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SERVANT AND ZION: TWO KINDS OF FUTURE IN ISAIAH 49

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I. Introduction

In Isaiah 49-55, the 2nd part of so-called Second Isaiah, two main characters dominate the setting, they almost take turns in these chapters: the Servant of YHWH and Lady Zion-Jerusalem. I am not the first one to observe this.¹ But I propose that in Isa 49-55 two kinds of future are envisioned and presented, and that these two figures, the Servant and Zion are representing them. This can be explicated by looking especially at Isa 49. This chapter can be read as an overture and an introduction into the development of these two figures and futures.²

Isa 49 can be divided into two units, v. 1-13 and v. 14-26. The first one concerns the servant, the second one deals with Zion. Both units depict a relationship in communication: in both parts the protagonist – in v. 1-13 the Servant and in v. 14-26 Zion – speak and YHWH answers. Both units deal with difficult experiences of their main characters, but they show two different ways *how to* deal with it and offer therefore two kinds of future.

¹ Here only some examples. The authors interpret the proximity of Zion and Servant in Isa 49-54 in different ways: cf. L.E. Wilshire, “The Servant-City: A New Interpretation of the ‘Servant of the Lord’ in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah”, *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 356-367; some remarks concerning this proximity can already be found in W.A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja. Deel II B* (POT 23; Nijkerk, 1983), pp. 271f; J.F.A. Sawyer, “Daughter of Zion and Servant of the Lord in Isaiah. A Comparison”, *JSOT* 44 (1989), pp. 89-107; M.C.A. Korpel, “The Female Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 54”, in B. Becking and M. Dijkstra (eds.), *On Reading Prophetic Texts. Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes*, (Leiden/New York/Köln, 1996), pp. 153-167.

² Of course Isa 49:1-13 has also a connecting function; cf. U. Berges, *Das Buch Jesaja. Komposition und Endgestalt* (HBS 16; Freiburg et al. 1998), pp. 369-373. The servant links Isa 40-48 where the servant of jhwh and the servant Jacob-Israel cannot exactly be separated with Isa 49-55 where Zion now plays an important part and Jacob-Israel is mentioned only one more

II. Relationship in Communication

II.1 The Servant and YHWH in Isa 49:1-13

The Servant speaks about his experiences in the past and he recounts his dialogue with YHWH about his task and his fate (v. 1-6). He quotes God calling him: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (v. 3) He tells about his frustration in the past: “In vain have I labored, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity” (v. 4a). But like a confession he expresses his trust in YHWH’s care and reward for him: “yet surely my cause is with YHWH, and my reward with my God.” (v. 4b) In his speech the Servant himself names the turning point in his fate: “Now” נָעֻן (v. 5) – now is the time that things are going to change. The cause for this change is YHWH’s word again. So far the Servant was unsuccessful. But now, YHWH expands and renews his task (v. 6). So far he was sent only to Jacob and Israel. But now YHWH sends him also beyond to the nations. In his speech, the Servant tells about his fate, his task and his unshaken trust in God, and in all this he tells about the turning point caused by YHWH – “now!”

But only in the second part of this unit, in v. 7-13, the Servant learns about the new times starting from this turning point. Now God is speaking, his speech a mixture of proclamations and assignments. It will be the “time of favor”, the “day of salvation” (v. 8). Then the Servant will be safe and at the same time have new tasks. There will be a change in power structure: He who used to be a slave of rulers will be revered by kings (v. 7). This new time will be characterized by the restitution of people and land and by freedom for the oppressed (v. 8-9). There will be safety and care for all who are on their way, coming from all directions. Metaphors of a friendly nature, vocabulary known from the exo-

time. See also the links between the second servant-song in Isa 49:1-6 and the first one in Isa 42:1-4; cf. B. Janowski, *Stellvertretung* (SBS 165; Stuttgart 1997), p. 73.

dus theme, and the figure of the caring shepherd are interwoven into this image of the future.³ In short, v. 7-13 unfold the upcoming, better future.

The Servant – now the addressed one in this relationship – will be part of it in two ways. He will benefit from it, and at the same time also participate in YHWH's actions towards his people to let this future time happen. He is the covenant *of* the people and *for* the people. He has to call out to the miserable and needy. He will lift up the devastated land.

