in-depth reflection on how these expertises may be applied to biblical exegesis.

Chapter 2, “Isaiah 28: A Matter of Food and Drink” (53–100), serves the claim of the monograph that “through the language of agrarian wisdom, Isaiah 28–35 issues a call to obedience that transports the reader from reflections on historical destruction (chs. 1–27) into a holistic vision of ultimate hope (chs. 36–66)” (53). Stulac arrives at this conclusion by explaining that Isa 28 forms the very basis of the whole series of six woe oracles (Isa 28–35). The chapter does so through the contrast of the verdict on “the drunkards and their covenant with death” (28:1–22) with the parable of “the farmer taught by God’s instruction” (28:23–29). In the agrarian view, these two passages stand for the abuse and right use of the land. This explanation of Isa 28 as determining the function of the following woe oracles in Isa 29–35 leads, literarily and theologically, to a new perspective on this micro-unit and even the whole book of Isaiah. The methodical setup is refined by applying the epistemological schema of “the transmission of knowledge on four levels”: that of Isaiah of Jerusalem with his audience/disciples, that of the narrator with the implied hearer, that of the implied author with the implied reader, and that of the actual author(s) with the actual reader(s). This interpretive model is not new. In my view, it remains open to discussion, particularly in respect to the validity of the second and third levels in some literary genres, but its actual functionality for prophetic texts, especially the book of Isaiah, has been proven by earlier studies. Here Stulac applies it first to the woe oracle of Isa 28 (to the other ones in the following chapters), elaborating the literary place of Isa 28 in the composite and the book as a whole (78–100). It leads to significant insights that can be captured under two topics: the proper use of land and the right local course of action, both indispensable for the vision of YHWH as maker of the earth to become effective.

The conclusion is not drawn at the expense of earlier exegeses but often in discussion with them. The overall argumentation is supported by an extensive net of lexical references. Its use is not limited to counting occurrences of words in related texts in Isaiah; on the contrary, time and again the contextual meanings of the words is indicated. Only one thing is missed here: the specific function of “the cornerstone in Zion” (Isa 28:16) in the
agrarian perspective (70–71), the more so since in the next chapters it is shown that “the place Zion” plays an essential role in the progress of the woe oracles.

Chapter 3, “Isaiah 29–32: The Creaturely Body in Place” (101–45), deals with the second through fifth woe oracles. While making use of the earlier scholarly discussion about their complicated tradition- and redaction-historical genesis, Stulac situates their individual content and sequential cohesion in the same agrarian reflection on history and hope that is the thrust of Isa 28. This concept forms the prevailing paradigm of interpretation for the sociopolitical events that struck “Israel” from the eighth until the fifth century BCE, as we can presume behind the final wording of the texts. Historical interest is not the ultimate rationale of the reporting: Stulac characterizes the various woe oracles by means of theological headings. The second, “Location” (Isa 29:1–14), and the third, “Proximity to the Creator” (Isa 29:15–24), together associate Zion’s salvation with YHWH’s identity as the artisan of all. The fourth (Isa 30:1–33) and fifth (Isa 31:1–32:20) together discuss “The Prospect of Land Inhabitation.” These topics represent the main areas of interest by which the agrarian theorem is elaborated, always in continuation of the insights gained from Isa 28. As before, the exegesis is supported by referring to the network of lexical correspondences and affiliated concepts within the series and the biblical book.

The research is largely innovative. It is appealing due to the consistency that marks the explanation of the continuing agrarian paradigm in Isa 29–32, in connection with a careful analysis of the literary, in particular rhetorical, data. The theorem confronts with perspectives of significance not previously discovered, yet it neither hover above the text nor disregards different results of literary-historical exegesis. Rather, it tries to integrate them in the proposed sociotheological frame. Of course, some questions will provoke discussion, such as the proper historical identity of each woe oracle within the sequential reading, the contrast between the literary audience and the implied hearer with regard to the whole composite, and the semantic basis of the anthropology concerning “the creaturely body.” These questions are legitimate in recognition of the gravity of the overall explanation.

Chapter 4, “Isaiah 33–35: A Geo-theology of Dwelling” (146–94), departs from the current scholarly structuring of the book of Isaiah insofar Isa 33 is explained as rhetorically deviant from the preceding five woe oracles and intimately connected to the dual painting of Isa 34–35. Just the same, the arguments of the opposite opinion that takes the sixth woe oracle as forming one composite with the five preceding ones are seriously discussed, and the connections of Isa 33 with Isa 28 and 29–32 are not neglected but integrated in the discussion. If the agrarian paradigm has convincingly been argued as ruling Isa 28–32, one can agree that it arrives at a new realization in Isa 33–35. From this outlook, Stulac elaborates the specific role of Isa 33 as a conceptual and semantic interchange between
the main parts of the book of Isaiah. Consequently, Isa 33 is estimated as more than a somehow detached redactional block. As the last woe oracle, it bears the balance of the five preceding ones and serves as the foundation of the following diptych. It presents a principle value of Isa 29–32: stable land inhabitation as available for those who recognize YHWH as king in Zion and Judah.

The agrarian paradigm clarifies that God’s sovereign dominion is more than a noncommittal statement. It is measured according to its effects on life, and as such it demands assent. It stands for God’s dwelling in the land to the benefit of people who hope in God, “our salvation in a time of distress” (Isa 33:2). Sinners ask: “Who can reside with the consuming fire?” The people simply reply: “He who walks in righteousness” (33:14–15). This constituency shows up through a careful analysis of the epistemological orders in the successive subunits of the chapter: “Isaiah of Jerusalem and his disciples come to form a cohesive party that the implied hearer is encouraged to join” (161; see also 173–74).