The Servant's role in Isa 49:1-13 is one of trust in and cooperation with YHWH in spite of difficult experiences in past and present. The Servant answers to YHWH and YHWH to him; YHWH promises him to save him and care for him, but at the same time calls him to take his part in this caring and saving action for YHWH's people. They are addressed by YHWH only via the Servant, but never directly beside him.

II.2 Zion and YHWH in Isa 49:14-26

In Isa 49:14-26, the second unit of the text, some of these can be found in a similar way. Zion has a relationship in communication with YHWH as well, and YHWH promises her to save her and care for her. But in both issues she also differs from the Servant.

The unit begins with Zion's address to YHWH. I assume that this statement ranges from v. 14 to 15a followed by YHWH's answer beginning with "Even ..." in v. 15b.⁴ This is most plausible in terms of content as I will show. Formally it corresponds to v. 24-25 where after a question in v. 24 the speech of YHWH is

³ Cf. C. Westermann, *Das Buch Jesaja. Kapitel 40-66* (ATD 19; Göttingen/Zürich 1986), p. 174. His thesis of a "new exodus" in Second Isaiah however I can't find as evident as he does.

⁴ Usually v. 15a is already read as the beginning of YHWH's answer; cf. e.g. W.A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja. Deel II B* (POT 23; Nijkerk, 1983), pp. 56f; O.H. Steck, "Beobachtungen zu Jesaja 49,14-26", in O.H. Steck (ed.), *Gottesknecht und Zion. Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Deuterjesaja* (FAT 4; Tübingen; 1992), pp. 47.

introduced with a messenger formula and begins after this with “Even ...” So Zion said: “YHWH has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her baby, show no compassion for the child of her womb?” (v. 14.15a) Her statement, somewhere between lament and reproach, is meaningful in two ways: It shows that Zion’s attitude towards YHWH is very different from that of the Servant. She sees herself abandoned. But at the same time she claims YHWH’s care; she would have expected him to care for her like for a baby. Both Zion and the Servant assume that they have been connected to God from the very beginning of their life; this is marked by the word וְבֶרֶךְ “womb” in both cases (v. 1 and 15). But Zion’s conviction has been disappointed, while for the Servant his has been corroborated.

YHWH answers Zion’s statement: The whole following passage from v. 15b onwards is an attempt to console her, to convince her, to argue that her impression is wrong. Different from the Servant, she does not react in the text. Her voice is retold in YHWH’s speech, but then he anticipates her questions before she even has had a reason to say anything.

Several images are used in YHWH’s speech to express how she is connected to him with strong and durable bonds. The first one is the one of mother and baby that YHWH takes up to surpass it: “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (v. 15b) All the time – contrary to Zion’s impression – YHWH has had her image before his eyes, sketched into his palms (v. 16). This image already shows the polyvalent meaning of “Zion” in this text. It suggests that it does not matter if the physical city is in ruins *or* the woman might not be there. Being devastated and depopulated, she will be lively and crowded again (v. 17-19). Being a lonely and childless woman she will have many children (v. 20f). She will be revered by kings, just like the Servant (v. 23). The combination of these different metaphors to express Zion’s rescue and restitution makes it obvious that the text speaks about a woman and a city at the same time. What is said about one can also be applied to the other. This kind of metaphorical speech is best understood

as a personification, a complex of metaphors that gives the impression of one person while speaking about much more than this.⁵

The future for Zion is announced to her in two patterns of communication. In some parts of the speech, YHWH tells Zion that the change has happened already, and in others YHWH announces things to come. Like in the first unit of the text there is a turning point here as well (v. 19), marked with “now” עתה. It is situated in the tension between announced and experienced circumstances. This tension is most obvious in v. 19: “Surely your ruins and your desolate places and your devastated land – surely now you are too crowded for the inhabitants, and those who destroyed you go away.” Here, Zion’s devastation stands next and yet unconnected to her lively crowdedness.⁶ But the same tension can be found more often in these verses. In v. 18 Zion is called to lift her eyes, because then she could see – and therefore experience – that she is not lonely any more. In v. 20f YHWH anticipates the surprised reaction of Zion, once she realizes what has happened to her: that she is not desolate and childless, not lonely and shamed, but surrounded by her children. Again, this expresses the gap between her experience and the situation as proclaimed by YHWH. Thus, the turning point from suffering to a new and bright future time lies in the tension of the change that has happened already, but is not yet experienced. The new future is with YHWH in every sense of the word: It is already realized with YHWH but has not reached Zion’s consciousness, and it will be for Zion a time of YHWH’s presence.

III. Two Models for the Future

⁵ Cf. G. Baumann, *Liebe und Gewalt. Die Ehe als Metapher für das Verhältnis JHWH – Israel in den Prophetenbüchern* (SBS 185; Stuttgart 2000), pp. 38-48; B. Schmidtgen, *Die Stadt als Frau im Buch Jesaja*, (unpublished dissertation, Basel 2001), pp. 310-321; S. Gorges-Braunwarth, *Frauenbilder – Weisheitsbilder – Gottesbilder” in Spr 1-9. Die personifizierte Weisheit im Gottesbild der nachexilischen Zeit*, (ExuZ 9; Münster 2002), pp. 92-98; Ch. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion. Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis MN 2008), pp. 17-22.

The Servant- and Zion-passage in the text offer two kinds of future. This implies the presupposition that they are addressed to an audience that has to come to terms with experiences of suffering in its past and probably also in its present, and has to understand its relationship with YHWH anew. The extratextual identity of this audience depends on when and where one assumes the formation of this text and its wider context of 2nd Isaiah.⁷ But there is intratextual information about these intended addressees which can be concluded from what I have presented about the text and its dynamics so far.⁸

III.1 The Servant-Model

There is one future offered in Isa 49,1-13, in the relationship of YHWH and the Servant. The Servant knows and speaks about his difficult past and present, but his trust in YHWH is unshaken. He lives oppressed like a slave and despised by others, but YHWH announces to him a change of powers. The Servant also knows that not everyone takes up his attitude towards YHWH, and he is called by YHWH to reach out to those others. He has the task to participate in the change that is about to happen. He knows about the need of his fellows to be raised, to be restored, to be brought back.

⁶ Cf. H.-J. Hermisson, “Die Frau Zion”, in J. van Ruiten and W. Beuken (eds.), *Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (Leuven, 1997), p. 32.

⁷ Today, many scholars assume that Isa 49 was formed in one way or another after the return from the Babylonian exile and originated in the group of the returned *gola*. Cf. e.g. U. Berges, *Das Buch Jesaja. Komposition und Endgestalt* (HBS 16; Freiburg et al. 1998), pp. 369f; O.H. Steck, “Die Gottesknechts-Texte und ihre redaktionelle Rezeption im Zweiten Jesaja”, in O.H. Steck, *Gottesknecht und Zion. Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Deuterojesaja* (FAT 4; Tübingen 1992), pp. 161-164.

⁸ The difference between the reconstruction of an intended audience and possible historical addressees can be compared to the difference between the *narratee* and the real reader, a differentiation used in narratological analysis. The former is deducted from textual signals and information, using textual pragmatics as means of interpretation. For information about the latter signals in the text are used in order to connect extratextual information to it.

I propose that the Servant is understood best as a personification, too, like Zion. To understand the Servant as a personification does not solve all of the difficulties, but it allows to combine the individual and collective aspects of him as well as some of his contradictory features in the different texts analogous to Lady Zion. The Servant is spoken about like a person, but he stands for more: he stands for a certain kind of relationship with God; he stands for a certain way to react, and for a certain kind of people who might do so.⁹ Thus, Isa 49,1-13 is not about the Servant as one very special person who understood YHWH better than anyone else. It is about one kind of future: This is proposed as one way how life for the people of Israel could develop after destruction and oppression, after living in exile or living poorly in the destroyed land. This is one way how trust in God and life according to God's will is possible, although the experiences of the past have shaken the belief of the people fundamentally.¹⁰

III.2 The Zion-Model

⁹ This is a try to deal with the difficulties of how to grasp the phenomenon of the Servant in Second Isaiah. A clear cut division in "individual" and "collective" understanding I find not adequate; cf. for Isa 49 J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AncB 19A; New York et al., 2002), p. 304. But there exist several other attempts to describe the problem, cf. e.g. W.A.M. Beuken, *Jesaja. Deel II B* (POT 23; Nijkerk, 1983), p. 43, who describes the presentation of the servant in this text as a literary double meaning: the servant as an agent of YHWH and at the same time identified with his people. R. Kessler, "Kyros und der *eved* bei Deuterojesaja. Gottes Handeln in Macht und Schwäche", in M. Crüsemann and C. Jochum-Bortfeld (eds.), *Christus und seine Geschwister. Christologie im Umfeld der "Bibel in gerechter Sprache"*, (Gütersloh 2009), p. 150f, uses the term "perspective identification" (*perspektivische Identifikation*) to describe the relationship of the Servant and Israel: Identification is envisioned but not yet fulfilled. Cf. the description of the problem by F. Landy, "The Construction of the Subject and the Symbolic Order. A Reading of the Last Three Suffering Servant Songs", in F. Landy (ed.), *Beauty and the Enigma. And Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible* (JSOT.S 312, Sheffield 2001), 211: "The sharpness of the individual is juxtaposed with extreme symbolization. This is the source of the fascination and the difficulty of these passages."