In agrarian perspective, Isa 33 forms the “keyhole” to the diptych of Isa 34–35 in which the landscapes of devastated “Bozrah/Edom” and flourishing “Desert/Aravah” are contrasted as two theological models of life conditions according to how YHWH the king allocates the land that he owns. The cosmic language and imagery is used to sketch the habitat that waits those who have assimilated the teaching of the series of woe oracles.

Chapter 5, “Isaiah 36–66: Agrarian Patterns, Agrarian Hope” (195–218), focuses on the connections between macro-units of the book of Isaiah. The blocks are thoroughly analyzed in view of the thesis of the study (Isa 36–39 in 196–203, Isa 40–55 in 203–12, Isa 56–66 in 212–18), but some scholars might be pleased by a more extensive discussion of the first block from the literary-historical angle. The present discussion continues the dominant line of thought of the investigation. While Isa 36–39 deal with Assur’s military actions against Judah and Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE, Stulac interprets these chapters within the frame of the agrarian ideology about the right appropriation of land. “The implied hearer is free to consider those events in relation to texts that originated in a later period (such as return from exile), but that are positioned prior to the narrative retelling in question (e.g. Isaiah 35)” (197). Thus we encounter agrarian elements and topics in Isa 36–39 that determine the composition and articulate the tenor of the six woe oracles in Isa 28–35, but the analogy advocates the trustworthiness of the prophetic trajectory designed there, which aims at guiding from destruction to hope. In support of this thesis, Stulac points to evidence in Isa 36–39 that illustrates that the Assyrian attempt to conquer and ruin the land was maliciously but vainly leveled at its sovereign YHWH (198–200).
Chapter 6, “A Call to Obedience: The Implied Reader Reads Isaiah 28–35” (219–38), offers a summary of the study, under three headings: “The Six Woes in Their Sequential Presentation” (220–22); “Re-reading the Six Woes in Light of the Whole (Book of Isaiah)” (222–34); and “Avenues for Ongoing Research” (234–38). The first and second sections present a comprehensive outline of the six woe oracles in agrarian hermeneutics and viewed from the third “epistemological level” (it has been explained before [78–85] but not yet systematically explored). This involves the relation of the implied author with the implied reader, not to be mixed with that of the historical prophet in Jerusalem with his audience or that of the narrator with his hearer. Literary-historical scholarship may feel ill at ease with this pattern of layered speech, but here the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The implied reader of the third level, that is, the student of the “scroll” of Isaiah, appropriates the unfolding significance of Isa 28–35 for the audience to which he or she belongs by integrating the agrarian perspective and pragmatic challenge of the woe oracles into the frame of the prophetic book as a whole.

The re-reading exercise is far from a flat review of things heard and seen before; actually, it succeeds in rekindling the curiosity insofar it accurately summarizes the individual woe oracles in alluring new wordings from an related but different point of view: that of the implied reader of the book of Isaiah (as opposed to that in the previous chapters of the study). The implied reader is to take to heart not only the purport of the woe oracles as a semiautonomous composite but also in connection with the adjacent book parts in sequential reading, being sure not to miss the pragmatic challenge of the woe series. Thus the heading of the chapter, “A Call to Obedience,” is justified: readers of the woe oracles within the frame of the book of Isaiah are provoked to accept the preaching of the historical prophet, portrayed by the narrator and transmitted by the implied author. In the same way as the iconic farmer of Isa 28:23–29 is taught by God himself about how he should work and what the yield will be, so readers are trained to follow the course designed in the woe oracles: the trajectory from history (destruction) to hope (revival).

The monograph closes with two appendices: “Annotated Translation of Isaiah 28–35.” “Glossary of Abbreviations.” The former contains a so-called root-oriented translation at the service of reading this particular study. It does not rely on text criticism of the Masoretic Text; it only reflects the network of intratextual relations that encompasses the chapters under scrutiny.

This lucidly composed and written work is to be assessed as an important acquisition in the laboratory of contemporary research on the book of Isaiah. It is strongly innovative with regard to both the hermeneutics of biblical prophecy and the detailed exegesis of Isa 28–35 within the context of the whole book. The paradigm of the agrarian mindset is proficiently explained in the frame of anthropology and the social history of premodern
Israel. The literary theorem of reading as production of meaning according to four interrelated orders is explained and consequently applied. By means of both implements, the series of woe oracles in Isa 28–35 is thoroughly analyzed with a sharp eye for all sorts of literary data. The coherence of the composite provides the opening and concluding chapter(s) with a special function: Isa 28 sets the agenda of history and hope; Isa 33–35 totes up the balance of the series for the purpose of continuing the reading process of the whole prophetic book. Previous studies of Isaiah, both diachronic and synchronic, have critically been taken into account. Research in the aftermath of this study may consist of further reflection on the interchange of the agrarian with the literary-historical paradigm, in particular in respect of the adjacent sections of the book of Isaiah. Finally, there is a question flowing over from this research that is touched upon but not elaborated: How does the interchange of these two paradigms relate to the so-called present-day mindset? Just as Stulac’s monograph guides readers through a sequential reading of the book of Isaiah, it itself deserves reiterated reading.