¹⁰ This develops the position of several scholars further who assume that the Servant in Isa 49 stands for a certain group within the people who has a task to fulfill directed towards the people as a whole; cf. e.g. U. Berges, *Das Buch Jesaja. Komposition und Endgestalt* (HBS 16; Freiburg et al. 1998), pp. 369: "der Ebed, d.h. die im Exil geläuterte Gola, nimmt das Wortamt *coram mundo* wahr."

But obviously not all the addressees did or could embrace this Servant-model. Isa 49:14-26 gives the impression of another kind of reaction to the situation and therefore another model for the future, presented in the relationship of YHWH and Zion. She states her situation as godforsaken. YHWH's following response gives clues as to why she thinks so.

All she can see is a destroyed city, and a devastated land, with only few inhabitants left. All the hardships of a woman's life in the society of Ancient Israel are sketched to describe her miserable situation. Like a woman sent away she is socially unprotected, like an infertile woman she is socially isolated, like a mother without her children, she is lonely and distressed (cf. v. 21). She knows about power of soldiers who take booty and captives. She knows what can happen to a woman with no support when she is accused in court by a powerful opponent (cf. v. 24f).

All this is not the story of one woman, of one person. But by means of the personification all this is told as the background against which her statement of lament and reproach towards YHWH must be heard. Zion does not strike a conciliatory tone in Isaiah 49.¹¹ But there is a long response from YHWH, filled with affection, promises for change, and attempts to convince her. There is not one condition for Zion to fulfill, there is not one concession for her to make. All she has to do is to trust and believe in YHWH's words, to change her view ("Lift your eyes all around and see" v. 18). This will suffice to let the new future happen.

IV. Conclusion

¹¹ Cf. C. Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion talks back to the prophets. A dialogic theology of the book of Lamentations*, (Leiden/Boston 2007), p. 107; K.M. O'Connor, "'Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem'. Second Isaiah's Reception and Use of Daughter Zion", *PSB* 20 (1999), p. 288.

This is the other model, the Zion-model, for a possible future time with YHWH, sketched out right after the first one, the Servant-model. The two are positioned in one chapter next to each other. This gives the impression, that there were also people, who felt and reacted rather like Zion than like the Servant. But for them as well, this text in Isaiah offers a model for a hopeful future time. There is no differentiation of better and worse, no comparison between Servant and Zion.¹² The Zion-model takes serious the experience of utter suffering, loneliness, and abandonment. The Servant-model assumes a positive and trusting attitude in spite of suffering. So Isa 49 provides two different models for a relationship with YHWH which will prove sustainable for the future.

I am convinced that in Isa 49 the two models do not describe two different groups existing already but offer two options – which might have lead to different groups later on, (see Isaiah 56-66). This could explain why Zion and the Servant are neither in Isa 49 nor in any other text up to Isa 55 presented together or interacting with each other.¹³ Isa 49 communicates two different ways to deal with a situation sketched in the text, and the way they are communicated is not judging or disapproving, but open and inviting, leading into the new future.

¹² Tendencies in research literature to dichotomize the two as “unresponsive” (W. Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, [Louisville KY, 1998], p. 125) as against “compliant” (C. Man-dolfo, *Daughter Zion talks back to the prophets. A dialogic theology of the book of Lamentations*, [Leiden/Boston 2007], p. 117), are splitting the complementary juxtaposition of the two.

¹³ Isa 54:17 might be an exception which fits this explanation since there the change happening from Isa 56 onwards is on its way already. But even if Servant and Zion are only alternating figures in the text there is an implicit option for contact between them: The group which is addressed in the Zion-model could very well be the group to which the Servant-model calls to reach out.